

“There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with your dick, Lupton,” says Dr. Whittington.

“But it hurts when I piss,” I protest.

“Is there any discharge?”

“No.”

“Then you must have been fucking too hard. That’s all.” Dr. Whittington scribbles some notes in my file. I do not believe him though. I feel stupid standing there with my pants pulled down around my knees waiting for him to test me for the clap. Every time I take a piss, my dick head hurts, and I am more than positive that whore in Manila gave me the clap. I pull them up and button the fly. “Is there anything else?” Whittington asks me.

“Ah, no Sir, I just thought because my dick burns when I piss that I should have the clap.”

“I don’t see anything, Lupton,” he says without looking at me and this signals the end of my sick call.

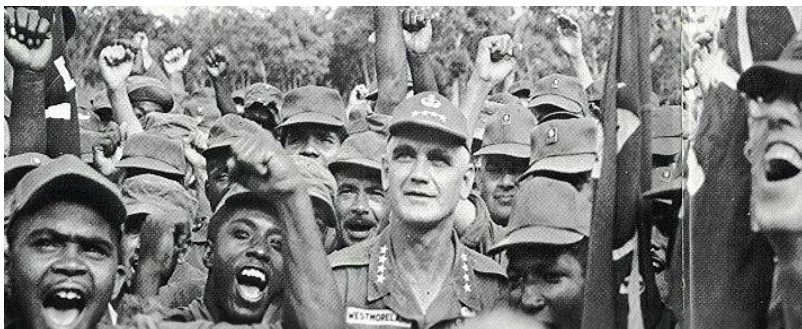
The next morning we assemble into a company formation and march toward the rear of B Company’s bunker line. There is an open spot devoid of rubber trees where the whole battalion eventually joins us for a big ceremony. Nobody knows what is to happen but excitement grows when a formation of six helicopters, two slicks and four gunships, roars low over our heads. “Westmorland is in the one in the middle.” Sergeant Condi tells us. The choppers fly over emitting a deep rumbling drumbeat then disappear behind the treetops; we are left standing there waiting for the great General. Shortly, whole gaggles of jeeps drive up in a convoy, and I can see the sacrosanct general sitting divinely in the front seat. An aura of poise oozes forth from his comportment; all eyes are upon him, and he knows this. His jeep sports a general’s pennant bristling with stars.

“A-ten-SHUN!” Roars the battalion Sergeant Major and everybody snaps to attention, especially the staff officers who hope the general will notice them and invite them to serve in the relative luxury of MACV, and, as Richardson would say, “They look as if their assholes are sucking air.” General Westmoreland steps upon the hood of his jeep with his long legs lifting him smoothly to the top where he puts his hands akimbo and surveys this fine infantry battalion standing in front of him. “Stand at ease men.” The general is tall and regal, and to us 19 year olds he is the Godhead. He tells us what a fine battalion the Wolfhounds are; with such a distinguished combat record, he is positive we will do well against the Viet Cong. It is his policy to visit each unit in his command. He laments not seeing us sooner but North Vietnamese Army units are invading the Northern provinces along the DMZ, and he has been spending much time with that.

A Major from battalion calls out individuals from all of the companies and the soldiers form a long line. They stand at attention as the General pins medals on each soldier’s pocket while the Major reads a short citation. They go from the first soldier to the last awarding them purple hearts, silver and bronze stars, and Army Commendation Medals.

The Battalion XO wants to take a picture of all of the men awarded medals. He hurriedly lines them up in three ranks for the photo shoot then the recipients rejoin their units, and the photographer mounts the jeep. The General stands in front of A Company,

which gathers around him for a picture. Westmoreland poses as if experiencing an epiphany. The yell of six hundred men reverberating in his ears, fists thrust skyward in warrior bravado. Who is not to tingle with a charge of pride? The photographer snaps his picture, oh, wait, one more to be sure, we give another Wolfhound yell, click, and the picture becomes immortal. The Sergeant Major yells attention again, and the general climbs into his waiting jeep, all of the officers, still hopeful, salute him in unison, and away rides the gaggle of leadership to the next unit.



**Figure 1 Sgt Condi (behind and just left of Westmoreland) Dyer's face is behind Condi, my fist to the right of Westmoreland – Cu Chi 1966.**

Our next operation takes us to more villages. We sweep through them with abject monotony finding no Viet Cong to kill. The civilians never make eye contact with us. Their stares are vacant. The villages are devoid of men but overpopulated with children. I decide to root around inside a thatched hootch. I step into a time warp of 100 years. I point my rifle towards the thatch roof expecting to find a Viet Cong wedged between rafters just like in a Batman movie, but all I see is the underside of the roof, burnt black from kerosene and wood smoke. I can imagine all sorts of things living within the straw thatch.

It takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the dark where I see one room with a bamboo divider separating a wooden bed covered by a micron thick woven bamboo mat. There is a scullery located in the right corner, a termite ridden armoire, and a Buddhist alter with burnt joss sticks and black and white pictures of their dead elders staring back at me through a dusty cobweb laced frame. Everything is old, homemade, and cheap. Their possessions are meager and the smells of the dirt floor, mold, and succulence from successive Monsoons give off the stench of old festering clothes.

I rummage through a bureau drawer and poke around their black clothes looking for I do not know what. I discover a collection of old Chinese coins with a square hole in the middle, some French Colonial brass money dated 1936, and a Ho Chi Minh 5-dong aluminum coin, all of it strung on a string. I decide to purloin them for a souvenir. Every piece of coinage on the string is from a bygone era and is old and worthless, so I feel no remorse about stealing it. The old woman and her adult daughter stare at me as I put the money into my pocket.

