

**In the Twilight's Last Gleaming,
He Had Left Civilization behind...**

The Shadow Soldiers

“War criminal!” Lieutenant J. G. Steve Drosky, USAF, could hardly believe the verdict pronounced by the Viet Cong military judge, down for the mock trial, from Hanoi. Drosky sweated in the blazing Asian sunlight. He stood, tied, in the central compound of some godforsaken village in North Vietnam. He wore the same green nylon flightsuit he had worn the day his A4 Skyhawk had been shot down.

In the last two weeks of the war, he had been streaking up the Gulf of Tonkin, under bright skies, toward the torpedo boat base at Hon Gay, north of Haiphong.

His big American-Polack body smelled ripe in the jungle heat. Sweat, darkening the nylon under his pits, ran down his skin. His cheeks, chin, and throat itched with the—how long was it?—ten-day bristle.

His hands, crossed at the wrist, had been tied tight by a young Viet Cong who had spit his contempt in Drosky's face. Drosky spit back. He had a bruise to show for it. The purple bloomed through his dark blond stubble of beard. In the tropical heat, the sun was darkening his fair skin and lightening his eyebrows and moustache.

He was hungry. He was thirsty. He needed a cigaret.

His big uncut dick itched under the foreskin he hadn't been able to reach to strip back in over a week. The VC, fearing his bull-sized build, kept his wrists tied behind his back, alternately in ropes and in irons. He knew the crack of his hairy ass was crusted. The fucking fuckers were intent on humiliating the best and the brightest of the American fliers every way they could.

Through each interrogation, Drosky had given only name, rank, and serial number. He was learning fast that he, and probably the other two Americans, also tied for trial and sentencing in the shadowless high-noon sun, were the only three people in the whole compound who gave a fucking shit about the Geneva Convention. Drosky had never before seen the

other two Americans until he had been dragged out of his solitary-confinement cage for this fifteen-minute trial.

Drosky figured one of the two other Americans for a flier. He was strapped up spreadeagle ten yards to the right of Drosky. He stared straight ahead, as if once he had seen something so terrible he would never look at anything again. The judge's words "life sentence" hardly seemed to register on the flier's face. Drosky calculated from the weathered look of the lean pilot's body that he had been bound to the bamboo tripod for some days and nights. His flight suit had been sliced off and he was exposed: head and torso and legs. The VC had stripped him down to his green boxer skivvies and boots. His dog tags glistened against his hairy chest. Even crusted with the sweat and dust of this filthy captivity, he looked to Drosky like the kind of good-looking skyjockey who, stateside, gets volunteered for recruiting posters.

To his left, Drosky checked out the other captured American. He had been trucked into the compound about an hour after Drosky's tied wrists had been hoisted up painfully behind his back to a tall metal pole the village children had once used to tether their game ball. Drosky figured he wasn't going to be any braver in this one than he needed to be. He wasn't any John-Fucking-Wayne; but he was an Air Force officer, a career pilot, 28-years-old, married, with one kid, a son. His shit was together. But the sight of the VC troop truck pulling into the compound with the second American had sickened him.

A half-dozen young VC soldiers, commanded by a squat burly captain with a shaved bullethead, milled around the handsome young Marine. The USMC grunt was hanging suspended by his shoulders from the metal canvas-cover struts arched over the bed of the truck. Unable to touch his feet to the floor to steady himself, he swung back and forth like a side of young American veal. He was too young to be beef.

Drosky figured the kid for no more than nineteen. Twenty, tops. He was a fresh capture. The sidewall clip of his buzz cut was less than a week old. He was stripped shirtless, down to his green fatigues and boots. A bamboo pole cutting into the small of his back held the crooks of his arms immobile against the pull frontwards of his forearms which were manacled by the wrists tight across his hard belly.

Drosky figured him for the kid who captains his high-school football team in the fall and joins up the next spring, right after graduation. On the third finger of the young Marine's left hand, Drosky spotted the flash of what looked like a new gold band.

That was a mistake.

All in-country military personnel had been ordered to avoid wearing wedding rings into combat. The VC liked to use the information that a prisoner was married against him. Drosky himself, after his shootdown, stripped off his flight glove, removed his wedding ring, held it a long moment, and then tossed the gold band far from him into a rice paddy.

That act more than anything made him realize he had left civilization far behind.

Drosky found it hard to tell anything much about the kid's face. His eyes looked tough enough, though he seemed to refuse to look at Drosky, even when the VC took hold of the bamboo pole and lifted him, high and long and slow, so his whole body-weight hung excruciatingly from his manacled arms in the slow march toward Drosky. The Marine was embarrassed. The bondage itself had become torture. As the VC carried him in agony close past Drosky's face, they stopped, and forcibly turned the handsome Marine's face for Drosky's inspection.

The dirty VC hands held the suspended American's head painfully still. Drosky studied the kid's mud-crusting chin and lips and nose. The young Marine avoided Drosky's stare. A fresh cut clotted through the kid's left eyebrow. The VC displayed him hanging in front of Drosky's own tied body. The squat captain with the bullethead moved in. Carrying a swagger stick, he approached the young Marine's mouth. With one quick blow he broke off the kid's two front teeth.

