

Now Is Forever Indochina

World War II has just ended. From the chaos and tragedy enveloping mankind, a collective sigh amid renewed hope signals the way forward. Recovery begins, except in Indochina, where war rages on. World domination is no longer the issue. Instead the political spectrum narrows: the adversaries are a rebellious indigenous population and an old colonial power bent on regaining lost empire.

A story as old as man. But now, in 1947, it is a modern day drama played out in the jungles of the fledgling country of Vietnam, pitting the rebel forces of newly declared President Ho Che Minh against the country of France, which has held dominion over these lands and people since 1880.

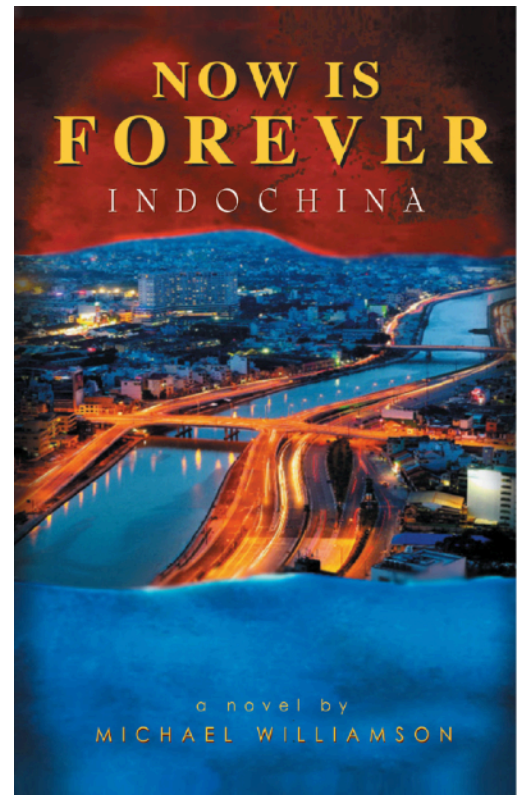
The defeat of the Japanese left a power vacuum that Ho rushed to fill with his Viet Minh fighters, who far outnumbered the remnants of French colonialism. A disillusioned, but experienced, young American Marine injects himself into this volatile mix of war and emotions by joining the French Foreign Legion in Saigon. His elevation through the ranks enmeshes him in battle, while the extremes of war launch him into a search for meaning, love and an unknown destiny.

So begins a journey that in four novels will take you to Vietnam, Hong Kong, Japan and finally the Ryukyu Islands as life evolves and destiny is fulfilled.

Chapter 1

Metal crashed into his shoulder, the burning impact spinning him around. Again and again bullets ripped his falling body. Through half-closed eyes, the blurred vision of a woman stared down at him. Smoke curled from the muzzle of her automatic weapon, the acrid smell biting his nostrils his last sensation.

The man bolted upright, his bunk creaking with the exaggerated movement. Sweat coated his body. Snoring and the aroma of unwashed bodies brought him reeling



back from the nightmare. He shivered from the cooling sweat as he lay there clearing his head. He used thoughts of tomorrow to push the woman's image from his mind.

After almost a year in country, he had trained his mind to close out the night sounds, but he knew the coming dawn could hold more than the normal dangers of patrol. Curious apprehension caused him to speculate on tomorrow's events.

He lay on his mosquito-netted bunk, the damp night air enveloping his clammy skin. The sleeping sounds of the fourteen other men he shared the tent with provided a melodious backdrop to the intermittent cries of gibbons and langurs challenging the calls of hornbills and parrots inhabiting the surrounding jungle.

"Zachary Norton was still amazed at how the jungle came alive at night. From the distance a dank breeze delivered the barely discernible roar of a mature tiger. It fascinated him. He listened intently, hoping to hear it again. He had never seen a tiger during patrol. He had been told that if he did see a tiger, it was by intent; they hunted from ambush, like the Viet Minh.

