

THE GREATEST BEER RUN EVER

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I was born July 13, 1963. Mama and Daddy moved to Lexington, Kentucky, after I was born, and then to Frankfort, Kentucky. It was The Sixties. Daddy was working in Frankfort when Martin Luther King, Jr., marched there. He and Mama took me in a stroller. On the way to the Capitol, a sweet African American woman approached Mama and told her to take me home – which she did. Daddy went on and actually shook MLK's hand. He loved that story. They moved home to the farm in 1964 when my grandfather, Ben Adams, died October 17, 1964. In thinking about this paper, getting from Point A to Point B, I reflected on some of the things that I remember about growing up on the farm in The Sixties. There were pull tabs on cans, the kind that you could cut your foot on. These were still not as good as the Long Tom's in bottles from the chest cooler at Country Boy Store or The Store in Lafayette. Rotary dial phones (which our children will never know) were the only phones we had. I remember when we got the first long cord that allowed us to walk around most of the kitchen when we were able to get on. My grandparents' numbers were 5-3380 and 6-1441. We shared a party line with Aunt Mopey and Uncle Bill, and then with R.V. and Minnie Carter, who lived on the farm. July 20, 1969 was a Sunday. Mama and Daddy made us watch the first moon landing. They also made us come in

and watch the televising of Nixon's resignation speech on Thursday, August 8, 1974. I was 11 years old. I didn't want to watch, it was the end of summer and I had important things to do, but I am so glad they made these things part of our lives.

I started at South Christian Elementary in the fall of 1969. We had one color television in the den and it was connected to an antennae. One black ribbon cable ran from the outside to the back of the television to a two pole hook up. We received channels 2, 4 and 5 out of Nashville, along with Channel 8. If the weather was right we could pick up Channel 13 out of Bowling Green. There was no remote. Let me re-phrase that, my little brother and I were the remotes. I remember The Wonderful World of Disney on Sunday nights. The Wild, Wild West. Gomer Pyle. Green Acres. The Brady Bunch. The Smothers Brothers. ...and I remember the semi-religious act of the evening news. Specifically, whether it was Channel 5, 4 or 2, I remember what seemed like the leading news story each night was The Vietnam War and casualty counts.

Full disclosure: I knew/know so very little about that War. Candidly speaking, I know the music of The Sixties from much more recently. What I really know about The Vietnam War would be from The Deer Hunter, Apocalypse Now, Forrest Gump, Born on the Fourth of July, Good Morning Vietnam and that genre of movies. I have absolutely no independent recollection of studying it in History at Hopkinsville High School – and Trevor Hooks was a great History teacher. Daddy had served

in the Air Force. He was stationed at Kincheloe Air Force Base in Michigan. My bad math seems to indicate that this was from 1960 to 1962 having been in the Air Force Reserves at U.K. I know he didn't re-up. He would have been 28 when he got out. He would not have been eligible for the Draft Lottery in December 1969 in that it only applied to those born between 1/1/1944 and 12/31/1950.

The First Indochina War started in 1955 and, apparently, never really ended. What we know as the Vietnam War really (the Second Indochina War) got underway in 1964 with the Gulf of Tonkin incident that involved a clash between a U.S. Destroyer and a fast attack North Vietnamese vessel. In 1959 the U.S. had less than 1000 servicemen in Vietnam. In 1963/1964 we had 23000 troops there. By 1964/1965 the number approached 184000. By 1968 the U.S. had 536,100 troops in Vietnam.

So, a brief aside regarding my 13 year old son, Will. Will is incredibly receptive for his age. He's big reader and a bigger listener. He needs a cardigan sweater, Hushpuppies and a pipe. He's a 40 year old man in a 13 year old body. Last fall, we were on the way to school in the morning and listening to NPR. At that time, there was much in the news about North Korea, and Will asked, "What happens if we go to war with North Korea?". I realized, based upon his question that he had no exposure to this concept – a nation at war (or war as he perceived it). I told him, in so many words, that life would go on. He'd keep going to school, I would keep going to the Courthouse, and Melissa would keep on teaching. It was still difficult for

him to fathom, not having a frame of reference. This is worth mentioning, because everyone here has experienced everyday life in a nation at war. Some more than others, and some of you here may have served.

