

# FISHING WITH HAND GRENADES

*Ari Pontz*



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The events recounted in this book are based on actual events. In most instances, names have been changed. Any similarity between fictional names and names of any person living or dead is entirely coincidental.

All letters and journal entries in this book are fictional. They have been composed by the author based on actual events.

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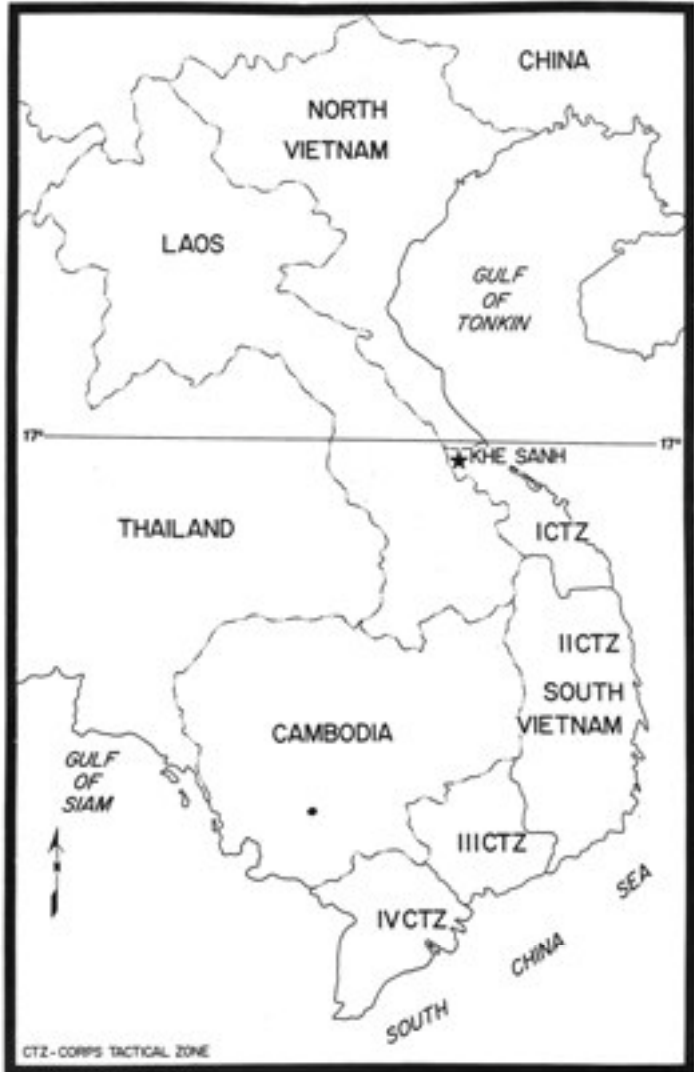
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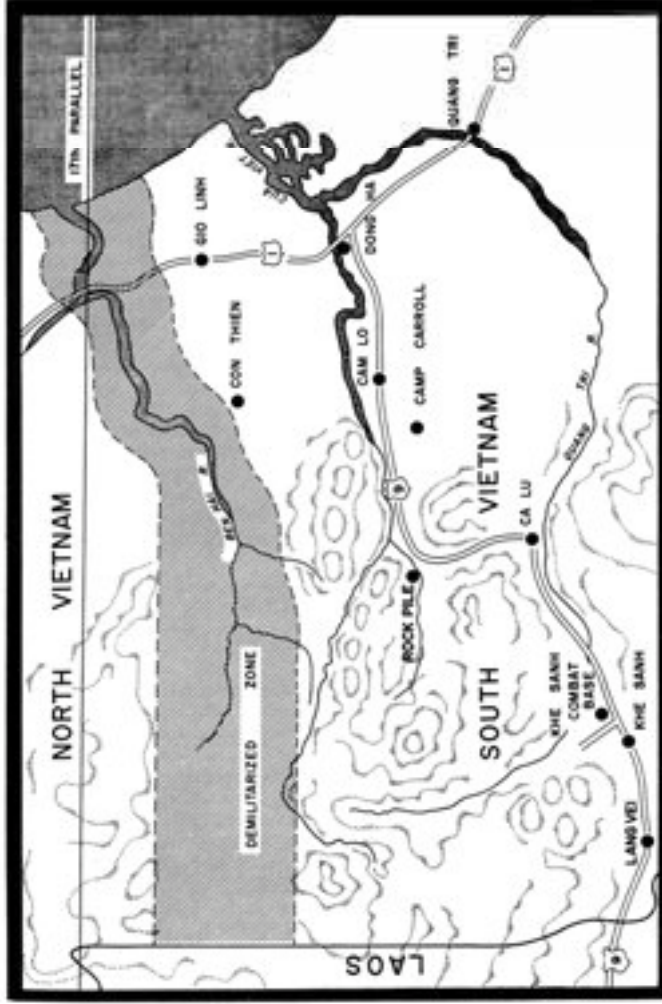
SOUTHEAST ASIA



