

CHAPTER TWO

The summer of 1963 was exceptionally hot and humid. As the red August sun rose above the mountains to the east, the small village of Chicol slowly came to life. Chicol was situated just outside the main gate of the United States Air Force Base at Osan, South Korea. The stagnant hot air was permeated with a pungent odor of rotted cabbage. Rundown shops lined the dirt street. The shanties were built mostly out of plywood or rusted corrugated steel. Sheets of cardboard held the sides of the poorly constructed buildings together. Rain or shine, local villagers would stop to do business with storeowners and street vendors. The merchants would often stand outside their shops, waiting to hawk their goods to the United States Airmen who entered the peaceful village. It was a futile gesture most of the time. The Airmen only came to Chicol Village for booze and female companionship. It was a conflict of two civilizations but mostly an intrusion into a way of life of a desperate South Korean people. It was not unusual to see small orphan children begging in the street. The survival of these weak and defenseless children often depended on their trickery or sheer persistence. Girls as young as twelve would offer sexual favors to U.S. Airmen but were “mostly” ignored. There were plenty of opportunities in the village to engage prostitutes and Bar Girls for such activity.

A boy and girl, no older than six, stood outside Don Han’s Pawn Shop waiting to trap unsuspecting U.S. servicemen entering the village. Their intention was to bamboozle the GIs out of a few Korean won or Military Pay Certificates. (*This was a form of currency used to pay U.S. Military personnel*). The two children were dressed like ragamuffins. Their pathetic, dirty faces, were hard to ignore. They knew how to play the game and stopped at nothing to achieve their

objective. Three U. S. Air Force enlisted men wearing starched summer khakis passed by the two children but ignored them. The little girl burst into artificial tears, and the little boy took her in his arms and pretended to console her. The three Airmen laughed—having seen this charade many times in the past. An old South Korean woman named, Crazy Mary, pestered the three. She was clad in raggedy and soiled clothes. Crazy Mary was legendary in the village of Chicol. The hunched-over woman had a dirty face etched with deep wrinkles. Many people in the village believed her to have magical powers; a Soothsayer of sorts. The three Airmen pushed past the annoying woman. One of them shouted, “Crazy Mary!” The old woman swung her crooked walking stick in their direction. The three young Airmen cackled and continued down the dusty, dirt street.

Two South Korean prostitutes jumped out of the shadows of Oh’s Tailor Shop. They called out to the three GIs. The three Airmen stopped and turned. One of the prostitutes inched her skirt up slowly to her waist. The dark triangle between her legs stood out for all to see. She called out in a provocative voice, “Hey, GI, you want to fuck-ee me?” One of the Airmen made a move towards her, but his two buddies grabbed him—almost knocking his blue garrison cap off his head. They dragged the rambunctious Airman away. As the three GIs headed for the main gate of Osan Air Force Base, grey clouds darkened the day. Lightning and claps of thunder were followed by a heavy down pour of morning showers. The three Airmen ran towards the white wooden guard shack that controlled access onto and off the base. An arched sign affixed to the top of the white shed spelled out in bold letters, “Welcome to Osan Air Force Base.” After 7:00 a.m. it was permitted for Airmen to leave and enter the base without a great deal of scrutiny.

Two spit and polish Air Policemen stood watch at the gate. They were dressed in summer khaki uniforms and wore white covers over their blue service hats. White shoelaces crisscrossed

their shiny black jump boots. The two cops were armed with .38 caliber service revolvers. A blue Korean Shibal taxi entered the main gate carrying two U.S. Airmen. (*Korean taxis were not built very well, but they served their purpose. The enclosed Jeep vehicles were mostly put together from scraps of sheet metal and leftover U.S. Army parts*). The rickety taxi ran through a puddle and splattered the three Airmen who were also entering the gate. The three Airmen hollered and cursed at the Korean taxi driver.

The showers cleansed the foul air, and a sweet smell lingered for a short while. Rain was the only true sanitizer to effectively combat the offensive odors that came with the hot season of summer. There were several sources associated to the unpleasant stench. Human waste and urine flowed constantly through the open sewers known as benjo, or ditches, and it was not an uncommon sight to see children or adults squat in the road when nature called. The carcasses of dogs and cats often littered the streets. The stink of rotted cabbage known as *Kimchi*, a favorite food of the Korean population, assaulted the human nostrils with a vengeance.

At Osan Air Force Base, there was a stretch of property known as C Diamond where eleven fighter jets were housed in prefabricated steel hangars. Six hangars stood on the right side of C Diamond, numbered one through six. Five hangars on the left were numbered seven through eleven. The two rows of hangars were positioned in a zigzag pattern. The front doors of the hangars remained open most of the time to expedite a quick taxiing of the aircraft in the event of any emergency. The F105s were on perpetual alert and guarded twenty-four hours a day by the Security Police, a spin-off of the Air Police. The job was mundane and unrewarding. The Security Police often felt ill-treated. They were constantly exposed to the elements, the scorching heat of July and August; the snow and below freezing temperature of January and February. And there was the isolation and the solitude of “humping a post.” This was the practice of walking up

and down in front of a hangar for eight hours, sans relief. There were also several observation posts strategically located on top of the hill that surrounded the air base. These were nothing more than old bunkers, or artillery gun emplacements sites, left over from the war. The conditions there were just as dreadful for the Security Police. The inside posts included the gate houses on the Flight Line ... if you were lucky enough to catch the assignment. And there was the Access Control Desk to the Air Crew Operation Center but that was usually reserved for Airman First Class.

