

#25 Endings – beginning of August 1968

Writer's Notes – before and just after leaving field for Saigon, Vietnam

I had the willies. Something was about to happen, and I did not know what. Whatever it was, it was going to be no fun at all. Having survived in the field as long as I had without so much as one decent wound to show for it, I had a real respect for my instincts. Several times in the past, they had saved me and the men in the platoon from walking into trouble.

My instincts had not always been right. There were times that internally I had judged impending disaster, but nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The first time or two this happened, I laid my feelings off to superstition. Then over time, as my instincts proved correct more often than not, I rationalized that during the times my instincts had not panned out, something outside my ability to perceive had taken place that changed the circumstances about to overtake me. Now I trusted my instincts totally. The shit was about to hit the fan.

The company had been on the move for three days. It had been a relatively unforgetful march. The first day I had faced death three times in a twenty-four hour period. That day had set the tone for this outing. The following day, Fourth Platoon had been hit while on a sweep. The company had managed to react quickly, overrunning the ambush that had cost Fourth Platoon two men killed and five wounded.

That firefight had not been enough to earn us a trip back to the rear. On this day, we kept stumbling across signs that the enemy was in the area and looking to fuck with us again. This was all right with me. Even though we had hit them hard the previous day, it did not make up for the men we had lost. Still, it would have been nice if Battalion would see fit to send another company into the area to back us up. The signs we were seeing indicated that the enemy might be present in strength. The intelligence people seemed to think there were two enemy regiments operating in the area.

We were used to hearing such information. The company was always being sent out to find an enemy regiment or division. Luckily we had never met such a force in a situation that required us to stand and fight. I say "luckily" because a trained regiment of the North Vietnamese Army would clean our clock. Our "company" was currently at strength of just one

hundred and twenty men, the equivalent of two reinforced platoons, or three conventional platoons, or to my way of thinking a half-assed company". It was ludicrous to think we could stand up to a regiment of enemy troops. On the other hand, this is what we had been doing for the past nine months, why should today be any different? It really was not, other than me having the willies.

We had been on the move since just before 0700 hours. The terrain was not particularly dense, and the company had covered a great deal of ground. We were sweeping an area about ten miles west of the ocean in land that was alien to us. For three days, we had been sweeping north then south, always moving a little westerly toward the jungle. Here were gently undulating hills, nothing close to the mountains of the Central Highlands. It was better than what existed further east, but not as comforting as the jungle further west.

It was strange that I missed the jungle. Nine months ago I would have sworn it would eat the company alive. That the day would come when we left a hill top and entered the jungle and were never heard from again. It had intimidated me less than most of the men but had intimidated me nonetheless. After almost six months living in it, the jungle had become a home of sorts.

If home was represented by the concept of friends, family, warmth, and security, then the jungle was now home. I felt more comfortable there than in this terrain, where foliage was not dense enough to suit my tastes. If it allowed the company to move quickly, it would allow the enemy to do the same. It was easier for a small group to move through jungle terrain, than for a large group. The gooks had trouble assembling enough men quickly in the jungle to do real damage to us. While providing us with good cover, the jungle did not prevent artillery and bombs from being effective. If anything it increased the deadliness of such weapons. Nothing like being hit by a flying tree to slow a man down.

Fighting in the jungle was a matter of attitude. Knowing that all its power showed no favoritism made fighting there easier. If we had difficulties, so did Charlie.

When we had first arrived, it was assumed that the Vietnamese enemy had a tremendous advantage fighting in the jungle. The fact of the matter was that most of the NVA regulars found the terrain and environment of the Central Highlands as alien to them as it was

to us. Sure they moved through the jungle, but as a rule they used the paths available. For a long time, they had lived and moved through the area unopposed. We came along and fucked up their lifestyle big time. By not using trails, we avoided their booby traps. By moving in random patterns, we avoided their ambushes. By living every day in the jungle, we adapted to the fighting conditions.

The company learned how to move slowly through the jungle with a minimum of noise. The enemy might know where we were in the evening when the choppers resupplied us, but once we entered the jungle, we became their equal. Equal, that is, until we called in artillery or air support.

That is not to say they did not have their wins. Like the time the company got ambushed at a landing zone, or the time the military hierarchy decided to assault a hill that was in essence an enemy fortress. Then the enemy had the advantage, and they did not waste their opportunities.

