

Chinook Wind

Memoirs of the Vietnam Highlands 1966-1967

Robin Huxley

*Forget the past and do not hold remembrance of by gone strife
Out from the tombs of memory Walk gladly into newer life*

*When resurrection frees the mind from stifling rooms of old despair
O'heart be willing to forget the harsh events that put you there
Doris Huxley 1917 – 1993*

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Robin Huxley 310 309 9645
robinhuxley@gmail.com

Chapter One

When I was very young my father took me on a hunting trip. Hunting is not exactly what we did – trapping is the more accurate term. My father had learned to trap from his father and when he had some extra time, or when our family needed a little extra money, he would plan a trip to upper Michigan and get a few furs, mostly wolf. There was snow on the ground and I remember driving for hours through the silence. It was beautiful with the snow in the trees, although the winter overcast always, even as a child mildly depressed me. We had a small cabin just off Interstate 75 as you travel north. If you take 75 far enough you get to Mackinaw Island and the best fudge in the world. We got to our cabin in the early afternoon and quickly threw our stuff inside. Dad wanted to set the traps before dark so that, if we were lucky, we could leave the next day. I remember following my Dad through the snow. There’s something about being with your father that is always exciting even if fathers don’t usually talk much. I had just turned eight and my father was showing me how to set the traps, and where to set them. He told me how to look for the possible animal trails and how to disguise the traps. I listened and nodded as he tried to teach me the finer points of it. He told me about grandpa and some funny stories I have long since forgotten. We got back to the cabin just as the sun was going down, which is fairly early in upper Michigan. He had brought some jerky and we ate that while he heated soup and fried a couple of burgers. The heat from the small stove warmed the cabin enough for me to take off my jacket. We ate quickly and my dad brought in some wood and built a fire. Then he surprised me and brought out some marshmallows. We

roasted them and he asked me a few questions about my friends and my older brother Phil. It was very nice being there with him and I felt very close to him. After our marshmallow roast we cleaned up and got ready for bed. He told me a few stories about the war – World War II – mostly funny stories and I drifted peacefully off to sleep while he was in the midst of a recollection.

We started out early the next morning after a quick breakfast of oatmeal. We had set the traps in a large arc around the area and were walking out to the farthest trap so as to collect the animals on the way back to our cabin. I remember following my dad through the snow. We were breaking through a few inches of fresh snow that had fallen last night. I could see my breath and was glad I had taken my good coat and hat. The early morning forest was quite magical to a boy of eight. As we neared the area of the trap I remember seeing my father squat down. I stopped behind him and waited. He remained in this position for a long, long time but I would have never disturbed him. I watched the muscles of his jaw ripple along the side of his face. He collapsed back in the snow and sat with his back against a tree. He looked ashen and crest-fallen. He stared at the trap and I looked down for the first time. There was a fair amount of blood on the ground, which was very vivid against the white snow. I saw that the trap had been sprung and then I noticed there was something in the trap, a wolf paw. I looked up at my father and he finally looked at me. “Rob,” he said softly. “We trapped a very special animal last night. I’ve always heard that it’s survival of the fittest but I’ve always thought that it’s something more that drives life. Mark Twain said ‘It’s not the size of the dog in the fight, but the size of the fight in the dog.’ I guess that’s what I’ve thought. There are special people and I suppose special animals too. They just seem to have more life in them. They fight harder. And you just seem

to sense it about them.” He looked squarely at me “You have it.” He paused catching his breath. The wolf paw had moved him in some seminal and profound way. “I’ve heard about this but never seen it before,” he paused. “You’re probably too young to understand, Rob but this is about survival. Put yourself in this wolf’s position for a minute. Think about the fear and panic when that trap springs. You pull and twist and yank but there’s nothing to do. You’re trapped. All the animals I’ve ever trapped seem to resign themselves to it and in the end are either dead or placidly waiting for the bullet. But last night we caught something different, something special. We caught one of those special animals with the extra life in it. He wouldn’t be trapped. So full of life that he would make the sacrifice of his paw, take the pain, do whatever he had to, to live.” He paused looking out into the forest. “He’s out there now, three legs left.” He looked directly at me, a strange look in his eyes. “Can you imagine the fortitude it takes to bite off your own leg? Can you imagine the pain?” He shook his head in disbelief. “He probably saw the rest of the pack moving on but he wouldn’t be left. He wasn’t going to die alone. He was going to leave with them. He wouldn’t give us the satisfaction of finding him. Damn it.” He shook his head and smiled to himself wryly, then turned to me, “From the moment we’re born a trap starts closing on all of us, humans and animals alike. Everyday that trap closes a little bit more. It just about closed on our friend last night but he pried it back open.” His voice had a far-off tone to it. “He’s alive. He’s free. He’ll die the way he wants to, not the way we chose for him.” He looked off into the distance, “Damn...damn...damn...” He trailed off. He ran his hand through his hair and he lit a cigarette. He never said another word about it. I followed him back to the cabin where he found a shovel. It took him most of the day to break through the frozen ground. His hands were bleeding from the

effort, but he finally buried that paw. We retraced our steps from the night before and found that was the only trap that was sprung. He closed each trap as we came to it and threw them deep into the woods. When we had undone all the previous night's work, we collected our things and drove back in silence. We never went trapping again.

Chapter Two

The intercom on the C-130 Hercules crackled to life as we all turned and stared at the speaker. “Good morning,” said the pilot in an unusually chirpy voice, it being one a.m. “We’re approaching Camp Anari. The base is currently under attack.” Thank God, I thought. We’ll have to fly back and wait this out. But the pilot continued, “Once we land we aren’t going to stop, just taxi. We will drop the back hatch and you will run out and hit the deck as we continue to taxi. Good luck and welcome to the Highlands gentlemen.” Jesus, this sounded bad. I looked around at the thirty or so other ‘replacements’ that had shared the short one-hour flight from Bein Hoa, just north of Saigon. I had only been there two days when my orders came in. The holding area in Bein Hoa was called the 90th replacement and was a real shit-hole. It was hotter than hell, total confusion, and there was this sense of despair about it. I was glad to get out of there; at least I had thought I was. Right now it didn’t seem so bad. My orders were to fly north to the Central Highlands, Pleiku City, and the new home of the Fourth Infantry Division. Right now I wondered like everyone else, which of us was going to make it? How many of us on this flight would be going home?

Vietnam was not so much an assignment as it was a sentence. It didn’t matter what the crime, the sentence was always the same – twelve months in Vietnam. ETS or ‘end of time served’ was 365 days and counting. I was to learn that Vietnam was much like Dante’s inferno, it was all hell but it did have levels of misery. The highest ring, the melancholy ring was served in the south where you fought the tropics, not the NVA (North Vietnamese Army). The heat, humidity

and boredom were tolerated with the unholy trinity of booze, drugs and whores and the worst action you saw was a syringe of penicillin in each cheek. At least that's what I was told. I wasn't so lucky. The Highlands, where I was headed, were known for many things. They were remote, mountainous, heavily jungled, and very eerie. It was a no-man's land of gang warfare. The orders were pretty simple, "Search & Destroy" – walk around and if you see anyone, kill him. It was our turf, and we weren't sharing it. I didn't know it at the time but the Central Highlands – saved for the worst offenders – was Dante's ninth ring of hell. And I was flying straight into it.

The wheels hit the runway hard and caused the plane to bounce. Given the size of the plane it was an uncomfortable, sickening feeling. The roar of the plane silenced the mortar fire for the moment, but once we slowed down we could hear the deep booming explosions near the airfield. As promised, the back was dropped, and off we ran. I stumbled a bit as my foot hit the ground. Since the plane was still moving when I took my first step I was going twice as fast as I thought I was. I lurched over to my left and fell into a ditch. It was like running into a sauna even at one a.m.. There was a slight rain falling and the ditch was full of water. I was soaked. I stayed in the ditch for a while not sure which way I should run. I watched the C-130 wheel around and throttle up. A roar of engine and powerful gust of wind over me and she was in the air, flying away from this madness. Fortunately the battle was not too close to the airstrip so I was able to watch the show. War is an interesting spectator sport. I watched the incoming mortar fire and our big guns answering the volleys; flashes of light and deep booming explosions. It was beautiful in an odd sort of way until it hit you that people were

dying over there. Suddenly it's not so beautiful. As I was sitting there waiting for orders my mind went over the last few weeks and my arrival in Vietnam.

I had been in advanced infantry training at Fort Polk, when my orders for Nam came in. At the end of training I got a shock. Ten days of leave! It was just enough time to say goodbye. Fuck it, I thought, I'm taking more than ten days. Maybe I'm not even going. We'll see. As I left Fort Polk I realized I'd changed somehow. I actually felt like I should go to Nam and kill me a whole bunch of gooks. What the hell was I saying? What have these bastards done to me? Has yelling, "Kill, kill, kill," all day long for ten weeks got to me? Do I really want to kill people? I don't know. This whole thing is crazy. I'll have to see how I feel when I get home. I'm no killer! Am I? As I flew home to Michigan I thought of nothing but Vietnam. Was I going to go? Was I ready for it? Was I going to die there? When I got home I started drinking and I didn't stop. The winter of 1966 was very cold and I remember thinking, well at least it will be warm when I get to Nam. How naive can you get?

I could tell my mother was very concerned. I had only just told my parents that I was
In the infantry and was probably going to be fighting a lot while I was in Vietnam. My parents were strong and never let on how really concerned they were for me. Mom tried to hide her feelings but I could tell she was very worry about my situation. I felt it best to spend the time I had with my friends. We drank day and night and this kept me from worrying about Vietnam. I had two brothers and two sisters but we didn't talk much about it. I don't believe Leslee or Phil knew what

to say. They were the older ones. Kyle and Kevin were too young to understand. I was the middle child. I was damn scared of the uncertainty of it all. I'd sit with my family and watch the news and see that body count going up everyday and wonder, Am I going to be one of those poor bastards that gets whacked over there? I did not want to go but couldn't imagine turning tail and running. What should I do?

My girl friend and I avoided talking about Vietnam also. She was so beautiful. I had only met her a few weeks before I went into the service. And she was the first person I saw when I flew in from Fort Polk. Diane Oliver was the sweetest girl I had ever known. I'm not sure why she continued to love me after my two-week drunk but she did. I'm sure she knew I was scared under all my bravado. She was so understanding, so concerned, and I was playing the young hero going over to keep her safe. We laughed and cried but mostly I drank. Diane was never a big drinker but she was there the whole time. Diane said very little those two weeks but she stayed beside me and comforted me in a way beyond words. Just having her near me was what I needed and somehow she sensed that.

One night, a few days before I left, my best friend in high school, John Adams, told me he was going to enlist in the Marines. His dad had been a Marine and his uncle also. I begged him not to do it. I felt he would die in Vietnam. We were both dead drunk and suddenly we started crying. He told me he had to do it. He had no choice. I didn't understand but could see there was no changing his mind.

I stayed four days past my due date at Travis Air Force Base outside San Francisco. I was AWOL but I didn't care. What could they do, send me to Vietnam? Bust me? I was only a PFC (Private First Class,) and you had to be that rank to go to Vietnam. Hell, I couldn't lose. I had the Army by the balls on this one. When I got to Travis they made me go before a Captain who asked me where I'd been. I said, "At home, Sir." It was all such bullshit. I felt like saying, You're lucky I'm here at all! He told me to wait for orders and dismissed me. That was easy, I thought. I should have stayed home another week. FTA - Fuck the Army.

As I waited for my orders I saw thousands of troops headed for Nam. Air force, Navy, Marines, it looked like a very big show. After a few days I was loaded on a C-141 cargo jet. The pilots said that if anyone wanted to come up front and look in the cockpit it was okay. I was very eager to sit in the cockpit of this enormous plane. To my surprise only a few others were interested, and they quickly left. I spent the whole flight up front with a major and a captain who were very open to all my questions about the plane and all its gadgets. They asked me what I was going to do in Vietnam and I told them I was in the infantry. They treated me well the entire trip. It made me feel good. We took off and flew for eleven or twelve hours to our first stop. No land at all, then suddenly there on the horizon was a tiny speck, Wake Island. I knew about Wake Island and all the Marines that had died there in WWII. After we landed for a very brief refuel stop, I stood on the beach looking out at the beautiful ocean thinking about all those Marines that had died here twenty five years earlier. I hoped that my friend John wouldn't be part of our 'new' sacrifice. I hoped I wouldn't either. It seemed strange that so much

death would come to such a small a place. I wondered about Vietnam and what it was like. I thought of the body counts I had seen on the news those past few weeks.

My thoughts were interrupted by the call to get back on board. Next stop Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. It was nighttime when we got there and again we took on fuel and left quickly. Next stop, Vietnam. We had been flying maybe twenty to twenty five hours by then. Suddenly, if anything can be sudden after twenty five hours, there it was - Saigon, South Vietnam. We landed and were quickly trucked off to Bein Hoa, north of Saigon; and from Bein Hoa to my flooded ditch. A lot had happened in the past few weeks, I thought, as I sat, soaked, at one thirty a.m. on that rainy, pitiful night. At two a.m., a sergeant came down and told us to get our, "God Damn asses" out of the ditch and into the bunkers about three hundred yards from the airstrip. We were told to grab any bunk and I spent a fitful night in the bunker. I can't remember ever feeling so completely alone.

Chapter Three

The next morning I made it to a replacement company and waited a day and a half for my next orders. The base camp near Pleiku was very large and I was free to wander about while I waited. The base was big enough to land a C-130 inside its perimeter and then some. It was very impressive. The best America had. This being a full scale 'police action', there were hundreds and hundreds of choppers of all sizes and models. One of the pilots saw me admiring one of the big Hueys.

"You just get in?" He asked me.

"Yeah, do I look like it?"

He smiled. "The uniform's not in bad shape and you're still impressed with the equipment."

"Guilty," I said. "I got in last night."

"On that 130 huh?"

"Yeah, during the attack last night." I said.

"Wasn't too bad last night. I heard we only lost one or two guys. It's been a lot worse but we've got it pretty good here. Those guys out in the jungle are the ones catching the shit. Don't let these base camp cowboys give you any crap about how tough it is here," he said, meaning the base camp.

There was an awkward silence, since I think he guessed I was headed into the jungle. He probably thought he'd said too much. I said, "See ya around." He nodded, and I wandered along taking my time looking at the planes and tanks, all

sorts of military hardware. I kept walking around and met some interesting guys. There were cooks, mechanics, clerks, supply people, and I was amazed at the number of soldiers who weren't going to be doing any fighting at all. I was also jealous. I would have loved to stay at the base camp. In chatting with these guys I discovered they got three hot meals a day, a rack to sleep in, mail everyday, movies every night, clean fatigues whenever they wanted. Some guys even had little Vietnamese girls washing and cleaning for them. Plus all these guys received overseas pay and combat pay. It was amazing. Of course an 'action' of this size, like anything else, requires a hell of a lot of logistics. I didn't begrudge these guys the duty they drew; I was just envious. I tried to befriend anyone and everyone I met to see if I could somehow get assigned to the main base here. Over the next day and a half I did hear a lot of guys squawking about how tough it was, but I remembered that guy talking about the jungle duty. It haunted me, the way he had said it. I knew I didn't want to go there. Also I could see it in the eyes of these base campers, behind the stories, they knew the truth, and they knew lots of men were dying less than twenty miles away.

The next day I was loaded on a Huey, in fact I think it was the same one I had been admiring, and taken to a forward firebase. The base camp at Pleiku was on an open

Mesa that stretched for miles. As we headed west I could see the foliage beginning to thicken. It was ominous and I sensed danger in the air. We landed at the firebase called "The Oasis." It was more of a forward staging area than a firebase but could serve either function. Even the guys that were there got a better deal.

Hot chow all the time, hot showers, and mail all the time. It was hard to believe there was a war going on so close and these guys were never going to see it, at least not the way I was going to see it. Strange, but all wars are like that, I guess. A very small percentage of an Army actually does the fighting. Who knew? Why me?

I ate that night at the firebase mess. I was surrounded by guys laughing and kidding, shoving each other and stealing food. It was good-natured enough but I was a stranger in a strange land and I felt a profound loneliness descend upon me. I knew it wouldn't be long before I wouldn't be getting any more hot meals. Not long now before the kidding would be over. I ate despite a growing lump in my throat. It was 20:30 (that's 8:30pm to civilians,) and I was coming back from the mess to my tent. There were six or seven guys huddled around a radio in front of the tent listening to "A" Company's radio transmissions. The company was fully involved in an ambush and it sounded very bad. I could hear the firing of weapons and screaming and yelling. They were getting hit hard and taking a lot of casualties. I could hear the company commander screaming on the radio for fire support (artillery). Then we could hear the rounds screaming in. This was all taking place six or seven miles away. I finally walked out of the tent. It was getting to me and I needed some air. It was a clear night and I was starting to shake in spite of the heat. I looked at the stars. Please God, get me through this. When I returned to the tent an hour later the radio was gone and everyone was asleep. I thought how horrible it must be out there in that jungle in the darkness. How horrible to die so far from home, family and friends, in this foreign land. Tomorrow I would be joining my outfit and I would get my own chance to see, and hear, and taste, this horror up close. I remember being very scared. I knew I was

about to experience something that would change me for the rest of my life. If I could have figured a way out of there at that moment I would have taken it. I felt, or hoped that it was all a dream and soon I would awaken. I would wake up and go into work at the A&P Supermarket– but I wouldn't be complaining, not anymore. I crawled into my cot and lay there for an hour and thought about “A” Company again out there in that jungle and what they must be going through. I'd know soon enough myself and I hoped I'd be able to handle the nightmare. I was frightened but I knew there was no way out. No way out. Tomorrow I was going to see what I was made of. No one should have to do this, I thought. I'm still a teenager, damn it! I'm still a virgin, damn it! I've never been with a woman and I figure there's a good chance I never will. It all seems so unfair. Who said life is fair? As I started to doze off I noticed I was sweating and I felt my fatigues. They were soaked and I knew I had to get it together fast. I began a little pep talk session. Whatever happens that's the way it goes. Just try and do the right thing and maybe you'll get through! All the worry in the world will not change what's about to happen. Be strong and you will prevail. The internal coaching helped me, even if it was total bullshit. I needed to get my mind off all of this madness. I began fingering my lucky coin necklace that I wore next to my dog tags and I thought about my friend Bill Baker.

Chapter Four

Before I was drafted I moved from Plymouth, Michigan to Houston. I had some wild idea that if I moved, the army would never find me. Well, I didn't really believe that but thought it might delay things a bit. While I was down in Houston I found my old and dear friend Bill Baker. Bill was twenty years my senior but had been my lifelong friend. He had been my Sunday school teacher, tennis coach, badminton coach, and personal confidant over the years. He was one of those adults that every kid meets who seems to understand somehow. Bill had been a semi pro basketball player. He had been in the Navy in WWII as an officer on a ship in the north Atlantic. He had a Masters degree from the University of Michigan in Electrical Engineering, and was the finest person I had ever met. One of Bill's many talents was, he was a private pilot. He had even offered to pay for my private pilot's license, but I had turned him down. What was the use? I thought. I'm going to Vietnam and it might be a one-way trip. Why bother? I never did really believe the army was going to forget me.

Bill and I had many long conversations about my impending induction and he was one of the few people who told me I should let my conscience be my guide. I was confused and it felt good to hear him say that, because my conscience was saying don't go. Don't go. DON'T GO!! Bill always left it up to me and said whatever I decided he could live with it. I loved him for that. He made it my decision.

As I lay there in the cot I thought about the many places Bill took me and I felt myself beginning to relax. We flew to the Bahamas in his plane and to Padre Island in south Texas. We went to Matamoros, Mexico and many other interesting places. I think now, that he was trying to show me the world in case that was all I ever got to see of it. Bill was a fine man. He taught me so much about life and living.

My time in Houston was magical and exciting and sometimes I would even forget about my draft situation. But most of the time it weighed on me very heavily. I just couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to happen to me, something very bad. I even talked to Bill about it. He assured me it was going to be all right. He said I was strong and capable and that I would make it through whatever happened. I wanted to believe that so much. I remember asking Bill if he thought Vietnam was a worthy cause. He wasn't sure. This was 1965 and many people still thought we could do some good over here.

Bill flew me to Nassau in his private plane. It was magical. I remember the feeling I got looking out over the sea and seeing the Islands on the horizon. The water was a bright turquoise and you could see right down to the bottom. I knew it was going to be warm and wonderful to swim in. Bill raised the tower and got permission to land. We flew past the runway, banked to the right, straightened out and banked again to the right. An aerial U-turn and a perfect touch down. Bill got instructions from the tower and we motored up to our slot and cut the engines. As the propeller spun down I lifted the hatch on the Cessna 182 Skylane and breathed my first of Nassau. It was paradise. Warm, fragrant, and never before smelled scents flooded my nose and I just stood there and breathed for

several minutes. I had been to Canada a number of times but this was my first time in the tropics. Bill and I grabbed our bags and hailed a cab. Bill had arranged a room in the Nassau Bay hotel. The lobby was open-air and I couldn't get over how excited I was to be there. We threw our bags in the room, threw on some swim trunks and headed for the pool. We toasted each other over two glasses of frozen daiquiris. We got advice from the concierge and were soon on a boat headed out to a coral reef. Bill had given me a few scuba diving lessons, another hobby of his, enough for me to feel only excitement over my first real scuba dive. The boat weighed anchor and Bill and I went through our pre-dive checks. He and I sat on the edge of the boat and fell backwards into that window-clear sea. I remember being surrounded by bubbles and I smiled into my regulator. Down we went. We hit the bottom at about forty feet. Bill gave me the okay sign and I returned it, although I was much more than just okay. I was ecstatic. The coral was an explosion of color. The only things more colorful were the fish. I followed a crowd of Sergeant Majors, striped fish that seemed to have no fear of me. I saw some beautiful angels and butterfly fish swaying over the coral head. I was lost in the beauty. The Sergeant Majors had been drifting with me. I saw something out of the corner of my eye, something fast. I turned my head just in time to see the tail of a Sergeant Major in the mouth of a rather large and cruel looking barracuda. It had found a slow swimmer; one not paying as much attention as he should have and a life was over. It brought me back to the reality that haunted me and a small shiver ran through me in that warm Bahamian water. Even in that magical place, death was a second away. The guard was dropped for only a moment. The vigilance relaxed for only a moment. It only took that

moment for death to creep into paradise. I swam slowly over to Bill and watched as more fish frolicked before us.

