

“Hey, where is everybody?” Returning from R&R, Brooks jauntily walks into the hootch with the smile of a man whose balls hang empty. The company has been in the rear now for almost a week after we got back from the Cambodian border. I turn and look at him without expression. “They are all dead Brooksie,” I tell him flatly. The smile on his face turns to a wrinkled frown. He does not believe me.

“No shit... what do you mean?”

“Like I said, they are all dead. Third squad got wiped when you were gone.”

“You mean *everybody*? No *shit*, that can’t be,” Brooks sits on his bunk staring over all of the empty cots. He looks like he wants to say something but hesitates. After a while, I think it finally dawns on him that we are not bullshitting him. He does not say very much as he changes into fatigues.

“Everybody whose bunk is empty died.” Boutoff adds passively.

“No *shit*,” he replies with dismay, “when did this happen?”

“They got it the day after you left for R & R. You missed the ambush by a day simply by going on R & R.”

Not everybody loses on ambush though. The demise of 3rd squad wipes out almost all of Brooks’s gambling debts. He only owes Buxton and Greco small amounts mainly because they keep ragging him for money every payday.

“No *shit*,” he says, “Tazlaar? Fell? Alicia?” Brooks names his main creditors. “Did Sergeant Price get killed too?” Brooks sounds almost hopeful because he never liked the squad leader ever since Price caught Brooks sleeping on bunker guard, and Price made him fill a hundred sandbags. Brooks whined and cried about it, but Price would not relent.

“Be a man and take your punishment Brooks,” bawls Price, “and don’t be going to sleep on guard again!”

“Yeah, and they got that new Lieutenant too,” I tell him as he walks toward us.

“No *shit*?”

“Yeah, no shit.”

Fagan disappears from the hootch when we return from the field. After payday, he goes AWOL to Saigon where the MPs pick him up almost immediately. Hamby goes down to LBJ and brings him back. As Hamby waits for the MPs to bring Fagan, he leans against the counter and watches old Sergeant Thomas, now Private Thomas, stoically mopping the commanding officer’s floors. Sergeant Thomas always picked on Hamby’s ass back in Schofield, ragging him incessantly about one thing or another because Hamby is a good-old-southern-boy. Only a private back then, he must tolerate the black sergeant’s chicken shit with humility. “How you like being a private now, Thomas?” Hamby deigns to ask with a snicker of revenge curled in. Thomas, startled, turns to see his former subordinate, now his antagonists, leaning arrogantly on one elbow with a Colt 45 on his hip, and a snicker on his lips. Hamby could not pass up the opportunity to rub salt in old Sergeant Tom’s injured vanity just one last time. No lexis could ever describe Sergeant Tom’s contempt for white hicks.

“You stay here Fagan,” Hamby orders his prisoner to wait for him outside of the first squad’s hootch. Hamby walks in and after a while I hear a BANG!

“Goddamn it Hamby, now we got a hole in the roof.” I hear Bishop carping. He is a diminutive person in stature who complains inordinately.

“Aw, don’t sweat it. I’ve got bigger things to worry about.”

“Hey, what are you doin? I ain’t goin no place Hamby, don’t shoot my ass,” supplicates Fagan.

“Aw this stupid 45 went off when I unloaded it, Fagan, just stay where you are.”

“Man, I thought you were going to shoot ma mother-fuc-king ass,” Fagan dances his jig-a-boo boogie in a circle, a big shit-eating grin adorning his face. Guffaws emanate from inside first squad’s tent.

“All right, Fagan, stop acting stupid, come on, let’s go to the orderly room,” Hamby herds his prisoner into the orderly room to find out what to do with him. Captain Mayone elects to court-martial him for cowardice and going AWOL to Saigon. It seems when Fagan showed up in the rice paddy he was not carrying his rifle. First Sergeant Letoto makes Fagan show him the direction he skedaddled. He and the First Sergeant walk about 50 meters south of the ambush site where Letoto finds Fagan’s rifle. Sergeant Letoto picks up the weapon and examines it. “The goddamn rifle jammed on me, Top. It fired only one bullet, and I couldn’t get it un-jammed,” Fagan whines to a deaf ear. Sternly, the First Sergeant begins ejecting rounds from the M14, showing the rifle should work. He ejects the nineteen rounds left in the magazine. Top inspects the gas cylinder near the muzzle and notices Fagan has the spindle positioned to allow gas to blow through the barrel and not recycle the rifle’s bolt. The M14 can fire a crimp-cartridge to launch a rifle grenade, but the rifle grenade is an old weapon not used because we utilize the M79 blooper.

“You say you waited to run until you thought the ambush was domed?”

“Naw Sarge, the fucking ambush never fought back, my gun jammed, and when I saw everybody was a goner, fuck ‘em, I ran.” Letoto twitched his eye at this last proclamation.

First Sergeant Letoto did not buy it. He stood with the CO and the mortar sergeant watching the tracers zigzagging in the night sky during the firefight. There was plenty of fighting by the third squad. “Where were you when you lost this rifle?”

“I fell into this hole over here and was too scared to move all fucking night, Top,” Fagan defends himself with almost a whine in his voice.

“I don’t know Fagan. Something doesn’t sound right here. Pick up these rounds and get back to the captain, he’ll decide what to do with you.”

Letoto resented Fagan bad-mouthing the 3rd squad; nobody chicken shitted out except him. He knew something did not smell right with Fagan’s ever-changing story. If he had left his weapon at the ambush site, the VC would have policed it up and that would be the end of it. However, we have the weapon, and it would have worked had Fagan paid attention to the spindle. The only thing that bastard did was fire one round and run like hell, everybody else stayed and fought. Sergeant Letoto urges the captain to court martial him, which means there must be an armed guard watching his dumb ass twenty-four hours a day. Lucky me, I get to stand guard over him tonight. They put him in second squad’s hootch.

Buxton, Fagan, and Brown swill beer in a private bull session when I take over from the prior guard. He gives me his 45 pistol for a personal weapon and takes off. The only other person in the hootch is some reticent buck sergeant from the mortar platoon

who is indifferent to everybody else around him. Fagan gets up and starts walking outside. “Hey, where do you think you’re going?” I challenge him. I put my hand on the 45. There is a magazine in the handle, but I have not checked to see if the pistol is actually loaded.

“Buxton, tell that motherfucker I’ll take that goddamn pistol away from him and shove it up his fucking ass if he gives me any more bullshit,” Fagan gestures toward me with his IQ finger.

