

#8 Thanks – Late 1967 – jungle, Vietnam

It had been raining for the past week every day for at least several hours and all day for the past twenty four hours. It was remarkable to Lou that he hadn't swelled up like a sponge or shriveled up like a prune.

It had been a hard day. The company had moved four clicks through the jungle and was now encamped on top of a mountain to Lou's rear. It had been during the march that the company had come across the trail that lay fifteen yards to Lou's front. It had been a logical place for the platoon to set up an ambush. There were signs that the trail had seen much use lately, and Lou felt there was a real chance that the ambush might get sprung.

When the platoon had moved into position, it had been hard to find a good place to set up. The terrain was steep, and the trail was located halfway down the mountain. The land sloped steeply on either side of the trail. It was only common sense to set the platoon up above the trail. Lou lay on the slope sort of curled around a tree. This was necessary just to keep from sliding down the hill. He was wrapped in his poncho, but this had not kept him completely dry. And the night was not particularly cool, so he was able to maintain his body temperature and not get chilled.

He had placed his claymores to cover the trail. They were located about ten feet from it, and because of the slope of the hill, they would be at almost eye level when he detonated them. They were also tipped slightly downward to ensure they would get anyone who might lay down on the trail or attempt to flee downhill. Lou wished there had been time to set booby traps on the down side of the hill for the enemy to detonate if they were forced to flee in that direction.

It was around 0230 hours by his estimate. Lou had learned not to bother looking at his watch at night when in ambush. There was no reason for it. There was no task to be performed at any given time. The men were not pulling watches. It was up to each man to be ready if the ambush needed to spring. Most of the men would be awake in the jungle around Lou. Waiting. Lou was sure some were sleeping, but as long as they did not snore or make

noise, it did not matter to Lou. He knew they would wake up in the instant things began to happen and that they would come out fighting.

Sleep. Real sleep. The sleep of the innocent. The sleep of a man at peace with himself and his world. That sleep was gone forever. Never again would his mind shut down as his body rested. Those days were gone. Now his sleep was that of a jungle animal. It was a requirement of survival, and so he did sleep, but it was not the sleep he had known just two weeks ago. Sleeping with one eye open now had true meaning to Lou. It was a trick all the men had been forced to learn.

It was the middle of the night, and Lou was wide awake. He was becoming a nocturnal thing. Now the night was his friend, and he felt most alive and at peace during its passage. Laying there in the dark felt good. He was invisible. The jungle was alive, and so was he. On a night like this, with the rain dampening the noise and shutting out all light, Lou felt safe. His sensory antennae were alert. An enemy or a friend could not approach without Lou sensing them. It was an overwhelming advantage in this situation and would aid his survival as much as that was possible in such a hostile environment. While completely awake and alert, Lou was not tense. Tension would come if any sensation touched his nervous system. For now he just lay there at ease, letting his muscles relax from the work of the day.

Physically, Lou's body was recovered from the initial shock of the hardship imposed upon it by living in the jungle. His right ankle, which he had injured while exiting a helicopter, was much better. He had to keep it wrapped in an ace bandage most of the time, and he did limp slightly because it was still sore, but the ankle no longer hampered his movement. Lou had come to realize his body was in good condition. The company's move had been hard. Two weeks ago, no one would have been capable of handling such a long day without being completely exhausted. Now everyone was capable of handling the physical labor of such a move.

Lou estimated the weight of the supplies and munitions that were carried on his back to be around seventy-five to eighty pounds. The terrain was brutal, dense jungle situated on steep mountains. The days were hot. When the sun was out, the temperatures could be over a hundred degrees with very high humidity. The rains made the ground slippery whether they

were moving up or down the hills. Despite all this, Lou's body had reached a point where it could handle a long day's movement with only minimal protest. Tomorrow the day would be repeated, and despite being in ambush tonight, his body would handle tomorrow's march with similar ease.

Mentally, Lou had adjusted to the violence of the environment in which he now operated. The days were long with periods of intense physical labor, and that could be mind numbing, just trying to survive and live in an unfriendly environment. Then a sudden meeting of hostile forces, the violence. Trying to close with and kill the enemy or trying to keep from being overwhelmed by a superior force. Regardless of the outcome, there were mental scars left by such actions, and one such scar was called adaptation. Lou's squad had been lucky so far. PFC Chuck Johns had been its only casualty, and he had been lost to the mosquitoes. He had some sort of severe allergic reaction to mosquito bites.

The First Platoon had lost four men over the past week. It had happened during a short firefight initiated by the enemy. Two of the men had been hit in the initial burst of automatic weapons fire that had signaled the beginning of the fight. Another had been hurt going to their rescue. The fourth one had picked up shrapnel from a grenade the enemy had gotten close enough to do damage. Only one of the men was dead when they evacuated them from the field, although another one was in bad shape. No one knew what happened to them once they left the company.

They had been able to close with the enemy and engage them for almost thirty minutes that day. Captain Pickett had done a good job of maneuvering the company to maintain contact and keep pressure on them during the fight. The artillery had provided good support. The company had lost ten men, killed or wounded, and it was credited with a body count of twenty enemies. It had evidently been a chance encounter, and the company had acquitted itself well.

Losing close friends was hard. Lou had not cried. Amongst the men in his company, crying was not acceptable behavior. They were Airborne Infantry. The toughest, meanest fighters in the world. Every one of them was a volunteer who knew what was expected of him and was willing to pay any price to belong. Part of that price was the loss of friends. Another

part of the price was the need to be strong when such losses occurred. No crying allowed. No weakness shown. Just smile and carry on.

Laying there in the rain, Lou thought about the men they had lost. It was a luxury he could afford in the dark, and yet it troubled him. He could not recall their names or faces or voices. A selective amnesia that he found distressing. *Is that what will happen to me*, he wondered? *Killed and forgotten?* The men in the company did not talk about those friends they had lost. They talked of enemy dead and confirmed kills, but not the cost of such things.

Lou knew he would probably be killed or wounded. It was a realistic evaluation of the situation. They were operating in the enemy's backyard against units numerically superior. It was only a matter of time before the enemy either pinned them down and kicked their ass or they stumbled across of battalion or two of NVA. The company had around one hundred and forty men in it now. The men were proving themselves capable of meeting the image they had of themselves. Everyone had proven capable of pulling his weight in combat. Still, a company was not a very big force in comparison to what the enemy had in this area. There was little hope of ground support once the unit was engaged. There were gunships, artillery, and air support. These would help to some degree, but they would be of little or no use once the two forces were in each other's face. Those things, the machines of mass destruction, became background music when the unit was engaged.

During the last firefight, Lou had gotten off two grenades at the enemy. The enemy was close enough and Lou had a good lane for throwing. He had to expose himself for an instant each time to get off good throws. The jungle had not allowed for a classic overhand lob. Instead, Lou used the standard, shortstop to first base, side arm, quick delivery style. Both times Lou had gotten off the throw with bullets passing close to his position. The explosions had been satisfactory and had accomplished his goal of first reducing the firing from that area, and then eliminating it. His squad had been moved back after that incident. Once the firefight ended, with the enemy withdrawing, Lou's squad moved back through the area where the firefight had occurred. Lou went to the area where his grenades had gone off. He and Big John were pleased to find a couple of nice size holes blown in the shrubbery. There was also an abundance of blood sprayed over the area. No bodies or body parts, just blood.

Neither Lou nor John said anything to each other or anyone else about their find. Lou admitted to himself later that he felt bad about it. He was happy there were no bodies to haunt him. Someday there would be, but he was willing to wait. Killing was not part of the job; it was the job.

Having accepted the inevitable outcome of his lifestyle, Lou had adopted the mentality of a hunter. He would not be the hunted or allow himself to be perceived as bait, hung out to entice the enemy. Instead he decided to be the hunter. His job was to find and kill game. It was what his platoon was doing right now. Sitting in the bush, waiting for the game to enter the trap.

Lou needed to urinate. Bodily functions were just another one of those little unpleasant things that needed to be dealt with, regardless of the circumstances. The fact that the night was pitch black and the rain would dampen any noise, made it an easier task to perform than might otherwise be the case. Lou stood slowly, noiselessly. Once his needs had been taken care of, he took the opportunity to stretch his muscles and relieve some of the kinks that had been building by laying on the ground motionless. Everything was done very slowly, making sure no noise was generated by his movements.

