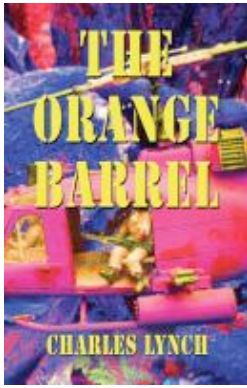




THE ORANGE BARREL

CHARLES LYNCH



Amazing action story of a young helicopter gunner in Viet Nam. His last day of flying combat missions filled with flashbacks of battle and childhood war games and their relation to the present. His struggles with fear, alcohol and drugs reach a point as reality blends with fantasy with a hit of LSD. His girlfriend, who may be enemy, complicates matters as does his duty to God and country. The story is filled with actual accounts.

The Orange Barrel

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6729.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

Your Free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

THE ORANGE BARREL

Copyright © 2012 Charles Lynch

ISBN 978-1-62141-242-7

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by Booklocker.com, Inc., Port Charlotte, Florida.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

2012

First Edition

Chapter 1

Launch

Three large dragonflies headed out into the dark morning haze in their quest for prey. Their strong wings beat heavily against the humid air, for these were great beasts. Green, single-pupiled eyes bobbed to the rhythm of the air pockets in the clouds. Their rigid metal legs vibrated under the tremendous power of flight. Short stubby wings protruded from the sides of each abdomen. Attached to them, pods full of deadly eggs. Five entities lived within each beast . . . each a special organ, with a special purpose.

Rufus leaned out of the door panel and laughed into the 90-knot wind. His green, bulbous eye shields protecting him from the blast. He looked over at his twin organ on the other side of the craft.

Rico watched him humorously, then returned his gaze to the ever-changing checkerboard pattern below. Rufus stroked the automatic weapon he held, exploring its sculptured metal sensuality. Then he ran his fingers down the belt of ammunition that coiled into the box below. He sat down on the bench, reached over, and tapped Rico's shoulder. When Rico turned, Rufus yelled to be heard over the clamorous din of the helicopter's blades.

"Hey Rico, you feeling anything yet man? I'm starting to turn on, I mean like, I think I'm starting to feel something. It's been at least an hour since we dropped hasn't it? I mean like, it's supposed to take an hour, ain't it dude?"

"Yeah hombre, I'm starting to cop a buzz man. Nothing serious yet, but I'll tell you when I start to really cruise." With this Rico turned back to the panorama before him. Ahead his

Charles Lynch

world appeared as if seen through a fish eye lens . . . tiny and distant, then looming at him in a crescendo of reality. Behind him it dwindled to a point in infinity.

The three craft entered the mountains just as the sun peeked over the horizon of the ocean behind them. Within minutes they would be nearing their objective. Rufus checked and rechecked his weapon. Rico began to do the same, peering through his huge eye lenses that had darkened to dull the brightening light.

Dropping low and skimming the treetops, the insects' droning wing beats were now muffled to place the surprise of attack on their side. A voice crackled in everyone's head, "Ten minutes to target, get yourselves ready, somebody wake up Doc."

Rufus leaned over to the other bench and gave a sleeping figure a shake. "Hey old man, time for action, get your tired ass up off dat bench."

Doc was an old man in his mid-thirties who had prematurely aged. His thick black hair was streaked with gray, and the lines in his face bespoke of lost youth in the last tour of duty he did. Drowning himself in alcohol, he had sought to hide from the nightmare of his job. Unable to live in the stateside world of the military, he repeatedly volunteered for the Orient. The military's ability to provide a warm bed and a cheap bottle to warm his belly has always been an attractant to him and his kind. Of course the girls are a little friendlier here toward men as ugly as he was, too. Doc had the prognacious jaw and jutting brow ridges of several species of early man.

"Doc, snap out of it man," shouted Rufus over the din, "Get up. We'll be over target in a few minutes." He began unbuckling the hungover airman from his seat.

Doc grumbled and tumbled out onto the floor. He let out a whiskey belch and a simultaneous fart that skewed faces up in the windy cockpit. "Damn man, you get hold of some bad

The Orange Barrel

tequila or something? Make a man want to jump out of de bird with dem stinky fumes," Rico said, trying to pull his collar up over his mouth.

"Yeah, yeah. You guys all suited up and belted?" Doc stood groggily and surveyed the area in the back of the chopper, mentally counting boxes of ammo and supplies while checking security straps and tie downs. He lazily pulled on his flak vest and helmet, making him look more beetlelike in appearance. "Did we get hit? What's that vibration?" he said, gently placing a hand on a door frame to feel the slight unnatural movement.

"No man, we ain't hit. Dis ain't our bird, remember?" Rufus returned.

Doc flashed back on the week before through a smoky case of hard liquor. It had begun with a simple cargo drop at an obscure firebase in the highlands. Willie circled the dirt-covered mountaintop trying to draw enemy fire from the tree line. As the chopper dropped low, Rufus released his ready grip on his gun, and helped Doc prepare a number of parcels to be tossed out the door while they hovered over an opening in the Marine bunker below. It was dusk, and the reddish glow of the evening light was compounded by the red soil. Willie steadied the bird while Rufus and Doc dropped boxes and small crates to a big black marine in striped underwear. He passed them to waiting hands in the dark passageways around him. Rico held his gun at the ready, scanning the tree line for movement or weapons fire. Out of this area a glowing light appeared, seemingly to rise up and hover. Slowly it moved toward them. Then it sped up. Rico was first to notice the apparition. "Hey man, check that out like, what is it?" "I don't know, but it's coming on fast," Rufus said, wild eyed.

Willie shouted "RPG!" Then he yanked on the throttle and stick in an attempt to get out of the way. Rico began firing at it.

Charles Lynch

Rufus jumped into the waiting arms of the big black marine below.

Doc, peering over Rico's shoulder, had enough time to say "No chance." Then the rifle grenade slammed into the tail of the fragile craft, severing and spinning it into the main rotor. The Huey spun wildly, until it contacted a wall of sandbags, then it flipped and landed on its side. Everyone scrambled out and into the bunkers as mortars and bullets were thrown their way. Bruised but unhurt and breathless with adrenaline, they laughed, then stared at the memory then laughed again. Doc quickly downed a pint of his medicine and his stiff form slowly relaxed into liquid.

They spent the night with the battle-weary marines, who had been overrun twice in the last week. Laughing and passing around joints to the squad in the hole, Rufus and Rico unwound, although deeply shaken by the experience. Doc spent the night in a corner nursing the last of a three-dollar bottle of bourbon. He finally passed out, rolling in the dirt and filth of the floor. Rufus piled him into a corner and threw a blanket on him. Nights in the highlands could get chilly. Willie and Red, the copilot, got drunk with the officers and went to bed early.

At three in the morning they awoke to explosions and the sound of enemy bugles blowing in the distance. Mortars were coming in and the base rocked from the explosions. Rico and Rufus were already up and firing their recovered M-60's at the approaching troops. Doc struggled up to the trenches and found a mortar pit that needed a new assistant. Star shells lit the sky as beehive rounds blasted out of heavy artillery cannons above them into the faces of the onrushing enemy. Doc pulled pins and loaded the mortar **until** the tube glowed. Fearing the dull light would give away their position and melt down the weapon, they poured their canteens and water jugs on it till they ran out, then took turns pissing on the heated pipe in a last ditch effort

The Orange Barrel

before it misshaped and puddled. Finally the enemy gave up amidst terrible losses and retreated as the dawn's light reddened the sky.

"Victor Tango nine, this is Tango seven, three minutes to contact point, copy that Tango five?"

"Tango five copy."

"Tango nine."

"Hey man the sun's up, Check out the colors on dem rocks," Rufus said, gesturing with an arm that fluttered in the wind.

"Colors? Check out the faces on de rocks. They're all grimacing and mouthing feelthy words at me." This from Rico, who was really starting to feel the effects of the LSD the two had taken before breakfast. "They are mean. Dey is angry at us for shooting up de country and blowing stuff up. They hate us," Rico whispered through the mike, trying to freak Rufus out.

"Aw shaddup man, ain' nuttin' gonna happen, dis gonna be just another milk run, you'll see. And stop trying to freak me out with that Mexican ju ju crap, too," Rufus returned, his voice faltering. Rico chuckled to himself, then went back to the mesmerizing landscape below. "Are you checking out what the forest is doing? Its like reaching up for us with tentacles and arms . . . you know . . . I think I'm starting to really fry. Is this that stuffs from your seester, or did you get it from the V.C.?"

"Dis be some of Victor Charlie's finest, the orange barrel. I gotta sends some of this to my sister. I know she'll get off on it . . . it be some bad stuff. I be knowing dat already, 'coz I be gettin' jammed, whoooooeeeee!" Rufus shouted back to Rico while hanging half out the door.

As they dipped over a hill, a group of large black beasts with horns stampeded from their water hole. To the two gunners they looked like giant slugs.

"Can we drill 'em Willie? Can we?" Rufus spoke over the mike trying to sound childish.

