

*It was in the late Eighties while I was on the road traveling to most of the major U.S. cities that I began to question my own understanding of the Vietnam War. I felt somewhat ashamed that in my desire to distance myself from those nitty gritty days in the Marine Corps I knew really very little about the event or its finite causes. So, hauling out some disciplines learned in my university life, before I got in the sales game, I created a filing system and began to read and commit to some steady research. I also, from time to time, interviewed fellow veterans I would run across. I found them in sales meetings, in taxi cabs, or working in my accounts. Sometimes they would just say a few things and stop. Other times a veteran would sit with me in a lobby or at a hotel bar and tell his story. "Red Eye To Philadelphia" as a short story is a compilation of some of these short interviews condensed into a person, a character who calls himself simply "Taylor". In contrast to my account of Seventh Marine Regiment's early experience at Qui Nhon also presented on this site, I intend this account, "Red Eye" to give the reader, especially the student, a feel for how the Vietnam War changed in six years' time, how Marines entered South Vietnam earlier and later. How the war experience has occupied and transformed the minds and deeds of those of us who went to this place long after our departure. In imitation of Frances FitzGerald's "Fire in the Lake", my story begins with a quote from I Chang a text for ancient Chinese Taoist philosophers.*

## RED EYE TO PHILADELPHIA

**Book of I Chang  
The Fifty Eighth Hexagram-Twee:  
(pleasure)**

**The Marsh Below    The Marsh Above  
ORACLE**

**"The surface of the marsh is still.  
The inner marsh seethes with life  
Beside it friends sit and talk.**

**The conversation is easy  
But the communication between them is deep."**

**February, 1987- LAX:** Which book? That was the question. Vance Poplar gripped his leather briefcase in one hand and lugged across his arm a heavy trench coat he knew he would need in the morning. The echo of endless announcements drifted in and out of the tiny book shop in the airport mall. It was always the same

question when you got right down to it, he thought. Twenty bucks for a hard back first edition. What were the odds that you'd get stuck with a dog? Pay your money and take your chances he thought laughing to himself as he reached for his selection. An attractive brunette brushed by him at the counter.

"Nineteen Fifty Seven." snapped the black woman behind the counter, her hair smartly and meticulously crafted in jeweled dread locks which bobbed about her long brown neck. He noticed her long orange fingernails on a hand that rested on the counter impatiently. Poplar peeled a Twenty from a wad of bills, paid and walked out toward his departure gate. He was still reeling from the sales quota he had just received and his mind raced at how he would stay in the game. American Airlines Flight 34 the "Red Eye" as it was commonly known to the traveling executive set was boarding at half past eleven bound for Philadelphia.

Meetings. Endless meetings. Conventions. The marketplace. America. The company had come a long way since he'd walked off the street into that grimy Brooklyn factory back in Seventy Two. Five years after he'd left the Corps. He had walked off the street into Small's Machine Shop and suddenly his life began to roll. Roll big time. Poplar, now the top salesman for IPD Corporation was going home once again loaded with samples, and marketing data that would surely launch his company to its next plateau. International Pneumatic Devices had exploded from this small machine shop to a frenetic high tech instrument company in just eleven years. Poplar knew and never lost sight of his own rise from a nickel and dime existence in a dumpy basement apartment on Bleeker Street in New York City.

Scratching and clawing he had eked out his own way. Bearded and quiet, he moved about the canyons, swallowed up by abrasive Manhattan. It amazed him how women who were as poor as he, would suddenly disappear only later to be discovered in the windy circles of Manhattan elite complete with Park Avenue Apartments, ski trips to Aspen or Switzerland. The crushing reality, he realized, was if he was going to dig out of that Bleeker Street hole, it wasn't going to be on his good looks. Now, eighteen years later he was about to snuggle into his First Class seat with a good book, and prepare to scream through the night in perfect luxury. A contrast that constantly gave him great pleasure.

"So how do you like it?" came a voice without a face.

"Pardon?" Poplar looked up from his book and into the relative darkness of the compartment. A voice came across the aisle again.

"The book." Suddenly the face of an African American man appeared. Realizing the circumstance he instantly switched on his overhead light and Poplar could see he was slight in frame and well dressed. The man wore a club tie and an immaculate white shirt.

He had been sipping his drink in the darkness.

"Oh." Poplar clumsily glanced at the yellow book jacket. Great black gothic type loomed over a primitive charcoal drawing. The author's name also in black was printed just beneath it in a curious roman upper and lower case combination. "A RUMOR OF WAR" the authors name Phillip Caputo. Poplar glanced at his watch.

"It's pretty good." said Poplar to the man. "I guess I lost track of time."

"Actually I should be on the New York flight. It was sold out. Can you believe it? I'd figure the midnight flight would be wide open. "

"Guess there's a lot of fat cats got to be at work tomorrow morning. "said Poplar. They both laughed.

"So you're going to Manhattan when we get in?" asked Poplar.

"Aww, I got some friends in Philadelphia I haven't seen in a while." the man waved his hands as if it didn't matter where he landed. "What war was the rumor about?"

