

Run Between the Raindrops

by Dale A. Dye, 1944–

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To the gallant Marine grunts who fought and won the Battle of Hue City.
Even after all these years, it's still an honor to stand in your dwindling ranks.

Author's Foreword

This book began in the worst possible way for some of the best possible reasons. That's a fairly evocative comment to make about a work published some 25 years

ago to scant critical notice and lukewarm sales that barely covered my meager author's advance, so I'll take the opportunity of this resurrection to render some thoughts on my first novel.

Ironically, action on this book began on Okinawa, that far eastern island that served as launching point for so many of us who wound up in Vietnam anytime from about 1965 through the end of war ten years later. I was in a fairly stable three-year tour of duty out there having committed to a career as a U.S. Marine and managed to wangle a commission from the enlisted ranks. In a nod to upward mobility, I followed the urging of then Staff Sergeant Maggie Chavez, my wife at the time, and began pursuing a college education. It was a truly wonderful experience, but I was too ignorant to appreciate Maggie forcing me into a consciousness-raising pursuit that paid huge dividends later. Thanks, Maggie. And I'm truly sorry it took me until now to say that.

Another person I need to thank for the experience at the University of Maryland's University College out there on The Rock is Dr. George Sidney, who was my English professor and later became my literary mentor. George was a scrawny little guy with a big brain and heart to match. It was hard for me to credit the fact that he'd been a Marine rifleman during the bitter fighting in Korea, but he'd come through the Chosin Reservoir campaign and even wrote a book about his experiences. And that's what tripped the trigger and launched the initial effort to write about some of my own wartime experiences.

We were within sight of my baccalaureate degree in English Lit and looking for something that would grant me a final fistful of credits needed when George started talking about his war experiences and how difficult it had been for him to write about them. He spoke about some of the scenes in his book and they sounded so like things I'd seen in Vietnam that I couldn't keep my big mouth shut. "I should write a book about Nam."

George squinted at me and pondered for a moment. It wasn't the first time we'd shared wartime horror stories, but it was the only time I'd mentioned wanting to write about it. "If you do," he said picking at the label on a bottle of Kirin Beer, "and if it's as good as some of your other writing, I'll check the blocks and grant you the degree requirements."

With multiple Vietnam tours under my belt between 1965 and 1970, each with their own ample dosages of unique experience and colorful characters, it was clear to me in the planning stages that I was going to have to narrow the focus. To do that, I simply had to open the flood gates and let the images flow from where they'd been dammed up in memory. Nothing crystallized as clear and nerve-jangling as three weeks in Hue City during Tet of 1968. It was right then, as I pondered the image of gore-stained Navy Hospital Corpsman binding wounds to get Marines back into the fight raging through Vietnam's ancient imperial capital, that I came up with the title for this book.

"Ain't it a bitch?" Doc Toothpick asked me one night toward the end of the battle for the northside. "Seems like making it through this Hue City deal is like trying to run between the raindrops without getting wet." And there was the title. Now I simply had to write the rest.

Having read most of the greater and lesser war novels as part of my formal education and my abiding interest in all things military, I knew they ran curiously

to type. The new guy flush with innocence arrives in a combat unit, meets a colorful cast of characters both princely and pathetic, becomes steeled or unnerved by the brutalities of combat, and either gets his ass blown away or survives, returning to an ungrateful nation that just can't understand what he's experienced. I wanted to write something different with trappings and observations on the gonzo model of first person, experiential screeds that would convey the surreal, often hallucinatory images I recalled from fighting in the mean streets of Hue.

It was a scary prospect and I felt the need for reinforcements, so I communicated with my close combat buddy who had fought through most of the Hue City battle until he got riddled with rocket shrapnel. Both of us had harbored delusions of writing The Great American War Novel at one time or another over the years since Saigon fell. We were both writers. We were both angst-riddled and angry. Why not collude and collaborate on a book about Hue?

Why not indeed? And we tried to make it work but our styles, motivations and schedules never quite came into sync. It wasn't his fault. It was mine for insisting on a departure from conventional storytelling. The more I pondered, the more I became convinced that the tale should be as twisted and torturous as the fighting that formed its core. Historians, journalists, and other chroniclers could deal with the facts of the Hue City fight. I wanted to take readers on a head-trip that jangled, sizzled, and buzzed like a bad acid jag. In my view, the story—or the impact I wanted it to convey—demanded an erratic, staccato style with prose as raw as the scenes it described. That sort of tune could only be played by a one-man band, so writing the novel would be a solo effort.

At this point, the story began to boil, bubble, and come alive. I thrashed away on a typewriter, often working through the night as Maggie got used to wearing earplugs and dealing with the night sweats prompted by recounting some of the most harrowing moments of my life. It was both rewarding and therapeutic. I learned that I'd been suppressing some bad memories that were prompting bad behavior. These days that's called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Back then I thought it was just the stoic, manly way of dealing with painful experiences about which noble warriors did not speak publically. And I learned that like a resounding, healthy fart, such things are better out than in. Mentally reliving the experiences I recounted in writing "Run Between the Raindrops" didn't cure me of my war nerves, but it did force me to confront some very lethal demons that would have eventually eaten my soul.

Along the way I learned a lot about novel writing and about the weird way I engage in that lonely pursuit. I'm a very visual guy and what I do is close my eyes, let a scene unspool in vivid, living color, and then do my best to describe the movie I've just seen on the inside of my eyelids. Most writers don't do it that way. But another thing I learned is that I'm not like most writers, which might account for my less than sterling notoriety in literary circles. Writing for most writers I've met seems to be a very cerebral exercise. For me, it's a sort of low-impact PT session. I write with my body as much as my brain. In the course of composing a single novel, I've been known to completely wear the letters off a keyboard home row. I also talk to myself quite a bit, sounding out the dialogue and tasting the words.

When I'm shouting or screaming in this effort, I've been known to frighten small children and set dogs to howling for blocks around the neighborhood.

Fortunately, I'm fairly facile with language, but when I handed in a first draft to Dr. George Sidney, he thought it was too stilted. George felt I was over-structured and confining myself with conventional prose. "You've got to let it flow from your mind, onto the paper and into the imagination of the reader." George thought it might be a good drill if I went back through the manuscript and tried to eliminate the first-person pronouns. I did that—mostly to appease him—and it turned out to be a brilliant exercise. Suddenly sentence structure lost its sharp edges and rounded into a burbling stream of consciousness. It was the key that popped my story-telling instincts wide open and allowed me to include some very, very personal and painful elements that I'd been afraid to expose in the initial telling.

That doesn't mean *Run Between the Raindrops* can't be improved. It's full of literary naiveté and writing blunders that I would neither make nor tolerate these days. I'm a better writer—or at least more practiced at it—than I was back when I first composed this book. I've completed and published seven other novels since and learned a great deal from writing each of them. My prose is less derivative now that I've found my own voice, although I still tend to wield words like a meat-axe. I understand now that story-telling is an art that improves with age and practice. So, in that more polished voice and with nearly a half-century of distance at hand, I've consented to take a second look at this book, smooth some literary bumps, and try to improve the product.

It's been difficult to edit by revisiting those mind-numbing experiences in Hue, but I believe now as I did back on Okinawa many years ago that the gain is worth the pain. Some of that has to do with the war stories I hear these days from veterans of the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Likely because these vets know I've seen the elephant and heard the owl, they open up to me and describe some of their own most seminal experiences in combat. And many of their stories contain the same sort of surreal, shocking elements that I recall so vividly from the battle for Hue City back in 1968. There's a common denominator there that needs to be explored and explained to ensure this new generation of veterans doesn't experience the ignorance and ennui we did on return from our war in Vietnam. If some of these folks read "Run Between the Raindrops," they may see that common bond and realize their situation is hardly unique. Painful memories and haunting images are part of the dues you pay to play in the deadly and desperate game of mortal combat.

If you've not read the book, I hope you enjoy this version. If you're one of the few who read it when it was released back in 1984, I hope you'll take another look and follow me once again, step by painful step, through the mean streets of Hue City during Tet 1968. Either way, I'm genuinely glad for your company.

Prologue

Most of the emotion-drunk survivors in the belly of this vibrating beast are higher than whatever the instruments in the cockpit indicate. Most of them are

out of it one way or another. This Flying Tiger is removing mostly-whole bodies from the Land of the Lotus Eaters and that's a huge jolt to the collective pulse. There's an energy surge that seems to sweep and spark through long rows of uniformed bodies strapped into narrow seats. Layered over the hum of the engines propelling this big silver cylinder out over the South China Sea is a counterpoint of young male voices singing excitedly of plans and expectations.

They run curiously to type, these young American males with dark leathery tans running from the neck up and the elbows down where skin shows through unfamiliar dress uniforms. Random seatmates become best buddies as they share plans to tear The World a new asshole beginning immediately after landing. But that's 14 hours from now, a tiny tick in time compared to 12 months or more in The Nam. They will endure, calling on long practice in dealing with things in-county that they could not change regardless of how hard they wished or prayed.

A sweaty soldier at my elbow wearing a Purple Heart under aircrew wings wants to show off an album he compiled flying as a door gunner with the 1st Cav. He's chatty and chipper, providing detailed descriptions of the rice paddies and jungle-covered mountains he snapped from his seat in a Huey. There's even an aerial shot of the Citadel in Hue. He wants to talk about that. No way... not yet... too soon.

Searching for distraction I just nod and stare at scudding clouds outside the window. Door Gunner turns on the man sitting at his other elbow, a truck driver that wants to talk about a convoy ambush somewhere north of Danang. They play one-up with each other while I stuff stereo earphones into my head and click through recorded tunes. There's some Motown. Philly Dog would dig it but he's dead, cut down with his buddy Willis on the walls of the Citadel. Country channel blares with somebody singing about a ring of fire. Same song the Southerner used to sing off-key through his crooked nose, but Reb is gone, chopped nearly in half by some faceless gook gunner in Hue City. Janis Joplin strikes a chord: Nothin' left to lose. That's freedom.

There it is—and images from Hue City flicker behind my eyelids. There it is among all the poor over-stressed, under-appreciated guys that fought through that shit-storm. Too many of them dead, crushed, or crippled and nobody celebrates what they accomplished with not much more than guts and a determination not to let each other down. It could have been me—probably should have been me—dead and bloated among the mist and moss on those walls. But it's not over by a damn sight, not at the end of this flight, not at the end of some politician's tunnel, and not until there's some long-overdue light shining on those guys and what they do for a nation that doesn't give a shit.

There's no end in sight and they'll be looking for volunteers. That will be me with my hand waving in the air, ready to sign any waiver they demand from war-junkies wanting to return to the pointy-end of the bayonet. And like the man says in the old tune, I won't be back 'til it's over over there—one way or another.

Through the Looking Glass

Kipling had it nailed. The dawn does come up like thunder in this part of the world. You can almost hear a roar and rumble as the sky slowly explodes into light. Staring at that crimson orb, spreading streaks of purple and yellow across the horizon as it rises from the South China Sea, you wonder if old Rudyard was really standing on the road to Mandalay when he wrote about it. He could have been standing right here on the southern banks of the Perfume River watching the dawn come thundering up over Hue, the seat of the Vietnam's ancient mandarin emperors.

Nothing—not even the incessant drizzle—mutes the beauty of the dawn. There's serious *mojo* in a scarlet sun, warm and welcome as it chases an inky wet night. Imagine zooming out over the water to sit with your back to that sun where the struggle between light and dark seems prelude to a bloodier confrontation taking place below. From up there you've got a panoramic view of an Asian anachronism.

There's a long stretch of pristine white beach, bisected by a purple ribbon of water that runs east toward the South China Sea. At the high water mark, there's a shimmering sand castle, complete with turrets, ramparts, and redoubts. And like the topsy-turvy world Alice encountered on the other side of a looking glass, things down below get curiouser and curiouser.

It's like staring at an ant farm. There's surely pattern and purpose to it all, but if you're not an ant, it's hard to comprehend. There are things trying to kill other things down there. It's a battle royal with flags flying and carcasses crumpled everywhere. As a bloody sun pumps more light onto the scene, an army of things swarms toward the walls of that sand castle where an army of other things tries to drive them back. The clash is horrible there.

With a final rumble of Kipling's thunder the dawn cracks full and dumps you off that high perch. And down in the mud and the blood, you are once again a Marine Corps Combat Correspondent assigned to celebrate or eulogize the things around you, the guys doing the fighting and dying in the Great Big Battle of Hue City. There are plenty of civilian reporters milling around down here, the ones who fashion themselves front-line war correspondents, but they've got a job much different than yours despite a similar title. They will interview, analyze, and dissect the fight from tactical or political perspectives. Your beat is down in the squads and platoons, writing quirky hometown vignettes about the grunts that know little of the tactics and care less about the politics.

It's a symbiotic relationship on this beat among the men who carry the fight forward on blistered, aching infantry feet. The way it works is the grunts fight the battles and combat correspondents march along with them, observing from close-up and picking up the little stories that civilian newsmen consider too petty or heroic to support national cynicism about an unpopular war. The military correspondents aim their stuff at the rural American weeklies and small-time fish-wrappers that need copy to fill the news-hole with local color. The grunts get a little recognition in their hometowns and the occasional shot of publicity often makes their miserable existence a little easier to abide.

Among the very few of us assigned to the combat correspondent gig, there is little desire to put up with the misery, pain, and exhaustion of the grunt lifestyle on anything but an irregular schedule. We mostly stick with it because we know

there's an out when we want one. We carry orders that say we can come and go as required, which means when we please most of the time. The key is to maintain just a little distance. You can write knowledgeably and insightfully about infantrymen without having to be one every day all the time. At least that's what we keep telling ourselves in an effort to maintain that crucial little distance between observers and observed. It doesn't always work that way. We are, after all, trained U.S. Marines just like the guys we write about, and that's a factor that keeps cropping up when times get hard.

Times are most definitely hard and somehow out of joint here in Hue City. Modern warriors, fondling automatic rifles, stare across the water at the walls of the Citadel in the same way ancients must have stood near arbalests and catapults before the great siege battles of antiquity. Now it's Yankee Doodle besieging King Nguyen's Court and there are desperate defenders burrowed like moles into the walls surrounding his palace. And King Nguyen holds a valuable trump in this contest. Those walls and his palace are cultural icons filled with historically significant artifacts. Marines don't give a shit about all that, but someone in Saigon does. There will be no air strikes or artillery barrages employed lest those life-saving methods blow big chunks out of Vietnamese history.

Back there along the line of grunts waiting to cross the river, civilian correspondents are asking questions about it, trying to coax emotional quotes from numb survivors of the first half of Operation Hue City. Makes you wonder who the real dumb-shits are. People that ask questions like that or the befuddled bastards that try to answer them? It pleases me to hear several of the southside survivors tell the reporters to take a hike or get fucked. I'm a pissed off man at this point and I could do with some pleasing. See, I'm supposed to be in Hong Kong on an R&R that got summarily canceled when the gooks decided to stage a nationwide offensive during Tet 1968.

Let me tell you about that.

Danang

There is a standard ration of shit from a lifer in the rear who feels that seven months in the bush is no excuse for wanting to go on R&R. The unit is short-handed—not enough correspondents to stretch over the outfits operating in northern I Corps—and we all have to pitch in over the Tet period, et cetera, et-fucking-cetera. A big problem seems to be the unmitigated gall I display by leaving my post at Con Thien up on the DMZ to pick up orders for the R&R that had been scheduled by this very same lifer four months earlier.

“You should have stuck it out up there until we could send somebody to relieve you. Who's going to cover Con Thien while you're gone?”

Well, hell, let's see if I can find enough MPC to pay for a call to someone who gives a big rat's ass. The Captain can solve the problem, but he's away at a briefing. Let it simmer while I head for Hooch 13 to wash away some of the accumulated DMZ slime. Its mid-day, so there might be some hot water left in the showers.

But there's neither rest nor recreation down in the hooch area where combat correspondents share rear-echelon housing space with headquarters clerks and jerks. It's like walking into a ward full of raving paranoid-psychotics. Everyone screaming about gooks moving all over I Corps and big enemy pushes on urban areas. Shitter rumors are flying and every shoe-clerk knows a guy who just told him the straight scoop.

It won't be me, but somebody ought to tell these guys it's almost Tet. Even the VC and NVA take a break for that deal, visiting their ancestors and trading money and banging on gongs and barking at the moon or whatever else they do to celebrate the lunar New Year. They can do all that and welcome to it without me in attendance this time around. After too damn long as one of the fish in the barrel up at Con Thien, ducking incoming and watching unlucky grunts turned into hamburger, I'll be observing the occasion in Hong Kong, thank you very much.

Figures there's only cold water in the showers but at least it's wet.

Code of the Grunt: If it's good you can't have it so just drive on, dude. Don't mean nothin'. In a day or two I'll shower in beer. Just plug a cold beer IV in my arm, order up a Chinese cutie and get into some serious sex. My shit is all in one bag. Five bills in back pay and all I need to do is hang out here in Danang until flight time. I'll just change uniforms then slide on up to the CP and get it squared away with the Skipper.

The Captain wants to know if I've got any idea why the division cooks and clerks are all filling sandbags and running around with loaded rifles. He's pretty sure the fact that I have no fucking idea why that situation attends is likely because I've been stuck up north and away from the larger war picture. I'll give him stuck up north but we were damn sure as close to the war picture as I ever need to be. Skipper says recon patrols report large enemy forces moving toward the urban areas of I Corps and he's putting all scheduled rotations on hold, including my Hong Kong R&R. This leaves me seriously pissed but you don't say no to the Skipper—and I owe him for covering a number of prior misdeeds with the heavies who do not like the carefree attitude espoused by Combat Correspondents.

He wants me to grab my helmet and head back north to Phu Bai where the division has Task Force X-Ray on stand-by. If the flap fizzles, he'll have me on the first thing smoking out of Danang for Kowloon Airport. The laughing lifers safe in the rear take umbrage when I call them a gaggle of rear-echelon pogues, but I'm out of the CP before they can do much more than bitch about it.

No flights north until morning which leaves me no option but to get roaring drunk. So that's the plan, but there's a problem with the execution. Freedom Hill PX, just down the road from the Division CP on Hill 327, stocks beer and whiskey for controlled consumption by soldiers, sailors, and airmen but Marines are barred from purchasing any of it. The Division CG apparently thinks Marines have better things to do than sit around drinking when they get the rare break from mortal combat. Even the portion of the standard MACV ration card that outlines how much booze an American is allowed to purchase is removed before it's issued to a Marine.

Getting around this dilemma will take some serious criminal activity with which I am intimately familiar. Marines with an abiding interest in mood elevators or attitude adjustments have two basic options. See the little slicky-boys that hang

around the perimeter fences selling potent varieties of Laotian Green or Cambodian Red marijuana or find a way to obtain the booze their ration card says they can't have. Smoking dope just makes me see spiders and other threatening horrors that usually have me curled up under somebody's rack in the fetal position, so I'm what we call a Juicer.

Smart Juicers in The Nam learn to operate within a thriving barter system. In the case of the Juicers among the 1st Marine Division Combat Correspondents—and there are many of them—it's a matter of becoming canny traders at the bargaining table. After a firefight out in the bush, grunts make a mad dash for SKS carbines or Chicom pistols, things they can claim as legal war trophies, stuff they can take home with them if they live long enough to rotate. That stuff is good as gold on the market and it's about as hard to come by, so those of us who travel with the grunts make it a practice to pick up small items of NVA equipment that the grunts don't bother to collect. Those gook belts, pouches, helmets, canteens, and entrenching tools are catnip to REMFs who never venture outside the wire.

As luck and an abiding thirst would have it, there is a clutch of gook gear stuffed inside my field pack. There's a guy I know from previous barter excursions who is amassing a huge collection of stuff that he intends to take home and lie about, so I get on the road and out away from people milling around the CP looking for other people to put on working parties.

It takes me only three rides to hitchhike my way to the Naval Construction Battalion Compound outside Danang. Seabees seem to have unlimited access to alcohol, but they drive a fairly hard bargain. Grunts are always hitting on them for steaks or booze or building materials, all of which they have in abundance. Prices are high with Seabees, but they'll always deal. I'm after white stuff, the booze that is least detectable when mixed in a canteen with Kool-Aid or the bug juice they serve in field messes. The trump I'm carrying includes two NVA AK-47 bayonets, very cool and desirable trade goods, and I'm betting my Seabee source will go for them like early rotation orders.

It's early in the day so there's no crowd at the Seabee EM Club. The manager, a crusty first class petty officer, stands in the doorway chewing on a toothpick with his foot resting on a case of Johnnie Walker scotch. He's my guy, a hard man to finesse, but not as shrewd as he thinks he is. We've done business before and he's vulnerable to a guilt trip so I make a slow, roundabout approach wearing my best war-weary, thousand-yard stare.

"Long time, no see, dude. Where you been?"

"Up north on the DMZ..." I let that hang for a while, staring down at my scuffed jungle boots. "Nasty shit up there, man. I've never seen so many gooks in one place. We damn near got overrun a couple of times."

He chews on that for minute, eyes the NVA pack sitting at my feet, and then invites me inside for a beer. He knows the drill. I follow him into the dark, cool interior of the club Danang Seabees built to their own specifications and coil myself around a barstool. He pops two rusty cans of Black Label with the church-key he carries hooked to his dungarees and opens negotiations.

"Guess a guy's been through what you have could use him a bottle or two."

"That's why I'm here. It's always great to see you and all, but I won't be in the rear for long and I need some supplies."

He ponders that and pries a few war stories out of me while we work through two more beers. Cheap bastard casually extracts the price of the beers from a five-dollar MPC note that I put up on the bar. When I run down, he starts to bitch about his own problems, typical rear-echelon bellyaches, but talking makes him loosen up and before long he's pouring tequila shots on the house.

"Sometimes I wish I could just get out of here and hook up with some of the Seabee outfits operating in the field, you know?"

"You don't want any part of that shit, dude." I grab the bottle and re-fill the shots but he doesn't seem to notice or care. "Seabees are dying like flies up north building base camps and carving out that big fucking chunk of the DMZ for asshole McNamara. You need to stay where you are so we can do some business."

"What're you lookin' for?"

"Gin or vodka..." I reach into my pack and plop an NVA entrenching tool on the bar. He handles it for a while looking underwhelmed. "I got one or two of these that you brought last time. What else you got?"

Beer and tequila were stretching my bladder out of shape, so I slam the AK bayonets on the bar and trundle away toward the head. They have installed a flush toilet since my last visit so I take the opportunity to deposit a week-old C-ration shit in the Seabees shiny new commode. When I get back to the bar, my trading buddy has two fifths each of cheap gin and vodka waiting for me. The bayonets are nowhere in sight. It appears we have made a deal.

To make travel a little easier, I stop in a remote corner of the Seabee compound and pour the liquor into a clutch of extra plastic canteens and then stuff it all in my pack. There are a bunch of vehicles rushing out of the compound by the time I reach the main gate and the first one to stop takes me all the way back to the division compound on Hill 327.

Having spent most of the ride in the back of a truck nipping from the canteens, I arrive at my hooch just at dusk and fucked up like Hogan's Goat which is entirely appropriate to the situation in the division rear area. Alarm sirens are wailing and panicky clerks are falling all over themselves trying to reach a row of defensive bunkers. The inky sky over Hill 327 is lit by parachute flares and roving patrols of combat shoe-clerks are rousting REMFs, shoving them into a leaky perimeter being formed around the division CP. Crawling into a dark corner of Hooch 13, I wrap myself in a poncho-liner and drift off to sleep. Anywhere in Nam is safer than out on a line with nervous pogues shooting at shadows.

15th Aerial Port Squadron

"Look, I've got to go north today and standing around here bullshitting with you isn't getting me there." What a delight to be hung-over and arguing with a fat, sweaty, gum-popping staff sergeant behind the booking desk at the 15th Aerial Port. We've been at it for half an hour while he works through a full pack of Spearmint and I deal with a head full of worms and wet sand. The sergeant is apparently too short to give a shit. While we're bitching back and forth, he's coloring little squares on a short-timer's calendar.

“You bush-beasts don't impress me for shit.” He sticks his pen behind an ear and pops his gum. “I'm the one who says *where* you go and *when* you go around here. No Marine birds going north today, and that's the way it is. Sorry 'bout that.”

Sorely tempted to reach over the desk, grab this prick by the stacking swivel, and commence field stripping his sorry ass, I realize it's futile. And it's too hot in here for a man with a world-record hangover. It's another of Nam's little conundrums. You can generally zip right up to the forward areas with minimum difficulty, but just try getting space on something headed for the rear. There's a much better chance of finding a PFC in the Pentagon.

So, how to get myself and four canteens full of booze plus my field gear up north past this uncooperative sonofabitch at passenger control? Heat and frustration drive me away from the desk to ponder the gaggle of aircraft on the 15th APS flight line. A transient breeze carries the familiar odor of the orient mixed with JP-4 jet fuel. An Air Force cargo plane taxis toward a forklift idling next to a stack of boxes. The gear is marked for an outfit based at Dong Ha, and it's likely the incoming aircraft is due to carry it there. If I can snivel my way aboard that C-123, I might make Phu Bai before dark.

A pilot in a jaunty blue overseas cap is standing outside the airplane, watching the forklift operator load his bird.

Code of the grunt: Innovate and adapt, do what you have to do when and where you have to do it. The Air Force lieutenant eyes my slovenly condition through tinted flight glasses and smiles like a man who knows he's about to become a mark for a needy grunt. He's been there and done that a bunch driving airplanes around The Nam.

“Excuse me, sir. I got a real problem and I thought maybe I could ask one of you officers for some help.” I give him everything but the tears and digging my toe in the dirt. “My brother's up at Dong Ha at Charlie Med. He got hit yesterday and I got permission to go up and see him. But the Marines say there ain't anything flying north.”

And here is a clear opportunity for this guy to demonstrate that the Air Force could and would fly where the vaunted Marines would not. “So you want the Air Force to take you up there?”

“Yes, sir, and if I don't get up there today, my brother might die and I would never see him again.” I am prepared to whine and wheedle further but it isn't necessary. This guy sees his chance to trump the Marine aviators and be remembered for all time by a hard-pressed grunt as Really Good Joe. He motions for me to say no more and get my gear aboard the aircraft. “When you see your brother, tell him the Air Force got you there on time, hear?”

His dual-engine transport claws for airspace over Danang creating a peculiar but familiar sensation back in the cargo compartment. It's as if the airplane doesn't want to leave the earth and get up there in triple-A range with its ass hanging out. There is a reluctant little lurch when the wheels lift off the runway and the deal is done. I snuggle under a retaining strap stretched across the floor of the cargo bay, hoping the staff sergeant down below at the booking desk picks up a bad burst of clap on his first low-level mission over a female back in The World.

My delicate stomach wakes me from a sweaty stupor as the aircraft suddenly dips and tilts. Visible below is the red clay of Dong Ha and the pilots are taking no

chances on incoming artillery. They manhandle the airplane around the pattern and roar into a final landing approach at the last possible moment. Dong Ha puts me close, but I still have to make my way to Phu Bai. Leaving me on a steel-matted runway, the aircrew unloads rapidly and then spins it around to head back for cold beer and clean sheets.

Dong Ha

Dong Ha is headquarters for the 3rd Marine Division, but it looks more like a sleepy outpost. Somebody ought to let them know the yellow horde is about to descend according to the vaunted oxymoron known as military intelligence. There is just one lonely Huey parked on the matting in front of the shanty passenger terminal. Two or three Marines sprawl in the red dust near the building in various stages of stupor. Grunts are incredibly flexible in a lot of interesting ways. Despite the heat boiling up off the runway matting, these guys manage to arrange their limbs under, over, or around 60 pounds of bulky equipment and sleep like babies.

Code of the Grunt: Never stand when you can sit, never sit when you can lie down, and never lie down without going to sleep.

There is a familiar form crapped out on a Willy Peter bag inside the terminal door where dark shadow provides a little shade. I've humped enough clicks behind that rawboned body to recognize it from any angle. He doesn't bother to lift the helmet covering his eyes when I walk over and kick at his scruffy jungle boots.

"On your feet, Douchebag! There's a war to fight—or so they tell me down in Danang."

"Hey, dude, I was wondering if I'd run into you on this deal." My buddy Steve is a solid combat correspondent, competent in a firefight, with a weird sense of humor and a compulsion to emulate Ernie Pyle. We spent a lot of time together, back in the pre-Nam world and working with the 1st Marine Regiment when they got sent north to reinforce the DMZ. Hooking up with him will make this whole exercise a lot more palatable.

He sniffs at the canteen I offer and a huge grin spreads across his sunburned features. "Well, you've been back to Danang, I see. What's the word from the rear?"

"Major panic among the pogues who are sure the great piss-yellow hordes are about to descend from the north or something. Skipper sent me up here to join up with Task Force X-Ray and stand by to stand by."

He takes another slug of gin and passes the canteen. "Thought you were scheduled for R&R..."

"I was—and if nothing happens in the next day or two, I'm out of here and headed for Hong Kong. Skipper promised."

Steve gets to his feet and shoulders his gear. "You've been a member of our beloved Corps long enough to know the value of promises. They are much like assholes. They all stink."

Code of the Grunt: Promise in one hand, shit in the other. See which hand fills up first."

"Maybe we can wangle a trip to Hue, dude. Remember the last time we got up there?"

Hue—When it was Cool

We are sight-seeing in a borrowed Jeep, half-drunk and half-listening to a historical rap from a buddy who is based in Hue with the American Forces Radio & TV outlet in the city. Sergeant Tom Young, a pal from stateside, is hosting two bush-beasts buddies and trying to make us believe he'd rather be out in the bush with us than stuck in his plush job. It's bullshit and everyone knows it, so we just gaze like lechers at tight little Asian asses molded to bicycle or motorbike seats, as winsome girls in *ao dais* offer coy smiles or covert waves. It's all bright colors and happy people, the opposite of what we are used to in the dirt-poor villages we patrol out in the hinterlands.

Hue is a different thing, a sprawling impressive city shot through with national color like Rome or Paris where residents always seem conscious of living in and around their own history. Like a trio of tourists we visit The Citadel on the north side of the Perfume River, gawking at its splendor. It's a fortress from an earlier time, a square mile of thick stone walls surrounding a sub-city that has grown up in the shadow of the ancient walls. There is a moat full of mud and pond scum surrounding the walls and all the measurements are precise. That moat is 40-feet across and 40-feet deep. It guards walls that are 40-feet high and 40-feet thick. Tom knows all the details.

In earlier times Asian bandits, warring hill tribes, rival rulers and Mongol hordes attacked the walls. Now lichens, moss, and tropical ivy encroach on the great stone slabs, but they are no less intimidating for their age. Vegetation rises unevenly up the walls toward the broad tops where bracken and bramble grow wild. In a few more centuries the encroaching growth might form a lush, living carpet, crossing the walls and closing on the Imperial Palace, centerpiece of the Citadel complex. Tom says it was designed on the Chinese model, patterned after parts of the Forbidden City in Beijing.

It was easy, staring up at those walls, to let your imagination run. The climbing ivy might be the gnarled fingers of attackers who die assaulting a hallowed fortress, casualties of another fruitless attempt to reach the inner city behind the Citadel walls. There are nine separate gates in the walls each one featuring a bridge that spans the moat. Inside the gates, string-straight avenues crisscross the Citadel's interior which is a mix of stately homes and shanties. The shanties are new and crowded with people who look like they ought to be out in the villages wading in paddies. Many of them are war refugees who are seeking shelter behind Hue's thick walls.

Still, there's a distinctive sense of ancient history here. The Nguyen Dynasty emperors did a lot of building and beautifying before they were elbowed out of power by a more modern dictatorship in Saigon far to the south. The noisy, frenetic shanty sectors seem a blot on the pristine lay-out of the Citadel, mixing the worst elements of peasant poverty with the best of mandarin splendor. And right there in the middle of it all was the biggest anachronism of all: Headquarters of an ARVN infantry division. Strolling around the manicured drill square is a Palace Guard in polished boots and tightly-tailored uniforms. None of these guys

seem worried about war. Stuff like that happens in the jungles on the other side of Hue's walls.

When we viewed it as combat tourists, Hue was majestic, stately and beautiful, a little oasis of Vietnamese peace and prosperity where the war seemed reassuringly remote. That first visit was pleasant and reassuring. The second time sucked.

Dong Ha

Steve is swilling gin and bitching about the bad taste a plastic canteen imparts to his favorite booze. He's only here with me because they ordered him from his beat up on the DMZ to reinforce a short staff of Combat Correspondents at Phu Bai, where elements of the 1st and 5th Marine Regiments are being pulled into a perimeter for some rest during the Tet ceasefire period. It seems like a great opportunity to circulate among the bush-beasts and pick up some stories to feed the mimeograph machines back in Danang.

So it's getting dark, and we're still sitting on the runway at Dong Ha in the shade of a Huey with its rotors tied down and no crew in sight. The option is to hit up our counterparts in the 3rd Marine Division for a little overnight hospitality but they'd likely drink all our booze, so we decide to try and find a ride to Phu Bai.

Inside the Dong Ha passenger terminal, a bored Air Force clerk is paging through a Playboy at the passenger manifest desk. He looks like his counterpart down in Danang, the kind of guy who would ace an Asshole Aptitude Test. As we contemplate an approach, he playfully gooses an old Vietnamese woman in a conical hat and baggy silk trousers who is lazily sweeping up the joint. She pretends to swat at him with her broom each time he jabs at her butt. When we interrupt the game, he's solicitous but firm. "There ain't a fucking thing flying north or south. Everything's locked on standby for combat commitments."

"What about that Huey parked outside?"

"Emergency bird on Ready Five and it don't go nowhere unless there's an emergency, which in your case, there ain't."

We are apparently locked in a no-fly zone but outside the terminal there is a serpentine convoy of Army supply trucks staging along a perimeter road. The vehicles bear the tactical markings of a doggie outfit we know is co-located with the Marines at Phu Bai. For a couple of healthy belts from one of our canteens, we get a reserved seat up front with one of the drivers.

"Where you dudes heading?"

"Hard telling. We'll probably find out at Phu Bai."

"I wouldn't drop my pack if I was you. My lieutenant says the shit has hit the fan in Hue. They sent a bunch of Marines up there this morning. Looks like the ceasefire is bullshit just like every other fuckin' thing in The Nam."

"You shittin' me?"

"Gospel, dude. They say gooks are raisin' hell all over the fuckin' country. You dudes are in for some serious shit."

The Canals

There is a light, irritating rain falling at dawn. It alternates with heavier showers throughout the day, and we are either soaked with hot sweat or drenched with cold rain as we climb in and out of issue rain suits. There's an ambient hiss in Hue as the rain washes over us. It's like a noisy snake slithering through the streets and it leaves a musty, cloying odor of wet canvas, mildew, and decay in its wake. It's chilly for bush-beasts used to clammy jungles, but that doesn't keep the sweat from pumping. That bodily function has nothing to do with ambient air temperature on the outskirts of Hue City.

We wake up on either side of a comatose grunt who shared a billowy featherbed with us in a house we cleared on our first day in Hue. Velour curtains ripped from the windows kept us warm during the night and soaked up some of the moisture we leaked into the bedding. There was a wonderful warm and dry feeling at dawn, but that didn't last long. Grunts sprawl in the living room of the shot-up house that serves as our temporary platoon CP. No one seems overly interested in anything that's happening outside this sanctuary. If it's serious and it's going to involve us, the word will be passed.

Meanwhile, the morning ritual of field troops continues. There's a nearly ravenous need for hot coffee. It's rarely going to be a good day in The Nam and little things like inhaling coffee vapors at the start of one means a lot. Steve cadges a wad of C-4 from an attached combat engineer and has a canteen cup of C-ration coffee ready in moments. Burning volatile plastic explosive to heat coffee is one of the trade tricks that differentiate a veteran from a new guy who will wheeze with watering eyes over an issue heat-tab and still not have his stuff ready to drink before the order to move comes down the line.

With the bitter coffee boiling in our stomachs, we step outside, glare up at the low cloud layer hanging over the Phu Cam Canal area, and watch grunts dragging bodies into a heap. Some of the dancing shadows we saw darting through the alleys last night were not specters. There are five bodies, all in NVA uniform, all fat and sleek, and all very dead. A similar number of Marine dead from Alpha Company, 1/1 has been moved to the rear and out of sight. For some reason, the gooks didn't get around to blowing the little An Cuu Bridge over the canal which leaves the main supply route between Phu Bai and Hue open for units flowing into the city. Maybe Alpha Company caught them on the way to rig the charges. Yesterday there was a short, sharp firefight in this area that stalled our convoy and caused the CO to drop off a platoon in place to hold the bridge. We spent the night with them.

We slither into wet web gear and fall into a line of grunts forming up on the sides of the broad avenue leading deeper into the city. A squad leader stops near us and bums a light from the end of my cigarette. "Gunny says we're supposed to link up with the rest of the company near the MACV Compound. They're sendin' some dudes from 5th Marines up behind us."

He flinches and squints up the street in the direction of three explosions followed by sharp exchange of machinegun fire. "That's the MACV Compound." Squad Leader has been monitoring his radio all night. "Gooks tried to overrun it

and got their ass kicked. Bunch of doggie MPs and advisors are holdin' the place. And that's where we're headed."

Nodding nervously and trying to keep my cigarette stoked in the drizzle, I glance at his helmet. He's drawn a detailed depiction of the Marine Corps eagle, globe, and anchor emblem on the camouflage cover and modified the *Semper Fidelis* motto to Simply Forget Us.

"How soon we movin'?"

He points at an idling truck where a Corpsman is working on a wounded Marine. "Soon's the Doc gives me the word on Franklin." It doesn't look like the word on Franklin will be encouraging. He's been hit by plunging fire from a gook up on one of the roofs across the canal. Two rounds drove through his body from shoulder to hip. The Corpsman kept him alive all night, but Franklin has that fish-belly pale look that says he's lost too much blood. Likely Franklin is doomed and like most doomed grunts, he'll go quietly with no fuss. There's rarely any drama when a wounded man dies. It's almost anticlimactic. The damage has been done. And maybe it's better to avoid the lingering and angst that comes with bleeding out or shock. Grunts often argue the point. Maybe it's better for all concerned if life gets snuffed out violently by high explosive or a burst of small arms in a vital area that takes you down so hard that you're dead before you hit the deck. We saw a lot of that shit yesterday.

Yesterday

A staff officer from Task Force X-Ray at Phu Bai blazed through the base camp leading a pressgang of grunts. Everyone who was available—whether he thought he was or not—got shoved into a provisional rifle company built on the skeleton of Alpha Company, 1/1. Gooks had grabbed Hue City and the Marines were going to grab it back. We loaded up with the convoy headed east and tried to find a grunt squad we thought we could trust. Every Marine is a rifleman, but label-lickers and box-kickers somewhat less so.

It didn't take long to make the eight-mile trip, and it took even less time to realize we were smack in the middle of a shit sandwich. Gooks bunkered in buildings on the city side of the An Cuu Bridge over the broad canal that drains the south side of Hue took serious issue with attempts to blow through and relieve the pressure on the MACV Compound near the banks of the Perfume River. A wall of incoming smacked into the lead trucks and we bailed out to assess the situation. Grunts and people trying to imitate grunts fanned out to engage the NVA in spider traps and machine-gun positions spotted around a traffic circle on the outskirts of Hue.

The fight rapidly turned into a series of Keystone Kops sight gags, but there wasn't much funny about it. On the good news side of the ledger, we'd run into a platoon of five M-48 tanks headed for Hue to board water transport for some other destination. The tankers were drafted to provide us with an armor shield which got a couple of the stalled platoons moving. On the downside, Alpha grunts were fresh from jungle fighting along the DMZ and having trouble adjusting to a very different sort of combat. There on the outskirts of Hue, bad guys in concrete buildings had

all the advantages and the shrapnel effect of every round fired was doubled or tripled by rock shards and flying glass.

Hanging around the CP, we listened to the radios and tried to make sense of the squawk and chatter as Alpha pushed toward the MACV Compound. We were taking casualties in return for not much progress. That much was clear as Alpha Six checked in with the command group and discovered that a company from 2/5 was headed in our direction to shove us from the rear. Meanwhile, he planned to press on behind the tanks now engaging targets with grunts huddled behind them like ducklings.

We chose to avoid that exercise. There's not a rifleman on a modern battlefield that can resist shooting at a tank and the ricochets can be just as lethal as direct fire. We passed the time watching Alpha Six stew and steam and speculating on why he didn't just call for a massive artillery strike from the batteries back at Phu Bai or dial up some Snake and Nape from close air support.

The lack of artillery, air support—even naval gunfire since we were close to the coast—didn't seem to make much sense given the Marine Corps penchant for spending metal over meat. And then we got to thinking about the special prominence of this city, the convoluted process sometimes required to clear fire missions, and the attitude we'd often seen displayed by our gallant ARVN allies. Given that context, the high command was highly unlikely to bring a sledgehammer to bear on this tough nut.

