

QL 20

Roadbuilding was a principal strategy of the Vietnam war. The Lines of Communications (LOC) program, a 2,700-mile, three-level network of roads, originally scheduled to be complete in 1974 was moved up to 1971. This hurry-up completion was vital to safe military traffic flow. It was a vicious circle in that roads couldn't be built until areas were relatively secure, and roads couldn't be secured until they were fully built.

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Engineers count. They get inside their private worlds. That's more of a fault than a blessing. Decker recalls the many times his wife has pointed out a beautiful sunset that he has been oblivious to. Once she used some of their very small savings to buy two gallons of paint and materials, and had repainted the living room of their very small apartment. Decker didn't notice for five days, and then only became aware of it when a neighbor visited and commented on the new look. Thankfully, his wife understands the typical nature of engineers: weak in social rituals such as small talk but strong at working to make relationships work. Decker has taken a personality profile and understands his strengths and weaknesses. He knows that there is probably no one better at planning a great party; but that once the party is planned he shouldn't

be invited because of his introverted nature. He appreciates that people often see him as aloof and reserved, but that really he is often just in “tuned out” in his little world of ideas.

Seventeen. That’s the number in Decker’s world right now. That’s 17 passengers not including the crew of six that flies and operates the C-141 Starlifter, a four jet engine Air Force cargo plane now traveling at around 500 miles per hour, pushed by its Pratt & Whitney turbofan engines. The aircraft is loaded with pallets of materials destined for the west coast and perhaps beyond. The two loadmasters have carefully ensured that all the cargo has been carefully secured for this cross-country flight, with just one brief refueling stop at Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma. The load has also included a passenger seating module, six rows of six seats each. The seats are much like commercial aircraft, with pull-down trays. And Decker, as well as the other passengers, has noticed that there is more space between the seats than most airlines provide. Prior to takeoff one of the loadmasters spent a few minutes serving as a flight attendant, giving the passengers some safety information and advising them on the length of the flight, which, with refueling, would be more than seven hours. Of the seventeen passengers, two are officers, and have been allotted seats in the first row. The other officer is an Army major who has taken a seat to the far right and busied himself with papers from his briefcase. The enlisted personnel have also been separated, with the three more senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) occupying the next row, and the balance of the enlisted personnel, both Army and Air Force, occupying the last four rows. There are no Marines or Navy personnel on this particular flight. For the most part, all the passengers are quiet; mostly sleeping.

It has been a long and emotional day: saying farewell to his wife at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia; then catching this military hop across the country en route to Travis Air Force Base in California. A military hop is more formally known as space available travel. Most military cargo and refueling planes have a limited number of passenger seats installed. The seats are sometimes no more than canvas, but often of a type similar to those on commercial passenger flights, and Decker is thankful that such is the case for this flight. Military personnel can apply to get one of the available seats and thus get transportation from one base to another at almost no expense. Of the seventeen military passengers on this flight, some are either experienced or have gotten “the word.” There is no cabin service and therefore no food, so eat well ahead of time or bring a snack aboard. More important, although the cargo area is pressurized, the military cannot bear the cost and waste the weight for insulation so temperatures can get a bit cold. Passengers

are wise to bring their own blankets and pillows to stay warm and hearing protection against the noise of the plane's engines. Of the seventeen, most are prepared but there are a few who have dug into their duffle bags to add extra garments. Decker had actually visited the air terminal at Langley a few days in advance of his hop, and was glad that the volunteer at the counter was more than willing to provide him some tips and hints. He has his blanket, an old one that can be discarded, if necessary, and a brown bag lunch consisting of tuna fish sandwiches, a small bag of chips, an apple, and a can of soda. They'll help occupy his in-flight time.

Jim Decker, Second Lieutenant, Corps of Engineers, U.S Army, has come down on orders for Vietnam on a carefully planned schedule. His military obligation, as an ROTC graduate from Purdue University, was two years active duty. He spent nine weeks in engineer officer training then eight months as a Platoon Leader at Fort Lewis. His posting to Vietnam works out so that his second - and last - year of required active service will be overseas. While Decker serves his tour in Vietnam his wife is staying with her parents in Daytona Beach. There she'll attend Old Dominion University and pick up some more college credits as she works for her degree in Elementary Education.

