



Chapter One

Are We in Hell?

The eerie silence of the Vietnam jungle hung all around like some hidden shroud awaiting the next corps to fall into its thick, tangled brush. Ray's eyes stared into the shadows, his rifle clutched in a strangled hold, while his heartbeat echoed, resounding like a death toll in his ears.

He could sense evil manifestation in the undergrowth by how the skin on the back of his neck prickled. He knew he was right; the Viet Cong were here and very nearby. He shook his head to clear his mind. A buddy on his left stepped forward as a shot rang out, and with a groan, he fell face down into the vegetation. A marine crawled to lay beside him, covering his shoulder with his arm for comfort.

Ray dropped to one knee, eyes moving backward and forward while trying to fathom where the gunfire originated. Lifting his rifle to his shoulder, he randomly fired repeatedly into the gloom. With a shout from the sergeant, his fellow marines followed suit as a Viet Cong sniper fell from a tree. More of them jumped from bushes, fleeing away while being gunned down, their small figures lying prone where they fell.

Walking over to look at them, Ray felt sick, resisting the urge to vomit.

These were children recruited to fight before they were fully grown. Tears sprung to his eyes. He was only nineteen, yet older than these young ones.

They were not thoroughly trained in warfare but were taught how to sabotage supplies, report enemy positions, fire a rifle, or throw a grenade. The Viet Cong held no discrimination about age, and children were instructed early to believe in the cause.

Turning away, Ray's mind thought of the mothers, never to be able to see their offspring again and not ever to see them grow to adulthood and have families of their own. At that moment, he despaired that a country could involve children in war. Yet children here were not like the treasured ones back home; they grew up to serve.

Then the realization of his unmoving buddy resonated, and Ray hurried over to where others stood helplessly around, many smoking to calm their shattered nerves. Ray reached for his pack of cigarettes as his sergeant yelled into his radio phone for the MediEvac, "named Huey's," help. Ray slowly replaced the cigarettes in his pocket. All need for them vanished as he helplessly shuffled mutely around the area, still dazed in shock, to wait.

When the Copter finally arrived, with no ground space to land, it hovered overhead, lowering a rescue sling for the injured. Ray and three others gently picked up their wounded comrade to carefully place him within the makeshift bed.

Not a word was spoken as all understood the gravity of his wounds. Seen was the blood pool left inside the sling as they pulled away. Ray felt he'd faint from the metallic blood odor and had to sit while reaching for and gulping water from his canteen.

"Okay, Guys, cover these bodies as best you can; the ones that got away will be back; you can bet on it. Hurry up about it, then let's get out of here." Sarg was agitated and had every right to be, losing a man in a confrontation was never easy. Neither was seeing the children's bodies lying on the silent scatheless ground.

Late afternoon they entered a clearing surrounded by forest. There was no need to be reminded of mosquitos at sunset and sunrise as the annoying insect ate off the sweaty, unwashed, combat-clothed men. Ray swatted away at them before reaching for his little green bottle and squirting the liquid into his hand to rub over his face, neck, and exposed hands. Was there a worse torment?

He opened and ate from his small meal pack, as did all the other men, and it was hardly enough to satisfy or sustain. Ray's mind wandered to sitting in his mother's kitchen in Southeast Tennessee, eating Cornbread and chili. His stomach growled in protest at the thought.

He decided there and then to always thank his mother for her cooking. He knew now to be grateful instead of taking her care for granted. With eyes cast down, he whispered into the approaching night. "I'm sorry, Mother."

They all knew better than to sleep beneath trees, as no one wanted a snake falling on them during the night. The Vietnamese ate snakes and considered them a good feed; Ray thought about this and wondered what they tasted like. He was always ready to try anything different or unusual and knew he had just placed that menu on his list.

Time to sleep, if there was such a thing as rest with continuous thoughts of the enemy ever close by. Rest overnight in the jungle consisted of two-hour watch teams sitting back to back and always prepared with their indigenous helpers for a sudden attack. Ray took his turn with all the other men, but rest, and sleep was uneasy. He learned to sleep fitfully (which also remained with him for the rest of his life.)

The patrol began again at dawn, so breakfast got devoured without thought or enjoyment. Eating fast was also to remain with Ray all his life, as was being vigilant and existing on hardly sleeping.

Ray was a quiet, peaceful man who cheered others and never complained about his suffering. He took life as it came and existed with a caring, positive attitude toward everyone.

The morning patrol moved forward in the unbearable heat to set up an ambush. Yet the Viet Cong were underestimated with their intelligent underground tunnels, which enabled them to impart surprise attacks. They could defend themselves much better than the Marines who traversed on unknown foreign soil.

Ambush or be ambushed as these soldiers most often were.

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Ray got shot in the chest and lower left arm on his last combat patrol. He couldn't believe the unbearable pain that even smoking marijuana to combat gave no relief.

He was sure he'd die there, where he felt was hell, far away from home—withering on the ground in torment and looking up at the innocent clear blue sky.

How peaceful all seemed while his body raged with a burning fire. After what seemed hours, his Huey arrived and landed safely in a clearing. There was no tender care, only hurry, quickly collecting him and two other wounded. They retreated from there as fast as possible. Machine gun blasts with yelling in English and native tongues resounded in the hazy distance.

Ray was incoherent in his muttering. Shocked and confused by the noise, he was unsure what was happening. If there truly was hell, then he was sure this was it. Nothing in his mind at that time could be any worse.

