one very hot day

David Halberstam

1967

At eleven thirty they were moving haphazardly along the canal, one of those peaceful moments when earlier fears were forgotten, and when it was almost as if they were in some sort of trance from the heat and the monotony, when they were fired on. Three quick shots came from the left, from the other side of the canal. They appeared to hit short, and they landed near the center of the column, close to where Lieutenant Anderson was. He wheeled toward the bullets, spoke quickly in Vietnamese, taking three men with him and sending a fourth back to tell Thuong what he was doing—not to send anyone unless it was clearly a real fight, and he could hear automatic weapon fire; they were taking no automatic weapons, Anderson said.

He sensed that it was not an ambush; you trip an ambush with a full volley of automatic weapons fire—to get the maximum surprise firepower and effect, you don't trip it with a few shots from an M-1 rifle; the fact that the sniper had fired so quickly, Anderson thought, meant that there was probably one man alone who wanted to seem like more than one man. But damn it, he thought, you never really know here, you tried to think like them and you were bound to get in trouble: you thought of the obvious and they did the unique. He brought his squad to the canal bank, and two more bullets snapped near them. *Ping, snap. Ping, snap.*

He told one of the Viets to go above him on the canal bank, and one to stay below him, and one to stay behind him as he waded the

canal. They were to cover him as he crossed, and they were not to cross themselves until he was on the other side; he didn't want all four of them bogged down in mid-canal when they found out there was an automatic weapon on the other side. They nodded to him. Do you understand me, he asked in Vietnamese. He turned to one of them and asked him to repeat the instructions. Surprisingly the Vietnamese repeated the instructions accurately.

"The Lieutenant swims?" the Viet added.

"The Lieutenant thinks he swims," Anderson said, and added, "do you swim?"

The man answered: "We will all find out."

Anderson waited for a third burst of fire, and when it came, closer this time, he moved quickly to the canal bank and into the water, sinking more than waist high immediately. As he moved he kept looking for the sniper's hiding place; so far he could not tell where the bullets were coming from. He sensed the general direction of the sniper, but couldn't judge exactly where the sniper was. He was all alone in the water, moving slowly, his legs struggling with the weight of the water and the suck of the filth below him. He knew he was a good target, and he was frightened; he moved slowly, as in a slow-motion dream; he remembered one of the things they had said of the VC in their last briefings. ("The VC infantryman is tenacious and will die in position and believes fanatically in the ideology because he has been brainwashed all his life since infancy, but he is a bad shot, yes, gentlemen, he is not a good shot, and the snipers are generally weak, because you see, men, they need glasses. The enemy doesn't get to have glasses. The Communists can't afford 'em, and our medical people have checked them out and have come up with studies which show that because of their diet, because their diet doesn't have as much meat and protein, their eyes are weak, and they don't get glasses, so they are below us as snipers. Brave, gentlemen, but nearsighted, remember that.") He remembered it and hoped it was true.

Ahead of him all he could see was brush and trees. Remember, he thought, he may be up in the trees: it was another one of the briefings: "Vietcong often take up positions in the tops of trees, just like the

Japanese did, and you must smell them out. Remember what I'm telling you, it may save your life. You will be walking along in the jungle, hot and dirty. And you hear a sniper, and because your big fat feet are on the ground, you think that sniper's feet are on the ground too. But you're wrong, he's sitting up there in the third story, measuring the size of your head, counting your squad, and ready to ruin your headgear. They like the jungle, and what's in the jungle? Trees. Lots of 'em. Remember it, gentlemen, smell them in the trees."

Anderson had left the briefing thinking all Vietcong were in the trees; even now as he walked, he kept his eye on the trees more than on the ground.