That night Bill and I were walking the streets of Nassau, my good mood had returned and I was having a wonderful time. We had scuba dived all day and seen many beautiful things, the barracuda notwithstanding. Now it was evening and it was time to do some nightclubbing. After a great dinner and a few bars we happened upon a club called Black Beard's Tavern. We went in and ordered a few drinks and out came an older black man who went over to the piano and sat down. His name was George Simmonet. He sang that calypso favorite "Yellow Bird", his rough, gravelly voice scratching out the lyrics. For the first time I felt the loneliness of the song. For the first time I understood the friendship between the man and the bird in the song, a friendship born of sorrow and shared misery. I've never heard it sang better. I was mesmerized. I wanted to cry, I was so moved by his performance. The man was so rich in his feeling, so sweet in his demeanor, and he had a voice that could unlock a thousand memories, or in my case create them. I loved that old man and his music. I could see that the performer's magic had touched Bill too. Bill gave me five dollars and told me to give it to the piano player. As I approached him, he smiled. I dropped the five dollars in his jar and told him how wonderful his music was. He smiled a deep, warm, twinkling smile and thanked me for the tip.

We stayed in the Bahamas for a week and flew to several islands to scuba dive. It was an experience I treasure. Often Bill would let me take the controls and fly the plane. I loved that feeling of power, of ultimate freedom. When we finally left

the Bahamas it was as if I were leaving a fairy tale world. As we winged our way back to Houston in the Cessna 182 Skylane, I kept thinking about those beautiful islands off the coast of Miami, The crystal clear water and warm sunny days. It was a perfect vacation, and a lifelong memory.

On another trip we flew to Padres Island on the Gulf of Mexico for a visit. It was a very interesting place with a lot of history. We dove on an old shipwreck in the Gulf and it was very exciting. It is always strange seeing a ship on the bottom. Even though it was not a treasure ship, I couldn't help but get that adventurous feeling. It was a feeling that you're about to find something, something important. We went down about eighty feet. The water was rather murky, making the doomed ship seem even more eerie. I floated over the deck and down into the wheelhouse. The wheel itself had been pushed to the side but was still intact. Bill swam up behind me and we explored some of the lower decks being very cautious as we entered each room. There were crabs that side-walked away from us, claws in the air. I saw an octopus slink into a corner and change color. We had been down for about forty minutes when I saw it. There was a faint sparkle in the murkiness and I swam over to it. I brushed my hand over it, swishing away several layers of dirt. I picked it up and looked at it. It appeared to be a coin, a silver coin. I put it in my grab bag and had a closer look after we surfaced. It was an old silver half-dollar, and it was in very good shape. I turned it over and looked at the date. 1917.

"Damn," I told Bill, "That was the year my father was born."

"Well, that's your lucky coin I guess." He smiled.

We looked all over the island and had a grand time. We found an old jewelry shop and Bill had the idea that we should make the coin I found into a necklace. The jeweler behind the counter said it wouldn't be a problem. I picked up the lucky coin, now a necklace, the next day. We continued to explore Padres Island. At one point I was feeding some seagulls and they were surrounding me as I fed them. Some would fly by and take the food right out of my hand on the fly. Bill took a wonderful picture of this moment and I still have it.

Bill Baker was with me right up until the night before I went into the service. We had been hearing more stories of Vietnam and they weren't good. I remember Bill looking me directly in the eyes after dinner that night and saying,

“Rob you have got to survive. No matter what, you've got to survive. Hell, maybe you'll get lucky and stay stateside, but if you go to Vietnam, promise me you won't do anything stupid. Promise me you'll do whatever it takes to get out alive.”

I assured him I would, but he was freaking me out. Laying in my cot, it seemed the only stupid thing was coming here in the first place. I fell asleep holding my lucky coin and thinking of those happy, wonderful times Bill had given me. I also remembered that Bill said I would make it through this. Just don't be stupid, Rob; don't be stupid.

Chapter Five

The next morning I was given an M-16 and 500 rounds of ammo, 8 grenades, 200 rounds of M-60 ammo, a claymore mine, 8 boxes of C-rations, an entrenching tool, utility belt and ammo pouches, 20 malaria pills, a poncho, and poncho liner, 20 sand bags, 3 medical wraps, 2 canteens, a bayonet, 2 pair of socks, gun oil and a partridge in a pear tree. It all weighed about seventy pounds. I was loaded onto another Huey with a bunch of C-rations and other supplies and off I went again. As I flew west, the terrain changed dramatically. The ground became very mountainous and was completely covered with jungle. Shit! We flew for twenty minutes or so and then I saw a firebase deep in the jungle on the side of a hill. We landed there and I got off along with the supplies. I walked up an incline and reported to the First Sergeant.

“Private Huxley reporting, Sergeant.”

“You got your entire gear soldier?”

“Yes Sergeant.”

“Report to 2nd platoon 1st squad. Ask for Dave Buckley. That’s all.”

“Thank you, Sergeant!”

As I walked away I heard the sergeant mutter under his breath,

“Welcome to firebase Agnes, soldier.”

So this was it, C company 1st Battalion 22nd Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division. Somewhere near the Laos border. This was one scary looking place. As I looked around for some direction a guy pointed me toward 2nd platoon. As I

walked I noticed how tall the jungle was around the firebase. The engineers had blown the jungle away to build this fortress. There was lots of artillery around, 81 mm mortars, 4.2 mm mortars, 105 howitzers pointed right at the jungle, and a few 155 mm SP's (self propelled) thrown in for good measure. Everything had been flown in; there were no roads in or out of there. Just looking at that place I knew the shit was going to fly! I just hoped it would not be my shit. I wandered around a bit and finally got directions from a guy named Jim in 1st Platoon. As I approached 2nd platoon I found Dave Buckley who would be my team leader. The army divides you and divides you down to a team. There are four men to a team, so besides Buckley and me there would be two more guys in the team. There were two teams to a squad. Four squads make up a platoon. Generally there are four platoons to a company but in Vietnam there were three platoons, and the fourth was stationed at the firebase and was essentially an artillery platoon. There are three companies to a battalion. There are three battalions to a regiment. I was assigned "C" company, first battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry division. But in the end, in Vietnam, it quite often came down to the four guys on the team. Dave Buckley was pointed out to me and I scrambled up an embankment and found E-5 buck sergeant Dave Buckley rolling up his poncho liner.

"Private Huxley reporting."

Dave looked up eyeing me. I was hoping for a smile, a grin or even a twinkle in his steel-gray eyes but I saw none. He stood up and eyed me from head to foot.

"How tall are you, Huxley?" He asked.

"6'5", almost."

“Lucky you’re so damn skinny.” He turned away and went back to packing. That was Buckley - cool, confident and no nonsense. He knew exactly what to do and when to do it. And he didn’t waste any energy when he could avoid it. There was no idle chitchat from Dave Buckley. He was 21 years old but seemed ancient. Dave finished his packing and stood up again.

“All right, Huxley, let’s go meet the rest of the team.”

I followed Dave as we wound around the brush, equipment, and guns towards a large bunker. Two guys were sitting outside smiling, and making small talk. They looked up as Dave approached.

“Rob Huxley, this is Ron Brown.” We shook hands smiling. Ron was tall, not as tall as me but about 6’2”. He impressed me as someone who would not rattle easily and I felt good about that. He was solidly built and rather handsome. He had been cleaning his gun and seemed to be doing it unconsciously.

“Where you from Rob?” he asked.

“Michigan. Plymouth, Michigan”.

“Hey, I’m from Wisconsin. Practically neighbors huh? Welcome to Nam – at least it’s warm.”

I smiled. “That was my main reason for coming.”

He looked at me again and tilted his head slightly. “You enlist?” he asked flatly, not seeming to imply anything by the question.

“Are you kidding? Drafted. Even Michigan doesn’t get that cold.”

He chuckled slightly. “Good. Good..” He finished quietly. I looked down at the last member of the team and was greeted by a warm smile.

“I’m John Sweeney,” he said extending his hand. “I see you’ve got a camera. Let’s go take some pictures for the folks.” John stood up and I guessed him to be

about 5'10" but he had large shoulders and arms and I knew I wanted to be on his side of any argument. He moved very gracefully and we spent the rest of the day wandering around the firebase taking turns snapping pictures of ourselves in front of the howitzers, mortars, and helicopters, anything that was big and olive green. John was from Long Island, New York and had been a musician. He was easy to talk to and I felt much of the tension flowing out of me as I spent time with John. He had an easy way of talking that inspired trust and confidence. We talked about family and friends, fears and hopes and by the end of the day I had a close friend. As we walked back to the bunker he looked at me and said,

“Rob, I like you, and I want you to know something.” He paused looking me right in the eye, dead serious. “We’re going to make it out of here. I know it.” He smiled and walked in front of me. In one sense it was a crazy thing to say but I believed him and I felt better than I had felt since landing in Saigon less than a week before. I liked my team, and I felt especially close to John, my new best friend. These were the guys who were going to get me through Vietnam.

The Fourth Infantry Division was very famous. They had served in WWII and many other wars, with great distinction. The division had arrived in Vietnam five months before I did. The guys began to tell me of their time so far. They had only arrived at the firebase a few days before me. Prior to that, they had been stationed along the coast in a small fishing village. The village was called Tuy Hoa and they described it as very good duty. Good duty means they had seen very little action and taken very few casualties. This was not to say they didn't know their business. These guys were good and had trained together at Fort Lewis, Washington. They had been together over a year as a unit and were very cohesive.

They trusted each other and knew what to do when things got tight. Since I had not trained with them or been stationed with them till now, I was an unknown. I knew I'd carry my weight though. I remember going down to get my physical after I got my induction notice. I passed, big surprise, and off I went. First stop Fort Knox, Kentucky. Basic training was a breeze. I was tall and thin, and I had always been a very good athlete. I remember scoring 480 points out of 500 on my first physical training test. It was a piece of cake and I actually enjoyed my first three or four weeks in the army. I was the best in the Company. I knew it, and the army knew it. They asked me if I wanted to go to OCS (Officer Candidate School). It required an additional year in the service so I had turned it down. One day, during the fifth week of our eight-week training schedule they marched about forty of us down to a building and had us sign a bunch of papers. It was very unclear what was going on, but we all signed and marched back to the company HQ. Later we found out that our group had been selected quite randomly to go to Fort Polk, Louisiana. We were to receive advanced infantry training and would definitely be going to Vietnam.

When we finished basic training, we were sent by train to Fort Polk. No leave or anything. I thought they must need men pretty badly over there. When I got to Fort Polk I was sent to a place called Tigerland. When I saw Tigerland, I knew I was in big trouble. It was old and grungy. All the noncoms had been in Vietnam, some twice and a few three times. There were more CIB's (Combat Infantry Badges, awarded to Infantry soldiers only, and only those who have been in combat,) around there than anywhere in the states. These guys knew their shit and I figured if I was going to make it in Nam I'd better learn as much as I could from them. There was a lot to learn. I was still scoring in the 480's to 490's on the

PT tests and I knew the NCO's would have liked me to be more of a leader, but I was lying low. I just wanted to get through this experience alive. I didn't want to be an officer. I didn't want to be a leader. I just wanted to live.

Tigerland was a good training area for Nam. We'd go out in those swamps for weeks and pretend to be soldiers, crawling around in the water and rain, digging holes and filling sandbags, you know, all the high-tech stuff. We learned about and fired all the Army weapons from an M-16 to an M-79, fifty calibers, claymores, 45's, you name it, we shot it. We did low crawls under live fire, night watches that never seemed to end, LP (Listening Post) every third night with the NCO's constantly screaming at you. "Move it, move it, God damn you," was a constant cry. "Do you think you're on vacation here or something?" Food had to be eaten fast for some reason. I hated that, since I was a slow eater by nature. I learned to adjust and crammed the food down my pie hole, as they say. That was hard for me. Other things that seemed hard were much easier for me, like running for hours, or pulling KP for twenty four straight hours. There is the right way, the wrong way and the army way. All right, I'll buy that. The best part for me was the Cadre, so colorful and intense. Like Sergeant Clark who claimed his blood type was O.D. (olive drab), his religion Infantry. Sergeant Clark would call cadence with a sweetness that made the march seem tolerable. He could call cadence for hours with no trouble.

"Jody's got your girl and gone, Jody's home and you're in Nam, Sound off, one two, sound off, three four."

I don't know why, but I enjoyed it. I guess it was the dependability of it that was so attractive. One night on patrol I saw Sergeant Clark pull a live blasting cap out of his gear. Somehow it went off in his hand and shredded it. As a medic wrapped his hand, he informed us that if this had happened to one of us we'd be going to the hospital but that he wasn't going anywhere! His balls were much bigger than his brain but I still admired him. Of course he'd been to Nam and knew what the rest of us would be learning soon enough, that a shredded hand wasn't a big deal. The sergeant had also been in Korea, a real warrior. He used to tell us we were all going to die in Vietnam and then laugh like hell.

He'd also scream at us in formation, "If anyone thinks they can take me, come on up here and I'll tear your balls off. Come on!" he'd say.

Sometimes he'd be dead drunk. No one ever challenged him. He had been in the army twenty years and was one of a kind. As the training began to wind down, I still found it hard to believe I was going to Vietnam. This only happens in the movies! I did have a sense that I had been trained well and was as ready as I could be for whatever was going to happen.

Even though I had a different start than Dave, Ron and John, I felt like I would pull my weight when the time came. But for them and for me things were about to change in a way we could not imagine. The 'good duty' was all behind us and I had just started. The rest of the afternoon and evening we spent talking about ourselves and what was going to happen. We were leaving the firebase in the morning and things were about to get tense. I felt that with these guys around I had a better chance of surviving. I rubbed my necklace for luck and hoped Bill and

John Adams had been right about their predictions. None of us could have imagined how bad the next six months were going to get.

The campaign we were being sent into was named operation Sam Houston. Search and destroy the enemy. We would be fighting NVA (North Vietnamese Army) troops that were headed south down the Ho Chi Min trail to fight the war. These were highly trained troops with lots of equipment and skill. They also would be in Battalion or Regiment size force. Ours was an attempt to stop the flow of troops and equipment to the south. We would find out that it was sort of like trying to stop the growth of the jungle or stopping a monsoon. The Vietnamese had been fighting for generations. It was part of their life, trying to expel foreigners. We were the latest in a long line of enemies, and as far as they knew, not the last. One look at that jungle and you knew there was no way we could stop them for long. It reminded me of the old analogy between involvement and commitment. In a breakfast of bacon and eggs, the hen is involved but the pig is committed. The NVA were committed and had been for generations. Our problem was that the US was merely involved. None of us thought about, nor did we have orders to win. There was no plan to win. We were only there to keep them back. Like trying to keep the ocean off the beach. It's a damn shame so many men lost their lives just trying to hold on for their twelve months. When I talked with the guys the main theme was always time. How much time did you have left? Usually expressed in days. A hundred and four and a wake up, and so forth. In the case of my team, they had arrived as a unit so they mostly had the same time left. This would be something that became more and more important to me as time passed in Vietnam. But for now it was just a bit of information. Afterwards, I would come to

believe that if we had twenty times the forces we had, we would not have been able to stop the Ho Chi Min Trail from being effective for the North. I was a Private and I could see that but the Generals couldn't? We were about to fight these little guys in a knock down, drag out affair that would, over time, mean less and less, just a whole lot of killing and suffering. We searched, and many, many of us were destroyed by operation Sam Houston.

As we talked I soon realized that it would be John Sweeney and me together. Ron Brown and Dave Buckley shared team lead duties. I felt as though the four of us were going to help each other make it through this ordeal alive. I didn't realize how soon the four of us would be tested. The Highlands were as bad a place to be stationed as there was in Vietnam; but I felt as though I had been compensated for this by being placed with three very good men. This would prove to be truer than I could then imagine. So let the war begin and the countdown on my own time start, and let God have mercy on us all.

The next morning we formed up and headed out into the jungle. There were four columns disappearing into a dark and deep green maze: New York, Wisconsin, California and Michigan. Who would have ever dreamed that four people of such different backgrounds, dreams and ambitions would end up there together? We were half a world away from everything we knew, marching through a jungle, strangers in a strange land. Alone, together. The heat was on and we would find out it always was. You had to learn to deal with it. The weight on your back was also something you had to get used to. As we moved through the jungle I was very aware of how exposed we were. If they're out here waiting for us, they're

going to get first blood, that's for sure. Leaving the firebase would always be a downer, but especially that first time out. In my mind there was an NVA behind every tree and bush. I'm sure there was nothing but adrenalin in my veins. My eyes, like saucers, were wide open as I tried to see through the jungle. I really missed the firebase and having all that artillery around. I quickly found out the bugs, and fleas, and ants were always at you. On this first morning we were attacked viciously by the insects of Vietnam. Many of us began to wear towels around our necks to help keep the bastards off. We had insect repellent but it never seemed to do much for me. As the day wore on and my back began to ache from the weight, and numerous insect bites began to swell and itch, the monotony of the jungle began to take over. One foot in front of the other, up the hill, down the hill. I began imagining Sergeant Clark was calling cadence and I fell into an almost hypnotic state.

As noonday approached I was feeling very tired. I told John that I hoped we'd stop soon. I was beat. I had just said this and was turning aside when John tackled me, knocking me five yards sideways. A second later the whole jungle lit up. The sound was deafening. I could see tracer rounds going over me very close. I stayed low to the ground and I found some cover. I could hear people screaming and I was looking at John to see what to do. He motioned for me to stay put and seemed rather calm. This helped me a lot since I was too scared to breathe for a while. As we crawled to our right we saw some movement on our flank. John and I started firing and Ron and Dave soon joined in. I must have fired a hundred rounds before things calmed down. It all happened so fast. I was stunned. Whatever and whoever it was, we seemed to have gotten it under control rather

fast. I went for a walk after things settled down and saw some wounded and dead GI's. I guess that's why I went for the walk, but I was not prepared for what I saw. The wounds were very different from what I had expected. They were unusually large and very gruesome. I remembered all the old John Wayne movies where a bullet grazes you and there's a trickle of blood. A shrug of the shoulders, a set of the jaw and that was it. But I saw huge chunks of flesh removed from arms and legs. There were guys with deep gut wounds and gaping holes, squirming and screaming in pain. Bullets had entered the body and erupted out. Large masses of flesh gone; blood and other fluids seeping, sometimes gushing out of these now deformed limbs. And those were the lucky ones. They were still alive and likely headed home. Vietnam, for them, was over. Nothing could have prepared me for this. Not even Sergeant Clark's hand incident. Now I could appreciate how small a thing that really was. I kept thinking, My God, what have I gotten into? The blood was so vividly red and there was so damn much of it. It had a faintly metallic, coppery smell to it. The pain these guys were in was great. I felt so helpless. How could I have been so naive? Is this what it's like? I'd been in the jungle three or four hours and already I knew what to expect. It was insane. Christ almighty, get me out of here! When I got back to our area we started to build a bunker. One of countless bunkers I would dig in Vietnam. We cut logs for the roof of the bunker and lined it with sand bags. We cut fields of fire for maybe thirty meters out. Some guys were cutting an LZ (landing zone) to get the wounded and dead out. Once that was finished we settled down with some C-rations and I realized my left side was sore. Then I remembered John tackling me from the side and it finally hit me that John may have saved my life. I looked over at him and he looked up and smiled.

“John, thanks for knocking me out of the way.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“Buy me a beer next R&R,” he said.

“What tipped you off?” I asked. “Did you see something?”

Buckley joined the conversation and said, “Rob, he’s just like that. It’s the damndest thing but my advice is, if Sweeney says get down, don’t think twice, hit the deck.”

“What do you mean? John’s got ESP or something?” I asked.

Ron told the story. “We were in Tuy Hoa,” he began quietly, “We had orders to come up to the Highlands. We had heard about it and none of us were looking forward to it. The four of us went down to a local bar, one last chance to get drunk before we were shipped here. Jack Dechance was the guy you replaced. He had been with us through basic and the first few months in Nam. The four of us were the squad. Well, we were all sitting there slamming some beers and watching some topless Vietnamese dancers when Sweeney jumps up and says, ‘We’ve got to get out of here.’ I remember looking at Dave and we both shrugged and stood up. Jack said he wanted to stay. John asked him one more time to come with us, but he was enjoying the titty show and the beer too much. He said he’d meet us back at camp. We didn’t get fifty yards away when the bar blew up. Some Vietnamese kid riding a bike pedaled into the bar and tossed a bomb damn near onto the table where we’d been sitting. Jack and a dozen others were killed instantly. Forty five others were carried out and sent home. Jack was blown to bits, just like we’d have been if we’d stayed two more minutes. Whatever Sweeney says is gospel to me.”

I looked at John, who just shrugged.

Chapter Six

That night was very rough for me. I knew I was in deep shit and it wasn't going to get any better. John, Ron, Dave and I knew we had been fortunate not to be up front today or we'd have probably been hit. The whole story of John had me a little spooked. I thought that he subconsciously saw, or heard, or smelled something that tipped him off. He was a natural hunter and probably had keener faculties than even he realized. But that bar story was a bit unnerving and I hadn't really thought about who I had replaced or why. I wondered about Jack and what he may have been like. He was gone. Dead for a beer and a look at some tits. Jesus. I was chain smoking and had to try and calm down. It was not easy! No one could have ever told me what this experience was like. You had to be there. You had to see it, smell it, taste it, and hear it to believe it. I had, and I still didn't believe it! I cleaned my rifle and ate another box of C-rations but had trouble dismissing those grotesque flesh wounds. The choppers finally came in late and got our wounded and dead out. I was glad I didn't have to deal with any of that. I had second and sixth watch that night. As I lay there thinking about what had happened that day, I was happy to have gotten through it. My first combat. I was now a Combat Infantryman, but I knew that meant nothing. What would tomorrow bring? How long could we survive out there in that jungle? There were many questions but very few answers. All I knew was I had to be very careful about what I did and maybe, just maybe, I'd survive. I knew I would be sticking like glue to John. I didn't know if he had any special powers or not but he'd saved me that day. I fell asleep clutching that lucky coin I found on the dive trip with Bill Baker.

That seemed like years ago and it had taken place in a very different world. Right then I needed to rest; it had been a long, miserable day.

