

#24 Death Times Three – the field, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – This describes a period of time from when I came back to Vietnam in July 1968 until I was transferred down to Saigon. It occurred right at the end of my time in the field and describes a day before I left the field.

The choppers took us east from the fire support base where we had spent the night, toward the ocean. At this altitude I could watch the landscape below; it was covered with rice paddies and interspersed jungle. It was not the type of terrain the company was used to operating in, and I was not looking forward to our current assignment.

At the morning briefing we had been told the company was going to be placed in an area around a coastal village where enemy activity had been unusually high over the past week. It was not the normal patrol pattern for the company, and I was sure there were other people just as apprehensive as I was with the assignment. Looking toward the eastern horizon, I expected to see the ocean at any time.

The rice paddies below were pockmarked with craters created by bombs or artillery. From the air, one was able to see just how frequently the military forces operating in the area had employed such ordnance, and from the looks of it there was either plenty of targets moving through the area or a plethora of ammunition being wasted. I wondered if they ever actually hit anything other than rice plants. Farming in this area had to be hazardous, with the Viet Cong operating at night and the U.S. Military operating during the day. I felt saddened by the tale the landscape told me of the conflict. It must be hell for the farmers and their families, I thought.

The terrain began to change even more as the helicopters flew east. The vibrant green rice paddies grew sparser, and the land flattened even more with ever thinning ground cover. The whiteness of sand could be discerned in ever widening strips of ground. Leaning out the side of the copter, I tried to spot the blue that would indicate where the ocean was.

I saw the lead chopper dip its nose and bank to the right. I scooted my butt back into the copter and took a death grip on one of the seat anchors. The other men in the copter did the

same thing so that no one shifted too violently when our pilot mimicked the flight leader's gyrations.

One thing about operating in such open country was that the approach into the landing zone was a lot quicker and more direct than in the Highlands. Although I missed the mountainous jungles when on the ground, I did not miss the wild rides associated with a helicopter assault, nor the small landing zones we had to utilize. Here the land stretched out before us in all directions, offering little in the way of ground cover for the enemy. Our helicopters carrying the First Platoon and another group of four carrying the Second Platoon were all able to touch down at the same time, spread out over a relatively large area.

We started exiting the craft before its skids touched the sand, sprinting away from the chopper as quickly as possible. Once I was outside the diameter of the blade's rotation, I flopped to the ground and took up a defensive position facing outward, away from the aircraft. It was noisy from the thrum of all the engines and rotors in the area. Overhead, gunships could be seen circling the area, looking for anything suspicious.

I closed my eyes and ducked my head as the chopper behind me revved its engines and lifted off. It passed directly over where I lay. The downdraft of its blades cooled me, but at the same time it stirred up the sand and proceeded to blast my skin with a million pellets. Then they were gone, heading west. It would take another trip to gather up the rest of the company and bring them back to our location. For now there were only about sixty of us on the ground. I got up and looked around. The rest of the men in the platoon were also beginning to stand. I watched as the various squads started moving outward, expanding the rough perimeter we had initially established.

Lieutenant Atkins had his ear to the handset of the radio, and I could see his lips move periodically as he communicated with the command post back at the initial LZ.

Everyone knew their job and, despite the newness of the terrain, moved into new positions with minimal directions. We had specifically reviewed what type of deployment would be necessary in such open country, and the men reacted exactly how they had been briefed.

I felt naked standing there in the open and quickly moved over toward First Squad. Finding a small depression in the sand, I set myself up there. I could see Spec Four Hailey rubbernecking the area as he and the lieutenant remained kneeling in the middle of this huge sandlot the company had chosen for a landing zone. If there was an enemy with a scoped rifle anywhere within a few hundred yards, it would be easy to discern the ripe target the lieutenant was making of himself by remain upright. I imagined Hailey was praying the sniper was a good shot and could discern the more valuable of the two targets. The danger of course was that the sniper would only have an automatic weapon with an open sight. In that case, he would put his sight between the two of them and squeeze the trigger, spraying down the area in the hope of getting at least one of them. Finally the lieutenant started moving off toward Third Squad. Hailey let him lead off and then began following after giving him a good lead of at least fifteen meters. I felt sorry for Hailey. Being the lieutenant's radio man could be no fun and greatly increased the risk of getting shot.

Lieutenant Atkins was simply not cut out for combat. It was becoming more and more apparent to everyone within the platoon.

It was not courage. No one doubted the lieutenant's willingness to face danger. In combat he had proven his willingness to engage the enemy. He would expose himself in order to move about the battlefield, even to the point of being reckless. It was not his courage that I questioned, nor his intelligence for that matter. There was no doubt that he was intelligent enough for the job.

