

#7 Third Day – November 1967 – forward artillery base, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – This story had to do with us ambushing a company of NVA in a village.

...Thanksgiving of 1967 and the main emphasis was that we learned that, or we surmised that, we were never actually going to be periodically taken out of the jungle for rest and recreation, like most outfits did.

Editor's Notes - In the context of the Vietnam War (1959–1975), the Army of Vietnam was referred to as the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). This allowed writers, the US military, and the general public, to distinguish northern communists from the southern communists, or Viet Cong. However, both groups ultimately worked under the same command...

The helicopters were moving north and west. Below, the ground was nothing but a vast undulating green carpet. Lou began to understand the nature of the jungle then. It was immense, stretching out in every direction for mile upon mile. The terrain was rugged mountain. Not the straight up and down mountains of the American Rocky Mountains, but more the rounded mountains of the Appalachians. And here there wasn't rock face, but the green of the jungle. All shades of green. Everywhere. The choppers kept a lot of air between themselves and the ground during the trip. Lou had a perfect perch, sitting on the side of the helicopter with his legs dangling off into space. He scanned the area looking for a place where the chopper might set down if it developed problems. The green carpet below offered few openings. Should the helicopter crash land, it was doubtful that it would even be able to reach the jungle floor. The remaining helicopters were stretched out behind like geese behind the leader of the flock. There was a total of ten in this flight, and they had been in the air for about fifteen minutes now. Only once had Lou seen any signs of civilization. They had passed to the south of a small fire support base, perched on top of a mountain, about two minutes before. Other than that, nothing. Lou had no idea where the company was heading and why. This was the beginning of the third day in the field since leaving the base at An Khe. If it was anywhere near as exciting as the previous two days, well, it couldn't be. The helicopter machinegunner tapped Lou on the shoulder and pointed both ahead and down. Lou got the gist of the signal and tightened his grip on the side of the aircraft. He looked forward but could not see a place

where the helicopter might land. Suddenly the chopper banked right, giving Lou a perfect view of the sky. Then its nose dropped, and suddenly they were in a steep dive. Lou had been through this before a couple days earlier. It still scared the shit out of him. He figured that next they would begin a wild, ground hugging approach to wherever they were going to land. Instead, the chopper suddenly slowed its descent and began to flare. Magically, an opening at the top of a hill suddenly appeared at Lou's feet. The chopper hovered feet off the ground as Lou felt a tap on his shoulder. The ground beneath his feet was a tall, light yellow mat that was being flattened by the force of the rotors' downdraft. Lou stepped down onto the chopper's skid and then dropped to the ground.

A hovering helicopter is not a very stable platform. Even under the best of conditions it is difficult for a pilot to maintain the aircraft in perfect equilibrium above the ground. These were not perfect conditions. At the time Lou let go, there were five other men scrambling to exit the craft, and in a damn big hurry to do so. The ground was an infantryman's home. The sooner on the ground the better. Just as Lou let go to jump down, the chopper moved. Not much, but just enough to throw Lou off balance. Lou dropped the three feet to the ground with his right foot slightly extended. On his back was a rucksack weighing approximately sixty pounds. He landed on the outer edge of the foot with all his weight. The right ankle exploded in pain. Lou fell flat to the ground. His body's reaction to the pain was immediate. At that instant, Lou wanted to do one of two things. Either pass out or vomit. Lou did neither. He had sprained the right ankle several times in the past. He knew immediately what had happened, but that experience did not help in the current moment. The chopper he had exited had already lifted off. There were twelve men now on the ground in the middle of enemy territory, since the LZ was only large enough for two choppers to land at one time. The other men were already in the trees, taking up defensive positions. Two more choppers were already on the way in to land. Lou had no choice. He rolled over onto his stomach and began moving. He felt the wind on his back as the next pair of aircrafts landed. He was in the woods. Lou was gasping for breath when he finally moved over to where Big John lay. He was sweating profusely and still nauseated from the bolt of pain he had felt. He could feel the pressure of the injured ankle as it tried to swell up inside the boot. The jungle boot he wore was laced halfway up his shin. It

would serve to stabilize the ankle. It would have to. The choppers continued to land behind them. Each man kept a close watch out to his front. The jungle was denser here than the area they had moved through yesterday.

Squads and platoons had gotten mixed together as the choppers landed. Each man had headed directly into the nearest wood line as soon as they unloaded. By the time the last chopper took off, there were sixty men on the ground in a perimeter, completely surrounding the LZ. Sixty men in a tight perimeter ready to fight off any attack the enemy might try to mount, while they awaited the arrival of the rest of the company. Lou knew it would be at least a half hour before the second lift came and an hour before the whole company was assembled. He heard Sgt. Wilson call for First Squad. Lou and Big John went to where Sgt. Wilson was waiting on the edge of the clearing. It took Lou a while to make that trip. His ankle was still throbbing. From experience, Lou knew that he had injured it pretty seriously. In the past he had always been in a position where it could be treated. Twice he had gotten limited duty after hurting it. Now he could only grin and bear it. When Sgt. Wilson had called, he got first to his knees. Then, using the M-79 as a cane, had managed to get to an upright position. Having suffered through this kind of injury before had one advantage. He already knew the way to walk most effectively on an injured ankle. He would move his injured foot forward first, finding firm footing before moving his good foot. He had to be careful when he moved, because the injured foot could not bear a lot of weight and it would be easy to lose his balance. He had to keep all his weight directly over the injured ankle since it could no longer support any sideward weight. It slowed Lou down a tad.

"I want the squad to take up positions from that big tree there to that tree there," Sgt. Harris said, pointing. "Tie into the Second Squad on the left and the Second Squad of Second Platoon on the right. Move five to ten yards into the wood line and set up good defensive positions. No digging, but set out claymores to cover all approaches. Two men to a position. We'll change positions again when the next wave of men land. Now move!"

Sgt. Wilson led the squad to their designated area and assigned positions to the men. Lou worked his way into the bush. About five yards in they found a good area for a position.

There was a depression in the ground with a log lying on the ground nearby. "You want the hole or the tree?" Big John asked.

"Tree," Lou answered moving in that direction. When he got there he dropped his rucksack and sat on the ground behind the tree, facing out from the perimeter. He had put a shotgun round in the grenade launcher since the jungle was too close to use an explosive round. Keeping watch, he smoked a cigarette as he watched Big John set out his claymore mines. Big John was careful in selecting positions for these weapons. The claymore mine was a nasty little device, capable of doing real damage under the right circumstances. They needed to be placed in such a way as to spread their killing pellets in an effective arc. It was also important to have them in front of something that would protect the person triggering the mine from the weapon's back blast. Although the plastic explosive was shaped to direct the blast forward, there were never any guarantees when using explosives. It was also important to place the mines so their positions could be observed. There were known instances of the enemy sneaking up and turning the weapon around so that when detonated the weapon would kill its owner. Once Big John had completed his task, he moved over to Lou's position.

"Give me your claymores," he said. "No, I'll take care of placing mine," Lou said, getting gingerly to his feet. "Listen, Little Lou," Big John said, using the nickname Lou hated. It was something Big used to bug Lou. He never used it when other men were around. "You injured that damn ankle of yours again, didn't you?"

"Don't call me that, asshole," Lou replied, avoiding the issue. He unpacked the mines from his rucksack while speaking. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"I'm not saying you can't, Lou. Just offering a helping hand. How bad is it?" Big John asked again, rephrasing the question.

"Bad enough," Lou answered as he hobbled off with the claymores. So what if it took him a little longer than normal to set the mines up and run the wires back to his position behind the tree. They were in no hurry. Besides, without the rucksack, he was able to move through the bush easily as long as he didn't make any stupid moves. Ten minutes later, he was done. Lou climbed gingerly over the log. Sgt. Wilson was just approaching the position as Lou sat. There was a new man with him.

"How's the leg, Merrins?" Sgt. Wilson said when he got there. By using his last name, Sgt. Wilson made it clear that this was a serious question.

"I twisted it a little getting out of the copter. It hurt at first, but now it's tolerable," he replied.

"This is Private Murphy," Sgt. Wilson said, indicating the new man next to him, "He's a medic. I want him to take a look at that ankle." Sgt. Wilson knew Lou was hurt. He had noticed the fall, but had been unable to offer any assistance during the landing. When Lou had approached the squad, Sgt. Wilson could see the strain on Lou's face. He also noted the way Lou moved. Now he had to decide if the injury would affect the functioning of the squad. He couldn't afford to have a man injured to the extent that it would dramatically affect his performance. Not out here in Indian country.

Lou stood up. "It's okay, Sarge. A little sore, but I can move around alright as long as I'm careful," he said.

"Take off your boot and let Murphy have a look at it," Sgt. Wilson ordered.

"Can't do that, Sarge," Lou replied. "As soon as I take the boot off, the ankle is going to swell to about the size of a cantaloupe. I'll never be able to put it back on. I don't want to go barefoot all day," Lou said, smiling. Sgt. Wilson was not smiling. "Listen, Sarge. You remember the last time this happened. We were on a field exercise for three days after I hurt it. I kept up and did my job. It was only when we got to the rear that I needed medical treatment. It hurts some, but not enough to justify being sent out of the field. You make me take the boot off and I guarantee you the medics will ship my ass out. You want that?"

"No," Sgt. Wilson replied. "Okay, I'll tell you what I want from you. Stay off your feet as much as possible when we're not on the move. Keep that ankle elevated when you can. I want Murphy to take a look at it this evening. If it swells up then I ship you out. You have to handle your own equipment and keep up. If you change your mind before the last flight of choppers leaves, tell me. I'll get you sent to the rear for a few days. Anything you can do for him now?"
Sgt. Wilson asked the medic.