In the morning John told me I had done well yesterday

“Just keep doing the same thing and we’ll get through this all right.”

I sure hoped he was right. We emptied our sand bags and filled in the bunker and headed out into the jungle. It was six in the morning and maybe eighty degrees. We moved through the jungle as quietly as we could. The weight on my back was a constant reminder of how long the day would be. Because of the heat, fatigue was always with us. It gnawed away at you, never leaving you. I remember times when we would stop for a moment and I’d lean against a tree and actually fall asleep for a few seconds before I knew what had happened. This was not good. More than once I was told to snap to. In a way the jungle was beautiful, so green and lush and pristine. The sounds of the monkeys and birds crying out lulled you into this jungle trance. Then there were times we’d hump through the elephant grass and vines, which often required chopping our way through. We were constantly on the look out for any signs that the NVA. had been around. About three or four o’clock we would stop and start setting up for the night. Dig the hole for the bunker, cut logs for the top of the bunker. Fill sand bags, usually about a hundred and fifty or so. Cut your fields of fire, set out claymores and trip flares. Then it would be time for a delicious box of C-rations. Perhaps it would be the ham and bean; or the always-tempting beans and franks. Sometimes, when we finished early and the sun was still up, we would heat the rations with some C-4 explosives. If we did this after dark, we might as well set up a neon sign flashing, “Americans here!” C-4 burns fast and very hot for a short period and it

was perfect for heating up C-rations. It would almost make the rations edible, but not quite. Twice a night you would pull an hour watch, and remember, no sleeping on watch. This was pretty much the routine with a few variables. Such as every third night or so going out on LP (listening post). Thirty or forty meters outside the perimeter, you would lie down on the ground and listen for the NVA. Any trouble and you radioed in. Three guys usually went on LP. It was always an adventure.

Five days had passed since the first encounter. I was starting to settle in but my hands were really a mess. The constant digging had taken its toll and I had blisters everywhere. I complained about it a bit but was told they would heal and I should just “suck it up” and keep digging. I thought my hands were ready for this since we had dug a lot at Fort Polk. But this was different, very different. This was the Central Highlands. It was either hard, red clay or rocky ground. It was always tough going in the Highlands, no matter what. Plus at Fort Polk we dug because we were ordered to. Here we dug for our lives. There’s a difference.

In the afternoon of my sixth day in the jungle we stopped early on a very high ridge overlooking a river. We must have been three hundred feet above the water. From the ridge it seemed like you could see forever. There was a wonderfully scented breeze. We tended to get a little claustrophobic in the jungle, everything on us all the time. It was great to be looking out for a change. I scanned the horizon for smoke, for birds suddenly flying up, for awkward movements, but the jungle was at peace. I felt the war was far, far away from this peaceful, beautiful spot. After we prepared the bunker and fields of fire I learned

that John, Ron and I would be going back down to the river to pull an LP and ambush combination. We would have a radio and a lot of ammo, but if anything happened down there, we were dead. We also had a starlight scope which allowed us to see in the dark. I thought this was our best advantage and it was kind of fun to look through the starlight scope. Just before dark we started down to the river. Knowing the three of us were going to be on our own down there made the scene a little more foreboding and I questioned the feelings of peace I had earlier. My fear and apprehension grew as my shadow lengthened. When we got to the river it was dusk but, despite my fears the river was quite beautiful and I suddenly felt good again. I quickly took a bunch of pictures. The water was warm and clean and I wanted to jump in like I did in the rivers back in Michigan. Instead I wandered out on some rocks and knelt down to wash myself. It was wonderful. It had only been five days, but I felt like I was washing five years of dirt off me. I took my time and relished the moment. Again I looked around and marveled at the beauty and peace. Vietnam, as a country, was beautiful and I could imagine my Dad would have liked it. It would have been nice to have been there with him and Phil, camping and fishing. It was tragic that we were violating this beautiful spot with war. I rinsed off and filled my canteens. Ron and John were setting up our LP. They had picked a good spot. It was a little above the river but with a commanding view. We spent a quiet and uneventful night there. Even if something had come along, I don't think any of us would have done anything. There was no way up that embankment in the dark and we would have been in a very awkward position. Although it was unspoken, I felt we had all agreed to just be quiet and be careful that night. We weren't about to ambush anyone.

On my watch I could see an incredible number of stars and the Milky Way looked like I could reach out and touch it. Again I was caught up in the majestic beauty of this place, the soft jungle night sounds. It wasn't threatening, at least not on this night. I listened to the low insect buzz and I was reminded a little of Houston and the Caribbean. The night was warm and cloudless and the war seemed far away. Since several days had passed, I sensed some cockiness returning to the company. After all, we were Americans, didn't we always win? Didn't we always fight on the side of right? I wondered, and I hoped our swagger didn't get us in trouble. I knew we were well armed and well trained but we were in the jungle. It was the NVA's home turf and that gave them some distinct advantages, in my mind. We had a lot of resources at our command, like air and artillery support, but fighting in the jungle was different than I had imagined and I didn't feel as secure as some did, even with the USA behind us. Still it was a beautiful night, with no hint of trouble. I began looking at the stars again and listening to those soft night sounds.

Chapter Seven

A few more days passed and all was quiet on this northwestern front, which meant things were great. The more mundane, the better it was in the Highlands. Up and down we went through the dark and eerie jungle. Looking, looking, always looking, but we didn't run into anything. Word had it we would head back to the firebase in one more week and I couldn't wait. My hands had turned black and ugly where my blisters were. At least they were not as sore. It was the little things that helped. As we approached another river we were told that a two-star General was coming out to us. He was the division commander and this was big news. We all wondered what the hell he would be doing there. What secret mission was he on? We speculated that he was going to give us some critical orders. Ron pulled me aside and very seriously told me not to volunteer for anything.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Ron looked to both sides and said conspiratorially, "The General is here to put together a suicide mission, so don't volunteer for a damn thing. All right?"

This freaked the hell out of me. Ron and Dave Buckley were team leaders and knew stuff the rest of us didn't. I was damn glad Ron was looking out for me. I planned to stay as far away from the General as possible.

When we got to the river it was, again, a beautiful, garden-like setting. It was so striking, it didn't look real. I was stunned again by the sheer splendor of Vietnam. This river was larger than the other one, and it flowed a bit faster. Our platoon leader was in charge of the security for the General and gathered us

around for a pep talk. I was nervous. I was worried that if there weren't enough 'volunteers' some would be chosen. I didn't want that to happen. The platoon leader informed us that the General would be choppered in with his people and we would be securing the riverbanks while he went fishing! I looked at Ron and he grinned from ear to ear. He got me, the bastard. It's always the quiet ones. As the General's two choppers approached, we took our positions on the riverbank.

Our platoon leader 2nd Lt. Martin yelled out, "Here comes the General. Simulate excitement and happiness."

I laughed for ten minutes. What a hoot. It got even funnier when the General got out with his rod, reel, bait-box and vest full of lures. He had a hat that had even more lures on it. It was right out of "Field and Stream". As the general waded into the water, a muffled explosion went off just upstream. I hit the deck, but a guy next to me motioned me up.

"Grenade fishing" he said.

I didn't get it, so he explained that you take a grenade, pop the pin, count two or three seconds, and toss the grenade in the water. The delay keeps the grenade from getting to the bottom and stuns the fish. They float to the top and you just go gather them.

"Come on," he said and I followed him upstream.

After a few minutes I remembered who he was. It was Jim, who had first directed me to 2nd platoon. Jim was in 1st platoon and he and I talked for hours. We spent the rest of the afternoon kicking back. We both took the opportunity to wash off. We lay down on some rocks to dry and talked about home, the army, and what we were going to do when we got home. Jim had a fiancée, and he showed me her picture. He had two younger sisters who were damn cute. His

Dad owned two McDonald franchises and he was going to take over one of them. I guess there's more money in that than I had thought. He was from Green Bay, Wisconsin – actually a neighbor from across the lake. I told him I was in Nam on vacation to escape the Michigan winter, and he liked that.

The General fished for a few hours. Some of the fish from the grenade explosions had floated down past him, much to our delight. I don't think the General liked this too much but he didn't make a stink about it. He finally had enough, and our 'secret, security, suicide mission' ended. I was pleased when he flew away. The day had gone quite well. I was so relieved that Ron had been kidding me. I had a new friend in "C" company, whom I liked a lot. I smiled at myself again. Suicide mission – Jesus. I don't think the General was very pleased, and that made me oddly happy. Jungle fishing is over-rated, unless of course you use grenades.

Chapter Eight

As the days dragged on I wondered about many things, but mostly my survival. I wondered how long it would be till the next encounter, and of course I wondered what the hell I was doing there. I wished I had come to fish instead of to fight. Jim and I talked about these things and I had grown pretty close to him. The guys in my own squad seemed to have accepted me. I felt very good about that. Our 'team' was now a real team. I could feel it. Trust is the cornerstone of a good team and I knew I could trust these guys, especially John Sweeney. The days were very much the same but very physical. The weather was always hot and humid with some rain mixed in for variety. The same smelly clothes day in and day out. The same tired C-rations, with the same bugs and ants fighting you for it. Fear was always there, hunkered down on your back. And I wondered about this war. Why was I or any of us there? I remember John asking,

“Guess what day this is?”

“ I don't know,” I would say.

“It's Sunday!” he would answer, and I would be amazed.

The days were all alike and ran together. No news, no papers, no TV, no way of marking time, so it simply got away from you as day ran into day, ran into day. Then, when reminded, you would think about Sunday in the states, at home. Mom would be cooking a wonderful dinner. You might be at the lake with your friends or driving around town on a warm summer day, top down, without a care in the world. Then you'd be wondering if you'd ever see any of that again. You wondered why you didn't appreciate the magic of it when you were there living it.

Sometimes it was just too much to think about and you'd have to come back to the jungle. It was something you had to train your mind to deal with. Some counted days, others talked constantly of home. Still others just shut down and said nothing. I always worried about those guys. It was like they knew something bad was going to happen to them and there wasn't anything they could do about it. They just waited in silence; waited for the bullet. Combat does strange things to your mind and people handle it in different ways. I had confidence I would make it. I had Bill Baker's belief and John Sweeney's "Second Sight". I rubbed my lucky coin, my talisman. No, nothing was going to happen to me. Whatever helps to get you through, that's the way to deal with it. As the evening neared, we started to build another bunker. Yet another hole in the ground, another hundred and fifty sandbags, cut the fields of fire, and on, and on. Row, Row, Row your boat, life is but a dream. And this had to be a dream, a very, very bad dream.

For the past three nights Sweeney had been harder and harder to wake up for his watch. It had started out with him being awakened from what seemed to be a bad dream. The following night he began thrashing about for several minutes before I could get him to wake up. That night, when I tried, he began fighting me and I had to lie on him and put my hand over his mouth til he came out of it. I was thinking it would be better to just take his damn watch myself than go through this shit. He finally popped his eyes open and apologized.

"What the hell are you dreaming about John?" I asked.

He only shrugged, grabbed his gun and moved off silently into the darkness. It was spooky.

As another day started, we began to move out. I noticed John was on edge and I didn't like that at all. But several hours passed and everything seemed to

be okay. It was just another hot, humid, normal day. So typical that I was just drifting into that stupefied trance, when I suddenly saw John hit the deck. I dove to the ground just as the jungle exploded with heavy, automatic gunfire. It was 1st platoon and they were getting hit hard. We were on top of a ridge and quickly started to dig in. The ground was very rocky and I couldn't get the damn shovel to bite. No cover. I started cursing this rocky, open spot I found myself in. The rounds were flying over us, sounding like angry hornets on fire, and I was really starting to sweat. I could not dig in this ground. God help me. Please God help me get through this rocky ground. I remember pushing anything I could around me to try and get some cover. I saw rounds hitting the ground in front of us. John and I glanced at each other. We both thought this might be it. Reflexively we started shooting in front of us even though the fire was coming from behind us. I would find it was often that way, total confusion and panic. I continued trying to dig. Shoot, try to dig. Shoot, try to dig. I thought we were going to eat it, for lack of cover. God, just let me get behind something, anything. There was a lot of firing and grenades going off. The CO called in the artillery. Immediately they laid in a hundred or so rounds that were very, very close to us. I kept hoping those artillery guys didn't fuck up the coordinates. Jesus, it was loud. The rounds were so close; the ground was shaking under us. One short or long round and we were history, part of the "Friendly Fire" statistics. Despite my fears, the artillery guys at the firebase did an impressive job and soon the NVA was on the run. We stood up and stretched, happy to be alive. I lit a cigarette. Jesus, that was too damn close. I sat down with Sweeney and we started hearing the news about "C" company. 1st Platoon had ten wounded and three dead. We went out into the jungle to mop up and found many dead NVA's. Some of the guys were kicking and cutting the dead

bodies. I didn't know what to make of all that, so I just watched in astonishment. Most of the bodies were torn up so badly, you couldn't tell where the arms and legs fit. The smell was ghastly. There's a weird difference between the smell of GI guts and Vietnamese guts. It was starkly different, owing to the diet. I saw some guys urinating on the dead NVA's. I remember feeling sad that men would be brought to that. In a short time I would understand things better.

We had to cut another LZ to get the wounded and the dead out. This took the rest of the afternoon. We formed our perimeter and started digging our bunker for the night. The digging was constant and unrelenting. My hands were now hardened though and there was a bright side, only eleven more months to go. I wondered about my friend Jim. I hoped he was okay, and went looking for him. It gave me another opportunity to see the carnage. This was a bit worse than the first time with many guys groaning in pain. The large open wounds were an open invitation to the flies and other pests. Many men were too injured to keep them off. The medics were busy giving shots of morphine and bandaging as best they could. I found Jim next to the second body bag waiting for the long ride home. In the bag was a guy in Jim's team, in fact his partner, his 'John Sweeney'. Tears were rolling down his cheeks and he was rocking back and forth. I tried to talk to him but he couldn't hear me. He was in a place of deep sorrow, far from there. He'd lost a partner, a brother, to this Goddamn war and it would take a long time, perhaps a lifetime, to deal with the loss.

That evening Ron, John and I reviewed the day. We had been very lucky to get through the day. I felt especially lucky to be paired with Sweeney and to have been watching him at just the right moment. I rubbed my lucky coin and said a

silent prayer of thanks. We had run into a large force of NVA's and the artillery had saved our lives. John had met Jim briefly so I told him that Jim's buddy was dead. "Shit," was all John said and looked down. Now they were killing people I knew, friends of friends, fellow Americans. Those dirty fucking gooks. I felt terrible for Jim, knowing how I'd feel if anything happened to anyone in my team, especially John. I hoped I wouldn't find myself pissing on any dead gooks but remembering Jim next to the body bag, I wasn't so sure anymore.

We had to be especially alert that night in case the NVA decided to return. I was beat. I had nearly lost my life. The day had completely drained me. It was the after effects of adrenaline and sorrow. It was very difficult not falling asleep on watch that night, but somehow I managed to stay awake. I was smoking more and more. It helped calm my nerves. I thought about those dead NVA's, those twisted, distorted and mangled bodies out in the jungle, that once beautiful jungle. We left the bodies for the flies and maggots, those NVA bodies that belonged to mothers and fathers in North Vietnam. I knew someone's Daddy was out there, a Daddy that would never return home. Why? For what? Someone tell me why. There must be a reason and if I could find out the reason, perhaps there would be some other way to resolve this. It was that nagging question, that unanswerable 'why' of war. I went to wake John up fearing the worst but he quietly popped up as soon as I grabbed his foot, happy as a lark.

Chapter Nine

In a few days, Buckley told us, we would be at the firebase. We were headed back that way now. In a few days we would put this all behind us. In a few days we would get hot chow. In a few days we wouldn't have to dig bunkers. Just a few short days to stay alive and all would be well at the firebase.

Three long days later we stepped out of the jungle and into firebase Agnes. I remember being scared flying to Vietnam. Once I arrived, Saigon wasn't so bad. I was scared on my way to Beinh Hoa, but again that was okay. I was scared on my way to Pleiku City and then to the Oasis. Firebase Agnes freaked me out but I was okay until we hit the God Damn jungle. That's where I found out what fear was all about. In the jungle I found the real meaning of Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness". Coming back to the firebase that had once scared me so badly, was like coming home. It was the end of round one and I was still standing. At the firebase the artillery was all around. It was damn comforting. I didn't appreciate it the first time, but having been out in the jungle with just my M-16, I felt immortal inside the perimeters of firebase Agnes. Even if the gooks tried a human wave assault, the artillery boys would lower their 105 howies and shoot right into them. The company settled in for at least three or four days' stay. That afternoon we got some hot chow. It's indescribable what a little heat does to food. It was the best stuff I had ever tasted. We also got clean fatigues and a clean set of socks. Clean socks, my God, what good fortune. It is amazing what joy can be had from such seemingly simple things. I was feeling very good after a wash up down at the water truck they had choppered in. Later we were assigned a perimeter bunker and we made ourselves at home. These were large, six man bunkers. Around

sunset, Ron and I decided to sleep on top of the bunker; John and Dave were going to sleep in the bunker. Ron and I liked the idea since it was very stuffy in the bunker. As night fell, Ron and I talked of home. He had been in college when the draft came calling but he had accepted it with pride. Ron was only a few years older than I, but he seemed much older to me. I always felt safe when he was around. He seemed to always know the right move. He seemed to be a natural soldier and just automatically did the right thing. He didn't have that "Second Sight" that Sweeney had, but if you just did what Ron did when the shit started flying, you'd be okay. We dozed off around eleven o'clock. An hour later someone started screaming, "Incoming!" Ron and I quickly got in the bunker while the NVA peppered the firebase with 60 mm and 80 mm mortar fire. This went on sporadically all night, with Ron and I getting out and ducking back in. We were in and out of the bunker all night long. Finally at about five o'clock in the morning there was a pause, and then there it went again.

Ron looked at me and said, " Fuck it, lets just stay here," and we did.

The shells came in all around us but we were safe. Ron had the secret of immortality and if I just stayed close to him nothing could touch me. Ron Brown was immortal, and I hoped it was catching. We got maybe two hours of sleep that night but were never probed by the NVA. The next day was an easy one and we were able to rest most of the day. Hallelujah! ETS minus another one!

The next few days passed uneventfully and it was a good time to recharge the batteries. We played cards, wrote letters, and generally relaxed. It was good duty at the firebase. All good things in the army must end, and too soon we were headed out into the jungle again for another round of hide and seek with the NVA – round two was starting. damn it.

As the days turned into weeks, I found myself getting used to the daily grind of jungle life but I was always tired. Tired from the constant movement, the never-ending digging, and there was always the heat. We rarely received fresh fatigues and few of us wore underclothing. Often, as men's fatigues ripped or tore in the jungle, their genitals or asses would be exposed. No one ever thought much of this, but I always found it strange to be talking to someone with their dick or balls hanging out. There were snakes, and lizards, and frogs and spiders, big spiders. Five days from the firebase I got bitten on the back of my hand by a spider. Within minutes, the back of my hand swelled up as big as a tennis ball. It scared the shit out of me. I ran to the corpsman and he gave me a shot of something. A few hours later the swelling was gone. I found myself hoping, along with everyone else, for that million-dollar injury that would get me out alive. As it was, the rate of survival was low. Some got malaria; others got jungle rot, a kind of infection that made a little sore a very big sore. Others just went nuts. I saw more than one man lose it. The jungle, combined with fear, was constant and unrelenting. And there was always that possibility, that horrible reality, that at any given second you could be shot. We all knew from experience what that looked like. It was a never-ending mind game not to let it get to you. You told yourself, I'm going to make it, even if everybody else gets shot. I'm going to make it through this. There's no way I'm going to get killed out here. Some days that thinking worked, and some days it didn't. You dealt with it one day at a time and counted down your 365 days. Sweeney was getting hard to wake up again and I didn't like that trend at all.

One night, as we were opening up our rations, I struck up a conversation with the M-60 machine gunner from our platoon. His name was Bobby Stoker and

we hit it off right away. He was very funny and he seemed to have an endless supply of funny songs.

“Well a pecker wood a pecking and the barks a flying, the old folks fucking and the little ones are crying.” All in a heavy Grubbs, Arkansas southern drawl.

He had signed up on the buddy program with his friend Jack Prince, who was in 2nd platoon with him. But that was about the only part of the program the army had lived up to. He and Jack were supposed to have been learning electronics and computers. How they were supposed to pick it up out there in the jungle was a mystery to them. Bobby, Jack, Sweeney and I stayed up talking for a long time that night. Meeting someone I liked was refreshing, and I always pepper new people I meet with a thousand questions. Sweeney would roll his eyes as I asked question after question of my new friends. My buddy Jim sat with us for a while, but he wandered off before long. He had never quite recovered from his buddy's death, and I made a mental note to try and talk to him more. I worried that if we saw action again soon, he wouldn't be 100% and you needed that.

Chapter Ten

February 16, 1967 would be a day I would spend the rest of my life trying to forget. This day changed us forever. The day started out as they all did, hot, humid with a sense of fear. That small, nagging fear had become so much a part of our life in the Highlands that it was just one more thing we woke up with. We went through our normal routine of packing, and we started our stroll through the jungle. The call came in at noon. It was "A" Company and they were getting badly hit. We could hear the gunfire and screams on the radio. They were taking heavy losses and needed help now. They were about three or four clicks (kilometers) away. That can be a long way in the jungle when you often have to fight for every forward step you take. Our CO (Commanding Officer) had us move out in their direction. We went quickly but it still took most of the afternoon to get there. As we got closer, we could hear the small arms fire very clearly. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. We were close and we were going in. I tried to keep myself focused on the business of getting ready, and not on the possibility of dying. The loud cacophony of screams, guns, grenades and the general upheaval of the jungle was very near. This sounded very bad and worsened, as we got closer. The fear I had been fighting rose in me gradually, like climbing up a large roller-coaster, the fear building with each click of the tram until you hit the peak and lurch over the top and start down in that heart-thumping free fall. I could smell the gun smoke and stench of the dead. It was almost time.

