

BLOOD CHIT

by

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APC

Apippa Publishing Company
Riverdale Park, Maryland

"You come from a family of Samurai," Kabuo's father said to him in Japanese. "Your great-grandfather died because he could not stop being one."

Snow Falling on Cedars
David Guterson

"Rattlesnake definitely does *not* taste like chicken, not for my money," Captain Bonner said. He paused a second to build a little suspense. "Oh, but now *alligator*," he said, smacking his lips, "that's real succulent critter."

He got a nice laugh from his captive audience of three. They stood in a semi-circle around him—Chaplain McCurdy, the Warrant Officer pilot Garrett Prue and Staff Sergeant Chuck Paxton.

"The night we had our survival meal in flight school," Mister Prue said, "they gave us a live goat to kill." They were standing beside his helicopter and he paused a second to listen to a radio transmission. Then he went on. "The NCO in charge picked a city kid to cut its throat. I think the wildest animal he'd ever seen was a pink poodle," he said, and gave a swishy little gesture that got a chuckle. "He got his bayonet in the goat's neck but couldn't find the jugular. That poor goat—what a racket. We finally put it out of its misery. Skinned it, cut it up and roasted it."

"Hey, Padre," Captain Bonner said to Father McCurdy. "Would you say grace over the goat, or give it the last rites?"

"Both," the Chaplain replied. "*And* prayers to ward off indigestion." Everybody laughed.

During the general laughter, Sergeant Paxton slid in beside the priest. "Hey, Padre," he said quietly. "Got a minute?"

McCurdy gave him one of his patented Irish grins. "Sure. Come on," he said, and they walked about 20 feet away.

The company of ten slicks, Huey helicopters used to transport troops, had flown in a few minutes before and lined up in the field in staggered trail, a kind of symmetrical zigzag. When an artillery mission ended, they'd lift Captain Bonner's infantry company into its objective area. Not far away, two Cobras, the new helicopter gunships, waited to give fire support to the slicks at their landing zone, if it was needed.

The field where they were waiting sat next to the Na Bhe tank farm on the banks of the Saigon River, just southeast of the capital. Two nights before, an NVA squad a kilometer or so away had dropped half a dozen quick rounds down a mortar tube and fled, leaving one of the storage tanks of crude blazing furiously. Now, although oily black smoke still rose from it, the tank was just about burned out.

"I need to go to confession, Padre," Paxton said to the priest. The noise of the Hueys insured privacy.

"As soon as I got here, I gave general absolution to everybody going out on the lift. It's a combat zone privilege, comes with being shot at, so you're covered." Father McCurdy gave him another grin.

"Yeah, but I kind of scared myself last night."

Padre's face grew serious. McCurdy knew that, over Paxton's ten months in country, the sergeant had developed into the strongest squad leader in the company. Which brought disadvantages.

"What happened?"

"I was with one of the girls at Mama Huong's." His eyes faltered just a bit, then sought the priest's as he went on. "And when I was done, I looked at her. There was so much hate in her face you could feel the vibrations. And that pissed me off so bad I almost..." He stopped, frightened by the recollection of it. "I've never been that mad in my life. I wanted to... It was all I could do to keep from hitting her. With my fist." His voice dropped, appalled by the memory. "I wanted to kill her, I really did."

"Well, just remember, getting shot at does funny things to people sometimes--not just soldiers but civilians, too, including prostitutes. She can blame all the destruction on us, even her condition in life. And after a troop's been over here a while he can buy into that with guilt. And that changes into a tremendous amount of anger, as you found out. After lust, anger's the sin I hear most about in confession. Anger and hate."

That surprised Paxton. "Not fear?"

"Listen," the priest responded, "when somebody out there wants to kill you, fear's not a sin, it's a survival skill." Paxton smiled a smile for a second, but didn't feel any better. "Let me give you absolution anyway, just to make it official." And he did, carving out the sign of the cross. Paxton mirrored it by crossing himself, but he still looked haunted by the incident at Mama Huong's.

"Hey," Padre said. "When do you fly away from this green sauna?"

That brought a grin that stayed around a bit. "Seventeen May, nineteen and sixty-eight," he said, and actually chuckled.

"Wow," Padre said. "You're out of here in two months.

"Fifty-six days, Padre. Fifty-six and a wakeup." Padre clapped him on the shoulder and they headed back to Captain Bonner and Mister Prue.

"Sounds like you guys got the same survival course in flight school they gave us grunts," Bonner was saying.

"Yeah, but of course a whole bunch of flying stuff, too. Like how to get a shot-up helicopter back on the ground, so you can walk away from it."

"What do you do?" Paxton was clearly interested.

"Well, if the engine conks out, you usually auto-rotate in. Or, you try to steer so you'll hit a tree or a building that looks like it'll break up easy. That can absorb a lot of the shock, and hopefully you'll be able to walk away from it."

"I used to feel pretty safe in these things," Paxton said.

"It's just immediate action drill, like what you do if you're caught in the kill zone of an ambush. You get an enormous amount of technical helicopter stuff, too. Oh, and you get this."

He pulled out a piece of cloth about eight inches by fifteen. "This is my blood chit." Paxton closed in around him, curious. "It's a message in the language of every country or tribe you could possibly wind up in. It started out as an Air Force item, but we carry them now, too."

