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We are lucky this day. The supply sergeant, Sergeant Gallegos, receives our supply of jungle boots and jungle fatigues. Our stateside fatigues are hot and uncomfortable in the 100-degree heat. Our feet sweat so much the salt leaches through the leather of our boots and turn white against the black color. The sergeants harp on us to polish our boots but it does no good. Cu Chi is a virtual dust bowl. The trucks and tanks grind up the clay surface and without any rain, the ground turns to a powdery talcum, and it can be six to eight inches deep in some places. When the rains start to come in April, the dust turns to feet deep mud. It looks solid, but you sink shin-deep into the muck that settles in the drainage ditches the engineers dug along the sides of the roads with their graders.

We are all dressed up as if we are going to the prom. I have three sets of jungle fatigues that actually fit well, a new pair of jungle boots, size 9, and they are comfortable, if a bit stiff, but I take some Neatsfoot Oil and shoe polish and soften them up a bit. They really are good boots, and we like them a lot. I look like I am dressed up for women.

“Hey, Smokey.”

“Yeah Lupton?”

“Would you like to go to the battalion dance with me?” I ask my hootch mate as we massage Neatsfoot Oil into the leather of our brand new jungle boots.

“Why of course Lupton, I would feel honored to be your bitch.” An outbreak of laughter erupts in our hootch.

For three bucks, MPC, Sergeant Gallegos offers to buy us footlockers made by the Vietnamese in Cu Chi from beer-can tin. My footlocker sports Budweiser, other brands depicting life in America, for Coke Cola, Sprite, and Hams Beer along with others decorate our hootch. We put them on a shelf built along the side of our new hootch so our clothes and equipment will not get wet, and we can secure our possessions from thieves because thieves are everywhere in this unit. We need the space in the 10-man hootch since there are 18 of us living literally side by side. There are 13 men from third squad, three of us on the machine gun, and eventually they put in two ARVNs with us. I pick the corner bunk because I know it is the coolest place in the hootch.

In the morning formation, Sergeant Letoto announces that we are getting our M16s later this morning. Everybody has been waiting anxiously for these rifles ever since we attended an orientation class in our barracks at Schofield. At that time, the company only has two of them, so as Sergeant Dunlap gives a lecture about how to break one apart, we pass the other one around for everybody to look at and fondle. “The one thing you cannot do with the M16 is put a cleaning patch into the barrel like you can with the M14,” Dunlap demonstrates. “The patch and ramrod will just not fit into the barrel when you insert it into the muzzle. You must put the ramrod into the muzzle and then thread the cleaning patch into the eye of the ramrod from the chamber end. Then you can draw it through the bore without any problems.”

We have cleaning swatches for the M14’s larger 7.62 bore. With the M14, you thread the patch through the loop at the end of the cleaning rod and then shove it through the muzzle, draw it up and down to clean the carbon out, or you can put the rod into the bore first then thread the swatch and drag it through the bore from the chamber. Either way there is no problem. You cannot do that with the M16’s smaller 222-caliber bore,

the orifice is too small. You must insert the rod through the muzzle end first, thread the patch, and then drag it through the bore. If you try to stick the patch through the muzzle end, it will jam and it is very difficult to remove. Normally, after I load my patch, I put the handle of the ramrod on the floor and step on it with both feet to hold it fast and then pull the patch through by lifting up the whole rifle.

I like to run an oily patch through the bore first thing and then clean the rest of my rifle. The oil will loosen up the carbon, so when you are finished cleaning it the last thing to do is run a dry patch through the barrel. When I look through the muzzle, I put my thumbnail at the other end to reflect the light to see if the bore is smooth and shiny. If not, I need to repeat the process. Normally, I only have to do it once and I am finished. I never put the rifle down on my bunk because dust from the wool blanket magnetizes itself into the rifle and the arms room sergeant will reject it. I learn to put the cleaned piece on my footlocker where there is no dust. This may seem like nitpicking, but I have seen many pissed off soldiers at Schofield trudge up and down those two flights of stairs, clean their rifles again, and then put it down on their bunks before they take it downstairs only to come back up huffing and puffing and swearing at the arms room sergeant.