"Yeah," PFC Murphy said. He took his satchel off his shoulder, placing it on the ground at Lou's feet. "Sit," he said to Lou. After he was on the ground, Murphy took a hold of Lou's

ankle. He gently began moving it until the pain registered on Lou's face. He let the foot down gently. "Well, it's probably not broken," he said, looking at the sergeant. "Just a severe sprain. Here take these," Murphy said as he pulled a bottle of pills from his kit. "Aspirin. I want you to take two every four hours. Should help some with the pain, and might help the swelling some." He reached into his medic's kit and came out with a roll of tape. "You are right about not taking off the boot right now. How is the pain?" he asked.

"Tolerable," Lou replied.

Murphy elevated the leg and began wrapping tape around the ankle on the outside of the boot. "This should help stabilize the injury. May make moving a little easier, but don't let that fool you. That ankle is seriously injured. Don't go messing around on it as if it were all right. Like the sarge said, keep it elevated and stay off it as much as possible."

"Thanks, Doc," Lou said, getting to his feet. He put some pressure on the foot and took a couple of short steps to test the ankle. There was still pain from the pressure the skin was exerting on the side of the boot, but the tape definitely made the ankle more stable. It was able to support Lou's weight better. Lou sat back down.

"Take care of yourself," Sgt. Wilson said as both he and Murphy moved off. Sgt. Wilson was worried about Lou. He wondered if he had done the right thing in not sending Lou back to the rear. Spec Four Merrins was a tough little bastard, the sergeant thought. What he had said about being able to keep up when this had happened before was true. Sgt. Wilson knew that Lou would do everything possible to keep up and would not complain, no matter how painful the injury. This was both a good and a bad attribute for a soldier to have. He would keep a close eye on Lou for the rest of the day.

Lou got himself comfortable behind the log. He lay on his stomach with his injured foot elevated on the rucksack. Big John had moved back to his position to keep watch over the area when Sgt. Wilson arrived, and Lou knew that Big was anxious to talk to him about what had transpired. He was showing discipline by staying in his position and doing his job. They both maintained their alertness when the next lift of men was landing. Here in the jungle, just yards from where the choppers were landing, the noise was muted. It was surprising how little noise reached their positions. Once all the men were unloaded, positions were shifted to make room

for them in the perimeter. For whatever reason, Lou was allowed to stay in his position, with Big John shifting over. There were now approximately a hundred and twenty men on the ground in a tight perimeter. Enough firepower to withstand anything but a major enemy attack.

Once Big John was settled in, he asked, "How's the leg?"

"Better. The aspirin and tape job seem to be helping. Being off it doesn't hurt either," Lou said. "Thanks for offering to help earlier."

"No sweat, man." They both grew quiet as they scanned their areas of responsibility. A half hour later the rest of the company landed. Lou thought there would be plenty of action then. Instead, nothing happened for almost another hour. Finally Sgt. Wilson showed up at their position. He told them to gather up their equipment and meet up with the rest of the squad. They did so quickly, first packing the claymores away in their rucksacks, storing the detonators separately from the mines. Once the squad was together in the woods, Sgt. Wilson led them back to the edge of the clearing. Lou could see men from other squads and platoons meeting in little groups around the edge of the clearing.

Sgt. Wilson spread out a portion of a map on the ground in front of him. The other men were gathered in a close circle around him. "We are here," Sgt. Wilson said, pointing to a place on the map that had been marked in red. "This is where we are headed," he said, again showing a point on the map. "Gentlemen, the situation is this. We have a visitor with us," he said, pointing over to where the company commander was standing in the center of the perimeter. Next to Cpt. Picket stood Plt. Sgt. Harris, and next to him a Vietnamese man. It was strange to see him standing there. He seemed so out of place. He was. "That man standing next to the captain is a Choi Hoi," Sgt. Wilson said. "In case any of you have forgotten what that is, let me cover it with you again. That man over there showed up at An Khe almost dead about two months ago. He had with him a Choi Hoi pamphlet. These pamphlets are dropped by the guys in the psychological warfare section. They promise anyone showing up and surrendering with one of these papers in their possession will get granted amnesty. Our friend showed up with the paper and a very fascinating story. He evidently was kidnapped from his village in the South almost two years ago and taken as a prisoner by the Viet Cong. He has spent most of the

past two years working as a slave for the NVA. His job was to cook, gather firewood, and clean up their living areas, things like that. He finally got an opportunity to escape and took it. After wandering around in the jungle for two weeks, he found his way to An Khe. He was interrogated at Brigade. After extensive questioning, the guys in intelligence were able to get an estimate of where he had been held. The place we are heading for is supposedly the area where the Choi Hoi thinks the enemy camp is. The camp consists of several hooches, maybe as many as twenty. According to our man, these guys have been living there in relative peace for some time. The ARVN haven't operated in this area for years. We'll be the first American troops to enter the area. If we are in the right place, if our friend isn't lying or setting us up, and if we can find this place, we are going to attack it. The company will be moving out in about fifteen minutes. It's now 0930 hours. We hope to get into position by 1300. According to Mr. Choi Hoi, that's when things at the camp seem to settle down for a while, after their midday meal. Second Platoon has point. We'll be tail-end Charlie on this one. Fourth Squad has rear security. Second Squad will supply the flankers for this movement. According to our guide the jungle is quite dense here. The whole company will be in file. Keep close and don't lose contact with the man in front of you."

The men sat back on their rucksacks. Lou lit up a cigarette and started cleaning his weapon. He thought about what had been said. If things went according to plan, they would make contact with the enemy today. The chances of the company actually getting the drop on the enemy seemed slim. This was their home.

Lou did not like the M-79 in this situation. The jungle was too dense to use high explosive rounds, and he only had four shotgun rounds. The shotgun rounds could only be fired one at a time, leaving him of defenseless while reloading. He would have much rather had an M-16 rifle. Of course his greatest concern was whether he would be able to keep up with the company today. He was already tired and sore from yesterday. Injuring his ankle was just bad luck. Oh well, what would be would be.

Having cleaned his weapon, Lou got some candy from his rucksack and started to snack. Private Murphy came around and began passing out malaria pills to the men in the squad. Each man had to take a pill every day to protect them catching malaria. Malaria was a disease

carried by mosquitoes and could be very dangerous. Failure to take the pill was considered a court martial worthy offense. The thought of this made Lou smile. Like the Pill Police would track you down and send you to jail if you caught a disease that might just kill you. Lou classified this kind of decree as ARMY THINK. Such concepts were determined by people who had no concept of reality.

Suddenly things began to happen. People began getting to their feet and preparing to move out. No orders were issued. Everyone knew what was happening. As soon as the point man for Second Platoon began heading out, everyone started moving or getting ready to move. Being the last platoon out meant there would be a wait of several minutes before First Squad would actually start moving. Right now the company had about 170 men on the ground. On the move it would be spread out in a line almost two hundred yards long, depending on the terrain. Lou stood there, awaiting the beginning of the march. He shifted the rucksack on his back, trying to get it comfortable. It was a movement he would make a hundred times over the next few hours. A towel was draped across his neck. He would use this for many things during the course of the day. Its main use was to periodically wipe the sweat from his face. It would also be used to cushion the straps of the rucksack, wipe dirt from his arms and hands, clean the outside of his weapon, protect his neck from mosquitoes and insects, and perhaps wipe his ass in an emergency. It was as much a part of his uniform as his boots.

The day was not particularly hot, although it was heading in that direction. The jungle would be cooler than out in the open. At the same time, it would be difficult for a breeze to get to the floor of jungle. The air was very humid, and Lou wondered whether it would rain. There wasn't a weather forecast, so only time would tell.

"Lou," Sgt. Wilson said, "Here's that map we promised you."

"Thanks, Sarge," Lou replied, taking the map into his hands. Sgt. Wilson immediately left to take care of more business elsewhere. Lou quickly oriented himself with the map. It was the same one Sgt. Wilson had earlier, so all the various markings were still available. He studied the map carefully for the next few minutes as the squad stood around preparing to move. The company was leaving from the top of a relatively high hill. They would descend the hill to a valley below, follow the valley past the next mountain over, then climb the next hill. The

terrain was very steep, according to the topographical map. Lou could see where the company would probably have to head a little north in order to find the easiest way down the mountain. Only the men leaving the perimeter ahead of his squad seemed to be heading directly towards the destination on the map, down what looked like the steepest part of the hill. He was sure this was probably just an initial move before turning once inside the jungle. The last squad of Fourth Platoon started moving out. Lou tucked the map away in the pants pocket on the side of his right leg where he could get to it easily. In this terrain he would not need to study it too frequently, since it would be hard to get lost descending a mountain.

