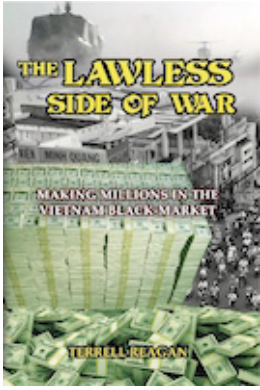




THE LAWLESS SIDE OF WAR

MAKING MILLIONS IN THE
VIETNAM BLACK-MARKET

TERRELL REAGAN



A young, naïve Texan takes a job with a foreign assignment in Saigon in order to beat the draft and, through attrition, he quickly becomes one of the project engineers in a company with over 55,000 employees. Due to his influential position, he gets involved with The Dragon Lady of Saigon in black-market operations that net over \$155 million in today's money until the Chinese underworld cleverly take control of his stash...

The Lawless Side of War

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THE LAWLESS SIDE OF WAR

**MAKING MILLIONS IN THE VIETNAM
BLACK-MARKET**

FICTIONAL MEMOIR

BY

TERRELL REAGAN

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CHAPTER ONE

6-6-66

War clouds over Vietnam had begun to rain on my parade in Austin, Texas as I was trying to graduate from engineering school, find a job with an occupational deferment, and beat the draft. I was a typical engineering student in 1966, broke with hard decisions to make before the draft board made the decisions for me. The war was escalating and every young man in America wondered whether his draft number would be called. Some enlisted while others like me searched for a ways to avoid this interruption in our lives.

The University of Texas was a big campus with mixed affiliations. Far away from the engineering school, the long-haired hippies were protesting the war. We were the short-haired kids who brandished an armful of books in one hand and a slide rule in the other. We didn't have any desire to tote a picket sign because we didn't understand the protest, but we also didn't understand the war.

My relationship with the Waco, Texas draft board was tenuous since I had deliberately avoided two senior courses in my double major of math and physics at Baylor to enter engineering school at UT for an extended scholarly stint. My 254 hours of undergraduate work had pushed the limit and since law school was full, my academic life was now over.

My best buddy, Hans Wolfgang Dietrich, a big six foot four-inch blond-headed full-blood German we called Wolfie, brilliant architect and engineer, was a specimen that would have made The Third Reich proud. We had never been out of Texas except for an occasional trek to a Mexican border town and with graduation fast approaching, we kept each other informed on a daily basis about defense-related companies that were providing airplane tickets for a job interview that might keep us from packing a gun.

Friendships developed in college were blood-bonding and Wolfie and I were no exception. The system we had devised for passing information on exams was so intricate and fail-proof that we could have patented and sold it to the CIA. Our finances were so

interwoven that we settled three years of debts to each other over a game of pool at a local joint then sold our books for a little cash until we could score a job. We had tried to serve our country with the least amount of damage to ourselves by applying for National Guard units on the “buddy system” but after discovering they were all full, we decided to be a team on the job market.

We each had a single interview suit, a thirty dollar Sears special. With no money for pressing or cleaning, we made the wrinkles work until Wolfie threw up on his suit after a night on the town in Chicago in transit to meet with the Trane Corporation in Lacrosse Wisconsin. He was not allowed on the company plane for the last leg of the trip. We didn’t want to work there anyway.

I was an arrogant self-centered little smart-ass prick who believed that if I could get a deferment, I would rise to the top of any corporation. While Wolfie and I were interviewing at the Flour Corporation in Los Angeles, the president called all of the students into his office and asked if there were any questions.

“Yes sir,” I said, as my narcissistic Napoleonic complex made me thrust my hand in the air with such force that it pulled my five-foot nine-inch frame out of my chair directly in front of the president. “Sir, exactly what is your annual remuneration for being president of one of the largest and the most respected construction companies in the world?” I asked, which created a few snickers and gawking from the attendees.

“And why do you ask, young man?” an astonished president of the company asked.

