

NAM '68

A NOVEL
BY JAMES HOGAN

Hellgate Press



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NAM '68

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PO Box 3531

Ashland, OR 97520

email: sales@hellgatepress.com

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The accounts included in this novel are based primarily on true events and are dedicated to the members of the 5th and 7th Cavalry, and to all of the United States troops and our Allies who fought bravely during the conflict in Vietnam.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT APPEARS TO BE ISN'T ALWAYS what it is. Time and space separate truth from reality, and the events within this novel—most witnessed firsthand by the author and some acknowledged by other young warriors who shared their experiences at the bar on firebase Jack—endorse this account.

The time was 1968, and the Vietnam War was splitting the nation apart. College students protested in droves against the draft and a war that politicians downplayed as a conflict. But there were troops who stood firm between the communists and a corrupt government far from their homeland. These boys turned into men at an early age were called “the undesirables,” a term the United States military coined when discharging soldiers it couldn't control after those men did their wartime duty.

The word “undesirable” was nestled between an honorable and dishonorable discharge and was rarely used in the oral form. The pencil-pushers at the time had no idea how to catalog the behavior and insubordination of a few, so this term was applied—not necessarily only for High Pockets, the guy who possibly coined it, but for a lot of others who did their duty and fell between the cracks of the armed forces establishment.

ONE

FLUSH THAT IDEA

IT WAS THE SUMMER OF 1967. A young man, barely out of his teens and who had partied a little too much the night before, awoke to the sound of his mom's voice yelling from the kitchen below his bedroom. "Get down here or I'm throwing it in the garbage. And make your bed before you leave that room."

The smell of bacon frying in the pan enticed Jim to get out of bed and throw the blankets back up over his wrinkled sheets. He took a quick shower, brushed his teeth, and went downstairs.

"I'm ready for breakfast," he said as he strolled into the dining room, still hungover from the night before. "I hope it's not the same old crap on a different plate."

"Don't curse in this house," his mother said in a stern voice. "Now sit down and eat."

"Where were you last night?" she asked, as she sat across the table with all of her attention directed at him.

"Out" was his only reply.

"That's not an answer so let's try this again."

"Okay, I was at a party downtown with the guys," he replied reluctantly, hoping she wasn't expecting him to give a detailed description of his escapades.

"What time did you get home, and where's your car?" she asked.

"I don't know what time I got home, but I hope my car is parked out back."

"Well, it's not, so now what are you going to do, smart guy?"

"I'm going to finish my breakfast and then call the police," he said.

"Well, thank goodness you don't have to go that far, because your car's parked down the street and I know you didn't park it there. When are you going to grow up?" his mother asked.

“Today. It’s been marked on my calendar for a while.”

Jim was always ready with a crisp response, but at that moment he felt an uneasiness in the atmosphere—as if his life were about to change and although it had been a long time coming, today was the day. Just then the phone rang, and at the same time, the postman slid the mail through the slot in the door. “Get the phone,” his mother said, “and I’ll get the mail.” It may have been better the other way around.

The caller had information about a gang fight that was going down within hours, and his attendance was sorely needed. “Who are we fighting?” he asked just a little too loud as his mother reentered the room.

“A black gang out of Philly,” was the caller’s response.

“When and where?” he asked as he stared into his mother’s eyes. But his mom interrupted the conversation before the answer came.

“You’re going to a fight?” she asked. “Well isn’t that ironic! You’ve been invited to two fights in one day, but you might want to read this before you commit to the first one. It’s a tad more serious because it involves guns,” she said, handing him the letter she had already opened.

It began “Greetings from your local draft board.”

“Oh no!” Jim said as he read through the neatly typed document.

“You’ve been drafted, haven’t you?” his mother asked, peeling the phone from his hand and telling the caller, “If he doesn’t call you back, start the fight without him” before hanging up.

“Yeah, but that’s okay—they can’t take me.”

“Why not? Do you hold a political job or are you enrolled in a school that I’m not aware of?”

“None of the above,” he replied. “Don’t you remember what the doctor said when he sewed up my Achilles heel after the car accident?”

“Yes, I do,” his mother responded. “He said you’d limp for the rest of your life. But you don’t.”

“Oh but I will when I enter that recruitment center, and I have thirty days to perfect the technique.” That said, out the door he went to his current engagement. For the next month, he practiced limping to the point of exhaustion. On the day of his acting debut he could have fooled anybody.

With almost forty other unfortunate souls, Jim waited in the auditorium for the first barrage of instructions. A thin but athletic-looking sergeant entered the room. "Gentlemen," he said, "some of you are going to embark on an incredible adventure, while others in this group will not. In the next four hours, those chosen will become apparent, depending on your individual skills and physical abilities."

This is going to be a piece of cake, Jim thought, and it should have been. However, during an untimely bowel movement, he had held a lengthy conversation with another gentleman in the stall next to his.

"Are you here for the physicals?" the unseen voice asked.

"Yeah," Jim said, "but I won't be heading to the train station with the rest of them."

"Oh? And why is that?" the inquisitive defecator asked.

"Because I have a disability," Jim said. "I sliced my Achilles tendon clean through to the bone in a car accident three years ago."

"So I guess you walk with a limp," the voice asked.

"No, but the doctor who examines me won't know that," Jim replied.

"Well, good luck," the faceless entity said as he exited the washroom.

And that's when it dawned on Jim what he had just done: He had stupidly explained his whole plan to a total stranger. But lady luck couldn't be that cruel, he thought; the guy was probably just another recruit. As our resident genius exited the washroom, his only thought was that after two more exams he could grab his belongings and go home.

The first exam was a urine test, which was quite embarrassing considering he had to hand over to a nurse his filthy concoction in a small cup, which was full to the brim and sloshing over the sides. The next room he entered was the final test and, just as during the one before, a nurse was in charge.

"Do you have any noticeable abnormalities?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, "a bad case of hemorrhoids."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Didn't you just see me hobble in here?" Jim replied. She must have gotten her diploma off the back of a pack of matches, he thought.

"Okay, can you show me any points of major surgery and scars?" she asked Jim.

"I sure can," he said, and proceeded to take the sock off his right foot. "There.

Can you see that? My Achilles tendon was sliced clean through. It took twenty stitches inside and out and then six months to heal.”

“And you’ve limped ever since?” she asked.