At the end of the day, we dig positions along the side of a huge bamboo hedgerow. The bamboo is as thick as my leg and as tall as a four-story building. Only a few feet behind us, lying hidden beyond the thick bamboo stalks, is a house. An ox-cart road runs between the house and the bamboo. Beyond the house lies an expanse of rice paddies.

Normally, we set up in a circle with the platoon and company CP to our rear, but this time our positions are in a straight line with the bamboo hedgerow behind us. I do not know where the company CP is. On my right are Hamby, Harnack, and some other first-squad guy, I cannot remember whom. Populating the hole to my left is Sergeant Fitch, Bailey, and Bishop. Between our positions is a large gap in the bamboo with a driveway intersecting the main ox-cart trail. To our right front is a mud-walled hootch where a woman is futzing around, but at dusk, she hops on her bicycle, rides through the gap in the bamboo without looking at me, and never comes back again.

I buy a Tiger 33 beer from an old man whose bicycle is loaded with beer and sodas. He wants fifty piasters, but I chew him down to thirty. I have never tasted Tiger 33 before; it is warm, grainy, and not enjoyable, so I pour most of it out on the ground.

I am with Dyer and Boutoff, and we decide I will take the first 3-hour guard from nine to midnight. The temperature turns comfortable with a breeze to dry off our sweaty fatigues. The huge bamboo constantly creaks as the wind blows the tops about. Back and forth, back and forth, creak; creak, creak as the trunks chafe gently against each other. WHAM! A grenade explodes beyond the house in front of us, the silver sparks burst in a sphere around the deafening explosion. I position myself behind the machine gun; all turns quiet for many minutes. The other two do not even stir. I can hear them breathing deeply. All the while, the bamboo is creaking as the cool comforting wind blows in gusts.

I begin to relax again but I am leery of more explosions. WHAM! Another hand grenade explodes this time from behind the bamboo at Hamby's foxhole. I believe one of them has thrown the grenade. Quiet descends around me once again. Still there is gentle creaking of the bamboo as the wind rustles through the tops of the tall stalks. After about an hour passes, there is a third explosion. This time it explodes harmlessly way in front of us, between my hole and Sergeant Fitch's. "Stop throwing hand grenades," I hear from a faint whisper. Fitch appears like an apparition through the darkness, and he walks boldly upright toward me then stops conspicuously silhouetted in the middle of the gap of the trees. "Don't throw any more hand grenades," he speaks without whispering. I cannot believe this *asshole!* I sit in numbed stillness too frightened to respond; he turns and walks silently back to his foxhole.

I cup my ears with both hands to enhance my hearing, listening intensely for footsteps in the dark. After an hour, I perceive a sound to be somebody's head scrapping the corner of the tin roof on the house in front of us. In a panic, I shake Dyer awake and tell him I am going to throw a grenade. With my hands shaking so much I fear I might drop the grenade, I yank the pin and heave it as hard as I can into virtual blackness; then I huddle far down into our hole. "Come on, come on, and explode will ya." It takes an eternity for the goddamn grenade to detonate. I quickly look up but see nothing, I hear nothing; I want to shit myself.

"There's something out there," I whisper to Dyer, "I know there is a gook throwing grenades." Dyer staying awake reassures me. The time is just about midnight, and it is his turn to pull the next three hours of guard. I take his place at the rear of the hole and try to sleep, but I cannot. Thinking about Sergeant Fitch's stupidity keeps me awake. I am constantly checking to see if Dyer is alert before I succumb to my weariness.

It is dawn now. I rub my eyes to get the sleep out of them and grab my M14. Boutoff is already searching in front of the hootch where he vehemently chides me about not killing the phantom noisemaker. I walk over to the house and find where my hand grenade blew up. There is no blood trail. The explosion did not even break the huge clay water jar that it landed next to, but the grenade did land close to where I envisioned the noise was coming from. "What did you think you were doing throwing all of those grenades last night, Lupton?" Sergeant Fitch saunters from his hole like the cock of the walk.

"I only threw one of them. The VC threw the other three." He does not believe me. "Hey, Hamby, how many hand grenades did you guys throw last night?"

"We didn't throw any," he answers with his country boy accent.

"Who threw the one that exploded behind your hole?"

"Ahh don't know."

"You didn't throw any did you," I ask Fitch. He denies throwing any. Boutoff jives me some more about throwing the grenades. This skepticism grinds my guts. I turn around to Sergeant Fitch, "Don't ever come walking up to my hole again and tell me to stop throwing grenades."

Fitch strides up to me real close, "Fuck you, Lupton. Who do you think you are talking to anyway?" Out of deference to his rank, I abstain from branding him an asshole. We glare at each other intensely before returning to our holes to eat our rations; Fitch is a nasty bastard.

"Goddamn Fitch walks right up here and tells me to stop throwing hand grenades. Right there," I point to the gap in the bamboo. "What an asshole," I whisper.

"You should have tossed one at him while he was walking back to his hole," Boutoff casually suggests. "That'll teach 'em." Hysterical laughter erupts; Fitch looks in our direction only to see us glancing over at him and snickering contemptuously.

"Yeah, that'd make him shit his pants for sure. I wouldn't even have to pull the pin; just let it drop behind him on his way back. I know goddamn well someone was out there." After eating our C's, we saddle up our field gear and wait for the order to move out. Fitch stands with his M16 resting on his ammo pouch. We glower at each other with disdain. He just snickers at me and looks away. "Fuck 'em," I think, "the goddamn moron."

"C Company triggered an ambush last night. They suffered five killed and at least that many wounded. Two of them seriously," Sergeant Rodriguez tells us, "but they killed about a hundred VC." WOW! They killed a hundred Viet Cong. "They were saved by the artillery and 81 mortars."

"It couldn't have been a hundred," says Sergeant Walker, "that's just too many."