The man was making conversation thought Poplar. It's only a few hours or so until we're down. He was too keyed up to sleep. What the hell.

"It was the Vietnam War. The book is about the first part of the Vietnam War." said Poplar.

"Oh." said the Black man. He did not speak for a long moment. "I was there but it wasn't at the first part." he said laughing almost boisterously. Then he lowered his voice speaking more softly caring perhaps to not wake the sleeping passengers around them. For the first time during the flight Poplar noticed two men in the seat behind him who were not sleeping either. Their lights too were on and they seemed to work intensely, pouring through green bar reports, calculating and making notes.

"What branch of the service is the book about?" The man leaned across as he spoke again.

"The Marine Corps."

"Really? I was in the Marine Corps."

Poplar looked directly at the man. "So was I." he said in a nearly inaudible laugh.

The man smiled in disbelief and looked away to some invisible focal point in the compartment. Then almost as quickly. "How long were you in the Corps?"

"Four years. Enlisted." replied Poplar.

"Nam?"

"Yea."

"Stewardess." The men in back of them piped up. "Could we get some coffee?"

The flight attendant returned with the ships silver and poured

aromatic coffee into china cups. The two men hardly noticed as they continued to rattle through reams of printouts. "Uhh are we on time? What time for Philly?"

"Well, we're on time. But there are some reports of fog from Baltimore to New York. I'll ask the captain. There could be delays. I'll let you know." she said smiling and glancing toward their work.

"Are you gentlemen OK here?" she turned and spoke to Poplar and the man.

"I could use another Dewer's." said the man. "You?"

"Grand Mariner" Poplar said to the stewardess.

"What year in Nam, man."

"Sixty Five and Sixty Six." spoke Poplar into the darkness.

"Damn! It's hard to believe now that...that the war lasted so long. Sixty Five! Damn!" he said again savoring the coincidence of their meeting. Savoring survival. Savoring the moment. Savoring, then shutting down the thoughts. " Yea, Nam, Laos."

"When were you there.?"

"Seventy One and Seventy Two." said the man.

"Here are your drinks, Dewer's and Grand Marnier." Poplar noticed the stewardess's perfect pastel manicure and caught the slight subtle scent of her perfume.

"To the Grunts wherever they may be. God bless em." said Poplar. The two men toasted.

"Ladies and Gentlemen this is the captain. We've just received word that Philadelphia is socked in with pretty dense fog. We'll add on about forty five minutes, that'll put us at about Five Thirty in Philadelphia. We'll keep you folks posted on alternate airports or holding situations if they come up. Just settle back and ask our good flight attendants if you need anything."

"You know, say, I'm Vance Poplar." They shook hands across the aisle.

"Everybody calls me Taylor."

"Well you know, I never thought much about it after I left. I mean it. I got out and never looked back. Never thought about it. I've read some. A few movies. But I'll be frank with you; I was reading this book back in the terminal." Poplar held it to the reading light, "and. there is a lot I still don't know about the war. A whole lot, here , what, twenty years later. You get what.."

"I hear you. Uhh you in any action?"

"Well yes and no?"

Taylor boomed a laugh at this answer. "Yes and no! You in action man you say a big YES! Ha!" He laughed again then tried to suppress it. Then Poplar joined in the laughter.

"Well here's the thing," more laughter. Poplar sipped his liquor and squared himself on the arm rest. He was beginning to enjoy this conversation. "We were there early in the war. In this book; this guy tells what was happening only about forty miles up

the road, Highway One, from where we were. Place called Chu Lai. I was at the Okinawa camp he departed from only nine months after he left, Okinawa, for the States, you know, on normal rotation. Camp Schwabb. Ever hear of Schwabb?"

"YEA! I know where that is. SCHWABB. Damn!"

"Well. You talk action. Except for one, there weren't any big battles. I think there was, lets see Ia Drang, Pleikeu and there were a few other places the Special Forces had set up with the ARVN units and the Montagnards. We didn't know anything about what was going on around us. Ia Drang, happened in November. When we went in, July of Sixty Five, it was just a little before the shit hit the fan... It was in a place called Qui Nhon. In August we went to a big operation named Operation Starlight. Ever hear of it?"

Taylor shrugged in non-recognition.

"Then we just went on a lot of Search and Destroy missions. Some sniper stuff, land mines. Some bad ambushes that hit the line companies that we only got rumors about. I caught lots of patrols but I was still back in the tents too." said Poplar

You were a rifleman? asked Taylor.

"Started out as a rifleman then weapons and ended up in Eighty One Mortars. What about you?"

Taylor took a deep breath like he was preparing to pick up something. "Well when I was in they were offering a two year hitch thing. Then after all the training, uhh the war was going full pitch you understand, I ended up first in Flames then with the M-60." Taylor looked into Poplar's face for some recognition of what he was saying.

"Yea. I was in weapons platoon for a year or so. Rockets, Flames, M60s. We had some M-60s. Only once heard it fired in combat though." Poplar laughed to himself as he thought of that rips from the 3.5s up at Qui Nhon. "I did fire it several times on the range up on Okinawa. My only time with the M-60 was back in Pendleton." said Poplar. Suddenly the name *Golden Meadows* popped into his head.