“That’s right,” he replied. “I wish I could have seen you today before I had to go through all those other exams.”

“I don’t make the rules,” she said, “but if I had to guess, I’d say you’re most likely not going to be inducted. Stay here; I’ll be right back.” She then quickly exited the room.

Well, that was enough encouragement for Jim to start figuring out a way to get back home. His mother had dropped him off earlier, insisting he leave his car at home just in case he didn’t pull off this charade. And a wise woman she was. Just then the door to the small exam room opened and a tall, slender man entered holding a clipboard, dressed in a white smock with captain’s bars on his collar.

“Well, James,” the doctor said, “I’ve been told by my assistant that you have a serious foot disability.”

“That’s right, Doc,” our thespian said.

“Do you mind if I take a closer look at it?” the doctor asked.

“No, go right ahead.”

“Damn, that’s pretty gruesome. I bet that hurt like hell when it first happened.”

“Not really, Doc. I didn’t realize it was sliced until I stepped out of the car and my heel slid up into my ankle—that’s when it hurt.”

“I can imagine,” the captain said. “But what I want to see now is simply a formality. Step into the hallway, James; I need to test your stability before I let you go.”

“If you’re going to ask me to walk a straight line, I won’t be able to,” Jim said.

“Like I said,” the doctor insisted, “it’s only a formality, so why don’t you try.”

This, of course, had been anticipated and was practiced over the month after receiving the lethal government letter. With an insincere display of balance, Jim failed the task. “See, I told you I couldn’t do it. Now can I go home?”

“Yes, I suppose you can,” the doctor said, “but it’s such a shame the army’s going to miss out on all your excellent talents. Would you mind doing the test just one last time before you go?”

“This is bullshit,” Jim said. “You’re fucking with me, aren’t you.”

“Absolutely not. Come on, one more time, please do me this favor.”

Again, heel to toe with the same manufactured and insecure steps, Jim retraced

his previous path. But this time the doctor, who was standing off to the side, took a step forward and pushed Jim. Considering the disability, Jim should have fallen on his ass. But instead, his agile body took over and despite being shoved, he stayed on his feet.

“That’s a hell of a limp you have there,” the doctor said. “I wish I had one like that. I shoved you as hard as I could while you were performing your act and you didn’t miss a beat.”

“What does that mean?” Jim asked.

“It means you’re in the army. Now go back to the auditorium for the swearing-in ceremony. Oh yeah—be careful what you say to strangers in public restrooms.” And with that the doctor was gone.

Well, he had given it his best shot, Jim thought. It was only for two years, and the war in Vietnam was going to be over any day now. So off he went, back to the group of other reluctant draftees. Sitting comfortably in the same seat he had occupied earlier, Jim waited for the next shoe to drop. It wasn’t long before a captain entered the auditorium, flanked on both sides by two marines.

“Gentlemen, the captain said, “I know Sergeant Miller told you earlier that some of you would be embarking on an adventure and some wouldn’t. Well, I can proudly say that only one out of the forty of you who entered these doors this morning couldn’t make the cut.”

“What was wrong with him, Sir? Did his glass eye fall out while taking the exam, or was she discovered taking her brothers place during the physical?”

“Who said that?” the captain barked, while the two observant marines were pointing straight at Jim. He stood up, a half-smile lingering on his face.

“It never ceases to amaze me,” the captain said. “There’s always a smartass in every group. Come up here and stand next me,” he said to Jim. “I want to make sure you repeat every part of this oath as I give it.”

After the ceremony was over and Jim had given up his immortal soul to the army, he couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “Hey, Sir, what are the marines doing here?” he asked.

“None of your fucking business,” the captain said. “And there’s no ‘hey’ in front of sir when addressing an officer, do you understand? You just took the oath, and your ass belongs to the military for the next six years.”

“I don’t think so, Sir,” our new recruit said. “Draftees are active for only two years.”

“That’s right,” the captain said, “but you didn’t read the small print? Two years’ active duty and four more on standby. But you don’t have to worry about that—I see a tombstone as your headboard before the two years are up. Now go back to your seat, and take these folders with you.”

The two marines then walked into the group and started to pick out certain individuals. Four in all were led away in a less-than-masculine manner: they were crying their eyes out. The army was bad but the marines was the worst when it came to getting mind-fucked. Those poor guys had every right to shed those tears as they exited the auditorium to join the marines.

“Gentlemen,” the captain told the rest of us, “you are now part of the most prestigious fighting outfit in the world. And no matter what patch you wear after your eighteen weeks of training, or wherever in the world you are sent, I wish you all good luck. There’s a bus outside waiting to take all of you to Thirtieth Street Station, and Mister Smartass there has everyone’s files; he’ll be in charge. Now you’re all dismissed except you, James, I have a few extra words for you.”

As the others left the building, the captain made it quite clear that Jim shouldn’t take his task too lightly, because if all thirty-five swinging dicks didn’t arrive at Fort Bragg the next morning, it was his ass on the line.

“Why me?” Jim asked.

“Because I grew up with a guy just like you,” the captain said. “He was a sneaky son-of-a-bitch, too, but always got the job done. Now get the hell out of here!”

That doctor must have had a talk with the captain, Jim thought, as he left the building and entered the bus.

“Our leader has finally arrived,” a junior smartass remarked as he boarded.

“Look, you guys,” Jim interjected, standing next to the driver, “I didn’t ask for this job, so don’t give me any problems. And if anybody’s thinking of running for it, please don’t, because it’s my ass if you do and I will catch you.” This was said with the confidence of one who had spent much of his youth running from the police after playing some nifty pranks in his neighborhood. Evidently his threat didn’t fall on deaf ears, because no one deserted before the train pulled up the next morning at a station just outside of Bragg. This time there were six buses waiting. Apparently more draftees were expected for this one-way ride to hell, Jim thought, and this was verified by the first officer Jim saw as he stepped off the train and handed over his burden of folders. It turned out that this particular train ran from New York with stops in Philadelphia, Delaware, and Washington, collecting every

unfortunate kid whose number came up and who wasn't lucky enough or smart enough to have a college deferment.

