

RAMBO YEAR ONE

BY WALLACE LEE



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

Wallace Lee's
RAMBO YEAR ONE

Based on characters created by:
David Morrell

English Translation:
Wallace Lee
Mary Bottazzi
Wall Street English, Vicenza

Test reading:
Mat Thomas Marchand
Piero Costanzi
Orazio Fusco
Arianna De Angelis

Website design by:
Marco Faccio

Cover art:
Subject by Wallace Lee
Photo by Marco Bizzotto
Knife design by Jimmy Lile

A Special Thank:
To all of the veterans that contributed to this book;
words aren't enough, guys. Thank you from the heart.

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ramboyearone@gmail.com

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HOW TO READ

Sometimes this book uses a special way of reading that simulates the titles of the big screen, but this is meant to work **only if** you are reading (and so viewing) one page at a time.

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Double Edged Ghost Writings

The characters in this novel are fictional, but the events described actually occurred. The fictional content and references to true historical facts are distinguished in the notes at the end of this book.

- a ghost writer -

Year One

1966

The camp was one of the remotest camps in Vietnam, close to the Cambodian border. It was one of the very first nights in the jungle for Berry Delmore, who had celebrated his twenty-third birthday just a few days earlier. The camp was a rough-and-ready agglomeration of tents, trenches, sandbags and barbed wire. It was there that Delmore met some S.O.G. soldiers for the first time. Delmore was a black conscript and back in those days the idea of entering the special forces was simply ridiculous, but what happened that night would change his life forever. On July 16, 1966, Berry was about to embark on a journey from which he would never return. From that time onward, he divided his life into two periods: 'before' and 'after' that night.

The screams beyond the perimeter of the camp had been going on for hours. The men kept perfectly still in the darkness, lying behind sandbags or sitting in the trenches; they made no movements at all and just stayed there, waiting for the next scream.

“Make it stop!” Laurence cried out for the umpteenth time.
Laurence was a black kid, barely nineteen years old.
“I just can’t take any more of this crap. I don’t want to hear it anymore!”

Everyone heard Laurence’s appeal but out of the darkness came no reply.
Nobody could do anything.

Delmore managed to squeeze down a bit lower in his hole so he could light up a cigarette without being seen by the enemy. Although Berry was fairly heavily-built and probably the tallest man in the entire squad, on that particular night, after hearing all the screaming for hours on end, he didn’t feel so tall. Quite the opposite. He just felt so small, crouching in that dugout. Another cry was heard in the distance but this time it was shrill, almost a howl, the kind of scream that conveys a sense of real physical torture and incredible pain. Delmore shook his head in the darkness, in a futile attempt to get rid of the horrible images going through his mind at that moment. He just continued to smoke. A lifetime ago - when he was still at school - he happened to read something about life in the trenches during the First World War in Europe. The situation he was in right now reminded him of those stories.

He remembered reading about soldiers from the two different sides that had even spoken to each other from behind the trenches or they would communicate somehow between one dugout and another across no-man’s land, only to kill each other the next day or a few hours later with absolutely no feelings of remorse. He had also read stories about screaming, wounded soldiers who were so close and yet so far from

safety, because no one had the courage to go out and drag them back to a safe place. Some sniper, hiding somewhere and waiting in the darkness, had preferred to inflict non-lethal wounds on his victims, leaving them there crying out for help so that he could then kill anyone attempting to go out and help them.

Berry was in a situation just like those that had occurred half a century before, but the Second World War and the conflict in Korea had certainly not been 'trench wars'. So if someone told him he would end up in a situation like this in Vietnam, he would never have thought it possible. But that's the way it was.

And then there was this kid.

Alex Roland Simmons was nineteen years old. The Vietcong had captured him and decided to hold him close to the camp so that the others could hear everything as they slowly tortured him.

They had tied him up in the dark just a few yards from the base so that his American friends could listen to his cries.

And we heard him for sure. Oh, God, we could hear him!

"AAAAAAAARGH!"

Laurence wrapped around his head everything he could find: a camouflage jacket, a towel, even a sweaty shirt.

Then he curled up, lying on the ground, as if he were sleeping and not on guard duty.

But Delmore didn't complain and neither did any of the others.

All of the others were drinking and smoking or staring into space as if nothing was happening.

Delmore felt that he wanted to hear everything they did to the boy; he really wanted to hear it all.

It was his way of living this moment of impotence; his duty at that moment was to obey orders, and the orders were to do nothing.

What Delmore would really have wanted to do was to save that boy, or die trying, but he couldn't.

So he didn't.

He just defended the camp.

Besides, it might really have been a trap.

Maybe the Viet Cong really wanted them to come out and Berry, who was no fool, knew that's the way it was.

He clenched his teeth as he lit another cigarette.

The packet was now nearly empty.

"AAAAaaaa"

He lowered his head between his hands.

Had he really finished his pack of cigarettes, he would have cracked for sure.

Then a woman's voice suddenly echoed in the darkness.

"YOU FUCK VIETNAM WOMAN, EH?"

Delmore got up and, walking with a stoop, went over close to the commander's tent to eavesdrop and hear what the officers were saying.

It was fairly evident they didn't know what to do.

The lieutenant was still talking with the major, and they still didn't know how to get out of the fix they were in.

They didn't want to venture out beyond the perimeter. Going out at that moment would probably cost dozens of lives. Berry also knew that would probably be the outcome. In particular, the Viet Cong also knew that might happen.

"HEY, YOU, AMERICA ... YOU KILL CHILDREN AND RAPE WOMEN!"

No, there was no way of leaving the camp without being massacred. It was a risk they didn't want to take. They just couldn't, and that was that.

"YOU RAPE WOMEN, I KNOW TRUE!"

Not even with five M-60s or all the firepower in the world would it have been possible to get out of a camp surrounded by snipers in the jungle waiting for them during the night.

At least, that's what the top brass thought.

And the fact that Berry was really in a different frame of mind didn't count. He would have preferred the platoon to suffer casualties rather than let a boy of nineteen be tortured in that way, but it didn't matter at all.

At that point in time Delmore could not have known for sure, nor did he ever get a chance to find out, but the truth was that if they had left the camp, they would not have died by the dozen ... they would have *all* died.

However, these are the 'ifs' and 'buts' of history, and Berry - just like the rest of them - could never be certain about the outcome. So the doubt remained with him forever, like a deep scar.

And this is why Delmore's fate was decided that night.

"YOU RAPE WOMEN!" The woman shouted again from somewhere in the darkness.

"YOU NO MORE RAPE WOMEN!"

"YOU NEVER RAPE WOMEN AGAIN!"

" AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH"

The whole unit realized that the 'Apache' sniper (the nickname they had given to her) was castrating the boy.

"NO, NO, NOOO!"

Everyone could hear what was happening.

"HERE YOUR COCK! HERE! RUN AND GET YOUR COCK! "

There were more shrill cries, then a low groaning and then more high-pitched, heart-rendering screams.

"YOU BLEED NOW? YOU BLEEDING LIKE A PIG! "

Then came a series of low-pitched sighs and the sound of stifled, difficult breathing.

More screams.

More screaming and a long, sighing sound.

Then some coughing and gurgling.

Then, weaker cries.

A long, drawn-out lament.

And then, prayers and pleading.

And then a longer lament, but the sounds became weaker and weaker as the hours passed by.

It was almost dawn when the long, low, drawn-out noises finally stopped completely.

The rest of his platoon had heard him all night.

They had somehow remained close to him to the very end.

Alex Roland Simmons was nineteen years old.

That morning, at daybreak, Berry Delmore decided he wanted to apply to join the Green Berets.

He wanted to be a Special Forces soldier.

He wanted to 'cross the border'.

He wanted to fight with those who were smuggled across or 'dropped' somewhere on the other side of the border, alone and with no assistance, and they weren't going into Laos and Cambodia just to fight.

No.

They went across the border to *murder the enemy*.

It was the only way to do it. The war was not going on there 'officially', and any American was automatically considered a criminal after crossing the border, even though he was only following orders.

Of course, the orders were never written and if necessary it would have been possible to state they had never been issued; these 'non-existent' orders would have meant a death sentence in any case for the soldiers involved. If not worse. They might have been left to rot forever in a prison in Laos, without being recognized as prisoners of war.

They made it legal to do *anything* they wanted.

Berry was fully aware of the fact, but he didn't give a damn.

He knew what the score was and he was willing to take the risk.

It was what he wanted to do, and he wanted to do it more than anything else.

Because as he saw it, crossing a border was simply the thing that he had not been able to do that night.

*“What doesn't kill you,
makes you stronger.*

No, not in Vietnam.
In 'Nam we got to the point where...

*what didn't kill you,
made you someone else”*

Berry Delmore, 1980

RAMBO YEAR ONE

PART I

THE SELECTION PROCESS

Fort Bragg, a year and an half later.

A couple of weeks before the Green Berets selection process began, Manuel Ortega met Berry Delmore for the first time.

Ortega was thin, with brown hair and a little shorter than Berry. He had an Hispanic surname, but his family had been living in the U.S. for generations. His face had no Hispanic features. On the contrary, he had 'northern', Caucasian features.

Berry Delmore was twenty-three years old: the same age as Ortega. He was tall, big and looked fairly mean. Most of all, Berry looked smart, really smart.

Berry had already fought for real - just as Ortega had - and in order to join the Special Forces he was prepared to do anything he had to.

Where so much dedication came from, Ortega had no idea, but he didn't care.

He too had no idea as to why he needed to join the Special Forces so badly.

The same day, Ortega also met John Rambo for the first time, and he talked with him much more than he did with Berry.

He and Rambo met just after the medical examination, at the office where the application forms had to be submitted.

After signing his papers, Ortega rather shyly invited Rambo to go and drink a beer with him. They might as well take the opportunity to relax, as they would both soon be up to their necks in trouble.

Johnny Rambo – as Ortega heard people call him - was a silent guy.

There was a thing that Ortega picked up on immediately: Johnny had already had combat experience, just like he did.

You could tell from the extreme seriousness of the guy, and his 'seriousness' appeared to be a constant trait despite the fact he was three years younger than Ortega.

As they talked, the fact that they were both veterans made them feel as if they already had something in common.

Rambo was reserved and did not say much about himself, his past or his family.

Ortega was still getting to know him, but perceiving he was so reserved, he just let it go.

The two young men only spoke about the training procedure and their fears about the selection process.

They exchanged ideas on how they should go about getting ready for the tests and did so without hesitation, knowing they were not really competing against each other; if you deserved to be chosen, you would be and that was it. So it was better to give each other a hand, just as you would on a battlefield.

At some point the talk inevitably turned to the Vietnam subject, and shortly afterwards they both fell silent for a while.

They continued drinking their beer without saying anything, until they broke the silence, asking each other about their experiences in the war.

Ortega summed up his own experience in a single sentence:

"I saw a lot of our soldiers die, a hell of a lot, and that was it. That was my war. And what was your

war like, John?”

What Ortega had dismissed in just a few phrases, for Rambo was a completely different matter. He asked Ortega if he wanted to listen to a story about some particularly hard fighting he'd taken part in.

As soon as Ortega nodded Rambo started talking.

Up to that point, Rambo had offered nothing more than monosyllabic responses or short phrases - albeit in a friendly manner - but the boy now vented his feelings in a long monologue.

His words came flowing forth, almost incessantly. It was like watching the sluice gates of a dam being opened; the words came out like a river in a flood.

As he talked, he occasionally sipped his beer, and his tone was calm, almost glacial; he had a fixed, 'distant' look.

John Rambo

“The base and headquarters were at the top of a hill. The terrain was practically bare with no vegetation on it and the area had been strongly fortified. Around the bottom of the hill there was a spread of dense jungle growth and the perimeter was checked constantly. We spent months digging to fortify that position ... months and months. The whole hillside below us was a maze of trenches, with the usual rows of sandbags, barbed wire and underground bunkers.

On that particular day the sun was shining and the radio was on. You could always hear it in the background; it was on 24 hours a day. The sun and that constant low sound of the radio almost put you to sleep. For us, it was like being at the beach. There was a really sleepy atmosphere at the base that day.

Then, suddenly we heard a lot of shouting over the radio. I was there when the call came, and I heard everything. One of our patrols out in the jungle beyond the northern perimeter had come across an enemy unit. The screams we heard over the radio were desperate. The guy out there in the jungle was panicking and shouting too close to the microphone so we couldn't make out what he was trying to say. He had a southern accent. He said that they had just come across an enemy mortar unit and the mortars had already been positioned. At that point all hell broke loose in our camp. It was like the end of the world had just started.

All of the fortifications down at the lower level of the camp were destroyed; some of them were blown to smithereens. I was up at the top, close to the command bunker, where I could see everything that was going on. There must have been more than ten enemy mortars. Within just a few seconds all of our outer trenches, bunkers and barbed wire disappeared into a cloud of dust and splinters. The entire perimeter below us was surrounded and covered by smoke and dust. In the meantime some of our M60s were already responding to the fire but they were shooting at nothing.

Our men in the trenches were no longer safe. At most it would take just two or three more attempts for the enemies to see how to adjust their trajectories and then they would be able to drop the mortar bombs into the corridors we had dug in the ground.

The commander we had at that time was called Morris, and he was the one who helped me realize what was going to happen. He turned to me and said:

“Those god damn shells are gonna fall in our trenches.”

I hardly had the courage to look up over the sandbags but, as cool as a cucumber, Morris was just standing there, looking down at what was going on. He said that all of the first salvo of mortar shells had targeted the outer defense line, so I could get up and watch. There was still no risk for us.

"Judging from what they're aiming at", Morris said, "they want to weaken our external-perimeter defenses and then they'll attack us. Otherwise they would have targeted the command bunker right from the start."

When he finished the sentence, I began to feel my hair rising out of fear. I felt tense, very tense, because the idea that they were about to arrive was a shock. I was young then ..."

Ortega stopped to think.

That boy - who had just turned twenty - felt that he was still very young until a year ago... And that everything had changed now.

"I was afraid, but he was really cool so I got up and looked over the ramparts too.

He was right. The shells had fallen by the bunkers, the machine-gun nests, and the two armored cars assigned to our company. In other words, the shells had all fallen on our front defense lines.

The armored cars were already moving. Their drivers shouldn't give these North Vietnamese enough time to adjust their trajectories.

They had just a few seconds to maneuver away if they didn't want to be hit and end up dead.

It must have been scary having to do what they were doing.

In the meantime, Ford and Martinez, the two guys that were with me, had returned from our bunkers with the M16s and helmets. They brought a rifle and helmet for me too.

Morris went on explaining what was happening.

"Look down there, Johnny," he said, "and look carefully. They're going to destroy our machine guns with the mortar shells or in any case they'll force us to move them.

Then they'll come up the hill.

It would have been enough to engage the mortar unit out there to prevent all of this happening but when our reconnaissance patrol identified them, it was too late.

They goofed up.

Now our only hope is to repel their attack if we can, while the other patrols out in the jungle move back from their sectors and converge on the enemy unit."

But this wasn't the worst possible scenario.

Morris added:

"... unless this first attack is just to put us off our guard and concentrate our attention on what's going on here. This may be just a ploy and if there are enough North Vietnamese out there to attack from two sides ... we are finished."

Ortega now interrupted Rambo, who was talking a lot and very quickly.

He asked him whether the North Vietnamese did attack in the end.

Ortega had a great desire to know how the story ended, but Rambo simply told him that they did eventually attack.

The guy suddenly dried up and didn't say anything else, as if he had already spoken too much.

Then he said:

"You see, in cases like that there are only two kinds of people: *those who know what the 'moves' are and those that don't*. People like Morris knew what the moves had to be. Others, even above

him, didn't."

Rambo took a sip of his beer, and went on talking:

"Trautman definitely knows what he's doing. When they got him to create this unit, he inspected the companies and told us we could take part in the selection process. Some of the guys didn't even listen to what he was saying but I was interested in the selection and I managed to suss this guy out a bit and I got to understand how he thinks about various things. Believe me, he knows what he's talking about. We are lucky to be with this guy. He was the one who taught me about the 'moves'. The motto of the unit he's putting together is '*We study the next move, Sir!*'

You'll see how many times they get us to repeat it.

You'll see ...

A lot of other people think that what Trautman says is a load of crap.

For many people, the colonel just goes overboard with his calculations and thinks too much.

For me, it's not like that.

Because I know ... I've seen it happen and I know it's true.

I know he's right."

Rambo drank some more beer and gazing into mid-air.

Then he continued:

"I'm not going to be one of those recruits that just try to survive the selection.

I want to be the way he wants me to be 'cause I know he's right.

And then, fine, so you can be the meanest motherfucker in the valley of death, but unless you know the moves, man, you're dead even before you enter a combat zone and without even havin' a friggin' inkling why it should be that way.

That day, on that hill, I had no idea what I was doing.

But Morris had a clear picture of everything."

Rambo was looking into the distance again.

He drank some more beer and then, without Ortega asking him, he went on with his story.

"That day some people knew what moves to make, and others didn't.

There were some of them who didn't even know what was happening in their area and they were moving around aimlessly; they didn't have a clue why they were doing it and they just went where they thought help was needed ... but by doing that, they were abandoning their side of the hill, not realizing that if their unprotected flank fell, the North Vietnamese would have broken through and entered our camp.

In short, they were trying to help out but at the same time they were putting our lives at risk."

"How did the battle go, John? Did they arrive? Did they attack in the end?"

Rambo nodded.

"And you ...?" asked Ortega.

Rambo continued drinking his beer.

"Did you kill any of them?"

Rambo nodded again.

"Well, it was like target practice, using the 'pig' (*the M60*); that's all it was. The way they were coming up at us it was like something out of World War I.

They tried to conceal their presence with smoke screens, but it didn't do them any good because I

knew where to shoot; I just kept pressing the trigger and that was it.

Then, as soon as they began to approach, a couple of Cobras took off from the top of the hill.

As they were lifting off, those friggin' choppers raised so much shit and dust from the ground ... I couldn't see a thing and the noise was deafening. I couldn't even talk to Ford.

As soon as they were up, they soon started firing and covered us, and they were just over our heads. They were firing their rockets and using cannons. They hit back with everything they had, all at once.

I could see the drifting trails of smoke left by the rockets coming down to the base of the hill.

All hell was let loose over our heads: with the chopper blades, the rockets and machine guns, it was like sitting in a jet turbine.

As soon as the North Vietnamese managed to dodge the helicopter fire, they started to loom up in my machine-gun sights.

Using an M60 and an M16, Ford and I took out at least twenty of them and those we didn't kill had to stay crouching in their holes.

At that point, some of the enemy tried to head toward the barbed wire to escape.

We fired and reloaded and kept on shooting without ever stopping for five hours, and we were constantly targeted by those frigging mortars.

They didn't stop using the mortar shells even when their own troops were coming at us. They were practically shelling their own assault troops with a sort of 'intentional' friendly fire.

Seriously.

They came on toward us without stopping even under their own artillery fire.

The North Vietnamese didn't give a shit about killing each other and if you've never seen it, you have no idea what they're capable of doing.

It was the sickest show I'd ever seen. It was beyond any military logic and yet, it seemed to work.

Almost none of them died from friendly fire.

Boy, was that scary stuff.

So our human target practice went on for something like five hours, while on the other side of the hill, we were doing a lot worse.

But the others held out.

At the end of that goddamned attack, the ringing in my ears wouldn't stop, my hands were covered in burns and I couldn't see out of one eye because of all the dirt that had been thrown up by the explosions and the Cobras hovering above our heads.

Anyway, we did it.

And that's how it went in Siu Fei that day.

I guess I was lucky."

The young veteran took another long swig of his beer.

He tended to drink slowly, but when he did, he consumed a hell of a lot all in one go.

"Martinez was dead, but we didn't know till the next day."

Ortega shivered, but Rambo didn't catch on that his story had affected him somehow.

"We went to sleep that night but we just didn't know where Martinez was, and we didn't care very much either. A lot of us had finished our night-shift guard duty shortly before the attack began so we hadn't slept for twenty-four hours ... and that included me.

At some point during the combat Martinez just disappeared and it pissed us off more than ever.

But then we were close to snapping under the pressure and so we couldn't give a damn. Some of the others even passed out from sheer fatigue.

Do you get what I'm saying?

Some thought he might have been hiding somewhere, or maybe he'd just flipped.

That can happen.

And it happens more often than people think ... they get lost, so they hide out somewhere, they just get as far away as they can from the fighting, they freak out and stay put somewhere for hours on end, sobbing and weeping their hearts out, even after the battle is over.

The next day someone found his tags in the middle ...

In the middle of ...

Yeah, fuck, we found his dog tags and we figured what had happened: a mortar shell had fallen into a foxhole just when he was moving through it.

So there was nothing left of Martinez.

That same day, Morris the officer who knew all the 'moves' lost a hand, so he was sent back to the world.

They told me he was injured by something that fell out of one of our choppers; I wasn't there when it happened.

They told me he's still on active duty, but working as an instructor.

Anyway, he was brilliant.

And Ford, the guy that covered me ... he's still there ... maybe in Saigon.

He's been there for three years now. He always extended his enlistment.

He killed one of them with a bayonet that day.

Yeah, he did 'n all.

He went to fill up with ammunition ... and he almost didn't make it back.

He was running, and he was practically unarmed at that moment; that was when he came face to face with one of them ... one of the few North Vietnamese that managed to get through our cross fire: the cross fire I was also providing.

He survived just because he was faster than the enemy ... and if he had died, it would have been all my fault and mine alone."

"Holy shit!"

"Yeah."

"That was really a hell of a battle."

"Right."

Rambo paused.

Then said:

"It dawned on me that if you are not a member of the Special Forces, you're just a number ... cannon fodder.

You're expendable.

They'll use you like a pawn, whenever necessary.

But the Green Berets are a different thing, and are worth a lot. I mean they're very expensive to train: it takes time and money to prepare them. So the guys in charge want them to stay alive ... because they're precious, ok?

And that's what I hope to become: precious, because that way I might survive another 'tour'. So this is why I decided to try to enter the 5th Special Forces group."

*“ In war there are only two types of people:
those who know what the moves are and those who don't ”*

John Rambo, 1967

Fort Bragg

Ortega was stretched out on his bed in the middle of a dark room full of sleeping recruits. He couldn't sleep. His thoughts drifted back to his first meeting with John Rambo, a couple of days before.

Rambo appeared to be a rather shy guy at first, but he occasionally smiled. He would tend to loosen up and share things with people he felt he had something in common with, and that meant people who had already fought in Vietnam. Once the ice was broken, Rambo was a good talker, and talking with him had been a pleasure for Ortega.

His eyes had a strange look for someone so young.

Rambo was barely twenty - so three years younger than Ortega - and yet he had already fought in worse circumstances than he had.

This made him different from the other guys of his age, and in some of the things Rambo had said that day that difference became more obvious.

Ortega liked him immediately and that night he hoped they would both pass the selection program and be assigned to the very same team.

Ortega was so proud to be there, with such worthy guys.

And besides, he was not scared by the competition. He was sure to pass.

In his opinion, they weren't even adversaries.

He didn't see it like that.

If he was one of the best, he would join the special forces. Otherwise, someone else would deserve it more than him.

Failure didn't scare him.

He definitely wouldn't like it, but he wasn't scared.

From their breathing, it sounded like most of the other guys were already sleeping, but he couldn't.

He was too excited.

He knew what was going to happen and he couldn't wait to start.

He was ready.

He had heard a lot of stories about the selection program, and those who had spoken to him about it referred to the colonel as '*the-beast*'.

That stories said that four out of five soldiers would usually fail the selection program, meaning that they usually ended up injured or - in the worst cases - hospitalized.

Despite all of the stories he'd heard, Ortega was not scared, because after his first tour of duty in Vietnam he wasn't easily put off or frightened by anything.

So that night, in his camp bed, Manuel Ortega felt concentrated and full of energy.

He wanted to make it.

He wanted to be chosen so much that he had also paid a very high price to pursue his goals. His ambitions caused the end of his relationship with Helen, his girlfriend.

After finding out that he had decided to become a professional soldier, she left him.

During his first tour of duty, they didn't see each other for almost a year, with the exception of a couple of periods of leave, and she knew that Ortega had seriously risked his life at least twice.

It was obvious from the beginning that she would have never ever accepted a decision like that and he had always known it, but he could do nothing about it.

For Helen, his desire to continue this kind of career was nonsense.

It also meant that he didn't love her, because that job would keep him away from her for a long time. And, most of all, she would risk losing him forever.

But none of this mattered for Ortega.

He had made his mind up, and this selection program was the first part of that decision.

He wanted to join the special forces more than anything else.

Manuel Ortega

In 1965 - a year and a half before joining the special forces selection program - Ortega went on leave during his first and only tour of duty in Vietnam.

He came home and landed at Leavenworth airport.

After six months of fighting in Vietnam he was finally back in the States, even if for just a short break.

It was then that Manuel Ortega - twenty one years old at the time - had his first sexual experience.

His girlfriend Helen decided to make love to him when she understood how many Americans Ortega had seen dying with his own eyes, right in front of him.

In less than a year spent in Vietnam, Ortega had had to take care of thirty-five American corpses.

Ten of them had slowly died in his arms, and he couldn't do anything about it.

Even if he had never been assigned to the front line, and had never seen any actual combat, he had become familiar with situations like that and watching people die.

*

Ortega had always been the first to get out of the air ambulance and the last one to get back in.

His role, working as an armed escort for medical personnel, was one of the most dangerous but despite this simple truth, that had never been enough for him, because for each and every one of the guys he saw dying, Ortega felt that he had done something wrong.

At the moment of their deaths they would let out a long sigh, and their eyes would move more slowly and finally just stare.

Then the pupils dilated and Ortega knew at that very moment that it was over for them.

On so many occasions he could do nothing more than hold the hand of a young - or not so young - man, telling him that he wouldn't feel a thing, that nothing would happen, everything would simply shut down and it would just be over.

Because at a certain point, Ortega stopped lying to those that couldn't be saved.

He changed his attitude and he always told the truth to everyone no matter what, because in his opinion sooner or later they would have realized it anyway, and he felt that those lies everybody told dying people only made everything worse than it already was.

And when it was all over, Ortega always found something that he or his team could have done better, faster, or making sure the wounded would feel less pain.

In his mind, every time somebody died they had always arrived too late, or they lacked the right equipment or they had been in the wrong place.

With the kind of attitude he had he was one of the best people in the job.

However, this also made him suffer like hell.

Ortega had never been on the front line but all the same he knew very well what war was all about.

He had seen very clearly what the consequences are. And during that period of leave in the United States, his memories were certainly not fading. On the contrary, he thought about the conflict and his experiences so much. Those memories were far from fading away. On the contrary, he had all of them really clear in his mind.

It was also a war in which people were killed where apparently there was no war going on at all. People would die even at a great distance from the front line, and that included civilians living in the cities.

Most of all, Ortega had to deal with wounds inflicted by mines or traps of various kinds and only to a lesser degree with combat-related injuries.

The Viet Cong - or 'Charlie' as they were often called - were not really into conventional warfare. They would leave land mines here and there or kill groups of Americans using snipers and then retreat as quickly as possible.

They would occasionally carry out terrorist attacks against civilians, planting bombs inside markets or bars.

When this kind of thing happened, Ortega would often assist wounded American soldiers in the midst of groups of Vietnamese men, women and children who were dying all around him ... and this was something he never really accepted.

As far as Ortega was concerned, the life of an American citizen could not be considered more important than the life of a Vietnamese citizen, but the top brass used to say that too many American deaths would bring an end to the US effort in the war, and, with the Communists left free to take over, the result would be genocide.

So Ortega did as they said.

On one occasion he assisted a small party of thirty-year-old officers who happened to be with a group of teenage prostitutes who had been ripped to pieces.

He once had to assist a few American entrepreneurs surrounded by Vietnamese kids wounded by shrapnel and bullets.

Even if Ortega's job was to help after that what had to happen had already happened, he was constantly surrounded by danger and more than once he came close to death by inadvertently walking past a few hidden land mines.

He had seen one of his colleagues blown to pieces by one of them.

Once he even responded to Viet Cong terrorist fire

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His girlfriend decided to make love when she understood that Ortega had risked dying a virgin in Vietnam, and that that period of leave might be the last time she would see him alive.

So, that afternoon, they made love for the first time.

That noon was intense; it was as if for a moment they had become one and their souls had become joined. She enjoyed it so much she cried with emotion afterwards.

So much happened that day that he felt as if he had traveled a million miles, had just made love for the very first time in his life and he was now having dinner with his family whom he hadn't seen for what felt like a lifetime ... and the sun hadn't set yet.

It had been a forty-hour day and he was suffering from jet-lag.

He was both physically and psychologically exhausted.

A terrible day, and it wasn't over yet.

After a quick shower, Ortega was now having dinner with his parents and he was acting as if nothing had ever happened between him and Helen.

This made him feel uncomfortable.

He also thought they could smell the scent of sex on himself. It was like wearing the wrong clothing, and in the wrong place. Though, obviously it would have been impossible for them to 'smell' what he'd been up to.

He had a shower, used eau de cologne and changed his clothes. However, he was still afraid his family would be able to smell what he had just done, or that they might read it in his face somehow. He felt uncomfortable and not only that.

He didn't want to eat with them.

His only desire was to remain alone with his thoughts about his 'first time' with Helen. But he had been away from home for so long, and so many things had happened in the meantime that if he didn't have dinner with his family they would never forgive him.

So the evening started and there were so many toasts, pats on the back and so on, and everything was going fine, until Ortega said:

"Hey, shit, ma ... this chicken is fuckin' awesome."

As soon as he uttered these words the whole room suddenly became silent.

Ortega immediately said that he was sorry, almost laughing. He said that having spent so much time with 'the guys in Vietnam' he had become a little rude.

"Really, I am sorry, ma."

"It doesn't matter, son. God only knows with what kind of bad people you had to deal with."

Anyway, a cold atmosphere lingered on for a while.

Ortega noticed tension in their expressions and gestures, a certain distance in his parents and relations, who might be thinking that he was no longer the boy he used to be.

However, everyone soon returned to the light-hearted banter, but during the pleasant moments with his family and the laughter, Ortega retained a sense of guilt because of what he had said and his coarse manners. It continued like this until they started asking him about the war.

It was bound to happen.

They had just hedged around the topic throughout dinner.

They really did everything they could to resist the temptation to ask him a lot of questions about his experiences, but in the end it was inevitable.

Ortega never replied for real.

He just said:

"I saw a lot of people dying, dad. There were so many of them."

And the discussion ended there.

Manuel Ortega had a stepbrother, Richard, the son from his father's first marriage, who was sitting right beside him.

His father's first wife died before Manuel was born, so Richard was his elder brother. They had the same father, but different mothers.

They were very fond of each other, but during his first leave from Vietnam it was clear that for his stepbrother Ortega had become an overbearing figure.

The combat ribbon that Manuel had earned in Vietnam was an award that his stepbrother would never be able to equal no matter how much he studied at university.

Ortega had not yet joined the special forces but his dress uniform was covered in badges, ribbons, awards and so on. All he needed now was a Purple Heart for combat wounds, and then he would really be a war hero.

His stepbrother was a medical student, and a fairly mediocre one. Would Richard ever become a physician? He might become a male nurse, but probably never a real doctor. In any case that would be better than serving in a bar or sweeping the roads but it would be nothing much compared to the

'almost-war-hero' his younger brother had already become.

There were no ill feelings between the two of them, but Richard tended to feel overwhelmed and dismayed in realizing he had been outdone by his younger stepbrother.

Later that evening, while Richard was brooding over his sense of mediocrity, Manuel found it difficult to get to sleep.

He hadn't spent a night in a real bed for about six months and he felt uncomfortable with the perfectly folded sheets and blankets.

The feel and the softness of the lightly perfumed bedding irritated him.

He was also perturbed by the silence and cleanliness of the house.

For a little less than one year he had slept in sleeping bags or on camp beds that smelled of sweat and in the midst of the never-ending activities of a military base. Even during the night, no-one could ever really relax in the outposts or camps where he had been stationed.

He was also tense on account of what had happened between him and his girlfriend.

He felt restless.

The shadows that appeared across the walls of his bedroom reminded him of the branches of trees in the jungle.

As they did, he suddenly jumped up, with his eyes wide open.

He was back in his room again, the room he had used throughout his early childhood and teenage years, but that night it wasn't as comforting as he previously remembered it.

It was cold, and everything was still.

It was dark and barely lit by the very little light that came in through the window.

It was as if he had just become a kid again, and he was afraid of the dark.

