

CAPTAIN FOR DARK MORNINGS

by

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Based on the book by Shad Meshad

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FADE IN:

OVER BLACK: BASED ON A TRUE STORY.

EXT. VIETNAM, 1970 - DAY

A blinding flash as morning sun crests the horizon, bathing the dense jungle in golden light.

Exotic birds call to their mates as dawn broadens the spectrum of green hues.

The jungle gives way to individual trees - then a single tree in a small clearing. Under it, a tiger feasts on the meat of a carcass... human?

In the distance, a low rumble grows louder, closer.

The tiger lifts its head - stock still - crouches low as the massive belly of a DC-8 troop transport flies over predator and prey.

EXT. TRANSPORT PLANE - CAM RANH AIR BASE - DAY

Wide-eyed NEWBIE GRUNTS and OFFICERS emerge from the *Flying Tigers* transport.

Sweat, from searing heat and mostly anxiety, forms dark blotches on their dress green uniforms.

CAPTAIN FLOYD 'SHAD' MESHAD, 25, dark-haired and clean-shaven, steps through the transport door. Squints through heat signatures shimmering above the tarmac.

Around his neck Shad wears a SILVER TALISMAN. S-shaped, the charm oddly resembles the Superman logo.

INT. TERMINAL BUILDING- DAY

Weighed down by stateside duffels, the Newbies shuffle on one side of the huge building split in half by a twenty-foot hurricane fence.

Pushed forward with the throng, Shad's view is limited to those in front of him.

On the opposite side of the fence, BELEAGUERED VETERANS file by like a chain gang. Heading for transport home, they're hollow as ghosts in an echoing abyss.

One VACANT VETERAN, head wrapped in gauze, stares at Shad as he passes.

Pressed forward like a cow to slaughter, Shad clutches his talisman. Can't help but turn around to look--

Across the fence, not one Veteran looks back.

INT. OFFICER'S SUPPLY WAREHOUSE - CAM RANH AIR BASE - DAY

It's a bustling maze of Officers, Grunts, paperwork and supplies, all under the watchful eyes of MP's.

SHAD stares at a mountain of gear piled behind a SUPPLY SERGEANT - one of many stationed around the warehouse.

FIRST SUPPLY SERGEANT
Size up, Soldier.

SHAD
Large.

Rough hands drop folded fatigues, boxers and socks on a table.

STATION TWO

Shad reaches for his jungle boots.

Above the fray, a canned voice crackles over a LOUDSPEAKER.

OVER LOUDSPEAKER
Learn your gear. Love your gear.
Could be the only thing standing
between you and Charlie.

The warning trails off in echoes.

Shad bends to shove the boots in his army duffel. Straightening, he rams into a BLACK GRUNT.

BLACK GRUNT
Watch it.

Shad holds up his hands - sidesteps any confrontation.

STATION THREE

A SECOND SUPPLY SERGEANT barely glances at Shad as he hands over patches and rank bars.

OVER LOUDSPEAKER

Your country appreciates that you answered the call... Your presence here means continuation of freedom, democracy and decency...

WEAPONS STATION

Massive hands slide a pistol belt across the table to Shad - transfer a COLT PISTOL into his hands.

OVER LOUDSPEAKER

Look to your left... your right.

Shad does. Locks eyes with another Officer.

OVER LOUDSPEAKER

These are your brothers. Have their backs - or one of you will be dead within days.

Shad clips the belt around his waist. Feeling the weight of the pistol and the world, he slides the gun through its loop.

EXT. TERMINAL - NIGHT

Now in fatigues, Shad lugs his duffels to an Officers' transport truck. ENLISTED line up to load onto another.

Shad takes note as a BLACK OFFICER and his BLACK GRUNT BUDDY perform a complicated DAP - an elaborate set of handshakes and slaps - then separate to board their prospective buses.

INT. OFFICERS TRANSPORT TRUCK - NIGHT

Shad takes a seat next to a gregarious, ALL AMERICAN TACKLE type.

The Tackle checks out the Captain's bars on Shad's fatigues.

ALL AMERICAN TACKLE

What's your assignment?

The transport lurches forward. Both men watch through the window as a pair of Jeeps, mounted with M-60's, escort them from the safety of the base.

SHAD

Psych Medic at the 95th.

ALL AMERICAN TACKLE
Cush job at China Beach... far out,
man!

Shad's not so sure.

