

### **#13 Bad Day** – Early 1968 – forward base, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – Fourth day back in the field.

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We worked our way up the hill toward the perimeter. To say my ass was dragging would be an understatement. My fourth day back in the field was going to be a bugger. Nothing like pulling an ambush to start the day out right.

It was the first time I had the platoon out on ambush on my own. Circumstances were such that it would be an easy task without much chance of complication. The night felt safe, since the ambush site, while the best available, was really a very unlikely place for a nighttime confrontation. I knew from experience that this was often the way things were in the highlands; it would have made more sense just to pull the company together into a perimeter for the night and let everyone get a good night's sleep. But logic often had little to do with our daily missions. Now the first squad was leading us to the top of the hill to recover our equipment and prepare to head out for the day's march.

I had not slept at all during the night. In ambush this was not always the case, depending on the circumstances. On a night when there was no moon and a poor ambush site, I would sometimes take little naps, allowing my senses to warn me of any dangers. Acting as Platoon Sergeant without an officer present in the platoon left all the responsibility squarely on my shoulders. Although blessed with experienced squad leaders and men, it weighed heavily on me. My night had been spent in tense wakefulness, with much energy spent taking care of an overactive imagination that would not rest.

The things that could possibly go wrong kept flirting through my mind. Everything from radio failure to being overrun by a battalion of NVA. Most of my worst fears were just bullshit. Whereas I respected the enemy's abilities as a warrior, his skills were no greater than mine or the men in the platoon. The night was our domain as much as it was theirs. Several times during the night I slipped through the jungle, quietly checking out the men's positions to ensure they were maintaining noise and light discipline. During the night I had managed to move a couple dozen meters in either direction from my position behind the ambush kill zone without

being challenged by the men or shot at. It was a skill I had developed during my first stay in the field, and I was glad that I had not lost the ability in the interim.

The trick to night movement was to carefully study the surroundings during the day and rehearse the path while there was light. After setting the ambush in the previous evening's dusk, I had chosen a central position to spend the night. By marking the position of certain terrain features and foliage, I chose paths that would lead me toward either flank. Starting at my position, I paced off distances, imaging my movement in the dark. Standing by a tree that would serve as a marker during the night, I studied it quickly using my hands to find those characteristics that would in the dark give me a clues about my position and the direction to move toward the next guide. It took only minutes to figure out distances and directions. I moved a few fallen branches out of the way so my feet would not have to contend with them in the dark. I mentally reviewed the course several times before settling in for the night.

Private Hailey and I spent the night together guarding the radio. If the ambush was blown, we would stay where we were until we got a sense of what needed to be done. I had already instructed him on what I would expect under the circumstances, and so we had a plan of sorts. He was alarmed when I told him I would be moving around at night in order to check positions. It was something that just was not done.

All the men in the platoon had been warned that I would be checking positions during the night from time to time, and I asked them not to shoot anything approaching their positions from the rear without first challenging the movement, because that thing might be me. This of course met some resistance, since the men were used to treating any strange noise as the enemy and were not used to friendly movement at night. To me this made no sense at all. If the gooks were willing to walk through the jungle at night, why should I limit myself?

That night I had checked positions twice without being challenged. It was not that the men were not alert. As a matter of fact, they were quite good at the ambush site. By moving very slowly and purposely I had been able to get close enough to actually detect a couple of the men. Most of the time was spent lying within easy earshot of the men for minutes without being able to detect their presence. Since they were not apt to move from their positions, I knew they were there, but my senses were unable to pick up even their breathing. There was

no smoking, snoring, or loud noise during the course of whole night. It was both very weird and very satisfying to be in charge of such men. Although the chances of any encounter that night were minimal, they maintained their discipline.

I did catch some sense of their presence once or twice. The kind of thing that could only be discovered by intense concentration. A wisp of the smell of urine coming from one position. A louder than normal exhalation of breath from someone changing body position. The soft rubbing of fabric against a plant. Things that only someone listening quietly laying up the jungle would ever hear.

I was never more than twenty meters from my position during the night, although both trips had taken a couple hours to accomplish. It was the only way to move at night in the presence of heavily armed men, and even then it was fraught with danger. Each step was an exercise of balance and concentration. I moved slowly, never thinking in terms of time. My only concern was noise. It required a tremendous amount of concentration, and each time I returned to my position I was more tired. On the other hand, it was better than just lying there all night. Certainly more exciting.

Morning. The column stopped for a moment and then began moving again. It would not be long now before we approached one of the company's positions. I had called ahead, and they were expecting us. Still, the point man, Spec Four "Hare" Harris, would approach the perimeter with great caution, ensuring a cup of coffee for breakfast instead of picking claymore mineshot from his body. Such things seemed important, and so any delay was acceptable. The platoon was returning by a new path that Hare created as he moved forward.

Ten minutes later we moved through one of Third Platoon's positions on our way into the perimeter. The men manning the positions within eyesight were already sipping hot coffee and eating some Cs. Their rucksacks were packed, and they were beginning to fill in their foxholes.

The men moved directly to where their rucksacks were laying on the ground. Most immediately collapsed alongside them. They would only have about fifteen minutes to secure something to eat before the company began moving out. Hailey moved over to his rucksack

with the radio as I headed over to the company command post, an impressive tree the captain was sitting under, awaiting my return.

"Good patrol, Sergeant Merrins?" he said by way of greeting.

"Morning, Sir," I replied, sitting and taking out a cigarette. I lit up and took a deep breath.

The other men in the group just sat there waiting.

"Okay gentlemen, let's get this show on the road," the captain said.

The morning briefing only took about five minutes. Only the captain spoke, and we sat and took notes until he was finished. It was a case of him defining the order of movement and all other pertinent information we platoon leaders would need for the upcoming movement. Despite being tired I listened carefully, taking a few notes. After the briefing was over Captain Carlson turned his attention to me again.

"What's the order of march, Sergeant Merrins?"

The Captain did this every morning, picking a different officer to quiz each day. Until now I had not been picked, and only being an NCO, I had hoped to be spared. No such luck.

I had few notes to rely on. It was an old habit of mine from my college days. I was not a very quick note taker and if I attempted to take too many notes, I would miss parts of what an instructor was saying. I had instead learned to listen carefully to everything that was being said, writing down only key words and phrases. I was sure the captain had noticed this quirk. Whereas the officers would fill a couple notebook pages with notes, I rarely had more than three or four words written.