We were as quiet and as careful as we could be, coming up into it, but it was of little use. They knew we were coming and had been waiting for us. My heart was hammering out of my chest, and every sense was on high alert. Our

front columns had stalled. They were suddenly unsure, sensing an immediate danger that couldn't be seen. Surprisingly, our captain, Colin McManus, had come up to the front to see what was holding us up. What he was doing there was a big question in my mind. We were stalled because it seemed like, smelled like, felt like we were walking into an ambush. We were all looking around, waiting. The tension was damn near unbearable. I could hear my own breathing – short and somewhat raspy. I looked over and saw that Sweeney had stopped cold and that was good enough for me. If President Johnson had personally ordered me to advance, I wouldn't have moved till Sweeney did. McManus was damn near on point, wearing brand new fatigues you could spot a mile away. He had a map open and was talking to one of his lieutenants and gesturing off to his right. Out of the corner of my eye I saw John dive behind a tree and I was right behind him. The NVA opened up with a deadly volley of automatic fire right into the heart of us. John and I were both on the ground a split second before the volley tore through the jungle. I looked up into the tree I was laying behind, and watched it get shredded. Leaves, twigs, branches, insects, and whatever else was in the tree, came raining down on me. I was buried in about three seconds. I was thinking of just lying under all the debris and waiting things out. I was completely covered. It wouldn't slow a bullet down but I was damn near invisible. I focused on getting my breathing under control. My hands were shaking badly, along with the rest of me. I knew some of us were already dead. This was heavy fire. They wanted us bad! I brushed some of the foliage from my head, spitting out a leaf, and looked over at John. He motioned for me to stay down. Don't worry about that John! As the fire lessened, John, Ron and I started to move forward. Buckley was around somewhere nearby but I couldn't see him. It was just the three of us in

that hot, green jungle of death, slowly, cautiously moving forward and into it. God help us. We heard the AK-47s and SKS's; the shit hammer was coming down - on us! I thought of "A" Company living through this for most of the day. My heart was still hammering. I felt like it was actually moving my fatigues, it was so strong. John, Ron and I started firing back on full auto and we managed to turn it into a bit of a standoff. We moved up enough to see that Captain McManus was hit very badly. A medic was attending him while another man covered them. He was firing wildly trying to keep the gooks off them. Unfortunately they were in a small, rather open area and needed to move. I couldn't tell if Captain McManus was even able to make a run for it. I would never know. I saw some movement in the trees and knew the NVA were climbing up to get an angle of fire. I shot into the tree where I saw the movement. As I watched, the open area was suddenly peppered with fire.

"MOVE! RUN, GOD DAMN IT, THEY'RE IN THE TREES!" I yelled and ducked back behind a tree. It was useless. By the time I finished screaming they had all been hit. It looked like Captain McManus had taken at least three shots in the chest. I saw large puffs of blood exploding out of his back as he was hit. I was quite sure he was dead. All of us shot into the trees and threw grenades. We provided as much cover as we could. It wasn't enough. We couldn't get the gooks to fall back. They were holding their positions. I could see a little movement from the other two men with McManus although it appeared they were seriously wounded. I squatted behind a large tree and did a quick check. I found out I had used almost half my ammo. I began worrying about how long this was going to last and flipped off the auto to conserve rounds. From behind us I heard the sound of men moving up and into position. From behind me, to the left, I saw

Bobby Stoker, the guy from Arkansas whom I had met the other night, and his buddy Jack Prince. They were moving up quickly but carefully. Bobby had a strange, intense look on his face. I saw he and Jack were headed for the clearing and I gave them some supporting fire. I yelled over to Bobby, "THE TREES BOBBY – WATCH OUT!" He nodded without really looking over. He and Jack crashed into the clearing and he started unloading with that wonderful M-60 machine gun. The sound was deafening. I thought I could feel the ground shaking. It was the first time I had seen Bobby in action. I was glad he was on our side. He was spraying the trees like a fireman dousing a fire. Tracers went out almost like a beam of light cutting through the jungle. Leaves, branches, vines, debris was exploding under Bobby's barrage. I started cheering uncontrollably, and flipped my gun back to auto. I started firing for all it was worth. Bobby was unloading on these motherfuckers and in a few seconds he accomplished what the rest of us couldn't. The gooks were on the run and running fast. There is no other word for it - it was magnificent. I could feel the pounding in my heart ease off a bit. Now I began to feel that we were going to get "A" Company out of this hellhole. There was some broken return fire at first but it didn't faze Bobby. He was shooting from his knees while Jack fed him ammo. He was firing right over the wounded men and the corpse of captain McManus. He was a guardian angel who had arrived too late for McManus but who would save the other two. The M-60 machine gun is an awesome weapon in the right hands. There were never two better hands than the ones that belonged to my friend Bobby. He was rooted in that opening, raining destruction and fear on the gooks. He didn't seem to be aware of his own danger. The sound reverberated through the jungle. You couldn't hear anything else. Besides saving the medic and the guy providing cover, he may well have saved the

three of us. I will never forget that sight. Bobby on his knees, in that opening, fire spewing from the throat of that glorious gun. Thank God for us that he and Jack were there instead of in electronic school as promised by the Army. We needed them that day, and it wouldn't be the last time Bobby would come to my rescue.

He finally took his finger off the trigger and as the echoes died down we realized it was over. My ears were ringing and it would take several minutes before I could hear again. The little fuckers had tucked their tails between their legs and *De De Mawed* (hurried) away. They disappeared into the jungle like ghosts. Vanished. If it weren't for the smell, blood, and body parts, we might have convinced ourselves it had been a dream. We had taken some heavy casualties in our effort to relieve "A" Company. Captain McManus was our biggest loss.

We began to move up on "A" Company's position. I felt good about driving off the gooks and was hopeful we'd meet our buddies. As we came into the battlefield all my hopes evaporated. As the enormity of the loss struck me, I went into shock. I was walking underwater. I couldn't breathe. Everything changed to slow motion. I watched myself turn my head to take in the carnage. It was gruesome, but hypnotizing. You couldn't look away. I just kept turning around, open-mouthed, surveying the slaughter of "A" Company. There were bodies piled on bodies but no real perimeter. We had been drilled on this very hard. The first move in an ambush is to "Circle the Wagons," or make a perimeter that you can defend. This is critical. With a known perimeter you can call in artillery from the firebase. No perimeter zone, no artillery. You're on your own. "A" Company never had time for this, or they were so caught off guard and disoriented that they could never team to make a perimeter. That meant very bad fighting conditions and almost assured annihilation, depending on the size of the NVA troops. I had never

seen anything like this before. Bodies and body parts were strewn out over the jungle. I saw an arm dangling from a tree but no body even near it. I saw a foot lying beside a flower shoot. It was a massacre. I kept turning around and around. How could this happen? Jesus, how could this happen? Where was I? This could not be real. It could NOT be real. I could hear my breathing again as if from a long distance, like my dive trip with Bill Baker. I tried concentrating on my breathing – breathe in and hold, exhale. I was breathing through my mouth to try and keep the stench out of my nostrils. I felt a heavy weight on my chest and it hurt to simply breathe. It hurt to see. I felt old. I was finally jarred out of this by our platoon leader. He told us to gather up everything we could and pull it into the new perimeter. I was wandering around in a daze, still in shock and denial. When you see detached legs, feet, and limbless torsos, it is horrifying, yet in a way numbing. I think your brain shuts down so you don't go mad. I found that even breathing through my mouth, the smells were amazingly powerful – gunpowder mixed with blood and intestines, shit and piss. Smells I had never smelled before and some I hoped I would never smell again. Breathe Rob, just breathe I told myself – you'll get through this. But there was no escaping those horrible, acrid smells from hell. Breathe, damn it, breathe. That's where we were, Hell. Hell in the Highlands and I had had all I would ever want of it. I felt the bile in my throat and I fought hard not to throw up, but lost that fight. It was too much to take in. I leaned against a tree and lost it several times.

The platoon leaders kept after us about the perimeter and I finally came out of it and began pulling what little was left back toward our perimeter. There wasn't much, but I grabbed everything I could to put off picking up the dead. But

at last there was no escaping that duty. I approached a young, naked soldier propped up against a tree. I noticed he had bandages on him. He had apparently been shot after, or while his first wound was being dressed. He had been shot many times and had a horrible, empty look. I discovered that the human body has a caved-in, crumpled look when it has been drained of blood. I knelt down next to him and stared into eyes that didn't see me. I stared into those lifeless, doll eyes for a long time, hoping, I guess, to see some flicker of life. But there was none. I reached over and closed his eyes, shutting out the world for the very last time. Hopefully shutting out those last, terrifying, painful moments. His hair was matted with blood and most of his face was gone. They had taken all his clothes and scattered his things all around him. A great sadness for this boy came upon me suddenly. Why did he have to die? What were we doing here? Why do good decent boys have to be mutilated like this? His lips were pulled back from his teeth and he already looked like a skeleton. This poor young boy was lying nude, full of holes, in the jungle. I was overwhelmed with pity. This poor boy who had died so young, so scared, and so painfully, in this God forsaken jungle, deserved something, I just didn't know what. My tears were the only thing I had to give. I knew this was terribly, irreversibly wrong. I started shaking and crying, unable to control my reaction to the enormity of it all. I had seen dead bodies before but this one got to me. He somehow brought home the horror and senselessness of it all. I cried and couldn't stop for a long time. Finally, slowly, getting a little control of myself I tried to pick him up. His head rolled around and as I threw him over my shoulders I saw a massive softball size hole above his left ear and his brain fell out onto my boot. I froze. As a final 'thank you' the gooks had shot him in the head to send us a message. It works even though you know they do it for effect.

Knowing it doesn't help you not react to the cruelty of it. I didn't know what to do. I looked down at that brain on my foot and thought about the life it had contained. In that mass of goop was the memory of a mother's kiss and a father's praise. In there somewhere was the memory of his first day of school, tying shoelaces, playing football, baseball and lazy summer days. There were memories of Sunday dinners and apple pies. Inside was the memory of his first kiss, his first love, and his first broken heart. I looked down at the small wad of tissue on my boot and thought it looked too small to hold so much life in it. A whole life – the good, the bad, the joys and the sorrows were oozing off the side of my dirty boot. I looked down, tears welling up again. I kept asking myself, "What am I doing here? What am I doing here?" It was almost dark and I had to get him into the perimeter. I didn't want to, but self-preservation took over and I flicked the brain off my boot. I left it where it fell, not knowing what else to do. There was no time to bury it and I couldn't put it back in his head, so in the end, I left it, God help me. I carried him up to the LZ, and put him down with many other bodies, most of "A" Company. I walked back to where we were setting up. I felt completely numb. I dug the hole for the bunker and filled the sand bags while John cut logs and Dave cut fields of fire. Ron helped me with the bunker. We were all on autopilot. The army had trained us well. There were so many wounded and dead from the two companies that it took many chopper trips to get them all. But we finally did get them all out, all but us. We were left for the next massacre.

We were quiet that night until John asked, "What the hell was this all about? This fucking acre of land? Did we win here? We lost so many men over this fucking piece of jungle and we don't even want it. We'll be marching away from here tomorrow. It's not like we took the hill. It's not like we advanced the

DMZ [Demilitarized Zone.] It's not like we won the damn war. We just ran into the other side and a whole lot of people died and now we're moving on. I don't get it. I don't get it." He looked up pleadingly, "God help me understand."

John is normally quiet so this outburst caught us all off-guard. He was right. There was no victory there just continued life for the survivors. We hadn't saved America or stopped Communism. We were just alive but too tired and too stunned to fully appreciate that fact. We were alive, but February 16, 1967 changed all of us profoundly. Now we knew the realities. We could be overrun. There was something about coming from America that made us believe we could never lose. Oh, we might lose a few guys here and there, but lose a battle? No fucking way. Well, we could lose. In this jungle, with no artillery or air support, those bastards were as good as us, maybe better. They could overrun us, and the thought of that horrified me. I saw the twisted face of that Unknown Soldier and I shuddered. I knew what those little fuckers would do if they did overrun us. I had seen that poor bastard and I knew. Suddenly peeing on the bodies didn't seem so outrageous. When I thought of that dead boy, it made a lot of sense. I was unable to sleep very much that night, even though I was completely drained. I felt the demons were very close. I kept thinking of all those unknown, dead GI's and I kept wondering how all this had happened. We lost our CO. He had been a fine man and soldier. We would have to do without a CO for a while. We were in desperate need of ammo, C-rations, water, and lots of other supplies. I prayed that the gooks didn't know about the ammo shortage. I nodded off in fits from time to time. The dawn came up, surprisingly, as if it were just another day.

We had seen the worst of it and I couldn't believe it had happened. "A" Company was gone. Gone. This was the kind of thing you read about, and you

shook your head over but you knew it doesn't happen, does it? That morning I spoke to John about the soldier I had carried in. I told him I couldn't get that guy out of my mind. I was really spooked and terrified of being overrun. I was shaking as I spoke. John had recovered from his outburst of last night and was his old, calm, reassuring self.

"Let's give it a few days, Rob," was all he said.

I knew he meant that I should not think too much about what had happened. I must have still looked scared. He looked me square in the eyes and said this was not going to happen to us.

"One thing's gonna happen, Rob; you and me are making it through this. We are gonna make it outta Nam. I know it. I know it, man." He put his hand on my shoulder and shook me a bit as he spoke. It felt good to hear him say it. I believed in John Sweeney. I trusted his insight with my life. It had already saved me several times. He was my best friend. He would surely get me through this alive. But I still knew they were out there - out there waiting for us, those dirty little fuckers.

In the late morning we saddled up and headed out into that mist-covered dark, and eerie jungle. It was a new day and I was a different man. I was a scared and nervous man. How long would it be until the next ambush? How long before the next horror show?

You could only wonder, and worry about such things. It would come when it came. You just had to live with that uncertainty. It was not easy. I'm glad I didn't know what was ahead. Anyway, it was another long, hot day in the jungle, thankfully without incident.

Chapter Eleven

Although the next few days were uneventful, edginess had settled in over the company. No one was talking, but we were all thinking of the ambush. In one sense we were grateful that “C” Company had taken such small losses. Considering we had walked into an ambush, we had been very fortunate. But most of us couldn’t shed the loss of “A” Company. Most of us had lost several friends. It preoccupied us. It haunted us. There was a sense of dread that stalked us through the jungle. It was tracking us step by step. It was a darkness that brought fear and anxiety to the company. We weren’t the same confident, bragging, boisterous group that had swaggered through the jungle. We knew the score, and we were being ever more cautious and careful as we ventured through this strange and forbidding land.

March 1, 1967 was a morning like any other. We got going about six am. We were becoming slightly settled again, thanks to the monotony of the Highlands. Boredom is an amazing balm. Days of no encounters had reassured us that perhaps we were going to be okay after all. Perhaps the whole thing had been some horrible dream. The pain of it all slipped away as pain does. At about 11:30 am, Sergeant Sabana approached me and asked how it was going. Before I could get a word out, all hell broke loose. Fire was coming from several different directions. I hit the ground trying to sort the sounds out. Sergeant Sabana and I quickly found cover behind a very large, fallen tree. As the ambush began to heat up and the fire became more intense, the sarge and I smiled at each other. I was holding my lucky coin. We seemed to have found a nice, safe spot behind the tree. We fired a little into the trees to provide support, but mostly we laid low. Suddenly

and surprisingly, Sergeant Sabana grabbed at his crotch and began screaming in pain. At first I didn't understand what was going on. Had he been shot? Where was the blood? Something was very wrong but I didn't know what it was. I thought maybe a bug had bitten him. As a last resort I grabbed his hands and pulled them away. Then I saw it. Sabana had been shot high on the inside of his left leg, around his crotch. I ripped his pants open and I saw a huge hole where the flesh had been torn away by the bullet. When I saw the wound, I couldn't understand why it hadn't been bleeding more. As if in response to my thoughts, the blood started gushing out all over me. I tried to stop the bleeding by pressure on it, but I couldn't stop it. I tended to the wound as best I could, and I screamed for a medic. I couldn't put a tourniquet on his leg because the wound was too high on his inner thigh. A few moments earlier we had been safe and happy behind that tree, then things started going downhill fast. I glance up at sarge, and I saw his eyes rolling back in his head. He started to go limp.

“Hang on Sabana, hang on damn it! MEDIC!!!” I screamed.

After what seemed like hours, a medic finally crawled up to us. He started working on Sabana, and I wiped my hands on my fatigues, grabbed my rifle and started firing into the trees. We were in a very dense area of the jungle and I could not see more than four or five meters in any direction. I'll never know, but there's a good chance that Sabana was shot by one of our own. Friendly fire, as it's called. Finally the fire eased and we got the area secured. Sabana was choppered out, and as far as I know, he survived. His blood was flaking off me for days. I could not understand why I hadn't been shot also. We were side by side when he was hit. Just lucky, I guess. It was a very intense, but short-lived ambush. We had only suffered light casualties from the engagement. John told me later that I had

been very fortunate not to have been hit. I already knew that, but I nodded in agreement. It was one of the very few times we saw action when John and I weren't together. I was going to stick to him like glue from now on.

Despite John's assurances, I felt as though it was only a matter of time before I got shot. I knew that we were going to see a lot more action and in this jungle it seemed as though there was no escaping the final outcome. More and more I could feel my body weakening from the daily ritual. If I could have gotten some sleep at night, it would have helped so much. But pulling those two watches just didn't allow one to get a good night's sleep. I never slept well on LP, it was just too dangerous. I must have been down to about 170lbs, and at 6' 5" I looked like a bean pole. I had lost my appetite as well. John and I had become very close by then, and he could tell I was losing it. He encouraged me to eat, even giving me his fruit rations, which he knew I enjoyed. He took my watch a couple of nights and with the extra sleep I began to feel a bit better. John was about 5' 10" and strong as an ox. Rarely did I hear him complain about our situation. In fact, there was only one time, the night of February 16, when he had his little outburst. He was a man you knew would be there when the chips went down. John had a great sense of humor and was always there with a smile and a word of encouragement. If I was digging a bunker John would always be there to spell me. Whatever it was, John would be there for me. I began to trust in that and it was a great comfort. Whatever happened, John and I were going out together

A few days later it was John, Ron and I on listening post. I hated LP, but you had to do it. We went out at dusk and set up about thirty or forty meters outside the perimeter. We set up our claymores and found a spot we felt would give us an edge. We picked our watch rotation and got ready for the night. Every

hour we radioed in a situation report to the CP (Command Post), "Sit Rep [Situation Report] negative," or the dreaded, "We have contact." I had first watch and everything went well, meaning everything was quiet. Then I had to wake John for his watch. Waking John was starting to be a problem again, which meant he was beginning to have his dreams again. John was a very heavy sleeper and when agitated he would swing his arms and kick wildly before he awoke. It was a real chore to get him up on watch that night and it gave me the creeps. As he sat up I asked, "Bad dream?" He just nodded. I gave him the radio and made sure he was awake, and then I went to sleep quickly, trying not to let John's premonition dream keep me awake. It was very warm that night and soon John was waking me up to tell me that there was contact. John called in and told the CP we had contact and we would be coming in. The CP radioed back and gave us the okay. Ron said I should set off the claymores at his nudge and John and I would follow Ron into the perimeter some forty meters away. I took a few long breaths to steady my nerves. I had three hand igniters ready to go when Ron gave me the signal. When he did, and I set off the claymores, the flash blinded me. Shit, why did I look into it? My night vision was gone. I reached out for John or Ron but they were gone. They had assumed I was right behind them. I was blind, alone, and also defenseless, since Ron and John were carrying my gear for me. I could hear jungle sounds all around me, and the sound of movement through the bushes. I hit the deck and started low crawling. I prayed I was crawling toward our perimeter. It was slow going and it took me about ten minutes to reach the Company. By then the effect of the claymores was beginning to wear off, but I still wasn't sure where I was and I had no weapon. Unsure about what to do next, I tripped a flare and everything lit up. I jumped up and started screaming,

“Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!”

Fortunately, the guys yelled for me to come in, and I quickly dove into the bunkers. I was scratched up pretty badly but I was more scared than anything else. I found Ron and John. I told them what had happened and they were very apologetic about the way things had gone. John bear-hugged me.

During the next forty five minutes, artillery fell all around us. It amazed me that they could be so accurate with their fire missions. It was four in the morning and I was happy to be safe and inside the perimeter. I felt like I had been given another chance to live after getting back to safety. We were all very tired after this event and figured we would sleep for a few hours inside the perimeter before dawn arrived. That was when word came down that the CO wanted us to return to the LP site. I couldn’t believe it; we had to go back out there? Shit, fuck! I felt like refusing, but I knew we had to go. I was so pissed. Why go back out there? What the fuck will that prove? God damn it, I hate this shit. In a few hours we’re moving out anyway! Why? Why? Why?

We went back out but we only went a few meters into the brush and laid down. Fuck it man that was insane! I didn’t sleep at all. I was wide-awake from fear and anger. I felt relieved that we didn’t go all the way back to the original LP.

Crazy shit just to keep things interesting. Like we needed things to be more interesting. I stink, and my ass is sore and I’ve got cuts and scrapes all over my body and I think I’ve had enough of this shit. This whole thing sucks. Stop it Rob, I tell myself. Stop whining. You’re here. You’re stuck. Okay, I’ve vented a little bit and now I feel better. So lets get going and have a wonderful day in the jungle. Lets just make the best of a very bad situation and keep on keeping on. Shit! I need

a break very badly. In the morning we came back in and got our things together and moved out.

Chapter Twelve

March 14, 1967 began like any other day and we were blissfully unaware of the horror that awaited us. Six o'clock and we were on the hump through the long and winding road. It was the standard hot, humid, steamy morning, although there was a faint but pleasant breeze, ever so slightly perfumed. I had slept well and felt rather good that morning. From that day on I would always be suspicious when I awoke in a good mood. Dave, Ron, John and I were on point that day and that did make things a little different. If anything happened, it was going to happen to us first. But it was a pleasant morning. What could happen? We started out well but were soon bogged down and we had to break out our machetes. We were doing a lot of cutting that morning, since the jungle was quite thick. I remember being in some tall elephant grass chopping away, cursing, more for amusement than from anger. It was about ten a.m., when the radio crackled to life. The news was bad. "A" Company had walked into another major ambush and was being slaughtered. As I heard the news I kept thinking about the last time we had come to their aide and how bad it had been. Even in the warmth of the jungle I shuddered.

