

## #18 Firefight – the field, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – I am not real sure but I really feel like it's probably during that period of time after we left Bong Son Firebase.

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There was a firefight that day. It started, like most firefights do, with two men of different genetic origins meeting at a watering hole and deciding they did not want to share the water. So deciding, they started shooting at each other. In this case it wasn't an actual watering hole, but a small opening in the jungle which both men decided to cross at the same instant. After stopping and studying the terrain, the Hare stepped out from behind the tree and into the opening at almost the same instant as his counterpart from the other side.

Luckily my man got off the first shots. The enemy's fire was more a reflex, his last reflex, and it did nothing more than knock down some leaves and scare the hell out of Hare.

The Hare hit the dirt, and Buddy Herrington, his backup, took up position to cover him. He was ready when three of the dead man's friends made a sudden appearance with rifles blazing. Buddy put one down and forced the others to dive for cover. Meanwhile, Hare let loose with a hand grenade and put a big hole in the underbrush. Then he did an about face and joined Buddy back down the trail.

Sergeant Fry's First Squad went on line and moved up along either side of the two point men. Second Squad went into position on their right, while Third Squad went left. Everyone moved quickly into position using the tactics we had discussed. All three squads were on line and waiting when the enemy came down the hill in a big hurry. One minute sooner, or maybe only fifteen seconds, and it would have been two forces butting heads straight on, but the rapid deployment of the platoon changed all that.

It only takes an experienced man a few seconds to get into a good defensive position and tie in with his squad members when all the men know what they are doing. These guys had been in the bush long enough that they did not hesitate, and when the enemy started appearing to their front, they were ready.

The firing had stopped for an instant after Hare's grenade went off. I was back near the end of Third Squad and was far enough away that I did not immediately know what was

happening. There is a natural tendency in that situation to want to just lay down until things become clearer, but when Third Squad moved forward quickly, I joined them. Fourth Squad followed me and the radio man forward.

The platoon had made a definite trail as it moved. When I reached a position where I could see both Hare and Bill taking positions behind a couple of trees, I found my own spot to give them cover from, should they get into trouble. If the situation called for it, they would pass back through my position on their way to join the company. The radio was squawking, and as soon as I was in position I answered it.

"Five, this is Alpha One, out."

"Alpha One, what is your situation?"

"Five. My point man has initiated contact. The platoon is deployed along the hill with three squads on line facing up the hill, over."

"What do you want?"

"Move up Second Platoon and tie them in on our right, ov..."

I do not know if he got that last word, as the woods along the hill came alive with the sounds of music, only it wasn't Julie Andrews singing. The enemy had, almost as quickly as we had, deployed on line. Almost as quickly, but not quite. My men had their butts on the ground, and were wound around and behind the trees like coils. They were waiting, and the whole line opened up simultaneously. Even being keyed up and anticipating the noise, I still felt my heart jump when the firing started. Everyone facing the enemy had their weapons on rock and roll and there was a wall of hot steel on the way to the enemy that quickly stopped their charge down the hill. The guys had enough time to prepare their hand grenades and soon these started going off up the hill.

The firing along the line waxed and waned for the next minute, and I tried to pinpoint where it was the heaviest and who was doing the firing. The firing began to slack off over to my left, where Third Squad had deployed, while remaining brisk to my front and over on the right. Bullets passed over and around the log I had chosen for cover. I looked back down the trail and spotted Sergeant Friend, Fourth Squad's leader, looking over at me. I pointed over towards the

right. He shook his head in acknowledgement. Half a minute later, I could see the men in Fourth Squad moving in that direction.

"Alpha One, this is Five, over."

"Five, this is One, over."

"Sit rep, over."

"Five, this is One. I just put my fourth squad on line to the right. Everything seems to be holding. Over."

"One, be advised, Second Platoon is moving up the trail to your position. Where you want them?"

"Five, have them move to our right, over."

"Roger that, One."

"Two, this is Five, over."

"Two copies, over."

"Three, this is Five, over."

"Five, this is Three, over."

"Three, move up behind One's position for now, over."

"Medic! Medic!"

The voice was coming from off to my left. I popped up and scrambled toward it, about five feet to a tree. I had dropped my rucksack before moving, but I had on my webbing and five bandoleers of ammunition. It was still not possible to see where the calls for help were coming from, so I picked another spot and moved again. Taking up position, lying behind a tree, I could see Jennings from Third Squad laying next to Cooper. Jennings was doing the yelling while Cooper seemed to be doing the bleeding. From where I was laying, it looked like he had been hit in the leg. Instead of moving over to them, I quickly took up a position further up the hill. The fire coming down the hill was now minimal in this area, but I wanted to get in a position to block anyone up the hill from moving down toward the cries.

I flopped down behind a tree and peered up the hill. Right now I could not see anything moving, which was good as far as I was concerned. A minute later I caught some movement out

of the corner of my eye. Startled, I turned in that direction and brought my rifle around to bear on the target, only to realize it was my radio man moving into a position nearby.

I turned my head back up hill and caught some movement in the brush to my immediate front. Squeezing the trigger, I put a burst of five rounds into the area and followed it two seconds later with another burst of three rounds. I inched closer to the base of the tree, waiting for a response, but none came.

It was hot, and the sweat was running down my face. Some got in my right eye, causing it to begin burning. I quickly wiped it with the towel from around my neck. Again I caught a flash of movement and emptied a half clip into the bush. I already had another clip out and quickly dropped the empty onto the ground and reloaded, releasing the bolt and seating the next round. The next ten minutes was more of the same, with bursts of fire from both sides along with the occasional hand grenade. Most of the fire seemed to be ours, based on the sound and location.

Jennings and the medic dragged Cooper down the hill behind some logs. I would not have known where they went, but Jennings's head kept popping up periodically, keeping an eye out for the group.

Meanwhile the firing in my area stopped. I took the opportunity to grab me a quick couple of gulps of water. My mouth was dry, my hands shaking, and my heart pounding. Nothing new really.

"Five. This is Two, over."

"Two, this is Five, over."

"Five, I've got casualties, and the enemy seems to be trying to break through, over."

"Roger that. Three, this is Five, over."

"Three copies. I will move up in support of Two, over."

"One, this is Five, over."

"Five, One copies, over."

"One, what is your situation? Over."

"Five, I got one man down. I don't know his condition yet, but he was moving when the medic got to him. Things are quiet on the left flank, but I can hear the second and fourth squads being engaged. Over."

"One, pull your third squad down the hill and protect the left flank. I do not want any surprises from that direction. Over"

"Roger. Over."

"This is Five, be aware we have Willie Peter arriving up the hill. Give me a call when you spot it. Over."

No one answered. The artillery was getting involved, and it was time to get everything consolidated before the HE started dropping into the area.

"Tell Sergeant Baskins to swing his squad back down the hill in a flanking position," I said, addressing Private Hailey, my radio man. Without a word, Hailey took off down the line to find Baskins. I turned and looked back to where Jennings and Cooper were lying. After a minute, Jennings' head popped up from behind the log. I waved him up the hill.

Jennings plopped down beside me. He was breathing heavily, sweating profusely, and had blood on his hands and uniform.

"How's Cooper?"

"Doc has the bleeding stopped. Looked bad, but I don't think it got bone, just meat."

"Good. You stay here. Third Squad will pull back down the hill in a flanking position. Make sure they gather up Cooper and the Doc, okay?"

"Sure, Sarge."

I grabbed the radio and headed down the hill. The firefight was raging off to the right, so I headed in that direction.

"Five, this is Two, over."

"Five, over."

"Willy Peter spotted about one hundred yards above our position. Over."

"Roger."

Once I was below where my second and fourth squads were, I headed back up the hill. Moving quickly from tree to tree, it did not take long before I spotted one of the men from Fourth Squad.

Spec 4 Jones was in the process of reloading. There were empty ammunition clips all around his position. He was behind a log and working his way toward the left end of it even as he reloaded.

