

#19 Bullseye – the field, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – None

It was one of the moments in time that are destined to stay with you the rest of your life. It was not a whole minute, more like thirty seconds, the time leading up to the incident of no significance until after the episode occurred.

I had the platoon out on a sweep. The rest of the company was held up about a half click from where we were operating. Close enough to move up quickly if we ran into something the platoon could not handle, but far enough away that they were no longer part of our reality.

The company was operating on the very edge of the Central Highlands. The terrain consisted of low, rolling hills covered by the usual jungle fauna. Betwixt and between the hills ran flat, open areas. The Vietnamese cultivated these areas for growing rice, partitioning them with dikes and flooding the areas prior to planting. This was the area First Platoon was sweeping in search of the ever elusive Charlie.

I knew that old Charles was somewhere nearby, laying low and keeping an eye on our movement. I knew this, not because I am a psychic, nor because I was being paranoid, although of course I am guilty of that, but because twice on this day the company had received sniper fire. It was my sincerest hope that the platoon stumbles onto the whereabouts of this particular gook or group of gooks as the case may be, giving us an opportunity to thank him or them in our own special Airborne way. The sniper's ability to turn an otherwise only moderately miserable hike through this lovely country into a hair-raising and utterly miserable hike was not appreciated. The men in the platoon were in a foul mood and were making an extra effort to find the little motherfucker.

The only thing that could possibly save the sniper's life was that he was a piss poor shot. You give anyone in the platoon a free shot at a passing column of infantry, and I doubt if very many of them would miss even once, never mind twice. Either Charlie did not have his heart in his task or he needed glasses.

The platoon was traveling light. The only thing we were humping at the moment was our weapons and webbing. For most of the platoon members, this meant between twenty and

thirty pounds, although some of the men were carrying more. Our rucksacks were back where the rest of the company was waiting. The weight of the rucksacks made what we were carrying on us seem insignificant.

I actually preferred this type of patrol over moving with the whole company in tow. The men in the platoon were good about noise discipline, so the platoon moved through the bush with very little noise. There was no conversation during our move, everyone remaining silent and saving their conversation for a more appropriate time. The platoon had thirty-three men in it, but you would never know from the noise it made during its passage.

I was pleased with the progress we were making toward our objective. With just the platoon in motion, it was easier to make consistent progress, as we had none of the constant stop and go that came with a company move. Our forward speed remained what it always was, a very slow, careful walk through the jungle. Our speed was dictated only by the terrain and the need to ease through the jungle. Haste could get you killed, and I let the point men set the pace they felt was appropriate. The last thing I would tell them to do was hurry. If they decided to stop and lay still for a half hour because of something they saw or sensed, that is exactly what the platoon would do. If they moved the platoon back and detoured us two hours out of our way, that was just the way it was. There were no time clocks out here, and if you screwed up and got fired, they put your ass in a body bag.

Hare and Buddy were setting a nice pace. They were in their hunting mode, not only determined to get the platoon exactly where it was supposed to be, but also to get the sniper. Since they pulled point for both the platoon and company on a regular basis, it would be hard not to understand their pointed hatred of snipers.

Everyone hated snipers, although if given the opportunity, most of the men would not hesitate to snipe the enemy. Maybe this was a double standard of sorts, but it did not stop us from hating the little fuckers. Point men hated them the most, even though a sniper very seldom just shot at the first man he saw. Rather, they had a tendency to wait until a group of enemy appeared in the hope of spotting an officer or other important member of the group. Still, the point men took it personal when the group got shot at, figuring in some way that they had failed by not spotting the sniper before they fired. This was of course foolish, because a

good sniper took great pains setting up so that they would not be spotted even when they were firing.

