

# FATE

BY DICK CULVER

I suppose many, if not all, who have stared the “Grim Reaper” in the eye in one manner or another, depending on their vocation, have occasionally pondered their place in the overall scheme of things. Is there *really* a bullet out there with your name on it? ...Or if you buy the farm will it be from one marked “*to whom it may concern!*”? How many of you have ever gotten that creepy and sometimes unshakable feeling that *your* time was up and you were not going to make it through the next operation? Many have, and since such feelings or premonitions *occasionally* come true, (it’s simply a matter of percentages, I suppose), the legends take on a life (or death in this case) of their own. The mere fact that the individual who finally caught “*the one with his name on it,*” voiced his premonitions to close companions may have perhaps given an unwarranted boost to the feeling that your fate is occasionally controlled by supernatural forces, or certainly in the hands of some unknown “puppet-masters” pulling the strings. Let me tell you a few true stories, and let you decide for yourselves...



## A BIT OF BACKGROUND...

Some of these stories occurred in the early summer of 1967 when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Regiment was engaged in a continuing operation off the coast of South Vietnam as a part of Special Landing Force Bravo. Now, if there was ever an assignment that would keep the adrenaline pumping, this was it. Essentially our battalion was assigned to the USS Tripoli (LPH-10, a small aircraft carrier designed to house the majority of an Infantry Battalion, and its supporting helicopter air assets – helicopter transport, and gunships). Other elements of the SLF Battalion (there were usually two, Alpha and Bravo – 2/3 comprised SLF Bravo) were housed in a LST and an LPD designed to house additional personnel (both battalion assets, and supporting units, artillery, engineers, HST personnel, etc.). This seaborne conglomeration (essentially a bobtailed Regimental Landing Team) would sail in small circles in the South China Sea close to the nearest expected action. If one of the Division (1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>) units came under intense and unexpected fire, the staff personnel (from III MAF or Division Headquarters) who kept their fingers on the map, would “land the landing force”. A sort of cavalry to the rescue operation, much like the “*sparrow hawk*” concept, only on a much larger scale. What you must understand is that when the SLF was sent ashore, the fat was already in the fire, and you could expect “incoming” as you landed. Assignment to such a unit was not designed to give your life insurance agent untroubled dreams!

Several other stories take place over a much longer period of time, and were perhaps cumulative actions, albeit still possibly falling under the overall mantle of an all-knowing and all-seeing higher intelligence we have come to call our **FATE...**

## **STORY NUMBER ONE...**

In the early summer of 1967, following several reasonably hot operations, a young hard charging lieutenant was assigned to the battalion as an Infantry platoon commander. He was typical of the youngsters we were receiving from the Basic Officer's School, motivated and just generally "gung-ho". He was well built, and obviously in good physical shape, and to hear him tell the story, he was looking forward to a long Marine Corps Career. Certainly he performed up to expectations, and he was a great example for the troops. He had his leadership traits down pat, and the kids assigned to his unit seemed to "lord it over" some of their contemporaries, pointing out that they had the best platoon commander in the company. The young lieutenant responded in kind and treated his men well. It seemed to be a win-win situation. After several spirited firefights, however, the lieutenant no longer seemed to be the same happy-go-lucky individual who had joined the Battalion a month or so earlier. He had let it be known to some of his peers that he had begun to get the feeling that he wasn't going to survive Vietnam to make it home to his family. He began to believe that he was going to be the victim of a sniper's bullet, and that it would be fatal. He never made this public knowledge, but a few of his close friends let the information leak. In short, he personally had bought off on "*the bullet with his name on it*" routine.

One afternoon while exchanging fire with the NVA, a single shot (most probably) from an AK-47 came out of nowhere and hit the lieutenant reasonably high in the chest, and off to one side. The Corpsman got to him almost immediately, and pronounced that the Lieutenant was gonna' be OK, and that he was going to medivac him to the Tripoli in about 15-minutes. The Corpsman gave him a morphine shot to hold down any inadvertent pain, he had his wounds bandaged, and the Corpsman gave him water. The kids in his platoon came over and good naturedly told him they'd expect him back in the field as soon as he finished screwing off. The lieutenant was loaded aboard the medivac CH-46 and taken straightaway to the Tripoli. The only problem was that the lieutenant died en route to the ship for no particular reason the doctors could discern. Apparently, he died of shock, and considering his mindset it may well have been self-induced shock based on his deep seated belief that he was going to die from a single rifle bullet.

