

could afford to tell the truth, make an error, or admit to ignorance." When John F. Kennedy decided to commit large numbers of American advisers to South Vietnam, Hackworth volunteered at once—and was startled to be turned down. He had too much combat experience. Too *much*? Yes, he was told, the role of the American adviser was not to seek combat but to train the Vietnamese Army to seek combat, and therefore combat veterans were not needed, not *desired*. This seemed an oddly fastidious concept—war with kid gloves, let's not dirty our hands or theirs—and of course was abandoned as the Communists continued to advance and the Vietnamese Army to collapse. There were successive tours in South Vietnam—including a remarkable stint with S. L. A. Marshall, the military writer whose work must now be examined afresh—and Hackworth's disgust and pessimism grew with each tour. He found the Army lying to itself and to everyone else. The Pentagon seemed to be treating the war as the occasion for career management of its officers, every lieutenant colonel entitled to a battalion, every colonel to a brigade, and never mind the officer's qualifications. Meanwhile, the war was being lost, buried in an avalanche of bogus statistics and false promises of progress. Finally, the American command initiated the cowardly and murderous foray into Cambodia, where ARVN battalions were shredded as the frightened and ill-prepared paper tigers they were. Hackworth gave his pessimistic after-action report to senior American commanders and was told to sit down and shut up. Defeatists were not welcome. The truth was unspeakable.

His last assignment was as senior adviser to the 44th Special Tactical Zone in the South Vietnamese Delta near the Cambodian border, and it would be the final turn of the screw. On the surface, the war was being won. There were few large-scale engagements, roads were open, and terrorist activity (both sides) was down. Official reports suggested the corollary: If the Viet Cong were retreating, the ARVN must be advancing. All wrong, as Hackworth soon learned. The Communists had moved into a new phase of their struggle, and the ARVN was as ineffective as ever. But the reports were received with enthusiasm in Washington, and Hackworth was one of the first to see the grotesque irony. "It was as if the system had come full circle: these same reports, which had been in large part responsible for *escalating* the war, were now eagerly sought after by the Nixon administration as the ultimate smokescreen for their abandonment of the effort."

The last assignment, very far into no-man's-land, off the map where no rules applied, culminated in the celebrated "Issues and Answers" interview. Broadcast from the field, it was a sensation. Hackworth disclosed the bankruptcy of American training and tactics and the incapacity of the

and Easy up north in November when “The Man got the big one the hard way”; Millett and Easy and the February bayonet attack.\* There were countless war stories, from the “Bowling Alley” at Taegu to the Yalu and back, all concerning the trials, tribulations, and heroics of Easy. It was small wonder that any other units were needed in Korea at all, judging from Easy’s own accounts of their derring-do. But I enjoyed the little game. It gave me time to take the measure of my new outfit, and I was pleased with what I found. They were a spirited, proud company, and besides, most of their stories—to some degree anyway—were true.

A day or so later we moved into a blocking position and tied in with G Company. As soon as I got my platoon busy digging, I paid a visit to mighty George, which I’d left five days before. It was like a homecoming, with bear hugs, slaps on the back, hoots and hollering and exaggerated salutes. “Come see me after you get your shit squared away,” I told them, “we’re just down the line.” And they did—the whole platoon dropped in at my CP, so happy that one of theirs had made it, one of theirs was a lieutenant. None of them called me “sir,” just Hack, and a very put-on “Hack” at that. Now it was the 3d of E who had to listen to overblown war stories—all about their “green” second balloon, no less: “Man, he got us in some deep shit there . . .” the George guys were saying. “Hell, he’s the baddest guy in the valley! You guys in old Easy Company might just have to get off your asses now that you got Hack here.” The George boys’ visit sent my stock up 100 percent with the new platoon. They stopped looking at me under invisible microscopes, and it was total acceptance all around. Now, I thought, *we can get on with the business at hand.*

“Two up and one back. Feed ’em hots and keep ’em in clean socks.’ That’s about all you’ve got to know to make it in the infantry,” drawled Platoon Sergeant Crawford as we moved up a few days later, with George and Fox on line and Easy in battalion reserve. We were married up with a platoon each of tanks and quad-50 half-tracks; our job was to be a counterattack task force in case the Chinks broke through the front line. Every day we rehearsed various counterattack plans. During these maneuvers I had the opportunity to have a good look at 3d Platoon, and there was no question that I’d inherited a strong, solid outfit that knew what it was doing. The platoon was full of characters, too, like PFC “Red” Smalling, a

\* On 7 February, the day after I got hit, Lewis Millett, then CO of Easy, led his men in a bayonet charge that Army historian S. L. A. Marshall deemed the most effective bayonet attack in the history of the U. S. Army. With all the attendant publicity (and Marshall’s gifted hand writing the commendation), Millett ended up getting the Medal of Honor. But a number of George’s guys who’d witnessed the assault thought that as actions go it was remarkably oversold. On the other hand, G Company always resented Easy’s glamour-puss reputation; George quietly prided itself on being steady and solid instead.

was just as well. Having suddenly lost his year-long position as lord of the castle, he had enough on his plate trying to figure out who the hell this strange man was who called himself his father and wouldn't let him sleep in Patty's bed. Also, kids—my kids, anyway—got away with murder with their mother in charge. Undoubtedly it was quite a shock to their little systems when I came back with a whole new set of rules and banished anything less than *ordered* chaos from my home. I don't think it was easy for any of us at first, but the worst part was that just when we were beginning to function really well as a family again, I was on a plane back to Vietnam.

By then I'd been at the Pentagon for two stir-crazy months. But just before Thanksgiving the sun began to shine in my windowless, subterranean office when, without warning, Brigadier General S. L. A. Marshall came to visit. I was stunned. "Slam" Marshall, as he was known, was a legend of sorts in the Army. He'd walked and talked with the greats (Ike, Ridgway, Patton, Bradley), and he was the author of such widely read books as *Night Drop* and *Men Against Fire* from his WW II days, and *The River and the Gauntlet* and *Pork Chop Hill* from Korea. He was a historian cum military analyst, considered by some to be *the* American expert on soldiers in combat; to be sure, he was fascinated by the ultimate game of war. He had already been to Vietnam, where his study of the 1/101's Highlands fighting provided the stuff for his soon-to-be-published *Battles in the Monsoon*. I'd met him during that trip, when he was interviewing the participants of our Dak To fight (a fight that would win the brigade a Presidential Unit Citation), and in the months since, we'd had occasional contact, always when the General was chasing down some detail to go in his book. But I had not seen him, nor was there any reason why I should have, which made his sudden visit, in civilian gear, to my Pentagon cranny all the more mysterious.

General Marshall came right to the point. "Hack, I've been talking to Johnny Johnson,\* and we both feel the Army has dropped the ball in Vietnam. We aren't learning from our experience there. The lessons learned are not being recorded and passed on, and we're taking unnecessary casualties because of it. Now, I told Johnny I'd go back and set up a system that will use my postcombat interrogation techniques, but I'd like you to come with me. I'm too old to be trudging around battlefields on my own. Besides, we click well together, and it'll get you out of the Pentagon." (In our previous correspondence I'd made no secret of my hatred for the aptly named "Five-sided Puzzle Palace.")

I was flabbergasted. For weeks and weeks I'd badgered and harassed

\* General Harold K. Johnson, the Army Chief of Staff, the mere mention of whose name brought Kesterson and me to attention.

OPO's Infantry Branch for a change of assignment. I'd been told to "keep quiet or chance ruining a promising career," and I'd finally taken another step forward in the ticket-punching parade by accepting that guidance in the interests of the "bigger things" my counselor said I was "earmarked for." But then in walks S. L. A. Marshall—a man whose World War II books I'd read and reread since childhood, a man whom I was admittedly in awe of—and offers me not just an out from my horrible job, but the opportunity of a lifetime. It was almost unbelievable.

"When do we leave, sir?" I asked.

General Marshall told me the Chief of Staff would want to see me before we headed off in just over a week's time. Even so, when I was called to Johnson's office, I felt not unlike a parish priest might feel upon being told to report to the Pope in Rome. I viewed the meeting as a rare opportunity to have the Chief's ear, so I prepared a list of points to squeeze into my audience with him, all regarding what I felt was needed to improve our combat efficiency in Vietnam. Much to my disappointment, when I arrived at his office I was told exactly five minutes had been scheduled for our meeting. "Take no more," said the General's aide, Colonel William Caldwell, "the Old Man has a very busy afternoon. You'll be in and out."

I'd met General Johnson once before, about a month earlier at an awards ceremony. Then, as now, when I was called in to see him, I was struck first by the size and splendor of his office, and by the windows (wonderful windows we in the dark depths of the Pentagon could only dream of) that looked out over the swollen Pentagon parking lot and beyond, to the Potomac. The Chief greeted me in his formal, no-nonsense way. At the age of fifty-four, Harold K. Johnson was the youngest Chief of Staff since Douglas MacArthur—no mean feat for a man who spent three years of World War II in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps after the fall of Bataan. Tall, straight, and handsome, Johnson *looked* like a Chief of Staff. He was a sincere, kind, and genuinely good man, who, word had it, was also devoutly religious, with a deep dislike for such soldierly pursuits as hard liquor, fast women, or foul barracks talk. I knew to be on my best behavior. "Sit down, Colonel," he said to me now, "I want to brief you on your mission with General Marshall."

It took him about three minutes, the gist being that with a view toward improving the collection of basic data on U.S.-fought battles in Vietnam for a future, official Army history of the war, Slam would teach the after-action reporting techniques he'd pioneered during WW II to selected U.S. Army officers in all divisions and separate brigades in the theater. Because General Marshall would be visiting Vietnam as a private citizen, Johnson went on to

explain, my job throughout the tour, rather than simply assisting him, would be that of representative of DA's Chief of Military History. Privately, I didn't understand the General Marshall-as-private-citizen twist, but I barely had a chance to contemplate it when General Johnson, after a considered pause, said, "Take care with Slam, Colonel. He is the Army's powerful friend, but he can be a treacherous enemy." I masked my surprise. As far as the conversation I was following went, that comment came straight out of left field.

With two minutes left out of my five, it was small-talk time. The General had met my family at the awards ceremony; now he asked how they were, and how my work was going. "Everything's fine, General," I replied, painfully conscious of the clock running out. "But, sir, if you have a minute there's something bothering me that I'd like to discuss with you."

"Let's hear it," he said.

"We've had U.S. Army units in Vietnam for eighteen months," I blurted out. "Almost one-third of the Army is committed to that war. But at Fort Benning there is only a handful of field-grade officers with Vietnam experience, and half of these were advisers. They weren't with U.S. units. We're just not putting our best and most recently experienced combat officers into the school system, which is where I believe they belong. We're sending them everywhere else to get their tickets punched, as if their careers took priority over the war. Vietnam is the toughest war we've ever fought, and we're going at it as though we're fighting World War II all over again."

"Now just a minute, Colonel Hackworth," the General bristled. "In terms of enemy and terrain, the fighting in Vietnam is no different for infantry than when we fought in the Philippines after Pearl Harbor."

"Sir," I said, "that statement is about as far from the truth about the nature of the war in Vietnam as I have ever heard!"

I couldn't believe the words had come out of my mouth. I could feel my face getting hot as General Johnson, red-faced with anger, stared at me from behind his desk. After a moment he leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath. He picked up his phone and called his aide. "Cancel all my appointments for the rest of the afternoon," he said. Then he turned to me, his face grim and his voice icily stern. "I will give you the rest of the day to justify that remark, Colonel Hackworth."

Johnson walked briskly over to a large worktable across from his desk and pulled out some Vietnam battle maps. "Every general who has fought in Vietnam has briefed me at this desk and with these maps," he said.

I'd gotten his attention, so I decided to go for broke. "Sir, maybe that's the nub of the problem. Maybe those generals do not know how different the war is either. In my experience over there—and I have to admit, I was only

with one brigade, but we were all over Vietnam and I talked to a lot of people—the only people who really know how to fight this thing are the Australians and the Viet Cong.”

General Johnson and I talked at the worktable for about an hour and a half. We refought the 1/101's battles at Tuy Hoa and Dak To, discussed enemy tricks and tactics, and how, until we'd learned, the brigade fell for the enemy's lures and got itself chewed up again and again. When I'd made my case, the General put his arm around me and walked me to the door of his office. “Son,” he said, “I'm going to think about all you've told me. I'm sure you've made some valid points. But if you're right, I must say it is most discouraging. I only hope this tour with Slam proves you wrong.” Johnson patted my back. “I'll have a look at what's happening at Fort Benning, too,” he said. “Meanwhile, Colonel . . . good luck.”

I felt as though I'd won him, I really did. And it felt great.

At the end of the day, I met General Marshall for a drink. I told him about my meeting with the Chief of Staff, and how knocked out I was that Johnson would compare Vietnam to Bataan or island combat. Marshall said, “I agree with Johnny. Infantry combat is infantry combat.” I could have fallen off my chair. *Does he really believe that?* I wondered, but I had no time to ask him, because just then we were joined at our table by one of Slam's old friends, General Moshe Dayan. When you traveled with Slam, I was beginning to discover, it was first-class all the way.

The former Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army had recently returned from Vietnam, where he'd looked at damn near everything. He'd accompanied platoon- and company-size U.S. units deep into the Highlands jungles (something I never heard of any American general doing in Vietnam at any time throughout the U.S. involvement); he'd observed larger actions, too, and come away incredulous over the American style of war. He thought our companies too eager to rush to battle at any price. He was amazed at our use of firepower, citing one case where the Americans fired more than twenty thousand rounds of artillery in a single action. Yes, Dayan admitted, the action did result in some two hundred enemy dead, but at a price of more than all the artillery used during the Sinai campaign! Dayan's personal study had shown him that the enemy almost invariably had the initiative on the battlefield, and he quoted Mao's rules of warfare verbatim,\* suggesting that until these simple guidelines were acknowledged by our leaders, the enemy would continue to have the upper hand.

Dayan confirmed many of my own thoughts (or, more accurately,

\* “When the enemy advances, we retreat. When he escapes, we harass. When he retreats, we pursue. When he is tired, we attack. When he burns, we put out the fire. When he loots, we attack. When he pursues, we hide. When he retreats, we return.”

