

# A BEAUTY FOR BRAVO COMPANY



Here is the August 1965 Playboy cover with Jo Collins as Playmate of the Year.

If the M-16 rifles had not started jamming, the filthy, exhausted men of 2nd Lt. Jack Price's platoon might never have gathered in the squad tent to ask him to do the impossible. But Vietnam in late 1965 was like that: Tiny circumstances set off unpredictable chains of events that led sometimes to belly laughs in the chow line, sometimes to brutal death in the jungle. You never knew where the chain might end. The point man of a patrol might trigger a mine, but often it was the second, third or even fourth man on the path who was blown to bits. So the problem with the rifles started the chain of events. Price's men took it from there.

Price was a 23-year-old West Point graduate when he arrived in Vietnam to take charge of his own platoon, and right away he heard soldiers curse the perilous unreliability of the Army's new M-16. The gas-operated weapon was jamming, sometimes in the middle of firefights with the Viet Cong, because expended shells stuck in the chamber. About the only way to knock the shell out was to shove a cleaning rod down the barrel. Price's company had no cleaning rods. Price was a platoon leader in Company B of the 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, 173rd Airborne Brigade. The 173rd was the first major ground-combat unit the U.S. Army sent to Vietnam. The hard-charging warriors of Company B called themselves the Bravo Bulls. The Bulls' officers had filled out the paperwork to get cleaning rods, to no avail. They beseeched supply sergeants, phoned Saigon and contacted the Pentagon. Still, no cleaning rods arrived. Stories were making the rounds that men had been killed in combat because their M-16s wouldn't fire.

Pfc. Jim Jackson, a Bravo Bull, almost became one of those stories. Jackson hiked out to the jungle with Lt. Ronald Zinn and his platoon the day Zinn was killed, July 7, 1965. The day was a dark one for the Bravo Bulls because Zinn, an athlete in the 1964 Olympic Games, was one of the company's most beloved men. After his death, they named their camp after him: Camp Zinn. Zinn and his platoon were creeping through the steaming jungle when they came upon a Viet Cong training camp. Bullets started raining in. The soldiers ducked for cover, but it was already too late for Zinn. Shot through the head, he fell instantly. Jackson scrambled into the jungle underbrush and began returning fire.

All around him, other Bravo Bulls fired back as well. The M-60 machine guns chugged out rapid fire, and the M-16s kept up a constant rattle.

The air grew thick with the acrid blue haze of gunpowder. Some of Jackson's buddies began screaming for help. Wounded men lay everywhere. Medics ignored the flying bullets and started dragging men to safety. The fight grew more frenzied, the firing more intense. Jackson wasn't sure he was going to make it out of this one alive. And then, as if to assure him he wouldn't, his M-16 jammed. Throwing the weapon aside, he crawled to Zinn, taking cover as the bullets kept ripping into the dead lieutenant's body. Jackson grabbed Zinn's M-16. The rifle stock was completely gone, shot off, but what was left of the weapon still worked. Jackson aimed it in the direction of the unseen enemy and fired it, over and over. He survived.

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Stories such as Jackson's were common. Men's lives were in jeopardy because they couldn't clear the shells from their rifle chambers. Dismayed that no one had been able to get the cleaning rods that would help, Lieutenant Price took action. He wrote a letter to a buddy at Colt Arms Co. Price had been on West Point's skeet and trapshooting team, and he occasionally had competed against the Colt Company's team. Colt made M-16s. Price told his buddy that he now was in Vietnam and his men needed cleaning rods. It was a matter of life and death to get them, he wrote. He offered to pay for them himself. Price sent off his letter to Colt. Then, along with the rest of the Bravo Bulls, he waited.

The Bulls had set up their camp in a rubber-tree plantation outside Bien Hoa, a ragged little town with a French restaurant but not much else. Bien Hoa also happened to be the place where the first U.S. advisers in Vietnam were killed, back in 1959. The soldiers weren't there to protect the town, though. Their orders were to help the South Vietnamese Army whenever it ran into too much trouble and to defend the airstrip. Jokers often called the Bien Hoa air base, about 20 miles north of Saigon, the busiest airport in the world. Minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, cargo planes, fighter jets and Huey helicopters armed with machine guns and loaded with soldiers took off and landed. If the birds in the nearby jungle were singing any songs, no one could hear them over the aircraft engines' constant roar. The Viet Cong hid beneath the jungle's dark green canopy and occasionally lobbed mortars that landed at the air base with a dull thud. They also fired their rifles at the cargo planes. Occasionally a plane would come skidding in, shot up, its metal underbelly screeching down the runway and showering sparks.

