

## **#9 Sleepless Nights** – Late December, prior to Christmas 1967 – forward base, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – I was having night sweats and chills.

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Suddenly he was awake. His first conscious thought was that he had fucked up big time. He knew he was not supposed to be sleeping. The last thing he remembered was telling his radio man to get a couple hours of sleep and he would pull the first watch. After that, he could not remember anything. He knew he must have fallen asleep, and the consequences of that could have been disastrous. He also knew that nothing serious had happened because he was still alive.

He opened his eyes. His radio man was sitting under a low bush about ten feet from where he lay. Private Walsh had been with him for about three months now. They had always gotten along well, at least until now. Now they had a problem. A big problem.

It was dark. Not the pitch black dark of the night on the floor of the jungle, but dark. No moon, just a vast galaxy of stars overhead. The sergeant's eyes were acclimated to the darkness upon awakening. Everything was shadows of darkness and lesser darkness. From his very slight movement, the sergeant could tell that his radio man was awake.

He could not hear the radio, but he knew it would be on squelch and that the operator would be using the squelch button to answer any messages being transmitted to the squad. One of them must be by the radio at all times. At least Private Walsh was on the job. This was of some consolation. It did not explain everything, but the squad had not been left without any communication.

Sergeant Merrins was instantly aware of all this. He was aware of the M-16 that his right hand rested on. His bayonet lay under his left hand. By shifting his left hand just a couple of inches, he found his hand grenade right where it should be. This told the sergeant that he had arranged himself properly before dozing off. It also presented a puzzle to him. If he had dozed off when he was supposed to be awake, he wouldn't have been in the position in which he awoke. On the other hand, if he lay down on purpose to get some shut-eye, he would certainly have remembered that.

The sergeant knew it was just before dawn. There was no lightening of the darkness in the eastern sky, nor any visual clues to the time, but the sergeant could still sense that these things would begin shortly. This sense of time had evolved as a result of time spent in the bush. He had a watch, but he couldn't read it in the dark without a flashlight. Some of his men had watches with luminous dials. The sergeant wouldn't wear one. When the nights were pitch black, any flash of luminance could invite unfriendly curiosity. The sergeant believed it was the little things that kept a man alive.

Before moving, the sergeant scanned the area with his ears. It was strange to think about hearing in this manner, but it was another habit he picked up in the jungle. Of course there was always a lot of background noise during the night, especially when humans in the area had settled in for the night. The sergeant's brain had already classified these noises as normal and would ignore them unless otherwise told to do so. Listening intensely, the sergeant began to pick up small signals that told him of the presence of other humans. Of course the sergeant already knew that there were ten other people relatively close to him. Hell, he had brought them here with him. Listening closely he heard the soft rustle of cloth against the earth at some point just beyond where his radio man was sitting, as someone moved. He knew this was the machine gun position facing up the trail that he had set up the ambush on. The position was occupied by two men, one of which was his most experienced machine gunner, Mike. The other man was a new guy the Sarge had gotten into the platoon just the day before. He could not remember the new man's name, but that would change quickly. Each new man was welcomed into the platoon quickly. The sergeant made sure of that. There were three other positions off to his left. From those positions he heard nothing.

This squad he had taken out on ambush was a mixture of veterans and rookies. The platoon had gotten in three new men for Sgt. Willis' squad, which had been short for some time, and these were the first new men in over a month. They could not replace the men the squad had lost, but it was still good to get replacements. Normally, new men were not sent out on ambush their first night in the field. Hell, if possible they were not sent out for at least three days. Even this was too soon, but normally it was all the time anyone went without going out on an overnight ambush. It was the new lieutenant's bright idea that Sgt. Willis take his squad

out tonight. Sgt. Merrins disagreed with this decision, but when the lieutenant insisted, there was nothing to be done. Sgt. Willis was a good man, but he had only recently been promoted to head the Second Squad after the untimely removal of the previous squad leader. Sgt. Merrins was not comfortable with the idea of Sgt. Willis out there in the bush with three new men. It was not fair to any of them. In addition, the battalion had just moved into this area yesterday. Prior to that, the whole brigade had been operating further north in the mountainous highlands for the past five months. With these considerations in mind, Sgt. Merrins decided to tag along with the patrol. This was in no way unusual and no one even questioned his motives. The only person who it affected was his radio operator Bill, and he was one of those people who accept the way things are without complaint or comment.