*instincts*) on the war, which was a great relief, given that they were thoughts I'd expressed that very afternoon to the Chief of Staff of our Army. General Marshall, meanwhile, countered all the Israeli's arguments with "We'll wear them down. No one can take the kind of punishment we're dishing out and win. Look at the Germans and the Japs. . . ." Finally, having now heard Vietnam compared to World War II twice in one day (by no less than the Army's boss and by one of America's top military analysts), I decided it was best to excuse myself and go home to wish Patty and the kids a happy Thanksgiving and a merry Christmas—I *won't be home for the next four months, ya' see. . .* The poor Army family.

Both United States Army, Vietnam (USARV) and MACV's Saigon headquarters were incredibly plush, and worlds away from the city that throbbed just beyond their respective gates. Outside were taxicabs and bicycles, and beautiful girls with long, black hair and lovely *au dais* that flew like kites in the steamy breeze. Inside were charts and graphs and aides and assistants bustling busily through air-conditioned rooms. The staffs of both HQs, officer and enlisted, wore jungle fatigues complete with the new, canvas-black embossed insignia recently developed to be sniperproof in the bush. They wore the cleated canvas boots of the warriors, too, but unlike the real warriors, whose battle scars were mirrored in those boots rubbed white by rocks and undergrowth, these rear-echelon commandos (or rear-echelon motherfuckers [REMFs], as they were known in the parlance of Vietnam) were peacetime Army perfection. The only thing mirrored in their gleaming, polished boots were the overhead lights in their busy offices. I would have been amused by the whole scene if it weren't for the knowledge that the guys here in these pristine headquarters received the same "combat pay" as the soldiers who really did the job, living in the mud and risking their lives every day.

The MACV briefing General Marshall and I received before we went into the field was suspiciously rosy in its assessment of how went the war, but it matched well the view Slam had professed to Dayan and me in Washington. As such the General was positively jubilant as we proceeded on to Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport. There, a VIP two-engine aircraft bearing a one-star red standard was waiting for us, its pilot, copilot, and crew chief all lined up in front of the plane waiting to salute and shake the hand of Slam Marshall. This was a far cry from what I was used to. The way most guys got around Vietnam was by hitchhiking a ride, often after waiting at heliports and airports for hours, or even days. But with Slam, it was red-carpet treatment all the way—doors held open, people bowing and scraping wherever he went, and not a moment's delay.

Given his reputation and all the respect accorded to him, one who had never seen Slam might easily imagine that he was an imposing presence, like a MacArthur or a Gavin. He was not. On the contrary, Slam Marshall was a small, very plump man in his mid-sixties, whom one would be immediately forgiven for mistaking for an animated sack of potatoes rather than a flag officer. He was no doubt the most unmilitary-looking general since the Civil War. His uniform, which he always wore in the field, was permanently wrinkled World War II khakis or fatigues. His shirt pockets, which were always unbuttoned, were home to numerous felt-tipped pens, all sticking out. His fatigue cap had embossed on it, front and center, a general's star twice, perhaps three times larger than, the regulation size. Marshall actually looked more like a caricature of a general than the real McCoy, but because he wore his ridiculous costume with complete self-confidence, while a trooper or an officer might look at him in utter amazement, he'd never, *ever* allow himself to laugh.

When everyone at Tan Son Nhut had finished kissing Slam's ring, we got into the VIP twin engine and took off on the first leg of what Slam would describe, ten years later in his autobiography,\* as my "journey into disillusion." He would not be wrong. But all the sad and sorry revelations I would make were still well down the track that day at Tan Son Nhut, and for the first few weeks of my tour with Slam I was perpetually high, with the mission, the man, *and* the extraordinary opportunity being with him allowed me, as an outsider, to play in the inner circle of the general-officer world.

Our first stop was the 1st Air Cav Division's base camp at An Khe, where we were greeted effusively by its CG, Major General John "Jack" Norton. Norton was an old friend of Marshall's, the two having met in 1944 when Slam was doing his postoperation study of the Normandy invasion.† As the two men reminisced, I stood back and marveled at the metamorphosis of the 1st Air Cav's Highlands home. It bore almost no resemblance to the place the 1/101st had secured for the Flying Horsemen in mid-1965. What had then been a village of perhaps twenty-five hundred mostly mountain people had sprung up into a ticky-tacky cardboard instant city with more than eighteen thousand Viet and Montagnard camp followers. The jungle was gone. The Cav had chopped it away to build a barricade—eighteen kilometers in circumference—inside which was the base camp, a fine airfield, and the towering How Kow mountain, which sat in the middle like a silent giant. Choppers and fixed-wing aircraft filled the sky overhead. Many more could be seen dotting the long runway, or in sandbagged

\* Published two years after his death, in 1979.

† Then a whiz-kid major, Jack Norton had been G-3, 82d Airborne, for that operation.



revetments on either side. The 1st Air Cav truly was a going concern, and if ever one were looking for a “we’re winning” reading on the wartime barometer, An Khe was certainly it.

General Marshall and I went to work immediately, setting up the first of four “schools” to teach his postcombat interviewing technique. Essentially a copy of the system police use for reconstructing a crime, Marshall’s method entailed bringing together the participants of whatever action was to be reviewed, and, with a trained interviewer guiding the discussion, reconstructing that action as a group. (For Slam’s schools, the actions we examined were recommended to us by a unit’s Operations people or commander, and we conducted the interviews at the An Khe base camp or by visiting the participant units near their own positions.) While each man, whatever his rank, was allowed to speak freely about what had happened on the ground, the reason the interviews were conducted in groups rather than with individuals was to minimize the bullshit factor. The men kept one another on track, so not only could a fuller picture be developed with everyone’s input, but a truer one, with a minimum of exaggeration. It was a very good system. And though the fighters eagerly did most of the talking, the interviewer was a crucial element, because a good one could capitalize on the tiniest scraps of information to get to the crux of a story. Yet the interviewing drill itself could be as simple as a trooper saying, “Small-arms fire was tearing into us. I saw four men go down and then I saw Whitey running up on my left holding a grenade,” and then the interviewer breaking in to say to Whitey (who would also be among the participants gathered for the occasion), “Okay, Whitey, what happened then?”

The object of the endeavor for Slam and me was not to draw conclusions about the fights we examined in the schools. (Though it would quickly prove unavoidable—like the disturbing observation that, a year after Ia Drang, the Air Cav was still looking for big battles, still war-gaming huge, totally unimaginative hammer-and-anvil operations à la Benning, though the enemy had long before reverted to *economy of force* tactics that made the Cav’s WW II approach like swatting flies with a sledgehammer.) Instead, our job was simply to train our students, all officers from the Army’s Military History Detachments already in place in Vietnam, in a method of after-action scrutiny that could be easily set up and maintained in their own units. *They* were the ones to draw conclusions from their own battles while collecting their historical data, and make any fallout “lessons learned” available to their commands to prevent the same mistakes being repeated in future engagements.

A tireless worker, General Marshall conducted all the interviews in the first school while the officer-students observed the technique. Slam really

was a master at it, with a natural feel for battle and a great understanding of squad and platoon tactics, his specialty. He also had a most incredible memory, bordering on total recall. On one occasion he stunned everyone in the room when he turned to a burly, old-soldier platoon sergeant in his mid-thirties and insisted he knew him, though the sergeant was positive they'd never met. "It's in my book *Night Drop*," said Slam. "I met you at Normandy, right after the 82d jumped in at Ste. Mère Église. You were in the 2d Battalion, 325th Glider Regiment."

"No, sir," said the sergeant. "That wasn't me, but I'll be damned if you're not talking about my older brother. He was in the 2/325 Glider, just like you say."

We stayed at An Khe for two weeks, working solidly by day and enjoying the expansive hospitality of General Norton by night. The Cav CG was most supportive of Slam's effort here in Vietnam, and made sure our every need and comfort was looked after, both in the field and in the Cav's Hilton-like VIP quarters where we were put up. We ate in the generals' mess, a room with three long tables forming a horseshoe, the head of which was reserved for the generals and VIP guests like Slam. The staff and less important guests (like me) sat opposite one another at the two legs perpendicular to the generals' table, and throughout each evening's three-course, five-star-quality gourmet meal (presented on fine china embossed with the Cav insignia and served by black waiters in starched white jackets—probably line infantrymen who'd found a home in the rear), we politely eavesdropped on what the VIPs were saying. There was little, usually no, talk of war during these formal dinners. In fact, you'd never even know a war was going on unless the generator sputtered, coughed, and went out, plunging the room into darkness. Fortunately, an efficient generator operator (probably another line soldier who'd found the good life in the rear) would promptly switch on the backup unit, and the lights would go on all over the mess hall. Usually this was just in time for after-dinner cigars, liqueurs, coffee, and conversation, at which time the guests normally told some well-worn anecdotes.

Slam was a marvelous storyteller, and as "senior" guest, most evenings of our stay with the Cav he held the mess-hall floor. One night, however, found him sharing the spotlight with author John Steinbeck, who was in Vietnam to visit his son, a radio announcer for Armed Forces Network in Saigon, and to take home all the "good news" on the war effort. In his last years of life, Steinbeck was in pretty shocking physical condition, particularly compared to Marshall, his contemporary; the two distinguished guests had equally healthy egos, though, and there soon proved to be insufficient room at the head table to contain them both. At the happy hour before dinner, the two old men had spent their time sniffing at each other like bulldogs.

Throughout the meal, normally cheerful, twinkly-eyed Slam had been stony-faced as his Nobel Prize-winning rival showed him the respect he might show a copyboy for an insignificant weekly rag. When the dinner was finished, the two men spent the rest of the evening fighting for the floor to deliver their respective tales of “the time I talked to” kings or presidents, and by the time the whole thing was over, I’m sure I wasn’t the only one to gratefully tumble into bed, absolutely exhausted.

After reconstructing two of the 1st Air Cav’s actions for the students of the first school, we said good-bye to Jack Norton and his luxurious An Khe home and flew off to the equally sumptuous 1st Division base camp at Di An. The base-camp mentality in Vietnam was an outgrowth of the static days of the Korean War. Back then the Vietnam-era generals had been majors and lieutenant colonels on the outside looking enviously in; no doubt many of them had thought, *When I’m a general I’ll have that, too*, and now that they were, they were going to, even if the base camps had even less place in this war than they had in the last. In Vietnam, a frontless war, the security requirement alone at these base camps was massive. At the 1st Air Cav, an entire brigade—fully one-third of the division—was engaged solely in protecting the unit’s An Khe home. Similarly, by the time I’d left the 1/101st in June, one-third of its combat power was tied up guarding Phan Rang. In the 1/101st this was particularly significant, in that when we’d originally gone to Phan Rang, the position was almost Charlie-free. But the longer we stayed, the more interest the enemy took in the place. By the time I left, they were regularly blowing up vehicles, lobbing an occasional mortar shell, and doing selective sniping. So almost by design, the base camp invited enemy activity, and then depleted the fighting strength of a unit in the effort to counter it. Frontline troop strength was continually drained, too, by the number of men needed to stay behind simply to service the base camps as they grew bigger and more plush. And in that the camps created an extra layer of diversion in which a trooper, fresh out of the hospital or back from R&R, could lose himself before returning to his unit, it wasn’t long before these massive installations were really as much the enemy as the enemy himself.

But you’d be hard-pressed trying to convince the high-living generals of that, or even Slam, who took to such splendor as if it were his God-given right. As for myself, no doubt I was initially seduced by the good life at An Khe, and even at first in Di An, where I was assigned to share the air-conditioned bungalow (complete with a bar in the corner of the living room and a full-time Viet maid who kept shoes polished, clothes washed and pressed, and beds made with perfectly starched white sheets) of one of

the Big Red One's assistant division commanders, Bernard Rogers. But my enthusiasm disappeared pretty quickly when I saw the terrible complacency such living engendered. ADC Rogers, for example, emerged from his room each morning wearing pajamas and a dressing gown. Worse, even though the information we gained during Slam's schools exposed critical deficiencies in the U.S. effort from the level of the individual soldier the whole way up the chain of command, most of the generals at their evening happy hours seemed blissfully unconcerned, if not totally unaware, that any such problems existed.

Operation Attleboro was a prime case in point. With more than twenty thousand Americans involved at the height of the fighting, and more air and artillery used than on D-Day of the Normandy invasion, as of December 1966, Attleboro was the biggest operation of the war so far. And according to Colonel Stoutner, G-3, II Field Force (who practically begged Slam to study it as part of his second school), it was nothing less than a classic, brilliant victory over the Viet Cong. But something smelled very funny to Slam and me about the perfectly planned, stunningly fought, triumphantly concluded battle—our briefers' contention that the Viet Cong no longer controlled their time-hallowed refuge of War Zone D, for one thing. And indeed, when Slam and I took Stoutner's suggestion and turned our undivided attention to Attleboro, what we found was an operation that was rotten through and through.

Attleboro was initiated in the middle of September by the 196th Brigade, the first U.S. brigade of its kind to fight in Vietnam. Less than a year before, the unit had been a band of two thousand raw recruits. After six months of training, from "This is a rifle. . ." to the Brigade in the Attack, this instant unit had been declared combat-ready, and prepared to deploy to the Dominican Republic to replace the 82d Airborne element that had been there since the beginning of the unrest. But at the last moment the 196th was rerouted to Vietnam. The new destination would prove a hell of a place for them to have to wet their feet, because all declarations to the contrary notwithstanding, the 196th was *not* combat-ready.

The unit had not been trained correctly from the outset. The initial NCO cadre was mostly artillery or armor, and even the brigade's operational report for the period ending 31 October remarked that "the serious shortage of infantry personnel made the training mission extremely difficult to execute." As Steve Prazenka always said, "Learn it right and you'll do it right the rest of your life. Learn it wrong and you'll spend the rest of your life trying to get it right"—if the 196th's training mission was difficult to execute, it shouldn't have been hard for the powers that be to imagine how a combat mission would go. To make matters worse, Colonel Frances S. Conaty, the 196th's initial

commander (and a Medal of Honor winner with a reputation as a good infantry soldier), was relieved when the unit arrived in Vietnam, and was replaced by one Brigadier General Edward H. deSaussure, Jr., an artilleryman who had never before commanded or served in an infantry unit. So the stage was set for a very messy baptism of fire for the first instant brigade.