The Bravo Bulls' job was to chase the Viet Cong away from the airport. Or, preferably, to kill them. Price was a natural at the job. He and his men constantly humped out into the thick jungle, across rice paddies and through bamboo stands and tall elephant grass to shoot it out with the Viet Cong. When the men went out, many hoped they wouldn't find any enemy, because that meant somebody they were joking with just that morning might get killed. Price seemed to be fearless, though. He had an abundance of guts. Some thought Price acted too keen for combat when he first arrived at Bien Hoa. On one early patrol, far out of range of mortar support and unable to call in airstrikes, his platoon sergeant, Jim Quick, put his hand on Price's shoulder and told him to turn back. Whoa, whoa, whoa, said Quick, a Korean War veteran and 15 years older than the men around him: You'll get enough of it soon enough. More than you want.

Price learned. In a matter of weeks, his calm under fire and his uncanny instincts in combat won the trust of the men in his platoon and the Bravo Bulls' commanding officer, Capt. Les Brownlee. That's one outstanding platoon leader, Brownlee often thought when he saw Price bringing his dirty men in from the jungle, ordering them to clean their weapons and wait for the next assignment.

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One day, not long after Price wrote his letter, a box of 500 cleaning rods arrived in the mail. Courtesy of Colt. Price's stock shot up immediately. He was suddenly the go-to guy, the lieutenant who got things done. But the cleaning rods were just a link in the chain. The men then came to the squad tent with their request. A request for the impossible,

a request for a small miracle. Cleaning rods are fine, one of them told Price, but what we really need, sir, is for a bunny from Playboy magazine to come visit us. The soldiers grinned to see Price's puzzled look. No, not just a bunny, another chimed in. Not just a bunny from one of the Playboy Clubs, but a Playmate, one of those busty girls who appear naked in the magazine's centerfold every month.

The men laughed at the wonderful impossibility of it all. A Playmate in Vietnam! Quick, the platoon sergeant, laughed, too. He was 34, and he liked to see these 18- and 19-year-old kids teasing their lieutenant. Price could only laugh back. Why just any Playmate? one of the soldiers asked. Why not the 1965 Playmate of the Year? The men guffawed. Come on, lieutenant, they said. You can do it, you can do anything. Get us the Playmate, sir. Price looked from man to man. He was thinking, and when he pondered a subject, a light flickered in his eyes. The soldiers stopped laughing to see their lieutenant turn pensive. Price stood silently for a few more seconds while the men waited. Well, he said at last, there might be a way to bring a Playmate to Vietnam, but it's a long shot. And then he laid out a plan of action. Quick, as eager as the next man to meet a real Playmate, nodded his head in agreement. He liked Price's plan. Let's do it, he said. And then he volunteered to start collecting money from the platoon.

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Nelson Futch sat behind his gleaming white desk on the first floor of Playboy's Chicago headquarters and fretted. As director of Playboy promotions, he recognized a good publicity stunt when he saw one. And the letter that had arrived that morning seemed to offer him a great chance to engineer some headlines. But it was all too impractical. And dangerous. Impossible, even. Maybe. Futch looked across the desk for the letter, which lay somewhere among the many memos from Hugh Hefner, Playboy's founder. Hefner worked in the evenings and dictated memos late into the night, so when Futch and the other executives entered the three-story brick building on East Ohio Street each morning, their secretaries greeted them with a fresh stack of Hefner's utterances.

This morning, as the sun shone weakly through the Japanese shoji screens on the windows, Futch's secretary also had handed him a letter. Futch sorted through the memos and pulled the letter off his desk. It had been pounded out on a Remington typewriter, formatted in a formal military style, addressed to Mr. Hugh M. Hefner. The date in the upper right corner was 13 November 1965. Futch read it over, a bemused smile on his face as he ignored the occasional misspelling:

"Dear Sir:

"This letter is written from the depths of the hearts of 180 officers and men of Company B, 2nd Bn, 503d Inf, 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate) stationed at Bien Hoa, Republic of Vietnam. We were the first American troop unit committed in action here in Vietnam and we have gone many miles, some in sorrow and some in joy, but mostly in hard, bone-weary inches. You may have seen pictures of us in 'Life' 22 October 1965 and read of our victories and our setbacks in the neat black and white newsprint at your breakfast table, while we were picking off the leaches and loading ammo into empty magazines. We are proud to be here and have found the answer to the question, 'Ask what you can do for your country' and yet we cannot stand alone - and now I come to the reason for sending you this request.

