

Author's Note

In 1968, I was a young Army lieutenant stationed at Camp Pelham, South Korea—not far from the demilitarized zone which still marks the armistice line between that nation and the totalitarian north. At the time, my battalion was one of a few nuclear-capable artillery units there. Because of my advanced security clearance, much of my time in the land of the morning calm was spent working with this “special weapons” ammunition.

As spring began to thaw a brutal Korean winter, my unit was visited by an unusual and anonymous group of soldiers, sent to us for training. These officers and their men were already quite familiar with the howitzers we used. They had come, we were told, to learn how to employ the nuclear rounds these weapons could fire. Soldiers talk, and a few of us knew some of the men who had arrived. It soon became clear they had come from artillery batteries in South Vietnam. Their presence and mission had to remain highly classified.

It did, and after weeks of intense training the men left, as innocuously as they had arrived. I never heard anything more about them, nor did I see the men again. Apparently, any plans to use nuclear artillery in southeast Asia never met fruition.

Still, after more than half a century, the writer in in me asks “... what if?” What if such a plan had gone forward? Where and how could nuclear artillery have been used in Vietnam? Possible answers to these questions lie in the pages before you.

The Author
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Other Books by Kip Cassino:

The Narrow Man

Buddies

OLDOGS

Incident at Aviano

Gleaners

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PROLOG

The Skies Above South Vietnam, 1967

A silver jet bomber flashed high above cloud cover that thoroughly masked the ground below it. Hidden beneath lay the Sepon River, where the borders of South Vietnam and Laos meet. The pilot needed no ground references to tell him where to drop his bombs. An intersection of two radio beams was all he required, and that was coming up. “Constant Farmer zero-six, this is Cabbage Picker two-zero, over,” he transmitted, glancing down at the clouds boiling beneath his wings.

“Picker, this is Farmer, go,” came the immediate response.

“Starting my run, wait,” the pilot replied, as he aligned his plane with the intersecting beams on his scope. The big jet bled speed and altitude in a barrel roll, which arced into a graceful dive. The pilot reached for switches, awaiting the signal to release his bombs. In the meantime, too late detected, three telephone pole-like tubes appeared above and behind him. Alarms blared in his earphones. “I got SAMs,” the pilot reported, commencing a steep dive to evade the missiles he now knew stalked him, ejecting radar-confusing chaff. “Going low ...” he continued, but the sentence—like his mission—was never completed.

“Pilot error?” The Navy Captain asked. “He came in very high.”

Across the conference room table from him, deep in the Pentagon, the Air Force Colonel shook his head. “Hemmer was one of our best. Followed the mission profile perfectly,” he said. “High or low, it makes no difference. We go in lower and slower, the guns get us.”

“Some get through.”

“Yeah, some do ... but not enough. Even one loss, if it’s the wrong plane, is too many. My boss, your boss, and the guy running Happy Harry here won’t accept that outcome.” The Air Force Colonel nodded to his left, at a man who had yet to speak but wore a broad grin.

“My turn, gentlemen?” the Army Colonel asked. “Now that we’ve talked about what hasn’t worked, let’s discuss what will. Let me present artillery, the king of battle.”

The three men, each a senior aide to his respective chief of staff, were discussing what, on its surface, seemed like a simple arrangement—even though the involvement of nuclear weapons made it the first of its kind. The Soviet Union would allow the U.S. to take out a target vital to her interests using nuclear weapons. The U.S., in turn, would allow the Soviets to do the

same. Only one target could be chosen by each side, and both strikes had to be equally deniable. Simple.

The Soviets had already made their choice known: the Chinese nuclear testing facilities at Lop Nor, on the eastern edge of the Tarim Basin. Their motivation was apparent. Since the Chinese exploded their first atomic bomb in 1964, the Kremlin had become uneasy. By 1967, when they detonated their first thermonuclear device, Soviet discomfort had become alarm. A split had evolved between the two Communist giants. Border disturbances along the Ussuri River and in Zhen Bao had become firefights. Mao was purging lieutenants who showed pro-Soviet inclinations. It was high time to teach the Chinese a lesson, and retard their nuclear weapons development in the process. Privately, the Soviet leaders fretted that waiting much longer might make their “lesson” too dangerous to carry out.

The Johnson administration, dealing with the Soviets through “hot line” secure calls and clandestine ambassadorial meetings, found itself amenable to the deal—at least in principle. Neither Johnson nor his top advisers had any love for the Chinese Communists. Seeing Mao’s nuclear ambitions thwarted would ease world tensions, they agreed. As a secondary effect, heightening Chinese enmity against the Soviets might be good for the U.S. as well. Beyond all else, Johnson liked to make deals. His whole political career was built from them. Perhaps an arrangement like this one would lead to others, and slow down or stop the ruinously expensive arms race both nations were locked in now.

