

*The final chapter in the LRRP/Ranger
Jungle War series by Kregg P.J.
Jorgenson.*

Sweet Sorrow: The Jungle War - Book 3

By Charles McNair, M.D.

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KREGG P. J. JORGENSEN

SWEET SUNBROW

THE JUNGLE WAR
BOOK 3



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This is work of fiction. While there were 13 separate U.S. Army Ranger-75th Infantry Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP/Lurp) Companies serving during the Vietnam War, there was no R or Romeo Company-75th Infantry LRRP/Ranger (MAC-V) unit, nor was there a Camp Mackie forward operating Base Camp to house them. All names, characters, places, events, and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.

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Chapter 1

Saigon, 1971-

If the fickle gods of war zone Military Transportation hadn't actually graced them this morning, then they at least gave the two Army Rangers favorable nods.

Today it only took Captain Robison and First Sergeant Poplawski a little over an hour to get from their Ranger Company compound at Camp Mackie high up in III Corps down to Saigon and over to MAC-V Headquarters to attend a scheduled briefing.

Their commute began with a wind-whipped, open-door Huey helicopter flight down to the joint U.S. Army and Air Force base at Bien Hoa, 19 miles north of the fledgling nation's central government hub. Shortly after the helicopter touched down they caught a cage-windowed military bus that was just leaving from Bien Hoa down, to and through, the chaotic streets of Saigon over to the Tan Son Nhut Military Air Base. There it was just a short, dusty walk, in the already sweltering morning heat to their destination.

The walk laced the black leather toes of their nylon jungle boots with a pale orange patina of road dust, and left dark rings of sweat slowly spreading beneath their armpits and on the lower backs on their jungle fatigues. The morning was more than muggy. A punishing, sauna-like high heat and accompanying humidity began pushing and probing against them like invisible fat fingers making them feel like walking wet sponges. No matter where they were stationed in Vietnam, GIs felt like they were just one good shower away from actually feeling clean immediately after a shower. These two were no exception.

The military meteorologists predicted that by mid-afternoon the worst of the seasonal heat would settle and hold in the high 90s with a high humidity index level. A heat advisory was sent out warning that by 1500 hours the double hit combination of the rising heat and humidity would become life threatening. The one-two punch would stop someone from sweating, raise an individual's body temperature higher than the outside temperature, and cause cramping, dizziness, and nausea- all symptoms and deadly signs of Heat Stroke. GIs were advised to stay hydrated, wear head covers outdoors, and forego strenuous physical activity.

With little to no breeze coming out of the South China Sea, the high season hold would not give up its grip until later in the evening. To most GIs it seemed that Vietnam didn't have four distinct seasons, just a four cycle sequence of wet, wetter, hot, and really, really dog breath in your face hot. The transition today was moving into the hotter cycle, but for those in-country the war was still business as usual, sweating or no sweating.

Generally, the trip down to MAC-V Headquarters from Camp Mackie for the 1300 hours or one o'clock briefings took them ninety minutes and change, depending upon the ever changing twists and turns of the war, available outbound

transportation, the weather, and, of course, the undeniable accuracy behind the military maxim that *'whatever can go wrong, will go wrong, so plan for the worst and hope for the best.'*

A rescheduled time change for today's briefing, though, had them leaving Camp Mackie earlier than normal on the morning mail run. The *best* was the better availability of morning air and vehicle traffic that got them to Tan Son Nhut sooner than their regularly scheduled meetings.

After clearing the Military Police security checkpoint at the main entrance of the Command Center, the two were making their way down the freshly waxed and buffed hallway toward their assigned briefing room when the First Sergeant gave his Company Commander a cynical side eye.

"You know, Sir," Poplawski said. "And please bear with me on this, Captain, because this is just a thought, mind you."

"A thought, is it?"

"Yes sir, it is. One that perhaps might better serve military efficiency and combat mission performance too, I might add."

"Okay, First Sergeant, in the name of efficiency and mission performance you may add," said the Captain, playing along. Robison was always amazed and appreciated how Poplawski had the uncanny knack to Occam's Razor the heck out of any issue to cut to the chase and find the simplest, if not more efficient and direct run at a solution, albeit with his usual bent toward sarcasm. "What's your observation and time saving and job enhancement suggestion? Let me hear it."

