

#16 The Lieutenant – Part Two – field Vietnam

"You have these rules written out for everyone, Sarge?" the lieutenant asked.

"No, Sir. Don't take Hailey too seriously. He just likes to run his mouth sometimes," I said. Hailey just grunted his contempt for my statement.

I went on, "I do not make the rules, Sir. At least not all of them, and certainly not a majority of them. The rule about the webbing was actually Sergeant Fry's idea. He brought the subject up at one of our powwows. We discussed it and all agreed it was a good idea. The squad leaders just told the men it was my decision, which in some ways it was, but in others it was really the squad leaders'. That's how all rules come about. Not only from the squad leaders, but from the other men.

"I don't enforce the rules as much as the men do amongst themselves. If a rule makes sense, they will adopt it for their own protection; if it doesn't, they wouldn't follow it anyway. The secret to establishing a rule is to make sure it reflects the reality of the situation."

"Like my rule about wearing helmets and shirts at all times, Sergeant?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Will the men follow those rules?" he asked.

I smiled. "You won't even follow those rules, Sir. Last night you had your helmet off most of the time."

"Yes, but that was different. I was not on the perimeter at the time."

"I agree with that, but the question is why did you take it off?"

I could see the wheels turning in the lieutenant's head. "Not any particular reason."

Hailey contributed another snort to the conversation.

"You have something to add?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I do," Hailey said. "Begging the lieutenant's pardon, but the reason he took off his helmet is that it weighs a ton, is hot and uncomfortable, and there isn't an infantryman alive that does not hate the damn thing."

"This is all very true," I said.

"Then you do not think the men should be required to wear them when on perimeter?" the lieutenant asked.

"No, Sir," Hailey answered before I could. "It's a chickenshit rule." His face turned red and there was a scowl on his face. It was not often he got worked up over something, but he was now. .

"How is it 'chickenshit,' Private?"

"Because it was made by someone it does not apply to, Sir. You made the rule. It will be easy for you to comply, since most of the time when we are dug in, you won't be on the perimeter. Therefore you will have the option of not wearing your helmet most of the time. The other men will not have that option, will they, Sir?"

"No, Hailey, they will not, and while I sympathize with their predicament, the rule is for their own good. Sometimes unpopular decisions have to be made. It's not a popularity contest. Besides, what are you getting all steamed about, you don't spend that much time on the perimeter either."

"That's not the point, Sir. The point is that the decision is being made by someone who doesn't have to live with the decision. Someone who does not have a clue about how it will affect the men. Maybe even someone who does not give a shit about them."

"That is enough, Private," the lieutenant barked.

Hailey turned, picked up his rifle and rucksack, and headed for the perimeter.

"He always so verbose, Sergeant?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Well he will have to learn to keep his opinions to himself. I do not need a private telling me my business." I did not reply, instead leaning back on my rucksack, I closed my eyes in preparation for a nap.

"I was right."

I chose not to answer.

"Wasn't I, Sarge?" the lieutenant asked.

"Your call, Sir," I said.

"Well, don't you agree with me about the helmets?"

"No, Sir," I said. I shut my eyes again, hoping to catch a few minutes rest. All this talking was beginning to weigh on me.

"Will the men listen to me?"

"Yes, Sir," I said.

"Will they obey me?"

"Obey you, Sir? Maybe."

He let the subject drop. Silence took hold. It was amazing just how silent things were once conversation ceased. During the whole conversation, no one's voice had risen loud. The lieutenant had been smart enough to keep his voice low enough to keep everyone from overhearing.

I knew Hailey would keep his mouth shut about what had been said, but I also suspected word would get out anyway. Sound in the jungle took on strange characteristics. Something said at a normal voice level would sometimes be transmitted no more than foot, but at other times much farther. When it was quiet, one could periodically pick up bits and pieces of quiet conversation going on around him. In our current situation, everyone was laying out there in the bush in defensive postures. They were using all their senses to tune into their surroundings. In the jungle, hearing was almost more important than seeing, and we were in one of those situations.

I had learned long ago that the jungle had ears, and that anything I said to anyone had a chance of being overheard by someone else. For that reason, I always assumed I was being overheard and never said anything that would embarrass me or any of the other men.

