

Each One a Hero

©2016 Michael March

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**EACH ONE
A HERO**

A WORK OF
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
FICTION BY

**MICHAEL
MARCH**

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Dedicated to all the loyal young men and women who answered their country's call and served in the armed forces during the Vietnam conflict. To the brave souls who've paid the ultimate price and the countless others who still today, carry the physical and emotional scars of war, we thank you for defending our freedom. This message of appreciation may be a bit late coming, but America loves you and will always cherish their heroes.

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CHAPTER ONE:
**WELCOME TO
THE PARTY**

JULY 17, 1967

THE MERCILESS HEAT of the tropics attacked their bodies with ultra-intense humidity that generated waves of physical discomfort. Eight exceedingly nervous recruits sat in the back of the “deuce and a half,” their poplin fatigue shirts inundated with moisture and pasted to their bodies. The wide-eyed young men, none of them far removed from puberty or the protection of their stateside safety nets, held on for dear life as they bounced around on the long benches of the transport vehicle that rumbled up Route Two, carrying them to their new home.

A small village, slightly obscured by the cloudy gray acrid-smelling exhaust, lay five hundred meters behind them. Lieutenant Garcia, riding in the jeep just behind the lumbering truck, would later identify it as Xuan Loc when filing his comprehensive, after-action report. The “newbies” each held an M-14 rifle provided by the Long Binh armory less than an hour earlier. A six-clip bandolier of ammunition hung from each man’s shoulders. At this time of day and in such a “friendly” area, no one expected trouble.

The in-country-for-a-day replacements belonged to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment and were less than six clicks from their eventual destination, Blackhorse base camp. Each maintained a watchful eye as they wondered what to expect from this new reality. For the eight, varying degrees of anxiety ran through their sensory system. None had any idea what they'd be experiencing in just a few seconds.

"Hey, Danny, will ya look at that old guy over there. Just check him out."

Cliff, a usually mellow and easy-going Californian, pointed excitedly to an old man squatting on the shoulder of the roadside. His back to them and bare butt exposed, the old guy had removed his conical straw hat and held it in his left hand as he relieved himself.

Daniel, a sarcastic New Yorker, laughed out loud.

"Cliff, this is whacked. Don't tell me that dude is taking a crap in the ditch. That's fucking crazy, right?"

Before the displaced "surfer dude" could answer, a deafening explosion rang out and the M35 truck stopped dead in its tracks. The noisy six-cylinder diesel engine sputtered for a fraction of a second before giving up the ghost. The soldiers in the truck bed, unable to get a good handhold on anything, all flew forward, making hard contact with the rear of the truck's cab. Falling together in a heap, their rifles scattered on the truck bottom. The report of automatic weapons fire began to fill the air with bullets ripping through the fiberglass and wood of the sideboards that scarcely provided any protection.

The men responded swiftly. Scooping up one of the rifles from the metal floorboards, they scrambled to the right side

of the disabled vehicle, lifting their weapons and returning fire. The lead ACAV, thirty feet in front of their truck, pivoted right and its fifty-caliber machine gun and pair of M-60s, already locked in on targets, tore up chunks of the underbrush. The recruits peppered the outskirts of the jungle with rounds from their M-14s. The transport's engine smoldered, a victim of a command detonated mine. The blast, in addition to blowing off the shotgun side front tire, had sent shards of metal through the broken windshield and into the cab of the truck.

“Mother-humper; this is a fucking piece of shit!”

Through the din, Dan recognized Cliff's voice and turned in his buddy's direction. His friend struggled. Bending down on one knee, he frantically tried to clear his weapon. Dan noticed another rifle lying on the truck bed behind his pal. He yelled out to him.

“Cliff, there's another rifle behind you. Turn around.”

Dropping the useless weapon, Cliff grabbed the new M-14 and slid next to Dan. The weapon belonged to one of their number, who no longer had use for it or could return fire. His lifeless body, lay face down on the floor of the truck, hit in the initial burst of enemy small arms fire. Suddenly, another trooper fell sideways, his weapon falling from his hands and bouncing off the bench beneath him. The mortally wounded comrade's face exploded and his limbs went limp. He crumpled onto Cliff, knocking his rifle aside, as a splash of cranial gray matter and rivulets of red life-giving fluid, splattered onto his fatigue shirt. Cliff pushed away the dead trooper, steadied his weapon and continued firing.