Technically he knew a lot more about running a platoon in combat than I did, something that I could appreciate more than the rest of the men in the platoon could. Over the past two weeks, he had taught me a lot of the technical details about airstrikes and artillery support that I had not been in a position to appreciate in the past. In return, I offered guidance to him in handling the men within the platoon. I had made it my job to keep him alive long enough for him to develop into a good platoon leader.

It was difficult. No. It had proven to be almost impossible.

Maybe if I had not been given R&R during that first week the lieutenant had the platoon, things would have turned out differently. I would never know. What I did know was that by the time I got back, everything had changed.

The combination of losing Sergeants Fry, Harris, and Kirby in a short period of time had changed the chemistry within the platoon dramatically. That was normal. Lieutenant Atkins' presence, combined with my being gone during the adjustment period, had made the necessary adjustments all the more difficult. I had spent the past two weeks trying to straighten the situation out, but I was increasingly discouraged with the results.

I got along with the lieutenant as well as I could. In many ways, his arrival had made my life easier in terms of handling the platoon. He had good technical skills and knew his way around.

If someone had told me there would be a morale problem in First Platoon a month before, I would have bet all my life savings that it could never happen. Now there was a problem, one I did not know exactly how to handle.

Looking over to where the lieutenant was sitting, I felt disgusted with the situation. This was a perfect example of the type of action that had the men worried.

Because of the lay of the land, it was difficult if not downright impossible to find a good defensive position. But everyone in the platoon could be counted upon to do the best they could with what was available. Not the lieutenant. Sitting out in the open without a thought for his safety. It was this lack of basic survival instinct that worried me. The men had no confidence in his ability to protect himself, which of course made them nervous about his ability to protect them.

The lieutenant had managed to make a lot of enemies within the platoon during my absence. Looking over to my right, I spotted Sergeant Fisher and the other men in Fourth Squad. Things between Joe and the lieutenant had gone from bad to worse. I did not know if the lieutenant appreciated just how bad the situation was, which of course was his whole problem.

The lieutenant was prejudiced, and he let that affect how he related to Sergeant Fisher. Just how insulting and detrimental his attitude was and how it related to his position within the

platoon did not seem to enter the lieutenant's consciousness. Joe's squad consisted of seven men who would die for each other. Insulting or belittling Joe was the same as waving a red flag at a bull. Joe's men were especially fierce in combat. Somehow all the psychotics had wound up in his squad. Whether this was fate or one of God's little jokes, I did not know. I had considered breaking them up for fear of what they might do one day. The thought of survival dissuaded me. Besides, I could not ask for a better group to cover our ass in the midst of combat. They were aggressive, willing to take chances, and very efficient in policing the battlefield after a firefight. That was something I preferred to leave to others, rather than witnessing the stuff that bad dreams are made of. The fact that the company had never managed to send a prisoner to the rear had never been questioned by those at Brigade. Fourth Squad had a lot to do with that, and if the lieutenant hadn't figured that out yet, it was time to educate the man.

Thirty minutes later, the helicopters returned bearing the remaining men of the company. While they were still dots in the distance, First Squad, led by Spec Four Boyd at point, moved out in the direction of the village that was our destination for the morning. Boyd was a good fifty yards forward before his back up man moved out. Once they were well out in front, First and Second Squads began moving out together. Each squad was on line with First Squad to the right of the formation. Because the land was so open, the two squads were spread out over a couple hundred yards as the men swept slowly forward. With the flank men out another thirty yards on either side of the formation, our front covered a wide area as the platoon progressed. The lieutenant and Hailey took up position in the middle of the formation, perhaps twenty yards behind the advancing line.

In open terrain like this, it was important to keep the spacing between men. Doing so would diminish any mortar attack or machinegun fire that we might encounter. It would also lessen the chance of a booby trap injuring more than one man unfortunate enough to find it.

Once the first two squads were off in the distance, Third and Fourth Squads got on line and began moving out. By now the helicopters were on final approach. I moved off after the platoon just as the choppers approached the area from our rear. Taking up a position twenty

meters from the last line of men, I would be in good position to direct their movements if the first line came under fire.

Even though it was still early in the morning, the day was heating up. The ground we were moving forward on was a mixture of white sand and bunches of short grass. Although not perfectly flat, the terrain had few undulations. It was possible for me to still observe Boyd out in front of the platoon, even though by the time I moved out he was a good two hundred yards away.

