

#10 Fever – December 23 and 24, 1967 to January 2nd 1968 - Vietnam

He sat on the bunker facing east. His home lay in that direction, just over those hills and past the water that lay beyond. Only about 15,000 miles or so. He smiled at that. Only about 15,000 miles or so. Figuring the company moved about three miles per day through the dense jungle they operated in, if he started walking home in the morning, he could be home in about 5,000 days. With a quick mental calculation, he was able to estimate that this would be about 14 years. The date was the 23rd of December 1967. He might be able to make it home for Christmas 1981. Lou would be 35 years old. This made him laugh out loud. The thought of him or any of his buddies living to be 35 years old was funny.

"You okay, Professor?" the medic asked.

"Yeah." Lou replied.

Professor. It was his nickname. They had given it to him shortly after moving into the field. Sometimes they shortened the name to Pro. He liked that better. Made it seem more like they meant professional instead of Professor. It was their weird sense of humor that earned him that title. In reality he was Specialist Fourth Class, Louis Merrins. He was a rifleman, in the first squad, of the first platoon, of Company A, of the Third Battalion, of the 503rd Infantry Regiment, of the 173rd Airborne Brigade (Sep). Lou, to his friends most of the time, but more and more, Professor. He was slowly losing his old identity and taking on an entirely new one. Of course he had changed over the past six weeks. They all had. Impossible not to.

Lou was the Professor for several different reasons. For one thing, he had a college education. He had denied this, pointing out that he only had two years at a junior college and that to be considered a college graduate you needed four years. Since the average education of the men in his squad was less than a high school education, to them he was a college graduate. He also tended to lecture the men about almost anything that interested him. He learned how to operate the platoon's radio and taught the men in the squad how to use it. To keep track of where they were in the bush, Lou always carried a map and a compass. Orienteering was more his skill than it was any other man's in the company; it was his thing, so

he spent time with the men, teaching them how to read the map and use a compass for navigation. He was always learning the best way to do things and then passing them on to the men in the squad because that was the way he was. Sgt. Wilson, the squad leader, did not mind him doing this. He knew that the Professor was better at teaching the men than he was. Anything he wanted to teach the squad, he would teach the Professor and let him teach the men. And lastly his age had something to do with his nickname. At twenty-one years old, he was one of the oldest men in the company, if you excluded the lifer NCOs, and most of the men did. Before they left the states, he was the only one in his platoon who could legally purchase booze when they were off base, drinking. He was always asked to go to town drinking with the guys. Hell, they insisted. He knew it wasn't his sterling personality that got him invited, but what the hey.

Lou sat on top of the bunker with the sun warming his back. It would be getting dark soon, another hour or so. The medic was there to look after him. He had been sick for some time now, exactly how long was hard to pinpoint in his mind. There were no calendars in the field, and if it wasn't so close to Christmas, he wouldn't know what day it was. He had really begun to notice his worsening condition over the past four nights, and it was only at night that his symptoms became apparent. Night sweats. Shivering. Unquenchable thirst. Muscle cramps. It wore on him. He had not mentioned it to anyone in the squad until this morning. It embarrassed him to be sick, and he was determined to hide his sickness from other members of the squad. He was sure it was just some bug he had picked up and that his body would bounce back just as it had when he had that bout of dysentery. He was proud of his body's toughness, and any physical weakness would simply not be tolerated. Last night on ambush had been the worst night yet. Sgt. Wilson was in the position next to him during the night, and when he heard noise coming from Lou, he knew that something was wrong. When the squad got back to the fire base that was to serve as their home for the next few days, Sgt. Wilson confronted him. Lou admitted that he felt himself coming down with something. Sgt. Wilson called in one of the company's medics to look at Lou. The medic took his temperature. It was 101 degrees. Lou was surprised at this. He knew he was running a high temperature at night, but he felt fine

during the day. A temperature of 101 was not enough to get a man sent out of the field. Still, after talking with the Professor, the medic seemed worried.

The company had been pulled out of the field for the first time since entering the jungle six weeks earlier. This had taken place because of a so-called Christmas Truce that was to start at midnight and last until midnight on December 25th. UNFUCKINGBELEIVABLE! Six weeks of chasing Charlie through the bush, and now the Army in its infinite wisdom was going to give the gooks a two-day vacation to get their shit together. If you listened closely, you could almost hear the little bastards out beyond the wires laughing. Lou knew what he would be doing if he were them. He actually hoped that they would attack the base during the truce. The men in his company would be ready. Maybe the top brass believed in this truce bullshit, but no one in his company did. If the enemy was stupid enough to try to attack during the truce, he would be amazed at just how unfriendly the Airborne Infantry was during the season of peace on earth.

