

RAMBO YEAR ONE TAKE ME TO THE DEVIL



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

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IMAGES

Israel Military Industries UZI.



A nine millimetre Uzi sub-machine gun from Israel.

Sub-machine guns are weapons that shoot handgun caliber bullets in full auto. They have a shorter range and are less powerful than assault rifles, but are far easier to control in full auto and handier overall especially for close proximity fighting like the jungle warfare kind.

The SOG used Uzis for the most part on parachute-jumping missions because of its small size.

Despite being so compact, Uzis sport a standard-size barrel and, considering its period, could shoot with extraordinary accuracy.

If needed, it could be aimed with one hand, and with the magazine located inside the handle it could be reloaded very easily even in the dark. It was an extremely reliable weapon even in the worst of conditions, be it in the presence of sand, mud, rain or extreme cold. Not even being submerged in water could stop it and kept working even without clearing the chamber before opening fire.

Although nowadays its open-bolt technology is outdated, there is still no other submachine gun as successful as the Uzi was in so many countries across the world.



Cessna 'bird-dog'

The “bird-dog” was an extremely slow, cheap, lightweight and small and lightweight civilian air plane, and although cheap, it was known for being extremely slow. It was unarmed (or almost unarmed) for the most part and was often used in a support role for SOG ground soldiers.

Given its ability to fly very low and slowly, it was used to locate hidden structures like radio relay sites, give info to ground soldiers and occasionally even for battlefield observation from up above or correct the nearby artillery’s aim throughout the fight.

Some of its pilots showed so much skill and subject to such levels of danger to become real and proper living legends.

In the above photo, an F4 Phantom strikes after receiving the coordinates from a ‘bird dog’ airplane.

Take me to the Devil

Ortega opened his eyes, and the deathlike darkness gave way to confused images and sounds.

Ortega was on-board the Huey, lying on its metal floorboard.

His chest was warm and sticky with his own blood, but he was alive.

The wind slapped him against the face while the noise of the engine was stunning, but nevertheless, he was alive.

Ortega had a clear view of Messner, Danforth, Krakauer and Eddie Johnson, one of the hostages they'd freed on that mission looking down at him. They were standing all around him, packed up against each other and sporting worried expressions on their faces. He could tell they were worried by the look in their eyes. Their torn clothing told of the time they'd recently spent on the run in the jungle, while he could hear someone talking on the radio behind them. Besides all that, of course, there was also the pain...

Ortega could hardly swallow.

It was excruciating.

Comparable to gigantic hand – made of needles – squeezing his chest diabolically. Jesus. Ortega couldn't be alive... Not if he felt that bad... Not with all that pain he couldn't.

I guess that bullet gutted me– he thought.

It must have... and it must have been a large calibre too.

It probably ripped open my stomach because that's the only plausible explanation for how much pain I'm in.

Ortega shifted his look down to his chest, but his camouflage uniform was so full of blood that he couldn't understand where he'd been hit.

Why the hell doesn't anybody ever just die instantly in this damn war?

Why doesn't everybody die, just like that, bam, it's over, the same way they do in the movies?

Jesus.

Ortega stretched his hand out to Krakauer and Berry... fully aware there was nothing else they could do for him any more.

Be that as it may, he was happy they'd be there in his final moments before he died.

Even just seeing those faces made him happy, yeah...

He was happy about being awake.

He was still alive.

Still alive for the meantime at least. Not that there was much hope though, because he was well aware of the way he felt. He could feel it inside. He could feel *it* deep inside him reaching out to him.

Take me – he thought.

Berry took his hand and held it tight.

“Raven?” whispered Ortega, but Delmore Berry didn’t answer. No one did... This because Rambo and Jorgenson were gone, and Ortega knew it. “You’re gonna’ make it, Manuel,” Delmore said quietly to him. “You’ve got this.”

Ortega was in a state of shock. He had lost too much blood and was looking pale, too pale. The longer he laid on that metal floor the more blood he was going to lose. Ten minutes later, there was so much blood that it began dripping onto the floor.