Paxton peered intently over his shoulder. The top third had a full-color American flag, and under it he counted 14 different versions of the message. Besides English, French and Dutch, it had Vietnamese, Thai, Burmese and two kinds of Chinese. A lot of the others, though they were named, meant nothing to him. He had no idea what countries or tribes spoke some of the languages. He read the English:

I am a citizen of the United States of America. I do not speak your language. Misfortune forces me to seek your assistance in obtaining food, shelter and protection. Please take me to someone who will provide for my safety and see that I am returned to my people. My government will reward you.

"It's like an IOU for the help you get," Paxton said.

"That's exactly what it is," Mister Prue responded. "'I owe you for my life.' It's supposed to work like a traveler's check, so you don't have to assault unsuspecting goats."

"What do you do if the bad guys get hold of it?" Chaplain McCurdy asked.

Paxton gave a little laugh. "Pray they can't read."

Paxton turned away from Captain Bonner. "This isn't right." The words came softly, as if he was talking to himself.

"What?" Bonner asked, smiling, not having understood.

Paxton turned back. "It isn't right." The First Sergeant took a step closer to the two, his eyes contracting to a pair of angry brown slashes in a sunburned face.

"What's not right?" Bonner asked.

"This is the third daylight patrol my squad's had in ten days. I had casualties in both the others. There's eight other rifle squads in the company and some of them have never been out. It's not right."

"You shut up, Paxton, and just do it." The First Sergeant was holding tight to his flaring temper.

"Get your sorry ass moving."

"I'm going, First Sergeant, but it's not right."

Bonner interrupted as the First Sergeant was about to unload. "Hang on, Top." He turned to Paxton. "I know you've been out there a lot, but this one's pretty important. That's why they told me to send my best squad leader."

Paxton was appalled. "You mean my people are going back out there again because of *me*?" Bonner subsided momentarily at the failure of his crude flattery.

"That's enough, Paxton." The First Sergeant bit off his words. "You get your people their extra rations and ammo, and move them out through third platoon at 0730." He looked at his watch. "That's seventeen minutes."

"We'll make our departure time," Paxton said, standing at the tent flap. "But it's not right." And he was gone.

The First Sergeant scowled. "That sorry..."

"He's been doing some heavy lifting, but it hasn't been that bad," Bonner said.

"It's for you to say and him to do, sir. That's why they call it a chain of command."

"Yeah, but he's right—he's had three of his people killed or wounded his last couple of times out. And if he *thinks* he's got a problem ..."

"My heart pumps piss," said the First Sergeant.

Paxton moved quickly back toward his squad. For the first time since he'd been in country, he felt like Captain Bonner wasn't squaring with him. "Send your best squad leader"—Paxton knew what he was downwind from. First the flattery, then another recon mission. As he thought about it, he realized that's how Bonner did it the last two patrols. *How many more casualties today?* The hell with it—I'm mister short timer. *But it's wrong.*

Wrong or not, MACV Headquarters was still a mass of twitching nerve ends and chewed nails from the NVA's Tet offensive last month. General Westmoreland was all aquiver in his highly polished

combat boots, wondering if the bad guys were going to do it again. And maybe they would.

But third squad had humbler, more immediate worries. Paxton and his people would be heading out in a matter of minutes and he needed to get his head on straight. He'd be working directly for the Old Man on this patrol, taking his squad south for five kilometers to check out a stand of nipa palm that followed a nameless stream for another three clicks. Last night, airborne sensors picked up unusual readings in the area—at least 20 people, probably more, in two or three clumps. The main trunk of the Ho Chi Minh Trail wasn't that far west and the NVA could log some much larger troop formations at the site on their way down from the north.

He gazed out at the terrain. Large stretches of open rice paddies lay in every direction, dotted with clumps of nipa palm, and so it had been for the last two days. It would make their concealment on the march difficult, and sometimes impossible. The thick groves of nipa stalks, standing 20 or more feet high and clustered together in the soft mud by tidal streams, would give the enemy plenty of cover.

To work. His squad was short five people and he talked his platoon sergeant out of Casey Jones, a grenadier from second squad. The tall, broad-chested black from Cairo, Illinois had been drafted right out of a lackluster four years in high school and found the discipline of the Army a pleasant revelation. Recognition based on performance, and pay based on rank, not race, left a deep impression on him. He intended to make it a career. The other squad leader grumphed and humphed about temporarily losing Casey, but Paxton was satisfied. Seven was just about the right size for a recon patrol. Any less and there'd be too little firepower to break contact in a crunch and haul ass. Many more and you might as well announce yourself with a bullhorn.

Paxton's squad was close to the lightest in the company right now, but everybody was under strength. His platoon was down 15 men, but when the lieutenant complained to Captain Bonner, the company commander was loud and clear about his own shortages. Bonner complained about taking less than a hundred soldiers on an operation. He said Roman centurions used to have a hundred men—“that's what the name meant,” he explained, “honcho of a hundred troops”—and he ought to be taking

at least 150 soldiers to the field. Replacements had been promised for two weeks.

When Paxton told his people they were going out on another daylight recon patrol, they took the news in silence. Gomez wouldn't make eye contact with him for a couple of minutes and looked intently at his boots. He hoped nobody would hear about the old man's best squad leader bullshit.

Mission: Gomez finally got in motion and pulled a small notebook out of his breast pocket. Move ASAP five clicks to the recon area, avoiding open paddies and using the nipa groves for concealment whenever possible. Check out the recon area to see why they got the high readings last night. Watch out for booby traps—when they were in this area six weeks ago, there were some old ones down there. Now there could be new ones as well.

