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This afternoon I read on page two of *The Stars and Stripes*, a blurb that the Department of Defense is establishing a policy that if two directly related family members are both serving in Vietnam, then the one who has been here the longest may request transfer to leave Vietnam. I read the article several times, and sure enough, I qualify to leave Vietnam early. All I need is a letter from my brother's company commander stating the date my brother arrived in Vietnam, and my brother has to declare that I have been here the longest, and he does not intend to apply to return to the United States. This is it, my way out!

With my newspaper in hand, I head out the hootch to find somebody who can authorize my leave to Ben Hoa. I spy our executive officer heading for the officer's tent. "Say, sir!" He does not hear me, "say, sir," I yell a bit louder as I run to get his attention before he disappears into his tent. At the last moment, he turns around somewhat indignantly.

"Is that how you address officers, Lupton? You just yell out, say?"

"I yelled, say sir, sir." This nitwit just has to bust my chops over my presumed lack of deference. I have no choice though; I must show obeisance like a cowered puppy and kiss his ass. "I didn't mean any disrespect, sir. I just need you authorize me to go see my brother to get a letter from him. See here," I show him the *Stars and Strips* article, "all I need to do is go down to Ben Hoa to get a letter."

"Let me see that," he says with some interest, "okay, let me check with battalion, and I'll let you know tomorrow."

"Oh, great, thank you sir! Thanks a lot." I have escaped an ass chewing, and Lieutenant Roller seems interested in my project. The next morning, he okays a pass for me to travel to Ben Hoa. I am able to catch the courier chopper later in the morning. I sit next to an MP who is escorting a guy in handcuffs, and a couple of other officers. The chopper takes off heading for Saigon.

The helicopter never flies above 30 feet. I sit with my heart in my throat as we zigzag along the deck at 90 knots dodging wooded areas, hopping over hedgerows, and terrorizing unwary rice farmers.



Figure 1 This is an example of contour flying as seen from the pilots seat.

We soar across broad open rice paddies that border the highway leading to Saigon. As we begin flying over the slums on the outskirts of the city, we gain altitude and observe the city floating slowly underneath us from three thousand feet.

The helicopter's first stop is LBJ where the MP and his prisoner get off. I could get off here too, but because this is LBJ, I feel queasy about being so close to such a shitty place. I get off the helicopter at the next stop where I can hitch a ride to the 140<sup>th</sup> H & M Company.

It turns out I am only several miles away from the main gate. A ¾-ton truck picks me up after only a couple of minutes of hitch hiking. The two assholes in the cab are passing a pint of Bacardi Rum back and forth, and when they polish off the bottle, the passenger heaves the bottle over the cab with a right hook where it smashes into a ROK truck, just underneath the passenger's window. The smashing glass awakens the Korean soldier who is confused about what has happened. I think to myself, "Holey shit, none of us has a weapon, and this asshole just threw a whiskey bottle at a Korean soldier. Now we are in for a one way fire fight." Fortunately, the Koreans turns left as the idiots yell obscenities at the ROK soldiers. We continue down Route 1 until I yell at them to stop at the Ben Hoa main gate. We come to a dusty halt about 200 feet from the gate. I thank them as I jump off and walk to the main gate, actually, I am glad to get away from the drunken sots.

Finding my brother's company is a piece of cake this time. The company clerk points me in his direction, which is the same place I left him several weeks ago, sewing chevrons on uniforms. He is surprised to see me again, and I am excited to explain the reason for my visit. His company commander agrees to have the letter typed up by the next morning.

That evening when we go to chow, I notice we are within walking distance of LBJ. I recognize the compound with its high chain-link fence topped with three strains of barbed wire. From each corner, I see guard posts with machine gun barrels sticking from them. Within the compound are metal conex boxes where it is rumored they house new prisoners for their first seven days, without cigarettes.



**Figure 2 Long Binh Jail (LBJ) not far from the 140th H & M Company - 1966.**

After I get my letter the next morning, I leave immediately, so I can get back to Cu Chi and have our clerk type up my request for transfer. There is no thought of visiting whorehouses, or bars, or shopping in Ben Hoa, or Saigon, or anything any other distractions. I want out of Vietnam so bad that I am standing in our orderly room by mid afternoon.

The clerk does not know how to type my transfer request; promulgated regulations do not exist yet. Three days later, I sign my Disposition Form 1049 transfer request. I am so excited I cannot wait.

For the first two weeks of September, the platoon flies more Eagle Flights. We spend most of our time pleasantly riding in the chopper at three thousand feet. Some days we are busy; we land, search a village, and then take off. We might do this three or four times a day. Nothing bad happens except when Captain Cole accompanies us one day. We fly around for about an hour before they insert us into a village. The LZ is close to a house where a female water buffalo and her calf live in a coral attached to the hootch. The noisy helicopters make the female buffalo fidgety; she breaks down a rail in her pen, comes roaring out from beside the hootch with her head down and charges the FNG standing right next to me. Unlike Brooks, this FNG begins shooting, bang, bang, bang; the buffalo keeps coming, bang, bang, bang; he stands firm and does not let up his fire until the cow limps to a stop smack dab in front of him. She veers away from us, limping badly; the calf follows close behind her. The poor animal meekly shambles behind our right flank then straggles into a wallow lying beside a row of tall bamboo. She stops and bellows in anguish. We can only look upon this wounded animal and feel sorry for the unfortunate creature.

“Somebody with an M14, go ahead and shoot her,” orders Captain Cole with visible empathy for the poor cow, “Lieutenant.”

Lieutenant Holiday aims his M14 for the coup de grâce. His breathing slackens just a second before squeezing the trigger, click. He has forgotten to load his weapon. I wonder how this officer ever graduated OCS. Holiday pulls back the bolt and chambers a round. The cow stands belly deep in the wallow when the lieutenant shoots her behind the left ear. Gallons of blood gush from her nose and mouth before she falls on her knees. Defeated, she rolls over dead almost trapping the calf, which fights to keep its head above the bloody mix. Crying vainly, her offspring struggles from underneath its mother, and stands looking at us with its knees shaking. The whole incident is poignant.

Mamasan walks cautiously from her house, visibly upset about her loss. She ambles bravely in front of us to inspect the carnage. Hearts and Minds quickly dissipate as the woman leads the shaken calf by the nose ring back to its pen.

