

Vietnam War Story Collection

A collection of stories based on the combat experiences of LT George Kalergis in Vietnam. Some are 100% “factual” and some are based on a “compilation” of actual events, dramatic language added, separate events combined, a few names changed etc. Stories are clearly marked by category. The LZ Colt story descriptions are from both sides of the battle as discovered from first-hand accounts of participants, my personal experience, and captured enemy documents.

Story #1 (Factual)

The Attack On LZ Colt

First Cav Search & Destroy

It is early October-1967 and the First Cavalry Division (Air Mobile) is conducting “Search & Destroy” operations against the Viet Cong (VC) in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. The soldiers of the 3rd Brigade are finishing up their part of that mission in the An-Lao Valley. After months of combat operations, they have been unable to “win the hearts and minds” of the populace or to eliminate the Viet Cong and NVA who remain entrenched in the valley. As a last resort it has been declared a free fire zone and a “scorched earth” campaign is executed. George (Greek) Kalergis, a lanky, once good hearted, Lieutenant-Forward Observer (FO) attached to A Company 5th of the 7th Cavalry watches as soldiers torch the huts in the valley. He sees the dry grass huts flame up quickly, a brilliant, red, crackling, and popping inferno sending the memories of generations flickering to the heavens. From the light-hearted fun times to the somber moments of their lives, generations of memories all becoming just so much hot air going up in smoke. Huge water buffalo are shot but refuse to go down or die quickly from the small caliber M-16 bullets that make their insides leak.

Some days it is humans the soldiers hunt, but today it is chickens and barn animals, large and small, all butchered and left to rot in the now demolished rice paddies. Death smells the same for both human and lesser animals and that smell of violent death permeates the humid jungle to settle into the soldiers' helmets, boots, hair, and clothing. Some will still smell death in their dreams' decades later. Any food or tools, whatever the Viet Cong in the valley might find useful, is forcibly removed or destroyed. The long-time native residents of the valley are marched out to be "re-located" from their centuries old, pristine, and beautiful valley home, which is now in ruins. The shit running down the pants of a frightened old man, the piss of young children too terror stricken to scream, and the salty, snot smell of women heaving with sobs for the loss of the world as they know it assault the soldiers' senses. The bewildered inhabitants putting one foot in front of the other have been robbed of the security of their homes and livelihoods. They feel the ties that bound them to their village are completely unraveling and although still alive, look like walking dead. Unfortunately, it is necessary and unavoidable as they have been sympathetic towards the "enemy", or anyone else with a gun pointed at them.

Those leaving are the lucky ones as anyone left in the valley and the surrounding jungle is fair game to be shot on sight. "Kill anything that moves in the valley", is the new order of the day.



An Lao Valley



Burning Huts



Shooting their Water Buffalo!



Villagers Being "Relocated"

Lt Kalergis' earlier philosophy that he is fighting for "freedom" and to win the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese people has long since been shattered. He is reconsidering his view, but unfortunately it is much too late. He must continue to follow his orders for a year. Winning the war, whatever that might mean, is not really his priority; doing his best to stay alive and keep his comrades alive is. He had better tend to this fighting business or his legs and boots will be sticking out from his poncho waiting for a body bag as many of his comrades before him.

Not ever far from his mind or emotions is the desire to make his father, an Army General, proud of him. He did not have much success at that while doing poorly in college and when he flunked out, quickly received his "letter in the mail" telling him he has been drafted in the Army and to report to Ft Gordon, GA for Basic Training. Completing his "Basic" and "AIT" Field Artillery training he is assigned to a regular artillery unit as a howitzer crewman. He then volunteers for Officer Candidate School (OCS) and after six grueling months graduates as a Second Lieutenant. That accomplishment helps him with his self-esteem and unfulfilled desire to make his father proud. In 1967 all new Lieutenants, upon serving 6 months stateside, are sent to Vietnam.

He had his doubts about the war before going, but he trusted the judgement of the older, wiser military and civilian leadership' and he wanted to do it for his father. His refusing to go to war may have hurt his Dads' military career. Now reality has hit home. He is thrust into the war and is experiencing in the caldron of combat, the violent, heartless, and cold inhumanity that man can inflict on his fellow man. He and many others no longer have a choice. They are here, wired, scared, confused, and unhappy ... mixed bags of emotions and trauma. Only a few are truly anxious or looking forward to fighting an enemy they don't really know. Greeks sense of right and wrong, like a rubber band stretched too tight, is close to snapping, and he is unsure it can return to normal. Trapped in a nightmare, he wonders if he will ever recover.

One day in the future he will wonder, *“How can any field soldier who has seen action, return from Nam without being trapped in the depressing clutches of Post-Traumatic-Stress-Syndrome.”* His humanity is leaving him like the smoke rising from the villages they are burning. It was beginning to seem like “Gooks” are not real people and if they are cooperating with the North, they deserve to be run out of their homes. At least that was the view of some. George thinks to himself, *“They cooperate with whomever has a rifle pointed at them. Who can blame them, and now we are burning their homes, killing their livestock, and sending them away to a strange new place to be relocated?”*

Many of his comrades will commit suicide on their return to the “world”. The politicians back in that “world” are still telling the senior Generals they must win the “hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese, but quite a few soldiers are not buying that platitude any longer. The foot soldiers in the jungles and rice paddies know what is important. **“Body Count”** is the real measure of success and they are pressured to deliver that for higher headquarters, one way or another. No questions asked! Once they are dead, who can tell if they were VC “sympathizers”? It was a terrible dilemma for the naturally kind-hearted Americans who would sometimes hesitate to kill a suspicious Vietnamese civilian only to be shot dead in return. Greek thinks, *“How the hell do you tell the “good” Vietnamese from the “bad” Vietnamese without getting shot?”* Sometimes, 20 KIA are reported with only 2 weapons found. The ratio of the enemy casualties to friendly is absurdly reported to be at least 10 to 1. By God, we are winning the war!

Now the 3rd Brigade receives a new mission. They will move to I Corp, the northernmost part of South Vietnam. Here, like in the An-Lao, jungle covered mountains surround miles of rice paddies. Unlike the An-Lao Guerilla Warfare we have been accustomed to, this larger valley is populated with many more enemy soldiers. Intelligence later reports that there are at least six companies of hardened VC guerrillas along with 5,000 regular, well-equipped soldiers of the 3rd NVA Regiment. Timely intelligence was not a strength of the First Cavalry Division.

The regiment is under the command and control of the NVA Second Division hidden somewhere in the mountainous jungle terrain to the north. The new mission of the 3rd Brigade is to move to the Que Son Valley, engage and defeat the 3rd NVA Regiment and turn over control of the valley to the South Vietnamese government. Tough shit for the civilians caught in the middle.

The war must be won to stop the “Domino” effect from spreading Communism throughout the world. Some argue, stop it here, rather than at home in the USA. A dubious argument, as decades after the USA has left, South Vietnam seems to be doing just fine, there are not many “Commies” in their shopping malls, and the USA has found plenty of other countries to send their military to fight in. History has shown “The Domino Theory” to be a “Boogeyman”. “Communism” has not prevented Americans and others from now visiting a prosperous and peaceful Vietnam and doing business in a cooperative atmosphere.

An older and wiser “Greek” would one day wonder, *“Why did we kill a million Vietnamese? What did the deaths of tens of thousands of young Americans accomplish? Mankind seems unable to learn from the lessons of the past.”* Long after the war he tells his buddy Shack, “We continue to find excuses to fight wars around the world to win “Hearts & Minds”, covert their citizens to the “American” way of life and help them to distribute their oil.”

The Move

Getting to I Corp is a tremendous challenge. Charlie Battery is preparing for its’ mission to provide artillery support to the 3rd Brigades maneuver elements in I Corp. They are loading six 105 MM Howitzers, 80+ men, ammunition, and equipment into Caribou fixed wing aircraft for the first leg of that journey.

When Lt. George Kalergis, the Fire Direction Officer (Greek), Lt. Raymond Shackelford, the Executive Officer (Shack), and the Battery Commander, Captain Charles Haines (Chuck) have finished loading their men and equipment into the stubby, workhorse aircraft Greek says, “How the hell are we going to take off from this piece of crap dirt runway?” He soon finds out as the pilot revs the engines up to full throttle and with a deafening, clattering roar, the plane leaps forward to shake and rattle, faster and faster, down the short runway.

Inside the metal belly of the beast, with the triumvirate holding on for dear life, it is like a giant carnival ride and they curse like sailors violently bouncing and bumping against each other. Just as Lt Kalergis is thinking, *“Holy fuck, the hell with science, this aint gonna work!”*, the specially engineered “short take off” aircraft, now at the very end of the runway, gives a final bone jarring jolt to lurch into the air like a crippled duck. It just clears the jungle’s edge, several trees are now missing their top few branches, and they are stumbling on their way to the Que Son Valley.

Arriving and deplaning at a small airstrip not far from their final-destination, Charlie Battery soldiers wait to board large, twin bladed, Chinook helicopters that will transport them to their new home ... LZ Colt. Soon, while the pilots skillfully hover the giant helicopters just meters off the ground, soldiers sling six of the big guns under them. Then, when the 105-MM howitzers and their basic load of ammunition are securely attached, the rest of the crew board the remaining helicopters and they are off to their destiny. It is the afternoon of 8, October 1967, as Greek peers down at the sprawling rice paddies and verdant jungle rushing by below. From the air it seems peaceful and beautiful, but he has spent many months in them searching for the enemy and knows better. He suspects that moving this far North will be even more dangerous than his previous experience in the Central Highlands and is surprised they have not been briefed on that. He can see seven other giant helicopters flying in a line, six with Howitzers and Ammo slung beneath them.

With the howitzers dangling from long, sturdy, canvas straps they look like a flock of giant Pelicans flying one in front of the other, long fishing lines and lures trailing along below them.



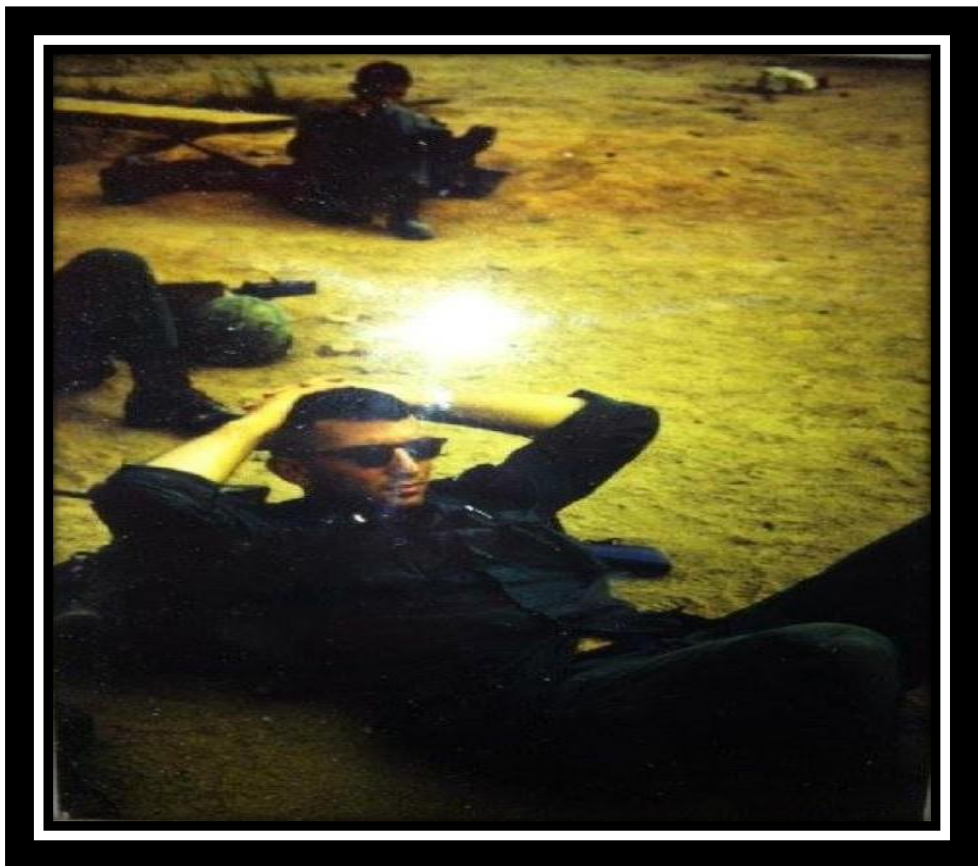
Helicopters Enroute LZ Colt



Caribou Waiting For Charlie Battery



"Shake Rattle & Roll"



"Greek" with his FDC crew waiting for their ride to LZ Colt

Arriving At Colt

Soon enough, they are landing at LZ Colt. It is a hubbub of frantically organized activity. Taxis frantically honking horns in a Grand Central Station rush hour would be considered calm compared to the multiple helicopters rapidly arriving, unloading and departing. Not just Charlie Battery, but also the 5th of the 7th Battalion Headquarters, Tactical Operations Center (TOC), and CPT Matthews soldiers of Bravo Company for perimeter security. Troopers jump and fall from the choppers into the dangerous footing of a muddy, slippery, mess. Helicopter blades spinning like mad whirling dervishes in the gusting monsoon rain sling sheets of water and mud over everything. They remind Greek of a hyper, surrealistic painter, violently sloshing paint onto a giant canvas. The footing is terrible ... troopers slip and slide around as the wind and rain stings their faces. The weather makes everything much more difficult than normal. Greek wonders, as he often does ... *“Am I dreaming? How the hell did I get in this never-ending drama?”*

First Of The Ninth Hunter Killer Teams

In periods when the rain eases, Greek sees Huey Gunships of the 1st of the 9th Armed Recon Troop patrolling the edges of the jungle that surround their new, low-lying position. Before the war is over, these “Red” Hunter-Killer teams with their “Blue” reaction platoons, will account for half the enemy killed in action (KIA) for the entire First Cavalry Division. They boast many highly decorated members, including four pilots who will be awarded “The Medal of Honor”. There is a thin line separating brave and crazy. The crazy-brave 1st of the 9th pilots and soldiers walked both sides of it daily.

****Lt Kalergis walked it with them for his first month in country, but that is a different story entitled “A Helicopter Ride”***



"Red Team" Flying Death!

Gunship with 2.75 Rockets, 40 MM grenade launcher & 2 M-60 Machine Guns.



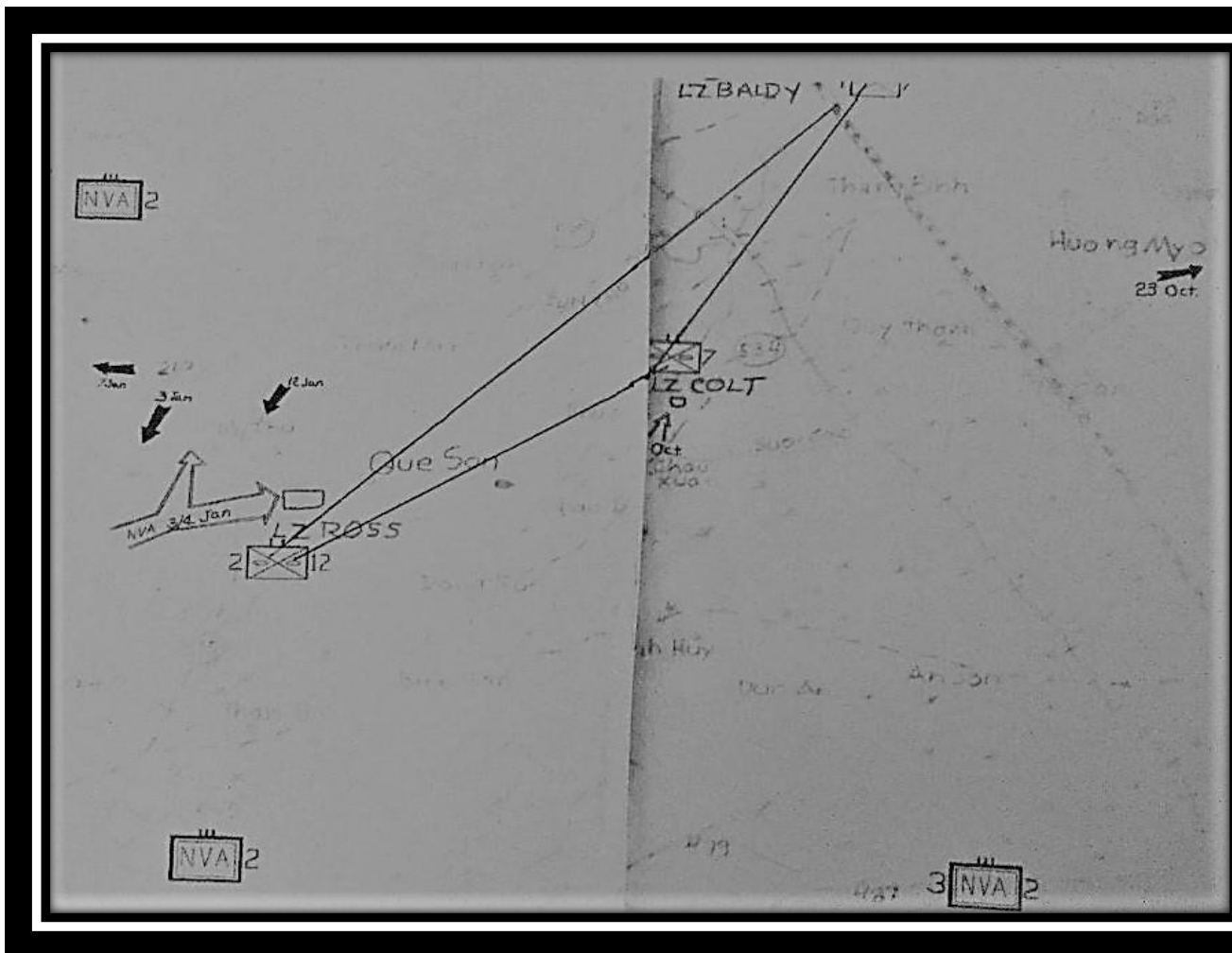
"Blue Team" Leaping Into Action!