From the commencement of Operation Attleboro, for almost seven weeks the 196th had a leisurely walk in the sun. They made few contacts with the enemy but accomplished a lot in their wide-ranging mission by uncovering and destroying many VC supply depots and logistic installations. It wasn't until 3 November that the brigade's good life came to an end, when it became apparent the enemy was going to strike back. In good World War II fashion, General deSaussure requested and got the 25th Division's 1/27th Wolfhound Battalion to act as the anvil while two of the 196th's organic battalions played hammers to drive the VC into a killing zone. At least that was the plan. On the ground, all intentions quickly went by the boards when C Company, 1/27th landed on a cold LZ and proceeded north right into a VC ambush that got them from the front, both sides, *and* the rear. Within two and a half hours the company had taken fourteen WIA and ten KIA, the latter figure including the company commander, the first sergeant, one of the platoon leaders, and one of the platoon sergeants. Until the 1/27's battalion commander, Major Guy S. "Sandy" Meloy III, came and took control, the senior officer on the ground was a brand-new second lieutenant on his first operation.

A1/27 was brought in to reinforce its battered sister company, and was ordered to "roll up the VCs' flank." DeSaussure, meanwhile, ordered three companies from two of his battalions to go to the rescue. All were made OPCON of the 1/27th, giving CO Meloy control of five companies by the end of the first day's battle.

By the end of the second day, a wounded Sandy Meloy was simultaneously commanding *eleven* rifle companies from four different battalions. In lethal action that found A1/27 hanging on in the face of numerous frontal attacks (after being ambushed just as C1/27 had been the day before), deSaussure had begun to commit unit after unit piecemeal, without rhyme or reason. Somehow all these units ended up under Meloy's operational control, and it was just fortunate that Meloy, the son of General Guy S. Meloy II (who fourteen years before had taken such an interest in me at Fort Benning), was an able commander with a hell of a lot of troop-duty experience under his belt. He fought his ad hoc mini division beautifully for thirty straight hours, until Major General DePuy (late of MACV, now CG, 1st Division) arrived to relieve Meloy's forces and take over the battle from the totally unqualified deSaussure.

It was at this point, according to all the official reports, that the battle turned in favor of the Americans: DePuy apparently decided to turn the entire region into a parking lot. Practicing what he preached as the author of the big U.S. search-and-destroy operations, he employed huge "Rome Plow" bulldozers that plowed, ripped, and sheared through the jungle, leaving bare swaths a thousand feet wide in which VC movement could be easily spotted from the air. In some areas he had engineers use ditchdigging machines to slash into the Viet Cong's ingenious network of underground tunnels and bunkers (most of which, time would prove, remained untouched, unshaken, indeed *undetected* throughout the U.S. involvement) that ran through both War Zones C and D like a poor man's subway system. DePuy believed in maximum firepower, too, and by the time Attleboro was over, a total of twelve tons of tac air, thirty-five thousand artillery rounds, and eleven B-52 strikes had rained down on the enemy.

DePuy was actively and aggressively seeking what he called the enemy's "threshold of pain," the point beyond which he believed the enemy could not sustain the punishment we were inflicting. It was his solution to end the war. Therefore, not unlike Sherman when he marched across Georgia, wherever DePuy went he left destruction in his wake. In the Iron Triangle, for example, more than six thousand peasants were moved to refugee camps and their abandoned villages were burned and bulldozed to the ground so their land could be declared a free-fire zone (with anyone caught within it considered VC, fair game for all choppers and spotter planes that hunted there). Defoliants like Agent Orange were sprayed frequently throughout the 1st Div's AO of War Zones C and D, and the ground had been bombarded so frequently by B-52 strikes that it looked from the air as if it had been pressed in a waffle iron.

DePuy would have had no complaints from me for what appeared to be his Napoleonic "the weaker the infantry, the heavier the employment of cannons" philosophy. There was no question that using firepower was better than wasting lives. But the problem was that a lot of lives were being wasted, too. Each day as Slam and I collected our information on Attleboro, visiting unit after unit that had somehow been involved, I got more and more depressed to find the same problems occurring, the same lethal mistakes being made again and again—and they were the exact mistakes we'd made in the 1/101st as far back as a year before. The Viet Cong, those dumb country hicks (or so we perceived them), were still fleecing us city slickers every day. Irrespective of Attleboro's official report of victory, the fact was that the operation (which claimed 155 U.S. lives and another 741 WIA) was just another case of dancing to the enemy's tune, a tune written years before during the Indochina war. The tactics the NVA and Main Force VC

employed at Attleboro were right out of *Street Without Joy*. The standard bitch of the French (“I just *know* the little bastards are somewhere around here—but go and find them in that mess”)<sup>1</sup> was the same complaint Slam and I heard again and again from the Yankee “long noses” a dozen years later, as their accounts of the fight revealed that the VC initiated or controlled almost every action. (During Attleboro, they sucked U.S. units into well-prepared killing zones—almost a replay of the lure we fell for at My Canh—and then ate the Americans up at eyeball-to-eyeball range. All our men could do was try their damndest to extricate their dead and wounded and themselves, and get some distance so they could hammer the enemy with our unbeatable firepower.) And yet, when I asked the company and battalion commanders who’d participated in Attleboro whether they’d read Bernard Fall’s basic primer on the war, few could answer in the affirmative.

During our reconstruction of Attleboro, Slam and I found that other U.S. units were being devastated without meeting the enemy at all. In the 199th Infantry Brigade, for example, one company had taken sixty casualties over a three-month period, forty of which had been from booby traps (generally constructed of American “debris” and generously emplaced by the VC throughout War Zones C and D). I did a quick calculation of how many of the remaining twenty had been friendly fire WIAs, and when it was all shaken out the enemy might as well have stayed home. “To subdue the enemy without fighting,” said Sun Tzu, “is the acme of skill.”

This is not to say that these U.S. units were not making any kills. At Attleboro alone the enemy KIA by body count was reported to be 1,106.\* The operations Slam and I studied *were* hurting the enemy, but it was not at a price the opposition could not sustain. According to one of the basic principles of guerrilla warfare, if the G is not losing he is winning, and if the G’s opponent is not winning he is losing. As long as the VC and NVA could sustain their losses, they were not losing the war, whatever “defeats” their foe ascribed to them. And there was no reason to believe they would not be able to continue to sustain their losses, even in the face of Westy and DePuy’s search-and-destroy tactics and the rich man’s war the Americans were waging. If the VC and NVA “lost” at Attleboro, it was a conscious decision to run away to fight another day. No doubt they would go to ground and lick their wounds, but just as had been the case in the Indochina war, going to ground was just the first step in rebuilding, in strengthening their ranks and their will to prepare to meet us again on the very same ground as

\* The number of individual weapons captured during the fighting at Attleboro was only 141, however, which made that body count highly suspicious: while a 4:1 body count/weapons captured ratio was fairly reasonable, 12:1 was extremely unlikely.

before. So even if Operation Attleboro was a victory for us in the WW II sense (i.e., we held the ground at the end of the battle), in terms of the material losses in both choppers and ammo used, in the number of U.S. dead and wounded, *and* the fact that the enemy would (and did) move right back into the area the minute our units pulled out, Attleboro was a Pyrrhic victory at best.

But no one wanted to know. While all the generals Slam and I met seemed wholly behind our endeavor, none showed any real interest in the findings the schools uncovered. The same base-camp complacency that did not see the need for self-examination in the first place had led to what appeared to be a total absence of curiosity (even when the hard work was done for them) about what was happening around them. I would have liked to tell these generals what we were learning on those many occasions when, to my utter amazement, one or another sought my advice on some future plan, but since Slam never broached the severity of the problems when he was turned to for guidance, I certainly didn't think it was my place. I should have gone right ahead, though. By the time we'd finished the second school, I realized that in the power game I was way ahead, and could probably have said anything I damn well pleased.

Traveling with Slam, I was accorded respect well beyond that due my rank of light colonel. I was not a general and I didn't belong, but the real generals seemed to forget that or put it aside. For the purposes of the trip at least, I was one of them. It didn't hurt that I was representing the Office of the Chief of Military History on the express recommendation of the Army Chief of Staff; everybody assumed I was tight with General Johnson, and again and again I found flag officers who wouldn't even have acknowledged my presence at other times slapping my back and acting out the role of big buddies. I was knocked out that the guys who wore stars still had to play the political game, and even more so that they thought I had the power to give any one of them a little career jump. And it was General DePuy, of all people, who was the most striking example of those who sought to take advantage of my "close" relationship with the Chief.

William Eugene DePuy was considered by insiders to be the prime architect of America's war in Vietnam, and a principal in the development of the U.S. "frontier" strategy there. He was an extraordinarily brilliant man, or so went the word, who had made his name as a staff officer, having had little command experience at all and none on the company level. After he took over the Big Red One, DePuy quickly became infamous throughout Vietnam for on-the-spot relief, firing some thirty battalion commanders, most within days of their arrival. While this was actually more the work of DePuy's no-bullshit ADC for tactics, James Hollingsworth (a gravelly-



voiced, colorful character who cursed a blue streak, had five Purple Hearts from Africa, Sicily, and Europe during World War II, and was undoubtedly the real power and spirit behind the 1st Div),\* what was interesting was how, when DePuy finally settled on the battalion commanders he wanted, their average height was at least six feet. It was a Frederick the Great thing, I was sure. DePuy himself was very short, and ferretlike in both look and manner, and whenever I saw him conferring with his towering subordinates I couldn't help but think of old Frederick and his runt complex. Still, DePuy would go on to have an unparalleled impact on the Army. Under his continued patronage, in subsequent years his handpicked Praetorian Guard would slip into the Army's top jobs. DePuy himself would never go "all the way" to Chief of Staff or Supreme Commander, NATO, but his incredible influence as a power broker in the top tiers of the Army would have much to do with who did (and who did not). Later still, he would expand his base and take on his most ignoble role, that of undeclared head of the crusade to rewrite the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, of which he was so much a part.

But that was all in the future. In 1966, DePuy was already a powerful, powerful guy, so I was totally unprepared for the ingratiating smile he flashed me when Slam and I arrived at Di An, or the way he took me aside as soon as he could for a private word. Though I'd met with him quite regularly the previous year when, as J-3 of MACV, he'd visited me in my S-3 role with the 1/101, one thing I never would have expected would be to be greeted by DePuy like a long-lost brother. (DePuy was even more fawning and deferential to Marshall, but since most of the generals we met treated Slam not unlike a king, in that respect his behavior was unremarkable.) "Hack," he said, "I'd like you to do me a favor if you get a chance when you talk to the Chief. Just tell him I'm a good man. And tell him—sure, I curse and carry on a bit, but it's all an act. It's what the troops in the Big Red One expect. So if you could just tell him I'm a good man. . . ."

Slam and I spent Christmas with the 1st Division. On the twenty-sixth, Bob Hope gave his traveling show for a huge Big Red One crowd. It seemed like madness to assemble such a large target for VC mortars and rockets, but the antagonists had declared a cease-fire and the show went on despite intelligence reports that the Viet Cong would strike during the Christmas truce. I didn't go. Besides the fact that it was mind-boggling to me that

\* Jim Hollingsworth went on to become one of the most effective high-level advisers of the Vietnam War. At An Loc in 1972, he virtually took command of ARVN's III Corps, and used B-52s like tac air to stop the major NVA offensive dead in its tracks.

DePuy would take such a mammoth risk with the lives of his men, I'd made a practice of missing Bob Hope shows since Korea, because I didn't like his slick brand of humor and I'd just preferred to stay with my unit and avoid all the confusion. Slam, on the other hand, was a Bob Hope fan, and a distinguished guest at the performance. He was still chuckling when I met him after his return, and repeated what he considered the classic Hope joke: "The U.S. bombing raids on North Vietnam are the best slum-clearing program Uncle Ho ever had."

The following day, still during the cease-fire, a VC unit ambushed a 1st Division platoon whose patrol also violated the truce. The ambush took place less than two clicks from the now vacant Bob Hope venue; with the VC armed with both a machine gun and a mortar, a day earlier they would have made some impact on that show. The Americans took seven KIA and several WIA in yet another classic "no one's learning" scenario: a young, OCS-trained lieutenant had allowed his platoon to cross a wide-open rice paddy. The first I heard of the incident was when DePuy came dashing into the generals' mess as excited as a second lieutenant going to his first guard mount. He told Slam to saddle up—they were off to battle. As DePuy dashed out again with Slam in hot pursuit, I marveled at this incredible example of oversupervision: *a division commander rushing to the scene of one of his platoons' open-and-shut screwups?* Where were the platoon's company and battalion commanders? Where was the brigade commander? From the information Slam's schools were routinely revealing, most likely they would be on the scene as well, overhead in choppers, all of them issuing orders and playing what became known as the Great Squad Leader in the Sky, creating absolute chaos in an already confused situation. Such was not the way to win a war, but the longer the war went on, the worse this situation got, as many senior officers saw their units' fights and patrols only in terms of the glory it could bring them, or in terms of the medals and ribbons they could win (awards so common that they only became conspicuous by their absence in a guy's fruit salad) without leaving the beyond-rifle-range comfort of twelve hundred to fifteen hundred feet.\* In the case of DePuy's and Slam's dash toward the sound of guns, by the time they arrived on the scene the guns were silent; there was little to do but evacuate the dead and wounded and come home, which they did.

For New Year's Eve, I took Slam with me to a party at the New York Bar on Tu Do Street in Saigon. The place was owned and operated by my dear

\* The worst case I heard while with Slam of the Great Squad Leader syndrome was one of a platoon leader who, pushed for time by *his* Great Squad Leader in the Sky, ordered his men to use a well-traveled trail through the jungle. The unit fell victim to a single command-detonated claymore mine set up along the trail; the result was eight wounded and seven killed, the latter figure including the lieutenant, who, according to survivors, had always made a point of traveling through the bush and never using trails.

friend John Westmoreland, who, since his battlefield commission in my Fighter Company in Korea, had risen through the ranks to make light colonel (I was so proud). After a couple of early-sixties tours of Vietnam, he'd recently quit the Army, joined the State Department detachment as a civilian, and come back to the war zone, where he'd made a life for himself. He'd met and married a Vietnamese woman named Jackie who had a penchant for having children and making money; they had one kid already, as well as two or three very successful bars on Tu Do Street. My personal favorite was the New York, with its mirrored walls, laminex tables (each separated from the next by a curtain), and big American tape decks that blared out down-home country-and-western and popular Beatles tunes. Troops went there on pass to fall in love with any one of Westy's resident tea ladies, those fragile Oriental dolls who melted hearts with their lies ("I see you one time, I love you too much . . ."); the boys fresh out of the bush didn't care, as long as they could pretend it was true.