Charles Lynch

"Go head Ruf, deprive the enemy and all that patriotic stuff," said the pilot as he swung the chopper into position so Rufus could get a good shot at the running animals. Red, who had been half snoozing, shook his head in disgust.

Streaks of hot metal spiraled their way into the pitiful animals. Everywhere they turned, the herd was stitched and cross-stitched with crimson thread. Rufus ran a few more rounds till the survivors were out of sight, then returned to his position hanging out the door like a collie going for a pickup ride. His big chicklet teeth smiling like a mule eating bumblebees. Rico sat on the edge of the stoop, feet dangling out the doorway, he twisted his head around, enjoying the sounds and sensations the wind produced blowing through his helmet. Doc sat on the bench wiping his perpetually running nose and tombstone eyes, his ruddy angry face like a clenched fist. Sometimes Rico thought he was crying, he couldn't tell, but he knew he wasn't happy.

Willie's voice cracked into the mike, "OK boys eight minutes. Let me give you a quick run-down. A loach spotted them coming over the border at 1800 last night. They dropped him as soon as he got his description out, so you know they're packing something heavy. A magic dragon scoped them at 0450 this morning, and ops says we'll catch them in the open at a place they defoliated a week ago . . . sun should be in their eyes. Looks like a turkey shoot to me." The other choppers acknowledged the transmission.

When the ship on Rico's side got too close, he flipped off the gunner that was staring at him. The gunner yanked his gun around, pointing it at Rico, and pretended to fire several rounds. Rico flipped him off again with more emphasis. Then trees separated them.

Rico and Rufus were now reaching the point where they didn't need to study an object or view in order to hallucinate, a

The Orange Barrel

turning point in their trip. Hallucinations began occurring spontaneously when a certain plateau is reached, and may last for several hours until the drug's effectiveness is diminished. Rico and Rufus were also being loaded up with adrenaline the closer they got to the objective. Both were beginning to take deep breaths . . . trying to shed some of the anxiety that was building in their chests.

"Hey brother man, you diggin' on the rocks again? I mean dey is really trippin' me out. We been this way before, and I know I didn't see any of this the last time. This is incredible. I don't just see steam commin' off dem . . . they look like they's on fire. Man we gotta keep our haid. Dare gonna be intense stuff goin' down," said Rufus, his head swinging back and forth as he caught sight of one spectacle after another. Red and Willie looked at each other and snickered, then lit up a joint and passed it back. Rico grabbed it first and took a deep drag. He passed it over Doc's head to Rufus who did the same. Doc pulled a flask from his flight suit, saluted both the gunners and pilots, and took a hard pull.

"You know Rufio, them rocks be talking to me. Dey says dis ain' no free ride. The faces say something is going to happen to us," Rico said, trying to sound spooky.

"Shut it man. I doan needs that right now. I be paranoid enough as it is without you messin' with my haid," Rufus shot back with a little steel in his voice.

Rico laughed at him and turned back to the door. He charged the bolt on his weapon, popped off a few rounds to test it, then sat down and prepared himself with prayer.

Rico had been in country for seven months, been wounded slightly twice, and received several decorations. He had also been shot down five times, including the crash on the firebase. Twice he had been the sole survivor of a tumble through the trees. He had even been shot down twice in the same day. On

Charles Lynch

one of these occasions he had jumped as the chopper exploded, and splashed into a mangrove swamp of brackish water. He swam back to the flaming wreck, pulled the only survivor out and dragged him to a tangled group of mangrove roots. There he held him in his arms while the enemy quickly dug through the downed burning craft, looking for booty just fifty feet from them. The wounded crewman pumped the leech filled swamp water in and out of a hole in his chest until he died. Rico never told anyone about it.

Rufus had been in country for three weeks. He was assigned to Rico on arrival and Rico had taught him practically everything he knew. His three-week lifespan being a testimony to Rico's teaching ability and incredible luck. He had taken well to flying guns, and was a true artist in his ability to lead a target and arc just enough rounds to bring it down. Ruf also loved to party, chase the ladies in the bars, and do a little smuggling. He occasionally ran a black market loop from the surrounding base PX stores. He always carried a satchel of trade goods to the many bases he visited and proudly showed off any enemy articles he had collected in his travels and dealings. Rufus was brought up in a LA ghetto and adapted well to military life. He also adapted well to his job. The body count he had collected was high for a new guy. He also had no conscience, obeyed orders, and obeyed those orders no matter what they were. He was the perfect fighting machine. Rico helped shape him that way so he would survive, and keep them both alive.

Rufus had been hard-core all his life. Born into the middle of a large family, he was used to competition at home and in the streets. When he was 14, his oldest brother was killed in the war and it shook him deeply. By 16 his shock turned to anger, and seeing the war would go on forever, he resolved to getting even with an enemy that he had never seen. He volunteered to fly guns knowing that he could kill more of the people that

The Orange Barrel

murdered his brother than he could in any other job. He considered artillery, but he would never know if he was doing any good or if he was killing the wrong folks. Flying guns was more personal, yet not too personal. He was not on the ground pounding through the mud or depending on a knife to save his life. Nor was he pushing a typewriter or rotting on a ship far out at sea. He wanted to come home and be able to answer the question, "WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE WAR?" (which he would be asked the rest of his life) with the best answer anyone could give.

He had watched other boys in his neighborhood go over the pond to battle, proud and determined, then watched them return, dazed and confused. Most that returned had a bad Jones, (they were junkies) and quickly lost everything they had, trying to keep the high that shielded them from the horrors of what occurred overseas. First they lost their wives and families; then turned to crime to support their habit. Crime usually meant dealing. They eventually ended up in jail with a chance to dry out and think about it. One of his best friends returned and got into the drug scene in a big way, moving truckloads of pot and heroin over the border into Arizona. He finally got tied up with an aggressive undercover cop that he shot and killed. He was half-killed himself, paralyzed from the waist down in the gunfight. It was the first lawman to be killed in the city going clear back to the rowdy old west days. Rufus didn't follow his trial, but he knew that you don't kill cops in a redneck city like that, especially if your black. He will be drying out for a long time, that is, if his sentence wasn't accidentally cut short. Rufus knew of several young blacks that volunteered for the war just to get at the great dope that was available there. Upon arrival other blacks quickly set them up with drugs or contacts, and within a week (or a day) they were headed home in a box, a victim of an overdose. Hard drugs in the U.S. were watered

Charles Lynch

down to 5 to 15% of their true consistency. Here, they were 90 to 115% pure. He couldn't imagine shooting even a tiny bit in his arm and surviving. He also knew guys who went AWOL the day they were supposed to go home . . . a huge monkey on their backs. They hid out in the barracks and shot up a whole vial twice a day, getting money sent from home. Rufus avoided them because they were always bugging him for any extra morphine ampoules he had in his pockets. He always had to be careful of his belongings around them, too.

The enemy was the enemy in every way; he could kill you and make you enjoy it. A thousand-dollars worth of opiates cost five dollars over the pond. Aircrew, especially medicos like him and Rico, had access to military morphine in quantity. It was safe compared to the enemy stuff, which fluctuated in potency. That got you killed.

When he was in basic training, he once got detailed to the base hospital to destroy dated medications at the dump. They loaded up a flat bed truck with cases of the stuff, under the watchful eye of several gun-toting guards, then drove out with an entourage of security vehicles leading, and following.

Upon arrival, a backhoe pulled away from a fresh hole and Rufus and his buddy began unloading cases from the truck. They were circled by guards and told to climb into the pit. Rufus began getting scared about then, causing the guards to chuckle, so he was quickly assured by the officer-in-charge that he wasn't about to be executed and buried; and to obey orders. He did. Case after case of morphine vials was handed to him. The two boys had to break them, one vial at a time, on a piece of concrete that was provided for the occasion. This began after breakfast and continued until almost dark. When he asked what the truckload was worth, he was told, "millions."

They finally dropped him off at his barracks, after a severe frisking. He went up to his quarters, joined his fellow trainees,

The Orange Barrel

and told them what he had done with his day. He was able to quickly discover who the junkies were in the small crowd by their angry looks and jabbing questions. He liked to tell that story to his junkie friends, just to watch them squirm.

"Hey Rico, this is it." Rufus said over the mike for everyone to hear. Everyone felt the trueness of this so ancient a saying, and smiled to themselves. "Rico, loosen up dude, doan be ballin' up on me again. Yo' ain't no fun when you fall in like that."

Rico snapped his head up from the trance the passing vegetation held him in, and turned to face him. He had been staring too long and reality had slipped away. He saw Rufus as a chitinous beetle, with a huge fly's head. His weapon had become part of his body. Ammo belts pumped liquids through arteries. Roots grew from Rufus' feet into the helicopter's deck. Rico gasped for breath as an anxiety attack hit him. He began hyperventilating and quickly spun around to the more open view of the doorway. Doc looked up at Rufus. Rufus looked at Doc.

"Hey Rufio, don't mess with me senior. We ain't on de same planet anymore," Rico said, sullen.

