

# DMIZ DIARY



**JEFF KELLY**

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Cover photo: The author at Camp Big John on the Cua Viet River, May 1968. Photo by Dale Watt.

## *May 8th - Leatherneck Square*

It rained hard during the night but I covered up with the plastic sheeting that comes in 81mm mortar ammo cases and in the morning I was dry. At first light everyone was drenched and muddy except me. Colonel Marsh asked where I spent the night and I joked that I checked into the Howard Johnsons on the next ridge.

We were two days into another operation and a couple of clicks north and east of where Dan and Doc Kord were killed. Mike Company had made enemy contact each day of the operation, but it was light and we suffered no casualties. As I prepared my gear to move out, I had a disturbing realization. Of the five canteens I carried, four were empty. My personal goal for the day was to get some water, either by crossing a stream or by resupply.

Word was passed that Lima had point with Mike following in trace. Only a few cumulus clouds dotted the sky. I called in the battalion weather observation into Drakepool and he told me the temperature was expected to go above 110. I relayed that to Captain Mac and he passed word to conserve water.

We moved up on a long, grassy plateau and followed it south until mid morning. Signs of the NVA were everywhere. Lying beside the trail was a weathered ammo box marked with Chinese writing and an unmistakable 82mm stamped in the wood. This was Indian country. To the west, across a broad valley, was a bald ridge that looked like our old position from Operation Marsh Gas. "Hey 2-4, that ridge over there," I asked Dyer. "Is that..."

"Most affirmative," he said cutting me off and verifying the position of the Marsh Gas ridge. "You're starting to read that map like an FO."

On the radio Garrett was complaining to Drakepool about not having an AO. Lima was off the plateau and making their way up the next ridge when it began. I first heard just one shot, SKS it sounded like, followed by three quick shots. Then we heard Lima's M-16s answer and receive a response from many AK 47s. More weapons on both sides joined in and in seconds the valley between the plateau and the ridge was at full crackle. Then we heard something that stopped each of us in our tracks. It was deeper, slower and louder than any of the other weapon being fired. "Shit! You hear that? That's a fifty cal," Captain Mac said to the CP group.

"There's another," said Gertz.

"Two more," said the captain. There was no mistaking the sound of the heavy machine guns. They were actually Soviet 12.7 mm, but we

called them fifties because they were so similar to our 50 cal. Guys in Mike talked often about the time on March 16th when the gooks used 50 cal. They said one round from a 50 could knock down a medium size tree, and even a little burst could scatter a paddy dike or turn a grave mound into dust and flying rocks. What normally served as cover from AKs didn't cut it against a 50 cal. They said when the NVA used their 50s, stand by for beau coup gooks.

Garrett was on the air screaming for an AO, fixed wing and gunships. He ended with, "And Drakepool, get the 46s ready. We're going to have medevacs."

From atop the plateau we could see fire teams from Lima assaulting the slope of the ridge. While the plateau was open with sparse vegetation, the NVA ridge was dark green and covered with foliage. We could see Lima's grunts clinging to bits of cover and firing up at the NVA positions. The NVA positions were dug into the crest and concealed beneath bushes. Puffs of dust raised by their muzzle blasts gave them away.

In Mike, we weren't in any danger except for all the stray rounds and ricochets whining over our heads. Captain Mac ordered our 60mm mortars set up to fire support for Lima and shortly they were throwing rounds across the valley. While we held position I checked my rifle and pistol, making sure a round was in the chamber of each.

Mick opened a can of peaches and slurped them down, carelessly spilling syrup down his chin. Casually he ran a sleeve over his face and dropped the empty can. "No sense in saving 'em for later. Might not be a later."

We were going into the shit. As we started into the valley to reinforce Lima, an artillery round screeched over our heads and exploded in front of our point squad. "Goddamn it, Dyer," shouted Captain Mac.

"Not my stuff," Dyer shouted back above the roar of the firefight. With a shrug and a palms up gesture he yelled, "Gook."

Another round came in and impacted further up the hill toward us. I heard the pop of the gun before this one came in and thought it was our own stuff coming out of Con Thien.