Captain Carlson asked about ten questions. Way beyond his usual quota of three or four. I had no problem answering them.

"Now I know why they call you the Professor, Sergeant Merrins. You must have a photographic memory."

"No, Sir, I just learned to listen real well to my elders," I answered smiling. The three lieutenants looked dumbstruck. Whether it was my answer or their reaction to it, Captain Carlson burst out laughing. Shaking his head, he warned us we had only ten minutes before the company would move out. I headed back to the platoon.

I ate a can of Cs while briefing the squad leaders. Since we had pulled ambush the night before, our platoon would be situated in the middle of the company and would not be expected to patrol when the company was stopped. This would allow the men to catch some periods of rest.

My ass was dragging big time. I could hardly keep my eyes open. I lit a cigarette and took a deep breath. It wasn't until the second one, in combination with the coffee Hailey had fixed for me, that I began to perk up. The day was bright and would heat up quickly now. Getting ready to move out, I took a mental inventory of my status.

Physically I was exhausted before the company even began moving. I would have expected such, not having been in the field for three months. My muscles were not used to the hard labor, and every movement caused one form of discomfort or another. I ached all over so that it was impossible to focus on any one particular problem. If not for aspirin, I probably would have been unable to move. The combination of the stress and the physical requirements of the job was almost too much to bear.

I had learned from my earlier stay in the field that it was not unusual for me to let the circumstances we encountered in the field get my spirits down. Once the day got started, things had a tendency to get interesting and divert my focus from my body. Today should be no different.

The company began moving out, and the platoon took up its position within the formation. Since we had ambush the night before, the First Platoon was third in the company to move out. Our main job during the day, besides humping the boonies, was to stay with the company headquarters section and provide security when the company sent some of the other men on sweeps of the area. If anyone got any extra rest or had an opportunity to catch some sleep during the day, it would be us.

The company had been searching the area we were in for over a week now with little contact. This was par for the course and the only thing to do was to keep looking. I did not mind in the least. It was important that I continue learning more about running the platoon and the men serving in it.

The morning passed slowly. The trip down the hill was arduous, all stop and go, without enough stopping to allow for any real rest. At the bottom of the hill, the company moved east almost a full click before settling into a perimeter so that Fourth Platoon could search an area enemy might be using.

I gathered the squad leaders around me.

"Captain says we should be here for a couple of hours while Lieutenant Kelp checks out that valley south of here. Have the men get as much rest as possible. We are moving almost two clicks further west before we settle in for the night, so be prepared to move out quickly once we get started again. Any questions?"

"How they hanging, Sarge?" Joe Fisher asked. "You going to make it? You looking a little peaked to me."

"I'll make it," I replied much more confidently than I felt.

The squad leaders moved back to their men, not wanting to waste any rest time that had been made available to them. Everyone needed sleep and rest. Private Hailey had chosen a large tree to crash under. He was already asleep next to the radio, which he had turned down low.

The day was hot and my mouth so dry I could not have spit if my balls were on fire. I still had plenty of water but did not know how long it would be until we got refills. I drank about half a canteen of warm water, taking a couple of aspirin and salt pills along with it.

The platoon's situation was such that we were not part of the perimeter. Most of the men found shade, which there was always an abundance of on the jungle floor, and after checking their area of choice for ants, lizards, scorpions, snakes, and other assorted neighbors, they lay down and were immediately asleep. Everyone had developed the necessary habit of going to sleep instantaneously the second the opportunity presented itself. It was a skill vital to survival in the jungle. On average, a soldier in the field got less than six hours of sleep a day.

I had been awake for over thirty-six hours, and as soon as the men settled in, I intended to get my share of sleep. Settling in next to Hailey, I leaned back against my rucksack, closed my eyes, and sat there like a dummy.

My legs were aching. Even though I had gotten myself in good shape while stationed in the rear, I knew I was not field tough. Today's move had been normal for the other men, who appeared oblivious to the physical demands of the move. I, on the other hand, was in physical pain from the stress placed on my leg muscles by the move down the mountain. This was normal for all new men, but that did not make my condition any less miserable. I lit up a cigarette. Sitting there smoking, swatting mosquitoes, and sweating, I began to doubt the wisdom of my choice of professions.

It was almost three hours before the company started moving again. Listening to the radio, it was evident that Lieutenant Kelp had managed to get himself turned around and confused while patrolling the valley. A less than triumphant return was awaiting him as his platoon rejoined the company.

Resting for three hours certainly helped, but unfortunately not nearly enough. I was fine for almost the first hundred yards, but after that each step was misery. It felt like my leg muscles were on fire.

In the highlands, every step was either up or down. The terrain was seldom flat. Since the company never, and I mean never, used a trail, our path had a tendency to meander up and down the hill, over and under and around the brush and fallen trees. Even with good noise discipline, it was impossible not to hear the company's movement through the jungle.

There were days that life in the jungle was almost too much to endure. Everyone ran into those days. Those were the days that being around friends and colleagues really paid off. Leaning on the other men psychologically and if necessary physically was what kept one going.

I did not have that luxury. Being new to the field and taking over as both the platoon sergeant and acting platoon leader, I felt all alone. Within the moving column, I was isolated physically from the other platoon leaders and sergeants. All the men in the platoon were eyeballing me as we moved. I was being judged by each and every man, and I did not blame them in the least.

Even the squad leaders, the very men who had more or less elected me to lead the platoon, were watching me closely. They had to be wondering if they had made the right

choice. Was I really capable of leading the platoon? That capability depended on a lot of factors, not the least of which would be my physical abilities.

A platoon sergeant occupies a special place in the psyche of the men within the platoon. As the senior NCO present on a day to day basis, he is the ruler of everything that occurs. Squad leaders have control of the men within their squads and are therefore more intimate in their knowledge of the men. But they act under the direction and control of the platoon sergeant, whose presence everyone is aware of. Platoon leaders, who are officers, are absent from platoons for large periods of time, especially in training. Their presence often represents an intrusion into the soldier's life, at best a necessary burden for the men. Here in the Nam, this relationship had amazingly changed very little.

From the day I joined the Army, I had always admired the NCOs more than the officers. Most were the best soldiers the military had to offer. Since the platoon sergeants were the most senior NCOs that enlisted men interacted with on a daily basis, their word was gospel.