MAP 1

I CORPS TACTICAL ZONE

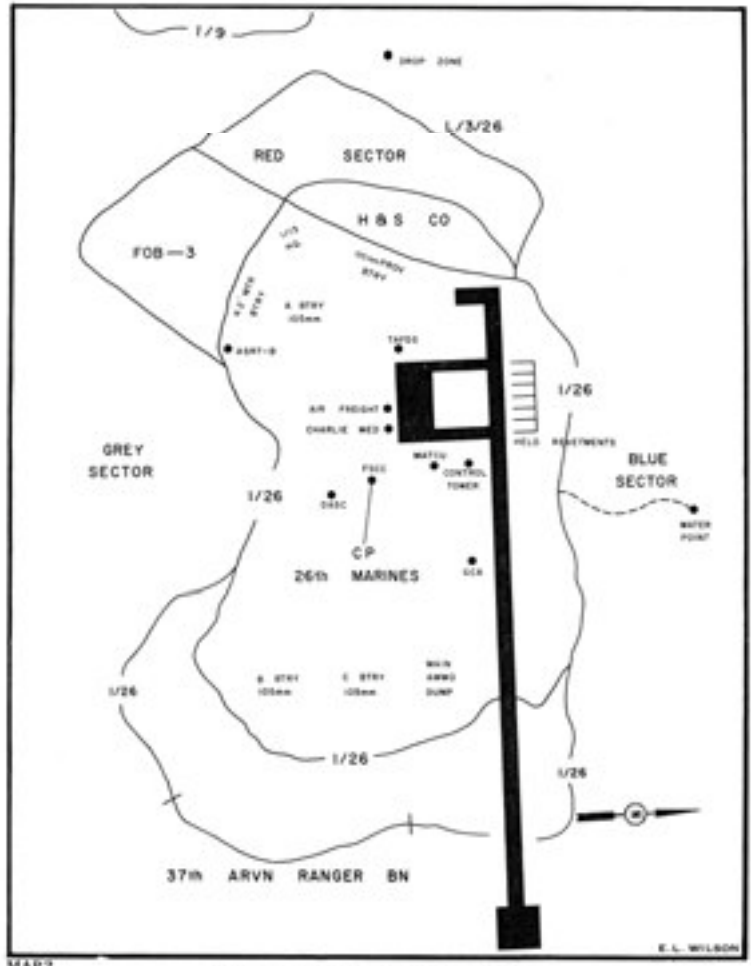
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E.L. WILSON

**NORTHERN QUANG TRI PROVINCE**

MAP 2



MAP 7

**KHE SANH COMBAT BASE**

## Chapter I

### -1986, Part I-

*“Be the first person on your block to  
have your boy come home in a box.”*

*-Country Joe McDonald*

**D**ear Mom,  
Hello from Vietnam. How is everyone doing back home? You're all well, I hope. Hey, Mom, thanks for the letter. It was really great to hear from you. If you could, next time please include some pictures of the family. I miss you guys and it would sure be nice to see your faces again, even if it's only in a photograph.