Two hours later, Lou sat on the side of the mountain, pissed. It was just past noon. By now the company should be climbing the hill where the enemy camp was supposedly located. Instead, they were sitting on the side of a mountain trying to figure a way down to the valley below. So far the move had not been very hard on Lou's injured ankle. Maybe this was because the company was moving so slowly that Lou was spending more time resting his ankle than moving on it. Maybe it was because the point man had chosen to go through every impenetrable grove of trees or brush he could find. Maybe it was because the company had to backtrack a half dozen times trying to find a way around an obstacle. The company had also run into another unforeseen problem. It seemed that everyone in the company had come down with a case of diarrhea. A case of the galloping crud. A case of the steaming shits. It was so bad that Lou thought they would have to rename the whole outfit from the One-Seventy Third Airborne to the One-Seventy Turd Airborne. The path of the company's move stunk, quite literally. Lou would not be surprised if the enemy smelled them coming. It really was no laughing matter. He knew how bad he had felt after his bout with the shits the day before. At least then, the company was not on a major move to find and attack an enemy encampment. Lou was glad he only had a bum ankle to contend with. Lou knew what was causing the company's gastrointestinal problems. It had to be the change in diet since leaving An Khe. Since then, all the men had been switched over to eating C rations. If this was the result of that switch, then someone in the rear should have their ass kicked. The company had been kept out of the field for a week so they could adjust to the environment they would be operating in. There was no reason they couldn't have been exposed the wonders of the magical C rations.

The old song, "Bean, Beans, the magical fruit. The more you eat the more you toot," had turned into "Cs, Cs, the magical hit. The more you eat the more you shit." This whole day would be a complete waste. Maybe they should just back up and start all over again.

An hour later, the company was on the move, about to climb the hill where the enemy camp was located. Lou's ankle was throbbing and his limp was becoming more pronounced, but he was feeling good. The company had finally begun to move in a reasonable manner after Cpt. Pickett decided to replace the squad that had been pulling point. The new point man had finally swung the company north down a part of the hill where the ground sloped off more easily to the valley below. Although further on the map, the way proved much easier to move through. The new point man, whoever it was, seemed able to spot the easiest direction to move along and did not seem overly concerned about whether the compass direction to the target was followed exactly. Within thirty minutes, the company had climbed down off the mountain, and thirty minutes later they were poised to move up the hill. It was now 1300 hours. Lou figured another thirty minutes to reach the enemy camp. By now, word had filtered back that the Choi Hoi was sure of their position. They were close enough to the camp that he recognized the terrain. The captain had called for a ten minute break before the company began to ascend the mountain. The men had been grateful for that since they were all tired. The day had gotten hotter, although the heat was not unbearable on the jungle floor. All the men's uniforms were soaking wet from the sweat that poured from their bodies. The rest gave them a chance to replace some of the fluid their bodies had lost, but Lou noticed they were all careful about not drinking too much. They had all learned a lesson from yesterday's fiasco. A lot of them had spent the night without water because of the supply helicopter not making it in before dark. Some of them said it was the worst night of their lives, one they would never forget. Now the last thing they would allow to happen was to run out of water. Of course they were aware of the problems of not drinking enough water. Dehydration, cramps, heat exhaustion, and of course everybody's favorite, heat stroke. All of the men carried salt tablets, and Lou made sure he took a couple when he drank his water, to replace the electrolytes his body was losing. Lou took the opportunity to check the map one last time before the company

moved out. It seemed that everyone agreed on where the company was at this time. No one had asked for his opinion. He was okay with that.

The hill the company was about to climb was not nearly as high as the one they had descended. According to the map, it was also not as steep. With the addition of the Choi Hoi to guide them, the company would be able to move quickly into position to attack the enemy camp. Lou doubted that the attack could be pulled off, but he was nervous. His feelings were similar to what he felt prior to exiting an aircraft for a parachute jump. Nervous anticipation. Then the company was moving. First straight up the hill. About half way up, the company began to circle the hill, as the enemy camp was on the far side. The move was made quietly. Everyone knew the need for stealth and had adjusted his equipment during the move to ensure nothing would bang or clang. The pace was slow because of the jungle. Lou was able to keep up easily, but the ankle was a steady throb. He had taken a couple of aspirin at the last stop. With a little luck, they would begin to take the edge off the pain soon. His weapon was locked and loaded with a shotgun round. In the dense brush the company was moving through, a high explosive round would never travel far enough to detonate. The round had to travel fifteen meters before it would be armed. In this place it could only go about ten meters before it hit something, unless Lou was aiming straight up.

Again the company stopped. Word was passed back that the company was dispersing into an attack formation. The men could only stand there in the jungle awaiting further instruction. They were all keyed up, not knowing exactly what to expect. Everyone was alert to the possibility of the company being ambushed. Lou knew he did not trust the Choi Hoi. This could all be a setup. Slowly the line of men moved forward in starts and stops. Ten minutes later, Lou's squad reached a point where Lt. Burroughs stood with Cpt. Pickett and Plt. Sgt. Harris. Lt. Burroughs spoke quietly to Sgt. Wilson while gesturing with his hands giving directions. Sgt. Wilson signaled the squad to follow and led off in the direction the lieutenant had indicated. After about ten meters, the squad approached a small ridge. Lou could see men from Second Squad crawling toward the ridge line. Sgt. Wilson quickly assigned men along the firing line and then signaled the squad to begin moving toward the ridge. On hands and knees

the men moved forward. The ridge was just a slight rise in the ground. Once there each man peeked over the top.

Lou slowly raised his head and looked. The ground fell gently down from the rise in the ground. From his position, Lou could see one structure and parts of two others. This was possible because much of the brush in the area had been cleared, leaving only trees in certain areas. The building had a window on the side Lou was looking at. It was thirty yards to the target. Lou quickly broke open his weapon and loaded a high explosive round into the chamber. With a little luck, his first shot would be through the window.

There was no movement in the area to his front. The men on either side of him were silent. Lou did not know the signal to commence the attack, but he would know it when it was given. Wiping the sweat from his eyes, he waited. This was the hard part. Knowing something was going to happen any second, but not knowing what. The building to his front seemed deserted. Maybe the enemy had abandoned the encampment after the Choi Hoi disappeared. It seemed unlikely that the enemy would not have security men to warn the camp of attack.

The attack was initiated from the top of the hill. From a distance, the firefight started with a single shot, which was followed by a whole series of shots. Still, Lou and the men on the line did not fire. Lou sighted his weapon on the window. Although the ground brush had been removed, there were a lot of branches at a level slightly higher than a man's head in the area. This caused Lou some concern, still he thought his round would make it to the window. Suddenly a man ran out from the side of the hooch carrying a weapon. The men on the firing line immediately opened fire. More men ran out, some of them falling as they were shot. Lou pulled evenly on the trigger, until the round left the grenade launcher. His satisfaction with the shot lasted all of three-tenths of a second, when the shell exploded in brush, fifteen meters from his position. Pvt. Wills, whose position was one man over on Lou's left, let out a yelp. "I'm shot, I'm shot," he yelled. *Oh shit. I shot one of my own guys*, Lou thought. Meanwhile, all hell was breaking loose around them. The whole company was firing. The noise was deafening as fire poured into the village. Then everyone was up and advancing toward the buildings. Lou got to his feet. He again loaded a shotgun round into his weapon and then began advancing on the building to his front. His progress was impeded by the weight of the rucksack and his bad

ankle. Lou was about fifteen meters from the building when an enemy soldier suddenly, impossibly, exited the side of the building. The man had an AK-47 held at waist level and was facing Lou as he came into view.

Fuck me, Lou thought. He could see the muzzle flash as the enemy's weapon sprayed bullets at him. Lou planted his right leg in preparation to throw himself forward. His right ankle immediately gave way, and instead of going forward into a dive, he went down like a sack of potatoes. The M-79 had been pointing straight forward, and Lou had taken the slack out of the trigger at approximately the same instant that he was deposited on his ass. The shot went off in the general direction one would expect to find the monkey population of the jungle residing. Almost straight up into the air. The gook's bullets were tearing up the ground all around Lou. The enemy continued moving to his right while firing, passing for an instant behind a small tree that stood between him and Lou. Suddenly his weapon stopped firing. The little bastard turned and took off running.

All this action had taken place in a time span of approximately four seconds. In Lou's mind the action had lasted for several minutes. He now lay on the ground shaking uncontrollably. *I should be dead.* he thought. *He had me. No way I'm not hit. Just hasn't registered yet.* Lou waited there for the pain to hit. "You all right, Lou?" Big John asked, coming to a skidding halt beside him. The firefight was moving away from them now. Across the hill and down toward the valley below.

"Yeah," Lou answered. Looking toward the building the enemy had come from, Lou suddenly started moving again. He quickly signaled John to be alert by pointing at the building. Lou did not want someone else coming out of there firing. Loading his weapon, he approached the hut with John. Big John took a grenade off his webbing. They moved behind a nearby tree. Big pulled the pin and threw the grenade toward the window. It was only a lob of five meters and the window was quite large. The grenade hit the side of the window and fell to the ground, going off with spectacular results. Being behind the tree saved their lives. Lou was glad Big John was the one who handled the grenade. Lou's hands were still shaking so bad, he was sure he would have dropped the damn thing at their feet after pulling the pin. The fact that Big John had missed the window did not bother Lou in the least. When they looked around the tree

after the explosion, there was a big hole in the side of the building, and it was on fire. They could see that there was no one inside. By now, the sounds of the firefight were dying down. Just occasional shots being fired. Lou sat, digging in his pocket for a cigarette. He was shaking so bad that it took a while to get the damn thing into his mouth. Trying to get the cigarette lit was another story. Finally Big John reached over and took the cigarette lighter from Lou's hand, holding the flame near the end of the cigarette for him. John's hand was shaking slightly, Lou could see. He took a huge drag on the cigarette, letting the smoke course all the way down into his lungs until it reached his toes. Never had a cigarette tasted so good.

There were three bodies lying just to the side of the hut. Enemy soldiers cut down by the men as they tried to escape the company's attack. Seeing them there suddenly reminded Lou of Ben. "You seen Ben?" Lou asked Big John.

