

*Set in the dank, nearly impenetrable jungles of southeastern Laos during the Vietnam War, Longshadows is the riveting story of a top-secret Studies & Observation Group, or SOG, reconnaissance team sent on a daring mission into Laos to discover a dangerous truth that lies behind enemy lines.*

## **LONGSHADOWS**

by Kent White

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# LONGSHADOWS

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*A Dangerous Truth Lies Behind  
Enemy Lines...*

*AUTHOR OF **Prairie Fire** and **Forgotten***

**KENT WHITE**

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## - CHAPTER ONE -

MCSHANE COULD HEAR them clearly now. They were giggling like children. He squirmed uncomfortably in the confined shallows of the wash. They were almost abreast of him. Careful not to rustle the dry leaves, he drew his CAR-15 automatic carbine to his shoulder. And then it began. Not heavily, at least not at first, but striking in short erratic bursts. As the sky churned from a slate gray to a bottomless black, there was a fierce and savage downpour. The summer monsoons sweeping down Laos from the north had begun.

The rush of warm water swelled the gullies and washes of the steep Laotian hills with thick brackish water until they overflowed their narrow banks and spilled over onto the rich, dark soil of the jungle.

Staff Sergeant Steve McShane, team leader for recon team Illinois, lowered the CAR and kneaded the tips of his fingers into the muscle spasm twitching irritably in his left thigh. He shifted some of the weight off the leg, momentarily alleviating the annoyance, and peered furtively over a moss-enshrouded log at the narrow dirt road where the enemy patrol continued its steady pace. They even looked like children, he decided, small and impish in their rumpled, filthy khaki uniforms.

Their idle chatter ceased once the rain began. Loose equipment clanged as the North Vietnamese

Army patrol hastily traveled south along the road in a single column, anxious to reach the shelter of their jungle camp. McShane slumped back into the concealed protection of the elongated Z-shaped wash that paralleled the road and waited.

When the last of the soldiers disappeared from sight, McShane sighed in disappointment. He had hoped to ambush the NVA. Perhaps snatch a prisoner. But the patrol of forty to fifty soldiers was too large for his six-man reconnaissance team to handle covertly.

He glanced across the wash at his recon team. Water gushed over the backs of their legs and buttocks. Except for their difference in size, his assistant team leader, Sergeant Chuck Harbor, and the four indigenous mercenaries, appeared identical under a thick covering of mud and slime. White teeth shone through the grime as they managed half-smiles. This is my family, McShane thought, and he alone was responsible for their survival.

Despite the heat and tepid rain, he was cold. His joints ached from inactivity. He was envious of the NVA soldiers, soon to be dry in their hootches, eating warm rice and joking among themselves about how miserable they had been. He would wait a minute more, allowing the enemy patrol to place additional distance between them and his rag-tag reconnaissance team.

Satisfied the NVA were no longer a threat, McShane signaled the team out of the wash and pointed them toward a grove of thick-trunked silk

cotton trees he had spotted earlier at the crest of a slope fifty meters northeast of the road. The team crept stealthily to the shoulder of the road then dropped to their bellies. McShane cast a nervous glance up and down the road, hoping there weren't any lingering NVA. It was clear. One by one, the members of RT Illinois cautiously sloshed ankle deep in black mud across the open road.

As they began their ascent up the hillside toward the trees, the monsoon rains intensified. The grove became just a blur through the rain. McShane swiped at the water cascading into his hazel eyes with the back of his hand, trying to clear his vision. But it was useless. The trees appeared as a badly focused photograph. He directed his attention toward the largest of the trees leaning just forward of the others and led the team on.

Suddenly, a shattering explosion rocked the team, knocking them to the mud. The team scattered for whatever cover they could find. From behind a cluster of thin saplings, McShane scanned the road. Crouched on the shoulder of the road behind some brush, three NVA soldiers raised their AK- 47 assault rifles to their shoulders. A fourth soldier emerged from behind a thicket and drew his right arm back over his shoulder. McShane could just make out a Chinese-made, wooden handled, potato-masher style grenade jutting from the NVA's bony hand.

Before McShane could get off a shot, several AK rounds slapped at the mud, splattering his cheeks with black goo. McShane lifted his CAR-15 to return fire

just as the soldier released the grenade. He squeezed off a burst, emptying a third of the twenty-round magazine. The grenadier's head jerked back violently as one of the 5.56mm bullets hit him in the mouth. At the same instant the soldier collapsed onto the road, the grenade plopped into the mud, an arm length away from Harbor.

Harbor was concentrating his fire on the three soldiers who were now advancing up the brushy hillside when his attention was abruptly diverted to a flicker of movement to his right. Turning, he saw the grenade poking ominously from the mud.

"Grenade!" he shouted. He tucked his CAR tightly to his chest and rolled away from the grenade, downhill, trying to put as much distance as God would allow between him and a sure death.

At the end of the second rotation, the grenade detonated. Squirming behind a small clump of rocks, he fired at a blurred form sprinting down the road. The soldier pitched forward into a puddle of water. Harbor then redirected his fire toward a muzzle flash flickering from a low hedgerow adjacent to the road. After several short bursts the flashes vanished.

An unnerving silence spread throughout the jungle. As he lay there in the false quiet, Harbor suddenly was aware of a piercing pain in his right thigh. He turned on his side. But before he could investigate thoroughly, a new volley of automatic weapons fire erupted, forcing him to ignore the pain. The gunfire was so intense he was unable to return

fire. Chips of stone showered his face and hair as bullets dug away at the rocks.

"Fuck," he muttered. He glanced to the left and then to the right, searching for better cover. A few meters to his right, Hoc, the team's grenadier, was kneeling behind a chest high stump. As he reloaded his M-79 grenade launcher, he motioned Harbor over to the stump.

Harbor took a deep breath, filling his lungs with moist, humid air and lunged toward Hoc and the stump. Suddenly, his injured leg gave way and he collapsed a body length from the stump. He reached out toward Hoc's outstretched hand. The mercenary took hold of his wrist and pulled him through the mud until he was safely behind the stump. Harbor leaned back against the charred stump and observed the scrawny Vietnamese mercenary lift the stubby M-79 to his shoulder.

