

Prologue

“They love the dark,” Colonel William Messier told me on my first day in Vietnam. “They love how it cloaks a man, and how even the tiniest sound travels.”

His words echoed in my mind as I stood in the pitch black that engulfed everything around me. There was not a single whisper of light anywhere from any source—no moon, no stars, nothing. I couldn’t even see my hand as I raised it to my face; only felt my breath on my palm. Yes, the Viet Cong loved the dark, and right now, from every direction, men spoke in hushed tones thinking they could not be heard. To me they might just as well have been shouting. Was I the only one who knew that the enemy made nightly patrols of the jungle? That they waited for a moonless night such as this; biding their time until our troops got comfortable and started chatting? Sometimes all it took was a sneeze, a sigh, or a snapping twig. Growing agitated, I wanted to shush them. If only I could project my thought, *Quiet, you guys!* into their heads. All I could do was hold my breath and wait.

Suddenly a high-pitched whistle shrieked, followed by a blinding flash of light. Too dark became too bright, and everyone was shocked into silence at last. As my eyes adjusted to the glare, I saw that we were surrounded by men brandishing rifles and dressed in the familiar black jump suits and straw hats worn by the Viet Cong.

A moment later, the voices resumed; startled, confused—“*What the hell...?*” and Gene Richards, the president of the Massachusetts Selectmen’s Association

and emcee for that evening's event, spoke reassuringly: "Everyone please stay calm and remain in your seats! That was a demonstration of what our boys in Vietnam are experiencing. Just as you didn't hear these men come in, so, too, the Americans fighting in Vietnam do not know when they are being surrounded under dark of night. But that's where the similarities end. Here, someone can turn the lights on. Over there, the darkness lasts nearly half a day. Here, we know that these men surrounding our tables are not planning to do us any harm. Over there, our boys—your sons and mine—live each day with the very real possibility that they could be ambushed at any moment."

"Cripes, Gene," said Norman Hill, "you couldn't just put on a slide show?" There was nervous laughter as people joked and tried to regain their emotional balance.

"Maybe next time." Gene glanced at me, and I nodded, ready. "Now folks, the people in Washington call it a 'conflict,' but the man we're honoring tonight has seen what's going on first hand, and he can tell you without a doubt that what our boys are doing over there is fighting a war." Gene paused for effect, then went on, "As most of you know, Charlie Yaitanes went to Vietnam and spoke to the soldiers. They told him that every moment is uncertain; at any moment they could be called upon to make the decision: *My life or his?* Because that's what it comes down to over there: kill or be killed. Charlie himself had a few close calls while he was there, and we're lucky he survived in order to accept this award."

A few close calls? I almost died! Forcing myself to smile, I nodded again.

“And so I am proud to present the Massachusetts Selectmen's Association's Man of the Year Award to Stoughton's own Charlie Yaitanes.”

The crowd, which was made up of selectmen and local officials from most of the state's 352 cities and towns, in addition to the men dressed as the Viet Cong, erupted into shouts and applause.

I rose from my chair on the stage, joined Gene at the podium, and as he presented me with the award, I was aware of a dozen flashbulbs going off. We posed for the picture that would appear in the next newsletter, then Gene relinquished the stage to me. Nervously, I adjusted my microphone and fumbled through my notes looking for page one; where was page one, why wasn't it right on top? Oh, there it was... meanwhile, the applause grew louder. People were standing, clapping as hard as they could, some shouting my name, and one man whom I recognized as the father of one of the soldiers I'd spoken to, put two fingers in his mouth and let out an ear-piercing whistle.

Flattered by the reception, I abandoned my notes. Now was not the time for a carefully crafted lecture. I needed to tell these people, from my heart, how—and why—I had gone to Vietnam.