SHAD
Here to help if I can. How 'bout
you?

Reflections of the guard towers and razor wire surrounding
the base pass Shad's skeptical eyes.

ALL AMERICAN TACKLE
(with bravado)
4th Infantry - psyched to see the
action. No pun intended.

With no warning, a trip flare outside the transport rockets
into the dark sky.

EXT. OFFICERS TRANSPORT TRUCK (MOVING) - CONTINUOUS

Stark white light illuminates the breach as a VC (Viet Cong)
breaks through the perimeter.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! GUNNERS on the towers and escort
Jeeps open fire.

INT. OFFICERS TRANSPORT TRUCK (MOVING) - CONTINUOUS

A TRANSPORT OFFICER yells -

TRANSPORT OFFICER
Hit the floor!

Shad dives.

KABOOM! - outside, the satchel charge on the VC explodes.

Moments later, Shad glances up. Pieces of dead VC streak the
broken window glass.

On the seat above, blood fountains from the All American's
neck.

ALL AMERICAN TACKLE
Help!

Shad kneels next to him. Clamps his hands over the wound to
stem the blood. It's unstoppable.

The Tackle's eyes are on Shad's face.

ALL AMERICAN TACKLE

Is it bad?

Another set of hands places a compress on the wound and applies pressure.

SHAD

C'mon, man. Right here. Stay with me.

Shad holds eye contact until the All American's eyes close for the last time - Helpless, Shad slumps to the floor.

EXT. 95TH EVAC HOSPITAL COMPOUND - DAY

A Jeep drives off. Leaves Shad alone in a downpour at the entrance of the fenced compound.

Located near Da Nang, the 400 bed hospital sits at the base of the Marble Mountains - ringed by razor wire and guard towers, it shares a beach on the South China Sea with a small fishing village.

A series of dull white quonset huts is connected by a corridor - each of the huts is home to a different medical specialty.

Shad stares at the sign on the compound fence:

Welcome to the 95th Evac Hospital.

Hell's Half Acre Revisited.

LARRIBY (O.S.)

It's really not so bad here - 'til the Medevacs drop in.

Shad turns.

Walking toward him, MAJOR HANK LARRIBY flashes a grin. The guy's a stud - 35 and way the hell taller than Shad.

LARRIBY

Hank Larriby.

Shad salutes.

SHAD

Captain Floyd Meshad, reporting for duty.

LARRIBY
Psych, right? Good to have you.

SHAD
Good to be here.

LARRIBY
You'll change your mind about that.

SHAD
I volunteered.

LARRIBY
(amused)
A week says you wish you hadn't.

Larriby grabs one of Shad's duffels.

LARRIBY
Christ. What's in here?

SHAD
Government issue, tape recorder,
camera... a blender.

LARRIBY
That'll come in handy against the
VC.

Larriby motions Shad to follow.

SHAD
What do you do?

LARRIBY
Resident Urologist. I can get you
girls, dope, tetracycline...

SHAD
Tetracycline?

LARRIBY
So your dick won't fall off.
Course, if it does, I can sew it
back on.

Shad frowns and Larriby busts a gut.

LARRIBY
I'm the dick man.

SHAD
(ala the Beatles)
Goo goo ga joob!

Larriby guffaws - punches Shad's shoulder.

LARRIBY

You and me are gonna get along just fine.

He stops in front of a bare plywood structure behind a sandbagged bunker. Dumps Shad's duffel on the ground.

LARRIBY

Home sweet hootch. You're second from the left. Dump your shit...

Points across the compound.

LARRIBY

Meet you at the O-Club in fifteen.

INT. OFFICERS CLUB - DAY

Shad wanders in.

Built of plywood and Plexiglas, the structure looks out on the South China sea. Inside, a simple L-shaped bar seats fifteen. Only a couple of stools are taken.

Wooden benches and fold up chairs line plywood tables. A silent TV airs an episode of *Bonanza*. Joe Cocker's gravelly voice rocks from speakers over the bar.

LARRIBY

Over here, Captain.

Larriby motions from a table he shares with COLONEL BANKS, 52.

Banks is an old body builder. He wears a T-shirt, fatigues and a flat top. Obviously been at the table a while.

BANKS

Name's Banks. Welcome to the 95th.

Banks shakes Shad's hand and about breaks it.

Banks offers a chair and Shad takes it. Larriby pours Shad a Mateus.

BANKS

About time we got a new shrink.