Sgt. Wilson arranged for the medic to check the Professor throughout the day. In addition, the medic decided to spend the night in the bunker with him, since this is when his symptoms manifested themselves most often. His temperature had dropped some during the day but had not gone away completely. Lou had been given the day off. The first thing he did was take off his boots. Then he unwrapped the ace bandages from both his ankles. The skin underneath the wrappings was all black and blue, the skin stretched tight, slightly swollen. His ankles had never given him trouble until he spent time in service. Being in the infantry put a lot of stress on them, and during training he had injured both of them several times. It was no big thing during training, periodically earning him some time off. He had injured his right ankle jumping from the helicopter on their first assault. The medics had taped it up, and he had kept on humping. He had a very definite limp until about a week later when he slipped while stepping over a fallen log and twisted his other ankle. With both ankles taped, his bilateral limp made him walk almost normal. Lou had learned to live with the constant pain caused by his ankle injuries, and he refused to allow it to slow him down. He chewed on aspirin to keep it at bay. And back with the medics, he had spent most of the day on his back with his feet elevated. His ankles were still ugly, but some swelling had retreated. For the first time in weeks, his ankles didn't hurt, and with the extra rest, he was beginning to feel almost normal. During the

day he decided that he wasn't really sick. It was just his mind fucking with him. If the medic wanted to stick around during the night it was all right with him.

Lou woke up shivering. He was laying in the bunker on his poncho. He had gone to sleep as soon as it got dark. Sgt. Wilson had told him he would not need to pull guard that night. It was pitch dark. He could hear the breathing of the other men in the bunker.

"You awake, Pro?" Sgt. Wilson asked.

"Yeah, just woke up," he replied.

"How you feeling?"

"Great," he answered. "I'm a little cold, but otherwise I'm okay."

"Bullshit," the Sgt. replied.

The Sgt. shook the medic awake. How a man could have slept through their yacking, Lou did not know. Medics were different from infantrymen.

The medic moved over next to him using the light of his flashlight. The light had a red filter that cast an eerie light within the bunker. "You look like shit, Pro," he said. "Here, put this under your tongue." He pushed a thermometer into his mouth. The medic grabbed his wrist and then just as quickly let go of it. "You're burning up," he said. Lou felt the hand on his forehead. Again the hand pulled quickly away. "You're sweating like a pig," the medic said. His voice seemed to come from some distance away. Lou thought that was weird. He felt the medic's hands quickly brush him down all over. "Goddamn it, Sarge, he's soaking wet." The medic grabbed his wrist and felt for the pulse. A minute later he said "His pulse is around 120. Not real fast, but higher than normal." He took the thermometer from the Professor's mouth and held it close to the light. "One hundred and three degrees," the medic said. "Sarge, I'm going to get a chopper in here for your man."

Lou reached out and grabbed the medic's arm. "Listen, Bob," he said, "I am feeling a little sick. I admit that. And if tonight is anything like last night, I'll feel a lot worse before the night is over, but I don't want to be evaced in the middle of the night. I'm sick but not dying. Just give me some shit for the temperature and you can ship my ass out at first light."

"No way, man, you're out of here as soon as I can rustle up a copter," the medic replied, pulling his arm away.

"Hey, Sarge, don't let him do it. It'll be morning soon, and there'll be a copter in with first light. You know those fly boys don't like that night flying unless absolutely necessary. I'll be fine."

The sarge smiled, "You just don't like that flying shit. I've noticed how jumpy you get when we mount up. You are always the first one off when we land. Okay, but first light and you're on your way. Bob, give him whatever he needs. I don't want his honky ass dying on me. Ain't gonna be writing his mommy and daddy explaining how one night he just up and died on me."

"He's your man, Sarge, but a 103 temperature is nothing to fuck around with. I'm no doctor, but anything above 102 gets to be dangerous. I think we should get him out of here," Bob said.

"He's my man, Doc. My call. Another couple of hours won't kill him. Watch him, and I'll go make arrangements for the chopper." With these words, the sarge turned and began working his way to the entrance of the bunker.

Bob reached for his bag. He dug around in it for a minute and then handed three pills to Lou. "Here, take these." He dug around some more and came up with more pills.

Lou popped the three pills in his mouth and began to chew. The bitter taste told him they were aspirin. When Bob started to hand him some more pills, Lou held up his hand and said, "The sarge said to take care of me, not feed me."

"The aspirin will take an edge off that fever. These are just some salt pills. You've sweated out lots of fluid, so we need to replace the salts you're losing in the sweat. That's probably why you've been cramping up at night," Bob said. "What I want to know is why the hell you just don't let me get a chopper in here now?"

"Listen, Doc," Lou said.

"I don't hear anything," the medic replied.

"That's your answer. It's night. There are people awake at every position. Truce or no truce. But most of the guys are getting some real sleep for the first night in weeks. A chopper coming in will get them all up. They need their sleep more than I need a chopper. I know that doesn't make sense to you, but it makes perfect sense to us," Lou said.

He closed his eyes, rolled himself into a tight ball, and fell asleep. Bob leaned back against the wall of the bunker and lit up a cigarette. He'd stay awake and watch the Professor through the night. He admired the man but could not begin to comprehend what he had just been told. It was quite clear old Lou was talking out of his head. Bob figured Lou was too stupid to die on him. Let the men sleep. What crap.

Lou stood off to the side of where the copter would land. The sun had just climbed over the crest of the hills to the east, and the copter was inbound. It was not an evac, just a standard supply copter, but they were to give him a ride into the hospital down at Bien Hoi, the brigade's home base in country. The medic had contacted the hospital, and they would be expecting him. In addition, the battalion's headquarters had been contacted, placing Spec Four Merrins TDY in the hospital. The medic had placed a tag on the Professor's shirt and had handed him a binder with the medical data that would be needed to see that he got immediate attention upon landing at the hospital.

