

"PRAIRIE FIRE puts you in the middle of a world not many see, and from which many never return. These men played a high stakes gamble with their lives to walk among the enemy. For every man they lost they killed a hundred, and the NVA had five hundred looking for every one of them. This is not on the edge; it is over the edge."

— Jim Morris, AUTHOR OF War Story and Above and Beyond



PRAIRIE FIRE

Kent White

AUTHOR OF
Forgotten and Longshadows



***Prairie Fire** is the story of Sergeant Steve McShane and his six-man reconnaissance team. Their mission is to penetrate deep into the jungles of Laos during the war in Vietnam and discover the truth about the existence of a North Vietnamese Army POW camp incarcerating American and South Vietnamese soldiers. Once behind enemy lines, McShane pits his courage and strength against the enemy in a series of deadly clashes.*

Prairie Fire

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- CHAPTER EIGHT -

MCSHANE SAT ON the edge of his bunk, gazing somberly out the screen door at the sawtoothed mountains surrounding the FOB. The early morning light cast a soft orange glow on the peaks. Normally, he enjoyed the spectacle. But this morning, he hardly noticed. His mind was elsewhere.

McShane checked his black-faced Seiko. It was 0625. Five more minutes.

He had been awakened abruptly at 0400 by a barking dog in the 'yard village behind the camp. Except for visiting the latrine and brushing his teeth, he'd been sitting on his bunk ever since, plagued by thoughts of the mission. He was even more skeptical than before over the chances of success and wondered if MACVSOG had actually thought the operation through. What troubled him most was breaking in a new man on such a high risk mission.

McShane glanced over at Wormington sitting in a folding metal chair. He was bent over, applying mink oil to the leather on his jungle boots for the second time that morning. "It's almost time, Dave."

Wormington nodded and without a word stood, tossing the oil soaked rag into the garbage can. He unhooked the ammo and grenade-laden web gear from

the nail above his bunk and slipped into the canvas shoulder straps. McShane waited for Wormington to buckle the pistol belt securely around his waist, then held up his rucksack.

Like his own ruck, its weight probably equaled about half his body weight.

Wormington backed into the pack, twisting his arms through the padded shoulder straps. He adjusted the straps until they were snug and then helped McShane into his rucksack.

Besides their CAR-15s and suppressed .22s, they each brought along their own personal firearms. Wormington had a Walther P-38 his dad had given him when he turned thirteen and McShane carried the standard military issue model 1911 .45 caliber automatic. Combined with the indig's armament, and along with the FOB's superior air support, the team had enough firepower at their disposal to put a serious hurt on any NVA unit foolish enough to take them on. They gave each other a quick spot check of their equipment, then grabbed their CARs and stepped out into the cool highland air.

As they made their way along the path toward the helipad, Deros, the camp's mascot dog, came bounding from behind a bunker and jumped up on Wormington's leg. The mongrel licked Wormington's hand several times, as if to wish him luck. He gave the dog a pat on his black head, then pushed him aside. Deros followed them to the edge of the chopper pad and then veered off toward the indig's barracks.

Trang and his men were waiting at the edge of the

tarmac as the Americans approached. The indig's tiny frames were dwarfed by their large overstuffed packs, but they appeared quite comfortable as though they'd been carrying a ruck all their lives.

The pilot and co-pilot of the Huey UH-1B were going over their pre-flight inspection, making a final check of their instruments and flight controls. The two door gunners hurriedly loaded cans of belted 7.62mm ammunition for the M-60 machine guns affixed to bipods on either side of the Huey. Ground personnel fueled the chopper from a thousand-gallon tanker truck.

McShane decided the time was right to brief Trang on their mission. There wasn't any chance of a leak now, he figured. He took Trang aside and explained the basics of the mission to him. Trang's face expressed indifference and he remained silent even after he'd finished the impromptu briefing. McShane studied him carefully, searching for a hint of approval or disapproval. Even though McShane had his own reservations, it probably didn't matter to Trang what the mission entailed as long as he was out in the bush.

Suddenly the early morning quiet was broken by the harsh, shrill whine of the Huey's massive turbine engine. The huge rotor blades gradually began to spin. McShane motioned to Trang to load the team on the chopper. They quickly clambered aboard and sat down on the metal floor. He and Wormington followed them. The Huey vibrated violently as the rotors picked up speed. McShane leaned back against the transmission housing and closed his eyes. The chopper shuddered as it slowly lifted off the pad.