“He is just going to get some more beer, Lupton,” Buxton explains, “relax, don’t worry he ain’t going anywhere.” I can hear Fagan rummaging through the ice in the cooler outside of the hootch, but I cannot see him through the screens in the darkness. I ponder my chances of getting in a deeper shitstorm if I blow Fagan away. There are three witnesses of color against me, and only this white, namby-pamby sergeant behaving apathetic toward everyone else. The odds are not in my favor. Fagan saunters back inside with three beers, passes them around to his buddies and ignores me. I listen to snatches of their conversation as I pretend to read a copy of the *Stars & Stripes*.

“Down at the 93rd Evac Hospital, I saw this guy stuffed in ice waiting to be shipped home. Ma ass ain’t gonna be like that motherfucker,” Fagan elucidates in between draws on his beer.

“Hey, how did you get away from that ambush site, Fagan? Buxton just puts the question out. Fagan is not lost for words as his big floppy Negro lips spew forth his catharsis.

“A couple of hours after we set up they hit the ambush. I was asleep and all of a sudden, there is a shit load of incoming fire. There are explosions going off everywhere. Then a big boom throws shrapnel singing past my head, probably when Dyer’s machine gun stopped firing, and a second later, he must have triggered the goddamn Claymore that the gooks turned around on him.”

“How long did all this take?”

“I...don’t know a couple of seconds, maybe? Next thing I remember is Sergeant Price yelling at me to get the fuck out of here. As he runs past me, the VC fire another burst, and he yelps like a dog when they take him down. It’s then I tell myself to get outta there. They were shooting at me too, but I outran all of those bullets. I just flat out ran like a motherfucker until I run into a muddy hole, and I just laid there. I could hear them yelling to themselves. I was shaking and praying to God, oh, oh, do not let them little goddamn gooks motherfuckers find ma ass, please Lordy, please. Goddamn my knees are knocking so loud I thought Charlie was going hear my knees a’ banging, so I just grabbed my legs to keep from shaking so much. I know they were looking for me; I can hear them scrounging around tripping over things not far away,” Fagan pauses for a long, reflective drink on his beer, “I still get nightmares when I think about Fell. I hear him crying for his mother when the VC overran the ambush. I could hear the bang when they shot him.”

“Yeah, I hear ya brother, the medic said he had a bullet hole in his forehead,” corroborates Buxton.

“I lay out in that stinking muddy-assed hole all goddamn night praying those gooks wouldn’t find my ass. I was one praying motherfucker. Later that night, I hear what sounds like other soldiers off in the distance, but I ain’t certain if they are ours.”

“Nobody blames you Fagan. I mean, shit, what would anybody else do in that situation?” Buxton counsels and they all drink another round of beer, only this time Buxton volunteers to retrieve them.

Buxton is right though. What would I have done in that situation, run, or stay and die? Myself, I probably would have run too. The disposition of Fagan’s cohorts is not to begrudge him for surviving his own annihilation.

Their bull session breaks up around 2300, other squad members filter in and go to bed, and the mortar sergeant turns off the electric light. I light a candle, so I can keep an eye on the prisoner and not have to sit in the dark while he sleeps. Fagan settles down into the bunk next to me, turns, and in a flowery falsetto voice, supplicates me to souvenir him a cigarette. He is such a nigger. Now, with no more of his jabunggee brothers around for him to jive, he behaves as amiably as any sissy white boy might when bumming my cigarettes. I could say, “fuck you, Fagan,” and live with a clear conscious, but I should not stoop even so low as Fagan to deny him a lousy cigarette? It grinds my guts to no end to proffer him a Camel; I even light the stupid thing for him too. Fagan does not even utter a thank you, and he smokes my cigarette in silence while staring at the ceiling. He stomps the butt out on the floor, rolls over, and falls asleep with his back toward me. Resentful that I must stay awake while he sleeps, I stare at his pathetic black ass in silence, wishing he would get up and make a run for the door, so I can shoot the dumb son of a bitch. I have no such luck; he lies comfortably slumbering until my relief shows up to take over. That is just about the last I ever see of Fagan.

God takes care of idiots, fools, and drunks because Fagan is court marshaled for cowardly conduct and going AWOL, busted to private E-nothing, and fined, no big deal for him. I cringe when hearing they reassign him to work in the Division PX for the rest of his tour. He is off the line.

The next morning we get Lieutenant Holiday for our new platoon leader. There is no formal introduction, he just shows up at the formation looking a bit uncomfortable, and we go out on a sweep in front of the company area. Sergeant Rod does most of the leading while Holiday becomes familiar with our SOP. We walk out to the gates of Nightmare Village and marvel at the two pictures of Wolfhounds somebody painted on each concrete gate pillar.

I walk with Knott, who takes over Dyer’s machine gun. I turned in my M14 for a 45 pistol, which makes carrying ammunition much easier for me. By now, my obsession is to decrease the amount of weight I have to hump; the M14 and the resulting ammunition represent about twenty pounds. As the assistant gunner, I will be busy feeding ammo to the gun and not firing my rifle, so the theory goes.

A platoon size patrol takes place the next day. Lieutenant Holiday and Sergeant Rod lead us through the wire in front of our bunker line, and we head in the direction of the French Mansion. The platoon makes a broad sweep along the edge of the rubber plantation and circles back toward the estate. When we stop for evening chow, each man claims a rubber tree as his friend. No sooner am I bringing my c-rations to a boil with a smokeless heat tablet than a lone Viet Cong shoots a probing round down my row of rubber trees. It comes whizzing past me then smacks loudly into a tree trunk just beyond. The round is a low powered bullet because I hear the rifle’s muzzle blast first then the bullet zings past without breaking the sound barrier. In the beginning of our tour, somebody found a few homemade bullets manufactured out of copper tubing, right in this

area. They looked crude, but they would work if fired from an old Springfield or other bolt-action rifle. I speculate a Viet Cong sentry suspects our presence and wants to draw return fire. However, nobody appears to notice anything; neither the new lieutenant nor Sergeant Rod, so I merely shift my cooking fire a quarter-way around my rubber tree and finish eating chow.

