

#15 The Lieutenant – Part One – field Vietnam

Writer's Notes - I served with Lieutenant Atkins for about a week, and then I received orders for my special leave, which is the story "Leave," about my return to the United States for 30 days.

"Sergeant Merrins! Yo, Sergeant Merrins!" I heard the call the first time and recognized the voice immediately. It was that of PFC Martinez from Third Squad. I opened my eyes and spotted him immediately. He was standing in an opening on the edge of the wood line peering into the shadows, trying to spot my position. I stood up, my movement catching his attention. He turned and moved over to my position.

I sat as he approached, and he quickly sat down beside me. I lit up a cigarette.

"Those things will kill you," Martinez said. It was something he pointed out every chance he got.

"You came over here and interrupted my siesta to tell me this?"

He smiled. "No. Actually I came to tell you something else, but you shouldn't smoke. Bad for your wind. Besides, it gives away the company's position."

"Fucking Cuban. As if every gook in the neighborhood was deaf and blind, what with helicopters landing here and circling overhead. Charlie needs my cigarettes to lead them to our position."

Martinez laughed. He and I both had similar outlooks on things. An irreverent acceptance of the situation we found ourselves in. Martinez was hardcore Airborne. The son of an exiled Cuban refugee, Martinez had found his niche in the Army. His hatred of communism was both real and passionate. Serving his adopted country in its fight against the communists from North Vietnam was almost a sacred quest where he was concerned. PFC Martinez was proving to be a superior warrior, and I was sure that he would go far in his military career.

While his feelings ran in one direction, his demeanor ran in the opposite. Martinez, once he got to know and trust someone, was as friendly and outgoing as anyone I knew. He enjoyed the company of others and was quick with a quip and a smile. The language he spoke

was a combination of Spanish, English and ghetto jive talk he learned from the brothers in the outfit. A devout Catholic, Martinez's speech had a tendency to be colorful, a situation that would have to be corrected should he ever make it home to his family. Listening to him required a sharp ear and a quick mind, because of his rapid delivery, heavy accent, and plethora of phrases taken from different cultures within our society. Everyone liked Julio, including myself, except of course when he was interrupting my siesta.

"Is there something you want to tell me, or are you just pissing on my nap time?" I asked.

"Sergeant Baskins sent me to tell you a new guy got off the skid," he replied, referring to the supply helicopter.

"So?"

"He was an officer. A Second Looney. Sergeant Baskins thought you should know."

"Thanks a lot, Martinez," I replied.

Martinez turned and headed back to whatever he was doing. What he had told me was both expected and unexpected. Everyone knew the First Platoon would eventually be getting a new platoon leader. The amazing thing was that we had been able to function for so long without one. It had been almost three months since my return to the field, and the platoon had been without an officer for over a month before that, indeed a rare exception to the Army's way of doing things.

I had been looking forward to getting an officer for the platoon from the first day I had been given the responsibility of running things. Three months ago, it was something I looked forward to. Almost every day for the first month I asked either Top or Captain Carlson about whether there was an officer on the way somewhere in the system for us. Perhaps it was just my own insecurity speaking, but without the special training officers received, I felt I was in over my head.

Now things had changed somewhat. The platoon was capable of functioning as a well-knit team. Being in charge had been stressful, but the job proved easier than I had expected. It wasn't because of my skills so much as the men I had under my direction. They were an exceptional group, capable of acting together to accomplish our mission. The squad leaders

were all superior soldiers who treated what we did very seriously. The men in the platoon were all very capable. They weren't angels, but they all worked well together. In military terms, "we had our shit together."

Still, I looked forward to getting an officer. It would relieve me of a lot of responsibility and make my job a whole lot easier. I basically still just wanted to be a grunt. A ground pounder. A jungle fighter. Mostly, I just wanted to be responsible for myself and not have to worry about everything and everyone within the platoon. I would still be the platoon sergeant, but with an officer over me, and superior men under me, just how hard could the job be?

Spec Four Hailey came moseying over to my position.

"His name is Lieutenant Matthew Atkins," he said without preamble. He sat down next to his precious radio and began cleaning and fiddling with it. He flipped through the various communication channels, changing frequencies and listening while he continued talking to me. "Just graduated from jump school and straight out of OCS. They just sent us a fucking cherry, ninety day wonder."

"Anything else I should know?"

Being a radio operator, Hailey not only knew everything that came over the radio, he knew everything happening within the company and almost everything happening within the battalion. Of course he was tied into the underground information network made up of every radio operator in the whole brigade. Somehow or another these men seemed to know everything that was happening even before the brigade commander.

"No. That's about it. He showed up last night at battalion. We've been slotted for the first qualified officer since our wonderful vacation in Bong Song. My guess is that they couldn't find anyone, so they sent us this guy." We both chuckled at that thought.

"Why don't you head down the line and warn the men," I said.

"A waste of time. They were already grilling me on my way back here. News travels fast in the jungle, you know."

I stood and stretched, working the kinks out of my body. It had been a long day, but everything had been taken care of. All that was left was a hot meal, distribution of the new supplies, a meeting with the squad leaders, meeting the new platoon leader, and finishing the

foxhole. Hailey had gotten a good start on that project before being called away to the command post. I should have finished it by now, but the temptation to catch a cat nap had proven too tempting. Hailey would have finished it if told to do so, but we shared the task unless something prevented me from doing so. It was tempting to use the new officer as an excuse to visit the command post, but both Hailey and I knew that was bullshit.

Placing my weapon within arm's reach, I removed my webbing and then my shirt. Grabbing my entrenching tool, I jumped down into the freshly dug hole and began digging down. It was a given that the radio would summon me shortly to the CP to meet the platoon's new man, and I was looking forward to that encounter.

It did not take long for me to work up a good sweat. Digging a foxhole was always a hard job, just sometimes harder than others. On some days, I actually enjoyed the physical labor. Working the muscles slowly until they warmed to the work being imposed upon them, I let the ground determine the amount of energy expended. Slowly, the job picked up a rhythm of its own. My mind relaxed and wandered as the body continued to function on automatic pilot. Digging is essentially a mindless activity, and I had a tendency to lose myself in the mindlessness of the activity.

"One of you men Sergeant Merris?" a voice asked.

Hailey jumped to his feet as I turned to answer the voice.