Westy had a cozy corner organized for us when we arrived at the bar, and a strikingly beautiful good-time girl for Slam. I'd been more than a little apprehensive about taking him along (anyone with a discerning eye would say that the New York, like most of the bars on Tu Do Street, was actually pretty sleazy), but it proved to be a wasted worry—Slam loved the place. The hardest part of the evening was actually in getting from the front door to the table. Very rarely did one see a general on Tu Do Street, so when Marshall walked in wearing his distinctive rumpled khakis and huge general's star, it caused a tremendous stir (to his great delight).

The rest of the evening was drunkenly wonderful. Slam displayed an incredibly earthy side which meshed perfectly with Westmoreland's, and when the New Year came and went and Westy suggested we go back to his house to continue the party, Slam was all for it. So everyone paired off, made our way to John's villa, and drank our way through the dawn. At some stage in the wee hours Slam and his tea lady disappeared, and I had a good chuckle thinking the old fox had gotten (or was getting) his ashes hauled by the Viet bar girl. She was probably the first Vietnamese civilian he'd even *talked* to. Sadly, all was not as it appeared. In the morning, before I stumbled out of his house, Westy told me the girl had reported in on her night with Slam. "General have many things in head but nothing in dick," she'd said. "He go to sleep right away. But Number One general! Big man!"

Months before, still in Washington and thinking I was stuck in the Pentagon for life, I'd written an article titled "No Magic Formula" to pass on some of the knowledge I'd gained fighting with the 1/101st in Vietnam. With my deputy Bill Kesterson's magic edit and polish, we'd forged it into

a great piece, and I'd sent it to "Gentleman Jim" Timothy, my old CO, now a general and Assistant Commandant at Fort Benning. Tim had said it would be published in *Infantry* magazine early in the new year, so when Slam and I arrived at the 173d Airborne Brigade's base camp at Bien Hoa, I was surprised to see a stack of mimeographed advance copies of the article on the desk of the 173d's CG, Brigadier General John Deane. Even more surprising, I found that Deane had attached a glowing cover letter to each copy addressing my qualifications to write same.\* Apparently the piece was mandatory reading within the 173d.

It would be a tremendous understatement to say I was very proud of that. But as pride goes before a fall, it was soon evident that few of the brigade's soldiers at Bien Hoa had done their homework. The 173d, now the oldest serving U.S. Army maneuver unit fighting in Vietnam, was battle-scarred but not battle-wise. Commanders seemed preoccupied with the big picture. They didn't notice how the small things, the things that made a unit effective and prevented unnecessary casualties, were slipping, and slipping badly. Guys were using soap, toothpaste, and shaving cream before operations. They were smoking and wearing mosquito repellent on patrol. I even saw one guy returning from patrol bopping along to the strains of Jimi Hendrix pouring out of a portable radio the kid had bought at the PX and carried with him into the field. Few NCOs and company-grade officers were doing anything about the slow disintegration. Old NCOs were already getting scarce, and the young captains weren't with their companies long enough to make a dent. More than a few of the men Slam and I talked to didn't even know their company commanders' names. It was a bad situation, and one made all the more worrisome by the fact that the 173d had some of the *better* officers, NCOs, and enlisted men we'd seen among the units we'd examined to date. If an elite Airborne outfit like this one was falling apart, what more could possibly be expected from the average, unglamorous, footslogging infantry unit?

Visiting the 173d was not an uplifting way to begin the New Year. Fortunately the next stop was my old home, the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division at Phan Rang, and there my spirits were lifted instantly. Unlike any other Regular unit I observed during my tour with Slam, the Screaming Eagles were routinely employing tactics that actually fit the war. General Pearson, still in charge after almost a year, called them "semiguerrilla" tactics—stealth, deception, and surprise, units infiltrating the battlefield at night and without the use of choppers or accompanying artillery H&I. Basically they were evolutions on what Hank Emerson had developed a year earlier, and *they worked*.

\* As Chief of Staff of IFFV under Swede Larsen, John Deane had been my endorser on the special ER rendered for my short tenure as the 1/327's battalion commander.

The 1/327 was being commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Collins (son of retired four-star J. Lawton Collins), and the unit looked great, particularly the Tigers, who netted five dead VC and five weapons in a classic ambush the day Slam and I arrived. "Gunfighter" Emerson's old outfit, the 2/502, was now in the infinitely capable hands of "The Gunslinger," Lieutenant Colonel Frank Dietrich, a paratrooper since World War II who'd come up through the ranks.\* At one stage during Geronimo I, the thirty-seven day 1/101 operation we started to examine for Slam's third school, Dietrich maneuvered his entire battalion into one square mile of thick jungle to box in an estimated 100 NVA soldiers who'd fired on a Recondo patrol. It was a measure of the fine discipline among the 2/502 troopers that *not a single friendly fire casualty* resulted from this very tight, very dangerous situation. As the operation continued, over three days of fighting the '02 killed forty-one enemy and took thirty-six prisoners on the way to rendering the 5th Battalion, 95th NVA Regiment ineffective as a fighting unit.

Dietrich's was the biggest engagement of the Geronimo campaign, but there were other equally impressive ones, like the dawn ambush in which a very patient, reinforced squad of fifteen men killed nineteen NVA, took one prisoner and eighteen weapons for no casualties of their own. The significance of Geronimo I lay in its close to 10:1 (enemy to friendly) kill ratio, the very high weapons-to-body-count ratio (143 weapons, individual and crew-served, to 149 enemy dead), and the fact that many of the seventy-six prisoners taken had voluntarily surrendered in the face of the American brigade's superior tactics—economy of force tactics that gave the enemy a taste of their own medicine. I was elated. There was no question that the continuity of General Pearson's command over the past year and his openness to good ideas were essential ingredients in the brigade's success, but I also knew that if the 1/101's procedures, starting with its basic philosophy of "Know Your Enemy," became a standard among U.S. units, we could have the same success all over the Vietnam battlefield. We would be able to beat this foe. We'd be able to fight the same protracted war of attrition the enemy was willing to fight, without paying the heavy, heavy price in American lives. The Screaming Eagles were proving again and again that alert, well-trained soldiers could out-G the G.

I shared my enthusiasm with Slam, but he was more distracted than impressed. "Their load's too heavy, Hack," he said, and proceeded to give me his well-developed World War II argument about the soldier's load (he'd

\* Dietrich was also a featured hero (as "F. Dietrich Berkely") in Ross Carter's one-of-a-kind book of war stories and war truths, *Those Devils in Baggy Pants*.

written a book about it) and how too much weight will exhaust a trooper long before the first shot is fired. What he said was absolutely correct, but the point he missed was this was *not* World War II, where there was a "front" and a main supply route right behind, from where goodies could be brought up as required, or that resupply Vietnam-style (by chopper) would compromise the paratroop guerrillas' very modus operandi. Neither would Slam acknowledge that while the troopers' loads were heavy when they went into an AO, centralized caches in the bush kept the men light when it came time to fight. And when I suggested that for the first time since we'd arrived in Vietnam we were seeing a Regular American unit doing it right, Slam said irritably, "Let's face it, Hack, there's no juice here."

"No juice" was Slam's way of saying there was no stuff at the 1/101st for a book. No Vietnam War *Night Drop* or *The River and the Gauntlet* or *Pork Chop Hill*. Immediately I could feel my face burning. I'd known for some time Marshall wasn't concerned about the schools we were running for the Military History Detachments, but I hadn't realized he, the military operations analyst (as he sometimes called himself), had no higher purpose at all in his analysis of military operations.

When we first planned the trip, Slam had talked about visiting every one of the ten divisions and separate brigades in Vietnam (which we eventually did). I'd suggested we streamline the effort by conducting not four schools, but one, at An Khe, and bringing all the student officers there. The interviewing technique was the same wherever it was taught and regardless of the action being scrutinized, and I'd figured there would be plenty of material to work with even if we just reviewed the 1st Cav's operations since July. Besides, it didn't make sense to go hopping and rushing all over the country when the students could come to us. But Slam had put his foot down. "We must visit every unit," he said. "I want to cover all the major U.S. Army campaigns since I left in June." Logistically speaking, this was a moderate pain in the neck, because it meant we had to take all the student officers with us when we went from unit to unit. But even that would have been okay, except it soon became clear that Slam, whose job it was to teach these men being flown all over South Vietnam at the Army's expense, couldn't have been less interested in them or whether they learned the technique at all. Not just in the first one, but in all four schools, the Military History Detachment officers sat on the sidelines and watched while the General conducted the actual interviews. Slam never placed them in charge or asked them any questions—in truth, he simply ignored them. Meanwhile, every evening Slam counted the longhand pages of notes he'd taken that day as most people would count money. He'd glance through the pages, noting all the soldiers' names, which he'd taken down during the interviews

perhaps even more assiduously than the action—"Every name is worth ten books at the cash register," he'd declare.

So even before the "no juice" comment, I'd recognized that Slam's priorities on this trip were not the same as the Chief's or mine or the officers of the Military History Detachments who traveled with us. But I was still not prepared for his reaction when, about a quarter of the way through our examination of Geronimo I, Jack Norton called from An Khe to say a hell of a fight had just finished around an Air Cav fire support base (FSB) designated LZ Bird, and Slam ought to come up and have a look. "Wind it up," Slam directed me, fire in his eyes for the first time since we hit the 1/101st. Already he was seeing in his mind's eye another *Pork Chop Hill* (commercially his most successful book), only this time he'd call it *LZ Bird* and keep the TV rights. He'd given them away for *Pork Chop Hill* and often talked about how, as a result, he felt sick every time the film of his Korea story played on the tube and he didn't get a red cent. "I'll never let that happen again," he'd vow each time he wound up his lament on the subject.

So we folded our tent at the Screaming Eagles' nest, and headed back to the 1st Air Cav, where Slam got all he needed for his book. He also made sure the Cav CO on the ground at LZ Bird, a captain who'd led his men courageously in the very heavy hand-to-hand battle, was put in for the Medal of Honor. Unfortunately, this generosity of spirit on Slam's part was, I knew by now, as calculated as it was real. Besides the boost to book sales he envisioned should the real-life lead figure therein win the Big One, the award would be another notch on his own belt. Because Marshall had a thing about making heroes. One of his favorite pastimes was dropping names, generally in the context of his having "made" the subject (who was usually some illustrious three- or four-star general, past or present), and a favorite Korea tale was the one in which, through his clever prose and big-league contacts, he got the Medal of Honor for Lew Millett and his bayonet charge. By the time of the LZ Bird episode, I'd grown used to his chatter, so I silently wished the captain presently the recipient of Slam's attention well in the Blue Max stakes, and tried to let the rest of the affair wash over me.

But it was hard to watch an idol moving closer and closer to the edge of the pedestal I'd placed him on. Despite his glowing reputation, I was beginning to see that Slam was less a military analyst than a military ambulance chaser, more a voyeur than a warrior, the Louella Parsons of the U.S. Army. Because although it was the 1/101's hard-learned, well-proven economy of force tactics that held the key to winning the war—wearing the enemy down on our terms for a change, without paying the price—Slam

responded only to heroes and heroics, men fighting against impossible odds and, as necessary for the drama, dying. This wasn't to say he was a bloodthirsty man, it's just that that was how he saw war. But that wasn't something I understood at the time.

We never did return to the brilliant Operation Geronimo I or the "juiceless" 1/101st. Instead, we went up to Pleiku and the mostly draftee 4th Division, an outfit relatively new to the war. As we had with all units to date, we told the division's G-3 we wanted to review what he considered one of the more significant actions his unit had been involved in. Without hesitation he chose Paul Revere IV, an operation conducted along the Cambodian border the previous November, and suggested we meet in one hour's time for a full briefing. I was amazed. It usually took at least a day to organize such things. Promptly an hour later, however, the briefing officer and his entourage appeared before us with a set of full-color charts and graphs and the slickest presentation I'd seen throughout my time with Slam.

It was a fine diversion, especially considering that the content was nothing new—Paul Revere IV, we were told, was a classic encounter. *Ho hum, here we go again*, I thought as we heard how early intelligence had picked up a large NVA element, which the 4th Division and some OPCON units promptly and skillfully deployed around; how the U.S. forces proceeded to push their foe into a trap in which the enemy was savagely punished and all but destroyed, with the tattered remnants limping across the border into Cambodia while the Americans marched home in glorious victory. Slam and I exchanged more than one dubious glance as the briefing went on. We'd heard it all before, in unit after unit—though the numbers always changed, the victories remained decisive. When it was all over, I couldn't help but ask the briefing officer how he'd gotten the remarkably comprehensive presentation together so quickly. "This briefing is the same one we gave to General Westmoreland, General Wheeler,\* and Defense Secretary McNamara a few days ago, sir," he replied crisply, as briefing officers tend to do.

We began our interviews with the 4th Div participants. Then I went to the POW camp and interviewed all the prisoners taken during the battle. This examination of the POWs, coupled with the horror stories of 4th Div troops, whose squads or platoons were chewed up and spat out by their NVA opponents, revealed that there was almost *no correlation* between the official Army report on Paul Revere IV and what actually happened on the ground. I was astonished. There was no question that our boys had

\* Earle G. "Buzz" Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.



performed heroically. And no question that the enemy had been punished—the official figure was more than a thousand KIA—by the Americans' incredible firepower. And our boys *did* hold the terrain at the end of the battle (even if it was an empty chunk of steaming jungle), so if the operation were measured against our World War II experience, it was indeed a victory. But if Paul Revere IV was viewed as it had to be, from the perspective of the war of insurgency that it was, then we did *not* win and we were *not* brilliant. In fact, we were stupid, lethally so, and Charles won the day. The enemy initiated the action, using tried-and-true Highlands methods, i.e., threatening a CIDG border camp and using NVA decoys to entice U.S. forces into an airmobile operation. The enemy sucked the American units into well-dug-in killing zones along the Cambodian border, killing more than 140 and wounding more than 560 of our men on terrain that favored them completely (once they'd accomplished their mission, they could scoot right across the border to regroup). As General Vo Nguyen Giap, North Vietnam's Minister of Defense, later wrote of the operation in his September 1967 statement on the war, "In the high plateau area the LAF [Liberation Armed Forces] lured the U.S. troops into coming to Plei Djerang\* and annihilated them in bloody battles along the banks of the Sa Thay River"; while neither Slam nor I would have used the word "annihilate" to describe U.S. losses, after reconstructing the battle, our assessment of Paul Revere IV did in fact track much more closely with Giap's than with the sanitized U.S. report of the events.<sup>2</sup>

That the official and true stories of Paul Revere IV were so distinctly different was bad enough (though really, it was just a question of degree in relation to the only slightly less glowing and slightly more true reports we'd seen previously in unit after unit). But what was worse was that for the first time I realized that probably no one at the very top had any idea that the official reports were wrong. Slam knew, and he agreed with me that there was a regular and heavy-handed use of the M-1 pencil in the effort to put our debacles in their best light. But if the M-1 pencil was being applied starting at the company level, with embellishments added all the way up the chain of command, whatever underpinnings of truth remained by the time these reports got to division and corps were probably accidental. So from there, these reports—reports like Paul Revere IV, full of relatively honest but totally false optimism—made it all the way back to Washington unchallenged. And then they became the basis of critical decisions made on the war.

