

Follow the life of Nelson Bennett as he goes from very successful salesman to highly decorated Army combat pilot in Vietnam, to two-star general, to multimillionaire jet setter-to a drunk, broke, and homeless derelict who ends up spending almost three years in a federal psychiatric prison hospital. A near death experience in Vietnam left Nelson an alcoholic with chronic PTSD. Join him as he reveals his compelling and surprising story.

I VISITED HEAVEN BUT LIVED IN HELL

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I Visited Heaven But Lived in Hell

**A Wounded Warrior, A Failed Life
The War Rages On**

"This is the most fascinating book I ever read."

"I would refer this book to any person who can handle the emotionally charged work."



Nelson Peregoy

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Authors note: I have made this autobiographical novel as accurate as possible to keep the storyline parallel to the way I remember it. All the names have been changed and no reference should be made or implied to any actual person or place.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Death Calls In Vietnam	1
Chapter 2: The Start Of It All	39
Chapter 3: Part Time Jobs and Frogs	66
Chapter 4: How Many Roses to Get Laid?	104
Chapter 5: Choose An Aircraft to Die In	134
Chapter 6: Returning From Nam.....	164
Chapter 7: I Plan To Resign But, The Government Has Other Plans	201
Chapter 8: Pentagon Duty - What a Bizarre Twist!	221
Chapter 9: I Want No More Stars	238
Chapter 10: Sobering up	267
Chapter 11: Screw It, I'll Just Get Rich	289
Chapter 12: A Tragic Price for Peace of Mind	329

Chapter 1

Death Calls In Vietnam

It was raining straight down like a cow pissin' on a flat rock. I had no way of knowing if it was my night to die.

It was monsoon season and the rain was relentless.

“You’re cleared for takeoff, Quiet Three. Go, Super Spook and protect us, y’all hear.”

“Roger that, Phu Bai tower. Quiet Three’s on the roll.”

Pushing the throttles forward to full power I felt the aircraft shudder, doing its takeoff dance like a wild animal straining against a harness. Then, releasing the brakes, the thrust plastered us back against the Martin Baker ejection seats as the giant propellers cut into the air and hurled us down the runway. My takeoff roll number three hundred and seven was underway.

“Quiet Three, Phu Bai tower. Contact north area departure on channel three, now.”

I engaged the mike button on my control stick again and responded, “Quiet Three going to channel three. If we’re lucky, we’ll see you in a few, tower.”

When the airspeed reached one hundred and forty knots, I eased the control stick back and after using four thousand feet, I carefully finessed the aircraft off the runway. The Mohawk was a short takeoff and landing aircraft “STOL.” When it was low

Nelson Perego

on fuel and not very heavy, it would jump off the runway in less than a thousand feet, climb six thousand feet a minute straight up and land on a six-hundred-foot strip. Load it with three thousand pounds of jet fuel and it became a slug. Once off the runway, I had to quickly get the landing gear up to reduce the drag and then do a slow climb to altitude. I raised the flaps and pulled the power back a little to climb power. Eighteen-year-old Spec 4 Jerry Thompson, my infrared photography systems operator, commonly called a *tech*, was sitting in the cockpit beside me.

The OV1 Mohawk surveillance system was an ultra high resolution infrared photographic system that was capable of looking through the jungle cover. The monitor in the cockpit showed a map of terrain directly below the aircraft. This helped us identify enemy troops, trucks, sampans, and storage areas even though they were covered by jungle growth. The one big-time disadvantage of this system was that its optimum efficiency was fifty feet above the ground. This, of course, was not conducive to pilot longevity.

“Systems coming on L-T,” Jerry said. Jerry sat a short six inches to my right.

“Shit, I hate that. If the system didn’t work we could abort this mission stay home and drink whiskey, Jerry.”

Even though I had just been promoted to First Lieutenant three days earlier, I had already picked up the nickname L-T, short for lieutenant. The Army graced me by promoting me three ranks after my three hundredth mission.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

It was 2:33 in the morning, June 6, 1966. It would take eleven minutes to cross the DMZ into the North. The clouds were always so close to the ground our heads were in them when we walked.

“L-T, the rain may let up a little when we cross the Z”

“I God damn hope so.”

Jerry came back on the intercom and said, “By the way L-T, any word on your rotation home?”

I pushed my mike button and said, “I’ve decided not to go home, Jerry. I’m gonna apply for citizenship. Think I’ll just get me a little patch of jungle heaven and start a monkey farm when the war’s over.”

“That’s too funny, LT. This is a nice place to visit but I don’t think I’d want to live here. Seriously, whatever happened to the hundred missions and you’re out deal?”

I smirked and said, “Jerry, forever it’s been one hundred and you go home, right? Well, somewhere around the hundred and seventy mark I got notified, just like we all did, that all the pilots in the unit are frozen in assignment. No available replacements, the orders said. I think the Gods are pissed at Mohawk jockeys. Doesn’t matter, it’s a nice warm feeling to realize you’re needed. Know what I mean?” I laughed.

“How many you got, anyway?”

“Tonight is three zero seven and climbing. A few more and I can get fries with it.” We both had a big laugh.

Nelson Peregoy

In a moment Jerry came on again. “Shit, Sir, that sucks.”

“Jerry, the official word now seems to be silence. I think everybody in the Department of the Army at the Pentagon is somewhere in a bathroom stall jacking off.”

It didn't make any difference how many, after a hundred or so we were all numb with fear and the fear was all consuming. After long enough, it permeated every cell in the body. It was total. While we were in combat, we lived in a drug-like fog, moving like an endless wheel trying to find a way through a maze or hanging onto a fraying rope and watching it unravel.

Every twenty-four hours was like the twenty-four hours preceding it. Get out of bed at 2:00 in the afternoon, breakfast next, spend the next hour performing a preflight of the aircraft, flight briefing at 10:00 p.m., break for dinner then back to meticulous flight planning until launch time, usually around 2:00 a.m. If you were lucky enough to get back on the ground then it was flight debrief and head for the Johnnie Walker scotch. Drink until you passed out and then get up the next afternoon and do it all again.

I never had much use for alcohol. In fact I only drank it a few times and never anything stronger than beer or champagne. Unfortunately, that changed when I flew my first low-level night combat mission over North Vietnam. It must have been five a.m. when I finished debriefing and left the flight line; the sky was starting to lighten and the rain was still coming down in sheets. I crossed the mud street to my hooch, soaking wet and so cold and tired I couldn't stop trembling. When I opened the door to my hooch I heard, “Welcome, my man, how does it feel not being a virgin anymore?”

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

My hooch mate, Jimmy Bill Hale, a tall lanky Mississippi redneck, was soaking up his umpteenth shot of scotch. Breakfast, he called it. Jimmy Bill drank at least a quart of scotch every day, including before and after his mission. He always said, “I don’t drink at all on takeoff or landing, I’m afraid I’ll spill it.”

I said, “Hey, man, how about I borrow some of that goon juice—just enough to calm my nerves, you know.”

“See! You see!” he yelled, slapping his palm on his thigh. “I told you you’d come to love old Johnny. Get after it, boy.”

He passed me a half full quart bottle of Johnny Walker Red. As I took the bottle I looked up and said, “Father, forgive me.”

I took a long swig and said, “Shuee. Shit Jimmy Bill that stuff burns like fire, all the way down to my fucking toes, man. Damn.”

“Yeah, well, just trust old Jimmy Bill, you’ll learn to love that pain. Just think of it as liquid sunshine. You remember what the sun is, don’t you?”

“I don’t know, man, that’s some vile shit.”

“Yeah? Well you can hate the taste, but you’ll love the feelin’.”

I turned up the bottle again. I couldn’t get enough, fast enough. I don’t remember the rest, but when I woke up the next morning two things had happened. First thing I knew about immediately; I had a headache bad enough to kill a large mule and a sick

Nelson Peregoy

feeling in my gut accompanied by hot and cold sweats, like a female ape in high menopause.

The second thing that had happened, I didn't find out about for several years—I was set out to be an instant alcoholic. From that moment on and for many years, I drank to pass out. It was a nightly escape—a guaranteed way to stop the demons from coming and a blessed release from the fear. Alcohol provided a protection from reality. I know the scotch numbed me to the insanity around me.

The insanity was everywhere. The United States government and its entire population—as well as the U.S. and foreign press—were all made insane by this unwanted war. The Vietnamese people and the U.S. soldiers who fought in Vietnam were also totally insane.

When it all started in the early sixties, it was a wonderful feeling to think we were liberating a population dominated and suppressed by Communism. That quickly changed. Those of us who were in Vietnam felt alone and abandoned. We were sent to Vietnam to do an honorable job, but the world branded us dishonorable for doing it. American soldiers felt lower than dung.

The U.S. government actually didn't know how to get loose from the problem. For over ten years, the governments sacrificed over fifty-four thousand lives to the false altar of South Vietnam.

Meanwhile, we were fed a generous daily dose of hate in the press; not just from the U.S. press but our allies, too. They said our entire country hated the baby-killing soldiers who were

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

serving in Vietnam. Hell, we knew firsthand the Vietnamese people hated us; all they wanted was to be left alone to eat their rice. The truth was that ninety-nine percent of the Vietnamese population was illiterate; they didn't know or care who we were, or who ruled their country for that matter. How many times had I heard, "Go home, GI." It was the only English phrase most of them knew.

The only people who were happy that we were there were the smattering of the South Vietnamese hierarchy and the elite who were reaping great power and riches from the U.S. involvement. And, of course, the barmen and whores loved us for the green dollars we brought.

During my nineteen months in the 116th Arial Surveillance Airplane Company we lost thirteen of thirty one pilots. Each time a pilot went down, of course, an observer went in with him. I learned in flight school there was a condition known as the Invincible Syndrome. I believed that many pilots were lost in Vietnam as a result of this. When a combat pilot flew against anti-aircraft fire of any kind for an extended period without getting hit, he felt invincible. So he'd take greater and greater risks until he was finally shot down.

