

At the apex of the Civil Rights movement in America, a Jewish boy from New Jersey was deployed to fight in our nation's first fully integrated war. Assigned to the mortar platoon of a rifle company in the 1st Infantry Division, he shared the experience of combat with young men from all cultures and economic backgrounds.

# ON THUNDER ROAD

by Michael Alan Shapiro

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# ON THUNDER ROAD

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**SOUTH VIETNAM**

## Chapter Three

### May I Have Some Purple Haze, Please?

*November 1967*

The morning Chinook waited at the airfield to take us out to Bravo Company. I walked up the back ramp with the other men and sat on a metal bench in the dim light. We were shoulder to shoulder with our backpacks on, holding M-16s between our knees. The noise from the engines was too loud to talk over so we sat in silence, each of us in our own world. The Chinook's engines revved and our shoulders rocked together as it lifted off. Flashes of sky and green jungle showed through the small, round windows. After a half-hour flight, the Chinook landed inside the perimeter of Bravo Company. As we touched down and the tailgate lowered, we could see purple smoke from smoke grenades that they had popped to guide the Chinook in. I walked down the ramp into a dust storm thrown up by the rotor blades. Soldiers with their heads down, bent over against the tornado of the prop wash, ran by me into the hold and carried out supplies. I was barely clear of the Chinook before it lifted off again. I had to turn my back and half bend at the waist to brace myself and keep from being blown over. I felt sand and dirt being driven into my skin and clothes. The deep, thumping, WHUP WHUP WHUP WHUP sound of the blades was deafening. The Chinook flew off and I straightened up and looked around. Heat waves shimmered up from the red clay earth.

Jimi Hendrix's *Purple Haze* played on a radio.

I paused for a moment to look around. We had landed inside a camp fifty yards wide. It was encircled by barbed wire and ran alongside a two-lane dirt road. The flat roadbed ran for miles in either direction. On both sides of the road, a clearing one hundred to two hundred feet wide had been cut out of the thick

jungle. Inside the camp, smoke from a burning pile of trash wafted up into the still air. Sandbagged foxholes, ten yards back from the barbed wire and five to ten yards apart, formed a circular perimeter. There were more sandbagged foxholes in the interior of the camp but these were less symmetrically laid out. There was a group of six, a space, then a group of five, another space and another group of five.

Some soldiers sat outside their foxholes playing cards, others cleaned their weapons. Men walked to and from the latrine sheds or hauled things across camp. A dozen soldiers worked outside the barbed wire in the clearing that ringed the camp. They were cutting logs and brush and dragging them to a fire to burn. It was hot and very humid, and most of the men had their shirts off.

Two tents in the middle of the camp were centers of activity. The large mess tent, big enough to seat fifty people, had soldiers on KP duty washing pots and pans. The smaller tent was the company commander's. Several clerks worked at a table outside the open flaps. The grunts at the foxholes didn't have tents but sheltered themselves from the sun by constructing lean-tos with their green, plastic ponchos. I saw soldiers smoking dope, and others cigarettes.

I was finally in a combat zone, and I was scared. I hadn't counted on that.

"Welcome to Thunder Road," a soldier called out. "New recruits report over to the captain." He pointed us to the smaller of the two tents. Mack, me, Toby, and four other new recruits picked up our gear and walked to where the captain waited for us in front of his tent.

"Welcome to Bravo Company. I'm Captain Allen," he said. He shook our hands and looked each of us straight in the eye.

“He’s pretty young for a company commander,” I said to Moore when the captain went into his tent to get his clipboard. I put him at about twenty-three years old.

“You are now on Highway 13,” Captain Allen said as he came out of the tent. “This is our Ho Chi Minh trail. Whatever goes by vehicle west out of Saigon, goes on Highway 13. We’ll be guarding the engineers as they repair it with their earthmovers, and from our night defensive position here, we’ll walk patrols into the jungle and sweep for road mines. You are not in the rear when you’re on Thunder Road so I expect you to act accordingly.” No one said anything.

“Okay, here are your assignments.” The captain read from his clipboard. “Mack Moore, Toby Pearce and Paul Gebhart are assigned to Oscar, that’s the mortar platoon.”

Captain Allen assigned the other four new recruits to rifle platoons, pointed all of us in the right direction, and wished us good luck.

I heard James Brown’s *I Feel Good* playing at one of the foxholes as we walked through the middle of the camp.

“Hey, what’s happening back in the world, bro?” one brother said as he stopped work to look at us. He was muscular and his black skin shined from the sweat of his labor.

“Hey, man! When was the last time you saw a round-eye’s pussy?” another black man called out. His gold tooth flashed in the sunlight.

“Hell, these guys are so green they’re still pissing water from the States,” A skinny white guy yelled from the front of his lean-to.

I dropped my gear next to the mortar pit as the E-7 platoon sergeant came over to meet us. He was a lifer with five stripes and older than the other men, in his thirties. He was a big man, six foot four, two hundred fifty pounds with light brown skin.

“Welcome, men, to Oscar platoon,” he said in a southern drawl. He smiled and shook our hands. “I’m Sergeant Bell.”

I could tell by his manner that he was happy with the army. He reminded me of my old drill sergeant, Mumford. "This guy would be in heaven back in the States having us police up cigarette butts," I whispered to Moore. Sergeant Bell read from the roster.

"Let's see here, Gee-bart?"

"Geb-hart," I corrected him.

"Jeb-bart," the sergeant tried again. He smiled at me and I let it go.

"Anyway," Sergeant Bell went on, "you'll be in Sergeant Delino's squad." He pointed to a Hispanic man sitting by a foxhole. Delino looked over, smiled, and gave us a casual, half salute.

"Mack Moore," Bell continued.

"Yo," Moore answered.

The sergeant looked up at him and said, "You'll be with Sergeant Delino too."

Bell looked back at his list. "Toby Pearce?"

"Here," Toby answered.

"You'll be in Gardner's squad." Sergeant Bell motioned to the second mortar where a group of black soldiers sat on the sandbag wall of the pit. They all had their shirts off. Everyone was trim and muscular; only Sergeant Bell carried a few extra pounds. Mack and I shouldered our rucksacks and walked to the mortar pit.

"How you doing, guy? I'm Tony Delino." Delino greeted us and shook our hands. He had a big smile, ruddy complexion, and eyes that studied your face when he talked to you.

He introduced us to the rest of the squad.

"You can bunk together in that foxhole near mine." He pointed behind us. Sandbags laid out in the shape of a rectangle made a protected box to place our air mattresses in. We made ourselves at home. It was hot and we took our shirts off. Of all



the men, Mack Moore had the best build. He was pure muscle, chiseled with definition, like a boxer. I was in shape too. I had been a wrestler since third grade and had lifted weights since I was twelve; although my legs were short, my upper body was that of a man forty pounds heavier.

Later that afternoon Sergeant Bell called us back to the mortar pit and asked us about our training.

"I want you to try the fire direction position. Gee-bart," he said when he learned that I had been to college. "Hey, Charles! Charles," he called to a tall, lanky black soldier with a long, thin face. "Come over here a minute and take this man aside." Sergeant Bell pointed to me. "Teach him how to compute. Let me know if you think he can do it."

I followed Charles to one of the mortar pits and sat down next to him on the sandbag wall.

"Have you ever been on a mortar team?" Charles asked me.

"No," I said.

"Okay. Well, it's a little complicated but I'll try to explain what we're doing. We get a map of each area that we go into." He opened a map and showed it to me. "Sometimes the lieutenant will fly the area in a recon helicopter and then brief us on the topography. He'll make pencil notes on the map of what he saw." Charles took out a large, round plastic board two-and-a-half feet in diameter which had preprinted compass points on it and a moveable straight line that rotated from its center. "We write on the computer board the details of the map." Charles wrote a couple of numbers on the plastic board with a grease pencil to demonstrate.

"Using a compass to align ourselves to north, we now have the board and map set to the ground around us." He demonstrated this by lining the board up with the north on a compass.

He pointed to the five-foot long mortar tube in the center of the pit. "There's a fixed firing pin at the bottom of the tube. When the mortar round is dropped down the tube, its primer strikes the firing pin and ignites the internal charge."

He picked up a live mortar round from a stack of them neatly piled along the inside of the mortar pit wall. Pointing to the primer cap on the bottom of the mortar round, he said, "The flash from the primer ignites the internal charge and shoots the mortar back out of the tube. If we want it to travel farther, we attach bags of gunpowder." He showed me several thin, white canvas bags tied around the mortar round.

"Okay." I nodded.

"The distance the mortar travels will depend on the number of charges attached to the round and the angle or elevation of the tube. Theoretically, if the round is shot straight up, ninety degrees elevation, it will come right back down the tube, bullet end first." Charles held the mortar round in both hands and pretended that it had just come out of the tube, rolled over at its zenith and fell back down, into the tube.

"That a live round you're playing with?" I asked nervously.

Charles laughed. "Yeah. It's safe. It takes a firing pin to set them off." He put the mortar round down and took out a pencil and notebook.

"So, at forty-five degrees, the round shoots farther out. He demonstrated by drawing an arch with his pencil. "We have a mortar manual with tables that tell us the number of charges needed at each elevation for any given distance. For example..." He thumbed through the paperback manual and found a table to show me. "A charge one, at forty-five degrees elevation will land the round 100 yards out. A charge two at the same forty-five degrees will land 110 yards. But a charge two at sixty-five degrees will land at 100 yards, it just travels higher."

He drew a higher arch on the paper and I nodded.

“We want to use the lowest charge possible whenever we can. That’s important because you don’t want to hit the helicopters or fighter jets. “The only other computation is the direction. Like I said, we use our compasses to get our maps aligned with the real ground around us. Those red and white, striped poles with the flashlights attached to them, are aligned to due north. We can see them at night, to help us line up the compass points. We set up the mortar tube so that we’re shooting where we want to. Understand?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“We go over the maps with the lieutenant and Sergeant Bell at each firebase. They’ll point out the trails that they think the VC will use at night and the open areas where they’ll be firing their mortars from. A mortar can’t be shot from under trees, so we know they’re firing at us from clearings. We also compute our tree lines, the entire way around the perimeter,” he pointed to the tree line with his pencil.

“The reason infantry companies set up in clearings is so the enemy will have to come at us across an open area. If the rifle platoons have to chop down trees to make a clearing, than that’s what they should do. Having this open area means that there is a tree line around the camp from which the attack will be launched.” He paused and sat down next to me. “We wire in the shots to the tree lines so we can kill them there, before they charge us.”

“Let’s try to compute some targets.” Charles pointed to different locations on the map. I calculated the azimuth, direction that is, from the numbers on the board and I used the manual to set the charge and the elevation needed to hit it. “Good, that’s right,” Charles said as he checked my numbers on the second problem. “The worst situation for a mortar squad is a dud round. The gunner and assistant gunner have to take the mortar tube off of its base plate, turn it almost upside down and

slide the round back out. The gunner then has to catch it with his hands and pull it the rest of the way out.”

Charles walked to the mortar tube and took it off of its base and swung it upside down. “If the internal charge is late igniting and suddenly goes off, the round will explode and the entire crew would be killed.”

“Who has to do that?” I asked.

“It’s the gunner’s responsibility.”

“Good,” I said.

“I’ve seen them remove a dud round while we were in the middle of a firefight, in the rain, at night, with bullets zinging in over our heads and the gunner had to get up on his feet to turn the tube upside down and remove the round.”

“Bummer,” I said and Charles laughed. It was the first time I had seen him smile.

“We have two first gunners in the platoon.” He went on, “As first gunners they have certain rights, like they’re exempt from lone patrol. They have reputations, too. Guys say, ‘Oh, that’s Gardner. He’s the gunner in Bravo Company.’ You know, there’s some respect in being the gunner, just like there is for machine gunners. The two best guys in the platoon are varsity and each has his gun unless someone comes along who can do it better or is steadier under fire.”

Charles had relaxed and he studied the features on my face as he spoke. I listened without interrupting or joking. He was telling me how it was on the line and I appreciated it.

He had me mark the computer board with the location of the night’s ambush.

“We need to know where our own people are so we don’t end up hitting them during the heat of a firefight,” he explained.

“I understand,” I said, and nodded my head.

When I had finished with Charles I walked to a foxhole where the men from Oscar platoon were hanging out. There were two

games of Bid Whist being played. One of the men handed me a pipe and I took a toke. I smoked it and drank a beer from the platoon's beer allotment. Some of the men preferred milk, which they drank straight from orange and white milk cartons. An old tape player was blaring out Junior Walker and the All Stars' *Shotgun, I'm a Road Runner, Shake, Finger Pop, and Tune Up*.

I listened to the table talk. A soldier named Rojas, a tall man who looked like an Apache warrior, smiled and said hi. His jet-black hair had blue highlights in it. He spoke with a slight stutter but his voice had a relaxed pace. Rojas wore his green towel like a serape, keeping the sun off of his shoulders. I liked that idea and decided I would cut a slit in the middle of mine when I went back to my foxhole. Rojas asked me questions about home. What was going on? What was new?

"They're burning down the cities," I said. "There's tanks in Detroit and Newark and..." I stopped short when I noticed Delino had his shirt buttoned up, both sleeves and collar. Rojas saw me stare and said,

"Tony's sick of the sun."

"It's too damn hot to be wearing your shirt buttoned up," I said.

"I'm not here for a tan like you pretty boys," Delino said. He grinned, ear to ear.

I watched them play a couple of hands.

"Can you play Bid Whist?" Rojas asked me.

"I know a little bridge," I said.

"I'll explain the rules and after this game, you'll be my partner."