"Let's step into my office," said Captain Mac as the whole CP group piled into a small bomb crater. We laughed at this but it was obvious a gook FO was adjusting on Mike company. The next shells came in a barrage of three rounds and hit in the middle of the company.

"Let's go. Move left down the slope. Get off this impact area," shouted Captain Mac. I left the safety of the crater with great reluctance. It was good protection for the CP group, but the rest of the company was in

the open with no cover. We started for Lima's left flank across an area that was rocky and covered with waist high stalks of dry grass. We scrambled a few meters until we heard the faint pop of artillery, then we had a few seconds to find a niche in the rocks. Those rocks saved us. They offered crevices that protected us from the shrapnel and blast that was sometimes just feet away. On the third or fourth barrage, I misjudged the pops. It was easy to do since the friendly and enemy artillery were both north of us and generally along the same line. I was standing when three rounds of 152mm bracketed me, simultaneously exploding in front, behind and to my side. The concussion knocked me off my feet and clouds of black smoke rolled at me with terrifying speed, buffeting me with hurricane like forces. My ears rang and I gagged on acrid smoke. Running a hand down my body and between my legs I felt for damage. Miraculously, there was none.

Time for a drink, I thought. Mortal fear and the hundred plus temperature had turned my mouth to chalk while my arms glistened and my utilities were dark with soaked through sweat. My plan to not crack my final canteen before we set in that night was quickly revised. The water, hot and tasting of plastic, was delicious. It rolled refreshingly over my tongue and washed away the acrid cordite taste. "Two gulps," my mind commanded but my body demanded more. Half the canteen was gone before I could force myself to stop.

"Let's go, Air," said Staff Sergeant Veteto. The CP group had already cleared the area and Sergeant Veteto was bringing his First Platoon across. He was a rawboned Arkansan and in my opinion the best platoon commander in the company. "There'll be less incoming down by the river," he said as he shifted his shotgun to his left hand and pulled me to my feet with his right.

"Ain't this a bunch of shit, Home," said Lex. He was right behind Sergeant Veteto carrying his radio. Lex had taken to calling me Homey or Home because of our Florida connection.

We moved about twenty meters when Dyer began screaming, "Incoming! Incoming!" Everyone flopped to the ground as six artillery rounds exploded around us. There were now two NVA batteries shelling Mike Company from protected positions across DMZ. Kid was monitoring the 2-4 net and called "shot out" every time friendly artillery fired. If Dyer heard the pops in the distance and Kid had not given a "shot out", he knew it was incoming mail.

"All right haul ass," shouted Veteto after the rounds hit. We needed no further urging. We ran for our lives and the downhill slope plus our

heavy packs gave us more momentum than we could control. The next time incoming was called my feet were playing catch up with my forward leaning body; I couldn't stop. I was near the base of the slope racing through a stand of broad leafed banana plants when explosions cut them down like a reaper and Mike Rollins was on the ground with the back of his leg laid open. I dove forward and rolled on my pack and shoulder to get on the ground without skidding face first across twenty feet of rocks. Lex doubled back and scooped up Rollins, nearly twice his size, and carried him to cover as if he were a child.

Mike Company lay on the riverbank panting. For half a minute there was no incoming. Fifteen feet below us a steep incline led down to a dark stream. Numerous footpaths were cut into the bank and steps reinforced with logs were hacked into the steepest sections. Tall trees on both banks cast shadows across it. Then the incoming started again, but on top of the plateau where our mortars were and where India and the command group now hugged the ground as we had before. They were getting drenched with NVA artillery. It was amazing that we had moved through it was so few casualties. Rollins was the only one I saw. Drifting off the crown of the ridge was a plume of black smoke from exploding shells mixed with lighter colored dust from the disturbed earth.

"How the fuck did we make it through that," said Thomas, the radioman for 81 mortars. He started to light a cigarette but Lindsley his FO snatched it from his mouth and threw it away.

"I don't give a fuck how scared you are, motherfucker. Don't light that thing." Lindsley's ebony skin glistened in the bright sun and his nostrils flared as he drew in oxygen. But it was his eyes that alerted me to a new danger. He was staring across the little river and it dawned on me that we were about to go to a bad place.

