

## **"Caution: War may be hazardous to your health"**

by J.A. Coutant, 2001

### **intro-----**

The following piece has been extracted from a larger, unfinished prose work that covered the year of my tour of duty in Viet Nam. I started writing because I had grown very tired of carrying around in my head all the memories I had from that time. Writing them down helped to get most of them out. The content was developed using letters and tapes I sent to my family and from notes, prose fragments, some library research to confirm dates of military and civilian activities, and from memory. The bulk of the original work was written between 1975 and 1977. I finally burned out while typing that first rough draft. All work stopped just before I got to the events of Fire Base Cudgel (Cai Lay). When I got to that point, I put my head down on the typewriter and started crying. I had had enough and could go no further.

The prose notes for this particular section started in 1969. This is the first time that all writings have been pulled together and put in order. As originally intended, the larger work was written in the third person, with some name changes. Here, I have put events back into the first person and used proper names, if known. Because this piece is from a larger work, some events and people are presented seemingly without a context. All are described in more detail elsewhere in the larger work. I did not consider it appropriate (for reasons of length and intended narrative function) to give them all a full context here. This piece is a straightforward, linear narrative; ‘the narrator’ can look back in time, but can not look ahead. What occurred ‘after’ is covered in the epilogue.

As written here, this piece represents my point of view and only my view. I make no pretense that this is any kind of general history of the events described or a wholly accurate description of them. I have been careful to include only what I knew at the time and have excluded anything that I’ve learned at a later date. Obvious minor mistakes have been corrected, as found. I have also taken care to preserve my written "voice" of the time and not use changes in the vernacular that occurred after that period. More importantly, I have worked to present the whole picture as I saw it and saw myself in it. I can rightly say that it has taken over 30 years, five of those in counseling, to be able to write about that time.

I thank the following for their generous help with this effort: Charlie Salt for editing and comments, Lee Alley for the positive phone calls, e-mails, and a copy of an interview tape, and Karl Simon for the final edit and production. Also, a general thanks goes to the good folks at the Vet Center, Portland, Oregon.

In the mood of these times, I feel I must write that the following material may not be suitable for all readers. It contains language and references to activities that may be offensive to some. It is intended for knowing and understanding, mature adults. I offer no apologies for trying to describe accurately my life as I lived it in November of 1967. Also, while this material is written for the military knowledgeable, a glossary is provided after the epilogue.

## **"Caution: War may be hazardous to your health"**

- Written on the back of an envelope, letter date 11/30/67

"War can kill you quicker than smoking cigarettes!" - Anonymous

Cigarettes, that remark reminded me to put an extra pack in my helmet liner and another in the

camouflage band. It also occurred to me to take along some extra safety pins and hooked six through my jacket pocket flaps. I usually carried a couple, never this many. It was a hunch. I also packed a couple of extra pairs of glasses, then went down to the Aid Station and picked up an extra box of morphine. Sarg didn't want to give it to me but he couldn't refuse needed supplies. The doctor backed me up and I signed for it.

I would also have to make sure that my mail was not sent out to me. The Orderly Room blindly tended to assume that we would want mail if we were out for more than a day. I always worried something would happen to me and the V.C. would have my family or a friend's address back in The World. There were stories of hands or other body parts being mailed back to families in the states. I didn't want my mother finding parts of me in a box with a letter in broken English telling her what an imperialist war monger I was and that it was too bad she had let the war against the Peoples' Liberation go on.... Her nerves were bad enough.

I checked my aid bag again, packed heavier bandages - field dressings - and less bottled diarrhea and 'itch' medicine, bandages being lighter to carry than glass and more to the point. I sat on my cot, lit a cigarette, and stared between the web tops to the deserted hoochs out across the paddies. The sounds of the frogs and the bugs drowned out most of the other noise. I thought of Minor, poor Minor. He hadn't made it a month when he was killed in Cai Lay. I wanted to get one back for him. I wondered how "Tree" was getting along back in The World. Good old "Tree", who had gotten me into Recon. I was scared; I had a gut feeling I was going to make it through, but with no idea in what condition. I'd seen enough to know a lot of the variations on how I could get wounded and that I had something to worry about. I didn't want the military to be sending parts of me back to my mother either. Then again things might be pretty quiet. Once is not a pattern. I made a few pre-rolls and stashed them in my bag, another 'first'.

The day was bright with a high overcast. It felt odd to be going into a major operation without the 'tracks'. But then the new command a T.O.C. didn't seem to know how to use Recon and the A.P.C.s together. Too many heli-borns. The thirty-five of us climbed into the 'slicks' for the flight down to Dong Tam. We were dropped in a vacant area, away from the main heli-port. We only had to walk down a slope and cross a road to get to the transient housing; web-top frames with no web tops. There were no cots and no bedding. But shelter was off the ground; the bare wood floors. Around dusk the 'C's were passed around, I got a box marked "beef steak", better than some. The can spit a little when punctured with the P-38. I got some C-4 and lit the wad, bringing the can to a boil. An odd musky stench rose with the heat, the juice bubbled into foam. Not appetizing. Apparently the can had been damaged, but nothing had leaked out to discolor the box. It had looked OK; the top hadn't been bulging. But somehow air had gotten in and rotted the contents. There were no more C-rations so I made do with the fruitcake and the rest of the contents in the box, with some sympathetic donations thrown in.

There was to be a show at the Service Club. I headed over early to meet up with an old A.I.T/O.J.T buddy, Ronny, and four other medics from the 2/60<sup>th</sup>. We checked the place over and found four, windowless side rooms; two were full of guys watching TV, another with card games going on, and the last, not air conditioned, was empty. There was some furniture but no electricity. We claimed it as ours. Perkins pulled a V.C. oil lamp out of his pockets and we had light. Two of the other guys produced a couple of plastic bags and began rolling. I pulled out a couple of the joints I'd brought, lit one and passed it.

Ronny looked pretty good, he had lost some weight and the expression in his eyes had changed. Some of the mischief was gone, replaced with sadness. The wariness that had always been there was tinged with fear. Perkins had changed a lot. I hardly recognized him. Already slender, he had lost a lot more weight

and had gone sort-of native. He was not fully regulation in dress; a red and yellow woven belt with an old flip-lid ashtray hooked on, was the most conspicuous addition. He also had more beads and stuff around his neck than I did. It seemed the 2/60th was a more relaxed place than the 5/60th. It was his expression that had changed the most. When I had met him before he had been friendly and outgoing, he was now depressed and withdrawn. Whatever he had been through had been really hard on him. I could tell by the way the others watched and treated him that they were concerned by his changes.

As we started to pass the ‘numbers’ around, we told stories of the trials and tribulations of getting stoned. And what we had been going through in the field. I remembered that we had been in the Bowling Alley back in September and that we had gotten radio calls about the 2/60th getting hit pretty badly. I had been very worried. I was told that it had been an element of ‘friendlies’ reconing by fire and that the incoming had been way over their heads. Nobody had been hurt

It was apparent that we were a rather sober-minded little group. We had all been in the Cai Lay area before. We knew guys were going to get fucked-up and killed. The place was notoriously hard on medics. If not death, then there were all the ways of being "alive". In A.I.T. Ronny and I had both had to work on a hapless young N.C.O. who had been strung up in traction, buried away for months in a tiny room of our hospital. The bed and poles took up most of the space, we couldn't so much as move from one side of the bed to the other without bumping into some part of the rig, thereby setting the poor guy off in shudders of pain and swearing. It was no way to live. We had all heard the horror stories of V.A. hospital treatment. No way did we want to spend the rest of our lives strung up on wires at the mercy of others. As medics, we were all too aware of just how much of the body could be missing and life would still go on. We could appreciate how much trauma the resilient human body could withstand and survive.

I had horror daydreams of being wounded and stranded in the jungle. I wondered what lengths I would go to to survive. Of having to decide whether to patch myself up if I wanted to live or die depending on the extent of my injuries. I could never reach a decision and decided to reserve that judgement call if the time ever arose. I had realized earlier that to think about not surviving was a severe mental handicap.

At some point someone asked for the time. It was "twenty after the hour of eight.", "twenty twenty hours.", "eight twenty.". Another had eight twenty-five, then came "stateside or here?!" The man had two watches, one on each wrist. Another said we were all slow; it was eight thirty-two. We had been there roughly an hour, undisturbed.

The outside walls of the room were slatted and screened. The interior walls were solid and there was no air circulation. We hadn't opened the door to the main hall because of the risk that the smoke would blow out and not in. We had chosen some discomfort rather than risk being smelled. It was decided that we should leave one or two at a time, to emerge as a group would be conspicuous and leave the door open too long. When I left, I found the barn-like hall was bright, very crowded and noisy. There had not been many men around when we got there and now the place was full.

There was some kind of show going on the stage at the other end of the hall. There were Red Cross girls involved in skits and games with men they had picked out of the crowd. They were singing songs in some kind of pom pom girl routine. From the middle of the room, over a sea of heads, very ‘ripped’, I could only guess at what was really going on. The crowd got noisier when they found that a band they had expected was not going to play. It all became too much and my claustrophobia kicked in.