"Not since you blew up that tree," John replied with a smile on his face. He too was staring at the bodies. Lou noticed he kept his rifle pointing in that direction, lest one of them begin to move.

"I thought I had a clear shot," Lou answered back.

"Well, you didn't," Big John said needlessly. "May have gotten a monkey or two. We'll go back and check if you want."

"Fuck you," Lou said. He was worried about Ben. How seriously he was wounded made Lou apprehensive. *Fucking M-79.* Lou thought. *No good for jungle fighting. Too much cover for explosive rounds, too slow using shotgun rounds.*

Sgt. Wilson appeared around a tree, walking in their direction. "Lou, Big John, you guys all right?" he asked.

"Yeah," Lou replied. He stood up, leaving his rucksack on the ground. He took a tentative step on his bad ankle. It seemed all right, no further damage having been done.

"You scared the shit out of me with that first shot of yours, Lou," Sgt. Wilson said. "I thought maybe the enemy had strung some mines in the trees. What happened?"

"I thought I had a clear shot at the window," Lou said indicating the structure that was now blazing. "Must have just caught the overhanging brush. You see Ben? Last I heard of him, he was laying there yelling about being hit."

"Yeah. I saw him. He's further down the hill. Went charging off after the enemy with everybody else. Should be making his way back soon. Nice fire," the sarge commented. He walked over to where the enemy dead lay. Lou and John followed. "Any of these yours?"

"Not mine," Big John answered. Lou cringed inwardly knowing what was probably coming next. Big John did not disappoint him. "Not Lou's either," he said. "Seems Lou had something against monkeys. First he tried to hit them with HE, and then he used a shotgun round on them. Him and I were about to do a body count on the monkey population when you showed up." Big John and Sgt. Wilson both had big, shit eating grins on their faces by time the explanation of what had happened was done. Even Lou could smile by then.

"Fucking monkeys," he said. "Fucking, commie, hairball, monkeys. Kill them. Kill them all."

Other members of the squad were starting to appear from the surrounding areas. The hooch was now blazing away, the smoke rising straight into the air. Lou saw PFC Baker stop next to another building. He took out his cigarette lighter and lit the hut on fire. The building was like all the other ones they had attacked. Thatched roof and sides woven through a wood frame. Not much in the way of a shelter, but plenty to keep someone dry and provide living space in the jungle. Made of all natural material, it began burning vigorously in a short period of time. Hare, accompanied by Ben, immediately deviated from their line of march to another nearby structure. Building burnings evidently seemed like a good idea to them. Pretty soon that structure was also ablaze. Lou smiled at this. The real damage to the enemy had already been done. They were dead, wounded, or on the run. The buildings were of no real value and could easily be replaced, although Lou thought that the last place they would rebuild would be this site. Still, if it made the guys feel better, what the hell.

Ben and Hare drifted over to the group. "You okay?" Lou asked Ben.

"Yeah, just a scratch," Ben answered, holding up his arm. Lou couldn't see anything.

"Not a scratch," said Lou.

"Fucking A," Ben replied, digging around in his pocket. His hand came out holding a tiny piece of metal. Lou recognized it as a piece of shrapnel the M-79 scattered from the coil of metal inside the shell. Still, where was this wound Ben was bitching about?

Ben saw the disbelief in Lou's eyes. He moved closer, pointing to a small puncture wound in his arm. "Medic pulled the shrapnel out, right there. Says I get a Purple Heart. Wounded in action, ya know?"

Lou laughed. He was relieved that Ben was not seriously injured. Glad he had earned a Purple Heart so easily. "Anyone else want a Purple Heart?" he asked the group, raising his grenade launcher. They all smiled, shaking their heads.

Bobby Fry came over to the group. Just from the look on his face, everyone could see he was unhappy, but he said nothing.

"Bobby?" Sgt. Wilson said.

"Darn M-16 jammed on me. I got the first one coming out of the hut, and then it jammed. By time I got it fixed, everyone was halfway down the hill. Never did get another decent shot. I hate this rifle. Too doggone temperamental," Bobby said. For Bobby this was a whole week's worth of talking. Lou was by nature a quiet person. But compared to Bobby, he was a jabbering fool. No one would argue Bobby's claim that one of the bodies was his handiwork. Bobby was an expert with a rifle or any weapon for that matter. Being raised in the Alaskan wilderness had ensured that. Bobby had complained to Lou before about the M-16. He would have preferred a heavier caliber weapon with a longer range. He was the only one in the company that Lou knew of that would have preferred using the older M-14 rifles.

"Trade you," Lou said to Bobby, offering him his M-79. Bobby's face lit up in a smile. Without another word they exchanged weapons and ammo. Bobby handed over his rifle and four full clips of ammunition. In exchange Bobby got the grenade launcher and eight rounds of ammo.

"Let me have one of those full clips," Sgt. Wilson said. "I'm almost out."

"Well, I am out," said Ben.

"Me too," chimed in Hare.

"Same here," Sgt. Taylor indicated.

"Everyone check your ammo," Sgt. Wilson said. A quick count showed that there was a total of 187 rounds of M-16 left. Since the squad had a full load going into action, they had a total of 900 rounds to begin with. Luckily, Bobby had only used three rounds before his

weapon jammed. By staying back with Lou, Big John had only used one clip. This accounted for 177 of the rounds left. Sgt. Wilson had the other ten rounds left in the clip in his rifle. All the other men in the squad had managed to use up all their available ammo. Lou kept one full clip for himself and gave the others to the men in the squad. Big John did the same. Between them, each man now had about twenty rounds of rifle ammo, and most had their full complement of hand grenades. Lou knew they were now open to an enemy counterattack without much fire power available.

There were shouts as squads and platoons were assembled. The attack had been an overwhelming success. So far there had been no cries for medics that Lou had heard. Other than Ben, none of the men knew of any other injuries within the company. "I'm going to go find out what's happening," Sgt. Wilson said and headed off up the hill. The men in the squad all sat and began going through their rucksacks. Lou and Bobby quickly exchanged cleaning equipment for the weapons they had exchanged. Within minutes, the weapons had been broken down and were in the process of being cleaned. Big John was sitting beside Lou. His first order of business was to open a can of C rations and begin eating.

"Thought you were dead for sure," John said with a mouthful of food. "I saw you go down, and bullets were kicking up the ground all around you. How the hell that guy missed you I'll never know." He stopped speaking, awaiting a response Lou supposed. Lou was wondering the same thing as John. How had that little fucker missed him? Had him dead to rights. The scene kept playing over and over in his mind. Lou quickly finished cleaning his weapon and got to his feet. Leaving his rucksack behind, he moved toward the building where the action had taken place.

"Hey, Lou, aren't you supposed to be resting that ankle?" Big John called after him. Lou raised his middle finger in a salute and continued over to the building. Walking around to the front of the hut, Lou placed his weapon on his hip and turned to face up the hill. Now he was standing where the enemy soldier had exited the building. From there to the place on the hill where he had gone down was an easy stone's throw. Lou moved to his right. After four steps, he passed behind the same tree the enemy soldier had while he was firing at Lou. The tree was only five inches wide. There, at about the same level as Lou's weapon, were two holes. There

was also a groove on the right side of the tree, put there by a bullet, no doubt. Lou reached out and touched each hole. In his mind he could picture the bullets inside. Maybe these were the ones that would have hit him. The AK-47 had not stopped firing until it ran out of ammunition. The enemy had swept the weapon right across the area where Lou was standing. At that range, it was almost impossible to miss, even with the weapon wanting to pull up and to the right. The muzzle of the rifle on the man's hip would only have been inches from the tree as he passed behind it. Close enough to stop two bullets and deflect another during the fraction of a second it took the enemy to move past it. Just close enough to save Lou's life. Of course it was all supposition, but Lou knew he would believe it for the rest of his life. The building was now burned to the ground. *Good riddance*, Lou thought.

Lou lifted his left hand up in front of his face. It was steady now, no longer shaking. Lou did not deny that he had been scared. Scared shitless. Between that and the adrenaline pumping through his system, it was a wonder that he had functioned at all. The whole incident had been wild. Having survived it, Lou felt pretty decent about his performance. He hadn't hesitated to fire when the time was upon him. The company had actually assaulted an enemy encampment, and Lou had not hesitated moving forward with the other men. While he was damn lucky to be alive, Lou understood he had no control over that. Everyone took their chances once the bullets started flying. The company had acquitted itself well. All the men Lou had seen did their job without hesitation.

Thinking that over, Lou realized he had actually seen very little of what had gone on around him. He had seen the first enemy soldier who exited the building go down, but not the other two. After that, his field of vision had narrowed to encompass only what was taking place directly in front of him. Tunnel vision of sorts. Lou couldn't honestly say that he had noticed much noise after that first barrage. He remembered Big John asking if he was alright, but he could not remember hearing the firing that must have been going on all around them. Weird.

The area was now quiet, except for the occasional shouted order. Sgt. Wilson had not returned yet. Lou decided to take the opportunity to explore the enemy complex. There wasn't really much to see. The men had set all the buildings on fire and by now most of them were just smoldering heaps of ashes. Besides the three bodies outside the hut the squad had

hit, Lou saw four others while wandering around. As far as could be ascertained, there were no enemy wounded or prisoners. He asked men from other squads and platoons about this, but no one seemed to know of any enemy that had survived the assault. They had either escaped or not. Even with the brush thinned out by the former occupants of the area, the jungle was quite dense. It was hard to see more than one or two structures at a time. By only hitting one side of the camp, it was possible for the enemy on the far side to escape. Lou heard of no organized enemy resistance. Once alerted, it seemed that the enemy's only response was to exit the area. Seemed like a smart idea.