<https://youtu.be/r0OfSyj-dhY>

Tactical Situation LZ Colt

Rice paddies surround each side of a slight rise, a mere "Bump" in the earth, that is becoming LZ Colt. The guns for Charlie Battery cannot be placed in the usual manner, one hundred meters or more above the surrounding terrain. Instead, they are located at ground level, just a little higher than the elevation of the surrounding Rice Paddies. Extending out from Colt 700 to 1,000 meters, these paddies go right to the edge of the surrounding dense jungle.

Rough Sketch Three LZs Locations



Normally, fire bases are set on the tops of hills to make their defenses more effective and to provide the interlocking fires for Brigade operations. The other two brigade fire bases, **LZ Ross** and **LZ Baldy**, have been located on the top of hills in a triangular shape with **LZ Colt**. The problem is that Colts' part of that triangle is sitting smack dab in the center of thousands of meters of open rice paddy! The mission requires and senior command demands it, but they may as well have had big red bullseyes painted on their backs. Knowing Colts' unusual vulnerability, like alert birds of prey, heavily armed 1st of the 9th gunships patrol around Colt just above tree-top level ready to pounce on any possible enemy hidden in the edge of the jungle. They will find many enemy targets throughout this new valley in the weeks and months to come. Deadly targets that shoot back with 51 caliber machine guns. NVA soldiers will shoot down more than a few of the Huey Gunships and their crews. The 9th Cavalry troopers and pilots are ***crazy-brave, mother fuckers!***

Charlie Battery has been through this LZ occupation drill dozens of times and they have become damn good at it. This time it is made many times more difficult by the mud, wind, and rain. They will also soon find to their deep concern, that a lack of adequate helicopter logistics support is also to be a major problem. While Charlie Battery is setting up, LTC Wickham's, Tactical Operations Center, is being situated close to them, also right out in the open. They are both "sitting ducks", vulnerable as newborn babies, left out in a cold and uncaring rain.

To make matters even worse, LZ Colt does not have nearly the normal amount of defensive Concertina Wire, Trip Flares and Claymore Mines they are accustomed to. Uncharacteristically placed wide out in the open, on a poorly equipped, low lying bump in the earth, it is a disaster waiting to happen. LTC Wickham, the 5th of the 7th Battalion Commander, is beside himself and damn near insubordinate as he angrily objects the positioning with Col. McKenna, the Brigade Commander. He is told, "The position is vital to the Brigades operation and you will just have to make it work."

McKenna stressed the need for speed to gain the element of surprise over the enemy. He promised logistical support, but the unusual number of choppers down for maintenance and the forecast of Monsoon weather have not been adequately considered in the planning of the move. The critically needed support is not to be forthcoming. When more supplies and equipment still do not arrive the next day, McKenna advises that the soldiers on Colt need to ... "Suck it up and improvise". Unfortunately, the soldiers of B Company have too few troopers for the job and are spread far apart on the thin perimeter, some just barely "mutually supporting".

Simultaneously two of the other battalions' companies have already been quickly and separately deployed into the mountains searching for scattered guerilla forces as they did in the An-Lao. Greek thinks, *"We sure could use one of those companies for additional security until we have all our defenses properly built up."* Bravo Company soldiers are spread too far apart in positions that are barely mutually supporting. Greek tells Chuck, "This thinly manned, spread out, and poorly equipped perimeter with only one strand of wire is a fucking recipe for disaster." He hears LTC Wickhams' radio operator telling his buddy, "I thought McKenna was going to fire the old man the way they were going at it." The commander and all of us had no choice, but to "suck it up"! Meanwhile the big question in Greek's mind remains, *"Exactly who the fuck is going to get the frigging surprise, us or them?"* He had an ominous feeling who it might be.

The terrible weather and helicopter maintenance problems continue and even on the 2nd day of occupation, Colt still does not have its' normal complement of equipment for the defense of a new position, never mind the defense of one as open and exposed as Colt. Without a doubt, the officers on the fire base all agree, this is the worst position any of them has ever been in. Instead of the normal triple strands of Concertina Wire stacked around a perimeter high on a hill top, there is only enough for a single strand. Not only that, Bravo Company perimeter bunkers are "miles" apart in the flat, wide-open terrain.

Chuck, George and Shack are aghast that even the day following the initial occupation, we still have far fewer than normal rolls of Concertina Wire, Sand Bags, Trip Flares, and Claymore Mines. Charlie Battery, Bravo Company, and LTC Wickhams' Battalion TOC are "prime targets", nakedly vulnerable, right out in the center of a huge open rice paddy. They are all growing increasingly apprehensive as there are rumors the valley is home to 5,000, regular NVA soldiers. Still, they get no formal briefing on that. Intelligence filters down to the troop level slowly.



Que Son Valley



Recon of The Que Son Valley

Citizens of The Que Son Valley

Unlike some of the South Vietnamese back in the Central Highlands, most of the inhabitants of the Que Son valley do not buy into the American mantra, “Win the hearts and minds of the people”. To them it was merely American “propaganda”. The slogan may have had some moderate success back in the more pacified Central Highlands? Here however, there were no friendly and secure villages filled with Sin-City Business-Girls, barber shops, souvenir shops, or food and drink establishments run by enterprising and friendly local Vietnamese. Instead, these villages are filled with citizens who are fervent Viet Cong sympathizers. Most regard us only as “round-eyed” invaders. Because they have no wish to be “liberated”, higher headquarters is seriously considering making it a “free fire zone”, just as they had done in the An-Lao Valley. Greek thinks occasionally, “If the citizens don’t want us here, why are we fighting in the middle of a civil war.”

Greek sadly remembers as an FO in the free fire zone of the An-Lao being sick at heart, as he watched soldiers laughing because it took so many M-16 bullets to bring down the huge Water Buffalo. He told his RTO of the time, Danny Garrity, "I bet they wouldn't be laughing if someone was shooting their cattle on the ranch back home!" If the natives don't want to be liberated, we will just obliterate them and their homes, seemed to be the policy when unable to win their "Hearts & Minds". *"So much for that fucking slogan, we are becoming the "bad guys" here!"* Greek solemnly thinks, as he watches hundreds of grim-faced citizens marched from the An-Lao valley to be "relocated" from their generations' old homes.

In the Que Son, much, much different than the An-Lao, staged throughout the valley are huge caches of money, food, military equipment, weapons and ammunition available for use by six companies of hardened Viet Cong guerillas and 5,000 regular NVA soldiers. The "war games" of the Central Highlands that the brigade has become accustomed to, characterized by snipers, homemade booby traps, a few regular NVA soldiers, and occasional skirmishes with local Viet Cong guerrillas are soon to be over.

The Greek is not sure the General and his tacticians, who have hastily located them here, fully understand the new and increased risk we will now face. They have grown used to relatively secure base camps and running company size, even platoon size (Eagle Flights) Search and Destroy operations looking for an elusive, guerilla style enemy well hidden in the Central Highlands. Charlie Battery, except for a few snipers, has not been attacked in many different and more defensible positions they have occupied for the previous six months. The maneuver companies seldom, if ever, were able to find enemy units larger than squad or platoon size. Once in a great while, a company size enemy unit, but nothing like the regiments and battalions we now face. Time and again, in the Central Highlands, intelligence reports of enemy locations would prove to be wrong. This led to not only a kind of complacency, but a desperation on the maneuver side to find the enemy, defeat them and prove the "Airmobile Concept".

Here in our new location, the much larger and better equipped enemy is eager to find and engage us in our fixed and open positions. Complacency in combat is a recipe for disaster, especially with relatively inexperienced, ambitious, and aggressive senior planners. Planners who have only several short months experience in combat and who have grown accustomed to a different kind of war.

He had learned in his earlier Forward Observer (FO) duties conducting “Search & Destroy” operations in the jungle and rice paddies with Alpha Company, that the reality of the situation on the ground is not always what is hoped for or understood by the planners looking at their maps. Everything is easier from the rear command bunker. As an FO on the ground, he once heard from the command and control helicopter high above, “Why are you moving so slowly? That Elephant Grass does not look that bad from up here. You have to move faster!” Just minutes later, as we try to move more quickly to get into our assigned “blocking position”, there is a sudden, sickening, crunch and puff of black smoke and the soldier walking right next to Greek, has his foot blown up by a booby trap set in the tall grass. Screaming, until the Morphine works, the company must halt while he is taken out by a medivac helicopter.

Greek could not tell his bloody boot from his foot and thinks, *“How in the hell are the doctors going to get his boot off? Fuck the commander in his chopper. I’m going to move slowly and carefully. I dont want to be screaming with my foot shredded and bloodily melded to my boot.”* From then on, they all moved even more slowly, taking each step very, very carefully in the waist high grass. Greek was afraid to move even one step. Nightmares of that bloody boot continue to haunt Greek decades later. *“Moving carefully through this booby-trapped high grass reminds me of trying to get into the frigid ocean water back in New Hampshire.”* Now everyone is putting one foot slowly and gingerly in front of the other, trying not to tread too heavily. The VC have succeeded in stopping the progress of A Company. “I guess Elephant Grass doesn’t grow on maps?”, Greek mumbles to himself. Combat is deadly dangerous.

It seemed to him that A company at times, may have had that danger increased more than necessary by ambitious senior planners. Many of these Field Grade staff and commanders had only an average of 3 months combat experience in their staff positions as well as little if any experience on the ground in actual combat. Positions, especially coveted command positions, are rotated every six months so more could have a chance at jobs that would promote their military careers. That “learning curve” does not promote maximum success and often resulted in mistakes on the ground. It was a never ending “On-The-Job” six-month training cycle exercise. Except that, here the “training aids” were live and deadly!

Body Count & Fucking Politicians

It seems like sometimes the tacticians just did not listen to less senior commanders on the ground. After all, they are fallible humans under the stress of combat. Like the rest of us, the planners were constantly pressured by the First Air Cavalry Division chain of command to defeat the enemy, prove the **“Air Mobile Concept”**, and report larger numbers of “body count” (KIA). It seemed there were never enough enemy dead to report. Body count reports are run up the chain of command, through higher Headquarters, eventually to be seen in the Pentagon and White House. There they are enthusiastically regarded as evidence we are winning the war. The absurdity of reporting millions of dead NVA compared to tens of thousands of our soldiers is somehow overlooked for over a decade. In any event, they are hearing what they hoped for, and believing what they want to believe. While the “higher ups” are congratulating themselves on winning, the pressure for results would sometimes cause grave errors in the jungle and rice paddies. Grave errors which resulted in black sedans, with dress uniformed officers, briefcases filled with medals, to drive up to homes back in “anywhere” USA, with a grim message, “I’m very sorry to have to inform you that your son has given his life fighting for ‘freedom’ and his country in Vietnam.”

Now their boys are coming home in flag draped caskets to be tragically met by sobbing loved ones. That scene is horrifically repeated tens of thousands of times over the period of the war. It is a sad and turbulent era with many young people demonstrating against the unpopular war.

Although some may disagree with Greek, in retrospect the student demonstrations were more than justified, and even necessary to help end fifteen years of a pointless war. He would sometimes think, *"If fifteen years of increased troop levels and firepower do not make a difference, how will twenty?"* What pains and discourages him even more, is the disdain and disapproval shown by the many people who disparage, humiliate, and emotionally damage brave young soldiers on their homecoming. Young men whose valor and sacrifice have been so cruelly wasted, must then face a new battle on arriving home. Told they are fighting for American values, freedom, and the democratic way of life, they are not treated that way on their return. Many will commit suicide. Young and unsophisticated in the ways of the world, Greek and many of the other soldiers, at least initially, believed they were fighting for a just cause. Egregiously lied to, they did not deserve to be spit on and cursed when they arrived home. They just did what they had to do in order to stay alive. Once in hell, there is no way back home for them and they are forced to fight like Roman Gladiators of old to stay alive.

Greek thinks, years later from a wiser and more experienced viewpoint, *"The SEATO treaty and The Gulf of Tonkin incident were just excuses. Excuses, like 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' in Iraq. The blame needs to fall where it belongs, squarely on the shoulders of the political leadership and the senior military doing their bidding."* (McNamara, Johnson & Westmoreland etc.) Their self-serving, arrogant, and deliberately errant interpretations of treaties like SEATO and the misleading reporting of the Gulf of Tonkin incident were poor justification for the millions killed during the war. The language of that treaty clearly did not include absolute mutual defense and the Maddox was used to deliberately provoke North Vietnam in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Sorry fucking excuses for a useless, expensive and “profitable” (for some) war that killed millions and tragically impacted tens of millions of Vietnamese and American extended families. If we had stayed 10 years longer and killed another million or so, how would that have made the Vietnam of today any different than it is now? The “Domino Theory” and the spread of Communism have turned out to be just so much “Hocus Pocus”.

Greek thinks later, *“When will we ever learn that foolhardy, ambitious, and errant leadership was criminally responsible then, as they are today, for the tragedy of wars with **no real missions**. The political leadership and military at the very senior level deserve far more blame than many of the well-intentioned protesters or other scapegoats.”* Greek does not believe cowardice is what motivated most of the protesters. Even Jane Fonda, used by the North, with her tragically wrong, ill-advised and mistaken trip to Hanoi was well intentioned. The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

Captain Trang

None of that is of current concern for Chuck, Shack and Greek as they had very good reason for more immediate worry. Their fears were justified, because while they were scrambling to set up Colts defenses on the morning of the 9th of Oct., from the nearby concealment of the jungle tree line 700 meters away, Cpt. Trang and his NVA recon party are closely observing them. Unlike most of the US soldiers he is fighting, Trang has volunteered to fight in this war. He misses his fiancé and life at home in Hanoi, but is fiercely determined and willing to sacrifice, to bring about “Father”, Ho Chi Minhs’ dream of a united and free Vietnam. His commander, Major Tran, who as a young man had helped defeat the French decades ago, is the 3rd NVA Regimental Operations Officer. He and his senior officers are passionately convinced their presence here is the beginning of a grand tactical plan. One that would eventually drive out these new foreign invaders, just as they had defeated the French near this very same location.

All of them were completely dedicated and fiercely believed they would bring peace and prosperity to a re-unified Vietnam. In fact, the NVAs' 2nd Division troop build-up a little further north, hidden in the mountains, is the headquarters where at that very moment the soon to come nationwide TET offensive meant to turn the war in the North's favor is being planned.