"I'm with you on dat dude. I be riding a wild horse right now . . . Yheeee Ha!" Rufus returned, swinging the mounted gun wildly.

"No, I mean it hombre. Something's different dis time . . . maybes the V.C. acid was laced with something . . . like some kinda poison or something. I'm feeling pretty loco right now and my stomach is starting to hurt. Rico said giving Rufus a serious look. "Hey man, does your stomach hurt? Mines' is hurting pretty badly, and I dropped my barrel before you did, so yours should start hurting pretty soon too," Rico said, facing out the door, holding and kneading his stomach.

Charles Lynch

Rufus had been feeling strange things in his abdominal region, too. Cramps and twitches had been striking occasionally enough to give Rico's words some credibility. He began kneading his stomach as a knot grew in his throat. Calculating that Rico had popped his tablet as soon as he woke up, and that he had dropped his fifteen minutes before breakfast, he should be coming on about...

Rico staggered back and fell on the floor clutching his stomach and crying out. Rufus went into a panic, dropping to his knees and opening Rico's shirt so he could breathe. Rico went into convulsions, flopping in Rufus' arms. Spittle ran out the corners of his mouth and his face turned red. This was the ultimate horror to Rufus, who felt tears in his eyes and was visibly turning white, watching his friend die before him. He knew he would be following soon, the enemy played many tricks like this on the drug oriented soldiers.

Rico couldn't stand the grin on Doc's face anymore and busted out laughing. He lay their clutching his stomach as real cramps hit him from the hilarity of the whole scene. Then he rolled around on the floor like a tickled two-year-old, until he was paralyzed from giggling. Rufus stared in shock as Rico went into his laughing fit. At first he thought it was part of the slow death the poison inflicted on its victims. Then he saw the grin peeking out from under Doc's helmet.

"Damn you crazy spic, why you go an' do that to me all the time. Damn you 'bout screwed up my haid doin' dat the last time we was trippin' and you put all that ketchup on yo' suit and freaked me out bad. Damn yo' a crazy fool." Rufus gave him half a kick in the ass then turned around fuming, grabbing the handgrip of his gun. He sat down, shaking his head. Then rubbed his stomach as a cramp hit him . . . he started giggling. After a few seconds he couldn't stop, and joined Rico, who was trying to recover from his last bout of the yucks, on the floor.

The Orange Barrel

This restarted him, and he was again racked with stomach contractions that forced him to maintain reality . . . whether he wanted to or not.

Chapter 10

New Places, New Faces

"Hey Rico, let's go dude. Grab a mailbag and follow me," Rufus said, shaking Rico's shoulder, rousing him from his thousand-yard stare. Rico refocused his eyes and unclipped his safety strap. Stepping out on the tarmac he stretched his arms and looked around, glad to have escaped the painful dream and unaware his chopper had landed. Grabbing a heavy bag of mail, he headed for the nearby ops building with Rufus to drop it off. Hitting the pisser to make his own drop off, he realized he has pissed in hundreds of different places since his arrival in-country. "When I get home, I'll put up a map with pins in it for every place I made a deposit," he thought to himself. Before he left, he jotted down some interesting graffiti in his notebook.

Heading back to the bird, he glanced around at the amount of cargo and materiel that had collected on the steel decking. He was especially interested in a cargo net with a 6-foot pile of captured guns on it that would soon be dumped in the ocean. Walking around it he noticed a particular weapon of his fancy and yanked it out during a lonely moment in the area. It was a beautiful enemy AK-47. The stocks had been hand carved with pictures of bamboo and straw-hatted people peeking among them. A coin dated 1949 was imbedded into the hard wood, the same birth year as his. There were also a number of brass tacks carefully hammered into intricate designs. He counted 43 notches filed into the barrel. It was an impressive amount for a foot soldier. Then he noticed that they had been filed in different directions, meaning the gun had several owners. He slung it on his shoulder and walked nonchalantly back to the

Charles Lynch

now-empty bird. Looking around, he stuffed it under the seat behind the webbing.

Rico had been issued a brand-new M-16 when he arrived in-country. He cleaned off the cosmoline protectant, grabbed a box of shells and headed for the rifle range. Within three shots it was hitting right on, so he took the rest of the clips and slammed them in, John Wayne style, and hammered his target to confetti. On the sixth clip it jammed. Rico quickly unloaded the gun before the hot barrel cooked off the jammed round and removed the clip. He immediately took it apart, searching for a bur in the metal or a piece of dirt clogging the slide. He found a slight buildup of carbon from the powder but nothing else. It was a new gun. He repeated the annihilation on another target and the gun jammed again. He walked over to the gunsmith shack, holding it up like a child with a broken toy.

“Hey man, this thing has a problem,” Rico said, laying it on the counter.

A burly three-hundred-pounder with a hairy chest picked up the weapon and inspected it. “The only thing wrong with this is it’s new.” He copied down the numbers and put it away. Then he went to the back of the immense racks and brought out another.

Rico thought he was joking when he saw the battered, rusted and decorated piece. The stock had a large dent in its synthetic skin. On it, painted in black, was a peace sign. The metal receiver had been pecked in intricate flowery designs with an armor piercing bullet and hammer.

The forward stock was new, obviously just replaced. Rico fingered the piece, then picked it up. It felt lighter. He pulled back the charging handle and it wiggled. So did the bolt . . . a lot. “Hey man, what is this? This things gonna blow up in my face!” He handed it back and crossed his arms waiting for a reply.

The Orange Barrel

“I’ll tell you what. There was a battle up north a while back and they found a couple dozen dead guys with their M-16s torn down from jamming on them. They were all new. Now, you see the slide on this one?” He gave it a wiggle. “This baby will never jamb; take a lot of that lousy powder to plug up this. And if you ever get a bullet stuck in the barrel, just shoot it out. Old babies like this are pretty forgiving.”

Rico grudgingly took the weapon and went back to the pit. It fired straight and refused to jamb, even when it got hot. He took it back to his room and started working on the rust with a pad of steel wool. There were notches carved in the barrel. He counted 43.

Rufus came walking up. "Rico, things change. Willie says were taking some high mucky-mucks across the border to some base camp they're fighting over. We're blowin' outta here in twenty minutes, s'posed to bring more ammo and rations; dem boys 'bout ran out. Somebody's gonna bring out a palette, so hang loose." With that he walked back into the ops shack for more coffee, leaving Rico to direct the loading and securing of the impending boxes.

Months of training stateside, and the valuable experience he'd received over the pond, made Rico the cargo specialist of the crew. He knew how to distribute a load evenly on the small floor and secure it from the acrobatic flying that sometimes occurred. Heavier parcels went on the bottom with the light on top, weighty ones nearer the rotor shaft, netting over it all. It had to be properly secured or an air pocket in the low clouds could slam it into your teeth.

As the forklift and cargo crew pulled up with the supplies, Rico walked away to let them figure it out.

The ride had been uneventful, as all rides are until you get some place. The entire floor of the bird had been covered a foot deep with ammo and ration boxes. Two brown-nosing orderlies,

Charles Lynch

a colonel, and two generals sat on the benches. They were strapped in, with their knees under their chins. Rico and Rufus stood at the ready on their guns trying to look attentive, while well out of reach of any accurate fire from below. Willie had a colonel next to him who was occupying the headsets with his nervous prattle. Rico slipped the plug slightly on his umbilicus to disconnect the sound.

The sound-insulating helmet muffled the ringing and throbbing of the engine and blades. Escaping from the intercom was a treat he often enjoyed. Flying through different areas allowed the opportunity to listen in on the frequencies of ground troops and attack aircraft and the entire pathos of war that was happening below. Willie was always scanning to hear what was going on. This bugged Rico, because it was so overwhelming to him at times. It was nice to hear the rock and roll that always played from the station in the capital, and played in his head at all times anyway, but when it was interrupted by a frantic soldier calling for help, or some downed pilot whispering coordinates, it ruined the whole experience. Rico, who was very music oriented, wondered if it would damage the memories of those songs in the future.

Willie cut back on the throttle and eased the bird down. He circled the area looking for any sign of friendly troops. He saw none. Below them were scattered trees and a brown forest floor, and nothing else. He called on the radio again to the infantry commander below for directions. He was told to go south a hundred yards and drop down into the trees. As they descended, they noticed the roof of a large structure next to them. It undulated like a vast sea from the prop wash.

Rico and Rufus were awed by the incredible creation. Before them sprawled a covered encampment that enclosed an area the size of three football fields. Trees grew up through the roof and spread above. The roofing material consisted of

The Orange Barrel

overlapping five-pointed leaves. They had been sewn together by hand and there were millions of them, the thread was peeled from bamboo stalks . From the air it was totally invisible. They landed and disembarked, the two gunners assigned as guards to the brass. They pulled their personal weapons and followed the group, eyes on alert. Rico felt something from his new weapon he never felt before from any weapon, love. The artistic designs and carvings changed the piece from an efficient killing machine to a piece of art. The stocks were made of warm wood and not cold metal like the black M-16. He realized the piece belonged in a museum of war art and not at the bottom of the ocean where it was headed. He resolved to somehow get the piece home.