My own relationship with snipers was one of respectful hatred. As a platoon leader, I had to use the radio on a regular basis. To a sniper, a person talking on a radio must be an officer. If I knew Vietnamese, I would have made a big sign telling the sniper that I was a lowly sergeant and to save his precious ammo until a real officer was present. Not knowing Vietnamese and secure in the knowledge that most of the enemy were illiterate, I carried no sign. Instead I was damn careful when using the radio. Two rules were never to use the radio unless it was absolutely necessary and to stay well-hidden when using it. I would crouch behind a tree or a log, or a body, or crawl into a hole, before using it. My conversations had a tendency to be brief and to the point.

My radio man was ever so careful to camouflage the radio as best he could. When the company was moving, he had it packed in his rucksack, on his back. This limited the amount of other things that could go into the rucksack, so the rest of the men in the platoon carried his extra gear for him. They all respected Hailey for the job he had to do and were more than willing to lend a hand.

Hailey did a good job on the radio. His was the only one in the outfit that never seemed to go down. Part of it was luck, but there was also some hard work that went into keeping it functioning. Hailey kept it wrapped in plastic when it rained. He continuously worried about it, making frequent communication checks with the company radio clerk to make sure we were on the air. In some ways he was a pain in the ass about it.

I knew the importance of the radio but had a tendency to lose focus on it when Hailey was not around. Since I was the platoon sergeant, but also acting as platoon leader, I was required to have the radio available with me at all times. This meant that when Hailey was off doing something, I was left in charge of the radio. All too often I would lay it against some tree and then my attention would drift off in another direction. The next thing you know I would be searching for it, trying to remember exactly where I left the damn thing.

Even though it was bulky and heavy, in the jungle losing something two feet from where you were standing was possible. Hailey would consider it the crime of the century anytime I

didn't have it within arm's reach, feeling much the same about it as any rifleman felt about his weapon. In reality, the radio was our best weapon, since with it the rest of the company was available to assist us if the need arose.

Hailey carried all the radio codes and frequencies around with him. I had the same codes and frequencies written on the plastic covering of the map I carried. In a real bind, Hailey was the one who worked the radio. He had it all memorized and could flip frequencies to contact anyone we might need to communicate with in an instant. I frequently tested his knowledge just to reassure myself that the information I had was correct. To someone not familiar with radio procedure, this might seem like a small thing, but Hailey had to keep straight at least four frequencies and several code words in order to contact the various services available. Old Charlie was not to be underestimated in his ability to pick up our transmissions, so everything had to be changed frequently. At least once a day, and sometimes twice, if the situation called for it, all the codes and frequencies changed. It did no good to know what the code was two hours ago, if it had changed. It did no good to talk into the radio if everyone else had changed frequencies and you had not.

Having this stuff written down was of value, but having it memorized was even more important. When the shit hit the fan, it was hard just holding the map steady enough to read it. It was difficult to remember your name, never mind your code call sign and your counter sign should that subject arise. Then there was the night. Try reading the frequency changes at night with the enemy all around waiting for a light to shoot at. Any light would do.

Hailey kept everything together for us, and no one minded humping his gear. He was our contact with the outside world, and we protected him as best we could, which was not much.

Besides functioning as the radio man, Bill also had to act as platoon runner. When the platoon was in action, it was sometimes necessary to pass information from me to other platoon members. Sometimes this information could be passed from man to man or position to position until the information reached the right person, but this was not always possible. Even though there were only some thirty men in the platoon, when deployed, the platoon might occupy a front of anywhere from thirty yards to a couple hundred yards, depending on

the terrain and operational situation. As platoon leader I was responsible for finding out what was happening when we came under fire. This required me to move toward the action as soon as it could be determined exactly where that was. Hailey would have to accompany me, not a very pleasant assignment. From there things only got worse if the platoon's deployment had to be changed in any way. Moving during combat was a sure way of shortening your lifespan, but Hailey did his job, carrying messages whenever necessary.

