

#5 First Day – around November 6th or 7th, 1967 – the field, Vietnam

Writer's Notes - This was our leaving the fire support base at An Khe and being placed into a forward artillery base. This happened two weeks after we had landed in Vietnam which was on the 23rd of October, 1967.

The company was moving out. Finally. The culmination of six months of preparation. Through it all, Lou knew that this day had to come, but now that it was here he felt as if the whole thing were a dream. The company was marching away from the area that had served as their base for the past seven days. Those seven days had been spent getting the company outfitted for the trip to the field. It also gave the men time to acclimate to the weather and time zone.

There had been a lot of physical training that mainly involved walking around the perimeter of the base with all their combat gear. Getting ready for the rigors of the field. It had been a big adjustment in terms of the daily heat. The base was An Khe. It was located just on the edge of the Central Highlands in the Republic of South Vietnam. Daytime temperatures got close to 100 degrees. At night it cooled down considerably. Once the men had gotten the hang of drinking plenty of water during the day, the outfit seemed to be getting along just fine. Physically it had been hard at first, getting the body back into fighting shape. The whole battalion had been sent overseas by ship. This had meant two weeks at sea. Even with daily exercise, it had been difficult to keep in any kind of decent shape. Lou had been sick almost the whole trip. No. Make that the whole trip. His physical conditioning had suffered more than most, and the past week had probably been harder on him than on some of the others. But now he felt ready for the trip ahead.

Up ahead he could see the helipad with the choppers that were going to transport the company into the field. There were fifteen of them sitting on the ground, engines off. Lou felt a little queasy seeing them sitting there. In training they had done a couple simulated assaults. This was back at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Of course he had also been allowed a few practice parachute jumps from them when with the 82nd Airborne. Those trips had been short and sweet. Basically straight up and then a parachute drop down to the ground. There were no

parachutes now, and this was not a simulation. The straps on his rucksack were beginning to dig into his shoulders. They were carrying a full combat load. On previous days, their rucksacks had not weighed nearly as much as they seemed to now. Of course, they were also carrying full combat munitions. In addition to what he had carried in the past, he now carried 10 rounds of M-79 ammunition. On his webbing, he had hung four live fragmentation grenades. In his rucksack, he carried two claymore mines, two smoke grenades, and a couple of flares. Like all the men in the company, he felt ready for anything Charlie could throw at them.

He was sweating profusely by the time they got to the helipad. It was 0800 hours. The platoon sergeant, Sgt. Harris, had already assigned the men to different teams for loading into the copters. As soon as the platoon had reached the pad, he dispersed them to the various copters. The company would be airlifted in two waves. Being in the First Platoon meant he was among the first to load up. Six men were loaded into each copter. This was fewer than they had when they practiced, but now, with all the equipment they were carrying, it was a tight fit. Inside the copter the crew chief got them all settled. He knew they were cherries and that this was their first actual assault. He checked to make sure none of the men had a round in the chamber of their guns, explained that they were actually being transported to a small fire support base a few miles north and west of An Khe. He told them they would be in the air for ten to fifteen minutes. Everyone was told to get comfortable and hold tight while in the air. The crew chief then moved behind one of the M-60 machineguns that were mounted in the door on either side of the copter. He plugged his helmet mic into an outlet on the inside of the craft. Lou could see his lips moving as he talked to the pilot.

Louis looked around. The inside of the copter was dirty, unlike the ones they had done their simulations in back in the states. There were no side doors on the machine. Lou had been loaded into a small seat in the middle of the ship. He had to take off his rucksack prior to sitting down. It now sat between his legs on the floor. Four of the men were sitting on the floor, two on either side. They were nervously scooting further away from the side of the copter and gravitating toward the middle of the craft. Their hands kept moving, searching for a good hand grip to use once the chopper started moving. Lou's stomach was beginning to feel a little queasy now, waiting for the show to start. For a second the thought crossed his mind that this

might just be another drill. Another practice. Any minute they would be unloaded and led back to the company area for more training. The pilot and co-pilot both turned their heads toward the rear and gave them a quick once over. Lou thought they looked awfully young to be pilots. Lou was twenty-one years old. Neither one of the pilots looked older than nineteen years old. This did not give Lou a lot of confidence. Lou noticed that the crew manning the machineguns was not only wearing flak jackets but also sitting on them. He knew immediately what that meant. They were afraid of bullets coming up through the floor of the aircraft. Lou stared at the flooring at his feet. Sure enough, he could see patches in the floor. Goddamn! He suddenly felt very uncomfortable sitting on the seat. He felt his scrotum tingle as his family jewels hung out there, suddenly a much larger target than he could have ever imagined. Just as he was getting ready to ask one of the guys in the squad if he could borrow one their flak jackets for maybe ten or fifteen minutes, the engines started to turn.

Lou knew it would be loud inside the copter. He had been in them before. Of course the doors had been closed then for most of the trip. As the engines wound up to liftoff speed the noise became almost unbearable. There were fourteen other copters revving up also. Though the windows in front of the pilots, Lou saw the lead copter lift up off the ground. It hovered there for a second several feet off the ground sort of wobbling. As it gained altitude in front of him, his copter suddenly started to rise unsteadily into the air. The aircraft in front of them suddenly dipped its nose. *Oh great, my first wreck*, Lou thought. Suddenly the first craft moved away from them with ever increasing speed. Just then the nose of his craft performed the same maneuver. Nothing like the way their copters had taken off in the past. This take off was more violent, more explosive. Lou was ready to throw-up. He looked at the men on the floor. He felt sorry for them and swallowed hard. The craft picked up speed and then suddenly popped straight up and twisted to the right. Lou suddenly was looking almost straight down from the right side of the helicopter. He quickly reached down and grabbed the back of the shirt of the man sitting at his feet. Both men on the floor on that side of the aircraft were holding on for dear life. The one closest to the door, or, more correctly, the opening where the door was supposed to be, got a death grip on one of Lou's legs as his butt slid ever so slowly toward the opening. It was Sgt. Wilson, his squad leader. Right then and there, Lou made his

first combat decision. He would save Sgt. Wilson if he could. But if Sgt. Wilson's ass went through that hole, he was going alone. Fortunately the copter righted itself before a final decision on the matter had to be made. Sgt. Wilson looked up and smiled. Lou just hoped Sgt. Wilson had not read his mind a minute ago. Lou felt guilty for even thinking the way he had, but if the pilot did that again, he had every intention of moving his legs before Sgt. Wilson got another death grip on him.

The aircraft gathered altitude and began a gentle turn to the right. Down below, Lou could see the last of the copters in the squadron lift off. From this altitude, they appeared to be toys. Soon the copters were all in the air, and the squadron formed up in a relatively tight formation. The flight of the craft was level, or as near level as these flights seemed to get. From the ground, a chopper appeared to move in a straight, graceful flight. Inside it was noisy. The craft bucked left and right, up and down, as the pilots made ever so slight adjustments to keep the craft moving toward its designation. Lou's stomach was still queasy from the take off. There were also the butterflies from the anxiety of riding in an unstable aircraft, over enemy territory, in the mountains, covered by jungle, with nowhere to land. *Alright, I can handle this,* he thought. *No big deal. Hell, I am Airborne Infantry. I am a member of the finest fighting company in the world. No sweat.*

Just then both machine gunners jacked rounds into the chambers of their weapons. They wore straps attached to their midsections, and with a firm grip on the airframe, each was leaning out looking intensely at the jungle below. Suddenly the copter dropped like a rock. Through the canopy up front, Lou could see the jungle rushing up toward them at alarming speed. Once again Sgt. Wilson grabbed his leg. Louis could picture the crash scene: dead with a sergeant Sgt. hugging his legs. At what seemed like the last instant, the copter leveled off. Lou was just beginning to feel a sense of relief as the copter cleared a ridge line when it again dropped down into the valley directly in front of them. They were traveling at the speed of light. There were trees outside the copter on either side flashing by. Fuck this Lou thought. Let me out of this flying tin can. The copter again shot straight up into the air. At the same instance both machine gunners opened up. The roar of the engine combining with the roar of the machineguns and the roar of the wind past the doors, or at least the opening where the

doors were designed to go, now had Lou's maximum attention. He had no idea what to do except to hold on for dear life. His stomach was doing flips. He stared down at the top of Sgt. Wilson's head and in his mind pictured what it would look like with Lou's breakfast spread over the top of it. He also wondered whether Sgt. Wilson would kill him quickly or torture him slowly. With these thoughts in his mind, Lou again swallowed hard. It was the third time this morning he had swallowed the same breakfast. It had only tasted good that first time.

Suddenly the copter reached the crest of the hill immediately in front of them. The machine gunners quit firing. And there, directly in front of them, was the fire support base. Lou could see the first copter already lifting into the air as his pilot flared their craft and quickly touched down. The crew yelled for everyone to exit immediately. As if Lou could not get out of there soon enough. He couldn't. Just as his feet hit the ground, the copter took off. He had grabbed his rucksack as he exited. He made it out, but his rucksack almost didn't. It didn't leave the aircraft until it had been lifted almost directly over his head then it departed the chopper in a hurry. Only his quick reflexes prevented it from landing directly on top of him. Lou threw himself to the side as the equipment landed with a thud beside him. He quickly got to his feet. The blast of air from the departing helicopter was dying down. His mind registered the distant firing of machineguns. He grabbed his rucksack and threw it over his shoulder. He heard the machineguns stop firing. Lou checked his webbing to make sure his grenades were still attached. Suddenly he heard the roar of engines as he was hit with a fresh blast of air and dust. He turned toward the sound, and there, almost staring into his face, sat the pilot and copilot on the next helicopter coming in for a landing. He turned and ran. When the wind, noise, and dust again began to settle, he saw Sgt. Wilson off to one side waving at him with one arm. The other arm seemed to be pressed to his side. There were tears running down his face. He's been shot, Lou thought as he moved quickly to assist his squad leader. As he got closer, Lou could hear the sergeant laughing. He was laughing so hard, he had to hold his side to contain his amusement.