Lou had been working his way up the hill. He was getting tired, and his ankle was beginning to throb in protest. Time to head back. Rather than retracing his steps, Lou moved further into the complex, planning to take a different route back to the squad. He rounded a big tree. One of those huge mothers that were several feet in diameter and extended upward toward the heavens. Lou came across a scene that he was to remember for a long time. There was a hooch that was built into the side of the hill. It appeared to be significantly larger than the others Lou had seen. There were two enemy soldiers laying on the ground in front the building. Lou had a good view, and the distance was only about twenty yards to the front door of the structure. One of the enemy was a middle-aged man. Lou had trouble estimating his age. It was one thing Lou had already discovered about the Vietnamese. They appeared to age differently than most Americans. Many older men appeared quite young. He had met a man that cleaned barracks in the battalion area back at An Khe who appeared to be about twenty, but one of the guys who worked in the rear claimed that he was actually closer to forty years old. The other enemy was a young woman. They lay there on the ground side by side. Lou could see that they were both breathing, but they had been seriously wounded. The man lay in a pool of blood. Both of their chests were moving erratically. Cpt. Pickett and the company's platoon leaders were standing off to one side studying a map. Master Sergeant Turner and Platoon Sergeant Harris were conferring about something. The Choi Hoi stood to one side. His gaze seemed to be focused on the man lying on the ground. He looked angry. Lou would have loved to hear his story. There was a man leaning over the prisoners, shouting at them in Vietnamese. He was dressed in fatigues like the rest of the men present, but Lou could see he

was Vietnamese. Lou had not seen him earlier but guessed that he was an interpreter sent with the Choi Hoi. Probably responsible for guarding the Choi Hoi also. His voice had been steadily rising as Lou stood there. Suddenly, without any warning, he slapped the wounded man across the face. Lou could hear the sound of the blow from where he was standing. Just as quickly Plt. Sgt. Harris kicked the interrogator in the side, sending him sprawling onto the ground. It had happened so fast, Lou doubted that anyone other than he, Harris, and Master Sgt. Turner saw exactly what happened. The Vietnamese man rolled onto his side, his hand going toward a pistol in a holster on his hip. Lou jacked a round into the chamber of his rifle and began swinging it in the direction of the Vietnamese reaching for his pistol. Everyone froze. It was a distinctive sound Lou's rifle made. The gook's hand moved slowly away from the holster, his eyes locked on Lou's. Lou smiled at him. Sgt. Harris had not been asleep during this action and had also jacked a round into the chamber of his rifle, which he was pointing at the man he had kicked. Seeing that the situation was under control, Lou turned and left.

Good for Sgt. Harris, he thought. Both the prisoners are dying. Let them die in peace. When Lou got back to the squad, everything was about the same as when he had left, except that Big John had wandered off somewhere. Lou sat down next to his rucksack. He took the clip out of his rifle and jacked the chambered round out. Reloading it back into the clip, he put the clip back in the rifle, tapping the bottom of the clip to be sure it was seated properly. The guys in the squad looked at him while he did this, but he didn't feel obligated to tell them what had transpired. He lit a cigarette, leaned back with his eyes shut, and enjoyed his smoke. It felt good to be alive.

It was a full fifteen minutes before Sgt. Wilson returned with Big John in tow. "Everyone give me half your ammo," he announced to the group. "Seems we did better than most of the squads. Some of them don't have any ammo. The company is getting ready to move out, so be ready." He took his helmet off and was holding it out upside down. Everyone quickly counted out half their ammo and dumped it into the helmet. When it was full, Sgt. Taylor quickly held his helmet out and collected the rest. He and Sgt. Wilson headed back up the hill. Lou could see that the other men were now as nervous as he was about the situation. They were in the middle of the jungle and almost defenseless. All of the guys except Big John had all their

grenades. Still, without ammo for the weapons, they felt naked. Lou almost regretted having given up his M-79. At least he had had ammo for it, before giving it up.

Sitting again, Lou said, "Where were you, Big?"

"Off looking for you, asshole. Sgt. Wilson spotted me wandering around. He's pissed at me for not staying with the squad. Says I should know better than to go wandering around on my own. I didn't tell him I was looking for you. Figured he'd see that for himself when we got back to the squad. Course you beat us both back, now I'm in trouble."

Lou laughed. "Fuck that, Big John. This isn't the rear. What the hell you think Sgt. Wilson's going to do, give you an Article 15? Don't worry about it." He reached into his rucksack and came out with a pork and potatoes C ration. "Here," Lou said, tossing it to Big John. That brought a smile to John's face. Unfortunately Big John didn't have a chance to enjoy it. Sgt. Wilson returned to the squad, and within minutes they were all moving toward the top of the hill. Once there, they were put to work clearing out a landing zone for a helicopter. It was hot work, and Lou found himself near the bottom of his second canteen of water. It took the squad, working alongside the rest of the men in the platoon, about thirty minutes to clear an area large enough for one chopper to land. As soon as they were done, red smoke began to drift across the opening. Within a minute, a chopper landed and the men quickly began unloading the boxes of ammunition from inside. Meanwhile, men from Second Platoon showed up carrying AK-47s, which were quickly loaded onto the helicopter. As soon as this was done, the chopper lifted off and was gone.

The cases of ammunition were broken open under the direction of Sgt. Harris and MSgt. Turner. Most of it was M-16 ammunition, which came packed in small cardboard boxes with twenty rounds in each box. There were also a couple of cases of empty M-16 clips and bandoleers for carrying them. Everything was quickly divided and picked up by members of each platoon. By the time it had all been divided and issued to the troops, Lou wound up with twenty clips and four hundred rounds of ammunition. Its weight was quite impressive. Lou felt like some kind of Mexican bandit with four bandoleers crisscrossing his chest.

A short time later, the whole company was again on the move. Lou had no idea where they were headed. He checked his map to gain their current position. By checking his compass,

Lou knew the general direction of march, but without knowing their final destination, it was impossible to guess where they would wind up. This was good. If he couldn't guess their destination, then neither could the enemy. It was nearly 1630 hours. It was hot, and Lou's ankle was really beginning to hurt. He had taken a couple more aspirin. The company was on the move for an hour before they began climbing another hill. By keeping track of the company's position, Lou knew the hill they were climbing was both high and steep near the top. Luckily, the point man was again doing a good job of moving through the bush. An hour later, the squad reached the top of the hill. Lou was exhausted. His leg muscles ached, and his ankle was screaming at him. It was now 1840 hours. It had been a long day.

The top of this hill had quite a large opening where helicopters could land. A perfect site for extraction of the company back to An Khe. Lou's mind had just registered this fact before Lt. Burroughs began assigning squad areas for setting up the perimeter for the night. Within minutes, various positions were assigned and the men began digging in. Again, as on the previous night, this was to be a company perimeter. Even though it covered a slightly larger area, the perimeter would be quite tight. Because of this, the squad would only man two positions with four men in one position and five in the other. The site Sgt. Wilson chose for his fire team had good natural cover on either side of the position. The team would dig a three-man foxhole. If attacked, two members of the team would fight from behind a couple of large trees next to the site. Several things took place over the next hour. The position was dug with a good field of fire cleared for the site; a couple of choppers landed, bringing in water and even more ammo for the company; and the men each got a chance to heat up some chow.

After these chores were accomplished, there was time for men to relax. Big John used it to construct a shelter using his poncho. He was not the only one, and soon Lou saw a miniature poncho city grow up in the bush in back of the company perimeter. It was a trick the men had learned while in training. The shelters provided shade during the day and cover when it rained. Lou sometimes opted for one of these if the weather was bad. The day was still clear despite the earlier feeling of rain in the air. He had decided to sleep out in the open tonight. Lou inflated his air mattress and found a relatively flat spot near the foxhole. The mattress itself was quite heavy and meant to withstand a lot of punishment. Lou was glad he had it. At least

there would be some degree of comfort available during the night. After arranging his equipment for the night, Lou decided to take off his right boot and take a look at the ankle. He would try to keep it elevated as much as possible during the night, and he was fairly confident he would be able to get the boot back on in the morning. He was just unlacing the boot when a voice called. Lou answered the call, and then PFC Murphy appeared.

"You some kind of mind reader, Doc?" Lou asked. "I was just about to remove the boot." Lou used his bayonet to cut the tape from around the ankle. He pulled the tape off and unlaced the boot. The boot came off easily. The release of pressure on the ankle felt better than sex. Lou let out a groan of pleasure that brought a smile to PFC Murphy's face. Now Big John came over and sat next to Lou. "You coming to the official unveiling, Mother John?" Lou asked.

"Yeah," Big replied. "I want to see if you're really injured or just a big pussy."

"I was wondering the same thing," Sgt. Wilson said as he approached the group. Lou looked around at them, embarrassed. He could do without this kind of attention. There was also some apprehension in his mind about the condition of the ankle. Without further ado, he removed the sock. The ankle was swollen, the skin stretched tight. There was a purple discoloration that started near the bottom of his foot and extended several inches above the ankle. Lou looked around proudly at the other men. Not as bad as I thought, his expression implied.

PFC Murphy let out a low whistle. "That will get you two weeks rest," he said.

"What the hell you talking about?" Lou shouted. "That's nothing. I've seen it worse than that, you stupid quack. Get the fuck out of here and leave me alone."

