BLAZE *of* LIGHT

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COURAGE FOR BATTLE, FAITH FOR CRISIS

BLAZE *of* LIGHT

THE INSPIRING TRUE STORY OF GREEN BERET MEDIC
GARY BEIKIRCH, MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

MARCUS BROTHERTON



WATERBROOK

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Blaze of Light

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For anyone who's ever fought through a battle
or sheltered in a cave

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PART I

The War

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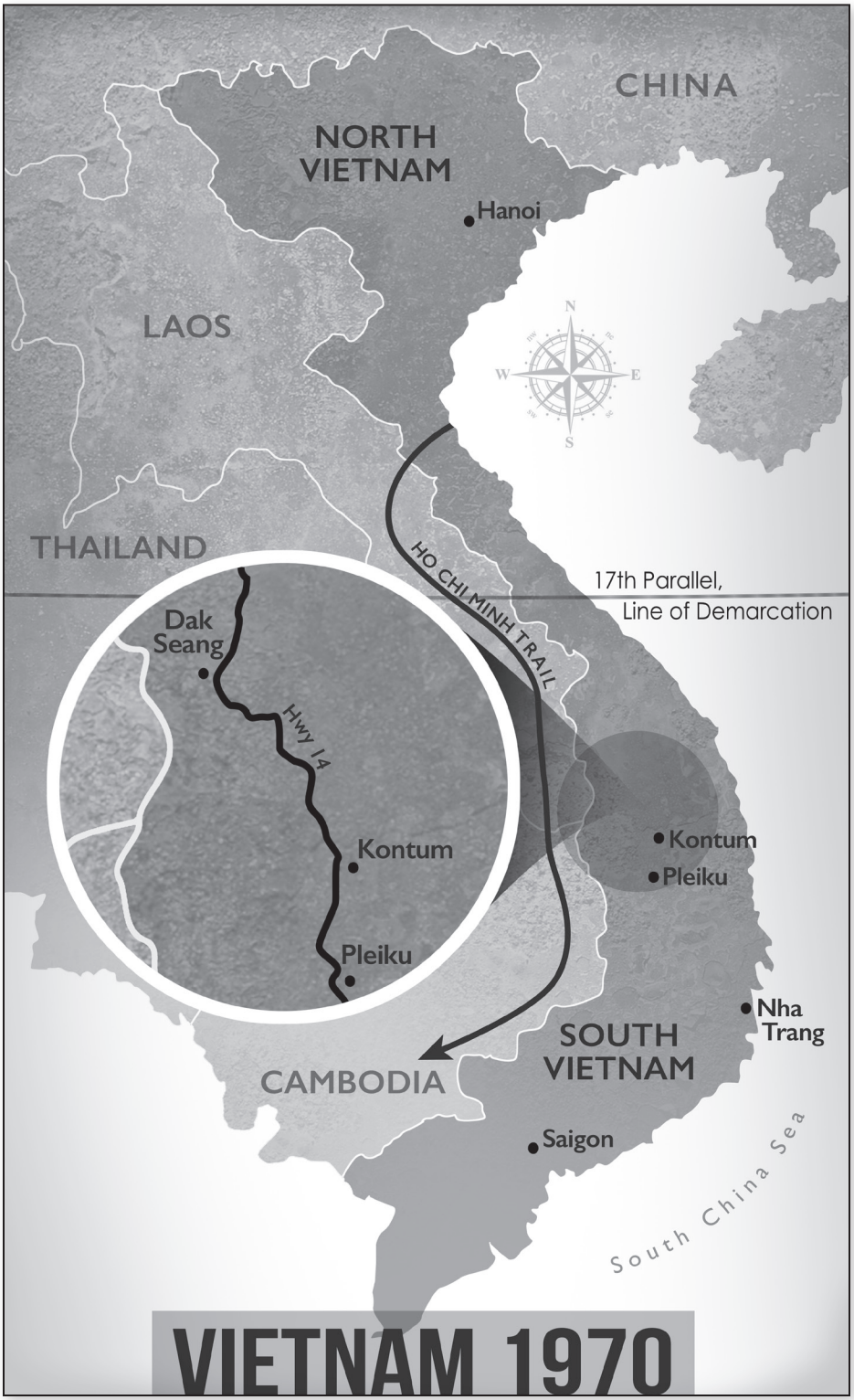

Prologue

In the haze before sunset, on the first day of the siege, an enemy rocket destroyed the last building still standing in the village of Dak Seang. He saw it explode in a chaos of splinters and nails while bullets whizzed overhead and mortars from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) shook the ground. The smell of sulfur and burning bodies filled the air. Still, he knew the assault wasn't over yet.