Dan pulled out an empty magazine, shoved in a full one and continued shooting. Cliff, crouching down next to him, his right knee resting on the bench and head peeking just over the slat panels, did the same. Curses spilled from Cliff's lips. The truck's sideboard supported their rifles. Both their right forefingers applied pressure to the metal triggers, a steady stream of bullets spewing from their tools of destruction.

The smell of the smoking, burned-up gunpowder, the popping of the grenades emerging from the M79 launchers and the corresponding explosions, which landed less than half a football field distant, made for a surreal scene. Just like a battle in a John Wayne movie, but this one unscripted, way over budget and with no director or cinematographer. As hateful as life could be, this was the seventh circle in "Dante's Fucking Inferno" with absolute pandemonium and violence on the loose, looking for victims to send to damnation for all time.

The soldiers had no choice. Empty their magazines and reload. Don't let the bullets stop flying from the rifle barrel. Those bastards in the trees wanted to end their lives. Don't let them. Just keep firing and snuff out their flames first.

One voice began yelling and then another. Several people picked up on it and joined in.

"Cease fire, cease fire."

The sounds of weapons on the warpath slowly diminished. People relaxed. The danger had come and gone.

• • •

THE FIREFIGHT LASTED less than ten minutes. By the time the two helicopters hovered overhead, the Viet Cong had packed up. Like phantoms, they'd disappeared back into the jungle. Leaving behind some cigarette butts, a bunch of shell casings and some blood, Charlie had also left his calling card. Two of the newly arrived troopers no longer walked this earth.

A gruff voice, rising above the tumult, advised the surviving troopers of their good fortune.

“You know, you sons of bitches are mighty lucky.”

The words came from the mouth of Sergeant Warren, the track commander of the APC that led the four-vehicle convoy as he slowly strode past the six surviving replacements. He adjusted his web belt that supported the holster and forty-five pistol while giving a bit more of his sage advice.

“Good thing the dinks didn't have more people with them and decided to only break our balls. We coulda been caught up in a crossfire and really fucked.”

Two of the guys nodded in response.

Shaken, Dan's facial expression told his story.

The sergeant's gray eyes narrowed, but before he had a chance to say anything, Cliff distracted the NCO with a question.

“Hey, Sarge, didn't we kill a few of them motherfuckers. We did, right?”

The sergeant didn't answer. He turned away and helped another trooper pull a poncho over one of the dead bodies lying next to the truck. A breeze fought against his efforts, trying hard to leave the poor soul's disfigured face uncovered. The sergeant looked up and growled.

“Hey, you cherries, get over here and help out.”

Dan’s body shook. He felt sick to his stomach. As he reached for the corner of the poncho, he turned his head and gave up his breakfast. The puke landed right next to the half-naked body of the dead grandpa. The sergeant smirked.

“Hey, you better get used to this shit, rookie! It only gets worse.”

Dan pulled out his handkerchief and wiped off his lips. He spit and swiped at his mouth again.

“Sorry, Sergeant.”

Dan felt dizzy and took several deep breaths to help steady himself. Holy shit, he’d barely survived his first taste of the Southeast Asian insanity.

CHAPTER TWO:
**A MOST BEAUTIFUL
SUMMER VACATION**

THREE DAYS IN-COUNTRY

TO THE COMMON citizen, getting sent to a war zone sucks the big one and several facts of life need immediate acceptance. One of the line items up there on the list is the need to irrigate one's body. Replenishing precious bodily fluids, expended by even the slightest of physical activities, needs to be embraced and converted into second nature. This task is easily accomplished by drinking plenty of lukewarm water and scarfing down handfuls of those little white salt tablets, first introduced to everybody in basic training. But even more vital on the ever-expanding "must-do" itinerary is protecting oneself from disease.

Anti-malaria pills can cause a bad case of the "shits," but that physical reaction comes with the territory; better to deal with the cramps and resulting consequences than carry around some messed-up malady for the rest of your life. But number one and the most golden of all the rules is the need for self-preservation. Get your freakin' head down whenever the sound of incoming fire pervades the eardrums and keep it down. Don't go sticking it up to look around.

