

RAMBO YEAR ONE

# BAKER TEAM



THE BIRTH  
OF A LEGEND

WRITTEN BY WALLACE LEE

BASED ON THE CHARACTERS CREATED BY DAVID MORRELL  
A DOUBLE EDGED GHOST WRITINGS FREESHARE RELEASE



The unofficial Baker teams' insignia.

It was an unofficial shoulder patch (designed by soldiers and hand-sewed by Saigon's tailors), and meant to be worn during conventional warfare only.

CCN, CCC e CCS (*Command and Control North, Central, South*) were the three SOG's zones of operation.

The two Baker teams were the only one purposely trained for operating in all the three sectors.

The survival knife represents the reconnaissance nature of 'fighting behind enemy lines', using stealth, survival and self-reliance as their primary skills, which are also the reason the Baker teams were created for.

The AK refers to the most clandestine operations ran by the two teams, which required the use of Russian weapons and uniforms in disguise.

# BAKER TEAM

Wallace Lee's  
**BAKER TEAM**

*Based on characters created by:*  
David Morrell

*English Translation:*  
Wallace Lee  
Mary Bottazzi

*Test reading:*  
Orazio Fusco  
Piero Costanzi  
Mat Thomas Marchand  
Rime Merln

*Website design by:*  
Marco Faccio

*Cover art:*  
Subject by Wallace Lee  
Patch drawing by Marco Faccio  
Photo by Marco Bizzotto

Released by Double Edged Ghost Writings, 2016  
ramboyearone@gmail.com

Copyright disclaimer:

The characters of Rambo and Col. Sam Trautman were created by David Morrell in his novel *First Blood*, copyright 1972, 2017. All rights reserved. They are included here with the permission of David Morrell, provided that none of the story is offered for sale. The use of the characters here does not imply David Morrell's endorsement of the story. The *First Blood* knife was designed by Arkansas knife-smith Jimmy Lile (1982). Everything you read here that isn't mentioned in any official licensed Rambo movie or novel at the time of this publishing (2017), is an original work by the author. Electronic copy for private reading, free-sharing and press evaluation only. No commercial use allowed.

This the second volume of the saga.  
The first is RAMBO YEAR ONE.

To better enjoy the reading, we strongly suggest you to read this E-book viewing one page at time ('single page' mode).

## IMAGES





The olive drab battle dress uniform used during the Vietnam war.

On the left, it is worn together with a 'jungle hat' (which was often used by the Baker teams) and on the right with the so called 'baseball hat'.

During long-range operations the US special forces avoided the use of the helmet, because of its weight.



The *Tiger Stripes* battle dress uniform, never officially issued.

It was available in many slightly different colours, and was mostly used by Special Forces soldiers. In the above photo you can see the so called 'night' version, which was the Baker team's favourite one.

It recently reappeared in Afghanistan, used by very few and rare US Special Forces soldiers.



Model 18 Randall knife (with compass), also known as 'Baker knife'.

Nowadays the knife is still sold with a naked handle, just like during the Vietnam war, and the buyer then wraps its handle with a cord at choice.

Randall designed some of his knives together with SOG personnel, and this is one of those knives that lately went into mass production exactly like Randall and the SOG had designed it.

*He one used by SOG soldiers used to sport a black-coated blade.*



Model M1911 pistol

One century later, the 1911 is still an outstanding pistol, still in use by law enforcement and military as well - mostly in United States - and despite the fact that some of his most famous features (as the caliber) have been re-evaluated recently.

His pros are the use of two safeties, his extreme reliability even in the dirtiest environments and his accuracy. Many SOG soldiers shelved it for the Browning Hi-power, in order to have a larger magazine at disposal (the rounds were almost doubled). With regard to this decision, SOG soldiers were precursors of the modern, hi-capacity small-caliber pistols that started being worldwide-used during the nineties, and are the nowadays standard.





Ruger pistol model MK I, caliber 22, with integrated suppressor.

It was very accurate pistol, very light and extremely reliable.

Contrary to most weapons that can be 'silenced', the caliber 22 is an already-subsonic caliber, so in order to get the maximum 'discretion' you don't need to use special ammunitions.

It was a very popular weapon between spies, guns for hire and CIA agents.

It was mostly used by the '*shadow men*' (reconnaissance scouts) of the two Baker teams

Some very special units use it nowadays still ( they use in fact the Mark II, a slightly updated version).



M18A1 Claymore mine

Anti-personnel mine producing a 'directional', cone shaped explosion, which explains the 'FRONT TOWARD THE ENEMY' writings.

The claymore shot one hundred steel balls in a thirty degree angle of explosion. It was usually placed on the ground and ignited using a wired ignition, but there were other ways of using it.

It is still in use nowadays.



From left to right: smoke grenade, fragmentation grenade and phosphorus grenade.

The phosphorus grenades ('White Phosphorus', also known as '*Willie Peter*'), were 'technically' considered smoke grenades, but in reality they were incendiary grenades and mostly used inside the tunnels, where those grenades were able to burn out all of the oxygen in a very short time, and so killing the enemies by asphyxiation.

Its flame used to burn at a very high temperature, couldn't be extinguished using water and when it touched the skin, it used to attach at just like napalm did, creating very severe burns and very difficult to treat.

After the Vietnam war, using phosphorus grenades 'near inhabited zones' was declared a war crime, but since such a legal definition is quite ambiguous, nowadays is very rarely used by any army, to avoid controversies.



## M16

The M16 was a very 'futuristic' rifle shooting a light caliber for its era, but that is considered a medium one by nowadays standards. It was an '*assault rifle*' with respect to its heavier and more powerful counterpart, the M14, which was considered a '*battle rifle*' (a distinction that was never defined very well, and that nowadays doesn't exist any more).

Used since the very first start of the conflict, the M16 was issued with twenty rounds magazines. It used both a caliber and working system completely new, but in the beginning of its story it proved itself a very bad design, jamming too often and with other problems that continued until its barrel was modified and soldiers trained to clean it much often than they used to do.

SOG soldiers – who received better training than the average soldier – had less issues while using it since its beginning, and they liked it against the opinion of the most because of its lightness, which was a very important feature during long-range missions.

Near the end of the conflict the army started using thirty-rounds magazines, and its original too-fast rate of fire (20 rounds per second) was slowed down.

After these modifications, it finally became a very fine weapon.



### XM and XM177-E2

Designed a little time after the M16, it was nothing more but a shortened version of the former. With regard to it's era, it was an unbelievably light and easy to handle rifle (just like a sub-machine gun) featuring a range and power almost on par with others full-size assault rifles. Its very, very fast rate of fire was never changed (it could empty a twenty rounds magazine in one second). It was the weapon of choice of SOG men and most Special Forces as well, together with the AK.



### AK47

The AK – introduced in 1947 – is the most successful design in firearms history.

It was a Russian design whose intrinsic reliability was far, far better than the M16's one.

Despite being heavier, it practically never jammed and used thirty rounds magazines instead of the M16's twenty rounds one.

The AK47 shoots a heavy and slow bullet that gives it a shorter range and a trajectory more difficult to master for it's user, but whose power can be considered on par to the M16 thanks to it's larger diameter.

If the American rifle went under several changes over the years (up to change it's whole name to 'M4') the AK is a good rifle even for nowadays standards, and it's exactly the same that was used during the Vietnam War.

The only real update it ever received – during the fifties already – was starting to build it using a lighter alloy.

Very few weapons has ever been so long-lived in firearms history.



#### M14 rifle.

The M14 was a 7.62 millimetres very accurate and very powerful rifle, but with a very strong recoil too. It was considered a standard rifle with regard to its era, but under nowadays standards it's considered a high-caliber weapon for long-range engagements.

Some SOG soldiers liked to use it as a sniper-rifle, because with its twenty rounds magazine and selective-fire capability, it offered a higher volume of fire with respect to its 'rival', the much more accurate M40.

It was Coletta's weapon's of choice.



#### M40 rifle.

Bolt-action 7.62 sniper rifle.

It was an extremely accurate rifle with regard to its era, simple to use and reliable under any situation. It's still used nowadays by both law enforcement and military.

It was only issued to qualified snipers.



Night vision sight PVS-2 a.k.a. *'starlight scope'*

The US used 'passive' night vision devices for the first time ever during the Vietnam War.

The vision offered by the instrument was black and green.

Those very first night vision devices – huge, heavy and with a very bad definition – raised very different opinions between the soldiers. Most found them useless, while a minority of marksmen and snipers said they were essential. Since then, the US invested a lot of money to develop this technology and became the worldwide leaders in night vision warfare usage.



M60

The M60 was the standard US machine gun during the Vietnam War.

It shoots a 7.62 bullet, an ammo than can reach very long ranges and creates much more damages with regard to the ball used by the M16.

It was designed to be used laying on the ground and operated by two men: one for shooting and the second holding the ammo-belt and reloading it. To solve the problem of holding the belt, soldiers used to tape a can on the gun, but the weapon was lately updated fixing this and other problems. Anyway, even with those modifications, shooting standing or from the hip was not a task for everyone.





#### Russian Rocket-Propelled Grenade launcher, 'RPG'

Born as a light, cheap and mainly anti-tank weapon, it practically was the terror of any motorized vehicle and even some very light buildings too.

It had no electronic guidance, but it automatically exploded on the target proximity thanks to an infrared thermal sensor. So, in order to destroy a moving target, the user needed no perfect accuracy. It had little effectiveness against the infantry, because its warheads produced no fragments, but it could destroy any helicopter and most of armoured vehicles.

So much was a widespread weapon that any US vehicle was considered at risk at the simple sight of a single Vietcong within RPG range.

Just like the AK, the RPG is still a current weapon, and is still used nowadays as then, using the very same tactics and giving the same results.



Huey helicopter, for infantry transportation.

Helicopters usage gave to the infantry movement skills they had never had before, and the Vietnam war was fought using brand-new tactics.

The first Vietcong attacks against US forces were some plainly suicidal missions, with the only goal of giving the Vietnamese generals some intel about the real US capabilities, with the purpose of planning a strategy for the future.

The Huey helicopter used to mount two machine guns each side, operated by hands (but they couldn't fire straight in front of the vehicle).



Gunship version of the Huey helicopter

It was nothing but a standard Huey equipped with some extra weapons (heavy machine guns, rockets, etc.). The heavier weight reduced the infantry-carry capabilities of the helicopter, and made him less agile overall.

After the end of the war the Huey was upgraded with two engines instead of one, becoming more reliable in any situation, but during the war it was easily influenced by the weight-load, altitude and bad weather. Only the most skilled pilots could use it to its full capabilities



#### F4 Phantom fighter jet.

Two seats, multi-role fighter jet that could be used as both an interceptor or bomber, by just loading a different set of weapons. When very lightly loaded and with a set of anti-air weapons only, it could fight on par with other military interceptors-only aircrafts, like the fearsome Russians MIGs. It's the most numerous produced super sonic military aircraft in US history. It finally left service near the end of the nineties, but it's still in use in other countries.



#### A1 Skyraider.

With a design dated back to WWII, the Skyraider looked very old during the Vietnam War already. And yet, thanks to its high manoeuvrability at low speeds, it demonstrated itself an awesome aircraft during close range engagements, like most air-land fights were over the mountains or in the jungle of Vietnam.

It was known for his capability of receiving multiple hits and yet continuing the fight.





The Vietcong were 'armed civilians', in other words guerrilla fighters, with no uniform. Their ranks were made by men, women and sometimes very young kids too. They used any clothes while fighting and when at risk of capture, they used to toss away their weapons, hoping to be mistaken for civilians by the enemy.

The Vietnam War caused so much civilian deaths also because of this fighting attitude.

On the right, one of the very few garments the Vietcong used very often: the so called 'black pajamas'.

Lacking the use of uniforms, the black pajama was the only easily available 'low visibility' dress for the Vietcong.

The scarf (called 'khan ran') represented the soldiers rank.



The North Vietnamese battle dress uniform, with its notorious tortoise-shaped helmet.

Baker Team



Samuel Trautman committed his first murder near the end of '62, someone called Ryan, a C.I.A. greenhorn.

One of the good guys.

It wasn't a simple execution of an enemy spy, but a plain and real murder of a US citizen.

Ryan came in South-East Asia in 1962, six months before Trautman did.

He came in Indochina with the task of passing US weapons to the many irregular forces that used to fight against the communists (Montagnard, F.U.L.R.O., Arrows, etcetera...).

In the beginning, the CIA agent behaved well: he disguised himself as a real guns smuggler and cheaply passed everything he had to pass, and always to the right people.

But Ryan understood very well how things really went in Vietnam, and soon started to take advantage of it: *'places you go, customs you find'*.

During the time-lapse of one year, the number of weapons 'mysteriously disappeared' while at Ryan's hands, increased excessively.

Ryan had understood that 'expanding' was the real business; in other words, finding new suppliers and new buyers, always selling some more and to everyone, the Vietcong included.

One year later, Ryan had his hands on everything: prostitution, drug refineries, slavery...

Above all, he started asking favours as payment, so to be sure to have so many friends to always get away with it, no matter the situation or trouble he would have ever ended up with, even with the Americans.

Also because - all things considered - in order to get a universal-immunity in Vietnam, you only had to bribe the South-Vietnamese Army... And nothing was easier than that.

So Ryan tried it, did it and became rich, powerful and autonomous, and the idea of one day getting back to Langley didn't even cross his mind.

In Vietnam he lived as a king by then, inside a sumptuous country house and protected by his own army of men.

He was the living example of the 'Vietnam dream', from low-level spy to warlord in a blink of an eye, and with his hands in almost any criminal activity, with friends protecting him between both the ARVN and the Vietcong.

He didn't really work for the CIA from a long time, even if on the papers he still did.

He did everything on his own, with weapons supplied by private citizens from all over the world: Americans, South-Africans, Chinese and even Russians.

He bragged himself for selling *'everything to everyone'*, as a *'real US pro'*.

He lived in a big colonial country house right in the out-skirt of Saigon, surrounded by armed guardsmen as if he was an important diplomat of a non-existing nation.

Ryan used to launder his money investing it on his General Motors plant of choice in Saigon, which was a very good way to both cleaning the money and get even more very important friends.

The General Motors had no idea where all of this money came from, nor had any interest about it at all, nor the South Vietnamese had: when you invest tons of money in a third world country, no one asks you where all of this money come from.

They don't even want to know.

Ryan ended up under Trautman's sights when he started studying the ground to go into politics.

Going into politics in Vietnam was slightly different with respect to the US.

It meant poking your nose between the intrigues of the capital city, and the ranks of the prime minister Diem: a favour here, a bribe there... And you started having a role over the government's decisions too.

But Ryan never got as powerful as he wished to be.

Once under Trautman's sight, his days as a king were doomed to an end... And by hook or by crook.

After six months in Vietnam, Trautman's period of adjustment as a spy was over.

The time had come for the colonel to take the initiative, to take action on his own... And Ryan was the first on the colonel's list.

But Trautman was going to kill a CIA agent, no matter how dirty: he and Garner were not authorized and Ryan had his ass much more than covered. So, at his very first initiative ever, the colonel was taking an all-in bet already. Their credibilities, careers, their lives... He and Garner were betting a very high stake over a very hard match to be fought.

First thing, Ryan succeeded in convincing a couple of CIA very important senior officers about being a good CIA child, and about selling to those he was supposed to sell only, using no secondary channels (and even if none of it was true at all).

These two bigwigs were much more powerful than Trautman was, and because of their friendship with Ryan they made Trautman and Garner look like two paranoid amongst the other CIA agents. In other words, the two bigwigs spread the word that Trautman and Garner were the witch-hunters kind of guys.

In those days, Trautman's notoriety as a 'rebel' was starting to spread out amongst the military already, so most of the secret servicemen believed in Ryan's version of the facts.

As a secondary factor, had anybody pushed Ryan against the ropes, he would have turned out talking not just with his own commanding officers, but to the press too.

He knew some very hot details about many so called 'victories' against the Vietcong, that could make those victories become much more 'realistic' under the public eye, so to say.

During three massacres at least, the ARVN made a clean sweep of all of his inner opposition (not communists) and did with the full knowledge and help of some US advisors.

The corpses of some children (charred by napalm) ended up been considered as Vietcong killed in action too, and Ryan knew names, dates, places and facts related to facts like those and enough to create a major, outrageous scandal on US soil.

On the other side, Trautman inquired about it.

The guns dealer never left anything on papers: he had no safe box with compromising papers to be opened by someone else if something had happened to him. There was no such thing, nothing at all... And this was a big mistake by Ryan's part, and that he had made because he used to consider himself untouchable inside his stronghold, together with an army of his own.

He had too many political and military supports to simply worrying about being killed in the streets, just like any other criminal.

In those days, 'technically' the Vietnam war had yet to start, and the 'fragging' term was not born yet and the idea of an American military killing a CIA agent sounded like science fiction to Ryan.

But this superficiality was bound to cost him his life because, that night, science fiction was going to become reality.

\*\*\*

That night Garner and Trautman both wore a 'black pajamas'.

First, they spent two hours studying the sentries movements in front of the country house, waiting

for their paths to let them in unnoticed.

Only then, in the end, when all of the sentries were in the correct places at the same time, Garner and Trautman nodded each other and started walking fast and silently forward the villa's entrance, and finally got there unnoticed by a hair's breadth.

Once reached the wall of the building, they hide in the shadow.

They made it.

The house was big, dark and silent.

\*\*\*

Trautman turned on the beside-lamp on the beside table.

The light was right in front of Ryan's eyes and he woke up shaking under the sheets.

He saw the big silenced barrel of Trautman's twenty two caliber pistol first thing, and pointed right at his face.

Only then did Ryan recognize Trautman.

During that very short while of pure horror, Ryan understood – and he did in the worst of the possible ways – how much he had underestimated the colonel.

He never really thought that the colonel could push himself so far.

After a first while of incredulity, the panic made Ryan so stiff that he went all the way back against the wall over his bed.

He took his pillow and pushed it against his chest, in a desperate attempt to protect himself just like a baby would have done.

“Don't kill me” he said, and by just doing that he touched a very delicate subject inside the colonel's mind.

Killing a man looking right into his eyes is not an easy task, not even killing a piece of shit like Ryan, who paid himself wealth, power and whores selling weapons to the enemies of his own motherland.

Even the expensive bathrobe he wore – black and gold-bordered – made Trautman feel sick.

The colonel didn't want to let Ryan talk, because it would have just made everything even more distressing.

So he shot Ryan immediately, before he could say a single word.

The Ruger MK I kicked two times at his hand and giving out a muffled sound.

A small black spot materialized over Ryan's forehead.

The CIA agent slowly tilted his head on one side.

His eyes half-closed, and in the end stopped.

The thud of the two shots – even if lowered by the silencer – seemed loud to Trautman, too loud, but after a very long while spent in still listening, Trautman established that inside the country-house nothing had changed.

Everything was quiet.

Garner stretched out toward Ryan, felt his neck with two fingers and then nodded to Trautman.

The colonel lowered his gun.

Time to move.

Garner went to the exit door and looked at the outside garden.

Two sentries walked forwards and backwards the yard with an irregular cadence.

In order to get out of there without being seen, Garner and the colonel had to wait that both the sentries were at the right place, and at the same time.

Trautman spent the first part of his wait looking at Ryan's inclined corpse.  
Just a small amount of blood had come out from the two small holes.  
When the colonel checked his wrist-watch for the first time, he felt like an hour had passed by, and yet only ten minutes had.  
He then look at Garner's direction, but his mate just made him stay still with a gesture of the hand (*'not yet'*).  
The two sentries continued to walk around using irregular paths that could not be predicted, and the wait was exhausting.  
It was like that damn night had no intention to ever end.  
When Garner finally made his gesture, the two men got out from the house in a hurry.  
They crossed the yard walking low, swift and silent, very silent through the darkness, as if they were two shadows.  
A few minutes later they were on board of their jeep already and along Saigon's streets.

RAMBO YEAR ONE

# BAKER TEAM



Five years later

## Fort Bragg

After the selection process, the day was luminous over the base and the sky was blue: the storm was over, at last.

Leaves and broken branches were scattered everywhere.

That night, the guys received their first off duty hours since what seemed an eternity, to them.

Gates passed by the rooms to announce the news and a few minutes later – just the time to change their clothes – who could walk on his legs started to get ready to go out of the base.

The first to be ready at the entrance hall was Delmore Barry, but he stopped to wait the others, in order to get out all together.

The black coloured guy was smiling already. He almost looked excited.

Despite the fatigue and the pains, having been chosen for the Baker teams galvanized him.

He couldn't stand the wait to get out of the base.

After a while, Rambo joined him.

The two knew that they had been assigned to the same team already. Garner had read their names that morning, in front of a dormitory that looked more like a hospital than barracks.

Barry shook Rambo's hand, and immediately understood he was a couple of years older than Rambo.

Then the two were joined by Jorgenson and Messner.

Ortega and Coletta were still at the hospital, while Krakauer and Danforth didn't feel like going outside, which meant that the remaining four were ready to go. So, after exchanging the usual courtesies, the four went out together.

They were outside Fort Bragg, at last.

Once outside that kind of concentration camp, the guys found that even the air seemed to have a different smell.

It seemed them to have lived not just one, but two whole lives in there.

Barry was the more smiley of all. While everyone used to walk with a limp or slowly, he was the only one that looked like he wasn't suffering any pain at all, even if the marks on his face told a different story.

The four guys went on board of the bus that was going to the town.

As it started moving, Barry gave a pat on Rambo's shoulder, as if just getting on board of that bus had been another very difficult task to achieve. Then he laughed again, extracting a smile from Rambo.

Rambo was shorter and thinner than Barry at the time.

His face looked younger and cleaner than the others. Barely in his twenties – roughly two, three years younger than all of the others – he looked like he was a teenager still.

Rambo liked Barry's expansiveness immediately.

On the contrary Messner, after introducing himself, stayed on his own, and now looked outside the window with a fixed expression, as if he was watching a television screen.

The only one who looked unhappy was Jorgenson.

He stood up, one hand on one of the the bus standing bars, and looked beyond the window screens as if the landscape was slipping away from him.  
It was then that Messner sat up and went to him.

“Man” he said.

Jorgenson did not reply.

“I know what you are thinking about, but you shouldn't worry about Ortega. Trust me, 'cause I am the Doc, am not I? He will be as new and very soon. It was a good one that I was there when it happened”

Jorgenson didn't reply.

“It's nothing, man. Really. You did nothing beyond repair to this guy ”

At the end of the bus, Rambo was looking at the two guys talking each other. At a certain point, he started to stand up to talk to Jorgenson too, but Barry put a hand on his shoulder, stopping him.

“Leave him alone for a while” he said.

Rambo looked Barry with a puzzled face.

“He will have his chance to sort it out with Ortega personally, if that's what he want. He just need to spend some time on his own”

The bus stopped, the four guys got out.

When he put his feet on the ground, Messner said:

“Jesus Christ, I can't even do the steps”

\*

Fort Bragg was no big city at all, and the guys went in the first bar with some busy people.

When the beers were served, Rambo looked to the one in front of him as if it was a dead muse.

On the contrary, his mates picked them up and started drinking as if it was the most natural thing to do in the whole world to do.

And when they had consumed half of them already, Rambo had still to touch his one.

But then, on the contrary, Rambo suddenly lost any fear, and finally joined them.

That night, the four drunk beers together, asked each other where they came from, what was their jobs before joining the army, and if they were married or single.

They talked, drank and talked again.

It was the first time that Rambo hanged around with guys of his age, and he understood that for them, drinking, joking and saying stupid things was completely natural.

Raising the tones of their voices, drink some more... All of these looked like good things for them, and natural.

To Rambo it was nothing like that, but he liked being there anyway, and together with them.

He liked it very much.

And after the selection he had just passed, everything looked just awesome.

But Rambo was not used to drink so much beer and that mix of vicious daze and light euphoria made him feel uncomfortable.

He had to be careful, very careful.

Obviously, the others were living the moment in a different way.

To them, that sensation was ultra-cool. Before of that day, Rambo have never even imagined that

there could exist a good way of being drunk.

He looked to the three guys in front of him, and he asked himself why none of them had already become as evil as his father usually was when drunk.

Maybe it was due to the beer (his father used to just drink whiskey).

Or maybe, those guys were just different.

Rambo then asked himself how much time it would have taken them to become like his father if he had he drank the way he used to, and given the fact that all in all... He was his father's son.

He was just like him, inside himself. He knew it, he felt it up to inside his bones.

And yet, that night, nothing happened.

At some point during the night, they found that in that bar there were some other Fort Bragg's base guys that they didn't now, and yet they joined them.

A guy – that was no soldier – asked them if maybe it was someone's birthday, but the bartender replied before they could.

He said:

“This no birthday. Don't you see the bruises on their faces? These guys has just passed 'the' selection. They belong to the Fifth Special Forces... And the next one is on me”

The bartender was around his fifties, and had just talked using a very friendly tone, but with no smile on his face.

That said, his son vanished in the back to take some other beers.

At this point, the bartender's face darkened definitely, but the four Baker team's guys were too much on the top of the world to notice it.

Even if the blood between the army and the Special Forces was not exactly a a good one, the night the four Baker team members didn't notice it. It was nothing but some sort of party around the jukebox, while drinking beer in streams and talking.

The hate between the Special Forces and the other soldiers – that was rising right just during the Vietnam conflict – was not at his maximum yet, and the Baker team was going to realize about it's existence only much more later.

The guys danced, drank, sang and made some row all night long...

Even Rambo, after finally losing all of his shyness, joined them, just like anybody else.

\*\*\*

Toward the end, the atmosphere finally chilled out.

At late night, when the last coin was inserted into the jukebox, the song 'Stand by Me' started up, a song a couple of years-old already, but talking about the importance of having someone at your side, during the difficult periods of life.

*When the night has come,  
and the land is dark,  
and the moon is the only light we'll see*

The four guys, that had become friends already by then, sat all around the same table.

At this point they were tired, sleepy and drunk, and that was the time for reflections by then.

The jukebox – between one scratch and another – continued.

*No I won't be afraid,  
oooooh I won't, be afraid,.  
Just as long as you stand by me...*

At the end of the song, there was a long while of silence.

They were all sat around the same table, stunned by the plaster that was starting to make them feel sleepy by then.

The one of them who broke the silence was Jorgenson.

He turned his head to Messner, that was sat beside him, and asked him why did he join the Special Forces.

One at time, everyone told his reasons to the others, as if everyone had the duty of doing so with respect to the others.

And everyone lied.



## Part I

### The course

*“ God didn't make Rambo  
I made him ”*

*Samuel Trautman, 1982*

The following day, Trautman refused two calls for the Baker teams, turning them to other Fort Bragg's units.

The first was a special mission in Israel, that had just declared war against Egypt.

The second, was a clandestine mission in Bolivia, against the communist rebels lead by a Cuban guerrilla-fighter called Che Guevara.

Trautman refused those two calls because - as he said to Garner the day before - he hadn't even started to deal with his teams yet.

It was 1967 and Trautman sincerely hoped that the Vietnam war would have stopped much before the two years of training required by the two Baker teams, but he didn't count on it.

In the colonel's mind, having just selected 'the best of the best' was not enough to think he had created an elite unit.

Trautman's objective was to make them become a brand new kind of soldiers, with equipment, training and an attitude of mind completely different from any other already existing unit.

And this meant that he had to train them personally – or almost entirely personally – for the next two years, before employing them.

With the rank of lieutenant colonel of the army special forces, Trautman headed about two hundred men divided in twenty teams, an half of which was employed in Vietnam already, under the command of the MacVsog.

He trained them in Fort Bragg, then the MacV generals used them, even if, technically, they belonged to him.

Adding the South Vietnamese soldiers engrossing their ranks, Trautman's forces went up to almost five hundred men, which were entirely commanded by general Loyd at the time, a general that put in simple words... Was a dickhead.

Because of Trautman's presence in Fort Bragg, maybe Garner and his men had a somewhat heavier hand than usual, during the selection program of those first sixteen men for the two Baker teams. Maybe Garner, Gates and the others have been so heavy handed with the rookies because of 'political' reasons.

Trautman's adversaries between the bigwigs were many, and they all hoped that Trautman's training program was doomed to give away no noticeable results at all, which was the reason why Trautman and Garner has been so heavy handed.

They couldn't just be two very good teams: they had to be the best.

Trautman was betting on that training program his entire career, because his enemies – and he had many – couldn't stand the wait to see any colonel's failure.

From the point of view of the military establishment, Trautman was just one of the many adversaries to defeat during the career race.

And an adversary of the worst kind, because he belonged to the faction of the 'rebels', which were the ones that never used to lie about the Vietnam War's failures.

Trautman was a 'pessimist', one of those who thought that the Vietnam War was doomed to be a long and bloody one, and that the final victory was no sure thing at all, and he never had any scruple in saying what he thought.

But since the divergence between the war-hawks and the rebels in the military had become a proper and real feud by the time, any possible colonel's success was at risk of turning itself into a match-score in favour of his ideas about the Vietnam War.

And so, had the 'Baker team' program worked for good, it would have been a bad hit for the war-

hawks to take.

Too bad.

The two Baker teams had not placed foot in Vietnam, and yet they had some enemies already in US. Luckily for them, Trautman and Garner were very well aware of it.

One day later, Fort Bragg

“Come in, Jorgenson”

Trautman closed the door behind him, and he did it trying to look the darker he could.

After sitting behind his desk, the colonel stayed silent for long and on purpose, just to make sure the guy got nervous, and for good.

He was planning to look the guy straight into the eyes while talking, but Jorgenson was faster than him, like he couldn't stand the wait to start talking.

And that was no good sign at all.

“Am I in trouble, Sir?”

“I don't know yet”

Jorgenson swallowed and Trautman added:

“I won't use no circumlocutions, private Jorgenson. It's simple to say: I have been asked to throw you out. And I would like to know from you why that happened”

Jorgenson lowered his eyes.

“A general asked you that, I think”

Trautman was surprised by the way Jorgenson was sure about it and resigned to it, as if he was just waiting for this to just happen one day.

And so, it suddenly became obvious that something was very wrong.

The order of getting rid of private Jorgenson came from the highest levels of power... Just like a matter a matter of national security, which it wasn't for sure.

But double crossing a simple marine was no matter for the big-wigs at all, for god's sake...

The big-wigs used to ruin the lives of journalists, politicians and men of power, not to simple marines ones which were no-one's sons, and had no role at all in the challenge for careers.

The smell of burning coming from Jorgenson's problem could be smell one mile away... Which was the reason Trautman had summoned him there that night; to just know the truth.

“Now talk, Jorgenson”

But he just continued staring at his own feet in silence, like a punished kid.

“Don't waste my time, son”

At that point, Jorgenson closed his eyes.

“The matter's name is Mary Williams, sir”

*Williams... - Trautman thought.*

Williams, just like the general who gave him the order - and using no circumlocutions while saying it - of rejecting Jorgenson for no reason at all.

Hearing that, someone like Trautman needed no other explanations to understand everything, and he barely stopped himself from laughing in front of the kid's face.

*A general's daughter, my god, Jorgenson... You are dating with a general's daughter, for Christ's sake.*

*Fuck... I mean, kid... I understand that it's the sixties with the hippies, the free love and so on, but for Christ's sake... Did you really needed to get into trouble with a general's daughter?*

Trautman barely avoided the laughs and Jorgenson, who still had his eyes lowered to the floor, didn't noticed anything.

*You must be crazy as a coyote and I mean for real, Carl Jorgenson* – Trautman thought.

Then, overcoming a very great difficulty, he erased the barely noticeable smile on his face and went back into the shoes of the adamant colonel.

“Are you doing things seriously with her, boy?”

“We are going to live together as as soon as I am sure to be admitted inside the SOG”

It was something already, but not enough, for the colonel.

“Answer the question, boy”

“More than anything else, Sir. I care about her more than myself, my health and my life. I didn't even want to try this sick selection program for deranged people, if you let me speak freely, sir”

“No offence taken, recruit”

“... The point is that I had no other choice. We are going to live together very soon, and her family won't give us a single dollar. We will be on our own. I need to move forward with my career. I need the secret services”

Trautman got speech-lees.

Was this guy really real?

No one goes through a selection program like the one Jorgenson had just passed... Just because of a girl. It wasn't just enough.

The need for money, the buying of a house... None of these things used to last more than just a couple of hours under Trautman's clutches during the selection process.

No...

If there was something that no one could stand without a real inner motivation pushing him forward, was Trautman's personal selection program.

What soldier had to do to get inside the SOG was a matter of *faith*, not a task, a duty, or a job neither.

And then, of course, Jorgenson had lost his self-control when he hit Ortega with a fist during the selection process.

That was the proof a full mental failure... But he wasn't the only recruit who made a mistakes like that during the selection process, and that was a fact.

Every single recruit had a single moment of proper and real delirium at least, near the end of his personal selection program. That was one of the reason it was so harsh: to see their behaviours *after* they were broken already.

Barry didn't even noticed the instructors patrols incoming to capture him, Danforth and Krakauer tried to fight against ten instructors instead of surrendering, Coletta risked a death by exposure and Rambo almost wept.

All in all, Jorgenson always proved himself an extraordinary guy, just like all of the others who passed the selection, and if he really had gone trough that kind of hell just for a girl's love... Jesus. His love must have been an exaggerated one.

*But fuck, Jorgenson: the general Williams...*

*What a breed of an enemy you made yourself, for just being a marine?*

But then, the recruit stopped his thoughts.

“If the problem is the sucker-punch to Ortega...” he said, but Trautman raised his hand and stopped

him immediately.

“As far as I am concerned, you both passed the selection program, just like all of the others. And this is the only thing that really matters, for me”

“Sir, I...”

“Everything's fine”

“But the general....”

“I am going to teach you now something I don't use to talk much about, Jorgenson.

One of the most difficult duties in the soldier's job, is understanding when your officers gives you a legit orders, or not. It took me a whole life-time to get that and this, I can assure you, this is one of those orders nobody can give me for sure”

“But this will create you many enemies between the bigwigs, sir”

“Ah! You don't know me, son... I have them already, and much more than you can possibly imagine. Anyway, the last year in this month, we couldn't even create a single Baker team, so I won't lose a recruit that had passed the selection just because a fucking general don't want him to date his daughter. A daughter of age, I hope...”

“My god.... yes, sir. But...”

“Pass the course, Jorgenson. This year of training won't be a problem for you: from a physical point of view, you are far better than the most and I got this already. But you will also have to pass some theoretical and practical exams too, and those will be a matter of head, not muscles. With the physical selection process passed, the worst part is over, but you can still be rejected, all of you can. But you are well aware about this...”

“Sir, I...”

Trautman stopped Jorgenson before he could thank him. That would have been too embarrassing

“That's all” he said.

“Yes sir!”

Since he couldn't thank him, Jorgenson moved slowly, like if he was trying to wait a little bit.

Trautman noticed that so he added:

“I won't betray you Jorgenson. But your destiny is at your hands only, son”

(Carl Jorgenson)

Mary,

*Everything's fine here, as always.*

*Since we worked so hard during the selection process, yesterday they gave us a free night.*

*The selection process was very tiring, you know that? Almost tough.*

*Anyway, everything's fine.*

*I passed it.*

*And don't worry about me: these are the finest guys in the world and as long as I will be here I will always be safe.*

*In the next few days I will have to sit back at the school-desk, can you imagine it?*

*They put us at studying again.*

*I have to get used to it again, because I have never really studied in my life before.*

*We have to learn to speak the Vietnamese outright, which is odd thinking that I cant barely speak English properly.*

*Everyone says that the worst has gone already, but I am a little scared of being rejected anyway.*

*We have already made friends to each other, and even if we haven't really done anything together yet.*

*It's quite strange in here, you know? Everything's different.*

*The Special Forces are a whole different world. Like a family.*

*I think that the reason for that is that we are going to work in small units, where everyone has each other's life at his hands in some ways.*

*And this is wonderful.*

*I am happy my darling, because I feel much more important here with regard to when I used to work with my dad.*

*That's the kind of place where I do really am someone.*

*I miss you two very much...*

*I can't wait for the day our little secret will be born.*

*Sometimes it seems me I can see her already.*

*I am mad for you with love.*

*I don't give a shit about what your father will have to say about it, I am happy about this little girl. I couldn't be happier of both finding you and starting a family up with you.*

*Who cares about the wedding ceremony, it doesn't mean no shit to me.*

*I would kill for you if necessary.*

*I love you*

*I love you so much, my love*

*For ever yours,  
Carl*



(Manuel Ortega)

Helen,

*I made it... They took me.  
I passed the selection.*

*Forgive me if I write you only now, but those of the selection process have been tough days.  
It was really hard.  
There have been moments when I really thought I couldn't make it.  
I suffered a little cut on the tongue.  
Don't be afraid, it's nothing serious. I was really tired, you know... I got sloppy for a second and it was too late, but it's nothing at all.  
And don't worry: here's different with regard to when I was Vietnam.  
Here everyone helps each other, you always work all together and everyone's watching each other's backs.  
I know you are sad since we split... But please try to understand.  
This is what I want... This is what I am.  
This is my life, and finally and for the first time in my whole life, I am really proud of my self.*

*So, you see... I would like for you to be happy for me, because I fought with all of my strength to get what I wanted and for the first time in my life, I succeeded in something really big.  
And it's a wonderful feeling.  
Maybe this time I have really proved something to someone.  
I Would like you to feel happy just like I do, even if I know that it's impossible because this separated us and keeps us far away from each other but please try to understand, at least.  
And anyway, it won't last forever.  
No one does what we do here for a long time.  
Three, four years at best... Then I will get back to be a simple soldier, just like anyone else.  
But until then, I will be fine here.  
I will be OK.  
Even the nightmares stopped since when they started training us very hard.  
And if they will ever send me back to Vietnam, don't be afraid: Trautman – my commander – he's no fanatic at all. On the contrary, he has his head well screwed on.  
I won't be assigned to one of those reckless medals-hunters that are always in search for troubles in order to become heroes... Trautman's nothing like that.  
He is a bright one, trust me.*

*I miss you very much.  
I know that it's over between us, but this doesn't mean that you don't have a special place in my heart any more, between the people I love the most.  
Helen...  
I love you and I hope you love me too, in spite of everything.*

Manuel

## Fort Bragg

The 'special' mess (no one at the time knew the reason of its name) was a long building with a very high ceiling. The light was provided by some metal lamps hanging from the ceiling. The light of those lamps made the rooms look wretched, just like everything else at Fort Bragg. It was like everything at the base was well thought out to resemble a concentration camp.