There were supposed to be two large radios and four smaller units within the platoon. Today we just had the one large radio working. The smaller hand held units were notoriously unreliable, and all ours were somewhere in the rear getting maintenance. Our other large unit was with Second Platoon, since both of theirs were in for repair. So keeping the formation together, informed, and on the move was a problem that day, and Hailey had used a lot of energy passing information along. It was not so bad now that the platoon was out operating on its own, but I could see he was tired.

The platoon halted. I moved over a couple feet and crouched behind a tree, waiting for the platoon to begin moving again. I kept my eyes busy scanning the area, making sure I kept glancing at PFC Cooper's back. I was following behind him in formation and had to make certain that when he started moving forward again, I followed. Hailey was following me, and I knew he could see me and was watching me carefully.

I got out my canteen and began to unscrew the cap. Cooper turned toward me and gave me a hand signal to move over to him. I put the canteen away and moved forward. He pointed toward the man ahead of him and I moved off in that direction. Each man acknowledged my presence and pointed me in the direction I was needed. I glanced back to ensure that Hailey was following. Of course he was. When I got to first squad, Bobby joined me. Together we moved forward to where Hare and Buddy were held up.

They had led the platoon to the edge of a rice paddy. On the opposite side of the paddy were four hooches, Vietnamese houses. It was what we had been sent to search out. I took my binoculars up and scanned the cluster of houses. There was no smoke, and no one was moving. There were animals, which meant the hooches were occupied.

It was not unusual that there was no one moving over. It was approaching 1300 hours. After eating lunch, the occupants of the village were probably taking it easy in the shade. Farmers in the area worked from first light until around noon and then knocked off until later in the day when the sun started moving to the west. They did not work the paddies in the hottest part of the day. Unlike us Americans, they were not that stupid.

It was about a hundred yards across the paddy to the buildings. I backed away from the edge of the wood line, taking Bobby with me.

The first thing I did was check in with the captain, informing him of our position and our intent to send men in to check out the hooches. I confirmed the coordinates of the target and made sure he understood exactly where we were currently located and how I intended to move my men. This was done in case something happened and he had to maneuver the company to assist us. Also he would know where to look for the bodies if shit really went wrong.

The only reason we were operating in the area was because there were reports of a sizable enemy presence. That morning, we had received the latest intelligence report, which estimated that there was at least one enemy regiment in the area. Big deal. I had over thirty men to handle them.

Bobby and I planned the search. I would stay where we were located and deploy third and fourth squads to cover the village from along the wood line. Bobby would take first and second squad and enter the village from the south. I would have one machine gun covering their advance through the village. If something happened we had the option of providing covering fire for Bobby's force, assaulting across the paddy, or calling Bobby back to us. We synchronized our watches and agreed Bobby would have twenty minutes to get into position.

Bobby moved his men out, and I set up our position. Working as quickly as possible, we still took most of the allotted time to get the men in place. Everyone was tense. Checking out a group of structures that were occupied by civilians was always a tricky proposition. There was no way to differentiate between the enemy Viet Cong and the generally friendly civilian population.

Hailey spotted the movement of our men through the village first. I was hoping nothing would happen, but got on the horn to the captain again. He would stay by the radio until the initial sweep was completed.

Bobby's squad swept through the village quickly. He had placed them on line, and they moved with cautious speed. The squad did not stop to examine the houses. Their presence would draw an enemy response if there were any enemies in the village. The sweep finished without incident. I could see civilians moving around the building now. It had to be a rude awakening to have American troops suddenly move through like that. I wondered if those people had ever seen Americans before. Located where they were, I would have been surprised. To them the war was a distant rumor that probably only bothered their existence with periodic visits by the Viet Cong or government troops.

The village was now covered from three directions. Bobby's squad was now north of the village, Dan Kirby's second squad was in a blocking position to the south, and we were to the west. Bobby's men started moving back through the area for a more thorough search. We had agreed to a timeframe of about thirty minutes for the search, but I was certainly flexible on that point. Now that the area seemed secure, I could relax for a while.

Right.

"One, this is Five, over."

"Five, this is One, over," I replied.