The next nine weeks were pure torture—digging six-foot-square holes for no apparent reason and then filling them back in at 1:00 a.m., after spending the day on a ten-mile forced march with eighty pounds of dirt strapped to his back in a rucksack. Between the torments, he did learn how to parade march, salute, and avoid KP. The rest of the bullshit he could've done without. He didn't need to be shown how to fight or use a gun. Those traits would become his downfall after basic training. There was a wide range of jobs that needed to be filled, like clerks, mailroom and maintenance workers, Intelligence and nutrition specialists, to name just a few. But Jim fit in only one category.

His next port of call was Fort Polk, Louisiana, notorious for its similarity to the jungles of Southeast Asia. So it goes without saying that Jim's mode of service was infantry with an A+ attached in construction—correct that: destruction. The kid didn't have a chance! He was marked for the graveyard and he knew it; that captain had been right. Another nine weeks of bullshit training followed, the most useful of which was learning from one of the locals how to play with a scorpion without getting stung and chasing down an armadillo with a rock.

The day of final exams arrived and like too many previous reveilles, the sergeant woke the men with the same limited vocabulary. "Okay, you maggots, get out of those fucking bunks, and the last one of you ladies whose feet hit the floor clean toilets before chow. Assemble outside in ten minutes. Move it!" That sergeant should have recorded that speech and saved himself the trouble every morning, because it never varied; however, the sentences he managed to put together at rollcall on the last day were very much out of the ordinary. "Gentlemen," he began, "today's the day you've all been waiting for. After these final exercises you'll not see my face again, but when you're in the bush and fighting for your very lives, you will remember what I taught you." His last words were evidently inspiring to some of the troops, but not to this boy. In Jim's mind the sergeant was nothing less than a sadistic son-of-a-bitch and he was well rid of him.

A thirty-day furlough was next on his agenda before an eighteen-hour plane ride would deposit him on the other side of the world. That month went by in the blink of an eye. To say he wasn't scared when the day came to leave would be a lie. His mother made him his favorite breakfast that morning: creamed dried beef on buttered toast. But he didn't have the nerve to tell her that he hated it now, because

the army had shoveled that crap into him every fucking morning over the last eighteen weeks, only they had another name for it: “shit on a shingle.”

Once again, his mother was sitting across the table, just staring at him, her eyes swelling up just a bit. He knew she was taking a mental picture of him before he left.

“We’re going to have to leave soon,” he said, without looking up from his breakfast.

“I’m not taking you to the airport,” she replied. “I just can’t do it. Your dad’s going to do that. But promise me you’ll write as often as you can, and come back home, please come back.” That’s when the eye swelling turned into a deluge of tears.

“Mom, don’t cry,” he said. “If I have anything to say about it I’ll see you in one year. You know how sneaky and tough I can be. I’m not going to die over there and even if I do, you’re my beneficiary.” This guy didn’t have a sensitive bone in his body, and the apple didn’t fall far from the tree.

Before leaving home he took one last look at his room. Although it was small, he thought it was the best room in the house. There was only one window, but it overlooked the pantry roof and thus he had been able to sneak out onto the roof, jump into the backyard, and join his friends for beer drinking and wreaking havoc in the middle of the night, a ritual that had gone on for years. The neighborhood was quieter now, some of the guys were in college, others were busy working, and some had actually enlisted to fight for that cluster-fuck known as Vietnam.

“Well, boy, are you ready for your one-year all-expenses-paid vacation to Southeast Asia?” his dad asked, entering the house in a seemingly jovial mood.

“Yeah, Pop, I’m ready.”

“What’s wrong with your mother?” the observant old man asked, watching her cry, still seated at the dining-room table.

“I don’t know,” the boy said. “I tried to cheer her up. Let’s just go.” A kiss on the head was all he left his mother with before exiting the house. A glimpse in the rearview mirror of her standing on the front porch was Jim’s mental snapshot as he was driven away.

The airport was a new experience for him; his previous modes of transportation consisted only of trains and automobiles.

“You’re not afraid to fly, are you, Son?” his old man asked as they sat on a plastic bench inside the terminal.

“No, Pop, that’s the least of my worries.”

“Well, then why do you look so troubled?” his dad asked.

“Because I don’t know one person who’s made it back from over there in the vertical position, not wrapped in black body bags. Their family and friends celebrate their returns ceremoniously in a hanger at Dover Air Force Base.”

“Okay, I want you to look at the situation this way: your great-grandfather fought in the Civil War, and then your grandfather fought in World War I. I fought in World War II, then we skipped a war, and now you’re in the shit.”

“So what’s your point?” the kid asked.

“The point is that we all survived and made it back without a scratch, and so will you. Now, here’s how it’s done. First and foremost, don’t volunteer for a goddamn thing. Second, don’t be a fucking hero unless your surroundings without a doubt indicate otherwise. And third, if your team leader foolishly or deliberately puts you in harm’s way, shoot him!”

These words of wisdom only confused the poor boy at the time, but he didn’t forget them. Then a voice on the loudspeaker announced the boarding of his plane.

“I’ll see you in a year, Pop,” he said.

“I know you will, Son. Only do me a favor—don’t write to me unless you send a letter to your mother first; leave me as an afterthought.”

Without looking back, Jim walked swiftly across the tarmac, into the plane, and was gone.

TWO

THREE HEADS IN A PONCHO PONCHO

A WEEK LATER, AFTER A LAYOVER in Washington state, Jim boarded a Northeast Orient commercial jet, and after landing in Japan he was transferred to an air force plane that flew him to the asshole of the world. Complications started almost immediately. After circling what seemed to be an airport for more than thirty minutes, the pilot finally made an announcement. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “we have encountered a slight difficulty. Those of you sitting on the port side of the plane are witnessing a mortar attack on a small outpost five miles east of our landing area. The tower has informed me that it’s my decision whether we land or not.”

“Hell no!” the passengers yelled, “take us back to the States,” loud enough that they didn’t need an intercom.

“I wish I could be relayed back,” the pilot replied, “but I have to refuel and there are as many people down there who want to go home. So I’m asking everyone onboard to exit the plane as quickly and safely as possible when my crew opens the door.” At that instant his request was no problem, but the second the wheels hit the ground, all hell broke loose. What had been going on five miles away when they were up in the air was now raining down on them. It was apparent that the opposition was just waiting for this plane to land.

