

#11 REMF - Early 1968 – the rear, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – This was after leaving the hospital. I had lost 22 lbs. and was unfit for duty with an active Airborne unit.

They kept him for thirteen days after he woke up. Lou smiled at the thought. A prisoner about to be released after twenty years in prison could not have been happier. What should have been a period of rest and recuperation had in fact been a period of aggravation and harassment. Now they were turning him loose, not recovered, but free. The staff of the ward was as happy to see him go as he was to be gone. The head nurse of the ward stood at the door of the hospital to witness his departure. *Must be afraid something will go wrong and I'll return*, he thought. Louis was not completely without positive feelings toward the staff. They had managed to save his life. They had been honest enough to admit that they weren't exactly sure how. A combination of modern antibiotics and luck had determined that he would live to fight another day. For that, Lou was grateful, but not so much that he still would not miss the staff.

The sun was hot. The air conditioning of the hospital would be missed. Standing there, swaying in the hot sun was no fun, but Lou was too proud to walk back into the hospital and wait in the cool of the building. Finally a jeep, with the decals of his battalion stenciled on the front, pulled up to the curb. Lou had really expected to see Larry Hisle, the company's clerk who had driven him to the hospital two weeks ago. Instead the jeep was driven by another person.

Lou walked over to the jeep. "You looking for me?" he asked.

"Depends on who you are, doesn't it?" the man replied.

The uniform Lou was wearing was nondescript. It had been issued to him just that day and did not have any marking or insignias. "Louis Merrins," he replied.

"Jump in," the man said.

Before he left, there was one more task to be accomplished. Turning toward the hospital, he eyed the nurse standing there watching him. Drawing himself upright, he saluted. She was an officer and returned his salute as required by military protocol. Lou smiled and then

raised his middle finger in another kind of salute. *Fuck you, bitch.* He got in the jeep, and the driver pulled away.

The ride back to the battalion area took longer than the ride to hospital had two weeks earlier. Then Larry Hisle had set a new land speed world record at the request of the senior battalion medic. Now the driver did not seem to be in any particular hurry to get back. That was fine with Lou. Even moving at a leisurely pace, the motion of the jeep nauseated him. He felt slightly nauseous all the time now. Part of the recovery process. After taking no nourishment for nine days, Lou's body rebelled at being put back to work processing food. When his stomach finally decided it had no choice but to gear back up, his bowels rebelled. It had been a long process, but his digestive system was now working. Had the environment of the hospital been more conducive to recuperation, Lou would have probably remained there much longer. Now he was heading back to the battalion with medical records stating that he was now ready for his return to duty.

The jeep pulled up in front of the battalion aid station. Lou entered the tent and let his eyes adapt to the difference in lighting. Behind the desk sat Spec 6 Croner, who had helped Lou more than two weeks earlier. Croner looked up from the work on his desk. When he spotted Lou, a huge smile came to his face.

"Come on in and have a seat," he said indicating the chair beside his desk. "Just got a call from a very pissed off nurse. She says you were insubordinate and disrespectful. Sounds as if you must be in fine spirits."

Lou was slightly chagrined at Spec 6 Croner's welcome. He had not treated Croner very nicely during their first encounter. It was a good sign that he was smiling. "Sorry about the last time I was here," Lou said.

"That's all right. I wasn't very experienced handling grunts then. I've had an opportunity to meet a lot of the guys from your outfit and Company B since then. Quite an education really. I'm not as sensitive about certain things now. My biggest adjustment was getting used to your language and attitudes. Now, what can I do for you?"

"I'm ready to go back to the field," Lou replied.

"And I'm ready to fly," Croner said with a smile.

"No, I mean it. I can't take the bullshit. It's time to head back into the bush."

"The hospital sent over a copy of your records yesterday. The Brigade Medical Officer went over them with Doc Washington. According to your records, you now weigh in at all of one hundred and thirty pounds. You lost twenty pounds in the hospital while in the coma. When I first saw you, you looked like a fucking scarecrow. Now you look more like a stick man."

Lou smiled at this. "Yeah, I may look weak, but it's all muscle."

"That twenty pounds you lost was all muscle. When you came in from the field there was no body fat or very little. Your body had already used it all up fighting off whatever bug it was that was trying to kill you. After that, the body had to start burning off muscle for energy. According to the records you still have problems eating, and even though you've been able to put on a few pounds, your exercise tolerance is for shit. There is no way you are ready to go back out to the field," Croner said.

"Bullshit, Croner," Lou said.

"My friends call me Bill."

"Bullshit, Bill." Lou said.

Bill just shook his head while he continued to smile. He reached over and picked up his phone. "Give me supply," he said into the mouthpiece. "Scott? Specialist Croner. I have one of your men here who was released from the hospital this morning. Wants to go back to the field. I'll be sending him over for the usual. Yes, today. Yeah, an M-16. Sure, Merrins. Thanks Scott," he said, hanging up the phone. "All set. Just go see Sergeant James in supply, and he'll outfit you for the field. There's a chopper heading out to your company this afternoon. I'll make all the necessary arrangements. You report to your company clerk and they'll change your status and get you the necessary orders cut."

Bill held out his hand, and Lou shook it. "Thanks," Lou said as he stood up. He turned and headed out the door. Bill sat back down at his desk and smiled. Leaning back, he lit up a cigarette. Fucking Infantry, he thought. Lou would be back. There was no way that man was ready to go back to the field, and yet like every other grunt in the outfit, he seemed compelled to try. He wondered whether they really thought of themselves as supermen, or if that was just a facade they presented to the rest of the world. Bill had been in the military for nineteen

years as a medic. He had seen action in Korea. In all those years, he had never been assigned to an airborne outfit because he had no intention of jumping out of an airplane. His assignment to the 173rd Airborne had been predicated on the fact that there were simply not enough experienced men with his MOS to supply the outfit with the necessary support personnel. Since the Airborne serving in Vietnam would not actually be doing any Airborne assaults, it was not necessary for men assigned to noncombat roles to have airborne training. These were the type of men Spec 66 Croner had been used to handling. Croner had only been with the brigade for two weeks when he had first met up with Lou. The guy had been deathly ill, but he was still so arrogant and confused that it took Croner a while to realize what the situation was. Now Croner had enough experience with men from the same outfit as Lou's to realize that these were a different breed of cat. The Third Battalion lived in the jungle. These guys never came to the rear unless wounded, sick, or in transit. They had developed a tough mental attitude that allowed them to live a lifestyle that he could only imagine. These guys were not looking to get out of the field. They would only stay in the rear if circumstances forced them too, and they were always anxious to get back to their outfits. It did no good to argue with them. Bill had learned to just let them do what they felt they needed to do. Like Lou trying to go back to the field. No way in hell. The man would be back later, needing help again. Bill would be glad to give it to him. These grunts were good men. Bill admired them and would do everything within his power to help them, even if it meant making them suffer.

Lou exited the tent feeling good about things for the first time in quite a while. He knew the men in the squad would be glad to see him. No more than he would be to see them. The signs directed him to the battalion's administrative area where Larry Hisle, the company clerk, would do the necessary paperwork to get him back to the field.

Lou entered the tent and looked around. No Larry. One of the men sitting at a desk waved him over. The sign on the desk read "B Company," yet the man was waving as if Lou was expected. "Merrins?" the man asked. Lou moved over to the desk. "Yes."

"Yes, Sergeant," the man said, stressing his rank and how he wished to be addressed. He pointed to a chair seeming to indicate that Lou should sit. The man was a Spec 5 and an E-5 and outranked Lou, but he was not a sergeant.

"I'm looking for Larry Hisle, Specialist Goody," Lou said reading the man's name off the name tag. This man's uniform was clean and pressed with all the proper tags and insignias. The man frowned at Lou.

"Larry Hisle is no longer here. He had to go stateside. His mother died. Probably won't be back. A good chance he'll get a hardship discharge. We haven't gotten a replacement for him yet. I'm in charge here. I just got off the phone with Specialist Croner at Battalion Aid. It's going to take a while to get your paperwork ready. Here's a pass you can carry until you leave. The mess hall is located two tents to the left as you exit. Get some lunch, pick up your gear at supply, and report back here at 1500 hours. I'll have your paperwork done by then. Questions?" Spec 5 Goody asked.

"No, Specialist." Lou got to his feet and left. It was around noon. The mess tent was located where Goody said it would be. Lou entered and got a tray of food. He found a table that was empty and sat down. The sight of food nauseated him. Mashed potatoes and gravy, meat loaf, string beans, and a carton of ice cream. Food he would have killed for out in the field. There was a glass of milk, real milk. Not that reconstituted, white, chalky shit they sent out to the field periodically.

Lou sat there staring at the food. His breathing was heavy, and his legs were shaking. It was not a good sign. The thought that maybe he wasn't physically ready for the field crossed his mind. Lou ignored the thought and focused on the problem of getting the food into his system.

Just as he was finishing the meal, a man sat at the table across from Lou. Lou looked up. "How's the food?" Bill Croner asked.

"Fine," Lou answered.

"I heard you had some problems at the hospital," Bill said. "Want to talk about them?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Past. Doesn't mean anything," Lou said getting up. "See you."

Lou left the tent and headed for the supply tent. He knew he had been rude with Bill, but the man wasn't part of his circle of friends, and he would never be able to understand what

had happened at the hospital. Lou himself did not understand it completely. Some of it had to do with the anger that was present in him all the time now. Another thing Lou had discovered was that his ability to communicate with anyone other than a fellow grunt was limited. He had little sympathy for other people and their problems. They were so different from Lou that communication with them was almost impossible.

REMF. REAR ECHELON MOTHERFUCKERS. When he had first heard the term, he had thought it funny. Just another way to separate people. A form of elitist prejudice. Now Lou understood the term and why it existed. He was now a member of a group of men that was both feared and looked down upon by those who were not members. Anyone outside that group might as well have been from a different planet. Membership into the group required a price too high for any REMF to ever pay. Because of that, REMFs had a tendency to try to disparage members of Lou's group. There were definite class distinctions here in the rear. Lou, and every one in his group he had talked to, was aware of this. Members of his group dismissed it as bullshit. Their only goal upon reaching the rear was to take care of business and get back to the real world. Their real world.