"Loneliness in a man's heart is a terrible thing - and Christmas and New Years Day are just around the corner. The beauty of Vietnamese women is unquestionable and yet, we would appreciate so very much a real, living, breathing American girl. Now we must consider who we would like to see. We have unanimously decided that she is the Playmate of the Year for 1965. We further understand that, with a lifetime membership purchase, a bunny delivers the initial copy. It is our fervent hope that she will be allowed to deliver this copy. Should she not be able to, any of the 1965 Playmates of the Month would be received with open arms.

"If we are not important enough, alone, to send a playmate for, we could attempt to have some other units do as we have. If further, we could share our Christmas or New Years Day with her, it would be a privilege

beyond compare. When she arrives in Saigon, we would assume responsibility for getting her to the unit and back.

"I do hope that you understand the deep sincerity of our request and the hopes and dreams we have placed in it. We are anxiously awaiting your reply. Enclosed is a money order for \$150.00 for a lifetime subscription for Company B, 2nd Bn, 503d Inf, 173d Airborne Brigade (Separate). Should a personal delivery not be possible, please just forget about us, return our money order and we will fade back into the jungle."

The letter was signed by 2nd Lt. John S. Price. Below his name was typed the title "Bunny project officer."

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Futch shook his head. Yes, the lieutenant was right, sort of: Several years earlier, as part of a Christmas promotional offer, Playboy had pledged to have one of its bunnies deliver the first copy of a lifetime subscription. But there was fine print: The subscriber had to live in a city with a Playboy Club. Vietnam had no club. And no way could Futch justify spending hundreds of dollars of Hef's money to send a Playmate - especially Playmate of the Year Jo Collins - to a deadly combat zone to deliver a 75-cent copy of Playboy. Judging from the newspaper stories, Vietnam was a dangerous corner of hell, and Collins easily could come home in a coffin.

And yet. What if she made the trip - with a Playboy photographer, of course - and made it back safely? That would make for fantastic copy and banner headlines, Futch thought. No, no. Too risky. End of story. Futch decided he'd have to send Price a letter of regret. He decided he liked the nerve of Price and Bravo Company, but what would possess a bunch of guys to make such a bold request?

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Six weeks passed, and still the Bravo Bulls had seen no Playmate. Every day the men stopped Price and asked: Hear anything from Hefner, sir? Nothing new, Price replied. Word of Price's scheme spread rapidly through the company. Because he and Quick couldn't come up with enough money from their own platoon, they had tried to scratch up a buck from every one of the Bravo Bulls. In the end, the two had to throw in a few more of their own dollar bills to get the \$150.

Brownlee, the Bravo Bulls' commanding officer, shook his head and smiled when he heard what his young lieutenant was up to. He liked Price. Price was a replacement officer, having arrived in September two months after Zinn's death. Though Zinn was popular, Price conveyed a sense of mischief that the men liked. Brownlee met Price when Brownlee became company commander, and Price had made him laugh right away. That day, Brownlee gave a briefing in one of the small buildings, explaining how the company would run under his command, and Price kept raising his hand, as if to ask a question. Brownlee ignored him and kept talking. He would answer questions at the end of the briefing. Still, Price raised his hand, insistently. Finally, when Brownlee finished, he turned to the young lieutenant. What is it? he asked, testily. I was trying to tell you I've got dysentery really bad, sir, Price replied. But nevermind, it's too late now.

Brownlee soon learned that Price was an Army brat, the son of a horse doctor attached to the U.S. cavalry. He had lived in more than a dozen states by the time he began attending high school in Oklahoma. The way Price told it, he dropped out in order to study for the college-entrance exams. He applied to Yale, the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and the Army's U.S. Military Academy at West Point. All of them welcomed him. He chose West Point. His years there were uneventful, except for the final one, 1964. With no date for the ball during the school's "June week," he wrote a letter to a beauty queen, Miss Oklahoma, and out of the blue told her she ought to accompany him to the dance. She did. Price told the story over beers with the men, and they loved it.

To Brownlee's delight, Price was happy to arrive in Vietnam. Brownlee quickly pegged Price as a born leader. Perfect for the Bulls. The Bulls and the other men of the 173rd Brigade had trained in jungle warfare on the Japanese islands of Okinawa and Irimote before stepping off the plane and into the suffocating heat of Vietnam on May 5, 1965. Despite the training, each day at Bien Hoa was a struggle. Initially they lived in pup tents in the rubber-tree plantation outside the town. The rains came, and their lives turned miserable. Men slept in the mud with their hands in their crotch, worried that the ubiquitous leeches would become too intimate. They put their canteens to their lips to find the bottles covered with slick, wet centipedes. Spiders constantly jumped down the collars of their fatigues and crawled around inside. The mosquitoes whined all day long, numberless and insatiable. The pup tents eventually gave way to larger tents built over wooden floors. Then wooden buildings went up, each surrounded by a trench and walls of sandbags.