Suppose Alpha Six gets really pissed off and starts screaming for high-explosive fire missions from everything available that flies, floats, or shoots long range into Hue. ARVN commanders, who have the final say since we are nominally just here supporting their fight, refuse the request. Not one round gets stuffed into any tube pointed at Hue. Marine commanders argue hotly. We're losing Marines up there trying to get your showcase city back from the evil northerners. So what's the deal? Well, see, the ARVN badly want you to kick the bulldog shit out of those evil northerners occupying Hue, but it must be done *gently*, gentlemen. No heavy artillery, no airstrikes, and you'll just have to go through the houses and buildings one by one and kill all the NVA without dirtying any carpets or breaking any china in the process.

What's unfair about that? Aren't you the vaunted American freedom fighters pledged to save our country? Don't you possess special skills and spirit to defeat an enemy that's foiled and frustrated us for two decades now? Well, OK then, and why can't you kill the northern invaders without also destroying the sacred city? Why should it be necessary to damage the homes of the rich people who live in that fabled city? Perhaps what we have here is a massive cross-cultural failure to communicate. We should adjourn to the conference table while your Marines get on with the bleeding and dying up there in Hue.

That doesn't sit well with Alpha Six. He's an attack-trained dog on a choke-chain and his outfit is rapidly losing momentum. He charges toward the head of the stalled convoy when he hears another of his Marines is down by fire up there. Before he can do much about dragging the wounded man out of the impact area, Alpha Six is also down, blown back into the concertina wire flanking the canal. For some reason, that finally trips the trigger and we start maneuvering forward, shooting pictures of grunts shooting gooks.

Three platoons are maneuvering rapidly now. We spring forward and join an outfit being run by a tough Tex-Mex sergeant playing whack-a-mole with NVA shooters bobbing up and down in second-story windows. He's trying to get a tank forward to relieve the pressure and in between times, launching rockets at the enemy from a supply of LAAWs he's got piled behind a stone porch. Steve knew this guy Gonzalez from earlier actions south of Danang and recommended we latch on to his outfit. They didn't look like they were skating and most of them had bloody battle dressings covering some sort of wound, but I was in no position to argue due to the distraction of incoming rounds.

Alpha's 3rd Platoon—of which we were hesitant members—was ordered to occupy a two-story building they had just cleared and keep watch on an open area of paddies and farm-fields with a large blockhouse in the center. We could see troops of some sort milling around that building, but no one could tell if they were NVA or ARVN. Gonzalez set up a machinegun to cover Alpha's 2nd Platoon which was moving toward a fork in the main road leading into the city from the Phu Cam area. Snuggled up next to the gun-team, I watched the shadows.

Code of the Grunt: Shadows will kill you. No veteran gook is going to show you a silhouette or move from dark to light. If you are motivated to see an enemy before he gets close enough to rattle a grenade inside your position, you watch the shadows. If one of those shadows looms, blow it away.

The shadows below that building were taking a pounding from the 3rd Platoon grunts. Everyone was on full alert, with adrenaline alarm clocks keeping them awake out there on a jagged edge. Grunt on the other side of the window from me fondled his M-16 with one hand and his crotch with the other. Bloodshot eyes bugged from their sockets as he searched the shadows. We could see 2nd Platoon moving below us. Helping the assistant machinegunner link belts of ammunition was sufficient distraction and I started to drift away from Hue City.

Worlds Away

In this place and at this time, my parents are dodging their own brand of threatening shadows. Mine was a simple mantra: Shut up and do your homework, shut up and study to make good in military school, shut up and be a good soldier. Just shut up and it doesn't matter if what you have to say is interesting or intelligent. No one wants to hear it. No one has time with all those looming shadows out there. And I started writing just to avoid those orders to shut the fuck up.

At Missouri Military Academy, there was a solid, demanding English professor who thought I might have some talent and showed me the mechanics. He taught me to be a keen observer: to keep all my senses open and record everything I saw, felt, heard, smelled, or tasted when I told a story. My notebooks were always filled with more than facts. But they had all the keen observers they needed at the auto plants in St. Louis and the service academies all thought I should have something more tangible than a vivid vocabulary to make it in the pursuit of military sciences. Look for a prolix grocery store bag boy, underage with a full bottle of illicit booze, if you're reviewing that New Year's Eve party back in 1963.

Trying to talk to anyone who would listen at that party; trying to network my way into a gainful pursuit that didn't involve returning to Southeast Missouri with my tail between my skinny legs. Only the drunks would listen. I joined the drunks. And then I joined the Marines. As soon as I was sober enough to write, I signed the line intent on becoming a big fish in a relatively small pool. The hard-asses at boot camp had other notions.

Curriculum at the Campus of The Corps was simple and direct, geared to a lowest common denominator, and aimed for heart over head in the early going. The school colors were black and blue long before they morphed into scarlet and gold. No middle ground, no sniveling; just do or die trying. Learn to love your fellow Marines and hate everyone else. You are the best there is. You are the elite. You can do much more than you ever thought you could do. Is that clear, ladies?

And if not, just commence bends and thrusts until the Drill Instructor gets tired. See, it's like this: Marines love and respect each other. They depend on each other like family members. No Marine is ever alone if there is another Marine in sight. No Marine ever needs to worry about having to stand alone once he becomes a member of the club. Is that clear, maggots? Yes, sir! Kill 'em and eat 'em.

Feeling good came hard but I felt better than I ever had about myself. Here was a place where polite social intercourse was about as vital to your existence as social disease. And here was a place where mavericks were in the mainstream. Pay your dues and pack your load, that's all the Marines will ask but there are some interesting twists available. After a tour in the infantry learning that 81mm mortars are very heavy and hard on hearing, it was full focus on wangling my way into a slot in military journalism. The Corps had a swivet of keen observers but not many of them could write jaunty, laudatory prose about what they saw.

Occasionally, some fellow writer or photographer who admired my work or some senior NCO who thought I was an iron-ass potential lifer, made overtures. But the book says a Marine on Duty Has No Friends, and I always seemed to be on duty. It was my position and I chose to defend it alone. If life taught me anything tangible at that point it was that if you get too close to assholes you are bound to be shit on. By the time orders to Vietnam arrived, I could count my close friends on one hand and ignore three fingers. Steve was a solo exception and it was likely a case of opposite attraction.

He was an educated, clean-cut, all-American type with conservative viewpoints and a loving young wife who wrote homey letters about pots that boiled over and commodes that didn't flush. He had a great set of parents who bragged about their Marine son engaged in the defense of freedom in Southeast Asia. Steve had strong feelings about patriotism and the righteous nature of American policy in Southeast Asia. I was none of those things and held a skeptical view of any national policy on personal principle.

But Steve stuck with me. There was something about his ability to listen with a sly understanding grin on his lean face. And there was something about the way he seemed to care—really care—about other people's opinions. There was something about the way he did things for people without waiting around for congratulations or accolades. He would even give assholes an even break despite my warnings. Steve was an exception that proved a lot of rules.

And one of my rules was that I needed a guy like Steve with me if this deal in Hue City was going to get any worse.

Week One

It's late in the day, but something is brewing. Everyone is expecting orders and no one thinks they're going to be pleasant. A lieutenant arrives to let us know there will be no artillery support. Whatever we're going to do, we'll do it with nothing heavier than our own mortars. He spreads a ratty tourist map of Hue that he found in a local gas station. All the attractions where visitors can take memorable photos are marked with little green dragons.

"We're headed across this next series of canals..." He draws a line east-west with a dirty fingernail. "Eighty-ones will prep ahead of us and then we move. Once we start, I don't want anybody to stop unless the order is passed to hold. We clear all the way to this street here by the river. Right flank should sweep right by the MACV Compound. Skipper wants us there for noon chow. Any questions?"

Between Steve and I there's about ten questions beginning with how we get out of this chickenshit deal, but this is not the time. There's a rumble of snide remarks from the assembled squad leaders. A black Marine with a nickel-plated magnum revolver in a shoulder holster sums it up for everyone. "Another fucking dollar job on a dime budget. There it is."

We snap a few photos of an engineer detachment working to bridge the wide, deep canals that we'll have to cross to commence the assault. In about 20 minutes they've cobbled together a rickety-looking tinker-toy footbridge from two-by-fours nailed together and suspended at water level. An engineer is bouncing up and down on it to test durability. He is ankle deep in water but the bridge seems to bear his weight. The pistol-packing squad leader is dubious.

"Will that fucking thing hold?"

"What the fuck you want, the Golden Gate?" The bouncing engineer is in no mood for quibbles from a sidewalk superintendent. "You're lucky I don't set up a goddamn tollbooth."

We cross the canal clinging to hand-lines rigged to steady the heavily loaded grunts. Remaining upright requires a peculiar sideways shuffle. When a man makes it to the other side, he turns to help the next man up onto the far side of the canal and then scrambles to disappear. It won't take the gooks long to spot this encroachment, and there is no available cover nearby.

Steve goes before me on the shaky suspension system, looking like a circus performer doing a high-wire act. As I follow and reach for his hand up onto the opposite bank, there is a mad clatter of helicopter blades that catches everyone's attention and freezes the parade. Two Huey choppers are roaring up the canal at extremely low altitude. They are only about 30 feet off the deck, snouts pointed down in a menacing posture. We can plainly see the marking on the nose, a yellow oval with a black cat in the center. These guys are from an outfit supporting Army units in I Corps. Some of the grunts are waving when the door gunners suddenly open up and concrete begins to shatter under the impact of incoming rounds. The stupid bastards are strafing us.

“Friendlies, you assholes! Friendlies down here!”

The lieutenant stands in plain sight on the far bank screaming at the choppers with close rounds smacking into the pavement at his feet. I weather the attack pressed flat against the far bank. A Marine behind me screams and grabs at my legs to lever himself up off the bridge as the second chopper makes its gun run and sends more rounds screaming off the concrete.

It's over in minutes and trembling with close-call adrenaline, we watch the choppers soar out over the Perfume River to our left flank. They are jinking from side to side as the pilots walk on the rudder pedals and the door gunners lean out triumphantly like rodeo riders who just made it to the buzzer. Most of the grunts are aiming in on the helicopters when the Company Gunny passes the word to hold fire and get the fuck across the bridge. It isn't that the Gunny doesn't want to shoot the choppers right out of the air, but it's hard to justify since nobody is killed by “them sorry-ass, ignorant doggie cocksuckers.” And there are more pressing matters at hand.

The chopper incident is our first hint that Hue is rapidly becoming a confusing sort of combat carnival with clowns on both sides declaring their own personal free-fire zones. These guys walk on but no one is going forget being strafed by friendly choppers.

Code of the Grunt: Payback is a medevac. If Army Black Cat choppers show up again in the skies over Hue City they will most definitely be met with some intense anti-aircraft fire. And the shooters won't be gooks.

With mortars impacting a block to our front, the company crawls along a broad thoroughfare. Fireteams flow in and out of buildings and houses along the road like a snake winding its way through a maze. There's no future in strolling up the center of this promenade so we join a squad tasked with clearing a two-story structure that must have been some sort of official city building. We recognize the *Vietnam Cong Hoa* seal that marks government facilities as we duck inside and follow Marines advancing cautiously up a central staircase. Somewhere up above, we can hear the distinctive rattle of an RPD machinegun.

It's a classic gig from the films we've all seen about fighting in the towns and cities of Europe during World War II and, since none of us have had any training in this business, we model our actions on the movies. First man kicks open a door and sprays a burst of M-16 fire inside. Second man, hugging the other side of the door, arms a grenade and heaves it inside as hard as he can throw. The idea is to bounce the live grenade off the walls and make it tough for any gooks inside to chase it down and toss it out a window.

In between events, everyone is still bitching long and loud about the incident with the Army choppers. Steve wants me to imagine what a tour in The Nam would be like if gaggles of MIGs appeared south of the DMZ every day flying air cover for the NVA. I'd rather not imagine that, so I busy myself with cleaning concrete dust off my camera and trying to keep up with the grunts. One thing is for damn sure. No need to write up a story about the friendly fire incident at the canal crossing. That's not the sort of vignette the MACV Information Office expects to see from Combat Correspondents in the field.

Deeper into the city now and we make a turn toward the big vehicular bridge that spans the Perfume River where Golf Company 2/5 is supposed to be making

an attempt to cross over to the northside of Hue. Trucks and a couple of tanks rumble by headed in our direction. We're just beginning to feel some of the ancillary injuries involved in street fighting. Uniforms are shredded and everyone is showing bloody knees, elbows, and hands. It's a result of flinging our bodies down on hard concrete or the ripping action of rock shards that fly everywhere in a city firefight.

A halt is called and the acting Alpha Company Six tells us we're to wait here while Golf Company tries to cross the bridge and rescue some ARVN trapped inside the Citadel across the river. So the walls didn't work to keep the NVA at bay. If they got in, Golf Company can too—or so the thinking goes. I'm thinking they better get their collective asses in gear. If the gooks dig in over there on the other side of the bridge, we are in for a siege and that won't be pretty.

Steve has his notebook out and is trying to question the CO over the squawk of radio transmissions. At this point, as far as the CO knows, Alpha 1/1 and Golf 2/5 are the only Marine units in Hue. He's got no idea what the hell the ARVN are doing over on the other side of the river, but gooks are definitely inside the Citadel. There are reports of a big NVA flag flying over the walls. He's been told by someone at the MACV Compound that Hotel and Foxtrot Companies from 2/5 are headed for the city on the double. Meanwhile, he's supposed to clear one block left and right of our current position and be sure no gooks hit Golf Company in the back as they try the river crossing. And that is apparently being made under protest by Marine commanders who want to wait for reinforcements to arrive so they can get something more than a very tenuous toehold on the south side of the city.

Very suddenly, shit starts flying on two flanks and radios reveal that we are in a nasty bind. Golf Company is getting hammered by NVA dug in on the northside of the river. Apparently the lead squad only made it about halfway across before the gooks opened up and drove them back to the south end of the bridge. Meanwhile on our right flank, 2nd Platoon of Alpha Company has hit major resistance to their clearing efforts and is screaming for support. We head off in that direction.

Alpha Two is busily clearing houses when they run into stiff resistance from NVA in a Buddhist temple. As we approach the sounds of the firefight become clear and instructive. It's a grenade duel at this point with the ringing bark of American frags competing with the shallow pop of the Chicom equivalent. When we reach the platoon commander, he is sending a sitrep over the rattle of rifle fire from his advancing squads.

"Six, Two Alpha Actual, We're holding in a two story building on the left side of the street just across from that fucking temple. Request you send some more bodies over here to help dig 'em out, over."

Two Corpsmen arrive to assist with casualties. The platoon suffered one Marine killed and two wounded in the fight. While the Corpsmen deal with the wounded and wrap the dead man for evacuation, Two Alpha is ordered to push on and clear the remainder of this block. Golf Company is pulling back toward the MACV Compound after the failed bridge crossing and the trucks will pass right through this area.

We follow a squad into an alley running east and west, parallel to the Perfume River flowing somewhere to our left. Buildings on either side of this sinuous alley are reinforced with heavy doors and iron grillwork over the windows. There is no

cover here beyond sprawling flat on the wet pavement and hoping for the best. A gate-mouthed grunt grins at the cameras slung around our necks. He poses with his M-16 perched on a hip and points at his buddy slamming a fresh magazine into his weapon.

“Me and Sandy nailed three of them fuckers just a while ago. Where was you dudes then?” Steve shoots the obligatory photo. “You know how it goes, man. War is hell.” What can you say when a grunt pauses in mid-fight to show his best side for the camera?

Buddy Sandy chambers the first round from a fresh magazine and then, realizing instinctively that it will make a better picture, he snaps a bayonet onto the muzzle of his rifle. “You got that right, my man. War is hell—but this here combat is a stone motherfucker.” We all chuckle at the familiar observation. There’s a very thin line between bravado and bull-goose lunacy that bends and twists under pressure.

We push on down that alley, inhaling pungent odors from camphor-wood smoke and fish sauce. As in most big city back alleys, many of the doors on our left and right lead directly to kitchens. So far no one is taking pot-shots at us, but we can hear other squads operating on our flanks and having a tougher time inside the buildings. These guys have learned to frag first, ask questions later, and every crack or crump sends us cringing or sprawling. No way of knowing which explosion is a friendly frag and which is a Chicom until the shrapnel hits.

Passing below an open ground-floor window, buddy Sandy is just ahead of me when his helmet is blown off by a detonation. He demonstrates his indignation by cranking half a magazine on full-auto through the window.

“Hold your fire, goddammit!” The people on the receiving end of Sandy’s ire are not happy with the response. “We got friendlies in here!”

Sandy doesn’t much give a shit. “You motherfuckers better start giving us a fire-in-the-hole before you pitch them frags or I’ll blow your stupid fucking asses away.” House clearing is a tense, scratchy deal and we have yet to learn the rules. Up ahead, Gatemouth Dude is rearing back to pitch a grenade into a window. I’ve got him framed in my lens when the arm holding the frag suddenly detaches from his body. It tumbles end over end as if the arm is independently winding up for a pitch. The grenade detonates in mid-air and I’m so focused on that frame that I don’t duck. The RPG round that blew an arm from Gatemouth’s body roars close by as Steve knocks me down out of the shrapnel fan. A Corpsman splashes by heading for Gatemouth, but the man lies dead in a pool of gore with most of his chest missing. Gatemouth will never see The World and neither will the picture I took of him getting shredded by a rocket round in this shitty little alley.

At the open end of the alley, past where Gatemouth lies dead, there’s a street fight developing and everyone is rushing to either get in on it or get away from it. It’s hard to tell in the confusion, but we press forward which seems as good a direction as any at this point. NVA rocket gunners are sending rounds up both sides of the street at knee-level. A squad leader on the other side of the street is crouched behind a low stone wall signaling that he’s got one of the gook gunners spotted. He’s joined by a fireteam and they rush the position, covered by an M-60 gunner putting out long strings of covering fire.

Code of the Grunt: Charge the fire. You may shock the trigger-man so badly he'll forget to reload and you'll certainly get yourself clear of the impact area.

It's chaos out on that street but here at the end of the alley there's time for professional introspection. Broad-backed Marine with a drooping mustache is covering his mouth and leaning against a wall laughing at another man crouched and peeking cautiously at the action on the street. He elbows Steve and points to his buddy. "Hey, man, did you see that motherfucker Albritton? That cracker shitheel pissed his pants when that rocket went over."

Now he's got everyone's attention and a seriously evil look from the pants-pissing Albritton. "Did you dudes see fuckin' Albritton? Hey, Albritton, you a loose motherfucker, man." Corpsman to our rear is hauling Gate-mouth Dude's body back down the alley, but nobody's looking in that direction. In the midst of a firefight, dead men are better out of sight so they can be kept out of mind.

We're out of the alley now, following Albritton and his damp crotch up the street in the direction of those rocket gunners. Wherever the bastards are in the buildings at the end of this street, they've laid in an ample supply of B-40 rounds. It seems like one of them roars over our heads or just past our knees every few seconds. And the gook riflemen firing cover for them are having a field day sweeping us with wicked plunging fire from high positions on the left and right sides of the avenue. There's nothing for it but to keep moving, ducking in and out of doorways, sucking everything into the tightest possible package, trying to imagine you are invisible.

Somewhere to the rear, back where the rockets are detonating, there's the snort and roar of a small gasoline engine. From around a bend in the street we see a 106mm recoilless rifle mounted on a Mule, a small, four-wheeled platform designed to move infantry equipment over rough terrain. The crew is clinging to the speeding vehicle trying to scrunch up and disappear beneath their helmets. Apparently, this is what passes for fire support while the people in the rear argue about the potential for collateral damage that might be done by anything heavier.

The driver is wearing goggles and chewing maliciously on the filter of an unlit cigarette. He looks like a lunatic teenager going for broke in a soapbox derby as he wheels his mount into the mouth of an alley and signals frantically for the crew to begin breaking rounds out of their cardboard containers. The grunts are happy to be cheerleaders.

"Hey, 106s! Nail them motherfuckers! Get some, dudes!" It's the all-purpose mantra that works on all types of fire support. Get Some!

As the 106 crew maneuvers to get their weapon into firing position, grunts all along the street begin banging away to provide distraction while the crew loads and aims the big tube. A platoon sergeant shouts something about marking targets and reloads his rifle with a magazine of tracer rounds. The 106 gunner shows him thumbs-up. Steve is shooting pictures, but I've got other things on what's left of my mind. Somewhere back in that alley behind us, is the pack I dropped when all this started and there's some stuff in there I'm not prepared to lose to the vicious back-blast from a recoilless rifle.

Back in that alley, there's no sign of the NVA pack that's so much more roomy and comfortable than the one they issue to Marines, but there's little time to search. The 106 is about to fire and the back blast can be deadly.

“Clear the back-blast area!” Up near the entrance to the alley an assistant gunner is waving at me to get the hell out of the way. They are about to fire and I am about to suffer the consequences of losing my pack somewhere to the rear of their weapon. There’s radio squawk and shouting from an outhouse shack on my left, so I duck in to catch my breath and save my dignity.

Three or four radio operators are grouped near a window where the Acting Six is busily trading handsets and trying to comprehend the action out on the street. One of the radiomen notices me squatting near the door and moves in my direction with his long whip-antenna scraping loudly on the corrugated tin roof of the shanty that has become a temporary CP. He grins and points at my NVA pack sitting in a corner. My poncho—wadded up and hastily jammed beneath the straps when we moved out this morning—is now neatly folded and tied on for easy access.

“Never hurts to curry the favor of the press.” The radioman grins and actually blushes when I ask him for a name and hometown. He watches dutifully over my shoulder and corrects my spelling as I jot the info in my notebook. Somehow, when there’s time to actually write the little stories about this fight, I’ll work this guy into it and make him look heroic—or at least stoic. He saved my gear and it’s the least I can do to return the favor. That pack contains all I own.

Radioman is monitoring the battalion net. He’s got an informed idea of what’s happening to our right and left. He’s filling me in as I ponder how many times and in how much accurate detail we get the meat of our little action stories from these low-level communicators who always seem to have the big picture when everyone else is semi-to-three-quarters clueless. Apparently the NVA moved a detail of serious B-40 rocket gunners in to the east of the 2nd Platoon, and that’s what halted their advance. First platoon was ordered in to reinforce and the 106s were called up to deal with any strong-points encountered. Meanwhile, the Golf Company bridge-crossing deal is cancelled for lack of interest on the part of a very pissed-off battalion commander, and two more 5th Marines rifle companies are now entering the city.

Back out on the street, I find Steve interviewing a wounded grunt who’s being tended and mended by a Navy Hospital Corpsman. They are screaming at each other over the bang and clang of the nearby 106. The gunner is searching for targets, using the .50 caliber spotting-rifle mounted on top of the 106 tube. There are two or three sharp cracks and then the solid boom of the big gun. These things were made for anti-tank fighting and the armor-piercing rounds being pumped over the heads of cringing grunts are tearing huge holes into the buildings where the NVA rocket crews are no longer returning fire.

It’s like watching a well-oiled NASCAR pit crew at work. Complicated things just seem to happen with focused efficiency and there’s rarely a wasted word or motion. Ammo humpers drag projectiles from their protective containers, and pass the heavy rounds to an assistant gunner who slaps them into the rear of the weapon and closes the breech-block with an oily snick. The gunner seated on the left of the tube hears that the weapon is up and focuses on his sight, elevating and traversing before pulling on the firing switch to trigger the spotting-rifle. When a .50 caliber tracer tells him he’s on target, he depresses that switch and the 106 fires, belching smoke and exhaust gases to the rear. It’s mesmerizing until a

sudden flurry of action on our front sends the gunner twirling furiously on his directional controls.

“Got ’em in the open! Gimme a beehive!”

No doubt we’d wind up writing a little vignette about this 106 crew doing such valuable damage to the NVA formerly lying impervious behind concrete walls in this little section of Hue City, but there would be no mention of using the beehive rounds that contained hundreds of small steel darts called flechettes. Those badass anti-personnel rounds cut huge bloody gouges out of enemy troops in the open, but they are officially not part of the humane American arsenal which—according to our MACV Office of Information guidance—kills people in an open, honest, and forthright manner but does not maim them.

Despite that abiding, official guidance from on-high, the scurrying NVA at the other end of this street are being ground into bloody chuck by the 106 crew. With each beehive round fired there is a strange, whirring, buzzing noise like hundreds of pissed off hornets headed for a source of agitation. Assistant Gunner grabs Gunner by the shoulder, screams something at him and points up the street toward their impact area. All eyes locked on a North Vietnamese soldier squirming against a tree at the head of the street with a B-40 rocket launcher dangling from his hands.

Through a zoom lens, I focus on a strange tableau. The gook's feet are about six inches off the pavement as he kicks and jerks in a death spasm. His squirming body is riddled with holes which show through his dark green uniform as bloody splotches. Gunner caught him running from a building and fired. The resulting swarm of flechettes from the beehive round pinned him to a nearby tree like a paper target in a shooting gallery. As I watch, trying to decide whether or not it was a picture worth shooting, the dangling NVA's face suddenly explodes as if he'd bitten down on a blasting cap. To my right, a grinning grunt lowers his rifle and turns to gesture at his buddies who are just beginning to move back into the street. Get some? Got some—and let's go get some more.

Alpha Company is moving now, and to the rear of us there's another outfit bailing out of idling six-by trucks. Hard to tell in the scramble, but there might be a few familiar faces. Radio Operator trots by me with a nod and a smile. He'll know. “Who's that back there?”

“Hotel 2/5. Just got here. Gooks shot the shit out of ’em on the way into the city.” Radio Operator pauses briefly to pluck a toothbrush out of his helmet band and scrub concrete dust off his handset. “You leavin’ us?”

“Might have to, man. Fifth Marines is my regular outfit.”

“Them fuckin’ boots ain’t seen shit yet. Hey, I can fix it for you to interview the Lieutenant.”

“Cool. I’ll catch up with you.” The arrival of more 5th Marines means I’ll likely have to split from Steve before long. In our Combat Correspondent scheme of things, each of us runs with an assigned outfit unless there’s an emergency like this all hands on deck, balls to the wall rush into Hue City. When the tempo is what passes for normal in northern I Corps, Steve runs with 1st Marines and I’ve got a home with 5th Marines. Hotel has always been one of my favorite second battalion units. The Company Gunny loves publicity and takes good care of a guy who can provide it.

Hotel is trying to get organized and get their wounded evacuated. Apparently, they ran a vicious gauntlet of plunging fire as they convoyed into the city. Company Commander tells me he's headed for a position near the MACV Compound where he'll get further orders from his battalion commander who is already there. Hotel Gunny grins around his soggy cigar, jacks a fresh round into the 12-gauge shotgun he always carries, and says he'll draw chow for me at the compound. I've got a home with Hotel.

In the manicured yard of a well-appointed house just off a major intersection at the other end of the disputed street, the Lieutenant now commanding Alpha Company is taking a break with his radio operators. They are all clustered around a marble fountain that is still burbling water into a little pool of lily pads. Radio Operator signals it's a good time for a few questions.

It's Steve's deal, but he's nowhere in sight so I'll fill in for him but the Acting Six doesn't look like he's in any shape to provide much quotable. He's taken a big swan dive into that deep valley on the other side of Adrenaline Peak. While I'm fumbling for a notebook, he nods into a doze and his helmet falls into his lap. Red-rimmed eyes jerk open and he glances around at his radioman to see if he's missed anything. He notices me and nods. Time for the embarrassing, dumb-ass questions that always make me feel like an amateur ghoul.

It's perfunctory. He's knows it and so do I as I jot down his responses. Mainly, I'm searching for something deeper inside a man who took over when his boss was blasted into a medevac on the first day of a fight nobody expected on a concrete battlefield that's more vicious than anything they could imagine. If he survives, this guy will be a hard act for any officer to follow. Leading a lashed-up outfit of part grunts and part shoe-clerks through a day of hard fighting, he remained calm and collected, tracking scattered elements in almost constant contact with the NVA. His part in most of it was jumping from one radio operator to the next in an effort to give sensible orders and provide some direction for Marines out of his sight and personal influence. And sometime tonight when everyone else is trying to sleep or stay awake, he'll find time to think about the ones who didn't make it through the first day in Hue City.

We're finished. He can't add anything and I can't ask him to try. There's a nod of understanding between two survivors and then I stand to go find Hotel Company. He grabs at my knee and jabs a grimy finger at my notebook. "Get the story straight. I did a lot of talking on the radio, but those grunts out there bought this real estate."

Noble sentiments and just what you'd expect to hear—back at Quantico. But this is Hue City and if there's anything noble about the fight here I have yet to see it. For some reason it pisses me off. Come on, Lieutenant; give us all a break. Off the record and all, but few enough people in this goddamn war can do what you did with any competence and the grunts know that. They've got a fully functional bullshit filter and it's always dialed up to plus four. It's a nasty place to be up on the pointy end of the bayonet. There it is. And if you wanted it another way, you could have applied for graduate school.

Getting dark now and long, looming shadows are creeping across the streets of Hue. It's no time to be wandering around looking for Hotel Company. Steve is parked in the portico of a house that's been recently holed by the 106 crew that

saved the day. He offers the last cigarette in the C-ration four-pack and I suck smoke into lungs already clogged with concrete dust. The cigarette is stale as usual, probably from rations packed for grunts in Korea. There's just enough light for him to look over my interview notes. He asks a few probing questions of his own as if I'd missed something in talking to the Lieutenant and that doesn't improve my mood. Take the fucking notes, write the story when we get back to the rear, and make the guy a hometown hero. It is what it is.

"You're beginning to see it, aren't you?"

"See what?"

"You'll know. When you see it, you'll know." And then he rolls up in his poncho. I've got the first watch tonight and in the morning we might split. Whatever he wants me to see better show up soon. One or both of us might be dead before this time tomorrow.

Mostly to keep from nodding off, I wander out into a garden area where Alpha Company grunts are setting up the night watch in the last glimmers of grey light. There is just time for a final smoke before the glowing ash will make me a sniper target. It starts to drizzle again and the grunts meet the weather change with a barrage of bitching. Seeking shelter under a large banyan tree, I squat next to a grunt on watch with his M-79 blooper in hand and a string of extra rounds close by. We've never seen each other before, but that doesn't stop us from falling into a whispered conversation.

Grenadier wants to talk. He hasn't been in the Marine Corps long, just a little over a year with four months of that in Vietnam. There is nothing much in common between us, but it doesn't keep him from chatting like he expects me to be interested. He's anxious to tell me about his family and girlfriend somewhere in Iowa. It's too dark to see his face and oddly out of character for me, but I find myself actually wanting to *know* this guy as we whisper into the night. I've never even been to Iowa and can't imagine anything that would take me there, but Grenadier has me convinced I should pay him a visit when we get back to The World.

MACV Compound

God knows snipers have enough targets around this area. Can I afford to fire up a smoke? Is the high worth the hurt? Looks like about 15 more minutes before the sky will be light enough to make it safe. A smoke is likely the last thing I need with the croupy, phlegm-filled lungs everyone is developing due to the wet air and rock dust. I'll wait. A pre-dawn smoke might be comforting but a sniper round full in the face would roach the buzz completely.

It was relatively quiet last night and everyone is hoping that situation might maintain with the new day. A freshening breeze comes up as the sky grays around the edges with first light. The morning is gloomy with low clouds and the breeze carries mist into Hue from a weather front out at sea. The air is cold and most of us are miserable with chills when the word comes to saddle up and move.

We stumble toward the MACV Compound, moving like zombies in the dawn haze. Steve heads directly for the Compound gate, anxious to find the battalion

commander who might provide some sort of contextual sitrep. The CO is inside somewhere. We know he moved forward to set up his command post almost immediately after Alpha Company cleared the area around the compound. We'll shift to Hotel Company 2/5 today but it's no big drama. We can move between units easily. The way things are going, outfits in Hue are unlikely be more than shouting distance from each other as they operate. There's little room in a city fight for broad-ranging maneuvers. We are both anxious to reunite with the Horrible Hogs of Hotel Company, a stout, reliable outfit—a gang of hard-ass survivors who will welcome a couple of familiar strap-hangers.

According to a quick and dirty, almost rambling briefing we get from the battalion operations officer, Hotel spent most of the day yesterday trying to take the Vietnamese Treasury building. They didn't make it, but their attack did a great deal to protect Alpha Company's exposed flank as they moved on the MACV Compound. Hotel has been ordered to try again today and that gives us a short-term plan of action. Steve is adjusting his gear as we prepare to move, squinting through rain-speckled glasses at a sunless sky.

"Battalion Six says Hotel takes the Treasury Building today. No excuses. He also says transportation should be rolling for Phu Bai before dark tonight. We could get some of this early shit out with them. Got any interest in making a trip to the rear?"

The question is both rhetorical and ridiculous. We both have a great deal of interest in that but neither of us will go. There's a mutual feeling that we are onto something big here, something unusual that needs witnessing. The stories can wait until we've got some idea how to end them. "I'm thinking we should stick with Hotel for a while. That Treasury Building deal sounds like good copy." It's superficial but sufficient to send us off in search of Hotel Company.

"You know," he says as we amble off toward the area where a guide tells us we can find the 2/5 CP, "we could probably get bylines in every paper in the English-speaking world with our stuff out of here." He leaves it hanging for the fantasy it is. The civilian scribblers and TV types will be flooding into Hue before long, and anything we might write won't stand a chance against their sources, outlets, and big-gun reputations. Both of us have been down that road before.

A platoon of Horrible Hogs is hunched in a drainage ditch full of slimy water that echoes with colorful bitching from the yawning men waiting for word to move. All eyes are locked on the Treasury Building located about three blocks from us up a broad, tree-lined street running parallel to the Perfume River. The day's objective is up there squatting like an ornate mausoleum beyond a large courtyard surrounded by a stout stone fence.

The shitty weather is disorienting. How can it be this cold in Southeast Asia? What happened to the land of tropical jungles and sweltering heat? Smelly water ripples around my shivering haunches as a grunt invades my space. He's wearing a wide grin on his bristly face as he opens a conversation with a bog-standard Marine Corps introduction. "Where you from in The World, man?"

He doesn't really give a shit about some little burg in Southeast Missouri, but talking beats staring and brooding. By force of habit rather than any real interest, I pull my weather-beaten notebook and a pen out as I return the query. He grins

and nods while I scribble. “I’m from Amarillo, Texas. Name’s Autry—like the cowboy—first name Leon but they call me Gene. Figures, right?”

Scribbles record his responses to a few more obligatory questions about his job and his time in The Nam to date. Gene Autry digs out a plastic box that contains his smokes and offers me one. I’ve got a similar PX purchased box in my pocket and we talk for a while about how valuable things like that are in wet weather like the stuff that we are experiencing in Hue. Then it’s time to compare our Zippos. His is engraved with an image of Snoopy sitting on his dog house and giving the world the big middle digit. “Fuck ’em all,” Gene Autry says. “There it is,” I reply.

He’s a fairly handsome guy for a grunt rifleman with clear blue eyes and the scrubby vestiges of a mustache that his light beard won’t really support beneath his runny nose. Autry points to a scar beside his right eye and tells me that’s his first Purple Heart, grenade shrapnel that just missed sending him back to Amarillo as a one-eyed wonder. No biggie, he shrugs and launches into the life and times of PFC Gene Autry, beginning with how useless it is to keep reminding everyone that his real given name is Leon. We are becoming buddies in this reeking trench as we wait for the order to start up the street toward the Treasury Building. Autry probably has a bunch of friends nearby, but here I am with the potential for recording it all and what the hell. He’s never really talked to a reporter of any sort before this chance encounter. It’s a familiar tale about high school football, fast girls, illegal beer runs, and the big life-changer when he joined the Marine Corps to “get me a set of them fuckin’ dress blues, man.”

As I listen distractedly to Autry’s ramble, a time tunnel opens and I’m through the wormhole to a little Southeast Missouri town where I have been shuttled off to spend time with my Dad who is separated by the bottle from my Mom. On one of those sultry summer days just before I’m scheduled to start military school, a shotgun blast too close to my grandparents’ house sends me to investigate. And there’s my Dad—or what’s left of the chunky, intelligent, tow-headed Irishman that was my Dad. Now he’s dead by his own hand and I’ll never listen to his rambling stories again, never stand by his barstool and marvel at the way he could spin the simplest situations into fascinating adventures. It was so shocking that I couldn’t cry and simply stood there watching his blood pool around the new white basketball shoes he’d bought for me. The carefully folded American flag they gave me at his funeral served as a pillow for lots of long nights spent crying rather than sleeping. And then one morning I woke up dry-eyed with a firm resolution never to love anyone again as deeply as I did my father.

Of course, there were testosterone-fueled teenage years ahead, but I was never very good at anything beyond the hunt for frequent and fervent sexual encounters. It came to a head right after I graduated from that military school when a girl I felt slightly more passionate about than usual broke what was left of my heart. She’d hung in with me during a long, sultry affair then finally decided there was no future in it. She curtly handed back my graduation ring which had until that moment had hung between her luscious boobs, and walked out of my life. At a time of forced introspection, I had no idea where that life might lead. What I needed was direction, discipline, and distraction. I needed an outfit that didn’t ask many questions or expect many from its minions. It didn’t take me long to decide that outfit was most likely the U.S. Marine Corps, America’s version of a French

Foreign Legion where sad souls can escape and forget. So, running away from one death that haunted me, I joined a lash-up that specialized in, sometimes even glorified death, as long as it was all done the Marine Corps way with attendant honor and glory.

Go figure—and there in that slimy ditch in Hue City listening to Gene Autry tell me about a much more normal adolescence, I had nothing better to do than figure. Life's a bitch sometimes, I tell Gene Autry, and snap the notebook shut on his story and mine.

Treasury Building

Gene Autry elbows me back to Hue, nodding and pointing at the Treasury Building up ahead of our ditch. "I think I see them fuckers moving up there." His grubby finger brushes my nose and I see shadows flitting back and forth in the courtyard fronting the building. Those gooks know for sure what's coming their way and they're getting ready for it, improving positions at street level and up high in the building. Not hard to see why they were able to hold off Hotel's determined assault yesterday. It will be a mix of plunging and grazing fire when we get within their range. A clutch of dark clouds passes the sun, and in that brighter light I can see that the front of the building is torn up with bullet holes. It looks like some berserk architect has taken a jackhammer to it.

There is a dead Marine lying in a grotesque posture near the steps of the building. Autry tells me that it's Stevens, a Hotel Company man that they couldn't recover when they pulled back under intense fire. The Horrible Hogs are more concerned about retrieving their buddy than they are excited about a second shot at taking the Treasury Building. No one believes either task will be easy, but it's aggravating to see Stevens' body lying up there in a gook-controlled courtyard. Everyone seems a little embarrassed about that. No one says it in precisely textbook fashion, but everyone knows Marines don't leave other Marines—living or dead—behind when they quit a battlefield. There's no one to blame specifically and the situation yesterday was beyond their control, but a palpable level of anger is building up in Hotel Company. This second assault will be undertaken by a bunch of pissed off grunts, and there's a certain reassurance in that anger. They won't fail this time.

Activity begins all along the assault line as officers brief the squad leaders. There is an uneasy stirring among the grunts in our ditch, the ones that will make the first rush of the day. A rooster crows in the distance and it's almost like a bugle call. Firing starts immediately. There is a steady roar of rifle and machinegun fire from both ends of the long drainage ditch and concrete chips begin to fly in the distance. Six Marines near me break cover in a tidal wave of watery slime and pound toward the building, running zig-zag paths, streaming water from soaked trousers and boots.

Before long the assault takes recognizable shape. It's all about fire and maneuver as it always is in attacking a fortified position. One squad keeps gook gunners away from the windows with concentrated fire while another moves into defilade. Gooks are waiting for their time so there's not as much return fire as

everyone expected during the initial rush. It's a mild shock when we realize the leading squad is safely tucked behind the wall surrounding the building. The lucky leaders signal for the rest of us to come on and we rush forward to join them, bounding from cover to cover on both sides of the street. We know the gooks are in there. We've seen them moving around. So? Where are they and what are they waiting for?

Through a telephoto lens, I watch as two grunts crawl under cover of the courtyard wall toward a hole blasted by a recoilless rifle crew during yesterday's action. Autry tells me that 106 was taken out by a B-40 fired from an upper story, but the gunner is nowhere in sight today.

One of the crawling grunts is carrying a Blooper, the short, shotgun-like 40mm grenade launcher that is proving to be a valuable weapon for infantrymen in Hue. Behind Blooper Man is another grunt hugging two green tubes containing LAAWs, Lightweight Antitank Assault Weapons. As LAAW Man sets up to fire, Blooper Man dashes across the open space in the wall and peeks to select a target. They are in position to rock and roll now, but before they can trigger the assault, the late-sleeper gooks inside the building decide it's time to wake up and fight. AK rounds impact all around the assault team, tearing chunks of macadam up and down the street. Muzzle flashes light up windows all across the front of the building.