"Huhhh! I sure did." said Taylor. Poplar now looked closely into his face. He had narrow nearly oriental eyes and as he spoke they would flare as if amazed or surprised. About the same age as Poplar a bit younger, he was articulate with possibly a hint of a New England accent. Poplar thought him to be honest. His eye contact was frequent. And there was perhaps something about their mutual random anonymity that allowed honesty to flourish for the moment, he thought.

"Have you done much reading about the war? Movies?" asked Poplar.

"Yea. I saw *Apocalypse Now*. I'll tell you, I don't go much for getting back into that."

"I know what you mean. My wife and I went to see this,

what was it.. "*Deer Hunter*". I had to leave. The build up into the story to when they actually went in-country, the thumping of those choppers and the color green. Green, green, green. It actually made me physically sick.. Then the clicking of that pistol up against that Marines head. We were sitting in this dark movie house. It was packed. There were some noisy teen girls between us and the aisle. Finally in the thumping of the choppers and the Vietnamese voices, the VC! *It was their voices that finally got me. Contact!*. You know. The voices; that did it. I had not heard that voice, that sound in years. I had to get out of there. The girls would not move for me to leave. My wife just sat there, not sure of what was going on. Then I just kicked my way through the fucking bunch of," Poplar lowered his voice to say this, " teeny boppers and walked out into the lobby in a cold dizzy sweat. Another guy left too. With his wife. I saw him leave. I guess it was his wife. Went through the door and out to the street. I remember it was cold out. Then my wife comes out. We drove to another movie, an empty dollar movie and sit there watching *Dance Fever* until I simmered down. I explained my feelings to my wife, but I don't think she understood."

They retreated from the subject for a long period of silence. Just the whirl of the jet engines and the continuous desperate rattle of the two men behind them paging through the green-bar reports. Then Poplar held his book up too the cabin spot light. The liquor was working its magic.

"Listen to this. Here's what some guy wrote on this book jacket. *"I had begun to abandon hope that a spokesman would emerge to tell the true story of the fighting man in the enigmatic Vietnam War."* Poplar and Taylor stared at each other and laughed. Taylor sipped his drink.

Then Poplar ventured a deeper exploration.

"I'm a salesman. What's your line of work?"

"Imports. I buy and sell African art objects." Taylor reached under his seat and brought out a leather folio. He opened it and revealed expensively mounted color photographs of what seemed to be statues. He handed the folio across the aisle. Poplar hesitated at first then took the folio.

"May I?" Poplar asked beginning to turn the pages.

"Of course. These are recent acquisitions. They are from around the southeast coast of Africa and the island of Madagascar. That one is a Malagasy Grave Marker."

"That's interesting. I'd Like to put one of those in my office."

" It would cost you about thirty thousand. " Taylor smiled.

"How about you. What do you do?"

"Sales. Corporate sales, for about a little over ten years. Mainly instruments. Devices. Stuff like that. We just had a sales meeting in Anaheim." Poplar thought of some disturbing signs he'd seen at the meeting. Unsettling clues that Corporate America was



coming unglued. As quickly, he shut off the thoughts.

The reading spot over Taylor highlighted a newspaper headline on an LA Times resting in his lap. A racial beating incident involving the police had just splattered across the headlines. Poplar saw a unique opportunity for speaking candidly with a fellow former Marine, a fraternal exchange perhaps.

"You seem to have done okay for yourself since those nitty gritty days in the Crotch." They both laughed at an old familiar reference to the Corps. Poplar handed the folio back to Taylor.

"Do you ever find irony in the fact that you did your service and still see that stuff happening around." Poplar gestured toward the newspaper headline.

"You mean the police beating stuff.?"

"Yea."

"Well its funny you ask about that. Do you remember a year or so ago. There was another news story like this one. Only it was an off duty cop trying to lure belligerent police into beating him up on camera. Same kind of thing."

"Do you see any kind of connection between the possible cause of this excessive violence against suspects and atrocities committed by U.S. Forces against Vietnamese civilians?" asked Poplar.

Taylor weighted the question for a moment. "In terms of the frustration and fear, yea. I can understand it. I think for the most part it is a mixture fear and racism."

Poplar assumed a surprised expression and gestured with his hands.

Taylor held up his hand mid aisle stopping him short of his wordless point. "That was racism too, I know. But there was more of , like, if anybody gets it first, it'll be these mufuckers and not me. I'm gittin' my ass back to the world whatever. Yea. I can understand that." his eyes staring at Poplar. "But it doesn't completely jive here. I mean, a Black man unlike a White man.." Taylor interrupted with a funny laugh perhaps at the ridiculousness of explaining this to a White man. ".has to think ahead of his movements. He has to think way ahead, way ahead in a supposedly free society! He's got to raise his children to think way ahead!"

Poplar tensed at the unexpected emotion that suddenly appeared in Taylor's voice.