The Professor wasn't feeling all that great. He felt bad about leaving the outfit, especially on the day before Christmas. He knew he would only be gone for a day, maybe two. Still he was glad he had a chance to say goodbye to everyone before leaving. Physically, he had felt worse, but he was also a long way from feeling well. His temperature had fallen to around 101 by morning. He had been a little afraid that they would decide not to send him in. Not that he wanted to leave. It was just that he wasn't getting better and needed better medicine than the medics could give him.

Lou heard the copter approaching. It landed, and the usual chaos that surrounds a copter on the ground ensued. Work parties surrounded the thing, grabbing supplies off as quickly as possible, while the crew was busy trying to kick the shit out the sides. Lou bent down and picked up his rucksack, quickly slung it across his back, and turned to head toward the chopper. At that instant, one of the guys unloading the chopper backed into him, sending him sprawling. He landed on his butt and almost lost his rifle. Then he quickly rolled over and got onto his feet, heading for the copter. The crew chief was waving him on. As he put his foot onto the skid to climb onto the chopper, he felt a pair of hands grab him and pull him aboard. Lou was unceremoniously deposited amid ship. He grabbed for a handful of seat, knowing

what would happen next. The engine began to roar as the blades revved up to take off speed. Without warning, the copter lifted off the pad. After gaining the minimum altitude necessary, the pilot pointed the nose down toward the valley below. The copter responded by quickly picking up speed. Once the copter was moving forward and downward at a rate approaching the speed of light, the pilot pulled back on the collective, lifting the craft almost straight up. SOP. The Professor understood why they flew like this. Low and fast at treetop level and then up, out of the range of small arms fire. Evidently the pilots believed this truce bullshit as much as he did. For this he was grateful.

The crew chief sat down beside him. "Where are your papers?" he yelled into Lou's ear. Lou could barely hear him. "What?" he asked.

"Where are your papers?" the crew chief yelled again.

"Right here," Lou yelled back.

"Right where?" the chief yelled.

"Here," Lou yelled back while looking down at his hands. His right hand was wrapped around his rifle. There was nothing in his left hand. This struck him as funny, and he smiled at the crew chief. He couldn't remember what they had been talking about. "What?" he yelled at the crew chief.

"No. Where?" the crew chief yelled back. Now he was smiling. He moved the mike on his helmet in front of his mouth and began talking to the pilot. Lou looked down at the ground. Nothing was said for some time.

The crew chief tapped him on the shoulder and pointed out the door on his side. Lou looked and in the distance could begin to make out the towers that surrounded what must have been a large military base. "Bien Hoi." the crew chief yelled in his ear. It took them a while to approach the base. It was huge. He could see a large airfield with several runways. There were barracks, motor pools, hangars, a tank base, stores, and lots of tents. Off to the east was the sea. They passed over the base for several minutes before the copter headed down for a landing. Lou could not see a hospital, and he began to wonder what was happening.

The copter landed and the pilot killed the engine. As the blades slowed down, the noise level dropped dramatically. Lou began to exit the aircraft when the crew chief stopped him.

"Where you going, troop?" he asked.

"I thought I was going to the hospital," the Pro answered. "I thought that is where you guys were heading, but I guess you got lost."

"Name's Hal," the crew chief said, holding out his hand.

Lou shook it. "Lou."

"I had the pilot call back to base about your paperwork. They found it blowing around the compound after the chopper lifted off. You must have dropped it. The pilot says the medic he talked to was hopping mad. We called your battalion headquarter and they're sending someone to get you."

"Why didn't you fly me over to the hospital?" Lou asked.

"Without paperwork, you wouldn't have been allowed off the chopper. It's quicker this way. Now you just wait here, and someone will be by in a jeep to gather you up and take you where you need to go. I'm going to get me some breakfast before we go out again. With Christmas tomorrow, we're going to be ferrying goodies to the troops in the field all day. You take care of yourself and have a merry Christmas."

The crew chief moved off toward where the rest of his crew was headed. Lou looked around. The day was getting hot, and he wasn't feeling any better. He took a long drink from his canteen, and that helped some. He lit a Salem and took a long drag. It felt good to be on the ground after the long copter ride. He sat on the ground and smoked.

After about fifteen minutes, he realized that someone had fucked up. There was no one coming to pick him up. Lou got to his feet and looked around. Off in the distance, he could make out a large group of tents. Now either that would be where he needed to go, or whoever was there would be able to contact his outfit. The distance couldn't have been more than a quarter of a mile, and Lou was an infantryman. He had his own means of transportation and he used it.

Ten minutes later he walked into the rear area of his brigade's headquarters. There was a tent city laid out in front of him. There were signs everywhere pointing out the direction to

each facility. He quickly spotted the tent with a sign that had a large red cross painted on it. Bingo.

Lou headed toward the tent. The quick walk from the helicopter pad had done him in. His uniform was soaking wet, and although the day was hot and his equipment heavy, he knew that he was sweating much more than normal. His head was beginning to ache. His legs felt heavy and his ankles were screaming at him. He had not taped them this morning. It hadn't seemed necessary. He wasn't going to be doing any real walking, getting to the hospital. Now both ankles were vying for his attention. His boots were laced, and the tissue in the ankles was pushing against their sides. He needed to find a place to sit and get his ankles taken care of. The tent with the red cross seemed an answer to his prayers. Lou pushed aside the flap and entered. It took his eyes a minute to adjust to the dimmed light of the tent.

