

**#6 Second Day** – around November 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup>, 1967 – forward artillery base, Vietnam

Writer's Notes - This was the following day, where we moved out into a valley. This was about two weeks after we had landed in Vietnam which was on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October, 1967.

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Louis and the men in his fire team returned to the bunker after the squad meeting. Overcast skies were beginning to break up as the heat of the day exerted itself. The sun would be coming out soon. The wind had shifted around and was blowing gently from the west. Lou got his rucksack and proceeded to unpack everything and lay it out on the ground to dry. His poncho liner was drenched, and with Big John's help they wrung as much water out of it as they could before spreading it out on the ground. Luckily Lou had the foresight to wrap all his dry valuables in plastic. His wallet and writing material were safe. After everything was unpacked, the team turned its attention to rebuilding the bunker. Sgt. Wilson said that there were stores of iron rods available to replace the ones that were bent and that three of the guys from the other fire team had been assigned to locate the supply and haul the rods to the damaged bunker. The other fire team was much luckier the night before. Their bunker had withstood the storm, and they had been able to ride it out in relative comfort. The guys in the other bunker were willing to lend a hand in repairing all the damage.

Sgt. Wilson and the men stood around looking at what was left. The old roof had been torn off earlier. All that remained were the sides and a water filled hole. The men all took off their steel helmets and removed the helmet liners. They took off the camouflage cover and used the steel pots to haul water from the bunker.

"Let's throw grenades in there," Ben said.

"Let's throw Ben in there and then throw in some hand grenades," Big John said.

"Let's shut up and get the damn water out of the hole," Sgt. Wilson chimed in.

"Let's throw Sgt. Wilson in the hole and then call in artillery fire," Lou said. This drew applause from the other men in the squad.

"Fuck you, Private First Class Merrins," the sarge replied, smiling. The day before, there was no way Sgt. Wilson would have said such a thing. Being in the field seemed to be loosening

up his attitude toward the men. There had always been a separation between the NCOs and the rest of the men. Lou noticed this breach in the barrier and felt good about it.

They had removed about as much water as they were going to, leaning over the wall of the bunker and tossing the sloshing contents of their helmets repeatedly. Lou sat and lit a cigarette outside the bunker. He took off his jacket. Then he removed his shoes and socks. Then he removed his pants. He put his shoes back on. "The problem is it's too hot," he said while standing up. "Time to get serious." He proceeded to jump down into the bunker with his steel pot. The water still came up above his navel. Using his pot, he began slopping water out of the bunker like a madman. In such a manner, it was hard to control exactly where the water was going. Within seconds he had managed to get both Hare and Big John drenched. Sgt. Wilson was laughing so hard Lou was afraid he might rupture a vein or something. Ten seconds later everyone was stripping down and jumping in. Soon there was a veritable tornado of water spouting from bunker. Men from the other bunkers began to drift over to see what the hell was happening. The spectators were greeted by the rare vision of five grown men sloshing and hooting and slinging water. Insults were hurled and challenges issued. Anyone stupid enough to approach too closely was either drenched or had mud flung at them. This led to more insults involving family lineage, race, and inadequacies of certain body parts. This in turn led to more challenges being issued and more men taking up those challenges. Within ten minutes there were some thirty men in that dirty little hole and more getting ready to join in the fracas. The whole company probably would have wedged into that little hole had the captain not shown up.

"Attention!" someone yelled. Everything stopped at once. Old discipline exerted itself. Everyone came to attention.

It was quite a sight. About forty men standing around in various stages of undress. All the men in the bunker were soaking wet and covered in mud. Some were still struggling to their feet.

"Who's in charge here?" Captain Pickett asked.

"I am, Sir," Sgt. Wilson replied. The captain stared at him for a full minute without saying anything.

"Who the hell are you?" the captain asked.

"Sgt. Wilson, Sir."

"Sgt. Wilson, exactly what the hell are you and these men doing?" the captain asked.

"We're building a bunker, Sir," Sgt. Wilson replied.

"Who taught you to build bunkers, Sergeant?"

"No one sir. We're teaching ourselves."

"What kind of bunker you building?"

"An Airborne Bunker, Sir!" Sgt. Wilson sung out.

"Make it strong, Sergeant Wilson. Not like that piece of shit them legs built," the Captain replied. He was smiling as he saluted the Sarge.

Sgt. Wilson and all the men returned suit with the salutatory "All the way, Sir." The captain turned and walked away.

By now the bunker had been emptied of most of the water, and what remained was about a foot of mud in the bottom. This would dry over the next day or two. The men all got out and cleaned themselves off the best they could. No one left, and with Sgt. Wilson supervising they put the bunker back together. They made it better than that piece of shit the legs had built before them. Their bunker was pure Airborne.

It was almost noon. The men were all packed and ready to move. The sky had cleared considerably, and the sun was ducking in and out of the cloud cover. It was already around 90 degrees, and the humidity was high. What could you expect, living surrounded by jungle? Lou was ready to get this show on the road. He and Sgt. Wilson had studied the map of the area. The captain had marked a proposed route, but once in the bush Lou would move the company toward its destination based on the lay of the land. Since the only men who had actually been in the jungle in this area were from Second Platoon, most of the men, including Lou, had no idea of what actually lay ahead. Lou was determined to get the company down the hill as quickly as possible. Second Platoon's two squads had only made it halfway down the mountain in over four hours yesterday. Because of the delay caused by last night's storm, the company was moving out very late in the day. Their primary objective was the village in the valley below. Getting there before dark seemed important.

Sgt. Wilson came over from where he had been talking with Sgt. Harris.

"Helicopters are five minutes out!" he said. "Mount up. Lou, head for the wire. That's where we'll be leaving."

Lou quickly fitted his rucksack onto his back and headed out. When he got to the wire, he waited. Twenty yards past the wire the jungle started. Lou picked a spot where he would enter. His M-79 was loaded with a shotgun round. This was designed just like a shotgun shell, only much larger. He would be able to dispatch of anything that might suddenly appear up close. The effective range was 10 to 15 yards. Lou would have preferred a semiautomatic, short-barreled shotgun, like the one he had used as a shotgun guard at Ft. Ord, California. The M-79 was breech-loaded, but the fastest Lou could reload was about three seconds, and that was only if the second shell was immediately available. Lou did not know if this would be fast enough in combat. His favorite weapon was his M-16 rifle, which he dearly missed.

While waiting, Lou checked his compass to make sure to orient himself to the line of march he would take once into the tree line. He would have to keep a close watch on it today. It was easy to stray if you didn't keep your head on straight. Of course there were several men in the company with maps and compasses. Within an hour Lou knew they would all be arguing about exactly where they were. Lou had been chosen as point man because he was good at moving from one point to another through the woods. This particular talent had become apparent during training. It was a knack that Lou couldn't explain entirely even to his own satisfaction. He had spent many hours alone in the woods during his youth, and he thought that part of it may have been linked to this. Another part was due to his ability to look at a topographical map and get a feel for the lay of the land in his head. Whatever it was, Lou had proven his ability to locate points on a map. He was also good at moving through wooded areas and finding the easiest ways through dense woods. He was able to move quickly and quietly. He knew Hare had better eyesight, but in the woods Lou was better tuned into the environment. He noticed things that weren't right faster than the other men. His eyes spotted unnatural movement, or his hearing alerted him to unusual noises quicker than the other guys. There were many men in the company that had lots of hunting experience. Lou had none.