A lieutenant off to my left is screaming for covering fire and Marines in hides all along the street begin burning through M-16 magazines and belts of linked M-60 ammo. Sparks and rocks are flying from the front of the building in a noisy shower. Blooper Man swings around the opening to fire two quick rounds into a second-story window. He's good. He fires and reloads so quickly that the two reports sound almost like a burst of semi-auto fire.

The upper left corner of the Treasury Building explodes in a dark blossom of high-explosive. Through the smoke, an RPD machinegun with gook gunner still attached tumbles slowly to the courtyard and impacts with a sickening thump. LAAW Man strips another rocket and sets up to fire again as a rifleman next to him pours half a magazine into the dead gook. It's as good a break as we are likely to get and the lieutenant charges down the street waving for his grunts to follow.

Pounding along behind a grunt carrying at least a thousand rounds of machinegun ammo draped all over his body, I glance right and then left trying to locate Steve. He's nowhere in sight and I'm too nervous to conduct anything more than a cursory search. Something tells me if I stay tied in tight behind this hulking, ammo-festooned grunt, I just might make it all the way to the Treasury Building. If I can just stay right behind his broad butt I've got some sense of direction and purpose here, maybe a chance that he'll catch the first rounds aimed at us and I might skate. It's not very manly or heroic, but I'm going with it.

In a couple of minutes that seem like hours, we make it to the wall and dive to find cover. I'm left all alone when Broad Butt crawls away to re-supply a machinegun firing on the flank of the new assault line. Plunging fire from the upper floors is cracking overhead but not doing much damage. There are maybe six or seven lying in the streets; some bleeding out while others crawl for cover. The lieutenant flops down next to me and peeks over the wall. He's chewing on a lower lip and trying to decide how to get some of his people across the courtyard and into the building.

He's still thinking about it when a squad leader decides he's had enough bullshit and leads his guys into the open screaming for covering fire. They are fully exposed, running and gunning at NVA shooters in spider holes dotted throughout the courtyard. There's still deadly fire raining down from the building's upper reaches, but more and more Marines are taking it on themselves to follow the first squad's lead. Two by two or in single rushes, they close on the building and hug the structure which puts them in defilade and safe from shooters inside the objective.

The lieutenant vaults the fence and sprays a magazine full of ball ammo toward the roof. By the time I find the guts to follow, a unit of maybe four or five guys have made it into the Treasury Building. I can hear them banging away in there. More Marines flood in through doors and lower level windows as I shove a dead NVA out of the way and take cover in his little fighting hole. On a side of the building, there are more grunts firing and fragging, forcing open a side entrance covered by one of those accordion-type security gates.

The lieutenant maneuvers forward past me to join them with his radio operator in tow. He pauses at the entrance to radio a report on their progress and then inside the building. There's a roar of rifle fire and detonating grenades blowing out of the building and over my position in the courtyard. There's a serious fight going on inside that building, but there's no telling from here who is winning and who is losing. In about ten minutes by my watch, a Corpsman comes forward to reclaim Stevens corpse and haul it away out of sight. The noise inside the building begins to taper off to an intermittent rattle of single shots.

Hotel Company Gunny appears in the doorway with his shotgun dangling and a cigar clenched in his teeth. It's a classic image and I record it on a couple of frames as he signals for the rest of the company to advance. The Treasury Building belongs to the Horrible Hogs of Hotel Company. Those not engaged in sweeping the building quickly arrive and fan out into defensive positions around the courtyard against an NVA counterattack.

Before I head for the building to find out what happened in there beyond the obvious, I take a few minutes to strip the dead NVA from the spider-hole of anything that looks like valuable trading material. There's not much of interest beyond a clutch of letters covered with stamps extolling the virtues and fighting spirit of the People's Army and a full-face gas mask of the sort I've seen dopers in the rear turn into what they call a grass-mask. Stuffing the enemy gear in my pack, I head for the building and duck inside. The air is thick with dust and cordite through which grunts are running in all directions. It seems the safe bet is just to stay out of the way for a while, so I slump down against a marble bench and catch my breath.

Two grunts suddenly appear in the broad main corridor of the building, walking backwards and dragging two gook bodies. They head for the entrance and then fling the rumpled forms out onto the front steps for the security squads to examine. I hear a ragged line of cheers erupt from the grunts in the courtyard. Hotel Company has captured a major objective in Hue, a key piece of urban terrain and that's a story, so I rise to find someone who can tell me about it.

Sprawled along a series of polished marble hallways throughout of the Treasury Building, live grunts are doing what they always do after a firefight: Smoking or

munching on something saved in a pack or pocket, sucking on canteens, staring at their boots, the opposite wall or the ceiling. They scrutinize anything but each other. In another couple of minutes, the ringing in their ears will clear. They'll accept the fact that they survived again and the trash-talk will commence. Safe for a precious few minutes, they will critique the fight, focusing on the dark, near-fatal moments when somebody fucked up and got away with it.

Code of the Grunt. If you can't say something funny about a shitty situation, don't say anything. Keep the emotions buried until everyone comes to believe you don't have any. The thing to be—the thing to look like when anyone is looking—is just another grunt motherfucker who doesn't give a shit. There it is.

It starts with a PFC in horn-rimmed glasses, reloading his rifle magazines and yelling at another Marine sitting across the hall munching on a C-ration candy bar. Because neither one can hear very well, the exchange is made in high, croaking shouts.

"You the dude that pounded that cocksucker up topside with the LAAW?"

"Me and Blooper Man blew that motherfucker right out of his jock. You dudes find the leftovers up there?"

"We seen four of them assholes lying around in the area where you put the round. But they wasn't the same ones had us pinned down outside yesterday."

"How the fuck do you know that?"

"There was three more of 'em up there smelled like they been dead for a while. We got them motherfuckers yesterday is what I think. You got their replacements."

Another grunt enters the conversation in mid-quibble. "Who gives a shit? You got 'em, we got 'em; what fucking difference does it make as long as they're dead?"

There's more but I wander away from it. The littered, blasted hallways inside the Treasury Building are taking on the atmosphere of a locker room after the big game which is no surprise. Most of these guys aren't long out of high school and some of them are still coping with combat like they would a football or basketball game. That won't last long.

Steve is propped up against a marble archway sucking on a canteen. He offers me a hit and lets me know his story notes plus a couple of rolls of film are on their way to Phu Bai. "I found a dude they were medevacing for pneumonia. He promised to drop the shit off on his way to the hospital."

He was in on the initial assault, right there with the leading squads, but he doesn't have much to say about it. "Bitch-kitty, gooks everywhere tucked in little cubbyholes and all over the upstairs." That's it. From the blood pools, scorch-marks, wounded Marines and shell-casings scattered everywhere there was clearly a whole hell of a more to it than that, but he's not in a mood to expand or expound. When I probe, he simply holds up an empty cloth bandolier draped over his shoulder. When he started for the Treasury Building it contained ten fully loaded magazines.

We sit side-by-side reloading magazines from a spare bandolier. I'm punching a cleaning rod through my rifle when he digs around in his salty old NVA pack. In a moment I hear his high school ring clinking on glass. He grins and shows me the neck of a bottle.

"What is that—double-rectified busthead?"

Sheltering his prize from prying eyes, he shows me enough of the bottle to recognize Benedictine brandy. “Found it stuffed into some sandbags back at the MACV Compound. You’re looking at the kind of rare shit that prevents pneumonia in weather like this.”

“And that is the problem, my man. Looking at booze does not prevent pneumonia but I have it on good authority that drinking it is definitely prophylactic.”

We have a swallow or two each and the hot liquid works as advertised. Sitting there in a rubble-strewn hallway listening to blast-deafened, mind-numbed grunts bleat and bitch, we relax into a warm survivor’s cocoon where nothing much beyond the moment is worth the effort of worrying about it.

Steve wanders off leaving me to watch the gear. He returns in a half-hour flipping through the pages of his notebook. “We hold here for a while until the rest of the battalion ties in on the flanks...”

There is more but it’s rudely interrupted by a loud detonation that seems to send a shock-wave up through the floor. Something or someone has exploded in the basement of the building. Grunts are scrambling and falling all over each other, screaming for information. Didn’t anybody clear the fucking basement? From a rubble-strewn position flat on the tiles, I look to the right and see a thick door hanging nearly off its hinges. Smoke is billowing up from a stairway behind it and grunts are heading for the area with rifles shouldered.

Two NCOs are shoving anxious grunts back into overwatch positions and yelling at someone on the other side of the door. “What the fuck happened down there?” From below, excited voices bellow through the noise. “Come on down here. You ain’t gonna fuckin’ believe this shit.”

We waddle toward the door and peek into the dark. Acrid smoke billows up a stone stairwell as I crane to see what caused the commotion in the basement of the Treasury Building. A heavy object lands at my feet.

“Grenade!” We hit the deck and roll in a desperate effort to escape whatever was tossed our way. Hugging my helmet I hope for the best. If it’s a Chicom, we about to be peppered like a pin-cushion but nothing fatal happens. When we peek up from under our helmets, we see an NCO squatting near the doorway examining a bundle of paper. He grins and shakes the bundle at us.

“Here’s your fucking grenade. It’s gook money.” He shows the cash to curious grunts beginning to gather and celebrate surviving another close call. The bundle of Vietnamese currency is about four inches thick and neatly bound with gummed paper. The top bill is a one hundred piaster note or about \$1.10 in American currency.

“Shit, there must be about a thousand dollars here.” The sergeant has an odd, mercenary gleam in his bloodshot eyes. Grunts yell for him to break the binding and share the windfall. He begins to hold an impromptu payday formation and everyone gets a few bills from the bundle.

Code of The Grunt: When it comes to cash, get some while the getting’s good. Candy is dandy but money won’t rot your teeth.

With everyone preoccupied and squabbling about their share, Steve and I descend the stairs and head for a light glowing in the dark at the end of a marble corridor. Smoke from whatever caused the detonation is clearing as we round a

corner to find three dirty, disheveled grunts wallowing in a huge pile of cash. An iron-filigreed door hangs crazily off its hinges and a large chunk of plaster sits crumbled on the floor where the door joined the wall before the grunts used C-4 as a skeleton key. Beyond the door is what looks like a standard bank vault lined with safety deposit boxes, but any resemblance to your local savings and loan ends there. As we try to compute the amount of cash that must be just lying around in that vault, the grunts began pelting one another with bundles of money. It's like watching kids in a snowball fight or tearing into their presents on Christmas morning.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Steve wades through an ankle-deep morass of cash and scoops up some of the bills. "I'm thinking a wad or two of this stuff would go a long way toward financing some really great shit given current black market exchange rates." There are bundles of bills and sacks of coins everywhere. One of the grunts is stuffing cash into the cargo pockets of his trousers and pointing at a buddy who is lighting a C-ration cigarette with a large-denomination piaster note.

"We was supposed to sweep the basement for gooks, see? And fuckin' Manero over there, he looks in here and sees all this fuckin' money lyin' around, so fuckin' Manero, he breaks out a quarter-pound of C-4 and a cap, see? We blew the fucking gate and—look at all this shit, man! How much you think this shit would be worth if a dude could get to Saigon or someplace?"

"You're never going to find out..." The lieutenant's voice is the ultimate buzz-kill. He walks into the light and points at a wall of the cash cage where the crest-fallen grunts line up for the lecture they know is coming. They look like kids caught shoplifting as the officer advances on the yeggs and potential bank robbers in his platoon. The grunts mostly hang their heads except for the corporal on the right who looks like he's wondering if he can blow the lieutenant away and make off with enough money to buy a new life. I shuffle toward the rear of the cage as the lieutenant points at their bulging pockets and watches them unload cash into the canvas bag he's holding.

"There will be no looting in this city by people in my unit. Get all that cash into the bag and bring it topside. The Gunny will search everyone before he leaves the building." Grunts are too busy bitching and stuffing cash into the bag to notice the three bundles I kick under a table. Off to my left I spot a barred window that's been left open for ventilation.

"Easy come; easy go..." One of the formerly wealthy grunts stuffs the last bundle of cash into the bag and knots it securely at the top. "We coulda been huge with what's in this fuckin' bag..." His buddy shoves him toward the staircase. "In your fuckin' dreams, Manero. You wouldn't get no chance to spend it anyway. You're gonna die in this fucking Hue City." With loss of assets comes a serious slump in morale.

Code of the Grunt. Don't expect anything because you aren't going to get it. The only ration that won't be short is the ration of shit. Like the buttplate of a rifle, you are fairly insignificant and will get banged around at every turn.

Watching Steve follow the bitching grunts up the stairs, I retrieve the cash bundles, carry them to the window and toss them out into the drizzle. Once the

Company Gunny finishes his search, they'll be easy to retrieve and tuck away in my pack.

Topside, I clear the pat-down and wander outside the building while Steve compiles names and notes for a story about brave Marines rescuing GVN resources from the clutches of the greedy communist enemy. By the time I get back inside with a significantly heavier pack, he's bitching about fortunes lost and the down payment he could have made on that little colonial in Tacoma.

"My man, you have once again underestimated my cunning and guile. While that lieutenant was brow-beating his grunts, did you happen to notice the tall, skinny guy standing quietly at the back of the vault? That fuckin' guy was a looter. He'll probably be court-martialed and shot. Hopefully, not before he's able to split a significant bundle of cash with his best buddy."

There are questions and quibbles but they'll have to wait. Hotel Company is ordered to clear an avenue running parallel to the Perfume River which divides the city north and south. Hotel Six is going to lead the assault personally despite the sound advice of his Company Gunny. The CO is a tall, good-looking, tow-headed captain and very popular with his grunts. In a briefing in the courtyard of the Treasury Building, Hotel Six indicates a company of ARVN is holding against an NVA assault on an armory near the center of the city around the Le Lai Military Camp. MACV is anxious to reinforce them before the NVA get their hands on a large stockpile of weapons and ammo in the camp's armory. The captain says it's a necessary mission. The armory contains mostly surplus U.S. weapons of the WW II and Korean eras, but he isn't about to let them fall into enemy hands. AKs and B-40s are bad enough and he doesn't want his Marines facing M-1 rifles, BARs, and Thompson submachine guns to boot.

Le Lai Military Camp

Hotel fans out rapidly on both sides of the street, moving swiftly toward the objective. Six says it isn't more than three blocks away to the east. Right flank platoon runs as company guide using a parallel back street as a reference to keep everyone headed in the right direction. It's a dicey move and Hotel Six doesn't like having most of his troops out of his sight most of the time as he trudges along like a gypsy chieftain leading only a small caravan of radio operators and gun guards.

Steve argues for sticking close to the center so we'll be available to move in the direction of any contact, but I want to go with the grunts wandering through the houses on the left. You could tell the residents had split in a hurry and I want a look at whatever they left behind. There's a ghoulis attraction about roaming unfettered and uninvited around someone else's house and when it's a Vietnamese house full of alien artifacts, the pull is irresistible. Who knows? We might something to take an edge off the after-action jitters pulsing in my belly.

Third platoon slashes and crashes through a high-tone neighborhood, in the front door and out the back, keeping an eye on Hotel Six and trying to maintain direction. We dodge along behind them, taking a little time to search cabinets and cupboards. In less than a block, I've got a bottle of Johnny Walker in my pack

padded by the purloined cash plus and an ornate flask of some local busthead in my pocket.

Steve is on my right as we emerge from one house onto a breezy-looking veranda that rambles into a lush garden. The evil crack of a near miss drives both us to ground as the platoon on our right commences a fierce firefight. The shooter to our front sends two more close rounds our way and I speculate he's using an SKS carbine. We need to move or get blown away, simple as that and not much choice about direction.

Four Marines are crouched behind a fence at the end of the garden and burning ammo in four different directions. A lanky corporal with tattoos over practically every inch of exposed skin jumps up from behind the fence and points at the ground floor window of a building across the street. He's screaming for fire on that point when his head explodes like a water balloon full of blood. His buddies freeze, brushing at gore on their flak-jackets and ducking incoming rounds from the shooter across the street.

Ricochets scream off the wall at our rear and something smacks me hard on the bridge of my nose. My eyes are watering and there is the coppery taste of blood in my mouth. Steve is swabbing at my nose with a towel and pressing me down behind the fence out of the line of fire. .

"How bad is it?"

"Looks like a piece of rock or something hit you in the nose. Might be broken but you're definitely gonna live."

"Feels like somebody smacked me in the snot-locker with a fucking crowbar."

"Might improve your looks. Meanwhile, we're gonna have to do something about that asshole across the street." He points at the grunts now huddled around their dead squad leader. "Those guys don't seem to be highly motivated."

"Maybe we can get over there and pop a frag in his ass—like we did that time out on Go Noi Island."

"It's either that or lay chilly and hope for help to come." Steve points toward the sound of the firefight on our right flank. "That ain't gonna be anytime soon."

"Let's try it. It won't be long before he calls up some buddies to shoot fish in a barrel."

A Corpsman is dragging the tattooed corpse to the rear as we snake up toward the leaderless grunts and borrow two frag grenades. "Listen..." I grab the nearest man by the shoulder and shake him. "We're gonna go get that bastard across the street. He's in the window down low to the left of that doorway. See it?"

The grunt follows my pointing finger with his eyes and nods. Two more riflemen peek over the fence to scope the target. "You dudes need to fire cover for us when we move. Just pour it on that window and when you see us in position, shift your fire. You understand that?"

"Who the fuck are you guys?" A grunt on the firing line stares open-mouthed at my bloody nose. "Don't matter. You just need to do what I told you. We'll take care of the rest. Got it?" The grunts just shrug. It's our funeral.

When they cut loose, we make a looping left, cross the street and head for the shooter's building. Steve has one of the grenades and I'm carrying the other as we charge with our heads down and close rounds snapping by our ears. We reach the side of the building and slither along until we're on both sides of the sniper's

window. Every once in a while he sticks the muzzle through it and fires a few rounds. Steve waves desperately for the grunts to shift their fire and then leans his rifle up against the wall of the building to straighten the pin on his grenade. I've already done mine. It's a familiar drill that requires precise timing and he's got the best position.

He nods, pulls the pin on his grenade and lets the safety lever fly. He counts to three and then heaves the frag into the window. Immediately after he throws the first one, I've got the second one cooking and I pass it to him with an easy underhanded toss. He snatches it and the second frag detonates almost immediately after the first one. No telling what happened for sure but the little drill insures no gook will be able to run down a grenade and toss it back at us.

Inside the building, following our rifle muzzles, we sprint down a corridor and duck into the room where we judge the sniper must be. Near the window overlooking the street is a folding screen that's perforated like a sieve by grenade shrapnel. The gook sniper is crumpled behind the screen. The back of his dark green uniform is shredded and stained black with blood.

"Damn, that was slick!" An admiring clutch of grunts has moved in behind us and Steve is grinning at them. I am nerve-jangled and in no mood for after-action kudos. "Please don't let this become a habit, people. We are just along for the ride."

A short while later, we are huddled in another building near the ARVN compound waiting for the officers to decide how to attack it. More precisely, they are trying to decide how to attack the NVA who are attacking the Le Lai Military Camp. Gunfire from the other end of the street is deafening, hasn't slacked for the past ten minutes, so somebody is in the fight. It sounds like the ARVN must be firing every weapon they have stacked in that armory. The old World War II Garands and BARs are clearly audible above the crack of AKs and the spang of M-16s.

Through a window we can see the compound in the near distance. The NVA have laid siege to the place, shooting from various covered positions at the ARVN who are firing back from behind high walls and a big iron gate. I can't see any approach route except one leading right up the center of a street fronting our look-out. This will not be pretty.

"Ah think the ARVN have just vacated their mothahfuckin' position." A black Marine near my shoulder points toward the armory gate where an M-113 Armored Personnel Carrier roars into the street, tracks clattering and throwing cobblestones. South Vietnamese soldiers are falling off the vehicle as it grinds away from the camp and turns in our direction with NVA rounds pinging off the armor.

The APC churns past careening from one side of the street to the other and shedding topside riders like a rodeo bronc. We see the flash of frightened eyes beneath helmets as tiny ARVN soldiers hang on like desperate leeches. We are left with no friendlies inside the camp as the vehicle disappears leaving a cloud of pungent diesel exhaust in its wake.

Squad leaders yell for their Marines to move up both sides of the street. We pass Hotel Six and his radio operators crouched in a doorway waving the hustling infantry forward and yelling for speed. "Did you see the fucking ARVN?" The CO is

shouting at his Company Gunny. "We need to get some of our people in there before the NVA turn the place into The Alamo."

There is a crescendo of firing on the left in a short block of houses. One of the Hotel Company platoons is already in contact with the NVA. If they hold them, the rest of us might have time to make the gate. It's a footrace.

As sporadic fire pings off the walls near the front gate, a squad of Marines on the right finds a second, sandbagged and barricaded entrance and rips open a passageway. Grunts pour through it to take firing positions along the inside of the walls. There is very little return fire from inside the compound. Wherever the NVA are, they have not managed to breach the Le Lai compound.

Hotel Six is getting a radio update from battalion as he and his CP group move up and into the camp complex. He nods at me and says he's had some good news. As I fumble for a notebook, the captain says he's just heard reinforcements are pouring into the city from Phu Bai. All of 2/5 is now in Hue along with two companies from 1st Marines. The Great Big Battle of Hue City is morphing into a major engagement and the Six says we can expect a gaggle of civilian correspondents any time now.

There is a clear view across the Perfume River from the walls of the camp. The NVA flag is still flying over the Citadel on the north side and it doesn't look like anyone but the bad guys is moving over there. As we watch that irritating blue, red, and yellow North Vietnamese flag snapping above the walls in the afternoon breeze, it begins to rain hard.

We climb down from a guard tower and find Hotel Six in a talkative mood. Between his serious briefing and snide comments from the Company Gunny, we get a feel for what's happening elsewhere in Hue. The Marine command group, now firmly ensconced in Army territory behind the walls of the MACV Compound, is pleased that Hotel Company kept the NVA at bay in this sector. Hotel is due to attack westward before nightfall. There are scattered reports of 1st ARVN Division units regrouping and beginning to move into the city. There are also reportedly Vietnamese Rangers and Marines inbound and ready to make the assault on the northside as soon as we get the south side cleaned up to everyone's satisfaction. There is still a policy in place that precludes air strikes, artillery, or naval gunfire into the city, but Hotel Six thinks that might be modified now that some South Vietnamese blood is bound to be spilled.

Elsewhere in the Le Lai camp, Hotel Marines are rearming themselves from the huge weapons inventory in the ARVN armory, turning themselves into John Wayne clones. Grinning Marines are sporting vintage Thompson submachine guns, Browning Automatic Rifles, and M-2 carbines. This is the good shit, cool pillage, and macho weaponry of movie fame. It's all so much more dashing than the Matty Mattel, jam-prone, plastic-banana M-16s the Army foisted off on the Marines who resisted giving up their reliable, high-power M-14s kicking and screaming. Thompsons are a particular prize. Most of the kids in Hotel grew up on movies in which celluloid Marines used the venerable Tommy Gun to blast Japs in the South Pacific.

I am not immune and pick up one of the last Thompson's left inside the armory along with three 30-round magazines and as much .45 ammo as I can stuff in my pockets. When I find Steve, he grins at my macho firepower but doesn't have much

to say. What keeps him from giving me the needle is probably the M-2 carbine slung over shoulder and a pouch full of 30-round banana magazines hooked to his gear. It's an image thing, and we wordlessly trade cameras to snap each other's picture posing with the salty weapons cocked on a hip.

Later we sit in a corner under the eaves of a roof, watching the rain puddle in the armory compound and observing Hotel Company grunts getting ready to move at dusk. They are raggedy-assed Marines in baggy rain suits, shredded flak jackets and dented helmets. Many of the recently rearmed look like World War II Leathernecks just back from assaulting some coral island. Their cheeks and chins are covered with three-day stubble. Most have battle dressings wrapped around one minor wound or another. They are dead beat from almost no sleep in the past three days, but there's enough energy left to bitch. There always is and always will be.

Steve returns from taking a leak and then signals for me to join him on the other side of the compound. He leads to a rickety flagpole near the perimeter fence and points to a pool of water at its base. Floating atop the muck is a pile of crumpled red and yellow silk. "Look at this shit. The ARVN di-di'ed and just dropped their flag right on the deck." There are several bullet holes in the fabric and a stain that looks suspiciously like blood in one corner of the flag. I unhook it from the halyard and we hold it up. Steve shakes his head. "Those chicken-shit fuckers shouldn't have left their flag like this."

"Look, why don't we keep this thing?" I squeeze all the muddy water I can out of the flag and try to fold it. "Somebody in the rear might pay big bucks for a thing like this."

Steve chews the top off a Sharpie marker, spreads the damp flag on the flat of his pack and begins to print: Captured by 1st MarDiv Combat Correspondents, Hue City, RVN, Feb. 1968. He shows me the inscription and grins. "It needed context."

"How's this for context? It's a *South* Vietnamese flag. The *South* Vietnamese are supposed to be our allies, right? So how come we capture their flag?"

"In ten years who's going to know one gook flag from another?" There was time for a nap before we were due to move and the folded flag made a nice pillow.

It's dark when the sound of Marines preparing their gear wakes me. I stare through an open window at a huge moon breaking through the mist and gloom. With nothing better to do until ordered to do something, I stare up at that moon until it hurts my eyes. Shifting the flag beneath my head, I think of another banner and what it meant to me when I was a weepy kid at the side of my father's nondescript grave. Somehow the whole incident doesn't seem so tragic or traumatic anymore. Lots of people die in lots of horrible ways. You can live with it or you can die with it but it won't change. Never has and never will. Best you can hope for is maybe one good friend to be around at the end.

Cercle Sportif

Mid-morning on what I think must be our sixth day in Hue and the rain continues. Our notebooks are getting soaked and it's hard to write legibly with

fingers wrinkled and swollen like prunes. Somehow we are compelled to write it all down despite the indelible nature of the images seared into our memory banks. We make a point of noting it all, the sights, sounds, smells, feelings, and thoughts. There's still that little distance between observer and participant that we are trying to maintain, but it keeps shrinking every day in Hue. Under the cover of a poncho somewhere on the Southside near a well-manicured riverside garden spot, I examine my notes and wonder what really happened yesterday when I clearly closed that gap.

A gaggle of hard-core gooks were manning several machineguns, at least two RPGs and one M-79 which had everyone pissed off and sweating in the cold rain. We were holding in a row of houses along a broad promenade where the abandoned residences were particularly well-appointed and richly furnished. People who lived in them before the NVA served a sudden eviction notice were clearly members of the local gook country club set. Somebody from the S-2 section told me the country club itself was just up the street at a place called the Cercle Sportif. On that day in Hue, the membership committee was being chaired by the Phantom Blooper.

The misty, muggy air that morning was filled with arcing tracers flying in both directions up and down the street. Hotel Company pushed steadily westward and ran into a bunch of NVA holding a thin line, oddly willing to give up their positions and let us push them back toward a boat basin along the Perfume River. It was strange behavior that continued until we drew within sight of the big country club building and the pristine park across the street from it. That's when the Phantom Blooper started doing some serious damage. He killed two and wounded three with his first couple of HE rounds. The attack stalled.

When the weapon first barked from behind one of the hedgerows in the park no one caught the significance. We'd all heard that sound hundreds of times when one of our M-79 guys blooped a round at the gooks. The first shot, expertly dropped, sent shouts up and down the assault line. Some gook sonofabitch up ahead is firing a captured blooper and he knows how to use it.

Officers and NCOs were urging their guys forward but there was a strange hesitance among men who had faced significantly worse situations. There was something about being hit with one of our own weapons that threw an extra hitch in the leash holding veteran grunts at bay and it got worse in short order. Corpsmen crawled forward to check the wounded after a three-round volley that landed directly on the leading squad. Two of them went down to another precise volley from the Phantom Blooper. It was bad *mojo* like friendly fire and the grunts knew it.

Hotel Six surged forward through the stalled formation and pointed to a short-handed squad huddled in doorways along the street. Get in there, kill that bastard, and repossess the blooper. How can the Horrible Hogs of Hotel Company get frozen by one sonofabitch with an M-79? Unacceptable! For reasons I really didn't buy in the few introspective seconds before the designated squad moved out, I stuffed my camera in my pack and joined them, wiping rain off the Thompson and snatching the bolt to the rear making it ready to fire.

Steve wasn't around to see it and that's likely the real reason I followed those grunts toward the *Cercle Sportif*. He was somewhere around the Battalion Aid

Station looking for something to stop the gut-wrenching diarrhea that struck him during the night. He wandered away to shit and wound up banging away at a sniper with that carbine he carries. Nervous sentries nearly blew him away and we decided he needed to see a Doc in the morning. It left me on my own and I was discovering that was a dicey proposition.

The park portion of the *Cercle Sportif* was carved into the promenade ahead of us, a green maze of hedges, statuary and fountains some 200 meters south of the damaged railroad bridge that connected the two sides of the city. The S-2 guy said it was one of Hue's most popular attractions among well-heeled gooks. It was laid out in concentric circles—a pristine remnant of French colonial days. Three walkways cut through the grass circles, each lined with dwarf shade trees. NVA shooters covered each of those walkways and somewhere in the center of it all was the Phantom Blooper who handled an M-79 like a three-tour veteran.

The squad of eight advanced along the river's edge, staying below the street level, with me tagging along at the end of the line. We could clearly hear the Phantom Blooper firing and breaking the weapon down to reload. We could also hear his rounds impacting among the grunts to our rear and the cries for Corpsmen to assist the wounded. Every once in a while one or more of his covering machine gunners added to the din and we cautiously moved toward the sound of their bursts. We ran out of defilade at the south entrance to the park and there was nothing left to do but break cover and go for it. Just short of the first hedgerow, the Phantom Blooper shifted his fire and put two rounds close to the rear of our line.

Two men went down and two more blooper rounds impacted off to my left. There was no going back. It was either stay here and be slammed for sure or break through the hedge and take our chances. A Corpsmen sprinted into view heading for the wounded but he got his legs cut off by one of the covering machine gunners. Looking around for a better position, I noticed some movement to my left front. It was just a flicker in my peripheral vision, something dark against the white background of a plaster cupid pouring water from a vase into the base of a fountain.

"I got movement... left front!"

The squad leader crawled over beside me and stared where I was pointing at the fountain. He eyed the Thompson and grinned. "Put a burst into him. Cain't hurt..." He struggled with his gear trying to get at the LAAW strapped across his pack. By the time I had a good sight picture, he had the LAAW ready to fire. He nodded at me and I squeezed the trigger. Chips of white plaster flew off the fountain for a few seconds until it disappeared in the detonation of the squad leader's rocket.

The explosion seemed to spark some life back into the rest of Hotel Company. I could see them scrambling up the street toward us. The machine gunners opened up immediately and it was clear that we would have to deal with them in a hurry. Somewhere behind them, the Phantom Blooper was still cranking accurate rounds and sending rents of shrapnel into the assault line. "We got the angle on 'em." The squad leader waved us ahead and we headed for the center of the park while the defenders focused on the assault line advancing up the street.

Maybe it was the close back-blast from the LAAW or an auditory shut-down caused by sheer terror, but I couldn't hear the rounds that were clearly running through the Thompson. I could feel the recoil and see the ejects streaming out of the chamber—even watched myself change magazines in mid-sprint—but I couldn't hear anything until we reached the mangled fountain and hit the deck behind a pair of dead NVA sprawled in the rubble. That's when I heard the bark and realized the Phantom Blooper was near.

Spinning toward a white, wrought-iron park bench, I saw him dropping an HE round into the chamber of his M-79. He wore a pith helmet and a homemade vest with little pouches for extra rounds. The Phantom Blooper was just closing the action for his next shot when I squeezed the trigger of the Thompson and emptied the magazine.

The squad leader said I could have the Blooper but I didn't want it. One of the grunts carried it the rest of the way to the railroad bridge. And then he tossed it into the Perfume River.

The Hospital

Hotel Six looks like a frustrated phone-tree victim with the radio handset pressed against his ear. Wonder if the MACV Command in Hue has an answering machine? *You've reached the MAVC Compound but we're busy deciding your fate just now. Please leave your name and number at the beep and we'll get back to you.*

We've been stalled for too long here, waiting for Echo, Foxtrot, and Golf Companies to consolidate positions and form some sort of an assault line for the continuing push through the Southside of Hue. Hotel Six is waiting for the orders he's been expecting to advance on the city's main medical complex, the Catholic Hospital, with his sister units on flank or vice versa. Nobody knows for sure what's planned but everyone wants to find out. In a scratchy, fucked up fight like Hue, waiting is often worse than walking toward the enemy.

Steve is over his rabid case of the Hershey Squirts. He's in a corner of an abandoned building teaching replacements how to make edible potions out of C-rations. He's turning to the grunt side, no question. We didn't speak at all yesterday and when he showed up at nightfall, he had four frag grenades hooked onto his gear. The carbine was in his hands. The camera was nowhere in sight.

And this morning I had to coax him into going along to a camera supply store I'd spotted. Some grunts pulled the door off its hinges and it looked to me like the shelves were well stocked. Somewhere in that store, I was hoping to find a weatherproof 35mm Nikonos like the ones carried by some of the division combat photographers. It was just a block up from our position along a stretch of street being held by a Hotel Company rifle squad. The squad leader was a kindred spirit who believed what some people considered looting was really liberating gear from an evil enemy.

A couple of grunts are rifling the showroom shelves when we arrive. We paw through the debris and pocket a few lenses and filters when we hear a loud thumping noise accompanied by vivid curses coming from a storeroom at the back of the building. Among the scattered boxes and bags at the rear of the store, a

couple of wild-eyed grunts are slamming cameras against a workbench. One of those cameras is a very expensive Hasselblad.

“Holy shit, man! Don't do that! Give me that fucking camera.” Steve retrieves the expensive instrument, looked at it for a moment and then sadly shakes his head. “Trashed...”

Lance Corporal Numbnuts, the grunt that did the damage, is indignant and not at all appreciative of the fact that he's just ruined one of the finest cameras ever made. “Them other assholes got all the good shit while I was on watch! By the time I got here, there wasn't nothin' left but this old box camera piece of shit!”

“My man,” Steve dumps the camera on the workbench, “this particular piece of shit is a Hasselblad, worth a thousand bucks or more. Or it was before you beat the crap out of it.”

“How the fuck was I supposed to know?” Numbnuts pokes at the trashed Hasselblad. “I seen some good cameras at the Freedom Hill PX and none of 'em looked like that thing.”

“Let me look around...” I walk back toward the front of the store. “Maybe I can find you a Polaroid.”

“That's cool. I'd give you a couple of bucks for one of them.”

We don't find a Polaroid or another Hasselblad, but the grunt is delighted with the little Sony tape recorder I hand him on the way out of the store. “Outasight, dude! Fuck a bunch of cameras. Who wants to take pictures of this bullshit anyhow?” Good question, my man, and I'm having a hard time coming up with an answer. All the film we pilfer has an expiration date in the summer of 1967.

We're maneuvering slowly toward the Catholic Hospital complex. The move is replete with fits and starts as the battalion's rifle companies try to keep up with each other and cover flanks. During one of the halts, a squad reports to the CP with two bloodied and dazed NVA prisoners. They draw a crowd when interrogator-translators from the battalion S-2 come up to look them over while the Company Gunny yells himself hoarse trying to keep curious Marines dispersed.

Pissed off grunts apparently jacked them up a little on the way back to the CP from the look of their bruised and swollen faces. These guys are no local rice farmer part-time guerillas. Both are tall, erect, and well-fed. They look tough and stocky compared to the lean, beanpole VC we saw on operations south of Danang. They are wearing the OD uniforms of NVA regulars and the shorter of the two has some kind of rank chevrons on his collar.

The interrogators cut loose on them with the stilted Vietnamese they learned in language school, but there's no cooperation or even any sign that they understand the questions being asked. These are the kind of guys who wouldn't say shit if they had a mouthful. After a Corpsman treats their wounds, the S-2 guys haul them to the rear, arms bound at the elbows with comm wire. Clearly Nguyen of the North is a much tougher customer than Luke the Gook from the south. The grunts are grudgingly impressed.

An artillery FO perched in a third-story window overlooking the city lends me a set of binoculars. We've killed a shit-pot full of gooks on the Southside, but there are bunches more over there across the Perfume River. And they're dug in tight all along the perimeter walls of the Citadel. The FO says those walls are as much as 75 meters thick in some places, and I scope the area remembering our earlier visit

with Tom Young. We've been wondering what happened to him and figure it's likely all the AFVN guys were evacuated when the gooks staged the take-over. There hasn't been much opportunity to get back to the MACV Compound and ask around. It's on our list of things we need to do. I'm still staring at that irritating NVA flag flapping in a wet breeze that blows over the river when the lull ends as it usually does in Hue. People resume dying.

A rifle squad maneuvering near the hospital complex is caught by a wall of fire and stopped cold. Hotel Six checks with his flank units and then sends all hands forward into the attack. By the time I find Steve and maneuver forward, most of two platoons are cranking fire at the upper stories of various buildings in the complex. They are getting more than they're giving from gooks in high positions and casualties are mounting. The situation is typical for Hue.

Code of the Grunt: You can stay where you are and get killed or move and try to improve your odds. Just pick the lesser of the two evils and get on with it.

"Hotel Six, Hotel Two Actual. I need some sixty-mike-mikes to put a hole in the top right hand corner of the building to my right front. They've got a heavy gun in there and we can't move until we take it out, over." The platoon commander is hugging a perimeter wall next to his radio operator. His glasses are so grimed with dirt and sweat it's a wonder he can see at all. As a volley of machine gun fire rips chips off the wall, Steve opens up with his carbine, pouring tracers into a window where he's spotted a shooter. I sling the Thompson out of the way and grab for my camera. Somebody's got to record this goat-fuck, and it looks like I'm elected.

Through the lens I see a team of four Marines lurching toward the wall, carrying a stubby 60-millimeter mortar set up to fire. The mortar squad leader finds a spot at the mouth of an alley where he's got overhead clearance and the crew plants the tube. Two of the gun's crew fiddle with the weapon's simple sights and bipod while a third man rapidly unpacks stubby high-explosive projectiles from fiberboard containers.

Swinging the camera toward the open spaces between the hospital complex buildings, I spot a ballsy rifle squad leader urging his men forward to closer positions where the gooks won't be able to shoot at them without exposing themselves to the withering fire coming up from behind the perimeter walls. It's a sharp dude leading that lash-up. I'll get his name later if he lives. He'll likely get a medal one way or the other. The way I see it, a man smart enough to do what he's doing in the face of devastating fire deserves all the medals he can wear.

Another squad off to my right is running all over the courtyard killing NVA in spider holes at bayonet range. It's incredibly close and vicious fighting; the most brutal stuff I've seen so far in Hue. Thirty meters beyond my hide, a grunt dives into a hole where he's just killed an NVA at point-blank range and uses the body for cover as he picks off two more gooks in holes to his right and left. He shoots each of them once in the head, calm and focused as if he was firing for record on range qualification day.

The mortar squad leader crawls up next to the lieutenant looking for a target. The officer pulls off his grimy glasses and waves an arm in the general direction of a tall building on the right side of the complex. "There's a heavy machine gun up high in that building near the far corner there. Start dumping rounds and I'll adjust from here."

The mortar man scrambles back to his tube and points out the target for his gun crew. In seconds the little stovepipe begins to cough and bark. If you know where to look, you can follow the rounds as they fall toward the top of the target building. Grunts begin to cheer all along the firing line as the 60mm rounds blast chunks out of the concrete. The crew is smooth and keeps up a steady, staccato fire on the building. The fire from their weapon sounds like a slow-timed heavy machinegun as the mortarmen carve geysers of stone, plaster, and debris from the roof of the hospital building.

A runner from the CP group slumps in next to the lieutenant with a message from the Company Commander: "Six says keep the mortars and machine guns working on this side. The gooks are comin' out the rear of the building and Golf Company's cutting 'em to pieces."

A second 60 mortar is firing now, using the same dope developed by the first gun and rounds are dropping through a hole blown in the roof of the most hotly contested building. Occasional belches of flame and smoke pour from second and third story windows. Radios crackle with new orders: Mortars cease fire and 2nd Platoon is ordered to move a squad into the buildings to conduct sweeps. Golf Company on the other side is having a field day blowing away running gooks.

A Marine squad leader clutching a 12-gauge shotgun gets the assignment from the lieutenant. "Take your people in slowly and see if there's any left." The squad fans out to approach the building, policing up Marines out of spider holes in the courtyards as they approach. Steve and I follow hoping there aren't a bunch of stubborn NVA inside the complex caught between our sweep and Golf Company's block of any escape routes. We crouch near a wide staircase in the lobby of the main building as Shotgun Squad Leader leads his guys upward on a broad staircase. Before I can jam a new roll of film in my camera, a furious fight breaks out somewhere above on a second floor landing. It's brief but brutal, punctuated by several grenade detonations. We can see expended M-16 rounds bouncing down the stairs and twinkling in the pale light that shines through a blown-out window.