"Excuse me for a moment." Taylor stood. "Got to make a head call."

They laughed at the Navy term for rest room that either probably had not used seriously for two decades.

Poplar sipped the rest of his drink. The mask of jet noise seemed to soothe his mind. Maybe it was the drink. He felt strangely on the ledge of some new reality. The book he had just finished reading had jogged something in his memory long buried.

Long suppressed. It was as if, after a wild donnybrook or chaotic event, scattered fraternity brothers had converged again, each explaining in detail the horror or hilarity of a near miss; or of the tragic misfortune of some other luckless soul no longer among them.

Taylor returned with fresh drinks and handed Poplar a refill. Poplar glanced at his watch. It was Three Thirty AM and Poplar eyeballed the syrupy colored liquor with a hopeless, what-the-hell stare.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, this is the captain. We have received a second weather update from ATC Philadelphia. There is still a zero ceiling at Philadelphia and we are adding about another forty minutes. Its likely we'll get clearance just after sunrise. Sorry for the delay. I'll let you folks know shortly. Hot coffee and refreshments are available from our attendants. Thank you."

"You know, I have never talked much about the war with anyone." said Poplar. He considered carefully his wondering train of thought until an unexpected proposition found its way to his lips. "I am interested in knowing what happened to you. I mean, we went through the same basic training. Right? We're former snuffys." Poplar used yet another term known only to lowly grunts. He saw Taylor stare into his drink listening. "How in the hell was it that you went into the Corps in the middle of the war? I joined during peace time. Vietnam wasn't even common knowledge when I joined. Did you ever speak with anyone about your tour in Vietnam?"

The dim first class cabin was a supersonic cocoon hurling through the wild nebulous night. The aircraft's thin protective skin miraculously shielding executive passengers with highly polished wing-tip shoes and expensive suit slacks carelessly from the murderous elements just inches away in the passing night. Only hints of the violence of routine fight came and went with sharp lurches as the aircraft tore through weather fronts. A crumpled dress accidentally revealed the shapely legs of a sleeping female. The two young executives in the seat behind continued their desperate night vigil upon some reality that would meet them at dawn.

"Well not exactly. I have talked with Thelma, my sister, from time to time. She's helped me a lot. I know a few veterans who I see now and then. We talk a little. But not like...what you just ask me if that's what you mean."

"Where did you grow up.? In The City?"

"Naw. Near Baltimore. I went to high school there. My father died when I was little. My mother and father separated when I was young. I grew up on a one parent household. There was nothing I could do. It was one of those things you just come to accept. So I spent most of my time when I was not doing my school work or at church or traveling with my grandfather. Grandpa was a preacher and would travel to different churches on Sundays and



weekends. I either sang in their choirs or sat in on meetings with the church elders. Just sitting there among them a little guy with a starched white shirt and tie." he said laughing.

"After high school, I started to work around town. Mother played the piano, and I would spend a lot of time just listening and reading. I read a lot. I had learned accounting by helping my grandfather. Later that and some other business skills saved my life. Anyway, one afternoon my mother walked in from the street with the mail. It was a notice from the draft board. I was being drafted in to the Army. That was late in Sixty Seven."

"The war was well underway then." said Poplar.

"Yea . But I didn't know much about what was going on. I had seen the soldier's from the Army around town. They walked around with uniform jackets open. Hats cocked all over the place."

"Ditty boppers." quipped Poplar.

"Yea! Yea! " Taylor smiled. Another old term from the Corps.

"Well, when I saw the Marine Corps recruiter, in Dress Blues, I knew that if I went into the service it would be the Marine Corps. So I went into the Marine Corps for a two year hitch."

"What was Parris Island like then? Khe Sanh and Hue were hot then! Were they saying anything about Vietnam in your basic training?"

"It was probably the usual stuff. Maggot. Trash cans kicked around." he laughed. "The intensity, sure. But there was one very consistent message. It was '*You pay attention and do exactly what you are told to do because it could save your ass.*' We took all of our exercise and training seriously. Field stripping the rifle for example. That was done over and over with a blindfold, eyes shut and every other way. I was good at that. Also I was a Right End in high school football. I could run circles around some of those guys. When we graduated boot camp and everyone came to congratulate us, my mother, and grandfather, it was a nice day. I was very proud."

"Then you went on to ITR?" asked Poplar referring to the more realistic infantry phase of Marine training at Camp Geiger a microcosm of Camp LeJeune.

"Yea. There was that, then I went on home to Baltimore. Well when I got home, we were all sitting around talking the day before I was to leave. I said something that used the words, ' When I come back' and I noticed that Grandpa was really down. He said, 'you mean *if* you come back Taylor.'" I looked at him and said "NO! WHEN I come back!" Then it was time to go and I remember I was about to eat a Tasty Cake and a Hires Root Beer. I hadn't opened the drink and on the way out the door I told my mother to put the Root Beer and cake in the refrigerator and not to let ANYBODY, touch it until I got back. Then I left.