Lou was preparing to lay back down when he saw a light flash through the brush. He froze in place, watching. It was impossible to have been mistaken. The light had disappeared quickly, leaving behind the thought that it may have never existed. A hallucination. Lou slowly sat on the ground directly behind the tree that he called home that night. Again the light flashed through the brush.

On a night like this, in the middle of the jungle, the only way anyone could see was with a flashlight. It had come as a surprise to the men that the enemy would use flashlights to move. Like all the other men, Lou had almost convinced himself that the enemy could move at night without any need for light. It went against all logic of course. On a night like this, a cat couldn't see its whiskers.

Lou sensed the change that was now taking place in the jungle around him. All animal and bird noise was dimming. A reaction to the approaching intruders. This change would have registered their approach even if their light had not. The glimpsed light had been some

distance off. Being able to see it had been more of a freak accident than anything. The jungle here was so dense that, even though Lou was only fifteen yards from the trail, there was no chance that anyone standing on the trail and directing a light at his location would be able to see anything to give his position away.

Like all the other men in the platoon, Lou did not have to see the enemy to accomplish his mission this night. The claymore mines and hand grenades would do the job without the need to expose himself. The two hand-held generators for the claymore mines lay on the ground near the right edge of the tree. Lou leaned forward and picked them up. Along with his rifle, he cradled them in his lap. Taking two grenades off his webbing, Lou straightened the cotter pins. This would allow him to pull the retaining pins out of the grenades easier. By placing his left hand on the tree he would be able to throw the grenades in a gentle arc to the trail below, and then duck behind the tree before they went off. He had pictured the throw in his mind before night had descended and was sure they would not hit anything on their way to the target. It would be impossible to get a grenade to the trail using the left side of the tree because of the heavy brush and several smaller trees in the way.

Platoon Sergeant Harris was covering the end of the ambush from where the enemy would enter the kill zone. It would be his job to initiate the ambush. Everyone had been positioned so that they could not be seen from the trail, or in turn, see the trail. The whole ambush would consist of all the claymores being fired within an instant of one another, followed by hand grenades thrown into the kill zone by those who could do so safely.

The kill zone had been established by spreading the men along the route of the trail at approximately five yard intervals. Each man had set up two claymores to cover the sector of the trail immediately to their front. Only the first three squads were in the ambush sight. Lt. Burroughs had Fourth Squad spread out up the hill about fifty yards from the trail. They were set up in a fallback position for the ambush. Once the ambush was blown, the men could withdraw up the hill, if necessary, and set up another defensive line where Fourth Squad was established.

The men had been cautioned about using their rifles only if absolutely necessary. The platoon did not want to give away its position unless it came directly under fire. The claymores

and grenades would not give away their positions. The enemy would have no idea what hit them, and their only desire would be to leave the area.

Lou sat in the dark, impatiently. Now he was tense, a polite way of saying scared shitless. His heart was beating fast. Trying to control his breathing was a chore. He closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths. His right hand ran gently over the rifle in his lap, then changed direction and found the handheld generators to the claymores. Crouching down as much as possible, Lou waited.

Lou had heard the men passing his position for the past twenty minutes. There were a whole lot of them. At first he had been scared, and then, as time passed without the ambush being sprung, he had gotten mad. Now, having come to the realization of why the ambush had not begun, Lou was even more scared than before.

The initial fear had been caused by the upcoming fight, although at the time, Lou had felt sure of a favorable outcome. Lou's confidence had been replaced by fear with the realization that the enemy force marching through the ambush sight was a hell of a lot bigger than the platoon was capable of handling. If the ambush was discovered or if it were blown, the platoon would initially wreak a large amount of havoc on the enemy. Those caught in the kill zone would either be killed or wounded, but those enemy located outside the kill zone would be pissed. The enemy column was long enough that there were enemy units now positioned on either side of the ambush, that could attack their relatively unprotected flanks, leaving the men in the platoon encircled by the enemy in the dark.

Louis kept calm. Calm, like a deer caught in the headlights of a car. After twenty minutes of not moving a muscle, he grew tired and lay on his side. The enemy continued to make noise as they passed, but unless one of them strayed up the hill in the dark, there would be no way for them to know he or any of the other men were there. Lou closed his eyes and yawned. He knew this was not because he wanted to sleep but because of his nervousness. Yawning and suffering from heavy eyelids had been a reaction he had encountered whenever the unit was in an aircraft preparing for a parachute jump.

Finally the enemy column was past the platoon's ambush site. Lou maintained his quiet watchfulness for another ten minutes before beginning to relax. It had been a close call, and

Lou was thankful that the platoon had been able to survive unscathed. It would give the men a good subject for conversation in the days to come.

Lou had to wonder how different men would perceive the events of the night. Had some of them slept through it? Would they understand why the ambush had not been blown? Would they agree or disagree with the decision? Would they admit to being as scared as Lou had been? Of course he would not admit that to the other men in the ambush unless they admitted it first.

The night again began to come alive with animal and insect noises as life in this particular part of the jungle settled back to normal. It had been a full twenty minutes since the enemy departed when the sound of artillery fire echoed through the valley.

Of course, Lou thought. Captain Pickett had sent a patrol off to follow the trail that afternoon. They had not moved along the trail, but had marched through the jungle parallel to it. The captain had evidently set up a prearranged artillery point. Once he had received word about what was happening with the ambush, he gave the enemy an opportunity to reach that point on the trail and then had the artillery boys send a barrage onto the position. From the sound of it, the guys manning the guns would be getting a workout.

Lou listened as the artillery kept up a constant barrage. Slowly the fire was shifting further to the East in the hope that the enemy was fleeing along the trail in that direction. If the enemy was reacting the way Lou's company had been taught, they would have immediately lain down after the first shell had landed. The artillery would do considerable damage, but the safest place to be would be eating dirt. The jungle would negate a lot of the damage the shells could inflict, the trees and brushes absorbing huge quantities of shrapnel and dampening the blast of the explosions.

Lou felt sorry for the enemy. Artillery fire was by its nature frightening. Humans did not deserve to die in such a manner. Yet, this was war, and artillery and bombs were part of its cost.

Suddenly there were sounds coming up the hill from the trail below. The enemy had reappeared on the trail, now moving in the opposite direction, quickly. Lou gathered up the hand-held generators for the claymore mines again. They were barely in his hands before there

were two explosions just off to his left. Lou did not hesitate. Without thought, more as a reflex, the two claymore mines in front of his position went off. It was a good thing there was a tree directly in front of Lou, because he could hear some of the debris from the back blast landing in the brush around him.

Lou had instinctively closed his eyes before setting off the claymore mines. Even with his eyes shut some of the light could be sensed behind his eyelids. Lou grabbed the first hand grenade with his right hand, and pulled the pin with his left. His hand encircled the grenade, holding its spoon handle against the side. He felt the tree with his left hand and moved his body so he was positioned where his right arm had clearance to make the necessary throw. Keeping his eyes shut, Lou launched his first grenade, followed seconds later by his second. He was already back behind his tree when the first one went off.

The noise of the exploding ambush was deafening. The sound and blast of the various weapons were blended into one continuous noise. Lou was tempted to place his hands over his ears, but instead he went about the business of preparing to hose down the area below with his M-16 rifle. Up until now there had been no sound of small arms fire. If it were occurring, the noise was being drowned out by the much louder noise of high explosives.

Almost as quickly as it started, the noise and explosions died away. Holy shit! Lou thought. He was sure there was nothing alive in the kill zone. No way. But then he did hear voices coming from directly below him on the trail. Without hesitation he grabbed another grenade from his webbing, but before he could pull the pin, there was another series of explosions along the path. Evidently Lou wasn't the only one hearing voices. Pulling the pin, Lou lobbed the grenade down where the others had gone.

Lou had kept his eyes shut throughout the engagement, trying to maintain his night vision. Then he opened his left eye. There was nothing to see. The night was pitch black, and with the rain, visibility remained zero. *At least I know the other guys are awake*, Lou thought. He opened his other eye since there was nothing to ruin his night vision.