"That's what they are talking about on the radio," Sergeant Rod defends, "a hundred, sounds like a lot to me too, but that is what they are saying."

"Phew, I'm glad it wasn't us," I pronounce, "Old Fitch here would have told me not throw any hand grenades." I look at him and smile, but he sees no humor in my comment.

"You watch yourself, Lupton," he tells me dryly. I turn away. I know when I have pushed enough and let it go.

When we return to the company area, we find new meat in the hootch. Three FNGs with pink faces, eyes wide open and still dressed in starched OD fatigues. They sit

on cots watching third squad and the machine gun crew shuffle in exhausted and flop down their arms and web gear. We look vacantly at the new guys. They stare back at us, not knowing what to say. I go to chow.

“Come here brother,” Richardson, Fagan, and a few other black soldiers from first platoon beckon a tunicated FNG when he walks from the end of the chow line with his tray. He is scanning the room for a place to sit when the amorous invite comes from gracious black faces, “Sit over here with us young FNG,” They burst out in fits of laughter, “move over, let ma man have a seat,” and room is made for him on the bench. Brown puts his arm around his little friend, “Where you come from Brother?” I have never seen anybody welcomed to this unit like this.

Sergeant Prine orders us to clean our weapons and field gear before we are able to take a shower and change into clean fatigues. I hate sitting in three-day-old underwear so I strip off and wrap a towel around me. For some reason, Prine is attentive in making sure we clean our rifles before we can tend to ourselves. I have never seen him give much of a shit about our gear before, and eventually he disappears and never comes back to bother us again. This means we can break out the beer!

Our FNGs still look uncomfortable and nobody is even trying to be friendly. Finally, I invite one of them over and we chat amiably for several beers. I discover they went through basic at Fort Carson, Colorado and AIT at Fort Lewis, Washington.

“Hagan, get me another beer will ya?”

“Sure, Lupton, no problem,” he is such a good FNG. Normally, anybody else would tell me to get the damn beer myself, but Hagan brings back an ice cold one for me and another for himself.

“Where’s the church key? Isn’t in the cooler?”

“Nope, it is not there.”

“Hold on, I’ll see if I can find one,” I secure my towel and head out the door with a stagger. Holding myself up with the sandbag wall surrounding the hootch, I creep along using my hands to maintain balance. I notice the light is on in the senior NCO’s hootch, without much thinking, I open the door, step in, and gladly say, “Does anybody in here have a church key?” The only two people in the hootch are Sergeant Allunde and that numbskull Fitch. They sit on two opposing bunks talking privately when I interrupt them.

“Hey, what do you mean coming in here?” Sergeant Allunde is pissed at my intrusion.

“I just want to know if you have a church key, Sarge.” Standing there like the village idiot, I immediately grasp the perception of unwittingly stepping into a bucket shit. “That’s okay,” I try a vain retreat and turning for the door I say, “I’ll get one somewhere else.”

“Come here you. Get in here!” Allunde has been drinking too. He orders me brusquely while pointing to an imaginary spot on the floor. I do not know what he is going to do to me, but Allunde is nobody to fuck with when he has a belly full of beer, for one, he out ranks me by six stripes, secondly, he outweighs me by over a hundred pounds. I know being smart mouthed to this lifer sergeant is a death knell. He reams my ass up and down for being so stupid as to think he would give me a goddamn church key, “I’m talking with Sergeant Fitch. Who are you to interrupt us?” Sergeant Fitch sits there just simpering at my awkward position. This is his payback.

“Yeah, Sarge, I’m sorry Sarge, I won’t do it again Sarge.” Please Sarge, stop making me grovel in front of Fitch, dressed only in this stupid towel, please, I yell to myself.

“Now get out of here!” Oh, thank God.

“Sure Sarge, sure,” I see my opening to retreat and escaping with only this mortifying ass chewing, so I take it - fuck the church key.

“Ya get the can opener?” Hagan asks me when I return to the hootch.

“No,” Now I remember the P38 on my dog tag chain. It is stupid of me for not thinking of this before I naively waltz into the Hootch from Hades, “here use this P38.” Hagan is a tad bit confused because he does not have extensive experience eating out of tin cans yet, so I show him how to open the can of beer by cutting two holes on either side of the container then use the P38 to dilate one of them. “This way you do not have to suck the beer through the slit, thus avoiding bloat from the carbonation.”

I drink beer with FNG Hagan, and FNG Walley, and another FNG whose name I cannot remember except in his past life he works in a carnie before his friends and neighbors invite him to the draft party. I like his adventures of carnival life, and he is the only person I ever know who actually runs away from home and joins the circus. Unfortunately, my new friend is sleeping behind our bunker a few mornings later when some idiot in a jeep runs over his foot and that is the last we ever see of him. Jesus Christ, how lucky can some people be?

“Hey Lupton, can I borrow 20 bucks from you?” Brooks is going on R & R in the morning, and he is broke. He keeps playing poker and losing his ass off every time.

“Naw Brooksie, I borrowed 20 bucks from Beltz when we were in Manila, and I have to pay him back this pay day. I’m almost broke now. Sorry.” The government pays me 170 dollars a month, inclusive of 65 dollars combat pay. I am sending 100 dollars a month home to repay my aunt who loaned me 700 bucks for a car before I enlisted.

There really is not very much to spend your money on in Cu Chi. It goes for beer and candy, mostly for beer. The Wolfhounds support the Holy Family Orphanage in Osaka, Japan and while those donations are voluntary, the implication is that if you cannot afford to donate a few dollars to the charity each payday then you cannot afford to get a pass. We cannot go to town in Vietnam but there is rumor of three-day passes to Vung Tau, the clap-factory of Vietnam, and nobody wants to appear too broke to get one of these. This rationale is not lost upon anybody because the Wolfhounds have been supporting the orphanage ever since 1946.