The day I got into Vietnam, late July of Sixty Eight the plane

landed in Quang Tri. Up near the DMZ. We filed off the plane. A Flying Tiger charter." Now Taylor looked up from his drink and glanced at Poplar. Clearing his throat he continued. "We filed off the plane and incoming started screaming in! You know, mortars."

"Damn!" muttered Poplar.

"There was a guy sitting next to me on the way out. Like you and me here. We had talked off an on during this long ass trip. Well, he was killed in that barrage! Within his first hour in Vietnam, he was a dead man! Taylor now sat forward in his seat. His manor became tense and his eyes wide open. Now, for the first time in thirty one years he had spoken about his Vietnam.

"Nothing ever makes sense at the time. No pattern. Did you every wonder if Charlie was welcoming you to NAM? That it was not just a random coincidence. Like, 'lets shake up the new arrivals. "

Taylor boomed a nervous laugh. "Yea..UuuuuHhhhhh. We hadn't even drawn weapons or 782 gear. There were other casualties too but this one guy..." he shook his head. "Then we joined our units up in Dong Ha and got more in-coming that night! I got to thinking right then that, you know, UhhhOhhh I done fucked up baaaad! I got to get out'a here.' Then I saw this guy smoking a joint. He offered some to me and the first night I said 'No.'" And the next night we took more mortars. Again he asked me if I wanted to smoke and I took a drag. Before then I hadn't smoked or drank except for maybe a beer. Well I choked and coughed and he told me how to inhale. I remember it settling me down. I could think more clearly and I promised myself then that I would survive this. Whatever it took, I would get back."

"Had you drawn weapons by then?"

"Yea. I had drawn my M-16 and joined my fire team by then. We went out on several patrols, there was some stuff, I..I can't really remember but I think it was without incident. Maybe a land mine. I don't recall." Poplar saw little beads of sweat glistening in the beam from the reading light. Taylor's head was nearly bald. "Then I was put on an M-60 squad. The M-60 machine gun." Taylor looked at Poplar for some confirmation that he knew the meaning of M-60. We went out to hill 950, overlooking Khe Sanh. You know Khe Sanh right?" Taylor referred to the scene of the Dien Bien Phu like siege of the Marines in 1968.

"Now, let me think." Poplar's brain began to search for data. Searching. The dates. "Khe Sahn was over by the time you got there, am I right?"

"Yea. for around seven or eight months." I think. The Army 101st had relieved the Marines. There were still NVA regulars and popular forces scattered around. We had three guys out there on a listening post. Two white guys and a brother. Well I had the M-60 set up a thousand yards back and I hear these men on the

phone. They say. "There's somebody out front!" They heard movement and they went out. Got out of their fucking holes and went out to call in some shit. Then, I don't hear anything else." Taylor stared at Poplar across the aisle. "We heard nothing. Silence!. We wait a while till nearly dawn and the lieutenant and several of us go out there. We get there at the holes and these two white guys are dead. The Black guy is pissing and shitting himself. He's shaking and keeps repeating that the VCs have killed his two buddies. Kept using their names, like they were still sittin' there listening. He said the VCs said '..Right on soul brother.' " Taylor tore the scene from his mind in a twist of his head and took a long gulp of his drink.

"How long were you out at any given time?" asked Poplar.

Taylor laughed. " Sixty days, thirty days. No change of cloths. Just what's on your back.. You couldn't. You could walk along in the rain, soap down, and let the rain wash off the soap. You slept wet." his face took on a macabre expression. "You didn't talk." then he leaned forward and continued his sentence. "You just whispered like this." He paused and assumed a normal voice again.

"I was on hill 950 three times. Once when I got there. One in the middle. And once when I had fourteen days to go. They had a party for me then. A short timer. During the second time, I had a position set up, one of the three M-60s in the platoon." Taylor said pausing to search for something then he pulls a barf bag out of the seat pouch. Then he claws it making it rustle. "We heard the VC coming in through the elephant grass. I didn't want to fire the M-60 at night because they could see the tracers and locate me. If I had to fire, I would always move in unpredictable ways to the right or left. Fire and move, a long ways one time and a short ways another time. You got that M-60, you're a marked man, you understand?"

"Well we hear the NVAs coming through the grass and someone learns that there is a damn regiment size force out there! They call in *puff* the magic dragon." At saying this Taylor noticed a puzzled look on Poplar's face. "This was a C-130 mounted with twelve M-60s or Quad Fifties, I'm not sure. When it fired it was this big SWOOOOSH!!!!, I can't describe the sound. It would rain down on an area the size of a football field. It would start in back of the NVAs and cut off their escape, then walk in toward our position. So here comes *Puff The Magic Dragon* flying in out of the night and WHAM!!!"

"How did this effect moral at that precise moment?" asked Poplar.

"It was real high!" Taylor roared with laughter. "Kick ass man! KICK SOME!!!"

Poplar noticed one of the business men glanced up from his green bars then returned to his work.

"All the while we're throwing out everything we've got. 80

Mike Mikes, 60s, I ran out of M-60 belts! I had scrounged an M-16 back at Quang Tri and had it broke down with 200 rounds of ammunition in my ruck. I broke it out in the dark, put it together and continued on till morning. We threw every t-h-i-n-g at them!"

