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I do not recollect the exact date that Sergeant Thomas refuses to go out anymore. We are pulling routine patrols outside of our wire, and Sergeant Thomas decides he does not want to do this shit anymore. He has already been in the Army for about 8 years, which means he is on his second enlistment, and intends to be a lifer. Lieutenant Roth finds Thomas sitting in the drainage ditch paralleling the road to Nightmare Village and orders him to rejoin his squad. In front of Sgt Rodriguez, Lieutenant Roth orders Thomas to rejoin his squad and carry on with the patrol. Sergeant Tom just says no, he does not care what they do to him and walks back to the break in our concertina wire. He just sits in his make shift tent and waits for the patrol to return.

In front of witnesses, Captain Curbow orders him to rejoin his platoon. Sgt Tom just says no. He does not want to be in the infantry any more, that is it. At this point, the Captain frames his language into a direct order that Sergeant Thomas defiantly refuses to obey. "Okay, you are under arrest. Turn in your weapon to the supply room, your grenades too; you are restricted to the company area until we decide what to do with you." The captain is pissed off at Thomas. Everybody else is disgusted with his behavior.

Sergeant Tom merely hangs out at his shelter-half tent and stays entirely to himself. I do not understand what is going on until he invites me to eat lunch with him.

"Lupton, come on over here, I have some extra C-rations," he entices me to join him with food.

"Wait a minute Sarge; I want to get a couple of cold sodas." I give Dempsey twenty cents for two cokes. Finding ice is becoming easier since we arrived; the cokes are ice cold today. I join Sergeant Thomas at his poncho and shelter-half tent. He has constructed a bed frame from rubber trees, so he can sit elevated rather than having to sit on the ground.

"What do ya like, Lupton? I have Boned Chicken, Scrambled Ham and Eggs, or how about some Pork Slices in Water? I can heat them up ya know?" He is black-folksy; he waves a hand of generosity over his just opened case of C-rations he has purloined from the mess sergeant. He does not go to the mess tent to eat any more.

"Ahh, I'll take the Pork in Water, Sarge." He has already built a little C-ration tin can stove by gouging out air holes around the bottom and top rims with his P38. Sergeant Tom places a heat tablet in the can and fires it up, and then he sets my can of pork slices on the smokeless fire to warm. It is dreadfully hot in the afternoon and cold C-rations would be better, but he has already made his decision, and besides, the meat is much tastier hot than cold. When there is steam piping out of the can, he motions for me to take mine. Included in my meal are dried crackers, so I can make little sandwiches. "Thanks Sarge. By the way, what is going on with you? I ask him with some trepidation. I am trying to sound like a concerned friend.

"I'm getting court marshaled tomorrow, Lupton. I don't know what is going to happen to me." Sergeant Tom begins eating his C-ration. He does not look at me.

"Ahh, that's too bad Sarge, I'm sorry."

"There is nothing to be sorry about, Lupton," he tells me flatly. I watch his jaw muscles work his food, "I just decided I didn't want to do this infantry stuff anymore."

“But it was you who told me that if Sergeant LaVilla ever gets hit then it would be you who would have to take over the weapons squad. You remember that?” I am beginning to feel like I am stepping on his feelings, or something.

“You have a good memory, Lupton,” he says just as dry and flat as before. “I guess I remember I did say that, way back in Hawaii, but that isn’t important now, nothing is.” I detect the fatalism in his voice.

“Yeah, back in Schofield.” I look away from him because I feel I have intruded too far; he continues eating and not talking very much. I wish I had not taken him up on his invitation. I feel he regrets inviting me too.

“You are a good soldier, Lupton. You’ll do all right for yourself.” More dry ramble. He turns to look at me for the first time. “You be careful, you hear?”

“Yeah, Sarge, sure, ahh, yeah, I will, I will.” Sergeant Rodriguez is calling the platoon into formation; everybody moans and groans when they have to get up.

“You go join the platoon, Lupton. I have to stay here.”

“Okay, Sarge thanks for the C’s.” I hesitate for a moment. I want to wish him good luck out of a sense of gratitude; a spate of courage allows me to say, “I just want to thank you Sergeant Thomas...and, say good luck to you.”

Sergeant Tom looks up at me through his woeful brown eyes; our eyes lock. “Thank you Lupton, it’s nice of you to say that to me.”

I turn around and join the second platoon. I look back at him as I stand in formation. He has lain back on his makeshift bunk; his hands are behind his head, as he lies staring at the poncho above him. I can only imagine the depth of his isolation. When you are in trouble in the Army, you are very much alone; nobody wants to associate with you, and you might as well be dead.

I liked Sergeant Thomas. He treated me kindly when I joined the platoon, and he became my tutor to some extent by helping me with field gear I had never seen before, by showing me how to line up my bunk, by helping me fix my footlocker to pass inspection, and by pointing out the good men in the squad like Smokey Fell. He came up with that field jacket I needed during the week A Company became the ready reaction unit when nobody else would do squat. Sergeant Thomas was friendly with me when the other NCOs were aloof. I have never determined if he wanted to mentor a young trooper or he was trying to impress me or make me beholden to him like a puppy.

He is truly a jive nigger, always bouncing around with excess energy, constantly involved in one intrigue or another. On my first payday night in the company, he hit me up for a five-dollar loan so he could join a poker game. The barracks develops into a virtual den of vice; guys are gambling, gambling everywhere I look. There must have been five different poker games going on all at once; guys are rolling craps on their bunk for ten bucks a roll. Some are even pitching pennies against the wall; all of this goes on simultaneously within minutes after leaving the pay line.

My bunk becomes the table for a poker game. Sgt Thomas plays poker for a couple of hours then leaves the game with a fist full of bucks. Greko fumes at me for loaning Thomas the five dollars.

“Very good, Lupton, you just had to loan Sergeant Tom that five bucks, didn’t you?”

“Hey, how could I know he would clean you guys out?” I snicker in my retort. “It’s a poker game, isn’t it?” Greko warns me against giving Thomas any more money.

Shit, Tom has not even bothered to repay me my five bucks, and now he is out the door. Later that night, he returns and loses his prior winnings back to the same individuals. He repays me my five dollars and leaves.

“Hey, you see? You got your money back after all,” says I, but nobody is impressed.

Sergeant Thomas stands his court martial the next day. It suffices to explain that they find him guilty of desertion and cowardice in the face of the enemy. They bust him down to buck private, fine him big time, and under guard, ship his ass down to LBJ.

Sergeant Rodriguez culls me out for sandbags, others get tree-chopping details, and we trudge toward the line for the afternoon. Sergeant Tomas is not there when we return at five o'clock. All of his shit is gone too; he is now history. I do not remember anybody talking about him ever again.

The next day Sergeant Rodriguez details me to ride shotgun on the Vietnamese dump trucks bringing in laterite onto the base. Each truck has to have a GI riding in the cab or in the back of the truck. They drive to a central checkpoint where an engineer peers inside the truck bed and estimates how much laterite the truck contains. He jots the amount down and hands the driver a receipt. I climb into the truck bed; we drive a short distance to dump the load; I get back into the truck bed, and we drive back to the main gate where I get off and catch the next truck. This goes on for several days. We consider it dick duty.

At other times, I go outside the wire to cut down rubber trees, chop the branches off the trunks, and stack everything in a heap. We throw diesel fuel on the pile of debris and set them on fire. It is hard dirty work and we grow to dislike the detail.



Figure 1: We clear rubber trees in front of our bunker line. Lupton is in the rear, Knott is in the white t-shirt with Smokey Fell to his right. The others are unknown, Cu Chi - 1966.

In the evening, if I am lucky, I can get a steel pot of water from the water trailer and take it back to my little poncho hootch where I take a whore's bath. First, I brush my teeth, and then I take a washrag, soap it up, clean my face first, my crotch next, my armpits come next, and eventually the rest of my self - all with one pot of water. With further luck, there may water in the 5-gallon cans at the platoon CP, and I can get another steel pot full. I wash my socks and under shorts first, then my t-shirt, no rinse water is

used. I hang these to dry on the support wires of my hootch. With the last little bit of water, I might be able to wash the armpits of my fatigue shirt.

Somehow, the company purloins an aluminum drop-tank from a jet, and we construct a company shower. I find we can shower 3 people with one 5-gallon can of water by rotating under the water to get wet, stepping out to allow the next man to get wet while soaping up our body as fast as we can without looking like we are jerking off. Then I rotate into the diminishing stream of water to rinse off the soap. It is not too bad. I walk back to my tent with a steel pot of water and shave a few days of growth from my face. In the evening, just before the sun goes down, it is cool enough to wash without becoming sweaty again. With my teeth brushed, I feel like a new man.

Eventually, a laundry is organized. We take commo wire, string several fatigue pants and shirts together, and put them into a pile for pick up. They come back a couple of days later. We find our clothes by searching for our nametag on the fatigue shirts and there is always a pile of extra pants and shirts left over. I have to scrounge through many of them to find enough clothes in my size.

Captain Curbow is annoyed with us because we are becoming somewhat motley in our dress, so he puts out the word through First Sergeant Letoto that we are in the Army, and although we are in Vietnam, we will be in proper uniform all of the time, regardless. We must always carry our weapons everywhere, tuck in our shirts, blouse our boots, and wear a cover. This is a direct order.