"What's so funny, Sarge?" Lou asked as he wiped some of the dust off his uniform. The next copter was already landing. The only word of the sergeant's answer that Lou could hear sounded like "You." *Very funny*, Lou thought as he looked around. Several of the men were

looking at him, and all of them had smiles on their faces. Lou didn't care. He was on the ground and safe. He had survived his first helicopter assault. Even if it had been from one relatively safe base to another. He only hoped that he would never have to get on another chopper. Ships and helicopters. Lou vowed off both of them.

The First Platoon was forming up. Lou took his place in formation. The platoon leader, Lt. Burroughs, was issuing orders. The men were to take over eight of the bunkers surrounding the fire support base. These bunkers had been occupied by Bravo Company, which was now preparing to move out. Lou looked at his watch. It was only 0830 hours, even though it felt like they had already put in a hard day's work. Lou was assigned a bunker facing east. Three other members of the squad were assigned to the bunker with him. Lou approached the bunker from the rear. The men from Bravo Company already had their gear on and were moving out to a designated assembly point. Lou put down his gear against the back of the structure. To enter the bunker, one would need to step down into an opening in the rear. Instead, Lou walked around the front. Three rolls of barbed wire were strung not ten yards out. Lou approached the wire. Beyond, the land dropped away in an almost vertical cliff. The jungle started about 100 yards below his position. It seemed like an ideal place to spend his first day in the field. John Morrison, Lou's best friend, waved him back to the bunker.

"Big John" got his nickname from a Johnny Cash song by the same title. John was big. About 6 feet 4 inches tall and about 215 lbs. big. Most of the weight was muscle. He was a rifleman, and in his hands an M-16 rifle looked like a toy. John and Lou had become friends during training while in the states. Of course being in the same squad ensured that, but their friendship went deeper than others. Lou didn't think it was because they were both white, although that probably did play a part in it. John came from an upper-middle class family. That made him one of the privileged people as far as the other men were concerned. His father was what John called a "bigshot lawyer" in San Francisco. The Army was John's way of getting away from his father's domineering supervision. John was one of the friendliest guys Lou had ever met.

"What?" Lou asked as he got close to John.

"I need to go," John replied.

"So go."

"Where?" John asked.

"If you get close to the wire, maybe you can piss over the cliff."

Harris, another of the men assigned to the bunker, overheard and started laughing.

"Yeah, maybe piss on Charlie's head down there in the jungle."

"If I needed to piss only, I think I could handle that myself, gentlemen. But I need to take a shit. Did either one of you spot a latrine on the way in?" John asked.

Lou laughed. "No latrines out here, Big. Old Charlie would use it as an aiming point for sure. I'll tell you what. Put your gear down and go ask one of the artillery guys where you need to take care of the problem. Hell, we'll all probably need to use it before the day is over."

John put his stuff inside the bunker and then headed away to look for a latrine. Lou went down into the bunker to take a look around. It was dug into the ground and quite large on the inside. Five or six men could easily use it as a fighting position. It was well built too, Lou could see. The roof was sheet metal stretched over metal rods that were spaced every three inches across the whole length of the bunker. The walls were several sandbags thick, and the top had three layers of sandbags. Anything less than a bomb would not penetrate the bunker. It seemed like a good place to be should anything go down. Still Lou would spend as little time as possible inside. While not claustrophobic, Lou was not completely comfortable in a confined space underground. He went back outside and took a closer look at the fire support base.

The position he occupied was just high enough that he could see most of the base from the top of the bunker. Lou estimated that the base covered about four acres. From his bunker, the ground was almost flat until it sloped upward on the other side of the compound. There were about twenty-five bunkers spread out around the perimeter of the base. There were three artillery pieces sitting in the middle of the compound, 105 Howitzers. Each gun was enclosed within a circular wall of sandbags. Across the surface of the base were what seemed to be neat stacks of sandbags. These of course were the underground bunkers for the artillerymen's living quarters, ammunition bunkers, command bunkers, a kitchen, etc. There were no above ground structures visible. It all made Lou a little nervous. This was a real fire support base. This wasn't a simulation or a training session. It was real, and it was dangerous

being here. Not as dangerous as the helicopter ride may have been, but dangerous anyway. Lou suddenly felt like he was standing on a big bullseye.

"Look!" Harris yelled. He was sitting on the front of the bunker pointing at something off to the east. Lou's sight followed the line of Harris's finger. He couldn't see anything of particular interest. He scanned the sky searching for what Harris was pointing at.

"Got them," Pvt. Wills said, squatting next to Harris, smoking a cigarette. Lou continued to look toward the east, even though Harris had stopped pointing. His eyes scanned until suddenly he spotted several spots in the sky. It took him a few seconds before he realized what he was looking at. It was the squadron of helicopters bringing the rest of the company into the base.

"Cool," he said. "How far away you think they are, Hare?"

"Probably still a couple miles. Just entering those foothills," he said, pointing again. Lou trusted Hare's judgment. "Hare" Harris had good eyes. He would see things before others could. He was also a crack shot. His scores on the rifle range were invariably perfect. Harris was a lanky, loose jointed black man from Detroit, Michigan. He got his nickname from his background as a sprinter in high school. The kid was quick. Lou had seen him run a couple of times during training, and he had no idea how anyone ran as fast as Hare ran. Lou's body just was not capable of moving his legs fast enough to run even half as fast as The Hare. Lou moved over and sat next to Hare. He lit a cigarette and watched.

"Gunships," Hare said, again pointing off to the east. "Where?" Lou asked, once again letting his eyes scan the sky.

"Below the others. Sort of hugging the ground," Hare replied.

"Got them," Pvt. Wills said. Once again, Lou spotted them after the Hare told him where to look. Three helicopters flying in V formation, skimming over the trees.

"How you know they're gunships?" Lou asked.

"Two of them have miniguns mounted on the sides. The other one has rocket pods," Harris replied.

Lou looked over at Harris. He had a smile on his face.

"Bullshit," Lou said. "No way you can see that from here."

Lou could barely make out the gunships, never mind what kind of armament they were carrying. The Hare had good eyes, but no one's eyes were that good.

"Bet you a buck," Pvt. Wills said.

"You're on," Lou replied. Private Ben Wills would bet on anything at any time. It was his nature. More often than not, he won the bet, but not always. This time Lou knew he had him.

The gunships spread out and disappeared into the foothills below. Lou's eyes once again picked out the other incoming helicopters flying at a much higher altitude. Suddenly the nose of the lead copter dropped. Lou's stomach almost flipped just at the sight of it. He knew what the men inside the craft were feeling right now. The other copters kept coming in level flight, until about fifteen seconds later the second copter did the same thing. As the second one plummeted toward the ground, the first one was disappearing around the same hill the gunships had just minutes before. Lou knew they would come in from the south side of the base and land one at a time. He stood up and faced south to watch the show. This was all so new to him and exciting. Big John was approaching the bunker. Back from his trip to the latrine.

In the distance there was the sound of explosions. It was hard to pinpoint exactly where the explosions were coming from. Interspersed with the explosions was a low-pitched roaring sound unlike anything Lou had ever heard. These noises went on for a couple of minutes and then ceased. Lou thought they were moving toward the base, but he couldn't be sure. His attention returned to the south side of the perimeter. The first chopper should be popping up any second now. He heard the cry of M-60 machineguns drift up from the valley below. There was the underlying whine of helicopter engines. Suddenly the noise got very loud. Lou was almost knocked over by a sudden wind at his back. He spun around, and there he was, again staring into the faces of a pilot and co-pilot of a Huey helicopter. This copter had two rocket pods mounted on either side. Lou could see that about half of the missiles were missing. Lou fell down on the top of the bunker as the gunship passed not more than 10 feet above his head. There were two other copters about 50 yards to either side. Lou could see the miniguns mounted on either side of these copters. They all moved forward and then stopped, the lead helicopter hovering over the landing pad. They held their position for almost a minute. Lou

wondered what they were waiting for. He realized he could no longer hear the machineguns firing. The lead helicopter began climbing. Just as the other two began the same maneuver, the lead copter dipped its nose and took off. Lou knew why. He crawled quickly to the edge of the bunker and dropped off. His ears picked up more machinegun fire in the distance. At almost the same instant the first of the fifteen helicopters popped up directly in front of the bunker and headed for the landing zone. Lou opted to watch the proceedings from a prone position. He was amazed at how quickly things happened. Just like him, some of the guys in the choppers were not quite quick enough in unloading, with one or two of them almost being carried off again by the copter before they could depart. No chopper was on the pad for more than ten seconds. The last two choppers did not contain men but supplies. Before the first one appeared, Lou noticed men from the artillery platoon moving toward the pad. As soon as the first supply helicopter landed, there was a stream of them that moved toward it. They grabbed supplies and then moved quickly away. It was like a platoon of ants attacking a crumb of bread. The small stack of supplies in the copter was quickly unloaded, and the copter immediately sprang into the air. The second supply copter landed, and the procedure was repeated. It too quickly disappeared once unloaded. Lou was impressed with the whole drill. From the time the gunships appeared until the last copter disappeared over the hill could not have been much more than five or six minutes. Everything appeared to go like clockwork.