Hoc squeezed the trigger gently. The grenade launcher bucked. He followed the 40mm white phosphorous canister as it spun lazily through the air. With unerring accuracy it struck between two North Vietnamese Army soldiers setting up a Chinese manufactured RPD light machine-gun. The soldiers momentarily disappeared in a funnel of white hot sparks. Their tortured cries of anguish echoed throughout the jungle. Harbor's nostrils were quickly permeated with the sweet, nauseous odor of roasting flesh.

Hoc grinned and quickly reloaded. He glanced down at the American. Harbor was frantically wiping



mud from his jungle fatigue pants. Bright red arterial blood spurted from a large tear in the pants. Hoc edged closer and quickly slipped the blade of his Marine issue K-Bar knife into the rip and cut the material away from the wound. Blood pumped slowly from a deep gash the length of his hand. Without hesitation, the mercenary hurriedly unwrapped a 3 x 5 inch battle dressing and pressed it firmly against the wound. He tied it securely around the thigh and returned his attention to the road.

Harbor rested his head against the stump and closed his eyes. He felt weak and tired. From the medical classes he had attended during cross training at Fort Bragg, he knew that he risked the danger of going into hypovolemic shock from the heavy loss of blood. Even under the best of circumstances, he knew it was serious. But being so far from medical help, he understood it could be fatal.

McShane and Quang, the team interpreter, had taken refuge in an old shell crater. Rainwater was rapidly filling the crater with brackish run-off flowing down the mountain slope. McShane swore to himself. The water was nearly to their waists. He didn't relish the thought of drowning in a Laotian cesspool. He peered over the earthen berm and studied the grove of trees that was their original destination, only twenty meters away. They needed to get to adequate cover immediately. He tapped Quang on the shoulder and motioned him to move to the trees.

Quang nodded and slowly crawled over the slippery bank. McShane remained behind to cover

him. During the firefight, Minh and Vinnie had taken a stand a few meters to the right of the crater behind a low mound. They smiled when they saw Quang emerge from the crater. Quang signaled them forward. They rose to a crouch and followed Quang up the slope. McShane kept a watchful eye on the road.

He allowed the three mercenaries sufficient time to reach the trees, then lunged from the crater. Thick, sticky mud sucked at his knobby-soled jungle boots as he trudged up the hill. He felt as though he was in a dream, wading in a pond of cold molasses.

Through the crushing rain, Hoc saw his team members stumble in the mire as they headed toward the trees. He shook Harbor who'd passed out moments earlier.

"We go," Hoc said in halting English. Harbor nodded, offering the mercenary his hand. Hoc tugged at the large American, trying to get him to stand. His condition, Hoc realized, had worsened considerably and he was unsure if he could get him to his feet without help. Finally, Harbor managed to get to his knees and using the top of the stump for support, he pushed himself to an upright position.

McShane was abreast of the stump when Harbor and Hoc staggered forward. Hoc had both of arms wrapped around his assistant team leader, doing his best to keep him on his feet. McShane removed Harbor's rucksack containing the PRC-25 radio from his back and handed it to Hoc. McShane draped his arm across Harbor's shoulder and guided him forward. Looking like a pair of drunk G.I.s on payday night,

the two exhausted SF soldiers careened slowly to the trees.

A few meters from the grove, Harbor groaned and collapsed, pulling McShane with him into the mud. Hoc dropped Harbor's ruck and offered his tiny, child-like hand to his team leader. Just then, Minh and Vinnie burst from the trees. Vinnie scooped up the ruck and, along with Minh, grabbed Harbor by his arms and pulled him through a narrow opening between two, spiraled roots the size of a man's thigh. Beneath the roots, the earth had been hollowed out by years of monsoon rains, creating a cave-like chamber that extended several feet into the hillside. They moved him to the rear of the hollow and sat him against the damp earth wall.

Following close behind, McShane and Hoc quickly clambered down through the opening. McShane set Harbor's rucksack next to him and knelt down. He loosened the draw cord on top of Harbor's ruck and removed the radio, placing it between his radio operator's outstretched legs. McShane again reached inside the pack. Folded neatly under several packets of freeze-dried long-range recon patrol rations, McShane found his poncho. He positioned it around Harbor's shoulders, draping the excess over the radio, the team's only link with the outside.

McShane studied Harbor intently. Some color had returned to his cheeks. He was now sitting upright, adjusting the PRC's frequency knob to the day's pre-determined frequency. A radio operator to the end, McShane thought.

"How's the leg? McShane asked.

Harbor winced as he repositioned the radio. "It fuckin' hurts."

McShane pulled a quarter grain morphine syrette from the first aid pouch on his web gear belt and removed the plastic cap covering the needle. He jabbed it into Harbor's leg just above the wound and squeezed the inch long tube until it was flat.

"That should fix you up."

Steady streams of water spilled onto the radioman's thick, red hair and trickled down his muscular neck. He could feel the pain subside. An almost warm sensation came over him. If only it would stop raining, he thought. His penetrating pale blue eyes turned from the radio and gazed out at the rain.

"Please God, make it stop," Harbor whispered. But he knew his plea would go unanswered.

A sudden sound forced their attention upward. McShane stood and peered over the roots into the intense, gray wall of rain water. He could just make out the outline of a man's torso. He blinked, wiping water from his eyes. He stared hard at the specter-like image. It was slowly moving their way.

A second, then a third form joined the other. NVA trackers, McShane suspected. He swiftly pulled his CAR-15 from under his poncho and positioned it across the root, worn smooth by decades of rain. Hoc quickly joined him, bracing the grenade launcher on the root next to him. Together they followed the progress of the three trackers as they searched through

the undergrowth. Then, as quickly as they had appeared, the soldiers vanished into the jungle.

When there were no further signs of the soldiers, McShane dropped back down under the root. He knew the NVA had no idea where his team was hidden. The trackers had either given up or concentrated their search elsewhere. Nevertheless, the sooner the team was on the move, the more secure he'd feel.

