

Snake Eyes

It was a clear night in Columbus, Georgia. A nice, calm clear night where you may be able to lay in the grass and watch a shooting star burn up in the atmosphere. Nearby was the famous Fort Benning, still fully lit, despite the holiday. Only a few officers stayed on base while many of the soldiers went home to their families or out to party in the streets. For many, the only true way to live was to sit in a bar and drink until you puke. This is where this particular story takes place; in a corner of a less-than-spectacular bar somewhere downtown about men who have no desire to spend the night outside. These men are soldiers, but not headstrong grunts or stoic officers, they are men in their early twenties, worn down by the horror of war. It's July 1st, 1975.

First Sergeant Jake Ruegger, Lieutenant Scott "Scotty" Jacobsen, and Captain Troy Hoover had never met before the war but had grown to be inseparable by the war's end. All three joined up in 1963 and from then on they were referred to as "The Three Stooges" even after Troy gained leadership of his own company. Five years later they arrived in Hue City on January 29, 1968 with a company of about one hundred men; unfortunately, the three friends inherited the stooges' bad luck. On the next day, the Tet Offensive began.

They would spend the next six years fighting in practically every fight the Viet Cong could throw at them. After spending their last year in Vietnam in a hospital in Saigon, all three began suffering horrific nightmares and daydreams to the point where they stopped eating and sleeping. They were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. They could never etch out the faces of their dead comrades..

Troy glanced up at the clock hanging just over a neon-sign reading *Speakeasy Pub*. The firework display had ended two hour ago and the place was dying down. "Jake, does that clock say two o'clock or three o'clock," Troy said with a slur. "It says two for chrissake; how the hell were you in the Marines with your eyesight."

Jake answered also with a slur. "I'm just tired, damn it. Leave me alone," he spat out. Scott just sat there staring aimlessly as his beer slowly poured onto the counter. The bartender, already annoyed by their presence, walked in front of them and said, "I sure hope none of you fine gents are goin' drivin' lookin' like that." He was trying his hardest to anger them enough to make them leave and wasn't being too conspicuous about it either. Troy told him to get lost and went on a rant about how he had lost one of his testicles when the Viet Cong wired a "bouncing betty" and a piece of shrapnel hit him in the groin.

The bartender had lost all patience by now and began to walk to the other side of the bar. Troy and Jake were pretty riled up now, and the rest of the bar was growing uneasy as the two started singing along to a Jimi Hendrix song. The bartender just sat back and thought it better to wait for Troy to do something stupid then and call the police on him rather than fight with him.

Thirty minutes later the bar was completely empty except for the three veterans, the bartender, and somebody hidden by a small family-sized booth near the window of the bar. It didn't take Troy long to spot it, but you couldn't be sure it was a person since it was only a small smoke trail coming out from behind the booth. "Hey, I think you got a fire back there, Frenchie. Why don't you go take a whiz on it?" The bartender had stopped listening to him long ago, but Troy wasn't going to quit. In fact the only thing that saved him from probably getting kicked out of that bar was the fact that, out of nowhere, a six-foot oriental man appeared from behind the booth smoking a crudely made cigar and carrying a black satchel.

Troy, Jake, and even Scotty all turned around to get a look at him. He was good-sized, tall, but not lanky, and very broad in stature. He looked to be in his late forties or early fifties. He was wearing sunglasses, which, at this hour, didn't make any sense at all. You couldn't take your eyes off his face, or more specifically his left cheek. The skin was torn up and scarred, most likely from an explosion of some sort, and part of his ear was missing. The man pulled up a chair next to Troy and laid his satchel to his right. Troy looked dumbfounded. "Four shots of Tequila", he said with his face down. He spoke English pretty well, but with a strong Vietnamese accent. "A bit late to be drinking like that ain't it, pal", the bartender said.

"One for the each of us", he said,. Now Troy was a little uneasy. It wasn't normal for a total stranger to come up to you and start buying drinks. Troy couldn't take his eyes of the scar on his face. It was like staring into the eyes of a beast.

The bartender brought the Tequila and laid one shot in front of each person. Troy and Jake slammed them down immediately. Scotty took a few minutes and then downed his. After Troy downed his shot, he noticed a small chain jingling back and forth in the stranger's left pocket. He took a closer look, but was too drunk to make it out. It wasn't until he looked back up that the stranger was looking straight at him

through his sunglasses. "Pardon me pawtner," Troy said, suavely. At first the stranger slowly started turning back, but just as he did he pulled the chain out of his pocket and laid it on the table.

"You know what these are?" the stranger said. Troy took a second to take a deep breath. "Y-Yeah those are dog tags from 'nam." The stranger motioned Troy to take a look at the name. Jake and Scotty took a peak behind Troy's shoulder, too. The writing was small and hard to read and didn't it didn't help that Troy was still half-drunk, but he managed. *C-Captain Drew Hawkins, blood type AB, no preferences,* it read. "You know him," the stranger said. They all said no. "What was he to you, pawtner," Troy blurted out. At first the stranger looked like he was going to completely ignore him, but just as the three of them looked away he calmly said, "He was my captain."