Suddenly there was a loud explosion up the hill. The first high explosive round had landed. Another barrage would arrive just as quickly as the fire was adjusted down toward the company's position. I took advantage of the explosion to move up alongside Jones. He quickly turned toward me, and a smile appeared on his face as he recognized me.

"Let me have a couple of grenades," Jones said.

I quickly detached two from my webbing. Removing the tape from around the handle and straightening out the cotter pins, I tossed them over next to him.

He grabbed one and removed the pin. Gathering himself into a crouching position behind the log, Al quickly popped up onto his knees and let loose with a strong throw to his front. Bullets passed overhead and thumped against the log as he ducked back down. Dirt and other debris flew over the log after the grenade went off. I quickly crawled to the right end of the log.

I spotted PFC Miller behind a tree, firing up the hill. Someone just past him yelled something, but I could not make out the words. Just as I was about to pop up and get into the firefight, there was a tremendous explosion just on the other side of the log. The log moved backward, knocking me down the hill. There was no air in my lungs as I tumbled down a good fifteen feet before banging into a tree and receiving another jolt. Everything went gray for a second, and when I finally could see, things were sort of fuzzy. I could hear bullets whizzing overhead and then a couple of rifle rounds striking the tree just over me. I crawled quickly behind the tree.

Rolling over onto my back, I found myself taking in large gulps of air. My head was spinning, and I was nauseated. I closed my eyes and tried focusing on my breathing. Just

knowing I could crawl was an encouraging sign. At least all four limbs were functional. I still had my M-16 which was also encouraging, but in my current condition it was of little use.

After a minute the world stopped spinning, and I was able to breathe again. I moved cautiously over behind the tree and sat up with my back to it. This in itself was a major move. Everything hurt, and I wondered if I was hit. Since I had never been shot before, I did not know what it was supposed to feel like. I felt around with my right hand but could not find anything that felt like blood. I caught a flash of movement and quickly found I could move much swifter than I thought. Doc Daniels plopped down beside me.

"You okay?"

"You tell me," I replied.

"Lay down and turn over," he said.

Moving slowly, I complied. The earth began to shake as thunder boomed through the air. All thoughts of being examined disappeared from both mine and the medic's mind. The artillery slammed into the hill fifty yards up, blowing up trees, rocks, and everything else in the area. The concussive waves moved on down the hill, making the leaves rustle as they passed. The arty guys were really into it, and the barrage increased and spread both left and right.

I lay there waiting for the end. Artillery shells did not give a shit what uniform you wore, and I could only hope there wasn't one with my name on it. I grabbed my M-16 and crowded up against the tree. Doc huddled up next to me. I could feel his body shaking as the shells impacted to our front. "Fuck, Fuck, Fuck," The medic kept up a regular chant. Me, I was too scared to chant or do much of anything. I peeked around the tree to see if the enemy would try to close with us. Spec 4 Jones was lying flat behind the tree with his hands over his ears. His body appeared to be twitching like maybe he had been shot, but as long as he had his hands to his ears, I had to figure it was just a reaction to the artillery.

The smell of cordite filled the air. Suddenly the artillery barrage shifted about one hundred yards to the right. Close but far enough away that I felt safer. I gathered myself and charged back up the hill next to Jones. The doc followed.

"You alright?" I yelled, patting Jones' foot.

He turned his face to me. His eyes were wide and unfocused. "You okay?" I repeated.

The eyes refocused. "Yeah. Hey, Sarge. It's good to see you again. Last time I seen you, you was lying against that tree down there," he said pointing down the hill. "You weren't moving. Figured you were dead."

"Thanks for caring, Jones. Let's get ready for Charlie."

"Got any ammo you can spare? Running low."

I gave him one of my bandoleers. He still had one of his own but had probably used almost twenty clips from the looks of it. All the empty clips were spread out behind the log and down the hill. Jones was having one of those days.

Private Hailey yelled my name, "Sergeant Merrins."

He was down the hill, climbing upwards quickly, toward me. The artillery was still going off, providing a background roar that still made hearing difficult. I could not hear any small arms fire in the immediate vicinity, but off to my right it sounded like the firefight was still going strong. Seeing Hailey made me realize I had misplaced the platoon's radio on my little trip down the hill. I spotted it sitting under the end of the log that had been blown backward by the explosion. Evidently Hailey had seen the same thing as he approached the position, since he moved directly over to it. It took him a minute to dig it out from under the log. He put the microphone to his lips and spoke into it. A smile lit his face. I took that to mean his precious radio was working. He moved quickly over to where I lay. It was getting crowded behind the log. I could only hope Charlie had not noticed.

Hailey turned to me. "Third Squad has moved into its new positions. I saw Sergeant Fry on my way back. His squad is doing alright. No casualties at this point. Wants to know what to do. You look like shit."

"Thanks," I said holding out my hand. He handed the radio over.

"Five, this is One, over"

"One, this is Five. Thought you went AWOL. What's your situation? Over."

I quickly explained what little I knew.

"Five, Two, over."

"Two, this if Five, over."



"Five, we're hurting, Sir. Five killed, another dozen wounded." It was hard to make out the conversation. Between the small arms fire and the artillery that sounded close, Lt. Holmes' voice was difficult to hear. Even while reporting his desperate situation, his voice sounded calm.

"Two, I have Three moving in behind you; should be there any second. We have gunships and some fast movers standing by as soon as we can get your position fixed, over."

"Roger, over."

It made sense to me to move my platoon to the right. I was about to recommend that when I received a call.

"One, this is Five. Over."

"This is One, over," I answered.

"One. Keep your flank tied down. Third and Fourth Platoons will be moving in behind you and Second Platoon. As soon as we get set, I want you to be ready to pop some smoke to let our forward air observer know where you are located. Over."

"Roger, Five. One out."

"Follow me," I said to Hailey and started to move over toward Third Squad again. It took almost five minutes to find Sergeant Baskin. Along the way, I glimpsed Bobby Fry, and he gave me a wave. He had a big stupid grin pasted on his face. I thought it was just a nervous habit with Bobby, but I was never sure. The guy always appeared to be cool and calm.

Sergeant Baskin's squad seemed to be holding up well. I spotted his men tight behind cover, seemingly ready for anything. Fred had picked a spot for himself amongst the roots of a giant tree. He had a perch that was well protected to his front and had made himself comfortable. I moved into a position a few feet from him. "Captain wants us to pop some smoke to mark the flank when he calls for it."

"Paul!"

"Yeah?"

"Carl!"

"Yo!"

"Have some smoke ready. Captain wants to mark our positions."

"He calling Artillery in on us?" Carl asked.

"No," Fred replied.

"Good," said Carl. "That motherfucker wants to call in arty on our ass again; he can come over here and throw out his own fucking smoke."

"Yeah. Right on, Carl! Tell that honky motherfucker we don't need no artillery. Too damn noisy."

The whole time the men kept their eyes turned forward into the jungle, watching for movement that would signify that Charlie was changing his tactics. These guys were bullshitting while less than fifty yards away men were fighting for their lives. There was nothing anyone could do about that, the cards having been dealt by the man above. Besides, we all knew things could change any second. Right now there might be a battalion of gooks forming up for an attack on our side of the perimeter. If there was, then these were our last minutes of life.

"One, this is Five. Over."

"One, over."

"One, throw smoke."

"Throw the smoke!" The two men pulled the pins on the smoke grenades and tossed them forward into the jungle. I waited patiently by the radio.

"One, Air controller reports yellow smoke. Over."

"Roger that, Five. Over."

"Tell your men to get down. This is Five, everyone tell your men to get down, over."

I passed the word up and down the line. No one had a clue what to expect. We had all been exposed to artillery and twice had been on the receiving end of mortars. There had been opportunities to watch air strikes in the distance, but never closer than maybe half a mile. I burrowed in amongst the tree roots.

They hit up the hill. It must have been some type of cluster bomb since there was a sudden terrible roar that went on and on. There had been no warning. No sound of approaching engines or the whistling one always hears on the soundtracks of movies. One second just the sounds of combat, then the sounds of hell.