Specialist 6th Class William Croner was sitting at his desk just inside the entrance to the tent. He was one of the senior medics in the brigade and he was not in a good mood. He and the brigade's senior medical officer had just completed the daily sick call. Each day, several men would show up at the tent to be seen by the medical staff. Some of these were men recovering from illnesses or injuries sustained in the field. Most were men from the rear, trying to get out of work details. There was a hardcore group of these people who always complained of one medical condition or another. Their goal in life was either to do no work or, ideally, to come up with a medical excuse to be sent home to the states. The day before Christmas had brought almost every goof-off into sick call that morning. Spec Six Croner was sick of it and pissed at all the paperwork he had to struggle through as he took care of them. This was his mood when Lou entered his tent.

Spec Six Croner did not look up from his work when the tent's flap opened, that is until the smell hit him. Something akin to a dead cat. His eyes snapped to the figure standing in the tent opening. It looked something like an American soldier, but he wouldn't place money on it. The man in front of him was a mess. His mind quickly assessed him as a white male, about 5 feet 6 inches tall, weighing a hundred-forty pounds. As he stood there, he swayed slightly, looking around in a confused manner. Probably stoned, Croner thought. The man's uniform hung on him. He looked like a scarecrow swaying in the wind. In his right hand he carried an

M-16 rifle. On his webbing hung grenades. Bandoleers of ammo crisscrossed his chest, and a bayonet hung from a scabbard on his waste. There was another knife in a scabbard taped to the man's webbing up near his left shoulder, the handle facing down toward the ground. He could see the straps of the rucksack digging into the man's shoulders. The soldier's uniform carried no marking. No name tag, rank, shoulder patches, nothing. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up. Croner could see the sores that covered his arms. Scabs from old scratches, some reddened and weeping. And Croner could smell him.

Lou looked at the medic sitting at the desk, and a smile came to his face. Finally, someone who could help him, Lou thought. He reached into his shirt pocket, took out a cigarette, and started to light up.

"You can't smoke in here!" Croner yelled.

"Sure I can," Lou said lighting up. He still had that goofy smile on his face. The medic seemed a might unfriendly, but that didn't bother Lou. Somewhere in his brain, he recalled a ghost of a memory that there were men in the Army who spoke to him in that tone of voice. He hadn't heard it in so long that it amused him. Now he knew he was in the right place.

Croner stood up behind his desk. He was in no mood to take any shit from anyone, and certainly not the man who stood in front of him. "Soldier, I said you can't smoke in here. Now put out that cigarette and report in if you need help." The man in the door shifted slightly and took a puff on his cigarette. The insubordinate son-of-a-bitch! The medic saw the rifle shift a little in the Lou's hand. He noticed the clip in the magazine. It made him nervous. Still, he was in charge around here. "You can't bring a loaded gun in here. You're not supposed to bring any weapons in here. Why don't you give me the gun and tell me what you need?"

Lou looked down at the weapon in his right hand. He smiled. Ain't no fucking gun he thought. The medic could at least learn the difference between a gun and a rifle. He was exhausted, and now he was being told he had to turn over his rifle to a medic. It was all too weird for the Professor's mind to handle. He turned and stepped back outside the tent. The sun was casting a shadow along the front of the tent. Lou stepped off to the side and sat down. He felt a slight breeze blowing and was grateful for it. He worked the rucksack off his shoulders and leaned back against it. He would sit there and smoke his cigarette. Lou needed to figure

out what came next. He was beginning to have problems making his mind work properly. He wanted to unlace his boots, but he knew he would never be able to lace them back up. From the looks of it, he might have to hump it over to the hospital from here. He had no idea how far that might be.

Spec Six Croner could not believe it when the man in the door just turned and walked out on him. The man was definitely stoned and needed to be reported to someone. Besides, he couldn't be allowed to roam around the compound with a loaded rifle. Only the MPs were allowed weapons in the rear. After a couple minutes hesitation he moved to the opening of the tent. Croner saw where the soldier was heading and called the MPs on him. He threw back the flap and took three steps out of the tent. He looked to the left and right but could not see the man anywhere. He turned back toward the tent. His heart skipped a beat when he saw the man sitting along the side of the tent smoking the cigarette. He was looking up at him with that goofy smile on his face. "I thought you left," he said.

"Did," replied Lou.

"What outfit you with?" Croner asked.

"A Company, Third Batt."

"You got a name, boy?"

"Friends call me Pro," the scarecrow replied.

"Pro? Well listen Pro-" the specialist started.

Lou raised his left hand and said, "Don't"

"What?"

"Don't," Lou replied.

"Don't what?" Croner asked. He was getting even more pissed.

