Flies in Our Soup

Biên Hòa 1968 – 1969

"Hey, Govea, get up man!" "C'mon, we're going to one of the bars." I looked up into the rough face of Richard Diaz from Inglewood, California. I was lying in my bunk face down, trying to get some sleep to little avail. I had been trying all day to get some sleep, but the constant roar of jet fighters going out to kill Charlie, the heat, the humidity, the light, all conspired to keep me from sleeping. It was making me wonder if I was going to survive this year in Vietnam, a year I had just started. And now, Richard Diaz and two guys standing behind him were asking me to join them in going to a bar on the base.

I remembered what "Sarge" had told us about the bars. "Sarge" was a three-stripe buck sergeant who had responsibility for indoctrinating and training us newly arrived troops in Vietnam. He had just re-enlisted for another four years and was an old guy, about twenty-three. He had short-cropped blond hair and he knew everything there was to know about life, love and war. He supervised our weapons training and had taken us all around the base. He showed us Bunker Hill –10, where Captain Reginald Maisey and an "augee" had been killed repelling a major Viet Cong ground attack several months earlier. He showed us the bomb dump and told us about how an enemy rocket had blown it up with such an explosion that everyone thought all the Security Police in Abel area had been wiped out.

The next morning, when they came down to the squadron area, there was a lot of hand shaking and backslapping with comments like, "Man, we thought we'd lost you guys." Sarge also told us to "Stay away from the bars." "If you go to the bars, a girl is going to come over and sit on your lap and ask you to buy her a drink." "It's going to cost you five bucks and all it is, a glass of Coke with a drop of whiskey on top, so stay away from them!" There was no way I was going to one of those bars. Five bucks was real money. "Well," I said to Diaz, "Sarge told us to stay away from those bars." "Forget him!" Said Diaz. "C'mon, get up, let's go!!"

"Well, alright, "I said feeling my resolve dissipate. I got up and put on my fatigues and jungle boots and we went. I had seen the bars from outside. They were just shacks. As soon as we walked into the bar I felt uncomfortable. Having just turned nineteen and being newly arrived in Vietnam, I was really just a boy. I had never even dated, and seeing those girls with heavy makeup hanging onto GI's made me feel like I was in foreign territory. All the GI's looked like they were experienced and knew the score, but I felt out of place. Then I saw something I could not believe. It was "Sarge," drunk as a skunk and sitting at a table with some girls.

I quickly glanced away, not wanting to embarrass him or myself, but not before we made eye contact. I could feel his eyes burning into my back as we walked past him and sat at a table. Occasionally, I would glance over at him, and too often found him glaring at me. To Diaz and the other two guys, Sarge was just another troop and they paid him no mind.

After a while, Sarge got up and staggered over to our table and sat next to me. In slurred but

serious speech he said, “Govea, I thought I told you to stay away from these bars.” His intoxication made me bold enough to ask, “Well, what are you doing here Sarge?”

“Darn it Govea!!” he shouted, “I'm checking up on you guys!”

I had known Richard Diaz casually at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. I worked Security and he worked Law Enforcement. One day, LE was short one man and asked for a volunteer. I raised my hand because the LE uniforms were so sharp. I too, wanted to wear the white hat, white gloves, white scarf and white bootlaces over the dark blue uniform, and thought I looked pretty spiffy when I did. What I didn’t know was that volunteering once meant that from there on out, when LE was short, I was assigned to help out no matter what.

One day, I worked the main gate with Diaz. Later he would tell me, “Man, when you showed up at the main gate, you were so skinny I thought that if a strong breeze came along it would blow you away.” He left for Biên Hòa months before I did and when I ran into him one hot, clear day he blurted out, “What are you doing here?”

One afternoon, a couple of weeks after my first bar experience, he came over and said, “Let's go over to the bar and get some soup.” I couldn’t believe my ears. Eat in that place, that dilapidated shack where you could see rats running around? I said, “You've got to be kidding, I wouldn’t eat there.” “I've eaten there before,” he said, “they've got steaks and everything, it's better than chow hall food.” “C-rats are better than chow hall food” I said, “but at least it's clean.” “That's what you think” he said. Months later, when forty some SPs took sick from eating in the chow hall, I would realize he was right, but for now I could not reconcile myself to eating in one of the bars. “I'll go with you,” I said, “but I am not eating.” I was still going through the process of adjusting to Vietnam.