He was more scared in his own home than he might ever be in Vietnam.

He couldn't live a civilian life anymore.

It was as if he had fallen into some kind of trap and well beyond the point of no return.

He had seen so many people dying in Vietnam that a human corpse would not have much more effect on him than a crushed, dead cat lying at the roadside.

And even so, that night he was afraid of the dark.

"When your own home scares the hell out of you, it means you've gone too far." One of the guys in Bravo company had said that to him shortly before Ortega saw him die.

What was his name?

Ortega couldn't remember it, but he had to be someone with guts. He recalled that he was in his mid thirties and almost 'old' as far as Ortega was concerned. Before he died he once said that he had been in Vietnam for years, ever since the time only the French were fighting against the Communists. He had probably gone to Vietnam with the very first American military advisors.

Maybe he had even worked for the secret services.

While he was trying to remember his name, Manuel fell asleep.

That night he dreamed about Boswell, a guy who had been killed by a bomb. When they found him he was lying in his own excrement in a pool of mud with his trousers torn to pieces.

When a person dies, their muscles relax.

A lot of people think it's out of fear but it's not like that; the muscles simply become entirely relaxed when the brain stops controlling everything,

Sometimes it can happen because of fear, but the case that Ortega saw that day had nothing to do with fear.

The guy had simply died.

When they shoot someone and it's a serious wound, and you cut their pants away to assist them, you might see it happen.

That happened to Ortega.

You can tell the exact moment a guy dies in front of you when he suddenly starts shitting or pissing himself. The brain stops controlling the body and life simply slips away.

Other people present some kind of contraction, like an orgasm.

That day he'd had sex for the first time in his life, Ortega dreamed of a corpse lying on a bed that was screwing *something* above it.

The corpse was gray and naked, its mouth was open and a white tongue was hanging out of it.

Its feet were bare and contracted and its facial expression denoted something between extreme physical effort and pain, as if it were trying to bite something on top of it.

Ortega woke up again, but this time he woke up to sit on his bed, his eyes staring at the shadows, and he took a pause to reflect.

Maybe, after the end of his tour of duty, he could join the army and try the special forces selection program.

He would work with the special forces at least a couple of years and then he would continue his career in an easier role.

It could be a solution.

There was no more civilian life for someone like him.

Not anymore.

Civilian life made him think too much.

*“ When your own home scares the hell outta you,
it means that you have fallen in it too.
It means that you have just gone too far ”*

Anonymous, 1965

Fort Bragg: the first day

That day the sun was shining high over Fort Bragg, but it was going to be the last day like this for a long time.

The fifty recruits were all lined up next to each other, stomach in, chest out, in front of the American flag facing the sun.

They were all wearing the usual drab olive clothing and fatigue-uniform baseball caps.

All three of them were there. Delmore Berry, Manuel Ortega and John Rambo were together and staring at the flag just like all of the others.

The long wait was over.

They were finally going to meet the colonel they'd heard about.

Walking slowly, Trautman appeared in front of them.

He was silent and stared into the eyes of each and every one of them.

Thirty years old, of average height and with ice-blue eyes, that morning the colonel had a sullen, stern expression on his face, as if he was mulling something over in his mind, something bad.

He was wearing his dress uniform with all of the decorations he had received during his long career and his green beret with the yellow and red flash of the 5th Special Forces Group.

His hard, unfathomable expression projected a sense of strong determination, even anger and resignation.

His stare looked like if he was trying to find something hidden deep down within himself.

None of the recruits had any idea what might be going through his mind at that moment, but it was nothing good for sure.

He waited for a while, standing in front of the soldiers, then he finally found the words to say.

"If you are here, it's because you know what's going on in Vietnam. You know what you are getting into and what the risks will be. I want you to know as of now that I appreciate it."

Trautman turned and started walking.

"This is an experimental unit. We are here working in conjunction with the secret services.

Everything I say from now on is classified under military law. Whatever happens at this site must remain secret, otherwise you'll be court-martialed."

The recruits stood perfectly still.

They already knew what the situation was but every one of them was there also because of that.

The colonel's gaze started to move from one recruit to another and, one by one, he studied their appearance.

"Some of you are going to fail. In fact, most of you will be rejected. But if you listen carefully to what I say to you over the next few days, you'll have a chance to gain something from this experience no matter how it ends for you. If you hold out long enough and really put yourselves to the test, this selection process will change your lives forever. It's just like being in Vietnam: there's no going back after you've had an experience like this."

The soldiers became suspicious at this point.

They were puzzled and looked at each other, as if they were silently asking, “*what the hell is this guy talking about?*”

They found no answers in each other’s eyes and some of them began to feel a touch of anxiety as the colonel went on talking.

“What I’m going to do is create something inside of you that wasn’t there before, but there will be a price to pay. And the price is that you will change forever.”

The soldiers looked as if they were mesmerized.

“Yes, that’s it,” he said.

Then he added:

“If you want to join the S.O.G. (*Special Observation Group*) you will have to change the way you think once and for all. Because you will no longer be simple soldiers who just obey orders and do nothing more than that. You won’t be like a bunch of kids who only do what their dad tells them to. No.

Because you are going to fight behind enemy lines, and sometimes this will happen in conditions no one has ever had to cope with before.

So you won’t get a friendly pat on the shoulders or any white lies.

In SOG units there’s no place for Macho men who think they’re invincible simply because they can’t deal with fear. That’s ok for normal soldiers, but not in the special forces.

In the kind of missions you are going to be a part of, people who feel they’re invincible are the ones who die first.

There will be no bullshit here. We’ll tell you exactly the way things are. Period. And sometimes you yourselves will be telling us what your orders should be, and why.

Because this is one of the aspects of life in the special forces; it means *you have to be your own commanders.*””

Trautman paused a while to let the recruits think about what he had said.

Then he went on with his talk.

“As I said, there will be a high price to pay.

You will never be the same again.

Day after day you will lose your humanity and in the end you will lose yourselves.

You won’t be ordinary men just living their own lives.

You won’t be human beings at all.

You are going to become soldiers who command themselves and it will be like that also outside of these walls when, one day, you return to civilian life.”

The soldiers’ expressions became even more inquisitive.

“There are lots of jobs that require what we might call an absurd skill. There are car salesmen capable of selling their own mothers and lawyers who know what to do to get a pedophile out of jail. And there’s nothing strange about it; that’s the way it works. In our case, in the special forces, we look for people who are willing to die.”

He turned again and continued walking.

“That’s the way it is.”

He stopped and turned towards them again.

He put his hands behind his back and for a moment appeared to be engrossed in his thoughts.

He then added:

“On the other hand, you will be granted certain privileges other soldiers don’t have. You will be able to plan your own missions, decide what to do and even kill people at your own discretion. You will also be free to be afraid and during this course we will discuss what you should do when that happens.”

He continued to walk up and down in front of the soldiers.

“The purpose of this selection program is not only for you to 'survive' it, but most of all to understand why the selection process is carried out in this particular way. This is not just about physical fatigue and pain. You are not here just to find out whether you are 'real men' or not.

What's really important for you to understand is that no one wins a war only using weapons. When you are on a mission, you won't save your lives using force, strength, firepower and so on. You will save your lives, using just one thing: your brain. You must use your intelligence. The important thing is your ability to think straight even when you are suffering like hell and your friends are dying like flies.”

Only then did the soldiers start to understand what he was talking about and believe in what he was saying.

“The most important weapon you must learn how to handle properly will be your own mind. Acquiring a deep understanding of what you will do here and passing the selection process are two completely different things and whether you pass this selection or not, you will have a chance to learn how to use your mind anyway.

In any case, bear in mind you may not pass the selection process. It's rather similar to winning or losing a war: it may not depend on you alone.

It may happen that you become expendable so that other people who are better than you can take your place and we never see you again.

And if you are asked to be expendable, you will sacrifice yourselves without saying a word, just like any other good soldier does in war.

In this way you may succeed in becoming members of the special forces inside of yourselves before it happens in the real world.

And one day, that could save your lives if you find yourself in danger, wherever you are, even during peacetime and even here in the United States.”

Trautman paused for a moment and then started walking again.

“To sum up, I will teach you how to use and deal with two things in particular: *body* and *mind*.

These will be your most powerful weapons and the only ones you will ever really need.

The body must be trained and the mind study things.

And I will make you spit blood doing physical exercise and study to the point of insanity.

And that is a promise.”

Ten days later, Fort Bragg

That day it was raining and thundering; the sky was completely covered with dark, heavy clouds. The trainees were silently complaining in the rain. They weren't wearing anything waterproof at all, and the wind lashed through their uniforms. The exercise for that day was to carry a rock as large as a newborn baby.

Trautman was watching them in silence. He and his assistant, who was called Garner, were wearing olive-green ponchos. They watched the trainees without saying a word. Their faces were expressionless, as if they were watching a movie and not fifty young men walking around in the cold, carrying large rocks. Garner was holding a folder in which he occasionally made notes, and didn't care about the rain falling on the sheets of paper. The men were breathing with difficulty. They had been carrying the rocks for hours.

"Feel the cold and feel the heat," said Trautman.

Berry walked by in front of him, breathing heavily and groaning, and wondering what the hell the colonel was talking about.

Trautman was in his early thirties and yet from Berry's point of view the officer seemed so old. The colonel was often called 'Trautman the beast' or simply 'the beast' but at the time Berry had no idea why.

He was ten years older than the trainees but they had heard that once the selection program was over, Trautman would work out together with the trainees, doing all of the exercises, which seemed out of the ordinary given his age.

Berry's thoughts were interrupted when the 'old man' abruptly said,

"The clothes you're wearing right now are not fit for this situation but you don't feel cold. As long as you keep moving, you will stay alive. Remember that, because one day it may save your lives. If you don't move when it's extremely cold, you may die."

Berry wasn't really tired at the time, but having to listen to every single word the colonel said was almost worse than carrying all of those heavy rocks in the rain.

Berry was worried about getting injured, for example having a dislocated shoulder or, worse still, something might happen to his back.

That day they had begun with a two-hour run and now they were carrying these rocks, and if the rumors about the selection program were right, they were probably going to eat in the rain, with the their plates filling up with water.

Eating very small quantities of bad food and working like slaves to see who would survive was part of the selection program.

So they would probably go on like that for days, and then they would start keeping them awake.

Trautman and his men wanted to see who would lose weight and how much, and who got to a point where they couldn't take it any longer and after how long. The only thing the trainees wanted to know was how long this torture was going to last.

However, Berry had done his homework with regard to the selection process before joining the unit.

He knew that if he came to Fort Bragg without knowing what he might expect, it would have been worse; the fear would have made everything even harder to stand. Besides, he had decided a long time ago to do everything he could to pass the tests.

But that day, in the rain, Berry wondered why the hell they were doing all of these exercises.

What was the sense of it? Weren't they all just damaging themselves? Were they going to become victims of forced labor in Vietnam or were they going to be fighting in a war?

He had already been to Vietnam and he had already worked as a slave many times during his tour, but never like this.

This was just crazy, and no one could stand it for very long.

However, Berry had no intention of giving up.

He was far too angry to simply quit.

There were certain memories well-embedded in his mind of the yelling and screaming soldiers waiting to be avenged.

Berry wanted to go back to Vietnam.

There were too many loose ends and he had to go back.

And it wasn't just that.

That day, and that morning in particular as he was standing in the rain he also thought about a completely different matter.

He was black, and joining the special forces was the only way he might have a successful career in an army in which it wasn't easy for an African-American to be promoted or become an officer.

Whatever the reason, they weren't promoted in accordance with their years of service as would normally and automatically occur in the case of white soldiers.

This is why Berry would never give up during the selection process, even at the cost of splitting a rib or injuring his backbone.

He was really very pleased to be at Fort Bragg training to become a member of the Special Forces. Because there, the world was different.

Fort Bragg was a bit like Vietnam: it wasn't like the rest of the world and American rules and customary behavior stopped at the gates of the base.

The color of Berry Delmore's skin didn't matter at all.

At this particular site and time only two things were really important: what the trainees could and couldn't do.

In this sense whites, blacks and Hispanics were all on the same level. They were all the same and they were all brothers, suffering together during a period of hardship ... or at least that's the way it would be for those who managed to get through that damned selection process.

So, instead of letting the rock fall to the ground and yelling out in pain, Berry continued to struggle as hard as he could. In this way he could show everyone what a black kid could do in an army ruled by whites.

He had already beaten some of them: the day before three of the trainees threw in the sponge.

Berry was thinking of his less fortunate companions as he continued carrying his rock in the rain, with the wind blowing against his wet clothes.

Inside of him, despite the suffering, he conjured up the inner strength and smiled.

Berry didn't know it but Trautman's personal assistant immediately made a note of the fact.

Fort Bragg

It was the middle of the night and it was raining.

Trautman was wearing a waterproof olive-green poncho with the hood down.

The colonel was totally unperturbed by the rain as he walked along the artificial bank.

Below him, in the stream, two groups of trainees were moving through the water, carrying two enormous poles as large as trees.

Trautman was proud of them all, even those who he knew would never pass the tests, because each and every one of them was doing his best.

He observed them and spoke to them as they moved forward in the water.

“Chess is a game that was invented to teach the art of war to a young prince. Like a prince, you will also have a kingdom and the kingdom will be your mission: the task you are sent out to accomplish. In this kingdom you will be entirely alone and you will decide for yourselves how to proceed.

How you do it is entirely up to you.

I’m going to teach you the moves.

I’ll teach you how to play chess with death as your opponent, and you will be the princes.”

Below him the recruits were suffering; they were groaning in the water under the weight of the poles they were carrying.

Trautman just kept on talking.

“The SOG isn’t a normal unit and you won’t be trained like normal soldiers because your missions won’t be standard missions.

You’ll be fighting behind enemy lines and to do that you’ll need a few skills and qualities ordinary soldiers normally don’t have. You won’t be thinking like ordinary soldiers either.

Soldiers fight, and that’s it.

On the contrary, Green Berets silently enter the houses in the middle of the night and kill their 'targets' in front of their families.

And then, when you’re in enemy territory, there won’t be anyone there telling you what to do.

There will be no backup and no radios and you won’t be able to call a helicopter or an artillery unit to bail you out.

Sometimes, you won’t even have any weapons.

That’s when you will really be commanding yourselves, and this is why members of this unit are not trained in the same way the members of other special forces are trained.

In situations like the one I’ve just described to you your life is going to depend solely on what you do and what other team members do. Winning or losing means saving or losing your kingdom ... and without your kingdom, you are nothing.

So if necessary, you die trying to hold on to it.”

Close to the colonel the men started showing signs of severe fatigue and suffering.

Berry was swearing, Ortega had a kind of punch-drunk look and Rambo was suffering in silence.

Wearing his usual impassive expression, Trautman was serious and made no comment. He didn’t let on but he was watching them all very carefully.

He had already noted two of them in particular: Ricardo Coletta and Robert Plaster. The officer could tell they might be hurt in some way as they were already very tired; they were becoming distracted and clumsy. So it was just a matter of time before they suffered some kind of accident. They had already gone beyond their physical limits but it was too soon to be in that kind of phase. He hadn't decided to eliminate them yet but it was pointless for them to carry on. They were risking breaking an arm or something worse might happen. Trautman wondered whether he should reject them immediately or wait a while. He decided to hold on, hoping that his generosity wouldn't result in one of them getting seriously injured. Like in Vietnam, at Fort Bragg being nice and generous wasn't such a good idea.

Berry Delmore seemed to be the strongest one in the group. Rambo was the youngest. He was already done in, which could only be expected perhaps given his age but he was very good at hiding the fact. For the moment he looked like he was holding out, but it was just an illusion. Sooner or later he would pay the price of not having the same training and experience as all the others. Again, the colonel studied the two men who were on the point of collapsing and were therefore running a risk. They would definitely be all right when they got back to their units, and they might even end up as the best soldiers in their teams ... but it was not going to happen in the Green Berets. In the SOG they were putting their lives at risk or they might be the cause of someone else's injuries. Plaster looked like a zombie. His expression and lost gaze clearly showed he had reached the end of his tether. Would he still remember his own name? Soon, both of these trainees would 'explode', and that would be a dangerous moment, when they might really expose themselves to danger. Trautman himself had been in a situation like that in Korea. It had happened to him during a period of continuous fighting, and he had spent three whole days without sleeping. Seeing these men suffering, he was obviously reminded of his own past experiences.

That night in Korea, Trautman started seeing the tents of the camp shifting and moving on their own; that was when he understood he had reached the limit. It's only natural, we're human beings after all, but, thinking of the tragic events that followed, it had come far too soon. His lack of lucidity induced him to make the wrong decision at least twice. On the morning of the fourth day, he found himself at the top of a hill strewn with dead bodies. There was a stench of death everywhere. He came out of it alive, that's true, but he could hardly stand up. He would carry the burden of his decisions weighing down on his heart for the rest of his life. His 'human limits' had cost the lives of many men that day, and it was simply by chance that he had gotten out of that situation alive. From that day on, Trautman decided to dedicate time to discovering how to avoid those limits, and over the years he found various ways of doing it. Had he known about these techniques when he was younger, he might have saved many lives.

The time had come for him to pass on that knowledge in order to create better soldiers, who would have a few extra tricks up their sleeves when the time came.

The proper training would help them survive - and perhaps win - in dangerous situations.

That night, at Fort Bragg, in front of all of those men suffering in the pouring rain, Trautman had no desire to recall his own past experiences.

Watching these trainees, he had to focus on who was to going to collapse under the strain and more or less when, so that he could help them avoid being injured.

He had to make sure no-one ended up like Anderson the year before, a soldier who had lost an eye during a very difficult activity.

How could he forget it?

Ortega then fell into the water just in front of him. Trautman suddenly stopped thinking about the past.

Jorgensen was carrying a long wooden pole with the other men. He immediately used one arm to pull Ortega up out of the water.

As he did so he yelled because of the effort.

Ortega's head came out of the water and he started coughing and spitting out water.

After he had pulled him up, Jorgensen quickly put his hand back under the pole, yelling again.

Each pole weighed around one thousand pounds.

Trautman figured that in order to pull Ortega up out of the water, Jorgensen had dragged up a weight of about one hundred and twenty pounds using only one arm. It just took him a few seconds, but he managed it.

He then examined Ortega's face.

Ortega had blacked out for a few seconds. You could tell from the look in his eyes. He hadn't just tripped over something at the bottom of the stream; very briefly he had lost consciousness and the water revived his sense.

The group might have been about to lose Ortega too.

Trautman said:

"Ortega, do you think a king would be unaware of what's going in his kingdom?"

"No sir," he replied.

Ortega's voice was rough and shrill on account of all the water he had swallowed.

"Jorgensen, would you say that in your kingdom there are subjects who are no use to you with respect to your mission?"

"No, sir," came the reply.

"You helped your friend. Well done, Jorgensen. Berry, what do you do when you have to move the pieces on a chessboard?"

"I study the next move carefully, sir."

"WHAT DO YOU DO IF THEY SHOOT AT YOU?"

"WE STUDY THE NEXT MOVE, SIR."

"WHAT DO YOU DO IF THEY HIT YOU?"

"WE STUDY THE NEXT MOVE, SIR."

"WHAT DO YOU DO IF THEY KILL YOU?"

“WE STUDY THE NEXT MOVE, SIR.”

“ Soldiers fight.

*Green Berets slip inside the houses of their enemies,
and kill them in front of their families ”*

Samuel Trautman, 1967

Carl Jorgenson

Six years before the selection process

In 1961 Carl Jorgenson was eighteen.

That night he wore the gala uniform of the marines, the one with the dark blue jacket, the pants with the red line and the white hat.

He was a little shorter than average, but really muscular.

Over the wide, big chest his face showed Nordic traits: crystal blue eyes, light skin, blond crew-cut hair. People often asked him if his parents were German but he - having no idea - always used to said no.

He adjusted the perfectly fit uniform on himself.

When he was ready to go out, he checked himself again in the mirror.

He did it many times before going out.

He couldn't believe he was so elegant.

If there was something he had really learnt in the army, it was how to properly clothe himself: to shine his shoes, to polish the buckle of his belt, to correctly place the hat on his head and so on.

He spent all of his childhood and adolescence cutting wood inside his father's sawmill: a life of dust, dirt, sweat and hard work. A life spent wearing (and being) poor.

And this partly explained why the guy was so built and muscular, and why that night he was so happy to be so elegant for the first time.

He had never been so dolled up before.

It was the navy that made him feel for the very first time the pleasant feeling of wearing something really valuable. Being dressed up to the nines made him feel handsome and important, and that made him feel up to the world, which was a new thing for him.

He had spent years dreaming of getting out from that sawmill and never going back there, and with the marines he would probably achieve it.

Maybe, he was really going to master his own life, at last.

Jorgenson wanted to be independent, and had been dreaming of being from all of his life.

His father, despite the financial difficulties of a sawmill that didn't always go so well, never deprived his son of anything: food, medicines, clothes.

He always gave him (almost) everything except school, because Jorgenson senior really couldn't afford it. His firm would have gone bankrupt.

Friedrich Jorgenson really needed his son to work.

So, as soon as he could, he pulled him out of school and made him do small jobs.

But this was just the beginning, and didn't last that long.

After one month he immediately charged his son with harder works, so - a couple of years later - inside Carl's mind it was as if he had spent all of his life working as hard as slave, since he was a child.

And in the end, that was the reason that made him join the navy.

After five years spent working as a slave and eating like a horse, at fifteen Carl looked as if he was already twenty: he was as thickset, big and muscular as a football player, and he couldn't stand that kind of life anymore.

The navy would give him something more than a sawmill job.

After so many years spent as a worker and a beggar (often without a proper shirt for mass on Sunday) when that evening he arrived in front of the marines ballroom, his heart really skipped.

He was inside a spell.

The lights were as suffused as candles.

The guest-book was lying on a wooden rest and everyone had to sign it, him too.

The ballroom had long blue, red and white ribbons hanging from the ceiling, and it was full of men in uniform and women of all ages: husbands with wives, young men with their dates.

The women were all in evening dress, and Korea's veterans showed off large panels of flashes.

While looking at every single one of them, Jorgenson got himself lost.

At least two of them were wearing the *WWII VICTORY* badge.

There was a General too: Jorgenson clearly spotted the two little stars on the shoulders of that unknown old man. He didn't know who he was but that – *fuck!* - that was a real general. Carl wasn't a big shots expert, but he surely had to be the guest of honor.

Then he saw her.

A black haired girl, wearing a pearl-white dress, roughly of the same age he was.

She had to be someone's daughter, because she was arm to arm with no one.

He stared at her still as a baby... And she immediately realized it.

She pulled up her skirt a little bit and went to him.

“What's your name?” she said.

“Carl”

“Hi Carl. My name is Mary”

“Hi Mary”

“My uncle is Williams, the sergeant. He is an instructor. Maybe you know him”

Jorgenson smiled.

“Oh yeah I know him. I know him very well”

She laughed and as she did it he immediately fell in love with her.

Love at first sight, and forever.

Carl Jorgenson - who a year later would be given the call sign of 'Grizzly' - fell in love with Mary Williams just like that, without any chance of avoiding it.

It was just like a fall from a high cliff : he fell for her and from then on, he never got her out of his head evermore, for all his life.

“Do you want to dance?” she said.

As they approached the center of the ball-floor, Carl felt hypnotized. He felt a thousand eyes on him and he thought:

Is this real? Is everything real?

The ballroom spun around them while they danced.

Is this really happening? Are these people really seeing us?

But it was true.

And even when they got out of the ballroom to be alone, it was still true.

“Your parents...”

“My father is probably flattering some bigwig and when my father is working, I don't exist anymore. Don't worry Carl, no one has seen us going out”

As they arrived under the moon – and the music was now low and far away - they found themselves alone under the stars, in the silence of the singing crickets.

Jorgenson then kissed her and that was also his first kiss.

And in that moment he understood that the most beautiful thing in the world was his.

His forever.

When they broke away from each other, she looked at him with reddened eyes and cheeks.

Then Carl felt as if he was drowning in those liquid eyes, inside all of that water, while the darkness embraced both of them.

He needed so much that Mary that he felt he would die without her... And he didn't even know her.

Jorgenson brought his face close to hers again and then they both stood still for a while just like that, both in silence and so close that they couldn't focus on each other's faces.

"I love you" he said.

"I love you too, Carl Jorgenson" replied Mary.

Fort Bragg

The selection process had now been going on for three weeks and it was still raining.

The hut was wooden with a sheet roof.

Inside, Garner was gazing out the window hoping to catch sight of the recruits' shadows in the dark, as they knelt in the mud at the center of the square, in the rain.

That day they had just lost another five of them.

In a corner of the hut that was also Trautman's 'office', a stove slowly burned giving out very little heat.

"I don't understand, colonel. I don't understand at all. I mean, I am with you – I always am with you – but no one selects his men like that. You are only driving them crazy"

Trautman didn't even answer. He was writing something on the blackboard hanging from the wall and didn't give any sign he had even heard Garner speaking.

"Take the task of ordering them to do multiplications *while* they are doing push-ups: it's insane! Mathematics while working out... What a freak show. You are crazy. This will only make 'em freak out"

Trautman ignored him.

"And I have heard that you have already decided to make four of them take the pilot's license"

Again, Trautman didn't reply him, but this time Garner got annoyed with him.

"I am talking to you, colonel!"

"Garner – Trautman said without even turning to him -, I don't know what you believe but I'll tell you what I see. When this war began, we had a front line and some enemies to defeat. Now, the days of the military advisors are long gone and there are no more enemies or front line either. And yet, we are still fighting"

"Colonel... I am not asking your opinion about the war, but why you are torturing your men"

"You see... The television continues to shout this bullshit that for any single one of us that dies, we kill ten of them"

"And so? That's the truth"

"It is, but it doesn't mean shit. It's far more complicated than that. Do you know what this '*one for every ten*' really means? It means that in order to win we need eight hundred thousand American casualties in ten years, which is twice what we had during the whole World War Two"

Garner swallowed.

Trautman continued:

"The United States will declare itself defeated long before wiping out all of the Vietcong living between Laos, Cambodia, North Vietnam and South Vietnam. In Washington they have no clue at all about what's really going on over there. We are really risking losing this fucking war.

In fact, it's already happening.

And do you know why?

I'll tell you.

Because we don't have any fucking idea about what's really going on over there.

Not at all.

And if we want something to really change, we can only hope that people like them will understand how to do it"

Trautman pointed his index to the window, meaning he was talking about the recruits.
Then he continued:

“Because it will be them out there on the field, seeing what's really happening over there, not us.
And if they don't understand what we have to do in order to win, no one ever will.
But if they are too stupid to do it, we will lose this war, Garner.
And losing means dying.
All of them out there are going to die.
And then it will be yours and my turn, Garner.
All of us are going to die if we lose this fucking war, because to lose a war many have to die.
But I won't let that happen.
My career, myself... Me and you... None of us really matters anymore.
The only thing that really matters, is to prevent losing this damn war”

Fort Bragg

The group in the woods was made up of five recruits that had joined each other in order to reduce their chances of getting lost.

They were all panting, dog-tired and covered in mud.

A steep descent started beneath them, too steep for the heavy rucksacks they were carrying. Had they continued their march going down there, they would probably have killed themselves.

Only one of the group had already made a few steps of this steep and wet descent but Robert Plaster - who was behind and above him – stopped him right there, saying:

“Where the fuck are we going?”

Plaster received no reply.

He was filthy with mud on his legs, arms and rucksack too, because of the many times he had fallen on the ground.

The man a few steps below him – and exactly as dirty as him – was called Joseph Danforth.

He was quite thin and had a long beard and hair.

Small drops of rain were falling from his beard as he stood there, gasping for breath and waiting for what else Plaster had to say.

“Let's go back” Plaster insisted.

Having already taken some steps down the descent, Danforth turned to the other members of the small group.

Then he made a fast calculation in his mind.

Going back to take a different route would mean going back up the hill they had just come down three *clicks* (kilometers) ago.

Going up to that hill again?

No way.

Then he looked at the few feet of slope that he needed to go up to just return to the rest of the group, and that look was enough to make him feel sick.

Marching more than needed, none of them would ever accomplish the task. They would all collapse much sooner than that.

Not to mention the time limit.

Going back also meant they would have never reach the extraction point in time.

They would all be disqualified and rejected from the selection program and he absolutely couldn't afford that.

That selection was his last hope to stay in the army.

A few feet above him, Plaster stopped his thoughts.

“Let's go back – he reaffirmed again – this path is only good for suicide. I don't want to get my fingers burnt”

Danforth was the only one really sure about going down that slope.

He too - just like Plaster - had studied many times the contour lines on the map, worried about how steep the terrain might really be.

But he too, just like Plaster, had decided that the slope was worth a try.

That damn canyon on the map could have been both a viable path to succeed in the task or a death trap where you broke your back, depending on pure luck. The only way to be sure about the

viability of this damn canyon, was to give it a try by seeing it with your own eyes.
It was a classic case of fifty fifty... Which is why – at the end – those recruits found themselves at the top of this dangerous descent.
What Danforth was sure about (but Plaster wasn't) was that trying to go back would mean failure. To Danforth that looked obvious, but to Plaster it didn't.
Danforth thought that Plaster's opinion was a matter of fear, the fear of ending up falling from a gorge which – tired as they all were – surely wasn't impossible.
But the real problem was what fear did to people's minds.
Danforth had seen that happening a lot of times in Vietnam.

When an option is dangerous, people see it as prone to fail, impossible or technically wrong, even when it's none of that at all and the truth is that it is a good option, but only dangerous for your safety.

They were late – all the recruits in the group agreed about that -, but whatever Plaster said there was no way to go back and accomplish the task in time too.
Only fear could make anyone believe something like that.

No.

In Danforth's mind, they only had two options: getting rejected from the selection or putting their spinal cords at risk, and without any certainty of passing the task anyway.
Of course, the danger was a little exaggerated even for a special forces selection process.
A Process which, by the way, wasn't going so well for him.
In his physical condition, it was difficult to believe that he would survive another week of that stuff.
Many other recruits were obviously doing better than him, and Trautman would chose some of them for his new teams, not him.
He was going to be rejected.
He could feel it happening soon inside his guts, maybe already tomorrow.
Or maybe – again - fatigue and fear were clouding his mind, just as they were doing with Plaster. It was something he knew very well.
He had lived it one hundred times at least, when he was in Vietnam.
He couldn't be clear at the moment, because the fatigue had become pain a long time ago.
Danforth looked at the slope again: after a narrow curve below, the grass disappeared under him.
He rubbed his face and eyes, to take away some of the rain on it.
His beard was pouring water.
He knew all of those feelings: fatigue, coldness, fear.
He wasn't clear.
He shouldn't listen himself, neither his mind nor body.
He should go on and nothing else, like a machine.

“I'm going on” he finally said.

A short silence followed.

Then Plaster - who was the oldest of the five recruits group - said:

“My friend....This way you really risk seriously injuring yourself”

“I know”

This time silence was longer, with everyone quiet and still.

Then one of the four broke away from the group and with uncertain steps started going toward Danforth.

He walked slowly along the steep slope, and carefully, planting his feet well to avoid slipping.

"I'm coming with you" he said.

Then the rest of the group slowly started turning to go away. They looked like elephants on the move. The tiredness was such that they unintentionally knocked each other with their rucksacks, so stunned were they by their weight.

"Well... Good luck, man" Plaster said.

Danforth saw the group vanishing above him.
Then he and his mate found themselves alone.
Danforth looked at him and read his name on his uniform: Krakauer.
Realizing that Danforth was reading it, his panting mate said:

"People call me Crack"

"I am Danforth"

"They'll never do it. I had a suspicion that Plaster didn't understand shit about land navigation, but you know how these things go... You see a large group of recruits and because they are so many,, you think that they can't be wrong"

"I was thinking that too"

"Come on, now"

The grass slope went down following a water rivulet.
Water erosion had cut the mountain crest creating a little slippery canyon covered with grass.
As the two went on descending, the canyon walls became steeper and the mud patches on the grass larger.
To avoid losing their balance they started supporting themselves using their hands, sinking their fingers in the grass and mud.
A while later their hands were dirty up to their wrists, and when Danforth stopped to check the map, he could barely read it.
What's worse, every time he touched the map he risked making it so dirty that it would soon become useless.
He tried to wipe the dirt with his fingers, but he only made the mess even worse.
In the end, he wiped all of the map with the cuff of his jacket.
Below them, the slope dropped suddenly.
Danforth stopped to look at it.
They were at risk of breaking a leg, or worse.
Krakauer instead hadn't any hesitation at all and continued walking with the same methodical calm walking, as if he was marching in slow motion, planting his feet carefully at every single step.