Within moments, they were headed across the FOB and out over the rice field. McShane reopened his eyes just as they flew over the jagged mountains and peered out at the rush of green. At last, he thought, the waiting was over.

The flight to the Dak To launch site where they joined up with two UH-1F gunship escorts from the 20th TASS took less than fifteen minutes. They touched down briefly so the pilot could pass on the coordinates of the LZ to the gunship pilots. With their ordinance of twenty 40mm rockets and two General Electric Gatling guns, capable of firing 6000 rounds a minute, the gunships were a formidable addition to the operation. McShane felt a little more secure knowing they would be at their side if they encountered any resistance during their insertion.

They flew at an altitude of 3000 feet until they neared their AO. About five minutes out from their ETA the pilot dropped to tree top level to avoid detection. McShane instructed the pilot to make two false insertions in the hopes of confusing the NVA as to their intended LZ. The first insertion went without incident. During the second, however, they took some ground fire as they hovered for several seconds above a clearing a couple clicks from their primary LZ. McShane spotted several NVA soldiers just inside the tree line manning a Russian manufactured RPK heavy machine gun.

The gunships swooped down and strafed the tree line with their mini-guns and unloaded a half dozen rockets, silencing the enemy gun crew, while the Huey

slick pulled away and headed toward the LZ. The gunships quickly joined them, once again taking up positions on either side.

Suddenly, the slick banked sharply to the west and dived toward a small clearing, closely followed by the gunships. McShane prayed they wouldn't receive the same greeting. He glanced over at the indig. They were grinning like children opening presents on Christmas morning. Wormington's expression remained stoic.

As the chopper neared the LZ, the pilot eased back on the control stick. Half the size of a basketball court, and angling steeply toward the valley a thousand feet below, the LZ was pocked with shell craters. The slick hovered steadily five feet off the ground. McShane and Trang moved out onto the right skid and then leaped to the ground. They landed in between two craters and then each quickly chambered a round. Trang waved his men forward.

One by one, Wormington and the rest of the indig jumped from the hovering Huey while McShane and Trang covered them. Once the team was on the ground, they sprinted to the tree line ten meters away and set up a hasty defensive perimeter. McShane motioned to Wormington to chamber a round, something easy to forget on your first operation. He didn't have to remind the indig.

The slick joined the gunships and flew off toward the east. They would stay out of sight, but remain in the immediate area for another ten or fifteen minutes, in the event the team made contact and required an emergency extraction.

Ten minutes after they'd been inserted, McShane unhooked the PRC-25 handset from Wormington's web gear suspender and depressed the push-to-talk button. "Tomahawk one-six, this is Ambitious, over."

"Roger, Ambitious," replied the slick pilot.

"Still cold at this end."

"Roger, Ambitious. See you at the club."

McShane handed the handset back to Wormington and sat back against a tree. He wiped his brow with the OD handkerchief tied around his neck and pulled a map wrapped in plastic from the top pocket of his jungle fatigue shirt. He laid it across his lap.

McShane was pleased they'd made a successful insertion, knowing full well that it was half the battle. He traced the route he'd planned the day before with his forefinger. According to the map, compiled from old French maps, the route would take the team roughly three kilometers northeast of the LZ to a large creek that twisted through a narrow valley. The valley, all but hidden from view by the thick triple canopy jungle, had long been a suspected NVA stronghold, but had never been thoroughly checked out. He hoped they soon could locate a trail suitable for an ambush.

McShane and the team waited while Trang and Ngo moved into the jungle. The first thirty minutes after an insertion were critical. If the NVA were aware of the insertion and located near the LZ, they'd either attack quickly, or hide in the brush to ambush the team.

Ten minutes later, Trang and Ngo returned. McShane was relieved to see both men smiling. So far, McShane thought, so good.

Trang squatted next to his team leader and whispered. "Everything okay. No NVA."

McShane nodded his approval then signaled the team to move out. Trang took the point position and led the team over a faint path almost swallowed up by the jungle. McShane trailed a few meters behind him, followed by Wormington, Ngo, Billy with the M-79 and finally Loc as tail gunner. The surrounding jungle was dense enough to provide the team with a comfortable degree of cover and concealment, at the same time allowing them relatively unrestricted movement.