Chain of command: Paxton, Patrol Leader. Al Gomez, APL, and then Ken Janowitz. "Welcome back from R and R." Paxton grinned at Ken, who merely shrugged. "After that, it's whoever can get to the prick 25 and call for help." That got a smile or two, though not from Kessler, who carried one of the PRC-25's: "This lump on my back says, SHOOT ME HERE." Kessler had arrived in country almost ten months earlier, a week or so after Paxton, and for virtually the whole time he'd been the squad leader's RTO. Now, with the end of their year's tour in sight, they had begun talking cautiously about what they would do when they got back.

Ken Janowitz didn't smile at Paxton's PRC-25 joke any more than Kessler. Five months before, as a newly arrived PFC in a sharp firefight, he'd found himself the closest functioning troop to the radio and coolly adjusted artillery fire to within a hundred meters of their position. "Scrotum the size of a duffel bag," Captain Bonner said. With only a month in country, Janowitz found himself with a Bronze Star, Purple Heart, and an instant promotion. In Nam, that kind of initiative was coin of the realm.

After the mission was briefed, Paxton and Gomez did the household chores. One extra C-ration per man. Casey Jones said, "Give me ham and lima beans and my maximum effective range is out of sight." He got some chuckles, and a few sidebar comments about any soldier who would actually *eat* ham and lima beans. Verify two full canteens of water per man, purification tablets added. Ammo, first

aid pouches, an extra battery for each of the two radios, insect repellent to flush off the leeches. "But don't use it—and don't smoke," he said, looking straight at Schiller, who was draping machine gun ammo diagonally across his chest, "until the chopper's inbound. Otherwise, the smell could put us in a crack."

He passed out the checkpoints they would have to call in, so the Old Man would know where they were. And the artillery registration points, so they wouldn't have to figure out their location as a six-digit grid coordinate before they could call in a fire mission. And the location of Landing Zone Cody—one of the slicks lifting out the company would break away and come for them there.

"Questions?" None. He looked at them—Gomez returned the notebook to his breast pocket. Kessler was doing a radio check with the Old Man's RTO. Janowitz was charging one last magazine with ammo. Casey Jones stowed the contents of his C-ration box in his pack, while Schiller sucked on one last cigarette before they left the company perimeter. Mingo Sanders sat quietly, waiting for the word to move out. Paxton gave it to them: "Saddle up!"

He took the point himself at first, moving them out smartly to put as much distance between them and Bonner as fast as he could. To the NVA, the full company had to be about as quiet as a freight train and that suited Paxton just fine. With a distraction like that, he'd have a better chance of infiltrating into his recon area without being detected. But better going in on foot, like today, than by helicopter. He hated a single chopper insertion on a mission like this because every NVA around would know where he was and that he only had as many soldiers as one slick could carry.

In the initial segment across open paddies, he spread his people out. Al Gomez, a solidly built Chicano with a wife and two daughters back in Austin, Texas, brought up the rear. Al would keep his eye on Ted Schiller, a good man in a firefight with his M60 machine gun, but he had a tendency to daydream on the commute to work. His six foot, two inch frame usually made people think basketball, but in the showers his long torso and highly developed upper body marked him as a swimmer back in Michigan's peninsula.

Paxton kept them well away from the dikes and in the paddies. They were more likely to come up with leeches and maybe some foot rot. It also shaved a little off their speed. But when the NVA set up their booby traps, they catered to GI's who walked high and dry, begging to have a foot blown off. He glanced back momentarily. Dispersion was good. Casey Jones was in the middle of the paddy doing a visual check on the nipa palm half a click to his left. Lima beans made good soldiers. He smiled.

As they got within small arms range of the tree line they were making for, Paxton slowed the pace. The terrain ahead started the final leg of their approach to the recon area, but if there were any NVA in that vegetation they could shred the patrol up pretty good. He moved them with hand signals into a line abreast, maintaining dispersion. Then he pulled Schiller and his machine gun directly to his right. He wanted to be able to control the M60's fire, if he needed it. But no NVA opened up on them. Just inside the tree line, he put them in an outward-facing circle for a brief rest.

The sun was well up now. Their pace had brought a good sweat and they were all sucking on their canteens.

"Go easy on the water," he whispered to them. "Save some for later." He looked over at Kessler, screwing the cap back on his canteen. "Hey, Matt, what flavor?"

Matt Kessler got packets of pre-sweetened Kool Aid in the mail from his mother. Charlie couldn't decide which was worse, the strong-arm taste of the purification tablets or the sticky, artificial fruit flavor Kessler would use to kill the taste of the medication. But Kessler had no doubts. "Goofy grape," he whispered back. Everyone grinned, except Casey Jones from second squad. Ken Janowitz explained the joke to him and he smiled too.

"Listen up, now," Charlie said. "We'll be in the recon area in less than five minutes. Start looking for booby traps on tree trunks, and remember to check the stalks of nipa palm." He thought a second. "Look for anything that would show they were in here last night."

He walked about ten feet away and urinated, looking as he did for the booby traps he'd reminded his squad about. Then he moved them out, still in a scattered pattern but less widely

dispersed inside the nipa palm. They advanced more slowly, their heads and eyes always in motion—checking where their next three paces would fall, the nearest tree trunk, the space they had to pass through between two stalks of nipa palm. Looking farther ahead, they did an eyeball sweep of the ground, then straight ahead, then above. And back, side and forward to maintain visual contact with the others.