Behind him he heard the Viets firing now, but there was still no fire from the sniper. He reached the middle of the canal where the water was deepest; only part of his neck, his head, and his arms and weapons were above water now. He struggled forward until he reached the far side of the canal. He signaled to the Viets to hold fire, and then, holding his weapon in one hand (he did not want to lay it on the canal bank, suppose someone reached out from behind a bush and grabbed it), he rolled himself up on the canal edge, but there was still no fire. He punched through the first curtain of brush, frightened because he did not know what would be there (Raulston had once done this, pushed through and found to his surprise a Vietcong a few feet away; they had looked at each other in total surprise, and the Vietcong had suddenly turned and fled—though Beaupre in retelling the story claimed that it was Raulston who had fled, that the Vietcong had lost face by letting him escape, had lied to his superiors, and that Raulston was now listed on Vietcong rolls as having been killed in action, and that Raulston was now safe because they didn't dare kill him again).

He moved past the canal and into the dense brush, found what looked like a good position, and fired off a clip to the left, right in front of him, most of the clip to his right, and finally, for the benefit of his instructors, for Fort Benning, the last one into a tree nest. Nothing happened and he reloaded and moved forward. Then there were two little pings, still in front of him, though sounding, perhaps it was his imagination, further away. But the enemy was there, and so, encour-

aged, he began to move forward again, his senses telling him that the sniper was slightly to his right. He was alone, he had kept the others back at the canal bank; they would be no help here, for they would surely follow right behind him and he would be in more trouble for the noise they would make and for being accidentally shot from behind, that great danger of single-file patrolling; yet going like this, he sensed terribly how alone he was—he was in *their* jungle, they could see him, know of him, they could see things he couldn't see, there might be more of them. He moved forward a few yards, going slowly both by choice and necessity in the heavy brush. If there had been a clock on the ground, where he left the canal and entered the jungle, it would have been six o'clock, and he was now moving slowly toward one o'clock. He kept moving, firing steadily now. From time to time he reversed his field of fire. Suddenly there was a ping, landing near him, the sound closer, but coming from the left, from about eleven o'clock. The shot sounded closer, and more excited and frightened now, he moved quickly in that direction, feeling the brush scratch his arms and his face (he couldn't use his hands to protect his face, they were on his weapon); now he squeezed off another clip, two quick ones, three quick ones, the last three spaced out, a musical scale really.

There was no answer and he pressed forward, the jungle still around both of them. Then he was answered again, the mating call, two little pings, the VC's weapon had a lower pitch than his, and the sound—and this made him angry—was coming from the right, near one o'clock, where he had just been. He cursed under his breath, and moved quickly to his right, realizing even as he pushed ahead that he was doing a foolish thing, that he was violating all the rules he had been taught, that he was offering an American officer to a trap that he might be taken prisoner; at Benning they had warned against that, don't be captured, there was too much psychological advantage the VC could take, showing him around in the villages.

Still he pressed on, angry, frustrated. He thought the VC was mocking him, playing a game with him; you didn't do that in war, war was not a game, you didn't screw around, play jokes with rifles. He fired off another clip toward one o'clock and moved there. Then there was

a ping from the left, back at ten o'clock. He moved a little to his left, but he didn't fire. A few minutes passed while the Vietcong finally grasped his message, that Anderson for the time being was not going to fire. Finally there was a ping, from eight o'clock this time; the sniper was behind him. But he couldn't fire in that direction or he might hit one of his own men. He waited and waited and then charged toward six o'clock, ready to fire at point-blank range. But nothing happened.

Suddenly there was a ping ping from eleven o'clock. He turned and fired angrily, shouting: "Come out, you sonofabitch, come on, come on out. Fight. Come on, I'm waiting, I'm here."

He waited but nothing happened. Did he hear a giggle? He made the same challenge in Vietnamese, but it sounded foolish to him. No giggle this time. There were no more shots. He checked his watch. He had been gone ten minutes. He waited two minutes more, and nothing happened. Still angry, he went back to the canal bank, and collected the other Viets.

"Sometimes," said one of them, "Vietcong are like the pederasts. Don't feel so badly. It is their game."