The lieutenant would learn that too soon enough.

After about fifteen minutes, my eyes opened. The lieutenant was sitting there staring at me. I took out a cigarette and lit up.

"You have a nice nap?"

"Yes, Sir," I said. Hailey had not returned.

"Second Platoon just turned around and is on its way back," the lieutenant said. "Why do you think I am wrong about the helmets?"

"It is just impossible for the men to follow the order, Sir. They treat their helmets the same way they treat their rifles. A necessary burden. You try digging a foxhole out in the sun and keep your helmet on. Like Hailey said, they are a pain in the ass. Not well designed and too fucking hot. They are always falling off. As a matter of fact, they are so noisy when they fall off, it is the single loudest thing that gives away our position as the company moves through the jungle.

"You think it would be better wearing soft caps, like the Marine Recon units or our LRRP units?" the lieutenant asked.

"No Sir. They have a different function than we do. It's their job to avoid contact or break contact once they are discovered. Our company's function is to make contact and maintain it. When we're in a firefight it's liable to last awhile, and the chances of catching shrapnel, branches, or a bullet in the head are high. None of the men, or very few at least, will argue the value or necessity of the steel helmet. On the other hand, to try and keep it on the head twenty four hours a day is impossible. Don't worry, Sir. The first sign of trouble the helmets are on."

"I hate backing away from an order once I issue it."

"Yes, Sir. That is why you need to talk these things over before deciding to issue an order. I or any of the squad leaders would have told you why it was a bad idea. You want to shoot yourself in the foot, be my guest. You want to shoot me in the foot, well then, to hell with you."

"I'll..." started the lieutenant and then stopped as the sound of a distant explosion drifted down from the north. He jumped to his feet and began looking around.

I just sat there, waiting. The radio was sitting there next to me with the sound barely on. When the call came, I turned the sound up just slightly to catch the lieutenant's attention. Hearing it, he squatted next to it.

"Five, this is Two, over," Lieutenant Kelp's voice came floating up from the radio.

"Two, this is Five, over," Captain Carlson's voice came back immediately. Out of the corner of my eye I caught Bobby coming toward our position, along with Hailey.

"Five. I got two men down. One is serious and will need immediate evac, over."

"Roger, Two. Are you receiving hostile fire? Over."

"No, Sir. Looks like a booby trap, Sir. We passed a clearing about fifty meters from our current position that an evac can land in. We will be heading for that position."

"Roger, Two. Give me the coordinates when you get there, I'll have the bird in the air in one, over."

"Two out."

The lieutenant reached for the radio. "I would not bother the captain right now, Sir," I said. "He'll be busy with Six and the evac for a while, Sir."

"Well what should we do?"

"Just sit and get something to eat. We'll be here a while longer. The old man would already have us moving if that is what was required. The fact that he has not ordered us to move means that the Second Platoon will evac its men and then move back to the company's current position. Sergeant Fry, let the men know what's happening."

Without a word, Bobby and Hailey both moved out to let the rest of the men in on what was happening. The lieutenant took the time to begin playing with the radio, trying to keep track of all the radio transmissions taking place on the various frequencies. I took the opportunity to catch up on some more sleep, and by time the Second Platoon hit the company perimeter, I was feeling pretty rested.

The rest of the day's trek was a fairly rapid three hour movement to the hilltop that would serve as the company's overnight encampment. The lieutenant held up surprisingly well. This meant that we did not have to carry him, and for a new man that was an acceptable performance. I knew it would impress the men, for the last move had been difficult.

The platoon was slated for ambush, and I was worried that the lieutenant was not up to that, requiring both sleep and rest in order to be reasonably functioning in the morning. It was not unusual to leave a new man out of an ambush the first week or so of his stay in the field, assigning him to spend the night attached to another platoon. However, I had no idea how this would sit with a new officer.

Sergeant Harris led the platoon into the company's bivouac, finding a reasonably concealed area inside what would become the company's perimeter. The men spread out

around the area while the rest of the company went about the business of setting up a perimeter. The lieutenant collapsed beside a tree.