Do people die from self-induced shock? Yes, they most certainly do. Do you suppose the lieutenant mentally *killed himself* or that he had in fact found the "*one with his name on it?*" You'll have to decide that for yourself. Was the single bullet his "**FATE**" or his destiny?

## **STORY NUMBER TWO...**

This one has to do with a Captain who was assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Regiment fairly late in our evolution on the Special Landing Force. He had participated in some of our operations up close to the DMZ (extreme Northern I Corps) and as a result he had become used to fighting the NVA as a uniformed force, and not in the "get killed by a booby-trap set weeks earlier" scenario that we later experienced when we finally moved into our permanent base camp south of Da Nang, called The Triangle Outpost. Since most of us in the Battalion had experienced both methods of fighting the wily foe, we were able to shift gears on a moment's notice.

Our Captain (who we'll call John) had come to us from a tour of I&I Duty in New Orleans, stationed down on the Lake Front. He was a deeply devoted family man with an enduring love for his wife of some years. He talked of nothing else, and yet one day he received a most literal "Dear John" letter telling him that she was taking the family and "splitting the sheets," to use the vernacular of the day. This was apparently a total surprise to John, and it hit him very hard indeed. He was morose and his off duty conversations were filled with his desire to get back and get his family problems straightened out and bring the love of his life back into the fold.

To be absolutely honest, John's performance as a Company Commander didn't seem to suffer, and if anything he became even more aggressive – of course, we may have been missing the obvious. When the Battalion finally put in to the Triangle Outpost, having finished our tour with the Special Landing Force, we collectively breathed a sigh of relief and began to live like civilized human beings with hard-backed tents, canvas racks, a shower tent, and even a mess hall to heat our C-Rats. Life had become very good indeed for those accustomed to digging our own hooches and heating our own C-Rats. Our Mess Tent was a delight, and we even got an occasional hot meal that didn't originate in a can.

Patrol actions, however, now had degenerated to those that often resulted in wounds caused by booby-traps instead of concerted firefights. Dying from the actions of individuals performed several weeks earlier was maddening, and it caused an entire rethinking of our daily tactics. Shooting at uniformed soldiers engaged in a more or less conventional war was an entirely different smoke! While it wasn't out of the question to occasionally come across some armed Viet Cong, these were uncommon.

John began personally leading patrols as a Company Commander, a job normally relegated to platoon and squad leaders. Finally, one day John led his last patrol and ran into a command detonated mine that almost blew him in half. Tough to the last however, he remained conscious for a number of minutes after the detonation. The Corpsman was working feverishly over him, although shaking his head. John's last words? *"Tell my wife I love her!"*

Now the question has to be, did John deliberately push his luck knowing he had lost his one true love and wasn't able to face life without her, or had his dedication to duty caused him to lose track of normal sensibility and caution? Had the entire thing been a way of committing suicide rather than facing life without his wife? ...Or had John finally run into *"the one with his name on it?"* Perhaps the final booby-trap was simply his **FATE?**

## **STORY NUMBER THREE...**

This one is a bit displaced in the final fate of the individual involved. It has to do with a young Lieutenant who came to us in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>Rd</sup> Marines with the appearance of a lovable nerd but departed with the well deserved sobriquet of "Cold Steel Gunning".

"Cold Steel" was an unlikely looking young lad who lived to become a Marine Corps Hero. His story is better and more completely told in the sea story "Cold Steel Gunning," but I will give you a quick synopsis here. After having made the entire Battalion Staff miserable in his efforts to be assigned to an Infantry platoon, he finally wore the entire crew down and was given an NCO considered to be the toughest Platoon Sergeant in the outfit. The Platoon Sergeant was assigned to save the troops from Gunning, but, perhaps more to the point, to save Gunning from himself.

It would seem that we had worried unnecessarily as Gunning was more than up to the task at hand. Upon being accosted by an NVA Platoon, Gunning had retaliated by ordering his platoon to “fix bayonets” and driving the enemy from the field. After changing the magazine in his pistol following his famous bayonet charge, he became the toast of the platoon, and a couple of weeks later following another bayonet charge, this time subduing a NVA Company, he became the toast of the Battalion. He eventually left Vietnam with at least one Silver Star and a chest full of medals, apparently with nothing else to prove.

