

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 sunset where the combination of clouds and light have painted a multicolor sky canvas almost beyond words - that he has been oblivious to. Once, soon after they were married and living in a very modest one bedroom apartment in an old and worn complex, she used some of their very small savings to buy two gallons of paint and materials, and had repainted the living room. 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. Down deep he is shy; and he often wishes that he could be more sociable and outgoing. He appreciates that people often see him as aloof and reserved, but that really he is often just "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 Lockheed C-141 *Starlifter*, a four jet engine Air Force cargo plane now traveling at around 500 miles per hour, propelled by its Pratt & Whitney turbofan engines. The aircraft interior is a model of functionality. The deck is actually a series of rollers that enable materiel to be moved rapidly into and out of the cargo area, with numerous tie-down points to ensure that the stowed items do not shift during flight. This particular mission has about 20 wooden crates already secured with numerous web straps. Since they don't fill the cargo area, Decker surmises that they max the weight limit for the aircraft. Their contents are marked with packing slips stapled to each box in multiple locations, but from his seat he can't read them. Probably high priority repair parts.

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 pleasantly 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. The shoulder patches of the crew

indicate they are from the 44th Air Transport Squadron, 1501st Air Transport Wing, and he learns their home is Travis Air Force Base, California, Decker's destination for this leg of his journey. 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.

The aircraft ceiling has cushioned ductwork for heat and air conditioning, conduits for wire runs, fixtures for the lighting, and piping for hydraulics; all carefully set into padded insulation panels that provide some, but no much, noise dampening. The sides of the cargo area contain numerous storage cabinets for the strapping, pulleys, hoists, anchors, blocks, and assorted other accoutrement required to handle and store the payloads. Canvas seats on aluminum frames line the sides, but for this flight are secured in the upright position. Decker is thankful once again for the passenger pods.

The loadmasters are senior Air Force enlisted men. One is a Master Sergeant, pay grade E-7, who wears insignia bearing a chevron of six stripes with a silver star in the center. One of the six stripes is in an inverted V position above the star. The other loadmaster is a Senior Master Sergeant, pay grade E-8, who wears a chevron of seven stripes with a silver star in the center and with two of the seven stripes in an inverted position above the star. Decker notices that both relatively older than many of the "shake and bake" noncommissioned officers who rise rapidly in rank during wartime. And then it dawns on him that this aircraft is probably flown by reservists

from the Air National Guard. These men are likely earning their required monthly active duty hours through this mission to the west coast and back. He's thankful to have what is probably a very experienced flight crew. He also smiles to himself as he hears them talking to each other on a first name basis, something that would *never* be done in the Army while actually engaged on a mission. But then the Air Force is known for its informality. It's a standard joke that most Air Force missions have to end by noon so everyone can make their afternoon tee time.

There will just one brief refueling stop at Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma. The plane is noisy; it was not designed for passenger comfort, but for transport of military goods. The air, however, is fresh, but mixed with the hint of the many lubricants that oil the various systems. The interior is worn from the numerous loads of cargo that have been held in the belly of the plane, but it is overall neat, and loose items appear to be stowed in place. The aircraft even has toilet facilities, which turn out to be austere, but clean and serviceable.

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. Married just after graduation and commissioning, and before leaving for military training, Decker and his wife have had a wonderful two years together. Bonnie thrived as the wife of a new second lieutenant, caring for him as he returned nightly from training bruised and sore from the physical efforts, and cheerfully joining the wives of other new lieutenants for shopping and other activities. But she foresaw this separation. Neither talked much about it, too hard and too emotional. She had tried to be the good trooper, but couldn't keep from crying. Her parting words were, "Stay safe!"

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 on travel orders can apply to get one of the available seats and thus get transportation from one base to another at no expense. Of the seventeen military passengers on this flight, some are either experienced air travelers 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 had to dig into their duffle bags just before loading 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 will stay 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 will be good that she’ll have something to focus her attention upon rather than the uncertainties of what her husband may be doing.

