

#14 Deadly Night - 1968 – the field, Vietnam

It had already been a long day. The company had been on the move since early in the morning, over very rugged terrain, with almost no stopping. There had been no contact for the past week, and the battalion commander must have decided the company was not covering enough area. Today they had covered four thousand meters, or four clicks in military terminology. Since one click was equal to six tenths of a mile in civilian measurements, four clicks equaled two and four tenths miles. Not a very significant distance in terms of running or walking around the block. The Airborne Mile at Fort Benning was two miles long, and the men ran at least one Airborne mile before breakfast every morning.

Two and a half miles through the jungle, searching for a large enemy force, was something entirely different. Two and a half miles with a full combat supply strapped to your back in one hundred degree heat was a lot of distance. Add to that the constant rain, the density of the underbrush, and the steepness of the terrain, and you had to multiply the distance by at least a factor of ten. It was sheer stupidity, and the men in the company were paying a high price for the move in terms of energy expended.

The battalion commander's helicopter could be heard several times during the day passing over the company's position on the jungle floor. The stupid bastard has no concept of what it is like here on the ground, Lou thought. It was the only explanation for the arduous movement. To Lou it was inconceivable that the company could accomplish anything by covering such distances. He was in terrific condition but was now so tired that if a firefight took place, he was sure he would be almost too exhausted to participate. Being on the ground put these things in perspective. If the battalion commander were here with them, the company would not be instructed to cover half this ground. The battalion commander was a tough old man, but there was no way he would be able to keep up with the men in the company.

The company had now been in the field for three weeks, and all the men were acclimated to the environment. Alpha Company could hump the boonies with the best of them, but every man had his limits, and the company was being pushed to its. Lou was climbing a hill. It had no name, just an elevation number marked at its top on the map.

According to that number, it was the highest mountain around, and Lou could only hope it was the final destination of the company. Early this morning when the company first took off from its overnight position, the plan was for a move of just under two clicks. This did not sound like much, but Lou knew it would be a hard day. The hills in this area were mostly straight up and down with dense jungle and elephant grass intermixed. Lou had studied the map and figured a trip of at least four hours under the best of conditions. Well, he had been wrong.

Lou looked back over his shoulder and saw the Hare hold up his right hand with the palm wide open. It was their signal that Hare had been told to take five and was passing the message on to Lou, who was pulling point. Lou continued for another ten yards before finding a decent spot to take cover.

Upon reaching his position, Lou eased the rucksack to the ground quietly. Everything was secure, and so it made no noise as he set it on the jungle floor. Lou sat next to it. He was sweating profusely, a good sign. It meant his body had enough water in it to keep him cooled. Lou took one canteen off his right hip. It was full, as were the other two he carried. The company had crossed a stream at the bottom of the hill, and Lou, like everyone else in the company, had stopped to fill his canteen. He took his time emptying half a canteen into his mouth. The water was still cool and tasted good despite the purification pill Lou had placed in the canteen at the time he filled it.

Lou looked back to where Hare was set up in a defensive position covering Lou. So far, the two seemed to be making a good pair, which in some ways surprised Lou. He was again pulling point for the company, despite having two bad ankles that made moving less than pleasurable. Sgt. Wilson had made it clear that Lou was not expected to pull point unless he felt like it. To Lou, it made no difference, since he would have to move the same distance whether at the front or the rear of the company.

While being point man was considered the most hazardous job a man could pull in the field, Lou did not feel this was necessarily true, especially out here in the deep bush. The point man got to choose the path the company would take to reach its objective. It required a lot of independent thought and a feel for the lay of the land. Although Lou had a map and compass to work with, it was his ability to sense the lay of the land and feel his way through the jungle

that was his special gifts. Being out front, he saw everything before the other men in the company could alter the scene. His eyes and ears were attuned to the surroundings, giving him an advantage over the other men following him. And so, Lou preferred walking the point. It suited him.

Lou's pace varied tremendously as he moved the company forward. At times he would just glide along, making good speed, while at other times his movements were very slow, the company bunched up behind him. Once on this two click day, Lou had stood frozen in place for almost five minutes after catching a glimpse of movement in his right eye. Whatever had caused the movement in the brush was big enough to cause Lou concern. It was a tense five minutes, frozen in one position with the weight of his rucksack and the heat of the day pulling on him, before Lou felt safe enough to move slowly in the direction of the movement. A quick search of the area turned up nothing. He had moved on then, offering neither apology nor explanation for his behavior. It was a compliment to his abilities that Sgt. Wilson did not question him.