“Ahh, all right, let’s move out,” orders Captain Cole.

The orderly room keeps screwing up my request for transfer. First Sergeant Letoto calls me into the orderly room to resign my 1049 for the second time. “What seems to be going wrong, Top?” I am concerned my tour will be over before the transfer comes through.

“We need to put the request in the right format, Lupton. Don’t worry we’ll get it.” He waives me away with a gesture of his arm. I take heed and disappear before he gets pissed at me. When I leave the orderly room, I walk right in front of Sergeant Rodriguez. Damn, I feel hapless today. I must report to the bunker line where we fill

sand bags from a mud hole because the waterline is still only a few feet from the surface of the ground. What a great place they picked for putting a major base camp, eh?

We work, and we work, and we work some more. People gripe about the work all the time. Some would rather be out in the field, but not me. I like it here in the rear.

Captain Cole, in a burst of benevolence, gives the whole company the afternoon off after he pays us. I walk to the battalion post office and buy a hundred-dollar money order to send home. With some effort, I have been doing this ever since we arrived. During this time, I manage to repay my Aunt Edith a 700-dollar loan I borrowed for a car before I enlisted. The Army pays me 173 dollars a month, which includes nine dollars overseas pay and 65 dollars combat pay.

Second platoon does not have bunker guard tonight, so we swill beer for the rest of the afternoon and evening. The next day we work our details as before, and then after evening chow the platoon sergeants herd us back up to the bunker line where we continue burning rubber trees until dark. There is much bitching and complaining.

Two mornings later, after returning from the bunker line, I eat chow, and normally I would visit the latrine for my morning dump. Strangely, his morning I do not feel like taking a shit. I do not think much about it as I join the morning formation for police call, and afterwards the company falls in for a march to the 25<sup>th</sup> Division parade ground for a memorial service.

Every thing starts out okay as we hup, hoop, hee, hore out to the parade field. I feel a fart coming on, so naturally I give a push. Instead of gas exiting, I shit myself. Whoa, I squeeze my splinter as we march along. I become uncomfortable when the load of diarrhea does not retreat into my bowel. I pray I can maintain this discomfort until we are finished with the memorial service, but after several more minutes, I really need to vacate my bowels. The company marches past a latrine; I envy it, but I am too afraid to break ranks. I know Sergeant Rodriguez will yell bloody murder at me right along with the other sergeants. Ah, man, this hurts. "Somebody shit," I hear from the ranks, laughter abounds. Now everybody knows I shit myself. Goddamn it, I wish we would get there. Several minutes later, we arrive.

The whole battalion forms up in an open field. I can barely see the reviewing stand from within the middle of my rank. Captain Cole commands parade rest. A Company waits for a long time as the other companies form their ranks. As we wait for the proceedings to begin, I squeeze my sphincter closed with all my might. My forehead breaks out in a sweat, and I feel like I want to pass out. Finally, I can take it no longer; I cross three ranks of men to confront Sergeant Letoto. He is astonished I broke ranks. "Sarge, I think I have a bit of dysentery," he looks dubious; "I gotta take a shit, Sarge." From the look on his face, you would think I just committed capital murder.

He is visibly pissed at me and with a jerk of his thumb he says, "Alright, go. Get out of here." I scurry to the rear of the formation in a bowl legged quickstep as my sphincter muscle threatens to show me who is boss. I try double timing across the open field but that only makes it worse, and I must slow down to a tight ass trot until I spy a three-seater. I make a beeline for the shitter arriving just in time. I am clawing at my fly buttons, cursing at my belt buckle as I shove open the door with my body, and then frantically push down my under shorts just in time to let the mighty spate of the GI shits cascade into the 55-gallon drum of diesel fuel. I am sweating profusely as my intestines convulse spasmodically. It is a big dump too and I feel much relieved.

I am cleaning diarrhea from my under shorts when a black lieutenant walks into the latrine. We nod our heads at each other as he sheepishly deposits himself behind a small partition sporting two general's stars. It appears I have transgressed into General Weyand's shithouse. I will never know if the lieutenant just wants to shit where the General goes, or if he does not want to sit next to an enlisted man who is cleaning shit out of his underwear; I am thankful he does not hassle me about using the officer's latrine. I hurriedly clean up my sullied ass and leave. I arrive back at the company area just before the company returns from the memorial service. This allows me to take a quick shower and change into clean shorts and fatigue pants. Luckily, there is water in the drop tank.

Everyone except Smith spends a few hours cleaning our weapons in the afternoon. Over many months, the machine gun squad accumulates rifle-cleaning equipment. We have bore brushes, cleaning rods, patches, oil, and shaving brushes. Cone, one of our third-squad FNGs, asks me if he can use the cleaning material. I am afraid he will purloin what we give him, and because this stuff is hard to find I say no. He is a bit miffed at me, but I explain to him how difficult it is to keep all of this stuff together for the entire weapons squad. After talking to him, I relent and tell him okay, but he has to clean his rifle with us. I feel guilty about being a jerk, but with all of the thieving that goes on in this platoon, I am only protecting our scarce resources.

Second platoon catches a break. The other two platoons and the mortar platoon prepare to go out on a battalion-sized operation to the Boi Loi Woods. We are to remain as bunker guards for the next four days until we join the company. Four days in the rear is four easy days off the line, and we are smug as we watch the rest of A Company load the trucks for the helicopter pad.

I am stuck on sandbagging again, others continue chopping trees, and a few lucky stiffs get to build walkways from 105-ammo crates. This detail allows the guys to build a wooden walkway around the company area because the ground is now spongy from the high water table.

Good things never last in Vietnam. After evening chow, we learn Lieutenant Holiday is approaching time and grade to qualify for first lieutenant, and to further his career, he volunteers 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon for the field three days before we are scheduled to go out. Nobody is very happy about this as we climb aboard the duce and a half the next morning for the trip to the chopper pad. We fly to a huge open field where the rest of the battalion continues digging in for a multi week operation. There are field kitchens, a battalion aid station with a doctor, APCs from the 5<sup>th</sup> Mechanized, our mortar platoon, and even a ground-radar device at the next bunker. We take over a position marked by only four sandbags where two other men occupied it the night before.

