

THE HOMECOMING

By [A. D. \(Darryl\) James](#)

0600 Hrs. 1 September 1969

Div Arty Air Hootch City

Captain Darryl James woke with much anticipation. He was the "shortest" guy in the Air Section and would be the next to go home.

I have 9 days and a wakeup left in this hole he told himself. Well, come on, Pal, it actually hasn't been that bad. Has it? Your buddies here are as close as you own family. You'll miss them, and who knows? You might even miss this place.

He reflected on that a moment as rubbed his eyes and thought Nah! He stretched in bed and thought I should be real excited. I really should. I'm getting shorter by the second, but I have this feeling - this premonition that something bad is gonna happen. And what the hell is going on with her letters?

The "her" in the pilot's thoughts was his wife, Jan. They married just after he finished graduate school - the week before he reported to active duty at Fort Knox. He had not received a letter from her since his birthday three weeks ago. His daughter, born at Fort Rucker while he was in Flight School, was only a few months old when he arrived in Vietnam. He missed them both. Well, she never was much of a letter writer, he told himself as he studied the picture of his wife and daughter on the wall of his hootch.

The Captain shook his head as if to push out the black thoughts. A vague, heavy feeling hung heavy over him like a dark, building cloud.

The sleepy pilot crawled out of his rack rubbing the soft, nylon poncho-liner bedspread like an old friend. He loved his slender metal frame bed and would miss it when he left. Once during a rocket attack, when he was a bit hung over from partying, instead of running for the bunker, he just turned his rack over on top of him and went back to sleep on the floor. It seemed funny at the time, but not now when he was so short.

He smiled to himself as he trotted off to shower, I'll have to give my Amigos a little grief today. It's expected, I am the shortest guy around since ol' Tyler Morrison left. Hell, I am so short I didn't have to bend over to tie my boots this morning.

After breakfast, the pilot walked down to the operation hootch. As Div Arty Air's Operations Officer, he had scheduled the day's flight lineup and support missions for the Artillery Battalions. His name was not on the lineup. A Div Arty Air tradition exempted their short-timers from flying missions within their last two weeks. It would be demoralizing for one of theirs to buy-the-farm at the very end of his one-year tour.

The only flying left for me, thought James, would be a few milk runs. Perhaps, I'll take the next PX trip to Da Nang, or maybe a Donut Dolly sortie to some nearby firebase. I could always do the daily VIP admin flight to the airfield so some Colonel or One-Star could say so long to all the departing souls. Mr. Short-Timer will be there with them soon, too, returning to the world of flushing toilets and air conditioning.

The Section had been without a boss for a couple of months. Captain Morrison had been filling the slot as acting Commanding Officer and James would have moved into that position, too, but three weeks ago, things changed. They got a new CO, a Major Tim Collins who was an enigma to the staff.

Although the Major came from a staff position at the advanced flight school at Fort Rucker, driving helicopters was not his passion, just a means to the end. The "lifer"

artillery officer got into Aviation as a career building move after he got the picture that aviation was the big happening - the place to be in the 60's. He graduated from flight school as a senior Captain in 1967. He next went to the Aviation Maintenance School in Fort Belvar, Virginia. He then returned as an aviator to Fort Rucker where he transitioned into the new, fast maneuverable Loach.

Americal Div Arty Air was the Major's first Vietnam assignment. Like any newcomer, he was uncomfortable and still adjusting to the environment. Most missions at Div Arty Air were solo flights, which added to the Major's discomfort. This too was understandable because most new Vietnam pilots flew as a Peter Pilot for a few months with an experienced pilot-in-command sitting across from him.

The CO had little in-country flight time. His solo time had been a only few hours around the bay after receiving the required three hours of dual instruction with Captain Waco Sledge, Div Arty Air's check pilot. When he reached five hours total flight time, Sledge had signed him off. That was six weeks ago. Since then, the Major had only one flight, a run to the ROK PX in Da Nang that he logged as pilot-in-command while Captain Morrison flew the left seat as co-pilot.