It was April 1, 1970. Army Green Beret medic Gary Beikirch, age twenty-two, lay in a two-foot-deep bomb crater on a stretcher, paralyzed from the waist down, watching the battle continue to rage while he drifted in and out of consciousness. Blood seeped from three wounds in his stomach and back. He'd done all he could to help, even after being paralyzed. He'd cared for the wounded until he collapsed. In one hand he still clutched a short CAR-15 snub-nose assault rifle, a protector of the innocent lives in his charge. But now even the strength to keep his eyes open was nearly gone.

Breathing hard next to him, dressed in baggy jungle fatigues, a T-shirt, and unlaced boots, lay a young Montagnard medical assistant named Tot. He held an old Korean-era M2 carbine, but with his bandolier of ammo spent, the only bullets left were in his magazine. This was his village, located in the Central

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Highlands region of Vietnam, about twelve kilometers from the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

To Gary's other side lay another Green Beret—one of the best-trained specialists in the military. Short, muscular, chewing the stump of an unlit cigar, Dizzine was his last name. Everybody called him Dizzy. He had his communications radio pressed against his ear so he could discern the commands through the static. He was nearly out of ammo too.

The three men saw silhouettes in the distance. NVA troops were already inside the wire. Running. Shooting. The murk of smoke and gunpowder in the air made visibility tricky. Two soldiers emerged, sprinting toward the crater. At first, it was hard to tell whose side they were on. They charged closer. Gary guessed what Dizzy and Tot were thinking: *Make sure of your target. Be accurate. Don't go crazy.* They spotted black and green pajamas. Pith helmets. Tot took down the first. Dizzy fired a short burst from his M16 and leveled the second.

"Chopper's coming," Dizzy said. "Get him ready."

Tot glanced at Gary. "*Bac Si* [the Vietnamese word for "doctor"], you must go now."

Gary raised his hand in protest, then gave a slight nod.

American fighter jets streaked overhead and unleashed rockets and bombs. Gunships—aircraft that provide support for ground troops—rained machine-gun fire. As a last resort to prevent the Special Forces camp from being overrun, the Green Berets had directed air support to fire directly onto their position. But the plan to combat the assault wasn't working.

Earlier in secret, at dawn on the same day, some ten thousand NVA soldiers had encircled the camp. The enemy barrage had begun in darkness. Hours of incessant shelling had destroyed every big gun that protected Dak Seang, knocked out the Special Forces observation tower and antennae, ruined the generator houses, and now hit and flattened every building above ground. After five hours NVA had started infiltrating the camp from hidden underground tunnels. Simultaneously, above ground, multiple groups of enemy soldiers led

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charge after charge. Tied together two by two at the wrist, each pair of soldiers advanced side by side. They were drugged up and glassy eyed, and when they reached the protective concertina wire surrounding the camp, they detonated explosives strapped to their bodies. Suicide runs. This enabled other NVA soldiers to run over the corpses and up inside the wire.

Gary scanned the skies. Choppers were usually a welcome sight at the camp. They brought in mail and supplies. Medicine. Word from home. But the skies this evening exploded like a hellish version of the Fourth of July.

"There it is." Tot motioned with his chin. "You will make it, Bac Si."

Gary heard the *whoomp, whoomp, whoomp* of a medevac helicopter. He tensed. Because of the heavy enemy fire, the evacuation could last only seconds. Dizzy and Tot grabbed the ends of Gary's stretcher and poised, waiting. The chopper hovered and descended. Gary lifted his head and spotted the faces of the door gunner and pilot. Three more crewmen were inside. He laid down his head and braced himself, anticipating the sprint over rough ground. He heard a *pop, pop, pop* and raised his head again.