In the past, Big John had been Lou's backup when pulling point. It was strange having Hare behind him now. After scanning the area to ensure that he was safe, Lou turned and signaled Hare forward. In a minute the Hare was at his side, peering anxiously into the surrounding jungle.

Lou was dying for a cigarette. It was one thing about pulling point that he did not like, not being able to smoke. There was no rule against it, other than the simple rule of survival. That was one rule Lou refused to break.

"You okay?" Lou asked the Hare.

"Yeah, man," the Hare answered.

They both talked in muted voices that carried no more than one or two yards.

"Unload and take a break, I'll keep an eye out," Lou said. He could see that the Hare was both tired and a little anxious about their position. The two men were only ten yards from the nearest man, who had moved up to take over Hare's position when he joined Lou. The rest of the company was stretched on down the mountain. Ten yards did not seem like much, but if the enemy attacked, it would take some time for support to arrive up the steep hill. Lou was

comfortable with this because there was nothing he could do about it. Any enemy was as likely to hit the middle of the company as it was to hit the lead men. By moving into the area ahead of the others, Lou had gotten to choose the best defensive position available. He was also confident that he had neither seen anything nor missed anything as they moved forward. Since the only plan marking the company's proposed path lay within the confines of Lou's head, there was no way for an enemy to predict where the company was headed other than a general direction. It was easy to set up an ambush on a trail or stream. It was almost impossible when an enemy's path tended not to follow a direct line through the jungle.

The Hare took up a comfortable position with his back to a large tree. He took a couple of deep drinks from his canteen, reached into his pocket and removed a candy bar, and took a bite. His head was turning constantly, scanning the surrounding jungle.

"You're doing a fine job, Hare," Lou said.

"Easy for you to say, bro," Hare replied. "You like this shit, don't you?"

"Pulling point is just a frame of mind. I grew up spending a lot of time in the woods, most of it alone. I'm comfortable surrounded by trees and brush. I like moving quietly like the animals I saw all the time growing up. Nothing to it. If it weren't for all the shit we have to carry, the fact that my ankles hurt some, and the fact that there's a million gooks out there who want my balls for supper, it would be fun," Lou said, smiling.

The Hare smiled back at him, shaking his head. "Just my luck old Kenny went down yesterday." Spec Four Kenneth Yates was one of the platoon's two machine-gunners. Yesterday he stumbled climbing down some rocks, twisting his knee. The scream he let out when the leg gave way was scary, and everyone guessed that he was seriously hurt. The company's chief medic had treated the injury somberly. It had necessitated the movement of the company to a nearby hilltop and the evacuation of Kenny to the rear. Like the rest of the men in the platoon, Lou had facilitated the move by carrying some of Kenny's gear.

Big John had also assisted by carrying Kenny's machine gun up the hill. That had proven to be his big mistake. It seemed natural seeing the big guy carrying the puny weapon around in his arms. Right then and there, Sgt. Harris had designated Big John as the platoon's new

machine-gunner. The look on Big John's face when this happened was comical. He appeared both proud and ready to cry. Lou did not blame him.

Sgt. Wilson had tried to get Big John to become a machine-gunner before, if for no other reason than his size. An M-60 machine gun was a heavy weapon compared to the M-16 rifle, which was the standard weapon of an infantryman. Both weapons were capable of firing at a rate of six hundred rounds per minute, so that in terms of putting out lead, they were equal. The M-60 did have a couple of advantages. First, it was a belt-fed weapon. This meant that the ammunition came in a long belt that could be fed through the machine gun continuously. It could put out bullets at a prodigious rate without the need to stop every few seconds to reload. This was a definite advantage during an enemy assault.

The ammunition for the M-60 was a standard NATO round of 7.62 millimeters. It was heavier and slower than the ammunition used for an M-16 rifle, so it had the advantage of being able to maintain a truer flight and punch holes through the foliage of the jungle. It was very impressive at cutting down small trees and leaves and anything trying to hide behind them. The heavier weapon had a real recoil to it but was very stable when used with the bipod legs attached to the front end of the barrel. It had a long reach and was accurate out to and beyond five hundred yards.