"Uh, come on man... It's enough." Danforth said, by then ready to quit.

Krakauer stopped and turned back.

"What?"

"Have you seen where the fuck we are going?"

"I have seen it, yes"

"That must be thirty feet"

Krakauer looked down and nodded.

"Yep"

"I don't want to kill myself"

"And who says we are going to kill ourselves? We can break our spines at most"

"Come on, fuck!"

Krakauer looked down.

“Yes”

The two stayed still for a while. Krakauer was looking down and Danforth backward and upward, as if thinking about going back.

“Man, man...” said Krakauer.

Then he added:

“You don't think enough”

“What the fuck are you saying?”

“What do we have inside our rucksacks?”

“I don't know: shit? Bricks, I think”

“Me too”

Krakauer removed his rucksack from his back with a lament and while doing that, Danforth could read the pain on his face because, you know, when you remove a heavy rucksack after having carried it for many hours, it's the worst.

After he taken off his rucksack, Krakauer opened it and gave a fast glance into it.

“Bricks, sure. Bricks of shit”

Then he lowered the rucksack on the ground and in front of him.

He stretched forward to look down the slope, then gave a strong kick to the rucksack, and it immediately vanished.

“Oh shit” Danforth said.

“Have you seen man? Now we can go down this fucking hill without any rucksack at all”

“You are out of your mind”

“Come on.... We are going to fail our task anyway. Let's try it”

Danforth walked down a few steps, until he was beside his mate.

Then he stopped and looked up to the sky.

The rain was never-ending.

Even though the rain had been unceasing for days, the sky instead of emptying itself looked as if it was charging even more, becoming grayer and grayer and darker and darker... And it never stopped.

“Oh, Jesus” Danforth said, while looking at it.

He took off his rucksack and the pain was so strong that he looked like he was growling.

“Be careful - said Krakauer -: don't have to throw it. Just roll it. Because if you don't, it could rip apart, and in that case you'll have to carry your bricks with your bare hands”

Danforth gave a little kick to his rucksack and it started rolling violently. Before vanishing from sight, it was bouncing.

The idea that he was going to descend that slope gave Danforth a sharp pain to his stomach.

“If you want some free advice, go down on your ass, because going down standing is impossible” said Krakauer, then he crouched down and started going down partly dragging himself and partly using his arms..

A while later he vanished from sight, but Danforth could still hear him cursing.

Danforth waited for a while, just to be sure not to overrun his mate had he started rolling down, then he moved too.

He didn't want to use his butt, but three steps was enough to make him change his mind.

So he sat down on the ground and started pulling himself using the plants.
After a while, he started slipping.
He tried to direct himself against the left wall of the little canyon, but he couldn't.
Suddenly his butt had become a sledge.
It was just like going on a sledge with the difference that he had nothing under his butt and he could painfully feel all of the roughness of the earth under him.
He was scared already but in the beginning – at least – the fall seemed to be under control.
But then, Danforth started to speed up too much.
While falling, he let himself painfully bounce from one wall to the other.
He was trying to get near the mud walls hoping to grasp something to stop himself (or slow down at least) during his fall.
But he never could, and so he knocked his ankles, elbows and ribs.
He received a rock on his testicles and the sharp pain was so strong that it stopped his breath for a while.
When Danforth finally managed to stop himself against one of the walls of the little canyon, he couldn't breathe because of pain.
He stayed there still, writhing with pain and breathless.
Then, at last, finally came the scream liberating him from pain.
“AAAAAAH”
He reopened his eyes.
The next slope waiting for him was even worse.
Danforth shouted another long series of curses.
Then he suddenly realized how many blows he had just received, how many different pains he was feeling all over his body.
The most worrying one was right at the center of his back, which was very bad, because the back is always a serious matter.
He stayed a while just like that, clung to one of the walls of that damn canyon made of mud.
He couldn't see his rucksack and his mate either and – most of all - he couldn't see the end of this damn fall, that on the contrary seemed to just get even worse, and he was already too injured to simply go on.
He launched another long series of curses, then he decided to try to climb the wall, in order to exit from that damn canyon. He only wanted to get out from that damn deadly trap, and the selection process could go to hell.
So he tried, he really tried... But he simply couldn't.
As he slipped down instead of going up, he desperately sank his fingers into the mud and while doing so, one of his fingers violently met a rock under the mud, and his nail bent back on itself.
Danforth yelled because of pain, while he realized that he was slipping down more and more.
“NO! NO! NOOOO!”
He could do nothing more than turn around to place his legs forward, with the purpose of protecting his body.
A while later, he was accelerating downward.
A few seconds later, he was almost flying.

"You are still alive" Krakauer said.

Danforth couldn't see.

He dragged himself on all fours to the little water stream he could hear gurgling in front of him, then he put his head in and out of the water.

The water was so cold it felt like an ice hand grasping his face... But now he could see, at least.

He cleaned up his face with the sleeve of his jacket.

"Holy shit" he finally said, exhausted.

He felt light-headed.

He was gasping for breath because of coldness, pain and fear that had now become adrenalin inside of him, and he could feel it inside his bloodstream as if he had drunk an exaggerated amount of strong coffee.

And yet, it was already beginning to slowly fade away, and in doing so it was leaving in its place an even worse cold than before.

His hands were shaking.

Too much adrenaline, too much cold and pain: he was in a state of shock.

He really was out of his mind... But he had already experienced all of that.

It was a terrible feeling for sure, but he only had to wait and it would soon be gone, and everything inside him would return to its place.

Danforth put his face under the water again, then he cleaned his eyes with his fingers.

Although it was frozen, this time he received it as a blessing.

His heart started to calm down, his tachycardia to reduce.

He cleaned his eyes again, and he could see well again.

As the adrenaline started to vanish, other than the cold Danforth started feeling all of the pains scattered through his body, and most of all the fatigue.

Then he saw his rucksack in a corner of the river, half submerged under the water.

It was intact.

"I've got a good one and a bad one" said Krakauer with a lowered head.

He was gasping for breath too and was holding his arm.

"Is that broken?" Danforth asked.

"No, don't worry. Just a blow"

"Talk than"

"The good news is that we are still in time. We can still do it if we hold on"

"And the bad news?"

"We have fallen too far down. We have to go back up a little"

Danforth closed his eyes and took a deep breath, cursing inside himself.

Then he thought that he could never walk up, not even a foot.

He was completely, absolutely finished.

And more, all of that pain was likely to get wasted if they couldn't arrive in time to the check point.

He almost decided to quit right now, rather than continuing to suffer like that.

Also because – let's admit it – was it really worth it?

Because that was the kind of life that was waiting for him inside the special forces: a life of forced labor, a life made of suffering in order to keep in a physical shape near the human limits, by the means of grueling workouts that he would have to do every single damn day, and for years.

Danforth opened his eyes and looked around.

The truth was that he still wanted to join the special forces.

It would guarantee him a sure job for many years and it would take him away from really worse things too.

All of what he was suffering at the time he was suffering for himself, to pull his socks up, to finally

set up his life, because without that job in the army he would surely end up stone dead in the middle of an alley, or on the electric chair - which was something he had already risked – and he knew it very well.

Billy – he thought.

Maybe, had he joined the army before, now Billy would still be alive.

The first time he was pushed to join the army to avoid jail, but now he wanted it.

He wanted to be a professional soldier.

And that career would also give him the dignity he had chased after all of his life, that dignity his father never had.

Maybe one day, thanks to him, people would pronounce the name 'Danforth' with respect.

So the young man reopened his eyes, then stood up on his feet – *pain* –, went staggering to his rucksack – *more pain* – and in the end he put it on – *unbelievable pain*.

And while doing so, he almost cried.

After the climb the path was flat at least, and they weren't inside a flood stream anymore, but a little, insignificant drain.

Danforth and Krakauer were walking one in front of the other, deep in the water almost up to their shoulders, constantly tripping on the muddy river bed full of branches.

Behind him, Krakauer talked to him to cheer him up, and sometimes he pushed him forward, to help him when he lost his balance.

“Come on man” he was telling Danforth.

“Come on! It's almost over! Come on! We are doing it!”

The recruits were all sat on the ground, their backs against the barracks, the rucksacks full of stones lying on the ground in the middle of the square.

Rambo, Delmore, Ortega and Jorgenson were still with their eyes shut, as if they were soaking up sunshine that wasn't there. Ortega in particular was sleeping in that sitting position with his mouth hanging open.

In front of the barracks there was a little path passing over a little drainage channel, with a small concrete bridge.

From down there Krakauer came out first.

He dragged himself onto the road exhausted and cursing.

He was covered in sewer mud and water from the head to it's toe.

Then he turned himself, stretched out his hand and helped Danforth to get onto the road too.

“Hey! Look where the fuck those two are coming out” someone said.

The two slowly reached the center of the square, but they didn't see any officer.

“There he is” said Danforth.

Garner, wearing a poncho, asked them their names and wrote them down.

Then they both put their rucksacks on the ground and while doing that, the pain ritual repeated itself, but this time neither Danforth nor Krakauer tried to stop their moaning, and no one present noticed it or thought about judging them.

Everyone was more or less in the very same state as them.

In fact, Danforth and Krakauer were so happy at having made it that this time they felt less pain.

After getting rid of all of that weight, Danforth felt his legs weaken. Walking was like flying to him. His head was spinning.

So, since he was staggering, he went to sit on the ground and against the barracks, like all of the others.

Krakauer instead spent a while with the officer.

He asked him if he knew anything about the other recruits of his former group.

“Oh yes: they still are in the 'valley of sounds'. From there it takes an hour at least to come here. They will never make it in time. You are the only two of the original group that successfully completed the task. Well done, guys”

Joseph Danforth

Two years before the selection process

It was late night and the car was old and rusty.

Joseph Danforth and his cousin Billy parked on the other side of the gas station, then just stayed there, looking at it for a long time.

Their eyes were still and empty of any feeling, their silence was tense.

Joseph closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then reopened them and gestured to Billy.

Then they both put a ski mask on their heads and got out from the car.

While his cousin was walking to the gas station's entrance door, Joseph slid his sawn-off shotgun into his hand.

On the other side, Billy was armed with a revolver.

The shop windows were well lit. From the outside, the gas station looked bright, empty and still. The shelves were full of goods and there wasn't anyone behind the cash register.

Everything was deserted and silent, with the exception of the neon buzz.

Once the two entered the station, they looked again to the cash register, but again there was nobody.

It was too good to be true.

Danforth indicated to Billy the end of the room.

His cousin placed himself in front of the warehouse door, and stood guarding it.

The door had a circular window in its center, so that you could see the next room through it.

While Billy watched the door, Joseph went to the cash register.

As he reached for it, he hit it with the butt of his gun to break it open.

The sound he made echoed loud in the silence, too loud and out of place.

In the meantime, Billy was continuously changing his balance from one foot to the other.

He kept his gun pointed at the back door, but he often turned to look at Joseph... Too often.

When Joseph hit the cash register again, this time it made a sound so loud that they thought the sheriff himself (on the other side of the city) must have heard it.

And yet, the cash register didn't open up.

Some keys bounced away, but the drawer didn't open up.

It was as sturdy as a safe.

Joseph then turned desperately to Billy, and that was the last time he saw his cousin's eyes alive.

While Billy was turned to Joseph, the door behind him exploded in a cloud of splinters, while the gas station was overrun by noise.

Danforth instinctively threw himself to the ground, under the counter desk.

The wood panel was a little raised from the floor, and through that small split Joseph saw his cousin's head falling to the ground with a thud.

The still eyes of his cousin - from inside the ski mask holes - were now staring at him from the floor with no sign of life in them.

They were as still as rocks.

Billy was dead.

The following moment was silent, still and never ending. The circle of blood in front of his cousin's head just grew, and nothing more.

Then Joseph started breathing as fast as dogs do.

He closed his eyes and held them tight shut, trying to calm down.

But when he heard a barely hearable wood sound, his eyes exploded wide open and full of panic. Two black shoes were carefully coming close to his cousin's body. One of the feet gave a very slight kick to the body, as to check for any reaction. Joseph then raised his gun and blindly pointed it at him as if there was no wood panel at all between him and his target. Now it was his turn to shoot, and he would show him. Hell yes. He was almost sorry to shoot in cold blood, but he hadn't any intention at all of being killed or ending up in jail. *Reformatory, reformatory, reformatory and again reformatory. Then inevitably the jail, even if for one month only.* No... He would never let that happen again. And whoever the shooter was, he had just killed Billy. So he pulled the trigger.

The panel took most of the flame and shock wave of the shot: only the buckshot got through. So all of the the sonic boom bounced back into Danforth's ears, painfully deafening him. When Joseph got up, his ears were so shocked that he staggered, but he was immediately ready to shoot again, if necessary. And once he was out from his cover, he saw everything.

The old man (that Joseph had known since when he was a child, and even then he was already old) was doubled up with pain and on his knees, his hands on his chest. He was clutching his wound and staring at Joseph with questioning eyes. The blood was already spilling between his fingers and his look was lost, as if he hadn't understood what had just happened. Then he raised one bloodied hand and showed it to him, as if to say *'you have hit me. You have hit for good'*.

Joseph walked up to him and stopped right over him. The old men breathed slowly and with difficulty, and after a while, Danforth saw the light inside his eyes completely change. Now the man's mind was full of hate. He put his dying eyes right on those of the young, ski-masked guy that stood over him and said:

“Danforth's little bastard. It's you and your cousin, isn't it?”

The old man coughed, then added:

“I knew it”

He was dying.

“May god curse you, Joseph Danforth. May god curse you *forever*”

And that was the last thing he ever said.

And the last thing he ever saw were the two barrels of Danforth's shotgun coming over his head. BAAM

It was some kind of red and gray explosion, but Danforth immediately shifted his glance away from the mess he had just made, because it was too disgusting.

He also needed to leave very soon.

With one last blow of the shotgun's butt against the cash register, he finally opened it.

Had he opened it sooner, none of that would ever have happened, and his cousin would still be alive.

Then he took the money and ran.

A little before dawn, something woke Joseph up.

He had some kind of strange feeling inside him, an anguish in the middle of his chest that urged him to wake.

His hut – his home – was dark, cold and silent.

He couldn't sleep any more, not after what had happened that night.

He lay for a while in his bed, as if he was listening to something.

Inside his home (if you could consider such a hovel somebody's home) the light of the dawn was still blue.

The police were going to come and very soon, he was sure about that.

He was not sure they had any solid proof against him, but they would come in any case, even only to break his balls.

Before dawn, Danforth had wrapped both the money and the shotgun with wax covered paper and had buried them in the desert.

He hid them in a place such that he could find them again many years later, if necessary.

He was already thinking of the time he would spend in jail.

Had the old man not shot his cousin, everything would have been just fine but now, with Billy's body down on that floor, he was fucked up for good because everyone in town knew that he and his cousin had always done all of this shit together.

Danforth felt as if he had a sign hanging right from his neck, saying: *'I am Billy's famous cousin, come and take me'*.

He got out of his bed naked, and went to the door.

He took a pack of cigarettes and the zippo lighter.

Then he started thinking.

He had killed the old man with his own hands. The poor bastard had recognized him so he had had no other choice.

And that was the reason why professionals always went out of town to do robberies. Well, it was a little late to understand it.

What an idiot he had been.

Joseph wiped his face with one hand then he lit up a cigarette.

He opened the door and stayed naked just there, with his back on the door jamb, smoking and feeling the cold air blowing against his naked skin and waiting for the police to come in the dawn's blue light.

Joseph Danforth had just turned twenty and yet he had a long beard and hair.

He was skinny and tall and yet he had a potbelly and a pair of too long, ugly arms, too skinny and with too many visible veins, like those of regular drug user.

At twenty he was already a ruined man, most of all because of the booze.

While he was lazily smoking his cigarette, the dawn turned from azure to red.

But there was something amiss.

So he tried to figure the situation out because there was something amiss inside of him, something really bad... And it was that he wasn't feeling anything, nothing at all.

He wasn't even really sorry for Billy, and none at all for the old man.

He wasn't even really scared of ending up in jail, nor on the electric chair.

So he tried to take stock of the situation.

The money was buried, the police would never find it on to him.

They would come very soon – he could feel it inside his bones – but they would never find the money.

He and his cousin used to always drink, take drugs, push and date prostitutes together, and everyone in town knew that. And this was also the reason he was sure he would end up in jail, one way or the other, solid proof or not... It wouldn't make any difference.

And yet he didn't feel a thing, which was quite worrying.

His mother died when he was five.

His father died of booze the last year and Joseph's work for Arnie's garage was never enough to earn himself a living, and neither was pushing and being a pimp either.

All of his fucking life nothing he ever did had ever been enough... Never ever.

Every fucking day of his damn life he could remember, had always been nothing but a pain to him.

But a life with no pleasure wasn't worth being lived for him, so he did nothing more than struggle to survive day by day, for all of his life.

He had struggled to survive for so long that he couldn't even imagine a different way of living.

Did it exist?

Had there ever been a single person in the whole world who ever lived a life that was really worth living?

Probably yes, but who knows how many millions of miles away from that shit-hole of a town he lived in.

He saw the first blue flashes really far way, so far on the horizon that in the beginning they looked as if they were at the edge of the world, at least in the beginning.

The lights were slowly running from right to left on the horizon line, pulling some dust in the air as they passed by.

They were still so far away that he couldn't even hear their sirens.

He didn't feel a thing.

His mother, father and cousin had all died (and his cousin had always been his best friend too), so he now was really alone for good.

He had no job nor money saved, and he couldn't even spend what he got from the robbery.

Not now, at least.

And – maybe – the electric chair was just waiting for him.

Anyway, he was sorrier about his cousin than of ending on the electric chair.

He had a forty-five inside his drawer, with a legal license for it and all.

It was a hell of a handgun, the same one used against the Krauts and the Japs during World War Two, so it had to be a good gun for sure.

The two police cars – now much nearer than a while before – took the road that led to his house, not that Joseph was expecting anything different.

As they came down his road, the dust rose even more, and the two cars became bigger and nearer.

Joseph started thinking how good it might have been to take the gun out of the drawer and welcome the cops holding it, thus dying like a real man.

A death with balls, one of those people talk about for a long time.

Both of the cars suddenly stopped in front of his house.

The two men were sheriff Hatfield and, obviously, that Humbert dick-head. The two of them had come using two different cars (God only knew why).

They got out off from their cars armed with one shotgun and a pistol, and both were wearing sunglasses, even if the sky was still red because of the dawn.

Yea, yea, you are really cool, assholes – thought Joseph to himself.

They got out from their cars and immediately pointed their guns at him without even saying a word: no arrest declaration and no rights list... They didn't say a word.

Humbert went inside the house while Hatfield stayed outside to guard Danforth.

While Humbert checked the house, Hatfield got closer to him.

Then he hit him in the stomach using the butt of his shotgun.

Joseph doubled up with pain and fell on his knees.

“Found it” Humbert said from inside the hut, and then he came out with Danforth's forty-five in his hand.

Hatfield took it and held it.

Then he stood like that for a while, with Danforth's forty-five in one hand and the shotgun in the other.

All of the three stood still for a long while, Danforth still on his knees.

Then Humbert said:

“That's not a good idea, boss”

Hatfield raised his handgun, then he shot three times in the air.

The shots echoed in the desert like thunder.

“Don't do it, boss – Humbert said -. I don't like this thing”

Hatfield then kicked Danforth in the face.

The guy spun in the air like a top and slipped back. Then he fell onto the dusty ground and a little pool of blood appeared under his mouth, in the dirt.

“Find the money” Hatfield ordered Humbert, then he spat on the ground.

“Find the fucking money 'cause when you're done, I want him dead, this son of a bitch”

But they never found it.

Maybe the sheriff decided not to shoot Danforth hoping that, sooner or later, the money would show up... Or simply because he really wasn't a cold blooded murderer.

Whatever the reason, the two men never found either the money or the gun used to kill the old man, and the sheriff looked back with regret for a long time that he hadn't killed Joseph Danforth that morning, because sparing his life never gave him anything in return.

Joseph was sentenced for the use of force against a public officer and when he was proposed the army to avoid being jailed, he accepted even if he knew that it would mean ending up in Vietnam, and probably fighting too.

After a nine week basic course – all physical and theoretical, without any practical drill - Danforth fought in South East Asia for a whole year.

There he managed to survive, but between surviving in the real world and in Vietnam, Joseph began

thinking that surviving in Vietnam was a better fit for him.
Because while over there, he felt strangely comfortable.
Over there what he was most good at (surviving) was really appreciated.
In Vietnam, amongst people that were either dying or trying to kill you, his ability to adapt and do *anything* required by the situation was a really sought-after ability by anyone, and everything he had always been suddenly wasn't a disgusting thing for anyone.
It was really like living in another world.
What's more, during his first tour of duty he really risked his life only a couple of times.
To most, that kind of risk would have been unbearable and with much surprise to him, he saw many of his comrades going insane just because of risks.
On the contrary, he was accustomed to such worse things that this affected him very little.
To tell the truth, he probably liked it.

In the end, one year later, his tour of duty was over, he was safe and sound, and he got back to the United States as a free man.
He immediately went where he had buried his money and found it intact.
He changed all of it inside a casino, but he didn't play
He came in, drank a couple of glasses, then he came out.
Now Joseph had his money, and it was clean too.
He still lacked life, but maybe, in the army, he could find one.
So he joined the army again, but this time he also volunteered to join the special forces.
And after a brief psychological interview, the green berets immediately sent him to the SOG selection program.

Fort Bragg

The bulb that hung from the ceiling gave out a weak light.
Garner was reading some papers in silence and Trautman was writing.

"There's one guy, inside Baker team B, that has criminal records. They call him Danforth"

"Let me see" said Trautman.

Instead of passing him the papers, Garner read them aloud for Trautman.

"Use of force against a public official plus arrest resistance"

"Oh yes, the one with the beard. He is one of the two idiots of the C group that came down from the Valley of Sounds and nevertheless got today's task done. The next year this fucking canyon will be off limits for everyone, thanks to those two stupid idiots. If I find a single recruit trying to repeat their exploit, I'll immediately reject them and strangle them on the spot with my bare hands. Give me those papers. Let me take a look"

Garner passed them to him then said:

"I don't want rebels in my teams, Trautman"

"Neither do I, but I don't want altar boys either - Trautman pointed to the papers with a finger -

Use of force against a public official? It means nothing"

Trautman thought for a while. Then he added:

"Why haven't we received these before?"

"Bureaucracy colonel. You know how these things go"

Trautman read those lines again, then he gave everything back to Garner.

"I don't see anything that could be a problem"

"You don't care about who those people you going to work with are?"

"Frankly? No. The less I know the better it is"

Garner smiled.

"Colonel, you are always a surprise".

"I have to judge them, Garner. The last year during that selection we couldn't even put together an eight member team, so I really don't feel comfortable in rejecting someone just because he beat up a sheriff one year ago"

Then they both continued working on their papers, when the teletypewriter started to clatter.

Trautman went near the machine, waited patiently, then took the paper and read it.

The colonel was a man of integrity, but when he read to the point he felt his chest held in an iron grip anyway.

In Dak Son, a *Montagnard* (*) village, the Vietcong had just committed a massacre of civilians: men, women and kids, most of all unarmed, mostly using flame throwers.

The first guesstimate was about one hundred and fifty dead (**).

Trautman passed the paper to Garner without saying a word.

Garner said nothing about it either, because there was nothing to say.

Terror had been Vietcong's main weapon for around twenty years.

It had always been like that and it would be forever.

Terror was an easy weapon to use, a weapon that loaded US soldiers with paranoia and hate, and civilians with fear and obedience.

All of that paranoia, hate and fear pushed the Americans to do stupid things like friendly fire

episodes, torturing prisoners for no reason at all or executing them just because of hate.

And every time an American soldier made any kind of mistake because of rage or fear, sooner or later the press discovered it and the US really paid for it.

This was far different from the North Vietnam war effort, because their regime had no public opinion to respond to, nor journalists that always poked their noses into everybody's business. And even when this happened and somebody discovered their massacres, after all they were just Vietcong, weren't they? So no one expected anything different from them and there was never any scandal at all.

But why?

Why did no one ever denounce their massacres with the same scandal as the ones made by the Americans?

In what kind of upside-down world were American-made massacres by mistake worse than cold-blooded, high-ranking-ordered Vietcong ones?

That new massacre was a big problem for the colonel.

Had the Vietnamese finally started to report every VC in the area to the Americans every time they found one, the war would have been different.

But every time there was a massacre like that, it pushed the civilians one step back and they tried to avoid any direct confrontation with the communists.

Because the Vietnamese – like everyone else in this world – were only really interested in surviving, and with that massacre, the Vietcong had just earned another brand new year of obedience, at least.

*The *Montagnards* are an ethnic minority that live in the mountains.

**The guesstimate that Trautman received that night, was wrong. During the Dak Son village massacre, the Vietcong killed two hundred and fifty two civilians.

Fort Bragg

The following day the recruits were marching even more than the day before.

That morning was particularly cold and Krakauer's face was a pain mask, while he clenched his teeth.

I won't give in – he thought.

I can't give in.

His legs ached, his shoulders were heavy, his lungs were on fire... But it just wasn't enough.

What else do you think you can stand?

Everything – he replied himself.

How far do you think you can go?

Almost up to death.

On this subject, in 1961 Alan Shepard went on board of a fucking rocket and got himself launched a million miles up in the sky.

And in a few years from now, four or five people at most, would board an even larger missile, almost as tall as a skyscraper, and try to land on the moon.

I am doing it – he thought.

I am doing it.

I am holding on.

Lawrence then let the pain go throughout his body in all of its tremendous power, as if it wasn't painful at all.

This is nothing – he thought.

Some think Formula One pilots are brave to race on circuits where, if something goes wrong, you can end up against a wall at 130 miles per hour.

Some others think that the best in the whole world are the astronauts, as brave and cold blooded as machines.

But I have found something even bigger.

Such a big challenge, so difficult and so dangerous that it will finally give a meaning to my life for sure, even for the bad boy I have always been – he sadly thought.

And he found that challenge in Vietnam.

It was the war and the special forces.

Because they were the best of the best and that place, Vietnam, was a place where the meaning of the phrase '*put yourself to the test*' became so unbelievable that it would have made even the bravest racing pilots or astronauts become more realistic.

Even people like them would have never dared to go to Vietnam.

Because there's no so such final challenge in a man's life as war is (*) and Lawrence was absolutely obsessed by the idea of doing something great during his life, in order to avoid wasting it.

There are only two kinds of people in this world: those who want to be happy and those who want to do something.

So, after the first time in his life he ran for a whole hour, he immediately felt the need to run for two.

Then three...

And so on with everything he did, and for all of his life.

But if you aren't the son of an important person, it is really difficult that you will ever have your chance to really do anything big.

A long time ago, Krakauer understood that the army could give him his shot.

So during the basic training, he always gave his best.

Walking, marching, climbing...

The constant word had always been the same for him: *more, more, more...*

Because to Krakauer, being capable of something meant becoming someone.

And he wanted to be the best.

He wanted to be the one that could run more, march for whole days and be resistant to hunger, sleep and cold almost as if he wasn't a human being anymore.

And he wished to risk his life in Vietnam.

And if that meant killing people he didn't even know, he didn't care a thing about it, because if the United States had told him to kill these people, they couldn't be wrong.

And most of all, he would prove that the whole world was wrong about him.

He would show it to the world and, most of all, to himself.

He would show to everybody what Lawrence Krakauer was really capable of despite his poor, ugly, shaming origins.

But as his thoughts got near his past, he immediately stopped them and continued gritting his teeth.

* Oriana Fallaci's quote from the book *'Nothing, and so be it'* Rizzoli, 1969.

Fort Bragg

After the last days of forced marches, the 'survivors' were now running.

Despite the fact that they were all highly trained recruits, the last days made every one of them weaker, and every single effort was turning into pain.

As the minutes of run went on, the recruits felt like they had less oxygen inside their brains. Time dilated and never really moved on, the distances became confused, the recruits' vision blurred.

Many had their throats burning after the first hour, and that was normal. They had spent too many days working as slaves, eating too little and too fast, sleeping very little or not at all.

Half way through the second hour of the run, none of the recruits could say how much longer it was going to last.

Their lungs were now burning, their throats stinging, their legs hard, as if attached to heavy weights.

They were almost at the third hour of continuous running.

Many were coughing and with a taste of blood in their mouths.

To Danforth and Krakauer in particular, every single step was pain.

As well as the fatigue, they had to stand the pain coming from all of the blows received during the 'Valley of Sounds' descent of the day before.

Their run was asymmetrical and disheveled, irregular, because their bodies were full of bruises.

Despite the fact that they were both ten years older, Trautman and Garner were running with them too, and had been from the very start.

To the incredulous eyes of those young men, the two 'elders' didn't show any sign of fatigue.

To them, the fact that a thirty-year old man could run so long looked like some kind of miracle.

It looked like a collective hallucination.

The legend that the 'beast' Trautman used to work out together with the recruits was true.

But the most impressive thing was the fact that Trautman was capable of running and had the lungs to talk too while doing it.

Despite his ten years of age more than anyone else, he was better than any of them, at least while running.

But in that moment, Trautman's 'beast' speeches were only annoying them.

They surely distracted them from the pain of the moment, but being forced to hear all of those speeches during such a so painful exercise was so wearing to erase any possible interest for what the colonel had to say.

The pain erased everything and Trautman knew that simple truth all too well, but he only wanted recruits that were capable of paying attention to him despite such pain, and by this time everybody had understood that.

And that was the reason he continued talking and they continued listening to him: because they hadn't any other choice.

“You must respect your enemies. Respect and fear them, that's what you have to do.

Soldiers can think they are immortal if they want. They even *must* do it, sometimes, in order to keep their morale high.

But this kind of delirium – because when someone believes in something that doesn't exist, he is delirious –... You simply can't afford it. The kinds of risks this unit runs are too high for the usual macho-man kind of guy that thinks he is immortal.

Many are charmed by this kind of people.

Soldiers enjoy staying close to someone who feels he's immortal because he boosts their morale. But you simply can't afford that kind of luxury.

The Special Forces' life is far more cruel than a conventional soldier's. And amongst the prices to pay, there's the fact that you will always know your risks for real.

And this means being scared to hell and yet hanging on anyway.

You will have to get a thorough knowledge of them, and yet have the inner strength necessary not to stop.

In other words, being brave doesn't mean having no fear: it means feeling it, but throwing it deep inside your guts, in a faraway corner inside your mind, and continuing doing your duty anyway.

Heroes aren't born, but become.

And if you'll hear me I will explain how.

Those of you that can push the fear down into their minds one, two, three times... Sooner or later, they will succeed in exchanging it for something else.

One day, you will get to the point that you will be scared without feeling any fear at all.

You will push yourselves to the point that fear will leave its place to rage.

Because soldiers are scared by death, heroes don't want to die”

A young man amongst the recruits puked while running.

Trautman looked to him for a while.

The young didn't stop his run, nor slowed down: he puked on himself getting his suit dirty, but didn't stop his run at all.

Trautman took note of his name inside his mind: Messner.

He memorized two different things: the first – puking - was a sign of physical weakness, the other – not even slowing down – was a sign of mental strength.

If he passed the physical tests, he would surely become a fine soldier.

Then the colonel turned his head away from him, and went on talking.

“Remember: *Soldiers are scared by death, heroes don't want to die*”

Messner wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then shook his head.

Trautman noticed a couple of recruits helping each other. They were running as if they had been beaten by someone.

“What's this guy's name?” Trautman asked.

“Krakauer” replied Garner.

“Lawrence Krakauer”

“And the one yelling right next to him, he is 'our' Danforth”

“Yes. I suppose he is trying to boost his morale up”

“So it seems. See how close he stays to him?”

Trautman went on looking at them: the two were almost running shoulder to shoulder.

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“Breathe” Danforth was saying to Krakauer.

“Breathe... Don't give in, Krack. You are doin' it. I say you are doin' it!”

Without even realizing it, Danforth was now yelling to his mate.

He turned then to his side – to avoid being seen in trouble by him – and he too spat a big clot of blood.

-

Trautman liked that scene. He carefully noted everything inside his mind then went on talking.

“Many of you are now tasting blood in your mouths and are holding on because they think that they are the best. Maybe they think so because they have already been in Vietnam and have already fought, or because they come from the navy instead of the army, or simply because they are Americans, while the enemy is not... But this is wrong.