Anderson nodded grimly, and they crossed the canal in single file; Anderson much taller than the Viets, his head barely above water, was amazed; just as much of them showed above water as of him.

"The war is good for the leeches in the canal," said one of the Viets, "that is all. A full meal for them today."

He nodded, and then moved back to the main path. At least they would be able to move quickly, while catching up with the rest of the unit.

Anderson came upon them quicker than he expected. They had stopped and were gathered around a very small Vietnamese. They had formed a circle and the Vietnamese was standing with his hands up and his back to a tree; Dang was standing in front of him, towering over him, and Beaupre was behind Dang, towering over him. They get smaller and smaller, Anderson thought. As he approached, he heard Dang say, "Murderer, we have caught the murderer. VC dog. The dog."

"Got to be one of theirs," Beaupre said. "Doesn't weigh more than fifty pounds. All ours weigh more than that."

Dang was in charge of the interrogation. "A Communist VC," he said to Anderson, "part of the ambush plot against us."

"He means the little scouting party you just went on," Beaupre whispered.

"Proceed with the interrogation of the Communist Vietcong prisoner," Dang told Thuong. "I will assist when necessary."

The suspect said he was Hung Van Trung.

"Of course that's his name," Beaupre told Anderson, "they all have that name, that or Trung Van Hung or Hung Van Hung." His age was fifty-eight.

"The Communist is probably lying about his age," Dang said, "these people lie about everything."

Suspect said he owned a water buffalo: "Rich bastard, eh," Beaupre said when Anderson translated, "usually they don't even own a goddamn chicken by the time we catch them."

He came from the village of Ap Xuan Thong.

"Is he a Communist? Ask him if he is a Communist." Dang shouted and the prisoner began to mumble, a rambling guttural chant which seemed half song and half prayer.

"Tell him we are interested in his relationship with Ho Chi Minh and not his relationship with Buddha," Dang said.

A corporal slapped the prisoner. He was loyal to the government, he insisted, he was sometimes a government agent.

"Knees are too bony for one of ours," Beaupre told Anderson. In fact the prisoner said he was in trouble because the local Communist cadre which was headed by Thuan Han Thuan ("How can the VC chief have the same name as our man there?" Beaupre said), suspected that he worked for the government and had taken his wife away last night when the Communists had come; when he mentioned the cadre chief's name, he paused as if expecting that this would confirm his story.

Dang asked him for his identification card, and he could produce none, and Dang slapped him. He claimed the Communists had taken it and he was slapped again. They asked him about children. He said

he had three sons, and mentioned daughters, but seemed unsure of the number. Of the sons, he said, one had died of a disease. Which disease, he was asked; the yellow disease, he answered, and they all nodded *yes, the yellow disease, that one*, though later it turned out they were unsure exactly what the yellow disease was.

"Yellow disease," Beaupre said when told, "everybody in this goddamn country's got that. How the hell can you die from it?"

Two of the other sons had served with the government forces; he believed one was dead and one was alive.

"What units?" Thuong asked, the tone of his voice reflecting his boredom with the interrogation. The prisoner said he did not know the units, but they fought against the Vietminh, he was sure of that.

"Tell him that it is not the Vietminh, it is the Vietcong," Dang said, and the corporal slapped him again.

"Now tell us what happened," Thuong said, "and try to make it as honest as you can. Show us your heart is pure."

The prisoner nodded and began: he had worked long that day and had gone to bed early. It was the rainy season and there was more to be done this year because of last year's drought.

"Ask him what he had for breakfast," Beaupre told Anderson, "go ahead. Speed up the interrogation."

The prisoner was interrupted by Thuong who told him to hurry up with the story if he wanted to live to finish it. He had gone to bed early when he was called by Thuan Van Thuan.

"Is he a neighbor?" asked Thuong.

"No, he lives three houses away," said the prisoner.

"Sweet Jesus," said Beaupre. "The prisoner said he knew it was trouble right away."

"Why," demanded Dang, "because he knew all his Communist friends were coming? All the dogs were coming?"