As part of that process which we all went through, I was very reluctantly surrendering my standards of hygiene. I was learning that I was going to have to dramatically lower my standards or go crazy. I was realizing too that if I didn’t lower my standards, in the end I would have neither my standards nor my sanity, and it was better to keep at least one of the two. I was learning to shower in water that was “non-potable” and often smelled like it came from the toilets. Its yellow-brown color didn’t give much comfort about what might be in it. I was already developing “jungle rot” in between my toes, armpits and other places, and would soon learn that the white powder in the little green can could control it but not eliminate it. When the water was shut off for a few hours each day, you had to use a toilet that had already been used by two or three other guys and had not been flushed. Eating without washing our hands became the norm, and soon we thought nothing of it.

Mama-san brought back our washed fatigues often smelling worse than when she took them. We all smelled bad, but fortunately became accustomed to our stink so then it wasn’t so bad. I found that I went for days without brushing my teeth, as I believed it was better than rinsing my mouth with the same water we showered in…when it was available.

We arrived at the bar and went into the restaurant, if one can call a rat-infested shack with tables and bench chairs that wouldn’t be acceptable at a campground a restaurant. I don’t know how,

but Diaz got me to order some soup, although what I was going to do with it I had no idea anything but eat it. Soon, the waitress, a springy, young Vietnamese girl with no makeup came over with two large bowls of steaming soup and set them before us. Diaz began to gulp his down. I stared at mine, not knowing what to do with it. “Eat it,” Diaz said. I stared at it and curled my upper lip in disdain. “I don't think I can eat this,” I said. “What, you're going to let it go to waste!?” He asked incredulously. Just then, my good buddy Steve Bauer, and two other guys walked in.

Steve was a blond surfer boy from Burbank, California and Diaz and I had all been stationed at Langley, AFB together. Pretty soon, I had four guys saying, “eat it, eat it.” I stared at the bowl. Suddenly, Steve Bauer stuck his thumb and index finger into my soup and pulled out a small shrimp. “Look, shrimp,” he said, and stuck it in his mouth. I looked at him for a moment, he was still alive. Then… I put my spoon into the bowl, filled it with broth and ate it. IT WAS GOOD!! Better than anything I had eaten at the chow hall and even better than C-rations. I began to eat. There was shrimp, beef, noodles and other stuff I could not identify but it was tasty.

My Mom was a really good cook and I knew what good food tasted like. After that, I would go to Diaz and say, “Let's go get some soup.” By now I had adjusted. I was changing in other ways, although I didn’t actually know it. I had jungle rot and lots of it. So what? The white powder in the little green can did a reasonable job of keeping it from spreading, as long as you didn’t stop using it.
At night, while on duty out on the perimeter, I was bitten by chiggers. In the morning while in the chow hall having breakfast, I would roll up my sleeves and would see large, angry, raised, red patches of skin all over my arms. Using a toilet that had been used and not flushed was no big deal, but I did prefer digging a “cat hole” while out on the distant perimeter. Stinky water was welcome because it was there. My teeth were not brushed for days at a time, but so what, they were still in my head weren’t they? I stunk so bad it was pointed out to me by a young lady while on R&R in Taiwan, but I didn’t care, I couldn’t smell anything. I had adjusted, I was becoming a Vietnam vet and I was proud of it, stink and all. My hygiene standards were lower than they had ever been in my life or ever would be again, but in exchange I was keeping my sanity. Anyway, what choice did I have?

One day, Diaz asked me if I wanted to go eat some Vietnamese soup. “Let's go!” I said eagerly. We went over to the shack and ordered our favorite. The shack didn’t look like a shack anymore. It hadn’t changed, but I had. I'd just gotten used to it. It was part of my environment and I felt comfortable in it. While waiting for our soup we engaged in mindless chatter. “You see that Spooky pouring fire down on Charlie off Bravo area last night?”

“Yeah, Hueys too. “Charlie was in a world-a-hurt man, must have been pretty messy down there.” “I imagine they were all ripped up.” “Yeah, that Spooky kept dropping flares and tore that place up, and those Hueys were steering clear of Spooky’s fire too.” “Heck yeah, they didn’t want to get wasted by Spooky.” After a while, the young girl brought us our soup and also a big smile. We were regular customers. I didn’t really know her but I had come to like her. “Thank you so much,” I said looking her in the eyes. She diverted her eyes shyly, and with a singsong voice said “You waacome!” Diaz and I dug in. After a few minutes Diaz stopped eating. “Look at this” he said. In his soup spoon was a large, fresh green fly. “Well throw it on the floor,” I