The second grenadier, Mingo Sanders, slightly built with warm, brown skin, held up his right hand to call a halt. Gingerly, he approached a two-man pit in the earth a dozen feet away. He toed the dirt around its lip and found it relatively dry, then peered into it. He mouthed the word 'old' to Paxton and put his hand at his knee to indicate how deep the water was in the hole. In paddy country like this, you could hit the water table well before it was deep enough to hunker down in. But any NVA would gladly put up with a wet behind rather than leave his head hanging out in the shrapnel scatter of a 500-pound bomb. On the other hand, a canister of napalm presented a different set of problems. They moved on.

Positions showed up more frequently but checked out several months old. They came across an old booby trap tied to a tree, improvised from plastic explosive with bits of metal pressed into it, and molded around a blasting cap that was now inert. The field expedient hand grenade had once been connected to a trip wire set at about shin height between two trees, but the wire was missing. If the entire company was here they'd likely blow it in place, but given the strength of their patrol they didn't need to do that kind of advertising. Paxton pointed it out to Kessler, who alerted Gomez. Everybody else skirted around it at a respectful distance.

On the other side of the stream they were following, they glimpsed some huts. That meant they were officially in their recon area. Paxton halted the patrol and walked over to Kessler, who gave him the handset. He keyed the push-to-talk button and very softly said, "Wonder six, Rover three one. Checkpoint red." After a second he got a terse "Roger."

Paxton wanted to check out the huts. He waved them across the stream. On his left, Janowitz

took two steps and stopped in his tracks, softly snapping his fingers. He was pointing at something where an old path started across the stream. When Paxton got there, he found an olive drab anti-personnel mine, not a field expedient, but manufactured for the purpose—storebought was his term—and newly installed.

They were not alone.

Whoever was out there, they were fresh. Still having their basic issue of these AP mines meant they were just down from the north. Infantry probably, or maybe engineers, numbers unknown. It depended on their mission. He went from soldier to soldier to pass along this new cautionary information. He walked with a sharpened respect, almost a reverence, for the power to kill that lurked in the land.

He thought of the enemy in two separate tiers, troops and terrain. In point of fact, the terrain was neutral, friend of the side controlling it. But you couldn't control it all the time, or even very much of it most of the time. So, no matter how often you'd been over a piece of ground, when you went in cold you had to assume it was the enemy. And like right now, you weren't very often disappointed. The trick was to turn the tables and make the terrain your friend with your own booby traps and mines, and with night artillery of harassing and interdicting fires. Enemy troops, of course, couldn't ever be turned into friends, but every now and then they proved to be stupid, which was almost as good.

They resumed crossing the stream, pushing over into the eastern portion of the nipa grove. Janowitz and Sanders went first, then Paxton, Kessler, and Schiller with the machine gun, and finally Jones and Al Gomez. Paxton deployed them just inside the concealment of the wood line in a way that would let their fire cover both the front and rear of the clutch of buildings, then he crossed the 15 meters of open paddy to the back of the nearest hut.

He'd been here before, almost two months ago. And this time, as before, he found no nasty surprises crossing over. At the back of the hut, he carefully made a small opening in the thatch and peered in. The mud-wattle bomb shelter was still intact in the middle of the hut. The area was close

enough to the Ho Chi Minh Trail to invite an occasional stick of bombs from the B52's on night delivery. Apparently, the shelter hadn't been enough protection and the families living in these huts had abandoned them. He saw some fresh military wrappings inside the doorway, maybe from those storebought mines, and a bit of leftover chow. Oh, that welcome stupidity, which never failed to make Paxton feel savvy, like the Most Experienced Person Present. Some NVA had left the stuff clearly visible to anyone at the door of the hooch. Paxton decided a second lieutenant was in charge, or a new sergeant right out of NCO academy. He was beginning to feel downright cocky when his eye picked up the trip wire across the doorway, an inch off the ground. They had baited their hook with the military garbage, trolling for GI dummies, and they almost got one. He revised his opinion of the NVA sappers, while the surge of adrenaline dissipated. Were they expecting US troops, but not quite this soon? And where were they, anyway?

Back in the nipa, he briefed the patrol members again. Everybody had to be kept up to speed on what they'd found, so they'd know what to look for while they walked their walk. Also, if the patrol was hit and only one or two made it out, they had to know everything the patrol leader knew. Otherwise the effort and the casualties would be thrown away for nothing.

They continued south through the hostile terrain. At once they began to find fresh positions, with soil around the top still damp—old ones renewed, others quite recently dug. But there were no more booby traps. Those seemed limited to the outer perimeter of the new positions.

Halfway down their mission area, the stream split. In the crotch stood three older abandoned huts, much more dilapidated. Paxton sent Al Gomez to check them, but there were no baited hooks. He got a laconic roger when he reported checkpoint yellow.

Then he set the patrol in an outward-facing circle, while they ate. When he was digging a small hole to bury his garbage, he came across a bit of old NVA trash—some rusting ends of commo wire and a few food wrappers—and wondered what the archaeologists would make of all these layers a hundred years from now. The can for Casey Jones' ham and lima beans would probably be a footnote in

somebody's book.

They were done in less than fifteen minutes. He stood and gave them the infantryman's mantra: "Saddle up."

Although the west fork of the stream technically wasn't part of his mission, he sent Casey Jones and Ken Janowitz far enough to verify that the positions down that leg hadn't been improved. They found a storebought AP mine and came back. The mine, Paxton decided, marked the outer perimeter of the NVA positions at that point.