On the other hand, we periodically caught them in situations that were to our advantage. Like the night we blew the ambush along the mountain trail, or the time we rolled up their ambush by flanking them before they really knew we were there. All and all, the jungle had lost its mystique as a fighting arena, and now me and the rest of the men would rather be there than here.

The company moved onto the hill the company would call home for the night at about 1500 hours. It was a little later in the day than normal, but the ground here was mostly dirt, and it would be easy to dig foxholes for the night. It was Third Platoon's night out on ambush, or at least it was supposed to be. The captain fooled us all by deciding to keep everyone in the perimeter tonight. This was a sure indication he was feeling the strain of operating in this area along with the rest of us.

First Platoon moved quickly into position within the perimeter. The men chose the best possible sites for their defensive positions and then waited instead of beginning to dig in as they had in the past. They decided to wait for the lieutenant to make his rounds before breaking ground. Not that the lieutenant was any better at choosing sites than the men, but he had this nasty habit of making the men move positions, sometimes for seemingly no reason at

all. This recent development was to me another indication that the platoon was no longer functioning as effectively as it had in the past. The lieutenant's influence was undermining the decision-making process of individuals within the platoon that for so long had allowed it to function efficiently.

I was determined not to allow this attitude to develop. The lieutenant and I were due to have a serious conversation in the very near future. Meanwhile, the business at hand needed to be addressed.

I walked over to where Sergeant Fisher was talking to a couple of his men.

"Sergeant Fisher. You getting ready to set up a listening post?"

"Yeah. Figure to put one down there at the base of the hill," he said pointing toward a spot a couple hundred yards out.

"I'd rather keep the men in closer than normal today. Been feeling sort of uneasy today, like something might happen."

"Me too," said Private Mayes. "Like we are being hunted."

"Why don't you put the men about halfway down the hill? Instead of two men, I want a three man team with plenty of claymores and grenades. I also want you to personally pick the spot and then let the rest of the platoon know your men's return route should we get hit. I'm going to have Sergeant Baker do the same thing. Have your men dig in deep, Sarge. I want to be ready for a bad night."

Joe was looking at me funny. He shrugged and began moving off to get things running. Maybe I had said more than what was needed. Making the rest of the men nervous just because my own psyche was on full alert was probably not a good idea. On the other hand, the men were pretty used to my actions and would probably ignore this one.

I spotted the lieutenant over by First Squad, beginning his inspection of the perimeter. I located a spot about twenty meters in back of our defensive line. After arranging my gear, I began digging in.

The position I had chosen was right behind the crest of the hill, and from there, with a little clearing of brush located in front of the position, I would be able to cover all of Third and Fourth Squad's positions. There was enough natural cover nearby that the area would be a

good fallback position for this section of the perimeter. I made a mental note to point this out to the squad leaders in our daily meeting.

I was well into digging the foxhole when the lieutenant came over. He stood there for a minute without addressing me, so I just kept working.

"I picked a spot over there to spend the night," he said pointing to a small area containing a group of small trees.

"I chose this spot for my position tonight, Sir," I replied.

"This is a little closer to the line than normal. More exposed."

"Yes, Sir. I want to be closer to the action tonight. Been feeling jumpy all day. Like something is going to happen." I replied.

"You're not the only one, Sarge. Captain Carlson seems to have the same feeling. He informed the platoon leaders that he had laid on naval gun support for us. There is evidently a battleship sitting off the coast, and he's been in contact with it. Having seen what their guns can do, just the thought of it makes me nervous."

I had to agree with the lieutenant about that. Yesterday the Navy had surprised us with a little demonstration. The company had been moving through a valley when suddenly a hilltop about a half mile from our position blew up. There was a huge flash followed by a deafening roar. Even at that distance the ground shook. My first thought was that there were B-52 bombers somewhere overhead, dropping thousand pounders.

Captain Carlson was on the radio, and within a short time word was passed down that it was naval gunfire from a battleship located ten miles to the east of us. Whether it had been one shell or a group we never found out. It was good to know that support of that kind was available.

"Okay, Sarge. If you think this is where we should dig in, it's alright with me."

"We can stretch out behind that tree, Sir," I said, pointing.