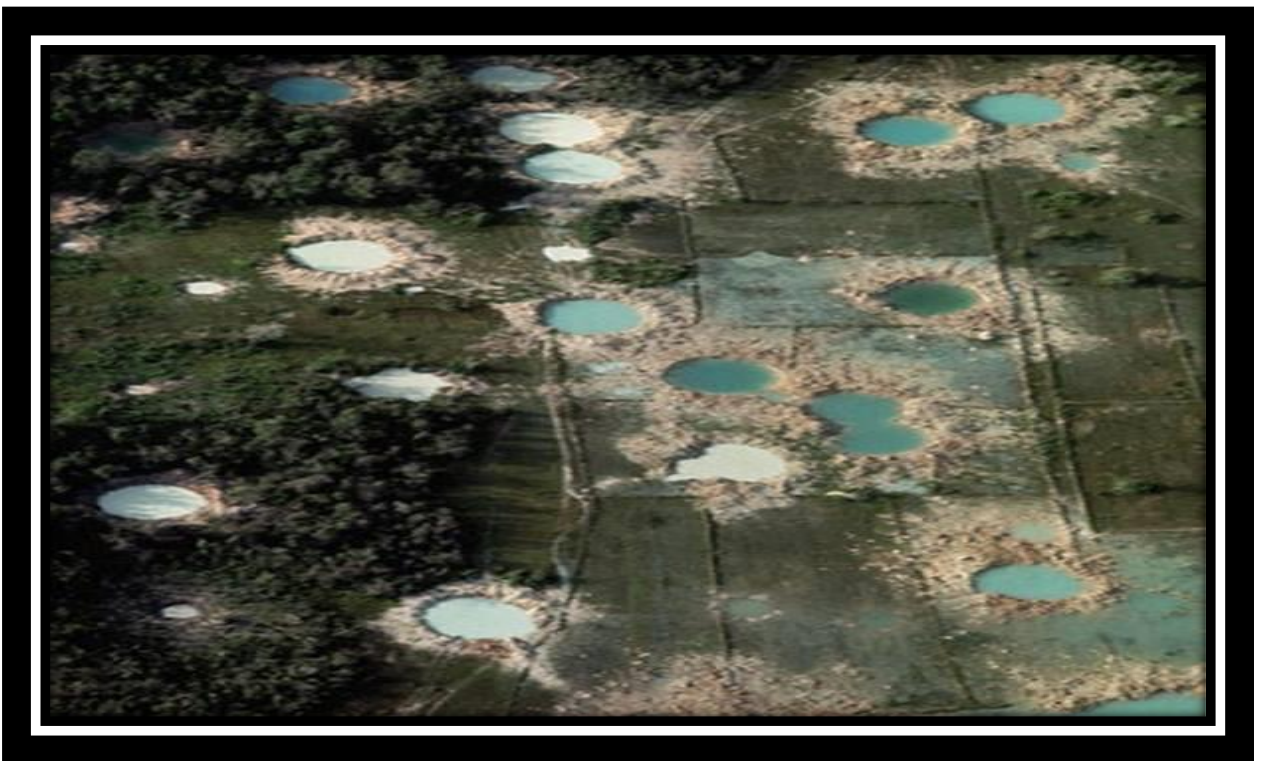
Cpt. Trang is tired! In fact, he is exhausted. He and his men have just finished an arduous and dangerous trek, traveling down the Ho Chi Minh trail from North Vietnam to The Que Son Valley. Much of it had to be done at night and 22 of his men are killed by a B-52 bomber strike. Without warning, as if from nowhere, hundreds of 2,000-pound bombs had crashed suddenly and horrifically right on top of them. Coming from miles above, dropped from planes flying so high they could not be seen or heard from the ground, the monster bombs left a massive trail of huge craters, holes in the ground large enough to throw a house in. They transformed the jungle into a barren moonscape scene of complete devastation. Littered with blood and body parts, it was an unimaginable, inconceivable, sudden living hell of fire, and brimstone. Many of his soldiers, punch drunk from the concussions alone, wandered about in a confused and half-conscious daze, bleeding from the nose and mouth. It was a doomsday surprise inflicted by the round-eyed devils from their invisible high-flying jets and it terrified and demoralized Trang and his men. The high-flying American pilots were unlikely candidates to win their "hearts & minds". American pilots like John McCain, who were captured and imprisoned in the "Hanoi Hilton" would suffer their wrath for many years. Now however, he and his men had arrived to re-enforce others in the 3rd NVA Regiment.



B-52 Bombers



B-52 "Arc Light" Bombs Landing



Craters From B-52 Arc Light

We Just Want To Survive

Unlike Cpt. Trang and his soldiers' intense hatred for the American invaders, most of the soldiers setting up LZ Colt had little initial emotional interest in the Vietnam civil war and like Muhammed Ali had no personal quarrel with the North Vietnamese. (Other than they were now trying to kill them.) Greek, sometimes wonders, *"Most of us just continue to follow orders, trying to survive a one year, 'in country' tour. Maybe Ali did the right thing in refusing to fight."* Many troopers had been involuntarily conscripted to serve. The number one priority for most, volunteers and draftees alike, is just to remain alive, and return to the "world" in one piece. They are told they are fighting for "freedom", and to win the "hearts and minds" of the people. Many, including Greek, wanted to or initially believed that. Not too many believed it for long.

Another major factor and source of mistakes in the war is the combat experience level of the US soldiers versus that of the NVA soldiers. Lt Kalergis fired 3 artillery training missions from a camp stool at Ft Sill before firing his 4th mission in combat. It was like a Brain Surgeon performing surgery just after reading his first text book on the subject. After 6 months, Greek is damn good at locating targets and blowing shit up, but then he is replaced by another "Newbie" for their "On-The-Job" training. Commanders and staff had the same learning curve, and no doubt, that resulted in mistakes that may not have been made by more experienced soldiers and officers.

Newly arrived or inexperienced artillery units more than once kill and injure soldiers when artillery rounds, "friendly fire", go astray. Calls for fire from troopers "in contact" that should have been answered in 30 seconds or less, sometimes take several minutes or even more resulting in more casualties. These tragic instances are a direct result of inexperience at all levels and Greek thinks, "They don't emphasize the right things in peacetime training." On the other hand, many of the enemy soldiers they were fighting had been doing it most of their lives. They had years of experience and were already home.

They have the “Home Field Advantage” and they knew the war would not be over for them after just one year. They are not burdened with any additional mission to win our “hearts and minds”. For good reason, they believe completely that they are patriots, prepared to fight for their homeland, not just for a year, but for as long as necessary, just as they had against the French in this very same territory. Foreign invaders have been repelled before and would be again. They knew they were patriots and just wanted to see all the round eyes dead or gone! Lt Kalergis, many years later would seriously think, *“If I had it to do over, knowing what I know now, I may have followed the example of Muhammed Ali and refused to go.”*

Captain Trang Continues Observing

As Cpt Trang continues to closely observe the occupation of the LZ, he can see it is a typical First Cavalry Division fire base set-up. As he carefully draws a detailed description of the key element locations, he is keenly aware that this is one of three fire bases set up in a triangle to provide interlocking fire support for each other and for the Brigades maneuver elements. He knows that the Troopers from each of three battalions are conducting Search & Destroy operations throughout that 100,000-square meter triangle. This is the “arena”, Area of Operations (AO) in the mountainous jungle and rice paddies where the combat for control of the valley would take place. If the key position on Colt could be destroyed, it would be catastrophic for the First Cavalry Divisions operations. On his sketch pad Trang carefully draws the locations of Bravo Company perimeter security, Charlie Battery Guns and FDC, the 5th/7th TOC, their Officer and NCOs’ GP Large, personnel sleeping tent, and what he believes is the smaller tent of the Battalion Commander and his Operations Officer.

He already has a rough sketch of the LZ from a local civilian woman who, having brought in an injured infant for medical treatment, has been able to scope out those locations. She has spoken with her relatives in the south and she knows what transpired in the An-Lao. He continues to watch Kalergis, the tall Artillery Officer direct the set-up of the big “292” long range antennas for the FDC tent. He told the Sergeant next to him, “That tent is a priority target for the Mortars and Sapper Squads. We will knock out their communications, as well as their command and control elements so they will be unable to request supporting artillery fire.”

He is pleased to see that the low-lying terrain of LZ Colt made it surprisingly vulnerable to attack and that there is only one-90-man company, thinly spread around the entire large perimeter. Not only that, the razor wire and other defenses are only partially in place. The sappers will only have a few trip flares and Claymore mines to avoid and just one roll of razor wire to cut, rather than the usual three. He continues to put together his situation briefing for Major Tran and the other key officers of the Regiment. *“We will win this first battle and deal a damaging blow to the First Cavalry Division presence here.”*

Getting Charlie Battery Guns and FDC Ready To Fire

Meanwhile, Shack and Greek are having a miserable, hell of a time getting the Firing Battery Guns and Fire Direction Center ready to fire in support of the battalions’ four maneuver companies. The monsoon wind and rain are getting worse, making the preparation damn near impossible. Greek watches Shack supervise the howitzer crewmen as they slip in the mud, often falling, four letter words spit venomously at the mud, the war, and the world in general. They struggle mightily to get their heavy guns “laid” in place. The guns, in order to fire accurately, must be “laid” parallel with each other on a common direction by using an optical instrument called an Aiming Circle. They cannot begin firing until that is accomplished. The Aiming Circle is located some distance from the guns.

The howitzer crews, struggling, slipping, and falling in the rain and mud will finally get a gun dug in and laid parallel, but after firing just a few rounds, the powerful recoil displaces the gun so far in the mud, it cannot continue accurate fire and so must be “laid in” all over again. It is a seemingly endless, dirty, and miserable task, but Shack continues trekking back and forth through the sloppy ground as in a bad dream, to the Aiming Circle to lay the guns again and again. He knows that when finished, he will be leaving for his six-day R & R to Australia. He would have crawled on his hands and knees to get the job done as visions of night clubs with pretty and free-spirited Australian ladies danced in his head.

Finally, after hours of strenuous, muddy, hard work, all 6 guns are “laid in” parallel, the FDC is set up, and Charlie Battery is ready to fire. Having finally accomplished this, that dirty dog Shack leaves us to go on his pre-planned, “Rest & Relaxation” trip to Australia. Timing is everything and Shack is not just lucky with the ladies it seems. He would miss an excellent opportunity to add more medals to his eventual 3 tour collection of three Bronze Stars, two Silver Stars, and three Purple Hearts.

****All soldiers are given a six-day break for R & R midway through their year-long Vietnam tour.***



105 Artillery Semi-Fixed Round Getting Ready To Load



105 MM Artillery Firing



Aiming Circle

The Warning

The next day, with the FDC and the guns now ready to fire, Lt Kalergis observes a 1st of the 9th Huey "Hunter-Killer, gunship team flying a low-level aerial recon just to the south of Colt. He flew with them on first arriving in Nam, attached as a Forward Observer-Door Gunner, so he knew they very often found enemy targets. He immediately dials up one of his radios to their frequency, telling them, "Brave Fighter 63, Charlie battery is ready to give you artillery support if needed, OVER." They reply, "Roger, good to know, thanks, OUT." Although Greek knows their first choice is always the immediate and devastating fire power of their gunships' organic 2.75 rockets, 40 MM automatic grenade launcher, and two 7.62 machine guns, he keeps one his radios on their frequency monitoring them. *"Just in case"*, Greek thinks. Sure enough, he soon hears the "Red" hunter-killer team surprise a good-sized enemy force crossing a river not far from Colt. He listens as they engage and kill many of them.

They quickly follow up with the insertion of a “Blue” team reaction force and Greek hears the blue team report on the radio to the gunships overhead, “We have 12 NVA KIA and one of them is a commander with a map for a planned attack.” Greek assuming that attack is going to be on Colt and not sure the intelligence information will be passed quickly enough (It usually did not) through channels to warn the Battalion Commander of the 5th of the 7th, asks Cpt. Haines, “What should I do, sir?” Chuck says, “His tent is only a couple hundred feet away; get on over there and tell him yourself.” Greek hurries over, doing as he is told. He finds the 5th of the 7th battalion commander sitting by his tent in a folding chair and goes over to report to him. As LTC Wickham listens, Lt Kalergis thinks, *“His response is kind of perfunctory.”* Trying to explain further, he is quickly and summarily dismissed. *“Maybe I should have shaved.”* Greek wryly muses.

We Improvise

Greek now returns to help his crew continue to urgently and laboriously fill large, empty, wooden ammo boxes with dirt to fortify the walls of the FDC tent. Fortunately, the FDC can be positioned right next to a huge rock which provided excellent protection for one side of the tent. That rock and the improvised ammo boxes filled with dirt will soon prove instrumental in saving Greek and his FDC crew. Normally we would have had sand bags to use for that job and the FDC crew, who had experienced only a little sniper fire for the previous six months back in the Central Highlands, bitched and moaned as they labored in the rain. Chuck ordered us to “improvise” with the empty ammo boxes and it was a damn good thing he did. Greek wonders what additional action LTC Wickham might be taking as a result of their conversation. Whatever it is, it would soon prove not to be enough to save him, his officers, or his TOC. ***“The Big Rock” on Colt, seen years later*** <http://www.cav57.org/return.pdf>

Major Trans Plan

The afternoon of the 9th of Oct., while the troopers on Colt continue setting up their defenses, Captain Trang is briefing Major Tran. After hearing and considering that report, Major Tran briefs his plan for a full stage, 300+ man attack on LZ Colt early in the morning. He tells the Third Regimental assembled leaders, "At 4:45 AM, shortly prior to sunrise, the 17th Mortar Company is to commence a mortar barrage from this small hill rise 750 meters from the enemy position." He points to the map. "They will rapidly fire 60 MM mortar rounds into the center of the enemy location to quickly damage the Americans' Battalion TOC, officers' tents, and the artillery FDC. The mortars will also cause the perimeter defenders to get their heads down. Then, with the mortar fire continuing and while the Americans still have their heads down in their foxholes, three squads of the V-16 Sapper Battalion carrying explosives are to cut the single roll of razor wire and infiltrate under cover of darkness." He points to a sketch, "Here is where their perimeter bunkers are very far apart. Gaining unobserved entrance, you are to use explosive charges to complete the destruction of the TOC and Officers tents and then move across the LZ to destroy the artillery command post and big guns. Close communication and timing between you and the mortar platoon is critical. Minutes later, at first light, with the Americans' communication, command, and control elements disrupted, the entire 5th and 6th Infantry Companies supported by 57 MM Recoilless Rifles, B-40 Rocket Propelled Grenades, and RPD 7.62 Machine Guns from Cpt Phams', 8th Combat Support Company will commence the main attack."

Cpt Trang asks the Major, "Sir, what can we do about the possible artillery fire available to support the enemy position from the two other American fire bases? They could possibly impede the attack and hurt us with their fire power. Is it possible to attack them simultaneously?" Major Tran replies, "We don't have soldiers in position to do that quickly and we can't get them into position in time. If we wait, we will lose the element of surprise and the Americans will have more time to build up their weak defenses."

Both sides desire for surprise would come back to haunt them. It seems that planners for both sides often need “reality checks” from those closer to the action, but they are not always willing to really listen or accept that input. Tran continues, “If we knock out their communication capabilities early, they will not be able to coordinate artillery fire against us.” He would later find that to be a fatal mistake. Still, the next morning of 10 Oct. is looking very damn ominous for the sky troopers on LZ Colt.

The Attack

Very early that morning in the FDC tent Lt Kalergis and his crew are just finishing with their early morning Harassment and Interdiction fires. (H & I) He is about to lie down on his cot to listen to the World Series on Armed Forces Radio Network. He is rooting for his Boston Red Sox and Jim Lonborg is pitching a no-hitter for them when a powerful explosion just outside the tent sends him stumbling, stunned to the ground. Quickly picking himself up and rushing to the radios, he hears multiple explosions from 60 MM mortar rounds landing in the dark all around the LZ. Major Trans’ attack is underway; it was going to be a long rest of the night.

Quickly getting the artillery battalion FDC on the radio, Greek urgently shouts, “We are getting mortared; stand by for a fire mission, OVER.” Followed by his quick exclamation, “Holy Shit, that one was close!”, as a 60 MM Mortar round strikes the big rock protecting one side of the FDC tent. Shredded canvas, wood and dirt, pelt him and his crew from the explosions of several more mortar rounds that explode right outside the FDC. His crew would later spend hours picking out the shrapnel and bullets from the wooden ammo boxes. “Holy crap, look at this!” Echoed in Greeks ears as his men pick a shit load of shrapnel and bullets from the ammo boxes that have saved their butts. The very same boxes they had bitched and moaned about filling with dirt just hours earlier.

