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SIX LUCKY MEN

At Bien-Hoa, garbage run was the most popular of all. Every Thursday, six men would be chosen to ride shotgun atop a heaped deuce and a half to a jungle dumping ground. Their purpose, other than riding shotgun in the event of an enemy attack, was to open the tail-gate and push the garbage out with their feet and their special garbage run snow shovels. The six were chosen by roster.

But the real reason for the garbage run's popularity with the men was the garbage run game. Long ago, no one knew exactly when, the game had been invented by some of the men who had preceded them, as far back as the middle 1960s. The game was financed by the company enlisted men's club. For every beer or shot of whiskey sold, ten cents in MPCs was thrown into a box that became known as the Garbage Run Pool.

Each run was allotted two cases of bar soap and a case of Coke for ammunition. Once the six men chosen were finished with their garbage duties, they would break open the cases, sit up along the sides of the deuce and a half box, and peg Coke cans and soap bars at the scavengers.

Ten cents was awarded for a hit, twenty cents for the genitals, fifty cents for the head, and five dollars for a knockout. There would be the usual arguments over who hit whom where, but they would never argue seriously. They had too much fun to be serious.

And since the scavengers welcomed the Coke and soap as potential black market merchandise, they made excellent targets. When the throwing would begin, they would stand exposed, their arms at their sides, their legs wide apart and

their genitals thrust forward. They knew a good thing when they saw one. They knew what the men were after.

And sometimes fights would break out among the scavengers over a bar of soap or a Coke, or over some half-eaten sandwich or half-full can of vegetables. They would hit each other with their fists and claw at each other's eyes. They would bite and scream and wail like banshees.

Once the six men returned to the Company, triumphantly riding the sides of the truck, their weapons brandished like jubilant Freedom Fighters entering Paris, they would collect their money and spend all afternoon and evening in the club, drinking their winnings.

And it probably would have continued forever, except one raucous afternoon in '69, the week's lucky six went out drunk without their Coke and soap and played the game for real.

ASYLUM

The asylum was in the most hotly contested area of Bien-Hoa Province, near the tiny hamlet of Tam-Hiep -- a few dusty, isolated weed huts along the muddy banks of the Bien-Hoa River. The asylum was three hundred yards away from the village, surrounded by a high cement fence topped with embedded glass to keep the insane in and the evil spirits from drifting over to contaminate the village. The Vietnamese considered insanity catching.

Since the insane were locked in and no one wished to be contaminated, the patients were left to fend for themselves. There were no attendants. The courtyard of the asylum was piled high with bones, discarded paper, feces, and busy rats.

Once a day, in the early morning, their food was brought by an old man from the village in a creaky water buffalo cart. He placed the day's ration on a squat table just inside the gate, and left again until the next morning. There would be a caldron of rice, a pot of meat, ten large French loaves, three packs of Park Lane cigarettes, and two small boxes of matches.

When the Fifth Infantry broke through to the village and entered the asylum grounds, they were appalled by what they saw. They stared with drooping mouths at the incredible filth. They couldn't believe it.