It is past 8 p.m. when the flight finally lands at Travis Air Force base, about 50 miles northwest of San Francisco. Travis is known as the "Gateway to the Pacific" handles more cargo and passenger traffic through its airport than any other military air terminal in the United States. Shortly after landing, the passengers are allowed to disembark, and they are picked up by a blue bus that takes them and their baggage first to the Air Operations Terminal, where the major is picked up by a waiting sedan, and a few of the others also depart. Those remaining are taken to temporary quarters for the evening. The first stop is the base's Bachelor Officer Quarters or BOQ. Decker picks up his duffle bag and enters the 1950s-era cinder block building. Bachelor Officers Quarters are actually motel-like accommodations for officers that are traveling alone.

The front desk receptionist, called the billeting clerk, is an Air Force Staff Sergeant with three rows of ribbons, including those for service in Vietnam. Decker, wearing the uniform of an Army lieutenant in the engineer branch, has one ribbon. It is the National Defense Service Medal. Everyone in the active military has at least one of these awards, representing service during this current conflict. Decker is there for the night in preparation for the next day's flight out of the base en route to Vietnam. The sergeant has probably seen thousands of officers who

spend the night and depart the next morning to meet their destiny, but he is respectful and friendly, even at this late hour.

“You’re assigned to a two-man room. Right now you don’t have a roommate, but you probably will get one later as more people check in.

“Tomorrow morning there is a shuttle bus here at 8 a.m. that will take your right to the airfield. Here is your key. Have a good evening.” Decker notes that the sergeant has said 8 a.m. rather than the military 0800 (oh eight hundred); another confirmation that the Air Force is to the Army as the Ritz Carlton is to your local motel.

Decker hauls his duffle bags to his room, which can be described as Spartan, at best. He is no world traveler, but this is the smallest, most austere and worn motel-like room he has ever stayed in. Not too good by Army standards, let alone Air Force standards. He makes a note to see if any of the other occupants are Air Force officers, because he strongly suspects they must be in much more luxurious accommodations elsewhere. He showers. The fixtures are archaic and the shower head spews an uneven spray. The tiles have layers of caulk. The exposed plumbing is stained with deposits from the hard water. But the place appears clean and an inspection of sheets confirms that they are ironed – a good sign. He checks the mirror. Although nearly six feet tall, Decker is rather thin, with a fair complexion and close-cropped light brown hair. Yes, there are dark circles under his eyes.

And he knows he looks even younger than his 24 years. Other lieutenants with similar youthful features have tried growing mustaches and speaking in deeper than normal tones to try to boost their image, but Decker thinks that people see through this in about a second, so he figures that he is what he is. He tries the small TV, but the reception is poor and the one clear station hosts an announcer giving the latest from the War Zone, including this week’s casualty numbers. He turns off the TV, pens a quick note to his wife, and wanders downstairs to find a mailbox. He had hoped for perhaps a friendly face and someone to talk to, but the lounge area is occupied only by two arm chairs and some worn magazines on a coffee table. He returns to his room, undressed and gets into bed. He is lying in his back in the bunk and has dozed off, when the door is opened.

The second occupant has arrived. He is a crusty, well-decorated Army captain with a small bag. Like Decker, he is traveling in his Army Khaki uniform. Unlike Decker, the captain’s uniform is neat and pressed. Decker’s uniform, after being worn cross country, looked

like it was pulled straight from his duffle bag – rumpled and wrinkled. The captain’s branch is Infantry, clear from the crossed rifles insignia on his collar. Among the captain’s decorations is the Combat Infantryman Badge. No other branches can earn the CIB, and it is only earned when in harm’s way. Decker sits up in the bed and switches on his reading light, wondering if he should stand.

The captain lays down his gear he looks to the now-awake lieutenant. “On the way over?”

“Yes, sir, leave tomorrow morning.”

The captain is quiet, undressing and settling into his bunk for the evening. He finally speaks again. “I hope you do better than the guy I’m meeting. He earned the CMH.”

Decker is awed. “The Congressional Medal of Honor?”

“Casket with metal handles,” replies the captain. It is dark, insider humor reserved for combat veterans. The captain has drawn the task of serving as an escort officer for accompanying the remains of an officer who has been killed.

With that the captain turns off the light and goes to sleep, leaving Decker staring at the dark ceiling, wondering if his tour of duty will end with someone escorting his remains back to his wife and parents.