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For the previous two days, each morning begins the same. Around 0630 the 8<sup>th</sup> Artillery begins shelling the village just outside of our wire. The village lies merely a few hundred meters from our bunker line. No one lives there anymore, and now that the 25<sup>th</sup> Division has moved into the Fil Hol rubber plantation and the surrounding flat open plain, there is only burned-out mud and straw houses remaining. After the 8<sup>th</sup> Artillery fire their barrages, our 4-deuces throw a few big mortar rounds into the ville just for good measure. Through my feet, I feel the subtle decisiveness of the big mortars leaving the tube from the battalion side of our company, and eventually we hear the louder retort from the target side of the company's area. What their targets are I have not a clue.

Next to arrive are the A-1E Skyraiders, which are nifty propeller driven aircraft capable of loitering for hours over an area keeping enemy soldiers hunkering in their holes. They carry rockets or bombs, but their best quality is their talent for putting the ordinance right down the tunnel entrance; but what their targets are I have not a clue.

I keep asking Lt Roth what they are bombing; after my third inquiry, he replies, exasperated, "I don't know, Lupton, this is my first day at war too," and I accept his admission of naiveté. The Korean War sergeants fail to offer an explanation either.

Two days ago, B Company spent the entire day fighting in the village. We listen to pops and crackles of the gunfire all day long. Our day starts the same as theirs did starting with the preparatory softening of the arty, mortars, and A1-Es. Then they cautiously venture into the rubber plantation in front of A Company's positions, pausing to consolidate, fixing their bayonets, and then marching in orderly formation into the village. B Company prefers fixed bayonets on their M14s when they venture beyond the perimeter.

B Company melds into the rows of rubber trees and shortly afterwards we hear rifle fire. Listening to machine guns pound away, we can only envision a fierce hand-to-hand battle. Rumor floats around that we are to go rescue them in an hour, but we keep filling sandbags and wondering what is happening out there in the village.

The day slogs along, we go to chow, and still we hear gunfire echoing in front of our line. We catch glimpses of helicopters through the canopy of the rubber trees; the cacophonies of machine guns from gunships chatter in long bursts, rockets punctuate the attack. Someone notices a medivac descending then rising above the treetops. After a while, all aircraft drift away to allow the 4-deuces to fire another mission. We are anxious to go, but Sergeant Rodriguez pulls the afternoon formation with the staccato popping in the background. He assigns some of the men to reoccupy B Company's bunker line while the rest of us return to filling the interminable cotton sandbag.

At around 1700, B Company straggles back to their company area. None offers to talk to us. They are bedraggled and disheveled, and I can see the sweat rings under their armpits and suspender straps. We watch excited activity in their mess area, and our medic tells us they suffered one dead and 10 wounded. This news is sobering.

The next day Sergeant Rod assigns me to bunker guard along the C Company perimeter. Dyer and I pass time by leaning with our elbows against the sandbags of the three-window bunker while resting our chins on our forearms. The machine gun occupies the middle opening. We listen to C Company engaged in the same familiar popping and crackling emanating from the village all day long.

In front of us works a bulldozer, pushing rubber trees into a great burn pile. Dyer is mesmerized with the dozer and tells me how much he likes to watch one work. He is a redneck cattle rancher from New Mexico and enjoys this mindless activity, and myself, I do not give a crap about watching the Rome Plough pushing around dead trees around all day. I am just grateful I am not out there again today hacking off the limbs. He has been gazing out the window all morning, but I grow bored standing there. I sit down on the wooden bunk nailed to the back wall of the bunker and lean against the dirt trying to get comfortable. I feel a nap coming on.

I notice a train of tiny piss-ants crawling from the dirt wall; they make a beeline to the floor where we dropped pieces of c-ration fruitcake. From the quarter inch hole, emerge elephant ants each driven by several mahout piss-ants sitting atop their heads. I feel like I am living Gulliver's Travel. Half of these resolute little buggers travel a straight line to the morsels while the other half return with their trove. Work groups role their goodies to the edge of the wall where two or three piss-ants muscle their treasure up the vertical impediment then vanish into the aperture. I am simply astounded with their dexterity, teamwork, and coordination.