Hoc remained above with Minh and Vinnie, surveying the jungle for roving NVA patrols. Harbor spoke softly into the radio handset to Leghorn, a secret SOG radio relay site perched high atop a craggy mountain peak in southeastern Laos. They would pass the message on to the team's Forward Operating Base, some sixty kilometers to the east near the South Vietnamese city of Kontum. His message was urgent. He was requesting an immediate helicopter exfiltration for the team.

When there was no answer, Harbor dropped the handset onto his lap. Despite the morphine the leg still ached. He tilted his head back until it rested against a cushion of green vines clinging to the earth. He closed his eyes and forced his mind to ignore the pain.

McShane stood hunched at the rear of the musty smelling hollow, his eyes cast downward as he stared at a depression at the entrance to the hollow. He watched solemnly as the brackish water spread across the already saturated soil, encroaching nearer to Harbor and the radio. Harbor, who seemed oblivious

to the water, picked up the handset and once again called Leghorn on the radio.

"Eagle, Eagle, this Iron Man, over," he said softly. He paused, staring bleakly at the approaching water.

"Eagle, Eagle," he repeated, raising his voice slightly. "This is Iron Man, do you copy?" There was more of the usual radio static. He turned down the volume some, but then suddenly a voice came through the ear piece.

"Roger, Iron Man. Read you five-by. What is your present situation?"

"Team has made contact with enemy force of unknown strength. Mission is compromised. One WIA. Moving to alternate LZ. Need extraction ASAP Over.

"Wait one, Iron Man."

Harbor settled back against the dirt wall and sighed. What a bitch, he thought. His first mission and he gets hit. Up until then the mission had gone well. The team was inserted yesterday afternoon and spent the night on a steep mountain slope wedged in between some trees. Except for a few cat naps, he didn't sleep. Their mission had been to investigate reports by 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division intelligence that tanks had been heard crossing the border. One of their fire bases near the border had been fired on. The next morning the team located a road and set up a trail watch. While they didn't see any tanks, they did observe several trucks filled with troops and ammunition pulling 37mm anti-aircraft guns. They'd

returned again today but the only activity they encountered were the NVA soldiers. He was disappointed they hadn't found the tanks.

His wound began oozing blood from the corners of the field dressing. He reached down and tightened the drawstrings around his leg. A sharp jolt of pain tore up his thigh to his crotch. He nearly cried out. Then Leghorn was abruptly back on the air, and for the time being he forgot the pain.

"Iron Man, this is Eagle, over."

"Go ahead, Eagle."

"Negative on the exfill. Launch site is socked in. Choppers will try at first light. Over."

"Roger, Eagle. Out."

"Fuck," Harbor said. He let the handset slip out of his hands and fall to his lap. The answer came as no real surprise. You couldn't see five meters in front of you. Nobody in their right mind would fly in this shit, he knew. Not even the FOB pilots.

McShane had noticed Harbor's soggy field dressing and pulled another from his first aid pouch. He bent over Harbor's leg.

"Bad news, huh?" McShane asked.

"Yeah," Harbor agreed. "They can't fly in this shit."

McShane pulled away the old dressing and studied the nasty, ragged tear in his leg. Fortunately, the heavy bleeding had stopped. He swiftly tied the fresh dressing over the wound.

"It's better this way." McShane said reassuringly. "We'd never make it to the LZ in time anyway. We'll

RON somewhere closer to the LZ, then get a fresh start in the morning. Hopefully it won't be raining. We're safer as long as the rain keeps up. The NVA aren't stupid. They know enough to get out of the rain."

As soon as he finished with the dressing, he had Harbor sit on his rucksack to get him out of the approaching water, then handed him the radio. "Sit tight. I'm going above and get Quang and the team. We'll move out in five minutes."

Harbor nodded slightly. McShane squeezed his shoulder reassuringly and slipped over the roots and disappeared into the rain. Harbor was feeling faint again and closed his eyes. He was unsure he'd be able to stand but knew he'd have to find the strength. The last thing he wanted was to be a burden to the team.

McShane slithered on his belly toward Quang who lay a half-dozen meters away from the hollow behind a low embankment. He was covered in black mud and nearly invisible. Vinnie lay just to his left and Minh was on his right. Their attention was riveted on the road and surrounding jungle. Hoc was kneeling behind a tree just inside the wood line, his M-79 cradled in his arms. Quang heard the sloshing sound his team leader's body made as he wriggled forward and turned.

The squat, graying Cambodian mercenary smiled.

"We'll move, now, Quang." McShane said in a low tone. "Choppers will pick us up in the morning."

Quang frowned. He'd hoped they'd be picked up before dusk. This was to have been his last mission,



even though he hadn't the heart to tell his team leader. He'd been with various teams at the FOB since 1965. Before the Americans came, he'd fought with the French. He was ready to settle down and had even found a house in Nha Trang to buy. But now with the mission going badly he feared the jungle spirits would not allow him to return.

From behind the embankment, McShane studied the area of dense, dull green foliage where the NVA trackers had launched their attack. It was difficult to see with any sort of clarity. But he doubted the NVA had lingered. They knew the choppers couldn't fly and would likely resume their search in the morning.

He would take Vinnie back with him and leave the others as security. Vinnie, whose father had been an Italian mercenary fighting for the French in 1950, was taller and stronger than the other team members. Vinnie would be able to carry some of Harbor's gear. He tapped him on the shoulder and motioned him to follow.

Harbor was barely conscious when they returned. He opened his eyes slightly when he heard them drop into the hollow and managed a weak smile. "Did you bring any beer?"

McShane chuckled. "Sorry buddy. The PX was closed. Tomorrow for sure."

"I can wait."

"How's the leg?"

"I think I'm going to need some more of your white man medicine, Steve. The leg's starting to hurt again."

McShane pulled another morphine syrette from his first aid pouch. "This will have you dancing in no time," he said as he shoved the three-quarter inch needle into Harbor's thigh.

"Thanks," Harbor said, smiling thinly. "I needed that."

