

Jack Estes

Books



A Field of Innocence

by Jack Estes

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Excerpt from Chapter Nine

. . . The next morning we tore down our poncho tents, gathered up our gear, threw last-minute letters into the outgoing mailbag and got saddled up, ready to move out. It was quieter than usual. The sky was washed over with thick, gloomy gray, and a thin, moist fog hung heavy in the air. The fog was enveloping us and seemed to slow us down. There were no smiles. Talk was in loud whispers or not at all. It was a graveyard come to life. It was as if depression and doom were handed out like hunks of cheese, then mouthed, swallowed and now a part of us. We looked at each other, not speaking, knowing in our hearts only one truth: before we were finished, some of us would die.

There were hundreds of us there, loaded up heavy, like mules. We were standing, sitting or lying down, our packs overflowing, with E-tools on top. Each man carried several bandoliers of magazines and ammo crisscrossed on his chest like a Mexican bandit. We toted frags and a mortar or belts of M-60 machine gun rounds.

And we waited.

There were radio men with antennas whipping and officers strapped with 45s, and dozens and dozens of helmets with bands across the top holding plastic bottles of insect repellent and white battle dressings. There were radios, machine guns, mortars, and LAWmen. We had M-79s for each platoon, and their carriers heavy-bagged with dozens of rounds. We had Corpsmen, and at the end, near the last of the long column, was a chaplain. I suppose the generals who were in the rear monitoring our movement on maps thought it nice to bring a man of God into a Godless war.

Suddenly Chinooks filled the air like seven-year locusts. The Operation was beginning.

In those few moments before the choppers landed to carry us to war, I lost what thoughts I'd once had of democracy and freedom and liberty. I forgot about being upset over Jane Fonda feeding the enemy, and I didn't hum the Marine Corps Hymn. I began to feel very frightened again. Afraid of what I couldn't control.

I thought briefly about Kristen and my new baby. That's all, and wanting very much to go home.

"Jackson," Ski said, walking over to me. "Rat's walking point, Rodo's back-up, then P.J., and you'll be the LAWman. No sweat. I'll be right behind you," he added, attempting to be reassuring.

Great, I thought, I have to carry those damn awkward LAWs. They're just more weight, and besides, those things don't fire half the time. They were supposed to be the ultimate in modern warfare. A collapsible one-shot bazooka. They were a pain in the ass to me.

Our platoon was the first one out. Then came another and another until dozens were on choppers filling the air and leav-

ing Stud behind.

We flew through valleys with miles and miles of thick jungled mountains on both sides, pocked and cratered from B-52 strikes. We banked past Mother's Ridge, site of the Valentine's Day Massacre where Ski and Rodo were heroes, and down into Ah Shau Valley. The eerie gray mist grew thicker as we circled, banked left, made a sharp descent, and finally touched down in a clearing at the base of a huge mountain. Quickly we filed out, down the ramp, out and away from the prop wash, trampling through thick waist-high grass as we ran and formed a half circle.

The other choppers came, dropping troops again and again until we had one platoon, then two, then another and another. Then we gathered up in a long single file, each man six or seven yards from the next. We were ready now. Our squad was up front as we moved out. We moved slowly and methodically, under the weight of the full packs. Rat was point, acting as the eyes and ears of 3/9. Rodo was close behind, followed by P.J., then me, then Ski and Buddy and the others. Rodo was covering Rat while Rat looked for trip wires and booby traps along the trail and Rodo looked to the flanks for enemy dug in, waiting to ambush us. Being in the first squad made us the most vulnerable, and therefore the tension was almost unbearable. Point squad was switched often but for now we were it.

Our plan was to attack and overrun a large NVA base camp. The resistance was expected to be heavy. We were prepared for the worst. We found a well-traveled trail. Reconnaissance reports had indicated its location, but the trail had been much easier to locate than anticipated. The dirt trail zig-zagged up through heavy jungle. A thick canopy of trees and foliage covered us. The NVA would have been impossible to spot from the air. In places sparse with overhead cover, thin trees had been bent across the trail and tied with bamboo strips to other trees. The NVA had worked hard to conceal their trail.