“Because I want to know the ceiling and the limit to what I’ll be making.” I didn’t want to work there either.

Professor Dorenberger, a jolly old Professor Emeritus of something we never understood, our mentor and friend, called us into his office one day and asked if we would be interested in working in the Philippines for Brown and Root, a Houston construction company that was the largest in the world. Their connection to the war effort by building pre-fabricated bridges for Vietnam should provide a guaranteed deferment but we had to be hired first, and then

apply to the draft board later. Wolfie and I spent the day filling out forms, not knowing that only one position was open.

I got the job and Wolfie got scared.

“You asshole,” Wolfie said. “Will I end up in a Vietnamese rice paddy defending your freedom to sit in an air conditioned whore house in the Philippines?”

“Just give me a head start, Wolfie, because with my line of bullshit and charm, I’ll have your ass airmailed right behind me.”

The job offer for \$900 per month plus \$300 a month expenses was the largest starting salary in UT engineering history and was the talk of the school because the average offer was around \$575 per month without any benefits. The thought of giving up my four part-time jobs at Marchack Engineering designing a valve for NASA, working for Chris’s Liquor Store on Saturdays, grading for the math department, and preaching in a fundamentalist church on Sunday mornings made me feel like I was getting out of jail. My thirty-five dollar a month room in the attic of a nursing home would not be missed.

A packet of information arrived that included a Philippine work permit, immunization card, security-clearance background check, an eighteen month contract, and an airplane ticket for departure on 6-6-66, the same day I was to graduate. The airplane ticket was the most beautiful piece of English literature I had ever seen.

Every family in the U.S. that had a draft-eligible loved one, which totaled in the millions, anxiously monitored the call-ups. My family was no exception. I could not get to Waco fast enough where I spread the employment documents on the dining room table to share the news about my job.

This table had been the center of my childhood. Dinner and prayer started precisely at 6:00 p.m. where we heard Mom’s daily report like when my sister tried to baptize the cat, listened to Dad’s monologue about our homework, and then argued with my brother over who would wash and dry the dishes. My brother, in Harvard finishing his Ph.D., was the only one absent the night I shared my future.

“I’ve been praying for this deferment, Son, and God has answered,” my fundamentalist Christian mom said, who claimed to have a direct line to the Almighty.

“It’s not a deferment, Mom, but it’s just as good, because I’ll get that after I apply from the Philippines.”

“Praise the Lord,” my dad chimed in, “and you’ll still be doing your duty for your country.”

“You won’t get shot will you, bubba?” my little junior high sister asked.

“No, Karen, that’s in another country and I’ll be home to watch you enter high school.”

With only three weeks to go before walking across the stage to pick up my diploma, I submitted my final engineering papers and went by my attic cage to pick up my last mail. Monthly bills had always been the most fearful part of college life but as I ruffled through the stack I had to grin because this time, I wouldn’t have to borrow money from Wolfie. Two envelopes erased my grin when I saw a return address for the Selective Service and one from Brown and Root in the Philippines.

As I sat on the steps staring at the envelopes, I thought that if I didn’t open them then there wouldn’t be any bad news. That was a stupid thought so I ripped into the Selective Service envelope to discover I had been drafted with instructions to report for a physical. Could the second envelope be worse?

The one paragraph letter from Brown and Root said that the Philippine office was only hiring seasoned engineers and wished me the best in my search for employment.

How could this happen? How could I be drafted and fired in the same day? But the Brown and Root letter came from the Philippine office and not the main office in Houston. I still had an employment package, an airplane ticket, and with nothing else to lose, I decided to see how far I could travel before a low-level clerk in an unknown office would catch the error.

The draft notice was so frightening that I chose the airplane ticket over graduation ceremonies and had my parents take me to the airport in Waco. I didn’t tell anyone about the draft notice, especially

my family, because my red-neck blue-blooded parents would deliver me to basic training. I thought it would be much easier to negotiate a tailor-made U. S. Army uniform if I were safely outside the country instead of hanging around the recruiting station. I was the only person who knew I had been drafted besides the draft board. Brown and Root didn't know, my parents didn't know, and the University of Texas didn't care.