"You owe me a buck," Pvt. Wills said as soon as it was quiet enough to be heard. Lou smiled. How the Hare could have seen the armament on the gunships at that distance, he did not know. Lou wore glasses that corrected his eyesight to 20-20. He knew that there were people who had better than 20-20 eyesight, but until then he never realized just how good some people's eyesight was. Amazing. No wonder the Hare was such a good shot. He was seeing the target better than anyone in the company. Lou felt a little jealous of Hare, but he was also glad they were in the same squad. One reason they had made Lou a grenadier was his lack of shooting skill. They figured if he couldn't hit a target with a bullet, then let him get a grenade close. It seemed like a good idea to Sgt. Wilson. Lou thought it a lousy idea. He hated the damn thing.

The M-79 grenade launcher was a breech loaded rifle that threw a grenade round up to 100 yards with a fair degree of accuracy. The grenade round was slightly smaller than a baseball in diameter and about five inches in length. The grenade launcher broke in two like a single shot shotgun and the grenade round was loaded directly into the chamber by hand. When the breech was closed, the weapon was cocked and ready to fire. The barrel of the rifle was short and had rifling grooves inside. This gave the grenade a spin as it left the barrel. The spin was necessary to give the round a straight trajectory in flight. The round itself had several parts. It had a firing cap that, when struck by the firing pin, caused the charge in the base of the shell to explode. This explosion caused the grenade to leave the barrel at a high speed with a good rotation. The grenade itself contained a device that actually armed the round after it left the barrel of the launcher. The round had to complete several rotations before becoming armed. They had been taught that the round would not actually detonate until it was fifteen meters from the launcher. This was good since the kill zone for the grenade was 10 meters. The grenade was packed with high explosives. In addition, there was a tightly coiled spring of steel. The steel coil had scouring every half inch or so. It was designed to break into little pieces when the explosives went off. Between the outer casing and the coiled spring, there would be enough shrapnel flying around to effectively kill or wound anyone unfortunate enough to be within that 10 meter kill zone.

Lou had no special training on the M-79. He had gotten to fire a couple of shells from it during advanced infantry training. Since then he had not gotten to shoot it. The decision that he would be one of the squad's two grenadiers had been made only since they had gotten in country. Lou had asked Sgt. Wilson if he could get some rounds to practice with. The Sarge had gotten him rounds, but there had never been a real opportunity to practice. Lou had practiced sighting on various targets around the compound at An Khe. He had the Hare with him. Lou would point out a target and give Hare his estimate of the distance to the object. The Hare would then give Lou his estimate. In the few instances where the chosen target was close enough to pace off the distance, the Hare was invariably closer to the correct distance. After a couple practice sessions, Lou began to get better at estimating distances. This was very important in using a grenade launcher. Because of the size and weight of the grenade, it was

not possible to shoot directly at the target. There was a pop-up sight on the barrel of the grenade launcher. It consisted of a tall thin rectangle of metal. Inside the rectangle was the adjustable sight. The sight could be moved up and down within the rectangle. There were markings on the rectangle that denoted distances of 25 meters, 50, 75, and 100 meters. If the distance to the target was 25 meters, when the rear sight was aligned with the front sight, the barrel of the rifle was pointed up only slightly from the horizontal. At a 100-yard setting, the barrel was pointing upward at an almost thirty degree angle. Though Louis was aiming directly at the target 100 yards away, the trajectory of the shell would be at a much higher angle. The idea was that the first shell would act as a distance marker with subsequent shots adjusted to give the correct distance to the target. A good idea in theory, but Lou had his doubts about his ability to use the weapon effectively.

When Lou first got the weapon, he familiarized himself with it completely. He worked to find the best ways to store the grenade rounds so they would be readily available and yet secure to his webbing. He learned to load with either hand. He practiced sighting the weapon using either his right or left eye. The sights were really designed to be adjusted by a right-handed individual, but Lou learned how to do it left-handed. At night he practiced loading and unloading by feel. He learned the best place to lay the rounds so that when he had to load them, he could do so quickly. He also practiced loading the weapon as quietly as possible at night. Now Lou felt as comfortable with the weapon as he could. He carried it slung across his back. Of course it was unloaded.

The men settled into the bunker. They chose the individual firing ports they would use in case of an attack. Because there was a cliff located not more than fifteen yards from the front of the bunker, there was not much in the way of fields of fire. Big John took the two ports on the right side of the bunker. From there he could quickly shoot either straight ahead or cover the next bunker off to their right. The Hare and Pvt. Wills would take the ports on the left side of the bunker. They could cover their front and the front of the bunker off to their left. There were claymore mines strung out in front of the bunker covering the barbed wire. The wires from the claymores entered the bunker and lay next to the detonators. They were not hooked up at this time. Since the grenade launcher was not a good weapon for fighting from

this particular position, Lou would control the claymores. He would be available to help any of the men should it become necessary.

Sgt. Wilson came by a little later in the day. He was the squad leader and also Lou's team leader. The squad had two fire teams of five men each. Each team had four riflemen and one grenadier. Sgt. E-6 Walter Wilson was a self-proclaimed, Airborne Infantry Lifer Motherfucker, and one of the two meanest men who walked the face of the earth. The other was Sgt. E-7 Mike Harris, who just happened to be the platoon sergeant at the time.

Sgt. Wilson walked, talked, and (some of the men claimed) shit Airborne. He was proud of his uniform, his country, and his momma's cooking. He stood 5' 11" and weighed in at about 180 lbs. When they first met, he immediately proclaimed himself one of the best athletes in the universe, second only to Cassius Clay, the reigning heavyweight champion of the world. Louis did not know if Cassius Clay was better than Sgt. Wilson. The man was in superb condition. He usually had led the unit's physical exercise sessions during training in the states. There wasn't a man in the company that could keep up with him at doing pushups. Sgt. Wilson would just keep going till everyone else quit and then do twenty more. He could run for miles, all the time singing cadence for the rest of the men who couldn't catch their breath, never mind give out with ritualistic Jody chants. In addition to being a real athlete, Sgt. Wilson was also a self confessed world class lover, desired by women of all races. White, Black, Asian whatever. The men in the squad figured this to be a fact, as long as Sgt. Wilson was willing to pay for it.

Sgt. Wilson was twenty-eight years old and had ten years experience in the Army. He made rank in the old army. The one before Vietnam, where the pay was small and promotions slow. He was an expert at his profession and during the past six months had trained the squad as well as humanly possible. He had already served a tour in Vietnam two years earlier as an advisor. He had imparted the lessons that he learned to the men in the squad. He was an excellent leader, his best tools being his smile and patience. He always maintained a sense of humor as long as things went according to his dictates. He was a strict disciplinarian, but at the same time fair and considerate of the men he led. No one would dare think of challenging his authority. To the men in the squad, he was as close to the definition of a professional soldier as

there was. Amongst the men in the company, there was some doubt about how other lifers would hold up under the strain of combat. No one questioned Sgt. Wilson's abilities.

"Okay men, gather around," he announced upon his arrival.

"Let me explain what's going on. This is fire support base Julie. We're going to be spending the night here. In the morning we're going to march down this hill we're on and patrol in that valley you can see below us. Intelligence has reported large groups of enemy troops moving through the area. It's our job to try to make contact with these guys and block their passage to the South and East. A Chinook will be bringing in a large shipment to the base in about an hour. I want two volunteers to help with the distribution of what's being flown in. The squad's share of the supplies will be brought to this bunker for distribution. Mostly C rations for the next three days. Hare, you and Ben are my volunteers for this job."

"Shit Bro," Hare said. "Lifting and hauling is honky work. Why not let Whitey Big and Little do the manual shit." Of course he was referring to Big John and Louis.

Sgt. Wilson smiled and just shook his head.

"I'll tell you why I don't have to do no manual labor, Hare. Sgt. Wilson tried to throw my ass off the copter this morning and if he ever makes me work again, I'm gonna report his ass to the captain," Lou replied.

Sgt. Wilson laughed. "Actually I was going to jump and needed a parachute. I grabbed for my chute and came up with your skinny white legs by mistake. Next time I grab you I expect you to follow me, white boy." They were all laughing by now.

"Lou, when that copter took off with you hanging onto your equipment with a death grip, I could have died laughing," the Hare said.

"If you thought that was funny, wait till next time. I came that close to vomiting on the sergeant's nappy-haired head. Only the thought of sharing my food with him stopped me," Lou replied.

"Next time those copters offer us a ride, I say we walk," Sgt. Wilson added. "Now listen up. A couple more things you should know. First, Second Platoon is sending a couple squads down the hill this afternoon to set up an ambush on Bravo Company's trail. The other thing is the weather. We have received reports that a typhoon is going to hit the coast sometime this

evening or night. Even though we are several miles from the coast, we have been warned to expect possibly high winds and rain. The captain just wants you to be aware of the problem. Make sure everything is stored in the bunkers before the storm hits. The bunkers should be safe, but be careful. Bunkers can cave in. Any questions?"