“That’s okay,” Brooks laments, “hey, Walley, will you lend me 20 bucks?”

Brooks is meticulous in his quest for a couple hundred dollars. Every payday his many creditors drop by the hootch and harangue him for gambling debts. He gives them five or ten dollars to mollify them for another month, but he can never pay off all of his obligations. Brooks is almost broke again by the second day, and he gambles that away too. Nothing embarrasses him about hitting up every hootch mate one after the other even though he already owes everyone.

“Brooks, you already owe me a hundred dollars. What do you mean begging me for another loan, huh?” Tazlaar rags him mercilessly.

“I swear Taz; I’ll give you a hundred dollars on payday,” pleads the little soldier.

“You’re just bullshitting me.”

“No, no, I will, I promise I’ll give you a hundred dollars on payday.”

“Bullshit, you will give me a hundred and ten dollars.”

“Okay, okay, a hundred and ten.” Brooks can feel the money between his grubby little fingers already. Tazlaar falls for the lure and forks over a hundred bucks. By supplicating humbly, Brooksie gets his R & R money. At 28 Brooks is an old Sp4; he is on his second enlistment and is suggestive of the *Beatle Bailey* cartoon character Zero, except shorter.

Boutoff and Caldwell go out on the LP just outside of the wire tonight. I do not know why I do not have to go but sleeping the night away without interruption is a rare occurrence that almost never happens. “Did ya get anything?” I ask Boutoff when he straggles into the hootch just after dawn.

“Yeah, we killed a million mosquitoes,” he replies then sets the gun down, sits on the bed, and looks at me with his tired wrinkled face. “Have a nice sleepy sleep, Lupton?”

“Hey, I’d of gone out with you if Prine had let me.” There are always unexplained phenomena in war.

“I’ve gotta kill that son of a bitch one of these days,” Boutoff says wearily, “it was just Caldwell and me; we had to stay awake half the fucking night.” We normally always have three on the gun, and we can get about six hours of sleep even on ambush, but when there are only two to a position, sleep is dear.

“See you guys later.” Brooks is dressed in his khakis and his cunt cap; he is walking out of the door to catch the morning convoy to Saigon.

“Where are ya going Brooksie?”

“Bangkok,” he replies as the screen door slams shut. “I am going to make love to somebody I haven’t even met yet.”

“Bang-cock, what an aptly named city,” I say to no one.

We go to chow then I take my morning crap. I wipe my ass using the last pieces of toilet paper in the twelve-holer. Moses is the only one left in the shitter with me. He searches frantically for some ass wipe. Realizing there is none, he looks at me pulling up my fatigue pants. Our eyes meet as I slip the end of my belt into the buckle and pull the restraint tight.

“You can’t leave me here alone!” Moses yells at me in a panic. I just laugh at him sitting there with his big dumb black ass hanging out. “You go get some toilet paper ya hear.”

“Who put you in charge?” I scoff and walk out. Talk about a rude jerk.

“You can’t leave me here, Lupton. Goddamn you!” I turn, wave, and walk into my hootch with a shit-eating grin. The moron can sit there forever for all I give a shit, however, being the nicest guy in this outfit, I walk through the hootch, out the other door, and over to the supply room where I obtain ten rolls of toilet paper from Capps. I ask politely and he gives me what I want, never a problem. When I return to the latrine, Moses is still sitting on his hole with his pants down around his ankles fuming and huffing about me leaving him there without any toilet paper.

“Here, you ingrate,” I toss him a roll and distribute the rest throughout the seats, he never does say thank you. I return quickly to the hootch because I fear getting my ass chewed out for being late to Sergeant Rod’s morning police call, which is sacrosanct.

“Saddle Oop!” We can hear the growl of the diesel trucks rolling onto the road, which lies between our hootches and the 81 mortars beyond. Their engines gurgle loudly as we climb aboard. We place the machine gun on the canvas roof of the cab where we can get the best field of fire in case the convoy runs into an ambush.

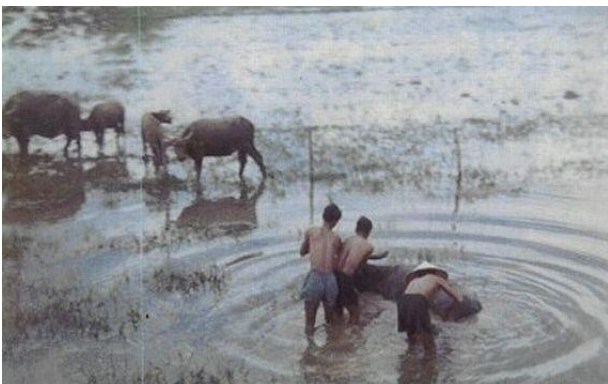


**Figure 2 Alicia (L) and Smokey Fell and Brown - June 1966.**

The convoy starts out the main gate, through the town of Cu Chi where oodles of little kids run along side of the trucks hoping we will throw them some candy. “Hey, GI, GI, you souvenir me candy, GI,” their hands outstretched, their legs churning just as fast as they can, dark brown eyes betray their enthusiastic expectations.

“Stop playing with yer pecker boy,” Sergeant Walker admonishes a little tyke who stands waiving at us with one hand and holding his penis with the other. Both boys and girls run around naked until they are toilet trained, and they shit wherever they feel like it, along side of the road, in front of their house, nobody seems to care.

We pass the ubiquitous gray water buffalo laboring to pull a plow through a mucky rice paddy. Little kids ride these behemoths using bamboo sticks to steer them to wallows where they wash them with muddy brown water.