"One, I need you to move to a position approximately two hundred meters Sierra Whiskey of Hotel, over."

"I copy that, Five. Two zero zero meters Sierra Whiskey of Hotel."

"Roger. The company is moving now. We should be there in six zero minutes. If you could secure the area it would be much appreciated, over."

The good news was that Bobby's men were standing on Hotel. "Hotel" was a reference code used to designate a spot on a map without having to give map coordinates over the radio. The captain wanted the platoon to move two hundred meters to the southwest and set up a secure perimeter for the company. The captain had not said why, but it had to mean the

company was being airlifted in another brilliant move by the men at Division Headquarters. Therefore our objective was a clearing that helicopters could land in.

I got the third and fourth squad leaders together. The move for us would be relatively easy, but for the fact that two of the squads were a hundred meters away, across an open rice paddy, without a radio.

I got out the map and spread it on the ground.

"This is where we are. This is where we have to go. Dan I want you and Joe to move your squads around to the right and join up with first and second squads here. I'll leave Hailey with you guys. I'm taking the radio and heading over to Bobby's group. Once I get there, you guys move out. Questions?"

It was a simple plan that did not require further discussion. It was a judgement call on my part. I could have sent Hailey across the opening, but he had been running his butt all day and humping the radio. It was my turn.

I didn't want to move all the men across the paddy. It would destroy too much of the crop and get everyone's feet wet. There was no reason for that.

Hailey got pissed when I told him my plans.

"You stay here with the radio. I'll go over and get Bobby's men moving. What happens if something happens to you? You got the damn radio and we don't have a platoon leader."

"Listen, Hailey. It will take me all of maybe two minutes to get over to Bobby. The area's secure, and nothing is going to happen. You're right about the radio though. You keep it. Stay with Sergeant Fisher. If anything happens, he'll handle it."

I turned and moved off to the edge of the paddy. Although we only had to move a short distance, the company would be slow moving that far, and we would need plenty of time to secure the landing zone once we got there. I did not have time to argue. Anyone could be sent across to gather up Bobby's men, but I was in the mood for a little action, not that anything was going to happen.

The day was hot. There was a breeze. The rice was green, and the tops of the plants moved in gentle waves at the encouragement of the wind. The water was dank and smelly. Luckily, it was not real deep. It did not go over the top of my combat boots.

Jungle boots are porous though. The water moved through the boots as if there was not material there at all. I might as well have been barefoot as far as keeping my feet dry. My only hope was that the boots would keep the shit off my feet. When I say shit, I mean fecal material. It was the way the Vietnamese fertilized their fields. Waste not, want not. Their waste was used to grow the vast quantities of rice that made Vietnam a rice exporter.

I knew from my courses in college that the water also had parasitic worms present in it. Just another wonderful fact I did not bother sharing with the men in the platoon. There was no sense giving them something else to worry about. A regiment of enemy was enough to keep their interest. None of them would think of drinking the water, so that was not the danger. The microscopic parasitic worms actually burrowed into the skin. Hip boots would have been the only protection from them. Still it was another reason not to move all the men across the paddy.

I moved quickly. Being alone, crossing that field gave me a spooky feeling. I was so used to being surrounded by jungle that it was eerie being alone in the open. The field was almost a perfect square, and as I approached the halfway point, the thought that I was passing through the imaginary center of a great bullseye flipped suddenly through my mind.

An instant later. No. Half an instant later. THOOP!

The mind is an amazing thing. It can operate at a speed double the speed of light. Twenty five thousand thoughts can pass through it in a microsecond, and one million in the time it takes for a stream of urine to hit the ground.

My mind classified the noise in the first zillionth of a second. Someone had just air delivered a mortar shell. After that my mind really went to work.

That's all I need, a fucking "THOOP".

I wonder who is shooting at who? Or is it whom? Wait a minute. We don't have any mortars.