"Grab your rifle and that radio, and follow me," the man said addressing Hailey. I chose not to say anything. The man obviously knew what he wanted; besides, I had a hole to dig.

The man looked down at me while waiting for Hailey to follow his orders. The lieutenant I was looking up at was evidently the new platoon leader.

Lieutenant Atkins was older than I had expected. Most new officers coming out of officer's candidate school were young college graduates, but this man seemed older than that by several years. Just looking at him, one could see he was new to the field. For one thing, his uniform was clean, as was his equipment, as was everything about him. His face was white. Not because of his race, but because the tropical sun had not yet had a chance to burn itself into the skin's epidermal layer.

"I'm leaving my sixteen here, you look after it," he said, addressing me while leaning his weapon up against a tree. "While you're at it, make that hole larger, I'll be bunking down with you men tonight. Oh, by the way. I'm Lieutenant Atkins, the new platoon leader." Turning away he addressed Hailey.

"Which way to the first position?"

Hailey looked over at me before answering. I shrugged my shoulders. Smiling, Hailey led the lieutenant off toward the first position.

"Strange, really strange," I murmured to myself as I continued working on the hole. Three minutes later I heard laughter coming from over where the platoon's first position on the right was located. I was out of the hole, just beginning to wipe myself off with my towel, when Hailey came through the brush.

"The lieutenant requests your presence," Hailey said with a big, shit eating grin on his face.

"He figured it out?"

"Yeah, and he does not look happy," Hailey said, laughing. I hoped the lieutenant was out of earshot.

I took my time putting my shirt on, followed by my webbing, then a couple of bandoleers of ammunition, followed by my steel helmet. Picking up my weapon, I walked over to where the lieutenant had left his weapon. Slinging my weapon, I inspected his, first dropping out the magazine and then sliding back the bolt. I caught the round in the air, having expected the worst. The fire selection switch was on automatic. Putting the shell back in the magazine, I seated it in the weapon, then turned to follow Hailey.

"FNG," Hailey said, shaking his head in disgust.

"Knock that shit off," I said. "You know how I feel about that, and don't go around telling the guys about this. Understood?"

"Yeah."

I wound up taking the lead. The lieutenant stood there by the platoon's first position with his back to me. Sergeant Fry stood by the position with Spec Four McCallum. They were standing at attention, not a good sign.

"Lieutenant Atkins?" I said.

He spun around and glared at me.

"Here's your weapon, Sir," I said holding it out for him. "I got that clip out for you, Sir. Bent. Got jammed when you seated it."

The lieutenant took the weapon from me. I could tell he was about to speak, but I turned quickly and faced Sergeant Fry. "Sergeant, all the men back from the work detail yet?"

"No, Sarge."

"Well go see what's holding them up." Bobby turned and headed toward the center of the perimeter, relieved to be let out of a peculiar situation.

"Ken. That foxhole is not going to dig itself," I said addressing Spec Four McCallum. He bent down, picked up his entrenching tool, and got back to digging the hole.

"Hailey, you stay near, while the lieutenant and I finish inspecting the perimeter." I turned and faced the lieutenant. "Ready, Sir?" I asked while stepping off in the direction of the next position.

The lieutenant followed, not docilely from the look on his face, but wisely. We moved from position to position. The lieutenant asked questions of the men at each position concerning how they were tied in defensively with the positions on each side. He was thorough and asked intelligent questions. Overall, the inspection went well and lasted about thirty minutes before we were done with the last position.

I led the way back to our position.

Hailey saw us approaching, gave a short wave, and headed down toward where Third Squad was situated. He left the radio at the foxhole.

"Where does he think he's going?" the lieutenant asked.

"It's his turn to pick up our supplies, Sir. I did it last time. He'll be back in a few minutes."

I loosened my webbing, laying it carefully over my rucksack with my bandoleers of ammunition. Sitting down next to them, I lit up a Salem. The lieutenant stood there for a minute looking down at me.

"You did a good job laying out the platoon's defensive position, Sarge," he said.

"Thank you, Sir," I replied.

"We need to talk. I did not particularly like your butting into what was happening over at the first position. This is now my platoon. Those men were being insubordinate and I will not allow that, nor will I allow you to interfere when I am making a point to the men. You got that."

"Yes, Sir." I replied.

"I'm serious, Sarge. It was bad enough you and the radio man pulled a quick one on me, but I will not brook insubordination from anyone. You got a problem with that, tell me upfront." The whole time he talked, he stood there looking down at me, staring directly into my face. I wasn't put out by it, but it was irritating.

The lieutenant had one habit that in particular was getting on my nerves. On his right hip was a .45 caliber pistol, standard issue for all officers. The lieutenant could not seem to keep his hand off of it. Throughout our walk through of the perimeter, his hand continuously sought out and touched the damn thing. It was irritating.

"I don't know what happened with Sergeant Fry, Sir, but Bobby is a good squad leader. I am sure it was just a misunderstanding."

"I told those men that I was the new platoon leader and you and I were inspecting the positions. They laughed at me. It took me a minute to figure out that the radio man was not you, but still, they knew who I was, and I will not be laughed at. I may be the FNG to your men, but I have been around for a while. They will learn real quick not to fuck with me. I am not finished with Sergeant Fry."

I took a deep breath on my cigarette enjoying the sensation of the smoke seeping deep within my lungs. "That's fine, Sir, but there is no need to bother Sergeant Fry, I'll take care of it."

"Sergeant Merris," he addressed me.

"Merrins, Sir. Sergeant Merrins, with an N.

"Sorry. Anyway, like I said, I'll take care of Sergeant Fry. If I need your help I'll ask for it."

"No, Sir. When you need my help, I'll offer it. I don't consider you a Fucking New Guy. Hate that term as a matter of fact. The men know better than to use it around me. On the other hand, you are new and need to learn the men before getting in over your head. As platoon sergeant, it is my job to advise you. Take Bobby for example. He won't be with us much longer, a few days maybe, probably less."

"He rotating out?"

"No, Sir."

"You psychic?"

"No, Sir."

"Then pray tell, why is Bobby leaving us."

"He's sick, Sir. Has been for at least a week."

"If he's so sick, why is he still in the field?"

"Not sick enough to be sent in yet, Sir. Medics think it may be malaria. Bobby kept it hid for a while, but he's beginning to show signs."