The sandy ground soon had my leg muscles aching. I had trained in Northern California during advanced infantry training, so I was familiar with having to march through sand. Weighed down with a rucksack of eighty pounds, the march began to turn into another one of those unpleasant little challenges that represented everyday life in the boonies. Within an hour my focus narrowed down to the patch of ground in front of me as I struggled forward. I kept glancing up to verify my position within the formation and ensure that the line in front of me was not bunching up. But mostly I studied the ground in front of me as I moved forward.

The company had moved forward a good click already, and we had maybe another click and a half remaining when the point man stopped the company prior to our entering the village. I was hoping the old man would call for a stop soon, maybe a five minute break for water and to relax the old leg muscles. A cigarette would have been a nice break. Not that I was addicted or anything, just that lately I had begun to look forward to the next smoke even as I put out the last one.

I was following PFC Martinez from Third Squad. It took me a while, but something about the footprints in the sand suddenly entered my consciousness. I was following Martinez's footsteps as closely as possible. The reason for this was simply to cover the same ground he had in the hopes of lessening my chance of stepping on some kind of booby trap. I noticed, however, that Martinez's footprints were off to the side of the man who had moved through the area ahead of him. In other words, Martinez was finding new ground to sweep with his foot steps for booby traps. Looking around I could see many sets of prints left by the men of the platoon as they moved forward. Not a good idea.

I was tempted to stop the platoon and talk to the men, but I knew the company would stop shortly. It was something that would have to be corrected. The chances of hitting a booby trap would increase exponentially the closer we came to the village ahead. Any way we could reduce our risk during the approach was worth considering.

I looked up at Martinez as my left foot struck the ground and kept going down. It was only a combination of luck, quick reflexes, and strength that kept me from dying that instant. As the left leg disappeared into the ground, my right leg flexed, then fought for leverage and balance. Without really having time to think, I threw my right shoulder forward twisting away from my left side. The rucksack that had been making my life miserable for the past hour now became a lifesaver as its weight, suddenly shifted to the right, and carried my body with it to the ground.

My eyes recorded the falling of the covering to the hole. My body bounced onto the ground and had the wind knocked out of it. I lay there quietly, barely breathing, as the implications of the situation presented themselves to me. My body was sort of convoluted, with my upper torso twisted on its right side, while the rest of my body lay beside an open pit. The left leg disappeared straight down into the pit, while the right leg lay parallel to the lip of the opening. Peering carefully over the edge, I could see that the bottom of the pit was a mass of punji sticks facing upward to the sky. My left foot had managed to plunge down amongst them. I felt some stinging coming from the shin area and wondered if I had actually been wounded. There were five sticks surrounding the foot and extending upward, two almost to the kneecap. One had managed to thread through the laces of my combat boot.

Around me things were happening. When I hit the ground, everyone around me went down. There were shouts in my direction as the men around me tried to figure out exactly what was happening. It took a couple of seconds before I became aware of PFC Martinez crawling toward me.

Glancing around, I could see a number of men beginning to move toward me.

“You guys stay spread out,” I said loud enough for the men nearest me to hear. It stopped most of them immediately. “I just uncovered a punji pit. Be careful,” I added.

“Uncovered my ass,” said Sergeant Fisher as he continued crawling to where I lay. “Damn thing looks like it still wants a piece of your ass.” There was a smile on his face. He knew there was no way I was moving until some help got near.

Crawling up behind me, Sergeant Fisher grabbed my rucksack and pulled my upper body backwards another four inches from the side of the hole. I reached up and laid my rifle on the ground above my head and then raised myself on my right elbow. Staring down in the pit, I could see where my left foot nestled amongst the sharpened sticks. Sergeant Fisher put his rifle down, took out his knife, and crawled over my right leg. Laying flat, and in the process causing one of his grenades to dig into my right leg, he positioned himself so that he could extend his arms down into the pit. Carefully he assessed the situation before making a move.

I lay there quietly, letting Joe handle it for me. I could feel myself shaking. Had I been walking two inches to the left, I never would have been able to avoid the pit. I would have fallen into it, the weight of the rucksack driving my body down onto the proliferation of sharpened sticks. While the pit was only maybe five feet deep, the fall would have killed me or at least make me pray for death.

Sergeant Fisher reached down and cut the lace of my boot to ensure that I would not snag the carved barb at the end of the stick. He then split the front of the pant leg further toward the knee in order to check out the wound and the perpetrating punji stick. Luckily it was not embedded in the flesh.