"We'll give the morphine a couple more minutes to work its magic then we'll move out. I think the trackers are gone but I don't want to push our luck. If it wasn't for this rain, they'd have been down our throats long ago."

McShane opened up his rucksack. He gazed down at its contents and wondered how he was going to fit the radio into his pack. It was already bulging with an extra battery for the radio, LRRP rations for five days, ten additional magazines besides the twenty he was carrying on his web gear, two cinemascope-shaped claymore anti-personnel mines, a half-dozen additional grenades, dry socks and a poncho liner he utilized as a makeshift sleeping bag.

He gave the battery and half the packets of LLRPs to Vinnie, which created enough of a pocket in the ruck to accommodate the radio. He picked up the radio and jockeyed it into position at the top of his rucksack. Vinnie helped him hoist the ruck up onto his shoulders. The heavier load was a surprise and it threw him off balance. Vinnie grabbed his arm to steady him. Now he remembered why he didn't carry the radio anymore, like some team leaders.

There was still the problem of Harbor's remaining equipment. He decided they'd bring along

his ruck and divide up the ammunition, grenades and rations among the others later. He tossed Harbor's rucksack over the roots and then he and Vinnie helped Harbor to his feet. Harbor was weak and his legs were unsteady. They held him upright.

"Vinnie, go above and get Minh to help."

Vinnie nodded and quickly scampered above. He returned moments later with Minh. Together they extended their arms through the roots. McShane boosted Harbor up through the roots toward the outstretched hands. The mercenaries each snagged one of Harbor's arms and with McShane lifting him from his waist they managed to pull him out of the hollow. McShane was relieved to see the rain had begun to slacken.

McShane handed Harbor's ruck to Minh. He and Vinnie, steadying Harbor by the arm, followed McShane toward a wide wash that snaked through the underbrush. While they could make good time on the wash, McShane didn't want to be overconfident. He knew the NVA patrolled the washes and trails but was gambling the enemy wouldn't be traveling much in the rain. As soon as they found another route they'd get off the wash.

Quang and Hoc, who'd been keeping an eye on the road and hillside, left their position and caught up to the team. Quang stepped in behind Minh. Hoc, who'd loaded a buckshot round into his M-79, assumed the tail gunner position, keeping a look out for NVA trackers. Fifteen minutes later, McShane led

the team off the wash and turned onto a faint animal track that traversed the steep hillside.

After a time, McShane turned point over to Quang, who expertly guided the team through the thick foliage. McShane dropped back to check on Harbor's condition. He was walking without Vinnie's help. He smiled when he saw his team leader.

"Okay?" McShane asked.

"Yeah, that last injection did the trick. I feel like I could walk to the FOB."

"Maybe some other time. I think I'd like to fly out this time around."

"Lazy bastard." Harbor added, grinning.

Yeah, McShane thought, he's feeling a lot better. But he knew the euphoria was short-lived and that the pain would eventually return. While the bleeding had stopped, he now feared the constant jarring could cause the wound to begin hemorrhaging again. He would have to monitor his condition closely.

As the team penetrated deeper into the jungle, McShane began to breath easier. Now completely engulfed by the jungle, the NVA would be hard-pressed to locate their position so far off the beaten path. His confidence grew and he was certain they'd find a suitable site to RON for the night. At first light they'd head for the LZ to meet the choppers for their extraction.

Five hundred meters south of the grove of silk-cotton trees, Quang signaled the team to stop. He moved a couple meters to his right then pointed into

the brush. McShane edged forward to get a better look. He stared in disbelief.

Rising a dozen meters or so into the mist-shrouded treetops was a thick wall of heavily entangled, impenetrable undergrowth several meters wide. It looked like a huge rodent nest. Quang stepped forward and began parting a cluster of vines. He ducked beneath the foliage and disappeared. Moments later his head popped back through the growth. Grinning, he motioned the team to follow him.

Limping unaided, Harbor followed Quang into the clump of twisted foliage. Minh followed on his heels, ready to grab him. As he passed through the opening Quang had created, he was completely awestruck by this quirk of Mother Nature. McShane found they were standing in the midst of a kidney bean-shaped clearing. Together they gazed in amazement at their surroundings. Soon the entire team stood around them.

McShane turned slowly, studying the snarl of vines and twisted branches that formed the cocoon-like structure that surrounded the clearing and rose several meters into the trees. McShane stared upward. An opening near the top allowed a thin shaft of light to penetrate the undergrowth, dimly illuminating the clearing.

McShane was pleased with their good fortune. The mass of knotted jungle growth would be impervious to detection by NVA trackers. The team would stay here for the night, he decided. He moved

in between Quang and Harbor. "This couldn't be more perfect. We'll RON here."

Quang spread the word to the indig. The clearing was large enough to allow the entire team to stretch out. The mercenaries immediately began attaching their ponchos together with some thin cord they carried and strung them out between a pair of low hanging tree limbs, creating a makeshift shelter.

McShane fashioned a similar shelter for Harbor and himself. Once completed, Harbor pulled the radio from his ruck and informed Leghorn of their position. McShane crawled beneath the shelter and leaned up against his ruck next to Harbor.

In the fading light he studied the indig huddled under their poncho tent, eating from their packets of freeze-dried LRRP rations left over from lunch. The scene reminded him of a three day Boy Scout jamboree he'd attended when he was twelve and his entire troop had crammed into one large tent. In fact, McShane thought, they didn't look much older than Boy Scouts as they scooped in mouthfuls of sticky rice and dried squid tentacles.

McShane's thoughts turned to tomorrow. They still had a half-dozen kilometers of brushy jungle to cover before they reached the LZ. He also knew the NVA trackers would be up before first light, eager to intercept the team and cut them down. It would be a perilous trip but he couldn't see any way around it. They might hold out where they were for a few days but it would only increase their chances of being discovered. They would simply have to take the risk.

McShane turned toward Harbor and watched as he shoveled a large spoonful of beef hash into his mouth. "How's the leg?"

Harbor swallowed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Right now, it's great. I hate to think what it'll be like in the middle of the night when the morphine wears off."