"You like?" the captain said to Drosky.

Drosky felt sick to his guts. It was a shit-load more than blood crusted on the bound Marine's face. It was jungle filth, the kind of human mud that snakes slither through to kill things that only come out at night.

The captain threatened the bound Marine with a couple of pulled-punch swings at his tight-closed lips and clenched, broken teeth. He poked his swagger stick at the dirty face and parted the caked lips. Drosky watched the swollen full cheeks of the cherry boy's face. Another threatening tap. The kid was scared.

The Corps had taught him obedience as the best solution to every situation.

The boy pulled his lips back. Bullethead tapped at his bleeding teeth. Another tap. Hoisted in midair suspension, he hung helpless. He parted his jaws. Obediently. Bullethead nudged the tip of his swagger teasingly into the boy's mouth. Churning deeper. Poking deeper. Fucking deeper into the terrified Grunt's mouth. Past his gagging. Past his vomit.

The young Marine's body stiffened and swung defenselessly. His eyes opened wide in terror at the force-feeding he saw coming; again.

Bullethead ordered up a bucket of fetid water, and with the kid's mouth pried open with the swagger stick, motioned for the ladling of crickets and small tree frogs to begin. They poured the slime down the kid's throat.

Drosky himself began to gag at the same moment that Bullethead triggered, with his hard-churning swagger-stick, the gag reflex in the young Marine painfully swinging by his arms in the humid sunlight. Bullethead stepped back, and the young VC soldiers laughed, as the young Marine tossed up the dark jungle slime of the force-feedings he had endured hours before when they had pinched his nose closed and fed a hose past his lips, through his teeth, over his tongue, and down his throat to his belly, slipping a small live snake down the tube, watching the kid's belly expand and contract with the dying snake.

Finally the Marine raised his eyes to look the three-feet directly into Drosky's eyes. He was crying, and he said, with his voice deep and husky from the rubber tube and the filth of war, "I'm sorry, sir."

Bullethead slammed him across the cheek with his swagger, and the guards carried him to another iron post twenty feet upwind of Drosky. They hung the bamboo pole securing his arms from the ropes. But this time, stripping his combat boots from his feet, they let his toes touch the muddy ground.

Blood ran from his nose.

The other flier, the Major, seemed to have chosen to notice nothing. Drosky figured maybe he was smart. Maybe that was the way to survive. But Drosky could not help hearing the flies and seeing the pile of vomit that the VC had gorged up out of the Marine's guts. None of them, Drosky knew, was ever going to get out of this alive. Charlie was fierce about the Americans. Drosky knew enough captor psychology. The odds were against the three of them. Severely abused prisoners rarely live to tell their stories.

The young Marine, at the pronouncement of his "war crimes," stopped his sobbing. He spit two words from his bloody mouth. "Fuck you!" He spit his brown spit at the VC squatting in the hot sun. They laughed and spit back, and then, bored, moved out of range, leaving the three Americans hanging, each in his own private agony, to the scorching sun, the suffocating humidity, and the low drone of hungry flies.

Drosky realized that even a short life, sentenced by these sadistic animals, might be longer than he could handle. But he figured they were maybe more sound than fury. In his guts, he was a fighter. He felt his tongue thickening with thirst in his mouth. He thought of old football scores. The feeling had long gone out of his hands. He thought of intricate

flight plans. For two days, the three men, fed only rice and boiled fish heads, were left strung up exposed to rain and sun in the compound. Drosky ran multiplication tables forwards and backwards. He picked out names for his captors: like shaved-down Captain Bullethead.

Drosky had enough fight in him to want to punch out and fucking kill the VC making a game of humiliating the American soldiers. Untied, Drosky figured he was big enough to take them all on. Fucking Charlie! But he was not untied. He could not stop the VC coming out, forcing him to his knees, pulling their short fat dicks out, pissing on his face and chest, hosing him with the high-pressure force of their short, thick, rice-rocket dicks. His own Polack sweat was like a moist shield on his blond skin. He hated the drunken piss of the young VC soldiers. Most were no more than vicious teenagers.

One of the fuckers, built like Mr. Mekong Delta, came out from his hooch almost hourly. He was some hybrid seed the French Colonials had abandoned when they fled Indochine. He was half-French. Almost handsome. Drosky figured him for the camp stud. Threatening Drosky with a pistol, Mekong forced him to his knees, causing his arms, still tied behind him, to pull painfully up past his shoulders. The shirtless Eurasian, powerful as a young tank, liked to force Drosky to watch him strut his stuff. When he whipped his dick out, he displayed his pizzle like some prize water buffalo at a cattle show. He was hung: big, uncut, and mean. He threatened Drosky's face with the heft of his hang.

Drosky knew a pervert when he saw one.