My schedule was to fly Trans Texas Airways to Dallas, then to San Francisco for my company orientation. Was this a bad omen leaving on the 6th of June? The newspapers were saying the sequence of 6-6-66 would not appear again for hundreds of years and the religious fanatics were quoting *Revelations* saying the world would come to an end. As I looked out the window of the prop driven plane I saw Dad still standing by his car, frantically waving his arms. I fought back a surge of tears at the reality of leaving home.

My arrival in San Francisco was at the height of the Vietnam War protest and with a draft notice in my back pocket while trying to leave the country, I didn't know where I fit into the equation.

Every time my name was called at the company one-hour orientation meeting, I was prepared to surrender my ticket, fearing that someone had discovered the discrepancy between the Philippine and Houston office. We learned about the spread of V.D., that tennis shoes would rot in the high humidity, and were given an envelope with cash for our one-day stay. No mention was made about where we were headed or the culture of the people with whom we would live.

With only an afternoon for leisure, I wandered into The Height-Ashbury district where the hippies had camped to protest the war and assail anyone with authority. Still dressed in my interview suit, I must have looked like an undercover cop as I wandered the grounds, stepping over entwined free-love bodies, wine bottles, condoms, and piles of trash, while refusing an occasional offer of a joint. Although I had never smelled pot during my sheltered life, the sweet aroma that infiltrated the air reminded me that in Texas, this whole crowd would face ten years in the slammer. The only gainfully employed person I saw was a topless shoe-shine girl who popped a towel on my

shoes to the beat of ‘Wooly Bully’ from a portable radio, while I watched her floppies defy engineering theory.

My thoughts were that a good earthquake could resolve their problems and a free bath instead of free love might be better suited. I was off to build bridges for the war effort and wondered if any of these kids were worth a single American life.

The excitement of boarding a Boeing 707 for Manila, the world’s largest airplane, was diminished by the thought of the draft notice safely tucked away in my suitcase. Was I a criminal or just a little bird in flight to a safe harbor?

The final approach into Manila revealed a stark contrast to my Texas home with lush fields carpeted in green rice paddies, the smoking Talisay volcano in the distance, and large slum areas that bordered the bright-colored roofs of the rich. After passing through customs, I noticed a guy holding a sign with my name on it. This was real class and I really was somebody.

Arrival in Makati Rizal, the new ritzy suburb of Manila where our office and housing was located, was like going from black and white to Technicolor. A new twenty-story building that looked like it belonged on 5th avenue in New York with security guards packing machine guns at the entrance was where I was to demonstrate my newly graduated raw engineering talent.

“Those machine guns seem to bother you, sir,” my driver said.

“Yeah, what the hell is going on here?” I said, thinking I had dodged the war.

“They’re just for show of wealth and prestige in affluent areas. They don’t trust them with any bullets.”

A brief introduction to the engineers made me realize that there was one thing we all had in common. Every engineer was a graduate of an engineering school in Texas. The admissions guy at MIT where I had first applied had been right when he told me to go back to Texas and finish college because that would be the source of my job. After a period of firm handshakes and small talk, I was ushered into the chief engineer’s intimidating office, a room full of plaques and awards from around the world with a polished mahogany desk that

looked like a dining room table. His name was Grayson, but the guys called him Big Dog.

“You didn’t get my letter, did you?” he said in a stern voice without ever greeting me or calling me by name.

“What letter, sir?” I asked, knowing he was referring to the letter of dismissal that I had tucked away in my luggage.

“We only have professional seasoned engineers in this office and the dumb asses in Houston made a mistake by sending you here.”

“Sorry, sir, but I moved during the final month at school and had my mail forwarded,” I said, hoping Big Dog did not have any psychological experience in reading lies.