My squad goes up to the bunker line, and we start clearing brush and chopping trees just behind our bunkers. After a few hours, we get the word that the M16s are here and to bring our M14s to trade for the new rifles. When I go to get my rifle that I left on the top of a bunker, I cannot find it. Sergeant LaVilla is pissed at me again, but I cannot help it. There is another M14 lying on the bunker, so I take that one. Sergeant Gallegos is trying to account for all of the M14s he will have to turn in. The sergeant is beside himself. He is yelling at the men lined up in front of him. He wants them to get in alphabetical order so he can check each serial number before parting with a new M16. There are not enough rifles for every man in the company to have one, so Lieutenant Roth and Sergeant Rodriguez are trying to figure out who should get one of the new rifles. I cannot wait for mine, but they tell me I am not to get one. "You gotta be shitting me Sarge. I have to hump this stupid fucking machine gun ammunition and it is heavy. Let one of the riflemen keep their M14." I see defeat staring me in the face. The pressure is on LaVilla, and he is starting to lose his temper. LaVilla makes me follow him to the company CP tent where he explains my problem to Captain Curbow. Captain Curbow tells him I will have to pay for the rifle. "I was working on the bunker line sir," I protest.

"You should have been carrying it with you all of the time Lupton," is his answer to this annoying little enlisted man's problem.

"But even when I am chopping trees?"

"You wear it all of the time Lupton," he turns away from me, "Give one to Fisher, he can use one. It will make it easier for him to string commo wire." Fisher? You gotta be shitting me. I cannot believe it. All he does is string commo wire and operate the radios in the rear. Why does he need an M16 for Christ's sake? The little fag does not even have to go out to the field. Fisher shows up at the mess table one morning sporting two black eyes. The rumor is he made a pass at the company clerk, who is a big guy, and he got the shit beat out of him.

LaVilla helps me look for my stock number in the line of men waiting for their new rifles. Sergeant Gallegos is just about to have a conniption fit trying to get everybody to cooperate with him. He is yelling, screaming, and flailing his arms around.

I ask each man what his stock number is, and we finally find my rifle. An idiot from the first platoon picked mine up from the bunker by mistake. I snatch my M14 from him, and I push his rifle into his hands.

“You stupid shit,” I sneer at him. Sergeant LaVilla makes me come with him back to the hootch. He lectures me for not thinking. I tell him it was my impression that I was not supposed to think and that was his job. Immediately I feel I may have crossed a Rubicon. “Oh really?” he snarls at me, “then I think you need to fill up the lister bag,” but I never seem to get around to doing it.

I have a tough time accepting the fact that I am still stuck with the heavier M14 and the 7.62 ammunition. I have to chunk around 400 rounds of M60 ammo along with six magazines of M14 ammo. The weight is killing me. My shoulders are aching only minutes after I pick up the boxes of ammo. The pain just intensifies as time passes and the hurt is excruciating. With the M16, I can carry more of my personal ammunition and the weapon is lighter too. I suggest to Sergeant Rodriguez that every man in the platoon should carry a 100-round belt of machine gun ammo rather than having the gun crew lug all of it. That concept is too practical for him to grasp, so my skinny shoulders must endure the tortures of the load.

After lunch, the company goes up to our bunker line and everybody blows a couple of magazines through the new rifles. There is some attempt to zero the sights but the effort is unorganized and chaotic. Even though I do not get one, I ask Lieutenant Yee for a chance to fire his. M16s have shiny aluminum bolts, which are light, so the rate of fire is very fast. I try to fire only one round at a time while on full automatic, but it is impossible to do so. The rifle fires too fast, so I let the entire magazine churn through at one time. We start laughing our asses off. The M16 has minimum recoil and does not climb, as the M14 will do. The big dilemma is you will run through your ammunition like shit through a tin horn. Now you are out of ammo. The rifle is nice even though it feels like a toy. The problems with the weapon become painfully apparent in a short time. Because of the gunpowder formulation, the chamber will seize the next cartridge and hold it tight. The aluminum bolt breaks off the lip of the round, and then we must take the cleaning rod and shove it through the muzzle to punch out the spent cartridge. In 1967, modifications are made to correct all of these problems. Unfortunately, for us, this is 1966.

There is a buzz in the company area. The whole battalion is going out on a three-day operation to the infamous Ho Bo Woods. MACV will not let helicopters fly over the area because the Viet Cong have quad fifties that shoot them down at 3,000 feet. A couple of years ago an ARVN battalion was massacred, not far from our base camp, in the Ho Bo when the VC encircled them. There is electrification in the air. Everybody knows this is some serious shit.