"Find the doc," I said to Hailey. He moved out and a minute later returned with the medic. Without comment the doc moved over to the lieutenant and began talking quietly to him. I went about the business of getting my stuff together for the night's work. It started with the preparation of the day's main meal.

I had been thinking of my selection all day. My mouth watered just thinking of it. Over the past months, I had fallen into the habit of eating only one large meal a day. My stomach was rumbling from hunger by time the opportunity presented itself. I rummaged two LRRP meals from my rucksack. One spaghetti and one chicken dinner.

I got out my canteen cup and filled it with water. I scooped a small opening in the soil and dropped in a heating pellet, lighting it with my cigarette lighter. Balancing the cup carefully over the hole, I sat back and watched as the water heated up, taking the opportunity to smoke a cigarette.

Around me, unseen for the most part, the rest of the men of First Platoon were preparing themselves also. From experience, they knew we had about two hours before we would move out, so everyone went about their individual preparations. Most were preparing their meals, although some would opt to eat later, just before moving out for the night.

I had learned to eat early, since time and circumstances had robbed me of opportunities to eat on several occasions. As I only ate once a day, this could be hard on the body. While snacking on candy throughout the day for energy was acceptable, it did not replace the need for more substantial nourishment. I did not know how many calories were required to maintain a body in the field, but considering the terrain and the physical lifestyle, it was considerable. Keeping the body from wasting away was difficult, and everyone ate whatever food was available.

My water was beginning to boil as the lieutenant moved over and squatted down beside me. "Dinner time?"

"Yeah."

"You mind if I borrow some of that water?"

"No, Sir," I said, lying.

He went and dug a LRRP out of his rucksack, which the men had returned to him. While they did not mind humping his equipment, they were more than glad to return it to him at the earliest possible minute. He opened the LRRP meal, carefully separating out the various components. He opened the plastic bag with the dehydrated meal. I had him place it on the ground beside mine, and carefully poured half the boiling water into each meal.

We both picked up our meals and began stirring the contents vigorously with the plastic forks from the packages. The water was slowly absorbed into the mixture, and within a couple minutes, a passable meal appeared within the bag. I dug in.

"You seem to be enjoying this stuff," the lieutenant commented.

"Yes, Sir. The first few months the only thing the company got was C rations. After going through that, these LRRPs are like a gift from the gods."

"I never had C rations before. Not too good, huh?"

I laughed, "No, Sir, not too good." Wolfing down the first meal was a habit of mine. Like any animal on the verge of starving, the eating act was just a matter of getting as much food into the stomach as quickly as possible. I was done with my first meal while the lieutenant was barely into his.

I poured more water into the canteen cup and half filled it with more water. Dropping another heating pellet into the hole, I began boiling more water.

"Hungry today, Sergeant?"

"No more than normal, Sir."

"You always eat two meals for dinner?"

"Sometimes I'll only eat one if it's been an easy day, but that is the exception rather than the rule. I only eat one main meal a day, so I got to pack it in when I do eat."

"That can't be good for you, Sarge. Why not eat a couple meals a day?"

"Most of the men do. While running the platoon, I found it difficult to find the time to eat during the day. Just fell into the habit of not even trying, and now I only eat once. The squad leaders know I do this as soon as the platoon is situated for the day. That is why they have not shown up yet. It's the only time of day I am not generally available to them. I like to

eat in peace. Even the captain's got into the habit of leaving me alone until after I eat. I get real grouchy if I don't eat."

"I guess I'm disturbing you then?"

"Yes, Sir, but I make exceptions. Enjoy your meal."

My water was boiling, and I quickly prepared the second meal. I had saved the spaghetti for last, since it was my favorite. The first meal down was hardly tasted, and so eating it first would have been a waste of good food. I leaned back against a tree and began savoring my dinner.

I could hear platoon life going on around me. The company was digging in on top of a hill. Unlike the mountainous terrain of the Highlands, the area we were operating in was more rolling hills. There was triple canopy jungle surrounding us for miles, so the ground cover was good for both the gooks and us.

Everyone went about their business in a quiet manner, but still there was plenty of noise to keep me informed that there were people surrounding me. With such an experienced group of soldiers, the need for supervision or guidance was minimal. Each man knew what was expected of him and went about his business.