"I'll have Hailey give you a hand." With that the lieutenant turned and left. I kept digging.

"Sergeant Merrins." I recognized the voice of White Owl immediately.

"Come to help me dig this hole, Owl?" I asked.

He smiled. "The captain wants you at the CP now. Says to bring all your gear with you."

I jumped out of the hole and started gathering my gear. "What gives?"

White Owl hesitated for an instant before answering. He looked around to make sure there wasn't anyone close by.

"You and Sergeant Kittle from the weapons platoon have been ordered to the rear for transfer. Word just came in from Battalion. The chopper delivering our water is already inbound. It should be here in five minutes. You and Kittle need to be aboard it when it leaves."

Since the chopper would be spending all of two or three minutes unloading, it did not give me much time. I was stunned. White Owl was already moving off toward the CP. Gathering my gear quickly, I followed him.

I had not even reached the post when I heard the sound of an approaching chopper. I arrived at almost the same instant the chopper landed in the clearing. Captain Carlson and First Sergeant Heard were standing there, along with Sergeant Kittle.

I did not get a chance to talk to the captain. Sergeant Kittle moved off toward the chopper, waving for me to follow. Under the circumstances, there was no option.

The chopper was surrounded by men unloading the plastic containers filled with drinking water. The ship's two gunners were quickly pushing them out the door. Even before the last containers were being unloaded, the pilot began to increase the power to the rotors in preparation for takeoff. Kittle and I quickly climbed aboard with assistance by the gunners. The crew was anxious to get off the ground. It was in their nature. To them, altitude represented safety, and the sooner they were into the wild blue yonder, the better.

I flopped my ass down into a seat mid-ship as the pilot lifted off. I glanced off to my left, trying to spot the captain, but the helicopter spun to the right, removing him from my view. I caught a quick glimpse of the platoon's position. A couple of the guys were looking up, but before I even thought to wave, the Huey dropped its nose and accelerated down the valley, quickly picking up speed. Once it reached what I always considered escape velocity, it shot skyward like a rocket. It was a move calculated to drop my stomach into my shoes. By the time I reoriented myself, the company's position was well to our rear.

I looked across at Sergeant Kittle. He was smiling, clapping his hand, and letting out yells. You would have sworn the man was going nuts. Then the impact of what had happened hit me.

UNFUCKINGBELIEVABLE!

I survived! Against all odds, against all logic, beyond my wildest imaginings, I survived!

YEAH! YEAH! YEAH! I was screaming while pumping both fists into the air. It was totally out of character for me to behave this way, but a feeling of joy I could not contain came bursting through.

FUCKING A! FUCKING A! Kittle was yelling in chorus.

Both machine gunners looked around nervously at us. Even the copilot turned to look at us. To be heard above the roar of a chopper's engine in an open bay was almost impossible. Right then, at a couple thousand feet over the rice paddies, I am sure old Charlie heard our shouts. The celebration ended with Ron and me shaking hands and slapping each other on the back. It lasted for all of ten minutes.

We were already approaching the large fire support base at Bong Son by the time I became aware of my surroundings again. The chopper touched down on the same pad the company had left from to go to the field a couple of months ago. It was Kittle's first trip back since we had left. On the other hand I had been here just a few weeks ago, going on and then returning from R&R.

As soon as the chopper landed, Ron and I hopped off. The chopper immediately took off toward another assignment.

It felt unreal, standing there with the hot Vietnamese sun beating down on us. I looked at my watch. Barely 1700 hours. The date was 20 August and the year was 1968. Using my fingers, I counted off the months. By my calculation, it was three days short of ten months since the company had landed in Vietnam. A lifetime.

It felt unreal as Sergeant Kittle and I headed toward Battalion Headquarters. I had never allowed my mind to contemplate this happening. Ron and I had both extended our tours, but our commitment to the 173rd wasn't up until October. Logically that was when our orders to

transfer would arrive. Smiling again, I realized that the transfer had not even crossed my mind in over a month, maybe longer.

Most people live with thoughts of the future. In the field, future was contemplated in terms of hours, sometimes maybe a day or two, but never beyond that. I never considered the possibility that I might actually survive the ordeal unharmed. It just was not a realistic approach to life in the bush. My mind had always pictured my last ride out on a medivac chopper, and only rarely would the picture include me alive.

