



RAMBO YEAR ONE POINT OF NO RETURN

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A DOUBLE EDGED GHOST WRITINGS FREESHARE RELEASE

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POINT OF NO RETURN

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a very special thanks
To all of the veterans that helped me with this,
..words are not enough. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

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The *First Blood* knife was designed by Arkansas knife-smith Jimmy Lile (1982).

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POINT OF NO RETURN

IMAGES



Here, we can see a reconnaissance team made up of both indigenous and American personnel sporting long-range equipment only moments after returning home from their last mission.



This picture shows an example of emergency stepladder use. Oftentimes, rescuing an SOG team was an extremely precarious feat and needed a quick rescue like the one only a stepladder could offer. It was much more dangerous however because soldiers not only risked falling from it, but also that the ladder became tangled up in vegetation or whatnot. That type of mishap would have very easily caused the helicopter to come crashing to the ground.



Gerber Mark II fighting knife.

The ordnance knife during the Vietnam War was the Kabar, introduced in WWII and useful for both combat and field usage. Because of its dual function, many soldiers felt the need for something more lethal, along the lines of a real and proper dagger. A dagger in the true sense meaning something longer, narrower and, most importantly of all, that had a double-edged blade.

That in fact is the reason why the most successful knife used strictly for combat in the Vietnam War was, by far, the Gerber Mark II.

Although it was never officially issued and therefore had to be paid for personally by the soldiers, it nevertheless became so widespread and 'fashionable' among them that it came to be a legend of the Vietnam War.

The LRRP (Rangers' Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols) were – and currently remain – the only elite military unit to use a real combat mission on enemy territory as part of their selection process. Only upon completion of his first real mission on enemy soil, was the rookie accepted into the LRRP and, to celebrate, was given a Mark II as a token for his new status as a true military scout. The Mark II therefore came to symbolize the whole unit as, in many ways, the Randall 18 came to represent Trautman's men.

A great part of the recognition enjoyed by the Mark II was certainly due to its menacing appearance although this recognition wasn't always well received. It even appeared in the hands of anti-war activists while they marched in protest as evidence to the world of how American soldiers had reached an all-time low wielding such a 'vicious' kind of weapon.

Some of Trautman's men owned Mark IIs as well, but they only carried them on missions when the offensive use of edged weapons was assured (or when overall equipment weight wasn't an issue).

As a knife, the Mark II was 'superior' in terms of pure offensive power but its narrow blade made it useless as a field knife.

Thus, for both Baker teams, the 'Baker knife' (the Randall 18) was the most important among knives anyway, and even more so on long-range missions, when equipment weight was of the utmost importance so soldiers would only carry one knife, that being the most useful one.

The only soldier who carried a Mark II on each mission was Coletta, keeping it on hand and ready to lend either to Rambo or Delmore, when the two 'shadow men' had a silent hit to do.



Browning 'Hi-power' handgun

Conceived in the thirties, it was one of the most widespread handguns in history and so much so to end up in the hands of both sides during the Second World War.

A nine millimetre pistol, the first design ever to host an amazing thirteen rounds in its magazine (hence its name) without any reliability problems, some forty years before it became the worldwide standard for semi-automatic handguns.

It only started to phase out in the nineties but it's still currently used in many countries worldwide.

Even if it was never issued by any US personnel, many SOG soldiers carried it instead of their 1911s because of its loading power which was better suited for the extreme SOG combat situations.



M79 grenade launcher, A.K.A 'blooper'.

The M79 was supposed to let a soldier launch grenades both with extreme accuracy and at a very long range.

The M79 was however, as heavy and cumbersome as a standard rifle, and since it could only fire grenades, it couldn't be used at close range or for self-defence.

Thus the army created a special grenade shooting buckshot ammo (like hunting shotguns use), but even then, a soldier with an M79 often had to use his 1911 in the most dangerous of moments.

That was therefore, the main reason why the Baker teams hardly ever used it.



M72 light-rocket launcher, US made.

The equivalent of the Russian counterpart, the famous RPG, except lighter, more modern and unquestionably more accurate too.

Unlike the Russian RPG the M72 was disposable so it did not need reloading.

Discontinued for more than a decade, its production was recently resumed for the Iraqi and Afghanistan Wars, due to it being lightweight, compact and above all, low in cost which allowed wide scale usage.



Attack-helicopter model 'Cobra'

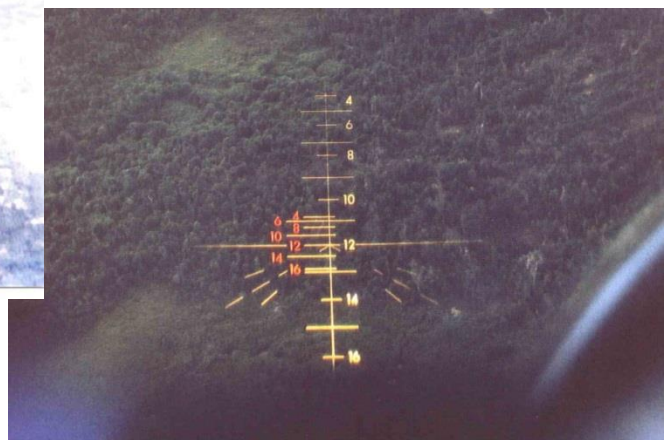
It was primarily used as an armed escort for other aircraft but oftentimes even as an attack helicopter especially on targets that were hard to identify by jet fighters (which required exact coordinates to hit their targets at such a high speed).

It carried a very heavy, quick shooting (20-millimeter) machine gun, rockets and missiles. There were numerous rockets but unlike the missiles were unguided and thus shot flatter like projectiles, but on impact caused serious damage.

The missiles on the other hand, were fewer in number but able to follow a target (such as vehicles or tanks) and had a much more powerful warhead.

The firepower a Cobra could therefore unleash in a matter of seconds was second to none.

Here below the Cobra's cockpit and its HUD display while shooting one hundred bullets a second.



Point Of No Return

Jorgenson woke to the darkness of his eyelids.
There was a stench of alcohol, chlorine and blood and people screaming in his ears.
There was a lot of it, and it was surrounding him.
Opening his eyes he caught sight of a tent ceiling above him.
The base hospital – he thought.
Then, with exasperating slowness he turned his head ever so slightly.

Next to the operating table where he was lying, two very filthy, un-gloved hands struggled, (albeit in vain) to block a pair of legs which were amputated at the knee. The stumps were spinning and thrashing about like the level of pain was unbearable. Only then did Jorgenson finally understand where the screaming was coming from even if it didn't explain why there was so much of it.
It just wouldn't stop.

“GIVE ME A FUCKING HAND!” someone yelled from behind him.

There was blood pouring from the stumps and squirting everywhere, so much that to almost hit Jorgenson right in the eyes. The sight of those dirty, gloveless hands touching an open and bleeding wound made it even worse to watch than it already was.

“YOU THERE! GIVE ME A FUCKING HAND, FOR FUCK'S SAKE!”

Jorgenson shut his eyes tight straightaway, and despite looking away, all that screaming made it impossible to get that horrible picture out of his head.

Only then did he realize he couldn't move.

Paralysis – he thought.

I'm paralyzed from the whip down.

His eyes shot wide open at the thought and he'd *probably never close them ever again.*

A plain olive coloured cloth was all that separated him from an ongoing operation, and in fact blood was streaming out from under it. Jesus Christ, it was like the cloth-screen hid some kind of blood-filled drainpipe.

When he looked up he noticed it wasn't actually a single cloth but two, one on top of the other with a small opening between them.

The patient's jungle boots on the next table were as plain as day.

He noticed they were shaking a bit, like they were having convulsions.

Jorgenson looked back up at the ceiling because no matter where his eyes wandered off to, he couldn't find peace.

Then unintentionally, he glanced back at the stream of blood still flowing on the hospital tent-floor.

It wasn't just blood though, but some innards as well which could easily have been leaves drifting down a river.

It looked like trash tossed onto the floor.

A pair of hands – gloveless yet again – reached down to pick those intestines up and take them away.

“What are we supposed to do with this shit?”

“Stick it up your ass”

It was then that the voices around him became distant, almost surreal and Jorgenson's heart started beating faster.

He was dying, and he knew it.

As he turned away from the horror he felt a presence. Shifting his stare back down to the floor and straining to focus, he realized it was a rat.

There was a big, black, disgusting full-fledged city rat observing him, and despite all the rats he'd eaten during the Special Forces training program, seeing it not only made him nauseous but horrified too.

Oh God, please.

Oh God.

When the oversized creature's shiny eyes finally met Jorgenson's, and their stares crossed fleetingly, to Jorgenson everything seemed to last much longer.

The rat sniffed the air uncertain about what to do next.

Jorgenson had a very clear idea about what a rat like that would be looking for in a place like this.

Something to eat.

Jorgenson swallowed and suddenly lost his breath.

He would much rather have died than stay there even a minute longer.

The sewer rat glanced at Jorgenson one last time without much care, then completely lost all interest in him and vanished.

“This one won't last more than half an hour. Let's not bother”

No, no, no...

Please, don't.

I don't want to die.

Jorgenson didn't know where to look anymore, but was even afraid to shut his eyes because if he did, he would probably never open them again.

So, despite wanting to resist, Jorgenson closed his eyes anyway, and everything turned black and slowed down, as if that very darkness had become a river, and he

was floating down it.

Shortly after, it darkened even more and there was silence.

When Jorgensen opened his eyes again, a military chaplain was muttering something above him but this time, his eyes were shut.

He was reading him his last rites.

So this is really the end – he thought.

The chaplain continued muttering quietly, head down, eyes shut with one hand on his heart and the other on Jorgenson's chest.

As soon as he was done with his last blessing the man pulled his hand away and left without turning back.

Once he was alone, Jorgenson suddenly got a whiff of piss.

He'd just pissed himself like a Goddamn kid.

Seriously? Carl 'grizzly' Jorgenson, member of the non-existent Secret Services' Special Forces unit A.M. Baker team, had just pissed himself for real? Was this really happening?

Did death really drag you down that low?

He tried yelling for help but nothing but a feeble voice came out.

“What do you think?” somebody said

“I think this one's got his brain bashed in. Even if he made it through the night, he would be a mess for the rest of his life anyway”

“Not necessarily”

“Oh, really? Look at his head. He'll be a fucking vegetable trust me. This one would be better off dead for his sake”

“Hang on, listen...I had a hell of a time getting the internal bleeding in this asshole's head under control. Now that the emergencies are done with, I can finally open him up”

“And I'm telling you it's nothing but a waste of time. We've been operating for the past twenty hours, man. Let's go have a beer”

“Come on man just one last try”

“Look at this!”

“What the...”

“Alright then”

Something moved around Jorgenson.

“You know what? I'm going to operate again and if you're up to it you can give me a hand, if you're not, then you can go fuck yourself. I can sort it out myself. I don't need your help, really”

“Jesus Christ, okay. I'll help you”

The acidic smell of diarrhoea overwhelmed Jorgenson.

Not this too – he thought.

Not this.

Then a needle pricked his arm, and that was a good sign because pain meant he must still be alive.

Before he knew it however, he felt weaker and lightheaded.

He fought to stay awake but it was futile, and in no time at all, everything was dark again.

RAMBO YEAR ONE

POINT OF NO RETURN

Dak To

The surgeon came out of the hospital tent wiping his hands on a paper towel. As soon as Trautman saw him, he rose to his feet.

“Have you been waiting for me long?”

Trautman didn't reply. He just stared into the surgeon's eyes without any kind of facial expression waiting to finally be told the truth. So the doctor lowered his look hoping to avoid the colonel's eyes while he spoke.

“Jorgenson won't make it through the night” he said. Trautman swallowed.

Jorgenson wasn't just 'anyone' to him. For the colonel, Jorgenson was one of 'his own' men. He'd trained him personally, and since he'd made it back from the battlefield alive, he'd imagined, albeit briefly, that he was going to live. Being hopeful was foolish however, and a part of him had always known it.

“Rambo, Delmore and Danforth will make it. There may be aftermath with Rambo's arm though and I've got some serious doubts about the complete recovery of Danforth's eye as well. We'll know more in a few days”

“That's all?” Trautman asked.

“Yes sir”

The colonel turned his heels and went back to the command.

Three dead and five injured out of sixteen men.

Overall, the mission had been successful and there were no doubts about that. If central command forced his teams to fight a few more conventional missions resembling the last one however, there wouldn't be any experimental program for Trautman to bring forward much longer.

That night, Trautman had risked losing both his teams even before they'd actually done the kind of unconventional mission he had really created and trained them for. *Goddamn brass heads* – he thought as he continued toward the base's command.

As Trautman opened the entrance door to the base, he saw Garner sitting on a chair

waiting for him.

“Jorgenson?” he asked.

Trautman however merely shook his head without saying a word.

“Goddamn it” Garner replied, slamming his feet on the floor.

“I heard he was still alive”

“Not for long”

Garner looked up, took a deep breath and tilted his neck to one side, making it crack not unlike boxers do before starting a match.

Finally, he said:

“He’s got a little girl if I remember well”

Trautman nodded. Garner then lowered his thoughtful eyes.

“And how are Rambo, Delmore and Dan forth doing?”

“They will all be K.O. for a few months. As for long-term consequences, Rambo might have permanent arm damage and Dan forth may lose an eye. We’ve got to wait for them both”

“Jesus. We’ll have to join the two Baker teams”

“That’s probable”

They were both silent for a minute.

“I don't know what to say Trautman”

“You probably shouldn’t say anything then”

Garner reflected for a while.

Then Trautman said:

“I’d say that’s it Garner. Now let's go and officially close this fucking operation down once and for all”

In the meantime, Rambo was in the Dak To Hospital, together with some other patients with minor injuries.

Rambo patted his bandaged arm lightly while trying, albeit in vain, to ignore the sharp pains coming from it.

The bandage on it was pretty good; it would do for the time being.

“How long do I have to stay here?” he said.

“When can I go back to my base?”

“You should stay in bed at least two days, but I need that bed, so we’re going to send you right back to your base today. You’ll need to get absolute rest though”

Rambo started collecting his things off the floor.

“Hang on, kid. I haven’t finished yet”

Rambo stopped.

The doctor was quiet for a moment, like he was trying to find the right words.

Finally, he said:

“I don’t know how to tell you this kid... So I’ll just say it. Your career in Special Forces is over”

Rambo looked up at the doctor.

“You’ve sustained permanent damage to your arm”

Rambo looked at him almost as though he hadn’t heard a single word.

So the doctor added:

“You’ll never be able to use it the same way”

Rambo defiantly tried moving his hand and saw that he could.

“I didn’t say you were paralyzed, I said you sustained some permanent damage which is different. You can stay in the army, but you’ll never be one hundred percent functional again. In other words, you’re done with the Special Forces”

Rambo opened and closed his right hand again.

“When they realize your arm is not working the way it used to, they’ll have to send you home, because that’s the way they work”

Rambo looked down and said:

“I guess I’ll become ambidextrous then”

Fifteen minutes was all it took for Trautman and Garner to declare Operation Black Spot closed and dismiss both the liaison officers and the base's joined personnel as well.

When the time came for goodbyes however, there was no hand shaking, nor pats on the back.

Considering the strength of the attack, the base's defences had held up well, yet there were heavy losses and in Vietnam, it had been a long time since the idea of having fought well could be a consolation for anyone.

A few minutes later, Garner and Trautman were walking down base corridors once again, but this time heading silently towards the exit. Before walking out the door, Garner stopped Trautman with a gesture.

“We got through that fast” he said.

Trautman nodded but looked like he was thinking about something else.

So Garner added:

“Samuel... We could have lost both bases”

Trautman didn't reply.

“It could have ended up a lot worse than it did. More than one of the brass heads would have enjoyed seeing us torn to shreds, and you know that”

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That's true – Trautman thought.

It was even worse than that.

Because no matter how cruel it might sound, Garner was playing it down, and by a lot.

Trautman had managed to hide it from everyone - Garner included - but the truth was that general Loyd had sent the two Baker teams into such a conventional, full-front battle to fight alongside regular soldiers because that wasn't the Baker teams' specialty in the first place.

In fact, the two Baker teams were experts in guerrilla warfare, not total warfare.

Maybe, Loyd simply imagined they wouldn't have excelled in that kind of operation but nothing else. He'd probably done it without really realizing it.

But then again, maybe He'd done it on purpose.

Perhaps Loyd had risked sending all of them (or almost of all them) to their deaths on their very first mission.

On the other hand, maybe, just maybe, it was how He'd hoped to get rid of

Trautman's program (and his career) over night.

In the end, four or five more deaths - or even just permanent injuries – would have been more than enough to end the Baker team program for good.

Making Trautman's experimental project look bad also meant making the colonel's whole view on the war look bad with it.

It went without saying that the colonel's career was obviously moving forward at the expense of Loyd's if you took into account that they had opposing viewpoints on everything.

The Loyd issue was something Trautman had to put off however, at least for now, just like he had to forget about losing Mac Daniel to friendly fire.

Trautman swallowed.

One enemy at a time – he thought.

The real ones first.

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Trautman headed for the exit and Garner followed behind him.

“One more thing colonel, regarding Jorgenson... Are not we going to tell the guys about it?”

“Not yet, Garner. The entire team made it home despite all expectations, and I want to keep it that way, at least for tonight. Let’s just let them celebrate”

Garner nodded thoughtfully, while the two of them continued down the corridor.

Trautman looked at him, and then added:

“It's not lying. I simply want them to feel like they’ve won, at least tonight. You can understand that, can’t you?”

“Of course I can, Samuel. That way they can celebrate a win. Otherwise...”

“Exactly”

Trautman reflected further, and then added:

“In all actuality, both teams really did win despite the losses. Last night those sixteen guys were on a rampage Goddamn it. And they did it on both bases”

Then, out of nowhere, the colonel suddenly seemed to come back to life.

He stopped and turned to Garner.

“Don't you get it Garner? Do you realize what those guys actually did last night? Especially Baker team B's performance. Their defence was...”

“Like never before. No one in Vietnam had ever seen that kind of defence before”

“And the next morning, they volunteered straightaway for another high risk mission. Even the wounded ones did. Even Eagle did”

Trautman nodded.

Then Garner said:

“We’ve never had men like these before colonel, never. And the credit is all yours, Trautman, it’s your program”

Trautman’s face lit up momentarily, but his enthusiasm and the light in his eyes lasted just that. As soon as he shared these last words with his friend, his thoughts went right back to team A’s losses, and to the painful agony Jorgenson was now facing, only minutes before death.

That was why shortly thereafter, his face went serious again.

“Everyone's performance was extraordinary and yet, it wasn't enough” he said.
“That's because nothing's ever enough in this fucking war,” Garner immediately answered.

“Not even being the best is ever enough in this frigging war, right, colonel?”

Trautman smiled bitterly.

“I said that, didn't I?”

“Of course you did, colonel”

“Yeah...”

They started walking again down the corridor towards the exit, but when they got there, Trautman stopped again.

“I need a drink,” he said.

“Don't you want to de-brief the brass heads right away?”

“Not this time, Garner, not really. We can do it tomorrow. What I could use right now is a drink. Do you want to join me?”

“I can't. I still have a million things to do”

“Okay then, I think that’s all for today”

Trautman then waved goodbye to Garner and went outside on his own.

Just as Trautman found himself alone outside however, he changed his mind. Instead of heading for the bar he made his way back to the hospital base, to see Jorgenson one last time before he died.

Don't do it – said a voice inside him as he walked at a brisk pace.

With all the politics behind that operation and everything else on his mind, Trautman was so enraged already that meeting Jorgenson that last time would have simply made the situation worse.

He was about to blow.

Don't go— that voice insisted.
Let it go.

He knew that visiting one of his men on their deathbed was a big mistake, but not going would have been worse.
Heart in hand he walked into the hospital tent.

Trautman stood silently looking at his man – Carl 'Grizzly' Jorgenson – one last time. The doctors didn't even think He'd have made it through surgery for his brain haematoma actually. Yet, several hours later, private Jorgenson was still, and would be for some time, on the verge of dying.

That night however, if God was willing, his pointless and long felt agony would have finally ended.

Jorgenson, Carl: twenty-four years of age, a wife and daughter.

Trautman had gotten to know him very well during his last two years of training in Fort Bragg.

In fact he may know him a little too well for his own liking.

Jorgenson enlisted in the Special Forces and Secret Services explicitly to support his wife and daughter. Seeing that he wasn't well off and his wife's father was a general, her family had cut all ties after they got married. In the end, maintaining his family was the real reason why Jorgenson joined the SOG.

Money alone however wasn't usually a good enough reason to do that kind of job. Jorgenson had not only successfully made it through the selection process but had even turned out to be a very good soldier.

It was a shame that it all had to end like this.

A real stroke of bad luck.

Trautman swallowed.

The soldier was lying on the hospital bed, still unconscious and the colonel was sure he could see the pain he was in by the expression on his face.

Trautman had never personally met his wife or daughter, but He'd seen their photo, and after spending all those months in Fort Bragg with Jorgenson, it was as though they'd met.

They'll be all right just the same – Trautman said to Jorgenson in his head as though the soldier could hear him. No matter where his soul happened to be right now while his body was there, dying slowly, he was sure he received his thoughts.

In any case, he really did believe that the soldier's wife and daughter would have got on all right after his death.

Once Jorgenson passed away, general Williams would have certainly reconnected with his daughter and start providing for them both.

You made it anyway Carl – Trautman concluded.

He rubbed his face like someone does when they're tired and need to wake up.
You made it all the same soldier.

Jorgenson mumbled and merely being there next to him was painful for the colonel.

You're a weakling and a sentimentalist – Trautman thought to himself.
He shifted his weight from one foot to the other,

*If I ever get this feeling in the wrong place or at the wrong time, it could affect my judgement.
I could end up making a mistake because of it, and my mistakes could get someone killed.*

Trautman sighed.

*I've got to learn to not feel anything.
I've got to learn to be stronger.*

It was odd that he wasn't able to be as strong as he needed to.
Jorgenson wasn't the first man He'd lost like this (to agonizing pain), nor would it be the last for sure, and the colonel was fully aware of that.
Not many are lucky enough to die a quick painless death when at war.

One more – Trautman thought.
That's another one Samuel. You're the one responsible for the pain that poor guy is in right now.

Trautman knew he had to calm down, but he really couldn't. He never should have gone there to see Jorgenson that last time.

Trautman lifted his top lip over his teeth almost as though he was about to growl.

He knew that feeling growing inside of him and summoned it up from a few years back.

It was the same one he'd felt the first time he killed someone.

Ryan.

That's right, agent Ryan the CIA traitor.

Don't do it – he said to himself, while his hand moved towards his waist checking for the 1911 he always carried on his belt.

Just hang on a minute and think this through carefully before you do something you'll regret.

He just couldn't though.

Therefore, Trautman looked him in the face for the very last time, turned on his heels and left.

Once Trautman was out of the hospital he got his breath back again.
That day the sun was shining high over the base.
The colonel hesitated for a second when for some reason he shivered.

*Don't do it – he thought.
Just let it go.*

Instead of listening to that inner voice however, he found himself walking hurriedly towards the base's entrance gate.

Are you losing your mind? - He asked himself.

Once he reached the crossing, the two guards saluted him, albeit puzzled by the sight of him. No one would ever walk around Dak To wearing a full uniform and sporting badges.

“Sir?” said one of the two guards, but Trautman disregarded him and maintained his quick pace towards the city.

Once past the main gate the true sense of what he was doing became apparent and Trautman asked himself for the second time what the devil he was doing. Leaving the Dak To base was like stepping into no man's land. If however you weren't actually out on the town but had decided to sport your stripes like Trautman was that evening, well, that was attempted suicide. In effect, the colonel was out of his mind by then. He looked straight ahead, almost aiming at an enemy target that only existed in his head, and made his way through the city streets.

COLD RAGE

The battle had only been over for a couple of hours but the streets were already full of people.

A group of begging children had immediately made its way to Trautman and surrounded him, jumping all around. The two children who were much younger than the others were bare-naked.

“Okei, okei. Amerika okei”

Their small hands stretched outwards the colonel while some pulled on his uniform's sleeves as he walked down the road.

Although Trautman ignored their requests, he couldn't help but look at them.

Whether it was the famine, disease or the war itself, most of those children would have died before they reached the age of seven.

One of them already had a swollen belly, which meant that he was highly malnourished.

In no more than a few days, that child would have slipped into a downward spiral of sleepiness and delirium, that always and inevitably ended in death.

Trautman knew there wasn't anything he could do about it.

Even if he tried taking care of him, a thousand others would end up the same way. In the end, there was scarcely anything to do to stop it.

Therefore, what was the point in saving only one?

There were other ways to get over guilt.

No one can save the whole world on his own at least not in this lifetime anyway.

Maybe in the next one, but certainly not in this one.

Trautman consequently simply went on disregarding them as he headed towards the city limits.

Calm down – he thought to himself.

You're just irate so calm down.

Think straight.

As he got further and further from the base, the streets filled with pass-byers, beggars, people on bikes and sometimes, there was even the occasional U.S. jeep with ARVN or American soldiers in them.

*Don't do it – said a voice in his head, as he stared into the crowd through lost eyes.
Control yourself because if you don't you'll blow everything.
If you get yourself killed, everything you've done so far will go up on smoke.*

Despite it all, Trautman continued through the crowd and, eventually in the midst of all those people, the occasional Vietcong face began popping up right in front of him.

They were all male, in their twenties or thirties and all had the same Vietcong style haircut. Their skinny bodies tended to have a straight and firm martial arts posture along with a very attentive stare.
There was no mistaking them.

The first one Trautman came across was so close when they passed each other that he could have reached out and touched him.

*Those sons of bitches – he thought angrily.
Walking out in the open just like that.*

But it's not like he could basically shoot them in the head with all those people around in cold blood,

As he went along his way, some Vietnamese respectfully moved out of his path, while others quickly disappeared back into the crowd preferring not to be seen at all. There were a selected few however, that stayed exactly where they were, staring at Trautman with hate filled eyes and a subsequent lack of interest in hiding it.

Trautman continued on his way like he hadn't noticed.
At a quick pace, he passed through the dangerous crowd for a while longer and only stopped when he finally got to his destination.

The Blue-Moon Bar was a bleak, one storey building, with a wooden sign that had been painted by hand.

It was practically empty inside and that day it looked more worn down than usual thanks to the light of day coming in through the windows. In a corner of the room, there were two young prostitutes who were both completely nude on top and thin enough to seem malnourished.

The two girls just laid there in a state of drowsiness, obviously high on opium, even if it was only morning. They were probably still high from the night before.

Trautman sat down at the bar, took his beret off and ordered a drink in Vietnamese. A guy popped out from behind the back door.

He came in, poured the colonel a drink, furtively looked around for any trouble and quickly disappeared again.

Trautman sipped his drink alone in silence as he waited.

He knew he was being watched.

In fact, only shortly thereafter, a Vietnamese made his way through the same back door.

He was gangly, taller than the average Vietnamese was and past his prime.

The man's forehead was high and sweaty, and there was oily hair coming down on it.

His eyes were as thin as slits while his facial features were rock hard.

Trautman didn't bother looking up from his glass.

"Your information was wrong, Lao" he said.

In a shrill and somewhat alarmed voice, the man started babbling incoherently, but when Trautman looked up at him he stopped point blank.

"The Vietcong were there, no? Information right" Lao said.

"No, no..." said Trautman shaking his head.

Then he added:

"First of all, there were two attacks, not one like you said"

"Vietcong's team were here. I told you they were!"

"No Lao, no... They weren't Vietcong's team like you said, but a whole damn battalion and they weren't the damn Vietcong at all, but North Vietnamese regulars" Trautman then leaned a bit over the bar towards Lao, and this time his eyes were the ones full of hate.

"We lost a lot of men because of you Lao"

The Vietnamese backed up all the way to the wall until his shoulders was up against it

"You, You..." he said stuttering.

"You lost men? Vietnam lost men every day! And much more than Amerika! I was right! You know nothing about Vietnam! NOTHING!"

From the corner of his eye, Trautman noticed the two prostitutes get up and disappear, and he knew exactly what that meant.

Then Lao added:

"You! Stupid American full of medals come here, fuck women, smoke opium and you think you understand my information!"

"I don't *'fuck women or smoke opium'*, Lao. Now you listen to me..."

"Then you fuck also for free if you want, but I no work for Vietcong! No! I work for those paying me! You pay me and I gave you information!"

"Exactly, Lao... You work for whoever pays you, and that was a *trap*"

Lao moved his head back in an attempt to catch his breath while Trautman, who was

still on the other side of the bar, kept his eyes on him.

In the South-East-Asian way of life, money was money no matter what, so selling information was a job like any other, and selling to both the Americans and the Vietcong simultaneously was normal, and there was no shame in doing it.

By that time however, the Vietnamese knew fully well that the Americans didn't see it the same way.

They didn't understand it, but they knew it.

The colonel in particular had made a name for himself citywide being especially harsh when it came time to enforce it.

That's why, after a long pause, Lao said in a feeble voice:

“No trap... I never betray my friend Trautman”

Nevertheless, he was lying, which is why Trautman looked straight into his eyes.

“No, man... I know you did, Lao. You took money from both of us, me and them, but the information you gave me was distorted”

“No...”

“Oh yes it was, Lao”

Under the counter and out of Lao's sight, Trautman ever so slightly lifted the holster carrying his 1911, to keep from shooting himself in the leg once he got around to pulling the trigger.

Not wanting to make a sound loading, he raised the hammer just as slowly too.

“How much did they pay you Lao?” Trautman said.

“I no betrayed”

At this point they stared at each other motionless.

They didn't move a muscle until Lao did something unexpectedly, taking Trautman by surprise.

Lao smiled.

With a smile, he said

“Trautman friend...”

Trautman looked at him

“I have costs, my friend. I hav'a bar that costs a lot daily and gimme no money. The Vietcong pay me well. They pay me a lot if I give them you alive”

Trautman then lowered his eyes back to his glass.

“I am fully aware of this, Lao” he said, and shot him through the wooden counter.

The gun was so close to the colonel's leg that he felt a sharp pain from the backfire. The forty-five made such a bang in that little place that even Trautman's eardrums hurt. It wasn't the first time he had fired a gun that way, so, despite the pain he knew perfectly well he wasn't shot.

The colonel had hit Lao right in the middle of the chest, where he could see blood quickly flooding out from.

For a split second Lao stood on his feet with a seemingly surprised expression, but slowly collapsed to the floor thereafter.

There was a small piece of intestine coming out of the hole.

His looked like He'd just seen a ghost.

Then a pool of blood started spreading on the floor.

Trautman got up from the stool and pulled out his pistol.

He knew shooting it while it was still in the holster could cause a jam, so just to be sure, he racked the slide again and a bullet flew through the air – *Clack!* -.

With his gun now at the ready, he looked around.

The place was still empty and silent, but despite this he felt he wasn't alone.

“You can come out now” said the colonel

“I won't kill you”

A little kid came through the back door behind the counter.

He had an old French colonial rifle in his hand and was shaking. His eyes were wide open, flinching and watery.

His weapon was pointing down and it didn't seem like he intended to raise it either.

Trautman pointed his handgun at him and suddenly, the kid's eyes came back to life.

He was barely sixteen.

Trautman was hoping he didn't have to kill him but kept all hopes safely hidden behind his rock hard expression.

“You shouldn't pick up that kind of thing if you don't plan on using it” he said.

Then, he added:

“You're still neutral in this district, are not you?”

“Y-yes S-Sir”

“Fine”

Trautman tossed three coins over the bar.

“If you ever decide to change sides for good, let me know”

Trautman turned and walked out the door disappearing into an undiscerning crowd.

Only once he was lost in the crowd did he finally feel safe and sighed in relief. Looking up at the sky, he closed his eyes and let the sun warm his face for a second. As his eyes opened, his stare returned to normal. Looking straight at the horizon, his eyes moved over the crowd.

*That takes care of one – he thought.
We'll get the other tomorrow.*

Dak To city Hospital

As Trautman headed back toward the base, Barry Delmore was on the other side of town at the Dak To Hospital, groaning in his bed.

The Afro-American's face was covered in sweat as he attempted to handle the pain by clenching his teeth and tightening his jaw.

How many of them did you kill last night Delmore? - He asked himself. After the first five however, the others seemed to be jumping for cover rather than hitting the ground dead. In any case, once the element of surprise was gone, everything happened too fast for him to really keep count.

Sons of bitches, bastards.

That night Delmore had finally gotten his revenge, which by that time had taken him two never-ending years to get, but when the time finally came He'd killed a lot of them, a whole lot of them indeed.

Right then and there however, the pain in his shoulder was piercing and the enthusiasm for last night's carnage was slowly fading.

Oh Jesus – he thought.

This is really excruciating pain.

There was basically no ignoring it.

And Johnny was the one who hit me – he thought.

Friendly fire.

But could he really define friendly fire a single shot that had hit him by mistake? Most importantly of all however, how the hell did it hit him from that far?

Maybe He'd used a satellite trajectory.

All the same, it was too hard to blame Johnny.

Rambo had saved everyone's ass that morning and Delmore knew it.

The pain must have been making him incoherent.

In the chaos of the battle, Rambo had been a little too reckless when He'd planted that claymore. His injury was nothing more than a streak of bad luck, just one of those things that happen when you are in deep shit and you have to take extreme measures in record time.

Of course forgetting Rambo's mistake was easier for everyone else, but for him who had been hit right in the shoulder, it was a little different.

All that fucking pain sure didn't help either.

AAARGH – was all he could say.

All in all, he was more disappointed about missing the party than anything else.

That night the entire Baker Team would have celebrated its first victory in Saigon. Everybody except for him that is. He was going to spend his night in that bed like an asshole.

That sucks – he thought.

After all the pain he went through doing the selection process in Fort Bragg (and then training for another year and an half) all the suffering had finally paid off in victory. Yet that night he wouldn't be there when his mates were going to celebrate it.

He almost felt like He'd fought for nothing.

It was as though He'd spent the last two years waiting for that night, not to mention how much he wanted to celebrate Ortega, Goddamn it.

Ortega had achieved a lot on that mission.

He'd been a hell of a vice-team leader and He'd really split Danforth's burden of command.

Barry hoped that Ortega had an exceptionally good time at the party that night because his friend was oftentimes a little too serious. He was always worrying about something or other and never had a smile on his face even at the best of times.

Delmore was lost in his thoughts – along with pain – when a doctor interrupted him.

“You're going to need a couple of months son to get over everything, but there won't be any long term consequences. The shot skimmed the bone but not hard enough to shatter it., You wouldn't have a shoulder at all right now if it had, so you'll be as good as new again, boy. I know it hurts like hell but I have orders not to give any painkillers to you Special Forces guys unless it's absolutely crucial. Anyhow, you should cheer up boy 'cause you're going back to the real world for a week or two at least because in this state you're no use to anyone anyway. And you'll be like this for some time, trust me”

Meanwhile, in that very hospital but in a different wing, a nurse named Shelley was taking care of Danforth's bandaged eye.

For the first time after what felt like an eternity, Danforth had nothing to think about which was, in itself, very liberating.

He had to admit that having no responsibilities to think about for a couple of days at least felt extremely good. There were no ammo checks, no revising maps with Ortega and no food or water inventory that needed doing. He didn't even have to work out. Truth be told, enjoying every single last drop of all of those privileges was all he needed to do. A real bed with real sheets, electricity, a real safe place to sleep, and most of all, the nurses, like that Shelley.

"I'll have to come by two times a day, to apply this again" the nurse said, as she showed him a medicating cream.

"You'll have to stay here at least two nights. We need to keep your eye under observation"

"Whatever you want, sweetie"

She smiled, stood up and walked away without noticing how Danforth was staring at her well-moving bottom"

"Whoa, man" said the black guy lying on the bed beside Danforth's.

Then the two simply nodded at each other while staring at the nurse as she walked away.

Evening finally came and, as soon as the sun had set, an exhausted Danforth fell into a kind of drowsy state.

That night he thought yet again of the old man He'd killed back in the US so long ago. It seemed like a lifetime since his last thoughts about him.

Fighting on this mission had been completely different from the gas station robbery.

Every single fucking feeling He'd had during Operation Black Spot had been one hundred times worse than ANY other stupid thing he'd ever done earlier in life.

Black spot had been sheer delirium.

The worst moment of all was when his rifle blew up in his face.

He'd always thought that the phrase 'blow up in your face' when referring to rifles was nothing more than an exaggeration. He'd somehow imagined the odd metal piece

flying here and there, but be lethal? Okay, maybe it was possible, but an exploding rifle was certainly no hand grenade.

Experiencing it first-hand however, had made him change his mind.

It was a miracle that he hadn't lost an eye. In reality, the most incredible thing of all was that he hadn't lost them both.

Not that any of this particularly interested him, that is.

In fact, neither being disabled nor leaving the SOG or so many other things really mattered much to him anymore. It's certain that the SOG would never have kept him if he was missing an eye, but the truth was that none of these things really meant anything to him now.

In his opinion, simply being alive would more than suffice, and it seemed like a great deal already.

If Messner hadn't stopped him with that dam helicopter, and he'd kept on chasing the Vietcong's battalion he had have gotten himself killed, along with everyone else on board for sure.

Although he had messed up a couple of important decisions that day, it had nevertheless gone well, actually remarkably well considering how it could have ended up.

He then drifted back to his memories, this time recalling when they'd defended the base.

A rifle blowing up in your face? Come on, that was nothing.

That night on the battlefield, Danforth had stabbed his enemy to death. Not many soldiers out there could say they'd been through something like that and lived to tell about it.

The bullet wound in his shoulder was burning and it made him feel a bit feverish and delusional too.

The moment he closed his eyes he saw an image of himself with a ski mask on. His replica was standing above him looking down, and he was holding a double-barrelled shotgun in his hand.

Danforth's eyes shot open bringing him back to his dark hospital room and the sound of fellow patients fast asleep.

Fuck – he thought to himself.

What a fucking bad trip.

He managed to calm himself down and shortly thereafter, his eyes closed once more but only to see the same scenario all over again. This time however, he was the old man playing dead on the gas station floor, and standing over him was his replica, the other him, wearing a ski-mask and still holding the double barrelled shotgun.

In other words, his replica, the Joseph in the dream was about to shoot him right in the face.

The double-barrelled shotgun moved to the middle of his forehead and then there was a bang.

Joseph woke up again.

“For fuck's sake buddy, stop your screaming already. That's the third time tonight” said a nearby voice in the darkness.

“Sorry man”

This time, Danforth was covered with sweat and noticing that the shadows had moved some meant he must have slept for at least an hour.

In fact, in that interval he eventually realized that the old man hadn't actually died instantly.

That very night, after Operation Black Spot, a forgotten detail came back to him.

He recalled the old man inhaling and exhaling at least twice *after* Danforth had shot him in the face despite having his head smashed in.

Consequently, he hadn't died there and then on the spot.

Joseph had somehow managed to calm down despite it all

He was getting hot and he could feel pins and needles in his legs.

It reminded him of his last LSD trip about two years ago.

Trying to stay awake wouldn't be easy.

The moon light shun through the windows and Ortega looked around at the shadows it brought about, when suddenly, out of nowhere it came to him. He was absolutely certain about it.

The old man was the one who had blown his face off with the rifle.

The old man had done it in revenge.

Yeah.

It was a too much of a coincidence to have happened strictly by chance.

Danforth had shot him in the face and the old man returned the favour by blowing the M16 up in his.

That's okay – Danforth thought.

I guess that makes us even.

Maybe.

Thinking further about it helped him fallback asleep.

As soon as he closed his eyes however, it started all over again.

CELEBRATION NIGHT

Saigon, night

That night the Baker team was probably celebrating in the only night spot citywide that played just American music and nothing else

It was small, narrow and full of cigarette smoke.

Apart from Jorgenson, Danforth and Barry who were still in hospital, all the other team members were there, including Rambo, wounded arm and all.

Along with loud music and dim lights, it was full of girls too, and after the help of a little booze, the atmosphere finally started to warm up.

Rambo

A wounded arm meant that Rambo spent most of his time standing aside and on the sidelines.

So when the others really started drinking and getting the party underway, he modestly smiled back at them and made a toast occasionally without actually ever getting up off his chair. He was even pretending to drink because with all the drugs in him and that throbbing pain, he couldn't possibly have drunk anything, or he'd have passed out for sure.

As the night went on however, his arm hurt more and more.

His teammates celebrated unrelentingly right in front of him taking little or no notice of him whatsoever. At one point though, Rambo broke out into a cold sweat and was barely able to keep his moaning quiet.

He watched the others keep dancing around, already drunk and somewhat out of control. Despite the carefree scenes, Rambo's thoughts returned to the battle. If it hadn't ended as quickly as it had, how on earth would he have managed to fight with his arm as injured as that?

He actually didn't have the answer.

Sweat began rolling down his neck as he fidgeted uselessly in his chair.

The very last thing he wanted to do was ruin the party for his friends so he hadn't told anyone about his career probably ending because of his injury.

Still dead set against wrecking the party however, he decided to suffer quietly in pain and with this knowledge for the rest of the night.

Ortega

As the Baker team guys got drunker and drunker, the music seemed to get faster and louder too.

That was no place for fifties music, nor for tourists. The songs were fast, the lyrics were all screamed, and there wasn't anything old style about it. The Baker team had let themselves go as the night progressed. Looking around at the young people dancing in front of him, Ortega couldn't help but think of Helen, and how much he missed her since they'd broken up.

That very day, Ortega had crashed on board a Huey helicopter but was, nonetheless still alive.

And that was just the first mission – said the voice in his head.

They'll send us over-the-fence on the next one for sure.

In Ortega's mind Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam were like a fourth dimension in space.

Ortega had done two years of training learning to fight in an area like that but it seemed impossible nevertheless that sooner or later he would actually end up there. God only knew what the hell would really happen once they finally touched down. If their first in-country mission had been as crazy as it had however, then it was probably safe to say the next over-the-border ones would undoubtedly have been much worse.

You'll never get home from this tour of duty alive.

That was the booze in him talking.

He knew it for sure because it wasn't the first time that alcohol made him have some odd thoughts.

You'll never get out of the SOG alive.

Ortega realized that despite not knowing any of the soldiers around him, they were all there together.

Most of them were a little younger than he was, but were about the same age as Johnny.

Ortega noticed that most of them were holding Vietnamese girls in their arms and although this made him miss Helen even more, he smiled at them nevertheless. They all acted as though they'd known the ladies for ever, but in all actuality, the majority

of these guys were not even pronounce their Vietnamese girlfriend's names. That wasn't what caught Ortega's attention the most however. What really struck him was the amount of energy pouring out of all of them. It almost seemed like life itself. They were all ecstatic about being alive and you could see it a thousand miles away. None of them had probably ever risked as much as Ortega had that day, but they didn't need to because no one could ever really feel safe in Vietnam anyways. Every time you made it through the day safe and sound therefore you were thrilled about still being intact. And that night, he was too. That's why there was always so much partying going on in Vietnam. That may have been the only thing that damn war was good for. It made you feel grateful about being alive, and simply living itself was an extremely cool and exciting thing. Ortega had had this feeling before. It had happened on his first tour right after realizing he'd barely missed stepping on a French landmine. If you thought about it, that wasn't the kind of feeling you could get back in The U.S. Ortega couldn't look away from the image of those drunken guys dancing and joking with their Vietnamese girlfriends. The soldiers cheered with every new song, singing and dancing until they almost burst. It looked like there were entire geysers of energy in them, and only by partying and dancing could they free it. Every time a song was about to end the energy levels seemed to diminish with it. When a brand new song came on however, it wouldn't take long for the guys to recognize it and they start all over again, with the same energy, right up to the next song. People were red in the face and dripping with sweat, the drunks were completely out of control and, at that point, pretty much everyone was drunk.

Ortega finally set aside any reservations, and finally joined in on the dancing. He lost Messner and Coletta almost as soon as he got to the dancefloor, and although he found himself surrounded by complete strangers, it didn't seem to matter. It was good to be alive. Drinking was good, being with his friends was good, touching and talking to the girls was good, but hugging and kissing them was even better. Ortega was so drunk that he didn't know what he was doing any more. It was good to have a future and a whole life ahead of him. That's what being young meant, you had your entire life to look forward to and that was something Vietnam had taught him. Ortega jumped, sang, drank, and chain-smoked cigarettes moving his head to the rhythm nonstop.

What'll I do if I live through this?

He lit himself another cigarette with his zippo but had trouble doing it because the flame was too high.

I don't want to die here.

Ortega then embraced a girl he'd never seen before but who looked free enough, and gave her a kiss on the neck.

*There are so many things I still wanna do before I die.
I can't die here.*

Although he loved Helen he'd just survived an almost certain death.

My life can't be that short.

It was easy to reach that kind of spiritual awareness in Vietnam, and those who did usually didn't need long to get a broader outlook on that very existence.

When you do survive anything as horrible as that – like what the Baker team had just been through – joy, warmth and energy burst inside of you all at the same time. When they do, they're all so intense that it's hard to handle them, especially if you're getting drunk to celebrate.

That night Ortega didn't hold back, as one or as all, and hugged and kissed girls even if they were complete strangers. He went on like that for the better part of the night, up until when everything in front of him became out of focus and he felt confused.

Messner

Messner, who was sleeping on a stool, awoke with a start.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Coletta, Krakauer and Ortega dancing, while Rambo, who was sitting down watching them kept to the side. In all actuality, everything was fine, except that the music was pounding in his ears and he really needed to puke.

Covering his mouth to keep from puking all over himself, he crossed the room quickly in a *slalom* like fashion around the other soldiers who were basically as drunk as he was.

When he got onto the street and into the cold night air however, he didn't puke after all but started breathing again.

It had just been a false alarm. He knew better than anyone that nausea worsened when you fell asleep, but maybe it was all over with now, so he turned his attention to the street.

The city was packed with people despite the late hour, even if he wasn't really sure exactly what time it was.

His stomach still felt a bit uneasy so he had a seat on the sidewalk and took a quick look inside the bar right behind him.

He saw Ortega dancing around like an idiot, pint in hand, spilling beer all over the place. It didn't look like he had the slightest idea about what he was doing though. Messner tried lowering his head and closing his eyes for a second, just to rest a bit. As soon as he did though, visions of the helicopter wreckage they had crashed in came back along with the RPG's flying warhead white-smoke trail which had barely missed his helicopter.

I almost got blown to pieces today.

He was fully aware that still being alive was nothing short of a miracle.

Had that RPG passed three feet further to the right he wouldn't be there now, just staring drunkenly around like that.

Linda – he thought.

He would have given anything right then to talk to “his” Linda on the phone again even if she wasn't his anymore.

He would have told her how lucky he was to still be alive and how awesome being

alive was that particular night.

Expressing it in words wouldn't have been an easy feat at all. It was one of those things that no one in the world could understand except for whoever had actually gone through it – but he would have tried for Linda anyway. If only he could have her on the other end of the line.

It would never happen though, because Messner really wasn't allowed to call her.

It wasn't simply because Linda was now married and living with another man, but especially because the affair she'd had with Messner was a kind of open secret in that goddamn hospital which he'd worked in about two years ago.

Nevertheless, calling her would have been so awesome that Messner couldn't help daydreaming about it.

He would have told her how much he loved her, how much he missed her and how tight he would have hugged her and told her about his day. A day unlike any other, when Daniel Messner had been grazed by bullets and rockets, some of his best friends had been in a helicopter crash and one of them probably wasn't going to make it through the night. Yep. While he and the others were there partying and having fun, Jorgenson was slowly dying at the Dak To base hospital, and Messner was painfully aware of that.

They should consider themselves nothing but lucky.

A deep sadness came over him.

He missed Linda and thinking about Jorgenson made him feel bad.

His eyes became teary because even if he'd had a telephone, he never would have made the call anyways.

Come on.

In the last year and a half she had never even replied to a single letter Messner had written.

The only woman he'd ever loved his entire life was back in her husband's arms and that was the sad truth.

Messner held himself tightly as he watched people pass by on the streets. The happiness he felt about still being alive suddenly became tainted by a sense of bitterness.

There was no getting away from it, that was his life.

Krakauer

The moment he set foot in that bar, Krakauer felt a strong feeling of anguish in him, and he couldn't shake it because of the girls there. It was full of *those kind* of girls. They were everywhere, all over the place.

He'd known ahead of time that there would be those kind of girls there, but from the moment he walked in he honestly couldn't help feeling it – it was almost horrid like – and got stronger the longer he stayed.

The worst thing was that those girls were actually there for his friends, who were almost his brothers by then, and the family he'd never had. They didn't think the fact that those girls were “those kind” of girls or that they were there in the first place was a bad thing at all. Actually, it was the complete opposite.

In Ortega and Coletta's opinion, at that point in time, those young women were, the coolest thing that could ever have happened to them.

In theory, those bitches were there for him too, if he wanted, and all things considered, a part of him wouldn't mind one of those kinds of girls for real, even if he thought that was absolutely terrible.

When Krakauer realized that eventually Ortega and Coletta would actually get together with those girls, he felt paralysed and short of breath.

Ortega and Coletta on the other hand, didn't have any problem with going out with them, greeting them, hugging them and commenting on them while Krakauer merely stayed behind and on the side lines.

“Check out those tits” said Ortega who was very drunk by then.

Your mother was a whore, Lawrence – said a distant voice from his past, echoing in his head. He couldn't remember exactly when he'd heard that comment for the first time, but he had heard and reheard it thousands of times in his head since then and for the rest of his life.

That's not true – another voice answered, as quickly as it always seemed to.

That's not true! That's not true! That's not true!

You know it's true.

Krakauer looked down and used the excuse of going to get another beer so he didn't have to follow Ortega and Coletta walking to those girls.

They are not like that – Krakauer thought.

Neither Johnny nor Manuel is that kind.

We've suffered together through Fort Bragg's selection and training. We have known

each other now for a couple of years at least. Even Danforth was a little racist before meeting Barry

Even if they found out who I really was they'd still be my friends.

