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HOOTCH 8

A Combat Surgeon Remembers Vietnam

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Chapter One

Goodbye, New York

"Run to Canada?" I asked.

"Of course run to Canada, you idiot! What are you doing going to Vietnam? It's a slaughter-fest out there, you'll get your ass shot off! And besides, where am I going to get some decent wine around here if you fly the coop?"

My friend Phil Neuberg was never at a loss for words. A recent graduate of Columbia Law School with a good job, Phil had been fortunate enough to draw a very high number in the draft lottery, virtually ensuring his freedom from military service forever. I was not so lucky. Here I was in April 1969, two months away from the end of my residency training in orthopedic surgery, and suddenly I was a commissioned officer in the United States Navy.

Back in 1964, I had signed up for the Berry Plan, whereby the Navy would allow me to complete my residency training in exchange for two years of active duty immediately afterward. Who thought in 1964 that we would be in this war for another decade? And why had I chosen the Navy? For no reason other than that I loved the dress blue uniform. Did I know that all Marine Corps doctors came from the Navy? I did not. (Marines are strictly combatants. All of their ancillary personnel such as doctors, dentists, nurses, lawyers, clergy, and administrators come from the Navy.) So here I was assigned to Charlie Company, First Medical Battalion Hospital, First Marine Division, in Danang, Republic of Vietnam. Totally screwed, no way I could get out of it. But…run to Canada? As a commissioned naval officer with the rank of lieutenant, escaping to Canada would qualify as a form of desertion.

"Sorry, Phil, but you know I'm a naturalized American citizen since 1961, you know I made a commitment to give the Navy two years, and now I have to go. I can't run. Besides, somebody has to care for those poor injured bastards over there, might as well be me."

"Somebody? Somebody?" he shouted back. "Paul, you *are* crazy! They've got career doctors in the service who love that crap, they don't need you civilian docs over there! You ask me, Toronto looks more beautiful by the minute!"

Phil was a good friend who cared about me, but he was wrong. I could not be a deserter. I also knew that if I ran to Canada or elsewhere to avoid service in Vietnam, I would scuttle my future in the US. I could never practice medicine in this country with a clear conscience, and would feel an awful guilt each time I saw a wounded veteran crutch-walking down the street. I would embarrass my parents, my younger brother and sister. But most of all, running would make me feel ashamed, like a coward.

"Thanks, Phil, but no thanks. Toronto may be a beautiful place, but not for me."

Instead, I suggested we go pick up our dates, pop open a couple of good bottles, and see what happens. I lived in a small but cozy studio apartment on East 88th Street, which Phil wanted to sublet when I left come July. My date Marina lived on 63rd Street and we had arranged for a double date with her roommate Natalie. Marina was smart, blonde, shapely, and very proud of her ample bosom. Each time she leaned forward or crossed her arms, her breasts would bulge temptingly enough to make eyes pop. Blessed with a brilliant smile and an infectious laugh, she was an up-and-coming fashion designer who dressed beautifully. Her roommate Natalie, quiet and dark, took an immediate liking to Phil. Why not? Tall, handsome, funny, and a lawyer, he had an open, carefree way about him which put women at ease.

"Puligny-Montrachet 1965, ladies, one of my favorite white wines," I said, popping open the bottle on Marina's coffee table and pouring some for each of us.

"Would anybody prefer red? I have a nice Chateau Talbot 1963," I offered.

"Just pour, Brief, don't lecture," interrupted Phil. "The man likes to talk about wine even more than he likes to drink it!"

Marina was a gifted athlete with great stamina, and sex with her was bit like white water rafting: exhilarating, noisy, and tiring. A distance runner and aerobic dancer, she often left me breathless. Our activities typically extended through the night, with me dashing off to the hospital before 5 A.M., and her leaving for work later in the morning. Unencumbered by any squeamishness about nudity, she liked to walk around my apartment undressed, especially since I made no effort to conceal my admiration for her near-perfect "Vargas Girl" shape.

But she was not my steady girlfriend for a number of reasons. First, we both knew I was going off to war in a matter of months, making my future uncertain. Second, Marina already had a steady boyfriend who wanted to marry her, a prospect which at the age of twenty-four, she found distasteful. But the real reason, I admit, was the sheer number of options available to a twenty-nine-year-old bachelor in 1969 New York City, smack in the middle of the sexual revolution. The parties, the bars, the parks, even the work places offered up a dizzying array of romantic possibilities I found myself unable to resist. My dating choices seemed to be unlimited, and with most of the women I met being on "the pill," there was little to worry about. Still, I was always discreet. I never boasted or joked about my so-called sexual conquests. I would politely decline to name names or discuss any sexual details when asked, and after a while my good friends stopped asking.

