

DRUGS AWAY

By Michael Lund

That Charlie got his brains spread over the Cambodian treetops made most of them forget that he'd been the chief scriptwriter for a doomed radio propaganda series. "*Insane*," he'd called "Drugs Away;" but the rest of them came to realize he was the crazy one. Still, maybe he'd been a genius, after all. "Sad loss," they told others back home, privately including themselves among the casualties.

The radio serial, to be broadcast in-country, was the brainchild of "Mad" Major Moon, who saw it as an effective anti-drug tool. His previous assignment had been near Chicago, where he was addicted to WCFL's Chicken Man. That ongoing comic drama of a would-be super hero originated in the Windy City and was then syndicated on, among other places, Armed Forces Radio.

"We'll call our show Drugs Away," the major told his soldiers. "You know, like 'Bombs Away.' The hero is named Smash. Sidearm is his diminutive sidekick."

"Turds Away," whispered Charlie to Mark, one of the other information specialists Mad Moon assigned to the project. Aloud he said, "You wouldn't want to go with something more conventional, sir, akin to 'Waste Water Means Water Shortage'?"

Mark, like Charlie a fellow former DJ, added,

"Hmm. Yes. 'Pot Lips Send Smoke Signals'? That's catchy."

Gerry, the third man on the team, was sleeping on the floor of the sound booth, and both Charlie and Mark hoped he was drunk enough not to wake until Mad Moon left. Gerry, though, would be the first to see how Drugs Away drew out Charlie's weakness as well as his strengths.

"We're going to have drama, men," Major Moon insisted. "Add some fire to the campaign!"

Mark asked, "Okay, sir, what happens in each episode? Does Smash go after the bad guys?"

"Of course, private. But he never catches the big boys, know what I mean? Potter, the most dastardly dealer in all of Gotham." The men would later call him "Putter," "Butter," "Pothole," "Butthole."

"Ah," Charlie chimed in. "So, listeners tune in for more episodes, hoping the villain is finally apprehended . . . or exploded, or drowned in a wooden barrel of oil, or incinerated in a tower of flame?"

Mark's eyes widened. He recalled how Charlie, on night guard duty, was fascinated by the Cobra gunships "working out," as they said, on suspected enemy units. The minigun's lines of fire were, he said with genuine admiration, "fucking lasers!"

“Good, sir,” said Mark to Major Moon. “But, um, there needs to be some sort of climax to each show, doesn’t there? I mean, I’m sure you’ve thought of that.”

Mad Moon eyed him suspiciously. He worried that the draftees in this unit, most of whom had more education than he did, were mocking him. “Hell yes, I’ve thought of that. Smash and Sidearm find a group of users and their equipment each time, see. And what happens is, they crash into a house—or a tent, or a Quonset hut—and they kick the shit out of everything—the pipes, the syringes, all that . . . that . . . paraphernalia. Smash lights into it screaming ‘Drugs Away!’ and the lowlife yell, faint, run for their lives.”

“I can see that happening,” agreed Mark, deliberately not exchanging glances with Charlie.

“We can give you noise,” added Charlie, convincingly. “Smash will fucking explode! Excuse me, sir.” He ducked his head, as if he’d spoken inappropriately. “I mean, he’ll blow things up, sir”

“That’s okay, Specialist. And you’re damn right he will.”

So the project began, despite the enlisted men’s conviction that such a program would never be aired. They could script episodes, record and edit them, but there was no chance in hell, they believed, that the top brass would let them be broadcast.

“It’s announcing to everyone that we know there’s a drug problem in Vietnam, for Christ’s sake,” explained Gerry later. A genius in his own way, he had concocted a scheme that let him work on his own schedule even in a war. “We’ve made a major effort to cover it up for months. Now we’re going to confirm what the mainstream media has been reporting? Nevah happen, G.I.”

The Information Office’s mission, of course, was to control the story. By this point, coverage of the protest movement was extensive back

home, and the in-country correspondents seemed interested only in tales of waste, ineffectiveness, low morale, drug use. Once hungry for genuine news of military progress, they were now on an anti-war feeding frenzy .

“Still,” Charlie winked, “I smell a good gig here.” He rose to an exaggerated position of attention. “From this day forward, men, we’re busy . . . hell, we’re enamored, possessed, enraptured by the “Drugs Away” project. We can’t go out on other stories or bother ourselves with routine jobs ‘cause this baby is going to consume us.”