"Hey, look at this," I tell Dyer. He turns, but is not interested in this wildlife discovery; he resumes watching the bulldozer with his chin resting on his forearms. The elephant ants have opposing pairs of gigantic mandibles used to hoist big chunks of cherries much too large for the teams of piss-ants. With great dexterity, mahouts direct their charges straight up the vertical wall, disappearing into their lair.

I decide to experiment a little bit. With my knife, I lop off the head of an elephant ant that is half way back to his burrow. Danger has struck unexpectedly, and at first, panic, but seconds later, another elephant ant picks up the cherry and plods back to their hole. Other piss-ants gather around the decapitated behemoth and after some frenzied head bumping, they form a detail. They hoist the old brute's head upon their backs and struggle to carry it back to the nest. Efforts to carry their fallen compatriot up the vertical slope are futile. They keep falling to the ground after each attempt. I cheer their determination. Finally, another pachyderm lumbers down the wall, picks the up casualty's head, and adroitly carries him back to the opening and disappears inside.

For their reward, I sprinkle a pack of sugar from my c-rations on the floor and the little buggers go ape shit. They abandon the fruitcake for the sugar granules, which are easier for the piss-ants to lug up the wall, and after an hour, the whole offering is gone. I can almost hear a band playing inside the tiny orifice as the last few grains disappear. Because this is not my bunker, I forgo plugging up the ant's hole or harassing them further, let the C Company men deal with them. I am proud of the little fellows.

Today it is our turn to conquer the ville. I am excited about my first combat. This is what I have been training for since my enlistment in May 1965. I am positive there is a medal of valor in my near future, and I hunger to kill a gook for God.

We breakfast earlier than normal. It is still dark. The artillery from across the battalion begins their bombardment, and then the 4-deuces commence their thumping. This bombardment goes on for an hour then the AIEs come on station. We watch them through the canopy and hear the wallop of their bombs as we put on our web gear. I can feel the excitement build.

Sergeant LaVilla begins checking our equipment. I carry 400 rounds of machine gun ammo slung across my chest like Pancho Villa, 120 rounds of M14 ammunition is

loaded into six magazines with one magazine in my rifle, 4 hand grenades, 2 smoke grenades, two canteens of water, and my mid-day meal of c-rations are stored in a sock that I tie to my suspender bracket. At the last moment, LaVilla hands me four one-pound sticks of TNT that I must put into the large pockets on my pant legs. Man I am loaded for Viet Cong!

Lieutenant Roth emerges from the company CP serious and determined. Following him is Captain Curbrow with his retinue of RTOs and the 4-duce mortar FO, the long whip antennas swinging wildly as they try to keep up. They swear when the elongated antenna tangles in the rubber tree branches while hurrying past Lieutenant Roth and Sergeant Rodriguez. Our squads form in ranks then move up to the bunker line where we join the first and third platoons. We lock and load our rifles. After a short wait for the officers to finalize the formation, the company moves out slowly. The A1Es are gone now; there is silence except for the radio squelch; at the first halt, I kneel down on my left knee and wait for the word to move out.

Within minutes we are up and moving toward the village. As we cross the plantation utility road, my position is on the left rear flank of the company formation. We stop again. Nothing is happening, and I feel thwarted because I want action. I need not worry though, after advancing a few more meters the first burst of Viet Cong machine gun bullets crack, snap, and pop over our heads; the entire company hits the ground in unison as the fire intensifies. A crescendo builds as first platoon's machine guns open up in a fusillade and the incoming rounds fade away quickly.

They order us forward again and we begin moving. As I get up, I realize Bray is not with us. I yell for him wondering if he got it with the initial burst of fire. "Bray!" Still he does not appear from the bushes where we took refuge. "Bray!" I yell again before walking back to find him, he stands up and walks toward me. "Why the hell didn't you answer me?" I am pissed at him; the company continues moving into the village, and we must trot to catch up.

Well rehearsed from the prior two days, and well hidden, the VCs start sniping at our lead elements. Our officers do not follow their basic infantry dictum of never taking the same rout to and from their objective on successive days. Captain Curbrow leads A Company through the same concrete gates as B and C companies before us; this is the third day in a row, same tactic, same shit, and same results. Beginning with the artillery, the 4-duce mortars, and finally the A1 Es, the infantry companies go into the village at exactly the same time, and from same direction. It is idiotic. These people are Majors and Colonels with years of experience, and they make a basic training blunder.

