

**#12 Second Coming** – Around April 1, 1968 – the rear (Pleiku) to the field, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – This was my return to the field after REMF.

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It may have been a new world record in the history of the American military. To go from lowly REMF to heavy duty grunt in six short hours was an amazing feat. Lou was sure there was a lesson to be learned there, but for the life of him he did not know what it was, whether it was a blessing or a curse, and even if the feat could be duplicated, if there was anyone other than himself stupid enough to allow it to happen.

The day had started out like most of the others over the past three and one half months, with an early morning run along the outer perimeter road. That morning he had run six miles, slightly more than he normally ran, and a hell of a lot further than he did that first day out of the hospital so many weeks ago. The running then had been what was necessary to get into shape to return to the field. Now Lou ran for pleasure. He knew that his chances of returning to the field in the near future were almost nil. It was one reason he had extended his tour by six months, with a request for transfer to another combat assignment. Even if his current commanding officer wasn't willing to release him from his current duties, Lou could get the assignment of his choice by extending his tour. The rules were set out in Department of Defense guidelines and could not be denied. The sooner he got out of his current duties, the better. It was beginning to drive him crazy. What occurred later in the day was a direct consequence of his insanity.

After his run, a quick shower, and breakfast, Lou began his day's work as company clerk for Alpha Company. Nothing out of the ordinary happened until later that morning. Spec Four Hudson stopped by his desk to let him know that Captain Woolford wanted to see him. Lou glanced up at the clock hanging from one of the tent poles. It was 1100 hours. At that time the craziness of the day commenced, and without warning, an ordinary day became a happening. A day he would remember for the rest of his life.

Here in Pleiku, the captain had his own tent that he shared with his aide. When Lou entered the tent, the captain was standing there with Major Brown from brigade headquarters. The major was a familiar figure at battalion headquarters for several reasons, the main one

being that he was Negro. It was unusual to see any colored officers, never mind one who held such a high rank. Lou was used to having colored people over him from being in the infantry. All the NCOs he had during his stay with Alpha Company were Negroes. Sgt. Wilson, first squad leader; Sgt. Harris, first platoon's Platoon Sergeant; and Sergeant Major Turner, Alpha Company's top NCO, were all colored. Lou had never given it much thought. All those men were qualified and had proven it in combat. The fact that Major Brown was colored would not have struck Lou as unusual had they met in the field. In the rear, Major Brown just stuck out more than he would have in the jungle. It was a case of getting use to seeing so many officers in the rear, and all of them lily white, that seeing a Negro officer was a bit of a shock.

Lou approached the officers, saluted, and reported in as ordered. The captain put him at ease and explained that it was Major Brown who was interested in speaking to him. The captain excused himself and left the tent with his aide in tow.

Major Brown moved behind the captain's desk and sat in the chair. "Have a seat, Sgt. Merrins," he said. Lou sat.

The major took a folder out of a briefcase that was sitting atop the desk. From the folder he removed two pieces of paper. From where he was sitting, Lou recognized one of them. It was his request for transfer.

"You recognize this of course?" the major asked, but in such a way that it was more a statement of fact.

"Yes, Sir."

"You are requesting a transfer out of the Airborne?"

"Yes, Sir." Lou replied.

The major's voice was now angry. "You're a goddamn REMF. You sit on your ass all day. I checked your records. You got your promotion to sergeant while in the rear. What right do you have asking for an assignment to another outfit, especially in a combat position? You aren't qualified to be in combat. You don't have what it takes. And now you are putting in for a transfer to a leg outfit. You are a traitor to the outfit, and I will not allow your transfer.

Lou sat there awe struck while the major berated him. Never in a thousand years would he have imagined an officer from the 173rd talking to him in such a manner. It was outside the

scope of his experience. Lou's eyes narrowed as he looked closely at the man in front of him. The major's insignia told him that the officer was in the Signal Corps. This motherfucker isn't qualified to talk like this to me, Lou thought.

"Fuck you, Sir" Lou said.

"What did you say, you little cocksucker?" the major yelled, standing up and knocking over the chair he had been sitting in. Lou smiled. This sonofabitch is big and angry. He wants your ass, so be careful, Lou's mind said. As in similar instances in the past, Lou's mind did not listen to his brain.

"I said, Fuck you, Sir."

"You'll be in Long Binh before this day is over, Sergeant. I promise you that. You hear me, boy?" the major snarled.

"No, Sir," Lou replied.

"What do you mean, No Sir? You don't think I can do that or you do not hear me?"

"No, Sir, I won't be in Long Binh, and No, Sir you will not deny my transfer," Lou replied. The smile was now gone from his face. Lou knew better than to lose his temper with an officer. Lou had long ago learned to treat them as the idiot children most of them were, but there was a limit, and the major had crossed over the line. The major continued to stand there in a threatening manner. It seemed reasonable that the man would launch a physical attack at any moment. Lou was ready for him, and he remained seated but prepared to fend off an attack. The major was both taller and heavier than Lou. But if he chose to attack, the major would never leave the tent alive. Lou had already made that decision. He felt under no obligation to warn the major.

The major turned and picked up the chair he had knocked over. He sat and stared at Lou without saying a word. Lou had seen this technique used a hundred times throughout his military career. To stare directly into another man's eyes was a means of trying to psychologically dominate them. To Lou it was a means of remaining in control of the situation. The fact that the major had sat seemed to indicate that the chance of a physical confrontation was reduced, but once Lou's body had been placed on alert, it was hard just to call the whole thing off. The major's stare did not bother him in the least. Psychologically, Lou had already

killed the man. It was now up to the major to decide his own fate. The major looked down at the papers in front of him on the desk. Lou relaxed.

"You seem pretty damn sure of yourself." Once more the major was looking toward him, but not directly in the eyes.

"Yes, Sir."

"Explain."

"The request for transfer was made under Department of Defense guidelines and cannot be refused unless there is something in my records that make me ineligible. There isn't. I have both the time in country and the MOS to be eligible for the position I requested. If you attempt to delay or deny the request for transfer, I'll be on the phone to the Inspector General's office so fast your head will spin. As far as my behavior toward you, well I apologize, but not because you didn't have it coming. I apologize because I expect better of myself." Lou settled back in his chair and was smiling.

"I'm still tempted to kick your ass," the major replied. Lou kept his mouth shut. He knew the time had passed in which the major represented a physical threat toward him. Now was not the time to get into a pissing contest with the man. Neither was it the time to bring out the survival knife he carried with him at all times. No one in the headquarters company knew he had it, except for Sgt. James in supply.

"And what if I don't accept your apology?"

"Then fuck you, Sir. Unless there is someone outside this tent listening. It's your word against mine in a court martial. I'll admit to telling you to get fucked, if you'll admit to calling me a goddamn rear echelon motherfucker and a traitor first. If not, I'll just lie like you will."

"I never called you a motherfucker," the major protested.

"You and I and everyone in the Army know what REMF stands for sir. I really don't care if you use foul language. It doesn't bother me in the least. Just don't deny it or get bent out of shape when someone throws it right back at you. I never would have said what I did, if you hadn't gone off on me first. It would probably be in both our best interests if the whole conversation was just put to rest," Lou said, trying to bring some sanity back into the situation.

"If you think that nothing is going to happen because of our conversation, you better think again. Like you said, I cannot block your transfer, and it would not be smart to use your language to bring charges against you. On the other hand, I'm still an officer, and I will not let you get away with it. You cannot talk to me that way. No, Sir. I will not let you off easy. Your problem is that you have it too easy living here in the rear. You have forgotten what Vietnam is all about. Well, you asked to be granted transfer to a combat position. Now I'm going to give you your wish. Let's see how you like humping the boonies. When you leave here, you go over to the supply tent and get what you need for the field. Your ass will be in the field before the sun goes down. I'll let Charlie take care of you. Now get out of here."

Lou stood and saluted, "Yes, Sir. Airborne!" Lou left the sarcasm in his voice and did not smile. He waited until he was outside. There were mixed emotions swirling around inside his head. What the major said about him being a traitor to the Airborne had hurt his pride. If Lou had been transferred back to the field when he was physically ready, there was a good chance that the request to extend his tour and transfer would never have happened. The request for transfer had occurred mainly out of his frustration at being stuck in a position in the rear. The outfit he had chosen was made up of all combat soldiers who had a rank of Sgt. E5. It was an outfit that was put together as a response team to combat that might occur in the future in the city of Saigon. It involved an active combat role, which was the type of position Lou was looking for.

There was no doubt about extending his tour. Lou had found his niche in combat. For whatever reason, he found the experience exhilarating. He had the ability to function well in combat situations even when scared to death. Combat was more of a mental exercise, a state of mind, than a physical experience. The physical part occurred almost automatically in response to what was happening around you. Louis believed that death during combat occurred in a random manner over which no man had any control. To be hit with a mortar round was just bad luck, or fate. It had nothing to do with one's ability to run, jump, or shoot. What could be influenced was the outcome of an engagement, by using instincts and the tools available. It was also possible to influence the circumstances under which combat occurred. It

was much better to be in position to spring an ambush than to have to react to an ambush sprung on you. Lou's instincts seemed tuned into this aspect of combat.

The whole psychological package that went into the makeup of a combat infantryman was what appealed to him. He was comfortable with the psyche that was necessary to function in that role. Once having developed the attitude and demeanor necessary to survive in the field, there was no going back to being a make-believe soldier, one who was trained for combat but required to perform tasks best left to lesser men. Lou had been able to adapt to his stay in the rear, but mainly by avoiding situations and people who might trigger a strong negative response. Like Major Brown, who had come close to losing control that day and close to losing his life. The major simply wasn't tuned into whom or what he was dealing with. Lou had no intention of letting the major get away with attacking him. That was the big difference between a REMF and a combat soldier. The major would have tried to hurt Lou in a fight. To Lou the fight would have been a life and death proposition. Having the survival knife would have given him an unfair advantage, but combat wasn't about fairness. It was about winning or dying. Lou accepted death as a reality of life in Vietnam; the major probably hadn't even considered the possibility today. And therein lay the reason Lou could not go home until he was ready to be discharged from service. Lou was more willing to take his chances in combat than to expose himself to the possibility, or more like the probability, of meeting up with some stupid officer or NCO who would challenge him physically without understanding the consequences of their actions. The military, especially the peacetime military that existed back in the states, was no longer appealing to Lou. While Lou had enjoyed his experiences in training, he was no longer the same man who had gone through the bullshit necessary to survive in that situation. Now he would need to stay in Vietnam until his tour of service was over and he was discharged.