"We got 'em. Send a Doc up here right away!" Shotgun Squad Leader is pointing at me and I sprint for the door yelling for a Corpsman. Two Docs shoulder through a crowd in the courtyard, charge into the building and sprint up the stairs. By the time we follow, they are working desperately over a wounded man bleeding onto the tiles of the second floor corridor. One of the Docs taps his partner and they stand. No chance to save the guy. He's bled out through three AK holes in his chest.

Steve wanders over to take a look while the Corpsmen unfold a poncho to cover the corpse. He nods for me to join him and I look down at the dead man. This fight was the last for Lance Corporal Numbnuts, the grunt who destroyed the Hasselblad. A corner of the little Sony tape player is poking out of his bloody trousers and I retrieve it as the Docs begin to wrap him for the long, lonesome trip to Graves Registration.

"You know this guy?" One of the Corpsmen eyes the tape player and his tone indicates he doesn't care for ghouls stripping bodies. "It's cool, Doc. I gave him this thing yesterday." The Corpsman shrugs and lifts the body to get a better grip. "Don't mean nothin', I guess. He's got no more use for it."

We spend the night around the hospital complex. For some reason, none of the grunts seem to want to sleep on the empty beds in the wards. It's odd. There is a rare creature comfort available but nobody seems to trust it's safe to indulge. Could be combat craziness or it could be fear of a late night Chicom tossed through a window to kill grunts so thoroughly crashed on a comfy mattress that they die in a dreamless sleep. Of course no one curled up in his poncho liner on the hard floor is willing to admit that. There's a batch of bullshit rationalization: Gook bugs, blue-ball fever, leprosy, the dreaded black syphilis, and ugly-ass bodily fluids permeating the mattresses are the main excuses tendered for ignoring the available beds.

Code of the Grunt. Always look a gift horse in the mouth. If it's free it will cost you somewhere, sometime. The easy way is always booby-trapped.

On a whim, I carry the little Sony tape player into one of the operating rooms where noise won't bother anyone and press the play button to see what Lance Corporal Numbnuts was grooving on before he bought the big one. It's Peter, Paul and Mary, Album 1700, with the statuesque Mary Travers wailing about leaving on a jet plane. And that's what's next for what's left of Lance Corporal Numbnuts. He's leaving on a jet plane, dumped into a big aluminum box, and never coming back. No foxy stews on the Freedom Bird to admire his medals and likely a closed-coffin funeral due to the garbage a gook made of his chest cavity. It's gonna be tough on Mr. and Mrs. Numbnuts back in The World.

Poor Mama Numbnuts will be wailing for the Marines to open the box so she can be sure her offspring is really in there. Poor Papa Numbnuts, a stoic veteran of The Big Two, will insist she doesn't want the last image of their flesh and blood to be a mangled lump of flesh and blood. They'll make do with that smiling, dress-blues boot camp picture for the rest of their lives and that's that for the Numbnuts clan.

The music is depressing in the circumstances, so I follow the example of Lance Corporal Numbnuts, USMC, deceased, and smash the Sony against one of the stainless steel operating slabs. Sleep comes quickly after I curl up in a corner of the OR, but my dreams are disturbing and warped around funeral images. The body in the dream box is mine. The funeral parlor smells like a verdant jungle rain forest. Or maybe it's verdant jungle rain forests that smell like a funeral parlor. In the dream it doesn't matter.

The dream corpse is casing the joint from some omniscient viewpoint. There are familiar faces in the quiet crowd. No wailing or gnashing of teeth at this gig. The uncles, aunts, and relations in somber funeral finery are simply opining that the dead dude got what he deserved. Why did the dip-shit join something terminal like the Marine Corps? All the other boys did their time in the Navy or the Air Force and stayed the hell out of that Vietnam mess. Lordy! All and sundry assembled just knew it would come to this.

The dream pallbearers come to get my dream corpse and they're all filthy bastards in muddy boots and shredded jungle uniforms. They reek sufficiently to wipe out the cloying funeral parlor floral stench. One of them with the stump of an arm leaking blood delivers my eulogy. "Here lies another dumb grunt motherfucker. Don't mean nothin'." There it is. Plant my ass. Let the grass grow and the worms eat. And the whole scene is dreamed in livid color.

Grunts banging and clanging through the hospital complex wake me at dawn. Climbing to the top floor, I stare through the hole blown by the mortarmen, looking across the Perfume River at the Citadel slowly being illuminated by a rising sun. Word last night was that the first battalion of the 5th Marines will likely be the meat fed into that grinder. They are heading for the city right now according to the CO's radio operator. No doubt that will trigger blood-letting on an epic scale, maybe even worse than the Southside. Get involved in something like that and you don't get out until you are sufficiently disabled to be of no further use—or dead.

A smart guy could avoid that, but I didn't feel very smart and I was fairly sure when the time came to cross the river, I'd be there. That fight will rate a chapter in somebody's history book: Twentieth century grunts laying siege to an eighteenth century castle, not something you see every day. We're talking military history here, my man, and a fight that will doubtless be a double-decker shit sandwich. And how are you gonna take a pass on something like that?

Down below my perch, the 2/5 Command Group and some ARVN officers are running what looks like a three-ring circus. They've assembled the medical staff of the hospital to confront a gaggle of wailing patients. The Vietnamese are a sorry lot; mostly old folks, females and screaming kids, clutching at filthy bandages and trying to get someone to listen to their tales of woe. ARVN are in no mood to deal with sick civilians and looking for NVA or local VC they claim are posing as members of the medical staff.

One recent surgery survivor gets a little too vocal with an ARVN captain who rips the bandages off an incision and shoves the wailing patient to the floor. A couple of grunt Corpsmen try to intervene and there's a tense stand-off between the Vietnamese and the Americans. A senior officer clears the spectators and orders us to leave it to the ARVN. Battalion Surgeon consults with one of the Vietnamese medical staff who speaks English. It's a sad story. NVA took over the hospital and demanded treatment for their own wounded as battle lines pushed toward the medical complex. Civilian patients were either tossed out or killed to make space for NVA casualties. When a couple of nurses and attendants objected, the NVA executed them in front of the other staff.

While the sad tales are told, a couple of nurses in a back rank make a break for the rear of the building. One of them is waving a pistol in the air. ARVN soldiers make a grab and miss. There are two sharp reports from the pistol which drives everyone to the deck. The NVA females are nearly gone when they run into two grunts coming in the back way. These guys waste no time with questions. They grab the pistol-packing woman and spin her to the ground. Her head cracks into the concrete with a sound like a melon being thumped. The second nurse nearly dodges but one of the grunts snatches at her hair and her feet run out from under her body. He sits on her and jams his rifle across her neck. That's two peoples' patriots cold-cocked by a couple of running dog lackeys of the imperialist system. The ARVN love it.

Steve is eating beef slices in gravy out in the hospital complex courtyard. We swap spoonfuls of goop after I open a can of ham slices. The rubble underneath my ass is uncomfortable so I move to a fairly level slab of concrete and plop down.

Something shifts underneath my butt but I don't bother to investigate. Steve rises slowly and points his plastic spoon at my crotch. "Don't move, man. Sit very still."

He crouches to look into the shadows beneath the slab. I can't bend over far enough to see what's got him so worried. "You're sitting right on top of a mortar round. Just stay put until I can get someone to take a look at that fucking thing." He comes back in a short time with a couple of combat engineers. They shine flashlight beams under my butt like a couple of mechanics diagnosing an engine noise. I'm starting get a little sweaty. "Is that thing live or what?"

"Probably is." The first engineer decides it's an NVA round. "That's an eighty-deuce, my man. It's been fired which means the set-back mechanism has been activated. It's dented pretty bad up near the fuse so we got us a little situation here. You move wrong or disturb that slab you're sitting on, the damn thing might detonate."

Second engineer waves away a few curious grunts and adds his professional assessment. "Ain't no percentage in fuckin' around with fired mortar rounds and PD fuses. They tend to be touchy motherfuckers. If you weren't perched on top of the goddamn thing, we'd just blow it in place and move on."

"I am, however, perched on top of the goddamn thing. What do we do about that?"

"My partner is gonna keep some pressure on the slab and while he does that, I'm going to help you up off of it real easy." He holds out his hand and grasps my forearm. "Now when I say go, try not to cough, gag, sneeze, or fart. Just up and off real easy. Got it?"

"You can trust that I've definitely got it. Anytime you're ready."

The other engineer reaches under my ass and puts pressure on the slab. I let his partner pull me off my perch. I'm cringing, waiting for the blast and even an expert like John Henry would be unable to drive a ten-penny nail up my ass with a sixteen-pound sledgehammer.

Nothing happens as I stumble away from the mortar round. Steve meets me grinning and hands over what's left of the beef and rocks. Looking over my shoulder and trying to relax, I watch the second engineer slide the round out from under the concrete. He pulls a sliver of steel out of his pocket and sticks it through a hole in the fuse.

"She's safe now." He tosses the nine-pound round to me and I'm afraid to do anything but catch it. The grunts are gathering again and laughing like the whole situation was designed for their amusement. Nothing funnier than some dipshit sitting on a mortar round and nearly getting his ass blown off.

"Was it a dud?"

"Nah, that damn thing was hotter than a Georgia hooker on payday night. If you'd have scratched your ass the wrong way, we wouldn't be having this pleasant interlude."

Steve and I find another place to sit and finish our breakfast. Later, I dump the mortar round down a cistern, wondering if I'll ever be able to shit normally again or just flop down on a couch without checking under the cushions.

AFVN (American Forces Vietnam Network)

A mud-spattered Jeep wheezes to a halt near the second battalion CP. It's festooned with radio aerials and antennae and looks like a porcupine on wheels. There's a full colonel riding shotgun and he wants to see the attached combat correspondents. A runner finds us wandering around with a platoon from Golf Company and leads us to the meeting like a couple of condemned convicts. Colonels don't personally confront sergeants unless they're pissed about something so gross it can't be handled by a lesser entity.

The colonel is one of the guys running this show from Task Force X-Ray, and he's up from his CP at Phu Bai visiting units in Hue. He eyes our disheveled appearance and unshaven faces for a long moment before deciding he's got a more pressing issue at hand. "You two are Division Correspondents?"

We introduce ourselves. No salutes or handshakes. The colonel's aide checks his notebook and nods. Apparently we are indeed the culprits his boss is seeking. "I understand you two know some of the Marines up here at the AFVN station?"

"Yes, sir," Steve uses a snotty OD handkerchief to mop some of the crud off his glasses. "We were stationed with Lieutenant Dibernardo and Sergeant Young back in The World."

"And when was the last time you saw them?"

"We spent a night with Sergeant Young just before Christmas, sir. We didn't see the lieutenant. He was in Saigon or something." I'm beginning to get an uneasy feeling about all this.

"So Sergeant Young was a buddy?" We note the past tense. Whatever this is, it can't be good news.

"We know him pretty well, sir. Is he OK?"

"He's dead. At least we're pretty sure it's him. One or both of you will report to the S-1 at the MACV Compound. We need somebody who knows Sergeant Young to positively ID the body."

I'm struggling to formulate questions but the colonel has issued his orders and he's got things on his mind more important than another dead Marine. "We don't know what happened to Lieutenant Dibernardo and several others. They're officially listed as missing in action. Apparently there was quite a hot little firefight around the station. MACV is looking into the situation. Meanwhile, we need to be sure this body they've got is indeed Sergeant Thomas F. Young. Get it done before dark. That's all."

That was all for us and an hour later we knew for certain that was all for our buddy Tom Young who showed us around Hue, got us laid, and shared his booze at Christmas. Things took a terribly personal turn for me and Steve seemed more shaken than I'd ever seen him. A little Vietnamese civilian employee of the AFVN Station told us Lt. Dibernardo and a couple of other Americans were taken alive by the NVA.

We wrote up a statement, found the colonel's aide and handed it over: Sgt. Tom Young, confirmed KIA, 1stLt. Jim Dibernardo and a couple of other Americans, probably POWs. The little civilian said they put up a stiff fight but that was cold comfort. These guys would be nothing more than footnotes when the story of the

Great Big Battle of Hue City was finally written. There it is and in the argot of our gallant allies, *Xin loi*, motherfuckers: Sorry 'bout that.

Zippo

“I’m serious, man. Call it bullshit if you want but these guys are just like the Marines who wrote history at Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima and Tarawa and the Chosin Reservoir.” Steve is in storyteller mode. He’s channeling Ernie Pyle and in the midst of a serious infatuation with the reeking grunts crapped out all around us. I pass him an inch of gin in a frosted bottle but he waves it away. “You know I’m right. You can act like you don’t give a damn but I know better. How about that shit with the Zippo the other day. What was that all about, my man?” I can’t get a grip on it but I suspect he’s got a point given what happened yesterday afternoon.

It was around 1400 somewhere near the Thua Thien Provincial headquarters that 2/5 had taken earlier in the morning. Three M48A3 tanks are tearing up macadam, creaking, clanking, and grinding forward on a city street with a rifle platoon moving parallel and choking on diesel exhaust. The muggy air in this part of the city still reeks of the tear gas Marines used to flush NVA from a block of contested buildings, but nobody wants to be back choking and gasping inside the gas masks we carry on our hips.

Armor crews are buttoned up tight and that’s unusual for tankers in The Nam. Normally they ride with all hatches open, preferring a quick exit to getting trapped inside a 50-ton coffin if a mine or an RPG penetrates their armor. Tanks make great pictures, and I’m tucked in somewhere in the middle of a fireteam on the right side of the push. Crouched inside the entryway to an office building, I watch the tankers sniff the air with the muzzles of their 90mm cannons. A radioman trots up with a message for the squad leader. Apparently some comm glitch prevents the CO from talking to the tankers. The squad leader contemplates breaking cover but as far as he knows that means climbing up on one of the tanks and banging on a hatch to get the crew’s attention.

“Use the T-I phone.” The answer seems obvious to me.

The squad leader is a Lance Corporal and he frowns as if I’m speaking a foreign language. “I never worked with tanks before.” The guy is clearly out of his depth and expecting an attached NCO to cover for him. Radioman feeds me the CO’s message and I sprint toward the rear of the nearest tank. The phone box on the right rear of the vehicle connects directly with the tank commander. I’ve done this shit before in training. It’s just like using a payphone. You open the box, grab the handset, and you’re talking to the crew inside the tank.

“Six wants you guys to advance toward the next intersection and set up overwatch positions. Grunts will move forward of you and search for targets.”

“You guys need to keep some grunts near the vehicles.” The tank commander sounds like he’s responding through a tin can on the other end of a taut string. “I don’t want any gooks getting inside B-40 range.” I cut a look at the squad leader. This is his deal. I’m just passing messages here. “It’s OK. The tanks are gonna move but you got to keep some grunts around to be sure they don’t get hit with

RPGs.” Grunt squad leader nods and leaves to pass the word. I roger the tank commander’s concern and replace the phone. The tanks lurch forward, rattling and shaking like they are about to disassemble into shivering buckets of bolts.

At the intersection—a four-way near the Hue Sports Stadium with an abandoned traffic police podium in the middle—the leading tank commander, a lieutenant wearing a comm helmet and grungy coveralls, dismounts looking for someone to discuss the next move. A grunt platoon commander trots up while his guys huddle in street-side doorways trying to keep away from the tanks. “We probably shouldn’t go much further. We get caught in one of those narrow streets and we can’t traverse or maneuver much.”

Platoon Commander points down the road. “Recon was in this area last night and they say the NVA are holed up in that block of houses. We got orders to clear the area so they can get some Shore Party people into the stadium. That’s gonna be the LZ for resupply and medevacs.”

Tank Commander ponders, eyeing his vehicles, the narrow street and the neat little residences that look like a slice of quaint Asian suburbia. “Let me put two tanks here at the intersection in overwatch. Third vehicle is a Zippo. How ’bout you send some of your guys forward and I’ll have the flame tank follow?”

“How ’bout you send the Zippo in first and we follow?”

“Goddamn, Lieutenant...” The tank officer has a clear case of RPG jitters. “That fuckin’ flame tank’s got three hundred gallons of high octane aboard and you know what a B-40 would do with that.”

“OK...” The Platoon Commander signals for a squad leader. “I’ll send a squad up ahead of your Zippo. We’ll focus on any gooks with rockets, but if we get hit, you guys blow the shit out of ’em.” It’s hardly classic tank-infantry tactics, but everyone seems to think it’s the best they can do to get this street cleared and keep the gooks out of the Sports Stadium two blocks away to the east.

A squad of grunts forms up for the move with a file on either side of the street, preparing to sweep forward ahead of the Zippo. The two gun tanks move into positions left and right of the intersection and the Zippo driver grinds his vehicle into gear ready to follow the infantry. The sweep starts, and I fall in behind the flame tank with a sniper and a covering fireteam ordered to be on the look-out for RPG gunners. All of the riflemen except for the sniper have loaded magazines of tracer that they’ll use to mark any targets they spot.

There’s not much use watching it all through a camera lens. MACV in Saigon is telling the press that forthright American troops adhering to the provisions of the Geneva Convention don’t use flame weapons on enemy infantry. It’s a laugh-out-loud load of bullshit and every civilian correspondent who has ever watched one of our aircraft dropping a load of snake-eye bombs followed by napalm canisters knows it. Regardless, the lifers insist there will be no crispy-critter shots taken or released.

Grunts near me are bitching about proximity to an NVA sniper’s wet-dream: A big-ass tank and a guy with a scoped weapon. “This is bullshit is what this bullshit is...” A hulking black PFC points at the tank and drops back a pace or two. “Ain’t a motherfucker in the world can resist shootin’ at a fuckin’ tank. Don’t make no never-mind he can’t do no damage. He’s just gotta shoot at a tank and when the dude does that, we catch the fuckin’ ricochets.”

“Yeah? How ’bout that fuckin’ sniper?” His buddy points at the man with the long rifle who is sweeping the street with his scope. “A gook sniper sees that guy and it gets real personal real quick.” All valid points and it suddenly occurs to me I’ve never been inside a tank in combat. The itch is too weird to ignore, and when the Zippo halts to let the infantry scout forward, I climb up onto the turret and bang on the hatch with my helmet. Through a crack I see a battered comm helmet framing eyes that look like two piss-holes in a snow bank.

“I’m a Division Correspondent...” I show him the useless camera hanging around my neck. “How ’bout I ride along with you guys?”

“Inside here?” The tank commander looks at me with a mixture of fear and disbelief. “This is a fucking Zippo, man.” I can smell the diesel fumes seeping up through the cracked hatch. “We got no choice but to ride this sonofabitch and you want to volunteer?”

“Just wanting to see what it’s like. I won’t get in the way.”

“It’s your ass on the line, pal.” The Zippo commander pops the hatch and makes way for me to drop inside. The gunner and loader look at me like I’m nuts and make lewd jack-off motions. I tuck myself into a corner behind the loader as the hatch clangs shut and the interior lights cast a weird bluish glow over dials and mechanisms I don’t recognize. The interior reeks of petroleum products. It’s like someone dumped me inside an old gas can. The tank commander peeks through his vision blocks, mumbles into a lip-mike, and the Zippo rolls on following the infantry. I can’t see a thing beyond a jumble of pipes and hoses that surround me like bloated snakes. This suddenly seems like a very bad idea.

The loader shoves me forward and points to a periscope. Grunts are moving ahead of us, cautiously scanning houses on both sides of the street. View from here is not much different than it usually is for me on the ground: nothing but asses and elbows. The tank moves with a strange undulating motion and minus a comm helmet I hear all sorts of creaks, clanks, and machinery noises that make me think we must be having mechanical problems. It’s disconcerting, but none of the crew seems worried about much beyond what they can see through scopes, vision blocks, and gunsights.

Over the unfamiliar machinery noise, I hear a sound like someone banging on an iron pot with a soup spoon. Suddenly there’s a shower of shell casings pouring onto the turret floor and I see the tank commander above me in the cupola triggering long bursts from the .50 caliber mounted up there. He’s screaming something into the microphone attached to his helmet, but I can’t tell what he’s saying without a comm helmet. The turret begins to swivel with a high-pitched whine and I lock onto the loader’s periscope. He’s busy with a batch of levers and twisting something that looks like the flow control on a garden hose. The hoses running through the turret suddenly stiffen and begin to vibrate under pressure.

Outside the tank there’s a firefight in progress. The platoon commander is standing in the middle of the street giving the double-time signal and pointing at a two-story structure on our right. A 90mm round from one of the gun tanks tears a ragged chunk out of the façade and I can see tracers arcing through the concrete dust. An NVA rocket team suddenly appears on the other side of the street but they are cut down before the gunner can shoulder the launcher. The machinegun mounted next to the gun tube begins to rattle as the gunner puts a burst of

confirming fire into the dead rocket team. His hands twitch on the gun control console and I feel the turret slew to the left. Small arms fire rattles off the armor making a sporadic din that apparently only I can hear. It sounds like I'm on the inside of a runaway popcorn maker.

The Zippo commander is screaming loudly enough for me to hear him over the chaos. "Left front... ten o'clock... fire, goddamn it... shoot!"

There's a loud whoosh and whine of liquid under intense pressure. A flickering stream of fire surges through the muzzle of the cannon tube and I watch wide-eyed through the periscope as the Zippo gunner hoses down two houses on the left side of the street. There are no grunts in sight and I'm twisting the periscope in an effort to see what's happening when the tank suddenly lurches sideways sending all four of us inside the turret bouncing off each other and into unyielding bits of metal or machinery.

Zippo Commander is climbing back up toward his perch, screaming loudly enough for me to understand we've just been hit by a rocket. There is such a thick fog of smoke, muzzle gas, and diesel fumes inside the turret that I can't tell if we've been penetrated or not. I'm reaching for the handle that releases the loader's hatch when the turret swivels right and I hear the scream of air pressure pushing heavy fuel through the piping near my head.

Through the scope I see grunts emerging from cover and running forward as the long fiery tongue of flame washes over two more houses and then the tank lurches violently as the driver bangs the transmission into reverse. The Zippo crew is either out of fuel, nerve, or motivation. It's time for me to transfer out of armor. When the vehicle stops behind one of the covering gun tanks at the intersection, I spend a few minutes screaming for the crew's names and hometowns, jot the answers in my notebook and bail. The muggy air outside the tank smells sweet as if I've just climbed out of a rank sewer and into a cool mountain breeze.

Up ahead beyond the intersection, grunts and tank gunners are banging away at NVA running away from this fight. Several of the fleeing gooks are burning and batting at flames as they surge into the line of fire. It's ugly as hell and I know some of the grunts are shooting just to put the crispy-critters out of agony. Better to get blown away than burn to death. But for the grace of God and the fact that the NVA don't have Zippo—well, there it is.

Walking up the street behind the advancing grunts sweeping houses is like approaching a bad barbecue where the host has used too much fuel on the charcoal. The smell of burned meat mixes with the stench of diesel. Radio operator up-chucks into the street and kicks at a charred NVA corpse, black and shriveled like an overcooked turkey. Other grunts, sweeping through the burned-out houses, have tied bandanas over their mouths and noses. Steve and the fireteam he's with at the far end of the street are wearing gas masks and staring at three charred corpses who got caught in the open when Zippo fired them up. The dead men look a little like overdone gingerbread men with lips burned away to reveal a snarl of stained teeth.

"You were in that goddamn Zippo weren't you?" He peels the gasmask off and hands me a smoke. There's not much to say. He saw me disappear inside the thing.

"That was you, right?"

“Guilty as charged. You got any chow?”

“Why?”

“I’m hungry.”

“Why the fuck did you get inside that flame tank?”

“Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“You know they hit you with a B-40?” He points his carbine at one of the crispy-critters. “You could have ended up like that.”

“Got a pretty cool story out of it.”

“Bullshit, man. You know they won’t publish anything about flame weapons.”

“So Zippo becomes a gun tank. What the fuck difference does it make?”

“You need to get your shit together, man...”

“Yep... anytime now that’s just what I’m gonna do.”

Foxtrot Company is crossing the intersection to our rear. A passing squad leader tells me they are going to try and force a crossing of the Perfume River over one of the bridges. It looks like a bitch-kitty, he says, and I might want to stay put. That seems counter-productive so I fall into ranks and find the Company Gunny who says I’m welcome to tag along. “If you’re looking to get your ass shot off,” he croaks around a wad of chewing tobacco, “this is as good an outfit as you’ll find to make it happen.”

Sports Stadium

The bridge is a double-trestle railroad structure, one of several spanning the Perfume River and connecting the have-nots on the south with the haves on the north. We sit with a squad of grunts and a couple of 3.5-inch rocket gunners in the second story of a building that provides a terrific view of the bridge and the river. There’s a lot of speculative bitching about what might happen when the word comes to push infantry and armor across that span.

As the grunts ignite little balls of C-4 to heat their rations, I launch into a Bill Cosby riff from something I heard on one of his comedy albums back in *The World*. Cosby is a football ref explaining the rules of the game to General Custer and the captain of the Indian team about to wipe out the U.S. Cavalry at the Little Big Horn. My take has a ref explaining the rules and conducting a pre-game coin toss between team captains Vo Nguyen Giap and William Westmoreland.

“Cap’n Giap, meet Cap’n Westmoreland. Here’s the coin. This side is heads and this side is tails. You call the toss, Giap. Cap’n Giap calls heads; it’s heads. You win the toss, Giap, what are you gonna do? Cap’n Westy... Giap says his team will take up defensive positions on the other side of the bridge where your people can’t hit them. Then you’ve got to bring your team, bare-ass naked and with no supporting arms, running across that bridge. This will continue until every last one of you dumb bastards is dead as shit. Now shake hands and have a good game.”

The rap gets some laughs and leads the grunts to an argument about following the tanks we’ve been told to expect or leading them across the bridge in the distance. Five minutes later, the discussion becomes explosively moot. There is a thump that shakes the building and we see blossoms of flame and dark high-

explosive smoke roiling up from the pilings supporting the bridge. That's followed by the boom of the charges and we watch open-mouthed as the center span of the bridge collapses into the slate-grey water of the Perfume River. In seconds, the entire area is covered with billowing clouds of rust and metallic dust.

A rocket gunner scans the distance with his binoculars and whistles through a gap in his teeth. "Shee-it! They dropped the bridge. We won't be going across that sonofabitch any time soon."

"Bridges don't mean shit to fucking Marines." Cynic Corporal is running a cleaning rod through his rifle and obviously underwhelmed. "We do amphibious landings, right? You can bet your ass the next deal will be sending our asses across that river in amtracs or landing craft. You can take that shit to the bank."

There are a few dispirited arguments but they peter out as we hear the clatter of helicopter rotors overhead. Two Hueys appear out of the clouds and mist to orbit over the downed bridge. There is an exchange of fire between door gunners and some gooks on the northside of the river. We can see observers leaning out of the helicopters wearing clean uniforms and fresh equipment that marks them as REMFs. They spend ten minutes inscribing figure-eights over the destroyed bridge and then clatter away headed south. It won't be long before they send new orders forward.

When the word reaches us an hour later, we're told to assemble along a nearby street and stand by to move back toward the Sports Stadium. There's a rumor that I can't confirm saying the first battalion of the 5th Marines is going to relieve us for the river crossing. Steve shows up saying he's seen troops moving up from Phu Bai and a bunch of ARVN Rangers and Marines are supposed to be assembling near the stadium. There has also been an unusual spate of inbound helicopter traffic. Could be we'll catch a break and get relieved, but nobody is naïve enough to relax very much.

While we wait, I sit and smoke, watching Steve scratching away at a letter. He's writing home. I can tell because he's using the USMC stationery he keeps wrapped with a sheet of plastic in his pack. He's focused, chewing on the end of a GI ballpoint, trying to find words that will mask what he's feeling. I've seen him like this before when he lets his mind wander back to The World he left behind in Washington State. He told me all about that shit one time over warm beers in the Danang Thunderbird Club.

First thing to understand about Steve is that he's a patriot and that shit runs deep. Back where he comes from the prevailing atmosphere is all wrapped around middle class morality. When it comes to military service, every guy has an obligation to go even if it's a shitty war that no one really understands. He told me one time he was catching trout out of a freezing cold lake in Idaho with an ex-Marine uncle when he decided to join the Marines. That meant Vietnam and combat, but nothing his uncle told him about brutal campaigns of the South Pacific in World War II changed his mind.

Steve was raised by a respected, educated family that actually discussed things like Vietnam at the dinner table, but he could be bullheaded. He meant it when he said that Pledge of Allegiance in the classroom and he believed there was glory in sacrifice. There it is and political arguments are irrelevant. It's every American's duty to die for his country if called on to do so. It was summer of 1965 when push

came to shove for Steve. He was out of high school where he starred as the editor of the award-winning school paper and being pushed toward a full-ride in a west coast college when the Marines landed in Vietnam. He was enlisted and on his way to boot camp the next month. And there was never a post-boot camp nosedive for him. Steve was never bothered by the politics of protest or the ambiguous nature of the war in Vietnam. He became the storyteller, the reincarnation of Ernie Pyle who loved relating tales about the raggedy-ass grunts he accompanied on patrols and operations. When his stuff appeared in the papers, he showed the clippings around like an actor with an Oscar. It was hard to make fun of Steve. If you tried, you came away feeling like a sacrilegious sinner or some kind of mewling, anti-American traitor.

It's raining again when we finally move away from the river front and the destroyed bridge. Heading steadily southward, we recognize patrols and people we know in the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. They are here in the city but don't seem to be doing much except staring across the river at the NVA flag flying over the Citadel. We drop out of line as we pass the battalion CP group and an officer tells us the weather is clearing for increased helicopter operations. The first battalion is busy gearing up and planning for the assault on the northside, so the battered and bruised second battalion will hold a defensive line south of the Hue Sports Stadium.

Moving up into familiar terrain, we begin to gag from the stench hanging in the fetid air, a cloying, lung-wrenching spoor containing traces of charred flesh and burned camphorwood furniture. I stop at the Battalion Aid Station to see if a Corpsman will take a look at a bothersome shrapnel wound on my right bicep. Everyone is busy with more seriously wounded but I finally find a bloody and bearded line Corpsman who is changing the bandage on a festering wound below his right knee.

"I was gonna ask you to take a look at this..." I pull up my sleeve and point at what looks like a leaky boil. "But I think you got more pressing problems."

The Corpsman struggles to his feet and takes a look at my arm. "There's a chunk still in there. Sit down and I'll probe a little. Won't be comfortable, but we need to get that chunk of metal out of there so it can heal."

"Fuck it, Doc. Don't mean nothin'. You just take care of yourself."

He shoves me down on a chunk of rubble and digs around in his Unit One medical pack. It hurts like hell but after a few minutes, he has a nasty little chunk of NVA mortar round gripped in the jaws of his forceps. "You want this fuckin' thing?" He shows me a sliver of rusty metal about the size of my little fingernail.

"I didn't want it when it hit me and I can do without it now."

The Doc shrugs and tosses the shrapnel into the street. He is clearly in pain from the wound in his leg and I feel like a turd for bothering him with my minor wound. He is wrapping my arm with a battle dressing and gritting his teeth against the pain in his leg. "Doc, I'm fine, but you better have someone look at that leg of yours."

"It ain't gangrene yet." He ties the battle dressing and begins filling out a wound report that will authorize me a Purple Heart sometime in the future when the clerks reach the bottom of their paper piles. "They need me up here, dude. We

ain't got enough Corpsmen to treat the wounded as it is. I'll keep humping for a while yet."

Steve has his notebook out and commences an interview to get the Corpsmen's name and hometown. The Doc wipes at the pus leaking from his leg wound and dabs on some sort of topical ointment. "Job's pretty down and dirty for a line Corpsmen. In Hue, we just set up the triage to the rear of the grunts and stand by for the wounded to come in from up forward. Next thing you know, the grunts come staggering in leaking blood or carrying a buddy who's been butt-fucked by a B-40 or riddled with AK rounds. We screen 'em and work on the most seriously wounded first. We got enlisted Corpsmen doing major surgery, I can tell you that. And the shrapnel wounds? Jesus Christ, everything in this fucking Hue City produces shrapnel. Guys come in here looking like fucking Swiss cheese..."

It goes on for a while. Steve will clean it up and make up some acceptable quotes. I wander toward the CP where the company commander is briefing his platoon commanders. Most of them are surviving NCOs. The officers in the battalion have taken a beating.

"None of this is for publication." The CO looks at me with bloodshot eyes and I tuck my notebook into a pocket. "We gotta re-clear that block of houses we swept this morning. That exercise cost us eight KIA and more than twenty wounded but they pulled us out too soon. Apparently, the goddamn NVA are back in there with heavy machineguns and taking pot-shots at the helicopters operating out of the Sports Stadium. I don't know how the hell they are managing to bring in reinforcements but they are. Forget all the shit this morning, we gotta do it again this afternoon. Keep the bitching down to a low roar and get 'em ready to move. I'll have more detailed orders shortly."

Church Music

Marine commanders directing the fight in Hue are under increasing pressure from the South Vietnamese Government as well as the American Command in Saigon to press the issue. What is apparently most galling to everyone not directly involved in the dirty fight on the southside of the Perfume River is that ratty-ass NVA flag still flying defiantly over the Citadel on the northside.

Rear echelon commanders visiting the city choke on the sight of the enemy flag as much as they do on the fetid air full of the stench of rotting corpses. A steady stream of refugees flows south out of the city and blocks the roads. That's making it difficult for REMF observers who want to collect a campaign ribbon and bother the Marine commander running the show.

Marines are perfectly willing if not overly anxious to attack but they are insisting on full use of air, artillery, or naval gunfire to crack the Citadel's thick stone walls. So far it's been a stand-off. The Marines insist and everyone to the rear of the fight dithers. The people who won't have to actually do it want that Citadel taken back from marauding NVA but they don't want it turned into a pile of ancient rubble. Here on the mean streets of Hue all the officers we talk to are convinced the higher command will eventually give in and authorize strikes.

Meanwhile, there's a major logistical base being established at the Hue Sports Stadium to support the push when it finally comes.

We are loitering around the stadium, policing up stories and photos among survivors of the Southside fighting. The second battalion of the 5th Marines is being strengthened by replacements and sending platoons out to police up remaining enemy strong points throughout the southside. Bored with listening to young Marines try to top each other's war stories, we attach ourselves to one of these patrols that's been ordered to sweep a block of houses east of the stadium. A platoon sergeant says it will be a fairly easy hump, mostly designed to train replacements and give them a feel for combat in a built-up area.

Grunts are slowly probing through a row of houses, mostly looking for loot and not expecting to run into any gooks. It's tedious despite the firefights we can hear blazing away a couple of blocks away to the east. After all the rain in Hue, the sunshine turns the air into a muggy miasma. We are covered with greasy sweat and shedding filthy clothing when I spot a little Buddhist temple in the center of the street. It looks cool inside and we need a pause to readjust our gear. The interior is cool and dark with a pleasant scent of sandalwood incense in the air. I slump against a wall, shrug out of my pack, and let the dry concrete soak up the sweat on my back.

My eyes adjust to the dark and I spot a smiling, pot-bellied Buddha sitting cross-legged on some kind of altar at the back of the temple space. Buddha's got a gold filigreed hand raised in serene benediction. All the bullshit, blood, and gore in Hue is not bothering Buddha and I decide to get more closely acquainted. Carrying the Thompson like a carefree squirrel hunter, I walk through the gloom and smile back at Buddha. About ten feet from his perch, I raise my hand to return his greeting and hear a slight scraping sound like metal against plaster or concrete. There's someone or something behind Buddha and that makes me very nervous.

Shadow flickers through a beam of light shining through a high window and survival instinct takes over. There are about 20 rounds in the magazine and I trigger them all blowing a huge hole in Buddha's fat golden belly. The noise in the confined space is deafening but I can distinctly hear a clatter back behind the altar. I've hit something that I sincerely hope is a rat or a cat. Steve sprints forward to get a look from another angle. He advances slowly while I kneel and watch the smoke boil off the barrel of the Thompson.

"You got one..." Steve waves me forward and kicks at some of the Buddha parts scattered on the floor. At the back of the altar is a single NVA trooper. He's dead and leaking blood from three .45 ACP rounds that shattered his chest. He's got a little knapsack slung across his shoulder and it's filled with little statues and delicate pottery. Apparently, the Americans are not the only ones looting in Hue. He's wearing one of the web belts with a silver buckle bearing an etched star and I strip it from his body. These things are premium war trophies and I've wanted one for a long time. The prize is my focus. I don't give a thought to the fact that I've just killed a man. Killing is common. NVA officer belts are not.

Steve roots around in the knapsack and finds some letters from the dead gook's relatives or friends in the north. The stamps show resolute workers plowing a rice paddy with one hand and brandishing an AK-47 with the other. Grunts arrive to investigate the shooting, take a quick look at the dead gook, and shuffle outside to

continue the patrol. Platoon Sergeant winks and points at the Thompson. “Those forty-five slugs tore the shit out of him. I got to get me one of those.” Then he shoves curious replacements back out onto the street. Just another dead gook and you’ll see plenty of those around here. Continue the march.

We are heading back out into the muggy heat when I spot something interesting in a niche off to the right of the altar. It’s a TEAC reel-to-reel tape player. It looks big and heavy but a quick measurement convinces me I can fit it in my big NVA pack if I stuff everything else in my pockets or hang it on my web gear. A thing like that TEAC will be a cool addition to our Combat Correspondent’s hooch in the rear. The guys will love it.

Steve watches me maneuver the tape player into my pack, plopping the bundles of purloined piasters on top of it before I strap it shut and try it on my shoulders. “You may have failed to notice, but this not the goddamn PX—and that load is gonna kick your ass.”

The pack has got to weigh 30 or 40 pounds and I’m staggering under the added weight as we emerge back onto the street and try to catch up with the patrol. It’s quiet for a block or two and I’m just getting adjusted to the elephant on my back when a firefight breaks out and grunts are scrambling for cover along the sides of the street. We scramble to avoid a burst of incoming rounds ripping up the macadam. The bulky pack is pulling me around and slowing me down but we make it to cover.

An NVA gunner has spotted our slow movement and adjusted his fire to chase us. When we flop down out of his sight, Steve is holding his cheekbone and there are trickles of blood showing through his fingers. “Caught a ricochet or something...” He pulls his hand away for me to take a look. It’s not much more than a long deep scratch. I pour water on a towel and dab at the wound. “No big deal. Chicks dig a scar.”

Grunts are leap-frogging up the street and it looks like the NVA are pulling back. We need to move. Up ahead, Platoon Sergeant is on the radio calling for mortar fire to block the enemy escape route. He’s got everyone under cover while he adjusts the rounds and I spot a vacant house where we can get some cover and I can get this goddamn anvil off my back for a few minutes.

The place is a shambles with broken glass and concrete dust scattered over everything in what must have been some wealthy gook’s living room. As we wait for word to move, I open my pack and play around with the tape player. It looks like a really good one—even has a radio built in so I figure I can tape music off the AFVN signal once I get this beauty to the rear. The plug at the end of the power cord looks a little weird but there’s probably some technician I can get to fix that. Outside, mortars are cracking into the area. Platoon Sergeant sticks his head through a window and looks around the room where we’re sheltered. “Six wants us to hold here. I’m gonna move some people in with you guys. Don’t get too comfortable. We’ll be moving before dark.” A fireteam stumbles in through the door and begins to poke around the house. One of them finds a bottle of what smells like sake, takes a belt and passes the bottle.

We’re inside the house for a couple of hours before word comes for the platoon to pull back toward the stadium. Steve has to help me on with the pack that is now festooned on the outside with everything that was on the inside before I found

the TEAC. I stumble out into the street just before dusk, trying to figure a safe place I can stash this tape player without someone getting either indignant or greedy and confiscating what is clearly looted property.

Staggering down the street behind Platoon Sergeant as tracers suddenly cut through the gloom making looping green arcs. Platoon Sergeant and his radioman are quick and agile, changing direction and bounding into a structure on the left side of the street. My effort to follow is hampered by the weight of the pack. As I spin left, the pack pulls right and I end up on my ass in the middle of the street while those fucking tracers search for me like fluorescent fingers. Struggling up to hands and knees, I feel an impact like someone has suckered slugged me with a baseball bat. Whatever it is spins me around drives me back prone, but I don't feel any immediate pain. Could be they missed me or it could be I'm too scared to know I've been hit.

Tempted to drop the pack but can't bring myself to do it. Steve sprints from cover on the other side of the street, snatches me up by an arm and hauls me toward cover. He's panting from the exertion by the time we get out of the line of fire but he's got enough breath left to let me know I'm an idiot. "I told you to get rid of that fucking thing, didn't I? You're gonna fuck around and get yourself killed over a goddamn tape recorder? What's the matter with you?"