**Figure 3 Buffalo bathing, somewhere in South Vietnam - 1966.**

I can see endless expanses of flat rice paddies in all directions, thousands of years old, stretching from horizon to horizon. They are interspersed with single mud and



thatch houses, some clustered in small hamlets. Bordering the rice paddies are mud and straw dykes contouring to what trivial elevation there may be. Farmers cut gaps in the dykes to allow water in the higher paddies to drain into the lower ones. They secure bamboo fish traps in these holes to catch tiny fish, crabs, frogs, salamanders, and only God knows what else. These people will eat anything.

After arriving at the bivouac area, we unload rolls of concertina wire and bales of sandbags then begin digging foxholes and stringing the barbed wire. We do this labor for several hours, eat lunch, and then we form up for a security sweep around perimeter. Lieutenant Rooney leaves behind third squad to continue fortifying and secure the camp.

An ARVN interpreter is with us today. We sweep through the first village without finding any Viet Cong but in the second village, someone finds a VC hiding in a hole located underneath a hootch. Under the supervision of Lieutenant Rooney, they walk him to the rice paddy where we are resting, and I watch the interpreter attempt to drown the guy in four inches of muddy water. I feel queasy watching the prisoner as the ARVN pushes his face into the water then he places his knee behind the Viet Cong's head, holding him in the goop. The VC lies quiescent for about 30 seconds; his impulse to breath causes him to thrash around until the ARVN cannot hold him any longer. The ARVN yells at the VC then repeats the procedure once more. Each time the VC passively lies in the water until he needs to breathe then struggles valiantly before the ARVN relents. "The VC wants us to shoot him," Lieutenant Rooney tells us with a smile. The ARVN yells at him again, down the poor sap goes. I take it the VC has had enough when after a muffled conversation; he leads us to another VC hiding in a hole not far from the interrogation site.

With two prisoners trussed up like Thanksgiving turkeys, we begin trudging back to the bivouac. Boutoff and I are following second squad when the man in front of Miller steps across a paddy dyke and trips the booby trap. It is a loud explosion and Miller screams like a stuck pig. Being closest to one of our POWs, I grab the bamboo stick strung through his elbows, guide him to the nearest rice paddy dyke, and sit his ass down.

The medic and a couple of others work frantically on the guy who tripped the booby trap. He has a large hole in his back, and Miller loses half his wrist. "Poor Miller," I think to myself, but this is what he gets for not offering me shelter in a storm, so fuck him, he deserves it.

The dust-off chopper arrives within 10 minutes. When it lands, a photographer jumps out and begins shooting a motion picture of the evacuation. He almost falls on top of the man with the hole in his back as the medics struggle with the poncho stretcher. Then in his excitement, he steps in front of Miller, who is groggy, his knees starting to buckle, and is going into shock. Shoving aside this over eager nitwit, the medic helps Miller on board the dust-off. The photographer excitedly jumps back in the chopper all the while filming as the helicopter pulls the skids out of the sucking mud and flies away.

After the excitement of the medivac, we organize our formation and prepare to move out. "Hey Sarge, can I use this gook to carry my ammo?" I solicit Sergeant Prine. When we begin to move he gives me the okay, and I loop my two ammo cans on one of the VC's shoulders and guide him through the rice paddies holding the stick. I feel so light after humping that Mylinos millstone for all of these months. I can only imagine what it is like to never carry that much weight, and I resign myself to some how get off this goddamn machinegun crew.

Sloshing through shin deep water the prisoner only complains once about the weight nagging his shoulder. I can see his skin stretching from the canvas strap. I tell him to shut the fuck up, he does.

My prisoner and I splash toward a spot of deeper water. A darker brown color betrays its dissimilar depth. One can never tell exactly how deep these things are. The depression may be only a couple of inches deeper or there may be a 20-foot deep well sunk into the middle of the rice paddy. My machine gun ammo will pull him down like a quarter-pound sinker on a fishing line. I know this, but I keep guiding my blindfolded gook in the direction of the hazard. "Hey, Lupton, what the hell are you doing! Move 'em to your left." Sergeant Rod anxiously yells at me; he can see where I am going with this and will not allow me to drown my prisoner. I turn half way around to see him hysterically waving his arm, so I steer my captive to shallower ground. Damn Sergeant Rodriguez; he robs me of my first kill.



**Figure 4 Covellio, Edwards and the VCS - 1966.**

We turn the two prisoners over to some MPs who meet us at the barbed wire. When I pick up my ammo cans, they feel like the burden of the world pressing unmercifully on my shoulder. I really do need to get off this gun crew.

We walk back to our foxhole, begin improving its depth, and I help construct a poncho shelter with two ponchos forming a pup tent and one on the ground to keep us dry. The afternoon drags on with the humidity creating rivers of sweat. By nightfall, our accommodations are acceptable then the rain starts in earnest.

The company brings its mess hall out with us. This means we will be out here for a while and only our noon meal will be c-rations. The rain is coming down hard when chow time rolls around. "Don't bunch up; spread out, you guys know how to do it. Remember, one ass-chewing will get you all." We line up in the rain with our tin mess kits, and the cooks take slack attention in doling out the food. By the time we find somewhere to eat, and shovel this shit into us, the rain has contributed to its soupiness. The bread becomes wallpaper paste and the mashed potatoes develop into potato potage.

After my sucky chow, I return to the foxhole. It is filling up pretty fast and we joke about how it does not matter how full it is when the mortars start dropping we will occupy it as fast as we can. Boutoff extols me to bail it out and begrudgingly I get down and empty the foxhole using my steel pot.