The platoon squeezes itself into the line where the distance between foxholes is shorter than normal. Our machine gun crew digs in with Sergeant Walker, Bishop, Bailey, and Linwood. That means there are seven of us in this single position, an unusual event. We feel charmed because with so many men in one hole we will only have to stand guard for one hour twice a night, a luxury.

Because of the rain, we have to make a sandbag floor to elevate us a few inches above the water. We are able to take our ponchos and build a tent large enough to shelter five of us when two people are on guard at night. The hole we dig is big enough for three men, and we manage to put a crude roof of sand bags on it. We mount the machine gun on top.

On our first night, the mortars shoot up a few flares. In front of us is a tree line that must be five football fields away. There is a large open grassy area all the way to the tree line with a slight depression half way between the trees and us. The mortars fire the flares at such a distance that the tree line casts a shadow, and I cannot see anything. After firing only three flares, the rest of the night is quiet.

I notice Smith is not cleaning the machine gun, even when he is given time. It is rusty on the outside, which means it is crusty on the inside. On my watch, I take the barrel out of the gun and feel the crud around the outside of the chamber barrel. I am pissed. For letting this go, I would bust his ass down to private. When I try to reinsert the barrel, it will not seat and lock properly. It is dark and quiet, and I am afraid of making noise, so I put the butt on the ground and gently force the barrel down into its socket. The next morning I rag Smith's ass about cleaning it, but it does no good. The machine gun still looks like shit, even the ammunition belt is corroding.

We continue fixing up our bunkers until it is time to do Eagle Flights. A Company's other platoons are pulling a sweep through a hamlet, and second platoon flies in next to the village to serve as a blocking force. Artillery fires to block any retreat from adjacent escape routes, and I cower down as 105 rounds hiss low over our heads just before they explode with a deafening roar two hundred feet away.

The shooting draws close to us as I paste myself to the ground. My feet lie in water as we lie listening to the other two platoons working their way toward us. At one point, the firing becomes very loud then it dies down; we can glimpse Americans walking through the village. The Viet Cong just sink down into their tunnels and wait us out.

The platoon rejoins the company as it continues sweeping through the village. Eventually, we walk back to our bivouac in the late afternoon. Sergeant Walker remarks how skinny the civilians look. The Viet Cong are active in this area, and they confiscate the villager's rice crop.

We decide to build up another layer of sandbags on the floor of our hootch because the rains saturate our first layer of bags. After we do this, it begins raining very hard, and all of us hunker beneath the ponchos in futile hopes of keeping dry.

Smith and I pull guard huddled underneath a spare poncho as the rain tap, taps gently on the rubber sheet. I again remark about keeping the machine gun clean, and he rejoins, "They gave us time in Germany to clean our gun."

"This ain't Germany goddamn it. Keep the fucking thing clean, all the time," I whisper to him, "The last thing you want the stupid thing to do is jam when they are shooting at you." Smith is an incorrigible nitwit.

I have to crawl over Bailey and Bishop to get to my sleeping spot. They bitch and swear at me for waking them up. I find solace with the pitter-patter of the raindrops and fall asleep quickly.

Almost simultaneously, two huge explosions shake us from our slumber. Everybody hauls ass from underneath the ponchos, and we gather up our rifles, ammunition, and stuff the bunker waiting for the mass attack that never comes. After a while, everything settles down, and I crawl back under the poncho hootch to sleep.

Hagan comes over wanting Sergeant Walker to give him someone to occupy another foxhole. Walker picks my ass to go instead of one of his own men. Begrudgingly, I crawl over Bailey and Bishop and grope around to find my M16. We walk past the land radar bunker to the next dugout where I find the medic working on

Edwards who was putting on his boots when the explosion went off. Four other men have already carried another wounded man away.

They recruit me to grab a corner of Edwards's stretcher. He repeatedly moans in anguish, "ma leg, ma leg."

We console him, "Don't worry Edwards, you'll be back home dancing with the girls in no time."

"Ma leg, ma leg," he groans some more.

"Edwards, you are outta here man, just hang on. We'll get you there," a voice in the dark reassures him.

How we find the battalion aid station I will never know, for the night is blacker than shit and not even shadows prevail. We carry Edwards into the dimly lit interior and place the stretcher on two sawhorses. The medics hustle us out of the double canvassed doorway and into the black abyss of night. I follow the others back to the bunker and lie down behind it in an attempt to fall asleep until the medivac helicopter flies slowly right over our hole, blowing stuff all over the place. At a hundred feet from the ground he switches on his powerful search light, which turns night into day. The medivac picks up his patients, switches off his light, and flies away into the night.

"Hey, Lupton, you got to stand some guard, man. I cannot stay awake anymore," pleads the other bunker replacement.

"Okay, no problem. Take off if you want to." He leaves as I sit up, find my weapon, and climb down into the bunker. Gnats begin flying into my ears and nose. I stand hunched over staring out the little bunker window until the dawn begins to break; all the while, I am swatting away these annoying gnats. When it is light enough, I look down into the muddy water and discover my feet are sloshing around in Edwards's blood. "Ah, Jesus Christ," I swear, "I gotta get out of here." I stick my head out of the bunker and pull myself up into the morning cool. The gnats preoccupy themselves with the bloody mess in the bunker, and I walk back to the machine gun position for my mess kit.

I pass the radar device to see one of the operators shaking his head, "we didn't pick anything up last night," he says to First Sergeant Letoto with a shrug of his shoulders. They should have picked up the sappers as they crawled all the way across the big open field right straight in front of their radar.

In the chow line, I listen our mortar men talk about hearing the shrapnel whizzing over their heads when the mines went off. Sergeant Rod was sleeping on his air mattress next to O'Shaughnessy during the explosion, and this morning both of their air mattresses are flat; the shrapnel passed through each mattress, missing them both.

"Holiday is dead," says the medic, "he was hit in the chest and died in O'Shaughnessy's arms last night."

"No shit! Lieutenant Holiday bought the farm. Goddamn, you know we weren't supposed to come out here until tomorrow, don't cha?" I tell him.

"So I heard."

"Did anybody else get hit last night?"

"That new guy, Cone, he was hit along with Edwards, and he died when the guys carrying his stretcher could not find the battalion aid station. They got lost and carried him all the way over to the opposite bunker line, and then had to carry him back. Eventually, they found the aid station, but Cone was already dead."