After agreeing in broad terms, the administration’s senior advisers and military leaders ruminated over potential U.S. choices. Finally, they had agreed that destroying the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos was the best alternative available. Strangling the trail would force North Vietnam to negotiate seriously for peace, and stop the corrosive unravelling of Johnson’s political support at home.

The President had never thought of himself as a globally-centered politician. He had Rusk, McNamara, and their subordinates for that. The Great Society, the War on Poverty, Medicare and Medicaid—these were what Johnson wanted Americans to remember about his presidency, not some ugly little war in southeast Asia. Yet the war made headlines every day. Cronkite and others filled the nation’s living rooms with its horror and frustration. Too many of the heartland’s young men came home in body bags. The generals and the diplomats could do nothing to help him. Maybe this single act of destruction would. “Do it,” he told his most trusted counselors. “Close the deal. Let’s make the motherfuckers wish they’d never been born.”

The diplomats got to work. Meetings were held ostensibly for other purposes. Classified codicils were secretly presented, reviewed, and approved. By September, Military planners had begun turning Johnson’s decision into reality. Our military had plenty of nuclear weapons, of

every size, yield, and description. How would the weapon of choice be delivered? Missiles, in the 'sixty's, were out of the question—too easily tracked, and far too inaccurate. Aircraft made the most sense, except for a proviso insisted upon by Johnson's key advisors: there could be no evidence left behind—no possibility of any nuclear technology transfer due to the attack. Tests flown above the actual target proved that some aircraft would likely be shot down trying to deliver their bombs. The probability for North Vietnamese salvage of an unexploded nuclear bomb was judged too great by McNamara's slide rule gang, much to the anguish and dismay of Air Force and Navy planners alike. That left only one option for Ho Chi Minh Trail destruction: the use of nuclear artillery.

Once the first atomic bombs were constructed, the scientists and technicians at Los Alamos and Berkeley quickly began work on improvements—new bombs for new purposes. Atomic weapon yield could be “boosted,” it was quickly found, even before the Mike Test of Operation Ivy demolished Elugelab Island in late 1952, as Teller and Ulam's enormous 74-ton “gadget” ushered in the era of thermonuclear bombs. Their device was quickly weaponized, made compact enough for bombers to lug international distances. Nuclear bombs were getting bigger and more powerful.

They were also getting smaller. The Navy and the Army both clamored for atomic weapons of their own. The Navy wanted nuclear torpedoes, depth charges, and anti-ship weapons. The Army wanted nuclear artillery, landmines, mortars for infantry, and even man-carried devices that could be deployed behind enemy lines by agents on foot. All of these applications would require lighter, more compact weapons—nukes that could be lifted by individual soldiers or sailors in some cases, and stored on trucks or ships. Theodore (“Ted”) Taylor, a brilliant nuclear scientist, headed a group that responded to their mounting requests. In fairly short order, he met all the military's demands, designing weapons small enough to be fired from Army cannons, launched from submarines on the tips of torpedoes, and even carried as backpacks. Most saw production and at least some distribution, though almost all were removed from service inventories by the late 1960's. Notable exceptions were the nuclear artillery rounds, which remained available until 1992.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail veered close to the border between Laos and South Vietnam's northern-most Quang Tri province, well within the range of the army's nuclear-capable field pieces. U.S. artillery could easily reach targets twenty kilometers from that border without firing from Laotian soil. Protected by sufficient security, the artillery would be in little danger of North Vietnamese interdiction. Vital roads and trails in the area could be effectively demolished within a matter of days, leaving craters far too deep and wide for even an army of workers to fill without months of labor. In the meantime, supplies needed in the south would be choked off. North Vietnam would be forced to negotiate, or watch her forces starved into surrender. If

unanticipated progress to open the trail again was discovered, a few more nuclear rounds would erase its promise.

The nuclear round chosen would be fired from an eight-inch howitzer—guaranteeing a yield sufficient for the job. There were plenty of units using that weapon already in South Vietnam—several battalions in the northern provinces where the mission would be carried out. Their crews had plenty of experience. Familiarity with the nuclear round itself was far less widespread, but there were proficient units in relatively close-by South Korea to instruct those chosen for the task.