After leaving the tent, Lou headed directly over to the supply tent. Sgt. James was not there. Lou left and went over to the mess tent. He spotted Sgt. James sitting at a table with Specialists Croner and Goody. Lou got a tray of food and sat at the table with them.

"Get my shit together, Scott. I'm on my way to the field," Lou said without preamble. All three men looked at him. "Yes, Sir, got my marching orders, and I leave this afternoon."

"Bullshit," Specialist Goody said. "I just came from a meeting with Captain Woolford, and he didn't say anything. There's no way in hell he'll let you go. You know that."

"Well, he doesn't know it yet, but Major Brown just reassigned my ass. The major thinks I have it too easy here in the rear and has chosen to send me out to the field to show me what being a real soldier is like."

"Well, I don't know how you got him to give you permission to transfer, but he'll change his mind when he gets through talking with Captain Woolford," Goody said while standing up. "I think I'll stop by his tent and find out what the situation is."

After Goody left, both Sgt. James and Specialist Croner congratulated Lou. They both knew how much Lou had been waiting for this transfer to happen, and they were both glad for him.

"You think the captain has any chance of changing the major's mind?" Sgt. James asked.

"Not a chance in hell," Lou replied with a smile. "I don't think the major will be in any mood to consider changing his mind. You see, I didn't ask for the transfer. It was something the major thought up on his own."

"Pissed him off, huh?" Croner asked.

"Now how did you guess that?"

"Just a talent of yours. What happened?"

"Sorry. It's a story I can't tell. If the major found out I said anything about what happened, he's liable to change his mind and transfer me to his own staff. Then I'd really be screwed," Lou said. That got a real laugh out of them.

Sgt. James and Lou discussed what needed to be done with Lou's gear prior to his leaving. They arranged for Lou to turn in his unnecessary equipment and pick up his combat gear around 1400 hours.

"Want to give me your survival knife to mount on the webbing?" Sgt. James asked with a smile. Croner looked sharply at Sgt. James and then at Lou.

"I thought someone stole that from you several months ago?" he said with a scowl in his voice but a smile on his face.

"Yeah, right. Like I'm going to let some REMF steal a weapon from me," Lou replied. While he talked his hand slipped inside his uniform jacket and an instant later the knife appeared in his hand. He reversed the blade and offered it to Spec. Goody. The knife was only about six inches long with a leather handle taking up about half its length. Lou had seen plenty of so-called survival knives that were twice as long and broad. This one seemed best suited for Lou's purpose. He never expected to have to use it in combat. That's why God had made shit like bullets and hand grenades. This was more of a tool for cutting branches, whittling, and meditation. It could be used as a weapon in a pinch; it was certainly sturdy enough and sharp enough. Out in the field Lou kept a bayonet for a weapon and prayed he was never in a situation where he was close enough to the enemy to have to use it. Hand to hand combat was not one of his fortes. Still, he kept it available, because if he could use it, he would use it.

"You keep it," he said to Specialist Croner. "A gift for all your help."

"You sure?" Croner said turning it over in his hand. Like most REMFs, Croner was fascinated with the tools of an infantryman's craft. The knife seemed to mesmerize him in some primitive way.

"Yeah," Lou replied. "I'll miss it, but you're a good man and I'll miss your ugly face."

"Thanks a lot, Lou. You take care of yourself in the field. I'd rather not see you back here, sick or wounded. Look me up when you get back." Croner said. He extended his hand, and Lou shook it.

After lunch, Lou took care of turning in his extra gear and getting outfitted for the field. By now all his old gear had been broken down for storage. The only things left from his original equipment were his bayonet and rifle. With Sgt. James' help, all the paperwork was done by two in the afternoon and all of Lou's equipment was assembled for the field. He would initially carry a reduced load of munitions, until his body had an opportunity to adjust to the rigors of the field. Lou was in pretty good physical condition from his rigorous training each morning, but he was not fooled by that. There was no way to get field tough except to spend time in the field. The rest of his ammunition would be sent out to the field over the next two weeks. Two hundred rounds of rifle ammo and four grenades would be a heavy enough load to start out with. Fortunately he was acclimated to the weather, which he hadn't been on his first trip to



the field. It would make a big difference in adjusting to the field. The biggest problem he anticipated was the change in food and what it would do to his digestive tract. He was not looking forward to that and decided to stop by and see Specialist Croner. Croner would have something that would combat the diarrhea brought on by the change in cuisine.

His rucksack had only four meals packed into it. The company would have a major resupply tomorrow afternoon. Lou would only have to carry food for one day. Luckily the meals all consisted of LRRPs, which were much lighter in weight than C rations. The difference in weight was much appreciated. All three canteens were filled and attached to the webbing belt. His goodbye to Sgt. James consisted of a brief handshake and a "see you later." Infantrymen found goodbyes awkward. They knew that when a man disappeared from your sight, it might be the last time you ever saw them. It had happened often enough to both men that neither one had much to say.

Lou walked over to the administration tent and said goodbye to Specialist Goody. They had learned to get along over the past few months, and while not the best of friends, Lou felt he owed the man a farewell. Specialist Goody was not happy to see him go. "You're an asshole, Lou," he said in way of greeting. "Off to play your little games while one of us will have to do your job until you get back."

"Fuck off, Goody. You're happy because there'll be more booze for you to drink. As far as me coming back, forget it. I ain't coming back here. Tired of all the saluting and shit. Damn arm aching from saluting all the officers you have running around here in the rear. Time to get back to the real world. Take care of yourself and don't go getting any more purple hearts."

"Before you leave, go see Captain Woolford." Goody said, extending his hand. Lou shook it. He glanced over at the desk he had used for the past three months. There was paperwork strewn all over it. Keeping a neat desk had never been one of his priorities. It drove both Specialist Goody and Captain Woolford crazy. If Lou had not been so good at his job, they would have made an even bigger issue of his sloppiness. Now someone would have to wade through his mess and try to figure it out. Lou smiled at the thought.

Captain Woolford greeted him warmly and had him sit in the chair beside his desk. "I hate to see you go. I don't know what happened between you and Major Brown, but I could

tell he was in no mood to be argued with. Major Brown is a good man. It is just that sometimes he gets a bee in his bonnet and goes nuts. By tomorrow, he will feel bad about sending you to the field, and will be ready to forgive and forget. If you want to stick around tonight, you can have your job back."

"Thank you, Sir," Lou said with a smile on his face. "I think I'll get out while the getting is good."

"Well, if you change your mind, just let me know. There will always be a place on my staff for you. I'll have you out of the field the minute you ask. I mean that," Captain Woolford said. Lou just smiled and shook his head. The man was a sweetheart, and Lou would miss him.

Lou rode out to the field on the afternoon copter delivering water to the company. The afternoon had stretched out while he waited for his ride and had given him plenty of opportunity to reflect on his move back to the field.

A lot of things had changed over the past four months. He would be joining a different company than he left. All the older NCOs would be gone as of today. Sgt. Wilson, Lou's old squad leader, had been Platoon Sergeant since the 26th of December, when Sgt. Harris had been wounded in the process of earning himself a Silver Star. Master Sergeant Turner had been transferred to brigade headquarters in Bien Hoi. The orders transferring Sergeant Wilson to the Jungle Training School in the Philippines had come through late yesterday. He would be returning to battalion headquarters in the same chopper that took Lou to the field. All the squad leaders in First Platoon had the same rank as Louis. One of them would have to step up and become platoon sergeant, at least temporarily. This meant there was a good chance that Lou would be given a squad to lead. The thought of that made Lou nervous.

The officers within the company had gone through a major change. Only two of the original four platoon leaders remained. There had only been one replacement to take the place of the other two the company had lost. First Platoon, which Sgt. Wilson led, had operated for the past month without an officer. It was a strange situation, and Lou wondered how it would be remedied with Sgt. Wilson's departure. It was very unusual for a platoon not to have an officer in charge, but Sgt. Wilson had handled the situation well up until now. A new platoon sergeant would have a difficult time replacing Sgt. Wilson as an NCO.

Captain Pickett had been replaced after the company suffered such high casualties taking Hill 891. Captain Sanford took over for two weeks before someone placed a gun to his head and told him to leave the field. The new company commander, Captain Carlson, had shown up the day after Captain Sanford left. Lou had a brief encounter with the man prior to him taking over the company. He was older than the most other captains Lou had met. Maybe forty years old. In civilian life that would be relatively young, but for the Airborne Infantry, that was ancient, and most of the men Captain Carlson's age were majors or light colonels.

Captain Carlson had an immediate effect on the company, raising moral and improving the life of the men in the field. They patrolled just as hard as ever, if not harder, but were treated better. He set an example for the men. People saw him as a rock under fire. Word was that you did not fuck with him. He took care of his men with a fierce loyalty, and in return expected fierce loyalty. Lou had heard nothing but good things about the changes from the men in the company.

The makeup of the enlisted complement of the company had undergone dramatic changes over the past six months, since it was first deployed. First Platoon, of which Lou was an original member, had only eight men left of the forty that had shipped over with the battalion. An 80 percent attrition rate over a period of six months. Those that were left were all veterans of a couple of major battles and many small ones. They were the core that the First Platoon was built around. Lou felt strange joining them. In terms of combat experience, he was a relative newcomer, with only six weeks' field experience. It made him wonder how enthusiastically he would be received by the other men in the platoon.

The helicopter settled into the company perimeter, and Lou exited immediately. He could see Sgt. Wilson shake hands with Captain Carlson, turn, and begin walking toward the helicopter. Wilson spotted Lou and a huge smile came to his face. Lou walked toward him, but instead of continuing toward Lou, Wilson turned and walked back to where the company commander was standing. Lou could see that Sgt. Wilson was having a very intense conversation with Captain Carlson and the other man standing with him. From his body language, Lou could see that Sgt. Wilson was antsy to leave, but he continued to talk even after Lou had gotten close to the group of men. Lou waited there patiently, knowing the

conversation would not last much longer. The helicopter was being quickly unloaded, and if Sgt. Wilson wanted to leave on it, he would have to hurry.

Sgt. Wilson turned and moved over to Lou. "It's good to see you back. You take care of the platoon, Sergeant Merrins."

"You take care of yourself," Lou replied.

And then he was gone. Moving quickly toward the helicopter, throwing his equipment aboard with practiced ease, and jumping in. The pilot was already revving the engine, and the second that Sgt. Wilson was aboard, the aircraft took off. Fifteen seconds later the sound of the engine was disappearing. Lou was glad he had an opportunity to see the man one last time, even if it was only for a couple of seconds. Little had been said, but it meant a lot to Lou.

Lou turned and addressed Captain Carlson. "Sergeant Merrins reporting for duty, Sir." He didn't salute or even come to attention. God it's good to be home, Lou thought.