As the path grew steeper, so did the trail's sophistication. In some places, rows of steps were dug out and lengths of tree-formed handrails had been constructed to make travel easier. At one point we passed what looked like a religious altar

made from bamboo with two wooden bowls holding rice.

We were quiet. Alert. Each of us was searching, trying to see deep into the bush, peering left, straining right. Bending, breathing hard, my heart pounded in my throat and seemed to echo out my mouth. The signs were clear. We were nearing an NVA camp.

Suddenly Rat stopped up ahead. Holding his arm up for us to halt, he dropped to one knee. We all did the same. Then he waved us to move. It was OK. The column sighed. We struggled on, passing by a decomposed body on the trail. A North Vietnamese soldier, his body slumped, bloated and decaying, probably killed by the recon team. I shuddered. I was frightened as I fingered the semi-automatic switch. My M-16 was now an extension of my body.

We crept on, climbing up into the mountain. We stopped and started, with Rat always searching, bent over, senses tuned and in control. It took a very special kind of man to walk point. You had no time for thoughts of home or a bullet splashing in your face. No time to dream or cry. On point, at any time, that special stillness may erupt. Fear is always there, and yet it isn't.

Rat's eyes were on the trail up ahead. Rodo's fixed on the short flanks and extended sides. They moved as one. We were the body, following them closely. We pushed on and as we did I felt a morbid kind of deja vu. I felt as if I had no history or future, only now and only here in this jungle, in this squad, at the front of hundreds, walking into my destiny. Thoughts of Kristen were gone.

We stopped... No one spoke... but we listened. We moved higher and deeper into the jungle, our heartbeats thundering. We knew we were getting close.

Suddenly the bush up ahead and on the right flank erupted with the crack of AKs and 16s and sounds of chi-coms exploding.

KABOOM... CRACK. CRACK. CRACK. I sucked the earth. Rounds were dancing, kicking up or slicing through the trees overhead in high-pitched TA-WANG TA-WANG CRACK. CRACK. CRACK.

"I'm hit, I'm hit," someone shouted in front. "Oh, God," came a cry from the back. The rounds were pouring from the jungle. Somewhere in front was a machine gun, laying fire. Or maybe it was off to the side. I couldn't tell.

More explosions followed and then an R.P.G. whistled overhead until shattering a tree. I found a log to hide behind as rounds impacted into it. I could see PJ. in front of me, shaking, clawing at the ground on his belly, small, trying to hug the earth as bullets impacted next to him.

Bullets slashed overhead. Ski came up next to me, bent over, laying rounds into the smoking trees. PJ. was now hidden from my view, around the bend in the trail.

I heard PJ. yell, "He's gone."

CRACK. CRACK. CRACK. The AKs opened up, keeping us low. Then suddenly we rose up, firing over the fallen tree, one, then two magazines. Ski and I were tearing ass... pumping rounds in bursts and sprays.

"Frag those motherfuckers!" Ski screamed, "frag those motherfuckers!"

Ducking below the log, I dropped my pack and pulled a grenade from my flak jacket pouch. The area we were firing on was about thirty yards to our front and off to the right. It was a long throw, but not impossible. I pulled the pin and flipped it over my head and listened as it passed through limbs and trees. KABOOM! It was short, but just barely. I threw another longer and better placed. KABOOM!

"Listen," Ski said, shaking as much as I was. "I'll pop a green smoke for cover and lay some fire and you crawl up and see what the fuck is going on up front."

Fuck you, I thought. Goddamn smoke ain't bulletproof. I liked the tree I was behind. From there I couldn't be hit. Oh, Jesus, I said to myself, no time to think. This is it! He threw the smoke. I left the tree, crawling on my belly toward PJ. He was lying on his side, trying to pull magazines off Rodo's body.

"He's dead. He's dead," PJ. said. Rodo was lying on his back, his head toward us. His eyes were open and empty. His mouth was wide, his face twisted into a blank stare of disbelief.

There was very little blood showing, just a small hole in his neck with something white hanging out. But the ground beneath the back of his neck was red and wet. He was already turning cold and pale. I tried not to gag. He was dead. That was it, and that's the way it would always be.