The bombs were falling much too close for comfort. I was down the hill from the forward defense line, and the concussions pounded me. Even twenty yards up the hill would

have been worse, and of course some of the men in the platoon were up there. From previous experience, I knew there would be at least two jets working, and more likely four. I was wondering if they had all made a pass at the same time, when the second string of bombs started going off. This time I covered my ears and kept them covered. I had absolutely no thoughts about the enemy. My focus was on taking one breath at a time and enjoying each one to the max. I knew if one of those bombs got off line, any one of those breaths could be my last.

I don't know how long the bombing went on. Time means nothing when each second takes on an importance all its own. It was not something you could adjust to. The explosions were terrifying. Their tremendous energy shook the mountain and tore open the earth. The air became filled with debris, smoke, and dust, and the day darkened as the cloud of smoke drifted down the hill over our positions. Anyone within twenty meters of any of those hits would be dead or incapacitated. My one desire during the whole process was for the Air Force to get its job done and get the fuck away from this mountain. Second Platoon, who had already gotten its ass kicked by the enemy, might look upon the whole situation differently.

Finally, the explosions stopped. I stuck my head up and looked around. The air was hazy with smoke and dust, making it difficult to see. My eyes watered, and my breathing was difficult. There was a ringing in my ears. The whole world appeared wavy, and I felt disoriented. A sudden wave of nausea hit me, and I vomited as the world spun.

I lay there panting for a few minutes. Slowly everything came into focus again. Taking a sip of hot water from my canteen, I swished the water around in my mouth and spit the vomit-tanged mess onto the ground, watering the tree whose roots had sheltered me during the bombing attack. Taking my time, I sipped water, emptying half the canteen.

It took a while to notice the silence. The ringing in my ears was lessening. I could not make out the sound of small arms fire or artillery. Maybe the battle was over. Or maybe I was deaf. Or maybe I was dead. Never having been dead, there was just no way to judge.

"This is Five, over."

"Five, this is Two, over."

"Five, this is Three, over."

"Five, this is Four, over."

"One, this is Five, over."

Private Hailey dashed over to the radio that was laying at my feet. "Five, this is One, over."

"One, you okay? Over."

"Five, this is Hailey. I'm with One. He appears dazed but okay. Over."

"Roger. There are four Cobras setting up for runs. Everyone pop smoke and stand-by. Get your men down. Over."

"Roger, Five. One out."

I was watching and listening, but I wasn't quite connected to my surroundings, and that worried me. Private Hailey got the men to pop smoke. Once the captain had confirmed the color of smoke along the line for the forward air observer, everyone got their butts back down. By then, I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes and get some sleep. This feeling of sleepiness was something new, and I wondered if something was seriously wrong with me.

The choppers could be heard approaching from the valley below us. This time I knew what to expect, but that did not make me feel any better about things. The rockets started hitting up the hill, not more than twenty yards in front of the platoon's positions up the hill. I could only hope that the guys up there had their asses well protected. The choppers prided themselves in providing really close fire support. We grunts did not always appreciate their enthusiasm for such close encounters, since their mistakes might just kill us.

Then the miniguns let loose on the hill. They made the sound of God ripping a hole in the fabric of the sky. Anyone who had ever heard it knew it instantly and understood the consequences of the noise. It was nowhere near as impressive as the sound of a bomb, but what it was doing to the ground in front of the Cobras was equally as impressive.

Each minigun was capable of firing six thousand rounds of rifle bullets every minute. When focused on an area, they were almost guaranteed to hit anything exposed. I did not know the configuration of the Cobras operating, but judging by the way the sound waxed and waned, they must have had at least three guns working together at times.

Two months earlier, I had an opportunity to watch two Cobras attack a hill less than a quarter mile from my position. Both aircraft let loose with their guns in a coordinated attack.

One minute, the hill was sitting there, easily visible. The next instant, a cloud of dust rose into the air over the hill, hiding it from view. A quarter mile from the action, I grew suddenly scared. True machines of death.

The choppers finally finished their attack after twenty minutes. By now my world was coming into focus, and I was able to understand the chatter emanating from the radio as the other platoon leaders coordinated their efforts to reinforce Second Platoon on the right. The choppers seemed to have done the trick. After their runs, the enemy had withdrawn through the bush. At least those who were still among the living.

The artillery now began working over the top of the hill we had been climbing when this whole mess began. It was time to police up the battlefield and get the dead and wounded evacuated. This meant securing a landing zone on the top of the hill so that the evac copters could land. I knew the call was coming.

"One, this is Five, over."

"Five, this is One, over."

"One, are you capable of running your platoon? Over."

"Five, this is One, Roger that last transmission. Over."

"One, what is your sit rep? Over."

"Five, I got one man with a leg wound. I haven't been able to get around for a while. It will take me a couple of minutes to figure our situation. Over."

"Roger One, call me when you are ready to move, Over."

"Be ready to move out in five minutes," I said, addressing Sergeant Baskins.

"Sure, Sarge," he said, moving off to the closest position.

I stood up. There was a slight wobble as the earth shifted on its axis, and then settled down. Turning, I smiled at Private Hailey to let him know that I was all right. Up the hill I could see Bobby Fry waving for me.

When I got to him, Bobby reported that other than the injury to Spec 4 Cooper, everyone else in the platoon was alright. "Alright" being defined entirely differently from what that phrase would have signified an hour before. If you could stand and wobble about, you were considered alright.

The radio was busy, and it took a couple of minutes before there was clear air for me to break in.

"Five, this is One, over."

"One, this is Five. Sit rep, over."

"It's the same sir. One wounded. The platoon is policing its area now; we'll be ready to move out in five minutes, over."

"Roger, One. Our air FO reports a large clearing only thirty or forty yards in front and to the right of your position where some of the bombs flattened the trees. I want you to move forward and make sure it is secure and suitable for evacuation of the wounded, over."

"Roger, Five, over and out."

Bobby had been standing next to me during the conversation. "Everyone get ready to saddle up. We're moving out in five," he shouted even before I was done talking to the captain.

"Sit down," Bobby said to me.

"I'm alright," I replied. "I need to find my rucksack though."

"Hailey is bringing it up the hill now," Bobby replied, pointing down the hill at the approaching man. Hailey had his rucksack already on his back and was dragging mine up the hill as best he could. Even without all the ammo and canteens that were hanging from my webbing and around my neck, the rucksack had to weigh another thirty-five pounds.

I plopped my ass on the ground and leaned back against the hill. Getting out a smoke, I lit up. Even though my lungs were still protesting all the cordite and dust they had been exposed to over the last hour, the smoke tasted good. My hands were only shaking slightly, most of the adrenalin having had time to stop stimulating my nervous system.

"I already have the Hare and Anderson checking out up the hill," Bobby said. "As a matter of fact, they were already heading out when I spotted them and sent a couple of other guys along to protect their asses. They seemed sort of pissed that I thought it necessary."

"Stupid fuckers are getting too cocky," I said. "They think they are a couple of indians and this fucking jungle is their reservation."

Fred, Dan, and Joe all moved over to where we were sitting.

"Ready to go?"

"I'm ready to go," Joe answered. "Home, or Taiwan, or Acapulco if that's what you mean. If you mean up the hill, hell no, Sarge." Joe's face looked old. His squad had been in the thick of the fight, and it showed, even though there was a smile on his face as he spoke.

"Home it is, Joe," I replied.

"Good, then I'm ready."

Standing up, I was ready to begin issuing orders when the call, "Men in" came from up the hill. I turned and headed in that direction with Private Hailey and Sergeant Fry following.

Spec Four "Tex" Boyd came strolling down the hill followed by Miller. From the way they were moving, it was apparent that everything was alright up the hill. After talking with them I got on the horn to the captain.

"Five, this is One, over."

"One, this is Five, over."

"Five, my men have secured an LZ straight up the hill from Second Platoon's position. My first three squads are already moving up the hill. Fourth Squad will move over and assist Second Platoon with its move. I've got men moving in front of Second Platoon's position and don't want any of them getting shot at. Over."

"Five, this is Two, I roger One's transmission, over."