I saw young Lieutenant Gunning one more time, after he had made Captain, this time in 1973 when he was serving as a Company Commander in the 9<sup>th</sup> Marines up at Camp Schwab. Gunning had found his niche in life and had decided on becoming a professional U.S. Marine. He had just come back from an R&R Trip to Hawaii to meet the love of his life, apparently to make preparations to “tie the knot” of nuptial bliss. Upon arriving back on the Rock from his sojourn, he was assigned as the Battalion Officer of the Day. Our legendary hero was found dead in his office the next morning, apparently by his own hand still clutching his issued .45 Automatic Pistol.

It has always been my contention that some wee lassie did for “Cold Steel Gunning” what the entire North Vietnamese Army hadn’t been able to accomplish during his tour in South East Asia.

My question is, was this a preordained **FATE** for the lad destined to be a hero in combat, but ultimately unable to handle civilian life and its feminine nuances? Are some individuals superbly equipped to handle combat, but totally unprepared to respond to life in the outside world? Had “Cold Steel Gunning” simply worked Captain John’s **FATE** in reverse, getting his “Dear John” in person as opposed to a letter from a widely displaced and no longer loving wife? One other possibility to consider is that perhaps “Cold Steel” had been fated to die in combat in Vietnam and the Grim Reaper had inadvertently turned his head just for a second during Gunning’s mighty exploits, allowing him to miss his appointed rendezvous with death, much as in the movie “*Final Destination*”?...Or had Gunning simply found “*the one with his name on it*” in his own holster?

## **STORY NUMBER FOUR...**

This one is a little more difficult to deal with as it was an on-going thing. It has to do with my well known 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant, Kenneth R. (Lockerbox) Jones, sometimes referred to as “Horrible Jones” for some unknown reason (heh, heh, heh)... Jones was a professional’s professional. Two tours as a drill instructor in the early to mid 1950s had established his reputation as a strict disciplinarian. His first tour on the field had made him a legend, and his return after the infamous McKeon incident in 1956 reintroduced him to his former Junior Drill Instructor who was now an instructor in the newly formed Drill Instructor’s School. Jones’s former assistant is said to have exclaimed “Oh No! He’s Back!” The originator of the “locker-box” drill for his platoons had returned to ensure that his Marine Corps had not gone to hell in a handbasket.

Jones had served in combat in Korea and carried a number of scars that bespoke of healed bullet wounds. Rumor control said that Jones had once played semi-professional football, and his physical build would have allowed him to participate in such activities. Facial scars supposedly acquired from going through the windshield in a car mishap gave him the countenance of one tough cookie. From personal experience, I can categorically state that he

was everything his reputation, record book and appearance would lead you to believe were truisms. One of my later Battalion Commanders following Vietnam told of Jones' exploits as one of his platoon sergeants in an infantry Battalion. Although Jones was legend, he apparently wasn't one who had milked the system for every available ribbon and dangler. His display of fruit salad was impressive enough, sporting a Bronze Star and appropriate Purple Hearts ...obviously he had not padded his record with anything that hadn't been forced on him by admiring commanders.

Jones' demeanor with the troops was something of a facade, as he pretended to be "*Jack the Ripper*," who was the very nemesis of a lad who failed to do his duty. I watched him supervise a youngster who had not worn his flack jacket on patrol bury his body armor in a 6'x6'x6' hole, fill it in, and then dig it up again. The uninitiated would have thought of this as punishment, but I saw it for what it was – Jones liked the kid and was trying to impress upon him the necessity of wearing it to make it home alive.

As the first sergeant of the company he was hard on the Marines, but would never allow any NCOs from the other companies to screw with "his" troops. He went well out of his way to conceal his activities, but Jones for all of his bluster was a "softie" at heart. The kids were not easily fooled, however, and while they avoided his wrath like the plague, they had a place in their heart for their legendary First Soldier.

He had a sense of humor that was also legendary, and he often took his fellow Staff NCOs to task just to keep 'em on their toes. In the Hierarchy of the 9 tiered rank system, certain nuances were to be observed, but not always voiced. The so-called line ranks (Gunnery Sergeant, 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant and Sergeant Major) were placed in the scheme of things above the more technical grades (Master Sergeant, and Master Gunnery Sergeant). One of Jones' old friends was the communicator of the battalion, a Master Sergeant named Flannigan. Every morning when Jones would climb out of his hole, he would look over at Flannigan and the conversation was always the same:

"Youse realizes, Flannigan, dat a First Sergeant is *ALWAYS* senior to a Master Sergeant, regardless of date of rank!"