They walked through different rooms of woven matting to view an entire training facility, marveling at the wonders the enemy constructed. Classrooms were filled with handmade desks and tables. A complete obstacle course filled a room the size of a basketball court.

Everywhere they saw signs of the personal touch, where thousands of man hours were spent making the place more cozy. There were handpolished chair seats and intricate bamboo doors constructed without the use of nails. Room after room held volleyball courts, ping-pong tables, class rooms, and even printing presses. Rico grabbed a handful of the propaganda sheets and stuffed them in his pocket for his scrapbook.

Just as they were about to enter the underground segment of the free tour, Willie called them back to the bird for immediate takeoff. As they lifted up and cleared the trees, Willie filled them in on their next mission. A pilot had been shot down three days ago, and was finally transmitting on his locator. The closest and most available aircraft being them, they were to be dispatched to the area in an effort find him. This would be easy if no one else was around, like most of the other retrievals they

Charles Lynch

had participated in. However, this pilot landed near the enemy's main supply route and there was a chance they found him, and were baiting the crew in for a lovely surprise. Rico looked back at the magnificent camp the enemy made, its flat roof blending in with the leaves of the forest floor. As they reached altitude and pulled away, his mind spun at the number of people it must have taken to achieve such a feat in so short a time. Then it blew up and burned from the charges the demolition team had installed.

On another brass shuttle they hauled, they landed on some cliffs on the Cambodian side of the river. They entered some tunnels that wound along the cliff tops that were interspersed with small rooms. In each room at head high was a small hole that looked out across the river into South Vietnam. Rico thought they were cool view ports but there was really nothing to see but jungle. Then he noticed something, he could hear people talking, as clear as a bell. It was a mile across the river valley but he knew no one was there. Besides, these were American voices, and he knew the nearest base was ten miles away on a mountain top. The next room had different voices, these were Vietnamese, and the room faced a different direction. Rico remembered an ARVN base 15 miles south of here and this room faced directly at it. On the out side on the cliff face were carved acoustically perfect cones that funneled in the slightest sound from the direction they are precisely pointed at. What an amazing hand made marvel. They must have hung from ropes for months chipping out the carefully measured dimensions of the giant microphones. All the time covered with brush hiding from aircraft.

He toured the rest of the recently abandoned facility with the generals. They himmed and hawed at the hand carved rooms with built in bunks and furniture chipped out of the limestone. Rico studied the different carvings of Buddha, and the attempts

The Orange Barrel

at portraiture that the bored inhabitants tried their hands at. Then he came to an area that was clearly Christian with crosses and votive sculptures of Mary and Joseph. Carefully chipped out wording was probably scripture. He played his light over artworks and got that cathedral feeling again. The slow burning, flickering candles splashing light on the walls in warm glows. The silent cloister and stone walls was all too Catholic. He ran out of the room, this all didn't belong there and either did he. All that was missing was the stained glass. Back in the chopper they circled around the marvel till the engineers blew it up, and it fell into the canyon. The generals cheered at the victory, which it was.

Willie took the bird north to a particularly hot area a few miles away. His equipment pointed the way like a bird dog. He circled the trees, looking for a chute, and finally caught sight of a silken banner, torn and fluttering in the breeze on top of a 200-foot giant. He lowered Rufus down on the winch through the trees until he almost ran out of line and had to lower the chopper into the branches. Rufus unclipped and dropped the last few feet. Turning on his flashlight, he began his search through the dark netherworld beneath the thick canopy. Carefully, he made his way to the area under the pilots parachute shrouds, winding his way around giant tree trunks that rivaled sequoias. Ahead of him he could see a strobe light flickering in the near distance of the darkened cathedral. Walking quietly, gun at the ready, he slowly approached a moaning figure trapped in the triple trunk of a medium size mahogany tree. He switched off the pilot's locator and strobe light and began to check his vitals and assess his injuries. He glanced warily around at the silent darkness. The hair on the back of his neck standing up as THE FEAR overtook him.

The jet had been struck by a round of flak a few miles away, damaging the extensive hydraulic system his aircraft was

Charles Lynch

plagued with. His controls stiffened up and he was forced to eject. His backseater's system failed, at least as far as he knew. It was dark, and he couldn't tell if he got out or not. He saw the splash of flame as the plane struck earth a few miles away. A minute later he crashed into the tree tops, unhurt and thankful. Undoing the 100 ft. descent cord from his survival suit, he began lowering himself through the branches to the ground below. Reaching the proverbial end of his rope, he decided to drop the few remaining feet into the darkness. He fell another hundred feet, flipping through branches, literally breaking every bone in his body. He came to rest head down in the crotch of the tree, bleeding and broken but alive. He floated in and out of consciousness during his three-day hell, until he managed to free an arm a few hours ago. Then it had taken another hour to open a zipper and extract the locator beacon; this with an arm that was broken in two places and a shoulder dislocated.

Rufus called up to Willie, reporting the pilots condition and asking for the basket litter they carried strapped under the bird to evacuate the man. He also asked that Rico join him in the painful extraction of the pilot from his predicament. It was a two-man job. They would have to carry him to an area where the cable could clear the trees.

Rico soon joined Rufus and the two were sizing up the situation. Willie had flown off to another area trying to draw attention away from the rescue. The two gunners stood in the silent darkness under the midday sun with the moaning man. Rico was shaken by the man's incredible predicament. It reminded him of a pilot he picked up months before.

During Rico's fourth month in the war he was assigned to a rescue outfit that picked up downed pilots in the North. They used Jolly Green Giant helicopters outfitted with electric guns and armor. They were giant ships, almost the size of a greyhound bus. They would wing into enemy territory, locate

The Orange Barrel

and retrieve a pilot even if he was dead, and zing back home just above the treetops before daylight. In daytime it could be different.

Most rescues were simple winch outs, or dive down and pickup in an opening of the jungle or the open rice patties. Others involved time-consuming extrication and on-scene first aid. The worst you could get would be a pickup on an enemy anti-aircraft gun testing range or near one of their army bases. Rico got the next best thing.

The pilot had landed a mile away from a medium size village, and all the townsfolk had rallied for the occasion. As they walked down the trail, they collected ferns and palm fronds to stick in their clothing and hats. The home guard brought their automatic weapons, while cap and ball muskets bristled from the crowd they commanded. The villagers made their own bullets and powder and had test-fired their weapons with the maximum load and bullet weight they could handle. They dispersed around the injured aviator and hid in the bushes and trees, waiting for the rescue team to arrive. On a nearby knoll, women and children had collected to view the coming battle from a safe distance. Rico's pilot pulled into the area, following the homing beacon. Slowly, he circled the giant craft around the downed man, searching the ground for any activity. He found none. The downed pilot must have parachuted down in the dark, and was obviously missed by the local villagers. At least this is what all pilots liked to think.

The para-rescue man swung out on the winch, slowly he went down. Rico and the other gunners sat on their guns, studying the ground for the slightest movement. The enemy below was ready, and held their camouflage against the immense propwash of the giant bird. The helpless pilot, his broken legs twisted at odd angles, stared up at the lowering

Charles Lynch

craft. Leaves and sticks buffeted his face as the bird lowered itself in.

The villagers had been instructed long ago on how to handle an airborne rescue attempt. They sat through long hours of political party speeches and studies while carving punji sticks that they sent south in bundles. Most of the ridiculous Commie rhetoric went in one ear and out the other, but when it came to the part about village defense, they paid special attention. This would be the first time in memory their village had ever had to defend itself. Conquerors had come and gone in the millennia and the village had always survived. They practiced with their weapons, made fortifications and bomb shelters, and spent a portion of their life preparing for this moment. They sent away their best children to fight in the south and watched them come home maimed or crippled, or not come home at all. For a decade they heard stories from those that returned about the inhuman treatment they received when captured. Finally, the war had come to them! They had a score to settle.

Rico squinted through the sights of his electric gun as he swung it back and forth, searching for a target. The multiple barrels whistled from the bird's propwash. Below him the trees tossed and swayed. Everything looked OK so far. It seemed like another easy retrieval. The para-rescue man was on the ground and was harnessing up the pilot. He glanced around as he quickly clicked in the injured man. Then, looking up at the bird, he shook his head. Over the head phones the words "open fire" sounded, and everyone did . . . everyone. The rescuer went down, his body on top of the pilot. Instantly they were riddled with bullets. Rico's heavy rounds blasted into the trees, raining branches and leaves on the people below. Bullets bracketed his gun port and slammed into the fuselage near him. The well-hidden defenders were impossible to hit between the giant

The Orange Barrel

stumps and logs and buttressed tree roots. They were firing up as fast as they could reload.

Rico changed his strategy. He began systematically cutting down trees and treetops, burying the defenders in a forest of slash. It was working. The sight of a giant hardwood coming apart in front of you was enough to put the fear of God in a lad.