I am on KP today. I have to get up early at o'dark thirty and start cleaning up behind the cooks as they fuck up perfectly good food. The work is hard, the day is long, and my ass is dragging by mid afternoon. It is hot, just plain hot. The KPs have to work out in the sun washing pots and pans in 32-gallon garbage cans of scalding hot water. The pants I put on in the dark this morning are too short for me to blouse properly. They keep pulling out of my boot tops when I bend over, and finally I get tired of tucking them back in, and say fuck 'em.

"Lupton, what are you doing with your boots unbloused?" The Captain asks me curtly. He sits at the officers' tables surveying his domain when I walk past him.

"Ah, these pants are too short for me sir, they won't stay in my boots," I reply with enough confidence hoping the explanation will suffice in our combat environment.

"Well, you just got yourself an Article 15, Lupton. I gave the order that everybody is to be in uniform and that includes bloused boots. You come see me at 1700 hours." An Article 15 is an administrative judicial action with a fine. I can refuse the Article 15, but then I will be court-marshaled. How could I get into so much trouble? I am distraught.

I go back to my tent immediately and find my boot blousers. These are elastic bands with hooks on the ends used to keep ones pant legs cuffed over the top of our combat boots. My short pants pull the blousers over my boots and the rubber blousers are annoying because they leave an impress in my skin. I return to labor through the hottest part of the day until 1700 when I fix my boot blousers once more and report to the Captain. He paternally inspects me up and down while I stand nervously in my filthy fatigues then he listens patiently to my account of why I disgraced the uniform. He forgives my sins and lectures me to keep my pants bloused from now on. I happily concur, graciously salute, and amiably resume my labors. I am thankful for the Captain's benevolence.

In front of our bunker line is an array of Viet Cong spider holes scattered amongst the rubber trees. They construct them with an open firing pit, also digging underneath the surface of the clay to form a small shelter where they can retreat into a very short tunnel that offers overhead cover from artillery airbursts or aircraft bombardment.

We really cannot see these fox holes until we are standing right over them. The Viet Cong use branches and leaves for camouflage to great effect. Battalion details A Company to eliminate these firing holes by filling them in. If it ever occurs to our colonel that all the VC has to do is dig out what we have filled in and reoccupy their positions, it is not apparent to me.

Sergeant LaVilla assigns me a pickaxe to carry and we patrol into the rubber plantation to destroy these positions. We encounter no hostile fire; a perimeter is set up, and the people with the pickaxes attempt to fill in the spider holes. I position myself spread legged so I can take a mighty swing with my pick by raising it high above my head. I figure I can use the flat end of the pickaxe and this will be the quickest way to get the parapet broken up so I can shovel it into the hole. To my astonishment, my first swing bounces off this deceptively loose dirt. Others remark about the same result. This clay is hard as a rock. After a few more frustrating whacks, I turn my pick around to use the pointed end, and give it another heave ho. The pick manages to penetrate the rock-hard clay by merely an inch. I pry a small rent out of the dirt. Another full swing produces even more penetration, and my prying action gouges out an even larger hole. I am encouraged. I break under the crust on my third swing, now the going get even easier. I am able to break up the entire parapet and scrape it into the foxhole. It fills up the hole about half way. The sergeants are convinced we have defeated the VC on this score.

Scattered throughout the rubber plantation are termite mounds that are taller than I am and about four feet in diameter. They are just as dense as the parapets, which makes them virtually indestructible. The VC tunnel underneath, and firing ports are dug from the inside. Their tunneling is virtually impossible to detect from the outside.

Another danger in the plantation is punji pits. The ones we see are old with their camouflage long gone. These pits are over three feet deep with the bamboo stakes set close together. Woe is to the unfortunate who falls into one of these things on a night ambush. However, I never hear of anybody so ill fated to impale himself. We pull up the punji stakes and keep them for souvenirs then push in the sides of the pit. That is the best we can do.

Each night ambushes consisting of one rifle squad, a machine gun crew, and a medic venture out in front of the company's position. Sometimes the ambush sets up a couple of hundred meters in front of the bunker line. Other times, the ambush travels out farther, many times to the old French Mansion. This is an abandoned agricultural estate house in the middle of the rubber plantation. We set ambushes out here a lot. Sergeant Walker takes us out here this night. The moon has not risen when we begin setting up. Smokey Fell keeps stepping on twigs when he puts out the Claymore mine, and the resounding crackles are loud! "Stop making noise, Lupton," I hear Sergeant Walker whisper angrily. It seems I catch shit for everything, but I do not reply because that means I will make even more noise. I quietly scrape away the twigs for a place to lie down and settle on my stomach for the night.

Except for artillery fire missions, it is virtually silent. The rounds hiss low over our heads. After the sibilant shells fade into a whisper, we listen to the reverberation of the volley thunder back to us. Every now and again, the 105s will fire a parachute flare. The round pops, emitting a baby-shit yellow glow through the crown of the rubber trees as its smoky tail trails to the ground. Its flame is enough to light our position with shadowy specters. Another volley roars over our heads hissing angrily then fading away into the blackness. Kaaboom, the retort drifts back to us with the finality of a huge thunderclap. The volleys persist for many hours. For the entire night, mortar flares illuminate the horizon, one after the other. I speculate they are illuminating an ARVN outpost because the Americans seldom use mortar and artillery flares this much. The ARVNs have little trepidation in keeping their positions lit up all night long. Small arms fire pops and crackles intermittently in the distance.

Sergeant Walker crawls like a ghost to the machine gun. "Can you hear 'em?" He asks us.

"No." I whisper barely audibly enough for him to hear.

"I hear them moving around out there. I'm going to have Stemac fire on them with the M79."

"Okay," I whisper wishing he would go away. I can hear nothing in between the artillery rounds. Stemac fires the M79 and instantly the grenade explodes with a roar. He hits a rubber tree right in front of him. I am surprised the shrapnel has not blown back on us. Everything remains quiet. My intestines gurgle with dread. I am sure the Viet Cong know exactly where we are now, and they are going to maneuver in the blackness, charge us, over run us, and kill everybody! I am positive we will die, but still nothing happens. The artillery fires once more. It becomes stone cold silent. I hear a slight rustle then a dull ping, KAABOOM! A grenade blows twigs and dirt into the air. Still nothing, a blanket of silence descends once more. I am scared *shitless*! Intestinal fluids begin to rumble back and forth, back and forth, back and forth through my descending colon until I must fart, but if I do that, I will give the ambush away. Gas continues rumbling to and fro until I am positive everybody can hear it. I am petrified. Still nothing happens. My mind conjures images of vile apparitions, shadows dance, there is death in this place, and I just know it!

After Walker throws another hand grenade, almost as a warning, it remains deathly silent. Nothing more happens that night. Smokey Fell suggests a timetable for us to pull guard, and I lie with my head inside my steel pot. The pot is the only thing between my head and the hand grenade shrapnel I am sure will find me. I want a cigarette so bad!

I drift off to sleep; peace has finally come to me. Fell gently wakes me up; it is my turn for guard. The quarter moon is up, and it shines a peaceful white hue through the canopy. I can make out the silhouette of the French Mansion off in the distance. There is absolute silence, not even the artillery is firing anymore. I put my M14 under my left arm so I can quickly grab it if I need to. I feel for my hand grenade so I know where it is. I finger the pin; it is straightened and ready for a quick pull. More silence. I stare at a tree in the distance. I swear it is moving, so I look at it indirectly, and it behaves standing there quietly. Good shadow, good boy, keep still and do not move. I turn my head to survey the ambush. At most, all I can see are darker clumps lying on the ground. It is disconcerting, for all I know I am the only one awake.

It is quiet as a pile of shit when the sun turns the inky black opaque sky into gray lucidity. Sergeant Walker crawls noiselessly over to us, and whispers for me to bring in the Claymore mine then he crawls to the next position. I wake the other two, and tell them I am going to get the Claymore. I unplug the igniting handle, remembering to put the safety plug on the two prongs, and then I begin winding the wire around my left elbow and between my thumb and index finger as I creep noiselessly out to the mine. I check to see if there is a grenade planted underneath it then I unscrew the detonator and finish wrapping up the wire. I pull the mine out and walk back in a hunch. I stow the mine in its pouch, collect my rifle and machine gun ammo, and wait.

Sergeant Walker leads us back to the bunker line when there is just light enough to see through the rubber trees. I guess he does not care to see if he hit anybody last night, for we do not make a search in front of the ambush. It is light when we stop at the edge of the rubber trees to make sure the bunker guards do not blow us away. We walk out of the plantation and zigzag our way through the opening in the concertina wire, and we shuffle exhausted back to our reserve area. We are tired.

“Did you hear anything out there, Fell?”

“I don’t know what Walker heard, but I don’t think there was shit out there,” he replies. We look at each other and shrug our shoulders, and then walk to the mess tent.

They do not have chow ready, but they do have fresh brewed coffee. The squad sits at the picnic table drinking the physically powerful GI brew. It is muscular and soon we feel stimulated and ready for the day. After chow, the squad goes back to the tent area to wash up, shit, and shave.

We break into small groups, each with an ax. One man chops away at the rubber tree while the rest look on, hands on their hips, supervising. Then when the first man is tired, he hands the ax to another who chops away until he is pooped. The axes are dull, but that is okay, we have plenty of men, and it becomes somewhat of a competition to see which squad can cut down the most trees.