Maybe spending time in the woods, enjoying the sights and sounds without having to focus on finding prey had instilled these gifts in him. He didn't know and he didn't care.

The first helicopter ferrying Charlie Company to the base had landed when Sgt. Wilson pointed to Lou. He immediately turned and left the perimeter wire. Within a minute Lou had entered the tree line. He paused for an instant, getting his first look and feel of the jungle. Here it was not as dense as he had pictured it. He could see ten or fifteen feet in any direction. A little to his left was the easiest way to move and he headed in that direction. When pulling point, Lou always tried to follow certain principles. For one thing, he never continued to move in a straight line while in the woods. Always he moved either left or right of his projected line of march. This was to prevent anyone who might be watching from projecting his destination in order to lay an ambush. He worked on the assumption that there was always someone watching. He moved ahead quickly from point to point, taking the path of least resistance to get where he wanted to go. Picking a spot, he would move toward it. Once there he would stop, listen, and look at the surrounding area for anything out of place. At the same time, he would check his compass to determine if he was pointed in the right general direction. Once comfortable with his observations, he would again move off quickly. He was constantly scanning the area including his rear. Right now he was being followed by Big John. It was his job to keep Louis in sight, although there were times when Lou would be out of his sight for short periods as he moved around trees and dipped down into depressions. Lou and John made a good pair, and when one pulled point the other backed him up. Whereas Lou would move in quick spurts, John, as his backup, would try to keep a steady pace for the rest of the squad and platoon to follow. Every time he stopped, Lou would look at John to be sure he didn't have any messages for him. If the company needed to stop for any reason, word would be passed to Big John, and he in turn would signal Louis to stop.

Lou looked for the easiest way for the company to move, but never would he use a trail. The enemy had the tendency to booby-trap trails and set up ambushes along them. Every man in the company knew better than to walk on a trail. In addition, Lou never moved along a ridge line. This would tend to silhouette them against a sky line, making them easy for an enemy to spot. Lou would find a line to follow on either side of a ridge. In addition to making it more

difficult for the enemy to spot him, it allowed Lou to use the ridge as a guide to his destination. Of course Lou had several guides to finding his way in the woods. Besides a compass, there was the sun, ridges, valleys, creeks, cliffs, hilltops, and plateaus. By memorizing these features of the maps before moving out, Lou could draw a pretty good idea of the lay of the land and what to expect as he moved ahead.

Lou had been on the move for fifteen minutes. He had just stopped to choose his next destination. As he checked his rear, there was Big John squatting down beside a bush signaling him to stop. Lou eased over next to a small tree that was next to him and eased off his rucksack. He spent several seconds completing his scan of the area. Once he was sure everything was alright he kneeled down beside his rucksack. The first thing he did was grab his canteen and take a good drink of water. He had three canteens and they had all been filled prior to moving out. The company would have water flown into them toward evening, so Lou knew to make what he had last. Putting his canteen away, Lou inventoried what had happened over the past few minutes. He was pleased with his progress down the mountain so far. He was setting a good pace and yet was being careful. The jungle had so far proven easier to move through than he had been led to believe. There was a machete available to help him move forward if it became necessary, but so far he had not needed it. Lou kept his ears tuned to the noises emitting from the jungle. It was relatively quiet but Lou knew the noise would increase significantly when the sun went down. Every once in a while he caught the sounds of the company moving through the jungle behind him. With a hundred and sixty odd men strung out in single file and trying to move in a coordinated way, there was bound to be noise. Whereas it was possible for a squad of men or even a platoon of men to move quietly, a whole company was impossible. Still Lou was pleased by the relative stealth the company was moving with. Lou took out a candy bar and started to chew on it. He would have liked a cigarette but would not smoke while pulling point. A puff of smoke might give the enemy a fix on Lou's position. He wiped his face with the towel that was wrapped around his neck. Although only on the move for a short while, Lou's uniform was already dark from sweat. The heat here was not as bad as it had been out in the sun, but it was still hot. The sunlight was mostly filtered out by the canopy of the jungle, with just a periodic patch reaching the jungle floor. Mosquitoes

buzzed quietly about, but they weren't overly aggressive as long as the men stayed on the move. Now that Lou was stopped, they had decided it was lunch time. Lou was used to the sight and sound of these little pests and did not let them bother him too much. There was actually little exposed area for them to alight. His uniform shirt had long sleeves that were down. This was to protect the skin from the various plants he had to brush up against and also provided a green camouflage. His neck was protected by his towel, leaving only his hands and face exposed to the mosquitoes.

Five minutes later, Big John signaled him to move out. The company had been paralleling the ridge on Lou's right up until now. After moving forward another fifty yards, Lou altered course and moved up and over the ridge. The company's objective lay at the bottom of this canyon in the valley below. Lou knew that once they crossed the ridge, they only had to keep moving south and east until they eventually reached the canyon floor. The cliff that the fire support base sat atop was somewhere off to his right rear, but he was unable to see it. He continued to move forward for the next hour and a half with periodic stops being signaled to him by Big John. For the most part Lou was able to avoid any really steep descents, and the jungle continued to offer relative easy passage to the company. By now Lou was beginning to get tired, but he worked hard to maintain good concentration while on the move. He had not spotted anything that raised an alarm yet. He had often thought about how nerve wracking pulling point would be in a real combat situation, but he had actually been enjoying himself so far. If it weren't for the weight of the rucksack on his back and its bulkiness, Lou was sure he could be making much better time. He was determined not to let this thought ruin his day.

On the move, Lou kept the M-79 loaded with the safety on. He had no intention of accidentally shooting his foot off with his own weapon. Since it had such a short barrel, it was easy to lose track of where it was pointed. He kept it cradled in one arm or the other, always ready for use at an instant's notice, and he wondered if Big John's M-16 had a round in the chamber and the safety on. He hoped so. Lou had heard Big John go down a couple of times behind him while descending the hill. An accidental squeezing of the trigger and the damn weapon would loose a half dozen rounds in Lou's direction before John knew what was

happening. Another one of those things you didn't think about in training. Lou might well be in more danger from the men following him than from any enemy he was heading toward.

The company was stopped again. Lou could see Sgt. Wilson move up next to Big John, then Big John pointed out his position to Sgt. Wilson. Next he saw Sgt. Harris and Lt. Burroughs move up. Pretty soon all three were moving toward his position. Maybe they're attacking, Lou thought. Actually he knew what they wanted before they ever got to him. On every training exercise, it seemed the company got lost once or twice during the day. Not so much lost as misplaced. Experience had taught Lou that most of the time, the company was actually where it was supposed to be, and it was just that the officers couldn't quite agree exactly where that was. Of course now it was much more important than in the past. Artillery, aircraft, gunships, naval support, and every other sort of fire support could only be delivered using map coordinates. It would be a big mistake to call in that kind of support without the proper coordinates.

"Captain says we're lost," Lt. B. said. "He thinks you are in the wrong valley."

Lou smiled at this. The thought of having misplaced a valley amused him. He hadn't looked at a map since he left the perimeter, but in his own mind he had a pretty good idea where he was.

"Let me see that map, Lieutenant," Lou said. Lou quickly used his compass to orient the map north and south. "Here is the fire support base. We moved along the north side of this ridge to about here, then crossed over it, and we've been heading southeast off this hill ever since." He continued looking at the map while picturing the terrain they had moved through in his mind.