I walk past the orderly room. I can see Lieutenant Roth and the other platoon leaders sitting on the floor with their notebooks out scribbling furiously. A few hours later, Sergeant Rod calls us into the second squad's hootch where he and LaVilla give us an orientation. I remember LaVilla telling us not to proceed any farther if we see a sign with a skull and cross bones with Tu Da written underneath it. That is Vietnamese for death, or minefield, or some place you do not want to go, and we are to hold up and wait for further direction. This scares me a lot. The others are frightened too, and LaVilla can tell from our demeanor that we are nervous. “Look here,” he says in a somber and

avuncular way, “a lot of other men have done this before, so it isn’t anything we cannot do.” Our young minds are at ease, and we breakup and return to our hootches to clean our weapons. I decide to inspect my M14 bullets by taking the first one out and using it to extricate each subsequent round from their magazine. I am shocked to see my rounds have green corrosion on every one of them. I wonder if they would work in this circumstance without jamming the weapon. The inside of the magazine looks like shit too. Brass does not rust, but when it encounters steel and moisture, it will form a corrosive crud between one round and the other. I show LaVilla. He is troubled with this discovery and orders everybody else to inspect his magazines. They contain same result. The Viet Cong would clean each rifle round until they are shiny, slick, and lightly oiled, but the American Army just throws them away and issues new ammunition, so that is what we do. All of the shitty casings are collected in a poncho and several of us carry them up to the old tent area where we throw all of the dirty ammunition into Sergeant Wright’s old foxhole and cover it up with dirt. Not only do we toss the rifle ammo, but we throw away all of the old hand grenades whose handles are twisted and broken from being fastened to our ammo pouches. Smoke grenades, Willy Peter grenades, and all such stuff practically fill the foxhole. I comment on how wasteful this is, and LaVilla tells me he has seen acres and acres of jeeps, tanks and trucks, and other vehicles abandoned in the Philippine jungle after WW II.

We carry boxes of new M14 ammunition and machine gun rounds back to the hootch where we divvy it up amongst the platoon and reload our magazines. I rub some more Neatsfoot Oil into the crease of my new jungle boots and ready the rest of my equipment. For whatever reason I cannot find my pack; I am sure I brought it with me from the other bivouac area, and I search for it thoroughly. I have no luck finding it.

At the end of the day, I enter the hootch just after Sergeant Guy comes in. “Hey, Sergeant Guy, how did your court-martial go?”

“I got three years in Leavenworth, busted down to private, loss of pay and all of that shit.” He is jamming his clothes into his duffel bag as he talks to me. I think, three fucking years, shit. “Gotta go Lupton, good luck to you,” he tells me as he drags his bag out the hootch.

“Yeah, good luck to you Sarge.” I feel sorry for him. He now has a completely new vocation as a felon. “Boy,” I say to myself, “I cannot imagine that happening to me.”

We luck out. They allow us to sleep straight through the night. “Saddle oop,” Sergeant Rod’s battle cry comes painfully early. We get into our formation and the company walks up to the bunker line. We keep following the bunkers until we are well past Charlie Company’s area, and then we go through a hole in their wire. We come to a halt and squat down. Sniper bullets begin popping over our heads, but they are too high to hit anybody. I guess they adjusted their aim because after the next burst of fire, Knott jumps up and jogs a few feet toward me where the camouflage is much more copious. He settles down low, declaring those are too close to him for his comfort. Another bullet ricochets off a tree and twangs away over our heads into the distance. The platoon kneels on the ground for another fifteen minutes before we start moving in a broad front.



Figure 1: A Company waits for the order to move into the Ho Bo Woods, Cu Chi - 1966.

Our platoon walks in a box formation into the large rubber trees where we pass the infamous listening post nicknamed Ann Margaret. I do not know why they call it Ann Margaret but they do. It is a very dangerous bunker with many casualties for its trouble. There is a lot of firing up in front of us. I hear exchanges of machine gun fire, and several helicopter gun ships make runs in support of the lead element. Word comes back that Captain Curbow is calling a medivac for himself and several men. After a long delay, we start out again, slowly advancing as the rifle fire diminishes until we pass a huge quantity of field gear and rifles. I do not know how many wounded we have but judging from this pile of stuff there must be a squad or two involved. Farther along, the formation narrows into a single file.

Each man waits to cross the Song Saigon. Fell is in front, then Knott and myself, after me is Richardson. Knott slips down the bank into the river. He loses his balance when his load of ammunition shifts, and he almost goes under. He splashes and fumbles to regain his footing. Smokey manages to stop him from his decent, and then boldly starts crossing the river. Smoke sinks lower into the river with every step he takes until the water is just under his chin. I can see him struggling with the muddy bottom. He holds the M60 above his head with both hands as he wades carefully into the middle of the stream. I hear a subdued moan and expletive, "It's fucking soft mud here. Goddamn it!" Fell struggles one last time as his head sinks even lower, and then he moves forward in a panic only to ascend out of the muddy brown water uttering another idyllic expletive. The man in front of Fell climbs up the bank with the assistance of the man in front of him. Fell gratefully clutches his predecessor's hand and makes the final effort to climb up to dry land, slipping and falling then throwing the machine gun up on to bank. The ammo belt snags a branch, the gun falls back down, and he has to wrench it up again. Finally, Fell is out of the river. He is breathing heavily as he waits for Knott to come close enough to help him.

