

GREY FUNNEL ON THE GUNLINE

The sand was soft and cool beneath his outstretched body. Lazily rolling onto his back, he pulled the well worn cap over his face to keep the sun's glare from his eyes and consciously allowed his body to relax. He was still aware of his surroundings. He could hear the waves gently lapping onto the white sand, seagulls squawking overhead and smell the pervading odor of drying sea weed.

Without warning, a flash of brilliant light shattered his mind; his body reacted instantly with a convulsive twisting spasm. His mind screamed, "Not again, not again," as his heart began to thunder and beads of sweat formed on his forehead.

A vortex of darkness sucked him deep into its grasp. Deeper and deeper he was sucked, helpless, tormented. He knew from past experience what was waiting for him, he'd trod this path before - numerous times. Try as he might, he couldn't escape or fight his way back from the depths. This 'thing' would not be satisfied until it had tormented his mind with another vision, another scene from that life which he wished he'd never lived.

It left him feeling tense and restless.

He was a man caught in a web of the past, trapped by repeated scenes lived long ago, yet still vivid and fresh as the day they happened. Was there no end to this nightmare of memories? When would he learn that he could never allow himself to relax; he always had to be on guard against those flash-back scenes of Vietnam.

Back in his motel room, he poured a large port and gulped it straight. He carried the next one to the bay window and slowly sipped the smooth but fiery ruby coloured liquid as he watched seagulls hovering over fishermen at the end of the long jetty. Patiently circling overhead, they waited to swoop and relieve a careless fisherman of their catch, while sail boats in the distance had their spinnakers rigged ready to catch the sea breeze. Palm trees growing by the shore road stood tall and serene, their green spiked leaves shading parked cars. Everything looked so peaceful. Why couldn't he experience that kind of peace for himself?

Consciously he came to a decision. He would purposely allow himself to think back to Vietnam, he would relive those three tours, every detail that wanted to come back to his mind, every thought, every face, the smells, sights and sounds. He was desperate enough to try anything to rid the merry-go-round of memories that plagued him

Sitting down in the brown suede arm chair with the bottle of port at hand, he was determined but apprehensive as he began the walk back into time and unlocked the archive of bottled memories.

He was walking towards HMAS CERBERUS. Eighteen years old. The new suitcase his mother had given him contained his clothes and few personal effects. The overnight journey from Adelaide by train had been uneventful but now as his steps brought him closer to the security gates of the Naval Base, he felt excited and nervous.

The training at CERBERUS had been hard. The early morning marches on the parade ground, living in close quarters with new found mates, learning to live with the 'leader' of the pack and having no close contact with his family, plus the absorption of his chosen field made life to be lived on the edge.

The day of his graduation came. Standing on the parade ground for the final time, he recalled how they'd all polished boots, ironed uniforms, cleaned guns, bayonets, and repeatedly practiced their marching. Now they'd made it and were graduating at last. The whole squad was elated. They slapped each other on the back, shook hands and filled the air with loud shouts of excitement. He was now a Seaman and life stretched out before him, open, un-lived and waiting to be explored.

During their final weeks of training at CERBERUS, there had been talk amongst themselves of the situation in Vietnam. They all knew that it was a probability they'd do a tour in that direction. So what? They were all fit, healthy, young and invincible. The Navy had new DDG's which had the most up to date fire power. They were ready to do whatever was asked of them.

The orders came through. He was posted to HMAS *WINDRODE* and was going to Vietnam.

He was quietly excited the morning he'd turned 21. In the eyes of the world he was now considered to be a man; he was eligible for the symbolic key to the house and was old enough to vote. When he returned home his family and friends would celebrate with a big party. In the meantime there were daily duties to be done. His ship was sailing up and down the Gun Line off the coast of South Vietnam.