Spec 6 Croner seemed like a nice guy, but Lou wasn't interested in becoming his friend. Lou would never see him again once back in the jungle. Making another friend was of no value to Lou and would require emotional energy he did not have.

The supply tent was only a short distance from the mess tent. By time Lou got there his legs were shaking and knees knocking. There was a counter near the entrance to the tent and Lou quickly, casually, leaned up against it. More for support than effect. A sergeant Lou did not recognize appeared from behind some of the shelves where equipment was stacked.

"You Spec 4 Merrins?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Got your stuff here." The sergeant walked over to a corner of the counter and reached down. He hefted a rucksack onto the counter. Attached to the rucksack was his webbing, covered with all kinds of goodies. His equipment. The sight of it almost brought a tear to his eyes. The sergeant reached down and came up with his six bandoleers of M-16 ammunition, then his M-16.

Sgt. James handed the weapon to Lou. There was a clip attached, and Lou immediately released it. The clip was empty. Lou jacked open the chamber to ensure there wasn't a round present. He broke the weapon open and broke it down quickly without thinking. His fingers flew over the weapon without thought. Holding the weapon up, Lou peered through the barrel. It was clean. The silver steel glistened. The bolt and other pieces were clean and lightly oiled. Almost as quickly as he had disassembled it, Lou put it back together. A smile played across his face during the whole time. Sgt. James watched with a touch of envy. He could remember when his weapon had meant as much to him as Spec 4 Merrins' M-16 meant to him. To Lou it was like meeting up with an old friend. Just the feel of it made him happy. *Maybe this is why I haven't been sleeping well lately*, Lou thought.

Lou laid the M-16 on the counter. "Thanks for taking care of it," he said to Sgt. James. He hefted his webbing off the rucksack. His eyes quickly ran over the grenades hanging on it. There was a piece of black tape over each cotter pin. The pin ends were crimped the way he had left them. Lou unfastened the survival knife from its sheath. The knife was sharp and the blade was lightly oiled. He put the knife back and pulled out his bayonet. Like everything else, it was in good condition. There were three canteens hanging from the belt. Lou shook one. It was empty, as were the others. He lifted the webbing off the counter and fitted it over his shoulders. Right away Lou discovered two things that struck him as strange. One thing was the weight. Without water in the canteens the webbing should have been almost featherweight. It felt heavier than he remembered. Once fitted to his body, Lou discovered the second problem. Someone had adjusted the belt so that it was way too loose. Lou took the webbing off to adjust the belt. Unloosening the hook that allowed one to adjust the length of the belt, Lou saw that the canvas bore the same markings of wear around the hole that the hook had occupied. He realized that no one had adjusted the belt. He had just lost some weight. Once the belt was adjusted, it worked just fine.

Next Lou crisscrossed the bandoleers of ammunition across his body. The weight of the ammo was amazing. His legs were already shaking when he turned again to the rucksack. He eyed it with suspicion remembering its weight. Undoing the straps, he did a quick inventory of the equipment contained inside. It was all there, just as he had left it the day he entered the

hospital. Luckily there were no C-rations in there. The company had just moved into a fire support base the day before and wasn't scheduled for resupply until the next day. Lou had already eaten most of his Cs prior to leaving the field and had given the rest away. Good. Less weight, he thought.

The counter was a good height for what Lou wanted to accomplish. He twisted the rucksack around so the straps were facing him. He dragged the rucksack to the front edge of the counter. Lou turned his back to the rucksack and worked his arms into the straps. The counter was slightly higher than his waist. Once his arms were through the straps, Lou had only to lean forward to pull the rucksack securely onto his back. He braced his legs in preparation of the anticipated weight. As he leaned forward, the rucksack leaped onto his back. Luckily Lou's knees buckled first before he was driven face forward into the dirt. Shit. Lou rolled quickly onto his side. He looked up, and there was Sgt. James peering over the counter, smiling at him.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Lou lied. He didn't know if he was hurt.

"You always this graceful?" the sarge asked.

"Fuck you," Lou said quietly. Sgt. James laughed at this.

Lou meanwhile was working his arms out of the straps of the rucksack as he lay there on the ground. He felt weak, nauseous, disgusted, and pissed off all at the same time. Sgt. James laughing at him did not help his disposition any.

Sgt. James came from behind the counter and offered Lou a hand. Lou, being a superior human, refused it. Once free of the rucksack, he worked his way to his knees. The bandoleers of ammunition hung from his neck as dead weight. Lou attempted to stand up, but his legs again betrayed him. The legs were shaking uncontrollably from fatigue. Just the weight of the ammunition was enough to keep Lou from being able to stand. He lay back on his side and worked the bandoleers off one at a time. He rolled over and sat, gasping for breath.

"You got a cigarette?" he asked Sgt. James.

"You shouldn't smoke," the sergeant said, disappearing behind his counter. "Here," he said. Lou looked up and Sgt. James tossed him an unopened pack of Winston's and then a book

of matches. Lou would have preferred Salem's, but beggars can't be choosers. "You going to get up?" the sergeant asked.

"Later," Lou replied. He adjusted the rucksack so that he could lean back against it, a position he had assumed hundreds of times since his arrival in Vietnam. Lighting a cigarette and sitting there, leaning against the rucksack felt good. The fact that he was doing it in the middle of a tent made no difference to Lou. It just felt so damn comfortable, so familiar. Sgt. James came around and sat down on the ground facing Lou. His uniform was clean and had all his insignias. Sgt. James' insignias included a combat infantryman's badge with a star and master's jump wings. His rank was Staff Sergeant E-6. Judging from his appearance, he was around thirty years old.

"Thanks for taking care of my equipment," Lou said. He was feeling more than a little stupid by now. It was evident that there was no way he was going to the field in the near future. Lou had been hoping that it was just a psychological weakness that was infecting him at the hospital. Now it was clear that Croner was right. It would take a while for his body to recover from his recent illness.

"What now?" Lou asked.

"Go see Bill Croner. He's expecting you. Called me back as soon as you left Battalion Aid. Didn't want me to waste time making up all the paperwork for your equipment. He said it would just be a waste of time. I should have never let you try the rucksack trick. Hell, your knees were buckling before you put the ammo on. Bill said you were pigheaded." He continued to smile. Looking at the situation from his perspective, Lou couldn't blame him. "Bill Croner is a friend of mine. Decent man. Really gives a shit about grunts. He'll give you a month to recuperate and then light duty for a month. Get you back on your feet and back to your outfit."

"Damn," Lou said getting to his feet. "Light duty, what's that?"

"Policing the area, painting things, cleaning latrines, things like that. You'll live in the transient tent. Have to make formation three times a day. Some inspections periodically. A lot of rest and recreation too. It's not any fun for a grunt in the rear unless you can find a job. Aren't many available though. Everyone back here hangs onto them for their dear life. Afraid of being sent to a line company." This last statement bought a smile to Lou's face.

Sgt. James laughed and shook his head. "Yeah. I know what you mean. Stupid fuckers think that's where they send guys who can't hack it in the rear. Can't seem to grasp the concept that there is no way in hell they would be accepted out there or that they are not qualified. Shit, most of them aren't worth a pimple on your ass. Wouldn't last a day in the field. Anyway, Bill isn't that way, so do you and me a favor and be nice to him, okay?"

"Sure, Sarge."

"I'll put your stuff away," he said pointing to the equipment on the ground. "It'll be here waiting for you when you're well enough to head back out. You run into any problems around here, come and see me before you do anything stupid. It's not like being in the field around here. A lot of chickenshit stuff to get used to again, like saluting officers and keeping your boots shined. Just stay out of trouble and you'll be out in the field in no time. Now go over and see Bill."

Lou left the supply tent and headed back to the battalion's administration tent. He entered and looked around. Spec 5 Goody was not at his desk. Good, Lou thought. Over in the corner of the tent he spotted what he was looking for. A desk separated from the others with a sign hanging on the wall of the tent indicating that the area belonged to Captain David Sanford, Administrative Officer, Third Battalion. And there, sitting at his desk working, the captain himself.

Lou walked over and stood in front of him at attention. When the captain looked up, Lou saluted. "Specialist Fourth Class, Louis Merrins, reporting for duty, Sir. Airborne."

The captain returned the salute. Louis could see the insignias on the captain's lapel showing that he was an Infantry officer. "Louis Merrins. That name sounds familiar. You wouldn't happen to be the same Louis Merrins who was discharged from the hospital today?"

"Yes, Sir."

"The same Spec 4 Merrins who was assigned to supply sergeant's school and went AWOL for two weeks back in the states?" Captain Sanford asked.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, Lou thought. "Yes, Sir."

"The same Louis Merrins who tried to stare down the battalion commander during a formal inspection?" At least the captain is enjoying himself. *Why else would he be smiling?* Lou thought.

"Yes, Sir."

"Oh yes. I almost forgot. The same Louis Merrins who transferred himself out of the 82nd Airborne Division against the advice of its commanding general?"

Damn, this guy is good. Must have my personnel jacket memorized. Lou couldn't help but smile. "Yes, Sir."

"And now you want to report to me for duty? Exactly what kind of duty do you expect? If I remember correctly you are a grenadier in A Company. Right?"

"No, Sir. A rifleman," Lou replied.

"Your personnel file says grenadier."

"Yes, Sir. But me and Bobby Fry switched weapons that first week in the field. So now he's a grenadier and I'm a rifleman, Sir," Lou replied.

"Great. Just great. You guys in the field just seem to do what you damn well please and don't ever take the time to keep us informed of what exactly is happening," the captain said with a touch of exasperation in his voice. "Back to my question. Exactly what kind of duty are you reporting for? The last I heard, you were being assigned to the medical transient section for recuperation."

