

A young man with light-colored eyes and a slight stubble is shown in profile, looking upwards and to the right. The background is a textured green with a satellite dish and some faint lines. The overall mood is contemplative and serious.

HOPE  
IN THE  
SHADOWS  
OF

WAR

a novel

THOMAS PAUL REILLY

*Hope in the Shadows of War*

by Thomas Paul Reilly

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H O P E I N T H E  
S H A D O W S O F W A R

a n o v e l

T H O M A S P A U L R E I L L Y



VIRGINIA BEACH  
CAPE CHARLES

*To my 58,272 brothers and sisters who  
perished in the Vietnam War*

*Lest we forget*

# VIETNAM WAR JARGON

*This is a partial list of the jargon used by US service members in the Vietnam War and terms used in this book.*

**Boo-coo:** Slang derivation of the French word *beaucoup*, meaning “much” or “many.”

**Cobras:** The Bell AH-1 was a helicopter gunship with rocket pods, 40 mm cannons, and mini-guns (7.62 mm high rate-of-fire machine gun). Cobras were also called “snakes.”

**Dear John:** A letter sent to a serviceman by a girlfriend or wife who was breaking off the relationship. Sometimes used as a verb.

**Didi mau:** Vietnamese slang meaning “to go quickly”; *didi* is a shortened form that American GIs used.

**Dinky dau:** Vietnamese slang meaning “crazy.”

**Doughnut Dollies:** Young women who volunteered through the American Red Cross to spend a one-year tour in Vietnam to boost the morale of American troops. They operated recreation centers, visited hospitals, and visited frontline base camps to bring cookies, doughnuts, and Christmas presents to soldiers.

**Echo side of LZ:** East side of landing zone; *echo* is code for the letter *E*.

**Five O’Clock Follies:** Daily press briefing given by military personnel in Saigon.

**Huey:** Bell UH1H helicopters; called slicks or choppers and served as workhorses in Vietnam.

**I heard that:** An expression of acknowledgement that could mean several things.

**Jodie:** Term used by GIs to describe men at home who dated servicemen's girlfriends while the servicemen were away.

**Lifer:** A career military person.

**LZ:** Landing zone in the field for helicopters.

**November:** Code for the letter *N*, representing *north*.

**One-eight-zero:** Due-south heading.

**Papa Four:** Call sign for ground troops in this story.

**Popping smoke:** Igniting a smoke grenade to identify one's position.

**RLO:** "Real live officer"; a commissioned, regular Army officer versus a warrant officer.

**RPG:** A shoulder-launched, rocket-propelled grenade.

**Sierra:** Code for the letter *S*, representing *south*.

**Slop and slugs:** Coffee and doughnuts.

**There it is:** An expression of acknowledgement that meant whatever the person wanted it to mean.

**Tiger Six:** Call sign for Timothy in this story.

**Tiger Five:** Call sign for Bobby in this story.

**Viet Cong:** AKA Victor Charlies, VC, Chuck, Charlie, Gooks, and Dinks.

**Warrant Officer:** A highly specialized expert in his or her specialty but different from a commissioned officer.

**Whiskey side of LZ:** West side of landing zone; *whiskey* is code for the letter *W*.

**Xin loi:** Vietnamese idiom meaning "sorry" or "too bad."

## PROLOGUE

# THE BATTLE OF ADVERSUS

LEGEND HAS IT that at the dawn of time and in the cradle of civilization, opposing forces met on the fields of Adversus in a primeval battle for the minds, bodies, and spirit of humanity. A horrific battle—relentless and fierce—raged for seven suns. Bodies blanketed the blood-soaked soil. Cries of the wounded muffled the thunderous sky. Death welcomed the sweet smell of rotting flesh. A curtain of bitter-tasting air, saturated with the humidity of blood, hung heavy and motionless as the dead slept.

As the eighth sun rose, enemy commanders met at the center of the battlefield. Eados commanded the oppressors—the legions of despair. Dochas commanded the liberators—the warriors of hope. They stood a breath apart. Eados gazed into Dochas’s eyes and saw the light of his nemesis—hope. Dochas stared into Eados’s eyes and saw the darkness of the great abyss—despair.