A W33 atomic round, fired from the exceptionally accurate M110 self-propelled eight-inch howitzer, was chosen for this mission—which by now had been coined “Operation Tollbooth.” Taylor and his team had created a weapon design masterpiece, using technology evolved from the very first atomic bomb—the “Little Boy” that evaporated much of Hiroshima in 1945. To keep the weapon’s weight down, “Fleegle” (Turner’s nickname for the design) used a double-gun mechanism, shooting two subcritical masses of uranium oralloy toward one another on tracks within a titanium-sheathed artillery shell. When the accelerated slug met the annular ring in which it fit, the chain reaction took place. His design reduced the necessary weight of the round by a factor of eight (to 243 pounds), and made it a feasible weapon for cannoneers to handle and load. An intricate triple-deck time fuse was used to initiate the explosion, which promised to unleash between two and four kilotons of hell on any target chosen. There was no need to test the weapon. The W33 had been in Army inventory for years, and had already been detonated as early as 1957, during the Plumbob series of above-ground tests in the Nevada desert.

All was in place—the target and weapon selected. Now the men who would bear the spearpoint of extreme U.S. policy needed only to be chosen and directed to their mission.

CHAPTER ONE: The Korean Bath

The brand-new lieutenant sat alone at the big semi-circular bar, his duffel bag beneath his feet. He calmly sipped his scotch and water, even though the sun was high in the sky. Frowning soldiers in combat gear strode past him outside the windows to his rear from time to time—on what seemed to be important errands. Joint wargames with the South Korean Army were in progress, leaving no one at Camp Pelham to take charge of a newly minted junior officer fresh from OCS (Officers Candidate School) and the replacement depot. The newbie was told to wait at the officers club until someone found time to take him in tow. So the sidelined young man found a stool, ordered himself a drink from the Korean behind the bar, and quietly toasted his own birthday. The date was August nineteenth, the year was 1967, and Xabier Brede was now twenty-one.

The ride from the replacement depot had been uncomfortable, dusty, and pungent. The discomfort began the minute he and others descended from the Boeing 707 that had flown them to Korea from McChord Air Force Base, near Seattle—days ago now that he'd crossed the international date line. He and the other officers from the plane had been led behind a hangar's partition to be given gamma globulin injections, for protection against hepatitis they were told. He was asked how much he weighed by a nearby medic. "One-forty-two," Brede answered, still groggy from the long flight—which had touched down briefly in Alaska and Japan before reaching Kimpo. At that news, the medic produced an incredibly large hypodermic as he told the young lieutenant to lower his trousers. The injection seemed to take minutes, until he was finally allowed to pull up his khaki pants once again. "If I'd known it was by weight, I'd have told you ninety pounds," he told the medic with a weak smile.

"Sit down if you need to, sir," said the medic, who was already sliding away toward his next victim. Brede felt well enough, though tender and a little surprised, so he wandered beyond the partition to see the enlisted men who had been on the plane with him. Unlike officers, they were given neither privacy nor chairs—lined up instead in rows facing away from the offending medics approaching from behind. Several gasped when presented with the huge hypodermics meant for them. A few fainted dead-away to the hard concrete floor when their shot was administered. After far too little recovery time, the whole group was told to gather their belongings and board the bus waiting outside the hangar doors.

South Korea was still in late summer, so the air outside the hangar remained still, hot, and humid. All the windows of the dark green bus the men entered were open, to catch whatever breeze might drift by. Everyone got to their seats quickly, piled their luggage wherever it would fit, and waited for the trip to the replacement center at nearby ASCOM City.

The bus moved through Kimpo Air Base's gates to a road that passed near the fields and rice paddies of several local farmers. Those within were immediately overcome by the heavy pervading stench, much like the smell of an ill-tended open sewer. Some gagged. Others looked wildly around the bus, trying to locate who among them was responsible for the fetor. Seeing this, the bus driver laughed. "It's none of you!" he announced gleefully. "This is the way Korea smells, all summer long. Farmers here use their honey buckets for fertilizer. In the winter it smells the same, 'cept frozen. You'll all get used to it, in about a month." The man laughed again and continued driving. His passengers shrank in their seats and tried to avoid breathing deeply.