"Christ! What did the ground look like in the morning?"

"Did you ever go into a meat market and see sides of beef hanging up? There were arms, legs torsos hanging all around in the tall grass. You imagine something, it was there. Heads with little holes in the front and the whole back blown away. These NVAs, we called em Rock Marines were tall men, like you, what, six feet, Chinese or Mongol I guess, not the short Vietnamese I was used to seeing. They had their wrists and nuts wrapped up. I don't know why. They had belts with pouches of drugs and high grade heroine. I mean the very highest grade Heroine there is. S-2 had it analyzed. As far as I know they did not plan to return, suicide attackers, but I can't be sure. Every man worries about his balls in combat." he said giddily.

Now his recollections became more chaotic and out of chronology, Taylor's memories began to jump out, ever buried now lubricated by the liquor now leaching up and passing from his lips.

"You know when I got out, I had come back to Baltimore and my cousin had gotten me a date with her girlfriend. Well I noticed that her last name was the same as a Marine I knew to be dead only for a short time. I figured it was just a coincidence and didn't say anything. I went to pick her up and was invited in and saw his picture on the mantle. It was the same man! He had been killed only a month or so before!"

"Have you been to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial? Do you recall what plate numbers the names of KIAs from your tour were." asked Poplar.

"Yes that's a big thing man." He said softly, emotionally. No I don't recall." He paused and looked away up into an air vent in the ceiling as if to suppress an impulse to weep. "That gets into some heavy thoughts. There was a Marine who took R&R and flew home to the states and married his childhood sweetheart. Then afterward he came back to NAM. His leave over, he was going to finish his tour. Well he got back and got into some argument with one of the NCOs and the NCO put him out on point. Well he got it in the head on *that* patrol."

Vance noticed Taylor was slipping deeper into some private morose and offered quickly, "I have checked and found that three Marines from my boot camp platoon in Sixty-Three, Platoon 310, were later killed in Vietnam. Did you ever inquire about your platoon at PI?"

"Ten." He did not guess at this number, Poplar thought. He new the number exactly.

"There was one guy who went on to officer's candidate

school in Quantico after we left ITR.(Infantry Training Regiment) One day when we were out on hill 950 some choppers came in and he got off the chopper. He was an officer!" Both men possessed the uncommon knowledge that Marine Officers have always been God Like. In the Marine Corps, Officers are supreme authority figures not to be questioned, to be respected and their orders are to be followed explicitly. Taylor continued " We said, 'Hey, looks like you finally made it man.' He looked around and recognized us. Said. 'Hey! What's it like here?' We just laughed and said, 'This is some baaaad shit man.'" NCOs were annoyed that we spoke to him that way, that he was an officer, I mean, but he was with us *first*."

One time we were up North next to the DMZ. There was Dong Ha, Quang Tri and Phu Bai up near Hue, you know? Quang Tri eventually got over run. We were flown into this place in the Ashau Valley. I *have* read some history about this. You see, with the Johnson and Nixon secret bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia and Laos the uhh Hi Van pass and other supply channels to the Viet Cong and NLF forces were blocked. All the supplies were diverted to alternate routes. One door way was the Ashau Valley, West of Hue. Come in through a place, I think it was Hi Vee pass. Hi Van that's what it was. The 101st Airborne had taken a pounding out there. A hell of a pounding. When we flew into this place it was during the middle of the day. It was hot and the choppers were trying to land and there," Taylor paused blinked his eyes and pinched his nose as if it itched, "...there was nothing but body parts all over the LZ. *American human body parts, you understand.*" At this revelation Taylor coughed a little cough. "The choppers were trying to land without touching the parts. Moving this way and that. Finally they just landed. I would have felt different if it were, say, animals!" Taylor searched Poplar's eyes. "*But this was our men's arms, legs and heads man! Americans!*" Taylor stood and walked to the bar in the rear of First Class. He returned with a fresh drink. Far below a sleeping nation slipped passed. Little specks of light, farms, little towns, slowly drifting by in the blackness. Then he turned and took his seat again. The windows still black as soot.

"Name some operations. I remember operation names during my tour like "Starlight and. Black Ferret, do you remember any names of operations?" asked Poplar surprised that he could mechanically recall code names.

"Dagger Thrust?"

"No...I, Wait...lets see. No it's been too long. So much of that stuff is buried."

"Lets see," Poplar continued to recite, testing his own memory. "How about 'Golden Fleece'?"

"No."

"Harvest Moon?"

"No." Taylor shook his head probing his memory.

"Lam Son?" There was a flash of something.

"Dewey Canyon?"

"THAT'S IT!" THAT'S IT! The name exploded a whole hellish file, which suddenly seemed to displays on Taylor's mind screen, gripping him in a new way.

Poplar for the first time began to feel uncomfortable. "Look Taylor, we don't have to go on with this. I just thought if.."