In Vietnam, it was not a matter of whether or not we would die, it was simply a matter of which night. Like I said—I had no way of knowing if this night was my night.

"Damn, LT, this is some shit weather. The friggin' gooks ought to be home making babies stead of blowin' SAMs at us poor bastards. After all we're only here to win the hearts and minds of these people—right?"

Nelson Peregoy

“Yeah, well you just keep your head in that scope between your legs; the clouds are so heavy I can’t see shit out the front.”

The OV1 Mohawk was a butt-ugly twin turbine aircraft that looked like a praying mantis and had three vertical stabilizers on its tail. The standing joke was that it took a strong pilot to handle three pieces of tail at one time. There were two ejection seats side-by-side in the cockpit; we never expected them to function properly. The Mohawk carried a two-man crew; the pilot sat in the left seat and the tech in the right one. There was a center console that held the throttles, flaps, gear, and the emergency release of the extra fuel tanks under the wings.

The Mohawk flew thousands of low-level night missions in North and South Vietnam. It was flown in support of fighter and bomber aircraft. Mohawk pilots were the dumb ass numb nuts who went in low, identified the target and reported its exact location to the bombers. All of the missions of the 116th were low-level night missions and all were over North Vietnam. We mainly concentrated on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the main supply route from China and North Vietnam.

There was no way to identify either the aircraft or the crew. There were no markings on the aircraft or our flight suits. There were no numbers on the aircraft’s black boxes. We even flew with no dog tags and no guns. Basically, we were not there.

Exactly eleven minutes after takeoff we crossed the DMZ into the North. Jerry said, “Feet wet.” That meant we were over water.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

“Okey-dokey, my man,” I said. “Let’s get on the deck and out of these damn clouds.”

“L-T, we gonna hug the beach until we get to our initial point, right?”

“Yeah, I plan to stay on the deck until we’re due east of our target area then up and over the pass and down the valley quick. Shoot the picture, then up and out again. If we’re lucky, they won’t know we’re coming until we been there.”

“Yeah, well good luck on that, L-T.”

“Jerry, you just find the target when I put us over the river. I want a perfect picture of that dock.”

Flying at two hundred eighty knots, fifty feet above the jungle in the mountains in the dark, produced an instant pucker factor.

“Jerry, my ass is so tight you couldn’t drive a greased flax seed up it with a sledge hammer.”

I said a short prayer, pushed the stick forward and felt the aircraft accelerate as we descended out of the clouds. My radio altimeter was at thirty-five feet.

Jerry said, “Damn, Sir, I sure hope the friggin weather is better up there where we’re going.”

I could see the spray from the white caps below us. As I approached the beach I turned north and delicately nursed the aircraft up to fifty feet so we were skimming the bottom of the clouds.

Nelson Peregoy

At the 10:00 p.m. target briefing we were told our target was a North Vietnamese Army convoy loading supplies from sampans along the Ue River. It was ninety kilometers southwest of Hanoi.

I said to Jerry, “My plan is to go north up the coast then turn west just before reaching the small hamlet of Thanh Hoa. That puts us twenty clicks northwest to the Lue Pass, right?”

“Okay, L-T, we going to stay on the deck all the way?”

“You bet we are. That keeps us below the SAMS. When we get to the pass we’ll climb to four thousand feet to cross through it.”

Okay, L-T. Remember that pass is narrow as hell and there are eight thousand footers for seventy-five clicks either side of the pass.”

The mountain range ran north and south and the only cut through it was the Lue Pass.

“Right. We’ll stay tight on course and altitude. We damn sure don’t want to bump into any granite clouds up there. Once through the pass, we’ll immediately drop down to the valley floor and when we cross the river turn south two clicks to our target.”

Although it had lightened a little where we were, we had been briefed that the entire target area was soaked in with clouds that stretched all the way to the ground in the mountains.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

The headphones in our helmets became very quiet while we both pondered where we were and what the hell we were doing there.

The silence lasted until I heard Jerry say, “Okay, L-T, we’re just about to Than Hoa. Think we should pick up heading two-eight-zero for fourteen minutes then climb like hell to get over the pass?”

“Roger that, coming left to two eight zero now,” I said as I punched the stop clock on the dash and set it for fourteen minutes. When it started flashing I knew we should be at the pass. As we left the coast behind, the clouds seemed to have a few light spots in them but the weather was still crappy. I held my altitude at fifty feet.

I heard my controller transmitting, “Quiet Three, this is High Flyer, we have you on radar. You are released from North Control at this time.”

“Roger that, High Flyer. Thank you for your assistance.” I knew that High Flyer was a command and control aircraft probably at thirty-five thousand feet. Those aircraft flew out of Thailand and stayed on station circling for twelve or more hours at a time. There was always one over the South China Sea directing all the traffic below.

“Three’s turning west for Lue Pass.”

“Hey, good buddy, we got bad boy flight of two F4s for your cap cover tonight. They’re over you now at angles fifteen. Say hello, Bad Boy One.”

Nelson Peregoy

“Bad Boy One, here. What you say? Quiet Three, we gonna do some damage tonight or what?” This son of a bitch sounded as excited as if he had a new girlfriend. These guys got off on destroying things.

“You betcha, Bad Boy. Just bring along that big stick and we’ll find you something to hit with it.”

“Three, you want to be real careful after you cross the pass, the gooks got rail mounted one-zero-fives around there.”

“Roger that, Bad Boy,” I answered.

The North Vietnamese Army dug caves back into the mountain sides and put down railroad tracks to move their big guns in and out of the caves. No matter how much they were bombed, they simply took bulldozers, pushed the caves open, laid down a few new tracks and they were open for business again. When a one-zero-five tracer round was coming at you at night, it looked like a basketball that was burning bright orange. Not a nice sight.

The North Vietnamese used proximity fuses on the rounds that exploded when they got within five feet of a target. When the shell exploded it spewed thousands of pieces of shrapnel in a large arc. We usually flew too low for surface-to-air missiles and we were mostly too quick for ground fire from Charlie’s rifles. Whether they were shooting up or they were on the mountains shooting down, these track-mounted one-zero-fives were the biggest threat to the Mohawks.

“Quiet Three, this is High Flyer. We’ve got another flight of F4s just ten to the south and a third flight forty clicks out.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

They're over Laos at this time. We're going to hold them all for your words. Headquarters wants this target real real bad."

"Roger that, High Flyer. It God damn sounds like they want it bad; hell, there's enough air cover to start World War Three"

"Three, this is Bad Boy. Say your ETA to the pass."

"We have the pass in sight, we're climbing to cross it now. Should be on the other side in two." The stop clock startled me as it began squawking; the fourteen minutes were up.

"Roger that, Three. Bad Boy is going to make a look-see run down the other side now. We're coming out of the clouds"

The flight of F4s flew fast dead-ending right over my cockpit as it went down the back side of the pass.

"You know, Bad Boy, we really don't mind if Charlie don't want to come out and play tonight."

"Roger that, Three."

We heard a new guy check in. "Hey you guys, Thunder Flight here. Please don't start the party without us. We're peddling fast as we can to get there—four minutes max."

"High Flyer here. Is everybody blacked out down there?"

I transmitted, "Three is lights out and starting down the back side of the pass now. We should be over the river in zero-three minutes. We'll be making our run north to south and on the deck."

Nelson Peregoy

“Bad Boy, flight roger that we’re blacked out and we’re in the clouds at angles ten.

“Thunder Flight is blacked out and descending through seven thousand now. We’re in the clouds, too.”

As my aircraft descended on the back side of the pass, we were popping in and out of the clouds at six hundred feet above the ground. I had to descend to twenty feet above the jungle since the target was thirty feet below the canopy. I was descending at a sharp angle and building all the airspeed I could. I reached over and pushed the throttles to full power; the engines screamed. The airspeed indicator was on three hundred and twenty knots and climbing. The rate of descent showed thirty-seven hundred feet per minute as I continued to descend to the valley floor then turned south and followed the river looking for the loading docks that were our targets.

On the intercom I said to Jerry, “We’ll be at twenty feet; we’ll take our shots, pull up, and get the hell out of there ricky-tick quick.

Jerry came on the intercom and said, “Man, I hate this part, L-T.”

I keyed my mike. “Just be cool, son. We’ll be out of there in thirty seconds.”

“God, I hope so L-T, I’m nervous as a whore in church.”

There in the valley the bottoms of the clouds were ragged at about eleven hundred feet. It had finally stopped raining.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

“Okay, LT. We’re on course, two klicks to the target. Cameras on. Klick-and-a-half now. One klick now, LT”

“Okay, High Flyer, we’ll be dead on the motherfucker.”

I transmitted, but before I could finish I saw the first tracer rounds crisscrossing in front of the aircraft. Two guns on either side of our flight path. They were way off target but coming closer. I was actually almost flying into them. It was so black, there was no way they could see us. They were just throwing the one-zero-fives down through the clouds; they’d heard the aircraft overhead. My instinct was to pull off, abort and try to get the hell out, but we were so close I persisted in the target run. Maybe I could get it.

Suddenly I saw a new row of tracers. I realized there were shells coming down on us from our right front. Then I heard Bad Boy leader screaming through the headset in my helmet.

“Break right—break right! Quiet Three, they’re shooting them down at you from the side of the mountain. You better get out of there. We’re rolling in hot to suppress. Oh shit, man, flares! Flares!”

None of us expected the flares. Charlie almost never used them because they lit up the world and made them sitting ducks, too. In an instant, the burning orange basketballs were walking right up to my airplane. I realized that I would never get the target that night. I pulled off to the right just meters from the target.

I heard Thunder Leader and Bad Boy both screaming in my helmet. I heard Jerry say, “Let’s break it off, LT.” I heard High Flyer screaming, “Abort, abort!”