At the opposite end from the stage was a door to a patio where a portable charcoal grill had been set up and steaks were being cooked. There was a long line and it was a long, ‘loaded’, wait for the tough meat,

the dry bread, and the mixed fresh greens of questionable origins. There was free watery lemonade or soda on ice, as a side concession. After I ate, I went back inside. It all made less sense than it had before. Ronny was lost in the crowd, so I left, feeling tired. With something in my stomach, I was sleepy.

It was late. I had to find my way back to where ever we were staying. While the night was bright, with a full moon, there was not enough light to read smaller details in the landscape. I found myself on the burm road very lost and far from any buildings. "Halt", was shouted out of nowhere. I stopped and shrugged, hands open, palms up.

"Hey, man. I'm a 'friendly'!"

"OK, "friendly", the voice came back, "what are you doin' on this road after dark?"

I explained that I was looking for my unit, that we had just arrived that afternoon and that I was looking for a group of open web tops. He hadn't heard of the 5/60<sup>th</sup>, he had no idea where the web tops might be and told me to get off the road. He explained that the whole base was a little jittery because some V.C. had gotten through the barbed wire and that they had been seeing figures around the perimeter the past couple of nights. Again, he told me to get off the road. I looked up back into the main part of the camp and vaguely saw that the sandy ground was an obstacle course of puddles and ditches. I told the voice that I was not going wading tonight! There were calls from the other guard posts asking what was going on.

I told the voice that I was going to keep to the direction I was going. I was told that it could be my funeral. I said that as long as I was on the inside of the perimeter, it would be his courts marshal if he shot me! After just talking to me? I told him I was sorry if he was upset, but I had an early wake up and needed some sleep. In a firm tone, I wished him goodnight and walked on. Another 300 meters and the road bent to the left, following the line of the landfill the camp was built on. There were some hoochs close on the left. I headed off that direction, feeling less tense as I got off of the burm road which continued off to the right.

I had to take a detour, but found our open hoochs. There were only 4 or 5 of them, Recon had two, the 2/60<sup>th</sup> had the others. Everyone was in, most asleep, I was the last one back. Each hooch was wall to wall men, with the rest out on the ground. No way was I prepared to sleep on the ground, I looked around and spotted an open jeep parked along side. I found my bag and gear. Checking the jeep out, I figured that with the shift in the middle, I would sleep sitting up in front. Then I noticed a narrow rear seat. I put my gear in the floor compartments in back and climbed in. I lay on my back, tucked my aid bag under my head and looked up at the sky filled with stars. It was warm; the rough dark upholstery had retained a little of the day's heat. The cool night breeze wafted just over my face. The space was a little short, but comfortable, firm but a lot softer than the ground. I was asleep in less than five minutes.

I woke up the next morning as the sun was coming up. I hadn't moved all night. We were a subdued group, checking our equipment and procedures. Our mission was indefinite, distances and objectives kept changing. After a breakfast of cold 'C's, we walked from the transient area, down a main road, to the other side of the camp. The loose, sandy ground caused us to walk out of balance with the gear that we were carrying. We also had to carry a couple of days worth of 'C's with us. I put mine in the oversize patch pockets on the thighs of my pants, the rest in my backpack. Others had stuffed cans into socks that dangled off where ever they could tie them on. With out the 'tracks', we had to carry all we needed with us. We had always traveled better and faster when we traveled light. So we rattled along as the bright morning sun went behind an uneven overcast. Light began to break out in patches when we reached the chopper field. It was a large sandy field, not the tarmac of Bearcat, bordered by the camp, a river, and a

treeline. The road we had been on continued through the middle of the field.

There were other groups waiting in lines out in the field. Recon still didn't know what we were supposed to do. Transportation was changed from the usual 'slicks' to the big Chinooks. The field was pocked with huge rain puddles; the largest were on either side of the road and between the airfield and the camp. The choppers drove a stiff wind that blew sheets of water across the puddles and tore them into droplets that mixed with clouds of blowing sand. The occasional shafts of sun would break through the darkening clouds and glare off the puddles and highlight the blowing sand and water.

I looked around and realized that some of these men I had never seen before. There were a lot of new guys. They had arrived the week before and this was their first operation. I thought that, so far, all of this was leaving a wrong first impression about what they could look forward to as an average mission. As an 'old-timer', I was concerned about the indecision and changes we heard coming over the radio. We were way out of our regular A.O., 'Higher's' intelligence reports were fuzzy and there was some anger in our worry because we knew the area was always active. Nobody going in came out in one piece. This was T.O.C.'s first time in there after the personnel changeover. Those sending us in knew less about the place than we did. At one point they tried to send us into areas we didn't have maps for. Our objective was coordinated, plotted, then cancelled about three or four times.

The roar of the engines made it impossible to talk and communication was yelling into each other's ears, our backs to the choppers, trying to keep the sand out of our mouths. We waited, huddled on one side of the field, then the other, trying to avoid the sandstorms that blew over us. First A Company was loaded into the bellies of the choppers, then B Company. It became apparent that Recon was not to be in the vanguard of this operation. Then the radio sputtered out that part of Bravo had made contact. A little while later it came over that there had been a dust-off in and that a second dust-off was called for. That did not sound too good.

We were left waiting four or five hours. For awhile we waited behind some conexs, beside one of the puddles next to the base camp. It kept the sand from blowing into our lunch as the Chinooks came and went. While waiting, I looked over the 'new meat'. A tall, dark guy with small eyes stood out. At some point I went off to look for fresh canteen water and take a piss. When I got back, the guys were sitting, backs against the containers, talking and napping. White was sitting with his arm around Teaque's shoulders. Teaque, the smaller of the two, was comfortably engulfed. I found myself feeling sad and envious; wishing that some one would hold me too.

Sometime around 1:30 it was our turn to be loaded inside a Chinook. The thirty-five of us were packed closely inside. Two rows sat down either side, with a row down the middle between; the 'newbys' and the R.T.O.s sat on the floor. I noticed we had a Hoi Chanh along. We, with experience, looked worried. The new men were bored or indifferent. Bravo was into the shit good, so, it was decided that it would take too long to unload from one big chopper, so we were unloaded from the Chinook and put onto six 'slicks'. Just like we always did for an air-mobile. It was exasperating that 'Higher' seemed to have no idea what to do with us. Around 2:00 or there after we were the last ones off the ground.

We were flown much higher than usual. For awhile the ground spread out below in the usual meandering curves of rivers, canals and treelines. The paddies were the usual irregular squares and squared rectangles of ever-changing dimensions. Further on, the only villages to be seen were clustered along a wide river, the treelines became spaced further apart and there were no hoochs anywhere. It seemed as if the choppers rose higher still. The ground below became something I had never seen before, there were no treelines; there were no trees. Canals the size of rivers ran straight to the horizon. The intersecting feeder channels came in at right angles to the larger canals. Contained within the borders of the channels and canals were rectangular paddies, all of regular shape, all with the same

dimensions. They were choked and over grown with reeds and water weeds. This arrangement spread out for as far as I could see in all directions. For sure, there had to be a lot of mosquitoes down there. There was no trace of the bright green that indicated cultivated rice

There were no villages, roads or any trace of settlement. The sun and clouds were reflecting in the vast grid like light bouncing off the dirty panes of giant French doors lain on the ground. It had all been abandoned long ago like some grand, decaying organic machine. The only landmark that broke the horizon was a faint, gray peak off to what I guessed was north. I assumed that it had to be a mountain to be seen from that distance. Being from Oregon and surrounded by hills and mountains all of my life, I found the view beautiful but slightly disorienting. It was like all references to scale had been obliterated and the landscape was now totally alien.

As we flew lower, curving treelines reappeared and we could see this area had also long been abandoned. The paddies were overgrown and it was into one of these that we were dropped, the gunships around us blazing away. A dust-off had come in with us too. We could see B Company off to the left along a tree-lined dike. It was a hot L.Z., I could hear the banging ‘pop’ of rifles and there was fire going by us. We had to jump out while the choppers hovered a couple of feet above the relatively clear water. The water was thigh deep, we waded, crouching, to get under the rotor blades and the incoming fire. Some of the new guys didn’t know they were being fired on and were walking upright! The rest of us quickly dragged them down. Some of them only believed the incoming was directed at them when rounds whizzed by their ears! We went to our knees and half swam to the dike to take cover with Bravo. They had been pinned down most of the day. Some of their Evac-Trac crew were out and amazed to find themselves on the ground for a change!

There was a depression, a sort-of under water ditch, next to the dike we were pinned behind. It was almost deep enough that I could unbend my legs. There was no dry ground, even the dike was flooded. This left us at least chest deep in water. The depression served as a kind of corridor between the paddy, overgrown with weeds and rice gone to seed, and the dike. We had nothing to do but fart around and wait. Two Recon guys had cameras in or hanging from their helmets and were taking pictures. Someone partly inflated an air mattress. I moved along the dike and found a new medic, assigned to B Company, who called over another. Stanley and Moore had arrived in a shipment the month before. I had met them but had not seen much of them after that.