Flannigan, a funny gentleman himself, and a great communications man, would simply look over at Jones and roll his eyes. It was a great joke between them, and it never varied.

I had come to view Jones as one of the great truisms of the Corps, eternal and a sort of keeper of the eternal flame. The 1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant sort of took me under his wing and in his own gruff fashion attempted to keep me out of trouble. To say that I was "gungy" when I arrived would have been an understatement. What he saw in my worthless fanny, except for perhaps a bit of prior enlisted service, was something of a mystery to me. Perhaps it was because down deep we both had an overriding love of the troops and tried to get 'em home safe. When I would attempt to do something a bit off the wall, like lead a patrol during an operation, Jones in his own way would attempt to dissuade my John Wayne urges by pointing out that while it was certainly *my* company, and of course I could do anything I wanted, that if I were to get killed it would leave the company without a commanding officer (indicating that this would be a VERY bad thing), but of course the Company Commander could do as he wished. This would be done in front of the troops, which had the effect of pointing out that bayonet charges were not really MY job, but if I wished to continue he'd understand. He probably saved my bacon several times using this technique and appropriately shamed me without making me look like a chicken \$hit in front of the troops. Once I figured out that he was

actually acting in my best interest (as well as the company's), I came to love the old bear. He was essentially what the Marine Corps was all about.

Jones was on his second extension in Vietnam when I inherited him, and he had done more than his share of the dirty work. I kept gently prodding him to find out if he ever intended to go back to the land of the big PX. He'd usually grin and say no more about it. Then one day, he came to me with (for him) a rather unusual request. Jones asked me if I would have any objection if he stayed behind in the Company Office aboard ship for awhile, as the work was beginning to pile up. I of course had no objection, as most of the Companies ran a version of this anyway. Normally the Company Gunny was the senior NCO during minor operations, when the Battalion had not been off-loaded for an extended period. He then made a statement that was seemingly out of character for the most knuckle-dragging First Sergeant in the Marine Corps. He said that he was finally getting a little antsy and starting to duck at any unexpected loud noise (hell, I thought that went with the entire situation). Bear in mind that Jones had participated in the "Hill Fights" on hill 881 in April, and that was a whole war in itself! I told him I understood, and that I thought a bit of time in the office might be good for the organization. But for Jones to admit becoming nervous under fire was seemingly totally out of character for him. Since we had become pretty close, I thought that such a revelation was an indication of mutual trust. I kept my mouth shut, as Jones had earned his mini-R&R in spades!

During the battle for the tree line and small hedge rows in the village of Ap Se Quan, just a bit southwest of Quang Tri, we had two CH-46 re-supply helicopters shot out of the landing zone (actually a graveyard, the only dry ground capable of handling a CH-46) with RPGs, wounding 17 individuals who were on the working party. One of the wounded was my Company Gunnery Sergeant, Franklin D. Craddock, another stalwart NCO and former Drill Instructor. Craddock, refusing to be medivac'd, jumped over the tail gate of the CH-46 staggering out of the landing zone. Craddock simply wasn't ready to be medivac'd! I got him patched up as best I could, but he obviously belonged in sick bay. When the choppers landed in the morning with our re-supplies and to take out the residual wounded, Horrible Jones appeared, as if by magic, doing a contact relief of Gunny Craddock. I had not sent back for the First Sergeant, but he had gotten word of Craddock's wounds and orchestrated a sort of NCO Change of Command. Jones hadn't been out of the blast but for a couple of weeks, and I would have opted to let him have a bit more rest and relaxation, but old time NCOs have a mind of their own.

Lest this become a Horrible Jones biography, I will taper off of the minutiae, and get back to the original tale. When I finally became the S-2 of the Battalion, and Hotel Company fell to another commanding officer, Gunnery Sergeant Craddock finally allowed them to "*find*" all of his many wound tags and medivac him back to Okinawa. I only had a couple of months left in country and often visited my favorite First Sergeant. One day, I asked Horrible if it was true that he was finally going home. He grinned and said, "Yep, Skipper, I got a letter the other day from my missus." The letter read as follows, if he was to be believed:

"Horrible, now I knows youse loves da' Corps, and feel dat your place is in combat, *BUT*, come dis June der's gonna' be a lot of "fornicating" (using different language of course) going on, and if youse wants to get in on it, you'd better be here!"

I left Horrible to continue his packing as I was preparing to head back to Camp Lejeune.