SHAD

Not really a shrink, Sir. Just a Psych Officer.

BANKS

Well, whatever you are, glad to have you.

Banks raises his glass and they drink.

BANKS

Biggest joke in this outfit is that pipsqueak shrink on duty now. Mizner.

SHAD

Have you been seeing him regularly?

Banks roars. It takes him a while to catch his breath.

BANKS

No. But maybe I should be.

SHAD

I could talk to the CO for you.

Larriby laughs - slaps Shad on the shoulder.

LARRIBY

You just did--
(indicates Banks)
Meet Colonel Banks - Head of
Medical Services for one and two
Corps.

Ten shades of red, Shad springs to his feet - stands straight as a phone pole.

SHAD

I'm sorry, Sir.

BANKS

Shit, Son. No apology needed. Sit your ass back down. Really more curious about your bench press.

Off Shad's confused look, Banks points to Shad's biceps.

BANKS

Gotta be doing something to get those guns.

SHAD

I don't know - guess I was pressing about three-forty before 'Nam.

BANKS

Perfect. I've been looking for somebody to train with. You a runner?

SHAD

Not so much, sir.

BANKS

You will be.

Banks downs his Mateus. Rises.

BANKS

Time I was hitting my hootch.

Banks pats Shad's shoulder.

BANKS

You're in KO at oh-eight-thirty. And when you see me, remember I'm a Colonel - gotta do the army bullshit - play the game for the pussies.

Shad stands. Salutes the Colonel.

SHAD

Yes, Sir.

BANKS

At ease, Meshad.

Shad relaxes.

BANKS

Meshad. What nationality is that?

SHAD

Lebanese.

Banks slams the table. Drinks bounce and Shad jumps.

BANKS

Goddamn, that's good news! My wife's Lebanese. All the men in her family have mustaches. You should think about growing a mustache.

Shad touches his upper lip.

SHAD

I will, Sir.

EXT. PSYCHIATRIC (KO) QUONSET HUT - DAY

Shad approaches the hut. Letters on the door read:

KO UNIT**INFECTIOUS DISEASE WARD**

Right next door is TRIAGE - a blood-stained helicopter pad and a row of stretchers wait just outside the entrance.

A Jeep with the words *Pax Mentis* painted on the doors, rumbles to a halt near Shad.

MAJOR MIZNER, 30, is at the wheel. Wimpy and frail, he's Woody Allen in fatigues. Clutching a clipboard, he ignores Shad as he slides from the Jeep and opens the quonset door.

SHAD

Excuse me, Sir?

Mizner judges Shad with eyes that blink non-stop.

MIZNER

You have an appointment?

Shad detects a slight lisp.

SHAD

No, Sir. I'm Captain Meshad - the new Psych Officer.

MIZNER

About bloody time. I hope you like to fly, Captain. And hear horror stories.

Shad follows Mizner through the door.

MIZNER

May not realize it, but I'm the only psychiatrist here for I Corps. And look where they put me?

INT. PSYCHIATRIC (KO) QUONSET HUT - CONTINUOUS

Mizner motions the 20 bed ward. Every cot is full.

MIZNER

Same ward as infectious disease. Ironic, don't you think? Since everyone in Nam's insane... or will be.

Mizner opens a door marked KO at the back of the ward.

MIZNER

See, they even warn you.

He slaps a large sign near the door that warns:

~CAUTION~

INFECTIOUS DISEASE WARD

INT. PSYCHIATRIC OFFICE - DAY

A couple of PSYCH PATIENTS look up as Mizner and Shad enter.

Two Psych Techs eye Shad from desks partitioned off at the back of the room - WILLIAMS, a black psych major from Detroit and PAISLEY from Staten Island.

Mizner doesn't look at either of them.

MIZNER

Show Meshad his office.

Still clutching the clipboard, Mizner hustles into his office and shuts the door.

Williams rises from his desk. Hugging a folder, he does a spot on imitation of Mizner, blinks and all.

WILLIAMS

It's just too much. Too too much.
Too much of this, too much of that.
They just keep coming. Clawing at
me to help them. Fix them. Make
them whole again. I'm a
psychiatrist, not a mechanic.

Paisley snickers at the show. The impudence makes Shad uncomfortable.

WILLIAMS

(to Shad)

Joe Williams, Sir. Psych Tech. My
sidekick's Bob Paisley.