It's a good question and I don't have a reasonable answer. Platoon Sergeant squatting nearby is calling for more mortars and I decide to get rid of the tape player. Survival instinct triumphs over greed. "Look around and make sure we can find this place again." I shrug out of the pack and search for a spot where I can hide my treasure until circumstances allow me to retrieve it and haul it aboard a chopper or truck headed for the rear.

"That won't be necessary." Steve has a huge grin on his bloody face. "Take a look at this." He points to a huge rent in one side of my pack. There are copper coils and wires showing through the hole. As I dig around to assess the damage, one of the reels comes away in my hand dangling wires and broken plastic. The player is trashed, the case cracked and the guts crushed by at least three slugs that hit my pack out on the street.

"I can't believe this shit."

"Looks like you pissed Buddha off by ripping off his tunes."

"Fuck Buddha..."

"Careful, my man, he probably did you a favor. It was the tape deck or your dumb ass, one or the other was gonna get blown away."

Code of the Grunt: Do not fuck with Buddha. He may be just another gook but he knows all about payback. When you catch a break in a firefight consider it a wakeup call. Buddha is reminding you that close counts with horseshoes and hand grenades.

Back at the battalion CP we find out the assault on the Northside is set for tomorrow. There's nothing to do until dawn but decide which first battalion outfit to cover. There are plenty of choppers bouncing in and out of Hue by now, but there's never a question of getting aboard one of them. We're going across that stinking River of Perfumes with the grunts. That's what Combat Correspondents do and neither of us can imagine not doing it at this point in the great big fight for Hue City.

Busted

The Navy is into the fight big-time now. There are carrier aircraft and naval guns pounding away at the Citadel, trying to make holes in those walls. Brown-water sailors are bringing black-hulled, heavily armed Swift Boats up the Perfume River. Landing craft and amtracs are being mustered all along the south banks of the river waiting for the assault troops from 1/5 to get aboard for the crossing. The regimental planners are crowing about a multi-prong shore-to-shore amphibious assault. After a grizzled old Korea vet tells us how it all reminds him of crossing the Han River with the old 5th Marines after the landings at Inchon in 1950 we walk away to say goodbye to the Horrible Hogs of Hotel Company.

Surviving grunts from 2/5 are feeling like they're well out of it now. They've been told the final phases of the fight for Hue City will be carried by 1/5 and the ARVN. Walking among clumps of guys we know from the southside is an experience. Some look like survivors of a near fatal car wreck; numb and disbelieving, rubbing grubby hands over arms and legs that easily could have disappeared in pink mists during any number of brutal firefights. Others are crowing just short of crying, nearly hysterical on a survivor's high. We wander around with our notebooks in hand looking for familiar faces, checking spellings and hometowns. Sometimes we discover that the story sketched out in our notes will never be written. The subject of the little combat vignette that caught our eye is dead. There are lots of those.

Over by a school where Hotel Company is resting, we see a cluster of high-ranking REMFs in conference with the CO and the Company Gunny. The spit-shined jungle boots and starched uniforms are in glaring contrast to the raggedy-ass condition of the grunts. The confrontation is clearly heated and our curiosity overcomes a natural aversion to brass-hats in high dudgeon. We find space near a shattered swing-set in the schoolyard and watch.

The Company Commander and his Gunny are standing slumped and bleary-eyed as one of the visitors shakes a finger under their noses. He's backed by a gaggle of ARVN officers with badges and pins all over their starched uniforms. When the harangue ends, the Company Gunny nods at his boss and walks toward a platoon of grunts sprawled in the dusty playground.

"Those assholes..." He jerks a thumb over his shoulder. "...are up here from Saigon, Westmoreland's staff. The ARVN are National Police. They say somebody ripped off a bunch of cash from the Treasury Building. We cleared the area, so they're claiming it was us took the dough. Any of you hogs know anything about that?"

"Shit, Gunny..." A Staff Sergeant lifts off his helmet and wipes at the sweatband. "You searched all of us before we left the area. Maybe it was one of our KIAs..." The Gunny chews on that for a minute. "Nah. I've already been through all the medevac gear." He sweeps the survivors with suspicious eyes, then nods and walks back toward the cluster of officers.

Steve looks at me with arched eyebrows and nods toward my tattered pack. The TEAC is gone but there are still three bundles of stolen cash in it. "Better cough it up."

"Shut up, man! What do you want me to do? Walk over there and just hand it over? I'll wind up in Portsmouth making little rocks out of big rocks for the rest of my life!"

The Gunny returns shaking his head and worrying a cigar butt. "They got a real case of the ass over this thing. Skipper says they're threatening to put the whole company under arrest. So, here's the deal. You got fifteen minutes. Anybody knows anything about the missing money, you come see me. I'll see if I can keep your dumb ass out of jail."

Grunts begin to get to their feet, talking and cursing among themselves about REMFs fucking with line dogs over a little stolen cash. Steve and I wander away until we're out of sight and then squat to confer with my pack and the cash between us. "We gotta hand it over, my man. We been on the line with these dudes and they've never done us wrong. Hotel Company has been through too much to get fucked around by this thing. It just ain't right."

No question in my mind that the REMFs will put the entire outfit in jail looking for a culprit who can be singled out as an errant criminal and offered up to the Vietnamese Government for summary execution as an example of what happens to looters. I'm trying to decide how miserable I'll be spending the rest of my life in prison when I spot the tattered ARVN pack lying crumpled in the corner of the schoolyard.

"Look, I maybe see a way out of this. You come along and back my play. Anything I say, you say its gospel and you're an eyewitness." Before Steve can ask any questions, I retrieve the ARVN pack and stuff the three banded bundles of cash inside it.

"Hey, Skipper..." The Company Commander recognizes us as we approach. "We've been looking for you." I hold up the ARVN pack and give it a shake. "And it looks like we got here just in time."

An Army full colonel seems to be leader of the inquisition. He eyes the pack and points at us. "Who are these men?"

"Division Combat Correspondents, sir..." The captain names us. "They're often attached to us for operations." He turns to me and points at the pack. "What's that?"

"It's an ARVN pack, Skipper. We took it off an ARVN during the fight for the Treasury Building." The colonel makes a grab for the pack and I let him have it. He holds up a bundle of cash and squints at me like I'm an easy target—which I am if I don't come up with something really credible in a hurry. "We've been looking around for someone to turn that stuff over to, sir. When we spotted the ARVN officers here, we figured they would know what to do with it."

"They obviously stole this money, Captain. I want these men put under arrest." He breaks out a notebook and GI pen. "Give me your full names, service number, and unit."

"I'd like to hear what they have to say, Colonel." The captain holds up a grimy hand and points at me. "I know these two and they are not thieves."

“No, sir...” I thank God and Buddha for a good officer and paint a pained expression on my face. “We didn’t steal that money.”

“Then who did?” The colonel is angrily clicking his ballpoint, anxious to begin writing up charges.

“Don’t know his name, sir, but he was an ARVN soldier.” A spit-shined Army captain begins to translate what I’m saying for the Vietnamese officers. There is a spate of gabbling and gasping as I continue.

“Me and my partner were just coming out of the Treasury Building after Hotel Company drove the NVA out of it. So, anyway, we’re heading toward the CP when we see this ARVN soldier coming out of a rear entrance to the basement. He’s got that pack in his hands and running like a sonofabitch and he drops a bundle of cash. When he stops to pick it up, we were on him right away. See, we were warned about looting here in Hue City and it looked like this ARVN was committing a criminal act, so we knocked him on his ass. He got away but we retrieved that pack and the money. We’ve been looking around for someone to give it to ever since.”

The colonel turns beet-red and he’s making little scribbles in his notebook that can’t be legible. He’s stabbing the paper so hard pages are fluttering to the ground. “And why didn’t you turn it in immediately? Thought you might get away with keeping it?”

“No, sir...” Steve has picked up the drift and he’s got an answer to one that had me snowed. “See, we immediately got involved in another fight near Le Lai ARVN camp, and then there was the *Cercle Sportif* fight, and then the Hospital Complex and then we got side-tracked in the battle for the Provincial Headquarters. Truth is, we just couldn’t find the right time to turn this stuff over...”

“So—you’re telling me an ARVN soldier stole this money?”

“No, sir, I’m telling you that an ARVN soldier tried to steal the money. We recovered it and there it is.”

“I don’t believe this bullshit for a moment.” The colonel points at the Company Gunny. “Sergeant, place this pair under arrest. We’ll interrogate them and take official statements at Phu Bai.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Colonel. And if you insist you’ll have to discuss the matter with my battalion and regimental commanders. They’re back at the MACV Compound, I believe.”

“I’ll damn well have you relieved, Captain!”

“You can try, sir. If my battalion commander says I’m relieved, then so be it, but I don’t take orders from officers who are not in my chain of command. This is a U.S. Marine Corps rifle company, Colonel, and we do things by the book. Seems to me you’ve got the money you were looking for and no harm done. If that’s not good enough, you can do as you please back in the rear. Meantime, we’ve got a war to fight right here.”

The Captain walks away from the parlay leaving the Army colonel gasping with rage and trying to decide on a course of action. When the ARVN cops start counting the money, we make our break and follow the company commander. The GVN national treasury might recover most of the missing cash, but there’s no doubt in my mind it will be minus a stiff finder’s fee.

Inside the schoolhouse, I find the Company Commander drinking coffee. He nods his thanks when I offer a slug of looted bourbon to give it a kick. He sniffs the brew and smiles. "You've got more balls than brains, you know that? Did you think you were gonna get away with taking that cash out of here?"

"I had my hopes, Skipper. But there's no way I was gonna let that asshole roust Hotel Company over it. Your outfit's always been good to us."

He nods and winces at the bite of the laced coffee. "What was your plan if he pressed the issue? Or did you think that far in advance?"

"Well, Captain, *he* might not have bought that ARVN looting story, but I've got some buddies in the civilian press that would eat it up. "

He laughs and drains the canteen cup. "Don't get the idea I approve of what you did, but I'll be damned if that pompous Army shithead was going to walk into my outfit after what we've been through and arrest anyone for anything. You fought most of the way with us, so I guess you're included. Now, get out of here and let me get some sleep."

One Man's Ceiling is Another Man's Floor

"You better speak English, motherfuckers."

We're looking for a place to hole up near the Perfume River when the challenge freezes us in place. A guy from Charlie Company 1/5 sent us toward this two-story building that looked like it was some kind of factory but we couldn't find it before dark.

"Christ, don't shoot. We're looking for Delta Company."

A figure forms out of the shadows and we see a grunt with his rifle pointing at our bellies. "You the correspondents? Platoon Sergeant said a couple might show up tonight."

"That's us..." Steve names us but it doesn't seem to mean anything to the sentry. He shrugs and points back into the gloom toward the building. "Company CP's inside there. First platoon's pulling security."

We drift toward the dark and the sentry returns to his post behind a pile of leaking sandbags. "You guys gonna go with us tomorrow?" I can hear the nervous tremor in his voice.

"That's the plan."

"But you don't have to right? You guys get to decide shit like that and go where you want to go? I got a buddy knows some correspondents and he said that's the deal."

"That's the deal. Somebody's got to make you famous when you do heroic shit under fire. Just do some heroic shit tomorrow and we'll get your name in the papers."

"Most heroic shit I'm gonna do is get my dumb ass out of here in one piece. Fuck them papers..."

It starts raining buckets while we stumble around in the dark looking for someone in Delta Company to inform that they have two strap-hangers for tomorrow's river crossing. Inside the shot-up building, we find the Company Gunny and he writes our names and service numbers in his notebook. "You two

can rack out with Corporal Martinez over there.” He points toward a dark corner of the building where we see someone moving around with a filtered flashlight. “I’ll assign you to a boat tomorrow when H&S Company is ready to move.”

Corporal Martinez is the guy with the flashlight. He’s in a good mood and even shakes our hands. “Glad to have you with us. I got the three-five rockets plus some spare radio operators and S-2 scouts—all kinds of cats and dogs. There’s plenty of room in here.” Martinez points at a pile of musty mattresses under one of the windows. “We even got mattresses. Just find yourself a flat spot and rack out.”

We pull a couple of damp mattresses off the pile and sit down to cook up a C-ration meal. Grunts on either side of us are doing the same. Martinez returns from checking his sentries and flops down near us. He’s got a wide smile on his leathery face. “We never had no correspondents with us before. How do you dudes operate?” Martinez pulls off his helmet and I note from a scrawl on the camouflage cover that he’s apparently from San Antonio. There’s an intricate and well-rendered portrait of a matador on the back of his flak jacket.

“We’re just glorified grunts, my man. We go where you go and watch what you do, maybe write a few stories, shit like that. When it gets messy, we add some firepower. No big thing.”

“So if you write a story about one of us, what happens to it?” Martinez pulls a bottle of Tabasco out of his pocket, pours a healthy dollop into his ration can and offers us a taste.

“Depends on what it is, you know? Sometimes it winds up in the *Sea Tiger* or *Stars and Stripes* here in country, other times they send it to the dude’s hometown and it gets in the local rag—just depends on what the Lifers do with it.”

Martinez nods and chews. It’s clear he’s wondering what it might be like to have some say over whether or not he has to risk his ass. We’ve seen the reaction before and it makes us uncomfortable. There’s no use trying to compare what we do with what they do. There’s an enigmatic bottom line to it all. We often see more combat than the average grunt does in a standard tour of bush duty but we can—and sometimes do—avoid the worst shit they face just by climbing on a chopper and heading to the rear. We can rationalize that as part of our duty but it doesn’t keep us from feeling a little inferior. There it is.

I’m awake an hour after collapsing on the mattress. My silent alarm is ringing. Steve is crapped out on my right. The grunts are crashed and sprawled all around us and I listen cautiously to the standard sounds of fidgety bodies, snores, farts, and ragged breathing. I’m hearing something else that I can’t identify but it sounds like its coming from above us. Maybe the Gunny put some people on watch up on the second floor. Maybe it’s rats scrambling and scratching inside the walls. Crawling off the mattress I step carefully over sleeping bodies toward the staircase leading to the second story of the building.

Passage from the ground floor has been completely blocked by rubble and layers of shot-up sandbags. It seems odd. Unless there’s an exterior stairway, there’s no way anyone is going to get up those stairs with all the crap blocking the way. I’m on my way back to the mattress when a burst of AK fire sends everyone on the ground floor scrambling for weapons and cover. There’s another ripping burst that echoes off the walls and everyone flattens on the damp floor.

“Who the fuck is shooting?” The Company Gunny is pointing a red-lens flashlight upward. In the dim beam of light we see concrete dust explode from the ceiling as another burst of fire erupts. Whoever it is, he’s up above us on the second floor and shooting down through his floor and our ceiling.

The Gunny snaps off his flashlight and screams for everyone to stay put. He heads for the blocked staircase as a stream of green-tinted tracers plunges downward in the dark. “Martinez, you got any people up on the second deck?”

“Fuck no, Gunny! You said leave it alone when we moved in here. There’s all that shit blocking the stairs.”

“It’s fucking gooks up there.” The Gunny flinches as another stream of green tracer plunges through the ceiling and ricochets off the concrete floor. Grunts are all hugging the walls, staying as far away from the beaten zone as they can get. A couple of them shoulder their rifles and fire bursts up toward the ceiling where the enemy fire is raining down on us.

“Cease fire, goddammit!” The Gunny looks around at the grunts changing magazines and sprints across the room. “Martinez! Get me a rocket team—in a fuckin’ hurry.”

There’s a scramble at the rear of the room and I recognize two Marines fumbling with a 3.5-inch rocket launcher and digging for ammo. A nearby grunt with a sick sense of humor begins to sing a line from a Paul Simon tune in a nasal hillbilly register. “One man’s ceiling is another man’s floor...” He gets a rewarding wave of chuckles from the twitchy grunts waiting for the situation to be resolved.

Another man across the room tries a Rolling Stones riff. “Hey, Gook, get offa my cloud...don’t hang around ’cause two’s a crowd...”

A couple more grunts with an under-developed sense of humor fire up toward the ceiling. The Gunny screams for sanity and leads the rocket team toward the blocked staircase. “Martinez, get some rifles and stand by...” While Cpl. Martinez musters an assault team, the rocket gunners kneel in position at the base of the stairs. The assistant gunner twists a round into the tube and locks the electrical connection.

“Firing the three-point-five!” The A-gunner taps his gunner on the shoulder and checks to the rear of the weapon. “Clear the back-blast area!” The armor piercing round impacts the pile of rubble blocking the stairs and the resulting detonation sends everyone prone. Martinez shoves four grunts through the opening and follows them storming up the stairs. There’s a single round fired as the lead man hits the second floor landing. He tumbles back cursing and holding onto a bloody spot just above his right knee. As a Corpsman rushes to his aid, we hear the crump of a frag grenade on the second floor above us. It’s followed by a volley of mixed AK and M-16 fire. It lasts only seconds and the last echoing reports from the second floor are clearly M-16s on semi-automatic. In the shocking stillness we even hear expended shell casings spattering onto concrete.

Two dead NVA troopers tumble down the stairs like wet sandbags. They are followed by Martinez and his surviving grunts. “All clear up there, Gunny.” Martinez steps gingerly over the dead bodies, stretches and checks his watch. He heads for his mattress, shucks out of his gear and collapses. There are still three hours until daylight and he’s not the kind of grunt who lets a little firefight disturb an opportunity to crash in comfort. Delta Company grunts all around us follow his

example. There's time to restore and replenish the adrenaline supply. Lots of that will be needed tomorrow when 1/5 crosses the Perfume River.

And we've got one last good story from the Southside of Hue City.

Northside

Waiting for word and getting to know some more of the key players in 1st Battalion, 5th Marines we will accompany on the Perfume River crossing, Steve is jotting in his notebook and giving a little military history lesson. Grunts with nothing better to do are listening avidly. Apparently he's working on battles that might be compared to what we are about to face on the northside of Hue. Steve mentions Bastogne, Monte Cassino, the Siegfried Line, and all those fortified castles and villas in the mountains above Anzio. Switching to more familiar Marine Corps campaigns of World War II, he considers Corregidor, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, and the Shuri Castle region of Okinawa, all fortresses of one ilk or another that simply had to be taken by frontal assault. He sees the looming battle for Hue's Citadel like that and speculates that the fight will be a significant chapter in military history.

Nice pitch but its *caveat emptor* for my money. Maybe the fight will go into the military history books, but the way I see it, sending Marines up against that fortress across the river is the first leg of an all-expenses-paid ego trip for the American Command in Vietnam. We're playing politics and propaganda in the same way the NVA are. They planted that big-ass flag and surrounded an ARVN headquarters inside those walls for a whole lot more than tactical leverage in a losing fight. If I'm an NVA commander, why screw around with the Citadel? There's nothing inside those walls worth a last-ditch stand that's bound to cost you a whopping shit-pot full of dead and wounded. Only a dumb-ass field commander engages in a set-piece battle against numerically and technologically superior forces.

You do a thing like that only if it will provide a significant propaganda gain. And the ancient seat of the Vietnamese mandarins provides that in spades for a wily communist. You grab the one landmark in the one city in both Vietnams that symbolizes the decadence of a hated class system and you show those running dog capitalist greed-heads in the south that motivated socialist soldiers can destroy the vestiges of an evil regime. You make your point in the press while your soldiers dig in to defend those walls glowing with revolutionary zeal. That's what counts in a war of ideas. How the fight actually turns out is less important than the fact that you forced it on the enemy and made it as bloody as possible. That's what I think but keep it to myself and let Steve talk about making military history in Hue.

Battalion Commander has a modicum of good news as his command group musters in a shot-up building on the south banks of the Perfume River. We finagle our way into the briefing trying to get a glimpse at his map and a feel for what might happen when 1/5 goes on the offensive against the Citadel. We're going to take the fortress from the inside rather than just slamming up against the exterior walls. Some ARVN troops who got trapped by NVA surrounding their CP inside the

Citadel complex have managed to keep control of one of the access gates. It's called Truong Dinh Gate and it's supposed to be open for immediate access which will lead 1/5 to a secure base of operations within the ARVN 1st Infantry Division compound near the center of the walled enclosure.

We're told the 6th NVA Regiment plus reinforcements are holding the warren of houses and shanties behind the walls. They are also dug in like ticks all along the walls in positions to put plunging fire on Marines sweeping from north to south. The bottom line is that we will clear the Citadel complex from the inside out rather than from the outside in—and we'll have a platoon of tanks in support. We are dismissed to get on with preparations for the Perfume River crossing. Steve thinks it's all good news, but I'm afraid it won't matter much which side of the walls we attack.

If the NVA are dug into bunkers and holes all along the dirt fill between the outer walls and the inner walls, how is one attack easier than the other? Walls are walls, man, thick and festooned with die-hard gooks. Walking away from the briefing, my head is suddenly filled with evil metaphors: Bugs creaming into the windshield of a speeding car, moths smashing into a porch light, and various night-nasty insects fried in a high-voltage bug-zapper.

Grunts are loading into Navy assault boats now. There aren't enough of them, so the Vietnamese Navy has offered a trio of armed junks which will ferry some units across. We are assigned to an LCM-8, a Mike Eight, with other cats and dogs from H&S Company. A pair of speedy little Skyhawks is striking the Citadel walls as we board. They flash and zoom over the target so fast it's hard to tell if they are Marine birds up from Danang or Navy planes from one of the carriers operating out on Dixie Station. It doesn't matter. The key is that someone in the rear has finally loosened the lock on supporting arms. Maybe the gooks will split and try to get out from under the air strikes and big guns. Late word is that the Army has a bunch of troops on the outskirts of the city to cut off reinforcement and catch any NVA that try to escape. That makes me think the gooks over there inside the Citadel aren't going anywhere soon. Maybe we'll just surround the place and starve 'em out. How long could that take? We've surely got more time to waste than Marines.

There's a silly tune running through my head as the little floating shoebox the Navy calls a Mike Boat rumbles into the river: *Joshua fit de battle of Cit-a-del. Hope de walls come a-tumblin' down.* It's a surprise to see some of the landing craft crewmen are U.S. Coast Guard. Who knew? Apparently, the situation in Hue demands intervention by shallow-water sailors fresh from manning lighthouses and LORAN stations. They look competent and committed, but it's hard to keep from wondering how many of them joined the Coast Guard to keep from getting drafted and sent to Vietnam.

Code of the Grunt: You can run but you can't hide. Dodge for a while but in the end they'll get you and very likely send you someplace where you'll get your end shot off.

There's some incoming fire from a little mid-river island as we churn across the river with the Citadel looming off to port and a flock of high-ranking observers off to starboard. As everyone in our boat shrinks below the scuppers, the PBRs surge ahead on the flanks of the landing craft convoy pouring streams of machinegun

fire at the NVA shooters. We feel the coxswain turn our boat to the left and pour on the power. A lieutenant near me jabs a finger at a hand-drawn sketch. We've made a northward turn toward a landing at Gia Hao which looks to be about two city blocks from that gate that is supposed to get us inside the Citadel.

The boat beaches with a crunch and the landing ramp drops. We can see other landing craft on the left and right disgorging grunts that spread out and surge forward. They are moving cautiously into a hard right turn and keeping a wary eye on houses and doorways for shooters. There's just a sprinkling of incoming making me think the NVA in this area are just luring us deeper into the streets that lead to the only open gate of the Citadel. If we make it that far, the real killing will begin.

Steve follows me inside a little temple structure while 1/5 grunts out on the streets get organized for the tactical move to the Truong Dinh gate. Outside there's an ARVN trooper waving his arms, pointing up the street and screaming about beaucoup VC. Inside there's another Buddha blessing all who enter but I'm not interested at this point. Steve moves toward the low altar and checks behind the statues to see if recent history might repeat but it's clear. "No gooks and no tape recorder." He plucks a yellow, plastic flower from a vase at Buddha's feet and jams it into the camouflage cover of my helmet. "You'll have to make do with this. It looks good on you."

The move toward the gate has halted. We find Delta's XO crouched in a stone portico, talking into a radio handset. Marines on either side of him are glaring at a high window across the street. There's a deadly accurate sniper in there, and he's gut-shot one the first platoon guys who is lying in the street moaning. A Corpsman vaults from cover behind a wall and runs to retrieve the casualty. He's six feet from the wounded man when the sniper cuts him down with a round to the chest. The Delta grunts fire a fusillade at the window but the sniper has faded into the shadows.

The Lieutenant sends a squad maneuvering around through houses on the left side of the street, trying to flank the sniper. We can see a gate about a block away from where we squat. There's what looks like a medieval drawbridge, but that can't be the gate we want. It's blocked with junk and debris. Once someone kills the sniper, we'll be moving in the other direction flanking the base of the eastern walls and moving right out in the open. Hey-diddle-diddle and right up the middle; it's the Marine Corps way.

A radio squawks to report the flanking squad got the sniper. I see a grunt in the second story window waving a scoped, bolt-action rifle, the weapon that did the damage. A steady drizzle begins to fall as Delta Company assembles to move. Up ahead we can hear the drum-roll of rifle and machinegun fire. That's another outfit already inside the walls and pushing on some intermediate objective. We're a little late to the dance, but no one is complaining. We can hear the occasional crack of 90mm cannons and the creak of tracks grinding over rubble. The tanks have arrived and that puts a little pep into Delta's step.

The point squad calls a halt as a couple of grunts from another company suddenly appear carrying a casualty. A Delta Company corpsman takes a quick look and takes over while the grunts rush back to wherever the fight that caused the casualty is happening. The Doc tells a platoon commander that the wounded

man needs to be carried to where he can be sent south on one of the boats crossing the Perfume River. The Doc volunteers to hump the guy back, but the lieutenant doesn't want to lose his corpsman. We are standing around close enough to get drafted.

"We could use a hand here. Can you two get this man back to the rear? You can join back up with us shortly. We're supposed to have a bunch of replacements coming this way."

It's a polite request that might as well be an order. There's no way we can say no and still maintain any kind of credibility with Delta Company. The corpsman does what he can for the gut-shot Marine, cautions us not to give him any water, and indicates we need to hustle the guy back to the landing area and put him on a boat. We help slide the wounded man onto a poncho, lift him as carefully as we can and backtrack through the advancing ranks of Delta Company.

At a rest stop along the way to Gia Hao landing site, I check the wounded guy's dogtags and find out his name is Wilson, he's got a boot camp service number, he's a protestant, and his blood type is O positive. He's dipping in and out of consciousness, in no shape to fill in the blanks. It takes nearly an hour to stagger back to the landing area and find the casualty-collection point. Some corpsmen go to work on our guy immediately and we sit down to chug canteen water and fire up a smoke. There's no way to tell if Wilson will make it out of Hue alive, but it's enough that we helped improve his odds.

The landing area is beginning to look like a classic amphibious beachhead. Supplies and troops pour ashore each time a boat lands from the Southside. Wounded go out on the same boats. Southbound coxswains hit reverse and execute a quick, high-speed run back across the river. Support troops or inbound reinforcements are milling around everywhere helping themselves to chow, ammo, water, or anything useful they can find stacked along the riverfront. We pick up some extra rations and head back toward the walls. Delta Company shouldn't be too hard to find. Passing the casualty collection point we look for Wilson. We've got a personal stake now in a guy we never met before we rolled him onto a poncho in Hue City. He's nowhere in sight, so maybe he's still alive. Continuing up the street with the walls on our left, we are passed by a Mule ferrying the first dead from the fight that's already underway on the other side of the walls. The bloody, muddy ponchos wrapped around the bodies are covered with an ugly blanket of blow flies.

At the intersection where Delta's first platoon killed the sniper, we spot two second lieutenants in stateside utility uniforms milling around and looking bewildered. They've got fresh high-and-tight haircuts, new flak jackets, rifles, and a single bandolier of ammo between them. One has a Military Airlift Command boarding pass peeking out of his pocket. Clearly less than a day or two off a flight from the States, they eye our ragged condition with a mixture of suspicion and gratitude.

"We're headed up forward..." One of the lieutenants waves vaguely in the direction we're headed. We just stare and nod. "Got any idea where we can find Delta Company? You look like you've been here a while and uh..." It just hangs there. He seems to want reassurance more than directions.

"Lieutenants, are you lost?"

Jaws jack momentarily. These new officers have heard all the jokes about little lost lieutenants. Neither of them is long enough out of OCS and The Basic School to challenge combat vets. “We’re assigned to Delta Company. Are they up this way?”

A burst of fire causes the lieutenants to flinch. It’s an M-60 and at least a block away, but there’s no way these guys can know that. “That’s probably them.” I point in the general direction of the Citadel. “We’re headed for Delta. You can come along with us, but best you pick up some deuce-gear first. You’re gonna need some more gear before you get too much deeper into this thing.”

We walk with the lieutenants back to the landing ramp and help them select belts, suspender straps, and canteens from a pile of medevac gear. “They rushed us up here so fast we didn’t have time to get any.” One of the lieutenant shrugs into his new gear, reaches for a pack of cigarettes, and offers us one. “Back at the battalion CP they said we’d get whatever we needed from Delta.”

“Maybe so, Lieutenant, but you’d be better off reporting in with more than a rifle and one bandolier of magazines. Delta won’t have much gear to spare—until they start taking casualties.” The other lieutenant cuts a quick, questioning glance at his buddy. Are we kidding? We are not and they say no more as we start back up the street listening to the rattle of a firefight on the other side of the walls.

There’s a guide stationed at the Truong Dinh gate looking for replacements and ready to escort them forward. We let him know the lieutenants need to find Delta Company and he takes the officers off our hands. The lieutenants offer to shake. It comes as such a surprise that it takes me a while to reach out for their hands. We give each of them a grip hoping there’s some sort of comfort or reassurance in the contact. They clearly need it.

We’ll follow in a little while after we get a feel for the situation. There’s a Shore Party Staff Sergeant set up at the gate and he’s happy to share from a pot of coffee he’s got brewing over a little kindling wood fire. Several ARVN troopers are milling around the fire eyeing the coffee, but Staff Sergeant makes no move to share with anyone other than us. We sip coffee and watch the lieutenants disappear in the direction of the ARVN compound. Delta is apparently holed up there waiting for orders.

Shore Party Staff Sergeant nods in the direction of the departing replacements. “What’s chances those guys are alive tomorrow?”

“About zip-point-shit if this thing plays out according to predictions.” Steve shrugs, finishes his coffee and folds the handle on his canteen cup. “But there are always the exceptions.”

We find Delta occupying some sort of musty ARVN warehouse and waiting for orders. They had a fairly easy time walking from the gate to the compound. Just a few bursts of plunging fire from gooks on the walls along the route. Nothing to write home about, a platoon commander reports as we join his outfit. Apparently the battalion commander is making sure he’s got all his troops and supporting arms in place before he commences the sweep from here to the walls on the southside of the Citadel compound where that NVA flag is still flying.

The rest of 1/5’s rifle companies are strung out along a ragged line that meanders through a couple of city blocks around the ARVN Compound and angled to face the southern and eastern walls of the Citadel. The big push is scheduled

for the morning, our second day on the northside of Hue. The first platoon leader admits he doesn't have much of a tactical plan in mind. Just sweep through and take what comes, he guesses with a shrug. Clear the houses, climb the walls, and kill any gooks we run into. If there is some sort of broad, bold, and sexy master scheme of maneuver, the lieutenant says he missed the memo. Sometime around dusk he finds us crapped out and says there are several civilian correspondents heading his way. He'd really appreciate it if we could keep them out of his hair.

There are two of them. One AP scribbler and another guy who says he's writing a piece for Esquire Magazine. We introduce ourselves and lead them to an out of the way area where we can determine whether or not we can help them without getting ourselves killed. The AP guy looks and acts like a veteran who can go the distance. The Esquire guy looks like a hippy and promptly rolls himself a fat joint once we're settled into an abandoned house that faces the southern walls of the Citadel.

Around 1900, a first platoon rifle squad arrives to share our abode for the night. With dark descending rapidly and a cold rain starting to blow over the city, we settle in and speculate about sporadic firing around the ARVN compound. There's a lot of nervous fiddling with gear and the rattle of grunts refilling rifle magazines or crunching P-38 openers into rations cans. AP and Esquire conduct interviews with the grunts but there's not much to report. These guys have yet to get into the fight very deeply, so it's just jive; mostly stuff they've heard rather than anything they've actually experienced in Hue.

It's time to explore the digs and my little map light is dim enough to keep from making me a sniper target. The place looks like it was once a comfortable home for someone with bucks or influence; maybe both. The furniture is heavy, ornate, and expensive. There is even a functional flush toilet currently topped by a grinning grunt leaning on his rifle and noisily depositing what sounds and smells like about a week's worth of congealed C-ration meals. There is a fireteam lined up outside the shitter, politely waiting for their turn on the throne.

Mortars are beginning to clang and bang into a night fire mission on something to the south of us. The mortarmen are firing mixed HE and illumination over the area we will assault tomorrow. Wind carries most of the illum rounds back toward our positions near the ARVN compound and grunts on watch are bitching loudly about it. There is an occasional crack from some NVA sniper's rifle as the light silhouettes a Marine target. The relative calm is making everyone nervous and prompting the replacements to speculate about an easy day tomorrow. The veterans loudly and profanely disabuse them of that theory. The trash talk is a pressure relief valve. The only thing sure about tomorrow is that there won't be much time for snappy patter.

Steve is crapped out in a corner cleaning his carbine and wrapping his camera in plastic for storage in his pack. He wordlessly hands me the wrapper from a spare radio battery so I can wrap my own camera. Both of us understand we won't be doing much photography when the word comes to move. There's a mutual agreement here. What we shoot tomorrow won't be pictures. We'll let the civilians handle that. With AP and Esquire along on the hump, Delta Company's efforts will get all the coverage required. And the grunts will appreciate a couple of extra rifles. Listening to the owl hoot of falling flare canisters jangles my nerves and

after a few minutes of rearranging gear, I'm off looking for a tonic to keep the spooks at bay until morning.

It's hard to keep from tripping over grunts sprawled everywhere in this mini-mansion, wrapped in whatever they can find to keep out the chilly night air. A few have stripped thick velour curtains off the windows and spooned together for warmth and reassurance. My map light illuminates a framed photo in one of the bedrooms and I pause to contemplate the image of an Asian family in another place and another time. There's a man and woman hugging two cute kids wearing Mickey Mouse ears and posing with Disneyland's Matterhorn in the background. No telling where this family is now, but it's likely not the happiest place on earth.

Relentlessly searching for booze, I continue to explore while picking up random objects that catch my eye and stuffing them into one pocket or another. It's kitschy stuff, little carved figurines and an ornate letter opener. The kind of Asian baubles you can buy in any rear echelon gook shop; nothing that would yield much in trade or even rate space on a respectable coffee table back in The World. It's just plain stealing little things that have no real value but I'm ready with rationalizations. It's not like the money at the Treasury Building or the ill-fated tape recorder on the southside. That was big-time looting, premeditated felonies committed for purposes of personal gain. This is different somehow. The little things that disappear into my pockets just seem like perks or rewards for surviving this long in the fight for Hue City.

AP Reporter finds me wandering toward the kitchen of our commandeered house and wants to know if I've heard anything about the mission tomorrow. He says he needs a detailed plan of action for his story. AP wants to find the battalion commander and get a full briefing but I advise him to wait for morning. A map-drill won't be much help. He just needs to understand there are only two missions that count from this point: Climb the walls and kill the gooks. AP thinks that might be a hot-shit lead for his story on the Citadel fighting and wants my name and hometown so he can attribute the quote.

In a little alcove off the kitchen I finally find the family liquor locker. A simple, delicate lock comes away with a twist of my K-Bar knife. The selection is ample and expensive. There's a magnum of French champagne that opens with a loud pop. The noise attracts a few anxious grunts worried about boobytraps. We kill the champagne in a hurry while Apple Cheek Grunt rummages around the liquor cabinet and finds something more familiar. He displays a decorative bottle of Jim Beam that's shaped like a pirate captain.

"My old man drinks this shit by the fuckin' gallon." Apple Cheeks breaks the seal, takes a hit, and passes the bottle. Everyone has a gulp or two, but there's some left when Apple Cheeks retrieves and re-corks the bottle. "I'm gonna chug the rest of this right after we take down that fuckin' gook flag."

"Best you drink it all right now." Fireteam Leader says while he herds his grunts out of the kitchen. "No guarantee your ass will be alive to enjoy it tomorrow." Apple Cheeks uncorks the bottle and drains it. "I might get hit tomorrow—but I ain't gonna feel it." The last bottle in the cabinet is cognac. It's half full and sufficient to knock me out of the mind games.

At dawn I've got a throbbing head that I'm trying to clear by deep breathing muggy air outside our overnight position when a four-man detail from another

platoon passes carrying a casualty in a poncho. The guy is clearly a goner. Apparently gook snipers had a productive night in another part of our perimeter. The dead man's eyes are still open and his head lolls toward me as the evac party stumbles by on the way to a casualty collection point. It's one of the replacement lieutenants we met yesterday. He's still got the MAC boarding pass peeking out of his flak jacket pocket. He lasted less than 16 hours on the northside of Hue and the real fighting hasn't even started.

Steve is making C-ration coffee back inside the house. Everyone else is bitching about no chow and no resupply. They all ate what was in their packs last night and there's no sign of more to come. Squad Leader wanders in with orders for everyone to pack up and stand by. He understands there's no chow but there it is. Nobody promised us a rose garden and shit happens.

Seems to me there's a simple solution. How about the ration and ammo dumps down the street? Squad Leader has no idea what I'm talking about but we found out yesterday that Shore Party people are stacking supplies everywhere to our rear. It's a self-service buffet designed to keep the grunts re-supplied without a lot of bothersome bureaucracy. Why not just go grab a case or two of Cs?

Squad Leader chews on that for a while and checks his watch. He's not very anxious to send a working party out with no telling what his guys might run into and orders imminent. On the other hand—he eyes me significantly and jerks a thumb over his shoulder—a guy who knows all about those supply dumps and doesn't really have much better to do right now might be kind enough to go get some chow and feed everyone. How about that? Ain't that a good idea?

I'm outside under a rapidly brightening sky and halfway to a knee-high concrete wall that fronts the house when a heavy machinegun opens up from somewhere down the street. Flat on my belly, I crawl for the wall and roll over to see the heavy slugs gouge huge rents out of the stucco façade of the house I've just left. A grunt peeks over a window-ledge to let me know he thinks it must be an NVA .51 caliber, the gook version of our venerable Ma Deuce. Steve shouts for me to crawl back inside as a squad of Delta Company grunts maneuvers past on the way to find the heavy gun and put it out of action.

Another burst cracks into the wall behind me as the NVA gunner adjusts his fire. He's got me spotted but I can't get any lower or move to the rear. Beats me how he can see me behind the wall but he keeps hammering away as if he's got some kind of x-ray vision. The only option seems to be to crawl on toward the end of the garden where I'll be hopefully out of his line of fire. Stay put much longer and the heavy slugs will blow a hole in the wall.

Hanging onto my helmet to keep it from slipping over my eyes, I get slowly up to hands and knees and wait for a moment. Gook gunner holds his fire. The supply dump is down the street, around a corner at the closest intersection that lies about thirty meters beyond the end of the garden wall. There's cover beyond that and I can make a running break for the supply dump. It seems like a workable plan and I start to crawl on hands and knees away from the house.

Gook gunner seems to be following my progress with steady bursts that chip away at the garden wall and the nearby buildings. Drop prone and he stops. Back up on hands and knees and he fires. Somehow he's tracking my movements. Near the end of the course, he sends a buzzing burst over my head that smacks into the

building planned as my cover. The rounds are so close that I can actually feel the hot breath of their passing. Suddenly something droops down in front of my eyes and the conundrum of the gunner's x-ray vision is solved.

It's that yellow plastic flower that Steve stuck in my helmet. A round finally clipped the stalk and robbed Gook Gunner of his target designator. He's been watching that flower bobbing along behind the wall like a little duck in a shooting gallery. A giggling fit takes me for a few seconds while I dig this guy's determination. He tracked me all the way and actually hit a quarter-inch piece of plastic tubing with a half-inch slug from a heavy machinegun at God knows what range. That's one happy accident. Another is that I survived it.

Code of the Grunt: Give the gook his due. He's good at what he does. Either you understand that and never forget it or you deserve to die.

Sector Sweeps

There's frenzied activity everywhere along the streets that cut through the previously populated neighborhoods inside the Citadel walls. Platoons are advancing toward what a lieutenant tells us is Phase Line Green. It's the morning objective for Delta Company, a toehold—a purchase to begin the assault on the NVA scattered before us in structures and surrounding us on two sides by bunkered positions atop the walls. Senior officers running the show are squinting up at those walls. The expression on their faces tells me they don't think much of the situation. Staring at the Citadel from across the river was one thing. It's a whole other thing standing in the shadows of those looming walls. There's some planning, plotting, and a lot of head-shaking, but in the end it will be climb the walls and kill the gooks. Nothing more subtle or sophisticated will do.