"P.J., he's gone. There's nothing we can do. Leave him," I said, flat and unfeeling as if I were an old soldier who had been in war all my life and had seen hundreds of nineteen-year-old boys lying dead.

"How's Rat, P.J.?" I yelled. He didn't answer, but his face told me. The firing was slow as PJ. and I crawled up the hill toward Rat, leaving Ski behind.

Rat didn't move. He was on his stomach. The big ears and smile were gone. Half of his head was blown off and particles of his brain were hanging out, splattering the bushes and lying in the mud. Three fingers on his right hand were shot off, but he still was holding his 16.

In front of him and off to one side of the trail were two more bodies, dressed in light brown. They didn't move. We didn't take a chance. PJ. and I emptied a magazine into them. It felt good.

We started to crawl back when rounds began tearing through the bush again, reminding us to stay low. PJ. and I dragged Rodo along to Ski and the safety of the fallen tree. We took his canteens, drank his water, took his ammo and his food and covered him up with his poncho. PJ. was quiet.

CRACK... CRACK... CRACK. More fire. We kissed the ground. The three of us were in love with the log, riding close. "We'll have to leave Rat 'til later," I said, taking another sip of water. "There's still a couple of gooks dug in. Maybe three or four."

"Yeah, I know," Ski said, cool and in control. "We'll get a bloop up here and blow up the place. And if that don't work, maybe we'll have the LAWman come to town."

He was crazy. It was too close, I thought. And besides, to fire the damn thing I'd have to get up from behind the tree and expose myself. No, that idea sucked. No more chances. I had had my share of crawling and John Wayneing it. I'm just fine behind this tree. I'll let ol' Luke the Gook come after me. I've

got a family. No, I'm sittin' tight right behind this big old log.

Buddy crawled up the trail to our log to join P.J., Ski and me. Sweat was pouring from him. He was breathing hard, almost gasping for air. He'd always seemed calm and self-confident, but now his face was shadowed with fear.

"What the fuck is going on?" he gasped. "The Luey from the second platoon was blown away. Wouldn't get his ass down. I yelled at the boot to get down. And he took a round in the head and fell on top of me." His voice was cracking as if he were about to break down. "God damn him. I told him to get down. I told him."

"Hey, hold on, now. Hold on," Ski said, trying to calm him.

"I told him to get down. I told him to get down."

"Shut up, just shut the fuck up," Ski said, slapping Buddy's face. Buddy calmed down, his breathing slowed.

"Now listen. Rodo and Rat bought it. But Rat took a couple of gooks with him."

Buddy's face took on an aura of sick depression and then he suddenly burst into a violent rage. "I can't stand it!" Then he rose to his knees, well above the trees and started pumping rounds into the bush, yelling, "Motherfuckers, Motherfuckers!"

Ski grabbed him from behind and pulled him down hard behind the fallen log, and then screamed, inches from his face, "You dumb son-of-a-bitch! You idiot! You're going to get your ass shot off. Now shut the fuck up!"

We sat there, tense, waiting for the AKs but they didn't come. Buddy was calm again. "Sorry I blew it for a minute. Ski, got a cigarette?"

"Sure, no problem. Here, keep 'em."

It was starting to get dark. The firing had stopped. A black dude carrying an M-79 from the squad behind us came up just short of our tree and planted three or four rounds into the general area. He waited and was answered with several misplaced shots, but no machine gun fire. He tried again. More waiting, and then again a few scattered cracks hitting nothing. It was a game now. They could see us, knew where we were, but couldn't penetrate our tree. Every time the black marine with the 79 moved into position to fire, the gooks would crawl

deep into the safety of their holes. They would wait for the firing to stop and then, to show us they were still around, come out and fire a few rounds.

"They've dug in just off to the right of the trail about thirty to forty yards ahead," Ski said. "They knew we were coming. Rat and Rodo just walked into them. All it is is a handful of slant-eyes, I bet, and they've got the whole fuckin' company pinned down." Ski took off his helmet, wiping his brow with his hand. "If we stay put, we're all right. If we move back we're all right. But if we move up, we might as well kiss our asses goodbye."