"Five, Three rogers One's transmission, over."

"Five, Four rogers One's transmission, over."

"This is Five. I got the Evacs circling nearby. As soon as the wounded start arriving I'm going to have them start coming in. Top will move up with the first group of wounded and coordinate their loading. Let's get moving. I want those wounded out ASAP."

No one had to roger that last transmission. Everyone in the company now had only one goal, and that was getting the wounded on those choppers as quickly as possible. Their lives depended on how quickly we could accomplish this mission. In some ways, First Platoon had the best part of the deal, securing the area for the choppers. We might get hit again in the process, but no one looked forward to handling the wounded. There was not a man who would hesitate for an instant in doing the job. It was just that no one looked forward to it. Everyone knew it could be them lying there, and it wasn't a pretty sight. When it happened during a fight,

your mind just accepted it. You did whatever was necessary to help a comrade. Mostly that consisted of yelling for a medic and protecting the wounded from enemy fire as best you could. If the situation called for it, and if it was possible, you stopped the bleeding by putting pressure on the site. Sometimes you had an opportunity to apply a tourniquet, sometimes not. One had to weigh the importance of saving a man's life against the basic need for survival.

Afterwards it was different. If the medics got to the man in time and the wound wasn't fatal, they gave the guy morphine. The morphine helped the pain and usually made the man impervious to his surroundings. This was necessary in order to move the person to the site where he could be loaded onto a helicopter for transport to a field hospital.

Transporting the wounded was a cruel and brutal maneuver often carried out under fire. In this instance the company had the luxury of a secure LZ, but that did not make the moving of the more severely wounded all that much easier. They had been wounded in the middle of nowhere, in the jungle, on the side of a mountain. There were no stretchers, no road, or even a path to be followed. The surrounding jungle had been rearranged, compliments of Uncle Sam. The normal chaos of the jungle was not helped by the fallen trees, burning brush, and enemy dead littering the landscape.

The day was hot, and the survivors of the firefight were exhausted and numb. Just surviving had a way of sapping all the energy right out of you. Now, with the enemy either defeated, withdrawing, or perhaps even reforming for another attack, the men in the company were faced with the task of moving the wounded and dead to a place for removal from the jungle.

A severely wounded man was placed on a poncho, preferably his own, and four men each grabbed a corner and headed up the hill as best they could. Today, because the landing zone was close, they could leave their rucksacks behind to be retrieved later. Sometimes this wasn't the case, and carrying a full combat weight, while struggling to carry a friend uphill and through the bush was exhausting. Each man was still weighed down with his weapon and the gear hanging from his webbing. A man never laid down his weapon or ammo out here in the bush because he might need it at any second; and so burdened with the tools of the trade he would struggle to move his fallen comrade.



The medics decided who went first up the hill to the copters. At least that was how the system was supposed to work. They quickly looked over the wounded and tried to determine who was most severely injured while still having a decent chance of living. These men were sent out first, followed by those men who had little or no chance of making it, even though they had not given up the fight. It was a difficult call, but most of the men accepted the medics' judgment in these matters, if the situation was stable enough, as it was today.

Under other circumstances, it was sort of catch as catch can and the first man loaded on the chopper by his friends was the first one off the battlefield. It wasn't always fair, but fuck it, in combat nothing is.

By the time I made it up the hill to the bomb crater Sergeant Fry had chosen for a landing zone, First Sergeant Heard was standing on the edge of the crater. Spotting me, he waved me over to his position.

"Is the landing zone secure, Sergeant Merrins?"

"Hell, you got here before me, Top," I replied.

Bobby Fry appeared on the other side of the clearing. He waved his hand over his head to make sure he had my attention. Once I signaled back, Bobby pointed first right then left to indicate that the platoon was positioned.

"Tell the captain to bring in the..." I was cut short because the first sergeant was already on the radio to the captain. Top was neither blind nor dumb and didn't need me to interpret Bobby's signals.

I took off, heading for Bobby's position with Private Hailey in tow. The opening made in the jungle by the bombs was quite large, the ground uneven and strewn with downed foliage and trees. I could hear the beating of chopper blades as the evac copter approached. In the background there was the underlying beat of other choppers, circling higher overhead. Gunships waiting for the enemy to start any shit while the Army extracted its wounded and dying.

I entered the treeline where Bobby had disappeared and spotted him taking a position facing outward. Moving over to his position, I put my ruck up against the tree. The radio was

busy as Top and Captain Carlson coordinated movement of the rest of the company up the hill. I would stay off the radio until I was called.

"Where's everybody, Bobby?"

"Second Squad has the right flank, Third Squad has the left," Bobby answered. He never looked back at me and talked in a very quiet voice. We were still in the bush and the enemy might have been anywhere. "The Hare and Buddy are up the hill checking towards the top."

Warning bells rang. I turned to Hailey and took the handset to the radio.

"Break, Break," I said into the mouthpiece. Suddenly the radio went silent as everyone else stopped talking.

"Five, this is One, over."

"One, go."

"Five, I have two men working their way up towards the top of the hill, over."

"Roger, One."

I handed the handset back to Hailey.

"I fucked up Lou, didn't I?" asked Bobby.

"Yeah. You did. Those gunships overhead had no idea we had men moving up the hill. Those guys have itchy fingers and will shoot at anything outside our perimeter. Now at least they know we have men up there. It won't stop them from shooting, but at least it might make them feel bad if they shoot our guys. I'm going to check the platoon's positions. Let me know as soon as those guys make it back."

I moved back from Bobby's position and then off to the right. Bobby had made a mistake in letting the Hare and Buddy scout out ahead, but I wasn't too mad at him. His men were aggressive, especially when they had their adrenaline pumping. Hare and Buddy at least had told Bobby what their plans were before taking off. Those two were getting just a little too confident and independent. I made a mental note to talk with them later if they survived. The next half hour was spent finding all the positions and checking with the men as best I could.

The platoon was well situated, the squad leaders having done an excellent job of placing their men. Bobby and the other squad leaders had already taken care of a lot of the smaller chores that needed to be done. The remaining ammunition had been redistributed throughout

the each squad. Third Squad, which had seen little action compared to the other two, spread around much of its ammunition. By time I showed up on the scene, everyone had about the same amount of ammo. My best estimate was that each man had about one hundred and twenty rounds and one hand grenade.

I knew that Fourth Squad, which was helping move the wounded, probably was almost out of ammo. They would get some from the dead and wounded. No ammo would get onto the evac copters; of that I was sure.

It is difficult to give your ammunition to another man. Before today, I had not fired a shot in anger for over two weeks. That meant I had to hump all that ammunition up and down the mountains all that time. You have a love-hate relationship with it. When not being used, it was a cruel reality. It not only had to be humped all over the place, but it needed always be within easy reach. It had to be cleaned on a regular basis to insure that it was ready when needed.

I had my daily routine. I checked my hand grenade closely every morning and visually several other times. No sense letting a cotter pin come loose.

Each day I took a bandoleer of rifle ammunition, five clips of twenty rounds each, and cleaned the whole thing. This meant taking out all the rounds, oiling the spring in the clip, and making sure it moved freely. Each round was wiped off with the towel and inspected, then replaced in the clip. Altogether it took about five minutes for each clip. It was a task done routinely, and almost any time the company was stopped you could hear the clink of the round and the familiar snap as the rounds were taken out and placed back into the clip. It was one of those mindless chores that was the difference between a weapon firing or not. Life or death.

When you finally needed it, then you were glad for all the hours you spent humping it and taking care of it. Giving it up was difficult. I was sort of jealous of the fact that others had gotten the pleasure of shooting off all their ammunition and were now asking for some of mine. On the other hand, I was glad they didn't have to take it off my body before shoving me on the chopper.

Our platoon medic, Spec Four Daniels, had made his rounds and reported that Cooper was the only one seriously wounded. Since he was capable of hobbling along with assistance,

Cooper was one of the walking wounded. The wound was through the upper thigh, but no arteries or bones were hit. He was a tough bastard, but then, they all were. Other than being tired, sore, and concussed, everyone else was fine.