The chopper was smoking, leaking fuel, its side riddled with bullet holes. The pilot reversed course and lifted the craft up and out of harm's way, limping toward safety at the next camp a few miles away.

"Don't worry," Dizzy said. "Another will get here."

Gary lifted his free hand from his side. It dripped blood. Although he'd done it earlier, again he took stock of his wounds: Shrapnel in his spine. Small-arms fire through his back and right hip. Either shrapnel or small-arms fire in his abdomen—hard to tell which. Under the makeshift bandage on his belly, his internal organs lay exposed and hung to one side. He closed his eyes. Maybe he drifted into unconsciousness. Maybe not. Half an hour passed. Maybe an hour. He heard shouts. Screams. Explosions. Dizzy firing his rifle. Then Tot's voice again:

"This one's yours, Bac Si. Get ready."

Again Gary heard a *whoomp, whoomp, whoomp.* Again he tensed. Again he lifted his head and spotted the faces of the door gunner and pilot. He lowered

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his head and braced himself. Then he heard a distinct hiss, felt the thud of two small explosions. Then one huge explosion. His body jolted. Gary lifted his head to look. Flames engulfed the chopper. It plunged to the ground like a rock.

A low groan escaped his lips. All his remaining strength melted away. All reserves of will. He'd lost too much blood. The fighting had proved too desperate. As much as Gary longed for rescue, he didn't want a third chopper even to try. Why risk the lives of another five men?

Two more silhouettes charged through the dusk toward the crater. At thirty meters, one cocked his arm to throw a hand grenade. Frenzied eyes. Sweaty brow. Dizzy aimed and brought him down. Tot wasn't far behind in taking out the second. But their ammo couldn't hold out much longer.

Dizzy's radio crackled. "Support the north wall. Now! Move!" Another breach of defense. More enemy soldiers were overrunning the village. Gary sensed unconsciousness overtaking him again. As the cacophony around him faded, Gary found himself staring far off at the blackened jungle. He wanted to live, but he didn't sense anger anymore. Nor did he feel fear. Death was inevitable. He knew that now. He sensed only sadness, the lament a warrior feels when unable to return to battle. Death beckoned all lives. All Green Berets. All allied Montagnard fighters. All villagers. The defenders' situation was hopeless . . .

And Gary knew he could do nothing more to help.

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1

Heart of a Warrior

Gary Burnell Beikirch (pronounced bye-kirk) didn't realize what a dangerous world he'd been born into on August 29, 1947, particularly when, at just eighteen months of age, he toddled up the stairs of the old Victorian duplex in Rochester, New York, spotted an open window, and leaned out against the screen.

He and his parents lived upstairs, while his aunt and uncle lived downstairs. Mealtimes were often a shared experience, and on this evening, while the grown-ups were engrossed in conversation, Gary had toddled off.

The child stood alone. The wind blew off the shore of nearby Lake Ontario, ruffling his hair. For a moment, the screen held fast while the toddler fingered the clasp that held the screen shut. Directly out the window, more than twenty feet below, lay the marble-hard surface of a blacktopped driveway.

Years later, Gary would wake in the middle of the night, breathless, shocked awake by repeated dreams of falling. In his dreams he fell and fell but never hit the ground. Fears soaked into his dreams like sweat soaked into his sheets. He feared breaking his head open. He feared the look on his parents' faces—anxious, desperate—as they peered over him in a hospital bed, where he lay in critical condition.

The latch opened.

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Gary tumbled out the window. The toddler hit the pavement headfirst with a massive thud. He was rushed to the emergency room at Strong Memorial Hospital, where X-rays showed his skull plates cracked in multiple places. The doctors, after closing the gashes in his scalp with more than one hundred stitches, weren't sure he would survive the night. A priest came to administer last rites.

Gary hovered between life and death. Time slowed for Gary's parents, George and Norma, as they hoped and waited, wondering whether Gary would ever heal or be the same. An article in the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle* (May 5, 1949) moralized, "Like too many youngsters before him, little Gary's curiosity led him to the catch on the screen."