"Don't worry. There's plenty more where that came from. Just wake me if it gets too bad." McShane added. "Now get some sleep while you can. We have a big day tomorrow."

Harbor nodded as he wrapped his poncho liner around his shoulders. He put his head on his ruck and closed his eyes.

## - CHAPTER TWO -

IT RAINED ON and off throughout the night. Water gushed through the opening at the apex of the cocoon, drenching the clearing and the men sleeping under their poncho tents. No one on RT Illinois really slept.

McShane stayed up most of the night listening to the rain. Sometime after two there was a brief thunderstorm. It had reminded him of the intense summer storms he'd grown up with as a child in the South.

He was the oldest of three brothers born at Camp Stoneman, near Rodeo, California. When he was ten they moved to Fort Polk, Louisiana. His father, Patrick McShane, a first-sergeant with an infantry company at Ft. Polk, was a veteran of World War II and Korea. One evening after work his father came home during a fierce thunderstorm only to find him and his two brothers floating paper boats down the rain-swollen gutters of the housing project where they lived. His father had been furious. Jagged bolts of lightning lit up the dark skies every few seconds.

"Get in the house, you little shits, before you're killed," he'd bellowed. Then he'd chuckled to himself. "Hell, on second thought, go ahead, stay out." But he herded them inside and cooked them lentil soup while they took a hot bath. He'd been a good father, juggling the military with single parenting after their



mother, Mary Donahue, was killed in an auto accident when he was six. His father was largely responsible for him joining the Army after high school.

Finally, an hour before sunrise, the rain stopped. McShane shook Harbor, who'd managed to sleep through the storm without needing another injection.

Harbor sat up with a start. "What's up?"

McShane reached for the radio in Harbor's ruck. "It's stopped raining. I'm calling Leghorn to let them know to send the choppers ASAP."

He quickly made commo with the relay site and was informed the choppers would be in the air at first light. That gave them less than an hour-and-a half to cover the three kilometer distance to the LZ. It seemed like an impossible feat. Then his thoughts turned to Harbor's leg.

"How's the leg? Need another fix?"

"Thought you'd never ask. The other one wore off sometime during the night."

McShane reached for the first aid kit on his web gear. "You dumb shit, why didn't you tell me?"

Harbor shrugged.

"Uncover your leg. I'll give you another injection now. You're going to need it. Quang says we're about three clicks from the LZ." He flicked off the protective shield covering the needle. "How he knows is a mystery to me. The map indicates it's more, but he knows this fuckin' jungle better than I know my own dick." He jabbed the needle into the reddened skin above the wound and pinched the tube until it was flat. "We're going to have to hustle."

Within moments the morphine quelled the vicious pain that had kept Harbor up half the night. He grinned euphorically, feeling as though he could sprint to the LZ.

The team hastily broke camp, shoving their poncho tents and liners into their rucks. They sterilized the area by picking up any litter they may have discarded. It was imperative they remain clandestine. The team didn't want to leave anything behind that may provide the enemy with valuable intelligence.

McShane ate a half-dozen quick bites of mushy spaghetti LRRP. With any luck at all they'd be home in a few hours in time for the FOB's Saturday afternoon steak BBQ. After three days of scarcely eating, steak and fries would be better than a piece of ass. Well almost, he mused. He forced Harbor to eat some of his rations then replaced the packet beneath the top flap of his ruck. He heaved the heavy rucksack onto his shoulders and motioned to Quang to move out.

Quang took point, followed by McShane, then Minh, a limping Harbor, with Vinnie directly behind him. Hoc once again settled into the tail gunner position. In the darkness the team had to pick their way carefully through the foliage. The thorny jungle undergrowth clawed at their fatigues. McShane glared at the luminous dials of his black-faced Seiko. It was almost six and wouldn't be light for another thirty minutes. He wondered if it was a mistake leaving so early.

A quarter mile from their RON site, Quang moved the team onto a narrow wash that traversed the hillside. It was nearly light now and unencumbered by the heavy brush, the team was able to move freely. Their pace quickened and McShane relaxed some. The steak BBQ seemed a little closer to reality.

Midway up the slope, Quang suddenly raised a clinched fist, the hand and arm signal for danger. The team came to an abrupt halt. He motioned them back into the jungle. They cautiously side-stepped into the tree line and knelt down. Moments later a squad of North Vietnamese soldiers strolled up the wash with their AK assault weapons resting on their shoulders. Two of the soldiers giggled among themselves.

McShane observed the soldiers closely as they passed his hidden position. They seemed too casual to be trackers. He figured they were probably a routine patrol enroute to their base camp. If they'd been searching specifically for the team their weapons would have been poised at the ready and their demeanor would be more serious. Nevertheless, he would give the squad a wide berth. The soldiers may have felt the team was out of the area and no longer a threat but he didn't want to take any chances.

McShane waited several minutes then tapped Quang on the shoulder and cocked his head toward the tree line. Quang nodded and led the team away from the wash and back into the jungle. McShane was thankful they hadn't encountered any trouble. In his haste to reach the LZ, he had endangered the team by allowing Quang to take them out onto the open wash.

As the team leader, he would be to blame for any screw-ups, not Quang.

After a few meters the jungle thinned and they were able to move quickly once again. The cool mountain air was invigorating. Harbor had found a tree limb about a meter long and used it as a cane. Under the circumstances, McShane noted, he moved along well, able to keep up with the pace.

Thirty minutes later, Quang again brought the team to an abrupt halt. He crouched low and signaled McShane to join him. The others deployed into a hasty defensive perimeter around them. Quang and McShane spoke in hushed tones for a few seconds then McShane backtracked to Harbor.

Quang never ceased to amaze him. He had been operating in these jungles for five years, leading SOG teams all over southeastern Laos. Quang's knowledge of the area was encyclopedic. In the early 1950s he had even led French Legionnaires into Laos and Cambodia in search of Viet Minh guerrillas. Last night Quang had told him that he'd led other teams to the covered clearing. It was his first-hand knowledge of their area of operations that had kept them alive.