Of course the squad leaders had already checked the men themselves, but I had the habit of having the medic make sure. Getting wounded was different for everyone. It was something I feared more than getting killed. I had no idea how I would react to being wounded, but having seen as much as I had, it worried me. Some men went into shock and stopped functioning. Others staunchly held the bleeding and kept fighting. There was no way to predict.

One of the guys in Second Platoon took some shrapnel in the leg. Instead of reporting it, he wrapped his pressure bandage around the wound and kept humping. Three days later he was running a temperature, and while the medic was checking him for that, he discovered the leg wound. By then it was all red and infected. After that, the captain lectured all of us on the need to check our men carefully after a firefight.

My men's health was always on my mind. I was more aware than most in understanding that the NVA and Charlie weren't our only enemies. Since my little brush with death caused by a systemic infection, I watched all my men carefully.

I was heading back toward Bobby's position when I heard the call signaling the return of the Hare and Buddy to the perimeter. When I got there, Bobby and Hare were sitting, the Hare giving a report of what he had found up the hill. Once he was done, he and Buddy took up positions where Bobby had been, while Bobby moved over to where I was.

"Everything is quiet up the hill," Bobby said. I could tell he was hesitant, wondering if I was about to blow up on him.

"Thank God," I said. "You did a great job handling the platoon for me today. We did well, and you were a bigger part of that than me. Just be more careful about letting the guys decide what to do. I know you wouldn't have sent the Hare and Buddy up the hill if they hadn't suggested it. It's good that they are willing to seize the initiative, but you and I are responsible for them. Just don't always feel you need to agree with them."

"I knew once they were out of sight that I had screwed up. Almost went after them, but I was busy setting the perimeter."

"Well, don't worry about it. You did an excellent job today. They survived and there won't be a next time. You'll know better."

Hailey moved over next to us. Bobby left as I talked into the handset.

"Five, this is One, over."

"This is Five. The last chopper is inbound and has some ammo aboard. I'm leaving you and Two here to handle the perimeter. Top will be with you guys. Three and Four are going to sweep the area, then we'll head for the top of the hill. Are your men back, One? Over."

"Five, this is One. My men are back safely and report no activity near the top. Roger your last transmission, over."

"Two rogers, over."

I was already on the move to Top's position as the other platoons checked in. I waited until the last chopper lifted off before moving across the clearing. Once there, Top set up the two platoons into a perimeter and designated who was responsible for distributing the ammo that was laying on the ground around where the last chopper had lifted off. First Platoon got assigned most of the heavy work, but neither I nor my men would complain about the task. Second Platoon had five dead and eight wounded out of the total of seven dead and ten wounded. They had started the day with thirty-three warm bodies and lost thirteen men from the field. Dead or wounded didn't matter since the men were no longer available to fight. Functionally, this meant about forty percent casualties for them.

It had never happened to me yet. Since taking over the platoon, we had lost one man with a slight head wound for about a week. Cooper was our most serious casualty to date, and he hopped himself up the hill.

First Platoon had been hit hard twice since arriving in country, but the first time I was in the hospital, and the second time in the rear recuperating. So far, we had lucked out in the two months I had been in charge. It couldn't last forever, but I was willing to take every day it didn't happen as a blessing. If it meant there were more of us to do the heavy work, great.

For the next hour, Third and Fourth Platoons swept the battlefield. Of course, our perimeter was set up on what was part of that battlefield, and several of the men made some grisly discoveries during that time. It was hard to ignore the smell emanating from the jungle.

Everyone was familiar with it, a fact which itself was sort of sad. The captain got a body count of enemy dead for the colonel, who was circling the company in his chopper. Luckily, he did not seem interested in landing today. For this I was glad, since it usually held up the company for an extra hour or two while he wandered around looking at shit we had already seen. He did it as a morale booster, but we looked upon it as a pain in the ass. We neither sought nor needed his approval. If there was anything he disapproved of, we really did not want to hear about it.

It was four in the afternoon before we started moving to the top of the hill. By then everyone was exhausted and anxious to get dug in for the night. All of us had been hoping that maybe the company would be pulled into the rear for a couple days of rest, but that just wasn't to be. The decision to leave us out in the field having been made, we were anxious to get into a good defensive position and receive our resupply of ammunition. Even with the resupply, everyone was carrying around three hundred rounds. This was three times what was recommended but only half of what we normally carried.

I talked to Hare about how I wanted the platoon to move toward the top of the hill. The fact that he and Buddy had already scouted ahead made me feel good about what we wouldn't find, but I did not want them following the same line to the top they had taken earlier. The jungle had eyes, and if the enemy had spotted their trail they might be waiting for us. Instead the company would slide to the left about a hundred meters before ascending. If I had my druthers, we would find another hill to sleep on.

When the company moved out, First Squad made all of two hundred meters before stopping. Word was passed back quickly, that Hare had found a trail leading away from the battlefield. I notified the captain and minutes later was joined by him and the first sergeant. Together we moved forward for a look-see.

I wondered why Bobby said it was a trail leading away from the site of the firefight. A trail rarely had a one-way sign designating a direction of travel, yet this one did. It was a blood trail, where the enemy wounded walked away or were carried from the battlefield. They didn't have any choppers to come pick them up. It was tempting to follow that trail, maybe to catch the end of their column and roll right over the remains of the enemy formation.

Though it sounded easy, it would have in fact been difficult. For one thing, our company was exhausted. Getting to the top of the hill would be a task, never mind pursuit of the enemy. Another factor was water. Everyone was low. Getting a resupply meant either climbing the hill and having it flown in, or heading down the hill to the stream at the bottom. Either way it would take time and the trail would grow cold.

The enemy was no dummy. The trail would be booby trapped as they withdrew. Anyone attempting to follow would be slowed by the necessity to find the mines before the mines found them. In addition, there would probably be an ambush set up along the route, necessitating a continuous flanking maneuver against the trail, and that would require covering a longer distance than the enemy.

The trail itself was a mirage that would quickly peter out the longer you followed it. The NVA used this area to assemble its wounded before moving out. Within fifty yards there would be two or more smaller trails, and further along even more branching. The enemy would spread out making their way back to hidden hospitals and aid stations in small groups.

The captain called the battalion commander and gave him our coordinates and the direction the trail took through the jungle. The choppers overhead moved off in that general direction while the captain issued orders to get the company moving again.

We hit the top of the hill about Five-thirty in the afternoon, well past our normal stopping time of Three. The whole company was placed into perimeter for the night. The NVA would not be happy with us, and if they had the men and resources available, they might try to take a measure of revenge against us. Thirty-six of their men lay dead on the side of the hill. At least that was the official body count. The artillery and bombs had scattered body parts around the area and had surely buried a number of bodies. Many of the wounded that were hauled away would never fight again, having died or having been so severely injured that their fighting days were over. The enemy had good reason to be pissed.

The choppers began landing with supplies as soon as the perimeter had taken on its initial shape. Every squad sent at least two men to help with the unloading in order to get the choppers in and out as quickly as possible. The last chopper in carried drums of iced soda and beer for the men. Even though it wasn't a normal resupply day, the cooks had prepared several

huge containers of sandwiches for the men. There was more than enough for everyone, and I was careful to make sure everyone got their fill.

It was not as good as being pulled out of the field, but it was very considerate of the battalion commander. Some sandwiches and a couple of beers was small reward for what the company had been through, but to a grunt it was more than what was anticipated. Had we received nothing special for our efforts, we would have thought nothing of it.

With Second Platoon depleted, its area of responsibility was smaller than usual within the perimeter. All positions were ready and had been inspected by eight. I assembled my squad leaders at my position for a little pow wow.

Everyone got comfortable, those of us who smoked lighting up. Looking at them, I suddenly started laughing.

"Fucker's finally flipped out," Fred said.

"Took one too many head shots," Dan concurred.

"Maybe you can clue us into what's so fucking funny," Joe Fisher said with a touch of irritation in his voice. Of course his squad had been on the right, with Second Platoon, so Joe had a really bad day by any standards.