I mean absolutely no disrespect to anyone who served. I promise that I am not diminishing any service to this country. I was a little younger than Will when we watched the news and saw the displayed casualty counts. *I* had no frame of reference. It was just news. I was totally unaware of the fact that this was the first televised war. Despite my big bell bottoms and long hair, I was not actually aware of divide caused by this war in this nation. I remember going to the Alhambra and two GI's entered in uniform and sat down. The people sitting next to them moved. I also recall cousins visiting from out of town being amazed at all the helicopters and planes flying in South Christian. Nothing unusual to us. One had mechanical problems and had to sit down on the farm. The General sent Daddy a personal thank you. My frame of reference for this developed much later.

In November of 1967, man named John "Chick or Chickie" Donohue, sat in Doc Fiddler's Bar, in Inwood, New York (North Manhattan). Chick was a 26 year old Marine Corp veteran who was now working as a merchant seaman. The patrons of the neighborhood bar had attended nearly thirty funerals for casualties of the Vietnam War and were now seeing protestors turn on the troops. Many of these troops were 18 and 19 year old boys. The bartender was George Lynch. They called him The Colonel. The Colonel was a patriotic vet, and Chick described him as "beautifully crazy".

Returning servicemen didn't buy drinks when they came to Doc Fiddler's. The TV above the bar was on and there were stories about these kids coming home and being called murderers. They were spat upon. The Colonel and the patrons were upset. They commented on how demoralizing this must be for these young men in service. The Colonel wanted to show the troops, these kids that grew up in Inwood, New York, that they were supported. "Someone should go over to 'Nam, track down our boys from the neighborhood, and bring them each a beer.". The Colonel looked at Chick and asked to borrow Chick's seaman card, a "Z" card. Civilians could not fly into Vietnam without military orders. Bear in mind that the Colonel didn't look anything like Chick, so this was not going to work coming out of the gate, but Chick was still trying to determine if this was just "bar talk".

The Colonel had purchased a lot adjacent to The Fiddler and had a flag pole erected. The flag was raised and lowered properly each day. The Colonel also had spare bunks for returning servicemen to sleep if they didn't have a place to stay AND he secured big time sponsors for his annual parade. Maybe this was the "beautiful crazy", but it appeared that The Colonel was serious. Having served in the Marines, having access to ships headed to the Pacific, John "Chick" Donohue assesses the feasibility of this whim. Very interestingly, he starts with listing boys from the neighborhood who have been lost, he reviews his friends who are there and he very objectively considers the protestors whom he defines as being entitled to their beliefs about the war. They were not wrong, he surmises, but their beef should be with the Johnsons (LBJ), the Westmorelands and McNamaras of the world.

He goes on to note that the demoralization would eventually be joined by returning troops actively participating in the dissent. Chick determines then and there that he has to try. This is for the kids. This is for his friends. This is for the neighborhood. He might get stopped by some authority (bear in mind Chick has an issue with authority). Thus begins the makings of “The Greatest Beer Run Ever”. Chick tells The Colonel he will do it.

The next night at the bar, as Chick arrives, he is met by the mother of Tommy Collins. Tommy is the younger brother of Chuckles Collins, one of Chick’s lifelong friends. Mrs. Collins, not one to be in pub, thanks Chick because word had spread. She offers Chick 100.00 in small denominations, which he refuses. A list is created. There was Ricky Duggan that had grown up in the same building with Chick. Kevin McLoone was a friend of Chick’s. They grew up together and had been to Giant’s games together. Kevin was a Marine and had spent a tour, but returned to Vietnam to install technology. Joey McFadden was in ‘Nam, along with Chick’s lifelong friend, Bobby Pappas. Bobby was 20, married and had a child. He had his list and units, the only problem was that Chick was not certain that this could be done.