Lawrence wasn't so sure about that though, especially since he didn't accept himself in the first place. So he picked up his beer gulping it down almost furiously while his friends, who were smitten by the girls, didn't even notice he was gone.

Krakauer turned and glanced in their direction and looked at the girls and then at his friends who were hugging them, buying them drinks and pin-on corsages and he almost felt happy for them, until a horrible feeling suddenly came over him.

So, that's the way it happened.

That's how I was born.

With the exception of his friends, who actually wouldn't do anything of that kind, many of the soldiers Krakauer had met in the past would have, and that bar was full of guys like that. In fact, a lot of them wouldn't have any qualms in the least about getting one of those girls pregnant or abandoning illegitimate kids as soon as their tour came to an end. How could anyone possibly get a woman pregnant with their own child and then go back to The US like she never even existed?

Was that the war's fault? No, it wasn't.

The war was basically another excuse.

Maybe at another time or in another place but that's exactly how it happened.

Krakauer felt like somebody had sucker punched him.

So, that's the way it happened.

He suddenly felt sick.

He must have drunk too fast and suddenly felt short of breath.

"Come on Lawrence, don't be shy!" said Coletta, but Krakauer pretended not to hear him because the music was too loud.

Krakauer drank, took a breath and drank again.

No one was supposed to catch on to what was going on inside him.

After downing the better part of his drink he began concentrating harder and switched over to 'mission mode'.

A mission was precisely what this feat had become and this mission's objective was to look as normal as possible.

It took about two minutes, but only then did he feel up to going to where the others were, and get closer to those girls.

Lawrence Krakauer

Eighteen years earlier, 1951

It was dark in the orphanage and Lawrence was only eight years old. That night he'd been beaten up by three other guys, and although he'd been in worse situations, they'd managed to shove him into a small metal locker. Once its door had been slammed shut the boys knocked it over onto the floor – BAAAAM!

After a few long moments, Lawrence, somewhat bewildered, watched the locker door open by itself but only just enough to let a storm of punches and kicks in. The kicks were coming downward from above like they were walking all over him. “Your mother was a slut Lawrence”

They weren't much older than he was, perhaps three years at most, but at that age you grow fast and they were all bigger in size, but most importantly, greater in number. Before he could even move his arms up in time to block the blows, they were already kicking him again. “A slut”

A slut – echoed in his head.

A slut.

Galvanized by the feeling they got from beating Krakauer, the group of boys became even more confident and began kicking him in the face.

His head banged against the metal locker each time they kicked him, and he seemed to hit the metal over and over again.

In almost no time both his lips were cut open, his mouth was full of blood and he could feel a loose tooth giggling near his tongue.

Feeling by that time somewhat exhausted, the group of boys finally stopped to catch their breath.

They walked away from the locker where Lawrence was still closed in. Despite the tiredness, it was obvious that the boys felt more satisfied than ever before.

It was then and there that Krakauer rose up behind them like a shadow, without any of the group even noticing he'd gotten out of the locker.

His face was covered in blood and his clothes were ripped and torn in several places. Neither the pain he felt all over however, nor would his fear be able to stop him at that point, not even for a second.

The shadow at their backs grew taller and taller, and as it silently moved up to them, he had grabbed hold of a chair.

Using every bit of strength he had in him, he brought it smashing down over them.

BAAAM!

“AAAARGH!”

The chair didn't break the way you usually see them break in western film brawls. On the contrary, it withstood the blow despite how hard it had been and a not even a second later, Lawrence was in position to hit the second one already.

This time however, instead of smashing the chair downwards, he swung it up high from side to side taking aim at their heads.

The second kid had managed to turn around in time but it didn't do him any good because the chair hit him right in the face causing one of his teeth to go flying through the air.

The third kid somehow blocked the chair so the fourth kid used the advantage to strike back.

He hit Lawrence with a left hook right in the jaw, the kind of hook you would find in a Boxing “How To” manual, such as real boxers do. For a second it was lights out for Lawrence, but only for a second, because that kid who coincidentally would one day be Special Forces, was right back on his feet ready to hit.

He never had the chance though.

The brawl suddenly came to a stop when two caretakers came out of only God knew where, and split them all up by force.

That is the story of how Lawrence Krakauer went straight from an orphanage to a reformatory school therefore, without living life as a free man until he joined the army.

Saigon

Krakauer and his girl walked out onto the terrace with the music fading slowly behind them and the soft wind blowing gently against their faces.

The wind lifted her black hair up ever so slightly showing off her beautiful slender neck.

Krakauer instantly understood the beauty of it all and it struck him so hard that that his heart felt like it was breaking.

All this because he knew he wasn't supposed to like her.

If his mother had really been like that girl, he simply couldn't be attracted to her, he shouldn't, it was unnatural.

Although it was all so absurd he nevertheless found her to be absolutely beautiful. None of this made any sense to him and worst of all, was all very painful.

“Who are you?” the Vietnamese girl asked.

“No one”

She smiled sweetly, and then said:

“Everyone has a name”

Lawrence then looked towards the dark horizon.

Some of the explosions not unlike lightning bolts or fireworks were lighting up the Saigon sky at intervals.

They weren't fireworks at all of course, but artillery shells exploding in the remote, but Krakauer couldn't say where exactly.

In a country that had already been at war for twenty years hearing explosions at a distance was quite normal and hardly anyone seemed to take notice anymore.

Not even him, not now at least, with such beauty like hers, right there in front of him and categorically for him.

That's how those macabre lightning bolts almost became beautiful to look at, as if they were really fireworks. Even the matter of his troublesome past had suddenly become irrelevant.

Lawrence was therefore finally able to let himself go for good, because she was in all honesty, too pretty to do otherwise.

Her neck was thin and delicate and her sleek dark hair came down over her shoulders. She was pale-skinned with an undeniably East Asian shaped face which was made up to perfection.

Lawrence gently took her at the waist turned her towards him and held her tight until

he forgot everything.

She then turned to face him and that was the moment when their eyes met.

“Who are you?” she repeated as he moved closer.

“No one” he said again.

Then he kissed her.

Her lips tasted like fruit. Lawrence had no idea of what kind, he just knew they did and her breath was indescribable.

As he kissed her a deep all-encompassing feeling of well-being came over him, as though everything was in its rightful place.

He felt what could have been an electrical charge go right through him, and his whole body shivered.

Once they had parted lips, despite feeling breathless, she gently ran her fingers through his hair.

Still caressing, she said:

“Again, Gi-Ai... Tell me your name”

“I haven’t got one”

The girl smiled.

“Oh come ooon, Gi Ai... Everyone has a name, father and mother. Many lost them but everyone had”

“Not me”

“How's that?”

“I’ve never had anything like that honey” he told her and then kissed her again but this time, the feeling was even stronger than before.

But I’ll never forget you – Lawrence thought to himself.

I’ll probably never see you again but I’ll never forget your eyes, your face, your smell or this night in which I was 'still alive'.

“You tell me your name” said Lawrence.

She smiled sweetly, and then said:

“That's not the same, *giai*... I no tell you my real name. I am no like you. No one must know I do this job”

Even though her comment did hurt Lawrence a bit he accepted her reply all the same, because at least it was a sincere one.

“Tell me anyway,” he said.

“Call me Tiun Ki, *giai*” she said lying, but at any rate, he was okay with it.

“That's a cool name. Sounds sharp”

Although she didn't even know what the word 'sharp' meant, she imagined by the tone of his voice that it was a compliment.

She smiled back at him.

The two of them gently embraced each other and didn't let go, watching the explosions flashing over the sky of Saigon at a distance while Krakauer kept stroking her long dark hair.

The Baker team B never did go back to that bar again just like Lawrence therefore never saw her again either.

The Following Morning

Dak To

Ortega stood at the entrance of Baker team B's tent.

He was wearing an drab, olive-coloured uniform with a bonnie hat.

Rambo was laying on his camp bed reading a Peanuts comic and sweating up a storm because of the pain in his arm all by himself.

Under his left sleeve Ortega could see the bandage which covered his entire arm.

Ortega walked up beside him without saying a word and basically stood there until Rambo pulled himself up to sit.

When Ortega saw he was up, he finally said what he'd gone there to say.

“Jorgenson's got three or four days left, at the very most” he said.

Rambo nodded slowly and then looked down again.

They both lacked the courage to look each other in the eyes.

Three or four nights of agony, both useless and painful – Rambo thought.

“Do the others know yet?” he asked quietly.

“Not yet, no. You're the first one I've told”

Ortega sat down next to Rambo, took his bonnie hat off his head and then the two just sat in silence for a while staring into space.

The sun was shining and the rest of the base was getting on as usual. The trucks were coming and going, soldiers were loading and unloading supplies, clothes and ammo. A few dug up trenches, and others filled sandbags. The area surrounding the city was humming, alive and pulsing

“Fuck” Rambo finally said.

Ortega pulled out his pack of cigarettes along with his zippo from his pocket.

He lit one for himself, offered another to Rambo, and then said:

“We did good on that hill. We set up one hell of a defence Johnny, and put up a fierce fight”

Ortega turned to look at his young friend's face while lighting his cigarette.

Johnny Rambo – Ortega thought to himself.

“You’re going to get a medal for what you did to defend our damn wreck. You do realize this, don't you?”

Rambo didn't reply.

Ortega had no way of knowing, but Rambo kept seeing Jorgenson stretching his arm out reaching for the door handle on the Huey, albeit in vain, in his attempt to hold onto anything trying to save his life.

In that scene, Jorgenson was trying to grab onto that handle and each time he did, Rambo tried to grab his hand instead, but in vain. All of this in the midst of their helicopter plummeting down.

No matter how close his friend's hand seemed, Rambo just couldn't grab onto it.

No matter how many times that scene played in his head, Rambo had never succeeded in help Jorgenson. Not once and not even in the nightmares he was having about it at night.

“Maybe Shorty should've flown slower or maybe faster would've been better, I'm just not sure. We should've known the ridge was a prime spot for an ambush” Rambo said.

“Don't get annoyed with Shorty, Johnny. He did what he could and he did it the best he knew how. We should've told him how to fly. And regarding the travel-speed, well I don't think it would have made much difference. I don't think any at all, actually. And I was right there beside you, when we got hit”

Ortega silently took a drag on his smoke and exhaled it through his nostrils.

“We're never going to know anyway,” Rambo replied.

“Yep. When you're at war, nothing's black or white John. It's not like when you're back at school, and there is a right answer for everything”

Rambo nodded, and for a little while longer, in complete silence, the two of them puffed away at their cigarettes.

“Getting him was feasible, you know? When he was falling, I mean. I could have caught Jorgenson and not let him fall”

“Maybe... - Ortega nodded – Or maybe not. It's also possible that you never really had a chance because it honestly couldn't be achieved but you only thought it could. You'll never know”

After putting out his cigarette, Ortega added:

“Okay now I want you to listen up, Rambo. I know how this thing works. You believe, beyond a shadow of a doubt that learning to live with it will be impossible,

but it fades in due course, and eventually you'll be all right again. You just have to wait for tomorrow. Wait for a new mission and have faith in what I'm saying. New missions always get rid of the last one's ghosts"

Ortega took his time finishing his cigarette but once he did, he stood up and put his bonnie hat back on.

"Johnny..." he said to take Rambo's leave, and then left.

*“It feels like you can’t live with it now
but sooner or later, it fades, and you’ll be alright again.*

Wait for tomorrow.

*Wait for a new mission and trust me,
a new mission always gets rid of the last one’s ghosts”*

Manuel Ortega, 1969

Civilian Hospital Dak To

Danforth was lying in bed.

He had a drip stick in his arm and a bandage over his left eye which at this point covered half of his head.

Trautman had already been standing there beside him for a while, but at least they were finally done the mission debriefing.

It had lasted over an hour and been exhausting for them both, but in the end, Trautman had a thorough understanding of everything Baker Team B had done.

“What Johnny did was... Unbelievable” Danforth said.

“I heard son. Now get some rest”

Trautman was about to leave when Danforth stopped him.

“Colonel”

“Yes?”

“There's something else”

Danforth told him about a moment of uncertainty that he'd had as a team leader. He'd hesitated about whether to go on with the mission – and leave his teammates behind – or stay to protect the helicopter wreckage. Messner had been the one that time, who had helped him make the right choice.

“Would it have been such a serious mistake, sir?” Danforth asked.

“You were on the field, not me. There's no way I can know. You tell me”

“I did wrong. You told us that all we had to do was find them, nothing else and to not take any risks. It went without saying that we weren't dispensable for that mission. I really don't know what the hell came over me”

“Of course you weren't expendable, that's obvious, but the situation which was unfolding on the field wasn't as obvious. Anyhow, to answer your question, yes that was a mistake”

“I... I couldn't see anything except the mission's objective, sir... I didn't care about anything else. I think that Ortega might be better at this than me. I think under certain circumstances he can think straighter than I can. Maybe he should be our team leader.”

Danforth sighed, and then said:

“Jesus Christ, does that ever sound horrible aloud.”

“By telling me this you are only doing your duty soldier, nothing more and nothing less. If you think that your team could get stronger with Ortega as its leader, yet you decide to continue as such, for pride’s sake, then you’re making a mistake, Danforth. Those kinds of mistakes weaken teams. In Vietnam as you well know, there’s a price to be paid for every mistake you make, whether it be sooner or later. Usually that price to pay is someone's life”

Trautman put his green beret on before leaving.

“Anyway, spitting something like this out can’t have been easy for you to do, so I appreciate it. What you did was true to Baker team 'style', and I don't expect anything less from you, nor from any of my other men. Is that clear?”

“Yessir”

“Very well then. Ortega is the new team leader, effective immediately, and you’ll be his vice-leader. Now then soldier, get yourself some rest.”

“Yessir”

Danforth stared quietly at Trautman as he made his way out of the room.

The Next Morning

Saigon

The sun was shining blindingly that morning as Trautman made his way to the American embassy, which also happened to be MacV headquarters.

He'd been putting off his mission debriefing for the last twenty-four hours not only with the MacV but with his two teams as well. The delay wasn't really a problem for Trautman because he already knew everything he needed. He was prepped to answer any questions the brass heads may have thrown his way. They would have questions to ask and undoubtedly quite a few too.

Trautman took a deep breath.

The time had come therefore to report his mission to his higher ranks.

It was the moment of the truth.

Trautman climbed the embassy's steps and identified himself at the entrance. As he hurriedly walked through the MacV, he went over Black Spot's debriefing speech in his head, one more time.

He had a lot to say.

He'd been very careful and conscientious while reconstructing the missions that both Baker Teams had concluded.

He knew that while presenting his debriefing he would have had a lot of personal enemies listening in front of him who couldn't wait to contradict Trautman's fact reconstruction.

It was very important for the colonel to consider his words carefully yet he intended to do justice to both teams. He wanted to tell them everything with the exception of the murder he'd committed inside that bar of course. That was nothing more than a moment of sheer madness, albeit *the justified kind*, but madness all the same and he had no intention at all of talking about it.

Trautman was a little late and when he arrived on the right floor after climbing the last flight of stairs the meeting room doors were already closed.

Trautman loosened his shirt collar a little because he felt like he couldn't breathe.

As he opened the door everyone turned to face him and the room grew silent.

Then they all got up at the same time without saying a word.

Trautman froze right where he was when Ericsson – a Navy general in charge of some Navy Seal teams - began applauding.

Once the highest in rank started the others followed suit, albeit sincerely nevertheless.

Trautman felt his heart pounding in his chest.
Some of them even came closer to shake his hand.

“Congratulations” Said Ericsson before anyone else.
“Congratulations, colonel” said another military while shaking his hand.

Trautman had to use all his inner strength to keep his eyes from tearing.
All of the Military Assistance Command big wigs gathered round him to congratulate him. Even general Loyd was present among them.

“We want to know how you found out where they were going to attack”
“Yes, tell us about the intelligence phase, and the battle as well”
“We want to know about everything, colonel,” said someone else.
“Yes, tell us everything, Trautman” pressed another voice.

When Jorgenson woke up in the middle of the night, his daughter was dead.

He looked around observing that he was inside an enormous beige-coloured tent. The only thing that separated him from the rest of the world weeping in chorus was nothing more than a cloth sheet.

His daughter was dead.

His small, pink, crying bundle was dead and forever gone. Jorgenson had lost the only real love of his life.

He burst into tears.

The tears came out in sobs at first, but then he was overtaken by shudders and a convulsive cough.

Virginia was *dead, dead, dead*. She was no more, his little love no longer was.

Jorgenson closed his eyes as tight as he could, but even when they reopened, she was still dead.

Standing above him now however, was a nurse.

She was holding one hand over his forehead and appeared to be checking for fever but actually, it was a caress of some kind.

Mary – he thought to himself.

Forgive me Mary; I didn't save our daughter.

The Following Morning

“Hello baby” Danforth said to his nurse.
He was sitting on a chair and merely looking out at the hospital courtyard.
“How's my favourite patient today?”

Danforth smiled.

She was wearing a tight white nursing uniform and a small hat on her head. Her hair was shiny, brown and held up with a hairpin so her neck was showing.

“I missed you, honey. Did you change your hair colour?”
“Come on silly, stop it”

She got closer to him and started undoing his bandages.
Behind her a black guy lying in a nearby bed made a series of obscene gestures to Danforth. There was nothing like a grown man trying to cheer you up by shaking his whip, sticking his tongue out and stuff like that.
Danforth did his best to ignore him.

“You haven't told me your name yet, baby”
“Because you've never asked. It's Shelley”
“Shelley what?”
“Shelley Suarez”
“I like it, *Shelley Suarez*. That's a double S, just like D.D. as in Donald Duck, or M.M. like Mickey Mouse.”
“Oh stop it, silly. You're going to make me mess up. You don't want me to take out your eye by mistake after everything you've been through to keep it, do you?”
“No of course not honey. But if I lose it now, maybe Imma gonna get to stay a week longer just so you can take care of me”
“You do always make me laugh and you know what? I'd like to see your face without this beard”
“I can't shave, honey. If they recognize me, I'll end up in jail”

The black guy behind her was now pretending to howl at the moon and this time Danforth couldn't help laughing.

“Okay now seriously, my dear: be quiet and stay still, or this time it's going to really hurt”

After she was done she smiled and left without saying a word.

“She's yours, man. Trust me” said the black guy.

“I *understand* women, especially the white ones. Their expression changes when they want someone”

“What's your name, buddy?” said Danforth still looking in Shelley's direction.

“Mitchell, Roger. Sir”

“You are a funny guy, Mitchell. What do you think, should I give it a go?”

“Go for it man. Between you and me, you're the only one who can walk so just give it a go. Go and do her for me too, but only if you promise to tell me everything afterwards”

“Well, that depends on how it ends”

Danforth got up off the chair and left.

Three hours later, Danforth and Shelley were alone together in a dark storage room. She touched his face, felt the roughness of his beard and then kissed him.

It was a hard kiss, almost violent like. They barely missed knocking heads and for a second, Danforth was even worried something would happen to his eye.

Once they got over the initial reservations, nothing else seemed to exist.

Danforth felt a shiver go from the back of his head right along his spine all the way down to his feet.

Afterwards, her kiss became tender and warm recalling a warm bath towel wrapped around yourself after having a cold shower or even similar to being hugged tight by someone who really cares about you.

Kissing and caressing her made him feel like they'd know each other forever.

When they stopped to catch their breath, they stayed close and simply gazed into each other eyes.

Very little light was getting into the storage room owing to all the shutters being left half-closed. This was meant to keep snipers from shooting at the American patients through them if open wide.

“I like you, Shelley” Danforth said.

“I like you too, Joseph. Where are you posted?”

“Oh, well we move a lot” he answered softly to her while gently stroking her hair.

“Kiss me again,” she said in a hushed voice to him and naturally, he did.

Kissing her gave him that shiver again and gave him such a feeling of wellbeing. It brought you to a parallel world with doors leading to other downy, warm and dreamy places.

It left you feeling regenerated the same as you would from a long sleep and he'd

never felt as refreshed or relaxed his entire life.

Whoever that woman was, he needed her like no other woman ever before.

He kissed her again, pulling her closer even tighter than before, until he could feel her breasts pushing up against him.

Danforth had been with many women in his life, especially back when he used to deal drugs.

Most of them were whores who let guys fuck them in exchange for drugs, but obviously with Shelley it was an entirely different story.

She made him remember his first kiss at sixteen and still a good boy. Well, sort of good, more or less.

Truth be told, it was more like his second kiss because the first had been an experience too new for him to really enjoy at that time.

Shelley's eyes had become teary like she'd been crying or something, but that had in no way been the case.

He'd never seen that look or expression on any girl's face after a kiss before.

“Don't vanish into thin air, Joseph Danforth. Okay?”

“No Shelley. We can stay in touch. Would you like that?”

“Of course I would”

While Barry, Danforth and Rambo continued to get better, Jorgenson refused to die.

For some odd reason, he kept going in and out of coma, but kept on living.

His agony seemed to become more atrocious as each day passed, and even if the doctors wouldn't change their diagnosis, he was, in any case, resolutely alive.

His chances of one day actually getting back on the field were zero of course, but the idea that he could actually survive no longer seemed impossible.

Anyway, no matter what Jorgenson's destiny would be, the war would go on.

And it did.

Right after Black Spot, Trautman and the Baker team started working on the Phoenix program again.

As he'd promised Patrick Nelson before his death, Trautman's persecution of those Vietcong living 'out in the open' before everyone was incessant. His efforts to curtail enemy progress didn't stop there however.

He also hit spies, double agents, informants and almost anyone else who was actively helping the Vietcong.

Naturally there happened to be some ARVN officials as well on that list, yet Trautman hit them all exactly the same way and occasionally without even informing his own higher ranks about it.

In Trautman's opinion, the only real hope for Vietnam was to end the guerrilla warfare.

The Guerrilla ranks had already been hit hard in the '68 Tet offensive, but in any case, what they needed now was a coup de grace.

When it came to trying however, there was no question about how implacable Trautman was.

Trautman always calculated each of his targets very carefully by collecting indisputable evidence and always endlessly reasoning over it. The other bigwigs involved in the program didn't always use his same methods unfortunately.

So it was strictly a matter of time before things would have to get worse and the colonel knew it.

In fact as time went by, things really did get worse.

*

The CIA agents started going into the villages and randomly choosing a civilian, to then put a hood over his head and take him around the entire area. The hood had a couple of holes so that the civilian could see and breathe. Every time he passed in front of a house belonging to a Vietcong the man had to gesture somehow, either by scratching his nose or straightening the hood on his head.

Then, the same day but during the night, some ARVN men would have knocked on the incriminated doors and shot at anyone who opened it, be it a man, woman or child.

Usually they basically said something like "April's fool" and then shot whoever in the face.

*

Trautman, of course had no idea exactly how bad things had become already. As a matter of fact, on one occasion while taking part in a discussion regarding one of the Phoenix Program targets Trautman had accidentally found out that Danforth and Ortega had access to some information which they weren't necessarily both supposed to have.

Trautman paused momentarily before speaking almost painstakingly looking for the right words.

Ortega simply stared silently at him, waiting.

“Listen Ortega, Danforth found out about it purely by chance and he shouldn't have said a single word to you regarding it. In any case, he knows exactly how personal all of this is to me and what I'm planning to do about it. He would do it himself if he was not still on the road to recovery. As far as I'm concerned, well, I don't know, his participation in it all is a different matter somehow.

Danforth is not like you, Ortega.

He is, well, I would dare say just more prone to accept some of the dirtier aspects of this war than you are.

What I'm going to ask you to do however is downright dirty, Ortega. This target won't be anything like the last four were. This would be very different, so diverse in fact that I really don't have the right to ask it of you.”

Before going on any further Trautman looked his new team leader straight in the eyes.

“You know how things work in Vietnam. You know how we get things done.

Almost everything we do here is illegal. This whole, damn, never outright declared war, in fact is illegal. What we're talking about here, well, this is a whole other dimension. This time it would be an entirely different ballgame”

Trautman looked away.

“And you'd be doing it all just for me. Not for this war, not for your country, just for me and me alone”

Ortega didn't say anything.

Trautman turned to face Ortega again.

“It's personal, Manuel, and as if being a personal matter wasn't enough, it's also wrong. The only reason Rambo volunteered was because in his view something needed to be done about it.

But it's revenge Manuel, pure and simple, and you and Johnny would be on your own.”

Ortega reflected carefully before answering, but when he did, he said:

“Sooner or later we’re all going to be 'on our own' anyway colonel, because that's the way Black Ops are meant to work. That's exactly why you created us. When all is said and done, this is nothing more than just another target”

“Don't let Danforth or Rambo influence your decision in any way Ortega. Once you commit to something like this there's no turning back. You're selling your soul to the devil if you do it, along with everything else for that matter.”

“I don't care, colonel

“I wanna do it anyway”

A PERSONAL FAVOUR

It was dark in the C130 cockpit as they flew over Dak To.

The man took a spring clip and hooked it onto the handrail, took a Zippo out of his pocket and lit a magnesium bar with it.

When the doors on the C130 opened mid-flight, he got hit by a strong, cold wind. He paused for a moment looking down at the city lights below as he held the burning bar tightly in his hand. When he decided he'd seen enough, he took the flaming bar and threw it out of the plane right over the lights he'd just stopped to admire.

The small parachute opened instantly thereby slowing the fall of the blinding light.

The flares they used to throw over the city lit up everything and everyone below. Regardless of whether they shed light on the good or bad guys, the torches served as yet another safety precaution against Vietcong terrorist attacks.

As Rambo and Ortega walked out of their tent they saw all those small lights above them in the almost black sky.

That night Rambo and Ortega were wearing their usual olive-coloured uniform with 'baseball' caps. Rambo's arm didn't hurt as much as it used to, so they were just like any other pair of regular soldiers on leave. Well, on leave and in an incredibly good mood that is.

They showed their IDs at the base exit post, where an officer of the military police glanced quickly at them, gave a salute and stepped aside for them pass.

The city of Dak To was full of lights and sounds, so much so that it reminded Rambo of an amusement park every single time they were out.

Rambo felt incredibly free that night. He had a target that night of course, but there was no guarantee that he was necessarily going to run into him. As far as he was concerned, it was not even the kind of target that needed worrying about. That probably explained why Rambo was in such a good mood that night because he essentially forgot about it as the night progressed.

The truth was that, fundamentally, he liked Vietnam.

There was no denying he'd gone through some nasty moments during 'Black Spot' of course, and he'd already been awarded an honourable mention despite his disaccord because of one of those moments.

How absurd - he thought.

He didn't consider himself a hero at all, and in reality, truth be told, he believed the exact opposite.

He hadn't really had much of a choice that day.

If he'd done anything differently, they'd all have died, him included.

That's the real reason why giving him an honourable mention for a medal was so absurd.

A mention for a medal of honour for something I didn't really have a choice about doing.

Rambo had barely anything to think about that night and it was nice not to think about anything for a change.

It was one of the advantages of being a soldier, in fact he hadn't thought about his future since the first day he enrolled. Frankly, there wasn't any need to, because when

all is said and done, there wouldn't have been any kind of tomorrow anyways.

On one occasion, purely by coincidence, Rambo got the chance to read the SOG stats without anyone being the wiser. Unwittingly, that day he discovered something Trautman had intentionally hidden from all of them, and for good reason. Since its creation, the MacVsog had had a one-hundred-percent death, wounded or missing in action rate.

In other words, everyone who had ever fought for the SOG until now had been either killed, gone missing in action or been wounded at least once.

Therefore, belonging to the SOG was like having a death sentence on your head, or worse even, like spending the rest of your life paralyzed. Regardless of everything Rambo had read however, he wasn't really scared by it. Truthfully, he wasn't even minimally bothered.

Essentially, at that point in his life, it was yet another excuse not to think about the future.

When all was said and done, South Vietnam, so basically an entire country, had managed to live well without ever seriously fretting about its own future for an eternity almost.

So in the end, that was the night that Rambo enjoyed the city of Dak To for what it actually was, a delightfully vibrant city. Essentially, it was an amusement park for adults, bursting with life.

For the past two years Rambo and his friends have led lives dominated by excruciating effort, hard battles and endless training. Now that it was all coming to end, that kind of pain was about to be replaced by hard combat and fear of death.

Rambo wanted to live that night as if it was his last, especially since oftentimes in Vietnam, every day could possibly be just that.

Rambo and Ortega walked all the way to the city centre.

They weren't dressed well enough to get into the high-end nightclubs so they kept strolling till they passed that part of the centre.

They entered a nightspot that was neither a dive nor one of so many high-end black-tie ones.

As luck would have it, they ended up finding the right place on their first try. A Rolling Stones song was playing on a jukebox situated in one of the corners of the room, and the only women there were all low budget Vietnamese hookers, who were just a notch above the street ones.

Rambo liked the Stones and so did Ortega.

The Stones were, in some way, the band which represented almost everybody on the team, which couldn't be said for The Doors. Only Danforth and Messner liked The Doors.

No way.

As far as Rambo was concerned, Jim Morrison wasn't anything but a drug-addicted

freak.

Rambo and Ortega spent the whole night drinking, laughing and smoking. Rambo wasn't really crazy about drinking but that night he did it nonetheless. All in all, it was a really nice night for the both of them.

When they walked into the place, their man was already there. He was a lone, American soldier, sitting by himself and drinking on his own. They both kept tabs on him out of the corner of their eye all night long, while they went on having a good time acting like everything was per usual.

They drank and smoked for a long time right in front of him, until naturally, the two of them ended up loaded too.

In order to get the job done, it was a lot better for them to be left alone, so Rambo and Ortega turned down at least three prostitutes who'd showed interest in hooking up. When they finally thought it timely, they buttonholed their man and started drinking again but this time with him. He was a soldier on his own, looking for some local company just like thousands of others.

His stare was distant, not really looking at anyone or anything just daydreaming.

His name was Alvarez, and he was more than happy to have a drink with Rambo and Ortega.

He had a look in his eyes, that look that something inside him was broken, the same look you could easily find among the troops in Vietnam.

Ortega and Rambo kept making him drink, initially with a Budweiser, then a no-name whisky and after that, another Budweiser.

They asked their man if he wanted some opium, AKA 'brown sugar' (*heroin*), or anything else for that matter.

Then they asked him if he wanted a hooker, but he replied that with all the booze he'd drunk there was no way he would get a hard on.

That said, Rambo and Ortega offered him another drink.

They went on to tell him about how their base had been attacked (during Black Spot) and about the three casualties, including Rambo himself, of course. Alvarez would never have even vaguely imagined that they were in the Special Forces unit.

It didn't take long for their man to drop his guard and open up, talking completely of his own free will.

The conversation became the telling of his tale, a tale in which he began reminiscing a loud about what had happened in Lam Ho, a village somewhere in the hills above Pleiku.

They'd been ordered to stop, and they certainly had.

The old man must have been half-deaf but when the grenade with the blooper shot, well, he definitely heard that before he died.

The man told Rambo and Ortega that he'd actually seen the fear in his eyes just seconds before the grenade exploded right in his face.

Rambo and Ortega, with stone cold expressions, played dumb, acting as though they had never heard anything similar before. Pretending wasn't hard, especially since that kind of story had no effect whatsoever on guys like them. They had heard it all before.

Thanks to their first tour of duty and the SOG training course, they knew better than Alvarez what that war was about, and that episodes just like that were an everyday affair in Vietnam.

At a certain point Alvarez raised his voice because the alcohol was really taking effect.

"Then we killed him – he said – and anybody else around him with the shrapnel, that fucking shrapnel. It was an accident"

Rambo and Ortega nodded.

Ortega then moved his head closer, looked Alvarez right in the eyes and said:

"The old man and his family were an accident, but Mac Daniel's death wasn't. He wasn't an accident at all"

Alvarez turned to look Ortega in the eyes, and then immediately did the same to Rambo.

Only then did he realize that the two guys who he'd been getting loaded with all night, had suddenly in the blink of an eye, completely sobered up.

Although the three of them exchanged glances for some time, it didn't take Alvarez long at all to realize things weren't looking too good for him.

Not very good at all actually.

"It was an accident," he repeated stuttering this time as he said it.

"No, it wasn't man. - Ortega replied -. You're to come with us, now"

"Trautman sent you here, didn't he?"

"Yes"

"I understand" Alvarez replied.

"Come on, let's go"

They brought him outside.

The alley was dark and empty, far from the busy streets.

"It was an accident." Alvarez said again.

"No it wasn't"

"Okay, it was no accident" he finally admitted.

Rambo went to corner of the street, as a lookout. As he watched Rambo walk away, Ortega took a fishing line from out of one of his pockets and began wrapping it around his hands.

When he finished, he tugged at it to make sure it was tight enough and to see just how it felt.

“Who are you guys?”

“I’m Scorpio and he’s Raven”

“No... I mean... It doesn't matter. I’m no different from you”

“No, you’re not”

“Mac Daniel wanted to court martial me but I’ve got two kids”

“That doesn't make any difference, now”

“You don't understand...my time was almost done. I had almost survived Vietnam and he was going to ruin everything. I couldn't let him do it. Killing him was a mistake, but I didn’t realize it until it was too late and there was no turning back”

Ortega couldn’t find anything to say, so Alvarez continued:

“What Mac Daniel didn’t get was that I was already paying. Man oh man was I paying, and God only knows how much I’m still paying now! You see... It's like having hell inside you and I’ll have to live with it for the rest of my life. Mac Daniel didn’t understand that though and he just wanted to get revenge. In the end, I think I did it for my family. I couldn't let him take away the money my sons would need to survive”

-

He may look like a good man... - Ortega thought.

They all look like good men before they die – Trautman had warned after assigning him that 'personal favour'. Nothing could be truer, so true in fact, that it made Ortega sick.

He tried to make the feeling go away by telling himself repeatedly precisely what this man had done.

Then Ortega said:

“Your family won't lose a thing. We’re not that cruel. The Vietcong strangled you while you were on leave, walking home from some bar. It's an honourable way to go”

After a long silence, Alvarez's eyes turned teary. He was now quietly sobbing, so Ortega took a few steps moving behind him, but Alvarez stopped him.

“Wait” he said.

“What now?”

“There's something you need to tell my wife. You have to...”

Ortega stopped for a second, getting a grip on what he’d just heard, still pulling the fishing line between both hands.

Something turned over painfully in his gut. This was going much further than he

could handle. He had no intention whatsoever to talk to Alvarez's wife. That would have really been too much. He would never do anything like that, neither in a hypothetical tomorrow, nor ever.

Alvarez went on:

“Tell her I never cheated on her. Please, I’m begging you. Tell her you knew me and that I never cheated on her. You saw it with your very own eyes tonight, didn’t you? I’ve never…”

There was something in Ortega's eyes that didn’t convince Alvarez however. He realized that Ortega was nothing more than his murderer and would never have had the guts to phone or even write his wife.

Ortega got closer, wrapped the nylon line around Alvarez's neck and tightened.

Alvarez tried to say something, but the air couldn’t get past his throat.

He made an attempt to resist, but it was obvious that he didn’t know any counter-moves for that kind of hold. Knowing nothing about hand-to-hand combat he didn’t have a hope in hell against someone like Ortega.

Realizing there was little he could do, Alvarez shook a bit but it wasn’t any good.

He tried to scream over and over but was barely able to even whimper.

Sergeant Alvarez struggled to get away with all of his might but Ortega wasn’t merely taller but much stronger too, and in the end finally tightened the slipknot while pulling Alvarez to his feet almost breaking his neck bone doing it.

Alvarez turned pink and his eyes looked like they were going to pop out of their sockets.

His tongue slid out of his mouth and was swollen like a boiled pig’s.

He was now pitch red.

Rambo, who was obviously uncomfortable, continued checking the street and around the corner as he repeatedly shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

After a long, seemingly endless agony in Ortega’s arms, Alvarez's face finally became dark blue, and he quit kicking.

Manuel Ortega had actually felt the precise moment when the life in him was gone.

He was dead.

Ortega let him drop to the ground.

Rambo caught up with Ortega while he was looking at the corpse from above with a grim expression on his face.

“Are you gonna talk to his wife?” Rambo asked.

Ortega wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“No. Fuck no”

“Why not?”

“What the fuck do you think dickhead? Maybe because I knocked her fucking husband off, right?”

The two of them were stark silent for a second looking at the lifeless corpse.
Then Ortega said:

“You tell her, John, if you really care. If you do however, I think you should tell her everything. Tell her that her husband killed some civilians by mistake and, after that, that he knocked off one of his own so he wouldn’t get court martialled”

Ortega spit on the ground.

“And while you’re at it, tell her that he committed murder for nothing too, just because he didn’t know that our martial court never really punishes anyone for any fucking thing. Then tell her that he was consequently, in turn done in by Special Forces as a lesson, or as payback... The hell I know. I can't read Trautman's mind. Tell her everything Johnny if you seriously think you’ll be able to talk to her.”

Ortega threw the fishing line onto the ground. His eyes were teary.

“Tell that woman whatever the fuck you want, I don't give a shit anymore”

Rambo and Ortega left the alley.

Ortega paused under a street lamp, pulled a cigarette out first, then a lighter, and with a *click* of his zippo, he lit it

He took a drag, and then stopped to look at Rambo.

“What a shitty job”

“Trautman did everything he could to get that guy court martialled”

“That's not the point Rambo. What the fuck are they gonna ask us to do next time?”

Not knowing the answer to that however, Rambo just looked away towards the street.

“It shouldn't be like that,” said Ortega. smoking as he walked away.

“It shouldn't for sure,” he added, practically talking to himself.

Shortly thereafter, Rambo couldn't say why, but he got the impression that Ortega was on the verge of crying.

He had known him almost two years by then, and he knew him well.

Heading back to the base they passed right in front of one of the many brothels that, as of late, seemed to be popping up everywhere for American personnel. Rambo and Ortega looked at each other, and silently walked into yet another new place, one they’d have used as an alibi for the night.

The slow song “*when a man loves a woman*”, was sweetly playing in a corner.

Ortega sat down at a table and, without a moment’s hesitation a Vietnamese woman propped herself down on Ortega's lap.

Ortega hadn’t had enough to drink. Not nearly enough that night.

So he raised his arm and ordered.

Rambo was lying on the bed.
There was a girl in topless standing right beside him.
Rambo watched her.

Her physique was fragile and perfect like that of a model.
The oriental shape of her eyes was exact and absolute, and the deeper Rambo stared into them, the more he realized that they were so wonderful that it almost hurt. They were green, crystalline almost, and the jet-black hair which seemed to frame them was so dark it could have been ink, as black as a raven's wings. It was perfectly smooth and as shiny as glass.

The light in her eyes was calm, revealing just how comfortable she was with being around him.
The feeling Rambo was getting just from the sight of her was a powerful one, almost magnetic and yet sweet.
It unsettled him and gave him inner peace all at the same time.
After walking around his bed, she laid down beside him.
It was then that Rambo became somewhat uncomfortable.
Naked as he was, he almost felt scared.
He felt something stirring in his stomach. It felt a lot like to fear, but it wasn't exactly that, nor was it as unpleasant.
It was more like sort of awkwardness.
The room was completely pink so it would look covered in silk.
Rambo had even paid a little more than he need have because he was so determined to see her... That wasn't the only thing though.
It was just that now, he was feeling it too, precisely as Ortega had.
It had only taken a little longer to take effect in Rambo's head.
He was feeling the weight of what had happened.
Consequently, after what they'd done that night he'd have done anything to a steer clear of the base, the war and maybe even from his teammates until it passed.
Even if it was only temporarily, he wanted to keep his distance from everything.
Afterwards, he would have gone back to life as usual.

Rambo pulled her shoulders to his, and the two of them moved closer.

She turned to look at him.
As she caressed his face gently, he looked back at her thoughtfully at her eyes. That

stare was begging him for something, and he couldn't help but lose himself instantly as those green eyes gazed back at him.

It was right then and there that he understood from a feeling within that those eyes were enough.

They lavishly filled him and looking into them sufficed. He wouldn't need a single thing more.

Her warmth enclosed him.

The two of them remained quite still momentarily observing each other only. For Rambo however it had lasted no less than a lifetime.

She embraced him tenderly and while they held each other tight, something happened inside of him.

The last thing he wanted was for anything to ruin that special moment, but he truly couldn't control himself.

Rambo went back in his mind and re-lived some memories of not so long ago.

He thought about the argument he'd just had with Ortega over the fact that he would never have talked to Alvarez's wife.

Then Rambo went back even further in his mind, back to when he was doing the SOG selection process.

Rain, hard work, cold temperatures and regular beatings were what his selection had been all about. He'd gone through it all just to get into a unit – the MacVsog – where the personnel had a 100% death or injury rate.

He then went even further back in his mind to his father and how much he used to hit him. He could probably kill him with a single hand if he so wished now.

Rambo felt her squeeze him tighter, almost as though she could read his mind, suddenly bringing him back to reality.

Rambo spoke Vietnamese fluently. He could have talked to her if he'd wanted to, but it would have been like admitting he was in Special Forces, and he couldn't afford it.

He would have given anything to talk to her, but he didn't all the same.

They stayed in each other's arms for a time and although she fell asleep, he didn't.

Hearing her breathe gave him a sense of inner peace which he couldn't explain.

They'd been two wonderful hours.

The girl brought Ortega up the stairs holding him up by his shoulder practically carrying him.

Anything Ortega tried to look at wasn't only blurred but out of focus as well, and climbing that staircase ended up being a long never-ending nightmare.

He struggled to make it up those stairs and when he finally did, he thought he was going to be sick.

The girl walked through the door closing it behind her, and disappeared.

Ortega threw himself on the bed.

He could barely even keep his head up anymore.

When the girl came back to his room, she was naked.

She jumped onto the bed beside him saying something in Vietnamese but he didn't understand.

She started playing around with Ortega's trousers to get them undone.

"Alvarez" said Ortega.

He could see his own hands right in front of him, but useless to him as they seemed completely beyond his control.

He wanted to stop her. He already knew then and there that he wouldn't have been able to do anything and he didn't want to be humiliated because of it.

He closed his eyes tight.

Alvarez... - he thought to himself.

Then he curled up while the girl kept trying to undress him.

Alvarez's family will get a letter in a few days.

Eventually the girl, had managed to undo his trousers. Making love to that American had by that time, become an obsession for her.

It was then that she touched Ortega.

Alvarez's family

A feeling of pleasure hit him instantly, unexpectedly, unwittingly, almost unpleasant.

At that very moment, it was a complete contradiction in the true sense of the word.

The girl then curled up at the height of Ortega's whip, while Ortega caressed her hair.

Touching her spine made him realize precisely how hot and alive it was, almost animal like. Under her skin, Ortega could feel her spine moving and bending like a snake.

Then, that wonderful feeling of pleasure suddenly turned nasty.

You're the only guy in the whole wide world that can't even enjoy a blowjob... You're a real fool Manuel.

Whose voice was that? Maybe Stephen's? Either it was his or it was some other bully

from high school.

I'm Special Forces, now.

I'm part of the SOG and I kill people for a living.

That night alone he'd killed a sergeant.

'My wife'... 'Tell my wife'... I'm not going to say a Goddamn thing to your fucking wife.

Ortega's eyes started watering.

He began to cry but the girl didn't notice.

You love Helen – said a voice in his head.

Helen left you – answered another.

He looked at the naked back lying under him again but now, quite unlike before, that feeling of pleasure had become painful.

He couldn't tune out all of those voices inside of him.

People die in Vietnam.

How did he die? Did he say anything? – No, he didn't say a fucking thing, colonel.

Are you gonna talk to his wife? (He recognized that voice though, that was Johnny's).

People die in Vietnam and that's it. There's nothing else to say.

They just die.

At around four in the morning, Rambo woke up and went looking for Ortega. It had been a very long night.

So much had happened since their evening had begun. The first thing had been the murder of Alvarez, then there was how much booze the two of them had drunk and last, but certainly not least, was that he'd just spent the last two hours with a prostitute. That night simply wouldn't end.

Rambo walked around all the rooms in the brothel. It was almost dawn and everyone was still asleep.

When Rambo found Ortega he was stark naked and fast asleep next to the prostitute he'd chosen for the night.

He was still completely plastered and couldn't even stand up. He'd had too much to drink, even for the likes of someone like him.

When Ortega woke initially, it looked like he'd somehow managed to snap out of everything, but in reality, it didn't last long at all. In fact, once he saw that Rambo was in better shape than he was, he let himself go completely by becoming slack and Rambo had to practically carry him all the way back to the base.

*

It was dawn by the time they got back and as soon as they reached the military police bar they started taking out their wallets.

“Hey, fucking retard, what the fuck's the matter with your friend? You can't hang around here like that”

Rambo held out their SOG ID cards. Those cards identified the two of them as secret service members which meant they weren't subject to any kind of questioning nor could they be in any way searched.

“Oh, Sorry Sir” said the military policeman somewhat embarrassed.

*

When Rambo finally lay down on his camp bed, his arm was hurting again. Ortega looked at him and said:

“We did it for Trautman”

Rambo looked back at him.

“A personal favour is exactly what he called it. A personal favour for him and him alone and nothing else, Right, Johnny? Will you say it too, please? Tell me we'll

never do anything like that again”

Only once Rambo was finally lying safe in his camp bed, surrounded by his sleeping teammates in a sobering silence, did he actually come to terms with what he and Ortega had really done that night.

A sense of anguish overwhelmed him as violently as a cold all-encompassing tidal wave would if you're just not quite used to the water temperature yet.

He felt tired all of a sudden, tired and old despite being only twenty-two.

It was a different kind of tiredness unlike anything he'd felt before, even though he'd felt so many versions, on so many occasions.

Maybe it was just the alcohol running its course.

He thought back to Alvarez again.

Rambo had helped Ortega without a moment's hesitation and without worrying about any of the consequences (just like the Army had taught him to do the year before Trautman).

Act first and ask questions later.

And when in doubt, kill.

Rambo had not done anything but his job. He'd watched Ortega's back during the operation, kept tabs on escape routes and patrolled the area.

The same night however, he'd also held a Vietnamese woman tight and perhaps that had brought on those changes in him. If those kinds of feelings existed, if they actually existed for real, then maybe, just maybe, life may hold even more than he knew. Something more than just hardship, combat or survival.

That feeling went well beyond anything Trautman had ever taught him.

If Rambo kept up that kind of lifestyle much longer though, he would probably die before discovering them.

He had a lot to lose if he stayed in the Special Forces his entire life.

One day he would reach the point of no return, and he wouldn't know how to lead a regular sort of life ever again.

You're thinking too much. – He told himself while he lay on his camp-bed, listening to his teammates sleep.

You're gonna die in Vietnam anyways, exactly like everybody else.

Right. Exactly like the SOG stats said they would.

Rambo then wondered how his friend Jorgenson was, considering he hadn't heard anything for days. His head was jumping from one thing to another incoherently, that night. He then asked himself who the woman was that had spent the whole night in his arms.

If Rambo told his teammates that he'd spent the all night simply hugging her, they would have mocked him till the cows came home, even if, all things considered, they weren't really assholes when it came to things like that.

Among the Baker team there was far more comradeship than anything else. They

helped each other rather than trying to be better than one another.

Anyway, he didn't even know why he hadn't fucked her like anyone else would have. Just lying with her that night had felt equivalent to finally taking a break for the first time in years.

He felt more rested than he had for a long time.

He pondered over what kind of life she could possibly lead. He wondered if she'd been forced into doing that kind of job, or had ever been raped, and if she had, how many times.

This made him think about the half-cast issue

He'd heard about half-American and half-Vietnamese kids being beaten, confined, or even segregated.

Rambo contemplated whether she'd ever dreamed about having kids, and if that kid would end up like that.

He then thought about Alvarez's wife and if she wanted to have children once her husband returned from Vietnam. Then letting his mind follow yet another train of thought, this time about Alvarez's last request and that perhaps Rambo should write his wife a short letter explaining what Alvarez had asked him to.

Rambo suddenly understood that his life had become hell on earth.

He sat up in bed wide-awake and full of energy at this point and it was right then and there that the cold, hard truth hit him.

His life was a nightmare.

A perfect and disgusting inferno that was chock-full of death, sobbing women, irrevocable mistakes, painful regrets and too much blood.

If it all wasn't enough, his God damn fucking arm was hurting again too.

He was going to be up all night, he just knew it.

It's the alcohol – Rambo thought to himself.

You'll be fine tomorrow

Tomorrow you'll start afresh.

Yet he kept seeing the Vietnamese girl's eyes and Rambo wondered if she would have suffered the same fate as thousands of other Vietnamese girls already had.

Alvarez's eyes then flashed back in his mind as well.

He remembered the look in them while Ortega was strangling him and then when his swollen tongue had come out of his mouth.

Sergeant Alvarez was probably from California if the sound of his accent was anything to go by.

A sudden chill seemed to come over him.

He looked past the camp beds his friends were in and right out the window at the sky which was hardly visible from where he was.

It's the alcohol.

It's the alcohol playing with your head.

Rambo got back under his covers and shortly thereafter, without even realizing it, he

drifted into a restless sleep.

Dak To

“Who are you?” Jorgenson said.

“It’s me, Lauren. Don't you remember, Jorgenson? I was here yesterday too”

“I don't remember. Do you know how my daughter died, Lauren? Because I honestly don't have a clue.”

“Your daughter is fine Jorgenson. I’ve been telling you that since yesterday and you still don't believe me. Is your vision still bad?”

Jorgenson turned the other way.

“No, I can see fine today, but I have to talk to my wife”

“A man came to see you again yesterday. Do you remember him?”

“No”

“Does the name Trautman ring any bells?”

“Yeah, he's my *boss*”

“Bravo Jorgenson” she said while giving him two light pats on the chest.

“You see? You're getting better”

The Next Day

That morning, Rambo's wakeup call was a swift kick. It was a little before nine a.m. They'd very nearly thrown him off his camp bed onto the floor. Ortega was standing overhead and looking down at him. He was handcuffed and was being punched by the two MPs. Rambo asked if he could put his boxers on at least, and while he got dressed Ortega and the two police officers stared silently at him. Once he was done they were both taken to the commander's office.