He's a strange Duck, thought James as he watched the Major out of the corner of his eye quietly, fiddling with paperwork. I wonder what his story is? Everyone has a story. He sure is difficult to get to know. The Operations Officer glanced at the large board on the wall that Sergeant Jenkins, the OPS NCO, maintained. The board showed each pilots flight time for the current month. Hell, thought James, the Major hadn't flown at all this month. Hmm, the Major is not at all personable and doesn't fly. Now here sits a potential morale problem. Well, it won't be my problem that's for sure. This short-timer is about out of here.

1800 Hrs. That Evening
Div Arty Air Operations

The Operations radio chattered away. Everyone was either on the ground or on the way home.

It's been a good day, thought James. No screw-ups. Jenkins had all the battalions' Hook and Slick support running smoothly. Not a whine or complaint from anyone.

James looked up as Jenkins walked in. The OPS NCO said, "No mail today, Sir."
"OK," Well maybe tomorrow, replied the Captain, I'm overdue for one; that's for sure.

Buck Sergeant Jenkins ran the day-to-day activities in Operations. The sharp, young college graduate made the job so easy for James that all OPS Officer had to do was schedule the pilot's missions and sign his name here and there. Like all the crew chiefs, Jenkins loved to fly. Many of the chiefs had some "boot leg" flight time at the controls making them handy to have in the front seat. The chiefs, however, preferred to ride in back as gunner with an M-60. Door gunners were used on convoy cover and scouting missions as well as covert insertions and pickups for LRRPS. Prior to receiving their Loaches, the crew chiefs even hung an M-60 in the door of the smaller, three-place OH-23G helicopters the Section used back then.

The door opened and CW2 Tim Booth, the last pilot in, entered sweaty and dirty. He sat heavily and began his paperwork. He was late and in a rush to catch up with the Div Arty Air gaggle gathered at the Officers Club. Soon, he left for the Club. It was

getting dark, Jenkins flipped on the lights as he and the OPS Officer prepared to close the office. Suddenly, the door popped open. The Major rushed in and shouted, "JAMES! I just got the word, the 73rd needs a FADAC computer on Hill Two-Niner, like right now."

"Sir, it's nearly dark," replied the Captain. We don't fly a night tactical mission unless a formal "TAC E" is declared. Sir, we can take out the computer first thing in the morning. This happens all the time. They usually wait."

James thought to himself, Surely they can use those little circle things to shoot those 105-howitzer's. Heck, I remember that they even showed us tanker pukes in Armor Officers Basic how to use them.

James had only 44 night flying hours in Vietnam. Generally, their night missions were admin flights like taking some Colonel home after dark. Admin flights or not, night flying in Vietnam was inherently dangerous. The mountainous terrain and the dark waters of the South China often did not provide a visible horizon for the nighttime pilot causing many to get disoriented and die. Because of this danger Div Arty Air always used two pilots at night. Two sets of eyes were safer.

James thought back to the dark night when Captains Waco Sledge and Jim Fuller, their best and most experienced pilots, got caught in the clouds over the Chu Lai airfield. They were taking a Lieutenant Colonel home to Duc Pho. Inadvertently, they climbed into clouds, got vertigo and nearly crashed into the sea. Each had a grip on the controls when they recovered from a death spiral. They decided to abort and return to Ky Hai Heliport. Neither could remember who actually made that decision or who landed. They staggered in visibly shaken, and their passenger had a distinct green complexion to match his brown pants. He was more than happy to spend another night in Chu Lai.

The Captain's thoughts were interrupted as the Major barked, "Then I'll declare a Tac E."

"You can't do that. Sir, only the Colonel or the XO can do that."

The Major snarled and grabbed the phone, and the Captain began to worry. James turned toward Jenkins and said, "Sarge, send a runner up the hill and see if you can find someone who's, ah, not drink - ah, I mean available."

"Yes Sir."

Five minutes later, The Operations Officer learned all the Loach drivers were at the Club playing liar's dice and slinging beers wondering where the "short-timer" was.

This is turning ugly thought James

The phone rang. The Major snatched it and said, "Yes Sir." He looked at the Captain with a half smile and said, "You got your TAC E, James. Division is sending over a FADAC. NOW GET SOMEONE TO TAKE IT OUT TO TWO-NINER."

"Yes Sir, but it looks like you and I will have to fly this mission. Everyone is at the Club."