I felt good. Walking down the road to the battalion area was like floating on air. I was not tired. I did not ache. The sun did not fry me.

Halfway to Battalion, a jeep driven by Staff Sergeant Scott approached. The jeep slid to a stop next to me, and before I could begin to throw my equipment into the back, Sergeant Scott was all over me.

"God Dammit, Lou, I just heard. You made it. You fucking made it." All the while the Sergeant was beating upon my arm and back. You would have thought he had won the Irish Derby. I glanced over at Ron who was just standing there with a big smile on his face.

"Jim, this is Ron. He's with me."

Sergeant Scott didn't hesitate in reaching for Ron and including him in on the celebration.

"Whatever you need, you get! Get in! Get in!" Jim shouted indicating the jeep. Ron and I climbed quickly aboard, if only to stop Sergeant Scott from mauling on us.

The ride back to Battalion was accomplished in minutes. Jim pulled up in front of Battalion Supply and entered the tent as Ron and I gathered our equipment. As we entered, Sergeant Scott was issuing orders to his men.

"Harris. You get over to Battalion Headquarters and get copies of Sergeant's Kittle and Merrins transfer orders. Will. Take their equipment and break it down. Inventory everything and store their personal items in the safe. I want the paperwork for them to sign ready in an hour. Make sure their weapons are locked away in the armory. "Huay, he said addressing a Vietnamese man, "I want a clean set of fatigues for these men now. Then get two sets and have all their tags and insignia sewn on. They will need those before they go to bed tonight."

"According to your orders," he said, addressing me and Sergeant Kittle, "which I haven't seen yet, you guys will ship back to Brigade at Bien Hoi, at 0700 hours tomorrow morning and then be sent to Saigon in the afternoon. Now how about a shower and something to eat?"

It was all happening way too fast for me. Ron looked a little dazed also.

Two hours later having taken care of the three basic S's (shit, shower, and shave) the three of us were sitting down at the NCO club eating dinner. Staff Sergeant Scott had insisted that we eat there instead of the Battalion mess. Although the menu at the club was limited to steak, salad, and ice cream for dessert, it more than met our needs. Considering that the club also allowed us to order drinks with our food, it stood head and shoulders above the mess tent.

"What's happening in the field?" Scott asked several minutes into the meal.

Now there was a question designed to bring a man back to reality in a hurry. I put the fork down I had been using to devour my steak and looked guiltily at Ron and then Jim.

"Hey. Don't look like that, Lou. I didn't mean to bring you down. Forget about it," Jim said.

Ron continued to look at me. The smile that I thought might be permanently affixed to his face had disappeared.

"Come on guys, relax. You're out of it. You did your job, and now it's time to celebrate."

"You are right, Jim," I said, picking up my fork and spearing my food. "We did our job, Ron. It's not our problem." Nodding his head, Ron mumbled, "Fucking A" without any real enthusiasm.

"To answer your question, Jim, I think the company is in some deep shit out there. Had bad vibrations all day."

"Yeah, Sergeant Merrins, me too," Ron added. "You could almost smell the fucking gooks all day. Everyone could. I heard the old man was on the radio half the day trying to get the company moved out of that area. Word was he thought they needed to send a bigger unit out into the field."

"I hadn't heard that," I said, "but my own instincts were telling me that something bad was about to happen. I do wonder if this sudden transfer will disappoint Captain Carlson though. He never did have a chance to get even for the jeep."

This brought a laugh from Jim.

"Did I miss something?" Ron asked

Jim explained what had happened, embellishing as only a great bullshitter like he could. By time he was done, all three of us were laughing, and the mood had lightened up considerably.

"Seriously, Lou, I got a friend in the artillery outfit for the base. If you really think the company is going to be hit tonight, I can give them a ring and have them set up for it."

"Set up?"

"Yeah. They always have several potential targets plotted. Each night they set their guns to cover the one they expect will be called in. Of course they get several missions on most nights, but when they are done, they always return their settings to cover the most likely target. Sometimes they choose that target randomly. Sometimes they choose it based on intelligence reports. If you got a feeling about this, unless they have some other hard intelligence, they might as well cover the target designation closest to your company."