It is third squad's turn to go on ambush tonight. Lieutenant Rooney goes out with them because he wants to see what an ambush is like. Sergeant Price leads them out the triple strand of concertina wire as the last modicum of light fades into blackness. It is still lightening and raining heavily when they leave. After another hour, I crawl into the pup tent and wrap myself up in a wool GI blanket. I recollect our basic training DI, old Sergeant Johnson, lecturing us we how can expect to get dry by wrapping up in a blanket and letting body heat desiccate our clothes. Tonight is such a night. Listening to the rain splatter gently on the poncho, I curl up still moist but warm, safe from harm; I feel protected from bullets while wrapped up in my blanket.

At 2300, our 81mm mortars fire many rounds waking me up. I crook my neck to watch sparks flash out of the tubes, but I am too fatigued for alarm. The firing is out going and I have no fear. I roll over once more, only to drift back to sleep.

"Lupton, get up, it's your turn for guard," Boutoff shakes my shoulder; I grudgingly emerge from my repose, resentful for the intrusion. "Come on, get up."

"Okay, okay, I'm coming," his annoyance will not relent. I have to get out of this womb and stand my three hours of guard until dawn.

"Third squad has made contact," Boutoff tells me.

"Is that why the mortars were firing last night?"

"Yeah, yeah, they lost contact with the ambush. Captain Mayone took two squads from first platoon out to look for them. He just came back; they could not find 'em."

"No shit."

"Stay alert, Lupton," he warns me.

"Okay, man, no problem." I light a cigarette inside of the pup tent before Boutoff crawls in. I find my M14 and ammo, and I take up a position behind the foxhole and carefully smoke my cigarette. The night is dead quiet except for the relentless fuck-you frogs. Their season is waning and I hear only sporadic calls for love mates. I detect no movement to my front or any activity from the CP to my rear. The night drags on forever until just before dawn Sergeant Rodriguez hurriedly splashes through the water.

"Lupton, get 'em up, we have to go find third squad."

"Okay, Sarge, alright you guys, get up, and put your shit on. We have to find third squad." Both Boutoff and Caldwell need no further prodding, they are up and ready in minutes. We assemble near the company CP for Captain Mayone to lead us out to find our missing ambush.

The company departs through the wire with a sense of urgency that slowly denigrates into the grind of a normal search and destroy mission. We head out into the slushy rice paddies and begin searching houses. The rice paddy water is still cool and not yet tepid.

Some old mamasan will not look at us, but we can tell everybody knows what happened last night. We just know it. I search through her hootch hoping upon hope I do not run across any dead GIs.

Our apprehension grows when we begin walking toward the next hamlet. I do not know where Fagan emerged from, but I see him walking toward us, he wears no helmet, carries no weapon, and no web gear; he is soaking wet, muddy and looks haggard. Captain Mayone talks to him for a few minutes, and we resume our march in a slightly different direction.

We can see a helicopter circling in the distance. I can feel anxiety well up inside me as we approach the next tree line, several others begin running ahead of the formation. They ignore calls to return. I cannot stand it any more. I trot out from behind Boutoff as the company wades through shallow water; I take a high step over a large rice paddy dyke to avoid trip wires and stop motionless. I stare at third squad, all lying dead. From behind me, the company splashes through the water until they too can see the ambush.



**Figure 5 Third squad lies dead in the rice paddy - June 28, 1966.**

Some lie face down while others are still laying face up where they died. I can see a leg lying in the middle of the paddy; a bloody stump indicates from whom the leg came. Everybody feels the flush of awfulness run through his body as the immensity of this tragedy sinks in. They are gone, gone except asshole Fagan, of all of the guys on this ambush, only Fagan survives, the biggest sorry-ass in the company.

“Okay, I want all of you guys to spread out and form security,” Sergeant Walker tells us. Most of us stand dumbstruck at this picture, “come on, you, Lupton, Boutoff go over there and set up a perimeter.” We move past the bodies, skirting a hootch on the right side of the ambush site and out into the paddies between that hootch and another. Buxton and I stand in the water trying to figure out exactly who was on the ambush. Boutoff sits on the paddy dyke, the machine gun lying across his legs, not saying a word to anybody. His face betrays dark thoughts as he stares silently into the distance.

“Alicia is there, and Bingham, yeah, and Byrum, yeah, those guys, and Price too! Yeah, Price led them out.” Recalling the squad members, Buxton said, “Who else, ahh, shit! Fell!”

“You’re shitting me! Smokey is dead,” I look toward the rice paddy where the squad lies. Of all the guys, I feel most deeply about Fell. He came back from emergency leave and joined third squad as a rifleman. “Tazlaar is there too, ya know.” I liked Taz. He was in Hawaii with us.

“Dyer too, Dyer’s gun was on this ambush,” the revelation upsets Buxton.

“Buxton, how come you weren’t with Dyer’s gun?”

“I drank a whole bunch of that gook brandy the kids brought around yesterday while you were out on sweep. I was throwing my guts up just before the ambush got ready to leave. Man, I was sicker than shit,” explains Buxton with a slight tinge of infamy. I watch his face as he realizes he missed the ambush because he got drunk on duty.

“Who was carrying ammo for Dyer?”

“Some FNG named Scheidt. Shit, I cannot believe they are all dead. Hey, why the hell was Rooney on that ambush? Officers never go out on ambush. What’s with him?”

“He wanted to see what an ambush was like,” I tell him.

“Some ambush he picked,” replied Buxton staring into the distance, “he should have picked an LP outside of the Cu Chi wire.”

The company commander with his retinue inspects the bodies and coordinates the helicopters to come pick up the dead. I can hear glass breaking in one of the houses closest to the ambush site.

“Hey, I’ve got some brains over here,” yells Sergeant Atkinson looking at the ground. The Captain calls it in to battalion as a VC KIA. Battalion will not accept this as a confirmed kill because we do not have a body, as if a gook can run around without his brains seems to make more logic to the Colonel. “They put up a damn good fight,” relays Atkinson, “look at all of the brass at the machine gun position. There must be three hundred rounds here.” Further examination reveals the VC turned the Claymore around on the gun position and that is what killed them. This means the VC had enough time to crawl around and set themselves up to attack the ambush. It also means the guys on the ambush were not paying attention.