The team we played against was the gunner Gardner and a soldier named Jesse. Rojas sat across from me. Gardner was to my left and Jesse to my right. Jesse was a couple of inches taller than me. He had a muscular build, and dark black skin with a flat, wide nose. He said he was from Georgia. His head bopped

up and down as he spoke and I laughed at him when I first noticed it. Jesse stared me down, putting me on edge. My stomach tightened and my hands started to perspire.

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?" Rojas asked me.

"One sister and one brother in college," I said, "and a younger brother still at home. How about you?"

"I have three sisters," Rojas said.

"Where you from?" the gunner Gardner asked me. He was a big man and well built, like a linebacker. I noticed that he had perfectly formed ears and a small nose. His face looked like the ones on classical Greek urns.

"New Jersey," I said.

"I hear only faggots come from New Jersey," Jesse said.

"You heard wrong," I said.

"What college does your brother go to?" Rojas asked.

"He a cock sucker too?" Jesse said.

"Nah," I said. "He saw your brother licking dick and it made him sick."

A big OOH went up from the gallery.

"Don't you be talking `bout my brother, motherfucker," Jesse said.

"Then stop talking about mine," I answered.

"Knock it off, Jesse," Rojas said.

Jesse ignored him. "You get your white ass beat bad you talk 'bout my family."

"That right?" I said.

"Yeah, that's right, muthafucka."

"Fuck you, man."

Jesse jumped up and knocked over the card table. The drinks and cards went flying. He pushed me hard in the chest with both hands and I stumbled backward then caught my

balance. Rojas jumped in between us and wrestled Jesse to the ground.

"You want to fight him?" Rojas growled as he held Jesse's throat with his left hand and cocked his right fist. "You got to fight me first."

The men jumped in to separate them. I grabbed a man who had grabbed Rojas, Gardner held me.

"Okay, Rojas, okay." Jesse looked away, avoiding his eyes. The fight went out of him and Rojas relaxed his grip.

"I was just testing him," Jesse said as we picked up the cards and put the card table back together. Gardner mixed and dealt out a new hand.

"I was just checking him out." Jesse repeated.

"This is our platoon," Rojas said. "You make a new guy feel at home here. You don't start jiving with them."

"I was just foolin' with him," Jesse said.

"You do it all the time," Rojas said, "I'm tired of it." We played in silence. My hands trembled as I sorted my cards. To break the mood I said, "I think he knocked over the table just to get rid of his lousy hand."

"Yeah, that's right," Jesse said to Rojas. "I fooled ya. Ha-ha." His head bobbed up and down and I laughed at him again but the atmosphere had changed and it wasn't long before Jesse and I were laughing at each other's jokes.

"Hey, how come my joker doesn't win the book?" I asked as Gardner pulled in a book I thought I had won.

"Man, that's the Big Boy right there," Jesse said.

"One joker's the Little Boy, one's the Big Boy," Rojas said. "The Little Boy beats everything except the Big Boy."

"How do I know which is which?" I asked.

"Look here," Gardner said. He turned the two joker cards face up for me to see. "You see there? It's got the trademark on it."

I picked them up. The Big Boy had the Bicycle trademark and the word "Guaranteed" printed on it.

"You sure do get excited when you win," I said to Gardner as he slammed his card hard on the table and pulled in the next trick.

"You got to play with style, my man," Gardner said. "Style is what it's all about."

"Any style will do as long as it's your own," Rojas added.

In the next game, Jesse slapped down the little joker and howled, thinking he had won the trick. I looked him dead in the eye, turned the Big Boy over slowly and pointed at the trademark. "Guaranteed," I said.

"Oh man, shit!" Jesse laughed.

After the card game the whole squad went to chow together. When we came back, Sergeant Bell assigned me to perimeter night watch with November platoon. I took my M-16, ammo, and grenades and walked to November's foxholes out on the perimeter.

"You the new man from Oscar?" November's platoon leader asked as I approached their row of sandbag bunkers.

"That's me," I said, paying more attention to the soldiers staring at me then to the lieutenant.

"That's Carter's foxhole there." The lieutenant pointed to a foxhole at the perimeter. "You'll be on watch with him."

I had heard about Carter. In Di An, the men had mentioned him, and again this afternoon while we were playing cards. He was the machine gunner in November platoon, and, they said, the toughest man in Bravo Company. Carter watched me approach from atop his foxhole. He was tall and carried over two hundred twenty pounds, all of it muscle. He had a large head with a square jaw.

"I'm from Oscar platoon," I said with a wave of hello. "They sent me out for night watch."



"You're one of the new guys. Where you from?" Carter asked.

"Newark," I said as I put my gear down.

"Shit," Carter said in a southern drawl. "Down home, we eat guys from Newark for lunch."

"Oh yeah? You eat 'em raw or with ketchup?"

Carter looked at me a moment then laughed. "What's your name, boy?" he asked.

"The name's Paul Gebhart, and I'd appreciate you not calling me boy."

"Hah!" Carter laughed. "You would, huh?"

"Yes, Sir, I'd appreciate it." I kept my hands tight on my M-16 so he wouldn't see them trembling.

"Man, I'd take you easy," Carter scoffed.

"Maybe," I said, "but being just five foot seven, I've always had to live my life by Colt's rule."

Carter turned, "What the hell you talking about, boy?"

"It's simple, really," I said. "You see, it was God that created man but it was Mr. Colt that made us equal." Carter broke up laughing.

"You got balls, boy."

"Yeah, and an M-16." I looked at him without smiling.

"Okay, Gebhart don't *shoot* me." He put his hands up in mock surrender. "I won't call you boy no more."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

He took a joint from his shirt pocket and offered it to me, "You want some?"

"Sure, thanks," I said. I took the joint, lit it, and pulled in. The smoke blinded me and I passed it back to Carter with my eyes shut. Carter laughed.

"You sure do make some funny faces, Gebhart."

"I didn't know we were on camera," I said. "I'm just being myself. You play sports in high school?"

"Of course. I played halfback in football, forward in basketball and batted cleanup in baseball. I had scholarship offers from some good colleges too."

"How come you didn't go?" I asked.

"Couldn't," he said softly. "I needed to go to work to help my momma support my seven brothers and sisters." Carter paused. "I got drafted into the army just a year out of high school."

"Well, maybe you can go to school on the GI bill when you get home."

"Yeah, I plan to."

We listened to music on Carter's radio and talked about sports and the civil rights problems. The other men in Carter's squad came over and sat with us. We sang along to Otis Redding's *Try a Little Tenderness* and continued with Aretha Franklin and Wilson Pickett tunes. It started to rain, but when Arthur Conley's *Sweet Soul Music* came on, our voices joined together in a loud, joyous chorus.

Some of the men danced on top of the foxhole, singing and shouting even as the rain poured down. The party was interrupted when we saw one of the headquarters people walking over. He stopped and stood in the rain by our foxhole. The raindrops dripped from his helmet and rolled down his plastic poncho. I could see he was not happy at being sent out as the messenger. I turned the radio off so we could hear what he was saying over the sound of the rain hitting the ground.

"The word is if the captain has to send me back, all of you will go on latrine duty for a week."

People cleared out after that.

"I'll take first watch, Jeb-heart," Carter said.

"Gebhart," I said. "Okay. Well, then I'll take second watch."

Carter laughed, "Okay Jump-start, two hours on, two off, until 6 a.m. then you can go back to Oscar platoon."

"Aye aye, Admiral," I saluted Carter sarcastically and wrapped myself into my camouflage poncho liner and tried to sleep. About an hour later Carter woke me up.

"I hear movement, man." Carter shook my leg, "I hear movement, man. They're coming, they're coming!"

I scrambled to find my M-16. I locked and loaded and jumped to the front of the foxhole and looked out the firing window. "Where? Where?" I shouted, not seeing anything in the dark.

Carter laughed.

"Geez, man," I said, "you got me good." I took a deep breath. "Damn, man, don't ever do that again."

Carter, still laughing at me said, "You're okay, Jeb-fart,"

"So are you, Far-ter." I punched him on the arm.

The next morning, I went to breakfast with the men in November platoon. We stood in line outside of the large mess tent and the men joked with their young medic named Stevens. He was slightly built with blond hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion.

"Hey, Whitebread," one of the men called out. "How come you don't carry a weapon?" Another black soldier with a bandanna on his forehead asked. "You crazy or something, Stevens?"

Stevens chuckled. "Don't care to."

"What's the matter with you, boy?" another brother asked. "Everyone carries a weapon in Vietnam."

"The guys in the rear have weapons, even the damn generals carry pistols," a skinny white kid with a heavy peace metal around his neck said.

"The other medics carry M-16s just like the grunts," Carter said.

"I just don't want to shoot anyone," Stevens answered. He said it without emotion.

"Yeah, but they'll be shooting at you!" one black rifleman said.

"I expect they will. They're shooting at everyone," Stevens concurred.

"Yeah, but the VC like killing medics, radiomen and officers," Carter put in. "I think they get extra rice for killing you guys."

"Well, I won't shoot back," Stevens said, "so why should I carry a gun around?"

"Why you here then?" someone asked him. "You volunteered for Vietnam, didn't you?"

"My religion won't allow me to fight in a war, but I wanted to help out if I could." Stevens spoke in an easy, matter of fact manner. I didn't agree with his philosophy but he had guts and I found it easy to like his style.

That afternoon I was lying on my air mattresses under a leanto. I had just lit up a joint when Delino walked by. He was wearing his shirt buttoned to the collar as usual. "No thanks, guy." He waved off my offer.

"No?" I said.

"No, uh uh," he said. "I don't smoke that funny weed."

"Suit yourself," I said and took another hit.

"Why do you want to get high anyway?" he asked me.

"It's fun. You see those clouds there?"

"Yeah." Delino looked up at the clouds drifting above us.

"Before I smoked this joint, I hardly noticed them, now I really see them. They're beautiful. Do you see how they break apart and then reform? See the sunlight melting them. Exquisite, don't you think?"

"You're a head okay," he laughed.

"Head and a half," I said.

"King of the heads. Okay, then I'm going to call you Cloud Six."

"Huh? You mean cloud nine?"

“No, uh-uh. The Captain is Bravo Six, the Lieutenant is Oscar Six. So, you’re Cloud Six.”

“Okay, I get it. Cloud Six it is then.” I went into my rucksack and pulled out a black felt pen and wrote “Cloud 6” in fat balloon letters on the side of my camouflage helmet cover.

Later that afternoon Sergeant Bell called for a platoon meeting. “Okay, listen up,” he said in a loud voice from the center of the mortar pit. “The following people are on LP duty tonight. Emery, you and Gee-bart will be out in front of November platoon. Jesse, you and Cool will take the LP in front of Lima.”

“Oh man, shit,” Jesse said.

“You got a problem?” Bell asked.

“I just had LP duty,” Jesse complained.

“Well, you’ve got it again, and if you give me any more bitching you’ll have it again tomorrow. You hear me?”

Jesse just mumbled and the sarge ignored him.

“LPs will go out at seventeen-thirty, so eat early and have all of your gear ready. Cool, if you’re late, I’m gonna send you out there every goddamn night, so get your head out of your ass. You hear me?”

Cool didn’t say anything but after Bell walked away from the mortar pit he began to rag him. “That farm boy thinks these white people will treat him like their equal ‘cause they let him order us around. That dumb-shit, Uncle Tom.”

“What’s el-pee duty?” I asked Delino while Cool was complaining.

“Listening Post, but we call it the Lone Patrol. It’s guard duty outside of the perimeter, an early warning system. If the VC try and sneak up, the listening posts will be able to hear them. They’ll report the movement to the company commander and request permission to blow the LP. If permission is granted, the men can detonate their claymores, throw all their grenades, and

under cover from that barrage, run their asses off trying to get back inside the perimeter.”

Delino walked with me to the mess tent. He told the cook we had LP duty and they let us in to eat early. “The sarge didn’t call your name,” I said as we filled our trays.

“Yeah, well, I’m going out with you,” he said. “I want to show you the right way to pull an LP.”

“Thanks, Tony,” I said.

After supper, Delino and I sat together and prepared our gear.

“There’s nothing worse than having to try and find your way back through the small opening in the barbed wire,” he explained. “It’s dark and there’s fire coming from both the Vietnamese behind you and your own company in front of you. It’s a lone patrol. If you see what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. But how do you get back then?”

“You just go for it, man. You’re either right or dead.”

“I see.”

He meticulously packed the rucksack with claymores, detonators, extra ammo clips, grenades, and ammo for the thump gun.

“There are other listening posts sent out by the rifle platoons each night, too,” Delino said. “So when we speak over the radio we have to identify ourselves. Each platoon has its own radio name, so we’ll be Oscar LP One.” Delino kissed his Virgin Mary medal and crossed himself.

About 5:30, just before sundown, we met up with Emery, the soldier I had pulled perimeter watch with in Di An. Emery flipped the joint he was smoking and said, “Either of you bring any rations? I’ve got the munchies.”

“I’ve got a T-bone steak in my pack,” Delino said, “follow me to Chez LP.”

“Yeah, right,” Emery laughed.

We walked to the perimeter, Delino with a radio strapped on his back and me carrying the rucksack. We each had M-16s and I had the short thump gun too. We went single file through the small opening in the barbed wire in front of November's foxholes. There was a tree stump sticking up about forty yards out, sixty yards from the tree line. We set up our LP there. While Emery covered us, Delino and I walked out to the tree line and set up trip flares. We came back fifteen yards and put three claymore mines down, inserted the blasting caps and carefully unrolled the wires back to our post. Delino connected hand detonators to the wires and made a little shelf on the tree stump where the detonators would be within easy reach.