Taylor put his hand up in the aisle, "Hey no man, its okay. Its just been so long since I dug into this." He slowly put the glass to his lips and sipped the Dewers with great care, pleasurably. Pensively.

"A while after I got there, I took on the M-60 machine gun. And we went on this Dewey Canyon. That must have been around January. January, Sixty Nine. Well we were on this ridgeline looking over to the next hill *and I saw the NVAs running along!* I whipped up the M-60 and just locked the trigger. "Brrrrrrrrrrt. When you shoot a moving target you traverse your fire from the opposite direction. I just kept firing. Then Sergeant Drummond, we called him "Drummer" bonged me on the helmet and said, "OooooohKay Taylor, that's enough...you'll burn up the ' gatdamn' barrel!" In a nervous relief, Poplar and Taylor both boomed with unexpected laughter. The green bar boys behind them keep calculating. The passengers slept on.

"Taylor, in January Sixty Nine the Third Marines launched an attack against the North Vietnamese units along the Laos Vietnam boarder. As I recall some colonel went into Laos in hot pursuit. The reason I mention this is that at the time our own expansion into Laos was non-existent and had the public learned of such an excursion it would have been a hot potato. Now, most accounts about the secret war in Laos began to appear around 1971. So you were in Laos earlier?"

Taylor laughed. "Yea we went in and out of Laos lots. I was with that Colonel. We went to Cambodia too. I carried a map. The lieutenant was supposed to be the only one who carried maps. But by that time I was a team leader and I had a map. I carried lots of things I wasn't supposed to carry." he laughed again and shook his head. "Hell at one time I carried an M-16 with extra rounds of ammunition. I told you about that. Plus my regular issue a .45 caliber side arm. We were on foot out there at 611. I knew we were heading West, waaaaay too far. I kept checking and saying "..shit..we're in Laos."" Later they told us not say a thing about Laos in our letters home. The thing I remember about that was how fast we moved. We were stepping out man. .So that when the NVAs spotted us and called in artillery, we would be already long gone. We entered and left Laos in the jungle and off the roads"

"You know," he continued, "there was a time about half way



into my tour, when I wrote home and asked my Mom to send me a picture of that Root Beer and Tasty Cake in the refrigerator. She did. I got this picture. In the mail and showed it all around. These guys were talking. This and that.. What they would do with their girlfriends when they got back. So here I am showing this picture of that Hires Root Beer. They thought I was crazy! I mean really. They thought I had lost it big time. I carried the picture until it rotted in my cami pocket. Another time we went into North Vietnam.

"Oh!. Beyond the DMZ?

"Beyond the DMZ. A few cliques north into the mountains. Well, they told us again that under no circumstance were we to mention the locations in our letters home. We went into a place and found a complex of caves. The caves were deep. So deep a bomb couldn't touch them. There was a hospital there where they were operating on this VC soldier and just left him on the table when they bugged out. You know, what I remember is, the walls in there were smooth and straight. Just like this bulkhead" he ran his fingers over the surface of the aircraft interior. "Not shabby and all. I said 'damn man'" The two laughed at the slow discovery of the evidence. Evidence of a potent, highly developed and indoctrinated enemy.

"You think all that fire power kept you alive.?"

He shook his head in a sobering stare. In his mind he was still there at that moment. He seemed to see bursts of untold horror only to quench it, then "We were never far from fire fights, land mines or infiltration. You could hear firefights somewhere in the night. Dead Marines were a common thing. I mean we would run across Marines, KIAs who the NVAs had cut off their ears and stuffed into there mouths. There was this one outfit in the 9th Marines we called the "Walking Dead".

"Toward the end of this second time out at hill 950, there was this patrol that ran across some VC. There was a woman among them and she seemed to be the leader. I found out about all this after it happened you understand." Poplar noticed that Taylor was suddenly being very careful perhaps even reluctant to continue. " Anyway my squad was called back up the hill and we left some people from S-2 there, you know Intelligence. There were several ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) officers with them. They questioned the VC women. We set out security while all this was going on. And then I hear this 'pop' sound down the hill. I remember I jumped around. Soon after that we got attacked big time. Big time. I learned later that the ARVNs had put a frag grenade up her...you know." Taylor coaxed some indication from Poplar that he understood what he was saying.. "They, uh, had here spread eagle on a tree and just set off the frag. " Taylor stared incredulous at Poplar. He took a deep breath.

"I guess it was the second time at 950 that we were attacked.

They were running and crawling at us. I ...I can't remember I was down in the dirt and then jumped up, fired a burst and didn't hit one of 'em . Then I felt my helmet jump and when I looked at it, a round had gone through the front top and out the back. I said and, please excuse me, "FUCK THIS MUTHFUKA" and jumped up and cut him in half. He did not go down and I kept firing then I must have hit him in the head because he went over." Then Taylor mimed the expression of the soldier falling as he slumped back in his cushioned first class set. "No. Maybe that was firebase Cunningham, anyway I was hit in the leg. I didn't notice it until morning. You see what this meant was, I would loose my M-60. Well I had to go back to the rear, back to Quang Tri. Then I went aboard the hospital ship for a while. After that I rotated back to the States.