"He looked fine to me. Skinny, but seems fit."

"Yes, Sir. Bobby's in great shape. He can hump with the best of us, but he's winding down. Can't keep on what little weight he has. His men spotted it first and came to me about it. I have the medics monitoring him, taking his temp, and they're just waiting for it to get high enough to send him into the rear. Has to be a hundred and two before they can tag him. A stupid concept. Anyway, I suspect that his next bout of fever will push him over the magic number and we'll get him out of here. Captain Carlson is aware of the situation."

"So I'm not to discipline him because he's sick?" the lieutenant asked with sarcasm in his voice.

"No, Sir. You won't discipline him because Sergeant Fry's actions do not warrant any action. You already embarrassed him in front of one his men, something that will get around very quickly. Bobby's men will not take kindly to that, but they can live with it. On the other hand, you go any further and things might get ugly."

"You trying to scare me, Sergeant?"

"No, Sir. I don't care if you're scared or not. I'm just telling you how it is, after that it's your problem. You do not have to listen to me."

"Anything else you think I need to know?"

Again with the sarcasm. It could get real boring very quickly. "Yes, Sir. You willing to listen?"

"I will listen, but do not waste my time with bullshit. I know it when I hear it." He sat against his rucksack while maintaining eye contact.

"Okay. First, you do not walk around with a loaded weapon inside the perimeter." The lieutenant's reaction was immediate. Grabbing his rifle, he dropped the magazine out, pulled back on the bolt. No bullet spun out of the chamber. His face turned red.

"What right do you have to check my weapon, Sergeant?"

"I have every right in the world, Sir. You left the damn thing when you went in search of the perimeter. I could not help noticing how you kept flipping the selector switch around. It told me right away you are not used to handling a weapon. It's all new to you. You're like a kid with a new toy. Sir, get this through your head, that is not a toy you're handling. It's only function is to kill things. It's my job to ensure it doesn't kill me or any of the men."

"Bullshit, Sergeant. I am an officer. If I feel like walking around with a loaded weapon, that is my business. You ever do that again, I'll have your stripes." The lieutenant then proceeded to jack a round into the chamber.

I stood, my weapon coming with me. The lieutenant's eyes narrowed as he watched. I smiled. Turning, I put on my webbing and bandoleers.

"Where you think you're going?"

"I think Top and I need to have a talk, Sir," I said.

"Well, I don't. You sit your ass back down."

"You ever hear the term, 'Fuck You,' Sir?" I said.

Hailey stopped whatever was going to happen from occurring, by selecting that instant to return with our supplies.

"Hey, Sarge. Nothing but LRRPs," he said, lugging our supplies over. They were inside his poncho, which he was using to make a sack. He swung it off his shoulder and it landed on

the ground with a thud. Of course there was nothing in our supplies that needed to be handled with care, since most supplies could only be damaged with the use of explosives. Well, except for the cigarettes, and since Hailey did not smoke, he was not particularly worried if they got crushed.

He spread the rucksack displaying our rations for the next three days. "Chow line is opening. Mind if I head on over?"

"No, go right ahead," I replied.

"You want me to bring your food to you, Sir?" Hailey asked the lieutenant.

"No. I'll get mine later."

Hailey turned and left. I turned my attention back to the lieutenant, ready to go find Top. He appeared calmer than a few minutes ago. Pressing the release he let the clip fall out of his weapon and then ejected the round from the chamber. Reseating the bullet into the magazine, he slammed the magazine back in its seat.

Without a word, I took off my gear. Bending down I began separating the supplies into two stacks.

"How do you know who gets what?" the lieutenant asked.

"Hailey and I take turns. He split things last time, so it's my turn. We know each other well enough to know how it goes. Besides if I screw him this time, next time he'll put it to me."

"Who parceled out the supplies in the first place?"

"Top makes sure all the platoon's get their share of supplies. Once the platoon gets its supplies, one of the squad leaders is responsible for breaking it down to the various squads. Today it's Sergeant's Baskin's responsibility. We rotate it so everyone gets a shot.

Hailey and I are included in First Squad's supplies. Once each squad has their portion, the squad leaders are responsible for seeing that each man in the squad gets his share. Since each squad is short at least a couple of men, there is plenty to go around. Any problems, I get involved, but that doesn't happen very often."

I took my share of supplies and began packing them away in my rucksack, leaving Hailey's bundled in his poncho.

"Listen, Sarge. I'm sorry if I got a little angry at you. I just don't want to be made to feel stupid or made fun of."

"I don't blame you, Sir. If we've learned anything being in the field, it's to separate what's important from what's, as you have a tendency to say, bullshit." I stared him in the eyes. "What I said about keeping a round in the chamber is a rule everyone has to learn and follow. Ask Captain Carlson or one of the other officers if you think I'm lying. Two weeks ago we lost a man from Second Platoon. Shot right through the head by accident, by a new guy who had gotten off the copter less than five minutes before it happened. We got the motherfucker out before any of the dead man's friends could kill him, but it was real tense there for a while.

Don't think it can't happen to you. You've got so much to learn, it's scary. I'll teach you as fast as I can, but you are going to make mistakes. Out here, the men will allow you to make the same mistake only once. After that they will lose patience with you, and you don't want that to happen."

"Or What?"

"Or nothing, Sir."

"I do anything else wrong today?"

"You mean other than walking around without your rifle? Or standing a couple of men at attention? That move will tell a sniper who is in charge. How about standing out in front of the foxhole? What happens if the men need to blow the claymores? Shit, you were almost standing on one. Besides being useless, that forty five of yours will tell the gooks you're an officer and get you more attention than wearing a red shirt out in the bush. Taking the radio will tell a sniper who the officer is, another invitation to disaster. Traveling from foxhole to foxhole isn't too smart either, and when visiting with the men it's best to try blending in so anyone watching will not tag your ass as an officer."

"Anything else, Sarge?" Once again there was anger creeping into the lieutenant's voice.

"Yeah. You can fuck with Bobby and get away with it. Basically, he's a decent guy who wouldn't hurt a fly unless it was absolutely necessary. McCallum, on the other hand, won't

forget you standing him at attention like he was some sort of trainee. I suggest you apologize to him."

"I do not apologize to enlisted men."

