

CHAPTER 1 — JANUARY 13, 1970

From a remote valley in the highlands near Pleiku, Second Lieutenant Slater Marshall and three enlisted men took cover behind an earthen rampart. Lying prone on the cool ground one hour before sunrise, the Special Forces quartet, alone with their thoughts, waited to face a company of North Vietnamese regulars. Holding rifles loaded with blanks gave them little comfort.

Two weeks ago, the world welcomed a new year. Six months before, America put two men on the moon. None of these events impressed Slater because the government forced him into a war that he thought was wrong.

Two administrations proclaimed that our country was fighting for democracy, so families would send their sons to kill. The military proposed a goal of winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese. This propaganda and other programs were aimed at Congress to obtain the war's funding.

The hearts and minds campaign sounded feasible in the States, but it didn't work in the jungle. Each foot soldier on patrol literally fought to stay alive against a determined foe. No one was able to pause and talk about civics or international relations especially when both sides carried weapons with hair triggers.

Despite the program's deficiencies, Slater carried the spirit of the operation and tried to reason with the enemy. His men thought he was nuts, but the tactic succeeded for a while until he realized that the village had won over his mind and his heart. Risking their lives, he and his men set up an ambush against the NVA to protect both sides: the American soldiers to the east and the village and its coffee crop to the west. Being this brave or foolish depending on the point of view went outside the bounds of Slater's quiet nature.

For most of his young life, he avoided confrontation and followed society's dictates of being seen and not heard. Given his shyness, he wondered how he got into this mess. Maybe he shouldn't have vocalized his anti-war stance during infantry training in Georgia. Maybe he should have escaped to Canada. He definitely should not have enrolled in the ROTC program at the University of Iowa.

These thoughts added to the stress of the impending battle, but he couldn't dislodge them.

The more he reflected, the more he returned to Fort Benning where he constantly stood at attention and received verbal abuse from his commanding officer. Captain Gray stuck with him like a bad case of VD. No matter how much penicillin he took, the CO wouldn't go away.

CHAPTER TWO — NOVEMBER 1968

Eugene McCarthy?”

The disgust of Captain Delaney Gray III could not be greater than if he wore white sweat socks with his formal dress blue uniform.

As commanding officer of this infantry training company, he was charged to produce gung-ho, combat ready officers for assignment to Vietnam. He did not tolerate goof-offs, and in his mind Second Lieutenant Marshall was a smart-ass. The CO believed his subordinate did not take the training seriously, didn't respect authority or chain of command.

Discipline made a man of Captain Gray at the United States Military Academy, so he would apply the same indoctrination to Slater. Gray would not tolerate any deviations from army regimen.

“You maggot. How dare you say that?”

Slater saw the captain's face redden as hot air spurt from his throat against the cool air of the afternoon.

Dressed in tailored, starched fatigues that clung to the contour of his muscular torso, the captain despised the trainee's nonchalant attitude. The lieutenant's baggy fatigues and lightly polished boots did not help his cause.

“Brave men fight for your freedom, and you disrespect them.”

Second Lieutenant Marshall braced while his irate CO thundered inches from his face.

“Of all the brave men to admire, you chose Eugene McCarthy?” The captain's jugular bulged in rhythm with every word. “That pussy, that yellow belly? He undermined the war effort.”

Slater saw from the corners of his eyes that the platoon cringed with every decibel. They were grateful that the CO was not upbraiding them. Slater tried to look intimidated so as not to encourage further tirades, but in reality he didn't care. He hated the army, the war, and had only himself to blame. Still his answer of “Eugene McCarthy” seemed innocent enough.

The moment had started when the class congregated in an open field, preparing for a march. The CO walked among his men and asked a simple question, “Whom do you admire?”

“George Washington,” “Robert E. Lee,” “Stonewall Jackson,” came the shouts. Captain Gray looked to his right and focused on Second Lieutenant Marshall who, the CO thought, should demonstrate more enthusiasm.

Slater glanced away, hoping Captain Gray would pick someone else.

“I didn’t hear anything from you, Lieutenant,” said Gray in a bellowing voice that intimidated those around him. “Whom do you admire?”

“Eugene McCarthy.” The answer came easily. Slater thought it better not to say Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his real hero, whom Gray wouldn’t know. He would think Slater too pretentious if he mentioned an obscure German pastor. Eugene McCarthy, whom Slater highly regarded, seemed less controversial. Upon hearing his choice, Captain Gray fulminated.