Knott is a couple of inches taller than I am so water does not stroke his chin, but he struggles just like everybody else. Smokey grabs his rifle to help him up the bank.

Knott is so big he yanks Fell headfirst back into the river. There is uproarious laughter on the waterway. Knott pulls Smokey out of the water then pushes him up to dry land. Knott decides to surrender his rifle and tosses his ammunition up to Fell. Then Knott crawls up the riverbank on all fours. He is hilarious to watch slipping back into the muck before managing to dig his brand new jungle boot into the mud. Fell struggles to hoists him up on the river's edge.

I begin my crossing slowly. The river bottom is gushy. Mud sucks at the heels of my jungle boots. I must really struggle to press forward with every step. Three quarters of the way across, the muck does not want to release me. I strain my legs to keep going; I feel if I stop I will surely sink; the water is up to my mouth already. With one great endeavor, I step up onto firmer footing. I gratefully hand Knott my rifle; I have to grab the stock with both of my hands when he begins hauling me up the bank. With his huge powerful arm, Knott drags me up on the riverbank with little effort, ammunition and all, just as if a fishmonger hauls a tuna fish from of the ocean. More laughter from the men behind me; I roll over and sit up laughing hysterically. We do not call him Superman for nothing.

Richardson progresses until the water is so high all I can see are his brown nostrils. He almost panics when water goes into his nose, but he snorts it out and is able to take that last important footstep. His face slowly emerges above the surface of the river. Buxton, the man behind him is even shorter, and we look with trepidation as his spook eyes suddenly sinks into the brown water, and for a second his helmet bobbles on top of his head. "Grab 'em!" I yell to Richardson. He snatches Buxton's groping free hand and hauls him closer to the shore. Buxton is coughing and spitting water, and he keeps exclaiming, "Motherfucker, motherfucker." I offer Richardson my hand and pull him up onto the riverbank; he helps Buxton. I heave my ammo onto my shoulders with a groan, and the platoon moves on.

The company moves farther north into the Ho Bo. There is sporadic enemy resistance but this does not slow us down. The 5th Mech is with us now and they just boom away with their 50-caliber machine guns. The rubber trees here are very large and they sport years of sloping scars on their trunks. The grass between each tree is dense and it conceals the Viet Cong very well. We stop and fire our weapons in the direction of sniper rounds, but we cannot see anything except foliage and more rubber trees running in perfectly straight rows until the space between the trees narrow into infinity.

The company moves on until we come to a place where LaVilla tells us we can dig our foxholes. This will be our staging area for the next few days, and we will run our patrols from here.

Sergeant Walker orders Moschkin and Greko to go 100 meters ahead of the platoon's line and set up a listening post. "Moschkin, I gotta take a shit," Greko whines.

"Well, go take a shit," Moschkin replies and continues peering into the trees. Greko is too frightened to take a crap but after a few more minutes he taps Moschkin on the shoulder and whispers, "Moschkin, I gotta take a shit, man!"

"Then go and take your shit Grek-ko. Stop complaining to me and go do it."

"Okay, I'm going back here so you know where I am. Okay?"

"Get going for Christ's sake," complains Moschkin. Greko is worse than a child is. He crawls carefully backwards for 10 feet, unbuckles his belt, and squats to let loose his diarrhea when Moschkin hears a dreadful yowl.

“They got me, ahhhh, Moschkin they got me!” Moschkin stands, swivels his automatic rifle to blast the VC, and instead, he gets a glimpse of a monkey scurrying away into the bushes; he holds his fire. Greko pulls up his pants. There is shit all over him. “That goddamn monkey, he jumped on my back just as I was letting it go!”

“Goddamn it Greko, shut up! The fucking VC will know where we are.” Sergeant Walker calls them on their walkie-talkie to find out why there is all the yelling. “We’re coming in,” Moschkin tells him.

“Negative, reposition yourself and stay out there.”

“Negative my ass,” retorts our Mongolian, “if they didn’t know we are here then they do now. We are coming in!” Moschkin settles the argument, and they return to the line. Greko stinks like shit and must content himself with wiping off with leaves because there is no water. Only now can we see the hilarity in his dilemma.