Nelson Peregoy

The world was glowing under the clouds and the radios were going crazy. Seeing Thunder Flight leader's bombs exploding a few thousand yards to our right front, I knew that was my escape route. The basketballs were close now and I was pulling back on the control stick climbing and turning hard right. I felt the G forces pulling me down into the ejection seat. Climbing, climbing to get into the clouds. We could beat these bastards. We were still very fast from the dive and at this airspeed we could make a maximum climb. God, just give me twenty seconds, I'll be in the clouds. Once we got into the clouds where we couldn't be seen, we'd be safe. But it was not to be.

"Get out of there, Three! Climb, climb, climb!" I think it was Thunder Flight leader screaming in my headset. There was chaos on the radios. Everybody was screaming at once.

Then Bad Boy leader said, "We gonna blow their little fucking heads off for you Three, over."

"What the...?" Suddenly there was a blinding flash on the right front of the cockpit, then an unbelievably loud, booming explosion and the aircraft shook violently. The round exploded close, real close, like right at the aircraft and it tore hell out of us. The canopy was blown away and the air was rushing through the cockpit. It was like standing up in the slipstream at three hundred knots. There was blood everywhere and Jerry had slumped over in his shoulder harness. I instinctively pulled the control stick full back and extended the maximum rate climb. I remember the aircraft was just a hundred feet above the valley floor and I was climbing at almost a hundred feet a second.

I felt a burning in my right shoulder. I died. Suddenly everything slowed.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

It was all slow motion, I could see Jerry covered in blood and I thought he was dead, too. But Jerry couldn't be dead, he was still bleeding. Dead men don't bleed. I felt a weight in my lap. I looked down; Jerry's right arm and his hand were lying in my lap. His watch was still on his wrist. The shrapnel had completely severed Jerry's right arm at his shoulder.

In slow motion still, I was floating out of the cockpit. No, there I was. I was still in the cockpit, and I was still flying the airplane. Everything suddenly became totally silent. I didn't hear the radios any more. I didn't hear the engines or the wind. I watched from outside as I lifted Jerry's arm. It was heavy and bloody. I threw it at his feet on the floor of the cockpit. I could see that the airplane was climbing really fast; it was going almost straight up. Airspeed was two ninety knots. As I watched myself and Jerry in the cockpit, I realized I was moving farther from the aircraft! I was scared. Where was the airplane? I had lost sight of the airplane.

I was cold—very, very cold—shivering. Everything was silent, and I was falling. It was freezing cold and dark and I was falling head over heels in a big tunnel. I had no control. I was falling farther and farther into this giant tunnel. Everything was slowing down again—almost stopping. I realized I was in a blizzard of raging wind.

I saw a pinpoint of light far away. I squinted to be sure it was real. I was moving toward the light. I wanted to be there, but it was all so slow and so cold, and so far away. My shoulder was bleeding where the shrapnel hit me. I was getting closer to the light. The sleeve on my flight suit was soaked with blood from my shoulder.

Nelson Peregoy

Suddenly Jerry was talking to me. "It'll be all right, L-T."

I couldn't see Jerry. Where was he? I tried to answer him but no words came out. I wanted to say, "Jerry we're going to get out of this but I couldn't make the words come. I was scared. Was I dead?"

As I got closer to the light I started to feel warmer air. It had been a long journey but I was going into a lighted, warm, wonderful place. Rays of light were shining through the misty warm air. It was beautiful. I was safe there, I was standing and looking for Jerry. I couldn't see him anywhere.

This place was the end of my journey. It was a place of peace, of grace, of total wellbeing. I was resting. I was very tired.

I stayed there for what seemed like forever. I lived there. It was my place. I was happy and I had total peace of mind and body. I missed Jerry. I wished I could find him. I wondered if he was all right.

My peace and the silence were suddenly broken by a woman's soft voice. I didn't want to hear what she was saying to me. The voice was kind and caring. Then I heard her say again, "Nelson, you must go back now. You must return to where Jerry is. He needs you very much."

She continued, "You must return. We are not ready for you here, yet. You have much to do before you come here. Please go back now."

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

“No.” I resisted. “I’ll stay here. I don’t want to go back. I’m safe. I’ve come all this way and it took so long. I’ve been here a long time and this is my place now. This is my home.”

I resisted for a very long time. I was afraid and shaking all over. I didn’t want to go back into that tunnel and be that cold again. But no matter how much I didn’t want to, I found myself returning to the tunnel. It was exactly like before. Slow motion; almost no movement. I was falling uncontrollably and it was freezing cold again. I was crying. “Oh God, please help me.” The wind was raging and the noise was unbearable. I was there forever and ever. Would it never end? I was so very afraid.

As suddenly as I had left, I found myself back. Back in my ejection seat in the cockpit, still holding the control stick full back and climbing fast. I was instantly hyper-alert. I could see Jerry still slumped over, held in the seat by his seat belt and shoulder harness. He was still alive because he was still bleeding. His blood loss had been slowed by his shoulder harness pressing against the bloody stump of a shoulder. The more Jerry slumped forward in his seat the more restricted his bleeding was.

The radios were crazy again. I could hear the other pilots screaming in my headset, and I could see the flaming orange basketballs still coming from one gun above me. I could see the air caps bombs exploding on the jungle floor below. The Napalm was strafing the jungle and everything in it. Burn the bastards. The F4s were throwing everything they had at the big guns. I could see the cloud cover above and I was still climbing at full throttle. If I could just get into those clouds. My mind was racing; I was holding a hundred thoughts in my mind at the

Nelson Peregoy

same time. It was like twenty movie reels on fast forward all playing at the same time.

I looked at my rate of climb indicator; it was still pegged at six thousand feet a minute. My airspeed was still two hundred and ninety knots. My God, how could this be? It seemed like I had been gone forever. I slowly mouthed the words, "What the fuck." Christ, my radio altimeter showed I'd climbed only forty feet. It had to be a mistake.

Although it seemed like a lifetime, I couldn't have been out but a millisecond. This was all some supernatural shit. Was it actually happening?

Everything was racing at warp speed; we were finally into the clouds. Our altitude was almost a thousand feet. It had only been eleven seconds since I had been hit.

I made it to the clouds but that looked like pretty much the end of it. Moments later the momentum started to run out. The airplane was getting sloppy and unresponsive. I had lost all power on the right engine. The big four-bladed propeller was wind milling, adding resistance instead of thrust.

I could see where the shrapnel had taken chunks out of the blades. I felt the tip of the prop come off and the engine shuttered violently. The engine fire warning light was flashing. The prop tip hit the tail of the airplane and the controls jerked. I was losing airspeed rapidly. Instinctively I reached up and feathered the right prop, then shut off the fuel to the right engine. I pulled the fire extinguisher handle. Thank God the fire light went out.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

The plane didn't want to fly on one engine. My airspeed was now down to one hundred and forty knots. The external wing tip fuel tanks were still full; each had two hundred gallons of jet fuel in it, each gallon weighing six pounds two ounces.

Again, training drove instinct as I reached over and pulled the release handle to jettison them and get rid of that weight. The tanks released immediately and they fell away from the wings. As they did I had more control. Hell, I was twenty five hundred pounds lighter. Even with that help I knew it was too late. Too low. Too slow. Too little power. The aircraft stalled and started to fall. It started spinning right into the dead engine. Altitude was falling fast.

“Quiet Three.” I heard Bad Boy Leader screaming. “We’ve lost you. Did you climb into the clouds? Where are you, boy?”

Then High Flyer. “Quiet Three, this is High Flyer. If you hear me, come up on guard channel.”

Shit, I was going to have to eject and at best become a prisoner of war; it was that or crash into the jungle and burn in the crash. There was still a hundred and fifty gallons of fuel in the main tank. What about an explosion? What about Jerry? I was in big trouble. This was my night to die.

I'd been taught in training, about instinctive reactions when faced with fight or flight. No matter how much training, though, I had no idea it would be like this. At this point, neither fight nor flight was an option.

When the aircraft came spinning out of the clouds the spin was almost flat. The chaos in my headphones was incredible; I

Nelson Peregoy

couldn't tell who was transmitting. I had to force myself to keep my thinking rational. I had to regain perspective.

I had to get the aircraft back under control. I'd trained for hours in flight school to recover from spins. I had to build airspeed to pull it out. I pushed the stick forward and pointed the nose of the aircraft straight down. The airspeed built rapidly. The jungle was coming up fast. I thought about ejecting Jerry but I knew that if I sent him out unconscious, the G forces would crush his spine. If he wasn't already dead, then death would be immediate.

Everybody was still transmitting on top of each other. I transmitted on emergency guard channel. "May Day! May Day! May Day! We're shot up bad. I'm out of control. I'm spinning in."

Bad Boy transmitted to High Flyer. His response came quick and clear. "Bad Boy has a visual on Quiet Three. He's out of the clouds and spinning through eight hundred feet."

Suddenly Thunder Flight leader was transmitting again. "Thunder Flight has a kill on one gun. Colonel Sanders would be proud of us. We cooked the motherfuckers extra crispy. Over."

With unbelievable calm I heard High Flyer say, "Everybody shut the fuck up down there. All aircraft in my control switch to guard channel and speak only when spoken to. Now. Quiet Three, will you assess your damage and situation for me, please."

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

I hadn't had time to comprehend what High Flyer said when I heard him say again quickly, "Talk to me Quiet Three. I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

I said, "Okay, High Flyer let's chat. I don't have anything better to do right now, you moron."

High Flyer replied, "Okay, let's stay cool here. You're gonna get out of this, Quiet Three."

Sure, this son of a bitch could afford to be cool. He was flying in a big comfortable aircraft high above any guns. He was sitting in a leather chair looking at a scope. He and his crew even had a pilot to chauffeur them.

"High Flyer, this is Thunder Flight. We are strafing with the last of our Napalm, then we gotta get along home."

"High Flyer transmitted back. "Roger that, Thunder Leader. You guys saved the day, oops, I mean night. You're released back to your carrier."