They'd rendezvoused with a United States Supply Ship for fast ammunition replenishment and both crews were hard at it transferring the yellow banded high explosives on to the HMAS *WINDRODE*. When the job had been completed, he'd gone to the ship's cafeteria to grab a quick cup of coffee. The Chief Coxswain had walked up to him holding a small cake with one candle and was preparing to shake his hand as he said, "Happy Birthday The internal piping system interrupted his speech with the Captain informing the crew that the *BRISBANE* was heading at full speed to answer an urgent call from the army troops ashore for support fire power. They would be joined by the *USS WADDELL* and form a 'race track' pattern.

One ship would sail up to the firing line, fire their guns then continue to sail in a reasonably tight circle while the other ship took their turn at the firing line. This is known as the 'race track' pattern. In this manner both ships could fire at regular intervals in support of the ground troops.

That put an end to his much looked forward to 21st birthday. He wondered off and on for the rest of that hectic day what the Chief Coxswain would have said if he'd been able to finish his speech.

The *WINDRODE* continued to take her turn sailing the seas between south and North Vietnam, and was called upon frequently to support ground troops. Sometimes the *BRISBANE* would sail as close as three miles from land to enable them to do pin point bombardments, while the Americans stayed behind 10 miles out at sea. The crews during day light hours were unable to see where their shells landed or the damage they caused but it was different at night. The sailors could feel the ship tremble as the shells were fired from the gun housing on the decks, those on deck witnessed their whispering trails as they flew through the darkness of the night towards their waiting target. Far into the hills of Vietnam their landing was visible by the blue, white and orange flashes that flared up into the night sky. It always reminded him of Guy Fawkes Night back home; the sound of the big 3 penny bangers being lit, the whooshing sound as the wick caught fire, and then the loud vibrating bang as it exploded.

It was 16 June 1969 at a place called 'Leatherneck Square' just south of the Demilitarised Zone that *HMAS WINDRODE* together with the US heavy cruiser *ST. PAUL* combined and retaliated by doing a surprise bombardment of their own.

Sailing into their designated area of Cam Ranh Bay with ship closed up, the whole crew began to feel the tension mount. The bridge was a hive of activity and men, when they needed to speak, did so in hushed whispers as if they were wary of adding more strain to the already tight atmosphere. The Captain was alert. His eyes were unreadable beneath the gold braided peak of his well worn cap pulled well down over his forehead, yet his officers knew his finger was on the pulse of the whole ship. The Navigator kept a constant vigil on their course and relayed in subdued tones any change of position to the man at the wheel, while the ship's radar gleamed information back from its red filtered screen.

It was nearly midnight as a small River Gun Boat belonging to the Brown Water section of the American Navy came out of the River System seeking shelter in the Bay. It came stealthily and undetected by the *BRISBANE*. As the larger shape of the DDG innocently sailed towards them the small crew of the River Gun Boat panicked and opened up instinctively with their fire power. It was on the stroke of midnight when the Australian Navy, alert for anything, returned fire with their guns on full automatic. The night sky was immediately ablaze with the hues from weapons disgorging their contents.

The Australians were not amused to learn it was an American vessel firing at them. As the smaller boat began to zigzag away through the choppy seas, the Aussies let the Americans know how they felt. Relief did not hover long with the Aussies. With the smell of cordite still hanging in the air, the crew checked the gun systems and once again retained defensive positions.

For days the Australian and United States navies continued to sail the gun line near the demilitarised zone answering the call from ground troops to send fire power where directed. During this period, *HMAS WINDRODE* was in continual closed up battle stations, no lights at night and everything fastened below. Meals were always at the ready, scant, but nutritious. Biscuits and coffee were available for quick refreshment. The crew on board existed sleepless,

with no change in the daily routine, no hidden agenda, except the one to be ready at a moment's notice to man their stations when ordered. There were no green trees to stretch out and relax under, no black earth to walk on, just the endless sound of waves lapping against the ship's side, blue sea as far as the naked eye could observe on one side, and sometimes the land of Vietnam on the other. The same faces greeted each other at the change of every watch. The steel ship, painted battle grey from her bow to her stern, confined them to each other and their cause until their responsibility to the soldiers on shore and the United States Navy was completed.