Joining us today are several engineers. They have a chain saw, and they rapidly cut one tree down after the other. They begin fuming and swearing at their stupid saw because it will start and idle okay, but it grinds to a stall each time it accelerates. After about four trees, the rubber sap gums up the chain. They huddle to figure out how to clean the gunk out of the bar. The engineers eventually get back into their jeep and drive away. All during this time, we are knocking down tree after tree. We drag the branches to a central pile where we splash diesel fuel on them then set them ablaze. The labor is mind numbing and we hate it.

The engineers reappear after noon chow and crank up their chain saw. We discover they are using gasoline to dissolve the rubber sap. Their stupid saw bursts into flame after a few minutes. They bicker loudly about which one has to take his fatigue shirt off to smother the inferno before the gas tank explodes. Everybody is laughing at them as they throw the smoking chain saw into the back of their jeep and drive away in a huff. When we break for chow at the end of the day, we have several roaring bonfires raging. By nightfall, the fires burn the piles of trunks and branches into smoldering heaps.

“Hey look at this, will ya.” Smokey Fell is sitting on top of the platoon’s CP bunker reading a newspaper from home. “It says here, that the VFW has inducted this, get this, ‘this assistant ships store keeper 2nd class,’ from the 7th Fleet into the VFW.” He

reads the article sardonically. Fell is highly amusing. “Now how about that; here is an assistant ships’ storekeeper being honored for his six-month tour of duty off the coast of Vietnam. Is this a crock of shit or what?” He looks at us and we all laugh. “Boy I betcha his tour was dangerous,” more chuckles, “and here we are sitting here looking stupid.”

“If they will take that stupid squid they surely must take us.”

“Ya know, I bet the VFW is full of guys just like this,” responds Smokey, “most of them are nothing more than rear echelon motherfuckers sitting at the bar, swilling beer, and telling lies. Six months, I could do six months in Vietnam standing on my head.”

“I hear for every infantryman in Vietnam there are 20 guys supporting them.” Dyer chimes in. “That means the VFW must be full of REMFs. Ha! To think they let them join with only 6 months sitting off the coast of Vietnam; a veteran of a foreign war with clean sheets weekly, three hot meals daily, and a soda fountain anytime.” Dyer looks around at his surroundings, “and, to think, this is good for us. What a crock of bullshit.”

All of us agree.

Sergeant LaVilla is becoming impossible. I cannot do anything to satisfy him; he is always on my ass about something.

Somehow, I get an appointment to see the dentist. I have a sensitive lower tooth that makes its presence known every time I chew. I eat noon chow and head off to the dentist at the 25th Division hospital station. The dentist is in a squad tent, and I can feel the heat ooze from the canvas above my head when I walk in the door. They put me into this jury-rigged dental chair made from welded pipes. I have to spit into a 10-can.



Figure 2: I get my tooth filled in Cu Chi - 1966.

Honest to God, I am amazed a dental assistant is not cranking a hand generator to operate the drill.

A major gives me an injection of nova cane; then he proceeds to fiddle around with a tape recorder, so he can listen to a message from his wife. For some reason he cannot seem to get the recorder to work correctly, but he is determined to hear his message while I sit in the dental chair waiting for the nova cane to take effect. He is a Major, and me a mere private, so I cannot ask him to hurry up. After more than an hour of watching him screw around with the tape recorder, he begins drilling my lower molar. He has been screwing around for so long the nova cane is now waning. I am glad when he tells me he is finished drilling. Gawd, I have been sitting in this torture rack for a long time.

I feel my new filling with my tongue as I walk back to the company area. I pass the PX and think about going inside for a look, but I decide to pass it up because it seems I have been gone all afternoon. When I get back to the company area, Dyer calls out to me to tell me Sergeant LaVilla is looking for me, and by the way, just where the hell have I been for such a long time.

“I was at the dentist,” I tell him. I do not know why he is annoyed at me. “Why, what’s the problem?”

“The problem, Lupton, is you were no where to be found.”

“I told you, Dyer, I was at the dentist.”

“You know, Lupton, your screwing around pisses everybody off,” he is shouting at me now. Dyer walks up to me close enough to invade my personal space. It is obvious to me he has been holding this animosity inside of him for a long time.

“Hey, fuck you Dyer. Who are you, my mother, or something?” I snap back at him. Who is he to give me a ration of shit? What does he care where I have been? What is it to him?

“Ya know, *Lupton*, you have been a pain in everybody’s ass, and you could use an ass whooping to straighten you out.” This guy weighs 230 pounds and is all muscle. He moves even closer, but I do not step backward. I stand my ground. I want to spit into his eye, but prudence will not let me commit suicide.

“Honest to god, Dyer, what is your problem, anyway?” I push him back, but he is so big I am the one who moves backward with my own shove. He seems surprised that I do not cower. Then he pushes me in return. I am definitely impressed with his strength. I will not survive a punch out, but if I shy away he will just keep pushing me, and I know this. I bump into his chest with my chest. I bounce back. He is immovable and ready to stomp my ass into the ground. “Where is LaVilla?”

“He is over at B Company’s platoon CP behind their bunker line, and he wants to see your ass,” he says with dry satisfaction as he takes another step toward me. I retreat a little then hold my ground.

“Ha!” I declare, “I’ll just go see him then.” This is my way out. I can now retreat from this standoff with my dignity in tact and my ass unstomped. He glowers at me as I walk through the rubber trees to B Company’s bunker line. I amble past a lone bucket of shit. The latrine is long gone, and somebody forgot to take the cut in half 55-gallon drum with him. It is half-full of shit with a million, zillion maggots roiling, churning, and bubbling throughout this malaise. I think I should get half a can of diesel

fuel and a stick, and come back here and fire up these maggots before they become flies. “That’s right, fry ‘em before they turn into little lifer flies with tiny lifer wings,” I muse to myself.

Amongst the rubber trees, I can see LaVilla standing behind the B Company’s CP bunker, his hands akimbo. The pleasure of my metaphor fades into ambient reality. “Ah crap, back into the shit again.”

“Where the fuck have you been, Lupton?” I have heard this before. He is pissed, but then I knew he would be. LaVilla is always pissed at me for something.

“I was at the dentist up at division, Sarge.” This is my second confrontation with an asshole, and my jaw is beginning to ache too.

“I’ve been looking for you all afternoon.”

“I just told you, Sarge, I just came from the dentist. The medic made the appointment for me. I told you so this morning.” God I hate stupid lifers.

“I’m sick of you, Lupton. Every time I turn around you are fucking off.” This too I have heard before. Besides, LaVilla is absurd; Greko fucks off much more than I do.

Again, I have to tell him I was at the dentist. “Here, look,” I yank the corner of my mouth open with my little finger to show him the new filling, “Ooo see the ew illing I ave in eye ower tooth?” LaVilla countenance reddens. He has to believe my manifestation, and that pisses him off. His face turns bright red, his breathing increases, and I see his temple throbbing. Nothing is going to placate this asshole.

“Stand at attention.”

“What?”

“I said, *STAND AT ATTENTION!*” What is with this guy? My face tells him he is a jerk, but I must endure this humiliation, slowly I straighten to attention. Now that I am standing with my asshole sucking air, he commences to chew out my ass for sins past, present, and future. For my transgressions, he banishes me to burn the enlisted men’s shit. My punishment is oh so metaphoric.

He marches me to our latrine. I have to drag 55-gallon drums full of shit from underneath our 12-holer using an iron rod. I drag the heavy buckets to the rear where he orders me to pour one almost full bucket into another. By filling the bucket too full, I will have to add diesel fuel numerous times, mixing it thoroughly so the content eventually burns down to a small pile of ash. The smell is nauseous.

I protest this extra step but he will not listen. Sergeant LaVilla takes delight in his instruction and villainously points out his intent. Using bare hands, I grip the cut out handle in the bucket, and with my other hand, I have to take hold of the gooey bottom rim and pour the contents of one into the other. The shit and piss slowly slithers into the bottom bucket. The aroma wafts up to my nose; it makes me woozy. He directs me to shake the top one to get all of the goo out of it, and then I let the can flop back to earth. I step aside in time to avoid the splatter ejected from the lip of the pail when it hits the ground. Some of the poop flies far enough to land on LaVilla’s fatigue shirt. I might not understand why his is so pissed off at me before, but I sure can appreciate why he is pissed off at me now.



**Figure 3 This is A Company's enlisted latrine.
The hapless are stuck burning shit, Cu Chi - 1966.**

LaVilla stomps off toward his hootch to change fatigues as I proffer my apology, which does no good; he is cussing, and fuming, and furiously shaking his head.

I am alone now and grateful to be eremite. I take a stick used for stirring up this cauldron of fecal 'n pee and stir the mixture to get the diesel fuel down into the bottom of the gunk. The trick to burning shit is to mix it well with the diesel fuel *before* you set it on fire. I want to incinerate the shit rather than have the diesel fuel float on top and blaze away. I still have to mix this whole thing into a gooey paste once more after the first fire burns down. The smell of the heated excrement is appalling; I want to gag. Several hours later, after it has burned completely, I can scrape the ash pile into a hole. I curse the dentist for taking so long to fill my tooth.