At just that same instant, the flare went off directly overhead. It turned the night into a surrealistic landscape of overwhelmingly light and dark shadows. Lou could not see the trail below, but then he couldn't in daylight either. The smell of cordite hung heavily in the air. He

liked the smell normally, but now it was causing a burning sensation in his nostrils. A pall of smoke drifted through the jungle, heading up the hill toward the company.

Lou waited tensely for the fight to resume. Instead, he heard voices passing a message toward his position from off to his left. Finally he heard distinctly the message to fall back. Lou whispered the message to his right and was rewarded by hearing Big John pass the message along.

Turning his back to the trail, Lou began climbing the hill to his rear. Fourth Squad could be reached by climbing straight up the hill. Once there, the platoon would turn and set up a defensive position. Anyone deciding to follow the platoon up the hill would get more of what they had just gotten. The first flare was drifting back toward the top of the hill as the second one went off. It was evident that someone knew the men were pulling out and had decided to assist them with some luminance.

Lou was in a hurry to get back to the next position up the hill. He felt naked climbing the hill with his back to the trail. A cold chill ran along his spine just at the thought of the enemy getting a clear shot at his back. After moving about twenty yards up the hill, Lou stopped long enough to sling his rifle across his back. The mountain was so steep and slippery with the constant rain that Lou felt he needed both hands free in order to make good time up the hill. He heard the noise of someone moving up the hill to his left. That would be Big John, Lou supposed. *Can't let the big guy beat me to the next position. I'll never hear the end of it,* Lou thought, beginning to move again.

It happened maybe ten yards from his destination. A challenge from one of the men in the Fourth Squad would come at any second. Lou had just taken an instant to recall the password he would need to enter the perimeter. The hill had flattened out onto a ledge maybe five feet wide. There was a tree, three feet in diameter, lying across the ground. Lou climbed up on it and jumped down on the other side. There was a flare in the air over his right shoulder. It was lighting the hill brilliantly while casting a black shadow of the log's outline. Hidden within the log's shadow was a shallow hole that Lou could not see. Lou found that hole with his left foot. The foot hit the ground and rolled over on him, bearing all his weight. The pain was immediate, intense, and sickening. Lou fell, and an uncontrollable moan left his lips.

There was no doubt in Lou's mind about what had just taken place. Having twisted his right ankle several times, he recognized the pain immediately, although it seemed somehow misplaced in the left ankle. He had never injured that one before. Louis lay there on the ground in both physical and mental anguish. The next thing he heard was someone climbing onto the tree he had just exited. He turned his head and saw a huge man standing on the tree, about to jump on him.

Laying in the dark shadow of the log, Lou knew he was invisible to the man on top.

"Watch your step, Big John," he said, "The first one down is hell."

Lou had managed to startle Big John, who almost fell backward off the log.

"That you, Lou?" Big John asked needlessly.

"No. It isn't me. I'm a gook and I'm pissed. Just what the hell you trying to do to me? Make me go deaf?"

The flare was drifting north, and the shadow shifted. Suddenly Lou was laying on the ground exposed to the bright light. Big John climbed down beside him.

"You don't look like a gook. Small enough and got those squinty eyes, but you're a lot uglier than most gooks. What's the password?" Big John asked.

"Hell, I don't know," Lou replied.

"Aha! All gooks know our password. You ain't no gook. You one of them Ugly Americans I read about. You taking a break or just trying to scare the shit out of me?"

"Just taking a break, BJ," Lou replied. The really intense pain of the initial sprain had receded to be replaced by the throbbing pain that would be present for the next several days. While uncomfortable, Lou knew the pain would remain bearable if he were careful. He stood up and took a step forward onto it. Even moving gingerly, it caused pain to shoot up his leg.

"Let's go," Lou said. "You first."

Big John looked at him suspiciously. "No. After you. I insist."

Lou led off, heading for the new perimeter. "You're limping," B.J. said.

Lou turned and looked at him. "I've been limping for the past two weeks."

"Yeah, but now you're limping backwards," Big replied.

"Backwards?"

"You know, not right," Big John said.

"You got something against the way I limp? You okay, BJ? Didn't take some shrapnel in the head, did you?" Lou asked.

"Fuck you, Lou. You hurt your other ankle jumping off that log, didn't you?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"Here. Let me help you," Big John said, reaching out and taking Lou's arm.

"What you gonna do? Carry me up the hill, you big ape? Just leave me alone. I can make it. You go ahead and warn the guys not to shoot anything limping towards the perimeter."

Once having been given marching orders, Big John was conditioned to obey. He turned and within seconds was out of sight. Lou limped over to where the hill again slanted steeply upward. He grabbed hold of a nearby tree and began hauling his ass up the hill. It took him almost ten minutes to reach the new perimeter.

"Lou! Over here!" Lou recognized Big John's voice immediately. Moving over to his left, he spotted the man standing there partially concealed by a tree. He limped over to John's position and collapsed onto the ground behind the tree.

"Specialist Merrins. Why can't you get shot like other people?" a voice asked.

"Very funny, Murphy. What you doing here?"

"Big John asked me to look at your ankle. I declined. Said I already seen the damn thing this morning. I figured if you hurt it again, it's your own damn fault. Then he tells me it's your other one that's hurt. Swell, just what I need. You're crabby enough with one ankle hurt. I can't wait to be around you with both ankles injured. I have some tape out, so just let me tape the boot for support and get back to sleep," PFC Murphy said.

Lou lay back and raised his left foot. Murphy squatted and lay the foot across one of his legs. In the light of the flare, visibility was good. Even so, he checked the ankle mostly by touch.

"You sure it isn't broken, Lou?" he asked

"Pretty sure," Lou answered.

"How bad you hurt it?"

"About the same as the right ankle," Lou replied.

"Okay," Murphy said as he began to wrap the tape around the boot at ankle level. "In the morning I'll want to take the boot off and examine it more closely."

"Okay, Murph," Lou said. The medic had done a good job making sure his right ankle was properly wrapped and taped after he had injured it two weeks earlier. PFC Murphy was a good medic whose skills had become evident as the unit saw action. He didn't panic under fire, and he moved toward an injured man as soon as the call "MEDIC!" went out. All the men respected him. He had earned it.

Most of the members of the platoon had already arrived prior to Lou. Within minutes, everyone was present and accounted for, and each squad took over a part of the new perimeter. Lou wound up facing down the hill. Once more there were claymores in front of his position. He had one assigned to him when he took over the position from one of the men in Fourth Squad.

There was now silence among the men of the platoon as again they awaited the appearance of the enemy. Lou thought it unlikely that they would try to follow the platoon up the hill. He was sure they had been severely mistreated by both the artillery and ambush. The enemy was probably still trying to figure out what happened, where the enemy was located, and what bad news was in store for them next. The answer to that arrived within seconds.

Lou heard the news in the form of the noise made as a mortar round exited its tube. It was a distinctive noise that all the men were familiar with. The company had been on the receiving end of mortars just once so far. It was a scary experience and had taught them to respect the weapon when it was brought to bear on a target. The platoon had been moved back from the ambush sight to give the weapons section, located in the perimeter atop the hill, room to work. The first mortar round landed well below the ambush site. Even though the men were located a hundred yards further up the hill, the noise was frightening. Lou could only guess what the enemy was thinking at that instant. They would know the next round would be a lot closer. He wondered if those who could were boogying down the trail or heading up the hill to the safety of a close encounter with the men of First Platoon. Within seconds of the first round landing the second round was on its way. From where he lay, Lou estimated the second

round to be right on target. Evidently someone else did also because the mortar section started dropping its shells into the area at an increased rate. Lou and every other man in the platoon kept their heads down. Some of the rounds were exploding in the tree tops further down the hill and flinging shrapnel in their direction.

Ignoring the fact that it had continued to rain and that the small depression he had found was full of water, Lou pressed his body close to the ground. The fact that he was soaking wet did not bother him in the least. His bandoleers of ammunition had been placed on his right side. They lay out in the rain but at least weren't laying in the muddy water underneath him. He had not bothered to unclip any more grenades, since his position would not allow him to throw any without endangering his own life. After firing the claymore, everything else would have to come from his rifle.