As bullets pinged across the pilot's windshield, they pulled up, yanking the lifeless bodies on the tether up with them. They spun, as more bullets tore into them. Finally, they were out of range. As the bodies were winched into the door, the pilot got another request for assistance on the coast. A seal team that was inserted the day before had been discovered and was making a run for the beach. As they neared the local villages they had been fired upon, then chased by anyone that could run as fast as they could. And they were running fast, despite the wounded they carried.

An old navy WW2 destroyer that was diverted for their pick up had dropped anchors near the reef, then plowed right up on the beach like a killer whale until its prow lay on dry ground. A heavy rubber waistband around the ship's middles allowed it to flex on the sand. Men with weapons crowded the decks, waiting to defend the team when they arrived. A rope ladder was flung over the side and hung waiting.

As Rico's bird swung into the area he could see the struggling seals through the scattered coconut palms. The pilot settled the bird above them, and flew sideways while Rico and the other gunner cleared a path in front and behind them. As the team scrambled aboard the ship, the captain reversed the propellers and engaged the winches to the anchors and pulled out into the ocean. Up and down the coast villagers paddled out in dugout canoes to give their final defiance before the ship went out to sea, many with spears. The captain steered the ship

Charles Lynch

along side them and ground them into the screws, one by one, before leaving.

"So how we gonna do this brother man?" Rufus queried, looking up at the whimpering pilot.

"I think we have to just go for it, you know, just do it," Rico returned.

"Man everything is broke in that dude. He's got ribs and leg bones protruding. He's only got one lung, I'm sure of that. I can't give him an I.V. 'til we lay him out, and that needs to be soon. I gave him an ampoule of morph when I showed up. That shut him up a little. But you know he's gonna be squealing when we pull him outta the crotches of that tree," Rufus replied, sobering at the thought.

"Rufy, that guy has been healing for three days. He's gonna strongly object to us moving him. Those bones are all starting to knit an', we're gonna have to break 'em all loose that's all," Rico said, preparing another ampoule for the injured man.

They gave him a second shot. It almost knocked him out. Then they shot themselves to ease their psychic pain and help them through the extraction.

Rico climbed up into the tree above the pilot, positioned himself, then grabbed hold of a broken leg and pulled. The man squealed like a choir girl as Rico worked the contorted body out of the tree, and down to Rufus. He laid him out, cushioning him in the wire net with the moss that covered the forest floor. He wanted to apply splints, but didn't know where to start. They were also getting paranoid from all the screaming, so they quickly buckled him in and headed for the new drop point almost a quarter mile away. Rico stuffed his red headband in his mouth.

The boys got really paranoid as they struggled over the difficult terrain. Everywhere they looked, they imagined enemy crouching in the shadows or peeking around trunks. If they had

The Orange Barrel

known that the day before a group of enemy had passed near the suffering man, then ate their lunch only a few yards away, they would have been extremely paranoid. With their short hair standing on end, they hustled through the dark with the suffering pilot.

Willie had been flying circles a few miles away so as not to attract attention to the rescuers and waiting for them to call him back for pickup. He watched air strikes from a distance, as B-52's carpetbombed a ten square mile area into matchsticks. Willie wondered if anything was there besides monkeys.

On his first tour he had flown a chopper equipped with a device that could detect human urine or sweat. Areas found to have a high concentration of this fluid were bombed heavily in the hope of destroying large amounts of enemy troops. The enemy figured out the new technology and countered by hanging buckets of piss in the trees. The B-52's destroyed untold amounts of the laboriously extracted substance, causing many an inflated body count before the enemy ploy was discovered.

Rufus called in that they were ready for pickup, and Willie came around, lowering the winch cable down into the trees. Rico was extracted first, to aid in swinging the litter into the aircraft. Rufus was last. All were relieved when they were on board. They headed to the nearest aid station across the border to drop off the whimpering man. They later estimated he said the words, "I can't believe you're here," more than a hundred times.

After refueling and getting some food, they took off with a load of cargo and mail for another firebase in the highlands. It was a milk run. Actually not milk, but steaks, beer and a number of other perishables, including three 80-pound units of human female. They were entertainers. Rico wondered about their expertise. Rufus grabbed a thigh and let a girl try on his

Charles Lynch

helmet. All were giggling as joints were passed across the couch in the windy living room of the chopper. Rico was taken back at the weirdness that was occurring before him. He looked out the door at the speeding landscape filled with little men that wanted to kill him. Then back to the three laughing, beautiful mini skirted girls that transformed the interior of the war bird into a homey place. He should be looking for targets, or be ready to return fire at an enemy below, but instead here he was, partying with friends, rock and roll on the phones. What a truly weird war.

They dropped off the beer and meat at the base, then headed for their next assignment, a mystery chopper caught in the trees. They easily spotted the bird and went to investigate: Rico's turn down on the tether. He made his way through the brush and climbed in one of the doors, his dilated eyes slowly adjusting to the dark, gloomy interior of the bird and the jungle. Dank smells filled his nostrils as he surveyed the scene.

The chopper was an old and bulky model that had been phased out for its slow climb rate and 'shoot at me all you want' attitude. This one crashed early in the war and had never been found, the trees swallowing it up like a hungry beast. A recent storm had torn off a large tree limb, and the bird was easily seen and reported by a low flying spotter plane the day before.

Rico poked around marveling at what Mother Nature would use a helicopter for, then turned his attention to the crew. They sat in their positions of death when the explosion flashed burned their souls free of their bodies. White boned fingers still clutched the guns and controls in a literal death grip. Vines and creepers had squirmed their way through bullet holes in the dark, snaking their way through the decayed corpses like poisonous adders. Leaves and flowers jutted from their chests and rotting clothes. Algae and moss covered windows and walls, the floors carpeted in green. The forest wasn't letting go

The Orange Barrel

of its catch. Branches that reached in through the doors to the light on the other side were covered with moss, lichen and ferns. The same blanketed the seats as well as anything that could support its weight. A small tree sprouted from an open munitions can near the door where the perpetual rains kept it full of water, its roots feeding from the damp, rotted bullets it held in its steel belly. The plexi-lens under the pilot's feet had filled with brackish water and an entire biosphere had been created. Frogs, toads and tadpoles swam in the miniature pool while insects circled above it like kingfishers, or slinked through the mossy greenery like deer on its shores. Questing vines stepped into the pool then sprouted tiny trees along its bank. Gently a Déjà vu passed through Rico as the water slowly wobbled from the rocking winds blowing through the branches. He shook it off with a deep shiver, trying to remember its origin. He looked at it again and saw the chalice of wine, the pool of blood swaying in the priest's hands. A deeper shiver hit him and he shook uncontrollably, the memory tapping into something he couldn't fathom. Something he hadn't seen yet. Then he watched toy army men wading the banks with their weapons held over their heads. Frogs with scuba gear swam clear of them, then dove for the bottom trailing bubbles. Too weird man, just too weird.

He quickly lit up a joint with his shaking hands, then studied the remains of the dead crew, time to refocus. The pilots sat at their controls as if still flying, their mouths held wide as if laughing at a dirty joke. Moss covered their melted helmets and hung down their faces like green beards. Rico stifled a giggle, as another flashback hit him again. He felt the spin of the hammer head ride at the carnival, and the tight cockpit had brought the memory back. The screaming skulls caught in the moment of zenith in the thrill of their life. He stepped back trying not to laugh at the horror before him, he knew he was

Charles Lynch

being disrespectful to the dead, but he knew these guys, they were aircrew, and if they were as hashed as he was right now they would join him. He started to laugh again and another flash back hit him hard, he had been here before, but everything was new. He allowed the memory to fill his mind while his lungs filled with the potent smoke and take him away from the scene.

A few months before Rico had been on a base and watched a cargo plane splat on a mountainside as its engines gave out from the concentrated fire of a small group of well concealed enemy. His crew jumped into their chopper, intent on a quick rescue before they were beaten there by the enemy and the airmen killed. Circling, they found the crash site vacant of activity, then landed and quickly looked for survivors. As Rico approached the crews' door, he found two men laying on the ground several feet from it. One was obviously dead, his skull failing to do its job, the other was unharmed, not a scratch, but still dead. Rico checked the other side of the bird and found another man kneeling Indian style, an elbow on his knee and his hand shading his eyes from the pounding sun. He was peering back toward the base below, intently oblivious to Rico's approach. Rico spoke to him but he wouldn't answer, so he gave him a shake and he toppled over like a mannequin. Rico examined him, then shook himself as he searched for a wound and found nothing. Something creepy going on here. He then walked into the plane, ducking through the slowly spinning propellers; the bird still had its wheels down. There he found the navigator at his desk, a pencil in his hand, staring straight at him. Rico shook him too, hard, no good again, the pencil fell on the floor. Then he stepped into the cockpit and found the same there, all dead, all at their stations frozen in time, not a drop of blood on any of them, white knuckles still gripping the controls. Rico was really getting the creeps, he backed out slowly as other men came to view the scene, they mumbled to themselves,

The Orange Barrel

then quickly left to set up a perimeter around the bizarre scene, the intro to “The Twilight Zone” playing in their heads.