"Hey Lieutenant, it's okay with me. Do what you want, but I don't think of the men in terms of ranks, race, religion or anything else. They are all individuals, and I treat them all just a little different. Bobby will ignore the whole thing, but don't let that fool you. If Bobby killed you, he would be smiling and you would probably see it coming. The smile is a nervous habit of his. McCallum would just kill you though. Never see it coming. You'd just wake up dead.

"Like you said, I don't know you, but if there is one thing you need to learn, it is that until now, whatever you've done in your life, it was all just play. You have not grasped this yet, but out here everything is real. Fuck around time is over. We all plan to make it out of here, it's just that most of us won't, not in one piece at least."

"Don't you think I know that already?"

"No, Sir. Until the shit happens, you have no idea what it's all about. These men do. They do their job and they do it well. Learn from them, and maybe you'll survive."

It was difficult to tell if I was getting through. The lieutenant appeared to be listening, which was good, but whether this was registering was debatable. I spotted Hailey heading back, balancing his meal as he progressed towards us.

"Time for some chow, Sir."

"Sounds good to me. I think I'll grab some food and head over to the CP. The captain said to drop in on him later. I'd like to meet with the squad leaders later, say about nineteen hundred hours, and then meet with the whole platoon around nineteen thirty hours."

He turned and headed into the perimeter, leaving his M-16 against a tree. Hailey had in the meantime gotten himself comfortably situated.

"Keep an eye on the lieutenant's weapon. If I'm not mistaken, he'll be back for it shortly. I'm gonna go get something to eat."

When I got back, the weapon was gone. Hailey smiled when he saw me looking where it had been, but didn't say anything.

"Do me a favor Mike, keep quiet about what you see and hear. I want what goes on between me and the LT to remain our little secret. No sense spreading your observations about what goes on too freely. It's too early to get a reading on the guy, and I want to give him every chance to succeed. You bic?"

"Sure, Sarge. You know I don't speak out of turn."

"Yeah, and I appreciate that, it's just that I think it may be much harder now than in the past."

"He doesn't have a clue, does he?" The question was rhetorical.

Bobby showed up early for the meeting. My weapon was apart, and I was cleaning it. He approached from my rear, and it was only Hailey's glance that told me someone was approaching from that direction.

"I think I'll check with White Owl," Hailey said getting to his feet.

Sergeant Fry sat across from me, taking the place Hailey had left. Placing his helmet next to him on the ground, Bobby sat there, his head cocked to one side, the question hanging in the air between us.

"What's Doc saying?"

"I have a slight fever, Pro," Bobby said. "I'll be alright."

"Yeah, Bobby. I said the same damn thing. It almost got me killed. Listen man, this isn't about courage or guts, it's about survival. If you're sick, I need you to get well. We'll survive without your scrawny ass. Besides, a little rest, and you'll be good as new."

"Doc says that if it's malaria, I'm out of the field for good. Can't handle that. I am not like you, Sarge. No way I'll make it in the rear."

"You saying I'm an REMF, Bobby?"

"Fuck no, Sarge! You're all grunt. Remember, I was sure enough of that to want you as platoon sergeant when you got back to the field. You just have the ability to adapt better than me. I'm not smart like you."

"Watch your language, Bobby," I said. He blushed. I couldn't help laughing out loud. "Christ, Bobby. You're the only man in the whole outfit that can be embarrassed by his own language. Some things never change."

"As far as intelligence, you're at least as smart as me. If you get out of the field, just find a job that suits you. With your rank and experience, there are plenty of things you could do."

"Like what?"

"How about chaplain's assistant?" Anyone not knowing Bobby's background might think this strange, but his old man was some sort of backwoods preacher up in Alaska. Bobby might be the consummate infantryman, but there was within his core a strong religious belief system.

"You think?"

"Sure. Why not?"

He smiled. "What's so funny," Sergeant Baskins asked, approaching. He was followed closely by Joe Fisher and Dan Kirby.

"Pro says if they ship me to the rear, I should get a job as a chaplain's assistant.

"Yeah, I can see it now, Bobby zapping sinners instead of gooks," Fred said, smiling.

"Yeah. Bobby converting REMFs. It amazing what an M-16 and a few grenades will do in making people get religion," Joe added.

Bobby's smile suddenly faded, and every man in the group turned to look at what had caused it. There was Lieutenant Atkins, approaching. No one moved, all conversation ceasing.

"Good. Glad to see you men here on time," he said.

"I think you know everyone, but let me introduce you to them again. Sergeant Fry, First Squad," I said, indicating Bobby.

Bobby stood and offered his hand, indicating to me that the early incident was forgotten as far as he was concerned. I was pleased when the lieutenant took his hand without hesitation and even smiled as he did so.

"Sergeant Dan Kirby, Second Squad." Dan and the lieutenant shook hands.

"Sergeant Fred Baskins, Third Squad." Again a firm handshake.

"Sergeant Joe Fisher, Fourth Squad," I said, finishing the introductions. Joe was standing already by the time he was introduced. There was a smile on his face as he stepped forward and offered his hand. The lieutenant hesitated. Not for long, but enough to send a message. Everyone caught it. No one said anything, but there it was, for all to see. The smile remained on Joe's face as the lieutenant completed the ceremony, but it was now frozen there, meaning

nothing. Looking directly at the lieutenant's face, I saw no indication that he knew what he had done. It was probably involuntary, some unconscious reaction to shaking the hand of a colored man. I did not have to look at the others to know how they would handle the situation. Their faces would not give away anything.

"I want to take this opportunity to congratulate you men for the fine job you all have done in the absence of an officer within the platoon. Captain Carlson says the First Platoon is the finest he has ever had the privilege of commanding. There is no reason for me to question his assessment."

All of us sat back down. Fred took out a pack of cigarettes and began to light up.

"Excuse me, Sergeant Fisher," Lieutenant Atkins said, confusing Fred and Joe's last names. "I would prefer you not light up while I am talking. It is important for you to pay attention."

"Yes, Sir, Lieutenant," Fred said, placing the cigarette back into the pack. He was smiling as he put the pack back into his fatigue pocket.

The lieutenant continued with his speech. I looked at the other men. Their faces seemed to indicate they were listening intently, but I had to wonder. These men were judging the lieutenant, and my thought was that he had already lost them.