Our section of the formation is now moving into the village. People in front of me are throwing hand grenades into tunnel entrances; they explode with horrific force and blow hot gray smoke out of the opposite openings several yards away. Tunnels are everywhere. Sergeant LaVilla is screaming for me to follow my machine gunner Smokey Fell. When I run, the four sticks of TNT bash against the tendons on the back of my knees, LaVilla's yells more vehemently, he is furious because I am moving slowly. I struggle to keep up as our squad wends our way around the hootches and clusters of tall bamboo hedgerows.

Things quiet down for a while allowing my squad to stroll along a wide ox cart trail. Now and again, I hear sporadic pops of friendly fire coming from our lead elements. As I approach an intersecting trail, I hear rustling from underneath a clump of

bushes at the corner of the intersection. "There are noises coming from these bushes Sarge, are any of our men in the direction of this road?"

"No, go ahead and shoot," he instructs me. I pull off five quick rounds. The bushes explode in a hullabaloo. One chicken tears from its cover and runs cluck, cluck, clucking down the perpendicular road away from me; its two legs are just a blur. I never knew chickens could run so fast. Another chicken rolls from under the bush with his guts hanging out; he is flopping around in his death throws. Still a third hobbles out in a daze on one foot. I blast him because it is easy to do so; he explodes in a puff of blood and guts and feathers and lies dead in front of me. I will count them as our company's first KIAs even though I am positive nobody will ever write it down. Sergeant LaVilla starts laughing, and his new good mood is contagious among the others around us.

We begin to move out again. I walk past a large tree on the other corner of the road opposite where the Viet Cong chickens met their fate. On my left is a spacious open field, and to maintain our line abreast, I must walk exposed to the distant tree line, and then the shit hits the fan. Everybody drops like 40-pound sandbags; an instant later, we are all firing madly across this open field. The VC have sprung their ambush; they know exactly where we are going, and they just bide their time to suck us into their interlocking fire.

Bullets whiz and crack above my head from several directions. Realizing I lie exposed, I spring up and dash back to the ox cart road to conceal myself behind the big tree, and quickly too, for bullets follow me, one two three, four of them. I dive for the earth behind the tree. Crack crack crack! Now I can return fire. There are no visible targets only the distant tree line, so I stop firing madly and settle down to well-aimed shots into the shadows. Others keep up their frantic rate of fire. After a while, incoming bullets moderate, but that does not stop everybody else from shooting as if they were defending against a charging horde. Now I feel I have to take a piss.

I get up in a crouch and dash back past the VC chicken guts to where there is a lot of vegetation to give me cover. I hear a lot of outgoing rifle fire but not too much incoming, so I unbutton my pants, whip out my dick, and take my whiz. I am understandably a little nervous, but eventually, I get the stream going and empty my bladder. I have the dubious satisfaction of holding my gun in one hand, and my rifle in the other all the while taking fire from the enemy. I do not know what that gets me, so I get back into the fray by valiantly dashing behind my tree and firing a few rounds just to feel useful. Who knows, maybe some VC will pop his head up just as I squeeze off my well-aimed shot into the distant tree line, nailing him right between his eyes. I will never know.

From behind me, somebody beckons, "Lupton!" I turn to see the medic holding an IV bottle over a man lying on a stretcher. Sergeant Porter waves for me to join them. There are about 10 soldiers; one is Ocho from third platoon, his arm dangles down his side. He took a round through his shoulder right in the ball and socket joint. Sergeant Porter tells him to tie up his arm or he will lose it; there is blood all down his front, and I can see a little bit of white bone. He is sweating profusely and beginning to go into shock. Sergeant Port smacks his face and yells at him to stay awake. I grab a corner of the stretcher and the party starts out.