“Thank you for flying with the United States Air Force, and enjoy your stay,” one crew woman said rapidly while shoving people rudely out the door. *Where the hell did she think we were*, he thought, *in Hawaii?*

At the bottom of the gangplank stood a neatly dressed corporal, who was apparently in the same delusional mindset as the stewardess. “Let me be the first to welcome you all into country,” he said calmly. “Now gather up your gear and follow me.” This guy was either stoned or on another planet, because he obviously

didn't care or realize what was going on around him. The mortars were still coming in. "Is anybody here from Philly?" he asked, nonchalantly trekking across an open field and entering a huge Quonset hut.

"I am," our reluctant private said.

"What's your MOS?" the corporal asked.

"Infantry," Jim answered.

"That's a shame," replied the corporal. "Half the guys on Jack just got killed today. You'll most likely replace one of them." And then to the group, "Okay, here's where I leave you. Captain Flanagan will be along shortly to give you your final instructions. Listen to his every word. He's already been were only a few of you are going."

By this time the bombing was starting to subside, but not totally and the idea of being in that tin shack didn't go over well with our boy. Outside is where he wanted to be, because the enemy wasn't aiming at the dirt as much as they were at the buildings. Then a side door suddenly opened and a sergeant entered.

"Good day, people," he said. "I'm Sergeant George. I'll be giving you your in-country briefing. Captain Flanagan normally does this but unfortunately he's in the hospital with scrap metal in his ass from our recent attack. So let's get started. How many in this room have infantry attached to their résumé?"

Only eight hands went up out of the almost two hundred men seated in front of him, Jim among them.

"Oh shit," he said, "they always send us too many chiefs and not enough Indians. All right, you people can step outside. I've got a different speech for you." About thirty minutes later the session let out, and the large group filed past the eight excluded infantrymen, looking at them as though they were already dead.

The sergeant was the last to exit. "You unfortunate expendables will be going to firebase Jack with me," he said.

"What about the speech?" our inquisitive private asked.

"Oh yeah; forget everything you've learned up to this point, and keep your weapon clean. Now follow me over to the armory."

That wasn't much of a speech, Jim thought, but the comments that were made when he entered the armory sure as hell spoke volumes of how bad his situation was. The first person he saw handed him a ditty bag.

"Strip down and put everything you're carrying in this sack," the soldier said. "The only thing I want to see on your person when you leave my station is your

underwear. That means no jewelry either, with the exception of dogtags and watches. These belongings will be returned when your tour in country is up, or sent to your next of kin, whichever comes first.”

The next person he saw was a little more sensitive. “Communications, secretary, personnel, or liaison?” the soldier asked.

“Rifleman” was the response.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” the soldier replied with a feminine lisp. “You don’t have any children, do you?”

“No,” Jim responded.

“Well, that’s good,” said the insensitive soldier, and handed him an M-16. “I don’t know if your sergeant told you or not, but you might want to keep this weapon clean.”

“I’ve already heard that speech,” Jim said.

“Well, then, have a good day and move along.”

His next station was even more bizarre than the ones before it. “Hello,” this friendly face said. “What size pants do you wear?”

“I don’t know,” Jim said. “The first guy took my clothes—go ask him, or guess.” That was a bad choice of words on his part. The shirt fit fine but the pants were too short for his six-foot, six-inch frame, and ran up the crack of his ass, not to mention the limited recreational area his balls had to endure. The last station he had to go to was the worst.

“I see in your file that your mother is your beneficiary,” the soldier said. “Do you want to change that?”

“Hell no!” Jim said in an agitated voice.

“Don’t get upset with me,” said the soldier, “I’m only doing my job. These are questions I have to ask before you take your first step into hell. I see on your revised chart that you’re going to firebase Jack.”

“That’s what we’ve been told,” Jim said. “Do you know anything about the place?”

“Only rumors, and they’re not good,” the soldier responded. “That hill gets over run more times than an interstate highway. And the scuttlebutt is they lost a shitpile of residents earlier today in that mortar attack.”

“Is there any place safe in this country?” Jim asked.

“Yes there is,” the soldier said, “and you’re standing in it. This camp, for all means and purposes, is the most secure in the whole country—hell, we don’t

even have to carry guns. We're surrounded by a battalion of marines, with more firepower than the atomic bomb. The gooks would be crazy to attempt a run on this place. Basically what I'm trying to tell you is, this is the Beverly Hills of South Vietnam. Firebase Jack, on the other hand, is the black hole of Calcutta; do you get my drift?"

"Yeah, I suppose I do," Jim said sadly.

"Well, good luck," the soldier said. "You can step outside now, you're done."

"Did you get an education in there?" his sergeant asked, as Jim stepped out the door.

"Yes I did," he said. "You're taking us to very bad place."

"Don't believe everything you heard," said the sergeant. "Those people have no idea what's going on outside of this camp. It takes ten of them to keep one grunt like you in the field. They deal in secondhand information, which is usually wrong. You're going to see the big picture, upfront and personal. That's not to say you shouldn't be afraid, but if you keep your weapon clean and your asshole puckered, you can survive. This is my second tour, and I know what I'm talking about."

"What outfit are we going to be in when we get to the base?" Jim asked.

"You're going to be in the 5th and 7th Cavalry," the sergeant said, "right alongside me."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I get to pick one out of every group, and you're it. Now get at the end of the line and make sure we don't lose anybody on the way."

Helicopters were coming and going on a regular basis to destinations only the pilots knew. After numerous attempts to secure a ride, the sergeant got angry. "I've got to get back to Jack before dark," he said.

"Why is that?" a recruit asked.

"Because there's a smoke-off tonight and I don't want to miss it."

"What the hell's a smoke -off?" another recruit inquired.

"It's a ceremonial thing," said the sergeant. "It happens at the end of every month. Anybody in camp who didn't smoke their entire stash of weed has to throw it in the communal fire for all to enjoy."

"Are you telling us that everyone on that firebase is going to be stoned tonight?" asked the reluctant private.

"Just about," the sergeant said.

“Well, in that case I hope we don’t find a fucking ride. I don’t want to die right away, I figured on suffering a little bit first.”

“Don’t get so excited,” the sergeant responded. “When you guys get out there, your attitudes are going to change in a significant way. Not one of you will ever be the same again.”

Just then a chopper pilot showed up. “Are you guys looking for a ride to Jack?” he asked.

“No,” said the private, “we’re looking for accommodations right here—”

“Yes,” the Sergeant quickly intervened, “can you help us out?”