Cliff, Dan and their fellow replacements had become so freaked out from their war-ravaged encounters, they'd hit the dirt if one of their number so much as passed wind a bit too loudly. Adjusting to life in a combat zone was very confusing, everyone struggling to survive and dodge the booby traps, both real and imagined. Staying focused and eliminating any level of foolhardiness took precedence over all else.

As Cliff and Dan worked on their burgeoning architectural skills by loading up burlap bags with damp dirt and redesigning a bunker on the outer perimeter, they'd each gone through a canteen of water since they started at noon. With the temperature at almost one-hundred degrees, the liquid replenished bodily fluids and restored electrolytes, keeping their muscles moving. Cliff dug the tip of his shovel into the dirt, letting it stand upright. Picking up an olive-colored towel, he wiped his face, then his shoulders and chest. Pulling a Lucky Strike from the cigarette pack in his fatigue jacket lying on a pile of sandbags, he flicked open his Zippo and lit it up.

"Ya know, Danny, I bet if we keep on digging, we'll end up in South Dakota or Wyoming or someplace out west. Maybe even come up on the Little Big Horn battlefield and find ourselves some arrowheads."

Dan, puzzled by his pal's comments, stopped shoveling, sat down on the side of the half-built wall and smiled.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

Cliff chuckled.

"Don't you get it? You remember when we were kids back in the States, we'd talk about digging to China? At least we did in California."

Dan still didn't get it.

"Yeah, we did in New York too, but I still don't understand."

Cliff shrugged, his lungs pulling in the smoke from his cancer stick. He shook his head from side to side. Still smiling, he exhaled the smoke.

"Okay, Dan! I'll explain. Where the fuck are we now? We're not too far from China. It's north of here. Right?"

Now Dan understood.

"Ha, ha. That's so funny, Cliff, that I forgot to laugh."

Speaking of the "badlands," and the "great wide open spaces," both Cliff and Dan wished they could be there right now and not on this far side of the world. Shit, both felt accused, convicted and sentenced for some crime they had no recollection of committing. One-year terms for both of them with no time off for good behavior.

Having newbie status was not an enviable position for any man to occupy. Viewed as fresh meat, still possessing some of their juicy baby fat, they'd get to sweat it all off in the proverbial meat grinder. Aware that just one tiny mistake and *wham*, that would be it—a one-way ticket to graves registration, they needed to sit up and pay attention.

The 11th Armored Cavalry happened to be a unique outfit, a bastard regiment with its own everything: air cavalry unit, engineers, transportation unit, medical detachment and whatever else it needed to function. Both men were property of the Third Squadron. Cliff was an Eleven Bravo and assigned to I Troop; Dan, an artillery man, was an asset of the Howitzer Battery. Before assigned any duty with their units, the neophytes attended a week of mandatory jungle training where they were taught the art of avoiding booby traps and

eluding poisonous snakes, as well as identifying feces-laden Punji pits. Warned repeatedly, the trainees could not have intercourse with local women. Undoubtedly, these women had been infected with incurable venereal diseases or hid razor blades inside themselves—so not to touch! And, oh yes, buying sodas from the kids on the side of the road was off limits. The drinks could be laced with ground-up glass.

Dan had been given a cot in the detail platoon hooch. The artillery battery, consisting of six 155mm self-propelled howitzers, sure made a racket, even when only one gun fired off a deadly round. Each night, at one hour intervals, a single M107 round was fired off by one of the guns, designed to mess with the enemy. As each blast went off the previous night, Dan sprung up from his cot and dove to the wooden barrack's floor, expecting the worst.

At breakfast the next morning, Pepe, also a New Yorker, clued Dan in.

“Don’t worry, you get used to it after a while. I don’t even hear it anymore. Sleep right through it, dude. So will you, man.”

A machine gunner on a forward observer track riding with L Troop, Pepe would be rolling out of the gates with part of Third Squadron in half an hour. The two of them had met the day before as Dan filled up his foot locker and got squared away in the barracks. In-country for more than seven months, Pepe seemed confident, twirling one end of his thin mustache with his left hand as he spoke to the recruit. Boy, Dan envied him. More than half-way done with his tour, that amount of time seemed almost unreachable right now. Only three days in-country for Dan; he felt lost and scared.