When it becomes almost dark, the platoon is up and moving into our ambush position, which is not far away. The ambush sets up along an ox-cart trail. Shortly, I hear a muffled voice talking into the radio then the faint thunk of the mortar round leaving the tube way back at the company area. I hear the growing hiss as the round falls well beyond us to my two o'clock; slightly illuminating the horizon is the white sphere lands. More muffled voices, more seconds later I hear the muted thump of the round leaving the tube, and then a strange wobbling resonance of the Willie Peter round tumbling end over end as it falls toward us. Oh GOD, someone stored the round on its side, not upright. I am *petrified!* My mind's eye watches the wayward round falling short, *right into the top of my tree*, engulfing me in a hideous cloud of smoldering white-hot phosphorous. As the whoosh, whoosh, whoosh grows louder, I push up against my tree trunk, cradling myself in my arms expecting a merciless death. The mortar shell strikes the ground a hundred feet or so behind us with a wimpy thud. Craning my neck to see around my tree, a small whitish sphere struggles to glow but cannot. I quiver as the angst flows out of me through my sphincter. I hear the muffled voice calling again, shortly, another round thumps out of the mortar. After a few seconds, I perceive the growing whisper of the next WP round as it approaches the ground, detonating in a white-hot plume just past the kill zone of the ambush. That is it, the crews calculate their adjustments, and the mortars are finished registering for the night.

We spend the subsequent days on sweeps with the 5th Mech. We get to ride inside of the tracks periodically and enjoy a break from the homogeneous spongy rice paddies. The tracks can cover more ground than the line companies can. In addition, we have the protection of the fifty caliber machine guns, which is sort of like having big mean dogs to protect you and finally there is safety from small arms fire inside the APCs. We actually enjoy the jerky, jostling ride.

Our formation of tracks halts along side a village where reports put a minefield in the rice paddy right in front of us. The track company commander decides he needs to burn a path through the mines using a track-mounted flamethrower. It takes some time to get the igniter fired up so it will remain lit then the napalm bursts through the nozzle, but it merely spews out in gooey blobs and lies on the ground unburnt. Laughter erupts at the crew as they give it another try, the track commander fumes and cusses, still the same result. After expending most of his napalm, they manage to get a good fiery spurt and the stuff on the ground flashes up in a horrendous conflagration, black smoke curling upward well above the bamboo hedgerow. The track sergeant turns towards us with a shit-eating grin and pumps his fist in triumph; we return his cheer. After the napalm burns itself out, the formation of APCs crank through the rice paddy into the village. Our track swivels to the left and drives through the cleared space without incident until we cross a high berm at the edge of the village. The track explodes a small booby trap right underneath where I stand. This explosion is the minefield we just tried to destroy. Standing next to me smiles some moron GI wearing black-rimmed glasses, joyously boasting this is his first

booby trap. Thoughts of Miller with half his wrist blown away runs through my mind, "Yeah, asshole, I'm just grateful the booby trap is as small as your brain."

Our track stops beside a thatched hootch next to a rather large field with row after row of neatly growing vegetables. A hunchback old mamasan walks outside with a fretful look on her face. She knows what is about to happen; she raises her bamboo broom above her head waiving a frantic signal for us to stop then she starts running toward us screaming words we do not understand. Her efforts are in vain as the motor revs and my track begins plowing through many months of tender loving care. Poor Mamasan, everybody just points to her hysterical protests and laughs. Pole beans, cucumbers, squash, and Chinese cabbage are all trundled underneath three tons of grinding treads; her voice drowns under the engine's roar. We race for the next hedgerow and render the same fate to the neighboring plot then continue through the village converting Saigon's subsistence farmers into hard-core Viet Cong all along the way. Our empathy is pathetic.

Riding around in APCs, and now and again on the tops of the 3/4 Cavalry's tanks, is all good fun. It takes the drudgery out of our day, but the easy times come to an abrupt halt when the tank we ride quickly sinks to its axles in the muck. We have to pull security around the crestfallen tank until a TRV trundles its way out from Cu Chi. By using a huge cable, it manages to winch the ignoble tank out of the mud. The armored vehicles go back to the security of a road; we must reacquaint our feet with muddy water and continue our tedious pursuit for the elusive Viet Cong guerilla.

To say the least, we do not find very many VC using this tactic. The VC may be unintelligent, illiterate peasants, but they are not so stupid to take on armored infantry. They just hold up in their holes and let the dim-witted Americans walk right over them.

The division devises a new tactic using helicopters. They call them Eagle Flights. At first, the whole company flies into a village escorted by gunships flying overhead, firing machine guns and rockets, but this is still slow, and it is cumbersome to coordinate over a hundred guys; the VC just waits us out.

The helicopter assaults are refined still further by using only two platoons to assault a village and holding one platoon in reserve. We can airlift two platoons using 12 helicopters, or six helicopters employing two lifts, the body count goes up marginally and the capture of VCS increases. It is possible to do three or four combat assaults a day. Our searches are more methodical, and we bring a couple of South Vietnamese police officers with us who take the time to question the villagers. Another nice point to this method of operating is we get to work out of Cu Chi every day. We do not have to bivouac in night defensive positions or go on endless nonsensical patrols that produce no tangible results, i.e. body count.

I have just bummed a Salem cigarette from Sergeant Walker. It is nighttime on the bunker line, and we position the machine gun on the right side of the access road leading through our barbed wire. I see a darkened figure skulking towards us, "Hey, either of you guys know what time it is?" Jackson, from the third platoon, walks half way over to us then stops. I can just barely see my florescent watch pointing to 2230 hours. I tell him the time and Sergeant Walker warns him not to walk around at night. Walker orders him back to his bunker and leaves to check the line then settle into his own bunker for the night. I inhale the Salem sensing the cool menthol in the back of my throat. I think what a pussy cigarette this is in comparison to my macho, unfiltered

Camels, but I am out of smokes and cannot get to the PX for more, so I must settle for what I can scrounge.

After I put out the cigarette, I climb on top of the bunker and settle into the sandbag chair we fashioned before it grew dark. With my M14 cradled in my arms, I use my poncho to keep my ass dry. The night is clear and cool, and I can hear mortars firing way off into the distance at some remote ARVN outpost. Now and again, I watch red tracers ricocheting skyward then I hear the 8th Artillery fire off a volley of 105s over our heads that hiss off into the distance with the explosion trailing back to me after several long seconds delay.

My mind drifts to the pleasant rumor that the 25th Division is going home on 14 November. We will be sailing on a ship just like the one we came over from Hawaii. Of course, there is absolutely nothing to any of this malarkey, but I write home that this is what is going to happen. I start to think of myself as a short-timer with less than 120 days to go when I actually have over 180.