“Yeah, follow me. I’m flying a water blivet out there. I can take you.”

After a short walk back to the airfield they discovered what a water blivet was: next to the helicopter sat a huge rubber ball of water that was attached with cables to the bottom of the chopper.

“I was supposed to fly this out of here yesterday,” the pilot told the sergeant as everybody got on board.

“But you waited the extra day because you didn’t want to miss the smoke-off. Am I right?” asked the sergeant.

“You’re absolutely correct,” said the pilot.

“See, I told you guys, this is quite an event. You couldn’t have arrived at a better time.” But the sergeant was wrong; the private’s timing couldn’t have been worse. The second they landed on Jack and exited the craft, bad news was waiting. A lieutenant ran up to the sergeant to inform him that a squad of his men was sent out earlier to chase down the assholes that lobbed the mortars in earlier that day.”

I don’t know what’s going on out there, Sarge,” he said. “We’re getting conflicting reports. Those guys are either in the middle of a massacre or they’re having a party. Another chopper’s waiting for you on the other side of the hill, if you want to fly out and see what’s go on.”

That was enough for the sergeant to hear, he went into high gear. “Drop your shit right here and follow me!” he said only to Jim. Then a mad dash ensued across mounds of bunkers, through an artillery platoon, and into an open tent with a smorgasbord of weaponry.

“Grab two grenades, two claymores with detonators, and two bandoliers of ammo!” the sergeant yelled as the run continued.

“Is this our outfit that’s in trouble?” asked Jim.

“Yeah,” said the sergeant, “now keep up the pace.” After another short run out of the tent, the chopper came into view, with a pilot waving frantically for them to get aboard.

“Bend down and stay away from that tail blade!” screamed the door gunner. “And pot yourself—we’re going into a hot LZ.”

The lingo used by the door gunner was Greek to Jim. “What the fuck is he talking about?”

The Sergeant was quick to interpret. “Take your helmet off,” he said. “Now remove the liner and sit in the pot.”

“What the hell is this all about?” replied the private, as they flew hell bent across a flat but pockmarked patch of ground and into the scenic mountains known as the highlands.

“It’s about your physical inability to shit out of two holes,” the sergeant explained. “Either do what I tell you or don’t, it’s your choice. The gooks haven’t perfected a gun that can shoot us from above in one of these things, although their AK-47s can sure as hell penetrate this craft from below; get the picture?” As a mental picture of a bullet ripping through his asshole and exiting out his mouth flashed in his mind, Jim accepted Top’s information as gospel and potted himself.

“We’re coming into the shit, gentlemen, get ready,” the pilot said, as tracer rounds were clearly seen flying through the foliage below. The chopper came to a stop, just hovering above ground. “Jump!” the pilot shouted. “We can’t land, the brush is too high.”

For a split second, Jim hesitated; he was jumping into hell on his very first day. But when the sergeant leaped, he followed. The helicopter took off, leaving them behind in what was now a silent void. The carnage that had gone on merely a minute before had somehow disappeared.

“Where the hell are you guys?” the sergeant yelled, rising to his feet after he had assessed the situation.

“Right here, Top,” someone replied from the interior of the surrounding jungle.

“Brownie, is that you?” the sergeant demanded.

“Yeah, it’s us, Top,” the voice said reluctantly.

“Okay, you guys, everybody get out here now!” And like a picture hidden within a picture, they suddenly melted out of the forest and into view. “What the hell’s going on?” asked the sergeant. “You guys aren’t pulling that old ‘we’re under attack’ scam again, are you?”

“Yes we are,” Brownie said, “the colonel hates us. Every time some shit happens, he sends us out to handle it, and that’s not fair. We spent fourteen days in the jungle, and we’re entitled to four days of R and R. But no, the minute you left and the mortars came in, he sent us out here.”

“Maybe he sent you guys out because you’re good at what you do, did you ever think of that?” said the sergeant.

“Fuck him,” Brownie said. “That cocksucker is trying to get us killed.”

“I don’t think so,” said the sergeant. “Did you catch or kill any of the little bastards?”

“Yes, we caught three and killed three.”

“Where’s the three that are still alive? I don’t see them.”

“Here,” said Brownie, who then pulled back a camouflaged poncho neatly spread over the ground. Three heads suddenly appeared, gagged and blind-folded.

“What the hell is this!?” the sergeant screamed. “You cut their fucking heads off!?”

“No, these three are still alive; we buried them up to their necks,” said Brownie.

“What for?” asked the befuddled sergeant.

“Because pay-back’s a bitch. This is the way they transport our guys back to Hanoi, so we’re doing the same.”

“Why didn’t you radio for an extraction?” the sergeant asked.

“We did and they told us to sit tight until they got back to us. And you know what that means.”

“Yeah,” said the sergeant, “you’re staying out for at least another twenty-four hours in an observation mode. But why didn’t you tell them you had prisoners? They would have sent a chopper out right away for you guys.”

“We fucked up that part of it,” said Brownie, “and radioed back that we had six confirmed kills and were just cleaning up. We figured on killing them all, but after the first few were ventilated, these three gave up and threw their weapons out to us and started screaming.”

“Let me guess what happened next,” said the sergeant. “You then decided to call itn a fake firefight to cover up the bogus report you made earlier and that way you could explain how you were now returning with three prisoners you didn’t have previously. Is that pretty much close to the truth, Mister Brown?”

“Yeah, it’s all my fault. Can you help us, Top?”

“Give me that fucking phone!” the sergeant said. “I’m not staying out here all night with these three cabbage heads sticking up out of the ground because of your

bullshit.” After a few choice words placed meticulously in a multitude of sentences to whomever was on the other end of that phone, it was apparent to those concerned that they would all be spending that evening enjoying the festivities back on the base camp. Top wasn’t your run-of-the-mill Non-com. He obviously knew how the system worked, and he pushed the right buttons when needed.

“Okay, now plow these dinks up and let’s get the fuck out of here, we’re on the clock,” Top yelled. A trench shovel was thrown on the ground in front of the new guy.

“You heard the man,” one of the seasoned grunts said, “jump to it.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Jim responded. “You buried them so you dig them up.” His response didn’t go over well with the rest of the squad. Weapons were slowly being raised, and what he didn’t know was that there was an inserted fragment within this company that didn’t read the rulebook on the proper etiquette or engagement of war; unfortunately he was standing right in front of them. Luckily for him, though, his first encounter with this group was witnessed by Top.