In the Airborne it seemed that every one of them was special. They were invariably tough, both physically and mentally. Not gentlemen anyone in their right mind would choose to fuck with. The platoon's first senior NCO, the one who had trained us and then led us in the field, was now a legend among the men. "The Blade" was the tag all of them used now when speaking of him. A tall, skinny, colored man, he had proven to be tougher in combat than anyone could have guessed. We had known he was tough, an iron man, capable of going all day and night, but in combat he appeared absolutely fearless. The men in the platoon had come to close to worshipping him, and his loss had been a major catastrophe.

SSgt. Wilson, who took over after the demise of "The Blade," had come from the same mold. Tough. He had been my squad leader, so I knew just the kind of leader he was, and his promotion had proven just how prepared his many years in the military had left him. Wilson was smart and tougher than leather. I knew that in many ways there was a gentler side to him, but I also knew that once he became platoon sergeant, this characteristic seemed to disappear.

I had not served with the platoon when SSgt. Wilson was platoon leader, having been in the rear the whole time. The men passing through the rear kept me informed of what was

happening in the field, and Wilson had earned nothing short of rave reviews. The men spoke bluntly of his abilities, and with few exceptions they liked the job he had done.

Now I was running the platoon. I was the third platoon sergeant in its short history. It would have been a little easier if either of the men I was following had not been superior NCOs. Things might also be easier if an officer was present, although not having one represented a blessing of sorts. One less thing to bother with at that point in time.

Now the men in the platoon were watching me closely. Everything I did would be judged against the actions of the men who had preceded me. Some of the newer men had never known The Blade, but through the stories that existed, their image of him was very real. Sergeant Wilson had earned their respect. The men missed him and now had to worry about his replacement.

I was under no illusions about my place within the platoon. To all the men I was a burden to be borne until I proved otherwise. The support of the squad leaders would help but only to a degree. It would allow me, a relative outsider, a chance to succeed, nothing more.

As the company again began to move out, I positioned myself so that the men would have to pass me one at a time on the way up the trail. I took the opportunity to look at each man carefully, scrutinizing them closely. What I was looking for was difficult to pinpoint.

Each man inspected me in return. What they were looking for was difficult to discern. I was careful to look each man in the eyes as they passed, or at least to give them the opportunity. Not every man was willing to meet my gaze, but that in and of itself did not tell me anything about the man.

Just looking at them, it was easy to discern that they were all more physically prepared for today's hardships than I was. Even the newest men had been in the field longer than me, and so their bodies had adjusted to the harsh reality of the life they were leading. The short rest had done wonders for most of them. They looked a whole bunch less tired than earlier this morning. I envied their strength while being careful to conceal my own fatigue as much as possible. Whether I was fooling anyone was questionable.

The company stayed on the move for another two hours. Compared to how we had moved at the beginning of the tour, the company was making good progress through the jungle. Everyone stayed alert while moving as gracefully as the terrain and foliage allowed.

The company stopped again and I collapsed back against the nearest tree. Hailey moved over beside me.

"You okay, Sarge?"

"Yeah. No sweat." I said.

"I can spread some of your gear around to the others if you need the help."

Looking over at him, I smiled. "Listen Hailey, I may look like shit, and I may feel even worse, but I'm doing just fine. I need your help, I'll ask. Got it."

"Sure, Sarge. Just asking."

"What's holding us up?"

"Second Platoon has been picking up signs of enemy in the area. They think maybe they found something. Lieutenant Holmes got a couple of squads deployed on line and is just beginning to move them forward."

Of course Hailey had been following all the action on the platoon's radio. The only advantage of being the radio man was in knowing everything that was being discussed over the radio. The sound was always turned down to minimize noise when the platoon was on the move, so that Hailey was the only one who always knew what was going on.

I leaned back and lit up. Wiggling my butt to get it comfortable, I had just begun to relax when Hailey tapped my shoulder.

"Officers forward," he said.

I struggled to my feet. The rucksack was weighing about a ton by now. I was careful to make sure my balance was alright before beginning my journey up the line to where Captain Carlson was located. He gathered us together into a tight circle.

"Okay, Lieutenant Holmes has found us an enemy base camp. He already has two squads posted on the other side of the camp. Holmes and Albert, I want your men to establish a perimeter. Lieutenant Kelp, I want your men to patrol toward the top of the hill. Just take

them up a couple of hundred meters and establish a defensive line. I don't want anyone coming down the hill at us. Got It?"

"Yes, Sir," Kelp replied.

"Okay. Sergeant Merrins, First Platoon will stay with headquarters and help us search out the base camp. I want everyone to be careful. Have everyone take their time. I want a thorough search of the area. Let's be careful."

The battalion had been combing this area for a month now looking for a base camp. I gathered the squad leaders around me.

"You got any suggestions, Bobby?"

"Yeah. Have everyone work in pairs. One checking, the other watching. No one makes any moves unless the other man agrees. We've done this before Sarge. We'll take care of it. You just relax and try to get some rest. You look like shit."

I smiled at Sergeant Fry.

"I want everyone to keep their equipment handy in case we have to Didi Maou out of here. Hailey and I will make a team and search like everyone else. Have everyone take their time and be thorough."

The next two hours were spent searching the enemy camp. There were plenty of signs of recent use, and just being there made everyone nervous. It was not a large base camp that had been in existence for a long time. We found no caves or tunnels, which was par for the course, considering that the Highlands was mainly rock. There were some defensive bunkers, recently built and in good condition compared to the older sites we stumbled across now and then.

Whoever had been here recently had chosen to move out before we showed up. Whether this was due to good intelligence on their part or just coincidental to our arrival was difficult to judge for sure. My guess was that our presence had not been anticipated.

We did not find any booby traps. The enemy was famous for leaving them, and we were just as famous for being scared shitless of them. This made everyone very cautious when it came to checking the place out. The men moved slowly, observing everything before disrupting anything.

It was not unusual to see a couple of men standing frozen in place, staring carefully at the tree tops. They were trying to make sure that Mr. Charles had not left any mines up there. Of course if he had, they would be well hidden and damn near impossible to spot from the ground. Still the men looked.

The camp itself was nicely policed. There was no rubbish lying around. There had been no equipment left behind. This was the best indicator that it had not been a hurried evacuation of the camp. It had been left in good shape for whatever unit might next be assigned to rest here.

There were six hooches amongst the trees. After searching them we burnt them, more for our satisfaction than for any real damage to the enemy. Being made of bamboo and thatch harvested from the surrounding jungle, they would be replaced easily when Charlie chose to move back into the area.