Greek, ignoring the mortars, runs outside to try and locate them in the distance. He is pretty sure he knows where they are coming from as he had analyzed the terrain around Colt earlier for just such an event. One small hill mass 750 meters to the southeast is the most probable location. Sure enough, looking in that direction he can hear the “plop”, plop” of mortars firing and sees their flashes as they fire from there on Colt. He quickly plots that location on the map and with his hands trembling with adrenalin, attempts to call in a fire mission with the small PRC-25 radio he has carried outside.

The reception is bad, so he runs back into the tent, telling his RTO to change to the longer antenna on the smaller PRC 25. (He will use it later.) Grabbing the handset of the “46” radio which uses the larger “292” antennas they had just set up, he urgently yells into the handset, **“Fire Mission, grid 294 637, direction 3200, mortars firing, adjust fire Over!”** The Battalion FDC repeats the fire mission back and in about 45 seconds they tell Greek, **“Shot Over!”**. **“Shot Out!”**, the Greek replies. After waiting to observe the rounds impact, he yells, **“Drop 50, Fire-For-Effect, Over!”** Shortly, **“Shot Over”**, comes from the radio speaker, the very rapid response from the Battalion FDC. Greek replies, **“Shot Out”**. It is surreal, as while waiting for the rounds to impact, he still hears the announcer for the World Series back in the good old USA, broadcasting the ball game from halfway around the world. Greek thinks, as he often did in combat, *“How weird, it seems like a slow-motion movie. Is this really happening?”* It is sure as hell is happening as he sees six 105 MM rounds explode very close to the mortar flashes. He rushes back inside, pushes the handset and requests, **“Continuous fire, over!”** Very soon, hundreds of rounds are on the way. They scream in like wailing banshees, whistling in the night very low over his head. He is glad as hell to hear them! They cover the target area with acrid black smoke, incandescent red flashes, and the eerie, whizzing whining of razor-sharp shrapnel searching for soft flesh. Sharp, jagged, steel, scientifically designed to do maximum damage to human tissues appears to have silenced the mortars. **“End of mission, mortars silenced, Over.”** **“End of mission Out,”** battalion FDC replies.

During the mission the Battalion FDC strangely informs Greek, “We have a request from LTC Wickham, ‘Big Wolf 6’ to bring artillery fire directly on the LZ.” Very critically wounded and with his headquarters wiped out, the battalion commander mistakenly assumes that Colt has been completely overrun and all is lost. As a last resort, he is requesting artillery fire to be placed right on top of the defenders of the LZ. The Greek replies, “Hell no, do not fire on us. Everything is under control.” If Greek had not countermanded that fire request from Big Wolf Six, our own artillery would have tragically and mistakenly fired on and destroyed many of Colts’ defenders. He continues to run in and out of the tent using the larger “46” radios inside the FDC to adjust fires.

While inside the tent reporting, “**end of mission**” on the mortar target, his RTO suddenly yells in a panicked voice, “Sir, Sir! I hear them speaking Vietnamese outside the tent.” Greek says, “Fuck me, they have penetrated the wire!” He tells his 5-man crew, “Get your asses outside, in your foxholes, and keep those bastards out of the FDC, **RIGHT NOW!**” Greek now hears rapid small arms and automatic weapons fire with multiple explosions from the area of the 5th of the 7th TOC, just several hundred feet away. As Major Tran had planned, the three Sapper squads, while Colts’ defenders have their heads down, have penetrated the sparsely manned perimeter, cut the lone strand of wire unobserved in the darkness and are now raising hell right inside our perimeter. Almost instantly they blow up the Battalion TOC and its personnel as well as the large GP tent in which the off-duty battalion personnel are sleeping. The 5th of the 7th command centers’ officers and NCOs are all dead or wounded.

So far, Major Trans’ plan is working perfectly. Simultaneously, other sappers have thrown an explosive charge into the tent occupied by the 5th of the 7th Commander, critically wounding him and killing the Battalion Operations Officer as they slept. Taken completely by surprise, all the other battalion headquarters personnel, officers and NCOs have been killed or wounded. While the soldiers on perimeter defense still have their heads down to avoid the mortars, the NVA, incredibly daring have attacked under their own mortar fire.

Without his rifle, Greek runs outside again to adjust more fire on the jungle tree line only to see one of the NVA Sappers just 100 feet away from the FDC raising his AK 47 to shoot him. Time stands still, as Greek thinks, *“Oh Fuck! I’m dead!”* Before the NVA soldier can fire, one of the cannoneers on the gun line, with his M-16 rifle on automatic, shoots him stone cold dead. That is just one of many acts of valor performed by American troopers all around the LZ that night. Greek, damn near shitting his britches, sees Chuck in his white underwear with 45-pistol in hand running from gun to gun, rallying the soldiers on them to repel the sappers trying to blow them up.

Fearing a larger follow up attack in the dawning light, Lt Kalergis starts adjusting fire on the tree line from four artillery batteries. (Two 105MM and two 155MM) He is not certain the NVA are massed there preparing to attack, however he knows they easily might be as it is their practice to commence assaults at “First Light”. As the light begins to increase, over the next several hours, Greek adjusts over 2,000 artillery rounds (50 tons of High Explosives) continuously into the edge of the jungle. He starts at the tree line and then moves the rounds in continuous fire along possible routes of retreat. *“I don’t know if those fuckers are out there in that tree line or not, but if they are, they are in a world of fucking hurt.”*

Continuous Fire ... <https://youtu.be/v94qdpJqK9w>

****He would find out decades later that indeed, they were there, preparing to launch a mass attack on LZ Colt.***

The Attack/Cpt. Trangs’ View

Simultaneously, Cpt Trang is crouching in the darkness of a tree line just outside LZ Colt watching as the 17th Mortar Company starts its barrage. They are good and almost immediately begin getting direct hits on their targets in the center of the LZ. Very quickly, too quickly it seemed, the American artillery is returning fire on the mortar position. Soon his mortars are silent.

He did not know if they were out of action, but he could not communicate with them and they had ceased firing earlier than expected. Now the cascading artillery rounds are moving from his Mortars location to the tree line, where three companies of NVA soldiers lie poised for a “first light” attack.

Fortunately for the defenders of Colt, an additional company of NVA soldiers and their commander which had been planned to attack simultaneously from the opposite side of the LZ has been prevented from getting into position on the previous afternoon by a 1st/9th “Hunter-Killer” team. These were probably the same helicopters that Greek had spoken with on the radio and later reported to LTC Wickham. Major Tran still has hundreds of soldiers poised to attack and he is determined to go through with it. Suddenly the intensity of the artillery fire dramatically increases as Lt Kalergis’ request for “continuous fire” starts impacting.

Thousands of artillery rounds start exploding accurately and continuously, almost as if the Greek knew exactly where the enemy is. It didn’t matter that Greek was lucky with his location of the target, the effect of tons of continuous high explosives landing on them was unimaginable. These were not small rounds like the 60 MM mortars; this was the combined, massive firepower of Division Artillery steel from two 105 MM and two-155 MM howitzer batteries. Some had VT (radar) fuses that exploded 20 meters above the enemy with huge red flashes and acrid black smoke to rain jagged, sharp, and deadly shrapnel down on the NVA soldiers.

Just as the NVA have surprised the defenders of LZ Colt, now they are caught by surprise by the responsive and accurate massed fire from the First Cavalry Division Artillery. They had not anticipated how much or how fast the divisions’ artillery would be able to return devastating fire right on top of them! Now Major Tran is on the radio ordering the attack, but Cpt Trang and the assembled attack force are no longer thinking about attacking.

They are desperately withdrawing to escape the 50 tons of steel from thousands of rounds of artillery that rapidly and continuously cascade down on them over the next hour. As they try to withdraw, Greek with good intuition, continues adjusting fire to follow their retreat through the jungle. The artillery fire accompanies their panicked withdrawal, inflicting more and more casualties. Major Tran should have listened to Cpt. Trang! He had gravely underestimated the effectiveness and speed of the First Cavalry Division Artillery massed fire power. His soldiers are paying dearly for Major Trans' element of surprise. Surprise is turning out to be a "Double Edged Sword" and LZ Colt, despite some key casualties, is for the moment saved.

Later

Later, with the sun higher in the sky and the replacements for the dead and wounded 5th of the 7th command and complete staff arriving, Cpt. Trang is retreating to the very well-hidden, mountainous, jungle location of the 2nd NVA Division headquarters. He is licking his wounds thinking, *"This is not over! We will learn from it, and TET is not far off."* Trang is correct in his thinking; during the TET offensive less than 2 months later, the same First Cavalry tacticians, instrumental in the ill advised LZ Colt plan, will make a similar mistake with another battalion, (***The Lost Battalion of TET***) committing them to battle before adequate artillery and equipment support is available. LT Kalergis is finishing up his firing on the escape routes, when CPT John Seymour, the new LNO, approaches just as he is calling "End of Mission." He says incredulously, "What the hell happened here?"

He is an excellent officer, played football for West Point and would prove to be a superb and brave Liaison Officer for the many months of fierce fighting to come.

**** “Gray Horse Troopers ... Forever Soldiers” by Charlie Baker, accurately describes the battle on Colt and many other actions of the First Cavalry Division.***

*****Another fascinating book about the action at that time ... “The Lost Battalion of TET”, is eloquently and accurately described by LTC (Ret.) Charles Krohn***

Lt Kalergis’ father, then Brigadier General James G. Kalergis, also in Vietnam commanding the First Field Force Artillery in Na Trang, visits the Brigade Headquarters the next day to be briefed on the battle. He hears a briefer conjecturing that some of the sappers may have come through a tunnel. There is a hole in the ground near the FDC that could have been a tunnel entrance, but Greek and his crew observed no sappers coming from it. Nobody entered it after the attack to see if it extended the 1,000 meters needed to the edge of the jungle or wherever the other end of the tunnel might have been. If they had come from that hole in the ground, they would have hit the Greeks’ FDC first before continuing across the LZ to the 5th of the 7th TOC. For some reason, it did not seem to be a priority to really check it out further after the attack.

It is Greeks’ strong opinion that the attackers came through the wire on the opposite side of the LZ to hit the Battalion TOC, Personnel and Commanders’ tent first and then continued several hundred feet more across the LZ, when Greeks’ RTO had said, ... “They are speaking Vietnamese outside the tent!” to continue their attack on Charlie Batteries guns and FDC. Of course, neither he nor anyone else knows for sure, but nobody reported “first hand” seeing enemy soldiers come out of that hole in the ground.

Greek and his crew were the closest to the alleged tunnel entrance and he thinks it is highly improbable and “wishful guessing” on the part of the staff briefers that the tunnel was used to gain access as opposed to coming through the wire. When the briefing is over, although Lt Kalergis did not have the detailed enemy information that he discovered decades later, he thought the briefing on the attack sounded somewhat different than what he had experienced on the ground. Once again, the “Elephant Grass” did not look the same on the maps as on the frigging ground. Greek told his father, “Dad that is not exactly how it went down.” He replies, “I know son.” Greek thinks, *“He must be proud, but he didn’t say so”*

After action notes from LTC (ret) George Kalergis

A decade later, Greek’s Dad now a Lt. General, calls him and asks, “Do you remember LTC Wickham from Vietnam?” Greek replies, “Of course.” His dad tells him, “Well, he was just awarded his 4th star and has been promoted to Chief of Staff of the entire Army.” Wow! Greek thinks, *“I wonder if General Wickham remembers our meeting on Colt and what he may have instructed be done to build up Colts defense as a result of our conversation.”* Perhaps nothing more could have been done, but he was keenly interested in hearing that from the General.

Several years later, in 1984, Greek now LTC Kalergis, is waiting to retire from his final assignment as the 7th Division Artillery, Operations Officer and has an opportunity to find out. General Wickham visits Ft Ord, California and gives a talk to the assembled division officers. After listening to the Generals’ talk, LTC Kalergis found his aide, telling him, “I was on LZ Colt with the General and would like to meet with him.” General Wickham declined. Googling Wickham’s description of the attack online many decades later, his recall of the attack differs significantly from Greek’s. In particular, he claims credit for calling and continuing the artillery expressing disappointment that he was only awarded a Silver Star instead of the DSC he had hoped for.

His recall very possibly was affected by the wounds he immediately suffered while he slept. His wounds were so severe, he was later given “last rites” by the Chaplain.

<http://www.cav57.org/LZ%20Colt.htm>

Greek learns decades later that others may have claimed credit for calling and adjusting the artillery that night. Just to set the record straight, as my Bronze Star awarded for the battle, and officers’ OER attest, I was the only one speaking with the battalion FDC that morning. Except for LTC Wickhams’ mistaken lone call to request fire directly on the LZ, which I aborted, I called for and adjusted every one of the 2,000+ artillery rounds fired in defense of LZ Colt.

Greek did not find out the final chapter of the LZ Colt story until over forty years later when he met and received information from retired General Howard Prince. He was the only 5th of the 7th Headquarters officer other than Wickham, who survived the attack on Colt. He is told that on the morning of the attack, just moments before the mortars started landing, Prince had awoken early and gone outside the tent to take the luckiest “leak” of his life. He is wounded by shrapnel, but, survived his wounds. To my incredulous ears, he informs me almost fifty years later, that documents were recovered from Major Tran when he was killed by a 1st of the 9th “Red” hunter-killer team several days after the attack. They found on his possession the complete plan and after-action report for the attack on LZ Colt. The attack plan found on Major Tran said nothing about a tunnel. Finding that information decades later has prompted and enabled me to tell this story. It is 100% factual, based on my personal experience and those reports. The names of the NVA officers and unit designations are from those recovered documents. Of course, it is just my “educated guess” what their thoughts and actions may have been before, during, and after the attack.

I am not pointing fingers or blaming anyone in that battle, or the war for their actions or lack of actions. I am just reporting that battle and the Vietnam War as objectively as I can, from my point of view, as I experienced it.

Others can easily have different perspectives because of the frenzy of combat and with the passage of time. I honor and respect all my brothers who fought in that terrible war. In the heat of battle, there will always be mistakes, even from the best of us and we all have our own memories of those events. In combat, many are called upon to make life and death decisions for themselves and others. Mine have not always been right, I made some good as well as some poor decisions. I was lucky, with the results of some of my poor ones as well as the good ones. In combat and life in general, we all make mistakes and we cannot be right all the time. Mistakes incur a much higher cost in combat. We all live with them as best we can.

I have lost track of Chuck Haines, but Ray Shackelford (Shack) and I have stayed in touch and get together occasionally to relive our adventures. I am content with my 20-year Army career, coming in as a “draftee” and progressing from Private E-1 to LTC. I greatly value my relationships with some incredible people that I worked for and that worked for me. I used the “lessons learned” in combat about artillery speed and accuracy for my future training of others for combat.

My Dad never did tell me he was proud of me. Maybe older generations of Greek immigrants just don't do that. I later learned that he did tell one of his close friends that he was very proud of me and his friend passed that on to me at my fathers' funeral in Arlington. I was gratified to hear that, but still missed getting a hug with that information. “Truth in lending”, I was always kind of a square peg in a round hole in the military, especially the peacetime military, and not really cut out to be a typical Army officer. I could never catch up with my father, also an OCS graduate, who went from Pvt E-1 to 3 stars. Thinking back over those days, I am greatly gratified, and humbled to learn decades after the war, that my actions may have played a part in saving some of my Comrades in Arms on LZ Colt.

“GARRYOWEN!”



General Tolson Awards "Greek" A Bronze Star



THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO ALL WHO SHALL SEE THESE PRESENTS, GREETING: THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE PRESIDENT
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AUTHORIZED BY EXECUTIVE ORDER, 24 AUGUST 1962 HAS AWARDED

THE BRONZE STAR MEDAL

(SECOND OAK LEAF CLUSTER) WITH "V" DEVICE
TO
MAJOR (THEN FIRST LIEUTENANT) GEORGE G. KALERGIS, FIELD ARTILLERY
UNITED STATES ARMY

FOR distinguishing himself by heroism in action on 10 October 1967, while serving as executive officer of Battery C, 1st Battalion, 21st Artillery during an enemy attack in the Republic of Vietnam. When his unit came under intense hostile fire, Major Kalergis, disregarding his own safety, exposed himself to the heavy enemy fire as he maintained communications with supporting artillery and higher headquarters. He also effectively directed the adjustment of supporting mortar and illumination artillery fire. His action contributed greatly to the successful repulsion of the hostile assault against the unit's position. Major Kalergis' display of personal bravery and devotion to duty is in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflects great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army.

