

# THE PRESIDENT'S SANDBOX

A NOVEL

GARY WAYNE FOSTER

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON

# THE PRESIDENT'S SANDBOX

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*To my sister Carol Jean Bolton*



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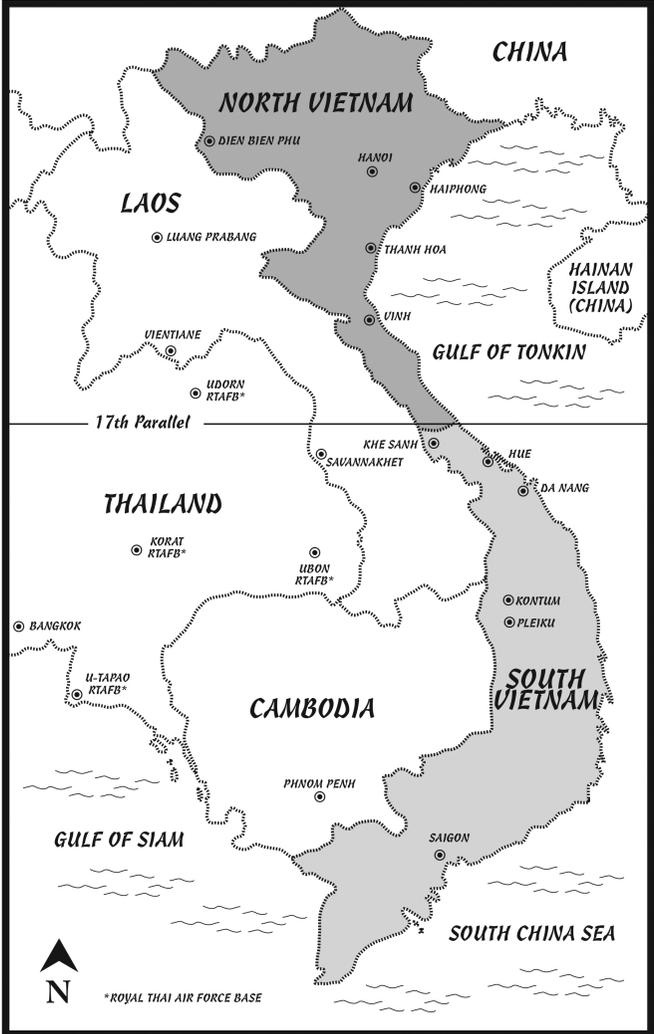
**THE  
PRESIDENT'S  
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Honoring the United States 26th Marine Regiment (Reinforced)  
and other American Defenders of Khe Sanh on the  
Fiftieth Anniversary of the Siege  
(1968-2018)



SOUTHEAST ASIA

## CHAPTER ONE

# EXHAUSTION AND PERCEPTION

The endless meetings in the White House since the spring and summer of 1967 consumed President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Exhausting, they stretched late into the night, often resuming before six the next morning. The subject of the meetings was always the same: the war in Vietnam.

Richard Helms, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, attended one such gathering in the Situation Room that lasted three hours in mid-December, just days before President Johnson was to travel to Australia, and not long after his first daughter's wedding.

Concern focused on decisions made by Hanoi that would affect the conflict with the Americans. The North Vietnamese, assuming a more belligerent stance, were declaring a new military policy.

Aerial photographs from U.S. reconnaissance flights, spread out on the conference table, confirmed a sharp increase in enemy activity south of the Demilitarized Zone. Certain battle loomed in Quang Tri Province, one of five South Vietnam provinces in the northern region of the country known to the American military as the One Corps Tactical Zone. The U.S. Marines' encampment in the extreme northwest corner of the CTZ was vulnerable. That place was called Khe Sanh.

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At the conclusion of the meeting, the President's senior advisors packed their briefcases and put their suit jackets back on. Some attendees slipped into a dining area called Navy Mess for coffee.

The CIA Director assembled his papers and stuffed them into a black folder.