It was from them that I learned that the other new medic, who had been dusted off, had not been wounded. A couple of the other men had small wounds and a dust-off was called in for them. He had patched up the men, then took the dust-off himself! He had told them what he was going to do, but they hadn’t believed him. He said he wasn’t getting shot at, no way. A second dust-off, the one that had arrived with us, had been called in for the two wounded. We shook our heads, expecting the worst to happen to him or hoping that it would, as we were still here, half floating in the cool water. A man from Recon said, "Hold it, Docs!" and snapped our picture.

The incoming fire that was pinning us down was coming from a treeline that ran all along to the left and to the front, about 1200-1500 meters [?] out. Mortars, artillery, and air strikes came and went but couldn’t stop it. It was guessed that there were only three or four Viet Cong who were pinning us down. As we were not Marines, there would be no over-the-top frontal assault on the unfriendly treeline. The ‘Word’ came down that we were to return fire.

On my left was the tall new man I had spotted earlier, back in Dong Tam. I watched as he carefully propped himself up on the dike with his elbows to see the direction of his fire and then take aim. I, by contrast, held my rifle over my head while I emptied a clip. This was one of the few times I had fired my weapon in the field; it was not a familiar action. Our position was now clear to the V.C. by the lines of

tracers from our fire. Our return-fire done, I turned to the new man. He tried to ignore me, seemingly disapproving my firing method. I ignored his disapproval and introduced myself. I asked his name and how he came to be here.

He was from a well-to-do East Coast family and just out of prep school. To draw him out, I asked what a prep school was. He gave me a look, then told me that it was a preparatory school for Ivy League colleges. He asked if I knew what those were. I said I did and then asked why, if he could afford that kind of education, was he here? He explained that his family believed in and supported the war. He got very superior while telling me about his long family history of military service. That cut no ice with me as my family's military involvement had been just as long, WW1 to now and all in-between, but that none of them had liked serving. They had all fought what they thought was going to be the last war. And now, the oldest of my generation, I was under fire. The new guy then told me that his place was here "... on the front line, where the action is.". I laughed, I couldn't help it. He was taken aback by my attitude, almost angry. I then gave him my uncomplimentary view of the war we were in. He gave me another look, said nothing and tried to move away. He couldn't go far, there wasn't room! I smiled to myself and wondered if his tune would change after a month or so of the 'real deal'.

Before dusk, a small Recon patrol was ordered over the dike for some reason. Point went scrambling and swimming into the adjoining paddy. The paddy was shallow and overgrown with rice gone to seed, which was our only cover. Point had to crouch under the bending rice, which formed a tunnel to crawl through. Center got just over the dike and Point was almost to the now quiet treeline. Teaque stuck his head up, then radioed back that he couldn't see anything. Daylight was fading rapidly and we pulled back behind our dike.

We now had company. An observer chopper had been downed in the next paddy, over to our left. It was too late for a recovery crew to retrieve it and we were now obliged to stay the night and guard it. We wondered why we couldn't just blow the damn thing up and get the hell out of there. No way, we were told. There could still be chunks left that were big enough to be useful to the V.C. There was concern over the electronics in the instrument panel falling into the wrong hands. I had to wonder where, in the middle of this semi-wilderness, the Viet Cong were going to find an electrical outlet to make any electronics work.

Before all the light was gone, we ate. In the dim light I regarded the can in front of me with deeply conflicted feelings. It was lightly coated with scum and there was nothing dry or clean to wipe the scum away. All that I had learned about sterile and clean techniques, and all of the degrees of cleanliness after that, was useless here. By any Western standards this can, and the likewise coated plastic spoon, were filthy. I was hungry. It was then that I formulated my "cleanliness-is-relative theory" and felt my heart sink as I punctured my dirty P-38 through the lid of the can. The contents of cold roast pork were no longer sterile. As the dark closed in, I ate in a near numb state, cold water up to my chest, wondering how it was that I had come to sink so low, in all the senses of that word.

Distraction from my self-pity came when the bombardment started again on the treeline. Incoming fire had stopped at dusk. It was guessed that the V.C. group was so small that they would slip away in the dark and the air and artillery strikes would make it too intense for them to bring back reinforcements. Wow, what a show it was! The rest of the evening and into the night was an incredible fire works display, made all the more novel because it was on the ground.

While the ground shook we settled in for the night. We had a choice of accommodations: sitting (feet braced), in the ditch with cold water up to our shoulders or sitting on the dike between the tree trunks with water to the waist. I chose a third way, following the example of one man who had some rope and had rigged a back-rest so he could sit in the fork of one of the trees - out of the water. I had tried sitting

in the water, half wet half dry and I knew I could get no rest that way. I found a tree with a fork that offered some back support. To stay there I had to pull my knees to my chest with my feet jammed into the branches. This left me about three feet off the ground and feeling very exposed. I quickly found that movement was very limited; if I moved too much I could fall out of the tree. I justified staying there knowing that I needed some sleep. And being dry helped to relieve my misery over the contaminated dinner. That and it was a great view of the fantastic light and sound show going on out in front.

It was amazing to watch all the hell that the U.S. military could bring down on the enemy. Grand and frightening, beautiful and sad. White domes of phosphorous smoke, columns of fire kicking white sparks and dirt above the tops of the trees, fire balls of napalm rolling over the ground. I could feel the warmth of it all on my face. The artillery shells gave off the hollow spinning sound as they whirled over us and there was the ‘thunk’, ‘whoosh’, ‘blam’ of mortars. Jets came roaring in, parallel to us, diving in low arks to drop their loads and leaving a string of explosions behind the roar of their after-burners. In, gone, ‘boom’, boom’, ‘boom’! The smoke and debris rising over pointed flashes of red flame. And more upon more kept coming down. I was thankful the V.C. didn’t have any air power.

It was lonely out here; we were not just down the road from T.O.C. This place was not close to anywhere. I thought that if all that I was watching was coming on me, or if I even heard it coming, I would be up and running. But where could I run to in the middle of nowhere? How could I run in four feet of water? Then I began to wonder if there was anybody out in those trees? Was all this having any affect? It was sad to think that other human beings might be under all that fire and noise. How miserable could they be?

There were pauses in the bombing and the air would fill with the sounds of frogs and insects, the birds remained quiet. It was during a resumption in the fireworks, around 10:30 or so, that I decided to get some rest. I turned my collar up to get some protection from the mosquitoes, pulled my jacket around my face, ran my hands up inside my sleeves and put my head in my arms. I dozed fitfully until sometime sometime after 12:00 when another raid started. And so it went until just before dawn, around 4:30. It was quiet for awhile and then the guys began to stir. About a third of us had found our way into the pale leafy trees, our fatigues made us dark dots in the otherwise gray, foggy landscape.

I unbent myself from my perch and the first thing I felt on getting down was the cold water around my ankles. Then I sensed that my back didn’t feel right. The sun was just coming up as I saw that all up and down the dike men were getting out of their trees and about every third one was having his back inspected. We were all finding that where ever the fabric of our jackets had been pulled tight across our skin the mosquitoes had poked through the cloth and had a feast. As I had had my arms pulled forward, I had left most of my back exposed and it was now covered with welts. I had to put my web gear on over all of that, hoping I wouldn’t end up with an infected mess later.

As I was taking a piss, in place, ‘Word’ came down that we would be leaving the area soon. So it was more dirty ‘C’s before heading for the bombed out treeline to meet up with Bravo. Alley and Jerry were having trouble dealing with their maps; the plastic map cases were filled with dirty water. It was about 6:00 and while the ground mist had risen, the sky remained heavily overcast. The downed chopper behind us was an unreal sight, tipped to one side, with water running across the floor. Arrangements were made for a Chinook to come in and recover it. As we started out across the paddy from the night before, we found the going was easier without having to crouch and being able to have our heads above the rice.

When we reached the bombed area, we found the land had been an inhabited, cultivated plantation area, neatly laid out some time ago. While the ground was a little above the water level, it had been cut with several, parallel irrigation channels. The water in the channels was below that of the surrounding

paddies. It was then easy to understand where the firing had been coming from and how the V.C. had gotten in and out. I had long legs, so channel hopping was easy for me, for some of the other guys it was more of an effort. We kept checking for the man behind us to lend a hand across. The heavily laden needed the help. New men learned to move quickly or they would get chewed out by the man left behind.

For all that had been dumped on the ground the night before I was expecting a kind of moonscape. At least some conspicuous evidence of what had happened, but I was unnerved to find the area looked oddly normal. The sun had broken through, which made it look more unreal. Some trees had lost leaves but were still standing. The yellow earth was burnt brown and scarred to black in some places, and aside from the litter of debris, that was about it. Even the rather tender, broad leaf trees that I called ‘rubber’ trees, appeared to have escaped much damage. It was a sight hard to believe. It should have been a flat black wasteland.

As we looked the place over, someone found the carcass of a burnt chicken, half-raw with some feathers still left. It was joked that the V.C. had left their napalm-roasted dinner behind. There was a thatched hooch, still standing, that looked almost untouched. Next to it was a short canal or basin. Teaque and another man slogged through and found an AK47. The only evidence that anybody had been there the day before. After they got out of the water they started to complain that their skin felt like it was burning. It was. Napalm was still active in the water. Very quickly we realized we had to get it off and fast. It had hardened on their body hair and was still burning. They dumped their gear, pulled off their jackets and dropped their pants. Bayonets, hunting knives and pocket knives were pulled out and from four to five men went to work on each man scraping - in effect dry shaving - the napalm residue off their skin. I produced some scalpel blades for the effort.