Sgt. Merrins slowly got into a kneeling position. He clipped his grenade onto his webbing after carefully checking that the pin was crimped. He slipped his bayonet into its scabbard. He picked up his M-16, running his hand over it to ensure there was not any debris stuck to it. He softly pushed up on the clip to insure that the magazine was properly seated. He knew there wasn't a round in the chamber so he checked to make sure that the safety was off. The men in his outfit had learned early on not to jack a round into the chamber until you were ready to fire. Several men lost their lives before this lesson was learned. New men had trouble accepting this concept, but they were watched carefully to ensure this rule was enforced. On the other hand, it was important that the rifle be ready to fire the instant the round hit the chamber. Everything Sgt. Merrins did, he did slowly. Movement at night was what caught the eye of the hunter. Noise traveled, especially metal rubbing against metal. Being slow and moving purposely at night became second nature. It was an art that was mastered best by men of patience and those who gave a high priority to survival.

As Sgt. Merrins prepared to move, he became aware of the condition of his body. He ached across his shoulders, neck, arms, legs; hell he ached everywhere. Not that this was unusual. The life he led placed a tremendous stress on the body day after day. There were no off days or days of rest and recuperation. His body and everyone else's in the outfit would probably be worn out in another month or two. No professional athlete could perform with the everyday aches and strains his body endured. Both his ankles were wrapped in special elastic

bandages the medic had given to him. He wrapped them both every day to keep down the swelling that would occur if they were not wrapped. He had sprained them both so often he wondered if they would ever heal. The Sergeant's mind did not dwell on these things; it simply noted that everything was up and working. Sgt. Merrins slung his two bandoleers of ammunition diagonally across each shoulder. Ten clips were in each sling, and each clip held twenty rounds. This was only four hundred rounds. They were traveling light. He checked to make sure his other five grenades were attached securely to his webbing. Lou would gather up his claymore mines and machine gun ammunition later. He slowly duckwalked over to his radio operator and sat next to him.

He whispered, "What time you got Bill?"

Bill pulled up his shirt sleeve, cupped his hand around the large, luminescent dial of his watch and replied, "About ten till five. We should be getting a communication check from the CO any minute now. You know he can never wait until it's actually time. He gets nervous about his boys."

"Well you let me know as soon as they call," Sgt. Merrins replied quietly. "It'll be daylight soon, and I want to get started back as early as possible." He wanted to ask Bill about last night and why he was allowed to sleep, but this was not the time or place. He would talk to him later. Sgt. Merrins and Bill both relaxed, watching out into the night toward the coming day.

An hour later the patrol was moving back toward the company's perimeter. Two hours later the patrol crossed the barbwire the company had strung the previous day. His company was setting up a fire support base for the battalion's artillery. Although there for less than twenty-four hours, the base was already beginning to take on the appearance of a military complex. The artillery pieces would be flown in by Chinook helicopters later that afternoon. Bunkers were being dug and sandbagged. The base was alive with activity. Sgt. Merrins moved the patrol back to that part of the perimeter where the rest of the platoon was digging in. The men who were out on patrol would be allowed to get some chow and a couple hours shut-eye before joining in with building the base. Sgt. Merrins asked Bill to come with him and moved

off toward the company command post. After they were away from the other men in the platoon, Sgt. Merrins turned to Bill.

"O.K. motherfucker, what happened last night?" he said.

Bill took a step backwards with a look of surprise on his face. "What do you mean?" he replied.

"You know Goddamn well what I mean," Sgt. Merrins replied in a low menacing tone of voice. He took a step in Private Walsh's direction. "I fell asleep last night while on duty and then I wake up to find you sitting on your butt like nothing was happening. You know better than that. I want to know how come you didn't wake me up."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" cursed Bill." He was getting mad. Sgt. Merrins knew the signs. Bill's face was turning red, his chest was puffing up, and he was beginning to stretch out. Now Bill might be a lowly private, but he was also one big, ugly son-of-a-bitch. The combination of Bill's demeanor along with his physical presence gave Sgt. Merrins cause to back off just a tad.

Besides, Sgt. Merrins had a lot of respect for Bill. Over the past months they had become an inseparable pair. Part of this was because of the nature of their jobs. As a platoon sergeant, Merrins was required to keep a radioman with him at all times. Bill had been assigned to that position in a large part because of his size. What the army classified as a portable radio, was not all that portable. It added a good twenty pounds to the weight of the equipment any line grunt had to drag around. Only a very strong person could do this day after day in the rugged terrain where they operated. In addition, Bill was very intelligent, knowing everything possible about the equipment he carried and its importance to the men in the platoon. His radio never seemed to break down like the others scattered throughout the company. Bill treated his equipment the way a mother protects a child. Bill never failed to follow wherever Sgt. Merrins chose to lead. This was often toward the sound of gunfire, and Sgt. Merrins respected him for this. Still Sgt. Merrins needed an explanation for what had happened the night before.

"Okay, Bill, why don't you tell me what happened last night."