Born in St. Davids, Pennsylvania in 1913, Richard McGarrah Helms attended schools in Europe. He became fluent in French and German. After graduating in 1935 from Williams College, he secured a position as a European correspondent for United Press International. Helms covered the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. He was among a group of journalists who interviewed Adolf Hitler after the so-called Rally of Honor at Nuremberg. Helms received his officer's commission in the United States Navy in 1942. A year later, his language skills in demand, the Navy transferred him to a mysterious organization: the Office of Special Services. His early assignments in the OSS were the beginnings of a lifetime of espionage.

Shortly after World War Two, the OSS was dissolved. The Central Intelligence Group took its place. It morphed into the Central Intelligence Agency. Officially recognized in 1947, the CIA's covert activities weren't employed until 1949. Richard Helms, struggling through the nascent years of the CIA, forming its unorthodox methodologies, was in the middle of it all.

A precisionist, Helms believed the CIA must provide a President finished, non-politicized intelligence based on exacting analysis of all relevant data.

The Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis, the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem in Saigon in 1963 and, three weeks later, that of John F. Kennedy in Dallas, moved Helms steadily into the intelligence spotlight. President Lyndon Johnson appointed Richard Helms to directorship of the CIA in June 1966. A year later, the accurate predictions he made about the Arab-Israeli Six Day War propelled Helms to the pinnacle of his trade.

Now, holding his folder, Helms stood alone in contemplation just outside the Situation Room. He caught sight of Marvin Watson, the President's appointments secretary and de facto Chief of Staff, and George Christian. However, he focused mostly on Walt Rostow, the President's National

Security Advisor, and Arthur Lundahl. The two men were talking in hushed tones.

Helms crooked his index finger at both men.

“Walt, Arthur. We need to talk.”

Helms adjusted his glasses. “You know, map scales leave a lot to be desired.”

Rostow and Lundahl looked quizzically at the director.

“Sir?”

Helms dismissed the inflection, the word stated more as a question.

“It takes time for someone to acquire a feel for geographic information shown on maps. Understanding terrain and elevation is difficult, but distances, well, that may even be harder. For foreign visitors to the United States, traveling from Los Angeles to San Francisco by road might seem easy. A matter of only a few hundred miles between the two cities, right? But, a full day is required to make the trip. Get my drift, gentlemen? It’s the scale that’s difficult to perceive.”

Lundahl nodded his understanding.

“Mr. Director, I...”

“No, Arthur. Let me finish my point.”

Helms could be loquacious at times. “Europeans think in terms of kilometers, not miles, which are longer...miles that is. Europe is smaller in area than the U.S. Distances seem less, but the numbers indicating those distances are greater. Map scales are, let’s just say, different.”

Lundahl scratched his head. Kilometers, miles, scale...was this going to be a long lecture?

“Many Americans understand that China, Brazil and Canada are big countries. But, how big? Bigger than Texas? It takes forever to drive across the President’s home state.”

Walt Rostow was growing impatient.

“Mr. Director, the President...”

Helms held up his hand.

“Both of you have traveled abroad. From Brussels, four countries can be accessed within an hour, right? One can go to Paris, have lunch and be home

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easily before dark. No one in their right mind would drive from Washington D.C. to Connecticut on Thanksgiving for turkey and back on the same day.”

Rostow massaged his forehead while Lundahl straightened his tie.

“Now, about Vietnam. The President’s struggling to understand the geography. He has to make adjustments away from perceptions about distance, land and space. We need to help him see the entire CTZ, especially around Khe Sanh, more clearly in the context of coordinates, elevation, difficult terrain...and distances.”

What was Helms going on about? Why the sermon?

Helms’s pedestrian speech, bordering on tedium, changed in tempo.

“You’ll recall General Westmoreland’s plans for cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail to stop North Vietnam’s flow of men and materiel to the South. Khe Sanh was to blunt North Vietnam’s efforts.”

“Yes, Sir,” Rostow responded. “The President decided against that action last April.”

“Right, Walt. Even you said it could be the most damaging decision in the war.”

“His decision could work against us, Mr. Director.”

“Listen, North Vietnam’s 325C Division, which pulled back after they were mauled around Khe Sanh last spring, has returned. They lost close to one thousand men during the fights in the hills. They’re still a threat. Ever since Operation Scotland began on the first of November, the President has been acutely worried about the continued influx of NVA into the area.