GIVEN UNDER MY HAND IN THE CITY OF WASHINGTON
THIS 8TH DAY OF MAY 19 80

J. C. Pennington
The Adjutant General



Georgiad C. Alexander Jr.
SECRETARY OF THE ARMY

Plastered with mud in the leech infested rice paddy, he doesn't dare to move his limbs. Crack, crack! bullets skim by—almost cracking his skull wide open. He escapes death over and over by a fraction of an inch. He cannot lift his head; it is too great a burden to shoulder. *"How did they know this was our 'pick-up' location?"* Dead or wounded, most of his team gone, gone, gone in a flash. The prospect of joining them seems inevitable. One foot of paddy dike is all that stands between him and a fusillade of angry lead hornets. Almost out of ammunition he struggles to get even lower, tunneling into the paddy. Gasping for air he inhales some of the slick soup he is lying in. It coats the inside of his mouth with slime as bitter as the war he is trapped in. Legs trembling uncontrollably, he squirms deeper, jolts of adrenaline blazing through him. Stomach churning, he chokes back bile and clings to the ground for dear life, the land slipping through his fingers in his unimaginable hell hole.



Whop, whop, whop, the cacophony of inbound helicopters assaults his ears. Tearing the sky asunder with their giant blades, the air cavalry is coming. With hope cresting the horizon, bugles blare in his desperate mind. Miraculously, rescue is here! **“Rescue!”** ... He repeats it like a prayer from the damned. Time seems to stand still. As he awaits, his limbs won’t respond to his wishes. Finally, flying just above the tree tops, the giant metal war birds come screaming in with cries of revenge. Rockets and machine guns, like cold, one-eyed witches peer down menacingly. As the gunships dive to attack, laser red fingers of death leap from them, here, there, and everywhere to saturate every square foot of the jungle with death. Now he hears the artillery preparation beginning as two hundred-pound artillery projectiles scream in just over his head. Even from one hundred yards away, he feels these “Hippos” strike like giant thunderous feet, to smash him with mammoth blows ... **Boom - Clap!** In the complete chaos, he is concussed from the sheer magnitude of their plundering tread. Their shock waves fiercely drive rain water in sheets across the Rice Paddy that blister his hands and face as if from a raging sand storm. Quaking, the rice paddy seems set on swallowing him, limb by limb, head to toe, while the jungle fills with acrid black smoke and explosive, red flashes. In his panicked daze, the scene becomes a nightmare canvas, a Salvador Dali painting glinting out from its’ frame to meld with his own vulnerable flesh. Razor sharp, jagged pieces of shrapnel, scientifically designed to wreak havoc on soft tissues, saw their way through the air. They attack everything in their path, tearing branches from trees and amputating limbs, they leave a swath of destruction twice the size of a football field.

Finally, a White Phosphorous round sends a brilliant white, glowing, whipped cream cloud towering into the air. As the smoke dissipates into a surreal fog, a pungent Garlic odor from the Phosphorous lingers. It seems as if the ghosts of the bloody and mangled dead are abandoning the battlefield to accompany the smoke, fading up in white whispers of reluctant goodbyes, floating higher and higher up a stairway to the heavens. The white smoke signals the pilots that the artillery preparation has been completed and they swoop in, ejecting hordes of adrenaline fueled, pumped up, cavalry troopers.

Like popcorn jumping wildly from the lid of a popcorn popper, his rescuers leap from their helicopters, firing their rifles into the veil of smoke to attack the enemy who have him pinned to the ground. *"The Viet Cong should all be dead. How could they have survived that fucking barrage of lead and steel?"* Impossible! Despite the explosive carpet of destruction laid on them, the Viet Cong continue to fire at him and the incoming choppers. Like a crouching tiger he tries to become invisible while the angry lead wasps continue to whizz by, just missing his vital parts, until suddenly a white-hot poker, pulled straight from a furnace sears his back. *"Damn, another Purple Heart! Enough already!"*

Helicopters continue discharging truck-loads of troopers. Like the cavalry of old, they charge into the jungle slashing and striking the Viet Cong that have him pinned down. Splashing through the fetid, muddy water, others sprint to where he is lying and manhandle him to a waiting Medivac chopper. There, he is thrown bleeding on the floor, his blood mixing with that of his dead and alive, torn and shredded comrades. The jet turbine screams at full throttle, pushing the helicopters' blades like whirling dervishes, faster, and faster. The helicopter tilts its' nose down, hesitates for a split second, gathers itself for a moment, before rushing urgently forward to gain air speed and climb steeply out of the jungle and speeding swiftly away from the enemy fire.

With wind blowing wildly through the open doors, he looks out from the floor of the helicopter to see the lush, verdant, jungle speeding away below. Its' foliage, transforming now, like a discarded emerald green evening gown being swept away by an angry wind. Dizzy from shock and loss of blood, he watches the battle scene fade in the distance, becoming amoeba-like, less cohesive, a mass of green, scaly jelly with a sinister dark iris shrinking ever smaller until it finally disappears. Now, with every turn of the helicopters' blades, he is closer to survival ... the refuge of the field hospital.

Landing with a thud and shudder, its' rotors slowing and folding downward like the resting wings of a huge bird the helicopter settles back into its' sand bagged nest to quietly recover from its' journey through hell. Medics race to pull him from the now still chopper, trundle him onto a stretcher and rush him into the hospital. As they wheel him into the operating room, he jerks suddenly awake. Sitting up, he is back to the present, sweating profusely in his own room.

He awakens to a gloomy early morning, a dark rain, slate grey as a wolf in the night, pelts a staccato drum beat on the tree tops just outside his room. Going to the window, he solemnly watches the rain drenching the landscape, his mood as gloomy as the weather. Although it is muggy and warm, he shivers, feeling a cold sweat trickle past the old scar on his back. The wind rattles branches that forlornly scrape the window. The storm is summoning him once again, with a voice he hears too often in his dreams. It flings him back to where he is clawing desperately into the rice paddy, just trying to survive.

Lighting flashes momentarily illuminate his Vietnam War medals to make them glow with a white flame on his wall. The storm continues to rage outside the window as well as in his mind. Flashbacks torture him. The sounds and sights of the storm bring him back to the crash of exploding munitions and the crack of bullets. “Greek” as his fellow war fighters once called him, looks disdainfully at the medals. Once or twice, he has thought about chucking them, but he can never quite bring himself to do that. He goes to the sink and looks in the mirror. His ocean colored eyes, once bright and lively, are now dull. They take in a tall, white bearded, still fit veteran of countless combat missions.

He tries not to, but he can’t help himself ... his mind wanders, out past the shadows of the roiling night, and back into that brutal dream place haunted with the shapeless specters of his long dead comrades. Like zombies, the suffering and lost soldiers seem destined to wander forever through clouds of smoke. “*So much useless suffering, fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity!*” He cannot escape the nightmare past of the medals and wonders. “*Are they symbols of valor in a noble cause, or do they merely signify my desperation to survive?*” He had to continue to fight to stay alive. He and his comrades had no choice! In order to survive they must continue hurling unjustified rage and death against an evil and repugnant enemy. An enemy who really was not too unlike himself or his comrades. Hypnotized, looking at the medals—he can’t tear his eyes away. No matter how hard he tries to avoid it, his mind takes him back to vividly recall the night ambush for which he was awarded that Silver Star. It was an action during which two wounded North Vietnamese soldiers had to be shot.

“What shall we do with these wounded”

The Company Commander orders, *“Finish them off!”*

No question about it, their squad could not carry two wounded North Vietnamese back through the dense jungle. A trooper puts bullets into their heads, and they stop writhing and moaning. Now they assume a position of silent rest, limbs akimbo, torsos seeping blood, contents of their minds so much grey matter on the muck of the ground. Later, looking at the photos from their blood-soaked wallets, he sees the faces of their loved ones’ smiling out at him, ... “HIM”, the round-eyed, foreign devil, who had just butchered their sons. He is tortured with remorse for them and momentarily hangs his head—not in shame, but in sober contemplation. In his mind’s eye he sees the sun beating down on the jungle trail, rotting their flesh and bleaching their bones. No matter how long their families waited and prayed, these two teenage patriots, fighting for “freedom”, and the “hearts and minds” of their people for a unified Vietnam were not coming home. Unlike the American invaders, there will be no jet cargo plane to carry them back home.

Americans, *we Americans*, he had to remind himself, stacked our dead heroes in boxes, their bodies so much precious freight. Their arrival home, *our arrival*— to be celebrated in the news, flag draped coffins plastered on the media to encourage more young people to become patriotic fodder. Fodder for a bloody, meat grinder, insatiable, money-making, war machine. Finally, their usefulness done, they are given over to their families for whatever dignity of private mourning and burial they can muster. Soon enough it didn’t matter anymore. He came to realize the dead were just “body count”, a manipulated score that is often reported many times higher than the actual number, turning tens of thousands into millions. Good news! – We are winning. *“A meaningless, deliberately misleading score card promoted by white haired, cold hearted, self-serving politicians and their lackey generals so they can proclaim continuing success and conscript even more patriots to escalate the war.”*



Regardless of how and where dead soldiers are disposed of, the “Freedom Fighters” on both sides are just as tragically, stone, cold, dead. The politicians and generals score cards did not matter to the sorrowing families of the fallen. For them, the game was finished and lost. Their loved ones were dead ... dead, fighting for their respective countries’ liberty, freedom and way of life. Ironically, the patriots on both sides were struggling for the hearts and minds of the same citizens of South Vietnam who desperately wished only for the soldiers of both sides to leave them alone.

The dead soldiers are irretrievably gone, the tragic cost of a war which would eventually take the lives of tens of thousands of American soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese. His priority rapidly became not to win, but just to stay alive and not to be sent home in a flag draped box. After seeing many of his comrades lying dead and still, boots sticking stiffly from under their ponchos, he became less sympathetic. He just refused to think about it, a defense mechanism, to ward off the continuous horror of a meaningless, nightmare war. He could not come to grips with it—it was mind numbing insanity, utterly confusing.

“Something must be terribly wrong with us and the world?” He often wonders, *“If in some future day I make it back to the ‘world’ I knew as an innocent young man, will I be able to pick up life where I had left it? Could the war be left behind? Will the anger and madness return with him?”* He has long ago learned, the answer is a tragic and debilitating - **“YES”**—the unthinkable, unimaginable, horror of the Vietnam War, continues to haunt and cripple him and thousands of others. Once young and vibrant people, now appallingly damaged and damned to suffer for the remainder of their lives. Much older now, many continue to struggle in vain to cope with the debilitating and maddening mental and physical trauma. We desperately use drugs, alcohol and even suicide to remove the pain. These strategies don’t work too well, and many will suffer for the rest of their lives.

“When will we ever learn?”



Newly arrived in Vietnam I am scared, but excited to be heading out on my first combat mission. As I step up on the skid of the chopper to jump aboard, I see two large "Skull & Crossbones" with the inscription, "***The Grim Reaper***" painted on each side of the fuselage. "*It looks like a giant, sleeping, bird of prey.*" I think to myself. The B Model, UH-1 Helicopter Gun Ship I am boarding is a flying arsenal. On the nose is a deadly 40MM automatic grenade launcher. Round pods of sixteen, 2.75MM rockets are mounted on either side while the door gunner and I sit in the doorways each manning an M-60 7.62 MM machine gun.

The pilot starts up the powerful jet turbine engine with a loud whine that progressively builds in volume and pitch as the giant blade spins faster. The loud, chopping sound cycles faster as the pilot changes pitch in preparation to take off.

<https://www.facebook.com/LibertyWarBird/videos/374728040020239/>



Red Team ... Huey Gunship



Blue Team Insertion

The sleeping bird is awake now and ready to go hunting. Sitting with great anticipation on the canvas seat, I look out the open door as we launch into the air from the steep hill top. Diving steeply over the edge to pick up air speed, the pilot pulls the nose up and we head swiftly into the An-Lao Valley to search out and destroy the Viet Cong.

At my feet is a large wooden box filled with many rounds of 7.62 MM ammunition. The lethal M-60 machine gun hanging from a "Bungee Cord" in front of me is ready for the hunt. I have never fired an M-60 before, in fact, this is the first M-60 I have ever seen. The other door gunner quickly shows me how to operate it. I wonder how many VC have been on the receiving end of its' death dealing 600, 7.62 MM rounds per minute. There is a good chance I will be firing that M-60 at the VC today and they will be shooting at me. I think, *"This is like a roller coaster chugging up the first hill, getting ready to plunge wildly down the other side."* It is a roller coaster ride on steroids and my heart is trying to jump out of my chest as we fly deeper into the valley. *"Holy shit"*, I think with a touch of panic, *"I have never even been on a helicopter gun ship before and here I am, flying into combat on one, with a frigging machine gun I have never fired."*

I knew I should have studied harder in college. It seems like just yesterday I was opening the letter from Uncle Sam telling me to report to basic training at Fort Gordon, Georgia. The next thing I knew, I had volunteered for Officer Candidate School at Ft Sill, Oklahoma and after six grueling months, graduated as 2nd Lieutenant George Kalergis, a commissioned officer in the field artillery. Now, just a few months later, it's Jan. 1967, the sun is just going down and I'm sitting in a GP Medium Tent on LZ Pony.

LZ Pony is a First Cavalry Division fire base perched on the flat top of a high hill overlooking the Bong Song Plain and An-Lao Valley. Outside I hear the almost constant **"BOOMING"** of artillery firing in support of the search and destroy missions being conducted by the maneuver units in the surrounding jungles and rice paddies of the Vietnam Central Highlands. "What will it be like out there?" I wonder. There is a big situation map up front with pins and markers to show friendly and enemy locations. The air is hot and dusty with the distinctive smell of warm canvas pervading the interior of the tent. Twenty helicopter pilots and I sit waiting for LTC A. T. Pumphrey, the 1st of the 9th Armed Helicopter Squadron Commander, to begin his evening briefing. We stand up as he enters the tent. "At ease men," he says as he picks up a pointer and goes to the map.

He is fit, confident, and a great leader. If they made a Top Gun movie for helicopter gunship pilots, he would have been cast in the lead role without hesitation. Any pilot that flew with the 1st of the 9th fit that mold, at least in their minds. He starts the evening briefing by introducing me to the other officers. They are all crack pilots, the best of the best, superbly trained and skilled to fly and fire the multiple weapon systems of their lethal war birds. Before the war is over, their 88 helicopters will account for more than half the enemy killed in the entire 1st Cavalry Division. Four of their pilots will receive, "The Medal of Honor", before the war is over. He says, "This is our new forward observer, Lt Kalergis. Charlie troop, he will be flying with you tomorrow and will take the place of a door gunner with one of your red teams. He will be available to call in artillery and request air strikes. Welcome to Nam Kalergis, do you have your radio and maps ready for tomorrow?" "Yes sir, I'm ready." "Charlie, you are to do a first light recon in the central section of the An-Lao Valley. As you know, the entire valley is a 'Free Fire Zone'. All the villagers have been evacuated and there has been a lot of enemy movement recently here", Pumphrey points to the map.

I did not know it, but the VC would also have quite a welcome for me. My first week would soon prove to be a dangerous one. I had fired only three artillery “practice missions” from a folding stool, six months previously at Ft Sill. I had rehearsed in my tent much of the evening before, calling in practice missions, one after the other. I thought I had the procedure down pretty good. I hoped to hell I did. It is perfect flying weather as we fly just above tree top level into the free fire zone of the An-Lao Valley. My helicopter is the “chase ship” of the Hunter-Killer red team, as we fly closely behind and above the lead helicopter. The low-level flight up the valley is exhilarating. The helicopter blades make their signature, steady, chop, chop, chopping sound and if my hair had still been long it would have been whipping from the wind blowing through the open doors. I think, “*man what a great ride.*”

Looking down, I marvel at how beautiful and peaceful the deserted jungle valley, like an emerald carpet speeding by below appears. Towering high above us on both sides are rugged mountains covered with lush, green, jungle. We are flying below and between them, a brilliant bright blue sky high above, with a crystal-clear river winding lazily down the center of the valley. We follow it, flying so low that I can make out fish in the water. “*What kind are they*”, I wonder?