*

The commanding officer looked up from his papers only when they were in front of him. His name was Decker. Ortega had heard about him, he was famous.

"Do you know why you're here?"

"No, sir" Ortega replied.

"And you, son?" Decker said.

"No, sir"

"You're here because last night an officer was murdered. The very same officer you spent your entire night drinking with"

Neither of them said a word.

"Where were you two last night?"

"We went into two nightspots sir. The first was the Blue Moon and..."

"And you were there together with CO Alvarez?"

"Yes, sir"

Decker tilted his head and his eyes tightened into two paper-thin slits. He looked like a wild boar about to charge.

“Now let me guess, gentlemen. At one point last night when it got late, probably more or less at the same hour he was killed, everyone had headed home?”

Ortega and Rambo gave each other a puzzled look.

“And I bet neither of you have any fucking idea about where he went after that, because you were both so plastered, right?”

“We weren't that....” Ortega began.

“Shut the fuck up you piece of shit. You haven't got alibis just like I haven't got any witnesses, but let me just...”

“Sir”

“... say that ok, I may not be able to slam your sorry asses into the tank right now, but I wasn't born yesterday either, and I know you're Trautman's men”

“Sir”

Decker closed his eyes not unlike when he was bracing himself for bad news, and then said:

“Talk, soldier”

“After the Blue Moon we went straight to a brothel”

Decker picked up a pile of papers and moved it from one side of his desk to the other dropping it with a loud thud.

Then he stood up, turned around and picked up the baseball bat that was leaning up against the corner of the wall.

Rambo straightened his back automatically becoming an inch taller, but from behind Decker's back Ortega shook his head violently indicating no in Johnny's direction.

Decker moved up to Ortega and put the bat under his chin lifting it so their eyes met.

“What I'd like to know from you sergeant Ortega, is why the fuck we're fighting this damn war if good men get killed by the enemy every day, like pigs in a God damn slaughterhouse, yet sometimes, we find a reason to kill our own to”

“Sir, I...”

“You think that I’m a fucking retard, that's what you think You think that Trautman can send his Special Forces here without good purpose, and kill one of my fucking men thinking I won't know what the fuck’s going on. Put your hand on the table, son”
“Sir...”

Rambo was ready to jump like a spring and taut like a bow at the ready. He was ready to take Decker out of the game at his first move. Ortega however, had said no, he’d said NOT to do anything and until he changed his mind giving Rambo some kind of signal, he would follow his team leader’s orders.

Ortega put his left hand on the desk.

Decker brought the bat down and hit Ortega with all his might.

There was a thud and despite wanting to scream, Ortega couldn’t.

The pain was so acute that Ortega was sure Decker had broken all his fingers, even if he hadn't.

Decker turned immediately and hit Rambo, who withstood the blow using a technique he’d mastered in training. He’d taken the punch as Ortega had wanted, but sustained the blow without any serious setbacks,

By doing so, Decker hadn’t even broken a single rib.

A second later however, they were both lying on the floor in pain.

A hand – Ortega thought to himself.

It's only your left hand, and he couldn't even break it.

“Twenty five” said Decker.

“Repeat it, soldier. The both of you” he yelled.

“Twenty five, sir!” said Rambo and Ortega in painful voices.

“Twenty five accidents – said Decker - twenty five in my division this year alone. Most of them went home maimed while the others, the others left behind children, friends, and families you dirty little pieces of shit.”

“Yes, sir” said Ortega.

“Pieces of shit”

Decker moved closer to hit him again only this time he aimed at Rambo's face. Rambo couldn't just let him do it though, so this time he caught the bat on the fly with one hand and once he did he didn’t let go either.

It was then that Decker realized it was all a set up.

Despite being guilty, they'd let him hit them, and once Decker saw what Rambo was capable of, he got shivers down his back.

Rambo let go of the bat.

Decker walked back to his desk and sat down.

“Get out” he screamed.

“You and your friend the dickhead who's getting a medal of honour. I told you to get the fuck outta here, and tell that son of a bitch Trautman that if he ever kills one of my men again, or even only tries to show his ugly face round here, he's a fucking dead man. He'd better not think he's untouchable just because he's in charge of that damn secret unit, because I swear to God I'll get his sorry ass put six feet under anyhow. Otherwise, I'll do it myself with my own bare hands”

Rambo and Ortega got up.

Ortega was in dire need of a doctor.

“Understand? You tell him. Tell him to watch his back. He may wake up one morning and find a grenade right under his bed. Make sure you tell him assholes”

While they were walking out of the room they heard the bat slam against the wall and heard

Decker start to cry.

The next few days went by slowly.

Barry had gone back to the US on leave because of his wounded shoulder while Danforth, who was still in hospital, flirted regularly with Nurse Shelley.

Ortega's hand was healing fast and didn't seem to have any permanent injuries.

In the meantime, Jorgenson, against all odds, was still alive.

He started gaining consciousness more and more often, and sooner or later they'd have sent him back to the U.S. on leave too, His leave would probably be forever though given that the chances of a complete recovery were practically impossible.

In no time at all, the recovered Baker Team members resumed their training and went back to working together with the ARVN.

Quite often as a group they went running on the base limits, did push ups or some other activity together and always as a team.

Sometimes they got a jeep and left the city, drove to the jungle and did some strange form of shooting practice using silencers or played those hide and seek games like the ones they did in Fort Bragg.

Everybody except for Ortega of course, who generally just walked around the base with bandaged up hands and worked exclusively with the ARVN. This was the case because when they weren't working out, the Baker team guys were training the ARVN men in counter insurgency warfare.

Given that they were all fluent in Vietnamese, the Baker team was a valuable asset and often used their connections to pass on to those South Vietnamese soldiers crazy enough to join the SOG in the first place.

Most SOG teams were a combination of American and South Vietnamese men so they all had mixed personnel. The two Baker teams were an exception to this rule since U.S. soldiers generally led other SOG teams

but the rest of the personnel were Vietnamese.

Moreover, as time passed, the Baker team guys grew to like them more and more.

The Hmong, Khmer and many other ethnicities appeared to be the only real bulwark against the advance of communism in Vietnam.

It wasn't long before Ortega and a few others came to be good friends.

For the first time Ortega felt like his life was finally getting back to normal and at least he'd found a lifestyle which somewhat suited him.

Even Helen replied to his letters now and again.

Although the thought of having to do another mission as crazy as Black Spot was ever-present, like a hatchet hanging over their heads at the guillotine, their training continued.

The lives they lead were lonely ones but at least short spanned.

No one expected you to risk your life like that for too long maybe a year but not more. After that, they'd all have gone back to the U.S. In the meantime however, how many suicide missions could they possibly assign in a year?

Surely not more than six or seven – Ortega thought.

One's already out of the way.

The next time he'd be back in the U.S. for good, he'd look for a regular job and finally settle down.

He would sort his life out once and for all and maybe, just maybe, even start a family.

Some days later, an officer came into their tent by surprise, and it was then that the Baker team found out Jorgenson was on the road to recovery. It would take a while but he was going to make it.

Those were happy days, they were.

Being on leave in a place like Dak To or Saigon was a lot better than the ones they did in Fort Bragg.

Vietnam was a sort of a playground for them and chock-full of temptations like alcohol, sex and drugs. Everything there was dirt-cheap including someone's life.

Occasionally they'd all get absolutely wasted or go to hoar houses together.

Rambo had met 'a girl', which is what he actually called her. It was the same girl he'd slept with a few weeks earlier when they'd done away with Alvarez.

Occasionally Ortega suspected that Rambo may be falling for her but in any case, he knew Rambo was no fool.

He was fully aware that a hooker could chop your balls off from one minute to the next if she turned out to be a Vietcong.

Four years earlier, in 1965, an eighteen year guy named Bobby Garwood, had disappeared under those exact circumstances and no one had heard from him since.

He certainly hadn't been the first nor would he be the last to end up like that.

It was highly unlikely though that the girl Rambo had met was a Vietcong because she seemed to truly adore both the U.S. and Americans on the whole, asking anyone and everyone, not only Rambo, to bring her there.

He knew, but it didn't matter at all.

He certainly wasn't naive and he seemed genuinely happy, which was more than enough for Ortega.

Barry's Leave

Barry got off the bus.

The mountain air was cold and damp, but the clouds were starting to clear.

Barry ignored the sign pointing to Hope and continued instead towards the lake.

After walking a few minutes longer, the dirt road lead downhill and he caught sight of the two houses. The sun was glistening on the water and in the distance he could see the mountains that seemed to reach the sky.

He undid his coat and checked the bandages which were the reason for his leave in the first place, one last time. He made sure they were completely out of sight because the last thing he wanted his mom to see was why he was on leave in the first place.

Once he was satisfied that nothing was showing, he walked off the road and across the green lawn.

When the front door opened his mother stepped out.

She was as beautiful as ever.

She was wearing a plain black dress with a dark coloured handkerchief on her head, and as soon as she realized it was him she ran towards him.

“DELMORE!” she shouted.

Stretching her arms out she grabbed onto him, hugging him tightly.

“Mom”

She buried herself in his chest.

He was as tall as a mountain compared to her so much that when they hugged, she practically disappeared.

“Delmore” she said again.

“Tons of love eh mom? I haven’t been away a whole year or anything like that. Let’s get inside, come on”

When she finally got around to taking her face out of his chest though, she was crying.

Did she notice I was wounded or was she just thrilled to see me?

Despite not being certain, Delmore thought it best to baically concentrate on not giving himself away.

“Oh mom, come on... I wasn’t away that long”

“Your shoulders are wider, and you’ve got skinnier. Your face is hollow honey,” she

said caressing his cheeks.

“Do they feed you in that God forgotten country?”

“Yes, mom”

“Just look at you, you’re flesh and bones, almost straight edged. You used to be so big but you’re almost scary looking now”

“Mom!”

“It's true. Your shoulders are even broader than before”

“Let's get inside, come on”

They went inside.

She lived in a white wooden house somewhat colonial in style.

His mom put a teapot on the burner.

“So Delmore, honey... When are you coming home? Are not you bored of the army and that God forsaken Vietnam yet?”

“How many times do I have to tell you, mom? I love my job”

“Don't talk nonsense. So why don't you ever talk about your job when you write me then?”

Barry narrowed his eyes, but then quickly let up as he turned to look through the window down at the lake. That was his mom.

How could she possibly understand?

No one could and no one ever would either.

That was something Delmore would take to his grave exactly like the rest of them.

“I can't talk about my job mom”

“Oh come on, there is not anything a son can't talk to his mother about. There is not a mother around that wouldn't give her life up for her children!”

“Seriously mom I can't talk about it. I took an oath. Anyway, it's no big deal. It's basically the same as what everyone else does over there, more or less. I mean the usual stuff. The thing is though that they made me take an oath, and if I ever broke it, I wouldn't be able to look at myself in the mirror again mom. Honestly, that's all”

That was the truth.

He'd never talked to anyone about his work before but sometimes it felt like he was going crazy because of it.

On more than one occasion, mostly when he'd had too much to drink, he toyed with the idea of telling someone something and maybe just changing the names or something like that to be on the safe side.

He tried to push the thought aside though and change the subject.

“How's dad?”

“Always worse son”

“In what sense?”

“Well, even though we haven’t really spoken since the separation, I think your father’s an alcoholic now or maybe even worse and I think he may be seeing some bad women again too”

He didn’t know what to say.

Looking at him even more closely she then added:

“You’re not going out with any bad women over there in Vietnam, are you?”

“Oh my God no!”

“They’re full of diseases, you know that right? You’re such a good-looking boy you don’t need to pay them Barry. A guy like you can have any girl he wants; they’re all at your feet. You know that, don’t you?”

She moved her hand to his cheek caressing it.

“You are such a handsome boy, Delmore. You’re your mother’s pride”

That evening Cindy stopped in at the Delmore’s, and the rest of the family left her and Barry alone.

The two of them sat side-by-side on the white, wooden rocking chair facing the lake. The air was cold, so they wrapped themselves up in a blanket to keep warm and Cindy gently laid her head down on his shoulder.

He turned her face slowly toward his caressing it meanwhile, and then kissed her. They kissed slowly and at length under the cosy warmth of the blanket.

Bearing in mind his time at Fort Bragg, the tour in Vietnam, getting injured and a thousand other things, although they’d finally come to this, Delmore had waited a whole year for that kiss. In his head it had felt even longer, more like a lifetime and now that the moment was finally upon them all he wanted to do was stay under that blanket till the end of time.

That night, like any other, a C130 was flying over Dak To, dropping its flares into the night sky.

The latest orders from above no longer allowed the Baker team to take their leave all together exactly like old times.

Rambo and Ortega were already a little tipsy as they made their way on foot to the usual bar-brothel, smoking as they went.

There seemed to be less people walking around that evening.

The walk there was a rather long one, and although in Ortega's opinion one brothel was as good as another, he would never have said no to Rambo, who these days, seemed pretty keen on that one in particular.

The two were walking down a dark, narrow and particularly lonely road when they saw a flash in the distance between the houses at the end of the road, practically at the horizon.

Rambo and Ortega stopped dead in their tracks.

Not a second later they were met by the unmistakable sound of a gunshot.

Always at a distance, yet another spark ensued, and, from one moment to the next, all hell seemed to break loose.

The city limits were under fire as a barrage of faraway shots and explosions hit it.

It was an infantry offensive, exactly like the '68 Tet offensive against Saigon had been, the year before. Not unlike the Tet offensive, this too was being carried out in enormous numbers and it looked like an attempt to take the city by force.

Rambo and Ortega froze where they were, almost paralysed, and consequently, too far from home to consider it an option.

They got off the road moving to the nearest house, and just as they put their backs against the wall, an enormous bang sounded.

A genuine and authentic crash sound bellowed at not even two hundred yards distance. The brothel they were on their way to, had just blown up into pieces.

While dust lingered in the air and fragments were falling back to the ground, Rambo turned and looked at Ortega pleadingly. Rambo wanted to go in for the survivors.

Ortega was no monster.

He too had gotten to know some of the people who worked there and he was no less upset about it than Rambo was, but not getting right back to the base could cost them both their lives.

Ortega looked up and sighed.

If he'd ordered Rambo to get right back to the base, his friend would never have

forgiven him.

So that's how they made the decision to stay and help whoever needed it.

ALL NIGHT LONG

Rambo and Ortega pulled out their 1911s from their backs as they walked along the roadside and now at the ready.

The shots in the distance became fewer and fewer and although Rambo and Ortega worried about snipers popping out of the building windows, in the end, there weren't any.

They got to the bar entrance and went in with their guns still at the ready. A wall had collapsed leaving dust everywhere and most of the lights had blown.

They could hear survivors coughing, others whispering but what they heard most were laments.

"We need to call the base," Ortega said as Rambo rushed up the stairs.

"Easy, Johnny"

-

Rambo climbed the stairs two by two, while Ortega stayed downstairs keeping cover.

Once he reached the next floor, his gun hand was trembling.

He wandered the corridors glancing hastily into the rooms when a sudden dizziness came over him and the corridor turned into an abyss.

Rambo leaned against a wall to catch his breath.

Impatient with himself, he climbed yet another flight and swiftly moved towards her room.

There was light from the street beaming in through where a wall had once been, the floor under it was hanging in mid-air ready to collapse without any given notice, while in another corner, there was something burning slowly.

There was a female body lying flat on her back on the floor.

Although Rambo recognized her build and hair instantly, it was impossible to see her face in the dark.

He couldn't be sure if it was actually her.

The face in front of him was covered in blood on one side, while the other was torn to shreds by the explosion.

Rambo took another step forward in an attempt to see better.

Some of her hair had been torn out, as though she'd been scalped by a redskin.

She was missing an eye, and all that was left was an obscene, black cavity, while the other eye was wide open staring blankly into mid-air.

Rambo lost his breath.

Thinking it couldn't possibly get any worse her blood stained mouth twitched.

She was alive.

She was taking quick short breaths, but she was still alive.

Rambo felt a stabbing pain in his stomach as he pointed his 1911 at her.

He couldn't leave her like that.

His mind was whirling. He couldn't get her off his head.

His gun hand was shaking.

Where the fuck was Ortega?

She would never make it with such serious injuries.

He knew he had to finish her off but once you crossed that line, there was no turning back.

He could hear the gunfire getting louder and closer so there wasn't much time left.

A battle was unfolding out there and they were about to find themselves right in the middle of it.

Rambo's mind flashed back remembering the first night he'd spent simply holding her in his arms but he blocked it as quickly as it had started.

His time was up.

Lowering his gun, he shot her in the head.

A rush of blood shot into the air, then poured onto floor.

Only after a few seconds did it lighten up.

Rambo felt something in him end.

Along with gun shots from outside he heard voices hollering in Vietnamese but couldn't make out what they were saying.

Apparently something was wrong but he was still in shock over what he'd just done.

He was unable to move and even had trouble breathing, let alone think.

Still paralysed by the shock he suddenly noticed something moving in the dark and it almost frightened him to death.

He couldn't make out what, but there was something that had been cut somehow and was now bleeding on its own in the corner.

Rambo moved hesitatingly forward and watched whatever that thing was emerge slowly from the dust.

A child wearing blood-soaked rags came forward almost in slow motion.

His eyes were tightly closed but his mouth was wide open as he continued to scream silently and lose blood all around him.

The explosion had torn both him and his mother to pieces.

It was too traumatizing for Rambo to stand. The image itself faded out of his mind until it was nothing more than a dark shapeless unrecognizable stain.

His head was throbbing in such excruciating pain that he wanted to scream.

Horrified, he slowly backed out of the room. It was too much, even for the likes of someone like him.

He wanted to throw away his gun, scream at the top of his lungs and flee.

He was well aware however, that he would only have got himself killed doing so, and not a single thing more. What it all came down to was that he couldn't scream, flee or anything else for that matter.

All there was to do was tell off the exceptional training itself because it kept him from screaming even at a time like this, therefore not giving him any possible relief.

He had to swallow it up and get over it, tasting every damn shade of it as he did, feeling damned to the core by it, probably forever. He could barely understand where he was or what he was even doing anymore

In what seemed a different world, Ortega was calling out to him in a loud voice, but the sound was dreamlike and remote by the time it got to him.

The shots coming from the street were practically below them.

Rambo slowly went back down the stairs to the first floor.

“What the fuck just happened here, Johnny? Why didn't you answer? Are you okay?”

“Yeah”

“I heard shots”

“You mean one shot...”

“No, no I heard you fire twice and...” but then Ortega stopped mid-sentence. Something at the window had caught his eye.

“They’ve found us, Johnny. They must know we’re Americans”

Rambo was trying to think straight again, but a rush of adrenaline shot through him.

He was in danger, and he knew it.

He took the last rounds he had out of his pocket.

He had three, so twenty-one bullets of which one already shot.

He then unloaded his gun looking carefully at the cartridge it was clear that a shot was missing. Ortega was right, he had fired twice.

“There they are - Ortega said-, fucking assholes. Do you see them?”

“Yeah”

“They are coming to finish the job Johnny, trust me. They’re deciding how to take us out. What do you wanna do Johnny?”

Ortega turned to look at Rambo, but the guy standing in front of him wasn’t the same Rambo. He was different. He had a look on his face that Ortega had never seen before.

He’d suddenly become another, a complete stranger almost, and it unsettled Ortega.

His eyes were locked and lacked any kind of expression, like a snakes. He was huffing and puffing, practically growling like a dog with each exhale almost tasting the blood.

“I’ve got three rounds too Johnny, but with this fucked up hand I don’t even know if I’ll be able to reload”

Rambo kept staring out the window.

“What do we do?”

“You distract them and I’ll kill them”

Ortega looked at his friend somewhat startled, and then replied

“What the fuck are you saying? You don’t know what the hell might be out there, and there’s shots coming from all over the city”

“I’m going,” he said.

Rambo disappeared into the dark as he proceeded down the stairs.

Ortega looked out of the window again back down at the street below and spotted Vietcong eyes right around the corner, Their eyes met, but neither of them were interested in only exchanging glances.

Jesus fucking Christ – thought Ortega.

Now that Rambo had left, Ortega had no choice but to go ahead and do it the way he'd told him to, which meant creating a distraction and backing him up as best as he could.

“Come and get me you fucking assholes!” he shouted as he fired a few shots down at the street.

-

Rambo was in the building standing in the dark where could see them from where he was standing in the dark without being seen.

There were five of them all armed with AK47s. They were getting ready to cross the street and come into where he was. Being indoors, he knew the AK firepower advantage wasn't going to be as good as if they'd battled it out outside.

In any case, we were talking about five AKs against two 1911s and no element of surprise.

It was then that Rambo realized he'd probably not only made a mistake but quite possibly his last. There was no point trying to deny it because he had unquestionably fucked up. His anger had got the best of him.

Damn it – he thought.

It had been a mistake, that was true, but it wasn't over yet. Like hell it was, and he didn't intend to simply give up.

So he started looking around for a corridor where he could hide out in the dark while he kept an eye on the main entrance without being seen. Once he found one, he went in and waited in the dark, with his pistol at the ready.

When the first Vietcong turned up he popped his head in and took a quick look without actually coming through the doorway. The Vietcong were known for this little trick and always did it to make sure no one was waiting for them inside.

Rambo however didn't shoot. He would never dream of shooting first if he wasn't sure to get the job done right.

Anyhow, Trautman taught that trick too and it served to unnerve any potential enemy waiting inside.

Once satisfied with that initial check, the Vietcong carefully ventured past the doorway.

He moved along the entrance hall so slowly and cautiously that it almost seemed to be in slow motion.

He couldn't have been over twenty and had a hollowed out face most likely caused by hunger.

Rambo's heart started pumping harder.

The Vietnamese probed the entire room using the barrel of his rifle the same way you would a radar antenna. As he moved forward, he slowly pointed it towards where Rambo was hiding.

The muzzle at this point was aiming right at him but Rambo kept perfectly still nevertheless.

Rambo knew how shadows worked. He'd done more than a year of training in the dark learning how to use them.

He can't see you – said a voice in his head.

Trust me he can't see you.

His heart was beating so hard though that it almost hurt. Rambo was laying his life on the line in hopes that the training would suffice but it really wasn't easy.

Don't move – said the voice again.

Despite his inner voice's better judgement however, he simply couldn't abide.

Rambo bent down in slow motion exactly at the same time the Vietcong soldier was deciding to leave.

He crouched down so slowly in fact, that it almost took him thirty seconds to do it.

In the meantime, two other Vietcong soldiers had come in, and they were barely older than the first was.

The young ones die first – Rambo thought to himself.

The young ones then the old ones, is not that right, you fucking assholes?

Rambo could tell by their textbook entrance that they'd been trained well, but he also knew there wasn't anything else to do but wait.

He watched the last two come in, but it was still too early to make his move.

The Vietcong had to believe that Ortega, who was on the floor above them, was the only threat there or they wouldn't ease up. A fake sense of security meant they'd stop checking their backs, and at that point, Rambo would make his move.

The first two wouldn't be hard to hit once they dropped their guards but the other three, well, he would have to wait and see about them.

He was uneasy and had the impression they could hear his heart pounding. After a few very long moments however, the last two soldiers seemed to lose any and all interest in his hiding spot as well.

It was then that they finally moved into position and tactically proceeded up the stairs to do away with Ortega. They considered the ground floor safe, precisely as Rambo had foreseen, and, as expected, their guards dropped.

When the first three tactically made their way up the stairs, Rambo knew it was time to do business.

-

Ortega, who was still on the first floor, was so scared he was sweating.

There wasn't anyone left on the street any more, and his first clip only had one bullet left.

“Come and get me, you dickheads!” he shouted while reloading.

“I'm right here you fucking assholes! Come On!”

-

As the first soldier vanished up the stairs, Rambo decided that the time had come.

He didn't even have to aim.

He looked right at the soldier who was covering their backs, pulled the trigger and the shot that fired was as deafening as a bomb.

It was as though a firecracker had exploded in the Vietnamese soldier's

face. Blood squirted all over the place and the wall behind him got covered with bits of his skull.

In the meantime, Rambo's gun had already moved onto the second target. The second Vietcong was caught off guard unexpectedly, and once he realized what was happening, he instinctively turned towards Rambo rather than moving to take cover.

The time it took him to spin around was far more than what Rambo needed to aim.

The bullet shot a hole right in the centre of his chest making it impossible to breath and he was instantly paralysed exactly where he was standing. Rambo fired again and this time he shot him right in the middle of the forehead.

The soldier fell onto his rifle face down on the ground.

The other three Vietcong hastily disappeared up the stairs.

“Fuck you, motherfuckers, go fuck yourselves!” Ortega shouted.

Rambo changed positions moving to the staircase wall and tried having a look up the stairs but was immediately greeted by a shower of AK bullets. As he quickly stepped back into the corner he was taking cover in, the bullets triggered splinters of plaster and fragments to go everywhere while the sound beat on his eardrums.

Rambo stretched out his pistol hand around what was left of the corner and, without aiming, randomly fired a couple of shots up the stairwell.

-

The floor shook under Ortega as the curtain of fire kept flying everywhere. He tried to get around the stairs too but a shower of bullets came right at him, so he went straight back to his cover.

Ortega and Rambo continued to cover each other's backs as they tried to get up those stairs. They shot at the Vietcong keeping them from doing anything tactical, without even wasting too much ammo while they did it. They were good, very good.

Ortega looked out the window conscious of the fact he had to get out of there and somehow find a way to escape.

Darkness covered the city not unlike when the lights go off during a power grid failure. Apart from the occasional flash coming from firearms which were visible sporadically along the horizon, not much else could be seen.

Right below the window, there was a small but thick ledge which Ortega knew solely happened to go all around the building. That was when using it as a potential escape route came to him.

I probably shouldn't – he thought to himself.

Ortega moved away from the stairwell for a second to scan the other rooms. Not only were there no escape routes there weren't any fire extinguishers, propane tanks or anything else either which he may have helped him get away. In other words, he was seriously fucked. He figured the best thing to do at that point therefore was to shoot another couple of bullets down the stairwell, solely to remind the Vietcong that he was still there.

Then he went back to the initial window and looked out onto the street again.

He noticed a thick powerline cable which extended from the brothel to the building on the other side of the road. You could say it connected them somewhat, but just barely. Maybe, --and I really mean just maybe-- it may be able to stand Ortega's weight.

Ortega put his 1911 behind his back and climbed out of the window.

“Fuck” he said looking down.

He climbed out onto the ledge as the city below him was still pitch black. The ledge seemed to stand his weight, but it was so small it could barely fit his feet.

“Fuck, Fuck, Fuck”

He shifted slowly covering a few yards until he was right under the power cable that linked the two buildings together.

With a stern flick of the wrist, Ortega opened up his butterfly knife.

What the fuck am I doing? I can't believe it.

Despite obvious reservations, Ortega went ahead and cut the cable, praying in the meanwhile that the power really was down on the entire city.

What the fuck am I doing?

In spite of all doubts, once he'd managed to cut through it, nothing had happened after all.

Next, he wrapped it around his good hand, gave it a hard tug checking to

see if it was sturdy enough to hold. Using his wounded right hand would have been painful, but he couldn't see any other way out.

A second later, he heard Vietnamese voices confirming their arrival, on his very same floor.

<< He has to be here... Somewhere >> they said about him in Vietnamese.

Ortega looked down.

I'm going to fucking kill myself.

He pulled the cable as hard as he could, and then jumped into the dark abyss between the two buildings.

He hung there in that emptiness for what seemed like an eternity before he finally began falling towards the building directly in front of him. Despite all odds, the cable held tight.

God please, make it hold!

He was three storeys high, but the cable was holding him up acting like a stiff bungee jumping cord or something.

Unfuckinbelievable – he thought.

I'm flying.

I'm flying like a fucking Tarzan motherfucker.

When he finally reached the building he smashed against it feet first, and it hurt so much that he felt it all the way up to his groin.

Suddenly he heard an awful sound, as if something pertaining to the cable had just broken

CRACK!

One of the hooks which fastened the cable to the wall had cracked and Ortega freefell for about a meter.

Not a moment later, he heard another **CRACK!** and dropped yet another meter.

Then one **CRACK!** after another and another... **CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!**

All of the hooks were giving way and Ortega was freefalling at a faster speed than before.

Leaning towards the other wall, he tried desperately to grab onto a window using his injured hand (since the other one was still wrapped inside the cable). No matter how hard he tried though, he honestly couldn't because it was too painful.

He was practically freefalling by then.

He glanced down and saw a terrace right below him.

The impact was painstaking.

He somehow managed to protect his head and spine albeit just barely.

Unsure exactly how, but in some way he'd kept from screaming despite the severity of the impact. He was certain however, that it had been equivalent being run over by a semi-truck.

He found himself lying in the middle of the terrace in so much pain he couldn't move.

He bent over clenching his teeth in a feeble attempt to suppress it.

He'd never felt anything like that before, not even during the selection process.

Dust got into his eyes and he heard the crackling of a shot and then another, and still another.

The Vietcong were yelling and shooting wildly against his terrace from the other building.

With one hand Ortega reached for the handle and opened the door behind him. With great difficulty he managed to drag himself into the dark apartment groaning in pain as he did. Once he was half way in, he pulled his legs in off the terrace and collapsed from exhaustion.

It was dark and quiet in there and appeared almost abandoned. That was definitely good news.

As he caught his breath, he suddenly realized his gun was gone.

He must have lost his pistol when he fell.

People were shouting outside as they continued to fire shots, so he dragged himself further away from the door and accidentally bumped into something, making it fall.

-

The Vietcong who had just shot at Ortega's terrace cursed about missing him. He and his two squad members couldn't do anything at that point except go and get the American.

Upon further consideration however, the one that had just killed two of his men, that asshole, may still be inside the brothel so he ordered the others to get back down to join the rest of his team.

The Vietcong in charge knew they all had to be excruciatingly careful because the American soldier could still be there waiting for them.

Once they reached the last stairwell, the three Vietcong stopped together

mid-staircase and stood still to listen.

There was a sound, an odd sound, like the humming of an engine with its gears in neutral, but he was certain it hadn't been there before.

The senior Vietcong gestured to the others to move on and two of them cautiously proceeded down the steps.

Almost straightaway however, the senior Vietcong had second thoughts. He patted the youngest on the shoulder to get his attention, and the young soldier stopped.

He had a feeling that something was wrong, so he knew the best place for him now was up front.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs the senior took a vigilant step into the entrance hall. As soon as he put his foot down he realized that the floor right under him was wet. Once again, he was certain however that the water in which he was standing hadn't been there before.

-

Rambo was patiently lying on the top of a wardrobe like a spider awaiting its prey. He was right there in front of them, ready to ambush but no one had the slightest idea.

In one hand he was holding his AK while in the other a severed cable from an internal combustion generator that he'd found. That generator, which was a large, portable emergency generator contained enough power to light up a hotel.

Rambo didn't even shoot.

He let the cable drop at their feet and on impact, the wet surface created a blue ball effect and an explosion bellowed in their ears. The discharge from the generator was so strong that the three Vietcong were immediately electrocuted lighting up like candles.

The electric current paralysed them so quickly that they didn't even have enough time to scream.

While their bodies twisted and caught fire, Rambo opened fire using his AK.

He shot fast, and in no time the generator in the other room caught fire and the power supply finally stopped.

When the last of them fell to the ground, Rambo jumped down from the wardrobe.

He moved up to the three of them and looked down.

Their faces were swollen, chock-full of blisters and there was a stench of burnt flesh lingering in the air. Rambo didn't feel guilty about killing the youngest one but no one at fifteen deserved to die, not even a filthy Vietcong trying to do him in.

The time had come to find Ortega so he went outside onto the street.

Ortega was still in the apartment where he'd 'landed', when out of nowhere, a light broke the darkness and he realized that three people were standing right in front of him. There was a woman holding a frightened little girl tightly in her arms and a man holding a handgun just as tight. Seeing the handgun pointed directly at him made Ortega swallow and the man holding the gun glared into Ortega's eyes.

< I am unarmed > Ortega said in Vietnamese.

< You are American >

< Yes, I am American >

< Go away > the man said to his wife and daughter, who obediently disappeared.

“What you doing here?” said the man now speaking in English.

“I got out... I was...”

“Why you in my home?”

“I was running for it”

The man didn't move or say anything for a moment, but then slowly lowered his gun.

“And how the fuck you runaway all the way in here? By flying?”

Ortega was speechless.

“This is my house”

“I mean no harm”

“I work for the South Vietnamese police, and this is my house”

“Oh God, thank you” Ortega said finally lowering his head in agony.

The Vietnamese police officer rolled his eyes and then sighed.

“Let me take a look at this leg” he said.

Ortega couldn't move. He would have to wait for the offensive to be over and hope that the Vietcong didn't find him first. If the Vietcong came into that apartment, they'd have killed him and the family hiding him because that is the way the Vietcong used to work. Given the physical state he was in, there wasn't anything he could do to protect them especially if only standing seemed to be an endeavour.

Ortega therefore simply accepted the fact that this was the way it had to be for now and decided to tell the Vietnamese police officer about his jump instead.

“Absurd this story is” the police officer replied after hearing Ortega's tale.

“No, seriously, I really did use the cable to swing onto your terrace”

“Weak cables can't hold no person. Can stand lamps over streets only”

“Just look outside if you don't believe me”

“You Americans are all idiots. Anyway, forgive me my gun. You Americans make whores pregnant rob from houses and rape women”

“Whatever you say man, you're right. Hey, give me a break Johnny, come on out of there”

Rambo moved out of the shadows behind the police officer and a moment of silence ensued.

“There's no need to worry about him man” assured Ortega.

“This is Johnny a mate of mine. Welcome Johnny! Exactly how long have you been there?”

An hour later the shots had become few and far between.

Ortega was lying down while Rambo sat on the floor in front of him lighting his zippo on the floor as if they were around a campfire or something.

Ortega was in so much pain, he was sweating.

“Debriefing?” he said with a broken voice.

“I fucked up,” said Rambo.

Ortega grinned and Rambo continued:

“I couldn't get rid of all five of them with my handgun alone. We shouldn't have ended up in there. I messed up Ortega”

“Whatever, it doesn't matter now anyways”

That night they'd both made some mistakes and they knew it.

“Now get some sleep boss”

“I don't think I can Johnny, everything hurts. You don't know what I'd give for a shot of morphine right now”

“You sleep and I'll do watch”

All night long time seemed to speed up and slow down as Ortega repeatedly woke and drifted back to sleep because of the pain.

When the first beams of blue light started streaming in through the window in the door, Rambo was looking down at the road as he stood as frozen as a statue by the door.

Ortega would have given anything to know what was going on in his head.

Rambo and Ortega sincerely thanked the Vietnamese police officer for what he and his family had done. They were fully aware of the risks he and his family had taken to hide them in their home until the offensive was over.

Then, after saying thanks and bidding farewells, Rambo and Ortega got on board a military jeep and were driven back to the base. Ortega was lying on a stretcher in the back.

The Dak To base had undergone a serious attack.

There were a few craters along the surrounding wall and some cut barbed wire indicated where the Vietcong had tried to get in.

Rambo let two male nurses carry Ortega away and he found himself alone near the base's entrance checkpoint.

The burden of the mistakes he'd made that night and all its horrors were about to hit him like a landslide when a face nearby suddenly caught his attention.

“Joey” Rambo said.

“Joey!”

Hearing someone calling his name, a guy lifted his head.

His eyes were in a daze.

Rambo couldn't believe it, but then again, faces didn't lie. It was one of his childhood friends and he was actually there in Vietnam too. It was too unbelievable to be true. What were the chances? One in a million?

“Joey Danforth”

“John... John Rambo – the guy replied - ...Well, I'll be!”

“I can't believe it, Joey Danforth in Vietnam. What a fucking coincidence!”

The two opened up their arms and hugged.

Then Rambo said:

“It must be five years since we saw each other last I think”

“Almost ten actually”

Rambo was happy to see his old friend but Joey Danforth didn't look as happy to see him, at least, not as much as he should have. There was something the matter.

“What's up, man?”

“It was a hard night, that's all”

“What happened? You can tell me Joey, we're friends. *Real* friends”

“Nothing Johnny, really. We lost a couple of men unfortunately, you know, the good kind”

Rambo quit talking and modestly watched his friend.

Shortly after, he said:

“You could use a drink. Let's go get one”

They went to the base's PX store, bought two beers and had a seat outside right in front of the two Baker team tents.

John and Joey had been friends since they were kids.

Their fathers used to spend their Sundays drinking together. When they did, the two boys would disappear into the mountain parts surrounding his dad's farm and always bringing along Rambo's eleven year old, dark coloured mutt with them.

Rambo remembered that when the two of them were together, the elderly dog would suddenly come back to life and follow them everywhere they went almost like a shadow. Despite how old he was, he would keep up till the evening time and then finally pass out from exhaustion.

Anyway, many years have passed since then, and now that dog was long gone.

“What do you do nowadays, Johnny?”

“Special Forces, in the Fifth with Secret Services”

“You're shitting me”

“No, I'm not. I'm serious”

“But you're wearing the same fucking army uniform as me! How can you be Special Forces?”

“Don't ask me anything else”

“I can't fucking believe that you hang around like a standard soldier but you're not. So it's true then!”

“What's true then?”

“What they say about the SOG”

“The SOG doesn't exist, remember that! Why, what do they say?”

“That you do crazy shit like using AKs, that you wear what you want and you do whatever the fuck you please”

“Well, I wouldn't say it's exactly like that”

“But Johnny... I mean, doesn't fighting without a uniform and killing off the battlefield make you feel like a bunch of killers?”

Rambo shot him a nasty look and Joey looked the other way. For a short time after, the two of them continued to sip their beers in silence.

“Can I ask you something Johnny?”

Rambo nodded.

“Have you ever lost anyone?”

“Not since I've joined the Special Forces, we haven't. One of us is in bad shape though. At first, it looked like he wasn't going to pull through, but he's still alive now, even if they don't let us see him yet”

Joey Danforth looked down again, ran a hand through his hair giving Rambo the impression that he was about to cry. He looked away again so Johnny wouldn't see his face in case his eyes became teary all of a sudden. Rambo took another gulp of his beer and gave him a second to deal with his pain by himself.

“You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want to you know” Rambo said quietly

“I was sound asleep Johnny and that's the same as killing them myself, with my own hands”

“How many were lost?”

“Three. Three Johnny, and they were all friends of mine”

Joey Danforth put a hand over his mouth in order to hold himself back, but it was too hard to manage, and in the end, he cried.

“Are you sure you were sleeping?” asked Rambo.

Joey however didn't reply.

“I mean, if you’d been awake, are you sure you would have saved them?”

“Not really...” replied Joey, and Rambo left it at that.

“You know, when Twain was dying, we patched him up even though we knew perfectly well that he wasn’t going to make it anyways. His eyes were shut and when I moved up next to him I put my hand on his shoulder. He felt it and without opening his eyes he lifted his hand into the air trying to find mine and wanted me to hold his. He didn’t even know who I was and yet he wanted to hold my hand. He had no idea that it was entirely my fault. He passed away before I was able to tell him what had happened”

“And what did you do when he pulled his hand out?”

“I took it. I held him by the hand until the end”

Rambo noticed that Joey was shaking so he glanced the other way.

Looking him in the face while he told the story had become too unbearable for Rambo.

“He died holding my hand and it was my fault he died in the first place for fuck’s sake.”

“Calm down”

“He died because of me, because I was sleeping”

“That’s enough Joey. Keep your voice down”

“You know John, when the VC came in I started shooting. They were all right in front of me, but by that point, they were already in and I couldn’t hit them all at once. It was already hopeless by then. I fucked the entire base up myself.”

“That’s enough! Just stop it”

Rambo grabbed him by his jacket and tightened his arms around him. Then he whispered:

“Do you want to get yourself arrested? Do it. Go to your commanding officer and report yourself. Just quit screaming, or they’ll arrest you for something else. Cut it out.”

John Foley had a dazed look on his face, the same as when you wake unexpectedly from a dream.

“You’re right, Johnny” he said as he sniffed.

“Take some time to think about it” Rambo said as he loosened his hold on him and eventually let go.

“Try to remember how things really went and then, make your decision afterwards. Let me just tell you something though, if you hadn’t been fast

asleep at the time you'd still be blaming yourself now except it would be for something else in any case. Whatever else, anything at all since it wouldn't even matter. Had your rifle jammed, you'd be blaming yourself for not keeping it clean enough even if it was perfect. The fact of the matter is that sometimes, rifles just jam. Do you see what I am trying to tell you? This may be nothing more than a sense of guilt playing tricks on you because survivors always feel guilty. Believe me, it's a fact. Maybe it's your first time, but I've already been there"

"Thanks, John"

"Good. Don't worry about it. Now go sleep on it"

"I'm not Special Forces material Johnny"

Rambo smiled.

"War is hard for everyone - he said - Had I been there last night, maybe you'd be the one giving me this talk and not the other way around"

Rambo was lying, but it was only a white lie. If Ortega had died inside that brothel for instance, Rambo would never have forgiven himself. It had been his idea to stay and help rather than take off. In fact, he knew that if Ortega was in bad shape now, it really was his fault. He was especially aware of that point and just the idea of it hurt him. Fuck did it ever.

Rambo took another sip of his beer being extra careful to quit drinking the minute he felt the slightest effect of alcohol in him. Drinking right after an offensive like that wasn't what he would call a smart move. It became increasingly evident to Rambo that the reason for his drinking was to hang out with the others and feel like them, nothing more and nothing less. He then asked himself if he was human like everybody else, because if making mistakes was human, he would have to find a way to stop being human then.

What an odd thought that was. It was one of those things that only occurred to you after you had risked your life and knew it, precisely as he had the night before. He decided it was better to just brush it off.

"Come on man, don't think about it" said Rambo.

Then he added:

"Are you still saving up for your Chevy?"

"No, not any more. I bought it"

Rambo laughed.

“Fuck. You used to dream about that Chevy when you were a kid, and now I can't believe you finally bought it!”

*“I wanna go home, Johnny.
I wanna drive my Chevy”*

John Rambo, 1982

Two days later Joseph Danforth and nurse Shelley met for the second time after his discharge in one of the rooms in the basement at the hospital. They closed the door behind them, took a few steps back and then she jumped on him kissing him passionately. That kiss was oddly different from any other past kiss Danforth could recall. It was by far the most sincere one, ever. She was neither a junkie, nor a whore. She was a beautiful woman, young but adult like, and among many, she wanted him. Danforth had a job he liked, with people he liked, he no longer stole and he didn't even do drugs either. Everything was going just fine. Even that woman was fine. As a matter of fact, he was crazy about her. When they let go of each other, he stopped to look at her for a spell and felt something he'd never felt before. He felt surreal. He couldn't believe that his life, for the very first time, was truly okay. It seemed impossible. He was worried about waking up and realizing it had been nothing but a dream because, simply said, it all seemed too good to be true.

She looked directly at him and then she half-closed her lips waiting to be kissed. So he kissed her like he'd never kissed any other woman before. He wouldn't admit to himself that he was in love, but he got pretty damn close.

This time I've really lost it – he thought to himself.

A month later Ortega had completely recovered. His ribs and back were okay and even his hand had finished healing.

Rambo got himself a Browning 'Hi-power' in place of his 1911. Using any kind of weapon you wanted was one of the advantages of the SOG and after that night in Dak To, Rambo decided that he needed a handgun that carried more bullets.

It was a popular alternative when it came to weapons among the SOG teams and Rambo was testing it for the rest of his team too.

He often went into the jungle surrounding the base to train on his own, usually practising his fast draw skills with it and then hitting multiple trees in a row, exactly the way he'd done that night.

One morning, with no forewarning, Jorgenson walked right into the Baker Team tent. The team joyfully gathered around him and it was all pats on the shoulder and the shaking of hands with him. The scar on his head was really marked, making him look a lot like Frankenstein, They'd all seen much worse things however, so considering what had actually happened to him, he was pretty lucky to be where he was and looking as good as he did.

While his mates celebrated him, unquestionably pleased to see him, Jorgenson involuntarily forced a smile on his face and his eyes gave signs of tiredness and hesitancy.

He gave the impression of being almost uncomfortable.

He seemed to be the only one not feeling anything, almost numbed.

"I missed you guys" he said eventually in a somewhat insincere voice, as if he didn't mean it.

"How you doing Grizzly?" Messner asked as he took his hand to shake it

"They're shipping me home for a bit. I'll be able to see my daughter again"

"Cool Carl!" exclaimed Krakauer giving Jorgenson a shake from behind as he continued his hand shaking with everybody else.

Coletta came into the tent carrying a box of beers over his shoulder festively.

"You're the man Grizzly!"

"Yeah, you rock!" they shouted a loud.

That night Jorghenson was already back in the U.S. He was home in the 'real world' as they liked to call it. It was the middle of the night however, and although he should have been fast asleep he was actually wide-awake. He was making his way down the upstairs corridor which lead out of his room.

Something just didn't feel right.

There was something definitely wrong at home that night.

In fact while Jorghenson was wondering along the corridor by himself, still in the dark, he heard his wife Mary's voice suddenly break the silence.

"You're only having a nightmare Carl," she said.

Jorgenson jumped back startled, trying to catch a glimpse of something, anything but that voice seemed only to be in his head.

"..and it is not over yet either"

Jorgenson turned towards his daughter's room, and walked through the doorway.

The little girl was sleeping in her cradle without a blanket. The room was full of flying insects and the little girl laid still.

Jorgenson moved closer to the crib, waving the flying pests away with his hands but to no avail.

Eventually, he reached her.

Looking down into the crib he saw that the baby's skin was grey in colour, seemed to have been pulled out of shape and as looked coarse as parchment.

She continued to lay there motionless, almost frozen like but most startling of all, was that she wasn't breathing.

It was obvious that she'd been dead for a while, so long in fact that her once chubby cheeks now retracted inwards and the flies were laying their eggs there.

*

Jorghenson woke with a start and found himself lying across his mate's camp bed face down.

He was hot and completely covered in sweat, almost feverish.

It was the middle of the night in Dak To and he was still in Vietnam.

The following morning, instead of taking the usual walk sporting their heavy, full range rucksacks, the guys opted for a group run.

They went for a run in the vast empty area at the back of the base in front of the airplane runway. The base was located on the southern city limit, and to make it safer they had burned the surrounding vegetation down with chemicals and you could still strongly smell them in the air. That ensured the Vietcong didn't have a jungle to hide their sharp shooters in and the base was definitely safer.

The Baker Team guys came out of the base chatting as they stretched and then slowly began to run along plane, despite the strong and unmistakable smell.

Jorgenson's leave

The following day Jorgenson caught his flight at the Saigon airport. The sun was shining and the city seemed strangely in good spirits. Quite a few hours later, he was once again in the company of his family.

On the afternoon of his second day of leave, Jorgenson found himself alone standing in front of his daughter's cradle.

The little girl was crying.

Her teddy bear had slipped behind the back of her head so she was crying desperately over it.

Jorgenson stared at her blankly as he stood next to the crib, motionless. He really wasn't feeling anything.

It was odd, and it hadn't always been that way. The memory of those feelings were still very vivid in his mind, but the truth of the matter was that those feelings no longer existed.

It naturally went without saying that he would kill for her sake but only because she belonged to him. She was his property and no one had the right to touch her. Even with his little baby crying however, there weren't feelings of compassion for her or whatever else.

It was very odd indeed.

A part of Jorgenson wondered why he lacked empathy for her in spite of her suffering, while another part of him wondered why in the world he should.

For that very reason he decided to simply keep staring at her and do nothing merely to see if the crying would eventually have an effect on him.

"Here I am, baby" said Mary's voice coming from the hallway.

"I'm coming, I'm coming"

By that point the baby was screaming shrilly with her cheeks stretched by spasms and soaked with tears, while her eyes were shut tight. When Mary walked into the baby's room, she was taken aback, almost startled by Jorgenson's presence.

“What in heavens..?” she said.

She leaned down into the crib to pick up the screaming child, and then held her tightly in her arms while rocking her gently as she moved away from Jorgenson.

“What the hell were you doing?”

“Nothing”

“Couldn’t you see she was crying?”

Jorgenson didn’t know what to say.

“You’re a monster”

“I wasn’t doing anything”

“Exactly, you’re a fucking monster!”

Mary rocked the baby in her arms with an air of warning directed at Jorgenson almost as though she wanted to hit him but couldn't because the baby was in her arms. The woman's eyes were distraught and the more she reflected on what she'd just seen, the more irate she became.

“Who are you?”

“I...”

“Who the fuck are you?!”

“Mary...”

“You are a monster! Tell me who you’ve turned into Carl Jorgenson, because I really don't know any more!”

Mary stormed out of the room taking the baby with her leaving Jorgenson alone with his thoughts.

That night, once the lights were out, it didn’t take Jorgenson long to feel as though the shadows were moving, almost alive. It reminded him of a liquid boiling lazily or leaves in the jungle which appeared still yet in any case, always alive.

Fear was a feeling which was still vivid and strong in Jorgenson and it went hand in hand with his sense of anger.

He’d left the infinite love he once had for his daughter and the perpetual need to make her happy in Vietnam. They weren’t part of him any longer.

Jorgenson lowered his head lifting his arms up above it, shielding it in a protective manner and then slowly broke down into tears.

“Carl” Mary said softly in a sleep-filled voice.
She reached over and embraced her husband holding him tightly.
“We’ll fix everything Carl”

One Week Later

It was night at the base, a time for silence and rest.
Rambo was about to have a look in the tent when Barry stopped him.

“I don’t think he looks too good, well you know, I mean Carl, since he’s come back...”

Rambo looked at Barry then turned his attention back to the tent. Jorgenson was sitting on his bed and although he seemed to be looking at his hands, in reality, he was staring into space. There was truth in what Barry was telling him, but Rambo didn’t feel like saying anything about it right then and there, so he turned away from Barry and went back to observing Carl.