Delta's Company Gunnery Sergeant has been tub-thumping all morning; trying to inject some warrior spirit—or at least a little enthusiasm—into his grunts. This ain't so bad, Marines. We get paid to do this shit. Keep the pace. Haul ass up there. Don't lose your momentum. The grunts don't seem to be buying it as they begin to probe cautiously forward through blocks of houses in the direction of a gate tower midway along the eastern wall of the Citadel. It's a long way between here and there through blocks of buildings, most of which are likely occupied by enemy shooters who have been playing us like a banjo as we push in one direction and then in another. My sympathies lie with the over-cautious riflemen, but the Gunny's got a point. No use trying to avoid the bottom line. The noose is tightening. The NVA will have to make a determined stand somewhere and it hardly matters whether it's sooner or later.

We make a hard right turn and pause behind first platoon's point squad to take cover in a ramshackle house on one corner of an intersection. Lead fireteams are moving in four directions along the streets probing for resistance. From a ground floor window, I can see a long stretch of stone wall and a barricaded gate. Up on those walls, 75-meters wide in some places, the NVA have bunkers dug deep into the earthen fill between the interior and exterior faces. Gunny crouches next to me and sweeps the walls with field glasses. "I've seen some shit in seventeen years, but this here is different. In Korea we mostly took the high ground and the gooks

were always trying to take it back. Looks like it's gonna be vicey-versy this time." He looks at me with a grim expression that asks what I think.

"Looks like something out of a low-budget sword and sandal movie, Gunny." As we stare, a Navy F-8 Crusader makes a low strafing pass parallel to the wall up ahead. We can see expended shell casings falling in a twinkling shower as the jet powers off into the low cloud cover. "Maybe the air strikes will take 'em all out."

The Gunny sniffs and stuffs a wad of Redman into his cheek. "Don't hold yer breath on that score. Air strikes hurt 'em but they don't kill 'em all. You can bet yer ass we're gonna be up there clearing bunkers most ricky-tick." He grips my shoulder and then trundles off shouting for a radio and reports from the point.

Watching more air strikes go in over stretches of the southern and eastern walls, I'm contemplating weirdness like scaling ladders, boiling oil, and arbalests when the word comes for Delta to move. No surprises here: Spread out on line, orient toward the tower gate up ahead, and sweep through until we get where we're going. Two helicopters clatter overhead as we start the push and it occurs to me that there will be a few of them landing back at the ARVN compound before long. A smart guy might be able to wangle a way out of this—but that's just a fleeting thought. Do something chickenshit like that on any pretext, justifiable or not, and I might live but for the rest of my life I'd regret it. If there has ever been a defining moment in my short and undistinguished existence, this is probably it. Best take the inevitable chances; at least roll the dice before you crap out.

Steve is in an alley shrugging into a new flak jacket. His old one is crumpled on a pile of bricks and full of shrapnel holes. He nods and points toward the gate at the end of the street. "We go as soon as the Navy takes a few shots." We hear the first rounds roaring overhead with the odd Doppler shuffle of passing naval gunfire. Rounds crack into the walls up ahead and there are some desultory cheers as the objective is obscured by deceptive showers of raw earth and rock shards. Bombers and big guns are just tickets to this game. Serious play begins when you let the grunts out of the locker room.

Delta squads are clearing houses to the right and left of the main boulevard leading up to the wall in this sector. Short, sharp firefights crackle and spit as the grunts encounter gooks in screening positions. The assault grinds steadily on toward that gate and a couple of rubble-strewn access ramps provided by the heavy stuff that precedes our advance. So far there has been only desultory fire from the walls. The main impediment has been NVA firing and falling back from buildings on the flanks.

The grunts on the approach keep eyeing those wall sections every time they get a chance to see down the street that guides their advance. Those walls will be the tough nut and no one seems to have a good handle on how many NVA we are facing along this axis of advance. The math is both simple and uncomfortable. In the combat game, attacker needs three to one—better five to one—in manpower advantage. Play those numbers out and you see the problem facing Delta Company and the rest of the battalion. Percentages say three to five attacking grunts will die for every defending gook they kill. And the gooks dug in along those walls are playing it smart, waiting for targets to enter clear fields of fire as the Marines inevitably must.

A serious fight develops on Delta Company's left flank where tanks have been moving in support of the advance. The CO orders a halt while he goes over to assess the situation. Steve lopes off in that direction while I reach for a smoke and then pass the pack among a clutch of grunts carrying 3.5-inch rocket launchers. The Delta Skipper has been keeping these guys in reserve and close at hand for bunker-busting duties once we get closer to the walls. Rocket Gunner wants to know what I know. Sorry, pal, but I'm a little out of touch with higher headquarters. No fucking idea when we will go, where we will go, or what will happen when we do. Don't let this correspondent thing mislead you. I'm along for the ride just like you are on this one.

Rocket Gunner gives up on me and watches Patriot, one of his ammo humpers, produce a small American flag he intends to raise somewhere up on those walls. Patriot says he'll need some help when the time comes as he wants to recreate the celebrated flag-raising atop Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima. Buddy Grunt promises to muster a crew if I promise to shoot a picture of it. He asks about my camera and I jerk a thumb at the pack on my pack. No problem. You get that flag up and I'll make you famous. He seems dubious and wants to know if AP Reporter and Esquire Dude will be there.

Delta Company Gunny bursts their bubble with a bigger American flag he's been carrying around stuffed inside his flak jacket. When the flag goes up over those walls, he says, it's going to be this one. Delta Gunny lost a bet with his buddy Hotel Gunny but he stands to recoup if he gets his own flag up over the Citadel. He launches into a description of the first flag-raising on the southside of Hue that caused such a shit-storm among the brass-hats in Saigon who thought the appropriate thing for the Hotel 2/5 Marines to do once they captured the Thua Thien Provincial Headquarters was raise the South Vietnamese flag. Hotel Gunny was having no part of any such cheap shit and he said so for the record. If the brass wanted a South Vietnamese flag raised then, by God, they could round up some of the chicken-shit ARVN to take the Provincial Headquarters.

Delta Gunny gets some of the story wrong but who cares? Its old news by now and some of the Marines we saw raising that first flag are probably already dead anyway. It happened relatively early in the southside fighting just about the time the first batch of civilian correspondents were turned loose in the city. We escorted a couple of them into the action and the resulting front-page photo appeared in nearly all the stateside dailies showing the Horrible Hogs of Hotel Company—led by their cigar-chewing Gunny—hauling an American flag up a bullet-riddled flagpole. There were accompanying shots of the Gunny and his guys holding up a ratty, bullet-riddled NLF flag that they'd pulled down in the midst of the battle. Naturally, the stories all made some reference to the iconic Iwo Jima incident and the Hotel 2/5 flag-raisers became celebrities throughout the fighting 1st Marine Division.

There it is. Twenty years between Iwo Jima and Hue City. Twenty years waiting for another shot at an immortal moment and another flag-raising over another enemy bastion. That's a lot of tradition but not much progress. Lots of people die on the way to those immortal moments. That aspect never changes and never seems to dampen enthusiasm for being part of it. If you've got nothing better to do—and we didn't at that moment waiting for word to attack—go figure.

Patriot tucks the upstaged flag into his pack and pulls out a ratty copy of the Fairhope, Alabama weekly paper. His boot camp graduation photo is on page two. The fresh-faced kid in dress blues, smiling grimly with a determined jut to his jaw, is proclaimed by the photo caption to be the very same rumples, unshaven, bleary-eyed infantryman holding the newspaper for me to examine. A three-paragraph blurb in the bottom right corner of the page catches my eye. It's a little feel-good piece about a grunt rescuing a puppy from a burning ville, a vignette Steve wrote when we were operating up on the DMZ. It carries his byline so I borrow the paper to let him bask in the glory of being published in the Fairhope Fish Wrapper. We meet halfway between the Delta CP and the fight on the left flank which has been decided in Delta's favor by a light section of tanks. The CO is holding where he is while he sends his first platoon on an alternate mission. This one will delay the inevitable push against the walls so we decide to tag along with them.

Patrols have spotted a company-sized NVA unit to the east of us and bunkered up inside an electrical power generating station. The gooks have cut off all power to the area and the GVN wants that fixed in a hurry. The priority, given the empty houses and lack of civilian residents we've encountered so far escapes me, but there it is. Maybe the ARVN trapped inside the Citadel lodged a complaint about cold tea and rice cakes. Who knows? Who cares at this point? Delta Company has the mission to clear that power station so someone who knows how can get the juice flowing.

Squatty Staff Sergeant is briefing three squads of grunts set to embark on the mission. A couple of worried-looking Vietnamese civilians are smoking nervously in the background. Staff Sergeant identifies them as technicians who will re-start the generating equipment if the NVA haven't fucked it up beyond salvage. He spreads a sketch showing the interior of the Citadel and jabs at it with a grimy finger.

"We move parallel to the river in this direction until we get to the generating station. We got one tank that will follow in trace. One Alpha is base of fire all along here on this little knoll. They got the M-60. Anything moving around that building, you blow it away. One Bravo, you guys are the assault element. When Alpha opens up, you go straight in through the gate and pop CS into the windows. Gunny's got the gas grenades for you. One Charlie, you're back here around the rear entrance. The gas ought to drive 'em right into your fire when they boogie out of the compound. Squad Leaders make sure everybody's got a mask. Check 'em personally." He jerks a thumb in the direction of the Vietnamese. "Once we got control, we bring in these two dudes and stand by while they get the power back on. Anybody got questions? We move in one-five mikes."

Squatty Staff Sergeant has no problem with a couple of strap-hangers as he eyes my newly acquired rifle and Steve's carbine. He'll take all the firepower he can get and a little publicity for his platoon wouldn't hurt either. We fall in with his unit heading away from the walls and perpendicular to Delta's axis of advance. It feels like a reprieve, a change for the better; like what I felt yesterday when I pitched the macho Thompson sub-gun into the Perfume River and picked up a medevac's rifle. Change in conditions, any change no matter how small—a new flak jacket, a fresh uniform or a different weapon—seemed welcome and

reassuring. As long as things could change you might survive, at least until the next change.

The power generating station is a long, low blockhouse affair about three blocks away from where we started and situated near a corner of the Citadel walls. The tank creaks and clanks into a hull-down overwatch position as Staff Sergeant confers with Corporal Tank Commander. No fire from the 90mm unless he designates a target. The tank will add machinegun support to the base of fire. Three rifle squads scramble to their designated areas as we eye the power station about 75 meters to our direct front. It looks deserted, but the recon guys said there was a bunch of gooks in there spread out between the fence and the main generator building. The gate to the compound hangs open on its hinges and Staff Sergeant doesn't like the look of that. He changes orders for the assault squad and sends them around to the back with the cut-off squad.

When the radio squawks to let Staff Sergeant know his guys at the rear of the power station are in place, he signals for the base of fire. The tank opens up followed immediately by the riflemen and machinegunners in One Alpha. We add our fire from a position next to a handy Blooper Man who is pumping HE rounds over the fence at a rapid rate. The assault squad must be moving, but we can't see them yet. We can see a bunch of muzzle flash winking back at us from the windows on this side of the main generator building. Heavy machinegun atop the tank sweeps rounds across the face of the building and some of the muzzle flashes disappear just about the time we see white smoke roiling out the facing windows. There's the gas. Squatty yells for everyone to don and clear as we jam the cloying rubber gas masks over our heads.

A rattle of gunfire sounds from somewhere behind the building and develops into a nasty firefight that we can't see. Staff Sergeant tells the tank to fire cover for us and orders everyone up to sweep on line toward the building. He's determined to catch the NVA in a pincer and it looks like it will work as advertised. Amazed that I'm able to see much less aim wearing the gas mask, I send a burst of M-16 rounds at two NVA crawling out a window as we sweep into the station courtyard. It's about that time that Squatty Staff Sergeant's plan hits a serious snag.

Beneath a thick line of hedges framing the compound, the gooks have dug a series of spider holes and shooters firing from those positions blow hard into the flank of Delta One Alpha. At least three Marines are down immediately and the rest of us are scrambling for any cover we can find. Blooper Man is on a knee next to me, hugging a wall of the building and pumping rounds directly at the line of spider holes. He's reloading when I catch a flash of movement to our left where a gook pops up out of a hole about ten meters away and aims in with an AK-47. Blooper Man sees the threat just as I shoulder the rifle and eliminate it with three quick rounds. Gas mask or not, there's no way to miss at that range.

The ambush in the power station parking lot boils down to a grenade fight with Chicoms and M-26 frags flying all across the area. Staff Sergeant is wounded with a round in the thigh that likely broke his leg but he's still running the fight. He orders his cut-off squad to maneuver and see if they can take the gooks in the spider holes under fire from a flank. Out of grenades and down to one full magazine of just three I stupidly carried into this thing, I hug the blockhouse wall and head to the rear looking for extra ammo.

Eyepieces of the stifling gas mask are steaming up, making it hard to see, but I spot the gook running in a crouch on the roof of the blockhouse. He's headed for the front of the building where he can fire down onto us or drop a few of the grenades he's got sticking out of a pouch on his hip. In a few more steps he'll disappear behind some sort of air conditioner or ventilating unit perched up on the roof. Ripping the gas mask off so I can get a better look at the sights, I burn through the last loaded magazine. The gook goes down hard. I'm choking and wheezing in a cloud of cloying CS gas, scrambling on my hands and knees to recover the gas mask.

The cut-off squad from the rear of the compound blows into the NVA from a flank and quickly dispatches those we didn't get in the early stages of the firefight. The Vietnamese electricians amble into the area looking around cautiously as they head for the entrance to the blockhouse. Steve finds me weeping snot and phlegm and trying to find a place upwind of the lingering gas fumes. The CS is mostly dispersed but I got a good dose when I ripped off the mask and the effects are still hurting. "You'll need this." He hands me a big red farmer's bandana. Everyone flinches and freezes as the electrical generators inside the blockhouse howl loudly back into life.

Steve silently watches me swab at my face for a while and then points at the courtyard where the platoon is policing up the wounded and dead. "Looks like the power is back on..." He walks over to one of the dead Marines and strips off a bandolier of loaded M-16 magazines. He heads back in my direction and nods toward a corner of the building where Blooper Man is helping Staff Sergeant radio in a report on the action to Delta Six. He jerks a thumb at the NCO having his wounded leg treated by a Corpsman. "He says you saved his ass."

"I shot that gook." Pointing at the dead NVA in the nearby spider hole I suppose a case could be made for some sort of heroics but nothing of the sort was on my mind at the time. "There it is and nothing more to it."

"I saw you get the one on the roof." Steve retrieves his soggy bandana and stuffs it in a pocket of his flak jacket. "I also saw you run out of ammo. You're gonna need these." He tosses me the full bandolier and heads for the courtyard. "Better go give them a hand with the wounded." Like it or not—and just now I'm not sure how I feel about it—we are becoming semi-useful grunts.

We help load the first platoon casualties on the tank and it clanks loudly away from the power plant, moving in reverse to keep its weapons pointed at the walls. Stacked on the tank's engine deck like a load of squirming, bleeding cattle, wounded men will be delivered to the Battalion Aid Station that has just gotten up and running near the ARVN Compound. Esquire Dude shows up and wants to interview some of the surgeons about the casualties they have been seeing. Pointing at the retreating tank, I motion for him to follow.

Esquire Dude doesn't notice the change in atmospheric as we near the BAS but I do. Even through the cloud of the tank's diesel exhaust, there's a coppery tang to the air that you can actually taste more than smell. It's fresh blood. The source is obvious as we kick our way through a pile of bloody battle-dressings outside the ramshackle house where the battalion surgeons and corpsmen have set up their medical station. The BAS is next to what looks like a playground or school yard. There's enough room to land medevac helicopters but apparently they

are hard to come by with other commitments for the Corps' limited amount of aviation assets. A corpsman tells me they've been calling for helos all day but most of the casualties have been hauled by mechanical mules back to the LCU ramp where the Navy is running Mike Boat shuttles across the Perfume River.

Wounded Marines covered in bloody bandages are sprawled in clumps outside the building waiting for treatment or evacuation. Those hardest hit are whacked out of their misery by morphine and sprawled on bloody stretchers that have seen hard use. Others less seriously hit, mostly freckled by bloody shrapnel rents in arms and legs, are trying to hide the grins that reveal how happy they are to be out of it. While Esquire Dude moves inside to interview some of the surgeons, I watch four wounded grunts in an intense parlay. Two of them are arguing with another two about something I can't quite discern.

"Fuck it. Just fuck it." One of the grunts stands, walks toward a pile of weapons and gear that the corpsmen have tossed outside the BAS. He picks up a weapon and a couple of bandoliers, and then angrily jerks the medevac tag off his flak jacket. Without looking back at his buddies, the grunt starts walking up the street, away from his salvation and toward the rattle of gunfire we can hear in the distance. His buddies watch for a long moment and then they remove their own tags and head for the pile of equipment. In just a few minutes, all four of them are rearmed and shuffling up the street away from the BAS. One of the wounded pauses so his buddy, limping badly on a leg that's been riddled with shrapnel, can tighten the bandage on a bicep which is weeping blood in long cascades down his arm. Returning the favor, Wounded Arm helps Wounded Leg limp back toward the fight.

Confused and slightly embarrassed by all that, I amble toward an outbuilding where Senior Corpsman is scurrying among the wounded brought in on the tank from the fight at the power station. He's a tough old bird, the kind of cynical FMF Corpsman that has treated everything from clap to sucking chest wounds during his time with the Marines. It's odd and a little disconcerting to see tears streaming down his dirty, unshaven cheeks. He's checking the seriousness of wounds, skipping the dead, and assessing treatment given by corpsmen up on the line where the wounds were incurred. When he finds a wounded man that needs immediate treatment, he silently signals for two younger medics who scramble to carry the casualty inside the BAS. As he works, Senior Corpsman is spouting what sounds like gibberish, describing wounds and required treatment like a med school professor. The younger corpsmen just nod and continue with their fetch and carry. They look nearly as shocked as the casualties they are treating.

It's called triage, the screening and separating of those who might live and those who will surely die. Senior Corpsman is making literal life and death decisions here in this blood-spattered courtyard. He knows it, the younger corpsmen know it, and the wounded know it. So do the straphangers like me who just stand around smoking and trying not to pay attention.

Esquire Dude shows up with a camera hanging around his neck and moves to get a better shot of the wounded awaiting treatment. "Put that fucking camera away!" I cover the lens with a filthy hand and make sure to smudge the glass. "You can write whatever you want to, but these guys don't need their picture in a magazine. They're gonna have all the visuals they need in nightmares." Esquire

starts to bitch and then takes another look. He gets the ghoulish aspect and puts the camera back in his knapsack.

He's standing there like he's in shock, clearly not understanding the gravity of what he's seeing as we watch Senior Corpsman work. There's a need to say something, an urge to make sure he understands. "It's called triage. There's only one doctor and not enough corpsmen to treat a shit-load of wounded like this. That Senior Corpsman has to play God. If a guy can't be saved, if he's too far gone, he'll never get inside the BAS. He decides the ones who might make it and sends them in to the docs. How'd you like that shit laid on you?" Esquire Dude agrees it's a heavy trip and wants to know if he can interview Senior Corpsman.

When Senior Corpsman takes a break to light a soggy cigarette, we approach and introduce ourselves. He's still streaming tears and snot which he idly brushes at with a bloody hand. Esquire Dude's first question about the responsibilities of triage blows a hole in his emotional fabric. Senior Corpsman grabs Esquire Dude by the elbow and leads him over to a stretcher that's been placed under a shade tree, isolated in a remote corner of the area away from the rest of the wounded. A beardless grunt that looks to be about two weeks out of high school is sprawled on the stretcher covered by a muddy poncho. His mouth is open to reveal a brace of crooked teeth and he's breathing in little short gasps. His skin is very pale and there are beads of sweat on his forehead. Senior Corpsman kneels beside the stretcher and dabs at the man's face with an OD kerchief that he slides from around his neck.

"Look at this guy." Senior Corpsman lifts the poncho just enough for us to see the gore it hides. "I got him shot full of morphine. He's not suffering—but it won't be long now." From under the poncho a sickening, fetid odor drifts up toward us. Senior Corpsman doesn't seem to notice but Esquire Dude gags, trying hard not to puke. The medical analysis tells us why this man never got to see the docs inside the BAS. "This is all AK damage...close range...a round entered the chest area under one arm and exited here." He points at a jagged gash that tore off most of the grunt's pectoral muscle. "It nicked the heart and collapsed both lungs. Second round caught him in the gut and spilled most of his intestines into the dirt." Senior Corpsman drops the poncho and shakes his head.

"No help for him—at least not anything that would do any good. He's about gone." Senior Corpsman uncovers the dying man's arm to check for a pulse. Livid and lurid against the pale, limp skin is a tattoo, a skull pierced by a bayonet. Beneath the grinning ghoul is a banner that reads *Death Before Dishonor*.

Senior Corpsman absently provides his name, rank and hometown, never taking his eyes off the dying Marine. Like so many Navy lifers, he's from San Diego, but that was long ago and far away from Hue City where he is forced to play God for wounded grunts. As we turn to leave, he kneels back down beside the dying grunt and speaks in a quiet soothing tone to a man who likely can't hear him.

"Go easy, my man. It's gonna be OK. You got a ticket home. Just lay back and let go."

As Senior Corpsman rises on shaky pins to handle another clutch of incoming wounded, the grunt on the stretcher does as he's been told. He lays back, lets it go and dies in Hue City.

Recollections and Recriminations

Tough time today but they've been telling me since boot camp that the only easy day is yesterday. The only good thing to come out of what seemed like a wasted day is that a detail I'm helping to evacuate a couple of dead guys has the great good fortune to run across the abandoned shop of a neighborhood beer merchant. By nightfall, I'm settled with the grunts of Charlie Company swilling *Ba Muoi Ba* and wondering if maybe it isn't time to see about getting out of Hue—at least for a while and just to turn in a few stories. The day was a tactical wash and I'm just sitting there, reviewing events, chasing spooks with bad beer.

Lost two faceless buddies before noon today—make that one buddy and an acquaintance, or make it one faceless acquaintance and one headless buddy. The acquaintance took an AK round right on the bridge of his nose. The buddy was headless when he went. The same gook sniper got both of them as they peeked around looking for a break in the incoming so they could pull back out of a shitstorm. The headless guy had been sticking by my side as we advanced that morning. We were old pals by Hue City standards. He was Gene Autry, the chatty grunt from Amarillo who once shared a watery trench with me on the southside.

He got his dumb ass transferred when the first battalion policed up able bodies as reinforcements for the move on the northside. Amarillo was now minus one of its favorite sons and I was brooding because of all the men I'd seen killed in Hue, I happened to know this one's name and a good bit of his life story. When our push on the walls was stopped cold in mid-morning, he got nailed and I helped drag him to the rear. It was pointless, but at least it got me out of the line of fire for a while.

Before he got his head shot off his shoulders, Gene Autry had been pissing and moaning about the shitty weather in Hue. We were blanketed by a cloying layer of clouds that pissed rain and ushered in cold winds that blew over the walls surrounding our combat zone. There has been an increase in air strikes and heavy-duty rounds from the ships offshore, reluctantly authorized by the rear-echelon map mavens who cringe at the thought of damaging anything important to Vietnamese cultural identity. That's not as helpful as it could be on shitty weather days, which seem to be most of the days in Hue.

So that morning, Charlie Company advanced without any support bigger or harder hitting than our own mortars. We were supposed to pull some kind of restricted flanking maneuver that would get us up on the walls and give us a better angle on the gooks scurrying through the area like cockroaches. NVA troops, operating in high-speed squads, crawled around everywhere inside the Citadel like phantoms, reoccupying buildings previously cleared, and sniping at us from the rear and flanks. The walls were pivotal to continued advances. They were also shot through with gooks dug in like maggots in a rotting tree stump.

Residents of a clutch of houses inside the Citadel walls near the southeast corner had either built or allowed to stand mounds of dirt between the back of their homes and the walls of the ancient fortress. A man standing on top of those mounds would be within five or six feet of the top of the wall. Even a dog-tired grunt could climb that far. The idea was to take two Charlie Company rifle platoons and see if they could grab a section of the wall as a sort of foothold. From

that bastion, they could take the gooks under fire and allow the rest of the battalion to advance deeper into the Citadel.

Delta was resting and I could have stayed with them but Gene Autry wandered by as Charlie Company passed our position and wanted some familiar company. It seemed reasonable at the time to wander along with him as I was feeling fairly useless and underemployed. My camera was still wrapped in plastic and resting heavily in my pack and there was nothing much in my notebooks besides scribbles and senseless scrawls. So why not just tag along with old Gene and his other buddies and see if we couldn't get up on those fucking walls? We get up there and it might be some magical moment, a historic phase of a historic battle. Guys like me were supposed to be there for historic moments, right?

Charlie Company Gunnery Sergeant led an element assigned to pass through two blocks leading to the southeast corner of the Citadel walls. There was no room or time for tactical subtleties. This would be the old belly-series from the line of scrimmage, right up the middle, with troops passing through houses along the way and avoiding the paved streets. It was shaky business from the start as we crawled through the abandoned homes. Never any telling what we might find in those houses and shops. What I found at the corner of the second block was just flat-out weird.

We took some fire in the approach but made our way to the portico of the structure where everyone waited for the signal to enter and begin clearing. Gene Autry and his buddies tossed several frags into the house and machinegunners at our back sprayed the structure sending brick shards and stucco flying everywhere. When the dust cleared, we waited a few minutes to see if the gooks would respond. They didn't, so the squad leader hand-signalized for us to move in and start clearing. There was a clutch of grunts charging through the front door, so I opted for an easier approach and climbed in through a ground floor window.

What I entered was apparently a living room. There was some dark ebony, highly polished furniture, and a nice looking oriental vase on a coffee table. Beyond a layer of dust and some random bullet holes, everything looked quite civil, quite normal. I followed the muzzle of my rifle into the dark room and froze. My forward foot was resting on something soft and pliable. Sweat began to drip and I was sure I'd stepped on some sort of booby-trap pressure plate. When the expected high-explosive detonation didn't occur, I slithered the rest of the way inside the room and discovered I was standing on a dead gook.

Squatting near the corpse, I surveyed the room for live ones, but it was quiet except for the squads clearing rooms on the other side of the walls. Gene Autry vaulted through the window staring with wide eyes over his rifle sights and asked me if the area was clear. Pointing at the dead man near my feet, I motioned for him to proceed. "Nobody here except this one. He's dead, we ain't. Carry on."

Gene Autry shouted that he was the last man and headed for the door. Rising to follow, I took a second look at the dead man. There was something strange about this guy, so I popped on a light to take a look. It was a humanizing moment that I wish I hadn't experienced. He was a basic gook trooper, complete with pack, pith helmet and an SKS carbine stacked against a wall near the window. He was well-fed and crew-cut and the expression on his dead face didn't look overly pained or concerned. The weird thing was his right hand which was wrapped around his

dick. This guy wasn't just checking his package or adjusting, he was beating his meat when he was killed. There were two bleeding holes in his upper chest, wounds that he'd apparently suffered at an embarrassing moment.

His swollen penis was wrapped tightly in his dead hand. His other hand was tossed backward above his head and gripping something that I couldn't immediately see. With a little bending and stretching, I discovered he had a death-grip on a photo of a pretty Vietnamese girl, framed from the waist up with her breasts exposed. NVA private dip-shit apparently died while fantasizing about that girl. And in that strange moment I realized that combat men are not much different regardless of their complexions, nationalities, or political ideologies. It was a seminal insight and from that time on I never touched my own dick without thinking about it.

On the other side of the house where I found the masturbating NVA, we ran into a bunch of his buddies who had their mind on business. They were spread out in a long line of shooters firing from windows, doorways and rooftops. Charlie Company was being pounded and would advance no further this day. While an 81mm mortar fire mission is being called, an M-60 machinegunner fires cover and we get set to pull back to safer environs. Looking for a break in the incoming fire, Gene Autry and his buddy peek from around a corner. That's when the sniper across the street chalks up two more on his individual scorecard for the Great Big Battle of Hue City. During a pause in the dicey business of hauling the bodies to the rear, we find the beer store.

Same Shit Different Day

Charlie Company tries again to reach the walls the next morning. It goes relatively well for an hour or so and we make it through the area where the NVA stopped us so painfully in the previous effort. We're in a second contested block now, full of ramshackle structures—they look like little shops or food stalls—that provide the access we need to get up on the walls. Company Gunny motions for everyone to hold and moves to re-position a squad to our rear. The plan is simple and deadly direct. While elements in covered positions on one side of the street provide suppressing fire, a designated squad will rush for the walls. The rest of us will follow if and when they got a foothold. We wait, staring through windows and loopholes as two machineguns are moved forward. We are now cocked and locked. The Gunny takes a last look around and then nods at the gun teams.

Over the roar of our M-60s we don't immediately notice that we are taking a hard rain of incoming from gook positions on our flanks. There are no visible muzzle flashes to our front. It's only when rounds begin to impact on the walls of our building and blow through the windows that we realize the NVA have set up a crossfire that covers the street we must cross to reach the walls. Crossing those 30 meters will be a bloody business, but the key is to reach defilade positions in one or more of the little alcoves that break up the otherwise straight stretch of wall.

Mortar fire from 60mm tubes just behind us begins to impact on the walls and the incoming decreases noticeably. Screaming for Marines to follow him, Company Gunny leads a squad into the street. He's firing his M-16 on full automatic,

changing magazines on the fly and running for one of the odd little loops and bends that the architects molded into the walls for no apparent reason beyond esthetics. He's followed by six other grunts holding onto their helmets with their gear flapping and banging. As more mortar fire strikes to the left and right of where the Gunny and his assault party are crouched, the rest of us break cover and make our own mad dash across the street. The gooks are not completely cowed. We hear the snap and sizzle of close rounds chasing us all the way.

Code of the Grunt. There's no cover between Point A and Point B, so don't bother looking for any. Just go for broke and hope for the best. Like it says in the song, what will be will be.

We make the defilade position which is now crowded with cringing grunts hugging the wall like a bunch of juvenile delinquents gleefully high on unpunished crime. At our rear, the platoon commander is waving and shouting. No one can hear what he's saying but it's obvious he wants us to exploit success. "Don't get comfortable." Company Gunny is panting and coughing around an unlit cigarette. "We still got to get the fuck up on them walls."

Two grunts make a lift out of a rifle and hoist a third man up level with the top of the wall. He's blown away before he can get a leg up and collapses among us where a corpsman starts to treat some very nasty wounds in his arm and shoulder. No one else seems eager to mount the rifle lift and the Gunny is about to try when a scrawny Boston Irishman with a shamrock inked on the back of his flak jacket elbows him out of the way. "Lemme do this, Gunny. I got it." He stuffs a shotgun round into his M-79 grenade launcher, pulls his pistol, and steps up onto the rifle elevator. "Get me up there!" The grunts lift him and we hear the thunk of his blooper followed closely by the sharp crack of his .45.

"I'm up," he yells and the rest of us follow as quickly as we can, pushed, tossed, and lifted over the top. Rolling behind a mound of dirt, I can see the logjam has broken. More Marines are flooding across the street and into covered positions at the base of the wall. We have a tactical toehold and I can hear someone in authority at my rear screaming into a radio, urging someone on the other end to join us. Marines are spreading out along a broad expanse, fragging anything that looks like it might be a bunkered position. There are NVA firing on us from the front and rear, but there's enough cover up on the wall to survive that. It's turning into a long-range exchange of fire in two directions but that's progress.

From this vantage point, we can see deeper into the Citadel complex. We are in possession of two separate, 30-foot-wide paths of uneven dirt that comprise the earthen fill between the exterior and interior stone slabs of the walls. We can see parts of a moat surrounding the Imperial Palace and to our rear there's a glimpse of that NVA flag that still flies over the Citadel. Firefighting peters out to a few desultory pops and bangs. That seems wrong after the wall of fire we'd been taking only moments ago. Maybe the gooks have given up on this fight. Maybe they don't deem this stretch of the Citadel wall as important as we do. No one is very confident that's the case as we spread out and begin to sweep north.

We advance cautiously through a stretch of bunkers and trenches dug into the dirt fill between the exterior and interior walls, carefully checking each hole or fold in the littered terrain, moving in brief furtive spurts to keep from being silhouetted on the sky-line. There are some desultory shots and shouts as grunts put

insurance rounds into dead bodies encountered along the way. There's just a few of us up here on the wall. The rest of the outfit is moving parallel, crawling through the houses across the street and keeping a close eye on us.

Terrain forces us into a single file, moving in a tense crouch along a trench that connects a series of abandoned fighting holes. Point man is about two places ahead of me when he fires a burst and dives into one of the abandoned holes. The rest of us crowd into cover, crunching into little cubbies and nooks as an NVA ambush party pumps fire straight down into the trench. Two men are caught with their legs exposed and get hit hard. Peeking around a little bend in the trench line, I can see four green Soviet-style helmets through the muzzle-flash of the enemy weapons. Company Gunny is yelling into his radio for suppressing fire from across the street.

Almost immediately there is the thump and pop of several M-79s and the incoming slacks off as the NVA duck for cover. Company Gunny uses the break to get everyone out of the trench and establish a firing line facing the enemy force. The radio squawks with a report that more gooks are rushing toward the area to reinforce those that are firefighting with us up on the wall. Things are getting intense as more incoming begins to chew up the ground around us. There's no corpsman handy, so I worm my way over to a black Marine who is squirming in pain with most of his right foot missing. Blood is pumping through what's left of his mangled boot and he's in a lot of pain. Using one of his suspender straps, I manage to get a tourniquet on his leg just below the knee and slow the bleeding. He takes my rifle and keeps it pointed forward as I begin to drag him along the trench, back toward the point where we got up on the wall.

We are nearly out of it, just passing a pile of discarded enemy gear, when an NVA springs out of a hole to our right and lunges with a bayonet. Why he didn't just open up on us will remain one of those welcome mysteries. Bayonet Boy misses me but manages to stab Footless Grunt in the thigh. He wrestles with our attacker which gives me enough slack to grab an abandoned helmet and bash Bayonet Boy a couple of good whacks on the head. He goes down hard, with his green pith helmet crushed and bloody on one side, but I keep swinging.

"He's dead, motherfucker! Let's get the fuck out of here!" Footless Grunt jerks the bayonet out of his leg and I continue to drag him toward the rear. He's screaming on a massive adrenaline jag and telling me we're going to make it. I'm hoping he's right, but if there's one gook laggard that we missed in our sweep of the trench line there could be more. He helps me in the withdrawal effort by scooting and pushing with his good leg as I retrieve the rifle to keep it handy. Maybe it's survival euphoria or just a search for distraction, but as we work our way out of the fight, I'm thinking about two hours of hand-to-hand combat instruction in basic training. There was no finesse to the encounter, no karate kicks or other slick moves. It was troglodyte stuff—pick up a big rock and bash away until someone dies.

At the alcove where we climbed up onto the wall, Footless Grunt manages to scoot himself down to street level. Trying to decide whether or not to follow, I'm distracted by a machinegun team advancing across the street. It's just a gunner and his assistant all alone out there in the open, draped in twinkling belts of spare ammo. Incoming rounds chew into the concrete around them as they advance,

firing short, sharp bursts into the right flank of the gook position on the wall. There's no reason I can see that they should be upright in all that fire but they are. The gunner has his helmet on backwards and there's a demonic expression on his face as he swings the bucking M-60 left and right, hosing down the NVA position.

Boots are thumping and grunts are shouting up the trench we've just used to escape the ambush. We are pulling back, apparently ceding our hard-won stretch of Citadel wall to the defenders for the time being. Company Gunny arrives and begins shoving his people down onto street level. The two dead men carried back by the squad have no objection to being unceremoniously dumped down off the wall. Windows across the street light up with muzzle flash as Charlie Company grunts fire cover for our retreating squad. We make the street and sprint across into cover among the houses on the other side dragging the dead men along like floppy pull-toys.

When I'm safely tucked in behind cover, there's time to take a look at the machinegun team still standing out there in the middle of the street, still alive for some reason despite the NVA fire blazing around them. Grunts are shouting their names, screaming for them to back off, that everyone is safely down off the wall, but it doesn't seem to register. The assistant gunner is still snapping belts together as the gunner continues to stand there hosing into the NVA flank. Company Gunny finally picks up a rock shard and heaves it at the team. The rock hits assistant gunner on the flak jacket and he turns to see Company Gunny waving frantically for them to pull back.

Assistant gunner jerks on his gunner's right arm which sends a shower of red tracers in an arc over the NVA position. Gunner shrugs off the distraction and continues to fire until A-Gunner finally twists the belt of ammo to stop it feeding into the smoking gun. Gunner looks startled, even puzzled for a moment and then gets the picture. They've got huge grins on their dirty faces as they chug toward cover. They reach safety, chased all the way by NVA fire, only to be called idiots, assholes and dumb-shits by a laughing line of grateful grunts. Was it bravery, intense focus, or just insanity? Company Gunny says he's not really sure but he's going to write them up for decorations regardless.

Charlie Company assault platoons are ordered to pull back away from the street, away from the walls, to establish an outpost position. We'll try for this stretch of walls again but not today. Company Commander wants to wait for some air support or naval gunfire to soften up the defenders.

On the way back to that outpost position, we encounter an NVA sniper who haunts us for days and becomes known among the grunts as The Dinger. He opens up on a squad chugging across a street near our new position and takes down a man with a headshot. Then he gets one of the two grunts who go out to retrieve the body. I'm peeking around a wall, watching all this when I spot a muzzle flash about 100 meters distant in a second-story window of what looks like a garage or mechanical repair shop. My shout alerts a squad leader who peers around the corner and tries to follow my pointing finger. The window is dark at this point, and we can't see anything. "You sure you saw him?" Squad Leader thinks I might be spooked which I most definitely am but there's no mistaking it.

Some sonofabitch stuck a weapon out that window and cranked off a round at the rescue party.

Squad Leader hands me a magazine full of tracers and yells for his people to watch where I fire. With the tracer ammo loaded up, I take aim, trying to keep as much of my body behind the wall as possible. It's a lot easier on me since I'm naturally left-handed and don't have to expose as much as a right-handed shooter. Two rounds streak off toward the window and then there's a blinding flash in front of my eyes that sends me reeling back to fall flat on my ass. First thing that crosses my mind is that the rifle blew up in my hands. One of those hands, the one that was wrapped around the M-16 pistol grip, is throbbing painfully. There's a ragged burst of fire from the surrounding grunts mixed with a shout from Squad Leader who is summoning a Corpsman. Somebody's been hit and it gradually dawns that someone is me.

Vision is gradually returning and I'm shocked to see my chest covered with blood. There's no pain from that part of my anatomy and I reach up to seek the source. There's a gash under my chin and I manage to pull out a sliver of black plastic embedded there. The blood on my chest is flowing from the chin which means I have not suffered the dreaded, usually fatal, sucking chest wound. That's the good news. The bad news is that my left thumb looks like it's hanging onto the rest of my hand by a sliver of mutilated flesh. When the Corpsman arrives, I stick the mangled digit up for him to see like a kid asking Mom to kiss his boo-boo.

"It ain't as bad as it looks." Corpsman goes to work with antiseptic and bandages. The thumb needs stitches—maybe even a few in the chin—and he'll tag me to get it all repaired back at the BAS. Still trying to figure out exactly what happened when Squad Leader arrives holding what's left of the M-16 used to fire tracers at the sniper hide. "That motherfucker's a dinger. I'll give him that much." Squad Leader hands me the weapon which looks like it's been carved into by a hack-saw. Most of the plastic stock and forearm is shattered and there's a huge gouge in the receiver just above the magazine well. "He was aiming at your gourd and hit the rifle looks like." Squad Leader pulls the magazine of tracers out of the mangled weapon, inspects it and jams it into a pouch.

Corpsman takes a moment from bandaging to look at what's left of the rifle. "I'm guessing the impact of the round shattered all that plastic. You took a piece of it in the chin and the pistol grip blew up in your hand—which accounts for this." He points at my left mitt which now looks like a boxing glove wrapped in bandages. "Damn sure could have been a lot worse, my man. You're one of the lucky ones."

Wall Hangers and Gang Bangers

Steve arrives at dawn saying he wants to be sure I get to the BAS for the required stitches. On the way we mumble about my taking the tag and letting them send me to the rear. We've both got a bunch of notes that would turn into good stories. And we both know we won't be leaving Hue to write them, at least not until the fight is decided. Unlike any other time that either of us can remember from our relatively extensive time in The Nam, we are attached here, emotionally pinned to the people we've been watching in this surreal fight. To leave—even in

the understandable line of official duty—would be abandonment verging on cowardice, a mortal sin that neither of us could bear on our conscience. None of that is said naturally. We don't have those kinds of conversations. Such words just sound cheesy and overwrought. But there's no need to vocalize. He knows, I know and it's just accepted. We're here for the duration, a wound bad enough to merit immediate evacuation or a trip out on the Body Bag Express, whichever comes first. There it is.