"What about your transition from that?" asked Poplar

"When I left hill 950, I had bought a camera and I wanted to take a picture of the guys as I pulled away. I put this camera on my pack and when the chopper came, I forgot about the camera and it fell off my pack. By the time I discovered it was gone the chopper was on the way. I asked if I could go back and get it. Ha!" Taylor laughed. " But the pilot wouldn't hear it. They thought I was crazy."

"Then I went through Malaysia and bought a bunch of suits. I wanted to get so far from that filth. I never wanted to see it again. Filth. Killing. Scuzz. And death. Fear. Well by the time I got home to Baltimore, my Mom's place, I hung those suits up and went to the refrigerator for that root beer and cake. I went out on the front porch and took a nice long drink. I tell you man, it was damn sweet."

"Did you have any adjustment problems? PTSD we know about now but no one really understood that then." Poplar sipped his Grand Mariner.

"After I was home for a while, someone broke into our house and stole all of my suits plus some other things. I had been looking for a job. My old employer wouldn't hire me back. And then this break-in. I checked around and found out who it was. I told my mother that I was going to kill him. I went to find him and I did find him and I told him. "Look, I know why you stole my things. Drugs in your brain man! Drugs talkin' you know. "It scared me because I knew I could have killed him so easily. I went there to kill him." Taylor spoke into his glass. "It was that whole thing still in my mind. Then I made a decision. I went back to my studies, general business and cultural anthropology. A double major. Worked my ass off. I never ever deviated from that course for six years. Actually never deviated from it to this day. I have a Masters Degree in Cultural Anthropology. I teach part time. In addition to my business. I made a choice."

"In the beginning, the VA had given me a big negative run-around. They doubted that I could cut school and wouldn't okay my

GI bill benefits." Taylor laughed a boisterous laugh. "I kept at'em till they wrote the thing out. Ha. I worried the piss out of them. This guy kept seeing me appear and reappear. Ha! Sometime afterward, I made the first of many field trips. To Kenya. It changed my life. A whole new thing. It was all connected to that decision I made, that I had left my M60 out there, back there, and now I shut it all off in my mind. Just shut it out. The only thing that hangs on this shoulder is an old classical guitar and my wife on occasion." Taylor laughed. It was the best decision of my life." No more killing man."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we've just heard from ATC Philadelphia. We have clearance and will be on the ground in about fifteen or twenty minutes."

The lights of the cabin came on and the rosy sheaths of sunlight sliced into the cabin illuminating sleepy faces. The aroma of fresh coffee floated in the air. Passengers yawned and stretched. Behind them Poplar glanced to see the exhausted executives folding the reams of computer paper. One man stood, looked around, discovering the dawn and headed for the rest room. "Tell New York we'll need Five Mil'. It'll give us six months operating capital and time to get back those contracts. Tell'em to cut twenty percent in the middle staff. If we're lucky Nippon and Pakistan will stay out for another year."

"Coffee?" asked the stewardess with a last gesture of service before landing.

The other businessman seemed to stare numbly out the window as puffs of pink broken clouds drifted past the window.

Poplar looked at Taylor. "People don't know. They would never understand. I mean what it took to survive. I've read some. More than I've let on. About the war. It was complex. One Marine's or soldier's experience might be almost unrecognizable to another. There is some sense to it somewhere. Anyway, even if it can never..."

"Hey. Its cool. Don't worry about it. It's the first time I've ever talked like that about any of that stuff." said Taylor toying nervously with a cigarette then putting away. You ever hear the song "Drive On" by Johnny Cash? This dude's telling about all the hell to some cat that picked him up, hitch-hiking. After each painful verse spoken to the driver, he ends it by just saying "drive on." You know. Like it don't matter any more. Just drive on. When I think of all the waste, the wrecked lives my dead buddies; it doesn't make me feel very good. But, Vance, it does matter. It matters a lot man." The landing gear slammed onto the Philadelphia runway.

"Guess you just dug up all that hell into this Red Eye from LA. That's what you did. You just unloaded the hell. Welcome home." Poplar slipped his trench coat on and extended his hand

across the aisle. He and Taylor shook hands soulfully and Poplar swallowed a lump of coal in his throat and thought he saw a well of tears in Taylor's eyes. As the frumpy bleary eyed passengers filed out into the empty sunlit lounge, lugging their ever present briefcases, Taylor spun around to face Poplar walking backward in the jet way causing a momentary disruption to the orderly egress from the airship.

"You know, you better watch yourself." he said with a warm smile. "Vietnam might just get you yet."

"Excuse me. Excuse me!" A boisterous business type complained.

"Fuck you!" said Poplar. Both men howled uproariously to noticeable irritation of the rest of the executive set hurrying to their quotas, knots in their stomachs, their masks already well in place at this early hour. Poplar, very much among them but a pretender really, retreated back into anonymity. Sweet, safe anonymity.

Mike Malsbary  
July 2002  
USMC 1963-1967  
Enlisted

[Return to main page](#)