“How you doing Carl? How was your leave back home?”
Jorgenson glanced up at his friend momentarily, but then went back to staring into space.

“Not exactly how I imagined it”
Barry, who was still standing at the tent entrance decided to come in and join them.
“Did something happen?” asked Rambo.
“No, nothing happened. It's exactly that, well, I don't know Johnny. I really don't know”

Berry sat down next to Carl.
“Try telling us” he said.
“Something definitely changed, but I don't know what. It’s hard to describe. I felt surrounded by complete strangers. I don’t know them anymore. What should I do Johnny?”

Rambo’s eyes opened wide almost caught by surprise.
“I don't know Carl. I can’t help you” he said.

Jorgenson looked down over at Barry who was beside him.
Barry put one hand over his shoulder, shook him a little bit, and then said:

“It's normal, man. This is war. It happens to everyone”
“I don't know. I am not entirely sure about that”
“I mean it, trust me. Living here is entirely different from living in the real world and a few days are not enough to catch up. Trust me. We’ve all been through it”

Jorgenson shook his head in perplexity.

“How's your daughter?”

“She's fine” Jorgenson replied.

“Are not you happy?” Rambo said.

“What about your wife? Did you get to spend some time alone with her?”

Just think about surviving, Carl – Mary told him before he left, while caressing his face.

“Carl?”

Just think about surviving and come back to me.

“That's normal Carl” Barry said. “We risk our lives here every day, we kill people and we watch our own squad members die. Then we get home find a decked table, every one elegantly dressed, smiling and talking about stupid unimportant things that mean nothing. It's the same for all of us, Carl. Vietnam changes you, but not for real.

Sooner or later, we all go back to normal, to how we were before”

Jorgenson turned to Barry again. This time, he looked like a beaten dog.

“Yeah” said Rambo.

“That's the way it works for everyone. It was the same for me too after my first tour”

“Okay, but I'm worried I may have crossed the point of no return”

“There's no such thing as the point of no return,” Barry said interrupting him and then added:

“That's the reason we call the U.S. 'the real world', because once when we get back there, we eventually go back to being how we were before all of this ever started. 'Cause the time we spend here, or the things we do in this place aren't a true representation of how we really are at all.”

Barry smiled.

“Believe me, man. One day, all of this will be nothing more than a bad dream. That's the way it was for me, and that's the way it'll end up being for you too”

“Listen to him Carl, he knows what he's talking about” said Rambo.

Jorgenson nodded a couple of times.

“Thanks guys, both of you”

“That's what friends are for,” said Barry.

He gave him a pat on his back as he stood up from his camp bed and left.

“Are you sure you're ok?” asked Rambo.

“Like new”

“Try to get some sleep then, will you? You need it”

“I will, as well as some exercise and training too. I've done nothing for so long and lost so much weight that if I had to do any long range shit tomorrow, I'd die on the spot. I need to train John. Train and eat. If I want to get back in shape I need to eat a lot more than what they're giving us in this place”

Rambo smiled.

“Don't worry about that man. You'll be training with us so we'll follow you step by step”

“And the food...”

“Christ, this is a big city Carl. Getting some extra food won't be a problem”

“Good” said Jorgenson.

He then began fiddling with his military travel bag but stopped as quickly as he'd started, and looked again at his friends.

“Rambo?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks”

“Oh, come on...”

“No really, thank you. The crash we were in just started coming back to me a few days ago for the very first time. I remember what you tried to do for me”

Rambo's eyes widened, and he straightened up somewhat surprised.

The expression on his face was a mixture of embarrassment, wonder and shame. The memory of not being able to save Jorgenson was still very a very painful one for Rambo.

On the other hand, for Jorgenson, Rambo had done everything in his power for him, and maybe more.

“You are a true friend, John”

One Month Later

That day, when the Baker Team got back from their daily training exercises, there was someone there waiting for them.

It was the medical officer, and once he'd visited Jorgenson, Delmore, Danforth, Rambo and Ortega he left without saying a word. Although the team had been surprised to find him there, they knew very well what it all meant. It was a sign, the beginning of a countdown almost, indicating that the Baker team was going back into action.

In fact, shortly thereafter, Trautman showed up at the base summoning the team to gather in briefing room B.

Only a day later they would be sent to a minute village in the Tri-border Zone, the area which adjoined with Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Their first mission behind enemy lines was awaiting them. Perhaps even their very first '*Black Op*'.

Since the details were classified they wouldn't have received all the Intel until they officially got the green light.

This would have been their first over the border mission, or as they liked to refer to it instead, as 'over the fence'.

This time they would be on their own.

They had twenty-four hours at their disposal to close any of their pending training activities with the ARVN and gather all of their equipment before the transfer.

So, the Baker team got to it.

The Briefing

Ortega was flying on board the helicopter, feeling a little nervous. He'd been urgently summoned to MacV's central office in Saigon, and even if he didn't know what for yet, he thought that it was probably already about a mission. There was no doubting it. They were about to brief him on their first 'over the fence' mission.

Ortega looked at the hilly landscape moving below him covered with paddy fields and shepherd huts randomly scattered around where the water buffalos used to graze. He wondered if they would be sent to Cambodia, Laos or even North Vietnam. There was a mix of emotions building inside of him.

He was electrified by the idea that maybe – finally – he would get to put those things they'd learnt in training to the test. They'd been two excruciatingly hard and long years of training.

A mission on enemy territory was finally upon them, and, unlike Black Spot, would be more than solely a defensive mission.

Over the fence aka beyond the border means we'll be on our own over there.

He was a little scared, somewhat worried and a bit anxious too.

He looked forward to putting himself to the test, but he was afraid too, all at the same time.

His team members had no idea how lucky they were not having to make the kinds of decisions that could cost your friends their lives.

Ortega started tapping his foot on the metallic helicopter floor as though he could music but it was only in his head.

If it proved necessary to sacrifice one of his friends in order to accomplish the mission, would he be up to giving that kind of order?

He was fortunate that since the SOG teams were so small one rarely had to give that kind of order.

It hardly happened at all actually.

If the need arose however, would he be capable of giving it?

Ortega looked once more at the landscape below him.

It's only the first 'over the fence' mission so calm down.

Once this first one is finally out of the way, it'll all be easier.

As they continued towards their destination however, a part of him couldn't help but hope there wouldn't be any mission at all. Or, at the very least, if the mission could be in due time rather than straight away. He just wasn't ready yet.

At the MacV head office in Saigon, Garner and Trautman had been deliberating about the map for the last three hours.

After yet another pause in silent reflection, Trautman finally spoke up and said:

“That's enough”

He picked up the papers in front of him, piled them up and patted them on the table a couple of times to tidy them better.

“Let's call Skorpio,” he said.

-

In order to get to the oval room, Ortega had to walk through the Special Forces' main command room. It was Ortega's first time there, and when he saw it, he couldn't believe his eyes.

It was full of desks, documents and people who were coming and going. What stood out the most in Ortega's opinion however, was the enormous notice board which towered above everything else. Truthfully speaking, it was only a blackboard which displayed a great deal of nameplates, but its size was daunting and there was a man incessantly moving all those nameplates around with a long stick.

The blackboard showed dates, times and places so that command knew exactly where every team was at all times. The nameplates with team names moved constantly, but Ortega noticed that some of those names were written by hand, in chalk.

It didn't take Ortega long at all to recognize the handwritten names because they were all SOG teams.

He tried to reflect momentarily over why that might be.

“Hey” Ortega said to the first guy who walked past him.

“Why don't the SOG teams get a nameplate just like everybody else does?”

The guy eyed Ortega suspiciously, looking him up and down before deciding to answer.

“Baker team B, Team Leader”

“Okay man. You SOG guys don't have a nameplate because it would be absolutely pointless. We'd have to keep making them constantly”

Ortega swallowed.

We'd have to keep making them – a voice repeated in his head.

He turned his attention back up at the blackboard again.

Meaning we drop like flies and the majority of us, on our first mission.

“Would that be a problem for you Skorpio?” Trautman asked from the other side of the room.

Ortega turned to see Trautman standing in the doorway that led into the next room. Apparently, he’d been waiting for him.

“No sir”

“Very well then, let's go”

Ortega looked observingly at the map and ascertained it was Laos.

They were going to send them to Laos.

After Trautman and Garner gave him a brief description of the zone they went on to explain, in rather hushed tones, the investigative nature of the mission.

Ortega counted the map's quadrants and understood the reason for Trautman and Garner's choice of tone and when he did, he swallowed.

The problem wasn't the investigation per se, but was presented by the distance itself, and exactly how much of it had to be covered.

The landing zone was correct – nice and far from any potential dangers – but the objective as such was too far to reach on foot. It was too fucking far away for anybody, whomever they may be and, so much so, that initially Ortega thought he had miscalculated the distances. When he was absolutely certain about not having made any miscalculations, he was equally as confident in his knowledge that no SOG team before him had ever hit that far.

“The target is twenty clicks beyond the point of no return,” Ortega said in a gloomy voice.

The term *'point of no return'* was the maximum range of operation for SOG teams. Just like planes or cars, SOG teams had their maximum range mainly based on their food and water carrying capacity but also on terrain and stamina as well.

Once you passed that point, the team would have faced food and water shortage on their way back home not to mention extreme fatigue.

Ortega had never heard of anyone who tried to get beyond the point of no return especially on enemy terrain.

Doing it like that, on a whim – so to say – as Trautman and Garner suggested, was pure insanity.

Had it been an imminent life or death situation, Ortega would never have thought twice about giving it a try. Being asked like that however, while he was safe and sound inside the MacV main office in Saigon and sitting comfortably made it unthinkable. Asking him under these circumstances pushed him to make the most logical decision which meant refusing and telling them that the mission was in all reality, nothing but a suicide attempt.

It was obvious however, that Ortega didn't refuse outright.

He didn't reply immediately, but reconsidered the giant map in front of him carefully and recalculated the possible routes, distances in days, in nights, and the necessary food and water rations.

The only way to reduce water and food consumption was to reduce the length of the mission itself.

This could only be done by marching fast like they used to do during the death marches back in Fort Bragg. Yet, those were nothing but muscle training exercises and had as a main objective exhausting the candidate to death.

Other plausible ways to keep mission length at a minimum was to allow very little sleep time, or none at all, probably an average of an hour a night.

Thus, if one considered the elevated marching rhythm, extreme fatigue, moderate fasting and sleep deprivation, they would not only lose about 3 kilos each, but would also have had to hunt at least twice on their way back. Under that kind of stress the chances of making a mistake would have skyrocketed because that's how human nature works. In situations like those, it doesn't matter how hard you've trained or for how long, you can only decrease the chances of screwing up, but never eliminate them entirely.

After all, they were only human.

Fighting under such premises was just an added danger and going into Enemy territory under such a premise was absolutely insane.

If that wasn't enough however, there was the whole invisibility issue. All things considered, it didn't correspond to the elevated rhythm of march required on that kind of mission, in the least.

The Baker Team had to make sure the enemy didn't identify them in Laos.

They wouldn't be able to engage the enemy for any reason in the world because engaging behind enemy lines usually meant eight shooting against a hundred. Great. The statistics clearly spoke for themselves because when the SOG teams engaged the enemy along the Ho Chi Minh trail it was always a suicide attempt.

Anyone and everyone participating risked a death sentence in every sense of the word.

Furthermore, a mission like that required Ortega and the others to not only be fast, but invisible as well, and the two didn't always go hand in hand.

Quite the contrary actually, they general worked as opposites.

You have to be very careful if you don't want to remain unseen, but being careful is problematic when you're moving fast. Speed and stealth neutralize each other not only in the jungle but on any other terrain for that matter.

At the end of the game therefore, there were all the necessary suppositions for a mission like that to turn into a tragedy before even reaching its objective.

Nevertheless Ortega went on to imagine the mission itself once they essentially reached the objective. Naturally when doing so, he would have to take the fatigued state they'd be in into account as well, and things basically got even more complicated.

At that point, they would have had to get into and look around the objective structure all without being seen. Moreover, being an investigative type mission, they wouldn't even have the slightest idea regarding what may really be in there. Would a Vietcong team be waiting? Was it capable of holding an entire regiment perhaps? Did they have any guard dogs? Or external towers?

They didn't know a single thing about it, and didn't have an answer to any of these questions, not one.

"The main problem is the distance," Garner said clearly interrupting Ortega's thoughts.

"We have been thinking about it for the last three hours, racking our brains over it. No matter what we contemplated however, there was no way of getting you and the team any closer to the target than that"

Truth be told, what worried Ortega most of all wasn't the target whatsoever but the journey itself there, and above all the one they'd have to make back.

"Now it's up to you Ortega," said Trautman.

"You have to tell us if this mission is possible or just plain suicidal"

"No, it's not," said Ortega as he analysed the map once more and continued with his calculations. Still observing the map, he added:

"It all comes down to this target's priority level. What I'm saying is that even though physically speaking its incredibly demanding, that alone doesn't qualify it as impossible, and I believe we can make it, so it is not exactly what I would define a suicide mission. If I was a bookie however, I wouldn't necessarily bet on me straightaway. I mean, betting on a team, any team, surviving a mission like this can't have high odds."

There was at that point a long awkward silence which ensued. Even Ortega himself was self-conscious of having said what he really believed so directly, and a loud. They were all uncomfortable, everyone except for Trautman that is, because unlike the other teams, he was used to asking his men to run nonsensical risks to reach menacing targets.

"Go on Skorpio" Trautman said.

Ortega tilted his head while he looked at them not unlike dogs do when they don't understand what they are being told.

"Twenty clicks," he said.

"It's exactly twenty clicks beyond our maximum food and water range. That first setback doesn't bear in mind fatigue, which happens to be the very by-product of our

marching speed. Moreover, that marching speed isn't a variable we can change since we have no choice but to maintain it"

Ortega became quiet again while he reassessed the altitude curves, the roads and the distances thereby working out the necessary food and water consumption for the umpteenth time.

We'll have a lot of alternative routes available, so even if the target is under heavy surveillance, we can still get there without making any contact with the enemy.

When it comes to fatigue levels or mistakes owing to marching speed, it's just a matter of sucking it up.

The belief that it's just a matter of 'sucking it up' is rather an understatement, when you really think about what needs to be done.

Jesus.

This time we'll be counting the minutes till it's over.

Anyways, as far as he was concerned, the mission was, technically speaking, was possible.

It may not have been for most of the other SOG teams but for Baker team B it was. After they'd spent two years putting their limits to the test, Ortega knew exactly what they were capable of doing, so he was more than certain.

Despite their capabilities however, that mission was going to be nothing but hell from start to finish.

With that in mind he thought it through even further before eventually agreeing to accept.

After a short pause, he sighed.

They risked being identified and captured or killed, particularly on the march back when they'd be the most vulnerable mostly because of exhaustion. They may even vanish into thin air like so many other SOG teams missing in action had done before them. Oh yeah, right, let's not leave those ones out.

It had to be an especially important target if Trautman was willing to put his prizemen on the line for something as crazy as this promised to be.

Ortega was still absorbed in thought while his eyes remained fixated on the map when he noticed yet another problem. In case someone felt there hadn't been enough problems cited already, that is.

"High Eagle (*the closest radio relay site*) is too far. We'll be out of radio communication range as well, or won't we?"

"That's affirmative"

"So how are we supposed to report our findings then?"

"There'll be a radio-air plane in flight over Laos specifically for your mission. We are however talking about Air America, so consequently there'll have to be several

limitations on using it. In fact, the time window won't last more than half an hour twice a day and it'll have to take place at a pre-established hour”

With so little radio communication at their disposal, they would have been even more isolated than he'd initially foreseen. Besides not being able to communicate on demand therefore, they wouldn't even have any kind of air support from helicopters or planes. Moreover, if all that wasn't enough, the timing on everything would be of the utmost importance for the entirety of the mission.

Ortega shifted his look to Garner in hopes of hearing his views as well.

“If you want to put an end to it right here, no one will have anything else to say about it” Trautman's colleague said.

“Well, at least we'll have this radio-airplane” Ortega replied.

“Yes, but we have no idea what is actually down there” answered Trautman.

“Furthermore, should our radio plane ever be shot down where it shouldn't be, we may end up having CIA radio equipment all over the cover of the TIMES”

Ortega nodded understandingly as he stood arms crossed without making a sound as Trautman moved closer to him and the map.

“We haven't even gotten into the target itself yet. From what we know, it is some kind of Vietcong logistics infrastructure such as a central command or communication centre. It may however be nothing more than a construction site for a bridge or road for that matter. It's of interest because it is one of the three possible locations where Vuong may be”

“Vuong” Ortega repeated to himself.

“Vuong is the junction ring between what happens on the Ho-Chi-Minh Trail and the Southern insurgents” Trautman said.

“He is the one that makes things work for real in Saigon. SOG's main objective has always been to turn the guerrilla warfare into a conventional war. We want to fight against an enemy wearing a uniform not against civilians wielding war weapons. Vuong fits into all this because he is one of the few men that can truly turn innocent civilians into perfect terrorists. He is one of the key men along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Tri-border zone.

Thanks to a tip-off, we know three locations where Vuong might be on 'X' day, and we are going to hit all three of them. Consequently, there is only a one in three chance that Vuong will be inside the target zone but if he is, you can bet we're going to order you to kill him. Moreover, if you succeed, replacing someone like him would be very problematic for the Vietminh, perhaps even impossible. They may never recover from that kind of loss again”

Ortega nodded and then got up out of his chair.

He walked to the table below the map and turned some aerial photos of the area towards him.

There was definitely something going on down there. The Vietcong were good at using vegetation to hide it, but they were definitely building something. At any rate, there was no way anybody could say what they were doing without actually going there and having a look.

Accordingly, Trautman added:

“Maybe it's an ammo deposit, in which case you make contact, we authorize a blow up job and that's that. Notwithstanding whatever there might be down there, or what you find, you've got to relay that Intel to us because it's essential we be the ones deciding what to do, not you. The behind the scenes for this mission are complicated”
“Here – Garner said as he pointed to the map on the wall – that's the point of maximum risk for the Air America flight. We've tried to find additional viable flying routes as possible alternatives but we haven't come up with any others. That's primarily why we've only managed to provide a radio-link which lasts half an hour but not a minute more”

“We'll make sure it's enough” Ortega said to all of them.

Garner took a step back from the map and said:

“Then that's everything. Now the decision rests with your Scorpio”

Ortega contemplated it a while longer as Garner and Trautman stayed silent and waited patiently behind him.

The routes were there, as were its alternatives and subsequently that objective was in their reach.

There was no question at all that it would have been an excruciating mission, but if Ortega's team pulled off a mission like that, they would be setting a new record for furthest range in enemy owned territory. Furthermore, it would unquestionably achieve both prosperous and acclaimed results that until now have been unprecedented for Trautman's experimental program.

It would give tenfold importance to the colonel's tactical views regarding the war at the very least.

Consequently, that alone, regardless even of the outcome of the mission itself, would have benefitted Vietnam as a whole and a positive result overall on the damn war itself. Everything was going wrong, and the only one really trying to fix things up was Trautman.

So, it was for this reason in particular, in the end, Ortega accepted.

For Trautman's sake.

“Yes” he said.

Trautman looked carefully into Ortega's eyes almost to ensure that he was certain of his choice.

“We accept the mission”

“Okay then” said the colonel.

“Operation '*Point of no return*' is the code name. Your mission objectives are to reach the target, identify then evaluate enemy forces, determine the success rate of a potential attack and relay it back by radio. Is that clear?”

Trautman and Garner both turned to face Ortega, who nodded.

“Presidential authorization should take no longer than a few hours”

“Nixon is currently at Camp David”, Garner emphasized.

Ortega swallowed.

“This is an H-1 objective, Scorpio of the highest level. Remember that you are on a reconnaissance mission. It must be clear as of now that under no circumstances will you attack in the presence of a base, red-site training grounds or anything else like that, hosting the enemy. I don't care about the upshot from operation Black Spot, how skilled or experienced you think you are or any of that. This time you are an investigative team, not an offensive one. Is that clear?”

“Yessir”

The following day in Dak To, Baker Team B was sitting in its tent already in full gear and waiting to embark. They were armed, wearing rucksacks, were camouflaged and their AKs were hanging from their slings.

They had spray painted black stripes onto their plain uniforms.

They all had cold expressions and determined looks on their faces and by that point they had already given goodbye letters to all the rightful recipients.

Jorgenson was there as well, and only the scar on a corner of his forehead hinted at what he'd gone through those last few months.

Ortega and his team had tested him long and hard in those weeks of training and he'd passed them all.

He seemed changed by Black Spot but it was probably a temporary and purely psychological thing otherwise he would have never surpassed Garner, Ortega or Danforth's tests.

Nevertheless, Danforth's right temple was scarred exactly as Rambo had one on his right arm too although his was hidden once he was dressed.

They were only on their second mission and the SOG demanded a minimum of six before getting out of the unit. It seemed however, that the team had already been through a thousand battles at the very least.

"Okay guys, let's get sterilized" said Ortega.

The Baker team guys in front of him took their dog tags off and one by one and handed them over to Danforth.

"Take anything that could be traced back to you country of origin off" said Danforth.

"Documents, badges, anything and everything because we're going over fence"

Ortega who was standing next to him, then added:

"I'm not going to feed you any bullshit so we need to get one thing straight right from the get go. This mission is going to be hard, almost painstaking. We're going to be on our own over there, and we can only bank on each other, nothing else"

Ortega reflected a moment but then added:

"But you are also the meanest motherfuckers the SOG has ever had Baker Team, and there's no one else in this world I'd rather have at my side on a mission like this"

All their expressions turned serious and as far as Ortega was concerned, you could cut the air with a knife.

By that point, they were all worked up.

"Fuck. I wouldn't even swap Danforth for anybody else. Not even for John the fucking duke Wayne"

Coletta, Krakauer and Delmore all smiled.
Even Rambo let himself grin.
Ortega then concluded:

“No seriously Baker team, you have no idea what it means to me to lead you over there.

Nor do I about how to say it.

It's a privilege.

No, it's more than that, it's an honour.

Now, let's get going.

“Let's go and get this fucking helicopter for Laos”

Manuel Ortega, 1969

**OPERATION
POINT OF NO RETURN**

Part One:

“The plan”

“It’s hard to describe how going over the border makes you feel.

Imagine if death was an incredibly good-looking and elegant woman who was married to a very dangerous man, and you had to kiss her right in front of him and then make a run for it. It’s like that.

*Going over the fence is like hitting on death...
But you really have to love her to get it done”*

Manuel Ortega, 1969

They may have had steel legs owing to two long years of training, but not that even prepared them for how long that march actually ended up being. Beside the sharp leaves, insects, ants and snakes, the weight of their rucksacks never seemed to ease up.

On the first day in particular, they kept a fast pace which, in hindsight, was too fast. Since the Baker team was still in '*relatively friendly*' territory, it almost 'ran' the whole time, even if the weight of the supplies and water was still at its max.

Generally, SOG teams didn't warm up their meals because it risked giving away their position, and on this mission, neither did Baker team B.

Ortega and the others used to fill their meal bags with water, keep them in their pockets for hours - which brought the dry frozen food packets back to room temperature - and then they would eat that disgusting concoction like it was pre-chewed meal.

If you managed to eat it without getting nauseous, it did serve to nurture and hydrate you, and as luck may have it, during their training at Fort Bragg they had learnt how.

The heat was atrocious during the day and the humidity level made breathing hard while in contrast it was bitterly cold at night. It was like a hand, albeit cold at night and wet during the day, passing through your clothes continuously touching you in a bothersome way. Even when the mission schedule actually allowed you sleep time, despite only for a few short minutes, it got at you just the same.

*“Sleeping in enemy territory isn’t comparable to any other experience in the world.
It's more like passing out than sleeping.*

*While you’re trying to fall asleep every part of you rebels, reminding you that you
can't really fall fast asleep because 'they' could come and get you at any moment.
That's the reason why you can't let yourself go completely.
You're afraid that if you close your eyes, you may never open them again, so when
you finally surrender to the darkness, it's only because of extreme exhaustion. In the
end fatigue always beats anxiety and you fall asleep while this odd kind of inner
struggle takes place inside of you.
That's how come you never really sleep.*

You can't fall asleep, you don't dream and you don't sleep.

It's like you don't exist, and that's it.

*You close your eyes and when you open them again two hours have passed in a blink
of an eye.
And nothing else”*

Manuel Ortega, 1969

By the time they'd reached one of the most dangerous parts of Laos, the rucksacks had become a lot lighter. It was then that Ortega and the others came across the first disconcerting signs of the enemy.

Stick signs written in 'Vietcong codes', fresh footprints and roads hidden deep in the jungle.

That was genuine enemy territory and not just for the sake of saying. They knew perfectly well that if they were sighted by a couple of guards, they'd be attacked by an enemy who'd be no fewer than a hundred enemies at the very least.

So, on the second day along with tiredness, unbearable heat and the difficulties of the jungle itself, the feeling of fear started to spread as well.

On the third day the team stopped talking completely. The dialogues, which were already few and far between, became practically just hand signals, as if they had all suddenly become deaf and dumb.

After spending four days like that – in a state of constant vigilance, exchanging only hand signals and glances - they had regressed to an animal state very reminiscent of a wolf pack.

They walked slowly, studied their surroundings and would stop and start walking again.

Every now and then, they even smelled the air.

Coletta who was at the front of the line, often stopped the team stop in front of a particularly thick 'wall' of vegetation beyond which he thought he 'sensed' something. During those moments, he would stop in front of the vegetation just standing there motionless and listening, while some yards back, the rest of the team stayed as still as statues.

Occasionally, he closed his eyes while 'picking up' on something rather than actually hearing it.

They had regressed to an animal state for real.

As a result, they never got any decent rest.

Whoever was at the head of the line would stop because of a potential danger and consequently, those at they had to stop too. During those tense intervals, whoever was at the back used to eat their C rations, gulping down some of their concoctions, and that ended up being their break. Often times, those turned out to be the only kind of breaks they had.

They were already behind schedule and they basically got further behind every day.

By the fifth day, the Baker team finally reached their objective.

Overall, they had accumulated a forty-eight hour delay and one of them had even suffered a minor injury. Barry had twisted his ankle because of all the hurry they were in one night.

Nothing serious of course, but it was slowing him down and he had to keep it under control, making sure it didn't get worse than it was already.

The sky was grey and the lack of sunshine kept the air humid. As Ortega had foreseen the team was already tired by then. When the guys started hearing noises coming from the enemy base however, the adrenaline kicked in wiping out any and all signs of fatigue.

Their camouflaged faces showed signs of tension as they scanned for potential targets with weapons in hand.

While the rest of the team stayed back for cover, Rambo and Coletta broke away from them and slowly advanced to the designated point of observation.

Coletta, crouched down on the muddy terrain and smelled the air holding his M14 while Rambo left him to climb a small crest.

A few yards later, Raven lay down and began to slither.

Coletta realized he was far too anxious and had to find a way to calm down.

Closing his eyes, he sniffed the air around him again and listened carefully like his father had taught him to do many years earlier on one of their many hunting trips together.

That seemed to make everything clearer in his head, so he opened his eyes again.

Far more focused, he envisioned the enemy base as nothing more than a small anthill buzzing with activity, in the middle of a motionless jungle.

Everything was clear by then.

There were some other 'presences' too which were right outside the base (probably soldiers going in and out) but they were too far away to be a risk factor the Baker team needed to take into account.

A lot calmer, Coletta lay on the ground and crawled along the same path Rambo had until reaching him.

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Rambo and Coletta silently dragged themselves a few meters further taking care to remain unseen behind the vegetation until the objective finally revealed itself below them.

Rambo stretched out his neck ever so slowly in order to get a better look.

Observing below he could see an open valley that stood where dense jungle vegetation once had. They had cleared the vegetation to create an open plain.

There were a few buildings varying in size but still under construction in the centre of this artificial valley. Along the area's confines however, Rambo saw that there were two Russian-made trucks.

The Vietcong were building some permanent structures there and had literally occupied a small piece of Laos to do it.

It wasn't clear to him however what its exact function may have been.

Observing further, Rambo noticed three huts with fortified metal roofs and that

caught his attention.

He had no idea what pretext they had for being there since they didn't look like armouries or soldiers accommodations for that matter.

Rambo surveyed further.

First he noted an old Russian-made excavator and then three bamboo made turrets which were roughly ten feet tall and each with a corresponding guard on top.

From that height, they have a perfect line of sight – said Rambo to himself.

Those on the other hand, could definitely pose a threat to the Baker team.

Rambo kept stock-still and maintained his position.

This game of hide-and-seek which he and Coletta were playing there was extremely dangerous, and they both knew it. In spite of that, all the training in Fort Bragg was giving them the necessary confidence to keep their sang-froid.

So, regardless of the guard's line of sight, Rambo and Coletta maintained their position, stood perfectly still and continued their watch.

Gradually, Rambo pulled out some binoculars cautiously from one of his pockets.

On one side of the plateau, he caught sight of two men who were working together and appeared to be building something.

They were wearing some North Vietnamese uniform pants but neither of them had a shirt.

It was then that Rambo noticed exactly how skinny both of them actually were, which lead him to the assumption that they must have been slaves, or something like that.

Immediately after however, it became eminent they were not Laotians at all.

No... - Rambo thought.

Not they can't be at all.

One of them was very tall, far too tall to be a Laotian.

Could they be Russians?

Rambo wondered if the circumstances called for him to use his camera.

The idea of giving the world proof of Russian involvement was awesome, but at the same time, a little childish.

The MacV had spent years, albeit unsuccessfully, trying to do exactly that.

In view of that consideration, Rambo decided to make a mental note of that odd couple, but then went on to examine the rest of the base.

It was unquestionably big for a construction site and there were a lot of tools scattered everywhere.

Whatever they were building – whether it be an ammo deposit, underground bunker

or even a communication centre – it was definitely something big. Rambo counted ten or fifteen individuals in all, of which six were armed with AKs, while everyone else was probably only a worker and, consequently, unarmed. Well, in all actuality, they were slaves to be precise. As he considered those two men further, a feeling of discomfort grew progressively stronger inside him.

*Those are Westerners – he thought.
Dear God, that's what they are, they're Western slaves.*

The question was however, what the hell were some Western slaves doing on a Vietcong base in Laos? Rambo immediately tried to think back to any cases of civilians recently kidnapped – or gone missing –in that area, but nothing came to mind. That was a Trautman thing, not his. So in disbelief he stared at them for the umpteenth time and the harder he stared, the harder his heart seemed to pound. Then suddenly, it occurred to him that perhaps those slaves weren't just Westerners but maybe they were even American. *Shit* – he said to himself. He turned to Coletta with a look of despair on his face.

-

It didn't take Coletta long to notice the look on his friend's face, practically calling out to him. He immediately decided to abandon his position therefore, and cautiously crawled a little further, up to the betting where Rambo currently was. He then lifted his M14 and looked through its riflescope. When he lowered his stare from his scope, he couldn't help cursing either. Those prisoners were Westerners all right and there was no doubt about it.

Rambo and Coletta nodded to each other: it was time to move.

As they got back to the rally point, they found it empty. It was the team who made itself visible by slowly coming out of the vegetation.

“Well?” asked Ortega.
“Did you see Vuong?”
“No we didn't. But we did see something else”
“Something else? What the fuck do you mean you saw something else?”

“We have prisoners, Scorpio. Western prisoners, two at least, maybe more” said Coletta.

Ortega swallowed.

“Westerners?” he asked Ortega in disbelief.

“Westerners”

“Fuck... I didn’t really expect that, at all. We have to try the radio link again right now.”

“If those really are Western civilians then there's nothing much to decide at all” said Barry.

“We infiltrate and have a chopper get here”

“No one would like to free them more than I would, Snake. But as soon as the VC hear a gun flight going on, they might kill all of the hostages instantly anyhow”

“If that’s the case, then I say we free them in *stealth mode*,” Barry said.

“The stealth way won't work” Rambo intervened.

“They have too much personnel and far too many guards on the peripheries. Even if we could get inside without been seen, we could never get out of there without engaging. Much worse than not engaging would have to be us being captured. But if we’re the ones attacking, and we’re the ones doing it from the get go, then we could win with the element of surprise. And if Vuong is in there somewhere, then we’ll be able to get him too”

An attack – thought Ortega to himself.

There’ll be about forty North Vietnamese regulars in there, and we’re an eight-man team on a reconnaissance mission.

And if Vuong is in there for real, they’ll use everything they’ve got to defend him.

“Sniper?” asked Ortega.

“If we attack then maybe yes, but the truth is that I don't know, Skorpio. There are too many factors and not only how to release them, but the whole aftermath. The prisoners might be in bad shape so we may not even be able to take them to a LZ”

“Of course we could” Barry insisted.

“We’ll create a LZ ourselves somewhere in the near vicinity. We can do it” said Krakauer

“This is a building site. They are using the POWs as slaves. They’ll walk out,” said Messner.

“Okay that's enough guys. We have to get confirmation by radio in any case”

“No, Skorpio, we have to attack now. We can do this”

“We did the Indy five hundred to get here, Raven. Don't tell me what we can or can't do. If those prisoners can't walk and we attack, we are sentencing them to death ourselves”

There was a long silence, and after a while, Ortega felt the need to restate his position

at least a little.

So he added:

“Fuck. I’m not saying I don't want to do this. I’m merely saying that we’re going to follow the original orders. We’ll wait for the next radio-link and we’re going to do exactly what we’re ordered to do. We are soldiers for fuck’s sake and we have a very clear mission objective, albeit complicated, but nevertheless clear.”

“The first radio link was a shitty one – said Messner – and the second might be too. And you know that, Scorpio”

At this point, Ortega had the entire team against him. Even Danforth kept quiet instead of supporting him, so he started getting annoyed for real.

How could he be the only one who wanted to carry out the original mission orders?

How could they not understand that he wanted to free the POWs too, and that he wasn’t doing anything except for his duties as team leader?

“What if the command decides to send a special team three days from now?” said Ortega finally.

“Maybe a larger one? We are an eight man team on a reconnaissance mission and light-weight set up, for fuck's sake!”

“Skorpio is right. Our mission orders are very clear,” Danforth said eventually, but it was too late to help Ortega by then.

Coletta, who was looking away towards the base - even if it wasn’t clearly visible from their location – shook his head to himself, as if he wasn’t listening to anyone of them.

“Three days from now everything will be different, Skorpio. whereas right here and now we have a chance” insisted Coletta.

“Do you see a chance, Sniper? Because I sure as hell don't. I see nothing but putting half my team at risk and the POWs being wiped out on a poorly improvised and very fucked up raid”

“We are a Baker team - said Rambo -. Even with our light set up, we have double the firepower of any other team. We have two M60s, five M72 rockets, two bows, mines and a prize marksman”

“I know exactly what we’ve got!” said Ortega in a distinctly aggressive tone through clenched teeth but still whispering.

“But we are going to go along with the original fucking plan anyway!”

Ortega turned to look each one of them straight in the eye as he said it.

“End of fucking discussion”

At this point a silence ensued among them as Ortega turned to them again, and said

“They will order us to attack, in all cases. Jesus Christ”

Rambo glanced thoughtfully upward towards the hill, as if he could see the enemy base through it.

“I won't leave them there,” he said.

“Raven...”

Rambo however meant it, and Ortega understood it immediately.

“No, I won't leave them there” he repeated.

Rambo turned back to Ortega but realized he was gone.

He had literally disappeared into thin air.

Rambo suddenly sensed something, something moving quickly but by that point it was already too late. Ortega had moved so fast that he had managed to take Rambo by surprise.

He unexpectedly found Ortega right in front of him holding his Baker knife right at his throat, like he wanted to kill him. Rambo, who was facing the base, had not even noticed Ortega moving, and by which time it was too late to react.

The gesture proved so startling and unforeseen that everyone suddenly froze, almost petrified.

It was obviously nothing more than a simple show of force. He would never have hurt his friend.

If he had decided to do so however, nothing in the world could have stopped him.

Ortega stared Rambo in the eyes briefly and then said:

“Don't contradict me on a mission ever again, Raven, not ever, or I swear to God I'll slit your throat”

Ortega pulled the knife away from Rambo's throat but didn't soften his glare.

“You will obey your orders,” he growled.

Turning to the others, he said the same.

“You are all going to do what we came here to do”

“Yessir” Rambo eventually replied in the end, finally shaking Ortega off him in anger.

Once separated, Ortega put his Baker knife in his sheath again and said:

“Anyway, like I said earlier, they will order us to attack in any case John”

It sounded like Ortega was excusing himself, though.

“Because, in all honesty, it's the only sensible thing to do,” he said.

That afternoon Ortega made the team do two other reconnaissance stakeouts. Initially, Danforth and Barry went first on the east side, then Krakauer and Messner on the west one. Ortega would have liked to send Jorgenson too, but in comparison to the others, he seemed tired, so it was best to avoid taking any unnecessary risks.

In the meantime, the number of the Western prisoners rose to at least three, as did the enemy, reaching more or less around fifty. There were no VIPs around as of yet however, and unfortunately, it still appeared to be nothing more than a construction site like any other.

Before long, it may have become an important North Vietnamese base or perhaps a command centre with its barracks and a radio centre, but for now it wasn't thing of that kind. Most importantly, there was still no sign of Vuong.

That night, the wait for the radio link literally took forever.

Team Baker hardly slept at all that night trying to keep an eye on the enemy's teams going in and out the construction site to patrol.

Even when their shift rotation gave them the chance to get some sleep, no one slept for more than half an hour. Not knowing if they were going to attack or not the following day was even more worrying than the idea of being caught by the enemy during the night. Ortega in particular spent his hours completing a plan for the potential attack.

“What do you think, Grizzly” Krakauer asked Jorgenson.

“I don't think” he said.

Silence perused while the two of them – Jorgenson and Krakauer, who were on guard at the time – continued staring into darkness and listening to the sounds of the jungle.

“Come on, Grizzly”

“We have surveyed the base thoroughly, Ortega's plan is feasible and Rambo is good at using the bow. I think we have a decent chance of freeing them”

Despite Jorgenson's comments however, Krakauer sensed some concern in his voice, so he said:

“But there’s a 'but' isn’t there?”

“Yes. The problem is the unknown, but you already know that. We all knew that when we got on Ortega's nerves insisting on an attack”

“And what's the most likely unknown variable we may have to deal with?”

“Why are you asking me that? I am not Trautman. I don’t know more than you do.”

“Tell me anyway. There are so many unknown variables.”

“You have seen what they are building, haven’t you? We are talking about men, materials and equipment. This is not the usual outpost for refreshing tired horses, this is important. It serves a purpose, and yet none of us have ever seen the entire defence force, right?”

“No, we haven’t actually” Krakauer replied, then he shook his head as if he’d finally understood where Krakauer’s dialogue was heading, and it wasn’t good.

“You are talking about a QRF...” (*Quick Response Force*) said Krakauer.

“Yep... These guys have one for sure and Ortega thinks so too, otherwise he would have never given us a time-window that short for this kind of an engagement”

“Is it really that short?”

“Fifteen minutes to free some POWs? Come on, Tiger... With such a short time window you run the risk of mistaking Vietcong for POWs. Skorpion is not worried about the idea of this base having some kind of nearby QRF hidden somewhere in the jungle. He is absolutely sure of it”

“Jesus”

“When the first firecrackers go off, there won't be a couple of patrolling teams moving in on us around here purely by coincidence Not a chance. They will hit us with a real and proper death squad made up of fifty men or more. A squadron whose reason of being is not only to go from point A to point B, but to nail SOG teams so idiots like us don’t dream of attacking places like this one ever again!”

“Jesus Christ, Carl. That's the reason Ortega was so dead set against the idea from the start”

“Exactly, and tomorrow we’re gonna’ have us some fun”

Krakauer was quiet for a second but then went on to ask:

“And how the fuck can you stay so calm?”

Jorgenson nodded with a grimace.

“As a matter of fact Krack, I really can’t tell you how I’m managing. I guess I don't give a shit”

“Jesus Grizzly. Tomorrow might be your last day on earth”

“Like I’ve already told you Krack, I don't give a shit about anything anymore. I don't even care if I ever see my daughter again because I have to die in here”

Jorgenson grunted, then he moved from one bush to another, like he wanted to be left alone and end the discussion there.

Some hours later Ortega and Messner finally turned the radio on. The time had come to finally get some orders at least.

“Baker team to base” said Messner.
“Baker team to base”

The Baker team's doctor went on like that for what literally felt like two minutes. Right when he was passing the phone to Ortega so he could give it a go; the radio finally crackled the reply they were waiting so eagerly to hear.

“Covey leader to Skorpio. Come in Skorpio”
As soon as he heard it, Ortega’s face lit up. It wasn’t actually Trautman talking, but the message relator on board the radio airplane.
“Here I am Covey leader. This is Skorpio Skorpio *actual*, I’m receiving loud and clear”
(*the 'actual' name meant that Skorpio in person was talking, not someone else repeating his messages).

A few seconds of silence ensued while the radio operator listened carefully to Trautman's message.

“What’s the sit-rep Skorpio” (**situation report*).
“The target is NOT confirmed, Covey leader. I repeat: NOT confirmed, but there's something else.
We have a situation, sir”
“God damn it, Skorpio. Okay. Tell me what you have”
“It's the construction site of a base with an attached prisoners' camp, sir. A POW camp and we have some POWs which appear to be Western. Height and faces match up. I repeat, I confirm the presence of Western POWs, three at least. They might be American”
“Roger that Skorpio. Give me a sec to send your message forward”

-

When the message reached the command bunker, Trautman, Garner and Loyd were all right there in front of the radio operator, and they almost jumped on the spot when they heard it.

“I want a Hatchet Force at the ready and two F4s in flight, and I want them now,” Trautman said.

“And notify the DOD too” (**Department of Defence*).

Everyone inside the bunker started pacing back and forth in a state of uneasiness.

“There needs to be an emergency rescue set up and put into place” he said.

“I need...”

“We can't order them to attack,” said Loyd who was standing right behind Trautman.

“What did you just say?”

“Hostage rescue raids can't be improvised Trautman. Your men are on a reconnaissance mission, not an offensive one”

That was true.

Loyd's objection was a rational one but, as per usual, he was only thinking about advancing his career and little else.

Had Trautman's men actually managed to free some Western prisoners from the Vietcong, maybe even some US citizens, and on their very first over the fence mission, it would have been too much for him to stand, and too hard to compete against or beat.

At the end of the day, the 'points' the Baker team scored weren't merely bonus points in favour of Trautman itself, but his entire war tactics strategy as well.

That was something Loyd absolutely couldn't afford.

Trautman would never have imagined that Loyd could go as far as that. In fact, when he heard what Loyd was saying, he was stunned outright.

After the initial shock passed however, Trautman considered his comments further.

As much as he hated admitting it, there was no denying that Loyd's objection was rational per se, and perhaps more so than usual.

The Baker team was currently on a reconnaissance mission and as they were, his team was neither armed to attack nor equipped to move hostages to the any kind of LZ.

Moreover, they hadn't even actually established a precise location for the potential LZ. He was certain that Nixon would have unquestionably given the needed authorization for it, but that was merely Trautman's personal professional opinion.

Shit – he said to himself.

Destiny had just given the general a plausible reason to stop the Baker Team, and the general had caught it in full.

However their discussion would have ended, the colonel wouldn't have come out from that business all that well.

Nevertheless, Trautman wasn't going to give up that easily.

On the contrary, he'd give it everything he had left.

“No pre-planned rescue raid has ever worked prior to now in the history of this conflict, and you know this quite well, general. Only an improvised one did, improvised precisely like this one, and so it might this one too. WE will never have a better chance present itself than the one at hand”

“That is unfounded, Trautman”

“No, it's not. That's what experience is teaching us. In twenty four hours those prisoners could be anywhere else”

“Maybe you're right, Trautman, but then again, maybe you're not. You're saying that your men have seen some potential POWs that potentially may have been Westerners. Whatif they were second generation French? Or mercenaries for that matter? How can your men be so sure? Do they have any direct identification to go by, like names? No, they don't. They have only got what they've seen through their binoculars as proof. Besides, if that weren't enough, they're neither equipped nor prepared to undertake a hostage-rescue raid, and as long as I'm in charge here, we won't put unidentified civilians at risk with improvised actions. You're not going to attack, Trautman. Using the prisoners as an alibi, Washington will authorize a limited yet official landing into Laos. It won't be your men attacking though, The Fifth will do it, and they'll do it by the book. Or the Navy Seals, depending on which unit happens to be closer at the time, but it will get done by the book”

Loyd's tone of voice seemed to change.

He bore a distinct resemblance to a father talking to his hyperactive child.

“Colonel, we both agree on the need to attack at the earliest opportune time but let's just not do it like that. Try to see it from where I stand, colonel. We don't even know what's really hidden down there. I'm only asking you for time, and no more than twenty-four hours Trautman, that's it. It's the only way we can be absolutely sure that we've done everything possible to ensure the raid doesn't turn into a massacre”

Trautman swallowed that bitter pill.

He was almost shaking in anger by then.

He had trained his men for situations exactly like that.

He created that unit – and had trained it hard for two long years - intentionally for coping with situations similar to this one, and Loyd knew it.

The others with him in that room had absolutely no idea that the Baker team was deliberately and specifically trained to deal with situations like this and worse. If the Baker team was suggesting a raid, it was because they knew they could do it. Evaluating the probability of success of any and all missions was part of their job.

“At least ask them what they think about it, their opinions on the matter” said the colonel, but he already knew how the general was going to get around this.

“Trautman....” Loyd began,

“Asking your men if they want to attack is like asking a thief if he wants to give stealing the Queen of England's crown a try. They'd never say no”

Trautman's face began to redden. Fundamentally, the problem was that whether MacV's personnel knew anything or nothing at all about the Baker Team program – Loyd's opinion could very well be seen as a legit and sound one. All in all, among the other special force units, there was an unsettling way of making decisions and thinking in general (*'smash everyone, win everything'*) was especially popular.

What made him angry most of all however, was that the colonel had just spent the last two years making sure the Baker teams were well above and superior to that childish way of thinking. Loyd in fact was accusing them in front of the entire MacV staff of having that kind of mentality. The staff had absolutely no idea about all the work which had been done to triumph over that disturbing mentality, and they were being accused of being exactly what the colonel had never wanted them to be.

Son of a bitch – Trautman thought to himself.

He was almost shaking with rage.

That day, Loyd had basically hit rock bottom, the lowest he could possibly reach, and yet, there wasn't anything the colonel could say or do about it.

It was then that he decided to give up.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and then turned to the radio operator.

-

Ortega had been waiting in the dark, unaware of the developments when he suddenly heard an airplane engine hum in the distance.

It was quite probably, the very same airplane he was radioing.

“What the fuck is he doing?” Messner asked.

“How the fuck should I know?”

Ortega picked the microphone up.

“High Eagle, do you copy? Go back east, for fuck's sake, and do it now”

All of a sudden they heard crackling like noises coming from down at the base and beyond the hill as small weapons began shooting into the sky in the direction of the plane.

“Do you copy that High Eagle? You are too fucking close, fuck!”

The radio reply from above them came almost immediately thereafter.

“Direct order from the command centre: abort mission. Do you copy that Scorpio? We are under small arms fire; this communication won't last. Give me a Roger That, Scorpio. Give me a Roger That to abort mission: DO NOT free the prisoners”

Ortega pushed away the microphone as if it had suddenly become dangerous. Ortega then turned towards Messner, almost to see whether the expression on his face showed if he'd actually heard right or not. It couldn't be. No, there had to be a mistake. Postponing the attack made absolutely no sense, not without at least discussing it with the Baker team first. Ortega then turned to face the others, almost asking for help. There was something amiss. Something was very bad, indeed. Taking into consideration the time lapse needed to forward the messages, the order to abort had to arrive before they were shot at. This could only mean that Trautman had made his decision *before* the airplane ended up under enemy fire, so they couldn't have considered it for more than a minute. The order was therefore, executive. No, that couldn't be. There was definitely something wrong.

In the darkness some green tracers made their way up to the sky and were as long as laser rays.
Jesus Christ – Ortega thought.
He then turned back to his teammates.

The team may not have been at risk when it came to being located but certainly having the Vietcong in a state of emergency wasn't certainly going to make things any easier. Ortega had to reply to the radio plane message. He had to give a Roger that to the last communication despite how shitty or pointless he felt it may have been and yet he couldn't go through with it. There was something making him not do it.

“Skorpio, do you copy that? Confirm. We are already moving out”

A lightning flare shot into the sky, throwing a pale, dim light onto everything. Surprised by the light, Ortega's teammates suddenly lowered their heads dropping down into the shadows. As the flare was slowly swept away by the wind, the jungle filled with moving shadows. Ortega looked at that flare in distress.

“Scorpio” the radio crackled again.

If that base had the cheek to use things like tracers and flares, it was obviously

because it wasn't afraid of anything. Neither the Laotian government nor the US forces caused them the least bit concern.

It was almost a threat, or an invitation by the VCs (*herewe are motherfuckers, come and get us. We fear nothing*).

An entire army could be hiding in there, found on neutral soil of a neutral country bypassing all the laws generally followed in conventional warfare.

That war was completely backwards.

Ortega reluctantly moved the microphone closer to his mouth and then just stood there for a second, considering it further.

Shit – he thought.

The order not to attack was coming from Trautman himself and not basically from some asshole like most of the others were.

Trautman was the only man in the whole world that Ortega really trusted.

Everyone on the Baker team was against leaving those men there and that included him.

He simply wasn't capable of leaving them there.

He just couldn't fulfil his duty as a team leader under those circumstances.

Messner, Rambo, Barry, Danforth, Jorgenson, Coletta and Krakauer were looking at him. The entire Baker team were watching him from the shadows. They were still hiding and even in the dark it was evident by the look on their faces what they wanted.

Ortega still had a few more moments to reply to the radio plane and confirm his order.

