

Vietnam - 1968: A USAF pilot learns an airline wants to interview him - in Dallas, in three weeks. They don't know he's in Vietnam and he has fifty-six days and a wake-up before he can leave. It's a Catch-22 in Vietnam.

D.E.R.O.S.

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D.E.R.O.S.

“Date Eligible for Return from OverSeas”

John Rider

CHAPTER 1

The Brigade Base Camp At Phouc Loi

April 19, 1968

He slumped over his “desk,” empty wooden rocket boxes in front of the rear window of the tiny room. In weak, yellow light from a goose-neck lamp, Jack Boland stared at the letter.

Beyond the window of the old, ramshackle officers’ quarters, distant slashes of lightning briefly illuminated the jungle surrounding the base camp. Humid night air flowed through the window, carrying the odor of the jungle, like the smell of a wet, not too clean dog.

The letter came in a large envelope, along with clippings his father sent – mostly newspaper articles about the murder of Martin Luther King. He hadn’t read those. The craziness going on at home didn’t interest him all that much.

The TransCon letterhead got his immediate attention, however: The airline was hiring a few new pilots. Would he be interested in an interview?

In Dallas – May 8 & 9.

They had no idea he was in Vietnam.

Last year, before he left for Nam, he submitted applications to TransCon and two other airlines, using Ben’s L.A. address as a contact. Might as well get a couple on file, he figured.

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He hadn't mentioned he faced a year in Vietnam, or that his DEROS was 14 June, 1968 – fifty-six days and a wake-up from now.

Damn it, he thought, I never expected to hear anything from them until I got home and out of the Air Force. Why did this have to come now?

Six years ago, just before graduation from college, the draft loomed, and he applied for Air Force pilot training. The Navy's strange fondness for landing on moving runways surrounded by water didn't appeal to him.

He recalled his fathers's enthusiastic reaction when he told him he'd been accepted.

"Damn, Jack!" Ben shouted. "That's great! Airlines are moving to jets now, and you couldn't get better training... Besides that, a little military hard-ass might do your self-absorbed butt a world of good."

Already a Private Pilot, the year-long Air Force flight training, while demanding, came easier to him than most in his class. Among peers, he was known as a "hot" pilot.

Adapting to the Military, however, was another matter...he was not one to readily conform to military customs and regulations.

Frequently disciplined for minor violations, his classmates jokingly voted him, "Most Likely To Be Court-Martialed."

Still, he lucked out on his first assignment – got exactly what he wanted...the KC-135, the USAF tanker version of the Boeing 707, mainstay of many airline fleets.

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He couldn't have been happier. When he left the Air Force, some airline would surely be eager to buy his experience.

The past ten months hadn't been all that great, however.

Instead of flying a KC-135, here he was, living with the Army in the middle of the goddamned jungle...a Forward Air Controller, flying a dinky Cessna 0-1 *Bird Dog*.

He looked down at the letter again.

There's no way to get to Dallas in May, he thought. I'm screwed.

Sighing, he slipped the letter inside its envelope. *Hell with it, he thought. Forget the problem for tonight. Go to the O'club, have a few drinks.*

His boss, Al Mallory, and the other pilots were there for Father Mac's Sayonara Party. Tomorrow, all he had to do was fly down to Bien Hoa and pick up Al's replacement.

He put on his flight suit, and was lacing his boots, when he heard the slapping sounds of rotor blades. A chopper was on approach to the landing pad next to the long, white trailer belonging to Colonel Hatcher, the Brigade Commander. Nestled in protective sandbags in the open field behind Jack's room, the trailer was less than fifty feet from his window.

Strange, he thought. He'd never seen a chopper land there at night.

The blunt sounds of the chopper's blades sharpened. Curious, he stood up and peered through the rear window. He couldn't see the bird yet, but it was close.

Suddenly, a light over the trailer door came on, and he saw Colonel Hatcher on the small porch, arms crossed, frowning.

As the sound got louder, he leaned forward over the desk, and saw the chopper. Ground-level flood lights flashed on around the pad and a Huey slowly descended.

It was a “slick”, a troop hauler with only a light machine gun in the right door. Whipping up furious eddies of red dust, it touched down with a slight bump.

The pilot cut the turbine engine. Blurred rotor blades slowed enough to discern individual shapes, and the night went quiet.

Dressed in starched jungle fatigues, Hatcher stalked down the trailer steps, then was lost from view in a maze of sandbags. When the Colonel emerged and headed for the Huey, Jack switched off the desk lamp. He could see better, and people on the chopper pad couldn't see him.