The valley looks as if it might still have inhabitants that had missed the evacuation. The rice paddies still look somewhat neat and cultivated. They are terraced geometrically at successive heights, right up to the edge of the mountains to take advantage of every square inch of possible terrain to grow food. That food will now be denied the enemy. There are many deserted and burned out villages. They are scattered on small rises located between the rice paddies on the valley floor. We are low enough for me to see the thatched roof construction of the few huts that have not been destroyed. We fly over them, searching uneventfully for an hour. It was a great ride, a beautiful valley, but it would not be peaceful for long.



We make a sharp turn at a curve in the valley and head up a large ravine going steeply up the side of the mountain, when right below us, we spot a squad of VC soldiers running in a line up a jungle trail towards the cover of the dense vegetation. The pilot says, "Fighter red, rolling in hot!". The gunship noses up like a bird of prey preparing to strike and dives rapidly toward the fleeing VC. As a giant hawk spitting death from its' beak, it fires rapid streams of 40MM grenades up the trail. The VC, running desperately, look back over their shoulders at the exploding grenades that follow them up the trail. The explosions rapidly catch up with them and several go to the ground violently as if struck down by a giant invisible hand. I can see blood where they have been hit. The other door gunner is firing his machine gun at them, so I do the same. To my surprise the pilot hollers at me over the intercom, "Kalergis, don't fire. There are some friendly soldiers close by on the ground. You don't have enough experience firing the machine gun from the air yet."

"No shit, it's the first time I ever fired a frigging machine gun anywhere."

"I'll tell you when to fire Kalergis. Okay, you got it?"

"Okay, I GOT IT!" A short time later, further up the valley with my heart trying to pound out of my chest again, we spot a middle-aged man in khaki shorts working alone in a dry rice paddy outside a small village. The village appears otherwise deserted, but he seems nervous and looks up frequently.

I am hyper alert and no longer admiring the scenery. I had been scared on our previous gun run, but not as terrified as I had anticipated. I had never had such an adrenalin rush and events had become crystal clear, almost as if in slow-motion. The lead chopper now sweeps in, landing near the man in the rice paddy. I watch as their door gunner jumps out with his pistol and runs to take him prisoner. We will bring him back for interrogation. Suddenly, the dirt starts jumping up all around the chopper. At first, I don't realize what is happening. I can't hear any weapons firing over the noise of the helicopter. *"Why the hell is the dirt jumping up all around the helicopter on the ground?"* I quickly realize there are Viet Cong firing automatic weapons at the helicopter from just inside the village. I see the door gunner fall face down in the rice paddy and lie motionless. I am sure he is hit.

The chopper on the ground leaps into the air, like a giant bird clawing for altitude, leaving their door gunner face down, alone in the paddy. My pilot says urgently over the intercom, "Fighter Red, rolling in hot!" In we go for a rocket run. It is mass confusion, the rockets fired like giant 4th of July Roman Candles launching from just underneath me. Red sparks fly wildly around the open door, the other door gunner is firing his machine gun, but the pilot had told me not to fire mine just a few minutes previously. The pilot yells at me on the intercom, "Why aren't you shooting?"

"You just told me not to," I said. He replied, **"Shoot Goddamnit!"**

"What the hell, I wish he would make up his fucking mind", I mutter. Now, right over the village, I start firing my machine gun. As we make a sharp left turn for another rocket run, **"WHAM!"**, something hits the helicopter! Looking down, I see a jagged hole where a bullet has pierced the floor of the helicopter right by my boot and then exited close to my head. I felt like someone had just punched me in the head, really, **really-hard**! The concussion leaves me dazed for a moment. After several more gun runs, the "blue team" reaction force arrives and air assaults into the rice paddy. To my great relief, the "dead" door gunner comes to life, jumps up from the rice paddy and runs to meet them. He has been "playing dead" the entire time and is rescued unscathed. *"I bet he'll need to change his britches when he gets back!"*

Finally, the gun ships are running low on ammunition and the pilot says, "Kalergis, put some artillery on the village." I am already too pumped with adrenalin to be scared, never mind nervous. *"Shit, this is my first combat mission."* I had been frantically reviewing the procedures the night before and evidently, I was a quick learner. I put 200 rounds of 105MM artillery right on the edge of the village where the fire had come from. Seeing the bright red, incandescent flashes and black puffs of smoke inundating the village from hundreds of rounds of high explosive is unreal. It was more artillery than I had ever adjusted. Hell, it was more artillery than I had ever seen. I feel pretty darn pleased with myself as I manage to adjust quickly on the bunker where the fire had been coming from. I even remember to fire some "fuse delay". Fuse delay rounds have a split-second delay in detonation that enables them to penetrate the overhead protection of bunkers before exploding inside. We would later learn that had been very effective. We are running low on fuel and the enemy seems to have disappeared, so the blues are withdrawn, and we all head back to the base.

That evening, LTC Pumphrey describes his plan to return to the village in the morning. He starts the briefing by saying, "Good job with the artillery today Kalergis; I think our new forward observer is going to be a good one." He points at the map saying, "Kalergis, tomorrow morning, I want you to fire an artillery preparation of 500 rounds on the village. When that is complete, we will insert the blue team to discover whatever intelligence may have been left." Nobody thought the VC would be foolish enough to remain, but the commander was not about to take any chances. "Yes Sir, I will arrange for that," I replied. *"This is like a dream, but I'm feeling pretty good about myself."*

That night I lie on my cot thinking about the people I may have killed that day, probing my mind, like you might probe a new dentist filling with your tongue. I could not find much emotion. It seemed like a movie I had seen, or as if I was a character in a play. The reality that I had probably killed someone and damn near been killed myself just would not sink in. As I drift off into an exhausted sleep I wonder, *"What will it be like tomorrow? Am I going to survive a year of this? I miss home, my family and the comfortable reality I left behind."*

The next day, I jump on board a "white team", two-man, H-13 helicopter with a plexiglass "bubble" cockpit. (Like on Mash) The pilot, a crew cut captain who also looks and acts like he came from the set of "Top Gun" greets me. "Ready to blow up that village Kalergis," he asks? "Let's do it," I reply.

The H-13 has no organic weapons, so I am carrying my M-16 rifle and some extra magazines of ammunition. We head up the valley to shoot my second combat fire mission. The valley still looks serene, peaceful and beautiful, but now I know better. When I have completed the artillery preparation, the blue platoon will make their combat assault into the village to gather any intelligence that may remain. We fly directly to the village and I start firing. There doesn't seem to be any enemy, but I keep up a good barrage of artillery anyway. Hearing the loud "crunching" sounds of the explosions and seeing the mushroom bursts of black smoke and bright red incandescent bursts of flame from several hundred rounds of artillery was damn exciting. Once again, it was more artillery, by far, than I had ever seen. Finally, the artillery battery radios me, "We're running low on ammunition. Unless you have a 'live' target, we have to stop firing." Never having done this before, I had neglected to warn them that we would need more ammunition than usual, for a "Prep" that morning.

We can see the blues lift ships and supporting gun-ships flying up the valley for the combat assault and my pilot tells me, "End the mission Kalergis. Let's go down and see what your artillery did." I was a passenger, I had no choice. Down we go to telephone pole height. Suddenly, I see a VC soldier with a rifle running for a spider hole. The captain says, "SHOOT HIM!" I had an M-16 rifle in my lap. On automatic, I shoot at him and see my tracers follow him into his hole. "I think I got him," I say. As I am trying to reload, another VC jumps up and fires a burst of automatic fire from his AK-47 point-blank into the H-13 cockpit. Shattered plexiglass and blood fly around the cockpit. I have blood on my arms, but I'm not sure whose it is. I am stunned and confused. Looking over I see the pilot bleeding from the neck, blood running down the front of his uniform. It sounded like he was trying to ask, "How bad is it?" I couldn't tell exactly where it was coming from, but there was blood on the front of his uniform, and he did not sound good. "Damn captain! Do you feel dizzy? Are you are going to black out?"

"No, I don't think so; I think I'm okay."

He did not sound okay, but he seemed to have the helicopter under control, so I call the artillery back and urgently say, "Fire Mission", grid 231 748 automatic weapons firing, direction gun target line, adjust fire OVER!" They had been reluctant to fire more just a few minutes previously and ask, "Is this a live target?"

“Hell yes, we’ve been hit, and my frigging pilot is bleeding. Is that ‘live’ enough for you?” The artillery battery now has the live target they want. They repeat the fire mission back and quickly start shooting again. I didn’t have time to be scared, but my knee is jumping up and down and will not frigging stop. I am pumped so full of adrenalin I can barely breathe. I still have time to mutter to myself, “Shit, so far so good thinking, *“At least I remembered how to call the fire mission in.”* We stay over the village for thirty more minutes firing 500 more rounds of artillery. I keep asking, “Captain, are you feeling dizzy?” Finally, he replies, “Okay Kalergis, I’m getting a little weak.” His voice sounds strange and I can barely understand what he is saying. Greek thinks, *“Shit, I cannot fly this thing,”* and tells him, “We better head back”, to which he reluctantly agrees. *“The 1st of the 9th pilots really are frigging, crazy-brave mother fuckers!”*

As soon as I fire the last round of artillery, the blue team sweeps in for their planned assault. They meet little resistance and soon find there is a VC “sapper platoon” in the village commanded by a woman major. One of the “fuse delay” rounds has scored a direct hit on her bunker to penetrate their overhead cover and had exploded inside, killing them all. The secondary explosions we had seen were from caches of stored dynamite. *“Not bad for my second combat fire mission”*, I think. With the pilot still bleeding, we urgently start back. For the entire trip, I anxiously keep asking, “How do you feel?” Sometimes he would answer and sometimes he would not. He had a grim look on his face as he concentrated on keeping the damaged helicopter flying. Finally, he manages to touch down back at LZ Pony. “Damn good landing sir.”, I say with relief, as the medics hurry him off. “Good job Kalergis,” I hear him try to say. I learn later, that he passed out a short time later. There was glass from the shattered cockpit in his throat and vocal cords and he was rushed to the hospital. He recovered and returned to fly again.

As I walk from the landing strip, I pass a helicopter that has just landed. To my surprise I hear somebody call my name. Looking over, I see a couple of my former officer candidate classmates just arriving in country. Disembarking from their helicopter, they stare in amazement at my blood splattered uniform exclaiming, “George, what the hell happened?” I answer in what I hope is a calm voice, “Not much fellas, just another day in Nam.”



Suddenly, the present reality of day to day life is shattered by the homemade bomb as it blows up with horrible, unexpected noise, and efficiency. People are screaming as body parts and blood litter the ground. It is an unexpected hell! Seven people dead, scores injured and when the dust settles there are lots and lots of angry people. The perpetrators are angry that their religion is insulted. The survivors are angry at the violent, callousness of the act. How can anyone behave in such an inhuman way?

The press report on the chaos, interviewing those injured and the families of those killed. It is dramatic news and the trauma suffered by the victims and their families is graphically and intimately shared in the press, internet and all over the social media for weeks. It is the ultimate "Reality Show"; big news, followed by a massive, horrified and angry audience. There follow weeks of minute by minute reporting of the chase for the "bad guys". Finally, the "good guys" heroics result in the perpetrators being found. Justice is done, and the press and public settle back into their normal routines.

All that remains is the endless media discussion, predictions of more incidents and the staging of the congratulatory ceremonies for those claiming credit for the success of our side. As someone once said, "Success has many fathers, failure is an orphan!" The scorecard is balanced for the moment, with the anger appeased and justice satisfied.



Booby Trap

It is just another day in Nam, a daily reality of a cat & mouse game with an elusive and dangerous enemy. We pursue them daily on "Search & Destroy" missions. We are there to kill North Vietnamese and all those sympathetic to their cause. According to the President of the United States, we are also there to win the "hearts and minds" of the people. LT. Patrakis and his radio man joke that it was another day of "Search & Evade".

In our own hearts, we really are not looking forward to destroying anybody or the chance of being destroyed ourselves. At least, that is the case for those of us still retaining some semblance of sanity. Suddenly, the present reality of day to day life is shattered by the homemade bomb as it blows up with horrible, unexpected noise and efficiency! People are screaming, body parts and blood litter the ground. It is an unexpected hell. Seven are dead and scores injured.

We are shocked and scared, but not particularly angry. Fortunately, we are able to kill two of the perpetrators who make the mistake of lingering near the scene. It is not big news, it happens often. It is just another day out of the thousands spent in a war to preserve the peace of the world and protect our loved ones by tracking the enemy down on their own turf. It is better to kill them here than to do it in our home town. There would be no weeks of media reporting the tragedy or speculating on why they did it. We are at war!

We make our daily report to higher headquarters. "We have seven 'friendly' killed and 12 wounded." Fortunately, we are also able to report 20 enemy killed and 40 wounded. We have emerged victorious once again in our pursuit of freedom. Funny how whomever keeps the score always wins. Even though zeroes were sometimes misplaced in the chaos of war reporting, our reports tell the press and leadership back at home that we are inching closer to the goal of winning the hearts and minds, unifying the Vietnamese people and returning their country to peace and prosperity.

We are just doing our jobs, what our government has ordered us to do. We are not angry at the North Vietnamese. They have done nothing to harm us, our families, or anybody else in the USA. However, the North Vietnamese (and many of the South Vietnamese) are damn angry with us. It does not take much imagination to see why they envisioned themselves as patriots, fighting against foreign "Round Eyed" intruders from half way around the world. Soldiers who have invaded their country, shooting their livestock and burning their villages? Some of the more battle weary among us would joke, "Fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity!" Many of us are becoming very angry with mans' inhumanity to man that is being forced upon us by the senior officers and politicians from their safe and comfortable desks in the rear area base camps and Washington DC, but we were not particularly angry with North Vietnam.

Arriving back at base camp, some general flies in to pass out "impact awards" for our bravery and service to country. Those who were no longer able to receive them personally, had the awards delivered to their families at their stateside homes. The grieving families are notified by a black sedan pulling up to their homes in the USA with a young captain or lieutenant carrying a black briefcase filled with their awards and the bad news. He would tell them, "Your son or daughter died "fighting for freedom". Many of the families did not buy into the "fighting for freedom" propaganda.

They were angry that their loved ones were dead or injured in a war with no visible purpose or end in sight. They were angry at our elected leaders who had put so many, young people in harms' way.

The enemy dead who were at least sure about what they were fighting for, are unceremoniously left to rot in the jungle. Their families will wait and pray years for word of their fate and may never find out what has happened to them. In the USA, there is no indignant outrage in the media about mans' inhumanity to man through an act of terrorism. The word terrorism wasn't even mentioned. It was just a war, a "conflict". The whole incident was not particularly newsworthy, to be reported throughout the United States and followed by a fascinated public. It was just a routine statistic, not an act of terror. **It was just another day in Nam.**



Climbing Down The Mountain

Evil has found a foothold in the souls of the warriors doing battle here in South Vietnam. We don't really know why we fight. It is just that we seem to have no choice as we struggle and suffer in an unrelenting effort to destroy each other. It is as if Satan has arranged a stage for us to perform on here in the jungle. I am nearing the limit of my physical and mental endurance, feeling less human every day, as if trapped in a nightmare.

I disliked bullies when I was in school and we were obviously the bullies here. Bullies with helicopters, artillery and jets destroying villages and livestock to force Vietnamese villagers from their life long homes in the An-Lao Valley. I think in moments of clarity, that are coming less often now, *"I have lost touch with the person I once was. What is wrong with me and the others that we continue to accept the insanity of staggering down this jungle trail looking for people to kill?"* People who have done us no harm and represent no threat to us back home in the USA. *"Why do we continue to blindly follow orders in the guise of freedom fighters? Have I gone to sleep to awaken in hell?"* I want nothing more to do with this senseless destruction and killing.

It is as if I have lost the power of self will to be controlled by delusional, self-serving, power driven madmen from their air- conditioned offices back in the Pentagon and Washington DC. Perhaps Satan had an office there as well. What could I do? I saw no choice but to continue following my orders; there was nowhere to run. I was here now, with no way home except to serve out my year in hell.