The next day, Chick sets off to the National Maritime Union Hall. In what follows, as well as the balance of the book, you learn two things very quickly about Chickie Donohue. One, he is a huge Maritime Union advocate, and he uses it to his advantage. Two, he is a master of seizing an opportunity – damn the ultimate consequences. Because of his experience, he ends up on the Drake Victory, a refurbished World War Two vessel used to transport

everything. The Victory class ships had been mothballed after World War Two and pulled out to be used for Vietnam deliveries. He has time to pack a bag and head to the ship. He includes in his bag, six PBR, six Schlitz and six Schaefer. This gets to be humorous along the way. He gets a ride at the pier to the ship and calls his mother and father to tell them he's shipping out. He doesn't tell them where or why and gets onboard the Drake as the lead "oilman". The ship heads twenty five miles out to sea, then south to the Panama Canal and into the Pacific. They are carrying ammunition. The Drake drops anchor off the coast of Vietnam on January 19, 1968.

Along the way, Chick works to become the Ship Chairman, per Union rules. He worked multiple shifts as part of a plan to free up time when they arrived. They are advised that no one gets off the ship for security reasons, but this doesn't stop Chick. Since he is Union AND the Chairman, he meets with the Captain and explains that his step brother is here in 'Nam and he has to deliver some serious family news. Chick's not a big fan of the Captain (or any officer, for that matter), but explains that because he had doubled up on shifts that he's clear for three days. The Captain agrees and tells Chick not to get killed because he doesn't want to fill out the paperwork. Remember that Chick thinks he can pull this off in three days...

So, Chick pulls the 18 beers out of hiding, pitches them in another bag and heads out in a water taxi. MP's operate and man the water taxi's for security reasons, much like not getting off the boat. En route to shore, Chick notices the green and yellow sword and ax insignia on their uniforms. This,

ironically, is the 127th MP Company, which by the way, is Tommy Collins unit. Some of these MP's are on the way to relieve Tommy, who is shocked. Chick explains why he is there, beautifully crazy, and hands Tommy a beer. Chick delivers instructions from Tommy's mother and they share a laugh over Chick being there in a madras shirt and jeans. That will become important. What follows involves more than a beer in QuiNhon. Just so you know, it's never just a beer. Along with Chick's observation that many of the kids in Tommy's Unit would not be able to drink in the U.S. or vote – but were old enough to fight. Chick meets a Sergeant from Texas in the bar. When they return to Tommy's barracks, they continue to celebrate and a young lieutenant comes in barking questions. Remember what I said about Chick and officers, well, Chick barks back. The officer looks Chick over, shuts up and leaves. It's then that Tommy explains that in civilian clothes, everyone thinks Chick is CIA. Chick says good bye to Tommy and he's off to find Ricky Duggan.

The Sergeant from Texas in the bar in QuiNhon had a patch on his uniform with a black horse head set against a yellow background. This was the insignia of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, Bravo Company. The 1st Air Cavalry was a horse unit in World War Two. In Vietnam they rode choppers. The Texan had invited Chick to the fly with him on a mail run to the Highlands. No orders were necessary and Chick met him, to his surprise, at 8:00 the next morning at the airbase. Chick gets dropped at An Khe and is advised that Bravo Company had left for the DMZ 200 miles north. Chick seeks out the Sergeant about a mile up the road who advises that Ricky has gone

“north”. The Sergeant says that there’s nothing he can do for Chick, but if he writes Ricky a letter, Ricky would get it that afternoon. Wait a minute, THAT afternoon... Apparently, there was another mail run headed “north”. Chick asks if he can hop that plane. The Sergeant replies, “Well, you got here didn’t you?”. Chick heads back down the road to An Khe Airbase. He’s walking alone. A Jeep approaches from the rear with three guys in it. The Jeep stops just past Chick. One of the guys in the Jeep explains that, as a rule, they never pass an American. When asked where he is headed, Chick begins to explain that he’s looking for someone. One of the guys in the front whips his head around and says, “What the Hell?”. It’s Kevin McLoone. He’s on the list.

Kevin was there to assist in communications. Apparently, chopper communication was FM based, the Viet Cong had been hacking in to transmissions. Chick pulls out beer for all four. He does explain, at this point, that he keeps replenishing his supply because it’s hot in Vietnam. Another rule that Chick makes note of is that you always had to drink three or four in ‘Nam. The first would taste like vinegar. The second beer might taste like formaldehyde and the third like the Harlem River. You might get a good one on the fourth try. Kevin gets Chick to the airbase, and takes Chick to the pilot. The pilot agrees to take Chick, and tells him to just go up to Command and get his Orders. When Chick advises that he doesn’t have any Orders, the pilot sizes him up and tells him to at least go and put his name on the manifest. With a handshake and hug for Kevin, Chick is off to his next stop – Ricky, somewhere up “north”.