Getting my own affairs unscrambled left me with little time to socialize, and since I was now stationed at the Rifle Range at Camp Lejeune, some twenty miles from the main base,

and living in quarters at the range, my socializing mainside was severely curtailed. Generally speaking, I only saw any of my old time friends and acquaintances when they were assigned to the range for requalification.

I was notified one day in May that I was to report to the flagpole in front of the Base Headquarters at 0800 on a Friday morning. I attempted to beg off, telling the General's Staff Secretary that there was some mistake. I got another call telling me that "I" was the entertainment for the morning for a visiting Naval Academy Class. I grudgingly showed up, rather than disobey a direct order, and who should be standing tall to watch the ceremony but a certain First Sergeant Horrible Jones and Gunnery Sergeant Franklin D. Craddock. After a few handshakes, Jones and Craddock came over and said somewhat conspiratorially, "Ya see Skipper, we told ya' we'd take care of ya'!" With that, the General requested (demanded?) my presence in his office for a little talk, and Jones and Craddock disappeared before I could palaver with them.

Now is when Jones' story begins to take on something of a supernatural note. Following a tour back at Lejeune, Horrible again requested another tour in Vietnam. It was almost as if he was being driven by some unseen force to cause some preordination to come to fruition. I was somewhat relieved to find out that Jones had been assigned to the Civic Action Program. While this program COULD get exciting, most of the action was with the squads stationed out in the various villages as advisors to the local Vietnamese militia elements. Jones, being one of the supervisors of the program, made a point out of visiting each unit out in the field (in typical Jones fashion) whenever he had the chance. One day in January, 1970, Jones and two of his cohorts hitched a ride with one of the Navy Swift Boats going into the back country to pay a visit to some of the CAP Units. Jones and his companions were told to get a comfortable place to sit on the foredeck since they were in a relatively quiet sector, and little or no action was expected on the way. An unexpected explosion coming seemingly out of nowhere left the foredeck a twisted mess of human remains and wreckage. A "gook mortar round" came crashing down just forward of the pilot house and killed all three of the Marine passengers, Horrible Jones being among them. No further fire was received, the round essentially performing the duties of a "Deus ex Machina" in a Greek Play and providing an improbable end to a story line apparently originating many years before.

Now, my question is, was Jones simply destined to die in combat with the Marines he loved so well, or had he pushed the envelope one too many times? Having been in many extremely sticky combat situations with rifle, machine gun, mortar, and artillery fire abounding, he had skated with mostly minor wounds, only to die from an extremely unlikely round of detached mortar fire, perhaps not even aimed at the boat? Odds? One in Ten Million or more? Was this Jones' round marked "*to whom it may concern*" or was it "*the one with his name on it*"? Perhaps the single mortar round had simply sealed a **FATE** ordained many years before?

## **STORY NUMBER FIVE...**

And perhaps one of the most intriguing stories of all... This one deals with an old friend of mine, with whom I had served on and off for many years, a Lieutenant Colonel named Charlie Reynolds.

Now Charlie started out in the Marine Corps as an enlisted lineman in a communications outfit. He often told the story of his First Sergeant requiring the troops to climb a practice

telephone pole wearing pole climbers to retrieve their liberty cards stashed in a box on top of the pole.

Charlie was an able and competent lad who attracted the favorable attention of his superiors and was recommended for OCS. Upon successful graduation, Charlie decided to try his hand at becoming a Marine Aviator, and he was again one of the top in his class. Further, his expertise with both rifle and pistol convinced his CO that he should compete in the Marine Corps Division Matches as a representative of the Air Wing Team. Charlie, of course, did well - eventually becoming both a Distinguished Marksman and Distinguished Pistol Shot.

Early in his shooting escapades we had served together shooting the Far Eastern Division Matches on Okinawa, when Charlie bamboozled the Ishikwaka Fuzz in their relentless drive to make Okinawa safe from the irresponsible driving practices of the U.S. Military. Charlie was fun to be around and one hell of a rifle shooter.

Time passed, and during the Vietnam fracas Charlie put in two tours in country, one as an A4 driver (a small attack aircraft primarily used for close air support of the ground troops), and a second as a HU1E Gunship pilot (a predecessor of the Huey Cobra Gunships). Charlie was no *pansy* wingie, he was a true warrior, and he took the time to personally zero his four forward firing coaxial M60 Machine Guns. By setting the Huey down on a couple of logs, he got out with some substantial wrenches and, with the help of his crew chief, he loosened and retightened each gun until he was satisfied that it was dead on target at the optimum "anti-communist" range. Charlie was a warrior, perhaps more compatible with rifles and bayonets than silk scarves and moustache wax. His tours left him with at least one Silver Star and a reputation as one of the all time great combat pilots. The infantry loved him as he would almost get in their hip pockets with his A4 when they called for close air support. If Charlie could have found a way to attach a 16" Springfield bayonet to his Huey, I'm sure he'd have finished off any surviving enemy with the nose of his ship!