Mail from home began arriving regularly. Still, everywhere there was a sense of decay, a feeling that, where they had expected to find the glory of combat, they suffered only the grim reality of boredom, fear and death. Old Vietnamese men wearing conical hats and bicycling to unknown destinations ceased to be picturesque; the soldiers instead viewed them with growing suspicion. The knots of noisy children on the streets of Bien Hoa no longer prompted smiles with their games: They rummaged through the camp's garbage dump for scraps of food. And the quietly pretty Vietnamese girls only reminded the men of the ones they'd seen on leave in the Saigon bars and brothels, the thin young girls wearing mini-skirts and go-go boots and crooning Patsy Cline tunes for drunken American soldiers. In the mornings at Camp Zinn, the men poured diesel fuel down the toilets of the outhouses and threw in matches. Every day, the fragrant smell of the Vietnamese landscape evaporated under the stench of burning excrement.

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The Viet Cong, meanwhile, proved themselves fierce fighters, even if the men tended to dismiss them as "gooks." Hueys hauled Bulls to landing zones, and minutes later they would be face down in a rice paddy, exchanging fire with Viet Cong hidden in the tree line, bracing for the explosion that would kill them but praying they'd make it out alive. Increasingly, the prayers weren't enough. More and more patrols returned with wounded or dead men. Once-youthful soldiers with smooth faces now wore scowls on their powder-burned jaws. Their shrapnel wounds glazed over into glistening pink scars. Blood and the salt from dried sweat covered their fatigues, which, unnoticed by the men, stank. In the weeks after company clerk Larry Paladino sent Price's letter to Hefner, the combat-hardened men buzzed about the prospects of meeting Jo Collins, whose centerfold photo hung on one of the thin wooden walls of the makeshift PX. The star of the December 1964 Playboy, she was a sizzling goddess with 36-24-36 curves. Few men stared at her soft green eyes.

Her appearance in Playboy had caused a sensation with the magazine's readers. An aspiring actress who had had a few scenes in beach movies, she was sugar and spice, but mostly spice. Her photo spread in Playboy showed her draped across a couch, naked, resting on her stomach, a soft pillow tucked beneath her hips. One leg dangled playfully off the side of the couch. In her right hand she delicately held a long red feather duster. Precise bikini tan lines outlined her raised rear end. The centerfold shot, though, was the one the Bulls loved. In it, she stood beside a pool, wearing nothing but high-heeled shoes and a thin white blouse, which was very, very wet. Beads of water glistened on her long, brown legs, which tapered perfectly to her toenails, painted white. The pinup was a refreshing sight for the Bulls when they returned from the jungle, their faces caked in dirt, their tongues parched from the heat.

Dozens of other colorful pinups covered the PX wall. The flesh-filled photos had frayed and peeled in the humidity, but the men loved them anyway, often caressing them with their callused hands as they passed by. No matter how ratty and torn they became, the pictures remained. They were one of the few good things left to the men, a little piece of America to savor.

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Though the girlie magazines that arrived from the United States were welcome, the news from back home offered little encouragement. While the men of the 173rd bled to death in the elephant grass of Vietnam, anti-war protesters rallied in 40 U.S. cities, according to the Stars & Stripes newspapers they read. Draft-card burning had become so common that Congress and President Johnson had criminalized the act, threatening to put card burners in prison for five years. Singer Country Joe McDonald's anti-war song, "I Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag," was becoming an anthem. The final line of the chorus went "Whoopie! We're all going to die." The Bravo Bulls understood the sentiment. As 1965 came to a close, the Bulls longed for diversion, any diversion. They longed for relief from the constant killing. Price's scheme offered them hope.

On Dec. 31, 1965, as the night air grew wet, Price lay down on his bunk and tried to ignore the sound of the 175-mm cannon booming nearby. The artillerymen at the air base fired it at random targets every night. Price didn't know that the coming days' combat would provide another link in the chain he was forging. He also didn't know the night would be one of the last times he ever would have a good left arm to lay his head on.