"Good idea, Jim. I appreciate that," I said.

"I'll be back in a minute," Jim replied.

"Hey, Sarge, that Sergeant Scott is all right."

"Ron, why don't you just call me Lou?"

He looked me in the eyes. "Sergeant Merrins, I'm not really comfortable with that."

I smiled, "Then you prefer me to call you Sergeant Kittle?"

"No. I like being called Ron. Been called Kittle by everyone for so long I guess I got used to it. In the field I was being called Sarge all day, sort of got used to that too. It's nice being called by my first name for a change. It's just that with you being a platoon sergeant, I don't feel comfortable addressing you otherwise."

"I'm no longer a platoon sergeant," I said, smiling. Just the thought of it brought such a sense of relief that I could not help but smile.

"You are to me. You always will be. Nothing can change that. I mean you ran a platoon in the fucking Herd, Sarge. That means something to me. I got the same stripes as you, but what you did is different. No. If you don't mind, I'll just call you Sarge."

"I'll miss the Herd, Ron."

"Me too," Ron said. Lifting his glass he shouted, "To the Fucking Herd!" I realized then that he might be getting a tad drunk. The dining area had maybe thirty men with a variety of shoulder patches, most of which did not belong to the 173rd Airborne Brigade. No less than twenty of them stood, raised their glasses, and replied, "To the Fucking Herd."

It was comical, but also neat. Ron sat back down with a big shit eating grin on his face. "Fucking A, the Fucking Herd."

I really can't say I knew Ron all that well at this point. Him being in the weapons section meant that even though we were in the same company, our paths only crossed periodically in the field. I had become aware of him one day upon returning from an ambush where I had almost died of exposure. That day he offered me water he had been boiling to make me hot coffee. Warmth is what my body was craving most, and Ron's gesture touched me deeply. Only a grunt could understand that, but right there he won my respect and friendship.

Once again he had spontaneously done the same thing. The man was a fanatic, proud of both his outfit and the men he served with.

It was dark by the time Sgt. Scott directed us to the transfer tent. It was practically deserted with just a couple of men neither Ron nor I recognized. Our new uniforms were sitting on the bunk, and at the end were footlockers. I recognized mine and was sure the other was Ron's.

After Sgt. Scott left, I lay down on the bunk. I was tired and feeling the effects of the alcohol I had consumed with dinner. I closed my eyes.

It was almost midnight when I woke up. There was a lantern burning down at the far end of the tent and casting eerie shadows on the walls. My eyes were adjusted to the darkness at my end of the tent. Ron lay on his bunk, asleep.

I got up. My mouth was dry and tasted as if I had been eating rotten meat. Not having a canteen meant there was nothing to drink handy. Besides being thirsty, my bladder was telling me that I was in imminent danger of bursting something internally.

I exited the tent cautiously, knowing that the guards in the Battalion area were armed. By spotting them before they spotted me, I was in a position to warn them of my presence. It would make no sense for me to get hit now.

After taking a piss and then getting some juice from the mess hall, I found one of the battalion bunkers and climbed up. The night was warm, humid. There was a light breeze that took the edge off the heat. The moon shone bright with no clouds. Stars shined brightly in the heavens.

Lighting a cigarette, I sat there, smoking. Thinking.

I had been with my Company since April of 1967. Sixteen months. A lifetime. Too many lifetimes. Concentrating, I began trying to figure out the number of men left from the original company. At eight, my mind froze up.

Eight. Including me and Ron, there were eight of us left. Where had they gone? I began searching my mind for answers. Starting with my original squad, I began crossing them off the list. That was easy. Then the original platoon. Here things began to get fuzzy. Some were easy to remember, but other men I could only remember faintly. My mind had problems remembering who was in the original platoon and who had come later. I knew there were people I was missing, but my mind was having problems coming up with their names.

Men from other platoons were a complete wipe. Oh, there were a few I remembered. Suddenly I realized that the ones I could recall were the ones who had survived. The transfers and wounded. Not the dead.

Who in the platoon had died? I focused. Three? I came up with three names. They were all from First Squad, my squad. Who else? Faint memories, wisps of consciousness, traces of clues. In the ten months the company had been in-country, the platoon had at least ten men killed. I remembered that number from reports I had done as company clerk. Bingo!