"Yes, Sir. I was, or I am, or so I've been told. Anyway, Sir, I heard that Spec Four Hisle was sent home and that you need a company clerk," Lou replied.

The captain laughed, "And you think you can become a company clerk just like that?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Why don't you just sit back and take it easy for a while? I'm sure the medical officer wouldn't assign you for recuperation unless it was absolutely necessary," Captain Sanford asked.

"I'm not good at sitting around on my ass, doing nothing. If I have to stay back here in the rear, I would rather keep busy, Sir. When I heard about Larry and it became apparent I couldn't go back out, this seemed a logical answer, Sir," Lou replied.

"All right. Sergeant Goody can use the help. Been bitching about a replacement ever since Larry left. Maybe you can help with some of the filing. I'm sure having you will be better than not having anyone. You aren't going to make me regret this decision, are you?"

"No, Sir," Louis replied.

"Have you met Sergeant Goody yet?" Captain Sanford asked.

You mean Spec 5 Goody? Lou almost asked in return. He bit down on that retort. Now just might not be the right time to start trouble. "Yes, Sir."

"I'll have him set you up when he gets back from lunch. Get you assigned a bunk and squared away with supply and the medical people. Take the rest of the day off. You can get started in the morning. Don't push it. You are supposed to be recuperating. If I get any heat from the medical people, I may have to reassign you to them. Any questions?"

"No, Sir." Lou had a hundred questions, but now was not the time to ask them. The captain dismissed him. Lou saluted and left.

Instead of waiting for the arrival of Spec 5 Goody, Lou left the administrative area and walked down to the medical aid station. He entered the tent and spotted Spec 6 Croner sitting at his desk and talking to another soldier. Lou stood there patiently. When Bill spotted Lou, he dismissed the man he had been talking to and waved Lou over.

"Been looking for you. I have all your paperwork completed, and we'll get you over to the transient tent right away. You've got to be exhausted," Bill said.

"Not exhausted, just tired, real tired, real tired, fucking tired, but not exhausted," Lou said. This brought a smile to Spec 6 Croner's face. "Sergeant Jones says you're really a good guy. I hope that's true, because I have some bad news for you. All that paperwork you did is wrong. I'm not going to the transient tent. I got a job in the rear now."

"You shitting me?" said Bill.

"No."

"Doing what?" Bill asked.

"Larry Hisle's old job. I'm the new company clerk for A Company."

"I just had lunch with Sergeant Goody. He came over just after you left, but he didn't say anything about it," Bill said.

"What is this bullshit about calling Spec 5 Goody, Sergeant?" Lou asked.

"Just a personal quirk of his. Most of us just do it to keep him from bitching. Feels he gets more respect being called Sergeant. Who cares anyway? Now, how come he didn't say anything to me at lunch?"

"He didn't know at lunch. I went directly to Captain Sanford and asked for the job. Goody wasn't there when I left. Maybe he knows by now. Why don't you ask?" Lou said, indicating the phone.

Bill got on the phone to Goody. Lou could only hear Croner's end of the conversation, but that was enough to bring a smile to his face. Bill was smiling when he hung up. He immediately re-dialed the phone and spoke to Sgt. James in supply. Finally he hung up.

"Goody's pissed," he said, smiling at Lou. "Says something about going behind his back and the captain not knowing what he's doing. Pretty strong words for Goody. Sergeant James is tickled pink. Says you should come by and see him this evening if you're up to it. He's in the same NCO tent as me and Goody. I wouldn't recommend it. You need to rest, and I don't think you need to be around Specialist Goody right now. Sergeant James is making arrangements, getting you the necessary uniforms and equipment for your stay in the rear. He's having someone take them over to your new home. I'll take you over there later. I already told Goody you wouldn't be available for the rest of the day. Medical paperwork and such. Follow me.

Lou followed Croner out the back of the tent and into another tent located further back off the road. The tent had been partitioned into several small rooms. Croner led him into one that had a cot with a pillow and blanket on it.

"Take a nap. That's an order. If you get sick on me, I'll ship your ass back to that Major Nurse at the hospital. From what she had to say this morning, I figure you'll spend your time there in leg irons." With those words of wisdom, Bill left Lou alone. Lou had no problems following that particular order.

An orderly woke him up at 1600 hours. The inside of the tent was warm, but the overhead fans kept the air circulating, and the conditions were tolerable. Lou was led back to where Bill was working on more paperwork.

"Lou, have a seat," Croner said. "I've got all your paperwork straightened out. Here's the situation. We have sick call every morning at 0700 hours, and it lasts for about two hours depending on the number of people reporting each day. You are required to come in each day so we can track your recovery. If you are here when we open, I'll see to it that you get seen first. If not just show up around 0900, and we'll see you then. I've already told Sergeant. Goody that your availability is restricted to four hours a day initially. We'll let you work more as you get stronger. Two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon will be all you can handle initially. If that proves to be too much, don't be afraid to say so. I'm finished here for the day. Let's go get some chow."

Lou didn't say anything and followed Croner over to the mess tent. He wasn't hungry but knew it was in his best interest to put food in his body. Besides, with Croner present he felt there was no choice. Sgt. James joined them at the table shortly after they got situated. The sergeant let Lou know that all his gear had been moved into one of the enlisted men's tents. He had several sets of fatigues issued with all the proper insignias and patches added, and he would have to stop by later in the week to sign for all the gear. Lou thanked the sergeant for his help. He was very appreciative of all the assistance these two men seemed willing to extend to him. The three men sat at the table and talked. Sgt. James began telling about his first tour in Vietnam in 1964. He had been an advisor to an ARVN Ranger unit during that tour. Lou was listening intently while working at getting some food down when Spec 5 Goody sat down.

"Bill. Scott. And if it isn't Specialist Merrins. The battalion's newest filing clerk," he said by way of greeting. Lou looked up and smiled at him.

"File clerk? I thought Lou was clerk for A Company," Bill said.

"Yeah. According to Captain Sanford, but I've been told to handle as much of the work as is necessary. Lou here doesn't have any background for the job. Worked some in the 82nd Airborne as a personnel clerk, but according to his records he didn't go to school for the job. Right Lou? Just a grunt trying to find a cushy job in the rear?" Goody asked. He had started out in a conversational tone of voice, but as he went on his voice grew in volume and slowly took on a whiny tone. "I need a clerk and they give me a rifleman. Well, Merrins, you can guard the files for a couple months."

Lou smiled up at him. *Asshole*. "Gee. Thanks, Specialist, er, Sergeant Goody."

Goody's face turned red, and he seemed on the verge of escalating the encounter when Sgt. James spoke up. "Sit your ass down and eat, Harry. Jesus, you clerks act like a bunch of cats in heat. I was just telling Lou here about the time the Ranger battalion I was with got jumped by Charlie." That seemed to be enough to distract Goody from further ranting. He sat at the table and ate dinner with the group. Lou kept his mouth shut.

When the meal was over, Goody and Croner decided to head over to the NCO club for a drink. Sgt. James said he would meet them there after showing Lou his new home. The sergeant led Lou to a tent that was located behind the administration tent. Lou's cot was located at the very end of the tent near the rear exit. All his equipment had already been stored away in a foot locker and an upright cabinet for hanging clothes. There were locks on both of these and Sgt. James had the combinations written on a piece of paper. He opened each locker and along with Lou made sure everything the Sgt. had ordered was present. "Here, put on one of these," Sgt. James said, pulling one of the fatigue shirts off a hanger. Lou put it on. It already had a name tag sewn on along with his rank insignia, unit patch, jump wings, and combat infantryman's badge. Lou ran his fingers across the CIB patch. "Feels good, doesn't it?" Sgt. James said. There was a big smile on his face. "I remember the first time I got to wear mine. One of proudest moments of my life."

"You sure I'm eligible to wear this?" Lou asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Yeah, it's official. I had Goody look at your records. You were awarded it three days before you left the field. It's yours now forever. If you never spend another minute in the field, you'll never have anything to be ashamed of.

A lot of the guys in the rear will never understand the significance of that patch. They have a hard time grasping the idea that the whole purpose of an army is combat. You now belong to an elite club. No matter your rank or what job you hold, other members of our group will recognize you as a member. No matter how long some of the other men are in service, even good men like Croner, they will never achieve the right to wear that particular patch. Congratulations." Sgt. James' little speech meant more to Lou than if the award had been given

in front of a whole battalion of Airborne troops. One combat veteran congratulating another on survival and brotherhood. That's what the infantryman's badge meant.

Sgt. James proceeded to give Lou a short tour of the area, showing him where the showers were located, the latrines, the enlisted men's club, the battalion's underground bunkers in case of enemy shelling. The sergeant kept the tour short, knowing that Lou would tire easily.

"Let me give you a little word of advice before I go," Sgt. James said. "Don't get into it with Harry. I know he's a bit of a prick at times, but he does outrank you. Here in the rear that holds water. He can make your life miserable. It just won't be worth the hassle to fuck with him. Okay?"

"You just don't want me to have any fun, do you?" Lou said with a smile on his face. "Okay, but only because you asked me so nicely." Sgt. James had a smile on his face as he turned and left to find Harry and Bill.

There were a couple of guys on other bunks in the tent. "Anyone got a Salem?" Lou asked. One of the guys raised his head and answered to the affirmative.

"I'd be in your debt forever if I could bum one," Lou said.

The man tossed a whole pack and then turned back to what he had been doing. Lou pulled out the pack of Winston's he had been smoking and opened the pack of Salem's. He noticed that one of the men in the tent was smoking, but he did not see an ashtray. He exited the rear of the tent and walked over to the underground bunker. Climbing onto the roof, he sat and enjoyed smoking his cigarette. It was still an hour or more till sundown. Need to get me a watch, Lou thought. He wondered what had happened to his old one. Couldn't remember. Some of those days just before entering the hospital had been sort of confusing, probably due to his illness. The combination of food and relaxation made Lou feel drowsy. He lay down and decided to close his eyes for a few minutes. Within seconds he was asleep.