At evening chow, nobody will sit next to me. I am fortunate to be able to take a shower and change fatigues before I have to go up to the bunker line for the night.

Our bunker is the one situated on the right hand side of the road that leads out of our wire and into the rubber plantation. There is enough of a gap in the concertina to let an APC exit the compound so they place the machine gun there to protect the weak spot in our defenses. I am with Boutoff and Caldwell. Sergeant LaVilla climbs down into the bunker to make an announcement. "There are officers from Battalion inspecting the line," he says with serious intent. He turns to Boutoff. "When the officer comes down here I want you to stand at attention, salute, and say Sp4 Boutoff reports, sir. Then you will tell him what your fields of fire are and answer any questions he has. You got that?" We all nod. "Now fix up your aiming stakes and straighten up this bunker. We need to get the Claymore out too." Okay Sarge, we got you.

We mount the machine gun on the tripod tonight. I scrounge up a couple of sticks and lodge them between sandbags as tightly as I can. When the machine gun traverses, the stakes will stop the barrel; in the dark, this is how we can tell where the limits of our fields of fire are. Actually, the window is only a little wider than the stakes but Sergeant LaVilla is not interested in hearing that, he wants the aiming stakes emplaced for this inspection.

Boutoff is stringing the Claymore wire out in front of the dugout when Major Farmer, the battalion XO, appears in the bunker door. I stand frozen like a deer in the headlights, terrified, and then I salute, but I am too nervous to report. He returns my salute and asks me about our gun position. I point out our fields of fire and demonstrate how the aiming stakes work by traversing the machine gun back and forth. I tell him that Boutoff is putting out our Claymore. The Major seems genuinely impressed with my explanation. He compliments me and abruptly leaves.

It is quiet in the bunker. Sergeant LaVilla stands fuming. He glares at me with evil intent then he shakes his head in disgust. He is pissed again because I did not snap to attention and yell, "Private Lupton reports, sir." "Well how come Boutoff wasn't in here? He was supposed to report to the Major!" LaVilla turns livid. He stomps out of the bunker. I stand blankly looking at the other two in the diminishing twilight. Caldwell could care less, and in fact, he is enjoying my discomfort. Boutoff just snickers and leaves the bunker. Now I am afraid to go outside because I might run into more officers, and besides, I feel bad that everybody is disgusted with me.

We are preparing to go out on a sweep. I have one of these Kodak Instamatic cameras, and I am trying out places on my web gear to carry it. I put it into one of my ammo pouches to see how it fits. It fits well, but where can I put the two magazines I need to carry. I certainly cannot leave them behind; ammo is the most important thing I bear, so I take the camera out and replace it with the magazines and continue to contemplate this dilemma.

Sergeant LaVilla is watching me during this exercise. He walks up to me. "Well, lookee here," he says to the other squad members. They turn to watch his performance. "What do we have with us, a combat photographer?" He stands close to me with his hands on his hips. His disdain is noxious. Everybody is gawking at us. "What do you think you're going to do, Lupton, carry that camera and leave the M14 ammo here?"

"Ahh... no Sarge, I was just trying to figure out a place to carry the camera," I rejoin. His derision embarrasses me. Others have cameras.

"So you think you are a 'combat photographer' do you? He is smug and self-assured. He wants to make a fool out of me.

"Ahh...no Sarge....I...ah," I stammer. I do not know what to say to this jerk.

"You leave the camera here, Lupton," he points to the ground, "that is an order. I do not want to see you with that camera out in the field. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, Sarge, I understand you." I resent this asshole more than ever. There was a time when he was a bit of a father figure, but lately he is on my ass for everything. I follow his order and meekly put the camera away. I will resent this asshole even more thirty years after the war because I have exactly three pictures of this entire tour.

Platoon Sergeant Rodriguez tells me I have to pull details in the rear when the company goes out to reclaim Nightmare Village. Foreboding strikes when I learn that Richardson has to stay behind at the company area too. I know for sure I will be stuck on KP and other shit details with my archenemy. I cannot stand the thought, so I nag Sergeant Rodriguez and Lieutenant Roth to let me go out with the platoon; they keep telling me no. I view the next few days with dread.

"Lupton, get your shit together. You are to go out with the ammo APC."

Sergeant Rodriguez yells at me just before the company is to leave. I scramble to get my M14 and field gear ready. I join the company's headquarters group and help them load

an APC with all kinds of ammunition. This time there will be no VC tactical advantage, no being pinned down all goddamn day, no retreat, or phony assault. Today we are going in as three companies, a whole battalion of Wolfhounds. We bring along a company of the 5th Mech armored personnel carriers, some tanks from the 69th Armor, and a bunch of Rome Plows to flatten this ville of everything standing. I climb into our APC and ride out behind the infantry companies. We advance in jerks and halts through the rubber plantation. The Executive Officer is the APC commander and he sits in the 50-caliber turret.

The Viet Cong are there and they begin shooting at the formation coming in their direction, but their fire is feeble. The tanks and APCs blast away with their 50 cal's creating an almost nonstop cacophony for about 15 minutes, all the while, the line advances. It is not a fair fight this time.

The infantry sets up a large perimeter after securing the village, which becomes a beehive of activity. The engineers are walking around blowing up tunnel entrances. The bulldozers grind away at the huge bamboo hedgerows flattening them like so many toothpicks then pushing the debris into great piles where the rubble is set on fire by track-mounted flamethrowers. I hear, "*FIRE IN THE HOLE,*" from all directions, and then huge explosions cave in the tunnel's entrances. The engineers move from one hole to the next.

I tell one engineer with a satchel of TNT there is a tunnel opening over here. I get down into the hole where there is barely enough room for my lanky body to squat. I peer inside the opening only to see the light disappear into a black dusty void. I am not able to crawl into it because it is so cramped. He hands me three one-pound sticks of TNT then instructs me how to insert the blasting cap and rig the fuse. I light the fuse with my Zippo, it smolders as I quickly climb out of the hole. He yells, "Fire in the hole," as both of us walk away. The goddamn thing blows up with a roar.

When I rejoin the headquarters group, Captain Curbow excitedly tells everybody the engineers have discovered a VC body in a spider hole. He is having the corpse brought to us so the men can see what we have been fighting. Nobody has ever seen a Viet Cong soldier before, dead or alive.

The APC arrives with a dead gook lying on a bamboo mat. Two men haul it off the track and flop it on the ground for everybody to scrutinize. He is dressed in a pair of black shorts with a black shirt, nothing else. The VC must have been peering out of his spider hole when a fifty-caliber bullet nailed him right above the eyebrow. He has a great gaping hole in his forehead, and we observe his grey brains mushed about inside of his head. Ants are crawling throughout his skull. "The engineers found him lying in his spider hole when they were burning bamboo," explains the XO, "he had an SKS. They took that back to battalion for the Colonel to see. Look here," he points, "you can see where the napalm burned his stomach."

Posing like hunters with their rifles lying in the crook of their elbows, the mortar platoon sergeants kneel at the VC's head to have their pictures taken as if the poor bastard was quarry. I curse Sergeant LaVilla, for I want a picture of this dead enemy too.

Curbow puts out the word to the platoon leaders for men to come back to the CP and look at the dead gook. Buxton and a couple of the others from second platoon draw closer and silently gawk at the VC casualty. Buxton kicks the dink's knee; it resounds

with a dull thud. Rigor mortis has set in and the body is stiff. “Yeah, hey, they make ‘em solid,” Captain Curbow jokes; everybody laughs. The whole affair is macabre.

“Now who is going to help me load this dead gook onto the APC?” The XO wants to know. Everybody, including myself, steps backwards a few feet. “Ahh ha, nobody has the balls, eh? Come on, who is going to help me lift this fucker up on top of the track?” A couple of reluctant volunteers struggle with the bamboo mat and they attempt to lift the dead gook up onto the top of the APC. They are afraid the corpse will leak blood on them. For some reason, this ghoulish spectacle is hilarious. Everybody is laughing his ass off.

The APC roars to life and the dead soldier leaves for the Division morgue where he will go through more examinations that are insolent before graves registration buries him in an unmarked hole in the ground.

The captain sets up his night CP in a burned out hootch in the middle of the village. There is a large row of bamboo about twenty feet from the dwelling. My position is with some staff sergeant whom I have never met before. We sit next to the corner of the ammo APC facing the clump of bamboo. This is part of a crude circle with the captain, the XO, the mortar RTO, and medic in the middle, inside of the house.

The sergeant and I heat up our C-rations using this rotten egg smelling dried plastic stuff we find all over the place. It ignites easily, burns dirty like plastic, and leaves much soot on the c-ration cans. Later, I discover it is unburnt napalm dropped by the jets.

Darkness is falling as we finish eating our C’s. The sergeant and I agree on our times to stay awake, and we talk softly as the evening descends. After darkness sets in, we hear sporadic gunfire from all around the line. Now and again, a fifty caliber pumps out rounds and occasionally somebody shoots off a hand flare that drifts away indolently before burning out. For a long time, I can hear hand grenades exploding periodically. “Wake me before you throw any hand grenades,” the staff sergeant tells me before he lies down to sleep. At midnight, I wake the sergeant for his guard and put my head down to sleep. Almost immediately, it is time for my guard.