“You’re damn lucky, Lou,” Joe said. “I’m going to pull the leg straight up. Let me do it. You just relax.” Although it took Joe only a few seconds to get the leg free, it seemed longer. I rolled over, slipped off my rucksack, and sat up.

My hands were shaking as I lit up a cigarette. The platoon’s medic plopped down beside me and began examining my left leg. There was a slight tear in the skin, maybe four inches long and not very deep. Blood had run down toward the top of the boot, but it was very little, and the stream of blood had already stopped.

The medic reached into his bag and pulled out a bottle of hydrogen peroxide. Then he proceeded to wash down the wound in a vigorous manner. It hurt like a son of a bitch, but

being a real man, I quietly cursed him out rather than crying. I began to focus on what was happening around me.

Sergeant Fisher had already moved back toward Fourth Squad. He had been awaiting the arrival of the medic before deciding to move out. Didn't want the neighborhood to get too crowded.

Lieutenant Atkins, with Spec. Four Hailey in tow was the next to arrive.

"Looks like a close call, Sergeant," he said, walking over to examine the pit.

"Close enough."

Hailey kneeled down beside me. The first thing he did was offer me an opened canteen. I had not realized how thirsty I was until that moment. Greedily I sucked the canteen half dry. Hailey's focus was on the front of my leg where the medic continued to soak the wound and rub it raw with some gauze.

I watched the lieutenant as he walked over to the edge of the pit, too close to the edge.

"I'd be careful, Sir. Those sides might cave in."

Ignoring me, the lieutenant dropped his rucksack from his back. He then lay flat on his stomach and reached down into the pit for one of the sticks. It took me a second to realize exactly what he was up to.

"Stop, goddamnit!" I yelled.

Both Hailey and the medic jumped. Lieutenant Atkins looked over in my direction with puzzlement on his face.

"I wouldn't do that, Sir," I said, addressing him.

"And why not?" he asked.

"Well, Sir, let's just suppose I had fallen into that pit and was lying there with a couple dozen of those spikes sticking through me. What do you suppose you would have done?" I asked, trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"We would have pulled you right out of there of course."

"Good, Sir. Now think of this. If you were Charlie, would you have thought of that, and if so, what action would you take to make removing the body even more memorable?"

It took the lieutenant a few seconds, but the expression on his face changed once he had the answer. “Booby trapped?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Let me get the hell away from here before you go dicking around and find out,” I said.

The medic chuckled and bobbed his head up and down as he continued to wrap the leg in a bandage. A look of chagrin possessed the lieutenant’s face. I could see him biting his tongue and knew I would hear from him later. Something about being respectful in front of the men.

Captain Carlson approached with his radio man, White Owl, in tow. The area was getting more crowded than the Jersey Shore on a hot summer day.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Yes, Sir,” the lieutenant replied, getting to his feet and brushing his uniform off.

“Good,” the captain replied. “Lieutenant, why don’t you get back to your position. I want the company moving again in another ten minutes.

Turning his attention to me, he asked, “Are you alright, Lou.”

“Yes, Sir”

“Any problems?” he asked, addressing the medic.

“No, Sir. Just broke the skin a little. I cleaned the wound real well and put some ointment on it. I’ll have Lou take some oral antibiotics for the next few days and watch him for any signs of an infection. With luck, everything will be all right.”

“Don’t you want to send him to the rear, just to be on the safe side?”

“Your call, Sir,” the medic replied.

“Lou?”

“No, Sir. I’m fine. Get worse scratches every other day, Sir.”

“You know they put the ends of the sticks in shit before they set them.”

“Yes, Sir. It’s one thing to get almost shish-kebabbed, it’s another to get shit on,” I said. “I’ll be careful, Sir. There is no way I want a repeat performance.” I was referring to my previous battle with microorganisms, the one I had damned near lost.

The captain laughed at this remark. “I’ll have someone destroy this hole, so don’t worry about it. Anything else?”

“Yes, Sir,” the medic said. “Sergeant Merrins gets a Purple Heart for this.”

“Finally got yours, Lou,” Carlson said.

“I’d rather not, Sir,” I said. “It’s more embarrassing than anything. I wouldn’t feel right getting one for this little scratch.”

“All right, Lou, your decision. Get ready to move out,” he said moving away.

“You know that’s bullshit, Sarge,” the medic said.

“Guys in the rear would be hollering for one for plenty less than this.”

“I know. One of the cooks got a Purple Heart for splitting open his head on the side of a bunker trying to get inside during a mortar attack. The nearest mortar landed a couple of hundred yards from the battalion headquarters, but they gave it to him anyway. It’s just that most of the guys have gotten theirs for far worse than this silly little scratch. I’d feel stupid accepting one, and the guys would give me shit for the rest of my tour. Just forget it.”