Lou had inspected the rifle in the light of the flare. The chamber cover had been clean even after his fall. The rifle's bore was protected by a piece of plastic covering it. The plastic was held in place by a rubber band and seemed intact. Since obtaining the rifle from Bobby Fry, Lou had several opportunities to fire it, and it had never failed him. Lou was confident it would not fail him tonight.

The barrage lasted only about ten minutes. The company had a limited amount of mortar shells, and Lou was sure that Captain Pickett would save some for later, should the need arise. Lou was glad the captain opted for the use of the company's mortars rather than shifting the artillery into the area. Mortar fire, even friendly fire, was bad enough. Lou had no desire to be within a thousand yards of artillery fire unless absolutely necessary. Better to let the enemy exit the area than to expose the men in the platoon to that particular danger.

Another flare went off over the valley. Lou let his eyes scan the jungle in front of him. His view was severely limited, and with the noise just starting to fade away down the valley from the mortar barrage, Lou's hearing at that moment was not all that great. He wiped the mud off his watch. An hour to daylight, he thought. His eyes continued to scan the area to his front. Now that the firing had stopped, Lou again became aware of the pain in his left ankle. By bending his leg at the knee he was able to lift the foot straight up in the air. This was safe to do now that the mortar barrage was over. The two things that Lou wanted at that moment

were a cigarette and some aspirin. Lou had one cigarette wrapped in plastic with the aspirin he was carrying.

It was a real temptation to get the cigarette out and smoke it. With the smell of cordite and all the smoke in the area, it was unlikely that the smell of cigarette smoke would give away the platoon's position. Lou decided against the cigarette, not because of an increased danger, but because it was part of the self-imposed discipline he required of himself. Even though his smoking was now an addiction, Lou had decided not to let it rule his life. He was not willing to die just to fulfill his need for a cigarette. For that reason he only carried one cigarette with him into an ambush. It was there for the morning after, as the platoon headed back to the company's perimeter. He would not allow himself to smoke while either moving into an ambush site or while in position. Cigarette smoke was very distinctive and could easily give away the platoon's position. All the men followed the same rule, although no one had ever made an issue of the matter.

Lou worked his hand under his poncho and up to the right-hand pocket of his field fatigues. He reached in and got out his packet of aspirin. He was unwrapping the pills just as the last flare went out. Again the night was black. Lou felt into the plastic and got out three aspirins. He quickly popped these into his mouth. His hands had been muddy, and now he tasted the mud mixed in with the taste of the aspirin. It brought a perverse smile to his face. Not eating at an ambush site was another of his rules, and he decided he would definitely include mud in that restriction.

The rest of the night was spent in quiet repose. Other than the rain and mosquitoes, it was a nice reprieve from the excitement and tribulations of the night. The night eventually gave up its grip on the day. The platoon stayed in place until full daylight. Orders to prepare to move out were passed quietly through the platoon. Lou stood up slowly, like a man in his sixties. His muscles ached and his bones creaked as he worked himself into an upright position. He was shivering slightly from the combination of the chill in the air and being in damp clothing. There was a slight breeze. His poncho kept the wind off his torso, but his legs ached from the coolness. His left ankle had felt fine until he stood. The combination of aspirin and keeping it

elevated had helped diminish the pain. Lou took a swig from his canteen, quenching a thirst that had been building over the past hour.

He reached into his pocket and got out his plastic pouch. *Son-of-a-bitch*, he thought as he pulled the cigarette from its protection. It was broken in half. Lou felt like crying. *Fucking jungle, fucking war, Motherfucker, asshole, cunt, bastard*, his mind went off. Lou stood there, shaking with rage and frustration. It was not really about the cigarette. It was a culmination of all the things that had happened over the past two weeks. Blood, violence, fear, sweat, aches, pains, death, mosquitoes, mud, rain, leeches, shit food, diarrhea, torn clothing, explosions, and now not even a cigarette. He felt like running down the hill, finding the enemy, and having one final confrontation.

"You okay, Lou?" Big John asked.

Lou blinked his eyes to bring them into focus and himself back to reality. "Yeah," Lou answered, taking half of his cigarette from the plastic. He got his lighter from his pants pocket. It too was wrapped in plastic. Cupping his hands around the end of the cigarette, he lit up. The smoke was harsh as it went down his throat, making him cough. The half with the filter was still in the packet, so the half he was smoking was harsher than he was used to. But it was still so good.

"You're cutting back on your smoking, I see," Big John said with a smile on his face.

"I'm saving half for later."

Lou gathered up his ammunition. Big John moved down the slope and retrieved the claymore before Lou could get around to doing it. John wound up the wire with the firing cap and put it in his pants pocket that was on the front of his leg. The claymore was slipped into the front of his fatigue jacket. Big John would find its rightful owner once the platoon was back in the company perimeter.

Everyone was ready to move out, but the platoon maintained its position. Lou wondered what the holdup was. Then word was received that Second Platoon would be passing through their position to check out the ambush sight of the night before. Lou had figured his platoon would do that first thing in the morning. He was glad to hear that they would be climbing up the mountain instead. Lou knew he was at the edge of his endurance.

I almost lost it, he thought. I came close to freaking out. Can't be doing that. Lou had no interest in becoming a section eight. Intellectually, he knew that everyone was under tremendous stress. Combat was as close as a man could come to insanity. It went against the grain of his upbringing, and he was sure it had to be affecting most of the men around him in the same manner. The unrelenting pressure of being in the jungle day after day with no break from the dangers would continue to wear on him. It would be up to Lou to find a way to manage his psyche.

A half hour later, the platoon reached the company perimeter. Lou was dismayed to see that the other men in the company were already getting ready to move out. Normally the company would wait for at least a half hour after the night's ambush returned before moving out. It would give the men a chance to get some warm food in their bellies and some hot coffee. Today, the captain had decided it was more important to get down the hill and check out both the ambush site and the area where the artillery had landed during the night. Probably not even his choice, Lou thought. The brigade and battalion commanders would be interested in getting estimates of the damage inflicted on the enemy.

Lou limped over to his rucksack. He reached in and pulled out two candy bars he had been saving. Ripping open the paper covering, he shoved one in his mouth. The other one went into a pants pocket. He chewed quickly as he prepared his rucksack for the hump down the mountain.

"How's the leg?" Sergeant Wilson asked.

"It's okay, Sarge. Wish I had time to get it rewrapped though," Lou replied.

"Yeah, Lieutenant Burroughs is over there giving the captain shit about moving out right now, but I don't think it will do any good. You going to make it?"

"Sure," Lou replied. "I wouldn't know how to move if I wasn't hurting somewhere. Just don't expect me to do any wind sprints today. I thought we were penciled in for a short work day today, it being Thanksgiving and all."

"You know what they say."

"Yeah. Shit happens. I know, but I'm getting tired of shit happening. I need some rest and recreation. Some creature comforts. Why don't you see if we can't at least get a television for the outfit," Lou said.

Sergeant Wilson laughed. So did Big John who had been following their conversation. "No way," Big John said. "I know how things work around here. We get a television and I'll have to carry it. Right? Give it to the big guy, Right?"

"No, actually I was thinking that you could carry the batteries. They couldn't weigh more than six hundred pounds apiece," Lou said.

Third Platoon had already started heading down the hill. Lou dug into the side pocket of his rucksack and pulled out a new pack of Salem cigarettes. Opening the pack he quickly lit one and took a long deep drag on it. It was always the little things that meant the most in the field. The first cigarette out of a new pack might very well be the highlight of the day. By the time Lou got around to smoking another, the dampness of the weather would have stolen their freshness, and it would be another two days before he opened a new pack.

The move down the hill was laborious with the rain and steepness of the slope conspiring to slow the company's movement. It was actually easier to climb the hills than to descend them. The company had started straight toward the ambush site, but halfway there they veered off to the left, circling the mountain. After another fifteen minutes they reached a relatively flat area, and the company halted and set up a loose perimeter.

The First Platoon was spread out loosely inside the perimeter. This allowed its members to relax more than if they were in a defensive position. As soon as they were settled, they took care of some of their more immediate needs. Half the men had their weapons broken down within a minute and were cleaning and oiling them with kits stored in their rucksacks. It only took them minutes to ensure that their weapons were cleaned, oiled, and ready to sing rock and roll at an instant's notice. As each man finished, his partner repeated the task. Within ten minutes, every weapon in the platoon was cleaned and ready to go.