“We expect the entire 304th Division to be in theater soon. The 320th Division and the 675th Artillery Regiment will completely invest in early January. Further, the North Vietnamese high command has been studying various battlefield scenarios to determine points of aggression.”

Helms paused. “And, there you have it. Before the New Year starts, that’s how 1968 is already shaping up. In Hanoi’s eyes, its military preparations over the past ten years will have been for nothing if they don’t accelerate their agenda.

“Something big is about to happen in Quang Tri Province. It could spell disaster for the Marines and determine the fate of the President’s administration.”

Helms fell silent for a second. "Election year is coming up, gentlemen."

Walt Rostow spoke in an aloof tone.

"Well aware, Sir."

Helms pointed his finger at Rostow's chest.

"Walt, you've been vocal about our involvement in Vietnam, that we should use our military more effectively. Did you not provide the President with an analysis of our defensive measures at Khe Sanh in the face of probable attacks?"

"Indeed, I did. I pointed out that currently the First and Third Battalions of the Twenty-sixth Marines are at Khe Sanh. The Third Battalion, mobilized the previous May, was pulled out in early September. They deployed again on the thirteenth of December. The movement was phased so as not to alert the NVA that we were augmenting our forces. Our analysis confirmed we should reinforce Khe Sanh and not Camp J. J. Carroll which we originally thought was the primary target.

"I'm still concerned that we don't have sufficient strength at Khe Sanh against an attack by two or three NVA divisions. Back in November, four NVA regiments, six thousand troops, attacked Dak To. The enemy lost about seventeen hundred men killed while we lost close to four hundred KIA. But some would argue the NVA fared better."

Richard Helms cocked a curious eye.

"Why's that, Walt?"

"The North Vietnamese know that any direct confrontation with the Americans in the coastal plains of Vietnam will be ruinous to them. They seek the rugged terrain of the highlands that do not favor our forces. They want to entice us closer to the border with Laos. This is the scenario for Quang Tri Province, possibly the prelude to Khe Sanh."

Satisfied with an explanation he already knew, Helms smiled.

"OK then. You know what I'm talking about. Look, we don't have the luxury to explain to the President every little thing that's occurring over there.

"He appreciates a good aerial photograph, but to him the ground is flat. The details gleaned from high altitude photographs are difficult for him to grasp. We need a clear visual aid to inform the President. Got me?"

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Helms spoke out of context. “The manner in which the war is being managed is...well, quite frankly...”

“Mr. Director,” Arthur Lundahl spoke up. “Why not an enlarged map... wallpaper size? A map free of unnecessary information. Just the key locations and main roads. Maybe the maps we use are too cluttered with details. We can enhance shading to better represent the terrain, use miles instead of kilometers, if that would make it easier for the President.”

“Arthur, my boy, you may be on to something.”

Walt Rostow and Arthur Lundahl looked at each other in mild surprise. It was a simple idea, really.

Richard Helms left the west wing of the White House and climbed into the waiting limousine near the southwest gate. He caught sight of Arthur Lundahl. Helms rolled down a back window.

The cold December air froze his breath, its white vapor swirling around his face.

“Lundahl, come over here for a minute, please.”

“Sir...Mr. Director.”

“Arthur, we’re ex-Navy officers. We understand the need to manage events properly. It’s incumbent on us to make sure the President has easily understood information. You analyzed thousands of photographs during World War Two. You’ve written a number of papers about photo interpretation. You created the National Photographic Interpretation Center, NPIC, as you call it. You’re the top dog there.

“The special commendation you received from President Kennedy during the missile crisis speaks highly of your analytical skills. Your group received a Presidential Unit Citation. Here’s the deal, Arthur. We’ve got a bad situation. Your map idea makes sense.”

“I’ll look into it, Sir.”

Lundahl stood back from the limousine. The rear window slid up, then abruptly down.

“Oh, Arthur, your analysis in that meeting was excellent...Merry Christmas to you and your family.”

The heavy iron gates swung open. The black vehicle exited the White House grounds.

“Holy cow,” Lundahl said just above his breath. “I can’t believe it. Helms led me by my nose and I opened my big mouth. Now, I’ve got a project on my hands.”