"Well Sir, I'm thinking that maybe instead of them having us come all the way down here once a month for these briefings, maybe they could just, oh, I dunno, send us a *fucking* memo."

"You think that would do it, do you?" Robison said, chuckling.

"Given all the critical wisdom they generally impart and bless our way at these Dog & Pony Shows, why Yes sir, I do."

"What? You don't like to hear about the latest prizes for Bingo Night at the Embassy or say, updating your military driver's license in one of the many offices in this giant labyrinth?"

"Hmm? Didn't know we needed them in a war zone."

"The Bingo prizes or military driver's license?"

"Either. Both."

"Well, there are war zones and there are war zones, First Sergeant."

"Yes sir, I can tell by the on-site tennis court, movie theater, and cheeseburger smelling snack bars they have here, not to mention flush toilets and these wonderfully waxed corridor floors. In fact, these floors are so shiny and mirror-like I can damn near see my petty resentment in them."

"You do realize we fall under MAC-V's chain-of-command regardless of where we're actually stationed, so..."

“Play nice?”

“Or at least, play along.”

“They say what this latest get-together is about, Sir? The start time is earlier than normal.”

“No, they didn’t, just that they emphasized this one was mandatory and that we be here by no later than Zero-nine-thirty hours.”

“They maybe forget the commute and all, and maybe that we were lucky enough to hop a ride with a helicopter making a mail run to Bien Hoa this morning without it getting shot down by those always determined pesky little yellow fellows?”

“Pesky little yellow fellows? I take it by that you mean the Viet Cong?”

“Yes sir, them, and none that I’ve seen lately who’ll ever take gold in the Olympic high jump competition or make it in the starting line up with the Celtics, Lakers, or Pistons.”

“True, but here they seem to have the home court advantage.”

“That they do, Sir. And they do seem to favor technical fouls.”

“And no free throws for us. But once the briefing is over and we’re done here, we’ll make our way over to Long Binh and check in on our people. You have the berets?”

“Right here, Sir,” Poplawski said, patting both sides of cargo pants pockets. “I had the Supply Sergeant give me four new ones with the *Sua Sponte* crest patch sewn on.”

“Outstanding!”

“Maybe if there’re no more follow-up surgeries they’ll let us see them today?”

The Ranger officer agreed with a grunt and nod. Four of their people were laid up in hospital beds in an Evacuation Hospital eleven miles away in Long Binh and Robison and Poplawski needed to check in to see how they were doing after their surgeries. This mandatory meeting at MAC-V Headquarters was getting in the way of their pre-planned visits.

The Headquarters briefings generally were in the early afternoon, so they had made plans for the hospital visits before the briefing at MAC-V headquarters until the call had come informing them of the time change for the briefing.

“Command would like you here by no later than Zero-nine thirty hours, Captain,” said the junior officer making the call and passing along the message.

“Zero-nine thirty?”

“Yes sir.”

“Is there any way we can get out of the briefing, Lieutenant? We have several of our people in the hospital we need to check in on.”

“I’m sorry, Sir, but the Colonel said you’re required to attend the morning briefing. Said it’s mandatory. If it’s any consolation, the briefing will be shorter than normal.”

“Roger that, Lieutenant. We’ll be there,” said the Ranger Captain, not liking the answer but knowing the Colonel had the final say. The briefings normally ran an hour or so which would still leave plenty of time for him and his First Sergeant to make a beeline trip over to the Evacuation Hospital before catching a ride back up to Camp Mackie.

One left turn and another long corridor later they stepped through the opened doorway of their Liaison Office’s briefing room. The rows of chairs normally facing the podium on the small platform had been stacked on the left and right sides of the room. The two Rangers also noticed that the audience standing in a horseshoe formation around the room was somewhat larger than any of the previously attended briefings. Odd as well, they were receiving an unusual amount of courteous smiles and almost convincing appreciative nods on their approach. That, of course, had the Captain and First Sergeant somewhat confused and more than a little suspicious of what this early morning briefing was actually about. It also had Poplawski feeling like he was in one those nature documentaries where several studly Wildebeest had just stepped into a river crossing while a line of rear area crocodiles mud-slid into the water and began closing in around them. This audience too was all smiles and teeth.