"Sarge, I don't know why you're so upset. You told me you would take the first watch and that I was to get some sleep. About two hours later you woke me up. I took over the radio and you lay down. About ten minutes later you got up and came over and sat down beside me. You didn't say anything, but you were looking around. After about twenty minutes you said that I might as well get some sleep because you weren't going to anyway. I laid back down. The next thing I knew, you were waking me up. I looked at my watch and it was about 0400 hours. I took over the radio and you lay down. You woke up about forty-five minutes later. I swear Sarge, that's exactly what happened."

"You expect me to believe I was up all of last night and don't remember any of it. That's bullshit, Bill, and you know it."

"Fuck you, Sarge. If you don't want to believe me, you can just kiss my ass." With these words Bill stepped past Sgt. Merrins and headed for the company command post. Sgt. Merrins followed. This conversation was not over by a long shot.

Walking into the company command post, Sgt. Merrins spotted Captain Carlson talking with some officer he did not recognize. In the same group was Lt. Akman, his new platoon leader. Cpt. Carlson spotted Sgt. Merrins and waved him over to the group. Sgt. Merrins saluted as he approached the group and gave the traditional "Airborne" salutation. Carlson replied "All the Way." To someone not familiar with this particular group of individuals, this exchange would have seemed a might peculiar. This group thought nothing of it. It was an exchange that took place countless times throughout a soldier's career. Of course, in country, the salute and exchange only occurred out of sight and hearing of the enemy.

Cpt. Carlson said, "Sgt., this is Major Brown, the brigade's intelligence officer. He is down here to give me a briefing on what to expect in this area."

"Welcome to the middle of nowhere, Major," Sgt. Merrins replied.

"I suppose you're here to be debriefed about last night's patrol?" Cpt. Carlson asked. "Why don't we step over to my tent and you can tell all of us what it's like out there."

The group was briefed on the previous night's patrol. Sgt. Merrins was careful to include as much information about the terrain and the conditions he had encountered as he could remember. All three officers asked questions about the patrol. Sgt. Merrins kept

expecting a question concerning radio checks missed during the night, but none were asked. It was with some sense of relief that he was dismissed.

He exited the tent. Walsh was waiting for him.

"Sarge, I got someone I want you to talk to," Bill said. He turned and walked over to the company command post. The Sgt. followed. Inside, Walsh was standing next to Cpl. White Owl. White Owl was the Old Man's radio operator. He was the one responsible for setting up the radio watches that were pulled on the company's radio at night.

"Hello, White Owl," Sgt. Merrins said.

"How," White Owl replied. Sgt. Merrins smiled, as White Owl knew he would. The Sgt. and White Owl were members of the original company that shipped over together many months ago. There were very few of them left. Those who were still around felt a special kinship that they rarely felt for others. White Owl's mimicking of Indian talk never failed to bring a smile to Merrins' face.

"White Owl. Tell Sgt. Merrins what you told me," Bill said.

White Owl spoke. "I talked to you twice on the radio last night, Lou. At midnight you asked for a comm check and again at 0300 hours. I was on duty myself both times, so I know it was you. I'd recognize that squeaky voice of yours anywhere. I was sort of surprised that you did that twice in one night. Normally we can't get you to say anything."

With this Bill turned and left.

"Something wrong sarge?" White Owl asked.

"No. Hey, I need to get back to the platoon. I'm beat. You take care and I'll see you later." He turned and left.

Back at the platoon area Sgt. Merrins got about the business of the day. Since he had gotten so much sleep the night before, he was not tired. He heated up some C-rations for breakfast/lunch. After eating he went about his normal duties.

The fire base perimeter had been carefully laid out by the battalion commander. The base was located on a small hill that represented high ground in this area. Having come from the Central Highlands, they wouldn't classify this hill as high. On the other hand, it was possible to view the area for some distance in all directions. Unlike the jungle they came from, this area

had small brush that was easily cut to provide good fields of fire for the bunkered positions. Sgt. Merrins visited each of the eight bunkers being built by the men of his platoon.

Each position had an enclosed bunker with overhead cover. The material for the bunkers had been flown in the previous day by the engineers. Each bunker consisted of several hundred sandbags that the men filled using shovels and sweat. Overhead cover was made by placing steel beams across the top and overlaying this with sheets of thin metal. This was then covered with two layers of sandbags. Each bunker was big enough to accommodate five to six men during an attack. The bunkers contained ports through which the men could fire at the enemy in relative safety. The Sgt. checked to ensure that each bunker had overlapping fields of fire with the bunker on its immediate left and right. Firing pegs were inserted into the sandbags so that each soldier could define his field of fire in the dark. There were grenade sumps built into the front of each bunker. These were nothing more than a slit trench built along the floor at the front of the bunker. At the bottom of the slit trench there was a hole. The idea was that, if a grenade was thrown into the bunker, the person closest to the grenade would kick it into the sump. When the grenade went off, the explosion would be channeled up and away from the men. Any shrapnel would go either into the ground or up to the roof. Sgt. Merrins hoped he was never around when this theory was tested. Just the concussion from such a device in so small an area would leave a person deaf, dumb, blind, and fucked up. Bunkers had their entrances in the back. The entrance to each had a turn built into it so that a hand grenade or mortar shell going off behind the bunker could not spray shrapnel into the bunker. Each bunker had several wires running into it. These were from the claymore mines the men had setup to protect the approaches to the bunker. Each bunker sat about twenty yards in back of the rolls of barbwire the men had strung the previous day. Of course the wire was booby trapped with noisemakers and flares.