While we cleared the ground around us, November platoon came out of the barbed wire in single file. "They'll be out on ambush a couple of hundred yards beyond the tree line," Delino explained.

The men in November were going out light, without their rucksacks. They each carried a canteen, ammo clips, and grenades, all of it attached to their web belts. Their poncho liners were draped like sashes, hanging from their left shoulders down to their right hips. Each of them had his M-16, except Carter; he carried the 30caliber machine gun. He flashed me the peace sign as he walked by. Two of the men in his squad walked behind him with cans of 30caliber ammo. One of the ammo bearers shouted to Delino, "Hey, man. Make sure you don't shoot if we blow the ambush and come back in."

"No problem, guy," Delino called back, "just come back the same way you're going out."

"We'll try, bro."

"Yeah, well, don't come back out through there." Delino pointed to the tree line directly in front of our position. The men in November knew we had just set out trip flares and claymores.

"In the confusion of a blown ambush," Delino explained to me, "trying to make it back in the dark, it's easy to go off course. We'll hear it if the ambush blows. If it does, we have to be sure it isn't them setting off our trip flares."

"If we wait too long," I said, "VC could get past the claymores."

"We'll know it's them," Emery said. "For one thing, they'll be yelling to us. For another, headquarters will be telling us what's going on."

I watched November disappear into the night as I helped clear the ground for our bedrolls. A steady drizzle started to fall. I hoped I'd be able to keep some parts of myself dry, but then it really came down. I couldn't see three feet. Enormous raindrops pelted the ground; the jungle turned into a noisy sea of mud.

"How the hell are we going to see or hear anything?" I shouted into Delino's ear.

"We won't," he yelled back into mine.

"What do we do?" I asked.

"Nothing we can do. Just keep watch as best we can." Emery leaned into me. "This is fucked," he shouted in my ear. I looked closely into his face. Rainwater dripped down his coffee colored forehead onto his high cheekbones.

"I'm of the same opinion," I agreed.

"Write your Congressman," Delino said. We laughed and Delino gave us his ear-to-ear grin, breaking the sour mood we had fallen into.

For hours we sat huddled together, shoulder to shoulder in the dark. The rain hammered down on our helmets and ponchos. We couldn't see or hear anything more than an arm's length away. I lost track of time. I was tired and the monotonous rain made me drowsy. Under my poncho, where my sides touched Emery and Delino, the wet cloth of my fatigues held my



body heat. That warmth lolled me towards sleep and only the cold rain hitting me in the face, kept me awake.

When the rain subsided, I took the first watch. Delino and Emery crawled under their ponchos and covered themselves. My uniform was soaked through to my socks. Now that we weren't huddled together for body heat, I felt cold and frightened. Emery from deep inside his poncho liner peeked out at me. "You start to fall asleep, you wake me up, hear?"

"I won't fall asleep on my watch."

"Yeah, but if you get sleepy, get me up. It doesn't matter if you need help. It's okay to say, 'I'm falling asleep.' What's important is that we make it out of here alive, even if it takes all three of us staying up all night to do it. You understand me?"

"Okay, sure," I said.

"Hey," Emery added, "and if I snore just touch me with your foot."

"Yeah, me too," Delino said from underneath his poncho.

It was still raining. I had my back to the tree stump and peered out into the black night. Thirty yards in front of us was a little fort made from a large tree trunk and a pile of logs. I heard what sounded like a twig breaking near there. It could be a deer or just the rain. I heard what sounded like the snapping of branches from another spot by the tree line. I leaned forward and peered intently into the dark. Delino heard me stirring.

"You got something?" he asked without taking the poncho off of his face.

"I'm not sure," I whispered.

"Shit, Paul, you heard movement?" Emery sat up.

"Well I've got branches cracking and twigs snapping," I said. "I'm not sure from what. Hey, Delino, let me thump that pile of trees out there."

"Okay, go for it," he said from underneath his poncho. "We got tons of ammo, shoot the shit out of it." Then he sat up too.

"Wait a minute." He put the radio's handset to his mouth and whispered. "Oscar LP One to Oscar Watch, over."

There was static over the radio then, "Oscar Watch, over."

"Permission to thump in h and i, over."

"Do you have movement? Over."

"Negative, some noises, over."

"Roger, hold, will need to advise Bravo Six, over."

"Roger, out," Delino said.

"What's h and i?" I asked him.

"Harassment and interdiction."

"I see."

We listened as Oscar watch contacted Headquarters watch. The headquarters people had already heard our conversation as had everyone else on that band. Headquarters watch came back on the radio. "Oscar LP One, this is Bravo Five, over."

"It's the First Sergeant," Delino said to me. "I'll tell him it's Cloud Six calling."

I laughed, grateful he was with us and making jokes.

"Oscar LP One, over," Delino said.

"Permission granted," the First Sergeant said. "We'll advise ambush and line platoons, over and out."

"Roger, Bravo Five, over and out." Delino hung up the handset, looked at me, and said, "Shoot'em up, guy."

"Okay, I'm gonna harass and inter-dick'em."

Delino and Emery laughed. I broke open the muzzle of the thump gun and put in a grenade round that looked like a giant, green bullet, then snapped the barrel closed. When I fired the grenade launcher it made a quiet "thump" without showing a muzzle flash. Shooting it wouldn't give away our position. A few seconds after I fired, a quick orange flash and a puff of white-gray smoke marked the site of the explosion. I thumped every sound I heard, shooting a round or two each minute. I shot twenty something rounds—thump, thump, thump—before

Delino laughed at me from underneath his poncho. "If I was the VC I'd find another place to try and come in. This guy's blown up everything out there."

"That's right," I said in hushed voice. "In fact, I'm for setting off one or two of those claymores."

"No!" Delino laughed again. "Don't do that. The Captain would have a bird."

"Huh? The Captain would give birth to a colonel?"

Delino laughed, pulled the poncho down to his chin, and looked at me, "You're crazy, Gebhart. You know that, right?"

They fell back to sleep and I kept watch. The jungle quieted down and I stopped thumping it. The cold night seeped into my clothes. Mosquitoes buzzed around my face and in my ears. I slapped at them quietly. My hands and neck soon were lumpy with bites. I looked at my watch every few minutes, mostly to have something to do, but also because the lighted green dial relieved the monotony of the dark night. At 2 a.m. I nudged Delino's leg with my foot. He pulled himself slowly out of his poncho. When he crawled over to the tree stump, I crawled away to lie down. The rain had stopped but I was cold and wet and branches poked me through the poncho. I was still awake when I heard Emery take the last watch of the night. I heard them changing places and whispered from underneath my poncho, "Hey, Emery."

"Yeah?"

"You start to get sleepy, you wake me up, you hear?"

"You know I will, bro, you know I will."

In time, without realizing it, I dozed off. Just before dawn, in my dream, Emery leaned over and shook me. I saw that very clearly and at the exact moment that I was dreaming it, Emery really did lean over and shook my calf. "Hey, Paul, come on," he said, "let's get out of here."

I pulled the poncho down off my face and the dawn's light made me blink. Emery started to gather up his gear. Delino reached for the radio and said in a normal voice, "Oscar LP One to Oscar Watch, over." The sound of his voice surprised me awake. I heard the response clearly too, now that Delino had turned up the radio's volume.

"Oscar Watch, over."

"We're coming in, over."

"Roger, that's affirmative, over and out."

I sat up and stretched. I was sore from the hard ground and wet to the skin. I looked into the camp. It was light enough for the men on the perimeter to see us through a low-lying fog. The air was clean, flush with the smell of wet earth. I saw small fires start inside the camp. All the sounds of the rising men were quiet, yet each one floated distinctly over the campground before being absorbed by the fog and jungle brush.

We disconnected the three detonators and rolled up the wires as we walked out to the tree line. At the end of the wires, we took the blasting caps out of the back of the claymores and gathered them up. Emery pulled up the trip flares and we packed all of this into the rucksack.

Delino swung the radio onto his back and we walked through the ground fog. I pulled my poncho liner tighter around my shoulders. Thin and as wet as it was, the camouflage liner kept me warm.

As we approached the barbed wire, I had a flash of déjà vu of soldiers in the Civil War, on a morning with the same low-lying ground fog hovering above the damp earth. We were wet, cold soldiers as soldiers had been a hundred years before.

"Roman soldiers must have had mornings just like this too," I said, "after a rainy night two thousand years ago."

"Yeah, and they must have been just as sick of it as we are," Emery said in a tired voice.

We found the opening in the wire and walked past the perimeter foxholes towards Oscar platoon. It was with a sense of homecoming that Emery and I went to the mess tent to get coffee.

“Hey, Paul,” Moore said as I got in the chow line behind him. “You look like you been sleeping on sticks.”

“Sticks and stones as a matter of fact,” I said. “It’s a bitch out there, man.”

We took our coffee back to Oscar. Delino had started a small fire and had changed into dry fatigues. I put on dry fatigues too and brought a five-gallon can of water from the water trailer. I filled my steel helmet and put it over the fire. When the water was hot, I brushed my teeth, heated another pot full and washed my face in that water, then shaved. Delino and Emery did the same in their steel pots. No one spoke. We warmed ourselves by the fire as the fog slowly lifted. I knew Emery and Delino were both my friends. We didn’t have to talk about it, either. I would go with these two anywhere they were sent. I knew I could trust them and I knew they felt the same about me.

The LPs had the day off while the rest of the platoon had a regular day of work. I lay out in the sun and slept. In the afternoon I went under a lean-to and smoked grass. We had a couple of pipes going while *Crimson and Clover* by the Shondells, *Expressway to Your Heart* by the Soul Survivors, and *I Can See for Miles* by the Who played on the radio. When they could, men in other platoons stopped over to smoke and listen to the radio.

In the weeks that followed, my days became a routine of joining in the patrols that swept the road for mines in the morning. Went on patrols through the woods in the afternoon, practiced with the mortars for an hour or two each day and ended with perimeter or LP duty at night. The cooks made us

one hot meal a day, either breakfast or dinner, and every day the Chinook flew in with supplies and the mail. Mail call was the highlight of my day and I saw it was the same for everyone.

They flew out special turkey dinners for us on Thanksgiving and we ate them under lean-tos to get out of the tropical sun. I longed to be in the chill autumn air, watching football games and putting on a sweater and heavy coat to go outdoors. I wrote a long letter to Mary and one to my parents. I told them that Thanksgiving had been quiet, and, like everyone else, I missed being home for the holidays.

Several weeks after Thanksgiving, Sergeant Bell brought us the word that Bravo Company was to meet up with the rest of the battalion in the village of Quon Loi. After breakfast everyone in the camp began to tear it down. When we were ready to go, I hoisted my fifty-pound rucksack and went across the mortar pit where Delino handed me a pick and hung the round computer board around my neck. Yoakum, a small, dark haired man from Oklahoma, and Langford from Kentucky, grabbed the mortar tube and base plate. Astorga,, an Hispanic soldier from Corpus Cristi, picked up a box of mortar rounds. Delino handed everything out until the pit was empty. We walked away, leaving only the sandbags and empty foxholes as a sign that we had been there.

My M-16 weighed about twelve pounds; the ammo pouches around my waist another five pounds. On my webbing, the two grenades weighed a pound each, my two water canteens filled to the brim a couple of pounds more. In the heat and humidity, my body was awash in sweat. All around me men were struggling with their loads. "Now I know why they call us grunts," I said.

A Chinook landed and the water trailer was attached to its underbelly with long cables. It flew off with the water trailer swinging underneath it like a pendulum. The men of Bravo Company went into the shallow ditches on either side of the road. I leaned against the dirt embankment to take the weight off of my shoulders. We kept our eyes on the tree line and

waited. Twenty minutes later I saw the Huey helicopters approach. They flew in a “V” formation, but half a mile out the pilots folded into single file.

“It takes guts to fly in and out of these landing zones,” Rojas said. “The airmen are strict army—polished boots and starched shirts—so we call them ‘Slicks.’ But we get along with them fine.”

“See that door gunner?” Jesse pointed to a chopper landing. “You can volunteer for that. But it’ll cost you another year.”

“You’d get a clean bunk and showers every night,” Charles added, “but door gunners and point dog handlers are the most dangerous jobs out here.”

As the Hueys touched down, soldiers on both sides of the road struggled to their feet. Oscar platoon covered the men from Lima and Mike as they loaded. When they were in, the helicopters took off in a roar of jet engines and whirling dust. Another flight of choppers arrived and loaded the balance of Mike platoon and Headquarters. November and Oscar platoons waited in the ditch for a half-hour until the helicopters returned.

When they approached, Sergeant Bell called out, “Okay, let’s go. Let’s go!”

His orders were echoed along the ditch as we helped each other up and waddled onto the road as fast as we could. A gust of dirt kicked up from the rotor wash and stung my face.

“Let’s go! Let’s go! Hustle up!” I heard the chopper crew yelling to us.

I threw the pick in. Emery and Rojas climbed in from the other side and were already in the middle. I didn’t see how all of us were going to fit.

“You sit there.” Delino pointed to the doorway. “Moore, you’re on the other side.”

Delino and Charles held the frame of the chopper and I sat in between them and hung onto their arms. Our legs dangled out of the open door. The Huey took off and immediately banked

sharply to the left. I looked down at my feet; beneath me, the jungle treetops flashed by at a hundred miles an hour. I felt my butt sliding out.

"Hey! Pull me in!" I screamed.

"Don't worry, Gebhart, no one's ever fallen out." Delino laughed.

"Yiii! I'm not kidding. Pull me IN!" I screamed again. I held them in a death lock. "If I go down," I shouted over the roar of the engines, "you're both going with me!"