I got off the bunker and headed to Battalion Administration. I found the tent and walked in.

The clerk was sitting at the desk typing. It was 0130 hours, but he seemed wide awake. The hiss of the canvas flap that served as a door must have caught his attention. Even as he continued to type he addressed me.

"Yeah?"

"I'm Sergeant Merrins, Alpha Company. Flew in from the field today. Got a question."

Silence.

"I'm a member of the original company. I was wondering if it would be possible for me to look at the company's old monthly TOE reports."

The clerk waved me over. I sat next to his desk.

"Why?" he asked as I settled.

"I know this sounds weird, but I was trying to remember exactly what happened over the past few months. Can't seem to sort it out in my mind. Thought the reports might refresh my memory."

"What's the last name again?"

"Merrins," I replied, spelling it out, "Alpha Company" I added.

The clerk got up, and I followed him over the company's area. Reaching into the file box sitting on the Alpha Company clerk's desk, the clerk, Spec Four Kelly, scanned the few files laying there. Both Ron's and my files were there.

Flipping open the file, the clerk held it up and began scanning through it quickly. Each time he stopped, I recognized the form he was looking at and the information he was gathering.

"You're the Professor, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I replied in surprise. I hadn't expected him to know that.

"Sure, guys talk about you now and then. Got some funny stories to tell concerning you."

"Yeah. Mostly bullshit I'm sure."

Kelly smiled and headed for the file cabinets where the reports were held. He picked up two folders. I expected him to hand them to me, but instead he moved over to his desk and sat down.

"Let's see," he said. Flipping expertly through, he found the original TOE. I could see it was the one I had put together myself while with the 82nd Airborne. Under First Platoon's roster of riflemen, there was my name, listed first, just the way I had typed it.

Spec Four Kelly scanned each month's report then passed it to me. There was nothing surprising in the reports for all the months leading up to the company's shipment overseas, but they did trigger many memories. A couple times I chuckled out loud as a name suddenly brought forth a pleasant incident. Some of the names triggered a feeling of unease, but why I did not know.

Then he handed me the TOE for November 1967. Killed In Action (KIA) 14, Wounded In Action (WIA) 8. Then the list of names.

My mind reeled and my hands began to shake. "Yeah. The medics. I had forgotten about the medics." Then three names jumped up and kicked my psyche: Donovan, Peter, Weilman. "Sure! The patrol. The first out of the wire and the first killed. Fuck!"

I dropped the paper on the desk and got a cigarette out of my pocket. Kelly was eyeballing me as I lit the cigarette with hands that seemed destined to fly off on their own.

"You okay?"

I heard the answer dimly through a haze. "Donavan, Peter, Weilman. Yeah! Caught on the side of the hill that first night. One of them bounced a grenade off a tree in the middle of the night spooked by something. It bounced back into these guys' hole and killed them." Memories flooded back. Bad memories and the feelings attached to them.

I reached out and took the piece of paper Kelly was holding.

December 1967. I wanted to drop it and run. The names on the list came flooding back. There was no need to read what it said. My name was there, Temporary Duty (TDY) at the hospital. As company clerk, I had handled this particular list maybe a hundred times, but over the months I forgot it completely.

December 1967. A bad month. 26 December 1967. A bad day. The worst day of the rest of my life. Now, having started out to find my memory, I tried to block it out and couldn't.

I got up and left the tent. Earlier in the day I had walked toward the battalion area as if on a cloud. Leaving the tent, it felt as if the weight of the world had descended onto my

shoulders. Now memories long suppressed by the needs of survival while in the field let loose, and with each step I felt more sickened. January 1968, February 1968, March 1968. Names and faces flashed through my mind. Things forgotten and locked away. I moved off the road, found a quiet area, and proceed to throw up, physically ridding myself of the illness infecting my mind.

I climbed on top of the bunker, and for the second time during my tour I cried. I did not want to. I felt shame at not being able to control myself. It did not last long, maybe five minutes. Then I slept.

It was almost daylight. I was thirsty again and headed for the mess tent. After two cups of coffee, I started back for the tent. Although there was hardly anything to pack, I wanted to be ready to leave when our ride to Brigade was ready.