The mess had a single and very long table, to which the Alpha and Beta units of the Baker team were sitting on both sides, sixteen people exactly, even if a couple of chairs were still empty at the time, because two recruits were late. It was there that Rambo and Jorgenson met some of the recruits again since the end of the selection process, before they were split in two different teams. Just one applicant on four had passed. The last to sit at the table were Coletta and Ortega, that had just came back from the hospital..

The two were received by a chorus of whistles and applause.  
“How were the nurses, Manuel? Did you succeed in make this tongue of yours work a little?” Ortega returned greeting waving a hand, but did not reply.  
“Come on prick! Say something”

On the contrary, Jorgenson lowered his glance and was happy no seats were empty next to him. He absolutely had to talk to Ortega, but that was not the moment. He didn't know his own mind yet about how to apologize to him, but he would have quit the program, had Ortega asked him about doing so.

*Are you crazy – he thought*  
*Think to Mary's future and your little still-born too...*

No...

Trautman had just been too good with him.

What Jorgenson made to Ortega during the selection program was too heavy and he had no hesitation in taking full responsibilities for it... Whatever the consequences where going to be. Even more, he couldn't stand the wait of doing so, which is the reason why, in the end, he couldn't wait.

And so, Jorgenson jumped up on his feet, and in front of everyone.

“Ortega!” yelled Jorgenson... And all of the sixteen recruits shut up at the same time, making the whole mess silent.

On the other side of the long table, Ortega rose on his feet too, and the two young men faced each other in a distance, surrounded by a gloomy silence.

The chill of the silence was tangible over the mess' table.

Then the entrance door suddenly opened up.

It was Trautman.

-

The scene that unveiled itself in front of Trautman was a very strange one.

The recruits were all sat at their sits, still and in silence, while Jorgenson and Ortega - on the

contrary – were standing one in front of the other each one at one side of the long table, as if they were challenging each other.

Trautman immediately understood that something was wrong.

He stopped then at the door, his hand still on the handle.

“What the hell is happening in here?” he asked, but no one cared about him.

Everyone's eyes were fixed at the two standing young men.

At this point Trautman – without even noticing it – stayed still and silent, as if he was hypnotized by such a scene too.

And during that long while of silence, Jorgenson and Ortega never got their eyes away from each other.

It was like the time had stopped for everyone.

Jorgenson was the first to speak.

-

“Ortega, I am asking it here and in front of everyone. Do you want me to quit?”

Ortega did not reply.

He thought for so long before replying, that Jorgenson asked himself if his tongue could work again, or if he had cut it out to him for good.

“Jorgenson” finally said Ortega.

His voice was odd. It was obvious that his healing wasn't complete yet, but it was not just that only. His voice was unnatural, like if he was imposing it to himself, and he had some serious problems in saying the R.

“God damn-it, Jorgenson” Ortega said.

“Some simple excuses could work too”

Everyone burst out at laughing.

Some sung, some laughed, some yelled. Someone was yelling to Jorgenson that he was a sissy.

Someone else yelled to Ortega that it was his shot to receive a blow-job for free on the fifty avenue.

Trautman rose his eyes to the ceiling, as if asking for help to God himself.

It was time to have done with it.

“AAA-TTENTION!” he shout, and everyone shut up at the same time.

“Good” he said.

And he started his lesson.

## *The art of war*

“Two world wars and the Korean war thought us that war is chaos, plain and simple.  
And most of all, that there's no such thing as clean wars.  
The idea of a confrontation in which victory belongs to the best, is a nineteenth century idea. It's something for boxers, not soldiers.  
Forget ideas like 'confrontation', 'fighting', or the law of the survival of the fittest, because war is everything but a some kind of fair 'duel'.  
And the art of war is the art of trickery and foul play”

There was a while of silence.  
None of the recruits moved a single muscle  
Then Trautman continued:

“You will always cross on the battlefield someone out numbering you, outgunning you or just smarter than you... Always. If you can't accept that, it means that you are living outside the reality and that you are not the men I am seeking for. And so, that's the door. Am I clear?”

No one replied him.

“In this chaos the stronger often wins, but not always.  
Sometimes being more intelligent is what will make some prevail over the others, or being smarter.  
Some other times being the more violent is enough to get the victory, or defeat.  
You may use punches but receive a stab in return... Which is the difference between sport-fighting and war.  
If you throw a rock, a thousand rifles may return fire.  
Something very similar is happening in Vietnam right now, I have to say.  
Anyway, you should forget about the Genevieve Protocols, international accords, the Hague conventions and all of these kind of things. Those things doesn't really exists.  
The battlefield is no country with war-sheriffs walking around and ready to take down those who play dirt, and that you call 'war criminals'.  
You are going to be on your own over there and inside a world ruled by his own rules, and them only.  
And this world that has nothing to do with what you think about war”

The recruits started to look at each other.

“When the Vietcong decide to shoot in the forehead our surrendering soldiers, there's no invisible hand coming down from the sky to magically stop them, because they are breaking an international accord of some kind.  
In Vietnam journalists die, businessmen, doctors and nuns, and everyone else in the very same way.  
Our soldiers armed with the most technologically advanced weapons of mankind are daily killed by farmers with muskets, and just because they did the 'wrong move'.  
This is no defeatism, but the reality plain and right, and you will have to be strong enough to accept reality as it really is.  
Otherwise, and I repeat it, that's the door... 'Cause I don't need no men of your kind.

Clear?"

Inside the mess the silence was complete.

"War is the return of men into his animal state and the wildlife is run by chaos, not just the law of the stronger.

The stronger *should* win, but there's no rule in the world saying he will win *for sure*.

The purpose of this course, is to deeply understand the laws ruling this chaos.

I will teach you to think in the same way as the war goes.

And when we'll be done, you will have a so deep knowledge of war that you'll be able to safely move inside the most dangerous environment of the world, and the most unpredictable one.

During the Ia Drang battle, three years ago, the Vietcong used to make some night time rounds to finish off the GIs wounded that couldn't come back from the no man's land on their own feet.

They slipped in the darkness of the jungle to find the wounded and shoot them in the head, or stab them.

Two of our soldiers didn't just survived those bullets in the head, but got back to their team mates on their own and in the dark, while so seriously wounded.

One had a bullet hole through his eye, and the wound infested with ants too. He woke up in the jungle alone and horribly wounded, and he found his way on his own through the jungle, but when he finally found his mates, he risked to be shot on the spot, because he couldn't remember the password when asked.

So, that's it. That's the war, and the real one...

The one that you are going to fight"

It was night.

Krakauer was smoking in front of his barrack instead of sleeping, when Rambo joined him.

The crickets were singing and the sky was clean.

Rambo looked up to the stars, than he said:

“Nice night”

“It is”

Krakauer continued smoking and the two men just stayed silent for a while

Then he said:

“When do you think they are going to put us 'under'?”

“Soon. Trautman won't let us feel like the passing of the selection means that we are done with him”

“What do you mean?”

Rambo smiled.

“I think he wants much more than what we have given him during the selection process”

Krakauer sighed.

“What a bloody nuisance...”

“Yes it is”

“Where do you come from, Krack?” Rambo asked.

Krakauer lit another cigarette then winked an eye to Rambo.

“There are things that are nicer when kept private. Just like those that happens in war. Aren't they, John?”

*Of course* – Rambo thought.

Then he said:

“Have you been in 'Nam like me?”

“No, but not everyone likes to talk about his past, and it seems to me that you don't like it neither, isn't it, John?”

## Fort Bragg

Some days later, Rambo started thinking about the course as really similar to an hardcore version of a quite normal camping course.

If it hadn't been for the constantly-present subject about how to kill people, it would have been exactly the same of a course for young boy-scouts: how to read a map, land navigation, how to survive, how to train.

Fighting strategies, concealment strategies, moving strategies...

What they should have eat and what they should not eat, how to prepare it and why, how to survive the jungle without being found by the enemy, how to kill and then vanish in the air.

The second constantly-present subject, was how to be stealth while doing everything.

Every thing that was explained to the recruits, no matter what, was always explained together with the instructions about how doing it in the more silent and invisible way.

As the recruits started healing up the injuries occurred during the selection process, the instructors started ordering some easy physical tasks.

And as the days passed by, the training became more demanding.

The convalescence days were over, by then.

Soon, the training became really hard, and the sixteen men of the two teams started getting back to the showers still aching.

They were getting back to a level of difficulty similar to that of the selection process, but somewhat less intense, because that rhythm was going to last for two years.

The recruits used to train in the morning and study the theory in the evening, during the theoretical courses.

After that selection, from a physical point of view everything seemed easier to Rambo, but he couldn't understand why it was so easy. Had it depended on him, he would have trained like hell every single day, and he couldn't understand why they weren't doing so.

Rambo thought that the purpose of physical training was learning how to manage the physical suffering, and nothing else than that.

The more you suffered, the stronger you got and that's it.

So, every training day that didn't tired him up enough to feel some real physical pain, left him with a bitter taste inside his mouth.

When this happened, he used to go to the showers perplexed.

But one day, Trautman explained Rambo why they were training this way, and not more.

Any time he could, the young man was glad to have a chat with Trautman.

That day, the colonel told him that he was going to explain '*the body*' to everyone very soon anyway, but also that that evening, he was glad to explain it to him in preview and in person. So that day, before dinner, the two talked.



### *The body*

Rambo came into Trautman's office-room, the same in which – one month earlier – his selection was brought into question by Garner.

But now, the youngest of the two Baker teams was right there and in front of him, safe and sound after the selection, and asking him why that course was the way it was.

Trautman was sitting behind his desk.

“Sit down, Rambo”

Rambo sat.

“Do you know what's the most common mistake when Special Forces soldiers are training themselves?”

“No”

“They train themselves too much”

Rambo petrified.

In his mind, the idea of training 'too much' had never existed before.

To him, the only limit for training was the will for self-suffering that soldiers could possibly find inside themselves. To John, training had no limits, nor it could have.

“You see, Rambo... The strength of will counts, sure it does and it's never enough. After this selection, I guess you all understood the importance of '*believing to the impossible*' and '*trying to do it anyway*'”

Rambo nodded.

In those words he found his own thought, even if he still did not understand where Trautman was going to.

“But we are machines, Rambo, and nothing more or less than that. Our body is very similar to a racing car, but we are much more complicated than cars. We have a fuel – what we eat – and an engine... But the rest of it is much more complicated to explain. Anyway, the past stories of some of our P.O.Ws explained us some of the mechanisms that make our 'machines' work.

The first being that no one survives a too long period of *excessive* effort. And by 'excessive' I mean over your body's abilities of 'self-repair'.

Sheer willpower can make a huge difference but it's not the only factor at play. The other is your body and it must be up to it too. Are you following me, Rambo? You can't just take a kid and make him do what we do here. This is obvious, isn't it?”

“Yes”

“So the limits are two: one is physical and the other psychological, but believe me when I say you that the physical limit is real. It's not just a matter of the mind.

Someone gets his limit sooner, someone else later, and the mind will make a big difference in setting your exact overall limit, but the physical limit is real, Rambo.

It does exist.

The body of a regularly-training soldier and the body of someone who never workouts are two completely different kind of machines”

At this point Rambo started to understand.

It wasn't just a matter of sheer will: it was a physical matter too... Almost a matter of body mechanics.

“During the selection process many goes into confusional state. They lose balance or consciousness: they have reached and crossed their physical limit and are literally starting to die, because over the point of no return the body is disintegrating, not training.

And that point is established by your body.

What I am trying to say, is that between men with the same level of motivation, training makes the difference.

When I don't workout enough, my physical limits gets lower. When I workout some more than usual – and regularly -, it gets higher.

If you want to be the best, you need both things: body and mind. An unbreakable mind – because you know suffering – and a body forged by years of training.

The selection program is just meant to find if you have the mind, not the body.

You will build your bodies here, thanks to our two years training program.

Remember it, John: years.

Every time you stop training for too long, you are ruining your body”

Rambo nodded.

Trautman continued:

“There's another very important thing you all need to know, and this is the most important of all. Average soldiers are thought that '*nothing is impossible*', because they *must* be able to *try* the impossible just like if it was perfectly possible.

You guys are all able to do this already, or you wouldn't have passed the selection, and this is not for everyone, I agree...

But this is just the beginning.

I will make you move even forward that. I will make you go full-circle.

All things considered, inside the SOG I will make you make a step back.

At this point, the most important thing for you is to have a perfect knowledge about your actual limits. The missions you are going to run are far too dangerous for those kind of soldiers simply used to try the impossible without ever thinking about the consequences of their attempts, and just obeying the orders as if they were some kind of brainless machines.

Because in the SOG planning your missions will be up to you, not us.

So I need soldiers both aware of their own limits but also ready to give a try at the impossible, if necessary, and without batting an eyelid.

But this kind of equilibrium of the mind is very difficult to reach. You can understand this, isn't it?”

Rambo understood it... Sure he did.

But Trautman hadn't finished yet.

“Here comes an example; no one can march in the desert, under the sun and with no food nor water. The power of his will will be of very little use because first all later, *everybody* dies in such a situation.

Special Forces soldiers will survive some days more - thanks to the years of training inside their bodies and a will power stronger than the others – but first or later Special Forces die too.

Let's assume this is going to happen to tomorrow, during a mission.

The usual soldier may say: '*I am going to make it. Nothing's impossible. I can do it*'

But you simply don't have the luxury of reasoning like that, not in my units.

The correct way of reasoning that you are going to learn, is this:

*'An healthy man can survive from three to six days, and a Special Forces soldier maybe up to eight. But since we have no other choice, we will be the first to survive for up to ten days. And we are going to make it because we are the best''*

At this point, Rambo asked himself if he would have been up to thinking this way in Vietnam, but he couldn't say, because he had no answer.

What Trautman was saying was, in some aspects, horrible.

It would have been easy to just thinking that he would have been able of reasoning in this way at war, after all he had already come through in Fort Bragg during the selection process, but the truth was that he had never been in such an extreme situation before, nor forced to think in such a way in Vietnam.

The main problem was fear.

He had been through it already and knew the way fear could change everything inside a man's mind. Reasoning the way Trautman was talking about could be done in 'cold blood', while planning your mission and before its start, but not on the field, when you were tired and afraid of death, no... This was a completely different story, and one of those situations he sincerely hoped to never live.

At this point Rambo felt some kind of awkwardness, almost fear, because every military corps has his own principles and if those of SOG where such... Only God knew what kind of battles created them.

Then Trautman started talking again.

"I will teach you how to workout and train properly. I will teach you how to build up the kind of 'machine' your body really is.

Then you will continue doing as I thought you on your own, and for all the time you will spend in my unit.

The factors to consider are three: eating, sleeping and workout, and a single one of the three can easily ruin all of the others if not applied in the correct way.

That's the way our POWs in Vietnam dies because of hardship: because they work like slaves without eating, drinking and sleeping adequately.

Working out is simply not enough, Rambo... You must also be able of doing it with intelligence: regularly and always near the limits, but without ever crossing them for real, or you are going to ruin everything. And believe it or not, that's the most common mistake between the veterans; they train too much.

Anyway, after you have understand how does it works, you just need a lot of free time and constancy most of all. An unshakeable constancy"

Trautman smiled.

"Believe it or not, but after the two years that you are going to spend here in Fort Bragg, what you have made during the selection process will look like a walk to you. You will see.

But we are going to get to this point step by step and yet, you will see the first results very soon.

Once in a week, you will make one more push up.

Once in a month, you will run a little longer, or faster.

Doing this constantly, you are going to get stronger in everything you are training for.

All in all, this is the reason why we are going to make you work like dogs, during those two years"

Rambo stayed silent..

So Trautman added:

“One day, life or death could just be a matter of how many years you have spent working out, and how you did it. If you did it well, the results of these years will be inside your arms and legs. Otherwise, they won't.

And without the results of training inside of you, the sheer power of will won't be enough to make you survive. Do you understand that that, Rambo?”

The young man nodded, then said:

“But after those two years in Fort Bragg, how long will have to workout, colonel?”

“Well... Considering that one day your life could depend on it, you can understand it by yourself, isn't it, son?”

*“ Forever, Rambo. If you are smart, you are going to workout for all of your life”*

*Samuel Trautman, 1967*

(Coletta)

*Mum, Dad,*

*Everything's fine here.*

*I mean, the selection was a little a thing for crazy people, and everything they are teaching us sound a little crazy, but the worst is gone already.*

*I am in.*

*I had a couple of nasty moments mostly because of the cold weather, but it was my mistake and it won't happen any more. I learnt my lesson.*

*I think I found the path of my life, dad... The marksman, because everything I learn while we used to hunt makes me better than any one else in that role.*

*In fact, I can do already many of the things they want to teach me, and all of this thanks to you.*

*My mates are all a little emotional I have to say, but I think it's mostly because of stress.*

*We are really put to test, here.*

*It looks like they are teaching us how to fail properly, not doing things right.*

*In some ways, everything's the contrary to how I was expecting it, but it's good. It's cool.*

*I am learning many very interesting things in here, and that will be useful in my everyday life too.*

*Send my greetings to everyone*

*bye*

## *The stress*

Garner scratched his head a bit and tried to gather his thoughts.

“Stress is not just simple fatigue; it's much more complicated than that. It's an entirely different concept, which you will have to learn again from scratch.

Stress is everything we feel as unpleasant: mostly hunger and thirst, but also being sleepless, cold or wounded, or losing a friend.

It's everything that takes energy away from us, but also attention and motivation.

A soldier on the field complaining of the cold or the mud because it's been continuously raining for days is a soldier in stressed state. And in such a state, he is partially careless, no matter how little.

So, stress is distraction. What is stress?”

“DISTRACTION!”

“Good. The purpose of the training you are going to receive here is to increase your stamina with regard to the stress. That's why we are going to be a bloody nuisance to you until we make you crazy”

The class laughed.

Garner allowed himself a smile, then continued:

“While training, you will always have to search for stress. You won't 'wait' for it, or hope it will never come. You must search for it with all of your will, even if it's masochistic”

The recruits smiled again.

“Very good. After all of these years working out in the search of more and more stress, when you're at war, you will have to do exactly the contrary. At war, you will have to avoid stress with the same energy you have searched for it during these two years in Fort Bragg”

But as he spoke, Garner saw perplexity on their faces.

So he decided to underline the idea:

“If you aren't able to save your energy just because you are not used to it, you are not fit for the SOG. Am I clear?” ”

And while saying this last sentence he almost raised his voice, because they deserved it.

The selection process had made them big-headed obviously.

He could read it in their eyes.

After passing it, those idiots thought they were omnipotent and that nothing in the world could push them into a state of crisis any more, not after what they had been through in Fort Bragg.

Idiots.

*Macho men... That's what they are: fucking heroes.*

*But the point is that there's no room for heroes, inside the SOG.*

And he pushed himself to say it aloud.

“You just don't believe me. Jesus”

They looked even more perplexed and suddenly Garner hated them.

He hated them because had they left for Vietnam the following day... They would have just died as



heroes.

Every one of them, no one excluded, and that damn selection process – that had just cost them so much blood and fatigue -, would never have been of any use to them in Vietnam... Because they hadn't understood anything yet.

Garner tried to calm down, and gather his thoughts.

“How much longer do you think you would have held out, had the selection process lasted longer? A single day? Two?”

“But Sir, the selection was obviously...”

“WHAT? THE SELECTION PROCESS WHAT?”

But no one dared to reply.

Garner then took a deep breath.

Then he tried to understand what the guys in front of him were thinking and, in the end, he concluded that those guys had no idea at all about the world, life and even less about death, nor war.

“Do you think that the selection process was exaggerated, is that it? That it was beyond the human limits, am I right?”

Very well.

I am sorry to be the one to tell you this, guys... But it wasn't. Not at all”

Garner lowered his gaze.

“The selection was nothing. There are American POWs over there that are living an ongoing selection that is lasting years, and yet they are still alive. They are over there right now, as we speak”

Garner looked up again, and toward them.

“And that's another reason why Trautman and I are here right now: to explain to you how to survive such things, should they ever happen to you. The only thing we really ask of you is to believe profoundly in what we tell you here.

You have to believe in it as if it was a matter of faith, because one day your lives will depend on what we told you here.

And this is no game.

Is this clear for everyone?”

Garner looked in their eyes again... And this time they had finally changed.

At last the recruits were starting to understand that their lives were at stake, not just their careers.

And so, Garner resumed his lesson about stress.

“During your missions you must *always* save your energies.

If it's possible to march slowly and still get there in time, it's your *duty* to march slowly.

If you have more odds of survival by eating a rat, you must eat that rat. You don't have to wait until it gets absolutely necessary just because eating a rat is an unpleasant experience.

Clear?

Another thing.

You must learn to do as we teach even when your instinct tells you otherwise.

Instinct is a double edged weapon, doomed to fail at the first very unusual situation you face.

On the contrary, you are going to analyse the situation you are in, judge it using both your experience and knowledge and only if you really can't do otherwise, are you going to rely on your instinct.

Many of you are used to keeping your heads down and throwing yourselves in without a second thought. But if you feel the urge to shut your brains down when you have to clench your teeth, you

can go. That's the door. This is not the marines' corps"

After hearing those words, Jorgenson almost jumped in his seat... But Garner didn't notice.

"Here's much more complicated than in the marines' corps.

During the kind of missions that you are going to run, this kind of attitude will only get you killed.

I will use an example... Let's talk about fear.

Fear causes adrenaline, and adrenaline takes hunger away.

When soldiers are under siege and are scared by death, they stop eating for days, because of fear and adrenaline.

But after twenty four hours of continuous effort on an empty stomach, soldiers are fighting undernourished... And that will make them commit even more mistakes, which happen because they forgot to eat.

On the contrary, you are going to remember to eat. You are going to smother that wrong instinct suggesting that 'it's not the moment for eating', and you are going to stuff yourselves with food by force, if necessary. Am I clear?"

"YESSIR!"

"But you need lucidity to think in this way, and even more while fighting, and an absolute trust in what we are teaching you here. You won't even be human beings any more, after we have finished with you in here.

In the SOG we are going to teach you to use your intelligence much more than people spontaneously do.

Do you know why so many soldiers are such fans of instinct?

Because using it is easy. On the contrary, taking a pause and using your head makes everything even more tiring.

Analysing the situation while under enemy fire, continuing to reason while you are on your own, tired and maybe even wounded... It's during those moments that you really see what a soldier is really worth.

We are going to turn you into cold blooded calculators.

At the end of this course, you will be able to sleep at command, which is something completely unnatural, but that we are able to teach you to do.

You are going to eat every time you can, you are going to rest every time you have a chance of doing it without bad consequences and you are going to learn something new during every single fucking mission you are going to run, and with a humble attitude for all your fucking life.

And at the end of your last mission, when you'll be in your thirties, you will ask yourselves what you have learnt today. And you are going to do it just like you did at the end of your first mission, ten years before

That's the real meaning of '*studying the next move*'.

That's the reason why this is our motto.

Don't you ever forget it"

## Fort Bragg, some days later

The scenery was flowing past the two Baker teams as they were running.

Ortega liked that view.

As the minutes went by – with a relentless slowness –, Ortega saw the city change into countryside, and the countryside turn into hills... And yet they never stopped, nor did they slow down.

His throat started burning while the scenery continued to flow beside him, without ever stopping.

After his first return from Vietnam, Ortega used to suffer from nightmares, but they had ended. He was healed.

The selection process had made him born again.

Not that he had slept so much, after the selection, and so far he hadn't had a lot of time to think very much either.

And yet – for some strange reason – the two nights he had just spent at the hospital hadn't given him nightmares.

Maybe because of the environment too.

In Fort Bragg everyone knew what the Vietnam War was for real, so Ortega no longer needed to hide what he really felt. Rambo in particular was probably feeling the same way.

He and Rambo were really similar, and were becoming very good friends.

It was good to be fine.

Of course it was not going to last for ever – nor had he any intention of staying in the army for ever, if the war lasted for years –, but to him, finally feeling fine was a very big step forward.

He was going to survive Vietnam - just like he did the first time -, but this time his return to the real world was destined to be different. He was not going to become the destitute person he had been after his first return, a long time ago now.

No... Those days were over for ever.

And he was going to fix things with Helen too, one day... Or he was just going to find another girl.

No matter what, he was going to start a family one day, and live a normal life.

If he had just been able to pass such a selection, fuck.... He could fix his life too and that day, over Fort Bragg's hills, he was absolutely sure about it.

\*\*\*

Trautman unbearably just kept running at the head of the group while the recruits, on the contrary, were starting to tire.

It was nothing compared to the fatigue of the selection process, yet they were tired anyway.

Samuel 'the beast' Trautman, while running, was continuing his delirious speeches about the moves, chess and how to analyze the enemies' methods.

From his point of view, the war the United States were fighting in Vietnam was different from any previous one ever.

It was not similar to conventional warfare, but to the local Resistance the Nazis had to fight against while keeping control over their occupied territories' soil.

So it was no coincidence that there had never been any war declaration in Vietnam, from either of the two opposing forces.

To tell the truth, Trautman's personal ideas were barely mentioned during these speeches about

strategy.

His mouth was mostly giving out some very tragic sentences, very harsh and violent, and so even more actual.

“If this was a war like the others are, we would have dropped a couple of nukes over Hanoi already. But this is no war like the others are. And in order to win it, first of all we have to *understand* it.”

“Some think that we are exterminating the Vietcong because for every single US loss, ten of them are wiped out, and because we are winning every single battle.

But if it was just a matter of numbers, the Vietcong ranks should be decreasing, not increasing.

On the contrary, they are just like insects: the more you poison them, the stronger they get against poisons. Numbers have nothing to do with this war, but in Washington they are too stupid to understand that”

The group was so high on Fort Bragg's hills by then that to men it was as if they were towering over the city.

Even the vegetation was starting to thicken.

The sun was going down, and the light was falling.

Ortega's throat was stinging more than before, and his feet were burning at each and every step.

He was drenched in sweat from head to toe.

His legs were like jelly, his lungs almost gone.

Ortega had already started losing some pounds, and that day he asked himself if he had to start worrying about it.

Then he turned to look at his mates.

Their faces were taut, their eyes staring or closed into two splits, like snakes.

Ortega's body was near the point of no return by then.

He was going to explode... It's that he just couldn't, so was not going to explode for real.

He was not going to explode, and that's it.

The course had just begun, but one thing Ortega had learnt already: if he really wished to command his team, he had to be one of the physically strongest, or the strongest of all... Or so Trautman thought anyway, so Ortega had no other choice than to be so.

Because – as Trautman used to say – *when the going gets tough for the team, everyone has the right to give in under many circumstances, but not the one who is in charge, never ever, and for no reason at all, no matter what.*

*The commander never gives in.*

In Trautman's opinion, a team leader's duty was to literally die, before giving in.

So Ortega was ready to die right that evening already, if necessary.

He turned for a short while to Trautman, who was a few steps behind him.

The bastard was not only able to withstand the run just like any other recruit and despite being in his thirties, but he looked like he was also sweating less than him

And he could do it without ever stopping blethering, Jesus Christ.

To tell the truth, the colonel was now blethering just a little less than before, but it was a very small consolation.

Ortega esteemed him and listened to every single word the old man taught, always trying to make it his own... But he also thought that sometimes the 'old man' used to go too far, just like everyone else did.

And then of course, the Vietnam War had turned out to be much more difficult than anyone ever thought two years before, when it had just started, but this doesn't mean that Ortega always believed everything the 'old man', or the 'beast' as others called him, had to say.

As an example, it wasn't possible that all of the Vietcong were as worthy, smart and brave as Trautman said.

They couldn't all be so motivated as they seemed by something as idiotic as communism was. The pain brought Ortega back from his thoughts to reality, and he couldn't stay focused on them anymore.

It was almost dark and the wind was just starting to feel cold against his sweat-soaked gym suit. The way back to Fort Bragg was still long, and the idea of walking it wasn't very likely.

*It never ends... Today, it's really never ending.*

Ortega slowed down until he fell beside Trautman, as if he had to talk to him, even if he had nothing to say him.

Trautman was now struggling.

From so near, his facial expression was easier to read.

The old man was starting to get tired, at least.

But then the colonel turned right to him.

*Jesus* – Ortega thought

Then the colonel smiled.

He was satisfied.

*He is suffering less than me* – Ortega thought.

*And now I also have to withstand his approval, for God's sake.*

*Who in hell is this man? A fucking alien?*

*God... I hate him so much...*

And then – with no warning – Trautman started with his speeches again... And Ortega intensely wished to sucker punch him.

\*\*\*

When Trautman realized that the teams were well cooked – and that no one was still listening, with the only exception of Rambo – he finally stopped his running, and started walking.

At the same time, the sixteen recruits stopped running all at once at his back – some thanking God -, and they finally started getting their breath back.

They had been running for almost three hours.

## *Eating*

Danforth was particularly tired, that evening.

He sat at the end of the mess, aside, in the hope that no one noticed the kind of state he was in.

On the contrary, Coletta, Rambo and Ortega – the nerds – were unbearably always sat in the front row.

Danforth looked at them, than shook his head.

*Nerds.*

Danforth thought for a little while about his past, his life and the reason he ended up being there, the robbery he had carried out with Billy that had gone wrong.

*Nerds and mommy's boys too.*

Ortega wanted to become the teacher's pet, it was obvious.

But in Danforth's eyes, he was a weak man. It was so obvious.

He would never have what it takes to command a team, no... Commanders needed to be tough people.

And the right man for his team was himself.

Then Gates came through the door, shut all the recruits up and started his lesson.

“The purpose of this course is to survive. We will teach you how much you must eat during a survival situation, what and why. Do any of you know what beriberi is?”

No one replied.

“Beriberi is a deadly disease, like pellagra. To tell the truth, it looks like a disease, but it's not exactly a disease. It's something that happens to those who don't eat some of the nutrients the human body needs to work properly.

Because eating *something* is not enough. It's necessary to eat *all* of the substances the human body needs in order to survive, because if just one of them is completely missing, sooner or later the body will die. As an example, if you just eat corn for one year, you will die because of protein loss. So, we are going to teach you what you must eat during a survival situation, and how. And then we will teach you how to hunt too, and harvest”

Gates paused.

“This will enable you to survive if you end up being lost in the jungle or – in the worst possible scenario – captured. The kind of situations I am talking about can last for months, or even years. Which is why we are not just going to teach you survival, but we are going to make you experience it right here, in Fort Bragg. We are going to make you live that way for a few months. We are going to do this because just teaching it to you would not be enough. We are going to get you *used* to it”

The recruits looked at each other puzzled.

“As we have told you already, a new situation means stress, and stress means distraction. And when a soldier is at war and distracted... He dies.

So the philosophy is always the same: *'suffering in here in order to survive out there'*.

Very well.

Let's start with what you have to eat, when, and why”

Fort Bragg, city center

The bar was dark.

A few feet further away, some men were playing billiards in silence.

"Hi John. Sit down" said Messner.

"Let's drink together"

Rambo sat down beside Messner, and the two drank in silence, watching the men's game.

"They are gambling heavily" Messner said.

"Yes. They are"

The two drank another sip of their beers, in an almost embarrassed silence. They had talked various times before, during the selection process as well as after it, but they didn't really know each other, not yet.

"Where were you stationed? I mean... Back in 'Nam"

"Sui Tre, army. Rifleman"

"I was in the infantry too: combat medic"

The billiards balls smacked in the distance.

"You are young, John"

"Just three years younger than you"

"I only said that you are young. Do you have any family?"

"A father"

"Brothers? Sisters? Women waiting for you at home?"

"A father. My mother died when I was too young to remember. I am an only child. And you?"

"I had a girlfriend. Maybe I still do, I don't know. It's complicated"

Rambo smiled.

"How can you not know if you have a girlfriend, or not?"

"She left me. You know... She was married already."

"Really."

For a while, Rambo looked as if he was going to let the subject go.

But then he said:

"Did you love her?"

"Love is a big word. I don't even know what it really means, being in love"

Rambo drank another sip of his beer while reflecting about it for a while.

Then he said:

"But you liked her"

"Yes, I did."

"How much time has passed since the last time you heard from her?"



“Since before the selection... A few months”

Rambo reflected again, then said:

“You should write her something, I think...”

The two drank their beers.

“Maybe I will do, John. Maybe...”

(Because of the risk that her husband might read them, the letters between Messner and Linda never make any reference to their past affair)

*(Daniel Messner)*

*Linda,*

*How are you? They accepted me, you know... I am with the Special Forces. It's unbelievable.*

*Now your friend Daniel Messner has been officially declared a tough guy.*

*Who could ever have imagined it?*

*I am now working like a dog every single day and without false modesty, I can say that I've built up quite a physique already.*

*I am joking.*

*They are teaching me some medical procedures that are quite 'unusual', at best. Crazy things meant to be done when you really have no other choice or better means.*

*I am talking about things that would nauseate a seasoned surgeon, and make him feel like a rookie again, like when we were back at school and disgusted most of the time.*

*But you know, what can I say...*

*We study how to fix things during desperate situations... And it seems that this kind of stuff has worked out in the past even if it now looks like some kind of butchery.*

*So I just learn and hope that I will never have to use any of these 'heresies', and in particular not on my own friends.*

*I hope you don't mind if we stay in touch and if I write you a letter, from time to time...*

*Your friendship is really important to me.*

*A hug*

*Daniel*

## *Hunting*

“If you get separated and the nearest point of rescue is more than a week’s walk away, your rations might not be enough. This has already happened to our teams many times in the past, so we will teach you how to hunt.

Hunting is difficult.

To survive in the jungle you'll have to hunt several hours a day, and this is going to condition your tactical choices... And this is the reason we are going to make you good hunters too, capable of surviving with nothing.

Our men who ended up in such a situation, they all made the same mistake: they were in a hurry. They couldn't survive the jungle, so they had to get back home in a hurry, because they had no other choice... And that hurry was the reason they ended up recaptured.

On the contrary, once you have learnt how to pick up food and hunt, you'll be able to roam that fucking jungle for months if necessary, without ever having to worry about food and water, and just concentrate on avoiding being spotted by the enemy.

Because as any Vietcong knows very well, hiding in the jungle is easy. But surviving it, that's a completely different matter.

So the most important thing, for now, is that you simply learn how to survive.

We are going to teach you the hunting usage of the knife, which is also going to be the only piece of all of your gear that you won't ever be able to live without. We are even going to teach you how to self-build one in case you lose your own.

We are going to teach you archery and how to build an emergency bow, in order to hunt without attracting the enemy's attention.

We are going to teach you which insects you should eat and which ones you should not, and the most hygienic ways of preparing them.

Rats mostly. If you're ever captured, they are going to be your most important key to survival.

Here in Fort Bragg you will have two months at your disposal to get used to this diet. And you should pray God you get used to it, because one day it could save your lives.

If you get the job done properly, Hanoi prisons will look like a hotel to you and when the Vietcong holding you prisoner think that they have broken you, you are going to slit their throats and escape”

Some recruits shared a nod of approval.

All of the others – on the contrary – remained silent.

They were thinking about what the hell of a situation they were getting ready for.

## Fort Bragg

Jorgenson came out from the shower still naked, and with the bath towel over his shoulders. Thanks to the months that had just passed, he was even bigger, more stocky and muscular than before.

He had just had his hair cut, and it was now crew cut and very short.

Getting out from the shower he met Johnny in the corridor, who was doing some push ups.

“They are letting Danforth and Messner keep their beards, did you know that? Because you know, we are going to work under-cover too”

Only then did Jorgenson realize that Rambo was working out.

“What the fuck are you doing, Johnny? Are you crazy?”

Rambo did not reply.