"Why does Second Platoon get to send out the first patrol?" Big John asked.

"The four platoon leaders cut cards for the privilege. Our fair-haired platoon leader lost," Sgt. Wilson answered.

There were a few more questions. Some pertinent, most just bullshit. After a few minutes the meeting broke up. About an hour later, the Chinook came in with the load of supplies for the company. The whole mess was carried in a large supply net that was lowered to the ground without the copter actually landing. Hare and Ben had headed down to the landing pad for the work detail. Lou was sitting on top of the bunker looking out over the valley the company would be heading for tomorrow. Sgt. Wilson and Big John were in the bunker catching some ZZZs. Lou heard the shot go off. Even though it had been a while, he recognized the sound immediately. It was so distinctive it could not be mistaken for anything else. He snapped his head around trying to locate the source of the sound. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of the explosion and a second later its sound. Someone inside the compound had fired an M-79 grenade launcher. The round had landed inside the compound, on the little knoll at the opposite side of the fire support base. As the smoke and dust cleared at the site of the explosion, Lou could see several men lying around on the ground. Several were moving, some weren't. Sgt. Wilson came barreling out of the bunker. "What's happening?"

Lou pointed over to the knoll. "Someone shot a grenade into the group over there, Sarge. The shot came from down near the helipad."

"You and Big stay here," the sarge said. He headed down to the helipad on the run.

The whole base became energized. There were men running from all over the base toward the source of the explosion. Lou could hear the cries for medics coming from various areas of the compound. Men were running and double timing it all over the place. It was the closest thing to a Chinese fire drill Lou had ever seen. Lou had nothing to do, so he sat watching the drama unfold in front of him. Big John sat next to him. Lou could see the look of

concern on Big John's face. Lou was glad he couldn't see his own face right then. His stomach was churning. He knew some of the men over there were dead. Killed by one of their own men. It scared Lou. It really did.

Lou looked over toward some of the other bunkers. All the men were on the roofs, trying to see what was happening. Lou suddenly felt very uncomfortable with what was happening.

"John. Everyone is watching what is happening over there. No one is paying any attention to the perimeter. Charlie could walk right in here now and no one would know. You watch the wire and I'm going to make a quick trip to the next bunkers. I'll be right back."

Lou ran over to the bunker on his right, which was occupied by men of his own squad. "Sgt. Wilson told me he wants one man watching the perimeter at all times. He told me to spread the word," Lou lied. The order made sense, and one of the guys immediately picked up his weapon and faced the perimeter. "You guys sent someone over to the next bunker and warn them. I'll head for the bunker on the other side of ours and warn them." Lou did just that and soon all the bunkers had at least one man on guard. In the meantime, the confusion was getting under control. Lou could see stretchers being carried down the knoll toward the helipad. Soon he could hear the sounds of the evac helicopters. Within twenty minutes of the explosion, the dead and wounded were loaded onto three copters and flown off. Before the last copter took off, two men who were not hurt got aboard.

About ten minutes later, Sgt. Wilson came back. With him were Hare and Ben.

"Let me see your weapons," he said.

Lou handed him his grenade launcher. The sergeant broke open the breech and then handed it back to Lou. Each man in turn handed his weapon over to the sergeant. Sgt. Wilson checked the chamber of each weapon and handed it back without comment. He turned and headed over to the squad's other bunker. Over there they could see him going through the same procedure. When he was done, he moved the men to the ground between the two bunkers and called to the men at Lou's bunker to join them.

"Let me tell you what's happening," he said. "You guys know Pvt. Bennet from Third Platoon?" Several men including Lou nodded. "Well it seems that Pvt. Bennet was helping with

the supplies. He bent down to pick up a carton. His grenade launcher was strapped across his back. For some reason, Pvt. Bennet had felt it necessary to load the sonofabitch. The trigger caught in his webbing and discharged the weapon. The men you saw being loaded into the copters were the medics assigned to the company from battalion. All ten were either killed or seriously wounded. We know that three are dead for sure. Two others were barely alive when we loaded them into the copters. I'm glad to see that none of you are carrying loaded weapons. This is not the first time I've seen this kind of thing happen, but goddamn it, I don't ever want to see it happen again." The sergeant's eyes were glistening, and there was a small quiver in his voice. Not that any of the men would ever notice it or speak about it. "This is no fucking game. The games are over. Here people die if you fuck up. Here, you die if you fuck up. Pvt. Bennet was sent to the rear on the last copter out. He is under arrest. He was crying like a baby. It won't help the medics that he killed and fucked up. Dismissed," Sgt. Wilson said. He left the group and entered his bunker. It was a while before he would come out.

Lou was stunned by the report. Everyone was. Those who knew Pvt. Bennet could not comprehend what had happened. Pvt. Bennet was a stand-up guy. A real booze hound who periodically got into fight in the bars in downtown Fayetteville, North Carolina, but a real trooper nonetheless. For him to be kicked out of the company in disgrace left them all feeling sad. The loss of the company's medics was a tragedy, but Pvt. Bennet's disgrace affected Lou more deeply. He did not know the medics. Pvt. Bennet was one of them.

Hare and Ben headed back to the helipad to complete their work detail. About an hour later they returned with the team's supplies. Sgt. Wilson came out of the bunker. He had all the supplies neatly stacked. He counted everything to make sure it was all there. He went over to the other bunker and did the same thing. When he came back, he called the rest of the fire team over.

"Here are your supplies for the next three days. You each get nine boxes of C rations. For those of you who smoke, they allow three packs of cigarettes a day. There are also candy bars here. Make sure you each grab a bunch. You're going to need the energy when we're on the move tomorrow," he said.

Lou took his share of rations, cigarettes, and candy. He carted it over to where his rucksack was and started to go through it. He had used C rations only twice before in training and hadn't really given it much thought at the time. Each box contained a tin can with a mixture of meat, sauce, and whatever. There was a small can that contained some kind of fruit and a can with either cookies or crackers in it. There was a plastic fork and spoon. There was also a small packet of toilet tissue in each pack. In training, this had seemed funny, but now with the reality of going into the field, Lou was glad it was there. There was a packet of instant coffee, with two packets of sugar and a packet of powdered cream. What Lou was not prepared for was the total weight and bulk of the nine meals. When he had used them before, one at a time, there was no thought about what a three-day supply of food would weigh. Lou's rucksack was already nearly full. Lou spent nearly an hour loading and unloading his rucksack. If he put all the food in first, he would have to dig through everything before he could get to it. If any of it was stacked in the rear of the ruck, it immediately dug into his back and spinal column the second he put it on his back. If he put it on top, it would mean unloading everything to get to his other stuff. Lou finally got it all situated, understanding that there was no ideal way to do it. The weight of the rucksack had increased considerably. Luckily the candy bars and cigs were easy to pack.

Lou tried one of the chocolate candy bars. They were made from a special recipe. It was made so the chocolate would not melt in the tropical sun. Lou bit into the bar. About halfway through he had to stop and take a break. The candy bar was like a rock. Finally he got a piece broke off in his mouth and started chewing. Chocolate wax. It tasted just like chocolate wax. Not that Lou was an expert on the taste of chocolate wax, but no other words could exactly describe the taste. Sgt. Wilson had called them Gorilla Bars. Now Lou thought he understood why. Only a gorilla could chew these tasty bastards. Lou looked around for Big John.

"Hey, John, you try the chocolate bars yet?" he asked. John shook his head. Lou tossed him part of his. "Here. Try one."

John took a bite. He chewed it for a few seconds then smiled. He took another bite. "Pretty good," he said.

Lou began laughing. "What's so funny? John asked.

"Nothing, you big ape." Lou turned his back on John. There was still a big smile on his face. "Hey, Sarge, when's lunch?"

Sgt. Wilson shook his head, smiling. "You just got a three-day supply of food and you want to know when lunch is? Listen you guys." he said to the group. They gathered around. "There is no breakfast, lunch, or dinner time from now on. We'll usually have time to eat before we move out in the morning, but in the field, don't count on it. Eat when you can. You'll know when is the best time for you. When you get hungry, eat something if it's possible. The candy bars are important when the company is on the move for long periods of time. Give you a short burst of energy. Don't try living off the damn things though. The Cs have extra vitamins and stuff your body needs, so eat enough that you don't get sick. On the other hand, don't eat all your meals the first day." Several men smiled at this. "I am not bullshitting, men. Some of you are going to get very hungry in the field. You expend a lot of energy out in the bush. It also gets mighty tense out there. Some guys eat when they get nervous, next thing you know they're going around begging food. You carry what you need on your back from now on. You run out of food and it's just tough shit. No stores. I am not your mommy. Don't ask me for my food. I won't give it to you. The same thing with water. Fill your canteens every chance you get. When we are near water drink plenty of it. If we're on the move, ration water and don't run out. Get dehydrated in the jungle without water and you can die. We take care of each other, but every man is responsible for taking care of himself."

The group again broke up. Lou sat against the bunker and lit up. Things were changing fast now. It was no longer a game. This was real. Men had already died. Lou had already been scared to death a couple of times, and it was only just past noon. Lou smiled thinking about the helicopter ride. It seemed funny now that it was over. Lou felt the sweat on his forehead. The day was getting really hot. He noticed that the windsock on the helipad had shifted position, with the wind having swung around from the north, and now seemed to be coming more from the east. Probably the typhoon approaching. Lou knew a typhoon was what they called a hurricane back home in the States. No big thing. They always did their damage to the coastal areas. The company was located a good ten miles inland.