Some of the men suggested tearing down the bunkers we found. After checking with the captain, who seemed distracted by other matters and did not care one way or the other, I decided against it. These were well constructed, simple bunkers that when searched turned up nothing. For all the effort it would take to destroy them, the enemy could just as easily build them again. I was not against inconveniencing the enemy, but had to weigh the effort required to accomplish the task. It was getting later into the afternoon, and everyone was hot and tired.

In some John Wayne movie there would be explosives available to blow the bunkers up. The company did not carry extra explosives for such matters, and they would have to be flown in with engineers to set them. Not an easy task considering the terrain we were operating in.

In the end it all came to naught. We expended a great deal of energy and accomplished nothing. It was just part of the job. We left the camp having accomplished nothing of value.

It was two hours later that the company began moving out again. Mid-afternoon with another hour's march to where we would dig in for the night.

Like everyone else, I was hot and tired. By now everyone was feeling the effects of the day's activities. It was just bad luck that First Platoon had been chosen to search out the camp. Instead of resting in a perimeter position securing the area like the other platoons, we had

managed to draw the assignment that required the expenditure of the most energy. Some of the men were grumbling about that as the platoon moved out.

I kept my own counsel on the subject. It could be viewed a couple of different ways. In one way, it was unfair, since the men were tired from pulling ambush the night before. They could have used more rest. On the other hand, putting them on the perimeter where they could rest would have meant that some of them might get too comfortable and begin to doze off. This was a real danger, especially when hanging around an area the gooks called home. It was probably best to keep the more tired men involved in the action. The search had certainly kept them alert, but it had also drained them physically and emotionally.

The stress of the search was a big factor in determining the energy expended. I am no more subject to fear than the next man. To say that being in the midst of an enemy base camp did not provoke emotion would be a lie. Everyone had been tense during the search. It was a feeling most appreciated after the job was done and the platoon exited the area in one piece. Why else would the men suddenly seem so elated to be moving out?

No one talked about that aspect of the job. The emotional drain caused by fear and applied to the human body for a long stretch of time. Of course being in the jungle on combat patrol continuously was reason enough to be fearful. Every hour of every day brought about reminders of just how dangerous our job was, but the extra concern caused by being in the base camp totally drained the body.

The company moved quickly up the hill and within the hour was establishing its nightly perimeter. The platoon was given its sector, and the squad leaders set about surveying the land and assigning positions to the men. This required minimal supervision on my part, although I checked the site of each position to ensure it was properly tied into the positions on either side. Again the squad leaders had shown their expertise, and no major changes had to be made. After Captain Carlson had made his own inspection of the perimeter, the men began digging in for the night.

Hailey had found a nice spot for us and had begun digging in by the time I was available to assist. I started to unfasten my entrenching tool.

"Cool it, Sarge. This one's on me," he said.

I was too tired to argue. Today was resupply day, which meant a hot meal and mail. It also meant new field rations of which I was almost out. Luckily I still had some candy left and got some out of my rucksack. Candy was always good for quick energy. The way I felt, three days at the candy store would not be enough to perk me up. All I had left was a couple of packs of chuckles. These were my favorites, and I had a tendency to save them for special treats. Now was a good time. I had somehow survived the day without dying of heat or exhaustion.

I still had a canteen of water. Taking a couple of salt pills, two aspirin, and a chuckle, I washed them down and began emptying my canteen. The first chopper, carrying the company's mail and fresh water supply, was already in route from the Fire Support Base at Pleiku.

Looking around I spotted several of the men digging their positions. It was getting near 1500 hours and even in the shade where I was resting the temperature had to be over one hundred degrees. There was a wind which was helping to cool things down as the sweat on my uniform began to dry out.

My mouth was still dry when I capped my canteen. Even though water was on the way, I was hesitant about emptying it before the water arrived. It was a tradition started my first night in the field when some of the men had run out of water. I had shared what I had left with some of the others and had spent most of the night dreaming about water. Since then I had always been careful not to be without even if my body craved it. It was a comfort just knowing it was available.

"Platoon leaders to the CP."

The words were being passed along the perimeter. I got up and headed over to the command post. Captain Carlson was looking over a map as I and the other platoon leaders joined him.

"Gentlemen. Have your platoons mount up. We are leaving here immediately. Six wants us on that hill ASAP," he said, pointing to the hilltop not more than half a mile across a valley. By chopper it would have been a half minute hop.

"Our resupply chopper has already been turned around. Bravo Company, operating south of here, got into a firefight with an NVA outfit this morning. The brigade has reports of

many enemy troops heading in this direction. The battalion commander wants an ambush set up at this location," he said, again indicating a position on the map at the bottom of the hill we had been ordered to occupy. "We move out in five minutes. Same order of march."

I turned and headed back to the platoon on the double. To say I was not a happy camper was a bit of an understatement. Passing the first of the platoon's positions, I said, "Mount up. We're moving out in five minutes. Squad leaders are to meet me over at my position immediately. We will not be coming back."

There was no need to tell the men to pass the message along. They knew the drill, and one of them immediately left for the next position, while the two others began collecting their claymore mines and packing their rucksacks. One thing about being an Infantryman, you were always ready to move out or fight at an instant's notice. Five minutes was ample warning for a move, even if the men were just finishing digging in.

Three minutes later, when the squad leaders showed up with all their gear, I was packed and waiting for them. I could see the disgusted look in their eyes, along with the excitement generated by the sudden change in plans. Their minds were already ticking off the possibilities, including a trip to the rear. I quickly briefed them on the move and the reason for it. The excitement quickly left their faces, while the disgust remained.

I did a quick survey. All the squad leaders were already out of water. I told them to check with the men in their squads, but I already knew the situation. Digging foxholes in the heat of the day made a man thirsty. Combine that with the long afternoon on the side of the mountain and the fact that the supply chopper had been reported inbound, and there was a better than even chance most of the men were out of water.

"Move out." The order came over the radio and the movement was on. I was tempted to get in touch with the CO and tell him our water situation, but realized it would in essence be questioning his intelligence. The man was no dummy, and I was sure he had already talked the situation over with the battalion commander. Orders had been issued, and there were really no choices.

The company's best hope lay at the bottom of the hill. There was a good chance there would be a stream, although it was not a sure bet. Our maps, while accurate in terms of denoting heights and locations, rarely indicated the presence or absence of water.