Swallowing Mekong's piss was humiliation enough. His wagging dick, hardening, was no way, José, acceptable to Drosky, who knew the facts of the way life sometimes was: he'd circle-jerked a couple times in high school, and let one of his drinking buddies one drunken night back at the Air Force Academy climb on top him, and bump bellies, till the cadet came and passed out on top of Drosky, who only half-endured the episode. While he'd been doing his buddy a favor, he'd been thinking thoughts about the girl who became, and still was, his wife.

Drosky knew, if he ever got out of this alive, some of this he'd never be able to tell her. He knew, if he lived through all this, he'd never be able to tell anyone.

Drosky vowed to keep forever to himself how the muscular, young, half-French VC with the middle-weight powerlifter's build, stroked up his big dick. He was proud to sexually humiliate the American. He liked to show off his enormous size. "We are not small," he said, spitting into Drosky's eyes. With his big wang bobbing from his uniform, he took cash

from the circle of drunken VC who'd bet on anything. They argued and wagered how far down Drosky's throat Mr. Mekong Delta's heavy artillery could slide, before the pussy American, they called him, choked and begged for mercy.

Mr. Mekong Delta liked to suffocate bound fliers on his enormous meat.

The muscular half-breed flexed his arms and made a fist. Drosky read his threat. If he bit the frog-gook, he'd lose his teeth. For openers. In the trade-off of death-before-dishonor bullshit, and raw survival, Drosky opened his mouth. Reluctantly. The rape situation left him little choice. He allowed his lips to be parted by the knob-head of the dick. It was hard, long, and big. Mekong slammed his right fist hard into his left palm, six inches above Drosky's face. Drosky took a deep breath, and dropped his lower jaw, just the way he'd instructed his wife, but ever so much more tenderly, before she was even his fiancée.

The circumference of the monster cock raised Drosky's upper lip high enough to brush his thick moustache into his nose. He was revolted by the slick slide of the huge cockhead depressing his tongue and probing back toward his defenseless throat. The muscular in-and-out thrust and tease began. Mekong was on show. The drinking and bets increased. Mekong punched his fist and palm together again.

Queer to them, Drosky knew, was only when a man was on the receiving end. The man dishing it out was not only untainted, but was about as manly and patriotic as a soldier could be. To the VC, the sexual abuse of an invading American was an honorable way to insult the aggressive macho warriors who, so much bigger than Asians, dropped in full battle armor out of the sky into the forbidden jungle, light-years from the lives they'd known.

Mekong's big fat dick forced its way with vengeance into Drosky's virgin mouth. With the bets running high as blood lust, the heavy-built VC took Drosky's blond head in his brown hands, and, pulling his dick out to the wet edge of Drosky's lips, spread his thick legs, and stanced his hard butt, for the final deep ram past Drosky's teeth, across his tongue, and finally...finally...through the raped and bleeding back of his mouth, deep down his gagging throat.

Drosky felt the man's huge military rod slam deep back in his head, and then descend, penetrating, down his gullet. He had never felt more violated in his life. Mekong held Drosky's face impaled on his cock. Drosky went through gagging into choking and felt himself heading down a deep dark airless corridor. His penultimate thought was refusal to die like

this. Instinctively, with hardly any purchase around the big dick, routed through his mouth, and rooted in his throat, Drosky fucking goddam tried to bite the pervert's dick off.

All hell broke loose!

Mekong screamed at Drosky's toothsome lunge. Near Drosky's left ear, a pistol fired loud into the ground. Mekong yanked his bitten dick out fast. Drosky tasted the film of blood where his teeth had scrapped the cock. He wished he'd more than only skinned the gook dick. He knew what was coming as Mekong's heavily muscled arms drove the hard-handed fists into his face. Mekong beat and kicked Drosky half-unconscious. He slumped over into the mud, falling off to his side. He could not reach the ground, not even for a moment's rest. His arms, still tied at the wrists behind his back, stretched beyond pain up his back, higher than his head. Half-kneeling, half-hanging, he passed out.

When Drosky awoke, he knew he was in worse trouble. The full length of his body had been completely coiled in tight hemp rope. Like wire around a spool. The VC squatted on their haunches around him, seeming to map out strategies for some mission Drosky could not make out. Occasionally one of them yelled at him and kicked him. This was it. He was sure they'd hang him by his heels, skin him alive, chop off his nuts, and finally his head.

A truck pulled up and stopped, brakes squeaking, motor running, next to him, blue exhaust choking him. Several VC came at Drosky.

"Open mouth!" Captain Bullethead shouted.

"Back so soon?" Drosky said. His mouth was parched.

"Open mouth!"

"You guys are real oral." Drosky was no silent fool.

"Open mouth!" Bullethead brooked no resistance.

Drosky refused. He locked his cracked lips together.

Bullethead took one of Drosky's blond-stubbled cheeks in each of his martial hands and squeezed hard until Drosky's eyes winced and his mouth was forced open in pain. Bullethead signalled to an ugly young soldier. He smiled. Drosky fixed on the ugly soldier's missing front teeth. The soldier crumpled old newspaper into balls and shoved them one by one into Drosky's mouth. Drosky wished he had kicked out the ugly motherfucker's teeth himself. Bullethead kept the agonizing pressure-pinch on his cheeks. A second soldier took Bullethead's swagger and shoved the dry newspaper balls farther over Drosky's tongue and deep into his throat.