They’d been called down to MAC-V ostensibly for a command briefing, because on paper, Company R-Ranger, fell under the command of MAC-V headquarters, but not MAC-V SOG. That was something both the Captain and First Sergeant lamented over when the new Ranger Company was first formed. MAC-V SOG, ‘*Studies and Observations Group*’ were, in reality, clandestine special operations teams that conducted daring and deadly missions deep behind the lines in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam. They, at least, would’ve better understood the Ranger Company’s true mission and purpose.

The Ranger First Sergeant was correct with his take on today’s briefing. The monthly meetings at MAC-V Headquarters were mostly informational or ceremonial, and perhaps served to remind those in attendance who was actually in charge of Romeo Company’s operational fate. Thankfully, the briefing coincided with their plan to check in on their wounded in the Evacuation Hospital, albeit later than the two had hoped for. To Robison and Poplawski the hospital visits held a higher, if not, more important priority than the monthly briefing. They, however, didn’t dictate the play. MAC-V Command did, so first, the briefing, then, the hospital visits.

It was Colonel Lubben, their MAC-V Headquarters Liaison Commander, who acknowledged Robison and Poplawski as they entered the briefing room.

“Ah! You’re early! Good! Then let’s get started. Gentlemen, please,” said the Colonel, calling them to the front of the room and motioning where he wanted them to stand.

Unbeknownst to the two Rangers this particular monthly briefing would not be a briefing, but a carrot and stick *thank you/fuck you* event.

The small crowd of attendees that were mostly dressed in short sleeved Class B khaki uniforms closed in behind them. A Spec-4 checking his F-stop on a Nikon camera and attached flash followed their lead before veering off to stand next to a second lower enlisted man, who was standing to the left, and a foot behind the smiling Colonel.

The carrot and *thank you* came in the form of an ATTENTION TO ORDERS command barked out by a First Lieutenant standing off to the side as those in the room came to attention. As the award orders were being read aloud by the young officer, Robison and Poplawski were surprised to hear that they would be receiving Bronze Stars for Meritorious Service. A Specialist-4 walked in from the sidelines holding a tray with the small oblong shaped medal presentation boxes. Colonel Lubben retrieved the first medal, and pinned it to the Captain's chest before doing the same to the Ranger First Sergeant.

The awards for the two Rangers, loudly announced by the junior officer reading the citation, were for their '*Outstanding leadership in combat operations in the III Corps Tactical Zone of the Republic of South Vietnam.*' That was echoed by the smiling Full Bird Colonel who then praised the two Lurps for their *outstanding* leadership with the unit during the grip and grin photo-op right before the Colonel quietly informed them that their Ranger Company was being disbanded.

Thus, the *fuck you* stick.

"Disbanded, Sir?" said the stunned Ranger Captain.

"Yes, that's correct," said the Colonel with a dismissive, like it or not, sniff. "Due to the drawdown of U.S. troop strength here in the Republic of South Vietnam, command is shutting down your unit in the next fifty-five days, Captain. However, that should not be overshadowed by the fact that over the last ten months, you and your Rangers have done stellar work carrying out *outstanding* behind the lines surveillance work. Truly *outstanding*! Congratulations!"

"Eight months, Sir."

"What?"

"We've only been operational for eight months. We're just beginning our ninth month, Sir."

"All the more outstanding!" said the senior officer, and then not to be deterred or deflected from his rehearsed speech, the Colonel nodded, smiled, and ran with his script. "Then, the prestigious awards for you and your people are all that more impressive!"

"My people?"

"Yes, because there's more," smiled the Colonel. "We're not done yet."

The Colonel went on.

“General Abrams couldn’t be here for this ceremony as he got called away to an emergency meeting with Vice President Ky, but he wanted to let you personally know how pleased and impressed he was, and *is*, for your unit’s professionalism, dedication to service, and its overall *outstanding* accomplishments.”