“These fucking workouts... You are exhausted too, Johnny, everyone can see it. You don't need to work out right now... You will only ruin your muscles. From time to time, you have to recover”

Rambo calmly finished his push-ups – doing them slowly and in the most tiring of possible ways – then he sat on the floor staring into space

He waited to get his breath back, and then he stood up and said:

“You are right Carl, but today we didn't work out enough, and what I can do I have to do it. If I can move and I don't do it, it would be *a waste*.

Jorgenson shook his head.

“You are crazy, you do know that, don't you?”

“If what Trautman says is right, the exercises we are doing shouldn't be in groups, but individually. Every one of us is different from the others: what's not enough for me could be too much for you, or vice-versa”

“I tell you this from the heart, buddy: your screws are not entirely tightened”

Rambo smiled.

Jorgenson stayed a little while looking at him, then he went off shaking his head.

*Eating, part two.*

Barry, sat at his place, picked up his piece of glass.

Garner said:

“In case of capture you will convince them that you need to shave. You will tell them that a piece of glass can't be held as a weapon, and so it's innocuous”

Barry looked at his dead rat. It was cold and stiff in his hand.

The small dead creature still had the freeze of the refrigerated cell upon it.

Barry asked himself who could possibly be the official US-army-rats supplier.

And rats of the worst species: big black sewer rats with shining black fur, but pink tails.

The idea of eating that small beast was enough to make him feel sick.

The idea that that he was going to live eating things like that for two months really made regurgitation rise up in his throat.

“Good cooking is necessary for hygienic reasons, but if we take the body parts containing urine and faeces, there's no need for it any more. So we are now going to skin our rat, and take all of these body parts apart, the intestine in particular. Pick up your piece of glass and make a straight, longitudinal cut over the animal's belly, from the neck to the groin. And prepare to drink a small amount of blood”

At the moment, Barry thought it was a joke. He looked around in search of support, but no one returned his gaze. On the contrary, most had just started cutting their rats.

Garner, in the meantime, was continuing his lesson.

“No matter how undernourished you might be, always remember to avoid drinking too much blood at a time, because it causes vomit. There's no such risk with rats, because they are small animals, but with rabbits or anything else the risk is real. Your stomach can just digest small amounts of it at the time, which is the reason you won't be able to keep it down. So remember to always drink small amounts of it”

Barry looked at Messner, the medic of his team.

Messner had started already, but Barry preferred to turn away from him. Messner had already been field-surgeon assistant in Vietnam, so he was already used to all kinds of dreadfulness.

Fuck.

Barry looked again at his rat with his piece of glass in his hand and, in the end he found the inner strength to start the cut.

He put the glass tip under the rat's neck.

He started pushing the tip, while making the glass slide down at the same time. The rat's fur opened up almost by itself, and immediately unveiled the beast's entrails, red and slimy.

Barry tilted his head back from the rat on the table, and assumed a disgusted facial expression.

Garner explained '*how to get inside with the finger tips*', with the purpose of fully disembowelling the animal..

After the cut, Barry took the skin away.

It was thin and slimy on one side, and furry on the other. The rats' face slipped off its head like a

glove.

The skin got stuck a little while, before being torn away.

Barry was now as white as a sheet, and it wasn't over yet.

The others had all already put their animals on one side and their skins on the other.

Garner said:

“Fine. Now that you have stripped the skin off your rat and the fur is far away, the animal is hygienic.

Now you have to pierce the heart and drink a few drops of blood”

The recruits executed it. Barry finished peeling the skin off his animal in a hurry, then he pierced his rat too.

Some sounds of swallowing up started coming from here and there in the room, as if they were sniffing it with their noses.

The rat's blood was cold and nauseating.

The taste of the iron flooded Barry's mouth.

The boy discovered that the rat's blood tasted just like any other blood, and just this idea made him even sicker.

“Everything crawling, flying, swimming or on four legs can be eaten”

Barry was struck by an acid retch.

“Don't exaggerate. As I already said, a sip is enough to ingest a huge amount of iron”

Barry puked on the floor.

The vomit came up from his throat in painful strokes, partly coming out the wrong way and forcing him into coughing.

That puke had the taste of rat's blood, and Barry knew that it was going to stay down in his throat for a very, very long time.

Coletta, who was sat beside him, laughed at him

All of the recruits group was smiling, but those smiles were somewhat fake: most of them were on the verge of puking too.

And witnessing that show wasn't of any help to them.

Garner continued talking as if nothing had happened.

“Everything other animals eat can be eaten. Everything you intend to try, keep it five minutes in your mouth: if after that wait, a disgusting taste appears, it's a dangerous sign. Otherwise, swallow it. Above all, stay away from anything containing a milky liquid”.

Fort Bragg, a month later

They were all sat in the mess, tasting their roasted rats, when Jorgenson came in triumphantly, immediately followed by Trautman.

“What's up big animal? - Danforth asked – Why are you late?”

“I have to make a special announcement”

The colonel smiled behind him.

They were becoming his boys, by then.

As a matter of fact, Trautman never really liked the idea – because it just made his work even more difficult – but in the end, it was an unavoidable process.

Trautman cared about his guys, and in some ways loved every single one of them.

And when the time would come to send them to their deaths, he would love them even more, because that day they were all going to become heroes.

That's the way it worked for him.

It's a mystery, but any soldier knows it: when you send some of your men to their deaths, you suddenly love them even more.

And if they survive too, the pain they spared you makes you truly love them.

At this point he becomes a brother.

Or a son, if he is very young.

Which was actually exactly what was happening between him and Johnny.

Rambo used to ask Trautman many questions, mostly about the things they were learning during the course.

And then, when they were face to face, he always questioned him about many other things.

Had the guy asked him about women, he would have started feeling like a father with his son for real.

*A son whom – one day – he could order to die for him*

Trautman was lost in his own reflections, when Jorgenson made his announcement in front of every one.

“Some days from now, my daughter will be born. Trautman has just given me a week's leave”

The chorus coming out after those last words sounded like a stadium, and pieces of roasted rat started flying at Jorgenson.

Barry stood up at the long table, and yelled at the top of his voice:

“Cool Grizzly! Very cool! Ultra cool!”

Trautman looked on smiling at them.

Those were the moments that made him bond with his men even more.

The two Baker teams were his pride.

No one had ever responded so well to his teaching before.

Team B was very special in particular.

They behaved as if they had everything inside themselves already, and they just needed his help to bring it to the surface. It was as if he hadn't selected them, but found them.

He was well aware that his ideas sounded too pessimistic and cerebral to many.

It was as if after years spent studying how to train 'adult' soldiers, he had suddenly found eight of

them that were just looking for an 'alibi' to become so.  
They were probably going to become some real special forces champions.

Anyway, both of the teams were gaining a deep understanding of what Trautman was teaching them, and that his teaching was the fruit of years of experience in the field.  
And because of that, they respected him even more.

Trautman was right about the Vietnam War, and he knew he was.  
And soon, the two Baker teams were going to become the living demonstration of it.



## *The knife*

That morning the sky was grey, the air humid and the woods wet.

After some miles of marching with heavy rucksacks on a dirty road, the young men stopped in the middle of the nowhere, and they all lined up.

Despite the cold and the fact they were all wet, they had just their shirts on.

The teams were all lined up and everyone had his knife in his hand.

Danforth was clenching his teeth, with his knife shaking in his hand.

Krakauer, who was right beside him, was staring glazed into the distance, as if he was trying to find something hidden inside his own mind.

Rambo had his gaze on Garner already, when he started talking.

“The one in your hands, is a brand new fighting model, specially designed for the SOG. It's called *Randall model 18*”.

The recruits looked at it: it was a long, black coated, bowie-clip knife with a saw-back.

The handle was cord-wrapped.

It was longer and more impressive than any bayonet used at the time for sure.

None of them was impassive in front of the charm of the beauty of a military knife as long and aggressive-looking as that one was, not even in the middle the cold they were feeling at the time.

“If you unscrew the pommel, you will see that it is a compass, and that the handle is hollow. Inside the handle, there are some items. Hollow-handled knives were created during World War Two for pilots usage, in case they were shot down. And it's a situation very similar to those you are going to fight your mission in”

*As downed pilots* – Danforth thought.

*Jesus Christ.*

“The first purpose for hollow-handled knives was to have a place to keep matches dry under any circumstances. Unscrew your handles”

The young men unscrewed their knives' pommels.

“Inside the handle there's a 'standard' kit: needle, string, fishing sinkers, a razor blade, matches. You are going to change that kit according to your mission's necessities.

The hollow handle means the knife can store a stick, which turns the knife into a spear. This is perfect for big game hunting as well as a thrusting weapon, if you end up being un-armed for any reason. A very fearsome weapon in hand to hand combat, and we are going to train you into using it.”

“The string is used for fishing, but also to strangle an enemy, if necessary. You just need to handle it in the usual way. Messner, show it to us”

Messner wrapped the string around his hands a couple of times. Then he tightened it as much as he could, to show the others that it was stronger than a standard fishing line.

“Well done. The handle of this knife is cord-wrapped, and so it doesn't get slippery not even when the knife is wet. But if you ever really need it, you can unwind it and use it as a spare cord for your bow. You are going to use this one for it, not the fishing line. Am I clear?

John smiled: had he really just said bow?

All of the recruits looked at each other incredulously.

The idea of grasping a bow in Vietnam made many of them smile, and more than one perplexed.

“Yes, you heard it right: In Vietnam you are going to kill with the bow too.

We are going to train you in mastering archery using the 'compound' bow, because no weapon is as silent as a bow is.

What we are going to teach you has been done by Vietnamese tribes for millennia, and some still do. You will never be as good as they are, but very close. Now, let's hold your knives and... ”

## Fort Bragg

After two months in Fort Bragg, Ortega decided that he just didn't like Danforth.

During on-leave nights, he always looked for some prostitute.

And then he smoked, drank and searched everywhere for marijuana as if there were notomorrow, and it wasn't such a good activity to be always busy at, in Ortega's mind.

That night Ortega stared at him over his own beer, while suffering at the same time the shoulder and leg pain he had sustained that day.

He asked himself how the fuck Danforth could be able to never give in.

He could fill himself with marijuana – and god only knew what else – all night long, vanish inside a dive in the dead of night with a hooker, and then reappear on Monday morning at Fort Bragg again, as fresh as a daisy.

Marches with heavy rucksacks, weight-lifting, jogging... He could always do everything like it was nothing, and Ortega hated him because of that, because he knew he was physically inferior, and despite the healthier life he was living.

And this, sooner or later, would eventually become a problem, because Trautman was going to choose the two team leaders very soon, and he would choose between the physically fittest of them. Trautman was looking for the perfect combination between physical strength and the right mentality.

Mentality first – he had said in the past.

Ortega wanted to command because he felt that role inside of him already.

He was a person of the reflective kind, and someone taught him that reflective people were very good in those roles where you should use your head.

Ortega wanted it very much, because in the deep of his heart he was sure that he could be a better leader than anyone else.

## *Invisibility*

It was sunny that day, and after ten hours spent marching, everyone had a halo of sweat under their neck.

The two Baker teams were walking in full gear: heavy rucksack, helmet and M16.

Trautman was walking in front of them and was equipped just like them but with a green beret instead of the helmet

“Rambo, Ortega” he said.

Rambo and Ortega ran in front of all of the others, passing the column and finally vanishing into the woods in front of them.

On the other side, the others continued marching as usual, as if nothing had happened.

A few minutes passed by, then Trautman ordered them to halt and said:

“Recruits... Did anyone see 'em?”

No one replied.

Trautman then sighed.

“Rambo: well done. Ortega: you must make more use of the shadows. Your rucksack was illuminated. You can now rejoin your ranks”

Rambo and Ortega came out from the vegetation at the borders of the path, rejoined the back of column and started marching again.

A few minutes later, Trautman said:

“What's wrong with my gear today?”

No one replied.

Krakauer in particular looked distracted already and Trautman knew perfectly what it was about.

It was the first symptom of fatigue.

Coletta looked like the fittest of the day.

Private Coletta, after recovering from the pneumonia he had suffered during the selection process, looked like he had just become another person.

Of course, he wasn't physically on a par with the fittest ones (Jorgenson, Barry and Rambo), but he was holding up much more than Trautman had expected.

“So - Trautman said – , what am I wearing today that is wrong?”

“The green beret” Rambo replied while panting.

“Correct, Rambo. I am the only one with the green beret, and so I am the commanding officer of the group, aren't I? Anybody can understand that from miles away”

A while of silence followed.

*Bullshit like this cost more than just one of my friends' lives* – Trautman thought.

Then he raised his gaze to the sun, wiped his sweat and said:

“How did you know that, Rambo?”

“For the same reason you do, Sir”

Trautman looked carefully at the guy, but his eyes gave nothing away.

Rambo was just like that.

He was different from all of the others by the fact that inside his eyes, you were never going to find

any answers at all.

“Messner, Barry” Trautman said, and the two vanished into the vegetation in front of them too.

The Baker teams’ training was never just a matter of pure workout: there were always some abilities to use or something to think carefully about, because that was the way Trautman wanted them.

The stresses always had to be two, not just one: fatigue and something to think about.

At that point, the two Baker teams started studying the bases for being 'shadow men'.

The guys used to jokingly call it '*the advanced course of hide and seek*'.

The colonel was an excellent 'shadow man', a real expert on the subject with years of experience in the field, but a very different experience from playing hide and seek at Fort Bragg, because he had learnt it the hard way, in the field, while taking first person risks.

*Ryan* – thought Trautman that day, while starting to explain.

*My first murder in cold blood.*

Forgetting that night was impossible for him.

Even though everything had gone smoothly that night, he and Garner had made several 'technical' mistakes while getting in that country-house.

With hindsight, they had been lucky... But with the Baker teams, it was going to be another story.

Trautman was going to make them get perfect.

Three months later

Patrick Nelson



*Trautman, my friend,*

*You know, here in Vietnam everything's stranger...*

*And day by day, it's always worse.*

*The most unreal thing is that the Vietcong have no corruption: inside the villages occupied by the party, people trying to ask for a bribe wake up the following day with a bullet in their head and a sign hanging from their neck, with 'corrupt' written on it.*

*That's the way the Vietcong keep the problem under control.*

*And let me tell you... In my opinion, training the South Vietnamese to wage war against the Vietcong is a little meaningless.*

*They are too poor, often starving, and so much that all they think about is asking for bribes or opium trafficking, and they don't do it to get rich, but just to survive.*

*There's no guns for hire in Vietnam. You just ask the right man on the street, you offer him 500 dollars and he will probably accept asking no further questions, because that way he is going to feed his sons for almost a year.*

*Everything here is crazy....*

*And everything looks as if it's governed by madness.*

*Some days ago I caught one of my best South Vietnamese officers asking a family for a bribe.*

*If the family hadn't paid it, he was going to shoot them even if they weren't Vietcong.*

*As I got there he had just taken the money and was raping the daughter in front of her parents.*

*I am talking about a little girl, and he was fucking her in front of her father tied to a chair.*

*He was one of my best South Vietnamese officers, one of those I really needed.*

*That's Vietnam's absurdity.*

*He was one of those very rare soldiers I have seen risking his own life for real while fighting against the Vietcong.*

*My hands are shaking while writing it down, but I have to tell someone... Then burn this letter my friend, because my life is at stake because of it.*

*Because when I saw what was happening, I went blind with rage.*

*I pulled out my 1911 and shot him in the head without even thinking what I was doing.*

*But then I felt sick.*

*I felt the need to puke, because I am not you, Samuel.*

*I had never done anything like this before.*

*It was disturbing.*

*The 1911's forty-five is a devastating bullet.*

*It opened a fucking hole up in his head with extreme ease, as if it was a fucking melon.*

*But I knew this man.*

*It wasn't like shooting an enemy in the heat of a battle.*

*And do you know the most absurd thing?*

*I do think that it worked for real.*

*War is a really perverted thing, my friend.*

*For fifteen days there were no similar episodes.*

*I hate this country.*

*In Vietnam, the dirtiest things a human being can do are always rewarded.*

*I can't stand it anymore.*

*Sometimes I think that even Diem was right, when he used to say that in Vietnam <<'the only way*

to get something from people is by killing a few >>.

*Sometimes it seems that violence is the only language the Vietnamese can talk, together with bribes, of course.*

*Opium and money are two languages that any Vietnamese can talk very well.*

*But the truth is that I am not like you at all, Trautman, and that I chose the wrong job.*

*Coming here was a bad mistake and it scares me the kind of man this country is changing me into.*

*I did everything wrong and I don't know how to get out of it.*

*I don't know how to get back.*

*Sometimes I think that if I can just get back home alive, I will probably never again be the kind of man I was before.*

*It was the first time I had done something like that, and I hope to never do it again.*

*I am a civilian, for god's sake.*

*An advisor, a trainer, a man wishing to make things work. I am the last one of the '63's military advisors, the real ones, when all of this still had a real meaning of its own.*

*But now I can't stand it any longer, and I don't believe in anything anymore too.*

*I can't do it any more Samuel, not like you did back then, when you could raise your head again despite everything that happened to you, no matter what, without ever giving up and always keeping your head straight at the same time too.*

*I am sick, tired, embittered and disappointed. I am looking forward to the time you'll be here again, to launch a proper and real campaign of targeted killings against the Vietcong cadres, just like we used to. No agreements with the Corsican mafia at all, this time. We need to get back the weapons that are getting out with the bribes, because here in the Quang Tri the gun smuggling of US weapons is really getting out of hand.*

*Fuck em all.*

*I hope you at least, in Fort Bragg, are getting on all right, and away from all of this, because here I am well and truly a fucking civilian, and I always have to behave under someone else's rules even while commanding one thousand gooks.*

*And fuck, I have to say it, since you went away I don't trust any of them anymore, not a single one, and those who have my own life in their hands as well.*

*I am afraid that one day you will wake up and read in the papers that they have fragged me\*.*

*They could stab me any time.*

*Saying I live every single second of my life in terror, is putting it simply.*

*And everything just because of the shitty corruption that Loyd and Boyle persist in using in their favour because << it's the way to keep things on their feet >>.*

*I can't stand it any longer.*

*Try to get re-assigned to the triborder zone the sooner you can.*

*I need you here and I need you now, or everything could go to the dogs in a few months.*

*So much for 'everyone's home before Christmas' (\*)... Who believes in that bullshit? At home before Christmas, but with a lost war.*

*Fuck em.*

*We do really have some shitty generals, Trautman.*

*Goodbye my friend,.*

*And don't forget to burn this letter.*

*Patrick Nelson*

*\* Fragging: coming from 'fragmentation grenade' , it's a slang term used to identify the murder or severe wounding of a US officer at the hands of his own troops, usually by means of a hand grenade, from which the term comes. The hand grenade left no finger prints evidence and left the door open to the doubt of it being a simple accident. In 1969, there were two hundred incidents, with twenty four deadly ones. Suspicious cases throughout the duration of the conflict were one thousand and four hundred.*

*\*\* Sarcastic quotation of general Paul Harkin's words who was the commander in chief of US forces in Vietnam and, in 1963, got everything sensationally wrong in predicting the end of the war before Christmas of the same year. In fact, the war lasted eight years more for the Americans, and almost ten for the South Vietnamese, and general Harkin's mistake became so sensational that his words 'home before Christmas' became legendary on US soil.*

Trautman put the letter down, a bitter grimace on his face, his teeth almost clenched.  
*But me, I would like you to be here, my friend* – he thought.

*I would like you to see them...*

*I would like you to see what kind of soldiers I am creating here, the kind of mentality I am managing to give them.*

*If we had just had a whole army made up of men like them a few years ago, none of this would ever have happened, my friend.*

Trautman sighed over the sheet of paper, then he gazed up at the window, outside, where the sun was shining that day.

And that was the moment he had another idea about his plan.

To tell the truth, it was a plan he had been working on for a long time before then, but the idea sprang into his mind at that exact moment, right after finishing that letter.

So Trautman picked pen and paper up from a drawer, and started writing.

(Samuel Trautman)

Patrick,

*I have a plan, but you too have to burn this letter as soon as you've read it.  
It's imperative: don't forget for any reason.*

*First of all, stand firm.*

*They can't keep me away from Vietnam for long; on the contrary, I have a likely date for my return already.*

*And you have to believe me when I tell you that we can do it.*

*There's a lot of intelligent people here, we are not alone and we won't stay here twiddling our thumbs waiting for an all-out, conventional war that is never going to come, not like Westmoreland thinks.*

*Using guerrilla warfare, the Vietcong are literally winning, so I see no reason at all they should ever start fighting in the open, as he thinks they are going to.*

*West-dick-head-Moreland.*

*It wouldn't make any sense at all... And that's the reason it's never going to happen.*

*All of his predictions have been wrong so far, and we both know it.*

*That man is a dickhead.*

*Westmoreland hasn't understood anything about this war, and yet he commands us all: that's the real problem.*

*Had he just let those who know how things work do their job, we would have never gone so far.*

*Anyway, crying about the past is pointless.*

*Let's think about the future.*

*I have a plan to get the Triborder-zone out of the current situation and yes, we can do it.*

*But you have to start acting right now, and on your own.*

*I know what I am asking you.*

*I know what this means to you. I am fully aware of the risks this is going to put you in.*

*Think about it as long as you need, and take your decision freely.*

*But remember that if you want to do something, now's the time.*

*Not in a year or two, when I will be present too...*

*We must unlock the situation now, even at the cost of facing up to our higher ranks, my friend.*

*If you ever accept, that's the plan.*

*Here's what you are going to do.*

*Go to your South Vietnamese officers, and tell 'em that corruption amongst privates must come to an end.*

*In a few months, corruption must be a matter for commanding officers only.*

*Tell them that if they succeed in taking corruption away from their privates, they'll be able to manage it on their own, and so doubling the income for themselves, at least.*

*We need to clean up just the troops, and that would be a good result already.*

*This is going to be the first phase.*

*It will be long, complicated and dangerous, but you can do it and even without me.*

*Then we will pass to phase two.*

*What I am going to write costs me a lot, believe me.  
I reflected a lot about it, and I wouldn't be suggesting it to you if there were any other options.*

*When me and the Baker teams get to Vietnam, you should have succeeded in confining the briberies to your South Vietnamese officials only.*

*Then we will take them down, one by one.*

*Maybe not every single one of them, but most of them for sure, until all of the others will have learnt the lesson.*

*I know what you are thinking right now.*

*On the other hand, you will agree with me that we can't go on with the kind of people like those ones are.*

*They are too prone to changing their allegiance, and selling weapons to the Vietcong or doing anything else but fighting the Vietcong.*

*They couldn't care less about it, and we both know it.*

*In order to really make a clean break with the old habits a brand new generation of South Vietnamese officials is required, but we have no time to get rid of all of the bigwigs and the men supporting them at the same time.*

*We must waste them.*

*If we just had the time necessary, I would send em all to the martial court... But I just can't. We need to act now. All of this commerce of weapons, slaves, drugs... It has to end and right now, if we really want the South Vietnamese starting to think about their country's needs, not just their own business.*

*Once we've made a clean sweep of all of those assholes, corruption will be out of the field once and for all, and no one will ever sell even a single bullet to the Vietcong any more, not after seeing what our Baker teams dare to do to those who step out of the line.*

*All things considered, the Vietcong does the same with their own men, so we have to do the same too.*

*When you are at war, you either become as bad as your enemy is, or you die. Am I right?*

*The Baker teams will disguise themselves as member of the Arrows\*.*

*This won't be an issue at all, because I have agents working for me amongst them already, and we know how to act like them.*

*I have planned everything already and we are going to do it clean.*

*In the meantime, the second Baker team will go over the border, in order to destroy the sanctuaries\*.*

*I don't give a shit about Laos' neutrality. No one give a shit about it in this war.*

*Washington is going to approve it or go fuck itself.*

*Because you don't know about this my friend, but we have run dozens of clandestine operations over there already, with no written clearances and without reporting what we do there to anyone. Everything's done by word there, and wearing no uniforms, with the only difference that this time we are going to do it for ourselves.*

*We are going to do it just for me and you, to save our part of the Triborder-zone.*

*Anyway, I wasn't the one who invented this shit.*

*They were the ones who ordered it in the first place, and I am now doing it again but for my own purposes, which are better than their ones are for sure, by the way.*

*I just have to say the word to my men again and Washington could never stop me in any way.*

*Thousands of American and Vietnamese lives are at stake.*

*I am tired of thinking about the public image, international affairs, Jonson's re-election or other*

*bullshit like that. My men are kicking the bucket out there. The time has come for us to start fighting this war in order to win it, not to just re-elect this or that guy, or to just keep the US international public image in its place.*

*Enough with all of this crap. Enough!*

*Should South Vietnam ever fall apart, the commies would wipe an entire society out: panic, refugees, mass retaliations...*

*I foresee a million deaths, if this is what is going to happen.*

*I don't think it would be so different from the Jewish holocaust during WWII, but I don't think Washington fully understands it, or they would do things in order to get some results, not to just have this guy or that guy elected again.*

*I'd better not think about it, because doing so makes me feel sick.*

*Going back to us...*

*If we get the ARVN work, we can really pacify the tri-border zone,*

*Talking about the rest of Vietnam... I don't know, Patrick. We can't win the whole fucking war just you and I. But if we give our best, we can get a lot, trust me.*

*See you soon, and don't forget to burn this letter up as soon as you finish reading it.*

*Samuel*

*\*Arrows: Vietnamese, anti-communist and nationalist group of the terrorist kind, but anti-American too.*

*They wanted to re-unify the two Vietnams, but under a paramilitary dictatorship not backed by either the USA or the USSR.*

*The truth was that they were working with both the United States and the Vietcong depending on their money or territorial needs.*

Six months later



Messner turned over under the blankets, feeling uncomfortable.  
Linda had never replied to any of his letters.  
He scratched his nose, he turned again.  
He wanted to stay in contact with her.  
Jesus Christ... He wanted to be friends with her, if she just wanted it too.  
He sat up, then rested his back on the wall.  
Really?  
Did he really hope to be friends with a married woman with whom he had just had a bad-ending love affair?  
*Stupid, stupid, stupid* – he thought.  
*How stupid I was..*  
How could the fact that she had never replied to any of his letters hurt him that much? All in all he had never loved her for real.  
*Are you sure?*  
No, in that moment he was not sure about anything.  
His head was in confusion because of all of the things that he was studying at the time (emergency medicine that makes your flesh creep), and his legs hurt him like hell because of the ten hours' march of that day, with the heavy-loaded rucksacks over Fort Bragg's hills.  
*Are you sure you never loved her for real?*  
What he was sure about, is that he didn't love her for real while he was dating her.  
But why did leaving her hurt him so much, if he did not love her why he was with her?  
*God damn it* – he thought.  
*Stupid, stupid, stupid..*  
*While you were with her, you never even dared to hope that it could last for real.*  
But therefore, was there any sense in hoping that her husband would ever leave her?  
Leaving a head physician for a Special Forces 'grunt'?  
*Idiot..*  
*You never really hoped, but it has always been what you really wanted anyway.*  
*Stupid idiot.*  
*That's the reason you really want her to reply to your letters.*  
For the umpteenth time he turned over in bed, and his legs gave him a sharp pain again.  
*Sleep Messner, or tomorrow you won't even stay on your feet during the march or you are going to fall asleep later, during the lessons, on the desk.*

## Fort Bragg

Besides Coletta – always a little out of the game, because of the very different course he was following, gradually within Baker team B two very different groups emerged.

Ortega, Jorgenson, Rambo and Barry were the ones 'with their heads screwed on', or the grinds of the group.

On the other side, Danforth, Messner and Krakauer were the hot heads, those of booze, joints and even hookers, sometimes.

Despite being a shy guy, Krakauer befriended them anyway. He used to talk very little, and never talked about himself or his past, as if he had something to hide.

He and Danforth - who during the selection process had put their lives at risk while coming down from a very dangerous canyon – had become very close friends by then.

They were two very similar kinds of people, and were living those months of very hard work out with the very same and very simple attitude: the surviving one.

Their aim was to 'survive' the physical tasks and be promoted at the exams day by day, without ever thinking about tomorrow.

On the contrary, Ortega, Rambo, Barry and Coletta (and in a lesser way Jorgenson too), were the 'true believers'.

Trautman had literally won them over, body and mind

Those guys were hanging from Trautman's words every day, and often from Garner's too.

The three hot heads deeply admired Trautman too, but learning his teachings were enough for them, and nothing more than that.

The case apart, as already mentioned, was the designated marksman Coletta.

To him, it was like being some kind of alien inside the Baker team B.

All of the team's guys, even the most serious ones – Ortega included – used to let themselves go freely, mostly when they were together in town, during their leave.

They used to drink beer, sing and try to befriend some local girls.

But Coletta always used to act more seriously than the others.

He used to behave as if he was a couple of years older than all of the others, even if he wasn't.

While the other guys were having fun, he just stayed on his own in a corner, looking at his friends with a smile on his face.

Anyway he too – just like the others of the 'true believers', didn't approve of Danforth and Messner's night-time exploits.

Sometimes he looked even less well-disposed than Ortega himself, who sometimes used to act like a proper strict father.

When Team B used to walk back to the base, after a weekend leave, Ortega was always the first to tell the others to lower their voices in order to avoid bothering the people in the neighbourhood.

He calmed the guys down when they were at risk of getting too nervous in the middle of local people, and he constantly kept an eye over them..

Coletta helped him very often, but with less energy than him.

The truth was that the selected marksman felt a little like a guest inside his own team.

His way of fighting was going to be very different from the one his mates were training for... And his personality was going the same way too.

*Invisibility, part two:  
'getting from behind'*

They were all in a line and divided into couples: the first – blindfolded – had his back to the second, who was grasping a rubber knife.

The purpose of the exercise was getting close without the blind-folded guy hearing your foot-steps

One of the couples was made up of Messner and Barry.

Barry was now behind the blind-folded Messner, who stood his back to him.

Barry slowly took a couple of steps, carefully putting the tip of his feet first, and the heel later, doing exactly as he had just been taught, being very careful to avoid making the slightest sound.

“Again” said Messner.

Barry went back at the starting point, raised his rubber-knife again and started walking toward him again.

This time he stood on two very minute stones, that squeaked one against the other.

“Again”

Barry went back again.

“Again”

“What the fuck, Messner... I haven't even re-started yet”

Barry restarted going forward again, but slowly.

This time he almost got within reach.

“Again”

“Goddamnit! - said Barry, throwing his rubber knife on the ground - This is fucking impossible!

“I heard your breath” said Messner.

“Oh come on! It can't be”

“Pick your knife up, ” said Trautman. He was in front of the recruits.

“Yessir!”

“The way you are putting your feet on the ground is wrong”

“I know – Barry said –, I know”

And the two started again, and kept going on until they were worn out.

\*\*\*

After two weeks of daily practice, everyone learnt how to manage his breath in the proper way, and they could walk at the speed of an average person, but producing no sound at all.

Even more, they gained a perfect knowledge about what sounds a human ear can hear and what it

can't, at any range and in any kind of environment.

Because – as Trautman pointed out – sounds don't spread out everywhere in the same way.

In the jungle – for instance – everything sounds closer than in an open field... And what's usually very silent in the jungle might not be silent elsewhere.

So, once sent into Vietnam, they would all start training over there again.

Just like they were going to do with a million other things... And for all of their lives.

## Philadelphia

The exact moment Jorgenson saw for the first time that bloody, screaming little creature that was his daughter, he fell in love with her.

The doctor had just cleared her windpipe with a textbook tap, and everything went fine. No Caesarean section, no unexpected happenings: the birth was perfect and Mary was now lying pale in her bed, her hair all black and sweaty, but she was smiling.

“It’s a girl – said the doctor – and she is perfectly fine”

Jorgenson burst into tears like a child, he was laughing and crying at the same time, while he continued to shift from one foot to the other, in some kind of weird dance, while the doctor passed the newborn to her mother and he looked at them both.

“They are both very fine, mister Jorgenson. You should calm down. Everything's fine”

Virginia Jorgenson, just born, had a large head, her eyes closed and screamed like someone had just skinned her alive.

But once clean, dried and wrapped inside some white blankets she calmed down, and the way she looked around was simply gorgeous.

“My darling...” he said

“My dear” replied Mary, looking at her husband.

He came close to her and went to lean his forehead over the sweaty one of his wife. Then the two smiled at each other, one lowered over the head of the other, while the new-born baby cried between their arms.

“My dear” she said again.

Jorgenson was now crying.

A cry with no sobs, as if just his eyes were crying, not really him. He petted his wife's cheeks with both his hands and stayed just like that, staring into her eyes motionless.

Oswald – Jorgenson's uncle – had stayed back until then, on the room's doorstep. Then he softly asked the doctor if he could take a picture with his camera.

“Of course” the doctor said, and he stood aside.

Oswald took three pictures, but Jorgenson and his wife didn't notice a thing.

The creature Jorgenson didn't even have the courage to touch looked like some kind of miracle in his eyes, or witchcraft.

The blood tie had just taken him over with unbelievable power.

For that new-born baby girl he would have killed the whole world, if necessary, and for his wife probably even worse.

The power of his feelings at the time was completely inexplicable to him.

With the Fifth Special Forces pay and SOG too, the kind of life waiting for them was going to be a fairly good one. This way, they were going to be able to afford to buy a house for themselves, and she could stop working.

And most of all, his daughter was going to have a proper childhood, and with no help from her mother's parents.

A real life, and their own one.

*Not like the one I had* - Jorgenson thought, without really wanting to think such a kind of thought

*Not like the childhood I had inside my father's sawmill.*

Jorgenson was then overwhelmed by a turmoil of painful feelings and memories, and let himself completely go.

He wept loudly this time.

Then he dried his tears with the back of his hand, while inside himself he talked to his daughter.

*You are not going to have the kind of childhood I had, my love. You are going to have a proper mother and father, not like the ones I had, Johnny had.*

*You are going to be happy, my sweetheart.*

*Our love will make you strong, serene and happy.*

*That's a promise... You are going to be better than me.*

*I love you, Virginia Jorgenson.*

*I love you more than anything else in world.*

*Invisibility, part three.*

Trautman and Garner were at the centre point in a clearing in the woods, near four human-like straw puppets.

They had been waiting for fifteen minutes and by then Garner was starting to get impatient.

“Trautman...” he finally said, but he couldn't end the phrase.

Two arrows hit two of the puppets at the same time.

Garner turned to see where they had just come from, but as he heard a little rustling behind him, he turned again.

The third and fourth puppets' heads were almost severed and Rambo, Jorgenson, Ortega and Coletta were right in front of him, with their weapons at the ready.

“Outstanding work, guys. Really outstanding” Trautman said.

All of the Baker team men were smiling, but Rambo.

He practically never smiled.

“Why did they shoot the furthest targets first?” asked Garner.

“To distract us, and I would say that they did that. As they came in, we both had our backs to them”

“That's true”

That's when the student gets better than the teacher – Garner thought.

He said:

“Very good work, guys. You in particular, Johnny.”

“Yes Rambo – said Trautman -: I have decided. You are going to be the second shadow-man of the team, together with Barry. You are the team's two best at it”

Rambo nodded with no expression on his face.

“Anyway, good job for everyone. Well done”

(Patrick Nelson)

*Trautman,*

*I've carried on with our plan... I've almost overcome corruption amongst the privates, and I have to say that without the bribes - amongst the soldiers, at least - it seems that something is changing for real.*

*The ARVN is now less worried about money, and thus much more about pure surviving fighting, and for real.*

*And this is exactly what I want to bring out: their survival instincts. Because if we lose this war, we Americans will just go back where we came from.*

*But them...*

*They won't have any place to hide, and the Vietcong won't have any mercy for them, nor for their sons either.*

*While three years ago I had to live constantly looking over my shoulder, I've finally started being really proud of the South Vietnamese I am working for.*

*We are re-building whole villages 'moved' (deported) by Diem in '65. We are cleaning whole zones up, freeing them from the Vietcong 'taxes'.*

*With no soldier corruption in our path, finding the Vietcong cadres has suddenly become much easier. We are now capturing or killing some of them almost daily.*

*With the bribes halved and so distributing much more food and aid, we are building whole new battalions up, and much more loyal than before because of what we are doing.*

*Many people don't think that the Vietcong are better than us anymore.*

*But the Vietcong are moving too.*

*Something is bound to happen, and it's nothing good. There's been big movements in the South of the DMZ, and something has changed here in the Tri-border zone too.*

*More weapons are flowing, more money and more North Vietnamese regulars.*

*This is getting to be a damn hornet's nest.*

*There's no corner of the jungle between Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos that is not hiding a Vietcong team, or just a fuel, rice or ammo depot.*

*Trautman, my friend, you have to speed the times up.*

*I need your men over the fence (across the border) and I need them in a hurry, before the irreparable happens. The only thing that will never change is the Khe Sanh siege, and I agree with you when you say that it's just a decoy.*

*A final attack on Khe Sanh would cause devastating losses to the Vietcong, and we would take the base back in just a few hours. Giap is not so foolish.*

*After all of the victories he has already had to our cost, the idea that our generals are underestimating him again is unbelievable.*

*Anyway there have been a lot of very bad signals recently in here, and they are before everyone's eyes.*

*Something very big and very bad is bound to happen, but without your men here saying what is really happening in Laos and Cambodia, I'm groping in the dark.*

*I have no idea what the Vietcong is going to do, and I am scared like hell about it.*

*Try to speed your times up, if you can, Trautman.*

*A storm of shit might be coming, and I need you here.*



## *Hand to hand combat*

“Many of you have some boxing experience, or Greco-Roman wrestling, and this is not entirely bad” Garner said.