The chopper pilot straightened, then banked to the right. "Whoa! Hey, motherfucker!" I heard Moore yell from the other door. "Pull me in. PULL ME IN! GOD DAMN IT!"

I laughed along with the rest at his pleading.

Ten minutes airborne, the helicopters flew over a remote Montagnard village in the lower central highlands. "I can see tit, I'm telling ya," Emery hollered out. "Look right there." He pointed to the top of a hill where small figures walked along a dirt path.

We stretched our necks and the guys in the middle leaned over our shoulders; everyone wanted to glimpse the half-naked women. I didn't see any tits, but the beauty of the landscape transfixed me. The lush green hills and valleys were cut through with streams and waterfalls. "It's beautiful," I shouted into Delino's ear.

"I didn't see her," he shouted back.

A twenty-minute ride brought the village of Quon Loi into sight. Below us, acres of rubber trees grew in straight rows, and an old mansion house on a hill in the middle of the plantation shone brilliant white in the morning sunlight.

"Quon Loi was a French rubber plantation," Toby yelled into my ear.

"It looks like it," I said. We hadn't spoken two words since the night out at the perimeter in Di An, but I had kept my eye



on him these past weeks. I liked how he handled himself. He was quiet but had a fresh sense of humor and worked hard. I was glad he was speaking to me again. "Except they've built a base around it." I pointed to the rows of barbed wire and tall watchtowers out on the perimeter.

Our choppers landed on a paved runway and we piled out and walked alongside the tarmac to Bravo Company's new camp. Foxholes left behind by previous grunts were already dug and sandbagged. All we had to do was unload and set up the mortars.

We were off duty that night; no LPs, no ambushes. The men in the other platoons came over to the mortar pits. Radios played, beer, whiskey, and weed were in abundant supply. Four gas lanterns lit up the two mortar pits. Outside of this ring of light, it was pitch black. The night air was balmy and the men from November platoon began to sing as the radio played. Carter did his best Smokey Robinson *Tracks of My Tears* imitation while his crew danced and sang the Miracles' part. It was our turn next. The men from Oscar stood in the center of the pit and sang along with Aretha Franklin's *Respect*. Gardner sang the lead part with Aretha while the rest of us did a funky line dance and sang the background: "Just a little bit, just a little bit."

We sounded pretty good too, except that Emery's voice was an out-of-pitch falsetto.

The song ended and we all cheered. I sat on the pit wall and watched as the soldiers in Mike platoon discussed which song they were going to perform. I took a toke from the pipe Mack had just passed me. Emery stood in front of us, tall, skinny and smiling with a red eyed, stoned grin.

"Emery, man," I said, "you sounded terrible."

"Nah, it wasn't me," he said. "I was good."

"Good?" Moore said. "Man, Emery, you sounded like a cat that gotta stick stuck up its ass."

Emery laughed and said, "What you talking about, bro? I was cooking."

I didn't drink any whiskey but the weed really messed me up. I needed to lie down. I went to find my lean-to but when I left the circle of light around the mortar pits, I was lost. The darkness fell over me like a black velvet cloth and I stumbled around, totally blind. It was so dark I had to close my eyes to make sure they had been opened. As it turned out it didn't matter if my eyes were open or shut, so I kept them closed. It was better that way anyway. I could see beautiful colored lights in my mind. With both of my arms stretched out in front of me, and my eyes still closed, I felt my way, one step at a time. I was doing good too, until I tripped over sandbags and crashed into someone's lean-to. I disentangled myself from the ponchos and made my way back, crawling the last long yards to the lights by the mortar pits. I found the sandbag wall and must have crashed there because in the morning that's where I found myself. Or should I say that's where Sergeant Bell found me.

"Gee-bart! What the hell are you doing?" he bellowed out in his best Fort Benning voice.

I opened one eye. Sergeant Bell stood over me with his hands on his hips. "I was sleeping, Sarge."

"Yeah, but why aren't you at your own foxhole instead of laying sprawled out here, like you're laying in some gutter somewhere."

I looked at him and blinked. "What was the question?"

Bell couldn't help but laugh. "Why the hell aren't you by your own foxhole?" he said, serious again.

"I couldn't find it."

"You couldn't find it? Say, do you know what happened to my hooch?"

"Huh? Your what?"

“My lean-to. I came back from the NCO club last night and found my tent a shambles. Someone knocked it down and trampled all over my stuff. Was that you Gee-bart?”

“It might possibly could have been me.”

“What do you ‘mean might possibly could have been?’”

“I remember crashing into something. It could have been yours, Sarge. But I wasn’t the only one who couldn’t see in the dark.”

“No, but you’re the one I’m putting on KP. Get your dumb ass up and over to the mess tent. You’re on KP this morning, AND tonight too.” He walked off talking to God knows who, his arms flapping at his sides. I watched him disappear into the mess tent. I figured I’d better head that way myself. I needed coffee, bad.

After drinking a pot-full and eating some biscuits, I sat down amongst a pile of pots and pans outside the open flaps at the back of the mess tent. It wasn’t much fun either, until two of the cooks came out and lit a doobie. “You want some?” The white cook with a Roman nose asked me.

“I guess, yeah, thanks,” I said. I took a hit off of the roach clip.

“I’m James Mancelli,” he said. “They call me Buffalo. This is Walter Painter.”

“Hey, breeze,” Painter said. He was a black man, bigger than Mancelli. He had a beer belly and wore a tiger’s tooth on a shoelace around his neck.

“Hey,” I said.

“Where you from?” Mancelli asked.

“Union, New Jersey,” I said and handed him back the roach clip.

“I’m from Buffalo.”

“I kinda got that,” I said and Painter laughed.

“He is stupid sometimes, ‘specially on this funny weed.”

"It is good stuff," I said, feeling the effect of the grass. It was very good. I started to have fun, washing the pots like I was taking a bubble bath. Only problem was, I learned later, when the water dried, my fatigues were covered in cooking grease. That problem was solved pretty nicely though because after chow, one platoon at a time, we walked down to the plantation house to take showers.

"It looks like an old Southern mansion in a movie," I said as we passed by the two-story house. It had four white pillars in front and wide wooden steps. The steps led up to a porch that encircled the entire first floor. Large tropical plants grew against the walls of the porch and tall palm trees graced the front lawn. "This was a French colony only ten years ago," I said to Delino.

"Those French people lived pretty good, huh?" he said.

"I think it was the Michelins that owned this place," I said. "It was their rubber company, I'm sure of that."

"Well, the general lives in the big house now," Delino said. "Things change but they stay the same."

We went to the administration buildings across the road from the mansion. They were freshly painted white and had dark wood shutters at each window. We stood in line until our platoon was called in. Each of us received two new sets of fatigues, drawers and three new towels. The supply personnel pointed us towards the showers. It had been 10 weeks since I had a decent hot shower. When it was my turn, I let the water run over my head. "This is sheer bliss," I said to Emery. "Sometimes you got to get dirty to know how good it is to feel clean," I said as I soaped myself real good.

"We're clean like motherfuckers," he said with a smile through the soap lathered on his hair and face.

I stopped scrubbing. "How clean is a motherfucker, anyway?" I asked.

"Pretty clean, Jack. Pretty clean," Emery laughed.

Dressed in my new fatigues, I walked back to the plantation house and sat on the front lawn under the shade trees with the other men in Oscar platoon. We lit up marijuana pipes and I was grooving on the scenery when I heard Charles say, "I'm tired of it. We're nothing more than second-class citizens. They send us to fight their war but at home their laws say we can't go here, can't do this, can't do that. We can't even vote and that ain't right. I'm tired of it."

"They use us to fight wars that got nothing to do with us and in return we get a crumb or two," Moore said. "We should do like Malcolm X says and leave these white people."

"Yeah? And go back to Africa?" Charles put in. "That isn't going to happen. Besides Africa isn't my home, America is."

"Yeah," Moore argued, "but if we can't get justice there, we'd better find some place where we can."

"We can't hardly get work," Charles said. "You don't think the white man is going to give us a couple of states do you?"

"Nah, they ain't gonna *give us* nothing. But if we take it..." Moore began.

"How are you going to *take it*?" Charles interrupted him.

"Well, if we had listened to Malcolm..."

"No, I don't want a separate country," Charles said.

"Me neither," Jesse agreed.

"Well, what ya gonna do then?" Moore asked. His voice had gotten high pitched.

"What do you think, Paul?" Jesse asked me.

I had known the hurt of anti-Semitism but I knew that the injustices black people had suffered in America were many times worse. I considered my words before responding. "I think it is going to get better," I said. "Change is coming."

"I don't know, man," Moore said. "Don't feel no different to me."

"Yeah it is, some," Jesse said. "Look at music and sports..."

"That doesn't count," Charles interrupted. "The same Americans who love a black star still treat other black men with contempt."

"I'm just saying it ain't like it was twenty years ago," Jesse said. "It is changing."

"Not enough and not fast enough," Charles said, and we all agreed.

"I don't want to be an athlete or a singer," Charles continued. He looked down at his hands. "I want people to see my work, without regard to the color of my skin or the kind of hair I have. I want to feel proud of myself and what I do." There was silence.

"You will, Charles," I said.

He looked at me.

"You will," I repeated. "Goodness will prevail in a righteous world."

"Nah," Moore said. "Earth is hell. We all died on some other planet and came to earth to suffer."

Charles looked at Moore and shook his head, "You better quit smoking that funny stuff, Mack. I'd take a day or two off if I was you."

We all laughed and headed back to the tarmac for lunch.

The dirt in Quon Loi was a bright orange color, and with the Chinooks and other choppers coming and going all day blowing it around, it wasn't long before our new fatigues and all of our gear had a layer of orange dust on them. I was sitting on top of the sandbagged bunker that night, relaxing and dusting the red dirt off my fatigues, when a firefight broke out in the distance. It was only five or six miles from Quon Loi on Highway 13. Artillery batteries inside the fort fired round after round in support. In the distance, red tracers rained down from Cobra gunships as they circled above the battle.

“It’s almost Christmas,” I said, feeling the irony of young men dying at the happiest time of the year.

Delino nodded, “Some of them will never see Christmas again.” He crossed himself and said a short prayer for the men under fire.

I had a hard sleep that night listening to the artillery batteries banging away. Sergeant Bell woke us before dawn. We were to relieve the unit that had been hit. I got up and stood in chow line as morning stars still shown in the dark night. I could see my breath in the chill air. Cool lit a pipe of grass and offered it to Moore and then to me but we both passed on it.

After breakfast, still in the dark, the squads fixed up their webbing and checked their ammo.

“Take two canteens,” Rojas told me. “It’s going to be a long day. We’re going to see some shit too. I can feel it.” He checked my gear. “Those guys have been hit hard. They’re going to be happy as hell to see us coming in.”

“You know it, man,” Gardner said. “We’re the cavalry coming to the rescue.”

I felt good about that but at the same time I recognized the fear in my gut.

We didn’t have picks or shovels to carry, just our combat webbing and rifles. I had one magazine locked and loaded and a second one taped to it for a fast forty rounds. Everyone had at least two hand grenades strapped to their suspenders; some diehards carried four. We each had a smoke grenade, every platoon with a different color.

The young men of Bravo Company were fully armed and ready to rumble. On the tarmac, we knelt and waited. I saw men dozing off but I couldn’t, my hands were sweating. As the first light of day brightened the eastern sky a pale blue, the helicopters approached. Without a signal, two hundred men stood up and readied to load.

Eighteen helicopters came in single file, landed, then quickly lifted off and flew south following the red clay road. A ten minute ride in "V" formation and the choppers went into single file. They came in fast to the LZ. I caught a glimpse of the battlefield. The camp was in a large, open field alongside Highway 13.

"Let's go! Let's go!" I heard people yelling. The chopper pilot hardly touched down when we jumped out and hit the ground running. I heard the roar of the engines behind me as they flew off at full throttle. We ran into the ditch on the side of the road, but before I had time to catch my breath, Sergeant Bell shouted for us to get up and join the company patrol.

Lima walked point, then came Mike, November, Headquarters and finally Oscar. We walked outside of the camp. I looked in beyond the concertina barbed wire and saw soldiers sitting on the roofs of their foxholes. They looked tired, unshaven, and dirty. No radios played, and only a few men walked around.

Our patrol crossed over the road that the choppers had just landed on. I stopped to look at two pieces of white plastic, melted into scorched black earth twenty feet wide by thirty feet long.

"Napalm made this black mark," Delino said. He stood next to me in the center of the napalm hit.

"Yeah, but what's that?" I pointed to the two pieces of white plastic.

Delino bent down and looked closer. "Some guy got blown right out of his sandals!" He said with surprise.

"God," I said. "Where's the rest of him?"

"They probably dragged his corpse off."

We walked in silence. I couldn't get the picture of the melted shoes and what had happened to the man who once wore them out of my mind.



We entered the tree line south of the camp. No one was sure what remained of the NVA unit or where they might be now. Bravo Company was to mop up but we could be walking into an ambush. We patrolled cautiously through the jungle for over an hour. I saw VC corpses off to the side of the trail but we made no contact. We came out of the tree line back into the large field, north of the camp. Oscar now had the point and the platoons behind us were in the reverse order from when we had entered the tree line. The sun blared down and Bravo Six ordered a halt and a five-minute break. I lay down and drank the last of my first canteen. Soon enough we had to move out. Emery walked point, I was behind him, Jesse and Rojas behind me. We walked parallel to the tree line and had gone to the far right of the large clearing when they ordered us to halt and make a left face. The next order was for us to walk, on line, into the jungle. I heard the veterans complaining.

