

# Rain



A SAILOR'S STORY

Richard Elliott



Rich Elliott just graduated from high school. He joins the Navy to take advantage of the G.I. bill for college. The Vietnam war was just starting and he knows nothing about it. Nobody does. Within a few months, he learns firsthand what it is all about. First, his best friend gets killed, and then his girlfriend. Rich ends up on a swift boat in the Mekong River behind a pair of thirty caliber machine guns.

# **RAIN**

## **A Sailor's Story**

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# **RAIN: A Sailor's Story**

**Richard Elliott**

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Although inspired in part by true incidents, the following story is fictional.

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First Edition

## **Chapter 1: Little Things Trigger Long Forgotten Memories**

Every day I walk my dog down back to the lake. Rain, cold, hot, every day.

Today was extremely hot. The humidity was like a steam room. That's when it hit me – the smell. The lake is more like a swamp, the lily pads, weeds, birds, turtles, dead fish all added to the smell.

It's like I'm back in the jungle on my machine guns on top of the pilot house on the swift boat. Waiting to pick up our Seal team and take them on a mission. It's amazing how something as unlikely as a smell can bring that all back as if it was beginning right now -- or never really ended.

I have a dock on the lake twenty feet long with an eight-foot "T" on the end. I brought a chair down with me and set it out on the end of the dock. I sit there every morning. Sometimes I'm lucky enough to see the sun come up: nature's rebirth. This morning the sun came up big and red. It ain't often you see a red sunrise. It reminded me of the morning on the delta.

*The Seal team was late getting back. We were at the pick-up location waiting for them to come in. We wanted to get out of there before sunrise and they were late. The sun was rising big, red and bright.*

*If we didn't find cover, we would be sitting ducks. The captain (CW4 warrant officer ex chief boson's mate) decided to move off up the river and find a place where the jungle canopy overhangs the river so we could hide under it and wait for the Seals to call in for an extraction. I was on my 30s (30-caliber, air-cooled machine guns) and Bill Cooper, my loader, was standing by prepping ammo in case they came in hot.*

*Richard Elliott*

*Sitting here on the dock gives me time to think. While waiting for my dog to do his business, I sit and let my mind wander. For some reason, the last few days it wandered back to the jungle. Something's on my mind? The smell? The red sunrise? The sound of the water trickling by my dock?*

*Everyone and everything was real quiet. The only thing you could hear was the trickle of the river as it went by. Then we got the call: they're coming to the rally point and they're coming in hot. In a blink, the motors were running and we were on the move. I put my headphones on and immediately could hear them calling for support fire.*

*Rain, give us a look-see, give us a look-see.*

*They called me Rain mainly because they don't remember my name, and also because I rain lead on the enemy. A look-see is a machine gun burst of tracer bullets so they know where I'm aiming.*

*Coop was already loading a belt of tracers in the guns. He knew the drill. I let off a stream of tracers and hear "left, left, left, come left". I swung left without letting off the triggers, raking the jungle. "Stop! Come low, lower, Rain, lower." I lowered the barrels still raking the jungle along the edge of the river.*

*I knew they were in deep shit by the excitement in his voice, so I had Coop keep the tracers coming. Normally, I would take the tracers out of the belt and put them all in one belt and leave other belts without tracers.*

*I would shoot tracers until I was on target and then put in the non-tracers so that the enemy couldn't follow the tracers back to me and the boat. But today, I decided to leave the tracers in. The sun was at my back and my Seals were in deep shit, so the most effective support was to keep the tracers going so my team members could monitor my gun fire and direct it to the enemy continuously.*

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*"You on, Rain; you on, Rain! Make it rain, Rain, make it rain!" I kept it up – Coop loading and me shooting. "One click lower, Rain, one click lower. OK. You back on, Rain, you back on. Make it rain, Rain, make it rain!"*

*My left barrel overheated and, in a second, Coop had twisted it off, grabbed a new one from its place in front of the pilot house, and clicked it in place. I was back shooting almost immediately. I was shooting almost straight out into the jungle and I knew the Seals were close. I hoped they were coming low so I wouldn't shoot any of them.*

*Then I saw them breaking through the bamboo heading for the boat. I also heard the 50s (the 50-caliber machine guns) in the back of the boat opening up.*