"My best guess would be we are about here," Lou continued, pointing to a place near the base of the hill. "Should be hitting open land any time now. The slope of the hill has been flattening out for the past fifty yards or so. Best guess." Lou's eyes continued to study the map, confirming his position and orienting him for when they moved out.

After looking at the map for a minute or two, Lt. B. said, "The captain thinks you're further east, about here."



"Well that's the captain's prerogative," Lou said. "Just tell him not to call in any artillery fire here until we get the fuck out of the area." Lou was smiling as he talked, but his words were serious. Lou liked Captain Pickett, but the man couldn't read a map for shit.

"The captain wants you to start moving further south," Lt. Burroughs said, passing along the message.

"Okay," Lou said. Five minutes later the company was on the move again. Lou immediately headed south for ten yards and then resumed his line of march toward the objective. Ten minutes later he spotted the edge of the wood line and the village further out on the plain. He signaled for the company to stop and waved for Sgt. Wilson to come forward. After taking a look, Sgt. Wilson moved back to inform the rest of the chain of command.

Minutes later the captain and Master Sergeant Turner moved up next to him. The captain got out his map and began studying it. Lou handed him his compass. Once the map was properly oriented, it was easy to shoot an azimuth to the village. The captain had been marking the company's progress on his map in grease pencil. His line of march showed them much further north in another valley. Without a word he now marked down the company's actual position on the map. He and the master sergeant turned and left without a word. A minute later, Lou was signaled to move forward. Once he reached the actual edge of the jungle he stopped again and waited for someone to tell him what to do. Both Sgt. Wilson and Platoon Sgt. Harris moved forward.

"Nice job, Lou," Sgt. Wilson said. "You had me worried there for a while. I'm just glad you were right."

"Me too, Sarge," Lou replied.

"Sgt. Wilson. Have your men spread out along the wood line to the right about a hundred yards. The platoon will set up a defensive position about two to five yards back in the tree line. Once we're set, Third Platoon will move through and take point into the village. Once the company is past, our platoon will bring up the rear. Your squad will lead out once Second Platoon has passed," Sgt. Harris said.

Five minutes later the squad was lying in defensive positions within the tree line, ready to provide fire support if needed for the company as it began to move across the plain. Lou had

taken up a position next to Big John. He was tired, both physically and mentally. It hadn't really bothered him while pulling point, but now Lou understood the mental strain he had been under during the march. He lit a cigarette and lay there on the ground enjoying it.

"Man. That was great, Lou. I wish I could move through the jungle the way you do," Big John said. "What's it like pulling point?"

"It's sort of scary," Lou replied. "Especially with you stumbling around behind me with a loaded gun. You have the safety on today?"

"No," Big John replied honestly.

"Goddamn it, Big. You either have the safety on or don't jack a shell in the chamber. It's scary enough out there without being worried about being shot in the back by my best friend. Okay?"

"Yeah," Big John replied in a hurt voice. Lou knew John wouldn't do anything to purposely hurt him, but he was quickly beginning to understand that this shit was real. Purpose didn't mean squat. Lou had gotten a really good look at the men in the company as they passed through the platoon's position. He could see the strain and fatigue on their faces. Although it was only around three in the afternoon and they had been on the move since noon, the heat and the jungle were exacting their toll. Now the company was moving out of the cover of the jungle during the hottest part of the day. Lou had already used up one canteen of water on the trip down the mountain. He knew he would have to ration his water for the rest of the day. Especially out in the tropical sun.

The land opened out in front of him. From above, the plain had looked flat, but now Lou could see that it consisted of gently undulating hills covered with straw grass that was about waist high. Here and there, scattered green bushes stood up, some about shoulder high. Upon moving out into the open, Third Platoon had deployed from a column of march into a double squad abreast on line formation. The platoon moved forward along a front over a hundred yards long. The point man, PFC Juarez, was a good fifty yards ahead of the rest of the company. Flankers were placed out on either side of the company. The distances between squads and platoons lengthened considerably. Just like in training. This would prevent an enemy from focusing any mortar fire on one particular group should they choose to attack. As Second

Platoon passed, Lou's squad gave them distance and then moved out after them. Since Lou was now in the middle of the company, he opened the breech of his grenade launcher while leaving the shell in place. This way there was no chance of accidental discharge. Once in the open, he put a high explosive round in the chamber since it would be very effective in the open area they were moving through.

They had only been moving for about ten minutes when the shots rang out. First a group of about six in rapid succession. Then a burst of three that had a darker bark than the previous shots. Then suddenly a paroxysm of fire. Lou recognized the first shots as having come from an M-16. The second burst must have been an enemy AK-47. After that, the primary sound was the M-16 with an occasional note from one of the company's M-60 machineguns. Lou was flat before the first burst had stopped. He faced outward, quickly switching again to a shotgun round. The grass was above his eyes, and his eyesight was limited to about six inches in this position. Still he kept his head down, using his ears to tell him exactly what was happening. Within seconds the firing was over, followed by a dead silence that lasted only seconds but seemed much longer as both Lou and the rest of the world took a deep breath. Suddenly a voice yelled: "We got three of them suckers. Hold your fire. Don't shoot. We got three of them. They're dead. Don't shoot." Some madman yelling and yelling. At least the voice was speaking English. Lou wondered what the hell he would do if it was speaking Vietnamese. He slowly raised up. First to his knees and then finally standing. The men around him did the same thing. He could see some men heading off to the right where the shots had come from. Lou turned to his right and began scanning the area. The other men were doing the same. Lou didn't know what was happening, but whatever it was, he would know soon enough. His job was to make sure nothing came up on him without being noticed. No one in his platoon had fired. The sound had come from far enough off to his right for him to know that it had probably been one of the men pulling flank who had tripped the firefight. The M-16 firing first meant one of the guys was quicker than the enemy and had initiated the contact. There were no cries for medics.

Within a short time, orders were issued and the men began to move. Third Platoon continued its march into the village. The other three platoons set up a perimeter on a small

knoll and were ordered to begin digging in. Overhead, three helicopters appeared and began circling the area. Lou lowered his pack to the ground next to Big John's. He unpacked his entrenching tool and began breaking up the ground in preparation of digging a foxhole. Once through the root system of the grass, the ground was moist and easy to move. The sun was out in full force, and the day was hot. Lou didn't bother guessing the temperature. Like everything else in an infantryman's life, the heat was just something that had to be accepted and dealt with. Within minutes, he and Big John were sweating profusely and panting with exertion. Lou had taken off his glasses and put them in a pouch on his rucksack to protect them. It didn't do any good to try to wear them when he was sweating as much as he was. After twenty minutes the hole was waste deep. Big John had gotten out of the hole to give Lou room to work. They would switch off periodically with one on guard and one digging. It was simply too hot, and each needed periodic breathers. Lou kept up a steady rhythm while working. At the pace he worked, he knew he could go for an hour without having to stop. All the time he had spent out in the fields during his youth had given him the mindset necessary to perform manual labor under these conditions. A lot of the guys in the platoon weren't used to it and would have to learn how to handle the work.

"Afternoon men," Cpt. Pickett called as he approached their position. Lt. Burroughs, First Sgt. Turner, Sgt. Harris and Sgt. Wilson were all following closely behind. They were walking the perimeter, making sure all the positions were properly situated. Lou had been concentrating so hard at digging he had not noticed their approach. He quickly got to his feet, only at the last second remembering not to salute.