It was going to take a miracle for me to survive the march. Even having some water would not help. This was only my fourth day back in the field after three months spent in the rear. All the training I had done getting ready for the field did not mean shit. I had known that even as I trained. It was one thing to be in good physical condition, it was something entirely different to be field tough. My body, and by that I mean every bone, muscle, and fiber, was simply not ready for the work involved. It takes a new man at least two weeks to adjust to the conditions imposed by living in the field.

I had anticipated the problems, adjusting the weight I was carrying by carrying less ammunition than the rest of the men. No one said anything about it, knowing it was necessary until I got strength back in my legs. By not expending any unnecessary energy, it had been possible to survive the day's march, but now I was exhausted.

It had been a hard day by everyone's standards. I could see that the other men were feeling the effects of the past twenty-four hours, but not nearly as much as I was.

The military had a perfect adjective used to describe such situations. FUCKED.

There was nothing to do but direct my ass down the hill along with the others and hope for the best. There was always a chance we would meet up with the enemy and get to lie around during a firefight. This scenario represented my best chance for survival.

The trip down the hill was slow and arduous. The battalion commander might have demanded speed, but the mountain had another idea. It would have been difficult to choose worse terrain if a team of experts had been given a month to accomplish it. Whereas the company usually had a destination at the beginning of each day's journey, it only had two factors it could manipulate: time and route. This allowed for terrain. Sometimes the easiest way to a point on the map was also the longest. When time was not a critical factor there was a choice of routes, and in the jungle the path of least resistance was one of its laws. It did no good trying to dictate your will upon the jungle. The jungle was, and it was up to us to adapt to that fact.

Our current move was the result of making a decision and then trying to impose our will. Every path was a disaster, with the company bouncing up and down the face of the mountain trying to locate a way to the bottom. Billy goats would have just turned around and headed down the other side of the hill, the side the company had originally used to reach the top. It took an hour to get down the hill.

The chuckles had kept me going until we reached the bottom. I was staggering by then and getting a lot of disdainful looks from the men. Any weakness was frowned upon, regardless of the situation. I could see that some of the men seemed sympathetic to my plight, but they would not offer their assistance without my asking. There was no way I was going to ask.

There are some irrefutable laws in the jungle. One of those was that water was bountiful until you really got desperate for it. There was no stream at the bottom of the hill. The rock-lined gully was dry. As we passed through it the men looked carefully, trying to spot any sign of a hidden pool. Any moisture would have been investigated, but none was found.

During the monsoon season we had all nearly drowned every day. Now there was no sign of rain. Hadn't been for almost a week now.

The company stopped for five minutes at the base of the hill we had to climb. My mouth was dry. My head ached. My legs were shaking. My M-16 weighed a ton. FUCKED.

The men spread out along the route of march, taking shelter in the shadows while maintaining a vigilant watch over the jungle. I moved over to Sergeant Fry.

"How you doing Bobby?" I asked. A preemptive question that took him by surprise.

"I'm hanging in there. I'd give anything for a drink. You?"

"I'll make it," I said with a lot more confidence than I felt. "How are the men handling it?"

"Pissing and moaning, but we'll be okay. The captain better have a chopper with water waiting for us at the top though."

"Don't worry about that, I saw him about ten minutes ago and he is hurting like everyone else."

Just then the line of men ahead started moving forward again. I let the men pass until my position within the column reached me and then joined the procession. I knew I would never reach the top, but I would die trying.

I felt guilty not offering any of my water to Bobby. Right now it was doing me no good. It was in a canteen resting inside the rucksack. The three attached to my webbing on the outside of the ruck were empty. I had packed the half full one inside in the hope of keeping the sun and heat off it, not wanting to lose any to evaporation. Having it there offered some peace of mind, and yet, for all practical purposes, it did not exist.

Everyone else was out of water. What little existed within the platoon at the beginning of the trip had long since disappeared before the bottom of hill. I could not very well just whip out the canteen and drink in front of all the men. There just wasn't enough of it to spread around to all the men. So it just sat there. To add to my misery, I had to cart the damn water up the hill. When the time came, I would use it.

At least that was my thought on the matter. My mind had stopped functioning rationally some time ago.

Half way up the hill and that was it. The company stopped, I stopped, and that was it. I slumped to the ground totally exhausted. Hailey saw it and moved over next to me.

"You need help, Sarge?"

I heard him but was having trouble locating him. There had been other times I had been near exhaustion, but this time was different. I lay there panting. Taking a deep breath was out of the question. Just too damn tired.

"You okay, Sarge?" Another voice. Not Hailey's, but not one I recognized either. A hand grabbed my shoulder and turned me over. I recognized the face, sort of, not being able to remember exactly who it was.

I shook my head, trying to wake my senses up. A wave of nausea hit. Turning on my side I tried vomiting, but there was nothing coming up. I swallowed hard. Not even vomit present to wet my mouth.

"I'm fine," I said struggling to sit up. I made it. Not gracefully. I sat there. FUCKED.

"Sergeant Merrins, forward."

I heard the message and struggled to my feet. I did not even attempt to pick up my rucksack. A hand reached out and supported me as I started up the line. Hailey half-supported, half-carried me forward.

Bobby spotted me moving forward and moved over to me. "Sit down, Sarge."

I sat. "You got a problem, Sergeant Fry?" I asked.

Bobby moved his head close to mine. "Jonesy says he's not going anywhere. He's refusing to move out. I wanted to you to talk to him, but I'll handle it myself."

He started to move off, but I grabbed his shirt. Not with enough strength to stop him but it got his attention and he turned to me. "I'll talk to him," I said.

Bobby shrugged his shoulders and moved off. Private Hailey helped me to my feet and I followed. Jonesy had moved off the path. He was leaning against his rucksack, with his helmet down over his eyes.

"Afternoon, Private Jones," I said sitting next to him.

Jones sat up and moved his helmet back on his head. "Well, well, well. If it isn't Platoon Sergeant Merrins," he said in a painful croak. The sound of his voice was barely audible.

"Sergeant Fry says you have a problem. Care to let me in on it."

"Fuck, Sergeant Fry. I ain't moving. They said we was getting water and I'm not moving until they get me some."

"Is that the problem? Water? Sergeant Fry, give Jonesy some of your water," I said.

"Sarge, COs want to know where First Platoon is," Hailey said, handing me the radio headset. I waved it away.

"Tell him we'll be moving in a minute," I said. Turning to Bobby I said, "Have the men pass my rucksack up."