The next thing everyone did was get some food. Since the company might move at any moment, the men did not try to heat their rations. Nothing to start the day like cold Cs washed down with water.

The day was heating up. Even with the continuing rain, it was already eighty degrees, soon to move into the nineties. Lou's uniform was drenched, now combining sweat with the water he had lain in earlier in the dark. He could smell himself and some of the men around him. Not a very pleasant experience.

Second Platoon returned to the company from its trip down the hill, and everyone got ready to move out again. Then word came back to relax. The company was going to wait here for a while. The perimeter was expanded to make room for Second Platoon, and again First Platoon was spread out within the perimeter. Big John immediately sat and leaned back against his rucksack. Within seconds he was asleep. Lou tried to do the same thing, but was still too wired from the events of the night before. Then the sky opened up and began to pour.

In the jungle, there was rain, there was pouring rain, and there were fucking floods. This was only a pouring rain, because Lou could still see things that were twenty feet away. In a fucking flood, though, the company sometimes had to actually stop movement when visibility became almost zero. Then it was hug-a-tree time in order to keep from getting drowned while standing upright in the jungle. Big John did not awaken from his sleep. In a pouring rain the men just continued doing whatever it was they were doing.

"Fuck this," Lou said, standing up. The first thing he did was remove his poncho. Grabbing the hood, he flipped the garment inside out. It was initially brown from the mud he had been forced to lie in the night before. The plastic poncho flapped in the wind and slowly began changing back to its original puke green. Lou rubbed his hands over the slick covering, encouraging the departure of the mud back to its native land, the surface of the jungle floor. Lou spread the poncho inside out across a nearby bush.

Big John had opened his eyes, as Lou's antics with the poncho had created enough noise to awaken both him and his curiosity. "Getting wet, asshole," Big said.

"Hell, I've been wet for a day now. I'm getting comfortable now," Lou replied. His fatigue jacket and pants had been a darkish brown when he removed his poncho. The pouring rain changed them to a light brown. Lou unbuttoned his fatigue jacket and removed all his wrapped articles from the pockets. These he placed in one of the side pockets of his rucksack.

He took his towel from around his neck and spread it over a nearby bush and then removed his fatigue jacket.

"You sure is white," PFC Wills said. He was sitting under a nearby bush, watching his fellow squad member with interest.

"Yeah, I was brown before the color was leached out of me,"

"You think I'll be white if it keeps raining?" Willis asked.

"Yeah, you, Sergeant Wilson, Hare, all you colored guys be white by Christmas. You know, like in that movie White Christmas," Lou said.

Lou held his fatigue jacket under a small waterfall that was created by the pooling of the falling rain somewhere high in the treetops of the jungle. There were similar streams of falling water all around the area. The weight of the water almost snatched the shirt from Lou's hand. The garment quickly changed color from light brown to green. Lou wrung the shirt out and then held it under the vertical stream for another dowsing. Wringing it out again, Lou could see that it was almost clean. He threw it over another nearby bush.

By now there were several members of the squad watching. Sgt. Wilson heard their exchange and got to his feet to see what was going on. Lou realized he was making a spectacle of himself, which went against his basically shy nature, but that was not enough to stop him.

After removing everything from his fatigue pant pockets, he slid them off and washed them too. Standing there in his boxer shorts, Lou was getting cold, but he did not let that deter him. Now there were catcalls and whistles. "Take it all off." "Shake a tail feather." "Show us what you got." All the usual intellectual bantering of a group of third graders.

Lou removed his boxer shorts, and more of the men were attracted to his show. Without hesitation, Lou stepped under the waterfall. The water pounded down on his head and shoulders. The water was cold, so Lou quickly rubbed his hands through his hair to get it clean and then did the rest of his body. It would have been great if he had some soap, but the men did not carry any in the field. Soap would give off a scent the enemy might pick up on. During the rubbing down process, Lou made sure his body was free of any leeches. It was one advantage to having an audience: if someone spotted a leech on him, there were bound to be comments. Two weeks ago, no one in the platoon had even seen a leech. Now they were all

familiar with them. Checking yourself and helping your buddy check himself had become part of their normal routine. After a minute, Lou stepped out of the waterfall. His towel was clean but soaking wet, so there was no incentive to even try toweling off.

Lou reached over and grabbed his fatigue pants. He had decided to stop wearing the G.I. underwear. A few days earlier, while taking a shit, he had noticed that Sgt. Wilson, who was nearby taking care of his needs, did not have any underwear on. Always the curious type, Lou had asked why. Wilson commented on the fact that he had learned on his first tour that underwear had a tendency to cause crotch rot, a painful rash caused by the underwear not drying out like the fatigue pants did as soon as the sun made an appearance. Lou's crotch had begun to itch recently, and while showering he had noticed a certain reddish condition of the skin in that area. Now was as good a time as any to remedy the situation.

Lou quickly pulled on the pants over his boots, all the while enduring the catcalls and comments of his fellow troopers. The Hare had been amongst his admirers and had even tried to organize a cheer from the rest of the fire team. Now as Lou quickly tried to dress, he was amazed to see Hare begin to undress. Then everyone's attention shifted over to Hare and Lou was left to finish dressing in peace.

The rain continued to pour down as other members of the squad including Big John and Sgt. Wilson chose to take a jungle shower. Lou felt great, even though everything he had on was completely soaked. He felt clean for the first time in a couple of weeks and could no longer smell himself.

The scene around Lou was now actually funny: several naked men, standing under streams of water in the middle of a deluge in the middle of a jungle. Some entered the water hesitantly, others plunged right in. Some stood there stoically while others danced quietly in response to the coldness of the water. Some had taken the time to remove their shoes, while others continued to wear their boots. Lou wished he had a movie camera to record the scene for the evening news. *Let's see what Walter Cronkite has to say about this action*, Lou thought.

Lou noticed Captain Pickett and Lieutenant Burroughs standing off to the side for just an instant. Then they both turned and left with big smiles on their faces. Of course, neither one of

them would think of joining the men, not because what they were doing wasn't a good idea, Lou thought. They couldn't bring themselves to join into such a common scene.

Being officers, it would not be easy, buck naked in the middle of the jungle, to maintain the necessary dignity. This was part of the attitude officers had that Lou did not like. It made the officers not superior but lesser men in the eyes of the soldiers they led. They probably did not have a clue that the men in the platoon felt that way.

Once completely dressed, with his poncho on again, Lou limped over to his rucksack and sat on it. He took off his right boot, peeled off his sock, and unwrapped the elastic bandage that bound the right ankle. Lou's sock was brown, and he laid it out in the rain to be washed. He did the same with the elastic bandage. Lou wrung out his towel that was now clean and wiped down his right foot. He inspected the foot carefully, looking for any signs of infection or abrasions. An infantryman traveled on his feet, and taking care of them was of primary importance. The right ankle was slightly discolored, and there was only minimal swelling. Lou had thought it almost completely healed two days ago and had not bothered wrapping it that day. It had been a mistake, and Lou had paid the consequences. He decided to keep wrapping the ankle, just to ensure it had extra support until it was completely healed.

"Looking good," PFC Murphy commented, walking over to Lou. Murphy was just getting ready to put his poncho on, having evidently taken the opportunity to wash up with the other members of the squad. "Let's look at that other ankle."

Murphy pulled out a scissors from his pant pocket. It was wrapped in plastic which he quickly removed. He cut through the bandage he had wrapped the left ankle with the night before. Of course, now it was hard to recognize the brownish mess for what it really was. Once Murphy had the bandage peeled off, Lou reached down and unlaced the boot. There was immediate relief from the pain caused by the ankle swelling against the side of the boot. The medic peeled off the sock which was stretched tight over the ankle. "Elevate it," Murphy said.

Lou lay on the ground on his right side and lifted the left leg up so Murphy could examine the ankle. Sgt. Wilson and Big John came over to join the inspection. It would not have seemed right if they were not present. "Looks like the other one did, huh?" Wilson commented.