Bobby looked sick to me. He had lost too much weight, and it showed in his face. When we had first met, Bobby looked like a fourteen year old. A real baby face. Over the months, that had not changed much, which fooled anyone who did not know him. Now his face had taken on age, the skin beginning to tighten too much on the bones. The man did not normally carry any fat on his body, so his weight loss was probably small. Measured on a scale it would not have been more than ten pounds, probably more like five pounds, but critical weight. Bobby's body was beginning to burn muscle mass for energy and robbing him of both strength and energy. It broke my heart to watch him.

Joe was staring at the ground, periodically nodding his head at something the lieutenant was saying, a bad sign. I always took extra time in dealing with Joe, making sure there was no misunderstanding when decisions were made that were not the way he wanted things. His being colored had something to do with that. I was sensitive to the fact that his skin was

different from mine. It was not something I was proud of, but it was something I had to deal with daily. Not that I felt it made me superior in any way, just that we came from different backgrounds.

I did not treat all colored people the way I treated Joe. With Joe, race was an issue. It was important to him, and therefore it was important to me, because I liked Joe and did not want to do anything to upset him, even unconsciously. Especially unconsciously. Over time we had built up a good working relationship. Joe's body language told me he was upset and anxious.

The lieutenant continued talking as Fred unloosened his canteen and unscrewed the cap. He was watching the lieutenant to see if he said anything. Not that Fred really gave a shit. He had never liked officers from the get go, so the lieutenant could not do anything that did not meet his expectations. Fred considered them all to be assholes, some just slightly better than others.

Once the canteen was open, Fred reached across Dan and hit Joe's arm with it. Joe looked over as Fred lifted the canteen slightly, offering it to him. Without a word, Joe took the canteen and took a big long drink from it. He handed it back to Fred, but Dan intercepted it, repeating the exaggerated drinking. He passed it back to Fred, who in turn offered it to Bobby.

The lieutenant continued talking, but the antics of the men had gotten his attention. He did not say anything as Bobby passed the canteen to me after taking his drink. I raised the canteen to my lips and took a couple of deep swallows. The water was tepid but tasty, since Fred had evidently added Kool-Aid to its contents. As soon as I was done, I screwed the cap back on and tossed the canteen back to Fred. Fred took the cap off, threw back his head and finished off the contents of the canteen. He turned the canteen upside down to show everyone that it was empty before putting it away on his belt.

I could see the lieutenant was curious about our actions, but he did not miss a beat in delivering his message to the troops. The significance of our actions passed him by completely.

"Now, I want you men to remember everything I have said to you. It's important that we are all on the same page."

"Sergeant Merrins, I want you to assemble all the men in the platoon in the clearing where the helicopters have been landing in ten minutes. I will address them for only about ten minutes, just sort of outlining what I have told you men."

I wondered what the hell he was talking about, and was glad I would have another opportunity to listen. "I'm sorry, Sir. We can't leave our positions unmanned. Why not have half the men at a time?"

The lieutenant looked at me suspiciously. Had he already brought up this point in his speech without any of us noting it and questioning him then? I hoped not.

"Okay. Half the men in ten minutes. Dismissed," he said, ending the conversation. Without a word the four squad leaders took off, heading back to their squads. I envied them. I had to stay.

"Sergeant Merrins."

"Sir?"

"What was that business with the canteen?"

"Nothing, Sir. Fred gets Kool-Aid from his Mom and he likes to share it with others, Sir."

"It's not very sanitary, drinking from the same canteen like that. The least you could do was wipe the mouth of the canteen off before taking a drink," he said.

"Yes, Sir," I said. It was one of those "Yes, Sirs" that actually meant "Fuck You." I had a feeling I would be using that term a lot in the future.

"That Sergeant Fisher seemed to have a chip on his shoulder. He ever give you any trouble?"

"No, Sir. Joe's a good man. Runs a hell of a squad. Has more than his share of oddballs, but Joe handles them well, and they all seem to like him."

"Well I got the distinct impression he did not like me. Maybe I am reading too much into it. It's hard to tell with them sometimes."

"Yes, Sir. Squad leaders are like that, hard to read sometimes," I said, beginning to mess with the lieutenant's mind. I knew exactly what he meant when he referred to the proverbial "Them".

"Sergeant Baskins seems decent enough, and so does that other one."

"You mean Bobby, Sir?" I said, playing the village idiot for the lieutenant.

"No, that other guy? Oh, what's his name?"

"You mean Sergeant Kirby, Sir?"

"Yeah. Kirby. Second Squad, right?"

"Right, Sir."

The Lieutenant stood up, wiping off his ass and straightening out his uniform. He looked good standing there, tall, clean shaven, sharp. He looked the part he was playing. Platoon leader, First Platoon, Alpha Company, Five Hundred and Third Regiment, One Seventy Third Airborne Brigade. Compared to him, the rest of us looked like bums. But looks meant nothing. The jungle taught us that every day. I hoped the lieutenant was impressed with himself. He still had a ways to go before the squad leaders would be.

I accompanied the lieutenant when he went to talk to the men. It was the least I could do, since I had not listened to his first talk.

The rest of the men were already sitting there on the edge of the opening, finding shade to sit in. Some stood as the lieutenant approached, but most remained seated.

The lieutenant stopped about ten yards from the tree line and motioned to the men. "Come in close where you can hear without me having to yell," he said. The men moved out into the opening reluctantly. Being Infantryman there were several things they hated, standing in the hot sun being one, and standing in a close group in enemy territory being another. They appeared nervous as they gathered around.

Meanwhile the lieutenant was looking around. He turned and walked over to a tree that was laying on the ground, leaned his M-16 up against it, and returned to his previous position in front of the men. I almost laughed, but at the same time I was embarrassed by his actions. Now we stood there facing the men. Me and my unarmed platoon leader.

"I want to take this opportunity to introduce myself to you men. I am Lieutenant Atkins. This is my first assignment having just graduated from OCS. It is not my first assignment in handling men however. Before I became an officer, I was a staff sergeant, so military life is nothing new to me. OCS just taught me those thing I needed to know to become an officer.

Because of my previous experience, I have a pretty good idea what it is like being an enlisted man in the Army. I think that experience will be helpful as I assume my new duties.

"I met most of you when inspecting the perimeter earlier. From what I saw, I know you know how to do the job assigned you. Talking to Captain Carlson only confirmed my opinion of your competence. I consider it an honor to lead you men.