All of these arguments are wrong.

Every single Vietcong that you are going to face is at exactly the same level as a US special forces soldier.

And you *little shits* are not special forces yet, and neither are you men that can say you are better than one Vietcong. You are not even half of a Vietcong. And it's up to me to make you become like them”

There were some mutters. Even Garner himself turned to Trautman with his eyes full of hate.

If the colonel's wish was to be hated, he was getting it for sure and much more than he thought.

“You think you are suffering here, but the enemy you are going to face in Vietnam march with fifty five pounds of gear fifteen hours a day, and he can do it for months. He often doesn't even have a backpack and he pushes it on a bike. He survives on a bowl of rice each a day and without even getting thinner.

But we, on the thanks-giving day, we parachute turkeys to our troops.

We need disposable razor blades, soap, clean clothes... And all of this is wrong.

They make their own sandals using old tires, we need shaving cream.

They can live days with a single bowl of rice, if necessary, because they pick up or hunt the necessary in the jungle.

And when they are out of ammo, they start building traps using what they find *on the ground*”

The recruits now felt insulted, humiliated and that was exactly Trautman's wish from the beginning. He wanted to see if they were capable of withstanding this kind of burden too, together with fatigue. But without even realizing it, Trautman reinvigorated them.

Because those kind of insults to their pride, in the middle of all of that suffering became rage, plain and simple.

Some of them spat on the ground with disgust, and Trautman saw their exhausted faces suddenly becoming full of hate.

Those guys were now blood thirsty.

For a little while the colonel felt disorientated, then he realized what had just happened and he let himself have a little smile.

He didn't care about how many he was going to reject: in that moment he was proud of all of them.

“In this way, the Vietcong survives with or without food and fights with or without weapons... And this is much more than what our soldiers are capable of. And most of all, he can do it because that is his nature. The Vietcong lives in a third world country that has been a state of war for twenty years. Over there, anyone who is not good enough to find a way to make a living doesn't sleep under a

bridge or eat at canteens for the homeless. Over there, anyone who can't make a living just dies, plain and simple. In Vietnam, there are no obese twenty-year old with a beer belly. You will never see 'em anywhere, not even amongst the rich. The Vietnamese are ultra-tough people and this is the kind of enemy we are facing, and if you think that we are going to win just because we come from a better country than theirs, you are really wrong.

In fact it's quite the contrary: the worse the regime and poverty, the more cruel and capable its fighters.

You will have to earn your victory.

And you will earn it sweating, suffering and even dying for it, if necessary. Yes... At least some of you”

Trautman lowered his eyes and suddenly looked like he had shut himself down. The beast had just lost the light in his eyes.

But it lasted just for a while.

And when the colonel raised his head again, he looked like he had just woken from some kind of dream.

He said:

“The more a country is uncivilized, the harder the natural selection amongst its people and the stronger its army. It's a law of nature.

Because the soldier that has already experienced for himself the meaning of the word 'survive', has something more inside himself than the others.

We - in United States – lost that kind of art many years ago, and you are here now to learn again what it means to live like an animal. It's already inside of you, it only has to find its way back to the surface. I will explain how.

So remember: every fucking Vietcong is not worth a normal soldier. Every fucking Vietcong is worth a damn Green Beret”

As he was saying that last sentence, Trautman was almost hissing between his teeth without realizing it.

That was a lesson he had learnt at a very high price, so he said those last words to himself more than to any of the recruits.

*“Soldiers are scared of death.
Heroes don't want to die”*

Samuel Trautman, 1967

Fort Bragg

It was night and outside it was thundering.

The roof of the hut was dripping and the drops were annoyingly falling on the faces, necks and ears of the recruits, who were shivering inside their sleeping bags.

As they lay on their camp beds, they fell into some kind of coma status that had little to do with sleep. Every one of them did, except Ortega.

He was the only one awake.

Instead of sleeping he was sat on his camp bed.

"Coletta has a fever. He can't do it" he said to no one in particular. Hearing Ortega talking on his own, Jorgenson was the only one to wake up.

He walked up to him barefoot.

"I think that Coletta has a dislocated shoulder, other than the fever" Ortega added.

Jorgenson didn't reply.

He reached Ortega and started looking to Coletta.

The head of the half-Italian, half American Coletta - a long range weapons specialist - stretched out of the sleeping bag with his eyes closed, almost tightly shut and careless of the rain drops coming from the ceiling onto his face.

Brown haired and nice looking, Coletta looked younger than his age and had a good guy's face.

His shut eyes were flickering under their eyelids.

He was delirious, not just dreaming.

"If only there wasn't no rain in here..." said Jorgenson, wiping his forehead dry.

"Johnny says it's on purpose" replied Ortega.

Jorgenson turned to him, as if to be sure about what he had just said.

"Yes, yes... He says that they pierced the holes on purpose in the roof, in order to let the rain come in"

"No... I can't believe this"

The two stayed in silence for a while, looking at Coletta tossing and turning in his sleep.

"My back hurts – Ortega said -. When we lifted that pole, inside the river... I think I lifted it wrong"

Jorgenson – who had helped Ortega to get out from the water when he had passed out just for while holding that pole - didn't reply.

"My shoulders hurt and my ankles too, Jesus Christ... Even my balls are in pain"

"Let's go to sleep. Even tonight they won't let us sleep more than two hours, and the others are in dream land already. Fuck, they fell asleep the way people usually pass out. We are the only two still awake"

"No" Ortega said.

Then he added:

"Help me"

They pulled soldier Coletta out of his sleeping bag and he didn't even wake up.

They then discovered that he had got inside of it with his wet clothes still on, as was obvious for someone out of his mind with fatigue and fever too, as Coletta surely was in that moment.

So they undressed him, they dried him and put on some dry, clean clothes, like a child.

He sometimes grumbled something, and nothing more than that.
Then they put him inside Ortega's dry sleeping bag and stopped to look at him.
And yet, Ortega wasn't satisfied.

"Take a poncho. No, take two and pull the strings out of them"

One was enough.

They hung the poncho between two crossbeams, so that no more raindrops would fall on Coletta.

Now he would sleep warm and dry, or at least for the next two or three hours.

Coletta might even recover, if only he could sleep a whole night... But that would never happen and both Ortega and Jorgenson were well aware of that.

Coletta's test was going to end and there was nothing they could do to avoid it.

Then the two recruits got back inside their sleeping bags.

Ortega went inside Coletta's wet one, and it gave him a shiver.

Then Jorgenson broke the silence again.

"How the fuck do you do it?" he said.

"Do what?"

"Doing what you just did. You could have two, maybe three injuries between the shoulder, ankles and back. You have two eyes that make you look like if you're dead already . How the fuck can you think about the others?"

"Just sleep"

"Trautman is a psycho. He never stops saying bullshit, while he tortures us"

Ortega opened his eyes.

"Coletta is *useful*" said.

"What?"

"I need him for my *mission*"

"What the fuck are you talking about, Ortega?"

"Just sleep, Jorgenson"

The two stayed in silence for a while, then adjusted themselves inside their sleeping bags, to finally sleep for real.

Outside, the rain was trickling over the sheet roof when a couple of bolts of lightning lit the small dormitory.

Only after a long pause the two rolls of thunder finally came, as low and far as the rumbles of a distant stomach.

"Ortega?"

"Yes?"

"You are a leader for sure"

Ricardo Coletta

Ten years before the selection process

During the fall of 1957, Ricardo Coletta was fourteen years old and that morning it was cold and damp, over the Creek mountain.

He was lying down and had been lying in wait for almost four hours, and by then he was really starting to feel cold.

His breath was coming out in little clouds and it was a gray morning, almost blue.

He was lying under some fallen branches, his head facing downhill toward the plain and the river, his hunting rifle at the ready, locked and loaded.

Despite the tiredness, his eyes peering out of the fallen branches were attentive. His gaze was really focused, in constant movement, his eyes never shut.

Patience..

It requires a never ending patience.

His father was one hundred yards away, on his right side, hiding in more or less the same way.

Patience... And feeling the wind.

Below them, the woods stretched down for some yards and then the trees were gave way to a clearing in front of a little river.

Sounds and wind... The wind most of all.

The kid shut his eyes.

His father had taught him that if listening or smelling proved difficult, *just try to close your eyes...*

It will help you to focus even more.

Coletta listened to the water of the river flowing below him, he felt the wind blowing softly and took note of its direction in case he had to shoot.

If the animal came from the top and the woods, it would smell him.

If it arrived from below – as his father thought – or rather from the plain and river bed, it wouldn't have a clue about his and his father's presence.

Coletta was cold.

He would have given everything he could to just move a little bit, just enough to pull out the flask from his rucksack and have a little drink.

Just to warm up a little bit.

However, despite the so many yards that divided him from his father, he decided to stay still, because he would have noticed him, and he would have scolded him.

They had been still for hours, almost since dawn.

The kid couldn't stand it anymore.

In the end, when he had almost lost hope, it came.

It was an enormous, dark male, two and an half yard tall at least; one of those bears so big that it could have killed you even just trying to pet you.

Coletta squeezed the rifle between his hands.

It had showed up near the cascades, where he and his father weren't expecting it.

It was too far away.

He had to move, he had to go down a little bit.

He got on to all fours.

After all of those hours spent lying still, when he finally moved, the kid felt something really similar to pain.

Coletta turned his head to his father and as he did, he found his father's eyes already waiting for

him.

The two nodded to each other.

They hadn't much time left.

The kid tried to find a compromise between speed and silence.

He moved crouched and fast through the woods in front of the plain, and started coming down toward the waterfalls, where the bear was still drinking.

Coletta stopped at the end of the woods, about one hundred yards from the beast.

It wasn't an easy shot and between him and his father he was the closest, so he was the one that had to shoot.

Coletta raised his hunting rifle and pointed it.

Then he rolled up the sling around his left forearm.

He lined the iron sights to the center of the head of the animal, then held his breath.

The bear stopped drinking and rose up on two legs to smell the air, as if he had just sensed something wrong.

Coletta adjusted his aim.

He was going to take his shot but he realized that the last branches between him and the plain might come into his line of fire.

So he raised himself completely – like a soldier coming out from his cover – then he lined his sights again.

And that was when the creature turned to him and saw him.

Their eyes met.

Coletta's were firm, precise, resolute.

On the contrary, the animal's brown ones filled with hate.

His lips curled up over his teeth, while a big cloud of enraged breath started coming out from his mouth.

In the blink of an eye, before Coletta's eyes, that wonderful creature had changed into an ultra-dangerous demon.

He had to shoot it in the head, otherwise he risked '*doing nothing more than tickling it, pissing it off even more*', which were his father's exact words.

But Coletta couldn't keep his sights still on the beast's head.

His arms were shaking because he had just spent too much time lying still, and in the cold.

But the bear was surely going to run somewhere and since he couldn't wait any longer, Coletta pulled the trigger.

The shot echoed round the valley like thunder and that lonely echo went up over the mountains tops.

The bear vanished inside the waterfalls, but it didn't fall: he vanished on all fours.

The kid had missed it.

Holy shit – he thought

He had missed him for good.

Coletta stood still, taut as a violin cord, his mouth half-closed, his breath coming out his mouth in small steam clouds.

After that moment of hesitation, he pushed the loading lever backward and forward – *Clackk!* -, thus reloading the rifle.

He surely had missed it and the worst thing was the beast had seen him but he... He had no idea about where it could be by then.

His legs became flabby.

With a jump, he got over the big rock where he had just shot from.

He held and pointed the rifle ready to fire. His head was down on the iron sights, all of his body facing the direction he was pointing it to, towards the waterfalls.

"RIIIICK" screamed his father.

Coletta instinctively shifted his aim to the river bank.

“RIIIIIICK”

His father, one hundred yards higher than him, was desperately waving his arms, but the kid didn't turn to him, because he felt it would be a mistake.

The bear peeped out from below the waterfalls, but this time he was close, too close, at around fifty yards from him. To gain some ground, it had run under the waterfall crest and thus 'under cover', just like a fucking soldier at war would have done.

And now, it was going to kill him.

In that moment, the whole world started to slow down in front of Coletta.

The bear climbed over the waterfall crest with an unbelievable speed. Once over the plain, it started running so fast that it looked like flying.

The scene looked unreal.

Ricardo had never seen anything like this before. That beast weighted quintals and yet it could run so fast that it looked like as if it was gliding in the air.

The terror took over the kid's legs – trying to escape would be useless – and if something hadn't woken up inside of him, he would have just stayed there still, simply waiting to die.

But on the contrary, terror forced him to think.

He would never have had the time to shoot, reload and shoot again.

He had just one round at his disposal and the kid knew that, so he did everything he could to avoid wasting it, because his life depended on it.

So, as the bear charged towards him, across the plain, the kid took a deep breath and focused his mind as he had never done before in his life, because for the first time since he was born, Ricardo Coletta – fourteen year old – was risking his life.

Then everything vanished: the valley, the river, his father's screams...

In front of him there wasn't anything more at all but his sights and the beast.

Then he saw the bear becoming smaller.

The whole world seemed to make a fast backward zoom, but the kid immediately understood that it had to do with something happening inside his mind and body only, because it couldn't be anything else.

He almost lost his focus, but then he gave everything he could to ignore that strange feeling.

He aimed at the lower half of its head, just to make the shot a little bit easier, and then he finally shot.

He shot and again he missed.

Even though he knew he could never do it in time, he put his hand on the re-loading lever and while he was reloading - for no reason at all - the bear reached him.

Coletta now had the confirmation that yes, everything was now over... Not that after the missed shot he expected anything different.

He was then within paws reach.

At fourteen, Coletta felt a brand new kind of feeling, that feeling you feel when you are absolutely sure that you are going to die, and right now.

He was sure for good.

And in a certain sense, it was almost fair.

Coletta thought that in some way he deserved it, because all things considered the bear was fighting for his life so it was a natural law - and somewhat even right - that the thing was reciprocal.

And this was the way the kid, at barely fourteen, understood for the first time what life and death really are.

The bear was in front of him, was almost on to him when Coletta saw a little blood squirt jumping out from his head.

The bear continued standing over him, ready to hit, but this time his movements were slow, as if it was undecided.

Coletta understood that something had happened when he realized that he had just reloaded and yet he was still alive.

And while his rifle was finishing its '*clakk*', he realized that the bear would not be able to hurt him anymore.

His father had hit it in the head.

Although still standing, the beast was now barely breathing in front of him. It was smelling the air for its last time before dying.

Only then did the kid and the bear really look into each other's eyes.

The brown eyes of the bear lowered on that kid that, in the bear's mind, was killing him.

Those eyes looked human at this time, and were looking at the kid with resignation, as if what had just happened was some kind of enormous, inexplicable form of injustice against it.

Coletta pointed his rifle between those eyes.

He couldn't miss from so close, but he didn't shoot anyway. He wanted to keep his last round in case it was absolutely necessary to shoot it.

So he kept his rifle just like that, floating in the bear's head's direction, while the beast's eyes slowly started to shut, and the kid could see every single shade in them.

The beast then slowly collapsed to the ground, but the tumble it took was so powerful that the kid felt the ground shaking under his feet.

Coletta then lowered his look (and aim).

The beast's eyes weren't dead yet.

So, while they were fading off even more, Coletta and the bear continued to look into each other's eyes until the very end, when the bear stopped breathing.

When the father reached his son, he was out of breath.

He walked to him with his rifle pointed to the beast, his eyes fixed on the sights, as policemen do when they get close to a suspect for an arrest.

Once he reached his son, his father never lost his aim on the beast down at his feet.

"You all right?" he said.

The kid could barely breathe.

"Yes" he said, but he was starting to feel that his legs couldn't stand him anymore, and he had a strong need to urinate. Hadn't he immediately done it, he would have pissed himself.

After what seemed an eternity to him, his father put a hand on his shoulder.

"It's dead – he said -. It's not breathing anymore"

Only then did his father finally lift his rifle and let it hang on his sling, on his back.

The kid felt a lump inside his throat and had to sit on a large rock, because he really couldn't stand on his feet anymore. And he couldn't feel his legs either, as if he was drunk.

"Everything all right, son?"

"Yes"

"Maybe you should lie down for a while"

"No"

He still had a real urge to urinate, but now he wasn't worried about pissing himself anymore.

Then he started to tremble, but not because of the cold.

Father and son stayed for a while just like that, in silence, one standing and the other sitting on the

rock, in front of the carcass.

His father searched his jacket, then lit up a cigarette using a steel zippo.

“Want one?” he said.

“No”

Then the two stayed there listening to the river's sound, while some mountain crows lazily flew above them, with his father smoking in silence.

They stayed some minutes just like that, until his father put out his cigarette against the sole of his boot.

Then he sat beside his son.

“I'm cold, dad. And I have a weird feeling in in my legs”

“You are in shock. It will be gone in a while”

“Am I a chicken, dad?”

“No, son. You have been very good”

“I missed it two times”

“No. The first time you hit him, but too low. You just *tickled* him”

“What's the problem with my legs, dad?”

“I told you son, it's just a matter of fear. But it's not the fear of cowards, this is something different. This is called *shock*. Remember it well. Try to feel it the best you can and to remember it, so that should it one day had happen to you again, you will already know what it is”

“Ok dad”

The man pulled out a whiskey flask and passed it to the kid.

Ricardo drank a sip of it.

“Son?”

“Yes”

“Don't say a word about that to your mother, ok? You would kill her with a broken heart”

“Sure dad”

“Are you cold?”

“Yes, but I can't stand up yet”

“All right”

His father removed his backpack, took a blanket and put it on to him.

“Better?”

“Yes it's better”

“You know kid, this is really one hell of a bear and we are going to make a lot of money out of it.

But this one was also the last. We don't really need this money. From now on, let's leave the bears in peace. What do you say?”

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“I won't say a word to mommy, because she would feel ill as you just said. But if she finds out what has just happened, she is going to kick your butt for good, isn't she?”

His father smiled and gave him a pat on his shoulder.

“Sure kid... If your mother finds out, she is gonna kill me. You can count on that”

His father looked to him again and shook his head.

Then they both started laughing.

*“ It's just fear, but it's not the fear of cowards. This is something different.
This is called shock. Try to remember it well.
Should it happen to you again, you will already know what it is ”*

Edward Coletta, 1953

Fort Bragg

Once Coletta was all set and dry inside his sleeping bag, Ortega and Jorgenson went to sleep. That night, the wind and rain became stronger and stronger, slowly and relentlessly, until the usual bad weather became a real thunderstorm.

One hour later, Coletta was still groaning in his bed.

Two hours later a real typhoon was blowing, and it was then that Trautman came into the hut.

“Coletta, Ortega, Jorgenson, Rambo” he said.

The first to rise to his feet was Ortega. He rapidly went to Trautman.

He was almost naked.

“Sir” he said in a loud voice, just to introduce himself.

Then whispered:

“Four people patrol, sir?”

“Four at a time, private”

-

Trautman's eyes were traveling around the hut.

Some of the soldiers he had just called hadn't even woken up.

Trautman looked at the water coming in through the ceiling and the objects lying everywhere: blankets, field stoves, cutlery, clothes hanging to dry... As the days had passed by, order had become disorder, and the disorder was now becoming chaos.

The B team was starting to give up, at last.

To tell the truth, it was not so soon to do so – those that had held out until now were really good soldiers – but they were all starting to give up anyway.

Soon, Trautman would start to see them break, and only then he would he finally discover who those men really were, who they were inside, because *'only when you break someone do you finally find out who he really is'*.

And - finally - it was just a matter of days before that happened. Maybe even hours, judging from those hut's poor conditions.

Or so Trautman thought at the time, while looking at the dripping ceiling.

And the fact that Ortega had come to him just like that, and whispering too, meant something was obviously out of place.

“What do you want, private Ortega?”

“Coletta has a fever”

Trautman didn't even turn his head to look at Ortega talking, nor did he reply. He just continued looking at the hut, always searching for some other interesting details.

“Listen, Trautman... I am not asking you anything. I understand that this is a selection process and that he shouldn't get any fever at all. I am just asking you that since we are going to go out four at the time, to put him in the last group”

The colonel didn't reply.

“Come on, Trautman... You have some recruits sleeping more than the others anyway... Let Coletta

be one of them. I know the guy: he is a worthy one. The fever could have happened to anyone”

Trautman turned to Ortega and looked him in the eyes.

“He shouldn't be sick”

“Coletta knows, he knows that all too well! With his no-quit attitude, he risks getting his fingers burnt. I am only asking you to change a couple of teams. Give him one more chance. What does it cost you?”

Trautman looked at him.

He shouldn't let Ortega soften him. Being soft in Fort Bragg risked getting them killed in Vietnam, because war is one hundred, one thousand times worse than anything you can possibly do to your recruits during any selection process, and Trautman knew that better than anyone else.

And that was the reason why, had he been able to, he would have personally taken Coletta and thrown him naked outside the hut, in the wild, only because he had 'dared' to become fever sick. But he didn't.

In the last few days he had carefully observed Coletta's performance.

The guy would have surely died before quitting and Trautman appreciated that.

If he was ready to die to join the special forces, he would surely do the same in Vietnam, to accomplish a mission.

So the colonel took a while to think about Ortega's suggestion.

All things considered, Coletta was ready.

Up to that moment, he had made it both physically and mentally.

He had surely made a bad mistake under-estimating the cold, but that was a technical mistake, mostly made because of his lack of experience, which was something that could easily be fixed with training.

He was the kind of soldier that asked questions, asked for confirmation, and didn't start executing an order until he had a complete picture of the situation.

And at the shooting range his performance was out of the ordinary.

Maybe the fever had just been an accident. Maybe... And it was that 'maybe' the doubt that gripped the colonel. Anyway, Coletta's skill considered, his fever had probably been an accident for real.

And this was the reason the colonel, in the end, decided to keep the recruit Ricardo Coletta, or at least for now.

“All right” he said.

Then he took a while to look at the young John Rambo.

He was the youngest of all of them, and yet he was still there, and he didn't even look so bad as many others did.

As the kid started putting his clothes on, Trautman watched him in silence.

Fort Bragg

That night Trautman didn't sleep.

He spent the night staring into the darkness, sat on a metal chair beside his bed.

Coletta was ready to die for a selection process.

I am doing it – he thought.

He was succeeding in making them become exactly what he had in his mind, both Coletta and all of the others.

'Soldiers are scared by death, heroes don't want to die'.

He was doing it.

His personal selection process – conceived, created and run by him – was changing these men into something that had never existed before.

So why did he feel just like that?

He felt proud and satisfied... He could feel those feelings rising inside of him and yet there was also a bitter taste inside his mouth.

Why? - he asked himself.

Because out there Vietnam was waiting for them.

Had there been any other war, they would have been the best, but Trautman was starting to think that this was the kind of war the US just couldn't win.

Simply because, sometimes, there are wars that you can't win at all, because war is not a game nor a movie either, and the world... Well, the world – outside the United States - is a place of absolute evil, where the good almost never win, and the war follows its own rules – and them alone – and none of these rules say that good will finally win over evil.

And war works just like that too, in its own goddamn way, and sometimes there are wars you simply can't win.

The US had just got a draw in Korea and in Vietnam the situation was much worse. It was a drifting country and divided into one thousand factions waging a cold war on each other, and civilians considered all of them worse than the other.

To the Vietnamese, the bad guys were the Americans and the military regime, not the Vietcong.

And that was the reason the US would never get anything from Vietnam but a draw, as had already happened in Korea...

Or worse.

Because for the very first time in their history, the United States were really at risk of losing a war.

The problem was that *'in order to lose a war, many have to die'*, as someone had told him many years ago.

So Trautman, in his worst moments - as that night was – could do nothing else than imagine all of his young men dead.

Each and every one of them.

And not just that.

He was also worried that the central command could use them without understanding their importance, without realizing what the colonel was creating with all of the sufferance of that selection process and the training that would follow.

He was scared that the brass heads could send them on those fucking missions with a *'life expectancy of fifteen minutes'* and that they would sacrifice them just like that, as cheap as cartridges.

And everything that all of these guys were suffering in that moment, in Fort Bragg – because that

was it, pure suffering – it was for nothing.

And them, 'his' guys, they would all die without saying a word, from the first to the last of them, exactly as he was teaching them to do.

1982

“Covey leader calling Raven, come in Raven”

“Covey leader calling Raven”

“Covey leader to Raven. Talk to me Johnny”

“Covey leader to identify Baker team: Rambo, Messner, Ortega, Coletta, Jorgenson, Danforth, Berry, Krakauer. Confirm. This is colonel Trautman. Talk to me Johnny...”

“They are all gone sir”

“Rambo, are you all right? Over”

“Baker team, they are all dead, sir”

“Not Delmore Berry. He made it”

“Berry is gone too sir”

“How?”

“Got himself killed in 'Nam, didn't even know it. Cancer ate him down to the bone”

“I am sorry, I didn't know”

“I am the last one, sir”

John Rambo, 1982

PART II

THE FINAL TEST

Fort Bragg

The five recruit group were alone in the woods.

It never stopped raining.

They were Ortega, Coletta, Rambo, Jorgenson and a new guy, that they had met for the first time only that night. His name was Messner.

They were following a dirt road in the middle of pine woods, and they were all wearing a heavy rucksack.

They looked like five living scarecrows.

They had been running, doing push-ups, weightlifting, running obstacle courses and doing other group exercises – like carrying rocks or poles – daily for more than four weeks now, but the long march of that night was really giving them the coup de grace.

They had all lost from three to six pounds of bodyweight each already, and every single muscle in their body was hurting. That last march session had lasted from twenty hours by then, during which they had only had two breaks of forty five minutes just to eat, and with no sleep.

They were almost at 'the end' of themselves.

The sky above them was dark, black and full of big heavy clouds, and there was little light, as if it was evening already. The rain had been coming down for a month with almost no pauses, and yet the sky showed no signs of clearing in the near future.

It was as if they were in Vietnam already, during the rainy season.

Their gazes were weak, almost hallucinated, sometimes pointed up to the void, with empty eyes, as asking for help from something that wasn't listening to them because it didn't exist anymore, or at least not in that woods.

Coletta still had the fever and he was obviously not watching his steps.

Ortega was the only one that persisted in keeping the group together.

He walked clenching his teeth, almost hissing, sometimes with his eyes closed because of pain, and he was the only one still checking the map. But his shoulders were soon to fail.

One was hurting and the other was giving him sharp twinges of pain and that, together with fatigue, were taking away from him any ability of think straight.

It was just like Trautman told them: as the pain and fatigue rose he could also feel his own mind becoming less reliable.

He was in trouble doing even the easier tasks, such as checking how much water he had left, the map, or even just turning back, to check if anybody from the group was lost.

Soon he wouldn't be able to recognize his own mistakes, and that would be the end for him.

Because that's when you die in war: when you stop reasoning.

Ortega remembered when Trautman had explained all of these things and he understood that yes, he was absolutely right about everything, and that during that selection program he was living all of this on his own skin.

He turned to his mates.

They looked like walking dead, mostly because of those damn rucksacks full of useless rocks.

If they were any later, they would be forced to spend the night outdoors, bathed in sweat, drenched by rain and still in the cold, and Ortega was starting to think that there wasn't anything they could do to avoid it.

He thought that, maybe, everything was a set up from the beginning. But if that was the case, they

would have had to send someone – with no rucksack and running in a hurry – to call for help to extract Coletta at least... And maybe himself too, because he had no idea how long he could stand still in that cold.

Then there was Johnny.

They were all class of '43 or '44 except Johnny, class of '47, the youngest of them all and Ortega was worried about him.

If Trautman was right – as he usually was about one thousand other things -, Johnny being the youngest of them all only meant that he lacked four full years of training inside his leg muscles compared to all of the others.

Ortega looked for him with a worried look, then he saw him in the middle of the second group, he too with a void up-looking stare, walking without watching his step, just like all of the others.

The team is shattered – he thought.

Trautman did, in the end....He broke us.

“Come on guys... We can do it” Ortega said, but he was thinking of something else.

He went with his fingers to search for his compass, on his chest.

His hands were shaking.

I can't do it... I can't.

He clenched his teeth, his face turned into a grimace.

All of my life...

All of my life I dreamt about joining the special forces - or so Ortega thought at the time, even if it wasn't exactly true. His desire of joining the special forces was fairly recent, but in that moment of suffering Ortega wrongly thought of having dreamt about it for all of his life.

All of my life I have dreamt joining the green berets but – maybe – I am not fit for this god damned SOG, or whatever kind of craziness Trautman has in mind for us.

Ortega had spent two years of blood, two whole years of his life spent suffering daily, running until spitting blood, doing push-ups until his arms started shaking and much more... Like Vietnam, just to mention another thing, and all of the deaths he had had to see over there.

The terror was something he thought he'd left in Southeast Asia and yet that selection process managed to scare him for good.

He was up to the point that had they told him *'do the tightrope walk over that ravine but don't take the heavy rucksack off'*, he would have done it... And he would have died while attempting it and without batting and eyelid. That was the point he had just reached.

And it was real, everything was real, because that's the way Special forces work... They were capable of making any fucking test turn real by the means of hunger, thirst, cold, lack of sleep and fatigue so bad that it made your body turn into a chorus of pains.

Jesus Christ.

And while he was lost in that state of quiet suffering, only thinking of correctly putting one foot in front of the other, Ortega's mind was taken away by memories.

In 1945, a little before he was born, many people used to die while training.

His father – who had never been a soldier – told him he had seen a tombstone (in his memories, Ortega remembered *it as if he had seen it, even if his father only told him about it*) a tombstone on which was engraved a name, surname and the phrase *“he walked in front of his comrades line of fire”*.

That Tombstone really existed, and it was in a UK military Cemetery.

Ortega brought with his mind back to the compass he was still trying to catch, because he hadn't yet. He again went with his fingers in search of it, but they were shaking too much.

He had to pay attention not to lose that fucking compass, because it was much important: they only had one for the entire group.

It was just another of Trautman's tricks to make everything even more difficult... Or it was just the paranoia that was finally driving him crazy.

Yes.

Maybe, he was going crazy.

He only had to open that damn breast pocket and yet such a simple act, in that moment, seemed impossible to him.

So, after a deep breath, he messed again with his fingers and finally got to take that damn compass. So he stopped and his legs became soft.

"Fuck" he said.

"Fuck no, no, no..."

His heart started pumping inside his throat: he had taken the wrong road.

You haven't gone the wrong way: you have no map. You are going by trial and error.

So it had to happen sooner or later... Calm down.

And pay attention to what you are going to say... Think about your team's morale.

"We went the wrong way, guys" he said in the end.

Fuck, not like that... You shouldn't have said it just like that.

He turned to look to his mates.

The zombies stopped in the middle of the dirt road.

Rambo raised his eyes to the sky. He was the last one of the group, the youngest, almost as frail as if he still had to grow up... Or maybe he had just lost weight during the selection process.

Messner, not so far in front of him, doubled up with his hands on his knees. He breathed like a broken boiler.

"Shit – Messner said – shit, shit, shit".

Jorgenson raised his eyes to Ortega, sick-red eyes full of hate.

He slowly removed his rucksack, barely keeping from groaning.

More than removing it, he literally unglued it from his skin.

The straps had started to lance his skin. You could easily see it from his uniform, because it had some dark spots of blood.

Ortega watched Jorgenson make that movement slowly, full of pain and hate... Hate against him.

"Jorgenson, don't..."

Only Coletta and Messner realized what was going to happen.

Messner said:

"Jorgenson, stop... We are all in the same boat"

"I'll smash your face in – said Jorgenson to Ortega -, I am going to break all of your bones"

Ortega swallowed. Even if a little shorter, Jorgenson was big, a lot bigger than Ortega and all of the others.

"Easy man – said Ortega -, easy... Do you think I am OK with that? That I like it? I didn't do that on purpose, what do you think? And we can't just stop here... It isn't a hidden place, they are going to invalidate our task"

"I'll give you a fucking task"

"Jorgenson!" shouted Messner without breathing.

But Jorgenson continued removing his rucksack as if he hadn't heard a word.

Once removed, he tried to take a step, but something rare happened to his muscles, something that usually happens when you abruptly enlighten your muscles after you've carried too much weight for too many hours.

Jorgenson completely lost his balance, fell to the ground with one knee and stopped just like that, lost in the pain the position gave him and unable to get up.

In the meantime, no one noticed Coletta.

Of all of the group, Coletta was the only one that hadn't rested on anything, not sitting or kneeling: he had just stopped in the middle of the dirt road, like a mannequin.