“We are almost there,” said Delmore. “Hold on, brother.”

When the helicopter landed on the hospital roof In Dak To, the rest of the Baker Team was received by a small crowd of paramedics and military personnel. Only once the hospital staff had put Ortega on a stretcher, cut his uniform wide open, checked on his temporary bandages and shot two injections of something or other into him did they finally take him to the OR.

In the meantime, a crowd made up of both medical and military personnel formed around the POWs and the Baker Team itself. Only then did the team realize Trautman was right there in front of them, standing just behind the crowd.

He was there waiting for them in person.

An insurmountable wall had formed between them of Surgeons, paramedics and stretchers at the ready. Nevertheless, there he was standing right there in front of them, observing carefully and not letting them out sight.

Danforth rejected any doctor who offered him care, gesturing to show his annoyance (*‘Prisoners come first, what the fuck!’*) until finally stopping where he was to look the Colonel straight in the eye, despite the crowd separating them.

As soon as he caught his eye Trautman gave him a nod.

Then in a slow and pensive manner, the Colonel lowered his head and Danforth immediately understood both the gesture and the message.

Without saying a word, he’d told him –*Well done* –.
Well done, he said.

RAMBO YEAR ONE
TAKE ME TO THE DEVIL

Part One

Beyond the Point of No Return

Garner cut through the crowd as he headed towards Trautman.

he was smiling when he set off at first, but by the time he reached the Colonel, he had orders ready for him.

“I want the POWs in Saigon ASAP. As for the rest of the team, send them to San Lu instead. When you’re done, come back here to the hospital for debriefing with Ortega.”

“Why San Lu?”

“Because I want the team to sleep there tonight. They deserve it.”

“Okay, fine.”

“Good. Now, let's get out of here. Let’s see if we can have a word with any of them at least.”

Ortega was about to pass right by the two of them as they spoke.

Two paramedics pushed out the stretcher Ortega was laying on, and that gave Trautman the chance to take a closer look at him albeit only in passing.

Now unconscious, the Baker Team leader looked quite pale in the face with beads of sweat on his forehead and dark rings under his eyes.

Black bags under his eyes – thought Trautman.

He’s showing signs of internal bleeding already.

His face was unnaturally relaxed, probably due to the morphine, so it looked quite different from how it usually did. It didn't even look like Ortega at all actually. Trautman had seen this kind of effect many a time before, on many a soldier who generally died shortly thereafter.

It’s almost as though he’s already dead – thought the Colonel.

That wasn’t his case however. He was still alive, for now at least. He was alive, in hospital, and just minutes from receiving a blood transfusion before ending up in surgery. As he looked at Ortega’s eyes more closely, Trautman thought of the new and improved version of morphine they were now using in the military. It was a lot lighter than the older one, or less dangerous overall.

We didn’t have drugs like that in Korea – he thought to himself.

When someone was in pain, he’d just scream like a pig being slaughtered, and that was it.

*

Everyone else on the Baker Team had a check-up as well but it didn't take them long to go through them at all. Aside from being undernourished and dehydrated, they were, for the most part, fine.

In little more than half an hour, their chopper was running and ready for lift-off. Consequently, Trautman hadn't had the chance to talk to any of them, not even to the Baker vice, Danforth. It didn't matter though.

His men had seen him and they knew that the Colonel had been there personally just to greet them, so that was more than enough for him.

Garner got on-board the helicopter with them before they took off to Lan Su.

Trautman stopped on the hospital rooftop for a moment, to watch them leave.

That was it.

The prisoners were safe, Ortega was in surgery and the team was airborne to Lan Su.

It was finally over. What's more, they'd had their greatest success, ever.

For the first time in SOG history, a team, which had been missing in action, had successfully managed to come back.

They'd even brought back some POWs while they were at it.

Trautman took a deep breath then turned to look out at the city.

The sun had begun to set.

Garner questioned the Baker Team their entire flight to Lan Su. He listened and made summary notes in a kind of informal debriefing, just to get a rough idea about what had happened to his men while they were missing in action.