"While pleased with your reputation, there are things that will need to change. I have my own ideas concerning how this platoon should function, and I intend to make those changes I deem necessary to improve upon the fine job you men are already doing.

"At OCS they taught many classes concerning squad and platoon tactics, based upon lessons the Army has learned during its stay in this country. Many of these tactics have yet to be taught to units already stationed here for any length of time. Therefore, when we rotate to the rear, I will be asking you men to give up some of your time to learn and practice these new concepts. In the meantime, I will be teaching your squad leaders what I expect them to do, and they will be passing the information along to you.

"Being new, I will be spending a lot of time watching and learning from you. It is not my intention to impose a lot of change upon you men, but there is one thing I have noticed that I feel needs to be addressed. As I made my rounds I noticed a lot of you men without shirts on or steel pots. From now on I expect everyone on the perimeter to wear steel pots. They are for your protection. Shirts are to be worn at all times.

"Any questions?"

There were looks of disgust, questioning, and irritation on a lot of faces. I stood there hoping none of the men had any questions at this time. A hand shot up.

"Yes?" the lieutenant said, acknowledging the hand.

"Private First Class Mayes, Sir."

"Yes, Private Mayes."

"Sir, you in the Infantry before you went to officer's school, Sir?"

"No, Private Mayes, I was not. I was a supply sergeant. Any other questions?"

"When we heading in for training, Sir?" someone in the rear asked.

"I don't know exactly," the lieutenant answered. "I suppose when we normally rotate in. Anything else?"

"Where's your gun, Sir?" the same voice shouted.

The lieutenant looked over to where his rifle was leaning against the tree. He looked back toward the men, who had turned and were heading back to their positions. I thought he might stop them, but he didn't.

I walked into the tree line and sat down. The lieutenant walked over to where his rifle lay, picked it up, and joined me. Lighting a cigarette, I waited.

"What went wrong?"

"If you don't mind, Sir, we'll talk about it later. The rest of the men will show up soon and maybe you need to rethink what you have to say to them."

It took only five minutes for the rest of the men to assemble. The lieutenant stood there with his head held high and addressed them. This time the speech was much shorter. Long on praise and without any talk of changes or criticism. The men left probably wondering what the hell the first group was talking about.

It was a half hour before dusk, and I was beat. Both Hailey and the lieutenant had been away for a while and I enjoyed the solitude. Like most of my Army life, finding periods of solitude was difficult, and I enjoyed every such opportunity to relax. The lieutenant made it back first.

"Okay, Sergeant Merrins, talk."

"Well first of all, Sir, you goofed when you said the men would train when we rotate to the rear. I know they did not have time to brief you very well yet, but I just assumed you knew we don't rotate to the rear."

"What? SOP for combat outfits is at least three days back for every two in the field. They taught that to us in school. Stressed the importance of maintaining military discipline while in the rear and using the opportunity to train the men."

"From what I know of other outfits, that is probably true. Hell, even our LRRPs seldom spend more than three days in the field and then are normally back for a week awaiting reassignment. The last time we were in the rear was about a month ago, Sir."

"No, shit."

"No shit, Sir," I replied.

"Made me look kind of stupid saying that then, huh?"

"Yes, Sir. Another mistake was telling the men your previous experience was in supply. I don't know what type of men you served with in the past, but this is Airborne Infantry. These guys chose to do this, and they do not have a lot of respect for the other branches of the service, and by that I mean anyone who is not an Infantryman or Airborne. They won't hold your background against you, Sir, since you're stupid enough to be here with us, but don't think for one instant that your previous experience is of any use to us."

"Okay, fair enough."

"Never put your weapon down outside of arm's reach."

It was the second time I had brought up this point today. He had the good grace to keep his mouth shut, although his right hand drifted down to the butt of his pistol. I laughed.

"Don't get confused about it, Lieutenant. That thing on your hip is not a gun. Shit, by our standards, it's not even much of a weapon. When an infantryman refers to your "gun," he's referring to that short appendage that dangles between your legs. The most embarrassing part was that you didn't even know what the man was referring to. Guns are for pissing and fucking, weapons are for killing."

His eyes flashed anger, but only for an instant.

"Was my meeting with the squad leaders as disastrous as my meeting with the men?"

"Yes, Sir."

"How?"

"You got a problem with colored folks, Sir." Bluntness was not normally my forte, but in this instance it was necessary.

The lieutenant looked around before answering. "I've never had much use for them myself."

"I respect your honesty, Sir. In case you have not noticed, at least half of the men are either colored or of non-white origin. Wasn't it that way in other outfits you served in?"

"As a matter of fact that was not the case. Most outfits I served in were mostly white, even the infantry outfits we supplied were mostly white. Airborne training, which I took right out of OCS, had a lot of Negroes, but I just figured they were running a whole bunch through at one time, so there was less trouble."

"Well, Sir, having served in the Eighty Second Airborne, I can guarantee you that Airborne outfits, and by that I mean all Airborne outfits, have a very high percentage of Negroes. This includes Rangers and Green Berets. You got a problem with colored folks, either get over it or get out of the Airborne. It's your problem, not theirs."

"Okay. I guess it will take some getting used to. Anything I can do to make things right?"

"The men expect you to be a fuck-up, Sir. Nothing personal meant by that, by the way. Everyone fucks up when they first get to the field. I did, Bobby did, Fred did, we all did. Nothing prepares you for what you are about to go through. Believe that and half the battle is won. The men will accept you if they are given the chance. Don't make the same mistakes twice, Sir. A man has half a chance of surviving his mistakes, but a man who repeats his mistakes is a liability to himself and those around him. Learn. You get one chance, so learn well. Here comes Hailey."

"I got the new frequencies and codes, Sir," Hailey said.

The lieutenant and I spent the next ten minutes going over the information. I had to give the lieutenant credit. He was a quick learner and was familiar with radio lingo and procedure. Taking the radio, he did communication checks with the various commands on our network, working the radio like an old pro.

"I'll pull first watch," he said.

"No, Sir, it's Hailey's turn. I want you to at least try to get a good night's sleep tonight. Hailey and I will handle the radio tonight, that way if you do doze off, we don't have to wake you up. Tomorrow night, you can pull a shift, and then we'll just work you into the rotation. Getting sleep is more important than you can imagine. A week from now you'll be wondering if you'll ever sleep again."