He made some quick calculations. If the rest of their recon area had the same density of newly prepared positions that they'd found so far, the NVA could shoehorn as much as a regiment in here. Whoever was preparing these positions would guide them in through the ring of booby traps at the north end, probably in the next night or two. Then they'd funnel out the bottom along the east fork of the stream and be facing straight toward the underbelly of Saigon. They could seriously disrupt business at the Cholon post exchange for a couple of days. Paxton's job now was to check the rest of his area and then get his patrol out as unobtrusively as he could, so the NVA regiment would stick to its plan. Then, when the sensors got the right readings, the B52's would bomb this whole area, and artillery would follow up with concentrations on their likely withdrawal routes.

They pushed on along the east fork of the stream. The density of the improved positions remained constant. When Gomez checked out a group of five more abandoned huts in the paddies east of the nipa palm, he found one with a repeat of the trash and booby trap arrangement. The huts were also designated checkpoint green. Paxton nodded to Kessler to call it in. But where were the damned NVA?

These latest huts, marking the official end of his recon area, stood at the extreme upper left of an open rice paddy half a kilometer square, flat as a checkerboard, and without so much as a bush sticking up above the top of the dikes. This open expanse was also designated LZ Cody and their slick would pick them up out in the middle, but closer to the bottom end where the nipa groves began

coming together to form an open-ended vee. They continued on until the stream brought them to the lower edge of the open area. The only tricky part would be finding a route through the perimeter between the inevitable booby traps. Tricky, yes, but also exhilarating and almost fun. He knew his squad would locate the storeboughts and navigate through them, and in two hours he'd be standing under a hot shower back at base camp. He called in "LZ Cody" to let the Old Man know they were ready to move out onto the pickup zone. They'd get the word to go when the bird was five minutes out.

He mulled over the meticulous preparation of all those positions they'd found, threw in the storebought AP mines and decided he was tracking engineers rather than infantry—probably a platoon. Plausible yes, but where the hell were they? They probably finished up here and moved on to the next bivouac site, but they'd have to leave guides behind to get the main body through the AP's. Well, just so they don't try to seriously disrupt our extraction out on the LZ. It would be the ultimate stupidity if they did, but something an inexperienced engineer platoon leader might try. Artillery and TAC air would clean their clocks good, but they could do a number on Paxton's patrol before he could get the fire support cranked up.

He took Mingo Sanders with him scouting their route onto Cody. They located three fresh AP mines—two buried, rigged to detonate when stepped on, the third about seven or eight feet up in the vegetation and attached to a trip wire strung along the ground. Its explosion at that level would have something like the effect of an artillery round set for height-of-burst, detonating a specified distance above the ground and scattering its whirling steel fragments onto the enemy below. It was devastating against troops in open areas and there were lots of those in the vast sprawl of the delta. Even Sanders with his little M79 grenade launcher could use the technique by aiming his round, about the diameter of a silver dollar or so, into overhanging branches above a dug-in position. The serrated wire wrapped around its inner charge would shatter into hundreds of tiny metallic splinters and whirl down on the soldiers below. It was a good trick for a grenadier to know.

Then, Paxton got a diabolical little idea that brought a smile to his face. The trip wire for the

mine in the tree extended out from the left side of the trunk, the side that was more tramped down. Guides would bring the NVA through on the right side in the dark. If he could re-string the trip wire across the less worn side, he could take out a few bad guys. At the same time, he'd turn the ground into U.S. terrain—for the simple reason that they couldn't be sure whether the engineer platoon leader screwed up or Americans had come in and messed with it. So, they'd have to treat it like every square inch had been reverse booby trapped. He liked that.

First he told Sanders to get some more distance, then he started to work quickly. The trick was to keep the tension constant on the trip wire. He tied it down temporarily to the root where it right-angled from vertical to horizontal. Next, he freed the running end from its terminal anchor. Then he began resetting it on the right side.

Sanders' jaw dropped open when he realized what Charlie was up to.

"Goddam, Sarge," he said. "You want to get your face blown off?"

Charlie was sweating freely now and enjoying it. He grinned at Sanders. He was already into some kind of high—his rapid pulse told him that, and the funny taste he got in his mouth whenever he worked with explosives. The biggest pucker was freeing the trip wire after the running end was re-tethered. The tension had to duplicate what was there when he started. He got on the side of the tree away from the mine. Then he reached around for the end of the cord he'd used to tie down the trip wire. Slowly, he drew it along until the cord, backtracking on itself, pulled through its own last loop and the knot vanished. No explosion.

Then, he heard Kessler's low whistle. He and Sanders moved back fast to the radio.

"ETA zero five," Kessler said. Except that a minute had already gone by, so the bird was four minutes out.

"Saddle up, saddle up!" But they'd heard Kessler on the horn and had already shrugged back into their packs. "What heading?"

"Zero zero zero," Kessler replied. So the bird would be coming in due north, even though that

would give it a light crosswind. Terrain drove that. They didn't want to be coming in across a place of concealment for the bad guys, like the trees, or lose track of altitude for a split second in the face of enemy machine gun fire and snag a skid in a treetop.

"Three anti-personnels at the tree line, two in the ground, one overhead. Follow me through in single file. When we hit the paddies, spread out. Maintain dispersion." He looked at his watch. Three minutes. "Let's move out."

He set off at an easy trot, slouching a bit forward to counterbalance his pack. Kessler was right on his heels with the radio. The pilot would come up on the command push momentarily. He took them left of the mine in the tree, pointing up at it without turning or breaking stride, then they cleared the tree line and splashed into the paddies.

"Spread out, stay off the dikes," Paxton said in a normal voice.