“Well, we’ve got you and we’ll try to make the best of it, but you’ll be tested like no other engineer and if you can’t pull your load, you’ll be sent home.”

I went into a long monologue about bridge design since that was their forte. Some math formulas from my first major were inserted into the conversation that I knew he would not understand and at that time, neither did I. The draft notice in my possession made me get so creative about my talents that I must have sounded like a used car salesman but the more I thought about packing a gun in the jungles of Vietnam, the more creative I got.

Big Dog looked at his watch and abruptly interrupted. “Okay, okay, the proof’s in the pudding. Park your gear at a desk, go to the company house, clean up, get some rest, and be here in the morning for the big show and tell.”

Was this really the house where I was to live? In Texas, we would call it a mansion. Six bedrooms encompassed the second floor with a kitchen, a dining room, and two bedrooms on the first. Armed guards were at the entrance to our compound, which meant we were either rich, important, or both. Even though I was free to live on the economy instead of in the company quarters, like most of the engineers who had brought their families with them, how could I beat anything better than this with full-time maids and two cooks? We even had our own driver and car assigned to the house and of course, the guys with the machine guns.

My new desk was stacked with design criteria but my first priority was to inform the Waco draft board of my new job status for the deferment. Designing and building bridges to ship to Vietnam should be a slam dunk. The required deferment forms were not available so I hand wrote a letter and included the carbon copies of my airplane tickets. The informality on my deferment request concerned me but this was my only option in order to keep from being classified as a deserter.

My second priority was to send a telegram to my dad informing him of my draft notice as if I had just received it. The only permanent address I had was in Waco and I knew my parents would eventually receive correspondence depicting my status.

My fate was in the hands of others and it was time to go to work.

I recognized that the complex designs that appeared on my desk each day were problems the other engineers didn't want. I had been thrown into an advanced-design unit but as time progressed, many seasoned engineers sought my help because unbeknownst to them, I would go back to the office at night to study. I even volunteered to design a suspension bridge when I wasn't qualified to design a pair of suspenders. I was the first to arrive in the morning and the last to leave at night.

Since we all worked, ate, partied, and slept in an inseparable environment six days a week, the privacy of Sunday was necessary for survival throughout my foreign assignment. At that time, the number one song was "California Dreaming" by the Mamas and Papas. Part of the lyrics rang in my head... "walked into a church, I passed along the way.....got down on my knees and I began to pray." My fundamentalist Christian upbringing would not let me escape walking into a church on Sunday regardless of the brand of the church. Therefore my first activity every Sunday morning was to find a cross and duck inside to do my personal and private ritual.

My second activity was to catch up answering letters to my dad who was a prolific letter writer, writing to Wolfie about job prospects, and buying every English newspaper available to stay current on the home front. I even read the want ads if time allowed.

One Sunday while reading the *International Herald Tribune*, a publication of the *New York Times* found anywhere in the world where Americans congregated or where English was spoken, a picture on the front page put chills through my body.

It looked like a picture of Charles Whitman, my best friend in the Architectural Engineering department at UT who was supposed to graduate at the end of the summer session. Sure enough, it was Charles Whitman. He had gone to the top of the twenty-eighth floor of the UT tower at the center of campus and massacred any and every student within his gun sight. Fourteen were dead and thirty-two were wounded. Our architectural engineering department was the smallest of the engineering schools and we were a close-knit bunch of guys. The article quoted *Time Magazine*, which had interviewed my professor Dorenberger who had arranged my job with Brown and Root.

I knew that Wolfie was out there somewhere in the real world grieving the loss of our friend but there was nothing I could do and no way to call anyone. Whitman would have been one of the first engineers I would have hired, once I was in the position to make recommendations. It was my first loss of a close friend. I walked into a church and I began to pray.

My first tax-free check had hit the Citizens National Bank in Waco and I promptly bought a 125cc Honda motorcycle. Now I was on an equal scale with the seasoned guys for the long Sunday trips around the island of Luzon. Working six days a week, ten hours a day was the contract requirement and our weekend rides helped keep a bunch of engineers out of trouble.