The only thing between us and our enemy was thirty to forty yards, some thick underbrush, and the fallen log. Our wall of protection was about two feet high and maybe fifteen feet long. We were on a slope, which helped to keep us lower than their fire. "When darkness hits, it's the Lawman up front, got it?" Ski said, and then put on his helmet and went back down the trail to grab a radio and let the rest of the platoon know what was happening.

"This is bullshit," PJ. remarked. "I could be pounding on my pud on watch instead of waitin* for Mr. Victor Charles to move his skinny little ass out that hole he's dug in. This night shit is for the birds."

We were in heavy darkness as Ski made his way back to the fallen log. "I explained the situation to Lt. Neal. He's sliding back down the hill and talking to the C.O. When he gets the scoop, he'll let us know. Apparently the whole battalion is strung out and digging in. I think we'll probably just stay put until morning. Anyway, let's dig some holes and hope the C.O. doesn't dream up some suicide shit."

Trying to stay low and out of range, we lay on our sides and dug in, close to the log. It was a dark, moonless night. It was a night I knew I would remember no matter how hard I tried to forget.

Fear began to edge its way into my mind and manifest itself in physical reactions. I started to shake as if cold, and breathe quickly as if out of breath. It would come in waves and then I would push the fear away. I had to be stronger.

We lay lined up in a neat row; Rodo, lying dead with a poncho covering him, me three feet away, cold, and P.J., with Buddy shivering noticeably next to him. When Ski came back up the trail there were five of us shadowed by the log. The black kid with the M-79 was yards farther down the path, digging in next to another tree. Tiny and Pigpen must be somewhere down the path shoveling silently, I thought.

The wind began to blow and crackle through the trees, each gust triggering imaginations and fostering new anxieties.

"Listen, what was that?" I whispered, low and heavy. A noise came up the path and to the left somewhere in the jungle.

"I don't know," PJ. said.

"Frag it."

, He did. We hit our holes. KABOOM. Shrapnel ripped through the jungle, tearing and whipping overhead. We waited. And waited. The noise was still there, but then so was the wind.

"Those zipperheads ain't dumb, partner," P.J. said sounding like a salt. "They're just sitting there, waiting for us to move. When we do, it's all over but the crying. Yeah, they're just sitting there drugged up and waiting for us to show our sweet asses. Well, I'll tell you, I'm about pissed," he added in a statement so understated I almost laughed.

"Well, we got no protection from the left side," Ski whispered. "What do you suggest we do?"

"Let's put a claymore out there," PJ. said. "We'll string a welcome out for Victor and blow his little dick off."

"Be my guest," I said, amazed that he would even consider crawling through the jungle at night in pitch darkness. "Yeah, you just crawl your ass out there and you'll be in a world of hurt."

"Fuck it. I think I'll pass."

Life was everything. I wasn't giving it away. It wasn't brave or courageous to die, I was thinking, but unfortunate, sad and incredibly unlucky. Yes, things were becoming so clear and defined in my mind. To survive was the important thing. To live and go home to my wife and baby. Stay on this side and

live, on the other side I die. Yes, I loved this log. This big tree is here, I thought, here for me to live. Rodo. Rodo. Now he's dead. But I'm alive. I could never help him, but he could help me. He was lying just to the side of my freshly dug hole. I would use Rodo to help me live. Kneeling in my hole, I reached out with two hands, grabbed underneath the poncho and tugged and pulled him over to the edge of my hole.

Now I had two logs. One thick and strong, made of wood. The other one, Rodo. Surely his body could stop a few rounds, I thought. Yes, I was lucky. I had life and I had two logs.

A new system of priorities, a revelation of understanding survival was born.

I could hear a voice talking in my head, a voice no one else could hear. My thoughts came at me loud and quick and clean like a prophet or evangelist.

To die isn't important, at least not here. Not in this armpit. If I die, it won't help anyone. The war won't suddenly conclude with my death. History won't be made over the death of my body. And I won't pass on to mankind some great ideal. I'll just be dead. So the most important thing is to live, to survive.

I felt crazed, but sure that I was making sense. I sorted out my thoughts, and by doing so, I came across a psychological approach to survival. I knew it would work.