“But you have to be fully aware of the fact that reality is very different from boxing or any other sports.

When you are at war, fighting is for killing, and there are no rules. The first to grab a knife wins, the first taking away his enemy's eyes wins, and so on... And you have to know each and every single one of those things can't happen in boxing or wrestling.

And that's why what you think you know about hand to hand combat... is entirely wrong.

First of all, hand to hand combat is not *boxing*, ok? It's *fighting with no weapons*.

SOLDIERS, WHAT'S HAND TO HAND COMBAT?”

“IT'S FIGHTING WITH NO WEAPONS”

“Very well. And never think that finding a weapon is difficult. I saw a man dying with a fountain pen stuck in his neck”

A while of silence followed.

“Yes” he added..

The recruits looked at each other embarrassed.

“Rule number one: the first to find a weapon, wins.

Rule number two: the first to lose his eyes, loses everything. The eyes are soft, delicate and easy to destroy with your bare hands. You can easily pull them away with your fingertips. Whatever might happen, never let your enemy get his hands close to your head. Coletta, Messner: put those goggles on”

The two came in front of Garner.

“Now wet your hands with paint and get on guard”

The two started facing each other

“Okay, Sniper, just like that. The first who gets colour on his foe's goggles will receive some beef instead of that rat's soup”

The rest of the recruits murmured a little bit, yet Coletta and Messner studied each other a little longer before starting fighting.

In the end, the selected marksman decided to attack first.

He threw a hook toward Messner's face, but he avoided the hit turning his torso away.

Messner and Coletta shared some other missed hits towards each other, and they finally understood how difficult it was fighting that kind of fight where you can actually blind someone with your fingertips. On the outside, it looked very similar to a regular fight, but it wasn't.

Then Coletta received his first fist on his mouth.

The crowd behind him made some kind of howl, and a while later, everyone was supporting and yelling as if they were in front of a football game.

“Smash his face”

“Kill him”

“Beat the doctor! Come on! He thinks he is someone important, just because he studied...”

The sniper avoided a stretched out fist from Messner, and replied with a hook on his jaw, then

finger-marked his goggles right in the middle of both his eyes.  
Messner cursed: his goggles were covered with paint, and he couldn't see any more. He and Messner both turned to the instructor sergeant.

“What are you waiting for? Resume the fighting” said Garner.  
“But I can't see a thing” Messner said, while removing his goggles at the same time.  
“What are you doing? Go on with your training, soldier”  
“I can't see a thing”  
“You have been hit in the eyes. Continue fighting”

Messner put his goggles on again, he assumed the on guard position and received a lot of punches from Coletta.

It was long and painful, until Garner finally stopped them.

“Okay, that will be enough... You are dead, Messner”

## Fort Bragg

After a whole year of intensive physical training, and 'brainwashing', one evening Barry – who was very close to a nervous breakdown due to tiredness - realized how much his chest had grown after all of those months of continuous and heavy training.

His chest was enlarged and his arms covered with well-defined muscles, and as hard as a rock. Even his veins were larger than before and almost rising above his skin. Other than enormously big, Barry could now walk as silently as a cat, use the shadow around him to become invisible and fight with his bare hands as never before. He could also shoot perfectly with any kind of firearm, both US and Soviet made. The training for conventional warfare (open-field fighting) had just begun. It was just like Trautman had revealed to them in advance one year before. Garner and Trautman were giving them a description of the Vietnam war scenarios with an amount of detail that was generally spared to conventional soldiers, and those details created a picture of warfare that was the opposite of everything everyone used to think about it.

That night, Barry finally understood what Trautman was really doing. It was not just a matter of making them become 'the best', no... Trautman's wish was to create 'smart-soldiers', some extremely critical-minded soldier whose opinion was always useful to listen to, and that's why they were teaching them all of that strategy. Barry and the others had to become able to run both CIA-style missions and 'classic' warfare ones too, to both coordinate themselves with the rest of the regular army and work on their own, when necessary. He had to become *humint* (human-intelligence) man too, and even if he had never thought about himself in that role before, he had to because their opinion, and so their team's opinion had to become as valuable as a colonel's one., From this point of view, Ortega was one of the finest. He was literally learning by heart everything they were teaching them about strategy, and Barry admired him because of that. If they continued to workout and study for long enough, soon Trautman would get what he wanted from them.

The problem was that now that he was halfway through the course and was starting to understand Vietnam for real... He wasn't so sure any more about his wish to get back there. And that night, all of the unfinished business he thought he had there was further away than ever.

## *The knife, part II*

“Knife fighting is very, very rare in the real world and usually, it's not a proper fight.

Most of the time it ends up in a single strike, usually initiated by an executioner and received by a victim, and the fight is over. But if you find yourself involved in proper knife vs knife fighting, there are some facts you should know”

Garner paused for a while, to reflect.

Then he said:

“When two knife-armed men face each other at the same level, they usually both die”

The guys – who had seen so many knife-fights on the silver screen - looked at each other surprised. None of them had ever heard before about a knife fight ending up with both the fighters dead on the ground. Until then, they had all always thought about knife-fighting as a noble-art (like boxing, just to mention an example) and yet Garner had just told them that the death of both fighters was the standard outcome of a knife-fighting duel.

“Without the advantage of surprise – Garner said - giving an immediately-deadly blow with a knife is almost impossible.

So, after the first strike, the real fight starts, and that's when the situation gets complicated, because when both men are in the knife-fighting guard position, giving deadly strikes is practically impossible.

Then the two fighters start 'kissing' each other, meaning that they start giving each other superficial wounds.

And the longer the fight, the more of those lighter wounds the two will give each other, and so bleed. So, in the end, those superficial wounds will finally kill the winner too, because of blood loss.

It was terrible... But presumably real.

There was no reason to make things like that up.

No...Garner was talking about things the army knew for sure.

Things someone had seen happening, and that's where the teaching was coming from

So the guys continued listening.

“This 'dead-men-fighting' situation can happen in the jungle easily, because in the jungle hours can pass before you receive proper first aid.

So, I will now teach you knife-fighting, but do remember that knife vs knife fighting in an even situation is already a half defeat, and so you are going to do anything you can to avoid such kinds of situations.

Always remember that your goal is to *kill*, not *fight*. There's no such thing as fair play at war and fighting puts you at risk of being defeated, but murder doesn't.

Remember that, always”

Garner took a couple of steps back, and so leaving the center of the open space.

“Danforth, Ortega” he said.

That morning, Danforth was a little out of sorts.

He was sick and tired of eating rats, snakes, spiders and berries.

He was tired of sleeping four hours each night for months, and so much daily work out that his muscles were in pain every single night.

So when he went to the centre of the open space just like Garner had just ordered him to do, his knees were squeaking at every movement, and his back was in pain when he was still too. His muscles were tight, stiff and weak.

He felt like an old man.

The selection had been terrible, but fuck... The course too was driving him crazy with tiredness.

And he was sick and tired of constantly hearing that he had to put on weight if he wanted to survive the SOG, and so to stuff himself with food each and every night.

Of course he wasn't going to quit after all he had gone through during the selection-program, but for god's sake... He was sick and tired for sure.

And when Garner called him to fight with the training, fake knives, he was going to be beat up for the umpteenth time that week, and he really couldn't stand it any longer.

This time he had no intention of receiving a beating at all.

The toy was broken.

The rats, the weight-lifting, the push-ups, the runs... Enough.

It was enough.

This time it was going to be different.

And seeing Ortega right in front of him, with his wooden knife in the right and at the ready, it was the last straw.

Ortega placed himself right in front of him and on guard, but Danforth threw his knife to him just like that, without even thinking about it.

The piece of wood flew as straight as a missile against Ortega's head, opening a cut on his forehead.

A small squirt of blood flew away from his head and up, in the air.

Only then did Danforth wake himself up, as if he had just stopped dreaming.

Ortega put his hand over the wound and spun at the same time, thus giving his back to his adversary.

He shook his head several times, as if he trying to shake away the pain with no results.

A burning pain, that judging from the convulsive movements of Ortega's head, looked like it had no intention of going away at all.

A very bad wound.

"You did wrong, Danforth" said Garner.

But Danforth did not agree... He was thinking quite the contrary.

He thought he had just gone over the top, so he turned to his instructor with a puzzled glance on his face.

"That's wrong, Danforth: a knife can't go through a human skull. Had this knife been real, it would have done just the same damage this one did. Congratulations, soldier. You have just pissed off your enemy even more, and you are now unarmed too"

"What?"

"Continue"

Ortega looked at his bloody finger-tips, then he turned to Danforth and only then could everyone see the real extent of his wound.

The cut on his forehead was three centimetres long and opened up by three millimetres, which was enough to see the white stripe of the underlying bone

Ortega then started advancing toward Danforth, his wooden knife firmly held in the right, in a perfect fighting stance.

And when finally got within reach, he slammed a first thrust that Danforth avoided by jumping backwards.

Ortega wasn't trying to hit him to win the fight, but just to hurt him.

Danforth then gave him a kick on his shin-bone and hit him right in the middle.

Then he grabbed Ortega's armed arm, but Ortega twisted himself out of his grasp, thus succeeding in getting out of the hold, then they both lost their balance and fell to the ground.

"Never use Greek-Roman fighting during a knife fight" Garner said.

A moment later, Danforth felt Ortega's knife in his side... With an unprecedented violence.

"AAARGH"

*Jesus Christ – thought Danforth – what pain!*

*He could have broken my rib. And had a broken rib pierced some internal organ, he could have killed me..*

Danforth managed to grab Ortega's armed wrist.

The two then lay embracing each other just like that, in that kind of Greek-Roman embrace, with Danforth blocking Ortega's armed hand.

"Okay, that's enough" Garner said, but the two of them looked like they hadn't heard a word.

"I said enough, dickheads!"

Garner kicked in the middle of them, making both fly away from each other.

The two fell on the ground again, in the dust.

"You went too far, both of you. There must be no accidents in here, am I clear? You can hate each other as much as you want, but the first of you putting someone else out of use is out of SOG. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yessir" said Danforth.

Half of Ortega's face was now covered in blood. His glance was turned away from Garner, because he wanted to avoid giving him the satisfaction of looking at him while he was talking.

"PRIVATE!" Said Garner.

"Yessir!"

"Look at Ortega carefully. Look at him, you recruits. Look at his cut on his forehead: this kind of cut can blind you with blood, and so they are very dangerous. If something like that happens to you, you have to bandage yourself before anything else. Do it before blood gets you into Ortega's situation. Any piece of cloth will do the job"

Garner took a little scarf from one pocket, turned it a couple of times on itself, then gave it to Ortega, who tied it over his head.

"Enough with knife-fighting for today. You, Ortega: do you need to go to the infirmary?"

"No sir"

"Very well, soldier"

*Hope (Washington state)*

Barry had three days of leave at disposal to solve some family economic issues regarding the purchase of a new house for his family.

"Mum... It's really beautiful" Barry said while looking at the new house by the lake.

"Such a beautiful view, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes, it is"

"We are going to rent the upper room to tourists. We are going to get it all right, you know? You don't have to stay in the army for ever. Come here, my boy"

To embrace his mother, Barry had to practically crouch. He let her kiss him on one cheek, then he tried to wriggle free, but she wanted to hold her boy tight.

"You got so thin".

"Mum!" he said.

"I am telling you you got skinnier. You also enlarged your shoulders, but you got thinner. You are scaring me, boy. What are they doing to you?"

"We work out a lot, mum"

"Are you all right? Do they treat you well?"

"Yes they do, ma"

"Don't fool me around, kid"

"Mummy!"

"Since your father left, you know how things have been here. If it wasn't for you and your job..."

"But you do have my job, mum. And they pay me very well. How's my nephews?"

"Very well. In the end, your uncle settled down for real. And I do hope one day you will do it too. You have no intention of going to Vietnam again, do you?"

Barry did not reply.

"I knew it"

She moved away from him and went inside the house. Barry followed her.

"I am good at my job, and we need the money"

"You could work with your uncle"

"It's not just a matter of money... I like it. I like my work"

"Don't talk nonsense. My son doesn't like killing people. My son doesn't like war"

"No, of course not. It's complicated"

She turned to him.

"I know that, son"

"I am going out to smoke"

Barry left the front porch and went to sit on the bench.

He lit a cigarette with his Zippo lighter while looking at the lake.

The humid air was blowing against his hair.

The mountains over the lake had a light fall of snow, but that day was a sunny one, and the silence and air against his hair made him feel good.

Smoking looking at the lake on such a sunny, silent day was really cool.

He really needed that leave.

And then okay, sooner or later he had to tell his mother that he was going to be sent to 'Nam again... But there was no rush. He had some more time at disposal to do that. He could wait for his next leave to do that, so that she could suffer less months.

In the small plain in front of the lake there were three houses.

Barry opened his eyes wide.

*Cindy* – he thought.

*Blow me... It's Cindy for real.*

Barry paused for a while in order to look at the charming black girl. She was a beauty for real. Her face was round, her eyes luminous, and she looked as thin as a lathe, as if she had never grown up since the days they were at the same school.

But for Barry, on the contrary, it was like a whole eternity had passed by since then.

And in the middle of that eternity, there had been Vietnam and the selection program. Above all, Vietnam.

Yet she looked just like the same girl she was before, and maybe, talking with her, he could feel like he was back then again.

“Cindy” he shouted.

The girl turned her head but stayed puzzled for a long while.

Then she recognized him, and smiled.

To Barry, this was the most beautiful smile of his whole life.

He thought that she had no intention of talking to him.

He thought that she was going to just wave, and then she would go back to her home, wherever it was.

But then she turned round and started coming forward to greet him.

As she was coming close to him, Barry felt his heart start beating.

She sat on the bench beside him, and they chatted.

The wind was blowing on the hair of both of them, the lake's water was shining and the mountain tops were lightly white.

And something inside Barry's mind changed for ever.

She was smiling, delighted to see her old school-mate after such a long time.

They now weren't kids any more, but young, and yet it was like their school days had never been over.

And that's how Barry fell in love with Cindy.



(Patrick Nelson)

*Trautman,*

*I've finally understood what is happening for real. Everything's clear, now.  
The movements in the South of the DMZ are going on just to keep the Khe Sanh farce going on, a farce costing the Vietcong hundreds of deaths each month, but a farce it still is.  
Khe Sanh is a bluff.  
No life is too precious for Ho Chi Minh.  
If thousands have to die just to make a bluff more believable, then thousands will die for nothing.  
That's the way our enemies fight.*

*They are going to make a larger offensive against the South Vietnamese largest cities.... Against Hué too, and maybe even Saigon. They are going to risk everything because they know that time is not on their side, and in my opinion they are going to do it during the lunar new year.  
I know they have just signed a cease-fire for the religious festivity, but it's almost a joke, isn't it? I mean... Some communists signing a cease-fire during a religious recurrence. Can you picture it? They are going to violate the accords they have just signed just like they have always done during this damn war.  
They are going to use the fireworks to cover their gunfire, and how!  
And it doesn't take a genius to understand that it's going to work because it's a very good idea, too good to be untrue even. There are too many people out there that haven't understood a thing about the Vietcong, my friend. There are still too many people around the world thinking that the Vietcong are stupid.*

*I have already warned the top brass about the oncoming offensive, and they obviously did not believe me. As you always said, because they are too scared to seriously think about what is bound to happen.  
They say that a major attack of that kind would be a massacre for both the fighting sides. They may be right – I add – but only if we hold on at the impact. Because if we don't and Saigon falls, or even worse, if the civilians turn against us and they start fighting besides them... The war is over.*

*Anyway the rumours - those rumours the top brass don't want to believe in – reached here, at the Tri-border Zone, and before everywhere else, and I couldn't stop it in time. My South Vietnamese men are terrified and I am afraid I am going to face an epidemic of desertions.  
Maybe we are going to be far away from the eye of the hurricane, but amongst my men in Saigon things will be different.  
I have officers that have sent their families away from the capital already, and some very good friends that have already given out instructions for when they die.*

*Regarding our plan to overcome the bribery and traitors, that plan no war hawk must know about... We made huge strides during the last months.  
You were right... About everything: conspiring together with you was fucking awesome... And I can't wait for the time you will be here again, perhaps with your new men too.  
Together, we are going to conquer the world... I can feel it.  
Then of course, my South Vietnamese can't fight properly yet, but now something has finally changed for sure, and for the good.*

*I do still have many drug-addicts, pimps and corrupted turncoats... Yet and despite of all of this, when I now turn to look at them I see some real warriors. Of course they are not ready yet, but they are really changing a lot, and I start understanding how the Vietcong can be so strong, because I see it in my men...*

*The Vietnamese have it in their blood.*

*They are really inclined for war, just like you once said.*

*You see Samuel that I don't have any problem in saying it: I do love my Vietnamese. That's the reason I am doing all of this: for them, not because of the fucking Cold War, the Domino-Theory and all of this top brass bullshit..*

*The Vietminh is a bloody and shitty dictatorship, and the Vietnamese don't deserve it.*

*I see in front of me the best this country has to offer, and I am ready to die for them just like I am ready to die for my own country.*

*It's just that fuck...*

*I do need you,, Trautman.*

*I need you here, and now.*

*Send them all to go and fuck themselves, and pull rank to get here sooner.*

*Patrick*

*P.S.: I am looking forward to the moment when general Loyd will finally hear about what we are really doing here, without his permission.*

*I can't wait...*

*Because that's exactly what the general fears the most: a handful of insubordinates acting outside his orders and yet getting such unbelievable results that they demonstrate beyond any doubt that that presumptuous dick-head was completely wrong.*

*This is bound to happen, my friend... And I am looking forward to it.*

## Fort Bragg

Because of the endless weightlifting session of the day before, that night at Fort Bragg's bar Ortega's shoulders and pectoral muscles were aching. And his head started spinning right after the first beer. As tired as he was, he should never have left the base. In front of him, Messner and Danforth had just offered a couple of drinks to two girls that looked more or less like pros from the world's oldest profession. Sometimes Ortega even suspected that Danforth might become the pimp of some of the girls that hung around the base. And right then he saw Danforth and the girl exchange some money, and he flushed with rage. He got off his stool, but an arm firmly stopped him. "What do you think you're doing?" It was Barry. Ortega did not reply, his eyes firmly fixed on Danforth, like two iron sights on their target. "I am talking with you" Up to then Rambo had just stayed on his own, drinking his beer, but seeing the scene he stood up and joined them.

"I want to teach a lesson to that dick head" said Ortega. "No, you won't" replied Barry. "He is a pimp, he smokes marijuana and he thinks he's really something, but he is just sullyng our team" "Damn' it, Manuel" Despite being right beside them, Rambo remained silent and just continued to look at Danforth with no facial expression. Ortega tried to insist on rising from his stool and Barry had to put one hand right in the middle of his chest in order to keep him down with the necessary strength. "You are not going to fight with anyone tonight, Ortega. You are drunk" "Am I drunk? They are stoned! And if that fucking stoned doctor ever tries to put his dirty hands on me because I am wounded, then someone will have to help him" "Oh, come on, Ortega"

In the end, Messner and Danforth noticed them. Danforth tried to get to them but Messner stopped him just like Barry did with Ortega. The Baker team was full of older brothers. In the end, everyone rose from their seats and reached each other to talk, but between Rambo, Messner and now Krakauer too – who had just joined the group – there were enough sober people to be sure that everything would go just fine. The truth was that Ortega wasn't sure about being appointed as the team leader. Trautman was undecided between him, Danforth and Coletta. But the designated marksman required studies too intensive for Coletta to be a good candidate. With all of the extra courses Coletta had to follow, it was too difficult for him to be very good at most of the common ones. And being the best in most of the courses was the first requirement for a wannabe team leader.

The two true candidates for the role were Ortega and Danforth, and the two men, that night, faced each other speaking their minds.

“You'll never be our team leader” Ortega said.

“A Florida's loser won't be either”

Hearing that, Ortega started leaping at his throat, but Barry blocked him immediately. Rambo was right beside the two of them, ready to intervene if necessary.

“Hey boys – the bartender said, from the distance -, I don't want any trouble”

Up to that moment Coletta had been outside, smoking a cigarette, but he came in right at that moment.

“What's going on?” he said to no one in particular.

The one who replied was Barry, while giving Ortega's shoulder a pat and holding him tight at the same time.

“Just a little booze-rage. Isn't it, Skorpio?”

Coletta looked at Ortega, then Danforth, and then smiled.

“I guess we could sort this out old-school style, couldn't we?”

Danforth's eyes lit up.

Danforth considered himself a street fighter... Forget hand to hand combat. And you could see a mile off that Ortega was none of that. Danforth was looking forward to an excuse to fight with that conceited daddy's boy.

On the other hand, Ortega looked like he hadn't heard Coletta's provocation at all.

His eyes were impassive, as if the rest of the world had just stopped existing.

“You are a dickhead, Danforth” Ortega said in the end.

Danforth burst out laughing.

“I did nothing to you, pal” Danforth shook Messner away from himself raising his hands at the same time, as if everything was fine, and he had no intention of starting a fight.

But he started coming closer to Ortega anyway, and so close that everyone held their breath...

Ortega tried to free himself a little bit, but Danforth and Barry kept him tight.

Now the three of them looked just like some some drunks holding each other.

When Danforth backed away from Ortega, he said:

“I did nothing to you pal. Let me live”

A long moment of silence followed, than Danforth added:

“Let me live, loser”

Ortega swallowed but did not move. He said nothing.

Danforth hadn't got what he wanted from him, so he talked again.

“Do you want to fix this old school? We should fix it here and now like real men. Let's go outside. I am going to take your fucking head off in three seconds”

Ortega looked at him for a while, then shook his head.

“No – he said with a calm voice -... No, buddy.”

Danforth pulled his head a little back in surprise.

“It's up to Trautman to decide who will command this fucking team, not us”

Then it was Danforth's turn to look straight into Ortega's eyes. But after a little while of reflection, he nodded once, then twice, and then he said:

“Fuck yeah, man... you are right about that for sure”

“Very well – Krakauer suddenly intervened - . A toast to Trautman, then!”

A while later, a tray full of Bud beer bottles arrived, and everyone picked one up.

“To Trautman, assholes!” said Coletta, rising his beer before anyone else.

## The following night

Rambo was running alone in Fort Bragg's woods.

The sentries walked along regular paths, which he and the Baker team had already studied for a couple of hours.

Rambo swiftly and silently sneaked from one tree to another.

He had no need to watch his steps to be silent: to prevent himself from stumbling in the dark he just needed to lift his feet a little more than usual.

Rambo was gaining weight, on his arms mostly, but on his legs too.

His muscles were now much more visible and defined, and he was starting to look muscular.

Rambo turned at his right and a few feet away, he saw Barry's eyes looking at him. They looked like two white marbles floating in the dark. Rambo gestured a thumb going across his own throat, in an unmistakable hand-sign

Barry nodded and Rambo vanished behind another tree.

A few seconds later, a flashlight's beam started getting closer.

Then the sentry arrived.

Rambo suddenly came out from the tree he was hiding behind and grabbed him from behind.

With one hand he plugged his mouth and with the other he blocked his chest, immobilizing him.

Then he lifted him from the ground despite his weight (which is something just a few months before he could never have done) – and he carried him right behind the tree he had just appeared from some seconds earlier.

All of this lasted just a few seconds.

The Baker team had instructions not to exaggerate with the other recruits. For Rambo, lessening the violence of his moves wasn't an easy task, but he did the best he could and did it right.

Rambo tied and gagged the guy, who was looking at him with his eyes wide open with terror.

Rambo then swiftly glanced over the bush he was hiding in, and saw that Barry had just disposed of the other sentry.

Rambo and Barry now only had to 'clean' the hutl-objective.

The briefing was clear: they had to use a soft hand, because all of the outside sentries were younger rookies, but not on the inside. Inside the barracks instructors were waiting for them and all of them were hand to hand combat experts against whom – in theory – none of the Baker team members should have any chance.

Rambo and Barry were both '*shadow-men*', but Jorgenson and Krakauer were the hand to hand fighters.

Had the mission required the capture of an enemy alive, they would have taken care of it, and they were looking forward to putting themselves to the test inside that hut.

There were two doors, one at the front and the other at the side.

Jorgenson and Krakauer exchanged an understanding nod, then they both entered the doors.

Jorgenson kicked the main door down and immediately received a blow with a club on his head.

He fell on the ground knocked down.

Krakauer looked at the two men in front of him.

One was white and the other black, and they were both taller than he was. Their arms were as big as dockers' and as they realized that Jorgenson was lost even before starting the fight, they both smiled in Krakauer's direction, because they were two against one.

"Do you want to surrender, kid? There are two of us and you have no replacements to accomplish this task. You can let it go and no one will say a -

Krakauer darted away like a lightning bolt and spun a chair towards the African American guy.

But the man avoided his attack using a simple move of his forearm, and with no harm at all.

But with the time lapse Krakauer had just gained with this move, he attacked the white one.

Krakauer threw himself against him like football players do.

Inside the narrow space of the hut the man couldn't avoid Krakauer's jump, and ended up being thrown against the wall.

Krakauer turned.

The black man was almost on him already, yet he struck first.

He rained him with blows, but almost none hit the target: the black man parried all of them, and he even avoided some.

Krakauer received a punch on his kidney and the pain was so sharp that it made him see stars.

Krakauer then turned to where the blow had just come from.

The white instructor was paralysed by surprise.

A fist like that should have sent anyone to the ground.

The fact that Krakauer was still standing was impossible.

That little moment of surprise gave Krakauer the time to react and he did.

He punched him right in the jaw and with a big surprise for both, this time the punch reached its target..

The stunned man took a few steps back and Krakauer jumped over the table in the middle of the room.

"You are out of your mind" said the other instructor.

Then Krakauer tried to kick him in the face.

In the meantime, the other instructor had recovered from the punch, and when they were two again it didn't long for them to overcome Krakauer.

The black coloured instructor grabbed Krakauer by one foot while he was trying to kick him, then made him fly on his back.

Krakauer hit the nape of his neck violently on the table, then fell on the floor, but in doing so he got loose from the instructor's hold.

Krakauer, who was now bleeding, lifted the table from the floor and threw it against both the instructors.

The two grabbed it the best they could, but Krakauer charged again.

He took a run and then literally flew with both his feet against the table, hoping to squeeze the instructors between the table and the wall behind them, but he didn't work very well.

Krakauer's leap had just given the instructors the time necessary to understand what was going to happen and when Krakauer threw himself against the table, the two turned it upside-down over him.

Krakauer then fell to the ground under the table, and the two jumped over it, keeping Krakauer stuck under the table.

Only then did the guy seem to calm down a little bit.

"Hey man... When I told you you looked out of your mind, I meant it. You are completely gone. You are dangerous"

Only then did Krakauer realize that he had just cut his eyebrow. The blood was now flowing over his eyes and making one of them blind. He didn't have any idea when it had happened.

“We are now going to pull the table away, ok? And you are not going to play any tricks. Copy that?”  
On the contrary, Krakauer started tossing again.

“I said that the task is over, you ass hole”

“Hello? Can you hear me? I said that it's over. Are you calm now? Yooo? Is there anybody out there?”

The instructor smiled.

“No way with this one... Fuck. He really doesn't calm down. What do we do now, Mac? Should we beat him to death?”

“Are you crazy? Don't you see it? *This one is absolutely awesome.* We are going to turn this guy into a bloodthirsty beast”



## Fort Bragg

Coletta had been lying on the ground for ten hours.

That day was so hot that his heart had start painfully beating over his temples, and to avoid being picked out he had to piss his pants.

They had told him plenty of times to do it with no problems when necessary, but doing it for real for the first time made him feel somewhat uncomfortable.

While the urine was drying on his pants, his eyeballs were starting to pulsate, and since he couldn't move at all the sweat over his face was starting to become very annoying. Next time he would use a head-band for sure, just like many of the others did.

And in the end, they finally opened those damn little cages.

The chickens got out.

There were ten of them, but just one had a flashy bow around its neck, and Coletta's job was to hit it and no other one than that one.

The chickens started walking everywhere inside their very small pen, and all very close to each other.

It wasn't really so difficult.

I mean that yes, it was: Coletta was tired, stiff, far away from it and the target was small, moving and amongst many moving others he had to avoid hitting, but none of these things were enough to make Coletta nervous.

Coletta had had to shoot while risking his own life in the past, during a bear-hunt, and so it took much more than this to make a guy like him nervous.

And then of course, there was the risk that another chicken got in the way of his shoot right when he had just pulled the trigger already, and after all of those hours of wait and heat he could miss the shot too, but deep inside of him he was sure he was doing everything he could in order to do everything right.

And that's the way the tension did not prevent him from reasoning.

Coletta lowered his eye to the rifle-scope as late as he could, in order to study the movements of all of the others birds inside the pen.

When he saw the right timing, he quickly lowered his head to the rifle-scope and shot just like that, with no indecisiveness or second thoughts.

The chicken-target exploded in a cloud of plumes and blood.

The shot had been fired from so far away that the other chickens were scared by the explosion of plumes, not the sound of the shot.

On the other side of the plain, inside the safe-zone, Garner raised his eyes from his binoculars.

"Impressive" he said.

And it was.

Coletta surely was one of the best of his course and competing with the best ones in whole US army.

Of course he wasn't the best around yet but he was a young and excellent marksman with as yet unknown potential.

If he carried on getting better like he had been the last few months, God only knew to what levels he would get. It has been a long time since Garner had recommended someone for Olympics qualifications, and he was looking forward to doing it again.

Some days later

That night, Trautman was urgently called for a phone-call coming from Saigon itself. As they told him who was calling, Trautman smiled and continued doing so even when picking the receiver up.

“Trautman?”

“That’s me”

“It’s General Loyd speaking”

“General”

“What the fuck are you doing, Colonel?”

“It’s a pleasure hearing from you too, sir”

“Don’t bullshit me, Trautman... You and that damn Patrick Nelson, in the triborder zone... What the fuck are the two of you doing in there?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Sir. I am here in Fort Bragg training your men, right where you sent me”

“Something’s happening in the Triborder Zone of your dear friend Patrick Nelson. There are South Vietnamese deserting, betraying and vanishing into thin air. What the fuck are you doing, Trautman?”

“Just some rotten apples leaving the tree, I guess. And with all due respect, I am a million miles away from Vietnam, Sir. I see no way I could...”

“Enough, Trautman. Is there anyone of the MacV behind this? Is the A.I.D. helping the two of you? I have no idea what you think you are doing, but this ends now. Am I clear? Stop right now or I swear that this time I won’t just send you back to the US”

“I am here already, Sir”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP! THIS TIME I WILL MAKE YOU LOSE YOUR RANK”

Trautman pulled the receiver a little away from his ear.

“I WILL HAVE YOUR ASS THROWN IN JAIL! I WILL HAVE YOUR LEGS BROKEN! I WILL HAVE YOUR ASS SENT INTO INTESIVE CARE, YOU FUCKER!”

“Sir...”

“WE ARE ON THE EDGE OF AN ABYSS IN THERE, DO YOU REALIZE THAT, COLONEL? THERE’S PEOPLE HERE THAT WANT TO SEE THE COMMUNIST PARTY INSIDE THE PARLIAMENT AND YOU START PLAYING WITH THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY? DO YOU REALIZE WHAT THE FUCK YOU REALLY ARE DOING?”

“I am doing nothing at all Sir. I am right here, in Fort Bragg”

“For the last time, Trautman: stop doing what you’re doing. That’s the last time I will repeat it”

“Or what?”

“Or I am going to have you killed, Colonel”

There was a long silence.

Trautman inhaled and exhaled deeply, in order to calm himself down, but in the end his eyes were narrowed into two small splits.

“I am okay with that Sir. I am ready to die in order to save this fucking country. Are you?”

At the other end of the line, the General too stayed silent for a while, before replying.  
Then he said:

“Very well, colonel. Very well”

## Fort Bragg

Interpreting the Huey helicopter Rambo was piloting was no easy thing.

Other vehicles usually have just one main control, a steering wheel or control stick... But a helicopter is no standard vehicle at all. The manoeuvring of a helicopter goes through the use of two very different controls: the control stick and the pedals, and this made everything much more difficult.

“The important thing – shouted the instructor beside him, while the engine was starting to rise its RPM for real – is that you get a flying license, and nothing more than that. Taking off, landing, getting from point A to point B. Am I clear?”

Rambo nodded gazing into space; all of his attention was toward the helicopter's reaction to his commands.

“What I am trying to say – the instructor continued – is that you are never going to be as good as one of our pilots, not with the very few flying hours you are going to do here in Fort Bragg. Do you understand?”

Rambo nodded again, but this time with more emphasis.

He was hearing him, but he was really focused too.

The helicopter lifted itself a little from the ground.

“Keep it... Do keep it, always. Never let it lead. Manoeuvring a helicopter is just like skating on ice.”

The helicopter finally rose into the air.

After a while of suspension in the air, Rambo tilted the helicopter forward, and it started flying.

“Good work Rambo. Very good”

Then Rambo laughed.

He was tense and concentrated, but rising toward the clouds was a unique feeling, and he didn't let it go.

As the helicopter finally took it's direction with no more hesitations, Rambo relaxed a little bit..

“Now I want to see some speed”

The helicopter tilted all of itself forward, like a roller Coaster before the dive, then it steeply started speeding up, flashing past.

Rambo looked around, then gave a pat on Ferguson's shoulder.

And while the helicopter was flashing past in the air, he started laughing

He was happy.

\*\*\*

When they finally landed, Rambo removed his headset and the instructor did the same.

“That was a good start, Rambo. You now have to just get used to it some more. But you have to remember that you are never going to be fit for combat flying. With a basic course like this one is, you'll never be able to do things such as landing on hot landing zones, or narrow ones, and don't you even dare do things like that if necessity arises, because these are not the kind of things you can just

improvise. In order to get such things done properly, you need an observer on the ground to coordinate with. He gives you indications by radio and your landing is practically a blind one. But that's a whole different story”.

Rambo nodded and the two got out from the helicopter.

“Another thing, Rambo. This is a Huey standard, made for troops transportation, but if you ever have to pilot a Gunship one, you'll be able to pilot it too. It just has some more sights than usual, in order to aim with the extra weapons too, but the commands are the same. The only real difference is that it's much heavier. If you ever have to fly one, you will have to take your time to get used to its heavier weight and the different way it responds to your commands. Also note that as you shoot, it gets lighter, and so its weight and balance changes, becoming more reactive as it loses weight. This fact can catch the best pilot out too. Anyway, the commands are the same, so in theory you should be able to fly one of them too. Is everything clear?”

“Yes, sir” said Rambo.

Ortega saw Barry go and order another beer over the other side of the bar. After picking it up, he was going to sit away, but Ortega stopped him with a gesture. "Sit down Barry, drink with me. It's been a long time since we had our last chat, you and I" Barry sat beside Manuel. The two made a toast, then had a sip from their beers and stayed silent for a while

"Wouldn't you like to be a team leader, Barry?"

"No"

"Why's that?"

But instead of answering the question, Barry asked another one:

"Have you ever been to Vietnam?"

"Yes"

"What did you do over there?"

"I was on board a heli-ambulance, and I used to do a little of everything: a door-gunner in the air, an armed guardsman on the ground. I also did some first aid a couple of times, when the real doctor couldn't do everything."

"So you saw some shit, didn't you?"

"Sure I did"

Barry stayed silent for a while, as if he just wanted to keep it inside. But then he spat it out.

"I was on the ground, you know... '*seek and destroy*'. We were posted to this small CCS outpost and it was always full of SOG men coming in and out. I used to know some of them and sometimes I had a chat with them, but most of the time I used to mind my own business. Anyway I saw some shit... - Barry said shaking his head and then looking down – Sure I did. The hell I did."

"What does this have to do with becoming a team leader?"

"Because sometimes things happen, you know... Things you don't want to feel responsible for. I mean, as long as you are a toy-soldier, you can come to terms with it. But when it's up to you to command your men, you simply can't. Not after what Trautman has taught us... What do you think about the things the man says?"

"That the man is a fucking living legend. I don't always agree with everything he says but fuck, the fact he knows his stuff is there for everyone to see. I think that the colonel saw more shit than us all put together. And fuck, the man is smart. I want to become like him. If everyone in Vietnam was just like him, everything would be different"

"Maybe... Maybe not. Sometimes in the army things just happens, because that's the real nature of war. But amongst the Special Forces things are different. When one of us dies, the man in charge will have to ask himself what he did wrong, and even when he did *nothing* wrong at all. If you become team leader, Trautman will never let you lie to yourself, not with the kind of ideas he has. So, if one day one of us should die, you would know the mistakes you'd made for sure, and even when you did nothing wrong. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Got it... Yes."