Our orders were to go as quickly as possible to "A" Company's position and relieve them. We started chopping our way through the jungle and did not slow down for hours. I could not think of anything but those guys getting overrun and killed. Dave, Ron, John and I had left the main body of our Company far behind. We were driven by the horrifying images of our last rescue of "A" Company. We didn't speak, we just chopped, moving as quickly as if there was nothing in our

way. We were driven, focused on getting to “A” Company. After a few hours we began to hear the small arms fire and grenades. We knew that as we got close to “A” Company’s position the NVA. would be waiting. It was almost five o’clock by then, and we slowed down for the first time since receiving the call, realizing that we had forgotten to eat. Seven God Damn hours of chopping our way to “A” Company. Seven God Damn hours since we got the call. Seven God Damn hours to get to them. Seven God Damn hours of hell for “A” Company.

When we reached the outer position of the battle area, we pulled up to checkout the situation. We could hear the sounds of the battle, and it sounded bad. We radioed back to our new CO that we had arrived at the site and were awaiting further orders. The CO said to hang tight and wait for our Company to catch up. I don’t think the four of us could have gotten there any quicker. We found out later that we had covered almost two miles in those seven hours. That’s a long way in the jungle. It would have been pretty good time with no jungle and we had outdistanced the rest of our Company. All we could do now was wait. Hurry up and wait, the Army motto. Except that while we waited, brave boys were dying not far from us. We could already see a lot of bodies and equipment lying around ahead of us. We knew the gooks were up there waiting for us and I was very anxious about what was about to happen. John and I were looking at each other and we both knew this was going to be big. We went through our rifle and equipment checks. Ron and Dave were very tense and keyed up as we waited for the Company to catch up. Even after the hump through the jungle I felt good. I felt strong. Let’s go get these motherfuckers!

I tried to keep my cool but it was very difficult. I felt twitchy. We knew there were NVA’s everywhere and lots of them. The question was were they going to rush

us? Would they try and overrun us? We checked our ammo and grenades again and were as ready as we could be. Wait. Wait. Wait.

Finally after about half an hour the new CO showed up with his people. This included two RTO's (radio telephone operators), an artillery spotter, First Sergeant, and several other soldiers. He questioned us about the situation and we explained what we knew, which wasn't very much. After a few minutes the CO informed us that we were going to move out and that he would lead the way. We were astonished by this plan. He was taking the core of our Company into an extremely dangerous situation. He was in from the States, a career man, there to get his CIB - his Combat Infantry badge - at our expense. He did at least position himself in front, which was sort of brave except that he had no idea what to expect. All his experience had come from watching John Wayne movies. War was clean and the good guys never lost. He hadn't been with us the last time we came to "A" Company's rescue. He hadn't been there to hear the screams or to fill the body bags. But he was there now with some weird "Pickett's Charge" idea (Up the hill and into the guns boys.) We tried to suggest a safer plan of attack, a flanking move around the left side, but he knew better. There was nothing we could do but follow orders and watch the Captain lead us up the incline toward "A" Company's position. It was total insanity but his stupidity probably saved our team's lives, since he took over point. Why was the Captain doing this? Why was he taking point? He could get his CIB as easily from the rear. I guess he felt he wanted to earn it. What strange and utterly misguided nobility. I looked at John and he motioned for us to drift over to the left side. We were going to flank. Fuck him. Dave and Ron came up behind us shrugging their shoulders.

As we moved toward the left slowly, it didn't take long to find out that the Captain had made a big mistake. The jungle lit up with the sound and fury of an unbelievable volley of automatic gunfire for which there was little defense. John and I dropped down and hugged the ground as close as we could. I looked up and saw the CO cut down by three or four shots to his chest. I also saw three or four of his people cut down. We were on our own now. So much for the Captain's plan. Those fuckers had us down and were bringing it to us! We began to fire back but they seemed to be stronger than us. They had the high ground and their fire was more intense. I crawled by the CO and watched him struggling for his life. He was throwing his head back and forth, while a medic worked on him. There was blood all around him, a lot of blood. I could not believe the Captain had been hit so badly. As John and I crawled forward and toward the left, the fire remained intense. People were being hit and I was very worried that we weren't going to make it. So much for getting the motherfuckers; they were going to get us. And then the unthinkable happened - Dave Buckley came crawling by John and me, half his face shot off. It was horrible! I could see his jaw and teeth. His eyes were enormous. Dave went past us to get cover and attention. Even with his terrible wound, Dave still had the presence of mind to do the right thing and get to safety, wherever the hell that might be. We wanted to help Dave but at this point we needed to get some heavy fire going. John and I were firing away for all it was worth and then we began throwing grenades. It was total madness. We just kept firing.

The CO was dead and so were a lot of other people. John and Ron and I had worked our way around to the left and we were getting a pretty good crossfire on the gooks; but it was clearly not enough. We were in deep shit. John and I looked

at each other and knew this might be it. Then we heard it - Bobby Stoker's gun. It was the most beautiful sound in the world. It was a sound that brought an unspeakable joy. It was the sound of the tide turning. It was the sound of victory, at least a momentary victory. Bobby laid down a fire that was so intense and powerful I cannot describe it. He was the Cavalry. He was Audie Murphy. He was the best of the best. He was an unmovable force that had come to save us all. Bobby was about bravery, and courage. I wanted to cheer. Those fucking gooks never had a chance when Bobby began to unload! Leaves flew off the trees, branches exploded, it seemed like the forest was being leveled in front of our eyes. Soon we were moving forward up the slope. At the top we realized we had run off a force larger than our own, thanks to some great artillery, Bobby Stoker, and our own will to fight like hell. We were also very lucky.

It was almost dark when we moved up onto "A" Company's position. I would not have thought it possible, but it was worse than the last time. There were so many wounded and dead that I was tripping over bodies. As the evening progressed, we tried to get organized and bring some order to the chaos. This was very difficult since "A" Company had been so severely crushed. One of their platoons had been completely wiped out save four men who were badly wounded. It was bad, very, very bad.

The jungle was thick, but we could not blow the LZ at night, since it was very difficult to set up the fuses in the dark. But we needed to get the wounded out quickly or many would die. We radioed for a Chinook to hover over the area. They would have to lower a cable to pull the wounded out. This worked as well as could be expected but took most of the night. In the meantime men were screaming for their mothers, and they kept screaming all night long. These men

had severe gut wounds and other horrific wounds. Was it their fault they wanted their mother? I plugged my ears with my fingers but it was no use, you could still hear them scream. I found myself getting angry. Shut up, just shut up, for God's sake, please shut up.

I had been going hard since 6 in the morning. Had it only been a single day? We had busted our asses getting to "A" Company, engaged in a very serious firefight, and were now hauling the wounded out in a ghastly race against death.

I was dead on my feet. I hauled stretchers to the Chinook cables and went back for more. There seemed to be no end to the wounded. It was sometime after midnight when I finally stopped. The world went into slow motion and there I was, watching this strange scene. I knew that this was a pivotal event and that this scene, this moment, this horror would be seared into my brain forever. And strangely, I knew why. I knew that all my senses were being overrun by what was before me. My ears heard the screams of the wounded, still calling out for their mothers. My ears heard the background fire of the NVA. They were still out there taking shots at us from time to time. My ears heard the deep boom of the artillery keeping most of the bastards back. Most of all my ears heard the awesome rotor wash from the Chinook. The entire area was enveloped in that Chinook wind. A symphony of power was being played for me that night. I could feel that powerful wind on my face and hands. It was whipping my clothes around me. It was a hot, sticky, acrid-smelling fierce and unforgiving wind. I could smell the heat. I could smell the flares. I could smell the powder from the artillery that kept pounding the gooks. And I could smell the blood, a strange metallic almost coppery smell. And I could taste all of these in the back of my parched throat. My eyes could see only dimly, and everything was outlined in hell-red from the flares. The wind from the

Chinooks caused the flares that were being fired over us, to re-ignite and burn after they hit the ground. This created a macabre and eerie visual effect. Shadows danced around us, or were they ghosts? Yes, Hell had descended upon us and I was swallowed up in the horror and the death and the gore. Time had no meaning. I was beyond and above all of this somehow, watching from somewhere safe and yet feeling, smelling, tasting, the horrors of hell. I don't know how long I stood there. A shove from John got me moving again and I put the moment behind me, forgotten for the moment, knowing it would never really leave me.

It was three in the morning when my platoon sergeant told me to go out and cut logs for the bunker we were building. There were still NVA's in the area and I knew the danger I would be in. Moments before they had discovered an NVA soldier inside the perimeter and they had shot him. But there was no way out. I had to cut the logs. With my M-16 slung over my shoulder, I went looking for suitable trees, but I didn't get far. Somewhere out side the perimeter I stumbled and fell on top of a body. The body was shot up horribly and was completely mangled. As I pushed myself off the body I found that my hands were inside his chest cavity. Even after all I had been through, this sickened me. I could feel the bile rising in my throat. I just couldn't do this. Dear God, how much can I take? I found John and asked him to cut logs and let me dig the bunker, and thankfully he agreed. I numbly dug, not knowing if I was digging a bunker or a grave.

We never did sleep that night. Dawn found us still hauling bodies out by cable. The wind was still blowing and the stories began to filter down. "A" Company's Captain had stuck a live grenade under him after being severely wounded, in case the NVA found him and tried to take him alive. A few men had held off dozens of NVA only to be killed in the waning moments of the battle. There

were many dead NVA, but somehow it didn't matter. It just didn't matter. Winning and losing seemed the same. Day and night lost all meaning. Heaven and Hell seemed oddly linked. I was bewildered and numb. Did this happen? Am I still alive? I was sure it was going to be over soon for all of us. Dear God, let it be over.

The next morning John, Ron and I talked about Buckley. He was damn lucky to be alive. He was damn lucky to be going home. Shot in the jaw and horribly disfigured, it was a new definition of luck. Half your face is gone and everyone is envying you. It was strange but no stranger than anything else. We were finally supplied with rations, ammo and water, but what the hell – to me that only prolonged the misery. I thought we might get some relief and get sent back to the base camp but that never occurred to those in charge. We were the lucky ones, after all. I was going to miss Buckley. He was a damn fine soldier. It also seemed to me that his wound was the signal that our luck was starting to unravel in this Goddamn jungle. Buckley was good, damn good; in fact, he was one of the best. If he could take a hit, then any one of us could. I knew that already, but somehow we had been blessed – but the blessing was over. John was surprised I hadn't been hit. He and Ron both said they saw me out in the open with bullets kicking up the ground all around me. They thought I was gone for sure. I remember being there and rolling sideways under a tree. I wasn't thinking it was a reaction. I was a cat with eight lives gone. I remembered looking down after rolling behind that tree and seeing a grenade right next to me. I remember seeing my hand grab the damn thing and toss it while my mind was trying to figure out how long it had laid there. As I tossed it, I realized the pin had still been in it. No danger, but my reflexes weren't taking any chances. It's funny how you remember these things, these incidents of the battle. Not the whole thing, but the little

memory bites of what happened. Most of the battle is a blur but you remember these incidents with amazing clarity. I remember my M16 jamming and grabbing another one from a dead GI. You take what you need. But the one memory that stood out was the sight of Buckley. That was a damn ugly wound. Thinking about Dave made me think about "A" Company. It was very hard to think about what "A" Company had been through - twice. And to see many of your own Company killed is beyond comprehension. They had fought hard for their survival but we were up against a larger force. The men of "A" Company 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry, 4th Infantry Division deserved better. We all did. Once again we had 'won' but winning had less and less meaning – simply those who lived and those who didn't. Vietnam, communism, democracy, all blended into a bitter stew that was shared by NVA's and GI's alike. We were just there in that damn jungle and God help us when we met. At least for us it was a twelve month tour of duty and we, assuming we lived, could get the hell out of there. The NVA's had a life sentence out there. They stayed forever. They died trying to get us the hell out, while we had been wanting to leave the whole damn time. It was madness, pure madness.

After a few days had passed, we began to heal again. Numbness was slowly replaced with thoughts of possibly living through it – of seeing home again. Ron was developing a slight case of jungle rot. It had started in his leg. He had started limping slightly. I couldn't understand why he wasn't leaving. He could surely get choppered back to base and get that leg treated. He never talked about it and never complained, but he was starting to look frayed and I was very concerned for him. I hadn't realized it but we had been heading back to the firebase. On March 19 we walked out of the jungle and into the firebase. Thank God, I thought, thank

God. An hour later we were enjoying some hot food. Hot food! Is there anything better?

Chapter Thirteen

I began to feel better. It is amazing how a few good nights' sleep and several hot meals will bring you back. I knew in a profound way that I had been as disfigured by the firefight as Buckley – I just wasn't showing it. Not yet anyway. Still, life at the firebase was good. It felt safe. It was a lot safer than trampling around the Highlands waiting for the jungle to erupt at a moment's notice. If I could somehow get a transfer to the firebase and ride my time out, I was sure I could make it. I would look out into the jungle every day and imagine the day when we were ordered out and shudder in the 90-degree heat. How was I going to go back into that nightmare? Like a criminal on death row with a stayed execution date, I lived life as best I could at the firebase, knowing deep down that we would be returning to the jungle soon. We got some news in the camp that a show was coming to the base camp. Nancy Sinatra was coming to entertain the troops – at least the ones at the base camp. For some reason not many guys wanted to go. I kept egging John to come with me, but he'd just shake his head and tell me to go. Hell, I thought, I could use a little entertainment. How bad could it be to listen to "These boots are made for walking"? It sure beat the hell out of body bagging your buddies, didn't it? The big day came and I jumped into one of the big Hueys for the trip back to the base camp. I was excited and surprised that the chopper was only half full. Although we weren't expecting trouble, I reflexively sat on my helmet. In a chopper you're wounded from below. I remember looking down as we flew into the base camp. Damn, it was big. I had forgotten how big the place was. Forget the firebase, I wanted to spend the rest of my duty at the base camp.

It was huge. There were plenty of guys there. There were plenty of big guns. Fight the war from afar. That's the way to do it. "Firefight forty clicks to the north of these coordinates." Drop some shells on the spot and go have a beer. No bodies to clean up. No NVA gut smells to deal with. No screaming GI's to carry out. No brains falling on your boots. Just shoot into the air and go grab a beer. That's the way to fight nowadays. I found myself resenting and envying these base camp cowboys. They were just playing Army. God, I wished I could. I was wandering around remembering my first visit. I was drinking in the size of it all when I remembered the big show. I grabbed a PFC that was walking by and asked him where the show was. He looked at me and pointed a finger back over his shoulder,

"Past the mess tent. Called Titty Mountain. Can't miss it, man."

"Aren't you going?" I asked.

He smiled and said, "I got five bucks and I can get a real fuck for that. Why watch Nancy shake her ass, when I can get some real ass?"

Good question I thought, but what the hell, it was a free show and I imagined the whores would wait. Maybe he was hoping to avoid the rush? So I went past the mess tent and up Titty Mountain. As I walked in, my mouth dropped open. There were thousands of troops there to see Nancy. Most of the pricks would never see anything more than this base camp. Why had I been chosen for the shit work in the jungle? They wouldn't know anything about the real Goddamn war except what they read in Stars and Stripes. All they knew was coordinates and the radio screams of the dying. Maybe one of these bastards wanted to find out what the 'real' war was like and I could switch with him. I was wondering about this when a scream went up. Nancy Sinatra was on stage. She came out in a short, green mini-skirt. She had a low cut top on and must have

had something pushing her boobs up because they looked enormous. After a few months in the jungle 'sexy' doesn't begin to describe her. She yelled something about the base camp and how God Damn happy she was to be there. She launched into her first tune, the speakers up too high and the sound a bit tinny. I hardly heard anything. My ears were ringing. All I could think about was tearing that mini-skirt off her, grabbing two handfuls of that platinum blond hair and fucking the shit out of her. What had happened to that nice mid-western boy? I daydreamed she was singing to me and that we were at home, in our apartment somewhere, two young lovers. I had just returned from work and there she was, singing to me from the kitchen. She would slowly walk over disrobing and make love to me tenderly, on the couch, while singing softly in my ear – at least until her first orgasm. I imagined pawing those tits. My wife, Nancy, and I were doing unimaginable things in the bedroom with her being as daring as I. This daydream lasted for a few songs but presently I began to be disgusted by it all. Why did she have to show up, bringing back memories of what might have been? I was thinking of my life with Diane. Why was Nancy torturing us with dreams of what may never be? Good boys, brave boys, now lay dead, while Nancy shook her ass for us up on stage. I guess I can't blame her, I thought. She doesn't know. She thinks she's helping. Giving us a show and reminding us of home. It's torture for me. I have started to believe I will never see America again – assuming it ever existed. Have I been in this jungle my whole life? A great despair flooded over me and I left, walking back by the mess tent. I could hear the show but I couldn't see Nancy anymore. It was better for me that way. I wondered why, then it struck me. Sex. That great metaphysical experience. The end all and be all of a young male's life. An experience I had yet to experience. What would it be like to sleep

with Nancy, or with any woman for that matter? I didn't know. I only had a presumption of ecstasy. Heaven on earth. The greatest pleasure the world had to offer. Would I die without ever knowing it? I realized the reasons for my contempt, and I felt I knew why so many of the guys had not wanted to come. I wished I hadn't. It was too painful to be so blatantly reminded of what may never be yours. We were like eunuchs in a harem. We could look, but never touch, never feel, never love. "I just found me a brand new box of matches, yeah." Fuck you, Nancy. You're too damn pretty to be out here torturing us. You're all that we'll never have. Thanks for rubbing it in.

As we flew back to the firebase I tried to put it all behind me. Unless I stopped myself, pictures of Nancy and me, the beautiful newlyweds, would flood back. How I wanted to be out of there. Please just get me out.

When I rejoined the guys no one asked me how the show was. They must have seen my face and they knew not to ask. For several weeks, I dreamed about Nancy. Forever the woman of my dreams – in a tight, green mini-skirt with enormous breasts, she would bring me dinner and rub my back while I ate. She sang softly in my ear. Bitch.

A few more days at the firebase and most of the replacements had come in. We were not quite full strength, which would have been one hundred and ten men, but it was good having the replacements. Extra manpower was always good out in the jungle. Off we marched, back into the abyss. Goodbye Nancy, these boots are made for marching. We could have been so happy in a very different life.

Chapter Fourteen

As we got deeper and deeper into the jungle I kept a close eye on John and Ron. I knew how dependent I was on those guys. John had already saved my life a few times. It was our team – conspicuously lacking Buckley. I hoped he was okay. He should be. Bad wound, but not particularly life threatening. I imagined him in a clean, white, cool hospital with pretty nurses in short skirts. Live, Buckley, live. We were down a man, an important man, but the team lived on and I knew that the only possible way out was helping one another. We had been through some heavy firefights and had come out okay. We worked well together. We moved and thought as one, sensing the needs of the others. It was a communication that couldn't be explained. When the shit hit the fan we all instinctively knew what to do. I would never be closer to anyone than I was to Ron and especially to John. The days fell back into that dreamlike pattern. We dug. We chopped. We slept. We woke. We marched. We swatted. We sweat. We dug. It was April now, the cruelest month. We had mercifully had only minor skirmishes with the NVA. No firefights like we had been through in February and March. Thank God. Just let us ride this out and get us home. No more death. I'll live with the jungle, the heat, the calluses, anything. Just let us live through this, please God. We began hearing rumblings that we would be going back to the base camp for a few days. Rest. A real rest with no duty at all. I couldn't fully imagine it. The base camp! It was like being in your mother's arms. I prayed it was true. Hope was essential to us.

About mid-April we were out on LP, and one of the new guys was with us. He had been with us for over a month now but he was not doing well. He always

seemed agitated, eyes darting from side to side and he had a far away, panicked look about him, always grim about the mouth. We headed out at dusk, John, the new guy and me. We chose a fair spot forty or fifty meters outside the perimeter. John had the radio and I set out our claymores and settled in for a long night. We drew straws and I took the first watch. It was a beautiful night. Quiet and hot with the smell of jungle flowers wafting in from time to time. I listened intently, but mostly I watched the stars and thought about home. Finally my watch was over and I woke John to pull the second watch, anxious to get some sleep. I fell asleep quickly. I don't believe I was asleep for very long when a strange noise caught my attention and I woke up, alert for the source of the noise. Suddenly John dived over me and onto the new guy who had begun screaming and swinging his arms wildly. I immediately helped John. It was all we could do to pin the guy down. He had completely flipped out. He calmed down enough for us to radio in. John told them we needed to come in and he got the okay. We started in, but the new guy bolted and we had to tackle him. It took everything we had to wrestle him back to the base. Once we got back inside the perimeter, four other guys grabbed him. John and I rolled off him; we leaned our backs against a pair of trees; we were panting and sweating like pigs. They tied the guy up and gagged him. John and I were bushed from the fight. An elbow had caught John on the right cheek and I could see a bruise coming up. I was tired but alert for an attack since anyone nearby knew where we were now. It was a long night for me. In the morning the man was medivaced out and we never saw him again. I couldn't help thinking that he hadn't even seen any shit. We knew he had been on edge but it is a scary thing seeing someone actually go nuts. He suddenly just wasn't there anymore. His body was there but he was far, far away. He had been muttering to

himself in meaningless phrases. Suddenly looking out - seeing a ghost and screaming. It was better for us that he was gone. He would have quickly been killed in a fight, and we already had enough martyrs. It was the first taste of insanity, as a strange sense of foreboding, doom, and despair descended on "C" Company.

It was under this cloud of desperation that the self-mutilations began. It was painful to watch and seemed to signal that we had failed in some deep and profound way. Our platoon leader, a 2nd lieutenant, went out one afternoon to cut some logs, something he had never done before. He returned with a large, deep gash on his left arm. He was sent to the rear and we never saw him again. About midday we broke for lunch. I had just cracked the lid off my C-rations when I saw a young man take a 45 pistol and shoot himself in the upper thigh. Several of us tackled him. Shooting himself was bad enough, but he could have brought down a pack of NVA on the rest of us. He was a machine gunner like my friend Bobby. He was also sent to the rear. John and I talked about this weirdness that was suddenly upon us. No one was thinking clearly.

"John, I'm trying to get an R & R. If I get one, I won't come back," I confessed

John looked at me in his deep, probing way and slowly shook his head,

"I understand, Rob. We'll miss you. But I've been worried. We haven't spoken about it much, but we both know Ron and I are coming to the end of our time. Bad luck your coming in late like you did. That leaves you here with recruits for over three months. It's been worrying me how to leave you here alone in this mess."