“All right. Like the captain said, your call.” He reached inside his pack and came up with a vial of pills. He took one out and handed it to me. “I’ll be giving one to you every six hours from now on until we use up everything in the bottle. In the evening, I will give you an extra one to take during the night. I want to keep you on a six hour schedule with these antibiotics. Don’t want you getting sick.”

“Just give me the bottle.”

“No way. I’ve done that in the past, but it just doesn’t work out. Either you’ll double the medication to get rid of it quicker or you’ll have it in the bottom of your rucksack two weeks from now. I’ll take responsibility for seeing that you get your medication, Sarge. Trust me.”

“Okay.”

Five minutes later, the company was moving out. Everyone had been warned about the booby trap, and now the men out front were moving slowly, scanning the ground in front of them carefully, looking for more traps. I could have told them they were wasting their time. My mind kept replaying the incident, including the fact that I had looked at the ground just

prior to stepping down. There had been nothing suspicious to forecast the mat covering the ground [that](#) had given way. Old Charlie was very good at his craft.

The day went smoothly after that incident. The company searched the village and found nothing of importance. We left it much the same as we found it. It was our policy to treat the villagers as politely as circumstances allowed and not to destroy their property. These were the people we were here to protect.

By sixteen hundred hours, the company had stopped for the day. We were setting up camp for the night, out in the middle of nowhere.

As we were used to dealing with a landscape where a view of ten yards was considered wide open, the terrain we were operating in was a nightmare. After searching the village, the company proceeded up the coast instead of inland into the jungle. We were to spend the night dug in next to a tree line that was not wide enough to encompass a decent company perimeter. Three fourths of First Platoon would be digging in out in the open. Off in the distance, there were other sparsely wooded areas, but our fields of fire were open for a good fifty meters in any direction. Charlie would have a hell of a time attacking us across open ground. Still, it felt unnatural not to be surrounded by concealing foliage.

I followed the lieutenant over to where he had been hassling Sergeant Fisher and the men of Fourth Squad again. Joe and the lieutenant had gotten off on the wrong foot. While I was away on R&R, matters had grown worse between the two men, and now I had to expend a lot of energy keeping them working together. It was not easy.

The lieutenant operated like there was nothing wrong between them. If this is what he really thought, he was a complete idiot. He went out of the way to make Joe's life miserable. Currently he was in the process of making Joe's squad relocate two of its three positions. This was the lieutenant's prerogative, but the fact that he had waited until the men had their positions almost completely dug before making the changes was simple harassment. His excuse, that he had just noticed the problem, sounded lame to my ears. The men in the Fourth Squad were not happy with the decision. Joe Fisher was furious.

Not that Joe said anything. Joe kept his mouth shut and avoided eye contact with both me and the lieutenant with a vengeance. Knowing Joe, this made me extremely nervous. I would have to spend time with him later for a better read on the current situation.

The lieutenant and I had just moved off to the side of one of the positions and he was in the process of issuing orders. He was good at that. Most of it was just bullshit, reiterating things that needed to be taken care of even though they had already been taken care of without any orders. It was just that sometimes the lieutenant had to hear his own voice of authority. Working with the guy was becoming a real pain in the ass.

Suddenly the sand just off to the side of where we were standing began to dance, accompanied by the sound of rapid thumping coming from the ground. Before the first grains of sand had landed, I was on my belly, crawling at top speed out of the area. “Taking cover” is the correct terminology for ducking and hauling ass. I was five meters away when I heard the lieutenant’s laughter following me. What he had seen that was so funny was beyond me, but until I found a suitable hiding place, I was not about to stop and find out. As I was slithering into a shallow hole, the distant sound of automatic rifle fire reached my ears.

Before I could get an M-16 round seated, the perimeter around me exploded as the men let loose in the general direction the sound had come from. Before the lieutenant could join me in my new found home, the men of the Fourth Squad had begun already leapfrogging across the open ground in the direction of the wood line from whence the rifle fire had emanated. They flowed quickly forward, two or three men moving as the other members laid down covering fire then ducking down quickly as others began their moves. Never moving directly toward the target, never moving forward in the same direction twice. It was a deadly form of a Chinese fire drill.

Hailey plopped down beside us and passed the handset to the lieutenant. I heard him mumbling to the captain as I prepared to move out. Third Squad had moved into Fourth Squad’s old positions and they were preparing to move out next. I would go with them.