After about fifteen minutes, Troy and Jake had found out he had grown up in South Vietnam, he had fought in the war much longer than the rest of them, and that he had served as a sniper. "15 YEARS!" Jake shouted in amazement. "I didn't know we had troops there that long".

"We didn't Jake. This guy's bullshittin' ya," Troy said. The stranger just sat there smoking his cigar.

"That's not true, Troy," Scotty said out of nowhere. "We had advisers in 'nam for near twenty years," Troy remarked, snootily, "Well were you a sniper or an adviser. I bet you couldn't even hold a rifle anymore."

"I turned my rifle in two weeks ago," the stranger said, calmly. "So you're trying to tell me that you fought gooks years before our soldiers started fighting gooks."

"You could say that."

Before Troy could answer back, Scotty snapped, "Just leave him alone Troy. A lot of shit happened in 'nam. Just take his word for it, for chrissake."

"Listen Scotty, a lot of shit did happen in 'nam, but what if he's just usin' that excuse to make it sound like he actually did something." I bet he warn't nothing. I bet he wasn't even a sniper. He was probably a damn civilian and bought himself a ride here on one of OUR choppers back in Saigon."

"What about the scar on his face, huh, Troy," said Jake "Come on say it man, how'd you get half your damn face blown off?"

"Bazooka," the stranger said.

"Friendly fire?" Jake asked.

"You could say that."

"Bullshit", said Troy.

The stranger never once asked a question about what Troy, Jake, and Scotty had done during the war, and every time Scotty or Jake asked a question, he always gave a quick and direct answer. He didn't seem to want an extended conversation. Troy wouldn't believe a word of it. Every time the stranger said something Troy would immediately follow it with a "bullshit" or "damn liar" and several others. "So I never got your name." Or would you settle for stranger, stranger," Scotty said. "It's Duong, Bao Duong," he said. "Damn, it don't get much more gook than that," Troy said. "Shut the hell up, Troy or I'll beat the shit out of you," Jake said angrily. "Oh you gonna take the gooks side," Troy said. "You a gook lover now. What about all of our bros his people killed, huh. Remember Bobby, and LeRoy, and Smokey, and the Randal's. What about them, huh. How would they like ya kissin' this gook's ass. A fight was close at hand but, just then, Bao shot up and shouted "You want to know how I got here?" They both stared at him blankly, lowered their fists, and sat back down.

He talked in a low, unemotional way, as if he was struggling to get the words out. He started out explaining how he had grown up in the south and how his people were frightened of the communists and of the tension growing between North and South Vietnam. Troy was growing impatient, so he grabbed another beer. "Get to the damn point so I can go home," Troy said.

"Fine," the stranger said. "Basically, I joined the Viet Minh."

Troy nearly fell back on his chair and the beer he had been drinking exploded out of his mouth and nose. Jake and Scotty just sat there trying to comprehend what had just been said. Troy regained himself and started screaming at him. "What the hell did you just say? You fought with the VC. How the hell did you get here? I'm definitely goin' to beat your ass now; either for the lying or, if it is true, bein' a damn piece of shit VC. "Wouldn't you like to hear the end of the story?" the stranger said, smugly. Troy rose up raised his right fist and shouted, "To hell with the damn story." Before Troy could land a blow the stranger quietly said, "I have not lied to you. I was a VC and I also served under a man named Drew Hawkins for the US army. It's the truth."

Troy couldn't believe his ears. "You're lyin'. I can see it in your face. You have to be." He was really uneasy now. He couldn't make heads or tails of the situation. The stranger asked again, "Would you like to hear the end of the story?"

"Fine, you damn liar."

Bao continued. Jake and Scotty were hooked, and Troy was looking for any loophole he could use to bust him in two. I was given a sniper rifle by my leader when we were in Da Nang. We were spread thin by American bombers, so I was left alone in a tall, half-destroyed building to watch for the enemy. Sure enough, one day I spotted a squad of American troops marching towards my building. I had been given my orders, so I went to work and did my job. They sent a forward scout, so I shot him first, clean shot." Troy was gritting his teeth now. After the story was over he was sure he was going to kill this man. Still, he allowed Bao to continue. "They sprayed the area with fire for about a minute and then sent a man to retrieve him. So, I shot him next. They began spraying the area again, but this time they didn't send a man. I knew they were coming to get me, so I waited. Five minutes later they sent mortar shells at me and began firing again. I couldn't manage much movement, but out of a shelled out hole I hit another soldier. Then, out of the corner of my eye I saw one soldier running towards my position. I was awe-struck. I scrambled to load another round. I managed a shot, but it was off, and he made it into the building right below my feet. I repositioned to a room in the back and waited again. Grenades were going off around me. I was able at least guess his location. Suddenly a grenade was lobbed into the room where I had been. After it went off the floor underneath me felt like it was going to crumble. I looked up and there was the soldier standing across the room. I rose up to shoot him. It should have been easy, but I had forgotten to reload. He saw me, shot a few rounds, and retreated behind a stone wall across to the other side of the room. It was a stand-off. After about ten minutes, I was getting scared. If I was going to die, I wanted to get it over with. I had only one shot so I decided I'd use my bayonet, too. It took me a second, but finally I just turned and ran toward the stone wall. I could feel tears running down my face. I turned the corner where he was. Then I practically fell dead. Before I could regain myself I was hit hard in the back of the head and I blacked out.