The mission seemed simple enough, if larger than most. Choppers would carry two battalions of the 503rd Infantry Regiment out to the Plain of Reeds in the Mekong Delta to harass a Viet Cong regiment that was pressing hard against the South Vietnamese army. Even simple missions, though, meant GIs would die. The Bravo Bulls belonged to one of the assigned battalions. On New Year's Day 1966, the men of Company B loaded up their gear. In addition to their M-16s, M-60 light machine guns and M-79 grenade launchers, Lt. Jack Price and the men in his platoon grabbed ammo belts, Claymore mines, radios, batteries and extra grenades. They jumped aboard the waiting 2½-ton trucks, which ground along until they reached an area the men called the Snake Pit. The Hueys waited there. The men climbed out of the trucks and into the choppers, their legs dangling out over the skids.

The Hueys sped forward, lifted off and banked sharply away from their base at Bien Hoa. The men looked straight down, about 2,000 feet. None wore a parachute. A swath of dry rice paddies served as their assembly area. When they landed, the men immediately set up camp and the officers briefed them on the next day's assault. The stacks of rice stalks dotting the plain reminded Price of Thanksgiving. The next morning, the Hueys lifted off again, heading toward combat. Price had been told they would land in more dry rice paddies. When he jumped from the chopper, his boots landed in thick mud. Price and his men, forming the flank of the assault, moved across the exposed flat toward a small earthen dike. The dike was the only thing anywhere to hide behind. Before the men could reach it, though, the Viet Cong opened fire. Bullets poured in from everywhere as the men scrambled through the mud. The Viet Cong's machine guns chattered and their AK-47s popped.

Price urged his men on. He looked for his radio operator, a new kid out in the field for the first time. Better keep an eye on him, Price thought. When Price spotted him at last, the new kid lay in the mud, dead, blood spilling from his chest. The men crawled toward the dike as the minutes passed, pausing briefly to radio for artillery and air support. The incoming fire didn't let up. Still, Price figured if the artillerymen and fighter-bombers could take care of the problem, no more of his men would have to die that day. The artillery opened up. At that moment, the Bird Dog, a small spotter plane that had been buzzing overhead all morning, exploded. It landed in the mud with a sickening whump behind Price and his men and continued to burn. The men couldn't tell if it had been hit by enemy fire or an artillery round.

The artillery continued to lob shells over Price's head. They landed with a boom where the Viet Cong hid. A single-engine A1E Skyraider flew overhead. Though the plane could fly no faster than 325 mph, its four 20-mm cannons sent the enemy ducking for cover. Price lay on his back in the mud and looked up at the Skyraider. Vortices of air peeled off the wing tips, leaving white streaks in the air just like in the "Steve Canyon comic strips. The next moment, though, Price looked on in horror as one of the plane's 500-pound bombs broke loose and tumbled down. Price and the men around him dived deeper into the mud, clawing desperately, trying to burrow underground in the frantic seconds before the bomb hit.

When it landed, the air exploded in a deafening rattle and the ground rolled like jelly. Where Price had placed a machine-gun squad to protect his flank, there now remained only an ugly splotch of blackened mud. The Viet Cong kept firing. Price yelled orders to try to reorganize his platoon. Then, instead of continuing to crawl toward the dike, he jumped up and began running. He ran toward the dike, the mud sucking his boots down with every step. As he turned to his left, a round flew in and smashed into his left forearm. The impact sent him cartwheeling through the mud. He pulled himself up to his knees and looked down at his arm. His bone had been crushed. The bloody left sleeve of his jungle fatigues filled with scarlet and pink goo. A severed artery jutted up from the torn sleeve and flapped around wildly, spurting blood.

Staff Sgt. Willie Boyd rushed to Price's side in a heartbeat. Boyd dragged him more than 100 yards to the dike while the bullets whizzed by. Price kept a Randall knife bound to his leg with thongs, and he jerked the thongs off and used them as a tourniquet. Platoon Sgt. Jim Quick yelled orders. He now led Price's men. As he lay in the mud and wondered how long it would be before a chopper could take him out, Price realized the wound was his ticket back to the United States. If he lived through the day. Feeling increasingly faint, he also thought to himself: No Playmate for me.

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Nelson Futch was a wreck. Newspapers were reporting that Price lay badly wounded in a mobile Army hospital in Vietnam. The papers also noted that Playboy was refusing to send him his requested Playmate. Playboy was being cast as the bad guy. Unfairly. To make matters worse, Futch's call to the Pentagon had been a bust. We can't help you, the public-affairs officer had told Futch before hanging up. Vietnam is a combat zone. We wish you luck, but the Defense Department can't be officially involved in sending a Playmate to a combat zone. Too risky. Futch had hung up the phone in despair. As promotion director for Playboy, it was his job to get the magazine publicity. Normally the job wasn't that tough. After all, he pitched a magazine that featured page after page of unclothed women. It practically promoted itself. But this situation with the lieutenant in Vietnam was turning into a headache.