"Don't call me Pro, asshole. My friends call me Pro. You call me boy one more time and we'll do more than just talk." Lou said with an obvious challenge in his voice. His voice had a sharp edge, but the goofy smile stayed on his face. Lou wasn't really all that mad. More than anything he was tired, hot and tired. He knew he shouldn't be talking this way to the medic. The guy outranked him, and he needed his help. His mind and his mouth weren't on the same circuit. Besides, the medic had started it all by asking for his rifle. What the hell did a medic

need a rifle for? It was all getting very confusing. He started to speak, meaning to explain this to Croner, but he was no longer there. He had disappeared. Neat trick, Lou thought. He looked around, confused. Maybe he was hallucinating. Lou finished the cigarette, stubbed out the ash, and put the butt in his pocket. He stood up and looked around. There was plenty of activity going on in the area. He decided to catch a ride to the hospital and get his ankles taken care of.

Spec Six Croner sat down behind his desk and dialed the MP extension. The line clicked open, but before anyone could answer he hung up. He quickly opened his base directory and found the number for A Company, Third Battalion. He knew the company clerk there, Larry Hisle. Maybe Larry could tell him who this guy was.

"A Company, Spec Four Hisle."

"Larry, this is Bill Croner over at Brigade Aid," he said.

"Hey, Bill, what's happening?"

"Got me a problem, Larry." Bill replied. He proceeded to explain to Larry what had just transpired.

"Sounds like one of ours, Bill. Had a man flown in from the field this morning. Supposed to be flown into the hospital, but things got fucked up. We were then supposed to pick him up at the helo pad down the road. Got there a little late, and he was gone. Listen, Bill, his real name is Louis Merrins. He's a good guy, but he must be pretty sick to have been sent in from the field. I'll be right down to pick him up. Don't let him go anywhere." The line went dead.

Spec Six Croner was suddenly very worried. Lou certainly had acted weird, but he thought he was stoned. He may have been, but he also could be really sick. Better round him up real quick. He stepped back outside. Lou was walking away.

"Hey, Lou," he yelled. Lou turned.

"Yeah?" he replied.

"Need some help?" Bill asked.

"Yeah." Lou replied.

"Why don't you come into the tent, and I'll see what I can do for you." Bill turned and walked back into the tent. He hoped Larry's friend, Lou, would follow.

Lou headed for the tent. He was glad the medic had returned. He wanted to ask how he did that disappearing thing. A jeep pulled up beside him. He looked over, and there was his old buddy, Larry.

"Man, am I glad to see you," Lou said.

"Lou, is that you?" Larry asked. The man in front of him looked only a little like the man he had seen just six weeks before. He was thinner, dirty, his hair was getting long, and he smelled. His friend stood there with a big smile on his face. But the biggest change was in the eyes. The eyes looked different. He couldn't say how, just different.

Lou laughed. Same old Larry. Always joking. "Of course it's me. Who do you think it is, General Custer?"

"You look a little haggard, old friend. What you wearing? Eau de Skunk from the smell of it. Throw your shit in the back of the jeep and let's go in and get you fixed up, or at least washed up," Larry said.

"You REMFs sure got sensitive noses," Lou replied, throwing his gear into the jeep.

"What you got in there, Pal?" Larry asked.

"Whatever you want," Lou replied.

They entered the tent. Spec Six Croner motioned them into a couple of chairs set up next to his desk. Larry and Lou sat down. Lou was beginning to feel good about things. He felt crappy, but with Larry here, things would get straightened out. Larry asked Lou if maybe it wouldn't be better if he gave him the rest of his gear to hold. Lou unlocked the magazine from the rifle and handed it to Larry. He jacked open the chamber of the M-16. Of course the chamber was empty, he knew it was, but he visually checked it anyway before handing it to Larry. He slipped the bands of ammo from around his neck. There were six of them, holding a total of thirty clips of ammo. Lou unclipped his webbing and handed that to Larry. He sat back down in the chair with a sigh.

Larry accepted all of his friend's equipment without comment. He was amazed at how much it all weighed. It all made him a little nervous also. Six grenades, two knives, six hundred rounds of ammo, and an M-16 rifle: his friend's tools of the trade. Enough here to kill a

hundred men, and more in the rucksack in the jeep. Maybe this wasn't his friend sitting there in front of him. Maybe it was someone else. Someone his friends called Pro.

The first thing Croner did was stick a thermometer in Lou's mouth. Just like mom always did when he got sick. Lou was anxious to explain to him that it was his ankles that needed fixing, but he waited patiently for the medic to remove the thermometer. Larry answered the medic's questions as he filled out the paperwork Lou had lost earlier. After what seemed like forever, the medic took the thermometer from Lou's mouth. He looked at it, then turned to Larry. "You got a jeep with you?" he asked.

"Yeah," Larry replied.

Croner was scribbling like crazy on the paper in front of him. After a minute he finished writing and placed the paperwork into a file. He handed the file to Larry. "Your buddy here has a temp of 104 degrees. He needs to be seen at the hospital right now. I'll call ahead. They'll be waiting for you. Do not, I repeat, Do not fuck around getting there. You understand?"

Larry turned and headed for the door. Lou just sat there. He had heard what was being said, but he wasn't quite sure if this had anything to do with him. He just wanted the medic to look at his ankles. Larry's ass headed out the door. The medic spoke to him, "Are you deaf?"

"What?" Lou asked.

"Didn't you just hear what I told Larry?" Croner asked.

"Yeah," Lou replied.

"Well?"