After checking out all the positions, the Sgt. spent the rest of the day going about the everyday mundane chores that went with his job. The company would be moving out into the field tomorrow. It was his job to ensure that the men had all the equipment and rations necessary to live in the field. Each man was responsible for his own things, but the Sgt. was responsible for each man in the platoon. Of course he had the help of his four squad leaders.

Each one of these men had been with the company from the beginning. Out of the forty men in the platoon at the beginning of their tour, there were only eight left. Everyone else had either been killed, wounded, or removed for medical reasons. No one had been there long enough to rotate home, and at the rate they were losing men, perhaps no one would. His squad leaders were all competent men with varying degrees of skills. They made his life easier, and he did his best to look after them.

About four in the afternoon, Lt. Atkins sent for him. The lieutenant had been in meeting with the captain all day in preparation for the upcoming patrol. It was time for them to get together.

Lt. Atkins was relatively new to the outfit. He had been with the platoon for about a month now. He was a graduate of officer candidate school. Prior to that, he had been a Sgt. E-6 in the infantry. He was twenty-eight years old and had been in the military since he was eighteen. With his background one might expect him to be a superior officer. In fact he was not. He had a tendency to act as if he knew far more than he actually did. His experience prior to becoming an officer had all been gained either in Germany or back in the States. Atkins had no combat experience prior to coming to the platoon. Sgt. Merrins often wondered about this. How an experienced noncommissioned officer like Atkins had been able to avoid combat duty before this was a question he would have liked to have an answer to. Lt. Atkins had a way of talking down to the men in the platoon. It was as if the experience they had gained in combat was not as important as what he had been taught in officer training. Sgt. Merrins was beginning to lose patience with the man.

Sgt. Merrins found the lieutenant sitting on top of the underground bunker that would serve as the company command post. It had been completed during the course of the day and was up and running.

"Afternoon, Sir," Sgt. Merrins said.

"I've been waiting for you sergeant," the lieutenant replied. "Where have you been?"

"With the platoon, Sir. I got the message about ten minutes ago and came as quickly as I could," replied the Sgt.

"When I want to see you, I want to see you now, not ten minutes from now. You got that, Sarge?"

"Yes, Sir!" the sarge replied. He was tempted to salute. Maybe some sniper laying out there in the bush would see the action and know which one of them to aim at. It was considered an insult to salute an officer out in the open in enemy territory. Both he and the lieutenant knew this. Sgt. Merrins thought he could do it and probably get away with it. The lieutenant would not even think twice about it, and that was what was wrong with the lieutenant. Sgt. Merrins was beginning to suspect that the man was too stupid to survive.

"What is the status of the platoon?" the lieutenant asked.

"Everything is taken care of, Sir. They are done building bunkers. Most of them are going over their equipment for tomorrow."

"I want you to make sure they all clean their weapons good today. I will hold you responsible. I plan to inspect their positions and weapons later this evening," the lieutenant said.

Sgt. Merrins did not reply. He just stood there with a blank look on his face. He did not trust himself to speak. Lou was glad his men were out of listening range. He would not tell the men to clean their weapons. It would be an insult to them. An Infantryman lived or died because of the condition of his weapon. They cleaned them constantly. The only one in the platoon whose weapon he was concerned about was the lieutenant's. The new guys would be told by their peers. The sergeant looked down at his own weapon. He had cleaned it after returning from patrol this morning and had wiped it down once already this afternoon. It was as much an appendage as an arm or a leg. The Sgt. noticed that the lieutenant's weapon was not in sight. It was probably leaning against some bunker somewhere, forgotten. He had warned the lieutenant about this in the past and refused to worry about it any more. A soldier without a weapon was just a civilian wandering around in the kill zone waiting to be slaughtered. Even in the relative safety of a fire support base, each man in the platoon had his rifle within arm's reach. They moved about with them without ever thinking about it. If some of the men in the platoon got a hold of the lieutenant's rifle, they would try to fix it so that it either wouldn't work or it would blow up in his face. The Sgt. reminded himself to be sure to

check the lieutenant's rifle before they left base tomorrow. Sgt. Merrins was not too worried about the lieutenant's inspection later in the evening. He would warn his squad leaders so they could be ready for him.