By the time they landed at Lan Su, the base was shrouded in darkness and silent. Garner didn't stay with them but left again soon after, just as Trautman had ordered him to.

When they reached their quarters, the Baker Team dispersed, each to his own bunk quietly, and each still wearing their filthy clothing.

Krakauer and Danforth wasted no time diving straight onto their bunks, dirty clothes and all.

Unlike the others however, Delmore, Messner and Coletta went on to check the state of their equipment instead.

That's when the mission felt, and was, finally over.

Even though that mission had been an unparalleled success, the Baker team B had at any rate, suffered two losses. Once you considered how close the team members were and the kind of team they were, those losses couldn't be thought of as minor at all.

In reality, they were anything but minor.

Berry – *painfully* – laid his weapons down first and then followed heed with the rucksack, placing it in the nearest dark corner. Now that he could finally sit down, any old bunk bed would do, and he hardly gave any of it second thoughts.

Jesus...

He'd never felt that bad his entire life, not ever, not even after he'd finished boot camp with Trautman.

Despite his exhaustion however, he wanted to wait a bit before laying down for the night.

Everything hurt. Even his wrists ached but he had no idea why.

The tent was dark and he could hear the sound of his friends around him in the stillness. It was then in the darkness when Jorgenson and Rambo, his two friends missing in action seemed to appear right in front of him. They appeared before his eyes, out of nowhere.

He must have been hallucinating. He was so tired that his thoughts were turning into real-life. He was daydreaming and it was real enough to watch like on television. In other words, he was seeing things.

Missing – he thought.

Missing in action, for fuck's sake.

There he was, bitching about how tired he was, while Rambo and Jorgenson were still out there missing. They might have been hiding out somewhere in the dark, obscure jungle or maybe worse, running for their lives. What's more, by this time, they were doing it with no food, no water and probably no ammo either.

They're screwed.

They're absolutely screwed.

Berry however, knew that in spite of everything, Rambo and Jorgenson hadn't given up.

They'd never surrender, neither in mind nor in body. He was sure they'd keep fighting to the bitter end.

Let's plan our next move, Sir.

They'd fight to the last drop of sweat.

Let's plan our next move.

They'd fight to the last drop of blood.

Berry closed his eyes in a prayer-like manner, when he realized *it wasn't done*.

It's not over – he thought to himself.

No, it's not over yet.

...Assuming they were still alive that is.

With that realization, Berry's thoughts were abruptly brought back to the now. The truth of the matter was, he'd probably never find out what had really happened to them. He could spend the rest of his life not knowing, as had been the case for

thousands of other missing in action soldiers, from the Second World War, the Korean War and now in Vietnam.

Missing in action – he thought dreadfully.

So many others had ensued and this time it was going to be two of ours.

A feeling of anguish came over him as the details from the mission and its final stages crossed through his mind again. He had concluded that with their given circumstances, at the time, there weren't any alternative actions or decisions to consider. Ortega hadn't made any mistakes and the mission, well, Ortega had accomplished his mission by bringing back as many hostages as he could. Furthermore, the number of casualties hadn't been kept at two, and that was something to be pleased about as well. Despite the mission's miraculous outcome and success on all fronts, Rambo and Jorgenson had been sacrificed for the higher end and nothing more than that.

After all, isn't that what war is really about? Dying for a greater cause?

So, if you actually think it could never happen to you or to any of your friends because you're all "better" than everybody else is, well then...

You're just fucking idiot.

They'd put up a good fight, a fucking good one, actually. Maybe even too good.

They'd fought exceptionally well considering they're only human.

They'd fought like machines.

Christ, we haven't been human for a long time – Berry thought.

Joining the Special Forces had changed everything.

I can't even eat a fucking hamburger in peace anymore, for fuck's sake.

Feeling guilty when I do, worried I'll get used to NOT eating absolute shit after that.

Christ.

Berry reached for one of the buttons on his shirt but was quickly distracted by his thoughts.

How the fuck am I supposed to live with Lucy after everything I've been through?