said, unimpressed, and continued eating. But for some odd reason, it had disgusted Diaz. I knew both of our bowls had come from the same pot, but I didn't care, I had adjusted. I had survived a few things by now and a big green fly in our soup was not worth a second thought. Who knows how many times there had been flies in our soup; probably every time. A few times, I had looked into the tiny kitchen and I could see Papa-san in there stirring a big caldron with sweat from his forehead falling into the soup, but I didn't care, I had adjusted, I had changed. But now, Diaz was really turned off. "C'mon let's go" he said. "What, you're going to let it go to waste!?" I asked incredulously. "Just throw it on the floor, what's wrong with you?!" A dead fly on the floor would not have even been noticed in this place. But Diaz wouldn't listen to reason.

"Let's go," he said, and got up. I had to decide whether to stay loyal to my friend or finish my delicious soup that had a fly in it. It was a tough decision. But I got up and followed Diaz to the door. When we got to the door, I looked back over my shoulder longingly at my soup. I wanted to go back and eat it. Diaz had left his soup spoon on the table with the fly in it.

As the months dragged on, I continued to change in other ways, although I would not know it until I had left Vietnam. Day after day I struggled to find sleep in the heat, humidity and noise. Night after night I struggled to stay awake, sometimes so consumed with exhaustion and fatigue that all I could think of was plunging into my bunk. At night I watched Spookies and Hueys pouring fire down from the sky, or I'd see a B-52 raid off in the distance.

One night, there was one so close another SP called in and asked if we were under attack because the concussions were so great. "Be advised," replied Central Security Control, "that's a B-52 raid five klicks west of the base." Another night, when I was supposed to be off, rockets slammed into the base. I had been drinking heavily but reported for duty as required.

I was soon recruited to help load ammo onto a flatbed truck that was taking it out to the perimeter. Perhaps because my judgment was off from my drinking, I lifted a 120 lb. box of—60 ammo the wrong way. A moment later I felt a burning sensation in my lower abdomen and I knew I had ripped a muscle and had a hernia. I spent three weeks in three hospitals and saw hundreds of young men with all kinds of ugly wounds. I learned there are countless ways to get burned in combat. And I saw one young man who shot himself in the foot to avoid going into the fight.

At Vung Tau, where I had surgery, there were Vietnamese patients-men, women and children. Some had been wounded by friendly fire, others by unfriendly fire. Others had been injured in various ways. Many nights, I had watched Air Force bombs exploding and helicopters firing their weapons at targets on the ground. But like the pilots who dropped the ordinance, I had never seen the results of their work up close until now. Many, had been burned and had hideous wounds covering their limbs and torsos where napalm had burned ragged and craggy into their flesh. Where nipples and belly buttons had once been located no one could discern. Today, they have nasty scars. Others patients were amputees, and others had parts of their bodies blown away.

Being surrounded by this multitude of wounded and injured, many of whom were immersed in their own personal pain and suffering, removed from my mind any lingering abstract notions

about war and permanently bound my tongue against discussions of war with any sense of false bravado. I continued to change.

One night, during a rocket attack, I was running for a bunker as lethal rockets were exploding around me. I asked myself, “Am I going to make it?” I answered honestly, “I don't know.” During Tet, I was on the east perimeter in the early morning with my good buddy John Fisher, from Uniontown, Pennsylvania. We were part of a defensive line of men waiting for the VC to launch a large ground assault against us. I wasn’t really scared as we were checking our weapons and ammo, but I thought to myself, “I could be dead in the next few hours.”

To maintain discipline, our own officers and NCO’s were hard on us, and I saw troops sent to Long Binh Jail for several months duration simply because they succumbed to exhaustion and fatigue. Our squadron commander told us that Security Police were not allowed to feel thirst, hunger, heat or fatigue. I came to believe that life was hard, mean and violent and that if I was going to survive it I was going to have to be hard, mean and violent; and so I was.

After completing my one-year tour, I went home on a thirty-day leave. One day, I went to a local junior college to see some old high school friends. Not a single one of them said anything complimentary, appreciative or kind about my service to our country in Vietnam. But then, no other Americans did either. That’s just how America was.

As I stood there with these college kids, I in my uniform, they in their cool college clothes, I watched them laughing and giggling over what I thought was complete nonsense. They struck me as childish and foolish, and I realized they were acting the same way they had acted in high school. I realized then that I was the one who had changed and that I could never be the same again. And I knew I was no longer a boy.