Atkins proceeded to brief the sergeant about the upcoming patrol. The sergeant paid close attention to what was being said. He took notes in the little notebook he always carried wrapped in plastic. They covered the map of the area in which they were going to operate. Sgt. Merrins noted the lack of elevation lines he was use to seeing on maps when they were operating upcountry. It would be much more difficult to keep track of exactly where they were on the flat terrain. Sgt. Merrins would be spending more time with his compass and map than he had in the past. At the same time, the lieutenant's presence made this a little easier. One of his best attributes was his ability to read maps. It was in technical areas that the lieutenant excelled. Besides being able to read maps and orient himself in strange country, the lieutenant had other abilities that were of value to the platoon. He knew how to call in airstrikes, artillery, mortar fire, and gunships. He knew squad and platoon tactics. How to move groups of men through varying terrain. How to set up defensive night positions and how to lay out an ambush. It was these skills that gave the sergeant hope that the lieutenant would eventually become a good officer. In the past, all these jobs had been Sgt. Merrins' responsibility. He could do them, but because he had picked up these skills in the field as opposed to a classroom, he was not always comfortable with his abilities. Lou never showed this uncertainty to the men in the platoon, although he suspected Bill knew. The men in the platoon rarely saw this side of the lieutenant's makeup. Lou suspected they greatly underestimated these skills.

After the briefing, the Sgt. gathered up his squad leaders and gave them the same briefing, almost word for word. Communication was Sgt. Merrins' forte. When he listened, he listened hard. He paid attention ferociously. What he heard, he remembered. Someone listening to this briefing would swear there was a tape recorder playing back the lieutenant's briefing, only in Sgt. Merrins' voice. The squad leaders were all relaxed during the briefing. They took notes and asked questions. Sgt. Merrins had all the answers because the lieutenant had been very thorough in his briefing. After the briefing, they sat around bullshitting for a while. This was the best time of the day. They all knew and respected each other. Including

the time they had spent training together back in the States, they had been together for almost a year. The men loved each other more than they had ever loved or ever would love another human being. They would never admit that, but it just was.

Technically, his squad leaders were not even squad leaders. The Military Table of Organization and Equipment manual required that a squad leader be a staff sergeant E-6. All his squad leaders were sergeant E5s. Sgt. Merrins held the same rank as the other men in the group. As a platoon sergeant, he held a position normally occupied by a sgt-E7. Prior to Lt. Atkins' arrival, he had been the acting platoon leader for three months, a job normally held by a second lieutenant. It was this lack of officer availability that had created part of the dilemma faced by Lt. Atkins. The squad leaders looked upon Sgt. Merrins as the platoon leader. They would have been perfectly happy to continue without an officer in the platoon. To them the lieutenant was an interloper and not welcomed. In some ways this was not fair to him, but this was Vietnam, and here nothing was fair. Sgt. Merrins had been happy to get the lieutenant. Being a platoon leader was not something he had bargained for. The truth was that he would have gladly given up his job as platoon sergeant. He never discussed this with the other sergeants. He had a job to do and he did it. It would do nobody any good to complain.

After a while the men drifted back to their squads. They would brief their men so that when the company moved out in the morning, everyone would be on the same page. The area they would be operating in was "hot". Intelligence sources reported the movement of large numbers of enemy troops into this area. His company's job was to find them and make contact. Sgt. Merrins knew that they would be out on patrol for a long time. Although the briefing had only covered a three day period, it would be updated each day to include the next three days. The plan would change every day depending on what kind of action they ran into and what was happening to the other companies operating in the area. If the area they were operating in was quiet, they would be quickly moved to another area. This is what his company did. They were hunters.

Since this was his first night in the fire support base, it was technically his first night out of the bush in over two months. Because of this, he planned to enjoy it. Each of the platoon's bunkers had four to five men assigned to it. He had already told his squad leaders that only one

man had to be on watch at each position. This meant everyone would be allowed extra sleep during the night. The sergeant would sleep in a spot about one hundred and fifty feet in back of one of the bunkers, near the center of the arc his platoon's bunkers described. That way he could move quickly to any bunker if there was an attack. He and Bill would share his position with Atkins and his radio man, Chuck. They had made their own position during the course of the day. It consisted of a circle of sandbags surrounding a small depression in the ground. They would sleep on the ground inside the circle. It would be relatively safe except for a direct hit with a round of high explosive. If something happened during the night, they would be heading for the bunkers anyway.

Privates Bill and Chuck were huddling together now. They had gone to their own briefing earlier in the afternoon and had come back with all the new frequencies and code names that would be used for the next few days. These changed frequently, and it was the radio operator's responsibility to keep all the changes straight. Both the lieutenant and sergeant were given this information, and Sgt. Merrins passed this information on to his squad leaders. This was not done in every platoon since squad leaders did not have the heavier radios used for company and battalion communications. Sgt. Merrins knew from experience that his squad leaders might need that information once the company got into action. Shit Happened.