Each combat infantryman in the hundred-man company is on their last legs. We continue with will power alone. Sweating like pigs in the same uniforms for weeks with no water to wash, we are malodorous as long neglected gym lockers. I am so tired that I move as if in a daze. Vines reach out from the jungle onto the steep, narrow trail and trip me. I struggle to get up, but my legs are cramping and will not do my bidding. The soldier in front of me carrying the fifty-pound mortar base plate stumbles into me and drops it. I watch it careening wildly down the mountain, running exhausted soldiers off the trail like bowling pins. When it finally comes to a halt it becomes quiet again. In the nearly impenetrable vegetation of the Vietnam Central Highlands, the sunlight and jungle sounds are muted.

We continue to forge ahead through the ominous and hushed gloom. My nerves are on edge and I am alert to every sound. The occasional harsh screech of a bird disturbed by our passing, makes my heart skip a beat from time to time. We have learned that when the jungle went deathly quiet, it was time to be even more alert, as if our lives depended on it. The constant misery, expectation of danger and discomfort is more debilitating to our morale than the actual, but infrequent fire fights with the Viet Cong. This morning, I had shaken a scorpion the size of a small lobster from my boot and while eating my C-Rations, a six-inch leech slithered under my shirt and fastened its' sucker mouth, to my back.

The mosquitoes are everywhere, big as B-52s and Harris is laying stone cold dead, zipped up in a dark green body bag, waiting to be shipped home early. The death of our point man cloaks us with a grievous pall, sapping our will and purpose as a vampire drains the life from its victim. The jungle became deathly still just moments before the rifle crack. Standing next to him, I hear him grunt as the bullet hits, like the wind has been knocked out of him. Staggering into me, he looks desperately into my eyes for just a moment. I think he is going to speak, when a torrent of blood gushes from his mouth and he dies in my arms.

I was still in shock. Harris was 22 with just seventeen days remaining before he would go back to the “world”, back to his wife cooking breakfast in their sunny kitchen, birds singing in the back yard, and a three-month old son he has never seen. This was to be his last mission before starting his “out processing” to go home. *“What are we fighting for half way around the world that could justify this kind of daily horrific tragedy?”* Harris is going home early now, in the cold, dark cargo hold of a commercial jet, a statistic in the noble fight to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. Hundreds of young men, who once had their whole lives ahead of them, are thrown into the dark metal belly of the plane, stacked on top of each other like so much baggage. Their loved ones waiting at home in the depths of despair, wailing and sobbing, “Why, why our boy?”

It was summer of 1967 and back home college students are demonstrating and protest marches growing. Tragically, they are not growing quickly enough to keep thousands more young people from making that terrible journey home, wrapped tightly in plastic body bags to avoid the smell of decay, so much discarded garbage. I think to myself, *“If the politicians had to accompany those bodies back to their families, they might join the protesters. Fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity.”* It seems a lifetime, but it was only a year ago, when my dismal academic performance and a draft notice ended my carefree college days early. After a short time as a private, I figure it will be better to serve as an officer and volunteer for Officer Candidate School. Just a few months after graduating as a 2nd lieutenant, I now find myself fighting a war I don’t understand, adjusting artillery fire on the Viet Cong who are trying to shoot my ass. I had believed in and trusted our older and wiser political, religious and military leaders and bought into the “Domino Theory”. I was willing to join the noble battle to stop the spread of Communism, win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people and to fight for “God, Freedom, and the American way”.

Now, after five months in the jungle and rice paddies, I have lost my humanity, faith in our leaders and my soul seemed in danger. The kind and compassionate young man I once was, has been transformed to a callous, dark, and combat-hardened, forward observer. One thing for sure however, I was damn good at raining death on the enemy when the commander, Captain Rogers asked for it! I could no longer remember how many Vietnamese I had killed, but it was a soul sickening, hell of a lot. At first, killing people was traumatic and kept me up at night.

Now, the war has become like a movie or a play I am watching. I am numb, an outside observer, not responsible for the carnage. "The world is but a stage and we actors upon it," well described my current view of the world. I could not quite remember why I had cried in my sleep and been so horrified by the violence and killing, when I first arrived. Once, when we were on "Search and Destroy" missions up and down the entire length of the An-Lao Valley free fire zone, I had watched Vietnamese villagers being forced from their life-long homes. I knew they regarded us as "round eye", foreign speaking invaders. It became obvious to me then, that we were not fighting for their freedom or ours. We didn't have a prayer in hell of winning any hearts and minds. I think, *"If there is a God, he has abandoned us all like the inmates at Auschwitz."* I was painfully disillusioned, a lost soul even, but I had become damn good at bringing hellfire on any Vietnamese I was asked to kill, and I didn't know how to stop. Satan chuckled.

With my legs still trying to cramp with every step, drenched in sweat, and bone wrenchingly tired, I walk next to Captain Rogers at the center of the company. We both have welts on our arms and faces from the "Wait a Minute" bushes that constantly grab at us from the jungle. Rogers, a good ol boy from Texas, is 29, tall and crew cut. His father and grandfather were Texas A & M alumni. His dream from childhood was to be an army officer like them. A dedicated and loyal career soldier, even he is having misgivings about the conduct of the war.

"Hey, Lt. Patrakis, come look at this," the new point man, PFC Garret calls back to me. Garret, a young man from Idaho, replaced Harris yesterday. He loved hunting deer and rabbits on the family farm and with his sandy hair and freckled face he looked younger than his 19 years. He squints nervously trying to look through the vegetation for anything suspicious. He says, "These damn ol deer in Nam shoot back, I don't think I'm gonna do much more hunting when I get back home." I go over to look where he is gesturing. Peering cautiously out an opening in the trail, I make out a dozen figures moving about in the rice paddy below. It is hard to tell who they are or what they are doing, but I had learned the hard way to be suspicious of everything. Now, I was even more so. The valley has been declared a "free fire zone", and all the civilians are supposed to have been evacuated. Anyone remaining is the enemy to be killed.

Our battalion commander, a not very tall, slim 35-year old graduate of West Point, has ambition far greater than his height. He has risen through the ranks as fast as humanly possible.

His goal is to be the next four-star general, chief of staff of the entire army. In a different life, his name might have been Napoleon. He is determined to report more enemy bodies than his competition. Enemy dead line the pathway to his goal and nothing would stand in the way of his ambition. His expression was deadly serious as he briefed us. Forcefully slapping his pointer to the An-Lao valley on the map, he had emphatically ordered Captain Rogers, "Anything in the valley the enemy can use must be destroyed. Kill whoever is left, no questions asked."

"Hey, Captain Rogers," I say, rubbing my leg to alleviate the cramping, "Come take a look at these people moving around down here." While he trudged over with a frown on his face, I thought about our previous missions in the valley. Women, children and old men, forced to leave their homes, trudging out of the valley with somber, stoic faces. They would occasionally steal a belligerent glance our way with resentful eyes. They carried what remained of their belongings on their backs and heads. There wasn't much to carry. We destroyed everything we could, to keep it from the VC. I did not see many young men leave the valley. I knew they remained here, hidden in the jungle, waiting with the same stoic expressions on their faces as their families. They wait patiently with a fierce passion for freedom, waiting to kill us and revenge their loved ones. Other invaders have come and gone from the valley. They knew they would outlast us as well. It was not hard to imagine why they believed they were patriots, fighting for their way of life, their homes and families.

The battalion commander didn't see it that way; he had his mission to accomplish. He told us, "The VC prey on the inhabitants of the valley and must be destroyed. Only then can the women and children safely return to their homes." "*What hypocritical BS*", I thought, "*They could return to what was frigging left of their homes.*" Our "scorched earth" campaign destroys everything of use to the enemy. I feel my soul being consumed and disappearing up into the heavens along with the bright red flames and clouds of smoke billowing from the villages we were burning. "Look at this big damn ol water buffalo," one soldier shouted laughingly to his buddy. "I fired ten rounds into him from my M-16 and he just stands there. What does it take to kill these big motherfuckers?" M-16 rifle rounds are small and deadly on soft skinned humans, but not on the large, thick skinned, water buffalo.

They were incredibly difficult to kill with the small bullets and it took a long time for them to die. Some of the soldiers thought that was funny. It made me heart sick. Satan was pleased. "I bet they wouldn't be laughing if some foreigners were shooting their cattle back in Kansas," I say to Garrity, my radio operator.

I'd often admired Captain Rogers' judgment and cool decision-making under pressure. Today I wasn't so sure. His whole countenance and body language showed the strain of the last several days. He is obviously exhausted and short of temper. Staring pensively at the people below, he is uncharacteristically indecisive as he asks, "This is a free fire zone, why are they out in the open like that? Can you see any weapons Patrakis?" "Not yet Captain, it's hard to tell at this distance. If we move closer, they'll hear us. What should I do sir?" He thought for a moment, a tortured expression on his face and then finally replied, "The CO has been pushing me for more frigging bodies. We lost Harris to that sniper and I haven't reported one damn VC killed." I heard his radio operator mutter under his breath, "Fuck those gooks. Harris was a good guy, incinerate the bastards." Somewhere, Satan had an evil smile on his face.

I wondered if Rogers might be thinking about what had happened with Bravo Company a couple weeks earlier. The VC had mingled with the villagers leaving the valley and then opened fire on the Bravo Company soldiers. Of course, they returned fire and several villagers were accidentally killed. Word of the incident got back to the newspapers and they made a big story out of it. The media is quick to turn us killing civilians into headline news, but civilians' killing us is mostly ignored. The hearts & mind folks in Washington are unhappy about the bad publicity and the Bravo Company commander ended up taking the fall. I was there when he was relieved. His face red and contorted with anger, as if possessed, the battalion CO yelled, "I told you to be careful with civilians. You know damn well that's my policy. I encouraged you to be aggressive, not kill women and children." He stuck out his hand and said, "Hand me your pistol, Captain." From the passion in his voice, it was obvious he had convinced himself the Bravo Commander was at fault for not correctly following his orders. I was pretty sure that his anger was not motivated by concern for the women and children, but more for the danger their deaths posed to his own ambition. The Bravo Commander was crestfallen, unbuckled his holster and dejectedly handed it over. *More BS, I thought? "He seems oblivious to his own orders to, kill anyone in the free fire zone, no questions asked."*

I shrugged my shoulders dejectedly, muttering, "Unbelievable." I could almost hear Satan chuckle. Rogers interrupted my thoughts asking, "Remember that cute Vietnamese barber back at division? They found her dead in the wire with a rifle in her hands after a night attack. How am I supposed to tell who the enemy is in this fucked up war? I think, *"if he puts our safety first and we kill civilians, he loses his career. If we don't fire, some of us could easily pay the same price as Harris."*

"So, what should I do sir?" "It's your call, Patrakis ... but, better safe than sorry."

"Damn, why do I have to make the call? Is Rogers becoming like the battalion CO? Had he been more like Rogers when he was a young captain?" I stand there exhausted, trying to think. *"Damn, the VC may have sent women and children into the valley to harvest rice."* Rogers pointed to the rice paddy impatiently and said, "Come on George, we're not waiting on your ass all day. Call in the artillery or we'll have to go kill them ourselves. You remember what happened to Harris yesterday?" Somewhere, Satan is smiling in satisfaction. How could I forget? I'd used some precious water from my canteen to try and wash the blood stains from my uniform. His blood is still faintly visible though, a reminder of his death. We cut a hole in the jungle for the helicopter to drop a rope in for the body bag and I told Captain Rogers then. "I'll never forget zipping Harris up in that frigging bag."



Men, Women, Or Children??

The Captain told me to write Harris up for a Silver Star. I was pretty sure the request would be turned down like some others. It was different when it came to awards for senior officers in the rear. I had read the commanders' Silver Star citation that said, "Awarded the Silver Star for extraordinary heroism while braving enemy fire to coordinate with his commanders on the battlefield." Good grief, all he had done was come in on the evening chow run. Maybe his helicopter had a couple of sniper rounds fired at it. *"Shit, everyone in the company would have a Silver Star, if that's all it took,"* I tell Captain Rogers. "He has six short months to make his mark." Many others are waiting for their chance to command, to punch their tickets for promotion. A good command report in combat means certain promotion to full colonel and a fast track for a Star. He had been very unhappy when the Distinguished Service Cross recommended in his award request was downgraded. Nevertheless, the Silver Star he received could turn out to be the crucial edge he was looking for over his competition. Still, he knew his final success would be measured by enemy body count.

"Jesus, what should I do about these frigging people in the rice paddy? They don't look like soldiers." "What the hell," a surge of hatred courses through Greek, *"They killed Harris and our mission is to destroy the enemy."* Anger overcoming my doubts, I pushed the button on the radio hand set. Somewhere Satan was nodding his approval. "Brave Fighter 16 this is Brave Fighter 27, fire mission, grid 936 798, direction 1300, suspect VC soldiers in rice paddy, adjust fire, **OVER.**" They repeat the mission back, and in a few minutes, report, **"Ready, OVER."** I took a deep breath, I was on automatic pilot now, and reply **"FIRE."** **"SHOT OVER"**, I hear back on the radio. **"SHOT OUT,"** I reply. The first round comes screaming in, very low over my head, with a loud, banshee, whistling sound. The target location is correct, and I hear one hundred pounds of high explosive burst with a huge **"CRUNCH"**. A bright red ball of incandescent flame inside a mushroom of black smoke appears on top of the figures below. The explosion sends hundreds of razor-sharp, steel fragments whizzing through the air. Like loud, angry hornets they search for soft human flesh. They are scientifically designed to do maximum damage to human flesh and organs. I thought I saw a severed limb. Two of the figures fall writhing to the ground and the rest are running. Satan was laughing as I quickly radioed the artillery and said with great urgency, **"Drop 50, fire for effect, OVER!"** Shortly, 36 more rounds are on the way. The rice paddy is inundated by giant red flashes and black smoke from almost two tons of high explosive.

“What would it be like to be in the middle of that hell?” Thousands of jagged fragments of shrapnel rip at the figures and now they are sprawled lifeless on the ground. *“They look like bloody, broken rag dolls. I’m glad I was too far away to hear them scream.”* My hands are shaking as I radio to the Artillery battery, **“end of mission, 12 VC killed, OVER.” “ROGER, 12 VC killed, end of mission, OUT.”** They sound exuberant, like they had just killed some deer or won a football game.

The Captain reported the 12-enemy killed back to the CO who replied, “Are you sure, Rogers?” He needed more enemy dead, “maybe you should count those bodies again.” “Hey Patrakis, count those frigging bodies again.” I reply, “Okay sir, oh yeah, now I see thirty.” Thirty was a nice round number for the officers back at the rear. They would consolidate that with other inflated reports and send the daily “score” to the Pentagon. The enemy casualty report would be placed on the polished wooden desks of the air-conditioned offices back in Washington. There, they will be regarded as more evidence we are winning the noble struggle for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people.

Nobody seemed to question that with a body count of 30, we had captured no weapons. By God, we are winning this war. The staff workers back at the base camp hurry to finish the report so they can head to the officers-club for a drink. Happy hour starts in thirty minutes. It was not happy hour in the jungle. “Okay”, Rogers tells Garret. “Let’s get down this damn mountain and see what Patrakis got.” Captain Rogers told me, “He has good eyes and ears and is a good shot. He’ll be an outstanding point man if he survives his first couple weeks.” I hear Rogers caution him, “There may be more, just go slowly and be careful”, I know he liked Garret and did not want him to suffer the same fate as Harris. He once told me, “I know it’s not a good thing to get to liking anyone too much Patrakis, but he reminds me of my younger brother back on the farm.” He sighed, “If I make it home, I’ll never be able to enjoy a walk in the woods again.” I think sadly, *“neither will I. Nobody returns from winning the hearts and minds of the people in Nam unchanged.”*

Finally, we reach the edge of the jungle. Out of breath and pumped with adrenalin, I rush to the opening in the trail and peer out. I have a sudden terrible headache. I desperately hope it is enemy soldiers lying dead in the rice paddy. My knee is jerking up and down uncontrollably and I feel sick to my stomach. I look around desperately for weapons.

"Thank God, I think I see a rifle and wait, not far away, a doll. What the hell?"