"The kind of things that for all of the other soldiers are inevitabilities, in Trautman's mind are all avoidable"

Ortega nodded.

"I agree" he said.

"Can you see it when he talks? The kind of eyes he has? All of the lessons he is teaching us come from the blood of the men he lost while being in charge"

"That's true"

"I don't want that kind of burden, man. I just want to fight and kill, and if I really have to, die too."

But I don't want to live the rest of my life thinking that one of my men died because I couldn't *foresee* this or *calculate* that. That's it"

"And your personal ambition? Don't you have any ambition, Barry?"

"...You neither, Ortega. I saw the way you used to help everyone during the selection. You think you did it because of your own ambition to become a team leader one day, but the truth is that you are the kind of man that wants to fix things. But trying to fix things in Vietnam is a very dangerous. You could be a very good team leader one day, and if you were ever appointed, I would follow you to the other side of the world. But the thing is that you are exactly like Trautman is: a man who wants to fix things. And in Vietnam – trust me – there's really nothing in Vietnam that can be fixed anymore.

And maybe.... there's never been.

That country has been at war for twenty years. In many ways, it's as if it has always been by now, and so will be even after the United States have gone.

And Trautman is wrong about another matter too: he always wants to understand everything... But understanding what's really happening there is impossible

Vietnam is another world... Trust me: that country lives in another space-dimension and the US have no role in that kind of world.

We are nothing more than another wave in the sea, maybe just a little higher than the other ones are, and that's all.

And we are almost at the rocks by now. And after we have smashed ourselves on the rocks, one day people in Vietnam won't even remember that we have been there. Our drop in the sea will probably last another three, five years at best, then we are going to win or lose that war and then Vietnam will go back to what it has always been: a really savage country and always at war. There will never be any real peace there, never ever. That's the way they live. That's the way the Vietnamese *are*, in many ways. It's in their blood."

Some months later, Fort Bragg, 1968.

The radio was hanging from the mess ceiling and its volume was excessively loud. Men were running in front of the radio from all over the base, in order to listen to the news  
The faces were tense.  
Rambo was in the courtyard when he saw the first guys starting to run toward the mess room.  
Understanding that something was wrong, he followed them.  
Under the radio everyone was still and listening.

The Vietcong – the so called 'partisans' of the Vietcong – had just attacked the imperial city of Hu-He, the former capital of the old Vietnamese empire, a city that was one of the most important symbols of South Vietnam.  
They had then attacked Nha Trang, Ban Me Thuot, Kom Tum, Hoi Ha, Pleiku and even Saigon itself. A steady stream of coordinated attacks and realized with a force of men larger than anyone ever thought the Vietcong could have at their disposal.  
The US embassy in Saigon was under siege and the images of the civilian employees of the US government crying for help from the windows of the building horrified the whole world.  
All of the most important South Vietnamese cities were under siege.  
The first rumours coming from Saigon talked about a first sapper, kamikaze-like attack against the US embassy, which was now under siege.

Rambo looked around the mess, but Trautman was gone.  
He then continued listening, but staying focused was difficult.  
It sounded like the end of the world.

No one had ever thought that the Vietcong could get so far for real.  
Never ever: what was happening was well beyond any of Trautman's worst expectations, and Trautman was no optimist for sure.  
That was a head-on fight, a proper all-out-war attack, but the colonel had always said that the Vietcong would never go so far because such an attack could be no good at all for the Vietcong.  
*Their real strength lies in guerrilla warfare* – Trautman used to repeat again and again.  
What the hell was happening then?  
Could Trautman be wrong?  
And if he was wrong about that, what else, then?  
A deep sense of anxiety overcame him, as if he had just made a mistake himself.  
Rambo then looked around, but saw other frightened faces just like his own.  
It felt like being inside a science fiction movie.

The imperial citadel and the university district had already fallen at the hands of the Vietcong, and it seemed that a blue and red North Vietnamese flag was already waving over the top of one of the ancient buildings.  
The US embassy was under siege and there was no information about the ambassador himself, and no one knew if was alive or dead.  
This was changing everything.  
From now on, the Vietcong would never have any limit.  
They made it then... They could now face the Americans at the same level.



That was becoming a clash of armies, an all-out war... And all of that despite the fact that Trautman had always said that something like that would never have happened.

One at a time all of Rambo's team mates came into the mess room, and he read the worry on their faces too, just like all of the others.

At this point, their being sent to Vietnam was a cert.

And this time it was going to be far more difficult than the first time, during his first tour of duty.

Rambo then looked at his hand, and wondered where Morris was, his officer that lost one hand in '66, during the hill defence.

He asked himself if where Morris was, he was listening to that news too.

Rambo asked himself what someone like him, who knew the 'moves', might be thinking.

He then asked himself if Trautman really knew the moves as well as he was always saying.

And he hoped that Trautman knew his job for real, because that evening, after the Tet offensive, he wasn't so sure about it anymore.

Fifteen days later, the Vietcong flag was still waving over the top of the Hue citadel and no one could understand how the Vietcong could withstand the siege by thousands of US marines. Someone said that those were not Vietcong, but North Vietnamese regulars.

Anyway, after napalm, phosphorus, artillery, tanks and the continuous attacks by US troops, the Vietcong were still inside the citadel, and it looked like they had no intention of letting it go.

Someone got to the point of saying that underneath Hue there were some secret tunnels leading to the countryside outskirts of the city.

It wasn't true.

The Vietcong were standing because they were many, resolute and they were using their guerrilla skills very well, thanks to the last ten years spent fighting against the French.

Anyway, some days later the Tet offensive came to an end, and South Vietnam still existed. The ARVN and the Americans had held up to the impact, and Saigon and Hue were free.

To those who knew a lot about the war, that was a good result.

But in the opinion of most of the US people, that was meant to be a short, easy and police-like war, because that was the rubbish the military had always said so far.

And this was the reason why, seeing such a big, brutal and unprecedented powerful attack and that the risk of a proper fall of the whole South Vietnam was real, the US read the Tet attack as an unbelievably humiliating defeat.

To the US people, it looked like the beginning of the end.

Anyway, one thing everyone agreed about: that this war that everyone had imagined as an easy and short one, was doomed to be long and difficult in reality, and surely going to cost more years of commitment and lives than anyone had ever imagined until then.

But it was too late for the military to confess it to the US public by then.

The damage was already done and the difference of point of view between the big wigs and the general public was overwhelming by then.

Any way you wanted to view the Tet facts, both Saigon and Hue had paid a very high price.

Before giving up the two cities and retreating, the Vietcong had executed five thousands civilians.

### *The survival and escape course*

Trautman's face looked marked that day, and not because of the recent news coming from Vietnam. The survival and escape course was going to be their last course... And the most gruesome one. And when Trautman started introducing it, he looked like he was remembering something from personal experience. Maybe not himself directly, but some of his friends for sure.

“The Geneva convention allows soldiers not to take prisoners” he said.

The recruits looked at each other.

“If a soldier can't take enemies with him, he has the right to kill them. Forget about waving a white flag and similar bullshit. In modern warfare, surrendering doesn't mean you are going to survive any longer”

Trautman paused.

Then continued:

“But the Vietcong have a strong motivation to take prisoners, as have we.

We need prisoners to extract information from them and they do for different reasons, but everyone takes prisoners in Vietnam.

The Vietcong trade in weapons, drugs, human beings and much more... But of all of this kind of stuff, the most valuable currency is always the US POWs.

Whoever holds some US POWs in his hands becomes a premier league player in the Vietcong's eyes.

In a country where everyone is 'his own party', it's not the soldier's rank that counts, it's the people they befriend, the weapons and money at disposal... and there's nothing at all any Vietcong wants more than to hold a US prisoner.

And that's the reason why during this particular war surrendering may be the best option.

If fighting becomes suicide, as it often happens while fighting behind enemy lines, you will surrender”

“During this course we will teach you the psychological tricks the Vietcong will use to extort information from you during your captivity. At first, you will think you are receiving pointless torture, but that's not the way it is. When you are captured, your personal war doesn't end just like that.

You are going to fight authentic psychological warfare, and you are going to know every single rule of it.

During this course we are going to explain how this kind of war works and the kind of tricks the enemy will use against you.

I use the word tricks on purpose, because that's exactly what they are going to use against you: real conjuring tricks that you are not going to find out until it is too late.

The Vietcong are going to divide you, torture you and try to set you against each other while doing it.

In order to do so, they will treat some of you better than others, in order to make you believe that they have talked already, even if that's not true.

And most of all, they will always lie to you.

They will deceive you about imminent release, or that your team mates are dead... They could even tell you that the war is over, if they think they'll ever fool you like that.

They will do anything they can in order to put you against each other and together with the stress from the torture, it will be easy for them to make you fight with each other, because you are going to be more tense than you have ever been in your entire life already.

They'll convince you that you have no value for them and that they will kill you as soon as you start boring them, even if that's far from the truth.

But the most difficult part will be finding the inner strength inside of you that will be necessary to avoid giving up.

Because, as a matter of fact, when you find yourself a prisoner at the hands of the Vietcong, your will for survival is not so strong any more”

Saigon, a month later

The sun looked big, red and almost sharp in the clear sky.

Through the window of the airliner plane, Trautman started seeing Vietnam's familiar landscape, at last.

After the Tet offensive, even the last standing war hawks finally agreed that it was time for Trautman to be called back to Vietnam, and he was looking forward to seeing Patrick Nelson's face again.

\*\*\*

A long time had passed since the last time he had been inside the MacV's main room. Yet, Trautman did not lose time with too many of the usual courtesies, and even less because the familiar faces – after such a long time – were very few.

General Loyd was standing right in front of him.

As their stares met each other, the general's didn't look threatening at all, quite the contrary.

Trautman walked forward but the general stretched out his hand first.

"I am really sorry for your friend's loss"

Trautman tilted his head in perplexity while letting his hand go.

"What are you talking about?"

"I am talking about Patrick Nelson. Didn't anybody inform you?"

"What happened to Patrick Nelson?"

"God damn it Trautman, I am sorry to be the one to tell you that"

"Just talk, general"

"His chopper crashed two nights ago. You were probably travelling at the time"

Trautman swallowed.

*Patrick.*

He didn't know what to reply.

*Patrick Nelson.*

"It was a rainy night with lightening and all. That chopper should have never taken off, but you know very well what kind of man he was"

"Yeah. Got it."

"It's that kind of mistake we are all making here in Vietnam, more or less"

Trautman barely nodded, as if he was elsewhere with his mind.

"Look, Trautman... We had many... Uh... differences of opinion in our past. But fuck... These are words suited for the occasion, and I am not the kind of man to use words suited for the occasion. You are a dick-head Trautman, but I am a soldier too, and I know how it feels when you lose a good man who is a good friend too. There are things that put us all in the same boat. I know you were doing things on your own behind my back but even if he was dickhead, God dammit, he didn't deserve to die like that"

Trautman nodded. He did not know what to say.

It was strange hearing such words coming from the same man that had threatened him just a few months back. And yet, Loyd looked sincere.

“There's another thing to say, Trautman... I am not the man you think I am, nor am I blind either... I can admit when I'm beaten... That's it”

Loyd hesitated a long time before going on.

“I... I think I owe it to Nelson... You were right. You two had your results in the Quang.Tri, I can't deny that. The ARVN has changed a lot, and for the better”

Trautman thoughtfully nodded, as if he wasn't listening any more.

In his mind there was only space for the image of another friend that didn't exist anymore, swallowed up by that damn country.

Trautman turned ready to leave, but before walking away he turned one last time in the general's direction, as if he had forgotten something.

“Thank you” he said.

## *Killing*

“Killing is not normal.

Most animals have an inborn repulsion for killing a specimen of their own kind, and this is natural. No soldier goes into a fight willingly.

When he is forced for real, he takes an aggressive stance, and that's the moment he looks like an animal the most: he then screams and shoots in the air, hoping to terrify the enemy, hoping to make him surrender without killing him.

Only during the third phase, when the enemy shows no submission, does the soldier start killing.

Your problem is that you can show none of these spontaneous reactions.

You have to learn how to kill instantaneously, with no passing through all three of the phases the common soldier usually goes through.

And you are going to get it by engaging moving targets, dummies and highly believable targets in general, until you won't lose any hesitation in shooting even when you are absolutely sure about hitting and killing.

And most of all, on Sunday mornings you are going to help the butcher of the base”

## *Fire fights*

“A fire fight is no boxing match, nor football game: there's no fair confrontation with the final victory of the strongest one, as most usually think”

While pausing to choose the right words, Garner was strolling backwards and forwards.

“No... A fire fight is far different from the kind of idea people have about it.

During a fire fight, there are some people shooting and some others receiving those shots, and a while later everything's done. During such an exchange, we talk about some shooters being better than others, quick reflexes or good training... But that is all bullshit. Nothing will ever save you from a firefight fought at the same level with your enemy.

Then of course... Some things may help: aggressiveness, smart fighting, cold blood... But if you end up fighting a fair fire fight, the final outcome of the fight will be decided by pure chaos, or luck.

Pulling a trigger is too easy to let 'the best man win'.

And so, finding yourself dragged into a fair fire fight is a half loss already.

You will try to avoid that with any means... Like the surprise effect, creating diversions or always taking the initiative. There are many ways to avoid ending up in an even firefight and this is going to be the real difference between the Baker teams and the other special forces teams”

Garner made a pause to reflect, then he started a very long explanation.

### *Action and Re-action: the importance of taking the initiative during firefights*

“You should never leave your enemy the opportunity of taking the initiative. You should always push him into just reacting to your actions, never giving him time to think or act following an accurate plan either. Hit in one place, then another one, then another...

As long as his moves are nothing but reactions to yours, you will always be able to foresee his next moves.

But whenever you give him the necessary time to organize himself, you will give him a chance to reason too, and so formulate and implement an accurate plan.

And we don't want our enemy to follow a plan, do we?

The guys shook their heads..

“Well. The best way to prevent your enemies from organizing themselves is using the surprise effect. But surprise doesn't last for long... And that's the reason why whatever you are going to do, you will have to do it fast”

### *The surprise effect and speed*

“If you set an ambush up against some North Vietnamese soldiers, you know roughly what is going to happen next... But the Vietcong are different. When ambushed, the North Vietnamese are trained in some automatic reactions, just like we are... But the Vietcong's partisans are not. This makes them very bad soldiers, but unpredictable too”

They could react in any way.

They could even run towards you and without even realising what they're doing, like cows at the slaughter house”

The recruits smiled.

“Do what you have to as fast as you can: hit using maximum force, evaluate the damages and get the hell out of there immediately.

Do always remember the rule of speed: whatever happens, get away from there fast.

After fifteen minutes, the enemy has had enough time to re-arm, spread out and find the right move to take you down.

On the contrary, with good planning, applied with the surprise effect and good speed, you have a very good chance of being successful in doing anything.

Let's start by introducing some basic schemes...”



\*\*\*

For nine months, the two Baker teams continued eating only disgusting food: snakes, spiders, rats and berries.

For two years they worked out daily until they almost spat blood, shot at targets until their hands filled with calluses, and repeated fire team schemes until they got sick of them.

In the end Trautman and Garner, after long reflection, chose Danforth as team leader and Ortega as his second man.

Ortega was smarter, but he also showed a certain kind of emotional nature and underwent some difficulties when the situation required reacting fast, and thus he had no time to plan anything at all. During these scenarios, even if less analytical most of the time, Danforth was much faster in reacting, so Trautman and Garner finally decided that Danforth leading together with Ortega counselling was probably the best choice.

Trautman and Garner were not exactly firmly convinced of their choice, because they were both two very good soldiers.

At the end of that course, the eight men of the Baker team B could understand each other with a glance, could move fast, silent and invisible like felines and were as expert on strategy as colonels. Above all, they were trained at staying lucid under any kind of stress, because everything they could do they had learnt it under stress, and so they could do it under any circumstances.

They were SOG men, by then.

To them, doing push ups in the blazing sun, rain or in the mud was exactly the same thing as doing them inside the gym.

Anger, desperation, fatigue, pain... None of these feelings could cloud their judgement any more.

Underestimating the importance of strategy issues, no matter what kind of task they were up against, had become a mortal sin in their minds.

Every single one of their gestures was fast, silent and accurate... And if necessary, outstandingly violent.

Almost all of them had developed muscles, shoulder width and an overall appearance that made them barely resemble who they had been two years ago.

Even the tasks performed during the selection process looked easier by then, and not because the selection process tasks were tasks for beginners, but because during the last two years all of them had literally doubled their marching, running and weight lifting limits.

And they were ready to try to push them further at any moment, if necessary, just as they had done very often during the worst moments of those last two years.

In order to become what Trautman wanted from them, they changed.

They had become different, and that's the way they were going to be for ever.

PART II

THE MISSION

*“To us, Vietnam was some kind of playground where we could do everything we wanted. A fucking amusement park where it were extremely easy to get cut, burnt, smashed, blown up or shot at.*

*And then we ended up being maimed, paralysed, blind, deaf or lifetime impotent for real, yet it was ultra-cool anyway. We were free for real, not like we were used to in the United States. Vietnam was just awesome.*

*The weapons were our toys, the helicopters our merry-go-round, the jungle our park.  
We drank like fishes, fucked like rabbits and we used joints and hero.  
We were 'stoned, immaculate', just like Jim Morrison used to sing.  
We were adamant about our idiocy: implacable and unshakable, and in many ways pure too.*

*And most of all, we were obstinate.  
Just like kids”*

*Anonymous, 1969*

# OPERATION BLACK SPOT

July 27, 1969, somewhere in the Quang Tri province

It was a sunny day and the Huey was flying high in the clear sky, with the Baker team B on board. The guys were sitting on the edge of the hold doors, with their feet hanging over the void, the tiger-stripe uniforms caressed by the cool blowing wind. It was good to be up there, hundreds of meters above the suffocating heat of the jungle.

-

Commanding officer Martinez was looking at the sky shading his eyes from the sun with his hand. The incoming special forces Huey could mean one thing and one thing only: trouble on the way. Martinez was perfectly positive about that.

He could feel it in his bones.

If there was something that damn East-Asian country was really good at, it was turning people into superstitious ones.

Before ending up in Vietnam he had never been a superstitious person, and yet he was very much by then, just like any other.

Because sooner or later, everyone became superstitious in Vietnam.

As the Huey came closer, Martinez saw those soldiers sat on the hold doors, their feet hanging out, their faces painted and the out-of-ordinance tiger stripes uniforms.

And as the helicopter came down, he could look closer and see more details of them.

They were all wearing jungle hats, their faces were painted two colours (black and green) and *Who the fuck are these men?* – he thought.

*Where the fuck did they find those Aks? How are they going to use them without being killed by friendly fire?*

*The same old special forces motherfuckers, god damn it....*

But the eyes of one these men made him think that maybe he was wrong about them.

They hadn't set foot on the ground yet and those eyes were scanning the environment already, as if they belonged to a tiger inside a cage, not soldiers.

That was his first real feeling about the Baker team B.

The helicopter blew the air below, while it landed in the middle of the open space.

Their faces were very well painted, the commander admitted to himself.

Those weren't the usual messed up marks he was used to seeing on his men's faces. The colours did not mix up with each other but were very well defined, as if drawn by a painter.

And they didn't paint their faces only, but also their ears, necks, wrists... Everything.

The only light coloured parts of their bodies were their eyes, which in the middle of those dark faces looked somewhat disturbing.

Martinez lowered his head a little bit, to protect himself from the air moved by the blades, while he continued staring at them.

Once their feet were on the ground, they started walking towards the base without even noticing his presence.

Only one of them, instead of going forward, stopped right in front of him.

His height was average, his hair brown.

Because of the din made by the helicopter, he had to raise his voice:

“Martinez?”

“Yes, sir!”

“My name is Skorpion. You are going to talk with me directly, and with no one else”

“Yes sir!”

As he replied, Martinez turned to the rest of the Baker team heading inside one of the big tents of the base.

The fact that they were all armed with AK made him very uncomfortable.

The helicopter's blade started speeding up to take off again, and the air against his eyes got annoying again.

“Let's get away from here, sarg!” said Skorpion with a little smile over his face.

The two ran inside the command tent.

The rest of the Baker team was inside already.

They were putting down their AKs on the ground and taking some M16s from a rack.

“What are you doing? What's happening?”

“Everything's okay. Nothing's happening”

Messner went to the centre table of the command tent and un-rolled his surgical instruments medical kit on it.

“This is no surgery tent. Sir, right now I want your men...”

“Don't worry about my men or those weapons... We just need four of them. You have an armoury full of M16s in here don't you?”

“Yessir”

Replied the commander.

And then:

“Now please, would you tell me what's going on?”

“Of course, Sarg”

Manuel 'Skorpion' Ortega approached the big map hanging from one of the commanding tent's walls.

“Three days ago our 'over the fence' electronical sensors turned themselves on in here, here and here”

Ortega's words were a lie, but a good one.

The tip had come from Trautman himself, but no one should know that.

“I am talking about sensors put in place by our intelligence teams” he added.

“I know. Go on” said Martinez.

“Well. We calculated an incoming attack here between 24 or 48 hours from now at max. If nothing happens during this amount of time, it means that the Vietcong battalion has taken a different route. The time at disposal is short, which is the reason my men have landed here already in operative status. We are going to stay on guard for the next 48 hours and if nothing happens at the end of that time, we are going to leave the same way we came here. But up to then, my men won't sleep, nor move or shift. Just give them a few hours to set a strategy up and put some traps in place”

Martinez's two officials looked at each other perplexed, then the base commander nodded.

“That's okay – he said -. Place yourselves as you wish”

“Excellent” Skorpio said. And then:

“I am relying on your collaboration. You have been here at the front line for too long, and everybody can see it. Your hair is long, the bags under your eyes are scary and there are people going around bare chested. Most of you are dirty and stink.

On the contrary, we are rested and we know this job. With your knowledge of the surroundings and our help, we are going to do an excellent job”

“Yes, sir”

“Fine. You should now recall your external patrols. From now on, no one leaves the base”

\*\*\*

In order to look like the base's personnel, the Baker team guys changed their uniforms with the usual olive drab ones, then they started to get the defences ready.

They dug four holes outside the perimeter of the base. They were barely wide enough to cover a crouched man. They then covered them with bamboos grates, which they then covered with leaves. All in all, the hole covers were barely one span tall and enough so that a man could take aim from the inside.

The remaining time at disposal was used by the Baker team to set traps all around the base.

All in all, Danforth needed four hours to get all of the Baker team ready and in place.

\*\*\*

“What's that?” Martinez asked

Barry handed him a big, used bullet case.

Its calibre was unknown to Martinez and a nail had been put through its bottom.

“Let me show you” Barry said.

Then he picked out an M16 bullet and put it inside the spent brass.

The 5.56 bullet fit it perfectly and its primer ended up right over the tip of the nail.

“Then you stick it into the ground tip-up. When someone steps on the bullet, the nail acts like a hammer”

“Yep... Understood”

“It usually makes a hole through the foot, but the cool part is that its sound is very similar to that of an M16, so the Vietcong can take it for an unknown enemy”

Barry put his trap inside a hole as big as a fist, then he covered it with some grass.

“And after the battle, you can leave it there without many troubles, because it's not a real landmine: one month, some rainy days and it won't work any longer. So there's no risk that some years after the war it's going to sever a kid's limb”.

Martinez nodded.



Third hour after midnight.

The camp-lantern radiated a yellowish light all around the tent.

Ortega was sitting on a chair with his eyes shut in some kind of half-asleep state, sometimes opening them just a little bit, like an always ready watchdog.

Martinez was smoking a cigarette while sat at the table he usually used for his briefings. He was thoughtfully gazing into space.

Messner was standing at one of the tent's corners, leaning on one of its four main poles, as if waiting for something.

He gave a glance out of the tent.

Soldiers were continuously coming and going.

The encampment was never at sleep, and no one was going to sleep that night for sure, because of the alert-state raised to the maximum level.

Messner came away from the threshold of the tent and looked at Ortega.

Ortega was carefully listening to the base's sounds and his face was filled with anxiety.

"Stay calm, Skorpio. Just calm".

"I was sleeping"

"No, you weren't, Skorpio. The plan is okay, the guys are ready and awake. Everything's fine. You can sleep if you want to"

"Everything's not fine. Eagle's our team leader; he should be in here, not me. I should be over there, with the others"

"He is taking responsibility for what he is doing"

"It doesn't work like that, Skorpio. Not for us of the Baker teams. We should avoid that kind of bullshit"

"Are you sure? 'Cause I think that it's too late for discussions. He is out there and you are in here, so cut it, Skorpio. Try to get some sleep"

Ortega looked around. He felt guilty already for having had a discussion with Messner in front of some other people.

"Fuck" Messner said, stopping his thoughts.

Then he added:

"Take this. Have a smoke" he said, stretching out a cigarette.

Ortega lit it up using his zippo lighter..

"Is it so obvious that I am nervous?" he asked.

"No. It's just me knowing you for some time by now"

Ortega inhaled a long, slow, deep drag.

"That's what I was talking about" said Messner.

-

At the same time, Jorgenson was on the outside perimeter, posted in front of a slit between the sandbags and near his M60.

Lowered in the dark over his machine gun, he was smiling while petting it at the same time.

In his mind, he could see his daughter's eyes.

He couldn't get out of his mind the feeling that looking into his daughter's blue eyes gave him, and

the way they looked all around with curiosity.

Looking into those little eyes of hers was stunning.

Virginia Jorgenson, one year old... His daughter.

One of the facts that surprised him the most was that the little baby couldn't stand the weight of her own head.

And yet, when you started playing with her, she smiled anyway, and she started spinning her little arms and shaking her little legs, laughing and happy.

*Happy.*

Virginia Jorgenson.

In a distant reality, Jorgenson was looking at the sand bags and grinning at them like an idiot.

And while doing so, he was petting his M60 at the same time, as if it was a beautiful motorcycle, and looking beyond those sand bags that he had to defend with his own life, if necessary.

It was in that moment that he realized that something was wrong.

And as if God himself had just heard his thoughts, a rumble shook all of the base from one side to the other, like thunder from an storm striking directly overhead.

All of the men on the base – no matter where they were – stopped and turned in the rumble's direction, paralyzed with surprise.

Jorgenson instinctively lowered his head over his M60's sights, then he bent forward, ready to keep the recoil under control when he started squeezing the trigger.

He then analyzed sound, tone and volume and direction of the sound, thus understanding where it came from.

He then concluded that the silence distorted it, making the sound louder than it really was.

It was nothing but a 5.56 shot.

But a strange one, with a slightly different timbre.

It was one of Barry's booby traps, east zone.

*They are coming* – he thought.

Whoever had just stepped on the booby trap had probably lost his foot, but since no shout had been heard, Barry thought that the guy was probably dead.

*They are coming for real* – Jorgenson thought.

His heart started beating inside his chest.

*... And so, Trautman was right.*

It was then that the cries started; after a long pause of silence.

A single shout, but long and blood curdling, that then rose to an acute pitch.

A while later, the Vietcong AKs started shooting in the darkness in all directions, and to some extent in Jorgenson's direction too, even if it was impossible for them to know his position.

*Jesus fucking Christ.*

Jorgenson saw the enemy muzzles flashing right in front of him, about three hundred yards away.

“Fuck” he whispered.

They were firing at him.

I mean not really at him - Carl Jorgenson, father of Virginia Jorgenson.

*They aren't shooting at you for real, Carl.*

*They haven't seen you yet.*

*Not yet...*

But that's what they wanted, isn't it? To put him down like a bad dog.

*So that's the way it feels – he thought..*

*That's it... We are in here for real.*

*We are at war, for Christ's sake..*

*I am fighting.*

In that moment, he felt paralysed.

The Vietcong hadn't seen him yet, but some rounds were hissing over his sandbags anyway, probably shot at random in the base's direction.

At this point Jorgenson saw the whole world zoom out, and all of the sounds surrounding him suddenly vanished.

Everything around him was plunged into silence and happening in some kind of creepy, absolutely unnatural slow motion.

*What's happening to me?*

The visual effect was so strikingly powerful that he had to resort to all of his inner strength to keep control of himself and open fire anyway, ignoring it.

And as he did, everything got normal again.

The M60 roared its bass, heavy roars while the spent shells started clinking.

It wasn't enough.

The AK bursts slowly flashed in the darkness, while he was answering back at them with his own fire.

Grizzly Jorgenson lowered himself a little more and pushed it against his body with more force, then he continued shooting randomly almost, where his instinct was telling him to aim.

He had studied the base's perimeter beforehand. He knew where to shoot.

Then he started shooting five-round bursts, just like they had decided to do.

It was like a Morse code for the other Baker team members.

His mind was finally clearing again.

Some Vietnamese shouts reached him, but they were coming from too far away for him to understand them.

Panic, fear, pain.

The wounded were more than one.

His heart was beating against his temple.

Some kind of frenzy was slowly slipping inside of him.

He was tempted to stop firing, thus disrespecting the five-round regular patterns of fire.

*No – he thought.*

*You can't do it.*

Panic was right round the corner. He could feel it growing inside his mind and tangible, like a stranger's presence inside himself.

*Calm down.*

That kind of guest was strong, smarmy and terrible, just like Trautman had described it back when they were in Fort Bragg.

*You will have to constantly ask yourselves if you are still focused –* Trautman had told them a long time ago.

*You will have to ask yourselves continuously.*

His problem was that he had a daughter to protect.

He just couldn't die.

*Am I operative or not? –* Jorgenson asked himself.

*Fuck yes... And now more than ever.*

And that was the way Jorgenson finally came to his senses.

He gritted his teeth and shot the umpteenth burst against the muzzle flashes he could see in front of him.

No one was going to make Virginia Jorgenson an orphan. Not that night.

He was going to kill 'em all, and even with his bare hands if necessary.

And when the first flare rose high above the base, Jorgenson could finally see them all: they were all right in front of him, two hundred yards away.

*Jesus Christ.*

He had taken four of them out already. The other three, surprised in the middle of the clearance by the light, desperately threw themselves on the ground..

*Die mother fuckers* – he thought, then squeezed the trigger again.

-

Barry's hole was outside the perimeter of the base.

It was camouflaged using a big pile of branches and leaves, in order to look like scrub too thick to get into.

Barry had waited until the last moment, and maybe too long.

In the beginning, he heard some barely perceptible rustles, as if he had just imagined them.

Then some footsteps and some other rustles.

And in the end, he even heard some Vietnamese whispers, even if he couldn't understand them.

Only when he started seeing some moving shadows did his heart start beating inside his chest for real, and he started worrying about the very unreal idea that an enemy might stumble over him, or tread on him... And that would have been a hell of a mess.

*"This is fighting behind enemy lines for real'... No shit* - he thought.

When the fourth Vietcong passed him by, his heart started beating so hard inside his body that Barry started worrying that the Vietcong might hear it.

He had been at risk of opening fire too soon two times at least, but he didn't because *'you don't play with death'*, so he had just clenched his teeth and swallowed the anguish down inside his throat and stomach, right where it came from.

And he had let almost all of them pass by.

And when the first booby-trap had exploded, Barry was so close that he felt as though he had seen the whole scene, even if he didn't.

Because the truth was that surrounded by that darkness he couldn't see a thing, but having memorized all of the booby-traps positions – and having heard the wounded Vietcong's shouts – he could conjure up a very clear mental image of his enemies' positions.

Then, a flare was shot in the air from the centre of the base, and was now slowly coming down hanging from its little parachute.

And doing so, it created thousands of moving shadows all around Barry.

Amongst all of these blurry shadows, Barry could confirm the Vietcong's position anyway.

Jorgenson's M60 had been shooting for a long time by then, and so had his enemies, and he – Barry – was almost in the centre of the fight, inside his hole.

In the middle of all of that chaos, it was impossible for the Vietcong to distinguish the AK's single rounds that Barry was going to fire very soon and at their backs, and it was even more difficult for them given the fact that Barry was going to fire his shots *exactly* during Jorgenson's very regular five-round bursts (which was why Jorgenson was shooting with this very regular timing in the first place).

So, Barry chose his first target, which was the nearest and thus most dangerous of the Vietcong in front of him.

Only then he did recognize his enemy's regular uniform.

*North Vietnamese...* He thought.

The North Vietnamese soldier had his back to Barry while shouting orders at his mate at the same time, trying to raise his voice over the shots.

Barry waited for Jorgenson's next burst, and when he finally heard it starting he squeezed the trigger at the same time: a single shot – KRAK! – that hit the Vietcong almost in his groin.

*Hit.*

He got him right in the middle. He saw him turn upward and raise his arms to the sky, as if he was trying to ask God himself for help. Then he shouted and collapsed to the ground, and yet none of his mates gave any sign of having any idea about the shooter's direction. His shout was high-pitched, piercing and annoying, like the sound of chalk on a blackboard, and yet everyone was still looking in Jorgenson's direction, not Barry's.

Barry did not shoot to kill, but to cause desperation. He wanted to force the Vietcong into helping their wounded, in order to break the attack apart.

He had to wound another one.

After the first shot, Barry changed target immediately, waited for another of Jorgenson's bursts and then fired again.

He shot at the first rescuer of his first target, but this time he shot twice, two bullets at his legs...

And did not stop

At his third round, he realized that basically, he was surrounded by the enemy by then.

He had to do something, and do it now.

*No.*

He was wrong about something, but he was lucky enough to realize it immediately.

*If I don't calm down they will spot me. I must shoot less.*

*Focus yourself, Barry... And shoot at the right time only.*

And then he hit his third and fourth Vietcong, and he would have hit a fifth too, if Jorgenson's last burst hadn't stopped too soon..

He then lifted his gaze over his iron sights, while the sweat was flowing down his forehead, ending up in his eyes. The next time, he was going to wear a sweatband, just like Rambo and Ortega did.

Again, he tried to calm down.

Then he lowered his head over his AK sights again, he waited for the next group of Jorgenson's bursts, then shot again – KRRRAK! -, slamming another three Vietcong to the ground, who started squealing like pigs inside a slaughter house.

Killing those mother fuckers was cool... And easy. He was starting to get a personal taste for it.

*Calm down..*

Killing all of those bastards was something he had desired for a long, long time.

Barry saw another one falling to the ground, then another one, then another...

He would have slit all of their throats personally if only he could.

*Die, mother fuckers.*

*Suffer and die like dogs, you pieces of shit..*

*Alex Roland Simmons: nineteen years old....*

"Alex Roland Simmons" he hissed between his teeth while shooting again and again. Some other North Vietnamese soldiers fell right in front of him

He was about to stand up, when he suddenly stopped.

*What the hell am I doing?*

He took a long, deep breath.

*Do you want to die? You don't want to die.*

He looked down at his smoking AK.

*Calm down, Barry. Just calm down.*

*Reload.*

Klack! - was the sound made by his rifle, while reloading.

*Reload and study what's really happening.*

*Study the next move, Barry.*  
*Study the next move.*

-

Inside the command-tent Martinez was standing still, in front of the radio. He was in a cold sweat and the sweat drops were sliding into his eyes, annoying him. Skorpio had understood that Jorgenson's and Barry's side were holding their positions well, but the attack was proving to be very powerful. The Vietcong were neither few nor confused: they were attacking in a very calm way, and – worse still – they probably had a very well defined plan in their minds. A *smart* plan. But the Baker team was there, that night, precisely to destroy that plan. Ortega was about to leave the tent - to go out and check all of the machine guns, in order to get an even clearer picture of the situation – when a guy suddenly came in. He was bathed in sweat and panic stricken. The Vietcong had just opened a second front line up on the east side of the base. Ortega saw Martinez swallowing. He imagined him swallowing a very bitter pill. Ortega looked more closely at Martinez, and decided he had to do something about it. “Let's go outside” he said. Ortega was scared too, but he had spent two years learning how to deal with it... But Martinez had not. And that was the reason he wanted to take him for a walk around the base. Distracting him would help.

At the South machine gun there were Danforth, Krakauer and two other guys from the base. Danforth was shooting with no hurry and looked very calm. His enemies were very far away and far beyond the range of the AKs they were carrying. Beside him, Krakauer was looking over the sandbags with his M16 at the ready. Danforth's bursts were so regular that you could set your watch by them.

“Sit rep?” Danforth asked.  
“The enemy has just opened a second front-line up on the east” replied Ortega.  
“Is that a fact?”  
“Christ, yes”

Danforth continued shooting. He had nothing to add.

“There's another thing: a guy thinks he saw some heavy weapons. Some kind of RPG, or something like that”  
“Shit – Danforth said -. What do you think about that, Skorpio?”  
“Don't ask me, Eagle. Maybe we are going to be overrun, maybe not. It's hard to say for sure. We shouldn't be a primary target, but the commies are not joking either, out there. They are many, well-armed and well-coordinated. And we have no idea about their numbers yet”  
“Okay. Let's start with the maximum suppression. Anti break-through plan”  
“Anti break-through: you got that, boss”  
“I will be in one of the advanced holes” Danforth said.

