# THE GREATEST BEER RUN EVER

## A MEMOIR OF FRIENDSHIP, LOYALTY, AND WAR

JOHN "CHICK" DONOHUE
& J. T. MOLLOY

*SOON TO BE A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE*

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wm
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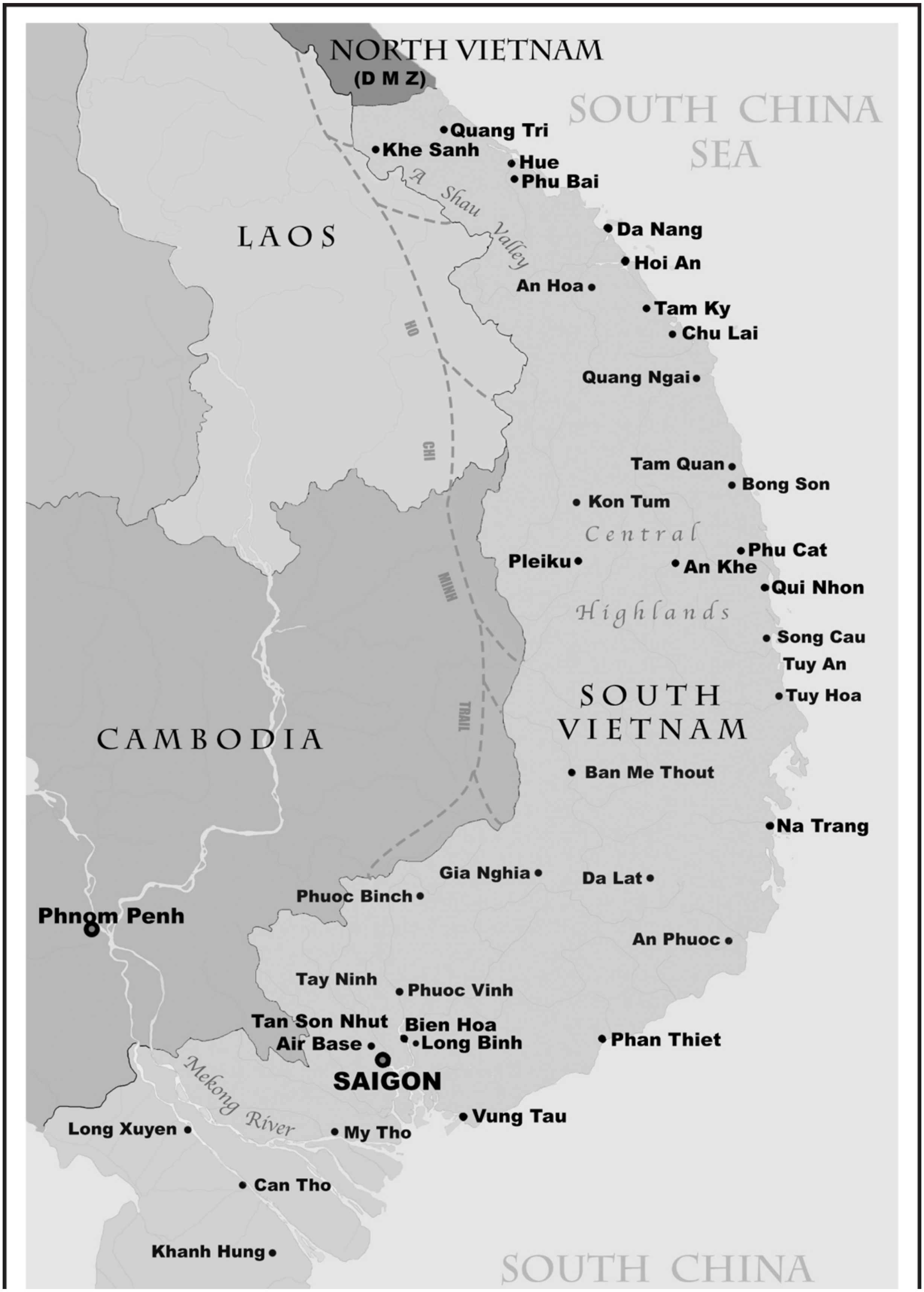
# Map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Tay Ninh
Phuoc Vinh
Tan Son Nhut Air Base
Bien Hoa
Long Binh
Phan Thiet
SAIGON
Mekong River
Vung Tau
Long Xuyen
My Tho
Can Tho
Khanh Hung
SOUTH CHINA

Quan Long
SEA
Con Son Island
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# Dedication

FOR THERESA O'NEILL DONOHUE
AND FOR GEORGE RUSH AND EAMON RUSH

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# Introduction

In November 1967 John “Chick” Donohue was a twenty-six-year-old US Marine Corps veteran working as a merchant seaman when he was challenged one night in a New York City bar. The men gathered at this hearth had lost family and friends in the ongoing war in Vietnam.