His head was hanging down on his chest like a hanged man's.

As the guys realized that Jorgenson couldn't get up and that he wasn't a danger anymore, they forgot about him and noticed Coletta.

He looked as if he had passed out while standing.

"Ricardo?" said Berry.

Ortega wiped the rain from his eyes and called him too.

"Ricardo?"

For no apparent reason, Ricardo Coletta slowly started falling backwards. The rucksack saved both his head and back, but he fell like a dead load, as if he was unconscious. Ortega and Messner reached him with some difficulties, because of their leg pain.

"Ricardo, can you hear me?"

He had passed out.

Coletta was unconscious and Jorgenson still on the ground, trying to fix the cramp that he had in his left calf.

At this point, Ortega was hit by desperation.

Fatigue had blocked his ability of think straight and now he was really scared.

He made a couple of shy steps in the middle of his mates, then he bent over Coletta and listened to his chest.

"Bronchial pneumonia – he said loud and clear, even if the truth was that he was talking to himself –, Bronchial pneumonia: this could kill him"

He should never have continued the selection program, for fuck's sake...

I thought drying him for good for one night would have been enough.

I thought I was helping him and protecting him, and instead I did everything wrong and if he dies now it's all my fault, and only mine.

Ortega was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't hear the voices.

"Ortega!" shouted Rambo.

"Ortega! Shouted Messner too, but again Ortega didn't hear a thing.

He's gonna die right now, god damn it... We are in trouble, but he is going to have his fingers burnt..."

"ORTEGA!"

Ortega finally turned.

Jorgenson gave him a hook on his jaw, a well-aimed hook, with all of the weight and power he could put into it and Ortega, who was tired, weak and absent-minded, received it very badly.

His neck bent violently and made an ugly noise.

Ortega saw the stars, the dark sky and the rain fading away above him, mixed up in a confused cloud.

Then he finally fell on the ground, pulled down by the weight of his own rucksack.

Rambo and Messner, one on each Jorgenson's arms, stopped him before he could hit again.

Ortega had just the time to feel his mouth filling with blood, and so understanding that he had probably just bitten a piece of his tongue away, then he fainted.

The pain awoke Ortega.

He was lying on the ground and someone had removed the rucksack from his back and put it under his head, as a pillow.

The pain in his mouth was hallucinating, as if a thousand needles were running through his head. And other than that, Ortega could feel the presence of a foreign body deep inside his mouth so far down that it was almost inside his throat.

Standing right over him there was a guy that he had met for the first time only that day: Daniel Messner, and Ortega looked at him as if it was the first time he saw him.

He was a guy of average height, with a long beard and curly hair so long that it made it difficult to see his face. It was odd to see hair like his amongst soldiers hoping to become professionals, but there was a rumor about the fact that the SOG was one of the very few units that allowed long hair, because of the classified nature of their operations.

And the fact that both Messner and Danforth had a beard seemed to confirm that.

“Don't try to talk”- said Messner from above Ortega -. Make a head movement if you understand what I am saying”

Ortega nodded.

Rambo was coming up to them.

He stopped right behind Messner then looked down at Ortega in silence.

“You have some gauze bandages inside your mouth – Messner said -. Your tongue wasn't chopped off, it will be like new again. But we can't search for someone to stitch you, 'cause you'll be rejected from selection if we do so. Do you want to quit?”

Ortega shook his head for a 'no'.

“I have already given you some morphine against the pain, so you are going to feel strange. Now listen to me. You were some kind of team leader to us....”

Ortega started shaking as if he was having spasms.

“What the hell is that?” Messner said.

“I don't know” Rambo replied.

Ortega opened his eyes wide, then they became white.

“Convulsions” said Messner.

Ortega moved his hand up to Messner's one, then held it tight.

“Maybe it's the pain” said Rambo.

Ortega nodded while mumbling.

Those weren't convulsions: Ortega was lucid. They were spasms because of twinges of sharp pain.

“Let's give him another morphine shot” Rambo said.

Messner had the vials already in his hands.

But Ortega was half conscious already and in that state, Messner couldn't be sure about how much morphine to give him. So he gave him just a little top of it, almost nothing at all, and Messner knew Ortega was going to suffer again, and soon.

In fact, Ortega immediately twisted in pain again.

As he was losing his senses - but this time for real - Rambo and Messner realized that injured and unable to talk, Ortega wasn't a leader anymore: the team's strength and morale had just received a very bad hit.

What's more, Ortega had just become a burden good for nothing except slowing them down, and so putting everybody's qualification at risk.

They turned him on his side, so that he wouldn't suffocate himself on his tongue, the bandages or the blood he had in his throat.

Daniel Messner

One year before the selection process

Inside the hospital corridor's everything was so still you could hear a pin drop.

The town was calm by then, and tired.

Daniel and Linda were completely on their own.

It was late.

The emergency room was pale, yellow, unpleasant. Linda was nineteen, had short, black hair and a perfect face, like an ancient statue of a Greek goddess.

She and Daniel came into one of the many rooms used to visit the patients in private.

Messner caressed her cheek, then kissed her.

In those days he had short hair, no beard and was paying for his studies by working as a male nurse. Torrence wasn't a big town and Messner's idea about fucking the wife of the chief physician turned out to be a very bad idea: rumors started spreading almost immediately.

When the two separated from each other, her eyes were bright with tears, as if she would start crying at any moment.

She looked at him.

He asked himself the real reason of her look. He asked himself if inside those unfathomable azure stars – that were her eyes – there really was love... Or something else, like fear.

Messner moved away from her.

He stayed still for a while, as if waiting for something from her.

Then said:

“The baby of eleven p.m. won't survive”

That kind of unfathomable torpor she was lost in after the kiss, that kind of magic in her look immediately faded away, and became surprise on her face.

Why had he said something like that in a moment like this? He had no idea.

He had just said something about work in a moment when they should only have been talking about themselves, about what there was - or wasn't - between them.

“It's horrible” said Linda.

Then she took his hands and held them.

They stayed like that for a moment, facing each other.

But after a while, Messner understood that something was wrong.

And as a matter of fact, she said:

“It has to be over, Daniel”

I knew it – he thought

The worst moment was the first.

The words got into his head with an effect like a blow.

And yet he knew... He had felt it coming for days. He expected it, but something inside of him died anyway.

Then he started reacting.

In some way, the pain started flowing inside him, and evolving.

In some way it became manageable and he was able to receive the blow and react.

In the real world, he barely swallowed and moved his look away from her, but other than that, his

face showed no sign of it.

He looked at her body for the last time.

For the last time, he allowed himself to give her that kind of look men give to things that belong to them... Even if, sometimes, there are things you own so much that in the end it's you that belongs to them, not the contrary. It's a strange mechanism, that no one has ever completely understood, but that's the way it is.

Messner looked at the high-cut neckline.

He looked at her shoulders, high and bare, the thin, long neck and his eyes never felt impudent, not after what there had been between them, and while he was doing it, Messner knew that this was going to be the last time he could do it.

Linda was wonderful.

Daniel embraced his lover and held her tight.

He closed his eyes and rested on the side of his neck.

She returned that embrace, holding him to her.

She softly put her hands on his hair, over his head almost to hold it, and the two stayed tight for a long time.

"It must be over, Daniel"

"I love you"

She then tilted her head, to lower her look to his.

"Look at me, Daniel. This is over"

The heat in her voice had faded and it gave way to pride inside Messner's mind.

"It's obvious that it has to end, I am fully aware of it. What do you think?"

Messner felt as if he had been treated like a child.

Nevertheless he didn't want to break loose from her. It probably was going to be the last time he would embrace her.

Then he tried to take control over himself.

All things considered, it was normal for him to have thoughts about death during a moment like that.

The only difference between him and anyone else, was that he had spent one year in Vietnam, and he had seen so many people dying that the idea of killing someone didn't seem so odd to him.

"Are you ok?" she said.

"Yes"

"Okay then. Okay."

She pulled away from him.

She straighten her white coat, pulling it down with her hands.

She pulled out a little mirror from a pocket, opened it and checked her make up in it.

Then she was ready to leave.

She put her hand on the exit door but she stopped just like that, with her hand on it.

And when she said her last words, she didn't even turn to him.

"I will miss you"

Then she left.

Messner found himself alone in the room.

He looked at the large clock hanging from the wall: his shift was going to end in just fifteen minutes.

He was undecided between ether or morphine.

In that hospital the doses of those substances were very vaguely registered: the procedure was easy to cheat and the risk of being caught was really low.
The real problem was that there could be an emergency right during that last fifteen minutes of his shift and working stoned would be a problem for him.
Messner took a syringe from the drawer, then he opened a closet.
The transparent jars were all perfectly lined up like little toy soldiers.
Messner took a little jar, he pierced it with the needle then put it in one of his pockets.
He then went to the toilet and locked himself in.
That night he was rather heavy handed with that stuff.

At the end of the shift he stayed a while in the office to get over his hang over, then he left the hospital.
The parking lot was almost empty.
He went to his car.
He switched the engine on, he left, but after just a while he pulled up at the side of the road, and decided to get high again.
He really needed to get high for good, that night.
He stuck the needle in his arm, felt the physical pleasure rising up and for a while he felt happy.
But after that starting moment of pleasure, he felt sad again.
It was in that particular moment that he decided to join the army again.

All in all, during the year that he had been over there, in Vietnam, he had felt like he belonged to something bigger.
Every fucking day spent in that fucking field hospital, he and his medical staff fought against something tangible, and they did it all together, with no second thoughts, no indecisiveness, no rivalry.
Shouting soldiers were carried in burnt, concussed, crushed to a pulp or spraying blood.
For a whole year he and his colleagues had struggled - better – had really *fought* in their own way against death, an enemy even worse than the Vietcong themselves.
An enemy whom fighting against was *really* fair.
And this made sense, to Messner.
Satisfactions had never been many, but some he had had for real, and that was enough for him: lives saved, young men saved from the wheel chair, amputations avoided... No matter how few, when those kinds of satisfactions came, they were the best.
They were even better than sex.

Then he thought that all things considered in Vietnam he had never risked that much.
He had always seen and heard about everything, but he had never really run any serious risk.
Yes, he helped a lot of disemboweled people destined to kick the bucket anyway. He did practically nothing else for a whole year but, all in all, little changed.
We are all going to die, sooner or later. Aren't we?
What really matters is to live well the time we have left, and he wasn't living it well, not at all.
And had he become a doctor, he would have lost his two most important things.
His only two real loves: Linda and morphine.
Linda, because he and she wouldn't have been colleagues anymore.
The morphine, because had he become a doctor, he would never have fetched the doses himself anymore, but an assistant. And this would have deprived him of the very special relationship he always had with the medicine cupboard.

So, that night, he definitively decided to re-join the army.

He thought that living the military life again could be a good thing for him.
And, while he turned the engine on again, he decided that simply rejoining wasn't enough for him.
He would try to join the special forces too.
Because we only live once, for fuck's sake – he thought.
And maybe, over there, he would finally find what he was really seeking from his life.

Fort Bragg

Jorgenson stayed sat on his own, shaking his head.

It was late night by then.

Messner and Rambo tried to take stock of the situation.

They had two injured, Coletta with pneumonia and Ortega with a cut on his tongue to which stitches would have been a better treatment.

They had also taken the wrong road, but orientating would have been too difficult until the early hours of the morning, so moving that night was useless.

Not to mention that the temperature would drop very soon and that the whole test – they had understood it by then – was just a mix of orienteering, never-ending marching and cold-resistance. They had never had any real chance of getting back to the base in time, and instructors had given them this idea just to disappoint them even more.

Mind is your best weapon.

Messner and Rambo had dried and changed Coletta already.

They had put him a double layer of clothes on: Rambo had given him his ones too, his spare dry ones, and they had also made him an emergency shelter by stretching out a poncho with its strings. However, Rambo was going to pay a high price for his generosity during the next night hours.

Jorgenson was still murmuring on his own, far from the others, as if he was mind sick: for the rest of his group, he was now useless.

He really couldn't get rid of what he had done to Ortega.

He probably didn't want to get rid of it: he wished to pay for it... Maybe, he even wanted to quit because of it.

He continued to move his head in the same way, like a robot, and maybe he was crying too, but with the rain on his face you couldn't say for sure.

“What the fuck do we do now?” Rambo said to Messner.

“What can we do? If you fall asleep you'll be hit by hypothermia as fast as a torpedo and tomorrow you are gonna be worse than Coletta. Ortega must be constantly checked, cause he is at risk of suffocating with his own tongue if he loses consciousness. Coletta's condition must be watched carefully, 'cause if the wrong symptoms show up, we have to throw in the sponge for him. And personally I think Jorgenson is out of his head. In the end, we are all in deep shit... And all of that without even a single Vietcong shooting at us”

Messner made a sad smile.

Then he dried his forehead in vain and added:

“Jesus Christ, I can't stand it any longer”

He shook his head.

“I've had enough of this shit for good. And you Johnny?”

Rambo didn't reply.

“Do you want Coletta to die in here? Do you want to see him dying here in Fort Bragg? Isn't this absurd?”

Again, Rambo remained silent.

“Fuck John, have you ever been war?”

“I have been in Vietnam, yes...”

“Don't you think that over there we are already dying enough? I won't let Coletta die in the U.S.A.”

“The mission...”

“We are not in war for Christ's sake.... This is a selection, not a fucking mission. Coletta deserves to be rejected, not die. And if he is ready to die just to pass a selection process, I take my hat off to him... But no SOG for him. It's better being alive, isn't it? Cause if he dies here, what's the point? It's a fucking waste, that's it. A damn waste”

Again, Rambo stayed silent and his face had no expression.

“Fuck, I do really hate you, when you do that”

At that point, Rambo decided to reply.

“Messner... I have nothing against you but here, tonight... You have no idea.

Here it's *easy*. People don't die in here. You are not forced to decide who lives and who dies here.

You don't have to order combat aircrafts to bomb the only one of your men stuck behind to save all of the others”

Messner understood immediately that Rambo was referring to an actual episode. Rambo was talking 'too much' - literally traveling with his mind - but about something he had really seen, and understanding it made Danforth's blood run cold.

That phrase, with the complicity of cold and fatigue, echoed inside his mind many times.

Killing the only one of your men stuck behind, to save all of the others.

The only one of your men...

It was one of those kind of things that happened in war, but the real one, not the one you saw in movies, or on television news.

Only those who had really been there knew about episodes like those.

The one that Rambo had just told him about was one of those kinds of episodes that no one ever used to say aloud... And one of the many.

Because in war – the real deal – things so bad happen that no one will ever talk about them, and Messner – who had been in Vietnam too – knew it very well.

Secrets so unmentionable that you can't even talk about them with other veterans, nor with the army chaplain either or with anyone else.

Messner too had lived a couple of episodes like those but he, unlike Rambo, would never have dared to say a word about them, not even that night.

“You see Messner... You can play at helping others here, if you want, because if it turns out bad, you just quit. But there... I have been in Khe Sahn. If you have no fucking clue about what you are doing, you die. If you do it wrong, you die. If you help someone that has just messed up, you die. Coletta is behaving just like that because he has never learnt this lesson. And the lesson is that when you try to do something beyond your ability in Vietnam, you don't go back home with a pat on the shoulder, saying 'at least I tried' . You don't get back at home at all”

“Ok, Johnny”

But Rambo's gaze stayed on him.

So Messner said:

“Understood, Johnny. Understood”

“Maybe you think that we are exaggerating here. You think something like *'we have one of us that is still losing blood from his mouth and another one with pneumonia'*

Messner nodded.

He was specialized in first aid and yes, he thought they were exaggerating. They should reject them all rather than that.

But as Messner was still listening to him, Rambo left his phrase unfinished and the two young men stayed silent, listening to the rain.

“Tell me one thing, Johnny”

Rambo nodded.

“The speech you made before... Regarding the one stuck behind. It 's a real story, isn't it?”

“Napalm” said Rambo.

“They passed over him with napalm. They did what they had to do. They saved a whole platoon”

Fort Bragg

That same night, Berry was with another group of recruits that, a little at time, was almost become extinct by then.

Of the original group only two were left, Delmore and a certain Daniel Putnam: all of the others had quit. The awareness of that, instead of galvanizing Delmore, depressed him.

There being just the two of them left felt terrible, as though they'd lost the others in a real war.

If the purpose was to make the recruit forget that it was just a selection, Trautman was succeeding in it.

The wind blew on their faces, lashing them with rain drops and freezing air. The rucksacks were heavy, their legs were exhausted.

"Help"

Berry's thoughts suddenly stopped.

The black guy turned like dog hearing a distant howling.

Daniel turned too to Berry, and the two looked into each other's eyes.

"Fuck no" said Daniel, hoping to dissuade Berry from doing something about that sound.

"I say no, Berry"

Berry turned again to the direction of the screams that, in the meantime, had become groans.

"Fuck, come on... It's a trap at the very least. Don't you understand? It's a trap for sure"

But Berry's gaze was fixed in the scream's direction like a wolf that already found its prey. His mind had 'hooked on' those screams and for no reason in the world would he have let them go.

Those screams had the shrill note of panic, an almost subliminal note that no one in the world could fake so they could only be real screams.

And Delmore, in Vietnam, had learnt them all too well.

"Fuck off Berry" shouted Daniel, while the black guy was leaving on his own, with that slow way of walking the recruits have when it's almost over.

"Fuck you Berry! Can you hear me? Fuck you"

Berry went toward those screams while Daniel, instead, went on his way alone.

Dick head – thought Berry.

As he walked down to the river, Daniel's insults faded away and the cry for help became nearer.

The depression continued to climb down to the little river, and so did Delmore.

"Help, help, heeeeeelp. Fuck, I-don't-want-to-die, fuck!"

Berry would have run, but he couldn't, nor could he remove his rucksack either. Had they found him without his rucksack, they would have disqualified him.

He wiped his face, while the wind seemed to abruptly change direction, as if Delmore was near a whirlwind.

He lifted his gaze to the sky for a while. Maybe, a whirlwind was coming for real.

Jesus.

He staggered a little, but proceeded.

Then he leaned on a tree log, just to catch his breath.

"Fuck, help... Someone... Help!"

Then Delmore chin up, took another couple of steps, and finally saw the scene right below him.

The guy was lying stuck on the river bed, under a fallen tree.

He was under the water up to his shoulders.

Delmore needed just a glance to understand that it wasn't a set up: the guy was not acting.

The tree had probably started falling when the guy was just passing and – God only knew how – he hadn't even realized it so, now, he was stuck under it and partly under the water. Delmore removed his rucksack very fast but, strangely, he didn't feel any pain while doing it. He was under the effect of adrenaline already.

“I 'M COMING” he cried.

The kid turned his head as much as he could, but the water was already lapping his mouth.

“Uh fuck! Oh God Yes, please!”

Berry tried to run down to the river, but he slipped on the mud, fell and finally rolled into the water. Strangely, again, he felt no pain.

“Oh God man, please: call help. Fuck, do something!”

Berry walked into the water until he reached the fallen tree. The rain of the previous days had moved the earth and the fucking whole tree had fallen because of that.

Berry slipped under the tree, held it the best he could, tested his hold, then tried to lift it.

“UAAAARGH”

It didn't work.

He re-adjusted his hold, dug his heels better in the water, on the river bed, and gave it another try.

“AAAAAARGH”

Nothing again.

The son of a bitch was heavier than a truck.

Berry paused to catch his breath and looked out of the corner of his eyes at the level the water had just reached: it was higher. The water was getting higher every second.

Was that really possible?

He looked up to the mud walls and saw some small rivulets coming down from them.

Sure that it was possible.

The water level was rising in front of his eyes and the guy could die under it.

Or rather... He was dying already.

Berry went under water again, but this time up to his head too.

He felt the river bed with his feet the best he could, then dug them in again.

When he got back to the surface, his head was pouring water from everywhere and to breathe he had to spit a little.

Then he prepared for another effort.

“Oh god, please, help me... I don't want to die, fuck, I don't want to die”

“Call help” Berry replied in a cold tone.

Then he yelled with the effort, while he gave it another try.

“AAAAAAAARGH”

This time something moved.

The boy wriggled a little for free, but an instant later the tree fell back onto him.

Berry let his hold go and fell on his back in the water.

He was exhausted... And the pain was becoming unbearable.

He was out of breath and he was feeling as if his heart was going to explode inside his chest.

Then he started to see stars.

Now I am going to faint – he thought.

But he didn't.

He passed one hand through his hair, he squeezed it then closed his eyes.

He tried to think about it, but his brain was yelling only: yelling because of pain, fatigue, cold, fear.

His heart was beating as if it was going to explode inside his chest, so much did he need to breathe.

Then Berry remembered some words.

What do you do if they kill you?

We study the next move, sir.

The next move.

But it was impossible... Thinking was impossible.

He had to use more strength on that tree because there was nothing else he could do.

The next move.

Berry looked at the guy: the water level was now at his mouth and the kid had difficulties in breathing already.

Then he looked around.

There was something not right... There was something amiss.

“Where's your rucksack?”

“It's - blur – it's below”

Berry got close and grabbed the kid's shoulder pads, pulled them a little and examined them.

Yes, he was still wearing his rucksack under the water and maybe that's what was keeping him trapped down there.

Berry searched his chest, then pulled out a bayonet knife from his sheath.

“Stay still” he said.

“Oh God”

Berry tried to insert the blade under the shoulder pad, but there wasn't enough space.

So he turned the knife on its flat side and this time he got it inserted and started cutting.

Snap!

Now he had to cut the other too.

“Oh God” said the guy, and started struggling free

“Stay still and call for help”

The next move.

“Call for help” Berry insisted.

“HELP”

“HEY” someone cried from above.

Berry was tempted to look up, but he didn't: he had to cut the other shoulder pad and this was deeper under-water, and so invisible and even more difficult to reach. He had to stay focused despite the desperate yells of the other recruit.

“WE ARE HERE! HELP! HEEEEELP! HELP US! RECRUIT IN DANGER! HELP”

Nothing... Berry couldn't find the other shoulder pad.

Berry put his bayonet back in its sheath, then he went under-water again.

Everything was dark and cold.

With his hand he blindly touched the recruit's body until he found the rucksack behind his back..

Then he re-emerged.

He grabbed the boy's shoulders and started kicking the rucksack: one blow, then two.

“Hey” said a voice beside him.

They were wearing black, not olive drab: they weren't some other recruits, but personnel from the selection process.

“We need to remove the rucksack from under his back” Berry said.

“Ok” the man replied.

A second man, who had just came down the slope, moved beside the boy, ready to use mouth to mouth artificial breathing had the water risen over his head.

Berry and the other man started kicking the rucksack.

No results.

And yet, this time Berry's mind moved quicker.

“Let's lift the log all together – he said – on my three”

Everybody took position and prepared.

“One, two, THREE!”

“Now boy, now!” said one of the men but the boy had been still for so long under the freezing water that moving proved too difficult.

“COME ON, FUCK!”

Berry gave a kick to the rucksack and the boy vanished under water to reappear a little way behind, finally free.

“YES! SHIT YES!”

The three men let the log fall back down.

They went to the boy, grabbed his uniform and dragged him onto the river bank.

Then they let him lie on the dirt road.

Berry sat on the ground, lowered himself onto his knees and smiled while giving him a couple of pats on the boy's shoulder.

Then he looked up to the two men that had helped him.

“Oh God, thank you guys”

“Of course” replied one of the two.

Berry received a hook to his jaw, a powerful punch that ran through him like an electricity shock.

As he received it, he heard a horrible STOK! sound and he bit his own tongue.

Pain exploded abruptly inside his head, then he saw stars.

His body turned like a wheel and he finally fell to the ground.

A while later, the whole world above him turned black.

Rambo was sitting on the gravel of the dirt road, near Ortega and Coletta, and he was keeping an eye on both.

He was too wet to sleep: had he fallen asleep with his clothes so wet, he would have woken up with pneumonia for sure.

On the contrary, Ortega had fallen asleep.

He was sleeping with his mouth and neck covered in blood. On his pale skin, the red looked almost scarlet. A cut inside the mouth is slow to heal and his tongue was still bleeding for sure.

The blood loss would lower his body temperature even more, that night.

That pallor was a bad sign and Rambo wondered if he should wake him up and force him to stay awake, like he was doing.

Anyway, sleeping in that temperature, and with no sleeping bags, wasn't a good idea for anyone.

They had slept for two hours a night for almost a month: skipping a whole night couldn't make them feel any worse than they already did.

Anyway, Rambo wasn't the only one awake.

Jorgenson was still muttering on his own, sitting with his legs crossed in the middle of the road, just a few yards in front of the rest of the group, alone.

According to Messner, no one in the group was lucid anymore: they were all broken, like zombies...

And Rambo agreed with him.

According to Trautman, these were the kind of moments when soldiers used to die, and Rambo agreed.

Because he had seen it happening.

Trautman was right about many things and all things considered Rambo thought that was a good selection program.

In 'An Khe To', central Vietnam, Rambo saw a black kid tripping on his shoelaces while they were retreating, and dying just because of those untied shoelaces.

Rambo had seen quite a few people dying during his first tour but the Freeman episode, that day of one year ago, fixed itself firmly into Rambo's mind.

And while waiting for time to pass, Rambo remembered.

It was a sunny day over Souie Tre, in the An Khe To province.

The battle had raged for three hours - an extremely violent battle - and Rambo and the others were a reconnaissance team in the aftermath of it, with the purpose of searching for enemies still in place, because those enemies could launch what some used to call a '*second strike*'.

The plain was flat, the grass high and dry.

Freeman, a nineteen-year old kid, sprang running at the first shot.

Rambo and the others had heard some Vietcong screams, then the first shots started flying and everyone ran for cover but Freeman, who sprang forward.

The Vietcong scout must have been a nervous type, because his first shots through the tall grass looked almost like shots in the air to Rambo, as if the scout's intention was to scare the American team more than attacking it. Maybe Rambo and his mates had found the Vietcong squad in a bad moment, and now they only wanted to keep the Americans away from them.

What happened next to Freeman wasn't caused by his equipment's weight nor by him being clumsy either: his shoelaces had become loose because of the many hours of uninterrupted marching.

During those eight hours of march they never stopped, so he never had the time to re-fasten them and, in the end, they obviously became loose.

When the guys of the team sprang running in all directions to disperse and get back to the previously-planned rally point in case of attack, Freeman instead was forced to stay behind.

Rambo could clearly see the grass between him and Freeman hit by the AK bullets and had the kid

tried to cross that stream of grass to reach his mates he would have been hit for sure. Two grenades exploded in the grass between them and the Vietcong: they had fallen short, as if barely aimed toward them.

Rambo didn't realize it but in the cold and darkness of that night in Fort Bragg, his memories became real. They became real images in the dark.. Rambo started seeing what he was remembering, smelling the smells and hearing the sounds of that day.

The grenades, fallen away from them and not dangerous at all, confirmed Rambo's idea that the VC hadn't really located them. They had just heard him and his mates and the Vietcong didn't want to engage.

The other members of Rambo's team were vanishing in the tall grass or out of danger already, but he and Freeman had to stay behind.

Rambo knew what to do.

He and Freeman only had to reach the rally point and survive there just ten minutes, then the reinforcements would have to do the rest.

Maybe Ray – the team's radioman – was sending their coordinates already and soon helicopters would show up, or even tanks.

They only needed to hold on a few minutes so the situation wasn't so bad, but first they had to get to the rally point and Freeman was held back by the enemy fire.

"I'll cover you - Rambo screamed -. Ready?"

Freeman nodded.

As Rambo opened fire with his M-14, Freeman started to run.

After the second or third shot of his burst, Rambo stretched his head a little out of the tree he was using for cover, in order to get an angle of sight, but in front of him he couldn't see anything other than the tall grass.

The enemies were right in front of him, but he couldn't see them.

From that grass, a shot could come at any moment and hit him in the head.

He would have given everything to stop shooting and return to cover of the tree... But he had to cover Freeman, so he continued firing. It was a long road the guy had to cross in the open and Rambo had to cover him at all costs.

So he continued shooting at random because through that tall grass he really couldn't see a thing. Fourth, fifth shot of the burst.

Had the Vietcong had an expert fighter - for example a well-trained sniper – he would have understood immediately that he was shooting at random, just to cover his friend, and had that fighter been real tough, he could try to hit Freeman (or Rambo) despite his cover-fire.

Rambo knew that the risk was real and Freeman, while running desperately, was terrified.

His eyes were wide open, his face disfigured by a mask of panic.

While he was running through that open field he was scared and in the middle of it, at the center of the meadow, something went wrong with his boots and caused him a moment of distraction.

Rambo turned then to Freeman, just to see where he was, and did it just in time to see his head blowing up.

The bullet had hit him in the center of his forehead while he was still running.

Rambo saw a particularly sharp image of that scene because it was a sunny day.

He saw a piece of skull jumping upward and something else dark squirting backward.

For a while, it was as if Freeman was still running, then he collapsed on the emerald-green grass.

Then he fell to the ground with a thud, his head out of control, landing on his nape.

Rambo had seen many war movies but was surprised by the difference between the big screen and reality: no actor can fall in the way he had just seen and from the way Freeman crashed his nape on

the ground, Rambo understood that he was dead even before he reached the ground.

And when it did, his brain came out from his forehead

If up till then Rambo had only feared there might be an expert fighter inside that enemy team, now he was sure.

Freeman had stumbled on his laces – almost undone – and that minimal indecision had slowed him, making him a perfect target, much easier than Rambo, and the sniper had dared to stretch out, take aim and shoot even if under Rambo's cover-fire .

The only reason Rambo was still alive was that the enemy sniper had aimed at Freeman, not him.

Lucky... I am alive because of luck.

After having heard the enemy shot, Rambo adjusted his aim accordingly, and continued to shoot and scream his mate's name until his magazine was almost empty... But for no reason. He hadn't seen the sniper's muzzle blast, nor smoke or anything else, and he had just continued shooting practically at random.

Some AK bullets started to strike the tree Rambo was using for cover, forcing him to stop shooting. Rambo lay on the log and closed his eyes. With his against it, he could feel the tree vibrating with every single bullet sticking into the wood.

He let the almost-empty magazine fall to the ground and inserted a new one, then he tried to memorize Freeman's body position with regard to the team's rally point: they would recover his body later, when the ambush was over.

If Souie Tre hadn't fallen that morning it surely wouldn't fall that afternoon either... Nor that night: leaving the body there was the wisest thing to do, but at great cost anyway, for Rambo.

As the enemy fire took a pause, the young man cleared off from his cover, vanishing in the tall grass.

He succeeded in reaching the rally point safe and sound, where the rest of the team was waiting for him.

They knew Rambo and Freeman had found themselves stuck behind because of enemy fire and when Rambo came back alone, no one said a single word.

They didn't even ask him what had happened.

When Jorgenson, ten yards from Rambo, was struck on the head with a club, for Rambo it was like waking from a dream.

Jorgenson's head tilted to one side with a rapid movement and to Rambo the scene looked far away and unreal, much less real than Freeman's brain squirting in the air.

After seeing Jorgenson's head tilting - and hearing the sound it made – Rambo stayed still for such long while that it felt like an eternity, to him.

He tried to stand up – the slowness in doing so exasperated him, but he couldn't manage it.

An arm closed his neck inside a deadly grip, a big and muscular arm that lifted him from the ground until his feet weren't touching the earth anymore.

Rambo tried to free himself, but it was impossible.

Only then, during that fight, did he realize what bad shape he was in.

All of his arms, legs and back were hurting: every single muscle of his body had gone to the dogs because of the lactic acid.

Despite the terror and adrenaline, Rambo tried to fight anyway, but he had no more strength in his body. Too many days of hardship and scarce food had just ruined years of training.

That selection process had lasted for too long and that night they had paused too long in too much cold an environment. He couldn't fight... But he would give it a try anyway.

His attacker was a foot taller than him, but Rambo tried to use his training anyway. He tried to use one of the moves he knew for that kind of situation, but his attacker anticipated it before Rambo could even try it. He knew Rambo's move even better than Rambo did.

Rambo saw that there were at least four attackers and that they were attacking his entire group. The last of the four went headed toward Ortega's direction, still lying inside his sleeping bag. Only then did Manuel start opening his eyes, when the man was already about to hit him.

"No!" Rambo screamed.

The man was about to kick Ortega in the face.

Panic had taken hold of Rambo by then.

"No! NOOO!"

Ortega woke up completely just in time to receive a kick to his mouth, exactly as Rambo had feared.

To avoid choking, Ortega turned on his side, then puked gauzes and blood.