He woke up when he heard voices approaching in the dark. Sitting up, he coughed to let the men approaching know he was there. Whoever they were, the noise caused them to change course and turn into a tent further down the line. Lou lit up another cigarette. He was wide awake now. The night was new, and Lou guessed that it was probably only about 2100

hours. This was one problem Lou had discovered while in the hospital: in the field, he had become a night person. His whole psyche had developed to a position in which night was the time when he was most alert and felt most alive. It had been part of his problem back at the hospital, where the staff felt that nighttime was for sleeping. Lou had been unable to sleep at night and then was continuously dozing off during the day. Another infantryman's habit. The ability to fall asleep instantly and awake totally alert at any place and time was misunderstood by the staff of the hospital. Patients were not allowed to lie around in bed during the day, part of the military's psychology against laziness. In Lou's case, it made his days miserable, and he found himself sleepy all the time, except at night of course.

The sleep he just awoke from was better than he had gotten this afternoon on the cot in the infirmary. Having spent six weeks learning to sleep on the ground, sleeping on a bed was alien to Lou. In the field, sleeping on the ground was natural. It was also the safest place to be in case of a mortar attack. In the hospital, Lou's mind kept telling him that sleeping above ground was dangerous if enemy rounds should arrive. Even though the buildings had sandbags around them, the staff at the hospital seemed unconcerned at the possibility. Lou had seen what high explosive rounds did to a body, and even though his logical mind told him that he was safe in the hospital bed, his psyche told him otherwise. That primitive part of the brain that worked continuously on survival would not let him sleep comfortably in the bed at night. Sleeping on the bunker had felt good. Now he was alert and felt fine and there was nothing to do and no place to go.

Right away Lou noticed the noise coming out of the darkness. He was used to nights where the only sounds were those of the jungle. No human noises. Human noises could mean imminent death in the field at night. Lou could lay for hours without making a sound. Here, everything was the opposite. No jungle noises, just human noises. Radio, records, tape players, and of course human voices. Like being stateside in the evening. As if there was no war being fought just beyond the wires of the perimeter of the base camp. The dichotomy of the situation struck Lou as bizarre.

Lou got off the bunker and decided to walk around a little. He quickly found himself at the entrance to the administration tent. *What the hell*, he thought, and entered the tent.

Whereas in the day the tent seemed dim in comparison to the bright sunlight, at night it seemed brightly lit. There was one man present, sitting at a desk by the front entrance.

"Private Dill," he said. "Can I help you?"

"Specialist Merrins," Lou answered. "I'm the new company clerk for Alpha Company. Start work tomorrow morning. I was wondering if I could look around for a while?"

Private Dill looked at a paper on the desk in front of him. From where he was standing, Lou could see it was a list of people. "Yeah, sure. Your name's been added to the list. You can come and go as you please. We have a guard on duty all night, but as long as your name's on the list, you can stay all night as far as I'm concerned."

Lou walked over to the desk with "A Company" written on a sign on the wall above it. There was a roll around chair with arms on it. Lou sat. The chair was comfortable and could both swivel and rock back. There was an Underwood typewriter sitting on the desk. Lou opened the drawer. It was filled with paperclips, pens, a small stapler, a staple remover, rubber bands, a hole puncher, etc. Just about everything a man would need to get started. *Now if I only knew what the fuck I was supposed to do*, Lou thought.

Lou reached down and opened the top drawer fitted into the desk's right side. Bingo. Files. A whole bunch of files. Labeled to indicate what they held. Lou recognized some of the labels from his work in the 82nd. He closed the top file drawer and opened the bottom one. More files. The first one had a label that read, "To Whom It May Concern." Definitely not a military title. Lou pulled it out and opened it. Double Bingo!

Larry Hisle had left a note to the person taking over his position. There was no way for Larry to know it would be Lou, and that was a shame. Larry would have liked the idea. Lou was sure of that.

Larry had listed all the daily, weekly, and monthly reports and when they were due. He listed a schedule of daily duties the clerk would be expected to perform. There were copies of forms with informational notes written on them as to where the needed information could be found. Larry had written out how many copies of each form were needed, how they were to be labeled, and how and where the copies were to be sent. There was a copy of all the most

frequently used telephone numbers and the names of the people on the other end of the line to help get things accomplished. Both Sgt. James' and Spec 6 Croner's names were on the list.

The last page in the file was just a short typed note: "I hope this file will help whoever takes over this job. Take care of the men. They only deserve the best. If you are their friend, God Bless You. If, on the other hand, you are just another Army prick: Fuck Off You Cocksucker. Your friend, Larry Hisle." Lou laughed out loud. Typical Larry.

Lou felt good. He was awake and alert. Time to get started. From the information Larry had provided, Lou knew what forms to fill out for the daily report. He also knew where to get the information. Picking up the phone, he got in touch with the battalion switch board. Lou had guessed that it would be manned 24 hours a day. Sure enough the operator answered and was able to patch him through to the communications center. He asked for the person Larry had listed on the telephone list, but of course, that person was already off duty. Lou asked the man on the other end of the line for the necessary information. He half expected the man to refuse, but the information was forthcoming almost instantaneously. Lou thanked the man and introduced himself. Cpl. Kern was the man at the communications center. He seemed glad to help. He asked Lou if he would be calling every night for this information. Cpl. Kern didn't even know there was anyone awake down at admin. at this time of night. Lou said that he was not sure, but that it might become a nightly ritual.

An hour later the daily report was done. Typed up in triplicate, with one form for Captain Sanford, one addressed to the Office of the Brigade Commander, and one filed away in a cabinet located along the wall. According to the clock hanging from one of the poles in the tent, it was 2300 hours. Lou still felt wide awake. The guard, Private Dill, had started a pot of coffee. Lou walked over and asked for a cup. Pvt. Dill gave him a strange look and then gave him a cup. He showed Lou where the sugar and dehydrated cream were located. Lou poured himself a cup of coffee, putting two spoonful's of sugar and one of creamer in it. Lou thanked Dill and walked back to his desk.

On the desk was a wire basket that contained mail pouches addressed to Alpha Company. Lou began opening and sorting the correspondence. Most of it was from brigade headquarters asking for information. One was from the hospital. Inside there was a list of men

currently in the hospital. It gave their current status and a date of estimated discharge. It was a short list, and Lou recognized every man on it. Most of them had been there since the 26th of December, the day Alpha Company paid its debt for its early successes. Lou filed the information away in its proper place.

With the help of Larry's file, Lou was able to dispense with all the correspondence over the next two hours. He only stopped twice. Once to find his way to the latrine and once to smoke a cigarette. Lou found the work interesting. It was a real challenge, since he had to learn everything as he went along.

Around 0200, Pvt. Dill bought over a cup of coffee for him. Two sugar, one cream. Lou thanked him. He went over the list Larry had left. According to it, he was done for the day, at least the work that was piled on his desk. Lou got up and wandered over to Croner's desk. On it was a file marked "A Company." Lou took that back to his desk and looked through it. It was work that had evidently backed up since Larry left. Stuff that could wait until time permitted its completion. Some was simple filing, which Lou disposed of quickly. Some was correspondence that Lou was just not in the mood to mess with, having no one to confer with about battalion policy. There were two lists that would need to be typed and mimeographed as battalion orders, with copies made for each man on the list, their files, commanding officers, and brigade headquarters. Lou quickly located examples in Larry's file. He was familiar with the procedure from his time in the 82nd Admin. Loading a piece of mimeograph paper into his typewriter, he got to work. Typing the lists took an hour, and running off copies took thirty minutes. It took another hour to organize the papers into folders for filing and distribution. When he was all done, it was 0315 hours. Time to knock off for the night. Lou cleared his desk. He took out a fresh file and addressed it to Captain Sanford. He put all the necessary copies for him and the ones that needed to be forwarded to Brigade after his approval inside. Lou attached a little note to the front of the file wishing him a good morning and placed it on the captain's desk.

Lou left the tent. The night was still warm, so instead of heading for his tent, Lou headed for the bunker he had slept on earlier. Once there he lit up a cigarette and enjoyed a good smoke. It was strange to be out at night and to be able to light up without having to worry about getting his ass shot off. Louis had expected to come across some guards in the

area, but if there were any, they were either not very alert or they were off sleeping somewhere. Once he was done with the cigarette, Lou lay down and closed his eyes.

There was just a hint of dawn when Lou opened his eyes. Enough light that he could make out the outlines of the various tents in the area. Lou got down off the bunker. His body felt stiff as he began moving around. It was a good stiffness. He was happy. Just to have the freedom to sleep outside and move around freely, without a nurse or orderly trying to tell him what was best for him, made Lou feel like a real human again. He walked over to the tent where his things were stored. Entering quietly so as not to disturb the men sleeping there, Lou removed his fatigue jacket. It was too dark to open the combination lock on the foot locker, so he could not get out an undershirt. That was something he would have to remember in the future. The morning air had a slight chill to it, but not too bad. Going back outside, Lou felt naked without a top. Even in the weak light his body appeared a ghostly white. Not having been outside for any length of time for the past three weeks had taken all the color from his skin.

He decided to try some PT, the dreaded daily exercise program practiced religiously by the Airborne every morning during training. Lou began by doing some slow stretching exercises to loosen the joints and begin warming the muscles. He began a series of exercises, pushups, deep knee bends, jumping jacks, etc. He did each one until he was tired and then did one more. In comparison to what he should have been able to do, the exercise period was pathetic. He had almost no endurance or strength. It was one reason he wanted to do it early, before anyone was present to see his embarrassing display. After fifteen minutes he was done, except for the morning run.

Traditionally, the company in training would run at least one Airborne mile and sometimes two or three. An Airborne mile was measured by the length of the track that ran around the field where the jump towers were located, in Fort Benning, Georgia. Each morning during jump training, every company of trainees was formed up before breakfast for a quick lap around the field. Measured in "leg" distance, the track was actually two miles long. Exactly one Airborne mile. Lou always liked the idea of an Airborne mile and what it represented. Men of

the Airborne were always willing to go the extra mile without complaint. It was a mindset that made the Airborne different from other infantry groups.