Both Teaque and the other man were fair skinned and aside from the red-brown of their faces and arms, their pale bodies glowed in the shade under the trees. Time was important to minimize the damage, but so was being careful. We moved them out into the light. Necessity, with intense and exact care, overcame any embarrassment. They resigned themselves to standing still and being attended to. Aside from some lame jokes, all was rapt, close attention to detail. We were finished when they couldn’t feel any more burning and couldn’t take any more scrapes or nicks. After patching some cuts, they got dressed and we moved on.

When we left the area, we found ourselves walking down a slope of about ten feet or so. After wading through marsh grass and water, the land rose again into a rounded knoll. On the other side we stopped for lunch. The area was open enough for chopper resupply. Ammo, water, and a hot, Mermite canned lunch were flown in. When we finished eating and B Company was flown out, there was a burst of automatic fire near by and we flattened. It was guessed that ‘friendlies’ had spotted something and fired without giving a radio warning. When that didn’t pan out, we were ordered to go in and check the area where the fire had come from. Waste of time, nothing there. We were left with a creepy feeling that, after all the bombing, there was still someone out there, untouched, besides us.

The containers for the food and water were gathered together & passed along to anyone with empty hands. We walked over a few more rises and over more ditches, then it was back out into the paddies again. The water was tepid to cold depending on the depth. We slogged along in waist deep water where the only things growing were weeds along the dikes. Overhead the clouds thickened into a dark gray mass and a light rain started. Staying clear of the treelines that surrounded us on two sides, we headed on to the remains of a collapsed building. There was nothing but rubble and then we were back into the water, again waist deep.

The rain stopped and the sun broke through, weakly, as we waited to be picked up, the food and water

containers bobbing around us. Around a hundred meters off, a thatched hooch was raised up from the water, derelict and gray. It was too far off to go over and check, so to be on the safe side, it was decided to blow it with an M-72. ‘Bang’, ‘whoosh’, ‘bang’! The thatch just absorbed the damage; we could see a flash through a window opening. Otherwise the hooch stood, looking untouched. We were all disappointed, having expected the thing to be blown to shreds, we wondered over the worth of the ‘law’.

One of the radios burped to life and we were told our choppers were on their way. About 20 minutes later we popped smoke but the damp air kept it from dispersing and made it hard to see. More was put out. Wet, standing in cool air, we chilled quickly in the rotor wash when we were finally picked up. The choppers hovered with their landing bars just skimming the water as we clambered on board. By the time we hit our next L.Z., the sun had burned a dim hole in the overcast. And we were back in the water again. The area was very creepy, abandoned and brooding. The paddies were filled with water weeds and orange scum grew around their edges, the only bright color in the dull green and gray landscape. I had not seen this stuff before and didn’t like the look of it. There was something unhealthy about it.

We slogged our way over to the only structures in the area. One was little more than rubble, the second, at right angles to the other and about 50 feet on, was headed to becoming that way. It had been a hooch with long, cement side walls, tiled roof and end walls, with a thatched extension. About all that was left were the side walls and part of the extension. The roof had collapsed in and part of the hooch pad looked to have been blown away. The surrounding paddy now ran in where the floor had been. There were no signs of recent enemy activity.

It was back into the scummy water to await our next pick up. The bottom of the paddy was very uneven, anywhere from waist to chest deep. One short guy hit a sink-hole and went under, twisting his ankle on his way down. A general restlessness went through the group and then we began to find the leaches. At first we were finding them on our arms. Then, after the awkward untangling of gear and clothing we were finding them, all swollen with blood, everywhere on our bodies. I felt an inward shudder of revulsion; they were slimy, black, wiggling, and fat. I had never encountered them before, those who had quickly brought the rest of us to speed on how to get them off. Everybody needed someone else to help them get to the skin they couldn’t reach. Bottled or aerosol bug repellent worked the best, squirted or sprayed on and they fell right off. Using cigarette lighters and lit cigarettes worked just as well but took longer, although there was a greater satisfaction with burning. As they dropped off they left little rivulets of blood that looked like shrapnel wounds, but all the same size and shape. When the choppers finally arrived, we boarded and the removal continued. We tossed the awful things out the open sides.

When we finally came down, it was our last L.Z. for the day. The sun was back behind the clouds as we slogged the last 500 meters through a gray-brown, knee deep paddy to the nearest treeline. We curved around to the left. To our right was a cultivated cane field - in the middle of this nowhere place. Straight ahead of us were three flat aluminum structures, about twenty feet square, with artillery pieces on them. They looked like big toads on shiny, alien water lily pads, hovering just above the surface of the paddy. It was a dully surreal vision, the future plunked down into the desolate present. Another part of my brain thought, "Well, this looks secure."

The vision in front of me became further skewed when I realized that all the men I saw, who were already there, were dry and walking the dikes and along the edges of the treeline. Not only were the men dry but their fatigues were starched and their boots, black and polished. We looked a bit odd, still trudging through the muddy water. We had arrived at Fire Support Base Cudgel.

Out of habit, we kept wading until we came to the edge of the treeline and hit dry ground. The dry and tidy guys were personnel who mostly had no field experience. I spotted Danny, who had been with Recon and now worked over at T.O.C.. He thought he had it made off the line and here he was back out

in the field again; agitated and excited. He too, had been in this area before and knew how rough it could be. He was glad to see us. As we walked along a line of trees, we passed a round, pointed, O.D. tent. He explained that this was the Tactical Operation Center, rather small I thought, and he now went where T.O.C. went. He left us to go back to work.

Coming out through a row of trees that screened the tent, we entered onto a large open, grassy area that gently sloped down in front of us. It was bustling with activity and now Recon was a side act in a larger show. Charley Company had gotten there ahead of us and was spread down either side of the open area, drying out and resting. There were treelines to either side, the fourth side ended at a small river. Four more artillery pieces were set on the riverbank, facing it. Across the middle of the area, where the ground flattened out, were stacked cases of ammo, C-rations, and water cans. Potholes had formed where the ground dipped and C-ration boxes and other cardboard had been tossed into them to counter the resulting mud holes. Paths were being worn in the soft grass and we followed one along the side, to the right, that went down to the river.

The river was swift running and clear, very different from the slow, red-brown, silt laden waters I usually saw. A spindly looking bridge made of crossed bamboo poles and small logs spanned the water. The bamboo poles had been tied into an ‘X’ form, with their ends driven into the river bottom. Three or four logs, no more than a foot in diameter were laid across untied. Someone obviously smaller and lighter than we were had made this flimsy structure. It crossed over to a mud bank about thirty meters opposite, with a cleared grassy area beyond. Prominently, between the bridge and a side canal, was a large, old deciduous tree, resembling an oak but lighter in color. It was bare and stood isolated on the edge of the bank. This area was about a third of the size of the one we had just walked through. It was surrounded by treelines to the back and left and a large canal, about twenty meters wide, to the right. The canal joined the gentle curve of the river at a sharp right angle. The clouds had been thinning and now the sun had broken through the dark gray streaks in the sky. The river, the opposite bank, the whole view was illuminated in a bright glow.

To my tired eyes it looked beautiful and I was moved. The ground was covered with the first grass I had walked on since I had been in-country. Instead of mud there was dry ground and lush green. I was strongly attracted to how the geometry of the lines of trees and canals complimented the curve of the river and the contours of the land. More than a little, in color and texture, it looked like areas where I had grown up. All was very green and agreeably cool by the water. It felt good here.

This vision of paradise, and the sunlight, dimmed a little when we found that we had to cross the rickety bridge. With the first men trying to cross, it became apparent that: 1. no more than two or three could be on it at a time, 2. should a log get knocked off and swept away, we were screwed - there was no quick way to replace it, 3. no rope we had was long enough to cross over and 4. there were two ways to get across. One was to use the bridge, or, for those too large physically or too heavily laden, swim.

I was skinny enough to use the bridge and that was a mixed blessing. I had to look down to watch my footing. I tried not to get dizzy watching the water rush below and from the bounce of the logs. Bare feet would have had no trouble here, but jungle boots gave no purchase on the worn wood. About half way across, the guy in front of me offered his hand. I waved him on because, due to the bouncing, he looked less stable than I felt. The last log ran from the bamboo supports to the bank, it was a long one with its narrow end on the land. I held my breath and sort of mentally propelled myself across, letting my body follow the bounce and roll of the last twelve feet. Others were not so lucky. Several men fell off, web gear and all. Then a couple of air mattresses were inflated to carry equipment across, with one man guiding a full mattress across. But after a couple of loads overturned, two to three men had to swim each load across. An M-60, several M-16s, and miscellaneous web-gear sank and could not be recovered.

While the other side of the river was being trampled to mud over the past two days, here there was long green grass, soft and bushy. The whole 50 by 100 meter rectangle was covered with it. Nothing had disturbed it for awhile; there was no path to the bridge. To my right, back to the river, the canal and about half way along the river, the earth had been cut into almost vertical banks four to five feet high. To the left and along the back was the dense growth of the treelines. This was the area we were to secure and guard.