The trail soon meandered uphill and they climbed for several hundred meters. Trang was at home in the jungle, having survived countless encounters with the NVA. McShane marveled at the way Trang negotiated the jungle brush. At forty, the former rice farmer moved through the jungle, dodging branches and vines with the energy of a man half his age. He felt very fortunate to have the old warrior as an integral part of his team.

Every hundred meters or so, Trang would come to a halt and crouch down. McShane and the others mimicked his maneuver, with half the team facing left, the others right, except Ngo who kept his eyes focused on the trail to their rear. All eyes peered deeply into the underbrush as the team listened for the presence of NVA soldiers. They would remain motionless for several minutes, their senses fully alert. When Trang was satisfied they weren't being tracked, he'd motion them forward again. They utilized the same methodical

procedure the remainder of the morning.

At 1200 hours, McShane stopped the team and motioned them into a thick pocket of underbrush where he decided they would rest and eat lunch.

McShane and Wormington eased their rucks to the ground and sat with their backs against a slick-barked tree. The indig took up positions a few meters out, forming a defensive perimeter around the Americans.

The two Americans quietly reached into their rucks and randomly grabbed one of the plastic packets of freeze-dried food. McShane got Beef Hash and Potatoes. Wormington ended up with a Chicken and Rice. As it was neither practical nor safe to heat water, they simply poured the tepid water from their canteens into the bags and let the contents sit until the chunks softened enough to eat. The indig preferred their own rations, a mixture of rice and small dried fish heads carried in a sock.

After a couple of minutes, McShane added some Tabasco sauce from a plastic vial to the hash and scooped out a bite with a plastic spoon. Still a little crunchy, he added more water then took a few more bites. It was his first lurp meal in over two months and he realized the rations would take getting accustomed to. He took a couple more bites then folded up the packet and slipped it beneath the top flap of his ruck. Later, when they took another break, the ration would have softened to the consistency of baby food. Fortunately, he didn't eat much while on an operation.

Pulling the plastic covered map from his top pocket, McShane laid it between his outstretched legs. He

estimated they'd traveled as little as a kilometer since their insertion. He found their approximate position on the map and pointed it out to Wormington. They were near the crest of a long ridgeline. They would cross over the peak then head into the valley below. He hoped to reach the valley before dusk.

"See if you can raise Covey. Give him our coordinates," McShane said.

McShane sipped water from his canteen while he waited for Wormington to radio the single-engine, Cessna 150 Covey pilot. So far, he thought, the mission had run smoothly. He credited the morning's success to Trang's years of experience. Often, teams lasted less than an hour on the ground before making enemy contact. He recalled at least a half-dozen occasions when he'd been forced to call for an extraction prematurely.

Wormington, who'd been speaking softly into the mouthpiece, cast the handset aside in frustration. "Can't reach him," he muttered, frowning.

McShane flashed him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry about it. He may be helping out another team or maybe he returned to refuel. We'll try later."

Wormington nodded and refastened the handset to the outside of his ruck. McShane sighed and rose slowly. Already his leg muscles ached. He heaved the ruck onto his back, noticing that his shoulders were sore, too. It was going to be a long day.

Once they crossed the ridgeline and began to descend into the valley, McShane called for a halt at a huge outcropping of rocks. While Wormington tried

reaching Covey and the indig drank some water and snacked on fish heads, McShane climbed the tallest of the jagged spires and surveyed their destination.

Stretching below like a slender, green pit viper, the valley wound its way north and south between the steep mountain slopes. No more than three hundred meters across and a half-mile long, the valley was covered in lush vegetation. He wondered what dangers lay hidden beneath the thick jungle flora.

According to his map, a creek ran the length of the valley somewhere amidst the greenery. Near the creek, he suspected there was an NVA encampment and perhaps the answers they'd come searching for. He climbed down from the rocks and signaled to the team to move out.

It took them the remainder of the afternoon to negotiate the rugged mountain slope. About a quarter mile from the valley floor, they discovered a plateau pocked with bomb craters and partially covered with fallen trees. As they poked around the deadfall, they found several collapsed bunkers. McShane was relieved there was no sign of any recent enemy activity. He surmised the bunker complex had at one time been the target of a B-52 Arc Light bombing mission and abandoned by the NVA as too risky a location. It was perfect for their needs.

The team carefully picked their way among the foliage that was beginning to overtake the craters. In another few months, the jungle would consume the entire area. McShane chose a crater located only meters from the tree line and nearly obstructed from view with

deadfall.