Now they were seeing protesters turn on the troops—boys eighteen, nineteen years of age—as they showed up at the draft board when called. One neighborhood patriot proposed an idea many might deem preposterous: one of them should sneak into Vietnam, track down their buddies in combat, and give each of them a beer, a bear hug, laughs, and words of support from back home. Chick volunteered for the mission.

Thus began his odyssey, which would stretch from Qui Nhon Harbor on the coast of the South China Sea; up north to the tense demilitarized zone, or DMZ, pushing against North Vietnam and Laos; to the Central Highlands along the border of Cambodia; to the US military’s huge bull’s-eye of an ammunition depot at Long Binh; and then all the way south to Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam—all in search of his friends.

Things did not go exactly as planned, but Chick did return to America, where he continued to look out for his friends and other working people. During the bitter 1990 *New York Daily News* strike, when he was working for the Teamsters, who supported the strikers, Chick found out that a freight train full of newsprint paper from Canada was headed to New York so that management could publish a “scab paper.” Chick paid a visit to workers at an upstate train yard, and, somehow, the train was intercepted and “got lost.” In North Dakota.

When Congress was going to cut funding for New York’s water tunnel and subway projects in the 1980s, Chick was by then a sandhog—one of the urban miners who work the dangerous job of excavation and construction of the city’s underground tunnels used to transport water, subways, trucks and cars. At the same time, he was a lobbyist for the Sandhogs’ union, Laborers’ Union Local 147. He’d work in “The Hole” in the morning and then take the train to Washington in the afternoon to try to convince the politicians to see the light. Ultimately, he did it by taking them into the dark; bringing a group of senators and House members seven hundred feet below the sidewalks in a cage elevator into the dripping caves. Despite their pleas to be taken back to the surface, Chick delayed their ascent until they pledged to vote yes on infrastructure. He was later accepted at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government as a master’s candidate, but rather than tiptoe around, he helped organize an employees’ union with slogans such as “You Can’t Eat Prestige.” And when his friend the author Frank McCourt, whose bestselling 1996 memoir recounted his impoverished upbringing primarily in Ireland, received threats before he was to give a public reading in Ireland, Chick flew over with a hulking alleged New York mobster so that he could stand next to McCourt as he read. There was no trouble.

You get the picture. Chick is the subject of many an amazing story, but the one you are about to read is the best.

—JTM

## Chapter 1

# One Night in a New York City Bar—The Colonel's Challenge

We were in Doc Fiddler's one cold night in November 1967. It was a favorite bar in the Inwood neighborhood of Manhattan, at 275 Sherman Avenue, above Isham Street. George Lynch was the bartender. We called him the Colonel. It was an honorary title, since he had made only private first class in the army. But he was a great military historian and patriot.

One day the Colonel commandeered the empty lot on the corner and erected a gigantic flagpole—something you might find in Central Park or in front of a government building. It's still there. Every morning, he would ceremoniously raise the flag; every sunset, he would lower it. Each Memorial Day and Fourth of July, the Colonel would organize a parade up Sherman Avenue. He tapped his connections to make it huge. He got Bill Lenahan, who was the commanding officer of the US Marine Corps Reserve at Fort Schuyler, the nineteenth-century fort in Throggs Neck that's now home to the State University of New York's Maritime College and Museum, to literally send in the marines to march. The Colonel's efforts took on an even greater urgency now that we were at war in Vietnam and with so many of our neighborhood boys serving there.

The Colonel got Finbar Devine, a towering man who lived up the street and who headed the New York City Police Department (NYPD) Pipes and Drums of the Emerald Society, to lead the flying wedge of kilted bagpipers and drummers while wearing his plumed fur Hussar's hat and thrusting his mace heavenward. Father Kevin Devine, Finbar's brother and the Good Shepherd Parish priest, got all the priests and the nuns and the kids from the

Catholic school to march, too. Another Devine brother was with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Colonel convinced him to organize a contingent of FBI agents to come out from under cover and march. The Colonel was beautifully crazy.