The ammunition came with every third round tipped with red phosphorous. As the shell exited the barrel, the phosphorous would burn a bright red on its way to the target. This provided a tracer round that the gunner could observe on the way to the target and make adjustments off of. Since these were appearing at a rate of about three every seconds, there appeared to be a red line reaching out for the target. Of course the reciprocal was true: Every gook in the area would see where the stream of bullets was originating from and shift their fire into that area. The gook's machine guns had green tipped ammunition to keep the sides from getting confused about who was shooting whom. Lou wondered who had decided which side got which color and if it would be considered dirty pool switching the color of their ammo.

Lou wondered if Big John had the right temperament for using the weapon to its fullest potential. Since their time in the field, Lou's estimate of Big John's character had changed tremendously. The gentle giant had proven to be a ferocious warrior who stood taller with

courage than he ever would because of his height. The man appeared fearless, although Lou knew that was not true. Big John was capable of performing his job despite the fear, like a majority of men in the company. Lou no longer worried about whether Big John would be there when the action got hot. Now he would just have to be sure to remind Big John to conserve ammo when things got hot. It was possible to ruin the barrel of a machine gun by putting too many rounds through it in too big of a hurry.

Big John's switch to machine-gunner had presented Sgt. Wilson with a problem. The squad did not have a machine-gunner in its makeup before, and in a way it changed the functioning of the squad. Lou and Big John had always been partners when sharing a night position or when Lou pulled point. But it did not make sense to Sgt. Wilson to put a machine-gunner out in front of when Lou was pulling point. It also made Lou a little nervous, thinking of Big John walking behind him in the jungle carrying an M-60.

Sgt. Wilson decided to have Ben Wills become Big John's assistant gunner and to have Hare work with Lou at pulling point. None of the men involved had any objections, or at least they were smart enough not to voice them. That night when the company dug in, Lou and the Hare manned one position, and Big John and Ben occupied another. When Sgt. Wilson came by, he commented that he had not meant that the men could not remain teamed as before when the squad was dug in, but the men decided to leave the positions the way they had decided.

"You want to pull some point?" Lou asked to be polite.

"Fuck you." Hare replied, striving to be even more polite than Lou.

"It feels good having you back me up. You move much quieter than Big John does, although he has been getting better at it. I know you're a better shot than he is, and with your eyesight you'll probably be able to spot things quicker than I can," Lou said.

"Well I ain't seen nothing but woods," Hare replied.

"Me either."

"Then why you stop back there?" Hare asked.

"I caught some movement out of the corner of my eye. Never quite made it out."

"Why you freeze like that?"

"I was just beginning to walk again when I caught the movement. Since I hadn't been moving, it seemed best just to freeze and become part of the scenery. It was my movement that probably caused whatever it was to start moving in the first place."

"Shit. Why not just drop down?"

"I didn't want to do anything to draw attention to me. If I dropped down, whatever or whoever it was would have had a definite fix on my position. I've seen deer walk through the forest and not spot me as long as the wind was right and I didn't move. On point I just keep my eyes in motion and trust that I'll pick out anything that is not natural. Of course, old Charlie is good at disguising things, so it's possible for him to be watching without me being able to spot him, but there is nothing anyone can do about that."

"I've noticed that thing about you not moving. If you stop while I'm looking away, I sometimes have trouble spotting you when I look back. I thought you had stepped behind a tree once, but then I finally saw you crouched behind a bush. I also notice that when you walk your head is moving all over the place, but when you stop, it moves very slowly," the Hare said.

"Like I said, Hare, I think you'll do good on point once you get comfortable with the idea that your mind knows what does and what doesn't belong in the area surrounding you. A few thousand years or so ago, our ancestor moved through jungles like these in search of food and shelter. Deep down inside us there exists the instincts necessary for our survival here. I think that because of my living and playing in the woods when I was young, I am just more aware of those instincts than you are right now. Just give yourself a chance, and I think you'll begin to feel the same way I do," Lou said.

"Yeah, in maybe a couple of thousand years," Hare said with a smile. "I do sometimes wish I had a spear to throw."

Lou's eyes caught Sgt. Wilson signaling them to move out. He immediately picked up his rucksack and swung it onto his back. He turned and headed up the hill.