The different units of the platoon were assigned to different sections around the area. A slope, of about four feet, bisected the land from front to back. It was here that Alley located Center, at the bottom of the slope and the left treeline, a little ways in from the river. The bank was about a foot high at this spot. The idea of sleeping that low and close to the water and the trees made me feel very nervous, I'd been through floods as a kid. That, and the mood of Center, made me want to stay on higher ground.

With Dicky gone - he got along with everyone - it was less agreeable in Center. There was nothing to buffer Alley's irritable mood. Don and I never talked much and he had become withdrawn without Dicky. Jerry was friendly, but changeable, while we got along, we were not close. F.O.s came and went. Fatigue and frayed nerves did not help. We had been living on top of each other the past couple of hectic weeks. At this particular moment, Jerry snapped at me over something small and Alley made some remark that hit me wrong. Feeling useless and put down, my mind snapped "Fuck this shit!". I walked over and asked Point if I could stay with them; they had set up in the corner where the canal joined the river. For the past couple of weeks they had been very friendly and I had been keeping closer company with them. Teaque said yes, they were glad to have a medic close at hand. So I went back and ask if I could stay with Point. Alley, seeming indifferent, just wanted to know where I would be. No problem. I gathered my gear and headed to higher, friendlier ground.

Most of this area was shaped into gently rounded ridges and furrows, parallel to the slope, which ran almost to the back treeline. A band of flat ground bordered the edges of the river and the canal. In this band and around the rest of the area were regularly spaced 'rubber' trees. While over six feet tall, these were small compared to the ones we had had to jump around earlier. I went for the big, old tree; something about it dimly clicked "Home.". I dropped my gear in a pile next to it, emptied my pockets of the "C"s, then sat down, took off my jacket and pulled off my boots to examine my feet. I cringed at what I saw and felt; they were all white and wrinkled way beyond the usual wet wrinkles. They didn't look like they belonged to me. The skin in the creases hurt and on the top each arch was a scabby pimple where the boot-tongue had rubbed. I found another leech. I lit a cigarette and held it underneath until the damned thing dropped off.

While the grass was nice and soft, I knew that I would get damp if I lay down in it, tempting though that was. So I gathered several large leaves from the 'rubber' trees and laid them some down to make a space large enough to sleep on. I thought of them as green bed sheets as I sprayed them down with bug spray. I wanted to make sure I could get some rest without a lot of little crawly company joining me. I looked up and saw some of the guys were going swimming and others had soap and were lathering up. The general inspection for leeches was still on going. As the ground was free of sharp litter and stones I left my boots off and went barefoot. I found some soap I could borrow - the last thing I would have thought to bring - and headed into the water. Not wanting to strip all the oil off my skin, I just washed my face and arms. In the cool water my gut pulled tight and I realized I hadn't taken a bowel movement in the last 48 hours and quietly took care of that underwater.

Thus relieved, I started swimming and stretching a little. Swimming with pants on was a hassle; they were heavy and tangled around my legs. I took them off and threw them on the bank. It felt great to have nothing on my body. Being an inveterate skinny-dipper I felt right at home! I got teased some, then Alley went by and spotted me. He frowned and said, exasperated, "Ah, Doc, put yer pants on.". I did and

went on swimming but tired fairly quickly in the current and with the extra weight of the pants. I got out and left the others to wash and swim and float around on one of the air mattresses. They were having a good time. Some went on diving, trying to recover equipment, but the water was too swift and deep for much of that.

Next, I sat down and examined the contents of my aid bag. It had been submerged as long as I had been and, up until this mission, I usually kept it as dry as my rifle. The events of the day before had made that impossible. The joints I had packed crumbled to shreds as I touched them. Like I would have had time for that. My heart sank when I found that almost all of the "water proof" clear plastic wrapped field dressings had leaked. I now had unbleached gauze wads contained in bags half filled with murky water. In training we had been instructed to open the bags and throw the contaminated bandages away. Left packaged and disposed of, we were told, they could be used by the enemy. I felt sick and agitated, then remembered that we were told that if this should happen, we would be resupplied. Standing on the bank, I made a little project of opening the bags and throwing the contents into the river. As I watched several large chest pads, all I had brought, swirl away I became vaguely angry with the military supplier who had no idea of the real conditions their products were used under. None of this seemed right. My only comfort was that I would be resupplied. I went over to Center and had my request for more radioed in. They would be sent on the supply chopper that would be coming in later. Feeling reassured, I went back to the tree and sat down on my leaf bed to rest. A few guys came over with minor complaints to look at, but there was not a lot I could do for cuts and scrapes except tell them to keep them clean and exposed to the air, if possible.

A new guy came over and asked to borrow my rifle. He had lost his in the crossing and was going out later on one of the two three-man L.P.s. In as much as I carried mine mostly as ‘camouflage’, I considered it as a platoon ‘spare’. He and it were not going anywhere far. Something was said about digging foxholes but no one had brought any entrenching tools to dig with. A call went in for those as well. It was around 5:00 p.m. when I finally was able to lay back and take a nap, vaguely wondering about the need for fox-holes, the first time I had heard that term used in-country. That was something new. Up until now there had been no question about digging holes for cover in water-filled paddies! I dozed off, thankful to close my eyes in a horizontal position, while the artillery and mortar banged away across the river.

Between 5:00 and 6:00 a resupply chopper came in. While the chopper hovered off the ground, the crew tossed out food, mail, flack vests, entrenching tools and ... sandbags! Guenther was on board too, he had come out to check on us and bring the C-ration sundry packs that usually never made it out to the field. What they didn't have were fresh bandages. So we had six entrenching tools for 35 men and no bandages. My gut went into a knot and I went back to Center in a panic and had them call again, but it was now too late for another resupply. I was pissed to no end. It seemed that, somehow, bandages were not critical items. What were they doing back in the Aid Station? I figured the idiot sergeant was screwing with me again. While we laughed about the ineptitude of the supply chain, there was the sharp edge of wishing they hadn't been so careless this one time.

I was fit to be tied. I couldn't find out who had fucked-up. I was now down to some wet tape, a suture kit, some topical skin lotion, soggy bandaids, two small bandage packs, and my spare pairs of glasses. I felt really poorly prepared and kept turning over in my head what could have gone wrong. I felt personally let down. I would bring smoke on some ass when I got back.

I had felt better after I had eaten but now the meal didn't sit well. It was getting dark and we took turns hastily digging. This foxhole thing had become more important for some reason. The ground was dense and hard packed and stooped labor with short shovels was hard work. A few chunks of sod were tossed into the sandbags and somebody wondered why they hadn't brought us sand as well! We laid the bags

around the shallow crescent we had dug and our "foxhole" was done. Some of the men took a short cut and laid full bags on top of the ridges on the ground. We worked until it was too dark to see what we were doing and were too tired and frustrated to care.

I was included in Points' night-watch list and took the 1:00 to 2:00 am watch. I let the man ahead of me know where I was sleeping and then checked out where the man up after me would be. About 7:30 I went back to the tree to settle in for the night. I put on my fatigue jacket and flack vest, it was turning cool, the sky had cleared. Then sprayed down my leaf "bed", other guys were finding bugs taking shelter under anything lying on the ground. Fireflies had come out. They were the first I had ever seen, I watched as they made wavy loops in the dark. I caught one and had it turn to phosphorescent powder on my fingers. They were very fragile. I put my helmet on and lay down with my depleted aid bag as my trusty pillow. Warmed by the flack vest I fell asleep listening to the night sounds coming from the surrounding treelines.

I was sound asleep when I was awoken at about ten to 1:00 a.m. The night was bright enough that I could distinguish some texture and judge some distance in the pale blue light. It was still hard to pick out the mounds and clumps from the men sleeping on the ground. I could also judge textures with my bare feet; at least nobody would get a boot in the face. I found a large mound of dirt to sit on, lit a cigarette and watched the fireflies, now flickering on the other side of the canal. They looped and turned, making designs with their cold light. They looked like blowing pieces of the moon and as bright. My hour went without incident. I smoked and listened to the night sounds. I checked the time by the glowing numbers on my watch and at ten to 2:00 I walked over and woke my relief and went back to the mound. At five-of, he was up and getting ready and I headed back to the tree.

There were two muffled explosions across the river; they were not the sharp concussions of our artillery firing. There were some shouts, then another explosion, then another. I picked up my pace and heard shouts of "Incoming!" at a distance and, figuring the same, picked up the call to wake those around me who were still asleep. The popping of small arms fire confirmed something was going on, at least on the other side of the river. I ran and got my aid bag, then hit the depression we had dug. Then the firing picked up on our side. A rifle grenade hit the tree and removed any doubts that Recon was into it too. There were calls for "Medic!" across the water. After the grenade flash another man clambered in on top of me. A round, pale head was right in my face; he had big, scared eyes and rivulets of blood running from his scalp. His wounds were not serious. For a spit second we stared at each other, he said "Hi, Doc.", then we both flattened as the small arms and automatic fire became even more intense. Another man I didn't recognize slipped in on top of us. Nobody said anything as the incoming fire kicked up dirt from the edge of sandbags around us. The V.C. knew where we were.