"Good to see you, Sergeant. No one knew you were coming. Took Sgt. Wilson by surprise. You visiting or staying?" the captain asked.

"Staying Sir."

"Good. This is First Sergeant Heard," the captain said, introducing the man standing next to him. Lou shook his head in the man's direction. He had heard a lot about the first sergeant, all of it good. Whereas Captain Carlson was tall and slender, First Sergeant Heard was short and squat. He appeared to be fat, but Lou did not let that fool him. The guy had a great reputation among the men in the company, and Lou knew that was the important thing. A man in the field had to earn respect, and the First Sergeant had done that. Lou felt good about joining a company that had such good men in leadership roles

"Sergeant Merrins, I want you to join us for a few minutes. I'm having a meeting with the squad leaders of First Platoon, and since this will affect your position within the company, I think you better be present." The captain turned and Lou followed him and Sgt. Heard into the woods surrounding the LZ. Ten yards inside the wood line, four men were standing around and talking. As Lou approached, he immediately recognized all four of them. Sergeant Fry, from First Squad; Sergeant Kirby, Second Squad; Sergeant Baskin, Third Squad; and Sergeant Fisher,

Fourth Squad. All of First Platoon's squad leaders. They looked up as the captain approached the group.

"Hey, Pro. What the fuck you doing here?" Bobby Fry yelled. He barged right past the first sergeant and captain until he was at Lou's side. He gave Lou a bear hug. It was a baby bear hug, because Bobby was only about five feet four. He was one of the shortest men in the company, but one of the most respected. Lou thought him to be the logical choice to replace Sgt. Wilson. "Last time I saw you, you were laying in a hospital bed in a coma. I thought you were dead for sure. Never expected to see you again. Certainly not out here," Bobby said enthusiastically. In the meantime the other men had moved over. There were quick handshakes and verbal slurs thrown as the men reacquainted themselves. Lou felt great. They were treating him as a lost brother.

"All right, gentlemen," First Sergeant Heard said, "it's good to see you guys like each other so well, but hugging leads to fucking, so knock it off. The captain needs to talk to all of you, so gather round. Light 'em if you got 'em," he said. The captain sat on a log, while the other men either squatted or sat on the ground. Lou worked his arms out of the rucksack and leaned back against it. He lit up a cigarette and relaxed, the M-16 laying across his legs. It felt so comfortable to be back amongst his friends. A quick inventory told Lou they were all a bit worn from their time in the field, but their morale seemed good.

"I have decided to put one of you in charge of First Platoon. It is a decision I reached after discussion with First Sergeant Heard and Sergeant Wilson. I have no intention of going outside First Platoon to fill the position. One of you will be our platoon sergeant before this meeting breaks up," Captain Carlson said. Good, Lou thought. We don't need an outsider taking over the platoon. Lou considered both Fry and Fisher qualified for the job, at least in terms of time in the field and the way he heard they handled men. He was sure it would be one of them. Lou was just as sure that he would not be considered for the job. For that he was grateful.

"Sergeant Fry. Do you want the position?"

"No, Sir."

"Sergeant Fry. Of the other men present, who would you recommend for the job?"

Bobby looked around at the men in the group. It was easy to see how uncomfortable he felt. "I know this will seem strange to you, Sir, but I'd pick Sergeant Merrins." Lou looked up, smiling, shaking his head. Good old Bobby. Friends to the end. Captain Carlson smiled at the suggestion also.

"Sergeant Fisher. Do you want to be our platoon sergeant?"

"No, Sir."

"Sergeant Fisher. Of the other men present, who would you recommend for the job?"

"Sergeant Merrins, Sir." Suddenly Lou got interested in the proceedings. *Why me?* and *Fuck this* were the two dominant thoughts going through his head at that moment.

"Sergeant Kirby. Are you interested in becoming our platoon sergeant?"

"No, Sir."

"Sergeant Kirby. Of the other men present, who would you recommend for the job?"

Kirby looked at Lou with a big shit eating grin on his face. "Sergeant Merrins, Sir."

"Sergeant Baskin. Are you interested in becoming our platoon sergeant?"

"Yes, Sir. I'd give my left ball to be platoon sergeant, but I'm not qualified and I know it. Maybe someday, but right now I couldn't handle the job. The Professor can. I vote for him."

"The Professor?"

"Yes, Sir. Sergeant Merrins, Sir. We call him the Professor," Baskin replied.

"Well, Sergeant Baskin. I appreciate your honesty. You gentlemen are excused. You can tell the men that Sergeant Merrins is the new platoon sergeant," the captain said.

"Sergeant Merrins will be around to meet with the men later, once Sergeant Heard and I are through talking with him."

Lou sat there dazed as the guys gathered around and offered their congratulations. Then they were all gone, leaving Lou sitting there in the presence of Sgt. Heard and Captain Carlson. He lit up another cigarette and leaned back. I'm having a nightmare. A fucking nightmare.

"Sergeant Merrins. Are you interested in becoming First Platoon Sergeant?" the captain's voice asked softly.

"No, Sir," Lou replied honestly.

"Until you stepped off that helicopter, it was Sergeant Fry's platoon. That was Sgt. Wilson's recommendation and my decision, even though we knew Sgt. Fry would not want the job. Sgt. Fry is a good man and with a lot of help would do a good job. He would have taken the job, because, like you, he wouldn't have had a real choice. This is my company. What I say goes. You understand that, Sergeant?"

"Yes, Sir," Lou replied quietly.

"Your name had come up in past conversations with Sergeant Wilson. The man has a great deal of respect for your abilities. I have also heard the nickname, the Professor, although I never put the two names together. When Sergeant Wilson saw you get off the helicopter, he came to me and strongly recommended you for the job. Said my problems were solved. But he was leaving and I do not usually change my mind. If Sergeant Fry had wanted the job, it would have been his. If the other men had recommended Sergeant Fry, it would have been his. If none of the other men had wanted the job, but couldn't decide who was most qualified, it would have been Sergeant Fry's job. If one of the other men wanted the job and the others agreed, it still would have been Sergeant Fry's job. This is not a democracy. It's the Army. I'm glad Sergeant Kirby thought he was voting, but there was no vote. Only a decision to be made. My decision," Captain Carlson continued.

"The only possible way I could have changed my mind occurred. I wasn't prepared for it, but I am smart enough to listen to what was said. For whatever reason, every one of the men feels you're most qualified for the job. I am not entirely comfortable with that decision. I don't know you except for the short conversation we had back at battalion administration. I was impressed by our conversation. It was my judgment that you were probably one hell of a clerk. I respect my men. The squad leaders of First Platoon are the best group of young NCOs I have ever had together in one platoon. With Sgt. Wilson leading them, the First Platoon is the anchor for the company. The other platoons are good, but it became clear to me early on that First Platoon was best. Now it's yours. Can you deal with that, Sergeant?"

"Yes, Sir," Lou replied.

"Good," the captain replied. The deal was done. The cards distributed amongst the players. Lou was not particularly happy with the cards he had been dealt. That didn't matter.

He was in the game. If you couldn't afford the bet or weren't willing to face defeat, you had no right sitting in on the game, especially this game. He glanced at his watch. It was already 1700 hours. Six hours ago he sat at a desk looking forward to lunch. An REMF. Now he was a platoon sergeant in one of the premier fighting forces in the world. At that moment he was as proud as he ever would be. To Lou there could be no higher distinction. For an infantryman, a grunt, this was the ultimate recognition. The captain was wrong about there not having been an election. It was not what he had been looking for, but an election had been held, and Lou had won. Without casting a vote, without making any promises, without asking for the job, he had been elected.

Lou spent the next hour being briefed by First Sergeant Heard and Captain Carlson. Lou had so many questions, but the amount of time was limited. He left the meeting with more questions in his head than at the start of the meeting. The meeting ended with the captain saying, "Sergeant Merrins. Take command of your platoon." There was a certain finality to that statement. Fantasy time was over; real time began now.

Lou headed over to find the platoon. He crossed the landing zone, heading in the direction Sergeant Heard had indicated. Once out of their sight, Lou again sat on the ground, leaning up against his rucksack. All around him he could hear the banter of the men as the company prepared for the coming night. Luckily, but also logically, First Platoon would be on perimeter tonight. Other than having a couple of listening posts out, the platoon would spend the night on top of the hill. For that Lou was grateful.

Lou lit a cigarette and closed his eyes in relaxation. Once he started the job, there would be little rest. Might as well enjoy a moment's peace.

"What you doing there, Troop?" a voice asked.

"Relaxing," Lou replied.

"You the FNG I saw get off the copter?" the man asked. Lou knew what the initials FNG stood for, Fucking New Guy. He had never liked that abbreviation and thought it was only used in the rear. It had not been used in the field prior to his departure and he hoped it had not become part of the company's vocabulary. He did not appreciate the term being used to describe him. From the small, black bar pinned on the man's lapel, Lou knew the lieutenant



was one of the platoon leaders. Since he didn't know the man, he knew it must be Second Lieutenant Kelp, the new Third Platoon leader.

"Yes, Sir," Lou answered.

"What platoon you been placed in?" he asked.

"First Platoon, Sir."

"Well, they're over there. I strongly recommend you get off your ass and get over there. Someone's probably looking for you right now," the lieutenant said. *Unfriendly fucker*, Lou thought.

Lieutenant Jeff Kelp was not held in particularly high esteem within the company. Lou knew this from having talked to the men in his platoon who passed through battalion admin. Lou was willing to give the man the benefit of the doubt. Still, it was not an auspicious beginning to their relationship. In the past, Lou would have just not paid any attention to the lieutenant's handling of the situation. Enlisted men were always exposed to the worst aspects of an officer's behavior. Now that he was in charge of First Platoon, it would be hard to accept the lieutenant's attitude. He did not want the men in his platoon addressed in such a manner. Without an officer present to run the platoon, part of Lou's job would be to ensure that the officers of the company did not feel they had any rights in handling his men. They may be officers and Gods within their platoons, but they would not be allowed any say in the functioning of the First Platoon.

Lou got to his feet, gathered up his equipment under the watchful eyes of Lt. Kelp, and again went in search of his platoon.

"Hey Lou, over here."

Lou located the source of the voice. It was Bobby Fry waving him over to the group of squad leaders. "We've been waiting for you," Bobby said smiling. Lou joined the group in the woods. They sat in a tight circle.

"You take the job?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah," Lou said. "Captain Carlson didn't give me any choice in the matter. I want to thank all you assholes for supporting me today. Why didn't you just shoot me when I got off the copter? It wouldn't have been any worse than the shit you pulled on me in that meeting."