Whatever decision he was planning to make, he would have to make it now.

They didn't even ask us our probability of success – Ortega mused.

That wasn't like Trautman.

Someone had made that decision other than Trautman.

“Answer me, Skorpio. Give me a Copy That” repeated the radio.

“Scorpio”

“Skorpio, Skorpio do you copy? I have to move, we have only got a few seconds at most”

Under the scrutinizing eye of all his mates, Ortega passed the microphone back to Messner.

He calmly took it from Ortega and turned the radio off while a the smile on his face got wider.

Even though everyone in the dim room was silent, the Baker Team continued to eye their team leader.

The second one to flash a smile lighting up the dark was Barry. His teeth appeared incredibly white in the darkness as he stood right in front of Ortega. Shortly thereafter, Coletta, who was on his right, chuckled despite covering his mouth with a hand. It was evident that they were all happy now. They preferred to die saving the lives of some prisoners rather than on some shitty pointless mission like Black Spot had been, for instance.

Ortega shook his head however, feeling somewhat angry with himself. His decision worried him. This feeling he had didn't feel wrong so much from a legal point of view because he was sure it wasn't a legal issue. In terms of legality, by pretending they hadn't received the last communication, they could justify the raid as an 'on the field' decision, and this would have spared them all the martial court. So it wasn't so much the idea of being court martialled either, but quite frankly getting caught up in a mess of such epic proportions. It was a suicide mission and he could imagine what would happen when the shit hit the fan. He couldn't fathom why he or any of the others would want to do it, for that matter.

Maybe Ortega had just gone insane. Maybe, that night in Laos they had all gone crazy, because only soldiers as crazy as them could ever end up in a situation as absurd as this. Ortega sighed. Eventually, almost justifying himself, he said

“There's no way Trautman made an order like that so it didn't come from him and that's the reason why I did what I did”
No one said a word. There was no need to add anything else. Even now, they were all thinking the same thing. Ortega sighed again and then said:
“Now go get some sleep, Baker team. Tomorrow is going to be a trying day. And I'll need you all to be on top form”

Slowly then they all went to get themselves ready for the night. They would be fighting at dawn.

Ortega rubbed his face with one hand in the dark.

He was still in time to change his mind.

It would suffice to go back to where they had come from without being seen, exactly as they had done to get to where they are now.

That option however was imagined, nothing more than a dream. It wasn't real at all, it was imaginary. So, in all actuality, he'd already made his decision, and having done so, he would have stuck it out until the very end.

The only thing he hoped for was to not have sentenced them all to death, along with himself.

It was truly unbelievable how even in times of war we died time and time again at the hands of our very own decisions rather than by our enemy's weapons.

Wars are lost even before come onto the field.

Trautman had been the one to tell him that once when they were at Fort Bragg a very long time. He'd said it during one of his 'deliriums', as the guys affectionately used to call them (*Oh no... The old man is going to get delirious and right now... I can feel it... Here he comes*).

How true it really was! That night was the moment Ortega finally realized it. In fact that was the night his understanding of how categorically true it was reached new levels making something in him change, and he was never the same again.

Consequently he turned in Messner's direction.

“Doc?”

“Yes”

“Tomorrow, I'll need you to back me up”

“Manuel, for God's sake...” Messner shook his head.

“Now listen to me very carefully Manuel, because I'm only going to say this once and then I'll deny having ever said something anything like it”

“What?”

“You are the best team leader I've ever met, Manuel. I swear.”

Ortega appreciated that. Then said:

“And yet I don't know, Doc... Today I made a really bad mistake. I reasoned like an average soldier, but that's not what I am. I shouldn't have let my feelings influence that kind of decision”

He then looked Messner right in the eyes and added:

“I am a team leader, Doc”

“Don't give a fuck, Manuel You have always been too hard on yourself. And anyway, the forces hiding inside that base are not at all what they seem. The camp is still under construction and only partly inhabited. In a weeks time it'll be working at full regime and it'll be the base for an entire North Vietnamese Army regiment. Only here and now however, is it within our reach It's ours for the taking, trust me. I did some calculating myself. There will never be a better moment than now.

“Nevertheless, your totals were partial and were almost done in the dark.”

“Come on Ortega, you just concentrate on your plan, will you? Make also sure it's one of your masterpieces, because come dawn we'll hit them using might like they've never seen before. And when they realize what's going on, we'll have already vanished into thin air with the prisoners.”

Part Two:

The Raid

Rambo's face was painted black.

He'd been in place at least thirty minutes by now, with no more than one hundred feet separating him from his Vietnamese sentry.

The guardsman had leant up against a tree about twenty minutes earlier, and hasn't moved a muscle since. It almost seemed like he was sleeping on his feet.

Rambo checked the time on the Seiko watch he was wearing on his wrist, but it seemed to be standing still.

He had to calm down.

So he closed his eyes.

He listened to the base in front of him and the jungle all around him but not a single thing was moving. and he was still too worked up.

All this tension would have made him slip-up and that was definitely something he couldn't afford, especially not on enemy territory.

So he focused.

It was like swallowing something.

Fear and tension need to be swallowed sometimes, precisely like a bitter pill. Some Baker team guys enjoyed believing that they could swallow fear up like a pill because they were born 'real man', but that wasn't exactly how it worked

Without the gruesome selection program and most of all, the following two years of training could Rambo (or the rest of them) have been up to controlling their minds the way they did.

By that time Rambo was calm and collected.

He looked up at the sky that was slowly changing colour from black to dark blue.

Checking his watch again, the time to act had finally come

Rambo lifted his Kalashnikov to eye level, pointed it in front of him and slowly began moving forward through the roadside vegetation.

He walked silently, crouching the whole way without ever taking his sights off the sentry in front of him.

When he got close enough to hear the guard breathe, he stopped.

He was taking long and steady breaths, almost like snoring.

The guard was sleeping on his feet and this was going to make things a lot easier.

Slowly, Rambo put his Kalashnikov on his back letting it hang on its sling, and drew

his Baker knife out.

The time had come to strike.

As he was moving in closer the guard jerked.

After an odd kind of cough however, he didn't move or change his breathing again.

False alarm.

Rambo took the last two steps which separated him from his man then his hands sprung forward like a striking snake.

With one hand he covered the guard's mouth while the other flashed the Baker knife into the air. With a solid heave, Rambo pushed himself against the enemy, making it absolutely impossible for him to move. Right after he slit the throat, the mouth under Rambo's hand stopped trembling.

Trautman was right in saying once you cut the enemy's throat he can't even complain.

Not needing the knife any longer, Rambo was able to hold the man with both arms.

The man flung himself a couple of times against Rambo, as blood squirted everywhere and he slowly suffocated in his own blood.

He wasn't a weak man, but the pain and shock had already debilitated most of his strength.

A minute (and a lot of blood) later, Rambo felt his man stop flinching in his arms all together.

So he slowly laid him down on the ground, paying close attention to not make any sound whatsoever.

Rambo, now stained with blood wiped his eyes with the back of his hands since his fingertips were obviously sticky as well, but he ended up getting even more stained than before.

It was then that he heard a rustling behind him.

“What the hell are doing?” he whispered.

It was Berry and he was right.

In all actuality that probably wasn't the moment to be wiping all that blood off his face.

He and Rambo exchanged a couple of hand signals, than Rambo lifted the corpse up off the ground, swung it on his shoulder and moved towards a small drainpipe nearby where he'd already decided to hide it.

He looked at his Seiko and realized they were running a little late.

Rambo was walking in the dark, in the tall grass, when he felt an excruciating pain in one foot.

In spite of rushing because it was late, worrying about making too much noise and the weight of the corpse over his shoulder, Rambo still managed to fall backward before that thing – whatever it was – devastated his foot completely.

Initially, it had felt like a giant knife had pierced his boot.

But then the pain eventually grew excessively and he could feel an alien object inside

his boot.

When the pain suddenly became excruciating, he moaned behind his grinding teeth.

He turned around and on the ground he saw what he'd stepped on was a punji.

The whole place was full of them.

What with the lack of light and the tall grass hiding it Rambo had hit it dead on and now, blood was gushing out of the hole in his boot.

Jesus Christ – he thought.

A wounded foot.

No, no, no...

A wounded foot in enemy territory, miles away from the nearest filtration point.

What he'd just done to his foot, was what the guys at SOG liked to call the 'wound of death'.

A trivial wound per se, but one which could end up killing you across the border.

That goddamn simpleton trap had probably cost him his life in one way or another, considering most punji traps were poisoned by either animal or human excretion.

Rambo clenched his jaw, wanting to scream as his heart fell.

Twenty-three years old – he thought.

I thought I could make it.

I really thought I'd be able to do at least a few more missions before dying.

He gave his head a shake because the pain was already decreasing

He may have been fucked up, but the rest of the team wasn't.

And the mission itself still had a chance.

He couldn't let himself become a problem for his team.

He had to stick it out.

He had no other choice but to keep fighting.

So, as the breeze blew against his bloodied and sweaty face, Rambo got back up.

Once on his feet and looking around, it was obvious that, from there on in, he would have to be far more careful.

He took his first steps jumping on one foot only.

His watch confirmed there were only a few minutes left before the attack was set to start.

He had barely enough time to take care of that wound.

He hopped behind a tree, sat on the ground and with trembling hands untied his boot to find his sock drenched in blood.

As he considered what to do he heard someone or something cautiously moving behind him.

Rambo turned around immediately holding his Baker knife by its blade and ready to throw if need be, when he realized it was only Barry.

“You’re not in position, Raven. What the fuck’s going on?”

Then he looked down and answered himself:

“Shit”

He crouched to the ground, slid his assault bag off his back and took something out of it.

“This is gonna hurt, Johnny” he said as he poured waterfall of alcohol over his foot and Rambo clenched his jaw as he did.

After cleaning it, Rambo and Barry checked it as best they could but it was very dark and they knew better than to turn their little red-coloured flashlights on.

In any case, the punji had not pierced from one side to the other.

The tip had passed right between one toe and the other wounding both but not completely going through anything.

Rambo had been lucky and there was no denying that, but he probably wouldn’t be able to march, making him a liability to the team.

“I don't think I can make it”

“Don't worry Raven. You'll walk”

“I don't think I'll be able to march”

“You’re gonna make it, John. You’ve got to because if you slow the hostages down...”

“I know, Snake. The body...”

“I’ll take care of it. You patch yourself up for good, but do it right”

“There’ll be plenty of other punji, around”

“I know. Wrap it tight, that’s right. ’Atta boy. I gotta go John”

“Go”

Delmore picked the body up and loaded it on his shoulder.

“We’ll never leave you, Raven”

“You’ve got to think about the hostages”

“If you’re too slow, I’ll stay behind with you”

The two of them stared at each other for a second

No, you won't stay behind with me – thought Rambo.

No.

Barry wasn’t supposed to risk his life for Rambo.

He had a mother to take care of.

He had a real family (*Not like the one Rambo had grown up with*), and really had people who loved him. He shouldn't put his life at risk for Rambo.

It was wrong.

Delmore, for God's sake – thought Rambo.

Were he and Barry such good friends for real?

Delmore...

Rambo tried to take a step forward to see exactly how much his foot hurt.

He was slow and seriously injured.

Being this slow meant he really ran the risk of being caught.

If he and Barry were captured, their dreadful fate would have been far worse than dying itself.

“No Snake...” said Rambo finally.

“Please, don't”

Barry smiled at him in the dark.

“You won't get rid of me that easily, man. We're gonna make it, and we're gonna do it together”

Damn it – thought Rambo.

His unit would be one man short doing the raid so getting into the base with three rather than four men could jeopardize the mission all together.

“I'll be back” Barry finally as he disappeared into the darkness leaving Rambo on his own.

“Damn it” he whispered again under his breath.

-

While making his way through the darkness, Barry tried to get over the thoughts that were nagging at him.

If he wanted to fight, he would have to forget about his injured friend for the time being because there wasn't anything he could do for Rambo right then and there.

Rambo had become an *issue* for him, and *issues* increased the probability of making a mistake, so he had to get it out of his head.

Having no other choice therefore that's exactly what he did.

A second later, Barry considered Rambo no more important than a bag you needed to remember at the hotel entrance after checking out.

The black man met up with Krakauer and Messner, who were in front of the base and already in position. Not yet knowing anything, the two men had just finished assembling the bow for Rambo.

“Where the fuck’s Raven?” Messner murmured.
“Wounded”
“What?”
“A *punji*. I’ll shoot with the bow. We’re going in in three”
“Shit” cursed Krakauer.
“How is he?” asked Messner.
“Shut the fuck up, and let’s get moving”

-

If Messner could have, he would have liked to stuff Rambo full of antibiotics straightaway.

The Vietcong piss on the punji for fuck’s sake, or worse still, shit on to them outright.

But when Messner looked at his watch, he realized there were only two minutes to the assault phase so there wasn’t much he could do for Johnny there and then.

Worse yet, if he took into consideration the distance they were to the nearest possible LZ, his friend was probably a dead man.

And now they had to get into the base short a man.

“It’s time” said Barry, and in silence the three of them started walking briskly toward the base.

As soon as they crossed the entrance gate, they quickly turned left, and hid between the shacks and external bamboo wall.

They were neither seen nor heard.

The shack they were crouching behind was made of brick and had a metal roof.

Barry and Krakauer were in front, while Messner was covering them.

They moved forward up to the corner of what looked like a house under construction.

-

Barry swallowed then stuck his head around the corner.

Precisely as Rambo and Coletta had said during the planning phase, that position gave Barry a perfect line of sight for a clean shot.

So he pulled his head back, moving back under cover.

Krakauer passed him his bow.

It was dawn by then.

While they were waiting in absolutely stock-still and silent, they heard a cough coming from the other side of the wall where they were hiding.

Jesus Christ – Barry thought, without moving a muscle.

The dark blue sky above them began to turn into a subtle red.
Barry hoped that at the very least, Rambo would be able to cover their backs.
He would be finding out soon enough.

-

Ortega and his unit were at the top of the hill that towered over the unfinished base.
The team leader was watching the base through his binoculars while Coletta, cradled his M14 like a baby next to him.
Ortega looked at his watch: the time had come.

“Let’s roll” he said.

Coletta smiled and nodded.
He spit his chewing gum out, pointed his M14 at the base and lowered his head down to the telescopic sight.
The rifle thundered in Ortega's eardrums as he looked through the binoculars down the hill again.
One of the guards at the main gate jerked back a bit then collapsed to the ground as a spurt of blood squirted from the side of his neck.

“Two inches lower, Sniper” said Ortega.
“Got it”

The hit North Vietnamese soldier flapped his arms in the dirt, like he was trying to swim on the bare ground. Then he stopped.
Ortega scanned the entire area.
Someone came out of a shack to check out what was happening and Coletta immediately blew his head off.

“I said no heads, Sniper. Not at this range. That's a fucking order”
“Okay boss”

-

Those first two shots were the signal Barry was waiting for.
He pulled the cord of his bow, held his breath, and went round the corner.

The guard on the tower was looking up toward where the shots had come from.
No one was screaming, not yet anyway.
Why are not they screaming?

Because it had all happened too fast.

It's just the adrenaline, Delmore.

One or two seconds had passed at most between the first and second shots.

Barry pointed his bow towards the tower guard and the whole world slowed down.

When he finally took aim, his target was pulling the charging handle on his AK.

The arrow flew straight up like a missile right to the guard's spine hitting him exactly where Barry had aimed.

TUMP!

One – Barry thought.

The guard shuddered. First he bent forward – hitting the parapet – and then he bounced backward, falling into the tower entranceway.

Barry withdrew back behind the corner.

He was already out of breath. He picked up the second arrow that Krakauer was holding out to him, pulled the cord and got ready to shoot again.

Only then did he hear the first screams.

He took a deep breath, and leaned back around the corner again.

The second turret was further away than the first.

Barry aimed then shot.

It flew longer this time and the guard on the second turret turned right before it got there.

This time the arrow was too high - '*no, no no*' thought Barry - hitting the guard right in the middle of his forehead.

It pushed his head back coming to a complete stop against one of the four lodge beams.

He was still standing.

The arrow may have passed right through his head, planting itself right into the beam.

A second later, his forehead was dripping blood.

Too high – thought Barry, then he leaned back behind his corner, where Krakauer was holding to the third arrow which awaited him.

Too high – Barry thought again.

If he'd hit the tortoise shaped helmet, the arrow would have rebounded and before Barry could have taken another shoot, the guard would have caught onto them.

He'd risked a lot.

Barry clenched his jaw. He had just about compromised the mission.

Calm down.

It's not over yet.

He still had to hit the third and final guard.

-

Ortega made a worried face.

“Fire post number two. And fast”

“Roger that” replied Coletta.

The sniper thus stopped looking through his rifle scope and took off running with Ortega.

-

Only then did Barry hear the first shots fired by the AK exploding in the base, but they were all heading up towards Ortega's unit on the hilltop,

Calm down – he thought.

Barry re-pulled the cord on his bow.

I am calm.

Then he poked out of his corner again to shoot at his third and final target.

This time however, the drill ground unfolding right before Barry's eyes was full of North Vietnamese.

Ten, maybe even twenty soldiers and they were all right in front of him, even if they were looking up towards the mountain.

Dear Lord – he thought.

Dear Lord don't make them turn.

Don't let them see me

And there were so very many of them...

Shoot, Barry.

Had even only one of them turned around, and if they had done it that very second...

Just think about shooting.

Barry aimed his arrow up to the third and last tower.

Get rid of that last, damn tower.

Fear became a pain in Barry's chest which was almost physical.

Oh Lord.

Oh Lord, please...

Make me kill him.

Please, please, please...

Consequently, Barry completely relaxed to the point of almost falling asleep, like he was already dreaming.

Now he was concentrated.

He'd finally managed to do it.

Now that fear was out of his mind, Barry felt as free as air.

He even felt free, strangely enough.

This time he didn't shoot his arrow, but 'let' it get to the target 'on its own'.

WUUUUUIP

And this time he actually saw it fly.

He saw it climb up to the guardsman, where it hit him right in the sternum.

Before the soldier had even hit the ground, Barry was already back under cover because, all things considered, no one could possibly survive a shot like that in the heart.

Delmore then folded his bow and put it behind his back as Krakauer returned his AK to him.

-

Once they reached the second shooting perch, Ortega looked below through his binoculars.

At that point, the North Vietnamese were trying to coordinate an attack up the mountain.

And exactly how many were there? Forty? Fifty?

Others even continued coming out of the sleeping quarters as well.

They were really too many of them at that point.

Ortega swallowed because they had made a mistake, done something wrong.

“S-Scorpio...” Coletta said in a trembling voice.

“I know”

And fuck me do I ever— he thought.

Ortega then picked up his AK and aimed. His heart was starting to pump furiously in

his chest and suddenly the idea that they may have done everything wrong ceased to worry him. He no longer cared.

He tried to catch his breath before shooting.

This is it – he thought, but the man he was aiming at kept running all over the place.

“Skorpio” Said Coletta.

“I know”

BOOM! - sounded the M14 next to Ortega.

This time it's for real - thought Ortega.

This is it.

This is what I have been waiting for my entire life.

BOOM!

“Scorpio help me, for God's sake”

Ortega finally pulled the trigger.

BAAM!

His Kalashnikov kicked between his arms, immediately giving him a feeling of violence. AKs were the only weapon in the world capable of making him feel like that.

His target instantly fell to the ground accompanied by a squirt of blood and seeing him fall down like that gave him a wonderful feeling.

Ortega then aimed at a new target, but this time he unleashed a small burst.

KRRRAK!

They were falling like puppets whose strings had suddenly been cut.

Ortega's heart was now slowing down going back to normal.

It's payback time assholes.

You're gonna pay for everything you've done to my life, you bastards.

You're gonna pay for it all, and with interest too.

You're gonna pay for Helen, for Boswell, and every single thing you've done to my life.

You're gonna pay for this whole fucking war.

And you're gonna pay for it right now.

Ortega's shots took down a third soldier, but this time the guy got back up and his face was gone

A shot had grazed him and taken some of it with it.

Ortega thought about putting an end to his misery, but left him to suffer instead.

Blood started squirting through his fingers which were keeping a piece of his face on.

Ortega could hear him screaming all the way to where he was, and it was wonderful. In the meantime, Coletta's M14 kept on thundering right next to him. And Coletta never missed.

“Scorpio...”

“Everything's under control”

“We have to move again, Scorpio”

“Give me a sec”

-

Danforth and Jorgenson were down lower than Ortega and Coletta, hiding in a tangle of lines, leaves and dead branches.

The lowest down and closest to the enemy however, was Danforth

He was crouched down in a real hole in the ground, covered with dead branches and tree trunks, which hid and protected him.

On his left he even had a tree trunk thick enough to stand the rounds shot by the AK.

On top of the tree trunk there was an M60 laying on top of the trunk with a second ammo belt right beside it, ready for reloading.

That's when Danforth heard the first voices whispering orders in Vietnamese and the snapping of branches being pushed aside and stepped on.

Jesus Christ, they're right here – he thought.

He pointed his AK towards the sounds, while sweat was annoyingly dripping over his eyes, down his temples and onto his beard.

Come on – he thought.

Come on, you assholes.

The first thing Danforth saw moving was a head peek right out in front of him.

The North Vietnamese soldier stayed there for a second looking straight in his direction, and that's when they stared right at each other. Even if the Vietnamese couldn't really see Danforth (who was camouflaged, in the shade and hidden behind leaves and branches) he looked straight at him, like he was looking him in the eyes.

Despite the fear he was feeling, Danforth stared right back at him, without even moving a single muscle.

All of a sudden however, his heart seemed to leap up into his throat, and he unexpectedly lost his breath.

He started hyperventilating through his nose but kept his mouth shut like a burrow nevertheless, as he was terrified the enemy would hear him (despite it being impossible at such a distance).

This is tough... - Danforth thought.
Fuck is it ever tough.

Despite having already gone through something similar during Black Spot, at least that had been at night. That day, under that hot sun, bearing enemy stares without moving an inch had turned out to be much more difficult than anything Trautman had ever made them do in training.

You've already been there.
You've already lived through worse things than these.
Calm down, God damn it.

Danforth continued inhaling through his nose but started taking much deeper breaths. Slowly, he then rose his sights in front of him to his target's head. His index finger was eager to pull the trigger.
Come on, you asshole.
Get the fuck away from there.

Danforth stood still like that – with the AK sights right on the guy's forehead and the trigger pulled halfway - for almost a minute.

Then – finally – the soldier moved on.

About fucking time, God damn it.

The North Vietnamese soldier studied the environment around him, slung his AK onto his back and dragged himself upwards by grabbing hold of trees seeing that it was so steep.

Danforth laid his AK slowly onto the ground and moved behind the M60 next to him. The enemy gestured to someone behind him, then continued upward, eventually disappearing into the vegetation.

Danforth knew that after that scout, all those who followed would have been far less careful than him.

And, as a matter of fact, after Danforth had seen the first soldier another, then another, followed by yet another went by and almost none of them bothered looking in Danforth's direction carefully again.

Coletta – whose current position was a great deal higher than his – had started to shoot again. Danforth recognized it was him by the sound his M14 made and those shots had definitely got the North Vietnamese's attention back.

In fact, by that point rather than looking around at all they focused solely on Coletta's gunshots.

Ortega's plan was working.

Trautman had done a fucking awesome job teaching them all those things back when

they were in Fort Bragg. A lot could be said about the old man himself, but that he didn't really know his stuff wasn't one of them, and the improvised plans following his protocol always worked, period.

Danforth stood still over his M60.

He squinted until his eyes became slits full of hate and fear.

The only problem was that if the Vietnamese had spread out too much – while attacking Coletta and Ortega – Danforth would have found himself completely surrounded by them.

And that definitely wouldn't have been good deal for sure.

Realizing you're surrounded is never good news – thought Danforth.

In order to ensure the ambush actually worked, Jorgenson himself - who was a little higher up than him – would have to be the one who opened fire first, and Danforth was praying he would do it right then and there.

-

In the meantime Barry, Messner and Krakauer were still at the base hiding behind the corner where Barry had shot his bow.

Only two years earlier, Trautman had taught them that *Sooner or later they'll believe there's only one enemy soldier around–*

It's a mistake everyone makes. Even as Americans we do it, and it's always just a question of time.

After the initial phase, you forget about everything else.

In fact that was exactly what was happening with the North Vietnamese: the more time passed, the less they watched out for other potential enemies being around.

It was certain however, that although not all the base personnel would have completely cleared out the majority by then, would have.

The time had almost arrived for Barry and the others to attack.

Barry looked at the buildings surrounding the area that they were supposed to cross, and wondered how many of their enemy would actually open fire on them while they ran across.

He took a deep breath.

Not yet – he thought

Not yet.

-

Jorgenson who was also hiding nearby simply at a slightly higher point than Danforth, had the duty of opening fire with his M60 straightaway, but before actually seeing the enemy, he'd heard them first.

Jesus Christ – he thought.

That was when he caught sight of the first sign of the enemy popping out from behind the trees at about forty yards below him.

They were only a spitting distance from each other but it would have to suffice for a shootout.

Strangely enough, Jorgenson felt relatively lucid by then.

He watched the first, then the second and then the third soldier position themselves right in front of his very eyes.

The time had come.

He took another deep long breath and then grabbed and pulled the M72 over his shoulder.

As he lowered his eye to aim, five or six adversaries were talking - probably only deciding which way to go - but in any case were right in the middle of the formation.

WOOOOOSH – sounded the rocket as a cloud of smoke made its way around Jorgenson's head.

The missile took off like a bolt leaving a straight smoke trail right up to the middle of the enemy formation.

Just before the impact, there were screams echoing in the valley, but by that point, it was too late.

The rocket detonated right in the middle of no less than five astonished Vietnamese faces, blasting smoke, fragments and debris everywhere, while Jorgenson watched a little red cloud which was most likely made of blood, form in the centre of the explosion.

After a second of silence, the screaming resumed though more prominent than before. This time they were suffocated howls while some were even shrill like, similar to those of a child.

The wounded and stunned were trying to recover from the shock of the explosion but Jorgenson didn't give them time to do it.

He threw the M72 next to him and quickly lowered his head over his M60.

He didn't have many visual targets but he could hear some of them yelling while he'd seen the others running to take cover right before the explosion. When he consequently opened fire, he shifted his aim quickly, from one very precise point to the next, shooting in short bursts thereby covering the widest surface area possible.

The cries changed in kind again.

The rocket may have shocked them but the machine gun fire even more.

The dirt was so soft that the seven-point-sixty-two bullets made fist sized chunks fly everywhere so Jorgenson thought he'd already hit at least three targets.

He was taken by surprise therefore when a Vietnamese soldier came right out of nowhere

Stunned by the rocket's explosion, the soldier was dragging himself along the ground while holding his left leg securely because it had almost been completely severed off.

His other hand was still grasping his AK tightly, and as soon as Jorgenson realized it he shifted his aim and ploughed him down with a storm of bullets that covered him from top to bottom.

Not discerning where Jorgenson was shooting from, a second North Vietnamese soldier actually crouched down by the tree right next to his.

Jorgenson turned and shot him with two bullets straight in the throat almost decapitating him.

As he turned his head forward again, another soldier caught his attention.

The man was standing upright, full of energy and outright focused.

He was yelling and waving his arms as he addressed the others authoritatively, and when Jorgenson noticed the whistle hanging around his neck he knew that even if he wasn't their commanding officer, he was a de facto one.

Jorgenson –who spoke perfect Vietnamese – even caught some of his orders, but before managing to fix his sights on him, the soldier vanished under one of the big dirt heaps off the mountainside.

In doubt, Jorgenson lowered his aim and shot at his cover blowing chunks of dirt everywhere.

The dry bank literally crumbled to pieces, so even if he hadn't been certain initially, he figured there was no way he could have missed him.

Screams seeping with desperation bellowed below him multiplying in number.

There were at least four wounded North Vietnamese soldiers screaming. Someone would have had to assist the injured, which would have slowed down enemy efforts. Apart from the frustration they'd be feeling, Jorgenson thought the slow down would ruin the advance definitively.

Out of nowhere however, the North Vietnamese officer reappeared.

Although unarmed he was gyrating his severed right arm which, after that blasts, had now become a stump.

Under extreme shock, he wasn't worried in the least about maintaining cover and the look on his face resembled a crying baby. Through his M60 sight, Jorgenson aimed right for him but had to pause.

He saw a soldier throw himself over the wounded official in an attempt to push him back under cover so Jorgenson decided to shot them both. Starting with the rescuer, he blew his kneecaps into nothing more than a cloud of blood and white fragments.

His seven point sixty two bullets had shattered the bones in his legs.

The first sign of return fire whistled over Grizzly's head forcing him lower onto his M60.

He'd been located.

Shoot, Danforth... - he thought, but there was still no sound of his friend return fire.
Shoot, you piece of shit.

Still nothing.

What the fuck are you waiting for?

What if Danforth had decided to change position?

No.

That mission didn't have any kind of plan B to fall back on. Now that they had attacked the base, they would have to kill every last one of them, or at the very least, die trying.

There weren't any alternatives.

If Danforth were already dead, who would cover him? Despite his concerns, there was no point worrying about it, at that point anyways.

If he had to stay there till they killed him because that was his destiny, then so be it.

Come on Danforth... Come on.

Jorgenson clenched his jaw in anger, pulled the safety pins out of two grenades and threw them below in quick succession.

As he was in a higher position, it was easier to throw them further.

Coletta – who was still in position above him – started shooting nonstop.

It was very rare to hear Coletta blasting away on his M14.

Jorgenson couldn't understand if he was shooting down at the base or somewhere closer.

The fight is getting out of hand – he thought.

The element of surprise had run its course and it was turning into a head-on battle against forces which outnumbered them.

Only Jorgenson's elevated position gave him a slight advantage but not by a lot.

Shoot, Danforth.

Shoot, you God Damn Eagle my ass.

-

In front of Danforth, there was a complete squadron of North Vietnamese soldiers by then, and they were all exposed.

There were others all around him however, on whom he had absolutely no visual.

The North Vietnamese had advanced in such a scattered fashion that they all ended up in front of him at the same time, and a few had even surrounded him.

Opening fire would have been suicidal.

Danforth licked his lips nervously.

You had to be one crazy motherfucker to come up with (and really go through) plans like these.

While raising the sights of his AK, the whole world looked as though it was zooming in and out right before his eyes.

Open fire – he thought.

Now.

Danforth started shooting as soon as he heard Jorgenson start.

As the first two enemies fell straight to the ground, their mates turned their heads and looked up upwards.

Struck by panic, they broke down even further when they thought Jorgenson had changed his position.

Unbelievable – thought Danforth.

Since Jorgenson hadn't actually moved from his original position, Danforth took advantage of their fumble straightaway and he instantly turned it into a carnage.

I'm doing it.

I'm really doing it.

-

In the meantime, the base had almost emptied, and Barry, Messner and Krakauer had waited long enough behind their corner.

The time had come to rescue the prisoners.

The three lined up one behind the other and each had their AK's stocks well placed against their shoulder.

When Barry, who was at the front of the line, nodded, the three of them turned the corner simultaneously running in the middle of the plane and shooting. Each one had a different target and each in opposite directions.

In the middle of the plane, there were two soldiers busy looking up at the mountain, but ended up shot and fell on the spot.

A third soldier – who was in the middle of the plain as well – spun around and lifted his rifle, but they all opened fire on him at the same time. He exploded from the inside, almost internally detonating.

A head popped out from one of the hut doors but only Messner and Krakauer shot this time.

He vanished behind the door squirting blood closely behind him.

There didn't seem to be anyone left by then.

The three, pointing their rifles all around, ran fast to the front door.

Barry and Messner went straight in, while Krakauer on the other side took cover at the doorstep, to watch their backs.

Once Berry was inside the room, he immediately noticed the smell.

It was dark in there.

It reeked of excrements and was unbearable. He was processing information at lightning speed when he noticed something lying on the floor.

Berry lowered both his head and rifle at the same time once he could confirm they didn't pose any kind of threat. Moving up closer, he understood they were people.

There were three of them, all unarmed and chained to a tree trunk embedded in the floor.

They slept chained to each other– Berry thought.

Stepping closer, he stared at their faces more attentively and discovered they were Americans.

My god.

Calm down – he thought, as he swiftly probed the room.

It was small and dark, and in one corner there were steps which lead downwards.

Calm down - he told himself again.

Berry felt stunned for an instant, almost in shock, because those faces had very little human left in them at that point.

Their skin was transparently thin, their eyes sullen and their eye sockets had become black.

Even if they could still look around, they were nothing but skulls.

My God – he repeated to himself in an attempt to regain his breath.

Berry was so jumpy that when one of prisoners moved to cover his face with his hands Berry jerked to shoot him. The battle was still raging on outside the hut, and it was starting to get to everyone.

At this point Messner slid past Berry and in a blink of an eye was at the prisoners examining them. Berry, on the other hand, kept back, still somewhat shocked.

-

“Are there any other guards?” Messner asked.

“Downstairs, are there any other guards?”

“I am covering you, Snake” said Krakauer from their backs.

“Go” said Messner too.

“No” said one of the three prisoners, the only one who had enough energy to mumble something a loud.

“There are no other guards, no, no”

Then, with a quivering voice, he asked:

“Americans?”

His eyes were almost teary.

Messner smiled, and then answered:

“Snake is a nigger. Don't you see he is a nigger? Of course we are Americans”

The prisoner looked at him as if he didn't understand a word.

“We're here to free you,” exclaimed Messner.

-

Berry started climbing down the steps one at time, with extreme caution.

It was dark down there and his eyes hadn't adjusted yet.

After his third step down, he heard a sob and came to a halt. Without hesitation, he turned and pointed his AK in the direction from where the noise had come.

Keep those nerves steady, Delmore.

You don't want to get yourself killed down here, nor do you want to kill a prisoner by accident either.

So, steady those nerves, black man.

Some kind of a cry or subdued scream sounded for a second time, but they were coming from upstairs. The prisoners had probably understood that they were there to free them.

When Barry finally got around to climbing the steps down again, everything else in his surroundings disappeared.

His mind was completely focused on the corridor below him and his heart started thumping inside his chest.

At the bottom of the stairs there was a door which was closed from the outside with a bolt.

It must have been the solitary confinement hole.

There couldn't be anything except other prisoners in there, and yet, for a second, Barry felt more in danger than ever.

He was too edgy and feeling a little hysterical.

Before pulling open the bolt he put the AK behind his back and took out his Browning. As he searched for his flashlight, he recalled it had a red filter so he decided on his zippo lighter instead. Once he lit it, he reached out for the bolt.

*

His hand was so shaky that the Zippo just about went out.

Barry took another step keeping the flame above him and suddenly saw a face came out of the shadows in front of him. Two faces, to be precise.

One was standing and the other was sitting on the ground, but it was the second one's face that captured Barry's attention most.

His forehead was split in the middle as open as a melon. His inner grey matter was almost visible and his eyes were fixed into space, like he was dead even if he wasn't.

If he hadn't been breathing, you wouldn't have guessed he was alive.

Worst of all was the smell. Even if he was alive, it reeked of decay.

Barry knew that smell from his first tour.

He always knew he would have smelt it again, sooner or later, but never would he have thought to smell it on a living human being.

They had cracked his head skull, probably with a nightstick, judging from the wound itself. Then, they had left him there to die with his brain almost exposed and naturally without bandaging it.

Animals... Those Vietcong are nothing but animals, inhuman.

Barry turned away.

It never seemed to end in Vietnam.

The atrocities had no limits, no end.

After Alex Roland Simmons' death, Barry thought he'd seen it all, but that wasn't the case.

Every time he thought he'd seen the worst the world could offer, Vietnam could hurt him again. It always dragged him further down and took him to such dreadful places that even the sickest fantasies couldn't imagine.

He had to cover his mouth.

Enough – he thought.

That's enough.

It wasn't over though.

It's not over; Delmore.

It's not over till it's over..

And you can bet this mission is not over yet.

It was pitch black at the bottom of those stairs, the same darkness as that night, three years ago, when the Vietcong tortured and killed Alex Roland Simmons.
Barry closed his eyes and held them tight.

Not again – he thought.

How many times will I have to re-live that damn night?

The other figure, the one standing, swiftly brought him back to reality because he may still pose a threat.

Barry turned to him, but the other man instantly said:

“No”

Then he lifted his arms up over his face like a child in the face of danger.

“No, no, no”

Berry cautiously moved closer to him trying not to scare him even further.

“I am American” he said.

The horror in his eyes was so deep that Barry felt it inside him. He’d never seen that look before. It was far beyond fear itself. That man expected Barry to kill him.

My God – thought Barry.

“Stop, please”

“I am here to free you”

“Leave me alone. Stop, stop, stop...”

It was then that Barry noticed his arm.

It was swollen, no smaller than football, and with an enormous black hole in the centre of it.

It was a bullet hole.

They had shot him and left him naked.

Barry got nearer and gently touched his shoulder.

“Look at me” he said.

The men started.

“Robert is sick”

“We have to leave”

“Robert is sick”

Barry turned to the stairs and shouted.

“Messner!”

Messner ran down the stairs in a hurry holding his AK.

“Robert is sick” the prisoner said again.
Berry threw Messner a confused look.
“Robert is sick”

Messner stared at the prisoner with the cracked head for a while.
His skull was open and its grey matter was exposed while the blood between his eyes was dried and obviously daysold.
There wasn't anything the Baker team could do for him in these conditions.
Barry waited patiently, and when he finally turned to Messner again, Doc shook his head as if to say there was nothing to be done.
Barry then slowly started dragging the other prisoner up the stairs.

“NOOOOO” the other man screamed.
“NOOO! I AM NOT LEAVING WITHOUT ROBERT! NO, NO, NOOOOO! LET ME GO! ROBERT! ROOOOBEEEEERT!”

In the meantime, Messner had returned down the stairs and without the prisoner noticing, he jabbed him in the arm with a syringe.

“Robert” he repeated again, but his voice was already weaker.
With a tranquillizing substance in his bloodstream, Barry brought him upstairs more easily.

-

To kill the prisoner with the crushed skull, Messner didn't even bother changing the needle. He reloaded the piston with three times more liquid than before.
What he was about to do was absolutely horrendous. It was one of those kind of things that stayed with you for the rest of your life.

His name was Robert.

The man Messner was going to kill was Robert.

In a better world, Robert may have survived, maybe by loading him on board a helicopter, or somehow.

The world they were in however, certainly wasn't a righteous one.

Among so many 'what ifs', there were some certainties as far as Messner was concerned.

After all the destruction the Baker team had caused to free the other hostages, he couldn't leave Robert there alive. God only knew what they would have done to him after in payback for all the North Vietnamese the Baker Team had killed. No, he couldn't leave Robert there, just like that.

So, despite all his doubts, Messner knew exactly what to do.

That's the reason he had filled his syringe with morphine without second thoughts.

It wasn't even his fault.

Honestly speaking, Ortega had sentenced Robert to his death once they'd decided to storm that construction site.

That's not true. he said to himself.

That doesn't make any sense so just stop it.

When you are at war there is no such thing as right or wrong.

And this man, really is no time to start thinking about it.

That's right.

Messner had to be quick.

Regarding the consequences of his actions, he could reflect later, and probably the rest of his life.

“Robert. Can you hear me Robert?” Messner said while preparing himself to give the injection.

Robert's head moved a little.

It was astonishing that he was even conscious.

“You can't come with us, Robert. We're too late to save you”

It wasn't the whole truth however, and Messner felt sick for having even said it.

He'd just lied to a dying man.

“I k-now” said Robert in a whisper.

Near death, he half-closed his eyes.

Messner showed him the syringe.

“I have this, if you want it”

Robert nodded again.

He saw it, comprehended and accepted it.

Perhaps, in all his suffering, he was looking forward to it

“In that case, I'll proceed”

Again, he nodded yes with his head, but when Messner was about to go ahead with the injection; he noticed that Robert was trying to do something.

Messner moved his ear close to his mouth but he did understand anything anyway.

Then it looked as if Robert was trying to scratch his neck.

He was reaching for his dog tags.

For some reason, the Vietcong had not taken them away from him.

Messner then took them off for him.

One of the two tags was scratched very distinctly with four letters:

WMLW – said the dog tag.

“My-wife. She'll understand,” said Robert.

Messner nodded, opened the chain up and took the scratched dog tag only. He put it inside his waterproof map-bag, which was for an SOG member one of the safest places in the world.

I will bring this to your wife if that's what you want – Messner thought to himself.

“Now close your eyes Robert”

“You won't feel a thing”

Robert closed them.

Messner put the needle in his arm, put one hand over his eyes and then turned away because death is a private thing.

Messner waited a few seconds.

There was too much adrenaline in him to feel the bitterness of the moment but he certainly wasn't proud.

What a shitty war – he thought.

He waited until he felt necessary and then he touched his neck.

Nothing – he concluded.

He put the syringe back in his backpack and picked up his AK again.

Although he was in a hurry that didn't stop Messner from looking at Robert one last time.

Goodbye, Robert.

His closed eyes had no expression by then.

Then Messner disappeared back up the stairs.

We have already lost one– he thought.

And this is only the beginning.

In the meantime, Rambo was still waiting and in position. It was awful listening to the sound of battle without knowing how it was really proceeding or being able to do anything. It was excruciatingly hard. Rambo had bandaged his foot and a few more minutes passed when he heard something. A noise he shouldn't have heard.

Judging from the sound, they were at least six or seven men coming quickly forward on the main road. They had to be a patrol team who had heard the battle taking place and were now rushing back to help their comrades.

Rambo looked around in despair, but there was nowhere to take cover, no holes, nowhere at all. They were coming towards him from the worst possible direction and they would have annihilated him straightaway.

Rambo moved to run away but his wounded foot blocked him immediately. He couldn't escape in time.

It was all over.

It may have been over for him but maybe for his team too because that patrol team was coming at their backs. As it was, Delmore and the others were about to be taken by surprise.

He was supposed to be covering their backs.

It was his responsibility.

If he died without putting up a fight, his mates would be ambushed as a result.

Rambo swiftly looked around again, but the screaming was so close by then that he didn't even have time to move. At least not in his state anyways.

Rambo anxiously leaned up against tree, looked up at that treetop, and his eyes suddenly lit up.

Yes – he thought as he secured his AK onto his back.

It might just work.

He quickly brought up his arms and started to climb the tree using all the strength he had.

He would climb that tree using only one God damned foot if he had too.

*

Here they come.

When the North Vietnamese got to the base's main gate, they slowed down and proceeded much more cautiously than before.

Wait – thought Rambo.

He felt his jaw clench.

His position on that tree was very uncomfortable. Rambo had multiple targets, some of them right under him and he could barely move the arm holding his AK. Not to mention, his foot was bleeding, God damn it.

Plick – made the drop of blood as it dripped down below onto a leaf next to the tortoise-shaped helmet of one of the North Vietnamese.

In Rambo's head that sound was deafening, but, in reality, the sound of the battle raged on, and it saved Rambo's life. In fact, the North Vietnamese soldier passed right by the bloody leaf simply ignoring it while Rambo, who was above him, followed his movements through the iron sights of his AK.

He didn't hear it.

He didn't notice anything.

The entire North Vietnamese team, he counted all eight helmets passed under Rambo while he stayed still on his trustworthy branch.

There was no point in waiting for them to get further away.

By that point, the time had come.

Rambo calculated that hitting the first three would be easy but the other five would have had time to react. That meant that they could easily turn and open fire or get under cover. Whatever their reaction was going to be, Rambo was going to have to face them.

John then closed his eyes, took a deep breath, re-opened them and then shot in full auto.

KRRACK

He managed to hit four of them.

All of the others suddenly turned to return the fire exactly as Rambo had foreseen.

But the thing is that they aimed at ground level. Not for a moment did they think of shooting up at the tree.

That moment of hesitation was more than enough for Rambo to kill them all.

All of the prisoners were now packed into a corner of the little concrete house while Barry and Krakauer were shooting outside from the door with their AKs.

“How many Americans in all?” asked Messner.

“Five Americans!”

So that was it, they had them all.

Perfect – thought Messner.

Krakauer, who at that point in time was shooting through the door, nodded he’d heard too.

Now they only had to put a stop to that damn firefight.

Messner grasped a smoke grenade from his equipment pack but some bullets passed right over his head and started cracking in their room.

“Shit!” he screamed while the rest of them dropped to the floor.

Some bastard had reached a position close enough to h was able to fire straight into the room.

That was not good, not good at all.

The hostages were at risk.

“Go downstairs!” Messner screamed.

The prisoners started crawling toward the stairs.

Then, as his hands shook with fear, Messner got ready to throw the smoke grenade outside, thus exposing himself to the fire briefly. That was the reason his hands shook.

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING, DOC! Screamed Krakauer.

Messner looked at the smoke grenade in his hands. He was holding the red one which stood for retreat.

Holy shit.

If Krakauer hadn’t stopped him in time, and he’d really have thrown it. well.

Messner let it drop to the ground with its safety pin still in it and then pulled out the right one.

With shaky fingers, he put his index inside the safety ring and threw the grenade outside the door as far as he could.

Ortega and the others would have seen it for sure.

“DONE!” he yelled.

It was then that all hell turned loose.

Thousands of holes were blown everywhere and that included on the walls, through the windows and on the roof. Fragments of wood and concrete started flying everywhere.

Yet Krakauer continued to shoot through the open door.

“DID YOU SEE THEM?” Berry screamed.

“YES” yelled Krakauer back and then bellowed:

“They are all on the opposite building. INCOOOOOMING!”

More wood splinters soared overhead.

Enemy fire was intensifying tenfold.

“Downstairs! Retreat downstairs!” yelled Messner.

“I can’t” shouted Krakauer

“SHIT!”

Messner tried to crawl away, but the floor in front of him was penetrated explosions.

Johnny should have been here by now – he thought.

The eight of us attacking fifty of them, and we have been idiots.

This was insane.

-

Fire.

The flames went up toward the sky shooting blisters of concrete, metal and wood everywhere.

Some of the flying rubble was on fire and the heat managed to hit Krakauer square in the face too.

Lawrence saw the scene almost in slow motion, like a state of hypnosis but then suddenly came back to reality.

It had to be Jorgenson with an M72 from the mountaintop. They had seen the smoke signalling 'hostage taken' and had started destroying the base.

If Jorghenson and Ortega had found the time to shoot down the mountain instead of at their own enemies however, it probably meant that the fight above the mountain was practically over by then.

All this thinking was affecting his ability to focus though.

So, he lowered his head over the sights of his AK again, and went back to looking for

targets but didn't find any.
There wasn't anything moving in front of him anymore.
That explosion had made the entire base silent.
Krakauer lowered his rifle.
They had won.

Ok guys - said Ortega.

We are going to use what Trautman use to call 'a double diversion'.

A little before dawn, Rambo and Barry will waste the sentries on the road behind the base, then their unit will enter the base and they will hide between the hostage's hut and the external palisade.

Coletta and I will stage the attack of a single sniper from the top of the mountain, and this will be the first diversion.

We are going to use four different, pre-determined points of fire, and we'll move constantly to keep from being killed, thus simulating the presence of one shooter only with no intention of attacking the whole base at all, but just a 'hit and run'.

In the middle of the chaos generated by it all, Rambo and Barry will kill the tower guards, thus removing their 'eyes' from above.

When the largest number of enemy are on the slope of the mountain, Jorgenson and Danforth will start the real ambush or the 'second diversion', using machine guns and rocket fire.

Jorgenson will shoot from the front, Danforth from the side.

At this point in time, the hostage rescue unit (Barry, Messner, Rambo and Krakauer) will only have to wait for the best moment to get in and free the hostages.

Once freed, Messner will throw a green coloured smoke grenade to 'destroy everything', or red for 'retreat'.

At that time, the Vietcong will realize the risk of losing the hostages and they will probably break their flanks in two to prevent this.

Dividing their ranks will be their second mistake because they will no longer have a way out.

Remember the most important thing, Baker team.

We must always be the ones leading the game.

We must force them to constantly react to our actions, without ever leaving them enough time to reason over what's happening. We can't let them organize.

Until they keep reacting to our aggression, we will always know where they are and what they are doing.

*We will even know what they are thinking while we are killing them...
Just like Trautman thought us.*

*We were born for this, Baker team.
Let's show them what we can do 'over the fence'.
We can make it, guys.
We are going to make it.*

Part Three:
Missing In Action

Ortega, Coletta, Danforth and Jorgenson had come down the mountain and were inside the empty base, by then.

In the middle of the vast terrain, Barry and Krakauer were waiting for them with their arms still at the ready.

There was nothing but rubble, smoke and corpses all around them.

The stench of burnt skin ran rampant.

Ortega, who was by that point, completely out of breath, stopped for a second to take in the results of Jorgenson's rockets but had to turn away from such a horrible sight.

He was really struggling to catch his breath. The fighting had taken its toll.

Looking over at Krakauer, Ortega noticed his incredibly worried expression as well. Something was definitely wrong.

Really, unequivocally wrong.

“Is everyone accounted for?” asked Ortega.

“Yeah. Where's Sniper?” replied Krakauer.

“He stayed outside to cover our backs. Vuong?”

“Never seen any trace of him. If you ask me, he was never here in the first place”

“Okay. Sit-rep, Tiger”

“Ok, man.... Doc is with the prisoners inside the west hut. There are four of them and they are all Americans. They can walk but one of them has got a wounded arm”

Ortega's expression became worrisome.

A wounded hostage. getting him to the nearest LZ may prove to be difficult.

Really difficult.

Ortega swallowed.

Let's hope it's not – he thought to himself.

“Will he walk?” he said.

“You have to ask Doc that”

Ortega looked around and saw that most of the team was there.

“I can't see no Raven here”

“Raven is covering the South main gate. He's injured too. Nothing serious, but he's got an injured foot.

Ortega sighed again.

Shit – he thought to himself.

Another one that may not be able to walk.

Accordingly, there were two of them already.

“Any other good news?”

