

CHAPTER 1

The two words swept through the mess hall like a northeastern wind blowing across Southeast Asia:
"They're here!"

It was mid-afternoon, July 1, 1969, in Cu Chi, Vietnam, and the sun was unrelenting. The swirl of dust from the Chinook helicopter created a surreal red and brown mist that coated sweating bodies like a new skin.

As Anthony Andrews gathered with the hushed crowd to watch seven weary-looking soldiers disembark and collect their gear, his eyes narrowed. All seven were black.

But what Anthony noticed more than their color, the torn and ripped uniforms, or the grime covering every inch of their bodies was their eyes: fluttering, darting, haunted. Most of the men looked thin and undernourished. One walked with a limp, one was carried in a poncho, and another, who helped the soldier in the poncho, cursed under his breath.

Anthony pulled out his Yashica camera and took pictures.

"Where are they coming from?" he asked a private first class who stood next to him, mesmerized, his hands poised as if to clap and his eyes tearing.

"Somewhere around War Zone C."

Anthony, unsure where War Zone C was, looked at the soldier whose eyes remained fixated on the men. "What happened there?"

The private never took his eyes off the men as he replied in the softest of voices, "From what I hear, hell happened there."

A military police jeep came to carry the two wounded soldiers. The others, with no one giving a command, gathered themselves, straightened, moved their obviously bone-tired, filthy bodies into formation, and began to march into camp when three more jeeps with MPs came and picked them up, too.

"The 25th Infantry Division in Cu Chi provides the reactionary units combating the Viet Cong insurgency," Anthony had read in a briefing manual when he first arrived.

Those men must have returned from one of those missions, Anthony thought as he turned to locate Major Leonard Rainey Bertram, headquarter battalion's executive officer. As a black reporter assigned to write about the black soldier in Vietnam, he was sure there had to be a story behind the return of those seven men. It was certainly the type the *Washington Post* was looking for, and without a doubt, something Anthony wanted to be the first to tell.

Major Bertram, Anthony's liaison, was standing beside his desk when Anthony found him. Anthony found it odd that in the few days he'd been in Cu Chi, he'd never seen Bertram sit at the desk.

Cu Chi was Bertram's second tour, having commanded a rifle company in the 25th in 1966. At six feet, two inches, the major was a few inches taller than Anthony. With a square jaw that appeared to be permanently clenched, he projected a commanding presence. But as Anthony approached, he watched Bertram's eyes widen as he ducked at the sound of a mortar falling some half-mile away before regaining his composure to greet Anthony.

Anthony ignored Bertram's reaction and his reddened face as he shook the major's hand. "Major. The men who just arrived? Who are they? Where did they come from?"

Bertram glanced down then beyond Anthony. "I'm not sure. We just received word of their return. I'll let you know more when I find out."

"I'd appreciate it, because I'd like to interview them."

Bertram nodded as if he had anticipated the request. "I do know they will have to be debriefed before they can talk."

"How long will that take?" Anthony asked.

Bertram shrugged. "Who knows? Could be days, could be weeks."

Anthony looked at the major a few seconds, head tilted to the side. "Really, Major? Is that standard procedure?" Anthony asked, then hesitated. Although this was the first time he'd been denied immediate access to any soldier, he didn't want to

anger his primary source after only a few days in country. Yet, he had a job to do.

"It is in this case." The major pulled papers from a pile on his desk and bent over to sign them.

Anthony straightened up. "Okay." He pulled out a pad, his pen poised to write. "Can I at least get their names?"

"Not yet."

Anthony looked up quizzically, then turned to leave.

"Major?" Anthony said as he stopped at the Quonset hut door.

"Yes?"

"The sooner the better for me, okay?"

Bertram nodded.

Anthony wondered if the reason the major never looked him in the eye during their conversation was because of Bertram's embarrassment from his reaction to the mortar round—or because he knew more than he was telling.

It became apparent after a week had passed, it was the latter. Anthony never got the interview, nor did any of the other correspondents, including the Army's *Stars and Stripes* reporter. And he still had no names.

Upset and curious at being closed out, Anthony tried to piece the men's story together from whispers and mutters in the mess hall and barracks.

"Only ones left..."

"Two weeks in the field..."

"Ambush..."

"Lost..."

"Reported MIA..."

"Reported KIA..."

But no one would talk to him directly.

"Sorry, Mr. Andrews—orders."

"It's classified, Mr. Andrews."

"Word from the top," one sergeant related in a whisper, "is anyone caught giving out information on those men will face an immediate court martial."

"Can they do that?" Anthony asked.

The sergeant shrugged. "Who wants to be the first to find out?"