Outstanding was the latest and highest buzzword compliment the Army was using and overusing these days, thought Poplawski, since saying, *Out Fucking Outstanding* was frowned upon, and *Huzzah* had gone the way of the Dodo bird. Publicly, the Army brass didn’t like the use of obscenities, and even had a regulation issued against their utterances.

At the moment Poplawski couldn’t recall the exact official title or accompanying numerical designation of the regulation, let alone its full wording, only that it was officially on the books. However, he had recalled the gist of it.

‘Profane, obscene, and/or other immoderate language will not be used or permitted,’ which he thought was somewhat odd since damn near every soldier caught up a firefight in the jungle or stomach and balls deep laying in a shit-smelling rice paddy in a sudden ambush likely never uttered, *“Oh shucks, the Viet Cong are shooting at us again. I’ll be darned, they just got Billy and Lamont, and hey, what do you know, my liver’s bleeding, too! Gosh, golly, gee, I’m a goner!”*

Poplawski suspected the regulation regarding the use of obscenities was more than likely meant to appease and placate public sentiment or the sensibilities of mixed company discourse in social settings. Never mind, soldiers when need be were trained and encouraged to gut an enemy soldier with a cold-steel bayonet in close-quarter combat bayonet training. The training came with what was called *‘the spirit of the bayonet,’* which was a three-word charging shout of *‘Kill! Kill! Kill!’* so perhaps it was improper to have a GI swear when they skewered an enemy soldier, twisted the blade, and then boot-kicked the still quivering body to free the bayonet as they shook away any of the attached torn intestines or scraps of bloodied viscera before the soldier moved on to the next target. That, of course, would be unseemly.

The regulation also kept a frustrated Poplawski from angrily shouting out, *‘what idiotic, cock-sucking, motherfucking, half-assed, hairbrained, sonofabitch MAC-V REMF shit for brains, decided to shut us down?’* even as the hollow sounding compliments to the two Rangers continued. Just as he was holding back his inner voice, he too was holding back his contempt, but just barely. The muscles in his square-jawed face were trembling like plucked cello strings as the Colonel continued his speech.

“That sentiment was also echoed by Brigadier General Reese, who gave glowing reports of your unit back up at Camp Mackie, which is why Romeo Company is also receiving an impressive honor,” he added.

Turning to the Lieutenant who had read the orders, Lubben said, “Lieutenant, please read aloud the next citation.”

“ATTENTION TO ORDERS!” called the Lieutenant, once more ordering everyone to come to the military position of Attention before he began reading the documentation he was holding.

“The Valorous Unit Award is awarded to R Company-75th Infantry, MAC-V Command for extraordinary heroism in action against an armed enemy of the United States while engaged in armed conflict...”

There was more military speak and accompanying gratuitous hyperbole, and after the junior officer finished the rest of the prepared text, he gave the date of the order, followed by the name and rank of the approving officer before he turned and handed the Colonel a small, gold framed, red, white, and blue striped ribbon pin along with an accompanying certificate.

The Colonel, in turn, presented both items to Captain Robison. Shaking the Ranger Captain’s hand, he held it in place for the pose and practiced smiling for the next Public Affairs ‘*grip and grin*’ photo-op. The enlisted photographer taking the pictures changed his angle and took several more shots until he was sure he had what he needed to chronicle the event.

There were more smiles and applause all around from those in attendance with the exception of Captain Robison and First Sergeant Poplawski, who took the news and awards a little differently than the presenter or the audience. Later, when the film was developed, the eight by ten, black and white photo would show that neither of the Rangers were smiling.

In truth, they were still bewildered by the announcement to disband the unit, poleaxed even, and it was Poplawski who even appeared to be angrily confused by the decision. He was about to offer an unfiltered response to the Colonel when Robison whispered, “*Not now,*” to his First Sergeant. Poplawski drew in a deep breath and slowly let it out. It was his way of counting to 10.

As a West Point graduate, the Captain knew better how to mask his thoughts and emotions than the now dour-looking Poplawski as he accepted the award on behalf of the Ranger Company. Robison was more resigned to acknowledge the bad news since he also knew that the decision came down from upon high, which meant well above the Colonel’s pay grade. That also meant there wasn’t anything he or his First Sergeant could do or say to change the outcome. Instead, his mind was racing with what all would need to be done with the remaining time they officially had left as Romeo Company. There was much to do.