The plane hadn’t really crashed, it was salvageable. It powered up the steep valley then the engines stopped, and so did the plane. It fell back and pancaked on the hillside, the wheels and powerful suspension taking the shock, the propellers never touching the ground, as if God had gently set down a toy he was tired of. Rico pondered on this one for a long time till he realized that except for the guy with the headache, everyone else had died of pure fright, knowing they were going to crash and burn with a full load of fuel and a cargo of munitions.

They were supposed to die and they did. Still it didn’t explain the crouching Indian, or the men that opened the door and walked outside to die.

Rico felt the perplexing memory wash out of him like a used bandage under a hot faucet till he felt white and sterile inside. The arboreal tomb was getting to him as was the silent company, time to get the job done.

“All right you guys, knock it off, quit bugging me!” he yelled at the group, trying to refocus his thoughts. He took some deep breaths then began fishing in the rotted chests for dog tags, leaving one for the graves registration team that would later bag up the remains. He spooked a bird from its nest that had been quietly protecting its brood in the chest of one of the pilots and jumped back with a gasp, the bird flapping in his face, his blood pounding in his head from fright.

“That was extremely freaky and gross,” he said to the crew, then thumbed through the dog tags reading names. “Alls you are is a bunch of broken machines that belonged to a company, and around your necks are nomenclature plates with serial numbers from the manufacturers with your model name, preferred fluid type, and what other company buries you.” As he backed out to the gunners he did the same, taking notice of the several

Charles Lynch

crucifixes on one's chain with his shaking hands, then he called for pickup, time to leave. As he waited, he smeared the slime from the gunners' tag and read the inscription: Santos Hezous Cairo, Catholic, O-negative, sounded Italian, maybe Spanish, how about Greek? He easily translated it, then laughed as he realized that was probably the last thing everybody said, "Holy Jesus Christ!"

As Rico's bird reached altitude, he floated back in, staring at the white-knuckle grip he held on his gun and watched his fingers turn into bones. Over the phones a frantic call came in from a downed wounded pilot.

"Yeah. Need a pickup, been wounded, copilots dead. The LZ is cold . . . repeat, cold."

"What do you think guys? Should we help him?" Willie questioned.

"I don't know; maybe we should check it out," Rufus answered.

"I don't think so, brabozos. That LZ is not cold! Why do you think he's setting there wounded? Why don't he fly the plane? I think he wants to make heroes out of us," Rico warned.

Don, the new copilot, on his first combat mission and assigned to Willie for the rest of the day, took a deep breath. He didn't say a word.

Chapter 22

Skulls

Willie and the crew made four circuits hauling wounded and lost their new co-pilot to a bullet in the foot. He envied the man, who would now be going home without having spent a whole week in country, and Don was ready to go home before he got there. Rico and Rufus were still frying heavy on the acid, though they were on the down side of the drug's effectiveness. After their last mission, Willie took them to a special place for a little R&R. They flew out to the coast to an area of the beach a mile wide. Willie circled the dunes looking for movement and saw none. He settled the bird down near the water and shut the engine off.

The last time Rico had been to the dunes they were on patrol. The place was no man's land and anybody in the area should not be there, and was to be confronted if not just plain killed. The pilot spotted a woman scurrying across the sand with a pack on her back and carrying a litter. Their craft circled the frightened girl like a wasp, the pilot shouting orders over his loud speaker for her to show him her identification papers. She responded by producing an automatic rifle and firing on them. Rico cut her down with a quick burst, then the craft settled in to investigate. On her back was a sack of white rice that was now pink scattered across the sand, on her stomach was a child that had been wounded. Having a humanitarian moment, the crew packed up the baby and raced for the nearest aid station that was only a few minutes away. After dropping it off, then waiting for a refuel, a medic ran up to them to tell them that the child's kidneys had been blown out. The crew quickly mounted up and raced back to the scene of the incident. They grabbed the dead

Charles Lynch

mother's body and threw her into the bird, then burned back to the aid station. The medics took her apart and found the child's kidneys intact, they had been preserved in the mother's body. Later they found that the child survived and was being sent to the states for adoption.

Before the beast's great wings had ceased their gyrations, Rico and Rufus were sprinting to the water's edge, stripping off their clothes and armor. Willie took the first shift standing guard with a keen eye for movement. He turned and laughed at the two youths frolicking in the water like the children they were. The two swimmers reveled at the colors and sensations the water was giving them. It's cleansing properties having a psychological as well as physical effect. Their black and brown naked bodies flickered to different colors and hues. Rufus was first to notice the phenomenon. He examined his hands closely, turning them over and back, white then black. Then he began to laugh again. He called out to Rico who was making a similar examination of another external appendage that caught his fascination.

"Hey dude, check this out, I'm a signal beacon." Rufus said flipping his hands.

Rico looked closer then went wild eyed, "Hey man, you're all purple, and your hair looks like some kind of moss or something. Now it's running down the side of your neck and dripping into the water in big chunks."

"Man you otta see yourself, you're as red as a beet, and the water around you is red too. You are redder than the spot on my red ball jets."

Rico studied himself closely, "Red red, well wet my bed, of all the colors, it's got to be red. I like your color better Rufi, purple shows some creativity. Everything in this place is red including me, this has been one red day."

The Orange Barrel

“Well hey man, come over here and I’ll rub some of this purple on you,” Rufus said, splashing Rico with water.

Willie had been watching their antics from the shade of the chopper. Gun in hand, he made another cursory check of their surroundings, then called to Rico across the mother of pearl beach to relieve him for a swim. Rico dressed and went to examine the chopper for any damage they might have incurred in the last action. Rufus stiffened himself into a log and let the waves roll him in the sand and beach him. Willie, usually somber, let out a rebel yell and dove into the boiling surf. Rufus sat in awe as he vanished beneath the surface. Seconds, then minutes passed, these seemed to turn into hours. Still no Willie. Filled with apprehension, Rufus jumped to his feet, his reality altered by fear. Then Willie broke the surface over a hundred feet out, blowing out spray like a whale. Rufus let out a sigh of relief, “Time warp,” he said to himself. Willie stroked back and climbed up the beach panting. He splatted Rufus with sand as he walked by. Rufus dove in the water with “asshole” on his lips to wash off.

The two swimmer’s laughing dimmed out to Rico as he probed the new bullet holes in the craft with his fingers. He poked his forefinger in one hole and watched it reappear from another almost a foot away. Then he checked the plexi-glass damage, peeking through the holes at the inside of the ship to see where the bullets went. It looked like one just missed him. He satisfied himself that none of the essential equipment was damaged. Then went over to his station and began raking out the spent cartridges that littered the floor. It was then that he noticed the peculiar tracings that his fingers made in the blood of the wounded men they picked up. He swirled his fingers in the scarlet finger paint making image after image. Soon he was oblivious, withdrawn into himself in a child like trance. He

drew faces that spoke, trees that wavered in the wind, and birds that flapped their wings and chirped.

“Rico, what are you doing? Your papa will be home soon and he will be angry with you again,” his mother said in his head.

“I know mama!” He almost yelled. That’s when Rufus walked up putting on his flak jacket.

“Hey man whatcha doin’?” Rufus looked at his gory canvas on the floor of the bird, “Man you be frying away, your gonna be a crispy critter if you keep up with that crap.”

Rico was too entranced to notice him. Swirls of color emerged behind his raking fingers, Red no longer dominated.

Rufus shook him angrily, “C’mon man snap out of it, you gonna get yourself stuck there and you aren’t gonna get back. You want to turn into a carrot like that medic did back at base?”

Rico shook his head and slowly turned around, “How long was I gone?”

“Only ten minutes but you’re supposed to be on watch, you even dropped your gun in the sand.” Rufus said, picking it up and giving it a shake.

“Yeah, guess I was kinda out of it for a while. Let’s wash this crud outta dey bird. Its collecting flies.”

Willie strode up pulling on a zipper, “If you guys still want to do a job on the ROK people you better get a move on.”

The two gunners tossed a few gallons of water on the floor trying to splash out the mess, then walked over to where a pair of gunships caught 200 enemy in the dark and killed them all. Bones and skulls were scattered everywhere on the shifting sands. The locals made off with anything of value long ago, and the smiling skulls sat like fallen apples, delighted to be picked up and put to use. Here and there, scavenging crabs scuttled amongst the bones picking at sinews and exposed marrow. The

The Orange Barrel

skulls themselves were home to several of the tiny urchins, and had to be shook out.

“Lookit them suckas run,” Rufus said, squashing one with his boot. “They is just little men, with little minds, eating out the minds of other little men. Plus they are being squashed by a little man with an even littler mind.” Rico laughed, grinning back at the skull in his hand.

“Man you is one crazy spic you know that?” Rufus said tossing a skull at Rico, which he easily ducked.