I was gaining control of my aircraft again. I had the spin almost stopped and was slowing the dive. I wanted to talk to Thunder Flight. "This is Quiet Three, Thunder Leader, sure wanna thank you guys for holding the Indians back, we'd be toast without you."

I had broken the spin and recovered the aircraft only a few feet before I would have hit the jungle.

Nelson Peregoy

I continued on the radio. “High Flyer, I ‘bout got this beast harnessed up. I think it may fly a little. I came so close to the jungle I scraped my ass.”

“Roger that, Quiet Three. Just have some pretty thoughts and slow your head down. Think about those nurses in the field hospital back at home plate.”

“Yeah that’s a nice picture, High Flyer. I gotta get this son of a bitch back to home plate first.”

“Three, they tell me them nursie girls love combat pilots, how is that round eye pussy anyway. Is it good stuff?”

This guy talking to me from High Flyer was a true professional. He had been trained in school to calm pilots who were in trouble. His pussy talk had worked. Just a tiny distraction helped ease me.

High Flyer was back on. “Quiet Three, talk to me, Son. What are your intentions?”

“Three here. I’ve got number two out and I’ve lost hydraulics, I’ve barely got the aircraft under control, repeat, barely under control. I’m going south down the valley staying on the deck. Around the mountains and out to the sea. I don’t have enough power to climb. I’m just able to hold altitude at this time. Over.”

“Status me on your tech, Three,” High Flyer said.

“My tech is severely wounded and unconscious; he’s lost a lot of blood. I’m not sure he’s still alive.”

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

“Roger that, Three. Just take baby steps and we’ll get you home.” High Flyer continued, “We have the cavalry coming. Nuck Flight is headed to you now and we have the Jolly Green rescue helicopters in position. They’re holding five klicks off the beach and spread from south of Hanoi clear to Da Nang.”

“Thanks, High Flyer,” I said. “I’m hope I don’t need them.”

High Flyer came on with a warning. “This is High Flyer transmitting on guard. Advisory. Advisory. All aircraft over North Vietnam be advised, we have an emergency working—repeat emergency working, south end of Vector Mountain. All aircraft should avoid this area if possible.”

I heard Nuck flight checking in. “Hello, hello, High Flyer. This is Nuck Flight leader, our location is classified.” He paused and said, “No, I didn’t mean that High Flyer, I’m just screwing with you. We’re a flight of four hanging out here, nine southwest of Vector Mountain. We’re descending through six grand at this time.”

“Roger that, Nuck. High Flyer has you on radar. Hold at two thousand, please. You are sixteen klicks west of your rendezvous point. Say hello to Quiet Three.”

“Good morning, Quiet Three, Nuck Flight here. You can send the Air Force home now that the real fighters are here.”

I transmitted. “Glad to have you here, Nuck Flight. I’m going to stay below the clouds close to the deck. This piece of shit I’m riding isn’t in perfect condition at the moment.”

Nelson Peregoy

Bad Boy Leader came on the radio. “We hate to give it to the Navy pukers but we’ve done the heavy lifting, and we’re outta go-juice. Good luck and God bless.”

Things started to calm down and I realized there was at least some chance of getting the aircraft home. I just hoped that Jerry could hold on. His harness was acting as a tourniquet and it had pretty well stopped the bleeding. Either that or he was dead.

I heard High Flyer say, “Quiet Three, we have two extra Jolly Green rescue choppers at the beach waiting for you.”

“If I get to the beach. I still can’t eject my right seater. I plan to go for broke and take him home.”

I was holding close to the tree tops because I knew that was the safest place I could be. I figured it was about twenty minutes to the sea and another ten or so to the Demilitarized Zone. My airfield was only seven kilometers south from there, and it was right on the beach.

“Quiet Three, this is High Flyer. Say your fuel stats, please.”

“I’ve dropped my pod tanks and I’ve got one thirty in main at this time. I’ll be on fumes but there’s enough since I’m only drinking on one engine.”

“Nuck Flight is rolling in south of Vector Mountain. We’re going to let the gooks have a few tons of Napalm for their marshmallows. If we can keep the little buggers busy enough they’ll stay out of your hair, Three.”

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

“Quiet Three is approaching now. I see your barn fire. I’m just south.”

“Nuck Flight has you in sight, Three. Your flight path is a good one. We’ll spread a little cheer along from here to the beach and put a little light in your life. We have plenty Napalm, we’ll make it daylight.

I was only a few miles from the beach now and I could see that the clouds had lifted over the water. Nice night for a full moon.

I heard High Flyer again now. “Quiet Three, we’ve notified North Flight Control of your situation and we told them we’ll maintain contact with you until landing. The emergency vehicles are in place at Phu Bai airfield and you’re cleared to land straight in.”

Nuck Flight did exactly what Leader said they would do, they made it daylight along my flight path. I never saw bigger Napalm blasts than these guys were laying down. I could almost feel the heat as I flew just south of their line. When I left the jungle and reached the beach I turned due south and transmitted again. “High Flyer, I’m pushing my nose right down on the sand, that’ll let the ground effect help me keep flying.”

I nudged the plane down to where the props were almost touching the sand. I felt the little bit of extra lift kick in and it lightened the controls. I had to start planning an approach and landing. I’d be at home plate in twelve minutes.

“Thank you for your help, Nuck Flight,” I said. “You and your boys can come to my weenie roast any time. We’re almost home now and all I have to do is dodge these damn fishing nets

Nelson Peregoy

the gooks are drying on poles.” The moon was so bright I had no trouble seeing them.

“We still have a few firecrackers left if you want some more light. Then you can see them nets better.”

“No thanks, Nuck. I have a handle on it now. Thanks, anyway. Over.”

“Okay, Three, Nuck flight is pulling out. We’re going home. Good luck to you Three, you’re a hell of a flyer, even if you are Army. Over and out of here.”

I knew that the emergency backup system, a tank holding five hundred pounds of high pressure air, would have to be used to blow my landing gear down at the very last minute. The drag on the airplane would be too great to continue flying if I lowered my landing gear too soon. As I approached the runway, I also knew I’d have to land at a much higher airspeed since I couldn’t extend my hydraulically-activated landing flaps. I’d been pumping most of my remaining fuel overboard trying to get as light as possible. More importantly, to minimize the danger of a fire if something went wrong on landing. The aircraft was handling a bit better as it got lighter and with the ground effect working for me, I felt pretty sure that I could land the thing. I didn’t know what shape the landing would leave us in, but at least I could get it on the ground.

High Flyer came on and it was the first time I’d heard stress in his voice.

“Quiet Three, be advised we got a problem. Phu Bai tower has notified us that the airfield is shut down. They’re under a rocket

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

attack at this time. We show you crossing the Z now. You're nine miles from the runway. Your next alternate airfield is at Da Nang. State your intentions, repeat, state your intentions, please."

"High Flyer, we've dumped out fuel. We're running on fumes. We don't have any choices. My intentions are to put this son of a bitch on the Phu Bai runway, rockets or no rockets."

"Roger that, Quiet Three. Then continue your stroll to your house."

The clouds had rolled in again and I was flying through some light rain. I could see the sky lit up over the airfield. Anytime there was a rocket attack, it was standard operating procedure to put up lots of flares to light up the entire area. That made Charlie afraid he would be seen and most of the time it would stop him from slinging rockets.

"Quiet Three, High Flyer shows you two miles from touchdown, Check gear down. Over."

"I'm holding the gear, got enough drag for now."

I could see the runway straight in front of me and what looked like an armada of emergency vehicles. There were fire trucks, crash trucks, and emergency medical vehicles. They were scattered all the way down the runway. These guys were ignoring the rocket attack and had come out in force to scrape me up when I got there.

As I crossed the perimeter of the airfield I heard, "This is Phu Bai tower on guard. We have you in sight, Quiet Three and

Nelson Peregoy

you're cleared to land. The crash trucks are standing by. Last check for gear down. Over."

I looked over at Jerry and said, "We're going to get you to the ship, boy. You just hang in." I knew he couldn't hear me. I was pretty sure he was dead. I was just yards from the end of the runway and not more than ten feet off the ground. I ran through the landing procedures that I would use. I was reaching for the emergency gear blow down handle when I sent my last transmission. "Quiet Three is blowing gear down."

I felt the landing gear come down and lock in place. I was over the end of the runway. I pulled the throttle back to cut off power to my good engine. I reached up to the overhead panel, cut the switches off and then pulled the fire extinguisher handle, just in case. My airspeed had fallen to eighty knots and the aircraft dropped like a simonized brick. It slammed onto the runway hard. This was an arrival much more than it was a landing, but at least I was down.

I quickly turned off all the electrical switches, then reached between my legs and turned my ejection seat switch off. I reached over my head and turned the second ejection seat override safety switch off. There were no brakes since they were hydraulic also. The airplane slowed and finally stopped almost to the far end of the runway. We were being surrounded by crash trucks and someone had a ladder up to the cockpit by my seat.

I knew these emergency crews were expert at pulling pilots out of cockpits and they proved it to me. As they helped me out I saw the medics working on Jerry.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

“Is he still alive?” I asked.

I didn’t get an answer and I remembered my earlier trip through the tunnel. The last thing I remembered was asking God to “please let him live.” As my feet touched the steel panel runway, I ran completely out of adrenalin and passed out cold. I learned later that when I landed the airplane only had three gallons of jet fuel left in the tank.

I came to in an operating room several hours later. I didn’t know it until then, but I had shrapnel wound in my shoulder. The doc was putting a suture in it when he said, “You’re one lucky dude, Dude. This is little more than a scratch, but this one suture will get you to the hospital in Hawaii and then home.”

“I don’t want to go to Hawaii. I want to go back to my unit. How’s my tech? Where the hell am I?”

“You’re on the Hope, and your tech is hanging in there, thanks to you. Right now he still owes you his life.”