“Once we enter that tree line,” Rojas said, “our visibility will be less than ten feet. We’re going to lose sight of each other.” “What if some guys get in front of the others?” I asked.

“That’s the problem with this brilliant maneuver,” Emery said. “It’s going to be a mess in there.”

“Let’s go slow,” Rojas advised, “and keep the man to your left in sight, even if you have to walk next to him, then spread back out when you can.”

Oscar platoon was on the far right of the company formation, Delino’s squad was the farthest right. The line of 200 men walked slowly into the tree line; we had gone only forty feet when a shot rang out and everyone hit the dirt. I lay in tall grass and I couldn’t see anyone but I heard shouting fifteen yards to my left then two more shots rang out.

“I’m hit, I’m hit!” I heard Sergeant Bell yell.

Rojas could see into the small clearing to our left and he yelled to me and Emery, "Cool is down. Sergeant Bell went in to help him and he got hit too."

Because Oscar didn't have its own medic, I heard them shouting for one. I saw Doc Stevens as he ran up the line from November platoon.

"There's a sniper in the there," Delino yelled to him when he got to us. "Doc, stay the fuck down! Don't go in there."

"I have to," Stevens said as he knelt next to Delino. "There's wounded out there and that's my job."

"Well, stay low, man. Keep as low as you can, Doc."

Stevens, bent at the waist and unarmed, went into the small clearing to attend to Cool and Sergeant Bell. Moments later, another shot rang out and Delino's voice echoed through the jungle, "They've hit the doc! Stevens is dead!"

No one volunteered to go in after that. Bravo Six wanted us to open fire into the small clearing but Delino shouted into the radio receiver, "No, no, our guys are still in there!"

Nothing happened for what seemed like a long time. Next to me Rojas stirred then stood up. "I'm going in," he said.

His words shocked me.

He pointed to our right. "We have to set up a semicircle with enough firepower to hold our flank," he said. "If we get hit from there, they'll fold us up one man at a time."

I could see just what he meant. "Okay," I said. I pointed to a bush ten yards away. "That'll make the top of the semicircle."

"Paul, stay down, goddamn it." Emery was not happy about me getting up but he covered me.

When I reached the edge of the clearing, Jesse called over, "Paul, Paul! Cover me."

"Okay, go!" I hollered and Jesse belly-crawled out to a position farther to the right. I looked at Jesse then back to Emery. The three of us were only thirty feet apart but it felt like

a mile. Rojas watched us set up a defense. When he was satisfied we had the right flank covered, he stood up and disappeared into the thick brush to our left.

There were several minutes of silence broken by the sound of automatic weapons and then I heard Rojas yelling: "Come on in! Come on in! It's over. I got him."

I saw people running into the clearing to work on Sergeant Bell and Cool. Rojas came out of the jungle brush with an AK-47 strapped to his back. He came over and lay down next to me.

"What happened in there?" I asked him, studying his face.

"I went in and laid down next to the sarge," he said. "Bell pointed straight ahead and said, 'He's right there. He's right THERE,' but I couldn't see anything, just brown grass and trees, so I crawled out into the bushes."

"Towards the sniper?" I asked.

Rojas nodded. "I figured if I was going to protect those men, I had to be in front of them not next to them." I shook my head in disbelief.

"I crawled out about fifty feet and stopped where it opened up. There were trees but no jungle grass. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a small movement. The sniper was less than a hundred feet to my left! Our eyes met and I fired first. I was on full auto so I hit him with seven or eight rounds and he just slumped over. I expected return fire from other VC but nothing happened. It got quiet and I decided I'd better get that guy's weapon before he recovered so I went over to him but he was dead. His eyes were just staring into space."

"How come he didn't see you crawling out?"

"I actually went past him," Rojas said. "He was squatting down behind a tree facing forward, toward that little clearing. Somehow, I got past him and when he did see me, I was sideways to him and the tree in front of him didn't shield him from me."

“What happened next?” I asked.

“I headed back towards the clearing with his AK-47. That’s when I realized all your weapons were pointed in my direction.”

Just then Delino yelled, “Gebhart, you and Emery get in there and help.”

“Okay, okay,” I shouted back. I patted Rojas on the shoulder and went to join Emery in the small clearing. Bell and Cool had already been taken out, but Doc Stevens’ body still lay there. His eyes were closed and his face looked peaceful. His helmet had been knocked off but somehow his hair was still combed.

“He looks like he’s sleeping,” I said to Emery. “There’s almost no blood on him.”

“He’s been shot through the neck,” Emery said. He turned Stevens to inspect the wound. “Here.” He pointed to the bullet hole halfway up the side of his Stevens’ neck. “It didn’t hit his jugular but it must have gone right through his spinal chord. He died instantly.”

Emery lowered Stevens’ head and we rolled his body onto a poncho. I kneeled next to him and looked at the wound again. It was a clean entry on one side and a three-inch slit on the other side of his neck where it exited. I could see down into his pink neck muscles. I could imagine how bad this was for his family.

“Shit! That son of a bitch!” I shouted. Emery looked at me, not comprehending who I was yelling at.

“Come on, Paul,” he said. “Take hold.” He nodded toward the poncho and we lifted Stevens’ body and carried him out of the jungle and laid him down in the clearing. I covered his face with a corner of the poncho when soldiers came to look at him. They asked us what had happened and Emery told them.

Headquarters sent over two soldiers to take charge of the body and we left to re-join Oscar platoon. As we headed towards the camp, Emery and I passed Sergeant Bell and Cool lying on the ground waiting for a medevac. Nearby, two medics sat next

to each other. Bell and Cool both had been given shots of morphine and the sarge lay on his back staring at the sky. Cool lay on his side. He still had his sunglasses on.

“Hey, man,” Cool said when he recognized us.

“How ya doing, man?” Emery asked.

“Shit, I’m fucking great,” Cool said, half sitting up. He spoke with a slur as if he was drunk, not quite forming his words. The bandage on his right arm was soaked through with blood.

“Light me up, okay?” He pulled a joint from his fatigue pocket with his good hand and Emery lit it and passed it to him.

“Man, I’m going home,” Cool said, “I’m through with this fucking place.”

“Yeah, that’s right man,” Emery said. “You’ll be home in a couple of weeks. You dog, you.”

“I hope your arm’s okay,” I said.

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Cool said. “I can’t feel it at all.” Cool looked at me for the first time. “That white boy died trying to save me,” he said looking into my eyes. “He shielded me with his body as he bandaged me up and tried to stop the bleeding. He got hit and fell on top of me. I’m never going to forget him, never.”

“Emery! Gebhart!” The men from Oscar called to us to catch up.

“Well, man, you take care of yourself,” Emery said to Cool.

“Yeah,” I added.

“Okay,” Cool said. “You guys, too.” He leaned back and lay down completely.

“So how is it,” I said to Emery as we walked towards the barbed wire, “that when Cool gets hit, it’s the sarge that got up and went in to help him? Everyone else had pulled back.”

“Yeah, I know,” Emery said. “But you can never tell what you or anyone else is going to do under fire.”

“Cool could figure more ways to get out of work than anyone,” I said, “and Sergeant Bell was always yelling at him. Just this morning, in the chow line I heard him shouting, ‘Don’t you be smoking any dope in front of me goddamn it! You ever do that again, Cool, I’ll have you put in jail. Yeah, you think that’s a joke, but you’ll come out of the brig and still have your days left in Vietnam so straighten up asshole! You hear me?’”

Emery laughed at my impersonation of Bell. Across the field we saw that the patrol had resumed. Bravo Company was headed into the camp and we jogged to catch up. The men in Oscar waited for us just outside the barbed wire.

The wire was strung in three rolls, each roll three feet round, two rolls on the ground side by side and a third strand on top of these two. I noticed two makeshift ladders the VC had used to try and scale the wire with. The bodies of a dozen Vietnamese soldiers hung in the wire. One man had been shot in the head. Half of his face and skull were gone and part of his brain hung out. I glanced into his skull but it was all a little too much for me—too naked the truth, too brutal a reality. I felt nauseous.

Two soldiers from November platoon had a deck of playing cards and were putting a card into each corpse’s mouth.

“The Vietnamese will be back for their dead,” Emery explained. “The cards will let them know it was the First Division that got these guys.”

“Hey!” I heard Rojas yell to one of the soldiers. “You’re disrespecting them.”

The soldier ignored him so Rojas walked over and put his foot on the soldier’s hand. The rifleman pulled it out and looked up at Rojas in surprise. “They’re gooks,” he shouted.

“They’re men,” Rojas said. “Leave ‘em alone.”

I could tell Rojas was serious and so could the grunt. Rojas was ready to dice it out with him but the soldier left without saying another word.

The dead Vietnamese looked like rag dolls to me; torn up rag dolls. They were human beings as Rojas said, but to me, I was numb towards them. If they hadn't been shot at the wire, they would have killed the men inside the perimeter. I felt bad for Doc Stevens, not for the attackers.

The men in Oscar platoon poked through the clothing of the dead men, looking for wallets and personal effects.

"Man," Emery said, "I ain't never seen nothing like this back in Dallas."

"Not in Jersey either," I agreed.

I noticed some small white pills in the dirt below one of the bodies hanging in the wire. "Hey," I pointed to them. "What's that?"

"That's their dope," Gardner said. "They get all fucked up before they try this shit."

Delino looked at me. "They're not feeling any pain when they make the final charge to the barbed wire."

I picked up the pills and blew the dirt off. "It must be some good shit," I said.

"Hey, Gebhart," Gardner said, "don't take that, man."

"Why not?"

"You crazy? What if it's poison?" Gardner's eyes were round in disbelief.

"What?" I laughed. "You think they had a plan to poison Americans crazy enough to take their pills after they were blown up at the wire?" I went to put them in my pocket but Moore saw me and said, "Hey, Paul, don't. You don't know what that shit is."

I looked at him for a minute, shook my head, and tossed the pills to the ground. "Okay," I said, "but Santos would be pretty upset if he knew we were throwing away good dope like that."

The lieutenant from November Platoon called to us and we all went through the zigzag entrance opening in the rolls of

barbed wire. On the other side we passed a line of foxholes and some soldiers.

"They charged that wire and we were shooting the world at them," one of the riflemen said as we went by. He was an overweight black man with his fatigue shirt hanging out of his pants. His partner was a short, muscular man; darker and with an angry mouth and hard eyes.

"They were trying to climb the wire to get to us," the shorter one added in a tired voice.

"We may not have a cause to die for, like them," I said, "but Sergeant Bell went in to save Cool. Doc Stevens went in to help them, and Rojas crawled in after the sniper. None of them had a cause but their people needed help."

"That's what it comes down to, man," Gardner said.

"The army doesn't care if we make it home or not," Jesse added. "All we got out here is each other."

"Amen, brother," Delino said, and we all agreed.



## Chapter Four

### He's a Soul Man

*January 1968*

Bravo Company returned to Quon Loi, and for the next 10 days we walked morning patrols through the rubber trees and had the afternoons off. On one of those hot afternoons, I sat in the mortar pit with Emery and Moore. Our rifles were apart and our cleaning kits lay on green towels. We had our shirts off and the radio playing.

I listened as Emery sang along to Sam and Dave's *Soul Man*.

"I'm a Soul Man, I'm a Soul Man," he sang over and over.

I laughed at him. "Hey, Emery. You're out of tune."

He couldn't hear me over the music but he looked up and smiled, "Pretty good, huh?"

I nodded, "Excellent."

"I'm getting me some pussy," Moore said.

"Yeah, me too," Emery said.

"I'll go into the village with you," I said, "but I'm not looking to get laid."

As we discussed our plans, three soldiers from Lima Platoon walked over. Desusa was from New York City. He looked like a choirboy with red-brown hair and freckles. Kenny Serena was from the Bronx. He was tall with black wavy hair and green eyes. He had a pencil thin moustache. I had heard people say that Serena was the best point man in the company. I also knew anywhere you saw Desusa you saw, Serena.

"Hey, anybody got any acid?" Desusa asked as he came up.

"Yeah, right," Moore answered.

Desusa laughed. "Want to drop some and see what this place is like with your mind blown?"

"You'd probably walk off into the jungle," I said.

"Yeah," Emery said, "and make peace with the Vietnamese."

"I knew two old heads who did drop some here," Desusa said.

"No way, man." I waved my hand at him.

"Yes Sir," he insisted, "when I first came into country. They were in my platoon."

"I wouldn't want to try it," I said. "It's too dangerous. Hey, man," I reached up for Desusa's M-14 rifle, "let me see that."

The barrel of the M-14 was longer than the M-16's and it had a wooden stock. He handed it to me and I stood up and felt its balance. "I used to train rotcees at the firing range with M-14s," I said. "I forgot how heavy they are."

"Yeah, but it's worth the extra hump to carry it around," Desusa said.

"Yeah?"

"Hell yeah. It's the best." Desusa made a face of assurance. "When you're out on point, these M-14s are money in the bank, man. They fire every time."

"Yeah, but the AKs are shorter and lighter," I said. "More maneuverable too." I passed the rifle to Moore.

"Yeah, but I'll still take the M-14 over their AKs," Desusa said.

"Yeah," Serena agreed. He was carrying an M-14 too. "There's only seven of these in Bravo Company and we have to loan them out to whoever's walking point."

"You guys walk point every time it seems," Emery said. "How come? You don't want to loan out your rifles?"

"Hell, no! Shit, take it," Desusa answered. "Go walk point, is what I say."

"It does seem like we walk point more than most guys though," Serena said.

"Hey," Desusa said, "I knew a couple of guys who were here when I first got to 'Nam, who would walk your point for you and pay you for it."

"Get out of here!" Emery laughed.