What was so infuriating about choosing Eugene McCarthy? The senator from Minnesota displayed courage of conviction by following a principle in which he believed. He went against his own ruling party by disagreeing with Lyndon Johnson in 1968 over Vietnam. He took a political risk and ran for President against the incumbent to give Americans another option. McCarthy wanted to end the war, bring peace to America, and get the troops home. His candidacy tapped into a groundswell of support that three months later caused President Johnson to remove himself as a candidate for re-election.

Slater thought the CO’s explosion served no purpose. Why would a sane man behave this way? He knew military decorum demanded it, so he didn’t take the scolding personally. In fact, he felt he deserved this treatment. He sold himself to the devil when he accepted an ROTC scholarship. He wanted to attend college, the first in his farming family. He had no money, so accepting a military commitment of four years after graduation seemed simple enough. Then President Johnson escalated the fighting in Vietnam. Slater couldn’t bear to shoot a rabbit. Now the army was training him to kill people.

Thoughts of the past vanished, and he returned to the verbal bombardment in the present. He became impressed with his CO’s strong vocal cords. How can he erupt for such a long time? Keeping a straight face now became his primary concern.

As Captain Gray fired verbal missiles, Slater reflected on his cavalier attitude toward the military and authority. Others in his training platoon described it as rebellious. They did not describe him as a rebel. Definitely not a rebel. Not here in Fort Benning, Georgia, where the South still fought the Civil War. Slater's aloof attitude encouraged more screaming. Did Captain Gray believe he could motivate this lieutenant by raising his voice and increasing the invective?

"Honor the traditions. Honor country. I want you to be a disciplined soldier that follows orders and contributes to the unit and to the country. Are you trying to provoke me by saying that traitor's name?"

Captain Gray made an imposing presence. After receiving his parachutist badge that said "Airborne" signifying his proficiency at jumping out of airplanes, he next attended the combat leadership course or Ranger school. Upon completion he earned his Ranger tab. Appointed as head of Fort Benning's company for graduates of the Reserve Officer Training Corps, Gray was tapped for the fast track. All the trainees respected his Airborne and Ranger patches.

They knew Captain Gray would go to Vietnam after finishing this class. He would lead an infantry company, a sought-after position for Academy graduates. He would get his "command" ticket punched on what he anticipated would be a stellar career. What an opportunity. He felt so lucky: a chance to lead men, get medals, and receive promotions. His father and grandfather commanded. No peacenik was going to derail his future.

Gray said, "I'm going to turn you into a 'strack' soldier." Slater had never heard this term before. The army defined it as a soldier being competent, gung-ho, and carrying out orders crisply without question. Slater defined it as a person who had a frontal lobotomy.

Captain Gray was an army brat mainly growing up around Fort Campbell, Kentucky, near the border of Tennessee. He upheld the family tradition of fealty to one's country and served as the poster child for straight arrow. He didn't tolerate anyone who went against God, the government, and the armed services. Those in the community took pride in his accomplishments: a role model for youth, for America, and for the values of the status quo.

Questioning the rules did not penetrate his thoughts. He did not appreciate Slater's disregard for esprit de corps and planned to ride this second lieutenant for the remaining weeks of the class.

When Gray stopped his shouting, no one interrupted the awkward silence that followed. The burn in the captain's cheeks lingered in the air. After a brief respite, the CO turned and yelled to the platoon, "All right men. Saddle up and move out."

As the squads pulled together, many glanced at Slater in disapproval. Others muttered, "Who's Eugene McCarthy?"

Slater and the platoon marched for three hours through Georgia thickets. At night, Gray put Slater on guard duty one hundred yards outside the campsite. After setting up his position and pretending to protect the platoon from enemy raccoons, he fell asleep, awakening four hours later to the snores from a nearby sentry. He couldn't go back to sleep and faced two hours before the morning exercises. During this time he wondered if he would survive infantry training.

No way could he be the mechanical trooper that Captain Gray prized. Slater learned to question everything in his life. He believed one of America's attributes was to search for the truth and not accept the status quo.

He thought about his hero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran priest who questioned the Nazis from day one. Many in the German Protestant churches welcomed Hitler as a strong leader that Germany needed to replace the chaos of the Weimar Republic. Slater tried to emulate his hero's example. He questioned the merits of his father's beatings and questioned the Vietnam War. In his mind, the lack of obedience to authority seemed justified since those in power led the country into this futile conflict.

After the field exercise ended two days later, Captain Gray felt duty bound to inform higher echelons about his incorrigible trainee. Placing a scathing assessment in Slater's personnel file, he described 2Lt. Marshall's behavior as snobbish, trying to get by in his army obligation, and protesting against the war, against discipline, and against the military. The only way Captain Gray could have inflamed the message with greater poison was to write it on red paper and affix neon lights to the manila folder.