In 1976 I was assigned to MTU to relieve Major Dave Willis at MTU and found that Weapons Training Battalion was in the able hands of my old friend, now Lieutenant Colonel Charlie Reynolds. I couldn't have been happier. It's always a pleasure to serve with a combat Marine whose entire thrust in life had been to close with and destroy the enemy. We both agreed that the true purpose of both WTB and MTU was to develop better and more effective combat techniques with the service rifle (and pistol, of course) and pass such on to the operating forces. I had always considered myself to be a Marine who knew how to effectively use his service weapons, as opposed to one who was dedicated to winning Olympic Medals. While the medals were important as an indication of your skill level with your individual service weapons, they were not unlike a Ranger Tab or a set of Airborne Wings, as opposed to a symbol of personal glory. Competition was great, but it served primarily as a way of honing your ability to cancel the enemy's birth certificate. Combat was the watchword, and in Charlie I had a kindred spirit.

Time passed, and instructional teams were run for the various Division Matches. With Charlie's blessing we got our first post-Vietnam Marine Corps Sniper School off the ground, although I suspect with anyone else in charge they might have objected to the way we had to rob Peter to pay Paul, since we were operating without budget, training aids or allocated funds. Charlie was the key to the salvation of the Sniper School, by constructively turning his head if nothing else.

After many years, Charlie decided to retire in November of 1977, and he headed back to Huntington, Tennessee, bought a house, and settled down... well at least for a time, at any rate. As with most aviators, Charlie was still yearning for the wild blue yonder. A bit of searching found him working as a pilot for the TVA (Tennessee Valley Authority) and getting his adrenaline fix in flying light planes for over-flights of reservoirs, dams and power plants.

Skip Hartnett and I made a trip up to Hanscom Air Force Base in the early Spring of 1978, and upon arrival back in Quantico, we encountered a very somber crew. Not knowing what the word was, I asked if the Commandant had passed into Valhalla?

"Worse," was the reply, "Colonel Charlie has bought the farm!"

Dear Allah... Not Charlie - what happened?

"We don't really have the details," was the reply, "but apparently a wing fell off his plane, and both he and his mechanic auggered in!"

The details were never clear, but as best anyone could figure out, both Charlie and his mechanic had given the plane a good going over and had taken it up for a test hop, when the wing came loose and folded across the top of the fuselage. There was obviously no recovery from that one, and one of the great all time warriors had gone to Odin's care, not in the heat of combat defending the world's greatest Republic, but conversely in the employ of one of Franklin Roosevelt's first attempts to bring socialism to the United States. Somehow I don't think Charlie would have been amused if he had cogitated on the perverse implications of defending socialism after having spent his entire life attempting to keep the spread of Communism in check.

I have carefully considered the ramifications of Charlie's demise, and have often wondered if he was simply destined to die in aerial flight, and the long Scythe of the Grim Reaper had somehow missed him when he had the chance all the years in the past? Would anyone flying that aircraft that ill fated afternoon have had the wing come off, or was it waiting for Charlie to correct some past mistake? Perhaps the apparent freak accident was simply in the cards, and his **FATE** been decreed long ago? ...Had Charlie finally found "*the one with his name on it*" over Tennessee instead of South East Asia, or was the wing marked "*to whom it may concern*"?

## STORY NUMBER SIX...

While this collage of vignettes is hardly a clincher to any of the above related tales, it has to do with personal experiences and is therefore immediately suspect and open to criticism. The mini-stories related here are simply an attempt to illustrate the other side of the coin: stories where I *should* have become a statistic, but for some unknown reason avoided my personal final liaison with the man with the scythe. I offer them simply as "what ifs," but somewhat interesting ones nonetheless.

During a few bouts with military parachute jumping I have had several incidents that should have "done for" this worthy, only to have them come out alright.