"No, man, it's true," Desusa said. "They told me, 'Hey, they let you kill here. You do this back home and you get the chair. Here you can kill all you want.'"

"Say what?" the other soldier with them spoke up for the first time. He tilted his head to one side and his forehead wrinkled. We all stopped and looked at him.

"What's your name?" Emery asked.

"I'm Willie Forman," he said, "but my friends call me Monk." Monk had a wide, wide mouth and a friendly smile.

"Monk?" Moore asked. "How'd you get a nickname like that?"

"When I was a kid and people asked me what I wanted to be, I'd say a monk 'cause then I wouldn't have no girls around me."

"You don't still feel that way, do you?" I asked. Monk laughed.

"Nah, but the name stuck."

"Where you from, bro?" Emery asked.

"Atlanta," Monk said with a southern drawl.

"Yeah, I been there," Emery nodded. "Got some nasty white motherfuckers down that way."

"Say what?" I tilted my head to one side and imitated Monk's voice.

"Hey, let's go into the village already," Desusa said. "I need a drink." He took back his M-14 from Moore.

"Okay, Breeze," Serena said, "don't get the tremors."

Desusa just laughed and said, "Hey, Kenny, ya got any dope on ya, man?"

"Sure," Serena answered.

"Well then, share it, shithead."

We reassembled our M-16s and walked across the runway and down the hill toward the village. We had on clean fatigues and were all wearing sunglasses, but a coat of orange dust covered us as it did everything in Quon Loi. "This is the strangest damn place," I said. "Everything is orange. I feel like I'm in 'The Wizard of Oz.'"

"Well then, click your heels three times and make a wish," Desusa said.

The dirt road led into the main street of the village. Wooden buildings with thatched roofs lined both sides of the street. The windows in the buildings were just openings in the walls, without glass. There weren't any sidewalks to walk on either, so we shared the dirt street with young Vietnamese men riding little scooters that spewed gray, oily smoke into the air.

Serena read one of the bar signs out loud: "Girls Here, Good Bar."

"It reminds me of the Old West," I said. "Except the signs are written in Pidgin English."

"You Like, Good Time," Desusa read another one.

"Come to think of it," I said, "maybe the signs in the Old West were written in pidgin English too. It sure isn't like my hometown though, I'll tell you that."

"Hey, check it out," Emery called to us. He was standing outside a bar with a mamasan trying to pull him inside the front door. "Hey, shit, lady, let go!" Emery got his arm free.

"You come in, good time," the mamasan said as we walked up.

We looked inside and saw a few GIs and some girls, but the place with the loud soul music down the block seemed to be the better destination.

"Later," Emery said to the mamasan and we crossed the street.

The music from the second bar blasted away as we stood at the doorway for a minute to check it out. Inside was packed with GIs. "Hey, there's Carter." I pointed to a table in the far corner. We went in and walked over to Carter's table.

"Que pasa, dude?" Carter said as he shook hands with everyone. We put some chairs and tables together and ordered drinks. Five girls came over from the bar. They laughed and would move around nice in our laps if we bought them little shots of tea which they drank from whiskey glasses.

The music played nonstop: The Four Tops' *Reach Out And I'll Be There*, Percy Sledge's *When A Man Loves A Woman*, The Capitols' *Cool Jerk*, The Temptations' *Ain't Too Proud To Beg*, Lee Dorsey's *Working In A Coal Mine*, and The Supremes' *My World Is Empty Without You*. When Wilson Pickett's *Land Of A Thousand Dances* played we got up to dance. *Soul Man* came on next and the brothers were battling it out for the title of best dancer in the battalion. Carter and Jesse had beaten everyone and were dancing solo with the rest of us forming a circle around them. We all sang along to the music as they danced. They took turns doing full, floor splits.

"Jesse won," I said to Moore. "He can move his arms, legs and back like he doesn't have a bone in his body."

"The original rubber band man," Moore agreed.

When the song ended we went back to the tables and ordered more drinks from the lap girls. Moore worked a deal out with the head mamasan and took one of the girls away to screw her. I saw a young Vietnamese woman sitting at the bar. Her long, dark hair grew down to the waist of her blue sequined mini dress. I guessed she was seventeen or eighteen years old. She sat on her stool expressionless.

"She's got an absolutely perfect body and the face of a movie star," I said to Emery.

"I know her," he said. "We were here in September and I saw that she doesn't like Americans," Emery warned me. "She won't be any fun. The other girls like to fuck."

"But just look at her," I said.

The mamasan who ran the place saw me and said, "You like?"

"Yeah, well..."

She grabbed my arm and walked me over and introduced us. The young woman didn't smile. Even so, I paid the mamasan a hundred pees and followed the girl to a large room behind the back of the bar. Paper screens partitioned the room into twelve cubicles, six on either side of the hallway down the middle of the room. Each cubicle had a narrow bed and small wooden nightstand. The girl went into one on the right and when I walked in she took her miniskirt off. I stared at her perfect bullet tits and absolutely flawless body.

I took my pants off and she washed me, then lay down on the narrow bed. I tried to kiss her but she turned her head away. She lay under me like a block of ice.

"Why are you here if you don't want to be?" I asked her. She glanced into my eyes then turned her face towards the wall.

I left the bar and walked alone back up to the tarmac. On my way to Bravo Company, I ran into Monk.

"How was it?" he asked me as we walked up the road.

"Depressing," I said.

"What happened?"

"We've turned their daughters into whores and their sons into pimps, and they hate us. I've just become a part of it and I feel dirty."

"Well, but that's the way it is here," Monk said. "They've got to eat. Nothing you or anyone of us can do to change it."

"No, I guess not."

Monk's words didn't make me feel any cleaner. I felt guilty about having cheated on Mary too. "I love screwing," I said, "but

it's different now. If it's going to leave me feeling this bad afterward, I shouldn't do it."

"That's right," Monk agreed. "If you have feelings for a special person, you should be happy about that and not screw around."

"Even when everyone else is having fun?" I asked.

"Even when everyone else is catching clap," he said.

Our orange-coated boots crunched on the gravel as we walked past the runway to the sandbagged bunkers of Bravo Company. There was a letter from Mary waiting for me. I stared at the envelope. I loved her, everything about her, even her handwriting. She wrote that she was lonely and missing me, every day, all day.

Charles sat down with me. He had a letter in his fatigue shirt pocket. "How you doing, Paul?" he asked me.

"I want to be home with my wife so bad," I said, "the pain of separation is like a knife in my stomach." I felt a tear roll down my cheek and I wiped it away.

"It's tough, I know," he said.

I blew my nose. "How are you doing?"

"I can't sleep anymore," Charles said.

"When do you go home?"

"I have seventeen days left."

"You are short," I said. "What's the first thing you're gonna do when you get back to the world?"

"You mean after seeing my mother and family?"

"Yeah, what are you going to do for fun?"

"Hmm, well I'll tell you. I think I'm going to go shopping in downtown Chicago. Yes, Sir, I am."

"What are you shopping for?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know, nothing special. I just want to see it all. You know what I mean? I just want to be back in the world, seeing all the fullness of it."

I laughed with Charles at the thought of him walking through the stores like a man shipwrecked for a year.

"Yeah, we have so much," I said. "We'll appreciate it more now. Don't you think?"

"I know I will," Charles agreed. "But I'm not there yet."

The following week the battalion received its orders to move west, to the hills in Treyninh Province by the Cambodian border.

"We were just out there in November," Emery said as he packed his gear next to me. "Loc Ninh was all I ever wanted to see of that province. Every time we're out by the border we lose men."

The veterans all knew this and I could feel the tension in the air. The joking and horseplay stopped. We left the old foxholes and waddled to the runway, burdened with our weapons and the equipment needed to convert another piece of Vietnam into a defensive position.

"We'll be in the seventh wave," Delino told us as we sat on the tarmac. He had Oscar platoon's radio on his back. "The Reconnaissance platoon will go in first, they'll let us know if it's a hot LZ or not."

"If you want to see lots of action you can volunteer for the Recon platoon," Rojas said. "You don't even have to sign up for an extra year. They don't hump all this weight like us, but they pay the price, they're the first in and the last out."

We heard the choppers approaching. There were six in each wave. When they landed, men from Bravo Company boarded. As soon as one wave of helicopters rose in the air, the next wave came in to land. When the choppers were all in the air, they went into formation and flew southwest with infantrymen hanging out of the doors. I watched the treetops flash by below. "It's supposed to be quiet," Delino shouted out.



The choppers came into the landing zone quick, touched down for just several seconds and gunned it out of there. As we piled out, they chopper crew shouted to us, "Hustle up! Let's Go! Let's Go!" As the last infantry man's feet touched the ground, they lifted back off and were gone in seconds.

I felt tight, anticipating the worse as I looked around the clearing and into the treeline. We walked into the center of the clearing and unpacked the mortar equipment as rifle platoons walked cloverleaf patrols around the perimeter. They went into the tree line then came out to the edge of the clearing, then back in again. They covered every foot of ground around the camp.

"We have to dig foxholes for ourselves, another one for the mortar rounds, and then the two mortar pits," Delino explained to me.

He pointed to the riflemen digging bunkers out by the tree line. "They set up in squads, their foxholes eight to ten yards apart. The firing ports are not in the center of their foxholes," Delino explained. "They're in the front corners, that way Viet Cong shooting straight ahead as they attack hit the sandbags in front. One bunker will be firing at the VC attacking the adjacent foxholes, while their own bunker will be covered by the foxholes to their right and left."

"The overlapping fields of fire is our best defense." Rojas said.

I nodded. I saw the logic of making every foxhole deliver a crossfire.

"We'll work in teams using the picks and shovels," Delino continued. "You get three minutes with the pick, just like a round in a prize fight. When your three minutes are up the next guy jumps in and shovels out your work. After he cleans out the hole, the third guy jumps in and starts three more minutes of picking, then the first man is on the shovel. Got it?"

"Got it," I said.

The ground was as hard as cement and the digging was difficult work. As I waited my turn, I watched riflemen enlarge the clearing by using hand axes to cut down bushes and trees. Other soldiers inspected the ground in front of the foxholes to make sure that their lanes of fire were unobstructed.

The afternoon wore on. Charles called me over to the computer board and we wrote down the bearings, the elevations and the charges needed to hit the clearings in the area. "This way we'll be ready to fire back if the VC mortar us," Charles explained.

"Gebhart, you're with me and Rojas," Delino called to me.

"Okay, I'm coming."

"We finished the foxholes." Delino pointed to the ammo hole next to the outline of the round mortar pit. "The Chinook brought in these steel bars," he said. "Help me put some across the top, then we'll fill sandbags and lay them on the bars."

When we had finished roofing the two foxholes and the ammo hole, I thought I'd take a break, but Delino pointed to the partially completed mortar pit.

"You're on the pick, we rotate every three minutes."

"Okay," I nodded. "How deep are we going?"

"The pit needs to be two feet deep," he said, "fifteen feet across. Then we fill sandbags two-high around it. Okay, guy, let's get to it." He handed me the pick and I went into the depression where the mortar pit was to be dug. I swung the pick into the hard clay; the handle vibrated and stung me like I had struck concrete.

We dug all afternoon. Darkness came and we still weren't finished.

"Isn't this good enough?" I asked Delino when the pit was a foot deep. "It doesn't have to be perfect."

"No," he shook his head. "We've got to finish digging-in. No matter how tired we are, we've got to be dug-in."

I didn't say anything.

"You remember that, too," he said. "Do you hear me?"

"Yeah, of course I hear you," I said. "I'm standing right next to you, right?"

"Yeah, but sometimes things go in one ear with you and out the other. This is important, Gebhart. No matter where you are, no matter how late you get there, you dig in. You hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you."

"Don't you ever forget it either."

"How could I? You just made it a philosophy lesson or something."

"Tony's right," Rojas said seriously. "These holes will save your life one day."

I felt they were treating me like a kid so when my turn came around again, I jumped in the hole and swung the pick as hard as I could, grunting with each throw. Delino lay on his side holding the red-filtered flashlight for me.

"Boys," he called out, "I think this new guy's gonna be all right. That's how you make your reputation out here," he said to me. "People pay attention to a guy who carries his own weight." He gave me a wink of approval.

We finished about eleven o'clock and I fell asleep after eating cold C rations. About midnight it started, a soft thump... thump... thump from out in the distance. The first men to recognize the sound shouted the alarm.

"INCOMING! INCOMING!"

I sprang to my feet and ran for one of the foxholes. There were already people inside but I pushed my way in. The men underneath me shouted, "Come on! Come on!"

The more bodies on top of them, the more the shrapnel would be slowed down. The sound of the mortar barrage made it all quite clear.

The big gunner, Eddie, tumbled in.

“Oooff!” I moaned as his two-hundred-thirty-pounds landed on me. “Hey, wait, Ed, you’re crushing me.”

“Sorry,” Eddie said and we shifted around.

“Okay, that’s better,” I said as his weight lifted.

Someone’s head smashed into Eddie’s nose. “Ow!” he yelped.

It was madness; arms and legs and shoving—but nobody was leaving.

The last two men could only fit their heads into the hole. “Make room! Make room!” they shouted as they tried to squeeze in further.

“Ain’t no more room, ain’t no more,” the men on the bottom of the pile shouted.

“I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe!” I heard a muffled yell.

I felt the foxhole’s cool, moist walls against my back. Outside, the enemy’s mortar rounds were landing, from the sound of it, not too damn far away. We were safe in the hole, unless a mortar landed right smack in the opening, but I heard machinegun fire. What if they break through the line while we were still down here? I didn’t want to get out and I didn’t want to stay.

“LET’S GO! LET’S GO!” I heard Delino shout.

