There were about a dozen of us who worked the night shift at the airbase. We were avionics technicians, a small platoon of Signal Corps geeks attached to the famed AmeriCal Division and it was our job to keep their large fleet of helicopters in the air by replacing and repairing their electronic components – radios, transponders, wiring and gauges, controls and sensors and firing mechanisms.

My particular expertise was in communication devices, especially transponders, strange gizmos that talked to each other in code and, via an electronic handshake with its counterpart on the ground, authenticated that the vessel was either “friendly or foe”.

As far as war time jobs go, mine was pretty cushy. It took intelligence and ingenuity and I was good at it, having graduated tops in my courses. I signed up for it in the beginning, knowing that it was only my brainpower that would keep me out of the bush, and so far so good.

Once I got acclimated in Vietnam, made some friends and learned the politics of the situation, I opted for the night shift because there was less pressure. The day shift had to deal with all the fucking lifers. “Lifers are like flies,” it’s been said, “they eat shit and bother people”, and the less I had to deal with them the better.
We only had one lifer on the night shift, Sergeant Timberlake, and he was pretty laid back. He talked to us as if we were human beings and he respected our intelligence, and he would even warn us if the brass was up to something hinky, like surprise inspections and what-not.

We went to work every day about 5:00 pm, early enough so the day shift could get chow. About an hour before we were to start, we'd eat dinner and hang around the mess hall until a truck came by to give us ride to the airbase which was a couple of miles from our living quarters. It would come back 12 hours later and get us back in time for breakfast just as the sun was coming up.

Our shop consisted of six or eight cargo trailers spread in a half circle like spokes on a wheel around a hub made of plywood that served as the office and storage space. The trailers had been converted into mobile electronic laboratories that could be towed by semi-trucks and set up or torn done in minutes. They were filled with millions of dollars worth of sensitive electronic testing equipment and therefore had to be air-conditioned. It was rumored that the only two places on the whole base that had air-conditioning was our shop and the General's hootch.

So the night shift was the place to be. It was laid back and comfortable and most of the time the war seemed pretty far away. Sometimes I even felt guilty, maybe a little cowardly, having it so easy compared to the poor suckers pounding ground in the infantry.

But the only problem with night shift, the thing that kept the war real for us, was the requirement that we pull guard duty on the perimeter. We rotated shifts with the grease
monkeys so everybody took a turn about once a week. It wasn't so bad. Three of us would spend the night in a bunker watching for activity in the wire that never came.

It wasn't like there was going to be any action – we were on the biggest base, and therefore the most armored and ready, in the I Corp and Charlie hadn't attempted an invasion since Tet, three years earlier. There really wasn't any point for the enemy to conduct a full-scale invasion because the whole world knew that eventually, soon, we would be leaving anyway. The Navy had already pulled out and the Army was in the process of turning the whole mess over to the locals as we prepared to cut and run.

Oh, we had to keep on our toes because every once in awhile we got harassed. A few rockets or mortars sometimes, just so we'd be reminded the little bastards were still around, a sapper in the wire now and again trying to blow up a chopper or a fuel dump or something like that, but it was pretty futile. The tarmac where the choppers were parked was almost out of range from all but the most serious of bombardments and the perimeter surrounding the base was a labyrinth of razor wire and land mines and tripwires and flares so it was almost impossible to sneak through.

So, six days a week we would go to work, work all night in relative comfort, spend a couple of hours winding down, and sleep most of the day. Get up and do it again. Day after day. It was boring most of the time and we pissed and moaned with the best of them, but every one of us counted ourselves lucky not to be humping a rucksack in the bush. Better to be bored than dead.

That Thursday started off just like all the others in the long string of crossing off days on the short-timer's calendar. We rolled out of bed, shoveled down our dinners of roast beef (it was roast beef for every meal, it's the only thing they knew how to cook or
some big ranching conglomeration had Westmoreland in their back pocket, but that’s a whole other story), and we straggled out to meet the truck.

There's a weird vibe in the air but nobody has put a name to it yet. Then, just as we're settling in for the ride, Mike turns to me, points down at his scuffed boots, and says, “Hey, I don't think the hootch maids came in today.”

The hootch maids are some local girls and old women we've hired to come in and do our household chores like sweeping the floor, making our beds, washing the laundry, and polishing our boots. They do it all quietly, while we are sleeping, like little elves that sneak in and clean around us and when we wake up all the tasks are finished for us. And it only costs us about five bucks a month each.

I always felt uncomfortable about the practice. It was the only time in my life I had a servant working for me and it seemed so cliché that the mighty armies of the invasion would hire the indigents to clean up after them. But it was what it was and I chipped in my five bucks and made a special attempt to be nice to the ladies whose country we were occupying.