We crossed in three places. The water was clean and swift and at its deepest came up to our knees. Commands were given with hand signals and whispers because the place was lousy with signs of the NVA. I tried to fill an empty canteen while still keeping my rifle trained on the steep riverbank above me. It was dotted with thatched hooches nestled amidst the trees. Small cook fires still smoldered, despite being hastily stomped out. Inside lean-tos were porcelain bowls and chopsticks, the remnants of an unfinished meal. I glanced back down and cursed; the neck of my canteen was above the water and none was going in.

"Keep moving, for Christ sake," hissed Gunny Smith. I had taken in hardly more than a swallow. I quickly put the canteen away and moved to the bank. Gunny was right; this was no place to linger.

Footpaths on the south bank showed heavy traffic where the NVA had come to the river for water. We climbed the hillside in silence, spread out in a company-on-line formation. I studied every bush and clump of grass in front of me, expecting to take fire at any second. I held my rifle tight, ready to blast on full auto. It wasn't a question of if we would make contact but when.

"Yo... Dude... Hey, radioman." The black machine gunner on my left called three times before I would divert my attention to look at him. He was pointing at my handset dragging in the dirt behind me. I was so keyed up I'd completely forgotten my radio. I reeled it in and clipped it to my helmet strap.

Near the top of the ridge was a large clearing. As we started across it a sniper's rifle cracked and I heard the bullet go overhead like a supercharged bee. The entire company hit the deck. I was on the radio immediately to get Garrett's AO over to our sector. Lima was pulling back across the river under cover of a huey gunship strike and the AO was free to work for us. I looked over my shoulder, gave him distance and directions to our position, then peeked above the tall grass, looking for a reference point to guide him to the sniper. Suddenly there was a loud crack and my face stung. "Oh!" I grabbed my face and dropping into the fetal position.

"Holy Fuck! Get a corpsman up here," I heard McAdam say.

A memory flashed in my mind: My boot camp platoon sat on the squad bay floor, jammed like sardines in what was called a school circle and I had answered wrong during a quiz on combat first aide. The question was: if a wounded man is bleeding and also not breathing, what do you do first. I said perform mouth to mouth. My senior drill instructor rushed me as my fellow recruits parted like the sea before Moses. I stood an island alone, waiting his correction. With his left holding me by the scruff of the neck as he screamed, "STOP," so close to my face I could smell the toothpaste on his breath, and then he drove his huge fist into my stomach. "THE FUCKING," he bellowed, his face never leaving mine, even though I was now bent over from the first blow, and he delivered another looping uppercut into my mid section. "BLEEDING," he shouted in conclusion. After a final punch he signaled the end of the lesson by loosening his grip on my neck and I dropped to the floor.

Stop the bleeding, I thought, pressing my hand to the sting, afraid to ease the direct pressure for fear my life would escape in a red gusher. Another thought crossed my mind; getting shot in the face wasn't as

painful as I expected. Tentatively, I withdrew the pressure from my face and looked at my hand. No red, just the normal grimy skin of my palm.

Doc Devett was beside me now opening his bag. "I'm okay, I think, Doc. What happened? I'm not hit."

"Then let me get the fuck out of here," Doc said without hesitation and without answering my question.

My rifle was in pieces. It had deflected the sniper's bullet. The round would have hit me in the chest had not the rifle gotten in the way. The round pierced one side of the plastic hand guard of my M-16, went between the barrel and the gas tube, and then knocked off the other half of the hand guard. It was the hand guard that hit my face.

Gunny Smith crawled beside me and bent my antenna over my shoulder. "It don't pay for a radioman to advertise," he said. It had become partially unscrewed and was sticking straight up in the air, practically taunting the sniper.

"Let me see your weapon," Gunny said. I handed him the pieces and he reassembled it. "The gas tube is bent, but it ain't broke." He held it up above the grass and pointed it in the general direction of the sniper and fired. "Works just fine." Then a big smile crossed his face as he picked the sniper's spent bullet out of the dirt and stuffed it in my pocket. "Here's a good souvenir for you, son." He slapped me on the rear and said, "Best keep your head down."