"Settle down, Lou," Sgt. Wilson intoned. Lou saw he had a smile on his face. "You kept up with the company today. I said you could stay as long as you didn't slow us down. Doc, you look after the ankle. If Lou can hump, then he stays."

"All right. I'll see you first thing in the morning then," the medic said with a note of futility in his voice. Lou thought it was from the medic's lost opportunity to practice medicine on him. "Here is some more aspirin. Just don't get shot. With all the aspirin you're taking we would never be able to stop the bleeding." With these words of wisdom, the medic moved off.

Fuck you, Lou thought. Big John was staring at the ankle. He reached down, grabbed the foot and turned it so he could get a better look. He let go and smiled at Lou. "You big pussy," he said. "I thought you were hurt. Shit, there isn't even any blood." Shaking his head in mock disgust, he headed back to where his equipment was.

Sgt. Wilson sat there, smiling. Lou shook his head in disgust and started putting his sock back on. He was mad at the medic for making such a big deal about the ankle. He put the boot back on but left it unlaced. He started to stand.

"Sit," Sgt. Wilson ordered. "I saw you go down today. I thought you were hit until I saw you sit back up. That ankle didn't help you much today. You can stay with the company if that's what you're determined to do. Just don't expect any help or special privileges. A few days in the rear wouldn't kill you." Lou didn't say anything. Sgt. Wilson finally got to his feet and left. Lou lay back and lit up a cigarette.

Lou knew he would be able to keep up with the company. The ankle would get better each day as long as he didn't do anything stupid. He would need to watch his step, but that wasn't a bad idea anyway. The enemy was very good with booby traps, and watching one's step was a way of life in the jungle. The rear held a special danger for Lou. He had to fight throughout his career to maintain his position as an infantryman. In the rear he was liable to be corralled into another job he had no interest in doing. Out here, he was with the people he knew and admired. His only real desire was to be one of this group. Here, his identity as a member of the platoon gave him pride and a feeling of belonging. That wasn't possible in the rear area. It was fine for others, but not Lou.

Sgt. Wilson had set the watches for the night. Since there were five in the fire team, he had decided that there would be two awake at the position during the night. He set up the rotation so that some of the men would get extra sleep during the night. Lou was assigned the first shift with Hare. Big John and Ben would pull the next shift. Lou and Sgt. Wilson would then share the next shift. Then John and Hare would be paired. With this arrangement, Lou calculated he would get maybe an extra forty-five minutes sleep during the night. The others would all get an extra two hours out of the deal. It wasn't fair, but hell, Vietnam wasn't fair. It was a lot fairer than the deal the enemy had been given today.

The men of the company took up their defensive positions at about 2015 hours as the sun set behind the mountains to the west. Everyone would remain on alert until it was completely dark. Dusk and dawn were the enemy's favorite times to attack. It was a standard part of their operational plan. At those times of the day, there was enough light to guide them toward us, but not enough light for us to sight in on them easily. Lou had his doubts as to whether these rules applied in the jungle the same as they might apply in the lowlands. Here, the enemy could close with the company by stealth at any time without being detected because of the abundance of cover. The company had proven that today. Even though the whole company had landed within a mile of the complex it attacked, the enemy was evidently totally unaware of their presence. It was a lesson well learned. An attack could come at any time from any direction.

Dark descended quickly. The Hare and Lou took up positions in the foxhole. The other men moved off to their positions to get some sleep. This was Lou's first night in a defensive position at night in the jungle. He did not count last night. That had been neither a proper defensive position nor an ambush position. Tonight the company had time to prepare its positions in advance, even though it was rushed. Right away Lou noticed a difference in the amount of noise the men made as they settled down for the night. Air mattresses squeaked, ponchos that had been stretched for shelter flapped gently in the breeze, some of the men were opening C rations in the dark. The noises were definitely man-made. Lou had to wonder if Charlie was lying out there in the bush using these noises to guide him into a position to attack the company. He wished the other men would knock it off. Within a half hour he got his wish. As the company finally became silent, the noises of the jungle began to increase. Those noises were always there, but now they began to take over the night. Again the mosquitoes seemed to be out in force.

Lou positioned his hand grenades so he could find them immediately in the dark. The detonators to the claymore mines were arranged along the front of the foxhole. Lou reviewed their position using his sense of touch while picturing their placement in front of the foxhole in his mind. His M-16 was loaded with a round in the chamber. He flicked his finger over the safety to insure that it was on. No sense in accidentally firing the weapon. He kept two

bandoleers of ammunition hung across his chest. The other two, he arranged so that he could find them easily in the dark. He sat on the right side of the foxhole with his left leg dangling and his right foot resting on the side of the hole. It would have been better if it was elevated, but it was the best he could do under the circumstances.

Lou heard Hare slap at a mosquito and smiled. *Poor Hare*, he thought. A city boy. Raised in Detroit, Michigan. Hare had thought the woods of North Carolina represented what the jungle would be like. Of course those woods had nothing to do with the landscape they now occupied. The Hare had been intimidated by those woods. Lou wondered what he thought of his current environment. Like all the men in the squad, Lou had gotten to know Anthony "Hare" Harris well in training. The Hare was about six feet tall and weighed all of one hundred sixty pounds. A tall, lanky kid who moved with certain grace. Hare was a true jock, a sprinter who was, as he was quick to point out, almost an all-state athlete. He had come in second in the Michigan State Track and Field Meet in the hundred yard sprint as a sophomore. He might have won that title had he chosen to remain in school. Lou wasn't sure why Hare had dropped out of school. It was apparent that Harris had the intelligence necessary to complete it. The Hare had the disposition Lou had often seen in high school jocks. The guy had supreme confidence in his ability to compete in almost any physical contest. Lou once had an opportunity to race Harris. Of course Harris considered it a joke, but Lou took it seriously enough to give it his best effort, and he surprised Hare by beating him at the start. His advantage lasted all of five yards. After that, all Lou could do was watch Hare pull away. Lou could only look at the Hare's skinny legs and wonder where all the power and speed came from. It was one of life's little mysteries.

The Hare was a pleasant person most of the time. Not when competing, but almost any other time. He came from a small family with only one brother who was quite a bit older. His athletic abilities had given him a quiet confidence. One had the impression that the Hare had nothing to prove to himself. The guy was a good soldier. Although he would bitch about Army life, Lou had a feeling that Hare actually loved the military. It was the way he carried himself and the obvious pride he took in how he performed his job. Lou thought that, of all the men in the platoon, the Hare was the best candidate to become a lifer. As a prototype of what

attributes an infantryman should possess, the Hare was a perfect example. Intelligent, physically fit, and with a plethora of self-confidence.

Both of them kept quiet watch over the area for the first hour. Lou was alert, but not tense.

"Lou," Hare whispered.

"Yeah."

Hare scooted over to where Lou was sitting. Getting really close so that he could be heard easily, Hare said, "I got two of them today."

"What do you mean? Two of them. Two what?" Lou questioned, not quite getting the gist of the conversation up to this point.

"Two of them people today," Hare replied.

"You mean two of those gooks?" Lou asked.

"Yeah, the two Bobby didn't shoot," Hare whispered. Then he was quiet for a while. Lou didn't quite know what to make of the conversation or where it was headed. He sat there, saying nothing, waiting to see if there was a point that Hare was trying to get across. "I had the first guy in my sights when he went down. The other two guys just suddenly appeared in my sights. I put a couple of bursts on them and they both went down. I think I killed them." Again he became silent. No one else had claimed credit for the kills. Lou had thought that strange. It was the nature of the men to brag on anything they accomplished. Part of the group psychology. Again Lou sat quietly. Then Hare began crying softly beside him. This surprised Lou and made him feel uncomfortable. *Shit, now what do I do*, crossed his mind. Lou reached over and put a hand on the Hare's shoulder.

"It's okay," was the best he could come up with.

The Hare cried quietly for what seemed like five minutes. Lou did not look at his watch, being slightly more sensitive than that. Once Hare stopped, Lou climbed down into the foxhole. He squatted and got out a cigarette. By pulling his towel over his head and shoulders he was able to light it without letting any light escape into the night. Now what, he thought. He squatted there and quietly smoked his cigarette as the Hare sat quietly on the side of the foxhole above him. After he was done smoking, he climbed back up and sat next to Hare again.

"You alright?" he asked.

"Guess so."

"You did good today, you know," Lou said.

"I don't feel good. I feel like I did something wrong."

"That's okay. You don't have to feel good about doing your job, but you did well. Killing those guys was necessary. They both had weapons. Little fuckers would have killed you or me if they had a chance. They might have felt bad about it later, but that wouldn't have done us any good," Lou said. "If given a choice, I'd rather you wouldn't feel bad about having shot them. But I'd prefer that to them feeling sorry for shooting us. Besides, you didn't kill them."

"What?"

"I said you didn't kill them," Lou repeated.

"I just told you, I did," the Hare responded with a touch of irritation in his voice.

"No. You said you put a couple of bursts into them and they went down. Now maybe you killed them and maybe you didn't. There must have been three or four other guys zeroing in on those guys. I know they would have never exited the building if my grenade round had gotten there first, instead of making a hole in the jungle. Even if they went down, they may have only been wounded. From what I saw, each body had been hit several times, so there is no telling exactly whose round killed them. If you want credit, just tell Sgt. Wilson. I hear you get a three-day pass for a confirmed kill. No one else claimed the bodies. If you want them they're yours."

There was a slight pause before Hare responded. "No. I can't claim them. Like you say, maybe I didn't kill them. Maybe someone else did. I still don't feel good about it."