"Afternoon, Sir," Big John replied.

The captain jumped down into the foxhole with Lou and looked around. "Whose position is that to your right?" the captain asked.

"Privates Harris and Wills, Sir," Lou answered immediately.

"And whose position is on your left?" he asked.

"Private Baker and Spec. Four Willis, Sir," Lou replied.

"What kinds of weapons do they have?" the captain asked.

"They both have M-16 rifles and hand grenades, Sir," Lou replied.

The questions went on for several minutes. Lou had an answer for everything. His life depended on that. The questions were ones that he knew would be asked by a good officer, to ensure the integrity of the perimeter.

"I want to compliment you on the way you performed today, Lou." Lou was surprised that the captain chose to use his first name. Something new again. "You were right about our position. I don't recall us moving over the ridge, and after a while I was beginning to question myself for having allowed you to guide us. I'm glad you were smart enough to use your own judgment on that last little move down the mountain. I've talked the situation over with First Sgt. Turner and Sgt. Harris. They know from Sgt. Wilson and Lt. Burroughs that you have a knack for navigation. We have decided to issue you a separate map so that you can keep track of the company's movement. You up to that responsibility?"

"Yes, Sir. If it's alright with Lieutenant B. and Sgt. Harris I'll be happy to give it a stab." Hell, it would be fun, as far as Lou was concerned. One more man to join in the daily arguments. Not only that, but Lou would get to argue with his superiors.

"Very good," the captain replied, and then he was off to the next position.

Sgt. Wilson sat next to where Big John was standing. Lou got out of the foxhole and moved over next to him. Big John jumped down in the bunker and began attacking the bottom of the hole. At the rate he went at it, Lou knew he would be relieving him in about ten minutes. Lou lit up a cigarette.

"Great job today, Lou," Sgt. Wilson said. "Captain Pickett's a good officer. Willing to admit his mistakes. I've known enough asshole officers to appreciate a good one when he comes along. Lieutenant. Burroughs is learning too. Keeps his mouth shut and listens to Sergeant Harris. They were both quick to support the captain's idea about you having a map. I don't want you to get any kind of complex about this though. You keep track just like the captain said. We have a problem, and I'll talk it over with you. I'll pass the information along to the higher-ups if necessary. Much more efficient that way. And don't worry. I'll make sure you get the credit when you help out."

"No sweat," Lou replied. He knew Sgt. Wilson well enough to know what he was doing, placing himself between the Lou and the others. That is, he was protecting Lou. If Lou was

wrong, Sgt. Wilson would take the blame himself. He was that kind of righteous guy. You had to love him. He was what being a professional soldier was about. A no bullshit, in your face kind of guy. Someone you could count on in a firefight, a fist fight, or a shouting match. It was why Lou wanted to become a non-commissioned officer more than a regular officer. First Sgt. Turner, Platoon Sgt. Harris, and Sgt. Wilson were all cut from the same material. Lou was hoping to one day measure up to their standards.

"Listen up, Big," the sarge said, getting both their attention. "Let me tell you what happened earlier. PFC Kincaid was out pulling flank for Fourth Platoon. Just walking along minding his own business. According to him, his biggest concern was not losing contact with the rest of the company. Suddenly he spotted someone walking right toward him. He didn't know what to do, so he just sort of froze. Evidently, the lead man in the incoming group had his head down and was almost on top of Kincaid when he finally saw him. By then it was too late. Kincaid got a burst into the man's chest before he could do anything. The guy managed to squeeze the trigger on his AK before hitting the ground dead. Scared ten years off Kincaid. The guys following behind their lead man had their weapons slung. Kincaid just kept shooting until his magazine gave out. By then a couple of guys from his squad had moved over in support including the platoon's machine-gunner, and they proceeded to hose down the area just for general principles. Kincaid says he thinks there were only the three of them. They evidently didn't know we were moving through the area. I guess the lesson is to keep your head up out there on flank. We got three dead gooks that must have been day dreaming and got themselves killed. They're laid out on the ground back there by the command center. I want you guys to go over and take a look. I'll watch your post for you."

"Uh. No, thanks, Sarge," Lou said.

"Yeah. I'll pass to if it's okay with you, Sarge," Big John chimed in.

"Not an option, guys," Sgt. Wilson replied, pointing in the direction of the command post.

From his tone of voice, Lou knew Sgt. Wilson was serious. No sense arguing. They picked up their weapons and headed for the command center.

When they got there Lt. Glenn from Third Platoon was conducting the tour. It consisted entirely of him pointing at the three bodies lying side by side on the ground. Lou had thought of not looking, just pretending to. He knew the reason for this particular exercise. Until now all the training had been mere shadow boxing. No one got hurt. Here was proof that the games were over. Here was the end product of all the training they had gone through. Here also was the end product of all the training the enemy had gone through. So rather than averting his eyes, Lou took a long hard look at the bodies.

Two of the men were quite young. Late teens or early twenties. About the same age as the men in the company. The third one was quite a bit older, maybe forty. They had all been stripped down to their underwear. The two younger ones had their weapons lying by their sides. Lou recognized the AK-47. It was the main weapon used by the communist forces throughout the world. It was famous for its durability and reliability. He would have liked to give it a try, but now was probably not the best time to ask. The small amount of damage that had been done by the M-16 rounds entering the body was surprising. Just a series of small holes in the torso of each of the men. No head wounds. There was also only a minimal amount of blood present. Lou knew the bodies had been moved, but still he had expected more blood and at least one head wound.

An M-14 would have done much more damage to the bodies. A round from one of those would put a real hole in a man. Its advantage was in accuracy and stopping power, whereas the M-16 fired a round that was considered to be of use in the hunting of small prey, such as squirrels and rabbits. The difference was the velocity with which each bullet hit. From what he had learned in his physics classes, Lou knew that force was the product of mass and velocity. What an M-16 bullet lacked in mass, it made up for with velocity. The shock of the bullet hitting at the speed of an M-16 round was much more devastating than the hole punched out by the M-14 round. Lou knew that inside these men were organs turned to mush from the concussive forces of the bullets. Some of the bony structures would be pulverized. Lou had absolutely no desire to get shot, but if he had to choose being shot by an M-14 round or an M-16 round, he would choose the M-14.

Lou looked away from the bodies. A few yards away sat Scott Kincaid. Next to him sat Sgt. Bowles, the platoon sergeant for Third Platoon. The sarge had his arm around Scott's shoulders and was talking earnestly to him. Scott Kincaid was a poor kid from El Paso, Texas. Normally he was really quiet, but he was also capable of producing a rebel yell fit to raise the dead in the midst of a fight. Some mental affliction probably. Lou had heard it first one night when Kincaid's platoon participated in a mock attack against Lou's platoon. Scared the shit out of him, coming out of the dark with no warning. Now he sat there talking quietly to Sgt. Bowles. Lou wondered how he was feeling right now. Scared, proud, depressed, boastful, mellow, angry. Lou knew there was no way to know, unless Scott told him. Probably a mixture of all of that. Lou did not try to assign his own feelings to Scott. It was one thing that being in the military had taught him. Each man was different.

Lou looked down at the bodies on the ground. The sight made him feel sad. He wondered what they had been like in life. Lou was a tolerant person who tended to accept human differences as one of the better ideas God had come up with.