*Charlie was hot on their heels coming through the jungle right behind them. You could see the fright in their eyes when the 50s opened up. They thought my 30s were bad, but when the 50s opened up, it was like their whole world came to an end.*

*The Seals closer to the boat turned and helped give cover fire for the rest of their team. The Zipper Heads caught out in the open were cut to shreds.*

*Now our objective was to keep the dinks who took cover down until we landed the team with their wounded on board and got the hell out of Dodge.*

The heat and humidity, the smell of the lake, and the sunrise have all added to my thought process to bring me back in time to the part of my life that made the most impact on it. After my 2<sup>nd</sup> day in-country, I really didn't believe I was ever coming home. From that day on, I wasn't afraid I was going to die – I knew it, and being afraid of dying and knowing you're going to die are two different things. Apprehensive, yes. Bone-chilling fear, no.

*Richard Elliott*

I really wanted to go to college, but even though I got a football scholarship, I couldn't afford it. End of story. A friend of mine told me about a program the Navy has that if you enlist in the regular Navy, when you get discharged, they will pay for your education. I went to the recruiter and asked him about it, and he confirmed it: Yes, they will pay for your education under the G.I. Bill.

I talked to my parents about joining the Navy. My Dad thought it was a good idea. My Mom wanted me to wait a year. After thinking about it for a week, I decided to join up. It was June, 1962 before anyone heard of Vietnam.

On a warm Thursday in June, I signed the paperwork to join the Navy. I was sent to Boston Monday morning for a physical. It was probably the most embarrassing day of my life. I played football and was used to being naked in front of other guys, but this was different. Bend over and spread your cheeks, pull back your foreskin. I was totally disgusted. The people giving the physicals weren't real doctors – they were corpsemen. One guy's penis wasn't as clean as they liked, so he got an ass-reaming or, as we call it, he got chewed out. They checked everything – eyes, ears, throat, even your feet. They checked for color blindness, flat feet, blood, heart, dexterity, everything you could think of and some things you never heard of. Finally, you see a real doctor; turn your head and cough. That's all he said – “turn your head and cough.” So that's what we called him.

I passed my physical and, a week later, I went to Boston, got sworn in, and took a plane to Great Lakes, Illinois – boot camp.

The flight to Chicago sucked out loud. It was turbulent and the guy beside me puked three times, using up all three barf bags in our section. By the time we got there, I think everyone was feeling a bit queasy. When we got off the plane, the busses



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were waiting to take us to the base. When we got there, we got off the busses and lined up into two lines, turned left, and marched us off to our new barracks. We dropped off what little bit of our civilian gear that we had, and were marched off to the chow hall. Welcome to Camp Barry!

It was funny watching everyone march, who weren't trained to march. Some were strutting, some goose-stepping, some hippity-hopping, and the rest of us just walking. Talking was not allowed, and when we got to the chow hall, we were directed to stand in two lines, face forward and no talking. A couple of guys thought they were far enough back in line as they could get away with whispering. They were yelled at and both were told to drop down and do pushups. Later, all they had to say was "give me 20" which meant drop down and give me twenty pushups.

Surprisingly, the food was pretty good. I'm a meat-eater, and we had beef and all to go with it. It's true the Navy has the best food. After chow, we were marched back to the barracks and left to our own thoughts. The smoking lamp was lit – not really a lamp, but a saying meaning you could smoke. Unless you were told the smoking lamp was lit, you could not smoke. Ronny and I, the guy that threw up on the airplane, started hanging out together. Our last names started with the same letter, so we were close throughout indoctrination week.

Morning came early – around 5am. They woke us up by walking through the barracks with a billy club and a trash can cover and beating on it like a cymbal. "Rise and shine! "Drop your cocks and grab your socks! Everybody up! Line up at the end of your bunks! You have 30 minutes to wash up, get dressed and form up outside according to height. Tallest to the right – my right – your left."

*Richard Elliott*

We formed up outside the barracks and our drill instructor was waiting. He had us straighten our lines out and marched us to the chow hall to start our day.

Indoctrination week was more physicals, testing, getting our clothes, sending our civilian clothes home, learning how to march, etc.

Camp Barry lasted one week – not really enough time to get to know many people. So I hung with people I knew. Ronny, the fire hydrant that puked on the plane; Glen, the muscle head – tough on the outside, mush on the inside. Preacher, a black, religious guy that seemed to always have a bible with him. For some unexplained reason, he took a liking to us and hung around our group, becoming one of us.