"Good," Lou replied. Neither one of them said anything else for the duration of the watch. They sat there quietly. It was a comfortable silence they shared. Lou had more respect for the guy now than he had before. The kid had a conscience, and that is to Lou what separated them from the enemy. Maybe that wasn't necessarily true, but for now it would have to do.

Lou thought back on his own reactions to the day's events. Despite being scared shitless, he had survived, and that was cause enough to feel good about things. There was the

realization that he hadn't felt any strong emotions when viewing the enemy dead. Maybe the fact that one of them had almost killed him had something to do with that. Another reason may have been that he accepted death as a part of the situation he was in. The ultimate end of all the training he had received was death. It was unfortunate, but Lou hadn't been the one to decide that a war was to take place. Now there were no choices. It was them or us. It did not seem strange that there were no enemy prisoners taken. The battle had been fought on the enemy's home turf. In the middle of the jungle there were no referees to call any fouls. Lou did not expect compassion from the enemy. Neither did he think that capturing the enemy and turning them over to the South Vietnamese would be doing them any favor. Oriental philosophy and the current situation in the South would almost certainly mean torture and death for the enemy. Louis had decided long ago that torture was not acceptable. He would not condone nor participate in any such action. Nor would he ever kill unarmed civilians. The thought of rape made him sick. All these things were unacceptable to his moral code. That code dictated that he risk his life in the service of his country. If his moral code ever put him in conflict with his superiors, he felt confident that he would do whatever was necessary to maintain his values.

It seemed strange when the company left the arena of combat that day. All the structures had been burnt to the ground. The bodies of the dead had been left lying on the ground where they had fallen. Their weapons had been shipped to the rear. As far as Lou knew, there were no booby traps left behind. He wondered if the enemy would work up the courage necessary to return to the area and claim their dead. Lou thought they might. Some of the guys in the outfit had dropped shoulder patches of the 173rd Airborne on some of the bodies. Supposedly to let the enemy know who they were dealing with. Lou thought of this as equivalent to a dog marking his territory by pissing on a tree. THIS IS OUR TERRITORY. BEWARE. FUCK WITH US AND DIE. Just a primitive means of beating on one's chest after a victory, really of no significance. Lou doubted that seeing the patch would send the enemy running north, having given up all hope of victory. Most of them would have no idea what it meant, other than it was sort of pretty. *Probably wipe their asses with them*, Lou thought.

It was finally 2300 hours. Lou gathered up his equipment. He crawled back and woke up Big John, then crawled over to his air mattress. He could hear John and Ben exchange greetings as they took over the foxhole. Lou reached into his rucksack and got out his poncho-liner. He had never actually used it before, since it had been issued only once the company arrived in country. In the rear there had been blankets to use, but the temperature never got low enough even to think about using one. The poncho liner was a very thin, lightweight blanket. Although Lou had his doubts as to whether it could keep him warm, he decided to use it now. The night had definitely cooled down. It was a welcomed relief to the heat they had lived in since arriving in Vietnam. Lou had wondered if he would ever be cool again. As he lay down on the air mattress, he made what he thought was enough noise to awaken the dead. The damn thing squeaked and moaned like a lady in love. Not that Lou had a lot of experience in that area. He had never really noticed that before in training. It probably did not seem important then. Lou closed his eyes.

"Lou," Big John whispered. Lou was instantly awake. Something must be wrong, he thought. Big John was crawling away toward the sound of his poncho flapping gently in the wind. Looking at his watch, Lou realized that two hours had passed and it was now time to resume watch. Moving slowly, he gathered up the necessary equipment, including his poncho liner to protect him from the night's chill. Every bone and joint in his body ached. It was as if someone had beaten the hell out of him while he slept. He unwisely decided to flex his right ankle. His body responded by sending a bolt of pain through it. Wincing, Lou let a quiet moan escape his lips. The ankle had tightened up over the past two hours. It was hurt and wanted to let the world know it. Its voice reached Lou loud and clear. Crawling slowly over to the foxhole, a distance of only five yards, was a chore. Once there, Lou arranged everything as before, ready for instant use. Sgt. Wilson sat on the other end of the foxhole and said nothing. Lou wondered if he was awake.

The next two hours were sheer hell. The need to sleep was overwhelming. During the past two nights, Lou had gotten a total of five hours sleep. The excitement of the days and the newness of the environment had held his attention and kept him alert. Now the body was demanding payback. It needed sleep to rejuvenate itself. It demanded sleep. It would not be

denied. Lou refused to give in to his body's need. He had to refuse. Pulling watch was no laughing matter. If the enemy decided to attack, it would be a lightning attack. On the other hand, the enemy could be waiting already, right out there in the bush. Waiting for someone's chin to drop down to their chest in sleep. An opportunity to pass through the company's outer defenses undetected. To get in the middle of the enemy camp and begin killing from there. It might seem farfetched to a civilian, but it had happened to other outfits in the past. Knowing the consequences of sleeping did not help much. The body struggled to impose its will on Lou, and he fought against it for the next two hours. Sometimes his eyes refused to focus. Shaking his head vigorously would help that condition, but only for a minute or so. Lou would flex the ankle to awaken the pain, but even that would only help as long as the pain lasted. Inflicting pain on his body was not Lou's idea of fun. He removed his poncho liner and exposed his body to the chill of the night. This helped for a short time while making his life even more miserable. It would have been nice if he could have asked one of the other guys to pull his watch for him, but that wasn't the way things were done out here. Every man in the outfit was probably suffering from sleep deprivation by now. As he sat there, Lou wondered if there were positions around the perimeter where the men had succumbed to the temptations of sleep. He would not be surprised if this had happened. It certainly would be interesting to find out. Lou suffered along for the two hours, maintaining his shift, awake if not alert. By time 0300 hours rolled around Lou was emotionally and physically drained. He used his last ounces of energy and consciousness to awaken Big John from his sleep. Big John was hard to arouse. This did not surprise Lou in the least. Lou made sure John made it all the way to the foxhole before finding his air mattress.

"Lou," Big John called again. Again time had betrayed him, passing swiftly in the night, leaving no presence for Lou to savor. The dawn had not yet arrived, but her presence was discernible to Lou's internal clock. He did not bother looking at his watch for the real time. Lou moved over next to the tree that would have served as his fighting position if they had been attacked during his sleep. Again his body sent messages concerning the stress being placed upon it by the jungle. Lou removed two aspirin from his jacket pocket and swallowed them along with water from his canteen. The water was cool and refreshing. Everything was covered

with a fine sheet of moisture deposited by the cooling of the tropical air here in the mountains. By the time Lou had settled in his position, his trouser legs were wet, adding another measure to Lou's discomfort as he settled in behind the tree. It was still dark, but his night vision allowed him to make out objects as long as he did not try to stare at them directly for too long. Two yards to his left was the foxhole, and he could make out Big John and two other bodies manning the position. To his left, he could hear one of the men in the next position moving about. It was that time of the day when the company again went on complete alert against an enemy attack.

Lou's ears picked up a message being passed around the perimeter from the left. Listening alertly, he heard Sgt. Wilson tell the men at the foxhole, "Mad minute in ten minutes."

Next Big John repeated the message in Lou's direction. Lou repeated the message toward the position on the right and then listened closely as it was passed on again. Wherever the message had originated, it was now traveling around the perimeter in both directions. Each man or position was responsible for picking up the message and passing it along correctly. It had been Lou's job not only to receive the message but also to listen to the next person passing it along to ensure it was not distorted. The company had practiced this particular form of communications many times during training. Everyone had to be careful, since it was easy to distort the message by the time it had been passed through so many men. It only worked if the message was short and pertinent to the current situation.

A "mad minute" was a technique the company would use periodically when in the bush. At the designated time, all the men would fire their weapons into the area directly in front of their position. Each rifleman would expend a clip of ammunition while the grenadiers expended two rounds of their choice. The practice served several purposes. For one thing it allowed each man in the outfit to evaluate the functioning of his weapon. Another use was that it allowed the men to expend some of the older ammunition they might be carrying. The men had already been taught to keep track of which ammunition was new and which was old. It was especially important that rifle ammunition be periodically removed from the clip and checked for cleanliness. In the jungle everything was exposed to constant high heat and humidity. Things could rust and become corroded, making them inoperable at the worst of times. The

mad minute was also meant to discourage the enemy from launching an attack early in the day. It would put them on notice that the company was fully alert and ready should they choose to attack. It was also possible that the company might actually bag a gook. It would be an accident, but it could happen.

As far as Lou knew there were no listening posts out in front of his position. The company had several such positions around its perimeter. A man going out to an LP was responsible for notifying the positions he would be laying out in front of, approximately where he would be. This would alert them to the fact that if things got hairy out there, one of their own men might find it necessary to make his way into the perimeter during the night. The men going on LP were always careful to make sure the men occupying the positions knew the passwords for the night. Forgetfulness could get you killed. It was the responsibility of the men on the LP to find a position where they were safe from any firing coming from the perimeter. Their skill at finding that kind of position would be tested this morning.