It was the study of Operation Paul Revere IV that most profoundly shook

\* The CIDG camp pivotal to the action of Paul Revere IV.

what Slam would later call my “almost childlike faith” in the honesty of the after-action reporting system. But it was Slam himself who sent me hurtling down the road toward disillusion at this time, because he saw as clearly as I did what was going on, and didn’t raise a finger or utter a word to try to change it. It wasn’t as if he didn’t have the power or the influence to do so. Slam had made himself virtually a one-man media effort to keep the American public informed on how the war was going. Besides his soon-to-be released book, he had a syndicated newspaper column and regular TV and radio shows (all of which he continued to write and/or tape while we were in Vietnam), and he had the ear of every CG in the country, including COMUSMACV Westmoreland. Only after Paul Revere IV did I reflect on a conversation Slam and I had had a short time before, after I’d witnessed (from a respectful distance) what appeared to be an animated, friendly talk between Marshall and General Westmoreland. Slam had returned to my side and promptly informed me that “Westy’s a dumbshit” who didn’t know what he was doing. At the time I was flabbergasted by the comment, but now I wondered what the hell else Slam expected, if the information Westy got was rah-rah bullshit such as we’d heard about Paul Revere IV.

I felt Slam had a responsibility to tell Westmoreland and the rest of the establishment the truth about what was happening to the war effort. But instead he continued to play the distinguished guest at every unit, and ruffled no feathers. I didn’t get it. If Marshall had the balls to tell me that Westy was a dumbshit who didn’t know what *he* was doing, why didn’t Slam have the courage to take a real stand on the mess we were making of the war, instead of falling back on the “we have firepower on our side/the NVA can’t sustain those losses/we’ll wear ’em down” argument?

As our trip drew to a close, my observations gained throughout began to line up to form a very bleak picture. It wasn’t just that we were losing the war. Instinctively I’d known that was the case for a long time. But what I couldn’t have guessed was how much faster we were losing than I had imagined. To me, General Westmoreland was like the poker player who hadn’t won a pot all night—in the desperate hope of changing his fortunes, he kept bumping the ante and forcing everyone to play faster. But it seemed he was throwing good money after bad. From the beginning of the escalation, as fast as we dispatched new units, the NVA matched them, the enemy, too, upping the ante, confident that we could be tapped out. Westy authorized huge search-and-destroy operations, but whatever return they brought was temporary at best. The enemy just went to ground and waited until the coast was clear to return and rebuild. In every action Slam and I examined, save the 1/101’s Geronimo I and the activities of Colonel John

Hayes's Special Forces "Delta Force"\* (the last unit we visited, which, pound for pound and weighed against its cost, was the most effective fighting force in Vietnam), U.S. forces had come out badly bloodied. Our casualty figures for 1966 equaled those for the Battle of the Bulge more than twenty years before. And though it was true that it took troops in Vietnam twelve months to chalk up such figures while it took less than two at the Bulge, at least with the Bulge one could say the bitter fighting there virtually ended WW II in Europe. But what greater good had our 1966 casualties in Vietnam achieved? An end to the war was nowhere in sight.

The emphasis on body count, a system already as obsolete as the CIDG border camps, was also taking its toll on the war effort by making everyone a bounty hunter and a liar. This yardstick of enemy dead had proved very effective during the British counterinsurgency experiences in Palestine and Malaya (indeed, according to John Essex-Clark, it was the only real measure of success in Malaya, where a platoon could patrol for a year and not see a single guerrilla). But in Vietnam, as the war escalated on both sides and Main Force and regular VC and NVA units expanded the conflict out of the guerrilla realm of banditos chasing and being chased through the bush, body count completely outlived its usefulness as a reliable measure of anything. Yet, with the passage of time, the reliance on it among the top brass of the military, the Defense Department bureaucrats, and the politicians would only increase. The more bodies we counted, went the thinking, the better we were doing. In fact, my experience with Slam revealed that the pressure for a high and instant body count interrupted the flow of battle, tied up communications, and created unnecessary casualties among troopers tasked with the job of doing the counting during a fight. Body count was also well on its way to destroying whatever was left of the moral code of soldiers and officers in the zero-defect Army. Leaders did not challenge suspect figures reported by subordinate units (who themselves knew the importance of a significant count) and too often actively inflated their scores to please their ER raters or just to get higher HQ off their backs. Sometimes a body count was completely made up to mask a screwed-up mission. In just one

\* Project Delta (Delta Force) was infinitely successful with its tactics, doctrine, and a basic philosophy completely at odds with the Army's Regular units. The same success was not to be found in the other, more traditional half of the 5th Special Forces operations—the SF/CIDG border camps like Tou Morong and Dak To. The border-camp program still looked good on MACV's "big picture" operations map, but in fact had long outlived its usefulness as a means to interdict replacement troops and equipment streaming down from the North. At this point in the war the camps were ineffective, enemy-battered defensive concerns that served as little more than bait for the NVA and VC to lure reinforcing or relieving units into large-scale ambushes. While one would have thought something would be done to change the mission, configuration, or tactics of the border camps to have them again contribute positively to the war effort, no alterations to that end were made, and the border camps seemed set to remain what they'd been too long already—just a very expensive drain on manpower and matériel.

instance, a battalion commander asked one of his company COs over the radio to tell him his college football jersey number to have *something* to report for a botched operation (“Eighty-six,” said the company commander; “Eighty-six!” exclaimed the battalion commander. “Great body count!”). Body count was much in the tradition of the Korean Certificate of Loss, in that it assuaged sectors of the public and the government that might otherwise have grown indignant over the waste the war was responsible for. But body count was infinitely more dangerous, because, like Paul Revere IV and other such essentially bogus after-action reports, the inflated counts made it all the way up the chain of command, where they became the proof-positive statistic that we were winning.\*

The colonels and generals Slam and I met on our trip were, in the main, very much entrenched in the can-do (at all costs) bureaucracy that fostered inflated body counts and the like. As such, they seemed truly blind to the crucial shortcomings in the war effort. It was a bad situation only exacerbated by the obscene luxury available to many at base camps like the 1st Air Cav’s and the 1st Division’s. Vietnam was as complicated a conflict as the U.S. had ever known, yet the longer many of these generals stayed, the less they understood the war or even tried to, so caught up were they with the finer things in life available in a war zone. I found it interesting that these guys, many of whom had learned little in their last combat commands in the sitzkrieg days of the Korean War, still managed to take the worst lessons Korea offered and make them the standard for Vietnam. (Of course, as a European-style war superimposed on an Asian mainland, the Korean conflict was an extremely poor training ground for a new kind of warfare, even if the generals had taken the time to try to learn from it, which the vast majority did not. It is also worth noting that in Korea, while the warriors commanded the first year’s bitter fighting, the Army’s legion of clerks, dancers, and prancers only volunteered their services to the effort after the war settled down, when it was much harder to screw up or get hurt and there was plenty of time for empire building.)

Our rifle units, which were turning over every ninety days, were ragtag and shamefully inefficient. Young draftees were running squads. Company commanders were kids with an average of three years’ commissioned service, an experience level shockingly low to do battle with an enemy who’d been fighting all his life. Old NCOs were few and far between, the NCO corps well on the road to being totally gutted through death and injury, or because the old noncoms simply saw the writing on the wall—many, many good NCOs were quitting after a single tour rather than

\* Hank Emerson has suggested that rather than a body count, a weapons count should have been employed in Vietnam, as such a statistic would be very difficult to fudge on the battlefield.

find themselves being sent back again and again for another Korea, another war there seemed no intention of winning. Without the NCOs, there was no muscle within the units, and with the constant rotation of company and battalion commanders (i.e., the moment they stopped looking green), there was no institutional memory either, to prevent repeated mistakes and to make things happen. The companies themselves were paper-thin. Almost all of the one hundred we came across in our travels were operating at around 50 percent of their authorized strength—at about 115 men, that was barely more than two platoons. So where were the rest? R&R, or sick, or lost in the logistics-and-support maze emanating from the base camps. \* It made no sense to me. In the peacetime Army, if a CO fell out with only 50 percent of his men for an ATT or an ORT, or even for everyday training, he'd be relieved. In the peacetime Army a CO had to account for the whereabouts of every single trooper in his command. Yet here in Vietnam, in combat, I never heard one senior officer complain, much less worry, about this problem. It was hard to believe they didn't notice; after all, it was not unlike driving a car on two tires. Nor did anyone seem to notice the pungent smell of marijuana that now permeated many a base camp. It was sold everywhere, for a nickel a joint or in a pack of twenty disguised as a sealed box of Marlboros. With three-quarters of the soldiers in Vietnam now draftees, Regular Army booze was taking a backseat to the weed, and though I didn't see it this tour, it was more than obvious that it was just a matter of time before marijuana made its way from the rear areas to the fighting line. MACV denied there was a problem and stuck their heads in the sand; in 1968, when heroin found its way into those Buddha grass "Marlboro" joints (eventually turning some 20 to 30 percent of the U.S. military in Vietnam into junkies before you could say "Far out, man"), it would be too late to turn the tide.

"Hack, all armies are inefficient," Slam counseled whenever I tried to share with him the litany of formidable woes our tour had uncovered for me. "Why, at best they operate at twenty percent. Right now the VC are limping along at six percent, so no matter how screwed up Westy's army is, it's twice as well off, if not more, than the enemy. Concentrate on tactics, Hack. That's your forte. I don't give these Communists more than a year. Surprised they've held on this long."

Slam's regularly offered prognosis on the war almost invariably led to an argument between us on the subject of firepower versus the will of the

\* At any rate, only a fraction of our Army in the theater was out beating the bush. The "tooth to tail" ratio of fighters to supporters was thought to be as low as 1:10, with a preponderance of the supporters working at the huge administration setups at Long Binh, Nha Trang, and in the Saigon area as typists, truck drivers, and the like.

people and guerrilla versus conventional war. At first I thought I'd win such a debate hands down. Slam knew next to nothing of the history of the Vietnam conflict, having never read Bernard Fall or General Giap, or even Jules Roy's recently translated *The Battle of Dien Bien Phu*. But even when I could prove that the operations he and I had examined were chillingly similar to those of the French—change the name from Paul Revere IV to Operation Lorraine, replace “helicopter cav squadrons” with “mobile groups” and “All the way, sir,” with “*Bien, mon commandant*” and one couldn't tell the difference except that the Americans were losing on an infinitely larger scale—Slam's routine and obstinate response was that war was war and I didn't understand it.

*Okay*, I said to myself in early discussions on the subject. Unlike Slam I had not participated in or written about two World Wars and two land wars in Asia (which was one of Marshall's most compelling and frequently voiced claims to credibility). And Slam was right, there was no question that the pounding our forces were administering was, day by day, sapping the enemy's strength. But one thing I knew was soldiers, and while I, too, could see the enemy getting physically weaker, I also saw his will growing stronger. Throughout the trip, on those days Slam holed up in his VIP quarters to bang out his newspaper column (Dateline: “Somewhere in the Central Highlands”) or flew to Saigon to do his television and radio tapings, I tried to go to the POW compounds and talk to some of the prisoners. I always told them I was just a historian trying to understand how both sides waged the war, and when they realized I didn't care what unit they were from and I wasn't there to get any secrets, from commanders to the lowest ranks they became openly friendly and helpful.

I learned plenty, and by the time the tour with Slam was over I had a damn good idea of what our North Vietnamese and VC enemy did and how he thought, both on the battlefield and off. I came away convinced that though our opponent wasn't invincible, his ability to endure was. He had the will, he had the numbers, the Eastern bloc kept him moderately well supplied, to date he controlled the hearts and minds of the people, and he knew he had time on his side. It had taken him a thousand years to kick out the Chinese, and less than one hundred to get rid of the French. What did it matter how long for the Americans, who actually made things easier by repeating the mistakes of the French? When I asked how long they were prepared to fight, almost every prisoner, from the uneducated, simple farm boys to the better-versed officers, said ten to fifteen to twenty years. They were going to win, they said, and they were prepared to stay in South Vietnam as long as necessary to do so. “Are you?” one asked.

I told Slam all this, and point for point invariably won every debate we

had, or would have won had Slam not always launched into his "war is war" discussion ender. Strangely enough, I had a gnawing feeling he actually agreed with me much of the time, that he was as aware as I that we were sinking deeper and deeper into a quagmire. But he refused to add up the facts, or at the very least wouldn't let the facts get in the way of his prejudgment of the situation. Meanwhile, body bags were filling with American youths at a rate of two hundred to four hundred a week, and through it all there were the infantry troopers, who clung to the belief that somehow in all this madness someone, somewhere, had to know what he was doing.

After Project Delta, we packed our bags for Saigon for the last time. Slam insisted we stay at the Oriental Hotel, a sleazy flophouse in the fish-stall area of the city where no Westerner in his right mind stayed. The place was located in a narrow alleyway not even wide enough for a jeep. Our cramped, stifling room (awash with Saigon's big-city sewer smell, the result of longtime uncollected garbage left to ripen in an unrelenting sun) was on street level, and Viets were always crowding around the window, peering in at Slam's fatigue cap, which he had the habit of "posing" in plain view when not in use. I'd shudder every time someone pointed at the huge star and joined in the chorus of "*Dai-Tuong! Dai-Tuong!*" ("General! General!"). Half the onlookers were VC, and a general (even a private-citizen-pretend-general like Slam) would be a great prize. I took to throwing a towel over that fatigue cap, wearing civilian gear, and spending every spare moment with John Westmoreland at his house or at the New York Bar. The few nights I had to stay at the Oriental, I slept with one eye open and pistol at the ready. Meanwhile, the Tet of '67 celebrations had begun, ushering out the Year of the Horse and ushering in the Year of the Goat. A year later it would come as little surprise to me how easily the Viet Cong's Tet Offensive got under way. As Slam and I walked through the city one afternoon, dodging huge, uncontrollable crowds and frequently screaming at each other to be heard over the din of wall-to-wall exploding firecrackers, we even talked about how simple it would be for the VC to use the noise and confusion of Tet to launch a great attack. "They're bound to use this cover sometime," Slam remarked. I agreed and hoped it wouldn't be that evening as I asked permission to spend another night at Westy's.