The sergeant's day was winding down. It would be dark in another hour. He heated up some C rations and leaned back against his rucksack to eat. He let his mind wonder about the events of the previous night. Of course that was the problem since there were no events the previous night as far as he could remember. During the course of the day, he had slowly accepted the fact that neither Bill nor White Owl had any reason to lie to him. During the debriefing with Cpt. Carlson, there had been no mention of missed radio checks during the night. The company would have contacted the patrol every hour for a communication check. If no one had answered, it would have certainly been brought to the sergeant's attention upon the patrol's return to base. The only logical conclusion was that he had answered those communication checks properly. Of course this meant he had to be awake to do that. He could not remember anything from last night. There had been no one else at his position to either confirm or deny Bill's version of what had happened. Sgt. Merrins was aware of the term

“sleep walking.” He wondered if it applied to this situation. If this is what had happened, he could become dangerous to be around. Survival depended on being alert to danger at all times. How could one be alert if their mind was asleep?

There was no one in the company to talk to about this problem. There were no doctors or shrinks in the field. Anyone else would think that maybe he was bucking for a section eight. Stone cold crazy! Sgt. Merrins knew he was no longer normal, but he did not think he was crazy.

"Sgt. Merrins," a voice called. Lt. Atkins had approached from behind him. Sgt. Merrins looked up at the lieutenant. The first thing he noticed was that he didn't have his rifle with him. If he noticed, then every man in the platoon would notice. This is why the men did not trust him.

"Yes, Sir," the sergeant replied, getting to his feet.

"I have been offered a bunk for the night in the command post. I will be there if you need me. Understand?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir," the sergeant replied to the lieutenant's back as he walked away.

Typical of the silly bastard, the sergeant thought. No mention of the fact that he never did inspect the bunkers. No information of what his plans were in case of an attack. His guess was that the lieutenant would try to get back to the platoon should an attack occur. The command post was almost a hundred yards away with almost no cover between it and the platoon's bunker. Sgt. Merrins would bet big money that if there was a mortar attack, the lieutenant would try to make it to the platoon. Sgt. Merrins would bet a month's pay that he would not make it. It was this kind of stupidity that worried Sgt. Merrins. Not only would the lieutenant would get himself killed, but he would do it in a way that got other men killed also. Didn't the lieutenant know that the men would notice his absence tonight? How did he expect them to follow him and accept him as their leader when he chose to spend the night away from them?

Sgt. Merrins sat back down and finished his meal. His thoughts did not return to the previous evening. Neither did he think of home nor family. Instead he ran through a list of things having to do with the platoon. After a while, Bill and Chuck came over and sat and talked

for a while. Neither Bill nor the sergeant mentioned what had happened this morning. There were no apologies offered and none sought. It was not necessary. Sgt. Merrins told Bill and Chuck that there was no need to pull radio watches that night. If something happened, they would know it. The company command post would not require any communications checks tonight. It was one advantage to being in base. An hour later they were all asleep.

Sgt. Merrins woke up. It was still dark, as he knew it would be. He had told himself to wake up at 0400 hours, and even though he could not see his watch, he was confident about the time. The sergeant was always slightly surprised at how accurate his sense of time was, but after all these months he no longer doubted his body's ability to keep track of it. He looked around. Like the night before, there were plenty of stars out but no moon. His eyes could pick up no movement. His ears had immediately picked up the breathing of the two men lying nearby. Off to his left he could hear noises coming from the area occupied by the artillery. Thank god there had been no fire missions during the night. That was a hell of a way to be awoken. Off to his right, toward the bunkers, he heard nothing. Infantrymen and artillerymen. Two entirely different animals. To an infantryman, noise at night meant death. To an artilleryman, it meant comradeship and safety.

The sergeant was aware of the M-16 his hand rested on. He was aware of the bayonet he held in his left hand. Even inside a fire support base, the sarge was ready for anything. He moved his hand a couple of inches to pick up his hand grenade. It was not there. He swept his hand back and forth in a wider arc feeling for it. It was not there. *What the Hell?* He got up on his knees and felt all around where he had lain. No hand grenade. *What the Fuck!* Bill whispered, "Anything wrong, Sarge?" *Yeah, someone just stole my hand grenade.* "No," he replied. He reached over to pick up his webbing. The second he began to move it he knew something was wrong. Way too light. His hands confirmed what his mind already knew. No hand grenades. A quick inventory told him everything else was present. Rifle, ammunition, rucksack, helmet, knife, webbing, canteens. All present and accounted for. The sergeant knew this was no joke. A thousand years ago when the company had first moved out into the field, someone might pull this kind of thing thinking it was funny. Now there wasn't anyone who

would do anything so stupid. He would find them in the morning, and with them he would find some answers. He sat and patiently awaited the arrival of the dawn.