Lou moved onto the main road and started jogging slowly in the direction of the helicopter pad he had landed on the morning he had come in from the field. Daylight was strengthening, and now there were men moving about. The sun would peek out over the horizon any minute now. The copter pad was only about a half mile away. Lou figured he could jog over there and then walk back. Not a very ambitious goal, but a beginning. Except for a short burst or two of speed while out in the field, Lou hadn't done any actual running since leaving An Khe over two months previously. The leg muscles began to complain about the abuse almost immediately.

Lou didn't quite make it to the helipad that morning, but he did almost make it half way. He first thought he wasn't going to make it after about two hundred yards, when his breathing was ragged and his legs were shaking. He knew for sure when he fell down, almost but not quite landing on his face. Feeling one of those quaint urges of nature, he quickly crawled over to the ditch running along the side of the road and puked. He was on all fours with his arms shaking, barely able to remain even partially upright, when he heard the brakes of a jeep as it came to a stop on the road near him.

"You all right?" a voice asked.

"Define all right," Lou answered. Finally his arms gave out, no longer able to support his upper body. He went down on his chest in the dirt. As he was sweating from the exertion of the run, the dirt changed instantly to mud. He rolled over on his back just to ensure the even distribution of the mud prior to sitting up. "You got a cigarette?" he asked of the voice that had addressed him.

"You shouldn't smoke," said the voice as a hand holding a cigarette swam into view. Lou took it and placed it in his mouth. The same hand held a cigarette lighter near the tip, and Lou leaned forward and lit up.

Lou looked up at the man who was now squatting beside him. The face looked familiar, but Lou couldn't quite place it. The uniform belonged to an MP. "What exactly are you doing?" the sergeant asked.

"It's the oldest Airborne exercise in the book. The run and puke. As you can see, I am at the puking stage of the exercise," Lou replied with a small smile coming to his lips.

"Exactly how far did you run?"

"Oh, all the way from there," Lou said pointing at the brigade compound just down the road.

"One of those distance runners, huh?" the sergeant asked with a smile.

"Hey, fuck you," Lou said. "You're probably thinking you can outrun me, but that's the easy part of the exercise. You try keeping up with me during the puking part. That's the hard part." He sat there shaking and smoking and feeling good. Maybe the helipad was further than he thought.

Suddenly Lou remembered where he had seen this man before. "Hey, Sarge! How the hell are you?" Lou said holding out his hand. The man looked at him closely. "You know me?"

"Hell yes," said Lou. "Don't you remember me? You helped me at the hospital the day I came in from the field. I fell asleep on some chairs in the lobby, and you woke me up. You took me down to the emergency room."

"Yeah, now I remember. Hey you looked bad then. What the hell did they do to you there? Starve you or something?"

Lou laughed. The sergeant helped him to his feet. Lou wobbled over to where the MP jeep was idling. There was another MP sitting behind the wheel, watching them. Lou turned to his long lost benefactor. "You saved my life, Sergeant Rose," he said, reading the man's name off his uniform tag. Louis explained what had happened to him. How close he had come to dying. "If you hadn't woke me up and taken me to the emergency room that day, there is a good chance I never would have woke up. It's likely that I would have died there, in that waiting area, on those chairs."

Sgt. Rose just smiled at this. "I'm glad I could help, but I think you're exaggerating a little."

"No, I'm not," Lou insisted. "It was no big thing to you, but whether you like it or not, you did save my life."

"Well good," the sergeant replied. "Now maybe I can save your life again by giving you a ride back to your area."

"Thanks," Lou said as he tried to climb into the back of the jeep, his arms and legs shaking from exhaustion. "Of course I could make it back on my own in an hour or two, but a ride will be much appreciated."

"Climb in the front," the Sgt. said, guiding Lou to the seat. Sgt. Rose climbed into the back. His driver had them back into the battalion area in three minutes. It was embarrassing. Lou got out of the jeep when it stopped. "Thanks for the ride, Sarge," he said, extending his hand. Sgt. Rose shook it. "Glad to see you're doing so well," he said with just a touch of sarcasm in his voice. "I'll keep an eye out for you on your morning runs. Never got the hang of that particular exercise. I like the running part. They just never taught us legs the other part of the exercise."

Sgt. Rose got back into the jeep, and his driver took off, heading back to wherever they had been headed in the first place. Lou went back to the tent to grab a towel and head for the showers. He moved really slow, still wobbly from his exercise. The tent had come alive in his absence. He had not seen a lot of the men living there the day before, and now he made quite an impression as he walked down the line to his bunk. Several of the men took a step backward as he approached, not wanting to be touched by this apparition in their midst.

Lou quickly gathered his supplies and headed out for a quick shower. After cleaning up and putting on fresh clothes, he again felt almost human. He was still a little shaky from a combination of weakness and hunger, but the silver lining was that his appetite seemed to be making a comeback. The men eyeballed him some more as he again left the tent.

Outside, Lou turned and headed for the mess hall. Once he got his food, he sat by himself at a table and, for the first time in a long time, dug into his food with gusto. Eggs, bacon, toast, pancakes, coffee, even an apple. Everything looked and tasted good. There was a clock in the mess tent, and Lou was surprised to see it was only 0645 hours. Still time to make sick call.

There was a line of men forming up outside the aid station. Lou took his place in line with the others. He only had to wait a minute before Spec 6 Croner came out for a look at the

line of men. He smiled when he saw Lou and signaled him forward. "Go inside," he said. Lou noticed him signal to several other men in line. They were all allowed to enter the tent in front of the others. Croner entered in back of this initial small group of men. There were two orderlies waiting there. "Take Lou to room one. Bill to room two. Mike you go to room three. Tim, room four. Jeff, five. Dr. Washington will be starting any minute."

Lou had no sooner sat on the examination table when Bill entered followed by Captain Washington. Lou quickly stood up at attention and saluted. "Morning, Sir, Airborne."

"At ease, Son," the doctor said, addressing Lou. "I know this is your first visit, so let's cover the rules we use around here. I am Dr. Washington. It's my pleasure to meet you. In here, you are the patient, and I am the doctor. You do not need to salute me or come to attention when I enter the room. Outside you can treat me like any other officer, but not because I like it. Okay?"

"Yes, Sir," Lou replied.

The doctor was evidently familiar with Lou's medical records. He gave Lou a quick, thorough exam. Other than recommending continued rest and eating lots of food, there was not much said. He left, leaving Lou there with Bill.

"I'm going to be busy for the rest of the morning," Bill said. "Report to me after lunch. Better still. Meet me for lunch around noon. Go get some rest, you look like shit." Bill left with a smile on his face.

Lou entered the admin tent and headed for his desk. The place was filling up, although Spec. Goody was not at his desk yet. Lou got the file out of the desk drawer that contained the correspondence he had not been sure how to handle the night before. He looked around. There was a man sitting at the desk of C Company. The man was drinking a cup of coffee and sort of staring off into space.

Lou walked over to him and introduced himself.

The man introduced himself as Private First Class Greg Hudson. Lou asked for his assistance and showed him the paperwork that he had questions about. Private Hudson quickly went through the correspondence with Lou. The kid seemed to know what he was talking

about, and within fifteen minutes Lou had the information necessary to get started. He moved back to his desk and was well into his work when Specialist Goody came over to his desk.

"What the hell you think you're doing?" he asked.

"Working," Lou replied.

"Yeah, right. You're not even supposed to be in until 0900 hours. Spec 6 Croner told you that yesterday. Get your ass out of here and come back then. I'll have found something to keep you busy by then." Goody had turned and left before Lou could reply.

Lou didn't say a word. He stood up, gave a little wave to Private Hudson, and headed out the door. He passed Captain Sanford on his way out. Lou smiled and nodded his head in greeting as he headed out the door.

"Attenhut!" He heard as he exited the tent. Shit, probably should have called attention when the captain entered, Lou thought. Fuck it, if the man can't take a joke.

Lou headed back to his tent. Might as well get a little nap in before heading back at nine. When he got to the tent there were three Vietnamese women straightening up, cleaning, and making beds. Lou had never seen anything quite like it. There had been an older Vietnamese man up at An Khe who did this sort of thing, but here there were three women. Lou could tell they belonged just by the familiarity they showed in handling the belongings of the men who were away working. Lou lay down on the bunk and rolled over facing the wall. He used his towel to cover his face and closed his eyes, determined to get an hour's nap in.

He didn't know how long he had been sleeping when someone touched him on the shoulder. Lou was on his feet facing his adversary in an instant, his hand reaching for the nonexistent bayonet on his hip. The man who had touched him took a startled step backward.

Lou's reaction to being touched had gotten him in trouble in the hospital. It was something he had no control over, the action already having taken place before Lou was even aware of it. Lou became aware he was staring into the face of a very young second lieutenant. He quickly came to attention and saluted. "Sorry, Sir."

"What are you doing lying in bed at this time of day?" the lieutenant asked in an angry tone of voice.

"Taking a nap, Sir," Lou replied.

"Don't you have a job to go to?"

"No, Sir."

"You mean you don't have a job?"

"No, Sir," Lou answered, waiting for the right question so he could straighten the situation out.

"What company you from?" the lieutenant asked.

"Alpha Company, Sir."

"And where is Alpha Company?" the lieutenant asked.

Lou was beginning to like this game. "Somewhere out there," he said, pointing in the general direction of nowhere.

"Who's the commanding officer of Alpha Company, Soldier?" the lieutenant asked.

"Captain Pickett, Sir," Lou answered. He was ready to smile in anticipation of the next question.

Sure enough it came. "Does Captain Pickett know where you are right now?"

"No, Sir. I don't think so."

"And why not?" the lieutenant asked. Louis could see he was getting angrier as the conversation went on, but now things had gotten far enough along that he could not stop.