How could I say goodbye to my life in New York? How could I part with my friends, my colleagues, my single life? I was aware that I was leaving for a distant and hostile country with no certainty of a safe return. Should I write a long farewell letter and mail out copies?

In May 1969 I finally decided that I needed to have one last huge party and invite everyone I knew, without exception. I decided to go all out. After all, who knew when I would have such an opportunity again? The party would be held at my apartment, with the best wine and food I could afford. All my pals from college, medical school, orthopedic residency, and bachelorhood would be invited. I faced a dilemma about which women to invite, and in the end, resolved to invite them all: every woman I was currently dating, had previously dated, or hoped to date in the future. One might wonder how I could invite them all. Wouldn't they be sore at me? But when I contacted nearly every woman I had ever gone out with and invited her to my farewell party, the vast majority accepted. Of course, they were well aware my buddies would all be there and, anyway, you never know who you'll meet at a New York City party.

On Saturday night, June 25, 1969, more than one hundred and fifty people in tuxedos and evening gowns wandered in and out of my apartment. Why had I asked my friends to come in black tie? If I were to get my ass shot off in Vietnam and never return, I figured the least my friends could do was look their best to see me off.

It was mayhem, it was pandemonium, it was wonderful. Wall to wall hugs, kisses, few if any tears, with music, food, wine, laughter, and one four-foot bottle of Chianti, which my brother Ben accidentally danced into and broke, releasing an overwhelming aroma of cheap red wine into the place. It was probably the most fun I've ever had in my life. No speeches, no lengthy goodbyes, no gifts. By the wee hours, everybody had gone, while Marina, Phil, and Ben stayed to help me clean up.

I slept for the next two days and was awakened by a loud knock on my door. A Federal Express envelope had arrived containing my orders from the United States Navy Adjutant General: I was to report on July 19, 1969, to the United States Marine Corps base at Camp Pendleton, California for boot camp training.

Chapter Two

‘This child saved us all’

In order to understand the sense of duty I felt toward my adopted country, you’d have to know a little bit about my past. I was born in Soroca, Romania on July 11, 1939 to Itta Libman and Sigmund Brief. For some reason, it was my maternal grandfather Bentzion Libman who was tasked with officially registering my birth. As the story goes, it took him a full three days to make his way to City Hall, so that my official date of birth is July 14, 1939.

Soroca, which was also my mother’s birthplace, was a small town of some four thousand souls in Bessarabia, a Russian-speaking province of Romania. My father was from Chernowitz in Bucovina, a German-speaking province formerly part of the Hapsburg Empire, some fifty miles away. When World War II broke out on September 1, 1939, just six weeks after my birth, my parents fled westward. My mother would never see her parents again.

During the war, we were wind-tossed all over Romania, running from town to town, from one refugee camp to the next. At some point, my father fell ill with spotted typhus, an epidemic that by the end of the war would claim tens of thousands of lives. Even with a sick husband, my mother managed to drag us from place to place, all the while nurturing and protecting us. I remember very little of those early years, except for vague sensory memories of being cold and hungry, and of rats running across my chest, though it's possible those were merely dreams.

Most of what happened to us during the six years of World War II came to me in the form of stories told to me by my mother, a gifted storyteller blessed with an excellent memory and remarkable patience, who nightly sent me off to sleep with her favorite tales, which I never tired of hearing. One story in particular was told to me so many times that I came to believe I actually remembered it.

It was 1942, and the war in Europe was raging on all fronts. The fact that Romania was a German ally turned out to be a double-edged sword for its Jewish population. At first there was hesitation to surrender the Jews, who were well-assimilated members of Romanian society, for deportation to the extermination camps. But as German occupation solidified its grip on the nation, Romanian cooperation with the Nazis became routine. Pogrom-like beatings, round-ups, and killings of Jews became daily occurrences. The ruthless Black Guard, an elite unit of the Romanian army with a particular penchant for Jewish persecution, was apparently given carte blanche to roam the streets, beating and murdering Jews at will.