One of the first things you learned was the term “Hurry up and wait.” They hurried you from the barracks to chow, where you waited in line. From chow to where you got your uniforms. We waited in line forever. We couldn’t wait to move on to Camp Moffat, our next step in boot camp.

Our last night in Camp Barry, we packed everything we owned into our sea bags in preparation to Camp Moffat. That night, Ronny and I were all packed up and sitting at the tables in the middle of the barracks talking about what’s next and looking forward to the day we finish boot camp. Next day, we marched into Camp Moffat.

Next stop, Camp Moffat – the real start of boot camp. The group of us and part of the group before us were divided into two companies – Company 317 and 318. I was in Company 317.

We were to stay at Camp Moffat from 3-4 weeks. While there, we learned how to fold and store our clothes, how to make up our bunks, how to tie our ditty bags (little laundry bags) on the end of our bunks. We learned how to wash our clothes – the laundry room, drying room, etc. We stamped our

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names and service number into all our clothes, hats, pea coats, everything.

During our weeks at Camp Moffat, we got our ranks by our company commander. I ended up as 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon Leader. Billy Campbell was our Recruit Chief Petty Officer and Billy Ray was our 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon Leader. We also have an Intelligence Officer, Athletic Officer, Religious Officer, and chow runners.

The chow runners ran to the chow hall and reported to the Petty Officer in charge that company 317 was ready for chow. The fastest chow runner from all the companies determined where in line you waited for chow. First one to report got to go first. With nine companies, 60 men to a company, you either ate first or 540<sup>th</sup>.

Luckily, our Religious Officer, a black man from North Carolina, could also run. We never ate less than 3<sup>rd</sup> company in line.

During the day, we learned marching, discipline, classes on military and weapons. We stood personal inspection every morning.

More than one recruit had to dry shave using the Company Commanders belt buckle as a mirror.

At night, we were back in our barracks where we wrote letters, did laundry, stood watch. We had a watch in the barracks 24-7, 4 hour shifts. We also did laundry, studied our military assignments, and generally hung out with each other.

Men are supposed to be tough – they are not supposed to cry. You can cut their fingers and toes off and they won't cry. But hurt them emotionally, and all men cry. Some can control the tears and only cry on the inside. I have seen some of the toughest men cry. I myself have bawled like a baby when something hurt me inside. At first, I get angry and lash out at what caused the pain. But eventually, when the anger is gone

*Richard Elliott*

and the hurt can't be ignored, I find out how human I am and find a place to be alone and release my pain.

One night in the barracks, I was awakened by muffled sobbing. Glen, the muscle head from Camp Barry, was crying. I wanted to go over to him and find out what was wrong but, instead, I let him cry himself to sleep.

Glen was big and strong and physically fit. It seemed unlikely he would be crying. Next morning, I asked him about why he was crying. At first, he wouldn't talk about it, but finally he opened up. He was homesick.

Although he was big and strong, he was emotionally a little immature, and showed his emotions, wore his heart on his sleeve. Although I was the same age as Glen, I looked at him as a younger brother. I loved him as a brother, a bond you feel for a teammate, like the other players on your football team. That bond lives on 'til this day.

Our company was as diversified as you can get. We had white, black, Asian, Hispanic and mixed racial profiles. They were big, small, thin, fat, short and tall. You learned that size doesn't make the man –the size of his heart makes the man.

We all had to work together to make our company the best it could be. I was surprised at how alike we all were – city boys, country boys and the boys in between. Basically, we were all the same.

I met this black guy who didn't go through Camp Barry with us but was part of another group that got split up. He was a Golden Gloves boxer from Philly and we got into an argument because he was talking in the chow line and I sent him down to the chow line Master at Arms to do pushups.

That night, back in the barracks, he called me on it. We went into the drying room to fight it out.

I knew he could box, so I decided it would be best to wrestle. I took a couple of punches, but was able to grapple him

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to the ground and get him into a submission hold. After that, we shook hands and soon became best friends. Eventually, I even was best at his wedding. His name was Jefferson White, and we all called him Snowball. You know, a black man named White. The name just seemed to fit. Snowball not only could box, he could sing too. Many a night, he entertained us with songs he knew from Motown.