Lou got out a can of C rations. The men had been issued heating pellets the previous day. They came wrapped in aluminum foil. When the foil was opened, the blue pellet could be removed. When lit it would burn with a low, hot flame for about ten minutes. Just long enough to heat up a canteen cup of water for coffee, and a can of C rations. That is, if everything was ready to be heated, as Lou was about to learn. Lou used his entrenching tool to dig a small hole in the ground and put a pellet into it. He got out one of the boxes of C-rations and opened it up. It contained a can of Ham and Lima Beans. *Oh great, Lou thought, I hate lima beans.* He knew that beggars can't be choosers and that he should at least give it a try. Lou prided himself in being willing to try anything once. So what if Sgt. Wilson had once described this particular combination of C ration ingredients as "Ham and Motherfuckers." It was not something he had made up, but a universal recognition of the Army's ability to produce a food product that would be most effective as a weapon if either thrown or heated and served to the enemy. Each C box came with a can opener to open the cans. These were small pieces of metal that were amazingly effective for opening a can. Each man invariably carried one attached to the chain that held the dog-tags he wore around his neck. It was no good to carry food in a can if there were no means of opening the can. In addition, soldiers used these same devices to cut the throats of a human if necessary. Often referred to as the "church key," it was an effective means of providing an emergency airway by opening the cricoid cartilage in the throat. Every infantryman was taught this technique as part of their first aid training. Lou thought about this, mainly because after what had happened today there was suddenly a severe shortage of trained medical personnel. Lou lit the heating pellet and threw it into the hole in the ground. He opened the top of the can, bending the top back to act as a handle. He used his towel as a heating pad to hold the can over the fire. The first time he had heated Cs, he had reached for the can with his bare hands. Bad technique, real bad technique. Then Lou remembered that he needed water to heat for his coffee. Lou looked at the pellet that was already burning down and realized he didn't have time. So he just concentrated on heating his meal. The gravy mixture quickly heated up and within a couple minutes it was boiling. This in turn quickly heated the slices of ham and the lima beans. The ham was fine. The lima beans

were motherfuckers. Just like Sgt. Wilson had said. Lou finished his first meal of C rations. His stomach was full.

During the afternoon, the wind continued to pick up. Around three, Lou watched as the First and Second Squads of the Second Platoon left the perimeter through the north side. Lou felt a little jealous. It was the company's first combat patrol and first ambush. He knew almost all the guys in the two squads. He prayed they would return safely in the morning.

About an hour later the artillery men put on a show for him. It was preceded by a sudden increase in shouting and activity from the bunker that acted as the command post for the compound. Suddenly the artillerymen were swarming around their guns. They quickly maneuvered the weapons around their axis to point them all in the same direction. They did this as a well-drilled team that had evidently done it many times before. There was an officer standing in the middle of all three guns, issuing orders. As an order was yelled out, one man at each position would repeat the order in a loud voice. Some of the men were quickly moving shells from underground bunkers and placing them next to the guns. Once all the weapons had been loaded, there was a pause in the action. The officer shouted out some orders. All the artillery men suddenly covered their ears. One of the guns went off. Lou jumped a little, even though he knew it was coming. None of the men, except maybe some of the lifers, had been close to an artillery piece when it was fired before. No wonder the artillerymen had covered their ears. The concussion of the blast was almost a physical entity. Lou felt the ground shake under his feet. The crew of the first gun quickly reloaded, and then everything was quiet for a minute. Suddenly the officer shouted a new set of orders. The men around the guns all made adjustments. An order to fire was given again, and again the first gun fired. Lou was prepared for it and covered his ears before the artillery piece fired. Another pause, more orders, more adjustments, another shot. Another pause, more orders, more adjustments. Lou noticed a difference in the men at the other two positions that had not fired. They had suddenly grown much more alert. When the order to fire was given all three guns fired together. The concussion from the guns was magnified. There was again a pause, but not as long as the last ones. In the meantime the guns had been quickly reloaded. An order was given and all three weapons fire simultaneously again. But now Lou could see that once a weapon was loaded, it

was discharged immediately. The whole battery was firing as fast as the men could load the guns. The roars blended together into a crescendo that waxed and waned depending where each gun was in its firing cycle. After about ten minutes, they all stopped. Orders were yelled, adjustments quickly made, and the cycle of fire started all over again. The fire mission lasted for about forty-five minutes, and by time it was over, Lou felt numb. What had started as an exciting event became an almost boring punishment. The smoke from the weapons drifted away from his position, but he could still smell the familiar stench of cordite in the air. The poor guys on the other side of the perimeter must have been choking on it. Once all the pieces were firing at the maximum rate of fire, Lou noticed that the men around the guns could only cover their ears when their individual pieces went off. Noise levels in those gun pits must have been horrendous. After it was all over, the artillerymen spent the next two hours out in the hot sun working on the guns and policing up the shell casings that were strewn around on the ground. Most of the artillerymen did not wear shirts. They were all deeply tanned from hours in the sun. They all looked very thin and muscular. During the barrage, Lou could see that they were sweating profusely. A fire mission was evidently a real physical exercise, especially for the guy supplying ammunition to each gun. Afterwards, the artillerymen sat around and drank water and smoked. Lou noticed that they all moved out of the firing pits before lighting up.

Sgt. Wilson had wandered down to the command post during the fire mission. When he returned, he explained to the guys what had happened. Evidently one of the brigades' recon patrols had spotted a large body of enemy troops moving along a trail about three miles away. They had called in artillery on the formation and the artillery had been able to chase the fleeing enemy for quite some distance before the patrol lost track of the enemy. There were reports of heavy casualties amongst the enemy, but the recon patrol was getting out of the area as fast as they could. The Fourth Infantry Division was sending a battalion out to sweep the area right away.

It was around seven in the evening. It would be getting dark in a couple of hours. Big John and Lou were sitting on top of the bunker facing east. The sun was beginning to ease further to the west, losing some of its brutal daytime heat. All afternoon the wind had been steadily picking up. Down below on the hill directly below their position Lou could see the tops

of the tallest trees beginning to waver in the wind. Lou guessed that the wind speed must be around thirty miles an hour, maybe more. It was just a guess, but one Lou had some confidence in. Back home he had owned a motorcycle for several years. Even before that he used to ride on the back of his older brother's motorcycle. He had gotten used to the feel of wind brushing past his head. Before getting a car, he had reached a point where he could judge his speed by the feel of the wind in his hair and the pressure it created against his upper body. John had his weapon broken down and was cleaning it with a rag. Lou admired the way he handled the parts as he disassembled, cleaned and reassembled the weapon. For a big man, with large hands, Big John showed an amazing amount of dexterity.

"How high does the wind get in a typhoon, Lou?" he asked.

"I'm not real sure," Lou replied. "I think that big hurricanes can pack winds of over one hundred miles an hour. Maybe more. I know that every once in a while, one hits the coast of the United States, and that they can cause a lot of damage. Some of that is caused by the wind, but most of the damage is caused by water coming ashore in low lying coastal areas. At least that's what I think."

"One hundred mile an hour winds," B.J. said with a certain amount of wonder in his voice. "Back home in San Francisco some of the storms coming off the Pacific had really high winds, but I can't remember winds being reported at much more than fifty miles an hour. You think a man could stand up in that type of wind?"

"You probably could B.J., but it would probably blow my ass right off this mountain top. If the wind gets that high tonight and you feel something grab you in the dark, don't be surprised. It'll only be me looking for an anchor," Lou replied.

They both stared off into the distance. The wind was coming more from the south east, but they could see some clouds building up off to the east. They had only begun to appear a short while ago, but they seemed to be moving quickly toward their perch on the mountain top. They had heard no further news of the storm since this morning. Sgt. Wilson was off at another meeting and would be back soon. Maybe he would have some word as to what to expect from the weather tonight. From the looks of it, they might get wet. Of course they had the bunkers to ride the storm out in. Should be as snug as bugs in a rug, as his mom use say. The bunkers

certainly looked solid enough. Men in his position and other positions around the perimeter had been sitting, standing, and lying on the top of the bunkers all day. They all seemed very solid. Louis wondered if they had been built by the engineers when the base was built or by infantrymen who had been assigned to guard the base. Lou certainly hoped it had been the engineers.

"You think any more of those guys died?" B.J. asked. Lou knew who he was talking about. Sometimes Lou got tired of his big friend's questions. He thought that B.J. sometimes asked a hundred questions a day. Usually the answer to one question led to another that led to another, ad infinitum.

Maybe it came from John's father being a lawyer. Sometimes Lou would get tired of the questions and either would not answer or just walk away. This never seemed to faze B.J. He would just save the question for later. Sometimes Lou would make up answers to pull B.J.'s leg. He was always amazed at how gullible and trusting B.J. was. Lou was always careful to tell John the truth, later, after he had his laughs. Again, this did not seem to bother B.J. in the least, nor did it inhibit his enthusiasm for asking questions. Most of the time, Lou provided John with the best answer he could come up with. He was willing to discuss any subject that B.J. showed interest in. It was his patience and sense of humor that kept B.J. and him close.

"I don't know," Lou said, answering the question. "I hope not, but I don't think we'll ever know."

"Why not?" B.J. asked. The thought of an unanswered question probably scared him, Lou thought.