One cold and gloomy winter morning, a squad of Black Guards set its sights on our apartment building, rounding up a number of Jewish families in the inner courtyard, some fifty or sixty of us. We were then lined up in rows of ten, five or six deep, as several Black Guards set up a heavy machine gun, apparently with the intention of shooting us all. The men were silent, while the women wept quietly. I was in my mother's arms, just under three years old, when I began crying uncontrollably. Perhaps it was hunger or the bitter cold, or simply fear, but this was not a child's mere crying. As my mother told it, my cry was such a strident, ear-piercing shriek that a soldier approached us and ordered her to make me stop. Instead, my screaming only got louder. According to Mama, my wailing was so loud that it caught the attention of a German officer in the street, who proceeded to walk into the courtyard with a platoon of his men and ask the Black Guard sergeant what was going on.

I was still screaming feverishly as the officer walked over to us, looked at me, and touched my cheek. I stopped crying. He told my mother that my blue eyes and rosy cheeks reminded him of his own little boy at home, and walked back to confront the Romanian sergeant, telling him to decamp with his men. An argument ensued, with the Germans holding their rifles at the ready. The Black Guards, visibly angry, packed up their machine gun and walked off in a huff, muttering curses and threats in Romanian. The German officer returned, told us all to go back to our homes, then left with his men.

We stood in silence for a moment, stunned but relieved, not quite believing our good fortune. A small group of people surrounded my mother and me, some crying, some patting me on the head. Old man Wechselblatt, who had been standing in the back, slowly walked over and said to my mother in Yiddish, *"Dus kind hott unz alle geratevet, zein gantz leben vilt ehr gebencht zein."* This child saved us all, he will be blessed his entire life.

Everyone scattered back to their apartments. That evening, my parents gathered their meager belongings and we fled in the dark, as we would multiple times throughout the war, trying to evade capture and deportation. By the war's end, some six hundred thousand Romanian Jews had been murdered, mostly at Auschwitz, with some perishing at a Romanian extermination camp called Transnistria.

Other memories of the war's early years are distinctly my own. In 1944, when I was about five, we were in the woods when a stray dog bit me in the leg. My father, a jeweler by trade, suspected the dog was rabid. He clasped a razor blade with jewelry pliers and proceeded to make a small fire to heat the razor blade till it was white-hot. He then burned my wound with the white-hot blade. What I remember to this day is not the pain or screaming, but my mother crying while holding me down, and the smell of burning flesh. I still have a large whitish scar on my left shin which looks like an old vaccination mark.

Another memory took place one year later in Bucharest. By then, I was nearly six years old and the war was winding down, the Nazis retreating on all fronts. We were hiding in some basement when we heard the clattering sound of motorized vehicles growing louder and louder, reaching a deafening crescendo. Peering out of the basement window, which allowed a sliver view of the street, we watched in consternation as thousands upon thousands of German troops hurried westward in obvious retreat, looking haggard in their trucks and motorcycles, some running along on foot. The sounds of rumbling tanks, motorized vehicles, and thundering boots lasted for hours and remain in my head still. Then, silence. They were gone. Afraid to move, we remained huddled in the pitch-dark basement for what seemed like eternity, not knowing what would come next.

Suddenly, the rumbling started again. We looked out and saw the Russian troops in their olive green uniforms decorated with red stars and insignia, speeding westward in their trucks, jeeps, tanks, and artillery pieces. None of them were on foot. They looked determined and angry, carrying their Thompson-like submachine guns with round clips. What a sight! The liberators were passing through! The others hiding with us in the basement started cheering, clapping, and hugging. For us, the war was over.

We lived in Bucharest for another three years, narrowly escaping to Paris in 1948 just as the Iron Curtain slammed shut on Eastern Europe, cutting off all access to the west. Our Russian liberators had begun their very own reign of terror.

Chapter Three

Boot Camp

When I arrived at Camp Pendleton outside San Diego on July 19, 1969, everyone was glued to the TV: "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind…" Neil Armstrong had just stepped on the powdery lunar surface; people all over the world were mesmerized. I too was mesmerized but more importantly, I was tired, hungry, and bewildered. I'd arrived in California with no idea what to expect. I wasn't sure why doctors needed boot camp in the first place. Still, after med school and residency, I figured, how bad could it be?

We numbered approximately fifty men, mostly doctors of various specialties as well as a few dentists, all of us Navy lieutenants. The first evening we were addressed by the commanding officer, Marine colonel Louis Codispoti, a hard-looking, leather-faced man in full dress uniform. Despite the fact that we would soon be assigned to various medical units in South Vietnam, he made it clear that his mission was to train us as Marine combatants; the doctor part was someone else's job. A low murmur rumbled through the room: Would we be facing combat?