Eados stretched his arms over the land and pillars of fire rose to the sky, scorching everything within sight. Dochas reached to the heavens and summoned torrents of rain that smothered the fires, washing the landscape clean of the ashes of despair.

An infuriated Eados said, “This will never end.”

“I know,” Dochas responded.

They turned and left, knowing they would battle again and forever.

Eados dispatched his legions to the four corners of the world, spreading germs of despair. Dochas commissioned his forces to the four winds, sowing seeds of hope. Each spawned generations of followers to carry out their missions. Eados's followers became the disciples of despair, leaving hopelessness in their dust. Dochas's progeny became the guardians of hope, shepherding the human spirit.



## CHAPTER ONE

*“WHERE’S THE BODY? Where’s the body? Where’s the damn body!”*

He woke with a jolt, the way a baby startles at loud noises. For Timothy, the line separating nightmares from reality was as thin as an eyelid. Mom stood at the doorway to his bedroom, just as she did when he was a youngster having nightmares, except now he was no youngster.

“Timothy, are you okay? I heard you shouting.”

“Huh? Yeah, Mom. I’m fine.” But he wasn’t fine. He doubted he would ever be fine.

Timothy could feel each heartbeat in every part of his body. Blood raced through his veins. Sweat covered his face, but not from the November night air. Trembling embarrassed him. He viewed it as a form of weakness, and it didn’t fit the narrative he had created for himself. Nightmares stripped the bark off his tree, and he felt naked.

“Are you having those dreams again?” Mom asked.

“Yeah.” Timothy didn’t want this conversation.

“I don’t know why those people at the VA can’t help you with that. You boys come home and—”

Timothy interrupted. “I’m okay, Mom. Go back to bed.”

Timothy stood to get a drink of water from the kitchen. Mom

gave him a hug, burying her head in his chest.

“Try to dream better dreams, Son,” Mom said, returning to her bedroom.

“I will. Thanks, Mom.”

He sat at the kitchen table and stared at the glass of water, heart thumping and hands trembling. It took a while for this much adrenaline to fade. He returned from the Vietnam War eighteen months earlier, and like tens of thousands of other returning veterans, he learned one of the great paradoxes of war: though he left the war, it never left him. The memories lived a thin layer of skin beneath the surface. The military taught them to fight the war but failed to teach them how to live the peace.

Timothy remembered a story he read about Japanese soldiers returning from World War II. The village elders took the returning soldiers aside and thanked them for their service—for their being brave and loyal soldiers. Then, the elders told them the village needed the soldiers to become good citizens, fathers, and husbands. No one had this conversation with Timothy, though he longed for it. After nearly a decade of fighting, the country was tired of the Vietnam War and felt contempt for its weary warriors.

Timothy rubbed his leg. The long scar was his most visible wound of the war. Pain never slept. At night, the dull ache awakened him, and during the day, sharp pain often reminded him of the day his helicopter was shot down.

A noise on the back porch startled him. He believed Vietnam improved his hearing. He heard every nocturnal sound. He looked out the backdoor window and saw a cat scurry past. He walked around the house to check the windows and doors—perimeter duty. His muscles were still twitching. *Damn adrenaline!*

He finished his water and returned to his bedroom, hoping tonight’s nightmare was over. A few hours later, Timothy woke to discover he had overslept. Thankful it was Sunday and not a school day, he dressed quickly, gobbled an egg sandwich his mother made for him, downed a glass of milk, and left for his job at the Christmas tree lot.

The wet November air had turned cold. At thirty-four degrees, things didn’t freeze, but they did slow down. The cold breeze stung his face as he walked to his car on the street in front of his house.

The car door squeaked like a tired steel door waking up in the winter. He slid across the cold, cracked vinyl seat and checked his wallet. *Five dollars, that's it? Oh well, it's enough for today. I'll get a half a tank of gas and lunch at McDonald's. Man, I hope my car isn't on empty.*

The car cranked lazily before stalling back asleep. "C'mon, not today, please." The fuel needle sat half a line above empty. *Late, again. Dez is going to be pissed. Too little gas and a dead battery. That's a lousy way to start my day.*

Rob—his neighbor and childhood friend—knocked on the driver's window. Timothy jumped. He startled easily these days.