"The LZ's just ahead, through the elephant grass," McShane said to Harbor, who had plopped down under a banyan tree. "Quang's taking Minh and checking it out."

"Trouble?" Harbor asked, his eyes full of concern.

"Just a precaution. Want to make sure we're the only ones here."

McShane knelt down next to him and together they watched the two mercenaries scramble across a log that spanned a narrow, deep gully. Soon they were swallowed up by the razor sharp, pea-green elephant grass.

The slender shafts of tall grass sliced Quang's and Minh's exposed forearms as they pressed deeper into the elephant grass. When they reached the outer perimeter of the grass they knelt down. Just beyond was the LZ, a triangular clearing covered in knee-high grass. Shallow ponds of stagnant water, churning with mosquitoes, covered the gently sloped clearing. Judging by the large number of shell craters, Quang knew it had been used before as an LZ. He also had the uneasy feeling the clearing was being watched.

As they observed the LZ, Quang noticed a path of trampled grass that led from the southern edge of the triangle to a grove of banyan trees. Quang was sure an NVA patrol was hiding in the trees. He tapped Minh, who was studying the northern portion of the LZ, on the shoulder and motioned him to move back into the elephant grass.

McShane was startled when he saw Quang and Minh suddenly reappear on the log. He sat up and grabbed his CAR, uncertain if they were being pursued. Anxiously he waited for them to cross the gully. He nudged Harbor, who'd dozed off, in the side with his elbow.

Quang crouched next to McShane. Out of breath, he wiped his brow with a perspiration-soaked cravat.

"Soldiers wait for us at LZ," he said in a barely audible whisper.

McShane rubbed his face with the palm of his hand. If the NVA had the primary LZ covered, he figured they likely had thought of the alternate too. The sudden low hum of a single-engine Cessna aircraft made him look up. Without hesitation, he unhooked the handset from his web gear suspender and depressed the transmit bar.

"Traveler, Traveler, this is Iron Man. Over."

The response from the covey pilot was almost instantaneous. "Roger, Iron Man."

"LZ is hot. Repeat, LZ is hot. We are in position. Suggest another LZ. What do you see from above?"

"Negative Iron Man. Nearest alternate site is several hours from your position. Three gunships will be on station in five. 'Fast-movers' on standby. I'll need smoke."

McShane grinned. Each of the Huey gunships was armed with forty, 2.75 inch rockets and two General Electric gatling guns with a 4,000 round-a-minute rate of fire. The "fast-movers", or F-4 Phantom jets, carried napalm and other assorted bombs. The NVA were ballsy, he knew, but it would be suicidal to try and take on the gunships and jets.

"Roger, Traveler. Out."

McShane hurriedly moved the team toward the LZ. Harbor's leg had stiffened up during the break and McShane had to help him across the log. They followed Quang along the same route he'd just taken. Five meters from the LZ, Quang stopped the team and

they hunkered down in a circle, their weapons pointed outward. McShane could hear covey, the US Air Force piloted Cessna 150 observation aircraft, but the plane remained out of sight to avoid visual detection. He unfastened a purple smoke grenade from his suspender, and together with Quang, crawled the remaining few meters through the grass. He stopped just short of the clearing and peered through the blades of grass.

McShane scanned the LZ. It was deathly still. Except for the trampled grass there were no signs of the NVA. He stared hard in the direction of the banyan trees and wondered if the grass could have been flattened by animals or the rain. He thought he might have seen the glint of a rifle barrel reflecting the early morning sun, but shrugged it off. Maybe he was just being paranoid. He pulled the pin on the canister and tossed it out into the center of the LZ. He prayed no one saw him. They crawled back to the others and radioed the covey pilot.

"I've popped smoke. Identify," McShane said.

The procedure of identifying the smoke had been devised to verify the color used. Originally, it was standard procedure to throw out a smoke grenade then give away its color, but once the enemy began capturing U.S. radios and monitoring their transmissions they often would duplicate the specified color, either red, green, yellow or white, to draw fire away from their own units. Procedure was changed, requiring that the gunships identify the color to make certain it was from a friendly unit. Purple smoke was

used by the teams because enemy units had not yet acquired the color.

McShane could now hear the Huey's approach from the valley below. The team craned their necks skyward. It was a sweet sound and brought smiles to their faces.

"Iron Man, this is Thunder One, I see purple smoke, over." It was the voice of the lead gunship pilot.

"Roger Thunder One. Direct your fire north, south and east of smoke." While McShane only suspected the enemy was hiding in the trees south of the smoke, he didn't want to take the chance they might be elsewhere. The pilot would understand the team was located in the grass west of the smoke.

"Roger, north, south and east." The gunship pilot verified. The three gunships approached the LZ from the west in a V formation. The Huey slick circled at a safe distance, waiting for word from the gunship pilot to come into extract the team. As they neared the clearing, they broke formation. Thunder One dove for the trees while Thunder Two attacked the jungle to the east. Thunder Three swung wide and approached the north.

McShane clenched his fists as he waited for the gunships to strike. With their immense firepower he felt the team was out of danger now that the gunships had arrived. Then he quickly reminded himself the team was only safe when they were back at the FOB drinking a beer.



As soon as Thunder One neared the trees, a heavy barrage of automatic weapons fire erupted from all around them. McShane was shocked at the intensity of the gunfire. The NVA must surround the team and been in position for some time, he thought. He realized now the team had been very fortunate.

McShane and Quang crawled to the edge of the grass to follow the gunships progress. Enemy soldiers were scrambling through the trees trying to escape the murderous volley of fire. Two NVA, attempting to retreat into the depths of the jungle, exploded in a cloud of crimson as dozens of mini-gun rounds tore away their flesh. Other soldiers recoiled in horror when they were sprayed with the gore of their comrades. The NVA hiding in the banyan grove abandoned their weapons and in a panicked frenzy dispersed into the jungle, leaving the wounded behind to fend for themselves.