ASCOM City, as he travelled through it, seemed to Brede like a random collection of large warehouses, Quonset huts, and other assorted structures—all humming with activity. Very little grass and no trees could be seen. The bus rolled up to a large hangar-like building, and the driver opened the front door. "Everybody out," he said happily. "Don't forget your gear. Go through the doors to your right. You'll get assigned here. Welcome to Eighth Army!" He laughed, closed the bus door and pulled away from the men, who were left standing on rough asphalt in front of the building's double doors. They shouldered their belongings, trooped inside, and formed a ragged line in the large entry hall. An army clerk was there to meet them, clipboard in hand. "Sing out when I call your name," the Spec-four boomed forcefully. He called a name and rank, got an answer, and checked a line on his clipboard, nodding with satisfaction when his list was completed. "Officers and NCOs follow me," he announced. "The rest of you wait here. Smoke 'em if you got 'em. There's ashtrays around. Don't put your butts out on the floor—unless you want to clean them up." With that, he led twenty-five sergeants and officers through the swinging doors and into the typewriter staccato of assignment.

Brede spent much of the next several hours sitting in outer offices and waiting areas. Luckily, he'd brought along a book to read, some new science fiction by Jack Vance. Eventually, orders in hand, he was directed out of the building to another bus, which took him to his quarters for the night. "Be where we let you off at 0600 tomorrow morning, gentlemen," the old sergeant at the front of the bus announced. "Your mess hall's right across the street. Please don't leave the base tonight," he said with a weary smile. "There's nothing beyond these gates you need to see."

Naturally, instructions like those motivated several newly commissioned officers and gentlemen to put their bags away, wash up, get some chow, and search for the quickest way off base as soon as they could. Brede found himself among a group of six brand new lieutenants walking quickly through a base gate as afternoon fell into evening. They led each other to a large structure less than a block down the road, from which the thump of music issued and heavy in-and-out traffic marked the doors.

"I hear these Korean girls are the best in Asia!" a new armor lieutenant crowed as he led the other five inside.

“I just want a drink,” a dour, slight infantryman beside him muttered.

Inside, the place was less than glamorous. Rows of wooden tables filled the large windowless room, poorly lit with glaring fluorescents. The air was filled with cigarette smoke and the jarring beat of unintelligible wailing music. Their table was none too clean, its surfaces sticky to the touch. An odor of stagnant beer and cheap liquor overlaid the already foul reek from surrounding farmland. Still, some of the young men had never experienced bars to compare to this one. Those who had found this place not so different from the joints they’d visited around bases in the states. Others didn’t care, as long as their basic needs were met.

Short, active-eyed Asian men wearing aprons and carrying trays ranged up and down the aisles between the tables, stopping briefly by those occupied to take drink orders. One stopped at the table Brede’s group had chosen. “What you want?” he grunted in partially discernible language, looking from face to face.

Four of the young men wanted beer. The infantryman ordered whiskey and coke. Brede asked for scotch and water. “Okay, okay!” the man said, nodding. “I get! Cost you five dollar American.” He held out a grimy hand.

The infantryman, whose name plate read “Collins,” rose slightly. “No American,” he said, shaking his head. “You take MPC. You bring, then we pay.”

“MPC cost more!” the scowling waiter complained. “Okay, you wait.” He turned and quickly disappeared into the gloom.

“American money is worth a lot more to these guys than the MPC we’re supposed to spend here,” Collins explained. “If we’d paid him first, we’d never see his ass again.”

“Sounds like you know your way around here,” one of the other butter-bars at the table said. “You been in Korea before?”

Collins nodded. “Last time through I was a corporal. Just got out of OCS. Why they sent me back here I’ll never know. Everybody else in my class went to Nam. The Army works in mysterious ways. Anyhow, hide any American money you have left on you. Just use the MPC they gave you today. You’ll be better off.”

The little man returned quickly, with four bottles of beer and two cloudy mixed drinks—one darker than the other. “Here you drink,” he said proudly. “Now you pay me ten-dollar MPC.”

Collins shook his head. “Here’s five,” he said, handing out some garish paper MPC notes. “That’s all you get. I give you one more, you promise to come back.”

The server, who said his name was Joon, was as good as his word—as long as the tips kept flowing. As the young men at the table began their fourth round of drinks, he offered them a suggestion.

“Maybe you like girls,” Joon said, his eyebrows raised. “Good ones, clean. You want, come with me.”

Collins shook his head. “Half the girls he’ll show you have clap so bad it will melt your dick off,” he said. “They’ll steal every cent you have on you while they’re at it. Wait till you get where you’re going if you need to get laid.”

Brede hadn’t said much the entire evening, but now he spoke out. “I want a Korean bath,” he said, rising from his chair. “I’m going with Joon.”

His desire was not absolutely sexual in nature. Brede had read about Japanese baths, and seen pictures of them: large porcelain-tiled pools full of steaming water, with winsome Asian women swimming or wading in them. No one with any clothing on at all, of course. The concept had crept into his dreams since he had learned about his upcoming assignment. He found it appealing, certain that Japanese and Korean baths had to be similar. He intended to find out.