Lou would have been more comfortable getting to know these people, sitting around a fire and talking. Well, too bad, but that just wasn't going to happen. He did not know if he would have done as good as Scott did, but he had no doubt that he would have tried. The company was operating in a free fire zone. Everyone out here was a target, including Lou. Sorry guys. I hope you've found heaven, but better you than me, Lou thought. Then he heard the sound of someone retching and turned his head toward the sound. Big John was down on his hands and knees throwing up. Lou walked over to him and squatted.

"You alright, big guy?" he asked.

"No."

"Can you walk?"

"Yeah," Big replied.

"Come with me," Lou said, reaching out and touching him on the shoulder. Big John got up and followed Lou back to their position. Sgt. Wilson saw them coming. He got to his feet, waved, and moved off to the next position down the line. Lou had Big John sit and handed him one of his canteens. Without a word, Lou jumped down into the foxhole and began digging. He



worked steady for about twenty minutes without a word exchanged by either men. It was a time for contemplation for both men. Lou had to assimilate what had happened and his feelings toward it. The physical labor of digging the foxhole had a calming effect on him.

"Sorry," Big said.

"Why?" Lou replied.

"For reacting the way I did back there." John sat there with his head down. "I'd never seen a body before. I was all right there for a couple of minutes, and the next thing I knew I was down on all fours."

"It's okay, Big John. I was sort of queasy back there myself. What you did I wanted to do. Just didn't have the guts to do it. After the trip over here, I have a real aversion to puking. I need a large body of water present before I'll even consider it," Lou said.

Big John raised his head. He had a weak smile on his face.

"Fish all over the Pacific stay clear of our ships now thanks to you, Lou," Big John said. "You and Donovan."

Yeah. Donovan, Lou thought. Lou was glad he did not have to see Donovan's body earlier in the day. Donovan and those other two guys killed last night.

Those other two guys, Lou thought. He could not think of their names. He suddenly realized that he had not thought of those guys all day. If it had happened on a training exercise back in the States, he probably would have been thinking and talking about them all day. It had only happened this morning, and yet no one had said a word about it all day. Of course, he had been out on point, but still Lou thought it strange that he had not even thought about it.

"What were the names of the other two guys who were killed along with Donovan?" Lou asked Big John. He knew John would know. Being a social animal, Big John considered it a crime not to be able to come up with the proper name. Lou stood there, looking at John. He could see John was struggling with the answer.

"Peters and Weilman," he blurted out. "Yeah, Peters and Weilman." Lou saw a look of relief cross Big John's face.

The thunder came from the west. Lou's eyes and probably the eyes of every man in the area looked in that direction. Lou could see the cliff they had spent the night atop. He

recognized the sound of the artillery beginning a fire mission. It was several seconds before he heard the sound of the shells' explosions drift up from somewhere to the south, where they had landed in some valley off in the nearby hills. From there, the volume of thunder rolling off the nearby hilltop increased dramatically. The fire mission lasted for almost an hour. During that time, Lou and Big John had managed to complete the foxhole, get something to eat, and stamp down a small area of grass in front of their position. The constant fire reminded the men that there was a large enemy force operating in the area. This motivated them to dig deeply.

The fire mission had stopped, and the sound was beginning to echo away when deeper thunder rolled up from the hills to the south. Lou's eyes scanned the sky for the aircraft that would be necessary to deliver ordnance of that size. He thought he caught a glimpse of reflected sunlight at one point but was never sure. This noise too lasted for quite a while. Whatever had attracted attention into that area surely included some unhappy campers on the ground. Lou was glad that the enemy didn't possess the firepower that was being used against them.

Lou and Big John were satisfied with the job they had done on the foxhole and were leaning back taking it easy when Sgt. Wilson came around. It was almost 1800 hours. He squatted down next to them.

"Bravo Company tangled with some NVA south of here," he said. "They sustained light casualties while using the artillery and aircraft to inflict some heavy casualties on Charlie. The gooks broke contact and are believed to be heading in our direction. The captain isn't pleased with our position. Too exposed out here. He has convinced the colonel to allow the company to move into a wooded area past the village about 400 yards. We are going to wait until dusk before making the move. Have all your gear packed, and be ready to move in an instant's notice. Make sure everything is secure. I don't want any unnecessary noise as we withdraw from the area. Any questions?"

"They bringing water in for us?" Big John asked.

"No. Too much shit is happening in the area and there isn't a copter available. They'll get some to us in the morning," Sgt. Wilson replied. "Any other questions?" There were none, and he moved on to the next position.

"Motherfucker. No fucking water. They promised us water, and now they aren't bringing us any. Goddamn it, Lou, it isn't fair," Big John bitched.

"How much water you got, Big John?" Lou asked.

"None. Hell, Lou, I practically drank all of the water out of the canteen you gave me," John said despondently.

"Well, not to worry, Camel Boy," Lou said with a smile on his face. "I still have a full canteen, and I will gladly give you half. Of course there is a price."

"How much."

"Let me think for a minute," Lou said as he cast around in his mind for an appropriate charge. "I know. Next time we get Cs, you have to take one of my Ham and Motherfuckers and give me a Beans and Weenies." The look on Big John's face made Lou break out laughing. Then Big John started laughing along with him.

"Deal," he said.

Hare walked over from his position as this exchange was going on.

"You guys got any water?" he asked. This got Big John laughing even harder.

"Ham!" Lou gasped with tears running down his face.

"Motherfuckers!" John giggled.

"Beans!" Lou said, laying on the ground and holding his sides.

"Weenies!" Big said, laughing. The look on Hare's face got them laughing even harder. He didn't know what to make of these two goofy white boys, but then he started laughing at them. It was contagious. Meanwhile Ben had drifted over.

"Hey, Hare. What you laughing at? Do they or ain't they got water?" he asked, shaking his head at the sorry display taking place before his eyes.

"For a price," Lou said. By now, Big John was getting himself under control.

"How much?" Ben asked cautiously.

"Weenies!" Lou replied. John started into laughing again.

"Motherfuckers!" he howled.

"Beans" Hare laughed, getting the drift of the conversation.

All three continued laughing for a few more minutes. Probably a sort of hysterical reaction to the events of the day, but boy, did it feel good. Slowly Lou caught his breath and sat up.

"How much?" Ben asked again.

"Nothing, Ben," Lou said. He was smiling. I and John have one full canteen between us. We'll share."

"Thanks, man. I and Hare just drank the last of ours 'fore Sgt. Wilson came by. You think it's enough?"

"It'll have to be, Blood," Lou said, using Ben's favorite nomenclature..

"I have some Ham and Beans if you want to trade," Ben said.

Lou looked at him and suddenly a light went off in his head. "You like those?" he asked.

"Yeah," Ben answered.

"I'll tell you what, Ben. I'll give you mine in trade for any other meal anytime you want," Lou said.

"Deal!" Ben said.

Free enterprise on the battlefield: What a great system.

Lou and Big John got their stuff squared away. Both had cleaned their weapons. It was heading toward night with the sun already hidden behind the mountain and the fire support base located atop. Lou leaned back against his rucksack to smoke a cigarette, and suddenly he became aware of an unpleasant pressure inside his abdomen. He jumped up and looked around. During the day he had noticed several of the men grab their weapons and head into the bush in a rather hurried manner. Lou now understood what the motivation had been. With bowels ready to burst, he needed to find a place to unload quickly. Instead of heading into the bush, he jumped down into the foxhole, dropped his drawers and let loose. It was a veritable explosion of organic matter mixed with all the valuable fluid accumulated in the body and propelled by odious and copious amounts of noxious gas. Shit!, his mind registered, at the same instant his intestines went into spastic cramps.