Now who are they shooting at? Let's see. Who can they see well enough to feel they have a real chance of killing? Is it the guys in the village surrounded by civilians? Maybe, but probably not. Well, is it the guys hidden in the woods, surrounded by jungle? Maybe, but

probably not. Well is it that silly fool walking across the rice paddy all alone with a target taped to his ass? Probably.

Mortars are funny weapons. You can often hear them long before anything happens. Right now there was a live round up there in the stratosphere somewhere, moving in a beautiful parabolic arc, on its way to a very specified destination. The enemy loved mortars. They were portable, accurate, deadly, and came with a lifetime warranty. In this instance, I thought, it was my lifetime whose warranty they were after.

The dilemma I faced in this particular timeframe was what to do. My first thought was that I could really use a cigarette right about now. Not that I was addicted. It just would have been nice to smoke a cigarette and think about the current situation. Contemplate life and think happy thoughts. A magnificent idea, but not particularly pertinent to the current situation. My mind rejected the option quickly, barely spending a millimicrosecond on the idea.

Current military thinking was that the safest place to be during a mortar or artillery barrage was flat on the ground, or with your "ass in the grass," as our instructor was so fond of saying. Mortars exploded upon contact with the ground, throwing shrapnel up and out. This theory was about to be tested. My mind quickly reviewed the whole lecture, searching for any other information I might need in my current dilemma. I remember wanting to ask the question about the effects of mortars and other assorted high explosives on a person lying in water. Being shy and sort of chicken, I never did ask that question.

Now my mind flashed on the subject and asked my imaginary instructor, "Sergeant, I have a question. If you are standing ankle deep, in shit full, parasite infested water, with a mortar shell bearing down on your ass, should you lay down, and if so, what exactly could one expect to happen to his body, supposing the mortar shell did not land directly on top of the head?" The instructor's brows came together as his mind went into deep thought on the subject. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, a smile started spreading across his face. Not a good sign.

"Sergeant. What I want to know is if it is a good idea to lie down in that situation? If so, should you keep your head above the water, hoping the shrapnel passes over your head, or

should you take a deep breath and submerge your head under water and risk getting your eardrums burst and having your eyes popped out of your skull?"

Now the instructor was smiling and snorting. Not a good sign. The other men in the class were watching me with a worried look on their faces. Those closest to me were inching away.

"I mean, if I submerge my head and there is a huge explosion, exactly how far into my ear will the shit penetrate? Is this where you instructors came up with that wonderful expression, "Hey, shit for brains, get with the program?" Another thing, exactly how far up my butt will all these parasitic worms be blown?"

Now the instructor is rolling on the ground, holding his belly and gasping for air. Two MPs come down the aisle, grab me by the arms and escort me out of the lecture. On the way out I pass an officer taking notes. Two months later there is a monkey, standing ankle deep in foul smelling, parasite infested water, wondering whose bright idea this was.

Should I fill my lungs or empty them prior to the explosion? Should I hold my breath or pant quickly to keep my lungs from bursting? Which will be worse, the spray of shrapnel, or the concussion wave passing through the water? What will be louder, the sound of the explosion in the air or the noise generated by the explosion passing through the water?

My mind continued coming up with the damndest thoughts at a speed that defied comprehension. The sound of the mortar leaving the tube had not even ended in the time it took for my mind to consider all these possibilities. If I was not careful, I would wind up having to catch the damn thing, since it would be too late to do anything else. I was tempted to look up, to see if I could spot its flight, and at least go down in the history books by catching it, but I maintained both my discipline and indecision by doing nothing.

While my mind continued sorting through the endless scenarios and permutations, my body began to react to the situation. God, in his infinite wisdom, had endowed the body with certain automatic functions that did not require conscious thought. Psychologists call your body's automatic reaction to overwhelming stress the "flight or fight" reaction. Sergeant Wilson called the same situation the "Shit or Get" reaction. He was probably closer to the truth.