He treated the boys who came back from the war like kings. At Doc Fiddler's, they didn't pay for a drink. Around the corner from the bar, in what we called the Barracks, he lived in a room with two army surplus bunk beds—one for himself and one for any GI who'd come home and needed a place to stay.

Behind the bar, the Colonel ruled. He listened and laughed and could tell a story like your Irish grandfather, doing every accent and voice, no word astray, with a finish that would cure your asthma laughing. But he was tough, and those who engaged in tomfoolery on his watch were soon jettisoned.

The Colonel had become unhappy lately with what he was seeing on news reports about the war. Antiwar protesters were turning anti-soldier. Not just anti–President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who escalated the conflict he'd inherited from President John F. Kennedy by increasing the troops from JFK's 16,000 to half a million. Nor were they strictly focused on General William Westmoreland, commander of US forces in Vietnam, who was asking for even more troops to be deployed. Protesters were now training their sights on teenagers who'd been drafted, and on veterans who'd come home from a hell they couldn't express. We were told that when the neighborhood boys had gone down to the draft board on Whitehall Street—many so inexperienced that their fathers or older brothers accompanied them—they'd been met by picketers carrying signs that read, "GIs Are Murderers."

As these news scenes played out on the TV above the bar, the Colonel didn't hide his disgust.

"You know how demoralized they must be while they're over there doing their duty?" he would growl. "We've got to do something for them!"

"Yeah!" shouted the assembled.

"We've got to show them we support them!"

"That's right!!" came the shouts, even louder.

"Somebody ought to go over to 'Nam, track down our boys from the neighborhood, and bring them each a beer!"

"Yeah!!—Wait. *What?*"

"You heard me! Bring them excellent beer, bring them messages from back home. Bring them . . . encouragement. Tell them we're with them every step of the way!"

The Colonel folded his arms on the bar and looked me dead serious in the eyes. "Chickie," he said, "I want to borrow your seaman's card."

It sounded more like an order than a request.

I was a US merchant mariner, a civilian seaman working on tankers and other commercial ships. I had joined after serving in the US Marine Corps for four years into the early 1960s.

I had a seaman's card—it's called a "Z" card—which is like a military ID. It has your picture and years of service on it. Mine noted that I could handle ammo, because I had military clearance. It's issued by the US Coast Guard and used in lieu of a passport.

"What do you want my seaman's card for?" I asked.

"I'm gonna get on one of those ships that goes to Vietnam," he answered, "and I'm gonna bring all the guys over there from the neighborhood a drink."

During the war, civilians couldn't fly from the States to Vietnam without military orders—not that anybody wanted to take spring break in beautiful downtown Da Nang.

But there was no way the Colonel could "borrow" my seaman's card to sail off to the war zone. He wouldn't know what to do on a merchant ship. Besides, he didn't look anything like me. I had red hair, I was ten years younger—forget it, there was no way. Besides, the idea was insane. Wasn't it?

I looked in the Colonel's eyes to see if he could possibly be serious. Oh, he was.

As of late 1967, Inwood had already buried twenty-eight brothers, cousins, and friends who had been killed in Vietnam. People from the whole neighborhood would turn up for the funeral, whether they knew the boy or not. At least half of the soldiers had been drafted or signed up right after leaving high school at the age of eighteen or even seventeen. At seventeen, their parents had to sign a permission slip, like for a field trip in school—a nine-thousand-mile field trip from which they might never return. Of the young men who did go to college, many were drafted soon after graduation and could be drafted until the age of twenty-six.

In Inwood, you didn't have guys with a doctor friend of the family composing notes about nervous maladies or heel spurs. No guys playing the endless college-deferment game like future vice president Dick Cheney, with his four college deferments and another for good luck. For us, crossing the border and becoming Canadian wasn't an option, either.

The Colonel and I had been good friends with Mike Morrow. He had been killed in June at the age of twenty-two by a mortar in the battle of Xom Bo II. His company and three others from the First Infantry Division were ambushed and outnumbered at Landing Zone X-Ray by up to 2,000 Vietcong (VC) soldiers. The bloody score, as reported by the United States government: "they" lost 222; we lost 39, just as the Summer of Love was getting started back home. We also lost Johnny Knopf at twenty-three, killed on All Saints' Day, November 1, 1966, when his mother was in church praying for him.