Virtually nobody knows why Jackson goes ballistic, but suddenly a stream of muzzle flashes illuminate the rubber trees into haunting specters as tracer bullets burst forth from his bunker ricocheting wildly off the tree stumps. I about shit myself as Jackson screams, “they’re coming, they’re out there,” believing the Viet Cong are making a massive human-wave assault right up the road between our two bunkers, I do a backward summersault off the bunker, sticking the landing perfectly. I squat down below the top of the bunker to peer into the inky blackness as another long burst of M14 fire comes roaring out of Jackson’s automatic rifle, “They’re coming, I see them, and they are coming to *kill us!*” He screams in a high pitch banshee voice. From inside our bunker, the machine gun joins with a short burst of red tracers bouncing off the ground and the tree stumps in front of us. Peering around the corner of my bunker I watch Jackson’s two bunker mates rush out the entrance, “That nigger is *crazy!*” declares one of them, both scrambling to escape the confines of the blackened bunker. We hear Jackson ripping up the two-by-four bunks with his bare hands searching for more ammunition. He resumes screaming at the top of his lungs as boards go flying.

“What’s going on down there?” Sergeant Walker yells to me.

“Jackson sees something,” is my timid reply as it dawns on me what is happening. Jackson has merely gone ape shit, and no, hordes of Viet Cong will not be over running us tonight, and I thank them very much for their consideration.

“Jesus fucking Christ, what is with that stupid motherfucker?” Buxton surfaces from the bunker with Knott trailing him. “Man, when that stupid crazy assed bastard started shooting I thought we were getting overrun. I just went for the machine gun and pulled the trigger,” Buxton hoots, as his panting subsides, “I didn’t aim at shit or nothing.”

“I was searching around for my glasses when Buxton crawls over me and starts shooting,” says Knott, “what the fuck is wrong with that guy anyway?”

“Stand back, stand back, I’ll throw this CS grenade to get him out,” a darkened figure yells out in the blackness.

“No, no, wait, Jackson, what’s going on in there,” Sergeant Dalton begins coaxing him out, “put the rifle down Jackson and come out of there.” The bunker falls silent except for the sound of panting as the two former occupants anxiously wait behind the bunker expecting Jackson to resume his rampage. “Come on Jackson, settle down boy.

Settle down in there. All right, now, come on out of there. You'll be all right. Take my word for it. Okay, now let's go back to the battalion aid station." Dalton talks to him as if he is calming down a horse. Shortly, a jeep arrives, and Jackson, the medic and Sergeant Dalton all drive back to the rear.

We are laughing now that everything is clear. I stand behind our bunker too frightened to settle into the sandbag chair again. It is still my guard and the two others go back into the bunker laughing and retelling their war stories then they fall silent, enveloped with sleep. My guard continues for another forty-five minutes until midnight, which seems like an eternity, and then I wake up Knott to relieve me.

Nice try Jackson. I guess the docs did not think his little episode on the line was worth a permanent trip to the rear either, because Jackson rejoins third platoon a day later.

Today is July 19 our sixth month anniversary in Vietnam, how about that. We spend the morning picking up cigarette butts, filling the shower tank, and straightening up the sandbags around the hootches. The mess hall has chow ready for us early, and then the company loads into duce-and-halves. We arrive at the helipad around 1100 hours. Because second platoon is short our third squad, we are the reserve platoon.

"Where's Buxton?" I ask Knott as we set down our equipment.

"Sergeant Prine is having him court-marshaled for going AWOL last week. He stopped by the EM club and had a few when he was supposed to be on detail. Prine insists he be sent up the river," Knott tells me with so much apathy.

"Why the hell does Prine want to send him to LBJ? When Buxton almost blew away Lieutenant Roth nobody did shit about that," I bicker. The absurdity of the Army mind, concluding it is a terribly wasted thing.

"I don't know, Lupton, not my problem." He says indifferently, and we sit down on the ground to wait. Knott attempts to nap but he jerks awake every time he nods off. "Damn guys were drinking until 2am last night. I hardly slept at all," he grumbles to me.

Just after noon, helicopters fly first and third platoons to two objectives. The choppers insert first platoon on Objective 5 and Lieutenant Schnizer reports only light contact. He feels he can take care of the situation without reinforcements. Colonel O'Neil immediately inserts third platoon into Objective 1 a few thousand meters distance, and they come under rifle and automatic weapons fire as soon as the platoon lands. Third platoon's Lieutenant Williams calls for a dustoff for a litter casualty. Shortly, they request the dustoff for two more personnel.

I am not too upset at this time. There is no request for the reserve platoon, and I am grateful for that. "Third platoon has one dead and three wounded," shouts a report from those assembled around the radio. After a while, "Third platoon has 3 dead and 6 wounded. They are calling for another dustoff." Our anxiety really builds when we hear first platoon is mixing it up at close quarters.

At 1300, Sergeant Rod's dreaded war cry shatters our peace of mind, "Saddle oop!" I buckle my web belt and gather up my two cans of ammunition as the helicopters land. I scramble inside the second ship finding myself sitting in the middle seat crunched in between Knott and Walley while Stemic sits on the floor between the two pilot's seats. There are seven of us crammed into the ship. The formation of helicopters sit on the ground for several minutes with the engines running full bore then we take off and gain air speed; after loosing the ground cushion, we become airborne. The air turns

cool as we gain altitude to 500 feet; I watch the ship's compass spin slowly to 280 degrees then I notice Nui Ba Dinh floating past the port cargo door as we line up for our descent. The helicopter vibrates noticeably as it begins to slow, the rotor tips smack loudly against the air, crack, crack, crack, and then both of the door gunners open up with their machine guns. The noise intensifies as we get lower then suddenly the ship bounces when the skids touch the ground. The door gunners cease firing so we can get off. The man sitting in the door takes the first step; Knott follows Stemic with me tagging closely behind. The four of us literally fall out of the ship in a pile. Immediately the door gunners resume firing directly over our heads as the choppers lift off. They break hard to their left. The right side door gunners keep firing as the ships fade away in the distance. Gunships make strafing runs, punctuating the pandemonium with 2.75 rockets. The noise is petrifying; we detect plenty of incoming fire searching for us.

There seems to be a lull after the slicks fly away; the platoon takes their bearings. Knott and I crawl toward our right front into the corner of the rice paddy. Here a larger dyke runs north/south and intersects with an east/west dyke in front of us, which is lower. First platoon's right flank is approximately 75 meters to our front; their line extends 50 meters further to the left. Knott and I find ourselves directly behind their right flank. They are taking cover along an ox-cart trail running east/west at the edge of the village.

Edwards takes a round in the chest as he exits the first helicopter and Lieutenant Holiday and Rios attend to him. Periodically, bullets crack low over our heads from the left front where a ditch curves around the left flank first platoon. Bordered by trees and shrubs, it allows the Viet Cong to encircle the first platoon but the men who exited the helicopters on the port side are able to keep the VC pinned down. After Edwards receives his shot of morphine, Lieutenant Holiday orders the platoon to shift right and form a line along the east/west rice paddy dyke that I am lying behind. More low fired bullets double crack over our heads, twanging away in the distance. "Do you think we ought to get on the other side of this dyke, Lupton?" Knott asks me.

