

## Time Fuzed

R. D. Edwards

**A**t some place in that theater of war young men were being blooded in small villages or stands of elephant grass. Others were spilling their seed in the massage parlors or backrooms of bars, buying girls short-time for a paltry 300 *piastres*. Some might be finishing their R & Rs in foreign ports, in drunken delirium, vomit dripping from the sides of the buses carrying them back to the airfield and back to the battlefield, a clot of whores waving them off. But here the air was sweet with the scent of rice fields being burned off after the harvest, hazing the tropical sky, masking the odor of night soil and the stench of Vietnamese cigarettes. The land had existed generations before their coming. Where the old dead lay buried under stones carved with Chinese blessings and the young dead lay under wood markers declaring *hy sinh*—happy death for the martyrs, where the young virgins strolled hand in hand on dusty roads in pristine white *áo dài*s and the boys file-danced in paper dragons. Earlier that year the monsoons came and went, the hamlets were flooded and dotted the peneplain turned inland sea, and the land, seen from the height of a circling Huey, marked itself off with the soft meandering of Mekong tributaries and the straight-ruled canals left by an earlier race of occupiers. Life here was ancient, older than the Americans could imagine, but they needed to imagine so little. Here, where life was arrested, they waited and x'ed off the days on their calendars, wanting only to reach up to change the channel or smoke a joint.

The year after the Big Tet the war had settled into a quiet routine in the southernmost tip of Vietnam near Cambodia, that part far and away from Tay Ninh, the A Shau, and the DMZ, also far and away from the HQ chickenshit and Saigon whores. In this margin of the war after the

enemy had exhausted itself in the big Tet, Viet Cong activity had been reduced to next to nothing. VC cadre positions were filled with 12-year-old girls and old toothless papa-sans. The hard-core NVA was focused well north of the quiet Mekong, a lifetime away from this quiet backwater. One of these camps, a Special Forces A-detachment, had a forgettable place name and number and was commanded by an earnest first lieutenant and a half-dozen NCOs who oversaw a couple companies of largely ghosted civilian irregulars. The green berets might have counted themselves lucky to be assigned to such a quiet locale but being SF they scratched at the itching boredom and safe routine. They wanted some action.

One day on a make-work patrol the unit uncovered a cache of VC weapons. It was a treasure trove of creosoted SKS rifles, mines, Chicom pistols, and grenades. The whole cache was loaded onto a couple Slicks and flown back to the detachment. The mines and grenades would eventually be dropped into the Mekong with a fused charge, the underwater concussion delivering a bonanza for the local fishermen who stood ready in their sampans, nets ready. The captured pistols would be passed up the chain of command as spoils. The rifles, slathered in grease, were in perfect condition and had a certain value as war trophies. The semi-automatic weapons featured attached swivel bayonets and, as they boasted semi and not fully automated firing, could be carried back to the states as trophies. Where the members of the unit had no such interest, they could barter the weapons for any number of items from the headquarters types back in Canto, Saigon, or Nhatrang, for maybe a porno film or a PX purchased Nikon.

The lieutenant would have been the one to share out the booty. He was a recent graduate of a college in California. He had a father who was proud of him, a mother who worried his return every day, and a little brother who idolized him. His blond hair was buzz cut and white side-walled. His smoothly baby-bottomed face incongruously featured a Nietzschean

moustache. There was a girl, the special one he'd brought to the high school prom and whom he gusted at his graduation from OCS in Benning. He carried a wallet-sized snapshot of her in a bikini that was shared around the team house on more than one occasion, and a picture of his dog, a Golden Lab, that also went around the table. When the guys ribbed him about having some round-eyed pussy waiting for him back home, or maybe not waiting, he laughed it off at first but later threatened to bust some chops. The threat inspired some furtive smiles around the team table that were quickly suppressed when the top sergeant caught their eyes with a stony glare. The lieutenant said he and his girl were going to get married, the priest had it all arranged. When not teased, the lieutenant was an easy get-along, and probably overly fraternal with the EM's. In front of the crew, with a '33' beer in hand, he'd joke recklessly about the colonel's whore. The guy was cherry, green and dangerous, which was probably why he was where he was.

The greasy SKS's were inspected and set aside. Then the lieutenant spied the crate of grenades. He looked over to make sure the team was watching, then picked one out, walked off a way from the group feeling the grenade's heft. Presumably his intention was to heave the weapon over the razor-wired perimeter of the camp. Before any of the EMs could do or say anything and before Co Banh, the interpreter, could call out, he pulled the pin and moved to throw the grenade. Chicom grenades are not time-fused, a fact lost to the lieutenant. As soon as his hand released the grenade it exploded, taking off his arm to the shoulder as well as his face and jaw. A medevac was called in, and through the miracle of military medicine he was kept alive another two weeks. His body was sent home with a Good Conduct, an Arcom, a Purple, and maybe a Bronze. The guys collected his personal effects that included the photos of his girl and his dog

and sent them on to his family in Pasadena, along with a letter from the first sergeant that told his folks what a great guy he was, a natural leader and example to all.

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After witnessing this from a horrified distance, Staff Sergeant Wilson 'ETS'es and goes home, picks up a degree at a community college while riding on his GI Bill, gets a decent civilian job, buys a house with his G. I., marries, has a couple kids. Then one day, a Fourth of July picnic maybe, Wilson's celebrating with his neighbors around the bar-b-que when one of his kids is playing with an M-80 firecracker somebody's given him . . .

*Wilson never was that much of a player. He was the lowest ranking NCO in the camp, the medic who later got into trouble for failing to keep track of the accountable drugs in his charge.*

Sergeant First Class Capote goes home after his DEROS and ETS, glad to be out of Nam and away from another dreaded 'friendly fire' incident that rearranged his thinking profoundly. He rides his GI Bill to a degree of some sort, finds the late-life love of his life who puts up with his night panics and they have a child, a boy, who grows up hanging on the stories swapped by the vets in the VFW or Knights of Columbus hall. After Nine-Eleven the boy enlists and gets shipped out to Iraq where . . .

*Capote never did learn to relax after the friendly fire incident that caused him to shit his pants. He was working toward full retirement, but the blond lieutenant's accident was*

*but one of several experiences that inclined him to return to the world and teach English in his high school alma mater.*

Carlson was the MI guy who witnessed the lieutenant's bad judgment and whose principle job was to chart what was left of the VC Infrastructure into neat three-ring binders. He airfares home after discharge, stuffs his uniform in a trash can in the airport restroom determined to put his service life behind him. He returns to the university campus just in time to see classes shut down for the student protests. He suffers the manners of bespectacled professors for several years and, just as he comes to terms with the meaninglessness of that accomplishment that matches the meaninglessness of his military service, he graduates into a job market that is non-existent except for a low-skill job with the Post Office. This he endures to his retirement, marrying along the way, and comes out believing he has story to tell.

**Robert Edwards** is a native Minnesotan and a Vietnam veteran (1968-70, 5th SFGA and 525 MI). He graduated BFA University of Minnesota 1974, and most recently retired library associate from the Saint Paul Public Library. His paintings and prints are included in numerous private and public collections ([www.studioRedwards.com](http://www.studioRedwards.com)), and his graphic skills are realized in various books produced with Loose Moose Publishing in Prescott Arizona. He has published in the 2019 *Southwest Writers Anthology*, *The New English Review*, and the *Chiron Review*. Robert lives with his wife Pearl among the ponderosas of Central Arizona.