"Nah. Looks worse," Big John said. They were like a couple of judges at a watermelon contest. As they offered their expert medical opinions, PFC Murphy went about doing his job. Murph's job was to manipulate the ankle as much as possible until Lou either puked or passed out. He was really quite good at it, and Lou was just getting ready to pass out before he stopped. "I don't think it's broken," he said.

Lou had real good look at the ankle. It was swollen and reddish. By tomorrow, the ankle would be all black and blue. After that, it would turn slightly yellowish as the bruising began to fade. He knew that winning the company's beauty contest was now out of the question.

"I'd offer you time out of the field," Murphy said, "but I get tired of you telling me to get fucked. Hell, if I could get fucked, I would get fucked. Still, I wouldn't be doing my job without recommending you be sent in and have this thing looked at. What you think, Sarge?"

"Hey, don't get me involved in this," said Wilson. "I'm just his squad leader. I get tired of him telling me to get fucked, just like you. Hell, I outrank him. He can't tell me to get fucked, but he does. You ask him."

"You pussies," Big John said. "Lou, that ankle looks ugly. You already move like an old lady. Why don't you go to the rear for a few days and let it heal?"

"Big John. I admire your grasp of the nuances of the native language. Your use of the word "pussies" was well timed and elegant. I must congratulate you on the progress you are making in this area. The fact that you were able to say it without turning beet red indicates real progress on your part. Still I must ask you to fuck off and keep your opinions to yourself," Lou said, not disappointing the men surrounding him.

There were smiles all around as PFC Murphy wrapped the ankle with a clean ace bandage. Lou wrung out the sock, and the medic put it back over the bandage. They were only able to lace the boot halfway up because of the swelling. Then Murphy used adhesive tape to secure it to the foot and reinforce the ankle. When he was done, Murphy reached down and picked up a handful of mud. He applied it to the bandage, smiling. Lou knew it had at first pissed off the private when he had done this after the first tape job on his other foot. Now Murphy understood the need to camouflage the tape job. A white bandage stood out like a red

cape to a bull. Murphy even seemed to get a perverse pleasure at ruining his beautiful job himself rather than giving Lou the pleasure. Lou was glad to see the man getting into the spirit of things.

Lou lit up a cigarette, leaned back against a nearby tree, put his foot up on his rucksack, and enjoyed the first really quiet moment of the day. The shower, getting his ankle taped, and getting some food in his stomach had all contributed to feeling better about things in general. Lou analyzed his feelings about what had happened to him during the morning when he had almost lost control of his emotions. There were a lot of factors that had contributed to the emotional turmoil of the moment including the long list of unpleasant facts of life that went along with his current predicament.

The main source of distress had come from the ambush itself. Although his participation was not optional, it was the result of his own decisions. He had enlisted in the military with the understanding that combat would be the ultimate result of his decision. Killing people was the job he had chosen, and the performance of his job was where the mental conflict was occurring.

Lou knew that violence was not a normal part of his psyche. His own psychological makeup was more Boy Scout than warrior, more choir boy than roughneck. Unlike most of the men in the company, he came from a middle class background that was both safe and nonviolent. During training, he told himself that killing was sometimes necessary in defense of one's ideals. Louis believed strongly in the battle between good and evil. It was an intricate part of the Catholic upbringing. This was an intellectual defense he had used to build up his psyche against the real violence he knew would occur in the performance of his duties.

Last night had been a very frightening experience. It was the first time an ambush had been sprung by the company, and Louis could guess at its effectiveness. What bothered Lou was that, at the instant in which everything blew up, he had a feeling of exhilaration. A real sense of joy. When the signal was given, he had not hesitated, and from the timing of the other explosions, Lou guessed no one else had hesitated either. Collectively the platoon had initiated an assault against an unseen enemy in the dark, and Lou had been truly happy to participate. It was this feeling that was in conflict with the way Lou had always viewed himself.

There had been no pangs of guilt. No wondering about the men they had killed. No desire to quit the action or not participate. Lou had enjoyed the moment. He had felt good at getting off the grenades that were aimed at dead or dying men. The kind and compassionate person had not shown up for this particular party, and Lou had not missed him. Later, laying again in the dark, waiting eagerly for a repeat of the action, Lou's conscience had again shown up, bringing with it feelings of guilt and shame.

Lou understood the conflict that was occurring within his psyche. There might in reality be no way to resolve the problem, and yet to allow it to tear him apart would not solve anything. His choice was either to quit what he was doing or accept that there was a part of him that in the past he had only suspected existed. Maybe this was a part of every man's psychological makeup. The animal part that lusted for not only survival, but also for the destruction of its enemies to ensure survival. Lou could accept this, but it would be easier if he felt a sense of hatred or loathing of the enemy. In fact, he did not.

The other men in the company expressed a hatred of the enemy. Lou was initially skeptical of this hatred. How could you hate another person without knowing them? There were people he had met that he did not particularly like. People he would fight with if necessary. He disliked those people, but he would certainly not feel good about hurting them. The few fights he had entered and won had left him feeling guilty and bad about himself. So hatred was not something Lou knew well.

Even after the company started losing men in combat, Lou did not develop a feeling of hatred for the enemy. Hell, if anything, he respected them more than before. They were a tough, aggressive foe. Their lifestyle was even more difficult than the one Lou found himself living. He often wondered if he would be capable of living as simple and hard a life as they did.

Killing without hatred seemed worse than killing with hatred. The results were the same, but the motivation became questionable. Deriving pleasure from the act of killing was a perversion. Lou could not deny his feelings, and yet he hated himself for feeling the way he did.

Lou finished his cigarette, field stripping it and putting the filter in his pocket. *Fuck it*, he thought. He was too tired to think straight. Lou closed his eyes and within seconds was asleep.

Everyone was getting ready to move out. Lou could not remember if he had heard the order or not. One second he was asleep, and the next he was wide awake, getting to his feet, and preparing to move out. The action bought a smile to his face. The weight of the rucksack on his back felt good. The rifle in hands felt good. The pleasant smell of the jungle felt good. The rain, which had stopped pouring and was now just a gentle sprinkle, felt good. His left ankle felt like shit. This bought even a bigger smile to his face.

"What's so funny, Lou?" Big John asked.

"I know this will sound stupid, but I feel good," Lou replied.

"You getting jungle fever or something?" the Hare asked.

"Yeah. Something like that. I just feel good. It's like this is who I am and where I belong. It's like I feel really alive. Oh hell, I can't explain it. I'm wet and tired. I've been shot at and missed, and shit at and hit, and everything feels good. That make any sense?"

"I think I understand," the Hare said. "It's like I was scared that first week in the field, but now I'm not. Well, I mean, I still get scared, but it's like it doesn't matter. It's all right to be scared and even in some ways fun. Shit. I don't know how to explain it either."

"I am what I am, cause I am what I am. I'm Popeye the sailor man," Big John said with a smile on his face.

"Yeah," Lou said.

"You fucking strange is what you am," Willis said.

"Yeah," Lou said.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm out of here," Big John said, heading out after the rest of the platoon. Everyone followed.

Everyone expected the company to head down to the spot where the artillery had caught up with the enemy the night before, but instead they found themselves climbing back up the same hill they had descended this morning. It was one thing about being a lowly grunt that sometimes bugged Lou, not knowing why the company did the things it did. First down the hill and then back up without any explanations being given. Of course this left things open to conjecture, and all the men enjoyed coming up with reasons for such behavior. Fighting their way back up the hill in the usual stop and go manner, the squad figured the reason for the

company's movements was either that the captain was lost, the company was going to be airlifted out, Ho Chi Minh had surrendered and the war was over, an enemy division had been spotted heading their way and they were going to dig in for a last ditch stand, or Ann Margaret was going to give one her USO shows for the company as a Thanksgiving Day present.

The company dug in early. Except for some of the men who were positioned as listening posts, the whole company was dug in. It was Thanksgiving Day, and the Army was taking care of the men in the field on this day. Arrangements were made to fly a hot meal out to the field for the troops. Turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberry sauce, green beans, and pumpkin pie. All the things that had come to represent Thanksgiving in the eyes of the top military brass.