"You better believe it, Knott. You jump over and I'll hand you the gun," I reply. We have a plan.

"Okay, here I go." Crack, crack, crack, the goddamn VC bullets follow him over the dyke. While never lifting my head above the lower dyke in front of me, I hand him the machine gun, more shooting follows the gun, and then I push my ammo boxes over the top and snuggle up to the barrier.

"I am coming," I yodel and lift my skinny ass up and swiftly hop over the north/south dyke as bullets hunt for me. Landing on the other side, I consider unbuttoning my fatigue jacket so I may get lower than my buttons. Knott sets up the machine gun then fires bursts of six rounds. Every time he lifts up to fire the gun, many VC return fire instantly. I break open my first box of ammo and snap the two 100 round belts together then I find the end of the rapidly diminishing belt already in the gun, fasten them together and straighten the belts so they will not kink and jam.

First squad maneuvers to extend our flank the width of the village almost to the tree line on the extreme right.

Lieutenant Schnizer wants second platoon to move up and help him. He pleads over the radio to Holiday for us to press forward. "First platoon needs help. We need to get up there. Somebody needs to move up!" Enemy fire is very intense every time anybody exposes himself. Lieutenant Holiday yells out the order again but nobody is

willing to abandon the cover of the small east/west dyke in front of him, especially Lieutenant Holiday.

Lieutenant Schnizer directs air strikes, dropping high explosives closer and closer to first platoon's position. Still the Viet Cong are able to advance so close that the platoon must keep them at bay with hand grenades. The platoon is now dangerously low on ammunition. Schnizer pleads on the radio for help. Holiday relays his anxiety, ordering us to go forward. Still nobody moves past the safety of our rice paddy dyke.

"Lupton, do you think we ought to move up to the next dyke?" Knott asks me in between bursts of six.

The uselessness of advancing is not apparent to me, but I respond: "Well, if you go, I'll go," I reply with much trepidation. Every time Knott lifts his head to fire the machine gun, we experience passionate automatic rifle fire. Phantoms drop dreadful plumes of burning jellied gasoline and still the VC keep up their relentless small arms fire. I attach another hundred-round belt in preparation of charging. Knott takes a deep breath, rises on his knees to grip the heavy gun, crack, crack, "ahhhh," he moans falling straight backward onto my feet. More bullets crack just above my head as I try to extract my feet from underneath the small of his back. With much effort, I pull my right foot free, jerking my left foot proves useless, he is a very big man, and I cannot get my foot loose. By placing my right foot on his hip and pushing with all my strength, my left foot begrudgingly slides out from underneath him. Knott stares straight up, breathing deeply, methodically gasping for air, but he is unconscious. Scrambling around to search his head for blood, I find none. People begin screaming for the medic. I explore his chest and arms and find no wounds; nothing tells me why he is comatose, and I cannot understand what is happening to him. Rios arrives trailed by a volley of incoming bullets. "He's not hit! What's wrong with him?" I scream at him. Rios grabs Knott's left shoulder and rolls him half way over.

"Is there any blood on his back? No?" He lets go of Knott's shoulder, pushes the right one up and searches for blood on his back. He finds nothing.

"What the fuck is wrong, Rios?" I am frantic. I do not know what is happening to Knott. His stomach continues heaving as he gasps for air, his lips vibrate when he exhales, I notice his face turning pale; his eyes wide open, stare blankly into the sky.

"Unbuckle his ammo belt, cut his bootlaces off, and rub his legs. Let's try to get his circulation going," crack, crack, crack.

"Rios, get down!" I yell at him as he repositions himself on his knees and begins giving Knott mouth to mouth. More rifle fire cracks over us when Rios repositions himself to massage Knott's heart. I try to unbuckle Knott's ammo belt but every time I get a little bit of slack to twist the buckle, his stomach gropes for air, and I cannot get the belt off. After several vain tries, I slip my knife between the canvases and slit the belt. His stomach continues heaving. I use my knife to cut his bootlaces.

"Rub his legs, try to get his blood flowing," Rios yells at me. He resumes his mouth to mouth. First Sergeant Letoto lies on his stomach holding the pulse in Knott's neck, the ghastly look of death in his eyes frightens me. I keep rubbing Knott's legs hoping the big man will snap out of it. Knott mercilessly slips away, his breathing eventually slows then stops, and his lips turn snow white. Sergeant Letoto looks at me then Rios and shakes his head. Knott is dead. Drawing a comet's tail of fire, Rios runs to the next wounded man.

I look at Letoto lying along the north/south rice paddy dyke then at Walley behind him. My only recourse is to turn around and man the machine gun. It is difficult to aim well with tears welling in my eyes, but I do my best to kill the commie cocksuckers. I swear and call them rotten motherfuckers in between bursts of six. Still their fire is unremitting even after more bombs decimate the tree line. More calls erupt for the medic until I hear a scream. "It's Rios, he's been badly hit," yells the men on the other side of the north/south dyke.

A dust-off begins touching down. The enemy fire reaches a crescendo; I rise and fire my machine gun to help cover the chopper. Seconds later, I realize the helicopter is not flying away. Turning around to my left, I see the pilots leaping out of the cockpit; the right door gunner struggles with his machine gun as the blades begin losing RPMs. I detect smoke wafting up from the engine compartment. There is no doubt about it now; we are in some *very deep shit!*

I turn to see a first platoon man cover behind bushes near the village; he falls backward. The man next to him runs to his assistance. At this point, I discern all of the aircraft are gone. The jets, the command and control helicopter, and the gunships are just not there anymore. The Viet Cong begin to come out of the tree line, into the paddies, and they are swarming what is left of our first platoon.

"Be careful, they might be first platoon," warns Lieutenant Holiday.

"They are VC, sir!" I yell at him, the dumb shit. I have been in country six months, I have never seen a Viet Cong in combat before, and now they are overrunning first platoon right before my eyes. I fire the machine gun as rapidly as I can. Each time I rise up to sight the gun I draw fire. I discern a machine gun banging away in my right ear. The Viet Cong even manage to get out into the open rice paddies with a machine gun and engage the right side of our line before the helicopter gunships return. Their assault on our positions fails, and they meld back into the cover of the wood line when the Huey gunships begin their strafing runs. After the gunships are finished, another sortie of Phantoms begins dropping more ordinances on top of the enemy.

The first platoon is down to one working rifle that will fire only one round at a time, all three of their machine guns are disabled, and they resort to holding off the Viet Cong by using the last of their hand grenades. All but eight of them are dead or wounded.