I had been thinking about that a lot. Without Ron, and especially without John, I didn't hold out much hope. I looked at him closely,

“What do you think about all these guys wounding themselves?”

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and tapped them on his helmet, pulling one out and lighting it. He took a long drag and finally said, “It's one answer.”

That's all he said and the talk drifted back into the more familiar territory of life in New York and Michigan. “C” Company was holding its own against the enemy but we were crumbling from the inside. There was a cancer of despair that was to claim many, including one, whom I would not have imagined at the time. A few days later I watched a guy who had his best friend jump on his leg sideways and break it in two. I saw and heard the nauseating crack. God, it was ugly. There was something in the wind. Men were beginning to break. This was too much to endure. At night I laid on the jungle floor and prayed that God would deliver me. I didn't hear back. Does God penetrate into this heart of darkness? I thought. I feel completely alone. I again officially requested my R& R and hoped they would let me have it. If I could just get out of there, if I could just get out of that jungle, I would not come back. The thought of shooting myself is too much, I thought, but I'm not above desertion at this point. I've had enough. We've all done more than our share and seen too much. It is time to get out. We'll all be killed. I know it. I feel it deep inside myself. Perhaps that is what the others felt. If you know you're going to die, if you are absolutely convinced you are going to die, what options do you have? What obligations are there to die in a foreign land for a cause that is so murky? Do I sacrifice my life for this rotting jungle that America doesn't want anyway? But here we were, trapped. Someone must stop this madness but no one does.

I don't know how much longer I would have lasted. My spirit seemed at the point of breaking when word came down that we were going to be choppered out of the area to help build a new firebase. God replies! A few days later it became official. We were ordered to help build the new firebase just to the south of our present position. I would have crawled there. Thank you, Lord! Thank you! We're going to make it.

As we rode in on the Hueys, we could see the area was not as dense as the old firebase. We landed and enjoyed a peaceful lunch. I was breathing deeply and felt a dark shadow pass from me. This was good. I could make it. We were going to be all right now. We soon started building the large bunkers required for the firebase. We knew we would be there for a while. We were taking our time. Everyone's spirits were lifted. As we cleared the area of vegetation we got Montagnard villagers to help us. These were Vietnamese natives, like our American Indians and they were straight out of National Geographic magazine. They wore little or no clothing and were very friendly. I instinctively liked them. Surrounded by war, they went about their existence as best they could. As they went through their daily routines I found myself greatly admiring these people. They also had very powerful pot, which they freely shared with us. I never smoked it in the jungle because I wanted every sense I had, every minute. But here, away from the action, safe, I smoked and laughed and forgot. The Montagnards would work all day for soap or a candy bar or anything we would give them. Capitalism triumphs!

As the firebase began to take shape the artillery pieces began to arrive. Everything was brought in by helicopter. It was entertaining to watch the equipment hanging underneath the large Chinooks. They would set down their

loads with great skill and made it look easy. We had gas chain saws to cut the larger trees for the bunkers. There was a lot of activity and it helped make you forget the past for a while. I didn't mind the work at all. It felt good. I was thankful for this chance to get strong again. The jungle wore you down in many ways and the work helped restore us body and soul.

We began to take day patrols in the local area. We discovered a large Montagnard village nearby and they led us down to a beautiful river area that they used to wash and bathe themselves. The Montagnards had taken bamboo shoots and pushed them into an embankment. This had created a small dam. They also had layered bamboo down to walk on. It was very inviting. The whole setting was Eden like; there was no shyness or embarrassment. I couldn't help standing there and watching the Montagnards bathe. As I watched, Bobby Stoker stripped down and jumped in with a bar of soap and started washing some of the Montagnard children. It was beautiful and innocent. He was soon surrounded by children. Everyone was laughing and having a good time. Soap was something new. I took some pictures of the scene and started laughing myself at the sight of Bobby, in the middle of all the children. It all seemed so natural, and for some reason, funny. For a moment we were so damn far from the war. Bobby was a country boy and seemed to get along with those country folk. He was amazing. We gave the children candy and soap and shared what we had with them. As the children and adults finished, four or five of us got into the bathing area. The water came out of the ends of the bamboo shoots and was very refreshing. We spent a pleasant hour or so washing our clothes and ourselves. It was wonderful. As we headed back to the firebase I wondered about these strange and interesting people. We would return to this spot as often as we could over the next few weeks. I always felt a

great sense of peace and happiness there. It was a special spot. It felt great to be clean and washed, but more than that, it was an oasis from the war. A clean and pleasant, happy spot where fear and death were not allowed.

One night we were sent out to pull an ambush of sorts. It was to be two squads, about sixteen men. We all hated these lunatic missions. They made no sense at all. If we did ambush someone and there were more of them than us, we would all be dead. A typical ambush might find you a mile or two away from the perimeter, so if anything happened you were dead. Everyone was aware of how dangerous these ambushes were but orders were orders. At dusk we saddled up with extra ammo and claymores and off we went. We had a couple of young sergeants in the group who were 'leading' us. John told me we were all in for a surprise. When we got out of range of the firebase, I had an idea of what that might be. Sure enough, when we got to the tree line we walked another hundred meters or so and that was it. We all found a good spot and that was our ambush for the night. I was delighted and very relieved. It also made it clear to me that there was a general feeling that this whole thing had gone far enough. I slept like a baby that night and awoke with a smile. We came back in the next morning and pronounced the ambush a complete success!

Over the next few weeks most of the big artillery pieces arrived. There was still much to do and there was always hot chow. Life was good. That day our mail finally caught up to us. Mail! That was the best. My parents had written and so had my girlfriend. I savored every word on every page. I read each letter a dozen times. It was so good to hear of normal things. There was a world, a good world, beyond the jungle, beyond the present madness. It didn't matter what they said, just to hear about home was the important thing. Soon it was dark and we settled

in for a good night's sleep. I dreamed of home. Diane had replaced Nancy in the dream apartment.

We finally finished the bunker. It was beautiful. It was solid and secure with double rows of sand bags on top and huge, ten inch logs underneath. Six or seven men could stand and fire out of these bunkers. I wished I could be one of them. We were all proud of the job we'd done in building the base. With the firebase complete, it was time to move on. John and I talked deep into the night. We felt like that area would be easier to work in and our luck would be better there. The next morning we moved easily through the jungle and for a few days it did seem better, a little more open. But soon it began to look like the same thing we had been in before. It was as before, thick, overgrown, dense, an unforgiving jungle, with lots of hills and valleys. The terror quickly began to return, stalking us through the gloom as we marched deeper and deeper into the madness. That evening we built our bunker and set up for the night. I was pulling a two a.m. watch when the skies opened up with a torrential downpour. It rained heavily for hours. As I sat there behind the bunker, with my rifle tucked underneath my poncho, and the rain pouring down, I thought of home and how much I missed it. I thought about my family and how much I had to be grateful for. Although I was from a working class family we always had enough. My dad was a great believer in Christmas and birthdays and he and mom always made sure we enjoyed those times. There was so much love given by my parents and grandparents. I was lucky enough to have had a happy childhood. In the end, parents can't really give you much more than that. I thought of my four siblings and I felt grateful that God had picked me to endure this hell. He knew I was the strongest. He knew I would make it somehow. As the rain trickled down the back of my neck from a

hole in the poncho, I thought about Diane Oliver, my girlfriend, and her beautiful smile. She was a sweet and wonderful girl and I was lucky to have met her before I was drafted. Maybe she would marry me when I got home and we would have a whole bunch of kids. It would be wonderful. I thought about my older brother who had listened to my dad when the latter suggested he go into the Air Force. My brother spent four comfortable years in Seattle, Washington. Of course, he complained about the rain. Sitting there in the Vietnamese rain, I smiled. I thought about my life and what I wanted to do with that life. I wanted to travel and see everything good the world had to offer. I wanted to see islands and deserts. My life was just starting when all this happened. I had been an exchange student in high school and I had spent some time in Berlin, Germany. I was there when President Kennedy made his famous speech, "Ich Bin ein Berliner." I am a Berliner. That experience opened the world for me and I was very excited about the future. I got to see Holland and Belgium. I traveled through much of Germany and was fascinated. I even went to East Berlin and East Germany to see how little things had changed since WWII. East Berlin still had many buildings in a state of rubble and it was a dark and lifeless place under communism. Was that what we were fighting? That was Europe though, not some Third World country that knew nothing about communism or democracy. I had witnessed Communism. I had seen the damage. But we weren't saving South Vietnam from communism. This was a civil war. We were just there, in the way, resented by most. Why were we there? Why were 500,000 American men there trying to jam democracy down the throats of those backwoods people? Does one teach democracy at the point of a gun? These little men would fight and die to the last man. It was their country. It was their homeland. Our commanders had underestimated the enemy, the

people of Vietnam who were fighting for their home. I felt hopeless on that forlorn, wet night.

It was still raining when I awoke John for his watch. I was tired but shared a smoke with John and told him how much I wanted to go home. He looked at me, smoke curling out of his nostrils.

“I know, Rob. I understand. We are going to make it. Just focus one day at a time. There’s no yesterday. There’s no tomorrow. Just now. Focus on now and we’ll be okay.”

He always made me feel better. I owed him my life several times over already. We finished our smoke and I quickly went to sleep, the rain still falling hard. I felt the terror and despair of the war creeping slowly up my spine. I clutched for my lucky coin and rubbed it in the dampness.

Days followed days and we wound around back and forth searching, searching for our enemy. This was not a war, we were just milling around, like a gang, throwing hard looks and nasty remarks against our rivals, only there people are dying. Every step deeper into that jungle has me questioning the reason. I don’t get it. If we’re here to fight, let’s fight. Pick an objective Mr. Commander-in-chief and let’s get this God Damn thing over with. Drop Nancy Sinatra on the DMZ. Any GI fighting his way there gets to fuck her. Put up some posters of her in that God Damn green mini dress, tits bulging, and we’ll have this war over quickly, and we can all go home. Please, let’s just do something. We’re sitting ducks out here just marching around and it is just a matter of time before we run into a larger force. We’ll be chewed up like “A” Company and for what? A few acres of land that whoever is left will just walk away from. The ground is saturated with brave men’s blood, men who gave ‘their last full measure of

devotion'. But there will be no speeches here. There will be no monuments here. There will be no consecration here. The survivors will bag the dead and march off to another encounter, and another, and another, until we're all dead. Why? Why? Why? Many more stories filter down, of men wounding themselves. It is pure madness.

Chapter Fifteen

A few more days of insanity passed by and then another gift from heaven was suddenly upon us. We were instructed to blow an LZ and then we were to be taken back to the Base camp at Plieku for rest. No duty whatsoever for three, perhaps four days. I felt a lump in my throat and found my eyes watering. God, we were going to get out of that shit for a few days. All of us were stunned by the sudden fortune. We blew the LZ and the promised Hueys appeared on the horizon. Was there ever a more beautiful sight? Was there ever a prettier song than that powerful Ka-thuwk, Ka-thuwk as the blades cut through the hot, humid jungle air? We were still stunned knowing they were coming for us. John and I jumped into the first Huey that sat down. We sat on our helmets, grinned at each other, and shared a smoke. I couldn't stop grinning as the Huey lifted off and we spun around heading south, the setting sun off to our right. It was now late April.

The base camp was on a high mesa in the central highlands and we could see the lights from a long way off, riding in with the darkness. Dusk had given way to night as we stepped off the Hueys. After landing, we were directed back to our area of the base camp, which had tents and cots. We would be sleeping off the ground! Just this would have been enough for an outbreak of joy, but we were told they had held food for us. Hot food! Civilians can't know the true joy of heated food. After eating out of cans for months, the simple addition of heat caused the flavors of the food to explode in our mouths. I ate everything I could get my hands on, as did Ron, John, and everyone we knew. Suddenly life was wonderful again. A tent, a bed and a real dinner. We were overjoyed by our good fortune. But there

was one more surprise. Beer! We all had been allocated a ration of beer to last us the three days. Their mistake was giving it to us all at once. Our stomachs bursting, we waddled back to our tents with our beer clutched tightly, as if the Army might reconsider and ask for it back. We jumped into our cots and cracked the first of the beer. Bobby Stoker had found a guitar somewhere and he had begun to play his favorite song,

“Well the peckerwoods a pecking and the barks a flying, the old folks fucking and the little ones a crying - Oh de lay-a, de lay-a de lay”.

Everyone was howling. After he finished his country repertoire, John Sweeney grabbed the guitar and began playing some rock and roll. I had never seen John play before, and it was great to see him rock and roll. Everyone was singing and drinking. We all laughed til we cried. It felt so good to be at ease and happy again. It was a celebration of life. The 5th Transport Battalion joined us in the celebration, and we welcomed them. We wanted to share our joy, but more importantly, they had more beer and dope. Soon we were all drifting along, singing, laughing, and feeling so very, very safe. I remember lying on the cot, not really listening, but catching a few things here and there. Then I began to listen and discovered that the 5th Battalion wanted to know what the war was really like. God, I thought, can't we leave it in the jungle for a few days? I don't want to talk about it. Hell, I don't want to think about it. I want to drown all the sights, all the smells, all the horror in as much beer as I can find. I tried not to listen but I was sucked in.

“What's it like to get shot at?” “See anybody get hit?” “Lose any buddies out there?” “Were you scared?” Dumb, mindless, little boy questions that started to annoy me. Easy Rob. They don't know. You might have asked the very same

questions a few months ago. Let it go. Have a beer. Listen to John's song. Sing loud and drown out these senseless questions. The night became a blur of faces. I remember the tinny sounds of a slightly out of tune guitar pounding out some Bob Dylan tune. I remember sinking deeper and deeper into the cot, then into a peaceful blackness. I slept dreamlessly, without moving, and I awoke, still holding my can of beer.

We had the luxury of not having to get up. There were no sandbags to empty. There was nothing to pack up. No mindless march through the jungle, and no one on point. The only appointment was breakfast, but a hot breakfast was just enough motivation to get us going. John and I grabbed plates and we were treated to eggs, bacon and pancakes with syrup. It just couldn't get any better. I pigged out again and went back to the tent for an after breakfast nap. I could get used to this. We spent a pleasant day lazing around. There was some small talk of home but mostly we relaxed. We were ravenous wolves, so dinner got us going again. John, Ron, Bobby and I ate everything we could get our hands on. We were quiet during the day and quiet during dinner, since that was serious. We lightened up a little once we started feeling full. We all went down to the showers and cleaned up. The cold water felt especially refreshing after a good meal. We walked back to the tents in high spirits until we realized we had a problem. Our three day ration of beer had been drunk up the night before. Not a drop left. Some of the guys mildly complained, but we all knew we could be in the damn jungle and that not having any beer wasn't that big a problem. Still, I had a solution. I had scouted the PX, where the beer was kept, when we got our allotment. I whispered to Bobby that I knew how we could get more beer. He looked at me and his eyes lit up. We were off. We walked slowly through the camp, taking our time,

and refining the plan. As we approached the PX I explained the layout to Bobby. All the talk was unnecessary since the place was deserted. I jumped over the 8-foot fence and quickly snuck in and grabbed five cases of beer. I slunk out and threw the cases over the fence to Bobby. Quick as a fox I was back over the fence and we were running back to the tents. We were two bad boys who had broken into school after hours. It was exciting, but fun excitement. It was 'pretend stress' excitement. When everyone saw what we had, we were greeted as returning heroes. The beer started flowing again and it became a recreation of the night before. Singing, laughing, jokes, tears, we were letting it all out again. Unfortunately the five cases didn't last very long. By rights someone else should have gone the next time but I knew the layout. I had the plan. I was also a bit drunk and a little caught up with the first success. Of course I'd go for more beer, I said. No problem. Piece of cake. Bobby and I were pretty loaded by then and we really didn't give a shit about anything. When we got to the PX area, Bobby and I did the same thing as before. I went over the fence, but when I came back with the beer it didn't look like Bobby standing there. It wasn't. It was an MP (Military Police.) I set the beer down and walked slowly back to the center of the compound. There were six or seven tents and many stacks of supplies inside the fence. I was desperately looking for a place to hide. I needed some cover. I finally decided on lying between two personnel tents that were only a few feet apart. It was a wonderful stroke of luck. Just as I was stretching down between the tents, all the lights came on. The camp dogs started barking and I was in big trouble. I laid there almost shaking. It took me back to those wonderful summer days of playing hide and go seek with my friends. I remember being terrified when one of them would get close to my hiding spot. I felt that same mock terror and then I almost

laughed out loud. God, I hope they don't catch me and send me to Vietnam. The worst thing they could do to me was send me back into the Highlands. Anything else would be a reward. I began to notice that as I laid there between the tents I could hear and see everything. The MP's had German Shepherds and they were barking and growling. The PX people had flashlights and everyone was looking for me, the evil beer bandit. I figured I'd just lie there till they caught me and then I would tell them some bullshit story about sleepwalking or something. Who knows, I'm half in the bag anyway? Fuck'em! After about fifteen minutes of searching, the Almighty stepped in and put an end to the silliness. The heavens opened up, which sent everyone running for cover. I just laid there smiling. I was used to the rain. With water running down my face I tried to figure out my next move.

I don't know how long I laid there but as the PX guys entered their tents I could hear every word they were saying. They couldn't understand how anyone could have gotten out of the compound so quickly. It was impossible, one guy remarked. As the rain poured down I wondered how long I should wait before attempting to escape. After about twenty minutes, I finally decided to go for it. I slowly got up, rain pouring off me. As quietly as I could I moved toward the front gate. Thankfully, it was still raining hard. I had several dozen excuses worked out, but to my astonishment, the front gate was unlocked and I walked right through. I was sure the MP's would be waiting for me on the other side, but no one was there. After a few steps I took off at a full run and hightailed it back to my Company. It was about two in the morning. When I walked in the guys were still up, wondering what to do about me. They couldn't believe I was free. Bobby had explained to them what had happened, and everyone figured I had been nailed. They were all happy to see me, and dying to hear the story of my escape. I told

them I had to use some of my best jungle skills but it was, “No big deal.” I winked at John. They all laughed and patted me on the back. Bobby came up to me and said he was sorry he had left me. He had tried to yell for me, but I hadn’t heard him. He had saved my life several times and I thought it was a little funny that he’d be upset about this. I told him it was nothing, and I reminded him of how much I counted on him when it really mattered. We both laughed like hell.

The next morning, after another sensational breakfast, John came up to me to ask if I wanted to go to a little village close by. We could have a few beers and mess around. Beer always sounded good to me so I said, “Let’s go!” There were three or four of us but I was hanging with John. When we got to the village it soon became clear that it was just a bunch of bars that serviced the base camp people. The bar was stuffy and I felt a little claustrophobic. We joked about the night before, and my “Great Escape.” After a few beers I realized there were many Vietnamese girls selling themselves in the bars. I suddenly felt a great tension and embarrassment. I had never been with a girl. In the jungle I had thought many times of dying while I was still a virgin. It seems stupid but young men have this exalted idea of sex. It is the great mystery. It is the final step to manhood. The more beer I drank, the more love was replaced by lust. I thought about the guy who had pointed me to Titty Mountain for the Nancy Sinatra show.

“Why watch Nancy’s ass when you can have some real ass?” he had said, or something like that. The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to know this great pleasure and mystery. The more I drank, the less I thought about home and the future, and the more I thought about the here and now. Sex, why not? Go out a man instead of a virgin. I asked John and he agreed

“Why not, why the hell not?”

This might be the last opportunity I would have to find out the great mystery of the universe. Suddenly, I had to experience this great and unknown event called sex. The more I drank the more I knew I had to find out. I would not die a virgin. I got up and stumbled across the bar to where there were around ten or so girls sitting. A few started giggling, and a few winked wickedly. It was all up to me. I was king for a day, or at least for an hour. I scanned them all again and picked the one I wanted. She looked ever so slightly like a Vietnamese version of Nancy. She took my hand. We walked out the back door where there were a number of little shacks covered with tin roofs. We went in one and she started some broken English and gesturing. I finally understood when she patted my wallet. Two dollars. Even as drunk as I was I was a little surprised to learn that love was so cheap. I paid her and she began to undress. She had beautiful skin, flawless, actually. Her teeth were surprisingly white and somewhat dazzling in the semi-darkness of the shack. I saw her brown breasts, not huge, but well formed. The darker nipples hypnotized me. She motioned for me to get undressed as she slipped off her skirt. I started tearing off my clothes and she laughed a little. I stood there naked, but wasn't sure what to do. She patted the mat beside her and as I laid down she rolled me over on top of her. I don't know what I had been expecting, romance? I wanted to savor the experience, but she wanted her next two bucks which were back in the bar somewhere. It was damn hot in this tiny little room and in no time, I was sweating like a pig. It didn't take me long to figure out what to do. I felt like I was watching myself and I wondered what the hell I was doing. It was too late though; I certainly wasn't going to stop.

"Didi moa, didi moa," she kept saying – hurry up. Well it was over soon enough. She squirmed out from underneath me and squatted over a bowl of water,

splashing it between her legs to clean off, I suppose. The whole thing made me slightly ill. I dressed quickly but not as fast as she did. I was practically pushed out the door. The whole thing was very depressing, demoralizing and degrading. I was sorry I had wasted this 'first time'. Like all young men, I had dreamed of sex, and how great it was going to be. Now there I was, spent, depressed, and two dollars poorer. I felt dirty. I felt I had failed, somehow.

Back at the bar John saw how I was feeling. He seemed to understand. Always my best friend, he bought me a beer and told me not to worry so much.

“Its just sex, Rob. Don't make it more than it is.”

He was right of course. What was I expecting, candles and champagne? Well if they did kill me at least they wouldn't be getting a virgin. Mission accomplished. We went back to the base camp and got there just in time for dinner. Hot chow anyone?

That evening we got more beer somehow. I continued drinking. This was our last night at base camp. Everyone was partying like there was no tomorrow – of course for us, there might not have been. I was drinking, but not partying. I kept thinking of my de-virginization. It had been so clinical. I was a virgin and then I wasn't a virgin. But it had been so different than what I had imagined it would be. When you're a boy you hear the locker room talk of Shangri-la, of ecstasy. I had experienced it first hand, and it had been a disappointment. I felt that I had somehow betrayed Diane – which to a great extent, I had. We weren't engaged, but I cared about her. My brown-skinned girl was just a \$2 whore whom I had used to prove a point. I felt low. I felt dirty. I felt I had thrown my pearls before a swine. What had I been thinking? Couldn't I have saved myself for Diane? I was sure she was saving herself for me. What the hell was the matter

with me? I also kept thinking that we were going back to the jungle the next day. The vacation was over.