While he coughed and tried to breathe in vain, he launched a horrible, guttural noise.

A pool of blood appeared under his mouth, and yet he couldn't breathe.

Inside Rambo's mind, those bloody gauzes were the spitting image of Freeman's brains.

Rambo was losing consciousness.

They really looked like the brains of his friend Freeman, a nineteen-year-old factory worker from Illinois, "K.I.A., B.N.R.", meaning '*Killed In Action, Body Not Recovered*'... Because when they returned to the ambush place together with their reinforcements, Rambo and his team mates never found his body.

They just found some gray matter scattered on the ground and nothing else, which is why Freeman was classified as KIA/BNR.

Until the finding of his friend's pieces, a couple of his team mates had suspected that Rambo could have lied about the black guy's whereabouts, in order to hide the fact that he had simply abandoned him to the Vietcong.

But after the finding, on the contrary, no one had any more doubts about Rambo's version of the facts.

But the body was never found.

The Vietcong had taken it away with them and no one ever understood why.

Nowadays his body is probably still there, buried somewhere in the outskirts of the An Khe To province.

In war, even this kind of things can happen.

In war, everything happens.

It was the last thing Rambo thought before passing out.

Manuel Ortega

Four years before the selection process

Ortega decided for the first time to join the army in '63, in front of the television news announcing the murder of the president of the United States.

That afternoon, he was alone in his home because his parents were at his uncle's house.

So Ortega took his chance and drank a couple of his father's beers: an innocent, 'boys' thing, and nothing more than that.

Ortega wasn't a spoilt boy, nor mixed-up or a rebel.

Not that at his age he wasn't still in time to become like that, he just wasn't that kind of guy.

He was a calm boy, maybe a little lonely but peaceful, and surely not the kind of guy you could imagine - one day - running or marching with a rifle in his hands, screaming that '*killing is cool*'.

The only thing that really didn't work inside of him was that he had no enthusiasm for anything.

And that afternoon, he decided to get drunk because he hadn't anything better to do.

The first beer had gone down bitter and disappointing, but cold at least and so, in some way, comforting on such a hot day.

The guy wasn't really good at holding his drink at all. Once he started his second can, the young Ortega felt his head starting to spin already, and the urge to puke too.

Together with the sick feeling, a sense of guiltiness rose up, even though he had probably just drunk too fast, as often happens to those who are not used to drinking alone.

He turned the television on.

It looked like all of the channels (not so many at the time) were all broadcasting just news.

There wasn't even one western movie or cartoon: all of the damn channels just had an anchorman speaking.

At first, Ortega continued to switch between the channels, because he didn't want to watch news at all.

Then he thought that if all of the channels were broadcasting just news, something big had probably happened.

Maybe the Russians had finally launched the bomb for real.

Maybe it was the end of the world.

So Ortega decided to stop, turn the volume up and finally hear what the hell everyone was talking about.

They had killed the president.

Not the president of the Supreme Court or any other kind of president: someone had killed *that* president and they continued repeating it like a hurricane warning.

Someone had killed Kennedy.

Something rose into Ortega's head and seized it, and it was as if the guy was possessed by his own feelings.

The United States...

The United States are the only place in the world where the law grants people the pursuit of happiness.

While in the red countries – instead – the communist governments committed horrible massacres: the Tibetan monks in China, the Russian Gulags... And many others. All in all, while many countries in the world used terror against their own citizens, in the US people just lived to be happy, fuck...And yet, someone had just shot its president.

How the fuck could anyone shoot the President of the United States?

Ortega continued watching incredulous, as if he might have had misunderstood.

And they didn't even shoot a president like many others, but one of the Kennedys... An idealist, a pure of heart, and yet someone shot him in the head just like a fucking injured horse being put down.

Manuel had just drunk two beers he shouldn't have, and someone, that morning, had woken up, loaded a rifle and shot *his* president.

In that exact instant, Ortega saw himself from the outside, and did it so well that it scared him.

He had no enthusiasm for anything, he never devoted himself to anything.

No one in the world would ever have succeeded in forcing him to dedicate himself anything. Had he continued living this way, he would never have done anything good in his whole life.

That was how Ortega decided to join the army.

Had he not drunk those two beers, that afternoon, maybe Kennedy would have survived.

Yes.

Yes because he - those damn two beers – he had drunk them without even opening them.

That was the problem.

He had taken the first one with his mouth, bitten it like a dog, and pierced it with his teeth until it exploded. Then he had gulped down blood and beer all together, sucking from the aluminum blades as sharp as razors, and he did it without even feeling any pain.

He had felt the blades rip his lips and go through his skin, giving him just a vague discomfort together with the consciousness of the damage he was doing to himself, but no real pain.

The first beer mostly tasted of blood.

Once over – and despite the fact his stomach was already turning against him – Ortega immediately started another one as if he was crazy, like a possessed person, and this time his mouth literally crushed.

He could clearly feel that with his cheeks pierced he couldn't suck anymore, because of the air loss caused by the hole cuts he had just made on himself.

Manuel Ortega was now literally drinking his own blood, with an even more bitter taste because of the very little beer that was diluting it.

And while he continued to gulp down that bitter blood, the television continued its litany.

“The President died at...”

Ortega...

ORTEGA

“ I shouted out
Who killed the Kennedys?

When after all...
it was you and me.

Who? Who? Who?”

Rolling Stones, 'Sympathy for the devil'

Fort Bragg

Ortega tried to turn on his side, but someone was holding him in that position already. He was indoors, lying on the floor with his hands tied behind his back. In front of his face there was a little pool made by the blood that had come out from his mouth while he was conscious.

As he regained consciousness, the man immediately released him.

Ortega's mouth was filled with the nauseating taste of blood and the pain was hallucinating.

He would have cried aloud in pain, if it wasn't for the greater pain doing that would have caused to him.

"You are awake, at last" said a voice from above him.

The light in the room was unbearable.

The pain was strong, but the thing he was more worried about at that moment was the feeling that his dream had just given him: inside his chest, his heart was pumping in anguish as if he had just heard about Kennedy's death for the first time. He could feel the same freezing grip inside his chest as that day, the same sense of void, of anguish, as if he was holding an unbearable weight.

The dream had been too clear, too real: in all of his life, he had never experienced any illusion like that before.

Someone told him that the selection process could push you out of your mind: eating on the ground, with no dishes, sleeping an hour each night and 'suicide' daily with too much fatigue... Many had told him, but until then, he had never had any idea about what it really meant.

That dream he had was a real delirium.

'When you have done that selection... You have done everything' someone told him.

'Take care not to end up in one of Trautman's units... That man is ravenous. He's not a man, he's a beast'

And remembering those words, for some reason Ortega calmed down.

"Do you want to quit, Ortega?"

The young man recognized Trautman from his pants: he was the only one that never wore the combat uniform but always the dress one. Ortega almost made the mistake of replying – had he done so, his tongue's pain would have killed him – so he just shook his head.

"You need stitches, Ortega. Stitches we are not going to give you"

Ortega remained silent.

"You could suffer permanent damage, you know... Problems in tasting things taste or articulating some words"

Silence again.

"Your military career could come to an end, because of that. Listen... I have read your file: you are bright. You are not just anybody. You shouldn't let a stupid injury put your whole career at risk. It's not worth it"

Silence.

"Also because this wasn't an accident. It's not your fault. You are now injured only because another fucking recruit went off his head, and you don't deserve this. But in this condition..."

Trautman stooped.

He moved his head near Ortega's and whispered:

"No... You don't deserve this. You are a good soldier. You don't deserve to pay all of your life because of someone else's fault"

Then the colonel got up.

“He will be court martialed, for that. But only if you quit. 'Cause if you don't, obviously it's as he had never done anything to you. We can't put him on trial if you don't quit. And you don't deserve it, Ortega”

But Ortega, who had almost come to his senses by then, didn't fall for it. It was too obvious a trap from someone as smart as Trautman was. Almost ridiculous.

And Trautman, who was smart for real, noticed that barely visible smile on Ortega's face.

“Shit, boy” he said

“You really are in deep shit, now”

The 'machine' was nothing more than a children's wheel with lead weights attached to it using an iron wire, so that turning it required a tremendous amount of effort. Delmore had been making it spin for two hours, by then. Of all the others of his group, Delmore was the last one Trautman and Garner were still making do physical training, because he wasn't exhausted yet.

The water streamed down the colonel's face and the wind lashed it with violence, and yet he didn't show any sign of sensing any of it: the cold, wet or lightning. Trautman wasn't feeling anything at all. "You don't understand" he said to Berry. Then he lowered his face beside Delmore's one, and started following him, walking in the mud together with him. "You don't understand anything"

"Sir" Delmore replied whispering, clenching his teeth from the effort. The fatigue kept him warm, but the colonel had been still for hours. Delmore asked himself how the hell the colonel could stand that. That man was really made of ice.

Berry couldn't hold on like that for long. The wheel was too heavy and every single step he sank deeper into the mud. And walking round and around, every turn always made the situation even worse, so that the wheel was starting to tilt. It risked falling upside down, and onto him. "Sir" said Berry. His lungs were hurting. His arms and back were both hurting, his face was frozen and wet, and the wind never stopped lashing it. The weight of the wheel squashed and pressed his wrists. The pain would probably last for days.

"Sir...."
"Do you want to quit, sir?"
"Sir, I..."
"Do you believe that in Vietnam it's different from here?"
No.
Berry didn't believe that. Nothing in the world could ever be similar to the way he was feeling in that moment.
"You are wrong, soldier" Trautman said, as if he could hear his thoughts.
"You are dead wrong"
Berry slowed his steps, to look into the colonel's eyes in silence.
"Because this time, we are really going to lose this war"
Berry stopped.
"But to lose a war, many have to die"

Trautman's eyes were fixed in the void, staring at the distance, and it was then that Delmore had a flash of inspiration, a revelation. Trautman was a good man. What he was doing to them, that selection... He was living it with them, almost as if he wanted to clear his conscience from what he was doing to all of them. That's why he was wearing such light clothes, he didn't use the poncho-hood so often and had run

and marched for so long together with them. He didn't do all of these things just to stay fit.
No.

In that moment, Trautman was inside the head of every single one of them, and as much inside the heads of those that were still holding on (for now) as in the ones of those that had already quit.

“Why don't you quit?” The colonel asked him.

“Why?”

Because this was just cold, pain and fatigue, for Berry.

Because he had already been in Vietnam, and over there he had found things much worse than what he was experiencing in Fort Bragg.

Most of all, he had left there Alex Roland Simmons.

Him, and many others just like him.

So, to Berry, the cold, fatigue and pain – even if well beyond any common sense – they still weren't serious business at all... Not after having already been in Vietnam.

They were nothing at all.

So he lowered his head and restarted pushing the wheel with his teeth clenched.

And he started slipping on the mud again, as if nothing had changed.

Danforth and Krakauer were the only ones captured already with a lot of bruises all over their bodies, because of the many falls they had had while coming down the 'Valley of Sounds', one week before.

They were thrown on the floor with their hands cuffed and they stayed just there, but Krakauer didn't stop screaming and shaking.

“ASSHOLES, ASSHOLES, ASSHOLES”

He never stopped: he kicked and screamed as if he was crazy.

Garner looked at him as if he was an alien.

Then two men jumped on him, but they couldn't hold him still, not even in two.

“Stop that, soldier”

“YOU BASTARD ASSHOLES, FUCK YOU!”

Krakauer bit the wrist of one of the two men. Garner moved back as if he had seen a raging bull coming out from its pen.

“Holy shit” he said.

The bitten guy moved back too.

One of the guards was holding his wounded wrists, while the other was still fighting against Krakauer.

He tried to jump on the recruit, but only received a kick on the sternum in return, that made him fly to the other side of the room.

Garner turned to run away, but found Danforth in front of him, who head butted him.

The sound it made was really similar to a watermelon falling on the floor.

Garner moved back a little because of the blow and blinked his eyes, but immediately recovered from the shock.

“You don't know anything about survival, do you?” he said to Danforth.

Then he put one hand in one pocket and threw the handcuff keys in front of Danforth's feet.

The recruit looked to the keys puzzled, like an animal in front of a piece of meat that could be bait.

Then he quickly grabbed the keys and moved away from the instructor, while he opened his handcuffs.

Then he threw them to Krakauer.

From the sounds coming from the corridor, Danforth understood that more instructors were coming in.

“They won't take part” Garner said.

And then:

“Come on”

He beckoned the guy to come close, in a gesture of challenge.

Danforth assumed the guard position, just like boxers do.

“Boxing? Oh please...” said Garner.

Danforth looked to Krakauer perplexed.

In reply, Krakauer nodded to him and went out into the corridor to face the instructors that were coming in.

Danforth then hunched his head inside his shoulders and moved towards Garner.

He saw Garner starting a punch, so he moved his body sideways to avoid it... But it was already over. It was over before it could even begin.

Danforth flew across the floor after a half somersault, and with no clue at all about what had just hit him. Then he knocked his head on the floor with such violence that he saw stars.

Garner had 'brushed' him with a kick on his ankles that had literally made him fly away.

The punch he had seen a while before, was just an intentional dummy. Seeing that Danforth probably had boxing experience, Garner kicked him, because in boxing there are no kicks at all. When Danforth was finally OK, he rose to his feet again. Garner smiled a calm smile, almost respectful. "Lesson number one" he said. "When you are captured, never use force... Never ever" The second lesson came almost thrashing Danforth to death. Garner stopped only some minutes later, to ask Danforth if he wished to quit. Danforth replied no. Garner then continued that way almost all night.

Inside one of the huts Garner, with some ice on his hands, was taking stock of the situation.

“Ortega needs stitches on his tongue. Delmore is in stand-by already because of a possible spinal cord injury. While the guy with criminal records... He has a dislocated shoulder. Maybe, this time we'll get rid of him for good.

On the other side, from Team 'A' two arrived unconscious, and one with hypothermia”

Trautman was sat at his desk, in front of some papers, and didn't reply.

“I could say that your selection is over”

Trautman stayed silent again.

“Where do you want to get, colonel?”

Trautman was filling out the modules for the courses.

Every one of them had to learn Vietnamese.

Then he wanted four helicopter pilots and four tank pilots. He wanted special forces soldiers that once on board any chopper, knew what was really going on better than the pilot himself.

They had to be experts about everything that could possibly happen both on and off the field, from the beginning to the end of the mission, and to be even more expert than their own colonel was, or anyone else commanding them at the time.

Because that was the only way to survive, in Vietnam.

Only then, did Trautman stop a while to think about Garner's words.

By now, he already had an idea about who was going to pass the selection and those who wouldn't. In the long run, Rambo could turn out be problem, because of his young age.

But he wasn't doing bad: on the contrary, he was holding on even too well for his young age, and he would probably pass the selection.

His real problem was his head.

He was aggressive, impulsive and solitary, too solitary, and inside the kind of special forces

Trautman was going to create there was no place for solitary types, because when you are in war, a lone man has no meaning. Only team work really matters.

And most of all, he was going to lose it any moment.

Not with his body, but with his mind: he was losing lucidity, and Trautman couldn't afford any fragile men, inside his Baker teams... But it was normal, for his young age.

Maybe he would pass the selection, but it would just be a lucky shot, because his mind had quit already. His mind was beyond the point of no return already.

Trautman knew the kid very little, but he had overheard some phrases mentioned by Rambo, and he had started believing that Rambo had joined the army to run away from home. And if he was right, Rambo had done it in order to run away from a violent father.

Trautman tried to overcome those thoughts.

Whatever the kid's story was, his past or his age, nothing should matter to him.

If he passed the selection, he would join the Baker team. Otherwise, he would go back to his former unit, just like all of the others.

Because that's the way his program worked and that's the way it had to be.

Rambo was going to lose his head any moment, and Trautman's duty, at the time, was to break the boy for good.

“Garner?”

“Yes?”

“I want you to decide about the boy”

“Rambo?”

Trautman nodded.

“And what exactly should I do with him?”

“He is going to lose it. I want you to finally break him. And try to be objective with him, because I can't”

Garner tilted his head a little, puzzled.

“Why?”

“Because he is too good for someone so young. He is too trained, too strong, too motivated. He would be the first to join the SOG at such a young age and I can't be objective about him... Also because I don't give a shit about his age: he is going to lose it with his head. So I want you to finally break him. Take care of him yourself”

“Ok”

Ortega was lying on a table, his hands and feet tied.

He was alone.

Again, they had put a cloth inside his mouth – he could barely breath through it – and he was just lying there, still, waiting for them to come back and start torturing him again.

And in the end, they obviously came for real.

They were holding some buckets.

He felt the water passing through the fabric over his mouth and starting to come in through his nose. He tried to blow it away, but he couldn't catch his breath to do it.

Some water reached his throat, and he retched.

He tried to cough it away, but in trying to do so, he only hurt himself.

Between the gauze for the wound, water and blood, he couldn't cough the water away, he couldn't set his airways free.

He was now short of oxygen.

While he couldn't breathe, Ortega felt that he was dying.

He started shaking his body, but it didn't help.

At this point there was a never-ending, really long pause, then – finally – they set his nose free and only then could he breathe again.

The wheezing sound Ortega finally made was long and horrible.

When he breathed, he stimulated the wound on his tongue and the cloth immediately became red with both blood and water.

He was soaked with freezing water – as if it wasn't cold enough – and he couldn't even scream in pain. He could only mumble, and that too hurt him.

“Quit, Ortega: the SOG doesn't suit you. You don't have what takes to be a leader”

Ortega didn't reply.

Some other water flew inside his throat and Ortega immediately tried to breathe, but it was too late already.

He was short of oxygen again, and again he felt that death was imminent.

I am dying – he thought.

I am really dying.

He started shaking as if he had seizures: it was partly his body trying to set himself free, but the seizures were also involuntary, due to both panic and pain.

Only then did the water stopped flowing and, through the wet cloth, Ortega could finally breathe... Again.

“We don't want you in the SOG”

“We will make your life hell, if you get in. Because you know... We talked about you a lot and we don't like you, as a team leader. We'll take you down, whether you want it or not. That's why you are here rather than in the infirmary, receiving stitches on your tongue. So that, tonight, we can take you down for good. Understood? Look at me...”

I said LOOK AT ME, GODDAMN IT!

GIVE ME SOME MORE WATER, ASSHOLES!

I'LL TAKE YOUR TONGUE OUT, MOTHERFUCKER! I'LL CHOP IT OUT RIGHT NOW. I AM GOING TO TURN YOU INTO A FUCKING CRIPPLE SO THAT YOU WILL NEVER EVER LEAD ONE OF MY FUCKING TEAMS!”

The man put his index finger inside Ortega's mouth and started pressing his wound beneath the wet gauze.

The fabric immediately became drenched in blood, becoming even redder than before. They had re-opened the cut on his tongue

Ortega felt his head pierced by a thousand sharp needles, than he fainted.

Jorgenson was taken by the collar and lifted from the floor.
His jailer – he only wore a black T-shirt, despite the cold – held him around his neck as if he wanted to strangle him.
While lifting him from the floor, his arms were swollen and all of his muscles tense, with the veins in relief, as if going to explode any moment.
Jorgenson tried to put up resistance, but the brute – bigger and taller than him – had no problem in doing with Jorgenson what he pleased.
The strength of his adversary was so unreal that Jorgenson couldn't believe it.
The man carried Jorgenson into the interrogation room painfully holding him by his neck and without ever letting his feet touch the ground.
The lights passed over him like the street lights of a highway
Then he was thrown onto the floor of the room and he could finally really breathe.

Under the powerful light of those lamps he couldn't even keep his eyes open.
It was the fifth consecutive day without sleep for him, but he only really realized it under those lights.
The man lifted him again from the floor, slammed him onto a chair and tied his hands behind his back of the chair.
Every single muscle of Jorgenson's body was ached because of the exaggerated efforts made during that fucking selection.
Outside it was raining – *fuck!* - and never stopped.
The windows of the room had just bars – no glass – and the room temperature was the same as outside: it was evilly, cold and humid too.
The wind howled along the corridors of the empty building.
Stop, now stop.
He really couldn't stand it anymore.
Suddenly Trautman appeared in front of him, but with those lights in his eyes he couldn't see his face.
“Do you know who I am?” he said.
Jorgenson immediately recognized his voice, but at first he couldn't reply, because he could barely breathe. He didn't even have enough strength to speak.
Trautman then grabbed his hair, tipped his head and looked from above.
“Answer me, when I speak to you”
Again, Jorgenson couldn't reply and Trautman let him go.
The boy tilted his head with his eyes half closed because of the strong lights and almost passed out.
He went into some kind of half-sleep, somewhere between dream and reality.
Trautman made a gesture to Gates and he passed him a riding crop.
If there was something that could really hurt Jorgenson at the time it was surely his calves and his stomach muscles, because they are the ones that, after an exaggerated workout, hurt more.
Trautman dealt him a blow on his undefended belly, and using as much strength he could.
The scream was sharp and shrill, and seemed never ending.
Jorgenson used all the breath he had in his chest, and it sounded as if that scream was pain itself trying to exit from his body.
After caught his took breath, he finally said:

“You are Trautman”
“Negative. I am 'the beast', soldier. And you are my enemy”
He gave him another blow and the scream started with re-found, horrible energy.
“NAME AND RANK” Trautman cried.
“Private Carl Jorgenson, 18744121”

“Very good, dickhead. Very good”

Another blow, and again against his legs.

Then the instructor gave him a kick that made him jump up from the ground and fall on his back.

The din was tremendous and the young man was so dazed by lack of sleep and fatigue that he didn't lift his head while falling, thus partly blowing it on the floor.

Trautman then started kicking him.

He was killing him.

After a while Jorgenson was sure of it, and absolutely: his selectors had become crazy.

He was going to die.

It was impossible they were really doing this to him.

It was impossible that Ortega hadn't been transported to hospital yet, or Coletta, with his pneumonia.

They were like possessed and somebody was going to die because of that.

Maybe him.

More blows: a kick to his stomach, then one to his face.

Then Trautman vanished.

Two men untied his legs and lifted him from the floor, while Gates took Trautman's place.

“Here, dickhead” they said.

They put him in front of the window, then pulled his hair in order to force him to look outside.

“You don't want to talk? Very well. Watch this”

Then they shut the lights down.

Everything became dark.

The freezing cold air coming from outside started blowing against his face, awaking him with pain. Jorgenson peered into the darkness, but in the beginning he couldn't see a thing, because his sight was clouded by pain. Then he started seeing something.

A pole. Someone was tied to a pole.

They had tied him in the middle of the square, in the rain, wind and cold.

Jorgenson didn't immediately understand his identity.

The first thing he noticed was the iron wire holding his neck. It was so tight that had he tried to move, he would have strangled himself.

Then he recognized him: it was Coletta.

“No! - Jorgenson cried – NO, NO, NO!”

“Quit, dickhead. You wounded one of yours: quit. Do it and we will take away the pneumonia-sick idiot from the rain. A typhoon is coming, did you know that?”

Jorgenson lowered his gaze, then started crying: sobs, tears and everything else. The last time he had cried had probably been ten years ago - at least - when he was still a child, and that knowledge shocked him even more.

“We don't want you in SOG: quit. Quit and we guarantee that you won't face the court martial for what you have done to private Ortega. Quit...”

“No”

“Quit!”

“No”

They started kicking him.

Gates and someone else continued kicking and punching him, and on his face too, while Gates screamed:

“QUIT, DICKHEAD! PEOPLE ARE DYING OUT THERE!
OUR LADS ARE DYING, DO YOU UNDERSTAND?
THEY DIE BECAUSE THEY ATTACK WITH THE SUN IN THEIR EYES
THEY DIE BECAUSE THEY FORGET THE CORRECT RADIO CODES
BECAUSE THEY SHOOT EACH OTHER BY MISTAKE
BECAUSE THEIR LACES BECOME LOOSE AT THE WRONG TIME
BECAUSE THEY ARE WORRIED ABOUT KILLING CIVILIANS...
And you, dickhead... While all of this is going on out there, you...
YOU CRUSH THE MOUTH OF ONE OF YOURS”

“NOOO”

“YOU SMASHED ONE OF YOURS' FACE BECAUSE YOU WERE TIRED!”

He kicked Jorgenson in his testicles.

“Aaaaaaargh!”

“YOU, TONIGHT, YOU KILLED ONE OF YOURS!”

“NO!”

Gates gave him a punch on his mouth, making him fall to the ground again.
When Jorgenson managed to look up, Gates had a club in his hand.

“You ruined Ortega's test and you are killing Coletta. This is the last time I tell you: quit”

At this point, Jorgenson really wanted to quit, but he couldn't.
He thought of Mary and his father's sawmill – where he had worked for years, since he was a child -
and how much he needed that military career to live with her.

Mary's image never faded away from him.

Jorgenson wanted a house, marriage, some kids.

He wanted to marry his wife, but without no needing the approval of that shit-head general her father was.

And the only way he could do it, was going abroad, for the pay.

Because he would never have had any career at all in the marines, not with such a powerful enemy as Mary's father was amongst the bigwigs, an enemy who was always doing anything in his power to prevent the affair between him and his daughter.

No...

He needed the SOG.

He had no other choice.

It was in that exact moment that Jorgenson made his decision.

And that decision was that he was ready to die, if it was necessary to pass that selection.

To die now.

“Quit” Gates repeated.

“No”

Jorgenson took a moment to breathe.

“Never” he added.

Gates then hit him again and continued hitting him with his club until Jorgenson finally fainted.

The rain continued to fall from the dark sky.
Rambo was kneeling at the center of the muddy square, his hands tied in front of him.
He was trembling.
His head was bent over his tied hands, like a prayer.
Gates was standing behind him. Garner on the contrary was in front of him holding a night stick.

“We won't take you, Johnny”
Rambo lifted his gaze, as if he had just awoken from a dream.
“You are too young. Those who have passed the selection were all born in '43, you would be the only one born in '47. You are too young. Accepting you here was a mistake”

Rambo started moving his chest up and down, shaking a no with his head, like a Jew in front of the western wall.
To make him stop, Garner gave him a blow on his chest with his night stick.
The pain ran through Rambo's entire body like an electricity charge, then exploded inside his throat, taking his breath away.
When he could finally breathe again, Rambo screamed.
A nasal scream, and desperate.
Garner then came even closer to him, while Gates stayed behind, as a guard.

“You did good during this selection process, but you are simply too young. I don't know if you are really as good as the others, or if yours is just will power... But I have no room for mistakes. Because if I do wrong, someone in Vietnam could die because of you. You can understand that Rambo. Don't you?”

“No”
Garner shook his head.
“You are rejected Rambo. Go away. And you can go away too, Gates. We don't need you anymore”

In the meantime, Trautman arrived unseen behind both.
He was wrapped up inside his poncho while the rain continued relentlessly.
“No” Rambo sobbed.

Then he tried to raise his hands in Garner's direction, but he just received a night stick blow on his fingers in return, and he went back down.

“Enough Rambo: you are rejected. You can come back next year”
“No, no, no...” Said Rambo kneeling, then he burst into tears, his belly shaking with sobs, his head lying on his hands, as though praying.
Garner leaned down to him
“Why Rambo? Why are you doing all of this? You are too young. You are going to die in Vietnam, if you are sent back over there”
“No, no...”
“You don't know what the SOG really is... None of you really knows”

At that point it was Trautman – from behind both of them – that talked.

“Do you know what happens if we take the wrong people, Johnny?”
“Of course you know” Garner pressed him.
“Did you know that every time we choose someone we are probably sentencing him to death? Or worse”

“Sometimes, even worse”

“No, I beg you, no...”

“WHY, JOHNNY?” Trautman screamed, exhausted by then.

“TELL ME WHY! TELL MY WHY YOU WANT TO DIE IN VIETNAM! TELL ME! TELL ME WHO THE FUCK YOU REALLY ARE”

“I DON'T KNOW WHO I AM!”

Trautman backed away astounded, and Garner with him.
Then they both stayed still.

“Don't send me back home” Rambo was talking without looking him in the eyes, as if talking on his own.

“I don't want to go back home, please”

Then he closed his eyes and started shaking his head.

“I can't go back home. I really can't. You should kill me rather than that, but don't send me back home”

Rambo lowered his head to offer it to the night stick.
Garner rose his weapon to hit again, but stopped in mid air.
The boy was about to say more.

“I don't have another life; only this one. Go ahead and kill me Garner, but don't send me home”

Garner then slowly lowered his night stick, as if he was hypnotized.
The colonel was too.

They both looked at the kid and when he turned to them, they finally met his gaze.
Garner felt like he was falling into an abyss, because it was the truth...
Everything Rambo had just said was the truth.

In order to make the army become his whole life he was ready to die... And the Special Forces were probably the only way he had at disposal to do so.
Garner continued looking into those eyes, but felt unconformable.
There was something inside those eyes... Some kind of abyss.
He had seen many in such a bad state, but only in Vietnam, never during a selection process.
The boy was broken. Even more, he was momentarily crazy.
In Fort Bragg, all of his past recruits had quit long before reaching that kind of point-of-no-return that Rambo had just crossed and yet, he was still holding on.
It was the first time in his life Garner had ever seen anyone holding on for so long after that point.
Rambo would have never surrender, no matter what else was going to happen, or for how long.
And if he was ready to die for a selection program, God only knew what he could possibly do to accomplish a mission in Vietnam. Or to save himself, or his friends.
And there was something innocent too, in his gaze.
Rambo's acceptance of anything else they were about to do him was complete, almost heroic.
For a moment, Garner suspected that the kid really hadn't any home at all to return to, and that what Rambo had just said wasn't just a phrase.
At this point, Garner suddenly returned to reality.

He looked then in Trautman's direction, but inside the colonel's ice-cold eyes he found no answer
Trautman gave him the duty to decide about the boy, and a pact was a pact.

Garner then asked himself what his real duty was on that selection program, and his duty was to have no mercy, in order to be sure to send to Vietnam only men that were fit for the situation... Fit for *everything*.

So he raised the night stick again.

“All right, Rambo... you won't go back home” he said.

And he hit him again, and many times.

Manuel Ortega awoke lying on the ground.

He was soaking wet.

His hands were tied behind his back and he was shaking like a leaf. His teeth were shaking too and every single movement he made gave him a sharp pain in his tongue.

The cold was making him retch.

Had he puked with the gauzes inside his mouth, he was at risk of suffocating.

Ortega didn't want to die, he hadn't joined the selection program to die, on the contrary... Maybe, he had joined to be less expendable than the other common soldiers. To be more *precious*, just like Johnny suggested to him a life-time ago, by then.

He had no idea how much longer the selection was going to last, but after he had been tortured on the wound on his tongue, for the first time he had started thinking about quitting for real.

At the moment, however, he was mostly worried about dying.

Don't puke – he continued repeating himself.

Don't die.

Trautman came in through the door. He stopped a while to look at Ortega.

Then said:

“You have suffered permanent damage to your tongue, Ortega. But legally, we can't reject you, if you don't quit yourself. But I wouldn't do that. Your disability is going to have more value if you join the Special Forces”

Ortega turned vaguely in Trautman's direction.

“But put yourself in my shoes: dismissed right after joining... It doesn't sound so fair. Resign, Ortega. Quit now because you are never going to join the special forces anyway. You are a disabled man”

Ortega shrugged on the floor, as if he couldn't care less.

Trautman kicked him on his stomach.

Ortega tensed and closed his eyes.

“The next will be on your mouth, Ortega. Don't make me do it. I don't want to do it”

Ortega turned on the other side, to show him his hands tied behind his back, and then gave him the middle finger.

Trautman's face became red.

He started snorting in rage, then looked at his watch.

He breathed for a while, undecided whether to give him another kick or not.

It was the hour, by then.

It was two in the morning, on Wednesday the twenty fifth, nineteen-sixty-seven.

Trautman stooped calmly over him, then said in a low voice:

“Congratulations, lieutenant”

Then he got up.

“Welcome on board”

Coletta was still in the rain, tied to the pole.

The iron wire was tied so hard around his neck that it pressed deep into his skin.

He had puked on himself twice already, and by then he was all dirty with it.

He was soaking wet, shaking, coughing and stinking, while the rain never stopped battering on his head, and the wind blowing against his wet clothes.

He could clearly feel the fluid inside his lungs, a symptom of pneumonia. He had constant shivers and very bad nausea.

How could he... How did he get in such bad condition?

All of that selection process should have been within his reach: the fatigue, hunger, cold... He had gone through all of that already, when he was child and used to go hunting with his father: he had always endured everything, and the cold too.