Rumbling in the distance, I hear a Chinook gunship, Guns-A-Go-Go.



Figure 1 Armored Chinook, Birth Control, from the Guns-A-Go-Go.

The gunship devises a plan to make a run in front of first platoon while firing their 40mm and 120mm cannons. They make their run spouting the 2.75-inch rockets closely enough to create a solid smoke screen. The covering fire allows first platoon to break contact and run back to our position.

The Chinook fires his rockets one behind the other blanketing the full length of the tree line with light gray smoke. Port side M60 and 50 caliber machine guns crackle and spew out fire at the enemy with stable streams of death-for-you Luke-the-Gook. The fifty-caliber tail gunners spit tracer after tracer into the enemy line while covering the withdrawal of the gunship.

We watch the survivors of first platoon rise in unison in front of the smoke screen and haul ass back to us; their eyes confirm the existence of the nightmare. First platoon's conscious-objector medic leans exhausted against the lone tree growing in the north/south dyke just in front my position. His right shoulder devastated, blood saturates his fatigue jacket. Eyes dazed, he will not respond to our calls to come on. Finally, he manages to lurch the final few feet into our LZ.

Hardway lands next to me, eyes wide open electrified with foreboding; he is breathing heavily through his mouth. His ammo pouches are empty, his grenades are gone, and he wears no helmet. When he looks at me, his ghastly eyes tell it all. He pants like a mad dog, as he yanks Knott's 45-pistol out of its holster turns and fires several rounds as the rocket smoke begins lifting. "Sergeant Green is dead."

"What?"

"Sergeant Green, and Sergeant Hubbard, Holmes, they're all dead," says with a wave of the .45. He turns and continues shooting until the ammunition is gone then he throws the pistol down and jumps over the north/south berm.

Cantu flops down on my right side. He too has the ghastly look of death in his eyes. He took a bullet in the knee getting off the chopper and now wants to bum a cigarette. I toss him my plastic cigarette case and resume firing my machine gun. The Guns-A-Go-Go ship makes another pass in front of us when I become aware of an explosion to my left front. I see where the gray puff of smoke of the mortar that just landed. Then another mortar shell explodes to my right front; it is then I realize the Viet Cong have just bracketed us. It only takes a couple of seconds until I hear the faint hissing of a mortar round growing louder and louder. I scrunch my neck into my helmet, lower my head beside the machine gun butt, and wait for the resulting burst of shrapnel, but nothing happens. I turn to look behind me. Just beyond the prostrate body of Knott lies the tailfin of an unexploded 81mm mortar, a dud, sticking out of the soft dirt. I turn again and fire as a Phantom drops napalm into the guts of the village. There are no more mortars.

Lieutenant Holiday yells for the wounded to go to the next rice paddy because there is a lift of helicopters coming in for them. I fire my machine gun as sparingly as I can for I am almost out of ammunition. The noise of the helicopters thundering to a fast stop quickens our covering fire. Brewington and Beaver die helping the wounded into the ships. All of the helicopters fly away safely and when the racket flutters away, second platoon finds itself alone. I can hear shooting on the other side of the north/south dyke as the VC attempt to flank and finish us off. Firing trails away to sporadic well-aimed shots because we are now almost out of ammunition. I only have 25 rounds left; we wait for the next lift to come for us. Eternity has no limits.

The choppers are coming; the excitement is palpable. "All right everybody let's get out of here!" Holiday yells as I hear the ships break with loud cracks from their blade tips whipping the air. The door gunners begin firing their machine guns. I detect the right side of our line running past me; I stand and pull off a long burst at the tree line. The machine gun pushes me off balance, so I let off the trigger. With a great step, I clear the north/south dyke, glancing to my left, I see Rios lying dead.

The Viet Cong want my ass. Bullets are cracking past me, so instinctively I keep my body low as I run through the soft rice paddy. I trip when the weight of the M60 sucks me into the dirt as if wanting me to stay and die. I look at the first helicopter and see the starboard door gunner frantically waiving his large arm for me to come on, come on, oh Jesus Christ, hurry, hurry the fuck up! I make my final dash and when close, I toss the machine gun into the cargo door, the gun dragging me in behind it. My brain declares me safe, as I lie cowering behind the pilot's seats, until I recognize the two oblong orifices in the diamond-studded floor right in front of my face are bullets holes. The helicopter lifts off, the door gunner begins blasting away with his M60, I grab my machine gun, swing it around, point it out the door at the receding tree line, and I pull the trigger, the bolt slams home, but nothing happens. My last three rounds are jammed in the firing tray.

There is no jubilation in the helicopter. The machine muscles its way up through the sky vibrating incessantly as the pilot pushes the good ship to its limits. I am just starting to appreciate the fact that I am not in danger anymore when the door gunner waives for me to come near him. "When the helicopter sets down, *get out!*" He shouts over the noise of the blades as the chopper loses altitude I can feel the warmth of the ground approaching. I am in an almost near panic when we settle down hard in a grassy spot enclosed with the barbed wire of an ARVN outpost. I leap out with my machine gun ready only to see a group of ARVNs milling behind several rolls of concertina wire. I raise the machine gun and pull the trigger. Nothing happens; only now do I realize these gooks are not my enemy. As the blades wind down, one crewmember begins helping a wounded Major out of the pilot's seat while another crewman sets off a fire extinguisher into the engine compartment. The hissing fire extinguisher causes my knees to crumple, and I find myself sitting on the ground thinking my heart just stopped. Some of the ARVNs begin laughing and pointing at me. "You rotten motherfuckers, what are you doing standing behind that barbed wire? Why aren't you out there fighting the goddamn VC?" I scream at them. They just look at me like a bunch of dumb ass sons of bitches.

"Hey, hey, you, come here, come here," a crewman pulls me by my arm, "come here. What are you trying to do get us killed?"

"Fuck 'em," I yell at him. I glare at the twenty or so ARVNs strutting around like peacocks in their tailored Tiger fatigues, talking, glancing, and smirking at me.

"Sit down here, right here," he pulls me around to the other side of the helicopter and pushes my shoulder down. I sit with the machine gun lying across my hips.

There is a first platoon survivor with me in the ship. He takes a bullet through his forearm between both bones. Both of us feel like we survived walking into a two-twenty electric line. The major flying the chopper is bleeding badly and sits on the ground waiting for a helicopter to take him and the wounded first platoon man to the 93rd Evac hospital in Saigon.

“It took eleven hits, sir,” the door gunner reports to the Major. The chopper never did catch fire.

“There will be another helicopter coming to take you back to Cu Chi,” the crew chief tells me. After the wounded fly away, another helicopter flies in for me.