Joon led Brede down a dark hallway to a dimly lit, low-ceilinged room set with several small tables. On the far side of the room, Korean women sat on a long bench. Directed to a chair at one of the tables, Brede was told to wait. “I get you somebody.” Joon told him.

The young lieutenant sat at the table, losing himself in thought. He was slim, of medium height, with dark hair, grey-blue eyes, and a prominent Gallic nose. Sensitive of his age, he had grown a mustache since graduating Artillery OCS, but kept it close-cropped within regulation.

There was movement across the table from him. Brede looked up. A small, plump Korean girl wearing a short, revealing dark dress swished by him and sat down. Dark hair, a round face enveloped by a big smile, and large dark eyes confronted him. “I’m Kimmee,” the woman said, “you want good time?”

He hardly knew how to react. There were so many inputs to sort through. The girl was pretty—in a dusky, Asian way. Her costume left little to his imagination. She was certainly well-endowed for her size. Eager too, with no pretense. Her scent was exotic, sour-sweet, like no other person he’d ever been near. “I want ... I want a Korean bath,” he was eventually able to blurt.

The girl looked at him in wide-eyed bewilderment for several seconds. “You want Korean bath?” she finally echoed, brushing hair from her forehead.

Brede nodded.

Kimmee made up her mind. “Okay, *jung-wi*! Okay! I get for you. First, you buy me drink!”

Brede nodded dully. The drinks he’d already had were catching up with him. Kimmee’s smile broadened in triumph, as she raised a plump arm and called for a waiter. “*Makkoli*,” she shouted.

Joon was back at the table in a flash, two beer-like bottles in his hand, along with spotted, streaked glasses. “MPC is forty,” he rattled.

The new lieutenant reached into his pocket. “I don’t think I have that much,” he said with a frown. “All I’ve got left is U.S.”

“U.S. good!” Joon exclaimed, grabbing a ten-dollar bill from his hand. “This enough!” He quickly scuttled away.

Kimmee, still grinning enormously, poured herself something that looked like beer from one of the bottles Joon had brought. “Now we drink!” she exclaimed. “You very cute. What you name, *jung-wi*?”

“Xabier,” he told her, concentrating hard to form the words. “When do I get my Korean bath?”

Kimmee evaluated the *nobyeong* across the table. He was hardly more than a boy, and smelled like burnt meat—as did all his kind. Soon he would fall asleep in front of her. No more money then! She decided to do them both a favor.

“Ess-a-buh,” she told him—trying her best to pronounce his name, “you gimme ten buck American. Get up, come with me now.”

“Are we going to the Korean bath?”

“Yes, yes!” She said, rolling her eyes, rising. “We go now. You follow me.” He stood unsteadily from his chair and handed her a Hamilton, his last—but who cared! She took his hand and led him from the room through a side door. Once outside, he doggedly followed her a short distance down a dirt path, which led to an area surrounded by a fence constructed from what appeared to be wooden shipping pallets. She opened a gate and led him inside, to a group of huts.

Kimmee stood Brede against the slats of a pallet-fence. “You stay here,” she told him. “Take off you clothes. I back soon.”

Under a big full moon, the night was bright. he eagerly stripped off his khaki’s and underwear, combining them with his shoes in a neat stack which he placed to his side—his drunken lethargy overcome by anticipation. He looked around the bleak compound, wondering

where a big, porcelain pool could possibly be hidden. As he peered about, he heard a sound, then a giggle, after which his back and shoulders were showered with cold water. Stiffening, instantly sobered, he turned in confusion to be drenched from head to toe by the continuing torrent.

Wiping his eyes clear, Brede saw Kimmee a few yards away in the dark, confronting him with a garden hose which continued to spray him with tepid water.

“This you Korean bath,” she said between gales of tinny laughter, “Same as I take.” Seeing his frown, she dropped the hose and skittered away in the darkness, leaving him wet and alone.

Brede stepped from the muddy puddle that surrounded him to drier soil, then bent to retrieve and don his damp clothing. Angry when he began, by the time he’d put on his pants and shirt he was smiling ruefully. As he stood dripping in the dark, he began to laugh softly. He remembered a line from a John Wayne movie he’d seen once: “People should do what they want to do ... and get what they deserve,” The Duke had said. Brede’s introduction to Korea certainly proved that. Sighing, he left the enclosure and walked back toward the base gate. As he trudged down the path, he looked at his watch. Two o’clock in the morning. Still time to change clothes and get a nap in before the bus arrived. He tried to light a cigarette, but the pack in his pocket had been soaked.