We set up our machine gun in the middle of an ox cart trail. I can hear sporadic gunshots all around us but there is no activity in our sector. We each take turns digging the foxhole. It has to be big enough for three of us, and the work progresses quickly throughout the afternoon. Dyer leans with his arm against the parapet as I dig; he is not paying much attention to anything in particular when I see this big ass black scorpion crawling against his forearm. I quickly put the blade of my entrenching tool between his arm and the scorpion. He just about shits himself when he sees what I am doing. “Yoo, I thought I felt something brush my arm,” he cries out as he jerks his forearm from the pile of dirt, “Look how big that fucker is. It must be four inches long. Jesus Christ!” I maneuver it away from the hole and trap it with the entrenching tool. I have Ronson lighter fluid with me, and I spray a circle of fluid around the big black bastard and light it up. The scorpion runs around witlessly trying to find a way out of the circle of flames. “Do ‘em,” yells Dyer. I give the VC scorpion the coup de grace with a burst of liquid fire, and it explodes into flame, madly dancing around for a few seconds before succumbing to the heat as a puff of smoke erupts from his carapace. After laughing like nitwits over this tomfoolery, I resume digging our hole until I can stand chest deep. Sergeant LaVilla comes to inspect our positions and suggests we stick tree branches into the ground behind us because at night this will camouflage the hole dug into the lighter colored trail and blend our site into the shadows of the surrounding rubber trees.

“Who shit here?” Sergeant LaVilla steps into a puddle of shit lying close to the hole. “Goddamn it, Lupton, is that yours?”

“I don’t know Sarge, maybe.” Every time I have contact with water in this country, I contract a case of the GI shits. Maybe it is mine, but I honestly cannot remember squatting beside the hole and shitting. He orders me to bury it and not to do it again. “All right, all right,” I grumble as I scrape the brown pool of diarrhea into the bushes a few feet away.

Later in the afternoon, our platoon does a security sweep around the company perimeter. We find nothing and return to our hole in the ground to eat our c-rations.

Sergeant Taylor and Sergeant Watts come walking down the road past our hole carrying a radio. They are registering the mortars for the night, and the two mortar sergeants venture out beyond us until they disappear into the trees. After we hear the Willy Peter round thump out of the 81mm tube behind us, the marking round lands with a dull thud right where they want it. They walk back still talking on the radio and stroll past us on their way to the company CP behind us.

Sergeant LaVilla comes to tell us we have to have two men awake all night. "The VC is probing the line so you need to stay vigilant," warns our fearless squad leader. "At 0500 we have to be 100 percent alert. That means everybody has to be standing in this hole. Intelligence says the gooks may try a dawn attack. Got that?" There is a lot of rifle fire and hand grenades are going off in first platoon's sector of our perimeter. Nothing is happening in front of us so after some time passes he disappears up the road to the platoon CP.

Knott attempts to sleep behind the big rubber tree to our right. Fell and I stand in our hole anticipating a Viet Cong tank driving right up the ox cart trail and over running our position. What we are going to do about this I do not know. Mortar flares are constantly igniting in front of the first platoon's positions, there is shooting for several hours until the activity dies down. I wake Knott for his guard. Fell tries to settle down for a couple of hours of sack time when the first raindrops begin falling through the leaves. The monsoon began a couple of days ago when we moved into our permanent hootches but there has not been any rain for the subsequent few days. Nobody thinks to bring a poncho with him so there is nothing to protect us from the rain. It begins to rain like a motherfucker, in sheets, and more sheets. The wind blows in gusts and the temperature dives precipitously. We are soaking wet and quivering as we stand in the foxhole listening anxiously to hear the Viet Cong sneaking up upon us. It is so cold we find ourselves leaning up against each other to keep warm. Finally, Knott puts his big arm around my shoulders, and I put mine around his waist. We stand there shivering like two queers on a holiday but neither of us gives two shits to a fart in the wind about public opinion. We are cold.