"WHAT!" he shouted. "Why isn't someone available? Shouldn't we have someone on standby? Surely this isn't how you run things around here, Captain James."

"Sir, this TAC E is unusual. Heck, this is only the 5th or 6th TAC E since I've been here. It's rare for us to fly anything other than a scheduled admin mission at night."

"Well," replied the Major, sitting down and composing himself, "I'll need to stay here and man the radios."

This is getting worse by the minute, thought James.

The door opened and an out of breath Spec 4 said, I have a FADAC for Major Collins.

"O.K." said Sergeant Jenkins, "Ah, I, I guess you better send it down to the flight line."

The Captain turned back toward the Major and said, "Sir, Sergeant Jenkins can work the radios. Two pilots are needed for safety at night. It's our SOP. I'll do the flying, but I really need you to sit in the left seat. Two set of eyes -" "No," interrupted the Major, "I need to stay here to manage things." He looked up and said sharply, "Captain, if all your buddies are ah, inebriated, then do it yourself. It's your deal, now get it done."

That was uncalled for thought the Captain. They're not drunk, just having drinks before dinner. I wonder - maybe this turd can't fly very well. Or maybe he is just plain scared. Either way I don't think I want him flying with me tonight. James looked at Jenkins who stared without expression at the wall. "Would you like to go, Sergeant?"

Jenkins looked back at the Captain and smiled, "Sir, I would Love to."

They grabbed their chicken plates, M-16's, 38's, and survival gear and walked down to the flight line leaving the Major to man the radios. At the flight line, Wally, one of the crew chiefs, motioned for them to take his Loach. As usual, he wanted to go along.

"Sir," said Wally, "I can mount that M-60 in the back in two minutes flat."

"Not this time Whale, sorry. We won't need it."

Wally's Loach had a bright blue whale painted on the transmission cowling. Wally's nickname was "Whale" and he decided to adorn his aircraft with his label. He was not particularly fond of the handle, but he knew there was nothing he could do about it. The nickname stuck.

He had become Div Arty Air's "Whale." If he complained, Div Arty Air would call him that to rub him a bit. By not complaining, everyone thought he liked it. He'd be "Whale" in either case. It's just one of many examples of "Catch 22," Div Arty Air style.

Wally helped Sergeant Jenkins and Captain James preflight. This was his Loach - the Whale. He was proud of her and waited to see that everything would check out perfectly. It did. After preflighting, the three watched the Division technicians load a large aluminum suitcase - the FADAC computer - in back. They treated it like it was a case of precious gems.

As Wally helped the Captain strap into the left seat, the "short-timer" thought to himself, don't sweat it, Amigo. Jenkins can fly this Loach at least straight and level. He can help watch the instruments, and work the radios. Everything's cool.

James hit the starter button and waited for the compressor gauge to stabilize at 15%. Then he slowly cracked the throttle spraying jet fuel into the engine. The Loach engine temperature had a tendency to spike during starts and cause damage. James set the radios, called Ky Hai tower and received permission to taxi and depart. The Loach climbed to the east over the foamy surf of South China Sea and almost immediately turned left toward Chu Lai Bay. It leveled off at 200 feet as required to stay below the fast movers' airspace. James was surprised when Ky Hai immediately gave him clearance to continue climbing. No jets tonight? thought the pilot.

It was a clear, beautiful night. Americal Division was spread out before them like a sprawling, sparkling city. The huge Chu Lai Airbase off their left side was lit up like a JFK Airport in New York City.

The two heard no radio traffic. They seemed uncomfortably alone as they climbed south along the sanctuary of the highway. They leveled off at 3,000 feet and continued south as the darkness closed around them. Twenty minutes later, they came to the position where they had to turn inland away from the sanctuary of Highway One.

They turned west and James thought he could hear his butt cheeks pucker. It was pitch black toward the mountains. The Captain dimmed the instrument panel lights in a feeble attempt to see the horizon. It didn't help. The foreboding darkness in front of them, seemed like a black hole ready to suck them in. The pilot turned off the running lights to hide in the darkness. As he did this he hit the intercom switch on the cyclic and said, "They have us on radar with flight following, Sarge. I'm more worried about Charlie seeing us then running into another airplane."