By 0600 hours I was showered, dressed, packed, and ready to move out. Sergeant Kittle was showering, but other than that ready to leave. I left the tent to get a bite of breakfast before the mess hall got too busy. The men in the rear were just now getting up. Out in the field, the men would just be standing down from their morning alert.

Two men burst from one of the tents up ahead. One jumping into a jeep and speeding off, the other running toward the battalion admin area. Having been a REMF in the past I knew something big must be happening. Guys in the rear mostly operated at one speed, and what I had witnesses was not it.

I tuned into the battalion communication center with a sense of dread. The previous night's memories were still with me, and I was sure that was the cause for my feelings.

Entering the tent, I could see it was humming. One of the officers looked over at me but then turned his attention elsewhere without questioning my presence. The battalion commander was there issuing orders left and right. Knowing the layout of the tent, I knew instantly that all attention was focused on Alpha Company. Phrases passed back and forth, KIA, wounded, air support, pulling back. The shit had hit the fan and Alpha was in it deep.

There were two empty desks off to the right. The one furthest from the door drew my attention. I spotted what I was looking for immediately. Walking over to the desk as if it were

my own, I picked up the book that was sitting there and opened it to the first page. I quickly memorized two of the many radio frequencies listed there.

I backed out of the tent and headed for the admin area. To stay and distract the men at Battalion Comm. would do a disservice to the men in my company. I wanted to know what was happening, but I also wanted the men in the field to have the undivided attention of the men in the tent. They controlled the artillery, choppers, and air support the company would be needing.

Instead of entering the admin tent, I hustled around back to where the jeeps were parked. I knew some would be in use, but sure enough there were two sitting there unattended. I jumped in one and quickly started the engine. Then I hopped in back and flicked on the radio.

As the set warmed up, I set the frequency for the link-up between Alpha and Battalion. I set the volume so I could hear what was being said but also low enough that it would not draw the attention of others in the area.

Jumping into the driver's seat, I backed the jeep up, turned it around, and then backed it next to the other jeep. Once again I repeated the process in the second jeep, this time tuning the radio to the link between the platoons of Alpha Company and Captain Carlson. Between the two radios, I was able to piece together what had happened.

For the most part the action was over, although the tension in Carlson's voice was thick. From his perspective things weren't over, not by a long shot. To him this was simply a lull in the action, but for this he was grateful.

Carlson's voice came floating over the radio as it had many times for me over the past four months.

"Six, this is Alpha Five, sit rep. Tango Whisky Oscar dead. Sierra India X-ray wounded, three in need of evac, over."

"Roger, Alpha Five. Evac three minutes out, be prepared to pop smoke, over."

"Roger, over."

After a short pause, "Alpha Five, pop smoke."

"Roger. Over."

"Alpha Five, Evac reports purple, over."

"Roger. Over."

Everything brief and to the point. Of course Six might be handling communication from six different sources, and the captain I knew handled two and was ready to handle more if necessary.

"Five, this is One, over."

This was on the company channel. The voice of One was Joe Fisher's, not Lieutenant Atkins'.

"This is Five, over."

"Sir, I've place listening posts out again. They are in position, and everything seems too quiet. They are about fifty meters out from the perimeter. I repeat Foxtrot Oscar, in case you need to call in any artillery, Sir, I mean Five, over."

"One, this is Five. Good work, Joe, keep me informed, over."

"Roger, One out."

Well that answered a question real quick. For whatever reason, Sergeant Joe Fisher was in charge of the platoon. Doing a good job too, judging from his handling of the radio. I smiled.

"Six, this is Alpha Five, over."

"Five, this is Six over."

"Six, I have a list, over."

"Roger, over."

"Kilo-India-Alpha, Lima-Tango, Alpha-Tango-Kilo-India-November-Sierra."

The radio droned on, but I lost my focus on what was happening.

Lt. Atkins dead. A little over twelve hours after I left the platoon, Lieutenant Atkins was dead. Once again, the platoon would be operating without an officer, a situation that the men in the platoon had wanted.

Four days ago, they had warned me not to sleep with the lieutenant because they planned to kill him that night. I had deflected their intentions at that time, but now Charlie had taken care of the problem for us. Or had he?

I flipped off the radios and killed the engines. Looking at my watch I no longer had time for breakfast. If we hustled, Ron and I could just catch our helicopter. END