Lima was all the way off the ridge and we were ordered to pull back also. Supporting arms were being called to work it over. I tried to be cool and act like almost getting wasted was no big thing. I showed the hole in my rifle to some of the guys, even managed an insincere laugh, but on the inside I was shaken. The more I thought about it, the clearer I saw a picture of me as a KIA, laying on an LZ, a permanent routine medevac, staring into the sun and turning green. For all the times I'd seen KIAs stretched out waiting for choppers, I never thought it could be me - until now. When we came to the river again I waded across too preoccupied to remember my empty canteens.

Near the battalion command group Cherry Red and Tonto sat down beside me to share the tiny piece of shade I found. It was incredibly hot and I was still numbed by my close call. "What a time we had with the gook arty," Cherry Red said. Supposedly the NVA artillery was now shut off by air strikes and counter battery fire being directed north of the DMZ. "It was worse than anything at Alpha 3, TJ. I didn't know the gooks had that much arty. Shit! I saw a round hit behind one of the HST guys. It



threw him up in the air; his leg was hanging over his shoulder. I didn't know if it was broken or cut off or what. He got killed.

“And the colonel, dude. A round hit on the edge of the bomb crater he was in, the whole side of it caved in and he got buried alive. Lucky the sergeant major saw it and dug him out. He might of still been there.”

Tonto, also a wireman and Cherry Red's best buddy nodded and grunted. He rarely spoke.

Across the perimeter I saw Colonel Marsh talking to some wounded waiting to be medevac-ed. He was covered with red dirt. He had it hanging in his eyebrows and caked to his face and neck. One of the wounded he was with had a serious jaw wound. Half of it was gone. I saw it when the corpsmen were changing his battle dressing. Exposed molars hung like buckteeth, except they were by the guy's ear. They were from Lima. Nearby was a captured 12.7mm machine gun sitting on its base.

Lieutenant Myers ran four flights of air strikes on the NVA ridge and Garrett ran repeated medevacs for the wounded from Lima and the command group. I heard Garrett on the radio chewing out one of the medevac pilots for not following procedure. The chopper almost landed in the wrong clearing. Obviously it was a trap set up by the NVA. They must have been listening to Garrett because when he said, “smoke away” they popped smoke too, trying to lure the chopper into the wrong LZ. Choppers are supposed to identify the color of the smoke and wait for confirmation of the color and clearance from the ground before landing. Luckily Garrett saw him and warned him out of the trap.

Then I heard the words I knew were coming: “Saddle up! Mike Company has the point.”

At least I'll get another crack at that water, I thought. We began moving down the now familiar slope, resigned to the fire fight we knew waited on the other side, when in the sky behind us we heard the whistle of incoming artillery. We took off like a herd of spooked deer, running for the safety of the riverbank, knowing the gook FO would do his best to catch us on the open slope. People were yelling to spread it out, but we all converged on the riverbank because it was below the slope. I could see it ahead when the whistle of another adjusting round came up behind me. Feeling it closing on my back, I dove for the bank, stretching to clear the lip. The guy I slid into grunted when my helmet rammed his ribs, but when the round exploded he pulled me protectively lower on the bank.

Down at the river I was damn sure going to get some water. I ignored the gook hooches on the ridge and was concentrating on filling my canteen when the scream of an incoming round ended with an

explosion fifteen meters upstream from me. A pillar of water shot up to the treetops and fell back on us like rain. That had us running again, across the river and up the ridge to where the sniper had fired before. I only managed to get two inches of water in my canteen. As before, the artillery switched off of us and back to the command group. Dyer thought maybe the river was the maximum range of the gook arty. Kid said, "Maybe the gooks have too many friendlies on this hill to use arty here."

The backside of the ridge was only slightly touched by the prep fires and air strikes. Here the jungle was dense and thick and it swallowed us in an envelope of vegetation. I lost visual contact with Southern Alpha, my AO. For a while I guided him by the sound of his engine, but soon we both realized it was futile. He could not see through the solid canopy above us. On the ground, the plant life was a mesh we weaved around and through, and our column tightened up to a five-foot interval to maintain visual contact.