"Well, what?" Lou asked in a confused voice. Conversations were hard to follow here in the rear area. They were so circumspect.

"Don't you think you better follow your friend Larry?"

"Why?" Lou asked.

Croner smiled. It was evident that old Lou was not tracking very well today. With a hundred and four temp, it was amazing that he was functioning at all. He needed to get the man to the hospital as soon as possible. How to get him out of the tent and into the jeep might be a problem. Just then the flap to the tent opened, and Larry came back in.

"I was getting ready to take off when I realized I was missing something," he said. "Why don't you come with me, Lou?"

"Sure, Larry," Lou said, getting to his feet. He followed Larry outside. "You want me to drive?"

"Nah. You can drive next time," Larry replied with a smile. "You just sit there and take a load off your feet while old Larry sets a new land speed record. Here, hold this file for me. And Lou, try not to lose it this time." Larry slammed the jeep into first and stomped his foot on the gas pedal. Pretty soon they were heading down the road like the proverbial bat out of hell.

Within minutes, they were approaching the hospital complex. It sprawled out in front of them. There was one large building surrounded by multiple one story buildings. There were signs everywhere with different names on them that Larry didn't quite understand: Histology, Radiology, Morgue (he knew he didn't want that one), Laboratory, etc. He had never been here before and wasn't exactly sure where to go. Finally he saw one called Admitting which pointed to the large building in the complex. He drove right by the one which read Emergency Room.

Larry pulled the jeep right up to the curb in front of the building. There was an MP standing there right next to the No Parking sign. Looking at the stripes on the MP's sleeve, Larry said, "Excuse me, Sarge, I need some help."

"Sounds reasonable," the MP replied.

"I need to get my buddy here admitted to the hospital. Can I park here for a minute while I run him in?" Larry asked.

"No, you can't," the MP said. "That's why they have me here. You go in there and you're liable not to return for several hours. Been happening too much around here lately, which is why I'm standing here."

"I was told to get him here pronto. What should I do?" Larry asked.

"If you want, I'll walk him inside. You wait here until I get back." Lou got out of the jeep. He quickly shook Larry's hand and headed off after the MP. The MP held the door for him, and Lou entered the hospital. The cool air hit him and stopped him dead in his tracks. Air Conditioning! Air Conditioning! Air Conditioning! His mind just froze and kept repeating the

phrase over and over again. Now he knew he must be hallucinating. The MP tapped him on the shoulder. He was saying something while pointing off to the desk located on the right side of the lobby. Lou realized his audio system was out of whack. He could see the MP's mouth moving but no message was coming through. Air Conditioning! Fucking Air Conditioning! The MP turned and walked back out through the doors. Why would he do that? Why would he leave the air conditioning!

Lou looked down and noticed the papers in his hand. Oh yes. Got to see a doctor about his ankles. He moved over to the desk.

"Can I help you?" a corporal asked.

"Yeah, I need to see a doctor," Lou replied.

"Which doctor?" the corporal asked.

"What?"

"Which doctor?" the corporal asked again.

"Ankle doctor," Lou replied.

"What?"

"Ankle doctor," Lou replied again.

"You got an appointment?" the corporal asked.

"What?"

"An appointment to see the doctor?" the corporal asked, his voice rising.

Lou handed him his paperwork. That should take care of things. Talking had suddenly become very confusing again.

The clerk took the paperwork and looked through it. He was basically a clerk with no medical background. He could see the soldier's name and unit. It was on a form he hadn't seen before. He would have to contact someone with more experience to know what to do with the rather smelly man standing in front of the counter.

"Listen, I'm not exactly sure where you're supposed to go. Why don't you have a seat over there while I get on the horn and figure out where you're supposed to be?" He said this while pointing to a row of chairs located across the lobby. Just then, the phone on the counter rang. The corporal picked it up while he laid Lou's paperwork on the shelf behind the counter.

Lou moved over to the chairs the corporal had pointed to. He was very confused by now. Things didn't seem to be going well again, and he didn't know why. He sat down. He was shivering ever so slightly. Not enough for anyone else to notice. Lou looked at his watch. Almost noon. He hoped someone would come for him soon. He was getting hungry. He was tired. He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

The MP entered the doors to the hospital. He had just been relieved and decided to run in and use the can before heading back to the barracks. He spotted the soldier he had brought in earlier in the day, sitting in a chair sleeping. When he was done taking a leak, he noticed him again. The guy who had dropped him off had said that the man was really sick. It seemed strange to the sergeant that he would be sleeping in the lobby. He walked over the man and gently shook him. The man did not stir, and the sergeant noticed the guy's clothes were wet. Feeling the first stirring of fear, the sergeant shook him harder. The man woke up.

"Hey man, you alright?" the sergeant asked.

"What?" Lou replied, trying to shake the cobwebs out of his head.

"I asked if you are all right?"

"Yeah," Lou replied. "The corporal told me to take a seat, and I must have fallen asleep." Lou looked down at his watch. It was almost Five-thirty. He stood up, but just barely. The MP saw his legs begin to go and grabbed him.

"I don't mean to pry, but you look like shit," he said.