When I arrive at Cu Chi, I walk into the 25th Aviation’s orderly room and ask for a ride back to A Company. This smirky worthless-ass buck sergeant tells me everybody is at chow, thanks so much you asshole. As I turn to leave, a PFC eagerly volunteers to take me back to the company area in his jeep. All the jerk wants to do is drill me for information. “What happened out there, what’s going on, how many of you guys got killed?” I am in no mood to tell him anything. I cannot stand this asshole any more. I consider getting out of the jeep, but he speeds up while drilling me for information.

Finally, we pull up into the company area where I get out and walk away from him.

Capps looks at me as I walk past him. I hand him Knott’s 45-pistol, “its Knott’s,” I tell him, “He’s dead.”

“Knott is dead?” Everybody has been back at the company area for over a half an hour. The REMFs know what has happened, but they just do not know all of the details.

“Yeah, he’s dead,” is all I can say. I keep walking back to the hootch where Boutoff and Caldwell are the only occupants. Both of them are still walking around in a daze, and nobody says anything to me. I put the gun down on the floor, take off my web belt; I sit on my cot. Staring at the floor it all sinks in how close we came to annihilation, or worse, POWs. I feel it coming on. I put a towel over my head to preserve my dignity. Nothing can stop the remorse. The plywood floor absorbs my teardrops spreading symmetrically as the next drop lands upon the first. Nobody says a word when First Sergeant Letoto walks silently into the hootch as I lose it some more. He sits across from me on Caldwell’s bunk. I tell him how much I hate that fucking asshole Prine. “Buxton is supposed to be carrying ammo today, but Prine wants him court-martialed because he went AWOL for a few hours a week ago. The cocksucker, we only had five hundred rounds of ammo out there when we needed Buxton’s four hundred. I want to kill that bastard Prine.”

Sergeant Letoto never does tell me not to hit the jerk off; he only warns me he will do what he must if I slug him. He sits with me until I regain control of myself then leaves. Not one officer visits us to see how we are.

We hear shooting toward the line. I hear a commotion outside the hootch as people begin running in various directions. “The VC is attacking,” somebody yells. I grab the machine gun and tell Walley to come with me to the ammo dump for some machine gun ammo, and I begin running toward the line. The firing becomes intense as I reach the ammo dump where I realize there is no in-coming fire. I pause to listen as I break open a case of M60 ammo only to see people stomping back from the line bitching that it is only some goddamn artillery unit test firing their weapons on our line. I keep my cans of ammo and follow Walley myopically back to the hootch. The mess hall is holding chow for us, and I get to eat, but I am not very hungry.

“You gotta be shitting me!”

“Yeah, Rios was picked up along with Edwards.”

“You mean Rios was left out there?”

“Yeah, the Shithook came back just after we were picked up, and said they saw somebody waiving a T-shirt, so they dropped down and picked up Rios and Edwards. Rios is paralyzed; Edwards took a bullet in the chest when we got off the helicopters.”

“Does Lieutenant Holiday know they were left out there?”

“Shit if I know.”

I get a sinking helpless feeling in my stomach. Rios does not deserve abandonment. I can only envision what he feels when the noises of the Hueys fade away, and realizing he is alone lying in the rice paddy, helpless. Bedlam offers no apologies; what happens is final. Second guesses are mere speculation to past events gone wrong and nothing more. Nor can one blame those hysterically seeking to escape their own kismet. Remorseless guilt will nag at my conscious forever more.

Brains lubricated with beer rehash the day's events in small groups. Why were there only our two platoons engaging the obviously superior force? Why did third platoon wind up so far from first platoon? Where was the artillery? Why did the 5th Mechanized Infantry not attempt to rescue us? Why were there insufficient slicks to land another company to our east and flank those sons-of-bitches? After 6 months of Search and Destroy operations, we finally find the enemy, and our attempt to wipe their asses is forlorn, instead they rout us. Here is the Wolfhound's shining moment, and somebody does not quite understand the situation. “By the way,” I ask, “where was our Captain Mayone?”

“He was in the C & C ship.”

“You mean the one at 3,000 feet?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Free beer from the battalion mulls our distress. The 2nd platoon survivors divvy up the brew and commit it unceremoniously to our ice chests. Staggering out to the third rubber tree provides my only release. “Piss on this day,” I mumble as I lean against my trustworthy rubber tree and empty my bladder. The rafters perform their customary whirl and eventually slumber mercifully alleviates me from reality.

I wake up in a bunk at the other end of the hootch not remembering why I am still fully clothed. It is about 0630, they have forgone the usual 0500 waking-hour, and the sun is shining when I sit up on a stripped-down bunk still worn out from the prior day's fiasco. I look down at my feet contemplating my next move when Sergeant Prine opens the door at the far end of the hootch and wants me to get some magazines from Knott's bunk. I sleepily nod my head and demurely reply okay then I start putting on my boots. “Hurry the hell up, Lupton!” Prine yells at me in a burst of inpatients. He picks the wrong time to rag my ass. I shove my left foot into my second boot, and with long determined strides, I walk vigorously down the center isle toward him.

“Don't you ever give me any of your shit ever again Prine! Don't ever fuck with me you goddamn asshole!” Drawing up close to his face, I glare into his eyes. Others who stand nearby look dumbfounded. I should have just smashed him in his fucking face and attacked him vigorously, but I do not. I scow at him and tromp over to 2nd squad's hootch, retrieve the magazines, and stomp back and thrust them into his chest. “Here you asshole, don't ever fuck with me again,” I yell at the surprised sergeant as I head for the mess hall with my bootlaces slapping wildly around my ankles. I am lucky the mess line is still open, and I load my tray with sloppy SOS as the KPs stare at my angry demeanor. Prine did not fuck with me for a week after his comeuppance in front of the platoon.

I am able to take a shower, shave, and take a huge diarrhea shit without enduring Rodriguez's consecrated morning police call around our hootches. The company is standing down for the next few days to allow the distress of our calamity to wear away. A Company is only half of what went out on the 19th, only 2nd platoon is operational, and we are missing our third squad.

After I change my clothes, Rod herds us into 1st squad's hootch where we meet with Lieutenant Holiday. He critiques yesterday's fiasco and asks if anybody took any pictures. Bailey, who is always taking pictures, says he managed to snap a few as he held the camera up above the rice paddy while keeping his head down below the rim of the dyke. We laugh at his pantomime. Holiday assures him he will get the roll of film back, but he never sees it again.

"Sir, I want to recommend Knott for the Bronze Star." I tell Holiday. "He didn't get too far, but he was the only one who tried."