"Right, Sir," replied Jenkins. "It sure is dark ahead."

"You got that right."

Every now and then they saw small dull specks of light and the faint glow of campfires. Their eyes picked up lines of pink tracer flashes. Friendlies, they hoped. They saw none of the green tracer flashes from the ammunition the VC preferred. Each in their minds could see green tracer lines reaching up to them in their small, vulnerable helicopter. Things seemed quiet below them. Suddenly the darkness ahead was interrupted by a salvo from the 105-howitzer battery on Two-Niner. The sight was spectacular with the hill now only twenty miles ahead.

Now how can they do that without their little ol' FADAC? thought the pilot chuckling sardonically to himself. Must be using those cute little circular slide rules.

"Looks like a firework show at Disneyland, Sir," Jenkins said over the intercom.

"Big fireworks," the Captain replied. "Well we certainly can't miss the hill, now. Right?"

"Yes Sir. Just as long as they stop when we get there."

"They will."

As they got closer, James forced himself to keep his eyes inside the cockpit. Staring at the artillery flashes would ruin his night vision and he would need sharp eyes to land on the dark hill.

The radio crackled, "Phoenix One-Three, this is Salvation, over."

"Salvation, One-Three."

"One-Three, you have a check fire to land at Two-Niner in zero five minutes, they recommend you approach directly from the east."

"Wilco, Salvation, Phoenix One-Three, out."

James slowed to 60-knots and began descending over the hill in a left, corkscrew pattern. Jenkins chatted on the FM with battery operations and confirmed their check fire. James closed his eyes to retain his night vision and flashed the landing lights twice to allow the Battery to see their Loach descending without running lights. The pilot could now make out the gun emplacements and hootches below. Everything appeared quiet. A ¼ ton truck's headlights blinked and then stayed on lighting up a sandbag landing pad. The Loach descended toward the pad, turning tightly to stay over the relative safety of the hill.

This is turning out to be a piece of cake, thought the pilot.

They landed to a hover on the pad and settled softly in. James kept the Loach light on the skids, ready to depart as soon as the FADAC was offloaded. Some guys grabbed

the metal suitcase and threw an identical one on board. A Spec 4 came up to the pilot's open door and shouted, "SIR CAN I GET A RIDE BACK TO CHU LAI? I AM ABOUT TO DEROS.

"SURE," James yelled back over the rotor noise, "JUMP IN; I AM GOING TO DEROS SOON, TOO." The soldier climbed in back. James pulled pitch. The Loach leaped into the air, turned left and climbed in a tight spiral over the hill.

At about 200 feet, the small aircraft was baptized in a searing, white light as all six 105-howitzers fired directly below them. The bright flash blinded the Loache's occupants. A deafening boom immediately followed that was loud enough to easily penetrate the sound proof helmets worn by James and Jenkins. The DEROSing passenger's unprotected ears were less fortunate. He covered them and screamed.

Time seemed to stand still as the pilot yelled out "HOLY SHIT, I CAN'T SEE."

The aircraft bucked in the air. James instinctively jerked up on the collective causing the nimble Loach to go straight up. The aircraft hovered high over the hill then began drifting down in a dangerous, low speed flight. As the pilot prayed, God please let me see and please keep this thing flying. After what seemed like an eternity, he began to regain his vision. James scanned the instruments with blurred eyes and saw they were at 700 feet, 35-knots airspeed and descending slightly. He nudged the nose over slightly and stabilized the aircraft in a normal 60-knot climb. The pilot took a deep breath and thought to himself, Everything is OK. I can see. We are still in one piece and flying. We are going to make it unless our own guys shoot us out of the air.

His eye caught the transmission torque meter which showed that he was pulling too much torque. James eased the collective down to bring the needle back into the green. The "Whale" would now have to be grounded and have its transmission inspected by maintenance.

As the pilot got the aircraft into a nominal flight attitude, Sergeant Jenkins screamed into the FM radio at Battery Operations below them, "CEASE FIRE, CEASE FIRE."

"Ah, Roger "One-Three," ah, standby one," came back the reply over the FM radio.

The battery's operations people knew Jenkins. They called him everyday for Hook and Slick support. The Sergeant found himself panting. He willed himself to relax as he thought, Those bastards will find themselves dealing with one really pissed off OPS NCO tomorrow. They will be hard pressed getting any extra perks from me for awhile.