“Spic? Well look at you, the purple mogambo man with the armload of skulls like out of some Tarzan movie,” Rico returned, ready to dodge another cranium.

Rufus eyed him deeply, Rico’s shape shifted and fluttered, then malformed before his eyes. Rufus’ mood had changed.

“Hey grease ball, you want to kiss one of these suckas?” Rufus challenged, a skull in hand.

“You wanna eat one Sambo?” Rico snapped back.

Willie walked up pointing a skull at the two, and working the jaws simultaneously as he spoke. “All right you guys save that crap for the enemy, we got to get going and I need what’s left of the sun if were going to fly under those trees.” The two gunners ignored Willie and stared stupefied at the talking skull, necks outstretched, mouths agape, frozen in their positions till it finished its speech. After its amazing oration the two stood shocked, then slowly healed from the performance. They busily completed the task of loading the skulls into the bird, then fled to the sky, leaving the white parchment of sand, and the squirming myriad of headless bodies behind in the baking light. Willie climbed high and the boys settled back for the ride to their next objective. They chuckled occasionally to themselves as they listened to the conversation amongst the skulls that were knee deep on the floor.

Charles Lynch

“What are they talking about?” Rico queried, his anxiety topping out being surrounded by the mass of muttering craniums.

“You hear it too? I thought I was going nuts. They seem to be just whispering to themselves, at least that’s what I hear.” Rufus replied.

“You know what they sound like? Like a bunch of Chicanos on the street corner talking real quietly.” Rico surmised.

“Yeah man I hear a bunch of bros in the same place doin the same thing, you know this is gettin’ pretty weird man, I mean I’m really tripping on this.” Rufus returned, sword fighting a crab lodged in an eye socket with his penknife.

Willie took the chopper high over the base of Colonel Kim and his dreaded ROK men. Disliked by allies and enemies for their ruthlessness in battle and prisoner accommodations, the ROK soldiers were occasionally accidentally bombed, mortared, strafed, misdirected, or shot at by their friendly allies. Although valuable for the degree of discipline and fighting spirit, they were still shunned by all but their own.

Willie leaned the bird into a tight spiral over Tang’s headquarters’ building.

With both gunners holding their support straps, the skulls tumbled and rolled off the slanted floor into space with the help of a boot or two. Falling and skittering out the door they joined in the laughter of the three men as they headed for their last mission against their enemy. Many turned around to give the crew a final smile or nod, then plummeted downward, face first, wobbling to the air currents they created.

The first struck the ground outside the front door of the chow hall, then worked their way to the roof of the headquarters building. They splattered on the corrugated sheathing scattering bone chips and teeth everywhere. Doing no damage except a psychological one, the skulls ceased their insidious laughter as

The Orange Barrel

the last ones splashed down on the roof like pearly plastic raindrops. At the cessation of the gruesome hailstorm, several ROK men ran outside, binoculars in hand, in hopes of getting their ID numbers. They received such gifts from the sky before, and had to clean them up.

Before the last of the brain buckets struck the planet, the dragon was gone over a nearby hill. The crew waved at a sentry atop the nearby mount who waved back with a peace sign and a toothy smile. Then Willie dove the speeding craft down the other side into an opening in the trees that exposed the snaking green body of a river. Willie knew it well, and easily avoided the heavily muscled branches that swept over them to prevent an escape skyward. The creek was wide enough for the craft's flight, as long as they flew close to the surface.

The sun flickered through the leaves onto the lenses of their helmets, as the chopper careened through the vast tunnel of thick vegetation. In some areas it became near dark, then lit up as a sunny spot occurred. Pink, yellow, and blue trunks reached out with their feathered limbs in an attempt at grabbing them. Bolder trees struggled with their squirming root balls to gain better purchase at a chance at knocking them down. Occasionally a rotor tip slapped at a branch that got too close making everyone jump.

As the sun dropped lower in the sky, Rico thought of the upcoming battle. He detested doing villages at the whim of somebody that felt they could be harboring enemy soldiers. A lot of people were about to be killed probably for no reason and the continual waste of humanity was getting to him. Many times he shot up small villes and later found that no weapons were recovered or that the enemy was just not there. For a whole month Rico was involved in the scorched earth policy that was designed to deny the enemy any means of support. He slaughtered animals and watched whole villages go up in smoke

Charles Lynch

with their precious bamboo silos of rice along with them. He swooped over villes whose shady trees were freshly denuded with defoliant, thus depriving the enemy of cover and forcing him to fight in the open against the merciless guns in the sky. The deadly chemical when used only slightly diluted, was a weapon that killed the young and aged outright. When the attacking troops ran through the huts and courtyards killing the survivors, they found spontaneously aborted fetuses around campfires where the pregnant mothers were cooking or weaving baskets. We was going after future soldiers before they were even born. Across the border jets flew low and dispersed brightly colored ribbons over villages much to the cowering peoples' delight. They came running out, collecting the colorful gifts thinking them a peace offering from an enemy that had been so cruel for so many years. Minutes later, after the slightest touch of the deadly bait, their skin broke out in splotches and they died an agonizing death. Writhing on the ground, blood seeping from every orifice including their pores, within minutes their bodies turned bright red, the blood soaking through their clothes. Rico had been to the Plain of Jars on several occasions picking up downed pilots or escorting observers that made notations in their little books or took pictures of the devastation. Rico saw some of the giant jars on a hill top once, when he came by the next time they were all shot up by bored fighter pilots.

The place had been severely bombed for years, rendering the valuable rice patties useless with gaping craters. After this they were sown with anti-personnel mines destroying their usefulness for decades if not centuries to come. Eventually it became a tradition for the oldest girl in the family to make the first plowing of new land. She would detonate any unexploded ordinance in the field, the boys being too valuable as soldiers or breadwinners to have their feet blown off unnecessarily.

The Orange Barrel

As a teenager, Rico remembered watching TV while at dinner with his family, as a new bomb was demonstrated for the whole world to see. It had a camera in the nose and a brain, and could be directed in flight towards its target, much more effectively than a dumb bomb that just fell out of the sky and hit whatever. The screen showed a bouncy film as the bomb made its way towards a tunnel opening in a cliff face till impact when it blanked out. Clip after clip was shown as the smart bombs made their way into cave after cave killing the inhabitants. Now that Rico was in country, he could see the progression of events that led up to the new hardware. Aircraft first bombed the villages forcing the occupants to dig holes. Then they bombed the holes forcing the survivors into caves. Caves were hard to hit so the TV bomb was developed, and everybody in the world got to watch the final extinction of a race of people that lived unchanged for millennia, on the Plain of Jars. Unfortunately the soldiers were all gone and the adults were out being killed in the fields with their crops. The caves were full of children and the aged, placed where everyone thought they would be safe, they were all that was left to be bombed. The people of the Plain of Jars were all but extinct.

The village was getting closer and so was The FEAR. He thought he felt a strange vibration in the bird but discovered that his feet were tapping wildly from fright. He concentrated, taking deep breaths to calm himself, trying to sit still like a fidgeting choirboy full of pee in church. He knew what was going to happen, he had done it before, and the village would be wide open as always, they would swoop in and do the nasty and pull out. Piece of cake, or was it? Most villes were unprepared for an instant air assault, their guns were always hidden and had to be dug out of stashes and caches. It will be like the other times, he thought to himself, nobody dies but them, which meant nobody dies. Rico had been in-country long enough to

Charles Lynch

see a trend in the way that things were turning out. Sure we were kicking butt everywhere we were confronted, and we won all the battles, or sort of won, but by the way people talked we were still losing. He overheard officers talking several times and they sounded defeated. He figured them as homesick little boys wanting to go home and ignored their words. When he started hearing defeatism from other men, he began to wonder. In other wars, and other countries, talking defeatism got you shot. This wasn't true with them, everybody had been talking defeatism for years, including the politicians. The eventual plan was to turn the war over to the people that lived there and for us to get out. It had already begun, he had seen it on TV so it was obviously true, color guards marching into the maw of a cargo plane, flags and pennants furling. What he didn't know was the soldiers would be following, eventually. New soldiers kept arriving, marching out of planes like belted bullets out of an ammo box. Then they were loaded into helicopters and trucks and shot into battle. There they ricocheted around till they went home or were spent and ended up stuck in the ground somewhere or in a hospital to be reloaded into another belt or sent home too dented to be reused again. He saw ships get reassigned, while other ships replaced them with new crews that needed to be trained in the arts. Whole air wings were sent home while others continued to strike from Thailand and the islands. Bases were being closed, firebases abandoned or turned over to the natives that quickly lost them to the enemy and were never retaken. Long lines of trucks clogged the highways wading through refugees in unending convoys, reshuffling the cards of the game.