The next morning we enjoyed one last hot meal. Eggs, pancakes and bacon – and I ate as much as I could, even though my stomach was queasy about our trip back into the jungle. Surprisingly I found that I was interested in visiting my little whore again. As disappointing as the experience had been, there was a hook about sex that had been set. But there was no time for another \$2 romp. After breakfast we saddled up and headed for the choppers. We took off into the wind and began to fly out into the west, away from the rising sun. We flew out over whore town, toward the dark, and ominous jungle. I felt very edgy about our trip back. Was the nightmare really beginning again? I realized that the emotional baggage I was carrying had become too close of a friend. The mutilations, the decapitations, the blood and the stench remained as close to me as Ron and John did. I thought about that boy's brains on my boot. I remembered Sabana's blood all over me. I remembered the horror of it all and I shuddered. I tried giving myself one of my little pep talks as we flew deeper into the jungle. I became all army, checking out the area as much as I could. When scared, go back to the basics and double and triple check everything. At ten thirty, we landed at a forward firebase. I hoped we might spend a day there, regrouping, but we left for the jungle right away. Shit. John, Ron and I were ready, but it was frightening to be back - a recurring nightmare that just wouldn't end.

Chapter Sixteen

The first few days after we got back, went by agonizingly slow. We braced ourselves for the grind. Dig the bunkers, fill the sand bags, take your watch – wake up, empty the sand bags, start the hump, walk all day, dig the bunkers. It was routine but routine was what we desperately needed as we cautiously readjusted ourselves back into the terror. But the dread of being back in this no man's land was taking its toll. My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me? I cannot remember ever having felt so alone. The only ray of support was my team – now John, and Ron, and of course, Bobby. I would be dead without them. Dead. I knew somehow, beyond any rational explanation, that 'we' were charmed. As long as I had Bobby, Ron, and especially John, I was somehow going to be okay. I was somehow going to make it through. I didn't understand it. I didn't know why I was there. But I knew our team was invincible. I just kept telling myself that as long as I stayed with Ron, and with John, I would get through that terrible shit. We had only been back three nights when the mortar rounds began to fall. I thought to myself, How did they know we were back? As if the mortars were a greeting from the NVA. Welcome back soldier boys – we missed you. How did they know? The shelling went on all night. I barely slept. I watched the sun come up over a green valley and I was suddenly, surprisingly, happy to have just one more day. I hadn't slept due to the shelling but the rising sun felt good, warm, and reassuring. One more day, God Damn it. As we emptied our sand bags and started the day's hump, it was good to be on the move again. The morning joy was holding over and I thought we were masters of our fate. Moving out into the jungle, we were aware of being alive, truly alive. We appreciated every minute and every

small event was treasured – the dawning of the day, a perfumed breeze, the low insect buzz. Every small event was treasured since we knew it could be our last. We missed no opportunity to help a comrade. If we weren't being shot at, life was good. I became better and better at pacing myself. I joined the rhythm of the jungle and I became an animal. Moving with the sounds, the sensations – feeling my way through the vast green expanse. For me, there was only the jungle, and I was part of it. My pace became the jungle's pace. My senses became attuned to all that surrounded me. I felt I was close, very close, to that sixth sense that John had. I could feel something wrong in the jungle. I couldn't say how, it was just some innate ability to become one with the earth. A strange and intoxicating power enveloped me. After a few days of exultation, I began to notice a problem when I urinated. The jungle cat had a slow burning sensation that could only mean one thing - I had contracted some sort of venereal disease. At first I was going to go right to the medics and get a shot. But then I thought better of it and thought it might be advantageous to wait a few days and see what happened; but it became impossible to endure the pain. I began to feel dizzy and very warm, maybe even hot. I told the medic that I was hot and thought I had malaria. He took my temperature and it was 103 degrees. I was envisioning a long medical leave back at the base camp. Hot chow, perhaps a few more dollars invested in experience, beer, and long naps. The medic said I might have malaria but he wanted to check something else. I was told to drop my fatigues. Somewhat embarrassed I pulled down my pants and let him have a look. He found a discharge and said he could easily take care of that. He instructed me to bend over. I was hit with a large needle full of penicillin and that was that. No recovery. No

beer. No base camp. He sent me on my way and said to check back with him if I was still uncomfortable the next day. Shit.

I'm not sure why this affected me the way it did but it was at this point that I began to lose contact with almost everything I had held dear. My mock confidence crumbled quickly. My body had been infected with God only knew what, just because I did not want to die a virgin. My mind had long ago been infected with so much horror, and death, and gore, that it was impossible for me to imagine anything worse than what I had already experienced. I truly wanted to give up at this point, but I didn't know how. The jungle was getting darker and more fighting was in the air. All I could think of was Christ on the cross. Father, why have You forsaken me? How did all this happen, and why? I wandered into my jungle and tried to gather myself. As I looked around me at all the foliage and the trees, I became lost in a world of confusion and bewilderment. Get me out of here, please someone, help me. But there was still more pain to come. Were I to live a thousand lives I will never understand.

I tried, as much as I possibly could, to never think about what I had seen or been through. What was past was past and dredging up that past only made things more difficult and more peculiar. Let go of all those negative thoughts and know you are going to make it out of here. Later that afternoon we stopped and began to set up. We needed three or four guys for a water run. Damn. We had crossed a river about an hour before. John, two guys I hardly knew, and I drew the death card. I hated these water runs because if anything happened, you were fucked. I had a very bad feeling about it. We could have stopped and loaded up on water when we were at the river but CO's never linger around a river because

of danger of ambush. This meant that a few of us would be sacrificed for a few canteens of water.

Ours was not to reason why, so off we went with thirty or so canteens each and a desire to get there and back as quickly as possible. I had a bad feeling about it, but John seemed oddly at ease. This reassured me since I had come to trust John's sixth sense without question. We got to the river in about half an hour. We quickly filled the canteens while keeping watch for enemy soldiers. I was very nervous. John must have noticed and he told me that everything was okay and that we were in good shape. Coming from John that meant a lot. I shrugged off the feeling –almost. We finished filling the canteens and we started back for the Company. It was dusk by then and we knew we had to get moving. I jumped at every bird we frightened into flight. I was spooked by every odd jungle noise. I hit the deck a few times for no apparent reason. My mind went back to the guy John and I had to wrestle back to camp. I was losing it badly. Come on, Rob. Come on, man. John said it was going to be okay. John knew, he just knew. Hang on buddy, we're almost back, I told myself. My internal pep talk began working and I started settling down. It just seemed stupid to risk four men's lives for a Goddamn water run. We moved through the jungle quickly and returned without incident. John had been right again. We dug into some C-rations and set up for the night. One more day finished. One more day of life granted and one less day of interment in Vietnam.

Right around that time I started doing some math. I was at a countdown of 132 – the number of days I had left in Vietnam. But I came to the alarming realization that both Ron and John were at 31. Their original five months in South Vietnam, drinking beers and digging new latrines all counted. It had all been

blurred for me. Since we had all gone into the jungle together I had felt like we were all coming out together. I guess at first I knew they were leaving first, but as we had come to form our team, this difference had long since been forgotten. Now it was back – front and center. I couldn't live four months out there by myself. We were a unit, a pack, a team. It had taken us several weeks, if not a month or more, to know each other like we did. We were more than brothers. That night I dreamed of John and Ron waving to me from a Huey. I was sinking in quicksand as they flew off. I bolted up from sleep, gasping for breath. This couldn't be. This couldn't be. They couldn't leave me here to die alone. But what choice did they have? Their tour was up. Mission accomplished. Thank you soldier; get on with your life. You can forget all this. Go home. Get married. Have some kids so we'll be supplied for the next war. My God, I've got to leave with my team. I've done everything they've done, why am I being punished more? Every time I thought of them leaving I could feel the panic rising within me. It was a ghastly, cosmic, sickening joke. Since most of the Company had been together from the beginning, most of the Company would be leaving with Ron and John. I would be left with a whole Company of new recruits. It would take weeks, for the ones that would make it, to come up to jungle speed, to acclimate, to understand the situation. The entire Company could be wiped out while these greenies learned the ropes. This was no place to be doing 'on the job training'. Didn't the idiots in charge know this?

The days ran together. We continued our jungle routine. Wake-up, empty the sand bags, pack the gear, eat, walk, walk, walk, eat, walk, walk, walk, dig the bunkers, fill the sand bags. We knew it would go on forever. Perhaps we were already dead and in hell, we just didn't know it. This thought became an obsession

with me. What if I was in hell, the literal Hell? How would you know if you were in hell or not? Was that part of the punishment, to not really know you were there? Perhaps the punishment was to continue on, believing you were alive and believing you still had hope. I was going mad with this thought. I could have died in any one of those battles. Had I been judged? Had I been sentenced to hell? We did the same things day after day. Would it be year after year, century after century, an eternity in this jungle? I fantasized killing myself. I imagined pulling the trigger only to discover I was already dead. I was in terrible shape and these dark, depressing thoughts took me further down. All of us were the walking wounded. We had been hit many times but the wounds weren't visible. Still, they were very deep wounds, deeper than we imagined.

One night while contemplating hell, I heard the drone of many B-52's overhead. I could see their outline against the moon. I saw that John was awake and watching also.

"What's up?" I asked.

He just shook his head, still looking up. It was operation Sam Houston changing over to operation Francis Marion, but we infantrymen would never perceive a difference, assuming there was one. Then the bombing started. I saw a burst of light and automatically started counting, 1001, 1002, 1003, Kaboom! The explosion was not quite 4 miles away. That was very troubling. I had two immediate worries. First was the reality of a major force of NVA pretty damn close to us with this many bombers flying over. Second, I hoped to hell they had our coordinates. I didn't want to have one of those big ones landing on us. John, Ron, and I huddled together and spoke briefly about this bombing.

"That's a lot of planes," Ron observed

It went on all night. They were so close we could feel the ground quaking under the barrage. Bomb after bomb, the site, just to the northwest of us, seemed to be glowing. Thank God they were on our side. I couldn't imagine being the target of that attack. It must be hell over there. I smiled to myself at that thought. I guessed I wasn't in hell yet, just four miles from it. We never did get back to sleep that night. In the morning we received orders to inspect the bombing site. I imagined us looking into one, big, deep hole. We did our usual morning routine and headed off toward the Northwest. We found out that the Air Force had been testing something called Arc-Light, which had something to do with the navigational systems, and the effectiveness of a bomb strike. It was pretty technical apparently. They were dying to test it out. It was tough luck for the gooks. The five hundred pound bombs had been dropped on suspected NVA positions. Our job was to go and see if they got anything. Around noon, we started to get close. We could tell we were close from the smell, that horrible battle smell of blood, intestines, and burned body parts. We came across a huge bomb crater. It was big enough to bury a house. Then we discovered that the Air Force had also dropped napalm. We saw some NVA's eaten up by it. As we went through the area we found many burned and charred bodies. The information had been good and I shuddered to think of us meeting that group of NVA on our own. The further we moved in, the harder it became to breathe. The odor was overwhelming and many of us were breathing through towels to avoid the stench. Since the attack happened at night, I was sure those NVA never knew what hit them. One minute they were sleeping and the next minute they were no more. It was an attempt at a pleasant thought, but judging by the bodies, a lot of them did know what was happening and they had felt every last torturous minute. You could see

the last moments of pain in these bodies, curled up and screaming in agony. I noticed a few guys picking up rifles and other equipment as souvenirs. It was hell and I was reminded again of my personal hallucination. Were we in hell? I thought I was going to start screaming uncontrollably. My eyes were darting around trying to see if anyone realized I was crazy. No one seemed to notice me. Somehow I was able to fight the urge to scream. I thought of the gooks instead. It must have been an unbelievable experience for those who might have lived through that, although it was hard to imagine anyone surviving. We did not bury or touch the fallen bodies. This was science after all, and the Air Force would be following up. We did count the bodies and generally assess the area. By my own observation, Arc-Light was a complete success. We were close to the border of Laos and anything could happen out there. We wrapped up the assessment as quickly as possible and moved out of the area that same afternoon. It was a nightmare, and we all took away fresh wounds.

That afternoon we were told to blow an LZ. We had hot chow, mail, and a full bird Colonel coming in for a visit. We blew the Landing Zone and began the nightly routine. We needed to cut a line of fire at least thirty yards in all directions. That's a lot of trees to cut down. With the Colonel coming in they told us to double it. Shit. Once you get used to it you can take down a pretty good-sized tree in about five to ten minutes. You then needed to hack it up for the bunker. Four sand bags in front and two in the back. You'd then create a top with all the wood and cover that with more sand bags, filled from the bunker you dug, which was four to five feet deep. It was a lot of work but you got used to it. It would have been easier with a full night's sleep but that never happened. Everyone had at least two, and usually three watches. We were just finishing up as the light began to fade.

From far off you could hear the helicopter making its way toward us. It landed and I was very glad for the hot food, and found I had three letters from home. I was just mildly curious regarding the Colonel. I saw him speaking to the CO later that evening. They seemed to finish up and the Colonel took out a hammock and set it up between the trunks of two of the trees toward the center of the perimeter.. The night was quiet and my watches seemed to go by quickly. One note of minor concern was that John seemed to be dreaming again and was difficult to wake up. In the morning our Colonel unhooked his hammock and walked over to a waiting Huey. A few minutes later they were flying east. What was that all about? He hadn't spoken to anyone but the CO and from my observation of the conversation, it didn't seem important, more chitchat than anything else. I was a bit miffed that he hadn't spoken to any of us. What was he doing here? Why spend the night? Jerk. It was just one more stupid, unanswered mystery. Although thanks to the Colonel we did end up moving out a little later than usual, and I reasoned that the hot food and letters made the Colonel mystery a wash. Why should I care that he decided to spend the night? Fuck him.

I hadn't had a chance to read my letters the night before, since the Huey got in just at dusk. I hurried to get my sandbags emptied and then I read the one from my girlfriend Diane before we started the day's hump. The good thing about her letters was that I could see her, as I read them. I imagined her beautiful face speaking the words to me. I read it twice. She was a nice girl so there was never anything spicy or raunchy in the letters. She would let me know what was going on around town and let me know if anything was going on with any of my friends. They were nice, clean, wholesome letters, which always ended with, "I love you." I decided that morning – no more sex til I returned home and married Diane. I

lifted the letter to my nose and inhaled deeply. She hadn't perfumed the letter but I could smell her on it. A clean, baby-powder, and 'White Shoulders' smell that just traced the letter. I closed my eyes and it was like she was there with me and I realized how lonely I was. I got through my brother Phil's letter quickly. He'd bought a car and was telling me about it. Good, old Phil – I was glad he was state side and in the Air Force. I saved the letter from my oldest sister Leslee til lunch. As we broke for what would be a quick lunch, I pulled out Leslee's letter. It seemed she had a new boyfriend. I was happy for her, but they never seemed to last very long. Leslee was a big girl. I thought back to a night just before I left. Diane and I had been bar hopping with some of my buddies when Leslee came in to the bar where we were. She saw me and came over and hugged me. I pulled her out on the dance floor and we danced three or four dances in a row. I remembered laughing and swinging her around. She was a wonderful person trapped in an overweight body. But it sounded like everything was working out well with her new guy. I hoped so. I loved my sister dearly.

I read her letter, not knowing that Leslee had killed herself three days before I had received it. There were casualties at home also.

It had been about three days since we had assessed operation Arc-Light and we had been moving north. That morning about ten a.m. we came upon a very large NVA encampment. It appeared to be deserted, but the coals were still hot so they had not been gone long. We were all on high alert and suspicious of an attack. I kept looking into the trees, certain that a sniper was going to open up any second. We also saw a lot of equipment lying around, which meant they had left in a terrible hurry. This appeared to be a main staging area and I estimated it could accommodate at least a thousand men. It was a large base

camp for them, and I was puzzled as to why they would have rushed off. It appeared they would have easily out-numbered us and why they would have left so suddenly, leaving so much equipment, was baffling. John had the idea that news of Arc-Light had spread quickly and that the gooks thought another air raid would be following us. I liked that idea since it created an aura of terror around the American troops. Up to now the terror had all been directed toward us. Now the boot might be on the other foot. I prayed it was true, but I was very happy that, for whatever reason, the gooks had taken off without a fight. As it turned out, much of the encampment was underground and someone would have to verify that the tunnels were empty. Fortunately, the smaller, shorter guys drew the tunnel duty, and fortuitously, they were empty. The NVA had just vanished. The underground tunnel system covered many acres, and after the teams inspected them all, we began to blow up the system. Charges were left in the tunnels and blown, once the men were clear. We destroyed everything as quickly as we could so that we could leave the area. It was spooky knowing they had just been there. Where did they go? Had they gone for help? Had they truly been spooked by Arc-Light? We didn't really want those answers, we just wanted to blow their camp and go. There was a sense of immediate and present danger. The CO must have sensed something, because we almost double-timed it south the rest of the day. When we stopped for the night we had put many miles between the NVA encampment and us. I hoped it was enough.

John and I spoke that night, after our perimeter was in place, about how lucky we had been that day. If we had stumbled on that camp, while it was still occupied, they would have easily overrun us, and that would have been our last day. Someone was watching over us and we were very, very grateful. Several days

passed and we saw no action even though we were right in the middle of the supply route to the south. We knew they were all around us, but somehow we kept avoiding contact, or at least the gooks were avoiding us, which was fine by John and me. Overall, things were quite different. We had all lived through the hell of Feb. 16 and March 14. We were changed men. There was little laughter among us, just the routine that kept us going. Every day was one less that we would be spending in Vietnam – assuming we lived to our ETS. I was again feeling the despair and disorientation of my hell hallucinations. I couldn't shake the idea that I was going crazy. I would be marching along, and suddenly feel that I was going to start screaming. I would look around from side to side knowing that at any second I would go over the edge. I could see the guys tying me up and gagging me while I continued to scream and scream at the madness and horror.

“We're in Hell!!! We're in Hell!!! Don't you get it? This isn't life, it's death and we'll be here FOREVER!!! God help us!!! GOD HELP US!!!!”

But He doesn't hear. God is far from here. God doesn't visit hell. God doesn't listen to prayers from hell. We have all been condemned, but only I know it. Can I keep this great, and ghastly secret? Can I keep from screaming? These thoughts would hit me several times a day, but somehow I would hold them in, not willing to acquiesce to the madness. Anxiety attack is the clinical term, I think. Eyes front soldier, I told myself.

“ Jody's got your girl and gone...” I'd sing out a cadence to myself, anything to keep my mind off my own madness.

Dig the bunker, fill the bags, cut the logs, sleep, watch, sleep, watch, sleep, empty the bags, eat, swallow, march, sweat and please don't scream, please don't scream. Hold it in. Hold it in. One more day. Just one more day. Hold it in.

Chapter Seventeen

For all the anxiety and madness, we had been lucky, but in mid-May our luck ran out. We were walking up the side of a steep hill and I was alternately considering screaming, or throwing myself down the hill, hoping for a serious, but not permanent injury. My mind was considering the pain of a broken leg or arm, but I was also considering the fatal broken neck that might happen were I to take the plunge. To be or not to be was still the question. We had a scout dog on point that day and I heard part of a bark when the jungle exploded around us. The dog and his handler were killed instantly and I was yanked out of my crazy daydreams and back into the reality of war. My body and my mind were again focused. I quickly realized that the gooks had somehow gotten between us and had us shooting at ourselves. That was not the first time that had happened, but it was very easy to panic and start shooting our own men. The ambush started heating up and fire seemed to be coming from all directions. John, Ron and I were together, and we got as low as we could get. Several members of our platoon were hit and they began screaming for medics. The medics were incredible people who would always answer the call of the wounded, putting themselves in harm's way to help a fellow soldier. There are no words to explain their bravery and compassion under fire. They should all receive Medals of Honor for the heroic jobs they did. We stayed low and dug in to get even lower as the rounds whistled over our heads in all directions. There was no telling what was friendly and what was enemy fire, but a bullet from either side was just as fatal, so we continued to stay low. The dreadful part of those ambushes was the uncertainty of what would happen next. Would they try and overrun us? We had all seen what that looked

like, and I knew we would fight to the last man. It was risky business and you had to consider your ammo. We had a lot of ammo but not an unlimited supply. We were shooting it out and trying to hold our own but always with a cautious eye on the dwindling supplies. The last thing you wanted was an empty gun. John and I were continuing to dig in when we heard the first whistle of incoming artillery. Thankfully, someone had been able to call in the artillery, which was our ace in the hole usually. If we could keep the gooks back and there was at least some separation between us, the artillery would be successful and drive the gooks back. The artillery started falling very close to us, and John, Ron and I knew we were damn close to the gooks. We could hear the fragments whistling through the trees. We felt the artillery shaking the ground we were clinging to, the ground we were desperately trying to get under. Machine guns thundered around us and we laid there helpless, not knowing where the enemy was or in which direction to crawl. All we could do was wait, wait and pray. As I rechecked my gear, ammo pouches and grenades, I saw that Ron and John were doing the same. We all sensed that something was happening and we wanted to be ready for it. John suddenly looked to the left and following his eyes, I saw the movement also. They were making their move on our left flank. John, Ron and I started throwing bursts of fire in the direction of the movement we had seen. The movement had come from the area of artillery fire so we were pretty sure we were firing on the gooks. We had the sense that this was the make it or break it charge, and we all fired desperately to turn the gooks back. There was a hail of fire in both directions and for several minutes it was impossible to tell what was happening. I had switched to auto sensing it was now or never, so I swept a path in front of me as best I could. John was also on rock and roll but Ron was still firing singles, although shooting

quickly. It seemed to last forever. I could hear many men from both sides getting wounded and killed. I could hear the foreign screams above our own and I felt the tide was turning for us. I could hear the report from Bobby's gun far off to our left and more than likely, in the direct path of the gook assault. I emptied a magazine and quickly loaded a fresh one, switching to single shot as the madness began to diminish. It appeared that the gooks felt we had the upper hand today and had begun to back away. Still, it was dusk before we felt we had secured the area to any degree. It was only then that we were able to assess the massive losses we had taken in this ambush.