Eventually the rain tapers off to a drizzle. All we can hear are the raindrops falling through the tree leaves. The wind dies down but it is still cool. I tell Knott I need a smoke, and I squat down into the watery muck and hold my Zippo on its side. I carefully flick the flint to light a tiny blue flame that does not burn beyond the chimney and quickly light my cigarette. I squat there shielding the dull orange glow with my hand for several minutes sucking in the smoke. I feel a sense of relief from my craving, and I stand up to exhale. The smoke tastes satisfying and sweet; my nerves settle down a little. When I move my feet I can hear the water sloshing around the bottom of the hole. My boots are soaking wet and uncomfortable. Knott wants to bail our redoubt, but I am scared he will make too much noise. I duck down, cup my cigarette again, and draw in deeply. I cannot dissuade Knott; he takes his helmet, peels off the cover, and begins warily bailing out the water. He bails very slowly and quietly until the water is gone and nothing remains except squishy mud. "Careful," I whisper to him as I squat for the last of my cigarette. He methodically scrapes the rest of the liquid mud out of the bottom, and we feel a bit more comfortable on the dryer dirt.

Rifle fire pops in the distance behind us. We resume our diligence in earnest. I see it, a light! There is a purple light moving toward us about twenty feet right in front of our foxhole. There are no footsteps to designate a VC. Knott grips a hand grenade. "Throw it Knott, throw it," I whisper with desperate urgency. "Throw it!" I cannot stand the wait. I sidle up behind the machine gun and switch the safety off. Know demurs. The light goes out as if it hears me. Nothing happens.

"Wait," Knott whispers into my ear, "don't shoot." Still nothing happens. I feel like I want to have some more diarrheas. The gas in my intestines rumbles aloud. I know

the VC can hear it; they are out there listening for my fart. It becomes deathly silent, not even a gust of wind can we hear. The time passes and we relax. "It must be a bug," whispers the big man almost inaudibly. I take my turn to sleep behind the big rubber tree until 5 am when it is time for everybody to stand to. The three of us stand guard in our hole in the ground as the sun slowly lights up the forest. I am trying desperately to keep my eyes open but to no avail.

"Lupton, wake the fuck up!" I snap awake with a start. "Here. Take these Cs," Sergeant LaVilla has come with breakfast for us. He hands me a box of c-rations.

"Wonderful," I utter, "Ham 'n Motherfuckers for breakfast, just what I always wanted." I know damn well he saved them just for me. They taste putrid in the half morning light, but I am hungry after last night, and I gobble down the entire can. I am grateful for the cookies that come with this meal, but I would kill for some canned peaches or fruit cup right about now. There is no time for heating coffee because the company is on the move by 0700. I lug my machine gun ammo upon my shoulders, and we trail off in single file to an assembly area where Lieutenant Roth gets us into formation. We begin our day of humping the Ho Bo.

During a halt, I manage to take another diarrhea shit. After several hours of walking, we position ourselves along a stretch of jungle. There is dense jungle on one side of us; tanks and bulldozers have carved a wide-open swath on the other side. We can hear shooting periodically, but I cannot determine where our forces are located. I feel terrible. I know I have some sort of temperature due to the rain, so I leave the gun position and follow the tree line, turning right I come to where Sergeants Rod, LaVilla, Lieutenant Roth, and the medic are sitting in a tiny clearing. "I feel like shit Doc."

"Okay, let me take your temperature," he replies; he digs into his bag and brings out the thermometer, puts it into my mouth and we sit waiting. "Ah, looks like you have a temperature of 102 Lupton." The bullet snaps past my right ear close enough deaden my hearing and make my ear start ringing.

"Who fired their weapon?" Lieutenant Roth quips angrily. The next round lands just to the right and in front of me kicking up dirt for all to see. It ricochets past me with a twang and crashes into a tree behind us. Everybody jumps up to find somewhere to hide. I head for a mound of dirt but Sergeant LaVilla beats me to it. Next, I run to a tree, but Sergeant Rodriguez claims that spot. I spin full circle not knowing where to go; finally, I dive behind a small bush that provides some modicum of concealment. I imagine the Viet Cong sniper watching my chicken dance is laughing his ass off; his biggest disappointment is nobody is calling for a helicopter to recover my body. We all peer into the shady jungle before us. Slowly Rod and LaVilla get up and tell me to come with them, and we advance carefully into the trees. We fix our attention on a large termite mound, examining it carefully. I want to pursue farther into the bush, but they tell me not to advance. Then everyone resumes sitting in the clearing again.

Lieutenant Roth tells me to rejoin my gun crew, and I walk back along the same route I took before. When I turn left at the corner, I come under sniper fire. I drop into a shallow depression made by tank treads as the bullets crack low over my head. Crack, I press my cheek down into the dirt, crack, crack, and crack. "Oh, God, make it stop," I scream to myself. The bullets are close, crack, and God hears me; the sniper stops shooting. I raise my head. I see nothing in the shadowy copse; I get up and trot back to the machine gun position.