Then there was Tommy Minogue, who signed up at nineteen and one month; after turning twenty in March 1967, he had died a hero. His death was particularly hard to take. As courageous as Tommy was, he was a sweet kid. He was big, but he would never think of bullying anyone. He never wanted anybody to feel left out, and he found a way to include kids no one else would want to play with in the team sports in Inwood Park or in street games. We were friends with his older brother, Jack, and his three other brothers, so he was a little brother to us. Back then, when parents would have four or six or even ten kids, the older brothers would let the young ones tag along, and we'd look after all of them.

This was the kind of kid Tommy was: one summer, his father, John "One Punch" Minogue, asked his friend Danny Lynch down at the Miramar Pool if he had a job for Tommy, to keep him out of trouble for the ten long, hot weeks away from school. Lynch said he was sorry, but they'd filled all the jobs. Mr. Minogue looked dejected as he walked away.

Lynch called out, "Wait! Maybe Tommy could come and help out, and then he could at least swim for free."

Mr. Minogue went for it, and so did Tommy: He worked like a beaver every day. Lifeguard Andy Rosenzweig tells the story of how one day, the owner of Miramar Pool showed up as Tommy was sweeping and stacking towels and carrying deck chairs. He asked, "Wow, what are we paying that kid?" and Lynch replied, "Nothing."

“Well, start paying him today,” the boss commanded. Even bosses saw Tommy’s integrity.

Later, Tommy joined the Second Battalion of the Thirty-Fifth Army Infantry and became a platoon medic. He was soon sent to Kon Tum Province, in the Central Highlands, on Vietnam’s border with Laos. A few days after Saint Patrick’s Day, his unit of 100 soldiers was surrounded by a thousand North Vietnamese army regulars who had swarmed over the border. The platoon, outnumbered ten to one, was overrun within minutes, leaving company commander Captain Ronald Rykowski badly wounded. Tommy ran a hundred feet through a hail of bullets and threw his body over his captain, taking several bullets. Ignoring his own wounds, he treated the commanding officer, ultimately saving his life and that of the company radio operator next to him. Tommy then grabbed a machine gun from a fallen brother and fought back against the NVA soldiers, along with the remaining members of his company, continuing to shield the wounded Captain Rykowski. At the captain’s orders, the radio operator called in air support, but by the time it came, twenty-two men had been killed and forty-seven badly wounded. Tommy didn’t make it.

Three of his brothers, Jack, Donald, and Kevin, organized the Thomas F. Minogue Chapter of the Narrowbacks Social and Protective Club, and dozens of us meet regularly to remember him. I still don’t know why Tommy Minogue hasn’t been awarded the Medal of Honor, given by the president on behalf of Congress for extraordinary acts of valor.

These were the kinds of kids we were losing. They were so young—eighteen and nineteen, early twenties. The marines, which I’d joined at seventeen, considered me old at twenty-six; they’d cited my age as the reason for rejecting me when I’d tried to re-up in 1967.

People didn’t support the troops then as much as they do now. The country seemed ungrateful for what they were doing, because it was an unpopular war, and Americans were watching its brutality on the television news every night. But our young soldiers were doing what they felt was their duty. I’m not saying every guy was gung-ho about going to fight the Vietnamese. But in our community, at that time, if you were called by your country to fight what our leaders said was the spread of Communism, you went. You wouldn’t think of doing anything else but your duty. In Inwood, we grew up singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the end of Mass every Sunday; you’d receive Holy Communion and sing the “*Agnus Dei”* Latin hymn, and that would flow right into the national anthem like a medley. Your feelings of patriotism were connected to your religious beliefs. They were cut from the same sacred cloth.

The guys who didn't want to serve, they moved out of the neighborhood. If I truly believed how they believed, I would have left, too. I wouldn't want to make enemies of the people I grew up with because we disagreed about President Johnson, General Westmoreland, or Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. The fight was with them, not the people on my block. You didn't have protests in Inwood.

I would see the protesters in Central Park, and if I became one of the guys yelling back at them, what would that accomplish? Nothing. But I wanted to do *something.* Having served in the marines overseas myself, I figured that when our buddies over there heard about the discord from new recruits or in letters from back home, it would probably make them feel pretty damn bad.

To us, the people marching here with the red-and-yellow North Vietnamese flag while our guys were over there dying were traitors. No matter how we felt about the war, that was just wrong. What we didn't know yet was that our own brothers and sisters were among the protesters, and that Vietnam veterans would soon join them. But rather than go down and fight the antiwar demonstrators, the Colonel wanted to launch his own counteroffensive and go directly to Vietnam to supply positive reinforcement to our boys.