So at this point, Chick is feeling like this is a bunt. Three days, no problem. Two guys on the mail transport had been wounded and were returning “north”. These guys are in Ricky’s Company and the plane lands in Phu Bai. Off the plane, Chick waits until the two load a transport truck. As the truck begins to move forward, he yells and bangs the side of the truck once. It stops and he climbs in the back and bangs twice. Apparently, these are universal signals. The Truck arrives at LZ Tombstone (that sounds positive). The two soldiers advise that they need to get to LZ Jane. Chick, thinking on his feet, heads to the Operations Center and tells them in his best Madras plaid shirt, jeans and CIA voice that he needs to get on the manifest to LZ Jane. Not only is he booked, but he eats dinner with the Major who questioned him about things going on in the U.S.. After a good meal (with an officer), Chick is on a Huey, with the doors open headed to Quang Tri over hostile territory.

The chopper dusts off with Chick on the ground with two returning servicemen and a civilian. The sergeant major yells, “Who’s this guy?”, and the two guys with him say they don’t know. After a rough explanation of the fact that Chick is here looking for Duggan, the sergeant major is in on it and radios for Duggan to come back in with his roster number. Another security measure. They actually have Chick get down in a hooch, a one man foxhole, and they cover him with a poncho. When Ricky gets in he asks the sergeant major, “You wanted to see me sir?”, and he responds, “Oh, we didn’t want to see you, he did.”, and they pull the poncho away. Yet another “Holy shit!”, and the story unfolds. Chick is “assigned” to Ricky and they

go back out on ambush patrol. When Chick is asleep in another hooch because there are no buildings out there, they notice movement in the brush. Another serviceman calls for Duggan and the Starlight Scope, an early version of night vision that costed a million dollars. Shots are fired and Chick is scared for the first time thinking that this might not have been the best or smartest idea. It's not until the next day that they get back to Operations and then to the beer that Chick had brought. Later in the day, they get Chick to another LZ and he wishes Ricky well with a shove off via Chinook, approved by the pilot, to anywhere other than there.

Chick works his magic back to Phu Cat, 17 miles north of QuiNhon where the Drake is anchored. Gets off the Chinook and is harassed by a young Marine. It's very interesting how he is impressed with the fact that he walked away from the kid wondering if the young man would shoot him. He's creating a quandry, just by being there, and catches a ride on a truck. Somewhere south of where he lands, at a fork in the road, the driver needs to go left and Chick wants to go right so he gets out and hoofs it south on a dark jungle road. About a half a mile down the road Chick happens on a young child playing with a ball in the road. As he approached the child, smiling at him, he hears a scream and a woman, probably the child's mother appears of the jungle and snatches the child. Chick, unnerved, heads on down the road. A short time later he is picked up by a Korean truck driver who ends up taking Chick to Chick's destination before his own and dropping him. The MP's that Chick meet at the gate are amazed, telling him

that the road he travelled was "Charlie's" at night. It then that Chick learns, not surprisingly, that the Drake Victory has left port.

In Chick style, he makes his way to Saigon. Things are complicated now because all he has is his "Z" card. At this point, he learns from the American Consulate that he needs both a visa and a permit to get out of South Vietnam. This is going to take some time and some bribes. The Consulate official, with whom Chick develops a love-hate relationship, finally submits to Chick to the extent that he points Chick in the direction of the French company that facilitated the business with the Drake Victory, Mr. Minh. By virtue of Chick being "on the beach" they were obligated to pay him \$40.00 per day. As Chick says, "God bless the National Maritime Union."

Chick is on hold in Saigon at this point. He sees Heller every day at the Consulate, and Minh each day to collect his \$40.00. He finds a place to stay in a hotel owned by a South Vietnamese police officer he befriends. Throughout this daily process, Chick talks about reporters at a bar where he hangs out while waiting. Ultimately, he gets his passport, and is advanced 900.00 by Heller and the U.S. government in order to secure his exit visa. Heller advises that there is another Victory ship headed to Manila that has agreed to take him on and he needs to be at the airbase at 8:00 a.m. Chick notes he is a little upset because he would not be able to find Joey McFadden or his buddy Bobby Pappas.