Over at the first platoon's sector, the second mine collapsed a bunker down. The guard was lucky enough to be down inside putting on his boots when it blew and the roof collapsed on him. He didn't get hurt though."

"Wow, fuck, lucky for him!" We smile at each other, shaking our heads in disbelief.

"Yeah, the ambush made contact last night too. Ward was the squad leader. A squad of VC walked right up on them before they knew they were there. They managed to kill one gook."

"That's all?"

"Yeah, after they blew the ambush, they broke and ran back to the wire. Captain Cole took them out again, and made them stay there for the rest of the night while he and his RTO walked back."

"Shit man, I am glad I was not on that ambush," I say with much relief. Ward recently returned from his six-month stint in Japan. Captain Cole made him a squad leader in the first platoon when he came back. "When did all of this happen?"

"Right after the gooks blew the Claymores. I think the ambush was out too far to intercept the sappers." The medic is just a repository of information this morning.

"Hey, have you heard anything about Edwards? What happened to him at the hospital?"

"He lost his left foot. It was too far blown to save it," the medic tells us.

I feel badly about treating Cone like an asshole the other day. He did not deserve it, and I feel bad about Edwards losing his foot too. I cannot say I feel any great amount of remorse that Holiday is dead. He got what he deserved for not letting Stemac go to the rear when he knew damn well Stemac had only three days left in country.

I take my chow back to the bunker so others can go get their food. The bread contains more bugs than normal, so I add extra salt and pepper to my scrambled eggs, throw on my bacon, and make a tolerable sandwich. It is actually not that bad tasting, and anyway, the flour weevils probably add a tad bit of flavor. I wash down the meal with my bitter GI coffee.

The Viet Cong managed to plant three Claymores last night, two went off, and one was dud. After we wash our mess kits, everybody huddles behind his bunker so the engineers can blow the dud Chinese Claymore. The Chinese command detonated mines are not the five pounders we carry; these weigh 25 pounds and are loaded with all kinds of scrap metal. The goddamn thing shakes the ground when it goes off.

Captain Cole gathers the company around the collapsed bunker; he gives everybody a collective ass reaming about staying awake at night. He rails at us, swearing loudly as the Chaplin looks on, and then he intimidates everybody with general courts-martial if we fall asleep on guard. He explains in detail how Ward triggered his ambush, and how pleased he is of Ward's effectiveness as a squad leader, blah, blah, blah. I am hardly enamored with the Captain's pep talk and thank you so much for the condolences and encouragement, ya dick.

As far as I know, everybody was awake. The Viet Cong scored big time with their sneak attack, and we paid dearly for it, that is all, and today is another day. We start with a sweep in the direction of Ward's VC KIA. The 1<sup>st</sup> platoon members strip the body and leave him naked lying face up in the broiling sun. We continue into the surrounding villages searching for any traces of the sappers or the remnants of the VC patrol, but we



cannot find blood trails or a villager stupid enough to rat out the Viet Cong. Stories spread that someone in the third platoon was going to hang some old gook. They supposedly had the old boy standing on a stool with the rope around his neck when the platoon sergeant happened upon the incident, and made them take the old papasan down.

By late afternoon, we return without any VC suspects or hostile contact. After I dump my field gear at the hole, I decide to investigate the cluster of APCs in the middle of the bivouac. I ask the guys at the first track if they know anybody named Jordan, or Sizemore, or Arnold, and to my surprise, they tell me where to find Sizemore, my AIT platoon buddy.

“Hey Sizemore, how are ya doing?” Sizemore looks up from his chore. His countenance appears older; his fatigues are faded and wrinkled.

“Hi Lupton,” is all he says in return.

“Where are all the guys from AIT?” I am still hopeful, but he continues straightening up the sandbags inside the track.

“Arnold is here. Corea got killed. He was driving a track when it ran over a booby-trapped 500-pound bomb,” he looks up at me and adds with dismay, “It blew him in half.” This news hits hard. Corea is a nice fellow and I liked him.

“How about Jordan, where is he?” I ask.

“Jordan took two fifty cal's in the back. Arnold held him as he bled to death; he knew he was going to die, and he calmly talked until he passed out.”

“Oh,” I pause; this is not good news. “And where is Arnold?”

“He’s around here somewhere; probably working on his new track. We lost one two days ago. We had to blow the thing up with TNT and leave it in the Ho Bo Woods. The driver died when it ran over a mine.”

“That’s a bitch. Two of our guys were killed last night when they blew those Chinese Claymores,” I feel obligated to add.

“Yeah, the shrapnel from those things landed all around us.” Sizemore never really appears happy to see somebody from Ft. Polk. I look around for Arnold but cannot find him, so I walk back to my bunker then go to chow.

Just before it starts to get dark, Sergeant Atkinson attaches a Starlight scope to his M16; he begins zeroing it in by aiming at c-ration cans placed 25 meters from the bunker. It takes him quite a few shots before he is satisfied with its accuracy. We take the hand held Starlight scope with us on almost every ambush. By magnifying ambient light, we are able to see in the dark. It works best when the moon is shining, but it can be marginally useful using only starlight.

The night vision device is sensitive to light and the operator must keep the lens covered during the daytime, or the light will damage the unit. On many occasions, I see bedraggled men coming in from an ambush carelessly carrying the scope with its lens pointing into the sunlight. Only once have I looked into the scope and could discern definite shapes in the dark tree line in front of me. All of the other times when I look into it, all I can see is a fuzzy green screen. It is almost useless.

I have to go on ambush tonight with Sergeant Atkinson’s 2<sup>nd</sup> squad. We wait until it is fully dark then walk directly out in front of our sector until we reach the slight depression in the spacious open field. We set up here, and I put out the Claymore mine.

The night proves to be Stygian black. I look back toward the bivouac and see virtually nothing, not even the silhouette of a tent or anything. I search the surrounding

area seeing nothing but black, black horizons vaguely denoted by infrequent stars in the sky. The three of us set up a schedule for sleeping, and I take the first guard from nine to midnight.

Everybody is still strangled out from last night's sapper attack. As I lie awake, all I think about is another VC patrol walking up on us before I can find the Claymore detonator. I make sure I have the detonator in my hand then I position my ammunition boxes in a V formation in front of my face, so if we are fired upon or a hand grenade is thrown, I will have something to protect my head. It is not much, but out here in the open field, anything is reassuring.