It was at that point that Ortega definitely thought that Danforth was an ass hole. A team leader shouldn't put his life at risk inside one of the advanced holes, just like any other team

members. One of the first duties for a team leader was to avoid all risks until it was absolutely necessary... Not to mention that, from inside one of those holes, he couldn't command anyone at all. In fact, by doing so Danforth had just passed the Baker team's command to him. Ortega would have liked to reply something, but decided to say nothing. He didn't want to contradict his team leader from the very first mission.

"It might already be too late to reach your hole"

"I will give it a try"

Danforth turned his gaze elsewhere, than back to Ortega.

"We have had our differences of opinion, Skorpion – he said -, but you are a good soldier. If we shouldn't get through this, fighting together has been a pleasure"

Ortega smiled as if he was going to laugh.

"Don't bullshit me, Eagle: we are like a mouse and a cat, you and I. If it was me in charge of this team, I would never ever place myself inside no damn advanced hole"

"That's the truth. This is exactly what a talker-guy like Trautman would say if he was here now. You are a real friend, Skorpion"

"You too. Don't get killed, Eagle"

-

At the top of the hill – half a mile away from the base - Coletta and Rambo were watching the attack from above.

Coletta was looking through his night vision sight, and the luminous screen created a little green halo around his eye.

Rambo had a night vision device too, but he was holding it in his hand and used it from time to time, just to check the other side of the valley.

In the sky there were at least three flares rising up right then. They were illuminating the attackers well.

Thanks to those flares and their night vision devices, Coletta and Rambo could see the scene like daytime.

Beneath them, the base looked like a phosphorescent nativity scene, over which the white blazes of automatic weapons flashed sometimes.

As Coletta finally saw the enemy formation in all of its numbers, he had a lump in his throat, and his legs softened.

It was like looking at a big, rabid dog right in front of you, with no chain restraining it and ready to jump.

*So that's the way it feels* – he thought.

"That's it, Raven" said Coletta.

Then he added:

"There are roughly forty of them. All of them have light weapons plus a couple of RPGs and machine guns, more or less. But I can't see the rest of the column. I have no visual. I can't know how many..."

Rambo did not reply.

Coletta raised his eye from the sight and lowered his M40 rifle.

"Not that it makes a lot of difference, given the fact that we can't retreat. The sooner we convince them to go away, the better"

Coletta smiled.

"Let's go and make some noise, Johnny. Let's go over the '202' one"

The two men started walking fast in the darkness through the jungle and down, toward the bottom of the valley, in order to change hilltop.

It was a cool night, but Coletta was sweating anyway.

*So that's it – thought Coletta -.*

*We are searching for the enemy, and contact...*

*We are doing it for real.*

Yes, they were doing it for real and even if it was craziness. No healthy-minded person at war would have gone looking for the enemy that way, but they were fighting using guerrilla rules, not conventional warfare ones. They were fighting the way the Vietcong did, and just like the way Trautman had taught them to.

*If the Vietcong can do such things, you will too –* were Trautman's exact words, during a calm and sunny morning of one year before.

And that night it was up to him and Johnny to give it a try.

*You are not scared by death. You don't want to die –* Coletta repeated to himself, in order to pluck up his own courage, while running through the jungle.

The hill vegetation was thick and running in the dark difficult.

His thoughts suddenly went to his father, and his mountain home where he had grown up: he missed his home.

He could feel that place inside his heart as a place where he wished to be right now.

*No, not like that. Calm down.*

*Stay clear.*

He pushed that visions away from his mind by shaking his head, and continued running toward the next hilltop, where they were going to dominate the attacking enemies.

*Calm – he thought.*

*You are not going to get yourself killed. It's just your first mission. There will be a lot of thuds, but it's just your first mission.*

*Calm.*

*In Fort Bragg there are people that survived dozens of firefights.*

*Rambo is three years younger than you, and yet he has fought already and is right here, at your side.*

Calming down again was an almost painful effort for Coletta, and yet he did it.

While climbing up hill number 202, Rambo and Coletta started asking each other the perfect place to post themselves, but Coletta had a couple of ideas already.

*God only knows what would have happened if yesterday we hadn't had a whole day at disposal to study the terrain...*

No, no...

*Focus yourself.*

Coletta had no idea where such kind of thoughts were coming from, but he tried to do the best he could to push them back and focus on the present time only, just like he used to do when he used to hunt together with his father.

The place he was searching for had to be good for both shooting and to get away in a short time, because sooner or later they would need to get away, and fast. Coletta had no doubt at all about the latter part.

When the vegetation got even thicker than before, Rambo started to make a path through the jungle. Coletta followed him closely, with his M40 in his hands.

The two were sweating a lot by then.

Then the flares in the air became more than before, and the night became lighter.

They finally got to the top of hill number 202 pretty fast, and with no troubles.

The Vietcong were all busy attacking: none of them at all were scattered in the surroundings.



Had the Vietcong suddenly turned backwards and spotted Coletta and Rambo, the two would have barely had two minutes at disposal to flee the scene.

It was enough.

Coletta plucked up courage.

He just needed to say some macho-man bullshit, before starting it.

So he said the first thing that came into his mind.

“Okay, Raven: let’s start my personal kills list. Since every kill needs to be confirmed, you are going to be my witness. Prepare yourself for the counting”

Coletta immediately regretted that cowboy bullshit he had just said.

He lay over a rock spur and then looked inside his night vision sight.

The nearest Vietcong at the base were few, but very close by then.

It looked like two at least of the Baker team's holes had started shooting already.

Coletta locked his first target; inside his night vision sight it looked like nothing more than a black and green, human shaped mark.

He was sitting behind his cover, where he probably thought he was safe.

He was reloading or something; Coletta couldn't say.

Coletta inhaled, held his breath, than pulled the trigger.

BOOM.

*I killed a man – he thought.*

Coletta saw his target's head vanish in a black and green cloud inside his night vision sight

He swallowed while chambering a new round.

KA-KLACK!

It was terrible... A terrible feeling.

*I killed him like a dog, and even worse thinking that I would never shoot any dog, for any reason.*

Trautman had taught him to ignore fatigue, pain and fear too, but that no...

No one had ever spoken about ignoring your own conscience, so Coletta's mind got distracted by that

*I killed him like a wild boar.*

The selected marksman swallowed again while lowering his head again on his sight, in order to find a new target.

*What an awful feeling..*

*Enough! Focus yourself!.*

He had no time to rave.

*Study your next shoot; the wind, the exact time you are going to choose to shoot...*

*Just focus.*

The Vietcong – green and black in front of him – continued moving like fluorescent ghosts.

*I smashed him like an ant, God damn it.*

*Stop.*

*Ask yourself if you and Rambo should change position.*

Coletta clenched his teeth, while continuing to look through his green lit small screen.

*Keep on reasoning, because your life is at stake, for God's sake.*

*It's just like with that bear, back when you were fourteen: you either keep reasoning or die.*

It was in that exact moment that Coletta finally put himself back on his feet.

He was finally clear again.

Coletta locked his second target but before pulling the trigger he reconsidered his first shot point of impact, and adjusted his aim accordingly.

This second target was brandishing an RPG, and was right in front of Barry's advanced hole.

*Fuck.*

Even inside the blurry night-sight vision, it couldn't be anything else but an RPG, and the Vietcong was aiming it already.

*See this, mother fucker...*

Coletta aimed a little lower, in order to hit him in the lower part of his chest, but right before pulling the trigger he realized his mistake..

BOOM! - his M40 thundered.

The Vietcong started and squeezed the trigger in pain.

*Jesus Christ.*

The rocket was fired high and hit one of the very few trees beside the base.

The blaze blinded Coletta's night vision sight for a little while.

*Damn.*

Had that rocket hit someone inside the base, it would have been no one else's fault but his.

*I hit in the head the one I should have hit in the chest, and the one I should have hit in the head I hit in the chest.*

Coletta re-armed his rifle.

He had just made a mistake, it was not going to happen again.

“It went high and against a fucking tree, Sniper. Everything's fine” said Rambo.

Then he added:

“Don't stop”

Coletta breathed deeply, then lowered his head over his sight again, and shot over and over.

BOOM

BOOM

BOOM

He stopped a while to take a breath.

“That was the fourth, Rambo” he said.

-

Inside the base, everyone was on its perimeter and shooting outwards.

The faces were tense, pale and sweat-covered, their moves excited, often rough because of terror.

It was like the Vietcong had just been caught under two fires: the base and the Baker team members on the outside were acting as two different entities.

The west side was a chorus of awful screams, just like a hell's circle.

On the contrary, the attack on Danforth's side was still at an early phase.

Up to then, 'Eagle' had barely shot any rounds with his AK, to avoid being noticed by the Vietcong.

But by then, he thought that the time had come to start shooting with his M16, to avoid any friendly fire episode.

So he laid his AK on the bottom of the hole, picked his M16 up and pulled the trigger.

The assault rifle exploded right on his face.

Danforth let himself fall down in the hole blinded, deafened, balanceless and victim of the shock status, because of the air-wave pressure effect against his eardrums.

“JO DAI! JO DAI!” someone shouted above him..

Danforth clearly saw the AK barrel's tip pointing against his face.

“JO DAI!” the Vietcong yelled again, and again Danforth couldn't hear.

The damn Vietcong was right there, standing... But for some odd reason, he hadn't shot him yet.

Danforth did not let surprise overcome his mind. He reached out one hand beyond his hole's edge and grabbed the Vietcong's ankle, making him lose his balance – and made him fall on his back. The Vietnamese was a light one so doing it was easy for Danforth.

“AYEEEE” the Vietcong screamed while crashing on his back.

Danforth pulled out his knife from his sheath and made it flash in the air.

The Vietcong gave him a kick in the face – and Danforth felt his jaw making a cracking sound – yet he continued pulling the Vietcong toward himself by his legs, and the Vietcong couldn't point his AK on him.

At this point, Danforth lowered his blade, giving him a first stab at his groin and using all of the strength he had.

Danforth felt the knife slicing through the Vietcong's body side to side, up to colliding against the ground.

Blood suddenly squirted over his face. The Vietcong started screaming in pain and finally lost the control over his AK's rifle for good.

As Danforth pulled out his blade in order to hit again, the blade pulled out a whole piece of the Vietcong's intestine.

Danforth lunged again - thunnk! - and then pulled the man toward himself using the blade (just like he had been trained to). He made the man disappear under the thick camouflage-vegetation above his hole.

While in there and hidden from anyone else's eyes, Danforth stabbed him again and again, up to making pieces of his enemy's body.

A while later Danforth stood still for a while, in order to get his breath back.

He was all covered in blood: over his hands, arms, neck and face.

He was out of breath.

He had so much adrenaline coursing through his body he felt sick.

He really couldn't breathe.

A little at time he started calming down, and then he started feeling the pain, a whole world of pain.

His face was burning, his jaw was giving him sharp pains similar to electrical charges and his ears were whistling.

He had one hand he couldn't move any longer and a blind eye, because of the M16 that had exploded in his face.

And yet, if he wanted to live he had to be able to ignore all of that pain, because he had no other choice.

And that meant feeling all of those awful pains deeply and in all their shades, because only feeling them all and deeply would he be able to get them down and back where they would continue hurting him, yes, but with no clouding power over his thoughts.

*Christ please help me* – Danforth thought while starting to feel all of them, and for real.

His face was burnt, one eye closed, swollen and painful, his right hand stuck and out of order at the moment.

Danforth felt all of these feelings and let them go through himself because he had to do something, and he had to do it now, or he wouldn't survive for long.

That's the way he restarted reasoning.

He then looked at the darkness surrounding him using the only good eye he had left.

The M16 was gone - shattered in pieces – and yet he needed to shoot with a friendly weapon to avoid friendly fire.

With his left hand, he pulled out his 1911 from its holster, making all of it dirty with dust and blood.

That fucking North Vietnamese corpse was stealing all of the space inside his hole.  
If the need arose, because of that corpse he wouldn't be able to move properly inside the hole.  
He raised his head.  
The battle was moving towards its climax and bullets were whistling everywhere over his head.  
With all of the mess he had just been through, he didn't even hear them coming.  
He had missed the start of the proper offensive.  
Where the fuck had they come through?  
That fucking corpse was occupying too much space for real.  
And he couldn't toss it away from the hole either, at the moment. He had to wait for the Vietcong to go away, or they would spot him.... But he couldn't wait either.  
Danforth tried to bend the corpse to create some space, but he couldn't.  
Then he started kicking it.  
He hoped that by crushing his bones it would take up less space, but that gave him no results either.  
Then he grasped his Randall knife and started sawing his neck up.  
Blood squirted everywhere.  
It squirted hot over his own hands, neck, eyes, but since the corpse's heart had stopped beating already, the blood flowing out during the beheading was somewhat less than Danforth had expected.  
Sawing a head off with a knife – even a Randall one – turned out to be much more difficult than expected.  
In the beginning, the knife's edge went through the neck's skin as if it was mush, but as the blade touched the spinal column, things got much more complicated.  
Danforth then turned the blade upside down, in order to use its serrated side, and then things got very messy, a turned into a real slaughter.  
Even using the serrated edge, beheading someone was far beyond the purposes the knife was meant for.  
The thing went on for a long time.  
Every time a flare rose high up in the sky, Danforth looked out of his hole through the thick vegetation, and when he couldn't see anyone he started sawing again.  
And when he finally removed the head from the body he checked out from the hole that no one was looking, then tossed the head out, in the open.

As he put the camouflage vegetation back in place, his hands were shaking and he was out of breath.  
His wounded hand - despite still being very sensitive and numb with pain - was starting to gain mobility back.  
His hole was a mess and the stink was making him feel sick and yet, without the corpse's head in it any more, he could now crouch so low down to feel safe.  
Danforth lowered himself as far as he could on the hole's bottom, and finally started to get his breath back.  
*Jesus Christ* - he thought.  
During his fucking state-of-the-art SOG training no one trained him to behead people.  
Definitely not... That was something he had had to make up on the spot.  
Danforth had been through a lot during his life and enough to feel like he had lived three whole lives already and yet he had never felt anything comparable to the feelings he had at that time.  
Yet he had done many things during his lives... He had risked, feared and failed a lot...  
He had risked being severely wounded, dying and ruining the rest of his life too, and all of that before being sent to Vietnam for the first time.  
But the way he was feeling that night, in that moment... That no.  
That was really the end of *something*, and the beginning of *something else* inside his mind.  
*Billy* – he thought.

It was his cousin's name, killed during a robbery gone wrong a long time ago by then. Even if it had no sense at all, he thought that his cousin Billy must have felt something very similar, during his death.

*No fuck, no – he replied himself.*

*The VCs are still out there.*

*Let it go.*

*Forget it.*

*Think only of survival, like an animal.*

-

Coletta had been shooting for twenty minutes by then, and without ever lowering his M40, a considerably heavy rifle, and even heavier with a PVS2 night vision sight mounted on it.

"I can't stand it any longer" he said.

"My hands are shaking too much"

He passed the M40 to Rambo.

As he received it, John immediately started checking the surrounding area, but no Vietcong had left the main, central attack force to start chasing him and Coletta.

Yet he couldn't believe it..

Rambo couldn't understand.

Coletta had shot more than fifteen by then. How could the Vietcong not have spotted their position yet? Was it possible that he had used the battle sounds so well that they never realized that a shooter was atop that hill?

Or maybe, had the Vietcong decided to just ignore them, because they had no other choice?

No... there was something amiss.

Rambo locked one target and shot.

BOOM

A green cloud exploded in the middle of the man's chest and he fell to the ground at the same time.

Rambo chambered another round and when he lowered his eye to the sight again he saw something he would have never wished to see, but that as a matter of fact he had been expecting.

"They are moving" he said, without raising his eye from the sight.

"They are all moving, and they are all moving toward us"

*So nothing escaped us... That's good. Too bad they are all coming to get us.*

Coletta picked up the secondary night vision they had, the hand-held one, and he too looked down the hill.

"Fuck – Coletta said in a whisper -, no, no, no... They are turning wrong"

"Shit" he added while raising Rambo's M16.

"Give me my M40 back"

They exchanged their weapons. Then Coletta said:

"How many?"

"A lot. How many do you see of them?"

"A flood"

The two lowered their optics and started running up the hill.

The Vietcong sent no twenty-man team chasing them... *All* of the Vietcong were falling back toward Rambo and Coletta's direction.

If Coletta and Rambo didn't leave fast enough, they would have to face the whole Vietcong force on their own, and what's worse, they would have to face that force while it was fleeing the scene...

And – just like Trautman had taught them in the past – *there's no tiger as dangerous as the desperate one. The worst enemies are those that have nothing left to lose*".

No matter what, neither Coletta nor Rambo had any intention of putting Trautman's teachings to the test.

"Faster, Rambo. Run like hell!"

They had to run blind, in the darkness, because they couldn't turn any flashlight on, and the vegetation was very thick.

In front of Coletta, Rambo was continuously hitting his head against the branches of the jungle.

Then the hill's slope suddenly got steeper.

A little later, Coletta's forehead was pouring with sweat down his face, his leg muscles were hurting from the blows of the branches during the run in the dark, and his heart was pounding inside his head... And pounding too much.

He knew that feeling.

He and Rambo had stayed still for too long (while shooting) so he was now suffering from the lack of a proper warm up before running so fast and so uphill.

Rambo was clenching his teeth too.

The slope became so steep that Coletta started grabbing the vegetation to pull himself uphill... But it was too dark.

They were at risk of ending up in a dead end (like a bush too thick to get through) and without even knowing it, in such a dark jungle.

"Run Rambo! Run!"

SWOOOSSSH

An RPG rocket flew past above their heads.

Finally, they had been spotted... Of course.

*I did no wrong* – Coletta thought.

Well... In fact, they should have probably left the scene a little earlier.

*It was not just my fault ... We both did.*

Whatever, that mistake could now cost them both of their lives, or worse.

They could even be *captured*.

"Even if we get to the top of the hill, they could over-run us anyway"

"I know" replied Rambo.

Up to that time, the Vietcong's objective had been the US outpost... But now it was Rambo and Coletta.

They had spent too much time shooting.

"The claymores" said Rambo.

"Over the hilltop?"

"Yes"

"Good idea"

A soldier – Ortega did not know his name – entered the command tent.  
“It's over... They are retreating” he said.

At first, Ortega took a deep sigh of relief, but then, his face darkened again.  
Rambo and Coletta had to return to the base yet, and only then would it be over for real.  
They were on their own out there, and he knew it.  
Ortega chased those thoughts.  
*They can watch out for themselves* – he thought.  
Or that's what he hoped.  
Ortega turned to commander Martinez, who had his back to him.  
Hearing about the Vietcong's retreat, Martinez became as stooped as a vulture, and put one hand over his face.  
He made a deep, long whisper, and in the end he sobbed.  
Ortega reached him and grabbed his shoulders.  
“Let's go outside”  
He took the commander out of the tent.  
It was the second time already that Ortega was taking the commander away from his men to avoid them seeing him upset, but that was no heavy burden for Ortega.  
Those kind of nights were no easy thing for anyone including Ortega, even though he had been trained to withstand that kind of stress in Fort Bragg (and even worse than that, as a matter of fact) Ortega felt a good part of that stress too, which was the reason he felt close to Martinez, while going outside the tent with him.

Outside, the sky was starting to turn blue.  
It was dawn by then.

“It's all right, man – said Ortega -. I just wanted to avoid your men seeing you like this”  
Martinez was now crying, yet his voice was not broken by his sobs.  
“If you hadn't been here...”  
“But we were, buddy. And when the time comes, do remember that Trautman was the one who sent us in here”  
“Of course I will... I will remember it for my fucking lifetime. Had the Vietcong overrun us...”  
“But they did not. And the war is not over yet, so calm down”  
“If you hadn't known about the attack beforehand, if you hadn't been here, amongst us”  
“But it went fine, okay? Everything went fine”  
“No, you don't understand. I have full responsibility for all of these men. Getting them back alive to their homes and families is up to me, not you. Every single one of them”  
“You did a good job”  
“I didn't do a good job. How could I? I've been here for barely two months! There are kids in here that have been fighting for almost a year and know much more about this war than I do and they should be in charge, not me”

Ortega suddenly felt uneasy.  
Martinez was right, but the Vietnam war just did not work like that, and everybody knew that.  
Because after one year spent in there – when you were just starting to understand what the hell you were doing – the time had come to be sent back home, and no reason in the world would have made you wish to stay there.  
Many think that the rule of the one-year-long tour of duties was the right one. Even a human one.  
But the truth was that the one-year-at-a-time rule had a completely different purpose.  
Because its real deal, was its impact on the careers of the soldiers.

Its purpose was to give the combat infantryman badge to the highest possible number of soldiers... And not in order to win this war for sure. The one-year-tour-of-duties procedure's real effect was to create soldiers whose only interest was surviving the war, not winning it. In such an army, no one was interested in results for sure. But that was just one of the many, stupid mistakes the US were making in Vietnam, and it wasn't one of the worst either, not by a long a shot.

"Then listen to your men, Martinez. Listen to the right ones. They respect you, they trust you. Ask for their advice and don't be afraid of taking it. This war is too complicated to let yourself be fooled by ranks and things like that. Listen to those who know what they are talking about. As a matter of fact, the SOG don't choose their team leaders by ranks. Did you know that?"

"No"

"The best in doing the team leader job is appointed team leader, and that's all. We don't appoint the strongest, fittest or best at shooting... But those that prove themselves the best in managing the team's work"

Martinez nodded and looked like he was starting to cheer up.

"And now just relax, man. It's over"

Ortega put a cigarette in his mouth.

Then he picked out another one for himself and lit them both.

He turned his gaze west, toward Rambo and Ortega's hill.

The sky was blue and red with sunrise, and yet still too dark at the time to let him see the top of the '202' hill clearly.

It was then that Ortega suddenly saw an enormous, yellow flash under the hill's vegetation and, after a few seconds, he heard some kind of faraway thunder, but so loud as to shake both him and Martinez.

*That was a fucking real explosion* – he thought.

Ortega took a puff of his cigarette, then calculated in his head the distance of that explosion based on the time lapse between the flash he had seen and the sound he had heard. Thanks to that calculation, he had a rough idea about the size of the explosion he had seen too.

It had been a big and loud thud for real.

Such a detonation wasn't made with Vietcong's stuff nor Rambo or Coletta's usual claymores.

But they could have used some C4, and this was something his two team mates had at their disposal. They had probably used some C4 combined with something else (like a grenade or a claymore) to cover their retreat.

Ortega stayed silent but inside his mind he prayed that that was the way things had gone for real.

"What was that?" asked Martinez.

"Nothing to concern us. None of ours' there"

Ortega lied for a good cause.

Martinez's nerves were shaken enough already just like that, and that was normal.

People usually break down much more *after* the action than *during* the action itself.

Everyone breaks down eventually, because that's the time when your tension starts to fade away and you suddenly start feeling everything you couldn't afford to feel before.

Ortega had been through all of that during his first tour of duty already, but while in Fort Bragg he had been taught to stop all of this inside himself... Together with a thousand other similar things.

And that was the reason Ortega was still perfectly functional at the time, unlike Martinez.

Besides, there could be a few Vietcong still out there. It was too soon to just turn it off.



And he wasn't tired either.  
He had just spent a sleepless night

“Enjoy this dawn” said Ortega.

And then:

“Fuck... Thinking about it, Vietnam could be such a wonderful country...”

He then turned to Martinez:

“If it wasn't for this damn war, it would be a hell of a place to spend some holidays. Wouldn't it?”

The daylight was entirely up by then.  
Outside the base the sky was grey and a cold wind was blowing over the corpses and the craters left by the explosions of the battle.  
No one was talking.

All of the Baker team members were still geared up like the night before, the weapons still in their hands, the faces still made up with camouflage paint.

Martinez was standing in the middle of nowhere while looking at the Baker team men wandering around the bodies on the ground.

In the beginning, Martinez thought that they were stealing the goods off the corpses, just like every single soldier of every single army in the whole world does.

Only then did he realize that they were just searching them.

They were leaving in place all of their items but the AK magazines.

As a matter of fact, the day before the Baker team had showed up armed with AK rifles.

About sixty corpses were scattered around the base and the Baker team picked more AK ammo than the amount they had used that night.

Barry greeted Martinez and Ortega with a wave of the hand, then he invited the commander to follow him around the base, and he agreed.

-

As Barry and Martinez arrived at Danforth's advanced hole, they both had to put a neckerchief over their mouths and noses, because of the smell.

Death has a rotten, stinging smell and once is usually enough to remember it for the rest of your life. Everyone remembers it for ever.

Danforth's hole smell in particular was extremely strong.

It looked like someone had just used it as a slaughter house.

No sign was left of the head that Danforth had severed in there, but the rest of the corpse was there, all curled up in the middle of a small lake of blood and looking at the way it was lying, that beheaded body probably had all of its bones broken too.

It had probably been screwed up into a ball like that by Danforth himself, in order to get more space inside such a small fighting-hole

So the two of them spent some time still in front of the hole puzzled and disgusted, trying to figure out what the hell had really happened in there.

The soil was filled with congealed blood and midges.

Martinez crouched to take the body out of there.

“Don't do it – said Barry stopping him - . You should just fill the hole”

“It isn't deep enough to bury a body”

“Maybe. It's just I wouldn't take it away from here, if I was in your shoes. I would just cover it”

Since he was tired of holding the neckerchief with his hand, Martinez tied it around his neck and over his mouth, cowboy style.

Then he waved a hand at two soldiers, to have them do as Barry had just said.

Then they heard someone calling for them.

Barry turned and no matter how far away, he immediately recognized both of them: it was Coletta and Rambo, thank God.

And they looked safe and sound.

They were walking very slowly, almost staggering, and they were both smoking.

They looked drunk or stoned and one of soldiers of the base was yelling at them.

“Stop! I said stop you motherfuckers!”

“Fuck yourself, asshole” replied Coletta without even turning to him.

“Stop or I'll shoot you! I swear to God I will”

“Ok man, ok” Coletta finally said.

The selected marksman sat on the ground like a Buddhist monk on hunger strike.

After a little while of indecisiveness, Rambo sat too.

Coletta pulled out a little metal flask from one of his pockets and had a sip. The guard was still aiming at him with his rifle, waiting for someone that could guarantee him that those two very strange soldiers belonged to the base for real.

*They got drunk* – Barry thought, even if maybe, he was wrong. Maybe the two of them were just a little shocked by the battle.

Whatever the reason, it was fine anyway.

He could barely imagine the kind of battle they had probably just got through, out there, in the open.

-

Danforth arrived at the infirmary on his own two legs.

He had no problems walking, but his right eye couldn't see almost anything, and his right hand was burnt. Anyway, as a matter of fact, none of these things worried him at all.

The very worrying part was entirely different and had nothing to do with those injuries.

The real problem was that he was continuously stumbling for no reason at all given the fact that he could see properly with his safe eye.

The problems was that he could not understand the terrain and where he was placing his feet in particular.

It was a very weird feeling.

While walking back at the base, he crouched down to pick up an AK magazine, but his fingertips went so far down that they hit against the metal, as if he was trying to get them through the magazine, not pick it up.

He couldn't judge distances any more, that was the problem.

Why was that? Did he have concussion?

He could not remember any hard hit against his head.

Could his continuous stumbling be due to the fact that he was looking through one eye only? Was it something normal for those who have one eye only? He had never heard about such a thing before.

And if the damage was permanent, what was going to happen to him?

Would the SOG let him stay with one eye only?

\*\*\*

When Ortega entered the command tent, Messner was bandaging Danforth's wounded eye.

“How are you, Eagle?”

Messner replied instead.

“His ear drums have taken quite a blow but there's no blood, so I think they are going to be okay.

Regarding the wounded eye, I am not sure at the moment, but I don't think there will be permanent damage. I will be sure a few days from now. He is going to have quite a scar for ever, that's sure”

“Is this really necessary? 'Cause I really do look like blackbeard...”

“No John-Wayne-like bullshit soldier, please” Ortega said.

"I need your eye for something like another couple of years, at least. After those two years, you can take it out with our own hand, for all I care"

Danforth smiled.

Now that they were all safe and sound, they were ready to debrief Trautman. Since Danforth was wounded and under Messner's care, Ortega could do it on his own.

So he went for the radio.

\*\*\*

"Skorpio to Covey Leader, come in, Covey leader"

The radio gave out some disturbance, but no reply.

"Skorpio to Covey Leader, come in Covey Leader"

"Do you want me to try again on a secondary frequency?" asked the young man at Ortega's side.

Ortega looked at him.

The young man was wearing some wide black-plastic, square-shaped glasses, with too thick lenses to be carried by a soldier.

He was nineteen years old at best, but he looked like fifteen.

Could this schoolboy really have been in here throughout the attack?

*Jesus* – Ortega thought.

*This guy is cannon fodder.*

Had the US fallen so low during these last two years Ortega had just spent in Fort Bragg? Was that possible? Yes, of course.

So Ortega said:

"Let's use this frequency for now, kid"

"Yessir"

But right in that moment, finally came the answer they were waiting for.

"Actual Covey Leader here. I am listening. Talk to me, Skorpio".

'Actual' meant that Trautman was speaking in person.

At least.

"We drove the attack back, Sir"

"Update, Skorpio"

"We have lightly wounded. Eagle Sir, with a blindfolded eye. All of the others are safe"

"Base personnel losses?"

"About ten or so, but all more or less lightly wounded. On the other side, the Vietcong lost about sixty men, two machine guns and four RPGs. All I mentioned is at our disposal in perfectly working order. But we lost the enemy's battalion, Sir. The bulk of the force wasn't here. The battalion must have split and we fought against a single unit. We have no idea about where the rest of the forces might be"

"I know, Skorpio. They are here"

"What?"

"You did an outstanding job, Baker team B. I have to leave you now. We are in quite deep shit right now"

"Covey leader, I..."

"Don't do anything. It would take too long to get here on foot, and by chopper you would be destroyed before even touching the ground"

“Colonel...”

“Don't say anything stupid Skorpio, and don't even dare think anything. Subject closed. You did an awesome job and you are fully aware of what might have happened if you hadn't. So, mission accomplished, Baker Team. You are going to receive clearance for flying as soon as flying is safe again. I have to go now. We are going to get on all right. Communication's over, Skorpio”

Two hours later

Trautman had spent the whole night inside the command bunker, right under the centre of the base. A whole night spent at the radio, in front of maps and the toing and froing of messengers with terse messages and tense eyes.

After the night spent inside the bunker, when he finally came up to the surface, the sunlight was blinding.

For a long while he couldn't see a thing, but then, in the blinding sunlight, Trautman started seeing the craters on the airfield, the destroyed barbed wire, the G.I.s corpses still abandoned on the ground at the time, while some of the smoke left by the explosions was still floating in the air.

Only then did the base's losses suddenly become real and the weight of the whole world seemed to fall on his shoulders.

*Ten men* – he thought.

*Ten men, and two of them belonging to Baker team 'A'.*

And those were two men he knew personally and had trained for two very long years.

And even worse than that, Trautman knew full well about the betrayal he had just suffered.

He raised his eyes up to the sky, in desperation.

Two times... He had been cheated and betrayed two times that same night.

Cheated by his informer, who sold him inaccurate information that probably – or better, surely – was meant to satisfy both the colonel's thirst for information and the Vietcong's thirst for blood too.

All things considered, the colonel's informer never denied having connections with the Vietcong too, just like he had with the colonel.

But most of all, Trautman had been betrayed by his own generals – Loyd in particular – because they should have never sent soldiers like the Baker teams to fight such a defensive mission.

*We can't send 'em over the fence (across the border) just like that. Not such an experimental unit like your Baker teams are* – were Loyd's exact words.

But it was all bullshit... Over and over.

A Vietcong offensive had always been at risk of becoming a disaster, and that's exactly what Loyd hoped when he assigned that job to the two Baker teams.

He had assigned them to the defence mission hoping they would suffer some losses and the fact that Trautman's informer had given him some inaccurate information hadn't helped for sure.

Loyd knew exactly how difficult Trautman's men were to replace, had he lost any that night.

And he probably hoped that too.

Not that Trautman lost too many of them – not even someone like Loyd was capable of pushing himself that far – But one or two, just like had then happened... In other words, just enough to cause the colonel some serious trouble.

Trautman passed a hand over his own face.

*Cheated and betrayed...*

"Sir?" said a far voice.

*Two times...*

"Sir?"

Trautman finally turned in that voice's direction.

"What, soldier?"

"Well, I... I've been told to inform you"

Trautman raised his eyes to the sky.

*Betrayed... I have been betrayed.*

"Talk soldier, just talk..."

It's about Mac Daniel, Sir. I've been told to inform you about his death. Last night, Sir.

Trautman turned to him.

"No – he said-, that has to be a mistake. Mac Daniel was in the bunker with me, he never fought"

"That's the reason I've been told to inform you"

"What does this mean, soldier?"

“He's been shot between the command bunker and the radio station”

“No” Trautman said, almost losing his balance.

*No – he thought.*

*No... He was right here beside me, just a while ago.*

Trautman looked at his wrist watch: an hour had passed since Mc Daniel had left. The fight was over, Trautman had relaxed and did not notice the passing of time.

*No...*

*It can't be real.*

But it was, and a fast look at the young, worried face carrying the news was enough to understand that he was not wrong and not lying either.

*I knew it – thought the colonel.*

*I knew it would end just like that.*

Friendly fire... That's what it was for real: a fucking friendly fire episode.

And all because of a single, damn criminal who caused his friend Mc Daniel to be dead by then.

“Are you all right, Sir?”

Trautman passed one hand over his mouth to stop himself retching.

*A base shattered into pieces and my Special Forces program almost ruined by two losses in the A team...*

Trautman reached a crate of ammunitions: he couldn't feel his legs any more.

He sat and waited for that feeling to be gone. All things considered, it was normal.

Even if he hadn't personally fought that night, he had commanded (and so risked his own life) anyway, and the adrenalin was now leaving his blood stream, leaving him with no energy left inside his body.

A while later, he started breathing again.

A while later, blood started pumping inside his chest again, but this time it was filled with rage, up to being poisoned almost, so much was the rage that was flowing inside him.

He would get his revenge.

At the cost of risking his whole career, or being court martialled too, but he would have his vendetta.

He had committed a murder already in the past... And seeing that day's situation, he was probably going to commit another one.

Maybe even two.

\*\*\*

The sun was high by then, when the Baker Team B finally boarded their helicopter.

Ortega and the others hadn't changed their clothes yet, hadn't eaten nor rested at all since the battle had ended.

On the contrary, after the mission they immediately had their debriefing.

They had then re-armed themselves and swapped their AKs for XM177s, and only then had they taken off for Dak To.

The fact that Dak To's airspace had been opened again meant that the fight was over by then, but they couldn't be sure about it. So, during the flight, Ortega ordered everyone to eat something, and they obeyed even if they weren't hungry, because they couldn't know when they were going to have another chance to eat something.

\*\*\*



An hour of travelling later, the men were finally in sight of the base that the Baker Team A had defended that night.

More than a battlefield – looking at it from above – the base looked like a dump in the open. It was filled with rubble of every kind: destroyed vehicles, barbed wire, eradicated poles, disembowelled sand-bags scattered all around, like apples fallen from a too tall tree.

And then, obviously, there were many corpses scattered all around, even if most of the dead US soldiers had been put inside their body-bags already, all lined up in front of an hangar.

The airfield – punctuated with small craters and all kinds of rubble – was going to be unserviceable for a whole day at least.

Looking at it from above, you could clearly see the exact spot where the base's perimeter had been attacked by the Vietcong.

Everything all around and in front of the base was devastated.

The bunkers and buildings looked like they had been bitten by some gigantic tigers.

Ortega imagined that the Vietcong, to do that kind of damage, had probably used rockets, hand grenades and some suicide sappers filled with trinitrotoluene.

To have a better look, Ortega stretched his head out of the helicopter and looked right below.

Rambo then stretched together with him, but Ortega held onto him by his shoulders, in a paternal way.

“You released your spring-hook already”

Then he smiled and added:

“I don't want to find out if you can fly for real, Raven”

Rambo closed the spring hook then stretched out again.

Ortega could read the apprehension on Rambo's face while looking down at the base.

Most of the Vietcong bodies had been piled up to create some sort of dead bodies pyramid.

A dozen bare chested young soldiers, with a neckerchief tied over their mouths in a cowboy bandit style were throwing some other bodies onto the top of the pyramid as though they were throwing some bags of rubbish.

*That was a hell of a battle... – Ortega thought.*

*And we missed it.*

Not that he and the others had not fought the previous night; quite the contrary.

But there...

Last night had been a very different battle in there.

They had obviously risked being overrun and had suffered some casualties.

The Baker team's Huey did some manoeuvring before landing, so it showed the whole base to the passengers.

The east corner of the base hadn't been cleaned up yet, and the corpses were still lying here and there where they had been hit.

The helicopter slowed down, giving them another moment to see the scene from above.

Some Vietnamese were bent over the barbed wire; they had been hit while trying to pass below or through it.

In front of a machine gun's nest there was a large pool of blood, and right in the middle of it there were just a pair of legs and some intestines. There were no signs of the rest of the body.