Chick runs in to an old sea faring friend who on the S.S. Limon at a bar. The Limon is a frigate that's refrigerated and holds 7000 tons of frozen food that

includes anything that could be frozen. They head out for one of Chick's many nights on the town in downtown Saigon. January 31, 1968 is a big night because it the Vietnamese New Year's Eve, other wise known as "The Tet", and Chick is set to leave the next day.

In a nutshell, this had become a very unpopular war which was exacerbated because everything was televised in almost real time and being fought in the homes of U.S. families. There had been rumblings about a change in tactics of the NVA and the Viet Cong. Apparently, Ho Chi Minh and General Giap had sought a Tet holiday truce and Johnson, McNamara and Westmoreland had agreed to it. The popular theory is that the U.S. should have been aware that something was up, but it seems that the U.S. wanted a breather as badly as the North Vietnamese. In actuality, the NVA and Viet Cong had begun moving weapons and troops, in secret, into many major cities with the attack scheduled to occur during the very truce they had sought. 84000 NVA and Viet Cong attacked over 100 cities and military sites.

Meanwhile, Chick and his found friend are at a bar, shocking, and listening to The Doors. While talking to a girl named Peach Blossom who delivers a wonderful history of Vietnam, as the New Year rings in, Chick comments on the fact that the fireworks seem to keep going and going, not knowing at that moment that the Tet Offensive is underway. This includes the taking of the U.S. Embassy. This is a really, really interesting part of the book with literally handfuls of U.S. troops defending or retaking cities, airbases and government buildings. Apparently, the U.S. response to the NVA/Vietcong

strategic shift was minimal at best, and Chick is flat in the middle of it. He manages to find Heller, who had agreed to take him to the airbase. This ultimately doesn't matter because in addition to losing the Embassy, the NVA and Vietcong took the airbase. Chick's not going anywhere. One of the believed goals of the Tet Offensive was to create an opportunity for South Vietnamese to rebel against the U.S. and allied forces. While this did not appear to be successful, it is thought that the NVA and Viet Cong certainly won the public relations war with the Tet Offensive.

Saigon is blockaded, but Chick is able to move about with relative ease - because he's Chick. He uses his access to the Limon to move food to his hotel and bar hangouts. With this time, he also begins working on finding Joey McFadden and Bobby Pappas. He learns that Joey had contracted Malaria a second time and had shipped home. Bobby, he believes is up at Long Binh base, about an hour drive north of Saigon. Long Bihn was a large base, as well as being described as a tinder box because it was the main ammunition dump. Chick, in Chick fashion finds a vehicle headed there. Long Bihn was one of the places that Bob Hope appeared with Raquel Welch just that Christmas.

Chick arrives and heads to the Main Depot, just off base (because of the ammo), to find Bobby. Bobby was a communications specialist there. The MP's get Bobby without telling him who is there to see him, and there's no doubt that Bobby is surprised. Chick hands him a beer, noting from the trip that it's symbolic because there are bars all over the base. Chick stays with

Bobby to finish his shift and then Bobby takes Chick to get him fatigues. On the nametag on the left: John Chick Donohue. On the right side: Civilian. The two lifelong friends then head to the Enlisted Means Club, despite Bobby being a Sergeant. Chick and Bobby talk with Bobby's command who asks lots of questions about Saigon, with Bobby telling his command that Chick was there for the taking and re-taking of the Embassy. Chick advises that he thinks that the war is "in the short rows". Chick stays with Bobby for a couple of days and then has to head back to Saigon. Another handshake and a prayer.