Midnight finally rolls around, and I shake Smith's shoulder. He does not stir. "Smith, wake up, man. It's your guard." He grumbles a bit but still does not wake. His moan is disconcerting, for it is the only sound in the aural abyss. I am positive the VC can hear it, they will crawl up on our ambush, and set up another Chinese Claymore and the whole ambush will die, just like 3<sup>rd</sup> squad. I shake his shoulder a bit harder, "Come on Smith wake up. It's your guard," I whisper with a hiss; still he sleeps. I am scared shitless. A grunt here, a groan there, and all of sudden a sapper is upon you and blows you into the next world. I let Smith slumber for an hour when I shake him more rigorously; still he will not wake up. "Fuck this," I think to myself. I attempt to wake up the ammo bearer, but he is just as indolent as Smith is. I am too frightened to push the issue. After last night, any noise will give our ambush away.

I stick my head up and look around me. All I can see are a few vague lumps. Maybe I should crawl over to Atkinson and tell him these two assholes will not stand their guard. Naw, I will make too much movement, and he will be pissed at me. I stay vigilant for the next two hours when I notice it is five o'clock; I have been awake the entire night. I grasp Smith's shoulder and shake it hard, "wake up Smith, you fucking asshole," still he lies there pretending to be asleep. I know he is faking it because his breathing changes, but still he will not get up.

I conjure up all manner of scenarios. If I stab the asshole in the back, he will yell bloody murder. If I cut his throat, I will have to explain why he is the only one dead. If I make any noise, Atkinson will get pissed at me. My eyes are drooping uncontrollably. I struggle to stay awake as best I can until six thirty when Atkinson crawls over on his hands and knees and tells me to bring in the Claymore. It is funny how my two fellow compeers are now spry and keen to gather up their ammunition and eagerly wait for the patrol to return. I grind my back teeth as I angrily spin the Claymore wire around my elbow. These cocksuckers will get theirs. I swear it to the Gods they will be sorry.

Sergeant Atkinson leads the ambush back to the wire just as dawn gives way to full sunlight. After we cross the perimeter, I come unglued. "Did you two assholes have a nice sleep?" I yell at Smith. I push him in the back, and he stumbles forward, turning to face me. "You too, asshole," I confront the ammo bearer in a loud voice. "You have a nice rest out there last night too? Jerk off!" I turn around to face Smith.

"Fuck you, Lupton!" He retorts indignantly, insulted that I would bring light to his behavior last night.

"Fuck you too, both you assholes." I am livid. I want to club them both over the head with my M16. The commotion brings Sergeant Rodriguez around.

"What's going on, Lupton?" he demands.

“These two assholes wouldn’t pull their turn at guard last night, Sarge! The fuckers slept all goddamn night.”

“Yeah, I gotta hand it to Lupton here; he stayed awake all night last night.” Atkinson chimes in. I do not know how he knows this, but I think his comment will produce an ass chewing for the two reprobates or a justified trip in front of Captain Cole. How naïve I am.

“Look at this fucking machine gun;” I yell at The Jap, “it looks like shit. Look how rusty it is. The stupid fucker refuses to clean it. The goddamn thing will probably blow up.” Sergeant Rodriguez and Sergeant Kobayashi inspect Smith’s machine gun. Rod orders Smith to clean it up right away.

I get no pat on the back, or anything! Nobody says, “Way to go, Lupton.” No kudos for my all night vigilance either. With a jerk of his thumb, Rod tells me to go to chow, and I stomp off toward the mess tent in a huff. Nothing ever comes of Smith’s and the ammo bearer’s transgressions.

This is not the first time somebody refused to pull his guard while on ambush, Caldwell declined to pull his guard on one ambush one night, and I swear it will be the last time anybody fucks me over. How audacious to pull this bullshit the day after sappers crawled across the exact same field to set up those Chinese mines that killed two men. In addition, I am infuriated that Cole does not chew their asses after his disheartening accusations about sleeping on guard *this very morning*. I am just disgusted with everything.

Mostly, we spend our day on blocking forces as the rest of the battalion’s line companies pull numerous sweeps. The helicopters insert us into a rice paddy containing waste high mature rice plants. We jump from the helicopters and sprint a few feet away then I notice the choppers are not flying away. I turn to see Sergeant Rodriguez and O’Shaughnessy loading a black pajama clad Viet Cong into their helicopter. Later we learn that when Sergeant Rod jumped out of his helicopter, he landed on the leg of a VC who is hiding in the tall rice plants, breaking the Viet Cong’s femur. I can see his leg does not look normal as Rod shoves on his butt to get him safely into the chopper before it takes off.

Sergeant Rod motions for everybody to get in a line abreast and to start moving through the tawny rice when all of a sudden a VC rises to his feet about 10 feet in front of me, his hands high in the air. I am so startled I almost shoot the son of a bitch. The ammo bearer ties the up VC, and we move quickly through the paddy looking for yet another suspect. We never do find one.



**Figure 3 Sergeant Rod hustles VCS to the helicopter. O'Shaughnessy works the radio while Moschkin stands guard.**

The helicopters pick us up on the other side of the rice paddy; we circle around and land inside of our bivouac. I watch members of our mortar platoon scramble after their playing cards as we descend. The rotor wash throws up the cards and the players scramble to retrieve them. I wish I could sit around playing cards.

We wait in our groups at the chopper pad, but we do not go anywhere for the remainder of the afternoon. I mosey back to the bunker along with everybody else. Sergeant Kobayashi tells us flatly we have to go on ambush again tonight. I yell and bitch that we went on ambush last night, but he just walks away as he always does. I swear that bastard is just getting even with us for making him look incompetent this morning, the sorry ass.

Sergeant Motta takes out the 3<sup>rd</sup> squad. We march directly out in front of our position, except this time we keep going well past the depression in the ground, and then into the tree line beyond. We hold up for a few minutes while Motta walks to the rear of the patrol to make a head count then we penetrate the village for several hundred feet eventually turning right on an ox cart road. We follow the trail for several hundred meters. He stops us again and calls for the mortars to fire a marking round. The Willey Peter lands on the other side of the next bamboo hedgerow. The patrol is perfect; we are right where we are supposed to be, and we set up our ambush with the kill zone overlooking a large rice paddy, kudos for Sergeant Motta.

