

Trail of Bodies

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Prosecuted Innocence

Prologue

Bullets packed with the right combination of magnesium perchlorate and strontium salts create bright trails when fired—tracer rounds.

Tracer rounds whined overhead like an angry swarm of fireflies searching for an easy, or careless, mark. The squad's unlucky number, thirteen, came about as a result of United States Marine Corps, private first class Dalton Brook's careless head peek over the embankment of the washed-out rut they were hunkered down in. A sniper's bright yellow firefly entered Brook's right eye, and, in a bright red mist, evacuated most of his brain matter through a softball-size hole at the back of his head.

Under fire, Captain Robert Benjamin Daniels was as cool as a penguin on an ice flow, and about as vicious as a mother polar bear protecting her cubs. Nearing the end of his third tour of duty in the jungles of Vietnam, Captain Daniels, for the past several weeks, had been giving serious thought to volunteering for a fourth stint. While he loved his job, and his job was to kill as many of the enemy as possible, it was his love of being in charge that explained why as a commissioned officer he'd chosen to accompany the recon-squad into the jungle for the scouting mission.

As the battle intensified, Daniels sat calmly with his back pressed against the eroded embankment of tangled roots and mud, casually cleaning "gook dirt" from beneath his fingernails with a sharpened twig. He extended his hands out at eye level and inspected his manicure. Satisfied, he snatched the sawed-off Ithaca model 37 Featherweight 12 gauge shotgun (its seven shot magazine loaded with 00 buckshot) from his lap, and shouted overtop the small arms fire raining down on them from the front flank.

"Bricker!"

It had not been Corporal Michael Dakota Bricker's intent to spend his nineteenth birthday pinned down in a muddy ditch halfway around the world, fighting an enemy he could not see. Hunkered down below the line of fire, and only because he couldn't reach the military-issued shovel stuffed into his backpack to dig any deeper, he crawled over the legs of his fellow soldiers toward Captain Daniels.

"Sir?"

"Crawl your Limey-ass over here!" Daniels yelled above the racket of chattering AK-47s and Chicom machine gun fire.

The Bricker children, Dakota, and sisters Virginia "Ginny" and Maryland "Mary" had each been named after one of the states in the Union. It was their father's subtle reminder that while they had all born abroad, they were still citizens of the United States of America, and according to Colonel Thaxton Bricker, that knowledge was imperative.

Before retiring, Colonel Bricker spent the better part of his United States Air Force career traveling the globe with wife "Trish", who peddled her secretarial wares to the various embassies where they were stationed. The Colonel ran his household with the same military precision as the bases he oversaw. The Bricker children had learned early on not to complain about their globetrotting lifestyle. When the Colonel gave the order that they were "bugging out", the family packed up their essentials, said goodbye to temporary friends, and then moved on with their lives. By the time Dakota was eight years old he, and his siblings, had lived on every continent with the exception of Australia.

After Trish's untimely death in Southeast Asia (the result of a snakebite) Colonel Bricker settled in as commander of the US Air Force base in Lakenheath, England, where Dakota spent his formative years, and developed his telltale English brogue. He graduated from the base high school and, much to the Colonel's chagrin, applied to culinary arts school rather than follow in his father's substantial footsteps. While at Corus Hotels Institute at Bracknell, Dakota met Emaline "Emy" McCartney, and promptly fell head over heels in love. Both graduated with honors before making a hasty departure to the United States. Dakota's plan was to take the newly budding Las Vegas Strip by storm, billing himself as a European trained Master Chef while Emy rode on his coattails as Director of Housekeeping; his plan was quickly derailed by a quirky U.S. law that required all males over the age of eighteen to register for the draft. After the "Uncle Sam wants you!" Selective Service lottery was drawn, Bricker found himself in second position. At the time he'd given serious consideration to an immediate departure for Heathrow

Airport, but decided that if his father found out he was a draft dodger, the Colonel would no doubt load him onto a military transport and personally escort him back to the good old U.S. of A. Dakota Bricker accomplished two things during his brief stay in Las Vegas: he changed Emy's last name to Bricker, and he enlisted in the United States Marine Corps' food service, not jungle patrol.

Bricker kept his head below the line of fire as he slithered through mud and roots to where Captain Daniels sat, seemingly oblivious to the increasing swarm of rounds chopping a hole in the vegetation on their rear flank. He scooted next to the captain, his British accent barely audible over the gunfire, and said, "Sir, you called for me?"

Captain Daniels reached into the shirt pocket of his battle dress uniform and pulled out a pair of foam earplugs, handed them to Bricker, and shouted, "Stick these in your ears, boy. It's about to get real noisy around here. I called in for a little air support."