The shrill, tortured cries of the mutilated soldiers, most just teenagers, echoed throughout the jungle. McShane's skin crawled. He hoped their agony and suffering would be brief. Suddenly, Thunder Two swooped down and unleashed another withering firestorm, silencing their screams. As the gunships stalked the perimeter of the LZ, releasing their deadly armament, the NVA units who'd so cunningly waited in ambush withdrew from their positions and retreated in terror. The team could hear the soldiers crashing through the bush all around them. The gunships continued firing rockets and mini-guns for several more seconds and McShane

applauded them. Without their assistance his team would likely have been wiped out.

McShane's attention was abruptly drawn to a rustling sound to their left. The team fanned out, keeping their weapons trained on the elephant grass. McShane grabbed the handset.

"Thunder One, Iron Man. I have enemy movement to my south. Can you give me some support?"

"Roger, Iron Man. You have about a dozen bad guys approaching ten meters to your south. I can take care of them. Keep your heads down."

The team tried to melt into the mud as the gunship came in low. McShane took a quick look upward just as two rockets streaked toward the elephant grass. They appeared to be coming directly toward the team. There were two violent explosions. The ground shuddered beneath him. McShane clutched his ears with a pair of muddied hands. Jungle debris and mud showered the team. The gunship followed up the rocket attack with a three second burst of mini-gun fire then banked the craft hard to the east.

The stench of charred flesh permeated the air. McShane wrinkled up his nose. He was thankful it was finally over. One last thought entered his mind before he depressed the transmit bar - better them than us.

"Outstanding, Thunder One. Now get our asses off this mountain."

"Roger, Iron Man."

The Huey slick, monitoring McShane's conversation with the gunship pilot, dropped through the cloud cover and quickly swooped toward the LZ. The gunships circled above.

McShane motioned the team up and moved them to edge of the elephant grass to wait for the slick. As the Huey approached the clearing, the team burst from the grass. Minh held Harbor by the arm and led him toward the helicopter now hovering a few feet off the ground. Just as they reached the craft, automatic weapons opened up on them from the trees.

Vinnie, Quang, and Hoc crouched down and fired into the trees. As Minh helped Harbor into the chopper, he was hit in the chest by several AK rounds and fell to the ground.

McShane rushed forward and grabbed Minh by his left arm and dragged him over to the Huey. Stu Hansen, the chase medic, who had already pulled Harbor into the Huey, reached out and grabbed Minh.

The door gunner swiveled his M-60 machine gun back and forth just above McShane's head, spraying the trees and jungle with bullets. The noise was deafening. McShane grimaced as he swung around to check on the others. They were in a shell crater a few meters away, firing at the enemy soldiers in the trees. He tried yelling to get their attention but they were unable to hear him above the whine of the turbine engine and the gunfire. Swearing to himself, he rushed toward them, firing short bursts in the direction of the banyans.

As he reached the crater, each of the gunships made a quick pass at the trees, firing rockets into the North Vietnamese's ranks. McShane hurriedly ushered the team out of the crater and pushed them toward the chopper. He admired their loyalty. They would have given up their lives to assure the safety of their American team leaders.

They clambered aboard the Huey, continuing to return fire. McShane sat next to the open doorway searching for a target. The NVA had ceased firing at them. Suddenly, movement beneath the trees caught his attention. He looked deep into the shadows of the now blackened and smoldering banyan grove, less than thirty meters away. In the early morning sunlight that bathed the trees in a soft orange light, he could make out the shadows of several soldiers against the grassy LZ as they fled into the jungle. Something, however, struck him as very odd. One of the shadows appeared much longer than the others. Understanding that most of the Vietnamese stood five feet tall or less, the shadow he saw darting into the jungle must have belonged to a man well over six feet.

McShane swiped at a bead of sweat flowing into his eyes and searched the jungle again. The shadows were gone now and he shrugged off what he'd seen as a trick his weary eyes were playing on him. But then as the Huey began to lift away from the LZ, he took one last glance at the LZ. What he saw shocked him. Standing near the LZ in a chest high thicket of brush he saw a tall, bearded man gazing up at the ascending chopper. As he craned his neck out the chopper door

to get a better look, the bearded man suddenly bolted into the jungle, surrounded by a score of NVA soldiers. He laid back on the metal floor and closed his eyes, too exhausted to contemplate what he'd just witnessed. For the moment, his cares were over.

In less than forty minutes, they were over the FOB's helipad. McShane knew he faced an arduous de-briefing with Owens. But after that, he would take a long, hot shower and maybe squeeze in a little nap before the BBQ. As soon as the chopper landed, Harbor was carried away on a stretcher to the dispensary. The indig filed off to their barracks to be debriefed later by Lieutenant Vanh, the Vietnamese Special Forces liaison assigned to the camp.

McShane made his way directly to Owens' air-conditioned office in the headquarters' building. He opened the door without knocking and found Owens sitting behind his desk reading a file marked TOP SECRET.

"Do you ever knock?" Owens asked without looking up.

McShane ignored the question, too exhausted to reply. He pulled up a metal chair and sat directly across from the S-2 sergeant.

"Tough one, huh?"

"A little." It didn't seem like too much of a lie. Already he'd begun the task of mentally blocking out the unpleasantness of the past days. An image of Minh's torn open chest as he lay mortally wounded on the chopper floor still lingered, but he'd take care of

that at the club tonight. He figured he was due a good drunk.

"How's Harbor?"

"He'll be okay. A few weeks at the hospital in Cam Ranh Bay and he'll be good as new."

"Good." Owens said, setting the file aside on his desk. He leaned back in his chair, locking his hands behind his head. "You ready to tell me what happened?"

"I guess. Sooner we get this out of the way the sooner I can have a beer."

Owens looked down at a yellow legal size note pad. "You mentioned in one of your radio reports that you saw some trucks pulling 37mm anti-aircraft guns. Can you show me the exact position of the road where you saw the trucks?"

McShane vividly recalled the convoy of trucks that they'd seen the first morning of their road watch. One of the trucks had veered off course to avoid a deep rut and narrowly missed crushing Hoc as he laid in a clump of brush on the shoulder of the road. Fortunately, Quang grabbed his leg in time and pulled him out of the way.