As the night began to lighten with a hint of dawn in the east, the sarge moved off toward the first bunker on the right of his platoon's responsibility. He moved quickly but quietly. When he was within thirty feet of the bunker, Lou spotted one of the men looking at him. He couldn't see the man's eyes, but his body position told the sarge when he had first been spotted and then when the man had recognized him. It was light enough now that no challenge was issued to his approach. When he got close, he recognized Private Carr of First Squad. He had an M-79 grenade launcher cradled across his left arm. The breech was open with a round in the chamber ready for instant use. This was proper procedure for this time of day. The enemy loved to attack at first light, when it was light enough to see ahead but not to shoot accurately. The sergeant entered the bunker. Everyone was standing up, peering out through the firing windows. All eyes turned to him. "Morning, Men," he said to no one in particular. The men mumbled back various replies. They were used to his morning visits. He popped in and out of their lives several times each day. He knew each and every one of them by name. Even though he was not a member of their squad, they didn't view him as an outsider. Lou could tell so by the way they immediately picked up their conversation. And he knew from experience that if he had the lieutenant with him, the men would have remained silent until they left. Men who lived together like they did become very clannish. Outsiders were not welcomed.

"Sergeant Willis is over at the other bunker, Sarge," Corporal Haley said. "Thanks, Jim," he replied.

"Got any weed on you, Sarge? We smoked all of ours last night," Private Miller said. Everyone laughed. This was probably true.

"Jonesy is due back from R&R today. I'm sure he'll bring back some with him and be happy to share it with you, Bones," the sarge replied. This got even a bigger laugh. Jonesy would have a stash when he got back. He would be more than happy to sell some to the guys, but everyone knew Jonesy was too cheap to share anything with anyone.

"Fuck you," he heard Miller reply as he headed off to the next bunker. The men seemed to be in good spirits this morning. Being out of the field for a day had its medicinal value.

The sergeant spotted Sgt. Willis sitting with his back to the bunker smoking a cigarette. Sgt. Merrins sat beside him and lit up a Salem. His first of the morning. Best cigarette of the day. Of course everyone knew that the truly best cigarette was the one just after sex. The next best was the one you lit up after a fire fight. Usually your hands were shaking from a combination of psychological reasons and the adrenaline pumping through your system. That cigarette was an affirmation of life. But outside those two, the morning cigarette was the best.

"You come back for these?" Sgt. Willis asked, handing him three hand grenades.

*Christ.* "Thanks," Sgt. Merrins replied.

"You're getting senile in your old age," Jim said, smiling. *Twenty-two and crazy as a billy goat,* Lou thought.

"Just tired," Lou replied while hooking his grenades back on his webbing. He knew right away they were his. A million grenades in country, and he could pick his out of the bunch. Every man in the outfit could do the same thing. Weapons were very personal items.

"You scared the hell out of Andy last night. He didn't know you were there until you tapped him on the shoulder. Almost gave him a heart attack. He still looks a little white this morning," Jim said smiling. Private Andrew Higgins was black. Sgt. Willis was a white, Southern bigot, a card-carrying KKK motherfucker. Sgt. Willis and Andy were best friends.

"I'll apologize to him right now," Lou said beginning to stand up.

Jim's hand stopped him. "No need, I apologized for you. Andy thinks you're weird anyway. The way you like to move around at night. You're like a damn spook. One of these days, one of my men is going to shoot your ass. You'll be dead just like Old Stonewall, kilt by your own men," Sgt. Willis said. Sgt. Merrins knew that Jim was referring to General Stonewall Jackson, who was killed riding back to his own lines at dusk during the Civil War. He was always amazed at how much Jim knew about the Civil War. Some Southern men were like that. It was as if the Civil War was a current event like the Civil Rights battles taking place back home. Jim was not very tolerant when talking about that subject. His political views were just a tad to the

right of Herr Hitler's, but Andy was his best friend. Amazing. "He said you were still sitting on the bunker when he went off duty around two. What time did you leave?" Jim asked.

"Just a little later," Lou replied.

"Well pick up your hand grenades next time. I'm not your mother," Jim said smiling.

"Yes, Sir, Mom." Sgt. Merrins replied. He flicked the burning ash from the end of the cigarette. He stripped the paper down, emptying the unused tobacco on to the ground, and placed the dirty filter and paper into his pocket. He did these things without thinking, part of this military training. And this is why the hand grenades bothered him. He would never leave them lying around. He couldn't remember visiting the bunker last night. As far as he knew, he had slept through the night. Now there was evidence that this is not what had happened. In addition, he had violated one of his own survival rules about leaving weapons lying around unguarded.