News that Price lay in a hospital bed in Bien Hoa had jolted Futch into action. As far as he knew, Price was dying. And he wasn't going to let the young man die without trying to get a Playmate to the Bravo Bulls. Hugh Hefner published Playboy for guys like them, and somehow the magazine would come through for them. So far, nothing had worked. Playboy had friends at every level of government, but everywhere the answer came back the same: We can't help. The State Department might approve a trip in late February if Playboy could overcome the military restrictions and complete the mountains of paperwork, but anything earlier than that would be unfeasible. But vague promises of a late-February visit did Futch no good, since the doctors planned to ship Price back to the United States no later than Jan. 13.

Futch enlisted the help of his fellow executives and the secretaries, but after wrangling with the problem day after day for a week, no one could figure a way to get the government to approve an immediate Playmate visit to Vietnam. Price was out of luck, it seemed. The only bright spot was the Playmate, Jo Collins. Futch knew he could rely on her. Just 19 and one year out of high school in Oregon when she posed as Miss December 1964, Collins was a promotion man's dream: She not only had girl-next-door looks and preferred simple jeans over high fashion, she had an adventurous spirit. Futch knew the vivacious beauty would go to Vietnam if asked. If he could only find a way. And suddenly he found a way. Several executives were in Futch's office when one finally blurted out, in exasperation, Why don't we just put her on a Pan American Airlines flight to Saigon? They still fly out of San Francisco. Why bother with government permission? They can't stop us, can they?

It was an idea. But still no good. We can put her and a chaperone on a Pan Am flight, Futch said, but we still don't have a way to get her around Vietnam without getting her killed. We can't do it without the military's help. If they don't help, it's the same as denying us permission. Another colleague spoke up. My sister used to work with the USO,

he said. She knows a guy in Vietnam who coordinates the USO trips. Track him down, Futch said. Any man who knew how to shepherd the Donut Dollies of the USO through a combat zone was just the guy he wanted. Futch told his secretary to get plane tickets. If she could catch a plane and the USO coordinator would handle the details, Jo Collins was going to Vietnam.

Only, nobody could find Collins. Futch and his assistants called her apartment in Los Angeles, her family, her friends. They called the office where she worked as a part-time secretary. Another day passed, and still Collins couldn't be found. Eventually, someone reached a relative who said Collins was visiting family in Oregon and, maybe, just maybe, she was on the road somewhere outside Portland. Futch made another call. A long-shot call. Later that afternoon, an Oregon state trooper knocked on the door of Collins' mother's house in Eugene. Collins opened the door. Are you Jo Collins? the trooper asked. Yes, she said. I've been looking all over for you; Playboy asked me to find you, he said. You need to call them immediately. They want you to get a passport. They want you to go to Vietnam. Collins nearly jumped for joy. Great! she thought, quickly trying to recall just where Vietnam was.

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As he made his rounds in the surgical ward, Dr. Kris Keggi, a captain, felt he had never seen the wounded men, nurses and other doctors so excited. To be honest, he felt a little nervous himself Jo Collins had landed in Saigon the day before and checked into the Embassy Hotel. Word had spread that she would arrive any minute at the Army hospital at Bien Hoa. Already men had painted Playboy's white bunny logo on walls, jeeps and helicopters. Keggi looked over to the bed where Price lay, a heavy cast on his arm. Keggi liked Price. Everybody liked Price. Soldiers constantly came to visit him, to sit at his side and joke with him. To Keggi, Price seemed an American original, hard as pig iron and a tough character, but always laughing at something.

Keggi had met Price just over a week earlier, when the orderlies brought him in with his left arm little more than a mass of blood and pulp and splintered bone. Keggi had told it to Price straight. I can amputate the arm and save the elbow joint so you can wear a prosthesis, Keggi said. Or I can try to save the arm. But if I screw up, you'll lose not only the arm but the elbow joint as well. That means no prosthetic arm, just a stump. Price looked up from the stretcher and gave Keggi an impish smile. I trust you, doc, he said. Go ahead and save the arm. Keggi hadn't screwed up. Price's left arm would never work as well as it had, but at least he had a left arm.