He lowered himself down between two charred trees until he felt the bottom. He ducked down inside. Right away he noticed that the black soil exuded a slight odor of cordite. The crater, he estimated, was about five and half feet deep, not quite tall enough for him to stand erect, but wide enough to accommodate the team comfortably. It was almost dark inside, the only illumination coming from a few shafts of light penetrating the deadfall.

He was pleased with their find. It was so far off the beaten path, he seriously doubted the NVA would ever suspect anyone was bold enough to hide in one of the craters.

McShane motioned to Trang, who was peering through the opening, to come down. Trang hurriedly motioned to the others to take up defensive positions behind some logs. Wormington slipped through first followed by Trang.

Wormington slowly scanned the interior of the crater. He was surprised at the crater's size. It was at least ten feet across, more than adequate to hold them all.

"We'll RON here for the time being, Dave," McShane said quietly. "I want you to set up the radio. Maybe we'll luck out and pick up some enemy radio transmissions. Ngo can interpret." Wormington nodded and began to remove his rucksack.

McShane turned to Trang. "Send Billy and Loc out forty to fifty meters and find a position for a listening post. Have them set out Claymores. I want Ngo to stay

with Wormington and listen to the radio. You and I will make a quick trip to the valley. There are still a couple hours 'til dark."

Trang nodded his approval and quickly scurried up the dirt bank to relay the orders to his men. He reappeared a few minutes later with Ngo.

McShane crouched down next to Wormington. He was already screwing the pieces of the long antennae together.

"We shouldn't be more than an hour to an hour-and-a-half away. If we run into any trouble and you hear gunfire, take Ngo and move out of the crater ASAP. We'll rally at the bamboo forest where we had our last break." Wormington nodded. "Billy and Loc will back us up. If we're delayed and we aren't at the rally point in an hour, call for an extraction and move to the alternate LZ. We'll head directly there. Alright?"

Wormington managed a weak smile. "Take it easy and don't follow any bread crumbs."

McShane chuckled and gave Wormington's shoulder a light squeeze, and then he and Trang crawled out of the crater. Ngo squatted beside Wormington and watched curiously as the American poked the tip of the eight foot antennae through the branches.

Immediately, they came upon Billy and Loc who'd taken up positions behind logs at two adjacent craters. Trang quickly explained McShane's plan and then they continued on toward the valley.

He and Trang worked their way cautiously through the heavy vegetation as they descended the mountain slope. The jungle forest soon darkened except for

infrequent spears of fading daylight that pierced the triple canopy. Even though his muscles were throbbing, fatigue was settling in, and his perspiration-soaked shirt was clinging to his back like a dirty dishtowel, McShane felt more alive than he had in months. Sensing their goal was nearby, he shrugged off the discomforts and pushed ahead with a renewed vigor.

Ten minutes into the valley, he heard the soft trickling sounds of running water. He and Trang paused to listen. It was difficult to ascertain how far away it was. They moved closer, anxious to find the source before they had to return.

Suddenly, Trang, walking a couple meters to McShane's front, came to an abrupt halt and raised his right hand into a fist, the signal for danger. McShane froze. His eyes searched the jungle. Trang moved slowly, like a feral cat stalking a sparrow. He continued a few steps, then eased to the ground, waiting for McShane to join him. With his team leader at his side, Trang slithered a couple of body lengths beneath a low hedgerow and stopped.

Just before them, entirely camouflaged from the air by the dense undergrowth, lay a hard-packed trail the width of a sidewalk. Looking south, the trail ran straight for roughly twenty-five meters, then twisted abruptly to the east. Glancing in the opposite direction, McShane noted the hardpack continued for another ten meters until bending sharply to the west.

McShane turned to Trang and motioned him to get up. The two of them stood at the edge of the path and cast a furtive glance in either direction. The hard-pack

was smooth and appeared well-maintained. The brush had been cut back evenly on the sides like a hedge to a height of about seven feet, creating a tunnel-like effect. Cautiously, they walked up the trail toward the bend.

At the bend, the trail made an almost ninety degree turn, continued several meters more, then crooked sharply back to the north. The fifteen-meter section of trail between the two blind curves was ideal for their purposes. There was more than adequate cover and concealment on either side as well as excellent fields of fire. McShane's mind raced at the possibilities and he began to formulate a plan. Suddenly, it appeared with such clarity that he knew it had to succeed. They would begin tomorrow.



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