Once they could be seen, he felt it didn't much matter if they were heard. It wasn't that he shouted, but it always relieved some of the tension for him to be able to talk out like that. They pushed straight east and made good headway through the water, taking a bit less than two minutes to reach the approximate middle of the open area. As they slogged along, the noise reminded Charlie momentarily of kids in a pool, but instead of laughing and yelling there was only their hard breathing. At the midpoint he turned them sharply left and continued moving northward because the closeness of the opposite tree line made him uncomfortable. Those trees could hide anything, but they angled away to the east, so the farther north he went the more distance he got from them. Then he heard the whop-whop-whop of the helicopter.

"Rover three-one this is Eagle two-seven. Pop smoke." Paxton slowed and reached around for a smoke grenade hanging on his pack. Kessler passed him at full speed and Paxton heard him, breathing hard, gasp out a "roger" as he pulled the pin and tossed the grenade onto a paddy dike. The whop-whop-whop was louder. They'd see the chopper any second.

At the soft pop of the grenade, Kessler turned and glanced back at the vivid yellow smoke

starting to rise and spoke into his handset. "Smoke out." Paxton, 20 feet back, turned and held up his hand to halt the patrol, then picked up his pace to catch up with the radio.

"Hey, Kessler," he yelled, "this is the place!"

Kessler stopped, grinning. Out of breath, he looked back over his shoulder and gave a little toss of his head to signal he had heard. Then there was a deafening explosion from very close in front of him, and a wall of heat and a massive shock wave picked him up and threw him bodily into Paxton, rolling them together in a tangle in the filthy paddy water. Through the intense ringing in his ears, Paxton could hear brisk small arms fire. They were dead center of sector in an ambush and Kessler was screaming. But when he looked down, the two of them wrapped together, he saw that the entire left side of Kessler's head was a jumbled mess of ripped flesh and bone fragments and brain matter, with only hacked-up remnants of his ear remaining and his eye completely vanished. And then Paxton realized he was the one who was screaming.

He wrenched the handset from Kessler's grasp, forcing himself to ignore the unidentifiable bloody shreds plastered to it. "Hot LZ! Hot LZ!" When the roger came back, he was already pulling the radio off Kessler's body, the rounds from enemy automatic fire snapping just overhead. The slick was well short of their position and already executing a hard left-hand turn. But the bird had come escorted and two Cobra gunships were getting ready to roll in for a firing pass on the enemy positions.

Prone in the paddy 30 feet behind Paxton and to his right, Sanders was struggling toward the dike for cover, holding his M79 above the water with his left hand while his right arm dangled uselessly. The handset for the second radio, which Sanders carried, dragged through the water at the end of its cord. Paxton scooped up Kessler's radio by its shoulder straps and ran, bent double, to the same dike Sanders was making for, followed all the way by the snap of enemy rounds right behind him. An NVA machine gun's location in the tree line was obvious from the rhythmic streaks of green tracers coming across at them a foot above the water. And there were four unseen rounds for every one that showed green.

"Schiller, get that machine gun!" But Schiller was already sending a stream of his own orange tracers into the nipa. As Paxton ran to Sanders, Schiller began to draw AK47 fire and Gomez, just beyond Schiller's machine gun, squeezed off ten quick rounds of semi-automatic trying to suppress the AK's.

Then the gunships were rolling in one behind the other and laying down rocket and machine gun fire along the eastern tree line and just inside it, finally pulling up and away a hundred feet off the ground. Incredibly, the flat green trajectories continued in the face of the heavy fire from the helicopters, lifting and arcing up toward the gunships. Most of the strings of green lagged behind them, but one of the strands intersected the last gunship for a second or two. At once, small licks of flame sprang up from the engine housing on top of the ship. It shuddered visibly in midair and seemed to hesitate for a split second. Then it tipped over into a slow-motion plummet, the entire superstructure rotating in increasingly wild and erratic loops around an invisible axis in front of it, like some giant maple seed gone berserk. It crashed head first 60 feet north of Paxton, rolled over onto its side in a foot of paddy water and lay still.

Paxton's first instinct was to help the two men in the downed gunship, but he squelched it ruthlessly. Instead, he ran to Sanders and grabbed the handset of his radio and half dragged, half carried him the rest of the way to the paddy dike. This radio was on the artillery Fire Direction Center's frequency, but he took one look and threw the handset down in frustration. A round had penetrated the PRC-25 on the side and exited at the middle of its broad back.

"Fuck," he said, quietly but with deep feeling, and turned to Kessler's radio. It was picking up a transmission. "Rover 31, this is Wonder 6. Tell me what's going on out there." Captain Bonner could hear the firefight five kilometers away and probably already had the company on the march toward their patrol.

"Help me out of this thing, will you?" Sanders was struggling one-handed to get the dead radio off.

He ignored the Old Man and Sanders both and changed the frequency on Kessler's radio to the Fire Direction Center's.

"Sarge!" It was Schiller. "Getting low on ammo."

"Well, ease back!" *Dumb Shit*. Then, into the handset, "Peacock five this is Rover three one, fire mission."

"Send your mission."

The nearest artillery Registration Point was at the southern tip of the nipa grove that hid the NVA. He figured that from the RP they were dug in 150 meters away, a bit east of due north.

"Enemy platoon in a tree line, dug in," he said. "From Omaha, zero-three-zero degrees, add one-five-zero." He almost said 'will adjust,' but that would get him only a single round to base an adjustment on. He wanted rounds from all five tubes of the battery, and right now. "Fire for effect."

"Roger, wait."