The hand grenades have stopped exploding, and for a while, it is deathly quiet. To help me stay awake, I hold my hand grenade slightly elevated. When I realize my forearm is touching my knee, I know I am drifting off to sleep; I snap awake, scared shitless, not knowing if I have been sleeping, or if my mind has merely gone vacant. Time seems irrelevant. I do not know how long I may have been unconscious, or if I have been sleeping at all. I sit up with my back taugth until my eyelids grow heavy, my mind empties, and my arm is resting on my knee once again. I rub my eyes and straighten my back again only to hear crackling noises in the dried bamboo twigs in front of me - step, step, step, and step. I bolt to attention; my stomach floods with fear. I know there is a Viet Cong walking through the clump of bamboo. I am positive he knows where I am, and the next sound will be the ting of the grenade handle, and the sound after that will be the thump of the grenade, and it will land right in front of me, Oh God! I foresee my eyeballs blown out on the ground. I try to pick them up to put them back into my head, but I cannot find my face! My hand grenade is ready, but like an idiot, I shake the stupid staff sergeant awake and whisper, “I am going to throw a grenade.” He wakes out of a dead sleep unaware; he cautions me to wait. I should have heaved the grenade into the bamboo thicket, but I demure. This is my big mistake. Still more silence, dead

silence. Both of us listen for the next twig to snap, but it never does. The staff sergeant drifts back to sleep, and I sit my guard alone for the rest of the night.

At 0600, the dawn is creeping upon the blackness; the line erupts in all directions with massive gunfire and hand grenade explosions. I bolt back to reality ready to fire, but the envisioned human wave attack is an illusion. Still, the fusillade intensifies briefly then comes to an abrupt halt. The mad minute is over.

After our wake up call, everybody at the CP is up preparing his C-rations and getting ready for the day. With sufficient light, I walk over to the hedgerow with my M14, safety off, and search thoroughly for a tunnel opening, footprints, or anything I can find that tells me there was a gook moving around last night. I find nothing.

People begin arriving at the CP to report to Captain Curbow regarding last night's explosions. The VC threw two hand grenades at Sergeant Wicker's hole, both exploding close to him, but without injury. Then he hears another thump; the hand grenade rolls down the parapet into his hole and gently taps his helmet. He tosses it away. The next morning he discovers the VC failed to pull the pin.

Buxton and Miller occupy a foxhole together. Buxton relays his story, "Miller pulls the pin, I hear the handle flip off, and then he doesn't throw the stupid thing." I plead with the stupid motherfucker, "Throw it Miller goddamn it, throw it! Finally, Miller heaves it. I stick my head into the hole just as the goddamn thing goes off right in front of us. I tell the Miller not to ever do that again, or I will kill your ass.

Then later in the night, two guys wearing helmets come walking up from behind. They just keep walking right past us when I say, "Don't go out there Sarge." One of the fuckers turns around and sprays the foxhole. When he shoots, I stick my ass as far as down in that foxhole as I can get it. Miller throws another hand grenade at them, but the two VC disappear into the woods. Motherfucker, I like to shit my pants."

Sergeant Dalton brings Captain Curbow an old World War II pineapple grenade. He has taken the detonator out of it. Curbow is very happy with his souvenir; kudos goes to Sergeant Dalton who departs with a pocket full of brownie points.

Work resumes on destroying the village. The plows are busy all day long. There are more explosions from blowing up the tunnel entrances. The place resembles Dante's Inferno; fires are everywhere.

Sergeant Price finds a booby trap close to our CP. He places a hand grenade next to it and everybody runs behind the APC except him. When it explodes, a tiny piece of shrapnel lodges just above his solar plexus. As the medic, and everybody else, gawks at the blood droplets oozing from his chest, he complains of dizziness. Even from this seemingly innocuous wound, the medic diagnoses shock and sends him to the battalion aid station. While his injury appears minor, Dr. Whittington evacuates him to the 93rd Evac in Saigon where he stays for several days. The doctors tell him the shrapnel lies very close to his heart, so they decline to operate on him to remove it.

I hang out with some of the 5th Mech soldiers in their APC. Nobody bothers me the whole day long, and I am glad when the operation terminates. We go home late in the afternoon. I have had enough excitement for one operation and another spooky night out in Nightmare Village is more exhilaration than I can handle.

The company assembles for a class just behind the bunker line. Obviously, there is something important to tell us, and of course, there is. We are sitting on the ground behind the first platoon's CP bunker when there is an enormous explosion just on the other side of the CP bunker, then there is another one yet closer. My ears ring, I wince with anxiety at the intensity of the explosions. Sergeant Dunlap starts with a serious sermon on Claymore safety.

The day before Brooks, a black guy in the first platoon who liked to play guitar and another soldier named Duckett, whom I did not know very well, were winding up their Claymore wire, and obviously both of them were handling the mine when it went off. It was a messy kind of thing with hands and guts blown all over the place. I must have been asleep when it when off because I never heard it.

A week before, the company was invited to a little bit of homegrown entertainment at the battalion. Brooks was there playing his guitar accompanying a headquarters soldier. They sang a parody from the Ballad of the Green Beret:

*We don't wear no Green Beret
We don't get no parachute pay
Saw 10 dead men the other day
And not one, wore the Green Beret*

They sang about four more versus but I cannot remember them. Then the headquarters guitar players sang a disingenuous little ditty about Colonel James Cothra, our ignoble battalion commander, and he went on to detail how chickenshit the Colonel is. The Sergeant Major was up there singing right along with the guitar players, and I wondered how his behavior is going to contribute to his career development because Colonel Cothra is still in command of the Wolfhounds. It is a funny song detailing the Colonel's behavior on February 5. The Colonel never descends below 3,000 feet the whole time he flew over the battlefield.

"You men need to put this goddamn safety plug on the end of the wire before you start to roll it up. We think the Claymore blew up because one guy was winding up the wire and the other one was handling the mine. Static electricity builds up when you run your hands over the wire and if you don't have this here safety plug on you can set the mine off," he holds out the end of the Claymore wire and demonstrates so everybody will know exactly what he is talking about. "Also, what you do not want to do is put the detonator in the mine until you have placed goddamn thing in the ground, and you are sure you will not have to move it! Then you screw the detonator cap into the mine like this. If you are unsure of how to place the mine, there are raised letters that say THIS SIDE TOWARD ENEMY. Ya see!" He holds the mine for us to see. This is all pretty much a review for us. We went through this in Hawaii, but everybody is shaken up about the two guys who died. "A good way to remember which side you want to point away from you is to put it up against your chest like this so the curve fits the form of your chest then you know which direction the Claymore is going to blow. *Don't ever* go out and pick up the mine *BEFORE* you feel around underneath it for possible booby traps. The Viet Cong are known to put hand grenades under the mines at night, and you will get your ass blown away for being *stew-pid!*" His voice rises at the end of his sentences. He

wants to make his point apparent to us all, and I feel he has succeeded in doing just that. "Is that clear?"

"Yes Sergeant Dunlap," everybody answers him in harmony. Dunlap looks around at all of us before he turns the meeting over to First Sergeant Letoto.

"A few days ago," the First Sergeant starts out with a low composed voice, "a couple of men from the second battalion motor pool, stole a jeep and went down to Cu Chi to see a girl that one of them had fixed up for some boom-boom. It seems when they were driving back the VC ambushed them. One of them was wounded, and he fell off the jeep, but the other two made it back to the base. Neither of them told anybody what had happened until the next morning. When the wounded guy was found, the VC had killed him and cut off his penis and shoved it in his mouth." Wow, this is grave stuff. Who would have thought to leave the guy behind and then not say anything about him? "The other two confessed the next morning that one of them knew the girl who set them up for some pussy. The MPs got the girl and she confessed that she is VC." He looks around at the company sitting on the ground before him. The faces of his audience are blank. "You men need to use some common sense in dealing with these boom-boom girls. Not only are they treacherous but they carry venereal disease," There is another pause. "Now I know all of you men want to go back to your families safe and sound, and nobody wants to end up on the South Sea Island where they keep men who have venereal disease that will not respond to penicillin. They are not allowed to go back to the States until their syphilis is cured." He is persuasive, and none of us knows that the infamous South Seas Island he talks about is simply a made-up fairy tale. The Army inculcates this yarn to every generation of soldier who ever served in the Army in every prior war. This strange island is sited somewhere in the world but nobody can tell you exactly where and there lives a colony of soldiers with the incurable Black Syph. "Nobody ever gets off this island, and you sure as hell do not want to go there yourself. Because of this, the Colonel is restricting everybody to the battalion area. You are only allowed off base when we tell you that you can go." Ah, shit, I say to myself, now we will never get any pussy! There are rumors of 3-day passes to Saigon, and I feel I am next on the list, until now. He is serious though, getting off the base is difficult to impossible for the entire year. Sergeant Letoto has not told us so, but we are under the distinct impression that we are going to have to jerk off for the next year if we want to change our oil. Boom-boom girls are definitely out.

Now that we have listened to our safety lecture on both Claymore mines and the Black Syphilis, Sergeant Rodriguez details our squad to resume constructing the squad hootches. The Army supplies us with kits to make wooden skeletons so a regular sized canvas squad tent can make semi-permanent living quarters. I have been working with my squad for several days to erect these structures. The trickiest part is setting the foundations so they are level. Some of the other men have worked construction before, and after we complete four or five of them the work goes smoothly. There are twelve of them for the line soldiers, a supply room, an orderly room, and a senior NCO hootch. The officers get a smaller gazebo styled tent situated just behind the orderly room and between the 81-millimeter mortars. We finish the last one before we go to chow.