Bricker had barely worked the soft earplugs into place when a Cobra gunship screamed up from the misty valley below, its pulsating blades thumping a hurricane downdraft and bending tree branches into painful arches. The Air Calvary paused overhead for a moment, verified the "friendly's position", and then unleashed their payload; four Sidewinder rockets and three two-minute bursts from twin .50 caliber machine guns mounted on each side of the hull. Hot shell casings rained down on the Marines as the munitions found their mark a half-click ahead. The thick jungle erupted into blinding flashes of orange-red flame, followed by clouds of billowing black smoke that swirled through the air in the helicopter's downdraft. A millisecond later the ground shook with seismic proportion. The co-stick flashed a thumbs-up to the grunts below and then banked the helicopter left, disappearing back down into the steamy valley.

Several thousand pounds of ordinance was all took to end the torment of the enemy's gunfire. Those that had not been blown to bits by the rockets red glare, or shredded into unrecognizable corpses by the heavy machine gun fire, retreated into the labyrinth of subterranean tunnels and caves that the Viet Cong used to conceal their movements. Except for a roaring brushfire the jungle was mortuary quiet.

Captain Daniels climbed to his feet, brushed the dirt from his clothes, and said, "Let's move out!"

Bricker chanced a cautious forward peek. "Sir? Aren't we going to check for wounded?"

Daniels stopped dead in his tracks, his head snapping around to face his squad, most of them still huddled below the line of fire.

"Tell you what, Brick, old Chap," Daniels drawled with a mocking accent. "Why don't you crawl your Limey-ass up the hill and explain to the poor wounded slope lying on an armed grenade that you're there to help him. As for me," Daniels thumbed over his shoulder, "I'm headed for EVAC two clicks the other direction." Daniels ran piercing, unforgiving eyes over the squad, spat on the ground, worked the saliva into the dirt with his boot heel, and said, "That's all I plan leaving of me in this Godforsaken shithole." He slung the shotgun over his shoulder, pushed through his troops, and stopped, momentarily, to look at the only casualty of the mission thus far.

Twenty-four uninterrupted months in Viet Nam and Daniels had witnessed more close up death than most people would see if they lived four lifetimes. A *gallows' humor* grin spread across his face as he looked over his shoulder with a smirk. "Would one of you ladies be kind enough to pick up Brookie? I'm thinking he's a little bit lighter now."

After his honorable discharge, Bricker returned to Las Vegas where he found Emy working in housekeeping, not as Director, but as a maid at the Sand's Casino. He also quickly learned, as did most returning Nam vets, that being a veteran and twenty cents *might* get him a cup of coffee.

Bricker stood behind a Blackjack table dressed in a starched white shirt, black vest and bowtie, while lethargically dealing cards to alcohol-plied guests who spent more money than they could afford to loose trying to beat the odds stacked heavily in the casino's favor. He barely noticed the players' faces as he tossed cards across the felt, pausing long enough to help inebriated players tally their cards, rake in the loosing bets, and then start the process all over again, hundreds of times a shift. Not until the table's maximum bet, five hundred dollars, was placed in the bettor's circle did he lift vacant eyes from the felt and focus on the face.

It had been three years since they'd served together in Viet Nam. Captain Daniels stood on the patron's side of the table holding a glass of Captain Morgan's Spiced Rum over shaved ice.

"Figured you'd own one of these places by now, Brick," Daniels said, smiling and sipping his drink.

Bricker beamed back a grin and nodded to the man who'd twice saved his life in the jungles. "Figured you, of all people, Sir, would know better than to waste your hard earned cash in a casino," he said.

Captain Daniels took a seat at the table.

Bricker, like millions of other *Life Magazine* subscribers, had flipped through the August 25th 1967 issue, its propaganda cover photo a U.S. Marine walking alongside a Vietnamese boy on crutches. Bricker's interest had settled on the small article at the back of the magazine. The feature profiled a certain Captain R.B. Daniels's rocketed ascent (pardon the pun) up the financial ladder, a result of his newly designed computer chip and software program pioneering LASER guided military weaponry.

Bricker dealt the cards and flipped the dealer's second card face up—Ace of spades. Beginning to his left, Bricker pointed to each player and offered "insurance" against the dealer's potential Blackjack. All but one player declined. He worked his way around the table pausing in front of each player and waiting until they motioned for another card, or waved that they would "stand pat". Seats two through five motioned for cards and as each hand "busted", Bricker raked in the five and ten-dollar losing bets.