His eyes watered and his knees went weak in the process. The next fifteen minutes was a very gut-wrenching experience for Lou. About the only good thing to be said about it was

that at least the bunker was a safe place to take care of business. Lou could only hope that the company commander did not change his mind about moving. Lou had Bill bring him some toilet paper from his sack. He wondered what Charlie used out in the bush. As he was climbing out of the foxhole his guts cramped again. After several attempts and another half hour, he finally made it out. His body had exhausted itself of any excessive water and waste. Bill, who had moved upwind of the foxhole, walked over and without a word began using his entrenching tool to throw dirt over the mess at the bottom. This maneuver quickly shut off the smell emitting from the hole. Lou lay on the ground smoking another cigarette. His mouth was exceedingly dry, and his body felt weak. He knew it would be dusk in another twenty minutes.

"Goddamn, Big," Lou spoke. "I hope that doesn't happen while we're on the move."

"You okay?" Big asked.

"Yeah".

"Sick?" Big asked.

"Nah."

Lou finished his cigarette. He thought of drinking some water then had a better idea. He quickly found a tin can of sliced peaches and another of sliced pears. These he opened and ate quickly. Time was getting short. Both tins had the fruit packed in juice that helped quench his thirst while the food replaced the calories he had lost.

He had just finished when men started to move single file past their foxhole. They moved silently, and Lou could hear them breathing heavily as they moved. He and Big John quickly got their equipment ready. Then the voice of Sgt. Wilson was whispering for them to move out. The day was deeply into dusk, and the men in front of them were barely visible. Lou let Big John move off first, figuring it would be hard to lose track of the lumbering giant who was his best friend. Within minutes Lou was drenched in sweat and breathing heavily. His legs were heavy. He had not recovered from the march of the day or from the diarrhea. Still he kept his head up and had his eyes scanning the environment. The company was moving ahead at a good clip considering the time of day. As it moved, so did the night, and soon it was as dark as it would get. Lou's eyes adjusted. There was no moon out, but the stars blanketed the sky. They were so plentiful and bright that Lou was amazed. Since there were no artificial lights

anywhere, their luminance was unperturbed. Of course growing up in the country, Lou had seen them like this before, but it had been too long. They brought with them a feeling of good times and an exuberance of lost childhood. Louis had learned not to fear the night and to love it.

They reached the island of trees and brush where the captain had chosen to set up the company's perimeter for the night. Although not high ground, it offered good protection and much better fields of fire for the men. The men were paired off, Lou sharing his position with Big John, and told to move about a yard into the wood line and to choose the best defensive position they could find in the dark. There was to be no digging, and they were to remain as stealthy as possible. Hopefully the enemy had not been able to pick up the company's move. Because the grove of trees was not too large, the distance between positions was only about ten yards. Lou had been careful to observe where the men on either side of them entered the tree line. Lou found a position beside a large tree. By laying his rucksack on its side, he made good protection on his front. He could easily roll behind the tree for protection should the need arise. The ground he lay on was slightly damp but not really bad. He worked his poncho out of the rucksack and laid it on the ground beneath him. He carefully checked out his lines of sight and made sure he had both high explosive and shotgun rounds readily available for his M-79. After that he got out his canteen and took a couple of small sips. Big lay about four feet from him and began getting himself settled.

"You need some water?" Lou asked.

"Do dogs shit on the sidewalk?" Big John asked. Lou passed him the canteen. He was tempted to tell him to go easy on the water, but decided Big John would have to decide on his own what was fair. When Big handed it back, Lou had to wonder if he had taken any of it. It was still relatively full. The next problem was getting the canteen to Hare and Ben. Luckily their position was closest to where Lou laid. Although he could not see them, he could hear them settling in. It was too far away for Lou to call to them, so the only solution was to move in their direction. Lou took his time. Moving very slowly and using his hands to find his way, he moved silently toward their position. Although not as dark as last night, here inside the wood

line, visibility was measured in inches. Lou would move a ways and then stop and listen. Each time he could hear enough noise to fix their position before moving on.

Finally he was close enough to hear Ben whisper to Hare, "You think I should try and go get some water?"

"No," replied Hare. "Just be patient. Lou will come to us."

"You sure."

"Yeah," Hare replied.

Lou smiled at the exchange. It felt good to have Hare trust him like that. Lou knew he could probably close the distance even more before they became aware of his presence, but he didn't want to scare them or get shot.

"Whiskey," Lou whispered. There was complete silence. As time passed without a reply, Lou began to get nervous. "Whiskey," he whispered again, just a little louder. Another pause before he heard Ben whisper, "Who's there!"

"Lou," he replied as he began to crawl forward again.

"Over here," Ben whispered needlessly.

Soon all three of them had worked their way into a position where their heads were close together. They could whisper and be heard easily. "Whiskey is the password asshole," Lou said. "Who's there? is not the proper countersign. I could have shot you if I hadn't guessed who it was." Lou was smiling as he said this. Of course neither Ben nor Hare could see this.

"Well I forgot," Ben replied.

"Me too," Hare said.

"I thought you guys might be thirsty," Lou said, handing over the canteen to Ben.

"Thanks a lot, man. I'm dying."

"It's about 2130 hours," Lou said without looking at his watch. "You guys keep it, and I'll be back around three."

"Wait a minute," Hare replied and then moved away from them. Ben had unscrewed the top and Lou could hear him taking a series of sips from the canteen. Hare returned a couple of minutes later. "Here. Take this," he said extending his hand. Lou took the object from Hare's hand and immediately recognized it. All the men carried fishing line rolled up on

something, sometimes the actual roll or sometimes a stick as was the case here. They used it to string trip wires for their flares and sometime their hand grenades when setting booby traps.

"Tie that around this bush," Hare said, indicating a plant next to Lou. "When you want the canteen back just pull on the string to signal us. We'll tie the canteen on the end, and you can pull it over."

"Good idea, Hare," Lou replied, while tying one end around the bush. "The only problem is there's a lot of stuff on the ground between our positions, and the canteen would get hung up. I'll use the string though as a guide back here later. I'll give three tugs to let you guys know when I'm coming. Let me get a sip now. I need to get back to Big."

Lou took a small sip of water, noticing that Ben had actually taken very little water from the canteen even over several sips. Lou handed it back to Ben. He slowly backed away from the other two men, turned himself around, and moved back toward his position. He unwound the fishing line as he moved quietly back toward his position, keeping it taut so it would not snag. It was easier finding his way back, and within minutes he judged himself close enough to whisper "Whiskey."

"Romeo," came the reply almost instantly. Good for Big, Lou thought. The man was awake and he remembered the passwords. Lou moved back to his position and wrapped the end of the line around the frame of the rucksack. He felt around in one of the pockets of the rucksack and found some hard candy he had stored there. He popped one in his mouth and began sucking it. It would keep his saliva going and keep him from getting too thirsty. He rolled on his belly and got himself comfortable. He wanted a cigarette but decided to forego that particular pleasure for the time being. Lou glanced to his front and could barely make out the deserted village they had passed through on the way to this position. It was a good 100 yards away across an open field that Louis suspected was an abandoned rice paddy. What he actually saw was a darkened silhouette of where the village should be.