I knew that the Hope was a giant hospital ship that cruised just off the coast of South Vietnam. It was staffed with military doctors and nurses and was capable of not only triage, but full medical treatment. The injured were flown by evacuation helicopters and treated as required. Then after being stabilized, they were picked up again and transported by helicopter to Saigon or Da Nang where they were put on an Air Force evacuation aircraft and flown to Tripler Air Force Base in Hawaii.

I got up from the operating table and reached over for the shirt of my flight suit; it was lying in a pile on the floor. As I picked

Nelson Peregoy

it up I realized it was full of bloody stains and the sleeve had been cut away.

“Think you can find me a shirt?” I asked the medic who was in the room.

“I want to catch the next chopper back if that’s okay, Doc?”

“Whatta you fucking nuts? The regulations state clearly that any injury suffered in combat is grounds to evacuate out to Tippler,” he said.

“I want to go home in the worst way, Doc, but not like this. My tour has got to be over soon and, if I make it, I’ll go home with my head up and not from some sham injury.”

“Fine, catch the next flight back, you dummy.”

“Can I see my tech?”

Just then the medic came back with a blue Navy work shirt. He handed it to me and said, “Come on, I’ll show you where his operating room is; it’s just down the passageway.”

“Right, I’ll follow you. Thanks a bunch, Doc. I’ll recommend you to all my friends.”

“Just be safe, okay?”

The medic led me down the corridor for what seemed like a mile. Finally, he said, “Here, sir. You can look in the window, but I’m afraid you can’t go in. Hell, he won’t know the

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

difference, sir. He's in bad shape, but the Doctor says he thinks he is going to make it."

I could see several people working over Jerry. I said to myself, "God, make him better."

My thoughts went back to Rucker and flight school. "Gentlemen," Colonel Tony Blevins said, "There are ten of you now; two of you will quit or be washed out of this training before the class ends. That leaves eight. Three of you eight will die in the airplane within a year. Learn to fly this airplane well, pay strict attention to your instructors. Every one of them has flown the aircraft in combat. Memorize every nut, bolt, and system on the Mohawk. Try to tame this flying machine with proficiency and knowledge. Good luck and God bless. I'm not at all sure that all of Vietnam is worth a tiny part of the price we are paying for it."

Now I knew exactly what Tony Blevins meant and I knew he was entirely correct.

I went out the flight deck door to a bright, sunshiny morning. I found a chopper on the helo pad. It was to be an hour before the next flight returned to the mainland. I went to the mess and had a cup of badly needed coffee. I really wanted a drink of whiskey, but I knew there wouldn't be any on the ship. No booze allowed onboard.

The flight back to Phu Bai seemed long, although it was only forty-five minutes. The chopper set down and dropped me off in front of my company operations shack. The ops officer was surprised to see me come back. Everyone thought I was headed home to the States.

Nelson Peregoy

When I entered my hooch, Jimmy Bill was pouring a glass of scotch. It was 10:00 in the morning; I knew it wasn't his first one of the day.

"Hey, pal, you're just in time for cocktails," he calmly said. "The rescue medics told us you were only scratched. I'm sure glad you came back. I bet twenty bucks you weren't gonna go home."

"Gee, I'm sure glad you're so happy to have me back, Jimmy Bill."

Jimmy Bill held out the scotch bottle. "Here, have a drink. Have a bunch of drinks; you'll feel better."

I did as instructed and soon I had enough in me to pass out, or go to sleep or whatever. That night I flew again.

When I went for my flight briefing at ten that night, I saw some pictures of my airplane; there were two hundred and forty shrapnel holes in it, and the right prop had a foot-long piece missing from one of the blades. That piece was actually lodged in the tail. One of the briefing officers told me I probably shouldn't go out to see it. He said he thought it would be a real downer.

Several days later I received a promotion to captain. The citation read: "For heroism in the face of the enemy."

Along with the promotion were orders to go for a six-day rest and relaxation in Australia. When Jimmy Bill found out I was going, he borrowed one of the typewriters in the ops shack and, using my orders as a model, he wrote himself one just like it.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

All he had to do was change the name and a couple of numbers and he was all set. I had showed him how to do it earlier, just the way John Mills had taught me.

We caught a hop to Saigon, boarded an Air Force transport and were soon in Sydney. We headed out for our hotel. We washed up and put on civilian clothes. As we headed for the bar, Jimmy Bill said, “Pal, you have any idea how much I want some round-eye pussy. I’m so tired of fucking gooks, I’d almost rather jack off. Well, not really, but I need a refresher here for sure.”

“Jimmy Bill, you know I just got married.”

“Yeah, well, when you’re ten thousand miles from home in a combat zone, you get a pass. Just read the small print on the bottom, that’s all you gotta do.”

“Yeah, and what does the small print say?”

“It says, ‘Approved for unlimited pleasures of the flesh, but don’t tell.’”

We had a big laugh.

Thus far I had made it without sex. I had sworn that I wouldn’t screw around on Samantha. Oh, I had played with the gooks and like every GI who ever went to South East Asia, I got a few hand jobs after a massage at the local steam and creams. But in some irrational way, I decided that was all right.

Nelson Peregoy

There were a couple or six good-looking females in the bar of the hotel. The place was a meat house. Not only was it full of women, but each one was better looking than the other.

The Aussie women were all free-spirited, outgoing and happy. They loved American GIs. They'd tell you in a hurry that Australian men were "dickheads who had the staying power of a rabbit."

Late that night the combination of too much scotch, too many willing woman, too long away from Samantha and raging hormones allowed me to justify my decision. Jimmy Bill and I ended up back at our hotel room with three queens. Or, because my eyeballs were well lubricated by the scotch, they looked like queens. The party went on until almost dawn.

The next day Jimmy Bill and I were drinking lunch in the bar again when he said, "You know, there's something definitely different about the Aussie chicks."

"Yeah, what's that?"

"I can't put my finger on it, but they are for sure different than American girls."

I laughed and said, "Jimmy Bill, I think we should continue a scientific study of these women until we discover this difference you're talking about."

"That, pal, is the wisest thing you've said in some time."

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

We topped off our tanks with scotch all afternoon and without stopping for dinner, we diligently set out to locate that night's participants to further our study.

By the end of the week, Jimmy Bill and I had had or shared a good number of Aussie women. We talked about writing some new orders to extend our stay in Sydney another week. But when we examined that possibility thoroughly we both agreed it was very possible that continued indulgences in the study of Australian women could possibly be hazardous to our health. We could end up too weak to return to combat. Particularly with respect to the enormous quantities of scotch that had to be consumed during the facilitation of said study. Our experiment finally ended and we dispatched to the airport for our ride back to hell.

On the way back we were both so numb and fatigued that there was little talk. But Jimmy Bill did say, "Pal, I think I have reached a conclusion."

"Tell me," I said.

"Aussie women are just different, that's all there is to it."

"Brilliant. Fucking brilliant, Jimmy Bill."

Jimmy Bill and I arrived back at Phu Bai at nine at night and went for a flight briefing at ten. The flights continued to drag on each night—taking off, going into a hot target area and waiting for Charlie to throw his shells at me. Just waiting to get blown out of the sky.

Nelson Peregoy

The night of my three hundred twenty ninth mission I found a message in my info box. I would receive my alert orders in forty-eight hours and be going home in seven days. What joy washed over me. Could it be I would get out of this hell alive? I started to turn and a clerk handed me a second message. Jerry was dead; he died at Tripler having never regained consciousness. I screamed and the tears ran down my face. Fuck! Fuck this whole fucking mess. God damn it all. I threw my helmet across the operations office and walked out. As I left the room I said to the ops officer, "I'm not going to fly tonight; just fuck it all. I screamed again. "Every son-of-a-bitch gook in this shithole country isn't worth Jerry. I went directly to my hooch and got piss ass drunk while I cried. I finally passed out.

The next night I was back in the cockpit. On the takeoff roll in the dark rain I again thought, *could it be I'll get through this?* Was I really going home alive? I did, but I was taking two incredibly damaging conditions with me.

The Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the alcoholism would rot the rest of my life and all for nothing.

Chapter 2

The Start Of It All

I was sound asleep on my father's lap when he died. He flinched then farted and I smelled a terrible odor of poop. A big black car came and took him away; I never saw him again. Although I was only seven at the time—he was seventy-six—my memories are as strong as if it happened yesterday.

His name was James Bernard Bennett and for fifty-seven years he worked twelve hours a day, six days a week. He never missed one day of work in his life and he only took off two holidays each year—Christmas and Thanksgiving. When he finally came out of the mine each night, his whole body was black with coal dust except for the whites of his eyes and his teeth. After work he walked the eight long blocks from the mine elevator to our house. My mother always had two buckets of hot water waiting for him on the back porch and she helped him scrub the coal from his body. Then he would put on his clean clothes and go into the house.

Every night the routine was the same. He went directly to his big chair in the front room, sat down, reached over, and turned on the console radio to listen to the Amos and Andy Show. My mother brought him his fruit jar full of white whiskey; he drank a pint of white whiskey every night of his life. Later my mother brought him his supper which he'd eat sitting in his chair. After supper he laid his head back and went to sleep. I never saw my father in bed. I believe he slept in that chair every night.

It was there that I experienced my first taste of alcohol. Many nights after my father ate, I climbed on his lap and listened

Nelson Peregoy

while he told me stories of his adventures on the high seas. Sometimes he put his index finger into his whiskey and rubbed it on my lips. It tasted horrible.

“I don’t like that, Daddy. That stuff tastes bad.” I’d say, wrinkling my nose.

His reply was always the same. “Yes, it is bad, son, and it’s bad for you, too. You promise me you will never drink whiskey.”

“Yes, Daddy. I don’t like it and I promise you I will never drink it.”