A commotion at the end of the ward caused the patients and nurses to look up. When they did, they saw - Collins. A noisy entourage of beaming officers, enlisted men and others followed her as she walked through the doors. All eyes turned to her. Her eyes sparkled and her smile dazzled like sunlight after a storm as she walked into the ward. She wore a black sleeveless sweater with the Playboy logo, covered partially by an unbuttoned fatigue shirt. The wounded soldiers lay in their beds and grinned. The entire ward fell silent. Awkwardly silent. An officer pointed Price out to Collins. She walked straight to his bed. Price felt his gut tighten with nervousness. But he knew he had to say something. Gosh, he blurted out, you're even prettier than your pictures.

Collins laughed and held out her hand. Price looked down at it. In her palm she held the latest issue of Playboy magazine. The first of the Bravo Bulls' lifetime subscription. She had traveled 8,000 miles to deliver it. Looking at Price's broad smile, she was glad she had come. The next moments were a blur to Price. Keggi had doped him up to dull the throbbing pain in his left arm. He knew he was talking to Collins and knew she was talking to him, but later, when he had a chance to recall their meeting, he couldn't think of anything they talked about. He couldn't even remember if he kissed her. In minutes, she was off. She wanted, she said, to visit the other men in the ward. As Keggi watched, she walked from bed to bed, stopping long enough to chat with each of the wounded soldiers. Some asked for her autograph and she obliged. Others asked her to help them finish letters they were writing home. She took up a pen and wrote a few lines. Others simply asked if she would light their cigarettes. Certainly, she said.

Keggi looked around at all the men, some of whom had propped themselves on their elbows to better stare silently at Collins. All of them were smiling. Keggi had seen generals and senators come through the ward many times. None



of them, he thought, had ever done as much good as this 20-year-old woman. She spoke softly and soothingly, perfectly at ease among the bloody dressings and bandaged limbs. She asked the men questions about their lives and chatted casually with them. The men, some of whom had earlier been groaning in pain, looked happy and relaxed. They treated her politely, almost, it seemed, with reverence. A nurse hurried over to Collins. There's a wounded man who wants to see you, the nurse said before turning away. Collins stood up and rushed to keep up with her. The nurse stopped beside a stretcher. On it lay a soldier who looked as if he had fallen into a meat grinder. His uniform, caked in blood, was ripped to shreds. His entire body looked as if it had been cut open. His life was ebbing away.

The chain of events that Price had set in motion had led Collins to the soldier. The M-16 rifles that jammed, Price's solution, his platoon's request, his letter to Hugh Hefner, Futch's quest for publicity, even the Oregon state trooper's search for her - everything had brought her here to this broken, bleeding man. An unknown chain of events, far more terrible, had brought him to her. Collins looked down at him, and tears pooled in her eyes. Sweetheart, the dying soldier said with a struggle, I've been waiting to see you. Collins choked back a sob. Then, just before the soldier closed his eyes on the world, he exhaled, and, looking at Collins, caught a final glimpse of its beauty.

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Pfc. Jim Jackson was happy. After 10 days in the Plain of Reeds, the Bravo Bulls were going back to Camp Zinn. Word had passed from man to man: Jo Collins waited for them there. Rumor had it she had already given Price the company's first Playboy issue. He couldn't wait to get a look at it. Jackson and the other Bulls were driving a herd of captured water buffaloes down a dirt road to a "friendly village," where choppers awaited to carry the men back to Bien Hoa. Jackson walked out in front, the point man. He didn't know why they were on the road. He assumed minesweepers must have cleared it. His mind wandered elsewhere when - boom! - an explosion sent him flying. He lay on the road, dazed, dust choking his breath, and wondered how he had gotten there. Had he dived for cover, or had the explosion knocked him down? He heard the sound of 700 steel ball-bearings whistling through the air in all directions. A Claymore mine had detonated.

Jackson and the other Bulls ran for cover. Sergeants yelled orders to check the tree line for Viet Cong. After making sure none were hiding nearby, the Bulls hurried back to the road. Two men were injured. Jackson saw another lying on the ground, dead. Oh no, he thought, it's Sgt. Harper. Sgt. Richard Harper was 22. Jackson, who was 19, had come to love Harper. There was something decent about him, something righteous in the way he treated everyone around him. Jackson didn't know what to say or do as he saw Harper's body lying in the dirt. Hueys eventually arrived to carry Harper's body and the two wounded men away. The men concluded that the Viet Cong must have remote-detonated the mine. Another U.S. patrol, after all, had passed the same way earlier without tripping any wire. Jackson, though, had a sick feeling in his gut that he had triggered the explosion. He thought he might have tripped the mine while daydreaming. His guts churned at the thought.