I scrambled out with everyone else and dove over the sandbags into the mortar pit. Eddie maneuvered the mortar tube while Emery, acting as his assistant gunner, held a mortar round. The other men pulled wooden boxes out of the ammo foxhole, cracked them opened, and tied canvas charges to the mortar rounds. They stacked them by the sandbag wall, sorted by the number of charges.

“We’ve got to knock out that enemy mortar,” Charles said to me. He and I sat in the pit with our backs to the wall. He searched the map with his red-filtered flashlight. “Oh man, oh man,” he muttered over and over.

I looked up from the map and saw that Charles had his helmet on backwards so that it stuck up high on his head. I noticed that he had the map upside down too.

"Charles, Charles, look," I said. I turned the map right side up for him.

He looked into my eyes. "Oh, shit!" he said. "I don't know if I can handle this. I'm shaking."

Delino saw what was going on. "Let Gebhart do it," he called out. "You just check him. Okay, Charles?"

"Yeah, yeah, okay," Charles said.

I found the clearings we had marked up earlier in the day. "Which one of these do we want to hit first?" I asked.

"They sounded pretty far out to me," Charles said, "hit the farthest one, there." He pointed to a clearing two hundred fifty yards out.

Another series of enemy mortars exploded inside the perimeter. I hurried to give Eddie the coordinates. "Heading two-four-oh degrees, elevation fifty-five."

"Heading two-four-on, elevation fifty-five." Eddie repeated it back to me as he set the mortar tube to those coordinates.

"Charge three," I said.

"Charge three," Eddie yelled, both to me and to Emery.

"Four rounds left to right," I shouted over the mayhem. "Fire when ready."

"Four rounds, left to right," Eddie repeated. "Ready?"

"Ready," Emery shouted.

"Fire!" Eddie shouted.

Just as our round went out, an enemy mortar shell burst just outside the mortar pit. Shrapnel whizzed over our heads and we all kissed the dirt.

"Stay below the sandbags," Delino shouted.

Emery, tall and lanky, tried to drop the next mortar down the tube without standing straight up. He was tall and exposed

when he stood up. With the enemy's mortar shrapnel whizzing in the air, he hesitated to drop the rounds down the tube. Moore saw this and said, "Here let me do it." Moore was shorter, and quicker for that matter. He took Emery's place and dropped the rounds down the tube as fast as they could hand them to him.

Each round fired out of our mortar tube made a loud THUMP and the tube sounded a loud RING. The ringing hurt my ears but just then I didn't mind. It felt good to be fighting back. Our rounds exploded in the jungle but within a minute there was another VC barrage. This series of shells landed right outside our pits. I looked over at Rojas. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "If one lands in here with us, we're gone."

"We'll be alright," Delino said. "Just keep low. Listen for where those mortars are coming from."

No one said anything. "They're calling in artillery for us," Delino said. "We're going to be okay."

His words of confidence helped me to relax. I was able to function. I felt a strange feeling though. We were in the jungle, miles from civilization, and under attack by the Vietnamese. Whoever could fire the most ordnance would win. It had to be us, otherwise we all died here this night. My hands felt stiff as wood and my knees trembled, but I was resolved to fight for my life.

I was able to hear the direction of the enemy's thumping mortars. I found clearings on the map in that area and called the coordinates to Eddy. We fired a second volley at one of the new clearings as Gardener in the other mortar pit went to work. Their first round was a flare that drifted slowly overhead, hanging from a white, silk parachute, it burned a brilliant, phosphorous light, turning night into day.

I heard shouts from the perimeter, "Here they come! Here they come!" Trip flares went off at the tree line and I could see figures of men running around and diving for cover as our

riflemen opened up. The bright light of the trip flares illuminated narrow sections of the woods in a cold, white light. A tingling sensation went through my body. People were coming to kill us.

As the riflemen let go with another volley, their red tracer rounds showed me the killing fields of fire they were laying down. All around the perimeter, Bravo's machine guns and M-16s opened up in sporadic, sometimes insistent firing. Whoever was coming for us would have to go through some bad dudes.

"Flare round, Paul," Delino yelled to me. I looked up. The mortar flare overhead was sputtering.

"We need to keep the flares constant now," Charles said, "so the riflemen can see the VC. If it goes out before another one is burning, the darkness will seem twice as black." I calculated the charge and elevation.

"Head it into the wind," Charles told me.

I saw which way the first flare had drifted and hollered out, "Flare round, heading one-two-oh."

"Flare round, heading one-two-oh," Eddie repeated as he maneuvered the mortar tube.

"Charge three, seventy degrees."

"Charge three, seventy degrees."

"Fire when ready."

"Ready?" Eddie asked Moore.

"Ready," came the reply.

"Fire!"

It went up over our heads and burst into light. For fifteen seconds both flares burned, then the first one sputtered out and ours lit the battlefield.

"Continuous light," Delino cupped his hands and shouted to the men in the foxholes, "brought to you by the Oscar Platoon Lighting Company."

The enemy mortars had stopped but the ground attack grew heavier. Both mortar pits targeted the tree line. The first round I directed landed too deep into the jungle.

"We need to put those just inside the tree line," Charles said to me.

"So I bring it up five degrees?"

"Yeah. Try it and see."

"Raise elevation five degrees," I called to Eddie. "One round, fire when ready."

"Elevation to eighty degrees, one round. What charge?" Eddie frowned angrily at me.

"Same. Charge one."

"Charge one, ready?" his deep voice shouted to Moore.

"Ready," Moore said.

"Fire!" Eddie yelled.

This time our round exploded just yards inside the woods. It knocked down trees and obliterated underbrush.

"Perfect," Delino shouted to me.

"Okay, four rounds, fire when ready," I called to Eddie.

The next four rounds tore the hell out of the jungle and the small arms fire stopped coming in from there. We saw muzzle flashes and green tracer rounds from another place and we turned our mortar on them.

Both mortar crews blasted the attacking VC with round after round, and without missing a beat, each pit took a turn firing a flare to keep the illumination going. Each mortar we fired left a cloud of gunpowder smoke until now, after twenty minutes of battle, there was a gray haze covering the field around us.

Finally, after forty minutes, the attack broke off. The jungle grew still and we recovered from our efforts.

"Medevac coming in," Delino warned us. A few moments later we heard the chopper. A blinding spotlight on its belly beamed through the dark night. The medevac landed near our mortar



pits and a tornado of wind threw our gear all over camp. After the wounded riflemen were loaded, it lifted off. As the heavy sound of the rotors deafened us, whatever hadn't been blown away on its landing flew away now in the take off.

Moore and I found our air mattresses and laid them next to the pit wall.

"Shit, that was something, huh?" Moore said.

I saw that my mattress had been punctured by a piece of mortar shrapnel and I ran my fingers over the hole.

"Yeah, goddamn scary," I said. I lay down on the ground. "Shit, this doesn't get it," I said.

"Here, you can share mine." Moore moved halfway down his fat, blown-up air mattress. "We can lay head to head," he said, "our butts and legs on the dirt, our backs and shoulders on the air bag."

"Thanks, Mack," I said. The top of our heads touched and one of us moving bounced the other around, but for me it was better than sleeping on cold hard ground.

I put my hands behind my head and looked up into the night sky. "Damn!" I said. "I was scared when those mortars kept getting closer. It's sheer luck that one of them didn't land right in our pit. My heart is still pounding."

"Did you hear the way the shrapnel was zinging over the mortar pits?" Moore asked.

"Hell yes, I did. That goddamn 'WHISH' sound scared me good. I don't know, Mack, maybe we'd be better off in a rifle platoon. They get to stay in their foxholes while we're out here above ground."

"Yeah, maybe," Moore said, "but I don't like the idea of having to go on ambush either."

"Yeah, you're right about that," I said. "How are we going to survive ten more months of this?"

"I don't know," Moore said. "I sure as hell just don't know."

The next day Charles packed his gear, and I sat with him by the mortar pit as he waited for the Chinook to come in.

"Last night," Charles said. "I was trying to read upside down numbers. They looked like strange symbols I'd never seen before. My last night in the field and I'm under fire. Man, I'm sorry but I was just too short to handle it."

"You had your helmet on backwards too," I said. I put my helmet on backwards and made a goofy face and we both laughed.

"Good luck, Paul." Charles shook my hand.

He was going home and his joy rubbed off on me. I was happy for him.

In the afternoon Rojas and I went on day LP. We took our rifles and grenades and walked down the hill and set up ten yards from the tree line. We sat, back to back, looking into the jungle.

"Can the VC sneak up on us without being seen or heard?" I asked Rojas.

"Uh-uh," he said. "They're just like us. We make noise walking through the jungle and so do they."

I still had my doubts. "They must be quieter," I said.

"Look," he said. "I'm going to walk around out there." He pointed to the trees. "Don't shoot."

"Yeah, sure," I laughed.

Rojas went into the bushes. "You can hear me, right?" he called from the jungle.

"Yeah, I can hear you."

I could hear branches moving, grass crunching, twigs snapping as he moved. I thought of Rojas crawling out to get the sniper outside of Quon Loi.

"I'm being as quiet as I can," Rojas called again. "Can you still hear me?"

"Every time you move," I said.

"I'm coming out now."

"Okay."

"Those are men we're fighting, not ghosts," he said as he sat next to me.

Several days later we tore down the camp and the slicks came in to get us. The battalion flew east to Long Binh. On the flight I listened to the men talk about what they were going to get at the PX and the women they were going to see at the USO. I looked forward to sleeping on a cot under a roof. We landed on the tarmac in Long Binh and deuce and-a-half-ton trucks drove us to barracks.

"Whose barracks are these?" I asked Delino as we entered one of the buildings.

"An infantry unit based in Long Binh," he said. "While they're out in the field we'll use their barracks just like companies use ours in Di An when we aren't there."

"Seems like we never go into Di An." I said.

"No, we don't. It's a secure area, has been for more than a year. The action's out here, so here we are."

We weren't in the Long Binh barracks a half-hour when Lima's platoon leader, Lieutenant Faro, called us together. He was in his late twenties. He was due to rotate home soon and his year in Vietnam seemed to have caught up with him. He had a haggard look about him. He needed a shave, and, to my eye, a strong drink.

Oscar Platoon needed a new lieutenant, and since platoon Sergeant Bell was wounded, Delino had been calling the shots. Today, headquarters sent Lieutenant Faro over with our orders.

"Oscar's been put on detail to string barbed wire out on the perimeter," the lieutenant said when he had us assembled.

"What?" several soldiers cried out in unison.

"Shit!" Emery said.

"Man, this is fucked," Jesse called out.

“Long Binh already has three strands of wire around it,” Delino said.

“Well, you’re being sent out to make a section of it doubled,” Faro said. “That is, three strands in front of three strands.”

“You know you can’t be too safe,” Delino said, “especially when you can get some grunt unit to do the work for you.” It was the first time I had seen him angry.

While the rest of Bravo company had the day off, each of us picked up a pair of rawhide gloves and a wire cutter before jumping into the deuce-and-a-half trucks that had come for us. We stood at the railings and rode out to the perimeter.

Emery shouted to Delino. “Why do we have to string their fucking barbed wire?”

“These Remfs are fucking assholes!” someone yelled out to a soldier walking along the road.

“What’s a Remf?” I asked Rojas.

“Rear Echelon Mother Fucker.” He took one hand off of the rail and gave the finger to another soldier walking along. The soldier looked confused for a second, then saluted Rojas back.

A young sergeant from an engineering corps rode with us. He had a plain face and blond hair. He was in charge of the detail but he didn’t say a word when he heard us cursing out the engineers.

“He knows we got a raw deal,” Rojas said, “and that the engineers should be stringing the wire for Long Binh.”

The truck pulled up at the end of the road and we jumped out.

“Okay, let’s get it up,” the engineer sergeant called out. We unloaded rolls of barbed wire from the second truck. When there was enough down for that section, we cut the bands that held them together and dragged a new roll across the ground. It unraveled like a slinky toy.

The sun baked the ground and there wasn’t a hint of a breeze. It was hard, heavy work and we were all beat. After an

hour, several men drifted off to lie down in the shade. A pipe came out and I joined them. Eventually, everyone except Delino and the engineer sergeant were in the shade taking a break. Delino, still wearing his shirt buttoned, collar up and sleeves down, walked over. His uniform was ringing wet. He sat next to me and took a long drink of water from his canteen as he watched the young sergeant still hard at work. Delino looked me square in the face, pointed, and said, "Now THAT'S a sergeant!"

"Yeah, he sure is," I said.

Delino went out to help him and it was just the two of them for a while. They were going to do the job themselves or die trying.

"Okay, darn," I said. "We can't let them do it alone." I went to help, and before I reached them the entire platoon was up and back into the killer sun. The cursing had stopped and the only sounds I heard were the snipping of the cutters and the wire being dragged across the ground. At 5 p.m. the young engineer sergeant told us we could call it quits and load up.

We rode back to the barracks in silence. The PX had closed and all of the hot water in the shower sheds was used up. We crashed on our bunks, exhausted. Storm clouds gathered outside and I could smell rain in the air. As evening fell, the trade winds shifted the palm fronds outside. Someone turned on a radio and soft music floated across the barracks. Life stood still. It felt good just to be lying on a soft mattress with music playing. The balmy, evening air lulled me to sleep.

When I woke in the morning, for a moment I thought I was in my room in the house where I grew up, but then I saw Delino sitting on the edge of his bunk putting his boots on.

"For a minute I forgot where I was," I said.

"You're in Vietnam, guy," he smiled at me, "so rise and shine."

