

0900 Hours
October 13, 1969
95th Evacuation Hospital
APO 96337
Da Nang, South Vietnam

Hot. That word didn't seem appropriate for the heat of Vietnam. The fiery depths of hell was more like it. Add in the oppressive humidity, it was like breathing hot water from a sauna bath. The heat index was well over 120 degrees. Meat started cooking between 105-115 degrees. Her OD-green jungle fatigues were soaked in sweat. And the country smelled different. Not fresh like the hot plains of Texas, but a moldy, greasy, unpleasant odor.

Cathy looked out the open side window of the UH-1 helicopter, or *Huey*, as the thick dark green canopy of trees below the skids went by in a blur at 125 miles per hour. The door gunner scanned back and forth with his M60 machine gun attached to the cabin ceiling with two bungee cords. A belt of armor-piercing ammo ran from the breech into a green metal ammo box on the floor.

On the map given to her at the airport, the 95th Evacuation Hospital sat on a jetty of land near Da Nang, listed as the Son Tra Peninsula. Monkey Mountain was north of the hospital complex and, to the south, the South China Sea.

In the distance, Cathy saw waves of the cerulean blue ocean lapping against a white sand beach. She hadn't expected a beach. A strip of mud, dirt, maybe, but not sand.

Inland of the ocean was the 95th Evacuation Hospital. A maze of prefab corrugated metal large and small Quonset-type huts, standard rectangular buildings, haphazardly constructed elevated wooden structures, and tents separated by asphalt and dirt roads. Sandbags and six-foot corrugated steel sand-filled abutments protected everything from rocket and mortar fragments. Jeeps, deuce and a half trucks, and ambulances transited between buildings.

The tennis court in one corner was more unexpected than the beach. Cathy didn't have a racket or play tennis. Given that was a possible activity, she might learn if she had the time.

The 95th Evac was a referral center for the region's complex cases, including neurology, dermatology, special radiologic procedures, oral surgery, psychiatric consultations, orthopedic surgery, neuro-surgery, and general surgery.

A fence of concertina razor wire surrounded the camp perimeter with three heavily armed guard towers on each side of the square.

On the corner opposite the tennis court on the beach side sat the chopper pad with a red cross painted in the center. That's where the chopper headed. It slowed, transitioned from forward flight into a hover, and descended, kicking up sand blown in from the beach.

With a small bump, the skids touched the asphalt. Cathy jumped out with her duffle bag and ran across the pad to the man standing at the edge. The smell that hit her in the face reminded her of the Dallas stockyards on a blazing hot July day. It was true the Vietnamese used human shit as fertilizer.

"And you are?" the man asked. He was about five foot six, slightly overweight, and about fifteen years older than her with graying brown hair.

"Second Lieutenant Alexander, sir," Cathy answered, noting the silver eagle pinned on the right collar of the man's green fatigues. His left collar held a caduceus. She handed over her orders.

He looked at them. "Lieutenant, I'm Dr. Doug McKay. Welcome. We've been expecting you."

"Thank you, sir."

"Follow me."

As they walked through the camp, Dr. McKay pointed out the hospital, chapel, armory, motor pool, pathology lab, blood bank, mess hall, living quarters, headquarters, showers, and the most important place for the majority of the camp residents, the enlisted and officers' club.

The Welcome sign—*Welcome to the 95th Evacuation Hospital "Hells Half Acre" Revisited (SMBL)*—didn't relieve her apprehension.

She fingered her caduceus as they passed the hospital mission statement printed on a large square white sign:

1. Support the US Forces, Vietnam, Free World, Military Assistance Forces and Civilian War Casualties Located Within Northern I Corps Area
 2. Treat All Classes of Patients Within Capabilities
 3. Evacuate Patients as Required
 4. Provide Area Medical Support
 5. Support Civic Action Programs
- Conserve The Fighting Strength

Finally they stopped in front of one of the small metal Quonset huts. Three wooden steps led up to a screen door.

"These are your quarters. They're called a hooch around here. You share them with another nurse, Lieutenant Paula Willows. You go on duty at 0800 in the morning for your orientation." McKay turned and left.

Cathy carried her duffle bag inside and set it on the unmade bunk. An Army-issue OD-green wool blanket, almost white sheets, and a worn pillow were stacked on the lumpy mattress. She sat beside her duffle bag. The bunk frame squeaked in protest underneath her.

"Home sweet home," she muttered.