“Oh yes. There's more boss, and it's the best of all. Fasten your seat belt, man...”

“God damn it, just say it”

“The radio-pack, boss. It's gone. It was hit and it's all fucked up”

“What the fuck are you saying, soldier?”

“Hole right through it. Must've been hit by a damn bullet or something, I don't know, boss. A bullet, or a fragment or something along that line”

Fucked, that's what we are, fucked.

Ortega shut his eyes.

Now we are absolutely, definitely and unquestionably fucked.

“We left it outside the base, and it was, well hidden. It got hit by a stray bullet. I really don't have any idea how it could have happened. We do have short-range pocket radios though and emergency beepers too. Even though we'll have to try using those ones at regular time intervals and in the right zones.”

Did he say short range radios? – Ortega thought keeping his eyes closed and blocking out Krakauer's words.

In Laos?

We are all going to die for Christ's sake.

Without any means of communication, we are all going to die out here.

Jorgenson – who had joined the two together with Danforth – started bouncing from one foot to the other.

“... We could turn the beeper on and use the short-range radios too while moving forward to one of our LZs, couldn't we? Trautman knows the three possible LZs for this mission, am I right? Or not?”

Not exactly.

It didn't work like that at all, but Krakauer was no navigator and trying to explain it to him would have been a waste of energy. Lord knows that was neither the time nor the place to do it.

You guys are practically dead already– said a voice in Ortega's head.

You are hungry, tired and in sleep withdrawal. You have two wounded and haven't got an LZ.

You are dead, that's it.

No.

No.

He needed time to think, and he had to do it with Coletta.

Yeah, that's it.

Ortega then opened his eyes up back again, and abruptly stopped Krakauer's from going on.

“Shut up” he said and then added:

“Search the base for intel then place C4 everywhere. I want timers set up at thirty minutes”

“The death cards*, boss” said Danforth.

Ortega glanced up at the sky.

“Exactly. Put those damn cards and then let's head westward. I don't want a single word about this mess to the POWs, or I swear to God I'll waste you all myself”

“Yessir”

Ortega looked at his wristwatch.

“We've been engaged for seventeen minutes and I want to get out of here before touching twenty five. Is that clear? Now move, move, move!”

Jorgenson and Krakauer left.

“Thank you, Eagle”

“For what?”

Danforth turned his AK sling round over his shoulder and then even dared to light himself a cigarette. All things considered, they had killed everyone on that damn base.

“Take this. Have a drag” he said.

Ortega had a drag of smoke as he considered the grounds around them further. His mind was whirling.

He had to find a way to ask for an emergency LZ without a long-range radio but that was impossible.

Yet, he had to find a way to do it, or they were all going to die, and fast.

“Take five minutes for yourself, Scorpio. Think carefully and calmly about it. In the meantime, I will get you Coletta”

* The death cards were the ace of spades – usually with some kind of skull in the middle – that the SOG used to leave over the bodies of the enemy they killed beyond the border. For the Vietnamese people, the aces of spades were omens of bad luck. So called 'experts' in psychological warfare believed that leaving those cards on the bodiesserved to lower enemy morale.

Jorgenson started searching through the rubble with Krakauer.
The back of his neck was tingly because of all the adrenaline still flowing in his blood stream.

His hands were even shaking.

He was tired, very tired.

His left temple was pulsing painfully, but he had to hold tight because the mission wasn't over yet, not by a long shot. Furthermore, with no radio at their disposal, he couldn't imagine what would come next.

Without their long-range radio, Jorgenson really didn't know how they were going to get back home.

Jorgenson started kicking rubble here and there.

He was short on breath.

He had to stop for a bit and knew perfectly well that he didn't have a choice about giving in to what his body needed. He wasn't keen on the idea though because as long as they were in that damn base they were all still very much in danger.

There still wasn't any sign of weapons or documents around illustrating the reason for building that base.

Could it have been nothing more than just a prison camp?

Further ahead, just under some debris, Jorgenson came across some bodies.

They weren't only visible but he could smell them too despite having killed them only moments earlier with his two M72s.

Jorgenson took a few more slow, cautious steps before the entire event unfolded before his very eyes.

The bodies were carbonized black with twisted fingers and others had broken contorted legs and some were detached.

The majority of their faces had been blown away.

Not to mention their arms, in fact one of them actually, had really short arms.

It seemed to have very small fingers too, almost doll like.

No.

That hand was too small for Jorgenson's mind to come to terms with.

No, no, no, this can't be.

A sharp pain seemed to pierce through his heart.

What did he do?

What the hell had he done?

As he moved forward through the rubble over the little hand, he started digging faster until practically throwing it aside.

No.

He saw six, maybe even seven bodies.

Women, Laotian women and children.

“Fuck no”

He had to be hallucinating. It couldn't be otherwise.

Jorgenson was a father, father to a little girl. He couldn't have truly been responsible for killing a baby.

Worse still, it didn't end there, there were two other children there, and four mothers.

No, it couldn't possibly have been Jorgenson. He couldn't have been the one who killed them.

Not by his own hand.

Maybe it was nothing but another one of Trautman's practical jokes, one of those damn tricks he always used to play on them, trying to mess with their heads. Those used to nearly drive him crazy and back when they were in Fort Bragg. It might only be that. Now that they were really fucked up because they didn't have a radio, and given that they were all probably going to die, that vision was probably nothing but a practical joke.

Nevertheless, Jorgenson somehow knew that it wasn't.

Everything here was genuine.

Only when he finally reached for those bodies did the reality of it all actually hit him. He felt so overwhelmed by it, that it was near to being sucker punched right in the face.

“NO! NOOO!” he started screaming like crazy.

Someone grabbed him straightaway by the shoulder, but upset as he was, Jorgenson didn't even understand who it was.

So he pulled away from him too.

“NOOOOOOOOO”

Jorgenson felt himself being blocked again, and this time with far more strength but it was too late.

He had completely lost himself, he was out of his mind.

He'd fallen inside some kind of bottomless pit, inside of which he was forced to face the consequences of all his horrible actions. Everything he'd done. He knew he would never be able to climb out of that bottomless hole again. Not ever.

“Boss!” shouted Krakauer.

“We’ve got a problem boss!”

Jorgenson freed himself again, this time using even more vehemence than before. Instantly, he was over by the bodies again.

All the victims were wearing Laotian tribal clothing.

Those were Laotian slaves, captured and forced to work on the Vietcong construction sites.

It was a common occurrence along the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Most of the victims were crushed by the collapsing building, while the others, who had been closer to the rocket explosion, had literally burnt to death.

Four women, a newborn and two other children – he thought counting the heads (and bodies).

Seven in total.

Two, maybe three entire families.

In the meantime, Krakauer was still kneeling on the ground holding his head in pain still stunned by how his friend had reacted.

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING GRIZZLY?” Ortega shouted at the top of his lungs.

Jorgenson turned.

Ortega was moving quickly towards him as though wanting to fight.

Jorgenson however, didn’t move.

The real world was lightyears away at that moment.

When Ortega finally got him he grabbed him violently by his uniform collar and held it tight very nearly strangling him, until the pain finally brought him back to reality.

For Jorgenson, it was like waking up from a dream.

“I KILLED 'EM!” he shrieked.

“Calm down, God damn it! We’ve got far worse problems right now!” Ortega screamed back as he shook him.

“I FUCKING KILLED THEM!”

Jorghenson was spitting as he screamed, and his tone of voice seemed to be mving from rage to tears.

“I FUCKING KILLED THEM!”

“OF COURSE YOU DID, GRIZZLY! I ORDERED YOU TO DO IT!”

It was only with that recollection did Jorgenson give signs of calming down slightly.

“DON'T... don't you...”

“They were Vietcong slaves - said Ortega - slaves who were kidnapped and forced to work! We couldn't see them from outside! We couldn't have known!”

“I shouldn’t have shot at the hut!”

“I ordered you to do it so that we didn’t put the American POWs in jeopardy. This shit happens in war. Fuck. Today, we attacked an enemy of fifty with eight soldiers. We made a mistake while we were doing it. That’s all.”

Ortega let Jorgensen’s collar go.

“I ordered you to do it. I gave you the order” repeated Ortega, in a hypnotized fashion.

“I’m the one who made this mistake. I’m responsible for it, not you””

Jorghenson lowered his head.

Then he buried his face in his friend's shoulder, using it to muffle his own tears.

Eventually, he looked back up again.

“I haven’t finished checking all the rubble yet” he said.

“The intel.

“Go” replied Ortega.

It had never solely been about freeing the hostages, but obviously about getting them back to the LZ as well.

Now that the long-range radio was gone, God only knew how and when they would have made contact with the MacV again, especially by using those damn emergency, short-range radios.

Considering where they were, Ortega had to seriously take into account that they may never get an emergency evacuation. Unfortunately, that meant getting back to Vietnam *on foot*, which was nothing short of impossible.

Actually, it wasn't just impossible, it was unconditionally and fucking categorically impossible.

So, once they'd managed to calm Jorghenson down and were waiting for Coletta's to come back, Ortega went through everything in his head all over again. Each time he did, his conclusions hit him as hard as a hammer pounding mercilessly on his head. He was on the verge of having a mental breakdown.

Ortega wanted nothing more than to yell a loud and throw off all that gear weight that he'd had on for days but he knew that wasn't an option.

As a result, he swallowed it like a bitter pill and forced himself think straight, especially since there wasn't much time left. Five or ten minutes at best and then, considering all the commotion they had made in the valley, the whole North Vietnamese army would be at their doorstep in full arms.

Ortega consequently tried to calm down at least, even if it certainly wouldn't be enough.

In order to come up with a working plan which gave those prisoners a real chance of surviving, Ortega had to put his humanity aside, and so he did. He had no other choice.

As a consequence, for the first time ever, Ortega held back his feelings and became a fighting machine.

A Goddamn fighting machine.

He finally managed to collect his thoughts, put together ideas and relate them back to his past experiences. He not only discarded all the previously planned LZ options, but even got it on his first try. This brand-new plan suited the situation much more realistically than trying to ask for a pickup using short range radios and beepers ever could.

What's more, the plan took into account the chance of sacrificing or leaving behind whoever need be, himself including himself. Anyone was expendable at whatever point if it guaranteed the hostages their safety.

Now the only thing left to do was decide on the best possible route with Coletta.

Ortega took a deep breath.
A long march awaited them.
It was time to get at it.

*

In an effort to get as much distance covered as quickly as possible, Ortega destroyed some of their own equipment including one of the two M60s and then split the team up into two units.

Four would have marched wearing two rucksacks which meant wearing one on their back and another on their front, while the other four would each carry a hostage on their backs.

At first, Ortega didn't tell them in which direction they were really heading.

All things considered, the direction they took at the beginning served to help lose their tracks.

“Ready?” Delmore asked his prisoner.

“Yes”

He consequently put his arms around Delmore's neck and clung to his back like a Koala bear. Delmore took a few steps on the spot to check the weight distribution on his legs.

I expected worse. he said to himself.

That was undoubtedly because that prisoner didn't weigh what a normal adult man would. His captivity had turned him into a living skeleton.

He did in any case weigh more than his rucksack and so a few hours from now, Barry would have felt the difference.

Krakauer passed Berry his AK.

That was either going to be a very long march, or otherwise, short and deadly.

Probably the latter.

Ortega was watching the team get ready for the march when he suddenly realized he'd made a mistake.

Rambo had a wounded foot.

Ortega immediately stopped Rambo who was already loading himself with two rucksacks and called Jorgenson instead, who had 'historically' been the strongest Baker team member.

“You will have to walk with a double load, Grizzly. You'll be carrying Johnny's rucksack too”

Jorghenson looked at Ortega somewhat surprised.

“Raven is wounded”

“Right, of course. That's no problem”

-

Jorghenson let his prisoner down off his back, put on Rambo's rucksack in front and then let the prisoner get back on again.

With the rucksack on his front and the prisoner on his back, the two things together seemed to leave him a little out of breath.

Jesus Christ – he thought.

Would he be able to think straight under these conditions?

How tired was he going to be if they hadn't reached for any LZ in an hour or two?

How hot was he going to get?

Not a moment later, the team was ready to leave.

-

“Will you be able to march, Johnny?” Ortega asked whispering so that no one else could hear as he adjusted to the weight of the two rucksacks.

“This march is going to be a long one,” he said.

“Of course I can. Let me be the point man. I am the only one who’s unloaded”

“Ok”

Ortega turned to the team at last, and this time raising his voice said:

“Everyone ready? Good. We’ll have to tough it out at the start Baker team, but then the prisoners will walk on their own. Raven will be our point man to begin with and afterwards we will shift on the hour.

The next one to take a double load after Jorgenson will be Delmore. Is that clear?

Good.

Now let's move out, Baker team”

Considering the prisoner, his gear and his rifle, Barry tried not to ask himself exactly how many extra pounds he was carrying, or how long he'd march before actually passing out.

The terrain was uneven and every time he had to lift one foot a bit higher to keep from tripping or something, the effort became excruciating. His ankle, which was still a little painful from the outward march seemed on the verge of almost breaking.

At the first plain they met, Barry tried for the umpteenth time to point his AK out in front of him.

With a hostage on his back, he could hardly even shoot let alone fight a battle if it had been necessary. The front unit (the one with the two rucksacks) would have to.

Jesus.

“Whatever happens – Barry said to the hostage -, don't ever let go of me”

“Fine”

“Really... Even if they are shooting at us, don't let go. 'Cause if you do, you'll still have to run, but for yourself”

“Ok”

The Baker team continued marching.

“My name is Eddie. Eddie Johnson. What's your name buddy?”

“I am Snake”

*

There were four prisoners of which three were privates and the civilian was a mechanical engineer. The Baker team only actually became acquainted with them twenty-four hours later, the first night they actually got to rest in the jungle.

Although carrying the prisoners themselves wasn't supposed to be for long, it actually ended up lasting an entire, day.

In the course of the march, Barry moaned through a clenched jaw every step of the way and looked like a fountain he was sweating so much.

Breathing had become painful as though he was scraping the inside of his lungs with every breath.

Not to mention his ankle which was now stinging but at least it was constant and not getting any worse.

Something was definitely wrong with him.

If he hoped to survive the mission, he had to be very careful about the condition of his damn ankle. Not that he was very hopeful about that, considering the team's radio had been destroyed.

Barry turned to look at Jorgenson.

Apart from when they did the selection process, no one had seen Jorgenson tired again. One thing about him was certain however, and that was that operation Black Spot had changed him.

He wasn't the same guy he used to be any more.

Perhaps the month he'd spent in a bed had ruined a lifetime of training, or maybe, there was something else.

Whatever the reason, Jorgenson had truly changed.

Turning back round to face the front, Barry panted and puffed closed mouthed more noisily than an old boiler.

The fatigue was devastating him, so much so that he wouldn't even have noticed a VC suddenly jump out in front of him.

Luckily, Rambo was at the front of the line leading the way, so all they had to think about was walking, more or less. The exception being the fatigue of course, since unfortunately, there was no forgetting about that.

Barry suddenly had pangs of regret about not having suffered more than he did while training in Fort Bragg.

What the fuck are you saying, Delmore? Your two years of training in Fort Bragg were hellish enough as was, and that was the undeniable truth.

If he had suffered more at Fort Bragg though, he probably would've been suffering less there.

Still carrying two rucksacks, Ortega stared down at the ground as he walked trying to block out his tiredness. It was becoming painful for him too at that point, but no matter how tired he was, his thoughts as the team leader still unremittingly hounded him.

How much time is this taking? – He asked himself.

How far have we come already?

How much longer can we handle this marching speed?

Once he was certain the enemy was off their tracks could they slow down a bit, but not yet.

What they had to think about right then and there was getting as far away as possible from that damn half-built base.

If they continued to go on at that speed while carrying all that weight, Ortega was sure he'd unquestionably had stiff legs the next day.

You can do it – said a voice in his head.

You've got to do it.

He wanted to moan a loud but in enemy territory, it probably wasn't a good idea. He'd have to do his suffering in silence.

About an hour later, Ortega believed that they'd 'run' enough, so they stopped for a six minute break to change roles.

Ortega and Danforth went away from the rest of the group to scout out the area.

Once they were alone, Danforth spoke openly to Ortega.

“You can tell me now, Skorpio”

“What?”

“The plan boss, I mean, where are we going?”

“We're heading West”

“I have a compass too, smartass. I know we are going West so they lose our tracks. What I'm asking is if we're going to turn to North or South. Where are you going to give calling the choppers a try?”

“Nowhere. When I say we're going West, that's exactly what I mean”

“What?”

Danforth stopped Ortega with his hand and the two were now facing each other.

“We can't go even deeper into Laos!” said Danforth.

“We are in Laos already”

“Jesus Christ”

“Keep walking Eagle”

Danforth resumed walking but quite slowly.

“The border is way too far and entirely at the hands of the Vietcong” said Ortega.

“We knew that from the very beginning, the moment we decided to attack anyhow, right Eagle?”

So now, here's where I'm going with this.

The Vietcong doesn't know we lost our radio, so they think that we're going East, East because that's where all the best LZs are, and the border is nearest too. They're probably patrolling all of the LZs East of us already. Am I right?”

Danforth nodded unwillingly, so he went on:

“So what do you want to do, Scorpio?”

“Take your time, survive and escape, remember? We know how to survive in the jungle. We will wait a couple of days, two or three at most and we will do it in here, inside this shitty gorge. Look at this”

Ortega pulled out his map and showed him the zone he meant.

“There are no roads or villages here, nothing at all. This zone is too steep even for the Vietcong hand-carriers, so it has no value for the Ho Chi Minh trail. It has no value for anyone”

“We have rations for eight people, and there's twelve of us” Danforth replied.

Then, he added:

“Even by using the emergency rations....”

“Oh, I'm sure we'll use the emergency ones too, and we'll also have to hunt”

“The prisoners are not like us. They can't eat like us, they'll die.”

“The prisoners will eat our rations and we will live by hunting and collecting. It's going to be extra-tough but we can do it. In a week from now, the Vietcong won't remember we even existed”

“A week is a long time. They will give us missing in action status but the problem with that is we are not in Vietnam here. They will stop looking for us”

“Do you have a better plan?”

Danforth didn't say a word.

“I didn't think so. Now, tell me something Eagle, when you voted to free the hostages, did you think about what would come next even for second? What about how to get them home, when we even had a radio at our disposal? How about the way to get them to the nearest LZ without becoming VC prisoners while we did it? Or did you only think about destroying that fucking base and that was it?”

“Uh... sincerely speaking, I thought that once we had levelled that damn base to the ground, the cavalry would have just showed up. Exactly like in a goddamned movie”

“As far as we are from the border and in the middle of Ho Chi Minh trail? Not a chance in hell Joseph. You just didn’t think about the next move. That's the reason I am the team leader, and you are not”

Danforth looked straight at Ortega and his smile was gone. He wasn’t making a joke but stating a fact. Danforth knew perfectly well that it was the fatigue in Ortega talking, not him. That's why Danforth chose to ignore Ortega’s low blow.

“Now you have to trust me on this, Eagle. Let's disappear and wait. Trust me. That's the only thing to do. Let's let the Vietcong run out of gas, 'cause if we cross them now, we’re fucked. They’ll run out of steam, you’ll see. If we manage to disappear for forty-eight hours more or less, then the Vietcong will think that we somehow arranged a chopper pick up during the night or whatnot. They might even give up on us. The only thing we only have to do is get to that fucking gorge I am talking about. There we can rest and let Rambo's foot heal for a couple of days too. That will give him a better chance of completely recovering”

Around twilight, the Baker team let the prisoners walk on their own for an hour. All of the prisoners managed to walk, even Ron Lowell who had a wounded arm. Their line up may have slowed down at times, but it never stopped completely, not even when night came.

“There are still too many VCs around” Ortega said bluntly lying to the prisoners as they walked on.

“If we call the choppers right now, they’ll basically get shot down. We have to make sure we’re not seen and keep moving which means you guys too. I know that you’re weak and injured but we don’t have any other choice. It’ll all be over relatively soon, but now, well, now you have to make one last effort”

When darkness fell, they had their first forty-five minute break, during which none of them actually slept obviously.

The pause did finally give Messner the chance to do something about Rambo's foot at least.

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From a ‘civilian’s’ point of view, it wasn’t what you’d call a serious injury.

Two toes may have been injured but the cuts weren’t deep so they would’ve healed on their own in a few days’ time without needing stitches.

What troubled Messner weren’t the cuts per se, but the risk of getting an infection in that damn jungle. That environment made the probability of doing so infinitely higher.

They undoubtedly had to march for at least another twenty-four hours but it could have been even longer. Problem was that Jonny's foot needed to rest, stay dry and most importantly, disinfected.

He ran the risk of having to amputate if it went into gangrene.

No matter how that mission ended, Rambo couldn’t treat that wound as badly as he was doing, or his foot would be damaged permanently. Basically speaking, he would never fight again.

“Take this,” he said as he passed Rambo a pill.

“Actually, here, keep them all. You should take one or even two a day, especially if in three days time we’re still in Laos. Worst case scenario, they’ll give you heartburn!”

“Okay”

“This is serious, Johnny. You’ve got to change the bandages regularly, disinfect it as

often as possible and don't be a hero. You could lose your foot”

*

They were still resting when Ortega and Coletta turned their red torch off and folded their maps, when Danforth joined them.

“What do you think, Eagle? - said Ortega as Danforth, who was sitting nearby, listened quietly.

“Do you think the prisoners will make it?”

“They will. Even the wounded one is keeping up. The only ones torn to pieces around here, are us”

Ortega nodded in the dark.

“I know. Let's go”

They set off again and continued for the rest of the night with their doubled loads, stopping only to cook an adult baboon that Rambo had managed to kill with his bow while he was in front.

The meat was so good that the prisoners didn't even eat their MREs.

At dawn, the jungle was cold and damp because the nights were still cold on the high planes.

Coletta was holding his M14 like a baby in his arms as he looked up at the sky that was barely visible through all that vegetation. Coletta was covered in sweat and had a painful expression on his face probably because of carrying two rucksacks.

“The weather is going to hold,” he said looking up at the red coloured sky.

“Yes it looks that way.” said Ortega sitting next to him. He looked tired as well.

“It had better” he added glancing over at the hostages and examining them as he did.

Despite hostage morale being astonishingly high – probably because, all things considered, they were free – it was obvious by then that the situation was precarious. Their expressions, their movements and the way they spoke to each other made for a tense atmosphere. They could all feel it.

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In the prisoners' minds, there was something amiss.

All in all, there was something very odd in the way the soldiers who saved them, were behaving. They had attacked without airplane or helicopter support or any other support for that matter. Worst of all however, was the way they were marching, maintaining an absurd pace despite the double loads they were carrying.

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Ortega obviously couldn't hide any of this from them.

Furthermore, no one on the Baker team talked much to the prisoners to avoid spreading panic.

The prisoners therefore were under the impression that the team was hiding something and became somewhat concerned.

Hence, it was on their second day of march that a sense of suspicion arose between the soldiers and the hostages.

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Near midday, after four long hours of carrying the prisoners, the overall morale level was quite low. Not only had water consumption doubled, but the Baker team itself

was really on the brink of exhaustion. Distraction was always a side effect of fatigue, and eventually both caused mistakes.

By the third day not only was morale at an all-time low, but in the aftermath, Ortega found out the prisoners believed they were being lied to about everything.

Despite not having actually met any VC up to now, Coletta continuously came across various clues like branch signals, tracks made by cycles carrying loads and occasionally even booby-traps.

For all intents and purposes, that place was a no man's land, where basically anything could happen at any given moment.

All the same, they went forward.

That same day finally marked their arrival in the valley foreseen by Ortega and Coletta. Believing it to be relatively safe, they walked more or less to the centre. The steep terrain and thick vegetation made it a highly unlikely passage area, which thereby made it perfect.

That evening, as per usual, Ortega and the others did their food, water and ammunition stock count.

They found that the MREs – which post-raid had become exclusively prisoner food – were lasting much longer than anticipated, almost twice as long actually. The hostages were eating about half of what an average soldier would, undoubtedly because of their captivity, of course. Moreover, the little they were eating was still far better than what they'd eaten as prisoners until then.

“We’ve gained a few more days of food,” said Danforth as he put the rations back into the rucksacks.

“Yep” agreed Ortega.

“But we’ll need to hunt nevertheless, and the sooner we start the better off we’ll be”

“Gotcha”

“Eagle, organize some guard shifts, will you? do some hunting ones too while you’re at it. I want to have a little chat with Doc regarding the short ranged radios”

“Consider it done”

*

That night, before going to sleep, Chester confided to Barry that thanks to those combat rations, he was eating better than he had in *years*.

Barry, who was literally starving by then, kept how hungry he was to himself.

If on the one side, the prisoners felt better than ever, then on the other, the Baker team really needed nourishing. It was their duty however, and they didn’t expect it to be otherwise

In any case, seeing a hostage, who was in such a bad condition express such happiness, well, that was priceless for Barry.

“I am happy for you, buddy” Barry replied.

For those four former US prisoners, it was their first night as free men in a long, long time.

THAT NIGHT IN THE JUNGLE,
OVER THE FENCE

Chester, Johnathan

Johnathan Chester was a thirty-one year old soldier, but, most of all, he was a logistics man.

He'd been working in Army logistics for years, and when he ended up in Vietnam, he was very well aware of how dangerous it was. He never thought that he would ever find himself in a battle, and even less that he'd ever end up as a POW.

Above all, he never expected to be a POW for two endless years.

That night, Chester had a dream about an old deserted house.

It was old and decrepit, and from the front, it resembled a belfry it was so tall.

He was inside, standing on the top floor and looking down onto a spiral staircase below him.

The wooden steps were all half-broken and quite dangerous, but since there was no other way down, he would have to use them.

He certainly couldn't stay there forever, so he didn't have much other choice.

Chester cautiously set his foot down onto the first step, checking to make sure it would stand his weight and then carefully proceeded with the second.

Unlike the first, the second step seemed a bit too shaky for his liking, but just as he moved to step back, it was already too late.

The wood under him gave way abruptly, and Chester went straight down like a torpedo, right through it.

Just before hitting the ground, his eyes shot open.

There was nothing around him except a blanket of darkness that lay over the jungle.

Chester felt all shaken up and confused after realizing he'd fallen into some kind of black hole. He was still under shock over what had just happened, when everything suddenly lit up into a glowing red colour all around him. A bearded face appeared before his eyes.

"You were talking in your sleep man. Calm down, it was a dream, okay?"

Chester calmed down immediately.

"Sorry"

"There's no need for apologies," replied Eagle (Chester didn't know his real name was Danforth).

Chester could feel he was a bit teary eyed.

It was so dark that Danforth couldn't possibly have noticed it, but when he did,

Chester was sure his voice would've given him away.
All this emotion was a rarity for him.
After what seemed like a lifetime, strong feelings of emotion like fear, rage and hope were finally coming back him.
Yep, believe it or not, even hope.
From the very moment he got his freedom, the emotion causing him the most grief was without a doubt hope itself.
Hope was really too painful to deal with.
Chester was slowly becoming human again.

“Everything alright buddy?” asked Danforth as if he could hear Chester’s feelings too.

“I don't think I'll be able to get back to sleep again tonight”

There was a real and proper battle of the wills going on inside him.
On the one side, the humanity in him was surfacing, while on the other, he was still the emotionless robot he'd turned into in captivity. The voice in his head screamed at him, insisting he not take any unnecessary risks and wait it out before becoming human again. Indisputably, that voice represented the rock-hard part of him, with little time for emotion.

Reprogramming the human aspect back into him again was anything but easy, and Chester had learnt that lesson all too well during his captivity.

Don't show them your weaknesses.

That's of the utmost importance if you want to survive.

Don't ever give them any kind of satisfaction, ever, because if you do, they'll turn your life into a living hell.

Never let them know what you're feeling.

The problem was however, that there was a very fine line between not showing your emotions and becoming an unemotional machine.

You have to look like a machine, act like a machine and finally become one if you want to survive.

“Calm down” repeated Eagle.

“You are still too agitated”

In all reality, Chester was rocking back and forth, not unlike a mental patient.

Escaping had finally pushed him over the line.

“Do you want to talk? - asked Eagle – We can talk, if you whisper. The others are on guard duty, so it's safe to talk here. Ok?”

Chester nodded but Danforth could barely tell it was so dark.

“You know what? I would seriously give my right hand for a smoke right now.

Wouldn't you?"

Chester didn't answer.

He was motionless, as though he hadn't heard a single thing he'd said.

"How long have you been prisoners?"

"Well, I've been one for two years whereas Robert has for five I think"

-

For Danforth, those words went down about as easily as a spoonful of castor oil.

Chester didn't notice a thing.

A variety of things may have been going through his head but they all pertained to the mission.

His didn't really care about Chester, not at that point anyways.

It was nothing more than curiosity.

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"Who's president now?" the hostage asked.

"Nixon. He just got into office"

"Fuck. I don't even know who the fuck he is"

"He was Eisenhower's fucking vice president. Come on, man"

"Oh, that guy. yeah right. I do remember him"

Neither said a word as they lay in the dark.

This time it was Danforth who broke the silence.

"Was Robertson a friend of yours?"

Chester started crying and this time there was no holding back.

Danforth waited patiently for him to stop.

He waited for a long time.

Then Chester's voice rose from the sobs.

"For two years Robert was the only family I had. When I got captured, he'd already been a prisoner for three years, and had even learnt Vietnamese. But I swear – and everyone can confirm it – that he never broke the code of conduct, not even once"

Danforth wasn't completely convinced.

In all those years, God only knew what the Viet had done to him.

Chester felt the need to continue:

"Right from the start we got by with the little we had and took care of each other. Mostly, he taught me how to eat, or, shall I say how to keep everything down. He was

a pilot and trained in how to behave if captured, unlike me. I used to think that eating what they gave me would kill me, and at first, I refused. I was wrong though, man oh man was I wrong! I tried to be a tough guy with the Vietcong too. I would insult them, react to them and obviously, never obeyed them but that was dead wrong too. He taught me how to survive there. He really did”

His voice broke again and at that point Danforth could imagine him crying in the dark.

“It just doesn't make sense,” he said.

“It doesn't make any sense that a man should survive that kind of hell for five very long years, only to die the day he's freed. If he'd died five years earlier, it would've saved him a world of suffering, wouldn't it have? Do you see what I'm saying Eagle? Do you realize that none of this makes any kind of fucking sense?”

“The wound he had on his hand for instance, fill me in on how it happened”

“Lowell got it from trying to escape. You don't know just how many times I told him to not even think about it. We all used to say it to him, but he never listened.

Given that he had only been there three months, well, at that juncture, he was going through one of the worst phases of captivity. It's around then that you come to terms with the reality of it all. You reach the inevitable conclusion that you'll be there *for the rest of your life*. Do you know what I mean?”

Danforth didn't in the least.

He couldn't even imagine it, nor did he ever want to.

“While we were moving to a new camp, Lowell decided to make an attempt. We were nothing but slaves to them, or Guinea pigs at best Even after two years they kept beating me like it was the first day They never got tired of it. We were only a means to vent their rage and nothing more. Beating an American increased soldiers morale tenfold.

Sometimes we became the prize, given as a reward to the most deserving for something he'd done.

They had twenty minutes, and the only condition was that they couldn't use knives. Only officers were allowed to make us bleed but only under the supervision of a doctor.

Robert got beaten once a week no differently from anybody else despite having been there for such a long time he was practically their butler. Most importantly however, for the Vietcong, he was a precious interpreter.

Nevertheless, they never grew tired of beating us.

Their hate never got old, it only grew but never passed. At every personnel change, they became animals again, and so, on went the beatings, excruciatingly hard labour and so on.

They used to change personnel often enough that we were always strangers to them.

At that last camp, where you attacked, they were really monsters, especially towards those Laotian families.”

Chester paused in silence for a moment before continuing.

“They made women and children work with no exception. At times,, they randomly picked a woman, brought her to the barracks and raped her. There were even a couple of abortions, at least. I’m sure of it because...”

Chester couldn’t finish his sentence though, leaving it incomplete.

Now Danforth could see it.

Chester was looking into the darkness like it was a window in his mind.

So Danforth stopped him:

“When we attacked we did not know about the other slaves. The Vietcong use people without a uniform every day. We did not understand”

“I know. I was in the hut too when they were shooting at us. Where were you?”

“I was on top of the mountain”

Neither of them knew what else to say.

The dark blue sky became a little lighter and was finally visible past the jungle’s treetops and branches.

“You know, honestly speaking, I don't think we are going to make it” Chester said.

“You should give me a gun, just in case we get captured again. I’m telling you this because I’m not going back there ever again, not now, not ever. I’m not as strong as Robert was, to stand all those years. He was the better man. I should’ve died in his place. Give me a gun Eagle, so if they ever catch me, I’ll kill myself”

“Hey”

“No, man, please, don't let them take me back”

“Hey, calm down, alright”

“What's your name?”

“I told you, it's Eagle”

“No, your real name”

“I can't tell you, man”

“I need to know who you are, who you all are. That scar near your eye, how did you get it?”

“Hey, come on, that’s enough ok”

“We are never going to make it. You can’t imagine what's between us and the border, but I’ve actually seen it”

“We will radio for a chopper long before getting that far”

“None of you would have ever come here, if you’d actually known what stands between us and that border”

“That’s enough I said”

“No. I’m not going to kid myself about ever getting home, and you shouldn't either”

“Oh Jesus Christ, that’s more than enough, okay? Stop this ruckus and try to get some sleep, now. Save your energy and don’t think about anyone except yourself, okay? Let us take care of the rest. Trust me”

“Eagle, just tell me one thing, are we really going to make it?”

“Of course we are. What the fuck man, we are the *Baker team*”

Manuel “Scorpio” Ortega

Ortega was on guard duty and positioned more or less at the bottom of the canyon.

He was balanced at the top of a tree facing the front of the plain.

From there, the night vision scope he'd mounted over Coletta's M14, gave him a line of sight of approximately two hundred yards, but he was primarily focused on the landscape.

He was thinking about way too much stuff, and all of it irrelevant.

An example to start with was water consumption. Their water consumption had gone down drastically since they'd stopped marching. Then, there was food consumption, the ammo situation, not to mention all the clicks they still had to march, possible alternative routes and last but not least, safe zones and the really fucking unsafe ones, where even only coming within a mile of them was suicidal.

They were going to break any and all previous records or ranges ever made on that fucking mission.

Ortega looked up from the riflescope's green visual for the millionth time. He was starting to get a headache, which was a common side effect of prolonged use of night vision sights.

Ortega went on to consider spy-plane routes and to the theoretical time frames in which they may have been able to talk to using short-range radios.

The imaginary map in Ortega's head suddenly got all messed itself up beyond any and all recognition.

There was no way he could do that kind of calculating off the top of his head. He needed to trace some lines on that fucking map to say the very least.

He'd just have to wait for the next shift change to do it.

Ortega sniffed and then tightened his poncho, hoping to find some warmth in it.

One thing was for certain, if they had to cross the border on foot, they weren't going to do it at the nearest or easiest point.

Nope, sorry, not us.

They were going to cross the border where it was easiest to *communicate*, not easiest to *cross*, because that's what they had to do.

With that thought in mind, Ortega couldn't help but swear under his breath because of how many uncertainties there actually were. Too many fucking variables to consider. The only thing Ortega was categorically sure about, was how long the prisoners could actually walk.

He glimpsed up at the sky but it was still dark.

The temperature had gone up a little that last hour but so had the humidity. There was a chance of rain the following day and this was bad news for both Rambo's and Lowell's wounds. What's more, it wouldn't have been too good for the march either, because rain made everything a lot harder and much slower.

That damn rain could have complicated everything, even shooting at a distance if they'd had to.

God please, don't let it rain.

They were spending far too long in that Goddamn jungle for his likes.

They were destined to make mistakes sooner or later, he was sure of it.

It was inevitable.

The real question was which mistake they would actually end up making however.

Ortega didn't have the answer and for all intent and purposes, it was probably for the better.

It was then that the plan really came to define itself in his head.

It wasn't very different from the first one he had come up with some days earlier, back when they were still on that Goddamn unfinished base.

Yet, he didn't really care too much for that one. In fact, he didn't like it at all.

Nope.

Now, the only thing left to do was decide which friend would have to do it.

Ortega sighed and thought about his mother, his father and his stepbrother Richard. He loved each one of them and missed them all.
He wondered if he would ever see them again.
He suddenly felt so common for even asking a question like that.
He was obviously so uncommon that it wasn't hard to shrug that thought away.
He was a fucking SOG team leader, for fuck's sake.
He was one of the best men Samuel 'The Best' Trautman had ever had.
Bloody right he was going to make it, for Christ's sake.
He was going to accomplish that mission.

Johnson, Eddie

Eddie Johnson hadn't been this sleepy in more than a year.

After being a prisoner, camping out in the jungle with some special forces soldiers seemed surreal.

He asked himself if it was only a dream, or if he had actually gone mad.

Maybe it wasn't.

Maybe everything was in fact real.

As he listened to the sounds of the jungle, he became suddenly conscious of the fact this nightmare might be coming to an end. It was the first time, in over a year, that he let himself envision it.

He could barely recall that last year of his life.

His mind had been wiped clean of it. There were entire months missing, full of humiliation, torture, but even everyday life.

He would have liked to remember everything, but he simply couldn't.

He had the urge to do so, yet despite not knowing why, it just wasn't possible.

In all actuality, all those memories were one big mass and continuously changing shape in his mind.

They'd kept him in solitary for months at a time and consistently tortured him. Ironically enough, he had no problems remembering that. In fact, that was something he just couldn't forget, no matter how hard he tried.

Then, for a period they'd even kept him locked in a tiger cage, but he wasn't sure when that was exactly, or for how long it had lasted.

Eddie's jaw tightened as he fought back the urge to cry.

The cages were built with bamboo sticks and made for tigers. They were too small to hold a human being and that was exactly what made them so awful.

A few minutes spent on your knees, in a space as small as that was enough to make anyone lose their mind.

Eventually, you found yourself pushing against the bars which was absolutely pointless, but you did it anyways thinking it did your muscles good. In reality, it helped neither circulation nor your mistreated arteries, but you did it all the same.

The harder you pushed, the more of an obsession it became and insanity became a bomb waiting to go off.

Johnson put one hand over his mouth to contain his sobs. His eyes were burning. That night everything all around him seemed so dark, a lot darker than usual. He was afraid of the dark.

Locked in and trapped, feeling nearly squeezed to death in those damn cages. Johnson had spent days, nights and sometimes both, under the pouring rain. One night, when everyone else was sleeping, a storm had broken out and it poured so hard that his cage almost flooded.

Not unlike the other caged up prisoners, he too risked drowning just as a rat would in a trap.

The VC guards, alarmed by the excessive rain, tried waking the camp up but were much more concerned about saving all the weapons, ammo and equipment first. Having to work as quickly as possible to ensure it didn't all rot under water.

That night, Johnson watched a Vietnamese hostage in the cage next to his, drown before his very eyes.

Johnson was fully aware that that the water level was rising and maybe he was only moments away from the same kind of fate.

In fact, centimetre after centimetre, the rainwater got higher, his cage rocking slightly and he desperately struggled to keep his mouth above it all.

Only then did one of those damn dwarfs finally come down into his hole, moving around underwater which now covered him neck down. By opening all the cages, they were able to swim.

Once freed however, Johnson could hardly stand.

That was common when you came out of those damn cages.

By using his arms therefore, he dragged himself out, all the while screaming and sinking into the elbow high mud.

Reliving those memories made him shiver, and he knew full well he wouldn't get back to sleep the night.

He slowly sat up and looked above for stars.

He had a small, vegetation free window of free sky above his head.

This seemed to calm him down somewhat.

The sky looked like a giant black blanket with a lot of little lights lit in it.

But Eddie Johnson had a lot of other ghosts in his head that needed to get out.

A wife and a son.

They were invisible.

He couldn't see them, and could hardly remember their faces. They were like ghosts.

He tried to cry again, but nothing came out.

The stars listened quietly as he sobbed.

Like a child, he hoped his wife and son could hear his prayers.
He said ac prayer for the people he loved and hoped they could feel his love even
imagine them.

He continued to pray for a long time.

Carl “Grizzly” Jorgenson

Jorgenson asked himself what was the point of being on duty if, truth be told, he couldn't see a fucking thing.

He tried focusing in on the sounds of the jungle but it was always full of sound. The rustling of leaves in the wind, odd whistling and nocturnal animals howling were all the usual sounds

It was all extremely creepy.

The wind itself, going through the thick jungle leaves could've been a flute.

There was always something skipping, flying or crawling in the jungle. It was alive and pulsing and in never ending motion.

He risked opening fire for no reason if he didn't calm down somehow.

That afternoon Rambo and Coletta became obsessed over the idea of eating tiger meat for dinner. Along with everything else therefore, that night Jorgenson added tigers to his list of worries.

The VCs are one thing – he thought, but tigers are another.

VCs don't run after you at seventy miles per hour and don't pounce from five fifteen feet away.

Most importantly, the Vietcong don't kill because they're hungry or because you look like a slow, brainless and pathetic prick.

A tiger was, in his opinion, a very shitty idea for dinner.

Jorgenson was pissed off because in Rambo and Coletta's opinion, being west of the border was like being on vacation in an exotic country. As far as he was concerned however, it was like living some kind of fucking nightmare.

He never got any sleep, whether it be day or night, he was eating very little and very badly, just shit like birds, rats or other pests, all because the prisoners, *poor little prisoners*, had to eat better.

Jorgenson roughly wiped his forehead with one hand. Even after nine days in the jungle, his hair was still extremely short.

He pointed his AK into the oblivion in front of him.

He stayed that way for a while, aiming his rifle in all directions but then he relaxed.

He just couldn't stand that mission any more. Enough was enough.

Ortega had it all wrong.

Going west had not been the smartest of moves.

It was the equivalent of burying your head in the sand aka a complete waste of time. Waiting for the situation to calm itself along the Ho Chi Minh's trail was like waiting for the war to end. When they attacked the base that was still under construction, they had undertaken the impossible, and those were the consequences. The difference was that this time, he would pay with his life, as had been the case with black spot. It was different this time however, he could feel it in his bones.

Ruckerson, Charles

Ruckerson closed his eyes but when he did, he saw little white spots everywhere. Somewhat alarmed, he opened them again. That's that then. Keeping his eyes open was definitely better.

Despite not being able to close his eyes, he felt rather alive on that third post-raid night.

He was doing all right all things considered, and after eating the Baker team's rations for the past three days, he felt better already.

His hand was paralysed in part from being handcuffed too tight for an entire night.

Charles Alan Ruckerson, nicknamed 'Rack' wasn't even in the military but a civilian contractor. He ended up in Vietnam because he was a very capable mechanic and they'd brought him there to do the maintenance on an oil line.

One day, while accompanying a shipment of pipelines to the outskirts of Saigon, he was kidnapped. It was Saigon for fuck's sake, not just any old city whatsoever.

Kidnapped by some common criminals who then, in turn, sold him to the Vietcong.

Once captured, for some unexplainable reason, the Vietcong were convinced he was an 'advisor' or a military counsellor.

In other words, they thought he worked for the CIA and the more he denied it, the more they were convinced otherwise.

The night had all started with them hitting his arms and legs, with bats.

Then they made him lay down on the ground while they tied him up and after putting an ant nest on his belly, they just left him there all night long.

The hardest part that night was dealing with the dark.

He knew fully well that those little creatures weren't going to stop just because he couldn't see them.

Then, at one point when his tiredness finally got the best of him, Charles began to feel things.

It seemed like the ants moving over him in waves. As if, by working together, they transformed into something else.

Whenever it happened, he would scream and shake making the feeling suddenly disappear.

When one night he accidentally woke the wrong Vietcong up, some of the guards actually got up and came down to beat him because of all the noise.

After the ants, came the electricity.

He'd never forget that.

Ruckerson let those memories fade away in his mind.

He rolled over on his the pile of leaves he was laying on and squished a bug on his cheek.

That was no ant – he thought to himself.

That third night in the jungle, before bed, Charles had asked the tall, African-American guy (*Berry*), for some insect-repellent, and the guy had given it to him on the condition that he not use too much and only on his face.

Then, without anyone noticing, Rack asked and got some more from the team's doctor (*Messner*), rubbing on a second dose.

That was, in his opinion, the only way he'd manage to get any sleep.

At least a little shut eye anyways.

Charles laid back down on his pallet and more memories flooded back to him.

After the ant episode came the electric shock torture.

That was impossible to forget too.

Recalling the electric shocks pained him but he wasn't able to get it out of his mind.

After cutting the wires from a disassembled lamp, the VCs had stripped him naked.

Then, while one wire was on a testicle, they would, at specific time intervals, they'd touch the tip of his penis with the other.

Just the thought of it all made Rack shake in horror, like when a dentist drills your tooth.

Yet, he'd survived that too.

Of course, he'd wondered whether it would affect his ability to have children, but nevertheless, he'd survived the electrocutions too.

Then, a week later, while picturing Marilyn Monroe as she sung 'happy birthday', he had his first erection after the electric shock torture. At least that confirmed everything was still in working order.

The only problem was his hand but it wasn't that bad.

In all actuality, it could've all ended up far worse than it actually had.

Everything after was run of the mill, ordinary beatings.

Plain old kicks, punches, lashes, buckets full of cold water or even piss for that matter. They banged his head against walls and even put cigarettes out all over him, including places like under his armpits. They beat him with bamboo sticks, walked all over him and even took photos of it all as they stood on him barefoot.

For the duration of those months, he'd eaten nothing but some kind of fish soup made with salty water and rice, and in so much pain that he could barely feed himself. They even gave him worms, rats and cockroaches.

The Vietcong are nothing more than fucking animals – he thought.

Rack could feel pins and needles in his legs.

They're not ants – he told himself quickly.

It's all in your head.

He turned over on his pallet for the umpteenth time.

It's just an impression. Everything's fine.

Jus hang tough for a few more days and it'll all be over soon.

He knew exactly what he was going to do the minute he got back to Saigon.

He wouldn't even go get his stuff from the apartment where he lived before his kidnapping. Nope. He would have gone as fast as he could to the Saigon airport and left Vietnam for good. He'd never have gone back, ever.

It was so close to happening he just knew it.

He could already feel it, right there and only a stone throw away.

At any rate, if anybody could pull it off it would be those very eight guys, who had so courageously attacked that camp.

They had risked their lives for him and he was never going to forget it.

Rack was sure they were almost out of there and it wouldn't be long at all.

He could do it.

He could feel it.

Lowell, Ron

This wasn't his fault.

Lowell turned over on his leaf made bed.

The pain in his arm, which was still as swollen as a football, wouldn't let up.

None of this was his fault.

He was only a clerk who'd been drafted against his will and sent to Vietnam before even completing three months of training.

Moreover, he was only twenty-one.

He didn't deserve any of this.

Some minutes later, emotionally exhausted, his mind gave in, and Lowell fell into a far from peaceful sleep.

He saw himself running through the jungle with Robertson and the Vietcong were on their tails.

The thing was that Lowell had seen it coming before Robertson, but since he was in front, Robertson hadn't heard him scream "Rob! Rob!" trying to get his attention. His friend only came to a full stop when he got punched in the face, catapulting him to the ground.

After seeing Robertson fall to the ground like that, Lowell stopped instantly too.

As he raised his arms to surrender, one of the North Vietnamese soldiers turned and pointed his AK at him.

"NO!" he screamed.

It was no use

The AK lit slightly and he suddenly felt his right arm get all warm.

The heat went through his arm like a flash, warming it up *on the inside*.

It felt odd and unnatural and he felt sick.

He would never forget that heat blast for the rest of his life.

After the shot, Lowell collapsed to the ground.

He couldn't reason, his brain had been put in pause, lost in a moment of horror knowing perfectly well he'd been hit, but not how bad it really is.

Lowell saw Robertson try to get up after that first punch, trying to defend himself, but as he did, a club came crashing down over his head.

Even from that distance, Lowell heard the horrible sound his skull made when it got hit.

That kind of blow would kill you.

Lowell woke with a start, for the hundredth time.
He'd lived that scene so many times by that point, that it hardly even upset him anymore.
Being free was far stranger than being locked in a cage, down a hole, living as a prisoner or that dream could ever be for that matter.
Lowell looked into the darkness.

This wasn't my fault – he thought.

John 'Raven' Rambo

Rambo did not sleep that night.

It felt like he could never get any sleep and, despite his injured foot, could never stay still either.

In spite of Messner's suggestions therefore, he spent that night just like all the others, crawling around the jungle floor like a hunting tiger.

Rambo would stop somewhere in the darkness, listen, smell the air for a second and then move on.

It's okay here too – he thought to himself.

Now, all I have to check is the south and south-west.

He was setting sound-traps so if anybody tried to get close to them, they would have noticed in time.

That area was proving to be as safe as Ortega had said it would. There were no old tracks or other signs suggesting someone may have ventured off the path before them. That place actually had been forgotten by all and yet, there was something which felt wrong just the same.

After the raid, focusing on the mission with the same concentration he used to, had become a problem, and, for the life of him, he couldn't figure out why.

Maybe he thought it merciless to continue the fight as though nothing had happened.

When, in all actuality, they'd just killed civilians.

Killing innocent bystanders instead of freeing them however, had been purely accidental and a side effect as there always were, in any fucking war.

Maybe that was the reason why, unlike the others, Rambo really couldn't get to sleep.

That certainly did not help his foot heal either.

You've got your entire life to think about what you have done. You can't think about it now.

You have to rest, or you'll end up making mistakes.

Rambo slowed his walk down.

Be a real soldier, and not think about it while on mission.

Under Trautman's orders however, he'd helped Ortega even kill an American.

Rambo staggered slightly in the dark.

He was tired, excruciatingly tired.

It was just the fatigue playing tricks on him.

Or was it.

It was just a question of time before he got his hands too bloodstained, and for ever.