My body's first reaction was to pucker my anal sphincter so tight I suspected it would stay that way for the rest of eternity. It closed not quietly but slammed shut with about the same sound as a door closed in anger. I was sure the men who were watching heard it as well. To someone watching at a distance it would appear that I was frozen in place. Actually I was alive with activity, it was just that at the moment I was internalizing everything.

Located on top of each kidney is a little group of tissue called the adrenal gland. One of its most important functions is to provide the body with a chemical called epinephrine, or adrenaline. Minute amounts of this chemical can cause the same reaction in the body as a hydrogen bomb going off. Normally the combined size of these two structures would be about that of one unattached thumb. Through daily exercise, like any other muscle group, I suppose, mine had grown to where their combined mass was slightly smaller than that of the matter occupying the inside of my brain. Unlike my brain, which was continuing to run away like some sort of wild stallion with a stick shoved up its ass, my adrenal glands reacted exactly as they should and added a minute amount of adrenaline to my body's circulatory system. This minute amount of adrenaline was exactly one hundred times the normal amount any civilian had ever received, but only ten times the amount that would be considered fatal.

Two things occurred simultaneously. My mind locked on the idea of fleeing, quickly rejecting it. I was standing ankle deep, in shitty, parasite infested water, whose surface was covered with a muck four times more slippery than ice. Wearing football cleats, I would be able to move approximately fourteen feet before the mortar shell landed, leaving me approximately ten meters inside what was so eloquently known as its "kill radius"

While my mind could operate at the speed of light, my body was slow. My mind could grasp the concept of speed, but my body lacked the characteristic necessary to generate any results in this area. In training, I had several opportunities to watch the Hare run. He had a lanky body, with a loping way of moving that generated a speed I could only attain by falling out of an aircraft without a parachute. I watched his arms move, the way his legs pumped and his face contorted, in the hope of duplicating his speed, but in the end it was all for naught.

My mind flashed, as it was so apt to do, and now I was the Hare, running mostly naked across some African plain. Moving gracefully, taking my time as I headed for some distant

destination. Suddenly I trip over something and take a spill onto the ground. I roll and jump quickly to my feet. Old Mister Cheetah, who had been taking a nap in the tall grass, gets up also, looking around in confusion. I, the Hare, take off running; a sure sign to the Cheetah that dinner is served. Before taking off after me, it shakes the dust from its coat and stretches its legs. It is in no hurry. Being the fastest creature on the face of the earth has certain advantages. Even a fleeing black man, whose head was disappearing over the hill, was not a problem.

I look back and see no Cheetah following me. This does not provide me with any comfort. I am swifter than the wind, but the Cheetah is faster than the lightning. Ten seconds later I glance back again, and there is the Cheetah, a hundred yards back and gaining rapidly. Ten seconds later it is about to spring while continuing to run at full speed.

The Cheetah can almost taste the meat it is chasing. It would be tough and chewy, just the way he likes it. A final spring, its paws stretched out to grasp the meat, and then nothing but the sight of the black man topping the hill a hundred yards in the distance. Old Hare had found overdrive. Hare could do it, I could not.

The other thing that happened at the same instant my mind rejected the thought of fleeing was that the adrenaline reached both my feet. While my mind continued to consider what to do, my feet made an instantaneous decision. FUCK THIS! There is an old Indian saying, "whither the feet go, the ass will surely follow." Truer words, had they ever been spoken, had never been written. In an independent decision, voted on unanimously by both parties, the feet took control of the situation. In the oldest Airborne tradition of "Follow Me," the left foot took off following the right and then vice versa as they continuously changed leads in their quest to exit this particular battlefield. Adrenaline is not for thinking with; that is what marijuana is for. No, adrenaline is for acting. My ass did follow.