So how's the weather in Philly? Has it snowed yet? The weather over here is lousy. During the day, it's sweltering hot, to the point that our clothes are soaked with sweat even when we're just sitting around doing nothing. Then, at night, the temperature drops so low that we have to wear extra poncho liners to keep from freezing. It rains all the time, too. Yesterday was the first time I saw the sun this week. The rain isn't all bad, though. At least when it rains I get the chance to clean up, which is nice since I haven't actually showered in more than a month. I also use the rain as an opportunity to fill my canteen with some much-needed drinking water. Still, despite the benefits it brings, three straight days of steady, driving rain is enough to make me dream about a parched desert. By the time the rain finally stops coming down, our bodies are all wrinkled and shriveled up, like when you spend too much time in the bathtub, and our gear is rotten and mildewed and smells absolutely horrible.

As bad as the weather is, the bugs are even harder to take — especially the mosquitoes. They say the North Vietnamese don't have an air force, but you could have fooled me. These bugs eat us alive, and the little bit of repellent we have does nothing to help. In addition to the mosquitoes, it seems like there are thousands of biting flies persistently swarming everywhere, feasting on us like buzzards on road kill.

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Speaking of feasting, I think what I'm most looking forward to when I finally get stateside is a hot, home-cooked meal. Right about now, there isn't anything I wouldn't do for some of your ham and cabbage. All we ever have to eat are C-rations, and in comparison to them, most anything would taste better. Even then, we still don't get to eat three square meals a day. All our supplies, including the basic essentials like food and water, are very difficult to come by. Between the constant patrolling and the meager food rations, I think I've lost almost fifteen pounds since arriving in-country.

Promise me you won't get all worried, but I have to tell you about a close call that I had this past week. It happened while my squad was on a routine patrol in the jungle surrounding the base. Our unit was making really slow progress because the jungle was dense and we were hacking our way through the trees with machetes. After cutting a path for what must have been several hours, we came upon a clearing in the tree line. Just as soon as we moved forward into the clearing, some NVA popped up from out of nowhere and started shooting at us. Everyone in the unit dropped to the ground to take cover, and we all began returning fire. Next thing I knew, as I was lying there, trying to jam a fresh magazine into my M-16, a grenade came flying through the trees and landed only a few feet from me. I instinctively rolled away, turned my back to the grenade, and braced myself for the explosion. But thank God, the pin wasn't pulled. If the idiot who threw it had been smart enough to pull the pin out of the grenade, I probably wouldn't have gotten out of the way in time. I keep counting my blessings that I wasn't hurt. What sucks is that not everyone was so lucky. When the shooting started, our point man Billy took several rounds in the chest and died before we could get him a bird.

No matter how hard we try to defeat the enemy, I feel like the situation is getting worse around here, not better. It seems as though every day, somebody else on the base is killed or injured. Besides Billy, my friend Tommy was killed two days ago, shot dead by a sniper. Just this morning, some kid who hadn't been in-country more than a week, and who didn't look a day over eighteen, stepped on a land mine and blew off his leg. He was so new that I never even learned his name. The good news is that he will live and get the hell out of here, but he will spend the rest of his life as a cripple.

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Even those of us who have somehow avoided being killed or injured have not escaped the brutality of this war. We're all physically and mentally shaken from what we have been through. Personally, I don't think I've had more than a few hours of sleep at a time in months. We live like rats burrowed in the dirt, and we reek of urine, blood, and gunpowder. We are covered in cuts and bruises, and our bodies continually ache. There is always a layer of dirt coating our bodies. We all smoke way too many cigarettes. Blisters have almost destroyed our feet, and everyone suffers from the obligatory cases of diarrhea and jock itch. Otherwise, we're fine.

One way I try to get through all this is by making sure to say a prayer every night for my buddies and me. I find it ironic, though, that I'm praying to a God in whom I have very little faith anymore. It is hard to have faith in God after witnessing the ugliness I have seen here. Recently, to help pass the time, I found myself doing a lot of soul searching. What I am coming to realize is that war is wrong. I know now that there is no point to it, to all the senseless death and destruction. Still, I keep on fighting because, despite my newfound beliefs, I also recognize that this war is not going to end just because that's what I want. And no matter what, above everything else, I must survive.