“Again, congratulations,” said the Colonel, drawing Robison’s attention back to the moment, ending the ceremony that had also ended Romeo Company’s short run.

They were dismissed.

Well, almost.

As the Colonel and the bulk of the attendees exited the office, the Colonel's red-faced Aide approached the Ranger Captain and intimidating looking First Sergeant with a quiet and awkward request.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"I'm...I'm afraid we need the medals back."

"Say again, Lieutenant?"

"The Bronze Stars medals, Sir. They're...they're only for the ceremony, Sir," he said to the Captain in an almost inaudible apologetic tone and then quickly added, "Copies of the orders will be entered into your military personnel files and the actual medals will be issued at a later date."

"The Army giveth, and the Army taketh away," sighed the First Sergeant as he removed the medal and handed it over to the Lieutenant.

"The Valorous Unit Award, though, is yours to take back to your unit."

"Thank you, Lieutenant, because if you asked for that back then you would've had to wrestle us for it," said Robison, placing the Valorous Unit Award citation ribbon in his top pocket.

"Damn straight," muttered Poplawski, staring at the now uncomfortable Lieutenant. "And we're one tough tag team!"

The Captain and First Sergeant removed the small bronze star shaped medals with the attached red ribbons and handed them over to the now rattled Colonel's Aide who seemed to be concentrating unusually hard on carefully replacing the two medals back in their presentation boxes for future presentations.

"Then I guess we're done here," said Captain Robison to his First Sergeant who gave a slight nod and started to follow his Commanding Officer out of the room.

"Sir?"

"Yes Lieutenant?" Robison said, turning back.

"There's...there's, eh, coffee and donuts in the back of the room."

Robison nodded. "Naw, we're good. Aren't we, First Sergeant? We good?"

The Ranger Company's First Sergeant sneered and grunted something that could've easily been construed as, '*Yes sir*' or possibly, '*fuck your donuts.*'

The two Rangers exited the briefing room. Like a boxer who'd just finished a difficult twelve rounds and lost by a bad decision, Poplawski was slumped-shouldered and brooding as they made their way back down the long highly polished corridor, and back out of the building's main entrance.

Exiting the headquarters' building and stepping back out into the high heat and harsh, glaring sunlight only added to their physical annoyance. The Valorous Unit Award was welcomed even if the disbanding of Romeo Company wasn't.

As they passed several highly polished military sedans parked out front, and paralleling the modern two-storied headquarters facility, there was time and space to talk candidly.

“Sweet Jesus, Captain, what the hell was that?” said the frustrated Poplawski out of ear shot of anyone nearby.

“Our marching orders, apparently,” said Robison.

“More like *wham, bam, thank you, mam, and oh, don't let the door hit you on the ass on your way out.*”

“I believe Edward Gibbon in *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* called it, *the vicissitudes of fortune.*” said the Ranger Captain. “The ups and downs.”

“Definitely the downs,” agreed Poplawski.

Robison nodded but there was another more pressing matter to attend to. “Come on, First Sergeant. Let's see if we can catch a ride over to Long Binh and check in on our people.”

The *'our people,'* of course, were the four seriously wounded Rangers from their unit that had been Medevaced to the 93rd Evacuation Hospital in Long Binh during the previous few days. A fifth Ranger had been killed in action in a vicious fight involving one of the two teams on patrol in the jungle. The five losses were a heavy blow to Romeo Company that barely had forty Rangers they could field for combat patrols at any given time.

Among those surviving casualties were two experienced team leaders, one assistant team leader, and a new guy who had only been in Vietnam for less than a month when he triggered a booby trap explosive device on his very first long range patrol. His war ended just twenty-seven days into his 365 day scheduled tour of duty.

Because of the severity of their wounds, the likelihood of finding all four still in the evacuation hospital were, at best, low. Lower still because of the briefing they had been required to attend. Medical evacuation flights tended to go out early in the morning. Generally, the patient evacuation policy was that after emergency surgery, and once a soldier's wounds or burns were stabilized, the soldier, sailor, marine or airman was airlifted to a second military surgical hospital in Japan for the next round of surgeries, treatments, and physical therapies. Some, though, were flown stateside to the Letterman Army Medical Center in San Francisco or to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

Still, the Captain and First Sergeant would try to track down their people in the Evacuation hospital, and that meant they would first need to find transportation for the ride from Tan Son Nhut to Long Binh.