"Funny, but I don't feel that good," Lou replied with that goofy smile that kept finding its way onto his face. With the sergeant's assistance, he made it over to the counter. Another sergeant walked over to them and asked if he could be of service. Lou explained what had happened earlier. His mind seemed clearer than it had been, and he was able to give a fairly lucid account of his conversation with the corporal. The sergeant was quickly able to find his paperwork that still lay on the counter. He opened it up and looked at the forms. He was no medical genius but could see from the form that the man was supposed to have gone in through the emergency room. He gave instructions to Lou and the MP.

Lou took his paperwork and headed in the direction the sergeant behind the desk had pointed. The MP put his hand on Lou's shoulder.

"You don't mind if I tag along, do you?" he asked.

He took the folder from Lou's hand, and they headed off down the hallway to find a doctor.

It took them about fifteen minutes to get to the Emergency Room. They stopped once to let Lou take a leak, once to let him get a drink, and twice to let him rest. He was tired like he had never been. They entered the Emergency Room and walked up to the desk. There was no one around, so they rang the bell sitting on the counter. A man with a stethoscope came out of an office.

"Can I be of service to you, gentlemen?" he asked.

"This man needs to see a doctor. Says you're expecting him," the sergeant replied.

"I'm Doctor Hill. I just came on duty about thirty minutes ago and wasn't told to expect anyone, although I'll be happy to help if I can." The MP handed him the folder with the paperwork. "I need to be going, this being Christmas Eve and everything. You take care of yourself," he said, extending his hand to Lou. Lou shook it.

The doc said, "Follow me" and walked out through some swinging double doors. Lou followed. He was led into a standard examination room and asked to sit on the table. The doctor pulled up a stool and sat down in front of him.

"It's my ankles, Doc. They're killing me," Lou said.

The doctor asked Lou to take off his shoes and socks. He did so. God, it felt good to get his boots off. The doctor looked at the ankles of the man sitting in front of him. They were a mess. He wasn't an orthopedist, but he wouldn't have been surprised if there was ligament damage in both ankles.

He manipulated both joints gently and saw the soldier wince with pain.

"How long you been walking around like this?" Dr. Hill asked.

"A few weeks at least," Lou replied. Finally, someone who was going to help him.

"It's beyond me how they treat you guys," the doctor replied. He opened the file to see what the medic who had sent him to the emergency room had written. There was no mention of this man's ankles. The tentative diagnosis was FUO. Fever of Unknown Origin my ass, the young doctor grimaced. Hell, this man was hobbling around on two ankles that were swollen

and discolored, and the damn medic was worried about a temperature. The doc let his eyes wander over to the section where the medic had entered the patient's vital signs. Temperature of 104. That couldn't be right. With a 104 degree temperature, no one would be sitting in front of him. They would be in a coma. The doctor scooted over to the desk in the room and pulled out a thermometer that was sitting in a jar filled with alcohol. Better safe than sorry. He stuck the thermometer into Lou's mouth.

"Says here you been running a temperature for several days," he said. Lou just shrugged his shoulders in response. The doctor looked down at his ankles again. He could see that there was even more swelling now that the boots were off. The poor bastard had to walk on these for several weeks without proper attention. How could he do that?

Lou sat there minding his own business. He was aware of his surroundings but not really tuned into what was happening. The doc was here taking care of him, so he felt no reason to worry. He continued to suck on the thermometer. Dr. Hill reached up and took the thermometer from his mouth. He looked at it, jumped to his feet, and ran to the door. "Medic! Medic! I want a Goddamn Medic!" he bellowed at the top of his voice. Lou almost fell off the table when he started yelling.

"You okay, Doc?" Lou asked, getting to his feet.

The doctor turned and pointed, "You, sit down right now!"

Two guys in whites entered the room. Both were huffing and puffing like they had just gotten done running. Pointing at Lou, Dr. Hill said, "This man has a temp of 106.4 degrees. You take him into the shower, put it on cold, and keep him under it until I get there."

The medics approached him and each one grabbed an arm. Lou had focused in on the word "shower." Seemed like a good idea. One whose time had come. Still, standing up had woken up the pain in his ankles. "Hey, Doc, you going to take care of my ankles after I'm through with the shower?" he asked on his way out the door. He didn't quite catch the answer.

They took him into a shower area and turned one of them on. He stepped under the shower not even bothering to take off his clothes. It was cold, and his legs gave out, and he didn't remember anything after that.

"Open your eyes, Pro," the voice said. So he did.

Jimmy Fox was sitting in a chair next to the bed Lou was lying in. When Lou opened his eyes, Jimmy jumped up and took a step back from the bed. Lou started to say something but could not speak. All that came out was a squeak. He tried again with the same results. He looked around. He was in some kind of hospital ward. He noticed a table next to his bed with nothing on it. On the table by the next bed he spotted what he needed. He tried to tell Jimmy what he wanted, but what came from his lips was some kind of silent whisper. He pointed toward the water glass. Jimmy understood. He moved quickly over to the table and got the glass. The man in the next bed said something Lou couldn't quite make out. "Fuck you," Jimmy said to the man as he turned back to Lou's bed with the glass in his hand. He was smiling. Lou took the glass and proceeded to nearly drown. He took a big gulp and began coughing and gagging. Lou was choking and spitting at the same time. Jimmy was both greatly concerned for his friend and highly amused by the scene before him. He stood there, smiling, ready to help but not exactly sure what to do.