“What are you assholes doing now?” the sergeant said. “I told you to dig them up. We’ve got to get out of here now!”

“But Sarge,” one disappointed grunt said, “the new guy won’t do it; he’s got an attitude and thinks he’s tough.”

“You better get to like him,” the sergeant said, “because he’s in your squad.”

“No way,” said Brownie. “We’ve got ten guys on our team and don’t need any more.”

“Your wrong,” said Top, “twelve is the minimum and you’re two short of the quota in case you can’t do the math. You’re only a buck sergeant, Mister Brown, your squad’s been without a lieutenant in charge too long and you’re not capable of leading.”

In this respect the sergeant was wrong. Brownie was a leader and in the following months he’d prove it.

“Where are the three dead ones?” Top asked.

“Down in that ravine,” Brownie said, pointing.

“Are they tagged?”

“Damn straight they are, we stuffed the patches down their throats.”

“Good, let’s go. We have a party to attend.”

After a short hump to an accessible hill where the helicopters could land, they were off, back to Jack.

The atmosphere back at the firebase was queer, to say the least. Jim didn't have a clue what was going on, but he felt kind of secure around these guys. He was enlisted into an elite club of unusual gentlemen, and would fit in like the middle finger of a glove. The only thing that had to be explained when they returned to Jack was how they reportedly killed six Cong, and returned with three of them still alive. But Top took care of that; he had an unquestionable attitude about him, and nobody seconded his authority. Two years in country afforded him that right.

The first night on the base was great for the young private—fifty-gallon drums of burning unused weed were permeating the little hill they called home. It was a far cry from the elegant base that sat five miles west of their position—no movie theaters, no commissaries, no neatly pressed uniforms addressed anywhere, and unfortunately no women, either. But this base was their version of home. Not much to look at approaching from the air, but on the ground it was an anthill of activity with an unkempt attitude of its own. The regular restrictions that applied back in the real world had no relevance here. This was the modern-day Wild Wild West. Everybody had guns and access to some of the most lethal weapons on earth, and weren't afraid to use them on whomever they deemed a threat.

“What's your first name?” Brownie asked his new recruit, as they all stood around a small drum of burning weed.

“Jim,” he answered.

“Not another Jim, we have four Jims already,” Brownie said. “I've got to give you another handle. Boys, we have a problem,” he said to his troops as they jockeyed for a better position around the fumes, not paying much attention to the conversation. “This guy's name is Jim.”

“Not another one,” said the disgruntled soldier who'd had words with him earlier.

“We need a new name for him,” Brownie said. “Does anybody have an idea what to call him?”

“Yeah, let's name him shithead,” said the same soldier.

“Don't do that anymore,” said Brownie. “You tried to back him down once and couldn't do it, so let it go.”

“Let's call him Stalk,” another soldier said, “because of his height.”

“Any more ideas before I have to make this decision on my own?” Brownie asked the group.

“Yeah,” the only black guy in the squad said, “I think we ought to call him High Pockets.”

“Where the hell did you get a name like that?” said Brownie. “It’s perfect.”

“My uncle,” he said, “he was tall, too, and that’s what his friends called him.”

“Okay, that’s it,” Brownie said to Jim, “your name is High Pockets. Now let’s go get a beer.”

The bunker they all entered after the naming, a modest underground saloon, was doing a booming business and seats were at a premium. The second they walked in, however, stools at the bar were vacated as if the patrons suddenly found themselves sitting on tacks.

“You guys got a new victim,” said the host behind the bar.

“Shut up and set them up,” Brownie said.

“You do realize you’re not supposed to be in here with those weapons, don’t you?” said the bartender.

“Yeah, we know, that’s why we got the good seats. Now do your job before one of my boys slips and blows your head off by mistake.”

“I get the picture,” said the bartender.

“High Pockets, you’re now one of us,” Brownie said, toasting the first drink. “These are the rules: No one on this firebase is more important than you, no matter what their rank is, and don’t forget that, if you want to make it home. I’ll never ask you to step in front of a bullet, or throw yourself on a grenade—that’s *G. I. Joe*® comic-book shit. You’ve got one advantage over most on this dirt pile—you’re in the company of some of the baddest motherfuckers on the planet. Besides, Top picked you to be with us, and his opinion carries a lot of weight; he must have seen something in you. But we’ll determine what you’re really made of after your first firefight. Top’s the only one we answer to, I guess you noticed. That may explain why we don’t have a lieutenant leading us like the rest of the squads—we don’t comply well with the rules.”

At that point Top walked in. “Did you fill him in?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Brownie said, “he’s in. He was in the minute he stood up to Big Mike, as far as I was concerned. But what are we going to do with him for the next two days? He’s only got half a tent, and there’s nobody to pair him up with.”

“The mosquitoes are going to eat him alive. He’s going to stay with me,” Top said. “Now let’s get out of here. You guys have had enough fun for one day.”

Top didn’t have a hooch like the rest of the guys. He had an underground palace that he shared with a number of other Top Sergeants that were rotating in and out of the jungle, in the same numerical order as he: fourteen days out, and four days in. The difference between the two accommodations was as drastic as the Trump Plaza is to living in a cardboard box. Two ponchos snapped together forming a pup tent and a mosquito net, if they were lucky, barred the front entrance of the two-man shelters. Top’s bunker had the same mosquito net in the entrance, but a whole lot more: Once through the cobweb net, one entered a room the size of a large basement with all the amenities of home; High Pockets first noticed a TV above a bar. Then the feel of a soft cushion under his feet attracted his attention.

A rug adorned the floor along with a real hammock in the corner and an icebox. “You’ll find that floor pretty comfortable,” Sarge said. “I’ve landed there on a few occasions and it’s not that bad. There’s a pillow and blanket behind the bar if you need it, and chow’s between six and eight a.m., if you decide to get up and eat. But don’t wake me, I’m on vacation.”

The next morning High Pockets arose to the sound of the reveille bugle, as he had on many occasions before; but now, being in country, the horn didn’t sound for him. He belonged to the out-of-bounders—“perimeter dwellers,” the inner circle called them, scruffier looking than the rest who regularly inhabited the hill, but respected by all to the utmost.

Disoriented and not knowing which way to go, Jim stumbled over to a group atop the hill and stood with them in a formation line. A neatly dressed lieutenant who was scrutinizing the rest approached him.