Sitting there eating, I could discern the sounds of practices that went into preparing for the night's activities. For instance, I could hear the clink and clank of weapons being broken down and reassembled as they were cleaned and checked out to ensure they functioned. There was the distinctive sound of bullets being ejected from their magazines as the rifles were separated for cleaning, and the distinctive click as they were loaded back into the magazine afterward.

The men quietly talked amongst themselves with bits and pieces of conversations floating through the air. It was sometimes quite easy to hear what was being said, although most of what was heard was fragmented.

I enjoyed my meal quietly, and the lieutenant was polite enough not to interrupt. When he got done eating, he got up, looked around and headed off toward the opening in the center of the perimeter where the captain would be setting up a command post. I watched him walk away. He appeared to have perked up now that he had some food in his belly and a short rest.

I would have been more impressed if he had his weapon with him. "Fuck him," I thought as he moved out of sight. He would be back shortly, as soon as the captain or Top spotted him wandering around without it. I was tempted to hide the damn thing, which lay up against his rucksack. Maybe it would teach him a lesson. On the other hand, it might just piss him off. Today he seemed to coming around some, willing to listen to whatever advice I gave him. Maybe that would last, maybe it wouldn't. I certainly was not interested in getting into an adversarial relationship with him. Our best chance for survival rested in a relationship of mutual trust and understanding. That would be the plan until circumstances dictated otherwise.

Sure enough, he returned ten minutes later, retrieved his weapon without even acknowledging my existence, and headed back out again. I would have laughed out loud, except that I did not think the lieutenant would appreciate it. I held my mirth to a quiet chuckle.

It was time to get to work. There was platoon business to conduct, and as unpleasant as some of it was, it needed to be taken care of.

"Hailey!" I called. Within thirty seconds he showed up.

"Get Hare for me."

"Sure, Sarge."

Two minutes later, Hare was sitting on the ground opposite me.

"You all set for tonight?" I asked.

"Sure. You want to cover our patrol orders?"

"Not now. I got something else we need to talk about. Bobby is not going out tonight. I'm leaving him back. That means someone must be given First Squad to run. I've decided to put Sergeant Baker in charge. I wanted to tell you first, in case you have any questions about it."

Hare stared at me real hard for a minute. I did not say anything more, waiting for him to digest the news. "Bobby going in?"

"Not yet. I'm not a medic but I suspect that it will either be tonight or in the next day or two. He is no longer strong enough to keep up the pace, and I refuse to drag him along tonight."

If he gets sick in the ambush, there is no way to evac him. He's too good a man to put through that."

"I agree." A simple statement but important to me. The Hare's opinions weighed heavily with me. "About Sergeant Baker, it's okay with me. I would like to know your thinking."

"In some ways you deserve it more than he does. You have been a member of the First Squad longer than him, but you will not be here much longer. I expect to see orders come down on your transfer within the week."

"Think so, Lou?"

"Between me, you, and the monkeys, the captain has already received word that you have been accepted into the program. You're out of here in two days at the most. I did not tell you before, not wanting to make you nervous or anything."

The Hare was smiling now. A month ago, when the captain submitted Hare for promotion, he also recommended him for the instructor's program at the Jungle Training Center in the Philippines. Hare had become not only the platoon's point man, but also the company's. In addition to handling most of the duties of the point man, he was in the process of training several other men in the techniques he utilized when pulling point. The jungle school was always looking for experienced combat veterans to train men. Hare, who had decided to make the military his career, fit the bill.

From his start as a scared city slicker, Hare had developed into the quintessential jungle fighter. I always felt safe with him out front leading the platoon and would surely miss him. Spec Four Boyd would assume his duties, being the most proficient at the job learned under the Hare's tutelage.

"Would I have gotten the squad if I was not getting transferred out soon?" Hare asked.

"No," I said.

Hare continued to smile. "That's what I thought. The thing I like most about you, Pro, is your honesty. Is it because you don't think I could handle a squad?"

"Hare, you chose to become point man. In doing so you essentially became less of a part of First Squad. Your importance to the company is second to none, but you will need some time working more closely with others before you take over a squad. Personally, I think when

the time comes, you'll be an exceptional leader. In many ways you already are. Shit, I've been following you through the jungle for the past three months. If that doesn't make you my leader, then I don't know what leadership means."