Everybody in the truck hears him and dons his “Oh, shit!” mask. When the hootch maids don't come in it is a bad omen. Invariably it means that their brothers and fathers and uncles and sons are going up on the hillside to lob a few rockets and mortars at us. Not a good thing. The fact that our shop, a hundred feet from the tarmac, sat right in the firing line was a bit worrisome but, considering Charlie's efforts of late, not a likely scenario.

So we rattled on down the road, each lost in our own thoughts and worries, until we were half a mile or so away from the base and we heard the first “WHOOOMPH!” of a
mortar round exploding to our west. The truck came to a screeching halt and we all scrambled out just in time to see the dust plume about a quarter mile away before the second one exploded even closer and we all hit the dirt and started crawling frantically for cover.

Half the guys crawled under the truck and the rest of us wound up in a shallow drainage ditch that ran parallel to the road. The shells are dropping faster now, a bunch of them. It's like there's five or six mortar tubes up on the hill and they're getting the range of the airfield by walking them in. Fire one, adjust up, fire another, adjust up, until you're there, hitting the target. There's five or six of them, we're stuck out in the open right in their path, and those fuckers are going to walk them right through us.

So I'm face down in this fucking ditch with my nose in the putrid muck that dribbles through it and these fucking mortar rounds or rockets, or whatever the fuck they were, are popping off all around me. Boom! Boom! Boom! Close enough to spray gravel on me, to smell the cordite in the wafting smoke, to break my ear drums if I hadn't been covering them with my hands.

Then, after what seemed like an eternity, it was over. Done. For a few short seconds death rained from the sky, and then it just stopped.

Off in the distance I could hear the Red Alert siren blaring and Timberlake’s yelling into the radio and we're all climbing back on board the truck and it turns around and hauls ass back to our living area so we can collect our weapons and gear and head to the perimeter. When the Red Alert siren blares, the Army's version of “all hands on deck” is “every swinging dick to the line”.
So we get back to the AO and grab our flak jackets and steel pots and head over to the armory to stand in line to be issued our weapons. Yeah, go figure. We're in a fucking war zone and they lock up our weapons and only let them out on special occasions, like guard duty and invasions, and we gotta stand in line to get them, because if they just let us keep them ourselves we would, undoubtedly, wind up shooting each other or some asshole lifer, and therefore it does make some sense in an Army sort of way.

We're standing in line holding all our gear, shuffling slowly past the counter as the armory clerk passes out the rifles, grenade launchers, and machine guns one at a time. He asks your name, he checks his list, he tells the PFC to grab such and such, he checks to make sure the PFC grabbed the right weapon by checking its number against the list, then he marks it down in his log book. One by one by one, a slow, tedious process.

Meanwhile, the fucking siren is blaring even louder and I can't hear myself think, it's starting to get dark and any minute the troops are going to riot and storm the armory by force and take whatever fucking weapons and ammo we can get our hands on and get the fuck up to the line before the bastards breach the wire. We can worry about the fucking log book some other fucking time, if you get my drift?

Then here it comes, “WHOOOMPH!” “WHOOOMPH!” “WHOOOMPH!” Close by! Right in our compound! Wood splinters and gravel flying everywhere as the hootch two doors down from us gets blown to smithereens. Luckily everybody who lived there was either on the line or standing in line with us at the armory so nobody got hurt.

The 10 or 12 of us still loitering outside the armory scramble for the nearest bunker and hunker down. It's just a bunch of sandbags stacked up with a couple of pieces of
plywood overhead and some sandbags stacked on top, and we know it's not much protection because we built the damn thing.

For the next 20 minutes we stay packed in there like sardines, shoulder to shoulder, our arms wrapped around our knees trying to be as small as we can so we can all fit. Somebody shit his pants and, combined with the stink of fear and sweat, the place smelled like a latrine and the stench was overwhelming.

In all that time there nobody mentioned the elephant in the room – we had no weapons. If the mortar attack was a prelude to an all-out assault, we were dead men. Like fish in a barrel, one grenade could take us all out, one AK could mow us all down without changing magazines, one direct hit will shred us all into tiny pieces of bloody flesh and bone.

Mike leans over and says to me, “Wish we'd put an extra shovelful of sand in these bags.” I couldn't help but smile even though I’m so scared it's going to take a crowbar to pry my butt cheeks apart.

About that time, Sergeant Timberlake makes his way back from the line to see what happened to us. When we tell him, he's pissed, and marches us all into the armory. He grabs the clerk by the lapels and tells him, very calmly, that we need ex number of rifles, ex number of M60's, ex number of M79's, ex amount of ammo and grenades and claymore mines, NOW! Ten minutes later we're armed to the teeth and headed to the line. Every swinging dick.