PAISLEY

(New York accent)

Joe and I assess 'em - you and
Mizner mess with 'em.

Williams opens the door next to Mizner's office. Motioning Shad, he switches on the light.

INT. SHAD'S OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Nothing but gray walls, a wooden desk, and a chair. The only wall items are a calendar open to JANUARY 1970 and a poster of Richard Nixon.

WILLIAMS

Not much more than nothing.

PAX MENTIS is scratched into the wood on the front of the desk.

SHAD

What's with that Pax Mentis?

WILLIAMS

Kind of our motto. Means *Peace Of Mind*.

SHAD

Care if I redecorate?

WILLIAMS

Have at it, but I got a load of mess waiting to see you at about 10 minutes per.

SHAD

Ten minutes?

Shad pulls Nixon's poster off the wall... drops it in the trash.

SHAD

Send 'em in.

Williams chuckles as he walks out the door.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC OFFICE WAITING ROOM - DAY

The radio's playing low. GRUNTS and an OFFICER wait to spill their guts as Shad, sporting the start of a mustache, and a BIG BLACK CORPORAL emerge from Shad's office.

Rather than shaking, Shad and the Black Corporal DAP - grasp hands, slide them apart and bump fists.

At his desk, Williams takes note as the Corporal leaves.

WILLIAMS

Captain?

Shad looks over.

WILLIAMS

Right on!

Shad smiles.

WILLIAMS

Sir, the JAG office called. They're sending over an e-val at fourteen hundred. Mizner wants you to take it.

INT. SHAD'S OFFICE - DAY

Shad's filling out a report.

With a quick knock, Williams sticks his head in.

WILLIAMS

He's here.

Nervous, Shad nods.

Williams disappears and two BEEFY MP's escort CORPORAL TORCA into Shad's office. The wiry kid is in shackles, eerily untroubled as he plops in the chair across from Shad.

The MP's take positions on either side of Torca.

SHAD

(to MP's)

Mind if I talk to him alone?

The MP's eye each other over Torca's head.

TORCA

You sure about that?

Shad looks at Torca. The kid has a weird smile on his face.

SHAD

(to Torca)

Thought it might be easier to talk. Give you the chance to explain your side of this.

Torca shrugs.

The MP's give Torca a disgusted glance and leave.

FIRST MP

We'll be right outside.

Shad settles his gaze on his new patient.

SHAD

I read the report. Torca - is that your real name?

Another shrug.

SHAD

Want to tell me what happened?

TORCA

Thought you said you read the report.

Seeing how it's going to be, Shad takes a breath.

SHAD

Okay. Is it true?

TORCA

Yeah.

SHAD

Why not wait for the enemy?

TORCA

Everyone's an enemy out there.

SHAD

These were guys in your platoon...

TORCA

If we get fucked it's not always because of the *enemy* you're talking about. It's because some fucking new guy gets us marked. Then *Boom!* - we're hit.

SHAD

Newbies need guidance.

TORCA

Not at my expense. I took them out of their misery. Those FNG's were going home in a bag anyway.

SHAD

How can you be the judge of that?

Torca's eyes brand Shad a naive idiot.

TORCA

Been out here as long as I have, you know.

EXT. JUNGLE - NIGHT

Face smeared with burnt cork, Torca belly crawls toward his unit's perimeter. His rifle is mounted with a night scope and silencer.

With no sound, he turns, slithers within 200 Yards of BRADY, a twitchy new guy whose eyes are trying to make sense of the dark.

Through Torca's night scope, Brady's on high alert.

Rifle to his eye, Torca smiles. Squeezes, squeezes... CLICK.

Blood explodes across Brady's gut. He hears the distant rifle Thwumpf! In silent shock, Brady stares in Torca's direction.

Tendrils of rifle smoke curl around Torca. He sniffs the air - reveling in the smell of burnt powder.

Crawling closer to his prey, Torca watches, engrossed, as Brady's body drains of life.

INT. SHAD'S OFFICE - DA

Torca shows no remorse.

TORCA

Just doing what the army taught me.

Unblinking, he leans closer to Shad.

TORCA

I kinda liked watching them squirm.

Skin crawling, Shad tries to keep his composure.

SHAD

Guards!

Torca gives Shad a bizarre smile.

TORCA

I thought you were going to fix me.

The door opens. Williams and the MP's swarm in.

SHAD

We're done here.

Shad rises. Backs away as the MP's haul Torca out.