"No," said the prisoner, "because Thuan's voice was loud and commanding"; he stopped, and it appeared for a second that he was going to say, commanding, like the Captain's, but then he continued. Usually Thuan's voice was soft and supplicating, an attitude he did not trust because Thuan was not honest. He claimed to have an electric box, the only one in the village from which he received special mes-

sages from Saigon and Paris and Hanoi; the prisoner was sure it was a false electric box. Thuan had been arrogant and had demanded they come to a meeting; Thuan had insisted that his wife come too, which upset him since she had been sick and coughing and had finally fallen asleep, but Thuan had given them no choice and so they were taken to the center of the hamlet, where lamps had been lit, and where there were twelve visitors, all men. He knew right away they were soldiers.

"Did they have any weapons?" Thuong asked.

"I didn't see any," he said, "but he knew they were there."

"How does he know?" Dang asked, "because he is one of them."

"Because of the way the men behaved," he said, "men who have guns behave one way and men who do not behave another."

He seemed puzzled that they did not understand the distinction, and asked Thuong: "You have never talked with a man with a gun when you don't have one?"

"Good question," Beaupre said, "the sonofabitch is telling the truth."

The suspect stopped as if waiting for someone to stop him; he said the men had talked about politics and said that the long noses (he looked embarrassed at Anderson and Beaupre) were coming to the village the next day and would try to kill all the people. Then they had served tea. He himself had taken two glasses. He had wanted to take only one, but had been afraid if he took one, this might offend the Vietminh.

"Vietcong," Dang corrected, less angrily this time.

Some of the others had taken three cups.

"See how many cups he'll take from us," Beaupre said when Anderson translated this.

The next day he had been told to go north from the village, because the Americans were coming from the south, east and west, and for that reason he had slipped away and gone south. Thuong asked him about his wife; she had been kept by the Communists as a bearer and as a hostage. Thuong continued to ask questions about the enemy, and Beaupre pulled Anderson aside and told him to get on the American radio and quickly call the information in; he did not trust the

Viets; if it were left to them, the intelligence might not reach the CP until the next day.

"He was telling the truth, wasn't he?" Anderson said.

Beaupre didn't say anything for a minute. "Yes," he finally answered, "he's telling the truth. That's the worst thing about it. Makes you long for the usual ones, who've never seen a VC, never heard of the war."

He walked on a few yards. "A rock and hard place. That's where we are, between a rock and a hard place."

He felt dry and thirsty and a little nervous; he had mocked this operation from the start, and most of his fear had disappeared with the selection of Big William for the helicopters. Now he was becoming frightened again, aware of his age and the senselessness of the war—not the killing but the endless walking each day and the returning to My Tho with nothing done, nothing seen, nothing accomplished, nothing changed, just hiking each day with death, taking chances for so very little, wondering if he were going to be sold out, wondering whom you could trust. He had not distrusted people in World War II. He had been assigned to an infantry regiment and he had fought with a variety of men, some had been good soldiers, some weak, some brave, and some cowardly, some who had loved the war, and most who had hated it, but whatever, there had never been a quality of distrust. It had been simpler there, even in Germany, where you hated everyone, but once you entered the villages, you were not loved and kissed, you were not ambushed or tricked or betrayed. The distrust had begun in Korea when suddenly it was more than a matter of fighting and killing, instead it was a matter of wondering where you were going, and whose intelligence had set it up and who was paying, was it only one side: a matter of looking into the face of the man when you finally met him, and perhaps looking for too much, seeing things which didn't exist, and looking for things which had no right to exist, which probably had never existed. "Don't expect our Korean agents to have blue eyes and blond hair and friendly smiles," they had told him, "they don't. They don't look like Marines. They look like gooks because they are gooks. Don't you worry about who they are or the way they look. You let us do the worrying. All you have to do is keep the

goddamn loose change out of your pockets because it makes too much noise on cold winter nights out there, that and trust your compass and your own good common sense. We don't expect you to like the Koreans, that's not your job." But compared to this country, Korea was simple: here you began with distrust, you assumed it about everything, even things you thought you knew. Even the Americans seemed different to him now, and he trusted them less; in order to survive in this new world and this new Army, they had changed. Yes was no longer exactly yes, no was no longer exactly no, maybe was more certainly maybe.