"Well, I agree with you, Pro. I just wanted to hear it from the horse's mouth so to speak. You talk to Bobby or Baker about this yet."

"No."

"Well, good luck. I do not envy you."

"Thanks, Hare. We'll cover our plans for tonight in about an hour. Let Sergeant Baker know I want to talk with him."

William "Tell" Baker had been promoted to Sergeant E-5 at the same time Hare had been. He had been one of Bobby's team leaders for several months and had proven to be capable of functioning well in that position. This would be a big step up for him. A team leader only was responsible for a few men besides himself. As a matter of fact, Baker's team consisted of himself and three other men. Baker had been groomed for the job by Bobby. It was Bobby's recommendation that put Baker in his team leader position. I wondered how he would perform in his new job. Only time would tell.

"You wanted to see me, Sergeant Merrins?"

"How's it feel being a sergeant, Baker?"

"To tell you the truth, it takes a little getting used to. Me, a fucking sergeant," he said. Suddenly he got a look of consternation on his face. "Not that I got anything against Sergeants, Sergeant. I just never pictured myself in this position."

I smiled. "I know exactly what you mean, Baker, and I'll tell you right now, it only gets worse. As a matter of fact that is why I called you over here. How's Sergeant Fry?"

"His ass is dragging, Sarge. He's definitely coming down with something. Everyone is worried about him."

"Glad you see it that way. I have decided not to let Bobby go out on patrol tonight. You'll be taking over First Squad."

"By taking over, you mean for tonight only, right?"

"No, Sergeant Baker, not just for tonight. The First Squad is now yours."

He looked sick. From a smiling, relaxed person to one of the walking wounded. Psychologically it was probably no different than being shot. My own mind flipped back to when I had been made platoon sergeant without any prior warning. I smiled.

"I ain't ready for this, Sarge," Baker said.

"Sure you are, Sergeant Baker. At least as ready as you will ever be. Sorry to spring the news on you like this, but Doc says Bobby's had it. No way am I going to let anything happen to him. Even if he doesn't get his ass shipped in tonight, he won't make it for more than a day or two. I can't see letting him try to run First Squad any longer. You are our choice to take over the squad, so now is the right time."

He was beginning to look a little better. "When you say "our" choice, who do you mean, Sarge?" he asked.

"All the squad leaders have taken part in conversations about who would replace them if something happens. Bobby of course recommended you, but the other squad leaders had a voice in it too. Why do you think you were promoted? You think I did it just because we're your friends? This does not have anything to do with friendship. You're a good soldier. You have stood up well here in the bush, and it's your turn to run things."

"Can I think it over?"

I laughed. "Sorry. I am not giving you a choice. Shit! Who would be stupid enough to actually want Bobby's job? Especially with him not even knowing about it yet?" I asked.

Baker suddenly looked sick again.

"Relax, Sergeant Baker. You'll do just fine. I want you to go back to the squad and tell Bobby I want to see him. Once he is gone, gather up his gear and have someone carry it up to the command post. You can tell the men in the squad about the changes taking place. It will not be a secret for much longer now."

Sergeant Baker did not know whether to shit or go blind. He continued to sit there for almost a full minute before he got to his feet.

"I'll get Bobby for you," he said, preparing to move out.

I stood and offered him my hand.

"Congratulations, Sergeant Baker. I know you'll do well. We'll be meeting with the other squad leaders in a little while. I'll see you then." We shook hands, and then he left.

I sat and lit a cigarette. The easy part was over. The next conversation was the one I dreaded most.

"You want to see me, Lou?" Bobby said sitting opposite me.

I took a deep drag on my cigarette before answering. In some ways that said it all, and Bobby, who was like a brother and knew me as well as any man ever would, looked back with an overwhelming sadness in his eyes.

"Sorry, Bobby," I said. He knew. I knew he knew.

"I'm relieving you of First Squad," I said, making it official.

"Thanks, Lou," Bobby said.

"Thanks?"

Bobby smiled. It was the old smile. The one I missed.