I slept well. My first watch on the radio gave me a lot of time to think over what had happened. There was still a hope that things would turn out alright. Maybe it was wishful thinking on my part, but hell, even I had a right to dream. I was sure that my job had not become suddenly very easy. Instead it wound up that having the lieutenant only added to my problems. I could not allow that to worry me too much. If the lieutenant was willing to try, so was I.

Morning came, and with it some good news and some bad.

The lieutenant was off to the morning briefing when the squad leaders visited my position.

"Morning, Lou," Bobby said. He was still looking like death warmed over, but his color was better.

"Have a good night?"

"Medic said my temperature didn't get over ninety-nine degrees all night."

"Yeah, Sarge, maybe Bobby's only got the flu."

"Sure, Fred, and maybe Charlie will surrender today. You guys seem in a pretty chipper mood this morning."

"We had our own meeting after leaving you and the LT last night," Joe Fisher said.

"After talking it over, we decided the lieutenant is not our problem."

"Not your problem?"

"Yeah. He's a new guy and someone has to take responsibility for him. We are lowly squad leaders. You are the platoon sergeant, so he is your problem. Good luck, Lou." They all sat there smiling at me. I was glad they had chosen a peaceful path, but I was not thrilled by their outlook.

"Hey, guys, with friends like you, I'm thinking about joining Charlie's side. If it weren't for the fish and rice thing, it would be an easy decision. How did the men react to him?"

"Some of them think he's funny, others think he's just stupid, but most think he's both," Fred responded.

"They must teach them how to be stupid at OCS," Dan Kirby said. "It is hard to believe that God made them that way. Unless stupidity is a requirement of the job." He was smiling as he said it, so it could have been worse.

"I talked with him for a while last night. He is new and it shows. When he found out we spend all our time in the field, I got the distinct impression he was ready to cry. Had no idea what he was getting himself into. A dose of reality might wake the man up."

"Speak of the devil," Bobby said getting to his feet.

We all stood up as the lieutenant approached. "Your boy got his gun but looks like he forgot his rifle again," Joe Fisher whispered to the group. Sure enough, the lieutenant was approaching without a weapon.

"Glad you men are all here. The captain says we will begin moving out in about twenty minutes. Not much time. Let me give you a quick briefing." Spreading the map out on the ground, the lieutenant gave a quick, concise report, including everything we needed to know. "I don't know which squad's turn it is to lead out, so I'll leave that to Sergeant Merrins."

"Move them out in fifteen minutes, Bobby," I said.

The squad leaders left. Of course the whole platoon was already packed and ready to move out. I had gotten the lieutenant to pack his gear before attending the morning briefing. The lieutenant walked over to where his rucksack was leaning against a tree. He took a step halfway around the tree and reached back, pulling his rifle to him by the barrel.

"I hope that thing isn't loaded with the safety off, Sir," I said.

"I know better than that, Sergeant," he answered. There was a just a touch of annoyance in his voice.

"You always this cranky in the morning, Sir?"

He turned, smiling. "No. I'm just sore from sleeping on the ground. Hardly got any sleep last night. The mosquitoes nearly ate me alive. I want to thank you for not having me pull radio watch. You were right about having trouble sleeping."

"No sweat, Sir. The squad leaders noticed you did not have your rifle with you when you returned from the briefing. I hadn't noticed that you left here without it."

"What's the big deal, Sergeant, I knew where it was located. Anything happen, I would have been headed back here anyway. Gooks couldn't steal it. Is this some kind of fixation with the men?"

"Lieutenant, without a weapon you are useless to us. During a firefight, we rely on every man carrying his share of the fighting. Charlie is not going to engage us unless he thinks there is a better than even chance he can overrun us quickly. If something happens, you better be prepared to fight wherever you are, so that means not only having a weapon, but also carrying around enough ammunition to at least make your presence noticeable. Everyone is loaded for bear at all times. The men will be expecting the same thing from you."

Hailey approached. "Hare just moved out," he said, picking up his rucksack and slinging it onto his back.

"Okay, Sir, let's go." Hailey led out with the lieutenant following him. The lieutenant would be positioned between First and Second Squads and would keep Hailey with him. I would travel between the Third and Fourth Squads, my normal position within the column. It was strange seeing Hailey move out without me.

The company moved steadily forward for two hours toward our day's objective. It was strange being in my normal position but without the radio. I felt somehow detached from the situation and found it enjoyable. The men in Third and Fourth Squads included me in their banter, something new for me. I guess when I had the responsibility for the platoon, I had never noticed what was going on around me as far as the conversation was concerned. My mind was always occupied out ahead of the platoon or involved in other problems.

For the first time in months, I was able to relax and really enjoy the day. The sun was creeping overhead, and the day was beginning to heat up. Physically, I felt great. Even humping a full load, my legs felt great and my back wasn't hurting. Later in the day this would all change, but for the moment I was able to enjoy myself.

As soon as the column stopped, I moved forward to check things out. Hailey and the lieutenant were sitting in the shade by the side of the trail First Squad had made while moving through the bush. One look at the lieutenant told me it was going to be a long day for him. His shirt was soaked with sweat, his hair plastered down on his forehead. He looked tired, not

sleepy, but physically tired. This would have been okay if it was two or three in the afternoon, but it was only a little past nine in the morning, and the company still had a long way to travel.

It always amazed us veterans at how hard field life was on new men. Although it was normal to feel tired and run down, the fact of the matter was that living in the jungle had left us stronger and tougher than we had ever been before in our lives. Seeing the lieutenant brought that fact home.

"You drinking water, Sir?" I asked.

"A little."

"Hailey, get the doc up here. Carr, Wyeth," I said addressing the two closest men, "take some of the lieutenant's gear and spread it out through the squads."

"No," the lieutenant said. "I'll carry my share."

"Yes, Sir, but not today," I replied. Carr and Wyeth had not even hesitated when the lieutenant refused. "It's no big deal, Sir. We have to do this with most new men. It's the effects of what the Army calls a 'hostile environment.' I can't let you slow us down, so it's my responsibility to keep you moving."

The platoon medic showed up and knelt down next to the lieutenant. "Morning, Sir," he said, looking into the lieutenant's eyes. "How you feeling?"

"Like shit."