Rico's disillusionment came over him slowly starting in the hospital. Being given a chance to think screwed up his whole concept of war and his part in it. The enemy made it a point to screw up a person's mind in one way or another, and they

The Orange Barrel

seemed to be doing a great job on everybody including the people back home. He had been here long enough to see people change, at least the ones that were still alive that he had known since his arrival. Most men, even the draftees, had some sense of honor and purpose when they arrived, over time this changed to self-preservation and mere survival. Rico knew men that shot any child running in their direction because they were occasionally mined. An orphan child was a burden on the enemy to take care of so they were used as weapons against us, a mental weapon. Anyone in the vicinity of the child shooting would receive permanent mental damage from viewing it. Another man that operated the front guns on a PBR boat cleared every bridge with the weapon of the small boys that threw their hand made hooks in the murky water below. His reasoning being three times his boat had passed under one of these bridges and been destroyed by a little boy with a grenade and good timing. Killing the crew and sparing him each time. He made a resolution and called it justifiable homicide. He also knew that these little boys would someday become enemy soldiers and would be killing American boys their same age that were now back in the states probably fishing off a bridge too. He convinced other crews of his logic and the practice spread. Soon little boys cleared the bridges whenever a patrol boat approached, a problem solved. Going under trees and heavily trafficked bridges was another story.

Everywhere Rico looked he could see signs that things were changing. Corruption was dug deep into everything and sometimes that was the only way things would work. He knew soldiers with rusted malfunctioning guns that wrote their parents and had a better one sent to them instead of trying to get one from supply. He had seen ARVNs that had brand new guns everywhere he went. He had even seen new American guns captured from the enemy whose numbers showed that they had

Charles Lynch

been in country only a week. Somebody was making money off this and it wasn't him. The disillusionment was getting to him as it was everyone else. Temporarily losing the girl had thrown his mind in several directions at once. He originally arrived with a death wish and wanted an honorable death if it was to be, but the girl changed all that, growing conscious from no conscious. He wanted to live out his life at its fullest, then he thought the girl was dead and he went back to his old suicidal train of thought. Then presto-change-o she was alive again and yearning for his company. Things change. Rico knew he was having problems with himself and his head but he didn't think he needed counseling... yet. The only time he felt whole was when he was with the girl and she was gone. He found himself daydreaming more often about her when he had a chance to think. She filled his sullen mind when he was alone with his thoughts and he noticed that other things were less important to him now. She was his better half. The real world back in the states dwindled to an old memory mixed in with thoughts of his childhood. At times he found himself dreading to go home like a man that spent many years in prison. He would have to adapt to another world in which his prior life had to be kept secret, and only whispered in corners over mugs of beer with veterans his own age. When he was drunk, he got urges to extend his tour 6 months like many rear echelon troops did. That would be fine if he could get another job, this one was killing him in a number of different ways. This was actually a great partying place that was incredibly beautiful with so much to offer. He could spend the rest of his life here if it wasn't for the damn war. The girl replaced many of his negatives with positives in the last few months and Rico felt himself developing into a human being. He refused to fire on corralled civilians that were to be destroyed like diseased cattle and got raked over the coals by his pilot for his rebellion. Other times he fired over the heads

The Orange Barrel

of unarmed enemy pack bearers, making them drop their loads for confiscation instead of killing them. Several times his gun jammed unexplainably, then discovered it was his trigger finger that jammed instead. The girl was getting to him and he knew it. She disagreed with what was going on and told him so. On the few occasions that she would get drunk, he would really hear about it. Resultantly Rico avoided getting her that way at all costs. He knew she was actually the enemy, and was with the other side in her thinking, although not directly involved. On occasion the white mice police questioned her about her brother, whom she said she hadn't seen in years. He seldom came around which was fine with him. They partied a number of times together and Rico was finally able to get a sincere smile out of him. His creepy henchmen always made his skin crawl when they were around, but he finally was able to ignore their black pajama presence. He never knew when he was coming and was reluctant to invite friends over that might take offense. Security was tight, with her brother being a spy, soldier and rickshaw runner at the same time.

The girl made the war more personal. He saw her face with its classic features everywhere he went amongst the dead and living. Once he hauled prisoners and she was there, her hands bound and a tag on her neck like a porcelain doll in a china shop window. He held her face in his hands looking into her deep dark eyes to see if it was really her. She squinted hate, and spit in his eye, a curse on her lips. Rico jumped back, shocked at the realization that she had a twin, and later found out that she called him a pervert. She found out later what a pervert was when she got to the POW camp. Ronette's effect on him had become more pronounced after they were blown apart by the smoky winds of war. Her words and Confucius like sayings echoed in his head when he had time to think. Slowly she developed a fascist little boy into a conscientious adult. Like she

Charles Lynch

once said to him, “ I think maybe GI you head hab something human in it.”

Rico was checking his weapon when Willie came on the phones, “Thirty seconds you guys, say your prayers,” then he went into his battle crouch behind his stick.

Rufus nodded to Rico with a knowing smile, Rico smiled back, popping his bubble gum, then spitting it out. He then put his dangling crucifix in his mouth like the boy soldiers of Cambodia did before battle with the Buddha charms they wore. It made them feel closer to their God, and Rico felt the need also. In an exciting moment he had bitten down breaking the legs off making him paraplegic. Rico always wondered where they went.

The ship careened around the last corner in the vegetation, rotor blades missing the water by inches. Ahead, the surprised mushroom people scurried in every direction preparing for battle, their conical hats bobbing on their heads. At 200 yards Willie unleashed the last of his rockets into the grass huts and small buildings. Flying near sideways, he blasted one side of the river, then twisted to blast the other, all the time still flying forwards. Everywhere the mushroom shaped houses exploded then fell in on themselves in flames. People and property blew out into the river and courtyards, as columns of smoke curled up into the trees. Wounded dogs limped to the safety of the bush, while crying children wandered about aimlessly, or stood staring at their dead parents. Several enemy gunners recovered from the initial assault and were returning fire, one round ricochet off the doorpost next to Rufus’ head. Rico spun his gun around on his strap and began firing through the door opening next to Rufus, the gun blast flapping the loose fabric of his pants. He got the enemy gunner before Rufus could find his location. Then he spun back around to rake his side of the river again, riddling several dugout canoes, their owners still

The Orange Barrel

paddling furiously as they sank. Nobody was shooting back on his side. Then a man popped up from a burning hole where a hooch exploded and caved in, his face blackened by soot. On his shoulder he aimed up an RPG, his conical straw hat in flames like a specter from hell on his head. Rico focused his gun on the man and pressed the trigger, nothing happened.

Willie shouted, "Shoot Rico, shoot! He's got us!"

Rico's eyes were transfixed on the gunner only fifty feet away, he pushed the trigger again and found it wasn't jammed, he was. The FEAR was too strong and he was seizing up at the wrong moment, slowly his mouth began to open wider and wider in a silent scream as the flaming gunner's white teeth took on a horrible grin as he realized *he did* have them. Willie began to spin the chopper around to give the shot to Rufus, thinking Rico's weapon was useless as the enemy rocket came at them. Rico saw it in slow motion as it approached and shouted a warning. The missile was heading for his chest, and Rico slowly moved himself out of the way, the rocket going under his arm and out the other side of the craft nicking the side of Rufus' helmet. The projectile continued on, striking a palm tree and toppling it in their direction. The bushy fronds narrowly missing the main rotor.

Spooked by the shot and Rico's crippled gun, they were off down the river, Rufus firing his gun behind them. The flaming gunner took off the blazing hat and waved good bye to the airmen, tossing the hat in the air. Rico waved back with an uneasy smile.

Willie asked if the gunners were all right and they both responded "of course" in unison, then broke out in nervous laughter.

They followed the river till they got to an open spot, then climbed to a safe altitude. Rico stood at the door, touching his sweaty fingers to the hot barrel and feeling them sizzle. Rufus

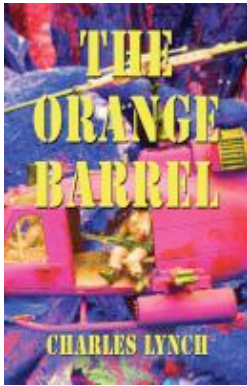
Charles Lynch

raked spent cartridges out the door, watching them twirl out of sight, then spoke up, “Wow man did you see them guys when we drilled them? They like deflated, like there was some kind of bubble around them and we popped it.”

Rico was staring down at his hands, “That was an ora. The Hari-Krishnas have them. I’ve seen them before, they really stand out under the trees like that in the shade. But you never notice them till they die.”

“Yeah Rico, dem trees, was dey trippin’ you out or what? The way the light was flickering through them, it was like watching and old movie show.”

“And coming out of them was like walking out of the theater into the light, it was beautiful.” Rico said, as he acted like he was fiddling with his gun and then test fired it. “There, that was easy to fix,” he announced.



Amazing action story of a young helicopter gunner in Viet Nam. His last day of flying combat missions filled with flashbacks of battle and childhood war games and their relation to the present. His struggles with fear, alcohol and drugs reach a point as reality blends with fantasy with a hit of LSD. His girlfriend, who may be enemy, complicates matters as does his duty to God and country. The story is filled with actual accounts.

The Orange Barrel

Order the complete book from

[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6729.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**