Lou looked forward to a hot meal, just like he did every third day in the field. It was also resupply day, which was good because he needed to replace the claymore mines and hand grenades he had used the night before. His greatest wish on this day was that the company receive more LRRP meals instead of C rations.

Two weeks ago when the company had first deployed into the field, everyone thought they would be spending three days at the most in the field before rotating to the rear for a couple of days. It had been the standard operating procedure for the men in the brigade prior to Third Battalion's arrival. It was now evident that those rules did not apply to the Third Battalion. Two weeks of continuous patrolling without any time in the rear had gotten the message across to the men. They were jungle inhabitants for the duration.

Lou was amazed at how well the men had adjusted to this development. There had been no protests, just an acceptance of their role. They were not rear area warriors. The jungle was where the enemy lived, and it was the company's job to make life unbearable for them. Everyone had adopted the attitude necessary to survive in this environment, and the men had become different from other men. They were slowly becoming more like their enemies and less like the men in other outfits they supposedly served with.

Lou's squad was dug into the side of the hill in the woods. He and Big John had managed to excavate a hole of sorts to serve as a foxhole in the event of an attack. The hole

had immediately filled with water. The morning's mist had turned into another deluge just after they had finished digging the hole.

After the deluge came the sunshine. The clouds cleared, and the sun shone down brightly. The jungle was bright and shiny as the sun reflected off the water, coating the plants. The jungle was at its prettiest at a time like this. Here, at the top of a mountain, the foliage was not quite so dense, and patches of sunlight reached the jungle floor, seeming to dance as the winds moved the tree tops above. Like every blessing associated with the jungle, this one came with a curse. The day was heating up quickly now, and both Lou and Big John were covered with a combination of sweat and mud from digging the hole.

"So much for our morning showers," Big John said.

"It felt good at the time," Lou replied as he spread his poncho out on a bush to dry. "Besides, at least I can't smell myself any more."

"I want to thank you for that," Willis said. He and the Hare were dug in only yards from Lou's position, so hearing each other's conversations was easy. "Last few nights, when the wind was blowing just right, it smelled like we was sleeping next to a four day old corpse. Hare was going to claim the body and try to get some leave time out of it. He was disappointed to find out it was just you white boys smelling so bad. We'd rather try to sleep near the gooks; at least they only smell of fish."

"Oh yeah," Lou replied. "I was walking down the trail thinking I had stepped in monkey shit, cause the smell just kept following me. Then I realized I had been walking behind Hare all day. Me and Big John switched and the smell went away. Began to smell like I stepped in Gorilla shit."

"Fuck you, Lou," Big John said. "Here I was getting used to smelling a corpse, and then it smells like I got monkey shit on my boots. At least I didn't have to walk behind Willis. He's always farting from those fucking lima beans he's eating all day. From now on, I don't think you should trade him your ham and lima bean Cs. I think they should ban the damn things."

"Hey, Big! You saying my farts stink?" Willis said.

"Stink!? Stink!?! When you fart, plants in the area die. I saw three monkeys fall out of a tree after one of your more quiet farts. I think Murphy needs to look up that ass of yours."

Maybe you ate some bad cat and it's rotting in your bowels. I'm thinking of asking for double hazardous duty pay for when I need to follow behind you."

"Lou, you going to let him talk to me that way?" Willis said. "It isn't that bad, is it?"

"No of course not Willis. Besides, it keeps the mosquitoes away at night," Lou replied with a smile on his face.

"Damn, I was wondering where all the mosquitoes gone," said Hare. "Don't smell so bad to me. Of course I am from Detroit."

The conversation flowed easily amongst the four men. Two weeks of humping the boonies together was forming a bond closer than family ties ever would. Last night they had functioned as a team even though they had been separated by the night and the rain. Lying there, they each knew the others were close and that when the time came to fight, they would all be there for each other. They respected each other as men and accepted each other as individuals. Even though the two white men shared one foxhole and the two black men shared another, it meant nothing. They shared everything, including insults. To an outsider, some of the remarks would smack of racism, but amongst the men the words were used to mask the emotional ties that bound them.

Sergeant Wilson appeared, followed by Captain Pickett and Platoon Sergeant Harris. Sgt. Wilson waved the four men over to his group which stood in the jungle about five yards from the fighting positions. The four men picked up their weapons and joined them.

"I just want to congratulate you men on the outstanding job you did on that ambush last night," Captain Pickett said. "Second Platoon reported fourteen bodies left at the site. All the wounded and weapons had been scrounged by the enemy before we arrived, so the damage to the enemy was probably greater than the body count. Sergeants Harris and Wilson say you performed well. I know, because last night when that ambush blew, it was like a dozen artillery shells landing at once. I could hardly believe that everything could be set off so rapidly." This brought a smile to the faces of the men standing around the captain. Each of them had been just as amazed when the ambush went off.

"I have a question for each of you. Did any of you fire your rifles last night?" A chorus of "No, Sir" greeted the captain's question.

"You are the last group in the platoon I get to talk with," the captain said. "Sergeant Harris said he did not hear any rifle fire from the platoon last night. I didn't believe him. It would only be natural to let go with a few rounds as the platoon moved back from its original position. I haven't been able to find one man in the platoon who took a shot, and I have no reason to question the men's answers. The fire discipline of the company since we entered the field has been outstanding. Your platoon's fire discipline under the circumstances of last night's attack exceeds any standards I could try to impose on you men. I salute your professionalism."

Lou felt good receiving the captain's praise. What he said was true. It was not empty rhetoric or unjustifiable praise. The platoon had functioned well last night, and Lou was glad the Captain took the time to tell the men.

"The choppers bringing our supplies and dinner should be here around 1600 hours. I want you men to relax and take it easy today. Unfortunately we won't be going to the rear for a while. Brigade feels the enemy is trying to move men and supplies through this area. They are pleased with all the contact the company has been making, and their plans are to keep pressure on the enemy. I wish I could offer you more. Two weeks of steady humping is hard. Everyone in the outfit is doing just an outstanding job, and I really can't express how much I respect the job you men are doing."

Lou accepted the captain's praise at face value. It was good to receive it. It was as close to getting a medal as any of the men were likely to come. That was fine with Lou. Just humping the boonies and doing their jobs was all they could expect. Lou would just be happy to get more LRRPs. The captain and his group moved off down the line of foxholes to continue their visit with the men in the company. Lou and the rest of the men in the fire team moved back to their positions. It was still morning, and the captain had given them the day off. Now if only the enemy would. Lou sat with his back against a tree and his left foot elevated on his rucksack. He lit a cigarette and watched down the hill for any movement.

Big John had stretched his poncho out to serve as a tent. "Mind if I get a couple hours shuteye?"

"No. I'm wide awake."

"Wake me in a couple of hours. Then you get some sleep," Big John said.

"Pleasant dreams," Lou said with a smile. He wondered if Big still dreamt. Dreams were a thing of the past for Lou. The day turned hot, but they were high on the top of a hill, and there was a fairly good wind that blew through the jungle floor. A rather pleasant day with the mosquitoes, bugs, and other inhabitants of the jungle.

Lou also got some extra sleep that day but was awakened early by the sound of helicopters approaching. The word went out for work parties to report for the unloading of supplies. Lou looked at his watch, and it was only 1500 hours. It was surprising that the copters would be an hour early, and Lou wondered if maybe the company's plans had changed and they would be moving out soon. Big John took Lou's place in the work party. For this, Lou was thankful. His left ankle was throbbing, and the aspirin would take a while to smooth the edge off the pain.

It was almost thirty minutes before Big returned with part of their supplies. After an additional trip of only five minutes, Big John settled next to the pile of goods. Lou had not touched anything until John returned from his second run. Dividing the supplies was done openly and fairly so neither one would feel cheated. Amongst the supplies was the next three day's supply of rations. There were six LRRPs and twelve boxes of C rations. Since Big John was the one who got the supplies to their position, he had first choice of which LRRP he wanted. He chose the Spaghetti meal, of which there was only one. Lou chose an LRRP meal for his first choice. This procedure continued until all the meals had been divided. Then they split the candy. Lou got three fresh packs of Salem cigarettes.