The answer came in the form of a male nurse. He arrived on the scene, took one look at Lou, and ran off, yelling "Bed six is awake! Bed six is awake!" This got Jimmy to laughing out loud. Lou lay in the bed gasping for breath. Finally his breathing slowed down to the point where he thought he might live when the doctor arrived.

"So, you decided to wake up did you?" he said.

"What?" Lou croaked at him.

"Who are you?" he asked, looking across the bed at Jimmy Fox.

"That's Jimmy," Lou replied.

"Private James Fox, Sir. Airborne!" Jimmy replied, saluting the doctor.

The doctor returned the salute. At least he knew whom he was dealing with. Airborne! The doctor knew immediately the one rule he needed to follow in handling these men. It was a rule everyone in the hospital knew. Do Not Fuck With The Airborne. These men were not like others they dealt with. They were a breed apart, and they looked after one another with a dedication that was frightening. Any other soldier would have been asked to leave. Private James Fox could stay as long as he felt like it.

Lou could see the insignia on the doctor's collar when he bent down to talk to him.

"Sorry, Sir, I didn't mean any disrespect," Lou said quickly.

"No offense taken, son. How you feeling Spec Four Merrins," he asked, reading Lou's name off the record he held in his hand.

"Pro, Sir," Lou replied.

"What?" the Major asked.

"My friends call me Pro, Sir," Lou replied.

"What should I call you?"

"Pro, Sir," Lou replied.

Jimmy Fox got a big grin on his face. "Actually we call him Professor, Sir," he said.

"Well, Pro, it's good to see you awake. Tell me, son, do you know where you are?" the doc asked.

"Sure. This is the hospital at Bien Hoi, Sir," Lou responded with a smile on his face.

"Good. Good," the Major said. "And do you know what day it is?"

"Of course, Sir. It's Christmas Day," he replied.

"No, son, it's not Christmas. Christmas was over a week ago. It's now the 2nd of January 1968. I know this might be hard for you to understand, but you have been in a coma since the day before Christmas. The truth is, I didn't think you would ever wake up again. You had a temperature of 106 when you got here. How you survived, I'll never know. You being alive was our Christmas miracle on this ward. I can't begin to tell you how gratifying it is to hear you speak. We'll need to run a lot of tests on you over the next few days, but your speaking makes me think everything will turn out alright." There was a tear in his eye as he squeezed Lou's hand. He turned around and walked off.

Lou turned to Jimmy. He hadn't questioned Jimmy's presence when he woke up, but now he remembered that Jimmy had waved to him before he got on the chopper. Jimmy was in his squad, and now he was in the rear, visiting him in the hospital.

"He jiving me, Jimmy?" Lou asked.

"No," Jimmy replied. "It's true. Today is January 2nd. You've been asleep since they brought you in here."

"They bring you here to babysit me, blood?" Lou asked.

"No, man, the guys in the platoon have been taking turns. I just happened to be the lucky one you chose to scare to death. When you opened your eyes, I think my heart stopped beating."

"Well you told me to," Lou laughed.

Lou was so glad to see Jimmy, he felt like he could burst. He reached for the glass and took a sip of water. It tasted so sweet. Then a thought crossed his mind.

"Jimmy. You just said the guys in the platoon were taking turns sitting with me, right?" he asked.

"Yeah," Jimmy answered tonelessly. Jimmy knew what was coming next. The Professor figured things out faster than most. He was tempted to leave, but it wasn't the way one treated friends.

"What are you guys doing out of the field?" the Professor asked.

"The whole company's back, have been for almost a week," Jimmy replied.

"Why?" Lou asked warily. He knew something was wrong. He was afraid of how wrong.

"Listen, Pro. You just woke up after a week in a coma. You heard what the doctor said. You almost died. Now might not be the best time to tell you everything that has happened. You might not be up to it," Jimmy replied.

"How bad, Jimmy?" Lou asked. Jimmy stood there with his eyes down. "Come on, Jimmy, how bad was it?" Lou asked quietly.

"Our company lost twenty-two men, killed and wounded. Bravo Company lost close to a hundred," Jimmy said with anger in his voice. "It happened on the 26th of December, the day after the truce. Motherfuckers used the truce to set up a double ambush. Bravo Company landed in an opening south of the perimeter. When they were all on the ground, Charlie sprang the ambush. We were airlifted into the only other opening in the area. They were waiting for us too. Two platoons had landed. Then, luckily, one of the guys made them spring the ambush early. The gunships were able to work over the area before the whole company landed. That's probably the only thing that saved us from Bravo Company's fate. After it was all over, they had to pull both companies from the field. They've allowed us time off to visit the men in the hospital every day."

Lou lay there quietly, taking it all in. When Jimmy was done talking, Lou thanked him for telling what had happened. He knew it had been hard on Jimmy, so he said he was tired and needed to rest. Lou closed his eyes and didn't open them again until after his friend had left. He didn't cry that day. He never cried about what he had learned that day. By time he learned about what had happened, it was old news. In the Nam, one let go of the old and moved on. But for another reason, he would remember that day for the rest of his life. It was a day when he returned to the land of the living only to find out that he had not been there when the men of his squad, platoon, and company had needed him the most. This left him with a feeling of shame. It would never go away. END