When the firing did cease, the command was given to head south down the coast. They'd been informed that the operation had been considered a success. Five hundred and sixty North Vietnamese soldiers were dead. To the Australian navy, the dead Vietcong were nameless people; the battle scene had been sightless. It was like the crew were living in a dream. The released fire power was real.

The continual tension they lived under was real. But the devastation, because it wasn't visible seemed unreal.

Then came the day he remembered most vividly.

Once again from her position far out at sea, the *WINDRODE* was called to fire upon the green mountains of Vietnam. Guns were primed and the order to fire had been obeyed. The crew waited for the vibrations to rock the ship as a signal that the steel cradles had released their load and live shells had commenced their mission of destruction.

"Reload" came the Order.

Fire!

It seemed second nature to the gunnies to automatically load, wait, reload. They'd performed the activity so many times.

No one expected the massive explosion as the gun's breech peeled back like a banana. No one expected the deadly shell aimed for someone else to explode in its own cradle. The detonation of the round as it passed up the gun barrel caused hundreds of pieces of shrapnel to fly through the thick steel gun mount and pass within inches of the three man operating crew in the forward gun mount. Burning slivers of steel landed on the bridge and flag deck.

Shocked and stunned sailors rushed to assist at the scene of chaos. One sailor was standing at the ship's rail white and shaking, blood spurting onto the deck from a deep gash in his wrist. Others began to wrestle with fire hoses, pulled at twisted steel, and trod on shattered Perspex. As he'd raced to help his mates he felt his own leg being cut on a jagged piece of steel, but in the urgency of the situation ignored it. The burning fragments of shrapnel had caused some injuries but not as many as initially feared. The situation had brought home to the crew a fresh realisation of the dangers they lived under.

How were the men on board the *HMAS WINDRODE* to know that the US SUPPLY SHIP had given them some faulty ammunition? The American Navy had been using up all ammunition reserves from the Korean War, some of it had been in storage for a length of time and had deteriorated to the extent that it was dangerous to use. No one was to know - until it was too late. The USS BOSTON had lost 4 sailors from a similar problem.

In the frantic cleaning up he'd not paid any attention to his leg; it seemed so minute in comparison to other men's injuries. Forty eight hours later he'd woken from a fitful sleep and felt like he was on fire. His leg was burning, he had a raging temperature, and couldn't talk cohesively, the medical facilities on board could not assist him and the *WINDRODE*'s crew were still coming to terms with the damage to their ship. It was decided to helicopter him out for medical aid to a MASH unit at Phan Thiet, in Military Region 2.

Within a short space of time, he'd been hoisted on board an American helicopter heading for hospital. Vaguely the thought entered his mind that he might be able to catch up on some rest. He would be able to see green trees again and feel solid ground beneath his feet.

The MASH Units greeted him like a scene from hell. Stretched out on the bare earth were rows of dead, dying and injured men. Medics, wearing sweaty green hospital gowns splattered with blood were bending over stretchers diagnosing injured patients, colour tagging them as they went. Orderlies following behind carried the tagged bodies to designated areas. Other Medics were yelling "STAT, OVER HERE, STAT" giving a further sense of urgency to the rapidly moving medical staff. Green Army jeeps with a large red cross displayed on their sides picked up the black tagged bodies covered them. With a ground sheet and drove away with their deceased burdens, while over head the whooshing sounds of the Huey helicopters bringing in more battle injured soldiers could be heard.

Finally a briskly moving Medic bent over his stretcher and stopped in surprise when he realised it was an Australian Navy man he was attending. After a brief examination he was tagged like all the other injured men. Orderlies came and transported him to a waiting helicopter which took off immediately for the 12th USAF Hospital in Cam Ranh Bay. When he'd once more been deposited on the ground waiting to be examined, confused medics greeted him with the question, "How could an Australian sailor be sent so far north to them in Cam Ranh Bay when the 1st Australian Field Hospital in Vung Tau had been nearer?" Baffled and yet concerned for his condition they started the treatment on his inflamed leg.