The Loach headed away from the hill and was swallowed by the darkness. The Spec 4 in back, traumatized by the light and noise, sat in a stupor holding his ringing ears. Up front, James barked at Salvation Control on the UHF radio and then switched frequencies to complain to Major Collins still manning the radios at Div Arty Air OPS. The Major said he would call Battery OPS on Hill Two-Niner and personally chew them out. You do that thought the shaken aviator.

All the way home, folks on the radios said something like, "Oops, sorry, you were definitely under a "check fire." That was a screw up, a big "Charlie Foxtrot". Sorry about that. Anything we can do? Are you OK?"

James and Jenkins ignored the weak attempts at consolation as they flew home to Ky Hai. They landed and hovered into a revetment. The passenger and the defective FADAC were met on the line by a ¼ ton truck. The passenger looked back at the pilot as

he got into the jeep and said shakily, "Thanks for the ride, Sir." The Captain noticed he didn't kiss the ground.

James and Jenkins found a group of Loach drivers and crew chiefs waiting for them in the Operations Hootch. They wanted to hear all about it.

0630 Hrs. The next morning
Div Arty Hootch City

What a night! thought James lying in his bunk. Hey it's eight days and a wakeup, won't have to bend to tie my boots today. OH, LORDY, AM I A SHORTY?

James dressed, had breakfast and walked down to Operations. No one discussed last night. Several pilots came through and headed to the flight line. Two pilots, CW2 Booth and CPT Larry Lassater, James's hootch mate, held up their thumb and first finger to the short-timer in the sign for a little amount. Then, as if on cue, changed their fingers into another universal sign sometimes called THE TALL BOY, or THE FINGER.

Ha, thought James; the pukes are just jealous. "Hey guys," he said, "don't get lost out there today. And Mr. Booth, please don't crash again. I hate filling out all those forms."

Their only acknowledgment was another TALL BOY. This one was emphasized with a sharp upward moving motion.

"Guys," said James, "please, show a little respect."

Later that morning, Jenkins got up and headed for the door. "I'm off for the mail, Sir."

"O.K.," said James without looking up from his paperwork. Several minutes later, Jenkins came back with the mail. "Letter from you wife, Sir."

"Great, thanks."

The pilot hesitated a moment, then tore it open. It began, "DEAR JOHN. . . "

James turned pale. The Major and the Sergeant looked over, curiously.

Something's wrong, thought Jenkins. bad news? Did someone die?

A tense, quiet pause filled the room. Jenkins thought he could hear everyone breathing. Reluctantly, OPS Sergeant said "Sir, ah, is anything wrong?"

James didn't reply. He sat staring at the wall. Finally, he said weakly, "Ah, something's happened." "Ah, ah, ah, she want's a divorce."

A heavy silence filled the room. Jenkins got up and took the shaken Captain's cup and said, "Let me fill this for you, Sir."

He went outside and sent a runner up the hill. Several minutes later Captain Lassater came down from their quarters to sit with their shaken OPS Officer.

The door burst opened. Everyone but James looked up as Captain Duffy, the Maintenance Officer, burst in. He grabbed James's shoulder and said, "Darryl, you are one of us. When you hurt, we all hurt. Shit you were going home in a week or so anyway. What the hell kind of homecoming is she planning? Shoot, Markowski is already home at Dix. I can call him and get him to-

"Easy, Steve, said Lassater. Down, Boy."

"O.K. O.K. Now what the heck can I do? Where's the Major?"

"He disappeared," said Lassater.

"Isn't that just great? O.K. O.K. Jenkins go find the Doc and Father O'Leary maybe they have some ideas."

Sergeant Jenkins rushed out the door.

The rest of the day was a blur for the hurting POS Officer. Word of the "Dear John letter" made it way around the Division Artillery and the 123rd Aviation Battalion. Many people called and offered consolation. Father O'Leary, authorized a priority satellite phone call to the States through the Red Cross. His call went through at 0400 Hrs. New York time. Sadly, he learned that only his mother-in-law and sleeping daughter were at home.

His mother-in-law said, "Sorry Darryl, she doesn't want you anymore; it's been hard for her. . ."