First Sergeant Poplawski figured that given the number of military vehicles delivering typewriters, photocopying paper, paper clips, staplers, pens, pencils, five-gallon water cooler bottles, pallets of beer and soft drinks, and bucket loads of hand cream and hand towels to wipe down all the brown nosing going on at the

base as well as at MAC-V Headquarters, the odds were better than good at finding a ride near the main gate area or in and around the general vicinity.

Since MAC-V was collocated at the Tan Son Nhut Air Base, it would be just a matter of thumbing a ride. The morning temperature was now pushing 90 degrees and they were sweating again as they began their search.

Chapter 2

Over the course of its operational time individual team members in Romeo Company had earned four Silver Stars for Gallantry, thirteen Bronze Stars for Heroism, and 15 Army Commendation Medals for Valor. In addition, 18 members of the unit would be awarded Purple Hearts for minor, non-life threatening wounds, the rips and tears and the near misses from incoming machine gun rounds, shrapnel from RPG blasts or grenade fragments in sudden ambushes and firefights. A number of Lurps had even received multiple Purple Hearts for additional non-life threatening wounds while remaining in the company and still shouldering rucksacks.

However, the many bumps, bruises, bug bites, sprains, fractured or broken bones, pulled muscles, cuts, scrapes, and even the suffered bouts of malaria from the grueling five-day, non-enemy contact patrols in the jungle, didn't merit Purple Hearts from the military. That was all considered par for the course, all just the expected norm of their everyday job.

Eight months in and Romeo Company hadn't lost any of their people to serious injuries or wounds. Nor had any of their people been K-I-A, Killed in Action, a rarity given the long range patrols they carried out in the enemy occupied jungles and the number of running gun battles they were involved in. Their luck was holding, but it couldn't last. War was always a gamble, and when the luck finally broke, Romeo Company bled deep.

On one day, on one agonizing afternoon, two of the Company's teams, minutes, and miles apart, took heavy hits.

Specialist-4 Jonas Warren, walking Point Man for Lurp Team Nine-Three, had just pushed aside some heavy leaves and brush away from a small rise in front of him only to step into the middle of a ten man squad of Viet Cong fighters taking a rest break on a small, unmarked trail.

In the sudden, startling moment by Warren, and the panicked shouts from two of the Viet Cong fighters seated directly in front of him that had the enemy soldiers grabbing at their assault rifles and whatever else they could find to kill the American, the fight for life was on.

"CONTACT FRONT!" the big man shouted over his shoulder to Staff Sergeant Tommy Wade, Nine-Three's Team Leader who was a few steps behind him. Warren fired on the first Viet Cong soldier who was seated but still trying to bring up his AK-47 as the close quarter firefight erupted and chaos ensued.

For Warren there was no cover, and it was too late to retreat, so the big man took on the fight screaming literal bloodied murder. Left with no choice, all he could do now was fight, and fight as ugly and as brutally savagely as he could.

The first enemy soldier he shot was down writhing on the ground as a second Viet Cong fighter sprang at him with an upraised spiked bayonet on his AK-47.

Slapping the bayonet and assault rifle aside with the barrel and frame of his rifle but unable to bring his M-16 backup on target in time, Warren kicked the enemy soldier as hard as he could to stop the assault. He was aiming at his balls, but his jungle boot missed, and the front kick slammed into the man's right hip instead. Still, it was enough to send him falling back onto the ground, but it wasn't enough to get him to drop his rifle. The Viet Cong fighter hurriedly brought it up on target.

Realizing what was coming next Warren pivoted left as he stiff armed his Team Leader, who came charging in behind him. The stiff arm hit knocked Sergeant Wade on his ass just as the fighter let loose a burst of automatic gunfire. In the staggered Ranger file formation, the team was in, the heavy rounds that just missed Warren and Wade, tore into Specialist-4 Leon Hagar behind Wade just as he too was charging forward to enter the fight. Hagar's legs were shot out from under him, and the impact of the assault rifle's heavy rounds butchered his front thigh muscles and splintered the leg bones. Hagar fell back screaming.