Every night after we washed our clothes, wrote our letters, straightened out our lockers, we would hang out at the tables in the middle of the barracks smoking cigarettes and talking. That's when Snowball would sing. Others would get up and sing with him, but Snowball was the star.

It was in the third week that some of the guys couldn't take the pressure. Me? I kinda liked boot camp. It sounds funny, but it was a little like football practice. You know being with the guys and working through it all was like being with your teammates and practicing football. The only difference is you didn't get to go home at night. In football, you practiced during the day. In boot camp, it went 24-7.

The first to break down was a kid from Indiana. He lived on a farm out in the country. Came from a real small town, and had never been away from home before. Not even on vacation. He just shut down. At first, he just got quiet, stared off into space. Then he lost interest in everything and was just going through the motions. Finally, he wouldn't get out of his bunk. He went for psych evaluation and was sent home.

The next one to break down to everyone's surprise, was our Recruit Chief Petty Officer, our Recruit Company Commander, Bill Campbell. One evening, he just started screaming that he couldn't take it anymore. He ran through the barracks turning bunks and lockers over and bouncing off the walls. It took five of us to subdue him. Then he started crying. Next day, he went for psych evaluation and was gone.

*Richard Elliott*

I was elevated to Recruit Chief Petty Officer – Company Commander, and Billy Ray became 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon leader. Billy and I thought that the Athletic Recruit Petty Officer would be elevated to 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon leader, but to our surprise, the Company Commander appointed a kid from Chicago named Joe Oshinski. Joe was a cool guy, always joking and clowning around. Referred to himself as “Joe the Pole” because of his Polish decent.

Through the course of the next few weeks, we found Joe to be a natural. His laid-back attitude offset Billy Ray’s sternness and, when they were both doing their jobs, it made my job a lot easier.

We got into a routine: Training during the day, writing letter, doing laundry and hanging out in the evening.

My group now expanded to eight. Ron: a real good guy built like a fire hydrant and with natural bulk and strength to match. Glen: the muscle head, everyone’s little brother although he was bigger, taller and stronger than all of us. Preacher: our chow runner and Religious Officer, the more level-headed of the bunch. Snowball: the Golden Gloves kid from Philly, his pleasant attitude and singing made him a favorite of everybody. Billy Ray: a southerner that had an attitude like he was in the Marines. Honest, fair, serious, helpful to everyone, but he seemed to be on point all the time – never relaxed and never let his guard down. Then there was Joe Oshinski, the newest member to our group: Joe the Pole, real laid back, easy going, but smart, knew how to judge people, a born leader. Another kid that joined our group, a friend of Joe the Pole, was Gary Buntley. Gary was a small, blond kid with pimples, an infectious smile, tried his best to stay squared away, and was one of our chow runners. Then, of course, there was me. Thrown into a position I didn’t really want, but determined to make the best of it. The rest of the groups or clicks in the

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company looked up to use for direction. One group did not segregate itself from the other; we all got along real good. It was almost as if we were all one.

Our Company Commander was a Reserve Chief Petty Officer on temporary active duty. Master Chief Schrom. He didn't seem to have a personality, a real matter-of-fact type person. He told me what had to be done during the day, more or less let me do it, and that was that.

Every morning, we fell in for inspection. After inspection, our chow runners raced to the chow hall to secure our position in line, and the rest of us marched in order to the chow hall. While we waited in line, my 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon Leader took over the company while I discussed what our Company Commander wanted us to do that day. Things like close-order drill, the 26-count manual of arms, marching. Add different classes on military training, etc. After three weeks in Camp Moffat, and before you went to Camp Porter you had to do a service week.

Service Week is a week in which all recruits work in some capacity to service the other recruits.

First and foremost are the mess cooks. There are three mess halls – one in each camp – Barry, Moffat and Porter. These mess halls need mess cooks to help cook, clean, do dishes, scour pots and pans, etc. Each company has to go through it. When your week is up, you leave, and the next company behind you moves in.

Next, we have recruits called service weeks. These are the Recruit Petty Officers that help the new recruits through indoctrination week and being a secretary-gofer for the Company Commanding Officers.

I was a service week at Camp Barry. On Friday, the end of the third week in Camp Moffat, we marched to our new barracks in Camp Porter.



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