Lou was three quarters of the way up the hill when he came to an opening in the woods. It was overgrown with elephant grass that stretched over his head. Lou could see the top of the trees on the other side of the opening, less than twenty yards away. He decided to skirt the patch of grass and moved off at an angle through the tree line. Fifty yards to the right, he

found the end of the grass and again started moving up the hill. Another ten yards up the mountain he spotted the trail. Lou stopped the company and signaled Hare to send Sgt. Wilson forward. Within minutes Sgt. Wilson, Platoon Sgt. Harris, Captain Pickett, Lieutenant Burroughs, and Master Sgt. Tucker were inspecting the trail. It was decided to have the company pull back down the hill a little way and then reconnoiter the trail in both directions.

This was not done in an expeditious manner, and as a result, the company was delayed again on the side of the hill for another half hour. Finally the company was moved almost two hundred yards to the right before the climb to the top of the hill was continued. They moved across the path one at a time. Second Platoon had found a spot where the ground was really rocky. By having the men cross one at a time while remaining on the rocks, it was possible for the whole company to move by the area without leaving a trail someone walking on the path would notice. After negotiating the trail, Lou led the company to the top of the hill which wound up being the company's final destination for the day.

It was already 1800 hours before they settled into their overnight position. The First Platoon was scheduled to pull ambush that night, so Lou knew there would be little time to rest. While the other platoons dug in, First Platoon was allowed to rest. After cleaning his rifle, Lou decided to catch a few minutes of shuteye, knowing there would still be time to get some food before the platoon headed out around 2000 hours. He leaned back against his rucksack and closed his eyes.

"First squad, lets get ready to move," Sgt. Wilson's voice said.

Lou heard the statement and was immediately awake and getting ready to move out. He grabbed everything he would take and quickly got to his feet. A glance at his watch showed that he had only been sleeping for thirty minutes. The weather was changing, and Lou could see clouds moving in from the West. It was typical of the weather pattern for the past two weeks, with the monsoon season just beginning. Brutally hot days with intermittent showers and thunderstorms. Sometimes the sun shined and sometimes it didn't. This day, it shined its brightest, keeping the temperature and humidity just above the unbearable stage. Now the rain would come to make their night miserable.

"Captain says that Brigade is reporting really bad weather for tonight instead of the usual shitty weather," Sgt. Wilson said. "The old man wants us to move into ambush position before the storms hit, so we got to get moving. Anyone who hasn't eaten, bring some food with you. We're moving out in two minutes. Lou, get out your map and I'll show you where we want to head."

As Lou was point man that day, the sergeant felt he would be most qualified to find the area where the platoon would set up ambush for the night. He was right of course. The trick would be to circle the hill and approach from a different direction than the company had used earlier. It would be a lot easier to just backtrack to the area, but there was always a risk Charlie would be waiting in the bush for just that kind of mistake. Lou and Sgt. Wilson quickly discussed the general direction Lou would take back to the ambush site.

Physically, Lou was tired from the day's march. The company had moved way too far that day, and the First Platoon had been given inadequate time to recuperate. That was Lou's opinion if anyone bothered asking. No one did.

Lou had led the platoon off the top of the hill, and they were making good time when the first storm hit and almost blew them off the mountain. This particular hill was going bald on top and had very little cover to break the wind and deflect the rain. Visibility dropped to almost zero, and after a quick conference between Sgt. Wilson, Sgt. Harris, and Lieutenant Burroughs, the platoon's movement came to a screeching halt. The men set up a quick defensive perimeter and hunkered down against the torrential rains.

The terrain was steep, and the wind was blowing directly against the side of the mountain where the men were trying to get some rest. Even though it was still over an hour and a half to sundown, the day had turned to twilight. The storm pelted the platoon for the next hour, and then the rain stopped as quickly as it had started. Daylight returned weakly, and clouds rushed by overhead.

Lou again led off. His movements were now slowed by the slippery conditions caused by the storm. Downhill movement required ensuring that there were adequate hand grips to keep him and the others from slipping down the hill. The platoon had left its rucksacks back in the perimeter, so the men were lightly loaded in comparison to what they normally carried, but

the weight of their gear was still considerable, perhaps thirty-five to forty pounds each. Most of the weight was due to the munitions the men were carrying.

Lou's load was typical. In addition to his loaded M-16 rifle, he had six grenades attached to his webbing along with a full canteen and his bayonet, six bandoleers of M-16 ammunition, each holding five magazines of twenty rounds each, and one hundred rounds of machine gun ammo. Every other man in the platoon carried the same. Two claymore mines, a steel helmet, a poncho and a poncho liner all added to the weight of the load. A man could get seriously injured taking a fall with all that attached to his person. For that reason, Lou was cautious moving down the hill. It was almost dark before he found the path the platoon would ambush that night.