"Hey, Tim. Sorry to scare you. Trouble gettin' that thing to cooperate this morning?" Rob said.

"Yeah. Hey, Rob. No gas, a dead battery, and I'm trying to get to work."

"Let me help. I'll get some jumper cables, a can of gas, and pull my car around."

"Thanks, man."

Timothy opened the hood of his ten-year-old car. It mimicked the creak of the driver's door. The 1963 Ford Fairlane had a ripped interior, rugged exterior, and retread tires. The silver-moss paint job looked like a spotted, rust overcoat. This sport coupe had become a sport jalopy. Ten years wasn't that old, but it was old before its time. Too many miles and too many bumps in the road for this tired gas-guzzler, already dying a slow death when Timothy bought it a year ago. He'd hoped to restore it at some point. He needed transportation for work and college . . . and church.

*Damn, I missed Mass this morning. I've got to quit doing that.*

Rob returned with the cables and a gallon gas can, which Timothy poured into the tank while Rob connected the jumper cables. Timothy slid back into the driver's seat, and Rob climbed into his car and started it. Timothy noticed how quickly Rob's car started and thought, *Wouldn't that be nice?*

After a few moments of cranking, Timothy's beast coughed to life, belching a cloud of black smoke.

"Looks like the rings are bad, too, Tim," Rob said.

"Yeah, I'm going to add that to my growing list of things to fix on this thing. Thanks, Rob, I appreciate the help."

“Sure. Happy to do it.”

Timothy handed him the empty gas can and promised to replace it.

“It’s a gallon of gas. Don’t worry about it,” Rob said.

“No, I take care of my debts.” Timothy wanted to maintain the little self-respect a broke college student could muster.

“Okay, that’s fine,” said Rob.

“Thanks again.”

Rob waved as Timothy pulled away, a Beatles eight-track tape blaring.

*“And when the night is cloudy there is still a light that shines on me . . . shine on until tomorrow, let it be . . .”*

For Timothy, *dreams* meant *tomorrow*. He never stopped believing in tomorrow, no matter the past. Hope died hard in his DNA. He called it the birthright of the Irish. The weatherman had called for clouds today and sun tomorrow, an appropriate weathercast for Timothy—cloudy with a hope for sunshine.

*Let it be*, he replayed the song in his head. He pulled into an open space at Schoen’s lot, leaving himself enough room for a jump-start if he needed one later. He shut off the engine, but the car spit and stammered as if it didn’t want to stay, a fact that didn’t escape Timothy. He didn’t want to stay either. One last backfire and it quit—Timothy jumped. *Damn backfire. Sounds like a gunshot.*

Dez stood at the edge of the lot waiting for him. Dez cut an unmistakable figure. He stood five-foot-nine wearing a black winter pea jacket and a wool *kartuz* cap. Timothy looked at Dez and dreaded the encounter. Dez was the kind of guy that took pleasure in other people’s misfortunes. He grinned at their pain. Most people disliked Dez immediately because it saved a lot of time.

“You’re late again, ya mick,” Dez said in a gravelly voice. Dez talked out of the side of his mouth and around a cigarette, a permanent fixture. He had thin lips and a heavy jawline. He sized up people by their ancestry and didn’t shy away from commenting on it.

“I know. Sorry, Dez. This thing didn’t want to start this morning. I think it wanted to sleep a bit longer,” Timothy said.

“You talking about you or the car?” Dez said.

“Both, probably. I had to get a jump-start this morning. I’ll get a new battery at Sears tomorrow. That’s if you decide to pay me for today.”

“You oughta get rid of that junk heap.” Dez pointed his thumb at the Fairlane. “Besides, you look like a stiff driving that thing. A young man oughta have a young car.”

“There it is.” Timothy felt like one GI talking to another.

“Get yourself somethin’ reliable and cheap to drive, like one of those new Jap cars. You know, the Japs are gettin’ their shit together. Cheap cars that don’t suck down too much gas. That’s pretty important these days the way the ragheads are screwin’ the world with their oil,” Dez said.

“Those cars cost more money than I have, Dez.”

“You could afford it if you got a real job that paid you some decent money,” said Dez.

“Are you going to give me a raise?”