Huh? What, hard on her? thought the pilot tuning her out, How about me? I am the one OVER HERE.

The Captain learned more. Unfortunately it was what he feared the most - there was some one else. The Loach driver returned to the Div Arty Air recreation room. As he dragged himself into a chair, he thought, Maybe this is my home now. Why should I even leave?

The news spread. The Old Man sent word that he wanted to see James. The Captain reported to Div Arty Headquarters and was shown into the Colonel Jones office. The XO, Lieutenant Colonel Carlton and Doc Peters were seated in leather padded chairs. The Colonel said, "Darryl, come in here and join us.

"JOHN," he yelled outside to his orderly. "Double scotch and waters all around."

"Yes sir," said the orderly standing in the doorway with the tray, anticipating the request.

"Carlton," said the Colonel, "can we get him home tomorrow?"

"Sir, I think we can," answered the XO. "If he's grounded, Sir, he's no use to us."

The Colonel looked at the short, boy-faced Flight Surgeon and said, "Doc, ground him; the Lad's going home ASAP."

Lieutenant Colonel Carlton, excused himself, walked into the orderly's office and called Division to have orders cut. He returned, sat down and sipped his double scotch and said, "Everything looks good, Colonel. I am worried, though, about the connections Darryl will need to get out of here." He turned toward James and said, "Captain, your orders are being prepared, but you need to out process at Division ASAP and depart for Cam Rahn, this afternoon, if possible."

The orderly returned and told them there was a problem. The last two Air Force C-130's to Cam Rahn Bay were full. The XO grabbed the Colonel's phone and called the Captain's replacement, "Captain Lassater," this is Colonel Carlton." "Larry, find James a ride to Cam Rahn, tonight." The XO hung up and sat down again.

"Darryl," said the CO, "Your people have done a good job. Remember one thing, Son. You have lots of friends here. Some of these men will be your friends for life. They are here for you. Me too. You look me up back in the World. I want to know how you are doing."

"Yes Sir."

Div Arty Operations
A Few Minutes Later

All the Div Arty Air Loaches were flying. Lassater worked the telephone trying to find James a ride. Duffy chewed on someone on the other phone. "Listen," said the

Maintenance Officer, "You get that damn helicopter ready or your ass is going to be farting in two places."

Exasperated, he slammed the phone down and said, "No dice Larry."

Lassater received calls from sister Aviation units offering rides late that evening or first thing in the morning. That would be too late. The Rattlers outfit offered to take him to Cam Rahn in a gunship late that evening. That might work, but it would be close.

Lassater was ready to accept their offer, when he finally got lucky. Their wayward Otter pilot, Captain Harding, reported in on the UHF radio. Harding was always loaned out to some other unit and gone much of the time. The Otter driver took the news from Lassater and replied, "Larry, have "One-three" meet me at the air base at 1610 hrs. Get him packed, I'll take him to Cam Rahn late this afternoon."

"Roger, OPS out."

Division Out Processing

James stood in line getting paperwork prepared and picking up his files. He asked the clerk to expedite the effort. The Captain told him he had a personal emergency and had to be in Cam Rahn tonight. The Specialist went back through the door in back. A few minutes later, James heard some officer say, "Tell him he has to wait in line like everyone else. No exceptions." The clerk came out and said, "Sorry, Sir the Admin Officer said that you will have to wait in line."

"May I use your phone, Specialist?"

"Sure, Sir." James picked up the phone and dialed two, two, zero.

"Div Arty, Commanding Officer's Office, please, Captain James calling."

"One moment Sir."

Div Arty, CO's Office, Sergeant Ratcliff speaking."

"Colonel Carleton, please. This is Captain James." A moment later, he heard Lieutenant Carlton's voice. "Yes Darryl."

"Colonel, I am having problems getting my paperwork finished up this afternoon. They have put me a rather long queue with the people leaving the Division in the next few days and -"

The Colonel interrupted him. "Darryl I will take care of this."

The pilot hung up. Moments later a phone rang in the back office. The Captain heard a commotion and then another door burst open. Two minutes later, a fat, somewhat effeminate Captain rushed out with his hands full of papers. The Admin officer was breathing heavily as he said, "Is there a Captain James here?"