When JB, as my father was known, was just ten years old, he and his older brother left their home in the Basque territory in the Pyrenees Mountains of Spain. He never returned. They made their way to the North Atlantic and signed on to work on a tramp freighter. They lived and worked on the same ship for 10 years. Since they had no papers, the captain treated them like captives. The captain knew they might run away, so they were watched closely when they were in port, loading and unloading the cargo.

Finally, when the ship docked in New York City my father, uncle and several other seamen were able to escape. It was 1888. JB’s freedom lasted only a few hours until the New York police arrested them all for vagrancy. After several days in jail, a man from the Virginia Carolina Coal Company came and offered to pay bail for anyone who would come and work for him. Although my father couldn’t speak English or even read or write, he somehow understood the offer and accepted. His brother refused and my father never saw him again. He never knew what happened to him.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

So at twenty years old, JB went to the Shenandoah Valley in Western Virginia to become a coal miner. It was there that he fathered me some fifty years later when he was seventy. After being widowed four times, JB married a woman from the same community who was forty years his junior. My mother, Alyffe Spencer, never went to school and like my daddy, she could not read or write. When my father died, my mother was pregnant with another child. My sister was stillborn several months later.

The mining company paid for JB's funeral and that cost was added to the already large debt our family owed the company. My mother had no alternative but to go to work in the mine. I wanted to go to work to help her, but I was only seven.

Alyffe was not the first woman to work down the shaft, but there were very few. It was considered bad luck to be in a mine shaft with a woman and until she proved herself, work conditions for her were tough. Many times the men would leave her at the elevator and make her wait and ride by herself. They would harass her by asking her for sex and frequently she had to do the hardest jobs. My grandmother came to live with us and my mother started working the night shift so she could have more time with me. My grandmother was a non-person to me; she was cold and distant and she almost never spoke a word, especially not to me.

Many summer mornings I got up really early and raced to the mine elevator so I could be there when Mama came up. I carried her lunch bucket and held her hand while we walked home. I remember the feeling of pride I had, thinking I was taking care of her.

Nelson Peregoy

My life was as normal as it could be in that place during those times. My friends and I played, swam in the river, hiked the woods, and rode in the snow on homemade sleds. Everything we needed we bought at the company store. The store, which stood in the center of town, was a large, two-story building complete with a big covered porch on all four sides.

Our groceries, clothes, and every other item we needed to live came from that building. When I was nine I got my first job. It was at the company store. Every day after school I had to sweep off the porches; they were always dusty since there were no paved streets. My pay was three dollars a week. Every Saturday I received one dollar and the other two went to pay off our bill. I was filled with pride when I took that dollar and gave it to Mama. Each time she would give me 25 cents back to go to the store and buy anything I wanted. I always bought the same thing—an RC Cola and a Moon Pie. With the nickel that was left over I bought two pieces of hard candy and three pieces of bubble gum.

Our school was a ten-year system; classes were in a two-room building. One room was for children in grades one through six and the other was for the high school students. I didn't like school at all; I thought it was boring and a total waste of my time. The only thing worse than going to school was going to church.

Church, just like school, was not an option but a requirement. It was a Baptist church and the preacher was a big, fat man who blew spittle when he got worked up preaching his sermons. He looked like he was at least 100 years old. On Sunday he stood in the pulpit and I felt like he was burning a hole right into my very soul with his laser-like stare. He shook his fist, pointed his

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

finger, and screamed that we were all sinners and we were all going to hell. I was raised to believe God was coming for us all and sooner than we thought. I was equally as sure that the preacher was going to hell for his sins, mine were nothing compared to his.

One day when I was finishing the sweeping at the store, my boss came out and gave me a package wrapped in brown paper. He instructed me to take it down to the church and give it to the preacher. When I entered the church, the preacher was sitting on the front pew talking to the man who was the director of the choir. He was another big, fat man. The preacher got up and told me to bring the package to his office.

So the preacher, the choir director and I went into his office; he took the package from me and closed the door. He then took me by the hand, pulled me to him and started to hug me. I had strange feelings; it was the first time I had ever been hugged by a man. I wanted to pull away, but I was afraid to resist. I actually feared this man; after all, he was the preacher. I had been raised in his church. The choir director watched quietly while the preacher told me I had to stand naked before God to receive his blessing. He unbuttoned my pants and pulled them down. He then lifted me up, sat me on his desk, bent over and put his mouth on my penis. I was 12 years old and that day I received God's blessing both from the preacher and then from the choir director. They made me swear to never tell a soul about them blessing me and if I did I would go to hell for sure.

When I left the church I felt sick, ashamed, and dirty. I wanted to wash myself, so I went to the river and jumped into the water with my jeans on. I cried and stayed there until it was almost

Nelson Peregoy

dark. When I got home my mother was still home. I wanted to tell her the truth, but I just said I had been swimming.

That was not the last time I received God's blessing in that church office. The blessing was periodically administered by one or both men for a couple of years. As time went on I seemed to become numb to what was happening; then sometimes I felt very guilty, particularly if I had an orgasm. Eventually they both lost interest in me. On Sunday I often overheard the preacher instructing the younger boys to stop by his office.

When I was fifteen I left my sweeping job and went to work at the Esso Gas Station next door to the store. One day a green sedan with U.S. Army written on the door pulled up. A tall, black sergeant got out of the car; his uniform decorated with badges and ribbons and yellow stripes. He was a recruiter and he spent an hour talking with me. He told me all about Army life and how much he liked it. This man was to change my entire life.

He explained that if I wanted to join the Army I had to work very hard in school, make the best grades I possibly could and as soon as I graduated I should go to the recruiting station in Richmond. He wrote my name in his interview book and gave me his card. I stood for a long time and watched that green car as it drove out of sight. I was excited about what I had learned and could hardly wait to get home to tell my mother.

My mother was off work so we sat in the front room and I told her all about my opportunity to enlist in the Army after graduation. I think she was more excited than me. For years she had told me she would never allow me to work in the mine. She

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

said we were blessed that God had provided me a way out of the coal mine. My grandmother thought it was a good idea, but she said she hoped I didn't get hurt. My mother always put a positive spin on everything. She told me she would be very proud to have her son become a soldier. She said I'd look handsome in a uniform. The challenge, though, was school. I gave my mother the soldier's card and asked her to keep it for me so I wouldn't lose it.

Although I had always made excellent grades, I had never really tried very hard to learn anything. Now it was different. I attacked my classes with a new energy. When my teacher asked about the obvious change, I announced that I was going to go into the Army as soon as I graduated. I became an honor student and at my graduation I was the top student in my class of 31. For my graduation present my mother gave me forty dollars to take with me to the Army. She also had wrapped the soldier's card she was keeping and gave it to me. She hugged me and said "I love you, Nelson." Oh, those words were so very important to me.

Just two days after graduation—I was seventeen years and two days old, with a tenth grade education—I left for Richmond on the Greyhound bus. The trip took most of the morning since the bus stopped many times along the way. That was the farthest I had ever traveled from my home. Before dark that same day I was well on my way to becoming a soldier.

The Army recruiting station in Richmond was only a block from the bus station. The second floor of the building had large open sleeping areas with open bays and open showers. It took a good bit of courage for me to strip naked the next morning to start my physical exam. There must have been fifty of us going

Nelson Peregoy

through our physicals at the same time. The physical, which included about a million shots, took all day.

That night we stood before the American Flag, put our right hands on our hearts, and swore to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States of America against all enemies both Foreign and Domestic. The third day we were administered several tests to determine our aptitudes, psychological profiles, and who knows what else. The last little nicety was burr haircuts that took each barber all of three minutes per head. There was much laughter and jousting as piles of hair fell to the floor.

Day four started at 3:00 a.m. when the forty-one of us who passed our physicals were loaded onto an Army bus headed to Fort Polk, Louisiana and basic training.

After arrived at Fort Polk on a Saturday afternoon we were assigned to our barracks. We were off Sunday, and we all just sat around talking and learning about each other. There was a chapel service at noon and reluctant though I was, I agreed to attend with a fellow from New York.

When we entered the chapel I was greeted by a number of very happy people. There were several officers and sergeants as well as privates. I was stunned when the Chaplin preached about God's love and grace. He said God wanted us to be happy and successful and to prosper. I had never in my life heard anything like that in church.

We were all excited when Monday rolled around because that was the day we all got our job assignments based on those tests we had taken. I thought I had done well and hoped for

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

something more than being a rifleman in the infantry. We were marched to a personnel building and I waited in line for a couple hours to get my results.

When I entered the master sergeant's office he looked up from his desk and said, "Sit down Bennett, I have some good news for you and I have some shitty news for you, too. First, the good news. You tested out with a genius IQ; your IQ score is one hundred sixty one. Anything over about a one hundred forty, maybe one hundred and forty five, is considered genius. Why hell, mine is a whopping one hundred seventeen. You'll be able to do anything in the Army you want to. Your future success is assured with a score like that."

Then he said, "The shitty news is you don't have an authorization release signed by your parents to enter the Army at seventeen. You can't join the service at seventeen without a parent's signature. So, my good man, you are about to be a civilian again. You'll be discharged under honorable conditions. You get out now, but remember, you have not fulfilled your two-year obligation. So when you're 18 you can reenlist; if you don't, you'll probably be drafted."

I was so stunned. I found it hard to speak. "Sir, can I go home and get an authorization and come back?" I asked. "My father is dead, but my mother will sign."

"No, it doesn't work like that," he said.

"Do I have any other choices? I've planned to be a soldier for a long time now. I had hoped to be able to get some more education and make the Army a career."

Nelson Peregoy

“Sorry, Bud. You’re shipping out tomorrow and you’ll be back in Richmond in a couple days and home by Friday.”

I couldn’t believe it, but that’s exactly how it happened. I returned to Richmond and then went back home. When I showed up at the front door with my Army uniform on, it was almost dark and my mother was just getting ready to go to the mine. She was so upset that she didn’t go to work that night.