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When the choppers set down at Bien Hoa and the Bravo Bulls piled out, they rushed to Collins. She stood at the edge of the landing zone, the wind from the rotors whipping her thick brown hair around and driving grit into her eyes. She smiled nonetheless and waved to the men. Capt. Les Brownlee, the company commander, strode through the growing crowd of soldiers. He was worried. He looked around at them and improvised a quick inspection. He knew many of them didn't wear underwear because of the heat, and often they returned to base with their pants shredded from the jungle's underbrush. He didn't want Collins to see anything that would cause her embarrassment. Spc. 4 Larry Paladino, the company clerk, stood by his side. He kept a tattered centerfold photo of Collins in his pocket. He wanted her to autograph it. He looked into her eyes and thought she couldn't be real. He felt he was dreaming. She had to be an angel.

The men completely circled Collins. Though they had talked in rough language about what they would do if ever given a chance to meet a pinup, they stood at a slight distance from her, shyly. In a land of constant, brutal killing, the

soft-skinned Playmate seemed pure and innocent. Too delicate to touch. Reporters and photographers suddenly crowded Brownlee. We want a big kiss from the company commander, they said, so we can get a picture. Brownlee immediately knew he wanted no part of that. He was a married man. He turned to two of the company's radiomen, Paladino and Pfc. John Cotanch. Listen, Brownlee said, you guys do all my talking for me anyway, so take care of this.

Brownlee studied both of them. Paladino, who had typed Price's letter to Playboy, was a smooth talker when it came to contact with headquarters. Maybe he should greet Collins, Brownlee thought. Cotanch was a smooth talker, too, though. But Cotanch had no front teeth. Brownlee nudged Paladino forward. Paladino didn't need the push. He stepped forward, grabbed Collins, tilted her back and laid a world-class kiss on her. The men roared. They couldn't believe Paladino's nerve. He was filthy from 10 days in the field, and here he was all over this beautiful young woman. They slapped each other on the back as Paladino kept Collins locked in the kiss. Collins didn't flinch. Instead, she threw her arms around Paladino and kissed him as passionately as he kissed her. She had flown in a Huey over the heads of the Viet Cong to get here, and she didn't want to disappoint the men.

Seconds ticked by, the men hooted and whistled, and still the kiss continued. Jackson, who minutes earlier had been brooding about Harper's death, stood in the crowd of laughing men. This is great, he thought, just great. The weariness of spending days in the field fell from his shoulders. He laughed with the rest of the men to see the grimy Paladino and the beautiful pinup locked in their embrace. She looks like an angel, he thought, a real angel. The most beautiful thing he had seen in a long, long time.

Roughly 180 Bulls had arrived in Vietnam eight months earlier, and since then their blood had paid for 150 Purple Hearts. So many of them had been killed or maimed, reporters had begun referring to them as Bloody Bravo. Standing around Collins, the men relaxed and laughed anyway, all the bloodshed and death suddenly as distant as the moon. Years later, when the sorrow of Vietnam weighed on them, when tears filled their eyes at the thought of all the Bulls who died, all the good men like Harper and Zinn and the young radioman killed on his first trip to the field, the Bulls remembered Price's scheme. Then they remembered Paladino's bravado and Collins' beauty. And when they thought about it long enough, the war became like a bittersweet old movie, one that ended with a kiss.

### **Postscript**

- Lt. Jack Price returned to live in Floyd County, Va. After meeting Jo Collins, he was sent to recuperate in a Texas hospital, where he met and wooed a beautiful hospital staff member. Her father called Price the sorriest excuse for a potential son-in-law his daughter had ever dragged home, and he forbade her from seeing Price. Price married her, and they have lived happily ever after.
- Capt. Les Brownlee returned to a Pentagon desk job: undersecretary of the Army.
- Platoon Sgt. Jim Quick returned to work for a local school district in Kentucky.
- Pfc. Jim Jackson returned to become a postal worker in California.
- Spc. 4 Larry Paladino returned to be a freelance writer and former sports editor for The Associated Press in Michigan.
- Capt. Kris Keggi returned to become head of the Keggi Orthopaedic Foundation in Connecticut.
- Nelson Futch retired to live in Florida.
- Jo Collins now manages property and lives outside Chicago. Next to giving birth to a daughter, she says going to Vietnam is the best thing she has ever done in her life.
- The men of Bravo Company, those who survived, generally believe to this day that Jo Collins' visit served as the inspiration for the Playboy bunnies' scenes in Francis Ford Coppola's film of the Vietnam War, "Apocalypse Now."

[Source: Richmond Times-Dispatch | Rex Bowman | November 2, 2002 ++]