The Beikirchs were a middle-class family. George built carburetors at Rochester Products, a division of General Motors, the plant where most of the town worked. After Gary's fall, George could barely concentrate on his job. On the side he played Triple-A baseball with the Rochester Red Wings, and all the players came by the hospital to sign a baseball for the boy. Norma worked as a homemaker. She spent her days and nights at the hospital, watching over her struggling son.

The parents had little to lean on except the love and support of their extended family and friends. That—and they knew their son had the heart of a fighter. They'd even named him with a future battle in mind, choosing Gary, a Germanic name meaning "spear," sometimes translated as "loyal warrior." They knew their son would be tough.

Another factor came into play during the crisis, although it remained hidden to the family until years later. Gary's mother and father were not churchgoers or part of any faith tradition. Yet every evening, on the other side of Rochester, a ten-year-old girl knelt beside her bed and begged God to spare his life. Gary's cousin Janet had been told the toddler would most likely die, but with all the faith of a child, she vowed to pray for his recovery for however long it took.

Gary's days in the hospital stretched into weeks. Surgery followed surgery. Stitches followed stitches. The doctors were concerned that even if Gary pulled through, he might experience long-term brain damage. Janet kept praying.

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The hospital-stay grew expensive and strained the family. To help, Norma went to work on the same carburetor line as her husband. Tragically, her hand caught in a machine and was crushed. There were no disability payments then. Her hand never fully recovered, so when she could work again, she found another job at a clothing store to make ends meet.

Slowly, steadily, against the odds . . . Gary fought his way back to full health. Doctors and therapists examined him and pronounced him cured. Gary's mental astuteness was deemed above average. His motor coordination was found to be excellent.

The pediatricians didn't know exactly what had occurred, why the fractured pieces of Gary's skull had not pierced his brain or caused any lasting damage. They knew only that factors beyond the here and now had played in the boy's recovery.

His parents chalked up this outcome to things that can't be fully explained.

Gary's first memory of his father is warm—playing catch together in the backyard. By then the family had moved from the duplex into a home of their own. George didn't want his son playing in the front yard, where a boy might follow a ball into the busy street. So the backyard, with its clipped grass and leafy willow tree, became an idyllic place for Gary to romp with Flash, the family's pet boxer. Here Gary and his dad threw a baseball back and forth, with George stopping every so often to show Gary how to place his fingers on the ball to throw curves and fastballs. George predicted that Gary would become a pitcher one day, and Gary dreamed of the major leagues.

But not every memory is warm. Gary remembers spinning around and around on a high stool at a bar. George had bought Gary a Coke that came with a paper straw in a tall glass of ice. As Gary drank his Coke, he spun the stool. The bartender knew George well and they joked together. At the front of the bar sat an old bowling machine. George handed Gary a stack of nickels and told

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him to play the machine. Gary slid a heavily weighted disk down the lane at the pins, which disappeared when the disk smashed into them.

When his nickels ran out, Gary went back for more and was surprised to find a woman with long eyelashes sitting next to his dad. George dropped more nickels into the boy's hand and brushed him aside, and Gary went back to the game. But when that stack of nickels ran out, his father and the woman weren't at the bar anymore. The bartender handed Gary more nickels. Gary played for hours until his dad showed up.

The next Saturday they went back to the bar, and a similar string of events occurred. Another tall glass of Coke. Another spinning barstool. Another stack of nickels. Another woman.

When Gary was six, he came home from first grade in the late afternoon as always, but that evening his father didn't come home for supper. At the dinner table, Gary's mom told him they needed to move because Gary's father had sold their house. Gary felt confused. He loved that house, and they'd just finished his upstairs room in knotty pine boards—he loved the smell of that wood.

His father wasn't home the next night either. Or the next. Gary and his mom soon moved in with a friend from work named Helen. The holiday season came, and a family Christmas party was held at the home of Gary's aunt and uncle. His mother had three sisters and one brother, and they and their spouses all gathered for the party, along with Gary's twelve cousins. Gary, playing in a room with all the cousins, was jumping on a pogo stick he'd received as a present. Suddenly, the clatter from the grown-ups' room hushed. Gary's mom appeared in the doorway and told Gary that his father was here and wanted to see him.

Gary followed her into the grown-ups' room. His dad was wearing a suit with a long trench coat. He took off his fedora, picked Gary up, and carried him to a more private room, where he set his son on his knee.