Drosky started to gag and panic. He could no longer breathe through his mouth. The hard dirty fists forced the dry newspaper rolls in until his

mouth and cheeks were stuffed. He could not salivate. He was scared. Death in combat had always been heroically, patriotically acceptable. But not this.

Drosky stared hard at that ugly, grinning, broken-toothed mother-fucker's mouth. He memorized the face. He would remember it if he had to take vengeance in hell. His anger saved him. He was mad enough. He'd beat these fuckers. Somehow. Someday. Somewhere. He concentrated. By will alone, he breathed around the dry wads of newsprint clogging his throat. Through his nose. Slowly. Carefully. Evenly.

Then the grinning toothless asshole blindfolded him.

The VC lifted Drosky's body, tightly coiled in endless rope, into the truck. He was helpless. For the first time in his wholesome, athletic, All-American life, he was scared shitless.

They drove him slowly in a 72-hour convoy toward Hanoi. They stopped in villages along the route to display him, the bound and gagged American war criminal. At one stop, he was sure, when they took the blindfold off that he was about to be beheaded. At another village, a crowd of more than five hundred soldiers milled around, seeming intent on stoning him to death. At another encampment, he was stood bound and gagged and wired to a post in front of a firing squad. The boys were, all of them, recruits no more than twelve or thirteen. For an hour, they were put through repeated execution drills: the command, the count, the captured American M-16 rifles, their cold young eyes squinting to the rifle sites, the raised sword, the shouted command to *Fire*, the empty clicks of a dozen unloaded rifles barreling in and sited on Drosky's face and chest and groin.

During another convoy stop, the VC rolled and wrapped Drosky's big body in filthy blankets that completely covered his head and face. They left him alone, unguarded, and bound in the enclosed bed of the truck. Sweat poured off his big body. Again he felt he was suffocating, dying, smothering under a wrap of dirty rags at the side of a nameless road far from home.

He vowed to escape. He struggled, unable to move any of his body coiled in the tight rope. He rolled his head side to side, as much as he could, trying like a man driven mad to get free of the smothering wool. No one paid any attention to his struggling. He was one American. One man. They were thousands. They were getting to him. His bodily functions were out of control. Everything was getting way out of control.

Within minutes, Bullethead unwrapped Drosky's head, removed the blindfold, and pulled the newspaper from his mouth.

"You are war criminal," Bullethead said. His voice was as even as his steady dark eyes. He knew how to exploit fear. "We are going to hang you."

"Horseshit," Drosky whispered. His tongue was thick in his mouth. "Horseshit!"

"For attacking and insulting the Vietnamese people, you must be punished."

Drosky remembered the young Marine and the silent Major back in the war-trial compound. Nobody in this day and age treated prisoners of war this way. There was the Geneva Convention. North Vietnam was a signatory.

"Geneva Convention," Bullethead said, "is for prisoners of war. You are...war criminal."

Bullethead signalled for a half-dozen soldiers to hoist Drosky out of the truck. They untied the rope winding around his body, but they kept his hands tied behind his back. The stench of his own flesh no longer bothered Drosky. He was beginning to like the aggressive smell of his own big American body. He figured it was about the only weapon he had left.

The VC called him a filthy pig.

Drosky cut his cheese as loud as he had ever farted during gas-lighting ceremonies in high school, when he and his jock buddies had drunk a lot of beer, pissed a lot of piss, eaten a lot of chili dogs and lit with matches the gas-farts they blew out their asses as they mooned each other in contests for the loudest and most explosive stinkers.

A filthy pig? He'd show them a filthy American pig.

He farted again.

The VC backed away from him.

Bullethead ordered him strung up by the neck, with only his toes touching the ground. The bright sun burned into his face. He squinted, reconning the area. Tied near a truck, similar to the one in which the VC had transported Drosky, was the young Marine. Drosky was surprised, and not too happy to see the kid again. He was a survivor at heart, but Drosky could tell, the way that Bullethead approached the kid, that he planned to waste him. Better he'd been shot dead than stand in as their amusement for their bored night's encampment. Drosky was glad he himself was older and tougher than the young Marine. His Academy training warned him the VC were perverts when it came to Americans.

The kid's too juicy, Drosky thought, much too juicy to be out here, a thousand years from nowhere.

The blistering sun was setting over the far trees, sinking into the horizon like the last light protecting them from the heart of darkness.

The twilight encouraged the hungry VC.

They stripped the young Marine naked, more naked than the kid had ever been, only six months before, showering after a Friday night high-school football game. More naked than he had been the night of the day that goddam gold wedding ring had been slipped on his finger. More naked than his first group shower as a USMC boot.

Drosky figured the kid was, like him and his own son, from some small town where they never thought of circumcising their boys. He had an unusually large lip of foreskin hooding the blind head of his healthy cornfed cock.