Rambo chose one spot and started placing sharpened bamboos on the ground.

The darkness in front of him was moving, but again, just another hallucination brought on by fatigue, famine, cold and sleep deprivation. Mostly sleep deprivation though.

During the tryouts, he'd seen darkness move like that already, so it didn't worry him. He could handle it, and since he'd marched up this gorge without a double load because of his injury, he'd work harder than the others to make it safer.

Rambo wiped the sweat off his forehead.

He didn't want to get his hands dirty with blood like Jorgenson and Danforth had with those rockets.

It shouldn't have happened and particularly not to him anyways.

He'd have gone insane if it had happened to him.

He'd have gone mad to the point of taking his own life.

You've already killed a woman, Johnny.

You did it in Dak To.

Although that may have been true, for him it had been an act of mercy.

For a while, he seemed to hear Trautman's voice in his head, which could only mean he was lot more tired than he would actually like to think.

The break Ortega had arranged on that gorge was turning out to be a true blessing in some aspects, but even so, his foot was still hurting and bleeding under the dirty bandages.

Just a few more traps and then I'll rest too.

Honestly speaking, the idea of losing his foot didn't worry him as much as it should have. In fact, there were times when he almost completely ignored it.

Rambo wiped the sweat off his forehead for a second time because his headband wasn't doing the trick.

The idea of becoming a disabled person didn't scare him either. On the contrary, to members of the SOG squad, losing a foot or whatnot, was practically the only way of getting out of that fucking war alive.

You killed a woman in Dak To, Johnny.

That was Trautman's voice again, which implied he seriously did need to get some sleep.

But why? Why did he hear 'the beast's' voice in his head?

It had always been him – and him alone – sending them on those fucking missions.

Whether it was having to defend just a single fucking outpost in Black Storm, or was having to kill spies or even killing an American, they'd been his orders.

He'd made them do all that shit. That voice in his head sounded like Trautman even because despite all that had already happened, Rambo considered him a friend nonetheless.

Given the fact that he'd taught him more about life and living than his father ever had, he was definitely a friend, to say the least.

Suddenly, something truly horrible occurred to him.

He understood that Jorgenson and Danforth had actually 'pulled the trigger' on the Laotian civilians, but he and Coletta had done the most important surveying that day. They were the ones who hadn't noticed those slaves because of other POWs who were potentially American.

Once they'd seen the Americans, nothing else had mattered after that.

Essentially the mistake was there's.

That was a bitter pill for Rambo to swallow, as he hammered the bamboo sticks into the ground harder than ever.

He continued to set his traps the rest of the night, right until dawn.

That morning, Messner couldn't help but notice Rambo's foot, which wasn't any better than the day before.

"This foot needs some air, Johnny. I am not going to put any bandages on today, and you are going to stay still all day and night"

Rambo immediately turned to Ortega.

"But boss, I..."

"But, but, but... I don't give a shit about your butts, Johnny," replied Ortega.

"I need your foot healed, period"

Ortega turned to leave, but added:

"If he tries to leave, shoot him Doc"

Messner nodded laughing under his breath.

"You guys are real assholes," muttered Rambo.

Two days later, the group finally started marching again.

This time they headed east, towards the LZs and all the way to the border itself if necessary, to communicate by short-range radio.

That's right.

That possibility did exist and since Ortega wasn't the least bit naïve, he always preferred to consider all the possible worst-case scenarios he could come up with. Whatever would end up happening that day however, they were moving towards Vietnam at last.

Their journey home had finally begun.

Coletta popped out from the vegetation shouldering his M14 but not uttering a word. Rambo came abruptly to a halt. Something was wrong. The two of them stood motionless and silently stared into the dark jungle, until Rambo took a few steps forward, right up to Ortega.

“Can you hear it?” said Coletta.
“What?”
“The silence”

Rambo kept quiet.
Coletta stared downwards.

“They found us,” he said.
Rambo tried to swallow, but couldn’t.
“You sure?”
“I am positive. They have found us and they are close too”
Rambo kept quiet for a second time, and looked at his friend with a puzzled expression. He didn’t understand how Coletta could be so sure.
“Come on Raven. Let's get back to the others”

They moved backwards without turning around.

“You’re absolutely sure, Sniper?”
“Yeah. Before any contact, there's always that *'moment of silence'*. Let's get back to the others. Now”

The team suddenly stopped and gathered.

Lowell saw the scouts coming back as the soldiers stood talking to each other.

Even if he couldn't hear what they were saying, it wasn't good news for sure.

In fact, almost immediately after he'd sighted them, Raven and Sniper moved towards him quite quickly.

All right, this is it – he said to himself.

Now they're gonna kill me.

Lowell felt his legs give way under him.

Your injury is slowing the group down too much.

Rob's death was my fault, so now they are gonna kill me.

Even if he was limping as he approached him, Raven was still as scary as hell.

Lowell tried to take a few steps back, but he knew there was no way out.

Raven grabbed his hands immobilizing them.

Lowell looked around desperately, and realized that they were gathering the other three hostages too. The other squad explorers – Tiger and Snake – had returned too.

Even though they were rounding up the entire group, he couldn't understand why Raven had tied his hands behind his back.

“Why did you tie me up Raven?” asked Lowell.

Raven didn't answer but made him sit on the ground. His face was stone-cold. Lowell had no way of knowing, but Rambo's mind was miles away.

Why? - Lowell thought to himself.

Ok, I'm wounded, but I am haven't stopped marching.

Was it because of Robertson?

That wasn't my fault.

Robertson didn't die because of me.

Scorpio and Raven stayed with the prisoners while the rest of the team hurriedly dispersed into the jungle.

Only then did Lowell realize that Raven was tying the other three prisoners as well.

Before going on to speak his mind, Scorpio took a deep breath and suddenly seemed a lot older.

“They’re surrounding us,” he said.

“I don’t know if it’s intentional, but the fact is, they are moving around us and we can’t face them. We have to let them *get by*.”

The prisoners looked at each other in bewilderment.

“There’s no plausible way out of this kind of tactical situation, but fear will make you believe otherwise. That’s the reason we’ve tied you. Both the gags and having your hands and feet tied up are for your own safety. They will keep you from screaming and running away.

If one of us gets found, we’ll let them take us prisoner.

Come out of your hiding spot with your arms up and tell them that you were left behind for misbehaving. Tell them we’re mercenaries, not from the US SF. Is that clear?”

The prisoners nodded.

“Do I have to tell you why?”

“No” replied Johnson, speaking on behalf of all of the POWs.

“Fine. I know this may look desperate, but in all actually it isn’t, and you can make it. We can all make it. They don’t know how many of us there are exactly, and don’t know our exact whereabouts either. Moreover, there haven’t got any k9s with them. That’s precisely why we are going to make it.

You only have to keep quiet and not move regardless of how scared shitless you are, and that’s it. We’ll take care of everything else the same way we have until now”

Ortega paused to reflect further.

He then went on to say:

“Keep your eyes shut. If you don’t see them go past, you’re less likely to do something stupid”

He kneeled down next to the prisoners.

“It’s all a question of nerves. If you get too scared, just close your eyes like you did when you were kids. Just close them. We don’t have to blindfold you as well, or do we?”

They all shook their heads from side to side, indicating no.

“Fine. We’ll be here for hours guys, and those hours will drag on, and feel nothing short of weeks.

Keep calm.

Try to not lose sight of reality.

Look at the sun: if it hasn't moved then that means not a lot of time has actually passed.

If you hear shots, DO NOT come out: we'll come and get you. The code word is 'Baker', ok?"

Ortega paused yet again, almost to make sure they had enough time to take it all in, but then continued.

"Wait for the word 'Baker'. Even if an entire night goes by, DO NOT come out no matter what. I know it's hard but you've gotten this far, so you can do this too.

You've got to" he said in a conclusive manner.

Scorpio had finished saying everything he'd intended to say.

Raven helped Lowell get back up and hopping along keeping his wounded foot up, showed him to his hiding place.

Raven slowly walked back and forth, calmly assessing the terrain as he glanced occasionally at the vegetation.

In the end, he brought Lowell to an old, fallen tree that was now completely covered in foliage

Then, he made Lowell lie underneath it while carefully putting the vegetation back in place over him, making him in turn, completely invisible.

"Leave some space so I can see the sun" Lowell said quietly.

"Trust me man, the less you see, the better it is"

Once done, Raven turned back to say:

"Now listen to me carefully. If the VCs find you, they'll try to make you turn your friends in. If that happens, try leading down there. Do you see that place over there? It isn't very far"

"Yes"

"Go to the middle of it and then say *damn thunder*. Ok? You should say it two or three times almost pretending to curse or something. If by chance one of the VCs understands English, you tell him it's only a swearword he doesn't know. Is that clear?"

Lowell nodded vigorously.

" 'Cause if we absolutely have to kill them, then we want them all to be down there when we do it"

Lowell couldn't believe that they were actually going to leave him there for real. Sure enough, not a second later, he found himself all alone buried under the vegetation, just him and the usual, never-ending and unbearable pain he had in his arm.

The sun was high in the sky and even if Lowell was in the shade, it started getting hot.

He couldn't hear anything except the usual jungle sounds like leaves falling or bugs flying, while everything else was still, almost dead.

He was already getting thirsty but knew he couldn't drink, because drinking meant moving, and moving meant giving away his position.

If I'd known about the Special Forces raid beforehand, I wouldn't have tried to escape and Robertson would still be alive.

Lowell tried to push those thoughts out of his head but it was hopeless. He knew fully well that before trying to escape, the other four prisoners tried unceasingly to change his mind.

The Vietcong had always retaliated in some way after the fact, whether it be because of an escape attempt gone bad or something else.

Trying had been sheer madness.

It was obvious and there was no point in denying it.

Lying in the heat made Lowell sleepy, turning those thoughts into film as he drifted off to sleep.

In the end, Robertson had made up his mind to help Lowell with his getaway attempt. In all actuality, they all had because once a prisoner decides to escape there isn't much anyone else can do about it.

Being generous was how Robertson hoped to limit the damaging effects of Lowell's attempt. Given that Lowell would do it anyway, helping him was the least he could do.

Overall, Robertson, that dickhead, was actually right about a lot of stuff.

Even if it hadn't done him any good, seeing he was dead just the same.

You were right Robertson. I should never have tried to escape.

That's when it all flashed back almost movielike. With the exception of a few details, the rest stayed pretty much the same.

He could see Robertson and himself attacking the guards. It was all happening with surprising ease but that was because after all that time, the guards had come to trust them.

Then there was the part about them fleeing through the jungle and the uncertainty over which direction to take.

After that, he remembered the four other prisoners behind them, when they came out screaming and last, but not least, the part when they got captured.

You already know the rest.

Even though they were injured, both of them ended up in solitary confinement. As a result, neither his shot arm nor Robertson's cracked skull got any kind of treatment.

They spent three long days and nights in that damn, dark whole the ground. Lowell was suffering not only because of his arm but also because he couldn't bear to watch how much agony Robertson's cracked skull was causing him.

After so many months of suffering in the jungle, he'd believed it was finally over and done with, but in all actuality, it wasn't.

He'd clearly been mistaken.

Those three nights spent bleeding in that pitch-black cell, and having to watch his pain stricken friend suffer, were the worst days of his life, by far.

They were long, almost never-ending nights of seeing Robertson's hardship. The word 'horrific' had assumed entirely new proportions for him.

No one would ever understand, not ever.

Never ever, not even in a million years.

We will never free you – said one of the guards throwing food and water at them, even if Robertson was no longer eating at that point. Lowell didn't even know whether it was day or night anymore.

There was no way anyone could possibly have the slightest idea.

Not in this lifetime.

You have seen too much (and all of them too horrific) that the rest of the world must never know.

You will never get back to the US to tell the story of what you have seen here.

What that means is that we can torture you till the very end.

So let me give you some advice, soldier.

Talk.

Because the sooner you talk, the sooner this will all come to an end.

Lowell started shaking.

Now his head was pounding as well, unquestionably from the heat.

*Because I know you want to die, soldier. I can see it on your face.
Talk.
Let me put an end to all of this.
Let me kill you.*

Those words were more painful than any kind of torture could be.
Lowell touched his arm and it hurt as much as when they had shot him.
He was hot, thirsty and the sun had barely shifted at all.

*Why are we doing all of this?
If this keeps up, I'll die from heat stroke.
The VCs will never come this way, there's no way.*

Lowell felt like he was going to puke.
He'd been lying there for too long. Even though it was hot the ground was wet and cold, and his arm was really starting to ache.
It had swollen to the size of a melon, and there was pus oozing out of his bandages.

*You were wrong – he thought.
No matter how suicidal escaping may seem, you've always got to try.*

The other four prisoners just wouldn't see reason, and that, in itself was strange, very strange.
He honestly couldn't understand it.
Something similar must have probably happened to the Jews in the Nazi concentration camps too.
Before ending up in Vietnam as a soldier, Lowell had read somewhere that if the Jews had rebelled all together in the camps, they could have actually overwhelmed their oppressors.
They would have suffered heavy losses but they would have made it.
Those were preposterously big camps though, with thousands of prisoners, not like the one he and the others were in.
There was no comparing his group to them though because it wasn't the same and it wouldn't have worked the same way.

Now he really felt sick.
He didn't know how much more of this he could take.
The only consolation was that the sun had finally moved a little.
At least time was going by.
He must have passed out for some minutes before, without being the wiser. That was the only possible explanation for the fact that the sun had moved that much.
Lowell's eyes were still closed when, out of nowhere, he heard a sound. Or at least he thought he'd heard something. A snapping sound, like a twig being broken or snapped

in half, and with that realization, his eyes shot open again.
Something had actually moved behind him.

Lowell held his breath.
He didn't move a muscle and strained to listen carefully.
It was quiet though, and there wasn't anything moving now.

Deciding it was just a false alarm, he relaxed.
The heat felt like a blanket smothering him, keeping out all the oxygen.
It was hard to breathe under there.
Lowell turned slightly to have a look at his arm.
It was even more swollen than before.
The bandages were filthier too and excessively tight.

The teams' antibiotics had arrived too late to help, so when he did eventually set foot in a real and proper hospital, they would amputate his arm for sure.
If they'd been stuck in that damn jungle for even only two or three days more, Doc (the team's practitioner), would have amputated it himself.
In fact, Doc had no qualms with operating right there in the middle of that fucking jungle, anywhere on the ground would have been fine.
A shiver went down his spine.
Then suddenly, behind him, in roughly in the same place as before, Lowell heard another noise.

This time, a feeling of terror shot through him like a lightning bolt.
He lost his breath straightaway as another pain this time as sharp as a knife, practically tore out his insides.
He was trembling now and could feel a lump forming in his throat making breathing impossible.
He wasn't supposed to be shaking.
Shaking would give his position away.
The lump in his throat was getting worse and if didn't pass soon, he'd have to cough.
Worrying about coughing made him feel suffocated even more.
His heart was going to explode.
It was pounding so loud they would hear it for sure.
Then, just when Lowell didn't think it could possibly get worse, he saw a Vietcong.

His watched the soldiers' shoulders surface a little at a time. He was moving in slow motion and with great caution.

Lowell shut his eyes tight.
Raven had suggested that, but he was terrorized.
It was too hard to bear.

Unable to resist, he opened them up again but the Vietcong was still there.
The entire upper part of his North Vietnamese uniform was visible now, and he couldn't help but notice that it was not only spotless but perfectly ironed as well.
It was over.
They'd left him to his destiny.

Damn you – he thought referring to the Baker team.
I knew it, Damn you. You've left me here.

He was all tied up there, on his own, like a salami, barely hidden under a few leaves and with absolutely nothing to fucking defend himself with.
This was insane.
The whole thing was fucking madness.

His body shook even more violently bringing him to close his eyes again.

Assholes – he thought - *Assholes, traitors, murderers.*
Oh God, please...
Just let me get through this alive, and I swear I'll kill every single one of them.

This time however, when he opened his eyes again there were two VCs in front of him.
They'd doubled.

Oh God no, please. No, no, no. Please-please-please.

The God Lowell was praying to however, wasn't listening.
Not even remotely.
On the contrary, it was doing the exact opposite, and completely ignoring him.

The two Vietcong soldiers were facing him and the fear in him was mounting, becoming too much to bear.

He felt something at his groin, but he chose to ignore it given everything else that was going on.
He could see the whole world staring at him through his enemies' eyes.

One was smoking a cigarette serenely while the other held his AK at the ready but without pointing at anything in particular.
They were still facing his direction.
The two soldiers were there some time, glancing at him every so often as his heart pounded like hell.
His heartbeat wasn't what you'd call regular any more though.

I'm scared to death – he thought
They're frightening me to death.

He got a sharp pain in his left arm.

I'm having a heart attack– he thought.

Then the whole world started spinning around him like a dark tunnel.

He was going to pass out.

The Vietcong were still there in front of him, but now he was watching them through a looking hole that seemed far away and distant.

Hang on – he said to himself.

Just hang on.

He wasn't able to resist however, and passed out.

“Baker.” said Krakauer.

“Baker” he said again.

“Fuck, Lowell. Didn’t you hear me? I fucking said Baker. It’s over. Everything’s ok. It’s us...”

“Where the fuck did he go?” Danforth asked, looking around.

It was coming up to twilight by then.

The team had already found everybody else but Lowell was the last one left.

Rambo eventually found him.

“Here he is,” he said.

“Fuck” grumbled Messner as he pulled him up to sit.

“Gimme a hand, Raven”

Lowell was pale, drooling at the mouth and couldn’t keep his eyes open.

Rambo slapped him in the face, but not too hard, to help him snap out of it, while Messner poured some water into his mouth at first and then all over his face.

“Are you all right?”

“Hey buddy,” said Chester from a distance.

They were all there standing around him.

“He’s dehydrated, and seems a bit feverish too” said Messner.

“Is it serious?” asked Ortega.

“Not yet. But we can’t stay in the jungle for much longer, boss. I mean, in order to make a real difference, I’ll need stuff we just haven’t got available here. We’ll absolutely have to do something for him soon though, within the next few days otherwise...”

“Ok Doc. I’ll have the re-entry route ready to go by tomorrow morning” said Ortega as he turned to walk away from the rest of the group.

Before walking too far off, he added:

“Raven, Snake, Eagle, you guys come with me”

*

Once there was some distance between them and the others, Ortega said:

“You did a fucking unbelievable job Johnny, seriously, a fucking masterpiece. Really”

Rambo did not say anything.

“You all did an unbelievable, but you Johnny, you were completely out of your mind out there. How many did you pull in? Fifty? And they did not even get the chance to shoot at you”

Rambo shrugged his shoulders indicating he’d done nothing special.

“Let me ask you something though. If you hadn’t gotten rid of them all, the way you did, what the fuck would you have done? Would you have fought the entire lot of them, on your own?”

Rambo didn’t actually know the answer to that.

When he realized the VCs were going to find Lowell's hiding place, he decoyed them over to his side instead by making noise, and that was it.

He hadn’t really thought about the consequences.

Nor had he worried about being shot at either.

As far as he was concerned, if the only thing you worried about was your own survival, and nothing else when you were at war, it made things more difficult.

“I’m going to recommend you for another fucking medal for all of this and you too, Delmore. You were even crazier than he was, if you want my humble opinion”.

“Why’s that?” asked Delmore.

“Because you sliced a guy’s throat open, that’s why. Did Trautman teach you that? I don't think so”

“I wanted to hear him scream before I left, just one last time”

“I got that. Did the two of you plan all this beforehand, or what?”

“No” answered Barry for them both. “Rambo made sure they heard his decoy and I left one of them on the ground, screaming. I’m sure they’re all still there, shitting their pants, worrying about another ambush. In any case, we haven’t got much time”

“Yep” said Ortega who was already absorbed in thought by then.

“We have to change direction again. Hand me the map”

A few hours later, all their enthusiasm about getting away had all but disappeared. If anything, at least the temperature was dropping, but the team itself had barely eaten in days and quite poorly when it had. What's more, they only had a few more days' worth of MREs for the prisoners and then those would be gone too. They were too close to the point of no return to wait any longer. The time had come to risk it all.

Danforth put the map away.

“Scorpio?” he said.

“What is it?”

“We have just broken all previous SOG records in enemy territory”

“Cool”

“Yep”

“Okay, but now let’s just get to some fucking water in a hurry and take a break before somebody passes out on us already”

As they walked, Lowell tried to gather his thoughts but to no avail.

He was feverish, weak and even having problems keeping his balance.

He'd had it.

If they didn't get him to a hospital soon, he'd definitely drop dead.

He didn't even care about surviving anymore.

He just wanted all this damn suffering to be over with.

Not more than a few minutes later, Lowell collapsed, hitting the ground like deadweight right in front of everyone.

He'd passed out.

That night, the Baker team finally had a chance to rest. The following day they continued their walk towards the border as best they could, but no one had responded to their short-range radios as of yet. What's more, the Ho Chi Minh trail stood between them and South Vietnam like an invisible wall they couldn't get across. Every time Coletta, Barry or anyone else for that matter tried to get in close enough to spy on the 'trail', they almost immediately had to retreat or risked being seen. Generally, whoever surveyed the area returned only minutes later because their cover was at risk. At the end of that thirteenth day, the team was virtually on the brink of exhaustion. In about forty-eight hours, the prisoners wouldn't have any MREs left to eat either, and that meant the beginning of the end for them all.

Bearing that heavy burden in mind, daybreak marked day fifteen of a mission that didn't show any signs of coming to an end.

When Coletta got back to his crew he was covered in sweat and had a dazed look in his eyes.

Ortega went up to meet him, but had to crouch down and practically crawl all the way there using the elephant grass to hide in. It was the only way to keep from blowing his cover.

“This one is no good either” said Coletta.

“Shit. It sure looked like a good place to cross”

Coletta shook his head in a definite no manner.

Ortega however, this time went on to insist:

“Not even if we all crossed at once? Or with the prisoners on our backs, or even...”

Coletta shook his head again, interrupting Ortega mid-sentence.

“No, Scorpio. It’s exactly the same as every other place we have seen so far. There’s a ninety percent chance of being spotted, and about a fifty percent chance of having to engage as well. Besides, even if we did somehow manage to get across it, I think our short-range radios would be out of bounds all the same. So any which way we look at it, crossing here would be fucking madcap too”

“Well, at any rate, let’s get the hell out of here” whispered Ortega.

“Good idea”

The two men crept low through the tall grass until they were back under cover in the jungle vegetation.

“We have to find another place to cross”

“Ortega...”

“There’s nothing else we can do”

“We can’t wait any longer, Ortega. Jesus Christ, we are eating leaves and roots for god’s sake, and haven’t had any meat in days. You know we are not eating enough, we can’t even think straight any more Ortega and that includes you too”

There was no denying it.

Coletta was right and Ortega knew it.

That fucking hellish march back had turned out to be two days too long already.

Coletta was right.

This wasn’t only a question of willpower as they used to say back at Fort Bragg anymore. There was a lot more than that at play now.

Sooner or later they were bound to mess up, all of them, and that would have been the

beginning of the end.

Coletta wanted his team leader to take act *before* it all got out of hand and he had every right in doing so.

“One more day, Sniper”

“No, Scorpio. It wouldn’t do us any good. Any which way you want to look at it, every single crossing-point we have seen so far has been the same more or less. This is Ho Chi Minh trail for fuck’s sake, Ortega. There’s no fucking way around it”

Ortega lowered his head over his AK almost in prayer.

“Fuck”

“And, to make matters worse, we are almost out of water again. Marching at this rate, without any water means we’ll hit rock bottom in less than twelve hours. Do you remember that thing Trautman used to say?”

“I don't remember what he used to call it right now either, but I know exactly what you are talking about”

“You see? We are out of our minds. Both of us are, already. We have to do something now”

“Alright, alright. Just a little north of here there was a place that was better than this though. It was south of the bridge, near the river bed”

“Fuck”

“Am I right or not?”

“Yeah, you’re right”

“Ok then, it’s settled. That's where we’ll cross”

*

“We got it everybody, we’ve found the right place” Ortega said assertively once they had all gathered around him.

The Baker team guys knew damn well he was lying though. In all actuality, Ortega had said it for the prisoners’ sake, not for anyone else’s.

“Crossing won't be easy whatsoever. At least at any rate, no matter what happens, or how it goes, today’s the day we are going home”

Someone rejoiced quietly under his breath as Ortega dismissed the group and walked away to be on his own.

As he walked, he lowered his head staring down at the vegetation under him.

Let's hope it is true – he thought.

And that someday, somehow, we all make it.

The crossover point was on the stretch of land where the Ho Chi Minh trail was a long dirt road not unlike a real and proper highway, and ran from north to south. Eventually, it met a wide river with an overpassing bridge. Crossing the river from the south side of the bridge was unquestionably the best place to do it because they'd be able to hide their tracks.

There was only one problem however, and that was that it simply couldn't be done.

The problem was the river itself, and that's precisely why it couldn't be done.

It wasn't only problematic because of its width or because of how incredibly deep it was, or even how fast flowing it was. It was all those things put together simultaneously, turning it into a fast moving, highly aggressive and extremely dangerous death trap.

It just couldn't be done.

On the north side of the bridge Coletta found a crossing rope probably dating back to when they'd built the bridge years before.

That's precisely where the Baker team was planning to cross.

With a little luck, the Vietcong wouldn't remember there was a rope to begin with, now that they had a whole fucking bridge at their disposal.

Anyway, even if they used a rope, crossing a river as wild and large as this was, would be time consuming and very challenging.

The most troubling aspect of all however, was how long they'd be out in the open.

Ortega knew they couldn't pull it off without having some kind of decoy ready to go beforehand.

Setting up a diversion in an area as patrolled as this was, on enemy territory to boot, may have been dangerous for everybody, but especially for whoever was in charge of the diversion itself.

Given that crossing the river automatically meant compromising your position, deciding who'd have to do the riskiest part was unfortunately up to Ortega.

The worst part of being a leader is having to make decisions that jeopardize the safety of your squad now turned friends. When it does happen though, team leaders have generally given it some thought beforehand.

Ortega wasn't a very well prepared team leader, but his team was so motivated that finding volunteers for something like that wouldn't have been that difficult despite how dangerous it essentially was.

That's why, in the end, he decided to be honest with his teammates and tell them how things were, knowing they would understand.

When the time came he told them everything no holds barred like Trautman had taught him, and then he let the team vote on it democratically.

At any rate, a few exceptions would apply to the choice as some technicalities did apply.

For example, they could not send anyone who wasn't dispensable, as the decoy. Messner for instance, had valuable radio skills (which incidentally were of the utmost importance in their current situation) or Coletta's skills as the sharpshooter or land navigator.

Even less expendable was someone like Ortega since he was team leader.

When Manuel finished his speech a long silence ensued, but in the end, despite Ortega's expectations, none of the five remaining candidates actually volunteered.

Ortega looked each of his friends in the eyes.

Not a single one of them was willing to die after everything they had gone through to get as far as they had. They were barely a stone's throw from South Vietnam. Not even the craziest ones Danforth and Krakauer volunteered in spite of their unquenchable thirst for adrenalin.

Not this time, anyway.

Ortega got a lump in his throat.

So this time he'd have to make the choice for them.

"I'll go" Rambo said shortly thereafter.

Ortega looked his friend in the eyes. His *best* friend, that is.

John 'Corvo' Rambo wasn't only a few years younger than the rest of them but he also happened to be the only one there already injured. Yet he was the only one offering to volunteer.

Rambo – thought Ortega.

Then he looked at him again.

He had a fixed stare, untainted, almost innocent. He knew exactly what he would have to face and yet volunteered nevertheless.

He was the soldier who had received an honourable mention, only months before. Ortega couldn't help but feel it was almost a shame, that they hadn't actually given it to him yet, but were still contemplating it. What the hell were they waiting for? Did they want him dead before handing it over?

Ortega loved him a lot.

He loved each and every one of them, but among them all, his friendship with Rambo was the one he would miss the most, if anything ever happened to him.

Jesus – Ortega thought to himself.

Now all he had to do was pick one more but this time, Ortega would need to do it on his own.

Delmore, Lawrence, Carl, Danforth... Danforth too, as the second in command, can't possibly be expendable either.

Shit.

Just contemplating it gave him the worst feeling he'd ever felt before.

If only Ortega could be sure that once they'd crossed the river everything would be over, he would have volunteered to do it himself, but there was no way of being sure. The radios still hadn't shown signs of life, and for all he knew, that fucking mission could last another four more days, or longer. God damn it.

Maybe, once they're across crossed the river, they'll have to make a run for it.

They may even find an entire regiment at the ready patiently awaiting them on the other side.

God only knew when they'd eventually be able to make contact with the MacV, especially using those goddamn little radios, or when for that matter. No...

The Baker team still needed a team leader, or at least for the time being it did.

Barry and Jorghenson were ideal candidates. Except for Jorghenson being a little stressed out, all in all, the two of them were still strong and healthy despite not having eaten well for some time now, and neither of the them had unique roles on the team.

“Don't make me choose guys. Please...” said Ortega, but his prayers seemed to go unheard.

Krakauer was a good candidate too, but then and there, Ortega wasn't getting a solid impression from him. He couldn't say why that was exactly, despite knowing his men exceptionally well. In his opinion, Krakauer looked too tired to handle a decoy role alone if necessity called.

After reflecting thoroughly, and despite many doubts Ortega came to a decision.

Jorghenson – he thought to himself.

He and Rambo had always played very well together, and even more so after Black Spot. They would have been a good squad for sure. Moreover, Jorghenson had always been very strong both physically and mentally (even if during the selection program he'd punched Ortega in the face).

Yep.

How could he possibly forget?

Maybe that's the real reason why you want to send him there, revenge over that sucker punch.

No, it wasn't.

It was nothing but a matter of role priority, and currently, Jorgenson was the last on the list.

“Grizzly” Ortega said finally, with a lump in his throat.

Leading up to the river were grasslands. Even though the grass itself was exceptionally high, Ortega swore he could feel VC eyes staring right at him. He couldn't help worrying about being spotted, from one moment to the next no matter how hard he tried.

Despite all his concerns, when they did finally arrive at the grass planes, to his surprise, whistles didn't blow, and no one fired shots up at the sky. Even the prisoners, along with the rest of the team, with the exception of Rambo and Jorghenson, reached the river without anybody being the wiser.

When Ortega saw the river up close and with his own eyes, he felt a lump form in his throat. That was one big motherfucking river.

In all likelihood, using that rope would probably make the crossing somewhat easier. If you just stopped to take a good look at what you were crossing however, it was enough to make you think twice about doing it. People definitely lost their lives in that kind of river. In fact back home, something like that would claim about a life a year.

What was even worse was that at some points, mainly in the middle, the rope disappeared under water.

Ortega turned to look at Berry.

“You're going first”

He didn't even have time to smirk when the first shot sounded behind him. Rambo and Jorgenson had already started to engage.

The shots multiplied straightaway and become a whole lot more almost instantly.

It sounded like they were up against the entire North Vietnamese army all on their own.

Ortega turned to where the shots were coming from, somewhat apprehensively.

The sky above him was grey and humid.

Explosions, screams, AKs blasting...

Ortega sniffed the air, closed his eyes and felt as though he'd just lost two men.

Then he heard Jorgenson's M60 return fire, with their only M60 that is, because they'd destroyed the other one to lighten their travelling load.

Good, good on you guys.

*Just keep it up – thought Ortega pleadingly.
God, please, I'm begging you, spare them.
Make the plan work.
Let them get through the next ten fucking minutes of fire alive, and then retreat.
Get them home for me.*

It was already over by then though.
There was no point in kidding himself, they were gone, overrun by larger forces and there was nothing in the world Ortega could do to help.
In all actuality, he shouldn't be letting himself even think about them.
He had to concentrate on the mission at hand.

“Messner, we are out in the open here. You may have a pretty good signal... Get on that radio and get a hold of anybody who will listen. Coletta: recon. Cover our asses. Go, go, go!”

In the meantime, Barry was through fastening himself to the rope and was looking at Ortega in bewilderment, not knowing if they were really expecting him to dive into that damn river or not.

“What the fuck are you waiting for, Snake? Dive in! Now!”

Barry took a deep breath and dove in.

-

Once in the water, it didn't take Delmore long at all to realize just how powerful the undercurrent actually was. There was no point denying it, that river was fucking angry, and fighting back. If the spring clip hadn't been hooked onto the rope he'd have been dragged along and then under, in mere seconds.
The river was overflowing, moving fast because of all the rain they'd had recently.
In fact, Barry had never been in a river that fast his whole life.

*I am not getting anywhere – Delmore thought to himself as he slowly pulled forward, holding tightly to the rope.
I've hardly even moved an inch.*

They all watched him apprehensively.

“UAAAARGH” he screamed in exhaustion.

Maybe they were wrong.
Maybe Ortega and Coletta had been mistaken and there actually was no possible way

to get across, not even with a rope.

Barry yelled out again.

Could his arms actually be that tired already?

They sure could. How many days had they marched carrying double loads for?

Even with the water smashing down as loudly as it was, his moans got all the way over to where his teammates were.

He felt worn-out from all the effort he'd used already and his lungs were about to explode.

Come on Barry...You're supposed to be in good shape. Everyone else is in far worse shape, and they'll even have to carry prisoners too. If you can't get to the other fucking side, no one will.

The problem was that he honestly couldn't do it.

The drag flow was too strong making any kind of forward movement exhaustively slow.

In addition to making little or no progress, he thought he was about to die.

Calm down.

Yet calming down seemed impossible. What he was doing wasn't just hard, it was painstaking.

Berry fixed his sights on the other side of the river, but despite his effort, it continued to be a long ways away. In all actuality, he'd barely reached the half waypoint.

That goddamn river really was enormous.

Do you want to die? - asked a voice in his head.

So go ahead then dickhead just die already, but at least do it quietly.

His mind suddenly quit thinking. Even his body quit moaning all of a sudden. Even the pains in his arms, legs and back quit and he didn't feel the cold temperature, or have blurry vision anymore. It had all disappeared.

The only things left were him, the water and having to get to the other side at any cost.

He'd never been that hypnotized by anything before, not even when he was trying out at Fort Bragg.

He'd turned into a machine.

-

Lowell, who was sitting motionless and open-mouthed, couldn't tear his blank fixated stare off of Barry.

Even, Messner and Danforth who should've been responsible for covering everyone's backs, at turned around to see what Barry was doing. It didn't take Ortega long to notice they'd turned around however and immediately screamed out:

“Pay attention for fuck’s sake!”

-

In the meantime, Coletta was trying to get a real understanding of what was going on through his riflescope from the back of the group.

Rambo and Jorghenson had let hell loose by that point. There were shots, screams, explosions, just about everything and anything going on back there. The first thing Coletta looked at was the road. The number of men and means heading Rambo and Jorgenson's way was downright troubling. There were also two trucks in the vicinity, unloading entire teams of men with a commanding officer yelling and gesticulating orders.

Not a second later, Coletta couldn't believe his ears when he heard the first sharp blow of a mortar blast.

Seriously.

The North Vietnamese team had actually put mortars into place to stop Rambo and Jorgenson.

The VCs must have thought the entire South Vietnamese army was shooting at them, rather than the two of them who were really making all that commotion themselves.

Despite the odds, Ortega's plan had actually been right about only needing a decoy and the VCs would have ignored the river, the rope and everything else, thank God.

Coletta lifted his eye from the riflescope.

The problem was Rambo and Jorgenson.

Oh my God.

Coletta had serious doubts about them being able to get around the enemy and get back the other side.

As things were, it seemed highly unlikely.

-

Shit! - thought Ortega.

What the hell is happening out there?

Ortega clenched his jaw in anger, and spit onto the concrete in front of him.

Rambo and Jorghenson were screwed, finished.

Even just surviving long enough to create the decoy the team needed was a miracle in itself. Staying alive for the team so it could cross the river, buying them time, was definitely a miracle by all accounts.

Then Ortega thought back to the bridge, that damn bridge that the North Vietnamese could use to surround them. If they were seen crossing, the VCs wouldn't have any trouble catching them on the other side.

We can't let them see us – thought Ortega.

If they do, we're dead.

Then he looked back at Berry.

Come on.

Come on Barry, come on.

Still more explosions sounded and shots fired.
Then, out of nowhere, two F4 flew right over them.

What the... Jesus Christ.

Not a moment later, the renowned thundering echo of the passing Phantoms sounded over the entire valley.

WUOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

Man, is the shit ever gonna hit the fan now – thought Ortega to himself.

If there were F4s in the vicinity, then that meant that the Baker team was close enough to use short-range radios as well.

Finally.

It's about time God damn it.

There may even have been a chance to save Rambo and Jorgenson if they moved fast enough.

“Doc...” shouted out Ortega.

“I am already trying for fuck’s sake! I am trying everything!”

Ortega shifted his attention back to the river.

The rope was still tightly pulled, but this time Barry was nowhere to be seen. He’d literally disappeared under the waves.

Ortega looked around trying to get him back in sight.

No.

Please, I beg of you, no...

Berry on the contrary, was kneeling on the riverbank on the other side.

Oh my God, thank the Lord.

His plan, his Goddamn plan had paid off, it had actually worked, thank the Lord.

Despite general relief, Barry collapsed with exhaustion and vanished into the tall grass.

No doubt crossing that river was hard, but dragging a hostage as you do it, was going to be even harder.

A whole lot harder.

-

Delmore was flat on his back thinking his lungs were about to explode.

He couldn't breathe.

He had held his breath doing the last few meters, that and more, just to get to the other side. Except now, his heart was in dire need of oxygen, and, in an effort to get it, was pumping like mad in his chest.

He thought he was going to die.

Keep on moving – he thought.

Staying still is worse.

He turned over and dragged himself forward in the grass. His arms and legs felt paralysed and were hard to move, but at least his heart was starting to slow down.

The problem was exactly that, meaning he shouldn't be stopping so abruptly. He wasn't supposed to stop like that. He was supposed to slow his heart down, a little at a time, or it would have exploded inside his chest.

Berry screamed in pain, but in doing so he managed to get back on his feet, even if he was staggering.

Then his mind went painstakingly back to the mission.

Berry pointed his AK out in front of him to scout out the surroundings.

What he had to do now was protect that damn rope because while the group crossed over, they'd be at risk. The fact that he felt as bad as he did, right then and there, did not matter in the least.

He had to protect the area, at any cost.

-

After an excruciatingly long wait, Danforth finally saw Barry give his signal from the other side of the river. The area was clear.

Turning round in haste, he gave Ortega the thumbs up.

“The fastest first!” shouted out the team leader.

The first one Danforth sent was Eddie Johnson, who was perhaps, among the prisoners, the fittest.

“Don't try to swim, ok?” said Krakauer while hooking him up to the rope.

“Just use your arms and stay calm. If you get tired, just hang on to the rope with your legs too, and stay where you are. Whatever you do though just stay calm, okay? This thing is gonna hold”

-

Johnson looked at the rope first, and then at the river.

Then, he swallowed.

That’s when he had a flashback.

He could see himself locked up in a tiger cage as the hole they’d put him in, slowly filled with water.

No...

Not again, no....

As far as he was concerned, stepping foot in that river was equivalent to parachuting if you were afraid of heights.

He just couldn’t go in there, not after having almost drowned inside that tiger cage. It was impossible.

“Go, you fucker! Go!” Ortega shouted, spitting as he did.

With a slap of the hand, Krakauer pushed him by surprise, and he fell into the water.

Behind all of them, Rambo and Jorgenson began pulling back in a desperate attempt to both make it out alive and divert the enemy away from the river and prisoners.

Jorgenson ran with his AK in hand, and at intervals jumped here and there, in an effort to sidestep the ruggedness of the land. He'd gotten rid of his M60 long before that.

He'd run, turn to shoot at his pursuers and then go back to running again.

Then, out of nowhere, a couple of Huey helicopters suddenly flew over him.

I'm here – he thought.

I'm here, God damn it.

They couldn't have done anything for them, even if they had seen the pair. Pick-ups weren't possible if the area was too hot, and this place was steaming.

Actually it's worse.

It's a lot worse than that.

Maybe they didn't even notice we're Americans.

The two of them just kept on running and shooting behind them as they did.

Under their fire jungle leaves were falling, branches were breaking and the enemy lowered their heads under cover.

Rambo took cover behind a fallen tree, rummaged through his gear and quickly threw a violet smoke grenade out in front of him.

“ONE OF TWO, GRIZZLY!” he shouted.

Jorgenson nodded. He knew exactly what it meant.

“GO! GO! GO!”

The two of them started running and shooting again, moving even further away from the river they should have been crossing instead.

Jorgenson thought back. It had been a while since he last felt as clearheaded as he did now.

They'd definitely achieved the objective of distracting the enemy by that point.

The re-entering plan was the one that was falling to pieces. The enemy kept putting itself right between them and the Baker team, and without a tight rope, they'd never have made it across that damn river.

Grizzly forehead was sweaty and his eyes were wide open because of the fear he was feeling and hard work he was doing.
In contrast, Rambo seemed remarkably calm.

By that time, Johnson had reached the halfway mark, yelling and screaming as he battled the current in Krakauer's arms.

It was getting harder and harder to breath and his heart was about to explode.

“NOOOOO!” he screamed aloud at every incoming wave.

He could hardly move anymore, and his hands were barely able to hang on.

Fate was about to get revenge for what it hadn't been able to do only months earlier.

That time, when he was supposed to drown in that tiger cage.

Everything made sense in Eddie Johnson's head.

In fact, his cry was a long and horrible one.

-

“Call Coletta back. We need him too,” Ortega said.

“I am receiving some Hueys” said Messner.

“But they don't hear me. Our signal is not strong enough”

“And the F4s?”

“Nothing. I can't find the frequency”

-

The other side was there, clearly in front of Johnson, but the pain in his arms was too strong to move them anymore, and fear was about to take over definitely. It was as though Krakauer wasn't even there with him.

He could see the world slowly turning into an indistinguishable form of blurred colours and sounds.

He couldn't move anymore.

He screamed over how difficult it all was, and this time it truly was otherworldly. He clung on to the rope with his legs too, to keep from being pulled under by the current.

He just couldn't believe that the safe hook was enough to hold him there. The moment he did however, the water current immediately turned him upside down and he ended up under water.

Johnson re-emerged, coughed and spit up water

One of his hands slipped off the rope terrorizing him even more.

“AAAARGH” he screamed to hold off the pain.

He couldn't keep his head out of the water anymore because moving had become impossible.

It wouldn't be long before his harness snapped and the under tide swept him away.

It was over.

“Hey man look, I'm here” said 'Tiger' Krakauer from behind him.

“We'll do the rest together from now on, okay? We're almost there and I can help you. I know you can do it”

Krakauer grasped the prisoner's collar lifting him over the rope and above the water, giving him a hand as he straightened out and clung back onto the rope.

“Don't let it go,” he said.

Krakauer put his arms around Johnson, wrapping the cord around him and then secured his own hold.

Johnson couldn't help noticing just how strong that man really was. He managed to not only hold him upright, but move him forward, all at the same time.

-

That's it, that's the way to get it done – thought Ortega from the riverbank.

That's how we'll get those damn prisoners across

From now on that's exactly how we're all going to do it.

Getting a few meters past the middle is all it'll take for the river to start flowing more slowly.

Only a few more arm lengths later and Berry 'Snake' Delmore was already stretching out his arms to help them climb over the riverbank.

Chester finally felt the ground under him.

Once out of the water he could feel the cold air slicing through his wet clothes and it stung like hell. Nevertheless, he was alive.

He'd made it out alive.

Tiger' Krakauer let himself fall down beside him, completely exhausted.

Johnson, who was observing him, went ahead and did the same.

Each watched the other but said nothing as they caught their breaths.

Eventually, Tiger Krakauer gave Johnson a pat on the shoulder and laughed.

Eddie Johnson smiled back. He was happy too.

He had never been that happy before in his whole life.

What team Baker could never have known however, was that Garner himself happened to be on one of the helicopters currently flying above them. There were always SOG teams missing in action in that area. From the moment they'd lost sight of the Baker team however, Garner intermittently accompanied the rescue teams out. Only now and again mind you, when time permitted, and when there were activated emergency beepers involved. In fact, that day there were.

After seeing the smoke from the first grenade, Garner and his two Hueys had not only located a team of two fleeing from North Vietnamese soldiers, but a whole other group too, as they crossed the river. It did not take a genius to know that anyone who used a rope to cross a river, despite the presence of a bridge, had to be fleeing VCs. At any rate, the Hueys could not get close enough to recognize any faces because of all the incoming fire. So, exactly who the hell were those men anyways? Considering how tall they were at that distance, they may have been Americans. Then again, they were holding AKs.

They looked and moved just like SOG men by all accounts, but they were in such a bad shape and poorly armed that they were more like a local militia than a SOG team. Moreover, there was no reason for anyone to be in that area. It was too many clicks from any recent area of operations either. In fact, while they were looking for the emergency beeper, Garner and the others had even expressed concerns about a potential ambush. In the past, the Vietcong had occasionally got hold of some fallen soldier's emergency beeper, and subsequently used them to lure rescue teams into ambushes.

Whatever the situation at hand was, there was nothing those two scouting Hueys could do for the two being chased.

Despite that, having to watch the scene from above and knowing there was nothing they could do to assist was terrible just the same.

“Garner to Covey leader”

“Go ahead, Garner”

“There's a team of 10 crossing the river. I repeat: that's ten in total. Four are not in uniform and appear to be in very bad shape. I mean, they all look pretty bad, but the unarmed ones dressed as civilians look a lot worse”

“Roger that”

The helicopter turned round to have another look.

“Get lower!” shout Garner.

“But Sir!” protested the pilot.

“Let’s wait a second Sir. We’ve got a Cobra attack helicopter on its way, in one”

“No way! We are going down and we’re going down now” Garner insisted.

He knew perfectly well that getting closer was dangerous but he didn’t really care.

“I said lower!”

The pilot nodded, initiating an upward and then downward movement, bringing the chopper into a dive, as Garner held tight.

It was then and there that Garner really got a good look at them, and boy did he ever. They were big, tall and well built. There was obviously no way of actually recognizing any faces at that distance, but those were American soldiers beyond any reasonable doubt.

He was certain.

“Back up! Up! Up!”

Garner could hear the bullets whistling by the Huey already.

Jesus Christ – he thought

Then he pushed his microphone into his ear.

“They are Americans, Covey leader. I repeat, they are Americans, God damn it. Confirm”

“Roger that” answered Trautman into his ear.

Garner closed the transmission. He would have given his right arm to know what was going through the colonel's mind in that exact moment, but it did not take long for orders to arrive.

Trautman had already made his decision.

-

Those men are missing in action and on the run – thought Trautman to himself.

We haven’t got anyone in this area. Those are MIAs for sure.

It was with that final realization that he acted without any further delay and said:

“Maximum priority, and suppressive fire all around them. From now on, those men are your top priority. Is that clear?”

-

“Roger that Covey leader” replied Garner.

He looked down below in deep consideration.

It was now up to him to manage the operation and not the colonel because he was the

one on the field.

Fuck – he said to himself.

That was Trautman's kind of thing though, not his, *God damn it*. Garner was an analyst or a strategist at best.

A violet coloured smoke screen – he thought then.

The two man team separated had thrown a violet coloured smoke screen.

A violet coloured smoke screen right in the middle of a combat op.

“Maybe they want us to land on the other side of the river. I bet that’s it” exclaimed the pilot interrupting his thoughts.

“Actually, I was wondering what the point of the violet coloured smoke screen was” replied Garner, and then adding:

“Maybe it's a *prairie fire*”

“That's not the way you call a prairie fire, Sir”

“Yeah ok, but if those guys...”

Oh Jesus Christ... - thought Garner, and that’s when it all came back to him.

He thought back to a long time ago when they were in Fort Bragg and both taught. He recalled one of Trautman’s lessons, one out of so very many, but at that moment one in particular came to mind.

It was a lesson on the usage of special smoke signals but were exclusively for Hueys on SOG support ops.

That wasn’t an SOG team though, so why are they...

Oh my God... though Garner again.

Turning immediately towards the pilot, he shouted

“Jesus Christ! If those men are who I think they are, it won’t be long before they throw another smoke screen. Then the two smoke screens should make a line pointing to specific coordinates. It's a code. It’s a Goddamn code! The line points out the target to destroy. Let's wait for the second one!”

“Are you sure about that Sir?”

“Absolutely. Keep circling overhead, soldier”

Could they really be using one of the Baker team's custom signals?

Could that actually be them?

-

Rambo and Jorgenson came to a stop in some of the surrounding trees as cover. They intended to defend the clearing directly behind them.

It only took a second for the first shots to whiz past their heads.

Rambo heard one fly right past his ear - *WHUUUUUUHIIIP!*

Then the second one immediately followed by the third. Those were AK rounds skimming past him and judging by how much fire he was under, they’d not only

found him, but there were multiple shooters onto him.
Moving out into the open meant getting shot almost instantly.
There was more and more happening before his very eyes.
The violet coloured smoke screen had undoubtedly attracted the majority of them.
They probably thought a Huey would be touching down to help them in no time at all. The VCs loved shooting down US choppers. Every man, woman and child in Vietnam knew that.

“Let them come even closer, Grizzly” said Rambo.

“You bet I will Johnny!”

Jorgenson shot another couple of rounds with his AK and then made a run for it.

“Now Johnny, I said now!”

“Just one more...”

“Now, NOOOOOOOW!”

Rambo grabbed hold of the second smoke grenade, pulled out the safety ring and tossed it.

Then using the violet smoke as cover, he jumped to his feet hoping they wouldn't hit him.

This time they just made a run for it not even returning fire or bothering to look back.

-

“There it is! The second smoke screen!” screamed Garner.

“Where? Where? Where?” asked the pilot searching down below.

“There it is, at two o'clock. Nose...”

“Got it sir! If we confirm the coordinates now, it'll take the Phantoms ninety seconds to strike. The timing is perfect, sir! But we have to act now!”