Later that day, somebody recovers two old rifles. One is a 1914 Springfield and the other is a 1916 German Mouser; both of them are loaded with five round clips. I speculate my sniper's weapon is the same, and he ran out of ammunition and had to reload, and that gave me the opening to get back to the machine gun.

The company is on the move again in a long line abreast. To our flank, we hear a huge explosion. A tank backed over a large mine.



Figure 2: Tank destroyed by huge mine in the Ho Bo Woods - 1966.

We hold in place for several hours before we began walking again. As we approach what used to be a village, Sergeant Greene, from third platoon, trips a booby trap that does not go off; he shouts to warn us of more booby traps along the trail. As we walk farther along, I can hear a distinct sibilant sizzle. I look at Fell who is to my right front, and I can see he has tripped a booby-trapped American butterfly bomblet, one that the jets drop. It is supposed to spin a certain number of times before it arms itself, and then when it hits the ground it will explode. Sometimes they do not detonate when they hang up in trees, and the Viet Cong make booby traps out of them. That is what has happens with this bomblet. All of us just about shit ourselves; I begin walking backwards without taking my eyes off the yellow bomblet. While it is only several pounds, it can throw BBs for about 25 meters and kill you very dead. Sergeant LaVilla places a hand grenade beside it in an attempt to blow the thing up. It is still there after the smoke clears. Then he shoots the stupid thing not once but twice and still, it will not blow up, so we leave it behind us. After that, we decide to keep off the trails, and we never have any more problems with booby traps.

We move farther into the village. A tank rumbles up behind us. In front of us is a panorama of rice paddies with a house surrounded with big palm trees way out into the paddy. The tank fires its 90mm gun. We watch the tank round travel to its target. It takes the top of one of the palm trees off, very impressive if I were a tree. I feel safe from rifle fire around this behemoth, but I am not too sure about wanting to walk too near it because their booby traps are tank mines.

The tankers take the crippled tank away with the big TVR; we resume our sweep. Boutoff shoots a chicken and turns it inside out, something to break up the tedium of the afternoon. C-rations for our noon meal never appear and we are very hungry. There are plenty of fruits to pick but the bananas are green, the pineapples have not turned sweet, and the peanuts we pull up from the field are soft, mushy, and not very appetizing. I am exhausted, as is everybody else. We are almost back to our base camp when we hold up for a break, and I hear Lieutenant Roth yell at O'Shaughnessy our RTO. "I'm tired too!" I imagine Lieutenant Roth was not happy about an extra sweep. We must take a final swing around the perimeter because the Colonel's C & C helicopter receives a few rounds of sniper fire when it lands, and he wants us to search for the sniper. Roth obeys like a good soldier. We must make the extra sweep in front of our company's position. This takes another hour before we trudge back into the protection of our perimeter. I am so pooped I literally drag my four boxes of machine gun ammunition on the ground as I come in. Finally, we get to our hole and unass our field gear and flop down exhausted. After five minutes, I go see the medic about my fever. He gets the battalion doctor to get me out of the sweep tomorrow. This is great. I can hang around the foxhole all day and be sick; let somebody else hump that fucking ammo. When Sergeant LaVilla comes over to our hole with some c-rations, I tell him. Unsurprisingly, he is not pleased. "You know," not looking at me in particular, "we don't want everybody else to think this squad is full of pussies." This sounds iniquitous and it pisses me off.

"All right, if that is the way you feel, I'll go on the stupid fucking sweep tomorrow," I sternly tell him. Now he appears frustrated that I agree to go. He leaves. "Fuck him," I tell the other two as I shovel down my meal from a tin can. Afterwards, I feel refreshed and we relax waiting for night to fall. We get no reprieve; LaVilla comes back to tell us we have to go on ambush this night. It is merely a listening post just a few meters from our position so it does not make much difference to us. We can be tired out there, or we can be tired back here. The three of us join second squad just as it is turning dark and the squad ventures out about 150 meters along the ox cart trail.

The night is uneventful. When we come back to our position, we eat our c-rations like ravished dogs. I bear in mind Sergeant LaVilla's admonition not to shit near our foxhole, so I take my weapon and squat down in the bushes close to the adjoining hole. I get rid of yet another load of diarrhea.

It does not make any difference if I get a chance to skate out on a sweep today or not because the whole battalion is on the move. I still feel feverish and weak, but I have to keep going regardless. I am not going to let LaVilla accuse me of being a pussy until I am lying unconscious. After another day of mindless walking about on line, the company consolidates for an airlift out of the Ho Bo. There are only two aircraft to transport the whole company. Every time the helicopters take off, we hear a sniper taking a few shots at them as they clear the trees.