I looked up and into another burst of fire hitting the tree. I could feel the warmth and particles hitting my cheeks. I touched my face, expecting to find it gone. It wasn't and I huddled back down with my arms over my head. I didn't know what to do. There was a pause, then the horrible mortar fire started coming in on our side of the river. The ground was shacking from the blasts.

The cries for "Medic!" started close by, full of pain and anguish, like I had never heard before. There was something about some of the calls that didn't sound right. Some were coming from the wrong direction. We had been warned, in training, that the V.C. would call out, then pick-off medics when they responded to the call. I could see myself low-crawling to help and getting a bullet square in the head. I was willing to swear to that, just then. Some of the calls had to be genuine, but I hesitated while the sandbags were getting chewed up, just inches away. I couldn't figure my odds. Before this, I always went to work after the firing stopped. I didn't know if anybody else in Recon was left alive to help. We

might be the only ones left. If we swam back across, whom would we find there? No way was I leaving that ‘hole’ until it was safe to come out. My justification became, "A live medic is better than a dead, brave one" and then beat myself up for my cowardice. The calls stopped.

I curled there wondering what to do, when thoughts of my family and home popped into my head. I became dispirited to the point of feeling sick and quickly blocked them out. I didn’t want those visions mixed with this reality. I saw them as dangerously escapist, illusory thoughts. I kept wondering if I was going to die, with that thought came panic and my heart sank further. I clenched my brain and thought, "No! I’m not going to die here!" No way, not in this place; not for anything. Then my thoughts developed into an almost uncontrollable desire to stand up in the deafening, smoking chaos, raise my arms in disgusted supplication and shout to the V.C. "Knock off the bull-shit! OK? We’ve had enough! Leave us alone, we got the idea!". This thought was supplanted with the desire to just get up and walk away and wash my hands of the whole, stupid, fucked-up mess. Walk off where? Shit, I couldn’t get beyond being pinned in a near pre-natal position. I could hardly move for the disbelief that this was real and happening to me. The firing seemed to go on forever, then it lessened. I thought, "Ah, it’s over" and V.C. would just stop and go away like they did in Bien Phouc.

The in-coming fire intensified by a beat and a half. We cringed tighter together and I could think of nothing more than paying exact attention to every sound and movement. They were ‘walking’ the mortars on the diagonal and they were getting closer. I turned and looked up; the air was filled with an amber fog of metal and dirt and plant fragments. I heard the ‘zings’, watched the dirt fly and then rain down on us. The ground rocked as the blasts got nearer. I figured that in one or two more rounds they would get to us. Another blast hit and someone yelped a few feet away. No doubt, they knew right where we were.

On the opposite bank, our artillery pulled itself together and began to return fire. There were massive ‘whooshes’ right over our heads. The Viet Cong firing slowed as the U.S. firing increased. Then outgoing small arms and automatic fired started. I had trouble believing I could hear the voices of men calling out; speaking in English. I recognized them as being from Recon. They were declaring that everyone one was across and the area was ready for point-blank fire. Those of us who could yelled across, "No, we’re still here! Hey, we’re G.I.s! Don’t shoot!". Anything to convince them not to open up on us! I was scrambling to work on somebody and he got the last of the bandages that hadn’t leaked. Our guys hadn’t known we were still here! Their fire kept going over our heads, short of a wholesale onslaught.

The ‘Word’ came across for us to withdraw. We scrambled to a low spot on the bank and slipped over and down. Before I hit the water I slipped out of my flack vest and ditched it. The water was too swift to swim in it, but I kept my helmet. While I was relieved to be moving, I was scared and near confusion. I could only function in each moment as it happened, moving forward. We crouched along the bank, until we reached the bridge. I looked back and saw two men supporting two others between them; they were the last ones. I turned back to help, but was motioned on. "It’s all right, Doc, we got ‘em.". I tuned back to the bridge, watching for who was in the water and where. I went in on the upstream side of the poles and was jolted by the shock of hot to cold. I started swimming across, keeping an eye on the other bobbing heads. Some were having trouble in the water and I helped pass them from pole to pole under the bridge. One man came around; revived in the cold, and swam the rest of the way on his own.

We crawled out of the water right under the artillery that went on firing right over our heads. I could feel hot air and stuff hitting my skin. Here, the bank was low and grassy. I gave a push to the guy in front of me, then turned to check those behind. We were all there. Some man I recognized as being from Recon called to us, gesturing from behind a low, grassy mound, off to the left. I was up to my elbows in spots as we low-crawled through some good-sized mud holes and under the muzzle blast of the big guns to get

to them. I glanced at my watch to check the time, it was gone.

Then I looked along the mound. Through the haze, I could see my guys were laying or sitting or curled up in the grass. It looked like every one was there. I was amazed, then relieved, and then deeply saddened. Here was Recon, mostly silent. No one was returning fire. They had nothing to fire with. It was Point's R.T.O. who had called over when we got across. He was scared, but clear-headed. It was from him that I found two of our guys were dead. "Lizard" and Brownotter were gone. Some of our men were on the other side of the artillery and accounted for. He asked if he should call for dust-offs and I told him yes, if we needed them, I didn't know. The firing was still intense, but I couldn't tell if it was in-coming or out-going or both. The air was full of smoke, dust and the strong, familiar smell of gunpowder.

Somebody was yelling on top of the mound. I scrambled up, keeping low. The man was lying at the far end, flat on his back and yelling for a medic. I crawled over and yelled, "OK, I'm here! What's wrong?" He continued to yell and I couldn't get it out of him where he was hit. I looked him over and couldn't find anything wrong. I couldn't get him to do anything. I finally got him to show me a shallow four-inch cut on his chest. The man could move and I wanted us down behind the mound. He wouldn't be quiet, making us sitting-duck targets. He was scared, near to shock, and stubborn. I pulled myself over him, looked down directly into his face and yelled, "There are guys hurt worse than you are who are not making half the noise you are! If you aren't hurt, then shut up, you're making us both targets!". I was guessing and bluffing. It worked. I got him to crawl down the mound to cover. Then I realized my aid bag was gone. I now had lost face: I was a medic without his aid bag. I had no idea what happened to it.

From the far end I worked my way back down the line of men, checking them out. The first were mostly exhausted and shaken and did not seem badly hurt. "I'm OK, Doc. But take a look at..." was what I was hearing. Injuries got worse, none life threatening, as I worked my way along. At one point I started guys cutting into their fatigues to use for bandaged to bind the rips and punctures and cuts I was finding. I quickly gave instructions to them on what they needed to do for each other and kept moving along. Some had already looked after each other and were stable. It seemed like an endless line of injuries I could do nothing about except offer verbal comfort and encouragement. I pinned one man's sleeve to the front of his jacket for want of a sling. I was so tired I was dizzy, it all felt deeply painful and I had to fight off going numb.

At the other end of the mound I found those with the worst wounds were with Alley and Jerry, who had a radio that he had to keep on artillery 'push'. He could not dial off it to call in dust-offs. The two most seriously wounded were Don and the new guy I had talked to the day before. Don had taken a lot of something in the neck and was moaning and breathing badly. He was half-conscious and hardly moved. The new man had taken a round in the back I was told, I had to take their word, it was too dark to see any of the wounds clearly. We couldn't move the new man for me to check. He would scream if turned. He had an unrelenting grip on Alley's jacket, then Jerry's. Over and over he kept half-pleading, half-demanding help.

He transferred his grip to me. "Do something, Doc! Do something!". But I couldn't, I couldn't wave my hand and instantly transform a wound I couldn't see to nothing. I couldn't do that and felt sick and useless. His grip was locked on my lapel. I could relieve the pain. I dug a box of my hard-won morphine out of a breast pocket. I injected both him and Don, pinning the used syrettes to their collars, but couldn't bend the needles to firmly secure them. The morphine seemed to have no effect. I transferred the gripping hand to a piece of someone else's clothing. Both men, as badly as they were injured, were in stable condition, but that wouldn't last. I was the first not the final aid and I needed help. It all seemed to take hours. I was gripped with fear that no word was out that we needed help.

I realized that I hadn't seen Mac. I asked if he was somewhere else in the area, then someone spoke up and said they had seen him dead in a foxhole. That news had barely sunk in when I felt a burning sensation on my leg. I pulled up my pant leg and found a leech wiggling on my calf. I pulled it off and flung it away. They were in the puddles behind the mound. Two more clung to my feet. They went the way of the first, no time for burning or bug spray. Behind me there were more calls for a medic. I had been ignoring them until I was finished with my own guys. I yelled to ask if they had a medic there. "Ya!", a voice from somewhere called back. "Can you handle it OK?", I asked. "Ya, I got it!", came the response.

Across the river gun-ships were raking the area with rockets, '60's, and mini-guns. My blood froze at the first burst of the mini-guns; an unreal sound like a sky full of Velcro being ripped open. The tracers ricocheted off the ground, reflecting in the water. The artillery was opening up with 'bee-hives', pounding them point-blank into the treelines opposite. The explosions in the trees gave me the best view I had had of them. Streams of bullets ricocheted around our former position. Part of getting dust-offs in was stopping the 'friendly' in-coming fire. It was a worry that a couple of short-rounds from that would have finished us all.