Running his towel over the M-16 to wipe the dampness from it, Lou's finger found the safety and checked to ensure it was in the safe position. Even though Lou had not had an M-16 for a while, it was a habit learned during training. He would make a conscious effort to do it frequently during the day until the gesture had become second nature. From talking with a veteran of jungle fighting, the men in the outfit knew that accidental shootings did take place. Each man was responsible for protecting the other men in the company from their own weapons. Pvt. Bennet had reinforced that training just two days ago. Lou adjusted his position so that he could fire his weapon the instant the signal was given. The sky to the east was lightening quickly now, and Lou could begin to discern individual trees and bushes. He scanned the area looking for some target he might sight in on when the company opened fire. He had never fired this particular weapon before, and since it had jammed on Bobby the day before, Lou was a little anxious about its performance. Bobby had adjusted both windage and elevation settings on the rear sights for his own use. He and Bobby were almost the same height. It was possible that the weapon was already pretty much zeroed in for Lou's use. It would still be nice to check it. Lou spotted a flare that had been taped to the side of a small tree. Its small silhouette was very distinctive and stood out enough that Lou thought he could

sight in on it. The target was only twenty-five feet away, but in the jungle, where line of site was normally limited, it would have to do. Lou lay his right cheek along the stock of the rifle and peered through the hole in the rear sight. The target immediately disappeared from view. It was not quite light enough yet to make the shot. Lou would be patient. In a few minutes the light would be bright enough to see the target better. Of course, whoever was in charge could not allow that to occur. It simply would have been too convenient for Lou. Seconds after deciding it wasn't light enough to make the shot he wanted, the whole company opened fire. The noise and firepower was impressive.

Lou's first burst was directed at the tree with the flare taped to its side. It was simply too good a target to ignore. He fired without the use of the weapon's sights. The light was simply too weak for good shot selection. That was the whole idea behind the exercise. It was exactly that time of the day the enemy would have an advantage in launching an attack. No one would be able to get an accurate shot. On the other hand, with automatic weapons at close range, shooting was more instinctive than calculated. The men had been allowed to practice shooting from the hip in training. Not enough practice to get really good at it, but enough to give the men a taste for it. At real close range, the fastest just might live to talk about it. After that first burst, Lou just sprayed the area with bursts of three to five rounds. Within seconds his weapon was empty. That was the downside of automatic weapons. They ate up ammo at a prodigious rate. The company had almost managed to shoot itself out of ammo yesterday. The situation had since changed, with the men each being issued more ammunition, and so Lou did not feel obligated to limit himself to one magazine. From the sound of it, neither did anyone else. Lou quickly hit the release freeing the empty magazine from the weapon. Without looking, he grabbed the next magazine and inserted it into the weapon, tapping its bottom to make sure it was completely seated. He released the bolt, chambering the first round, and started firing again. Lou smiled as he finished off the second magazine. It felt good to be firing the M-16 again. Once the weapon ran out of ammunition for a second time, Lou quickly went through the procedure of reloading. He never looked down at the weapon during the process, making his body practice the procedure without the benefit of sight. At night, this is how it would have to perform. In combat, it might be necessary to

maintain his concentration toward the action taking place around him. He did not want to become distracted by the needs of the weapon if at all possible. Some of the men in the squad had at first thought Lou weird when he practiced these moves in a dark room or out on the lawn in front of the barracks at night. Then Lou started issuing challenges to men in the squad. Who could unload and load their weapons the quickest in the dark. First with one magazine, then two, then three. Lou was always the fastest. Some of this was because he had started practicing earlier than the other men in the group. As they practiced, they got faster, but somehow Lou was always just a little faster. His mind was always able to locate the various items necessary to complete the task quickly, without the need for sight. Now everything occurred without thought. It was a part of his repertoire, requiring no more thought than taking a piss. The firing stopped as quickly as it had started. Lou again flicked the safety on, ensuring his weapon was protected from accidental discharge. The firing had been good for him. It woke him up. His weapon had not malfunctioned, a fact which gave him a feeling of confidence in its functionality. Lou maintained his position until the whole company was allowed to stand down.

As soon as the sun appeared over the top of the mountains to the east, the company stood down. One man from the fire team had to remain on watch at the foxhole, but the other men were free to go about their business. Again Lou crawled over to his air mattress. He was careful not to move the right ankle any more than absolutely necessary. Since Big John had opted to stay at the foxhole, Lou was free to clean his rifle. He ejected the clip from the rifle and removed the round from the chamber, replacing it in the clip before laying it beside him. He laid two grenades by his right side for immediate use if something should happen while his weapon was broken down for cleaning. Five minutes later, his weapon was ready for use, having been cleaned and reassembled.

PFC Murphy came by and looked at the ankle. Some of the swelling had gone down since the night before, as Lou had known it would. The medic wrapped the ankle in an elastic bandage. Once Lou had replaced his sock and laced up his boot, the medic again taped the ankle around the outside of the boot for further support. He handed Lou a malaria pill and about ten aspirin. "Take two of these every four hours," he said.

"What's this thing about bleeding to death you talked about yesterday?" Lou asked.

"Aspirin affects how fast the blood clots," Murphy replied standing up. "If you take enough, it can thin out your blood so much that we might have trouble stopping the bleeding if you get shot."

"Fuck that," Lou said, offering the aspirin back to the medic.

"You keep those," Murphy said, shaking his head and smiling. "You're going to need them for the next couple of days anyway. After that, the ankle might be well enough that we can reduce the dosage. Besides, why should you be different from anyone else?"

"What you mean by that?"

"How's your body feel this morning?"

"Like someone stomped me," Lou replied.

"Everyone I've talked to feels the same way. Nobody was ready for this kind of humping. Last night the medics had to treat at least twenty guys for muscle cramps and mild heat exhaustion. This morning it was a feat for some of the men just to stand up. I've been passing out aspirin like candy to every man in the outfit. Knowles has already told the captain that the men should be given the day to rest. Of course that's not possible, but maybe the company will have a little easier day of it." With that PFC Murphy moved off toward Big John. Lou got up and tested the foot. It felt good. He packed his gear as quickly as possible. He was slowed by the need to deflate the air mattress. It took a lot of effort to deflate it completely. Any air left in the damn thing would make it impossible to fold away and carry in the rucksack. Once that was done, Lou was again disgusted with both its weight and bulk.

Lou moved down to the foxhole with his gear. Big John got up and moved over to his air mattress. The first thing he did was unload his weapon and clean it. Lou got a can of C rations from his sack. *Beans and Weenies, the Breakfast of Champions*, he thought. He dug a hole in the dirt in front of the foxhole and proceeded to heat up his meal along with some water for coffee. After polishing off his meal, Lou leaned back against his rucksack and lit up. The morning was still a little cool and things were quiet. Again Lou began to feel sleepy.

Sgt. Wilson came over and plunked his ass down next to Lou. "I fall asleep last night?" he asked.

"Hell, I don't know, Sarge," Lou replied. "I don't think so, but I can't swear I was awake the whole time. I think I was. Every time I looked over your head was off your chest, and you didn't snore, if that means anything."

Sgt. Wilson smiled at his answer. "Good enough," he said, standing back up. He walked off toward the squad's other position, where Lou could see him talking to Sgt. Taylor. Lou leaned back on the rucksack, getting comfortable again.

"Hey, Lou," Johnny Norr said. He was approaching Lou from the next position over. Johnny was a member of Second Squad. Of all the people in the platoon, Lou liked Johnny the least. He was a city boy. Born and raised in New York City. Lou could think of a lot of words to describe Johnny, and none of them were nice. He did not trust the boy and often wondered why Johnny was so popular with most of the men in the platoon. Maybe it was Lou's own prejudices surfacing.

"You got any extra cigarettes I can bum?" Johnny asked.

"Sure," Lou said. He reached into the side pocket of his rucksack and came out with a full pack of Salem's. He tossed them to Johnny. "Thanks," Johnny said, turning and walking back to his position. As Johnny disappeared behind a tree, Lou remembered that Johnny did not smoke. He called over to Ben and asked him to watch the foxhole. As Ben came over, Lou got to his feet and walked over to where Johnny's position was located. He started to round the tree and then stopped. From his vantage point Lou could see Johnny Norr talking to Ned White. White was on his knees, digging through his rucksack. A minute later his hand came out holding two small cans of C rations. The smaller C ration cans always carried the deserts that came with each meal. White handed over the two cans, and in return Johnny handed him Lou's pack of cigarettes. Lou turned and walked back to his position. It was a typical Johnny Norr move. Getting cigarettes from Lou and then exchanging them for C rations with Ned. Lou just shook his head in wonder. He should have known better. Lou was angrier with Ned for not asking him for the cigarettes directly. Ned was hesitant about asking anyone for anything, whereas Johnny would ask a dying man for his last breath. Johnny and Ned were paired, and Johnny never seemed to hesitate using Ned for his own purposes. It was just one of several reasons Lou did not like Johnny.

Fifteen minutes later Sgt. Wilson made it back to the foxhole. The other fire team followed him over. The men in Lou's team were already packed and ready to move, except for the foxhole that still needed to be filled and the claymore mines and trip flares that were still in place. These would be the last things packed before the company moved out. Lou got his map out as soon as the sergeant came back. Sgt. Wilson held out his hand, and Lou gave the map over. The sergeant looked at it for a moment, orienting it to the north so that it made sense to him. He squatted, and the men in the squad gathered around him. The guys in the group facing toward the outside of the perimeter kept their eyes scanning the scenery throughout the briefing. No one in the group had their back completely turned to the jungle. It was a small thing, a minor adjustment in the group's demeanor. The day before, Lou was not sure this would have happened. Of course yesterday they had snuck up on the enemy and blew them away. Subconsciously, the men had learned a lesson about letting their guard down. Now they all gathered around Sgt. Wilson to listen to his briefing, but they were also paying attention to what was happening around them. Lou glanced at his watch. It was almost 0730 hours. The beginning of another day in the field. At least it would be their last one before returning to An Khe for some rest.

END