The limousine made its way past President’s Park and the monument commemorating the U.S. Army First Division, the Big Red One, and on to Constitution Avenue.

The easiest way back to the CIA was to turn toward the Lincoln Memorial, cross the Roosevelt Bridge to the George Washington Memorial Parkway and proceed up the Potomac River to Langley, Virginia.

Had Richard Helms made the journey a few hours later, he would have witnessed colorful Christmas lights adorning the homes on the opposite bank. Helms always enjoyed the scenic drive along the Potomac valley near Fort Marcy, especially during the holiday season, but his thoughts, now centered on a possible NVA ground attack against the Khe Sanh Combat Base, precluded such pleasure.

## CHAPTER TWO

# DUELING WITH GIFFORD

The jungles of western Quang Tri Province turned tranquil just before dawn—very tranquil—but not completely quiet. The only sounds heard were those of small birds, the occasional rustle of palm fronds and the low roar of the Quang Tri River as its muddy water sluiced through the cataracts below the canyon walls.

The heavy rains subsided during the night. A break in the clouds allowed some sun. Still, everything was saturated.

Captain Jason Becker led his Marine patrol on a mission to reconnoiter a section of Highway Nine far from the Khe Sanh Combat Base. Becker looked at his map. He and his men were on the north bank of the Quang Tri River just downstream of the confluence with the Da Krong and the Rao Quan Rivers. Becker confirmed his location in the eerie landscape by spotting two islands in the river that barely showed up on his map.

Lieutenant Gerry Gifford, who Captain Becker had placed at point, gasped for air as he ran back to the patrol. His M-79 grenade launcher and M-16 assault rifle, both slung over his shoulder, bounced on his back. Gifford always carried both weapons. He reached Captain Becker's position just below the cliff.

“Captain,” he urgently whispered. “Something’s happening on the other side of the river.”

Captain Becker returned with Gifford to the river’s edge to investigate. They scanned the tropical landscape from behind large boulders, looking for movement, for patterns. They heard the muffled but unmistakable commotion of personnel handling military equipment. Soon, they saw through the early morning grayness camouflaged figures toiling in the jungle.

Captain Becker strained his eyes.

“The NVA must have been on the move for a few days. What the hell are they doing, Giff? What’s their strength?”

“Not sure,” Gifford responded. “Maybe a couple of companies, half a battalion. Sure as hell seems to be a lot of ’em over there, Sir.”

“What do you see, Gifford?”

“A couple of .30 cal’s, Sir. I don’t see heavier machine guns...but there!” Gifford quickly pointed. “Over there, Skipper. See ’em? Mortars.”

“Eighty-two millimeters! Shit me alive, Gifford. We’d be crazy to start a firefight against that kind of firepower. Plus, we don’t know what they got hidden in the jungle. There’s no intelligence about NVA units operating here.”

Captain Becker, assessing his men’s position, looked downstream, then over his shoulder up to the steep hills toward the flat plateau on which sat the Khe Sanh Combat Base.

“Lieutenant, we don’t have the advantage.”

“Yeah, with Highway Nine behind us, I’ll bet they’re settin’ up for some kind of ambush.”

“Gifford, what do they know that we don’t know?”

Captain Becker, low to the ground, took another quick glance at the enemy through the brush. Sweat rolled down his dirty face.

“Gifford,” Becker said in a whisper. “Let’s get back to the platoons. Give the arty guys some coordinates and let them take the bastards out. If we maneuver, they’ll cut us down.”

Captain Becker and Lieutenant Gifford moved stealthily back from the river. Becker whispered again, “Gotta find Agostino and his radio quick. Gotta call in fire missions. Go, Gifford! Stay low!”

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“Got it, Skipper.”

Gifford started to run for the forward observer and the radioman. But, it was too late. The distinctive metallic sound of mortar rounds being dropped down the hollow NVA mortar tubes signaled what was going to happen next.

Suddenly, the valley resonated with loud explosions. Both men hit the ground.