“You’re out of uniform,” the lieutenant said.

Before Jim got a chance to answer, another voice was heard. “He’s one of ours.” It was Big Mike.

“Come here,” the lieutenant said. “What are you doing standing in their formation?”

“I don’t know,” High Pockets said. “I thought it was roll call.”

“It is, but not for you! Do you see this barbwire here? This separates the staff from the visitors. The permanent occupants of this resort live up here; we, on the

other hand, live down there in their urinal runoff. That's why we live in hooches and our bunkers are always full of disgusting sewage. Now let's go get something to eat. The rest of the guys are already butting in line."

High Pockets had a lot to learn and a short period of time in which to learn it. After breakfast that morning the squad walked casually back to their position and crawled into their hooches. High Pockets sat on top of a bunker staring out across the flats at the mountains. *What the hell am I doing here?* he thought to himself. *I'm going to die a horrible death somewhere out there in those fucking hills.*

Before he had a chance to feel too sorry for himself, a soldier strode stealthily up behind him. This was something you didn't do to High Pockets. Before the soldier got the first word out of his mouth, High Pockets had clicked off the safety and had his rifle pointed right at the intruder.

"Whoa!" said the soldier. "Don't shoot. The bad guys are out there. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Sorry," said High Pockets as he lowered his weapon. "I was doing some heavy thinking."

"Well, I'll remember never to do that again. Hi, they call me Put-Back," he said, cautiously taking a seat on the edge of the bunker.

"Let me guess: your first name is Jim too."

"Good guess," Put-Back said, "you're very astute; but my handle's no worse than yours."

"You know how I got mine," High Pockets said, "so tell me how you got yours."

"My last name is Putbowski; does that give you a clue?"

"Not really, why didn't they name you putz, or ski, or at least bow for short?"

"For the same reason they named you High Pockets. This squad is full of the most antisocial psychopaths the world has ever seen."

"How long have you been in country?" asked High Pockets.

"One week."

"So you're telling me that in seven days you've done a psychiatric evaluation on everybody in this squad."

"That's right, I did. Brownie told you the truth last night. There's no authority within this group except for Top and he has more than a hundred other guys to babysit in the company and my MOS is artillery."

"Then why are you here?" High Pockets asked.

"I don't know," Put-Back responded. "Top didn't pick me like he did you. I fell through a crack in the system somehow."

"Why don't you go to Top and tell him somebody shuffled your papers wrong?"

"Because nobody talks to him except the officers, Brownie, and now you. Maybe you could talk to him for me." Put-Back looked at High Pockets.

"That's a hell of a way to start a friendship," High Pockets said. "I can't help you; I'm the low man on this totem pole. Until I find out more about what's going on around here, I'm not asking for favors from anyone, only questions. Now get off my bunker and go back to your hooch, I want to think alone."

Hours went by and nobody disturbed High Pockets. Nighttime again embossed his space, but he wasn't thinking about dying anymore. The adrenaline was cascading through him now with a mind-altering flow. He wasn't going to die, but many others would—a thought that would leave him with the night sweats while in country. The two days afforded him went by with little effect, and information about the squad was even less forthcoming.

The company gathered at the bottom of the hill on the last day. A string of helicopters were flying in from the west, and one lone chopper from the mountains with a net dangling from beneath, flinging bodies from side to side under the turbulence of the rotors. Four men in all were attached; these were LRRPs, better known as "long range reconnaissance patrols." One untangled himself after being lowered as gently as possible to the ground, and only one other man was moving. The other two looked as if they had gone through a meat grinder.

"What happened?" the captain asked the only guy who could talk.

"Two fucking tigers got us," the soldier said. "We didn't have a chance. They were on us before we knew it."

"Where did this happen?" the captain asked.

"At the bottom of hill nine-twenty-one on the west side," the LRRP muttered before falling to the ground.

"Saddle up, men! We're going on safari!" yelled the captain.

"That's not in our orders," Top reminded him.

"It is now," the noticeably pissed-off captain said walking quickly to the lead chopper.

A hundred and twenty-five men boarded those helicopters that morning, and not one of them was more apprehensive than High Pockets. The chatter on the ride out didn't bolster his confidence, either.

"Where's hill nine-twenty-one?" he asked Brownie, trying to talk over the clapping blades above.

"Nine-twenty-one, where did you hear that?" Brownie asked.

"Back there," he said. "The LRRP that was stumbling around told the captain they were attacked by two tigers at the bottom of hill nine-twenty-one."

"So that's why the captain yelled we're going on safari," said Brownie. "Oh, this is just fucking great; if we go up there we may as well fly a few miles farther and land in Hanoi."

"I think Top's trying to talk him out of it," said High Pockets, now trying to defuse the anger of the others inside the craft who couldn't help but overhear the conversation.

"Well he better," said Simon, a short-timer with only a few weeks left before rotating out. "I've already started notching my stick and I'll be damned if I'm going to die now."

"Where are you guys supposed to be going?" the copilot turned and yelled. "We were briefed earlier it was hill nine-thirty-six and we passed it five minutes ago, eight miles off our port side."

"We're on a secret mission," hollered Brownie, "code named safari."

"What part of the 1st Cav are you guys attached to?" screamed the pilot.

"The 5th and 7th," Brownie answered loudly.

"We should've guessed," the pilot said to his flying partner. Due North and flying straight as an arrow was their direction. But all of a sudden the chopper listed to the left and veered off sharply westward.

"I guess Top finally won that argument," High Pockets said.

"Yeah, either that or the captain came down off his breakfast high," Big Mike responded.

"What direction are we heading now?" Brownie called out to the two in control.

"Southwest," the co-pilot yelled, "straight toward nine-thirty-six. Your captain probably changed the flight plan to divert any attention to the landing zone; he must be a pretty smart guy."

"Oh yeah," said Simon sarcastically, "he's a real tactician." Simon had no idea how good the captain was; he had only been with him on one previous patrol. But

because of his short-time status, skepticism clouded Simon's mind.

Hill nine-thirty-six was a cleared LZ where the refuse of others was clearly strewn over the landscape. C-ration boxes were everywhere. Trees that were once healthy had been blown up, with only splintered stubs remaining. The signs of war were present everywhere as they further devastated the already ravaged land. The French had started this process almost a hundred years before. Although they had brought European culture to the area, the Old World attitude seemed to be the preference of the multitude.