What would his father have told him, had he been there with him?

You have been beaten by the clothes thing, Ricardo. A trivial matter of clothes and it's a shame, because you could have done it. You could have passed that selection, and you would have deserved it.

Physically, you were up to it. The problem is that no mistake goes unpunished, in this life.

I've told you a thousand times: no mistake goes unpunished.

Maybe, this time, you will finally remember it for good.

Behind him, hidden behind the corner of the building, where no one could see him – Gates talked into his ear.

He had to raise his voice because the storm was becoming a real thunderstorm.

“Quit, Coletta”

But he didn't reply.

“You have fluid inside your lungs. You have bronchial pneumonia and you are in hypothermia”

“No” said Coletta.

“You are dying, this is no failure. Dying for a selection is senseless. It's not worth it. It's better to die on the field, isn't it? You didn't pass the cold resistance test: there's no failure in that. There are no ways of training for cold resistance. No one would say a thing”

“G-g-go and f-f-uck yourself, sir”

Gates looked at him.

“You are dying Coletta. If you don't pull out now, you'll pass out and die. Do you think you are the first rookie we'll lose?”

Coletta didn't reply.

Gates clearly saw him take a breath and then renounce replying, as if he couldn't even speak.

Then he closed his eyes and fell asleep with his neck still held by the iron wire.

Gates would have to take him away from there before he could suffocate on his own puke, or his fever became real pneumonia.

So he came out from the corner he was hiding behind, and went close to him.

Coletta had really fainted this time, and for good.

Gates shook his head.

Then he looked at his wrist-watch and even if Coletta couldn't hear him, he said:

“Congratulations, Coletta”

Then he smiled.

“You did it, dickhead”

Trautman and Gates walked past the two cells where Danforth and Krakauer were locked in. They were both unconscious

“And these two?” Gates asked.

Trautman looked at them.

They were the two fools that had dared to come down the Valley of Sounds. Had there been anybody that had risked their lives for real, during that selection process, it wasn't Coletta with his onset of pneumonia, nor Ortega with his little cut on his tongue.

No...

The only ones that had risked really hurting themselves were these two fools, one of whom had a criminal record too.

Trautman wanted to reject them both, but then he remembered the oath he took with himself:

'Let the selection process judge them, not you'.

“Yes” he said.

“Are you sure?” Gates asked.

“Yes, they are in. Both of them”

Trautman stopped to look at them a while longer, asking himself if they were going to give him any trouble in the future, and how much.

Then he continued along the corridor.

The 'survivors' of the selection process were walked inside some kind of hangar-hospital. The few that could run, ran., Rambo and Ortega were carried in by helping hands, Danforth, Krakauer and Coletta were carried in on a stretcher.

Inside the hangar the temperature was really high. Those who had no need of medical attention immediately lay on a bed, and a real one, at last. Many lay with their clothes still on, without even pulling the sheets over themselves. Ortega was carried inside the operating room, Coletta to intensive care, Danforth and Krakauer simply to the infirmary. Rambo and Jorgenson, instead, stopped a while at the window, to watch the thunderstorm outside the hangar.

A good and proper thunderstorm was raging over Fort Bragg's huts. The sky was full of anger, that night. A black whirlwind was spinning in the dark sky over the base, showing no signs of calming down at all. It was a spectacle for sure, but none of the recruits stayed at the windows for long.

After a glance through the window, Rambo and Jorgenson turned as though hypnotized, then they both went to their beds. They barely removed their clothes and slowly got in under the sheets. Every muscle of their bodies beat them with pain.

Rambo sighed and closed his eyes immediately .

Jorgenson first felt the sheets touching his skin, then the warmth that started to spread as a warm fluid poured all over his body, and he thought that that sensation, in that moment, was even better than sex.

After a few seconds, both the two young men fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, while outside the storm continued to vent its anger. It had been a long selection process, but now it was over. At last, Trautman had his two teams.

BAKER TEAM

Berry “Snake” Delmore

Manuel “Skorpio” Ortega

Carl “Grizzly” Jorgenson

Ricardo “Sniper” Coletta

Daniel “Doc” Messner

John “Raven” Rambo

Joseph “Eagle” Danforth

Lawrence “Tiger” Krakauer

Samuel “Covey leader” Trautman

RAMBO YEAR ONE

THE END

Dear reader,

What you have just read was the first novel in a saga.

The next volume, called BAKER TEAM, features the team's one and a half of year's training in Fort Bragg, plus their first mission in Vietnam, and at the end of this book you will find a short preview of it.

In other words, you have read *nothing yet*.

So yes, my friends...

This is just the beginning.

Despite the very cool cover and the English translation, YEAR ONE is nothing more than fanfiction. But whether official, unofficial, self-made or really published.... Does it really matter? Because if you are reading these lines, it means that you liked this book, and that's enough for me.

The real problem, is the English translation.

I will certainly freeshare the whole, five-book saga in Italian language but, frankly speaking, I can't promise I will translate all of it into English, because this would stop me from writing anything else for the next three years, at least. And since I am not doing this for money, I can't make any promises. I have to earn my living like anyone else, and translating this book was a REAL job, and for months.

I can take on such a commitment again - for years, this time - but it largely depends on the success of this first volume.

In other words, it's up to you.

And – of course – on David Morrell too.

Morrell is a kind person and a legendary writer and I will never thank him enough for allowing me to freeshare YEAR ONE.

He is the only one in the world legally allowed to write and publish about Rambo, so the last word on my work is his and will always be.

Can such an awesome writer possibly like my tribute to his characters? I don't think so for real - because he is such a better writer than I am -, but it's something good to dream about, isn't it?

So, let's dream.

Going back to us, I will email a personalized and hand-signed version of YEAR ONE to everyone reviewing it on any website, blog, videoblog, etc.

And don't forget to press the 'like' button on the Facebook page of this book, ok? It's also the best way for you to know if I'll ever decide to translate the second volume too.

So, to get your hand-signed copy of YEAR ONE, send me the link of your reviews to:

ramboyearone@gmail.com

That's it, guys.

I've been working on this saga for more than two years now, and I am doing all of this for free, so at least let me know that you are out there, each one of you, if you want to read the next book too.

Don't leave me alone.

Stay with me.

You are the only real reason I wrote this.

And now...

Let's enjoy the YEAR ONE extras: the '*History episodes behind the Rambo movies*', the '*Trautman's opinion about the Vietnam war*' and a short preview of the second of my books, featuring the Baker team's first fight.

Wallace Lee, 30/3/2015

DOCUMENTS

Real history behind the Rambo movies

Disclaimer:

What you are going to read is just the author's opinion after years of interest in the Vietnam War. While the author surely was in good faith while writing it, we can't exclude some less-important inaccuracies or that any of his sources were wrong.

Images were taken from the Internet and are used here just as reference, copyright (if any) is of their respective owners. This is just a freeshare work, no copyright infringement intended.

FIRST BLOOD

During the first movie, the homeless veteran John Rambo escapes from the police in the woods above the town. While the police prepare to chase him using all of their men, Rambo decides to defend himself.

The traps that Rambo sets up against the police are real Vietcong booby traps that can actually be set up in a hurry, just using a knife, a cord and some branches, which are the only objects Rambo had at his disposal in the movie.

During the Vietnam War, U.S. soldiers were trained to avoid these kinds of traps, but some special forces units – such as the SOG – were trained to set them up in a short amount of time, just like Stallone does in the movie.

In the drawing on the left, the so-called 'whip trap'. It can be made using bamboo sticks or using a hard stick and one cord, as Rambo does.

In the movie, we don't see Rambo preparing it but its effects.



The real unit that inspired the Rambo character – but in the movie is never mentioned – was called MacVsog

Most of MacVsog soldiers came from the Fifth Special Forces that at the time used to train men in Fort Bragg, just like as the movie says. Another piece of evidence is the green beret worn by Trautman himself, sporting a Fifth Special Forces flash.

The SOG (which were the MacV special forces teams) were soldiers specially trained to run illegal missions inside neutral countries or behind enemy lines, sometimes even disguising themselves

wearing Vietcong clothes.

They were used to move inside hostile territories and avoid contact with the enemy, which in most cases would have showed up in larger numbers and so, it would have turned into a death sentence for soldiers.

During those kinds of missions, their survival was mostly based on their skills in avoiding detection.

In other words, when we see Rambo hiding and avoiding the police in the woods, he is doing something he had spent years training for.

The existence of SOG teams was denied by the U.S. Government until about ten years after the war because their missions were against the international rules of war.

On the previous page, you can see the unofficial SOG symbol and its flash version for the combat uniform. Note that Trautman wears the same beret that the skull in the SOG's symbol does. Rambo and Trautman surely belonged to the SOG.

When reality goes beyond fantasy...

Below is an identification card of SOG personnel, the unit that commanded SOG teams.

Even if we never see it in any Rambo movie, Trautman surely had one of those during the Vietnam War, and it was too interesting to not talk about it here.

This card is the historical proof of how unique in the world – and somewhat surrealistic – the MacV was: a proper and real unit out of any rule, and the SOG teams were its armed wing.

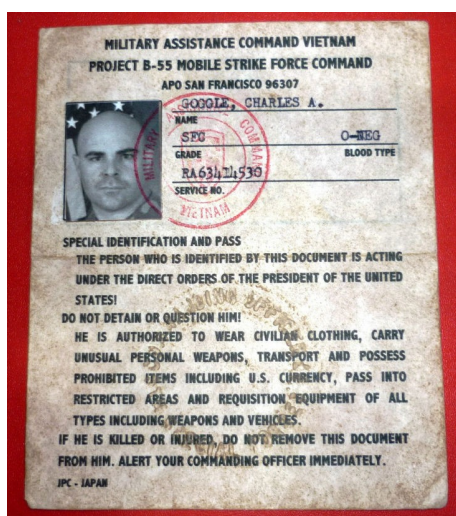
The card – which is genuine – says:

“The person who is identified by this document is acting under the direct order of the president of the united States!

He is authorized to wear civilian clothing, carry unusual personal weapons, transport and possess prohibited items including U.S. Currency, pass into restricted areas and requisition equipment of all types including weapons and vehicles.

If he is killed or injured, do not remove this document from him. Alert your commanding officer immediately”

Americans were forbidden from using dollars in Vietnam because doing so could destroy the country's economy. *'To possess and carry prohibited items'* is a permission to act out of the laws of war.



During his escape from the police, Rambo is eventually located and chased. He then gets stuck on the top of a very high cliff, but decides to jump using the tops of the trees to lessen his fall.

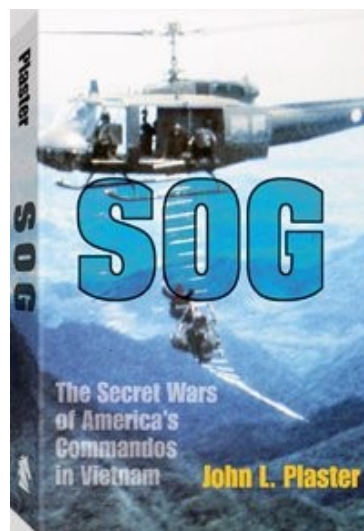
The famous **jump scene** really happened during the Vietnam War, and it happened to a MacVsog team, according to one of author John Plaster's books.

A SOG team, located in hostile territory and chased by a full Vietcong battalion (eight soldiers followed by something like one hundred enemies) found themselves stuck on the top of a high cliff. When faced with the possibility of being captured or killed, the soldiers jumped from the cliff, hoping to use the triple canopy jungle to lessen the fall.

Once on the ground and under the very thick jungle, they were also out of the line of sight of their chasers, who couldn't do anything more than blindly shoot in their direction.

No Vietcong dared to jump to continue chasing them.

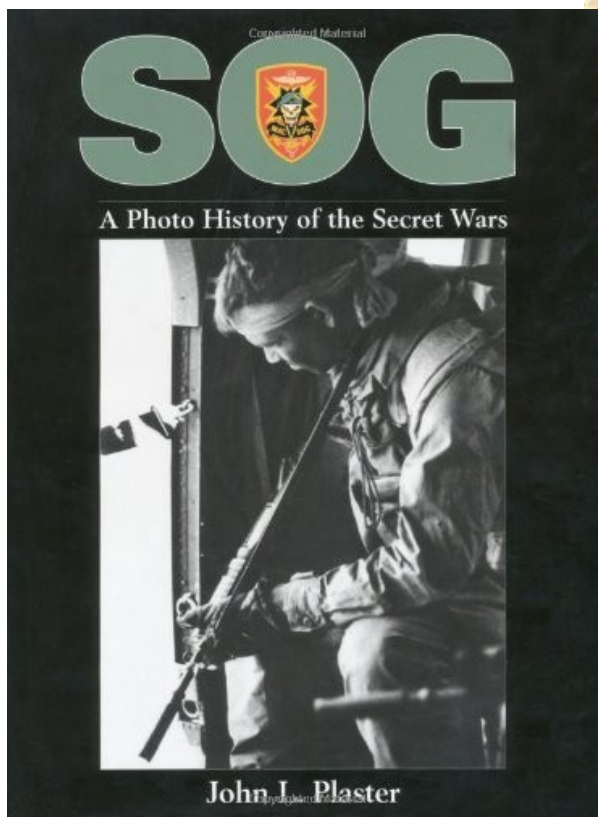
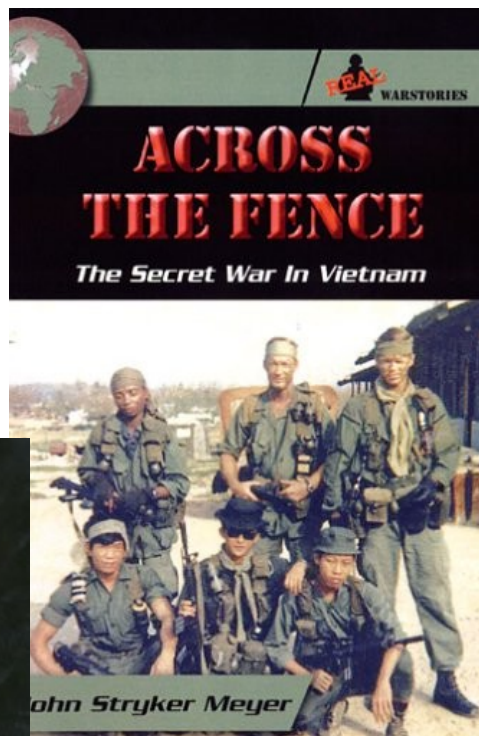
All of the soldiers injured themselves in the fall, but they all returned to their base alive.



The legend says that the famous knife used in the first movie was added by Sylvester Stallone (Morrell's book doesn't mention any survival knife at all) which - again - was taken from reality. **Hollow handle knives** were really used during the Vietnam War, mostly by SOG. Originally born to keep matches dry and supplied to airplane pilots faced with the possibility of being shot down, they were used by SOG because their mission situations were thought similar to downed pilots escaping from the enemy: a struggle to survive while chased by their adversaries. The hollow handle – other than being a place to hold small objects – could be used to make a spear, which is what Rambo does when he goes hunting during the first movie. *Below on the left, is a knife that was really used in Vietnam. On the right is the one used in the movie. They obviously share many features.*



The famous **band** that Rambo wears is not fictional and he wasn't the only one that used to use it. It was commonly used in Southeast countries to work and the Americans used it too. When a soldier runs a mission in a dangerous place - as high mountains or the jungle - the best way to survive is adopting some local customs. Even if in war movies you don't see it very often, the truth is that it was popular between US soldiers, and even more between Special Forces soldiers. *These two books show, in their cover art, stills of green berets at the time.*



The famous radio scene:
***“Got himself killed in 'Nam, didn't even know it”*”**

The American war ended in 1973, but some death dates go beyond the end of the war: 1975, 1979 and, sometimes, they go up to the nineties.

The war was over, but the deaths were still going on and in some cases they are still going on right now.

In fact, one of the many veterans that in those two years helped me to write this book, he too is currently sick and at risk of ending up with his name on Vietnam's memorial wall.

But how can a war continue killing after it's over from so many years?

The famous 'radio scene' of the first Rambo movie – maybe one of the best movie scenes in movie history – refers to one cancer in particular, because Berry Delmore *'brought it home from Vietnam'*. It's an obvious reference to the terrible issue of Agent Orange, one of the darkest pages of the Vietnam War, an issue that gave birth to a real conscience crisis in all of the United States, and it's something people still talk about and work on even nowadays.

Agent Orange was a chemical herbicide that the Americans used to destroy the vegetation, mostly by spraying it from civilian airplanes.

Leveling to the ground whole acres of terrain made it impossible for the Vietcong to hide in the jungle, and this became an important part of the American strategy during the war.

But then, both soldiers and civilians on both sides started to get cancer or other related illnesses.

Even today, in Vietnam, there are many cases of babies with malformations, leukemia or cancer related to herbicides used during the sixties, and many non-governmental organizations are actually working to both help the sick and clean up the soil.

Many think the U.S. knew Agent Orange was so toxic and yet continued to use it for both economical and military reasons, but this is just another urban legend.

During the sixties, the scientific community had yet to discover that cigarettes can cause cancer, so it should be no surprise that they underestimated Agent Orange's possible danger.

As soon as the first doubts started rising up, the military immediately changed to other chemicals, while the war was still going on.

On the contrary to what many think, Agent Orange wasn't so devastating itself, but because of the way it was produced. The toxicity was due to the dioxin that ended up in it during the production process, not because of Agent Orange itself.

In other words, it was so devastating because it was not as pure as it should have been.

And this is also the reason why it took so long for scientists to understand what was wrong with it, because they continued to study the pure chemical, not what was really inside the drums.

Either way, its consequences were dreadful.

The 'wound' opened by Agent Orange is one of those still open today and even the U.S. is still having many troubles recovering from it.

The keywords to study in depth on the Internet is “AGENT ORANGE”, but beware and don't use this words on an image search engine because the result is a series of really disturbing baby malformations.



RAMBO II



The first military unit in warfare history that used the **HALO parachute jump (High Altitude - Low Opening)**, was the MacVsog, in Vietnam.

The adventurous jump in the beginning of the second Rambo movie (despite the fact that it's a standard jump, not a HALO one) is some kind of fictional tribute to the dangers that SOG soldiers put themselves into when they used HALO jumps for the very first time in war.

Every SOG soldier **could really speak Vietnamese**, just like Rambo does during the movie. The language course was standard during SOG training.

Language knowledge was necessary to fight together with local forces. If captured, SOG soldiers used to pretend they couldn't understand the Vietnamese, so that they could listen to their guard's conversations without them having any clue about it.

Of all of the weapons in Rambo's armory the bow has always been seen as the most fictional of his weapon, but it's not.

The 'military bow' was really used by SOG soldiers during their missions, and the one you see in the movies is quite similar to the real one used in Vietnam.

We have already explained that when a team was located over the border, it usually also meant being captured or killed. However, sometimes engaging the enemy was necessary to accomplish the mission. In the jungle the vegetation is thick and if the mission forced the team to strike first it was possible that to get a line of sight on the enemy, SOG soldiers had to get as close to the enemy as just to ten feet away. During the sixties, silenced (suppressed) weapons were already available, but real world silenced weapons are much louder than movies use to show.



At short distances, the bow is more difficult to aim, but much more silent.

So, when SOG soldiers had to get really close to their enemies, they used a compound bow, just like Rambo does.

The only difference between the one used in the movies and the real one is that the real one was collapsible, while the one used in Rambo II needs a wrench to be prepared to shoot.

The explosive arrows, on the contrary, are entirely fictional: they were never used in Vietnam or after the war.

Even in this case we can't talk about pure fantasy, because in theory they can be built using C4 explosives, which is exactly the kind of explosive Rambo screenwriters had in mind when they created them for the second movie plot.

The confirm it's C4 is the ticking we hear before Rambo shoots them: it's a not-so-spectacular detail, but that makes the scene much more believable.

In fact, the C4 explosive can't explode on impact, but it needs an electrical input in order to detonate, so the ticking we hear in the movie is probably a secondary device made to make the arrow detonate even if it strikes a target too soft to trigger the main primer.

Whatever way the timer works, the bow's quietness makes it impossible to locate the shooter.

This is something most Rambo II viewers don't understand and so it created many misunderstandings with the public at large. How is it possible that a whole army responds to Rambo's fire without ever hitting him? The reason is that when Rambo shoots his explosive arrows, he is hidden in the jungle. This, together with bow quietness, makes him completely impossible to find.

So it surely is an exaggerated scene, but the presence of so many believable details is quite rare in the action genre.

Setting fire to the elephant grass is a military tactic that was really used during the Vietnam War. The 'elephant grass' is a Vietnamese kind of grass that is usually six feet tall or a little more. Inside this kind of grass, complete groups of people can literally disappear. Despite the fact that elephant grass is not bulletproof, it can make people become invisible anyway. Setting the grass on fire was a technique used to force the enemy to come out into the open. History books tell us that this technique was often used by the Vietcong against SOG teams. They surrounded them and then set the grass on fire. In the second Rambo movie there's a change of parts: Rambo uses this technique against the soldiers chasing him.



We have seen that the hollow knife was really used during the Vietnam War, but what can we say about the most famous saw-back in the world?

The knife with a chainsaw-like saw-back comes from fantasy, but there are a few interesting things that can be said about it.

This kind of knife was never well respected between survivalists nor the military, mostly because when it stabs it uses to get stuck inside the target because of the hook shape of the saw-back's teeth.



According to an Internet rumor, that's exactly what happened to a British soldier that used to carry an official licensed Rambo II knife on the battlefield during the Falkland war (yes, you have read right).

It seems that after having hit the enemy, he had to leave the knife in place because being in a hurry he had no time to get it out from the enemy's body.

That soldier obviously did not receive Trautman's training.

The correct way to use the Rambo knife, is hitting the enemy and then, once you have 'hooked' the enemy, use it to drag him where you wish.

To extract the knife, you only have to rotate the wrist in the correct direction, exactly like any Baker teams member were trained to.

You can see Rambo dragging an enemy to the ground right after the famous Rambo II radio scene (*"Murdock... I am coming to get you"*).

During the Vietnam War, those who were prisoners at the hands of the Vietcong were moved quite often to avoid being located by US forces, just like as it happens during the second Rambo movie.

During the Vietnam War none of the long-before-planned rescue raids ever freed any American prisoner of war. And this was due to the presence of a mole right inside the macVsog, which used to warn the Vietcong before any raids took place.

Here below: at the end of a rescue mission, soldiers examine some cages that were filled with US POWs until some minutes before their attack.



There is a scene in the movie during which Rambo arrives at the camp and he '*shouldn't find any POWs at all*': this scene painfully remembers something that actually happened too many times during the Vietnam War

The mole inside the MacVsog was never found and after many failed attempts, many started to think it was the CIA brass heads – or the US government itself - that used to sabotage any POW rescue attempt for unknown reasons at the time.

The Rambo II plot revolves around these themes, creating a confusing mix of reality and fiction.

During Rambo II, Trautman doesn't work with SOG, but with the Delta Force. Why?

The MacVSOG was disbanded in the middle of fierce controversies when the war was still going on (1970). Newspapers discovered that some U.S. special forces used to fight violating the international laws of war, and since the war was already unpopular in the United States, the military decided to disband the SOG.

Between the accusations against US Special Forces, there was the fighting the Vietcong on the soil of neutral countries, to act using irregular battle dress uniforms and to commit homicide between the civilians. In fact, the SOG really used to do all of these things because they were perfectly normal in the context of a civil war, where your enemies have no uniforms and follow no rule at all. For ten years the US denied that the SOG had ever existed, but the US laws say that after a certain number of years, any secret has to be declassified.

So in the eighties everything concerning SOG became public and SOG found its way into the history books.

And that's the way we discovered that the Delta Force was born from the SOG's ashes.

The Delta Force is a military unit specialized in anti-terrorism warfare and info gathering on enemy soil. Delta Force soldiers are as much soldiers as they are spies.

Most of the military personnel that created the Delta Force had a past with the SOG. Fighting strategies and methods, at least in the beginning, mostly came from the Vietnam War experience.



But the Delta Force connection doesn't stop here.

The Rambo II mission is inspired by a famous eighties urban legend regarding an alleged really-happened intelligence mission which featured US Special Forces soldiers infiltrating Vietnam.

Then years after the end of the Vietnam War, many think a Delta Force team was really investigating the idea that the Vietnamese were still holding a number of US POWs.

This suspect made many American families suffer for many years after the end of the war because many soldiers never came back from their missions (the 'missing in action') and nothing is known about their fate. Did they die while fighting? Were they captured then killed?

Regarding many of them, we will never know. They simply vanished into nothing, and during the eighties the Delta Force was investigating those cases, as Eric L. Haney admitted. Haney is a former Delta Force member and co-founder, but he denied that the mission ever received a green light (*"Two times the mission was in 'stand-by' condition"*).

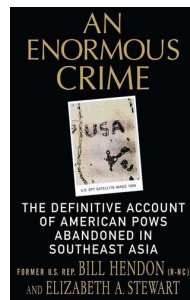
This was the starting point used by James Cameron (the 'Terminator', 'Titanic' and Avatar's director) to write the script for the second Rambo movie.

The movie puts on the big screen a fantasy version of the urban legend that circulated at the time regarding this alleged 'info gathering mission'.

Even if holding prisoners forever – denying their existence – doesn't have any meaning at all from a strictly military/strategic point of view, there is a small chance this truly happened.

The book 'An Enormous Crime' by Bill Hendon and Elizabeth Stewart, despite NOT being written using a correct historical/scientific method (it correctly describes the facts, but takes conclusions with too much freedom, clearly 'forgetting' that ANY war produces a lot of missing in action), it is an interesting book because it finally explains once for all why so many people were absolutely sure that the Vietnamese were still holding US POWs after the end of the war.

Also, it exactly explains the same theory that the Murdock character has in the movie.



Speaking the truth it's a possible theory (even if it lacks any evidence at all, so it's nothing more than a pure idea) for two reasons.

The first is that the US pulls out from the Vietnam while the conflict is still going on, even if North Vietnam denies it (Nixon said that had North Vietnam attacked the South again, the US would have come back to Vietnam). So, the POWs could still be of some use.

The second reason is that it had already happened in the past.

For example, it happened to an Italian soldier after WWI.

Captured from the Russians in civilian clothes - because he was a Special Forces soldier – he was considered a common criminal and the Italians were never notified about his capture.

His family was notified that he was still alive only when – after Stalin's death – the Russians wished to have better relationships with foreign countries. They admitted that he was alive and a prisoner only ten years after his capture, without giving any explanation about it and with great damage to his family, that by then thought him dead for many years.

Something similar could have happened in Vietnam too, and somewhat 'because' of the US themselves.

Between '65 and '67, the MacVsoG ran illegal missions on neutral countries' soil like Cambodia and Laos. Soldiers took off their official uniforms and dog tags, and absolutely acted underground. In case they were captured, their commanders denied to have ordered them any mission at all, thus leaving their men to their destinies. Soldiers were fully aware of this, and accepted the risk.

Between experts soldiers, the Vietnam War looked like a desperate war from the very first moment, and the idea of sacrifices like these once looked like nothing more than one of the natural consequences of such a desperate situation. In this way the US acted over the Vietnam border (Laos, Cambodia and – at a later date – in North Vietnam too), avoiding the risk of being judged by the



international public and most of all not giving the Russians an excuse to start a nuclear war.

From the third Rambo movie:

"I want you to know up front that if you are captured or killed, or if any of this leaks we'll deny any participation or even knowledge of your existence "

And Rambo replies:

"I am used to it"

In case of capture, soldiers were trained to act as if they were mercenaries, smugglers or anything else, and the Vietcong didn't consider them soldiers.

After the United States pulled out, the lie had no reason to exist anymore, but – after years spent lying - it would be too late for their captors to believe to the truth.

Anyway, there is no evidence at all that this has ever happened.

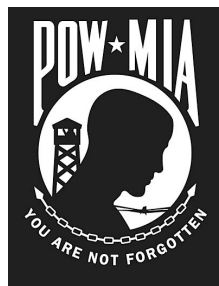
Whatever the Special Forces used to say to their captors, the Vietcong usually treated them as US soldiers just because they were Americans.

And whatever happened to those missing, most of them just died on difficult terrain or faraway places, and their location was then lost.

Regarding the prisoners captured but then 'lost' by their captors, the most believable thing is that they were tortured, killed and made disappear for public image reasons. In other words, to forbid them to tell the world what the Vietcong had done to them.

Keeping prisoners alive for decades, denying their existence, is expensive and has no military value, which is the reason the American government and historians alike think that none of this had ever happened until anyone show evidence to the contrary.

And in the end, almost forty years from the end of the conflict, no one has ever produced anything similar to evidence that anything of this has ever happened.



Here above is the logo of the non-governmental organizations that still investigate the destinies of the missing in action.

History episodes behind Year One

Berry Delmore and the Apache sniper

In the first chapter, Berry Delmore meets the Apache female sniper. During the Vietnam War the direct witnesses of this female soldier and her methods were many. The episode told by Year One is the same event told by Carlos Hatchock in one of his books. The phrases told by Apache, in particular, are exactly the same as the ones told in reality, and I actually have seen the photo of an assumed Apache victim that received castration.

Anyway, not all historians agree on the fact that Apache really existed. Some think it was just an urban legend born from some photos that the Vietcong used to leave on the field to terrify the US soldiers. The photos depicted soldiers that had received the same torture described in my novel and you can also find on the Internet but I strongly suggest avoiding searching them.

Whether Apache really existed or not, tortures like the ones described were really used, and the strategic impasse lived by Berry Delmore happened many times.

Vietcong snipers often tried to make the US soldiers nervous in order to force them out from their shelters.

It seems that the Apache sniper story influenced director Stanley Kubrick too.

In the end of his 'Full Metal Jacket', a female sniper shoots some soldiers rather than killing them - and she does it on purpose – to shoot their rescuers too. Many snipers, even nowadays, still use this tactic.

Some think that Kubrick was inspired in both the strategy for his sniper and the fact that she was a female rather than a man.

In 'Apocalypse now' we can also see a scene where the Vietcong insult the Americans from far away, hoping to force them to make a mistake.

The keywords to study in deep the subject of the Apache sniper are:

“APACHE VIETCONG SNIPER”

Whether she existed or not, leaving horribly mutilated bodies on the battlefield was a practice that belonged to the tactic of 'psychological warfare'. As the Vietcong started doing it, some US soldiers did it as well and inside history books, both the armies accused each other of doing such a practice. The keywords to deepen the subject are “VIETCONG PSYCOLOGICAL WARFARE”.

On the left, a real female Vietcong soldier of age, and on the right, the one in Kubrick's movie.



John Rambo and the hill defense

In the second chapter of the book, Rambo tells a North Vietnamese Army frontal assault to a hill. The basic NVA tactic was to get the nearer to the US soldiers without being seen, and engaging them the nearest they could.

Opening fire so close prevented the Americans from defending themselves using helicopters, airplanes and artillery, because of the too high risk of friendly fire incidents.

Then the Vietcong attacked all at once even using hand to hand combat when necessary, and hoping to win mostly because of their larger number.

This was a bloody strategy for both sides, but the only one that let the Vietcong compensate (even if not completely) for the American technological superiority.

Anyway, Rambo makes a mistake in this chapter: the NVA never intentionally used artillery on his own assaulting troops. What he saw can be explained with an unintentional friendly fire episode or an optic illusion. Anyway, as often happens during war, we will probably never know what he really saw that day.

The key words to deepen the subject are “HUMAN WAVE ATTACK”, which is the technical term that describes this strategy.

Here below, a sketch that portrays a human wave frontal assault featuring the Germans against the Russians during World War Two.



Manuel Ortega and his first leave

The US didn't go in South East Asia to fight a conventional warfare but a civil one, where most of the enemies didn't use any official uniform at all, at least in the beginning.

It was a war that often didn't have any real battlefield and many of the losses reported were lost during terrorist or sniper attacks, because of mines or booby traps, and sometimes even because of homicides.

More than a war by weapons, it was a real war of nerves.

The character of Manuel Ortega has difficulties in relating with other people and suffers from insomnia, nightmares and optic illusions similar to real hallucinations.

It's an accurate description of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which was an issue that hit (and still hits) many veterans.

The truth is that it always existed (even during wars in the past) but the US realized it for the first time during the Vietnam War.

The keywords to deepen the subject are “POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER”

PTSD is a problem that can stay for the duration of the life of a subject, particularly in those that don't receive professional help.