Bullethead directed his special vengeance against the young blond Marine. The VC spread the kid belly-down over a metal oil drum. His full rounded white buttocks glowed in the twilight's last gleaming. Vagrant clouds of cooking-fire smoke blew over his body and toward Drosky.

Drosky tried to look away, but Bullethead assured him what he feared. This was for Drosky's benefit. An experienced flier could be used; but young inexperienced Marines were pleasantly expendable. Some VC hunted Americans for sport. For the pleasure of the slow kill.

Drosky wished for the whoop-whoop of a chopper. For a direct artillery hit to blow them all away. Anything. But the Nam night was quiet. Only the occasional far-off boom of an explosion muffled by distance broke the low murmur of the jungle night.

The young Marine lay tied immobile over the 55-gallon drum with TEXAS OIL stenciled on its top. Two lines of VC formed on either side of his spread legs, nodding to each other and taking wagers. The Marine's bare butt was higher than his head and feet. The VC soldier at the head of each line held a rubber fan belt in his hand.

On a signal from Bullethead, the alternating beating of the Marine's butt began. The VC on the left swung his arm repeatedly over his head like a lasso, and then, with a war cry that broke the quiet of the firelit encampment, ran full-speed at the Marine's defenseless body, arm swinging to full arc, slicing down across the unmarred white meat of the American ass. The kid reared his head as the slice of rubber slashed red-hot into his flesh.

Then the soldier at the head of the left column took his running lick with his frayed rubber fan belt, striking a red welt crisscross the slash from the right. Passing the fan belts back to the head of the lines, the grisly relay race of whipping tore first the skin, then the bloody flesh, and finally into the deep muscle of the Marine's buttocks.

Bound and helpless, the Marine found and became his own his best silent courage, became his shouts, became cries, became screams, became shrieking, became moans, until, Drosky knew, his voice shredded and was gone.

Bullethead ordered five or six of the soldiers to stroke their own short-arm dicks to penetrate the groaning Marine's bloody ass. Drosky hated the sonsabitches mounting the bloody butt with no more passion than their quick humiliating vengeance. Disciplined to ferocious obedience, they shot on command, shouting their patriotic hate for the stinking American. Their dicks dripped with the Marine's blood and sweat. They laughed, and spit on him, and congratulated each other like night marauders after successful penetration of enemy lines.

Drosky disengaged. He composed a list. Anything to somehow balance this horror half a world away from everything he ever knew. He'd buy his wife a ring. He'd buy his son his first ball glove. He'd buy himself a car stereo. Some cassettes...a goddam hunting rifle. To kill the goddam sonsabitches. His fear had been one thing. This horror...this atrocity...was another. Drosky had heard how American soldiers massacred the villagers in Mylai, and worse; but all the fucking politics and all the fucking villages-wasted-to-save-them had nothing to do with this boy's personal final agony.

"You like show?" Bullethead spoke in close to Drosky's face, puffy from the noose of rope tightening slowly around his neck.

Drosky spit at him.

Bullethead smashed his face with an uppercut.

The VC toyed with the tortured Marine. Intent on playing him out. They untied him from the oil drum. He punched out at them with what was left of his husky strength. Drosky was glad to see some fight left in him. The VC wrestled him to the ground, and staked him out spreadeagle on his back. Bullethead ordered the Marine's wedding ring pulled off his finger. He pointed with his swagger stick at the dirty blond penis. The VC laughed at the size of the finger-ring compared to the thick American dick. In one rough-handed minute, they spit-worked the Marine's big cockhead through the ring, and forced the gold band down tight around its root.

The pressure of the hands pulling, forcing, stubbing his dick through the metal caused the whipped and spreadeagled Marine's cock to stand at full attention. Drosky watched the helpless kid look in horror at the betrayal of his own dick, hardening against his will, flopped back on his dirty belly, then rising, turning, filling—its thick veins made thicker by the strangling pressure of the ring.

A young dick on a naked man, bound, and exposed, full of heavy unmlkled sperm, aches to blow its pressurized nut off. The Marine's body, caked with sweat and dust and slime, was too resilient. He was taking too long to die.

Drosky knew what was coming. He watched the involuntary hardening of the Marine's cock. He watched the filthy shaft of the abused dick writhing, filling, rising. He watched, unbelieving.

The big USMC dick pointed straight up from the spreadeagled body. The shaft, rooted in crud-caked blond crotch hair, was dark with dirt; but the pressure of the wedding ring finally forced open the big lip of uncut foreskin.

Drosky could hardly believe the size of the big wet pink head rising rosy-clean and bulbous, crowning the boy's huge shaft, with the heavy collar of foreskin rolling back under the intense pressure.

The head glistened above the filthy tortured body. A drop of clear juice pearled up in the Marine's piss slit. It rose, bubbled bright, then flowed slow and wet down the shaft of filthy cock.

The VC gathered in close, cutting off Drosky's view. Something in him made him think how fucking proud he was that these envious fucks could see a beaten, tortured, bound American male body with enough balls to affront them with dick harder and bigger than they had ever seen before.

The young blond Marine's erection was his ultimate "Fuck you, asshole!"