"I didn't see you get of the helicopter," Dan Kirby said, "or I may have shot you." This got a laugh from the group.

"How you feeling?" Fred Baskin asked.

"Tired," Lou answered.

"No. I mean about taking the job. What's it feel like?"

"Don't know, haven't done anything yet," Lou said. "It's going to get dark soon, and there is a lot to do, so let's get started. I want to make an inspection of the platoon's positions before the sun sets. We have a lot to talk about over the next few days. I will need all the help you guys can give me. I don't know most of the men in the platoon other than by their personnel records. I met most of them as they passed through battalion headquarters, which is good in some ways and bad in others. To most of them, I'm just the company clerk. It will seem strange to them that I am now the platoon sergeant. Shit, it seems strange to me." They were all paying attention to him, nodding their heads in response to his statements. It was strange having these men, his friends, and in many ways, men of superior skills and experience, pay that close attention to what he was saying.

"About all we have time to do this evening, is to do a walk through, but I need your cooperation as we do this. It's important to set the tone for my first meeting with the men. When we meet like this you can address me any way you see fit, but when we are around the men, you are to address me by rank. I will do the same thing for you. I don't want the men to think of me as their friend or their equal. As friends you are my equal, but because you are a group of stupid motherfuckers, I am now also your platoon sergeant. In front of the other men that is the way things are to be handled. Now get back to your squads and I'll be along shortly. Bobby you stay here with me for a moment."

After the other men had left, Lou lit up a cigarette and leaned back against his rucksack. "You could have had the platoon if you wanted it," Lou said addressing Bobby.

"Yeah. I know. Sgt. Wilson had already told me. Listen Lou, I'm having trouble running a squad. There is no way I'm ready to handle a platoon. I would have done it, if that were necessary, but when you showed up it was no longer necessary. All the guys who are left from the original platoon will accept you without hesitation. You know your shit. Hell, we always

thought you were better than Lieutenant Burroughs. Knew more about all the technical shit, like operating the radios, reading maps, and calling in mortars and shit. I'm good at what I do, but you will be better for the platoon. We'll all back you one hundred percent. You won't have to worry about that."

"I ain't worried about that Bobby. It's just that I've been away for a while. It'll take a while to get oriented. I don't know some of the simplest things, like do I have a radio operator and if I do, where the fuck is he," Lou said. Bobby smiled.

"PFC Hailey is your radio operator. I have him working on a position for you and him. I'll take you to him," Bobby said. "Anything else?"

"Yeah. Just one other thing. As of now you are second in command within the platoon. When I'm not around, you are responsible for seeing that things get done. If I go down, you take over. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Bobby answered immediately.

Bobby led Lou over to where they could see PFC Hailey and then left to join his squad. Lou walked over to where Hailey was digging a foxhole.

"Private Hailey, I am Sergeant Merrins, grab your radio and follow me," Lou said. He put his rucksack down and turned toward the perimeter. "Where is the first position on the right?" he asked.

"Hell, I don't know," PFC Hailey replied nervously.

"Well, which squad is located on the right?" Lou asked.

"I don't know," PFC Hailey replied.

Lou turned and looked at the man. "How long you been a radio operator, Hailey?"

"Only about two weeks."

"Do you know how to operate that thing?" Lou asked pointing to the radio.

"Yes, Sergeant. I have received advanced training on it," Hailey replied.

"Well, it's a good thing you know something. I don't know how you and Sgt. Wilson operated. If you want to be my radio operator, I expect you to know the answers to the questions I just asked in the future. If I tell you to go get Sergeant Fry for me, I expect you to

know where the hell his position is located. If we are being attacked and I need to move the squad on the right back, you sure as hell better be able to find them," Lou said.

Lou headed in the direction Sgt. Fry had taken. Just over the crest of the hill he spotted a foxhole with two men sitting next to it. One man was eating while the other man was cleaning his rifle. The man who was eating sat facing outward from the perimeter, his rifle resting across his legs. As they approached, the man cleaning his rifle looked up. A smile appeared on his face. "Sergeant Merrins. How you doing? I heard you were back," Spec Four "Hare" Harris said. He held out his hand, and Lou shook it. "This is Boyd," he said, indicating the man who was eating.

"Good to see you again," Lou said. "How you enjoying your stay with Alpha Company?" Lou had met David Boyd when he had come through battalion headquarters. The man was from somewhere in Texas, fresh out of jump school when assigned to the 173rd. He had only been with the company about two weeks. Lou could see that he appeared tired and knew he must still be adjusting to the harsh life of the field. Lou could sympathize with that. It was something he was about to go through again.

"Oh, Alpha Company is fine. It's just the neighborhood they put me in that I object to," PFC Boyd said, smiling. Good, Lou thought. Just the way he had responded told Lou a lot. The man seemed in good spirits. He was a white southerner who was assigned to the same foxhole as an inner city Negro, but he seemed comfortable making a joke of it. From the Hare's reaction, Lou could tell he was not insulted by the answer, which meant he accepted PFC Boyd as a friend. In the original squad, the Hare had been teamed with PFC Wills, then for a while with Lou. Wills had been killed back in December. It was good to see that the Hare had a new friend. Lou was also glad to see that a Negro and a white man had been paired together. Unlike the rear area, where an unofficial form of segregation seemed to be occurring, such things could not be allowed in the field. In the past it had not happened, and Lou had no intention of letting it occur within his platoon. The other thing Lou liked was that a new man was teamed with one of the platoon's veterans. Lou spent time asking the two men a series of questions. Who was on their right? Who was on the left? Where were their fields of fire?

Claymores, listening posts, password and counter sign? Lou was happy with the replies he received and let the men know it.

At the next position, he found Sgt. Fry. From there on he was accompanied by one of the squad leaders at all times while continuing his rounds. In the course of his inspection, he got to see all the men left in the platoon from the original company. It brought him both a lot of joy and a lot of pain. There were so few of them left. They all greeted him enthusiastically, which made Lou feel good. His nervousness about being accepted proved to be unwarranted. Just as Sgt. Fry had said, the veterans in the platoon seemed to accept his appointment without hesitation. Lou was pleased with inspection. Just like Captain Carlson had said, the squad leaders knew their stuff, and it was reflected in the way the men in the platoon operated.

After inspecting all the foxholes, Lou headed back to his position with PFC Hailey in tow. He suddenly remembered a question he had concerning the listening post put out by Fourth Squad. He sent PFC Hailey ahead while making a beeline for Sgt. Fisher's position. Approaching from the rear, Lou heard voices raised in a heated argument. Lou was behind some bushes, out of sight. Sgt. Fisher's voice was very distinctive and he recognized it immediately. It took Lou a minute to place the other two voices. One belonged to PFC Wilburn and the other to Spec Four Clay.

Fisher said, "Well, he's now the platoon sergeant, and there is nothing to do but live with it."

"But you got more experience. Little fucker's nothing but a company clerk. He got it because he's white, and you didn't because you ain't," said Wilburn.

Fisher's voice raised a touch: "Bullshit. I told you. We voted on it. Pro knows his shit and will take care of the platoon better than I could. I've only handled the squad for the past two months, and I don't know all that radio shit. I want you to just keep your mouth shut and not cause any problems. Got that?"

"Yes Sergeant."

There was silence for several seconds. Lou felt stupid standing there listening. It had happened by accident, but it would be awkward if he were caught. About to leave, he heard the conversation continue.

"Fucking Uncle Tom. That's what he is. Let's them white officers push him around and don't do nothing. Let's some honky take over his job and don't do nothing," Wilburn said.

Then Clay spoke up, "Take it easy, Bro. You don't know shit and always getting hot and bothered about things. Sergeant Fisher be a good man and a hell of a soldier, but he not Sgt. Wilson. He going to become a lifer motherfucker, so he has plenty of time to become the man."

"Fuck that. Don't need no white boy company clerk becoming platoon leader. Should do the same thing those guys did with that Captain Sanford."

"That's different man. Sanford don't know shit. Pro different, Blood. The Hare says the man good. Knows shit. Moves through the jungle like Daniel Boone. Teaches you the right way to do shit. Don't hassle nobody," Clay said.

"Well he give me shit and I'll zap the little turd." Wilburn was unfazed it seemed.

"Don't talk like that man. Lou one of us. You think about doing some shit and you get hurt bad. He know you talking like this, he come in the night and slit your fucking throat. Man's a ghost at night. If you try to hurt the man, you won't live to tell about it. If Sergeant Fisher don't kill you, I will. The man is blood. Now shut your mouth and let me enjoy a smoke. Be dark soon."

Lou quietly backed out of his position. He did not want the men to know their conversation had been overheard. It was good to have both Sergeant Fisher's and Spec Four Clay's support. It was disturbing to hear PFC Wilburn discussing killing him if he wasn't happy with the way Lou performed his job. At some point in the future, it would be wise to talk to the man about his outlook on life.

It was almost dark by the time he got back to his position. Lou quickly began heating water for one of his LRRP meals. PFC Hailey picked up his entrenching tool and began digging the foxhole deeper. Lou ate quickly and was done just as the sun was setting. He got up and walked over to the foxhole. "Do a radio check with the CO and battalion communications," Lou said jumping down into the foxhole. It was deep and had sandbags around the top. A good defensive position if anything happened.

"We've got good contact with the CO and Battalion, Sarge," Hailey said.

"Good. Now let's get your duties straight. You are my communications expert. I expect you to keep up with all the communication codes and frequencies, and I also expect you to be able to pass along information within the platoon. If I need to see somebody, I expect you to be able to find them for me. Most of the time, where I go, you go. If I send you to do something, the radio remains with me. If I have to leave the platoon for a meeting with the old man, you find Sgt. Fry and stay with him. He is in charge when I'm not around. You'll be present when I talk to the squad leaders, but you are not invited to join in those conversations and you will not repeat anything said in those conversations. If I ask you to leave me alone with someone so I can talk with them in private, try to find a place far enough away you can't overhear, but within sight. If need be, turn up the radio so the noise drowns out the sound of our conversation. Anything you overhear is to be considered confidential. You break that confidence and you are out of here. You got that?" Lou asked

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Isn't there supposed to be another radio within the platoon?" Lou asked.

"Sgt. Wilson wanted another one, but the company radioman said we were only authorized to have one because the platoon doesn't have a platoon leader."

"Okay," Lou replied. It was something he would have to take care of in the morning.

"We'll split radio watch. Which watch do you prefer, first or second?" Lou asked.

"Second watch," PFC Hailey replied.

"Smart man," Lou replied. There was a definite advantage to pulling second watch. "We will pull watches in the same sequence every night. That way both the company and battalion yahoos will know who to expect when they give us a ring. There will also be no question as to who is responsible if a communications check gets missed." This brought a smile from PFC Hailey. "You got any questions?"