Doc smiled at him. He took out his old standby, salt tablets and aspirin, and handed them to the LT. "Mouth dry?"

"Yeah."

"Take these and drink half of a canteen of water over the next ten minutes. I want you drinking at least half a canteen every hour. Got that, Sir?"

"Where am I supposed to get the water from?" the lieutenant said.

"Don't worry about that, Sir. My problem. How's Bobby doing, Doc?" I asked in a quiet voice.

"Hanging in there, Sarge. You still want me with him all day?"

"You got somewhere else to go, Doc? A dance I don't know about maybe? Hell yes, stay with him. As a matter of fact, I want to see him right now," I said.

Bobby was there one minute later, a look of concern on his face as he stared down at the lieutenant. "You okay, Sir?" he asked.

"Yeah. How about you, Sergeant Fry?"

"I'm fine, Sir."

"Good," I said. "Now that everyone is fine, I suggest some changes, Sir. Sergeant Fry, I want you taking your normal position here in the column. Lieutenant Atkins and Hailey will move back with me so I have company."

"Okay with me," Bobby replied.

"What the hell, you know what's best, Sergeant," the lieutenant replied.

I was glad that the lieutenant was listening to my suggestions. It would make everyone's life easier. Everyone's except mine. Bobby smiled at me, I could see he was thinking exactly the same thing: "He's your problem, Sarge," to quote him earlier in the day.

"Fuck you, Sergeant Fry," I said.

The lieutenant gave me a hard, perplexed and disapproving look.

"Fuck me?" Bobby replied. He laughed and began moving off to inform the men in his squad of the change in marching order. We got to sit for another five minutes.

Suddenly everyone was getting up and preparing to move out again. The lieutenant looked up questioningly. Then the word came over the radio to move out. By then First Squad was already on the move and Second Squad began to pass our position.

"How did they know it was time to move out?"

"You'll learn, Sir. Actually there was no need to inform anyone over the radio. As soon as the Old Man thought it was time to move out, everyone knew. It's like radar, and everyone has it. One man spots him getting ready and begins to get ready himself. The next man immediately reacts to that movement, and so on, down the line it goes. Everyone here in the bush is always tuned into what is happening around them. Every movement or sound means something. You'll learn that, Sir, with time."

"I noticed one of the men seemed to be sleeping. As a matter of fact, I was about to say something to you about it, yet he was on his feet and ready to move out as fast as anyone else. I guess he wasn't sleeping after all, just resting his eyes?" the lieutenant asked.

"He was probably sleeping, Sir. Everyone does at some time throughout the day. Short five and ten minute naps. It's nothing to worry about, Sir. The men sleep but remain aware of their environment."

"What?"

But then it was time to move. Hailey led off, and the lieutenant followed. Even without any real weight, the lieutenant began to tire quickly, and two hours later, when the company set up a quick perimeter, he appeared exhausted. Luckily it was Second Platoon who was on search that day. So the company would remain here while they went out and tried to stir up some gooks to hunt. A pleasant thought, the most favorable feature of which was that we would rest while they patrolled off to the north.

The lieutenant insisted on checking the men's positions with me. For the most part, he just observed, only asking periodic questions. Hailey and I took up a position in the bush in back of the platoon's position. The lieutenant took the opportunity to wander off in search of Captain Carlson. He was back five minutes later.

Seeing that Hailey and I had made ourselves comfortable, the lieutenant did the same. I watched and when he began to take off his webbing I said, "Leave it on, Sir."

"What?"

"The webbing. Loosen it, but don't take it off, Sir."

"And why the hell not, Sergeant?"

Was that irritation I heard in his voice? "Because Second Platoon is out on patrol, Sir. If they hit anything, we'll be moving out in a hurry. You won't have much time to get ready, so keep yourself ready to go."

"You got a rule for everything, Sarge?"

"No, Sir," I replied. Hailey ruined it by laughing.

"Don't believe that LT," he said. "He'll drive you nuts lecturing on every little thing until you're ready to go AWOL. I was actually sane until he came along."

I lit a cigarette and relaxed.

"So he's just not nagging me?"

"No, Sir. Sergeant Merrins lectures everyone, all the time. His nickname is The Professor. You'll get use to it, Sir."

"Learn to tune it out?"

"No, Sir. I wouldn't recommend that for a couple of reasons. First, he gives quizzes to see if you are paying attention. The other thing is that what he teaches you will keep you alive. Right, Sarge?"

"If you say so, Hailey," I said. It was hard to tell if Hailey was sincere or just pulling my chain and trying to get a rise out of me.

"Walk around and watch the men if you don't believe me, Sir," Hailey said. "I'll bet you ten bucks not one man has his webbing off. Before Sarge took over, some would keep it on and some wouldn't. Now, nobody takes it off unless in night perimeter, and even then they put it on if they move away from their position for any reason."

"Sergeant Merrins decided that's how it's done?"

"Yes, Sir."

"And everyone does what he says?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Or what?"

"Or what?"

"Yes. What happens if someone doesn't follow the rules?"

Hailey shrugged.

"Sergeant Merrins. What happens if someone breaks your rules?"

I inhaled deeply on my cigarette and thought about my answer carefully before answering. I just shrugged my shoulders and smiled.

"You mean you don't know, or you are not going to tell me?"

"The truth is, I don't know, Sir. Someone chooses to break the rules, I talk to them. Never has someone I've talked to refused to follow orders. That won't last forever. I guess we'll find out what happens then, Sir."

"You were a platoon leader for three months and never had to court martial anyone or give them an Article Fifteen?"

"No, Sir,"

"But you would if you had to?"

"I don't know, Sir. Maybe."

"What about you, Hailey? You think Sergeant Merrins would court martial someone?"

"No, Sir. I don't think anyone else in the platoon thinks so either. Fuck up out here and you'll never make it to the rear, Sir."

"What does that mean, Private?"

"It means don't fuck up, Sir."

"You think Sergeant Merrins would harm me if I fucked up, Private Hailey?" Lieutenant Atkins asked, smiling.

Hailey smiled back. "Could be LT. If he didn't, there are others who would. This is a hostile world, Sir. All we are trying to do is survive. Follow the rules, and you will at least have a chance. You want to change the rules; the new rules will have to be better than the old rules before the men will follow them. That is not one of Sergeant Merrins' rules. It was here before he came, and it will be here long after all of us have left." END