"I haven't informed him of my whereabouts just yet. I thought I might later in the day, but I was tired and decided to take a nap. It's part of my job."

"Taking a nap at eight in the morning is part of your job?"

"Yes, Sir. A very serious part of my duties here."

"Soldier, do you know who I am?"

"Yes, Sir. You are Second Lieutenant Romain, Sir," Lou said reading his name off the uniform.

"And do you know what I do?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," Lou answered. This was one great conversation, I should be taking notes, Lou thought. A look of mild surprise had crossed the young lieutenant's face at the last reply.

"Well, what?" he asked as if expecting a serious answer.

"Sir, your job is to wake people who are trying to take a nap and ask them questions, Sir." *And might I add your doing a fine job*, he thought. It was fun pulling the lieutenant's chain, even if it might not be too smart. Lou was having fun. Still, he had enough sense not to step over the line and become insubordinate.

The lieutenant's face was turning red. "Give me your name, rank, serial number, and company." He wrote it down as Lou gave the information to him. The lieutenant began leafing through the papers he carried on his clipboard. "I don't have you listed as being assigned to this tent, nor is there anything that says you have permission to be here during duty hours. I am placing you on report and I want you to follow me over to the administration tent. You are in serious trouble."

"Yes, Sir," Lou replied, putting his fatigue jacket on. "May I ask the lieutenant what time it is?"

"It is 0855 hours. Why?"

"I'm supposed to report to work at 0900 hours, Sir."

"You told me you didn't have a job," the lieutenant said.

"No, Sir. I did not. You asked me if I had a job I was supposed to be at. I said no. I'm not supposed to be at my job until 0900 hours."

"And where is your job located?" the lieutenant asked.

"Until now, right here sleeping. At 0900 hours in the administration tent, Sir," Lou said with a smile on his face.

"What do you do there?"

"I am the new company clerk for Alpha Company, Sir."

"Then you work for Captain Sanford? I asked who your commanding officer was, and you lied to me."

"No, Sir," Lou replied. He really should have stopped smiling, but it was plastered to his face tighter than a leech. "You asked me who the commanding officer of Alpha Company is, and that is Captain Pickett, Sir. I am not in the habit of lying to officers, and I have not lied to you, Sir."

"Well, I'm officer of the day for the battalion. Part of my job is to ensure there are no people goofing off during regular work hours. Your name is not on my list for personnel who worked last night and have the day off. Is there a reason for that?"

"I don't know, Sir. Can I look at your list?" The lieutenant handed over the clipboard to Lou. He quickly scanned the top list that the lieutenant had referred to earlier. Then he began flipping through the other papers on the clipboard. He found what he was looking for. He pulled the paper off the clipboard and handed it to the lieutenant. Across the top of the paper was typed "PERSONNEL ASSIGNED TDY TO BATTALION AID STATION," and under the heading "Restricted From Duty" was Louis' name. He pointed it out to the lieutenant.

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?"

"You didn't ask, Sir, and I knew nothing about the list. I only got out of the hospital yesterday and don't know all the rules. I was told to take it easy and not to report to work until 0900 hours, Sir," Lou replied. "If I don't leave now, I'll be late."

Lou could see the lieutenant was not happy with the situation. He must have known somewhere inside that thick skull of his that Lou had spent the last few minutes jerking him around, but there was nothing he could do about it. "Dismissed," he said. Lou saluted, "Airborne, Sir." The lieutenant returned his salute wordlessly. Lou turned and left through the back of the tent.

Lou entered the administration tent. The clock on the pole read 0910 hours. "You're late," Spec Five Goody said.

"Not according to my watch," Lou replied, holding up his naked arm and smiling.

"Well the captain said he wanted to see you as soon as you got in. It's not smart keeping him waiting. When he is done with you, I have a shitload of paperwork that needs filing."

Lou walked over to his desk and got out the file Larry Hisle had left for his replacement. He thought he just might need it for his conversation with the captain.

"Specialist Merrins reporting as ordered, Sir," Lou said as he saluted the captain.

"At ease, Merrins. Have a seat," the captain said, indicating the chair next to his desk. "I found your message on my desk when I got in this morning. I looked over the paperwork you

left. I even called over to the communications center to check the information you placed in the daily report. You did good work. May I ask how you accomplished it?"

Lou explained about the previous night. Not being able to sleep, Larry Hisle's file, his previous experience with the 82nd Airborne, and his understanding of how the paperwork was processed.

"Very good," the captain replied when he was done explaining. "When I gave you the job, I had some doubts as to your ability. The paperwork you handed in is better than some of the work I get from the other clerks. As far as working at night, I really don't care as long as the work gets done. I told Sergeant Goody to find work to keep you busy. It is evident from your work that you are capable of performing the job of company clerk. As of this moment, you officially occupy that position. Since you are on restricted duty, you have my permission to report for duty at any time you see fit, with the understanding that I expect you to maintain your records and work up to standards. As company clerk, you will report directly to me. You will be given no additional duties without my permission. If you have any problems and need assistance, you may feel free to contact me directly. Any questions?"

"No, Sir," Lou replied. He could have kissed the man but was pretty sure that was against Army regulations.

"You're dismissed. Heck. Take the rest of the day off if you want. You've already handed in more work than most of the clerks will get done today. Send Sergeant Goody back here on your way out."

"Yes, Sir," Lou said, standing and saluting. "Airborne."

"Captain wants to see you, Sergeant," Lou said.

"You wait here, I'll be right back," Goody said, straightening his uniform. Yeah, right, Lou thought as he moved on over to his desk. He picked up the file he had been working on earlier in the morning, before Goody had so rudely interrupted him. In a way, Lou was disobeying the captain's order to take the rest of the day off, but he was bored and figured he might as well get some work done this morning. Besides, he didn't want to miss the show.

From his seat at the desk, Lou could watch the conversation taking place between Captain Sanford and Specialist Goody. Just from Goody's facial expression, Louis could tell that

he was not happy. At one point, the conversation began to get quite animated. Goody turned and pointed in his direction. Discretion being the best weapon available to Lou at that particular instant, he quickly looked down at the folder in front of him on the desk with fierce concentration. He did not smile externally. All of the specialist's, er, sergeant's plans for him were in the process of being destroyed.

Later in the morning, Lou was finishing up his work for the day. There was one piece of correspondence that had Lou stumped. It concerned the pay records of one of the men who was having money sent home to his mother. Since it involved finances, Lou was tempted to pick up the phone and call the paymaster's office for the information he needed. Instead he walked over to Goody's desk.

"Sorry to bother you, Sergeant, but I was wondering if you could help me with this problem?" Lou asked.

Goody looked at him suspiciously, maybe expecting some kind of punchline. Instead, Lou outlined the problem and asked what procedures needed to be followed. Goody turned to a file cabinet located directly behind his desk and pulled out the form Lou would need in order to provide the necessary request for information. Lou thanked the sergeant for his assistance. After returning to his desk and filling out the form, Lou returned the completed form to Goody and asked him if it had been filled out correctly. Lou knew it had. Still, it gave Sgt. Goody a chance to show off his expertise. Lou realized that he had to make an effort to get along with the man, at least until he was ready to return to the field. Besides, he didn't want Sgt. James to think he wasn't willing to accept his advice.

I'm turning into a REMF, Lou thought. A Fucking REMF.

Lou had lunch with the three men who had most affected his life the past twenty-four hours. He had an opportunity to tell them his Lieutenant Romain story. By time he got through, everyone was laughing. It was a good story. As they were all getting up to leave, Sgt. James asked Lou to stop by the supply tent, explaining that he had found something that belonged to Lou. Specialist Croner then told Lou to report to him as soon as Sgt. James was done. Specialist Goody said nothing.

Lou walked with Sgt. James to the supply tent. He was tired, both physically and mentally. They entered the tent together. Louis stopped at the counter. Sgt. James looked at him, "Come with me," and led Lou further back into the tent. The tent had lights on even during the day. There were rows of shelves loaded with all sorts of equipment. In the rear of the tent was a desk with a chair along side. Sgt. James sat at the desk, and Lou sat in the chair beside it.

"I see you and Goody called a truce," the Sgt. said. Lou didn't say anything. The sergeant opened the drawer to his desk and pulled out a large brown envelope. He showed it to Lou. It was addressed to the commanding officer of Third Battalion, 173rd Airborne Brigade. The envelope was closed with a string, wraparound. Lou unwrapped the string and dumped the contents on the desk. There was a folded paper that came out last and landed on top of the pile. Lou picked it up and read it. In effect, the letter explained that these were the personal effects of one Spec Four Merrins and were being made available for shipment home to his family. The letter expressed condolences for not being able to do more for one of their men. The letter stated that last rites had been administered. The letter was signed by Major Daniel Pitts, M.D. Dr. Pitts was the doctor who had appeared at Lou's bedside the day he woke from the coma.

Lou's hands began shaking. At the hospital, he had been told by several people that he had almost died. Lou always thought it was a figure of speech. Their way of bragging about what a good job they had done in saving his life. This letter changed that thinking. The author was convinced that Lou was as good as dead, and so he had taken the time to address a letter to his battalion's CO.

Lou suddenly smiled. He wasn't dead. In fact, right that instant, he felt as alive as it was possible to feel alive. Sgt. James was sitting there smiling also. He of course knew the contents of the letter and had wondered what Lou's reaction would be. Now he felt good for having shown it to him.

The pile on the desk was small. It contained Lou's dog tags, thirty dollars in military script, a comb, a cigarette lighter with his name inscribed on it, and his watch. Lou picked up the watch and wound it. The band was dirty and grimy. The face of the watch was so scratched

that it was hard to see the hands. Lou asked for the time and set the watch before slipping it on his wrist. He put the dog tags around his neck where they belonged. The thirty dollars went into his fatigue jacket pocket.

"Pathetic watch," Sgt. James commented.