The men of first squad were all watching to see what would happen. This was my first big test as platoon leader. If Jonesy didn't get off his ass and begin moving, I would be in deeper shit than I already was. Even if I did get him moving, I still had my little problem.

The rucksack was pitched down beside me. My mind quickly seized on the speed with which it arrived as one solution to my problem. I would simply lay there until the last man in

the column passed and tell him to pass me forward like the rucksack. The men could take turns throwing me up the mountain.

"If I give you water, will you get your ass up the hill?"

Jonesy just nodded yes. I opened the ruck and got out the canteen. I shook it so Jonesy and the other men could hear the liquid slosh around inside the container. Jonesy's tongue appeared as he tried to lick his lips in anticipation. I handed him the canteen.

Jonesy unscrewed the top and immediately took a sip. I could see by the movement of his mouth that he held the water there, savoring it like a fine wine before finally swallowing it. His eyes never left mine and a minute later he repeated the process.

"Thanks," he said screwing the top back on.

"You get enough to get you to the top? If you didn't, take some more, because once you hand that canteen back, there's no more for you."

"Yeah, I had enough."

"Running out of water was your fault," I said to Jonesy. The others were listening closely. "There are few promises that count out here. The Captain thought the water would be delivered, but the man can't promise shit. He did not drink your fucking water, you did. It was a mistake. It was your mistake. Mistakes get men killed. You've been around long enough to know better, so don't let it happen again. I on the other hand can make you a promise. The next time you sit your ass down and refuse an order, one of us is going to leave in a body bag. You got that!"

Jonesy had kept eye contact throughout my speech. I could read the anger there, it was shit or get time. "Sorry Sarge. It won't happen again."

He started to get up, but, before he could, I thrust my hand forward. It took him by surprise, but his instincts were those of any man from our country. Without thought he grasped my right hand into his, and we shook. It was a very unmilitary gesture, and the effect was immediate. We both smiled.

He stood up and took a step over to my rucksack. Reaching down he untied a bandoleer of ammunition from the frame and looped it over his head. Without a word he turned and headed up the hill.

"Can I have some of that?" It was Spec. Four McCallum. I handed the canteen to him.

"Take some and pass it around to the others," I said. I regretted that I had not taken a sip first, but was really too tired to care. The confrontation with Jonesy had energized me, but now that it was over, I was still faced with the problem of getting up the hill.

McCallum raised the canteen to his lips and took a sip. I had sort of expected he would take a few gulps before passing it to the next man, but he did not. He handed the canteen to PFC Miller then walked over to my rucksack. The top was open. He reached in and pulled out one of my Claymore mines. Tucking it in his shirt, he turned and headed up the trail.

Now a trend had started. I watched as the canteen was quickly passed from man to man. Each man raised it to his lips, took a sip, and passed it on. One by one they stopped by my rucksack and took some item of mine before heading up the hill.

The process did not stop with the first squad, but continued into the second squad. By the time they were done, all my gear, including the now empty rucksack was gone. This left me with just my M-16 and webbing. I was suddenly some fifty pounds lighter than I had been minutes before.

I continued to watch as each man took a sip from the canteen, wondering how long the water would last and what the reaction of the last man would be. Each man looked me directly in the eye as he took his sip, with most of them giving me a nod when they were done, before turning and heading up the hill.

Now it became more of a ritual affair than a water thing. Surprisingly fast, the ritual was taught, recognized, followed, and repeated. It caught me by surprise when Sergeant Fisher handed the canteen to Hailey, who was standing next to me. "You coming with us, Sergeant Merrins?" he asked.

I stood up, watching Hailey take what had to be the last drop of water from the canteen. He handed the canteen to me. Amazingly there was still water in it. I took a sip, and then another. Jiggling it, I could still feel a small amount moving around the very bottom. I put the cap on to save that last little bit for later. Hell, you never knew where your next drink was coming from.

I turned and headed up the hill. There was no guarantee I would make it, but I sure as hell would die trying.

They say a man can do anything if he puts his mind to it. There are a lot of such sayings: half truth, half wishful thinking. The next hour was more of a sensation than a real experience. I don't remember how I made it up the hill. A lot of the other men found the going difficult, but that was of no consequence to me. I went deep down into myself to make that trip and found out that deep down within myself was nothing special. I made it because I had no choice. Without the loss of my equipment, I would not have made it. Somewhere along the line they would have had to carry my ass, and I do not know if I could have lived with that.

The captain stood just over the crest of the hill waiting for me. He stood in shade with his rucksack still sitting on his back.

"You forget something, Sergeant?"

It took me a second to get the gist of his comment.

"No Sir. I won a bet. Loser had to carry my shit up the mountain."

"I'd like to see that man. Have to be Superman to carry two rucksacks up the hill."

"Yes, Sir. He is one super dude," I said.

The captain quickly gave orders to set up the perimeter. There were already choppers in the air with our supplies. They would be there in less than ten minutes. Sounded familiar. I only hoped that this time they would actually land.

My squad leaders were waiting for me. I quickly briefed them on our sector of the perimeter and made arrangements for a work detail to gather our supplies when they arrived. I led them toward the planned location of our first position.

The pain exploded up my leg, and I went down as though shot. A yelp of pain escaped my lips as I tried to grab my leg while falling to the ground. Not knowing exactly what was happening, the squad leaders all hit the dirt a fraction of a second later. Within a second, every man in the perimeter had their ass down searching for the source of danger. Not knowing what it was, just sure it was there.

Meanwhile I was squirming around on the ground writhing in agony. Bobby flipped me onto my back and began running his eyes and hands over me.

"Where are you hit?" he asked as he continued looking for blood.

"A leg cramp," I managed to get out as I continued to work the offending muscle with my hand. Bobby smiled and stood up.

"Sergeant Kirby. You get my men to work on their positions. Hailey and I'll take care of Sarge." The other squad leaders turned and left without comment although I thought I spotted a smile or two. Everyone else was getting up as the company got back to its business, relieved that it had been a false alarm.

Bobby kneeled down beside me. He grabbed the right leg and positioned it, then began hitting the knotted muscle, trying to get it to relax. The pain of him hitting me was nothing compared to the pain of the cramp. Every infantryman experienced leg cramps, at least all those I knew. While not a medic, I knew they were usually caused by a number of factors. Muscle fatigue, excessive loss of water, and depletion of the salt content in one's blood could all lead to cramping.