Garret looks cautiously around before bending over to examine one of the bodies. "Come on, what the hell did I hit?" I almost scream at him. I feel the last, fading vestige of humanity slipping away as he says, "Holy shit, Lt Patrakis, you're not going to believe who you just killed!" Satan laughed maniacally, a satisfied look on his face. The humans seldom let him down.

****The ending of this "story" is fictional for dramatic effect. What actually happened, is ... LT. Kalergis at the very last minute sees some 1st of the 9th helicopters coming up the valley and radios them to request they check out the people in the rice paddy. They turn out to be women and children the VC have sent in to harvest the rice. The guns were loaded and ready to fire, but Greek is grateful to this day that he cancelled the fire mission.***

Story # 6 (Factual)

The Ambush

One of my fiercest combat actions occurs as we receive a new Company Commander, Captain Feliz. We are searching in the mountains on the edge of the Bong Song Plain where intelligence reports for once, are right and we will soon encounter a substantial enemy force. We are moving down a narrow jungle trail around the side of a mountain under a dense jungle canopy. Moving slowly because the trail is so narrow and steep, the incline is so extreme that my left foot is six inches lower than my right as I try to balance myself to walk around the side of the mountain. As I struggle through the shadows of the thick vegetation, I feel like my whole body is constantly leaning to the left. I think, *"It's kind of what it might feel like to wear one high heeled shoe and one flat shoe."* Normally I would have been walking with Captain Feliz in the middle of the company, from where I could quickly call for whatever Artillery or Air Strike he might request. This time however, I tell him, "Sir, I better move up front. The company is strung out so far around this mountain that if we get enemy contact, I will not be able to adjust the artillery for fear of hitting the lead platoon."

Alpha Company 5th of the 7th has 90 men strung out single file for at least 100 meters, single file around the steep side of the jungle mountain. We can only see 10 meters or so up the trail because the vegetation is so thick. The light is restricted and that makes vision ahead, up the trail, even more difficult. It is an eerie kind of semi-twilight. For some reason, the jungle noises are strangely subdued. The commander agrees, so Danny and I move up to the leading platoon. If we have enemy contact, even with me close to the front, I will still have difficulty adjusting artillery or any other kind of fire support for fear of hitting my own soldiers. With vision limited and the enemy so close it is a bad situation. The VC are good at insuring they do not initiate contact until they are very close in. When they are too close, it limits my ability to hit them for fear of the artillery hitting us as well. Danny and I move up close to the front and are now walking with the XO in the middle of the first platoon of about 20 men. The lead platoon is now spread out at least a football field ahead of the rest while, in the thick underbrush, the remaining 70 men have lagged well behind. The whole company is stretched way out, down and around the treacherous jungle trail.

We have a Scout Dog and her handler with us. She is kind of a skinny, mangy, German Shepherd, named Phyliss or some ridiculous thing like that. The tropical heat did not seem to be to her liking, and she seemed kind of docile to me. I often wondered if she was really cut out for this “fighting” stuff? She earned her dog food that day though. She suddenly runs and leaps with a fierce growl into the jungle to grab a VC with a machine gun who is about to fire on us. Danny and I dive off the trail and a flurry of AK 47 and M-16 fire is exchanged. When the dust clears, several NVA soldiers are dragging one of their wounded companions down the trail. Man, I had sure misjudged that dog! She had taken a bullet to the nose to save several soldiers’ lives, very possibly mine and Danny’s. Later, I often hoped that she had healed well and been taken care of.

Now, Captain Feliz says in his broken English, (It got worse when he got excited.) “Chase them down, catch them!” We are practically running down the frigging trail after them, getting further and further away from the rest of the company. I call on the radio and plead, almost beg the new CO to let us stop so I can put some artillery fire out in front. However, perhaps at the exhortation of the Battalion CO, he tells us to, “Catch the fleeing enemy soldiers, now!” At his urging we continue our pursuit. He has only been in country a couple weeks. He had been in the Cuba Bay of Pigs Invasion, recently been commissioned, and had just joined the company. He would end up being shot and wounded several weeks later, but right now he is in command. He had shown up the first day loaded down with a huge rucksack filled with supplies, much like his Guerilla days in Cuba, I suspect.

He was not in shape yet though and sure enough, I end up having to carry a bunch of his stuff up the mountain on his first search & destroy mission. He was a good and brave guy, but new like all of us at one time and this was a different war and different armies fighting on both sides than when he was in Cuba.

I was always amazed at the “on the job training” the relatively inexperienced American officers constantly had to go through. All rotated through several job positions in their one-year tour. When the player pieces are moved on the war board back at the TOC, there is no indication of the experience of the players. All are assumed to be expert at their jobs. This was not a good assumption. *“Did the senior leadership really understand the level of training and combat readiness of the people on the ground?”* This handicap becomes even more pronounced as National Guard civilian soldiers are activated to join the fight for freedom. The enemy is much more experienced at jungle and guerilla combat than us. They have lifetimes of experience with the “Home Field Advantage”. Although we have greatly superior fire power, bringing it to bear on the long-experienced enemy is not an easy task. I tell Danny, “Captain Rogers would never have had the company running down this trail like this. We will stay near the front, but not so close to the lead element. I am pretty sure there are more NVA just up the trail and the company, is in perfect position to be ambushed.”

The jungle is ominously quiet, and I tell the company executive officer Tom Aubert, (Later killed at LZ Colt) who was with me, “We have to stop and fire some artillery up in front of us, even if the CO does not want us to. There are apt to be more NVA up this trail.” Despite the continued urgent requests to the CO from the XO and I to stop and fire Artillery, we continue moving far too fast down the jungle trail. The lead elements keep moving quickly about 50 more meters down the trail, moving much, much too fast. I tell Danny, we will stay with them, but we should drop back a little with the rear element of the platoon. As we pullback a little, the first squad disappears down into a ravine where two trails kind of converge in a V on the side of the mountain.

The NVA are waiting there with AK 47s above and on both sides of the platoon and suddenly the sound of automatic small arms fire fills the air. Almost immediately the men right in front of us are cut down dead or wounded. Danny and I jump off the trail. As I hug the ground and hide behind a small tree to avoid the hail of small arms fire, I immediately try to call in artillery. I am yelling into the hand set of the radio Danny is holding, but the small arms are so loud, I can barely hear the radio. I yell, **“FIRE MISSION, automatic weapons firing, grid 738 645, direction 2,000 adjust fire OVER!”**

Two minutes later, the Firing Battery says, **“SHOT OVER”**. To my dismay, the enemy was on the very top of the steep mountain less than 100 meters above us and the artillery rounds I fire just miss the mountain top, to explode hundreds of meters further away than I had expected them to land, far, far down the opposite side of the steep mountain. I hear them explode off in the distant jungle, at least three to four hundred meters away. The jungle growth mutes the sound and I cannot see them landing. Adjusting fire is even more difficult because I am uncertain of my exact location. We have been moving so rapidly under the thick jungle canopy and uneven terrain that I cannot pinpoint our location on the map. I shout into the radio to the Artillery Firing Battery, **“Drop 200, OVER!”** One minute later they radio back **“SHOT OVER”**. This time to my shock, the rounds land in the jungle behind us and the rest of the pinned down platoon. The mountain top is so steep that as I try to bring the artillery rounds in closer, the artillery rounds land dangerously close behind us. I radio to the battery and tell them to switch to high angle fire. Even with the rounds coming in at a much “steeper trajectory”, I still have a lot of trouble getting the rounds to stay on the top of the mountain where the enemy is dug in, but I keep trying.

We are still pinned down and being hit by the intense cross fire. I tell Danny, “We have to get a little closer to the front, I can’t see our soldiers and where the rounds are landing!” Danny, succinctly replies ... “You gotta be shitting me sir!” Danny had a way with words. We jump up and make our way another 30 meters down the trail, as close as we can get to the pinned down, dead and wounded soldiers. Meanwhile, the crack of bullets whizzing by is very distracting as pieces of foliage from rounds hitting the jungle vegetation fall on us as we run up the trail. It was surreal, I briefly think, *“It is like a movie I am watching in slow motion.”* It’s funny, I later told my friend Shack, “I was scared much of the time moving through the jungle, but during the ambush, I was almost emotionless, full of adrenalin and everything seemed crystal clear. It was like a ‘freeze frame’ movie and it seemed as if we were running up the trail in slow motion.” I would later be scared shitless just thinking back on it. Even to this day it scares me, but I was not too scared then.

In a short time, I manage to get some Aerial Rocket Artillery on station. I radio to them, “I will ‘pop’ smoke,” but, to my dismay, when I pop the smoke grenade to show the helicopters our location, it drifts out of the jungle too slowly, and too far away from us to show the pilots my location very accurately. Finally, the pilot radios that they think they see the red smoke.

That was the color smoke I had popped, so I gave them a direction and distance from the smoke and the gunships make a firing run to try and put some 2.75-inch rockets on the enemy. When the first rockets land just behind us, I tell them to check firing for fear they will hit me or my fellow soldiers. They just could not tell where we were in the dense jungle. I later realized that the enemy may also have popped smoke to confuse the helicopters. They are good at using the jungle cover and terrain and know how to confuse our fire support elements.

Meanwhile, the company commander has sent another 20 men to try and flank the enemy on the right and relieve the pressure from the fire we are still receiving. Unfortunately, they come under fire in the same way we had and now the company is split in half. Half of us pinned down by fire, with casualties and the other half separated by a couple football fields back down the dense jungle trail out of visible contact with the rest of us. I am still trying to get Artillery on the ambushers and start doing a little better with the high angle fire. I continue to have difficulty because of the steep terrain, jungle canopy and because I am forced to adjust mostly by “sound”. Our superior fire support is minimized by the shrewd enemy close combat tactics.

Finally, the enemy fire becomes more sporadic and eventually it stops. I later surmise that they may have been afraid I was getting the gun ship and other fire support too close and that if they stayed there, I would be able to mass those fires on them. In any event, they have retreated down the trail which enables us to pick up our dead and wounded. We then pull back one hundred meters to finally rejoin the rest of the company and form a perimeter for the night. A memory that still haunts me is the vision of one of our dead soldiers being dragged by his feet rapidly back down the trail, his limp head “bouncing” on the ground every time the soldiers frantically pulling him hit a bump in the trail. I think sadly to myself, *“What if this boys’ parents, and loved ones could see him now, being dragged down the trail like that? It was terrible! It was worse than terrible. It was tragically, horrific and there are no words that can do this nightmare scene justice. Why the hell didn’t the new frigging CO let us stop so I could put more artillery in front of us?”* Another incident that preys on my mind and in my dreams from that day is the two young soldiers who were friends and had joined the company just a week previously. One of them has been killed in the ambush and I see the other curled up, moaning in the fetal position next to him. He was not physically harmed, but obviously not able to continue. He was shipped back to base camp and did not return.

The Americans are paying a high price for some other peoples' "freedom"! Now it is getting dark and I manage to get a C-130 Aircraft (Spooky) on station. I hose down the entire area on top of the mountain from where we have been ambushed with its' Gatling Guns for as long as they can stay on station.



We remain in the position all night. In the morning, we call in "fast movers" for jet bombing runs at first light. Until then, I continue to fire artillery around us and use the Spooky Gunship to saturate the top of the mountain where I believe the enemy remains. The Gatling gun fire from the "Spooky" Gunship makes a low, non-stop moaning sound, kind of like a "fog horn", with a solid stream of red tracers pointing at the target. (If I could see the sky, that's what I would have seen.) With seven more rounds between every two tracers, Spooky covers every square inch of a football field in a matter of minutes. *"No doubt that will give the NVA pause to consider if they try to attack us during the night."*

I learn later that that we had come upon an ammunition depot, political indoctrination unit and training camp. Evidently, they were more concerned with evacuating their equipment, trainees and supplies than with continuing their attack on us. Luckily, they probably had just been trying to delay us, so they could evacuate everything from there. I knew the maneuver commander would report a big success, with inflated enemy body counts to the Brigade Commander, but the real skinny was that we got our butts whipped.

We only had two NVA bodies and we suffered 8 killed and many wounded. Without the Artillery, Spooky, the Jet Strikes called in that morning, and the fact that their priority was saving their ammo and supplies, things could easily have been much worse. When I initially reported the two enemy bodies, I was instructed that, "I better count again." I was not surprised, and I responded, "Right, make that 20-enemy killed." *What was the significance of a misplaced zero here and there?* I would later joke with my buddy Shack. "It gives new meaning, to the old saying, "Figures don't lie, but liars figure." I later receive a Bronze Star for Valor for the battle, but I didn't do anything but what I was supposed to do. George thinks, "*I was just trying to help save the soldiers and save my own ass. Good grief, how many more days can I last?*"

Story # 7 (Factual)

BIG MISTAKE

This incident, which occurred during my fourth month in the An-Lao Valley illustrates the difficulty of controlling men in combat and how easily there can be a disconnect between the planners and soldiers on the ground. That danger is often increased with new inexperienced leadership. With leaders changing position every six months in Vietnam, that was not an infrequent occurrence.

This time Intelligence reports an enemy battalion headquarters in a village several miles down the An-Lao Valley, so we are ordered to rush down from the mountain we are operating in to be picked up by helicopter in the valley below. Stumbling and falling, we rush down the mountain to quickly make the rendezvous with the "lift ships". During the rush, a soldier carrying the 45 pound "base plate" of the 81 MM Mortar falls and drops it. With a huge clattering "BOINGING" noise it makes it way, bouncing off rocks, rolling down the steep mountain trail toward the valley below.

Reaching the valley, exhausted from rushing down the mountain, we immediately jump into waiting helicopters that carry us up the valley towards the suspected enemy battalion headquarters. Scared as hell, humming the Beatles, "Here we go againnn!" (as was my custom)

I look out the open door, straining to see the impact of the last artillery round, “White Phosphorus”. The white smoke will obscure us from the enemy in the village and signal the pilots that the artillery preparation is over, and we are clear to assault into the rice paddy just outside the village. *“Where the hell is the WP last round? Where is the fucking artillery?”*



Before I can wonder long, the choppers sweep into the rice paddy and we find ourselves left face down in the open, one hundred meters from the reported enemy battalion. *“Were fucked, they dropped us in before the artillery preparation was fired.”* We lay there stunned for a minute, waiting for the enemy battalion to pick us off like sitting ducks. Finally, the company commander and his platoon leaders jump up and lead us into the village. To our great relief, there is no enemy fire. In fact, there is no frigging enemy. They have dropped us in the wrong village. We walk through the village, relieved to be alive as we search inside hooches and spider holes for an enemy who is obviously not here.

Suddenly my radio came to life. It is the Artillery Liaison Officer, CPT Dennis O’Conner (Later KIA at LZ Colt) who is with the maneuver battalion commander telling me the company needs to pull out of the village immediately. They are going to fire the artillery preparation. “Holy shit, why? We have already been in the village and it’s fucking empty.”

The LNO replies, "You need to pull back into the tree line on the other side of the open rice paddy right now!" "Why, why?" I yell in frustration and rage, close to insubordination. He replies, "The Division Commander, General Tolson, is on the way in his chopper to observe the artillery preparation and Air Force jets are already on station ready to bomb the village." All of this was supposed to have happened before we attacked the village and it was the LNOs' job to coordinate that. *"Aside from that Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play? Oh man, he has fucked up royally!"* I tell him "We don't need the fucking artillery or jet strike. We have already been in the village and there are no enemy there." Captain Rogers is telling the commander the same thing on his radio with no better luck. The show would go on! Nobody is about to report the "fuck up" to the General.

We pull back out of the village and watch a great show of "Shock & Awe" fire power as the artillery and jets blow the shit out of the empty village we have just left. The tactical planners are completely out of touch with reality and nobody, certainly not our ambitious battalion commander, has the balls to tell the General the truth. *"The frigging inmates are running the asylum."* Unfortunately, I would learn this kind of error and lack of will to fix responsibility is not all that uncommon. I would experience it again before my year was up. *"We have found the enemy and he are us!"* I thought wryly.

Meanwhile, Cpt. Trang of the North Vietnamese Army and the rest of the enemy battalion are watching the show from the next village, one thousand meters further up the valley. Luckily for me, Captain Rogers and his men, Intelligence had the wrong village. The NVA get to see the show, probably laughing their asses off at the stupid Americans. I was just glad to be alive!