Bullethead ordered his soldiers to stand back. He wanted Drosky's view clear and unobstructed. With a pointing of his swagger stick, Bullethead signalled for a renegade Montagnard scout to carry out the finish of the night's entertainment.

The Montagnard, from a primitive village time had forgot, squatted next to the Marine's body. Drosky could not afford any longer to feel sorry for the kid. Any feeling now was too expensive. He tried to think of nothing as he watched with increasing disconnection from the scene.

The naked Montagnard rubbed something, grease and something, across the broad hairy chest of the Marine, stroking the curling mat of blond fur almost sensuously, working the oil into the blond brush, across the chest, down the hairy belly, and deep into the crotch around the huge erect dick. The young kid's body glistened in the firelight.

The sky was moonless.

The Montagnard, squatting on his haunches next to the Marine, slipped his hand into his breechclout, and pulled out an American-made

lighter. In one hand, he held his rifle. With the other, he thumb-rolled the lighter to a flickering flame.

For a moment, the bright intensity of fire in the dark Montagnard hand froze the encampment in place. The small flame threw huge shadows against the dark trees.

The Montagnard moved the flame in close between the Marine's oil-slick pecs.

Drosky saw the smooth nipples reflect the flame.

In one swift move, the Montagnard touched the flame to the young Marine's chest.

Ignition!

The Marine's chest flamed up in twin mounds. A fast, burning flash of grease and hair crossed his chest, then raced fuse-like down the length of his furry belly to his grease-packed groin. The flames exploded around his heavy-haired balls, and seared up the flesh of the huge erect cock.

The Marine's body arched taut against the spreadeagle stakes. His wrist-bound hands turned to fists. His ankle-bound feet pointed toes down. The flash of flames burned for no more than seconds, but Drosky counted them an eternity.

The tortured Marine had no voice left to scream.

Drosky shouted for him.

Bullethead moved in close to Drosky. "Bo rown," he said, "Bo rown." "Bow down."

Drosky understood. He was on his toes, hanging by his neck. Bullethead wanted the American to bow down. He was tempting Drosky to hang himself.

Drosky stared instead out into the heart of darkness. Then closed his eyes.

Bullethead raised his hand and with toughened fingers forcibly pulled Drosky's eyelids open and turned Drosky's face toward the Marine.

The Montagnard unsheathed his knife. With one hand he pulled large pinches of muscular flesh from the Marine's seared chest and sides and belly. With each pinch, he carefully sliced the blade through the skin.

Drosky prayed the kid would die in shock; but the strength and health of his young body held off agonizingly even that brutal comfort. He writhed in the tight bonds as the Montagnard carved superficial flesh wound after flesh wound. The knife dripped red in the firelight.

The VC were losing interest in the renegade Montagnard ritual. It was night. They were tiring of their deathsport. The winners wanted to collect from the losers the wagers they had won.

Bullethead nodded at the Montagnard.

The dark face grinned. With his knife, he skillfully skinned the Marine's uncut penis from head to base. The raw shaft of the cock foamed red. The Marine, his hoarse voice reaching for one final scream, opened his face: mouth and eyes and flaring nostrils.

The Montagnard reached down for the one big handful of full blond balls. He slipped his blade deftly in under the sac. With one clean upward stroke, he castrated the Marine whose eyes, to Drosky, saw nothing more. Not even the revolver that Bullethead forced deep down and back into the Marine's open, screaming mouth.

There was only one bullet in the gun. Drosky agonized each unmerciful moment as Bullethead grinned and clicked, clicked, clicked the chambers, prolonging more for Drosky than for the Marine, to whom nothing any longer mattered, until, finally, after the fourth slow click, the hammer found the one loaded chamber, exploded, and blew the handsome Marine's face away forever.

Something drained out of Drosky. Something subtracted itself from his soul. He heard sounds, like other voices speaking. They were saying: "Steven Drosky. Lieutenant J. G. Service Number: 8291930." But it was not other voices. It was his voice in the darkness, mumbling in the sleeping camp.

Drosky knew deep down in the hollow growing in him that he was a prisoner, that no one would ever touch him tenderly again. The life left behind him had been a good one. Now no one even knew he was alive.

He was no longer flesh and blood.

He was a shadow soldier.

No one who cared for him or mattered to him even knew for certain any longer that he existed.

* * * *

For eight solid months, deep in the solitary confinement of a fetid tiger cage somewhere near Hanoi, Drosky fought to keep his sanity, and as much physical strength as he could scrape off the tin-plate diet. He ate putrid meat paste cut sometimes with pieces of pork fat, watery pumpkin soup, and small loaves of dirty bread pocked with weevils and rat feces.

Guards walked over the grates above him. They ignored him. He exercised. He meditated. No one spoke to him. He did not exist. He scratched designs on the wall. No one listened when he spoke. He pulled lice from his filthy prison clothes. He knew other Americans were nearby. He had

heard, on two occasions, a man's far-off whistling of "The High and the Mighty."

Drosky was sitting on his wooden cot, meditating, when the first American he had seen in nearly a year was pushed into the small cell. He looked like a dirty wet rag.