SSgt Wilson had described a leg cramp best. He said it was like grabbing the leg muscle with a pair of pliers, squeezing just as hard as you could, then hooking the pliers up to a car battery, starting the car, and sitting there gunning the engine. His description came nowhere close to explaining the agony I was feeling.

It took a couple of minutes before the muscle decided it had enough and loosened its grip on me. I lay there exhausted. My fatigues were soaking wet, and, for the second time that day, I was heaving without being able to vomit. Nothing there.

Sergeant Fry helped Hailey get me over to our position. Bobby picked the spot. Once he ascertained that I was going to survive, he left to do his job. I lay there putting my head on the soft earth and closing my eyes. It seemed like seconds later when I heard the approaching sound of a helicopter. I opened my eyes and sat up. The first thing I noticed was Jonesy approaching our position. Across his back was slung a rucksack.

"It's all there, Sarge," he said, laying it down next to me.

I had only begun to say thanks when the left leg cramped. What came out of my mouth was something on the order of, "That-Shit."

Jonesy jumped at the sound. Again I was doing my horizontal rumba. Hailey moved quickly to my side and began trying to pound the leg muscle into submission. Jonesy realized what was happening then and decided to help.

PFC Jones was many things, including strong as an ox. His actions earlier aside, the kid possessed a phenomenal physical strength. I saw the punch coming but was in no position to avoid the blow. I felt that blow through the pain of the cramp. "Maybe he broke the fucking leg," I thought, as my eyes watered and I fought blacking out. Luckily the leg muscle felt it also and retreated in defeat. Another blow like that would put it out of the muscle business for life. I had heard the term "muscle memory" before, and I was sure that muscle would remember the blow for the rest of its life.

"Thanks, Jonesy," I managed to say.

"You okay, Sarge. I'll do it again if you want."

"No. I think we're even now. Let's leave well enough alone."

The chopper was landing in a clearing on the other side of the perimeter.

"You need water, Sarge. I'll go get you some." Jonesy moved off quickly toward the sound of the copter. I was tempted to stop him. Arrangements had already been made to get our share of supplies, and I did not know if Jonesy was supposed to be involved or not. On the other hand Jonesy was right. I did need water badly.

Jonesy came back empty handed. I watched him approach, his head hanging.

"Sorry, Sarge. They landed the dinner first. There was no water. Said it's coming in later."

"Didn't they have the soda and beer ration?"

"Yeah. I asked the cook for some, but he said we'd have to wait like everyone else."

It would take a while for the cooks to set up, and then, depending on the order they would feed the men, it might be another hour before we got anything to drink. I was being selfish, but I also had an obligation to the men in the platoon. They had been without water too long now. How they could bring in the food first was beyond my comprehension. I knew the captain had nothing to do with that decision. Now there was liquid refreshment available, but we were not being allowed to have any.

The cook was sort of Lord and Master over the chow line. It was necessary to maintain order and be fair about things. It would not do to have every man for himself. On the other hand, this was the jungle.

"Who's the cook?"

"Staff Sergeant named King."

"Get Sergeants Fry and Baskins for me."

Jonesy left and quickly returned with my two squad leaders.

"Sergeant King is an old friend of mine from the rear. I want you to gentlemen to fetch him for me. Tell him the Professor wants to talk with him. Don't take no for an answer."

I watched them walk away. I knew Sergeant King slightly. He was good friends with Staff Sergeant Scott. Jim had told me once that King had gotten a kick out of my nickname, so I was hoping it would ring a bell with him. If not, Baskins would make sure he came along.

The three men approached. From the smile on King's face I guessed he was coming willingly. He spotted Jonesy who was still hanging around, and the smile left his face. I stood up gingerly. Both legs were still aching and I hoped they would not cramp up.

"Hey, Sergeant King. I heard you were around, how are things in the rear?"

He eyed me suspiciously. "All right, Professor. I heard they gave you a platoon. Who's your platoon leader?"

"We do not have a platoon leader," Bobby answered before I could explain. "Sergeant Merrins runs the platoon. What he says, well, that is sort of the last word on the subject."

"Sergeant King, we need water real bad. There's been mistakes made and we've been without water too long."

"Sorry. You got to wait like everyone else." He started to turn away, but Fred placed a hand on his shoulder from behind. The nice thing about Sergeant Baskins was his lack of verbal skills.

"Under normal conditions that would be just fine with me, Sarge, but these are not normal conditions. My men need water now. You can keep the beer and soda. I want the ice water from the cans." Sergeant King knew what I was talking about. In their effort to get cold beverages to the boonies, they would pack the beer and soda in trash cans filled with ice. They

would cover the top of the cans with wet burlap sacks to slow the ice from melting. In reality, by time they normally served the beverages the ice was melted. Still the drinks retained some of their coolness, and the cooks' efforts were much appreciated.

"Shit. You ever taste that water? Its got to taste like burlap, and those bags are not exactly clean when we put them on top. Your men will get sick from that stuff."

"Listen Sarge. If you took your dick out and began pissing, some of the men would be tempted to drink it. Jonesy here would probably kill to be first in line." Jonesy smiled and nodded his head yes.

"All right. If the men get sick, it's your ass."

"Hell Sergeant King, I'm not going to force them to drink it. Sergeant Fry, have a couple of your men gather up some canteens and let's get some of that water."

I hobbled along after the cook. It would have been better just to wait, but I did not want Sergeant King to back down from our agreement. When we got to the mess area, I waited beside one of the cans. Lieutenant Kelp was hanging around the area also. It was a habit some officers picked up, trying to scrounge a little extra food. He chose to ignore me and struck up a conversation with Sergeant King.

Bobby showed up a couple minutes later with Tex and Tell and about twenty canteens. A little overly optimistic on their part I thought. Kelp eyed them suspiciously as they approached.

I pulled back the burlap on the first can. "You can't do that, Merrins," Lieutenant Kelp said, stepping over to me. "Cooky says we have to wait, I already asked." He was referring to Sergeant King in a way I knew the Sergeant would not appreciate. Just like him forgetting to address me by my rank.

Ignoring him I took the first canteen proffered by Bobby and stuck it into the water. There was still ice floating around the top. Not much, but the water was so cold my mouth started salivating at the thought. Where it got the moisture from I could not guess. As soon as it was half full I tried handing it over to Bobby.

"No you first, Sarge," he said. As I put the canteen to my lips, Bobby plunged another canteen into the water.