"I can't do it no more," Bobby said. "I hate to admit it, but I am sick. I could not admit it to myself until today. Spent the whole day trying to work up the courage to tell you. Thanks for taking on the burden for me."

Now it was my turn to feel sick.

"Damn it, Bobby. This sucks."

He smiled. "What's the plan?"

"You'll spend the night at the command post. Specialist Dooley will be taking your temperature. If it reaches 102 degrees, they will call in an evac chopper for you. Captain Carlson promised me that."

"Thanks, Lou," Bobby said. Without another word, he stood and headed off toward the First Squad's position. There he would say his good-byes. They would be very similar to our parting. Brief.

I swallowed hard to keep from crying.

Lucky for me, the lieutenant made his appearance then, immediately taking my mind off Bobby.

"The captain says the First Platoon has ambush tonight. He says you already have the information necessary. What's the score? When do we take off?"

"I want to talk to you about that, Sir. Sergeant Harris has already gotten the information we need from the captain. I'll be having a meeting of the squad leaders shortly, and Sergeant Harris will give us the information then."

"You mean he will be the one who decides when we move out and what route we will be taking?"

"Yes, Sir," I said.

"Isn't that unusual? It is my responsibility to make those decisions, not some sergeant. I expect to have final say in any plans we have for tonight's action. In the future I want to be in on these decisions from the beginning. Understood, Sergeant Merrins?"

"Yes, Sir," I replied.

"Good. When do we meet with the squad leaders?"

"In about fifteen minutes," I said checking my watch. "I have a couple of things we need to talk about now, Sir. I want you to know I have relieved Sergeant Fry. He will be staying back tonight. Sergeant Baker has been given charge of the First Squad."

"Okay. If you think he can handle it. A night off would be good for Sergeant Fry."

"This isn't a temporary change, Sir. Sergeant Fry is too ill to carry on his duties as squad leader, and until such a time occurs when he is able to function in that capacity again, Baker is in and Bobby is out."

"Let me get this straight. Without checking with me, you have appointed a new squad leader for First Squad? A permanent one?" the lieutenant said.

"Yes, Sir."

"Sergeant Merrins. I know you have handled this platoon without an officer present, but that has changed as of last night. I am the only one who can make that kind of decision. As of now I am countermanding that order. I will decide who gets First Squad."

I did not say a word. Getting up, I grabbed my rifle and walked off toward First Squad.

"Where are you going, Sergeant?"

"I need to tell First Squad they will not be going out on patrol with the rest of the platoon tonight," I answered, keeping my voice neutral.

"Get back here, now," the lieutenant said in a loud, firm voice.

Several heads appeared above and around the surrounding bushes as men tried to discern what was happening. The lieutenant took note of this but said nothing. I walked over to where he was standing, stepping perhaps closer than necessary before stopping.

"Have a seat, Sergeant."

"Yes, Sir," I said. Being pissed would not help the current situation.

"I'll take over First Squad for tonight's ambush. We'll talk about who get the squad in the morning."

"There are two things wrong with that plan, Sir. First of all, you are not qualified to lead First Squad. You have no idea who they are and how they function. They are a close knit team of men who have been operating together for a long time. Every man knows exactly what to do in a firefight, how to react, and how to function as a member of the team. Your very presence would represent a danger to them and the platoon in a combat situation. Whether they would listen to you is very doubtful.

The second problem with your plan is that I have no intention of taking you along with the platoon tonight. You barely made it through the day. Tomorrow will be harder on you than today was, and a night in the bush is beyond your ability right now. I never allow new men out on ambush until they become acclimated to the jungle."

The lieutenant's face hardened as he took in my words. I could tell we were about to butt heads seriously.

"You got a problem with that, then you go to the captain, Sir. When you reach a point where you can handle all your duties, fine. Right now you are along for the ride. Relax, and enjoy it while you can. A week, two weeks from now maybe, you'll be free to do anything you damn well please with this platoon, but until then, I'll make those decisions you are not qualified to make. That includes putting Baker in charge of First Squad."

He did not say anything. He just sat there, staring into my eyes. I stared back.

The lieutenant shifted his eyes toward the top of the jungle. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I took out a cigarette and lit it up.

"You should have talked to me about Sergeant Fry and Sergeant Baker."