"No, Sarge," Hailey replied.

"Bullshit. Ask them," Lou said. If the man really didn't have any questions, Lou would get rid of him. Only a complete moron wouldn't have a lot of questions in a new situation like this. If the man was too stupid to ask questions or didn't have the balls to ask, he would be of no use to Louis.

"How do I address you?"

"Around others I am always Sergeant Merrins. Since we'll share the same position at night, you can address me anyway you feel comfortable. My friends call me Lou."

"What about my other duties?"

"What other duties?" Lou asked.

"Like digging a foxhole or setting up your shelter for the night."

"You are my radio man," Lou replied. "Not my mother or my servant. I'll do my half of the work on the foxhole whenever possible. I fix my own meals and hump my own equipment. If you are not happy with the way I pull my weight, say so. If I say something that you find insulting, say so. I am the platoon sergeant, and until we get an officer, the platoon leader also. Sometimes I won't be available to help you dig in, but if I can't help one night, I'll make up for it another night."

"Okay," Hailey replied. "I'm sorry I couldn't answer your questions earlier today. Sgt. Wilson just handled everything himself. Didn't expect me to know anything, just hump the radio for him and take care of preparing our position for the night. He'd ask me to prepare his evening meal for him usually. No big thing, just different from what you say."

The night was coming on quickly now. Lou lit up a cigarette. PFC Hailey did too. They sat together quietly, and by time they were done smoking, it was night. "I'll pull watch until 2300 hours," Lou whispered. "It's now 2046 hours." PFC Hailey crawled over to where he had stretched out his poncho for protection and disappeared under it.

Lou leaned back against his rucksack and got comfortable. Sleep was the last thing on his mind. He placed the radio on his left side with the volume turned down way low. In the silence of the night it would be easy to hear any change in the static it emitted, which would indicate a message being transmitted. His rifle lay across his lap. There was a clip in the magazine port but no round in the chamber. Since his position was located inside the perimeter he would have plenty of time to jack a round in the chamber if anything happened. There were three platoons occupying positions around the perimeter tonight, with the weapons section and company headquarters section located within the perimeter. Everyone



was maintaining silence. The only sounds were those coming from the jungle that surrounded the company. It was a big change from the rear.

Mosquitoes began buzzing around his ears, and Lou could feel them as they began to feed on him. He smiled. In the rear, they sprayed the area on a regular basis to eliminate the mosquitoes. It was a rude awakening to have them begin a feeding frenzy with him as the main course. Lou reached into his rucksack and got out the mosquito repellent. He spread some on his hands and face. He took the towel from around his neck and placed it over his head, covering his neck and face with it. *Home, home on the range*, his mind sang. He smiled to nobody in the night.

Best not to wish too hard, because God just might grant it. It was an old saying his mother had used. It certainly applied to Lou's day. After trying for so long to get back to the field, he now had his wish. To have been placed in charge of the First Platoon, which was leaderless, was certainly more than he had ever asked for.

Luckily, it was an uneventful night. Lou managed to get four hours of good sleep during the night. He was awoken for the second time at 0500 hours. PFC Hailey did not bother crawling back to his poncho to get another thirty minutes of sleep. They were both wide awake when the sun came up. Lou quickly packed his gear away and got his rucksack ready to move out. Lou sent PFC Hailey off to find Sgt. Fry, while he went in search of the company commander. He found him surrounded by the company's three other officers and First Sergeant Heard. Lou approached the group with some trepidation.

"Sergeant Merrins. Good to see you," Captain Carlson said. "Let me introduce you to everyone. You already met First Sergeant Heard. This is Lieutenant Gregory Holmes, Second Platoon Leader; Lieutenant Jeff Kelp, Third Platoon Leader; and Lieutenant Randy Albert, Fourth Platoon Leader." Lou shook each of their hands as they were introduced. He knew both Lieutenants Holmes and Albert. They had both shipped over with the company and had both been promoted to First Lieutenant during their tours. Lieutenant Kelp shook his hand with a suspicious look on his face. He evidently recognized Lou from the day before.

"Gentlemen, Sergeant Merrins is the new Platoon Sergeant for First Platoon. Until we get a replacement for Lieutenant Burroughs, I have asked Sergeant Merrins to attend our daily

briefings. In our meetings he will be treated as an equal, as was Sergeant Wilson. He will report directly to me and will have sole responsibility for First Platoon. During combat, he will function as Platoon Leader. Any questions?" There were none.

The briefing he heard covered subjects very near and dear to Lou's heart. Resupply, marching order, formation for deployment, intelligence reports. Everything was gone over quickly and thoroughly. Everyone worked on updating their maps. Lou was given one that had already been filled out for him. It covered the area where the company was operating and where it was going. They discussed how long it should take to get there. The maps contained marks signifying preexisting points for artillery so that the artillerymen supporting the company would have points of reference for fire missions. There were three such points along the company's proposed route for the day.

Lou was impressed with Captain Carlson's handling of the briefing. A tremendous amount of information was covered in just about fifteen minutes. After finishing he asked if there were any questions. Lou asked about getting another radio for the platoon. The captain promised to have one sent out with the company's resupply that evening. Then he told the men the company would be heading out in thirty minutes. Second Platoon would lead. First Platoon would bring up the rear today.

Lou walked over to Sgt. Fry's position. He sent PFC Hailey out to collect the other squad leaders. Sgt. Fry and Lou returned to his position. Once all the squad leaders were present, Lou quickly briefed them on those things they needed to know. His own presentation was made without notes, but included everything the squad leaders needed to know. By the time he was done, only ten minutes remained before the company was due to move out. After the others had returned to their squads, Lou joined in and helped PFC Hailey finish filling in their foxhole. Ten minutes later the Second Platoon took off down the mountain, beginning the day's patrol. Five minutes after that First Platoon entered the jungle.

It was four hours since leaving the overnight position, and Lou was exhausted. The company was making good time through the jungle. It was amazing when Lou compared it to the way the company had moved when first deployed. The men were all used to the heat and workload. Even though they carried a significant amount of extra weight, compared to Lou

they seemed unaffected by the morning's work. Everyone was covered by sweat, but Lou could tell by the way they moved that physically they felt good. On the other hand, he was exhausted. His head was pounding from a killer headache, and his legs were rubbery. Lou was just thankful that he had done so much physical training prior to being sent to the field.

The company was stopped while Third Platoon patrolled a valley off to the north. They would be gone for about an hour, and the men had arranged themselves into a defensive position of sorts. Lou had sent three two-man teams out as listening posts for the platoon. The machine guns were set up to cover the company's rear, in case anyone following the company chose to attack from that direction.

Lou found a good spot amongst some trees and put his rucksack down. He had PFC Hailey pass a message along the line for all squad leaders to report to him. He got out some aspirin and chewed on them, following with a couple of good swigs of water. Within five minutes the squad leaders were gathered around him, relaxing on the ground and getting as comfortable as possible. Lou sat there quietly smoking and sipping water until they were all assembled.

"How you making it, Pro," Fisher asked.

"I forgot how tough it is. I'll make it, but I'm glad we didn't have to check out that valley. The Old Man probably knows that. Probably why he chose to send Third Platoon out."

"No," Fry said, "Just SOP. Third Platoon got search today. We're tail because we were point yesterday. Tomorrow we'll be pulling search. Next day we got ambush. Always rotates on a regular basis. Captain feels it gives everyone a break."

"Yeah, just like in the platoon," Sgt. Baskin added. "Today my squad got point, tomorrow Fisher is up, then Fry, then Kirby. We just rotate every day."

"Why?" Lou asked. He knew it was the way the platoon had operated since the beginning of its tour. At the time it seemed like a logical way of doing things, but Lou was not so sure of that anymore. It was one of the things he was thinking about changing. He was anxious for the group to discuss this matter.

"Why not?" Sergeant Fisher asked. "Seems to work fine and is fair to everyone."

"Yeah, but is it the best way for the platoon to operate?" Lou asked the group. None of the men answered. They sat there waiting for the Professor to continue.

"I had an opportunity to talk with Sergeant Wilcox while I was working in the rear. He is in charge of one of the brigade's LRRP teams." Lou knew everyone in the group was familiar with the functioning of the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols. They were the guys that ran small patrol teams out in the bush and gathered intelligence for the brigade. They were held in high esteem by all the infantrymen. "Sergeant Wilcox discussed how a team operates in the bush. A lot of what he said makes sense, and I wonder if some of the things they do wouldn't also apply to the way we operate. There are five men in a team. Each man has a particular function within the group. They are cross-trained so that the group can continue to function if they lose a man or two, but all the men function within their primary role unless something unusual happens. For example, each team has a point man who always pulls point when the team is on the move. That's his job. His specialty. He is the most qualified to do the job and so he always does it. Sergeant Wilcox feels this makes sense. It doesn't make sense to put one of the other guys out on point and waste the talents of the best man for the job."

"Bobby. Who's the best point man in the platoon?"

"You are," Bobby said. This brought a smile to the face of all the men in the group.

"No, excluding me and all the squad leaders?"

"The Hare, with Buddy being a close second," Sgt. Fry answered.

"They always pull point for the platoon?" Lou asked.

"No way," Fisher replied. "It's considered too dangerous to make just one or two guys do it all the time."

"Too dangerous for who? The point man or the platoon?" Lou asked. "Sergeant Wilcox feels a good point man is in less danger out front because he knows what to look for and how to react better than anyone else in the team. He's in more danger in the middle of a team with an inexperienced man at point."

"Let me ask another question. Fred. How many point men has the company lost?"

"None that I can remember. Anyone else remember any?" They all shook their head to indicate no. Maybe the company had just been lucky so far. Lou had pulled point several times during his stay in the field and had actually preferred the position.

"Sgt. Wilcox feels that the team is much safer with a good point man and that to try to rotate that function would only weaken the team. Does the same principle apply to the platoon? Does it apply to the company?" Lou asked.

"I surely have missed your lectures, Professor," Bobby said. The men in the group laughed. "Sounds right to me. I have thought about it before. Lieutenant Kelp put a cherry out on point last week. He didn't last but a couple of hours before the Old Man made him switch. The company was stumbling around in the bush like a drunken sailor. I heard that the lieutenant got his ass chewed out for that. I know I wasn't comfortable with the situation. I feel better when the Hare's out in front."

"You think Hare should pull point for the platoon all the time?" Fisher asked.

"I think maybe him and Buddy can share the position, with one out front and the other as his follow. They could decide how they want to handle it."

"But Buddy's in my squad," Fisher pointed out.