"That's right," the colonel informed us. "All personnel assigned to Marine outfits, regardless of rank, medical specialty or physical makeup, need to go through five weeks of Marine Corps basic training. The training will be intense and will cover physical fitness, distance running, steeplechase-type obstacle training, rope climbing, and crawl tactics.

"Military instruction," he continued, "will include assault and defense tactics such as hand-to-hand combat, knife and bayonet training, small and heavy weapons operation, and grenade launching. When you finish your five week training course, I expect you to be Marines, think like Marines, and fight like Marines."

The colonel explained that time was short, which was the reason our training would be especially intense. Five weeks, with one day off every two weeks. When we finally assumed our duties in Vietnam, he told us, we were expected to defend our patients as well as heal them. We were expected to be not only doctors, but soldiers.

"Your training begins at 0530 hours and ends at 1600 hours," the colonel continued. "You will then shave, change, eat dinner, and report to Field Service Medical School at 1700 hours. That is all from me, gentlemen. I now give you Commander Perkins."

Colonel Codispoti walked off, leaving us somewhat stunned, as a stocky, smiling officer in Navy dress blues took his place.

"Now, gentlemen, for the fun part," he began.

"I am Dr. Perkins, responsible for your Field Service Medical School training (FSMS). We will assume that none of you, regardless of whatever surgical skills you may possess, has any experience in the field of combat surgery. We will therefore endeavor to train you in the handling of mass casualties, patient triage, and emergency medicine. You will learn swift and proper patient assessment, evaluation of the unconscious soldier, and treatment of the multiply-injured soldier.

"Your training will include open wound care, surgical care of deep tissues such as bones, muscles, tendons, nerves, and blood vessels. The orthopedic surgeons among you will treat all limb injuries involving fractures with the help of vascular surgery and other subspecialties when needed. The general surgeons will treat all abdominal wounds, neurosurgeons all head wounds, urologists all kidney and bladder injuries, and so on."

Perkins made clear that despite our individual specialties, we would be working in teams, and would be required to assist our colleagues at all times. He also took the opportunity to remind us that

Vietnam is located in Southeast Asia, a tropical paradise blessed with diseases like malaria, typhoid, dengue, and yellow fever, as well as rashes we had never seen before. Perkins explained that his job was to give us a basic understanding of these ailments. We were required to report to FSMS at 1700 hours every day, where we would receive instruction until 2200 hours.

"As a physician myself," Perkins said, "I fully appreciate that this will be for you a somewhat dissociative experience, since you will literally be taught how to kill in the morning and how to heal in the evening. So, you can warn your families in advance that you may all come home next year with split personalities, a little like Jekyll and Hyde!"

Everyone laughed.

That was the last laughter any of us enjoyed for the next five weeks. When reveille (yes, an actual guy with a bugle) sounded promptly at 0500, we jumped out of bed, put on our fatigues, wolfed down a quick breakfast, and assembled in "the square," where we were promptly introduced to Gunnery Sergeant McAvoy, our drill instructor (DI).

This man, who clearly enjoyed torturing people, made every day of those five weeks miserable. He spoke in shouts, with a typical order sounding something like "Get your fucking ass up that hill, SIR!!!" He did not use the word "sir" out of any respect for us, but because as an enlisted man, he was required to address commissioned officers as such. Every morning at 0530, we began the day with thirty minutes of calisthenics and push-ups, followed by a fast five-mile jog in heavy combat boots while carrying forty-pound packs. This was followed by weapons training, which included dismantling and reassembling the Colt .45 semi-automatic pistol as well as the M16 assault rifle, the standard Marine Corps weapon in Vietnam. Target practice followed, after which we were all handed M1 rifles weighing some fifteen pounds and made to run up and down hills yelling "Kill! Kill!"

We were taught how to fix bayonets and charge at mannequins tied to trees, stabbing them repeatedly until they died. We also received instruction in hand-to-hand combat, how to avert a knife attack, how to handle a choke-hold, how to throw opponents, and how to administer fatal blows to various parts of the body. We were shocked to realize how easy it was to kill someone with a single punch or kick to the Adam's apple. Delivered forcefully enough, the blow fractures the thyroid cartilage, shutting down the trachea and causing rapid asphyxiation. Gunny, as Sgt. McAvoy was known, informed us that he had once had to deliver such a blow during hand-to-hand combat in Vietnam. The only thing that disturbed him, he reported, was the crunching sound made by the man's imploding trachea.