"Make a circle around the core!" Top screamed, after leaving the choppers. "Two men to a foxhole. Do it now!" he yelled.

Within seconds the hill was secured. Then Top walked around the perimeter as if he were bullet-proof, inspecting each position.

"Your foxholes aren't not deep enough," he said to a few. "Put your fucking helmets on," he said to others. But to his favorite squad he said nothing. These were the guys who were sitting in the shallow foxholes smoking weed without helmets.

Obviously there was a preference here and everybody knew it. Top's hand-picked squad was immune to any scrutiny, and any questionable behavior against him would be vanquished by them in a most violent manner. This was obviously how Top survived his first tour, by surrounding himself with his own unkempt, undisciplined, and most lethal individuals he could find.

The first night on hill 936 was uneventful, with the exception of a wild creature that spouted out obscenities. "Fuck you," the creature seemed to say, over and over again from an undetermined distance.

"What the hell is that?" High Pockets asked Put-Back, who was his foxhole partner then.

"It's the 'fuck-you' bird," he said.

"Bird my ass," High Pockets replied. "Birds sleep at night, with the exception of owls and that's no owl. It's either the bad guys or a lizard, and I'm hoping for the latter."

The question of whether it was a bird or a lizard has never been resolved. Half the guys agreed with High Pockets that it was a lizard whereas the other half sided with Put-Back's version of a bird. Whatever it was, it sang them to sleep every night.

Those fourteen days went by without incident. Unusual, some said, like a cloud of good fortune surrounded them; nobody died. High Pockets now had his first tour of the jungle under his belt. Humping those hills gave him a new perspective on how it should be done. The pack he wore on his back and the provisions he took his first time out were cumbersome, a textbook of suggested items that only slowed him down. On his second trip he threw the pamphlet away and dressed himself. Four bandoliers crisscrossed his chest and back; two utility belts intersected his waist with attachments consisting of four grenades, two of which were percussion; a bayonet was strapped to his right calf; and five days of rations lined his pockets. Poncho Villa would have been proud of him. Humping the hills and walking point would be his forté.

By now High Pockets was invested into this shit. Concern for trip wires, pungy pits, bouncing bettys, swinging gates, and so many little traps too numerous to mention meant nothing more than missing a meal to him, which he never did. His actions and demeanor changed drastically on his second hump into the boonies. He wasn't the same laid-back smartass any more.

High Pockets was calculating, with a touch of devious intent infused into his psyche, and on his fifth day out, it intensified. "Who's got point tomorrow?" he asked.

"I do," said Rufus, the same black guy who had given High Pockets his new name.

"Well, then I've got a proposition for you. I'll walk your point for five days' rations."

"Okay," Rufus said without hesitation, "are you sure?"

"Yeah," said High Pockets, "but I want the food now, I'm out."

"Why didn't you fill up before we left Jack instead of loading up on all that ammo?" asked Rufus.

"Because I can't throw food at the bad guys and expect them to fall over dead" High Pockets replied. "Now do we have a deal or not?"

"Absolutely we do," said Rufus, who then grabbed his backpack and threw its contents out onto the ground. "Take what you want," he said eagerly.

"I don't want your favorites, but I do like the concentrated beef stew," said High Pockets.

"Take it," said Rufus. "I'm not particular," As they sat there heating their meals in the cups that lined their canteens, a limited conversation ensued.

"Where you from?" Rufus asked.

"A little borough outside of Philly," High Pockets said. "How about you?"

"The same, only outside of D.C., and I wish I was there now."

"Don't we all!"

"You're an odd one," said Rufus as they both reached for their meals, which by this time were done to a turn. "Nobody volunteers for point; what are you trying to do, get yourself killed?"

"No," said High Pockets, "it just makes me concentrate more and the day goes by faster."

The silence on the hill was broken when a shot rang out. Everybody was checking themselves for bullet holes, but the one who caught it was sitting right across from High Pockets. Rufus took the shot right through the back of his neck and the meal he was eating blew out the front, throwing blood and recently chewed morsels all over High Pockets. An instant disgust overwhelmed him, but not before the direction of the muzzle blast from the little shit who did it caught his eye. As soon as that round had killed Rufus, a retaliatory grenade was thrown baseball style into a tree directly at the enemy sniper.

Needless to say, High Pockets passed on dinner that evening. His focus was on his quarry. A black specter had fallen from its perch, and while the others were gathered around Rufus, High Pockets walked to where his quarry had landed. A gurgling little gook laid at his feet, dressed all in black silk with a lump the size of a grapefruit protruding from the side of his neck. Being someone who didn't like to see anyone suffer, High Pockets placed his foot on the guy's neck, applying just enough pressure to end it.

"Is he dead?" the captain yelled.

"He is now," High Pockets responded.

"Then tag him and get back here, and bring his weapon with you."

A chopper flew in just before dark and took Rufus's belongings and body out, but not before High Pockets grabbed his five days' rations. After all, a deal was a deal, and he had kept his end of the bargain the next day. This incident was just a prelude of things to come.

When they returned to Jack, an opening in the housing arrangements came into play. Rufus had been lodging with Dudley before his sudden departure. Dudley was a small man with his main attribute being his size. He was the tunnel

rat and grave digger of the group, and along with this distinguished position came a perk: he never had to walk point. Claustrophobia wasn't in his vocabulary and neither was hygiene.

"I guess you're with me now," Dudley said when the choppers set down outside of Jack.

"No I'm not," said High Pockets, "you stink. I don't know how Rufus put up with you."

"Bunk with me," Put-Back quickly said to High Pockets while eavesdropping on the conversation.

"You're in with Simon; what are we going to do, have three to a hooch?"

"No," said Put-Back. "Simon's short. He's out of country in less than three weeks and I'm ready for a change. Besides, if I wait until then I might wind up with Dudley, get the picture?"

"What's Simon going to do for the next three weeks?" High Pockets questioned.

"He can bunk in with Stinky for all I care," Put-Back said, "I'm sick of hearing what he's going to do when he gets home, over and over again."

"I'll give it some thought and talk to you later," said High Pockets. "Right now I'm hungry and smell like an old wet dog. I don't make good decisions when I feel like this, and as of now I'm on vacation for the next four days."