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DOGS: A FABLE OF THE VIETNAM WAR

One day the dogs came. There were four of them, and they walked purposefully into the company en masse, unannounced, and sat down in front of the messtent, as if they had been summoned for a terribly important mission.

There was Shorttime, snow white, arrogant and promiscuous, who gravitated immediately to the officers' hootch; and Blackdog, the shaggy, low-to-the-ground fighter who stalked the company and liked the motorpool workers best; Ky, sandy and sheepish, wily and refined the interpreters took him; and idiosyncratic, loud-mouthed Shaky -- minus a back leg -- the N.C.O.'s favorite.

Each group patted and caressed and fawned over their dogs. Soon, they occupied all the men's waking hours. And the dogs followed their masters closely, sniffing at their heels, waiting for orders.

Eventually jealousies and fist fights broke out. And the dogs began fighting too. Even Shaky hobbled into the fray. They snapped and growled and snarled.

One day they left as they had come. They all walked off together, single file, as if they had finished their important work and were needed no longer. They moved down the dusty base road, off the end of the base like off the end of the world and disappeared.

The Americans watched them go and were sad for weeks. The Vietnamese never even noticed they were gone.

-- Rick Christman

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