Just as the lead helicopter is taking off, it suddenly drops out of the air and lands right in front of where my lift is standing. The infantrymen inside come tumbling out as the pilot doors fly open and the two pilots jump out of their aircraft. White CS gas swirls out of the helicopter as the rotor blades begins to slow; the whine of the jet engine starts fading. One of the crewmembers kicks the billowing gas grenade out of the cargo door then retreats out the opposite side. The pilot makes the right call to land immediately and

shut down the engine. If he had not, then there could have been disaster trying to fly the chopper with burning tear gas spewing out of its cargo bay.

We step away from the helicopter while the CS grenade burns itself out. The still swirling chopper blades dissipate the plume, and it takes several minutes before the chopper can load up again. They resume extracting our company. I feel relief when it is our turn to board the aircraft. I am sitting in the middle of the seat when we take off. My sphincter tightens up as we lose our ground cushion and sure enough, the little sniper is down there shooting at us. I anticipate one of his rounds tumbling though the floor and striking me right square in my anus, oh Jesus, oh Jesus, pop pop pop. I breath out again as we fly low over the Ho Bo. Such respite is unknown to those who have never flown out of a hot LZ. We land in Cu Chi where duce and a halve trucks are waiting for us.

When I get back to the company area, the first thing I do is take another big diarrhea shit.

We clean up our equipment as soon as we get back and eat chow. I hit my rack as soon as it is dark. I feel worse when the CQ comes through the hootch with his flashlight rousing everybody up at 0330. When I sit up, I want to die, and regret being alive. For a fleeting moment, I think of going on sick call, but I know LaVilla will be down on my ass. The company is in a rush to get going. There is something the mess sergeant calls chow but it tastes too much like shit, so I pass on most of it. The company hustles into formation and our new captain begins a quick march to the compound's small gate located at B Company's sector. It is all I can do to keep up; it is dark and the machine gun ammo mercilessly digs my shoulders as we struggle to keep up with the front of the formation. As the sun rises, we are still walking with a mission. I trip over a tree root. Chilton, who now sports buck sergeant stripes, yells at me to be get up and get going, "If that were a trip wire you would be blown up Lupton." I get up.

"With any luck it would kill you too," I grumble to him.

"What did you say?"

"Give me a break, will ya?" I shout at his dumb ass. We are still under the impression that we can be courts marshaled if we give an NCO a line of shit in the field, but that impression disappears in a few more months as the fatigue of combat sets in, and then nobody gives a shit anymore. I have to stymie my retort because Chilton gets up close to harangue me some more.

We are to be a blocking force for the tanks and the 5th Mech who are pulling a sweep from another direction. I can hear them shooting the big machine guns and tank rounds are exploding along with the dull thump of the hand grenades exploding in fighting holes. Lieutenant Roth positions the platoon along a tree line of low brush. Edwards begins a fire to heat a can of Beenie Weenies. The smoke curls above the bushes giving our position away, and he stands upright to cook his meal. I cannot believe he is not paying attention to what is happening to our front. I keep looking for the Viet Cong to come rushing towards us in a mad frenzy to get away from the APCs and tanks, but they never arrive. We sit in the sun for several hours as the opposing force works to our front. There is more shooting and sporadic tank fire as the time progresses.

"They got 23 of 'em," Sergeant LaVilla fervently tells us. "The 5th Mech are going to take them down to Cu Chi and dump them off in the middle of town then wait to see who claims the bodies." Then we hear the growl of the engines and the tanks and APCs rumble out of the tree line and pass us only a few meters away. They have the dead VC heaped up on the tracks and tanks and man, are they fucked up. One VC has

only half a head, another's guts are spilling down the side of the tank into the treads like so much offal and other tracks rumble past with all sorts of bloody discombobulating gore one after the other. They drag a few KIAs behind the tracks with tow chains. It looks awful. We hear Division threatens the major in charge of this operation with courts martial for this bizarre spectacle and maybe rightfully so. More than likely nothing comes of it but that is what we heard.

When returning to Cu Chi, we are walking in a stupor while trying to keep contact with the first platoon when there is rifle shot from the other side of the hedgerow. A grenade explodes and somebody yells, "Perez got one." I never know what happened on the other side of the bamboo but there is supposedly a weapon captured and Perez has a minor wound.

The march back to our company area does not take very long. When we went out we circled part of the compound and now we are able to hike directly through the main gate and back to A Company's locale. I get a reprieve when we spend the rest of the day cleaning up from the past four days of operations, and I am starting to feel better after I eat noon chow.