I awoke to find my hands bound, and I was in my underwear. Four US soldiers were standing in front of me holding rifles to my face. "Hey, Cap, he's awake. What should we do with him? They all wanted to shoot me. I was sure I was going to die now. I started crying again. Then I closed my eyes and waited for death. I opened my eyes a moment later to see I was still in the same spot. This time, however, there were no guns in front of me but the soldier from back in the building. I started begging for my life at his feet, but I could tell he couldn't understand me.

The longer I begged the more confused he looked. I understood that I had little chance of surviving, so I lay back down and submitted to my fate. The soldier left me in the room and walked through a door at the end of the hall. It was a very fancy place; filled with strange machines I had never seen before. I felt strength in my legs again but had no desire to stand. Before long the soldier returned with three other men. Two of the men looked the same: green Army vests and pants with helmets that read MP. The third man, however, was different. He was a stiff-looking man with ribbons and medals all along his vest. He took one look at me and muttered something to me. At the time it was pointless; I understood no English. To my surprise, one of the three soldiers spoke Vietnamese; maybe I had a chance after all. He had told me that I was a talented bastard with a rifle, and that I'd make a damn good trophy as a POW. A prisoner seemed the only option now. I would spend about a year in that camp. My brothers in the Viet Minh boosted the morale of the people with suicidal raids on the US lines. The camp seemed to be next on the list. They came during the night and shelled the camp furiously. My brothers with me in the camp began celebrating; we were being rescued. It didn't take long for us to realize it wasn't a rescue mission. The POW barrack was hit by two mortar shells within minutes. We made a run for it; it looked good. There were no soldiers in our path and the jungle was only steps away. I understood that luck did not choose us today as a flare landed among us. Immediately a hail of bullets rattled around us, cutting most of us down. As for me, I took a bullet in the foot and fell over. A hill of bodies soon covered me. I still remember the smell of blood and bullets. By morning the raid had ended. I reached out to the sky and dug myself out of the mound. The mound seemed cozy as opposed to the camp. Bodies of both sides littered the ground; some were alive but not many. I searched the ground with pain. The sights of death made me puke near a puddle of blood and it felt as if I had lost my mind. I continued on my knees looking for anything at all. What I came upon was a familiar face. It was the soldier who saved me, the captain—the man who spared me even after I killed his friends. I started to cry as I saw his body mangled on the ground. I reached down and found a pair of silver chains around his neck, Dog tags. They were very well prized within the army;

they became the proof of a kill. Suddenly, I heard a rumbling in the distance. It was a familiar rumble. US tanks were approaching quickly. I had no choice. They wouldn't spare me after they saw this. I grabbed the captain's uniform quickly and threw it on myself. Sure enough, tanks rolled in. I acted mute so that they wouldn't suspect me. It worked well enough, and I found myself in the company of South Vietnamese soldiers. It became simple then. They sent me back to a hospital in Saigon, and I would leave the country for good in 1975 on the helicopters. I decided never to go back. I love my people, but I will never go back. I cannot.

Troy, Jake and Scotty remained sitting in a daze, fully sober now. Troy began to laugh. It started out low and mockingly but slowly grew into a piercing yelp that filled the bar. "You can't expect me to believe that do ya, buddy."

Troy looked to his side, expecting an answer, but there was none. The stranger was gone, his shot glass still lay in the same spot. You would have thought a ghost had been sitting in the bar. But one important piece of evidence still lay under the glass. Troy noticed it first, "What the hell is this?"

It was a photo of a battlefield. The image was familiar to the three soldiers who saw several fields littered with bodies and blood. But something stood out; it seemed too familiar. It took only minutes to realize the similarity. The battlefield was the one in the story, and in the corner a young man in a captain's uniform stood in the sunshine. It was him. The exact image of him, if only a little younger. They studied the image thoroughly, mouths agape. The only other significance in the photo lay at the bottom. A small sentence written in ink reading: The Snake's Eyes Never Lie. They would never see the man again.