I watch the first helicopter fly in and land. It takes a few minutes to load the six bodies into the cargo bay then the helicopter takes off and the next chopper lands. After the second one flies away, there are only a few minutes before we form up for a search around ambush site. I smell smoke from fires beginning to escape the insides of the two closest houses. I can hear the crackle of revenge.

The formation begins a wide sweeping arch around the ambush site. Everyone marches with stoic ambivalence determined to extract some retribution. We will take no prisoners. We find no people, none. Some guys throw hand grenades into holes, others in frustration shoot pigs and chickens. Sergeant Atkinson herds a gaggle of ducklings into a well then tries to drown them by pushing them below the surface with a bamboo basket attached to a long stick. After a minute, they all pop up to the surface, quacking madly, and obviously unhurt. “Okay, you guys have had enough. Come on now, up you go.” He carefully draws each duckling out of the well and every one runs in a different direction. We giggle at his silliness and move on to the next hootch.

I walk into a sturdy brick house covered with white stucco and sporting the shiniest floor ever seen. This one is a tile mosaic burnished smooth, reflecting the interior of the house from its stones. I survey glass china cabinets with complete sets of dishes, ceramic figurines, and other family artifacts. The roof is tiled red, the interior is immaculate, and then somebody yells, “Fire in the hole,” a hand grenade bounces along the polished floor. I scoot out quickly just before the explosion. I can hear the china case glass shattering as I rejoin the gun crew.

The company continues searching for people to interrogate, but we cannot find any. We stop in a rice paddy to regroup, and Rios tries to shoot a snake with his 45 pistol, but he never is able to hit it. Not being able to kill anybody is frustrating and eventually the company heads back to the bivouac.

We return at 11 o’clock and mill around our positions until chow time. Sergeant Walker begins tooting his leadership horn. “I knew when we got there we needed

security. That's why I told you men to form a perimeter." Yeah, right, Sergeant-Full-of-Shit, you are our fearless leader. "I thought it was interesting that they never checked the bodies for booby traps. That was Alicia's leg in the middle of the paddy. He took a direct hit in the ass cheek with an 81mm mortar. We found Price's body a little ways away. He must have run before they caught him in the back with three rounds. That goddamn Fagan, he keeps telling the Captain different stories. First he said they were hit just as they were setting up the ambush then he tells 'em he ran as soon as the VC started shooting. Still, another version is only when he realizes the ambush is doomed did he get up and run." Sergeant Walker is a repository of information. He is holding court.

First Sergeant Letoto condemns me to pulling KP in the afternoon. The heat is stifling with no shade, and we have to work in hot water washing the pots and pans the cooks throw our way. They are never thrifty with the clean pots.

It rains very hard in the afternoon and after the evening meal, the cooks tell me and another KP to carry this 32-gallon garbage can completely full of slop over to a hole and dump it. When we look at the container, we can tell there is no way the two of us can pick it up because that garbage can must weigh 400 pounds. Cheatum, our big black Mandingo cook, huffs, and snorts like a bull then orders another big black buck to get on the other handle, and they muscle this 400 pound can of garbage through a quagmire of slippery mud over to the hole and dump it in. They leave the empty can for us to take back and wash. Finally, just after sunset we are finished.

I return to my hole, soaking wet from sweat and rain, slipping and sliding in the semi darkness. I have been wet all day; my face feels greasy from the steam in the wash barrel, I have not washed in several days, my feet stink when I take my boots off, and right at this very moment, I do not love Jesus. I possess no clean socks, no change of clothes, and I have to get up at 3 am to pull my guard.

Because third squad is gone, our gun position shifts several bunkers away from our tent. Boutoff warns me, "Be careful Lupton, everybody is pretty nervous tonight." I have to walk through several flooded rice paddies to another bunker all the while being quiet but at the same time making enough noise so the other guards will not shoot my ass. I make it without incident, and with great effort, I stay awake until dawn.

After morning chow, Sergeant Rodriguez gathers us around and tells us a first platoon ambush made contact last night. You can almost hear the collective halt in our breathing. "They killed one VC and wounded another. None of ours got killed." Phew, everyone exhales, "This morning they brought the wounded gook back and interrogated him. It turns out he is the squad leader of the VC platoon that killed third squad. They discover the ambush because the guys are smoking and not paying attention. The VC took enough time to turn the Claymores around and then attack the ambush from the rear. Our mortars hurriedly adjusted and the rounds fell to close to the ambush, one striking Alicia in the ass, blowing his leg into the middle of the circle. The VC purloins all of the weapons and hi-tails it back over the Cambodian border." Nobody says a word.

"The Colonel is pissed to no end because Rooney took the radio codes and now the Viet Cong have 'em. He should have left them with me." The battalion uses the codes to authenticate the transmitter of a message. Everyday has a different set of variables, one on a horizontal axis, and the other on a vertical axis. Where they intersect is the day's code. When someone challenges the transmitter, he will look up the daily

axis settings and produce a correct letter code. Now Division will have to produce a new codebook, as if this is the most traumatic thing that happened out of this incident.

The FNGs we left behind at Cu Chi join us. I can only imagine what goes through their minds when news of third squad's demise hit the rear. They diffidently fall into the ranks, and we perform our daily security sweep around the perimeter. We find nothing of interest all this day. In the late afternoon, it begins to rain hard as we make our way back to the bivouac. When I arrive back at the hole I can see an APC has snagged the corner of our poncho hootch and my radio is laying speaker up getting soaked. I become infuriated at the APC crew for damaging my radio. They could have covered it up. Even though I do not know why I took it in the first place. I stomp off to find Rodriguez. I find him near the company CP, and I begin haranguing him about what happened. I do not even stay to find out what he is going to do about it, which is nothing, but I am too far gone to care. I stomp back through the water to my hole and turn on the radio. It works, "Oh my God, what have I done?" I say in my quintessential Colonel Nicholson moment. I guess everything is okay now - shucks.