Bricker was every bit as good at card counting as any professional gambler, and with nearly two-thirds of the deck played out, also taking into consideration the Captain's top card was a heart-six, he knew the odds were unlikely Daniels could build a winning hand.

The Captain leaned back in his chair and gulped down his drink, snapped his fingers at a passing cocktail hostess, ordered a refill, and then rested his elbows on the padded rail holding up the game until she returned with his beverage. He set his glass in the cup holder with a derisive smirk, stacked five additional black chips beside his original bet, and then leaned back in his chair.

Bricker shook his head; surprised Daniels would "double down" with such a weak hand. Daniels, however, stared into Bricker's eyes long enough he drew the attention of the Pit Boss, who stepped behind Bricker and let his eyes land on the hefty bet in front of seat number six. "Is there a problem, sir?" he said.

Daniels grinned arrogantly at the balding pudgy face hovering over Bricker's shoulder. "Not unless my winning is a problem for you, sonny."

"We encourage our guests to win." And for benefit of the others at the table, added, "Good luck to you, sir." He stepped back and nodded for Bricker to deal the cards.

Daniels saluted the man with his drink, and then with his pinkie finger sporting a diamond clustered gold band, flipped over his hole card—King of hearts.

Bricker dealt Daniels's double up card face down and then flipped the dealer's hole card—nine of diamonds. He bounced his fist on the table in front of seat number one and announced a "push", or tie.

With a confident smirk the Pit Boss stepped closer to the table. "Dealer has twenty. Pay twenty-one."

Bricker noticed the same display of confidence he'd seen exhibited on Daniels's face in the jungles. The table waited while the Captain took a long, slow draw on his cocktail, pausing with his glass near his smiling mouth. He finally reached down and flipped his hole card.

The Pit Boss craned his neck over Bricker's shoulder—five of clubs. "Congratulations, sir, twenty-one. Dealer, pay the lucky bettor," he said, with forced geniality.

The Pit Boss stepped from the table and brought the security phone to his ear, asking for a review of the last dozen plays on Blackjack table number seven, particular attention being paid to seat number six.

Bricker plucked a thousand dollars worth of chips from the dealer's chip tray and stacked them next to Daniels's original bet.

The Captain picked up his winnings, tossed a hundred dollar token across the table, and said, "I'm looking for a ranch hand-cum-butler. It pays five hundred...let's make that seven-fifty a week. Just in case you know anyone looking for a job."

Bricker rolled the *tip chip* over the back of his fingers with nimble precision, watching as Captain R. B. Daniels disappeared into the crowd.

The anonymous face seated in number three position, anxious to part with more money, said, "Hey, buddy, you dealing cards, or what?"

Bricker dropped Daniels's tip into the communal tip bin attached to the backside of the table, clapped and showed both sides of his hands for benefit of the overhead security cameras, and stepped away from the table. "I don't think so, *buddy*," he said peeling off his bow tie. "I quit."

That incident took place over thirty years ago and it was the last time Dakota Bricker set foot in a casino. The following day he and his beloved Emy moved their belongings to the servant's quarters at Daniels's secluded ranch, where they became becoming lifelong employees of Daniels Industries, Inc., effectively quadrupling their income.

Chapter 1

The Dalton Brook having his head blown off dream snapped Dakota Bricker bolt upright in bed, frantically swiping ghostly images of brain matter from the front of his uniform. The decades that had passed since he'd worn a camouflage battle dress uniform, and nearly as long since he had fought in the jungles of Viet Nam didn't change the vividness of that recurring dream.

The electric charge that jolted him from a deep sleep tingled across his clammy skin. He crawled from bed and stripped out of his sweat-soaked pajamas, moved to the open window and bathed in the cool desert breeze that gently lifted the drapes away from the window.

What Bricker wanted most was to put an end to the nightmares and go back to sleep. But somehow nightmares and sleep, placed side by side, never seem to commingle well. Most of the nightmares came from his battle experiences, while others came from having witnessed the things Captain Daniels did to young Vietnamese girls and boys to frail to resist. He knew the Captain's drunken tumble down the main staircase and breaking his neck, almost twenty years ago, his blood alcohol three times the legal limit to operate a vehicle, was no accident. The abuses that Captain Daniels bestowed upon the Oriental race had been avenged.

Bricker, still employed by heir to the Daniels dynasty, from the shadows of his room, let his eyes drift across the stamped concrete deck surrounding the swimming pool, skim across its placid waters, and come to rest on *Mr. Daniels's* den window. An iridescent blue light glowed from the second story window, which meant Mr. Daniels was again up late, working on his computer.