The NVA waited an hour before opening up. In the first seconds I assumed the point would be taking all the fire, since that's how it usually works. I crouched in readiness, squinting into the green tapestry of branches, vines, shafts of light and dark shadows. Then I noticed the leaves beside me twitching as bullets snapped through them and the ground at my feet came to a full boil from impacting machine gun rounds. "Oh, I'm hit," screamed the guy behind me. He dropped his rifle and grabbed his thigh. Blood seeped around his fingers. From behind Doc Devett and another set of hands snatched him back out of the kill zone.

I was center stage in the ambush. Desperate to get away, I dropped and wiggled along the ground like a salamander, moving forward looking for cover. The intense volume of fire sheared a limb off a tree and it fell on me, tangling me up. I threw it off and kept going. Chicom grenades came flying in on us, exploding with earth shaking booms. I kept squirming forward. Ahead I spotted the CP group mixed in with parts of First Platoon lying in a tight circle. As I crawled toward them the fire grew more severe, coming from the front, the side, and suddenly from a new direction as another light machine gun opened up from very close range. I could feel the puffs of gas coming from its muzzle perhaps ten feet away. Almost to the circle, I saw a slight depression big enough for most of my body. I crawled in and lost it.

Rooting, the grunts call it, when a man tried to force his body down among the roots to escape enemy fire. It's a term of derision. When a man is rooting, he contributes nothing. Like a parasite, he waits for others to do the difficult work for him. As I lay there and waited for the bullets to

strike my body, hoping someone in Mike Company could drive the enemy off, I was filled with fear and guilt. I knew if I moved, the hail of bullets flying in all directions would soon hit me. If everyone did like me and rooted, we would soon all be dead. Then the realization came that I was already a dead man. It was obvious; it just hadn't happened yet. Coming to grips with that had an immediate calming effect on me. I figured I should put what little time I had left to good use. I raised my head and looked around; no one seemed to have noticed my rooting. It felt like I was rooting down for a long time, but actually it was less than a minute.

Captain Mac and Sergeant Veteto were planning an attack of the knoll the enemy held, and Lex and Corporal Boyd were busy flinging frags. I saw that life was possible, if conducted below ten inches.

"Lee, get your people moving around the left side there," Captain Mac said. "I'm going up to the point to get Third's ass in gear. Rudy, Gertz and TJ, let's go."

As bullets flew all around us, our abbreviated CP group began a slow crawl up the column to the point. "Bring me back an ear TJ," said Corporal Boyd as I crawled over his legs. He was laughing at me and strangely, I found this comforting.

"Okay, red on the head like the dick on a dog," I said. His orange eyebrows arched in surprise. I'd used Lex's favorite rank on him.

On the trail that ascended the knoll we found the Third Platoon sniper being worked on by Doc Radonovitch. The sniper had a compound fracture of his upper bicep, the bone protruding four inches through the skin. The wooden stock of his M-14 lay under the break and was red and sticky with blood. "Again, for Christ sakes?" I said as I slid past. I had medevac-ed him a month ago with shrapnel wounds.

"It's not too bad," said Radonovitch, working to immobilize the arm while staying below enemy fire. "A through and through that snapped the humerus clean."

"Shit, Doc. You wouldn't be saying that if it were your arm. I only been out of the hospital five days," he moaned.

Heavy firing erupted along the left flank and someone yelled, "There they go." First Platoon, at the bottom of the knoll, had gotten the angle on a platoon of NVA and forced them to retreat. We could see them from our position moving up an eroded hillside next to the knoll. I jumped up and joined Third Platoon taking aimed shots at about thirty NVA. I concentrated on sight alignment, sight picture, and trigger squeeze and for the moment put the fire from the point out of mind. Puffs of dust flew off the backs of the scrambling NVA as they collapsed against the hillside.

Very few made it to the top of the hill. I celebrated the kills with the last of my water.

“Moving TJ,” said Rudy, and we continued our cautious advance toward the point. At places, in the defilade of the hill, we could move at a crouch, but mostly we crawled on our bellies until we neared the top of the knoll and came on line with the pinned down point element. The NVA were in low bunkers across a narrow clearing and had a textbook example of grazing fire. Grunts lay fanned out below the crest of the clearing as a concentration of fire went over their heads or hit into the crest, showering them with dirt and stones. Men popped up above the crest to fire bursts down the clearing at the bunkers. Seeing the others do it, I raised up to fire. Instead of the expected vibration of full auto against my shoulder, I felt only one little pat. I looked at the weapon and saw the magazine had fallen out. As I threw myself to the ground, rocks on the crest leaped off the ground and flew at me, bouncing off my steel pot and shoulders. “Fuck me!” The burst of grazing fire had missed me by a millisecond.