"We gotta support them!" he yelled again.

I felt the same way as he did, but actually going there seemed a little extreme. I couldn't give the Colonel my seaman's card. And I had been "on the beach"—slang for not working on a ship—for a while now. I was doing nothing, simply hanging out and drinking beer with my buddies, while our friends were over there dying or wounded or in harm's way.

I thought, *I have the right ID papers to slip into Vietnam as a civilian. I have the time. Maybe I can do this. No: I have to do this. Some authority figures will probably stop me, but I have to try. I have to.*

"Yeah, George, okay," I said. "You get me a list of the guys and what units they're with, and the next time I'm over there, I'll bring them all a beer."

It was sort of a flippant thing to say, but that's how it all started.

## Chapter 2

# Gathering the Names

The next day, I went into the bar and found that word had gotten out. People young and old came with slips of paper and letters with names of units or military postal addresses they had for their sons or brothers or cousins serving over there. When you wrote letters to soldiers in Vietnam, you would write their unit care of San Francisco, and the army, navy, air force, or marines would find them. You didn't want to give the enemy crib notes should the mailbag tumble out of the chopper. But the patrons told me the strange names of the places their boys had been: Phuoc Long, Binh Dinh, Pleiku, Lam Dong. I was a bit overwhelmed and jotted it all down, stuffing the precious pages into my pockets.

Amidst all the noise, I saw Mrs. Collins, hovering inside the front door. She was with her son Billy, or should I say, Chuckles. (Once he started laughing, he couldn't stop, no matter what nun or cop was giving him the stink eye, hence the nickname. The only people who called him William or Billy were his parents and substitute teachers.) Chuckles had been one of my best friends since grade school, so I knew Mrs. Collins, and she was never one to set foot in a pub.

However, her younger son, Thomas Collins, was stationed in Vietnam. As soon as she spotted me, she approached me and said in her lilting brogue, "Billy tells me you're going over to see my Tommy! Oh, thank God for you, Chickie! Tell my Tommy how much I miss him! And tell him that I pray for him every single day!"

She gave me a hug and then tried to hand me $100 in small bills—to give to her son, or to buy him a drink, or to use myself for whatever I needed to make the trip, she said. But I knew that the second I took that money, I would be in for it. In the cold, sober light of day, I was having second thoughts. What the hell had I agreed to the night before? I declined, as much as I could have used that $100, because I didn't want to be obligated and then get killed trying to find Tommy Collins in Vietnam.

"Mrs. Collins," I said, "let me know Tommy's unit. I'll find him. And if I do, I'll tell him how much you love him."

The Colonel yelled, "Don't worry, Mrs. Collins! Chickie'll take care of it! He's gonna do this! Let's raise a glass to Chickie!"

"To Chickie!" the crowd cheered, though I could see some skeptical faces.

The Colonel poured me another beer, and I drank as I compiled a list, with Tommy Collins at the top. Some sidled up and told me what they knew of soldiers' whereabouts. Pally McFadden gave me his brother Joey's coordinates with the army. A brother of Rich Reynolds, a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps, gave me his last known location. Ed O'Halloran knew where Kevin McLoone was. Kevin and I used to rent Winnebagos with a couple of other guys and go from Chambers Bar in Inwood to New York Giants football games—at home then in Yankee Stadium and sometimes hundreds of miles away. Kevin had already served in the marines in Vietnam; now he had gone back as a civilian to help outfit helicopters with new radio technology that would help prevent so many of them from getting shot down.

"Rick Duggan! You gotta find Rick!" someone shouted. "He's been all over the front lines!" Nobody knew what front line Rick was on at the moment, so I determined to go ask his parents. Rick had grown up in the same building as I had on the dead end of Seaman Avenue. His father was the only Republican in the neighborhood—and my aunt ran the Democratic club—but they joked about it. Rick and I were close; like Tommy, he was one of the younger, more fearless kids we let tag along with us when we dove off tall cliffs into the murky waters of the Spuyten Duyvil or generally caroused. Rick was with the First Air Cavalry Division and had joined at the age of nineteen. I planned to visit his parents the next day and ask for his location. I knew his grandmother had sent him a bottle of whiskey hidden—and cushioned—in a loaf of Wonder bread.