"Jim, have your men ready to go by eight. Bravo Company was camped just a couple of clicks south of here and are probably already moving this way. As soon as they get here, let them take over the bunkers. Our platoon will move out of the perimeter on the east side of the base, so you'll be leading out. About two hundred meters due east is a large field. Cross the field and set up security facing east. Second Platoon will be on your right facing south. Third Platoon will tie in on your left facing north. Fourth Platoon will face west. I've allowed plenty of time to get there, so take your time moving. Make sure your men maintain good spacing, just like we talked about in the briefing. When the choppers come in, Second Platoon is up first, followed by Third, Fourth, Weapons and Command, then us. Keep your men in position until the choppers are on the ground. Last time you had men milling around while the choppers were still in the air. I don't want to see that again." Sgt. Merrins was dead serious now and Sgt. Willis knew it.

"Yep," he replied.

"Any questions?"

"Yep."

"What?" Lou asked with a touch of irritation in his voice.

"We only going to need to carry three grenades now?" Jim asked.

Sgt. Merrins laughed out loud. "No," he said. "I need to find a store and buy three more to make a set. You take care of yourself, Country, and I'll catch up with you later." Upon saying this, he turned and headed on up the line of bunkers. He stopped at each position to visit with the men. He told each squad leader essentially the same things he had told Sgt. Willis. At the last bunker he met up with Cpl. Martinez.

Corporal Juan Martinez was older than most of the men in the outfit. He was a replacement that had been with the company a couple of months now, a Cuban exile who claimed he had been at the Bay of Pigs. There was no reason to challenge this claim. Cpl. Martinez was an excellent soldier and would be promoted just as soon as he had the required time in his current rank, probably sooner. He had joined up to fight in Vietnam. He hated the communists and wasn't a bigot. Juan hated all Communists, regardless of race, religion, or sexual orientation.

"Hey, Amigo," he yelled as Sgt. Merrins approached.

"Juan, how's it going?" the Lou asked in reply.

As Lou stepped close, Juan said in a lowered tone of voice, "You left your grenades on top of the bunker last night when you left. I put them in my pack so they wouldn't get lost. You look sort of naked without them. I'll go get them for you." He turned and ducked into the bunker. A minute later he was back with his rucksack and one of the other men. The sergeant wasn't too surprised. It would have taken an amazing amount of luck to get all his grenades back without some razzing from the men. Then Private Smiley headed up the hill, while Cpl. Martinez stopped in front of him. Juan opened his rucksack and handed the grenades to Sgt. Merrins.

"I didn't think you would want the others to see these," said Juan. "No one else even knows you were down here last night."

"Besides leaving the grenades when I left, was there anything strange about my visit last night," the sarge asked.

"Strange? No. At least not by your standards, Sarge. You showed up around 0230 and left an hour later. You just sat with me on the bunker. We talked a little just before you left, but nothing out of the ordinary. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing," the sarge replied. "Thanks for not making a big deal out of the grenades. I guess I just wasn't thinking."

"Don't worry, Sarge. It happens to the best of us."

Sgt. Merrins shook Juan's hand, turned, and left. He headed back to his position to get some chow and get ready to move out. He had learned enough about the night before.

Lou had evidently moved around quite a bit without knowing it. It was strange. The thought of this having happened again did not bother him like it had yesterday. Yesterday it was something new and frightening. Having lived through it twice now, it did not seem to be a fatal condition. It was amazing how good he felt physically and mentally. His body felt strong and his mind felt sharp. He felt like he had slept the night before. His energy level felt higher than it had in some days. Maybe what was happening to him was a good thing.

An hour later, he was sitting beside his rucksack, smoking. He had eaten, cleaned his weapon, and was ready for the day to begin. The day was heating up. He had no idea how hot it was because in the field they never received a weather report. But just sitting there in the sun, he felt a fine sheen of sweat covering his forehead. Bravo Company had shown up fifteen minutes ago. All his men were out of the bunkers. Most were sitting around, smoking and joking.

"Asshole alert," Bill said in a quiet voice.

Hearing this, Sgt. Merrins got to his feet. He looked toward First Squad. They were getting up and preparing to move out. All down the line, the men of First Platoon were mounting up. Without a word having been spoken they all knew the time had come.

"They ready?" the lieutenant asked. Sgt. Willis already had his men moving toward the opening in the wire they would use to exit the base.

"Yes, Sir," Sgt. Merrins replied needlessly.

"You take point," the lieutenant said.

Sgt. Merrins turned and headed toward where the First Squad was exiting the wire. There was a smile on his face. If someone had asked why, it was doubtful that he could provide a logical answer. He just felt good and was looking forward to being on the move again. He never looked back.

Sgt. Merrins never returned to that base. He never thought again about what had happened to him the previous two nights. END