Still, Mom, to be truthful, I don't know how much more of this place I can handle. Sometimes I just sit and shake uncontrollably, my hands trembling and my ears ringing from the constant gunfire. I try to hold myself together, to not crack under the pressure. I even cry to myself sometimes, although I don't dare let anyone else know about that. Marines aren't supposed to cry. Marines are supposed to be strong. I'm trying hard to be strong, I swear, but it's just so damn difficult.

Sometimes I imagine us acting like scared children hiding in a closet from a thunderstorm. All the while, though, I feel like we're becoming hardened and emotionless, ready to walk right into the eye of the storm without even flinching. The craziest thing about it is that if I didn't know better, I'd think these reactions were those of an old man who had suffered a lifetime of tragedy and hardship. I mean, can you believe I'm expressing myself like this and am only eighteen years old? Just saying it, "eighteen years old," sounds so young. An eighteen-year-old shouldn't have to witness all the dreadful things I have seen over here. For that matter, no one should, regardless of his or her age. What I'm living through is something I wouldn't wish upon anyone.

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However, the worst part of everything that I am experiencing is what happens when I close my eyes to try to get a few precious hours of sleep. When I am finally asleep, I dream terrifying dreams filled with ghosts. I see the ghosts of my friends—eighteen and nineteen-year-old kids who died way too young. I see the ghosts of civilians caught in the crossfire. I see the ghost of a North Vietnamese soldier whose brains I watched get driven through the back of his head by machine gun fire. But the most frightening ghost I see, the one I am absolutely petrified of, is that of the grim reaper. When I dream, I catch a glimpse of his deep, piercing smile and pearly white eyes staring out at me from underneath his black hood. I imagine him trying to reach out to me, mocking me, trying to take my life. Fortunately, in my dreams I'm able to find the power to fight back. But when I awake in a cold sweat, it becomes time for me to find the strength to fight him off for real.

Mom, I promise you that I won't let him get me. I promise that I'm not coming home to you in a box. I won't let them give you a flag. I want to survive. I want to see you again. I want to make it home from this godforsaken war, a war that I now know I never should have joined. It is just one of the many difficult lessons that this war has helped me understand. Too bad they are lessons I was unable to learn in some other, less painful way. However, of all the lessons this war has taught me, I think the most important is that . . .

*. . . Life is a flickering flame that can, at anytime, be extinguished by the gentle, blowing breath of fate.*

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Dan's left hand tightened around the neck of the nearly empty bottle of beer now propped upon his left leg. On the floor, in front of the living room couch on which he now sat, were nearly another dozen freshly emptied bottles. The brown paper bag in which the beer had been wrapped, and that earlier had appeared so crisp and new, lay crumpled at his feet. On a small table in front of him was an almost empty pack of cigarettes and an overflowing ashtray. In his lap sat a jet-black telephone, his right hand cradling the receiver. Between the middle and index fingers of the same hand, a cigarette burned. Smoke from the cigarette drifted gently into the air. Staring deep into the dark black plastic surface of the phone, Dan was reminded of the many

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nights he spent in Vietnam in the pitch dark while assigned to a listening post. The thought made him shudder.

As Dan continued staring through the blackness of the phone, a glint of light reflected off the surface. The image thrown off by the light triggered the memory of a photograph he had once seen—that of a Buddhist monk who had committed an act of self-immolation on a Saigon street more than 20 years earlier. Now it was Dan’s skin that felt like it might be on fire. He recalled that his own personal “gas can,” a steel remnant from his days in-country, had been stored for years deep in the bowels of his basement. It was stowed away in a metal lockbox that sat in a drawer of an antique oak bureau, along with some tattered photographs from the war and an old police uniform. Chills ran up his spine at the thought.