"Strack!" I said.

They looked at me like I was crazy. Maybe I was. Then Bobby chimed in, "Airborne!" He was grinning. Suddenly everyone got the message.

"Shine them boots, troop. That belt buckle needs some work, son. Haven't you ever heard of a razor, boy?" Soon we were all laughing and rolling on the ground. Combat did that to you, frayed your nerves to where you either laughed like a maniac or quietly went nuts. We had all been through this before, but that did not stop us from enjoying the moment. It was ten minutes before we all got control. A feeling of contentment and satisfaction settled into my soul. Good men to know. Good men to be with.

We looked like shit. It was the difference between what we had been once and what we were at that moment that lightened our spirits. The things that separated us from other soldiers back in the real world had nothing to do with what separated us from other men now. No shiny Airborne boots or starched uniforms.



Torn uniforms, circles of white where the sweat had dried, and wet patches where it had not. Dirty faces and hair that was long even by civilian standards. Only our weapons would have met with inspection standards, but even they were different from when we had them stateside. There they were toys or dressing. Here they were weapons, tools of the trade. There were scratches and gouges in the plastic barrel guards and very little area that shined from the metal having been scratched and the bluing removed. But no rust or grime. The barrels cleaned until all the residue had been scoured away, the steel barrel shiny, threatening. Each weapon would fire so long as how the weapon was cared for had anything to do with it.

"We do need new fatigues," Bobby said getting serious.

"Yeah. Both Wilburn and Clay have their asses hanging out. Not only is it not a pleasant sight, but they are attracting swarms of mosquitoes. They know a meal when they see it," Joe said, smiling. It was good to see that smile.

"Anything else?"

"How about some new claymores?" Dan asked.

After humping ammo for a while, everyone got worried about whether it would still work. I had never heard of a claymore mine not working, even though some had been humped for months before being used.

"I'll ask the captain in the morning," I said. I knew what he would say, but I would ask anyway.

I looked around the group, searching for more questions, but received none.

"You all did good work today. Make sure your men know that. If the enemy had gotten through us during that initial contact, the company would have lost a lot more men than we did. Doc says Cooper might make it back in a couple of months. Didn't think there was any nerve damage to his leg. Said his biggest problem was that he wouldn't stop grinning as they loaded him into the copter. How's Jennings taking it?" I asked Fred.

"He's a little shook. He and Cooper were together for almost three months. I set him up with Martinez and Reilly for the night. He'll be fine," Fred replied.

"Watch him for the next few days." Everyone knew what I meant. We all loved one another, and it would hurt if anyone got killed or wounded, but everyone had someone really

special. Before he was wounded, Big John had been my main man. His being shot hurt me more than anything, and since then I hadn't allowed myself to get as close to anyone else. I was tight with these guys, but not the way I had been with Big John. A man whose best friend was suddenly lost might react in several ways, some of which could represent a problem.

"What happened today?" I asked.

"First Squad had just gotten down when the first gooks came out of the tree line. Luckily we had about ten yards of open space in front of where we set up. They were stopped before they could reach our positions, but it was close those first few minutes. We were able to get grenades on them, and after a few minutes they seemed to shift to our right. They must have left a few behind to keep us tied down because we had sporadic fire until they withdrew. No one got hit, but that was luck. The artillery was as close as I ever want it to me. Henry almost had a tree land on him. Came through the air like a missile. Some of the smaller branches actually hit him when it landed. And Lou,"

"Yeah."

"You ever call in them Jets again, I'm quitting," Bobby said.

"Fucking A, Lou. I almost had a heart attack. For a minute there, I was even praying for one." Joe Fisher added.

"Anything else, Bobby?"

"Nah. Just another day at work. I'm looking forward to the quiet of the tundra."

"Dan?"

"We moved in on Bobby's right. Almost didn't get there. As a matter of fact, we started getting fire before we could get set and wound up slightly below Bobby's squad. Luckily, Jim Willis was up front with the gun and wound up just behind Cauley from Bobby's squad, but higher than the rest of second squad. The rest of the squad got on something like a line before the enemy moved over our way. We knew they were there from all the bullets coming down the hill. Suddenly, they were there right in front of us, advancing toward our positions. They had balls. I'll give them that. Almost got into us. Joe's squad arrived in the nick of time. Only their added firepower stopped those suckers completely. That and Willis. He set his gun so he could actually shift his fire across the front of the squad. The gooks were almost on us when his

bullets started passing in front of us. I don't know how many he got, but I'll swear to him hitting at least three that I know of."

"Maybe we need to give his name to the captain. Get him a medal," I said.

"I got no knocks against that. He held his position and saved our butts. Stayed there the whole fight. Just hearing his sixty working out made me feel better about things. He made his presence known all during the fight. Shit, I'll recommend him for a silver star at least."

"Make that a Congressional Medal of Honor," Joe Fisher said.

"Joe?"

"We were still moving up when Second Squad got hit. We just moved right up in with them. I thought for sure we bought it, until Willis got that fucking machine-gun working out. Broke their attack enough they stopped. Wilburn and Clay got their hand grenade act going then. Everyone else was putting as many rounds out up the hill as they could. Suddenly there's all these explosions going on up there. I thought maybe our mortars or artillery were getting it on. Once they had used up all their grenades, those silly bastards started moving from position to position, begging, borrowing, or stealing other guys' grenades. Both of them should be playing in the majors. Got great arms, real accurate too. One is crazier than the other, but I don't know which. Clay was laughing like a loon every time one of those grenades went off. Wilburn more serious looking. Got a scowl on his face the whole time, but he also seemed to be looking more carefully before picking out a place to put the grenades."

"You want to put them in for medals?"

"Yeah, might as well. They ain't going to be around much longer acting like that. They just seemed to be moving around the whole time. Weren't interested in anything but throwing grenades. I thought for sure they were going to drift off over to First Squad looking for more grenades, but at least they stuck around."

"I thought we were going to get flanked. The gooks had already moved further to the right than we were, and they were starting to move down the hill when Second Platoon hit them. Man, those guys just came in behind us, went on line right away, and kept moving into the gooks. That's where they lost most of their guys, moving right into the enemy. I saw guys on both sides going down there for a few minutes before Second Platoon moved them back. Then

they got down, sort of on line with our squads, although they were a little downhill from us. I think that's why the artillery got so close to us. Lieutenant Holmes needed it close to hold his position, but we were further up the hill than he was. I was afraid he would forget about us and call that shit down on our heads. It got real scary there for a while, but luckily, just when I thought we were going to get hit, he shifted it to the right. That man deserves a medal from what I seen of his platoon's actions."

"Don't worry, the captain has already talked to Battalion about that. I just hope they give his men some of the credit for what happened," I said. If I was a little sarcastic in my reply, it was not directed at Lt. Holmes. From my experience, I knew the officers need not worry about recognition. If one of them got a sore ass from using toilet paper that wasn't soft enough for their butts, one of their fellow officers would recommend them for at least a purple heart. If they deserved a bronze star, it would be upgraded to at least a silver star. Officers were never shy about getting their share of credit for what occurred. At least Lt. Holmes would have done something outstanding to earn his.

Continuing, Joe said, "Fucking flyboys nearly killed us with them bombs. If Second Platoon wasn't so close to losing it, I would have said fuck it and pulled back down the hill. I swear, that second set was throwing dirt and trees all over our position on the hill. It stopped Charlie dead. Afterwards, they started to get going again, until the Cobras showed up. After that it was all over. Fucking slopeheads got balls. I say let's give them the ARVN and get them NVA fucks on our side."

I couldn't argue with that. The enemy would have done better if they had withdrawn after Second Platoon got on line. Instead they chose to keep pushing in. Figured they could get close enough to make our artillery and air power ineffective. They almost succeeded. Without their help the company still would have won, just at a much higher expense. I wondered how other outfits would have reacted to such a swift enemy attack. If any of my squads had backed down from the fight, or if Lt. Holmes' platoon had hesitated in getting the enemy back up the hill, it could have been a disaster. Things would have gotten dicey, but Captain Carlson would have kept us organized, and not one man in the company would have backed down. Taking that as a given, it would take at least a battalion of enemy to completely destroy the company.