I would remove myself from caring about anyone here but me. In doing so, the only death that was important, the only death that mattered, was my own. I believed this. It must be true. I must be raving mad, the voice within me was shouting now. My new belief would carry me through. My new belief and the old one of loving Kristen and my child. I wanted to tell PJ. and Buddy. I wanted to tell them all. I would feel no death but my own.

I would not be touched by others dying. I would not cry or feel sick. And as my brain poured out thoughts, another pop-up lit the night. I could do it! I knew it! I believed this as the flare lit the sky. I believed this, right up until I slid the poncho from Rodo's face. I believed my thoughts until I saw his dead face looking up at me. I believed this until I touched the little bubble of blood that formed on his lips. I believed this,

Rodo, right up until the moment I really saw you dead. And as I looked at him, I wanted to break down and cry and scream and go absolutely crazy in my mind.

My mind howled as Ski came up the path in the darkness, crawling on all fours. He dropped his pack at the end of the log that was farthest from me, opposite Rodo, making sure to stay low. He propped a radio up against the back of the dead tree, pulled up the antenna, and motioned us to crawl closer. We huddled together on our bellies, P.J., Buddy and I.

"Listen up," Ski said. "I went down there and talked to the C.O. They're sitting fat about one hundred yards or so down the street, trying to figure which way is up. Anyway, those dumb fucks want to hit the gooks with some 105s. I told him he's nuts to try to pull that shit off in the dark and with us so close. So that's cool. Then they want us rushin' the position?"

"Buuuulshit," I whispered low. "We already got two KIAs, not counting the Luey."

"I know, I know," he said. In the dark I was sure he was nodding his head. "So here it is. We're sitting tight until morning. In the morning we'll blow those slant-eyes outta the water. We're supposed to call in every thirty minutes and let 'em know how everything is going. And just to keep Charlie on his toes, we'll be fragging his ass all night. Oh yeah, 50 percent alert. Shit, how the fuck you going to sleep in this bullshit, anyway?"

"I can't believe this," Buddy said. "I ain't sitting here on death row all night waiting for Victor. I'm down the road." He raised up to all fours and started to head down the trail.

"Keep it down," Ski yelled in a clenched teeth whisper, grabbing Buddy's arm and holding him fast. "There's no room and there ain't no cover."

"But, God damn, I..."

"Shut up," Ski said angrily. "No more talking. Buddy, you and I got first watch. You guys try to catch some Z's. And, here, I got some more frags." He emptied a dozen on the ground, and the long night began as we checked in with the C.O. over the radio every thirty minutes.

"Kilo 3/9er, this is Kilo L.P., it's cool here," we whispered

into the handset. "Fire in the hole." Ski or whoever, would pull the pin and flip a live one. An explosion, a flash of light and shrapnel slashing through the night. Then, silence and waiting. Darkness... Silence and waiting.

Again, in low whispers, "Kilo 3/9er, this is Kilo L.P. It's cool. Fire in the hole."
KABOOM, Light. Ripping. Silence and waiting. Waiting. "It's cool, fire in the hole."
KABOOM. Light. Ripping. Silence. Waiting.

CRACK. CRACK. CRACK. The darkness erupted. Rounds began washing at the log. Long bursts and short explosions. RAT A TAT... TAT. Lines of green tracers flew overhead. A scream somewhere down the trail behind us. "I'm hit!" Someone wasn't lower than the tree.

Quiet... dark... quiet. I loved the tree and tossed a frag. Explosion, light, dark, quiet... quiet.

Then, a voice came out of the night that I would remember and carry with me for the rest of my life. It was a terrifying demonic bellow.

"Ma-reeen. Ma-reeen. You die."

It was monstrous and mocking, thundering and slicing through my head. "MA-REEEN... MA-REEEN..." I felt crazy with fear as if the voice was shouting just at me. I couldn't stand it anymore.

"FUCK YOU!" I screamed as loud as I could, forgetting P.J., Buddy and Ski, forgetting Kristen and home. "FUCK YOU!" I threw a frag and so did the others.

It was a daisy chain of explosions, deafening and brilliant. A shocking rending of earth. I was shaking in my hole. Time was speeding up. Minutes moved like seconds and seconds were no time at all.

"Pop a LAW. Pop a LAW," Ski shouted, desperately. "We'll blow that asshole to hell!"