He'd be working in the Fire Direction Control Section once his initial orientation period ended. Meanwhile, his barracks, standard Army issue, was a semi-permanent pre-fab affair. It consisted of wooden floorboards, screened-in sides and a canvas covering with a musty, mildewed odor saturating the air of its interior. Dan looked at the bright side. It could be worse; he could have been dead already.

Dan's two months of technical training at Fort Sill meant nothing now. No such animal as Artillery Surveyor existed in Vietnam; the executive officer placed the guns and that job slot was deemed unnecessary. So with above-average math skills and sufficiently high scores on his aptitude tests, Dan would be getting some on-the-job training deciphering maps, while figuring azimuths of fire and distance. But first, jungle school in the mornings and blisters on the hands in the afternoon for another five days.

• • •

AT ZERO-NINE-THIRTY HOURS, Pepe pulled up his shirt sleeve and took a look at his watch, unaware that this would be the final time he'd view the high school graduation present from his parents or care anything about time. Only a few clouds hung in the sky and bright sunshine framed the day. The Third Platoon of L Troop and three vehicles from the 615th Military Police Company entered the kill zone, a trap later identified as having been sprung by the 275th Main Force Viet Cong Regiment. Also at precisely zero-nine-thirty, the parcel of land that represented grid coordinate YT432316 on a map of Route 20 exploded with the sound of recoilless rifles, machine guns, RPGs and small arms fire.

The heavily fortified unit of enemy soldiers, outnumbering their opponents by more than six to one, laid down a devastating bombardment of hostile fire. Pepe and the embattled American forces fought bravely for more than an hour before elements of K and I troops came to their aid, along with air power and artillery support. By eleven-hundred hours, Charlie had retreated into the jungle, leaving almost two-hundred of their dead behind.

Considered a resounding victory for the Americans, Blackhorse's losses numbered fourteen killed and almost three score wounded. Pepe's ACAV didn't make it; neither did he and two barrack mates riding on it. Their forward observer track took several direct hits from VC rockets and only the track commander, Sergeant Mason, survived, thrown clear by one of the exploding rockets and miraculously escaping uninjured.

• • •

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, they got a break from filling up sandbags under the blistering sun. Cliff, Dan and two or three dozen other troopers marched down to squadron headquarters and, standing at attention, watched and listened to the regimental chaplain as he memorialized those fourteen souls lost during the Route 20 ambush. In Vietnam for only four days, Cliff and Dan knew full well the meaning of life and death, and the harsh reality of war.

CHAPTER THREE: **FIELD DAY**

JULY 24, 1967

COUNTLESS THOUGHTS RATTLED around Dan's head as he peered out from the door of the helicopter and squinted into the bright mid-morning sun. Reflecting on his various concerns and trepidations, he heard the rotor blades of the Huey continue slicing through the steamy sky above, bringing the mechanical monster and its passengers ever closer to their destination.

"Well, here we go," Dan thought, as the Bell UH-1 began to descend, aided by the two puffs of green smoke that highlighted the landing zone. As the helicopter slowly settled onto the ground, the door gunner turned and gestured for the human cargo to disembark. Cliff poked Dan.

"You ready, bro?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Go, go, go," the crewman yelled, his hoarse voice barely audible over the racket created by the whirling rotor blades.

Dan, Cliff and the two other passengers grabbed their duffel bags and rifles before jumping out. All four of them ducked down as they ran from the Huey, avoiding its noisy, rotating blades. Dry mouthed, heart thumping in his ears, Dan scanned the area looking for the 155 Howitzers. A

strange sensation ran through him as he realized the vegetation had some similarity with the marshy lands surrounding the inlets at Gerritsen Beach in Brooklyn, making him a bit homesick.

The landscape may have been similar to those marshlands in some physical or visual respects, but it was still a totally unknown entity to Dan and the other troopers who stood there with him. Back home, he and his friends had worried about the water rats who resided amongst the tall reeds. The rodents never bothered anybody, wanting to avoid human contact and stay hidden, fearful of what the giants might do to them and rightly so. But Dan and his buddies worried even more, fearful of encountering one of the disease-carrying furry creatures while passing through the stalks.

In Vietnam, the rats grew to what seemed like a hundred times larger, had way more experience with human contact and were so much smarter than those in Brooklyn. Extremely dangerous, quite vicious and heavily armed by nature, their razor-sharp teeth could inflict a bite so lethal that no series of rabies shots or medicinal aids could help you.