"I got a feeling that it's in the past. Over here I think that events move too quickly to worry about what happened in the past. You learn. You experience. And you move ahead. When those guys were flown out of here, they left our world forever. They may be ten miles from here or a hundred miles, or maybe they're already in the belly of some airliner on its way back to the real world. It really doesn't matter to me. They ain't here, so they don't exist, not for us. A part of me wants to know, but another part of me wants to forget too. You can bet I won't forget about why it happened."

"I feel sorry for Bennet," B.J. said. "What do you think will happen to him?"

"Don't know," Lou said. "Probably give him an article fifteen. Fine him a month's pay and ship his ass over to one of the other battalions. I don't think they'll kick him out of the Airborne or put him in the stockade. It was just a shitty accident. It was dumb of him to have a loaded weapon inside the perimeter, but I'm sure he wasn't the only one. I'm just glad it wasn't me."

"Yeah," B.J. said. He was quiet for a while. This was unusual for him. Normally, Lou couldn't shut him up. The guy loved to talk. "It happened so quick. Those medics never knew what hit them. They never had a chance. You think it could happen like that to us?" B.J. asked.

"We're sitting on top of a bunker in a foreign country, surrounded by five zillion enemy who want us dead, and you ask if it could happen to us. Well, it could happen to me, but it won't happen to you. My mom always said that God watches over small children, drunks, and idiots. I think you qualify Big." Lou said, smiling. "Holy shit. Look what's coming," Lou said, pointing off the southeast. While they were talking, the sky had gotten progressively darker and the wind had picked up even more. Off in the distance, Lou could see a wall of rain approaching, and as he watched, it advanced quickly toward them. They both crawled off the top of the bunker, heading inside quickly. Hare and Ben were already inside. Sgt. Wilson was not around. Lou headed for one of the firing ports to watch the rain advance. He and the first drops arrived almost simultaneously. The rain entered the port traveling horizontally. Lou moved off to the side. Each firing port had been made from an old ammo box the artillery shells came in. The bottoms had been removed and they had been mounted on the sides of the bunkers and surrounded by sandbags. A layer of sandbags had been laid along the bottom of the inside of each box to anchor it in place and to reduce the aperture through which the men could fire. It also reduced the target through which enemy might aim. The top of the boxes had been left on. These were hinged, and had been propped open. The men now dropped these to block out the rain. Of course this left them totally blind to what might approach the bunker from the front.

"Someone needs to go out there and pull watch," Lou said. He had hoped someone else would make the suggestion. When the sergeant wasn't around, it usually became Lou's job to point out the obvious.

"Me and Ben humped supplies this afternoon," Hare said.

"Okay. I'll take the first watch," Lou replied. "But only an hour. We'll rotate one on and one off, at least until Sergeant Wilson returns."

"You call?" Sgt. Wilson replied, entering the bunker. He was totally drenched. When he had left, he had not bothered taking his poncho. Without it he had been drenched completely to the bone. Lou could barely make him out standing in the doorway. Even though there was probably an hour's daylight left, the air had become almost as dark as night.

"We were just discussing guard duty, Sarge," Lou replied. He explained what they had planned to do.

"Good plan," Sgt. Wilson replied. He knew it was Louis who had come up with it. "The chances of Charlie making it up that cliff out front are slim and none. Still, we can't take a chance. Lou, position yourself so that you can see the wire until it gets too dark to see. Then pull back around behind the bunker. I'll send Big to relieve you in an hour." Lou put on his poncho and helmet. Since the wind was blowing in such a way and with such velocity that no rain was entering the side firing port on the north side of the bunker, they had left it open. Lou decided he would lie on that side of the bunker to pull guard. "You guys should be able to talk to me from there," he said, pointing at the window. "I'll see you later."

Lou exited the bunker staying low. As he left, he noticed a small but steady stream of water running down the steps used to enter the bunker. Luckily the previous residents had used old ammo boxes to build makeshift sleeping beds along the back of the bunker. These were raised a couple of feet off the ground. With a little luck, they would keep things dry until the morning. The wind was now blasting out of the southeast at a steady sixty miles an hour. Lou kept below the edge of the bunker and worked his way to the northern edge along the back. He peered around the side of the bunker at the wire. He could barely make it out. Above his head, the rain was passing almost horizontally. Along the side of the bunker, water was flowing off the top and dropping almost straight down. The wind along the side of the bunker swirled. It was still warm. Lou's legs and boots were already soaked after the two minutes it took to get into position. The poncho was keeping the rain off the rest of him. The ground alongside the bunker sloped very gently toward the edge of the cliff. Lou took a

position sitting, facing the barbed wire. He leaned forward, pulled his legs under the poncho, and watched. He was relatively dry and mostly out of the wind. His visibility was poor, but so would be anyone's who tried to approach the bunker. By remaining still, no one would even notice him in this light.

An hour passed quickly. By Lou's watch it was 2100 hours. The wind had picked up even more speed and was howling just over his head. He had been able to keep amazingly dry, all things considered. Lou shifted the M-79 he held in his lap under the poncho ever so slightly. There was a round in the chamber, but the weapon was broken open at the breech. Lou felt in his pocket for a cigarette. He thought that he could get one lit. It was boring, sitting there, and there was absolutely no chance of the enemy observing him. This was because it was pitch black. Not dark like it would normally be if there were stars showing, but so black he couldn't see his finger when he held it a half inch from his eyes. The air had cooled down some but not enough to chill him. Sitting there with the wind and rain, Lou actually felt good. He got the cigarette out and was actually able to light it using his cigarette lighter. It was just a matter of hunching over and creating a pocket of calm air. By keeping his palm cupped and his head at just the right angle so that the rain didn't run onto the cigarette he was able to smoke. He had just finished when a red light appeared to his left. It was Big John at the window of the bunker.

"I'll be out to relieve you in a minute," he said.

"Don't bother," Lou replied. He had to talk loudly to be heard over the roar of the wind. "I'm not really tired or sleepy, and I'm already wet. I can stay here for another hour. It's no big deal."

"Thanks," Big replied. Both the light and B.J. disappeared.

Lou spent the next hour sitting there, not thinking of anything in particular. It was one thing he had learned from all his training: patience. He could sit for hours without moving if necessary. Tonight it was not necessary. Periodically he stretched the different muscle groups. Tightening and loosening muscles. Rotating and rocking his head to relieve the strain that developed in his neck. Flexing and extending his arms. Simple exercises to keep the muscles loose and warm. Someone sitting nearby would have hardly noticed the exercises taking place. This was followed by simple relaxation techniques to calm the muscles and get the body

comfortable. Lou also used mental games and imaging to keep his mind alert to and reduce the tension. The wind and the rain did not bother him, and he felt in no particular danger.

Around 2200 hours, the red light again appeared in the window to his right.

"You still there, Lou?" Sgt. Wilson asked.

"Yeah, Sarge, still here," Lou answered.

"Can you see anything?" the sarge asked.

"Can't see shit. Can't hear shit but the wind. Really no reason to be sitting out here to tell you the truth. No one's coming close to here tonight."

"Well come on in. We'll keep watch from in here."

It took Lou about five minutes to crawl back to the entrance of the bunker. He kept his left shoulder against the wall of the bunker as he crawled. In this weather he knew if he wandered even a little he could become disoriented and lost. No sense in doing anything stupid. He just took his time until he got to the entrance. The wind seemed to be blowing stronger than ever. He could not begin to guess its speed. He found the entrance to the bunker with his hand. He worked his body around so that his legs could find the stairs leading down. His right arm cradled his weapon, and his left hand kept contact with the bunker. Just before he entered, his left hand encountered the top of the door of the bunker and he felt the metal rods of the roof as they slanted inward. Another step and he was inside the bunker. The noise of the wind was dampened considerably. The red light of the flashlight again appeared. Sgt. Wilson was standing or sitting on something by the north window. He directed the light not at Lou, but at a place in the northwest corner of the bunker. There on the ammo boxes was a spot that Lou could sit down and maybe get some rest. The red glow of the flashlight was not very bright, but after the darkness of the night it made things manageable. Lou moved over to the spot and sat. He had thought about removing his poncho but then thought better of it. He would not be able to remove it without waking the other men who were evidently asleep. He sat, took the round from his launcher, removed his helmet from his head and placed it down by his side. He leaned back against the wall of the bunker and shut his eyes, preparing to get some sleep. Lou knew that Sgt. Wilson would pull first watch and then rotate it amongst the other men, until once more it would be his turn. The air in the bunker was still and there was a

definite smell of human occupancy within. Lou was almost asleep as he sat there listening to the gentle sound of quietly running water. Running water. The thought flicked gently through his mind. He opened his eyes. It was pitch dark and he could definitely hear running water. He hadn't heard it a minute ago. Then another thought hit his consciousness. When his left hand had felt the steel bar of the roof, it was sloping toward the center of the bunker. This morning when he had looked at the roof the bars were horizontal with no slope to them. Lou's heart started to race.

"Turn on the light, Sarge," Lou said.

The eerie glow appeared almost instantly. Lou looked in the direction he thought he had heard the running water. The light was not bright enough to make out the details of the bunker.