The real SOG and the Baker team

The Baker team is a fictional SOG team. While his tactics and purposes are the same of the real SOG, Trautman's teams are in many ways different from the real SOG, so you shouldn't confuse the real deal with the one in this book.

The two most important differences are about secrecy and recruitment.

The real SOG was MUCH more secret than the one described in the novel, and it never had it's own selection process and training program.

Also, Trauman recruits from both the army and the navy, which is something no special forces corps ever did.

The real SOG used to take his personnel only between Special Forces veterans that had already ran a certain number of highest-risk missions in Vietnam. This latter was the most important factor in choosing SOG personnel.

In Vietnam it was common practice to take note about how many times any soldiers had volunteered for high-risk missions. At the seventh time, the special forces soldier was secretly contacted by macVsog personnel. No one volunteered for the SOG because only who was 'inside' already knew about its existence.

The multiple high-risk missions veteran was then acknowledged about SOG purposes and the covert nature of its operations, and then asked if he wished to join.

If he accepted he was taken away from his former unit and sent to a SOG team, while 'officially' he was assigned to the secret services.

In YEAR ONE, Trautman tries to make the SOG become a brand new special forces branch and even if this never happened, it's not so far from historical truth, because after the end of the war and the SOG's disbandment, the SOG born again under a different name (DELTA FORCE).

Also worth a mention is the fact that during their history, the US armed forces have always been open to any kind of innovation.

The SOG itself have been one of the most innovative units of all the times, experimenting weapons and tactics that nowadays could make you smile a little (rocket pistols, sound tricks to fool the enemy, etc.). They were also famous for the almost complete freedom of action the MacV gave to their teams with regards to planning and executing their missions.

The keyword to deepen the subject is “MacVsog”.

Being a secret unit, the SOG hadn't any official symbol, but soldiers gave it one anyway. They paid Saigon stall tailors to sew it up for them, paying with their own money. These handmade patches were worn during conventional warfare missions, not the covert ones.

Here below, a genuine one:



**“Soldiers fight. Green berets slip inside houses
and kill the enemies in front of their families”**

Here Trautman is referring to the famous Phoenix Program, the controversial program of search, capture and aimed-murders with which the C.I.A. tried to destroy the Vietcong structure hiding between the South Vietnamese civilians.

Contrary to what most movies and even some books say, the Phoenix program was mostly ran by South Vietnamese officials and gave very good results, to the point that near the end of the US involvement, the Vietcong irregular movement was almost inexistent and the Vietnam conflict was (almost) just a conventional conflict (which is also the reason why, today, many think that if the US had just continued fighting for another couple of years, it would have probably won).

On the other side, the Phoenix Program created collateral damages also.

The number of civilians wrongly accused grew larger and larger every year, up to outrageous levels. Moreover, many prisoner - no matter if guilty or innocent - were tortured and then arbitrary killed by the South Vietnamese police.

At a certain point during the war, someone found the existence of the program and it became public. A journalist discovered one of those 'aimed' executions and a SOG colonel went under trial for murder.

'Apocalypse Now' clearly mentions the episode in the beginning of the movie, during the pre-mission briefing during which Willard is explained who the Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando) is.

Kurtz belonged to the 'Fifth Special Forces' (as Trautman does during the first movie). Also, his background clearly shows the usual SOG activities: to enlist local civilians, fight on neutral countries' soil and commit murders without any 'collateral damage' concerns.

The trial for murder – the real one, the so called 'Green Beret affair'- led then to the closure of the SOG.

Many are still talking about the effectiveness and doubtful morality of the Phoenix Program , even today.

The keyword to deepen the subject on the Internet, is “PHOENIX PROGRAM”.

The Phoenix Program's symbol was a phoenix with a parchment inside his beak, but it was never really used. Its spies exclusively worked in secret and wearing the insignia of a dangerous and hated program would have been suicide, which is why many think that this symbol didn't even exist during war-time, but was created only later, after the war was already over.



Ortega and the water boarding torture

Water boarding is a famous torture method particularly effective thanks to the fact that the water, getting inside the respiratory system, creates a feeling of 'imminent death' that is a terrible challenge for the victim's mind.

'Water boarding' is currently forbidden by the international laws of war, together with other kind of tortures which create permanent psychological damage to those they are used on (water boarding victims can dream of going again through the torture even after many years that the real events took place).

In Year One, Trautman uses water boarding on Ortega because he has to 'have already been through' what could happen to him if he is captured.

During the sixties, there still was nothing similar to the idea of 'permanent psychological damage' and exaggerating during training was a common use.

The keyword to deepen the subject on the Internet is: "WATERBOARD TORTURE".

A US soldier and a Vietnamese soldier torturing a Vietcong suspect, 1968.



**“They dropped the napalm on him...
Even if he was one of us”**

The episode told by Rambo in this chapter is real and similar to other episodes that happened many times both during the Vietnam War and other wars.

US soldiers defended their bases by constantly sending out little reconnaissance teams to locate the Vietcong before they could get close, thus hoping to prevent a close range attack.

If reconnaissance teams located large numbered enemies - or particularly well-armed – it could be necessary to shell or bomb them as soon as possible, in order to prevent a larger close range battle that could result in a massacre.

The patrol would then receive the order of withdraw, but under enemy fire it's often difficult to withdraw both quickly and safely.

If the situation was really bad with regard of the base, the zone could be razed to the ground with napalm too soon, even if that would have probably killed those who were still stuck there because of the firefight.

Those kinds of episodes - despite generally being rare – did happen. Usually it's difficult to find any inside history books or movies because they belong to the most painful secrets of any war and commanders forced to give these kinds of orders were then destined to live their lives with this burden.

The episode told by Rambo here comes from the database of www.pownetwork.org, which is a website that collects the stories of every single Missing In Action of the Vietnam War.

The soldier killed during that particular episode couldn't retreat fast enough and was killed by an intentional friendly-fire, exactly as Rambo tells in this novel.

When I finally decided to include that episode inside my book, I had foolishly forgotten the missing in action soldier's name by then, and between the hundreds of names in the database, I never found it again, and this is the reason I can't write his name here.

My apologies.



The usual look of a napalm explosion. It looked like liquid fire mixing upward in the air, just as liquid was the petroleum jelly that produced it.

**Trautman's opinion about the Vietnam War:
A conflict's time-line**

1954-1960

After about ten years of colonial civil war, France surrenders and retreats.

The country is split in two: North Vietnam is ruled by a communist regime and South Vietnam is under a bloody right-wing catholic dictatorship.

War changes, but it's always the same: at first, the communists were fighting against the French for freedom, now they are fighting to unify North and South Vietnam under a communist dictatorship.

The civil war in the South is immediate and violent; terrorism, bombs and attacks of all kinds are a daily matter. The weapons of the Vietminh (the North Vietnamese communist party) are mostly massacres and 'aimed' homicides, but also include gun smuggling, slavery, corruption and others.

Even though the Vietminh existed for many years and was the same movement that had just defeated the French, the US introduced it to the world as something new, and so gives it a new name. The Vietcong has been 'born' (which is a pejorative slang for 'Vietnamese communists'). In the meantime, the US starts arming South Vietnam and sending its first and very few 'military advisors'.

The job of the first US personnel on the field is to 'advise' the South Vietnamese forces, but without being personally involved in the fights.

1961

The Vietcong movement is still partisan with a few arms, and very old.

Guerrilla fighters mostly use rickety weapons from WWII and, sometimes, even some very dangerous (for themselves) handmade ones.

Nevertheless, they also start using US made weapons, which they receive from the South Vietnamese Army itself, thanks to rampant corruption.

Once armed as needed, the Vietcong infiltrates villages and the countryside and takes control using violence.

Once in power they force people - including the elderly, women and children - to work for them, turning peaceful villages into communist war bases.

They take away money and food, commit homicide to 'make an example' and force children to handle guns and ammunition to help them, because 'everyone has to help as he can'.

Many civilians will die in the process, but the communists don't care and most of the people just obey out of fear.

The South Vietnamese Army (ARVN, meaning *Army of the Republic of Vietnam*) starts receiving even more US weapons.

The US passes tanks, helicopters, and military airplanes to the bloody right-wing Diem's regime, while the situation for the civilians is getting worse day by day, and the Vietcong-occupied villages start being a real problem.

As a response to this, the South Vietnamese government forces an enormous number of civilians – who used to live inside rural villages from millennia – to move inside rotten flats made of cement on the outskirts of the largest cities, recently built with the purpose of '*taking the countrymen away from the hands of the Vietcong*'

It's a deportation, plain and simple, and as such it will cost many human lives. During those forced

marches, thousands die because of hardship, starvation and diseases.

And in some cases, in the aftermath of those deportations Diem uses US airplanes to bomb the 'emptied' villages.

But the real problem is that Diem doesn't really strike the villages occupied by the Vietcong.

Most of all, he gets rid of the ethnic enemy, in order to both avoid an all out war against the Vietminh – who he reverently fears – and make his dictatorship stronger.

The Diem family is Catholic and other than the enemy ethnics, they also hit religious minorities.

The Buddhists in particular suffer all kinds of abuse from the regime.

Day by day, the Buddhist protests inside the South's greatest cities become more and more intense until demonstrative suicides start to show up.

The photos of the Tibetan monks setting themselves on fire in front of the horrified eyes of international journalists travel all over the world, and these demonstrative suicides are against the US too because they are backing and arming Diem.

The US tolerates the inhuman behavior of the dictator because his regime is weak.

The military, politicians, police and various ethnics fight against each other to take Diem's place in power and then rule South Vietnam. Every single one of these factions is a real party on its own, but the strongest in the chaos are always the Vietcong, and if Diem falls, the communists will take the power for sure.

So the US thinks they have no choice other than backing Diem, but the civilian Vietnamese will never forget the US backed this bloody, corrupt and racist dictator.

This will create a break-up between the US and the Vietnamese that will last for the duration of the war, and it's still an open wound even today.

1962

Despite the complete lack of results, the US continues to send funds and weapons to the South Vietnamese government, and increases the number of military advisors to large numbers.

But none of these measures succeeds in changing the situation.

There are two main problems:

Almost fifty per cent of the US weapons sent to South Vietnam end up in the hands of the communist because of the rampant corruption in South Vietnam and of the enormous black market (which is almost entirely in the hands of the Vietcong).

In Hollywood war movies you don't see that – it would be a too much of a bitter pill to swallow – but the truth is that during this initial phase, the most widespread weapon between the Vietcong is soon to become the ultra-modern M-16.

Weapons, ammunitions, practically everything – but airplanes – end up in the hands of the Vietcong.

The South Vietnamese government seems to consider this phenomenon to be 'necessary' to avoid the collapse of their armed forces:

“We either let our soldiers get rich smuggling weapons to the communists, or they will become communists, too”.

The second problem is that the South Vietnamese army doesn't really fight against the Vietcong because *'The US won't let them win anyway'*. Their interest goes to other matters.

The Ap Bac battle is the first open-field battle between the Vietcong and the South Vietnamese Army.

The South Vietnamese forces can count on US rifles, machine guns, artillery, tanks, paratroopers and helicopters with unlimited ammo at their disposal.

On the other side, the Vietcong are few, with little training and are barely armed, and during the battle they pick up their own cartridge-cases from the ground because they are too expensive to be left in the field.

Despite the ARVN superiority in weapons, means and numbers, the Vietcong get rid of the situation by causing a lot of casualties, destroying millions of dollars of equipments and successfully fleeing the scene before it's too late.

The Ap Bac defeat is stinging and unreal, even more so because it happens while Kennedy is still receiving optimistic reports about the situation.

Obviously, there's something amiss.

Someone is lying.

The largest part of the US military says that the victory in South Vietnam is imminent and shows optimism. On the other side an active minority says exactly the contrary.

They say that the situation is desperate and that the South Vietnamese regime is hanging by a thread. To those, the whole country is on the brink of anarchy and the US should leave it to its own destiny before it's too late.

This difference of opinions reflects a fracture inside the US military that, with time, will worsen.

On one side, there are the '*war hawks*', which methodically use lies to persuade the US to end the 'military advisors phase' and send their first fighting-troops in Vietnam.

In order to get a war to fight (and fight it *now*), the hawks are ready to do anything, and they do it all.

They even lie to the US president and they feel no shame in doing that.

They think that with US troops on the ground, the war will be fast and easy.

On the other side of the barricade there are the '*rebels*', which are the ones that always say the truth, never keep their mouths shut about the abyss the US is at risk of sinking in, and often use their truths as a weapon against the war hawks.

By then, Trautman is openly siding with the rebels and in 1962 he is sent to Vietnam for the first time, as a military advisor for the ARVN.

Between those 'rebels', Samuel Trautman is a real extremist.

He thinks that disguising reports or being 'less pessimists' is equal to lying to the president, and so something not so different to high treason.

Also because lying about the war is something for '*dickheads, and dickeheads of the dangerous kind*', because '*You can lie about the war if you want to, but first or later war will make you pay for it. When you are at war, no mistake stays unpunished*'.

There is no way to come to an agreement with the principles of the colonel.

In '63 - while he is still in Vietnam - the hate against him spreads between the war hawks in a flash, like gasoline on fire.

In the meantime, in the US, Kennedy has no idea where the truth is, because he is surrounded by advisors who give him opposing advice.

The relationship between the two 'parties' inside the armed forces is destined to get worse, until it will become a plain and simple feud.

1963

The US, sick and tired of the violence against the civilians and seeing the Vietcong armed with US weapons, finally stops backing Diem's rule.

The same day the US ambassador ratifies the decision to Diem's government, riots start everywhere.

The military coup d'etat has begun.

Diem, trying to escape by then, is killed by an overzealous police officer.

The event leaves a deep mark on Kennedy, because he had met Diem in the past and he had expressly ordered the South Vietnamese to make sure no harm came to him.

Diem's place is then taken by an army general.

The new South Vietnamese government immediately stops deportations and senseless massacres against its own civilians, but by then hate has taken root.

In the meantime, the Vietcong movement has enlarged its ranks also because of Diem's cruelties. The consensus for communists has reached worrying levels and his forces are now owning some complete territories, even if they are little and few.

But Kennedy has caught on.

It is obvious that the military has lied to him and he is starting to evaluate reducing the US effort: less funds, less weapons, less advisors and no US troops will be sent in.

November 22, 1963: in Dallas, an unknown shooter puts a bullet into the United States President's head.

Kennedy instantly dies in front of a horrified crowd.

The vice president Lyndon Johnson takes his place for the remaining time of his mandate.

Two months later, Johnson will send the first battalion of US marines in Vietnam.

Despite the fact that the conflict is older than two decades, for the US people *'the Vietnam War has broke'*.

1964 -1965, the war 'breaks out'

The US military superiority is unquestionable, and yet something is not working because the fights turn out bloodier than expected.

In the Ia Drang battle alone – the first frontal battle between the US and the North Vietnamese - two hundred US marines die in two days, and more problems start showing up.

North Vietnam is using some territories of two neutral countries (Laos and Cambodia) as a 'highway' to send men, weapons and ammunition from the North to the South. It's the so-called *'Ho Chi Minh Trail'*.

Laos and Cambodia – both with shaky regimes just like Vietnam had – tolerate their invasions to avoid a direct confrontation with the NVA/VC, which they would lose for sure.

While occupying Laos and Cambodia territories, the NVA resorts to the usual violence against the civilians.

Whatever their methods, thanks to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, North Vietnam starts sending whole divisions of regular soldiers to the South who are destined to flank the Vietcong.

Stronger, better trained and better armed than the Vietcong, the North Vietnamese are real soldiers, not just terrorists.

A bit at a time, the famous AK starts being the rifle in the hands of the Vietcong and the khaki North Vietnamese uniforms start showing up in the jungle more than ever.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail is an obvious violation of the peace accords signed by North Vietnam just a few years before, but the international press doesn't see any scandal in that. The communists' habit of violating any accord (and just the day after they have signed it) is going to become a constant of the war. You don't have to read this as an act of cowardice, but as a cold-blood, well-thought out strategy.

North Vietnam signs an accord and the Vietcong makes just the contrary, taking full advantage of the following surprise effect.

And when faced with the accusation of violating their own accords, North Vietnam always replies that it has no control on guerrilla fighters in South Vietnam.

Obviously, it's a farce.

Giap is using diplomacy to create a diversion on the battlefield.

He has no interest in any kind of peace with a Vietnam split in two, and until violating the accords will causes a surprise-effect on the battlefield, he will continue doing that.

Nowadays, as an example of this attitude, we must remember the Tet offensive, when the Vietcong launched an enormous offensive during a just-signed religious truce.

But the Tet offensive wasn't the first time the communists did something like that; it was just the biggest at that point, and in the following years they would do it again, many times.

Despite the fact that the North Vietnamese government is saying one thing and doing the contrary, the international press seems to have no interest in being critical of it.

On the contrary, the press' behavior with regards of the US army is quite the opposite.

It becomes more and more openly contrary to any US military action, and this has its consequence on the Ho Chi Minh Trail too.

Finding a US soldier in Laos would sound like discovering one fighting in Switzerland, and for the journalists it's a juicy occasion.

On the contrary, the communists continue using the Ho Chi Minh Trail almost publicly, but undisturbed.

As a result of this, the Vietcong start building up real strongholds in both Laos and Cambodia, which they use to launch both terrorist and military attacks against the South (the so-called '*sanctuaries*').

The advantage the communists get from the Ho Chi Minh Trail is so significant that it changes the course of the whole war: the more the trail works and expands itself, the stronger the Vietcong in the South become.

So the US are forced to react, and for the first time in the conflict they start launching undercover, illegal missions over the border.

The SOG is born.

On the other side, the bombing and fights caused by SOG generates another war in both Laos and Cambodia, because the Vietminh can't afford to lose these territories, and it reacts with strength.

The Pathet Lao and Krom are born, which are the pro-Russian Laotian and Cambodian communists parties, respectively, whose soldiers are going to become the 'personal' Vietcong of both Laos and Cambodia.

In the meantime, the Sovietic Union (USSR), fearing that the US could change the course of the war, starts sending weapons and ammunitions to the Vietcong.

The conflict is assuming different terms and the adversaries start being larger and more daring.

Trautman, during the two years he spent in Vietnam as a military advisor, dared to give to the public too many disturbing truths, thus making himself too many enemies between the bigwigs.

As a measure against him, he is judged '*too much distinguished*' to stay on the field and is sent back to Fort Bragg, with the task of creating a new kind of special forces specifically shaped to fight the new kind of war the US is facing on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

So the colonel is forced to leave both his US and Vietnamese friends while they needed him the most, and for that reason he hated his higher ranks even more.

The first of his enemies was his direct commander, General Loyd, one of the worst war hawks out there.

Anyway, once back in Fort Bragg, Trautman gives his best in his new role, as he always did.

It's 1966 and the brass heads are still daring to declare themselves optimists in public, but the truth is that there still aren't any results all, and the only real measure taken by Johnson - without any intelligent change of strategy - is sending more soldiers and equipment.

And this, obviously, doesn't produce any result at all.

1967

The war grows worse, becoming even more expensive and bloody, and the US starts showing traces of its influence on his own soil.

Pacifist protests become more frequent and intense: people are demonstrating against their own government, and this, in US history, has never happened before.

Soldiers returning home from the front-line – and there are many by then – tell their families a view of the war that is too different from the official one - and people know very well who is lying.

However, for a US citizen facing the outright lies of his homeland, it is a plain trauma.

Most of the guilty party belongs to the military and their lies. The South Vietnamese regime still isn't a democracy worth defending, the Vietcong are not few and badly armed, and the war won't be short and easy.

The war will be long, hard and - most of all – it can be lost, and because of the lies of the war hawks, the US people find that simple truth on their own, and with horror.

Trautman is in Fort Bragg for two years, and the final draft of his personal brand new special forces training is nearly ready.

Until then, the SOG used to recruit personnel from other Special Forces branches, but Trautman – for the first time – is creating two teams specifically developed for SOG, and thus trying to make it a brand new Special Forces branch.

He conceived and got approval for an innovative training program partly based on the hardness he lived on his own when he fought in Korea, and partly on the brand new scenarios offered by the Vietnam War, like the fight against the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Even with regard of his training program, Trautman had to deal with the political opinions of the war hawks.

To them, the colonel '*pain in the ass*' Trautman, was so pessimist about the war that he found his way to have a successful career independently from the real outcome of war.

Because, however the war could turn in the future, it would have been difficult to evaluate the

impact of a training program, and many thought this was Trautman's real reason for it. They interpreted the colonel like this because they used to think this way in the first place, and they couldn't even imagine that a high ranking officer – like Trautman – was interested in anything other than his own career. The war hawks hadn't understood anything about the colonel or the Vietnam War.

The Baker teams were preparing to fight on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. This meant fighting behind enemy lines, with almost no technology and mostly on their own. Such an idea of fighting wasn't really popular during the sixties (but to the contrary) and this was the reason – in the colonel's opinion – a conventional training would have just killed his men. Trautman wanted soldiers capable of sneaking behind enemy lines in small teams, that could then hit the enemy and vanish into thin air. He wanted soldiers who could destroy the enemy chain of command on the eve of the battle. These kinds of ideas were extraneous to the military of that period and difficult to understand by people who didn't know anything about the unusual kind of war that was going on in Vietnam.

During the sixties, the US armed forces had just fallen in love with technology, firepower, helicopters and electronics. Some thought that, one day, the new means (like radars, airplanes and eventually atomic bombs) would have done everything, leaving no more roles to the infantry. Creating a unit specialized in surviving and fighting on their own - and eventually without any equipment at their disposal - was contrary to everything the military of this age believed in. In fact, Trautman's reasoning was simple: if the Vietcong could fight with nothing and yet put South Vietnam - armed with the best US weapons - in a difficult situation, he wanted men capable of doing the same.

In the beginning, those ideas were difficult to receive even for the Baker teams guys. More than training, it became a real brainwash to them. At first, they all had to learn Vietnamese in order to fight beside the Montagnards. Then, the colonel wanted at least one tank driver and a helicopter pilot for each team. His teams should have been capable of doing anything and acknowledge every aspect of every discipline, in order to plan their missions on their own. Until then, no one had ever conceived such a unit before. The two Trautman Baker teams were, in some way, a dream come true for him. He was going to create something that had never existed before.

VOLUME TWO:

RAMBO YEAR ONE

BAKER TEAM

The first mission of the Baker team

- a short preview -

A year and an half of training later, in Vietnam

“Fuck, fuck, fuck” cried Krakauer from the hold door of the Huey helicopter, looking to the void below him.

The helicopter at their side – with Ortega, Rambo, Jorgenson and Delmore on board – was falling down, and while Krakauer was looking at that horrible show, deep inside his heart he knew there was nothing in the world he could do to avoid it.

After a long, never-ending while of free fall, the Huey helicopter crashed a little below the top of the hill, sliding then down on its side.

At the impact, the cockpit jolted. It flexed and straightened in an instant, as if it were the face of a boxer hit by a hook, not a machine.

The blades smashed themselves on the ground and slowly stopped rotating. The beast had just stopped breathing.

Seen from above, it was a horrible show.

“Fuck” Krakauer cried again, but this time his tone had faded.

But the helicopter didn't explode.

It smoked but it wasn't on fire. It hadn't become a fireball, so there could be survivors.

Shortly thereafter – as if down there someone had listened to his thoughts – Krakauer saw something moving.

Someone (maybe Johnny?) was trying to come out from the wreck.

Messner, from the back, said:

“If I just could go down there, to see if anybody is hurt”

“Here they are. Fuck! Here they are the fucking VC!” cried Krakauer, who then started shooting down on to them with the M60.

He started a long, never ending burst, as if there were no tomorrow.

“Fucking assholes”

The helicopter had crashed in the clearing on top of the hill and Krakauer was shooting at the borders of the hill's base, where the vegetation was thicker.

He had to keep the Vietcong away from the wreck.

He aimed where he could see leaves moving, small clouds of smoke or any other kind of smoke in the middle of the jungle, but the truth was that he couldn't see a thing and was shifting his aim intuitively.

Coletta moved Messner away and started pointing his sniper rifle below.

The enemies were hiding in the jungle for sure, where they couldn't be seen from above.

To the Vietcong, shooting the wreck was like shooting at some cats in a basket: they would have continued their shooting range practice until all of the fallen Baker team members were dead.

At the hold door of the helicopter, Krakauer was shooting again and again, aiming at everything while Coletta, with his sniper rifle, was constantly checking their surroundings using his rifle scope. “Coletta, stop spotting and start shooting” said Danforth. “Or rather, let's throw some bombs on their dickheads”

Coletta put his rifle down, took an M-16 and started firing, emptying his first magazine.

Messner took a claymore, but they weren't in the right position to throw it: it would land too close to the wreck.

Then an RPG rocket rose up, flying toward them.

It climbed up fast, reached them and passed over them in the blink of an eye, missing their helicopter, but only just.

It was Krakauer – who was then at the machine gun – who saw it passing closest.

The rocket had climbed up from the jungle beneath them as fast as a bullet, and it took so little to

reach and pass them that when Krakauer realized what had just happened, everything was already over.

“Holy shit” he cried, and then instinctively jumped backward.

Danforth barely made in time to hear a hiss and see a trail of smoke beneath them, that the rocket had passed already.

Whatever, it had missed.

“Jesus Christ, let's get out of here” said Krakauer, starting shooting again, but with less energy than before.

The white RPG trail was still there in air, right in front of him.

“We have not located our objective yet” Danforth screamed.

“The enemy battalion is somewhere down there. I know it”

“Let's go away, fuck”

“THE MISSION IS NOT ACCOMPLISHED!”

A bullet pierced the steel floor beneath Coletta's feet, passing just between him and Krakauer

“Shit” the marksman said, looking between his legs.

“Jesus” said Messner, trying to hide behind the hood.

Another bullet pierced the cockpit's windshield, right beside Danforth's head.

“Holy fuck” .

Then a whole burst hit the flank of the helicopter and this time a bullet pierced Danforth's shoulder.

“AAARGH!” he cried.

Danforth put his hand on his arm and some blood immediately started squirting between his fingers.

An electronic alarm started to sound inside the hood, fast and shrill: PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU...

Some system necessary to flight had been hit. The helicopter couldn't fly anymore and that was its way to cry it aloud to the rest of the world.

PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU-

It was a so loud and shrill sound that it was enough to make anyone panic, not to mention the situation.

“We are hit” the pilot cried turning behind a little.

Then he spoke into the microphone, raising the volume of his voice so on the other side of the radio they could hear him despite the sound of that devilish alarm. The receivers of the transmission would have heard it for sure, and everyone in every US base knew what that sound meant.

-PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU...

-

“Zulu Twelve to base three: we are hit. Preparing for re-entry”

PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU...

“Roger that, Zulu Twelve. Preparing the base for an emergency landing. Can you fly?”

The pilot didn't know it, so he ignored the question. What he was sure about was that one chopper was already on the ground and if they were going down, too, no one would have covered them from above.

So the pilot said:

“Zulu twelve requesting backup now. Prepare yourself for coordinates”

PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU...

“Roger that Zulu Twelve. Go on”

-

While the pilot was passing coordinates, Danforth screamed:

“We are not sure of the enemy battalion's whereabouts!”

PIU-PIU-PIU-PIU...

“We must save our mates” Messner screamed.

“I am doing it – said the pilot -. The commands are now responding. We can stay”

Then he stretched one hand upward, pressed a button and that devilish alarm finally stopped ringing.

Then Messner cried:

“Eagle! We have to leave the mission and try to save the ours! We can still save them!”

It was truth and Danforth knew it, but the mission... The mission was going to fail, and he couldn't afford it.

So he turned to the pilot.

“Let's get back and accomplish the mission. That's an order, soldier”

“Fuck!” cursed Krakauer.

“EAGLE! - screamed Messner – NOW STOP, EAGLE! JUST STOP! We have already lost one chopper and four of ours! We can't lose two choppers and a whole Baker team just to locate a fucking VC battalion. Stop!”

“The mission...”

“We have a chopper down and a damaged one! You are wounded yourself ! Losses are going to exceed the value of the mission, do you understand that, Eagle? Enough! Let's leave the NVA alone and think only to save the ours! And do it now, or we are going to lose them for good! I have already seen this happening before and I don't want to see it again! I don't want to lose them, Eagle!”

-

All of a sudden, Joseph Danforth came back to reality.

He looked to his shoulder.

The blood squirting between his fingers was really too much.

His arm was completely wet already and the hand he was using to hold the wound was almost glued to the uniform.

He took it away for a little while, just to take a peek of the bullet hole in his arm.

The uniform was irregularly open, as if a fire cracker had exploded inside his biceps.

The hole was more or less eight millimeters large, and inside the wound he saw a red and black tangle of muscles and nerves squirting blood all around.

Danforth swallowed that vision as a bitter pill.

It was then that he understood he wasn't lucid and that he was making a mistake.

Messner was right: no one had ever said that they had to accomplish the mission at any cost.

Four men were almost lost already, and he - persisting in searching the enemy battalion - was putting a second helicopter at risk, too.

Trautman was risking to lose a whole Baker team during his first mission...

But was it possible? Was it really happening?

Sure it was.

All things considered, during the two years spent in Fort Bragg, Trautman told them many times that something like this could happen, one day.

Sometimes, being the 'best' simply isn't of any use at all.

You will always cross a larger numbered enemy on the field, or better armed or simply luckier than you are.

Always.

Because war is not a fucking sport, where everyone starts the same.

And that's the reason being the best won't save you if you won't use your heads.

“Yes, I am wounded” said Joseph, mostly to himself.

So Messner addressed the pilot.

“You: give the coordinates to the Phantoms: we are gonna cover our own down there until they are safe and sound. From now on, our mission is them”

The pilot started talking on the radio.

Even if the helicopter was damaged, they were going to stay there, in *loop*, doing everything they could.

They were going to stay there covering them and fighting for them until they could rescue Rambo, Ortega and all of the others... Dead or alive.

*“ The men you risk your life with,
they are not just friends*

they are brothers ”

Anonimous, 1969

RAMBO YEAR ONE

BAKER TEAM

- coming soon -

THANKS

First of all, a very special thanks goes to David Morrell.

He didn't only create a myth, but also allowed me to use it for free-share.

Thank you.

I know this may sound odd, but I sincerely hope you will enjoy this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

This is a tribute to what you created.

Then a VERY special thank goes to Mary Bottazzi and Piero Costanzi, the friend who introduced her to me. Without Mary's tremendous amount of revision for free of my very bad English, this book would never have 'reached' the world, not in its English version. But it did.

The translation worked out, and this is a dream come true for me, and I will never thank her enough for that.

Now, before I go on with the other thanks, let me explain a couple of things.

When it's time to thank people at the end of their novels, writers usually say: *'there are too many people I would like to thank, so I will just mention some'*.

Well...

Sad to say, but in this particular case there are very few.

Writers believe in things that don't exist, and they do so much that they change their lives because of these un-existing things.

But if you think about it, this falls perfectly under the definition of *craziness*.

So, if you aren't a famous and rich writer, people usually try to stop you from writing, because they think that working so much on things only existing inside your mind... Is insane.

And the fact that I was working on a free-share Rambo prequel made the situation even worse. I suspect that some of my friends secretly thought of hospitalizing me by force.

Anyway, at some point the whole world was telling me that I should stop: the fans (*it's too good: change the copyrighted names and sell it*), the few fellow writers who I dared to confess to (*Rambo? Seriously? Are you drunk?*), my personal friends (*you are a good writer, don't waste it*), my family (*stop wasting your time*).

Everyone I dared to tell, replied the same: *'Stop before it's too late. You have written a whole novel already!'*

But I couldn't stop, so I didn't.

I just continued in silence.

Then, after about a year, things changed.

Thanks to my youtube videos very, very few people started loving what I was doing, and telling me I should never give up, no matter what, because they were in love with my writing, and when I say love, I mean *real* love.

So thank you guys, really.

I won't lie: I needed it.

Some of those people asked not be mentioned here for professional reasons or for simple discretion, as did the US veterans that helped me. But there are others I can mention and it's a pleasure to do so. They are:

Piero Costanzi, both a fan and a real friend.

Randy Manning Stallone, who always believed in me.

Orazio Fusco, the first 'YEAR ONE-addict' of my Italian readers, who went through the first three books of my saga in a couple of sleepless nights, despite his very young age, and immediately asked me for more.

And most of all, I want to thank my very first US fan, friend, colleague and ally...

Mat Thomas Marchand

Whose Rambomania channel was a continuous inspiration for me.

You were the very few that always trusted in me and pushed me on....

Thank you buddies