Lou smiled at that. Like everything a man carried with him in the field, the watch had value beyond its material worth. Sgt. James held his arm so Lou could see the watch on his wrist. It was as pathetic looking as Lou's. "I know I should replace it. I had it the day I arrived in-country on my first tour. My wife bought me a new one, but I just can't bring myself to part with it."

"Yeah," Lou replied. "It's almost like receiving a body part back." He flicked open the cigarette lighter. Thumbing the wheel produced a spark and a flame. Lou smiled. "It's sort of sad that all a man's personal effects could fit into a single large envelope. Hell, I wouldn't even have had the comb, but my mom sent it in the last care package from home. I got it the day I left the field."

The sergeant picked up a file from the corner of his desk and gave it to Lou. It contained the forms Lou needed to sign for all the equipment he had received yesterday. There was a form signifying that he had received his personal belongings also. Lou was glad to sign.

"Anything else you need?" Sgt. James asked.

"I could use a flashlight, some cigarettes, Salem's if you got them, my poncho and poncho liner, a sharpening stone, and the survival knife off my webbing if possible."

"Sure thing," Sgt. James said. He led Lou to where his equipment was stored. "Took all the grenades and claymores to the armory. Didn't want any of my men messing with them. I also took your bayonet and survival knife and locked them away. The men working here would have confiscated them for sure." Lou retrieved his poncho and poncho liner. The poncho liner stunk and would need cleaning and airing out. The poncho was weathered and worn, but there were no holes in it.

Sgt. James helped Lou retrieve everything he had requested, including a carton of Salem cigarettes. Lou felt loaded down with the equipment as he left the tent, even though its weight was less than one-tenth of the weight he would carry in the field. After storing everything

safely away in his foot locker and closet, Lou headed on over to the Infirmary to find Croner. By now he was sweating profusely. His legs felt wobbly, and he had the beginning of a headache. Spec Croner was not at his desk. After waiting for ten minutes, Lou stepped outside for a smoke. He sat along the front wall of the infirmary tent on the ground and lit up. Closing his eyes, Lou leaned back against the sandbags that encircled the tent and smoked contentedly.

"You got something about sitting in front of my tent and smoking, Lou?" Spec Croner asked. "What is it with you and the ground? Can't you sit in a chair like a human being?"

Lou looked up and saw Croner smiling at him. Just giving me shit, Lou thought. He got up and followed Croner into the tent.

"I heard some talk about a scarecrow running along the road this morning. Know anything about that?"

Lou looked at him with as innocent a look as he could muster. "One of my orderlies also reported a story about a man spotted sleeping on top of a bunker early this morning. You know anything about that?" Lou's facial expression took on a look of even more innocence, if that were possible. Croner was smiling as he asked the question. "Well?"

"You got any aspirin?" Lou asked.

Croner got up and went back to the rear of the tent. He returned a minute later with three aspirin and a cup of water. Lou popped the aspirin in his mouth and began chewing them like candy. A look of mild disgust passed across Croner's face.

"You're supposed to swallow those, you ignorant grunt. That's why I gave you the water. Let me ask you another question, maybe one you have an answer for. How come every grunt I give aspirin to just chews them instead of swallowing them with water like any other human being?"

"In the field, almost everyone takes aspirin almost every day, just to help with the little aches and pains you have to live with. At one time or another a man needs to take them when water is in short supply. Water is more precious than almost anything but ammunition to a grunt. You're almost always thirsty in the field. The aspirin have a real bitter taste at first and make your mouth feel even drier than normal. But then the mouth begins producing saliva to

dissolve the aspirin. The saliva relieves the dry feeling in the mouth. I know it's not a very scientific answer, but it's my guess as to why we pick up the habit," Lou answered.

"It sort of makes sense," Croner replied. "Not by any logic I've been exposed to, but within the context of your lifestyle, it seems to make sense. After lunch Sergeant Goody invited me back to the administration tent. He showed me the file with your work in it. Says the work you turned in was excellent. Remarkable in light of the fact that you have no previous experience in the job. We looked over your personnel record too. Goody says your test scores are as high as he has ever seen." Lou smiled at this. He had heard it all before and wasn't impressed. It meant less than nothing to him.

"That leads me to another question I have about you. With your intelligence and background, what the hell are you doing as just a grunt?"

Croner had been watching Lou's face closely during the conversation. He had a real interest in finding out what made this man tick. The instant he finished asking the question, he knew he had fucked up. Lou changed right there in front of his eyes. Later, in trying to explain the change to Goody and Sgt. James, Croner found it difficult to articulate. Not a muscle moved. Lou sat there as he had before the question was asked. The smile on his face remained, but somehow it was no longer friendly, if anything it was threatening. Most of the change had occurred in the eyes, but just what change that was, Croner couldn't quite fathom. The voice that answered was Lou's and yet it wasn't.

"Just a grunt?" the voice asked quietly. "Are you implying that a man who is just a grunt is stupid?"

The eyes of the man sitting in front of him issued a challenge along with the questions. This was the man Croner had glimpsed fleetingly at their first meeting. Not the same man Croner had dealt with over the past twenty-four hours. The eyes gave off a menacing energy. They were eyes with no pity or compassion in them. They were the eyes of a man who could and would kill without thought or mercy if provoked. Sgt. James had tried to warn Croner about this the night before. That Croner would do well to be careful around Lou and that he had better never forget what Lou did for a living.

Lou had gotten into repeated trouble while in the hospital. Lou's medical record contained notes about both his aggressive and hostile attitude when provoked. There was a recommendation from one of the nurses that he be evaluated for psychological problems. Other personnel, orderlies, therapists, even one of the guys whose job it was to clean the ward, had reported feeling threatened by Lou. Not that Lou had threatened them, but that they didn't feel safe being around him. At this instant, Croner knew exactly what they were trying to say.

"Hey. Lou. It's me. Bill Croner. Your friend. Remember?"

Again, without moving a muscle, the man's demeanor changed completely. Again the smile was a smile. "Sure, Bill," Lou replied. "I just drifted away for a minute there."

Lou could see that Bill was nervous. He remembered the question and that it had pissed him off for just an instant, until he remembered that Bill was just a REMF. Still he wondered what had made Bill so nervous. Probably a guilty conscience for asking such a stupid question. Lou thought about answering Bill's question, but had a feeling that Bill had lost interest in the answer.

"You tired?" Bill asked.

"Yeah. Real tired. Real, real tired," Lou replied.

"Why don't you go out back in the other tent and get some sleep?" Bill asked.

"No. I think I'll head back to my own bunk," Lou said getting to his feet. "Thanks for the aspirin. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Croner watched him leave. Once Lou was gone, he picked up the file on his desk and went off in search of Dr. Washington. He needed to talk to him about what had just transpired. In his mind, Lou was dangerous. He would need to warn Goody. Sgt. James already knew, but Croner wanted to make sure the sergeant didn't let Lou get his hands on any weapons. Out in the field, Lou's disposition might be appropriate, even necessary for survival. The men in his outfit would know how to handle him and know not to provoke him. Here in the rear, there was a good chance that someone might push the wrong button and Lou would go off on them. Croner felt lucky that it hadn't happened to him. In his weakened condition, Lou was not much of a physical threat to anyone, but a weapon in his hands might change that equation fatally.

Croner thought back to the story Lou had told at the noon meal about his encounter with Lieutenant Romain. He had laughed at the story along with the others in the group. In his mind, he could see Lou coming awake out of a sleep with a weapon in his hand. The story was no longer so funny.

The noon sun was hot. Lou still had a slight headache. He was tired as he entered his tent. The three Vietnamese women were still there. All three were polishing boots, some of which were already polished. No wonder the men's uniforms and boots looked so good, Lou thought. Lou had heard their sing song voices talking gently before he entered the tent. Once he was inside, they stopped talking. Lou felt like an intruder. He opened his foot locker and took out his survival knife and sharpening stone. He had lain his poncho liner on his bunk folded neatly. Gathering his equipment up, he started to leave until he remembered the flashlight.

Lou moved over to the bunker. He spread the poncho liner out on top of the bunker to air out. Taking the flashlight, Lou went around the bunker to where the opening was located. There were eight steps leading down to the entrance. The inside of the bunker was dark. Lou turned on his flashlight to look around. The first thing he spotted was a light switch. He turned the lights on. The conveniences of a modern war, he thought.

The bunker was quite large, capable of providing safe cover for perhaps fifty men if an attack were to occur. It was not a fighting bunker. There were no firing ports or observation windows. *What fools would enter this potential death trap during an attack?* Lou wondered. It would protect anyone inside from enemy artillery or mortar fire. About that Lou had no doubt. Just the solid construction told Lou it had been built by the engineers, using heavy equipment and the best material for the job. Still, entering a hole in the ground during an attack was not Lou's concept of a good idea. Once inside, there was no way to protect the bunker from an enemy's direct assault. He supposed the men in the rear had enough confidence in the base's perimeter guards that the thought didn't even cross their minds. Lou only trusted in his abilities for survival.

Against one wall was a stack of ammunition crates. Lou took one off the top of the pile. It was empty. He could tell by its lack of weight. He lifted the hinged cover on the crate just to

confirm his suspicion. Good. Perfect. Lou put the crate back where he had found it and exited the bunker. He climbed atop the bunker, sitting next to the poncho liner, and lit a cigarette.

Pulling the survival knife from its sheath, he began sharpening it. Of course, it was already sharp from many hours of Lou running the blade across a sharpening stone. It was something that Lou did to pass time. An affectation. Or at least it had been when Lou had first acquired the weapon and started sharpening it on a daily basis. The men in the squad, especially Big John, were always teasing him about it. Over a period of time, it had become more of a trigger for meditation and relaxation. Lou felt comfortable with himself sitting there in the hot sun, smoking a cigarette, and gently running the blade of the knife over the stone. As soon as he was done smoking, he put the knife away and gathered up the poncho liner. A little airing out helped its smell a whole lot.