Ortega had seen things like that already in the past.

Sometimes a large calibre simply pulled an enemy into pieces and it was then very difficult to find

the rest of those pieces.

War is like a car accident: if haven't seen it happening, understanding what the hell has happened can be very difficult, sometimes.

As the helicopter touched the ground, Ortega realized that those severed legs' pants were US ones. The poor bastard was probably hit directly by an RPG warhead, or a hand grenade right in the middle of his chest.

The Baker team got out of the Huey.

Danforth went straight to the infirmary, together with Messner.

All of the others started unloading their team's equipment, most of which was the Russian weapons they had collected from the dead Vietcong.

Ortega went straight in search of Trautman.

He could feel some sort of anguish inside of him.

To get some info about the colonel's whereabouts he had to ask more than once.

Then an officer told him that the colonel was safe and sound, and pointed out a hangar to Ortega.

So, Trautman was safe.

Ortega was finally sure about it.

The vice-team leader got to the hangar passing in and out of a couple of buildings.

While doing so he passed by a huge hospital tent from which all sorts of screaming in pain was coming out.

It reminded him of a pig slaughterhouse he saw a long time ago, when he was still a kid, and that memory stayed with him for a while.

From outside the slaughterhouse the very young Ortega could not see a thing, yet those pigs' cries were so filled with horror that they sounded like they were humans, not pigs.

In front of that tent-hospital, that day, Ortega felt the very same anguished feeling of that far away in time memory, but even stronger, because even if he was an adult, those screams were made by humans, not beasts.

It was a proper Dantesque chorus, like the whole of hell was hiding in there, and those were the screams of dying people, and many.

Ortega continued toward the hangar-morgue, trying to ignore those sounds.

While walking he passed beside a giant pile of ripped and dirty battle dress uniforms. A big, fat dark and malodorous mountain and he knew exactly what it was.

He had seen things like those already, during his first tour of duty.

Those were the uniforms of the wounded.

A whole mountain of clothes cut away, ripped apart, pierced and soaked with blood, grey matter, entrails, piss...

Ortega turned his uniform's collar up to cover his mouth with it, but the stench entered his nose anyway.

He tried to rid himself of that sickness as best he could, then he plucked up his courage and moved on.

In the end, he reached the hangar they had mentioned to him, and he entered it.

It was practically empty.

Beside its entrance, a man sat at a desk filling out some forms.

Far from him, on the other side of the hangar, some military trucks were parked.

Trautman was standing so straight, almost to attention, in front of some lined-up bodybags lying on

the floor.  
He looked a decade older.  
Ortega had never seen *'the beast'* Trautman in such a state.  
He looked smaller.

“Sir” said Ortega.  
Trautman had some difficulties in replying.  
“Skorpio...”  
He had said Ortega's field name like getting back to reality was a huge effort for him.  
The colonel then looked about to say something, but didn't.  
So Ortega waited a while, before breaking the silence.

“How did things go, Sir?” Ortega asked in the end.  
Trautman inhaled deeply, then said:  
“We lost two members of the Baker Team A. The base's count of losses is still going on. They are light losses anyway, considering the kind of attack we have suffered”

Two course mates.  
Two people Ortega knew very well.  
Two brothers.  
Ortega closed his eyes and said:

“Who?”  
“Mann and Garrett”

Of course Ortega knew them, and he knew them very well.  
Only God knew how many times he had eaten together with them and chatted, laughed and suffered together, while at training. He shared silly things with them, barracks gossip, envies, ambitions and most of all drinking, during their nights of leave.  
They weren't the kind of friends he would have stayed in touch with after the war but fuck, they weren't just names either, in Ortega's mind.  
And it was unreal.  
Two years spent being selected, trained and gruelling work outs...  
A whole year eating shit to learn how to survive in the jungle and then you die during your first fire fight.  
The worst of Trautman's fears had just happened: two of his men had died while supporting a conventional-warfare fight, the kind of fight where everything they struggled so hard to learn simply disappeared in the pile, like a drop in a sea of casualty numbers.  
But all in all, that's the way the Vietnam war worked, and Ortega and Trautman knew it very well when they decided to get on board that roller coaster.  
Ortega then thought about his brother, even if he didn't know why.  
That older stepbrother who lost his mother when he was very young, who went to medical school and had always been better than him, or he had always used to be until Ortega was sent in Vietnam for the first time.  
Since then their roles were exchanged, and Ortega had now become the 'favourite' of the two brothers.  
Ortega used to think very often of his brother and the fact that he was studying medicine with no passion for it. Yet, since it had no sense at all for Ortega to think about his brother in that moment, he pushed away those thoughts he couldn't understand, because they had nothing to do with what had just happened.

“We could have avoided this” said Trautman.

Ortega turned to look at the colonel. Then he suddenly raised his head – taking the to attention posture – tapped his heels and shouted:

“IT CAN ALWAYS BE AVOIDED, SIR!”

Trautman looked at him for a while.

Then – even if very little convinced - he said using a very low voice:

“What do you do if they shoot at you?”

“WE STUDY THE NEXT MOVE, SIR!” yelled Ortega.

Trautman's voice was getting stronger again.

“What do you do if they hit you?”

“WE STUDY THE NEXT MOVE SIR!”

“WHAT DO YO DO IF THEY KILL YOU?” Trautman was yelling by then.

“WE STUDY THE NEXT MOVE SIR!”

Trautman and Ortega stayed still to attention, both silent, in front of the body bags lying in front of them.

The base all around was ignoring them.

"Follow me" Trautman said

He and Ortega went to the radio station and asked to get in touch with commander Martinez.

"There's the chance you have a *Janus*" Trautman said.

"A what?" Martinez's voice crackled out of the radio.

"One of my men's faces was blown away by one of yours M16s. You probably have a *Janus*, someone who sabotages your ammo. A guy putting defective rounds amongst the others"

"Fuck, I knew it"

And he knew it for real.

Half an hour later, Trautman received a priority message: a South Vietnamese soldier had been shot in the back while trying to run away from the B base.

\*\*\*

While the body count was still going on outside, inside the command-hangar Ortega, Trautman and Colin were looking at a big map hanging on the wall.

"Let's exclude the terrains too difficult to travel under heavy load. This leaves them just two sectors Then Ortega took over:

"So this leaves them with just two options: re-join the survivors of our attack force, or retreat in the border's direction"

"You are a Special Forces soldier, Skorpion – said Colin -. What would you do if you were in their shoes?"

"I don't know... The attack we suffered was a Toccata and Fugue . We didn't kick the shit out of them like you did. On the other hand, the attackers weren't few either, so they could get back into Laos without reuniting their forces. I don't know"

"They will reunite for sure – said Trautman -, but there's only one place where it's worth doing it. So let's say they are there already, right now. We can catch them, if they are there. Should we send some helicopters out?"

Colin was not expert enough on the subject to have a strong strategical opinion, but the helicopters were theirs, so he had the last word over the matter.

"I don't know – he said – going out to find them is quite a serious risk. How many men do you have at disposal, Trautman?"

"Just Skorpion's team, at the moment. The other team has not recovered yet. Skorpion?"

"We are not rested at the moment, but we can give it a try"

"Fine"

Colin waited for Trautman's reply.

The colonel looked straight into Ortega's eyes.

"Do you think you can do that, Skorpion? Are your men up to fighting again? How's Eagle?"

Ortega had a last moment second thought, so it took a little while for him to reply.

"Yes... Eagle is out of action" he said while reflecting on it.

They hadn't slept for the last twenty four hours. They had eaten little and in a hurry, and they had never rested at all. He hadn't for sure.

On the other hand yes, they could make it.

All things considered, it was just a matter of staying sat in the Hueys and studying the terrain down below, in order to understand the route the Vietcong were hiding in, and then the Phantoms would enter the game.

Yet Ortega had some difficulties in replying anyway, because lives – and many – could depend on the answer he was going to give.

They could do it. They weren't too tired to give it a try.

So Ortega decided to tell them the simple truth.

“Yes, I am sure we can make it. Our shape is good enough to get the job done”

“Are you sure, Skorpion?”

Ortega nodded vigorously.

“Then it's decided. As soon as Team A are in operative condition again, I will order them to join the chase too, just to be sure. But when you're over there, I want you to stay on board your Hueys, don't get too close to the enemy and - most of all - don't do anything stupid. The mission is just to locate and avoid contact... Am I clear?”

“Yessir”

Ortega was about to leave, when Trautman stopped him.

“Skorpion?”

“Yes?”

“I am telling you this again: don't engage. We are talking about two hundred North Vietnamese regulars. And when you get there, shooting you down will be as easy to them as bird hunting. If you give 'em a chance to engage, you are all going to get yourselves killed, period. Don't do it. Am I clear?”

“Yessir”

Said Ortega, then he saluted and left.

# OPERATION BLACK SPOT

## PART II

The wait was very short.

The Hueys lowered down on the plain and the Baker team guys ran out from the hangar and got swiftly on board of the two Hueys.

An overall force of two Hueys were thought to be enough to visually explore the map sectors the Vietcong's battalion was probably hiding in.

On board of the first front-head Hueys, came Danforth, Krakauer, Messner and Coletta. That was the 'commanding' Huey of the formation.

In fact, there had been some squabble between Ortega and Danforth about his blind-folded wounded eye, but after insisting a little bit Ortega finally gave up.

The second Huey was a support, 'cover-fire' one.

Using two helicopters, spotting the Vietcong in the jungle below should have been quite easy.

Ortega was sitting beside a pilot that everyone used to call 'Shorty Jim', because of his height.

Barry, Jorgenson and Rambo were in the back of the helicopter, with Jorgenson at the M60.

Rambo, standing with an M16 at his hand, was holding onto a bar and stretching the safe-cord to its maximum length.

Rambo was feeling tired that morning, even if he did not know why.

Twenty four hours without sleeping weren't ideal for anyone, but he was feeling too tired considering that the previous night had not been a physically demanding one.

Then he remembered Trautman's teachings.

*Everything's stress. The fact of having put yourself at risk is stressful too and on its own, and this fatigue you are going to feel will have nothing to do with the physical task you did, or did not do..*

So, that was the exact feeling Trautman was talking about. That night's fighting had tired him with no physical effort at all, just like Trautman had said.

And he wasn't the only one feeling like that. He could see it in his team mates' eyes.

*It's nothing more than a feeling inside your head.*

*Ignore everything, and make yourself operative.*

*Get into operative state, because nothing is over.*

\*\*\*

After five minutes flying, the base had already vanished behind Ortega's chopper.

After ten, the paddy fields vanished behind them too, and the two Hueys started flying over the jungle.

They were almost there.

If the Vietcong were nearby, they would soon spot them... Or - on the contrary - the Vietcong would spot the Hueys..

Ortega looked at his team mates.

Jorgenson was incessantly tapping his foot on the steel floor, as if he was tapping the rhythm of an only-existing-inside-his-mind song.

On the other side Barry – in a very Special Forces style – was sleeping.

*Eating whenever you can, sleeping whenever you can and so on* – was one of the many Trautman's mottos.

Barry was not entirely wrong in sleeping in such a moment.

Ortega was quite lost in his thoughts when he felt a hand tapping on his shoulder.

It was Johnny.

Rambo pointed two fingers toward his own eyes, then he pointed down to the jungle below.



Ortega stretched himself out and immediately felt the safe-cord pulling his side. Yet, he did get to see the jungle flowing down below.

They a very high hill was next to them.

Ortega continued scanning the ground below, but there was nothing.

They were flying very low just in case some enemy had the idea to open fire against them... Maybe even too low.

The vegetation below them was flowing very, very fast.

Rambo made a gesture again.

At first, Ortega saw nothing.

They were about to pass over the top of a hill, they were almost over its top when a very young North Vietnamese rose from the leaves.

He was wearing the regular uniform of the North Vietnamese army, a clean and neat one, as if he was wearing it for the very first time. He was really elegant, almost beautiful at the top of that hill, in the sun and with the clear sky behind him.

He was holding an RPG over his shoulder and pointing it straight toward them, while taking his aim in a perfectly calm way.

*Shit* – thought Ortega.

“ARRPEEGEE!” screamed both Rambo and Ortega, together.

Rambo's scream was quite a plaintive one, very similar to a wolf's howl.

They had to go straight and as quickly as they could, in order to not give the shooter the time necessary to take aim.

That was their only hope.

“SPEED UP!” Ortega shout to Shorty Jim, the pilot.

“Evasive manoeuvring!” he yelled.

“NO! GO STRAIGHT TOWARD HIM!” .

“DO AS HE SAID” Barry yelled too.

With a little jump, Rambo stretched his head inside the cockpit and put one hand on the pilot's shoulder.

“GO STRIAGHT FUCKING FORWARD OR I SWEAR TO GOD THAT I AM GOING TO SNAP YOUR NECK WITH MY BARE HANDS”

Seeing that scene, Ortega had a flashback.

*You must know about your mission more than your own colonels themselves.*

*You must know about flying more than your own pilots.*

The helicopter tilted down and started flashing forward and straight toward the enemy.

Jorgenson started shooting with his M60 but against nothing for real, because the enemy was out of his angle of fire. Yet he got all of the enemy's attention just for a while, but enough to make him hesitate enough to give all of them some precious seconds more at disposal.

Then the helicopter straightened and accelerated, while the Vietcong's head was enveloped in a white cloud.

WOOOOOOSH!

The RPG flashed past right in front of them, and so close that it looked like it had passed right in front of them.

It skimmed over the left side of the helicopter, and Jorgenson saw it passing right in front of his face and so close that it looked like had he put one hand out, he could have touched it.

“FUCK!” He shouted while losing the grasp over his M60 for a little while.

“IT PASSED THROUGH! IT PASSED THROUGH!” Rambo screamed.

Ortega could now sense the rocket's trail of smoke stinging his nostrils, so close had the rocket passed by.

*Jesus fucking Christ* – he thought.

“IT'S GONE” Jorgenson shouted too, while grabbing his M60 back with shaking hands.

The helicopter passed by the hill flashing over it while the Vietcong was reloading in vain.

In front of them there was already another hill and in the gorge between the two hills another Vietcong appeared.

He was holding an RPG too.

“ANOTHER ONE, ONE O'CLOCK”

Everybody turned in their right to look at the same time, but their luck was over.

This time Ortega barely whispered.

“Shit”

And before he could even end the word, the warhead was in the air already.

WOOOOOOOOSH!

A noise shook the whole helicopter, as if it was made of paper, then they felt some kind of bump, as if they had just been rammed by another aircraft.

“HOLD ON Jorgenson” Rambo screamed, but Jorgenson still had his hands on his M60.

He had the safety cord, but in order to shoot properly he had unfastened the seatbelt, and when Jorgenson reached out to take the spring clip, it flew away in front of him. The helicopter was starting its downward spiral, and while Barry, Ortega and all of the others already had their seatbelts fastened and were preparing for the crash, Jorgenson couldn't.

Rambo understood immediately what was going on.

“Hold on” he shouted in vain.

“Hold the fuck on, Jorgenson!”

“Jorgenson NOOOOOOOO!”

While moving towards the top of the next hill, the helicopter started whirling for real.

Rambo was ready for the crash and Barry too, but Jorgenson not yet, and now that the centrifugal force was far worse than before, he was being pushed out of the helicopter

Jorgenson stayed just like that, his legs out of the helicopter, one hand holding a bar and the other in the void, all stretched out trying to grab a seatbelt that was out of his reach.

He was going to smash his legs on impact.

The helicopter's blades were turning in one direction, the body of the vehicle in the other.

After some turns, it tilted all of itself on one side, and then it started its freefall toward the ground.

Barry, who was all crouched against his seat, closed his hands over his head, which was considered the safety position for the incoming crash.

Ortega, who was sat beside the pilot, started pushing against the window as hard as he could in order to hold himself against the centrifugal force.

The only one who could stretch one hand out and help Jorgenson was Rambo, but he was too far away from him and unlocking the seatbelt in that moment would have been suicide.

So he could do nothing but stretch towards him, hoping that Jorgenson could reach his hand on his own.

“Jorgenson!” he shouted.

His friend was going to die and right in front of him, just a span away from him.

“JORGENSOOOON!”

Then Rambo brought his hands back, in order to brace himself during the incoming crash and while looking into his friend's eyes at the same time.

“NO, NO, NOOOO” he shouted with all of the breath he could find inside his lungs and with such a

desperation in his voice that his voice changed so much that it didn't sound like his anymore.

Jorgenson saved his legs from the impact, but he then crashed against the steel floor with no protection at all, crashing his head, his back, his shoulders, everything.

When the flickering stars finally vanished away from Rambo's field of view, the helicopter was lying on its side and on the outside, pieces of metal sheets were slowly falling over the surrounding jungle.

It was like Rambo had missed some frames of the previous scene: a while before they were falling to the ground and a while later everything was still, and his back was hurting him like hell.

*I am still alive* – he thought.

They had just crashed.

-

“Fuck, fuck, fuck” Krakauer shout from the hold door of the other Huey, which was still in the air. During the impact on the ground, Ortega's Huey had some kind of jolt: it flexed itself and straightened again like a boxer's face hit by a hook. As if the helicopter had been a human being, not made of steel.

Its blades smashed against the ground then slowly stopped turning, like a wounded animal who finally stops breathing.

Seen from above, it had been a horrendous spectacle.

“Fuck” Krakauer shouted again, but this time the tone of his voice was quite lifeless.

Danforth, who was sat beside the pilot, was shaking his head while looking down with his only working eye at the same time.

But a while later, he could see that the Huey hadn't exploded.

It smoked but wasn't on fire and hadn't become a fireball either, so there could be some survivors.

“If I could just get down there and see if there are any survivors” Messner said from behind him.

After the crash there was a while of stasis, during which nothing moved.

-

Inside the crashed Huey Rambo shook his head in order to get rid of the stars that were blurring his vision.

Over him, Barry was already unfastening his seatbelt.

Ortega, who was sat in front of him – beside the pilot – felt his own forehead, as if to check that nothing was broken in there.

Jorgenson was lying still on his side.

Rambo unfastened his belt and dragged himself to his motionless, face-down friend.

“Can you hear me, Grizzly?”

But he gave no answer, not even a sign.

Rambo then checked his pulse on his neck.

He was still alive but unconscious, and losing blood from one of his ears.

*Cranial fracture* – he thought, and that though hit him like a knife stab.

He had probably hit his head against the steel floor during the crash. An unforgiving impact.

*Damn it, Grizzly.*

If he didn't come round in a dozen minutes, he probably wasn't going to come round at all, and every single second passing by unconscious added more likelihood of suffering permanent brain damage.

*Friend.... My friend.*

But Rambo had no time to feel those feelings.

He couldn't afford to.  
So he turned to the other side.  
Barry was good. He was standing on his feet already..  
He took a couple of steps, than started unscrewing the Huey's M60 from its bracket.  
Rambo noted what he was doing with a sidelong glance, then turned again to Jorgenson.  
After a long, almost never ending while, Jorgenson opened his eyes up.  
*Thank you God* – Rambo thought.  
But he was moving them only.

-

“Here they fucking are! Fucking Vietcong! ” shouedt Krakauer on board of the flying Huey, then he started shooting down with his M60.  
The guy fired a never ending burst, as long as if there were no tomorrow.  
“Vicious assholes”

Their mates had crashed into a plain near the top of the hill and Krakauer was shooting at the base of the hill, where the vegetation was thicker.  
He had to take the Vietcong away from the wreck; if they climbed up to the edge of the plain, it would be over for Ortega and the others.  
He was aiming at moving leaves, smoke clouds or trails of smoke of any kind in the middle of the jungle, but the truth was that he wasn't seeing almost anything and he was shifting his aim practically by pure instinct.

Coletta moved Messner with one hand and started looking down below using the scope of his precision rifle.

The enemies were very careful in staying where they were very well hidden by the jungle, and so invisible from above.

From the Vietcong point of view, attacking the wreck was like shooting birds inside a cage: they were going to sport shoot until they had taken down all of the Baker team members who survived the crash.

Shooting from the hold door, Krakauer was practically shooting at anything, and Coletta scanning the terrain down below with his rifle scope.

“Sniper! Stop spotting and start shooting - shouted Danforth -. Or rather, let's throw some serious bombs at those assholes”

Coletta put his sniper-rifle down, grabbed an M16 and started shooting in full auto, emptying his first magazine very fast.

Messner picked up a claymore, but they weren't in such a position as to toss it down. He was at risk of throwing it too near the wreckage.

-

Ortega was stuck inside the cockpit that was all deformed by the impact.

His breathing was difficult and he was feeling a strange sensation in the middle of his thorax.

He might have a broken rib.

He turned to look at Shorty: he was moving- so he was still alive -, but the dark visor of his helmet was full of blood. Ortega could not understand where his wound was, but it wasn't a very important issue at the moment, because he couldn't help him anyway in such conditions (what about him? How bad was he wounded? He had no idea) and he certainly couldn't do anything at all from the position he was at the moment, upside-down-almost.

“Can you breathe?” asked Ortega.

“Yes”

“Can you move?”

“No... I think I lost one leg”

Ortega looked down.

“Negative, soldier: both of your legs are still there”

He said, then smiled.

“Don't worry, you are going to feel them again very soon. Together with the pain...”

At the same time, Ortega heard the first bullet hissing over the wreck.

He heard the hisses only – no shots -, so the Vietcong had to be far away... For now.

He could even get a rough idea about their distance, thanks to his training.

*Ziiip...*

“You are gonna make it” said Ortega.

*Ziiip... Ziiip...*

He then examined the pilot better.

Shorty had broken both of his legs and one of the two fractures was an exposed one. The severed muscle was shining red over the white bone.

*Jesus Christ.*

Ortega drew his 1911 from his holster, pulled the slide back and passed it to Shorty Jim.

“Dont let 'em take you alive” he said.

Shorty nodded with difficulty and took the gun.

Ortega pulled out his knife, grasped it icepick-style and started hammering at the window, shattering it with the knife.

Shattered crystals rained over his face.

Then, with the sawback side of the blade, he started opening the window up, while new crystals started falling over him.

-

Rambo was trying to understand if Jorgenson's neck was broken.

It looked like it was not, yet Jorgenson was not speaking or talking yet.

While being very careful in keeping the neck 'in line', Rambo lifted his head from the steel floor and when he saw the side of his face that had been hidden so far, his blood froze inside his veins.

On the left side of Jorgenson's forehead, there was a depressed zone two centimetres deep at least.

His skull was fractured.

-

Jorgenson regained consciousness right in that moment, while Rambo was still examining him.

The first thing he saw was the glances of both Rambo and Barry – who had just joined - over him and staring at him in a very horrified way.

His vision was still blurred at the time, but their facial expressions were unquestionable.

“What?” he said.

“Stay calm - Rambo replied from above -. It's all right”

“Yeah” Barry whispered.

But Rambo was lying. They both were.

And if a guy like Rambo got to the point of lying, it could mean one thing, and one thing only.  
“Johnny” he said.  
Rambo nodded.  
“What the fuck is happening, Johnny?”  
At first, Rambo looked like he couldn't reply, but then he said:  
“We crashed. You sustained a serious cranial fracture”  
Only then did Jorgenson start hearing the surrounding sounds for real.  
They were under attack.  
“I feel sick, Johnny”

Barry vanished from his sight and he heard some metal sounds.  
A while later Rambo was gone too, and if they were leaving him that way, the situation was probably very bad out there.  
He had to do something.  
But he couldn't move and he was feeling sicker and sicker.  
He had strong nausea, too strong and so much that it seemed like it was going to kill him. He was feeling like he had ingested some kind of poison, of a deadly kind.  
Then everything blurred in front of him, becoming faded and far away. It was like falling inside a very deep and dark well, even if he was still there, inside the wreckage.  
Reality was coming and going as he risked losing consciousness.  
*Don't faint* – he thought.  
He was dying for real, for Christ's sake. He could feel the death inside himself.  
Any moment now, everything would vanish, and he would never wake up any more.  
Ever.  
“Jorgenson! Don't pass out, Jorgenson!” It was Rambo's voice.  
He hadn't abandoned him.  
Jorgenson clung to his friend's voice with an inhuman effort... But it wasn't enough anyway.  
He could do nothing against the deadly darkness surrounding him, and a while later it enveloped him like a shroud, making everything else disappear.

-

It was then that Rambo heard the first bullets flying really close to the downed helicopter.  
They were like vultures attracted by an animal's dead corpse smell.  
They were blood-thirsty.

“Barry” Rambo shouted.  
“I know” replied the black guy.

Then they both heard the sound of a helicopter flying over them.  
It was the second Huey, the one with the other half of the Baker team on board.  
They were studying the situation from above, but the zone was too hot to get too close, and even more dangerous for landing.  
Yet they were still there at least; they hadn't abandoned them to their fate.  
Rambo studied the sounds surrounding him.  
The Vietcong were many.  
Light weapons were all around but far away (for now). They were probably even out of range, but scattered a little everywhere.  
They were really facing a whole enemy battalion, as Trautman had said.  
But the thing Rambo feared the most was not death but capture... And that was a capture situation

for sure.

There were people in Vietnam that had been POW since '65, when the war began, and Rambo had no intention at all of ending up like that.

He would never let himself be taken alive.

“Raven” said Ortega.

Ortega got out from the cockpit through the broken wind shield, and was now asking him for a rifle stretching an empty hand in his direction.

Rambo stretched inside the cockpit rack and picked an M16 up when a bullet came through the helicopter, piercing its fuselage side to side right in front of his face, or thinking about it better, it pierced it side to side passing through Rambo's body.

*No* – he thought.

A white flash blinded his sight.

*No, no, no...*

Rambo lost his balance a little bit, while losing his grab on the M16 at the same time.

He didn't feel a sharp pain at first.

He just felt some kind of puff, like a gust of wind had just passed *through* his arm.

But then the burning immediately spread from the arm upward, toward the shoulder.

A while later, it was like someone had poured gasoline over his arm and set it on fire..

Before the pain could get any worse he quickly picked up the M16 and roughly threw it to Ortega, who in the meantime had vanished outside the helicopter, taking cover under the wreck.

His arm was still working, but the pain was taking his breath away, and had worsened even more, he would not be able to fight any more.

“You all right, Johnny?”

Rambo lowered his glance at his wound.

Where there once was his arm, he just saw an indissolubly red tangle squirting blood all over his ripped uniform.

And he couldn't breathe, so sharp was the pain.

He felt like suffocating.

*Calm down. Breathe..*

*Calm down.*

*Forget what your arm looks like.*

*Don't let fear grow inside of you.*

The bullet had opened the whole length of his arm, from the hand to the shoulder.

Rambo opened and closed his hand, noted again that everything was still working (as a matter of fact, it wasn't exactly working as before) then started asking himself how to deal with such a wound.

“Jesus Christ, John... Are you okay?” Ortega asked again.

Rambo crouched down, tilted on one side, searched inside a pocket with his good – yet shaking – hand, then picked out a bandage pack.

“I am fine” he finally said, barely breathing.

He had to ignore the pain. He had to do it.

The situation was too desperate for him to stop fighting right then.

They just couldn't afford it, period.

However, ignoring pain wasn't exactly the same thing as ignoring fatigue, which he was so trained for.

The principle was the same, but that... That was an entirely different matter, and much more dreadful.

While bandaging his arm Rambo swallowed and tried to breathe slower and deeper, to keep his shock status under control and calm down the pain.

All of that was useless.

*I can still fight* – he repeated to himself.

*I have to do it.*

While finishing bandaging his arm, he looked at the very long and bloody wound.

*It's nothing* – he thought.

*It didn't hit the bone.*

He didn't even have the time to wrap the bandage around before it filled with blood and began dripping on the ground.

The bullet couldn't have hit the bone, no, a thing like that just couldn't be.

*If it hit the bone, I could die... And I am probably done with the SOG anyway.*

It was then that Rambo saw Barry stand up with his M60 and move away from the wreck.

-

Barry ran out of the helicopter and started shooting while running.

Now that Rambo was wounded too, the only ones defending the wreckage were him and Ortega.

They desperately needed to gain some ground.

He stopped behind a rock big enough to give him good cover, then he positioned the M60 and started shooting.

The helicopter was at the top of a hill. One side was too steep to be climbed up by the Vietcong. But on the other side – the one where he was – there was a big plain.

If the Vietcong reached the edge of the plain, they could start shooting at the wreck using the vegetation as cover, and that would be the end for all of them.

Barry had to gain that terrain before them.

-

Once he'd finished bandaging his arm – the bandages were still dripping blood over him – Rambo looked in Jorgenson's direction one last time and – even if he didn't want to – he left him alone.

With the M16 in his good hand and the bandages still in the other, he finally got out from the wrecked helicopter and crouched behind it.

Then, with bloody hands, he finally grasped his M16 at the ready.

-

In the meantime, Barry was running forward from one cover to the other.

He had to keep the Vietcong away, but he couldn't see any enemy in front of him yet and his run was a blind one, through the jungle.

He couldn't see a thing in front of him but he could hear bullets whistling everywhere.

But he wasn't short of shelters: holes in the ground, rocks, fallen trees: a little at time but he was gaining ground.

The Vietcong was right there in front of him, even if far away at the moment, but despite all of the training in the darkness he had had in Fort Bragg, he couldn't judge their range exactly yet.

-

Rambo stood up and started running in Barry's direction.

His heart was beating like hell by then.

He soon reached and overtook his team mate, while the bullets never stopped whistling all around.

The plain ended and the trees started, but Rambo did not stop his run because he now had Barry covering him.



The trees were sliding by thick beside him while he ran.  
It was then that he clearly heard Danforth's Huey disappear.  
They were gone.  
*What?* - he thought.  
*What the hell are they doing?*

-

Ortega was now in front of the wrecked cockpit and was shooting down along the crest at his side.  
The VCs would have never climbed up that side, yet he had to keep them away anyway.  
Every now and then Ortega, between one M16 burst and the other, had a look to the cockpit's inside, in Shorty and Jorgenson's direction...  
And saw that Jorgenson was conscious again.

-

*I am still alive* – thought Grizzly Jorgenson.  
*Not for long, but I am still alive.*

-

To Ortega, Jorgenson looked even more lucid than before, even if not entirely lucid. He saw him starting bandaging his head on his own. He was doing it as if it could be of any use, considering such a serious wound.

*Stay down, for Christ's sake* – Ortega thought.

Jorgenson's hands were shaking visibly.

*Stay down and stay still, you crazy mother fucker.*

But he knew him very well by then, and it was impossible that a guy of his kind would just twiddle his thumbs during such a situation.

Ortega shot another couple of short bursts down below, then turned again to look at his wounded team mate.

The depression in his forehead was monstrously horrible to see while he was bandaging it. Just the sight of it was painful.

Ortega couldn't believe that Jorgenson was conscious with such a wound on his head.

He was seeing it and yet he couldn't believe it.

And then of course, Jorgenson was having many difficulties in even just bandaging his own head, and his whole face was so transfigured that it made him look like he was another person, and yet he was giving everything he could.

His face looked like a mannequin's, as if the truth was that Jorgenson was dead already, and yet he succeeded in bandaging his head anyway, even if the knots were so poorly made that they would untie themselves very soon. Despite all of that Ortega had no doubt that once done with the bandages, Jorgenson would try to fight too.

As a matter of fact, after that rough bandaging Jorgenson picked up an M16 and put it under his armpit, then went to sit in the middle of the wreck with eyes gazing into space and obviously exhausted already.

He was completely out of his mind.

*Jesus* – thought Ortega.

He had no time to worry about Jorgenson.

He just couldn't.

So the vice-team leader clenched his teeth and turned to the other side, toward Rambo and Barry, who were away by then.

They had reached and passed the trees, and he could barely see them on the other side of the plain. Rambo was crouched behind some cover and checking his arm, that never stopped soaking his side with blood. On the other side, a little behind him, Barry continued shooting his M60 to cover.

*We are falling apart.* - though Ortega.

Who could say how long Barry's ammunition would last if he continued shooting like that?

Ortega crouched again behind the cover in front of the helicopter's cockpit.

'His' VCs were still down there and shooting in his direction, but with him doing some spary fire from that upper position they showed no intention of trying to go round the wreck from that side.

*We are fucked in any case* – thought Ortega.

They were doomed to be overrun in a few minutes... But they were succeeding in slowing them down at the moment.

Anyone else instead of them would have been wiped out by now and easily, but not them.

No... They would last a dozen minutes more at least... Provided that Barry and Rambo weren't wasted before then.

They were strong, he and his team mates.

They were strong as hell.

*It's going to be a gorgeous death* – he thought.

But there was something amiss.

He raised his gaze.

The second helicopter was missing: it wasn't above anymore.

Noticing it, Ortega said to Shorty Jim:

“Our people are gone. I think they are continuing the mission”

*We are all expendable* – thought Ortega .

*It's the number one rule, and the only one that really matters.*

-

On board the other helicopter – the one still flying - Krakauer screamed:

“OVER FUCKING THERE, GOD DAMNIT!”

Then an RPG rocket rose up in the air toward them.

It climbed up fast, reached them and passed them in the blink of an eye, just missing them.

Krakauer, who was at the machine gun at the moment, saw it passing through and nearer than any other.

The rocket had climbed up from the jungle as straight as a bullet and so fast that when he realized what was happening everything was already over.

“Holy shit” he screamed while instinctively springing back at the same time.

Danforth had barely heard it whistling and seen a smoke trail beneath them than it had already passed by.

Whatever... It missed them.

“Jesus Christ, let's get out of here!” said Krakauer, while starting shooting again even if with less conviction than before.

The white trail of smoke left by the RPG was still there and so close that had he stretched one hand out, he could have touched it.

“We haven't located the target yet” Danforth shouted.

“The Vietcong battalion is somewhere down there. I know it's there”

“Let's get out of here”

“THE MISSION ISN'T OVER YET!”

A bullet pierced the metal floor plate beneath Coletta's feet, passing right between him and Krakauer.

“Shit” said the selected marksman, looking down between his legs.

“Jesus!” said Messner, trying to hide behind a passenger cabin's corner.

The bullet made a hole in the cockpit's windshield, right beside Danforth's head.

“Holy shit”

At this point, a whole burst beat down on the helicopter's side and this time a bullet entered near Danforth's shoulder.

“AAARGH!” he screamed.

Danforth put his hand over his wound and blood immediately started squirting through his fingers.

An electronic alarm started sounding; it was fast and shrill – PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU...

Some essential system for flying had been hit. The helicopter couldn't fly any longer and that was its way of screaming it to the whole world, and that sound was so sharp and shrill that it could panic you on its own and that, together with the overall situation, increased the overall chaos even more. .

-PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU-

“We've been hit!” screamed the pilot to the ones in the passenger cockpit.

He then talked into the microphone, raising his voice loud to make his voice clear over that hellish electronic alarm sound.

-PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU...

“Zulu-Twelve to base three. We are hit and preparing for re-entry”

-PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU...

“Copy that, Zulu-Twelve – replied the base - Preparing runway for emergency landing. Can you fly?”

But the pilot did not know, so he ignored that question.

“Zulu-twelve requests F4 Phantom support. Prepare to receive coordinates”

PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU...

“Copy that Zulu-Twelve. Go on”

While the pilot was passing the coordinates, Danforth shouted.

“We are not sure about the enemy battalion's whereabouts”

PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU...

“We have to save our people” Messner shouted.

“I can do it – said the pilot -. The controls are now responding again We can stay” he said, then raised one hand, pushed a button on the cockpit's ceiling and that hellish alarm finally fell silent.. Messner then shouted:

“Eagle! We have to abort the mission and try to save our people! We can still save them!”

It was the truth and Danforth knew it, but the mission... The mission was going to fail and he couldn't afford such an outcome.

So he turned to the pilot.

“Let's go on. Let's accomplish the mission. It's a fucking order, soldier”

“Fuck!” cursed Krakauer.

“EAGLE! - shouted Messner – ENOUGH, EAGLE! ENOUGH! We have lost a chopper and four of our men already! We just can't lose two choppers and a whole SOG team just to locate a fucking VC battalion!”

“The mission...”

“We have a fucking helicopter down on the ground and a damaged one! You are wounded too! The losses are overcoming the mission's value, don't you get that? Enough! Let those frigging Vietcong go and just think about saving our men! And let's do it now, or we are at the risk of losing them forever! I have seen this kind of shit happening already and I don't want to see it again. I don't want to lose them, do you understand me, Eagle?”

This brought Joseph suddenly back to reality.

He looked at his shoulder.

The blood squirting between his fingers was really too much.

His arm was completely soaked with blood and the hand with which he was pressing the wound was sticking to his uniform.

He then removed his hand just a little, just to examine the bullet wound.

The uniform was singed like a firecracker had exploded deep into his biceps.

The hole was more or less eight millimetres wide, and inside it Danforth saw red and dark blood squirting in a tangle of muscles and nerves.

Danforth swallowed something very bitter.

It was then that he suddenly understood that he wasn't lucid, and that he was wrong. He was making a mistake.

Messner was right: no one had told him to accomplish the mission at any cost, no matter what.

Four men may be lost already and he, persisting in trying to locate the enemy's battalion, was putting a second helicopter at risk too.