We sat up in the front room. I sat in Daddy’s chair and we talked until very late about what I was going to do. My grandmother seemed glad that I was home because she didn’t want me to get hurt in the service. Granny said she was glad, but I wondered if she really was. She was so cold to me it was like I didn’t exist. I had for years felt sure she didn’t love me at all. That thought saddened me. I told my mother I thought I should go to the mine office the next morning and get a job. I never saw my mother so mad as when I said that.

“I’m only going to tell you this one more time,” she said. “You’re my son and you will do what I say; you will never go to work in a coal mine.”

The only way I could calm her down was to promise over and over I wouldn’t go to work there.

The Army had given me two hundred and fifty dollars mustering-out pay when I left Fort Polk and I still had it all, except for four dollars that I’d spent to buy food on the way home. I also had the forty dollars that my mother had given me when I left home only one week earlier to go to the Army. Later that night we decided that I’d go to Richmond and try to get a job there.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

The next morning, which was Saturday, I went to visit Janice, a girl I had dated in high school. Janice's father had a good job working on the railroad. Since railroad jobs were the best paying jobs in the county, they lived in big lovely home. I always thought her family was rich. Janice's mother was always nice to me, but her father didn't like me a bit. Once Janice told me that her father thought that I was mine trash and he didn't want her to see me. Her mother overruled him and told Janice to invite me over any time she wanted.

That Sunday morning, like every Sunday morning, everyone in town went to church. That day I reaffirmed that I liked the nice, loving God I met in the Army chapel much more than the angry God our fat preacher threatened us with. After church I told Janice and Mama about my experience at the Army chapel. Mama shrugged and didn't say much. I realized she had no way of understanding what I was talking about; the only preaching she had ever heard had been hell-fire and damnation. I felt sad for that.

While we were at church that morning, one of the mine bosses saw me and asked why I was home so soon. I told him I was too young to go into the Army and I had to wait for a year to go back. That afternoon he came to our house to speak with us about me going to work in the mine. His visit was cut very short when Mama found out what he was there for. In just a quick minute, in no uncertain terms, Mama let him know that I would never go to work there. He said he understood and picked up his hat and left.

Monday morning bright and early I caught the bus to Richmond to search for a job. After hitchhiking and riding the bus back and forth to Richmond for almost two weeks, I landed a great

Nelson Peregoy

job with the Virginia Electric and Power Company at the James River hydroelectric generating plant. My starting pay was two dollars and eighteen cents per hour. I would be doing shift work and on the interview I was told there was lots of overtime.

When I told Janice about my job and that the overtime pay was over three dollars per hour, she was very excited. We had a big laugh when I said that soon I might be making more than her father. Janice giggled and said, “Well, you should, you’re better than him.”

My job started the next week. After I got my first pay check I was able to look for a place to stay in Richmond. I soon found a small, but nice room in a boarding house and rented it. I worked all the overtime hours I could get. Many days I worked twelve or eighteen hours, sometimes my paycheck would be over one hundred and fifty dollars; that was a lot of money back then. I gave my mother some money to help with our bill at the company store and I bought little gifts for her and my grandmother. Mother loved the gifts, but she thought they were extravagant. My grandmother never said a word about them; she just frowned, then took each one and put it in her dresser drawer.

My first job at the plant was to oil all the moving parts of the generating turbines and the water pumps that cooled them. It was no challenge at all—any monkey could have done it. The best thing about the job, other than the money, was meeting Samuel Goodman.

Samuel was a rough, tough supervisor who spent most of his time in the control room of the plant. He was my boss but there really wasn’t any bossing to do. After I finished oiling the

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

pumps I'd go to his control room to visit with him. He became my first mentor; however some of the things Samuel taught me were questionable.

Samuel was sixty years old and he had been married six times. One of his favorite sayings was, "I've made love to over two hundred women; God knows how many children I've fathered. I think I have enough experience to say women are only good for sex, cooking and cleaning."

He also liked to say, "You just remember this: It's a stupid son of a bitch that will turn down a piece of ass."

Samuel punctuated every sentence with a curse word. And he drank whiskey on the job. Several times I walked in and found Samuel in the locker changing room with one of the cleaning gals upside down on the benches. Once he even looked up at me and asked if I wanted to take a turn. I declined.

Samuel had been a DC-3 pilot in World War II and he told me endless stories about flying over the hump in Burma and India. His cargo contained everything from whiskey and supplies to paratroopers and whores. He told of harrowing experiences dodging a sky full of anti-aircraft flak and landing after having an engine shot out. I wouldn't have dreamed at that time that one day I would face the same kind of anti-aircraft fire.

One day Samuel told me something that neither of us knew would have such a profound effect on my life.

"Nelson, I want you to remember this. I know it's your dream to go in the military. If you do ever go in, you want to become a pilot," he said. "Pilots get the very best of everything compared

Nelson Peregoy

to other soldiers. The living conditions and duty stations as well as rations and liberty are always the best.” And in classic Samuel fashion he threw in, “If there’s no pussy around, you could always fly to where it is.”

Samuels’s second lesson was just as important. “Remember this, too,” he said numerous times. “The man who gets ahead faster and furthest is the man who is the first one to work, works the hardest, and leaves last.”

When I had days off I usually caught the bus home to visit my mother and to see Janice. Our relationship had progressed to the point where we were engaging in some heavy petting and I really liked it. The truth is, she did too.

Samuel had told me I should save my money and get myself a good used car. I figured that a car would sure make my life a lot easier. I had actually been saving most of my paycheck and after a short while I had a thousand dollars saved up. I started visiting used car lots around town. I guess I was quite a hillbilly because every used car salesman I came into contact said he was offering me the best deal because I was a nice guy and he liked me.

After a few days of car shopping I met Hal who owned his own used car lot—Hal’s Like New Used Cars. He also provided financing on the spot. Hal ask me how much money I had and when I told him I had a grand, he said he just happened to have a great used Chevrolet that required exactly one thousand as a down payment.

Hal led me to a really great looking Chevrolet. It was shiny black with chrome hubcaps and bright white wall tires. I fell in

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

love with the car even before I sat in it. When I took it for a test drive, I knew that car was for me. When we returned Hal wrote up a contract. I would only have to pay the down payment and sixty five dollars a week for eight months. He explained he was doing me a special favor by letting me make my payments right at the lot every week. The contract seemed high, but I wanted that car. I did tell Hal the three thousand dollar price tag seemed a little high.

Hal just smiled, put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Look, young man; I have a son about your age and I just hope if he was buying a car from someone they would give him a deal this good.” Deal done. I drove the car away.

The next day I left work at 7:00 a.m. and then I had the next three days off. I headed straight home. When I drove up to the house, Mama could hardly believe her son had an automobile. She made me take her for a ride right then. My grandmother didn't want to go. She said she was afraid of cars. I thought about it later and I suspected neither of them had ever been in a car before. Anyway, Mama just loved it and when I drove her past the company store she made me stop. She said she needed something, but I knew she just wanted to let everyone see our new car.

There was someone who liked that Chevrolet even more than my mother did and that someone was Janice. Even her father begrudgingly said that it looked like a good car, but that Chevrolets often had a lot of trouble. That weekend Janice and I rode around and used up over a tank full of gas.

Monday afternoon when I returned to work I proudly took Samuel out to the parking lot to look at my new car. He liked it

Nelson Peregoy

and after examining it closely he congratulated me on selecting a good one.

Then he asked me, “Nelson, did you christen this baby yet?”

“I damn sure did, Samuel, right there in that back seat.”

“Good man. How was it, pretty good?”

“No, to tell you the truth it wasn’t good, it was fantastic,” I responded, winking.

I was lying through my teeth, of course.

“How much did you have to pay for this baby?” he asked.

I took the contract out of the glove box, proudly handed it to him and said, “Samuel, the price is a little high but I think it’s a really good car.”

Samuel frowned and said in a loud voice. “My jumping damn! You could’ve bought the whole damn car lot for this much money. This thing didn’t cost three grand when it was new. How about you meet me here tomorrow morning and we’ll go see this shyster.”

“Okay, but whatatta you think we can do?”

“Nelson, I’m not sure but you can bet your ass we’ll do something.”

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

I worked my shift and that night when I drove over to my room I was so nervous about the next morning I didn't sleep very much at all.

I pulled into the parking lot the next morning and Samuel was already there and he had a guy with him. The fellow was black and he looked like a cross between a tank and a bulldog. He must have been 6 feet 6 inches tall and weighed 300 pounds. His arms were bigger than my head.

"Hey, Nelson," Samuel said as I got out of the car. "This is a good friend of mine. His name is Louis Mines but we call him Bigun."

"Hello, Louis."

"Just call me Bigun."

"Let's get going," Samuel said.

We all climbed into the Chevrolet and I headed to "Hal's Like New Used Cars." The closer we got to Hal's the more anxious I became.

"What you thinking about doing, Samuel?" I asked.

"Relax, relax, we're just gonna reason with this guy."

When we arrived Hal was standing in the doorway to his little office building, which was little more than a shed. Right above the door was a big sign I didn't remember seeing before "Buy Here. Pay Here, By The Week."

Nelson Peregoy

By the time we got into the office there wasn't much room left. Hal was shorter than any of us, he just came to Bigun's belly. He had to look up at Bigun to talk to him.

"All rightee," Hal said as he flashed a big smile. "You brought me some more business, huh Nelson?"

Samuel moved to within an inch of Hal's nose and started screaming at him. I don't know if Hal or I was more shocked.

"You good for nothing son of a dog. You're gonna make this contract right or we're going to make you wish you did," Samuel yelled.

Bigun moved a step closer to Hal who had to look almost straight up to see his face.

"I am an honest business man and I sold this boy the best car on the lot."

"Yeah, well you should've sold him the best car on the lot, you charged him five times what it's worth, you scum sucker," Samuel screamed.

Hal started to get nervous and was now looking around at each of us as he backed up a couple of inches. There was no place for him to go. Hal tried one more time to get the situation under control.

"What the hell you think I should do, just give it to him?"