They were re-laying the guns now to fire the mission. He switched back to the command push. "Hello gunship, this is Rover three one."

After the crackle of static, "Weasel two two."

"Be advised, I've got an artillery fire mission in progress." Paxton didn't want the one in a million to happen and have the bird get smacked with a howitzer round.

"Roger, I'm monitoring the FDC push. We've got backup gunships inbound. Should be here in three or four minutes."

"Your last pass was a bit short. I'll mark it with red smoke when you're ready."

"Roger."

"I'm going back to the FDC push now."

"Rover three one, this is Wonder six. What is your current...." Paxton reset the frequency, listening for word that the rounds were on the way.

While he waited, he tore open Sanders' shirt and began tying the bleeding man's battle dressing

around the wounded arm. As he worked, he looked around. One paddy dike behind him and a bit to his left, Casey Jones was just lofting an M79 round into the nipa palm. He got a tree burst just a bit in front of where the NVA machine gun was located. *Nice one.* Paxton motioned him to come up to his immediate left. The grenadier rolled himself over the dike, hugging tight against it, then low-crawled across the paddy to Paxton's left, holding his weapon just above the water. They both knew he was scooping a leech or two inside his fatigue shirt in the process. *Now—where the hell is Janowitz?*

As he looked around for Janowitz, he absently rubbed his mouth and nose, then realized the back of his hand had come away with blood on it, the sticky kind that's already half dried. He wondered if the initial explosion ruptured his eardrums, causing blood to seep out of his nostrils. He gingerly tried the airplane-passenger trick for altitude changes, forcing a sort of yawn, but it felt okay. He rubbed at his ear and got half-dried blood again, along with some crusting paddy muck. He decided red and brown must be plastered over most of his face. But he had to be bleeding somewhere. And then his stomach contracted into a sharp knot of pain and he groaned out loud.

Sanders caught the sound. "Sarge, you hit?"

"Kessler," he murmured, staring at his hand.

"Who?" Sanders shouted.

"Kessler's," he said louder.

"I haven't seen him," Sanders responded. "You know where he is?"

Paxton wiped his hand on his thigh. "He's Kilo." He spat it out harshly, using the phonetic identifier for the first letter of KIA. Sanders slumped a little, his head inclining slightly forward. His lips moved soundlessly for a second.

"Hey, Sarge." It was Casey Jones. "Where's Janowitz?"

The radio crackled. "Shot, over."

Paxton grabbed the handset. "Shot, out." The artillery rounds were on their way. He looked around. "Janowitz," he shouted, "where are you?"

Casey spotted him. "There!" He pointed back the way they had come. Ken was 50 meters south of their consolidated position.

How the hell did he get stuck back there? "Move up! Move up!" Paxton shouted. He gave the hand signal for 'assemble on me', circling his right hand overhead, index finger up. He had to get everybody together, to concentrate their fire and to be ready to make a dash whenever the slick came back.

Ken got no farther than ten feet in a low, crouching run before automatic fire was kicking up the water all around him, making it look like someone was throwing handfuls of gravel into the paddy. He dove back prone where he was, and then the artillery was roaring in. All at once, five enormous umbrellas of dense gray smoke and debris mushroomed up along both sides of the tree line, followed a split second later by the *crump* of the impact and explosion. With a casualty radius of 50 meters for each shell, the range couldn't be better. "Fire for effect!" he yelled into the handset, and got a roger.

"Rover, this is Weasel two two. Can you check out my people in that downed bird?"

Shit! Paxton had already forgotten the gunship lying on its side in the paddy. "Roger."

He looked at the tree line. After the artillery rounds, there were no green tracers. He wasn't inexperienced enough to think that all the bad guys were dead, but at least they were deep in their holes with their ears ringing, and the smoke and swirling earth set in motion by the explosions were obscuring their view of Paxton's position for the moment.

"Cover me," he yelled, and sprang up out of the water and onto the paddy dike, moving at a dead run toward the chopper. The possibility of booby traps on the dike was a calculated risk, nothing he could do about that. As he ran along with his rifle at high port, he realized he hadn't even fired it yet—*crazy war*. In the last few moments of his 15-second sprint, he heard the snap of AK47 rounds right by his ear and glimpsed a green tracer in front of him and high. He angled back into the paddies and threw himself down, rolling completely over from the push of his momentum. When he came to rest and raised his head, he was looking down the barrel of a pistol.

It was the pilot of the gunship. "Are you hit?" Paxton asked.

"Took a round through my right foot," he answered. "Not bleeding bad, but I think the bones are messed up." He was nursing a frizzled strand of leather out of the bloody tangle of his boot and foot. "Same place I took a round my last tour, you believe that? Exact same place."

Paxton believed it. He pulled the field dressing out of his first aid pouch and quickly tied it around the aviator's wounded foot, leaving the gashed boot in place. He started for the bird to get the other aviator.

"Save it," the other said curtly. "He's bought it."

Paxton's mouth went taut for a moment. Then he said, "Okay, let's get you back by the radio." As he bent to get a grip on the pilot, a Rocket Propelled Grenade struck the downed helicopter amidships, blasting fragments and bits of wreckage in every direction. A chunk of gunship slammed into the back of Paxton's left arm two inches above the elbow, spun him halfway around and dropped him on his back in the paddy.

The pilot rolled and squirmed himself over to Paxton. "Where are you hit?"

"Left arm."