A tap on the shoulder from a trooper interrupted Dan's musing.

"Don't you know it? This is some fucking great shit, man! I've been waiting for this chance since I signed up. I'll teach these commie assholes a thing or two. Just you wait and see."

Dan and Cliff exchanged looks over this guy's bravado.

Billy Watkins, a crazy blood and guts, gung-ho son of a bitch with the annoying habit of talking out loud to no one in particular, had turned his faucet on again. At jungle school, Billy had been reprimanded by one of the sergeants for his

constant stream of chatter. Dan and Cliff knew his whole story. An incessant talker, Billy would explain to anyone within earshot how his former sweetheart mailed him a “Dear John” letter and broke his heart prior to him leaving for Nam.

Billy promised he’d show them all, win some medals and learn to become the best point man in the business. A big, dumb, overgrown kid playing at war, just like he did growing up in Cleveland, always victorious and ready to fight another day.

Billy had made a “minor” miscalculation at the time of enlistment. Uncertain as to what he wanted to do in the Army, the recruiting sergeant convinced Billy that becoming an artilleryman would be the job for him. Arriving in Vietnam with a 13A10 MOS and orders to hump ammo on one of the big guns, Billy easily persuaded squadron headquarters to put him on an ACAV with K Troop, providing him the opportunity he so desperately craved. Billy could hone his proficiency with an M-60 machine gun and cradle a nifty little grenade launcher if he liked. Dan believed that with trouble already on the lookout, why give it some extra chances?

Archibald Lewis, a soul brother and the fourth variable in the equation, hailed from Detroit’s inner city. “T-Bone,” as Archie called himself, thought the whole Army scene a total bunch of bullshit. Claiming gang banger status, he had grown up with death. A veteran of the streets, he spoke through taut lips while explaining how he’d seen people die. While in jungle school, T-Bone had opened his shirt and pointed out two stab wounds to his left shoulder, and

laughed as he showed Dan where a bullet ripped away a piece of his left ear lobe.

T-Bone had been given a choice by a judge—jail or the Army. Another trooper assigned to “Killing” K Troop, T-Bone, unlike Billy, possessed a much more cautious approach to the war. In T-Bone’s own words, he wouldn’t be volunteering for any “mutha fuckin” thing and you could bet your sweet ass on that!

All four of them had arrived at Blackhorse base camp together, surviving the ambush on the way over from the Repo Depot. It was funny how each of them had a very different perspective on their immediate situation. Billy couldn’t wait to find trouble, T-Bone wanted to avoid any and Cliff just planned on doing his duty. Dan still struggled with the fact that dense jungles surrounded him.

Cliff and Dan shook hands.

“I’ll catch up to you later, Danny.”

“Yeah, good luck. Catch you later. Keep your head down, Cliff.”

Dan said goodbye to Billy and T-Bone. They headed off to join their unit. Cliff walked with them, intent on finding I Troop. Dan had it easier. He spied the big howitzers about a hundred meters away at the far end of the bivouac area. Balancing his duffle bag over one of his shoulders and carrying his M16 on the other, he stepped carefully, maneuvering through several yards of the calf-deep mud and making it up onto some dry grass.

Three M113 armored personnel carriers and an M48 Patton tank maneuvered about thirty meters ahead of him. Taking up positions against the piled up dirt and concertina

wire, they filled gaps in the defensive perimeter. As Dan walked toward them, a strong breeze blew the harsh odor of the smoking diesel fuel that powered their engines into his nostrils while the clatter generated by the mechanical monsters filled his ears. Suddenly, with a thunderous roar, one of the howitzers fired off a round. Dan just kept walking. As he reached the outskirts of How Battery, four of the guns fired off their payloads almost simultaneously. The ground shuddered from the recoil and Dan dropped his duffle bag and hit the dirt.

Everyone around him continued with their business and he laughed at himself as he stood up and brushed himself off. So did a master sergeant and a PFC as they walked by. Dan quickly gathered up his belongings.

“Excuse me, Sergeant. Can you point out the FDC track?”

The four guns fired again. The earth shook, but Dan stood his ground. The sergeant snickered and lifted his arm.

“Sure. Right over that way.”