"Yes, I am Darryl James."

"Come with me, Captain. We need to get you taken care of right away. I understand you are going home tomorrow. How fortunate."

"Yeah, right."

Div Arty Air Hootches

Jenkins came through the door of the pilot's recreation room. He found Captain Duffy, Captain James and three of the crew chiefs drinking a Coors with the departing pilot. One suitcase and James's acoustical guitar stood by the door. CW2 Booth came in all sweaty from a flight and offered to ride with them to Cam Rahn in the Otter. This was

a nice gesture because Booth had to fly in the morning. He knew the tired Otter pilot would not like to fly home alone in the dark.

"Booth you stink," said Duffy.

Booth ignored Duffy and gave James a huge bear hug. He said, "We have to boogie, Captain."

James looked around and said, "Say goodbye to everyone for me guys."

"We will," the group echoed.

Duffy said, "Now Darryl don't think you are getting out of a DEROS party. You, Amigo, are just postponing it until we can get together in the World."

"O.K. that's a date, Duff."

"COME ON, D" said Booth, "Quit pussy footing around. We have a date with an Otter."

Fifteen minutes later, James and Booth watched as the large single engine, tail dragger taxied over and shut down. A fuel truck pulled up. A tall, lean pilot came out, stretched and shook hands with James and Booth. The three climbed in the passenger door and walked up the steep cabin floor to the cockpit. James strapped into the right copilot's seat. Captain Jack Harding strapped in the left seat and Booth climbed in the seat behind James. Jack cranked up and departed Chu Lai to the north. At 600 feet they turned steeply toward south.

James thought to himself as he peered out for his last look at Chu Lai below, *Is it because of what awaits me in New York, or is it something else that gives me these mixed feelings in leaving? I will miss my friends here and I might even miss this damn place.*

No one said a word on the intercom. Finally Jack broke the silence and said, "I am really sorry, Darryl."

"Thanks, Jack, I appreciate that, and I especially appreciate you and Tim flying me down here tonight. I know you both are tired and will be really beat coming back tonight."

"No sweat; it's the least we could do for you."

Booth came on the intercom and said, "D?"

"Yeah, Tim."

"GIVE EM' HELL."

Hoping that no one can tell in the dim red glow of the lights from the instrument panel, James quietly sobbed. An hour later, Jack called ahead to have them met in Cam Rahn. They landed and deplaned. Tim carried Captain James's bag and guitar and set them in the jeep that had driven out to meet them. The three pilots embraced. As James turn to leave, Booth called out, "ONE-THREE."

James turned to him, "Yeah?"

"You know I don't give a rat's ass for commissioned officers, and I never salute one under the rank of Colonel unless some tight-ass makes me?"

James did not respond. After a pause, Warrant Officer Booth cranked off the smartest salutes James had seen since his ROTC days. Captain Harding then joined in with one of his own.

***0630 Hrs. Later That Evening
Cam Rahn Bay, South Vietnam***

James got another dose of paper work, and then there was nothing to do until the morning. He made his way to the Officers Club bar. It was crowded and noisy. James ordered a beer and noticed a bunch of rowdy First Cav guys toasting each other. As customary, they wore their Cav hats inside the club. What was rude to anyone else is just ol' Cav stuff to them.

A short, drunk Warrant Officer stood up and proposed a toast, "Will all Loach drivers stand up?"

Captain James stood, and raised his glass of beer along with a lot of other guys.

"Your Loach drivers are all a bunch of crazy ass fuckers," said the Warrant Officer.

Everyone laughed and drank up.

Next Morning

The Captain's American Airlines DC-8 left for Japan at 09:00 hours. A collective cheer erupted as the plane left the runway. They deplaned in Tokyo and James wandered the terminal for an hour until they called the flight to board. Depressed and lonely, he climbed back on the plane. When they departed, James took two mild sleeping pills that Doc Peters had given him. James slept soundly all the way to SEATAC, Washington. The stewardess tried to wake him up for each of the two in-flight meals. He barely stirred. She thought him to be ill.

0630 Hrs. 3 September 1969

SEATAC Airport

Seattle, Washington

After clearing Military Customs, the Captain called his wife. He learned that she didn't want him to come directly to upstate New York. "Come tomorrow or the next day; then we'll talk," she said.