“You kiddin’? I’m not the problem, you know.”

“What’s the problem, then?” Tired of this conversation with Dez, Timothy pushed back.

“You’ve got a head full of dreams and tuition bills to prove it, but you’re working for chump change at that hospital. That’s a loser combination. It don’t make sense.”

“It does when I think about the future. I need an education to do what I want to do,” Timothy said.

“See, that’s the problem.” Dez jabbed his crooked index finger in Timothy’s chest. “You got your head soaring in the clouds and your feet stuck in the mud.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Take some time off school, get a real job, and save some money. You can buy a new car, take care of your mother, and go back to school once you save enough money. Besides, all learnin’ don’t just happen in classrooms,” Dez said.

“So you’re telling me to give up on my dreams and get some dead-end job I have to drink my way through?” Timothy challenged Dez for a better option.

“No, just can the dreams for a while. Get some traction,” Dez said.

“What kind of job could I get? No one wants to hire a Vietnam vet these days. They think we’re all damaged goods.”

“Get a government job. They gotta hire you, right?” Dez said.

“I just left three years with the government, and that’s enough.”

“I can work you fifty hours a week and pay you more than those

nuns pay you at the hospital. What are they payin' now—minimum wage?"

"A little more than that. I get a buck seventy-five an hour. More when I work the night shifts. Thing is, the work at the hospital fits into my plans for the future."

"What plans? Bein' poor?" Dez laughed.

Timothy let it pass.

"Why do you wanna work with a bunch of nuts anyway?" Dez asked.

"I like psychology," Timothy said.

"I like beer but couldn't figure out a way to make a living drinking it." Dez laughed through three days of stubble as he knocked the ash off his cigarette.

"What I lack in pay I make up for with the experience it offers." Timothy got defensive.

"Yeah, that kind of experience is overrated. See, that's how those birds con you into working for them. I'll pay you two bucks an hour—hard money, no tax. That's more than you make now."

"I'll think about it," Timothy said, tired of the banter.

"Yeah, do. Don't be a chump. That's the point. You're workin' for jack shit and drivin' a piece of shit. That clunker ain't taking you nowhere, and neither are those dreams," Dez said.

"I told you. I'll think about it."

"Like I said, those nuns will screw you every time," Dez argued his point. "And they call my people cheap. I'll keep you busy through the holidays, and when spring comes, you can go to fifty hours. I'll work you here and at the other place too. But you gotta have a decent ride to get there. None of this late shit. I gotta business to run. I ain't no charity, you know. And those nuns ain't either. They're tryin' to make some cheddar, just like me."

"All right, thanks, Dez."

"Yeah, no problem. Now, get to work back there and help that simpleton unload the Christmas trees." Dez pointed to the tree lot behind the shop.

"C'mon, Dez. You're pretty tough on Kenny," Timothy said.

"Whatta ya talkin' about? Who else would hire a retard and pay him what I give him? He's lucky to have this job. It's damn near charity. Besides, he's got that creepy side, too. The ol' lady thinks he's a pervert."

“She thinks everyone is a pervert,” said Timothy. “Maybe it’s because she’s lived with one all these years.” Timothy liked giving it back to Dez and knew Dez didn’t mind an occasional good jab. Dark humor fit him like stink on a dead fish.

Dez showed some teeth, and they weren’t a pretty sight. He had a mouthful of chewers with the right amount of vacancies to make his words whistle.

“All I know is he sweats as much as me in the summer and huddles around the fire barrel in the winter when he gets cold.” Timothy’s nature was to defend the underdog.

“Right, you’re always stickin’ up for that schlep. Get on back there, and do what I pay you to do. We gotta be ready for the Thanksgiving rush. The suckers always show up that day,” Dez said.

“I think it’s going to be a good year for us. The weather people say it will be fair by the end of the week. That should help bring out the crowds,” Timothy said.

“Hope so. Gotta good deal on trees, so I bought a couple of extra trailers this year. Three different kinds. I’m gonna hire an extra schlub to help you two. Now, get on back there with the mole head. That trailer won’t unload itself.”

“Alright, I’m going.” Timothy walked away shaking his head, wondering how someone became that cynical about life. *I hope I miss that train when it stops for passengers.*