



Duster Dreams

by Richard Shand

Years after I returned from Vietnam, I continued to dream that the war was not over and I had to go back for another tour of duty. This is one of those dreams with its own peculiar distortion of reality.

The war had never ended. The powerful GM Cadillac engine ground away beneath me, sending vibrations through the steel hull and into my body. Clouds of dust billowed behind. More than twenty years had passed since I had left Vietnam, yet here I was back again. The tracks churned as the vehicle rolled past scrub jungle and rubber trees. The NVA were still out there and the country was in chaos. Frantic refugees streamed into an airport as mortar and rocket rounds kicked up plumes of smoke around the perimeter. I could hear the muffled explosions and cries in the distance. Many were desperate beyond reason. For them it was the end of the world.

The vehicle rumbled on and the landscape grew more barren and sparse. The sky, ever a twilight color, had grown darker now. We arrived at a firebase and I found myself inside a sandbagged bunker chatting with the new guys crowded around me. I was the old vet, leathery with experience and I felt out of place amidst these youngsters, so green and naive. I told them about the time the VC had come in waves at night through the concertina wire and how I had fired at them point blank with the forty millimeter guns. **BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!** Flares floated down like incandescent jellyfish and running figures could be seen, caught in the flashes of the explosions. Then the vehicle was hit by an RPG and I had been knocked off. I didn't remember the concussion. In fact I wasn't even certain whether this really happened or not. I did remember, however, that my [escape plan](#) had been rehearsed. I had crawled under the vehicle to hide, hoping that I would not be incinerated when the gasoline tanks blew up and ignited the ammunition. As I lay there on my belly, I watched 50 caliber tracers kick wildly off the ground in front of me and arc into the blackness beyond as the last defenders were overcome.

But the new guys had not been listening. They weren't interested in what I had to say. Instead, they joked and laughed amongst themselves to hide their nervousness. I walked outside and there was my family waiting for me by the berm, smiling and waving. I felt proud that my parents and wife were here and could see what a seasoned professional I was. I picked up my infant son and lifted me into the turret.

"Here are the guns", I said. "This is my job." I squeezed into the gunner's seat and, holding my son on my knee, I let me peer through the concentric ring sights. For a moment a feeling of peace pervaded me, then the scene faded to darkness and I remembered no more.