"I can't!" I screamed. "I can't!" the jungle was full of explosions and hysterical screams and I had to stay behind my tree. Ski quickly picked up a LAW, pulled the pin in back and fired.

"Look out! EAT THIS, SLOPE!" he screamed.

Nothing happened.

"Son of a bitch." He threw it like a baseball bat toward them

and picked up another LAW. ;

This time his effort was met with an ear-splitting, radiant blast pouring out in flashing heat waves from the front and back of the tube. The round hit and exploded directly and immediately, some forty yards to our front.

A moan came out of the darkness from where the round had impacted. Then fire came back, so we rose up over the log, propped on our knees, and fired volumes and volumes of rounds with red tracers into the area. We combed it, worked it, four of us crazily firing in flashes and tracers. And in my mind, Rodo cheering, mute beyond the grave. And Rat, too. I could feel them both ranting and raving as muzzles flashed. Grenades flew. The kid with the 79 moved up and popped off a rapid THUNK, THUNK, THUNK. Round after round. It was perfect. Overpowering. A superb orchestration of small arms.

The radio squawked at us. "L.P., what the fuck is going on? L.P.? L.P.?" It was begging now. "What's happening? What's happening?" It was afraid. We stopped and ducked behind our wooden wall, laughing at the radio.

"L.P.!? L.P.!?" It was frantic.

We laughed carefully and not too loudly. Ski put down his rifle and picked up the radio receiver. "Kilo 3/9er, it's cool. We just had some voices and movement. Over."

"Jesus Christ, we thought you were getting hit by a battalion. Over," the radio said.

"That's a negative. We just got some rounds and thought they were trying to move. It's all clear on this end. L.P. Over."

"O.K. Take it easy. You got the C.O. shittin' Christmas turkeys. This is 3/9er over and out."

"We sure scared the pee out of those donkeys," P.J. said, referring to the C.O, "What they need is some time up here behind this funky log."

The rest of the night was spent in sleepless quiet, wishing death to the voice that shouted, "Ma-reen. Ma-reen."

Finally I could sense daybreak, just as I could sense Rodo, in the waning darkness, lying next to me. Both were cold, motionless and quiet. In those few moments, a settling took place. A peaceful calm emerged to wash away the nightmare of

just hours ago. As the sun rose through the jungle's canopy, all of night came alive again, except for the dead.

It was cold and damp. The chilly morning dew had settled in and soaked through our utility shirts while the sun was still hidden by the sky's deep gray. It was a typical black and white Vietnam morning. A slow motion, one-dimensional morning. Even the bush looked dim and dreadful.

The only color was a thin stream of red that ran from under Rodo's poncho and into my hole. I wiped the dirt, trying to erase him from my memory.

"Well, what do you think, Jackson? You think those slopes are still dug in?" P.J. asked. "Did we get some, or what?" he was probing, anxiously, as I just stared at Rodo's feet sticking out from under his poncho. "I know we busted some ass!"

"Hey, guys," Ski interrupted, "I'll get the C.O., or whoever, on the horn."

Ski talked to the radio for awhile before he finally got off, rolled over, and faced us. "Well, sweethearts, the C.O. informs me that we are going to skate," and his voice took on a mock tone of authority. "Another squad is coming up to commence occupying the enemy position," he said, mimicking the C.O.'s voice and diction.

"Great one," Buddy said vehemently. "Great one. Someone else can go John Wayneing it up there and get their ass shot off. Shit, it's better him than me."

He'd spoken my thoughts. Ripped off my words.

"By the way, we got to put some covering fire out," Ski added. "And P.J., my man, you got to unload with a 72."

"Buuuuulshit. Check it out! The C.O. wants a LAWman firing, let him be a LAWman. No. Ain't no way. I'm sure as shit not leaving my log. We're just getting tight. Let the 79 work out, he's got more cover."

"Don't give me no heat! You and Jackson are the LAWman this time, sweetheart."

That ended the discussion. It had been a long night; we had not slept, we were tired, we had not eaten, and we were hungry. I had relieved myself in my hole during the night and the stench, along with the smell emanating from Rodo, had become

nearly intolerable!