Death didn't really bother Berry much any more the same way killing didn't upset him much either. He was rather indifferent to it, which was not unlike the way the rest of the Baker Team felt about it as well. They didn't really feel it any more.

Lucy – thought Berry.

My love... When all of this is over, I'll go back to being normal again.

I swear I will.

Yes...

He'd do it for her, so they could live together and maybe one day, even have kids.

Kids...

Then and there however, so soon after completing a mission deemed impossible, nothing could seem further from the truth.

I swear Lucy: when all of this is over, and we start a new life together, the only mission I'll be worried about is "getting back" to normal.

With that thought in mind, Berry started to undress again.

After spending all that time in the jungle, his clothes stank more than a backed-up

sewage system in a third world country would.

He was *in pain* as he took off his gear, and then in even *more pain* as he followed suit with his equipment belt, until all he had on was a uniform, pants and boots.

Not having any gear on was like being weightless. He could hardly even keep his balance.

Despite the sense of liberation, the thought of Jorgenson and Rambo still hurt.

It felt the way a cut feels when it's fresh and won't stop burning.

It would take some time to forget.

He gave his head a shake trying to get that idea right out of his head. There was no fucking way he was going to forget them.

Rambo was two years younger than he was so for Berry, he was the "kid" on the team.

Rambo meant a lot to Berry and he'd always be a kid to him too.

Unlike the others, Jorgenson already had a little one to look after.

He'd a little girl made of his very own flesh and blood. She was probably destined to grow up without her father thanks to that fucking war.

No, they couldn't be dead.

They just couldn't.

Not yet anyway.

Not just yet.

Berry looked around in the dark towards the other bunks.

Everyone on the Baker team was both physically and spiritually exhausted, and if he cared about his team as much as he said he did, then he'd need to get over the losses. He had to move on.

He needed to get over that sense of confusion he's been feeling since the adrenaline had died down and he'd started to relax.

They had to put it all behind them, even the loss of Rambo and Jorgenson, if necessary.

In no time at all, the team would have to move on and make as though they'd never existed, and that time was coming soon.

Yeah right, sure they would.

Trautman certainly wasn't going to give them a month off because they'd finished the mission. Not only was that unlikely, it was highly impossible.

That's why the sooner Berry moved on the better it would be for him and everybody else too.

Unless Ortega was about to die too, of course.

Now, that would have been serious blow for the team, an insurmountable one in fact.

If that ever actually happened, they'd probably ask Trautman not to call them 'Baker Team' anymore. That wasn't something he could get his head around though. Not there and then at least.

That meant Danforth would become team leader, they'd get three replacements and within weeks they'd be up and running again. No way. He couldn't handle something like that.

Jesus – thought Berry.
I don't even want to think about it.

It was a weakness of his. Actually, it was more than that, a real shortcoming. Not being able to accept certain scenarios or a situation like that in particular, especially when he knew, deep down at least remotely, there was a chance. That was a character flaw of his and as such, it was his onus to get over it and fast, maybe even tonight or better yet, right now.

For Christ's sake – he thought again.
Right, so if I have no choice but to accept that Carl and Johnny are gone, then it's got to be now.

Berry tried to get up off his bunk, but he fell right back down on it. Without any adrenaline to keep him on his feet, he was clumsier, had less energy and was unquestionably in a lot more pain.

His sense of balance felt off.

He couldn't even stand up.

I could a minute ago though.

He found himself glancing over at the 1911 suddenly just sitting on his rucksack, which he'd absent-mindedly left earlier.

The pistol was so full of mud that even just firing a single shot may have been dangerous.

It was the first time he'd noticed its state, only now that everything was over with.

Berry made note of his mistake and got back to taking off the rest of his equipment. When he finally got to his jungle boots, it hurt even more than he'd imagine it would. Berry cursed under his voice so as to not disturb anyone, especially Danforth, who had gone to bed without bothering to shower and was already snoring.

Berry was in bad shape.