McShane stood and crossed over to the acetate-covered map on the wall. He ran the tip of his right index finger along a narrow creek. "The road generally follows this creek through a narrow valley hidden from the air by the triple canopy jungle." He tapped a spot on the map. "This is where we saw the five trucks pulling the 37s. The canvas covers were folded up and we could clearly see inside the back.

Each of the vehicles carried a crew of six soldiers and dozens of boxes of ammunition. A sixth truck carried a security platoon of approximately forty soldiers."

For the next hour, McShane recounted the details of the operation in great detail. Occasionally Owens would interrupt him to ask a question or to have McShane elaborate on a specific piece of information. He was particularly interested in learning more about the trucks and the anti-aircraft guns. McShane had to fill him in on the details two more times before he was satisfied. Growing weary of the questioning, McShane interrupted him. He had to ask Owens about the bearded soldier.

"Now, I have a question for you." McShane asked.

Owens glanced up from his note pad. "Let's hear it."

McShane rubbed his cheek with the palm of his hand. "I saw something strange when we were being pulled out. I've thought about it and I don't know what to make of it."

"And what's that?" Owens asked curiously.

"Have any of the other teams reported seeing Caucasians working with the NVA in our area of operations? I know about Salt and Pepper, the white and black GI defectors seen with the NVA up in I Corps and I've heard about the guy called Red Beard that a team down South saw with a Viet Cong unit. But what about in our AO?"

Owens started with the questions again. "Why? Do you think you saw a 'round eye'? What did he look like?"

"As we flew away from the LZ, I saw him standing among several soldiers. He turned and glanced up at us. He was at least a head taller than the NVA and was bearded. Lord knows why. You'd think it'd be too hot for a beard. It was thick, I think, and dark. Hell, maybe it was just a shadow. He wasn't wearing any headgear and it looked like his hair was much lighter, almost blond. But it all happened so quickly that I didn't really see much, like his uniform or weapon. Hell, I'm not even so sure I saw him or his shadow at all, anymore. I hadn't slept in three days."

"This ... this... longshadow that you saw, are you positive he wasn't a Chinese? There have been dozens of reports of large Orientals fighting alongside NVA units. We're almost certain they're Chinese advisors. In fact, Chinese veterans of the Korean War are believed to have advised the NVA during the battle of the Ia Drang Valley."

"Probably the only thing I am positive of is that he was not Oriental, even if what I saw was a figment of my imagination. No, this guy was definitely a 'round eye' or - what did you call him, a longshadow?"

Owens leaned forward in his chair and reached for the folder he'd been reading earlier. He opened it and began flipping through the pages. McShane watched him inquisitively, pleased he'd stopped the questioning.



"So what do you think?" McShane asked, taking a deep breath. "Was he an American defector, maybe a foreign mercenary? Or even a Russian advisor?"

"Hold on, Steve," Owens replied sternly. "I'll answer your questions in a second." He paused at a page and scanned the contents, then handed the folder across the desk. "Why don't you take a look at this after-action report from RT Georgia. They were extracted a couple hours before you went in but they weren't de-briefed until you were already on the ground. The report might answer some of your questions."

McShane took the folder and began reading. Georgia's mission had been similar to their own: set up a road watch, look for targets of opportunity, bring back a prisoner. Pretty routine. But while the team was waiting in ambush alongside a trail they encountered the unusual. A patrol filed down the path, but was far too large to engage, so the team was forced to watch the soldiers march by. At one point the patrol stopped directly in front of where the team was hidden. One of the soldiers, much older than the others, began scolding a young soldier. Moments later, to the team's surprise, a bearded Caucasian dressed in green fatigues, stepped forward. At first he began speaking in a language that the NVA didn't seem to understand, then suddenly switched to Vietnamese. The assistant team leader of RT Georgia understood what he'd said, however.

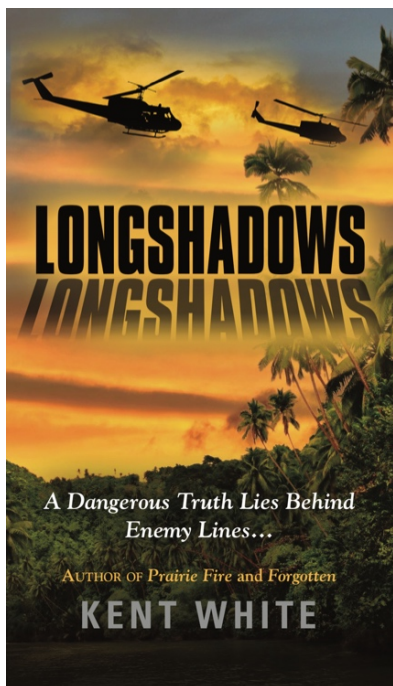
"Is this correct?" McShane asked, setting the file down on Owens' desk. "He heard the guy speak

German? You mean I saw a German today? How can that be?"

"We believe an East German," Owens emphasized. "Let me explain. We've known for months that East European countries have been supplying the North Vietnamese with weapons and supplies. Remember the operation you went on to try to capture the AKs with the unusual serial numbers? We had our suspicions then and were looking for proof that weapons were coming from East Bloc countries."

McShane nodded, recalling the prisoner they'd brought back and the seven AK-47s that turned out to be the usual Chinese manufactured.

"Georgia has now provided the first real proof pointing to a specific country. And you have substantiated their report. You weren't seeing things, Steve. Your bearded guy matches the description of Georgia's. Your man is no deserter or mercenary or Russian but an East German military advisor. And we want him. MACV-SOG in Saigon is offering a \$10,000 reward and a 30 day leave for the capture of the German - dead or alive." Owens studied McShane intently. "When will you be ready to go out again?"



*Set in the dank, nearly impenetrable jungles of southeastern Laos during the Vietnam War, Longshadows is the riveting story of a top-secret Studies & Observation Group, or SOG, reconnaissance team sent on a daring mission into Laos to discover a dangerous truth that lies behind enemy lines.*

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