As he lay there, he could periodically hear sounds of other humans in the area. Nothing too overt. Once in a while he would get a whiff of a cigarette. Mostly the men in the company were doing a good job of staying quiet and not giving their position away. The night was beginning to cool down some. Lou was thankful for that. The sounds of the night were coming



alive. That was good. Except for the mosquitoes. He could hear them buzzing around, sometimes very close to his ear. Lou's body was completely covered except for his face and hands. He reached into his rucksack and got out some insect repellent. It came in a little plastic container. Strangely enough, until now, Lou had not used it. It had been issued to the men prior to them leaving the base at An Khe. Of course the night previous, mosquitoes had not been a problem. Lou squeezed some repellent into his right hand. He rubbed his hands together. The mixture was oily and slick. It gave off a faint but distinctive smell. Lou then closed his eyes and rubbed his hands across his face, leaving a fine residue of oil behind. When he opened his eyes, they stung slightly from the liquid's fumes. Lou extended the towel he had draped around his neck to drape down over his face, leaving only the eyes and nose exposed. This reduced the noise of the mosquitoes around his ears which was the source of irritation.

Lou looked at his watch. "2200 hours," Big whispered to him. The guy must be psychic, Lou thought. "You first."

"Okay," Lou replied. Lou knew that Big John had just given him permission to get a couple hours shuteye. John would wake him at midnight for his turn at watch. Lou did not bother telling John about his need to make the trip back to the other position for water. He had a choice of either telling John later or putting off his trip till 0400 hours when he would be pulling his second watch. There was plenty of time to decide that later. Now was the time to get some shuteye. He closed his eyes and couldn't sleep. He could not deny, even to himself, the uneasiness he felt at the company's current condition. They were lying in a wood line in enemy territory with a large and hostile force operating in the area. Yet, Lou was exhausted from the past thirty-six hours. Except for a couple hours last night, he hadn't gotten any sleep.

Although not a religious man in the strictest sense of the word, Lou had retained his belief in God. His Catholic upbringing was strong enough to instill good moral values, and now he turned to his beliefs to find comfort. A prayer was in order. Not a traditional prayer, but something that would suit the situation. Lou was hesitant about asking God to protect him, for that would mean asking the Supreme Being to choose sides in a conflict he had not instigated. He would not pray against his enemy nor ask for God's protection against his enemy. Lou had promised himself long ago not to turn to God for help during times when he became scared.

Promising the Lord to live the good life in exchange for his protection was a moral weakness. Lou had vowed never to do that, and he had no intention of starting now. Suddenly it came to him: There was a chance that if he went to sleep, he might never wake up. Lord, may I wake up at your side. Having thought these comforting words, Lou felt a sense of relief. He closed his eyes and slept.

Lou woke up. He looked at his watch. 2358 hours. "Whiskey," he whispered to the night. "Romeo," the night whispered back. "Midnight," Lou whispered. There was no reply. Big John would now get a chance to sleep for a couple hours. Lou scanned the area with his eyes and ears. There was little to see, and other than the normal night sounds, little to hear. It was hard to believe that there were almost two hundred men lying in the woods around him. Sort of spooky in fact. During training, the company was rarely able to lie down for more than five minutes without someone making discernible noises. Now, nothing. Perhaps it was fear. Lou doubted that. He himself was apprehensive, but not fearful. He felt his body, and it was relaxed, while his mind felt alert. Other than being really thirsty, his body was making no particular demands. He was slightly hungry and really thirsty. He quickly retrieved a piece of candy and began sucking on it. At first it was like sucking a rock. After a while, his body managed to produce some saliva, and his thirst began a slow retreat. He spent his time reviewing the events of the day. What had gone right and what had gone wrong. Before long, his watch was done, and he again said his prayer and slept.

He was wide awake with the first shot. He snapped his weapon into firing position while his eyes scanned the field for a target. The first shot had been followed by a veritable hurricane of gunfire and explosions. They were distant noises, out beyond the deserted village. The fucking gooks were attacking the company's old position. Boy are they going to be pissed, Lou thought. It won't take them long to figure out what happened, and then they are going to come looking for us. That was a rather unpleasant thought. Just then the village began to blow up in cascades and bright flashes of light that suddenly blinded Lou. This was followed a second later by a wall of thunder that slammed into the woods with a physical force felt in every cell in Lou's body. And now Lou was behind the big tree, waiting for his life to end. Fuck. Now he was scared. His heart was racing, his hands shaking and his breathing rapid. He had his weapon in a

death grip. The thunder and light show went on for several minutes before he worked up the courage to look again in the direction of the village. Luckily the enemy hadn't used that period to attack the wood line. Lou berated himself for being chickenshit. At the same time, he was glad his instinct for self preservation had acted so quickly.

The ground was still shaking, but the light and thunder were moving west toward the woods the company had left behind earlier in the day. Suddenly the sky was bright with the light of first one flare and then several. Lou could see that the field in front of his position was empty. The whole valley was lit up as bright as day. Lou spotted a flashing light in the sky off to the north. Some kind of slow flying aircraft. Suddenly there were a couple of even brighter flashes, followed by a deeper, more ominous thunder. The ground shook under Lou. And then fire leapt into the sky in a long line across Lou's vision. One-thousand-pound bombs and napalm. And suddenly Lou felt a great sadness come over him. Any destruction that might come about from the weapon in his hands paled beside that which was taking place in the fields and woods out beyond the deserted village. Yesterday he had seen what could happen by one round from an M-79 grenade launcher. His mind could not conceive of what was happening from the explosions now taking place. Those poor bastards, Lou thought.

Lou had no illusions about his job. He was trained to kill the enemy. That was his job, and he would do it. As an infantryman, his battles would be fought up close and personal. His chances of survival were both slim and none. He could accept that, but he had trouble accepting what was going on in front of him. The artillerymen and flyers were killers too, but their war was impersonal and cold blooded. Their job was to kill everything. It was sad. Lou knew it wasn't a healthy way to look at what was happening. After all, the men being pounded into dog meat were his enemy. They tried to attack his company and would have succeeded if the old man hadn't done what he had. Yet Lou could not easily accept that as part of the game. Lou knew the enemy had mortars and would not hesitate to use them against him and his friends. Someday he would be as exposed as the enemy was this night, and yet, somehow, he felt closer to the enemy on this night than the men chucking the shells and bombs. The barrage lasted for over an hour and did not cease entirely even then. The artillery kept flares drifting

over the area and periodically dropped high explosives into the jungle. It was getting on toward 0400 hours and Lou saw Ben working his way toward his position.

"Got your water, Blood," he said with a big smile on his face. "Would have come sooner, but I was waiting to see if those artillery guys were going to take some practice shots on our ass."

"I know what you mean, man. Seems like we picked the wrong neighborhood to set up camp," Lou replied.

"Got my wire?" Ben asked. Lou unwound the fish line from around his rucksack and handed it to Ben.

"Thanks for the water. Couldn't have made it without. See you in the morning," Ben said. He turned and began crawling back to his position.

"Water," Lou said crawling over to Big. He handed him the canteen.