Mark later remembered the word “consume” as prophetic. But at the time he grinned and snapped off a salute. “Right you are, sir! It’s a damned creative challenge to come up with great ideas, so it’s going to take time, energy, in-tensi-ty!” He paused conspiratorially.

“But we are writers! We’ve just got to isolate the team from the everyday, the hoi polloi, the this and that. We’ll brainstorm, feed off each other’s genius to make this the best goddamned radio show Vietnam has ever seen . . . well, heard.” He didn’t realize that “Drugs Away” would feed on them all, but especially on Charlie, who was drawn by more than the creative challenge. Without realizing it, he was crossing the line between reality and fantasy.

Still, the great boondoggle of their tour had begun. And it was not one they had dreamed up themselves, but one they’d been assigned. Fortunately, they were able to keep what they were doing hidden from the civilian press, who would have gone wild with the story.

Charlie explained the “Drugs Away” scheme to his new friends at the enlisted men’s club, three veterans finishing the last weeks of their tour after experiences in the field they would not discuss. Jimmy, an infantry platoon leader, was not surprised that the Army was putting men to work on such a project. “There it is,” he said, lighting another Marlboro. “Another reason to keep officers in the rear .”

“Now, now. Some of those USARV-HQ colonels are falling all over each other to get out in the field,” said Wayne. The former adviser to an ARVN unit was half right, of course: promotion came with combat experience. And some officers, they admitted, were truly motivated, gung-ho to be with the men. Nearly all the enlisted men in USARV-HQ, however, were happy to be in so well fortified a base that they could enjoy bowling lanes, swimming pools, restaurants, and well-stocked PX’s. Their worst enemy was boredom.

“I’ve taken my share of them into battle,” said Skyking, a chopper pilot. “Wait! Make that ‘over battle’—i.e., a few thousand feet above the action where I could keep them safe.” The name “Prince” was printed on his uniform, but, out of the bush, he promoted himself to the next rank. He was the guy who would get Charlie on the bird that was shot out of the air over Memot, in Cambodia.

“I’ve been on a night ambush,” Charlie boasted. “Wanted to record the sound, you know—the jungle quiet, the nocturnal animals, wind in the reeds. Then, blam, rat-a-tat-tat, kablooe! Blown to smithereens. I had three different recorders set up.” He sighed. “But nothing happened.”

Jimmy knew the lieutenant who’d led the patrol. When his CO said he had to take the 71R with him, he set up where the Viet Cong were least likely to be. He didn’t want this asshole’s death on his conscious. He had enough of them already.

Wayne announced, “Another round,” not a question but an assertion. The issue was who would pay. Wayne had a nervous tic, the left side of his face flinching randomly. It wasn’t clear why he hadn’t been put on a Freedom Bird going home yet.

He and the others, though, were willing to hear Charlie’s ideas for “Drugs Away,” a goofy distraction from whatever they thought about when they were alone. Immune to the seductive

charm of comic book heroism, they would still chime in with suggestions, like Jimmy’s proposed chicken coop/chicken poop scenario.

It was inspired by Charlie’s mock daily news feed: “A chicken coop was broken into south of Dung Heap yesterday,” he would intone in his deepest announcer voice, entertaining visitors from other offices. “Fifteen hundred enemy were killed. There were no friendly casualties, though one CO got egg on his face and one hen was . . . well, we’d better not go into what happened to her.”

“So, you’ve got a bunch of guys smoking pot in a Vietnamese chicken coop, see,” explained Jimmy. “They’re passing around a pipe, and then it runs out. So, one guy . . .”

“PFC Shitforbrains,” offers Skyking.

“ . . . PFC Shitforbrains looks for the stash in and amongst—you can use that word, amongst—the nests.”

“And he finds a pile of dried chicken shit!” laughs Charlie. “They’re smoking it up, and Smash crashes in, tears the place apart, but Sidearm can’t find the weed. Busted!”

They cleaned the script up, of course, and there was pot in the coop. They titled it “Chicken Feed,” and every time the phrase was used they drew it out and inserted a long pause in the middle: “chickennnnn . . . feed!” Major Moon loved the echo of Chicken Man.