"I think we may be getting ourselves sold out," he said, and then added to Anderson, one of the few kind things he said that day or any other, "you be a little careful now. Hear?"

There was a terrible quality of truth to what Thuong had just heard and he did not like it; he had not liked the operation from the start and he had always disagreed with Headquarters and Staff over the area. Staff called it a blue area (the Americans, he decided, loved maps even more than the French and had taught them about red, white and blue areas; the Americans loved to change the colors, to turn red into white and white into blue, to put red pins on white spots and blue pins on red spots) and blue was supposed to be secure, but Thuong had never liked the area; he did not operate there often and so he tended to accept the Headquarters' version of the area as being secure, only to find once they were in the area that it was not quite what it seemed, that it was always a little more hostile than the authorities claimed. He suspected that it was a Communist area where the guerrillas did little in the way of challenging the government and were content to rest somewhat tranquil on the surface, using it as a communications path. The Arvin recruited, Thuong remembered, few government soldiers from the area, and the young men they did take showed a higher desertion rate than might have been expected.

He walked beside the suspect, near the rear of the column. "I believe you have told us the truth," he told the prisoner.

The man did not look up at him.

"Perhaps you will be free by the end of the day," Thuong said.

"Perhaps we will all be dead by the end of the day," the prisoner said a little bitterly.

"Would you like some of my water?" Thuong asked.

The prisoner said no, but then asked if Thuong would do him a favor: "You believe me and know what I say is true." Thuong said yes, he would do the favor, if he could, depending on what it was.

"Would you tie my hands together?" the prisoner asked. "You see if they see me walking with you . . ."

"I know," Thuong said, and ordered his hands bound; the Americans, he thought, should have asked this peasant whether he thought the area was blue or red. Perhaps they should explain that it was safe to walk free, that it was blue.

"You are not from here, are you?" the prisoner asked.

"No," said the Lieutenant, "I come from the north."

"I know, but you are not like the other northerners, you are nicer than them."

"Only because you are more honest than the other southerners," he said.

Thuong trusted the man although he did not trust southerners in general; he thought of them as dishonest, a little too lazy for their own good, a little too willing to tell you what you wanted to hear, always dependent on their women to do their work (almost, he thought, a pride in this, the best man was the one whose woman worked the hardest). He thought of northerners as being more honest, although the northerners who had come south like himself were no longer particularly honest; they had to bend enough themselves in order to survive.

Thuong was thirty-one, though, like most Vietnamese, he looked younger to foreign eyes. He was slim and his face seemed almost innocent; he had been in the Government Army too long to be innocent, eight years, and all of them either as aspirant or lieutenant. His lack of advancement was no particular reflection on his ability, indeed, those few superiors who took the time to monitor his file, such as it was with more papers missing than enclosed, were surprised at the degree of achievement and ability; having achieved this surprise,