I had been impressed with the business cards given to me on my college interview trips by the officers of various companies that kindled my desire to reach the top. I wanted to be somebody so I had some cards printed that listed my title as.... "MARINE DESIGN ENGINEERING SPECIALIST." This was a fancy title on an expensive-looking card that I passed out in the bars, but I would never dream of giving one to my colleagues. I was possessed with rapid advancement and by giving myself a big title, even though I was the only one who knew about it besides a few bar patrons, this

would give me an incentive to work into the position I had created and possibly open some outside opportunities.

As time passed, thoughts of my draft deferment application were temporarily placed on the back burner because I had begun to rise through the ranks of engineering due to the attrition rate caused by the wives of my colleges wanting to go back to the States. Was the draft board too backlogged to respond? Had I been lost in the system?

The thought that I might have fallen between the cracks ended when I received the fatal letter denying my request for a deferment, subject to additional information being provided. Even more alarming, they had included a long list of government penal codes for non-compliance without a picture of Alcatraz, with a comment that I was not in a war zone.

Telephone calls from the office to the States were not feasible because of the difference in time zones, the amount of time it took to get calls through, and besides, I didn't want anyone to hear the subject of my call. All alone, I could not think of any response to my draft board, which meant I had to depend on the ultimate reliable authority -- find a way to call my dad.

Almost every country in the world had a communication center at the central post office for telephone and telegram known as PTT. I knew my dad's schedule to the minute because all he did was work, be home at exactly 6:00 pm every day for dinner, and go to church. I called on Sunday afternoon, Waco time, and had a great family chat with Mom and my sister, then asked to speak to Dad privately.

"They put my deferment request on hold and since I'm 8,000 miles from home, I don't know what to do," I said in a voice of last resort.

"I know, I got a copy here and I didn't know how to reach you, other than by letter," Dad said, "but if I have to, I'll drive to Houston and kick Mr. Brown and Mr. Root's ass."

"The company is not involved, Dad. Only a vindictive draft board that is the final authority."

“I’ve already checked and they have a thing called a ‘hearing’ that I’ll attend. Hang tight, Son, and let me see what needs to be done before you pack your bags.”

I had visions of U.S. Embassy guards arriving with chains and loading me into a box bound for the States but I knew I was now in good hands.

After sending additional information as required, I was looking forward to some normalcy until Big Dog summoned me in a panic one morning to tell me that he had arranged a charter flight to our construction yard north of Manila in San Fernando for delivery of working drawings and that my bags and Honda would be delivered later by truck. I assumed that meant I was moving. I did not even ask about the urgency because I had overheard talk about relocating several engineers because of fabrication problems. Why me? Was I now a fabrication specialist? Foreign work was known for decisions like this but the real reason was probably because everyone else had threatened to quit, rather than work in a place whose only communication was a telex machine.

San Fernando was a deep-water port used by the Japanese in World War II for the initial invasion of the Philippines. Because of the excellent port facilities, Brown and Root had built a facility to pre-fabricate bridges we designed for Vietnam. The current contract called for twenty-three bridge spans of eighty feet each, known in the engineering world as a pony-truss, to be fabricated and shipped by barge to Da Nang.

Housing was impossible but I found a thatched-roof one-bedroom bungalow on stilts overlooking the South China Sea that reminded me of pictures I had seen in *National Geographic*. I could understand why the wives of the engineers in Manila would not move but the ocean breeze in lieu of air conditioning and the tranquil sound of waves surging under the balcony at high tide provided me with a false security, far away from the draft. On the weekends, we traveled to the top of 5200 ft. Baguio Mountain to enjoy the cool, sometimes frigid atmosphere, where I played my first round of golf.

I was supervising the loading of a ship when one of our Filipino draftsmen ran frantically toward the dock waving his arms. I had a long-distance call.