The only problem was figuring out how to make the sound of nests being ripped apart. Breaking eggs was easy—real eggs from the mess hall. Finally they decided rustling papers was close enough. The old saw about making an omelet was told too many times, however.

Meanwhile, Charlie was trying to get the grunts to talk about what they’d seen. “It was bad out there, huh?” he’d say to Wayne, who would have his back to the band from the Philippines playing on stage, three women gyrating to classic American rock-n-roll, a male drummer.

He responded, “It’s bad everywhere, man.”

“How about you, Sky? Were you able to stay above it all, so to speak, or did you get down into the shit?”

“We all get into it sooner or later. Ain’t that right, Jimmy?”

“So they tell me.”

Charlie’s attention switched to the lead dancer, whose steps resembled a stripper’s, though no clothes came off. Her bump and grind took her in a complete circle, her ass a rotating miracle. The other three seemed to have no interest in the music or the girl. Each night they drank steadily until the club closed, their expressions unchanging except for Wayne’s recurring tic.

Charlie told a long tale about flying on a Medevac chopper, wanting to make an audio feature about rescue operations. In a rare moment of restraint, Mad Moon nixed the project when he was told how many times that story had been done.

The goal of some enlisted journalists was to get out of the office for a week or two, supposedly in search of Vietnamization success stories. Nixon, frantic about the upcoming election, was demanding they produce evidence that the host country was taking on responsibility for its own survival. Reporters were careful to manage only one short feature for each trip, though, so the officers wouldn’t expect much from their comrades. Polishing each story could take a week or more.

Gerry had done one better. While assigned to audio, he was also a good photographer and took pictures wherever he went. Since the dark room belonged to the official photographers, he could only develop and print at night. After a while, he also began to work in the radio studio then as well.

One top sergeant left and a new one came, unfamiliar with the routine. Mark explained that Gerry worked the night shift, as if it were an established practice. And so it was for the rest of Gerry’s tour.

“Drugs Away,” though, was the perfect project to fill the days for Charlie, Mark, and Gerry as they concocted plots, reworked them, recorded a couple of proposed pilot episodes. They loved to add new sounds to the climactic scenes: rocks rattling inside a helmet, fists pounding sandbags, whiskey bottles broken into a fifty-gallon barrel.

There were also screams, cries, yips, and barks as Smash ran, leaped, dropped on top of offenders. Men from photojournalism, *Stars and Stripes*, daily releases were eager to help, adding new voices, moans and groans, the pleas of surrender. The recording sessions were relief from tension and boredom. The project, a stretch to begin with, was spinning completely out of control.

The more episodes of “Drugs Away” Charlie wrote, the more bizarre the situations depicted. It was as if the author were coping with his own demons by vicariously exposing and rescuing fictional characters from tight spots. His creations would seek escape from the war in drugs but feel anxiety about getting caught, guilt for failing to be men. The tension would grow through the 30-minute plot to a point of unbearable intensity. Then, Smash flew onto the scene in a righteous rage, his anger an expression of everyone’s vague frustrations.

Charlie was the voice of Smash. Gerry and Mark noted the manic tones in his performances. They tried, unsuccessfully, to get him to tone it down. “You ain’t Smash, man. Or Chickenman. You’re still a plain old troop.”

In “Trash Can Can” half a dozen troops were smoking dope in a giant corrugated metal waste bin, with a lookout sending increasingly nervous alerts to the others. “I think I hear a noise, man.” “We’re goin’ get busted. I feel it.” “There’s someone out there, I’m telling you.”

Charlie wasn’t content to have Smash and Sidearm swing open the metal door, arrest the men, and confiscate their paraphernalia. He wanted his super heroes to parachute in from above, screaming “Airborne! Drugs Awayyyyy!”

They rubbed a green t-shirt to make the sound of a parachute and blew into the microphone for wind. Mad Moon told them to get cookie sheets from the mess hall, throw them into the wall, bounce them off metal chairs.

In the evenings, Charlie drank with his short-timer buddies, always trying to elicit their stories of combat. He also began to work on Skyking to get him a ride on a Cobra gunship. Their mini-guns fired one hundred rounds per second. “One hundred thrills a minute?” he asked Sky.

“You could say that.”

“Did you ever take passengers, when things were quiet, I mean?”

“Fuckin’ joy-riding officers.”

“They loved it?”

“The lucky ones.”