"Fred?"

Sgt. Baskins gave his version of the firefight. Everyone listened intently, including me. Even though the enemy had shifted quickly to the right and had engaged the other squads more heavily, it did not take away from the job his squad was called on to perform. He had seen Cooper get hit in the leg. Evidently Cooper's leg was sticking out from behind the tree where he had chosen to fight from. One of the gooks got lucky in hitting him.

"Well, you guys did a great job," I said once Fred was finished with his account. "The captain has nothing but praise for the First Platoon.

"I wanted to shift the First Squad over to the right, but I wasn't able to find you," Bobby said.

"Well I was a little goofy for a time there. From what the captain said, it wouldn't have made any difference. The only way to scrape the gooks off our backs was to hold them steady. He has told all the platoon leaders time and time again not to try to maneuver our platoons too much once we get engaged. If we can stop Charlie, then the artillery and air cover can get to him. As a matter of fact, the captain was more than happy that Fred's squad kept our left flank secure during the attack. It allowed him to move Third and Fourth Platoons to back up Second Platoon. I think it is something to keep in mind. Unless you see a specific situation where moving is absolutely necessary, stay where you are. That includes not sending men outside our defensive perimeter without checking and letting other people knowing about it."

Bobby smiled. Everyone knew what I was talking about.

"Bobby and Joe, send our two scouts over to see me. Let's make sure everyone knows they did a good job. They know already, but make sure they hear what the captain said about the job they did. Anything else?"

"What they going to do with Second Platoon?"

"The captain says they will operate short for a while. He is taking them out of ambush and patrol rotation. He'll stick them with the weapons section and his headquarters group. That leaves us with three maneuver platoons, although weapons and Second Platoon can function together as a platoon if we hit the shit again. They'll get replacements as soon as the company

does. That means we don't get a replacement for Cooper until they get back to strength. Anything else?"

"We did good today. Followed our plan just like we discussed. I'm glad to be working with you guys," Bobby said. From him this was the equivalent of the Gettysburg Address. He offered his hand to Dan, who was sitting next to him. They shook hands. Then everyone shook each other's hands. It was one of the damndest things I ever did see. Weird, but it felt right.

It was getting near sunset when Hare and Buddy showed up.

"You want to talk?" Hare asked, walking over to my position.

"Yeah," I said, sitting and getting comfortable.

Both men sat down opposite me, watching, and waiting. Neither man felt the need to look away, both trying to maintain eye contact. I smiled at them. I couldn't help it. Their very demeanor cracked me up. They both smiled back.

I liked Hare more than most men. We had paired up before I went into the hospital. The two of us were in sync. I knew more about him than most, mostly because he was illiterate. He could have gone to college on an athletic scholarship if he could read and write. He was shocked to discover that I knew he couldn't read, but it was something I had known from the first day we met. It hadn't been important until we teamed up and he got mail. Until then, his buddy Ben had read his mail to him. He thought no one else knew. When I offered to read his mail for him, he got so mad I thought we were in for a fight. At first, he denied he had a problem and refused my help. Finally, he asked how I knew.

Hare was as intelligent as any man I knew. He was good at hiding his problem. Being in the infantry, I had gotten used to be around men like Hare. The first time we met, he had smiled at me and said, "Hi, name's Harris. My friends call me Hare." Of course, I already knew his last name since each of us wore name tags sewn onto our uniforms.

"Well, Harris, my name is Merrins, Louis Merrins," I replied.

I didn't know "Buddy" all that well, but he was a good kid who had become Hare's soul buddy.

"I hear both of you got confirmed kills today. You will both get three day passes out of it, not at the same time of course," I said, pulling their chains a little.

"Hey man, you can't do that, Sarge," Buddy protested. "If we can't go together, then I don't want to go."

Hare smiled. "Sarge is just shining you, Buddy. Likes talking shit, right?"

"Fuck you, Hare. I should have you and Buddy shot for your little stunt today. If the gooks had killed you two, I'd have you both up on charges right now. I would have found your ugly bodies, shoved hand grenades up your butts and reported you AWOL. How's that for shining you, Hare."

Hare smiled. Buddy looked nervous.

"You get killed, I'm going to go home and fuck Ellen," I said. Hare scowled. Ellen was his girlfriend back in Detroit. Now Buddy was smiling. Before Buddy came along, I was the one who had to write Hare's letters to Ellen. Some of the things he made me put in the letters made me blush.

"Shit, Sarge, if he gets killed, I want Ellen," Buddy protested.

"Fuck you, Buddy. You a Southern redneck. Way too white for a refined woman like Ellen," I said.

Now Hare was smiling again. "Both you got little dicks. Ellen just laughs at you. She'll find another brother. Sides, Ben says he gonna fuck her if I get killed."

"Sergeant Fry talk to you about today yet?"

"Yeah, Sarge," Buddy replied.

"You get the message?"

"Shit, Sarge, Buddy and I were careful. Those choppers can't exactly sneak up on your ass. Their chances of seeing us on the jungle floor when we don't want them to is zero," Hare said.

"Yeah, well, the captain was moving the artillery around, and he had no idea you guys were moving around near the top of the hill. For a city boy who was afraid of the woods six months ago you've come a long way. You and Buddy make a hell of a team, but you are also beginning to make me nervous. I don't want you two becoming too comfortable with your jobs. It's dangerous out front, and moving without anyone knowing exactly where you are can get

you killed. As a matter of fact, I am thinking about maybe beginning to train a couple of other guys for your job."

"Hey, Sarge. Don't do that," Hare said immediately.

"Will you at least listen to me?" I asked.

They both eyed me suspiciously.

"I have four squad leaders I am training to take over the platoon if and when I get shot. Not a nice thought, but it will probably happen one of these days, and they need to be ready. I almost lost both of you today. It made me think about how much we rely on the two of you to move the platoon from place to place. You two make a hell of a pair, and over the past month you have learned your jobs better than anyone else in the company. Even the captain recognizes that. It is the reason we are pulling point almost every day now."

"It's the way we like it, Sarge," Buddy said.

"Well, I like it to. I just want to know if there is any way we can train other men to do your job in your absence, like when you guys get your three day passes. Maybe just on short patrols."

"Who you got in mind?" asked Hare.

"You two pick the men you want. Spend time talking with them. Let them know how you think, what you see, how you decide where to walk. Teach them how to work as a team like you two do. According to Sergeant Fry, it was your teamwork that saved our butts today." They both smiled at that.

"How about Lonely?" Hare asked, smiling.

"You leave Lonely out of any plans you might have," I said.

Buddy laughed. Everyone knew Lonely was crazy.

"Promise me you won't be wandering around without checking with me or Sergeant Fry if possible. I am not going to make it an absolute necessity, because as soon as I do, I'd live to regret it."

"Deal," Hare said.

"Deal," Buddy said.

"Any questions?"



"Hare says you're the best point man in the company, Sergeant. You ever miss being out front?"

"Yeah."

"You better than Hare?"

"We're both still alive. That's as good as you get. Hare says you're as good as he is. I'll take his word for that and try not to lose any sleep over the fact that you both might be better than me."

"Shit, Sarge, you better than Daniel fucking Boone," said Hare, smiling. So much for that argument.

"Take care, Hare,"

"You to, Lou," Hare replied, standing. I missed sharing a foxhole with him. Sometimes playing at being Platoon Sergeant sucked.

It was 0300 hours. I lay in the bottom of the foxhole with the radio resting between my legs. My M-16 was leaning upright against the head of the foxhole. From this position I was able to stare directly into the heavens which were lit up by a million stars. An infantryman got to see the sky at night on a regular basis, one of the few benefits of the job. It was really quite spectacular. One must embody a point of view that does not have to compete with man-made light in order to get a real view of the heavens. My position was perfect.