By now it's pitch black dark. We're laid out in pre-dug foxholes in a line between the fortified guard bunkers. Two men to a hole. Because Me and Mike are technicians, we have old M-14 rifles from the Korean War so the new M-16 rifles can go to the grunts.
That's fine by me. I hate the M-16's. Made of plastic like the toy Mattel machine guns we had as kids, every one of them I ever shot jammed and I couldn't hit the broadside of a barn with it. My M-14 was sturdy wood and honed steel, like my Dad's hunting rifle, and shot true and straight.

These things and others I am thinking as we lay there in the dirt staring out into a black murkiness. I'm thinking about all those Audie Murphy and John Wayne movies I saw as a kid, and I know that any minute now a hoard of little yellow mongrels are going pop up right in my face, screaming their gibberish and charging the line with bayonets fixed. This is the fucking Alamo, baby! Fucking Little Big Horn, Pork Chop Hill, Guadalcanal, Waterloo! This is what they call the fucking Front Line!

The only question to be answered, for myself, when they come, is will I be shot in the front or the back? Will I fight with everything I have and die like a warrior or will I drop my weapon and beg for my life on my knees?

Sometime around midnight, just when our nerves are frayed and the exhaustion is setting in, something in the wire trips a flare a few klicks to our right and suddenly the perimeter is a free fire zone. Every swinging dick on the line is firing whatever weapon he has at the darkness out in front of us. Flares are popping off, tracers are spitting everywhere, grenades are exploding, it's a fucking wild display of awesome firepower.

The adrenaline is pumping, my heart is pounding, I'm a mad dog frothing at the mouth as I unload a whole magazine. Bam! Bam! Bam! I can see nothing but the shadows of shadows in the shifting gloom but I'm shooting at them. Bam! Bam! Bam!
I stop to change magazines and hear the “Cease Fire!” being called down the line. I call it out to the next foxhole. “Cease Fire!” A few random bursts and then it is quiet. Eerie quiet. The mosquitoes have quit buzzing, it’s that quiet.

Mike grabs my shoulder. “You okay, man?” he asks. I nod. We take deep breaths. I’m aching for a cigarette. I reach for my canteen and then I smell it. Fucking tear gas! As I found out later, the “Captain of the Guard” that night, some asshole shake-and-bake lieutenant with three weeks in-country, ordered one of the guard bunkers to fire a couple of tear gas grenades in the general direction of where the flare had gone off.

That’s all fine and dandy, even SOP, when you’re on guard duty because all the bunkers are equipped with gas masks, but none of the rest of us on the line had them. When the wind shifted and drove it right back into our faces, we were forced to abandon our positions and retreat to the barracks. A whole quarter mile of the line was left wide open while 40 or 50 of us flee the area in search of breathable air, hacking and coughing, our throats raw and our eyes burning.

Once again Sergeant Timberlake pulled us through it. Even though he had taken quite a bit of the gas himself and was pretty fucked up, he got us organized and triaged, and after an hour or so the guys who got the worst of it were hauled off to the first-aid station and the rest of us were stable enough to take our places back on the line.

Nothing else happened that night and Mike and I took turns sleeping, an hour on, an hour off, until dawn when the sun came up to reveal that the gook in the wire was just a goat that got lost and wandered into the free-fire zone. Goats are basically the stupidest animal on the planet and this one just casually strolled into a meat grinder that reduced his ass to sausage status.
After that things returned to normal. The next morning the hootch maids came back and went to work as if nothing had happened. We returned to eating roast beef at every meal and riding the truck to work every day, and we dutifully turned in our weapons so they could be locked up. It was as if nothing had happened and, on the surface, everything was just like it always was.

But a few things changed. The shake-and-bake lieutenant who triggered the tear gas incident got transferred to supply. Sergeant Timberlake got his hands slapped for scuffling with the armory clerk which led him to decide to take an early retirement and he was gone in a week. Some dirtbag lifer who rode our asses took his place.

Mike and I built a false wall behind our lockers and started secretly stashing weapons and supplies. When I left, six months later, we had collected, by trading on the black market or just plain thievery, a cache that included a sawed-off shotgun, an AK-47 with a 30-round banana clip, a grenade launcher, a couple of hand guns, a dozen or so various types of grenades, a half-dozen claymore mines, assorted knives and bayonets, two gas masks, a ton of ammo, a well-stocked first aid kit, enough C-rations to last us two weeks, and a crowbar for my butt cheeks.

We were determined that, when the sky is raining death and the bastards are coming through the wire, we would never, ever, stand in that fucking line again.