He spent another half hour trying to fall back to sleep. With a sigh of resignation, he pulled on his walking shorts and sandals and quickly threw back and replaced the netting as he exited his bed. He made his way past sleeping comrades and down a shadowy aisle leading to the permanent tent's front door. He closed the door silently. Walking a few feet into the noncoms' portion of the compound, he drew close to a rattan table and chairs. He stood, surveying the area for a few moments while he searched his right pocket for a small cigarette tin. His fingers wrapped around the container as he sat down and in a continuous motion laid the colorful metal box on the table top before him. He stared at it for a while before his other hand moved to assist in sliding the top back and exposing the contents: a single hand-rolled cigarette and stick matches.

He brought the tip of the torpedo-shaped kief cigarette to his lips. A match flared in the darkness. Drawing the dense, sweet smoke deep into his lungs, he held it there for several seconds before exhaling. He repeated the process two more times. Extinguishing the bright, burning tip of the cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, he replaced it in the tin.

Settling back in the chair, he understood the power of the drug loosed within him, and he knew it would not be long before his mind wilted and his built-up tension leaked from every pore. He felt footsteps behind him even before he heard them and only moments before he recognized the heavy hand that landed on his shoulder and the familiar voice that challenged him.

"Zach, what are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

“I could ask you the same thing, Jean Paul.”

“As you have experienced, I am a light sleeper. I felt you leave your bed. As this is not normal, I am curious. I ask myself, what forces my friend from the protection of the netting and into the wild jungle night?”

“That’s a bit melodramatic, but I appreciate your concern. Sit down and share the stars with me. In a few months all that we’ll have overhead is clouds and the serious rain will start.”

“Yes,” the Frenchman responded, “I hope our commanders understand that we must take maximum advantage of the next three months to gain the trust of these last villages. The Viet Minh will be slithering around in the summer mud to undo all we have done. I hope ‘ils sont bons a rien’ know we can’t afford reversals of all our hard work.”

“That’s what’s bothering me,” Zachary intoned. “I’m to report to the command center at 0800 and I don’t know what it’s about.”

“Buck up,” the older man said, “I’ve been in the Legion fifteen years, and I can tell you from experience, if it were something bad, you would already have Commandant Pierre’s “boot up your ass. So relax and let the morning come, you will be fine.”

Jean Paul’s rough but soothing voice and the medicinal value of the kief were a potent combination. He could feel their subtle powers erasing his prior concerns, replacing them with positive speculation of tomorrow’s meeting.

“What do you think they could want, Jean Paul? I have been—”

Approaching footsteps closed his mouth while drawing their eyes toward the sound of leaves trodden underfoot. They sat silently as an armed sentry, a M-1 carbine balanced on his shoulder, appeared from beyond the tent. They exhaled as they recognized Xe Dang Kho, a Ba Na hill tribesman they had enlisted several months before. He spoke his native dialect broken with phrases of French and answered to the name of Zee. Like most of the hill tribesmen, he was small, barely reaching five foot four inches tall. But he was quick to smile, loyal and fiercely independent. Zee, like most of his people, just wanted to be left alone, and he would fight to maintain the independence of his historical homeland from the Viet Minh.”

“Zee,” Jean Paul’s voice startled the man. Instantly the M-1 came down as Zee assumed a defensive posture. The shadowy darkness and their stillness had all but camouflaged the two men. Zee advanced cautiously.

“Sergeant Jean?” the sentry asked hesitantly as he came within a few feet of the table and lowered his rifle.

“Yes, yes. It’s me and Sergeant Norton, just taking a bit of the night air. Sorry to have frightened you.”

“No be here,” the man said in broken French and indicated with the rifle barrel that they move into the tent.

While both men outranked the sentry, they knew he was right and neither liked the menacing look on his face.

“All right, Corporal, relax,” Zach said, attempting to defuse the intensity he saw in the man’s eyes. “We are going in.”

They rose from the table. Backing away, they kept eye contact with the man until safely inside.

“Better to be safe than sorry,” Zack whispered. “We made him look bad and that’s never a good thing with a Ba Na. They are something. Did you see his eyes?”

“Jean Paul nodded. “I’ll see you after patrol tomorrow, and you can tell me about your time with ‘ils sont bons a rien.’” Zack had learned over these past months that this was Jean Paul’s favorite expression when referring to the Legion’s officer corp and roughly translated to “the big shots.”