"He'd remain in your squad except when the platoon is pulling point for the company or off on a search patrol. Any shit happens, he can either fight in place or make it back to his squad. If Buddy is such a good point man, he serves your squad better out in front than stuck back in the middle of the platoon."

"Then the Hare operates with my squad when we pull point, right?" Fisher asked.

Lou lit up a cigarette and took a few seconds before answering. Just from his question, Fisher seemed to accept the fact that the concept was a good idea. The conversation was headed in the right direction.

"That brings us to another principle the LRRP teams operate under. They always patrol in the same order when on the move. Point man, back up, team leader, radio man, and then rear guard. Each member of the team knows what is expected of him if the team makes contact. For example, if the point man suddenly comes upon a superior force of enemy, he will try to withdraw without being spotted. If a fire fight is initiated, he will empty a clip of

ammunition into the enemy and head for the rear. The second man, his backup, will provide covering fire until the point man has retreated past his position. He throws a grenade and then retreats behind the point man, while the team leader provides cover. The team continues to withdraw in this manner until they are able to break contact. The fourth man is on the radio bringing in a ride home, or delivering artillery cover for the group. Depending on the situation, the rear guard may have time to set up some claymores. If he does, he sets them off after the rest of his team has passed his position. In a lot of cases it discourages enemy pursuit. By always being in the same marching order, each man knows what is expected of him and how best to accomplish the team's mission. They have a number of such drills they practice. Always with each man focusing on his particular job within the group. They have had a lot of success with it. Maybe we should think of doing the same thing."

"You mean that each squad would always operate in the same order of march?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah," Lou replied. "First Squad would always pull point, with Second Squad as back up."

"I don't like it," Joe said. "Things are going just fine the way they are. Why change?"

"That's a good question," Lou replied. "I'm just throwing some ideas around. I want to know how you feel about them, that's all."

"Pro's got a good point though, you got to admit," Bobby said. "I'm not always sure what I'm supposed to do if the First Squad is pulling point and get hits and how that differs from if we're pulling rear guard. Sometimes the squad is in the middle of the platoon. Do we reinforce the rear or advance, or just lay there until someone tells us what to do?"

"Yeah. I know the feeling," Fred Baskin said.

"In the past, Sergeant Wilson always told us what to do," Fisher said with a touch of anger in his voice.

"I'll tell you what to do, if I'm around. But what if I'm not. What then? Basically what I'm trying to do is to get you to consider what is best for the platoon. These aren't my ideas. I didn't think this up. The LRRPs have a solid reputation. They've proven themselves effective,

and these are some of the things they use to accomplish their missions. I'm not going to try to cram this down your throat. Just think about it."

"Well it might work for a small team, but how would it apply to the platoon?" Joe Fisher asked.

"Let's just say Bobby's squad is pulling point."

"With the Hare and Buddy out front," Bobby piped in.

"Yeah," Lou said smiling. "Anyway, Dan's squad is backup. Bobby's squad initiates contact with a superior force. The Hare and Buddy drop back through the First Squad, which is providing covering fire. If Bobby doesn't think he can hold, he moves his squad back. Meanwhile, Dan's squad has spread out and taken cover. As Bobby's squad moves back through his position, Dan's squad provides covering fire. Then his squad moves back through Third Squad, which has now set up to provide him with covering fire. Each squad knows what to do in that situation. We'll talk it out ahead of time so everyone is prepared."

"Let's take another situation. Bobby's squad makes contact and decides to try to maintain it. Second Squad then moves up, and unless the situation dictates otherwise, they will always tie in on First Squad's right. Third Squad will always try to move to the left and Fourth Squad will move up to provide a reserve along the line, wherever the situation calls for one. They will also continue to provide rear and flank security for the platoon until one of the other platoons move up."

"There are a lot of situations that might occur. It's better for everyone to know in advance how their squad is supposed to react. If the squads keep changing position within the platoon, then each squad must learn to react to each situation depending on where they are operating within the platoon that day. It might get confusing."

Lou was looking primarily at Joe during the course of his discussion. Joe smiled.

"It does make sense. The LRRPs are solid, so it's hard to argue with the way they do things. I like the idea of thinking about what to do in a situation ahead of time. Sometimes we just lie around waiting for someone to tell us what to do instead of reacting to the situation. Sergeant Wilson always seemed to know what to do, but if he had gotten hurt we might have been in a world of shit," Joe said. "Okay, you got my vote."

Lou smiled and didn't say anything as the other members of the group gave their approval to the changes. It was important to him that these men get behind the changes he wanted to initiate. He would be doing them, with or without their okay. Like Captain Carlson said, it wasn't really a voting situation. It was the Army.

"Good," Lou said once the group had settled down. "We might as well get started right now. I want each of you to go back to your squads and let them know what's happening in terms of order of march. When we move out, I want First Squad followed by Second Squad, then Third and Fourth. I'll be between Second and Third Squads for the time being. Once we get a second radio, it will stay with Sergeant Fry. Sergeant Fry will operate as second in command for the platoon. During a march he will normally operate near the end of his squad, between First and Second Squads. Then I'll move back and operate between Third and Fourth squads. When we get settled in this evening, we'll get together again and discuss some other things. I'll also want to talk to the Hare and Buddy this evening. I'd prefer to tell them myself about their new status within the platoon," Lou said. "Joe could you stay for a minute?"

"Sure," Sergeant Fisher said as the other squad leaders headed back to their squads. Once they were out of earshot Sgt. Fisher turned to Lou. "What you need?" he asked.

"Give us some room," Lou said to PFC Hailey who had been sitting nearby during their conversation. After he had moved some distance away, Lou turned to Joe.

"Tell me about Wilburn," he said.

"He's a new kid. Don't know much about him. Quiet. Keeps to himself. Sort of sullen, hard to get to know. I put him with Clay cause Wilburn said he did not want to share a hole with no white boys."

"He a Panther?" Lou asked, referring to the Black Panthers, a radical Negro group that was preaching war with the white man.

"Could be, but Clay don't like him, so I don't know. Clay told me a couple of days ago that Wilburn shouldn't be trusted. Wouldn't say why." Specialist Clay was a panther. That he and Wilburn were not getting along gave Lou cause for concern.

"Thanks Joe," Lou said. "We should be moving soon. You got any problems with your squad being assigned to pull rear guard?"



"You mean, like Niggers to the back of the bus?" Joe asked.

"Sort of."

"No. I would rather be the point squad, but being last has its advantages too. You going to let us pull some drop backs?" he asked.

Lou smiled. "Yeah, if the situation allows for it. Time for you to get back. If we stop again before settling, send PFC Wilburn to me. Otherwise just wait until we set up for the night."

"You going to fuck with him?" Joe asked.

"Just a little. He's new and needs to know the rules. I'm just going to talk to the man."

"Don't bore him to death," Joe said with a smile, as he moved off.

Once Third Platoon returned, the company moved off, and except for some brief stops and starts, it continued to move toward its final destination for the night. There was no contact that day. There hadn't been for several days. Lou would not be surprised if the company didn't get moved from their current area into a more hotly contested area soon. The North Vietnamese Army was still staggering around after getting their ass kicked during the Tet Offensive. They had lost so many men, especially leaders, that they had to all but withdraw from the South. Lou wondered how their leadership was perceived by the enlisted men. They had been led in a general attack throughout the South and had initially achieved success, but then the leaders had chosen to stay and fight. The American and South Vietnamese Armies systematically destroyed them over the next month. The 173rd, with its four battalions spread across the central highlands, had not taken part in any of the major fighting. They had been left in position to interdict the enemy as they tried to move west into Cambodia or back north. The hunting had been good, as disorganized groups made their way back. Now most of the enemy had moved out of the area. Lou wondered if maybe the war would end soon. If not, it would be a long time before the enemy could operate as effectively as in the past. Replacing experienced officers and men was difficult in any army.

The company moved quickly into its overnight position at about 1300 hours. It had been on the move for six hours during the coolest part of the day. The men in the platoon seemed relatively fresh when they reached the top of the hill they would call home for the

night. Lou staggered into the perimeter. He was hot and tired. His legs were shaking, and his head was aching. He had gotten some aspirin out of the rucksack at the last brief stop and chewed on them. They were a parting gift from Specialist Croner, along with some medicine to control diarrhea.

As the platoon reached the top of the hill, Captain Carlson and First Sergeant Heard were there waiting for him. The captain gave orders for which sector of the perimeter Lou's platoon would cover for the night. They then moved off, leaving Lou with the task of organizing the platoon. Lou had the squad leaders spread their men out along the crest of the hill and then took them on a tour of their sector of the proposed perimeter.

The captain's instructions went something like, "I want your platoon to dig in from that tree over there, to that group of rocks over there. Third Platoon will be on your right, Second Platoon on your left. I'll be checking positions in one hour." Other than that, no other instructions. It gave Lou a lot of leeway in how he positioned the platoon. It would be responsible for covering one third of the company's perimeter. Fourth Platoon would not be digging in because they would be pulling ambush. Lou and his squad leaders moved to the far right of the platoon's position.

Facing downhill, Lou said, "Sergeant Fry. Your squad will always occupy the far right position with Second Squad on your left. You will need to find out where the next platoon's last position is located and tie in with them. Then Second, Third and Fourth Squads. Joe you will always tie in with the other platoon's last position on the left."

Lou took off again and walked along the crest of the hill, observing the cover, the way the land lay, the slope of the land leading up to the top. Once the whole area had been explored, Lou walked back to the approximate center of the platoon's position. By pointing, he gave the squad leaders instructions for what areas their squads would be responsible for covering and told them approximately how far down the hill he wanted the positions to be located.

"Any questions?" Lou asked.

"Lou, exactly where do you want each position?" Bobby asked.

"What?"

"Well, Sergeant Wilson always said exactly where each position was supposed to be."

"Bobby, you do know what constitutes a good position, don't you?" Lou asked.

"Well yeah."

"And you do know what area you're responsible for?"

"Yeah."

"So get on with it. You need to decide how best to deploy your men. I'll be available if you have questions. Hell, your men have to defend their foxholes. Let them help pick out the positions. I'll give all of you ten minutes to get the positions selected and then I'll begin walking the perimeter on Bobby's end of the line."

The squad leaders quickly moved out, gathering up their men and heading to their respective areas. Lou wondered if he were doing the right thing. It would almost be easier just to assign each position, as Sergeant Wilson had always done, but Lou wanted to accomplish several things with the squad leaders. He wanted them to think for themselves. Picking out good defensive positions was an art, and Lou wanted his squad leaders to develop that skill. By assigning an area instead of positions, each squad leader needed to coordinate his efforts with the squad leader on either side. This would allow them to begin functioning as a team. Instead of just being allowed to focus on their own squad, they now had to concern themselves with how the other squads were functioning. By being required to make decisions, their own men could see how they accepted responsibility, and it put them in more of a leadership role within the platoon.