On my right was a rifleman in a left handed firing position. Our heads were very close together. He was firing semi, sending precise, aimed shots down the clearing to the bunkers. From his neck came a tick sound and a spurt of his blood hit my face. He was bleeding from the front part of his neck, the esophagus perhaps and to my amazement, he ignored it. He continued to lie there and squeeze off rounds. “Hey, your hit dude.” He didn’t want to stop firing. I had to convince him to go back to Doc Radonovitch and get treatment.

Second Platoon came up on the right flank and First sent a squad up the knoll from the left flank to take the bunkers under fire. The additional firepower from different angles made an immediate difference. Sergeant Pigg, from Second, fired a LAW rocket knocking out one of the bunkers and Third sent fire team rushes into the clearing. Once fire superiority was gained, we held it and quickly knocked out the two remaining bunkers. None of our men were killed.

“Second Platoon, you have the point. Drop your packs. Take only ammo and water. They’re on the run. Let’s keep them moving,” shouted Mac.

As Second prepared, Rudy and I waited a few feet from the partially collapsed bunker, resting on a knee and catching our breath. We envied them. “Wish I could drop this bitch,” Rudy said, jerking a thumb towards his radio.

“Roger that,” I agreed.

Someone hollered “grenade” and Rudy and I dove away from the bunker. The chicom came out of the bunker and went off near our feet. When we tried to get up, guys from Second yelled for us to stay down and fired over our heads into the bunker. I lay there almost too tired to move. God, if only this firefight would end, I thought. Another chicom went off. I closed my eyes and tensed my body, then relaxed a little and it all went away. The next thing I knew, hands were grabbing me, turning me over. It was a corpsman looking for holes again. Physical and mental exhaustion perhaps, or just the overwhelming desire to escape from that place may explain it. But what actually happened was I fell asleep, incredible as it sounds. I do know how depressing it is to wake and find yourself in a firefight.

Lieutenant Young came up to us grinning. Guys from Second said it was Lieutenant Young who crept up and fragged the gooks in the bunker. He reminded me of the Beetle Bailey comics character Lieutenant Peachfuzz. He was so blond and boyish looking. Perhaps he was compensating for that, but he acted like a real, live John Wayne. “You guys picked a hell of a time for a nap,” he said. “You aware that gook was throwing chicoms at you? I thought he got ya. Look what the bastard did to me.” He turned showing us his hip and the back of his leg. It was dark with moisture. I thought he’d been hit in the ass. Then he pulled a metal whisky flask from his back pocket. It was holed and empty. “KIAed my flask,” he said with a laugh.

We were ready to resume the chase when Southern Oscar checked in with me. I could see him fine from the clearing. He was flying very low, just above the trees as he searched for the elusive NVA.

Our 60mm mortar team had caught up with us and one of the gunners asked me, “You talking to that airplane?”

I nodded.

“Get him out of the way for us. We want to put willie pete there and he’s in the way,” the mortar man said.

“Southern Oscar, Fighting Mad Mike. We’re going to fire a willie peter round where we think the gooks are. Like you to check it out.”

Our 60mm white phosphorus mortar round arced over a miniature valley and blossomed into a white mushroom cloud rising above the trees on the next ridge. The AO cut his power and dove for a look, then he banked hard left and his engine groaned loudly as he climbed away from a rising hail of green and white tracers.

“Jesus Mike, your round hit in the middle of twenty five gooks. No, there’s more, beau coup more. You got a hundred, check that, you got

hundreds down there Babe. Looks like you stirred up an ant pile, six or seven hundred of 'em. I'm working up an arty mission and my front seat is calling for air."

I hunted through the growing crowd in the clearing for Captain Mac and found him with Major Findley. "AO says there are six hundred gooks on the next ridge. He's calling for air now."

"Get your people dug in, Mac," said Major Findley. "I don't want them hit with our own air."