Waiting for the sutures takes a couple of hours and talking Senior Corpsman out of tagging me for evacuation occupies a little extra time while Steve searches out the battalion CP and tries to get a line on what happens next. By the time he returns I'm standing outside with the Docs and corpsmen watching a magnificent air show. Marine Skyhawks and Navy Crusaders from the bird farms out in the Tonkin Gulf are striking long sections of the Citadel walls. The roiling napalm strikes are luridly spectacular in the muggy air over Hue.

It's on for tomorrow morning, Steve reports. ARVN Rangers and Marines are arriving in the city to support a general advance with two objectives in mind. We push in a southerly direction, clearing NVA along the route and sweeping them off the walls. And while we're handling that risky chore, the ARVN will advance with the aim of surrounding the Imperial Palace at the heart of the Citadel complex. On the way back to the battalion, we spot Marines and sailors carrying huge radios and optics to direct naval gunfire as required during the push. Apparently, MACV is through fucking around with the stubborn gooks in Hue.

There's not much to do back at Delta Company. Most of the grunts are resting, re-fitting, and re-packing for the big push. There's some time to check my notebooks and ask around about a few follow-up interviews with some of the guys I'd noted for possible stories. About half of them are dead or evacuated. The remainder doesn't feel much like talking. Spend a few hours obtaining a new rifle and fumbling around trying to clean it with a bandaged hand. Steve digs around in his pack for spices and cooks up a tasty C-ration meal that we share in little tastes and bites like an old married couple.

Spitting rain at dawn as the grunts go through the familiar ritual of donning their gear, testing its fit and feel. There will be little time for adjustments when the word comes to move. We watch small clutches of enlisted leaders being briefed and try to decide who might be best to accompany when the order comes. It won't be long. We are hearing the weird Doppler shuffle of naval gunfire rounds headed for targets on the walls. We pull on two-piece rain suits and shimmy into our own gear. A flip of a Vietnamese coin decides the attachment issue. Steve will go with the first unit that moves, whatever that may be. I follow with the next one in trace.

Radios squawk and orders are barked: Time to get out there on the street and form up the assault line. Steve shuffles out into the misty air with the lead squad of the first platoon. By the time I move with a following unit, he's nowhere in sight. At an intersection, my outfit makes a hard right which tells me we are headed for the walls. We are on line as they come into view and it's heartening to see white phosphorous rounds—what everyone calls Willy Pete—impacting ahead of us, sending huge smoking, sparkling spears of burning chemical into the damp air. The assault line slows measurably as the shells crump and crack into long

sections of the walls. We are walking on the gun-target line and everyone knows big shells from big guns have been known to fall short.

Code of the Grunt. When it comes to fire support, more is always better... until some of that shit falls short... at which point none is best.

Word comes from the Naval Gunfire Party controlling the barrage: Rounds complete. We begin to spread out on line but the advance is held up by a firefight that breaks out on the left flank. A platoon moving parallel has hit a nest of NVA in some houses. We hold on a knee, leaning on our rifles, soaking in a warm, mild mist and staring at the walls now about a block away at the end of our street. Over on my right, Delta Six is going over a sketchy plan with Company Gunny and a clutch of platoon leaders.

“We’re now the right flank of the assault line.” He jabs a grimy finger at a drawing he’s made and covered against the wet with plastic from a radio battery. “We sweep and clear all the houses along this line then form up for a move on the southeast sector of the wall. ARVN Rangers are to our rear moving in the other direction. There’s supposed to be some Vietnamese Marines arriving on our right but nobody’s seen anything of them yet. Don’t let your people get hung up in the houses. Sweep through that shit and get ’em on line ASAP. We want a section of the eastern wall for leverage. Once we’ve got that, we hold and reorganize. On order, we push for the tower over this gate area right here.”

It’s called the Dong Ba Tower but “this gate area right here” will do for the grunts that have to take it. What most of them want to do is head south toward the Imperial Palace where the NVA flag flaps and taunts over the Citadel. It’s still up there, listlessly sagging, wet and ripped by bullets from anyone close enough to take a shot at it. Word is that symbolic mission will go to the Vietnamese who are supposedly somewhere with us inside the walls. The CO mentioned that in his briefing but it was fairly clear to all involved that if we just happened to get near enough and if the situation arises, he wants that flag replaced with ours. If 2/5 got away with it on the southside, there’s no reason 1/5 can’t get the Stars and Stripes flying over the Imperial Palace—at least for a while so everyone can see it before the ARVN haul it down and replace it with their own colors. Everyone gets the hint, but that objective lies to the south of us and we’ve got to deal with a pocket of hard-core defenders along the eastern stretch of the walls first. That’s the plan with Bravo Company closing from one direction and Delta from another.

What interested me most was the arithmetic. The Intelligence Officer related that there was still a major portion of the 6th NVA Regiment operating on the northside of Hue. Scratch a couple of battalions blown away on the southside. Figure the better part of at least two battalions still scrambling around over here; that comes to around 800 or so minus the ones we’ve killed so far—and nobody knows for sure how many that is. Draw a line, carry the two—best estimate is about a shit-pot full. And most of them are waiting for us somewhere up ahead.

While we wait for word on the Vietnamese Marines, the Navy sends a few more flights of aircraft to drop Snake Eye bombs followed by napalm canisters along a line to our front. It’s turning into a fire-support circus; the greatest show on earth unless you’re the geek that has to stick his head in the lion’s mouth. There’s a whole sector of the wall to our front full of roiling napalm flames. Some desultory cheers and get-somes from nervous grunts. Saltier guys with more time in The

Nam just watch silently. They've seen gooks pop up after Arc Light strikes from high-flying B-52s. Gooks are veteran survivors. They've been doing that shit for 20 years.

"Stand by on the line... don't be eyeballin'!" Company Gunny moves past me to alert the leading elements. There's a flight of two Skyraiders inbound and ready to drop some really heavy ordnance in hopes of blowing a few chunks out of the walls. If they can do that, we will have a lot more ramps available to get up and into the fight. The prop-planes appear with a groaning buzz and make a dummy pass perpendicular to our line of advance. Despite being told to keep their heads down, everyone is rubber-necking to see if the big black shapes hung under the belly of the aircraft will do any helpful damage.

The next pass is the real deal. The Skyraiders dive with piston engines snarling. There's a shattering roar and several of the closest grunts have their helmets blown off by the shock-wave. Windows in surrounding houses shatter, sending shards of glass flying everywhere. That gets our attention and everyone has stopped eye-balling by the time the second aircraft makes its pass.

Delta is on the move now and there are reports that Bravo Company to our left is approaching their sector of the eastern wall. While one platoon from Delta dives into the row of houses fronting the street that separates the wall from the interior, my platoon starts directly for a huge rent torn in the interior wall by the air-strike. A shower of rubble has fallen into the street and that's the route we'll take to climb the walls and kill the gooks. Assuming the flanking platoon eliminates resistance in the block of structures, and assuming we can all make it across the street, we should be up there shortly. And that's when the Hue City *mojo* strikes.

The lead squad sprints across the street led by a little Puerto Rican guy named Rodrigues. He's a couple of pages in my notebook and known to be both fearless and a bull-goose loony. The walls may have been significantly damaged by the air and naval gunfire strikes, but the NVA defending this sector were not. Two Marines go down hard and must be dragged to the rear as fire sweeps the streets. The only one left out there in defilade, just underneath the wall and hugging it tightly, is little Rodrigues and he's putting on a show for the rest of us. He knows the NVA can't hit him as long as he stays close to the wall and he's paying no attention to Company Gunny who is yelling for him to get his ass back over to the other side of the street.

Rodrigues leans back to eyeball the enemy guns winking and blasting from bunkered positions on the wall above his position. Then he turns to look back at us with a huge grin and flips the bird to the enemy gunners. They can't see the insult so they just keep pumping rounds at the rest of us hunkered down across the street. The next act in the Rodrigues Revue involves a couple of grenades which he pulls out of a pocket and arms. He's standing there with his back to the wall and two live grenades in his hands. His grin widens and his dark eyebrows flash up and down calling our attention to his ballsy plan. With an underhand pitch he heaves both grenades up and over the wall. When he turns to view the results, he's shocked to see both of his frags reappear accompanied by two Chicom grenades in a sizzling shower of high-explosive. Rodrigues just has time to leap for cover on the other side of the rubble when all four grenades burst in the air. Multiplication is the name of this game.

When Rodrigues reappears unhurt, we can see he's really pissed. Waving at us and making a pistol sign with his hand, he points at the machinegun blazing away just to right of the ramp. Rodrigues wants covering fire for his next act. We get the picture when he pulls a LAAW rocket off his back and extends the tube getting it ready for firing. Apparently, he wants us to suppress the machinegunners so he can crawl up there with a LAAW and blast the bunker. If he succeeds the rest of us can probably make it across the street. The assault line opens up and a steady stream of fire impacts all around the bunker. Rodrigues starts to make his move and squad leaders are screaming to make sure none of us firing support accidentally hit him. It's a tremendous display of marksmanship and fire discipline. And apparently Rodrigues trusts it as he begins to slowly crawl up the ramp on his belly.

None of us has ever seen a LAAW employed against a target that was less than five or ten meters from the muzzle but then none of us have ever seen a lot of things that are happening in Hue. Not trusting my aim with a damaged hand, I just watch as Rodrigues makes it up the ramp to a point directly under the bunker. He sneaks a quick peek and then raises the LAAW over his head. It's a matter of point rather than aim. He wiggles around a little trying to get his legs and butt out of the back-blast area and then presses the firing switch.

The rocket roars right into the NVA bunker and blows out the back in a huge cloud of dust and debris. There is a moment of stunned silence and then a squad is sprinting across the street. All of them make it, so Company Gunny leads the remaining squad there to join them. If I live through whatever comes next, I will write something about the Puerto Rican lunatic that cleared the way for us. But that will have to come later. Right now Rodrigues is busy with Company Gunny who is loudly trying to decide on a decoration or a court-martial for the hero of the hour.

So Delta—and by extension everyone else in Hue City beside the NVA—now owns a chunk of the massive walls that surround the Citadel thanks to an admirable set of cojones on a little lance corporal from San Juan. All we've got to do now is fight our way along that wall until we reach the tower over the Dong Ba Gate. Radio reports we've done a little better on our end than Bravo Company over on the left. The move from here is on hold until battalion gets a couple of tanks up to support our advance. Nobody's bitching much about the delay. Company Gunny is pushing more grunts up onto the wall to check and clear bunkers while he waits for word on the rest of the company clearing houses across the street. There is a line of NVA fighting positions to the rear of this area, so I decide to explore. That's where I run into Philly Dog and Willis.

"Reporter Man! What in the fuck you doin' up in this bad-ass town?" Philly Dog is just ducking out of an NVA bunker. The two gold teeth he's so proud of glint from the shadows. He's got his ever-present pearl-handled straight razor in one massive paw and an NVA officer's pistol belt in the other. "Willis, get de fuck out here and drop a focal on dis shit!"

Dog's best buddy, a skinny little black dude from Newark with hard, dark eyes and a pencil-thin mustache, ducks out of a nearby bunker where the rest of their squad is gathered. His eyes light up when he sees me and we do a little hand dance called The Dap. He'd taught me the intricate moves on an earlier op down in

the An Hoa Basin. "I owe you one, Reporter Man!" Willis hands over an NVA belt featuring a buckle embossed with a Red Star that he's just cut off a dead gook. "My old lady seen that story you wrote about me and Dog in the Newark News. You made me famous, motherfucker!"

Philly Dog pulls a pack of Kools out of his helmet band and we light up all around. Dog and Willis never change and somehow that's reassuring in Hue where nothing seems standard or familiar. They are arguably two of the biggest badasses in the battalion and although each of them has a couple of Purple Hearts in their sketchy service records, the theory in 1/5 is that nothing can kill Philly Dog or Willis. Dog smokes and jokes, stropping his razor across a calloused palm and lets me know he digs the action in Hue City. "Dis here is my turf. Fuck all that jungle and rice paddy shit, my man. Dis be just like gang-bangin' back on the block. Hue City or South Philly, dude, it be all the same shit to the Dog." He sticks his razor back into the top of his size 13 jungle boot and leans back to suck a lungful of menthol smoke. "These dudes," Dog motions at the other grunts, "they all got the wind up they ass, but me and Willis, my man, me and Willis be right at home in this fuckin' Hue City."

"See you're still packing that razor, Dog. Get much chance to use it?"

"Fuckin' A, Skippy!" Dog pats the razor and grins. "You know the rap, Reporter Man. "Philly Dog be cuttin' these fuckin' gooks three ways—long, deep and contin-u-ously."

"Dog be a fuckin' squad leader now, my man." Willis sweeps his hand around the circle of grunts. "All these chuck-dudes be alive right now because me and Dog be runnin' the show." Looking around at the filthy faces of Dog's under-strength rifle squad, it's clear that no one is likely to argue with that.

"Lemme show you some shit you ain't gonna believe, Reporter Man." Philly Dog crushes his smoke and motions for me to follow him into the NVA bunker. By the faint glow of my map light, I see both of the previous occupants are dead but neither of them seems to have any bullet holes or other obvious damage. Dog digs around in a corner of the bunker and holds up something for me to examine. "We was supposed to be checkin' for maps and papers and S-2 shit, but I found this." It's a little plastic baggie that seems to contain some kind of granulated powder.

"Looks like sugar or salt or something."

Dog tears open the baggie and dips his little finger into the substance. He grins and takes a little lick at the stuff. "Ain't no fuckin' salt, Reporter Man. This here is Horse, the Big H. These fuckin' gooks been shootin' smack." He tosses the baggie into the dirt and retrieves a battered tin cup containing a flame-charred spoon and a cheap little eyedropper type syringe. "We been fightin' a bunch of fuckin' junkies! Believe it, Reporter Man. I seen enough of this shit to know what I'm sayin'. Can you dig it?"

Guess I can. And no wonder the two dead ones in this bunker look so peaceful and unharmed. Mostly likely dead of a heroin OD. It sets me to wondering how many other gooks in the city might be chasing the dragon. It's just more of the jaw-dropping strangeness that seems to permeate everything in Hue. They keep telling us that the bad-ass NVA are all gut-check motivated, born in the north to die in the south and all that. Not the kind of dudes you'd expect to be tripping on heroin in the midst of a big fight with the evil American Imperialists.

Dog just grins and leads me back into the light where his grunts are shouldering their gear. Willis is haranguing one of them, a stocky white guy with a matted thatch of blond fuzz on his cheeks and chin. "I done tole you what that shit was, you fuckin' cracker!"

"What's up?" Philly Dog picks up his pack and cuts a mean look at the assembled grunts. "Fuckin, Tyler... man. I done tole him not to be fuckin' with that shit!" Willis clips the blond Marine on the helmet. "The dude done dumped smack into his motherfuckin' coffee!"

"I looked like sugar, man! I thought you was just jivin' us about heroin and shit."

Dog grabs the C-ration can of coffee from the blonde kid and tosses the liquid. "You fucked up big time now, Tyler. You gonna be a stone-ass junkie, my man." Tyler is the only one not laughing. He looks like he might faint. The laughter stops when we hear the clank and creak of tanks approaching from the other end of the street that runs parallel to the walls.

Hard-shell Crabs

We can feel the rumble in our bodies as we hunker in covered positions up on the wall watching two Marine M-48 tanks approach like a pair of circus elephants lumbering along nose to tail. The trailing tank brakes to a halt near a distant intersection while the leading vehicle grinds toward us. As it passes a closer intersection, a clutch of grunts sprints from cover and falls in behind it. There's a lieutenant among them and Steve is following close on his heels. Company Gunny is shouting over the roar of the diesel and the whine of the transmission as the tank advances in ultra-low gear to keep from outrunning the infantry.

"We move when the tank gets just ahead of us. Stand by!" Gunny waves at Tank Lieutenant who waves back. Across the street and through the alleyways on the other side we can see other grunts moving. It looks like three elements involved in this deal, the guys moving through the houses on our left, the guys following the tank and the rest of us up on the wall. It bothers me to see Steve hugging the tank. We've seen more than a few grunts dinged when small arms fire ricochets off a tank's armor and everyone shoots at a tank. Rifles and machineguns won't hurt the damn thing, everyone knows that but no one seems able to resist shooting at a big, fat target. Its battlefield *mojo* and the gooks are suckers for it.

As the tank passes us on the left, Steve looks up and I wave my bandaged hand at him. Then it's time for us to move. Philly Dog shouts for me to stick with him so that's what I do, stumbling and staggering behind his broad butt from cover to cover along the rubble-strewn surface of the wall. We make maybe 100 meters before the gooks decide we've gone far enough. A sheet of rifle, machinegun and RPG fire erupts all along the eastern wall on either side of the disputed gate tower. Up on the wall there's not enough room for everyone to bring his weapon into action, so Philly Dog calls a machinegun up and then prepares a LAAW for firing. I'm scrambling out of the back-blast area and watching the street where the tank has halted in a cloud of dust. Rounds are sparking and shrieking of its armor. The

grunts are hugging in tight behind the engine deck and I see Tank Lieutenant screaming into the T-I phone he's pulled out of the box on the rear fender.

Philly Dog fires his LAAW toward the tower and shouts for another one. The tank looks like a big ugly hound sniffing for scent as the turret swivels and searches. The gunner on the inside is looking for a suitable target to engage with the 90mm main gun. Seems like all the gooks ahead of us are firing at the tank but there's enough rounds coming our way to let me know we haven't been forgotten. Steve is huddled near the left track when the cannon finally cranks and the tank rocks in recoil sending up a cloud of dust.

Two more rounds blow chunks out of the eastern wall as the rattle and boom of the .50 caliber machinegun in the tank's cupola adds to the din. The incoming slows a bit under the impact of the tank fire and we are alerted to move. We're trying to get our shit together when a rocket gunner in the upper reaches of the gate tower cuts loose with an RPG.

The rocket hits the tank just below the main gun mount and the vehicle seems to shudder. Grunts scramble and scatter right and left to get out from behind the wounded beast which is beginning to emit oily clouds of black smoke. The last place anyone wants to be right now is inside that tank. If it penetrates, an anti-tank rocket round just makes a pinhole in the armor. The damage is done on the inside where shrapnel sprays through the vehicle like a shower of white-hot razor blades and turns the crew into instant hamburger.

Flames are licking up from the engine compartment now and hatches spring open on the top of the turret. What's left of the crew is trying to bail out, which causes the gooks to increase their fire. Those of us who have got a shot fire back in an effort to give them a chance, but it's not enough. One of the tankers is halfway out of the smoking vehicle when he's hit. Blood runs in rivulets through the caked mud and dirt on the turret. Company Gunny has found a blooper somewhere and is cranking rounds up toward the tower in what seems like full-auto mode.

Through the clouds of ugly black smoke around the tank, a couple of Marines are running into the street and climbing up through the flames on the engine deck where they've got at least some cover from the incoming. One of them is Steve. The other man looks like Tank Lieutenant. Steve grabs the bleeding tanker and pulls him the rest of the way out of the tank while the Lieutenant reaches inside a second hatch and jerks crewman into sight. They have just gotten the two wounded tankers down off the engine deck when the vehicle begins to shudder under a series of explosions that send gouts of flame and more smoke into the air. That's the death spasm; ready ammo stacked around the turret is cooking off which means anyone left inside is lost.

On the street to the rear of the tank, Lieutenant is waving for help and a couple of corpsmen sprint from cover to give them a hand. Tank Lieutenant stands and waves come on at the second tank which has remained parked through the whole episode. Tank Two rumbles forward with its coaxial machinegun spitting fire. There's barely enough room for it to squeeze by the dead vehicle in the center of the road and in the effort the left track takes out a section of wall that had been cover for a clutch of grunts. They scramble in one direction while Steve and the rescue party scramble in another carrying a limp and bleeding tank crewman.

Tank Two is firing on the move and headed directly for the eastern wall. One of its main gun rounds gouges a big chunk out of the Dong Ba Tower and the top section of the structure leans precariously. It's as if someone had dropped the starter flag on a stock car race. Marines on either side of the street leading to that tower are running and gunning, sprinting forward, ignoring those who fall around them. There's momentum now but who knows if it will be enough to get us that tower.

We are within about 50 meters of it when the gook gunner in the tower fires another RPG round at Tank Two. There's enough incoming on his end to spoil his aim. The rocket streaks toward the tank but caroms harmlessly off the top of the turret causing nothing more than a big gouge in the armor and a shower of sparks. The tank commander doesn't want to give the rocket gunner another chance, so he wheels the vehicle into a narrow side-street. Unfortunately, that street is so narrow that Tank Two can't traverse its turret. We are still on the move toward the Dong Ba Tower but the rest of the distance will be covered without tank support. Of course, this is Hue so...

Up the avenue in a crouching run comes a 3.5-inch rocket team. It's a squatty little gunner built like a block of concrete with an ace of spades inked on the back of his flak jacket. Following him and clutching two rocket rounds is a lanky assistant staggering under a pack board with extra ammo strapped to it. Most of the gooks are still firing at the burning tank, but the rocket guys ignore the ricochets, humping past the derelict in step as if they're doing some sort of drill on a training range back at Camp Pendleton. There's cover available but they ignore that and just keep closing on the wall, heading straight up the street in the open until Rocket Gunner passes Tank Two where he kneels and calmly shoulders the big tube. Assistant Gunner flips the switch on the back of the tube to make the electrical connection and checks the back-blast area as if there might actually be anyone out there in the open to be harmed by it.

The first 3.5 round roars away and smacks into a bunker at the base of the tower. It silences a pesky machinegun that's been cutting into us with grazing fire. That gets the gooks' attention and a shower of incoming begins to tear up the street and houses around the rocket team. If they're aware of it, it's not obvious. Assistant Gunner shoves another rocket into the tube as grunts on either side of the street begin to move. A second round blows into the stone façade just below the RPG gunner and we see him tumble from his perch to thud into the dirt at the base of the tower like a wet sandbag. Rocket Gunner takes a moment to observe the effect of his fire, nods and then sweeps an arm at the tower gate, inviting the grunts to carry on now that's he's silenced some of the opposition. As grunts begin to push past them, Rocket Gunner and Assistant Gunner stroll casually off the street in the opposite direction. That's rounds complete, mission accomplished; just another day on the range.

Philly Dog, Willis and four more grunts are fragging bunkers and picking off some gooks who have decided to un-ass the area and head north along the surface of the wall. Grunts to the rear of us are pitching extra grenades forward. We are less than 30 meters from the base of the tower which is so shot-up by now that it looks something a couple of kids hammered together with an Erector Set. Other grunts are closing on the area from the other side and banging away at the

escaping NVA. On our side NVA bodies, riddled with bullet holes and bloody shrapnel rents, are scattered everywhere. Philly Dog's guys pump insurance rounds into the corpses and keep moving. Company Gunny has taken a round in his thigh somewhere along the line but he's still humping and ignoring a corpsman who tries to get him to stop for treatment.

Measure of time and distance is long gone and it's a genuine surprise to discover we've actually taken the Dong Ba Gate area. While shot-up squads are reorganized into what passes for platoons, Philly Dog's outfit is ordered to hold in positions around the base of the tower. It's getting dark in Hue City and the rest of Delta is preparing to push in another direction. No one up here with us on the wall near Dong Ba knows or cares much what that's about. Our little portion of the fight is done for the day. What Philly Dog cares about as dark descends over the walls is that his squad is now down to only five men. He says I should probably get back down off the walls to where the rest of the company is spreading out for the night but he's glad when I decide to stay up there with him at the Dong Ba Gate.

It's never really quiet on the northside of Hue City but the night passes relatively peacefully with only sporadic shots and a few dull thumps of grenade explosions to disturb the peace as we hunker down in abandoned bunkers. I'm with Willis and two dead NVA in a position just to the right of the battered tower. Willis passes some time jiving at the corpses. "Listen up, motherfucker!" He pokes a finger into the bloody chest of a gook trooper with only half a head remaining and one dark eyeball that seems to stare back at him attentively. "Ain't nobody to blame but your own damn self. You be fuckin' with the bull you bound to get the horn. There it is."

It's 0430 by my watch when the mosquitoes swarm up from the stagnant water in the moat on the other side of the wall and commence an air strike. Philly Dog sticks his head inside the bunker. "We got movement. Stand by." By the time we crawl out into the dark, mortars are impacting all along this stretch of the wall. The first three rounds are off to the right but the next barrage is right on the mark, landing with vicious cracks right at the base of the tower and driving us back into the bunkers. That's followed by a shower of Chicom grenades and RPGs from the top level of the tower. Somehow, we either missed a bunch of gooks up there or they managed to sneak back in during the night. It's becoming apparent the NVA are making a move to reclaim this position, and there's no way we can hold against a determined assault. Dog's blooper man pumps some rounds to the north and we pull back from the Dong Ba Tower dragging two wounded men with us.

From their night positions below the eastern wall, a Delta Company platoon surges into action and charges at the disputed tower. The fight blows back and forth until dawn when the Marines flush the gooks out of the tower, inspect it carefully for stay-behinds, and then set up to hold.

Steve is at the Company CP when I wander back with a re-supply party that's been sent to bring up chow and ammo for the unit holding at the Dong Ba Gate. He's got a copy of a diagram distributed at a briefing on The Big Plan. The Vietnamese Marines have arrived and are mustering to the south of us for a drive toward the Imperial Palace. Elements of 1/5 will push along to cover their flanks.

Steve has been talking to a dude he knows from Alpha Company and says we ought to go over and see about it. My plan had been to check in at the BAS to have someone look at my hand. The left thumb is swollen painfully and every time I wipe the snot from my nose, it smells putrid. That plan goes on hold.

Luck Ain't No Lady

The ARVN Rangers and Vietnamese Marines are engaged in a slow move south toward the Big Enchilada, the palace compound that nestles up against the Citadel's southern wall. When they finally get their shit together and enough press assembled to mark their contributions to what has so far been an all American Marine show, they'll make the big push on the seat of their ancestral emperors. Meanwhile, 1/5 licks its wounds and continues to send small unit patrols on clearing operations to the east and west of the prime target.

Replacements are filtering in and there's a fairly steady flow of supplies coming across the Perfume River and up to us from the LCU Ramp outside the Citadel walls. Both men and gear are badly needed. Grunts are beginning to look more like Coxey's Army than an infantry battalion. Hue City has been hard on everything and everyone. There are cocky little bastards running around everywhere out of sight of the CP wearing weird bits of gear they've looted from the houses they clear day by day. There's a dude with a gaudy, hand-painted silk necktie wrapped around his helmet and another man wearing a kimono with embroidered dragons over his rain suit. Nobody seems to take much notice of the non-regulation get-ups, likely because the regulation stuff is so ratty and torn that make-do seems reasonable and if the grunts want to add a few little garish personal touches—well, maybe that's a sign that morale hasn't swirled completely down the shitter.

We are with the shattered remnants of Alpha Company occupying a recently cleared block on the west side of the Citadel near what a map says is the Thuy Quan Canal. It looks like a muck-filled ditch that we'll have to cross when the word is passed to push on south with some ARVN outfit on our left. Alpha has been hit hard during the northside fighting. While we slammed up against the eastern walls with Delta, these guys got chewed up in other fights all over the Citadel, losing most of their officer and NCO leadership. It looks like an outfit that can use a couple of extra rifles and a little experienced help.

As we wait, some fresh men are being interviewed by Moon Man, a lance corporal squad leader with a peace symbol on the front of his dented helmet and a knife that looks like a small sword hanging from a chain around his neck. It's an odd counterpoint, but the irony is lost on Moon Man who is jotting in a rain-swollen notebook as he talks to a man wearing brand new combat gear and a shocked expression on his beardless face.

“What's your deal, man?”

“I'm a baker. They policed me up at Phu Bai and just sent me up here. Next thing I know, some dude hands me a bunch of ammo and says report to Alpha Company. Here I am.”

“Yeah... times are hard ain’t they?” Moon Man licks the tip of his pen and turns a page. “So what’s your name, baker.”

“That’s it.”

“That’s what?”

“That’s my name. Baker, Walter C. Guess I should have known. When I got out of boot camp, they take one look at my name and send me to cook and baker school.”

Moon Man snaps his notebook shut and nods at the rifle slung over the replacement’s shoulder. “You know how to use that fuckin’ thing?”

“I qualified on the range but I ain’t handled a rifle for a long time. I been makin’ chow and bakin’ shit ever since I got to The Nam.”

Moon Man just nods and grabs the new guy’s rifle. He strips the sling and pitches it into the muddy canal. “We don’t use no slings. Man’s got a sling on his rifle, he’s tempted to carry it on his shoulder. You carry a rifle on your shoulder up here and you wind up dead real fast. You carry it in your hands so it’s there when you need it in a hurry.” Moon Man motions toward the grinning grunts watching the interview. “These guys know the ropes. You stick close to us. Do what we tell you and you might make it back to bakin’ cookies.”

Staff Sergeant Hawk Nose sidles up looking more like a cadaver than a Marine. He’s seen some hard times and his eyes are so badly blood-shot in his pale bearded face that he looks like some B-movie vampire. Steve knows him from a previous op down near Go Noi Island.

“You seen this gaggle of new meat that just come in?” We did. “Well, I’m needin’ all the help I can get until they send us some new officers and a Company Gunny. You guys are sergeants with time in the bush, so I’m askin’ you to play linebackers here. If it gets heavy...if things freeze up, can I rely on you to step up?”

“Your guys gonna be OK with that?” Steve knows how cloistered things get in a grunt unit under pressure. “Lots of ’em don’t know us.”

“Don’t matter. They’ll follow if you lead. I’ll pass the word.”

Hawk Nose points a finger at us and winks one of his red eyes. Steve stretches and starts to hum. What’s the tune? “Luck, be a Lady tonight... you know, luck be polite; don’t leave me tonight.” He’s polishing his glasses with a dirty shirt-tail and grinning. Having a little trouble seeing the humor in anyone but a grunt but—there it is. When the unit comes up on line and starts to move, we fall in behind a shaky line of replacements being shepherded by veteran privates who have become fireteam leaders. Steve pops me a little salute as he moves toward the right flank, walking with AP Reporter who has decided to come along on the stroll. I’m over on the left just behind Moon Man and keeping a close eye on Baker, Walter C.

It’s all start, stop, bitch, and start again as Alpha shuttles like an accordion trying to keep abreast of the ARVN units that are supposedly moving parallel with us. No one has seen them but we get regular orders over the radio to halt or hurry as we plod through streets and alleys leading south. It’s mostly what passes for quiet on the northside of Hue and we can hear the driver of the deuce-and-a-half following behind us shifting gears. He’s got extra ammo and a buddy from battalion Motor T manning a .50 caliber machinegun in a ring-mount over the cab. Ma Deuce and a few mortars on call are all the support Alpha’s got.

On the right we pass an ornate structure that houses a line of ancient brass cannons. It looks like a battery of muzzle-loaders that Citadel builders included to fend off attacking infantry as the cannons all point outward through a slot in the exterior wall. On the left side there is what looks like an ARVN motor pool with a couple of six-by trucks sitting inside a chain-link fence. ARVN sentries in pegged uniform trousers and ill-fitting helmets walk around them with M-16s slung on their shoulders. Somewhere on the other side of that motor pool a fight starts. We hear it but no rounds hit in our sector.

In response, Staff Sergeant Hawk Nose orders a turn to the left, pivoting on Moon Man's squad. We are in the process of making that move when the gooks hit us hard from a section of wall near those brass cannons. Two or three Marines go down immediately in the ambush. Everyone else scrambles for cover in nearby houses or behind the walls that surround a few close yards. New Guy Baker is faster than everyone else in finding cover. He's not a grunt but he's also not stupid. The incoming is hot and includes a regular spray of RPGs that sizzle overhead to crack into nearby structures and shower us all with stinging concrete shards.

Hardest hit is the right flank closest to the gook position along the western wall and I'm worried about Steve and AP Reporter over there. We can hear Ma Deuce on the truck crank into action but the thudding stops after a few bursts as the gooks nail the gunner. The truck driver is wheeling hard to get out of the line of fire but his vehicle is riddled. He bumps his way into a driveway between houses, locks the brakes and kicks open his door. Truck Driver is climbing up over the cab to see about his buddy when a long burst of NVA fire nearly cuts him in half.

Staff Sergeant Hawk Nose is trying to organize people to help the wounded laying out in the street and move them toward the truck. Moon Man gets the drift and organizes a firing line of grunts with LAAWs to blast away and provide some cover for the medevac effort. New Guy Baker fumbles with a LAAW passed up from the rear but I nix that idea and put him to work with his M-16. The salvo of rockets takes an edge off the NVA fire and we can see three or four people dragging wounded Marines out of the line of fire. AP Reporter and Steve are paired up carrying a casualty in a shambling run toward the truck. They make the tailgate and I'm just about to head in that direction, when an RPG smacks into the rear of the truck. Bodies are flying in all directions. It's a bloody mess over there.

By the time I reach the area, it's clear that at least three of the rescuers are dead. AP Reporter is wounded and has dragged Steve to the other side of the truck. He's in bad shape. Rounds are still cracking into the truck body as I try to get a look at just how bad. Hard to tell in his contorted posture, blast twisted him around violently, but I'm afraid to do much bending or twisting on his two bloody limbs. Looks like the left arm shattered at the elbow and left leg torn from thigh to knee by a large shrapnel slice. Bone is shining through pulsing blood in both wounds. Steve is out of it and turning pale rapidly.

AP Reporter is in better shape and helps me wrap battle dressings around the wounds. We manage to stop the leg bleeding with a tourniquet wrapped tightly around the thigh up near his crotch but there's no telling how long that will last. He's going into shock and needs a quick trip to the BAS. I know where that is and I can damn sure drive a truck but this one is going nowhere.

Remembering the ARVN motor pool we passed on the way, I snatch New Guy Baker from out of cover and tug him along at a dead run up the street. Poor dipshit probably thinks I'm saving his ass but he's along as gun guard once I borrow a set of ARVN wheels.

There's a lock on the gate to the compound containing the trucks, but a couple of rounds from my .45 cracks that in a hurry. We swing the gates wide and head for the first truck in line. It's a standard U.S. six-by and I've driven enough of them to know the drill. If it's got fuel, we're set. Tossing my rifle and bandolier to New Guy Baker I hoist him up in the back with orders to open fire when we reach the ambush site and keep firing until we've got the casualties loaded. He doesn't have much to say but the ARVN sentries do.

Two of them come running out of a little shack waving their rifles just as I get the engine cranked up and roaring. They're screaming something I can't understand but they get the intent of my pistol which I point at them through the driver's side window. "Di-di, motherfuckers! I'm taking this truck!" One of them moves to raise his weapon but both of them hit the road on the run when I fire a couple of rounds over their heads.

Gauges indicate the truck has fuel and I manage to find a workable gear as we wheel out of the compound and bend it around to the left heading for the ambush site. Through the rearview I can see New Guy Baker hanging onto the top of the cab with one hand. He's got a rifle in the other hand so it looks like he'll be some help. Over the roar of the engine, I can hear the rattle of gunfire and the thump of grenades. My plan, if I ever had one, is to pull up on the other side of the wrecked truck and use it for cover while we get the casualties loaded. If New Guy Baker puts out some rounds and if there's anybody left in Alpha to help me with the load-out, we might make it. According to the map in my head, the BAS is only about ten minutes away.

Diesel is wound up tight in one gear or another as we near the area where Alpha is trading fire with the NVA along the wall to our right. Rounds shatter the passenger side windshield and a few blow holes in the hood but nothing seems fatally damaged as I pull up next to the wreck, slam it into neutral and yank on the handbrake. Moon Man and a couple of his guys break cover and run over to help load the wounded. There's about five of them including Steve and AP Reporter. There's no time to check on their condition. With New Guy Baker steadily cranking out rounds over my head I get back in the cab, find a gear and wheel around headed up the street away from the fight. Rounds smack into the truck chassis with tinny little clangs and an RPG swooshes close by on the driver's side as I hit third gear and head for the BAS.

Some idiot bastard tries to flag me down at an intersection roadblock, but I grab a lower gear and nose on through the barricade. Up ahead I can see the playground outside the BAS with a clutch of civilian vehicles parked around it. Corpsmen come running toward us as I shut down the engine and jump out of the cab. At the rear of the truck, there's blood dripping down the tailgate and I'm a little unnerved to see that New Guy Baker has become one of the casualties. He's hugging a bloody forearm as he hops down to the ground. Steve is still alive and one of the corpsmen helps me get him off the truck. Ignoring Senior Corpsman and all the triage business, I hustle him directly inside to the docs. The surgeon

and his assistants take over and one of the corpsmen pushes me outside. He promises to let me know what's happening with Steve soon as he knows.

A terribly long, frustrating hour passes while I sit outside the BAS with my back against a musty wall, trying to rescue as many prayers as I can find in the flood of emotion washing over me. Beyond the obvious, there are lots of reasons why this never should have happened.

Code of the Grunt: You will do something stupid every day of your miserable life. If you cannot find something stupid to do on your own, you will be ordered to do something stupid.

Examined coldly and critically, we brought it on ourselves. We had an official exit stamp, a ticket to ride any time we wanted out of it. But we've been swallowed up by something bigger than ourselves—and at a time like this, something harder to understand. We admire the grunts, celebrate them in the stories we write and the pictures we take but there's that crucial distance. It's easy enough—and certainly safer for body and soul—to participate as required from that little critical distance. And yet it's hard to maintain the gap between observers and observed. It closes rapidly when you're shoulder-to-shoulder in deep shit. We don't need to, it isn't in the mandate or job description, but we have become grunts by osmosis. And there it is. There it is with all the ugly brutality on the outside and all the roiling emotions on the inside. There it is.

I'm sitting in the same place surrounded by a pile of butts when the Doctor finds me. He squats and helps himself to one of my smokes with a bloody hand. "We just put your buddy on a medevac. He's headed across the river right now. There's never any guarantees but I think he's gonna make it OK. He took a lot of damage to the arm and leg but I'm guessing he'll be able to keep both."

"The corpsman said he'd let me know before they took him away..."

"We doped him up pretty strong. He wouldn't have known you were here."

Let's Twist Again

Back with Delta on a drizzly dawn in some central sector of the Citadel. Mulling over word passed at a battalion briefing that kept me up most of a chilly night fending off nightmares and finally forcing me to share a half-bottle of putrid Mekong Whiskey with Philly Dog and Willis. Swill helped with a case of recently-acquired sniffles but it did nothing to make me forget what the Intel wonks had to say. There was a question from one of the company commanders about how come we keep running into gooks everywhere we go. Ain't we killing any of them? How many can be left in the 6th NVA Regiment after all this time and effort?

Well, see... that's the thing, the Intel weenie grins and scratches his head. We thought it was just the 6th NVA Regiment in here but documents and prisoners tell us a different story. Turns out we are up against the 5th NVA Regiment, the 90th Regiment of the 324B Division plus the 29th Regiment of the 325C Division. So, contrary to popular belief, there are more gooks in a shit-pot full than originally estimated.

As if that isn't bad enough, it turns out many of the troopers from those NVA regiments have been slipping into the Citadel through various tunnels, alleys,

sewers and side-streets and a lot of them are now behind us in areas previously cleared. The up-shot is that 1/5 is required to sweep backwards while the Vietnamese Marines—who have finally showed up in strength—sweep forward with a steady eye on laying siege to the Imperial Palace.

It all means doodley-squat to Dying Delta which was known as Deadly Delta before Hue. Beyond a welcome pause in the grind while the battalion reorients and receives replacements, it's the same shit, different day. One of the replacements is a pisser of a lieutenant who takes over Philly Dog's under-strength platoon which might just muster two full rifle squads if they get the required ration of new meat. Lieutenant Longlegs knows me. He's one of the guys who wrote me up for a decoration as a result of my involvement in something stupid and potentially fatal on an earlier operation with his outfit up close to the DMZ.

"Can't tell you how glad I am to see you here," he says flopping down and snatching one of my smokes. "God knows, we need experienced hands."

"Can't tell you how unhappy I am, Lieutenant." He pushes away the bandaged hand waved under his nose. "And I regret that I have only one hand to give for my country."

"Sergeant," Longlegs says as he sucks on my smoke, "there comes a time when we all need to bear in mind that every Marine is a rifleman—first, last and always."

"Mister Longlegs, I am painfully aware of that. First and always... OK. It's the last part that's got me worried."

"I could damn sure use your help with the new people, and I know you pack the gear. Can I count on you?" Longlegs just stares at me. What he means to ask is if I've got the balls to disregard the duty Mother Corps assigned me and do what his platoon needs me to do. He is a hard man to jive. Lieutenant Longlegs is what's known as a Mustang, an officer who came to his commission through the enlisted ranks.

"He be a motherfucker in a fight, Lootenant." Philly Dog drops his dime in the game. "I seen this dude do some shit" Longlegs just nods and continues to stare at me with a wry grin on his face. Help out or get out. Defecate or get off the receptacle, he'll wait for the decision he wants.

