

The First Two Pages of “Death Floor” by Martin Limón
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An Essay by Martin Limón

“Death Floor” appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* and featured my two fictional 8th United States Army Criminal Investigators, George Sueño and Ernie Bascom, both stationed in Seoul, South Korea in about 1975. In conjuring up this story, I realized that I would have to force them off base and into an area that was strictly outside of their jurisdictional authority. In order to make it believable, I began with the following sequence of events:

Step 1: Staff Sergeant Riley, the Administrative NCO at the CID Detachment, is a hopeless drunk, and periodically George and Ernie volunteer to take care of him. Thus, the very first line of the story:

“Your *chingu* come,” Jeannie told the comatose Staff Sergeant Riley, kneeling down and slapping the side of his face.

Later:

. . . every now and then Riley went on a bender. And when he did, it was epic. I’d seen him at the NCO Club, a row of shot glasses lining the bar, each gleaming little dollop of crystal filled to the brim with brown nectar known as Kentucky straight bourbon. Somebody said “go” and as others cheered and somebody timed him, he’d proceed down the row, tossing back one shot glass after another through thin lips, breathing heavily after each inhalation, and finally slamming the last shot glass down on the bar, a full dozen, within a minute; raising both fists in triumph. After that moment of glory, he faded quickly, no longer the life of the party. And soon his head would be lolling atop the bar and somebody—maybe the guy who

won the most money betting on him—would lift him up, drag him out of the NCO Club and make sure he made his way back to his closet-like cubicle in the barracks of Headquarters Company, 8th Army.

Step 2: Part of the reason George and Ernie take pity on Riley is because his military pension hangs perilously in the balance. As explained:

In the army, you get nothing if you don't do at least twenty years of service. If you do "make your twenty" then you are eligible for a monthly retirement check for the rest of your life. But if you serve even one day less than twenty years, you get nothing. So far, Riley had almost sixteen years of service and Ernie and I were worried that he was going to lose it all.

Step 3: In order to punish Riley but keep him in the service, the 8th Army Provost Marshall, sends him on a secret mission.

" . . . he gave me an out."

"An out?"

"Yes. He assigned me a mission."

That was odd. Riley was a clerk, not an investigative agent like Ernie and me. "What kind of mission?" I asked.

"Classified," Riley told me, his narrow lips twisted. "You don't have a need to know."

Step 4: A few days later, Riley is hurt so badly that an ambulance is sent to the nightclub district to rescue him.

That weekend neither Ernie nor I saw Riley, neither in the barracks nor around the compound nor out in Itaewon. On Monday morning he was late again. We were about to go look for him when we received a call from the MP Desk Sergeant. He gave us Riley's location and told us that an ambulance was already on the way.

So Riley's holy grail, whatever it was, became George and Ernie's holy grail. And making sure that the local criminal element knew that they could not

attack a military law enforcement officer, even an unofficial one, became an operational necessity.

All of this had to be accomplished while still conveying what every fictional story has to convey. That is, the tactile feel of the geographical and cultural setting—not to mention the details of the historical era—and finding a way to shoehorn such an unfamiliar zeitgeist directly into the reader’s bones. At least, that’s the ideal. Since writers are only mortal—most of us anyway—we only partially succeed in immersing the reader in the total experience. But in the act of trying lurks the true soul and spirit of the art of writing: the yearning to create a whole new world.

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Martin Limón spent twenty years in the US Army, ten of them stationed in South Korea. While still on active duty he began writing; typing on a Smith Corona portable typewriter (purchased in the PX) at his on-base quarters. After four years of trying, he published the first of what has now become over fifty short stories. His debut novel, *Jade Lady Burning*, featured 8th Army Criminal Investigation Agents George Sueño and Ernie Bascom. It was published in 1992, shortly after he left the service, and it was selected as a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. George and Ernie have appeared in a total of fifteen novels, in addition to *Nightmare Range*, a short story collection.

The most recent novel in the series, *War Women*, was published by Soho Press in November, 2021.