Mortar rounds tore up the landscape, but way short of the Marines. The pungent smell of explosives quickly pervaded the area. The NVA sprayed the nearby brush with machine gun fire. Small bullets peppered the trees and ripped the ground apart in spurts of mud. Becker and Gifford could hear the bullets as they zinged overhead. The recognizable short, staccato sounds of AK-47 assault rifles broke out. It all happened fast.

“The bastards! How the hell did they spot us so quickly? They’re gonna find the range and march their mortar rounds right up our ass.”

Becker yelled louder. “Gifford, run like hell. Get me the FO. Get Agostino!”

Both men, Gifford in front, ran toward the Marines who were protecting themselves where they could.

More enemy mortar rounds arced through the sky, fell to earth and exploded violently.

Captain Becker and Lieutenant Gifford made it back to the patrol.

“Return fire! Return fire!”

The Marines opened up with their M-16s and two M-60 machine guns.

The NVA answered the Marines with much larger, more potent rocket propelled grenades from shoulder-held B-40 and B-41 launchers. The flight of the warheads terminated in deafening explosions.

Both sides exchanged long torrents of machine gun and rifle fire. The firefight on the banks of the Quang Tri River, just what Captain Becker was trying to avoid, had started. The now-isolated Marines were in a serious fight for their lives.

Captain Becker called out to his radioman, cursing that he had ever left him in the first place.

“Agostino, we’re facing more than a company of NVA. Get Navajo on the phone.”

Little could be heard above the noise of the explosions. Becker yelled at his forward observer.

“Schuster, we got pre-assigned fire missions for this area?”

“No pre-planned fires here, Sir. Farther downstream. Toto two, Toto four and...”

“Lieutenant, no time for an explanation. We’ll call in a new fire mission...new grid and azimuth. Figure it out.”

Becker reached out.

“Agostino, give me that phone.”

The captain talked into the radio’s hand-held receiver while the FO plotted the fire mission.

“Navajo, this is Oscar Alpha.”

The captain repeated.

“Navajo. Do you read me? Oscar Alpha.”

No reply.

“What’s wrong with those arty guys?”

“Sir, too steep in this valley.”

“Navajo. Oscar Alpha. Need fire support.”

The captain waited for a reply. “Come on you cannon cockers, pick up the phone, for Christ’s sake.”

He pressed the button. “Navajo! Do you read?”

The NVA’s eighty-two millimeter mortar rounds were now coming closer. The air was thick with shrapnel.

Captain Becker turned to Gifford.

“They’ll have us bracketed within seconds.”

Gifford looked around. The steep cliff rising from the valley floor up to Highway Nine above him cut off any easy retreat. The only escape was moving up or down river—suicide either way.

“Navajo, Oscar Alpha. We need arty now! Repeat, immediate! Do you read me?”

Someone shouted.

“Corpsman down!”

In one quick movement, Gifford replaced the contents of his pack with four hand grenades. He put several fat, shotgun-like M-79 cartridges in his vest

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pockets. He grabbed his loaded grenade launcher, positioned his M-16 across his back and, with the satchel of hand grenades, ran across the islands, tripping on rocks and fallen logs, to the river's edge.

The Marines' fire coming from behind was matched by the NVA staccato fire in front of him.

North Vietnamese RPGs sizzled just above Gifford's head. They made horrendous shrieks as they left behind long smoke trails and a stench of burnt propellant. He heard the explosions behind him.

Gifford hid behind shoulder-high boulders. He eyed two NVA mortar crews to his left and the third mortar crew far to the right, all on the other side of the river. Gifford decided to hit the two outside mortars first.

He pushed the M-79's safety to the forward position and aimed the weapon. Its effective range was not much more than four hundred meters, but it was enough.

Gifford pulled the trigger.

The projectile flew on a true trajectory across the river and within seconds, exploded among the NVA mortar crewmen, killing them all.

"You dumb-shits don't know who you're messin' with."

Gifford ducked down and moved ten meters to his left to frustrate enemy snipers. He pushed the M-79's barrel locking latch to the right and opened it. He slid in another shell, closed the breech and moved the safety latch forward. He took aim through the weeds. The shot flew across the stream. Again, it met its target and exploded, disabling the second mortar and killing its crew.