He pointed out a command track with a tent attached to the back end.

“Good luck, kid. Welcome to the party.”

Lieutenant Schmidt looked up from the map as Dan pulled open the tent flap and entered. Pointing toward a cot in one corner, he gave Dan the first of what would be many orders.

“Take a seat, Dundee. I’ll be with you soon.”

“Yes, sir,” Dan answered him, trying to appear confident as he placed his duffle bag down and propped his rifle up against the cot.

He took a seat and watched as the lieutenant and the three other soldiers hunched over the map table. One worked with

an architectural compass and the other two, referring to a small chart, wrote down numbers. After several minutes of radio cross talk and the big guns sending their lethal charge skyward, the lieutenant picked up the radio handset and spoke one final time.

“Roger, Niner, Niner. This is Three Five, out.”

The lieutenant clipped the handset to the radio.

“Okay, Henderson. That’s it, let’s wrap it up.”

The lieutenant pointed at Dan.

“Here’s our new guy. Why don’t you get him squared away?”

Henderson gave Dan a nasty glance, looking as if someone had just squirted lemon juice into his mouth.

“That’s an affirmative, LT, as soon as I’m done here, sir.”

• • •

DAN FELT LOST, wishing he hadn’t quit the Boy Scouts and learned to be an Eagle Scout. That would have come in very handily right now. With the FDC track and attached tent having a full complement of residents and night approaching, Dan needed to make sleeping arrangements. Henderson, having shown Dan the basics of his new job, had lost patience and dismissed him, disinterested in helping him any further. Dan went to the lieutenant.

“Sir, there’s no room for me. Where should I sleep?”

The lieutenant looked a little perplexed and thought a moment.

“I have an idea. Come with me, Dundee. Bring your gear.”

Leading Dan outside, the Lieutenant pointed to the business end of the command track.

“You can prop up that front plate and slide your air mattress under it; should be good enough to keep you dry.”

Dan didn't feel very good about the proposed arrangement, but followed along with the lieutenant's suggestion.

“Yes, sir, thank you.”

Finding two sturdy branches, Dan, using his bayonet, trimmed them and cut them down to the proper length. He pulled up the heavy metal plate and, digging the supports into the damp clay, propped up the makeshift roof. Hopefully, this would shield him from any rainfall. With the sun disappearing behind the horizon, he pulled out the air mattress from his duffle bag and blew it up. Sliding it under the track, he pulled out his sleeping bag and placed it on top of the mattress. Slithering his way back, Dan lay down on his makeshift bed. He'd had an interesting day; sleep came almost immediately.

He awakened with a start. His watch read almost 2200 hours and his lower intestines pulsated. With no latrines yet set up, Dan knew that he'd have to do it the old fashioned way. With a trusty entrenching tool in his right hand and several sheets of course C-ration toilet paper in his left, he felt around in the dirt and found a nice level spot. Luckily, with the ground so moist, the shovel cut right through and within thirty seconds his impromptu bathroom beckoned.

Crouching down with fatigue pants and boxer shorts lying haphazardly around his ankles, Dan concentrated, wanting to take care of his business ASAP. The latrines would be in place tomorrow. Right now, he relished the idea of relaxing on one of those uncomfortable plywood seats rather than

doing this balancing act. In comparison to a hole in the dirt, a plank seemed heavenly!

With no one wanting to give the enemy a target, blackness surrounded him. Dan focused and tried to concentrate. Suddenly, his ears perked up. He heard the unmistakable sound of feet shuffling and dirt being kicked aside. As the noise became louder and louder, Dan realized that trouble headed his way.

Before having a chance to utter a word of warning, Dan lay sprawled out on the ground, gasping for breath. A heavy weight pinned him to the ground. God only knew where his small supply of toilet paper had gone.

“What the hell are you doing, soldier?”

The thundering voice came from the mouth of the man whose body lay crushing his chest.

Dan felt warm breath on his face and realized the body lying on top of him outweighed him by a good fifty pounds.

“Stop pushing on my chest, I can’t breathe. Just roll off me.”

The pain continued. The person managed to stand.

“Don’t be giving me any orders, you dumb shit. I’m the one giving the orders! Just shut your yap, soldier, and get on your feet.”