however, they did not feel obligated to increase his rank or command. Indeed the older he got, and the more papers there were in praise of him—including, dangerously American praise—the more it tended to mitigate against him; here after all was a man of ability who had not gotten ahead. Therefore, there must be something wrong, something unseen but known, something political; his superiors were in particular surprised by his father's choice of religion. His father, having associated with foreigners in the north, did not choose to convert; he worked closely with foreigners and dutifully accepted their pay and their orders, but not their religion. This was unusual for the time; there were, after all, many Vietnamese who began to dress like the French, eat like the French, and talk like the French. His father referred to them all as the "mustache-Vietnamese" in honor of their copying French-style mustaches. Thuong had once gently asked his father about this, why he had never taken their faith, and his father had said simply that he was paid for his manual contributions, not his spiritual ones. Nevertheless, he was closely associated with foreigners and during the beginning of the French war, he had continued to work for them, as much by accident as by decision (he did not particularly like them, but he had a vague feeling that since everyone else was deserting the foreigners, it was improper for him to do it as well); one of his objections after all to the French had been the contempt they had showed toward Vietnamese people and their obvious belief that all Vietnamese were cowards, to leave now would be to confirm all the worst things the French had said. When the foreigners by their stupidity, which his father could not have been expected to have foreseen, lost the war, thereby proving to the French that all Vietnamese were not cowards and making his father's original reason somewhat obsolete, it was decided to split up the family and come to the south, splitting up into small groups so that they wouldn't be stopped by the local Vietminh bands.

The way had been difficult from the start and Thuong's grandmother, who was in his charge, had nearly died from exhaustion. (Later Thuong remembered trying to find water for her, giving her all his water, and the terrible thirst that had stayed with him for days at a time. When he thought of the division of the country, he thought of his own thirst.) When they finally arrived in the south, they turned out to be among the few Buddhists who had made the trip, and were immediately placed in a camp for Catholic refugees. There they shared the difficult position of the Catholics of being unwanted immigrants in the south, without sharing either their faith or their protection.

On the basis of his father's connections, he had managed to attend a military school, after first lingering on the waiting list for a year and a half. There he quickly discovered that he was a northerner in the south, a Buddhist among Catholics, and thus at almost any given time lacked the proper credentials. The southerners did not trust him because he was a northerner, the Catholics did not trust him because he was a Buddhist. In a country shorn of idealism and reeking of cynicism and opportunism, he was an object of suspicion. So he remained a lieutenant; as they remained suspicious of him, so he in turn became distrustful and cynical about them. He accepted the legacy of being his father's son with the same fatalism, largely because he could think of no real alternative to it and because if it offered nothing else, it offered him a certain sense of privacy and individualism. He went along with their rules but he tried to remain himself. He envied the Communists their self-belief, their ideology, their certainty, even their cruelty; the Catholics, their convictions and connections; the Americans, their intensity and idealism; and his father, his gentleness and enduring innocence (his father, embarrassed and uneasy and unworldly, periodically would ask him if he *had* to be a soldier, wasn't there something else he could do; his father knew, of course, that it paid well . . .); he doubted what he did and he suspected that the war would probably be lost. It was not that he wished to be on the other side—that would be easy to do, a short walk away during an operation—nor that he thought the other side more just: the Communists, after all, had killed an uncle, just as the French had stupidly managed to kill a cousin, wiping out a village (until then pro-French) as the Vietminh had planned for them to do. The Vietminh side was as cruel as the French, and lacked only the corruption of the French.

He suspected that ten years of power would improve their sense of corruption (depending, he thought, on the degree of success of their system; they would need a certain amount of success to be corrupt. If their system failed, they could retain their integrity). The danger of going over, he thought, would not be that he had been fighting them all these years and had killed many of their people (they, unlike the Arvin, would have real records and they would know who he was, and who he had killed); nor that after the minimal comfort of My Tho, with its soda pop and iced beer, that life would be too rigorous. It was simply that he knew he was too cynical for the passion and commitment their life took. To gain religion in Vietnam, he thought, you must start very young; to retain it, he thought, you have to be very lucky.