I could hear the jungle just beyond the lip of the foxhole, alive with the normal noises of the night. That meant there was a good chance there were no gooks out there working their way toward the perimeter. The chirps, squawks, squeals, and other noises were welcomed.

Taking a cigarette from my fatigue jacket, I lit up. It was unusual for me to smoke during the night, but tonight I decided to make an exception to my general rule. Here in the bottom of the foxhole, the light would only be seen from directly overhead. With only the stars to acknowledge my indiscretion, I figured a cigarette would be of little harm. It was another hour before Hailey would relieve me on the radio, but I was neither tired nor bored.

When it was my turn, I fell asleep without a second's hesitation. Being tired was a normal state of affairs, and my mind had the ability to reach that state of consciousness described as sleep within seconds of having been given permission to do so. Now I was wide

awake, and my mind was flashing through the previous day's events, sorting through the information it had stored. I relaxed my body as best I could to allow my mind to operate unfettered by the aches and pains of my physical being.

It was good just to have my mind functioning normally again. Earlier in the day, I had been knocked out evidently for at least a few seconds, although I really had no memory of it. I remembered the grenade going off on the other side of the log and the log knocking me down the hill. Now my mind focused on the noise and violence of the explosion. When it had happened, there was no time to analyze the situation. Now I could remember the thud of the missile hitting the log an instant before the explosion. My mind recorded that detail and now replayed it to give me something to think about.

I had been preparing to pop up and fire a burst into the bushes in front of my position when I got knocked on my butt. A second later and that explosion would have taken my head off. If the grenade had cleared the log, it would have either been an air burst or hit just down the hill from me. Either way, I would not be laying in a foxhole and looking at the stars overhead. Whether dead or wounded, my life would have been changed dramatically.

My mind flashed onto Cooper laying there bleeding with Jennings yelling for a medic. I wondered which one of them had been more seriously wounded. Cooper would have a scar to remind him of the incident for the rest of his life. It was something he could touch, see, feel. Jennings' scar would not be visible. Instead it would be some new, invisible, pathway within his brain. A pathway that would alter his perception of the world. Whether it would lead to some new strength or become a means of his eventual destruction, only time would tell.

The captain was pleased with the way First Platoon had functioned during the day. He was very with the whole company. We had withstood a major engagement, and everyone had done their job.

I did not feel especially good about the job I had done. If you asked me that day to give a grade to my efforts, I may have given myself a D. I had not fucked up, but for a lot of the time I had been out of touch with the situation. Part of that was getting whacked in the head. A larger part of it was that the jungle greatly reduced one's perception of what was happening. Everything was seen in glimpses. Most of what was happening was perceived aurally. I could tell

instantly from the sound what type of weapon was speaking and what the response was. It was the only thing that led to my decision to move the Fourth Squad to the right when we initially tangled with the enemy. Luckily, I had guessed right.

Visually, it was unusual to see more than one or two other positions at one time. I could sometimes hear other voices and recognize them but not locate their exact positions. Every once in a while, a man would pop into view for an instant as he exposed himself, trying to get his rounds into some particular area. You could see him shooting at the jungle, but rarely could you see exactly what had touched off his actions.

Today I had not actually seen the enemy. Like us, they wanted to get a good shot but did not particularly want to die doing it. I shot at movement and sounds. Bushes that moved and sounds that shouldn't have been there. A ghost war fought against a ghost army armed with real bullets. Bullets and grenades. Let's not forget the grenades, I thought to myself not without a little humor.

I was actually enjoying this little scenario running through my mind as I lay there. Just another little thing to think about. Maybe, just maybe, I was going nuts.

I had several guys in the platoon who I would not hesitate to certify if they came to me for my recommendation. Spec. Four Clay and Private First Class Wilburn were two of them. Somehow these guys had developed into a couple of real psychos. Most of the men accepted their own jobs as something that had to be done. Clay and Wilburn loved their jobs and seemed to feed off each other's actions. They were beginning to act more and more strangely, and it was difficult to predict what they would do next. Today's little hand grenade throwing demonstration was an example of the type of shit they were beginning to pull. This time, their actions had a positive effect on the outcome of the firefight, but it also made me nervous. Their role was to function within the structure of the Fourth Squad. Having them act too independently could weaken Fourth Squad. It was not something I would intervene in right now. Today they had done well. I would just have to remember to keep track of them.

PFC George "Lonely" Mayes was another crazy. Being in Fourth Squad with my other two whackos was not good either. Poor Sergeant Fisher had more than his share of problem children, although to his credit, he neither complained about it nor thought it any big deal.

Lonely had been assigned to the platoon after the December 26 debacle. The boy was different. Not quite wired right in his head. I knew just a little about him.

Lonely was from West Virginia somewhere. He never received mail, nor did he ever send mail out that anyone knew of. I figured he was probably illiterate but did not know him well enough to say for sure. He had shared the same foxhole with Sgt. Fisher since being assigned to First Platoon, but Joe knew nothing about him. The guy was for all practical purposes a mute.

The man kept his mouth shut, his eyes active, and his thoughts to himself. Admirable qualities, but when carried to an extreme, decidedly unsettling. The guy did his job but had one disturbing habit. Periodically he would disappear. Send him out on flank, and you were liable not to see him again for the rest of the day. In the bush, Lonely was spooky. One minute he was there and the next gone. It had happened several times now, and I had issued orders that Lonely was not to be placed outside the formation when the company or platoon was on the move.

These were just some of the more interesting characters currently carousing with the platoon. Crazy as bedbugs.

I crushed out the cigarette butt against the side of the foxhole, took out a new one, and lit up. "Maybe I am crazy," I thought. There was pretty overwhelming evidence to support this supposition. I quickly listed them in my mind.

First, I was lying on my back in a foxhole in the middle of the damn jungle, I and was basically happy as hell doing it. Of all the emotions that could be used to describe the way I should feel about my situation that day, joy would have to be considered the most unlikely, and yet it was true: I loved my current lifestyle beyond all reason or comprehension.

Somehow, this was what my life was about. It was my destiny, and I loved it. Everything here in the jungle was about now, not tomorrow or yesterday, but now. Each moment was precious because it might literally be my last. There were no guarantees and no way to be protected from what was meant to be. Life was hard, each day harder than the last, and tomorrow was guaranteed to be harder in some way than today. I faced it and looked forward to it. I wasn't alone. I was surrounded by men like me. It did not make me any saner.

Another reason for questioning my sanity was the position I occupied in the company. To run a platoon of infantry without an officer was ludicrous. I had neither the training nor the desire to occupy the position I found myself in. I would rather pull point. Instead, I was responsible for the wellbeing of what was currently thirty-two other men. Who would have ever thunk it? Certainly not me. And yet, I was good at it, and I knew that. The captain told me so, my squad leaders told me so, the men I led told me so, but I did not need them to tell me in order know it was true. Somewhere along the line I had inherited the temperament, attitude, presence, and balls necessary to do the job. I was smart enough to see what was necessary to get the job done and good enough at handling the men in the platoon to get it done.

Today's firefight was another reason to question my sanity. I loved the shooting. Explosions scared the shit out of me and at the same time fascinated me. Getting knocked on my ass was painful, and yet the day after, I wouldn't hesitate to go into combat. Combat was the scariest thing imaginable, and yet I loved it. It made me feel alive, real. I would eventually get hit. Whether wounded or killed, it was inevitable. I was amazed it hadn't happened yet.

Another thing that made me question my sanity was that I could not remember the real world anymore. This world was so much more real than anything else I had ever experienced that I had begun to question the existence of the other world. The idea of it seemed quaint: a parallel universe that had nothing to do with me or the men I worked with. Every three days, a helicopter would bring us news of this other world. More often than not, it would make me feel sad. It should have meant more to me than it did.

New men focused on the real world, as if to somehow protect them from this one. Most, not all, but most of the more experienced men no longer talked of home. It was the past and had nothing to do with today. Today was for living. It was what was. Most accepted it, some chose to hate it, and a very few, the really crazy motherfuckers, loved it.

I laughed quietly to myself. And that worried me most of all.

END