By time the platoon got settled into positions, it was dusk, and the night dropped its curtain on the scenery. Lou had not had an opportunity to eat his can of C rations, and he was already beginning to feel the effects of too few calories consumed that day. His legs were shaky, and he had a slight headache for which he had already taken three aspirins. Both his ankles were sore from the hard day on the trail, and it felt good to be off them, even if it meant laying on the ground in the rain. Opening a can of Cs while in ambush was taboo, and the thought only stayed with Lou for a short time. He wasn't particularly hungry anyway; if anything he felt slightly nauseated.

The weather changed to gentle rain, more of a mist than anything. Lou guessed that the bad weather the captain had talked about was what the platoon had encountered on its way to this site. The lieutenant had chosen the ambush site carefully, and Lou was satisfied with the positioning of the men. It would be very effective should anyone wander along the path during the night. Lou was skeptical as to whether there would be any traffic along the path that night and whether such unlikely traffic would be enemy soldiers. The path was too high up the hill and crossed too many open areas on the way to wherever it led to be used by NVA soldiers. Their trails tended to stay below the jungle canopy to prevent detection from the air.

Lou's position was located in a small depression, on the side of the mountain, about fifteen yards above the trail. He had a good field of fire down to the trail. His claymore mines

were located on either side of his position about five yards off the trail. Someone passing along the trail during the day would be able to spot them, but not at night.

Lou got a candy bar out of his right leg pant pocket, stripped off the plastic covering, and commenced to eat his main meal for the day. From now on he pledged to himself to eat some food earlier in the day regardless of circumstances and regardless of how hungry he felt. There was a tendency with the heat and exercise not to have much of an appetite until the company had stopped for the day. Lately this had been occurring later and later in the day as they spent more time each day on the move at the behest of the battalion commander.

Lou had gotten in the habit of eating only one meal of Cs in the evening. The rest of the day, he munched on either candy or the tins containing cookies or canned fruit for energy. Lou had found that he was able to maintain adequate stores of energy this way, although he understood that he was probably missing some vitamins and minerals. With his current eating habits, Lou had been losing weight, his equipment gaining bulk as his body lost it. Lou's body was leaner and more muscular than ever before. He was no different than every other man in the company.

The evening air was cooling down as it did most nights in the mountains. While it would get up past one hundred degrees most days, at night it would sometimes cool down into the seventies. It might not sound cold to someone from a more northern climate, but a thirty or forty degrees shift in temperature was noticeable. Lou looked forward to the coolness of the nights, although once or twice he had actually been chilled by the night air. It was for this reason he had brought his poncho liner. Laying there in the early night coolness, Lou was comfortable.

Two hours later things weren't looking so good. The gentle breeze that had been blowing earlier had picked up considerably. While not nearly as bad as the breeze the company had encountered during its first night in the field, it was blowing strongly up the side of the hill. Even laying in the depression, the wind swirled around Lou vigorously. Normally this would be of little consequence, except now the temperature had dropped lower than it ever had in the past. With only three weeks of experience in these mountains, the company had not yet met, Lou was certain, the most extreme of weather conditions, although the typhoon they

experienced their first night in the field might define some of the more unsavory characteristics of such weather.

The night was still misting, leaving a layer of wet on everything. Lou had worked his poncho liner off his webbing and had managed to wrap his body in it. Although wet, the liner quickly absorbed his body's warmth and stored it within the fabric. Again Lou was warm, lying within a wet cocoon on the side of the hill.

Lou's senses came alive at the approaching of sound. At first, Lou did not recognize it, and all his body's senses went on full alert. Peering out into the night, trying to discern the source of the noise, Lou's face was fully exposed when the torrential rains arrived. It should have come as no surprise, but it somehow it did not. It was the sudden blast of wind and rain on his face that dampened Lou's spirit more than anything. It made a dismal day worse and a dark night more black.

No sense worrying about gooks, Lou thought. Nothing was going to be moving on that mountain until the wind and rain died down. In some ways it was a blessing. There was no reason to stay alert under the present conditions, so he decided to curl up into a ball and get some sleep. Like everyone else, Lou was chronically sleep deprived. To be able to get two hours sleep at a stretch was considered a luxury. To get four hours sleep each night was considered normal, unless of course you were on ambush, and then you might or might not get any sleep, depending on the strength of your willpower and your body's ability to survive without sleep. So far, Lou had been able to resist the temptation to sleep while on ambush, but it had not been easy. Under the current conditions, it would be stupid to try and stay awake.