"Don't worry Lupton, everybody who went out there is being put in for a Bronze Star," Holiday assures me. I accept his sincerity and leave it go at face value.

"Lieutenant," says Sergeant Walker in his folksiest southern drawl, "I only ask that Greco here not be required to go out in the field any more. He is short by only a few weeks, and he was wounded yesterday, and he has had enough." I am leery of Greco's wound; I hear somebody stepped on his middle finger when everybody scrambled into the helicopter, and he lost his fingernail, but I cannot say for sure this is so. He sits with a big shit-eating grin, holding up the over-sized bandage on his middle digit, and smiling at us stupidly.

"Okay, I think I can do that Sergeant," Holiday sincerely reassures Walker. He keeps his word too. Greco, the platoon's shammer and scammer extraordinaire, ungrudgingly resigns himself to con his way out of doing anything for his last 19 days. We are all jealous of his good fortune.

"Phew, I am gonna make it out of here *alive!*" he exclaims to no one in particular, "yesterday I was wondering if that was ever going to happen." He is visibly relieved.

When the meeting breaks up, we migrate back to our bunks. Boutoff and I begin cleaning our respective machine guns until word comes for everybody to report to the mess hall. The entire company is now able to fit into the enlisted men's section of the dining room, which can seat about fifty people at the picnic tables. I can see several jeeps pull up outside of the orderly room then a gaggle of officers walk grimly thru the door of the mess hall. Sergeant Letoto leaps in first yelling attention. Everybody comes to their feet in unison as the parade of officers, led by General Weyand, the Division Commander, strides into the building one after the next. All of the officers know their places in the pecking order. They shuffle to their positions by rank, led by the General, and followed by the Brigade Colonel, two Lieutenant Colonels, several Majors, and four Captains. Then lastly, more than a few first and second Lieutenants peer at us between the heads of the field grades. Accompanying them, and placing themselves obediently to one side of the officers, is the Division Sergeant Major, the Battalion Sergeant Major, and finally our First Sergeant Letoto. "Carry on," the General yells and everybody stands at ease, "Have a seat men." We all sit down in unity.

Before us stands, the most brass the enlisted have ever witnessed assembled in the same room since we joined in the 25th Infantry Division.

“Will the men receiving decorations please stand here,” Lieutenant Conway, the battalion adjutant instructs. Lieutenant Schnizer leads the way with Sergeant Brown next, to their right stands Sergeant Fisher, Gabler, Blue, 1st platoon’s Edwards, and Burns, and then Lieutenant Holiday, all stand stiff at attention. After Sergeant Letoto calls the company to attention again, Lieutenant Conway reads the short citations as General Weyand pins Silver Stars on Schnizer and Brown; the rest receive Bronze Stars with “V” devices. The recipients represent all of the non-wounded from first platoon, and the only one to receive a medal from 2nd platoon is Lieutenant Holiday. Afterwards, we resume our seats.

General Weyand gives a short speech to the morbidly glassy-eyed remnants of A Company as the gloom and awe of yesterday still glowers from our eyes. I scan the room looking at my peers sitting remorsefully at the starved fatigues of our Division Commander. He looms in front of us very tall and mercurial. I can almost see the glow of an unsullied nimbus surrounding his baseball cap. He is truly a leader of men but unhappiness permeates the ambiance in the room, anguish oozes amongst the picnic tables; vacant countenances betray the black mood of the survivors.

“I came here today to decorate these men on behalf of the President of the United States. From action to action, I have followed this company from the first day you arrived here, and I have a special place in my heart for you. It is hard to explain why we are here but we are fighting for something that is a matter of principle. We are fighting so that the men, who died, did not die in vain. I am not afraid to die as long as I know that there are men like you on my left and right who will keep on fighting and thus prevent me from dying needlessly.”

“There is a saying, steel is tempered by fire, and as far as I am concerned, you are men of steel. You have guts, and I am proud of you. I offer to you my congratulations.”

This is nice. He speaks with implied sincerity even though I have always thought it is merely a stump speech useful for other units as well. I want to stand up and say right to the General’s face, “Where was the rest of the 25th Infantry Division, Sir?”

I do not possess the gonads to ask such a candid question. The answer lies in the intestines of the battalion minutia, and they will remain classified confidential from the rank and file for many years. With humble obeisance to the General, we snap to attention at the end of his speech, and Sergeant Letoto dismisses us after our commander leaves the mess hall with his retinue closely following him out the door by rank.

In the 25th Aviation Battalion, Companies A & B along with the 118th and 116th Aviation Companies, the 145th Aviation Battalion, and the 52nd Aviation Company, Provisional (Armed CH-47), are recommended for the Valorous Unit Award and eventually receive it. Every member of the aircrews who flew out there on the 19th are awarded some kind of medal, 58 individual awards in all. From majors to privates, every swinging-dick comes away with something to pin on their chest.

We hear the 8th Artillery troopers receive medals for merely firing their cannons, even though no one remembers the shells falling anywhere close to us. A Company receives the fewest decorations of any unit involved in this action. Lieutenant Holiday receives his Bronze Star, and the rest of 2nd platoon’s valor is committed to ancient history. Summarily forgotten is Knott’s Bronze Star.

On July 20 the 5th Mechanized, along with helicopter gunships, rumble into Objective 5 with guns blazing. They do not know what to expect when they arrive.

What they find are four Viet Cong dead and one wounded. Only a few enemy weapons are scattered about and not much more. They discover tunnels and trenches where the Viet Cong fed men up to the foxholes forming their defensive positions. From the prisoner interrogation, G2 learns 1st and 2nd platoons engaged a hard-core VC battalion plus a main-force Viet Cong company. An American battalion consists of approximately 600 men and a company is about 150, plus a mortar platoon. The Viet Cong battalion might consist of 200 men, and their companies number about 100 soldiers, maybe. If our two platoons number approximately 60 men then we are outnumbered 5 to 1, and they possess the imperative advantage of being entrenched. This certainly explains why they never husband their ammunition and aggressively maintained fire at us all afternoon long. On our side, we possess jets, armed helicopters, and artillery, but what the hell, we cannot kill all of them.

With only four confirmed enemy bodies and one wounded, any attempt at calculating enemy body count is purely a wild ass guess. Only the Viet Cong know what their casualties are.

The saddest part is when the 5th Mech find all of our 18 dead at Objective 5. The Viet Cong strip them of their personal effects, weapons, and field gear then laid them side by side on their backs. To their credit, they did not mutilate or desecrate the bodies in any way. The 5th Mech loads the corpses into their tracks and delivers them to the morgue at Cu Chi.