There were many wounded and dead, more than I would have guessed. And because of the terrain, we would not be able to get any chopper support to get the wounded and dead out. The area was just too steep. It was a hell of a place for an ambush. I thought we would at least be able to use the cable systems off the big Chinooks but the CO said that was impossible. There was only one solution - to carry everything and everyone out of there to an area where we could blow an LZ. The first available area was several clicks away. The darkness came quickly on that dreadful night. It was a night of screams, agonizing screams from the wounded, and it never let up that night. We were surrounded by death and by these painful screams and mournful sobs. Also we were in constant fear that the gooks would attempt to overrun us again. Men wandered about lost in despair, not wanting to comprehend the horror, desperately hoping the madness was all a dream. Others slid into their bunkers and shook all night, in spite of the heat. There were bodies everywhere and that horrible stench I had smelled too many times before. John and I never slept that night. I think deep, deep down, somewhere inside us, we were thankful to have survived again. But the horrible

scene stunned us, our joy at being alive was silenced by the tortured screams of the wounded, and the Herculean task awaiting us the next morning. We were very low on water and I remember crawling around looking for canteens off the dead. There would be no water runs that night.

Chapter Eighteen

As dawn approached and I could see a little better I earnestly began my search for water. War creates a powerful thirst, especially in that climate. For some odd reason I started recalling Rudyard Kipling's poem Gunga Din. One line kept repeating itself, "But when it comes to slaughter, you'll do your work on water. And you'll lick the bloomin' boots of him what's got it." I was ready to lick some boots or worse. The slaughter had been horrific. Bodies were everywhere and I began turning them over looking for canteens. Many were missing; many had bullet holes and were empty. I finally found an intact one and heard water sloshing as I yanked the top off and swung it to my lips. It took a few moments before the strange taste made it to my brain. Something was wrong. I spit it out cursing. I poured a little on my hands. It was bright red. God Damn it, I thought. Now I'm drinking blood. Shit. Then it began to sink in. I looked, but there were no holes in the canteen. I smelled the contents and started laughing out loud. The bastard had put cherry Kool-Aid in his canteen. We all did it to try to make the water taste a little better. I took a long, grateful drink. I crawled back and shared the canteen and the story with John. He had a bit of a chuckle himself.

It was on that morning, surrounded by the dead and dying, watching the sun come up over the jungle that I realized how callous I had become to it all. Had they told me in boot camp I'd be crawling over GI bodies looking for water and laughing about it, I'd have said they were nuts. But John, and Ron, and I, and the whole platoon and Company had seen too much. The laughter was all gone unless

some sadistic event tickled us. We could walk through that slaughter and not even blink much anymore. It wasn't war, it was just life. This is the way life is. You walk around and kill people or get killed. It's no big thing, that's just the way life is. We were numb to it. I knew something profound within me had died, yet I couldn't do anything about it. I looked around at the bodies and felt nothing. I knew somewhere deep down that I should be sad. I should be moved. I should be crying. I used to react like that. What happened to the wonderful sensitive boy? Where exactly had he died? When had he stopped caring? I watched the sun rise on an insensitive day.

Once the sun had risen a bit higher we began to prepare for our day and the real work started. It was time to load up and move out. There were two choices: carry ammo and guns, or carry people. I decided to carry my buddy with the canteen. A part of me thought that maybe I could somehow get back some humanity by carrying a person out. Selfishly, I thought that carrying a body would be easier than carrying the rifles and ammo. It was one more in a series of bad choices. When I first lifted the dead GI, I thought, Yeah, this was the right choice. I saw John struggling to get the extra ammo and rifles balanced and thought that carrying a body had to be better. I'd only gotten a few hundred meters and I was spent. I was gasping for breath, drenched in sweat, and my legs were already feeling rubbery. The army, in its wisdom, felt that going uphill for a shorter distance was better than going downhill, so we all struggled with our loads up the steep embankment and hill. I needed a break already and went down on one knee, gently laying the body down and collapsing next to it. I saw that we were all struggling. Everyone was carrying too much. If the gooks were watching us, this would be an opportune time to strike. A few choppers were circling; I hoped

they were keeping an eye out for any hostile action. I didn't hear any guns from the ships and took that as a good sign. We started out alert, but after several hundred meters we just wanted it all to end. I picked up my John Doe and struggled on, fighting for another few hundred meters. As the day wore on I got rougher and rougher with the body. The first few times I had knelt down and laid the body down. Now I was simply tossing it off my back. It wasn't human. It was just one more thing slowing me down. It was just one more thing holding me back. My shoulders ached. My back was covered in some sort of fluid; I was hoping it was blood, but I knew dead bodies don't bleed. Something was oozing out and the flies liked it a lot, God Damn them. God, let this nightmare end. This went on for several hours until we finally crawled into the area where we would blow the LZ. I tossed John Doe off my shoulders for the last time, I hoped. We were out of water. We were low on ammo. We were out of C-rations. Mostly we were beat, completely exhausted. After the firefight the day before, then the hump up the damn hill today, with no water, no food, and great physical exertion, we were drained. There was no time to rest though; the wounded needed to get out quickly. I started hearing loud explosions and, "Fire in the hole," a warning to get down, since charges were being set off. The jungle collapsed around us. Several tall trees were crashing down when a strange incident occurred. I heard someone fairly close yell, "Fire in the hole." I turned and saw a huge explosion take down another tree; however this time a large piece of the trunk had split, and was flying straight at me. It was pretty good size. I would estimate it at 4' by 2'. It was headed straight for me. Suddenly time seemed to slow down. There was a roaring noise and then everything was quiet. I started to move to the side, my eyes never leaving the piece of wood. The whole world had entered this silent,

slow-motion time frame and I watched as the piece of wood sailed just past my face, missing my head by inches. I followed it with my eyes, as it smashed into several other good sized trees, knocking them down. Then suddenly, I was aware of the noise around me and everything had returned to normal time. It was very odd. I would have been killed instantly if that block had hit me. But I wasn't scared. I was caught up in the wonderment of the experience. We kept chopping the LZ out and started digging bunkers since we would be there for the night.

We were well beyond thirsty and hungry, and badly needed some ammo. The LZ. was almost done and it was very large. You could land two Chinooks side by side. John and I were making small talk about the last couple of days. We were both tired. Please let those choppers get here soon, I prayed. We need to be re-supplied as quickly as you can get here.

Faintly in the background we heard the slapping of rotor blades against the air. Oh, Thank God. The supplies were on the way. Soon we would have food, water and ammo. We would all feel much more at ease. They couldn't get there soon enough for my liking. More importantly we had wounded and dead to get out. Come on baby, bring those big birds in.

As the first two Chinooks began landing, most of us were on our feet cheering them on. There was just something about watching those big old Chinooks land that made you feel good, like everything was going to be all right. Help had come and we were all going to be saved from these dark and evil forces. Those Chinook rotors were our bugle charge. You heard them and you knew the Cavalry was on the way. Everything started blowing around from the wind created by the big choppers; but that was okay. Help had come, and we had made it

through another ordeal, another bloody ambush that had taken many lives. I longed to be on those choppers flying away from there, escaping from the madness.

As the Chinooks touched down I ran to the rear of one and waited for the back door to open. Time for some goodies! As the back door lowered, a dozen or more reporters poured out. Each one seemed to have a camera and they were shooting everything. They began firing questions about what had happened. I was in utter disbelief. Were these guys for real? Look around and see what happened to us, you dumb mother fuckers. We almost got our asses kicked. I tried to ignore them and concentrate on where the fuck the water, the C-rations, and everything else we needed was, for Christ sake. I wanted to start punching these guys but realized they were just doing their job. I just wanted them to do it somewhere else.

“What happened?” they asked.

Shit, there’s a war, haven’t you heard? I mean, come on man!

I pushed by the reporters and ran up into the back of the Chinook and saw some boxes stacked way up front. I ran to the C-rations and grabbed a few boxes and ran back to my squad. We ripped them open and shared the rations. I had opened a can of peaches and had put them to my mouth, when a reporter snapped a picture of me and asked me a few questions. I was calmer now and answered as best I could. I didn’t think much of it at the time but a few days later the picture appeared on the front page of *The Stars and Stripes* newspaper. There I was, gobbling down peaches, juice running down my chin. It was a great shot.

As more choppers came in, we got our wounded and dead out and we were also re-supplied. It wasn't long before the reporters were off to the next battle and we were forgotten. We were alone again, left to wander through the jungle looking for the elusive and dangerous little men that America hated. We were left to search and destroy the little men who fought so damn well and so damn viciously for their country. We were to search and destroy the little men who would not be denied.

Chapter Nineteen

The next morning, after all the dead and wounded had been evacuated, after we had eaten and been re-supplied, we headed off again into that terrifying jungle looking for death. During the last firefight, Ron had cut his leg diving behind some trees. It had bled a bit but none of us had thought much about it. This was the same leg that Ron had been ignoring for over a month. The jungle rot had grown steadily worse but Ron had kept going. I was glad he did, but I also knew that if I had the jungle rot instead of him, I'd be gone. Ron wanted to hang in there, though. The cut had somehow exacerbated the jungle rot. On the second day after the cut, I noticed Ron limping badly. I eased up on him.

“Ron, is your leg okay?”

He looked at me and smiled.

“Sure, just a small cut from the other day. It's just a bit sore. I'm okay.”

He pushed on ahead and I fell back in line. That was Ron. I watched him limp on ahead and I thought about my friend. He had been out there almost a year and he was a model soldier. In all my time with him, I had never seen him take a false step. I had never heard him complain or avoid any duty. Ron Brown was a rock. What an honor it had been to serve beside such a man. I loved him. When we broke later that day to set up our perimeter, his leg was so swollen he could hardly walk. With the bunkers dug, claymores set, and trip wires finished, John, Ron, and I sat down for some chow and a cigarette, before the sun set.

“Your leg is looking pretty bad Ron; you trying to prove something?” John asked.

Ron shifted and squirmed a bit to try to find a more comfortable position, but he finally gave up. He looked at John, and then at me.

“Our ETS is less than a week away. I went in with you guys and I thought I could go out with you guys. Now I’m not sure I can.”

Ron’s leg was very badly swollen and obviously infected. John went off to try to find a medic, while Ron and I finished our cigarette.

“Ron....” I fell silent not knowing what to say. “We’ll miss you,” I ended lamely.

Ron was a strong man and I knew it upset him to be leaving early, even if it was only a few days early. He wanted to be going out with the rest of us. Of course, he had forgotten that I wasn’t part of their group. My ETS was still a few months off, and I was terrified. Almost everyone in Company “C” would be leaving in a week. All save me. I would be left behind. I didn’t want to burden Ron with that thought, since he was suffering enough on his own, between his leg and his guilt at leaving early. John got back with the medic, who took one look at the leg and smiled.

“You’re going home, Ron

Home. The word slammed into me like the blast of a claymore. I knew I wouldn’t be going home. Ron would. Sweeney would. Bobby would. I wouldn’t. I would be left behind in this God forsaken jungle to fight alone. Even worse than that, to fight with a bunch of recruits I didn’t know. My team was leaving but I wasn’t. I was still wrestling with that. It seemed incomprehensible. The medic talked to the CO and it was decided we would blow an LZ for Ron to leave the next morning. Ron was given some penicillin and some morphine and relieved of duty. No watches for Ron that night, just a full night’s rest. It was an uneventful night

with John and I trading watches. I couldn't stop thinking about Ron, and how wonderful it had been to serve with him. I had mixed emotions. I was damn happy for Ron, but I knew we would miss him. We would miss him a lot if we ran into NVA in the next few days. We would miss his strength and his wisdom. We would miss his even-keeled temperament. But mostly, we would miss having him by our side. Ron Brown was a great friend and an outstanding soldier. I thought of Dave Buckley, wounded in our second major engagement. He was likely back in the states. Ron was leaving and would make a full recovery from this infection. Except for his memories, he would leave Vietnam intact. Good for him. Bright and early the next morning the LZ was blown. When we heard the chopper coming in, we started over with Ron. The leg seemed to be slightly worse and it would have been easier for John and me to stretcher him over but neither one of us would have even suggested that option to Ron. I could see in his eyes that he was not happy about this. This man richly deserved our respect. He made it through an unbelievable experience and was headed home. He still felt he hadn't done enough. He wanted to finish the ride. He wanted five more days and to go out with the rest of us. I admired him. I also thought he was foolish. Anything could happen in five days and if I had the chance to leave, I'd be racing everyone to the chopper. The blades of the helicopter were turning slowly, as it sat idling, waiting for Ron. Ron sat down in the chopper and painfully hoisted himself back. The pilot was on the radio, probably telling the firebase that he had Ron on board. I saw him pull out a pack of cigarettes and tap it on his helmet before pulling one out. He offered one to Ron, who refused. John and I shook hands with Ron and, just as the rotors started accelerating; Bobby Stoker ran up and shook Ron's hand. I could see Ron's jaw muscles tightening as he fought back his emotions. We

stepped back several yards and the Huey lifted off throwing a blast of dust and debris in all directions. I could see Ron watching us as the helicopter ascended and, once clear of the jungle, veered off sharply to the east. Ron was gone.

Chapter TWENTY

It was another day inseparable from the rest. It was hot and humid. I was tired. I was sore. I ached. But that I couldn't stop thinking about everyone's ETS coming up in a few short days. Everyone's but mine. I had to suffer a while longer. Now it was only John and me. We were the final two of our team still in the jungle. And then there would be one, I thought. Me. The thought of John leaving sent me into a panic. Could this really happen? Was I going to be left out here alone? Just me with a bunch of new people I didn't know and couldn't count on? It was a dream. It had to be. The Army wouldn't send a whole bunch of new recruits out here, would they? With no experience it would almost certainly be death if they ran into trouble. And I would be with them. Dreadfully I knew the Army would do it. The Army did what it had to do. I knew that. I also knew that without John it would be impossible to survive that situation. It would be impossible even with John, if we were the only two left. It was a problem without a solution. What could I do? I was trapped. I could feel it closing in on me every step I took. In spite of the heat, I shivered. Time was running out for me.

John and I sat around that evening and talked about his earlier days in Nam, before I arrived. He told me about their days at the little fishing village called Tuy Hoa. They would go to the beach and swim in the ocean. He reminisced about the warm water. He talked about Tuy Hoa's PX, and all the wonderful things that were there. He mentioned a few items he'd bought at a great price and had sent home. God, how I wished I would have been with them then. It would have meant a few months more of friendship, but also we could have left together. I had only been with them for the miserable part. I hadn't shared their good experiences. I

hadn't been 'warmed up' for the jungle. I had just hit the ground running, like I had done that night, so long ago, when the Hercules transport dropped us off. Things happen the way they happen and you just have to accept them, I guess. I realized it must have seemed like a lifetime ago for John. So much had happened to him since those quiet times in that peaceful little village. There were so many painful memories and losses. How would we live with those memories and losses, assuming we lived? It was a clear evening with a beautiful sunset. I enjoyed every moment there with John. We were on a high ridge and I felt good. It was good to be alive. John and I spoke of home that evening, something we hadn't done in a long time. We remembered everything that was good about home and to hear us talk, you would have thought we had lived in paradise. We smoked our cigarettes and talked of the future, as if we were a million miles from that place. It was good to be able to dream of such things again, if only briefly. It was refreshing to imagine ourselves after the war, to picture ourselves home, with a future. It felt good to dream again. Although I was keenly aware that the future was a lot more real for John than it was for me. John took the first watch and I had a few hours of peaceful sleep.

As my watch started, my thoughts turned sour. I was barely nineteen years old and I was trying to understand it all. I felt like I had been hit on the head with a baseball bat, and I was spinning, trying to catch my balance. How could so much happen to a person in such a short period of time? Why me? What the hell was I going to do without John? Without Ron? Without Bobby? I was still alive for the moment, but for how many more moments? I found my chest tightening and it was hard to breathe. Dear Jesus, what should I do? What can I do?

Why me? is an interesting question. Selfishly, you wondered why you were put in that mess. There were plenty of soldiers who spent their whole tour in Tuy Hoa. How did they get so lucky? Why was I punished? But then you started thinking about the many wonderful human beings you had seen getting killed or wounded and you asked the same question – Why me? Actually, Why not me? Why was I spared? There had been so many good men killed. There had been so many good men maimed. There I stood, unmarked, except for the horrors in my soul. Was I that much better? Did God have a purpose for my life? Why had I been spared thus far? There were no answers, only an endless set of questions posed to a silent, starry, night sky, a sky that was softly blanketing friend and foe alike. I knew that somewhere out in that jungle a young Vietnamese man was asking, “Why me?” while looking up into that fathomless night sky. Why were we trying to kill each other? Neither of us had any answers.

Time was getting quite short now and John was leaving in a few days along with everyone else in the Company. I was in a state of apprehension and utter shock. And it was getting worse. Of all the things that could happen to me that was the one thing I could not deal with. It is unfair and cruel, I thought, to expect me to go on without these men by my side. We have fought together long and hard. To be left behind and alone with an entire new group of people seems impenetrable. I am overwhelmed. My terror grows with every step. I can not be left behind. I’m part of the team, the squad, the pack, you must take me with you. I’m going to die out here! Please don’t do this to me. Please, don’t leave me behind. I plead to no one in particular.

Chapter Twenty-One

It was mid-June when we walked into another ambush. As usual, John dove for cover a fraction of a second before the shooting began. What would happen to me without that early warning? John and I were side by side when the thunder of gun fire roared around us once again. Like well-oiled machines we dropped back and secured our perimeter. Bobby Stoker was close by, blazing away with his M-60 machine gun looking as invincible as always. We had performed that scene a thousand times. There was Bobby, and there was John, shooting into the trees and trying to stay low. There I was crawling over by a tree to get some cover. Even in those circumstances my mind wandered back to my main problem: What would become of me without my protectors, without my team? I knew I was in hell and only a miracle could save me. As I looked at John and Bobby, I thought about how brave these men had been. How had we survived such a nightmare? We had survived because we had been together, our squad, our platoon, our Company. We had survived because of us. But we were all spent. The well had run dry and it was time to leave that place. It was time to pack it in one final time and say goodbye to our living, breathing hell. The jungle lit up once again, full of automatic gun fire. A tired and ragged group of soldiers fought one more time for their lives, trying desperately not to be killed in that last skirmish. Their last skirmish, I thought bitterly. As the grenades and artillery began to explode, we flanked and fired our weapons in a routine that had become all too natural. We were still looking out for one another and fighting the good fight, but I could sense that this was the end. This was the time for us all to go home. There

is no more need for any of us to die. Heads held high, let us go out of this place of death and evil...

I slowly looked around and saw John firing his weapon. I saw Bobby with his M-60 machine gun doing what he did so well. I looked back and saw my left leg sticking out of the brush at an awkward angle, open, exposed, tempting. It's time to leave this place, I thought. Time to go home and never think of this again...

There was a roaring in my ears, and the world, once again, went into slow-motion. Since we had secured the perimeter, the CO had called in the artillery and air support. Shells were landing quite close by and the smoke from the explosions had created a shroud of fog over the battlefield. I saw the explosions light up the jungle but they were silent as I looked about in this slow-motion world. The smoke drifted through the trees. It was quite dense in some areas and thin in others. I watched it drift slowly through the jungle. As I watched, through the smoke, I saw a figure walking toward me. I should have shot, but there was something familiar in the profile and the gait. As the figure got closer, I could see it was my father. He had been carrying something bloody which had gotten on his hands, and dripped down onto his feet. He must have touched his side with it, since it too, had a slight bloodstain. He was smiling at me and I was a boy in Michigan again. He didn't speak but he came to a stop just in front of me. He was smiling that wonderful, reassuring, Daddy smile. It was a smile of confidence and calm. A smile that says, "Don't worry, you're okay – I love you." I found myself crying and reaching out for him.

"Oh Daddy, Daddy, I love you. I'm scared, Daddy. I'm so scared. Please take me with you. Please..." He slowly stretched his arms out, never taking his eyes off me as I cried out for him. I felt him hug me...

White, hot, searing pain engulfed me as, suddenly, the world returned to real time. John was holding me, rocking me, and screaming for a medic. I knew I was wounded but the pain seemed to be everywhere. Tears were running down John's face and he continued to yell for a medic. I was bleeding badly from my left leg calf muscle. John quickly put a tourniquet on my leg and asked me if I was all right. I told him I was, but that I was in a great deal of pain. John cared for me and we continued firing our weapons as we fought our last battle together. Half an hour later it was over, and the gooks were on the run again. We had lived through our last ambush. John finally got the attention of a medic and I got some morphine. From far off I could hear the Chinook coming fast. It was coming for me this time. John helped me into the chopper. He assured me he'd be coming later that day or the next. His tour was over. John stayed with me, holding my arm, and telling me how brave I was, and how much he'd miss me. He told me the medic had said I would be okay, and that they would be able to save the leg, but I had heard the medic. What he had said was, he thought there was a fair chance of saving it. I looked at John who had saved my life so many times. I was having trouble thinking but I slipped my lucky coin over my head and handed it to him. "I'll mail it back to you in a few weeks" he said, clutching it. I had lost a lot of blood and I was lightheaded and couldn't focus enough to care at that moment. Thank God for John, though. I was glad he was there holding me. The other wounded and dead had been loaded on and the big engines began revving up. John pulled his canteen out of his belt and handed it to me as he stepped back away from the chopper. I watched John, and then saw Bobby running up, just as he had done when Ron left. He arrived too late to shake my hand, but he smiled and waved with his arm around John. The power of the Chinook made it feel like we were falling up, we were ascending so fast. Maybe it was my blood loss, or maybe the morphine was kicking in.

On June 16, 1967, we cleared the jungle and veered off to the east and I was riding on the crest of that powerful and glorious Chinook wind as it carried me out of the jungle, out of the highlands, and out of hell. I rolled painfully onto my back thankful that we were all going home, just as the world went black.

Epilog

On July 12, 1967 "C" Company, 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment of the 4th Infantry Division, in the Kontum Province of the Central Highlands of Vietnam, walked into a Battalion size ambush of NVA's. 2nd Platoon was overrun and all thirty-one soldiers were killed. This book is dedicated to those brave soldiers who gave their last full measure of devotion, for this country. It is dedicated to those brave boys who died for a war that remains an enigma.