The two men stared at each other.

It was the longest moment that Drosky had ever lived. Longer than all the solitary confinement. Longer because recognizable human touch was only an arm's reach away.

The two prisoners moved slowly toward each other unable to speak.

Drosky knew only that with one second more without some touch in the middle of all this lonely hell, with the warmth of another human so close, after so long, he would crack and snap forever.

The other prisoner was some shadow of his former husky self; but his eyes, staring unbelievably at Drosky, burned bright as coals. He had thought this new cell would be as empty as all the other cages in which he had been kept.

Drosky reached out to shake the man's hand. Their firm grips seemed some long-unused gesture, from a world a million miles away. The man reached for Drosky's arm. The two prisoners, complete strangers, pulled themselves close into one another's bodies. They hugged and held and cried and patted with an understanding born of their long solitary imprisonment.

They touched in ways unspoken. In ways that only men who have endured long torment can comfort one another. They lay together in a way to soothe deep wounds that the wives they knew they'd never see again could never have been able to understand and reach.

They were complete strangers, but they were soldiers, prisoners, men suddenly together, perhaps for only one brief night. They were men starving for human affection, tenderly exchanging all the grinding, weeping, hugging, laughing consolation they could give one another.

"The war." The man whispered in the last chill before dawn. "The war," he whispered softly into Drosky's ear, "is over." He touched Drosky's startled face, and soothed him back down, holding him on the cot.

"Home!" Drosky's voice was hoarse.

"No." The man spoke quickly. He could not let the defenses he knew Drosky had built up, crumble. He would need them all. He told Drosky how nearly eight hundred POWs had been repatriated some months before. "We lost," the man said. "We evacuated Nam with honor. They told me that when I was jailed up in Hanoi, and they laughed. Some honor.

We surrendered. I think we surrendered. They sent most of us back. They said they sent all of us back.”

“O my dear sweet Jesus Shit,” Drosky said, “we’re bargaining chips.”

“They’re going to fuck with us until they’re tired of fucking with us.”

In the hot July, depressed, Drosky and his cellmate lost all appetite. They were shackled to the bunks in iron ankle stocks and beaten more frequently. The uneaten food was collected by the Vietnamese to feed the pigs raised on the prison grounds. Drosky was no way ready to help the enemy.

He dumped their uneaten rice into the slop-bucket they shared.

The guards usually steered clear of the loosely lidded slop cans; but new guards had replaced the old. They needed to make their impression. They were harder, less lax in discipline. They had been schooled to bring the Americans to their knees. The regime had finally revealed their plans to use the shadow prisoners they had denied, and would continue to deny, had ever existed.

The new guards hauled Drosky from his cell for the first time in months for interrogation. They accused him of yet another crime against the Vietnamese people: he had thrown away his uneaten ration of food into the cell slop can.

For an hour they beat him, and then with his cellmate, surrounded by guards carrying a dozen slop buckets, Drosky was marched to the shallow mudwallow where the cans were daily emptied.

A new guard, so young he was vicious in the enjoyment he savored in the beatings he gave, handed Drosky a bamboo screen. His meaning was clear. Drosky and his cellmate were to use the sifter in the mudwallow to reclaim the rice Drosky had thrown away. The young guard drove them into the wallow with a rubber truncheon.

Calf-deep in the slime and mud and filth, the two prisoners were forced to kneel. The guard, in heavy rubber boots, waded in behind them. With both hands on a bamboo stick, he forced Drosky’s cellmate’s head toward the bobbing surface of the pit.

For long seconds, Drosky feared they were going to make them eat the stuff. Negative, Drosky thought, I’ll die first.

But the guard pulled back. He knew other plans existed for keeping these Americans as prizes of war. Their skill with weaponry and English was to be used sometime; no one knew when; and they were more valuable alive than dead. And alive, there were vast periods of long nights of vengeance, of long chances to discipline and humiliate and break them to be tractable to the needs of the new postwar regime.

The guards kept them on their knees sifting the rice from the muck for hours. Both men were exhausted from the screening. Drosky had to hold his cellmate's head up from the slimy surface.

The young guard laughed, and said something, which Drosky interpreted, about how the two Americans at night lay together. The guard spit at them, and ordered the soldiers to remove them from the mess pool.

They were hosed down. Drosky's cellmate was locked into bone-biting torture cuffs behind his back, and his feet were secured in metal stocks at the foot of his cot. Drosky, who was not secured in the cell, had to help him with his pajama trousers when he had to use the bucket. Drosky had to wash and clean him.

Bound hand and foot for weeks, the man asked Drosky to be tender to him, to touch him, to lie upon him for warmth. Drosky was no longer surprised at his own feelings. He no longer cared what anyone would think. No one who counted would ever know how relieving was his contact with the bound flier whose only relief was in Drosky. Finally, Drosky no longer even started the night sleeping on his own cot. He found a way to curl in next to his bound companion.

The new guards woke the two men late one night, and beat them both.