So he did his best at being a lieutenant. He told Anderson, the young American, that he was twenty-five instead of thirty-one in order to avoid embarrassing the young American; Anderson had been surprised, he had thought Thuong much younger. Thuong took a certain limited pride in what he did; more, almost in what he did not do, in that he did not play the game of promotion and did not attach himself like a barnacle to his superior officers, did not call in prolonged artillery barrages on villages before the assault. But the dominant feature of his life remained his fatalism. As his father had somehow made these fatal flaws, deciding at one strange moment to keep a false sense of integrity (false, thought Thuong, because both he and his father had made so many other demeaning decisions and accepted so much other fraud during their lifetimes), Thuong had continued relentlessly and recklessly down the same deserted path: there had been, after all, chances to convert. Others did; it had been suggested to him. There were many new Catholics in his class at the Academy, and now several were captains, and one was a major; but there was for him in conversion a sense of surrender, he had admired the Catholics when they were the minority in the north, but now that they had come to the south they had changed. What had struck him as quiet courage, now often seemed to him to be arrogance, and the converts were inevitably the worst.

So he continued his own way: he did not desert because it would hurt his parents (and also because it would make no difference to him) and so his life had made him a very old lieutenant. The particular reward that he now enjoyed for his fatalism was Captain Dang. The Captain was a year younger than Thuong and had been in the army for a shorter time, and was soon to be a major, according to Dang himself. He was well connected in Saigon and was aware of this; he visited Saigon frequently, and he often referred to the dinners and parties he had just attended. He frequently praised Thuong (in front of Thuong, implying that he had also praised Thuong in those same great halls); he talked of promotion for Thuong, something, Thuong was virtually sure, if it ever came, would come in spite of Dang. Dang did not know the name of anyone in the unit below the rank of corporal; he cheated on the ranks, regularly turning in more men than he actually had, failing to report losses (the advantage being that he was not reprimanded for losing men, and at the same time continued to draw their pay. The result was that the company which should have been understrength by ten men was usually understrength about two dozen, and the pressure on the men was even greater than it should have been). Thuong had compensated for this in part by commandeering an extra light machine gun from a friend in another company: the company had lost it, then captured it back in a long battle with the Vietcong battalion. Since it had already been reported lost, it was surplus on the rolls and Thuong had been owed a major favor by his friend—he had lent them three men during a key inspection. Thuong was careful to pay as little attention as possible to Dang's corruption; Dang, indeed, was convenient for Thuong. He fitted Thuong's own view of what an officer was, what the system was, and made his own lack of promotion easier to bear; it would have been more bitter were Dang a real soldier. But for two years and a half now, he had despised Dang over one incident. It was a time just before the American helicopters had arrived with their remarkable ability to bring in reinforcement, and there was still a terrible isolation to battle: you were hit and you stayed there alone and fought it out. There had been an ambush, a brief and bitter one, and Thuong at first had been paralyzed like everyone else, sure that he was going to

die there; but he had in those first minutes seen something he would never forgive and never forget (particularly since when he saw it, he expected it to be one of the last things he ever saw): Dang taking off his officer's pips. If you are going to wear the pips in the great halls of Saigon, he thought, you must wear them in the U Minh forest.

If I Die in a Combat Zone

Tim O'Brien

1973

ARRIVAL

First there is some mist. Then, when the plane begins its descent, there are pale gray mountains. The plane slides down, and the mountains darken and take on a sinister cragginess. You see the outlines of crevices, and you consider whether, of all the places opening up below, you might finally walk to that spot and die. In the far distance are green patches, the sea is below, a stretch of sand winds along the coast. Two hundred men draw their breath. No one looks at the others. You feel dread. But it is senseless to let it go too far, so you joke: there are only 365 days to go. The stewardess wishes you luck over the loudspeaker. At the door she gives out some kisses, mainly to the extroverts.

From Cam Ranh Bay another plane takes you to Chu Lai, a big base to the south of Danang, headquarters for the Americal Division. You spend a week there, in a place called the Combat Center. It's a resortlike place, tucked in alongside the South China Sea, complete with sand and native girls and a miniature golf course and floor shows with every variety of the grinding female pelvis. There beside the sea you get your now-or-never training. You pitch hand grenades, practice walking through mine fields, learn to use a minesweeper. Mostly, though, you wonder about dying. You wonder how it feels, what it looks like inside you. Sometimes you stop, and your body tingles. You feel your blood and nerves working. At night you sit on the beach and