"You are right, Sir. I am used to making decisions on my own. The question of relieving Bobby has been bouncing around in my head all day, and I have a habit of acting upon my decisions immediately once they're made. I promise to involve you in all future decisions."

"Okay, Sergeant. Of course you are right about choosing Sergeant Baker to run First Squad. I don't know the men well enough to make that kind of decision. As far as staying back tonight, I think I could hack it," he said.

"Yes, Sir. I appreciate that kind of attitude, but there is the reality to deal with also. You are not in any kind of shape to pull ambush and then hump all day long tomorrow. With luck, there will be plenty of tomorrows, and with them lots of ambushes. Any man in the platoon would trade places with you tonight, Sir. No one will think less of you for staying behind. They will know it was my decision."

Just then Hare came over to our position. He hesitated when he saw me talking to the lieutenant, but I waved him over.

Without getting up, I said "Lieutenant Atkins, Sergeant Harris."

Hare squatted down next to us. "Afternoon, Sir," he said while unfolding the map he had been carrying. Without preamble, he went into the briefing he had received earlier from Captain Carlson.

"The captain wants us to set up along the creek located here," Hare said, pointing. "I figure we'll head out this way, travel west about a click, and then head in about here." I followed the track his finger was tracing on the map. "I would guess an hour to get there, allow maybe another hour to set up. Sunset at twenty-thirty, give or take a few minutes. We leave at eighteen forty-five."

I had my map out and was marking the route Hare had picked out on the plastic overlay. I had already cleaned off the information that had related to today's march, so we were starting with a clean slate.

"Okay, Hare," I said. "Any questions, Sir?"

I could see the lieutenant was aching to ask questions, and so I was pleased when he got right down to brass tacks. He questioned how the route was chosen, how long it would take, what terrain lay between the company and the ambush site, and what route the platoon would return by and why.

Hare had a reasonable answer for everything. I had gotten out of the habit of questioning the Hare's decisions, realizing some time ago that he was capable of making good decisions without my input. When he was done answering the lieutenant's questions, I could see that the lieutenant was impressed also.

I thought the meeting went quite well, with both Sergeant Harris and Lieutenant Atkins having gained a measure of respect from each other. I thanked Hare for the briefing before he left to get ready for the patrol.

"I saw him talking with the captain earlier," the lieutenant said. "Twice, as a matter of fact. Earlier this morning and again this afternoon."

"Yes, Sir. Sergeant Harris is always either point man or backup. He has three other men who he is training. The company will sorely miss his presence once his transfer comes through."

"Where is he going?" the lieutenant asked. I explained.

"If he is so valuable, why did the captain recommend him for transfer?"

"Hare's served his time, Sir. Captain Carlson agrees. This will be a big boost to his career. What he has learned in guiding us and acting as our point man needs to be taught to others. It will save lives."

The squad leaders showed up shortly thereafter. Sergeant Baker was congratulated by the other squad leaders and Lieutenant Atkins. I could tell he was extremely nervous, but he handled himself well. The lieutenant handled the patrol briefing himself, covering the information he had received from Sergeant Harris. He also informed the squad leaders of his decision to rescind the order concerning the men always wearing their helmets and shirts.

The squad leaders accepted these announcements without comment. From the way they acted, I could tell that they were not comfortable around the lieutenant. Whether this

would change was difficult to judge. It was one problem with having such a close-knit group of men. Outsiders were only accepted slowly.

Losing Bobby and getting both Baker and Lt. Atkins made everyone in the group nervous. Would we be able to function as well in the future as we had in the past?

The platoon had been lucky for a long time now. Except for Cooper's getting shot, and even then not too seriously, we had lived a charmed existence. Everyone knew it could not last. The company had lost several men during that time with both Second and Fourth Platoons getting damaged severely. There was little doubt in my mind that First Platoon was overdue.

I believed in luck. It was the only explanation for my own continued existence. I had to wonder if the sudden change in the makeup of the group in front of me was the harbinger of new luck.

