

Knife 13 Goodbyes
13 May 1975

Standing on the metal U-Tapao tarmac, peering at stars on that warmish May night, three Nav lights twinkled faintly on the horizon. Our Sea Stallion helicopters were returning, and I was heartbroken knowing one had crashed, and was nowhere in sight. Proof winged ever closer, as lights flashed to brighter amber.

I waited breathlessly, not knowing which of my friends were no longer alive. I was destined to see them often perish, and never resurrected, in my dreams.

My heart pounded with the arrival of each whirring rotor. I read the tail numbers above lowered ramps as pulsing jet motors powered down, and fifty Security Police moved down the ramps. A soul wrenching reality clutched my heart as the gaping width of emptiness grew in their wake. I began to fully realize . . . Delta Squad would not disembark, and our brothers in arms were lost.

My youthful spirit ebbed as does sand through an hourglass. Only yesterday, these heroes' broke bread with me. And this morning, were volunteers-all to country's call. A hollowness filled me: Tonight, they seemed like ghosts of Knife 13.

Through God's intervention, I was taken from Knife 13 just hours earlier. "Need room for ammo," they had said. And I stood with weapon and ammo, and began the handshaking ritual, backslapping, bear-hugs all around. "It's not goodbye. They're taking one of us from each Knife, and sending us in advance to U-Tapao . . . I'm one of them." None of us realized the reaper hovered close, our brotherhood was to end, and only scarred memories would remain.

The choppers were empty, and I stood quietly. One last glance toward the black horizon. Nothing. My voice left me. I shifted between anger and despair, realizing I would never see my comrades alive again. Transformed, a twenty-year old sergeant instantly matured like a tempered old thirty-five.

In my thoughts over five decades since that warm fateful night, I still see the three nav lights first twinkling. I still feel emptiness, like a void within my heart. And still ever searching my dreams for the missing amber light . . . nowhere in sight. I should have been with them.

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56th SPS, Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, 1974-75, Delta Squad, Knife 13