Sergeant Rodriguez sends word for me to come see him at his foxhole. When I get there, he lectures me not to do that again in front of the company commander. I sheepishly say I am sorry, and okay, not to worry, I will not do it again. Sergeant Prine crawls out of the opposite end of their shelter-half tent, "What do you mean bothering Sergeant Rod? You are supposed to come to *me* with those kinds of problems, *Lupton!*" I grow incensed with Prine's haughty arrogance. If I had my rifle I would shoot the prick right now, and someone would give me an award later on, but I just stomp back to my hootch ranting and raving about what an asshole Prine is.

"Hey," says Boutoff, "you should have told Sergeant Rod you wanted to talk to someone who has the ability to do something about it."

"Yeah, I guess you are right," I reply, "knowing that jerk off Prine wouldn't do a fucking thing except be an asshole." I perceive roars of laughter from behind me.

"Hey, Lupton, come here," it is Buxton. He and a bunch of his cohorts are beckoning me to join them, except there is a trap. I watch the last fool who ventures over to them; he is picking his soaking wet ass out of the rice paddy. The ground looks like it is solid, but there is a concealed hole just under the water. The hapless ding-dong slipped into waste deep water, and now he has to get on his hands to knees to crawl out of it.

"No way man, not me," I am too smart to fall for this crap.

Sergeant Rod announces we have a beer ration tonight. This is interesting; they have never given us beer out in the field before. I retrieve the ration for the gun crew and walk back to the hole, being careful to avoid the raucous crew of GI Joes as they roil on the top of their bunker laughing their asses off at yet another hapless fool crawling out of the mud hole.

The brew is cold and delicious after the exasperation of the day. One of my beers is flat, but I drink it anyway. The alcohol buzz unwinds me after my tribulations, and aside from my ass being damp from sitting on wet sandbags, serenity envelops us as we watch the sunset turn bright red just above the horizon.

Now that I am over my hissy fit about the radio, we get to know the guys on the APC. All three of them have big noses. We ask them about this coincidence and they tell us one is a Polack, another is a Jew, and the last one is Italian. They turn out to be good guys, and we learn they are going to position the APC next to our hole. This night I

get a chance to pull my guard while standing behind the 50 caliber. "All you have to do is pull the arming handle back and press the butterflies to make it fire," the Polack tells me, "It is all set to go." I wish mightily that a VC would be stupid enough to try to infiltrate our line tonight.

Behind me, the mortars fire H & I rounds over our bunker. From the fired mortar round, the red-hot charge-clips sizzle when they fall into the paddy water beyond our bunker. I fondle the wooden trigger handles and trace the outline of the butterflies with my thumbs. I am invincible behind this monstrous weapon.

Crawling into the pup tent the next morning, I put my weight down on my right knee; it feels like kneeling on a thumbtack, my knee burns. I swear at my agony then roll up my pant leg to see I have heat pimples all over my lower legs. After I pop a few on my knees, my knee can tolerate my weight again. I swear and curse, wishing for the day when I am not in pain every time I turn around.

We bring our water trailer to the field only to discover the nitwit driver has put too much iodine in the water. The over treated water tastes like shit. I have to force myself to drink the stuff. I discover the two FNGs unwittingly leave their canteens in our tent, and I cannot restrain myself. I purloin some pure Cu Chi water from each man's canteen, drinking deeply and fast, so nobody will catch me. I revisit the canteens several times before I feel guilty about my indulgence, but I am thirsty.

On our day of departure, we have to empty the sandbags into our holes and roll up the concertina wire. After we load the duce-and-a-halves, the convoy travels uneventfully back to Cu Chi. Upon arrival, I head straight for the hootch to dump my gear. When I open the door and step inside, I stop in my tracks. I look at all of the bunks; the room is starkly bare except for the bunks of the two FNGs and the crew of the machine gun. All of third squad's personal property is gone, every bit of it. Only the bare wooden Army cots remain. Dust motes drift in the late day sunlight as it shines through gaps of the canvas. The setting is eerie and forlorn. It is only now that I discern the finality of third squad.

Boutoff walks in behind me. He stops too and stares briefly before nudging me to get going. We walk slowly to the other end of the hootch; I dump my gear on the floor. We look at each other, but neither of us talks. I turn around to see Caldwell and the two FNGs walk in the door, and they too survey the scene in silence. Nobody says a word.

I take out my two canteens and make a beeline out the door toward B Company's water trailer, now my priority objective. I empty out my canteens of the foul tasting iodine water and fill up both of them. I drink the entire contents of the first one and then refill it. There is still a tincture of iodine in my mouth, which will stay there for another day, but finally I am not thirsty. I return to the empty hootch then join the chow line.

After I eat, I clean up my gear I take a shower, shave, brush my teeth, and change into nice clean fatigues. Now I am ready for inebriation. Swanwick from the mortar platoon, and I walk up to the EM Club located just up the road. When we get there, we have to cross a wide drainage ditch. The dirt looks solid enough but when I step on it, I sink down to the middle of both my shins in soft gooey muck. Another long stride puts me on the other side of the obstacle, and my clean pants are now adorned with mud. There is nothing to do but wait until it dries before scrapping the dirt off with my knife. After imbibing a river of swill, we leap over the muddy fosse and stagger back to the hootches. Sleep overtakes me while the rafters spin their circles over my head.