I am stuck carrying the heavy end of the stretcher. While his feet are not so hefty, his torso weighs a ton, and I tire quickly. My M14 keeps falling off my shoulder and

banging into my shins. The four sticks of TNT are bashing the back of my knees mercilessly, and I curse LaVilla for making me carry the goddamn things. The four of us are exhausted from the stifling heat; we must set the wounded man down. He took a round up his ass cheek and the bullet exited through his abdomen. The medic has unbuttoned his pants down to his pubic hair and a bandage covers the exit wound. There is a field dressing stuck on his butt too. His sweaty shirt is open as he lies hatless, squinting against the sun. The four litter bearers are panting hard as we try to catch our breaths. I look down to recognize Marshal. "Goddamn," I exclaim, "it's Marshall!"

"Don't swear at me Lupton," he replies ever so calmly. I thought he was unconscious, but he is merely tranquil. I think he is praying a lot.

"Don't worry Marshall we'll get you back okay," I reassure the fallen.

We still have a long way to go to reach the village gates where the executive officer waits with the ambulance and a contingent of men guarding the  $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton ammo truck. "Let's go," says somebody. With a deep breath, we heave Marshall up and start walking double time when sniper bullets crack crack over our heads. The shooting stops when we squat down.

After we hump on for a few more yards, we stop to rest again. Marshall grows heavier and heavier with each successive step. The sniper is still taking wide shots at us, and we cannot stand up straight, which would make the going easier. Sergeant Porter tells another person to take my handle because I am fading quickly; he orders me to go forward to the hedgerow and secure it for the stretcher. The litter crew starts running in a crouch once more. They move through my opening in the hedgerow and dash across a small open field. The sniper takes a few wild shots but we just keep moving.

We can see the village gates where the ambulance waits. With one last effort, we are there. Marshall is briskly loaded into the ambulance; Ocho climbs into the back along with another guy who has wounds from grenade shrapnel. Someone climbs in the cab to ride shotgun and off the injured go to the rear. The rest of us flop down depleted on the ground to recover.

The XO occupies a small depression next to the gates that provides some cover from the sniper. The Lieutenant keeps yelling at the new arrivals to keep looking away from him and locate the goddamn stupid sniper. We lie on our sides exhausted with a tendency to look at our feet as our chests heave to regain our breath, and not to look away from us. "Keep looking out *there*, don't look at us," the XO's RTO points repeatedly to the rubber trees as if he is some sort of Boy Scout.

"Look out there your own goddamn self," I squawk back. I am panting madly, sweating in torrents, and just completely whooped. Gunfire ebbs and flows inside the village. The sniper shoots an occasional round in our direction causing the XO to nag us to keep looking away, toward the rubber trees. Now we want to shoot the XO.

I make up my mind to get rid of these stupid TNT charges. The crook of my knees are raw and sore as hell, and besides, who is going to blow anything up back here any damn way? I pull them out and throw them into the  $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton ammo truck. Then I turn around to see if I can spot the sniper who keeps popping rounds in our direction.

Bearing down upon us is the strangest site I ever see in Vietnam, a rider less horse gallops hurriedly past us and into the village where the shooting continues. Somebody offers to shoot it, but the XO declines. We all look at ourselves and laugh.

It is around noontime now. The XO has not told us we should rejoin the company again. I think he likes the idea of five more guys to secure his little CP. I pull out my Date-nut Cake from my sock and try to eat some of it; others do the same. I am hungry, but because it is so hot, I fill up quickly and cannot eat any more.

We watch another group of wounded straggle from the village with only minor shrapnel wounds. The ambulance has not returned but the company driver is here with an empty  $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton truck, and we load the five wounded men into that. I ride shotgun in the front seat to the aid station. The noise dies down as we drive through the hole in our wire, and then ride down the road past our platoon area and the company CP to the battalion aid station where guys with minor wounds lounge around outside. We offload the wounded and climb aboard the  $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton truck to return to the XO at the village gates. I watch Sergeant Prine calmly sitting shirtless on the sandbags, his ribs taped, serenely smoking a cigarette. He is in no way eager to venture past the safety of the battalion aid station.

Back at the village gates, we listen to the chatter over the radio. The battalion commander flies overhead in a C&C helicopter. He orders Captain Curbrow to disengage the enemy. Curbrow tells the Colonel he has two KIAs in front of his position, but because of enemy fire, they cannot retrieve the bodies yet. The discussion goes on for quite a while before the Colonel orders Curbrow to leave the KIAs and pull back. Captain Curbrow demurs because he knows he will be out here tomorrow to retrieve the bodies.