Lou had slept for almost an hour before he woke up shivering. The depression he was laying in was filled with water. This was not so unusual since monsoon season filled every depression with standing water, especially foxholes. Laying in a pool of water was not a strange experience anymore, a fine testament to his current living conditions.

The poncho liner was the crucial piece of equipment for handling such situations. It was made of a very light weight material which when dried weighed almost nothing. When it got wet, the weight of the blanket went up to close to one thousand pounds if you were humping the damn thing up a steep hill in pouring rain. The point being that it retained water like a

sponge. Once a person was wrapped within the liner, the body's temperature would heat the water trapped within the fibers of the material until it was the same temperature as the body. In many ways it was like a wet suit divers wear when working in cold water. By covering the poncho liner with a poncho, to keep freshly falling rain from cooling the trapped water, it was normally possible to get comfortable despite cool temperatures and rain. Tonight this system did not seem to be working.

Until now, Lou had almost always been in situations where, if water collected in his spot, he could simply move to a new location. Tonight that was not possible. It was pitch black; he had an assigned area to cover within the ambush site; his claymores were set and would have to be retrieved prior to moving; and any movement in the dark might be interpreted as hostile by other members of the platoon. Movement in this situation, while desirable, would be decidedly unhealthy.

On one other occasion, when Lou had been forced to lie in standing water, the water had been warm to begin with and his body warmed it further. This situation was definitely different. The falling rain was cold. Whatever atmospheric conditions were present, they were cooling the rain high overhead. The temperature of the surrounding air was also cooler than Lou had experienced since arriving in Vietnam. His position, an open area on the side of the mountain, was exposed to the elements. The wind whistled through, and gusts cooled his legs and feet significantly. An important factor contributing to Lou's discomfort was that the depression he was holed up in seemed to lay within the boundaries of a stream. The water was decidedly cool, moving, and it stayed that way. His body could not keep the water it was laying in warm, and now the water was robbing his body of heat.

Lou was familiar with the term "hypothermia." It was caused when the body had to continuously give up its heat to the surrounding environment. The shivering was his body's way of trying to produce more heat. If he could get up and move around, it would help his situation enormously, but being in a relatively open area, Lou did not deem this to be a good idea.

Survival was the number one criterion that decided the actions of animals in hostile situations. An infantryman weighs the consequences of every action against that one criterion. A mistake made, whether by being tired, cold, miserable, hungry or stupid, could result in

death. The right choice was not always the easiest, and yet each man was faced with such decisions almost every day.

Lou decided that the only thing to be done was nothing. He would just have to suck it up and survive the night. The night was normally his friend, but even a friend could get you killed if you weren't careful.

It was by far the worst night of his life. Until then, his first night in the field, lying exposed in a typhoon, had been the worst. Tonight would set a new standard for physical and mental discomfort. The shivering lasted throughout the remainder of the night. It was possibly the only thing that saved Lou's life. There were times during that night that every fiber in Lou's body had a life and urgency of its own. The teeth chattered uncontrollably. If it weren't for the wind and rain, Lou was sure that anyone within twenty yards of his position would have been able to hear him.

It was not the first time in his life that Lou had suffered from such symptoms. When he was sixteen, he bought a motorcycle. For the next several years, this was his main source of transportation, even in the winter, as long as there was no ice or snow on the ground. Many a day, with the thermometer hovering around zero, Lou had to use his motorcycle to get to one job or another. Despite layers of clothing and a leather jacket to break the wind, at sixty or seventy miles per hour, it was impossible to keep warm. Many a time he would be racing along a country road while his whole body shivered so hard that he feared he would lose control of the motorcycle. His teeth would be chattering away, and tears would be forming in his eyes in response to the bitter cold. Still a man had obligations, and it was better than walking. After such a ride, it would sometimes take a half hour before his body would stop shivering, and yet that never stopped him. Bent low over the handlebars, leaning into a curve with one knee almost scraping the ground, the wind blowing through his helmet, it was sometimes difficult to decide whether the shivering was from the cold or from fear. Still, it was worth the price. Living life on the edge was great. The colder it got the more alive he felt.