I whisper to the other two fuck heads, "I am taking the first watch, and I will kill both of you if you refuse to get up."

"Yeah, yeah, Lupton, fuck you," Smith grumbles as he settles in behind the machine gun. The ammo bearer sets up the Claymore mine, and they both go to sleep while I take the first guard. An hour later the moon shines brightly for the first time in several nights, and I can see all the way across the rice paddy to the tree line almost as clear as day. I feel secure concealed among the shadows of the bushes.

I firmly shake Smith awake at midnight fearing he will pull the same bullshit on me again tonight, but he wakes up and stays awake, at least until I fall asleep. The ammo bearer wakes me up at six. I feel somewhat rested after not sleeping for 48 hours, and we gather up the Claymore and the ambush begins walking back to the bivouac while it is still dark.

After eating morning chow Sergeant Rod tells us to break down the hootches because we are leaving. Everybody starts pulling up tent pegs and unsnapping the ponchos. All of a sudden, I realize the only poncho left on the ground is a wrinklely old dilapidated thing. Somebody else has claimed my brand new poncho for himself. As a rule, I put my name on every piece of field gear I own to deter thieves, but this time I forgot, now my brand new poncho is gone. The others have already folded their ponchos and tied them onto their web belts; I am sorely pissed, but what can I do.

We sit around for an hour waiting to go until Sergeant Rod tells us to put our hootches back up. We are staying another night. There is plenty of grumbling as we put the ponchos back together. I make sure my shitty poncho is included in the hootch construction because the next morning I am able to garner a better poncho when we take down the shelter. Bishop is stuck with the fucked up poncho, and he bitches vehemently to Sergeant Walker who gives him his just to shut him up. I congratulate myself on my cunning.

Back at Cu Chi, the company undergoes an IG inspection. Everybody must clean up his field gear and rifles thoroughly. I let Smith and the ammo bearer work on the machine gun. I am the assistant gunner and should work on the machine gun, but I could care less, let them clean it, I work on my M16.

We have to carry our disassembled weapons in a towel to some lieutenant I have never seen before who goes over every piece meticulously. The Jap hovers close behind me as the officer inspects my rifle pieces. I know Kobayashi is sorely pissed when the officer finds only one itty-bitty little speck of carbon underneath the gas nipple on the M16's bolt. Otherwise, my piece is spotless.

Sergeant Kobayashi escorts Smith and the ammo bearer to the inspecting officer where the young lieutenant rips Smith a new asshole. Every piece of the machine gun has dirt or rust on it. Our squad leader scowls as the lieutenant criticizes each part then the trio brings the weapon back to the hootch where Kobayashi supervises the two nitwits as they scrub and oil each piece spotless. Smith bitches bitterly, "This is a war, how do they expect us to keep this gun clean all the time."

"Boutoff could pass an inspection like this in the middle an operation while sitting on a rice paddy at any time, Smith. His gun was always spotless." I lecture him, but alas, the boy is permanently lost.

The trio takes the gun back three more times before it passes; Smith is beside himself in frustration, but I refuse to tell him how to clean the gun. He wanted to carry it, screw him.

I re-sign my 1049 for the third time before we load the trucks for the field. I show my annoyance with an offhand comment about competency, and the company clerk curtly rebuffs me. "I can do many other things, Lupton. I don't need any of your shit," he tells me in a huff without looking up. I feel he is subtly threatening to dawdle some more just to piss me off to no end.

“You don’t have to go out to the field when I walk out of this orderly room either,” I snap back at him. Captain Cole will have to sign this thing and the trucks are pulling into the company area to take us out to the field for another two weeks. After all of all this screwing around, I speculate Cole is conniving to keep me here as long as possible.

“Don’t worry, we will take care of you,” announces the clerk with mocking finality.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Get out of here,” he says with a wave of his hand.

I grab my ammunition and head for the duce and a halves. We load the trucks; Smith mounts the machine gun on the top of the cab, and away we go for yet another operation. The convoy rides through Cu Chi on Route 1 for several miles then we turn onto another paved secondary road until we arrive at the place where we are going to set up our bivouac.

This is another battalion-sized operation. We bring our field kitchens, our battalion first aid station with our doctor, and our mortar platoon. The bivouac is smaller than the Boi Loi operation we just finished, and the road cuts through the middle of the encirclement.

Sergeant Rodriguez shows us where he wants the machine gun set up, and we busy ourselves digging foxholes, stringing three strands of barbed concertina wire in front of our line, and building a shelter behind the bunker.

I walk to the rear of our position to cut some poles from a clump of bamboo. The bamboo is a pain in the ass. My knife is too small for the size of the stalk I need to cut, so I scrounge up a machete then attack the clump of bamboo with the proper weapon. I quickly cut several poles, trim them easily, and fashion a shelter with two ponchos snapped together making a large pup tent big enough for the three of us.

Work on our fortifications progresses until the early afternoon when we go on our security sweep around the perimeter. I believe I tripped a booby trap when I feel a tug on my thigh; I scoot away as quickly as I can before it can explode. I remark to Sergeant Rodriguez about this, and he paternally tells me to be careful because I am getting short. I notice of my hand grenades has unscrewed itself from the detonator, now I have to go back and find it.

Suddenly, Sergeant Rodriguez looks like he is trying to run away from himself. He backs up slapping his chest and arms furiously until he rips off his extra bandolier of ammunition and field gear, throws his M16 to the ground, and begins stripping as quickly as he can. It only takes a few seconds to see he has walked into a red ant’s nest. His fatigue shirt is off now, and he is beginning to unbuckle his pants. “Take it off Sarge, take it ALL off,” I taunt him with a big shit-eating grin.

“Goddamn you, Lupton,” he snorts as he madly thrusts his hand down into the fly of his pants. Others whistle and make catcalls. I begin thumping my thigh, and whistling the tune of *The Stripper*; others clap in rhythm until everybody is laughing and cheering at our hapless Sergeant Rod. “Knock it off,” he shouts at us while standing in his weenie light-green underwear with his pants at mid thigh, viciously slapping the back of his neck. There is one more desperate grab at the back of his thigh then he pulls his drawers all the way down. He pulls them up again but is not sure, and then drops his pants once more to reach all the way down to his calf to pick the last of his tormenters from his

trousers. Revengefully, Rod holds up the ant between his thumb and finger squishing it flat. Sergeant Atkinson walks over to help the poor man shake out any remaining red ants from his fatigue jacket and consoles him.