Drosky was clubbed senseless in the corner of the cell, watching his friend, still bound to the cot, being beaten with rubber truncheons and bamboo sticks. Drosky remembered seeing the thrashing man's nose flatten, turn sideways, break, and gush blood. "I love you, man!" That was the last Drosky saw of his cellmate.

When he regained consciousness, he was alone again in solitary confinement. In the slow grind of months, Drosky picked up enough with his pidgin vocabulary to learn of other Americans shot down years before over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were being transferred slowly, in great secrecy, from Laos and Cambodia, to Hanoi.

The new regime was expert in reeducating the fliers. Some caved in under extreme torture. Some cooperated out of sheer boredom after years of solitary confinement. The Communists needed the Americans they had shadowboxed away. The US fliers were needed to train a new wave of young VC troops how to repair and fly the planes and choppers abandoned years before in the hasty retreats from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

They teased Drosky with newspaper clippings. He grew sick at the mention of the term MIA. He wasn't missing in action. He was a prisoner of a war he was still fighting, of a war that was long over, as far as the world

was concerned. But not for Drosky. As long as he was held captive, he vowed to resist as long as he had strength and life.

No one, he knew in his heart of hearts, was really, truly trying to negotiate for the MIAs about whom Hanoi claimed to know nothing. He could hear the other American prisoners, voices muffled, in faraway cells. He learned to tap a code on metal pipes that brought coded messages back. For some, there were small brutalizations, in the cages, on the spot. Others were taken off to full-scale torture sessions. Men were disappearing from their solitary cages. Drosky knew that some of the disappeared were already teaching in classrooms. Those who refused had been murdered.

Drosky needed to survive. In every way he could he flipped the bird. He hated the enemy. He hated them when they finally decided it was his time for higher education. He hated them as they broke into his cell, surrounded him, and dangled the coils of torture ropes before his face.

He was determined.

They were determined.

They would make him of use to them, or they would kill him.

Finally it had come time to shit or get off the pot.

Drosky felt a thrill of fear.

In the boredom of interminable solitary confinement, he had almost begun to welcome the rough touches of the guards.

They pulled Drosky's arms behind him, tying his wrists together. He was blindfolded, and his shorts were ripped off, exposing his buttocks, balls, and dick. The guards punched his gut and kicked at his ass and shoulders. One kneed his nuts and sent Drosky sprawling to the floor, scraping his face. He rolled on his side. Winded, he felt hands binding his ankles tightly together with coarse rope. They rolled him onto his belly. The guards took the long torture ropes, cut to precise lengths, and tied tight half-hitches up Drosky's left arm from wrist to shoulder. As each loop was strung, a guard stood on Drosky's arm, and pulled the rope tight into his lean muscular flesh. Again, the rope was wrapped a few more inches up Drosky's arm and tied into a new half-hitch. Every several hitches the guards stopped and slapped Drosky's forearm and biceps like some salami to be coil-wrapped as tight as possible.

Then the guards half-hitched Drosky's other arm.

The bondage was torture and pain itself.

Three guards pulled Drosky's separately bound arms together behind his back, and tied his bound arms together, passing ropes even tighter around on top of the first bindings, wrapping them excruciatingly together: wrists, forearms, elbows, all touching, and then, with their booted

feet standing on his arms, they cinched tight against each other his upper arms, all the way from his elbows up to his broad shoulders, until his shoulders were nearly touching.

Drosky felt both shoulders begin to pull out of the sockets. He was in guttural pain. Its center was in his chest which strained out from the tension of the ropes pulling his shoulders back above his bound arms. His arms had already lost all feeling. They were swelling, deadly gray, and cold.

Then he felt their hands tying his legs in tight half-hitches from his ankles up to his knees.

Drosky thought this torture-bondage was the worst he had ever suffered.

Until he felt them raise up his torso.

Until he felt them raise his tightly trussed arms by the wrists, up, backwards, up his back, and above his head.

Until he felt the guard's knee forcing his back forward.

Until he felt the knee's pressure on his back, forcing his face down past his dick and balls, until his nose was between his knees, and his blind-folded eyes were squashed against his legs.

Until he felt the hands pulling his dislocating arms by his wrists back up over his bowed-down head, tying his wrists pointing straight up from his shoulders to a rope that stretched taut forward and down to his bound ankles.

Until in the room with the piss-soaked floor, there was only his screaming, his mouth muffled against his own naked thighs.

Drosky concentrated against their vengeance...*to give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades...*their knees and hands bent him expertly...*to continue to resist by all means possible...*knowing in their long experience with torture...*to make no oral or written statement disloyal to my country...*that they were too vengeful to let him escape by dying...*to give only name, rank, service number and date of birth...*knowing he could only stand so much immobile, suffocating, wrenching, spasming pain...*that I am an American fighting man...*one word in the shadow of this killing pain...*responsible for my actions...*that in all this torture, one word from him, one word...one word only, one word he could never say...*dedicated to the principles which made my country free...*one word that could stop them...*to trust in God...*one word no one a world away would ever, could ever hear him say...*and in the United States of America...*one screaming, broken, thigh-muffled, gagging, pleading *yes!*