"I'm bringing Lima and India up here too. We can expect a probe tonight."

"What about my medevacs," the captain asked.

"Okay, you get them out and I'll have Myers coordinate the air strikes."

"Get hot on that medevac, TJ," said Captain Mac. "Go as far north as you can. Take O'Donnell's squad for security."

North of the clearing we hit a solid wall of jungle. Behind me was a line of bandaged and bloody Marines limping and being carried by the squad and others. We were in the final half hour of daylight, but inside the jungle it was already night. When I told O'Dee we had to find another LZ, he balked.

"You're shitting me, right? You're pulling my leg? The woods are crawling with gooks and you don't like this LZ. You want us to find you another one. Riiight."

"All right, all right. Maybe we can finish before the fixed wing gets here." I wasn't anxious to explore the jungle with a parade of wounded in tow either. We assembled the wounded in the northern most corner of the clearing and waited for the choppers. Sergeant Veteto sat with the wounded, calmly smoking. He had been shot through the thigh.

The Phantoms arrived on station first and orbited above the jungle as the AO briefed them. They were dropping the first of their napalm when the medevac chopper called in range. The sun was sliding below the horizon and long shadows crept across the clearing.

The pilot of the CH 34 sounded older, like a senior officer doing his required hours. "Fighting Mad 1-4 Mike, this is Dapper Fiddle medevac. Tally ho on the air strike. What is your location from it? Go ahead."

"This is 1-4 Mike. I got a tally ho on you sir. I'm at your ten o'clock at a klick, just north of the last napalm hit. Go."

"How far north?"

"Fifty meters, sir." I cringed waiting for his response.

"Fifty meters! Are you crazy?"

“We got a lot of men hurt real bad down here, sir. And beaucoup gooks on the next ridge.”

He approached with extra caution. “Pop smoke,” he said tersely, and descended to the ground. “Fighting Mad Mike, your LZ stinks,” he said as he sat in the zone. “It’s too small, it isn’t properly lighted, and it’s too damn close to that air strike.”

“Roger sir,” I said into the handset as I helped a wounded man to his feet. The last of the napalm runs lit up the clearing, reflecting bright orange on the chopper’s windshield. Oh shit, I thought as the Phantoms lined up for their next run in. Now the fun begins. They would be dropping the hard stuff. Dash One (the first Phantom) seemed to be diving right at me. It was standard procedure for the gooks to get close to our lines during an air strike. They were safe if they could get close enough. In response Lieutenant Myers was calling the air strike in real time. “Everybody DOWN,” I yelled as a pair of snake eye, 250-pound bombs dropped from the jet and fell into the valley. As they went off I could hear the cracking sound of the bomb casings rupturing and then the fluttering of metal raining on the LZ and finally the pinging of it hitting the skin of the helicopter.

“Goddamn it Mike, I’m taking shrapnel,” came from the handset clipped to my helmet. “Get those wounded aboard or I’m leaving them.”

Doc Devett was running back from carrying on his worst case, a sucking chest wound, when the second Phantom released and shrapnel thudded into his back. As Doc rolled on the ground in agony, I surveyed the scene and wondered how things could get any worse. I raced around the LZ like a madman, screaming directions and pleading with the pilot for more time. I selected who would board the chopper by the bloodiness of their bandages. It was all I could think of to do. Devett, I carried on myself. I had no idea the extent of his wound and told the pilot to have his crew check him out.

In the scramble, I missed putting on the sniper with the broken arm; he thought he wasn’t going to make it out. Waiting for the second medevac bird, he became panicky as the shrapnel shower grew even worse. The Phantoms were bombing the southern edge of the clearing and not all the shrapnel flying through the air was spent. He shouted for me to get his flack gear. The bombs flashing in the darkening jungle seemed to be attacking us instead of the NVA. I couldn’t find his flack jacket so I leaned over his body to shield him. Accidentally, I bumped his arm and he screamed and cursed me. He was first to go aboard the second chopper. The pilot of the second bird sounded younger and waited in stoic silence

as even heavier showers of shrapnel bounced off his craft. Sergeant Vetito was last aboard. Hopping on his good leg, he gave me thumbs up and wished me luck.