It was just madness to stay in the back streets of Saigon, especially at that time. By regulation, as a civilian Slam couldn't stay in MACV quarters, but there were two lovely, secure hotels to choose from in the city, the Caravelle and the Continental Palace. Though Slam would later write that we stayed at the "native" Oriental because "we liked the people," the real reason was

a bit less convivial: Slam was incredibly cheap when the Army was not picking up the tab, and besides, the high-priced Caravelle and Continental were off limits because (as Slam would say derisively) "that's where the press stays."<sup>3</sup>

Slam hated the press, of which he did not feel a part despite the fact that he made most of his money the same way "they" did. With few exceptions, he thought they were freeloaders on the system, spending their time in Vietnam doing virtually everything *but* covering battles in the field. It galled him that the slant of many of the young journalists' work appeared "antiwar" (leading him to brand such men as David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan "Commies," and truly believe they were), or dealt with the politics rather than the strictly military aspects of the conflict. He simply could not see that each was inextricably intertwined with the other, any more than he saw any incongruity between his public disparagement of so many of his fellow media men and women as cowards and cynics and his own privileged position as guru to the generals. I could no more have imagined, for example, Slam Marshall on the ground in a firefight as any number of the other journalists were on a regular basis than I could any of those other journalists standing in a generals' mess saying (as Slam would, and often did, in an offhand, cheerful way), "I always think better with a bourbon at hand," and a horse handler immediately being dispatched to fill his glass and charge his battery.<sup>4</sup>

The night after our obligatory exit briefing with the USARV staff, Slam and I stayed at the Oriental Hotel and roared through some bourbon ourselves. The briefing had gone well for Slam but not so well for me. My view, that we desperately, *immediately*, needed to find a new strategy for the war because we were losing and losing fast, was not well received. Fortunately, Slam was there to lift the spirits of the entire top-brass audience with his opposing "we got 'em on the ropes" assessment; this view was accepted unquestioningly for the reason (I could only guess) that most of these guys didn't have a clue as to what the war was all about in the first place, so were more than happy to shuffle their staff papers, endorse exaggerated after-action reports, and accept good General Marshall's assessment that it was going just fine. Mercifully, I was not invited to Slam's exit dinner with General Westmoreland. The following evening, however, as the bourbon took hold, I took the mellow opportunity to try to tell Slam for the millionth time that the summing-up he invariably gave to the top brass bore no relation to the facts we'd gleaned over the last few months and he knew it.

But Slam was unconcerned and flying high. As the evening continued and the bottle emptied, he just became more and more expansive, talking



about the success of our trip as if we'd just made a major contribution toward winning the war. "A million words, Hack!" he exclaimed, patting the stack of notebooks at his side (which he never let out of his sight), in which were recorded all the after-action interviews from all the schools. "And every one of them is gold. I've got eight solid books here," he continued. "How's *that* for an insurance policy for Cate and the kids?" Cate was Slam's wife and, he often said, the power behind him. She was much younger than her husband, and Slam was always very concerned about providing for her beyond the grave. "I'll write them in advance," he said now, "and she can publish them one at a time when I'm gone."

Personally, at that point my thoughts were of the thousands of young infantrymen who would be gone long before Slam if somebody didn't pick up the overall game in the ground war. I'd kept my own notebook during the trip, in which I'd kept an ongoing list of my observations of our Army's repeated tactical failings as well as the details of my discussions with over one hundred POWs. I felt there was a book there, too—a handy-dandy little guide of do's and don'ts on how to fight the bad guys—that could be a significant contribution to the fighting men. But Slam didn't want to do it. His eyes flashed dollar signs only when he talked of his own eight potential *Pork Chop Hills*. And considering that the Army had thousands of manuals and dozens of schools, it really was crazy that a book such as I was proposing was needed. But in my view it was urgent, and I badgered Slam nonstop until he changed his mind. I started to write the minute he gave me his halfhearted okay. But pretty quickly he, too, got into the spirit of it, and before we left Vietnam, the first draft of the *Vietnam Primer* was done.

The night before we headed home, the General and I went to the Rex Hotel for dinner. We sat under the stars at the rooftop bistro, perfectly situated to drink, eat, and watch the war. Artillery was popping in what was left of the jungles around Saigon. Operation Cedar Falls, which had replaced Attleboro as the largest operation of the war so far, was just winding up its Sisyphean mission of destroying the Iron Triangle and all other VC redoubts in the area. (The Iron Triangle would prove no more "no more" after Cedar Falls than it had been when Butch Williamson proclaimed it so more than a year before; what had "once consisted of fifty square kilometers of the unknown," he'd said back then, "has now been destroyed . . . one more enemy bulwark [psychological and physical] has been completely marked off the situation map.")<sup>5</sup>

As I watched Puff the Magic Dragon lighting the sky with flares and whining over distant contact areas, I thought of the "Saigon cowboy" Pat Graves met here once on leave from his 1/327 platoon. Saigon cowboys were a breed of rear-echelon soldiers so called for their latest and greatest,

dressed-to-the-hilt warrior look that they took no closer to the combat zone than absolutely necessary. One of these guys sat down with Graves and fellow platoon leader Chuck Olyphant and after a time reverently drew their attention to the brightness of the flares in the Saigon night sky. The Above the Rest boys looked at each other and then at him in disbelief—the “flares” under observation were in fact neon lights on the building across the street.

Just then the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office (JUSPAO) lieutenant commander who'd been assigned as Slam's Saigon contact approached our table. With him was a VIP he wanted the General to meet. It was Bernard Fall, the greatest writer on the Indochina war, and through his books, one of my greatest teachers. A native of France, Fall had lived the history of his country's Indochina conflict, a history many Americans, including Slam Marshall, chose to ignore. Unlike Slam, who flew from CP to CP in his own personal chopper, ate off china plates, and gathered his information and gained his “expertise” second- and thirdhand at secured base camps after the firing was over, ever since 1953 Fall had strapped on his pack, carried his rations, and tagged along with combat soldiers on both sides of the conflict to understand the war. He had also spoken with many top leaders on both sides, including Giap and Ho. Himself a guerrilla with the French underground at the age of sixteen, Fall knew insurgent and counterinsurgent warfare inside out, yet his views that the Americans were going about the problem much as the French had—which was to say “all wrong”—were wholly unwelcome to the Johnson Administration and, it would seem, to the top Pentagon brass as well.

Fall believed that, like the French, we could not win the war. Oh, we could win it *militarily*, he said when he'd sat down at Slam's and my table for an exchange of ideas, and we *would* win it that way—like Slam, Fall was convinced that our enormous firepower and stunning mobility, two things the French didn't have, would prove decisive.\* But, he continued, a military victory was somewhat irrelevant, because Vietnam was first and foremost a political war, which the Americans, just like the French, did not understand. The Americans would never win the war politically, so they would never win the war.

Marshall's position was his usual “war is war” and we were winning this one. “I don't know anything about the politics,” he said, all he knew was Vietnam was a just war; in the short term, we would save the Vietnamese from the Communists, and in so doing would, in the long term, stop worldwide Communist aggression.

\* According to Fall, less bomb power was brought to bear in the fifty-six-day battle of Dien Bien Phu than in any single day during the present U.S. involvement. One U.S. mission, he said, employed more aircraft than the French had possessed in all of Indochina throughout their entire involvement there.<sup>6</sup>

In the course of the evening, Fall gave Slam a quiet education on the Vietnamese—their culture, their history, their unflagging determination since before the Common Era to rid their country of outside invaders. Bombing the enemy back to the Stone Age, he said, was not the answer to the problem the Communists represented. Social reform was: offer the Vietnamese a better life and watch them come over to our side.

Late in the night Slam went back to the Oriental to sack out. I'd said very little throughout the evening, but now Fall and I talked for another hour or so. He told me he was going up to I Corps next, to join the U.S. Marines who were operating on the Street Without Joy.

"Can I tell you something?" I said. "I've been an infantryman most of my life, and one thing I know is you can only go tagging along with squads for so long before you get killed. It's like rolling the dice, Bernard," I continued, and was stunned to hear myself almost pleading, "you can make so many passes, but eventually you've got to crap out. You'll buy the farm if you keep on going out on patrols. You're going to have to find another way to look at the war."

"You tell me how one can understand the war without dealing with the people," Fall challenged me, "without seeing how they are fighting. Without seeing the results."

He was right, of course. There was no other way.

Two weeks later, Bernard Fall was walking along the street he'd made famous, the Street Without Joy, with a U.S. Marine Corps patrol. He was talking into his tape recorder, reporting the war. ". . . shadows are lengthening and we've reached one of our phase lines after the firefight," he was saying, "and it smells bad—meaning it's a little suspicious. . . . Could be an amb. . . ." Fall's monologue was interrupted by an exploding booby trap, and in that instant he was dead.<sup>7</sup>

Bernard Fall's death at the age of forty was undoubtedly one of the great tragedies of the tragic war in Vietnam. Although persona non grata among the military and top Washington political men who were actually running the war (those, that is, who turned to Slam Marshall for the good news), at the time of his death Fall had a large and growing following. Through his books he was awakening people all across America, not only members of the intellectual community but many a perceptive soul in the military and the Defense and State departments as well. Perhaps, had he lived, he could have made a significant impression on the Nixon Administration. *If only he could have convinced Marshall*, I thought many times. Slam had the audience. Slam had Westy's and the President's ears. It didn't matter that he would have been out of his depth talking strategy. I'd come to realize Slam was out of his depth on most subjects, but he was a great Sammy Glick of

all things military and everyone still listened to him. But Slam was not convinced. He couldn't be—the war itself was his insurance policy for Cate and his kids. To tell the President, the military, and the American people that it had to stop would have been biting the hand that fed him, and it was not something Slam was about to do.

So our boys went on fighting, Slam went on writing, and one by one the predictions of Bernard Fall—based not on some superhuman prescience, but on being there, studying, and caring—became realities. And when the observations he made and desperately tried to convey from 1953 onward became impossible for the American powers that be to ignore (and much later, when the war was long over), it was Fall's widow, Dorothy, who would time and again receive the shamefaced apologies of men who'd refused to listen.

Slam paid his hotel bill in green—American dollars—and got a good rate. This practice was forbidden by MACV currency regulations, but anyone who'd been in Vietnam long (or for that matter, in almost any inflation-ridden country) did it. "I learned this trick in Spain when I was covering the civil war," Slam said unabashedly of his exchange as he pocketed his wallet and we headed for Tan Son Nhut airport and home.

We stopped in Hawaii, where we were debriefed by the U.S. Army, Pacific (USARPAC) staff. After the USARV briefing, I'd narrowed my wide-ranging concerns to three suggestions for improving our combat efficiency in the war; though I doubted I could make an impact, I shared them with these USARPAC people now: that a unit-replacement rotation policy be instituted, rather than the current individual one; that the one-year rotation policy apply to combat troops only, while the clerks and officers of the rank of major and above would have a two-year tour (and only receive combat pay if they earned it); and, most important, that a training school specifically for battalion commanders be formed pronto, to get these critical leaders read into the nature of the war and the proven U.S. and enemy tactics. Unfortunately, as had been the case at USARV, my views were shrugged off as alarmist by these guys who were even more out of touch with the war than the boys in Saigon, and Slam did nothing to change their minds.

For me, the weather improved considerably when we got back to Washington. General Johnson not only approved our idea for the *Vietnam Primer* and extended my TDY with Slam for another month so we could finish writing it, but he also took a very personal interest in the project: "The liaison on this book is between you and me, Hackworth, so come up anytime." The two of us went over the manuscript together word for word

in the next weeks, and although the final product bore the disclaimer that Slam's and my opinions did not necessarily reflect official DA positions, I really felt Harold K. Johnson *did* agree on almost every point therein. The only areas he really objected to in the original draft were our harsh discussions of the M-16 and of body count. In both cases Johnson felt we got carried away, that the M-16 was an emotional issue with me (which it was, and the results of our interviews in Vietnam had only reinforced my hatred of the weapon) and that body count was too sensitive an issue in itself to be the subject of my literary wrath. He personally rewrote part of the M-16 section, and though he kind of took the teeth out of the body-count discussion, he didn't change the intent.

But most importantly, the Chief of Staff pushed the *Vietnam Primer* from the word go. The book was basically a "lessons learned," covering the areas of our own and the enemy's security, communications, movement, weapons, intelligence, and training, as well as a substantial chapter devoted to enemy ruses, decoys, and ambushes. Johnson himself wrote the foreword, and the book's publication became a top priority. When I took it to the Adjutant General with a simple "General Johnson asked me to come by and get this printed right away," almost before I knew it there were a million copies being distributed all around the world. Meanwhile, Slam insisted the *Primer*, which was also produced in Thai, Viet, and Korean, be classified "For Official Use Only," which prompted another mini battle between us. "If we classify it, then soldiers won't be able to carry it into battle," I said.

"Don't worry, Hack, it'll get around."

"But what's there to classify in there? There is nothing secret in the whole damn thing. It's enemy tactics. Don't you think the enemy knows what their tactics are?"

"Hack," Slam replied patiently, "the reason I want it classified is so it will not be in the public domain. That way later on you and I can rewrite it and publish it commercially." For Slam, it was just another way to make a buck.

Slam Marshall would remain an enigma to me throughout our relationship and for many years beyond. He was a mean, power-rapt little man who threw his weight around shamelessly—how often I saw him in Vietnam offhandedly promising hungry, enraptured colonels and generals alike a mention "in the daily dispatch" (Slam's syndicated column) or in his next conversation with "Johnny" or "Westy"—but who also had the capacity to be sincere and generous and kind. He'd once told me the secret of his success was his philosophy of "do one thing well." ("Long ago, I decided to specialize in the infantry squad and platoon in battle," he said, "so while most of the other fellows were spreading themselves too thin grappling with the big picture, I became the Army's expert. . . .") Yet he had long since

abandoned that tack and instead had actually come to believe he knew almost everything about everything. And incredibly, he was able to convince a lot of people who counted that he really did. (On the other hand, there were those like Captain Eggleston, my TRUST company commander, now a lieutenant colonel, whose one and only encounter with Marshall, at a lecture at Fort Benning, had immediately conjured up for him one of his father's old sayings, "If you could buy him for what he's worth and sell him for what he thinks he's worth, you could retire.")