"I need to leave," the father said. "I probably won't see you anymore. But always know that I love you."

He set Gary on his feet, stood, then knelt at the boy's level and gave him a

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hug. His father led Gary by the hand out to where his cousins played, and then let go of his hand. One of the younger uncles was bouncing on the pogo stick, so Gary's attention was diverted. He doesn't remember his father leaving the party.

Later, the uncle, under the influence of too many drinks, hopped back on the pogo stick in an impromptu contest to see who could jump the farthest. The pogo stick broke. The uncle toppled off and Gary cried.

He tried to gather himself, but he found that his hold over himself had become very slack. The tears flowed far harder than they would have if he'd been merely a boy with a broken Christmas present.

For some time, little stability existed in young Gary's life. He and his mother moved constantly, staying for a season here and there with relatives and friends.

When Gary turned eight, his mother asked if he'd like to go to the nearby Seabreeze Amusement Park. His mother's friend Helen planned to drive, and she owned a sporty convertible that Gary always enjoyed riding in. Usually Gary sat alone in the back seat, but that day a man named George Schwartz sat with him. The man seemed kind enough and made an effort to know Gary. Together they went on rides at Seabreeze, threw darts at balloons, and knocked over milk bottles with a ball.

Not long afterward, Gary's mom said that she and Mr. Schwartz were getting married and asked whether Gary would like to have his last name changed to Schwartz. He didn't want to change his name, and he doesn't remember much about his mother's wedding ceremony, only that his cousins found it strange that a boy would attend the wedding of his parent—not many children were doing so in that *Happy Days* era.

Gary developed a liking for George Schwartz as a stepfather. A picture of George and Gary sitting by a hotel pool shows George with his arm around Gary just as if he were his own son. One day Gary's mom asked him if he'd

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prefer to call his stepfather "Dad." Gary said sure, he could call him "Dad" as easily as he'd been calling him "George." A week or so later, Gary's mom told him that he was going to have a little brother or sister and asked if Gary would like to choose the name. Gary had a buddy from school named Larry, so he chose that name when his new baby brother was born.

The new family—George and Norma Schwartz, Gary, and Larry—soon moved into an apartment in Rochester. Gary started fourth grade and, after a rough game of dodgeball, got into his first fistfight with the local bully. Gary tasted victory, and the bully never bothered him again. The spear was proving fierce.

George Schwartz enlisted in the naval reserve that same year to bring in extra money for the family. He'd served in the Pacific with the navy during World War II and had a photo album that contained pictures of the aftermath of battles on the Pacific islands. Gary pored over the album, horrified. He saw burnt and decapitated bodies, blood, guts—his introduction to the realities of war.

Not long after signing up for the reserve, George left for his annual two-week training. At the airport during boarding, the ramp separated from the plane, and George stepped into the gap, fell forward, and broke his femur. Part of the broken femur rammed upward and pierced his abdomen. He stayed in the hospital a long time and was never right physically after that, always in pain. Even then he worked three jobs—the first as a machinist for Delco, the second at a smaller machine shop, the third at a discount store, where he unloaded trucks. The family hardly ever saw him.

At the start of sixth grade, Gary's family moved again to Rochester's Tenth Ward, which had a reputation as a rough area. They lived in a duplex, part of a subsidized-housing project for veterans. Gary was a good student in sixth and seventh grades, making straight As and throwing himself into school. He took music lessons and played trumpet and French horn. He joined the Cub Scouts. He played baseball, football, and soccer. He was chosen standard bearer for his school, an honor that meant he raised the flag at school each morning and held the flag for assemblies while students recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

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Each Wednesday afternoon within the Rochester public school system, students were given the option of leaving school to attend religious education classes at nearby churches. Gary stayed behind in the classroom a few times but discovered that most students went, including many of his friends, who were mostly from Lutheran families. These students weren't particularly religious either, yet most had figured out that the classes meant an easy way out of school for the afternoon. Gary had never been to church. He decided he'd rather get out of school than sit in a nearly empty classroom.