A long-distance call? I didn't know we had a telephone.

Fear weakened my legs as I ran to the construction shack, wondering who could possibly find me in this god-forsaken part of the world. Everyone in the office had gathered around a phone they had never heard ring. It was my dad. I don't know how long it had taken him to get through or how he ever got a phone number in the small town of San Fernando but he was quick and to the point.

"Have you received your copy of the Draft Board response to your data," Dad asked, without even saying hello.

"Not yet, must still be in the mail."

"They say because you're not in a war zone, you will be classified 1-A. They must think you're on vacation"

"That's not true, Dad. I know plenty of guys deferred that work in the States."

"They've got the red-ass for the way this has been handled and the only resolution is to come clean with your company and see what can be done."

Draft boards were local and each one had their own strange authority. Bottom line: I had really pissed off a bunch of local Waco, Texas patriots. My dad was so proud of how I had muscled my way into a job and beat the odds of being fired before I was hired as I had explained to him in a letter. The vision he had from my letters of embellished success could only lead him to believe the company would someday be named Brown & Root & Reagan. However, the draft board had other ideas for me but they had left an opening. I was not in a war zone but with a bit of creativity, I could resolve this issue.

Being transferred to Vietnam was not a problem because the attrition rate over there was in days instead of weeks. The pay was better but it didn't matter because no one wanted to leave our lush living conditions. I had no choice but to send a telex to Big Dog and request a trip to Manila for a "come to Jesus" meeting.

He could not make arrangements for the charter flight on such short notice and a bus full of people carrying chicken and pigs to market that took ten hours was not an option. I strapped a small bag of clothes on the back of my Honda and departed at night so that none of the engineers would know my plans. The all-night trip on a road that was famous for its washed-out bridges, bandits, wrecks, and chug holes that could swallow a truck was a war in itself.

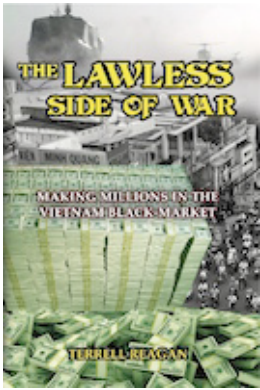
When I got to the Manila office, I went straight to the bottom line and laid out everything, step-by-step, about my draft situation and my need to be in the war zone in Vietnam. I found out Big Dog actually had a good side to his heart. He telexed a glowing referral to his cohort in the RMK-BRJ main office in Saigon with no mention about the draft deferment because the company boss in Saigon was ex-military and he did not want to trigger any questions or emotions.

The timing was right and the recommendation was so good that John Abrams, the Brown and Root guy who ran the entire RMK-BRJ operation in Vietnam, hired me in fifteen minutes with a return telex. It so happened that Abrams was in need of a warm body to fill a recent vacancy until fresh, qualified, engineering blood could arrive from Houston.

The chief engineer for all of Vietnam had unexpectedly left without notice and Abrams was in a bind. Being back in the Philippines in ninety days with a deferment and some new experience in management to help my rise to the top was sounding good. It also didn't hurt that I would be on TDY, meaning Temporary Duty Yonder, as in "over yonder," paid an extra \$425 a month, more than a school teacher made in Waco.

Big Dog had the secretary start making arrangements for the flight to Saigon for the next morning and informed Houston of my departure.

After boarding the plane, I could only think of the draft notice in my bag, the same thoughts I had when I left San Francisco except this time, criminal thoughts were avoided. I was headed for a war zone as required by the draft board and after my next submittal, I fully expected to be back on the beach in San Fernando.



A young, naïve Texan takes a job with a foreign assignment in Saigon in order to beat the draft and, through attrition, he quickly becomes one of the project engineers in a company with over 55,000 employees. Due to his influential position, he gets involved with The Dragon Lady of Saigon in black-market operations that net over \$155 million in today's money until the Chinese underworld cleverly take control of his stash...

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