Later that night, I lay in ambush. The platoon was located in a different area than we had started out for. Like everything else, things had changed in the face of reality. Long before getting to our planned position, the patrol had stumbled upon a well used trail. Hidden below the canopy of the jungle, the trail lay, heading east to west. We explored it carefully in both directions prior to picking out the place where we would await the enemy. Whether this was good luck or bad, only time would tell.

I got the old man on the horn and tied our artillery to the new position. The site was located within a couple hundred yards of one of the artillery designations, so they would be able to support us quickly if we needed them.

Around two in the morning, flares suddenly appeared in the sky, lighting up the night. This had the immediate effect of awakening every one of my body's eight jillion nerve endings. Having happened without warning, it was scary.

While I lay there with the adrenaline flowing through my body, I figured the flares were put there by the company. Since I could hear no disturbance coming from that direction, it was not in response to enemy action. There were several possibilities, but I hoped it was an evac for Bobby. Almost as the thought crossed my mind, the faint thumping of helicopter blades could be discerned passing overhead in the night.

The night wound up being uneventful, leaving a lot of time to think.

I had mixed feelings about the new lieutenant, but overall I felt pretty good about things. For a new man, his actions had been typical. Things were always difficult in the beginning. How a man reacted initially was not a good predictor of how he would eventually turn out. Conflicting signals were inevitable from any man faced with an overwhelming change in reality.

The lieutenant was anxious to take command of the troops and had gotten ahead of himself in making decisions. He had initially responded poorly to advice. In addition, it was easy to discern his low opinion of colored people. In the platoon, that kind of attitude would simply not last, the likely outcomes being termination either by a change of heart or violence.

The lieutenant was obviously intelligent. That was something of value, but only if he lived long enough and grew wise enough to learn the correct lessons the jungle and men would teach him.

Lieutenant Atkins was in good physical condition, and despite being somewhat older than most of the men, he seemed like he would have little difficulty adjusting to the field. His performance today had been acceptable, and he seemed to have bounced back physically today better than a lot of men in the past. I had seen men so physically exhausted at the end of the first day, that their survival was in doubt. The fact that the lieutenant participated in planning for the patrol and was capable of getting angry boded well for his physical prowess.

My gravest concern was for his survival instincts. His inability to understand the importance of his rifle was inexplicable. No one, and I mean no one, I had met before under similar circumstances forgot so regularly to take their rifle with them wherever they went. The basic instinct to survive dictated that a weapon was necessary in the circumstances found in the jungle. Primitive man knew this, and that instinct was present in everyone. Yet the lieutenant seemed to pay no attention to the most basic tool of his trade. To me and the other men in the platoon, his behavior in this matter was not only alien, but also unacceptable. We relied too much on each other for survival to overlook this shortcoming.

Another concern was the way the lieutenant addressed the men in the platoon. There was an edge to his voice that seemed to indicate a certain disdain for men of a lower rank. This might be acceptable in a supply outfit, but in an Airborne infantry company, especially one

engaged in real combat, this attitude was completely unacceptable. Each man was valuable, and the lowest private was to be respected and listened to. Just their willingness to expose themselves to the dangers of Airborne training gave them the right to be treated with respect.

I had expected, when I joined the Airborne Infantry, to be placed in dangerous situations. Even going into the situation with my eyes wide open had not prepared me for our current situation. Months of almost continuous patrolling and the daily exposure to combat situations were unusual for any outfit. Each man was tested on a daily basis. To treat such men without total respect was to ask for trouble. Having been in the military for a period of time without being exposed to such men may have blunted the lieutenant's ability to lead them. Not having trained with those like them was another liability that he would have to overcome quickly.

I had no illusions concerning the men I led. They had earned my respect and love. I would not have left them if I were given a pass to heaven, but I also saw their other side. There were more than a few of them I would not want dating my sister or joining my family. They were loyal to their friends to a fault. To their enemies they were walking death. They would kill in an instant if provoked and have no regrets for having done so. Those that might have regrets would still not hesitate to kill an instant later, should the situation call for it. Not fucking with them was on my all-time list of survival rules.

Whether he realized it or not, the lieutenant had rubbed a lot of the men the wrong way. The men would forgive that only for so long. After that they would not put up with such behavior. I could only teach him so much. He was responsible for the way he treated the men, and they would react to him based on his behavior. I could only hope things would work out.

END