Water is a strange substance. Everyone knows it can exist as a solid, liquid, or gas. What most people do not know is that it can provide tremendous traction for combat boots under just the right circumstances. For the initial four steps of my flight, this was not wholly true. On the first step my right foot buried itself six inches deep in shitty, parasite infested muck. The left foot was traveling much faster and was only in the water long enough to barely

touch the surface of the shitty, parasite infested muck. Then it was the right foot's turn again. It was traveling much faster than the left foot and still accelerating, and this time it only sunk halfway into the shitty, parasite infested water before finding good traction. It was at this point that the first water plume was spotted arising out of the paddy that I was beginning to pass over. On the fourth step the only part of the combat boot to touch the water was the sole. From this point on, my socks actually began to dry out as I proceeded toward my destination.

My fourth step coincided with the exact instant the mortar shell lost all its upward momentum and flipped over, pointing its nose down toward its target, one very scared, slow moving white boy. The gooks on the hill could only be laughing at what was happening in front of their eyes. Their mortar shell was seconds away from detonation, and other than a small movement toward the village by the "round eyes," nothing was happening. One of them did wonder why the water seemed to be spraying up behind the American.

My mind was finally grasping the significance of the action the feet were taking and began plotting a course. Taking into account such disciplines as physics, geometry, trigonometry, algebra, and quantum physics, it calculated all the angles and possible trajectories that would get me safely out of my current situation. It considered wind speed, air density, the rotation of the earth, and velocity of my bodies mass in trying to figure out which way to head. Meanwhile, my eyes spotted the closest piece of dry land, and my feet headed in that direction, taking both my ass and my mind with them.

I covered the distance between the center of the field and the dike surrounding the field in something close to record time. Moving a distance of fifty yards in 2.375 seconds is really not all that fast, and I am sure the Hare could have done it in half the time. As I approached my destination, I could see there was a shallow ditch on the other side of the dike. The ditch was filled with grass. Were there any punji sticks hidden in that grass? A very good question, but one I did not have time to contemplate, since the clock in my head that was calculating how much time I had until I was blown into a million pieces was reaching zero.

I dove into the ditch. Considering that I was travelling at close to eighty miles an hour and had launched my dive while still a good twenty yard from the dike, it was quite a graceful

landing, although somewhat painful. I hit the ground at about the same instant both the sound of the explosion and the concussive wave passed over me. Not even close!

THUMP! My body was thrown from its prone position, onto its back. A shock ran through my body, and I was sure I had been hit. THUMP, THUMP! Shit, hit again! My body spasmed from the shock. THUMP, thump. My mind figured it out at the same instant my body began to shake uncontrollably. That first THUMP had been my heart starting to pump again. It had probably stopped at the realization that a mortar shell was after me. The adrenaline had time to reach my feet before it stopped completely. My mind and feet, not realizing that the heart had already stopped and that I was technically dead, kept functioning. The pumping of my legs had circulated the blood carrying the adrenaline back to my heart at the same instant my body landed. My body slamming into the ground, in conjunction with the arrival of the adrenaline, had kick started the heart back into action. Now the adrenaline spread throughout my body. Its effects on the nervous system were the same as if I had taken all the caffeine from a thousand cups of coffee and drank it all at once.

Now maybe I am wrong. Maybe it did not happen exactly that way. It's only a theory, but somehow it feels right.

Bobby was beside me in an instant. "You okay?"

"Yeah?" I said, trying to get a cigarette from my pack. My hands were shaking so badly that half the pack had already been shook loose and were beginning to spread out on the ground around me. Bobby picked one up, shoved it in my mouth, and lit it for me. The end of the cigarette bobbed up and down in front of my eyes, making me feel slightly seasick. I was shook up, but the shaking was from the adrenaline in my system and not because I was scared. At least, that is what I kept telling myself. One by one the men from the village gathered around and expressed their admiration for both my running ability and my diving style.

I gave Bobby instructions, and two minutes later we were moving out to join up with the other men in the platoon. I was still a little shaky, but we never looked back. Why should we. It was only one mortar shell, not a barrage. The whole incident had lasted maybe half a minute

from beginning to end. A minute in the life of an infantryman that would stay with him forever.
END