During one night jump at Camp Pendleton in 1961 a Marine drifted over 1700-yards in the air and landed in Lake Pulgas. Since we were operating well away from any expected water obstacles, we were not wearing life vests. In this particular case, it may simply have been the lad's time to meet his maker. He was one of only two non-swimmers in the old

Force Recon Company, and he drowned wrapped in his own shroud lines. This case is essentially inexplicable, since no one else on the jump drifted over 400-yards. It would appear this particular individual might well have walked in front of a freight train that night if he had not been involved in parachute operations. On the other hand, I have personally shaken out a double malfunction, and landed safely, if somewhat sweaty. I remember smoking one of only three cigarettes in my entire life following that incident, and I burned my lips on the third puff. Close but no cigar (for a bad pun).

While rappelling out of a HUS Helicopter (later re-designated as the CH-34) at Onslow Beach in 1966, I was the first individual “on rappel.” We were hovering at about 90 feet, and in best recon fashion, I got myself about 20 feet of rappelling line slack and went out the door yelling “RECON” at the top of my lungs (the troops expected such nonsense from their officers, and who was I to disappoint them?). The trick was to have your right hand securely holding the line, and once you hit the end of your 20-foot slack and your downward motion stopped, you then went through the normal rappelling routine guiding the line with your left hand and breaking with your right. In theory this looked a lot more dangerous than it really was. The safety man on the deck had hold of the end of the rappelling line and could stop your downward motion by simply tightening the line. Unfortunately, two things happened simultaneously. First, in my haste to demonstrate my macho rappelling technique, I inadvertently lost my hold on the rappelling line with my “break hand” (this is NOT a good thing!). Still, an alert belay man on the deck could have averted disaster at any point by simply tightening the slack on the line. Problem? He was palavering with his buddy and not paying attention to what was going on. I was desperately grabbing for the line with my right hand to regain control and the ability to break my downward motion. Alas, no go - I was suddenly in the process of setting a new speed record from chopper to the beach – I KNEW this was gonna’ hurt (badly – 90-feet is a fur piece!). Somewhere along the way, an understanding Odin shoved the rappelling line back into my right hand, and by applying my best “breaking action” I came to an unceremonious stop with my feet about 2 feet off the deck. I, of course, simply let myself down the last two feet, bowed deeply from the waist to the applause of the troops who were sure I was simply showing off for them. Yeah, right! Jesus, Joseph and Mary! I backed out of the remaining rappelling line and excused myself from the rest of the exercise, making the excuse of turning out the usual interminable reports. I went back to the office coming very close to a mild (make that *major*) cardiac arrest. It took three tries to keep a whole cup of coffee from spilling all over the desk. I made mental notes to myself to avoid such hot-dog idiocy in the future. You just never know when Odin may be taking a nap!

Odin again took a hand during my escapades in Vietnam. I stepped into a “Zip” Panjii pit up to mid-thigh only to find that the sharpened bamboo stakes were rotted to the point of being almost powder. I suspect that that one had been left over from the French Indo-China days. Another bullet dodged, in a manner of speaking.

While executing a midnight change of command of a Rifle Company (my predecessor had been medivac’d following an artillery barrage), I was guided to my new digs by the Company Gunny. It was darker than the inside of a meat locker, and the surrounding tree line looked to be entirely too close for my personal tastes. Under the circumstances I had no choice in the location of my temporary Command Post, so I decided to hunker in until first light when I could assess the situation. My pre-dug foxhole (I still call ‘em foxholes, my heart is firmly entrenched in WWI) was of adequate depth and width. Perhaps Odin was looking out for me once again – I had *no* idea! My first action was to put my poncho liner in the pre-dug hole and get some shut-eye; it had been an exciting day. It was hotter than the hinges of

Hades in that hole, so I moved my makeshift CP and poncho liner to the top of the hole to get some fresh air. I had no sooner laid down than I was aware of some “swishing sounds” in the air followed by two spirited “booms” that emanated from the hole I had just evacuated. I grabbed my rifle and rolled over at the ready and spent the rest of the night squinting into the blackness of the surrounding vegetation. Morning light demonstrated how close a thing it had been. There in the hole I had just evacuated were the un-fragmented bodies of two Chi-Com stick grenades that had simply blown apart on the seams of the cast warheads. The damned things had simply separated without the normal fragmentation that that makes ‘em hazardous to your health. One fragmentation grenade I could have understood, but two? I can’t even imagine the odds! Chalk up another one to the whims of the Gods of War!