The steeplechase course was especially torturous, as it required us to rope-climb up a twelve-foot wall, jump off the top into a sand pit, crawl through metal pipes, run through a tire field, and vault over several pommel horses, all at top speed. If you fell, you were forced to repeat the entire course until you got it right. This was followed by a twenty-minute rest, including a quick lunch of C-rations, which we ate while leaning against a tree.

But without question, the most terrifying part of our entire training was the crawl-under-live-machine-gun-fire. Imagine a hundred-yard flat stretch of dirt with wood partitions six feet apart, a little like a swim meet, but with a barbed wire ceiling two feet off the ground. We were required to low crawl as fast as we could while cradling our M1 rifles in our bent elbows, peering out from under our helmets to make sure we were going straight. Behind us was the *tat-tat-tat-tat-tat* of machine gun fire. This was no mere simulation; several machine guns, located behind the starting line, were firing live rounds just above the barbed wire.

If you panicked and stood up, you would be hit by the live rounds. If you lagged behind, a megaphone-wielding Gunny would scream, "Move! Move! Move! Get your fucking ass going, sir!" Those hundred yards felt like a hundred miles, during which some of us gave up our lunch. The back of my neck ached, my arms burned from carrying that miserable rifle, my elbows were scraped raw, and the entire front of my body was chafed from the endless crawl through the dirt.

When it was over, I felt a strange sense of accomplishment mixed with terror. But there was no time to reflect on my feelings. After the crawl-under-fire came another five-mile run. Finally, 1600 arrived. Blisters, aches, and sores aside, I felt relieved the day was over. Then it was back to the barracks for a quick shower, change, and dinner, this time of real, welcome food.

Compared to boot camp, Field Service Medical School was a delight. Not only did it offer civilized relief from boot camp's physical rigors, we were given extensive instruction in all forms of combat surgery, emergency medicine, and treatment of tropical diseases. My civilian training as a surgeon in New York City had taught me nothing about treating multiple gunshot wounds, traumatic landmine amputations, or mass casualties. I had arrived with virtually no knowledge of triage science; now suddenly I was getting a crash course in the basic principles of wartime medicine.

I was intrigued to learn that fresh wounds in Vietnam were almost never closed the same day. Instead they were treated with so-called delayed primary suturing (DPS). It had become apparent soon into the war that most wounds were caused by high velocity objects like shrapnel fragments, which inflicted severe soft tissue damage and deep burns that were not readily apparent. If the wound was merely cleaned and the skin closed immediately, the damaged and dead tissue would fester, causing a wound infection that would require further surgery. The doctors soon learned they were better advised to first clean the wound and simply cover it with sterile dressings, then go back the next day and remove any additional dead tissue. On a third look, if there was no more dead tissue and the wound appeared healthy, the skin could then be closed for DPS.

Using this procedure, the majority of wounds remained clean, avoided infection, and needed no further surgery. That was a valuable lesson learned in the early and mid-'60s by our Vietnam combat surgeons, who imparted it to us.

With regard to orthopedics, we were taught strict general principles, mainly that major open limb fractures suffered in combat should be cleaned, closed and splinted, rather than fixed with metal devices to prevent infection. Permanent fixation could be done later, either on a Navy hospital ship offshore or at a rear echelon hospital in the Philippines or Japan. The principal exception to that rule was a combination fracture and vascular injury, where vascular repair or grafting was required in order to save the limb. In such cases, the orthopedic team would first achieve solid metallic fixation of the fracture. This would provide a stable construct for the vascular repair, which was fragile at best and could not survive in an environment where jagged bone fragments were moving around. If the metallic fixation became infected, that problem could be addressed later, but at least the limb was saved. This kind of instruction was most informative to us civilian surgeons, because combination orthopedic-vascular injuries were rather rare back home.

On my first day off, I contacted a friend who lived in nearby San Diego. I had met Frieda Heller on a trip to Israel earlier that year. Always gracious, Frieda invited me to spend the day with her, and proceeded to show me the town, taking me to her favorite restaurants, and lavishing me with a hospitality that was a welcome relief from Camp Pendleton.

The five weeks of boot camp were surreal, a combination of the exhausting, the exhilarating, and the bizarre. Our last day was capped by our official promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Commander and the receipt of our individual orders for assignment in Vietnam. Little did I suspect how useful the attempt to transform us into soldier-surgeons would be.