After chow, our platoon cuts and burns more rubber trees. The afternoon is hot, just plain stinky hot. "I need somebody to out on ambush tonight with the M79; does anybody want to volunteer for the ambush in return for an afternoon off? It is only an LP

just outside the wire; B Company has a few holes dug out there.” Lieutenant Roth asks us. There is a silence, and then I think what the hell.

“Okay, I’ll go,” I volunteer. I was out on ambush the prior night and nothing happened so what the fuck. I am tired and hot as hell and another afternoon of these shitty rubber trees is unappealing.

“Okay then, take off,” says Lieutenant Roth, he is happy to get rid of this problem. This is good enough for me. I walk back to my shelter half and poncho tent and try to sack out but the sun beats down on the poncho, and I cannot fall asleep as I hoped I would. Chow time comes around; I eat then get the M79 and ammo I need to carry. Sergeant Wicker is taking this ambush out tonight. We wind our way through the concertina around 1800 hours and relieve the B Company squad who is occupying the LP. They have scraped out slit trenches about three inches deep. Jones occupies the hole next to me; Ward operates the machine gun pointed at the kill zone further to Jones’s right. The ambush wraps around Wicker’s position in the middle. We settle down to wait for nightfall.

I do not like Jones, and he hates me because of my whiteness, so we just pretend to ignore each other. We should talk about taking turns at guard, but we do not.

The moon will only make a brief appearance this night; afterwards it is unmercifully black. I make mental notes of which rubber trees are in front of me so I will not fire the blooper into a tree too close. I can look down two rows of rubber trees as if I were looking at them through two mirrors. They run in a virtually straight line for a long, long distance eventually narrowing into a tiny far-away point where the trees seem to meld and disappear into infinity. I hear the popping of small arms fire way off into the distance. The light fades away and turns quiet. Artillery begins firing off single rounds of flares every fifteen minutes to an ARVIN outpost. The rounds hiss over the right of our position and the whisper is not very loud.

I have brought two cream filled c-ration cookies with me. I eat them both rather than offer one to Jones. I sit on the edge of the little slit hole and munch away contentedly in the darkness. As the time passes, I think of home and my family, and I anticipate when I am getting out of the army to take away the boredom. Eventually, I cannot see a fucking thing.

Breaking the silence, I hear a ting. I say to myself, “Now what goes ting?” Oh, shit! I slither down into the slit trench as fast as I can. The hole is too short for my lanky body; my knees protrude above the edge of the slit trench. I close my eyes tight shut as the explosion goes off. It is stone quiet for a few seconds. “Medic, medic,” it is Jones moaning, “I blew my eye out, Medic.” Oh GAWD, I am petrified! He blew his eyes out of his fucking head! “Medic, I blew my eye out, medic.” Jones is moaning in a detectable voice, to me it sounds like he is yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Shut up Jones,” I hiss back to him, “shut the fuck up.”

“Medic, medic, I blew my eye out.”

“Jesus Christ Jones, be quiet!” I pull my bandage out of my first aid pouch, unravel it, and grope in the darkness trying to hand it over to him. The medic crawls over to us. He quiets Jones down; Wicker joins the medic; they talk in muted whispers. I lie in the hole on my back with my M79 in the pit of my stomach; the safety pushed forward, the launcher is ready to fire. I am scared *shitless!* Voices mumble, and they remove Jones from his hole and take him back to where the radio is located. I can hear Wicker

mumbling into the mike. I continue searching for the enemy soldier who provoked Jones to throw the hand grenade. I see nothing. I cock my ear with my right hand then the other ear with my left so I can catch his faintest footsteps. I know they know where we are; Jones made so much noise everybody knows where we are, ah shit, Christ Almighty.

Wicker details Buxton to escort Jones back to the rear. Because the medic cannot see anything, Jones wears a bandage over both eyes. They stumble off toward the bunker line, truly the blind leading the blind.

I guard our left flank by myself. The night drags on and I am too scared to have a rest. At approximately three o'clock, something stumbles over some branches out in front of the machine gun position. I can hear the thump of the hand grenades hitting the ground a few seconds before they go off with a roar. One, then two grenades explode. Then a voice says he will throw another one, WAM! It turns quiet once again. My M79 is poised to shoot, the safety is off, and I hold a hand grenade ready to pull the pin. More silence. What ever tripped over that tree branch disappears quietly. I am living in the blackest part of hell.

"Lupton, how much sleep you get tonight?" It is Sergeant Wicker. He creeps over without making any noise; he startles me.

"I have not slept at all Sarge." I whisper ever so quietly. I do not think I have slept an instant, but I am surprised how quietly Wicker crept over to me. Maybe I have been asleep.

"You get a couple of hours sleep. I'll stay here." He crawls slowly into Jones's hole.

"Okay Sarge." I click the blooper to safe and let it lye between my legs so I can raise it quickly if I have to. I try to sleep but I cannot. I am too anxious to sleep, and I do not move a muscle until the sun starts to come up. I wait impatiently for the light to hasten so I can look for Jones's eyeball. Eventually, I can peer close down to the ground but I see nothing I can recognize. There, there is something. I poke at it with my finger. It is soft and moist and it sticks to my fingertip. "Ah, shit, this is only his fucking chewing gum. Where is his eyeball?" I demand of the medic as I shake my hand to dislodge the gum.

"I think he only got a couple of pieces of shrapnel in his eye," the medic tells me. "I believe he will be all right."

"Goddamn that stupid bastard. What the fuck did he throw that hand grenade at anyway?" I am livid. "What's with that noise over there?" Ward and his assistant gunner are searching out in front of their position for the person who tripped over that tree branch. They cannot find anything.

"I guess we scared him away," Ward declares in his Alfred E. Newman voice.

"Why didn't you shoot him with the machine gun?" I want to know.

"Aw, I wouldn't fire the gun before I chucked the grenade," is Ward's lame reply.

"Goddamn it, the stupid motherfucker" I spit. Sergeant Wicker forms us into a line and we walk back to the company area.

"Hey Buxton, did you take Jones back last night?" I ask him when I see he is walking back from the mess hall.

"Yeah, that stupid motherfucker, I had to walk him back holding his hand because he couldn't see anything. I thought if something happens to us then tough shit, you are on your own asshole. We had to use Wicker's flash light to signal the bunker line, man, I

was shitting myself that they wouldn't open up on us." Buxton's eyes bug out. He shakes from this experience.

I eat morning chow in a stupor; I am so tired. I did not get any sleep at all last night. What a dumb thing to volunteer for that ambush. I kick myself in the ass when we go back to chopping and burning rubber trees. How dumb can I be?

My platoon departs from tree cutting to go load sandbags on a duce and a half. Another platoon has been filling sandbags near battalion HQ, and we to load the truck and take the bags up to our bunker line where the engineers construct a modulated fighting bunker for us. The duce and a half is loaded with enough sandbags that its springs are now flat and the bed is riding on the axles.

The engineers have dug a hole for the bunker and a crane comes to lift it into the hole. We commence throwing the sandbags off the truck and another gang begins hefting the bags around the bunker. After the truck leaves, we acquire sandbags from the homemade bunker next to the new permanent one and sandbagging continues until late in the day. We dismantle the old bunkers, throw the rubber tree frames on the brush piles, and burn them. I toss diesel fuel on the large pile of debris from a 5-gallon can and some of it splashes on Dyer. He is not happy about this and moves towards me with his pissed off countenance.

"Hey Dyer, I didn't mean to do that on purpose ya know." I really think I am in for an ass beating; I step backwards a few feet, but there is really no place for me to run.

"Goddamn you Lupton, you are a goddamn fuck up." I have to agree with him quickly because he is coming on fast. Then I stop and wait for my destruction. With a long stride, Dyer is right up in my face. Then, I thank God; he sees the fruitlessness of beating my ass for an accident and turns away. He asks Sergeant Rodriguez if he can go change fatigues after he explains what a fuck up I am, Sergeant Rodriguez consents. Pheuwee, I got out of that one!

I start the bonfire with my Zippo lighter, and we return to the truck that has brought us a new load of sandbags.

"Fell, you, and Lupton, and Caldwell are going on ambush tonight," Sergeant LaVilla tells us.

"Ah, Sarge," I remonstrate I deserve a night of rest, "I was on ambush last night,"

"I don't give a shit what you want Lupton; you get your shit ready. You are going." Goddamn it I think, this is my third night in a row on ambush.

Sergeant Guy, the third squad leader who took over from Sergeant Thomas, is taking this ambush out to the French Mansion. I bear in mind our last payday when Sergeant Guy did not think finance paid him the correct amount, and he kept nagging First Sergeant Letoto that he wanted his dough now. Letoto finally had enough of his bullshit, grabbed him, and bent him over backward on the company CP bunker threatening to beat his ass to a fucking pulp.