"Nope, we all think you're going to tear up this contract and he's not going to pay you another dime."

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

“Hold on here,” Hal said to Samuel. “And what’s going to happen if I don’t?”

Samuel again got right up into Hal’s face and said, “Well, I thought you would never get around to asking that question. What’s gonna happen is Bigun is going to break one or maybe both of your arms. Then we’re gonna do a little body work on the rest of those cars out there on your lot, including testing the windshields for strength with that baseball bat we got in Nelson’s trunk. Then I’m gonna tear up this contract for you. Now have I answered your question?”

Hal raised his eyebrows and replied, “Hell, give me that damn contract.”

Samuel handed it over and Hal quickly tore it into pieces.

“Okay, now you thugs get out of here before I call the cops.”

As we walked back to the car, Samuel said, “Now this is an exceptional car and the fact that you bought it for a thousand dollars is an exceptional deal. Congratulations, Nelson.”

I came to love that car, not just for transportation, but because it became a temple of love for Janice and me.

One Saturday night, shortly after the incident at Hal’s, the inevitable happened when Janice and I went to the drive-in movie. We had been to the drive- in a number of times but we always walked there and sat on the bleachers down front near the screen.

Nelson Peregoy

This time was different. We found a spot way in the back where there were no other cars. The movie was a love story of some kind, but I was so worked up that I didn't pay much attention to it. I finally got my hand under Janice's bra and for the first time in my life I felt a real live breast. It felt wonderful. Janice's nipples got very erect and very hard; they weren't the only erection in the car at that time. Finally, we got in the back seat, and I didn't have much trouble getting Janice's panties down and then off. I was smoking hot and my penis was so hard a cat couldn't have scratched it.

After some convincing, Janice was ready for us to have our first sexual encounter. I moved on top of her and between her legs, with my mouth nursing her breast like a newborn. I was supporting myself with both arms around her. After a couple of misses, Janice reached down and took hold of me to guide me in. When she took hold of me it was all over. Bam! I lost it all over her and the car seat. It seemed like it was a cup full. God, I was so horrified, I don't even remember what I said, I was so embarrassed. I do remember though, that Janice was very nice. She said that it wasn't meant to be that night. And even though I tried again in the next hour or so, she just wanted to watch the movie. She didn't even want my hand back in her bra. She did say that we would try again sometime soon.

The next couple times I had time off to go home, Janice was having her period. After what seemed like a year of waiting she finally agreed it was time. I was like a rabid dog. I was so anxious to have her I was going nuts. When it did happen it was absolutely fantastic for both of us. Janice and I both were totally uninhibited and passionate; she made so much noise screaming I was worried we were going to get a visit from the owners of

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

the drive-in. I decided there and then I wanted to have sex forever.

Every time I had at least a day off, I quickly headed home to see my mother and Janice. By then we were enjoying sex every time we saw each other. Several months after I bought the car, Janice said she had something important to tell me.

“I’m pregnant; we’re gonna have a baby.”

Of course, I was shocked and surprised. Unfortunately the first thing I said was, “Oh, shit, your daddy is gonna kill me, Janice.”

That was for sure about the stupidest thing I could have said because Janice started to cry.

“You don’t love me. I know you don’t,” she said.

“I do love you. I do. I promise.”

“I’m so sick every morning; I don’t know what to do,” she said, sobbing.

By that time I was petrified. I didn’t know if it was more that I’d made her pregnant or that her daddy was going to kill me. Whichever, I didn’t have to wait for morning for my sickness, I had it right then. We sat in the car for a long time and finally started talking about it.

“What are we going to do, Nelson?”

Nelson Peregoy

“If your daddy doesn’t kill me, then we are going to get married, I guess.”

Janice looked at me and started screaming and crying even harder.

“You guess? You guess? You don’t love me. I know it. You don’t want to marry me.”

“Of course I want to marry you. Whether you’re pregnant or not, I want to marry you. Okay?”

Again stupid ass me spoke before I thought. “I just wasn’t thinking we’d have to do it so soon. Did you tell anyone else?”

“No,” she snapped.

“Well we’re going to have to tell someone sooner or later.”

The next day at the plant I worked fast. As soon as I was finished I went to the control room to talk to Samuel.

“I need to talk to you in private,” I said.

I couldn’t believe it when he replied. “What’s the matter, you get her pregnant?”

“Yes, Samuel, Janice told me this weekend she was pregnant,” I said as we walked outside. “Man, I don’t know what to do; her daddy is gonna kill me.”

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

“Nah, he ain’t gonna kill you. He’s just gonna be super pissed.”

“What do you think I ought to do, Samuel?”

“You ought to do two things. Tell him quick she’s pregnant and tell him even quicker you love her and you’re gonna marry her.”

We talked a while longer and when I started to leave to go back to work, Samuel said, “Hey, it ain’t so bad, son. I been married six times, you know.”

That didn’t make me feel any better, but at least I had decided to tell Janice’s folks.

By the time I had my next day off and went home, Janice had already told her mother and her mother had told her daddy. When I drove up to her house, she came out and said that they knew and her daddy wanted to talk to me, but he was at work and wouldn’t be home until about seven. So I went home and from 2:00 until 7:00 I was just sick with fear.

At exactly seven that night I knocked on Janice’s front door. She opened it and led me into the dining room where the inquest was going to be held. We all sat around the dining room table. Janice’s father looked at me and opened the conversation by saying, “Are you gonna marry Janice?”

“Yes, sir. I love her.”

“I don’t care whether you love her or not,” he said. “I just want you to get married as soon as possible.”

Nelson Peregoy

Janice and I were married by a Justice of the Peace the next week and our son Nat was born seven months later. We moved into a little apartment near Richmond and I continued to work at the plant. After the baby was born we were having a hard time paying the bills. When I talked to Samuel about it he said that he knew of an opening in the meter reading department and it paid a lot more money.

Soon I was interviewed and hired for that job. I found that I had landed a much better position than I'd even thought. I went to work at eight each morning and as soon as I finished the day's route I was off until the next morning. I learned to jump fences and run from one meter to the next and as a result I finished my route right around noon on many days.

I had a lot of interesting experiences during the time I was reading meters. Once I was working in a very low income area in Richmond, in a neighborhood of two-story houses. Most of them had two apartments upstairs and two down. The electric meters were inside each apartment.

On that particular day I bounded upstairs to one of the apartments. Like always I was rushing to finish. As I reached out to knock on the door, suddenly it flew open. As it did I heard a woman say, "You better get me to the hospital quick or I'm gonna drop this kid in the middle of this flo."

There, right in front of me, stood a totally naked woman, who looked like she was twenty months pregnant. She didn't even move as I reached for the door knob to pull the door closed. I was so embarrassed.

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

“Oh, please excuse me. I am so sorry,” I said. As I pulled on the door knob, it came off in my hand.

“I thought you was my husband, what you doing here?”

I put my hand on the edge of the door to close it, but she held it open and just stood there.

“I’m here to read your electric meter.”

“Well you bedda get yo white ass outta here ’cause my husband gonna be here any minute to take me to the hospital.”

“Yes, ma’am. I am so sorry.”

Suddenly I heard a male voice coming from the stairs behind me.

“What you doin’ here, honky? Don’t you be staring at my wife bein naked like she is,” the man said. “I’ll kick yo honky ass if you don’t get outta here. Sides I gotta get her to the hospital fo’ she has this kid right here.”

I did exactly as instructed and I got the hell out of there real quick. I don’t think I hit three steps as I ran down and out the front door. I wrote an estimated meter reading for that house as well as the next four or five houses down the street.

During my rounds I saw many drunken men and woman, too, not to mention lots of partially clothed women as well as nude sunbathers. More people than I could count—men and women—opened their doors in their underwear and invited me in to read their meters.

Nelson Peregoy

Several times ladies came on to me and once so did a man. Another day I had to get into a lady's basement to read her meter. She led me down to the basement and as we started back up the steps she said. "I been out of work for almost a year and I ain't got enough money to pay a big electric bill."

"I am sorry, Ma'am, but I can only record what the reading is, I don't have anything to do with the billing."

"If you'll make me a low reading on that bill, I'll give you the best lovin' you ever had."

"I'm sorry, Ma'am, but I got a lot of meters yet to read today and I'm kind of in a hurry."

"Look here, do you understand I'm offering you a good screwin' if you fix that bill?"

By this time she was between me and the front door. I just wanted to get the hell out of there. "I'm sorry I have to finish my route and if I have time I'll come back later this afternoon," I lied.

"Well, you just remember my offer. I mean it. You ain't never had the kind of screwin' I can give you."

"Okay, I'll remember." I went out of the front door as fast as I could and, thank God, I never had to read that route again.

During this time I was trying to save money so that I could go back into the Army. I knew the Army pay wouldn't support my family so having some set aside would help out. However, even though I was making what seemed like pretty good money as a

I Visited Heaven, But Lived In Hell

meter reader, something always came along to take it. There was never even enough to last from one payday to the next.

Not only that, but my son was having a lot of ear infections. It seemed that as soon as he got over one, he had another. The doctor bills were expensive and sometimes we didn't even have the money to pay for them. We'd have to set aside some money to give the doctor each payday. There just didn't seem to be any way to get ahead.

Then one day I came home from work and Janice said she needed to talk with me and that it was real important. Some little voice in my head immediately told me I had heard this before. And sure enough, Janice announced she was pregnant. A short time later I told Janice I was going to look for a part-time job. She wasn't very happy about that, but I told her I was going to do it anyway.

Follow the life of Nelson Bennett as he goes from very successful salesman to highly decorated Army combat pilot in Vietnam, to two-star general, to multimillionaire jet setter-to a drunk, broke, and homeless derelict who ends up spending almost three years in a federal psychiatric prison hospital. A near death experience in Vietnam left Nelson an alcoholic with chronic PTSD. Join him as he reveals his compelling and surprising story.

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