Around three in the morning the first cramps hit. First the right leg went into spasm. Fire shot up the leg as the calf muscle then the hamstring began their opera. Lou fought against crying out in pain. Rolling into a tight ball, he reached down and pounded the flesh of

the calf with his fist. The muscles felt like rock beneath as he struck down on them. When that cramp began to relax its grip he grabbed his hamstring with both hands and began kneading the muscle, until it too responded by relaxing. The pain had been excruciating, and Lou felt exhausted from the ordeal. The leg was sore as he moved it slowly, trying to work the kinks out. Both legs had several episodes of cramping throughout the remainder of the night. It was perhaps the worst part of the ordeal, since there seemed no way of preventing the cramps from recurring. There was no way to predict when they were going to hit, so that even when a cramp was not taking place, there was an element of fear attached to the next attack, which might occur at any second.

Lou held it together throughout the night. Sometimes there are no choices. His mind remained active, and he had a lot of time to contemplate his life. If given a choice of reliving this night on this hill or any other night of his life, Lou would be tempted to choose the other night, but knew he wouldn't. The night was trying to take the measure of the man, and Lou was willing to accept the challenge. Fuck the night, fuck the rain and the cold. He refused to cry or give into the elements. He refused to feel sorry for himself or rage against his God. Life is hard, and Lou was determined to be harder. His comrades lay nearby in the darkness, suffering as he was, maybe more for all he knew. His enemies could not be enjoying themselves very well either tonight, and this gave him some measure of satisfaction, although Lou knew that the enemy was not stupid enough to be out in this weather and was laid up as comfortably as possible waiting for the weather to clear.

Daylight finally came slowly, ever so slowly. Neither the wind nor the rain had slackened during the night. Daylight was a graying of the darkness, exposing little of the mountain where the ambush lay. The lightning sky brought Lou's focus back to the war. Now there was more to worry about, since this weather would be ideal for the enemy to use to attack the company. Right now they could be moving toward the mountain top in preparation for an assault. Peering out at the mist, Lou tried to discern any movement or noise that might signal the presence of the enemy. A half hour later the ambush was called off.

"Everyone gather your shit, and get ready to move out," Sgt. Wilson barked out to the men.

Lou stood up slowly and looked around. His legs were shaky, and he was still shivering. Big John moved over to his position. "You look like shit, man."

"I don't feel that good," Lou replied.

"Fucking hill kicked my ass last night," the Hare said, moving over to them. "At least I was able to stay fairly dry. Looks like you were laying in a lake, Lou," Hare said, smiling.

"Yeah, felt like one of those glacier lakes you read about, if you could read, Hare," Lou said with a smile. It was amazing how being around his friends could raise his spirits so quickly.

"Lou, you lead out," Sergeant Wilson said, moving past their position. Lou gathered his claymores as quickly as possible, which wasn't very quickly. It was hard to get his body moving. His legs felt like someone had beaten them with a baseball bat sometime during the night. He was completely soaked, and so was all his equipment. Lou had some doubt in his mind about whether his weapon would work. Looking it over, he saw that it was wet but clean. He was tempted to break it down and clean it quickly, but circumstances would not allow that. It made Lou uncomfortable.

Three minutes later, Lou headed up the hill with the Hare following. It was difficult to see ahead in the morning mists. With the company dug in at the top of the mountain, it was not a real navigation problem finding them. Just keep heading up the hill until you ran out of mountain, and that's where the company would be. It was a steep climb under shitty conditions, and it sucked every ounce of energy from Lou's body.

Lt. Burroughs had called ahead on the radio to warn the company that the ambush was on its way back to the perimeter, so that when Lou appeared in front of one of the positions, he would not be immediately shot. Lou had heard the men of the company before he could actually see them. He made sure to call out from a position of safety prior to exposing himself.

Lou actually wobbled into the perimeter that morning. It was sheer willpower that kept him upright and moving forward. Lou was hurting bad and trying hard to keep it from showing. He wondered if he had any strength to make it through the day.

The platoon's gear was stored in the center of the perimeter. Lou was moving toward the rucksacks when a voice rang out.

"Hey, Lou, over here."

Lou looked over at the source of the voice. It was one of the men in the mortar section, motioning him to come over to where he was standing. Lou's first inclination was to ignore him. He needed food in his belly and he needed it now. Instead he moved over to where the man was standing. He knew the man who had called him, but only slightly.