“Call the men back,” the lieutenant ordered.

“Why?”

“I told the captain I have a fix on the area and I’m going to call in artillery,” the lieutenant replied.

“That’s good, Sir, except Second Platoon has two LPs in that area and I haven’t seen them exit the wood line yet. With all the firing, they’ll have their asses down and expecting our company soon.”

I leapt forward, off in pursuit of Fourth Squad. Third Squad went straight for the wood line as the Fourth Platoon had already penetrated that area and we were not receiving any fire. We could not fire forward since our men were now out of sight. Our job was to get in close enough to supply support if they needed it.

It was no fun racing across that open ground. Besides being worried about an ambush, there was the thought of the artillery barrage and whether the lieutenant had gotten through to call it off. The other thing on my mind was the pit and whether we were about to find other booby traps along the way. No one was hesitating, but it didn’t mean they were not thinking about it also. We hit the tree line and took cover just inside. The men of Fourth Squad were already sitting there, staring out across the next open stretch. There was a body dressed in black lying about twenty meters out.

“Who got him?” I asked.

“PFC Spalding of Second Platoon, Sarge,” replied PFC Martin. “He was laying out about fifty yards up that way when he heard the firing,” he said, pointing to the LP’s position. “Once the gook fired, he headed out across the field. Spalding had a clean shot. Poor gook never had a chance. Put a full clip in the motherfucker.”

“Where’s Spalding now?”

“Sergeant Fisher took him back to his position to gather his shit together. Told Clay and Wilburn to stay out here as a Listening Post. Kid looked a little shook, but he did great, huh Sarge?”

“I’d say so. Listen you guys,” I said, raising my voice. “You did good work here. Fucking gook was probably already dying of a heart attack the way you guys moved in on him. Teach the bastards to fuck with the Airborne.”

“Airborne!” some of the other men replied. I could see in their faces that they were proud of the job they had done. My saying so was probably unnecessary, but they had earned the praise, and not to have said it would have been negligence on my part. That kind of speech would not mean much to all of the men, but it would to some, and they were important too.

Personally I was pissed. It was the second time that day I had almost been killed. Once in a rather impersonal way, by means of a booby trap. Then in a very personal way, by some gook with an automatic rifle. Had he been a better shot, both the lieutenant and I would have been dog meat.

I was mad for having stood out there in the open to begin with. Even though I had been alert, the terrain was all wrong for a standing conversation. Blaming it on the lieutenant was a cop out though, even though I knew it wouldn't have happened had he not initiated the conversation while standing there. I was too experienced to just stand there and listen. Finding a safe place to talk was my responsibility also, not just his. If following his lead caused my death, then it would be my own fault. I was responsible for keeping me alive. No one else.

On the other hand, the lieutenant's reaction to what happened did piss me off. Instead of reacting appropriately when I hit the dirt and began crawling away, he stood there laughing until the sound of the rifle fire reached us. Of course, the bullets had arrived before the sound could catch up, but he had just stood there while the men around us reacted to my movements. Lieutenant Atkins was still laughing when the men around him opened fire at the enemy.

Combine that with his desire to give a yank on one of the punji sticks in the pit, and it painted a picture of a man not yet in tune with his environment. After a month in the field, the lieutenant should have been more paranoid and ready to react swiftly to any change in his surroundings. His slowness and sloppiness after such a length of time were worrisome. I would talk with him again about it this evening, but my patience was wearing thin.

It was still early evening when PFC Mayes approached my position. I was done digging a defensive position within the arc covered by the First Platoon, one I would share with Hailey and Lieutenant Atkins. After heating water for a LRRP meal, I was sitting in the shade of a

poncho stretched overhead. The day was beginning to cool down. I was tired and hungry and looking forward to a little peace after the trials of the day.

They say that bad news comes in threes. Seeing Mayes approach made me wonder. Then I smiled. PFC “Lonely” Mayes was not one of my problem children. Other than his propensity to disappear into the bush if not watched closely, Mayes was not a troublemaker. He was generally polite, and he followed instructions without discussion. Of all the men in the platoon he was decidedly the strangest as far as I was concerned. It was hard to get a handle on the man.

Lonely was from some holler in West Virginia. A man of few words, when he did speak, he was difficult to understand, his speech barely interpretable. It was a combination of his accent and his usage of colloquialisms familiar only to his family and maybe a few neighbors. The man was not illiterate or stupid, but he hid that fact by not speaking much and being understood even less.