A two-and-a-half-ton military truck sped towards C Diamond. The heavy rubber tires splashed through puddle after puddle. The roof on the rear of the truck was covered with a heavy canvas, but the sides of the truck were open. A group of eleven Security Police officers rode in the back of the truck. They wore green fatigues and Ridgeway hats. Each man from 'A' Flight was protected by a rain poncho and carried an M1 carbine. The ride was bumpy and the Airmen bounced around like so much Jell-O ... always being careful not to put a finger anywhere near the trigger guard of their carbine. A rumor had propagated for years that once upon a time ago, during a routine post relief, a young Airman accidentally discharged his carbine while riding on the back of a truck. The live round in the chamber was never explained. The bullet traveled straight up to the sky and struck a magpie in flight. The bird dropped to earth like a rock. Fact or fiction? No one really knew.

The truck stopped at Hangar Number One and a young Airman Second Class jumped off. The light-haired Shane Brennan expanded the sling on his M1 carbine and slipped the strap over his shoulder. He then relieved his counterpart on post. The relieved sentry carefully released the

ammo clip from his carbine and climbed aboard the truck. The truck continued on to each hangar to perform a post relief. After the last man was relieved off the midnight shift, the truck drove off. Each newly-assigned sentry trudged back and forth in front of his hangar.

As the sun slowly broke through the gray clouds, twenty-year-old Shane Brennan slipped out of his rain poncho and tossed it to the side. Then he removed a small red transistor radio from his pocket and clicked it on. Shane smiled at the familiar 1960s song that echoed through the air. He strolled up and down the front of the hangar. Shane was a New York boy from Queens. He was not a disciplined Airman, and most of the time he did his best to resist the mundane rules of the Air Force. He had spent the first three years in the Air Force as a non-conformist. Shane was certain his assignment to Korea was in retaliation for his rebellious behavior. He didn't care much now. This thirteen-month tour would complete his four-year obligation to Uncle Sam. Shane enlisted in the Air Force when he was seventeen. It had been a rocky road for him, and he had many missteps along the way. Korea would be an education all in itself. Little did he know the experience would change his life, forever.

A blue Ford pick-up truck pulled alongside Shane. The doors of the truck were marked in white letters, "6314 Air Police." A sign framed in aluminum piping was affixed to the bed of the truck, and it was marked "SECURITY." The driver was barrel-chested Louisiana native, Staff Sergeant Baylis Quint. His brown pencil thin mustache highlighted his sinister smirk. Quint slid across the bench seat and hollered out through the open passenger window, "What the hell you think you're doing, boy?"

Shane swaggered to the truck with the radio still blasting. He already knew Quint had an inordinate dislike for Northerners.

Sergeant Quint rebuked Shane in his strong southern accent, “Turn that damn thing off!”

Shane turned off the radio and slipped it into his pocket. “What’s the problem, Sarge?”

Shane’s annoying simper seemed to provoke the thirty-six-year-old sergeant even more.

“You’re the problem, Brennan. You’ve been here two weeks, and you ain’t learned nothing yet.”

“Lighten up, Sarge. It’s just a stupid radio. No big deal.”

“Lose that radio, boy,” said Quint. “Or I’ll lose it for you, ‘hear?”

Shane shook his head in disbelief. The broad-shouldered Quint slipped over to the driver’s side and Shane watched as the tires spun, and the truck sped off. “Asshole,” grumbled Shane.

Bronx-born Manny Veneto, stood across from Shane at Hangar Seven. Manny’s South Bronx accent was unmistakable. He was half Puerto Rican on his mother’s side, but got his temper from his Italian father. Manny’s brown hair was curly, and his skin was a lighter shade than his mother or his father. His piercing green eyes could be intimidating at times, but the Korean ladies were fascinated by them. Airman Third Class Manny Veneto despised the rules and regulations that were a constant in the Air Force. He and Shane had a lot in common. The instant Shane was assigned to ‘A’ Flight, they became buddies.

“What’s his problem, man?” asked Manny.

“Think I’m his problem,” said Shane.

Manny shook his head and snickered. The eighteen-year-old shouted across to Shane, “Quint’s a redneck. He doesn’t like anybody north of Louisiana.”

Shane grinned at Manny. He understood the implication.

“Hey, you think about what I said?” asked Manny.

“You mean ‘bout going to the village tonight?”

“Yeah,” said Manny.

“I don’t know, Manny.” Shane was hesitant. He was smart enough to know a trip to the village could mean trouble.

Manny traipsed out to the middle of the road and slipped his carbine off his right shoulder and onto his left shoulder. “What’s to know? We grab a couple of beers at the club, and then we cut a *chogie* to the village. It’s time you got a taste of some local culture, my man.”

“Let me think about it, okay?” said Shane.

Manny adjusted the carbine on his shoulder. “Well, don’t think too hard.” Manny returned to walking his post.

Shane turned on his radio and quickly found an upbeat 1960s tune. Shane returned to the monotonous job of sentry duty. He considered Manny’s invitation to experience the village for the first time. Shane was pleased that in his short time at Osan he had managed to toe the line and stay out of trouble. Chicol Village could change all that.