

## What He Did Not Say Then

By Everett Cox<sup>1</sup>

*Explosions, screaming, terror – they were called harassment attacks. A half dozen rockets or mortars in the middle of the night. Afraid to sleep, anxiety, and depression take over. Psyops – psychological operations aimed at the soul. Night terrors of the war in Viet Nam.*

The sergeant knew it, even though the new guy did not say it. He had seen it before or heard it in what was unsaid or had heard the same request before. He knew it from the sound of his voice, the way his eyes would not meet his, the empty stare at the floor. He knew it from the knock on the door, the knock after the knock, the knock after a death or many deaths.

That Lieutenant died in his sleep, the shrapnel piercing his skull. Had this guy known the Lieutenant? He worked on the flight line. Maybe it was that incident in the barracks. The last rocket attack. The crush at the door. Someone picking men up and throwing them aside. He looked at the trooper. Terror and panic could make any of us crazy strong and shame can crush us. Was that why he now knocked on his door? Was that why the mumbled request? It was the mathematics of death. Lose one and another dies. Lose one and another becomes a ghost. Still on his feet, still reporting for duty, but now dead on his feet, lifeless eyes.

“You can put in your request,” the Sergeant told him. “I’ll do the paperwork, but it will never leave this office.”

He knew the young man would return to his tasks, do them right, be responsible, but he prayed to himself the young man would not walk into a spinning propeller leaving others with dead eyes, dead on their feet.

“Anything else, soldier?” he asked.

“No, Sergeant.” The soldier saluted, about faced, head down, shoulders slumped. Held the door so it did not slam.

The Sergeant heard the sob through the screen. Door gunners, rumour had it, the way to glory or death, the way to heaven or hell, the way to redeem manhood lost to terror.

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnam veteran.