As he took another drink from the bottle, his mind continued to race. His attention was focused deep inside his mind, on personally hurtful thoughts. There, in the inner depths of his psyche, a memory from the war triggered what had become a recurring mental picture of his own death. The images were crystal clear. Dan assumed that only events similar to those he had experienced during the years of his life following enlistment in the Marines were powerful enough to unlock this innermost part of the human brain. The backdrop for these images was a dark jungle of which Dan desired no part. He shuddered again, not wanting to consider the unthinkable possibilities.

The year was 1986. For the past eighteen years, Dan had lived with the memories of Vietnam. Each day, whether awake or asleep, he replayed in his head the horrors and carnage of the war. He lived with the gruesome memories of the untold number of corpses he had seen, both of friends and of enemies. He wrestled with the memory of seeing one of the best friends he ever knew lying dead, the top of his head missing. He often recalled that he had witnessed one of the most stunning places he ever laid eyes upon being ravaged and destroyed by bullets, rockets, bombs, fires, and Agent Orange. He had struggled to forget about the painful and horrendous events, the lives he may have taken, and those he had seen taken by others.

Dan tried to start over after returning home from the war in 1968. He had married in 1973, but the marriage ended less than two years later, solely because of his own mistakes. Caitlin had been a wonderful wife, and he had screwed up terribly. After years of working dead-end jobs or being unemployed, he finally found meaningful, steady work in

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1976 as a police officer with the City of Philadelphia. In 1979, he married his second wife, Gloria. Michael was born almost two years later, and Robert arrived three years after that. On the surface, things were going relatively smoothly, but under the surface, life was in turmoil. Dan was always depressed, and he turned to alcohol for relief from reality. The excessive drinking only pushed him further into his depressed shell.

Consumed with what the doctors called “survivor’s guilt,” his thoughts reverted continually to friends he had loved and lost. He dwelled on the memories of friends who had died, and contemplated what he could have done differently to help save their lives. Dan wanted to know, more than anything else, why so many of his friends died and he had not. Why hadn’t it been his blood that had stained red the stunningly green Vietnam landscape?

On top of the depression and guilt, there was the anger he felt. Mad at the world about the war and the needless killing that had occurred, the harsh realities of life had become too much for him to deal with successfully. With no suitable outlet for his emotions, he took out his anger and sporadic rage on others. There were repeated arguments and confrontations with both friends and strangers alike, and he exhibited a total lack of patience in dealing with people. Dan didn’t trust anyone, and his paranoia was also marked by a general suspiciousness that prompted him to repeatedly glance over his shoulder to see who might be watching. Dan didn’t show much concern for his own welfare or that of anyone else. He drove his car like a madman, taking unnecessary chances and risks, and otherwise lived life with reckless abandon. Not surprisingly, his behavior negatively affected his relationship with Gloria and their children. As the severe realities he faced exceeded what Dan was capable of handling, he turned more and more to alcohol. His life became a vicious cycle.

Unfortunately, no one cared about his problems. Nobody gave a damn about the Vietnam veterans. The American government did not care. The American public did not care. Even Dan’s own friends and family seemed apathetic. No one cared that his often near-lunatic behavior had caused his first marriage to disintegrate and that he had given up on trying to make it work and had walked out on his wife, or that his sister, his own flesh and blood, had stopped talking to him because he had fought in the war. Nobody cared about the scars, both

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physical and emotional, that still lingered. Nobody wanted to hear about how, after years of trying to work things out, his second wife, Gloria, had given up the struggle and moved away with their two children.

Still seated on the living room couch, deep in his mind Dan visualized the fiery orange and red explosion of a muzzle flash, and then everything went dark. Dan's head jerked up and backward, his eyes opening wide. Sweat trickled off his forehead. He quickly put the bottle of beer to his lips and reached for another cigarette, trying desperately to control his emotions. He remained glued to the couch, all too aware that the stairwell to the basement, at the foot of which was the oak bureau, was but a short walk to the other side of the house. Dan's tired hands gripped the phone more tightly. Looking down at the smooth, dark plastic receiver, he realized his options were limited, and that the only way out for him tonight was to use the phone. Dan took a deep breath and closed his eyes, and as he did, all his memories drifted through his mind like a soft, cool fall breeze.