Warren shot the shooter, stitching him in the right hand, arm, and shoulder. Several of the rounds that had missed the enemy soldier shattered his rifle stock and sent the AK-47 flying. A scream from his left had Warren turning on the trail and firing on another of the surprised Viet Cong fighters who was still fumbling with his weapon's leaf spring lever desperately trying to flip it down from SAFE to FIRE. The soldier crumpled and the threat was gone. Warren then turned his aim in on yet one more enemy soldier ten feet away who was bringing up an RPG rocket propelled grenade launcher to his shoulder to fire. A sustained burst from his M-16 caught the soldier from his right hip to his upper chest and blew out his neck. With his finger on the trigger the momentum as he stumbled back sent the shoulder fired rocket high and wide where it exploded well up into the trees.

The big Lurp was quickly aiming in on a small group of the Viet Cong who were taking cover behind a termite mound further on only to find his rifle bolt locked back. His 20 round magazine had emptied. Reaching for a new magazine from an ammo pouch, he dumped the empty magazine and was about to slam the new one in place when the Viet Cong fighter he had only wounded rose up and swung a heavy machete blade deep into Warren's right leg. The thick blade, hammered out from a broken truck spring, caught, and stuck in the American's calf muscle and bone as the wounded Viet Cong fighter twisted the thick blade trying to free it for another strike. With an agonizing, almost feral cry, Warren turned and shot the soldier again this time killing him, only before he could turn back around to face the remaining fighters, he was hit in his chest with a burst of automatic rifle fire. Staggering back from the impact of the hits and spitting blood, Warren took a second burst of enemy gunfire. The big man died toppling over with the crude machete still stuck in his leg.

With the weight of his 95 pound rucksack countering his own body weight and still holding him down, Wade was struggling to get to his feet and stay in the

fight. The best he could do, though, was sit up and shoot a lone Viet Cong fighter who was charging in on the rest of the team. While he shot and dropped the attacker Wade was hit moments later by small arms fire coming in blind through the foliage from his left. The thick brush and jungle that had obscured the unmarked trail had also hidden the remaining enemy fighters who were firing where they thought the Americans might be as they regrouped and retreated back down the trail. Had the Viet Cong known that they were only up against a five man team and that three of them were down, they might've carried on the fight. But with the two remaining Lurps laying down a storm of suppressing small arms fire, the Viet Cong survivors made their getaway dragging away their own wounded. The dead lay where they fell.

Both sides had taken too many hits to continue the fight and within minutes the small sudden firefight was over. Five of the Viet Cong and Specialist-4 Jonas Warren littered the awkwardly silent small trail. With one new team member pulling out bandages and trying his best to treat the badly wounded Team Leader and Assistant Team Leader the second surviving Lurp called in the CONTACT and sent out a request for a much needed Medevac helicopter to pull out the casualties. Both calls were immediately acknowledged with a return call saying that a Quick Reaction Force was being sent in to safeguard the Lurp Team, evacuate the wounded, and secure the site of the firefight.

Meanwhile miles away, in a neighboring Province and a third of the way down the *Nui Ba Den*-The Black Virgin mountain, Sergeant Darrell Thomas, a Team Leader for Longboat Team Nine-Four, and Private First Class Pete Norse who was on his very first Ranger patrol, were chasing after an NVA soldier who had slipped into a tunnel when Norse triggered a boobytrap.

The hidden explosive charge partially collapsed the tunnel and sent a plume of dirt, dust and rock shooting out of the channel's entrance like a giant shotgun blast startling the remaining team members who hadn't yet reached the entrance. When the dust settled and as two of the Lurps provided security Specialist-4 Harry Li, Nine-Four's Assistant Team Leader, scrambled inside the tunnel and immediately began digging his forward trying to get to the two missing team members. However, Li only managed to locate and drag out the badly injured new guy from beneath a mound of rubble and dirt in the collapsed mess.