Of course, I would try to find my good buddy Bobby Pappas, with whom I had gotten into a shenanigan or two. His father tended bar down the block, so I'd ask him if he had any information. Bobby was in his midtwenties, married with a baby, and he had already served in the US Army Corps of Engineers, but he got drafted anyway, because LBJ had ended President Kennedy’s mandate not to draft married fathers. I didn’t think that was fair.

I took one last sip and headed out the door. The Colonel refused my money and shouted, “God bless Chickie, and God bless America!” and some guys yelled, “Yeah!” and “Go, Chick!” It was as if the Colonel had given me my orders, and off I was to go on my mission. There was only one problem:

I still had my doubts that I could pull it off.

## Chapter 3

# Setting Sail

The next day, I went down to the National Maritime Union Hall at Seventh Avenue and Thirteenth Street. This great union was started in 1936 by a brave boatswain—a deck boss—named Joseph “Big Joe” Curran. He was charged with mutiny by President Franklin Roosevelt’s secretary of commerce after exhorting seamen on the SS *California* to refuse to cast off the lines until monthly wages were raised by $5. Seamen up and down the Eastern Seaboard went on strike, and Curran became president of the union. In addition to winning the forty-hour workweek and benefits, Big Joe built the hiring halls specifically to end corruption in filling jobs and to keep the workforce integrated. The NMU (now the Seafarers International Union of North America) has been very, very good to me and a lot of other mariners.

The union had built three modern buildings in the Chelsea neighborhood, on Manhattan’s West Side, including the shiplike headquarters I was in, and a seamen’s residence down the block with a hundred giant porthole windows, a pool, a gym, and classrooms. It’s now the Maritime Hotel.

New York was still a thriving shipping port in the 1960s. At the hiring hall, they had a board listing which ships were in port and what positions were open: fireman, oiler, boatswain, deckhand, mechanic, and the like. If you were on the beach, and you were ready to go back out to sea, you would come down and sit in the auditorium with the other seamen, and the union port delegate would call out the names of the ships and their destinations. Like this: “The SS *Manhattan*!! Going to the Gulf!!!” That was one of Greek shipping tycoon Stavros Niarchos’s oil tankers, headed back to the Persian Gulf for a fill-up. Or “The MS *Alameda*!!! Going coastwise!!!"—a merchant ship stopping at ports all along the US East Coast. They wouldn't give you a big description. In those days, the newspapers listed which ships were in port. If they called out Moore-McCormack Lines, or Mooremac, as we referred to it, chances were pretty good the ship was heading to South America from the Twenty-Third Street Pier in Brooklyn.

If you went to South America on a freight ship, you might leave that afternoon and be gone for four months. It's a big place, with a lot of ports. Before container shipping, it could take a week to unload the cargo and to refuel the ship's four or five oil tanks. That's why you would always know when a ship was leaving but not when it was arriving. In the States, the ship might pick up cargo in Brooklyn, stop in Philly to load up on more cargo, then head to Baltimore, Norfolk, Charleston, Savannah. Then it would go foreign, drop off and pick up cargo down the east coast of South America and return to the States. As soon as you were back in the good old USA, you would be paid. In cash.

I suddenly heard the word "victory" and snapped to attention. "The *Drake Victory!"* the guy yelled again, and I knew that it was probably headed to Vietnam. The great Victory ships of World War II were part of the "mothball fleet" that had been "Butterworthed"—cleaned spic-and-span—and pressed back into service in Vietnam, transporting everything from tanks to river barges. I jumped up.

Somebody yelled, "Pierhead!" That meant the ship was about to leave. I headed to the front of the hall. The ship was still short an oiler, but it was on a tight schedule and about to depart shorthanded. I was qualified to be an oiler—part of the "black gang" that worked below decks in the engine room—so I threw my card into the pile right then and there. I had seniority, and I'd been on the beach the longest, so I got the job. They told me to head directly to the ship from the hiring hall. Forget about long, tender good-byes.

I didn't have time to rush home. I had brought a duffel with me just in case, so I rushed up to Fourteenth Street and bought a razor, socks—just the essentials—threw them in the bag, and hustled uptown to the Port Authority Bus Terminal to catch the bus out to the ship. The SS *Drake Victory* was docked a few miles south of Staten Island, in Leonardo, New Jersey, where a milelong pier with three "fingers," or smaller piers, jutted into Raritan Bay.