Twenty kids attended his religious education class, and all the students were energetic. Some more than others. After three rowdy classes were held, the religious education teacher decided to kick the rowdiest students out of the group. An elderly woman named Anne Koch offered to help with the rowdy boys so they wouldn't be sent back to school. Gary was in this group, along with four other boys. Mrs. Koch led Gary's group across the street to a house owned by a school family who'd allowed use of their living room. Her hair was beautiful and silvery, her voice peaceful and calm—an educator unlike anyone Gary had ever encountered.

Each Wednesday, Mrs. Koch served the boys snacks—Coke and chips, or milk and cookies—then they simply talked. She allowed them to talk about anything that interested them, no matter the topic. Gary began to look forward to Wednesday afternoons. The other boys must have been as mesmerized, because no one ever was disrespectful toward the elderly woman. Her pedagogical method was to win the boys' attention not by lecturing but by listening. Some of the boys started to share deeper things with the group—about their cares and concerns, about arguments their parents or siblings were having, about challenges they faced at school. Mrs. Koch just listened.

One afternoon, when the boys were sitting on the stairs with Mrs. Koch, she spoke to them about a historical figure who could help them see a new way forward in life. She read to them from a little book—a New Testament, she called it—about how God loved the world so much that he allowed this man to die to take away the sins of the world. Fortunately, if anyone believed, the person

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would have eternal life. She described how God had sent his Son not to judge the world but to save the world. She asked the boys if they wanted to pray.

A few of the boys prayed with Mrs. Koch, and while Gary did not pray, he bowed his head and closed his eyes out of respect. Somehow he sensed it was important.

Before he reached ninth grade, Gary had moved eleven times and attended eight schools. Ever a good athlete, he made the varsity soccer team as a freshman and made the all-county team. But he let his grades slip and started acting out, feeling the strain of the constant moves, the family's lack of money, and the grief he still experienced over his biological parents' divorce.

Gary's feelings and rebellious acts escalated. At school, Gary and a friend named Chuck grew angry with a teacher and shoved him. Both boys were expelled. Chuck was sent to military school, but Gary's mother went to the principal to advocate for her son's readmission under the condition that his behavior improve. Gary was allowed back in, and he did shape up, although during nonschool hours he continued to make risky choices.

Gary and his pals hot-wired cars and went for joyrides. They broke into the school and other buildings after hours to explore and goof off, simply because they could. Once, he was arrested and taken back to the house in handcuffs. His parents prepared to move again, but Gary refused, and when they left, he lived with some cousins for the remainder of high school.

Gary wonders today if he always had a bit of a problem with authority since he never wanted to conform to the expectations of others or follow rules. That mind-set didn't help much in school, but it would make him a perfect candidate for Special Forces, where being a strong-willed, determined, out-of-the-box thinker was an asset.

He threw himself into his remaining years of high school. He joined the

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wrestling and gymnastics clubs. He joined a high school service fraternity and eventually became president. He continued playing varsity soccer. He became president of the varsity club, which was composed of all the varsity athletes in the school.

A cheerleader at Greece Olympia High School caught Gary's eye. She was vibrant and had short-cropped auburn hair. They dated seriously for two years, and Gary thought his future was settled. Other friends their age were marrying right out of high school. The cheerleader was headed to Brockport for college, about half an hour west of town, and Gary decided to go there too. She planned to major in physical education, and Gary figured he'd join the same program.

In September 1965, they entered the university, along with more than nine hundred other freshmen. During an orientation session, the president said to the class of incoming freshmen, "Look to your right. Now look to your left. In six months, one of the three of you will be gone."

That statement made Gary shiver because the draft was underway. If you were eighteen or older and enrolled in university, your status was 2S—meaning you were exempt from the draft. But if you were the same age and not a student, then your status was 1A—eligible for immediate military service. After high school a few of Gary's classmates had enlisted, but Gary felt no inclination toward the military. To him, Vietnam seemed like a faraway place he'd heard about only on TV.

At Thanksgiving, the girlfriend told Gary she wanted to end the relationship. She'd met a guy over the summer at the post office and was interested in dating him. Dazed, Gary wandered downtown to the Stoneridge theater and queued up to see a movie. Friends spotted him, realized something was off, and led him to a nearby restaurant, where he poured out his heart. Although he had encountered challenges in the past, nothing had hit him as hard as this breakup. His goals, his motivation, even his reasons for looking forward to the future had been wiped away. He no longer felt as if he had any reason to be enrolled in university. Except to avoid the draft.