“I have a friend of a friend who owes me one, you know what I mean? And he can get anyone who’ll take me up a thirty-minute MARS call back home. And, hell, I’ll record the sounds of the flight, make it a great feature story.”

The next “Drugs Away” scenario had men mainlining on a beach of the South China Sea. Mad Moon ironically got that script started. Irritated that his project was not being automatically endorsed at the next level of command, he insisted on spreading the show’s range. “It’s the units with cushy assignments on the coast that get away with shit,” he explained. “We’ll target their asses.”

Charlie said, “Smash will come on them from out of the sea. He’ll have his frogman suit, the snorkel, fins. He’ll be like a typhoon, a waterspout, fuckin’ Neptune firing lightning bolts from his hands and blasting everything with his trident. It’ll be a spectacular episode!”

The Major stared at him for a moment, as if he sensed something more than the usual bitterness of draftees in Charlie’s face. “Don’t let it get too complicated, Troop. Just make it clear that drug use is hurting the mission and that we’ll kick the ass of anyone we catch.”

The enlisted men suspected the top brass

were less concerned with what the grunts did than with how support troops in the rear got their recreation. Men in the field knew they couldn’t all be high and survive. And controlled marijuana use may have helped them get through the dangers they faced and perform the inhuman acts required of the infantry.

“Hey, and give us a sighting of Potter this time,” the Major added. “We’ve got to keep the theme going, that there’s a super villain behind the scenes. He’s got ties to the North, to China, to Communists back in the good old U. S. of A. Motherfuckin’ peaceniks!”

So, Charlie went to work inserting Potter sightings into the next episode of Drugs Away—piloting a fishing coracle, selling black market watches from a rickshaw, disguised as a water buffalo. At the same time, he didn’t let up in his other campaign.

Sky must have tired of being bugged about a gunship ride, so he passed word on that a correspondent he knew wanted to do a story about chopper operations. Maybe strings were pulled, IOUs called in. It could all have been done on the sly, no one quite sure who authorized it.

But early one morning, Charlie hitched a ride over to Cu Chi, where he found a parking lot full of probably one hundred Cobras. Their blades folded, they resembled giant insects. Thinner than the Hueys or Chinooks, they looked as if they could slip into cracks or seams and open up the universe. One had a seat for him.

All the guys had seen Cobras at one time or another, hovering over enemy positions and sending down a stream of machine gun fire. Only one in five rounds was a tracer, but from a mile away it looked as if a line of light was unzipping the earth. The sound was more a hum than a series of pops. They also had rockets for larger targets.

The ships would rise up singly or in small groups from the air base, tip their noses toward the ground, and swing off on a mission. Charlie

couldn't believe how many were on the airstrip, parked in orderly rows with busy crews getting them ready for action. The prospect took his breath away.

What brought down the one he was on no one could say, though it had strayed over the border, dangerous even after the Cambodian Incursion. Sky made the announcement and Jimmy the conclusion: "It don't mean nothin'."

The men in HQ-IO hid their fear in the usual clever phrases: Charlie, the creator of Smash (descendant of Chickenman), had donned his superhero outfit, flown after the bad guys, and turned himself into "ass ash," made "Smash hash," "crashed." Everybody marked off another day on their short-timer calendar.

At about the same time, the brass killed "Drugs Away," exactly as predicted. Entertaining, but highlighting a problem better dealt with quietly.

After a period of anger, Mad Moon rebounded. He found a new obsession: stopping the flow of empty beer cans into the black market. They ended up hammered together into

tin walls for refugee huts erected on the edges of towns. And he was sure they were housing sappers, spies, the enemy. Another team began researching Beer Can Alley.

When they got back to the World, though, Mark and Gerry exchanged a few letters about the tragedy. A great mind had been lost, perhaps a genius. They would get together themselves one day, the two of them, and produce a new radio feature in his honor. They were talented writers, too, who could create a legend, "The Father of Smash."

This time, though, it would be about a peacekeeper, someone who defused tension, resolved conflict. War Away or something like that, with a hero who calmed troubled waters. They would write the story for their buddies, those who came home. And it would be a tribute to all who had been injured, embodied in tales of the zany wild man whose gift for words and story was unique.

They didn't do it, of course, more ready than they knew to leave it all in the past. The present was now, and who would really care, anyway?