"Try to wiggle your fingers." They moved okay. The aviator took pieces of lace out of the remains of the boot on his wounded foot and began tying them together. "You're bleeding kind of heavy. I'm going to put a tourniquet on." He pushed the torn left sleeve up and tied the lace around the arm above the wound. Paxton started to put his right arm around him to move him, but the pilot said, "Wait." He stuck his thumb into the ooze of Paxton's wound and used it to paint a T on his forehead, so if Paxton passed out later any medics would know to look for a tourniquet. *Ash Wednesday*, Paxton thought, and allowed himself a brief ironic smile.

He dragged the aviator through the water to a dike that marked the halfway point back to Sanders and the radio, and fell heavily against it. "I hate these paddies," Paxton said, panting. He wrestled the airman 90 degrees around, so that he was parallel to the dike and right up against it.

"They're not only full of leeches, but the farmers all take their dumps in 'em. They think the shit makes the rice grow better." He pushed the airman part way up the dike and then laid his shoulder against his back, heaving him up and over by main force into the next paddy. He followed right after him and landed squarely on top of the pilot, pushing his head underwater before he rolled beyond him. The aviator came up coughing and spitting.

"I wish you hadn't told me the recipe for this stuff," he said, blowing water out his nose.

Getting the pilot to the radio took two more slow-motion rushes. His left hand could grasp okay, but it was no good for heavy lifting. The last 15 feet the AK47's found the range and kicked up the water all around them until the next artillery rounds pushed them back down in their holes. Paxton had just enough time to get the aviator to the radio before the NVA machine gun started up again. They'd figured out how much time they had between salvos.

"Weasel, this is Rover three one. I've got one of your people here, wounded. The other one didn't make it."

"Roger. Who've you got?"

"Tell him Baker." Paxton did.

"Roger. Be advised, we've got two more gunships arriving on station now and we're going to try the extraction again. I'm lifting the artillery fire. Your slick is inbound, about a minute out. Put red smoke on the enemy location and mark your position again for the slick."

"Roger," he said into the handset. He turned to Casey Jones. "Casey! Put red smoke on that machine gun." As the grenadier started to replace the high explosive round in his M79, Paxton tossed a smoke grenade into the water. The NVA greeted the yellow cloud bubbling up with an increasing intensity of fire.

Oh shit! "Janowitz! Janowitz, get up here on the double!" He tried to raise himself, looking where he'd last seen him, but the incoming small arms was too intense.

"Sarge, they got him." It was Al Gomez. "While you were at the gunship, I yelled at him to get

over here with us. He rose up to make a run for it and an RPG round went off right under his feet."

First Kessler, now Janowitz. Send your best squad leader...

"Rover, where's that red smoke? We need to start our run."

"Casey, get that red smoke on their machine gun!"

The grenadier lay up against the paddy dike, holding his grenade launcher atop it as he waited for a lessening in the fire brought on by the yellow smoke. He steeled himself, then knelt upright on his right knee in the paddy water, bracing his left foot against the dike. He took quick aim and got off the shot as three machine gun rounds struck him in the chest, hitting with the force of sharp punches. His arms flew up, the grenade launcher looping away, and he sprawled out flat on his back in the paddy water. His smoke round landed right on target, marking the enemy machine gun with red.

Why'd he raise up so high? Paxton ran over to him, knowing before he got there that he was dead.

"Sarge!" Gomez yelled. Paxton looked up from the grenadier's body to see the slick, inbound 50 meters south, its starboard door gunner pouring a continuous stream of orange tracers into the NVA position. At the same time, the three gunships were just beginning their firing pass in trail, one behind the other. They timed the run for the crucial few seconds when the pilot of the slick had to hold his helicopter in a tight hover a foot above the water, the perfect target. Paxton and Gomez loaded the wounded aviator into the slick with the help of the port door gunner. Schiller was holding just short of the tail rotor, running his last belt of ammo through the M60, shooting with fair accuracy considering he was firing from the hip. Finally, the wounded Sanders went in.

"Schiller! Now!" Paxton shouted, wondering if he'd hear him above the full-revving roar of the slick. But Schiller ceased fire and ran to the port door of the copter, jumping up onto the runner and springing into the bird right after Gomez and Paxton. The door gunner spoke into his headset and the slick lurched sharply forward. Gathering speed, it banked hard left, away from the NVA tree line. In a

quick look back, Paxton caught a view, like a snapshot, of the downed gunship close to Kessler's body. It was curled in on itself, not far from Casey Jones, who lay spread-eagled in the middle of the paddy. Janowitz would be half a football field away to the southwest, his body badly cut up by the shrapnel from the RPG round. *Why didn't he keep up with the rest of us?* The feelings that always took control of him after a firefight were already creeping in, making him question his decisions and actions. And now with the adrenaline petering out, the wound in his left arm was radiating with pain.

"Nice going."

He looked up at the aviator, not comprehending. Paxton could tell from his face that he was in pain from the wound in his foot. The pilot leaned closer to his ear. "You did a hell of a job back there."

Paxton gave a mechanical half smile to indicate that he'd heard. Some job. Walked smack into the middle of an ambush, got a gunship shot down, took four KIA and three WIA, including the helicopter guys. With the wound in his arm throbbing the way it was, why did he feel so numb?

The door gunner leaned down to them. "We're going into Third Field Hospital at Tan Son Nhut," he told them. The aviator's face was very pale.

"How long?" Paxton asked.

"ETA is one zero," the door gunner answered.

The aviator looked relieved. "Well anyway, that's good news."

The door gunner shook his head. "There's fighting all over the delta right now. Third Field's in mass casualty mode."