Marshall could be a braggart of the first order ("I could write on toilet paper with a crayon and sell it" was a routine boast), but his favorite claim to fame was at first the most puzzling to me, and years later, the most significant in terms of unraveling the hustler and the phony that he was, and how he was nonetheless able to make such a mark on the U.S. Army. Slam regularly brought up the fact that the Army had made him a general despite his never having attended even one military school, and that he was the only general in the Army to have this distinction. He neglected to say (and never would have, had I not followed it up out of sheer curiosity) that he'd gotten his star *not* in the Regular Army, but in the Reserve. Meanwhile, with no reason not to believe him, I accepted Slam's stories of World War I, his experiences as an infantryman in all the major campaigns, his battlefield commission to become the youngest second lieutenant in the U.S. Army during the war, the romantic tale he spun of Armistice Day, when he saw in the end of the war sharing his canteen with his brigade commander in the trenches. With no reason not to believe him, I accepted Slam's tales of World War II, too, his participation in the fighting in the Pacific as well as his service in Europe, which had him in the front line of the Normandy invasion. It would be many, many years, years in which Slam repeated the stories endlessly, in which his reputation was only further bolstered as one or the other appeared in everything from *Current Biography* (1953) to the obituaries upon his death in 1977, and in his autobiography published two years later, before I would discover that it was all a lie.

Slam had been an enlisted man with the 315th Engineers (90th Inf Div) during WW I, and spent his time not fighting as an infantryman but repairing French roads until just before the war's end. He had *not* been battlefield commissioned, and he wasn't anywhere near the trenches on 11 November 1918, being instead at the Army's France-based Officer Candidate School (then called the Infantry Candidate School). The self-proclaimed youngest lieutenant in World War I, who in fact never served as an officer in a TOE outfit—Reserve or Regular—in any capacity, ever, was not commissioned until April 1919, long after the last angry shots were fired. According to his service record, Slam saw no infantry combat in WW

II either (though he was awarded the CIB for the Marshall Islands campaign while serving on the DA staff), and far from being on the ground from the earliest hours of the 6 June 1944 Normandy invasion, Slam didn't even arrive in the European Theater until July, and then it was as a staff officer/historian reconstructing the operation. And while Slam would speak with pride of being the only American soldier to serve in all four of America's great wars in the twentieth century, it was a claim more than a little deceptive: his Korean War experience covered exactly three months (December '50–February '51), when he was recalled from the Reserves to active duty as a historian/"Operations Analyst" for the Eighth Army (a stint for his country that produced *The River and the Gauntlet* for himself), and his "service" in Vietnam was undertaken as a six-year retired Reserve general and a forty-year experienced journalist (Slam's job when he wasn't wearing khaki) looking for a story on the Army's tab.

A historian as careless with his own history as Slam Marshall was could hardly be a careful historian, and Marshall proved the rule. Veterans of many of the actions he "documented" in his books have complained bitterly over the years of his inaccuracy or blatant bias. For the lay audience, however, his "gift" was that what he lacked in accuracy in his books with regard to names of people, places, and units (not to mention events) he made up for by the immediacy he brought to the stories. He always wrote as if he were on the scene—jumping out of the plane, storming the beach, assaulting the hill. It was a conscious effort on his part to give the audience the impression he was there. Sometimes he wrote that he actually *was* there, conferring with and giving advice to the generals, or virtually sharing a foxhole with the troops. He didn't seem to care that what he wrote was totally inaccurate and easily disproved. He seemed to have relied (and successfully so) on the notion that no one would ever dare to correct him, to say, "No, General Marshall, you weren't there during the mortar attack," or "No, General, the enemy was not surrounding us."

The thing was that Slam wanted with all his heart to be a real general. But in fact, he was more like the Howard Cosell of combat: he'd never commanded troops either on active duty or in the Reserve, but he wanted to command great *armies*. He wanted to be like the other Marshall, George Catlett, for whom he took great delight in being mistaken (and frequently was, which no doubt accounted for more than a little of the blind respect accorded him, in that he never bothered to correct an awestruck fan), and his books reflected this. "... Having wintered with our line forces and Green Berets in the forward areas..." he would manfully encapsulate our tour together in his autobiography, and perhaps not even consider the dishonesty of the statement.<sup>8</sup> The truth was, in the air-conditioned,

five-star-dining, one-day-laundry luxury we lived in (or in the oh-so-secure base camps to the farthest rear of the forward areas where we did many interviews and not once, *not once*, came under fire), the only serious danger we faced was a hangover from one too many martinis in the generals' mess. But with Slam, the voyeur warrior, the truth never got in the way of a good story.

Slam Marshall was very good to me. Until the day came four years later when he had to choose between the Army (his meal ticket) and me as a soldier and a friend, he went out of his way to be a help to my career. As a civilian, he couldn't give me an ER for our tour together, but he wrote a glowing letter to go into my record about the excellence of our relationship and my contribution to the mission. He was still concerned, however, about the four-month "hole" in my record, so far as my efficiency reports were concerned, and suggested to General Johnson that *he* rate me for the lost period. Light colonels do not get rated by the Chief of Staff of the Army, but I did, a highly complimentary report (though like everyone else, Johnson cut me on tact) that secured the future of my Army career and virtually guaranteed me a star. When Marshall did stuff like that I always felt a twinge of conscience that bordered on extreme guilt—there I was, dismissing him as a phony when he was being his most magnanimous. I felt a similar ambivalence when I considered the incredible opportunities being Slam's favored son afforded me, things like sitting down for a drink with Moshe Dayan or Bernard Fall, or such ticket-punching necessities as making myself known among the general-officer ranks, for which Slam expected nothing in return.

With it all, though, the truth was that Slam was a fallen and irrevocably smashed idol in my eyes. He knew I'd grown away from him throughout our time together, but it was not something to discuss: I cherished my career too much to risk getting on his bad side, and I was opportunistic enough to see the value of staying on the good side. But there must have been many like me, whose silence in the face of Slam's power only added to it and gave credence to his dubious expertise, who allowed him to have an absurd amount of influence, which fed his ego and lined his purse, and for years and years did an incalculable, horrific disservice to the Army (the thing he professed to love above all), not to mention to the nation and to the men who fought and died in Vietnam. When General Johnson had warned me, "Take care with Slam. . . . He is the Army's powerful friend, but he can be a treacherous enemy," I had not understood what he meant. But when I finally did, I understood, too, that the Chief of Staff had gotten it backwards. The reality was that Slam Marshall was the Army's powerful *enemy*, because he was its most treacherous friend. And if he were alive today, perhaps even



more than the Vietnam-era generals who determinedly maintain we won the war we lost in their hands, Slam Marshall would have plenty to answer for.

Soon I was back to work at the Pentagon and Slam was home in Birmingham, Michigan, writing *LZ Bird*, *Ambush*, *West to Cambodia*, and *The Fields of Bamboo*, the four books that ultimately came out of our trip. None proved to be the next *Pork Chop Hill* Slam had been hoping for to cash in on the film rights; for that matter, none was even particularly well received by the critics or the public. The General did stop by my new Pentagon office (General Johnson had gotten me released from my old job in the bowels of the building and into a new one where I could actually be of some use, in the Directorate of Individual Training) to tell me he'd organized half the *LZ Bird* royalties to come to me. I didn't understand his motive, and so refused the offer; Slam knew how I felt when we'd returned to the 1st Cav to study the Bird operation, and that I hadn't done one thing toward the writing of that book.

The program we went to Vietnam to teach was high priority until no one was looking anymore. Slam himself didn't give it a second thought; I wrote an article on the technique that appeared in *Army* magazine a few months after we got back, but when I returned to Vietnam twenty-three months later, I didn't see the system being used at all at the bayonet level. For me, the value of the whole experience was digested in the *Vietnam Primer*. While the book did center around what we had seen, in it as well were a lot of *hunches* I'd developed throughout the journey on how to fight more successfully in Vietnam, perhaps even to win (at least militarily), by beating the little bastards at their own game. And while it would be a long wait until I had the opportunity to try those hunches out, at least—despite what Slam so obstinately had to say—it wasn't as if the war was going away.

find out what all the people's hollering was about. It was simpler to set up the mechanism to keep them in line, or put them in cages until they calmed down or came around.

As tied as I was to my Pentagon job, I still got out among the civilian population a lot during those turbulent days, not just in Washington (where people expressed their feelings about the war outside the White House gates with the chant of "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many have you killed today?"), but all over the country. Slam Marshall's *Battles in the Monsoon* had been published, and because Slam had written glowingly about me and my battalion during the Dak To fight (despite, incredibly, identifying us as the 2d Battalion, 327 rather than the 1st), I became kind of an instant celebrity. Before long I was called upon to join the Chief of Information's (CINFO) Distinguished Speakers team, a stable of well-decorated studs who, on request, had to speak/sell the war to whomever CINFO targeted. At first I did preaching-to-the-choir VFW and American Legion functions, Rotary and Lions clubs, and universities in the Washington, D.C., area. Later I was appointed the Department of Defense (DoD) representative to a presidential briefing team whose job was to sell the war through a lecture tour of major U.S. universities, countering in the process, it was hoped, the effects of the anti-Vietnam movement on the campuses.

The other speakers on the presidential team were from the Agency for International Development (AID) and the State Department. Our presentation was a slick dog and pony show designed to convince our listeners that America's purpose in Vietnam was pure, and that our effort there would bring peace and democracy to that war-savaged land. Most of our audiences were already supporters, but we generally ran into some organized student protest at each assembly, too. There was always a lot of heckling, but after a while my cospeakers and I each developed perfect put-downs that set the majority of our audiences cheering while the protestors were hustled out or meekly disappeared within the crowd. All in all, the tour was tremendously successful, and the only problem for me was the more I did the rounds with it, the more I knew what we were saying was bullshit.

My AID and State Department counterparts didn't believe what we were saying either, but it didn't seem to bother them as much. My problem was that by this time I was completely obsessed with the war—how we got into it and the mess we were making of it—and having given up trying to deceive myself, I couldn't stand the fact that I was deceiving the American people. Always before I'd studied the war from a military angle. For the CINFO job I'd had to read other things—the terms of the French cease-fire, for example. And for the first time I discovered that *we*, not the North Vietnamese, had violated the terms of that agreement; that *we* had refused

individual. They are too: *abrasive*, opinionated, undiplomatic, nonconformist, and effective.

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The capable combat leader has traits which are inconsistent with today's criteria for high-level positions. As a result, the men who know how to win in battle, with rare exception, just don't get ahead. Instead the second stringers who talk a good game in the shower room and are adroit at fixing the blame on others, succeed.

The system desperately needs an enema. Better yet, it requires a violent purge. . . . This purge will have to be initiated from outside the Army because the "system" is poured in concrete and it will take 10 to 20 years to weed out the "ticket punchers" and to reorient the policy makers.

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The system doesn't lend itself to fresh ideas. A new idea means waves. Waves mean causing people to be flushed out of their comfortable ruts. I have recommended numerous projects which could have led to a better trained Army, but most of my recommendations have not been acted upon even though all hands agree that they were damned good. So I found myself refusing to initiate anything and thus the process of vegetation started setting in.

To succeed in today's Army one must be quick on his feet and dazzle all with shifty footwork. To be a winner you cannot rock the boat and you must be willing to change your positions to accommodate the views of your "superiors." I found my head starting to nod in agreement though I knew down deep inside that I was in complete disagreement! My growing Pavlovian tendencies scared me to my roots!

Aside from word that the new Chief was "not happy" with what I had to say, I received no feedback on my contribution to his study. Still, there was always something happening to reinforce the views I'd expressed therein. Just one was the DoD briefing I attended in which Dr. Herman Kahn pontificated about the consequences of the Tet Offensive. Kahn, one of the gurus of American nuclear policy, felt he was an expert on Vietnam because, as he explained, he had visited the country every year since the early fifties. In fact this made him just another tourist, but the Defense guys and military men nonetheless gushed over everything he said. The military men were particularly enthusiastic, perhaps because, having been so conditioned by their own can-doism not to *think*, they were mesmerized by people who used their brains for a living. In the old days I may have been, too, but being with Slam had taught me well. Kahn, a huge-bellied intellectual, looked like a sloppy bohemian rabbi even as he acted as smooth and glib as Billy Graham. He didn't strike me as being into learning, though: he was into power, the way Slam was into power, power that you

could almost feel when you were with men who knew they'd arrived. I'd felt it with Slam, and I felt it whenever I traveled with a three- or four-star to visit one of my branch schools. As tagalong notetaker and horse handler I was always kind of in the back of the bus, but being close to that power was still some rush—from private planes onto waiting choppers, flags snapping, bands playing, and precise schedules of honor guards, inspections, and receptions. It wasn't hard to see why someone would want to be a general.

Or an intellectual. Kahn, his power masquerading as knowledge, was of the opinion that Tet was the beginning of the end for the Communists, that even if the war raged on into the eighties, it would be bandito stuff that would ultimately fade away. He went on to propose that the U.S. build a network of "freeway canals" in the Mekong Delta to further economic development in that rich rice region, but his proposition on how to secure the scheme (high-speed patrol boats) was about as realistic and sensible as the multimillion-dollar electronic fence McNamara wanted to build across the DMZ. ("Do something—anything—to win the war," McNamara and LBJ had tasked Lieutenant General Alfred Starbird, director of the Defense Communications Agency and Planning Group in mid-'66, and an electronic Maginot Line was the fundamentally flawed result of this straw-grasping exercise. A barrier field of sensors could be only as effective as the men on the ground who protected and defended it; an electronic fence would have required troops just to keep it safe from enemy hands, and even then the NVA could have just gone around it, using their well-traveled Laotian infiltration routes.) Kahn seemed to be one of the few who persisted, after Tet, with a confident, rosy view of the war effort. Why no one, myself included, challenged his blind-eyed opinions, his qualifications to express same, or his harebrained ideas, I'd never know.