Chick is back in Saigon, and he returns to his bar with all the correspondents. The news of the day is all the goings on in Washington. Westmoreland wants another 200,000 troops plus. The Senate was holding hearings questioning whether the Gulf of Tonkin incident happened at all. In the meantime, journalists were able to get their footage and stories out of Vietnam to Japan and on the air in almost real time changing Americans' opinions of the war as fast as changing a channel. The members of the press were engaged in their normal arguments when a huge explosion north of Saigon fills the sky. The explosions were so large and continuing that some thought the NVA might have acquired nuclear weaponry. It had to be Long Binh and Bobby was there in the middle of it. At first light, Chick hitches a ride on a transport to Long Binh and makes his way through the shambles to the Depot. There, standing in the middle of the Depot is Bobby Pappas – who, by the way, is very pissed at Chick who had said that he thought the war was almost over. Bobby asks. "Does this look like this freakin' war is over?". Chick responds,

“Can’t you take a joke?”. Relief sets in and Bobby recaps the incoming rockets that set off some of the explosions. There were lots of casualties. The Depot was constructed of steel units under 7 or 8 feet of sand bags. Yet again, they retire to Enlisted Men’s Club, but Chick can’t stay this time. Relieved to see his friend alive, Chick heads back to Saigon.

February 1968 started with the publication of the photo we have all seen of the National Vietnamese Police General shooting the Viet Cong prisoner in the street at point blank range. Eddie Adams would win the Pulitzer for that picture. Walter Cronkite goes on air, having met with General Creighton Abrams and effectively tells the U.S. that this war cannot be won. LBJ is quoted as saying that if they lost Cronkite they had lost middle America. McNamara resigns. Soon it was March and they don’t have St. Patrick’s Day parades in Vietnam for Irish boys. Very shortly thereafter, the Limon, the refrigerated ship was hit with rockets. In sum, the Captain of the Limon said to unload the ship or he would have it unloaded in Manila. One of the oilers on the Limon had been injured in the attack. Chick gets his friend to take him to the Captain. This was a Union ship. They could not sail short an oiler. The Captain eyed Chick up and down and said, “What the Hell, be on board at 8:00. The Limon waits for no man.”. Chick writes that it was around 3:00 at the time. He thought he could use the five hours to see his friends in Saigon and say goodbye. He really wished that he could say goodbye to the guys that he came to see. Chick never returned to shore. He was NOT missing this one.

After a stop in the Phillipines, the Limon set out across the Pacific. Three weeks later they dropped anchor in Seattle. Chick picked up his \$2000 pay leaving the boat. He went straight to a J.C. Penney and bought new clothes and then to the airport and bought a ticket on the first American Airlines flight home. They moved him up to first class and the gentleman seated next to him wanted to hear Chick's story. I guess some of the wear and tear showed in Chick. I know that you will be surprised to learn that they ordered drinks and Chick told his story over the next six hours.

Probably just as important, when Chick got off the plane at JFK, he took a cab to straight to The Fiddler. The Colonel remarked on his entrance to the bar, "Holy Shit, Chickie, you're alive!". Chick told him that, yes, he was and so were Tommy, Kevin, Ricky, Joey and Bobby. The Colonel poured shots for everyone there, including himself and raised his saying, "To Chickie, who brought our boys beer, respect, pride and love, God damn it!".

The story is legend, and there were those that didn't believe that a 26 year Merchant Marine could have pulled this off. Chick wrote the book in March of 2017. Pabst Blue Ribbon produced a 12 minute video with Chick and the guys which you can find on YouTube. Just search The Greatest Beer Run Ever. There are still doubters, but the friends he visited confirm "The Run" in consistent detail. I will say this, as well, even if parts of the story are stretched, for a short book, it is full of historical, political, geographical and nautical information. I, for one, believe.

So, here's your takeaway. First, I went into this book thinking that this would be a one sided presentation of grievances from the Vietnam War chocked full of how the protesters were wrong in their treatment of troops. In some respects, maybe Chick's aversion to authority, he lays it on the backs of the politicians and the military. This was personal to him. These were friends he grew up with. I remain amazed at the over-all objectivity of John Chickie Donohue. It was consistently more a matter of seeing the soldiers, these boys, as humans who served the needs of their country as ordered at the time, right or wrong. Second, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I have not spent more time learning about and understanding this War, especially considering that parts of it involved our backyard. Finally, I will say this: This is about friendship as much or more than anything else. Daddy always said that the way to determine your good friends is to figure out who would come get you if you were in Hong Kong and ran out of money. Bobby Pappas, Ricky Duggan, Kevin McLoone, Joey McFadden and Tommy Collins had a great friend.