“Nice ass Sarge,” I tell him, grinning like a shit-eating fool. He glares at me until the corners of his mouth triumphs into a sly smile; he puts his field gear back on then we continue our sweep. Everybody agrees that no one in the platoon can strip faster than Sergeant Rodriguez can.

Our first night at the new bivouac is quiet. I observe mortar flares drifting lazily in the distance as they light up an ARVN compound several miles away. We watch the flares all night long. The next morning we go on our sweep in the surrounding villages. While crossing a small ditch, my trailing foot snags a branch chocked full of thorns, almost tripping me. When I tripped, a thorn jams all the way into my calf, and although I feel a slight sensation, it does not hurt until the evening when I pull my pant leg up look to see what is wrong. I notice the butt end of the thorn on my skin, and when I pull it out, the damn thing is over an inch long. I just think it interesting I could walk around with it stuck deep into my muscle all afternoon and not find it overly irritating.

After morning chow the next day, I chat with Buxton and Smith behind our bunker. A FNG from the first platoon walks behind us near the clump of bamboo where I had so much trouble cutting our hootch polls. We take no notice of him until we hear an explosion and turn to see the FNG crumpled on the ground underneath a puff of grey smoke. Everybody yells medic when the man does not move and another guy and the medic runs over to help him. They carry the wounded man away on a stretcher to the aid station, and after the medic returns we call him over to see what happened.

“He went to dig a cat hole to take a shit, and on his first stab with his entrenching tool he hit a small anti-personnel mine. He got shrapnel all up and down the front of him,” the medic tells us, his hands still bloody.

“Did he get any shrapnel in his dick?” Buxton wants to know. This is important for 19-year olds to know.

“Yeah, he took shrapnel in his dick. Most of it went into his face though; I don’t think he is going to look very pretty if he lives.”

Later on, we hear the guy died, but I do not think that is true. He was only in the company a few weeks; nobody knows his name. How unlucky can someone be to hit a mine on his first whack? The hapless bastard never even gets to take his shit either. I never venture behind the bunker for more bamboo after this incident.

The machine gun crew has to go on ambush tonight with 1<sup>st</sup> squad. Sergeant Walker tells us we only have to go a little ways beyond the concertina wire in front of 1<sup>st</sup> platoon’s sector of the line. We have to wait until it is entirely dark before venturing through the wire’s opening. As we are halfway through the zigzag, the point man trips a trip flares. Everybody instinctively hits the ground and does not move. The flare is very close to us as I lie behind Smith with my eyes shut in a vain attempt to preserve my night vision. Eventually, I give up and watch the ARVNs incessantly lighting their compound with one flare after the next; they never stop. The light from these flares casts a dim luminance on us as we wait for the trip flare to burn itself out. “Goddamn, how are we supposed to out on ambush with all this goddamn light? We ought to say fuck it and go back,” I complain bitterly.

“Just lay there and shut up, Lupton,” Sergeant Walker grouses at me. Minutes later, the trip flare burns itself out, but we stay prone for another two minutes hoping our night vision will return. “Okay, Bailey, let’s get going,” Walker whispers. The ambush rises and ventures slowly into the lightly illuminated darkness of the open rice paddies. Sergeant Walker picks a dry paddy, which is a rarity, and we set up the ambush. I lie between Smith and Buxton tonight.

All of us stay awake, for it is still early in the evening. I look around to orientate myself in case we have to run back to the bivouac. When I crane my neck to look at our compound, I am just in time to see a round starburst of white-hot steel fragments, a moment later the sound of the explosion reaches us followed quickly by a banshee scream wafting across the rice paddies. This hellacious shriek ripples through my body striking horror. I freeze, frozen stiff with dread. My ascending colon gurgles with grotesque bile; it bubbles back and forth all night, and I am too unnerved to fart. I am certain the Viet Cong can hear my guts sloshing around.

All of us are all too scared to sleep. Buxton wants to partake in a conversation. He keeps whispering in my ear about all sorts of things until I cannot tolerate him any longer and tell him to shut up. At 0300, the three of us decide to set up a schedule for sleeping. Each is supposed to get two hours of sack time until the patrol gets up at 0600 and return to the bunker line. We agree I will take the last hour; I lay my head down behind my two ammunition boxes where I fall asleep quickly. The next thing I know, Buxton wakes me up at 0600. “Why didn’t you wake me up at five o’clock?”

“I tried, but every time I shook your shoulder, you moaned and made a lot of noise. I was afraid you were going to give our position away,” Buxton whispers to me as we put on our equipment. I do not believe him though. I think one of them fell asleep, but I do not care anymore; we bring the Claymore in and the patrol returns to the bunker line.

From what I can understand, the Viet Cong snuck up to the barbed wire and threw a hand grenade at the bunker next to ours. The scream came from an FNG buck sergeant whose name I cannot recollect. Anyway, he is gone and we never see him again.

Our entire day is very much like the day before. We sweep and search villages until we stop in a long and not so large rice patty to wait for the helicopters to pick us up. The gun crew is stuck on the last lift. When the second lift is barely off the ground, we come under automatic weapons fire. The monotony of the day instantly turns into terror.

As the helicopters can be seen flying in a broad arc in their approach to the LZ, Captain Cole orders everybody to get on the slicks from the right side. As the choppers slow to land, they begin firing their machine guns on the port side while the gunships thump out their 2.75-inch rockets along the edge of the village. I am the first to dash through the cargo door. I scoot all the way to the left side of the helicopter with my back against the pilot’s seat as the door gunner keeps up a steady fusillade of fire. Mortar rounds begin exploding as we lift off the ground, which prompts me to start firing my M16 into the adjacent village until I finish the entire magazine. The door gunner never stops firing even after the helicopter is well away from the LZ. I can watch the gunner firing into a house passing underneath us. Normally, people scramble away from the fire, but three people run head long into their house as the gunner keeps pumping lead into the roof. The choppers experience no hits and we safely fly back to the bivouac.