Noting Hatcher's uniform, he shook his head in disgust. There, dangling from the Colonel's gun belt, was his goddamned prop – a foot-long coil of thick, green nylon rope. It was his gimmick.

MacArthur had his corncob pipe; Patton, his pearl-handled revolvers – Hatcher, a length of rappelling line issued to Army Rangers. The word was, Hatcher was never a Ranger.

Jack's eyes adjusted to the flood lights, and he saw “Lurps,” a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol team, exit the chopper, faces blackened with grease paint to match their camouflaged “tiger suits.” A group around the cabin door was trying to unload something...

“Come on, damn it,” a man said in low but audible tones. “Get that fucker outta' there before the Colonel gets here.”

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Jack recognized the voice... 2nd Lt. Fred Reneau, the Lurp's leader.

"He's stuck, Lieutenant," one man protested.

"Well unstuck his ass, damn it! Somebody shine a light in the cabin and see what he's hung up on."

Jack glared at Reneau. He had no use for him – regarded him like a deadly snake, with revulsion. Many who knew him considered Reneau an out-of-his-skull killer.

When Reneau finished his second Nam tour, with enough holes in him to earn three Purple Hearts, the Army, in recognition of his special talents, sent him to OCS. On graduation, 2nd Lt. Fred Reneau promptly volunteered for a third tour, and more good times in Nam.

On a typical Lurp Ops, a chopper dumped a team in the middle of enemy-held jungle. They stayed for a week or so, hoping to locate VC units, base camps and supply caches. In South Vietnam, Lurps were considered a very ballsy bunch.

However, at Phouc Loi, Reneau's Lurps were also considered psycho, like their leader. On the base camp, ordinary grunts kept their distance. Because the Lurps were often wired on dexies left over from missions, the Brigade wisely isolated their hootch. A sign over the door said: "The VC For Lunch Bunch."

One night at the O'Club, Jack heard a tipsy Reneau boast how his team avenged the deaths of three Brigade troopers, blown away when their jeep passed a hootch on the outskirts of the "Ville", the stinking, festering collection of bars and whorehouses outside the main gate.

The occupants of the hootch, a young man and his wife, swore to the local Province Chief that VC forced them to watch while a mine was buried in the road, and later detonated. After

some “forceful” questioning, the PC believed their story, but Hatcher and Reneau didn’t.

A week after the incident, with Hatcher’s blessing, Reneau and three of his Lurps crept into the couple’s hootch while they slept, and slit their throats.

Hatcher approached the chopper pad, and nervous Lurps pulled hard on the object in the cabin. Finally, a dead man, clad only in black shorts and sandals, hands and feet lashed to a stout bamboo pole, plopped onto the asphalt.

The Colonel watched as Reneau ordered two Lurps to hoist the pole to their shoulders. The others formed a rank behind them, and the slight, wiry Reneau came to attention in front of the suspended corpse, popping a salute to the Brigade CO. Without comment, Hatcher returned it, and circled behind Reneau to look at the dead man.

Watching, Jack reached into a leg pocket of his flying suit and pulled out small binoculars he used on recon flights.

The body looked more like a strung hammock than a human; little blood on the skinny torso, but a lot of red welts, like bee stings.

Jack shifted the glasses to the man’s face. The eyes were open, the mouth pulled back in a taut, drawn grin. Then he noticed the hair. Sparse, crew-cut, and iron gray.

God, he thought. The guy’s a Papasan...

Hatcher turned. “Put your men at ease, Lieutenant.”

Reneau gave the command, and the Lurps holding the pole dropped the body roughly on the pad.

“Now, tell me,” said Hatcher, voice tinged with annoyance, “just why did you feel you had to show me this tonight?”

Reneau squirmed uncomfortably. “Well, sir, this Dink is special.”

“Special? Why? Because he’s not exactly a teenager?”

“Not that, sir. Look closer. Recognize him? It’s that new barber, the Papasan who shaved every fuckin’ neck in the Quad for the last month.”

Hatcher squinted at the body.

“Well, I’ll be damned. The old bastard shaved *me* this morning. How come you killed him? What was he up to?”

“We spotted him outside zone-two. Saw him when we was waitin’ for the chopper to pick us up.”

“You did say *outside* zone-two, didn’t you?” Hatcher asked, clearly concerned. “He wasn’t inside the rubber plantation, was he?”