A replacement to the company in early January, he was still barely accepted by most members of the platoon upon my arrival to the field in April. Somehow though, Lonely and I connected. We each had certain attributes that put us on the same wavelength, and we seemed to accept each other as friends. It was a little weird, and trying to put it into words made no sense. Maybe it was a tribal recognition from a past life or something.

Within Fourth Squad, Lonely had found his niche in the platoon. Somehow, against all logic, he had become best friends with Spec Four Clay. Clay was a Black Panther who despised the white race. Within the platoon, this had miraculously not presented any problems. Clay got along with everyone and was willing to look upon his squad members as brothers regardless of the color of their skin. We were his “good whites,” as opposed to all other white people. The Airborne was his home, and the men in it were his family. Still it was funny how he and Lonely connected. Clay and I were less than the best of friends. Not that I did not respect the man and his abilities. We had just never connected on a personal level.

Mayes squatted in front of the poncho. “We need to talk, Sarge.”

“Sure, Lonely, grab a seat,” I said, indicating a spot under the poncho.

Lonely's eyes searched the surrounding area. He kept his voice low, almost whispering, "Not here. Later. Over where we're staying."

Without further ado, he got to his feet and ambled toward his position. I really thought nothing of it at the time. Many of the men requested private talks somewhere away from prying eyes and sensitive ears. Even in the jungle, it was difficult to ensure privacy. In this open terrain, it was even harder. Luckily, one of Fourth Squad's positions was in the tree line. A good place to talk.

It was almost nineteen thirty hours before I had the opportunity to head over to Lonely's position. As I approached, I noticed Sergeant Fisher talking spiritedly with Clay, Lonely and Wilburn.

"Sarge, you talk to these stupid bastards, I'm tired of trying," Joe Fisher said. He looked exasperated and more than a little tired.

"What's the problem?"

"I have nothing to do with this. Talk to them," said Joe. And so saying, he headed off to his position.

I sat down next to Clay along the edge of his foxhole. Spec Four Wilburn and Lonely squatted down on either side of us. I could tell they were nervous, their heads swiveling back and forth, watching. Since none of them seemed all that anxious to start a conversation, I took the opportunity to light up a cigarette and get myself comfortable. It wasn't my job to get the conversation started, so we all just sat there.

"We got to talk," Clay finally managed.

I turned my head and looked him straight in the eyes. "Yes?"

Glancing around to make sure no one else was near, Clay returned his eyes to mine. "Don't sleep near the lieutenant tonight," he said.

"Why?"

The silence was deafening. I knew why. There was no hesitation as my mind came up with the answer, but I wanted to hear it from them.

They were doing some serious rubbernecking now. Lonely and Wilburn both leaned their bodies in closer. Anyone looking on would have suspected that we were plotting some kind of conspiracy. In a way, we were.

“Make sure Hailey isn’t near the lieutenant tonight either,” Clay said.

“Sergeant Fisher evidently doesn’t like this. Don’t you think that’s important?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Spec Four Wilburn replied. “It’s important, but we’re tired of the lieutenant’s shit. That motherfucker is going to get us all killed, and the sooner this is taken care of the better.”

“What are you planning?”

“Willy Peter,” Clay replied.

Then nobody said anything for a long while. I slowly smoked my cigarette, trying to ignore the men while I let my mind sort through the problem. It was a situation I had never really expected to face, and yet it had not surprised me when it came up.

“No,” I said. I let my gaze wander from man to man. “The lieutenant is my responsibility. As long as I am the platoon sergeant, nothing happens to the man without my permission. I’ll be sleeping near him tonight. You come for him, you come for me also. Understood?”

No one spoke.

“Some things are not acceptable to me, and this is one of them. It is my ass too. I’m not in love with the motherfucker, but at the same time, he is trying. Until he either stops trying or I am no longer present, the man remains my problem. I appreciate you talking to me. No one will ever know about this conversation. As far as I’m concerned, it never took place. Our little secret.”

I stood up and slung my rifle over my shoulder in a non-threatening position. The men stood up also. Without a word I headed back to my position.

The lieutenant and Hailey were both back when I got there. It was getting onto dusk. I squatted next to my rucksack and began to retrieve a can of fruit to eat while there was still enough light to enjoy it.

Neither Hailey nor the lieutenant were talking. This had become more or less the way things were between them. It was a real pain in the ass living with them.

“Anything happening?” the lieutenant asked.

“No, Sir,” I replied, opening the can with my church key.

It was 0400 hours and nothing was stirring within the perimeter. I was sleepy and it was difficult not to give into the urge to sleep. I lay tight up against a tree, motionless, waiting. Like many a night on ambush, time was passing slowly. It was difficult to remain alert. The position I had chosen gave me a view of where the lieutenant and Hailey were sleeping. I could not cover them completely, but one never could in this kind of situation.