Ron Kittle was a wisp of a man. Maybe five-four, which was the minimum height necessary to be in service. The man couldn't have weighed more than 110 pounds, which was also the minimum weight. Ron was in the mortar section, which was just stupid. The guys in the mortar section were expected to hump more weight than even an infantryman. To put someone Ron's size into mortars must have taken someone near mental genius or with a perverted sense of humor. For Ron to have stuck it out made him something of an enigma, a freak. Still, looking at him, Lou could see he looked no worse for the wear. Lou wondered what the hell he wanted.

Ron ducked under a poncho he had strung as a makeshift tent as Lou approached his position. Sitting on the ground under the poncho, Ron picked up a canteen cup that had water boiling in it. Lou squatted down next to the poncho.

"Come in out of the rain, Lou," Ron said. Lou worked his way under the poncho, finding just enough room to sit up out of the rain. Ron pulled an LRRP meal out of his rucksack and tossed it to Lou. "You look like you need this more than me," Ron said.

"Hey man, thanks," Lou said tearing the meal open. He opened the top to the plastic container and placed it on the ground in front of him. Ron poured half the contents of the canteen cup into the packet and handed Lou a plastic fork to stir the mixture with. The LRRP meal was spaghetti, Lou's favorite. His hand was shaking so bad that he was having trouble holding the fork and coordinating his movements.

"Give me that damn thing," Ron said snatching the fork from his hand. This momentarily angered Lou. He thought Ron was changing his mind about giving him the food. Ron quickly stirred the meal. "Don't want you spilling this stuff," Ron said by way of explanation. He gathered a glob of food on the end of the fork. "Open up," he said. Lou felt foolish taking food like that from someone he barely knew, but he was too tired and hungry to argue. He knew his hands were shaking so badly that it was doubtful he could hold meal safely.

Half way through the meal, Lou said "I can handle that now." Ron handed the food and fork over to Lou. The shaking had subsided to a mild tremor by then, and Lou was able to shovel food into his mouth. Ron got out another LRRP for himself and began eating. He refilled the canteen cup with water and used a heating pellet to begin boiling more water.

Lou quickly finished the meal, wolfing the food down as quickly as he could chew and swallow it. "Cigarette?" Ron asked, offering Lou an opened pack of Salem's.

"Yeah." Lou said working a cigarette free from the pack. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a packet of plastic in which his cigarette lighter was wrapped. Lighting up, Lou relaxed. The food he had eaten was like a quick acting drug, and Lou could almost feel the energy releasing into his bloodstream. He pulled the smoke from the cigarette deep into his lungs, savoring its warmth almost as much as its taste. He smiled as his hand shook faintly, moving the cigarette away from his mouth.

The water Ron had been heating quickly began to boil. Reaching again into his rucksack he came out with a packet of instant coffee, cream and sugar. He dumped the contents into the canteen cup and stirred the mess with a plastic spoon. He handed the cup to Lou. Lou took a couple of sips, feeling the fluid worm its way down to his stomach. The feeling of the heat down his esophagus could be felt long after the fluid had reached its final destination. Lou offered the cup back to Ron. "No, you finish that, then I'll make a cup for myself. Take your time, I'm in no hurry," Ron said. Without another word, Ron left. Lou finished both the cigarette and coffee.

When he was done, Lou felt sated. It didn't take much to fill his belly. Lou got up from under the poncho. It was still pouring rain, and from the looks of things, it could continue forever. He looked around, trying to spot Ron, but the man was nowhere in sight. Across an opening, Lou spotted the men in his platoon gathering their gear, and from the looks of it, preparing to move out. Lou moved quickly to join them. His body felt better now that he had some food in him, although he knew the soreness would last until the muscles were properly heated up. With the company moving out, that would be really soon.

Lou did not see Ron that day or the next. Two days later he saw Ron for a moment as the weapons section passed through his position. Lou and Ron shared a smile and a wave as

they went their separate ways. The two men rarely saw each other, and Lou didn't get around to thanking Ron for that meal until many months later. Neither man had any inkling that they would eventually throw in together again in the future and eventually become closer than brothers. Lou remembered that as one of the truly best meals of his life. Ron's kindness did not save his life that day, but it rescued his spirit when it was almost broken. It was one of the most decent acts of kindness Lou would ever experience.

When asked what the worst day of his life was, Lou would look back on that night and smile. He saw and experienced many things during the course of his time in Vietnam, but that night was something other. He came close to dying on that hillside, and it would have been a damn shame. END