Research and Development was full of civilian would-be Kahn types who made a living dreaming up Buck Rogers wonder gear (for which no scenario existed to justify its use) or Buck Rogers scenarios (to give themselves something to design wonder gear for). R&D was so remote from the user level that it was almost as if the soldier in the field was considered a pesky, somewhat irrelevant nuisance who, as much as possible, must not be allowed to interfere with the Grand Plan. "It doesn't take a year-long study to determine the 40-mm grenade launcher attached to the M-16 as an unsuccessful gimmick," wrote Lieutenant Colonel Robert Sunell in the same sixteen-officer study of problems facing the Army that I participated in, "yet we all went through the agony of installing it. I often wonder who is dictating what to whom. The Army to industry or reverse order." In the same study Major Fredric Brown, a tanker like Sunell, wrote of mine detectors in the world of R&D with the same passion I had for a simple

grenade pouch: "We seem overly taken with exotic gadgets . . . while my reaction is certainly emotional, it seems to me if we can go to the moon we can develop a lightweight, effective density mine detector." Brown also wrote of the oversophistication of equipment in terms that would become familiar in the years that followed, as the American people got less and less bang while U.S. defense contractors got more and more bucks. "I have a feeling that everybody has written down everything that he believes [a piece of equipment] should be able to do, then all requirements are totaled. The result is a very expensive, highly complex, long lead-time weapons system which the average soldier has great difficulty in mastering."

The military-industrial complex was alive and kicking and growing stronger by the day. Industry was dictating to the Army, but more than ever that "industry" was composed of ex-military men who one would have thought would know better, or at least care more about the service they had left behind. As of March 1969, 2,072 officers of the rank of colonel or navy captain and above were working for the ninety-five top military contractors, a number that had nearly trebled in the ten years since Senator Paul Douglas' study identified 721 retired military officers working in the top eighty-eight defense industries.<sup>16</sup>

In May '68, Slam Marshall rang me to ask if I'd go back with him to Vietnam—Westy wanted him to have another look at the war. I impulsively said yes, but as we talked I realized the purpose of the trip was actually to whitewash the effects of the Tet Offensive through Slam's considerable media power. One of the reasons I'd jumped at the invitation in the first place was that I'd had it with running around the U.S. selling the war on those speaking tours, and I'd be damned if I was going to go back to Vietnam only to continue the charade. So I told him I'd have to think about it, and then that I'd changed my mind. Slam was shocked. He wouldn't take no for an answer, and I finally had to arrange with my new boss, Colonel Kenneth Buell, to take a short leave just to get away from the constantly ringing phone. I went to Tim Grattan's in Seattle, but even there Slam or his wife, Cate, called every day, urgently looking for me. Darlene or Tim would always say I was "out fishing," until the Marshalls finally got the message. I didn't know whether I'd screwed myself by not giving in to Slam's desire, but I did know I was damn relieved when the phone fell silent.

I did not mourn the lost opportunity to go back to Vietnam, because I knew it was just a matter of time until I went anyway. The previous December, Major General Julian Ewell, an old 101 man from Bastogne (one of the many Slam said he "made" with his book *Night Drop*), had been assigned command of the 9th Division by his fellow "All the Way" Airborne

club member William Childs Westmoreland. Ewell had asked Hank Emerson to be one of his three brigade commanders, and in turn Emerson had suggested to Ewell that I be brought on as one of Hank's battalion COs. Ewell had agreed, and naturally so had I.

But I'd needed General Zais's approval as well, as I was nowhere near the end of my DIT tour, and Zais had invested enough time in me to give him every reason not to let me go. Both Ewell and Emerson came along when I went to plead my case. Thankfully, General Zais was completely understanding. Putting the interests of the troops above those of the bureaucracy of which he was a part (a rare instance at the Pentagon, I thought), he told me on the spot, in front of Ewell and Emerson, that I could go.

I was fully appreciative of the sacrifice Zais was willing to make on my behalf. I was walking on air, and even the response of my career branch to the news ("You don't want to go back. You've commanded your battalion there. If you go back and get into a donnybrook you'll ruin your chances for a star. What you need is Joint Staff duty.") couldn't dampen my excitement about going back to the cutting edge. The career managers, those number-one string pullers when it came to directing your life, had no appreciation of the individual as they worked out the same equation again and again to prepare everyone to be a future Chief of Staff. Their pat response to my own news was the final straw for me; I said to myself, *Screw their advice*, and paid no attention to them ever again.

Months passed. Ewell went over to Vietnam, Hank went over, and then so did Slam Marshall. Then, when I was just beginning to think about putting my house on the market (*Guess what, Patty, I'm going back to Vietnam, so I'll see you around . . .*), General Zais called me to his office. "Hack, goddamn, would you believe this! Westy just called—he's giving me the 101st!" The prize in the Army was to command the 101st Airborne Division, and there Zais had been, worrying whether he'd get a division at all. "So now we've got to get the team together," he continued. "You're going to be my G-3." It was probably the most important lieutenant colonel's spot in a division.

"I'm not going to be your G-3, General Zais. I've got a battalion in the 9th, remember? You told General Ewell in this very office you'd let me go."

"Fuck Ewell!" Zais exploded. "He's got his fair share of studs. I'm going to get some studs, too."

"You gave him your word, sir!"

"I've changed my mind. The situation's different now. Ewell's got the best guys there are. He's practically cleaned out the whole Army!" (Which he had.)

I came to a rigid attention. "Fine, sir," I said.

"You don't have to stand at attention, Hack," Zais burred. "Come on, let's start lining up the team!"

"I'm not going, sir," I said.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm quitting, General Zais. If there's no trust in the Army, if you can't trust a general to keep his word after he's given it to you, and after he's given it to another general—as you did, General Zais, to General Ewell right here in this office—then I'm checking out of the net. It's all over."

"Oh, Hack, forget it," Zais said.

"No way, sir," I replied, and meant it from the bottom of my heart.

I put in the paperwork. I had more than twenty years in and, after all, had it not been for Vietnam I'd intended to get out in '68 anyway. But I didn't want to get out. After months and months of ruminating on the issue, at the eleventh hour I knew it was true—I was fed up with the system and the war but I still loved the Army. And besides, I didn't know what the hell I'd do in civilian life. I'd quit on impulse. I had no training. I had no prospects. It was 1953 all over again, and for the first time in a long time I was damn scared.

And then Slam called. Just back from Vietnam he'd heard through the grapevine that I was getting out, and he wanted to know what I was going to do. The million-dollar question. "I don't know," I said.

"Well, come work for me," he offered. "I'm getting old and tired of all this war and traveling. You can write. You know my style and technique, and you'd be the ideal person in the Army to replace me."

It was an incredible offer. And I was touched or saddened or *something*: my ambivalence was almost painful about this man who cared for me as he might a son and would have been truly proud to have me carry on his work. And Marshall was right, working for him would be the perfect job for me, and once established in my own right I wouldn't have to wear the same mantle I saw Slam wearing all too comfortably now, that of the Army's top apologist. But then again, too much water had gone under the bridge with Slam and me. We stood so far on opposite sides of the fence that I knew it would not take long before we found no common ground at all. So I had to tell him no. And I never saw or spoke with him again.

Just days before I was to be discharged, Swede Larsen, at this point CG of Sixth Army, called me from his headquarters in San Francisco. He'd heard I was quitting and urged me to change my mind. "You're a good soldier and we need good soldiers," he said.

"The die's been cast, sir."

"You've still got the suit on, haven't you?" he asked. "What would you want to do if you stayed in?"

justifying facts and figures to make sure every single point I made could be countered, on everything from the “success” of Vietnamization to the precise number of jeeps in the South Vietnamese Army.

The readers of the Chief of Staff’s “Weekly Summary” (i.e., all general officers in the U.S. Army) were told that my comments “reflect[ed] a lack of understanding about the tactics and strategy employed in RVN [Republic of Vietnam] as well as the implemented improvements being made in the Army to enhance leadership and professionalism.” While a related memo stated that Chief of Staff Westmoreland “did not intend for the Army to engage in a debate with Colonel Hackworth in the news media,” he did order that a comprehensive in-house program be developed through the Army’s Command Information Program to let Army personnel in on these purportedly implemented leadership- and professionalism-enhancing improvements. “Such a program will have the effect of countering the Hackworth statements, although not specifically designed to do so,” the memo explained.<sup>4</sup>

“The Hackworth case” generated dozens of letters, memoranda, cables, and long meetings among the top brass of the Army. No top official in the Pentagon asked or sought to determine if my comments had any substance; the main thrust of the frenzied activity was first, to discredit me, and second, to determine what action could be taken to punish me for breaking the sacred taboo and speaking outside the fold.

The in-house discrediting took the form of such things as the Chief of Staff’s “Weekly Summary” (it was easy to say I didn’t understand the tactics of the war and just ignore the *Vietnam Primer*, whose very existence belied the statement; it was easy to criticize me by saying I did not understand the strategy of the war, because what general reading that statement would admit he didn’t understand it himself?\*). My public discrediting (tit for tat) was left to the Army’s chief apologist, Slam Marshall. Though he had not spoken with or laid eyes on me in three years, Slam wrote with great authority in his syndicated newspaper column that I was battle-rattled (“When a man has been overlong in battle—and that is Hackworth . . .”), damned me with faint praise (“I found him to be fairly steady and always companionable, brilliant in occasional flashes, tending to be resentful of association with higher authority, otherwise generous in spirit . . .”) and then lied through his teeth to imply I was a coward (“One year later, we tried the same thing again—at his request—but he simply vanished.”). One reader who immediately got Slam’s number was one Helen Lord MacNiven

\* Only three years later would a survey reveal that of the Army generals who had “managed the war” in Vietnam almost 70 percent “were uncertain of its objectives.”<sup>5</sup>



of San Pedro, California. Mrs. MacNiven wrote to Slam in an open letter, "May I suggest to you, sir, that . . . your column was designed to belittle, denigrate and demean a Colonel of the United States Army who has already proven himself to be a capable, forthright and courageous man . . . [and] that your petty sniping and carpings are those of an old man who has a dirty hatchet job to do."

Chief of Staff Westmoreland was very much involved with the Hackworth case, even obsessively so. In the earliest days he was just puzzled, calling in men who knew me, like John Hayes, to ask why I'd spoken out (particularly because he'd felt sure, so he told Hayes, that I was going to be one of the next brigadier generals). According to Jack Woodmansee, who was called to his meeting with the Chief while Westy was getting his hair cut, the General felt personally betrayed by my performance, declaring that I wouldn't have done it if I were a good soldier. Woodmansee told him I'd made a great contribution to the 44th Zone, which apparently calmed the Chief down a bit. But then MACV IG began sending word back from Saigon of its Team 50 discoveries, and then Westy got mad. The Inevitable General from South Carolina, who as COMUSMACV had ordered his staff to submit doctored reports on enemy strength in Vietnam to keep the politicians on board his "victory"-bound war train (or so it was proved fifteen years later), still unsullied as Chief, was determined I be punished out of his "concern for the Army's professional standards and ethics" and "the long-range impact . . . on the integrity of the Army, if no action of any kind [were] taken."<sup>6</sup> And even after he was informed by no less than Robert F. Froehlke, the new Secretary of the Army, that the investigation was not going to uncover evidence of "serious criminal misconduct" on my part, Westmoreland was determined that the case remain open. He made sure the Internal Revenue Service was apprised of the situation, and a commitment made by that organization to pursue me outside Army channels. He strongly urged the Secretary of the Army to sign a shattering Letter of Censure to go into my permanent file. In the end he had less luck with the Secretary than he did with the IRS: while I did get a seven-year tax audit (which uncovered nothing, as there was nothing to uncover), not only did I not receive a Letter of Censure for my permanent file, but any other Get Hackworth plans on Westy's part were nipped in the bud on the very day I was to get out. As Secretary of the Army Froehlke wrote in his close-hold Memo for Record on the subject:

During the course of an investigation instituted by certain allegations made by Colonel David H. Hackworth, testimony was received which indicated possible serious shortcomings in his personal conduct. This investigation of

Colonel Hackworth's personal conduct is not completed. Nevertheless, I am directing that the investigation be closed and retiring him as of this date.

My decision is based on advice of the General Counsel that significant evidence of serious criminal misconduct is unlikely to be developed by the ongoing investigation. Of equal importance is the consideration I gave to Colonel Hackworth's magnificent combat record, lengthy service in Vietnam, and multiple wounds, awards and decorations.

I, of course, knew nothing of all this as day after day I sweated out word that I would be allowed to retire. So when it was over, I could hardly believe my ears. On Tuesday, 28 September 1971, at 1900 hours, Joe Califano called. "Report to Fort Meade on Thursday," he said, "for your discharge." As he went on to explain how he'd persuaded the Secretary of the Army to let the case drop, and how the Secretary had given the hard word to Westmoreland, who'd had to give in, I barely comprehended the words. I was too stunned.

Two days later I reported to the Adjutant General section at Fort Meade. An old, very sympathetic colonel named Webb outprocessed me; it was quite a formal procedure, in which I had to sign papers, collect back pay, and close out this part of my life forever. In the middle of it, Webb received a phone call. He was sitting at his desk when he took it, but when the caller identified himself, the Colonel, a real southern-gentleman type, leaped to his feet. "Yes, sir!" he said with the utmost urgency, and stood at attention as the conversation continued, his side of which went something like, "Yes, sir . . . No, sir . . . No, sir, he hasn't," which I read as *Yes, sir, he's here . . . No, sir, he hasn't left yet . . . No, sir, he hasn't signed out.* "Very well, sir," Webb wound up the call, and I did a quick scope of the area to see how I was going to bust out. In my mind the Colonel had been told: *Don't let him go. We're arresting him and he's going to jail.* But I wasn't going to jail. No way were they going to get me, not after all this.

The Colonel got off the phone. "That was General Westmoreland," he said. He might have said, "That was General Westmoreland's office," but I wasn't sure—I wasn't receiving too well, my heart was pounding too loud and too fast. The Colonel started looking through the pile of documents and certificates that made up my discharge papers. He extracted one and showed it to me: it was a certificate, signed by Westmoreland, thanking me, Colonel David H. Hackworth, for my twenty-five years of honorable and dedicated service to the Army. The personalized certificate, a gimmick instituted by Westmoreland when he became Chief of Staff, was an automatic issue for guys who retired while Westy held the top job. But, "The General doesn't want you to have this," Colonel Webb explained, and deep-sixed it on the spot. And I thought, here is the Chief of Staff of the Army, running an

organization of almost two million men, with troops all over the world and a war being lost in South Vietnam, and he has the time—he makes the time—to call, or direct someone to call, the AG at Fort Meade to make sure I, David Hackworth, didn't think he was glad I'd been on his team. As the troops used to say, *So it goes*. . . .