It was during the questioning and admittance to their hospital that he remembered he was still holding a security key to the *HMAS WINDRODE* and asked if it could be returned to his ship via security mail. "No problem, but it'll take about a week to get there," was the reply.

Men from all walks of life filled the 12 bed ward. White, black, Hispanic, and now an Australian sailor had joined their ranks. He'd only been there a day or two and was sitting propped up in a narrow hospital bed with pillows supporting his back and elevating his leg while a drip with antibiotics flowed into his arm when a serious faced orderly approached him. The Orderly said that life was treating him kindly; the helicopter he should have flown to Vung Tau in had been blown up by Vietcong ground fire and all on board had been killed. The American soldier who should be lying in the bed that he occupied was now dead.

As he lay back on his pillows to digest this information he felt a little guilty that some unknown American had died in his place. But he was glad to be alive.

In the mean time, the powers that be had notified his mother explaining he was listed as Missing In Action, presumed dead. It was not until the forgotten key turned up in the security mail bag a week later the authorities discovered he'd been shipped to Cam Ranh Bay by mistake and was still very much alive.

Antibiotics continued to pump through his body as he waited for his leg to heal. One evening five American surgeons stopped by his bed to speak to him during their rounds. One stayed to finish his conversation while the other four continued into the next ward.

Abruptly he felt himself back on the decks of the *HMAS WINDRODE*. He was surrounded once more with black acrid smoke, screams of men and collapsing metal filled his ear drums and intense heat and fire surrounded him.

With a fresh shock he understood the ward next to him, the same ward the 4 surgeons had entered moments before, had been blown up.

Under cover of dusk, the Vietcong had landed in small boats on the beach of Cam Ranh Bay and had gained entrance to the large military base without detection. Unchallenged, they'd walked up the main road to the hospital and blown up 3 wards, killing surgeons and patients, then quietly skulked off into the night without a trace. The Americans who had been caught off guard, and not being able to see clearly through the dust and smoke of the holocaust, began to fire their weapons in the direction which they'd thought the Vietcong had disappeared.

The patients, some unable to fend for themselves, others unable to cope with a fresh outburst of terror, were screaming for help. Wounded staff, shocked and dazed, crawled over wreckage, helping where possible. More people were shot by the bullets which were being fired by disorientated marines, pinning patients and medical staff alike to the rubble remains of the hospital.

For an hour, intense spasmodic firing continued. It ceased when a thinking military person realised the Vietcong had long gone and the American marines, each thinking the other was the enemy, were firing at each other. The silence when it came was still and eerie.

His leg was on the mend and the Australian Navy, having discovered his whereabouts, made arrangements for him to return to Vung Tau where there was an Australian Field hospital... He'd been helped on board a Hercules C130 and flown from Cam Ranh Bay to the American Sector at Vung Tau. A waiting Ambulance driven by two Americans, transported him from

the air field to the Australian Hospital. He recalled the ambulance being stopped at the security gates by Australian guards who demanded some identification of the two drivers and also of him, the patient. The Americans were stunned at such a challenge to their identity and said, "Goddam, your Aussie friend could be dying in the back, and you want to see our IDs?"

He had smiled at that. Oh it felt so good to hear an Australian voice and to know that security was tight. God bless the Australians. No Viet Cong had a hope of sneaking onto their base and blowing up hospitals. This was no 'Cam Ranh Bay' situation. He was 'home' and he could feel the tension he'd lived with for so long start to unwind.

His leg had healed to the extent that he was able to walk about the hospital. The powers that be informed him that he may be sent back to Australia to fully recuperate. He pleaded to be sent him back to his ship instead. He made such a nuisance of himself they finally agreed to his request.