Each of them got two new claymore mines to replace the ones used the night before. Lou got three new hand grenades. The two men gathered up their supplies and moved them over to their rucksacks for packing. One at a time, they put another claymore out in front of their position. Then Big John took two of the new claymores and headed over to Second Platoon. When the men of First Platoon had set up positions, they were each given a claymore mine from one of the men in Second Platoon to set up in their defensive positions. Big John now returned the equipment to Second Platoon.

Lou quickly went through the rations. The three LRRPs he received would serve as his main meals each day. The fact that they were light in weight when compared to cans of C

rations made the decision even easier. Even if they weighed six pounds apiece, Lou would have chosen them because at least they were edible. The men in the company were forever asking when their rations of LRRPs would be increased. It was possible to trade any two Cs for one LRRP meal. This was after only two weeks in the field. In another month the deal would probably be three or four Cs for one LRRP. From the six boxes of Cs, Lou removed two cans that contained main meals. From each box, he also took tins of cookies and fruit. He dug into his rucksack and removed two C main meals he had from the last resupply. He placed these with the other food he did not want. He kept the toilet paper that was packed into each box of rations, then packed everything away carefully in his rucksack.

Big John returned just as Lou finished packing his rucksack.

"You hear why they came so early?" Lou asked.

"No. Doesn't seem to be any unusual activity. They're setting up the food lines for dinner. We should be getting a call anytime now. I hope we get fed before it starts raining again," Big John said.

Lou eyed the sky glumly. It had been clear when he lay down to take his nap and cloudy when he awoke. At the time he thought nothing of it. It was the monsoon season, so it would rain soon. So what? Of course he had forgotten about the evening's Thanksgiving Day meal.

Ten minutes later the call came for the first group. Lou and Big John just sat there a minute. "You go first," Big John said.

"No. You humped the supplies and claymores. You go first," Lou said.

"You sure?" Big John asked.

"Yeah. Take your canteen cup with you this time," Lou said, smiling.

Twenty minutes later, Big John returned carrying a plate piled with food. Lou didn't wait to exchange pleasantries with his friend. He grabbed his weapons and canteen cup and headed for the chow line. The sky was darkening ominously as he got in line. There were about ten men in front of him, with more appearing out of the wood line every minute.

The hill the company occupied was the highest in the area. Looking to the North, the men in the line could see the wall of water approaching quickly. Like Lou, most of them, their mouths already watering in anticipation of the food they were about to receive, had not

bothered bringing their ponchos to the festivities. Some of the men broke from the line, making a mad dash back to their positions for their ponchos. Lou could see it was too late for that, especially with his bum ankle. Instead he stood there like the big dummy he was and braced for the rain to hit.

The cooks had set up canvas coverings over the food line for just such an eventuality. They were not tents, just canvass stretched over four upright poles and secured with ropes tied to pegs in the ground. The wind hit an instant before the wall of water and tore the canvass right off the poles.

Even braced for it, the men were hit hard by the wind and rain. Like scarecrows caught in the middle of some farmer's field in a thunderstorm, they stood there, waiting for their food. This was not a downpour. This was a Fucking Flood.

The cooks had slammed the covers down on the large thermal container the food was in. They had their ponchos with them, but Lou was glad to see that one of them was not quite quick enough getting it on and got soaked. This got a laugh from his fellow cooks as the man jumped around and bitched. Suddenly they stopped laughing and looked guiltily at the infantrymen standing there in the rain getting soaked. Lou had gotten a kick out of the cooks' antics. The other men in line were smiling and laughing.

The cooks got their shit together and again started serving the food. It was a farce trying to feed the men left in line. As each one moved forward they were handed a large paper plate. As they passed each station the cook would open the top of his container and dish out the food onto the plate. With the rain coming down in sheets, the food would be instantaneously diluted and washed away. The mashed potatoes went the quickest, lasting maybe ten seconds as they turned to a milky solution that just ran off the plate. The cranberry diluted into a pinkish solution with some pale cranberry skins floating in it. The stuffing actually swelled as the bread absorbed rain before it to lost its cohesive forces and faded away. The turkey came out of the container steaming. You could almost hear the meat hiss as the rain stole its heat.

The last station had plastic bottles of real milk. Lou emptied his canteen cup and the server filled the cup. After moving away from the line Lou sat on the ground and took several

quick gulps of milk, before it became too diluted to enjoy. He smiled. Good meal, he thought. The rest of his food was already gone except for the drowning turkey floating around on his plate. He was tempted to pick it up and eat it but decided it deserved a proper burial instead.

Lou looked at the faces of the men around him. Under the circumstances it would be normal for them to be angry and upset. Half drowned, hungry, and several thousand miles from home, on America's day of thanks. Yet the men smiled and joked as they headed back to their foxholes. The Army had provided them with a special meal, and for that they were thankful. Weird group of guys. American Heroes.

Lou got back to his position, retrieved his poncho, sat back against a tree, and lit up a cigarette.

"Great meal," Big John said from his shelter under the poncho lean-to he had built.

"Potatoes were a little runny," Lou said, smiling.

"You get anything?"

"Enough."

"I couldn't eat it all myself. I saved this for you if you have enough room," Big John said. In his hand he held what looked like a turkey sandwich. Lou moved quickly over to his side.

"Where did you get this?" Lou asked taking the sandwich.

"Hell, they said you could have as much as you wanted. You took out of here so fast you probably didn't notice I was carrying two plates. I'm a big guy, need a lot of calories. As soon as it started raining, I put this back for you. Got a piece of pie here for you too," Big John said.

"Thanks, Big. Almost makes me feel bad about the things I said about you earlier." Of course the words were not spoken quite that clearly, since Lou had not stopped to swallow the food in his mouth before offering his thanks.

It was getting on toward night. The sun was about to slip below the western horizon. The sky was a bright blue, the rain clouds of the afternoon a memory. Lou was not fooled by this. The rain would return soon, if not during the night, then by morning. The evening light was sharp, and the air was already cooling down. From their position on the hill, it was possible to catch a glimpse of the hill directly across from them.

Lou was again struck by the beauty of the jungle they called home. Here, in the mountains of the Central Highland, in the Republic of South Vietnam, was some of the most beautiful landscape God had ever created. It was a cruel beauty that demanded respect. It was a beauty that could kill someone not prepared for its hardships and cruelty. Even without the presence of enemy soldiers, the jungle could kill you. Its steep terrain, heat, and monsoon rains, combined with poisonous snakes, scorpions, and, before the war, tigers, made for a hazardous environment. Man had turned it into an arena for combat of a different nature.

Two weeks earlier, the company had entered the jungle with a large amount of trepidation. They were entering the enemy's home territory and were worried about making it through a day. The last two weeks had taught the men a lot about the jungle and even more about themselves.

In those two short weeks, a change had taken place in Lou and the men he served with. Not a small, subtle change, but a major change. From the hunted to the hunter. It was seen in the way the men handled adversity. Rain, heat, dehydration, snakes, gooks, bad food. Fuck it. You could see it in the way they held their bodies, in the way they addressed themselves and their buddies. These were no longer boys out doing a man's job. These were men, very dangerous men. They were men who would do whatever was necessary to close with and destroy their enemies. They respected the enemy but did not fear him.

Sitting there watching night come, Lou felt at peace with the world. The day had brought about a catharsis of his spirits. Life was hard, and this life he shared with the other men in the company was harder and crueler than most. Reality had forced its way into his psyche and left him shaken in his beliefs and the way he viewed himself. It was the men he served with that acted as his savior.

They were good men, and Lou did not question that. As a group, they were honest, proud and loyal. They were the best friend every man searched for during his life but seldom found. True and brave men, whom the poets and writers tried to describe but could never quite catch the essence of. They did not do their job for money. How much money would it take to convince a man to do a job where they might die at any instant? A job where the chances of completing the job without serious injury or death were slim and none? No one

would survive without being scarred for life, either physically or emotionally. And yet these men served under the harshest conditions imaginable for God and country. These men had souls and balls. They believed in things like freedom, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It was part of their heritage, and they felt an obligation to pay the price that heritage extracted from each generation.

They were good men. The best his generation would ever produce. That was the truth. Of that Lou was sure. I am one of them, and so I too must be good. It was this logic that Lou used to arrive at the feeling of peace he enjoyed that evening sitting on a hill in South Vietnam.

END