More wounded appear from the village. I volunteer to ride shotgun to the battalion aid station on the  $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton truck. When we pull up to the aid station, Sergeant Prine still sits on the exact same sandbag still smoking a cigarette. After offloading the wounded, I climb back into the  $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton truck, and we ride back to the XO's CP once again where a discussion ensues about the company's precarious situation. I volunteer to get the 90 mm recoilless rifle in hopes of breaking the deadlock. "No way," announces the XO, only the CO can order up the 90. My big opportunity for glory vanishes. We are to stay here, peering from this position into the woods to find that stupid sniper who still fires an occasional round or two in our direction.

The afternoon drags on with yet more lightly wounded walking back from the village. We all wonder who the KIAs are, and the XO tells us it is Sergeant Todd from third platoon. When Sergeant Steel came to assist Todd, he too died by the same sniper.

Captain Curbrow recovers the two KIAs and slowly the company begins disengaging.

Second platoon's first squad returns wanting water and ammo. They converge on the  $\frac{3}{4}$ -ton ammo truck parked about a hundred feet away. I hear the executive officer yelling, "Be careful with that goddamn LAW," a second later, a loud bang followed by the sibilant hissing of the tank round. "GODDAMN IT! I TOLD YOU TO BE CAREFUL WITH THAT GODDAMN LAW, YOU STUPID ASSHOLE!" Earlier, Greko cocked a LAW, but it refused to fire, so he tossed it into the back of the ammo truck filled with all different kinds of explosives. Now we have a wayward tank round rocketing up into the air, and we all know it has to land somewhere. The smoke trail disappears into the hot, blue afternoon sky, and that is the end of it. I feel obligated to hunker my shoulders in case it lands close by. A moment later, the round explodes harmlessly into the rubber trees.

I join first squad at Sergeant Walker's direction, and we venture into the rubber trees a hundred yards to the left of the village gates and set up a skirmish line with a man behind each tree. Jones thinks he sees that annoying sniper perched in a distant tree, and he takes a well-aimed shot at him. "I got 'em!" he ejaculates. The XO begins bellowing bloody murder about firing without permission while the company is still in the village. Jones gets no respect for a good shot and the sniper never retorts. You can believe the XO is not about to lead a patrol to look for the body.

Eventually, the rest of A Company straggles out of the village. More wounded go back to the battalion aid station. A company regroups, loiters for a while longer, and then forms a line where I find myself on the left flank, far away from 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon. Baggio shouts at me, "Lupton, get away from here!" I glance to my right to see Sergeant Rod all the way over on the right flank, well past the Captain and his RTOs. I hesitate, "Lupton, get the hell outta here." Baggio is a nasty asshole. I do not want to get my ass chewed out by Captain Curbrow nor Sergeant Rod; I stay put and tell Baggio to go fuck himself. Baggio swears at me, "Ain't no private going to tell me to go fuck myself, get outta here," he yells in his insufferable Brooklyn accent, but as far as I am concerned he is merely a jerky Spec4 and cannot tell me to do anything. At this point, the company begins shooting and advancing in a line abreast back towards the village.

"Oh boy," I think to myself, "we are going back in there to show these Viet Cong who the real bad-asses are around here." However, this is not to be. The assault is short lived with lots of shooting and noise, but now it is late in the day, and well before the edge of the village, we cease-fire, turn around, and mosey back to our bunker line.

Third and first platoons repopulate the bunker line, second platoon returns to our reserve area where we wash up and eat chow. While cleaning our weapons, we compare our wounds, and in the process, we learn that even before we got to the village gates, Sergeant Prine claims he tripped and fell on his Walkie-Talkie, asserting he bruised his ribs. Sergeant Prine self-evacuates to the battalion aid station with a counterfeit grimace on his face, faking the pain in his ribs. I tell my version of seeing him idly smoking cigarettes at the aid station both times I brought wounded back. No one ever comes down on Prine for self-inflicting his wound. He gets away with it, and everyone agrees he is chickenshit.

The day's action is 46 wounded and 2 dead. The Viet Cong, who knows?