Lou did not want to be the same man Sergeant Wilson had been. He loved and admired the man and his abilities, but they were different people. Sergeant Wilson was used to telling the men everything he wanted done. Within a squad, this worked well and basically defined how a squad leader should function. When he took over the platoon, Sgt. Wilson had continued to operate in the same manner. It seemed as if he needed to control everything.

Lou wanted to use the experience of the squad leaders. He had no intention of trying to dictate how their squads would operate. It was important to let them know his expectations, but how they went about meeting them would be up to each man. They would have to learn to shoulder more responsibility than they had in the past. Each would be allowed to develop his

own leadership style. They all needed to learn how to function as a member of the team while also learning how to function independently. By the time he left the platoon, ideally each squad leader would be capable of taking over Lou's position. If there was ever a time in the future that Captain Carlson asked who wanted to be platoon sergeant, they would all be qualified and want the job.

After the designated period, Lou and PFC Hailey started their tour of the line. It came as no surprise to Lou that the squad leaders had done an excellent job of selecting defensive sites. Sergeant Wilson was good at reading the terrain and making decisions about how to place his men. The squad leaders had learned their lessons well.

There was only one position in Second Squad that Lou had serious questions about. It sat just a little too far down the hill from the other positions on either side. Sergeant Kirby presented a reasonable explanation for selecting the position. Moving the position further back would leave an area that men in the foxhole could not cover with rifle fire and could not see into. He had Lou lay on the ground to get the perspective the men in the foxhole would have while peering down the hill in the dark.

"Okay," Lou said. "I can see the problem with the dead area, but what about the fact that your men are liable to get shot from those two positions located further up the hill? Will they be able to overlap their fields of fire without jeopardizing your men? Can they put their claymores out where they will be most effective without worrying about your men? What happens if the captain has to call in artillery in the middle of the night? Can you men pull safely up the hill without exposing themselves?"

Lou and Sergeant Kirby walked down the hill a short ways and stared up at the proposed position. The men Sergeant Kirby had assigned to the position tagged along. They all stared up the hill.

"Suggestions?" Lou asked.

"Sarge, maybe our position isn't too far forward, maybe the other two are just too far back," Spec Four Willis said.

"Yeah," PFC Andy Higgins said. "Any further back and Charlie can get in here and lob grenades at us. Also get enough guys together to rush our position before we know they here."

Lou looked up the hill and could see that none of the other positions had a view down into the area where the men were standing. All four men were invisible to the men on the perimeter just twenty yards away. "What you think, Sergeant Kirby?" Lou asked.

"I think Willis is right, Sarge. I can move each of the other two positions forward about five yards so Jim and Andy aren't hanging out quite so far, and the new positions can then help cover this area. It shouldn't affect the positions on the either side of them too drastically. That position belongs to Bobby's squad. I don't think he'll mind moving it," Sgt. Kirby replied.

"Okay, you get together with Sergeant Fry and make the necessary changes," Lou said with special emphasis on the word Sergeant. From the look on Kirby's face, Lou could see that he got the message. Lou didn't want the men to hear his squad leaders refer to each other by first names. It was important that the men maintain rank distinction between squads. If anything happened to Sergeant Kirby, Sergeant Fry might have to take over control of the squad at the worst possible time. Lou did not want the men in Kirby's squad thinking of Sergeant Fry as "Bobby" if that need arose. They would have to accept Sergeant Fry's authority immediately, without question or delay. Their lives might depend on it.

It had taken Lou a half hour getting the platoon settled. He and Hailey moved back up the hill to find a position for them for the night. Because the company was due to get resupplied, the battalion commander had chosen a hill that had a nice opening for landing helicopters. Some of the platoon's positions were in the wood line, while some had relatively open land in front of them. Lou chose a position located just inside the tree line, about twenty feet in back of one of Sergeant Kirby's positions.

"You think you can find my squad leaders if I need them?" he asked PFC Hailey.

"Sure. I never went around with Sgt. Wilson before. Having the squads always take the same positions on the line will help a lot. You do that to make my life easy?" Hailey asked.

"No," Lou replied, "To make my life easy. We'll put in a position here. Later I want you to stroll around and locate each position starting from here. Imagine trying to find them in the dark, which is something that we just might have to do. Make sure you think about cover when you do that. We don't want to expose ourselves to rifle fire unless absolutely necessary."

Just then he spotted First Sergeant Heard moving toward them followed by Captain Carlson, and Lieutenants Holmes and Kelp.

"You ready to have the platoon's positions inspected?" the captain asked.

"Yes, Sir." Lou replied. He turned and headed off toward First Squad's furthest position. Lou was very nervous. Not only had he never been responsible for laying out positions before, he had no idea of Captain Carlson's expectations. Having two of the other platoon leaders along did not make things easier. Lou had warned his squad leaders to keep an eye out for him and to report to him when he arrived with the captain. Before he even reached a point from which he could see the first position, Bobby appeared.

"Sergeant Fry. Show the captain your positions."

"Yes, Sergeant. This way, Sir," Bobby said turning and leading the group to the first position. At the first position Spec Four Harris and PFC Boyd stopped digging and stood up. Captain Carlson stepped down into the hole that would become their foxhole and sat on the back edge of the hole. From there he began asking the questions Captain Pickett used to ask the men. Who is on the position on the right? What weapons do they have? Where are your fields of fire? Where are you placing your claymores? The inspection was quite thorough, and Bobby's men handled it with ease. The group moved on to the next position and then the next. At the fourth position, Sergeant Kirby took over from Sergeant Fry. As the captain began inspecting Kirby's first position, Sergeant Fry looked over at Lou. Lou gave him a discreet thumbs up signal, signifying a job well done.

The captain was curious about the location of Sergeant Kirby's first position. It sat out in front of the other positions, although not as dramatically now that the positions on either side had been adjusted. When the captain suggested that the position be moved back a little, Sergeant Kirby defended his choice, even offering to show the captain how the position would be viewed from below. Lou was surprised when Captain Carlson accepted the offer and the group moved down the hill. After viewing the problem from that perspective, the captain congratulated Sergeant Kirby on his decision. Rather than just accepting the compliment, Sergeant Kirby explained how it was actually Spec Four Willis who had come up with a solution for their problem.

The inspection of the platoon's positions lasted almost forty-five minutes. It was a lot more thorough than Lou had suspected it would be. After it was over, the captain led the group back up the hill to where the company command center was located. There Lieutenant Albert met up with them. They gathered around the captain, sitting on the ground.

"Sergeant Merrins. I want to congratulate you on the job you did setting up you platoon's positions. If I didn't know better, I would think you have been doing it for months," the captain said.

"Thank you, Sir," Lou replied. "I really didn't have much to do with it. The squad leaders were the ones who chose the positions. Sergeant Wilson did a good job of teaching them how."

"Just being smart enough to utilize their skills deserves recognition. Those squad leaders you have did a good job during the inspection. I could tell they had a lot of pride in the job they had done. In the past, only Sergeant Wilson would handle the inspection. It felt good talking to the men for a change. It was nice of Sergeant Kirby to give credit to Specialist Wilton," the captain said.

"That's Specialist Willis," the First Sergeant corrected before Louis could. Lou felt good that the First Sergeant knew his man's name.

"Yes, sorry. Specialist Willis. Kirby could have just taken the credit, but he didn't. I like that in a man. Anyway Sergeant Merrins, I don't care how you accomplished it. The perimeter was well put together. I spent a lot more time covering your area than I normally will. I just don't have the time. Most of the time it's either just me or First Sergeant Heard making the rounds. Although I have been thinking about turning those duties over to Lieutenant's Holmes and Albert. Don't be surprised if they show up sometime."

"No, Sir," Lou replied. The captain moved on to other subjects. The company was receiving its normal three-day supply that afternoon, and arrangements were made for work details to unload the material and distribute amongst the company. The company would be receiving its normal cooked meal from the rear area that day. The food was flown out in thermal canisters to keep it hot and was served by assistant cooks from the battalion mess. Beer and soda were also served.

Twenty minutes later, Lou made his way back to the platoon area. He wasn't surprised to see his squad leaders there waiting for him. They were anxious to know how the platoon had done, and Lou knew it. He was tempted to jerk them around a little first, since less than twenty-four hours ago they had conspired to get him appointed as platoon sergeant, but he could sense they were too eager to wait.

"Congratulations guys, the captain was impressed and passes along his compliments. You did a great job." All their faces lit up in big smiles. They had every right to be proud of the job they had done. Lou quickly organized the work parties for the resupply. He told the squad leaders to pass along the captain's comments to the men. They left for their squads. Sergeant Fisher asked, "Now?" Lou shook his head to the affirmative.

PFC Hailey had a good start to digging the foxhole he and Lou would use for cover that night if necessary. Lou told him to take a break. He put his rifle down against the closest tree and took his entrenching tool off his rucksack. Within minutes Lou was working up a sweat, digging into the soft earth. The digging was slowed by all the roots in the ground. The entrenching tool cut through them, but some of the larger ones put up a real battle.

"You wanted to see me?" PFC Wilburn asked.

"Yeah," Lou replied not bothering to look up from the work he was doing. "Have a seat. Private Hailey."

"Yes, Sarge?"

"Take a stroll," Lou said. He watched PFC Hailey move off toward one of the platoon's positions. Hailey had left the radio close to the foxhole with the volume turned up. Lou looked over at PFC Wilburn. The first thing he noticed was that he was unarmed.

"They give you a rifle?" Lou asked.

"Yes, Sergeant Merrins," Wilburn answered.

"Where is it?"

"Back at the hole. Clay will watch it for me," Wilburn replied. He had not taken a seat like Lou had asked him to.

"Well, you go back to your position and get your weapon. Then report back to me," Lou said, and turned back to the hole. It was a good ten minutes before PFC Wilburn reported back.



By then the hole was getting deep. Lou was tired and decided to take a break. He was not looking forward to this talk with Wilburn. It was too hot, and he was too tired, and the day had been too long, and all he wanted to do was rest, and now he had to talk to a man he didn't know and didn't particularly like, or want to like, about something he didn't feel like talking about. Great job, Lou thought.

He sat back against the tree where his rifle was leaning and lit a cigarette. PFC Wilburn returned with his weapon slung over his shoulder, the point down. His hand rested on the grip and his finger was near the trigger. All he had to do was raise his hand to bring the front onto target and pull the trigger. Of course, being in the perimeter, the weapon was not loaded. Lou stood up as the PFC approached. Might as well get this talk off to a good start, he thought.