After what seemed like a long time, the squad that was to begin the assault came slowly up the trail, their packs left behind so they could move freely. They moved cautiously, bent over, faces drawn taut with fear. Reticent, reluctant and crawling flat, they made it to the log. Ski briefed them on the suspected enemy location. There was no hostile fire. One by one they crouched just higher than the log. Suddenly they fled the cover, diving flat to the ground. They leap-frogged into a position exactly parallel to where the green tracers and devil voice had come from.

Still no contact. Could it be they were dead? Had the voice died?

The 79s prepped the area.

P.J. rose to one knee. The LAW fired true the first time. What luck, I thought.

THUMP... THUMP... THUMP, more blooie rounds. Another LAW exploded. Then like in some wild war story, the squad leader stood, yelled an obscenity while we laid down sheets of covering fire. One boy froze and shit his pants while the rest of the squad got on line, firing, rushing and assaulting their position.

The assault was an unanswered two minute barrage. The squad quickly overran the bunkers and fighting holes, and set up security.

P.J., Buddy, Ski and I put on our packs and walked by the kid who froze as he groveled and cried like a child. There were several fighting holes and bunkers. Frags were tossed into the bunkers just to make sure, but we had done the damage the night before. There were eight dead, and with the two by the trail that Rat had wasted, ten all told. They had lost chunks of heads and arms and looked like broken dolls. Blood trails indicated more wounded or dead had been dragged off or maybe buried somewhere. Two women were also found covered with brush, dead from multiple wounds. Another dead NVA had been chained to his machine gun, which in turn had been chained to a tree. His option was to fight until death. A draftee, I chuckled to myself. These few jerks were left be-

hind to die. Left to slow our battalion up so that their main body of men would escape.

We had uncovered a large enemy camp, and a supply depot. It was obvious that we'd surprised them. Inside and outside of the bunkers, scattered throughout the encampment, were large bags of rice, stamped-out cooking fires, and small black pots. We had interrupted dinner. Rifles and boxes of ammo had been left behind during their hurried retreat. A sack of medical supplies and a North Vietnamese flag were left behind, too. And then we found a massive underground network of tunnels. In one cavern there were boxes of literature printed by our American "Students for a Democratic Society" and additional boxes of Mickey Mouse shirts, mailed from California. Another cavern held dozens of rockets and thousands of rounds of ammo. In a room off to the side of what appeared to be a hospital, were six army cots in neat order with dead Vietnamese, each shot once through the head.

As the day progressed we pulled the dead from their holes and searched their bodies. Then we straddled the dead enemy, laughed, and took turns pissing on them. We pissed and we laughed. I don't know why we did, it just seemed like the thing to do.

The C.O. came up along with those that made up the C.P. He surveyed the situation, told us all what a commendable job we had done, and had his radio man take pictures of him standing, smiling, next to the enemy dead.

I wanted to put a bullet in his head. Why wasn't he standing next to Rodo, or Rat, I thought.

"The C.O. says we get to move to the middle of the column," Ski said.

"What about Rodo and Rat?" I asked.

"Well, we have to carry them."

"Where?" I was stunned.

"Til we get to the top, or somewhere where we can blow an LZ. The canopy is too thick here to get a bird in, so we're stuck. We've got some wounded, too. One dude shot himself in the foot last night; wanted to go home."

The platoon that was behind us when we started on the Op

and the platoon behind them struggled up the hill and passed us, moving us to the middle of our column. We went down to pick up Rodo. Another squad would carry Rat.

In all the war movies I had ever seen, and in all the imagined battles I had ever been in, carrying the dead was nothing like this. There were no stretchers here. None. The Medics and Red Cross didn't suddenly appear on the scene, load up the bodies in a Red Cross marked truck and swiftly whisk the dead away. The dead stayed with us. We carried them, like drunks from an all-night party. P.J. grabbed one arm, I took the other. Buddy in front, with his back to us, held both legs in his arms. We took the poncho from Rodo because it was awkward and kept slipping off. Makeshift stretchers made from utility shirts or ponchos only worked in boot camp and movies. Here, in the bush, with the difficulty of the terrain, it was impossible.