“Nothin’ to worry about, Colonel,” Reneau sighed. “We dropped him before he could duck into Michelin Square Garden. The damn Frogs won’t have no bitch about us trespassin’ on their R&R camp for Charlie.”

Hatcher’s shoulders heaved. “I share your sentiments about the place, Reneau. But we have to live with that stupid policy, so don’t ever put my ass in a sling by violating it.”

Reneau shook his head. “I won’t, but Colonel, it’s such a dumb-ass way to fight a war.”

“Agreed, but I can’t help it if Washington’s more concerned with pissing off the goddamned French than they are about our asses... So go on. Did you find anything on him?”

Reneau reached into a flap pocket and pulled out a folded paper. “He was probably going to pass this to VC inside the plantation.”

Hatcher took the paper and studied it.

“See, Colonel?” said Reneau. “It’s a diagram of every room in the Quad. Doors, windows, where our cots are. Those Xs show which way a guy sleeps, where his head is. Good info for hitting the Quad some night.”

Hatcher nodded slowly. "Look here," he said. "For each room, the officer's rank is written in Vietnamese. Hell, a few satchel charges tossed into some rooms in that dump would do a lot of damage."

"Check this out, Colonel." Reneau handed him another paper.

Hatcher chuckled. "Well, well, *my* trailer. Marked 'Dai Ta,' Vietnamese for 'Colonel.' And detailed inside and out, right down to the entrance through the sandbags. How do you suppose the barber got this info?"

Reneau shrugged. "Probably your maid. Either she let him in or passed it to him... As for the rooms in the Quad, he could have just walked around, looking in windows."

"Thuy?" Hatcher exclaimed. "Why, that damned old crone... Yes, you're probably right. The First Sergeant has the only key besides mine, and lets her in every morning."

Reneau smiled. "If I was you, sir, I'd have that lock changed first thing tomorrow... Now, the maids only work a half-day tomorrow. You want them rounded up for questioning?"

"Of course. When they show up, truck them over to Minh's headquarters. Let his people work on them."

Jack knew Colonel Minh, the Province Chief. He was tough, ruthless. Understandably. VC had lopped off the head of his predecessor, then stuck it in a toilet bowl in the man's own headquarters.

"Okay," said Reneau. "When they figure out where we're taking them, they'll be scared shitless. They'll talk."

"On second thought," Hatcher said, "handle Thuy yourself. Report directly to me what she said."

A broad grin spread over Reneau's face. "That's a roger, Colonel. And if it's okay with you, I have another idea that'll

blow the Mamasan's minds when they come to work. It'll make 'em easier to question."

"What's that?"

"Let us take Papasan here and hang him up where he'll do the most good. In that old, dead tree in the middle of the Quad."

The "Quad" – a quadrangle of six-room wings situated around an open, grassless square – had been built by the French Army in the 1930's. Now, Army Brigade HQ officers occupied most rooms. But Air Force FACs – Forward Air Controller pilots – lived in four. Jack Boland watched from one of them.

Over his shoulder, Hatcher glanced at the Quad. "Good idea," he said. "While you're at it, get some brigade insignia decals and stick them on him. Let the ladies know who's responsible for his condition."

Reneau beamed. "I like that."

Hatcher extended his hand. "Good work, Lieutenant. Your men can expect beer delivered to their hootch tonight. Just don't let them beat up the people who bring it. Carry on."

The Lurps cheered, and Hatcher walked to his trailer. When he disappeared into the sandbagged entrance, they broke ranks and grouped around the body on the pad. With excited, jerky movements, they kicked and prodded the corpse.

Dexedrine at work, Jack thought.

He could make out only bits of their animated jabbering, but noticed their wary glances toward Hatcher's trailer. Finally, Reneau shrugged, and nodded to his men.

Immediately two Lurps dropped to their knees. Long knives flashed when pulled from leg sheaths, and used to deftly slice off the barber's ears. Two others knelt at his feet, hacking at leather thongs holding on the "Ho Chi Minh" sandals made from old tire tread.

Jack winced.

John Rider

One Lurp, in a frenzy to gain his trophy, cut through an Achilles tendon, causing the barber's foot to flop upward at a grotesque angle. Seeing this, the other Lurps yelped approval, hopping about like a pack of Coyotes prancing around a ripped apart rabbit.

Jack lowered the binoculars. He decided he wouldn't go to Father Mac's party after all.

Christ, he thought, I hope the whole sick lot of them stay in the Army forever. What else are they fit for? Working in a slaughterhouse?

Too bad I can't sleep for the next fifty-six days...not wake up until the morning I leave this stinking sewer....

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