I had to get a dust-off in. While I waited for the radio, I became overwhelmed by it all. "Lizard", Brownotter, and Mac: gone. The first deaths we'd had in Recon. I put my head down and choked up. Point's R.T.O. reached over and touched my arm and said, "Don't Doc. Please don't." I took an uneven breath and pulled out of it. I wanted to be still, but I couldn't stop moving.

For some reason, I was the one who had to call for the dust-offs. The mound flattened out on the end, so I was lying face down in front of and next to an artillery piece going off over my head on one side and the radio and R.T.O. on the other. He dialed the push and I began,

"Cohort 33, this is Cohort Romeo Band-Aid. Do you read me? Over."

"Cohort Romeo Band-Aid, this is Cohort 33, I read you. Over."

"Cohort 33, Cohort 33. Dust-offs urgently needed this A.O. Over."

The word was out. The call went on, in stilted radio-talk. I told him I had two stretcher cases and three serious walking wounded. There were twenty-two more walking wounded with injuries of undetermined severity that I could do nothing for. I was determined to get my guys out; I wanted all of us out of there. But the dust-offs couldn't get in until all in-coming fire had stopped. The R.T.O. gave our coordinates. We had to wait. I crawled back to check on Don and the new guy and injected them with more morphine. It may as well have been sterile water for all the effect it didn't seem to have on them. The rest of the guys were remaining stable.

We waited and finally all incoming fire stopped. The dust-offs could make it in. Those who were able began to get active. Whole bars of C-4 were lit to mark an L.Z. The first chopper came in and threw the water in the puddles into a spray that whipped around us as we pulled the stretchers out the side. We ran them back to the mound. The new man was tall and heavy boned. He went into fits of agony as we lifted him and put him on the stretcher. I was on the back left corner as we picked him up and started to carry him. As we took a turn, I stepped and went ankle deep into mud. I turned, my leg didn't, my ankle twisted. The stretcher and the others kept going. I couldn't and fell forward still holding on. My corner dropped suddenly. The man screamed. Someone on dry ground grabbed the handle and kept going. I pulled myself out and started to guide the others. Then someone on the back end stumbled while coming off the mound and the stretcher went down again. The poor man's screams continue, then got lost in the

noise of the chopper. On the third try we got him on board. We went back for Don. He was heavy set, but smaller built, and was easier to carry and load. The three worst walking wounded were put on as well and the chopper left. Another dust-off came and I got another six to eight men on it. The rest were not seriously injured and could wait until morning to be taken out.

I felt a pain across the bottom of my foot when I hit some dry solid ground. I stopped to take a look and found a long shallow cut across the instep. I had stepped on a chunk of something somewhere. And I found more leeches. There was nothing more I could do for my guys, or myself, so I walked up to the middle of the area, behind the artillery pieces, where it was a little quieter. I found a scene that looked like the one I had just left behind. Men lay on the ground, some behind the crates and boxes. Two sat together, babbling incoherently, but not to each other. Another man, that nobody seemed to know, was calling for his brother in New York. I looked at him closely and recognized him as a Recon guy. He had received a concussion.

A man had been laid on some of the ammo crates; there was a small group around him. He was unconscious and seemed to have serious internal damage, but we could not determine how he was wounded. His breathing was rough and he gurgled intermittently. Two C. Co. medics and a medic from Artillery had checked him out. Our combined, conventional efforts brought no improvement to his condition. None of us had a plastic airway to insert to help him breath and we couldn't tell where the obstruction was. We couldn't use artificial resuscitation using pressure and mouth-to-mouth had been tried earlier and hadn't work. A tracheotomy was considered too risky, so a tracheostomy was suggested. The man's condition was getting worse.

I had been instructed in how to do the procedure and I had a penknife. We attempted to sterilize the blade over a cigarette lighter. I felt for the groove in the man's Adam's apple. It was surprisingly tough cutting in, through and between the cartilage and muscle. I was in when air whistled through the hole. I needed something to keep the incision open. The lower part of a ballpoint pen was the best hollow tube anyone could produce. The air rushed in and out after I inserted it in the hole. His breathing eased a little, but he still gurgled sometimes. We didn't like the sound of that, but we hoped for the best.

My head spun as I realized I had just dusted off my men who were in better condition than this man was. None of the other medics, no one, had called for a dust-off and apparently had not been aware that two had already come and gone. I swore and told them to get another one in! The man gurgled and then was still. He was dead.

The out-going fire had lessened and stopped about a half-hour before dawn. The sky got lighter as I limped back over to Recon. I started to leave the other medics to their dust-offs, then did a quick check for space and stuck some more of my guys on when it came in. I was hitting a second wind and I wanted my boots back.

The new sun was feeble but bright. The area looked oddly clean and fresh. It was like the landscape was lying about what had happened. It was the details that gave it away; the haggard, haunted look on the face of every man left. In the disorder of supplies and gear that had become the focus of reorder. As I walked down to the riverbank, I passed an officer looking across the river. As he turned and stared off I could see tears in his eyes. I was touched, then indifferent. Officers had the luxury of crying. I still had things to do. A couple of us hit the water again and swam back across to recover things we needed. Part way across, a Chinook with a damaged artillery piece dangling underneath flew over us. The rotor wash hit the old tree, splitting it in half. It came crashing down into the water almost hitting us.

Before getting out, I started to search in the mud and water around where I remembered slipping into the river the night before. I found a helmet with somebody's letters from home tucked inside the webbing of the helmet liner. There were a couple of flack vests, one probably mine, and two M-16s. I tossed them all up on the bank. Curiously, I kept bringing up pottery shards in about every other handful. It was a buff-colored ceramic with designs painted in black, unlike any I had seen before in our usual A. O.s. What I didn't find was my aid bag. I had begun to suspect that it had slipped off my shoulder when I had ditched my flack vest. The bag strap had been over my shoulder, not across my chest as usual.

I crawled up on the bank and looked around. All the 'rubber' trees had been blasted away. As I walked through the area I could see the ground was littered with helmets, flack-vests, web-gear, and rifles. We had been told to leave it all, that others would come in to do a full recovery. I checked in the shallow depression that we had called a foxhole to check if my bag was there. It wasn't. There were radiating burnt patches on the ground about five feet from where we had been. The rounds had been coming down that close. My web-gear and boots and 'C's were right where I had left them. The boots were a little damp. The web-gear and canteens were OK. The C-ration cans were riddled with tiny holes and the contents were beginning to rot. They had started to stink. The other guy got what he wanted, I put my boots on and we swam back across.

I was feeling restless and started walking around the area's perimeter, having seen little of this side of the river the day before. My perceptions of the land didn't change much; now I could see it in better light and from different angles. Even with the casualties gone, there were still more men around than I had realized. As I walked behind some ammo crates, a chopper flew over and blew up a loose tarp. Under it was the dead man, lying on a cot. Stiff and pale, with the end of the blue ballpoint pen stuck in his throat. Numbed, I realized I would never know what killed him. Next to him, on another cot, was a wrapped corpse. My heart sank as I covered them back up.

As I came down the other side I ran into what was left of Recon; nine of us left out of 35. I had been thorough in getting the rest out of there. Several men were going over to recover the bodies. I didn't know they were still there. When asked if I wanted to see them, I looked across at the far bank and thought, then asked if I had to. They said no, they could handle it. I knew that if I did, I would always remember those men that way. I wanted to remember them, as I had known them alive. I told them I couldn't do it. They understood. I did ask what happened and was told that they had all been killed in the the first minutes of the assault. I was told that Mac had a big hole in the side of his head. "Ya, real clean.", somebody said.

Off to the right, A. Company arrived. They were crossing a log bridge over a side canal I hadn't noticed. They walked by the mound. They were all clean, fresh and bright. They looked so young; they almost seemed to glow in the morning light. It clicked: this is how we were supposed to look. They were here to replace us. The two medics with them were buddies of mine from the Aid Station. I pulled one aside to look at a spot high on the back of my left thigh. Earlier I had reached back to scratch an itch and the area had begun to burn and felt raw. I couldn't see what the cause was. I dropped my pants and they both had a look. They concluded it was a shrapnel hole, but they couldn't tell how deep it went. "Looks like a Purple Heart to me.", one said.

Another dust-off was coming in. I checked with Alley. He said that he and Jerry were staying on with a couple of other Recon men. With the Alpha medics as my replacements, I was free to stay or go. In that I was now covered, had no supplies and was of little use, had a hole in my leg of unknown severity, and was unable to face another night in that place, it was agreed I should leave. I gathered up the few remaining guys with minor wounds and when the chopper arrived, got us onboard. The side doors were slid shut around us and we lifted off. It was creepy having the doors closed. The chopper flew low and fast over the rising mist of the countryside. It then rose very high and the air got cold. Sitting on the

floor, the full weight of my fatigue began to hit me. Nobody spoke as the engine roared and the blades hit the air. But for that noise, the back cabin was silent.

We landed at the hospital heli-pad in Dong Tam. The hospital was large and drafty cold. I was one of the last in line. A tired hospital medic had me drop my pants and the doctor just took a look at my wound and said the shrapnel would work its way out. I didn't get so much as a bandaid. That was it, it was that small. I was too dazed and tired to feel embarrassed and no one was putting me down. I was just one of too many others in the same condition; banged up, run down and exhausted but still on our feet. Along with the rest of the walking wounded, I was taken to a ward and assigned a cot. The ward was full and there was a lot of sneezing going on.