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Gary's grades plummeted. He started drinking and cutting classes. Friends dropped in at the bar to make sure he got back to his dorm safely. He finished his freshman year somehow, but his grade point average was dismal. Over the summer he continued drinking and partying.

The following September he returned to the university and felt slightly more invested. He played soccer and mostly managed to stay out of bars. Fall semester finished and spring semester began. Gary and a dormmate named Tom made a bet with some other guys to see which pair of friends could hitchhike the fastest from the university down to Daytona Beach, Florida. Gary and Tom dressed in shorts and T-shirts, walked to the highway early the first morning of spring break, and stuck out their thumbs. The guys hadn't calculated how far away Daytona Beach was (one way is more than eleven hundred miles), but they were determined to win the bet.

Their first hitch went smoothly, and they made it as far as Pennsylvania. On the second ride some Pennsylvania mountain folk took them to the middle of the Poconos. It was nighttime and snow was falling. Gary and Tom shivered along the freeway in their shorts and T-shirts, still holding a cardboard sign that read "Daytona Beach!" Fortunately, two college guys in a Pontiac GTO—also headed to the party at Daytona Beach—picked them up and drove them the remainder of the way.

On the beach, Tom began to violently vomit blood. He was rushed to a hospital emergency room, diagnosed with a perforated ulcer, and informed that a full recovery would take place only with several weeks of complete rest and a change in diet. Gary and Tom vowed to stop drinking so much beer, and Tom dropped out of college so he could recuperate. Gary stayed with him in Florida and quit college too. After a few weeks Tom recovered. They pooled their money, bought a 1955 Chevy hot rod, and cruised home to New York.

Gary knew that beach bums were soon drafted. Now that he was home, he needed a plan. A good friend named Don Jacques had just been dumped by his girlfriend, too, and since Don's family had a legacy with the Marine Corps, he

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told Gary he was enlisting. Don wanted Gary to join the Marines with him, but Gary thought that all marines were crazy.

"Well, then, what are you going to do?" Don asked Gary one afternoon while sitting at a bar.

Gary thought a moment. He'd recently read a book by Robin Moore titled *The Green Berets,* which would soon be turned into a movie starring John Wayne. Gary had a history of making quick decisions, and to him those Green Berets seemed like a noteworthy bunch of guys. In the book they looked to be doing challenging and adventurous work in the jungles of Vietnam.

"I'm gonna become a Green Beret," Gary said.

He spoke on impulse yet with commitment. Plus, he couldn't wait to wear the uniform. He envisioned walking onto the Brockport campus, strutting his stuff, showing his ex-girlfriend what she'd given up.

Don wished Gary luck. They said their goodbyes and promised to keep in touch. Don was a close friend. Maybe Gary's best friend. A few weeks later, on August 31, 1967, Gary was on a bus headed to Buffalo, ready to make the pledge to join the military.

Don made good on his vow and joined the Marines. He was one of the youngest men ever to graduate from Officer Candidate School and be commissioned in the Marine Corps. Everybody liked Don. He was a good athlete with a stocky build and chiseled good looks. He was soon sent to Vietnam, and in his letters home, he talked about missing his mom and dad, and about genuine friendships with the men he commanded.

In February 1968, Gary received a letter and newspaper clipping from a high school friend. When Gary recalls this today, many decades later, a faraway look still comes across his face and he chokes up. Don had been killed at Khe Sanh.

When Don died, Gary was still working toward becoming a Green Beret. His experiences in Vietnam still lay ahead, and the thought of going to the war in this wild country raised goosebumps. Fighting as a Green Beret in the

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mountains of Vietnam was for men of renown, Gary thought. Surely not for him. It was for crack troops skilled in the techniques of unconventional warfare. For the soldiers of the Special Forces. No, he didn't want to go to Vietnam. He'd try to get sent somewhere else, even as a Green Beret. Vietnam was only for men of legends.

Vietnam was only for John Wayne.

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