Thomas, who was further into the tunnel than Norse before the explosion, couldn't be reached, let alone rescued. Loose rock and dirt and heavy slabs of granite came down blocking the way forward. There was no way Li nor anyone else, short of mining tools and drills, could push through the blockage to reach him, if he was still alive.

A Quick Reaction Force, including a team of Engineers, were flown in under enemy fire to help to try to locate and rescue the missing Team Leader or, fearing the worst, to extricate the body. Several attempts were made to reach Thomas

without success. What remained of the tunnel was shaky at best and threatening to come down at any moment. Dirt was spilling down from the tunnel's ceiling making it look like a giant overturned hourglass. The supports that were holding up the rest of the roof and walls were bent, splintered, and worse, creaking.

After checking out the outside ground above the tunnel and crawling in and evaluating the fragile situation, the now worried Engineers voiced their concerns. What little remained of the tunnel, they said, would soon come down. The flow of the soil was increasing, and a total collapse was inevitable, if not imminent. And there was more bad news.

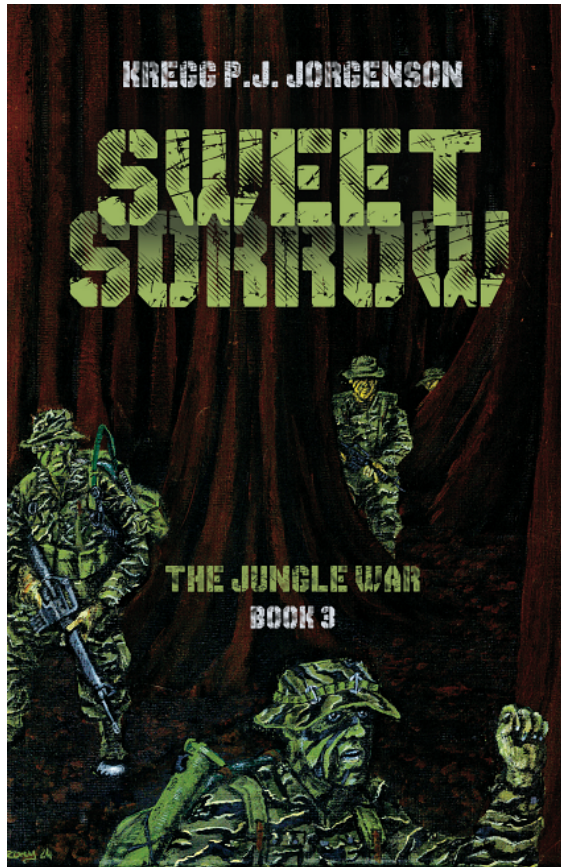
If Thomas hadn't died in the explosion and the initial cave in, then any further attempts to dig through the heavy stone and debris would only bring down more of the mountain on top of him and very likely, any of the rescuers. Against their advice Captain Robison needed to see it for himself. Borrowing a flashlight from one of the Engineers he crawled into what remained of the tunnel and began searching without success as the flow of dirt increased and fell. He barely managed to get out before it completely caved in. The rescue and recovery mission was called off and upon his return back to Camp Mackie the frustrated Ranger Captain would have to officially list Thomas as Missing-In-Action and Presumed Dead.

The once missing and presumed dead Team Leader, though, somehow had survived the explosion and cave in. Partially buried beneath some loose rock and dirt, he dug and crawled his way forward and found himself inside a vast tunnel complex and enemy occupied cave system. The bruised and battered Texan avoided capture and 36 hours later found a way out of the mountain where he was rescued by a passing Scout helicopter several miles away from the Nui Ba Den.

It wasn't an easy rescue either. The missing Lurp was shot in the upper right chest and shoulder in a running gun battle with the Viet Cong when the small helicopter swooped in with cover fire, touched down to a hover, and pulled in the weary and bleeding, and oh-so-thankful Ranger. Once airborne, and realizing the serious nature of Thomas' wound, the Scout pilot immediately flew him to the nearest Army Field Hospital in Tay Ninh before he was transferred that same evening to the 93rd Evacuation Hospital in Long Binh for a second, more complicated surgery.

One dead and four critically wounded Rangers in one damn day.

Captain Robison and First Sergeant Poplawski hurried their pace. The Evacuation Hospital was still eleven miles away.



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