"You can beat my ass First Sergeant if you want to," pleads Sergeant Guy. He sounds like a slave accepting his fate with the master. Actually, he really did not have much choice in the matter, what with the first sergeant bending him over backwards on the bunker. I watch from my tent hootch. Captain Curbow breaks up the fight almost immediately. I never saw Letoto be so aggressive with anybody like that before or afterwards. He will chew your ass off in a heartbeat if he catches you fucking off, but he never attacked anybody like that. Guy must have pissed him off to no end.

Somebody has purloined old coffee grinds from the mess hall. They have added water to the grinds in a steel pot and set a fire underneath. The brew boils emitting a nice coffee aroma. We let it boil for 10 or 15 minutes. Everybody on the patrol drinks a half a cup; we sip this dolorous brew without cream or sugar as we wait for the sun to set. My fatigue is diminishing by the time we lock and load our weapons; there are thirteen of us on this ambush.

Sergeant Guy leads us out of the concertina wire, and we walk into the rubber trees for a hundred meters and stop to wait for the night to fall. Then he sets out to lead us to our ambush site. A quarter-moon rises and leaves us with a modest light to guide our way. It takes a while before I realize the patrol has been walking for a long time. I do not recognize the terrain that should be the French Mansion, but we keep walking in single file deeper and deeper into Nightmare Village where only a few days ago we needed tanks and APCs to reinforce us.

Sergeant Guy stops, and I can hear him mumbling on the radio, we crouch down for about five minutes before resuming our march. We walk past a ditch the VC has dug. It runs for about ten or fifteen feet before it makes a bend, and then it bends back again, zigzagging its way along the edge of the village. I see what appear to be bundles of punji stakes spaced periodically along the ditch.

Guy talks again on the radio. I can hear a white phosphorous mortar round go plump in the distance. This is the marker round Sergeant Guy calls for to guide him to the ambush site. He starts walking toward the sound of the willypeter round and comes to an obstacle of bull dozed bamboo that the engineers have not incinerated.

Guy sets out to cross this clump of now dried vegetation. Each man in his turn crunches his way over this three-foot barrier. Each man makes more noise than a wild buffalo as he straddles the brush pile; it is about eight feet wide too, so this is a formable obstacle. We stop and stand in the middle of a rice paddy while Guy talks on the radio some more, and to my surprise, he walks to the rear of the squad, and we turn around and head back across the crackling clump of bamboo. Somebody whispers, "There they are to our left, over there." I strain to see any dark moving shadows. I see nothing. I take one leg and swinging it over the top of the pile of branches followed by my other leg. Goddamn it, I make so much noise, but I cannot help it.

We travel back past the VC trench line. I think to pick up one of the bundles of punji stakes but the patrol wants to keep going, so I forget about them. Finally, we are in the skinny rubber trees probably more in front of B Company than near the French Mansion, and Guy sets us up for the night. I am sure battalion has given up on the original objective because nobody knows where we are. After some more talking on the radio we hear another willypeter round pop off to our right front. I can hear the next one thumping faintly out of the tube. A minute later, we can see a dim glow from the muffled explosion to my right, except this time closer. This is good enough. The patrol has registered the mortars and after this interminable screwing around, we settle in for the night. The patrol has been walking around for several hours.

I agree to take the next guard at midnight. I put my head down on my box of ammunition and fall asleep in an instant.

Beelzebub lays his boney hand on my shoulder and gives me a placid shove. "Lupton," he whispers, "Lupton, come with me." I open my eyes and see nothing. It is

black as Hades. It is quiet, silent, black. I am terrified. I have died, "Lupton, wake up," it is Fell gently waking me for my guard. The quarter moon has set.

After a minute of rubbing the irritation from my eyes, I whisper okay and Fell lies down to sleep. Another hour passes; I bemoan my urge to take a shit. I let the farts out of me as easy as one can, trying not to break wind and give away our position, but it is impossible and the gas keeps coming. I must take a shit. I look around, see nothing, and I think maybe that this is good. If I cannot see anything then nobody can see me but moving around on an ambush is dangerous. Others do not know exactly where you are and there is a real danger of your own men shooting you. I feel for the c-ration toilet paper on my helmet, good it is there. Gently, and without a sound, I take measured steps by crawling on my fours only a couple of feet from our location. I squat and gently unbuckle my belt as gas comes rushing out of my ass creating an audible fart. I slip my under shorts and pants down a few inches and let an enormous turd slip out of me. More gas follows but it only makes a gentle hiss. I let another big dump fall out, and then I unravel my toilet paper and gently wipe my ass. I hope nothing has graced my pants as I rest on my knees and inaudibly pull up my drawers, buckle my belt, and ever so slowly, crawl back to my position. What a relief.

At three o'clock, I wake up the assistant gunner then fall asleep with my head inside of my helmet. Instantly it is six o'clock and Fell is bringing in the Claymore mine. I reattach my web gear and wait for Sergeant Guy to lead us back to the bunker line. The goddamn shit I took stinks to high heaven, and I hope some stupid VC will step in it even though I am sure nobody will.

After we eat chow, I learn that Sergeant Guy is refusing to go out to the field. The captain assembles the executive officer and Sergeant Letoto and gives Guy a direct order. Guy refuses. He is under arrest, and he is restricted to the company area. Eventually a guard watches him all the time while he waits for his court-martial. I think what a shame. Sergeant Guy always treated me okay, and now he has pulled a Sergeant Thomas. He is the second one to refuse combat and they court martial his ass for cowardice.

I am trying to fall asleep after morning chow, but Sergeant Rodriguez tells us we have to move from our temporary shelter half hootches to the wood frame squad tents we finished building. This is just a matter of humping our junk a couple of hundred yards to the new company area. I am tired as shit, but I have absolutely no choice in the matter. We disassemble our field shelters and spend the morning moving. The orderly room has a tent liner and a tent. Supply gives the senior NCOs a tent liner and a tent. The cooks and other headquarters personnel get their tent liner and tent.

I am helping to stretch the tent over our senior NCOs' hootch. There are men on top of the frame pulling with all of their strength while inside we are using tent polls to push the canvas up so they can wrench it over the two by four-roof frame.



Figure 4 We cover our hootch with canvas - Cu Chi 1966.

Sergeant Porter is yelling at Gonzalez from the third platoon not to use the spiked end of the tent pool to push the canvas. The spike at the end normally goes through the grommet at the corners of the tent. "Goddamn it, Gonzalez, don't use the spike end; use the butt end of the pole to push the tarp." Porter is hot and sweating underneath the canvas, and he is trying his best to organize the group to fit the tent over the frame, "Goddamn it, don't use that end you shit head; use the blunt end." I look at Gonzalez as he struggles to push the canvas. Everybody is using his tent pole's blunt end except him. He refuses to listen. With the next shove, his spike pokes through the canvas. He looks at me; I look at him, but I do not tell Sergeant Porter about the hole in the tent. He turns the pole around and manages to shove the butt end through the pilot hole he has made and now the gash is bigger. I just look away, and we continue manipulating the canvas until it is square on the frame.

I do not know what the senior NCOs will do when it starts raining, but my squad hootch has our own problem. The supply sergeant does not provide us with a tent because they have not arrived yet. By now, there are storm clouds mounting, and all of our shit is inside of the hootch with no roof on it, but this does not daunt us. The junior sergeants start calling for commo wire, ponchos, and shelter halves and eventually a roof is fashioned from this patchwork of rubber and canvas and black communications wire.

We are short of material so somebody suggests we take the large canvas fly from the temporary latrine and use this. The canvas is more than a few yards too long and

needs to be cut several times to fit the pieces on the top. Nobody gives a thought to cutting the fly, and we finish our roof as the first big drops of the rainy season begin to fall. It pours. We come inside the hootch with dripping fatigues as the rain intensifies. We inspect our ceiling and discover a couple of leaks but for the crazy quilt we have assembled, it is mostly watertight. I have to move my bunk over a little to get out of a drip, but generally, everything stays dry. I wonder how the senior NCOs are making out with that big hole in their roof. Fuck 'em I think.

By moving the company into permanent quarters, first and third platoons are not pulling the majority of the bunker guard. This night second platoon is on the bunker line. I bring up a steel pot of water, brush my teeth, wash my face, and do my socks and under shorts with the last of the water. I cannot rinse them so they dry with the soap still embossed in the light green fabric. I am able to change fatigue shirts, and I figure this is as good as it gets.

I pull my first guard and decide to sleep inside of the bunker because there do not seem to be as many mosquitoes as out side. I climb into the top bunk where it is a tight fit with barely enough room for me to turn over, but I fall asleep quickly. In the night, I dream the bunker is falling on me, and I cannot breathe. I try to turn over but cannot. I wake up in a panic and quickly climb down from the rack. I am sweating profusely and breathing heavily because of the crushing sensation in the nightmare. I decide to brave the mosquitoes and lie down outside behind the bunker. I pull my dirty fatigue jacket over my head and fall asleep. In the morning, I notice the armpits of my fatigue jacket stinks horribly. It must be due to the heavy sweating I experience when I wake in a panic. The jacket stinks so bad I have to put on my old fatigue jacket before I go to chow.

I am in the middle of shaving when Lieutenant Roth hurries over to Sergeant Rodriguez and an excited conversation takes place. "Saddle Oop, hurry up, lets get going," yells Sergeant Rod. I am excited, something is happening. Without much formality, the company starts moving toward the bunker line. We zigzag through the concertina and almost at a trot, we head for the rice paddies beyond the French Mansion, past the termite mounds, and the filled in spider holes. It is in the paddies beyond where we come under fire. We run and fire, run and fire some more. Smokey Fell dives behind a rice paddy dyke; I follow and land beside him on his left hand side. He fires a burst of six, then another burst of six. The Viet Cong return fire, we have to duck.