"Let me see that weapon?" Lou said.

PFC whipped the weapon up and slid the sling off his shoulder. He handed the weapon to Sergeant Merrins. Lou was not happy with that particular move. It had, for an instant, bought the weapon to bear on him, and the PFC had not checked the chamber before handing the weapon to him. Even if the weapon was empty, it was traditional to jack open the chamber and inspect it visually before handing it to another person. "It's clean, if that is what you looking for, Sarge," PFC Wilburn said. There was a tone of disdain in his voice.

Lou took the weapon into his hands. His finger automatically reached for the firing switch to check that the safety was on. It wasn't. Not only was the safety not on, but the switch was in position to allow automatic fire. Lou immediately got pissed. Pointing the weapon in the air he released the clip of ammunition from its seat in the weapon, catching it in his hand as it fell. He pulled back on the rifle's handle to open the bolt. Lou was not prepared when the bullet was ejected out the side port and went spinning to the ground.

Lou kept his face impassive as he looked at Wilburn. "You go back to your squad and get Sergeant Fisher and Spec Four Clay and bring them back here." Once again PFC Wilburn turned and left. Lou's knees were shaking and he sat back down. He was beyond pissed.

Within minutes all three men were in front of Lou.

"Sergeant Fisher. I am going to ask you some questions and I don't want any evasions. PFC Wilburn is in your squad, right?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"You are responsible for his conduct, are you not?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Specialist Clay. You share a position with PFC Wilburn, do you not?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"You both outrank the man and have more experience than he does, right?"

"Yes, Sergeant." Clay answered. Lou could tell from their body language that both Sergeant Fisher and Specialist Clay were already uncomfortable with the conversation. They didn't know where it was going, but they knew it was not good. PFC Wilburn on the other hand seemed pleased with how the conversation was going. Lou knew that his pleasure would be short lived.

"Then, if both of you have some responsibility for PFC Wilburn, maybe you can explain a few things to me. PFC Wilburn reported to me without a weapon. Sergeant Fisher. Is it your squad's policy to allow your men to wander around unarmed?"

"No, Sergeant," Fisher answered, looking Lou directly in the eyes.

"Specialist Clay. Did you see PFC Wilburn leave your position without his weapon? And if so, why didn't you say anything to him?"

"Yes, Sergeant. I did see him leave without his weapon and I didn't say anything. No excuse, Sergeant," Clay answered.

"Sergeant Fisher. I sent PFC Wilburn back for his weapon. When he returned, I asked to see it. He handed it to me. It was loaded, with a round in the chamber, the firing switch on automatic. Is this your squad's policy?" Lou asked in a tone of voice that let Sergeant Fisher know exactly how angry he was. Both Sergeant Fisher and Specialist Clay looked over at Wilburn. It was now Wilburn's turn to feel uncomfortable. He looked scared. Lou didn't blame him.

"Goddamn it, Wilburn. You trying to get someone killed? You know better than that," Sergeant Fisher said.

"Hey. I share a foxhole with him. He be more likely to kill me accidentally. What you thinking of boy," Clay said to Wilburn.

"You can't call me boy," Wilburn responded.

"Shut up, all of you," Lou said. "Sergeant Fisher and Specialist Clay. I think you know what would happen to the both of you if PFC Wilburn accidentally shot someone or even himself. You are both experienced enough to know what happens when new men are not closely watched. I am holding both of you responsible for this man's actions in the future. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sergeant," they replied in unison.

"Both of you are dismissed," Lou said. The two men left after taking one more opportunity to glare at PFC Wilburn. Lou did not envy the man when he returned to his squad.

"PFC Wilburn. You have a seat," Lou said pointing to the area he wanted the man. This time Wilburn moved quickly to comply with Lou's request. After replacing the bullet into the clip, Lou released the bolt on the M-16. Once the bolt was safely seated, he slipped the clip back into the magazine, tapping the bottom of the clip to ensure it was secure. He handed the weapon back to Wilburn.

Lou lit up a cigarette and sat up against a tree facing Wilburn. In a way he felt sorry for the man. He had just been humiliated in front of his squad leader and probably his best friend in the company. Being new was hard enough without screwing up. Things were going to be even tougher for him, at least for a while. Neither Clay nor Fisher were very forgiving individuals. Lou would have to make sure they did not hurt Wilburn.

"Private Wilburn," Lou said. "I am going to talk, and you are going to listen. First of all, if I ever catch you walking around without a weapon, or with a loaded weapon within the company perimeter, I will punish you severely. Just so you know I am serious, I will tell you what your punishment will be. One. I will tell Sergeant Fisher you called him an Uncle Tom. Knowing Sergeant Fisher the least he will do is beat the spit out of you."

Lou saw the look of surprise on Wilburn's face. The man started to open his mouth until Lou held up his hand. "If you are thinking of denying it, I'll call both Sergeant Fisher and Specialist Clay back. I will then ask Specialist Clay if he ever heard you call Sergeant Fisher an Uncle Tom. It will embarrass Specialist Clay to admit it, but I have a feeling he is no mood to protect you right now," Lou said, smiling.

"Number two. If I ever hear you threaten another man or even suspect you of thinking about it, I will take action. You may think of me as only a company clerk, but if you tried to do to me what was done to Captain Sanford, you would be in for an unpleasant surprise. Specialist Clay has already warned you." Lou could see the look of discomfort that was on Wilburn's face. The man was wondering where Lou got his information. "Captain Sanford may have deserved the treatment he got, but he was a good man. I am not at all like Captain Sanford. You do that shit to me and you better kill me, because if you don't, you won't live to brag about it. If you do kill me, you won't live to tell about it," Lou said, allowing anger to creep into his voice.

"Number three. I am offering you a choice. If you want to stay in this platoon you are welcome to try. If not, I will take you right now to Captain Carlson and get you transferred to Third Platoon. Which do you prefer?"

"I'll stay," Wilburn said.

"Are you going out of your way to piss me off? You don't think I deserve to be addressed as Sergeant, Private?"

"No, Sergeant. I prefer to stay in First Platoon, Sergeant," Wilburn said.

"All right then. As of right now you have a clean slate as far as I am concerned. I'll be watching you closely. You fuck up and you're out. If you have problems, you go to Sergeant Fisher. You listen to what Specialist Clay says. He's a good man. Keep your mouth shut and your eyes, ears, and mind open. Learn all you can about everything and you might live long enough to know something. Now get back to your squad."

"Yes, Sergeant," Wilburn said.

Lou was tense from the conversation. He had not been in that kind of situation since advanced infantry training and that had all been play acting. He had just talked harshly to three men who were carrying M-16 rifles, two of whom who had been in combat for almost six months and were not afraid to use them. His first day on the job was certainly a memorable one.

Lou got a gorilla bar out of his rucksack. He was still feeling the effects of the day's march and needed to put some calories into his system, but he did not want to ruin his appetite

for supper. Lou had just gotten a mouthful of candy when a voice called, "Sergeant Merrins. I hear you want to talk with me." It was the Hare.

"Yeah, Hare. But I also want to talk to Buddy Harrington about the same thing. Would you mind running over to Fourth Squad and bring him back here?"

"No sweat, Sarge. Be right back."

Buddy and the Hare returned a minute later and Lou had them get comfortable. "I want to ask you gentleman about something, but first let me explain why," Lou said. He then launched into his tale of the LRRP teams, how they were organized, and the importance of the point man for the team. After he was done, Lou asked, "How would you two like to become the point men for the platoon?"

"Fine with me," Hare answered first.

"Me too," Buddy answered.

Lou had expected a need for a real sales job to convince these men, but that had not been the case.

"How do you decide whose turn it is? You going to decide each day or we just going to rotate?" Hare asked.

"I'm willing to leave it up to the two of you. If you can decide between you what system suits you best, it's all right with me," Lou said.

"Well, I'm willing to do whatever Hare thinks is best," Buddy said. "He's better at the job than I am."

"What about you, Sarge?" Hare asked. "You going to pull some point? You're the best man for the job. Hell, it was you who got me hooked on it. I actually prefer walking point now."

"No. My walking point days are over as long as I'm platoon sergeant," Lou said. "Thanks for the compliment though."

"On days Hare is pulling point, do I just stay with my squad?" Buddy asked.

"No. I guess I didn't make myself clear," Lou said. "You and Hare will be a team. Anytime the platoon is either point for the company or out on patrol by itself, you and Hare will be pulling point. It's important to have both a good point man and a backup for him. I want

you two always working together in that situation. That way you two can communicate between yourselves better. Another thing is that First Squad will always be point squad. That way you will always have the same squad backing you up as situations develop."

Both men were smiling. Lou could see that they thought it was a good idea. "Sergeant Fry and Sergeant Fisher already have agreed to this setup. I want you two to work closely with them in deciding how things will go during any movement. Once we make contact with the enemy, I want Buddy working with his squad if at all possible. Okay?"

"Yes, Sergeant," the men answered in unison.

"Good," Lou said. He dismissed them and watched them move off together. It was amazing to him that the Hare had developed into a point man. He knew Hare had amazing eyesight, but when he first landed in country, it had been very questionable if Hare would survive in the jungle. He was a city boy, and the forest had been alien to him. Lou remembered feeling sorry for the man. Now, six months later, he enjoyed leading the platoon through the jungle. The ability to adapt was not to be taken lightly. Lou would remember both men when it came time to recommend promotions.

It was dusk. Full night just fifteen minutes away. All the men in the platoon were in their foxholes, peering silently toward their fronts. As soon as it was completely dark, half the men would be crawling off to sleep while the other half maintained watch for two hours. Lou sat in the woods peering out of the perimeter, his back to a big tree. Sitting there quietly, motionless, he was invisible to anyone outside the perimeter. His rifle lay across his folded legs, ready for use in an instant's notice.

Lou felt good about what had transpired over the past day and a half. Going from REMF to combat soldier had lifted his spirits more than any booze or marijuana ever could. It was good to be back amongst his friends. Just how much he had missed them had never really impacted his conscious thoughts until today. The feelings of intense loneliness and depression he had felt over the past three months were gone. Like a chronic pain a person had gotten used to, it was not noticed anymore, until one day the pain was gone, and only then could the reality of the pain become more real.

Lou reflected back at just how unbearable and demeaning his stay in the rear had been. Only now did he understand how much the men in First Platoon and Alpha Company meant to him. They were part of his soul, the part that supplied the pride and self worth he had missed for so long. *I am once again whole. I am home and I never want to leave home again,* Lou thought.    END