The squad waited for me, and when everyone was ready, we walked to the mess hut together. I looked them over, Delino, Rojas, Emery, Mack Moore, Astoga, Donny Langford, Yoakum, Gardner, Eddie, Toby and the others. We were a gang. A barbed wire gang it's true, still, we all knew we were part of a team. It was us against the army, us against the entire fucked-up world for that matter.

On the way back from chow, Moore touched my arm and said, 'C'mon, Paul.'

He walked across the road and we went into one of the engineer's barracks and stopped at a bunk with an air mattress. With an ease borne of practice, he quickly, but without rushing, let the air out of the mattress, folded it neatly and stuffed it under his arm and walked out.

"Here," he said when we hit the road, "now you got your own again."

"Thanks, Mack," I said.

"Yeah, take care of it will ya?"

"Fucking A, absolutely," I said.

While we were in Long Binh, the battalion commander rotated home. After chow one night, they put Bravo Company into formation outside the barracks. The sergeant major put us at ease and Colonel Cavazos asked us to gather around him. He was stocky with black, crew-cut hair and a large square face and chin. I sat down with the other men in a semicircle around him. The colonel sat on the sandbags of a foxhole and looked into each face. He spoke slowly.

"I've been going to all the companies to personally say goodbye to the troops," he started out. "I wanted to thank each of you." He nodded to some of the faces he recognized, then said to all of us, "It has been the highest honor for me to have been your battalion commander. We've been through quite a lot, you and I, quite a lot." He paused.

"I want you all to know that I will never forget your bravery, your loyalty and your hard work. You always did whatever was asked of you, no matter how dangerous, no matter how difficult." He paused again to look at the young faces before him. "I would choose this outfit for any fight they wanted me in."

He straightened himself up and said with feeling. "I want you to know that I did my best to get you home." His voice choked with emotion and he hesitated. His eyes glazed over, and for a moment, I think he saw the bodies of the young soldiers who hadn't made it.

"I want you all to take care of yourselves," he continued. "Do your duty and go home to your families knowing that you have served your country well. Thank you, and God bless you all."

I looked Delino square in the face, pointed to the colonel and said, "Now THAT'S a Battalion Commander!"

Delino laughed, patted me on the back and put me ahead of himself in the line to shake the colonel's hand.

The new colonel came around two days later to inspect the troops. Unlike Cavasos, Colonel Deiter didn't smile. He was tall and thin. His hair was almost white and his eyes were the color of water in a drinking glass.

The men around me snickered after he left the barracks.

"Did you see the pearl-handled 45?" Emery asked.

"He looks like a cocksucker to me," Jesse put in. "We're in for it now."

Later that week the battalion went on an afternoon patrol. We flew out of Long Binh and into a clearing six clicks east of Ben Cat. It was late afternoon by the time we set off on a jungle trail towards the village. After leaving the clearing, the column halted and Bravo Six gave the order for flankers to be put out.

"Every squad will send a man out fifteen feet off the trail," Delino explained to me and Moore. "Okay, Gebhart," he pointed first to me then to the jungle. "You'll walk flanker to the right."

There was no path fifteen feet off the trail. I had to walk through sticker bushes while branches slapped me in the face; but the worst part was the exposure. If the VC had an ambush up ahead, I stood a good chance of walking right into it. Sure, the patrol would be warned, but I'd be stuck in no-man's land.

Not only did they expect me to walk flank, but they had me carrying a stupid pick as I did it. I had my flack jacket and rucksack on too. My webbing was fully loaded with canteens, ammo, and grenades and I struggled under the load.

"Shit. Goddamn, son of a bitch," I complained.

"We can't see you but we sure as hell can hear you," Delino called to me.

Gardner suddenly yelled, "VC! VC!" and we all hit the dirt. "I saw three or four of them, I'm tellin' ya." Gardner pointed to the jungle on the right side of the trail. "They were behind those trees about a hundred yards out. I'm not bullshitting"

No one else had seen them, but when the patrol continued, I felt worse than before. I walked slowly, five yards off the trail, looking for the VC that Gardner swore were out here with me. I pictured the pungee pit with bamboo needles laced with human feces and walked even slower. Delino had his eye on me though and he came out from the trail.

"You've got to keep up, Gebhart," he said.

"You're going too damn fast," I said.

"Push on through, Paul. You've got to keep up," Delino said, then went back to the trail.

I began to whack my way through the underbrush.

"Motherfucker!" I shouted as a vine tangled me up.

Delino walked over again. "Here," he said when he reached me, "give me your stuff." He took the pick from my hand and



said in disgust, "Now go back to the trail." He turned and walked away before I could say anything. I watched him push hard through the brush, without a grunt or moan.

I followed behind him; after a couple of minutes I caught up and he stopped to look at me. "Okay, Tony," I said, "let me have my stuff back."

He hesitated.

"Come on," I said, "let me have it back."

He handed me the pick and went back to the trail. I kept my mouth shut after that and just struggled with the load like a man.

When we reached Ben Cat there was only enough light left to surround the village. Alpha and Charlie companies took a position on the far side of Ben Cat; Bravo Company had the southern half of the hill. Night fell and the stars came out with a quarter moon. Looking up the hillside, we could see the lights inside the huts. We ate our C rations cold, out of the can without fires. My watch time was at 10. At midnight, Rojas took over for me and I fell asleep on the damp ground until 2 a.m. when he shook me awake.

"Charlie Company's spotted a VC squad," he whispered.

I sat up and Rojas went down the line to wake the other men in our squad.

Suddenly a burst of rifle fire ripped through the dark. On the other side of the village, red and green tracer rounds fired out in every direction. The tracer rounds were shooting up into the night sky and that seemed odd. I sat next to Delino and we both watched as twenty green tracer rounds fired off into the heavens.

"What the hell are the Vietnamese shooting at up there?" I asked. "Beats me," Delino said.

Thirty red tracers shot wildly, straight up into the air. "Well, whatever it is," I said, "our guys are shooting at it too." We both laughed, but kept our heads down.

"You know, it's amazing," I said, "Washington and Hanoi can't agree what day of the week it is, but somehow they worked it out that they would use green tracers and us, red ones."

Delino laughed. "Charlie is way smarter than us. The AK-47s they use can fire our 7.62, M14 and M60 machine bullets, so if they ever get a hold of our ammo, they can use it; but their bullets are a millimeter too big for us to use."

"How come we didn't think of that?" I asked.

Our conversation was interrupted by the shock of artillery shells hitting the jungle. The artillery barrage ended the night infiltration and at daybreak the battalion formed a patrol to go up the hill and into Ben Cat. Wet, cold, and tired we took the steep trail that led to the dirt road that ran through the village. Dogs barked at us, chickens flew off squawking, and the villagers watched from their huts as we came through their backyards. We checked some huts for weapons, but there wasn't any action, and in a couple of hours the choppers came in and flew us out.

That afternoon in Long Binh, Oscar platoon met its new platoon leader, a Lieutenant Truck. I heard from Delino that he was twenty-six years old and had made officer through the ROTC program at his college in New England somewhere. The lieutenant was a big man with a big butt, thin blond hair, and chubby, pink face.

"We just got our orders to relocate to a firebase on Highway 13," I heard Delino telling Rojas. "Lieutenant Truck told me you're to go out with us."

"Is he crazy?" Rojas asked. "I'm down to eight days. If I go out today, I'll just stay the night and get the morning Chinook back in."

"Well, that's what you'll do then," Lieutenant Truck interrupted from the doorway, "but you're going out for the night."

Rojas looked at him. "No, uh-uh," he said. "I'm not going."

"We'll see about that," the lieutenant said. He turned and walked out and down the barracks' steps.

A half-hour later I heard Delino quietly tell Rojas, "Captain Allen agreed with you. You can stay in Long Binh when we leave. The captain's an okay guy, you know?"

"Yeah, he sure is," Rojas said. "Thanks, Tony,"

That afternoon as we packed our gear, Rojas came over to me. He held out his hand and I shook it hard and held it a moment.

"Hey, you take care of yourself," Rojas stuttered.

"I will," I said. "What are you going to do when you get home?"

"I'll go see my family in Texas and California."

When I first met him, I used to finish his sentences, but I waited for him to complete his thoughts without interrupting.

"Hey, Rojas," I said. "You know that was the bravest thing I ever saw." He looked at me and smiled. "It was also the *dumbest*. Crawling out to go one on one with a hidden sniper? Goddamn, man!"

Rojas chuckled. "Well, you know there's a fine line between crazy and brave."

"Yeah, right, a fine line," I smiled.

He patted me on the shoulder. "I'll write to you and send you some food." We shook hands again, and I left the barracks feeling good for Rojas—and sad too, knowing that it would be different without him.

We were out on Thunder Road the following week when Delino's big day came. I watched him pack his rucksack outside the mortar pit.

"Well, guy," he said to me as he slung it onto his back, "I've taught you everything I know."

"You taught me good, Tony. Thanks," I said and started to walk with him.

"You're going to make it," he said. "Don't you ever let yourself think otherwise."

"Yeah, sure," I said.

"Well, okay then. I'll be thinking of you and the guys still over here."

"I know you will."

"And quit smoking that dope; it'll make you stupid." He laughed and faked a slap at my face. I blocked it and faked a right hand back at him.

"Hey, I'm already stupid," I said. "I'm here, ain't I?"

"Yeah, but if you'd stay off that stuff, you'd almost be a nice guy. So cut it out."

"Okay, Tony, just for you."

He waved his hand and made a face, "You'll be stoned an hour after I leave."

"Ten minutes you mean."

"You hippie."

"You got that right. Hey, how about sending me some love beads when you get home?"

"Yeah, I can just see you now," he grinned at me, "patrolling through the jungle with love beads on."

We reached the landing area as the Chinook came in. It landed loud and threw dirt all over the place. In the middle of the dust storm we shook hands. Delino yelled something that I couldn't hear, then turned and walked up the back ramp. I turned my back and protected my eyes as the Chinook lifted up. I watched it fly away until I couldn't see or hear it anymore.

Three days later, I was in my lean-to writing a letter to my parents when I heard Lieutenant Truck call for me. "Gebhart? Where's Gebhart?"

"Here," I hollered. I stuck my head out and caught the lieutenant's eye.

"You're on garbage detail," he said. "Follow me."

I picked up my M-16 and followed him across camp to the mess tent where five other men from the line platoons waited for us. A two-ton truck drove up and the lieutenant shouted, "Okay, let's get it done."

We loaded the camp's garbage into the truck bed and climbed on top. The lieutenant sat in the passenger seat and, after a ten-minute ride, the driver backed the truck up to a large hole that the engineers had dug alongside the road. Peasants from a nearby village, mostly old women and children, came out to scavenge. They motioned to me to hand them the garbage bags rather than throw them into the hole. They wore ragged clothes and needed baths and I felt sorry for them. I handed them down the garbage bags to let them pick through the contents.

"They'll take any piece of food that isn't totally stinking rotten," I said to the other men on the detail.

"Gebhart," Lieutenant Truck shouted, "throw that trash into the hole." He stood on the step by the passenger door looking back into the truck bed.

"They're hungry," I said.

"I don't care. We're not here to feed them, we're here to dump the garbage."

I stared at him. "What's so bad about letting them sort through it first?"

"It doesn't look right," the lieutenant shouted. "They're eating our garbage."

I pretended to look around for the crowds of disapproving people, hands held out to my side, palms up, I searched, then shrugged. "Ain't nobody here but us, Sir, and to them it ain't garbage, it's food."

"Just do as you're told!" the lieutenant yelled. "Throw the goddamn food into the hole!"

The old women reached up for my plastic bag but I shook my head and threw it over their heads. They climbed right down into the hole and worked the pile, throwing their findings up to the kids to sack.

"Okay," the lieutenant called out when the truck was empty, "cover it up."

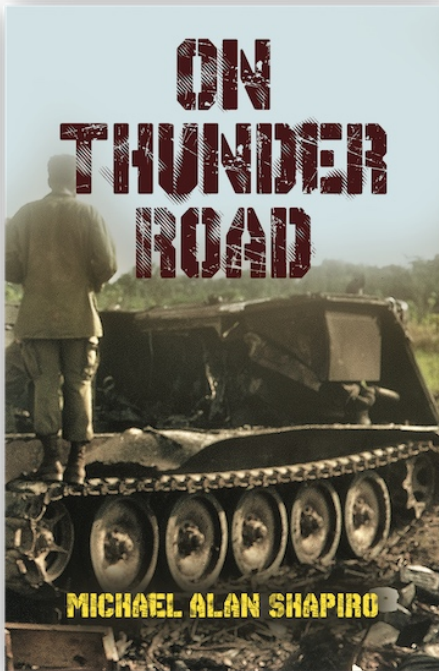
The other men shoveled dirt into the hole and the mamasans had to scramble to climb out. A couple of them were slow and were hit with the dirt.

"Hey, Jesus Christ!" I hollered. "Let 'em get out."

The soldiers, hot and tired, yelled at the Vietnamese, "Dee dee moi! Dee dee moi!" (Hurry up! Move it!). One grunt yelled back to me, "Listen, if we let them pick through this stuff we'll be here all day. They'll be back for more when the next truck comes out."

"Okay," I agreed, "but wait for them, they're getting out." We did wait until the women were out then filled the hole.

When we were back in camp, the men on the garbage detail joked about the argument I had with the lieutenant. I realized that Truck could hear them and that their laughter did not make me his favorite person.



At the apex of the Civil Rights movement in America, a Jewish boy from New Jersey was deployed to fight in our nation's first fully integrated war. Assigned to the mortar platoon of a rifle company in the 1st Infantry Division, he shared the experience of combat with young men from all cultures and economic backgrounds.

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