Machine gun fire swept over and to his right and into the trees far behind him cutting down limbs. Bullets ripped through the thicket and zinged off rocks. A line of earth fountains marched right past him to his left as the bullets ripped up the ground.

"Have to take out the machine gun. You sonzabitches."

Gifford reloaded his M-79. "Damn single-shot weapon."

He aimed and pulled the trigger. The grenade landed way in front of the machine gun and exploded harmlessly.

A fourth shot met its target, killing the crew.

Gifford took the risk of exposure. He stood to a crouch and, partially hidden, aimed and fired the last round from his M-79 at the third mortar. The projectile struck quickly with lethal accuracy and exploded.

Some North Vietnamese soldiers, shouting and pointing, approached the river's edge on the south side.

Gifford, his M-16 at the ready, moved to conceal himself and pulled two hand grenades from his pack. He mentally measured the distance to the conjunction point of his throwing abilities and the advancing enemy. Lobbing a grenade isn't like throwing a baseball. Regardless, Gifford was going for the strike zone.

Gifford clamped the safety spoon to the round grenade casing with his left hand and pulled the arming pin with his other hand.

"Ground ball to short center with a runner on third. A straight throw to home plate from behind second base."

Gifford rose up to his full height, drew his left arm behind him and, with the strength of a Roman catapult, launched his grenade straight at the enemy. The result was deadly.

"Not bad for a southpaw."

He spotted more NVA to his left, a more difficult throw. Repeating the movement, Gifford clamped the spoon down, pulled the pin on his second grenade and stood upright. He stretched his long, lanky, sinewy left arm all the way back. Like a tightly coiled spring, his arm snapped forward in a shortened arc over and to the left of his head. The grenade sailed to its target and exploded, stopping the NVA.

Gifford threw the last two grenades in rapid succession. He retreated into the brush with bullets tearing at the leaves and waist-high grass. Gifford turned, aimed his M-16 rifle, pulled the trigger and emptied the magazine.

The North Vietnamese were now charging in force across the river. The Marines opposing them lay down an intense wall of fire.

Back with the patrol, Gifford yelled out, "Captain, I can't suppress them anymore,"

Lieutenant Schuster tried to raise the Fire Direction Center on the combat base. He had determined the grid coordinates for the new fire mission.

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“Navajo, this is Oscar Alpha.”

A second later, with urgent desperation. “NAVAJO, FIRE MISSION!”

“Oscar Alpha. Send your mission.”

The grid would be sent in the clear. No time for shackle codes.

“Navajo, grid, x-ray delta, niner two niner four one niner, compass azimuth one four seven degrees. Request two rounds hotel echo, adjust fire, over.”

“Oscar Alpha, battery engaged. Firefight near Kilo Sierra. Stand by six zero seconds.”

Captain Becker grabbed the receiver from Schuster.

“NAVAJO! Oscar Alpha Actual! Negative, Negative! NVA in the open attacking our position. I repeat, NVA in the open.”

“Oscar Alpha Actual, working the data. Stand by fire mission.”

The Marines maintained a withering fire which stalled the NVA’s advance. NVA mortar rounds fell among the Marines. Fire from the NVA machine guns ripped through the area like a scythe. RPGs punctuated the cacophony with their rocket sounds and explosions that shook everything.

The Fire Direction Center at Khe Sanh plotted the grid and azimuth, determined range and deflection and muzzle elevation. The battery responded.

“Fire!”

Two howitzers fired one round each.

The FDC spoke immediately to Captain Becker.

“Oscar Alpha. Shot.”

There was a slight pause. Then the FDC gave Schuster and Captain Becker a heads-up.

“Splash.”

Two 105mm shells smashed into the river bed east of the tip of the north island and short of the advancing NVA. Mud and water flew into the sky.

“Navajo, Adjust fire. Right two hundred, add one hundred.”

Like before, the FDC spoke.

“Shot.” Then, “Splash.”

The rounds exploded in the middle of the enemy near the edge of the river.

“Navajo, good shooting. Request battery three volleys. Fire for effect. Oscar Alpha.”

Within seconds, eighteen shells exploded among the NVA. The valley filled

with a continuous roar of explosions. The ground beneath the charging North Vietnamese soldiers churned into brown and black geysers of dark water.