The flap from a nearby tent opened. Those inside stepped out to check out the commotion. As the light seeped out from the opening, Dan could make out lieutenant bars sewn into the collar of the man straightening out his uniform. The rank and fatigues belonged to the artillery battery’s executive officer, First Lieutenant Warren.

“What’s your name, soldier, and what’s your section? You’ve sure got a lot to learn. And what in the hell did you think you were doing out here? I didn’t graduate West Point to help wipe your ass. You get me?”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir.”

What else could Dan say? Shit always rolls downhill and this time, literally. A private, the lowest of the low on the totem pole, bore all the blame. Dan thought about how much he hated the Army. Maybe he should sleep with a cork shoved up his ass or next time take a stroll and dig his hole on the outside of the perimeter. It would probably be safer.

The lieutenant finally stopped swearing and stormed off. The tent flap closed and total darkness prevailed once again. Fumbling around in the dirt, Dan searched for those misplaced sheets of paper. Success, fortunately. He collected enough usable pieces of tissue to complete his business. Finished, he scooped up a few shovelfuls of earth and smoothed over his dirty work.

As he lay back down on his sleeping bag, Dan thought of the time when his third-grade teacher, Mrs. Harper, wouldn’t let him get to the bathroom and he had an accident and shit all over himself. He still felt semi-traumatized from the incident; the embarrassment, the horror of crapping in his draws. But fonder memories of home flooded his mind, pushing thoughts of his nasty teacher into a far corner. As he nodded off once again, he visualized himself as a child, fishing with his dad and brother in Prospect Park. The scene, so serene and soothing, lulled him to sleep.

Dan shivered, awakening with a start. The sun had begun to rise, but he felt cold and with good reason. His legs and

backside were three inches deep in a pool with the deflated air mattress and sleeping bag almost totally submerged in rain water. Dan wanted to cry but fought off the feeling. Instead, he pulled out a towel, a fresh pair of underwear and a dry uniform from his bag. Undressing, he rubbed himself dry and put on the fresh clothing. No one seemed to notice his plight or pay him any attention. Dan knew he'd better learn fast. Each American soldier fought on the same side, but in this cruel world of death and violence, the golden rule—every man for himself.

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THE JOB OF the Fire Direction Control section was to calculate the azimuth of fire and bags of gunpowder necessary for a 155mm Howitzer round to reach the map coordinates dictated by a fire mission. Obviously, this was a critical job. Even the tiniest of miscalculation could be life-threatening. Speed was essential and gained through practice, so SP4 Henderson, the chief of the section, took Dan under one of his large wings and drilled him on the basics. Marvin Banks, a PFC in the section, would be rotating in a few days and his replacement needed to be ready.

Sandbags, sandbags and more sandbags; Henderson held the straw bags open while Dan dumped in the moist dirt. The sun beat down and the sweat leaked out from his pores. Two hours of this and Dan's muscles ached. Finally, enough digging and filling. They had dozens and dozens of these babies to pile around the hole they'd dug out and needed to finish reinforcing their bunker.

Blisters from all the shovel strokes covered Dan's hands. Some looked worse than others; his palms stung like hell. Henderson scowled and shrugged it off, making light of his problem.

"Dundee, you better fuckin' get used to this shit and I don't need any crap out of you."

Dan didn't much care for this Henderson dude. But what could he do about it? Like Curly of the Three Stooges, he too was a victim of circumstance. With Henderson as section chief, he had little choice. Dan needed to coexist, learn and survive.

On today's menu: C-rations for lunch with Henderson and his impatient attitude for dessert. Dan's hand stung from holding on to the protractor, utilized to calculate the azimuth of fire. Both his hands burned at the slightest touch, but ignoring the pain and wincing every now and again, he worked his way through his three-hour practice session. At last, break time. Henderson paid him a compliment of sorts, remarking to the lieutenant that Dan might work out and wasn't quite as dumb as he looked.

Monsoon season held sway at this time of year. The dark clouds rolled in most afternoons and deposited their huge payload as a gloomy reminder of reality. The storms were quick hitters and provided temporary relief from the oppressive heat and heavy humidity. Henderson told Dan to appreciate the breaks now and then since the dry season could be unrelenting. Dan didn't see how anyone in his right mind could care for this climate or why anyone would want to live here. It sucked. And shit, his hands hurt like hell.