Lou re-entered the bunker and used his flashlight to find his way to the back of the space. In comparison to the temperature outside, the bunker's air was quite cool. Except for a dim light emanating from the entrance, the bunker was dark. Lou spread the poncho liner on the dirt floor. He took off his fatigue jacket, his boots and socks, and lay down on the liner. He unsheathed the knife, keeping it curled gently in his left hand. There was a gentle smile on his face when his mind shut down in sleep.

Lou woke up. He sat upright, totally alert and oriented. He looked down at his watch. It was 1700 hours. He had told himself that was when he wanted to wake up just prior to closing his eyes. Lou wanted a cigarette, but decided not to light one up until he got outside. He had suspected that maybe no one would think to check the bunker on a regular basis. From its appearance, Lou inferred that it hadn't been used in a long time. A place that was there, but not there. A place that would be remembered quickly in a crisis, but would not impose on a person's conscious thought under normal circumstances. Lou dressed quickly. Using his flashlight for guidance, he pulled down the top two crates from the pile. Inside one, he stored his poncho liner and survival knife. He placed the loaded crate back on the pile and then put the empty crate on top of that. With luck, he could use the bunker to take naps during the day without anyone disturbing him.

Picking up a tray, Lou went through the dinner serving line. He spotted Croner and Sgt. James sitting together at a table. Spec Goody was sitting at another table with some other men. Strange, Lou thought. Croner had spotted him as he exited the line and waved him over to their table. He and Sgt. James must have been there for a while, because their trays were almost empty. Lou sat, prepared to dig into the food in front of him. His appetite was beginning to return with a vengeance.

"I'm glad to see you eating so well," Croner said. Lou thought he still looked nervous from this afternoon.

"I might need to go back for seconds," Lou replied with a smile. He wasn't sure what he had done to make Croner so nervous. Lou seemed to have that effect on people lately.

Lou began eating with gusto, but now, suddenly, he was wary of these men. Something was going on here, but what it was, he didn't know. They were making him nervous. Finally he put his fork down. "What?" he asked.

"You got that survival knife on you?" Sgt. James asked.

"Oh. That's what this is all about. The knife. Something I said this afternoon?" Lou asked addressing Bill.

"Let's just say you got a little spooky on me this afternoon?"

"Spooky?"

"Yeah. Like pissed. Like you were considering cutting out my kidneys and having them for lunch," Croner replied.

Lou smiled at the imagery. "Sorry, Bill. I seem to be doing that a lot lately. You needn't worry you know. I may be a little strange, but I would never hurt you or anyone else for that matter. I know those assholes at the hospital got nervous when I got pissed, but it was their problem, not mine."

"You sure of that?"

"Yeah," Lou replied. "Besides, you're already too late. I left the knife laying on my bunk when I went to the latrine. When I got back, it was gone." Fuck you. Lou was not really mad at Croner. The man was only doing his job as he saw fit, but Lou was tired of medical people trying to analyze his psyche.

Lou could see the skepticism written all over Sgt. James' face. He knew damn well Louis would never leave a weapon laying around. No grunt would. Still the man didn't choose to question Lou's story. Croner did.

"It seems funny that you would lose that knife on the same day you got it back," he said.

"Hey, man. Shit happens," Lou said laughing. "Listen if you don't believe me, you can search me," he said standing up. Croner waved him back down.

"Mind if I look through your foot locker and cabinet?" Croner asked.

"Fine with me." Lou went back to eating.

"Okay. Forget it," Croner said getting to his feet and leaving. Sgt. James remained seated. He was smiling.

After Lou was finished eating, he and Sergeant James left the tent together. "Don't go playing with that thing where anyone will see you. And for God's sake don't use it on anyone."

"No sweat, Sarge," Lou replied. He turned and walked back to his tent. There were several men lying around on their cots, reading, writing, or dozing. Lou went to his foot locker and got out a pack of Salem's. He went over to the man who had loaned him the pack, the night before.

"Excuse me," Lou said. The man on the bunk looked up from the letter he was writing. "Here's your cigarettes. Thanks for the loan."

"Got to stick together, bro," the man replied. "Private First Class Thomas King," he said while extending his hand. Lou shook the hand and introduced himself. "My friends call me Curly."

"My friends call me Lou. You interested in going and getting a drink Curly?"

"You offering to buy?"

"Sure. I owe you at least one," Lou said.

Curly led the way to the enlisted men's club. They entered together and got a couple drinks from the bar. A beer and a rum and coke cost all of fifty cents. Lou headed to a table in the back of the club, away from the jukebox that was blaring next to the bar.

"Thanks for the beer," Curly said.

"My pleasure," Lou replied, taking a sip of his drink. He would go carefully. He hadn't had a drink of alcohol in a long time. Having lost so much weight, he knew the drink would affect him even more than normal. Besides, he would be going on duty soon. During the course of the day, Lou had decided to continue to work nights. It was quiet then, and Lou liked it when there weren't too many people around. The enlisted men's club was more empty than Lou thought it would be. The noise level was low enough to allow almost normal conversation.

"Mind if I ask you a question?" Lou asked.

"Go for it," Curly replied.

"I get the feeling I'm not welcome in the tent. There a reason for that?" Lou asked.

"Good question. Now I got one for you. You notice anything strange about you being assigned to that tent?"

"Strange?"

"Yeah. Strange. Out of the ordinary. Different. Odd. Anything half way kooky?" Curly asked, smiling.

"No," Lou replied slightly put off by the man's question.

"You is white, the rest of us is not white," Curly said in a shucking voice.

"Bullshit. The guy in the next bed is white," Lou replied.

"Puerto Rican."

"What about the two guys in the beds right across from yours?"

"Hispanics," Curly replied.

"Puerto Rican, Hispanic, what the hell, they're still as white as I am," Lou said.

"Well where do you work?"

"Administration tent. I'm a company clerk," Lou answered, feeling stupid describing himself that way.

"Everyone else in the tent works in the kitchen as cooks or assistants. All day everyone was trying to figure your game. Some of the men think you're a spy. Others think you were placed there to harass them when they're off duty."

"What do you think?" Lou asked.

"I don't know what to think. As a white man, you can't be there to spy. Like a cowboy trying to spy on a tribe of Indians. Just doesn't make much sense. You haven't been around enough to hassle anyone, although your behavior this morning was a little scary. Never seen a white man covered with mud like that, it some kind of ritual you do?" Curly asked, smiling.

"It was my attempt to pass," Lou said, using the phrase Negroes used to describe people of their race who were light in complexion and tried to pass as being white.

Curly laughed at that. "Well, you make one ugly nigger. Got that curly hair. You might pass if you learn to walk right and put some of that shit on your face. No seriously. Why aren't you in one of the other tents with the other clerks?"

"Hell, I don't know," Lou answered truthfully. He launched into his story about how he had come to be assigned to the rear. Lou had no idea why he was assigned to the bunk with the mess hall crew.

"You didn't make any enemies, did you?" asked Curly.

"Well, maybe," Lou answered and went on to describe his initial meeting with Specialist Goody.

"Man got you back good," Curly said, smiling. "Probably laughing about it right now."

Lou smiled at the idea. "My being there gonna cause problems? I'm really not interested in causing anyone any grief."

"The other tents are less crowded. They got plenty of space for you. I wouldn't be surprised if you aren't already moved by time we get back," Curly said. "I don't think the guys in the tent would mind if you stayed as long as you weren't in anyone's face. Don't go telling on us if you see things you don't agree with."

"Like what?"

"Like some of the brothers smoke some shit now and then," Curly said in a serious tone.

Lou laughed. "Mind you, it might stunt your growth, but as an ex-Airborne infantryman, I must confess to the abuse of that particular substance at one time in my recent past."

Curly laughed. "Okay. I'll let the guys know what you're about. You're welcome to stay if you want. It's really none of our business. Just doing our time, know what I mean?" Curly asked.

"Yeah. I know what you mean," Lou said holding out his hand. Curly shook it. Lou went up to the bar and returned with another beer. "Take care," Lou said handing the beer to him. "I got to get to work."

The sun was just beginning to set as Lou exited the enlisted men's club. He walked back to his tent and entered. There was a smile on his face when he noticed all the guys in the tent taking sidelong looks at him. He changed his uniform quickly and then headed for the bunker. Without looking at his watch, Lou knew it was getting on towards 2100 hours. It was dusk.

Lou sat on top of the bunker and had one last smoke before beginning work. It was less than 36 hours since leaving the hospital. In that time span, he had made several new friends, including his most recent, Curly. He had begun to renew his identity, which he had been afraid of losing near the end of his stay in the hospital. Lou was coming to grips with being a REMF. It wasn't as painful as he had imagined it might be. The people in the rear weren't really all that bad. Their problem was that they lived in a war zone but were isolated from the reality of what that meant. To them, the war was more a concept than a reality. To be concerned about where one slept was an example of that. The men back in his tent were settling down for a good night's sleep with the expectation that they would wake up in one piece in the morning. The men in Lou's company were settling in for the night in preparation of trying to survive with no guarantee that there would be a morning. Right now, at dusk, the company would be on alert for an enemy attack. At least one platoon, but probably two, would be out in the jungle, laying in ambush along some trail or water supply waiting for the enemy to make an appearance. With luck, they would bag some of the enemy. If things went wrong, they were vulnerable to attack and might die.

There would be a time in the near future when Lou would be able to return to his company. About that he had no doubt. Lou accepted that as the way things were meant to be. He wasn't proud of his new job, other than the fact that it gave him something to do besides just lying around all day while he recuperated. The job would even allow him to assist the guys in the field by taking care of some of their administrative needs. He would be available to help them when they rotated through the rear area for whatever reason.

Looking around in the failing light, Lou thought, *This is now my home*. To any infantryman, home was where his boots were. Lou had told Curly one white lie that evening. Lou wasn't an ex-infantryman. He never would be. And now it was time to get his infantryman's ass in gear and get to work. The other guys in the company were already working. He'd pass the night with them, if not in person, then at least in spirit. END