Trautman was at risk of losing a whole Baker team on its first mission...

Was it possible for real? Was it really happening?

Of course it was

All things considered, Trautman had repeated it to them countless times during the last two years.

*Sometimes, being the best is simply useless.*

*You will always come cross enemies on the battleground outnumbering you, or better armed, even just luckier than you. Always. Because it is not a fucking sport where people face each other on a fair basis.*

*That's the reason being the best won't save your lives if you don't use your heads.*

"Okay, I am wounded" Joseph whispered to himself, still in shock.

Messner then talked to the pilot.

"You: continue giving the coordinates to the Phantoms. We are going to give cover to our people until we have saved them all, From now on, they are our mission"

-

The fight had been going on for quite some time by then, and Rambo now had a clear idea about his enemy's whereabouts and intentions.

Everything was clear inside his mind.

The crest on the left of the helicopter was probably too steep for the enemies to attack from that direction, so Ortega and Shorty Jim would probably manage the situation (*maybe*).

The real problem was his side, where he and Barry were.

If the Vietcong reached the edge of the vegetation, they would start shooting at the wreck across an open field and from a covered position, an extremely advantageous situation that would have left Ortega and Jim no hopes of survival.

He had to find a way to defend the helicopter.

He and Barry were a little higher than their attackers, which is always an advantage factor during a firefight, but it wouldn't be enough for the kind of attack that was bound to come.

The VCs were too many.

Soon or later they would realize it too, and they would simply attack in larger numbers and from both sides at the same time.

Rambo had to think something, and fast.

That's how he came up with an *automatic ambush* for the first time.

*Maybe* he was in time to get an automatic ambush ready before the VCs took their positions in the jungle and at the edge of the plain. *Maybe*.

Attacking a crashed helicopter was making the Vietcong audacious for sure and he could use this boldness to his advantage.

He had a couple of claymores and some C4, and had he got the VCs direction right, he could blow them away.

Of course, he was not going to waste them all just like that, but many for sure considering that he was the one carrying the explosives for the rest of the team inside his rucksack.

It could work..

Here it was their only chance of survival... Maybe.

Maybe it was a good idea.

Rambo looked at his horrible arm.

In any case, it was the only idea he had.

“Hold your position, Snake” shouted Rambo.

Then he added:

“Whatever happens, continue holding your position and support fire. I’m moving forward”

“Copy that” shouted Barry.

Rambo moved forward and deeper into the trees on his own, until he lost Barry.

-

Jorgenson was sitting down on the wreck floor with an M16 in his hands and in agony again.

His hands were shaking and he felt sick.

He looked at the jungle vegetation on the other side of the plain but saw no targets to shoot at.

Everything was blurry.

He could feel he was in shock, but not so severe as to forget that he had suffered a cranial fracture and that nausea after concussion was a sign of cerebral damage.

Even if he was alive then, he was going to die in a few minutes and he knew it.

He could feel it coming inside already.

He closed his eyes tight.

He wished to help his friends before being gone, but he really couldn't stand on his feet.

All around it was crowded with flying bullets, many bullets, too many of them.

He was going to die... And soon all of his mates too.

He sighed.

His legs were tingling and he thought that a few minutes from then he would not be able to move himself any longer.

It was then that he had some kind of vision.

He saw his daughter.

More than seeing her, he felt her presence close as if she was right in front of him in that moment and right there, inside the cradle where she was probably sleeping in the US, a million miles away from there.

Jorgenson saw her minute hands, her little, puffy crooked legs, and he thought that those were the most beautiful things he had ever encountered in the whole of his life.

*My darling* – he thought.

Then his thoughts passed to his wife, to her pale skin and her black hair.

*Mary, my love.*

Jorgenson opened his eyes once again (He hadn't even noticed he had closed them in the first place).

Then he clenched his teeth and summoned all of his remaining strength.

*Listen to me, my love.*

*Listen to this.*

He then made a cry similar to that of an animal and using as much of the little balance that he could find he rose on his feet suffering a tremendous effort and using his M16 as a crutch.

*I love you Mary.*

But by doing this, his nausea suddenly increased, hitting him like a punch on his stomach.

He then moved the M16 away from his chest – to avoid vomiting on it – and lowered his head waiting for the vomit to come.

*Forgive me my love, forgive me for I failed in getting back home.*

For a little while nothing happened – and he hoped it was gone – but then he puked on his chest.

The gushes fell on his thorax dirtying all of it and forcing him into coughing and spitting.

*Please my love, forgive me.*

Jorgenson made a little, first shy step forward, then another one.

*Forgive me.*

He came out of the wreck ready for a fight and sure that he would meet dozens of Vietcong right in front of him and even if he could barely stand on his feet he started shooting bursts in every direction. His rifle started crackling furiously in his hands.

KRACK!

*See this, my love.*

KRRRACK! KRRRACK! KRRRACK!

*Look at me.*

With inhuman effort he leant on the wreck, inserted a new magazine and started firing again while some very, very far away Vietcong finally turned in his direction.

-

At the same time Ortega, who was in front of the cockpit, was still shooting down the steep slope, but he couldn't see the VCs down there anymore.

They were probably changing route to climb up the hill and this time they were probably taking the right one to get up the hill and attack for good, *God damn it.*

Ortega turned.

Shorty was still in the pilot's seat and shooting through the windshield using an M16 now.

If the Vietcong were changing route for real, the situation was going to get even worse than that.

There was no way to get out of such a situation alive... Not at all.

This time it was the end for real.

Bullets started hitting much nearer Ortega's position.

It was like the enemy had focused his position a little better than before.

*No...*

It was still too soon for him... He was not ready to die.

And yet the Vietcong had finally reached the plain borders, right beside Rambo and Barry's position

Seeing this, Ortega felt a shiver that shook all of his body.

He was still looking at the plain when Jorgenson passed beside him.

"What the fuck are you doing, GRIZZLY!"

But Jorgenson ignored him and continued shooting in the Vietcong's direction, forcing them to vanish in the jungle.

Jorgenson then tried to say something, but he found no words – as if he was confused – and instead of talking tilted his head and puked.

Only then did Ortega realize that he was dirty with vomit already.

It probably was the second time that he had puked over himself.

*Serious concussion* - he thought.

*Probable brain damage.*

“Grizzly! Get your ass back into that fucking wreck”

“I am dying Skorpio”

“Get back inside, crazy mother fucker! THAT'S A FUCKING ORDER!”

Jorgenson lost his balance and fell on all fours.

Ortega walked around the cockpit to him and when Jorgenson tried to get on his feet to shoot again Ortega grabbed him by his collar and downed him to the ground again.

“Stay down for Christ's sake! You are seriously wounded, Grizzly!”

Jorgenson mumbled again some meaningless words. Ortega pulled him by one arm and close to him.

“We are friends Grizzly, but you have to stay down and now, or I swear to God that if you don't you are done with the SOG, and for ever”

Jorgenson opened his eyes wide at Ortega.

It was like those words rang an alarm bell inside his mind and only then did he look like he finally calmed down.

-

While Rambo was running through the jungle toward the Vietcong, bullets never stopped whistling over his head, yet the enemies were still far away at the moment, and so far away that he asked himself how they could have hit him some minutes before.

He looked at the surroundings, but the area was too wide for the plan he had in mind.

He couldn't be sure that the Vietcong would approach exactly where he thought and thus blow up on his booby traps. Two of the possible paths leading to the wreckage were doomed to stay uncovered anyway.

Unless he stayed there personally, on his own, pushing the Vietcong into taking the path he wanted them to take.

He had to face them on his own.

Rambo swallowed.

He had no other choice.

He had to stay there in order to 'direct' them toward his hidden claymores using support fire.

*When I open fire from those trees, they will take cover here.*

As a matter of fact it was a crazy plan, but he had no more time at disposal for thinking. The VCs were accelerating their advance again.

He desperately looked around, almost in a state of panic.

He had no other choice for real.

He then crouched and started placing his claymores as fast as he could.

-

Ortega moved away from Jorgenson – who had practically fainted by then – and moved along the wreck, trying to stay as low as he could.

Barry's M60 had stopped shooting and that couldn't be a good sign.

He had depleted his ammo or was dead, and together with him Rambo had probably died too.

*Johnny* – he thought.

But he couldn't let himself be distracted by those feelings.

He now had two sides without cover, and so it was just a matter of time before the Vietcong gained

even more ground.



Rambo had placed almost all of the claymores.

He had choose the hole where he was going to open fire against the VCs and was sure about what the VCs were going to do next... Or sure enough to bet his life on it.

Rambo swiftly moved to another place to set up another claymore – Bullets whistled over his head while doing so, and yet the VCs hadn't seen him yet.

He suddenly crouched again and placed another claymore, splattering it with blood.

His arm never stopped bleeding.

*The next is the last – he thought.*

*Now I only have to decide how much C4 to add to them.*

*Yes.*

Rambo changed position one last time, and this time he put the wires inside some C4 instead of a claymore.

*Three blocks.*

*Three fucking powerful blocks.*

*And yet it might not be enough – he thought.*

*Three of them might not be enough.*

On the other hand, using more than three was suicide.

Rambo looked around, his chest shaken by out of breath breathing and his arm that never stopped bleeding, while connecting the electric wires to the C4.

*Use all of that damn C4 – said a voice inside his head.*

But it was too much... Too much for real.

*You must be sure to kill 'em all, John.*

Rambo then desperately raised his gaze at the sky.

*Ortega has a family waiting for him at home. All of them over there have one*

*You are the only one with no one back in the world.*

*Their lives are more valuable than yours.*

Rambo then put down the other two blocks of C4 he had, and connected them too.

Had he died that day, he would have died for a good reason.

Or at least that's what he thought that day, while placing on the ground so much C4 to blow himself away.

As if an evil God was listening to Ortega's thoughts, he saw some enemies' heads finally peeping out from the vegetation right in front of the wreckage, right where Rambo and Barry had been until a few moments before.

Something died right inside of him, right in the middle of his chest.

*So they are both dead this time, and for real* – he thought.

As a matter of fact it wasn't so important by then any more.

They were all doomed to die.

And anyway, soldier Ortega had always been fully aware – since the beginning - that he would die during that war.

And actually, it wasn't even such a tragic thing for the kind of guy he was.

And then of course, his brother and parents would suffer a lot, but Ortega had no sons to worry about nor similar things.

He didn't even have Helen any more.

Not to mention that he had so much ammo at disposal to be sure that they would never capture him alive, and that was enough for him to be okay with his end.

Rambo

A North Vietnamese regular soldier.

Two of them.

Three.

And close by now.

Very close.

Rambo squashed down as much as he could inside his depression in the ground.

*Not yet.*

*Not yet.*

They were in his sights.

He had them all within his sights.

*Now.*

Rambo rose from his hole and opened fire.

There were thirty of them, more or less.

The Vietnamese at the head of the column lost a piece of his skull and the one right behind him fell to the ground with a hole in the head.

All of the others immediately ran exactly under the little embankment Rambo had filled full of explosives.

Rambo then squeezed his M16 against his chest, threw himself face-down inside his hole, then pushed the claymore's switch three times.

While doing that, he didn't even think about dying.

He didn't think about anything at all.

He just hoped that his enemies died.

All of them.

Barry popped out so abruptly and right in front of Ortega that he and Jimmy didn't shoot him out of sheer luck.

“SHIIIIIT” screamed the black guy, then turned and started shooting at the plain with his 1911.  
“SNAKE” shouted Ortega.

Barry continued shooting like he hadn't heard a thing and looked like he was practically jumping on the spot while shooting with his handgun.

“WHERE'S RAVEN?” Ortega shouted, trying to overcome the roars of Barry's 1911.

“I DON'T KNOW... I LOST HIM – shouted Barry -... I DIDN'T -”

The noise that interrupted Barry's words was so loud and devastating that Ortega almost lost his balance.

There were two fighter jets low and in fighting formation. They passed over as fast as thunderbolts and so low over their heads that the noise took the breath away from Ortega's chest.

*Two F4 Phantoms* – Thought Ortega while breathing again.

They were shiny and huge while flying so low, and in many ways gorgeous even during such terrible moments.

But they were the wrong air-crafts.

The F4s were jets made to fly at high speed and Ortega and the others were too close to the enemy for that kind of aircraft.

*They should have sent some Skyriders* - he thought while turning his head to follow them with his gaze..

Ortega saw a bomb dropped toward the base of the cliff but was surprised by a deafening blast before they even touched the ground, when they were still in the air.

*Too close, My God.*

*Too...*

A blow overwhelmed him and almost pushed him to the ground.

While he closed his ears and crouched to the ground, he asked himself if he had had a hallucination.

He turned then toward Rambo's last position, but he had no time to see what happened, because the F4 bomb explosions behind his back were an entirely different matter.

The hillside below him trembled like it was turning upside down.

Ortega crouched under his cover again, trying to hold his cheek and eyelids as he had been taught to do in case of nearby explosion (to avoid his eyelids and cheeks being torn away by the blast).

A first shock wave – coming from the plain – hit him as he put his head near a jet turbine.

*Too close.*

But the real explosion would hit him soon too, the one caused by the F4s behind him.

Ortega then looked downhill.

He saw tree trunks uprooting up on their own, as the wave of an invisible tsunami was climbing up the hill sweeping away everything in its path.

*Here it comes* - he thought while assuming the safety position again.

*Now I die.*

This second explosion was so powerful and devastating that Ortega felt his lungs emptying, taking his breath away and almost tearing his face off his head.

Ortega was slammed against the helicopter and hit his head against it. He lost his balance and tried to protect himself in vain while being overwhelmed by that invisible ocean wave of air.

A while later, he was on the ground with his ears whistling and painfully trying to breathe again.

His eyes were hurting and he could barely see anything.

He struggled to his feet and looked downhill again.

A huge mountain of white smoke dominated the valley under his hill.

Sparks were still slowly falling to the ground and so slowly that they looked like they were in slow motion. They were leaving white trails behind them and were so many that overall it looked like a mountain-sized weeping willow made of white smoke.

*God almighty .*

A few seconds later some clods – as big as little apples – lazily started falling everywhere, and over his head too.

After that little rain of detritus, Ortega finally took his hands away from his face.

Then a long while of silence followed. It felt like time had just stopped, while the hill was surrounded by silence.

Ortega was alive.

Jorgenson was on the ground at his side, but he looked like he had no new wounds.

But he couldn't see Barry.

Ortega searched for him with his gaze and found him immediately and right there, in the grass in front of the wreckage.

*Barry...- he thought.*

-

Barry painfully turned on one side.

The enemies were gone.

Those downhill had been disintegrated by the Phantoms, those in front wiped out from the first explosions and those on the flank looked like they had left the scene.

Those two explosions had just silenced the whole battleground.

The lighter detritus was still in the air – like leaves and dust – and was now slowly falling back to the ground.

He couldn't even remember the moment when he had fallen to the ground.

His eyes were hurting because the air wave of the first explosion had squeezed his eyeballs.

The Phantom's bomb explosions, on the other hand, had struck him with a lesser violence because he – contrary to Ortega – had been sheltered by the helicopter wreck.

The first explosion had been the most dangerous to him.

Barry touched his face with his finger tips and it looked like everything was all right.

He then started touching his chest, and it looked like everything was all right there too.

Only then did he notice his shoulder.

There was flesh and blood there, between his shoulder and chest.

Inside the wound there was something shiny: a steel ball was stuck deep inside his wound. It was red-shining and covered with blood.

That was a claymore's steel ball, and probably belonging to Rambo.

How the hell had it reached him?

It probably got there by bouncing against something or by parable, because a direct hit would have probably got side to side through his body, thus killing him.

He had been lucky.

He looked at his bloody fingertips, then lowered his head.

*Fuck – he said.*

*You let yourself get hit, black man..*

*You let yourself get taken down.*

He turned on one side and stayed right there.

All around him everything was still, nor did he hear any sound (his ears were still whistling), but he felt a presence anyway.

Barry then went for his 1911 with his right hand, took it back from the grass and started dragging himself toward the wreck..

-

Ortega put one hand over his eyes to protect them from the sunlight, then heard a single M16 shot coming from the zone where Rambo had disappeared.

Then he heard another one.

Someone was very calmly shooting with an M16, and he was no Vietcong for sure.

No...

That was John finishing the wounded enemies off one by one.

A while later, even if far away and amongst the trees, Ortega could even see him.

It was Johnny for real.

That day in Quang Tri, the Baker team fought like no one else had seen before.  
And it ended well.

It was a terrible thing to say given the fact that Jorgenson was not going to survive the night, but it was the truth.

Thinking about the mess they had found themselves in, a single loss could be considered some kind of miracle and years had passed since Ortega believed in miracles.

Most of the merit belonged to Rambo, who succeeded in saving all of them from the frontal attack. Ortega had no words to describe what Rambo had succeeded in doing.  
God only knew what kind of medal he was going to receive for such an action.

Jorgenson was destined to a painful and slow death – he was leaving a wife and a daughter behind - -, and the happier Ortega was to be alive that day, the more painful was the grieving for Jorgenson's loss, until it became unbearable.

At this point happiness and pain exploded together inside his chest, and his legs failed him.  
He fell on his knees, exhausted.

His vision was blurry and his eyes burning.

He was crying and laughing at the same time, and he couldn't breathe. He was suffocating.

He had never felt anything like that before.

*It's just a shell-shock.*

*Ortega tried to breathe in vain.*

*It's going to pass soon – he thought.*

*Now it will pass.*

Then some liberating sobs finally started shaking his stomach and he started breathing again.

Ortega hoped one day to see Helen and his family again, because his friend Jorgenson, on the contrary, would never see his anymore.

*Please God...*

*Please – he thought.*

He then heard the unmistakeable noise of a Huey helicopter over his head.

He then looked up, at the sky and the sun.

It was the other half of the Baker team.

They were back, at least.

It was over for real.



*Bronze Star  
(with 'V' for distinguished valour)*

*During a helicopter-transported seek and destroy, Private John Rambo and half of his team were downed by enemy fire and crashed to the ground.*

*During the following desperate firefight to defend both the wreck and the wounded, Private John Rambo – who was wounded already by small arms fire - left his comrades behind to set out – at first with a companion and then on his own – an advanced defence against heavily-armed outnumbering enemies.*

*For having set up such a desperate, very dangerous and absolutely out of the ordinary action and on his own,*

*While he was on his own, under enemy fire and seriously wounded already,*

*For having fought with bravery and a spirit of sacrifice so high to be a reason for pride for his unit and an example for other units too,*

*Private John Rambo is awarded with the bronze star for valour because of his actions during the mission 'Black spot'.*

*For the same reasons, we recommend Private John Rambo's actions be considered for the congressional medal of honour.*

John Rambo (W.I.A.)  
Bronze Star  
Purple Heart

Joseph Danforth (W.I.A.)  
Purple Heart

Carl Jorgenson (W.I.A.)  
Purple Heart

Delmore Barry (W.I.A.)  
Purple Heart

BAKER TEAM B

TEAM STATUS AT CURRENT DATE - 1/02/1969

ON ACTIVE DUTY:

Manuel "Skorpio" Ortega

Ricardo "Sniper" Coletta

Daniel "Doc" Messner

Lawrence "Tiger" Krakauer

INJURED PERSONNEL/LOSSES:

Carl "Grizzly" Jorgenson W.I.A.

John "Raven" Rambo W.I.A.

Joseph "Eagle" Danforth W.I.A.

Delmore "Snake" Barry W.I.A.

NOTES:

Private Carl Jorgenson's wounds are beyond any hope of survival

W.I.A. Wounded In Action  
M.I.A. Missing In Action  
P.O.W. Prisoner Of War  
L.K.A. Last Known Alive  
K.I.A. Killed In Action  
B.N.R. Body Not Recovered  
P.F.O.D. Presumptive Finding Of Death

RAMBO YEAR ONE

# BAKER TEAM

THE END

Dear readers,

It has been four long years of working for free, but they were worth it.  
I thank you all for having read *Baker Team*. If you liked it, please share this work on your facebook page, if you don't mind. It means a lot to me.  
Thanks again.

a ghost writer

# DOCUMENTS

### *The Baker team's specializations*

*The Assaulters* (Danforth, Jorgenson, Krakauer, Ortega).

The assaulter's purpose was to face the enemy directly, using the maximum fire power at disposal. A rifleman, machine-gunner, heavy weapons specialist... The Baker team's assaulter could use any kind of light or heavy weapon and foreign made too, given the fact that those men could be sent into '*over the fence*' (clandestine) missions too.

Some of them like Danforth and Jorgenson were specialized in demolition devices.

With regard to the fighting formation, assaulters usually stayed in the middle of the column and had the duty of taking over the fight in case of direct, full frontal contact with the enemy.

*The Reconnaissance men, also known as 'shadow men'* (Barry, Rambo)

The main purpose of the reconnaissance men was moving without being seen.

The shadow man was an explorer, infiltrator and, sometimes, they had offensive roles too, when making a stealthy hit was of the utmost importance to accomplish the mission.

The reconnaissance man was also a hand to hand combat expert.

With regard to the movement formation, they usually moved at the head of the team, showing assaulters the way.

*The field medic* (Messner)

He was an expert in emergency medicine, stabilization of the wounded and emergency surgery.

In the Baker team, he was usually a radio-operator too.

Inside the team's formation, he would stay close and cover the team leader or the vice-team leader, who usually were too busy (planning or land-navigating the team) to be as vigilant as usually required by jungle warfare.

*The selected marksman* (Coletta)

Inside the Baker teams, the selected marksman was an expert in long range shooting, land navigation, survival and in track following or track disguising.

During his training, Coletta had to study much more theory than the other soldiers, because he had to know South East Asia's flora and fauna, its seasons and temperatures and even the local people's diets.

Trautman was a firm believer in the 'going native' theory, a theory that said that the best way to survive in any environment was to observe the way the locals lived and imitate them.

So Coletta spent his time in Fort Bragg learning the local Vietnamese ways of hunting and fishing, and he was taught them during very different courses for selected marksmen only.

This made him a little different from his team members.

Inside the team formation, he used to stay in the middle, to give indications to the scouts at the head of the formation, when the land navigation was considered difficult or dangerous.

*The Team Leader* (and the *vice team leader*)

Inside the SOG, the team leader was not chosen because of his rank or length of service.

He was the best in the most important subjects required to lead a team, which were theoretical strategy, practical planning and land navigation.

He also had to show his instructors that he had a 'total' attitude, meaning that he had to be seriously enthusiast about every single subject and possess a genuine desire to be the best in every single one



of them. Not competing to be the best in everything - because some subjects were 'less interesting' than other - would put the recruit out of the competition to become the team-leader. Ortega, Danforth, Coletta and Rambo were the best in most areas, but Coletta was too specialized a soldier, and Rambo too young. So, within Baker team B, the two real candidates were Danforth and Ortega. Inside the team's formation, the leader and vice leader used to stay some way back, to coordinate the team from behind.

## **The beginning of the conflict: The US Army**

*The US army that, in 1961, was daily drawing more and more 'military advisors' into Vietnam, was an army divided by an internal war for careers and the obsession to fight an actual war. In order to have a war to fight and a real one – they were ready to do anything and use any means. And they did. They did everything they could to have 'their' Vietnam war.*

After the victory during World War Two and the stalemate in Korea, the US military had accumulated a twenty-year-long victory-lust. Although Trautman had fought for years – to be precise from '62 to '65 – against the 'defenders' of the Vietnam war, all of his efforts had been in vain: they wanted a war, any war provided that it was *their* war, not their father's or son's: they wanted it for *themselves*, and at *any* cost.

They were a whole generation of soldiers who had grown up in the shadow of WWII, the great victory of good over evil, and they lived outside reality, like kids who had never really grown up, who wished to play at Cowboys against Indians on real battle-fields, and at the cost of actual lives. They wanted to show the combat badge off and everyone wanted to, from the privates to the generals, and at any cost. And when Kennedy asked them for a no-bullshit evaluation about the Vietnam situation, they simply lied.

To that kind of soldier, being in the army with no war to fight was like being virgins waiting for their first fuck ever... And the idea of getting old and still being virgins terrified them. They dreamt about feeling the feelings their fathers had experienced after the WWII victory. A feeling that could fill their chests, straighten their backs and wipe away any personal failure in their private lives: a failed marriage, an unemployed son, a relationship that had not worked out... A victory on the battlefield looked like could be the solution to *any* problem.

Lying about Vietnam could jeopardize the whole final outcome of the war itself, yet they did not care. Winning was a secondary problem, which they would think about, yes, but later. The priority at the time was convincing Kennedy that he couldn't just go on with the military advisors, and that the US had to send its own troops to the front line.

Trautman – on the other hand – had an entirely different opinion. Dreaming of a war to fight was one thing, but dreaming *that* war was... Sick. From his point of view, it was obvious that that war was going to be a disaster. You only had to take a look at what was happening. The South Vietnamese army was practically non-existent while guerrillas, on the other hand, sharpened by years of fighting against the French, were day by day becoming better organized, more widespread and effective. And then of course, not even Trautman thought that the US could actually lose that war, but he was fully aware that that war was going to be long, bloody and expensive far beyond the worst expectations, and he had some serious doubts that the US people would accept sacrificing such a

high number of human lives to save such a far away – and unknown - country.

As time passed by the difference between Trautman's point of view and those of the war-hawks became even worse.

The colonel started feeling like a stranger amongst his own colleagues, and he started asking himself often how there could ever be so many idiots inside an army that all things considered he admired.

The situation seemed like some kind of collective-craziness, and it was like a disease.

During the military advisor phase ('62-'65) and before the US soldiers' arrival on the battlefield, the 'disease' was widespread amongst the military personnel belonging to Trautman's generation, even those who were in Vietnam already, and so already had the situation in front of their eyes.

The truth was that the 'war-wish' was overwhelming everything including common sense.

The war hawks had no idea about what the *actual* cost of *any* war victory was, even the easier ones. On the contrary, Trautman had had his first encounter with the reality of war in Korea, and he came to the conclusion that some victories... Some victories just did not make up for the blood spilled and that the Vietnam war was doomed to give them that kind of victory in ANY case.

But the worst thing – in Trautman's opinion – was that the generals of his generation were no idiots. As a matter of fact, those generals had a very clear idea about the reality of the situation 'hidden' in Vietnam, yet they wanted to keep it hidden from their own eyes too, in order to avoid the risk of changing their minds about it.

But in Trautman's mind *'madness is the loss of contact with reality'*, and those soldiers that could *'avoid seeing what they did not want to see'*, were nothing more than mentally ill.

They were absolutely terrified of the idea of not wanting to fight the Vietnam war any more, because to many of them, the Vietnam war was the last chance in their lives to fight in any war.

So, 'the Vietnam obsession' became a genuine reason for living for many of them, like some sort of drug, whose addiction mostly hit those who had never set foot on an actual battlefield before, who had never sent their own friends to their deaths, who had never seen them shattered into pieces or smelled the corpses of their friends the day after. Those who had never gone through any of these things were an easier victim of this kind of mental-illness that was spreading amongst the army in those days.

Very smart and important people were also more or less consciously falling into this kind of trap too, like John Fitzgerald Kennedy himself.

J. F. Kennedy was far more an adult person than that bunch of idiots, but the problem was that when he needed to know about the Vietnams situation, he asked them, because that's the way the presidential staff is supposed to work.

And in the end, the continuous censorship of the real situation reports succeeded in its intended purpose: making the president lose contact with reality. And that's the final reason why, between '60 and '62, the overall expense in military help to South Vietnam bloated so much: because the best generals in the whole world (some of whom were the same who had defeated Hitler twenty years before) were still thinking that that the Vietnam war was going to be 'no serious issue,' and faced with the obvious difficulties that the guerrilla warfare was creating for the South Vietnamese army, they used to reply that *'just before victory, the battle gets harder... This is just the final rush'*

And they dared to say this kind of crap *before* the Vietnam War even got started.

On the contrary, in 1963 Trautman had already understood that the US was at risk of throwing itself blindfolded into a very difficult war, which could potentially turn out to be a disaster of biblical proportions.

But most of the soldiers had no interest in that.

Because it was up to people like Trautman to get the job done – not them – or get their fingers burnt when necessary, while trying to achieve it.  
So, the US military forces became so torn apart so fast that their feud became not so different from the one the South Vietnamese ally was in too.

The war between the rebels (or the 'pessimists') and the hawks became a real domestic battle that was fought using lies, phony accusations, deliberate transfers and reprisals against each other's careers.

And this is exactly what happened to Trautman in 1965, when he was sent back to the US because he '*was too much of a bloody nuisance*'.

Nevertheless, Kennedy was not naïve, and in the end he caught on: there was something amiss. Someone had fooled around with him, and he was ready to take a step back.

And that was when an era of suspicion was born, and the search for the traitor, and what was once nothing but differences of opinion became duels to the death, with failing careers and immediate dismissal for disciplinary reasons.

The war 'hawks' partially calmed themselves down after Kennedy's death only when Johnson finally approved the military 'escalation' in 1964, thus finally giving them the war they had lied so much for.

And then, the Vietnam War had a memorable beginning that most have forgotten nowadays, because thinking how things ended up in the end, it's too painful to remember with retrospect.

The marines landed armed to their teeth on the coast of one of the worst Vietcong territories at the time, basically a remake of 'D-Day part II', but using firepower technology that was twenty years ahead of the one used during WWII.

On those beaches, the very same forces that had defeated the French army were waiting for them, and the marines were ready to unleash a kind of firepower hell that the world had never seen before... But they did not find a single enemy on those coasts, and that day not a single bullet flew.

On the contrary, they found a parade of civilians waiting for them with necklaces made of flowers in their hands.

The Vietcong had been well aware of the marines' landing since more than one week before, and they hadn't just stayed there, waiting for them, like the Americans thought they would.

*'We are their enemies... They must fight us'* – was the Americans' thoughts, but that did not happen.

And what's worse, while the marines were landing armed to their teeth on the coasts, the Vietcong were attacking other villages using violence and terror and completely undisturbed, and precisely because they knew *exactly* where the Americans were that day.

That's how the Vietnam war began and, six years later, after fifty thousand American deaths, it would end in a very similar way.

## **The beginning of the conflict: South Vietnam**

*The US's biggest mistake, was sending their men to war saying they were defending a democracy. But the regime of South Vietnam was far from being a democracy. On the contrary, it was a corrupt, violent, bloody and very authoritarian dictatorship.*

*And as the people of US discovered from their newspapers the horror that they were defending with their own lives and deaths, they felt a deep sense of betrayal. As a matter of fact, even before putting their feet on the ground, they were divided and demoralized already.*

*Forty years after the Vietnam War, that betrayal is still an open wound and such a taboo that books and movies, even nowadays, barely dare to speak about.*

Between '62 and '63 (before entering 'the war') the bloody premier Ngo Diem- the Americans' catholic ally - ended up in history books because of the violence he committed against the ethnic or religious minorities, and because of the ease with which he ordered his military aviation to raze to the ground whole villages full civilians (and using air planes made, furnished and sometimes even piloted by the U.S., by the way).

And what's worse is that inside those villages, many times, there were no Vietcong at all.

Some of these villages just belonged to ethnic rivals who were in no way guilty at all, and who were destroyed just to demoralize the political opposition or raise the fake Vietcong 'body count'.

Diem, just like many other Vietnamese, used to live for appearances, not the truth.

This is what historians call a 'terror regime' and, throughout history, it was used by many dictators such as Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot as a means to keep their power.

Anyway, in the U.S., before the sending of the first foot soldiers to the field, most of the Americans knew nothing about this situation. Most of them did not even know where Vietnam was on the world map and yet, the US government was already spending millions of dollars on sending the South Vietnamese dictatorship military air planes, helicopters, fuel and weapons, and just to defend this dictatorship from the communist menace.

So, in a few years, the South Vietnamese army became one of most powerful and technologically advanced armies in the whole world.

In the meantime Diem continued pursuing his massacres, mostly to get his political enemies under control – by means of terror – and ignoring the fact that most of the survivors of those massacres joined the Vietcong ranks hoping to get their vengeance, one day, against Diem's regime.

What really mattered to Diem during this phase was nothing but staying in charge and keeping his power, not the Vietcong.

But there were also entirely useless cruelties, like those committed because of religious reasons.

Diem was a catholic and despite the fact that the Buddhist monks had every reason in the world to hate and fear the communists Diem, instead of keeping them close as the precious allies they could have been, he persecuted them and abused them in every possible way and just because they weren't Catholics: he killed the Buddhists, incarcerated them and deported them for no reason at all

Diem's power was continuously at stake and, just like many other dictators before him, he chose to use terror against anyone he saw as 'different'.

In 1963 the U.S. were not at war in Vietnam and yet they had 16.000 'military advisors' on the ground already, and the famous photos of the Buddhist monks setting fire to themselves were going around the world to the great shock of the US people, because these demonstrative suicides were against the US policies as well as Diem's regime, since the US was backing and funding Diem. In front of a large crowd of journalists, one day 'Madame Nhu' (Diem's wife) once said about those suicides:

*"If they ever do another grill again, I will give them the lighter and gasoline myself"*

For three years the Vietcong continued to enlarge their ranks because even a bloody communist dictatorship looked better than Diem's catholic dictatorship at the time.

But despite all of this, the US brass heads couldn't stand the idea of South Vietnam ending up as part of the Eastern bloc.

Anyway, the long-time friendship between Diem and the Americans finally ended in 1963, when they finally got fed up with such a violent regime and withdrew their sponsorship.

Having lost the US support (because they could no longer cover up the Diem family's madness), Diem's fall became just a matter of time and, as a matter of fact, as the US ambassador declared the new US position toward Diem's regime, riots started immediately in the largest South Vietnamese cities.

During a night of madness, blows and shoot-outs, Diem's followers ran away from him and a military coup d'etat started.

Diem was inside a police armoured vehicle and was barking his usual orders against the Buddhist monks (blaming them for the coup) when a bullet smashed his skull point blank.

As usually happened in Vietnam, Diem was killed by one of those people that had just sworn loyalty-to-the-death to him.

Then the South Vietnamese army created a new, shaky government, and it was that new government that would face the war against the communists during what was going to become the 'US Vietnam war'.

In 1963 Kennedy was killed too and, despite such a terrible situation, Lyndon Johnson decided to give it a try anyway, ending once and for all the 'advisors' phase and starting to send the US troops to fight in Vietnam,

Diem had finally been removed from the scene for good, but when the US finally asked its people to go to the battlefield, they were not aware of what had just happened a few months ago.

And there was also another problem.

There were several new problems by then.

The country that the US had just decided to defend at the cost of the lives of its soldiers - South Vietnam - had no intention at all of fighting against the communists, and when the US set foot on the ground, the South Vietnam troops finally put their weapons to rest for good.

Because in 1964 it looked completely impossible that some criminals – little more than farmers with weapons – could survive the US power and this, together with the mess the South Vietnamese army was in, created a paradox situation. The US went abroad to defend a country that had both inner enemies (the Vietcong) and foreign enemies (the North Vietnamese army) and yet, the armed forces of this country had no intention at all of joining the fight, but preferred to leave ALL of the fighting to the US troops.

And that's exactly what happened during the first half of the conflict, when the South Vietnamese army refused to fight against the communists.

In the beginning, the ARVN could barely call itself an army.

Corruption was rampant, incompetence widespread, unreliability everywhere and its ranks were filled with soldiers not willing to join the fight or worse, like moles.

The new regime, and so its army, were torn apart by bribery, by continuous inner struggles for power and the daily risk of a new coup.

So, all things considered, the US sent its soldiers to fight for a country in which the Vietcong was just one of many and even worse problems.

So the US soldiers, thanks to a long list of well-thought-out-lies, entered the field against about one million Vietcong having no idea what to do, or the real situation.

The civilians also hated the US soldiers and VERY much, because of what Diem (and thus the US) had done one year before.

So, all things considered, that was the mood the Vietnam War started in.

Then there were the tactical problems.

This was an entirely new kind of war the US forces had yet to discover because, after ten years of practice spent fighting against the French, the Vietcong guerrilla's warfare strategies were so formidable that they could make any US WWII or Korea war strategy... useless.

So, if the US wanted to win that war for real, they would have to do it on their own (with no help from the ARVN) and using a whole bunch of new tactics that they had yet to invent.

And that meant using thousands of men for years and with considerable losses, just to get an idea of how to win that conflict.

So, of course, after the first few months of the 'American war', the scene immediately unveiled itself as a terrible one.

During the first real full-frontal battle between the US and the communists (The Ia Drang battle) the US lost about *two hundred marines in four days*.

The US troops took comfort from thinking that they had caused the enemy much heavier losses, and in the end both the US and the communists declared victory.

Those kind of battles were doomed to be many more, and for many years.

But to tell the truth, those kind of losses were a kind of sacrifice no US administration could afford for real and, as a matter of fact, the Vietnam war cost Johnson his re-election.

However, the war had now started, and there was no turning back.

And when Trautman, in 1969, was sent back to Vietnam for the second time, he knew exactly what was waiting for him.

And he was ready.

**NEXT**



RAMBO YEAR ONE  
**POINT OF NO RETURN**

COMING SOON