Meanwhile the *HMAS WINDRODE* had sailed to the Philippines for repairs to her gun turret. He was filled with dread to learn that he'd have to return to Cam Ranh Bay to catch a flight to the Philippines in order to join his ship. The prospect filled him with alarm, but there was no other alternative.

He'd arrived back at Cam Ranh Bay in time to witness it being rocketed once more by the Viet Cong. Since the blowing up of the hospital wards, the Americans had become more than a little nervous and trigger happy. Security was tightened. He was told that a week after his previous departure, a security guard had informed a group of marines standing near a bunker that he was going in to check it out. A short time later, one of those marines had seen movement near the bunker, drew his M16 and fired five rounds. The security guard was mortally wounded. Similar situations like this occurred frequently and the fear of being fired at by your own 'friendlies' made everyone cautious.

The tension was not only affecting the Americans, but also allies stationed on the base. Cam Ranh Bay was a holding place for any North Vietnamese prisoners. There was a small group of injured North Vietnamese patients being held under guard and segregated from the main hospital. Except for their leader, they were all under 18 years of age. The American Doctors doing their rounds one morning, walked into this ward and discovered every throat had been cut. The South Korean allies did not take kindly to North Vietnamese prisoners.

As far as he could understand things, one needed to be careful of incoming fire and being fired at from personnel on the base itself. He realised that if he continued to wear his dark regulation navy overalls, from a distance he'd look like a Vietcong. He managed to get hold of some American greens and started to carry a colt .45.

Eventually he was on board a mail plane heading to the Philippines. As he looked out of the window and watched the land of Vietnam disappear beneath the monsoonal clouds, he heaved a sigh of relief. Stretching back on the seat, giving his injured leg as much room as possible, he looked forward to catching up with his old ship mates and any mail that may have arrived from home.

An hour and a half later, the plane was beginning to circle Subic Bay ready for landing. Looking out of his window, he could not believe his eyes. Far below him, sailing out of the

harbour was the *HMAS WINDRODE!!!!* He sat back in his seat utterly dumbfounded. Waves of frustration swept over him. Why him? Why did it all have to happen to him? He'd had his ship blown up, been rocketed, shot at, flown from one end of Vietnam to the other, hitched a ride on a mail plane, and now so close to reaching his destination and his mates, he could see them sailing away beneath him!

What would he do now?

On landing at the airport, he chased up the Australian Embassy Officials. He was told that because of security he could not be told where in Vietnam the *HMAS WINDRODE* was going. Officials told him the repair work on the *HMAS WINDRODE* had only been temporary. The damaged forward gun mount had been taken off and a blanking plate was used to cover the gaping hole. A radio aerial had been placed in the centre of the blanking plate, and now she was on her way back somewhere on the 'Gunline'. Her final repairs would not take place until she returned to Australia.

The next day he was flown back to Saigon, Vietnam. Arriving at Tan San Nhut Airport, arrangements were made for him to stay with an American EOD team in a 3 storey villa until he could be returned to his ship.

It was an education of life to stay with these men. They were all members of a demolition team, and lived with the knowledge that every day they lived was a bonus and any day could be their last. The rented villa was filled with captured North Vietnamese weapons and mines. The top floor was a large entertainment area and boasted a gaming table, a bar and a big fridge. The fridge was filled with hard to get VB. and Courage Australian beer. Not one can of American brew was visible. Every night was party night and he lost his fair share of money sitting at the round table playing cards. They'd sit down and relax with the Aussie beer, cigarettes and cards. They'd talk of women, situations back home and what was available on the black market. In the background, loud music blasting from the record player drowned out the noise of the rotating ceiling fan. Outside in the streets of Saigon intermittent car horns blared, while the shuffling steps of hundreds of homeless Vietnamese people could be heard as they sought shelter for the night.