It is past 8 p.m. when the flight finally lands at Travis Air Force base, about 50 miles northwest of San Francisco. Travis, 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. As the aircraft taxis to the parking apron, Decker is amazed by the activity: There is a Congo Line of four aircraft waiting to take off, three planes taxiing to hangers or parking spots, tons of containers stacked at every conceivable location waiting to be hauled somewhere, fuel trucks making their rounds, and service vehicles scurrying through the planes and cargo attending to their business. Soon the aircraft comes to a stop, and the passengers gather their belongings. But there is a long wait while the various engine shutdown and arrival processes are accomplished. Finally one of the crew motion to the door and the passengers shuffle to disembark. Decker exits to a steel frame stairway on rollers that has been pushed up to the plane. At the bottom, the group stands in the afternoon heat of the parking apron until they are picked up by a blue Air Force 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 Visiting Officer Quarters or VOQ. Decker picks up his duffle bag and enters the 1950s-era cinder block building. Like most of the buildings on the base it is painted a pale green. VOQs 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’s uniform displays one ribbon. It is for the National Defense Service Medal. The ribbon has a wide yellow stripe in the center, flanked by four narrow stripes of red, white, blue, and white and wide red stripes.

Everyone now in the active military has this award, representing service during specified dates, essentially during times of armed conflict.

The reception area is Spartan; there are two metal framed sofas with dark green vinyl cushions guarding a Formica-topped coffee table scarred with cigarette burns and hosting some worn magazines. The air is stale, combining the musky smell of old paint and cleanings that try to betray the age of the room, and the remnants of smoke that is always noticeable to those who have never had “the habit.” Decker approaches the desk; chest-high worn Formica marred with ink spills and scratches. He needs accommodations for the night to be ready for the next day’s flight out of the base en route to Vietnam. The sergeant rises from a desk covered with various papers and vouchers and orders that the military requires for billeting, and slowly makes his way to the counter. Decker notices that his uniform is a bit snug, something that would raise eyebrows the Army, even in wartime. The Army has fairly strict standards on weight control and the sergeant evidently needs some exercise, as in pushing his dinner plate away after just one serving. But then, this is the Air Force, not to be confused as part of the armed services.

As for the sergeant he 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 you 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 down hallways painted gas chamber green 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, somewhat high cheekbones, and close-cropped light brown hair. There is a small scar above his right eye from a cut while playing sports. Three stitches. 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 table. He returns to his room and undresses. His khaki uniform is wrinkled. Normally he would not wear the same uniform for two days, but he is traveling and needed the room in his duffle bag. He gives the shirt armpits a sniff test. They pass. He smooths out the wrinkles as he hangs up the uniform,

hoping that gravity will also help make the uniform look better the next day. He sets the alarm click that he has brought with him, and gets into bed. No, the bed is not comfortable; it sags from too many past occupants. But the sheets and pillow case are crisp and clean. He is lying on 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, had looked like it was pulled straight from a laundry bag – rumpled and wrinkled. The captain's branch is Infantry, clear from the crossed rifles insignia on his collar. Above the captain's four rows of decorations is the Combat Infantryman Badge. The CIB was created during World War II as primary recognition of the combat service and sacrifices of the infantrymen who would likely be wounded or killed in numbers disproportionate to those of soldiers from the Army's other service branches. It is awarded for being personally present, and under hostile fire, while serving in assigned, primary infantry or Special Forces duty in a unit actively engaging the enemy in ground combat.

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?”

With the light on Decker has a better view of his roommate. Older, perhaps 35. A small skull and crossbones tattoo on his forearm. A pronounced chin. The thought comes to mind: “Hard core.”

“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 very soon the only sound in the room is his light snoring. Decker stares at the dark ceiling, wondering if his tour of duty will end with someone escorting *his* remains back to his wife and parents.