He hung up and thought, *The hell with her, I am going home tonight, if I can.* James called his folks in NJ. They didn't know he was coming today. They were initially happy, then sad when they learned the reason for the early homecoming. They would meet him late that evening in Newark. He caught a flight to Chicago, then made a frantic connection to Newark. The stewardesses invited him up to the first class section on the half empty airplane and supplied him with beer throughout the flight. Two of the stewardesses came up to personally welcome home the tired, sweaty, rumped Army Captain. None knew of the dreaded homecoming he expected.

2200 Hrs. Later That Evening

Newark Airport

Newark, New Jersey

A large circle of family met him at the terminal. The group included his mother, three brothers, sister and a brand new sister-in-law he hadn't met. Hugs went around to all. At his boyhood home, they ate, drank and talked into the morning. After a little sleep, the Captain called to upstate NY, and drove three hours to get to his wife's apartment. All the way on the New York Thruway, he wondered what to expect.

1100 Hrs. 4 September 69

Canajoharie, New York

The homecoming was tense but subdued—an uncomfortable and miserable experience for all. James sensed the unexpressed heavy veil of guilt coming from his wife and mother-in-law. The meeting turned to demands. His wife wanted an immediate divorce, child support and division of property. He agreed to allow her to keep the car, furniture and wedding presents. The Captain kept the small savings and investments. An additional kick came to his already bruised ego when he discovered she had lost his irreplaceable college graduation ring. *Probably sold it* he thought.

James played with his 16-months-old daughter until it was time to leave. One insult remained. He walked out the front door and saw an attractive young woman on the sidewalk dressed in a business suit. She smiled and said, "Are you Darryl James?"

"Yes," he replied.

She thrust legal papers in his hand and briskly walked away. Surprised and confused, he looked at the papers. *Hell*, he thought, *they're legal papers. I have been served!*

The next day, he drove to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey to see an Army attorney. The attorney changed the aviator's will and advised him to ignore the legal papers. He asked the Captain to take a seat in his office while the attorney called his wife's lawyer in Albany, NY. James listened in to one side of the conversation, which quickly grew heated.

"You can't do that," barked the Army attorney. "He's an officer in the United States Army for gosh sakes, and I am telling you again **YOU CAN'T DO THAT**. Ah, ah, no sir . . . ah, ah, yes sir that's correct. Listen, no, it is **YOU THAT IS NOT LISTENING**, he's not going to do that . . . and no, **YOU CAN NOT GARNISH HIS WAGES, CAPTAIN JAMES IS AN OFFICER.**" There was a long pause while the army attorney listened on the phone. "Listen Sir, **NO YOU LISTEN**, this is what he will do. He will report to Fort Wolters, Texas and will ignore these papers, Sir, . . . he will pay child support while they are separated . . . ah, ah . . . O.K. you just go on and do that . . ." The attorney hung up.

He looked at James and said, "What a jerk. Forget about him; he doesn't know anything about military law. I don't think he could find his butt in the closet with two hands and a flashlight. Now Captain here's what you need to do. Continue to pay child support, ignore these flipping papers. No, on second thought let me keep them for you. My advise to you is, go have a drink, spend time with your family, meet some women, keep involved in your daughter's life, and when you are good and ready, give your estranged wife the divorce. This divorce should be at your convenience not hers. You haven't been home one week yet. Make her wait."

He did. James made her wait five months.

The Captain spent some time visiting friends. Slowly, things began to loosen up for him. His spirit was on the mend. Some time just needed to pass. One morning in the middle of his month long leave, he thought to himself, *I need to get on with my life. I want to go home, now.*

Two days Later ***Love Field, Dallas, Texas***

Captain James flew to Love Field in Dallas and was met by two very familiar faces, Captains Waco Sledge and Tyler Morrison. They had a couple of drinks and drove to Mineral Wells. His friends' wives had prepared a dinner in his honor. It was another homecoming, a nice one among two of his closest friends and their families. The men

drove James onto the Post that night at 2350 hours to officially report in. He signed his name and said, "I'm home. Today, the rest of my life begins."

Indeed it did.

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