The chances of the men actually trying anything tonight were very slim. I was counting on my position within the platoon to deter any action they had been considering, but I was not confident enough to just ignore the threat either. Maybe I would be making more of a statement by actually sleeping near the lieutenant. If I was wrong in my assessment of the situation, I would rather be alive to suffer the consequences.

It was strange lying there, my life in danger from the men I was responsible for leading. I knew how close I had come to dying twice that day already. How close am I to dying right now, I wondered, surrounded by enemy soldiers and my own angry, scared men.

The fact that the men were upset enough at the lieutenant to not only kill him but to do so in a way that would almost certainly be excruciatingly painful did not surprise me. Their options in retaliating against the lieutenant’s harassment were limited. Bitching and complaining about it had brought about no results, and they were getting frustrated. These men were used to taking whatever actions were necessary to protect themselves, as they had proven to the enemy sniper during that day. Killing someone was not only a viable option, but also an expedient one. The chances of them getting away with it would have been relatively high had they not talked to Sergeant Fisher or myself about it. They had chosen to get us involved on the basis of their trust that we would see things their way. Our reactions probably surprised them. The fact that they did not want anything to happen to me or Hailey was probably going to save the lieutenant’s life tonight.

I felt there should have been a dilemma concerning what to tell the lieutenant. Someone else faced with similar circumstances might be wrestling with whether the lieutenant had a right to know what was happening. As far as I was concerned, it was not the lieutenant’s

problem, not as long as I was present. Once I left, for whatever reason, then it would become his problem. I hoped the men would at least warn him before doing anything, but I had my doubts.

Telling the captain would not get rid of the lieutenant and would place the men of the platoon in jeopardy. The military's response would be to blame the men instead of the leader. The fact that the lieutenant was unable to effectively lead his men would not be considered sufficient reason for the men to contemplate killing him. Of course, the men making that decision were not out here in the bush surrounded by gooks and facing death on a daily basis. The men making the decisions about my men were sleeping in beds with clean linen, and they did not have a clue as to the realities of our life in the field.

I did not feel sorry for the lieutenant. His decisions led to him being here tonight. It would be like feeling sorry for the football player who breaks his neck. Anyone willing to use his head as a weapon on a football field should not be overly surprised if their neck breaks. But surprised they are when they suffer such an injury, and so are the people around them. But why? If I rammed into a wall with my head, even with a helmet on, I would be amazed if I did not get hurt.

The lieutenant was fucking with the men in Fourth Squad on a daily basis. I had no real idea why, but that was not important. What was important is that these men were killers, and the lieutenant was choosing to fuck with killers. It is what they were trained to do and what they were good at. I did not forget that, as evidenced by my watch position behind the tree that night. The lieutenant was in a position to treat the men any way he deemed appropriate, but he certainly should not have been unaware of the consequences of his actions. He was, which made him terribly stupid. If he wound up dying for his actions, it would be just one of life's little cruelties. If you play with the big guys, you are eventually going to get hurt. Making enemies of the men you are responsible for leading was reason enough to die.

It was after stand-down. I was packed and ready to move out. The lieutenant was off getting the platoon's daily orders, and Hailey was off getting the communication information. I was sitting on my rucksack, smoking a Salem and drinking the last of my morning coffee, when Lonely approached.

Squatting down in front of me and talking in a barely audible voice he said, “Look like shit, Sarge.”

I smiled.

“We didn’t sleep well ourselves. Wilburn convinced us you would come for us in the night. I did not think so, but he got us thinking, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“As long as you’re around and functioning, we ain’t going to fuck with him. If things get hairy, we’ll do whatever you say, but you have to stay close to that motherfucker and get him off our ass.”

“I’ll do the best I can, but the LT is stubborn as a mule. You guys got to stop taking the poor bastard so seriously. He’s just another fucked up officer,” I said.

“Yeah. But he is suppose to be ours,” Lonely answered, shaking his head in disgust.

I reached out my hand. Lonely took it, and we shook hands to seal the deal. My night would have been a lot shorter if we had done that earlier. I knew that had not been possible. It had taken the length of the night to convince the men to back off from their decision.

I smiled. Lonely must have seen the look of relief in my eyes. “You’re all right, Sarge. Ain’t nothing going to happen to you.” He left it at that and went back toward the Fourth Squad’s positions.

I only hoped that this was the end of a very trying day. Things had to get better. END