"To the best of my limited and suspect ability, Lieutenant, I'll do what you want me to do." That's what he wants to hear, of course, and it occurs to me that I am now well and truly screwed with the odds of surviving the ass-end of the great big fight in Hue City rapidly decreasing toward zip-point-shit.

"Consider yourself my third squad leader." Longlegs gets up to deal with the incoming replacements. "I'll try to give you some colorful people who will make good copy." It's osmosis, guilt by association, aiding and abetting, wrong place at the wrong time, but here I am—and there it is.

Code of the Grunt: Don't draw with a stranger if he's faster than you. You've fought your last fight if you do.

By sundown, the ARVN are broadcasting surrender appeals to the NVA over loudspeakers and I am surrounded by six new Marines, the saltiest of which has been in country for one month as a runway guard at the Danang airfield. Try not to do anything stupid. Stick with a vet if you can. Look up around buildings and don't run out of frags. Climb the walls or clear the buildings and kill the gooks. It's about the best tactical advice to be had and they seem to accept it stoically. Some

are grunts by designation, some are not, but they all get the drift. Regardless of the numbers on their records designating a military job, they know the drill. Every Marine is a rifleman. It's a little off-putting for the admin clerk and a couple of heavy equipment mechanics in the bunch, but—begging everyone's pardon—no one promised them a rose garden.

There's not a lot more to say as I lead them under shelter on the porch of a nearby house. The bad news is that we begin a northerly push tomorrow with one flank on the eastern walls and the other running parallel to the Imperial Palace perimeter and tied in with the Vietnamese Marines. The good news is that rummaging through the house to the rear of the porch yields a full bottle of VSOP Cognac. Sleep comes easy despite a raging fire that occurs just a block away from where I'm wrapped up in a poncho-liner.

In the morning, Willis is rapping to Philly Dog about the replacements as my guys surround Company Gunny who is handing out C-rations for a hurried breakfast. "Two ways of lookin' at it, my man. Either they grunt up and do the deed or this gaggle of maggots is gonna get us all killed. That's the motherfuckin' gospel."

There are dark clouds moving toward Hue but a swirling pink dawn gives me more sustenance than the ham and eggs chopped that comes with my meal. On a day that begins as beautifully as this one, combat seems like a sacrilege. Maybe the gooks will see that sky and decide it's too pretty a day to be killing and dying. And maybe there's a frog that's gonna fly right out of my ass. Chances are about the same.

Dog and Willis are stripping unnecessary gear from the replacements, adding extra ammo and grenades to their load. Willis is sporting a couple of sutures on his lip that have totally destroyed his carefully groomed mustache line so he doesn't have much to say. The former admin clerk in my squad is put to work with a notebook recording everyone's name, service number, and blood type. He seems happy to be on familiar ground and I leave him to it when Lieutenant Longlegs calls the squad leaders into a briefing on the new day's activities.

He's exuberant and trying hard to infuse a little martial spirit into a clutch of beat-up, dog-tired grunts who just stare back at him slack-jawed. It amounts to the same thing we've been doing all along in Hue. Get on line and sweep through the structures on a long city block killing all and sundry in opposition to the move. We will have a tank and an Ontos moving just behind us, ready to come up as required.

Back at the assembly area, a line of corpsmen passes carrying stretchers full of wounded from another company that had a bad night. Four of them are struggling with a dead man wrapped in a poncho stained with congealed gore. Vets just stare openly at the familiar sight. The new guys try hard not to notice but they keep sneaking peeks from under their helmets as the evacuation party trundles by us. In the next couple of hours, any one of them could be the oozing lump inside a poncho just like that. Or they could be a little luckier and wind up like some of the other wounded in the passing parade, minus an arm or leg or simply shot full of holes. It's not hard to read their thoughts. Ain't that a hell of a deal? What a fucked up way to return to The World.

Code of the Grunt: War is hell, dude, but combat is a motherfucker. Even the Purple Heart they give you is plastic. It don't mean nothin'.

See, the dead ones are lucky in a lot of ways. Those that survive to reach the rear minus various body parts necessary to lead a normal life have got yet another war to fight. They'll wind up back on the block in a country that hates their stupid guts for being wounded, a country that shudders and looks away from the stumps and glass eyes and prosthetics because they are reminders of a fucked-up, inconsequential, and ultimately meaningless war no sane or civilized person wants. Wounded warriors will always be an embarrassment to civilians and that's a harder situation to handle than the combat that made them invalids in the first place. Lots will fight back by giving the gawkers and critics what they expect. They'll be the war-crazed psycho-vets everyone expects them to be and have a hell of a time. Others will reject The World's conventions and just hide out somewhere, grow beards and long hair, and howl at the moon from some patch of woods that reminds them of The Nam. No parades, no free beers, no nothing but pity which is worse than being ignored. There it is and thanks very much for your service.

Lieutenant Longlegs puts the vets on the flanks and assigns my guys to go up the middle through a block of houses. A few of the structures facing us are two story and I remind the replacements to keep looking up as we move. Gooks know the deadly effect of plunging fire on grunts caught in the open. The drill is to muster at some covered point near a house or building, advance a couple of guys under covering fire aimed at facing windows, and begin to clear room by room. And don't go charging into dark rooms. Frag everything and then go in following the muzzle of your rifle.

New guys are nervous as cats, moving tentatively and way too slowly but we get through the first couple of houses with no problem. They are becoming more confident and more efficient as we pause in a terraced yard outside a low, rambling structure that looks like it might have been some sort of government office. There are South Vietnamese signs on the walls and a portrait of President Thieu prominently displayed on a bulletin board next to the door. We are spread out around the yard waiting for a resupply of grenades to come forward when my admin clerk turned rifleman points at the words painted above the main entryway: *Viet Nam Cong Hoa*. He wants to know what it means.

"Republic of Vietnam—South Vietnam." There's more that I recognize and I'm about to translate when it starts over to our right. We can hear the rattle of gook machineguns and the sharp crack of AKs mixed with the tinny pop of M-16s and the thump of blooper rounds responding. Philly Dog's outfit is in it deep over there. He's screaming for more fire. There's no mistaking that booming voice and colorful profanity. Everyone in our area scrunches around behind cover to orient themselves on the fight. The tank that's been following up the broad street on the right cranks into action and we hear the boom of its .50 caliber adding to the din. At our rear, about half a block away and idling in a cloud of exhaust fumes, is the Ontos with its six side-mounted 106mm recoilless rifles pointed right at our backs. The vehicle commander is up in the turret facing in the direction of the fight but he's making no move to head over there.

The fight on the right is just a minute or two old when it starts for us. An NVA machinegun team suddenly appears in a window and sends a long, rattling burst

over our heads. There are two or three other shooters firing at us, but I can't see their positions from flat on the ground behind a row of concrete planters. Right beside me is Admin Clerk who wants to know what we should do now. No telling if gook machinegunner and his buddies have hit anyone as yet. We were all behind fairly good cover when the shooting started. These gooks were a little slow off the mark. If they'd opened up when we first got to the building, we'd all be dead. Likely they were waiting for their buddies over on the right to kick off what looks and sounds like an ambush all along our route of advance. There's no radio to tell me what's happening but we can hear more firefighting on our left over where Lieutenant Longlegs is running the show.

From behind a nearby gazebo, a couple of M-16s cut loose so at least of couple of my guys are in the fight. Admin Clerk takes the cue, pokes his rifle between the planters, and begins to blaze away at the shooters in the building. What we need is that Ontos to get up here with those 106s. He's still back there behind us and making no move to close the distance. What the fuck is he doing? He's got to be able to see we're in a tight up here.

Admin Clerk rolls over to reach for a fresh magazine and there are the two smoke grenades that I hung on his webbing before we stepped off into this basket of shit. Snatching both of them off his harness, I tell him to keep firing at any muzzle flash he sees. It's about 30 meters from where we are to the front of the building, no wind to speak of and a full-charge of adrenaline to back my play, so both of the smoke grenades rattle around on the porch of the structure before they erupt in a mixed yellow and purple cloud. We can't see shit and neither can the gook shooters, but they keep blazing away at us through that colorful, slowly drifting screen. Yelling uselessly for everyone to stay where they are, I take off running toward the Ontos, waving my arms and trying to get the commander's attention. He sees me sprinting toward him like a lunatic and swivels his .30 caliber machinegun in my direction.

The wide-eyed driver slams his hatch shut which gives me a foothold and I'm up shouting at the commander's helmeted head in two quick bounds. He pulls the helmet away from his ears so he can hear me over the radio chatter and listens while I shout for him to get up forward and blow a few holes in our disputed building. He shouts back something about RPGs or B-40 rockets. Apparently, the Ontos is particularly vulnerable, much more so than a tank, and he's worried that the gooks might ambush him with anti-tank rockets.

Just the one machinegun and a couple of AKs, I tell him and wait a long moment while he mumbles into the lip mic on his helmet. The vehicle lurches into gear and begins a rapid run up toward where my squad is pinned down. There's just time for me to get off the damn thing and run around to the rear away from the rounds that are already beginning to splat and spin off its frontal armor. These Ontos are light and fast, so the vehicle outruns me rapidly and I'm pumping along trying to catch up when it stops and grinds around on the right track bringing the six recoilless rifle tubes to bear directly on target. He'll be firing in a moment and the last place you want to be is near the ass end of one or more 106's. An Ontos firing a salvo from all six tubes can take down small buildings with a storm of vicious back-blast.

He fires two from the top rack and the rounds blow sizeable chunks out of the building's concrete façade. From a doorway off to the side of the Ontos I can see two NVA sprinting out of the building. Admin Clerk takes both of them down neatly with four rounds from his rifle. The Ontos grinds a little bit more on one track, shifting aim and there's two of my new guys sprinting out of cover and headed for protection behind the vehicle. The commander is buttoned up so he can't see the two men running at his vehicle from the side. Screaming for them to stop and get down, I step out of the doorway and wave my arms. One of them gets the message. The other man, one of the heavy-equipment mechanics who probably ought to know better, doesn't. He's right behind the Ontos when the gunner fires two more 106 rounds. Back-blast slams into him like a hurricane, blowing off his helmet and most of his equipment, and sending him bowling down the street like a spastic ragdoll.

There's no further fire from the objective building that I can hear or see. The Ontos is slowly backing away up the street. Lieutenant Longlegs and a Corpsman are sprinting toward the back-blast casualty. He's out of it and peppered with debris but still breathing. All the skin we can see through his ripped uniform is scratched and oozing blood but that's just topical. The Doc is more worried about the blood showing in his ears. He won't be hearing much soon—if ever—through those. Doc wants assistance carrying him and I call for the other dumb-shit who narrowly escaped the back-blast. They hustle the unconscious mechanic toward the rear.

Longlegs wants to know what happened. When he hears my brief, he confirms what is becoming obvious. The gooks are standing fast along the line where they triggered the ambushes that hit us in the center and on both flanks. They aren't going anywhere without a major fight. He tells me to finish up with the building, give it a thorough sweep, and then pull back about half a block. Battalion is going to call in the arty to put some serious dents in the gook line.

Most of what's left of four NVA inside the building is bits and pieces. The 106 rounds did a job on everyone and everything inside and the cool interior reeks of cordite and fresh blood. There are three little offices off a main passageway but all of them are empty except for a stash of spare AK ammo and some B-40 rocket rounds. There's no launcher in sight which is great good luck for the Ontos that blew away this hard-point. Outside two new guys are pulling a pair of dead NVA out of some spider holes. One of the newbies has an SKS carbine slung over his back. Legit war trophy and honestly earned if he blew away one or both of the gooks sprawled in the yard. Admin Clerk is still kneeling behind the planters and watching wide-eyed.

"Let's go!" Admin Clerk turns to me with a puzzled expression on his face. "Check that alley on the other side of the building and then get back here. We're pulling back."

Turning to help my two newly minted killers check the gook bodies, I see Admin Clerk follow his muzzle toward the alleyway. He strolls right in front of a small basement window right down at ground level without looking. That's a bad move and I'm about to let him know that when a burst of fire cuts Admin Clerk's legs out from under him. Everyone scatters for cover while I curse myself for being stupid. The place clearly has a basement or subterranean crawlway and there's at

least one survivor in there. Either I didn't notice or ignored it in the excitement with the Ontos.

Admin Clerk is trying to crawl away and the NVA muzzle tracks him waiting for a kill shot. Emptying a magazine to distract the shooter, I grab a grenade and sprint to the side of that window. It's quiet after the grenade goes but I'm not interested in the results. There's no more fire, so we pick up Admin Clerk, put him on a door we rip off the building, and hustle him to the rear.

By the time we reach the rally point, high explosive rounds are tearing up the block we just left. Delta has stationed some sharpshooters on nearby rooftops. They are having a field day whacking gooks running into the streets to escape the artillery.

Old Home Week

Delta remains in reserve as three other rifle companies hammer away at enemy hard-points and pockets of resistance in the northern parts of the Citadel. Lieutenant Longlegs says it won't be long before they've got the area secured. ARVN units are filtering in behind our sweeps to hold what's re-taken. When the situation meets everyone's satisfaction, we turn around and head south in the direction of the palace compound. It's what will amount to a last big push. The Vietnamese Marines have got the place nearly surrounded and all that irritating amplified jabber we hear echoing through the city streets is ARVN psyops people trying to talk the remaining defenders into surrendering. There's been enough damage to this cultural icon and the GVN wants to see if they can avoid turning the Imperial Palace into just another pile of ancient rubble.

Listening to the loudspeakers blare one drizzly night, two old friends suddenly appear in Hue asking for me. Lieutenant Longlegs leads them over to the little parlor where I've set up housekeeping with the four New Guys remaining in the third squad. And suddenly we are seven with the addition of Doc Toothpick and Reb the Southerner. Last time I saw the lanky redneck from the Florida Panhandle, he had just talked himself into a cushy job as an assistant supply clerk at a compound down near Liberty Bridge. It was just after they'd given him a Silver Star and a third Purple Heart, an epic story which I wrote up for his hometown newspaper.

"Thought you were out of here on three Purples, dude. What happened?" Reb dumps his field gear in a corner and offers me a hit from a canteen filled with a familiar concoction of gin and grape Kool-aid.

"They wasn't movin' fast enough to suit me." He retrieves the canteen and passes it to Doc Toothpick. "I had me some words with an admin worm and then whooped his ass. All on a sudden, mah paperwork disappeared. They had me burnin' shitters which ain't no kinda business for nobody, so I told the Sarn't Major he might just as well send my ass up to Hue City. On the way I run into Toothpick and he said you was up in here somewheres. Longlegs brung us right to ya."

"What happened to your dick-skinner?" Doc Toothpick, a rangy, rugged Third Class Hospital Corpsman from St. Louis, picked up my bandaged hand, gave it a

sniff and grimaced. "Either you've been wiping your ass with that hand or it's infected." While he peels off the filthy bandages to take a look, Doc plucks one of his trademarks out of a pocket, pops it into his mouth and begins to chew. You can generally gauge his mood by how hard he's working one of his ever-present toothpicks. He told me once when I was interviewing him for a story about his rescue of three wounded men under fire that his mother sent them to him by the box-full, one box for every week in The Nam.

"How'd you get caught up in this deal, Doc? Last I heard they pulled you off the line and sent you to a Regimental Aid Station."

"You got any idea how many corpsman been blown away on this fuckin' op?"

"Got to be a bunch..."

"You fuckin' A, Skippy. I took one look at them snot-nosed replacements and told the Chief he better just send my ass up here where I might could do some good." He examines my swollen hand and discolored thumb under a flashlight. "And the first thing we better do is get you over to the BAS where we can pump some antibiotics directly into this hand." He digs around in his Unit One medical kit and tears open some fresh bandages. "Meanwhile," he says dumping two pills out of a plastic bottle, "take these with a hit of Reb's Purple Jesus."

"You heard about Steve?"

Doc Toothpick pauses in his bandaging and nods. "I was helping out on the southside when they brought him in off one of the Mike Boats. We got him on a chopper right away. I expect he's in Yokosuka by now or somewhere on the way home."

"How did he look?"

"How the fuck does anybody look that gets hammered by a B-40, dude? He's tore up but I'm betting he'll keep the arm. Not so sure about the leg, but he's out of it and headed stateside. They got good Docs back there can probably save it." Doc Toothpick finishes the re-wrap and checks his watch. "We ain't doing anything right now and I know a dude over at the BAS. Let's walk over there and get you treated before this thing shrivels up and drops off your fuckin' wrist."

Sentries on watch at various points along the route to the BAS challenge us several times but nobody shoots anything more damaging than insults about stupid bastards wandering around in the dark. "It seems like I'm always patching your ass up, Dude." Toothpick pushes his helmet back off his eyes and we talk about another time on another op when he spent a long afternoon picking Chicom shrapnel out of my butt and leg. "You've got to take better care of yourself and stop playing grunt."

"It ain't playing up here in Hue, Doc."

"Ain't it a bitch? Seems like making it through this Hue City deal is like trying to run between the raindrops without getting wet."

"There it is, Doc. There it is."

Senior Corpsman at the BAS volunteers to wake one of the surgeons, but Toothpick says he'll handle what needs to be done. Under a surgical light, the two of them look at my damaged hand and make little grunting noises for a while. When they've seen enough and decided on a course of action Senior Corpsman swabs my hand with some kind of topical anesthetic while Toothpick prepares a

syringe full of thick white fluid. "Chew on this." He pokes one of his toothpicks in my mouth and closes in with the syringe. "This might pinch a bit."

It feels like a thousand fire ants attacking my hand as Doc probes and injects at various places, shooting a strong antibiotic directly into the infected flesh. When it's over and my hand is re-banded into an even more unwieldy mitt, we duck out of the BAS and run into Lieutenant Longlegs who is checking on some of his wounded grunts.

"It's on for tomorrow," he tells us, the big push into the Imperial Palace area. We'll get a detailed briefing in the morning but the broad brush puts us on the left of the Vietnamese Marines sweeping due south until we hit the palace grounds. And this time the battalion CO is taking a page from the NVA playbook. We'll be moving under cover of our own shooters positioned on rooftops and upper levels of buildings all along the way.

By the time we get back to the squad, the South Vietnamese are once again loudly begging their northern cousins to give it up, be reasonable and rally to the Saigon side. Reb has polished off the Purple Jesus so there's nothing to do but try to sleep while the propaganda echoes up and down the streets of the Citadel. Hopefully, it's as hard on the NVA as it is on us.

King Nguyen's Court

When the push starts at dawn, we move steadily south block to block along what the map says is Dinh Bo Linh Street, a string-straight north-south avenue that leads to the Thuong Tu Gate in the southern walls. We need to cross about nine or ten east-west streets along the way and the first several intersections are covered by 1/5 shooters up on rooftops or in the second floor windows of buildings. They go into action when our sweeps force stay-behinds out into the streets or alleys. None of the gooks we've encountered so far seem anxious to do much beyond fire a few rounds to slow us down and then split for a new position. It's by far the easiest time we've had on a northside sweep, and I'm starting to hear some trash-talking from the grunts who speculate that we've finally got this thing licked. I'm not buying it and neither is Reb or Toothpick. We've all been lured and lulled into NVA traps before and this is no time to be getting over-confident.

On the other side of our assigned block is the eastern perimeter of the Imperial Palace. My guys are moving on the right flank of Delta's advance which puts us closest to the palace perimeter and in spotty contact with some Vietnamese Marines moving in the same direction. Every once in a while we spot an American officer wearing their distinctive tiger-stripe camouflage and he gives us a wave. We can tell he's a round-eye because he towers over the little VN Marines humping along beside him carrying radios.

It's a slow process, but we expected that. We hold up at every intersection while the Company Commanders send teams ahead of us to take high observation positions. We don't move on until word is passed that the cover teams are in position. I'm keeping an eye on the new guys, but it's easier now with Reb and Toothpick helping keep them in order and out of trouble. It gives me some time to

think about the battalion briefing which contained conflicting information. That's got me wondering and worrying about this light resistance.

An intelligence officer from MACV and an English-speaking ARVN officer briefed the command group saying they had reliable reports that a good number of surviving NVA have pulled out of the city toward the northwest where recently deployed units of the Army's 1st Cavalry Division are moving to block them. On the other hand, the ARVN officer related, they have radio intercepts in which NVA commanders in Hue asked for permission to withdraw; pleas which Hanoi promptly denied with orders to hold and die in place if necessary. So which is it? Are they running or are they dug in somewhere for a last stand? Everyone has a guess but no one has an answer.

It's just before noon when we got our first close-up look at the Imperial Palace. We hold in place near the northeast corner of the complex and just stare at the manicured gardens, moats and winding pathways that all lead to an ornate building that must be something like an Imperial court or throne room. Reb takes the opportunity to empty his runny guts into a nearby alleyway. The Purple Jesus has done a job on him and he's been running off to shit nearly every time we stop. Alpha Company on our left gets into a serious fight and we are ordered to freeze while they got the situation sorted. My guys spread out along a perimeter wall and just stare into the palace complex. It doesn't look like anything has been disturbed or damaged.

Reb joins me looking into the heart of the palace complex. There's not a gook in sight. It's just 50 meters or so to that structure and there's a little path that leads right to it over an arched bridge. I'm so tempted to just jump the low wall and trot over there to get a look at what this whole deal has been all about that I can't stand it. "Suppose they's gooks in that building?" Reb is snapping pictures with a little Instamatic camera and that gives me a very stupid idea.

Dropping my pack, I find my own camera and unwrap it from the plastic. If we're going to do what I'm planning, it requires something more reliable than an Instamatic. Doc Toothpick sidles up beside us and I tell him to keep an eye on the squad. We'll be back in 15 minutes.

"Where the fuck you goin'?" He eyes my camera suspiciously, "We been told to hold up right here."

"Listen, man; I was here once before all the shit started. I'm pretty sure the emperor's throne is just inside that building over there. I want a picture of me sitting on it."

Doc tells me I'm clearly out of my motherfucking mind but he's talking to my back as I vault a low garden wall with Reb following close behind. We make it to a line of ornate pillars that I remember from the earlier visit with Tom Young as tour guide. Just inside those pillars is a long hallway leading to a lushly decorated room flanked by ornate urns. At the end of that corridor is the raised throne where the ancient mandarin emperor held court before his kingdom fell to internecine squabbles.

Something wild and uncontrollable has hold of me now. I can't turn back without getting another look at that throne and if we don't get killed doing it, I plan to have Reb take my picture perched on it. There's not a soul in sight as we run down the dark corridor but I'm expecting to be cut down any moment. The

adrenaline is overpowering and the sheer audacity of what we are doing is a thrill I'll always remember—assuming I survive. It occurs to me as we reach the throne room unmolested that if there are gooks defending the Imperial Palace, they'll be doing it from out on the perimeter. No one with an ounce of military savvy would expect a couple of broke-dick Marines to come charging into the heart of the complex carrying nothing much more threatening than a camera.

And then we are staring at the ornate throne with brass chi-chi dogs on each arm as hand rests for his imperial majesty. I'm looking for Reb to take the camera as I climb up the steps leading to the throne but he's off somewhere in the shadows. "Come on, man. Get the flick and let's get out of here." But Reb has his trousers dropped around his ankles and he's squatted over one of the porcelain urns at the side of the dais. I can hear his mess squirting loudly into the receptacle and can't stop an onset of nerve-jangled giggles. For Christ's sake, we are in the throne room of the Imperial Palace with gooks all around us and Reb is dumping a watery load into an ancient artifact. This caper is way off the steep end of the stupid scale.

He uses a piece of a brocaded wall-hanging to wipe his butt and then leaps off the urn with his Instamatic in hand. Maneuvering him up onto the throne, I snap a couple of flicks with his cheap camera that I'm fairly confident won't develop into anything memorable but he deserves the effort just for going along with me on this deal. Setting my own camera to handle the low light, I rack the focus to best guess and hand it to him. Then I'm sitting up there on the throne of the ancient emperors with my knees crossed and a big grin on my face. He hits the shutter button a time or two and that's it. No matter what else happens in Hue, I'm immortalized as having been deep in the belly of the beast. Before we make a dash for daylight, I unscrew the right hand rest and stuck it in my cargo pocket. If I live through this, that brass rampant dog is an all-expenses paid binge at anybody's VFW Post.

Toothpick is waving at us to hurry as we sprint back across the little arched bridge and out of the palace compound. Delta has been ordered to pivot left and sweep over a disputed section of the eastern walls. The ARVN are in trouble and we are in for another session of climbing the walls and killing the gooks.

Last Gasps

Mortars and artillery are gouging clumps out of a broad sector of the Citadel walls as we pull back from the Imperial Palace complex and turn to get back up on the high ground. It's mid-afternoon when they lift the preparatory fire and Lieutenant Longlegs pushes us up one of the damage ramps onto the wall and headed south. The ARVN have been taking serious flanking fire from this area and we are ordered to eliminate that. We spread out and begin walking slowly amidst the rubble and detritus scattered in our path. The walls are thick in this area—nearly 100 meters at some points—and undulating with folds and swells that provide great cover for defenders we have been sent to eliminate.

Philly Dog is up on point with the rest of us spread out in a wedge behind him. So far there's been no resistance, nothing to see except scattered piles of trash and

debris. Dog holds up a meaty fist to signal a halt and then begins to poke around a rubble pile with the muzzle of his rifle. We watch him reach around his cartridge belt and snatch at his bayonet. Dog is just snapping it onto the end of his rifle when a gook hidden in the rubble at his feet pumps a burst into the big man's crotch. Dog drops his rifle and staggers backward trying to stay on his feet as the gook raises his sights and drives him to the ground with a second burst.

Willis screams and charges forward to the rescue but he's cut down before he take three steps. Suddenly we are facing a wall of fire that extends all across our front from the outer edge of the wall to the inner edge with NVA gunners firing from deep and well-concealed bunker positions. Most of those positions are skillfully dug in or around the innocent-looking trash piles that dot the area to our front.

Lieutenant Longlegs is screaming into his radio for fire support but everyone hugging the dirt up on the wall realizes something will have to be done before that if we intend to survive this close and deadly encounter. In one of combat's never-ending flukes, the gooks waited too long to open fire. They should have hit us at greater range. As it is, several men from the leading element are nearly on top of a few gun positions and they don't have to sacrifice much cover to start pitching frags into holes and firing slits. The rest of us start inching forward on our bellies or sprinting toward those mounds, sticking muzzles into any opening and triggering long bursts at the defenders inside.

Reb is just ahead of me, firing single rounds at a shooter under a pile of logs. He's taking careful aim with each shot, just like he's on a range for qualification day back in The World. When the muzzle-flash disappears, he pulls a grenade, arms it and runs for the log pile. He's winding up to heave when a burst from a gook on his right cuts into him and sends the Southerner sprawling. The grenade rolls from his hand and detonates sending a shower of dirt and shrapnel over the rest of us. Doc Toothpick scrambles forward but it's obvious before he reaches the body that Reb the Southerner is dead. Toothpick screams something I can't hear and then grabs Reb's rifle to begin firing wildly in all directions.

We are gaining momentum and I manage to reach Philly Dog's body. It seems unlikely that he could have survived but I need to be sure. His guts are leaking through holes in his lower belly. The second burst hit higher, tearing off most of his lower jaw. I can see the gold teeth exposed through a mat of blood and gristle. The unsinkable Philly Dog, the bad-ass street fighter, lies dead on the Hue City walls. His gang-banging buddy Willis is just a few feet away, all the jive and life leaking out of him through a vertical row of bullet holes in his chest. Sunlight glints off something that catches my eye. It's his straight razor and it belongs in his hand, so I pull it out of his boot and put it there. It's dumb and they'll strip it from him before they send the Dog back to South Philly, but it just seems like the right move. There will never be another thing I can do for Philly Dog or Willis.

Our M-79s, machineguns, and a few mortar rounds that begin to fall forward of us are breaking up the gook line and Lieutenant Longlegs is up and running from man to man, pushing us forward, urging us to move and shoot. For some reason, laying there on my belly surrounded by the dead bodies of Philly Dog, Willis and Reb the Southerner, it seems like a reasonable suggestion. We are, after all, in the business of climbing the walls and killing the gooks. As an assault line begins to

form and move past, I stuff a fresh magazine in my rifle and scramble to follow the leaders. It's a lot like riding a powerful wave with building speed and momentum as we surge forward, shooting and fragging holes right and left. There's a brutal rhythm to it, an infectious sense of gritty determination that drives us straight at the enemy.

Code of the Grunt: If I've gotta die it won't be laying down and shaking like a dog shitting peach-pits. If I've gotta die, I'll do it on my feet, moving, shooting and staring death in the beady-ass eyeballs. There it is.

We get a brief reprieve from some friendlies on rooftops across the street from this sector of walls. A machinegun carried to the top of a building over there somewhere sweeps the bunker line with plunging fire and we are suddenly moving forward faster. Enemy bunkers and fighting holes are flooded by a wave of screaming, pissed off grunts. It's oddly like some sort of savage ballet. Gooks are leaping and bounding between the mounds, rising to meet the Marines running swivel-hipped right into them. Desperate, deranged performers wearing costumes in various shades of green, some topped by steel pots and others by pith helmets, clash, shoot, and scream in a bedlam chorus. Bodies whirl, twist and slump in odd contortions all over the bloody stage: The Dance of Death.

It is an awesome sight—and it's very nearly the last thing I see. Just ahead of the path that I'm taking to keep up with Lieutenant Longlegs, there is a mound of trash that looks like a dump-site for old furniture or discarded household items. On top of it all is a bent and twisted fat-tire Schwinn, a bicycle almost exactly like one I rode when I was a kid. It's even got the plastic frilly things sticking out of the handlebar grips. Those little multi-color plastic frills have me fascinated and I barely notice the movement at the base of the trash pile.

They say you don't hear the one that gets you, but I heard the AK burst the gook triggered from under that mound, just below the Schwinn's mangled rear tire. The fact that I returned fire was likely instinct or an involuntary muscle spasm in a trigger finger. It's hard to say and I wasn't thinking about it lying flat on my back with a freshening rain pelting my face. Toothpick is there and tugging at my belt for some reason. It hurts and I think I asked him to stop. I also think he told me I was gut-shot. There is a wave of horrible cramps and I try to pull my knees up toward my chest but Doc Toothpick is sitting on them with one morphine Syrette gripped between his teeth and another one jabbed into my bicep. And that's about all I can recall about it.

To the rear... March

Two things surprise me laying on a stretcher just outside the BAS and fighting my way through a morphine fog. One is the pain which is not as bad as contemplated, or as intense as it was when they hustled me down off the walls and toward the rear. It's just a dull, throbbing ache that extends from under my ribcage down to my knees. Taken medicinally rather than recreationally, that morphine is some wonderful shit, and they pump me full of it on a regular schedule while I'm waiting with a bunch of others for the medevac that will take us out of Hue.

The other surprising thing is that the crickets have returned to Hue. Their tuneful chorus of croaks and chirps echoes in my head but hard as I think on the subject, I can't remember hearing them before; neither on the southside nor here on the northside while all the fighting and dying was happening. So maybe those buzzing chirps have a bigger meaning. Maybe the crickets sense the end of it all and are just getting back to doing what they do when wild-eyed humans aren't screwing up the environment. Anyway, it's nice to hear them, rumbling a steady, rhythmic bass-line under the song of war, as wounded men on my right and left, grunt and groan.

Staring straight up, it's hard to ignore the chemical dawn that breaks over Hue on the morning they take me to the rear. It's one of those surreal tequila sunrises that you sometimes see in the Florida Keys and it makes me think of Reb who will never see another sunrise in Florida or anyplace else. A corpsman gives me my morning shot and fusses with the bandages on my belly. He doesn't say anything and I don't ask him about the wounds. Good news or bad, they will tell me when it's time for me to know. So, I just lay there and watched the sky. Very likely old Rudyard Kipling was hitting the opiates when he wrote that stuff about the sun coming up like thunder. Streaks of pink seem to jet across the lightening sky and the rising sun looks just like a sizzling meatball as it climbs over Hue.

Shortly after full light, they load me up with four or five other casualties on a truck that creeps slowly up the mean streets, headed for the gate we used to enter the Citadel just....what was it...a week, maybe ten days ago? Likely the driver is trying to take it easy and not jostle the shot-up passengers, but I'm wishing he'd put the hammer down and get us out of there. No telling what's next for me, but it is hard to imagine surviving only to be killed by some stay-behind sniper looking to chalk up an easy target.

Lieutenant Longlegs came to visit last night. He seemed sheepish about my getting dinged. For a while, as we talked, I thought he might apologize for asking me to grunt along with his platoon. But that kind of thing is not his style. Every Marine is a rifleman. You pays your money and you takes your chances. Mainly, Longlegs wanted to deliver my pack and personal gear that Doc Toothpick rescued from the walls where I was hit. And he wanted to let me know the ARVN had finally overrun the Citadel and raised their flag. It was a major deal, he said, with all the press you could count and then some making it look like the brave South Vietnamese forces re-took their ancient capitol. It was utter bullshit, he said, and laughed long and hard, maybe a little too hard. I tried to laugh with him but it made my belly ache.

When war becomes a game of political football with every play called from the sidelines, you struggle under a strange and dangerous set of rules. The coaches controlling the imagery from Washington and Saigon decreed that Hue must look like an ARVN victory, a demonstration of their determination and fighting spirit, regardless of the reality. To that end, a bunch of dead and wounded Marines is neither here nor there.

For the most part it's over in Hue except for the mopping up operations. The Marines will be pulling out soon and leaving that to the ARVN and the press that is flooding the area now that the shooting is nearly done. It is certainly over for me and I am thinking about all that—what it might mean in both long and short

runs—as they haul me off the truck and load me on a Mike Boat with the other casualties. I am almost constantly thirsty but the corpsman have been really stingy with water. Mainly they just wet my lips and plug another IV into my arm. So when it begins to rain as we cross the river, I open my mouth and try to suck down some moisture.

A bearded Coast Guard crewman with a cigarette dangling from his mouth notices me and kneels to watch me gasp like a fish. “You OK, Marine?”

“I’d be better if I had a smoke.” He pulls a pack from his shirt, shakes one out, and lights it for me. As we smoke silently, I watch him trying to smile in some way that might cheer me up or reassure me. His glance keeps sneaking down to the big bandage covering my belly. “Ain’t as bad as it looks,” I tell him. “They missed my dick.” Coastie laughs, gives me a pat on the shoulder and wanders away toward the back of the boat.

On the southside, they tell me I’m going on a helicopter, either to Danang or maybe to one of the hospital ships out in the South China Sea. From there, who knows? I reach down to the cargo pocket on my thigh and feel the little brass dog stolen from the Emperor’s throne and close my eyes.

Code of the Grunt: You ain’t Superman. You do what you can and then you try to live with the fact that it wasn't enough.

Charlie Ward, Yokosuka, Japan

Woke up jet-lagged and disoriented in either a morgue or mausoleum. Hard to tell for the first few days of drug dreams and rat-races up and down a maze of corridors staring up from a gurney and surrounded by knitted brows and half-faces showing above surgical masks. Eventually, someone visits and stays long enough to let me know I’m in a Navy Hospital in Japan where they are doing some judicious cutting on my guts.

There are plenty of drug dreams and body aches that have nothing to do with my belly. They’ve got tubes stuck in me everywhere and there’s no comfortable way to lie except flat on my back. That leaves me staring at ceiling tiles for long hours or turning my head to check out the guys in nearby beds. Most of the wounded in this ward are pumped full of pain-killers so there’s not a lot of lucid conversation. The Ward Corpsmen are helpful and solicitous, but they’ve got little time to sit around and shoot the shit. The Doctors who make their daily rounds just mumble medical jargon and won’t answer many direction questions. Even the Red Cross ladies who come by irregularly to see if there’s anything we want don’t stay long. Some guy always says what he really wants is a piece of ass, and they trundle on to the next ward where they’ll hear the same crude comments.

There’s a catheter in my dick that’s particularly annoying and they’ve got some arrangement of drainage tubes in my belly that require changing every so often. That’s painful, but given what I’ve seen of some of the other casualties, I can’t bring myself to bitch very loudly. There’s a guy two beds over that’s missing both legs and one ass-cheek. Another dude across the aisle lost his whole package, balls and all, to an AK round. He won’t talk at all and I’m thinking he’d rather be

dead but he hasn't figured out how to make that happen. We hear whispered conversations sometimes between him and a Navy shrink that visits.

A starchy Navy nurse comes by to see me at one point and tells me the cutting is mostly done and I'm off the catheter. The tubes will have to stay in for a while, so they can suck out the bad shit and pump me full of good shit to fight infection. While they were dealing with my intestines, they mostly fixed my left hand, saved the thumb and reduced the swelling a lot. So in a couple of days they move me to a post-op ward and begin to talk about sending me stateside. None of that concerns me and I'm mainly just happy to be off my back and allowed to tool around in a wheelchair, mostly wherever I want to go.

Three or four other wheelchair maniacs get me involved in drag races down the longer corridors but the nurses put a stop to that when we have a particularly spectacular crash that rips a long line of sutures out of one of the racers. We sit around a big, bright room called a solarium a lot. There's a well-stocked magazine rack in one corner and if you pull it away from the wall a little bit you gain access to a fairly comprehensive stock of porn mags and fuck-books left for the Marines by kind and understanding Navy Corpsmen.

We quickly discover that there's a little slop-chute on the hospital grounds where enlisted patients can get beer. The Docs tell me not to drink as it will interfere with my internal plumbing which needs to mend on a bland diet, etc. Nodding with a full appreciation of their sound medical advice, I ignore it most nights and drink a lot of cold Japanese beer. After a while, I stop pissing blood so they stop arguing with me about it. Apparently, I'm a quick healer and the internal damage is a lot less threatening than initially estimated.

Sometimes I sit with some recuperating grunts on a little outdoor patio where we can smoke and watch the incoming wounded from medevac flights. We play a ghoulish game making bets on what caused the wounds we see. Angled wound in the upper body: sniper. Multiple entry wounds in a horizontal or diagonal line: machine gun. Small, clean punctures in the legs or buttocks: shrapnel from grenade or RPG. We can tell the ones that come in from Hue. No farmer tans on those guys. Their skin is marble white and shriveled from the rain and most bear pockmarks from flying brick or concrete.

When they turn us on to a room full of phones that we can use to make overseas calls, things get a little frustrating. There are a lot of wounded guys who want to shoot a lot of long-overdue shit with girls, wives, or parents, so the smart drill is to get there in the very early hours of the morning. It's the middle of the night most places stateside and the only callers on our end are people who don't give a shit whether they disturb the sleeping people on the other end.

A corpsman checks the records and lets me know Steve wound up at the Balboa Naval Hospital near San Diego. He gives me a number and I call around dawn in Yokosuka. It takes a while dicking around with ward nurses and waiting for transfers, but I finally get him on the line. He's good, the arm and leg will remain attached to his body and he's on the mend. They've been trying to buy him out of the Marine Corps but he's hanging in there for a disability pension. He's giggling about being a Sergeant, USMC, retired. He wants to know where I am, so I'm forced to tell him he's not the only one that caught a load in Hue City.

Toward the end of an awkward conversation, he asks me if it was worth it. Sure it was, I tell him. We climbed the walls and killed the gooks. Mission accomplished and we suffered honorable wounds in the line of duty... sort of. He accepts that quietly and then wants to read me a headline from the San Diego paper: ARVN Recapture Citadel in Hue. He doesn't say so but I can hear the giant exclamation point. And then the paper rattles and he turns a page. There's another story from Hue and he reads me a little bit. It's a report about mass graves that have been found on the outskirts of the city. Thousands of civilians executed and buried in those graves. Apparently, the NVA killed more than just Marines in Hue City.

We didn't know about that, of course, and Steve says from what he can see it won't do a thing to take the edge of the anti-war sentiment at home. There are still a lot of clueless people back there thumping the anti-establishment drums and saying the Tet Offensive is a major victory for the North Vietnamese. The war-mongering Americans deserved what they got in the fighting all across South Vietnam. When we run out of conversation, careful not to probe too deeply into what we're both feeling, I hang up with promises to see him as soon as I can.

My next call is to relatives who are wondering why I haven't called before to let them know how I'm doing. They seem to think there are pay-phone booths dotted around Vietnam. They've gotten the letter and a visit from some recruiter. They were worried sick, they tell me, and want to know when I'm coming home. Be home as soon as I can and we'll spend some good times together, I say. But that's a lie. What I'll do, I decide as I wheel back to the ward, is find a way to come back to The Nam. They'll send me to The World for a while. Orders are being cut, I'm told, but I won't stay long. There can't be that many volunteers to return after being wounded, but I intend to be first man in line with his hand raised.

There are stories to tell, stories from the bottom of the heap, down in the mud and the blood with the grunts, stories that will add a little luster to their sacrifice. There are stories that need to be told to counter all the bullshit that's being foisted off on the folks at home who will otherwise never know about men like Gene Autry, Philly Dog, Willis, Reb the Southerner and thousands of others. Unless they kill me, I will get at least some of those stories told.

There it is.