"You first," Big said. Lou unscrewed the top and took a sip. The canteen was still one third full. Ben and Hare had used good discipline in leaving so much for Lou and Big. Lou felt good about that. He and Big took turns taking sips. It was not enough to quench either man's thirst but it did take the edge off. They both stopped drinking while there was still some water left. Lou was glad. Just knowing there was some left eased his mind.

There was no sense trying to get any more sleep. Lou reached into his rucksack and got out a can of fruit. He opened it and had a morning snack. With the flares continuing to float overhead, he saw no reason not to have a cigarette. He rolled over on his back and lit up. With Big John continuing to survey the ground out in front of their position, Lou could just relax and smoke. He wondered what the company would find out there in the field in the morning. Lou was not looking forward to that. He had no desire to view the carnage, and the thought of it almost made him physically sick. He knew he would do whatever was required. Lou began the process of toughening his mind to the task ahead.

Dawn came earlier than the day before because of the lack of clouds. As soon as sunlight hit the top of the mountains off to the West, Lou stood up. His whole body ached as he began to stretch and work the kinks out of the muscles. Lou had felt this way after a strenuous day of training before, but yesterday had just been merely a routine work day in the

field. Big John suddenly headed a little deeper into the woods. Lou could guess what that was about. He was thankful that his bowel had not given him any problems during the night. He decided to make some coffee, but then remembered he didn't have any water.

Sgt. Wilson came by a minute later. "Got any water?" he asked. Lou handed him the canteen that had maybe three or four swallows left in it. Sgt. Wilson took a couple of sips and then handed it back. "I've been dreaming of that for the last four hours," he said. "Choppers are on the way in with water right now. They should be here in about five minutes. They're going to be landing on the other side of the perimeter. You and Hare go over there and hump back about four jugs apiece for the squad. Everyone's to fill up their canteens and be ready to move out right after that. Things are going to be moving fast this morning." He moved off. Lou quickly packed all his gear and gathered up Hare on his way to the LZ. They had just arrived when two Hueys landed carrying water in two gallon jugs. Lou and Hare picked up four apiece and moved back to the squad's area on the other side of the perimeter. The squad gathered in the woods and everyone began filling canteens. Once all the canteens were filled, they began drinking out of jugs, taking big gulps and passing the jug along to the next guy. God that water tasted good. Lou suddenly noticed that Chuck Johns was missing from the group.

"Where's Chuck?" he asked.

"Medics tagged him. Probably taking off with the choppers for a trip to the hospital," Sgt. Taylor said. "I shared my position with him last night. Around midnight he complained that the mosquitoes were eating him alive. Didn't make a big deal out of it or anything. After a while I heard him breathing sort of heavy like. I crawled over to him and asked if he was alright. He said he was but his voice was funny. I let it go for a while. Then the flares went off and I could see his face. It was swollen up like a pumpkin. You could see his eyes they were so swelled up. I crawled back to the CP and got a medic. Reilly had to give him a shot of epinephrine or something. Said it was a real bad reaction to the mosquito bites. Said Chuck would have to go to the hospital this morning and would probably not be allowed back in the field. Guy's allergic to mosquitoes," Sgt. Taylor said shaking his head.

"I'm allergic to mosquitoes too, Sarge," Private Baker said.

"Me too," Ben said.

"I'm allergic to loud noises and bright lights," Spec. Four Willis added. The whole group chorused such variations. They suddenly picked up on the sound of a helicopter approaching and moved over toward the edge of the wood line, not forgetting to haul a couple jugs of water with them to pass around. Two Huey gunships passed overhead and shortly thereafter began hitting targets on the other side of the deserted village. This was followed minutes later by a large armada of helicopters heading in for a landing in the fields beyond the village. Lou had never seen so many choppers together at one time. Not only Hueys, but also the larger Chinooks. They swarmed over the field then set down out of sight of Lou's company. When one swarm would lift off and leave, another swarm would appear. Lou could only guess at the size of the force being inserted. The noise of the copters passing over head was impressive.

"Okay, boys," Sgt. Wilson called. "Over here." The squad quickly gathered around. "That's Fourth Infantry Division landing a couple battalions over there. They're dumping another couple of battalions north of here. Going to sweep the area for survivors from last night's action. Captain says to pass on to you guys a congratulations for the way everyone handled the move last night. Also for the fire discipline everyone showed when things got a little hairy.

"Everyone here know what happened to Johns last night?" There were bobbing heads abound to the question. "He got on with the helicopters and is on his way to the hospital. Medics think he'll be fine, just won't be allowed back into the field. Damn shame to lose a man that way.

"Be ready to move out in about fifteen minutes. Choppers will be here in about twenty. They're going to land right there, in front of our position," the sarge said, pointing. "Three lifts of ten ships each. We'll be first out." He then began assigning groups for each of the choppers. "Everyone get ready to move out onto the LZ. I want each man to strap a water container on his sack. Don't leave anything behind for Charlie to use. Let's go." The squad quickly moved over to their equipment and prepared to move out. Lou took one of the water containers and collapsed it down to the smallest size possible and lashed it tight to his rucksack. He fastened the three full canteens to his webbing and quickly moved over to the assembly point for the squad.

"Lou, lead off," Sgt. Wilson said, pointing toward a mark at the south side of the open field. Lou quickly stepped off in that direction. Within minutes the squad had reached its designated area for pick up and was dispersed in a defensive pattern awaiting the arrival of the helicopters. Lou wondered where they were heading. Sgt. Wilson had not said, so he probably had not been completely briefed himself. Lou was glad that they were leaving the area and that the Fourth Infantry was policing the field beyond the deserted village. The activity over there was still going on with helicopters shuttling in and out of the area. Too bad Charlie, he thought.

Lou was sorry for Chuck Johns. He and Chuck were good friends and had spent much time together. They had traveled home together on their last leave prior to leaving the states. They both lived in St. Louis and had attended the same high school. Lou had graduated in 1964, two years before Chuck, and they hadn't known each other while in school. It was strange that they would wind up in the same squad together and become friends. Lou knew Chuck would be disappointed. He hadn't volunteered for all the training and bullshit that went with it to be pulled out of the field on the first day because of mosquito bites. Lou wondered how come the mosquitoes in North Carolina hadn't bothered Chuck. Vietnamese mosquitoes probably considered Americans good food.

Lou had kept a close eye out while lying there. He immediately noticed when Sgt. Wilson signaled the squad to get ready. Looking over his shoulder, Lou could see the copters approaching the LZ. He would be loaded on the first one in. They were landing in groups of five. As the first copters flared their approach in preparation for touchdown, Lou and the other men from the squad approached the helicopter, three from each side. The second the skids hit the ground, they began climbing aboard. Lou was the last one in on his side, so he got to sit in the door with his legs hanging over the side. He grabbed tight to the side of the airframe as the helicopter rose up. Once at altitude the pilot put the nose down and began to gather speed. Lou was ready when the copter shot up into the air. It banked toward Lou side, but he was ready for it and had a firm hold. The pilot climbed and headed into the mountains to the North. Lou was not able to see the field beyond the deserted village as the copter departed the area. They of course had to avoid all the air traffic that was taking place as the Fourth Infantry

Division moved into that area. It would be up to his imagination to consider what it may have looked like. He often wondered and at the same time he was glad didn't really know. No one ever told the men what was found. By time the company landed fifteen minutes later, that field passed from their reality forever. To Lou it was simply remembered as the place he lost a good friend to the mosquitoes of South Vietnam. END