"Stop that now." Lieutenant Kelp looked like he was going to blow a gasket. I did not have time to answer as the water flowed down my throat. Sergeant King was right. It was nasty looking and tasted like burlap. I was sure it could become an acquired taste. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of the captain approaching.

"What's the commotion about, Lieutenant?"

"Sergeant Merrins is draining the water out of the liquid refreshment containers, Sir." Now all of a sudden I was Sergeant Merrins again.

The captain stepped over to the barrel and looked in. "That stuff safe, Sergeant King?" he asked. The Sergeant just shrugged his shoulder to indicate it wasn't his concern.

"What's it taste like?"

"Burlap, Sir." I held the canteen out for him to try. He took it, wiped the lip of the canteen off with his hand and took a swig. "Cold. You aren't planning on hogging all the water for your men, are you?"

"No, Sir" I lied.

"Good. Lieutenant Kelp, get things organized here. I want all the water distributed to anyone who wants it." He took another swig and then handed the canteen to Top who was now standing beside him. Sergeant Heard did not stop to wipe the lip of the canteen off, opting for expediency. He finished the canteen off before handing it back.

"Goddamn it, Sergeant Merrins. I apologize to the men for not thinking of this first," Top said. "I've been bitching and moaning about the need for water and didn't even think about the trash cans. Hell, I normally use this shit to wash and shave with after everyone's been served. Never thought to drink the damn stuff though. Good work."

In the meantime, Bobby kept filling the canteens. Now men from other platoons were showing up. They quickly commenced to fill canteens. As soon as two were filled they were passed over to one of the men who would head for the perimeter bearing their newfound gifts.

I grabbed three full canteens and headed back to the platoon. I was met halfway there by Hailey, who was carrying the radio along with Jonesy. It still hurt badly to walk, so they were quicker getting to me than I was getting to them. I tossed each of them a full canteen. "Take

some and get the rest to the men," I said. Neither of them stopped to take a drink, opting to head for the perimeter instead. I moved over to my position, dropping beside my rucksack.

I dug out a couple of salt tablets and aspirin. I swallowed all four, washing them down with the water. Of course, it almost goes without saying, that on a bad day, drinking too fast is not a good idea. Instead of my legs cramping, my stomach did. Up came the water and the four tablets. I lay there in misery for a few minutes before repeating the process. This time I just took a few small sips.

For the next twenty minutes I just lay there in a stupor, wanting never to move again. They would be serving food soon, but I had absolutely no appetite. Maybe by the time everyone else had eaten I would be hungry.

Sitting up I lit a cigarette. It was beginning to get a little cooler, and having reached the top of a hill again, there was a slight breeze. Hailey joined me. His uniform was soaked.

"What you been doing?" I asked.

"Running water."

"Why didn't you leave the radio here?"

"Like I can trust you to answer it?"

I let that one go. He was probably right.

Jonesy approached with Bobby. I could see that he had a plate of food in his hand and Bobby was carrying a couple of drinks. Jonesy squatted down in front of me and extended the dish. "Captain says you get first serving. Sergeant King says there's more where this came from. Says to tell you, 'You look like shit.' His words, not mine."

I caught a whiff from the food and discovered I was a lot hungrier than I had thought. The water, salt tablets and aspirin had kicked in, and while not feeling human, I was at least feeling alive. I offered the others some of the food, but they refused. I opened a soda and offered them the beer. They passed it around, quickly finishing it off.

Later they moved off to get their own share of the food. They returned with an extra plate for me. It was amazing how hungry I had become. I had no problem finishing off the second tray. The food started working wonders on me, along with the liquid refreshments of course.

Feeling better, I once more became interested in my duties as Platoon Sergeant. I realized that since the beginning of the move off the mountain earlier in the afternoon the squad leaders had to look after the platoon for me. They had done a fine job without my help, but now it was again my responsibility.

Everyone remained busy the rest of the evening. The supply choppers carrying our rations, water, and mail arrived. It was almost dark before all the supplies had been distributed and positions dug. Lucky for first platoon we got to stay in perimeter that night.

It was now 0400 hours. Two hours before, Third and Fourth Platoons had sprung the ambush in the valley below. Artillery had been tearing up the valley. Everyone was inside the perimeter waiting to see if the NVA would try to counterattack our position. Rumors were that our company had hit the enemy hard. Two of our guys were wounded, but neither seriously enough to require medivacs. They would leave in the morning.

Hailey had dropped back off to sleep. It was my turn on the radio. I was wide awake and not feeling sleepy. My whole body ached, but my legs seemed to have decided they had punished me enough. I had not felt even a twinge for the past several hours, giving me hope that the worst was past.

I had known from the beginning that day was going to be bad, but I had not realized just how bad. Having survived it did not give me a feeling of accomplishment. I had been neither courageous nor graceful in getting through it, but it did remind me of valuable lessons again.

Guys new to the field needed to be treated carefully. Each day was physically miserable, but I knew from experience that the next day would be easier than this day had been, because my body was adapting to my circumstances. It was the reason I felt almost human now. If my first day back had been this bad, I never would have even made it to the top of the first hill. In some ways that made me lucky. It was my responsibility to remember that when the platoon got replacements over the next few months.

I remembered the water thing with Jonesy on the side of the trail. Thinking about it fascinated me. I wondered what Hailey thought of it. I reached down and pulled out the canteen we had used. The night was dark, but my hands saw the canteen for me.

Each man in the platoon had taken a drink out of it. Black, White, Hispanic, Oriental. Not one man had passed on taking a sip. Unlike the captain, not one man had chosen to wipe the opening before placing his own lips upon it. Any one of the men could have finished off the contents with a couple of quick swallows. They were certainly thirsty enough. I would not have blamed them in the least, but they all chose not to. Without comment, instruction, or discussion, every man had understood the rules and lived within them. Not rules written by others, but strict rules nonetheless. Harsh rules that others could not impose, because in the end, these men made their own rules.

I had seen these men share things before, that did not surprise me, but this had been different. They had chosen to make it that way, breaking old rules and creating new ones. Tomorrow those rules would probably change again. I certainly could not predict how or why, but I trusted that I could discern the changes as they occurred.

I had learned that I was not so tough. God liked to keep reinforcing that message. I had also learned that maybe I could be a good platoon sergeant, and only time would tell. The water thing had helped. It was an accident of sorts, but somehow it had worked in my favor.

By all standards it had been a bad day. Like most bad days, it had been good also.

END