Eating was out of the question. I sat down on the cot, took off my boots, took out the liners and put them on the floor to dry. I dimly noticed all my safety pins were gone. I felt numb and empty. I lit a cigarette and stared at the rough concrete floor, all else fell away. I tried to believe that what had just happened to me had really happened. I was so alone, with a nagging ache inside that I could give no name to. The smoke rose around me and defined the extent of my world. I was half-asleep sitting up. I put out the cig, put my glasses in a boot and finally lay down, crashing soundly off to sleep. Some one woke me, through a haze I was told that lunch was being served. I grunted and went back to sleep. It wasn't until around four that afternoon that I awoke and felt awake. I was hungry. I hadn't had anything to eat in the past 24 hours. At five, Point's R.T.O. and I went to dinner. The food was dry and tasteless, served on the regulation dirt-brown tray, and we ate it in the dim, colorless mess hall.

It was Vito's birthday. He had turned 21; his birth time had been 2:00 am that morning. About eight of us from Recon had found each other and were in the nearly empty hospital EM club. Between the bunch of us we turned up about \$1.50 in wet, ragged chits. That was enough for a beer or soda for each of us and a bag of beer nuts for Vito. The Doors' "Light My Fire" was on the jukebox. The bartender was regaled with our survival stories, but without details. It felt good to be together, even though there was an underlying tension and sadness over what we were not talking about.

This unexpected celebration was helping to bring us out of our dazed condition. Very self-conscious and off key, we sang "Happy Birthday" and "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" to Vito and he gave a short speech. His eyes were bright as he said that he was just glad to be there with us, glad to be alive. That if someone had told him, as a kid, that he would be halfway around the world celebrating his 21<sup>st</sup>, he wouldn't have believed them! He wouldn't have believed that he would just be glad to be alive. As we sat and listened to the music I looked down at my pants. They were covered with small spots of dried blood, not mine. I found blood spots on my arms. Someone noticed my self-inspection and said I had spots on my face as well. We fell silent. In the background The Supremes sang, "...Reflections of the way life used to be / Reflections of the love you took from me...". The next morning we were trucked back to Bien Phouc.

### Epilogue:

We had a week to recover. During that time Terry was back, now working for Division History. He was in Blackhorse when he heard what had happen to us. He arrived with a tape recorder and notebook and proceeded to interview us individually or, in my case, in a group of three, the three of us who had been together in the "foxhole". He explained that he would do a typed transcription that would be edited by an N.C.O. that was over him. Then edited by a lieutenant, then by the general in charge. After we told our side of the night's events, he told us about what we hadn't seen. We had missed all the 'good stuff'.

The V.C .had thrown grenades in the river at the men who were trying to swim back across. They had

been grabbing equipment out of the foxholes, our men fighting them off as they grabbed after them. One man watched his camera stolen off his helmet. Of shooting V.C. point-blank and another would be right behind. That the V.C. had been calling out for medics. That it had taken 15 to 20 minutes of the artillery firing ‘bee-hives’ directly into the trees to stop the incoming fire and turn the fight our way. It was guessed that the V.C. had left before dawn.

From other reports it had been pieced together that uniformed Chinese had been involved, acting as cadre. They had formed the V.C. into squads and used women and children to pass ammunition forward and pull their dead and wounded back. They were also using mortars, new to the area, because they had solid ground to work on. Terry also told me a story of how he had been to Cudgel the afternoon before the attack. As they flew out he had seen large san-pans in the river headed our direction. He had told the pilot, who didn’t believe him and wouldn’t call his sighting in. He said that there was muttering in Division that Cudgel might be one of the worst disasters in its history. To have sent troops across a water barrier was a major blunder. I could only agree and began to despise the idiots who had put us there and got my guys killed.

After being chilled, exhausted, and under fed, I came down with a cold. It was going around, all that sneezing in the hospital. It was a tropical cold, with the humid plugged sinuses and a fever in the heat. After all the talking I began to lose my voice. I started taking aspirin and anti-histamines and tried to rest. The cold kept going around. The anti-histamines were not popular with some of the guys when it was found that pills didn’t mix with beer. For some, beer became the preferred medication.

The depression over what happened became like a wooly blanket wrapped around my stuffed head in the heat of the afternoons. Consumed with guilt and anguish, I waited to be called in and berated for what I supposed I hadn’t done that night. That I would be kicked out of Recon. When that didn’t happen, I could only conclude that my conduct had been so bad that it was beneath being talked about, and prepared myself for being shunned by the rest of the men. Alley had said nothing to me on our return. I didn’t go to the memorial service; I felt I didn’t belong there. I was not a good medic, I was a coward who didn’t live up to the ideals and I would have to live with that shame for the rest of my life. When the others didn’t shun me, I beat myself up instead.

Of the six medics who got together that night in Dong Tam, Ronny, three of the other medics and I, were wounded. The sixth was K.I.A..

The "new man" died later in a hospital in-country. I was told that when he heard that he would be paralyzed from the waist down, he willed himself dead. From what I knew then, and have learned later, I believe that could have happened.

Danny was "Cohort 33' on the radio that night.

I got my rifle back. When Supply showed it to me, the barrel guards were missing and there was a deep bullet groove across the barrel.

The other four safety pins went to repair clothing. I couldn’t fit that into the narrative. Where they went was a little mystery that bugged me for years.

The lost watch was a Timex with a flexible metal band. I guess that it was sucked off my wrist while low crawling through mud under the artillery.

I can still only guess when and where I lost my aid bag. I have forgiven myself for losing it.

Yes, the moon was full on those nights. We checked that out on the Internet after I doubted my notes.

To this day I live in terror of ever seeing another firefly. Fireflies = shrapnel = death.

I have forgiven whoever it was that sent us across the river that day. I have let that negative energy go.

The distinctive pottery shards were probably very old; at least 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century AD, based on what I've seen and read. Serious research into Vietnamese ceramics only began about 10 years ago and information and study pieces are uncommon.

The boot liners were forgotten and left behind at the hospital.

Another Army pilot has refuted Terry's story, of the pilot not calling in his sighting. It would have been S.O.P to have called such a sighting in. I'll leave that detail to the professional historians.

In a letter from home, my parents enclosed a front page from a local paper that read, in part:

"GIs Drive Reds Off 2 Strategic Hills Near Dak To; Repulse Attacks In South [headline, second page]

Saigon (AP) - ...Far to the south, the Viet Cong made headlong attacks on two artillery bases of the U.S. 9th Infantry Division 60 miles southwest of Saigon. American artillerymen lowered their big guns and fired point blank at the charging Communists, who reached within 25 yards of the outer line. After the charge was repulsed, U.S. officers counted 67 enemy dead. American losses were 17 wounded. ...."

"Truces Called By Viet Cong [headline, first page]

Saigon (AP) - The Viet Cong announced Saturday a three-day truce over Christmas, another of three days for the New Year and a seven-day cease-fire on the Tet lunar new year in late January and early February. The cease-fire periods were announced over the Viet Cong's liberation radio, monitors reported.

President Nguyen Van Thieu announced Saturday that the South Vietnam would observe a 24 hour cease-fire on Christmas and probably one of 24 hours for New Year's and one of 48 hours for Tet."

-The Oregonian [newspaper]; Saturday, November 18, 1967; vol.VII.

Glossary:

Recon = reconnaissance platoon

V.C. = Viet Cong

'locals' = indigenous population

T.O.C. = tactical operations center

A.P.C., ‘track’ = armored personnel carriers

Evac-Track = company medical evacuation A.P.C.

‘slicks’, ‘choppers’ = helicopters

web-top = tent used as roof over wood frame

‘C’s, C-rations = canned food, military supplied

P-38 = can opener for above

C-4 = plastic explosive

A.I.T./O.J.T. = post basic training = advanced individual training, on-the-job training

‘friendly’, ‘friendlies’ = good guys

N.C.O. = non-commissioned officer

A.O. = area of operations

conexs = military cargo containers

Bravo = radio talk for "B" = B-Company (Alpha, Bravo, Charley, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot ,etc.)

dust-off = medical evacuation helicopter

L.Z. = landing zone

Point = the guy/guys in the front unit of a patrol

Center = command unit in a platoon

AK47 = V.C. rifle

Mermite = commercial & common name for insulated metal food containers

‘smoke’ = smoke grenades

M-72, ‘law’ = one-use, fiber glass bazooka

fire base = basic permanent settlement

web-gear = suspenders, belt, pack, ammo pouches, canteens, etc.

M-60 = U.S. machine gun

M-16 = standard U.S. rifle

F.O. = forward observer = maps & artillery coordination

night-watch = some one(s) awake at all time

R.T.O. = radio transmission operator

morphine = small metal tubes w/ capped needle on one end = poke, squeeze, inject

mini-guns = rapid fire machine guns

'bee-hive' = shell that explodes into barbed shrapnel

chits = paper bar tokens

'higher' = anyone above in command

"Cohort 33" = a battalion officer's code name

"Romeo Band-Aid" = Recon medic code name

L.P. = listening post

S.O.P. = standard operating procedure

'push' = a radio frequency

E.M. = enlisted man