“Navajo, repeat fire for effect.”

“Oscar Alpha, on its way. Will advise Romeo Papa and Charlie Charlie to provide reinforcing fire.”

“Navajo, have Romeo Papa and Charlie Charlie fire spotting rounds. Will adjust. All rounds fuse quick, victor tango in effect. Danger close, repeat, danger close.”

The Fire Support Coordination Center on the combat base made contact with Rockpile and Camp Carroll. Giant U.S. Army track-mounted 175mm long range guns, two from each location, fired. The projectiles arrived with a sudden impact, making the explosions of the 105mm shells look insignificant, but the large shells landed short of the target.

Schuster spoke into the receiver to correct fire.

“Add two hundred, fire for effect.”

Captain Becker yelled out.

“Marines, get low. Incoming 175s!”

The big cannons at Rockpile and Camp Carroll opened up with their large shells, in two volleys. The projectiles, their shriek faint at first, screamed loudly through the air. Within seconds, round after round smashed into the area amidst the advancing NVA. The U.S. Army’s King of Battle had arrived.

Suddenly stopped, the surviving enemy retreated south across the Quang Tri River and disappeared into the tall elephant grass, leaving their dead and wounded behind.

“Navajo, check fire. End of mission. Good shooting! Thanks to Romeo Papa and Charlie Charlie. I have at least three dozen enemy KIA.”

Literally out of the blue, a new voice came on the radio.

“Oscar Alpha, this is White Star Two Five overhead, north your position. State status.”

“White Star, ten WIAs, some serious.”

“Roger that. Arranging chopper extraction. Stand by one. Changing channels.”

Two minutes passed.

“Oscar Alpha, White Star. Three 46s en route. Two for extraction to Kilo

## THE PRESIDENT'S SANDBOX

Sierra. Other will take WIAs to Da Nang direct. On ground your position in one zero minutes. Have called for Alpha Charlie support. Copy?"

"White Star, thanks for gettin' us outta here. We owe you a few drinks."

The pilot's voice was garbled by the sound of the plane's engine, but one word came out clear.

"Vodka."

Back on the combat base, Agostino and Lieutenant Schuster approached Gifford as he sat against some sandbags with a warm Black Label beer in his hand.

"The captain needs you, Lieutenant. You and Lieutenant Schuster, here. Pronto."

Gifford looked up. He shielded his eyes from the low sun with his forearm.

"Come on, Giff," Schuster said. "Get your ass in gear. The skipper wants you and me now."

Gifford grabbed his M-16 and M-79 and stood. The Marines walked to the CP and went in.

Captain Becker didn't bother to look up from a report he was preparing.

"You knocked out three mortars, eighty-two millimeters, right, Gifford? How many mortars total do you think, Lieutenant?"

There may have been five or six. They were still settin' up."

"Lieutenant, I'm thinking there may have been as many as five hundred NVA out there."

Captain Becker lit a cigarette and inhaled. He turned to his forward observer whose face still reflected the terror of the event.

"Lieutenant Schuster, that was some bad shit, but we got through it. I know you ain't been here long. If you were scared, don't worry about it. I was scared shitless."

Schuster's face brightened up.

Becker continued. "You can be my FO anytime. I appreciate what you did today. We poured some bad-ass artillery fire into the middle of those bastards."

"Chewed 'em up pretty good, Sir."

Back to Gifford. “Doesn’t it strike you odd, Giff, that the NVA didn’t call in their own artillery rather than risk their men?”

“I never thought of it, Sir. I was too damned busy.”

“Get some rest. I’ll need both of you on the next patrol. There’s not many Christmas beers left. Be sure you get one.”

“Had one already, Sir,” Gifford said.

“Get another one while they last.”

“Is that all, Sir?”

“Gifford, something tells me this crap is just gonna get worse. I think we’re at Khe Sanh for the long haul.”

Captain Becker drew on his cigarette as he looked at Gerry Gifford. “You done good today, Marine. Good shootin’ with that blooper.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Oh, and Lieutenant...those grenades. Where’d ya learn to throw like that?”

“Phoenix, Sir.”