So, we carried him. Arm in arm. Leg in arm. We carried him. His butt and back dragged the ground and his head hung limp, mouth open, eyes empty, staring up at me. Blood had dried and stuck to his lips and the sides of his face. The white thing that was hanging from the hole in his neck was longer, and dangled down, off to the side. I could see inside his throat; tiny pink and flesh colored vessels.

It was just one small hole. Not enough to kill, I thought. Now Jimmy, who took the wrong path, left much more lying in the dirt. He was shattered, yet he lived. It didn't make sense. A little hole, that's all. But a bigger one in back.

Rodo was white. Cold and heavy and white. At some time his muscles had given way, and like the kid who froze, he emptied his bowels all over himself. The smell and the expression on his face made me want to puke.

One goddamn little hole, that's all. If it had only been his leg or arm. Rat's head was half blown off, he wasn't even close to life. But Rodo... all he had was one little hole.

We alternated carrying his body. From arm to arm to legs and back to arms. I liked carrying his legs; I could lose myself in games. I was carrying my drunk cousin Rich home from a party. Or throwing Kristen into the river like I used to do. Or

I imagined it was me. Me being carried off the football field my senior year when I broke my leg. I concentrated hard, trying to detach myself. Yes. It was me being carried, I thought. Not Rodo. And all the kids were cheering for me. And later, when I came back from the locker room, and out onto the field, I was cheered again and again. It came into focus now, became clear. Yes. It was me. I was a hero and the crowd was acknowledging me. It was me.

But just when I would begin to drift, to shift back, an arm or a leg would drop or catch on a branch, bush or tree. Just at the moment I was home and Saturday's hero, just when my mind would let go to be free, we'd trip and fall and end up in a pile.

It was hard for us to keep up with the rest of the platoon. Fatigue overcame us and became as constant as our sweat and the stench of our dead friend. Our arms grew as heavy as his dead body.

We stopped to eat, dropping Rodo like a sack of grain.

"Boys, you'd want to be carried out if it was you," the C.O. said, coming back to us and then leaving quickly as if he were running from his conscience.

Bullshit, I thought. If I were dead and had shit all over me, and was thousands of miles from home, I wouldn't want anyone, let alone my friends, to see me this way. That's bullshit. I wouldn't care.

It was a younger man's war. How did it go? "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away." It's the young ones who die. They die and stink and bloat up and turn cold and white. Yes, that's it, I thought, that's it. It's the young soldiers who do the killing and the dying. The old ones start the wars, and write home about the dead. The young ones simply die. They die in spastic convulsions of uncontrollable pain. They die twisted, bodies ripped open and spilling life in buckets of fleshy pulp. They die screaming, raving, mumbling, and choking on their blood and spittle. And they die quietly, like Rodo, with only one small hole. Shit. What does the C.O. know? I wouldn't care.

We filed on, lifting, shoving, dragging and dropping Rodo. We struggled over fallen trees and up severe jungle grades of

impossible-to-cut-through terrain. We battled with his weight, the heat, and insufferable bush. Our helmets fell over our eyes or dropped from heads, on to Rodo, and rolled to the side, off the trail. Packs slipped and rifles flew from shouldered arms. We'd let loose of one dead arm and a series of stops and stumbles sprang up like dumb comedy. If one of us faltered, we all faltered. It would never end.

The day went on and on and on, as he was dropped and carried, dropped and carried.

"Motherfucker," Buddy said, as we dropped Rodo hard. "You motherfucker," he cried, with tears in his eyes as he planted a boot on the side of the dead kid's head. And Rodo's head thumped and whipped to the side, not changing his face.

We weren't shocked. We weren't sad. We were tired. Our lives had changed so much in just a few hours. We stood over Rodo in silence, looking down. Then, not saying a word, we picked him up and moved out.

We settled in that night, set up a perimeter and sent out L.P.s. I dug my hole, made a tent with P.J., and finally ate. We moved Rodo away from our hole about thirty feet to the front of us. In the dark and with the dense thicket and natural slope of the land, he wasn't there.

I stood my watch, tired and drained. Morning came. Charges were set to trees and an LZ was blown. A Huey picked up Rat, Rodo, the Luey, and an assortment of wounded. They were going home. It was over for them.

We packed our gear and moved out

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