"Give me the light," he said. He could feel the tension in his voice. The Sarge handed him the light without hesitation. Lou could tell that he was now fully alert. He took the flashlight and removed the red glass filter. Without the filter the light given off increased by tenfold. Lou and Sgt. Wilson both saw the same thing instantaneously. At the southeast corner of the bunker there were two steady streams of water running down the side of the bunker. The earth under the sandbags was being washed away. The top of the bunker bowed inward in the middle, the steel rods being bowed by the weight of the wet sandbags they were holding. "Out! Everybody Out!" Sgt. Wilson yelled. Everyone was instantly on their feet and moving. Within thirty seconds everyone was outside in the wind and rain.

Sgt. Wilson was the last one to leave the bunker making sure everyone was out before he would leave. They had all crawled along the side of the bunker and were now laying in along the back and north sides. By staying down they were somewhat protected from the wind and rain. Lou had seen that they all took their weapons and ponchos with them as they exited the bunker. Luckily, Lou had left his poncho on. Lou could feel the man lying next to him squirming into his. Of course the guy would already be soaked by time he got his on. Lou did not know who it was. He could neither see nor hear anything but the wind.

He took his time and again worked his way around to the north side of the bunker. He found an empty spot against the wall and sat up with his back against it. It was going to be a

long night without any sleep. About five minutes later he felt the sandbags at his back shift. He leaned forward just as the sandbags caved inward. The wind came roaring against his exposed back, nearly knocking him forward on his face. Only his quick reflexes saved his helmet from being snatched from his head and carried away. Lou rolled onto his belly with his head facing into the wind. Once he was flat on the ground, he was once again out of the blast of the wind. He extended his hand outward and felt the sandbags of the wall. He moved his hand upwards feeling each layer of sandbags as he went. At the fifth layer, the rows of sandbags stopped. There had been at least five more layers there previously. Lou could imagine what the inside of the bunker must look like now. If they had still been in there when the bunker caved in, they might all be dead. This was not a good first day in the field. Not at all. Not by any definition.

Lou lay there. He was alone in the wind and rain. He knew the others were lying somewhere nearby. At least he hoped they were. What if one of them had panicked and tried to stand up? Lou extended his hands to either side but felt nothing. He lay face down and curled his feet up under the poncho as best he could. His weapon was inside the poncho with him, of absolutely no use in this situation. There was nothing to do now but wait. His mind drifted away thinking about home.

Two hours later the storm was still raging without respite. Lou was suddenly aware of the need to piss really badly. The urge had come to his attention earlier, but until now he had been able to ignore it. Now there was no ignoring it. This particular set of circumstances was not one covered in the training manuals. As a child growing up in the country, he had peed behind many a bush or tree in his life. However, he had never had to piss during a hurricane before. Oh well, there was a first time for everything. One option of course was to just let er rip. Wetting oneself was something that was just not done easily. The mechanics were simple enough, but the psychology of the act was awesome. Years of potty training down the tube. In training, there had always been the option of at least standing up before performing the ceremonies. Of course if he stood up now he was liable to be blown off the mountain. Even if he could stand with his back to the wind he had to worry about the stream reaching the men in the next bunker over. Their lives were not all that pleasant now, and a sudden stream of urine arriving at nearly supersonic speed would only make them mad. The only real option in this

situation was rolling onto his right side, raising his poncho above the level of his dick, and letting loose. The relief was tremendous and yet at the same time life became just a tad more miserable. Now he was soaked from the waist down from the torrential downpour. Up until now he had managed to stay relatively dry under his poncho. He had forfeited that luxury to the forces of nature. Lou just thanked God that he had no urges to shit at this time. What a great day this was turning out to be. He rolled back onto his stomach, again curling into a ball, and got as comfortable as possible.

Lou hadn't slept well the night before. Not surprising, considering the circumstances. The day had been long and filled with a certain amount of excitement and tension. The effects of this had taken their toll. Without realizing it was happening, in the middle of what was going to be one of the worst nights of his life in terms of weather, Lou fell asleep.

Lou was wide awake. Someone had brushed up against him in the dark. Lou had been startled by the touch, immediately shrinking from it and reaching for his bayonet on his hip at the same instant. He heard Sgt. Wilson's voice above the howl of the wind. "Who's this?" he shouted.

"Lou!" he replied.

"Who?" the sergeant shouted again.

"Lou!" Lou shouted. His voice was high pitched and did not carry well under the best of circumstances. These were not those circumstances.

"You okay?"

"Yes," he screamed in reply.

"It's about 0200 hours," the sarge shouted. "Everyone here is accounted for. I think the wind has died down a little in the past half hour. What do you think?"

"Hell, I don't know Sarge. If it has, I haven't noticed," Lou screeched.

"I'm going to try to get some shut-eye. Wake me if things die down," Sgt. Wilson bellowed. Then he was still.

Lou was thirsty. Of course his canteen was still in the bunker with all the other gear. Lou put his hand out in front of him and felt the wall of sandbags. They seemed to be holding firm. He moved his hand to the right and was rewarded by finding a stream of water running

down the side of the bunker wall. He edged up close to it and cupped his hand, which immediately filled with rainwater. Lou got his mouth up to his hand and directed the water into it. It tasted as good as anything he had ever drunk. He got himself comfortable again and settled down to wait out the storm. Over the next two hours, the wind slowly started to die down. By 0430 it was down to about thirty miles an hour. It was still raining, and every once in a while a gust of really high wind would pass overhead. Yet Lou thought the worst of the storm was over. He reached out and touched Sgt. Wilson.

The sarge replied immediately, "Yeah?"

"Rise and shine, Sarge. I think we survived," Lou said.

There was no answer for a minute. Lou rose to a sitting position. His pants were still soaked, and he was sore and tired from hours of lying still. He felt his joints creaking as he moved. He heard the sound of the sergeant doing the same thing next to him. Lou kept his back to the wind and reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette. Again he was able to light up despite the wind and rain. He had only been smoking for the past month, but like most addicts, he was adept at meeting his habit's needs. That first puff tasted great. He kept his hands cupped, protecting the cigarette from the rain. The glow of the tip could barely be made out when he took a puff.

Lou heard the mortar round exit the tube. He jumped, but recognized instantly that the round had been fired from inside the perimeter and was therefore an outgoing round. He heard the sergeant hit the ground next to him.

"Get down!" Sgt. Wilson shouted. Lou did so immediately as the flare shell went off overhead. The whole area was suddenly lit up brighter than day. The rain had slackened off enough that he could see the next two bunkers off to the north of his. One seemed fine, while the other appeared to be level with the ground. He glanced over to where the mortar had fired the round. He could see several men squatting around the four mortar tubes that belonged to the company's heavy weapons platoon. The flare they had shot off was drifting off to the southwest. It did not seem to be falling very fast, maybe caught in an updraft from the cliff. Within thirty seconds a second round went off. This time Lou's eyes were able to track the flight of the shell as it headed upward. Sgt. Wilson got to his feet beside Lou.

"Why did you have us lay down when the first shell went off?" Lou asked. He too was getting to his feet. The other men in the squad were all beginning to stand up.

"Listen men," the sarge said as they gathered around. "Whenever you hear a round leave a mortar tube, get your ass down. Keep it down until you're sure where the rounds are heading. Even friendly mortar fire will kill you. Sometimes those tubes produce what is known as "short rounds," meaning the shell has not been fired out of the tube properly and is going to fall short of its target. If you ever hear the guys at the guns yell "Short round," begin eating dirt. If the weapons platoon is shooting directly over your head, keep your ass down." Funny how these things had been overlooked during their training. They had never actually been present when the weapons platoon had been live-firing their weapons. On field exercises, they had always run through dry firing exercises. Practicing setting up and aiming their weapons without actually firing them. No one had said anything about "short rounds." It did not sound like any fun at all.

Lou looked over to the bunker. Sure enough, it had caved in, but not as completely as he had thought. The southeast corner had collapsed completely, but most of the roof had dropped down about three feet along the front of the bunker, while the back of the bunker roof appeared to have dropped down only about a foot or two. Lou was hopeful that maybe they could retrieve their equipment easily and that it might still be in decent condition. Lou spotted two men approaching their position from the south. The second flare was beginning to descend when the third flare went off. It was easy to see that the two men were Lt. Burroughs and Plt. Sgt. Harris.

"Good to see you men are alright," said Lt. Burroughs when they got close enough to be heard. Sgt. Harris walked straight over to the bunker and was inspecting it closely.

"Looks like this bunker will need to be completely rebuilt," Sgt. Harris said, moving over to the group of men.

"Sgt. Wilson, you come with us and have the rest of the men see if they can recover their equipment." Without another word, the two sergeants and Lt. Burroughs walked off toward the next bunker. The mortar platoon was keeping a flare overhead continuously now. Lou looked at his watch and saw that it was 0450 hours. Daylight would begin to arrive in

twenty-five minutes or so. The wind and rain were both continuing to slacken. The men moved to the opening of the bunker. The opening had dropped down a couple of feet.

The water was about two feet below ground level. Lou guessed that it was even with the ground at the front of the bunker. He did not hesitate. He was the smallest of this particular group, and it only made sense that he would be the one to enter the bunker and retrieve the men's equipment. He handed his weapon to Big John and put his helmet on the ground. Lou sat on the ground and lowered his legs into the water, feeling for the ground. Hare had taken off his poncho and was removing his webbing.