I staggered away from the LZ with the fatigue of ten hours of combat, stress and dehydration hanging on me. I was wandering the clearing looking for the Mike CP when behind me a familiar voice said, "That was about a screwed up medevac, dude." I turned and saw Garrett stretched out on a poncho liner like he was at a picnic. "I thought that 34 driver was going to climb down and kick your ass when shrapnel bounced off his bird," he said laughing.

"What the fuck, over." I sank exhausted to the ground beside Garrett. "Somebody ought to tell that dude there's a war on." I showed Garrett my rifle and he told me about the 50 cal's at the river. Then I told him about my water situation. There weren't many people I would ask for water, but he was one. Water was serious business. It was life itself.

Garrett threw the plastic canteen to me. "You can have two gulps. It's all I got for tomorrow so take it easy. I got it at the river and it don't have halazone in it."

"I don't mind," I said unscrewing the cap. It felt wonderful in my mouth, truly the nectar of life, then I felt something moving on my tongue, wiggling hard. I tried to catch it with my teeth but it moved too fast. Spitting out the precious water never crossed my mind. I swallowed, squirmy thing and all. "There's a fish or a leech or something in there," I said gasping. "I swallowed it."

Garrett laid back on the ground laughing. "Thanks for getting him out, man. Eat some ham and mothers, that'll kill whatever it was."

"I hope I get medevac-ed because of this and leave your sorry ass out here for the gooks." As I got ready to go, I remembered my lighter inscribed with our "War is Hell, but Combat is Decent!" motto from BNG days. "Remember this," I said, showing him. "I think I'm going to change it to say War is Hell, but Combat is a Motherfucker."

"Roger that," Garrett said. "Now I know why that guy sold it so cheap." A silence passed between us and then he said, "You know TJ, we've had contact everyday of this operation. Kind of gives you an idea what we'll be doing tomorrow, don't it."

"I'm still trying to get through today." I got up to leave. "Thanks for the water Bob. I really appreciate it."

In the Mike CP everyone was resting in their holes when I found them. I swung my entrenching tool at the earth and hit shale rock. After fifteen minutes of hacking I was drenched in sweat and my thirst was back



with a vengeance. A determination not to fall victim to an NVA probe kept me digging but exhaustion rendered my strokes ineffectual.

“Here TJ, you look like you could use some of this,” said Lieutenant Logan, our XO. It was a flask of straight bourbon. Normally I would have choked on it but it went down smooth, cutting the film off my teeth and cleaning out my throat. It hit my stomach and felt warm and nice.

Screw digging a hole, I thought. If they kill me, they fucking kill me. I laid down in my scratched out hollow, my legs, arms and head sticking out, and fell asleep.

### *May 9<sup>th</sup> – Fire In The Hole*

I woke sore and thirsty when Dyer shook me. First light had just broken. Without waiting for even coffee, which I had no water for anyway, we moved out. My breakfast was a cigarette. We entered the valley between the ridges. It looked innocent enough going in, until we saw the scores of bunkers and hooches. This was where the swarms of gooks had come from. Hidden beneath the canopy of low trees and bushes had been a high density living facility. The grass and undergrowth was trampled smooth by many hundreds of NVA sneakers. Those of us still smoking dropped our cigarettes as we prepared to hit the shit again, but the valley was not occupied. On top of the next ridge we entered what looked like a clearing, but once there we saw we were standing in the midst of a group of very large, extremely well camouflaged bunkers. Seeing the bunker openings, my eyes suddenly recognized the pattern of earthen mounds for what they were. We were inside a massive bunker complex. It threw a scare into me to suddenly find myself there. These bunkers were huge, larger than our Dye-Markers, and camouflaged with live plants and small trees. Lucky they’re empty, I thought.

This was something special. The captain passed the word to check them out and I slipped off my radio, laid down my rifle and drew my pistol. “Hold it right there 1-4 man,” said Gunny Smith. “We need you to stay on that radio. I’ll check this one.”

“Shit Gunny!” I complained. “I want to get a souvenir, maybe a 9mm pistol.”

He ignored me and dropped everything except his helmet and pistol then eased through the bunker doorway. He was a hard man, not in the habit of discussing orders once he’d issued them. I stood there steaming,