Just prior to my double-dud grenade affair, I had been on the side of a hill overlooking the DMZ and preparing to re-embark aboard the U.S.S. Princeton when I found myself in a spirited artillery barrage, compliments of Ho Chi Minh’s finest. The chopper took a wave off, and I went hunting a hole since I was simply ashore observing and hadn’t dug in. It seems that our spotter aircraft had left to refuel and the Zips were taking the opportunity to use our Battalion Radio Antennae as aiming stakes. Since cover was at a premium, I took advantage of a partially pre-dug hole that was not occupied. After doing a good second base slide, I got some of my body into the hole. The terrain was about as hard as concrete, and my predecessor had only gotten down about 4 inches in depth and had made his prospective shelter about 4 feet long. Anything beats nothing, and I was thankful for small favors. I found myself sharing the hole with another wayfaring stranger, a hospital corpsman who had been making his way across the hill mass. About 185 rounds of Zip artillery later, I finally got my eyeballs to stop spinning like slot machine wheels, dusted myself off, and climbed up to assess any personal damage. Aside from a number of minor perforations that were handily stitched up by the Doc and doused with a bit of iodine, I was back in battery. I started looking around for another individual who had slid into a hole about 12 feet away as the artillery barrage started. At first I thought I might have been hallucinating, as no hole was to be found – at least not until I checked a bit closer. A bit of probing disclosed a pair of jungle boots with bones sticking out and a lot of reddish-pink dirt. Nothing particularly spooky about this one, of course, as the Artillery Gods are always fickle and often can’t keep their rounds in the same grid square. The former occupant of the boots had simply gotten one marked “to whom it may concern!”

During a river crossing under fire (reminiscent of young Penell’s dilemma in “*She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*” but without the shallow ford), I volunteered to be the last guy across. We had sent a scout swimmer across with a piece of parachute cord tied to a rappelling line to secure on the opposite shore. By making brush rafts, we took one half of our heavy and automatic weapons across, while we covered the rest with our remaining guns. Once our ordnance was secured on the opposite shore, we used them to cover the crossing of the remainder of the company using the same techniques. Our only serious antagonist was a Zip automatic rifleman ensconced on a bluff overlooking our river fording operation, who mercifully couldn’t seem to hit the deck with his cover! He shot at us sporadically all afternoon without making a solid hit. Mercifully, we suffered zero casualties. It was finally my turn, and I dutifully untied the rappelling line on my end; holding my helmet in my right hand, I waded into the water. The little clown made his only hit of the afternoon and ricocheted one off my helmet, holing my helmet cover but leaving all else untouched. Either he was getting better, or I was making my departure just in time. Odin again? I began to wonder...

To cut this discussion short, let me skip from the jungles of South East Asia to the hills of North Idaho circa 1997. Always looking for one more adrenaline rush, I had applied for a job

running the external security for several embassies/consulates in both Africa and South America. The intricacies of the negotiations are interesting but not germane to the subject of **"FATE"**... except for one thing. The first Embassy I was offered was that of Kenya, as I had spent some time in the area previously. Before that contract came to fruition, however, the entire assignment process was overcome by events, and I was assigned to the U.S. Embassy and the Consulates in South Africa. The individual assigned to the Kenyan Embassy was a retired black Marine Gunnery Sergeant who had ties with the local natives. While I would have enjoyed the Kenyan assignment (I'm a Robert Ruark fan), I was more than happy with South Africa. The Embassy Assignments were all handled by the same parent company bidding for the contracts with the Department of State. Shortly after these assignments, the Kenyan Embassy in Nairobi was blown up by Muslim extremist, killing many people - including Embassy and security personnel. Had the Gods of War once again taken a hand leaving my skuzzy fanny unscathed? The possibilities give pause to contemplate the entire concept of **FATE...**

What's going to be my ticket to Valhalla? I would certainly like to think I won't be run over by a manure truck while crossing the street headed for a Baskin-Robbins. What would be my choice? When it's necessary to finally visit the Great Hall presided over by Odin and tended by the Valkyries, I suppose the ultimate method of demise would be to swing on a gibbet after having been tried for, and convicted of, rape at the age of 105 years - suspected or *accused* of rape wouldn't count – but *convicted*, now, there's a thought, eh what?

This, then, concludes my contemplations on the concept of preordination at the hand of unseen or supernatural forces. **FATE** or happenstance? It all depends upon how you look at it, doesn't it? Does the Grim Reaper play favorites, or do we all have a predetermined destiny with our own **FATE?** But then, that was the premise of our discussion, wasn't it? Hummm...

**SEMPER FI,**

**DICK**