He liked these men though. They were a good bunch and he'd enjoyed staying with them. It grieved him to hear that not long after he'd rejoined his ship three of them had been killed in an ambush while defusing a mine.

At last he was notified to prepare to return to his ship. He hoped with all his heart that this time he would be reunited with the *HMAS WINDRODE* and no rockets, no North Vietnamese or any other event would prevent him from putting his feet back on her decks. He was helicoptered out to the waiting *HMAS WINDRODE* and while putting on the harness that would lower him to her waiting decks, he couldn't help but think of all that had happened to him in the space of one month. He'd ducked rockets and bombs, been transported by Ambulance from base to base, flown from country to country, lived with captured live weapons and lost his money at cards. What the heck, now he was 'home' and that's all that mattered.

Their time on the Gun line was finished, and the *HMAS WINDRODE* turned for home; back to Australia. He was excited. Now he could *have that* long waited 21 st birthday party; his

friends would be glad to see him and to hear of all his exploits. His tales at sea would keep his friends amused for hours. He would visit his mother and reassure her that he was alive. He would be a returned sailor back from a war and would be a respected member of the RSL and the community.

Who had he been kidding? Why was life so hard? Why was it that the more one tried to do the right thing the harder the kick in the guts seemed to get?

He'd gone into the Mosman RSL for a drink with a mate. They were going to do some celebrating. Australian soil felt good.

"What're you doing here?" challenged a gruff voice.

"We're going to have a few drinks," they answered.

"This is only for returned servicemen. Get out."

"We're returned service men," and displayed their Returned from Active Service Badges.

"Returned from bloody what?" continued the challenge.

"From Vietnam."

"Get out, that's not a war, it's only a police action," scorned the RSL.

The two sailors ripped the badges from their lapels and threw them at the RSL member.

Outraged, they left.

Turning on the T.V. they were faced with the media condemning the Australian participation in Vietnam and accusing them of killing women, children and young babies. His 21st birthday party never eventuated. Friends did not agree with his involvement in Vietnam.

They had not come back from Vietnam as accepted, honoured men; they'd come home to humiliation, were spat on and called murderers. Australians - people of his own nation - had turned against him for what he'd been called by his government to do. He was an outcast - rejected. Where did he belong? He wasn't accepted by Australians. He wasn't accepted by the Vietnamese. Where could he go? What did he do that was so terribly wrong?

Disillusioned he had one alternative: to go back to Vietnam.

When his third and final tour of Vietnam finished he felt like a rudderless ship. There was no direction in life for him to follow, no friends that he trusted. The hurt, bitterness and anger at the RSL caused him to shun the Clubs they operated.

The accusation of his being a murderer and baby killer did not affect him as much as the rejection of his friends who had convicted him of crimes against innocent people. What did they know of Vietnam?

The late afternoon shadows made the motel room appear dark as he sat stumped in the brown suede arm chair, too weary to move. His trembling hand ran through his greying hair. The bottle of port was drained. It was over, he'd done it. He'd gone back, back to those haunting memories; he'd allowed his mind to remember what it desired. He'd faced his enemy.

His maturity allowed him to see things in a different light. He was older than the young man who had excitedly embraced life at sea. Sure his mind was uptight concerning all of the

traumas he'd experienced but by facing them he became aware of something which had been slowly creeping up on him.

He realised that the RSL didn't bother him anymore; he never went near it. His old friends had gone their paths in life even as he had travelled his; it didn't matter to him anymore what they thought. Let them be, they're history. He'd made other friends over the years.

He had survived his ordeal in life, sometimes on the shaky side, but he still loved the life at sea - there was no escaping that. Every job had its danger but it also had its rewards. He remembered thinking back to that time when he'd first graduated from HMAS CERBERUS and how life had stretched out before him unchallenged and unlived. He'd met his challenge; he'd lived his life and held no regrets for the career he'd chosen.

And now he had faced his enemy.

Perhaps he could be more at peace with himself now.