We return just in time to get into the chow line. I am still shaking when I put my cup underneath the drink cooler. With a smirky mien, the cook chides me about my vibrating canteen cup; I have to hold the damn thing firmly on the table so he can fill it for me. "What's the matter, Lupton? You shaken like a leaf there, boy," he teases me.

"You'd be shaking too with mortars walking up your ass," I snap back at him. This guy reinforces the reason why I hate these stupid chicken shit cooks.

Sergeant Kobayashi takes the 3<sup>rd</sup> squad out on a one-click ambush tonight. There are short ambushes where we only venture out several hundred meters then set up, and there are long ambushes where we patrol as far away as a whole click. A click is over 3,000 feet, around two thirds of a mile, and sometimes we venture out even farther than that. It is very difficult to remember where your friendly base is located if the ambush gets into trouble. This is what happened to the original 3<sup>rd</sup> squad in June; getting lost in the dark is easy to do.

During the night, Kobayashi radios that the Viet Cong have him surrounded. Sergeant Walker comes around to each foxhole and tells us to put on our web gear and be ready to move out when the word comes down. We might have to go rescue the ambush. The three of us put on our web gear, wait a while, and eventually the other two lie back down and fall asleep. That is the end of the incident, nothing happens.

The next morning I hear Kobayashi panicked when he called in the "we are surrounded" report. Not a goddamn thing happened all night, and he drags ass into the bivouac the next morning looking like a fool. "Fuck, I'm grateful I wasn't with him last night," I say in reflection of the wiped out 3<sup>rd</sup> squad, "I would have shit my pants."

The next night, Atkinson takes the 2<sup>nd</sup> squad out a lot farther than we went with Sergeant Walker on the first night. The wet paddies force us to walk along the berms, which vary in width and structure. Smith slips off the dyke and into the muddy water. I give him with laughter and that pisses him off to no end. His favorite embitterment is, "Fuck you, Lupton." Every time someone falls off I hear muted giggling, disparaging remarks follow. It is only a matter of time until I twist my right ankle and wind up in the muck; others taunt me to get even. I do not want to separate the patrol, so I limp bravely along trying my best to keep up; my ankle hurts like hell.

Buxton is so scared he carries out a shotgun to supplement his M16. We conceal ourselves in the shadows underneath a row of bushes where we spend another nervous night watching the ARVN compound incessantly fire mortar flares all night long; still nothing happens.

Today is more of the same, patrol, patrol, and more patrol. A Company arrives at the bunkers late in the afternoon where I notice some blood on the back of my right calf. I roll up my leg to find a leach lurching contently on my blood. He is a big sucker too, as fat as my pinky and about two and a half inches long. I light up a cigarette and look down again only to see a black burr-headed Negro in the way. "Get yo fat head outta the way, Buxton. I gotta burn this fucker off my leg." We giggle with glee as the little bastard wriggles and looses its bloody lunch before he slips loose. I pour lighter fluid on his ass and barbeque him.

After ten minutes, my blood continues oozing, so the medic escorts me over to the battalion doctor who is virtually disinterested in my case. He barely looks up from the newspaper to tell the medic the leach's saliva contains an anticoagulant to keep my blood from clotting, but not to worry unless I am still bleeding after a half an hour.

After getting my leg dressed, and on the way back to the bunker, I stop off at the platoon CP to ask Sergeant Rod if he will ask First Sergeant Letoto about my 1049. To my surprise, he gets on the radio and calls the First Sergeant. I can hear Letoto yelling over the mike, "You tell Lupton, if he thinks he is going to get out of the field with this, he has another thing coming to him!"

I roll my eyes skyward, "just tell him I am asking where my 1049 is, that's all," I tell Rod. He radios my query again and gets the same yelling and screaming about me not getting out of the field. I thank Sergeant Rod for trying and return to the bunker.

The highway running through the bivouac is always full of traffic, but nobody seems upset about the five guys taking a bath in the rice paddy beside the road using well water. Not having taken a bath for two weeks, I grab my steel pot, a pair of spare under shorts, and a sliver of soap with me and join the naked men. I tie a rope to my steel pot chinstrap and bring up some cloudy well water, strip off everything, and soap up. A convoy of ARVN trucks with their families piled high on trucks and the top of busses drive by; the girls smile and wave at us as I soap up my crotch and the crack of my ass. We laugh and waive as I rinse off the soap with well water, using the last steel pot full to shave, brush my teeth, and now I feel like a new person. I have to put my dirty fatigues back on, but I have new underwear, so I feel great. I have no ambush tonight either and the night is quiet.

We break down the bivouac the next morning by emptying out the sandbags into the foxhole, gathering up our barbed wire, and loading it on trucks then we begin our sweep.

Late in the afternoon, we hold up along the edge of a large open field where we come across upon a tree with a huge canopy. A horseshoe shaped foxhole lies underneath hidden from view. The only reason we find this position is that I almost fall into it. The tree's canopy conceals it from the air, and the Viet Cong have disposed of the dirt, probably in a stream, so there is no visible parapet. It is the quintessential machine gun position.

When we move out into the open paddies to await pick up, we come under sniper fire from the opposite row of trees. The return fire is brief and intense. Smith fires one shot from the machine gun when it jams. The bolt and chamber is so filthy he cannot pull the bolt back to reload, and he winds up taking his helmet and bashing the cocking handle to unseat the jammed bolt. He is pathetic to watch as everybody around him is firing like crazy. "Ya see, Smith, you asshole."

"Fuck you, Lupton!"

One of the FNGs fires all of his M14 ammunition except for his last 20 rounds. He begins breaking off bullets from the machine gun's ammo belt in order to reload his magazine. I tell him he is stupid for firing up all of his rounds on full automatic. "You have to take well-aimed single shots or you will run out of ammo," I lecture the nitwit, "this isn't even very much fire either."

"Ah, fuck you, Lupton, I'm gonna shoot at these assholes; I don't care how many rounds come my way." There is no reason to blow all of his ammo because of a few lousy sniper rounds; he does not even have a visible target. After the 19<sup>th</sup>, I husband each round I fire because I never want to run out of ammunition again.

Captain Cole maneuvers the company away from our exposed position, and we sit in a wooded area to wait for the helicopters. Our lift dashes for the choppers as they

come in and we fly back to Cu Chi without incident. After cleaning up our rifles and gear, I eat chow and begin imbibing my way out of reality.