"Here, grab onto one end of this," he said. Lou grabbed onto the end of the belt. Hare had adjusted it for maximum length which was about five feet. Hare lay on the ground next to the entrance. By both men extending their arms Lou would be able to reach about twelve feet without letting go. Ben squatted down and grabbed Hare's ankles, securing him. Lou took another step down into the bunker. He moved slowly, not wanting to slip and go under water. The flares were providing enough light that Lou could see. The roof had fallen inward and along the back wall was about a foot above the surface of the water. The water was cool but not cold. By time Lou reached the bottom of the bunker, the water was above his armpits. He moved really slowly to avoid making waves. He knew the roof could cave in completely without warning. He felt the side of one of the ammo boxes with his left foot. He stepped up onto it slowly. This bought him out of the water enough so that he could bend down and feel for the equipment. Luckily the men had kept their rucksacks closed before trying to sleep. He grabbed the first one and backed up to the door. The sack was easy to move in the water. At the entrance he handed it up to Big John who was sitting on the ground at the entrance to the bunker, opposite the side where Hare lay. Once Big John had the rucksack half out of the water, Lou could see him begin to struggle to lift it completely out. Lou returned to the bunker four more times and retrieved all the equipment. By the time he was done, he was cold and shivering.

Once out of the bunker, Lou grabbed for his rucksack. He quickly found a pack of cigarettes. He opened the pack and lit one. Lou sat back and smoked. He looked around at the activity that was taking place around the compound. The night was slowly retreating. A slow

graying of the darkness had already taken place. The weapons platoon was still lobbing flares into the air, but Lou knew that in a minute or two that would no longer be necessary. Lou noticed a number sitting around the walls of the firing pits smoking and drinking coffee. Lou had to wonder how they had made out in their underground bunkers during the night.

Lou reached into his rucksack and grabbed a large can of C rations. He did not bother reading the side of the can. He quickly opened it. Shit! Another can of ham and motherfuckers. Lou had received two cans out of the nine meals he had been issued. At least his luck was running consistently today. He knew things would get better since he didn't have any more of this shit left. Maybe that was the way to approach things. Get the bad shit out of the way first and hope the rest of the stuff would be better. Lou was already looking forward to lunch.

There was no reason to try heating the Cs. The ground was saturated, and there was no way to heat the can properly. Besides, Lou knew he needed the calories now. By taking one bite at a time Lou was able to gag the whole can down. He ate the motherfuckers first so he could relish the slices of ham. He even held each piece of ham out in the rain before eating them, just to wash the taste of the lima beans off them. The effect of the meal on his body was almost immediate. He could feel his body warm up and an increase in the amount of energy he felt. He rewarded himself with a can of peaches and some candy. He was still wet, but it didn't seem as important now that his stomach had been filled. He removed his boots and took off his socks. Lou wrung about a gallon of water out of each sock and then put his socks and boots back on. There of course were no clean, dry clothes to put on. The extra socks and underwear he carried in his rucksack were saturated.

Ten minutes later, Sgt. Wilson returned to the bunker. Lou could tell from the way he walked and the expression on his face that something was wrong. It was nearly daylight. The sun would be popping over the horizon soon, but with the cloud cover they would not see it this morning. It was barely drizzling now, and Lou thought there was a good chance the rain would stop soon. Sgt. Wilson walked over to his rucksack. He got out a can of Cs, opened them, and began eating. He didn't say anything for a while, and the guys in the squad left him

alone. They had all retrieved the necessary gear from their rucksacks and were in the process of cleaning their weapons.

"Second Platoon lost three men last night," Sgt. Wilson said without preamble. The men turned toward him. "They got caught on the side of the hill, unable to make it to the bottom before dark. They dug in. Sometime around 2200 hours, someone started firing. Thought they were under attack. One of the guys threw a grenade. It hit a tree in front of the position and bounced back. By the time the platoon leader got there, two of the guys were already dead. The other one explained what had happened before he died. The lieutenant decided not to try to make it back with the storm, so they just stayed there on the side of the mountain last night. They started back about fifteen minutes ago. A squad from Third Platoon is heading down to meet up with them and help them bring back the bodies." Sgt. Wilson sounded tired, and the strain of the night and the information he had to share with the men showed on his face.

"Do you know who they were?" Hare asked.

"Donavan, Peters, and Weilman," Sgt. Wilson replied.

Lou sat there. He was too stunned to say anything. He knew all three of them. Hell, he knew everyone in the company by name. He knew some of the men better than others. Had spent time talking with each of the dead men at one time or another. He had known Donavan the best. Like him, Donavan had been seasick the whole way over, and so they had spent many an hour at the rail of the ship, christening the ocean together. They had gotten to know each other quite well. Larry Donavan was nineteen and engaged to be married. He came from a large family that lived in the Bronx, New York City. His old man was a cop. Larry was planning a career as a policeman when his tour was up.

"I'm going over to talk with the other guys," the sarge said. "I had a meeting with the captain and got briefed on what's going to happen today. It's 0545 hours now. Let's all meet over at the other bunker at 0700 hours. I'll brief everyone then. You guys get to work on the bunker. See what you can do."

The sarge left, and the four men worked on the bunker. They disassembled the roof one sandbag at a time. The wet sandbags weighed thirty pounds apiece, but by working steadily, they completely removed the roof by 0700 hours. They stacked the sandbags neatly to

one side and the steel rods and sheet metal from the roof separately. It was evident they would need new steel rods before the roof could be reassembled. What was left were four sides and a swimming hole. The men were all sweating, for despite the cloud cover, the day was warming up. They were all muddy from handling the sandbags and sloshing around in the mud. When the sarge called for them, they were happy for the break.

The whole squad settled in around Sgt. Wilson.

"I'll let you men know what's going on. First, the storm that hit last night came ashore about twenty miles north of here. There is widespread damage in the coastal areas including the bases at Ben Hoi and An Khe. Luckily there was enough of a warning that the military was able to fly most of its aircraft further south yesterday afternoon. Things won't be back to normal as far as helicopter support until later this morning. The camp survived quite well with no one in the base getting hurt despite the collapse of several bunkers. Repair of the bunkers will get high priority."

"Second," Sgt. Wilson went on, "the company will be moving out of the perimeter. This will take place as soon as Charlie Company arrives from An Khe. The best guess of when this will occur is 1200 hours. First Platoon will lead out and the First Squad has drawn point. My fire team will take point followed by Sergeant Taylor's. Lou, you'll take point."

Lou suddenly felt nervous. Didn't know whether "to shit or go blind" as the men were apt to phrase it. By the same token he was glad it would be him.

"Third, the company is going to run a patrol along the base of the mountain and check out the village down there," Sgt. Wilson said while pointing at the village down in the valley. "There has been a report of increased Viet Cong activity in the area. In addition, there have been spotting of a large force of NVA moving through. As you know, the base artillery assisted in greeting these folks yesterday. Since then, there have been no sightings. They are out there somewhere, and it's our job to find them. Fourth Division Intelligence suspects an enemy regiment is moving into this area. That's who we will be looking for. Any questions?"

"Exactly how many men are in an enemy regiment?" asked PFC Chuck Johns.

"You know, I asked the same question, Chuck. The best guess from the captain was around six hundred men."

"Exactly what the hell are we supposed to do if we find these guys? They'll only outnumber us four to one," PFC Fry said.

"Bobby, you're the great white hunter from Alaska. What would you do if you found a pack of four hungry polar bears?" Sgt. Wilson asked, smiling.

Bobby Fry did not answer. He sat there with a thoughtful look on his face trying to figure that one out. Looking at him, one would think that he couldn't be much older than fourteen. He was cursed with a baby face. Being slight of build and only weighing around 120 pounds, people were always kidding him about living in Alaska. Bobby had been raised on a little farm about 100 miles from Fairbanks. His family's nearest neighbor was twenty miles away. The stories he had told Louis during their months of training had really been impressive. Bobby was a quiet individual, and hard to get to know. He rarely talked, and when he did, one had to listen carefully because he spoke so quietly. Bobby never bragged or swore, having been raised in a strict Christian house. Lou respected him for that.

"How long we going to be out on patrol?" Chuck Johns asked.

"The old man said it would probably be a couple of days," Sgt. Wilson replied. "I had a chance to talk with some of the guys in the Fourth Infantry Division. They rarely operate in the field for more than two days. For them it is unusual to even stay out overnight. Their companies are usually flown out early in the morning and flown back into their base for the night. My guess is that we will be spending more time in the field than that. We should get back to base every three days or so. That's how the other battalions have been operating up to now. Anymore questions?"

"Look!" Sgt. Wilson said, pointing across the compound. It was the men from Second Platoon filing in through the wire. They moved slowly, obviously exhausted from the long night spent in the bush. Bringing up the rear were the men who had gone out to help them carry back the bodies. They had brought body bags and filled them before entering the compound. For that Lou was grateful. Still, Lou knew that the second bag through the wire was Larry Donovan. He was the largest of the three. His squad just sat there watching until all the men were safely in. Lou glanced down at his watch.

The time was 0750 hours. Almost exactly twenty-four hours since the men had been loaded aboard the helicopters for the trip to the fire support base. Lou shook his head in wonder. He didn't say anything to anyone. They were all deep into their own thoughts. It had been a long day and night. So much had happened in such a short period of time. The company had counted seven dead and several wounded without ever making contact with the enemy. One of the men had been sent in from the field in disgrace. Today the company was to leave the safety of the fire support base to go look for 600 enemy soldiers, and Lou had been designated to lead them. Lou hoped that today would be quiet compared to yesterday. He wondered what the jungle was like. END