“You – Garner said turning towards the co-pilot – calculate the coordinates between the two smoke screens”

“Good as done, Sir”

“Then I'll get on the radio” affirmed the pilot, pressing the microphone button.

“Bravo twelve to Zulu, we need immediate fire. Do you read me ulu?”

Almost instantly, a voice broke the silence in Garner's headphones. It was the Phantom pilot.

His voice was low and as cold as ice, not unlike a machine.

“I copy you, Bravo twelve. Go ahead”

“Zulu, I am about to give you target coordinates. Once you're locked on, destroy everything”

“Affirmative, Roger that”

“Eyes open for two of our own down there. Precision fire is required”

“Precision fire confirmed, sixty seconds. Awaiting coordinates”

Then he added:

“Stay online Bravo Twelve. I don't want anybody using this channel right at the best part”

-

All set to cross the river, Ortega turned one last time for a quick look.

The battle may have been raging on but when he saw that wall of napalm rising over the jungle, he just about dropped and took cover himself, no matter how far away it was.

Initially, the giant explosion looked like an enormous blood blister. Its contents furiously amalgamating as it reached for the sky.

The bubble of fire kept its orange, red and black tones for a moment, but then transformed into an enormous cloud of black smoke.

Oh my God – thought Ortega.

Even at that distance, a warm breeze managed to make its way to him actually disheveling his hair. It was the equivalent to a giant demon yawning directly in his face.

Given the direness of the situation, Ortega asked himself whether or not he would have ever seen Rambo and Jorgenson again.

Probably not.

Maybe I've sentenced them to their death – he thought.

Maybe I really have.

Every single one of them had crossed that damn rope by now.

Ortega and Lowell were the only two left and the injured prisoner was all set to step in.

Consequently, he didn't have time to think about Rambo and Jorgenson anymore.

The team leader tugged on the rope for the umpteenth time, pulling on it with all of the strength. It was still holding up in spite of how many of them had crossed so far. It was still perfectly taut.

“Wait for me” said Ortega.

Lowell had had his injuries for such a long time that he was currently in very dire shape.

Ortega reached for him in the water and then put his arm around Lowell's waist.

“Hold on tight.” said Ortega.

As the water level rose, Ortega realized straightaway that Lowell wouldn't be able to hold himself up, not by a long shot. He had become too weak. Ortega clung tightly to the rope and pulled forward with all his might, but the effort was excruciating from the get go.

“JESUS CHRIST, HOLD ON TIGHTER!” Ortega bellowed.
“I AM TRYING!”

One of the two Hueys passed over them again, so far up and visibly powerless and all the while dangerously exposed to enemy fire.

After only a few meters, Lowell had to lock hold his position onto the rope. He was sure that moving even just an inch more meant he'd fall prey to the undercurrent. It would sweep him away, flip him over and he'd end up with his head under water.

Ortega started to push him harder, but the effort immediately became unsustainable, and after only the third push, he had to scream while he did it.

To make matters worse, the gunfire was getting closer.

Although the napalm had cut VC forces by half, napalm, the remaining VCs had finally noticed Ortega's men, and were now making their way towards them.

Shit – thought Ortega.

All of a sudden, Ortega lost his grip for a second, and immediately went under. The effort to get his head back above water was dreadful. This time Jorgenson wouldn't have been there to pull him back up.

The entire scene flashed right before his eyes.

It had happened one night, about two years ago, when he and the others were carrying a pole over their shoulders along a riverbank in Fort Bragg.

Ortega had felt dizzy and wound up falling into the water.

Despite how heavy the pole was, Jorghenson managed to pull him out of the water anyway with just one hand.

This time 'Grizzly' Jorgenson wouldn't be there to help him. He was all alone down there, and Lowell's life was in his hands.

The effort to get back from the surface was excruciating, but he somehow managed it. When Ortega surfaced from the water spitting and coughing, he was relieved to see Lowell was still planted there next to him, thank God.

“DON'T LET GO OF ME” screamed Lowell.

“I won't let go of you” Ortega replied as he gasped for air, even if the tone of his voice was impassive.

“I DON'T WANT TO DIE, PLEASE, DON'T LET GO”

“I won't let go of you man. I promise”

Ortega pushed him forward again, and this time they both had to yell out as they did it.

“I won't let go of you, but you've got to try to move by yourself. Otherwise, we are not going anywhere. Ok?”

“AAAARGH”

In consequence Lowell screamed and Ortega clenched his jaw.

Only seconds later however, Ortega's shoulders were throbbing in pain and they weren't even at the half waypoint yet.

That damn riverbank just wouldn't get any closer.

“I won't let go of you man. I won't let go of you.”

Ortega pushed him forward again.

The pain in his hands from holding the rope so tight was getting worse too.

“I don't want to die, please, I don't want to die”

“AAARGH”

“What's your name?” yelled out Lowell.

“What?”

“I want to know your real name”

Ortega stopped for a second, but only long enough to catch his breath.

“Now listen to me carefully, will you?” said Ortega looking directly at him.

Ortega swallowed some water as he spoke causing him to lose his breath once more.

He coughed a little but then continued:

“We will make it, Lowell. You have no idea what we went through just to rescue you... There's no way we are going to give up now. “UAAAARGH” he screamed out pushing Lowell forward for a second time.

“Oh God please”

Ortega came to a stop.

The situation had gotten worse.

Even merely hanging onto the rope was turning out to be problematic.

It was just a matter of time before the safety cord actually snapped. When it did, the current would surely drag them away to their certain death.

Ortega made another effort to move, albeit slightly, but the pain was too much.

It was over.

This time it was over for good.

The next move – he thought to himself.

Think about what the next move is, soldier.

Yes.

*And the next move is that we are all expendable.
We have always been.*

Ortega made a fist with his hand and even if the rope was incredibly tight, he somehow managed to wrap it round his arm.

“Hang on to me” he said.

Lowell clung onto Ortega like a Koala bear.

“Hang on better”

The two embraced even tighter.

“Ok. Now listen to me carefully”

“Yes, yes...”

“I am going to cut the rope, ok?”

“What!?”

“It’s alright, we’ve already passed the half waypoint, so if we hold on tight, the rope will drag us to the other side”

“No, no, no... Don't do it!”

“As soon as I cut the rope, I’ll toss the knife and hang onto you with all my might. Okay? Everything will be fine”

“No, no...”

“Look at me, Lowell”

“No”

“LOOK AT ME, for fuck’s sake”

Lowell opened his eyes again.

“We haven’t got any other choice man”

-

Krakauer and Barry were still standing on the other side of the river when they saw Ortega draw his knife from his sheath.

“No” said Barry.

“No” repeated Danforth almost echoing.

The blade glistened on the water and despite the distance, it was as plain as day for all to see.

Everyone, including the prisoners, quietly prayed Ortega not to do it. They were hoping for some other way or solution even though none of them had other solutions in mind.

“Don't do it Scorpio” whispered Danforth under his breath.

“Don't do it”

Coletta pointed his M14 at Ortega using his riflescope to get a better look.

Maybe he had an idea.

-

I could shoot the rope –Coletta said to himself.

Without having to cut the rope himself, Ortega could use both hands to hang on.

There's no way of telling him from all the way over here though, and cutting the rope by surprise could lead to a disaster.

Coletta moved his head away from the riflescope.

There just wasn't anything he could do to help.

-

“You have to trust me” said Ortega.

“No! Let's just keep doing the same thing! Please, please, please!”

“I can't do it anymore. I don't have enough energy”

“Please, don't!”

“I can't...”

“Please!”

“LOWELL! NOW YOU LISTEN TO ME, GODDAMN IT!”

This time Lowell closed his eyes.

Ortega continued to glare at him.

“That's enough, Lowell”

Ortega put the jagged side of the blade onto the rope. There was no point in trying to cut a rope that thick using the plain side of the Baker knife.

“Ready?”

This time Lowell opened his eyes and nodded.

Ortega took a deep breath and started moving the jagged blade back and forth.

After only a few tries, the rope started to unravel.

This won't take long to snap at all– thought Ortega.

Jesus.

It's actually going to break.

When the rope finally did snap, it happened so quick that it took Ortega by surprise and the two of them were pulled instantly under water.

The sound of gushing water surrounded them, and everything became dark and brown.

Ortega let go of the knife and it speedily disappeared under him. With one swift movement, he grabbed onto both Lowell and the rope as tight as he could.

He managed to re-surface, but only briefly.

They'd been dragged under once more, but this time it was even worse. They were going deeper and deeper even faster than before.

Ortega felt sharp pangs in his eardrums and asked himself – *is it ten feet already? Could that really be?*

Then, without warning, the rope jerked back powerfully catapulting them forward. Ortega somehow managed to hang onto it, but his shoulder snapped awkwardly and he was sure he'd dislocated it.

Lowell succeeded in hanging on too, but all at once, they were pulled even deeper into the dark abyss, and the undercurrent was even stronger than before.

-

“Let go of him” said Danforth from the riverbed.

The three prisoners turned together staring at Danforth in complete disbelief, but Danforth showed no fear and glared right back.

“He will only get himself killed if he doesn't” he said as he turned his eyes back to the river.

“Let him go, Skorpio. There's nothing you can do to save him”

-

Then, out of nowhere, something clicked in Ortega's head, and suddenly everything made sense.

Nothing in the world could bring them back up. The only way to get back up to the surface, from so far down, and with that kind of under tide, they both had to swim. Swimming meant letting go of the rope though, and letting go meant unquestionably being carried away.

In that dark abyss therefore, Ortega finally accepted the fact that Lowell didn't have a chance.

What's more, if he kept trying to save him, he wouldn't have survived either.

He was sure about it now.

In fact, he was absolutely certain.

Moreover, the further down they plummeted, the higher the likelihood of getting tangled up in branches, stuck in the mud or God knows what else. In all honesty, Lowell no longer had a chance, but Ortega, well, maybe he did. He may still be able to get out of this alive.

Therefore, in the end, the survival instinct got the best of him. Not even the mission's objective (*save Lowell, save Lowell, save Lowell*) mattered anymore and Ortega paid heed to his instinct.

Ortega let go of Lowell.

He hurriedly used both hands to grasp onto the rope.

This way at least he'd survive. Maybe.

Lowell however wouldn't let go and, as a consequence, continued to pull him down.

Make sure you don't hit the bottom.

Because if you do, you're dead.

With that in mind, Ortega pulled up his foot and used it to kick Lowell off of him.

Ortega didn't actually see what happened next, but he was no longer bound to Lowell and could no longer feel his weight. It was only then that the rope snapped back and in one swift movement hauled him back up towards the light.

Light. Air.

Finally some air.

Ortega was in such dire need of oxygen that when he did finally resurface he was screaming for air.

He almost died down there.

He'd seriously almost fucking died.

Turning abruptly, he glanced frantically around for a sign of Lowell.

He eventually caught sight of him several yards away but he was practically drowning.

He was at the mercy of the tide and kept going under. He couldn't stay afloat anymore either.

"NOOOO" cried out Ortega.

Then he disappeared under for the last time.

-

Still staring from the other side, the group sadly watched Lowell drown without saying a word. They seemed encompassed by a surreal silence.

Johnson and Ruckerson looked away, not bearing to watch. Chester however, couldn't look away and sadly watched until the bitter end.

A second later, there was nothing where he'd been.

He was gone.

It was over.

-

As he got closer and closer to the riverbank, Ortega noticed that the undercurrents around him weakened until eventually he was finally able to stand upright.

Thank you God – he said to himself.

He did not think he was going to make it.

It was weird to be alive.

He was quite short on breath and his arms, well, they may not have been broken but he couldn't feel them at all.

The pain in his shoulder was so excruciating that he must have pulled it somehow. He knew it wasn't dislocated since he could move it a bit, but there was definitely something wrong with it.

In any case, he was alive.

At least he'd made it.

Ortega staggered in the shallow water as he made his way towards the riverbank but fell to his knees before reaching it, nearly passing-out from the exhaustion.

Barry helped him get back up and onto the shore.

"It's all over Skorpio" said Barry.

"Everything's ok, it's all over" he said again.

He then placed a hand on Ortega's chest almost in an effort to help him breathe.

Despite the physical state he was in, Ortega's got a lump in his throat just the same.

I killed Lowell – he thought.

What is more, I lost Carl and Johnny at the same time too.

That was the truth of it all too because when he cut the rope to save Lowell, he'd automatically taken away Rambo and Jorgenson's re-entry route.

Barry and Danforth tried helping Ortega get back on his feet but he still wasn't strong enough so they sat him back down.

Four men... - thought Ortega.

We have lost four men already on this fucking mission: two prisoners – Robertson and Lowell – and two mates – Johnny and Carl.

"Skorpio" said Danforth who was next to him.

"I've never seen anything like that before. Not ever. Seriously"

Ortega, gasping for breath, turned to Danforth thinking he was taking the piss out of him.

Krakauer went on:

"You hung onto him at least two minutes longer than you should have. Two minutes after you should've already been dead"

"You did great, Scorpio" Delmore said too.

Ortega just shook his head however.

No, he hadn't outdone himself, not at all, not in the least.

He'd been a piece of shit.

On that mission, he believed his decisions and overall performance had been shitty at best.

Ortega was afraid, cold and full of adrenaline and every single inch of his body hurt. Yet his stomach felt cut open by a knife. Cut open by the mistakes he'd made, the shame of it all, and the feelings of guilt. The essence of failure.

He knew it would stay there for a very long time, maybe even for the rest of his life.

Ortega shut his eyes, to keep from crying as he especially thought of what he'd done to Rambo and Jorghenson.

Being drenched meant that even if he had cried no one would have noticed.

Nevertheless, he didn't.

He wouldn't have anyways simply because he couldn't.

It's not like the whole thing was fucking over or anything like that.

"We don't have much time" said Barry.

"The VCs have located us"

It wasn't as though Ortega hadn't expected that, on the contrary. He had not only expected it but it was the exact reason why he'd sent Rambo and Jorgenson out there to begin with.

The black guy put his arms around Ortega to help him stand up, but he lacked the strength.

He was in shock from low body temperature and exhaustion.

"You alright?" asked Barry.

But he wasn't.

He would need another minute before getting back on his feet.

"You alright?"

"No Snake, I am shaking... I am in shock"

Barry slapped him twice.

"No you ain't"

He moved closer to Ortega picking him up once more but this time with a lot more force.

"We've got to get the hell out of here man, and I mean now"

Ortega turned to Barry dumbfounded, but his amazement came and went. He was right, it sure as hell wasn't over, not over in the least. They weren't on board a fucking chopper or anything like that already.

As cold-hearted as it seemed, Ortega had to get over it everything that had happened. He couldn't afford to give a fuck about the mistakes he'd made, the men he'd lost or the physical condition he was in from then on. It was time to move on and forget it had ever happened.

Like a machine would.

Specifically because it wasn't over.

He had to silence his conscience, block out the cold, the pain, his shoulder, the fatigue.

All of it.

Like an animal – he said to himself.

The same way a fucking animal only thinks about staying alive.

That's what the expression 'fighting machine' really meant.

Therefore, Ortega got back on his feet, staggered a bit more but then asked Danforth to update him on the situation.

Coletta popped out of the vegetation right in front of Danforth and Ortega.
He was out of breath.

“It's a disaster boss: they are all over the place and heading in this direction”

“But have they actually located us or not?”

“Oh, man... You can be as sure as hell they have”

“Any potential LZs?”

“Two possibilities: one North and one West. Neither one will be easy though, and the West one even needs to be cleared with explosives first”

“Are the charges in place though?” Danforth intervened.

“Yeah, they are, it's done”

“How about the radio, is there any news on that?”

“Nothing yet” replied Messner.

“I think we may be low on batteries though”

Ortega bent down to get his AK and rucksack.

“What about the best LZ?”

“The west one”

Ortega looked West in consideration even though nothing could be seen from there.

In fact, he turned to face a wall of leaves and dense vegetation.

His eyes filled with anger because he was just fed up

He really couldn't stand it anymore.

He was at the end of his tether both mentally and physically, and for the first time in his life he thought about giving up in case he really lost it and exploded. Maybe it was time to put Danforth in command, or at least, just long enough to recover from that damn crossing.

Just for a bit – he thought.

Just for a bit.

In the end, he chose not to because he was more than capable of holding command.

His head was working just fine.

Therefore, he spoke up and said:

“Eagle, give me the rucksack with the left over explosives in it”

“What do you need it for?”

“Confirm the West LZ to the team, and wait for my signal before moving them all

out”

“But boss...”

“If I don't get back, you're in charge”

“There's no need to do this, boss” Danforth said.

“Go. Get outta here right, now. Get the fuck out of my sight, all of you”

Danforth turned to leave almost instantly whereas Coletta stayed put where he was.

“Is this because of Lowell?” he asked Ortega directly.

“Shut up, Sniper”

“There was nothing else you could do boss”

Ortega looked away and went on checking his gear since he'd just altered the setup.

“Don't get yourself killed”

“And you, you just think about your next fucking move soldier”

Coletta shook his head.

“You are out of your mind right now. We'll be waiting for you in any case”

Coletta turned and walked back to the rest of the group.

-

When he was finally alone, Ortega put the explosives in his rucksack while the others set out for the West LZ.

It was likely that the VCs already knew of all the pre-existing LZs in the vicinity. It obviously didn't take a genius to understand where a Huey could essentially land or not.

Clearly they couldn't get picked up on just any old, run of the mill LZ whatsoever. No, that was out of the question. They'd have to conjure one up just West of here, all on their own. The best part about that though was that the VCs definitely wouldn't have expected anything similar.

Once his equipment was ready, Ortega moved swiftly from tree to tree, gliding from one shadow to the next.

He was getting his strength back, at last.

Little by little, he was getting all his agility back even if he did still have sharp pains in his shoulder.

His shoulder wasn't the real problem however.

Ortega may have been pain struck, but what he felt most was anger with himself for all the wrong moves he'd made till then.

If they'd been attacked then and there, Ortega wouldn't just have fought the enemy. No, he wouldn't have stopped there. He was ready to die and as far as he was

concerned, dying was the right thing to do. Truth be told, Ortega wasn't thinking straight anymore. You have to keep in mind that Ortega had slept an average of two hours a night for the past two weeks and had probably lost at least fifteen pounds. He may have been 'gone' and not thinking straight, but well aware of it nevertheless because of all the training he'd received.

Fundamentally, the problem was that he was tired of thinking on behalf of his squad. Nonetheless, it was the wrong kind of attitude to have given his role on the team. All the same, right then and there, he didn't want to think through everything for everyone, but craved just going out there to fight.

In fact, now that it was nearly over, just that one time he only wanted to think about fighting.

That went against everything he and the others had always believed in, but he did not care.

In the meantime, the Hueys had gotten their attack underway.

Ortega heard the roaring sound of a machinegun firing off rounds and rockets exploding. Maybe one of the two Hueys was a gunship or perhaps a Cobra with heavy artillery had just joined the party.

It was hard to tell.

No matter which ones they were, the commotion they made was hellish even at that distance and it let Ortega run around without worrying about the noise he was making.

It wasn't far now to the 'fake' LZ which he'd be defending purely as a decoy to divert attention from the real one.

Ortega stopped on the outskirts of the planes to study the area more thoroughly.

The Vietcong were probably watching the perimeter already so Ortega asked himself were they could be hiding.

Not even a moment later, he'd already sighted his first two snipers.

There they are, those assholes – he thought.

Unfuckingbelievable.

They were waiting in position and somewhat camouflaged although not very well.

A third man held watch from a treetop as he was sitting on a kind of rope chair that hung from a branch.

Ortega took a few steps back making sure the shadows sufficiently hid his position.

Luckily, he'd seen them first and not vice versa so he was careful not to push his luck.

They would have problems if one of the two Hueys hovered over the real LZ because then the VCs would have run towards it and shot at the prisoners.

That's why Ortega had to kill them all, and now.

He didn't have any other choice.

Lucky – he thought.
Lucky I came to check.

Ortega crouched down behind a tree, laid the cartridges, grenades and the rucksack full of explosives down in front of him in an orderly fashion.

Then he opened up the rucksack: *four claymores, two losses: Rambo and Jorghenson. Actually, make that three* – he said correcting himself by adding his name to the list.
Fuck you all.

He then picked up the virtually empty rucksack and he threw it as far as he could, right smack in the middle of those VC snipers.

The instant he did, they started screaming back and forth to each other like crazy. The one on the top of the tree even tried to get down off his ropes.

Ortega opened fire.

He mowed the first two down with great ease, by blowing their heads into little red blood-filled clouds.

Then, he turned and took a shot at the one up in the tree as he stumbled to get down.

You should have jumped sooner, asshole – thought Ortega aiming straight for his heart.

The sniper fell backwards and head down as he hung from the ropes dead.

Then, what may have been an entire regiment appeared in front of Ortega's very eyes.

Great – thought Ortega.

Move in on me, you assholes.

Come on everybody; move on in, after all, this is our LZ.

Ortega got down low in his hole and aimed.

Now – he thought to himself.

He shot at his rucksack, blowing away what was left of the Baker team's C4.

There sure was a lot of C4, boy was there ever.

The explosion rocked the area so hard that Barry saw the trees sway right in front of him.

It was the sign he'd been waiting for. It was Ortega's signal and there was no doubt about it.

Barry pushed his wired up remote control three times, detonating a long series of small charges.

BOOM-BOOM-BOOM.

The trees looked like giants shot dead as they fell to the ground, one at time and perfectly in place.

The Baker team finally had its own LZ, at last, and this time it was the real one.

-

"Explosion: eastbound" said the chopper pilot.

"No, no, negative – said Garner -. That's not the real LZ, the west one is"

"I'd better tell Cobra then"

"Yes. Maximum coverage"

Then Garner turned to face his gunner and said:

"Dawson, did you see that other series of small explosions, at your six o'clock?"

"Affirmative"

"That's the real LZ"

"Confirmed, and I can see them too. That's right, sir! That's the LZ"

Garner's pilot got on the radio and updated the Phantom and Cobra pilots on the new situation.

The Huey initiated all necessary procedures slowing down and getting closer to both the new LZ and ground team.

Once Garner was close enough to really make out some facial features, he saw a guy that looked so much like Coletta he almost thought he was hallucinating.

Garner had realized that those men were SOG almost from the start, and he'd even seen them use smoke screen codes that only the Baker teams knew. Nevertheless, given that six other SOG teams were missing in action, while others had even started using Baker team signals he just couldn't believe it was actually them.

Yet, there was no mistaking it. That guy seriously looked like Coletta, and what's more he was even holding an M14 to boot.

*Well, I'll be damned, that sure does look like Coletta. – thought Garner to himself.
Ricardo...*

I can't believe it.
I just can't believe it.

Garner suddenly got a feeling in his gut
He'd known that guy for almost two years so he wanted to be hopeful. Yet at times of war, and especially with *that* war in particular, hope always ended in suffering. That's why a part of him didn't want to go ahead and believe it.

At least not yet, anyways.

So whether that was Coletta or not, the guy sporting the M14 was now running towards the open plains like a madman without any kind of cover seemingly immortal.

If Coletta was down there though...

If that guy was really Coletta, then maybe there were other Baker team survivors too.

“Covey leader, do you copy?”

“Go ahead, Garner” responded the colonel.

“Covey leader, I...”

That's when Garner actually got a look at the others, the entire group to be exact. Hidden among the dense vegetation, they were getting into position before having to move into the open for a Huey pick up. There were quite a few of them too.

Garner stopped briefly to study them further before proceeding with what he had to say via radio.

Yes, Garner recognized at least two other faces among those in the group, and their resemblance to Messner and Krakauer was uncanny. There were two, maybe even three faces he'd never seen before however, who unlike the others actually seemed underfed. They were in far worse shape than the others, in fact even their eyes looked...

Garner realized who those men were or *what* they were rather, almost instantly.

Those were POWs, for God's sake.

American prisoners of war.

Jesus Christ.

“Covey leader... Christ, okay. Listen, I'm not confirming anything yet, but there's a chance that those guys may be Baker Team survivors down there. What is more, by the looks of it, I'd say they've got two American POWs with them. There may even be three.

A long silence ensued. Garner figured Trautman had lost his voice, from the shock. So he added:

“Whatever the case may be, we're picking them all up right now, Sir”

-

The radio room personnel following Trautman's transmission, cried out in joy. Everyone seemed to jump out from behind their desks excitedly. Trautman however, who couldn't believe how the events were unfolding, simply collapsed down into his chair.

After all that time (and all those other SOG teams gone missing in action) Trautman just couldn't bring himself around to believing it. He wouldn't dare. It would crush him if it turned out to be the contrary.

You're too close to them— Garner had once told him at Fort Bragg, and he'd been right.

If one of those guys ever doesn't make it, it'll be hard on you.

Right now it's the same for me too. We're too attached.

That's why I need to ask you this colonel...

If things ever got really bad, could you command just the same? Would you risk their lives the same way you do with everyone else's?

At the time, Trautman had answered yes without the slightest hesitation. The truth of the matter was however, that Garner had been right. He'd been right on so many other occasions too, which was why Trautman esteemed him as much as he did.

In any case, whether Trautman wanted or not, that team was certainly a masterpiece, but not just his alone. They'd become much more than that.

There were shouts of joy as everyone in the room began redirecting whatever means available, be it teams, planes or choppers, to that triangle in Laos. All the while however, as his surroundings continued to bustle, Trautman did something that he'd rarely done before.

He prayed.

God, I beg of you – prayed Trautman.

Please... Don't let Garner be wrong about who they are.

Just let it be them.

-

“Some of them are in really bad shape down there” exclaimed Garner. It could end up complicating things.

Actually, it did complicate things; there was no doubt about it.

“Given the state some of them are in, using the ladder out is of the question. God Damn it, we have to go down. We have to touch the fucking ground”

“Roger that” said the pilot.

The other helicopter overtook them but remained in the vicinity in case one chopper wasn't sufficient. After all, the exact pick up number was still unknown. The Cobra on the other hand maintained a higher altitude while surveying the entire area.

“Garner... - said the Huey pilot - the Phantoms and the Cobra are asking us if all the personnel is accounted for and the LZ confirmed, or if there are any MIAs.”

“No, they are not all fucking accounted for! Nothing's confirmed yet!”

“Yessir. Hang on back there, we're going down now!”

-

After Coletta had explored the area's outskirts outside, was now Danforth ahead of them all just on the side lines of the brand new, dynamite cleared LZ.

It was then and there that he saw the helicopter begin its landing procedures.

It was like a divine apparition, almost celestial.

After all that time, and not knowing whether he'd live or die, he finally had something to believe in.

He shivered like someone was walking on his grave.

Maybe, this time, they really were going home.

His thoughts were interrupted by Coletta, who screamed out desperately from practically half way across the field.

“TEN SECONDS” Coletta bellowed, before firing a couple of warning shots towards the jungle.

Ten seconds – thought Danforth while loading his AK.

Ten fucking seconds before all hell breaks loose

Danforth made everyone get out of their hiding places and then glanced towards where enemies fire was coming from.

They'd have to be fast, incredibly fast.

The time had come and he was ready.

Ready for whatever would happen next.

His self-assuredness brought apprehension about Ortega however, and what must have really happened to him.

If the VCs were coming from the direction they were, then that could only mean they'd broken through Ortega's block point. If they'd passed through Ortega's block point however, then that had to mean Ortega was dead.

Danforth stomped his foot in rage.

“DAMN IT!” he screamed.

The circumstances called for getting over it immediately however, and so he did

He was their cover, but he didn't have a whole lot of ammo left. Knowing he couldn't waste a single bullet, he made sure every shot counted. By that point, the VCs were on the opposite side of the plains which left him just enough time to shoot to kill.

They were barely a stone throw from Coletta's checkpoint as he took aim, so if they did not somehow hold them back, the LZ would be at risk.

-

Precisely ten seconds later, Delmore, Krakauer and Messner each loaded a prisoner on their backs, and made a run for the helicopter, which was on the point of touching down.

Delmore was the last one to leave.

He ran all the way past Danforth, dropped of his prisoner, went back to take Danforth's place and started shooting.

By that point, the Huey had landed.

Danforth and Messner threw themselves along with Johnson and Ruckerson onto the helicopter where Garner was keeping cover M16 in hand.

"Garner?!" Messner said with a weak voice, but Garner didn't bother t to reply. He was on the radio to one person and talking to his pilot all at the same time. As he dealt with them both, his eyes shifted back and forth probing the entire area.

"WHERE THE FUCK IS COBRA? WHERE THE FUCK IS IT?" the gunner screamed at the top of his lungs to Messner, obviously irate, and rightly so, as he helped the hostages get on.

I guess it wasn't time for the victory lap just yet. Not even by a long shot.

Snapping out of it, Messner signalled the prisoners to lie down on the helicopter floor. Once they'd done so directly below the gunner, he spring hooked them so they wouldn't fly overboard once they lifted off. Satisfied Messner had gotten the point, the gunner went back to his M60.

That's better – thought Messner.

Because we may be low now, but once we're a few maters above the trees, we'll need that damn sixty for sure.

-

Coletta fired his last shot with his M14 and then tossed it because it was too long for the soon-to-be-overcrowded Huey. Not a second later, he started running like hell for the helicopter.

He ran across the plain as fast as he could, even passing Delmore who had gone back to cover him. Once he got to the Huey, he jumped on so fast not paying the least bit attention to where he was actually going.

In fact, once on, Coletta banged his head against the steel door knocking himself right over and onto Messner, Krakauer, the gunner and even the prisoners.

Almost per que, there was suddenly a long bang resembling an avalanche or something.

Looking up in panic, through the Huey's open door he caught sight of the Cobra

attack chopper hovering precisely above them.

He stared as its machinegun spun around spitting out a cascade of shells all around it as it did.

The white tracer beaming out of the barrel was as stable as a laser. Despite the lethargic speed in which it shifted from right to left, it was onehandedly deforesting the dense jungle opposite the plain.

Holy shit – thought Coletta watching the cartridge cases drop in front of him like water pouring from a faucet.

Delmore was the last one left and now it was his turn.

He turned to shoot one last time letting another couple of rounds of his AK go off and then tossed it.

“COME ON!” screamed out Coletta.

“COME ON! COME ON” everyone else echoed.

Despite the bullet storm coming out of the Cobra, which coincidentally was already changing position, VC heads started popping up on the plain’s outskirts.

Delmore ran even faster, desperate almost

Now he’s gonna get himself killed – thought Coletta to himself.

The helicopter had begun its lift off and was at least a foot high off the ground by then.

“WAIT” shouted Messner, worried the helicopter would take off without Barry.

The coloured guy almost tripped but managed to jump not once, but twice, and the second looked like a long jump. He was so far away however, that when he eventually landed from this last jump it was quite violently on top of everyone else.

Multiple hands shot out instantly to hold him tight and everyone else started shouting.

“GO, GO, GO”

The engine revved straightaway and the blades went faster tilting the chopper to one side lifting it.

“NO! OH GOD NO! LOOK OVER THERE! THERE!” screamed Chester, stretching his arm out and pointing.

They all turned.

It's difficult to say why no one on the Baker team had noticed him whereas Chester had. Perhaps it had been because they were all staring towards the plain’s outskirts. Whatever the reason, as soon as Chester screamed they all noticed at the same time.

“ORTEGA!” bellowed Danforth.

In the heat of the moment, the vice-leader let out Ortega's real name.

Ortega had lived through the fight with the Vietcong. He sure had.

He’d gotten through their lines without being seen and had kept out of the Cobra’s line of fire. He’d subsisted it all and was now tearing towards a helicopter that was

practically six feet above the ground.

“PILOT! PILOT! PILOT!” shouted Danforth.

“THE LADDER! THROW THE LADDER OUT!”

“Fuck! Is there another one?” yelled the pilot in bewilderment.

“HE’S ONE OF MY MEN, GOD DAMN IT!” screamed Garner back

“PILOT! THERE’S ONE MORE THERE! THE LADDER!”

The pilot rose his thumb three times.

“Yeah, we can do it. LADDER OUT! LADDER OUT!”

The ladder was rolled up tight inside one of the panels underneath them and getting it loose was nothing short of a fight in itself.

“Cover him! Cover him! Cover him!” exclaimed Krakauer.

“Give me that” said Coletta.

The selected sharpshooter took the M60 out of their gunner’s hands and pointed it down below.

He then took a deep breath and began to aim in the calmest of manner.

When he finally pulled the trigger, the Vietcong on Ortega’s heels stopped abruptly and fell face first to the ground.

Without further delay, Coletta redirected his aim.

“ORTEGA” they all shouted in unison.

Danforth had given away his real name so they were all using it at that point.

“COME ON ORTEGA!”

“COME ON! COME ON!”

At that point, the helicopter was fifteen feet above the ground but the ladder, which was far longer than that, was still dragging along

Ortega still had a chance.

“COME ON, COME ON, COME ON”

They were all yelling, even the pilot, despite not having a visual on Ortega’s actual whereabouts.

The Cobra that was now hovering next to the Huey, seemed to notice Ortega unexpectedly.

The moment it did however, it turned so violently in his direction that it almost turned on itself.

Virtually facing Ortega, it unleashed a hailstorm of bullets so close behind him that they only just missed him.

Despite all their efforts, there was still an incessant number of VC on Ortega’s heels as he continued running almost entirely out in the open without cover. As if that wasn’t enough however, there was still the fact that once he actually got onto the ladder and hung on, it would make him the perfect target.

In the meantime, Coletta kept on shooting single shots. Notwithstanding how slow it

seemed he was actually shooting, he had already taken down more of the enemy than the Cobra itself.

No one had ever seen an M60 get used like that before.

Ortega was able to get some distance between him and his pursuers.

The Vietcong preferred falling behind in exchange for cover given that the Cobra was covering him. The attack helicopter lifted its nose a bit, just the necessary to miss Ortega, and promptly shifted its weapon system to explosive rockets.

“COME ON ORTEGA! COME ON!”

By the time Ortega finally reached them, more or less a step away from the ladder, his face was thunderstruck and his eyes practically bulging out of his head.

He jumped onto the ladder and clutched on with all his might.

Feeling the rebound from Ortega's bodyweight, the pilot accelerated upward instantly.

“GO! GO! GO!” they shouted in chorus, even if the Huey was already lifting off.

-

Ortega held the ladder just between his armpit and elbow and hung on as tight as he could. At first, the chopper dragged him along for a couple of feet but it went up soon after.

In fact, not even a second later, he was already a meter and a half above the ground.

At that point, he was overcome by a sense of confusion.

Everything went surreal, somewhat dreamlike.

It's a dream – he thought, while bullets whistled past him and he got higher and higher.

it has to be a dream, it couldn't be otherwise.

The two choppers left together but stayed relatively low to avoid becoming easy targets. The Cobra stayed behind however acting as their cover.

When Ortega was next to the Cobra, naturally still hanging from the ladder, he was so close that he felt the air blow out of its machinegun.

Holy Shit.

A second later, the trees were slowly swaying beneath him

He knew couldn't just hang there and that the sooner he went up that damn ladder, the better it was, but when he took his first step he got sharp pains in his arms and shoulder paralyzing him.

He couldn't do it.

He just couldn't pull himself up. The effort to get out of the river had been too much and the pain wasn't helping any either.

He gave it another try but this time he screamed in pain, but again with no avail. He didn't have enough control over his arms to do it.

Then he thought that maybe staying there was for the better, and little did he know that it would be that very thought to save his life shortly after.

In fact, Ortega grabbed the spring hook they always carried near their shoulder and fastened it to one of the ladder's steps, and right after he did, a sniper bullet went through his arm into his chest.

In reality, Ortega had neither heard nor felt anything apart from a spasm which could've easily been an electric shock. Then his vision turned blurry like a white cloud.

He tried fighting the pain and shock but his legs suddenly became wobbly, his sight blurred and he passed out full weight onto the spring hook.

His gear immediately tightened all around him so violently that it nearly squeezed him to death but it did hold his weight. That was, after all, precisely the kind of circumstances it was designed for.

When Ortega regained consciousness, his sight may have been blurry, but he was still alive and ticking.

Not to mention the fact that he hadn't fallen off and splattered onto the ground.

Everything was becoming distant and blurry again though.

He was about to lose consciousness again and that wasn't good because maybe, this time, he wouldn't wake up.

Maybe his injury was life threatening.

Maybe he was dying.

When everything turned dark, Ortega wondered if it might be the darkness of death indeed.

He glanced down, looking at nothing, but it was all out of focus and he could barely just make out the outline of the jungle trees that passed hurriedly by.

Stay awake.

Stay awake

They were flying so fast that blood seemed to spray out of him the way it would from a spray can.

Just how much fucking blood am I losing?

Don't fall asleep.

Stay awake.

The pain got sharper, burning almost, and was becoming unbearable fast, but again, he knew that was a good thing.

Pain meant that he'd live at least a few more hours. Yeah right, that's it.

A soldier knows that feeling pain is a good sign.

As a result, Ortega resigned to just staying there, attached to the ladder and bleeding in the sky. Right overhead however, the rather confused gunner kept trying to look down hoping to get an understanding of what the hell was actually going on.

-

“They hit him” said the gunner who, in the meantime, had changed his position and was presently beside the winch.

Messner tried looking down below too but without any luck.

The entire team strained to stretch out and see for themselves, but it was impossible because of the fastenings that secured them.

Messner exchanged looks with Delmore, and it was enough.

All at once, the five Baker team soldiers grabbed onto each other's belt and held tight, and when they were ready, Messner unfastened his spring hook and stretched right out of the Huey as the human chain held him up from above.

“Yup, he's been shot – said Messner -. I can see a lot of blood. All the same, he is trying to hold himself up and seems conscious”

-

The Cobra caught up to the two Hueys, but instead of getting into their usual formation, it nosedove down to get at eye level with Ortega.

The pilot was wearing the usual green helmet with a dark visor. His visor was down so you couldn't see his eyes, but once parallel to Ortega, he shifted his sights over to him. The Baker team leader's head was off to one side bobbing up and down and his eyes were half-closed. His hands were reaching for the ladder, but to absolutely no avail because the wind gusts kept pushing them aside.

His blood was still spraying out of him the same way it would from a spray can.

Nevertheless, he was conscious.

Consequently therefore, he was still alive.

-

On board the Huey, Garner turned around to face the others and shouted:

“The Cobra right below us says that Ortega has been hit in the arm, but that he is conscious”

Everyone exchanged looks but there was nothing they could do. Not right there and then anyways.

They were still too close to the Vietcong to do anything useful. They had to get out of there, and fast.

Then the pilot went on to add:

“We are going to pull him up in... (Checking his watch) exactly one minute. One minute!”

Only then did the prisoners really come to terms with the fact that they'd *made it out*.
Really out.
As of now, they were free.
They'd done it.
It was over.
They were going back to the US.
They were going to *live*.

Ruckerson, who was packed up against the five Baker team survivors, looked over at Chester and Johnson before moving one hand to touch Chester's shoulder because he was closest.
Initially, he managed to stay calm, but soon after, he had to cover his face with his hand because he burst into tears. As everyone naturally thought, he should.

"Everything's fine, man" said Danforth, standing behind him, as he reached to put his arms around his shoulders.
"It's all over"

Ruckerson, also known as 'Rack' – who wasn't even in the military, but a civil engineer – started sobbing so hard it sounded like he was going to suffocate.
It was as though all of the tension albeit from the raid, from all those damn days spent in the jungle or from the damn final getaway, was trying to get out at the same time, but couldn't.

"HOW'S ORTEGA?" he shouted afterwards.
He was drooling. His voice sounded somewhat altered from all the crying. He was almost howling in despair.
"Hey" said Danforth, giving him a good squeeze.
"Calm down, man" Krakauer said to him smiling.
Coletta on the contrary, broke out in laughter, and Barry followed heed.
Only Messner managed to keep a straight face unlike the rest.

The three (now formerly) prisoners of war made room to reach out and hug each other. As they did, they placed their foreheads against each other's, not unlike football players do. By that point, they were all in tears. They were crying, hugging and touching foreheads without even knowing why anymore.
They were coughing, moaning, hugging tight and pulling at each other the way

puppies from the same litter do, trembling and with their eyes still closed
Then, Ruckerson's stuck his head out and looked in the team's direction.

“HOW IS ORTEGA?” he yelled out for a second time, spitting on the others as he did.

His nose was even dripping.

“He has been hit in an arm, but it's under control” Messner said from behind, with a cool impassive voice. It was a white lie, but quite an insignificant one by then.

“He will make it” he went on to add.

“Where are Raven and the other guy...what's he called...”

“Grizzly” said Danforth.

“Yeah, him”

“They are pulling them up on board another helicopter. Everything fine, okay?”

Another lie, just a bigger one this time, but Danforth couldn't do otherwise. Trautman's *'don't talk bullshit'* rule definitely did not work on civilians.

One day he would have told them the truth, maybe even right after they'd landed at the base, but now was not the time to do it. It was just too soon to tell them.

Ruckerson looked pleadingly back at the Baker team still in tears.

“Thank you” he said

Danforth, Barry, Krakauer Messner and Coletta met his look with embarrassment, feeling kind of tingly and moved, so much so that they almost started crying with him.

“I just don't know how to express it enough” added Ruckerson.

“Thank you”

“Thanks for what?” - said Danforth grinning.

“We don't even exist” added Krakauer.

With that, Ruckerson finally smiled back, because it was over.
This time it really was over.

“Garner, this is Trautman here: situation report”

“Garner, this is Trautman here: situation report”

“God damn it, Garner: talk to me”

“This is the pilot, sir. Garner can't talk right now.

Everything's done, sir.

He says that there's one injured and two missing”

(Trautman closed his eyes and took a deep breath)

“Give me the names, soldier”

*“Garner says... He says that Raven and Grizzly are the ones missing sir.
Skorpio on the other hand, is in pretty bad shape, but still breathing”*

No, not Rambo – thought Trautman to himself, while everyone in the room around him continued to bustle with joy and excitement.

Anyone but him, please.

Yet, paradoxically, they'd actually lost him.

Damn right they had, and had they ever.

Because, that's the way that Goddamn war worked.

Around him, everyone was busy shaking hands and patting each other on the back. They were all rejoicing over the release of American prisoners, which was, without question, an incredible feat all in itself. Trautman on the contrary stood motionless and gazed into space.

Losing one of his closest men wasn't a common occurrence for him.

It hurt.

Dammit did it ever.

Bronze star

On a dangerous rescue mission to liberate prisoners of war in enemy territory, privates Carl Jorgenson (M.I.A.) and John Rambo (M.I.A.) – who, at the time had a foot injury– volunteered to create a diversion attack against an enemy both larger in number and better equipped.

The objective of the diversion was to guarantee the survival of both the team members and the only-recently freed prisoners of war, whose rescue was the sole objective of the mission itself. For volunteering of their own spontaneous free will for such a highly dangerous action – that would almost-certainly cost them their lives – and for having shown self-abnegation going well beyond the common call of duty, privates John Rambo and Carl Jorghnson are both awarded the bronze star for merit.

Silver Star

During a dangerous helicopter-evacuation operation, Sergeant Manuel Ortega, acting without scruple in regards to his own safety, singlehandedly attacked a team of enemy forces with the sole purpose of slowing them down.

After leaving his teammates, he faced the enemy hindering them for the time needed – and essential – to save his own men and the three recently rescued prisoners of war. For this improvised operation and for the self-abnegations shown while being in a commanding role during a very delicate rescue mission, Sergeant Ortega is to be awarded the Silver Star.

Baker Team B

Manuel Ortega (W.I.A.)
Silver Star
Purple Heart

John Rambo (W.I.A., M.I.A.):
Bronze Star
Purple Heart

Carl Jorgenson (M.I.A.):
Bronze Star

Ron Lowell (K.I.A./BNR)

BAKER TEAM B

TEAM STATUS AT CURRENT DATE - 25/06/1969

ON ACTIVE DUTY:

Joseph "Eagle" Danforth

Barry "Snake" Delmore

Ricardo "Sniper" Coletta

Daniel "Doc" Messner

Lawrence "Tiger" Krakauer

INJURED PERSONNEL/LOSSES:

Manuel "Scorpio" Ortega W.I.A.

John "Raven" Rambo W.I.A. / M.I.A.

Carl "Grizzly" Jorgenson M.I.A.

NOTES:

W.I.A. Wounded In Action

M.I.A. Missing In Action

P.O.W. Prisoner Of War

L.K.A. Last Known Alive

K.I.A. Killed In Action

B.N.R. Body Not Recovered

P.F.O.D. Presumptive Finding Of Death

OPERATION POINT OF NO RETURN

The end

DOCUMENTS

The prologue: Jorgenson in hospital

During the course of his suffering at the field hospital, Jorgenson is physically weakened almost to the point of death, and can't do anything if not wait.

His own, very personal perception of the hospital is clearly exaggerated, almost horror-film like. His perception has obviously been altered by something, even if we don't know what to be exact.

The horrific conditions found in military hospitals, happens to be a recurring theme seen in many Vietnam War memorials and several films as well. Generally, these horrors go above and beyond the imagination, turning the hospitals into bleak, scruffy and highly contaminated areas. In some films, such as *JACOB'S LADDER* and *BORN ON THE FOURTH JULY* (the latter telling the story of the veteran and then journalist Ron Kovic), the horrors are plainly evident.

Many of the veterans unlucky enough to experience the kind of agony Jorgenson did throughout this book, described their hospitals to be just as horrible, if not worse, recalling details that had never existed (as was the case with rats) but believing them true even years later.

Within the pages of a military book about medicine and psychology, I discovered that this psychological phenomenon was well known to those working with the wounded. Moreover, I discovered that it happens with regularity, even nowadays in situations of war.

In near death situations, one's state of mind and weakened physical state put those who are injured into a mind-state not unlike a 'bad trip' obtained by using the very famous LSD hallucinogen drug.

This occurs because the injured awaits the coming of death, and is stuck in a situation where stress levels become unbearably high and there's nothing he can do to defend himself from it.

Having to wait, and not being able to do anything in the meantime, becomes unsustainable.

Minute after minute anxiety builds up so much that the brain starts misunderstanding the signal it receives from the real world, and the sounds and images change to such a degree that the wounded starts having hallucinations.

The hospital seen through Jorgenson's eyes, with its unreal scenes and its rats on the floor is an accurate depiction of this phenomenon, which is similar to what is described in those manuals.

Rambo, Ortega and Seargent Alvarez:
The 'Fragging'

Of all of the historical sources that inspired my saga, that's the most surreal of them all.

Without this note, you would have accused me of being problematic, immoral and mean spirited, but it isn't the case. This note, more than any other, explains why I decided to write down all of the historical facts that inspired me.

The US started to perceive the Vietnam war as a 'lost' war with the 1968 Tet offensive, even if that wasn't the case on the field, and the conflict went on for another four years.

The problem is that dying for a war one already considers lost is very similar to 'dying for nothing'.

As the US commitment went on, soldier morale got progressively lower, until it gave way to racial riots, drugs abuse and increasingly more violent protests against everything. Entire platoons refused to obey orders and the number of crimes committed by soldiers rose to unbelievable levels.

The term 'fragging' (literally 'to destroy with grenade fragments') became the most popular method to 'self-defend' from incompetent high ranking officers (and so, very dangerous) or too audacious (the so called 'medal-hunters').

Every time an officer lost men he risked becoming a target himself, and wounding or killing him became the easiest way for the troops to get another, more expert, more prudent officer. Or at the very least, a less zealous one. Considering the mortality of US troops in Vietnam, many considered 'fragging' a legitimate form of self-defence: *"if we don't get rid of him now, he's going to get us all killed".*

The most common method used to get rid of an officer (even if wounding them was enough to have them transferred elsewhere) was throwing a hand grenade inside his tent while he slept (hence the word 'fragging'). Hand grenades didn't have a serial number, revealed no fingerprints after the fact and you could never really say it wasn't just an accident.

There were however, other ways too.

Oftentimes, someone shot the officer in the back in battle, or you summoned him to some remote place and then faked an attack by some solitary sniper who, in all actuality, didn't exist.

The most underhand method, yet nevertheless entirely legal, was making him run dangerous risks without him suspecting it in the least. An illustration of this could be having him called urgently to an area in which enemy snipers were present and

waiting for US soldiers.

During the second half of the conflict, the US army became a very violent environment.

The act of revenge that Trautman asked Ortega and Rambo to carry out, referring to it as a 'personal favour', is an example of this violence. Even if it isn't a standard illustration of 'fragging', it certainly isn't impossible considering how often these events occur every day.

History books cite about two hundred verified *fragging* cases yearly.

Throughout the duration of the war, if we also include those cases considered suspect yet highly probable, the total hits one thousand and four hundred cases.

One in four soldiers had been an accomplice to, or known a victim of such a case.

SOME OTHER SHORT HISTORICAL NOTES:

Rambo and the SOG stats: 100% of KIA or WIA

The SOG stats that Rambo read without Trautman's knowledge are factual, even if, should we want to be exact, they refer to the whole war, and not exclusively to 1969, the year in which the book is set.

Ironically enough, it was actually far worse than that.

In fact, the SOG suffered 110% death or injured rate, because many of its soldiers were wounded multiple times.

The luckiest SOGs survivors made it home with minor injuries.

The other sad record set by the SOG was the number of missing in action it had.

With regards to the number of soldiers that fought on their lines, the SOG is probably the unit that suffered the highest percentage of missing in action in US history.

The presidential authorization

Author Jhon Plaster (along with others) says that some very delicate SOG missions (that might have had an impact on some matters of international diplomacy) were personally authorized by the president of the US himself.

The blackboard before the briefing *'the others use metal plates but you SOG teams don't. We write your names in chalk because your names never stay on the blackboard more than three days'*

This dialogue is real but as requested by the veteran who cited it, I won't mention my source.

RAMBO YEAR ONE
TAKE ME TO THE DEVIL

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WRITTEN BY WALLACE LEE

BASED ON THE CHARACTERS CREATED BY DAVID MORRELL
A DOUBLE EDGED GHOST WRITINGS FREESHARE RELEASE