I am firing my rifle when Fell turns the gun to the left and lets go a another burst of six rounds. My ears feel like somebody is driving chopsticks deep into my audio canal. The pain is awful. An immediate excruciating headache envelops me; I feel like I want to faint; my ears ring loudly at the same time as sound diminishes to merely a faint whisper. This is dreadful; I turn to my right, I look at the muzzle of the machine gun. Smokey lets fly another six round burst and the terrible pain strikes my ears and head again; I wiggle backwards away from the muzzle. When he fires once more, the noise is muffled and distant. My pain is from the concussion of the M60.

We get up and run farther along the dyke. I hardly hear anything; my ears ring as if I am living inside of a tuning fork. We hit the ground again when the VC give us their six round burst. The action dies down for a while. The Captain maneuvers his other platoons while we fire at the wood line in front of us. Always the asshole, Greko saunters past us mocking the VC rifle fire with his gesture of stupidity. Crack, crack,

crack, he winces and ducks in response and begins running, crack, crack, the Viet Cong fire follows him. We laugh at his clowning. "You are a lucky ass son of a bitch, Greko," Fells jives him.

"Yo man, these VC can't hit shit," giggles the idiot. He ensconces himself well down behind the rice paddy dyke only his eyes peering a few inches above the top. The fire picks up briefly again and then dies down. We wait in the sun while Captain Curbow calls in an air strike with napalm and high explosives. I think it is nifty to watch the jets come in and drop their shit. This is the first air strike of the war for us, and we are excited to see how many of the enemy it kills. Actually, they did not kill anybody, but the air show is nice.

We have a casualty. Capps is carried past us on a make shift fatigue jacket stretcher. His pants are down around his knees, and he is holding his balls and moaning loudly. It turns out he suffered a hernia while carrying the radio for Lieutenant Roth. Sergeant Rodriguez gets us up and the platoon moves along the paddy dyke until we come to a VC trench and hold up for a few seconds. Sergeant LaVilla orders the gun crew to get down in to the trench to set up the gun. Fell climbs down followed by Dyer. I do not get down into the trough but move along the trench until I see what appears to be a rifle muzzle in a tunnel entrance. "Hey, hey, there is a rifle there!" I yell breathlessly, "Get out of that ditch. Get out! Get out!" I point to the hole in a panic. Dyer and Fell stumble over themselves trying to back out. I am fumbling for my hand grenade from my ammo pouch when Sergeant Walker comes striding up, motioning with his arms outstretched, yelling for everyone to back off. He is holding his hand grenade, and he pulls the pin with a compartment that would make John Wayne proud; then he heaves the grenade into the opening of the tunnel and scurries away. Smoke and dust shoot up from the trench, and we all move stealthily back with our weapons poised to shoot in case the dink staggers out of his tunnel's aperture. We find nothing, no blood, no guts, no hank of hair, nothing.

"Did you see that rifle muzzle?" I ask Fell.

"I saw it," replies Dyer. Fell bobbles his head up and down.

"Are you sure," Walker wants to know, "you saw it?"

"Yeah, I definitely saw a rifle muzzle," confirms Dyer.

"I know I goddamn well saw it," I chime in. I should have just started blasting away with my M14 instead of letting Sergeant Walker do his hero walk with the grenade. I climb down into the ditch and peer timidly into the tunnel opening. The tunnel goes back only a few feet. There is just enough room for a VC to crawl back and hide from aerial observers. "Does anybody have a bayonet?" I ask. Walker hands me his. I get down on my hands and knees and probe the back of the tunnel hoping to find a false door where the VC is hiding. I cannot find shit.

Fell and Dyer set up the machine gun on the parapet while I do a recon for several yards to see if I can find any more VC. There is nothing. I climb down next to Dyer. "Ya know I bet you that gook took off when fucking Walker came up and chased everybody away from the ditch. I bet you he skedaddled up this trench to another tunnel and got away. I know I saw a rifle muzzle in this hole here. Did you see it Dyer?"

"Yup, I know I saw a muzzle."

"What did you say?"

“I said yes *Lupton*, I saw a rifle muzzle too,” he yells at me. His voice is distant, as if he is fifty yards away.

“Okay, you don’t have to shout at me Dyer. I can hardly hear shit. When Fell fired the gun the muzzle blast fucked up my ears.” He looks at me as if I am full of bullshit. The high-pitched ringing in my ears drowns out other noises. At least my headache has subsided.

The excitement is over now; we find no Viet Cong bodies. We walk back to the company area stopping and starting as the rest of the company throws hand grenades into the numerous holes we pass.

During a break, Fagan nags me for a drink of water. “Lupton,” beckons Fagan, “give me a drink of water will ya?” I look at this asshole. He is constantly giving me hard time and steals my clothes, my field gear, and anything else he can get his hands on, and then he threatens to beat my ass when I confront him. I still have not forgotten about that incident in Schofield. It is not likely that I will either. I do not want his slimy lips to foul my water with the backwash.

“We got three guys drinking on my canteen,” this is a lie but fuck this slime ball. “Get somebody else to give you a drink,” he looks back at me with his spook eyes, but I say fuck ‘em.

“Aw come on, Lupton, give me a drink of water,” he whines. I hope he is thirsty.

“Fuck you Fagan.” I am unwavering, and I am not going to share my water with him; “you got a water tank to get water from just like I do.” He scowls, calls me a motherfucker, swears at me, and threatens to beat my butt, but screw his black ass. I cannot stand him. Leatherwood gives him drink. I could be generous and give him a imbibe, but I know the next time he is hanging with the Brothers I will come under assault because the pack mentality demands they astonish each other with their bad ass jive talk, so there is no benefit to be generous.

When we get back to the platoon’s area, we can finish shaving and washing up. After that, Sergeant Rodriguez assigns me to tree chopping, sandbagging, and bunker construction until I want to shit myself.

The next morning Doc Davis is playing quick draw at the mess table, and he accidentally shoots Leatherwood in the thigh with his 45 pistol. Leatherwood is lying on the ground moaning, “Ma leg, ma leg. Why you have that motherfucker loaded for anyway?” The other men crack jokes about the medic’s Hippocratic Oath.

“You’re supposed to patch ‘em up after the Viet Cong shoots them Doc,” jives his friends, “not shoot them yourself for practice.”

“Hey, fuck you!” Doc Davis scowls back at his tormentors. He is in deep shit and he knows it. Leatherwood moans some more. “Shut up,” screams Davis in a fury. I can hear chuckling from all quarters. There is a large congregation of men surrounding the luckless pair of nincompoops. Davis helps Leatherwood to hop over to the battalion aid station where they evacuate him to Saigon for surgery. The wound is not a life threatening, so Leatherwood must have worked his injury for all it is worth because we never see him again. I look at this as one less Brother to deal with, and I wish Leatherwood all the goddamn sham time he can get.

The next morning the 65th Engineers arrive with a truck full of two by fours and other wood, several cement mixers, a load of Vietnamese laborers, and many bags of cement. Naturally, I am stuck on this detail. They are pouring the foundation for our

new mess hall. The structure must be three thousand square feet in area, which is huge. It is shaped like a capital L. The small base is the kitchen bordered by a serving line. The long part of the L makes up the enlisted men's mess and the tip of this long portion is for the officers and senior NCOs. Just outside, beyond the officer's mess, lies the KP area where there is a connex serving as the pantry. A slab of concrete, almost as an after thought, is for the hot water heaters and the KPs wash area. There is no provision for a shed to protect the KPs from the heat of the sun or the rain of the monsoons.

The engineers start work building the framing for the concrete. The Vietnamese laborers grab ass until the carpenters are finished the forms. They grade the center of the area using shovels and rakes to level and clear the space then the concrete pour begins.

I have to hand it to the engineers, and later the Sea Bees, they know how to work someone to death. They never stopped mixing and pouring the whole day. The engineer's big black platoon sergeant tells us how many boxes of sand and gravel to mix with how many bags of cement and water. The Vietnamese laborers work two of the mixers and A Company men work the other one. There is always a wheel barrel traipsing over wooden pathways to unload their concrete.

The work is worse than tree chopping or sandbag filling. I get a chance to eat lunch, but the poor engineers keep working right on through the heat of the afternoon. Our cook makes fried chicken and passes it out among the engineers who eat as they are smoothing wet concrete. The big black platoon sergeant keeps everybody working his ass off.

After lunch, I try to sham out of the hard labor by hanging around in my hootch but Sergeant Green finds me, and I have to go back to the gulag and keep mixing concrete. By the end of the day, the work is finished. The engineers load all of the tools into their duce and a halves and leave with their Vietnamese laborers. I suspect they will be at some other unit's mess hall early tomorrow morning, and they will do the same thing over again. I have to hand it to them though; it is hard dirty work day after day, week after week, month after month. The monotony is horrible and it sucks.

After evening chow, I am able to take a shower and change clothes. I am exhausted from the day's labor. I flop down on my bunk not caring about anything except closing my eyes. When I wake up, it is 0630 and the sun is up.