His legs, back and one ankle in particular were aching. That twisted ankle had almost cost him his life. Oh yeah, that's right. Had Berry become a burden on his team, they'd have left him behind to save the hostages. Even Rambo had run the same risk when he got hurt in the foot.

Jesus Christ – he thought.

When the only thing he had on was his underwear, he got back up and had the same problems as before doing so.

He obviously wasn't in good enough shape. Not good enough to do the kind of mission he had just come back from, that is.

Which was why, from then on, he was going to train a lot harder than he had till now. They all needed to train harder than they used to.

What the fuck are you talking about Berry? – he asked himself rhetorically.

You're the Special Forces unit with the most fucking training anywhere in the world.
Even so, - he thought to himself

Perhaps the mission had just been impossible, and that's why they lost Raven and Grizzly.

Maybe, rescuing those fucking hostages was the stupidest thing they'd ever done and the real reason their team members were dead.

Was that it?

Did war put us to the kind of test that no one could realistically overcome?

Of course it did. War was many things, but it certainly wasn't a fucking game.

Berry shook his head

He felt weak all of a sudden, almost sick.

He unloaded his weapons, removed the bullets from their chambers and put everything in order more or less as his hands shook in the process. Afterwards, he got up again, still staggering, and made his way towards the showers, where he hoped to wash away some of his suffering.

On the other side of the tent, Messner had just started unpacking his stuff when suddenly just stopped and stared in front of him as though he'd seen something.

Johnny – he thought to himself.

We really did lose Johnny and Jorgenson.

The team Doctor stood stock-still, with his hands in mid-air and staring into the dim light in front of him.

His hands were trembling.

Malnutrition – he thought to himself.

Just a bit malnourished.

Take it easy, it's nothing.

He thought back to Ortega and his injury again.

His medical opinion was that Ortega would probably get over it of course, but one could never be sure.

The bullet had exploded as it passed through his arm before reaching his chest and therefore couldn't have gone deep. What's more, it hadn't been hit any vital organs, or at least he hadn't shown any signs on the trip back that it had. At that point, there were signs of severe blood loss (including bags around the eyes and cold, pale skin), but not more than that. So after due consideration it was likely that Ortega would be just fine.

That was unless he died under the knife while they were taking out the bullet of course.

That was *always* a possibility.

As Messner pondered over Ortega's situation, memories of the moments they'd all spent together continued to go through his thought.

Laughs, booze, meaningless discussions... It was good to see Johnny have a laugh.

This was especially true because he almost never used to laugh.

Jesus, what's with all the memories? - Messner asked himself.

Johnny's voice, the look he used to give him when they talked to each other.

Rambo and Jorgenson aren't dead.

Not yet.

We can't consider them dead until we know for sure.

That's how it works when you're at war.

Nevertheless, Messner thought back to other past memories, and recalled what Rambo had done for them during Black Spot. That thing he made out of explosives, as he tried to save them all.

Rambo had definitely deserved being recommended for a Medal of Honour that day.

That's because Rambo was an altruistic health enthusiast.

He was the kind of guy that hardly drank, barely smoked and lived for the good of others.

Rambo was different from the rest of them.

Everybody needs something fun in life, all of us do. Things like drinking, fucking, fighting, getting stoned and so on.

Rambo didn't.

Rambo thought of one thing and one thing only and that was being at the ready, no matter what.

Well, being at the ready along with helping his friends, of course.

Fuck, it's like Rambo lives to make things right or protecting the people around him.

On several occasions, Messner had seen Rambo take a step back or stand on his own while everybody else was having fun.

Often times when all of his friends were high or stoned, he'd stand there, almost on guard, the way he'd on duty or something. He'd even stand in the more tactically favourable areas to do it. He was their fucking guard, a bouncer, a pimp, just overseeing everything.

Rambo may have thought no one had noticed, but Messner definitely had!

In Lau Su, the Baker Team had a tent assigned to them for their entire stay there. That evening, when Messner and the rest of the Baker Team were in their tent, Messner, at one point had caught himself just staring ahead at nothing for at least five minutes. When he finally came to his senses and snapped out of it, he shot a quick look around to make sure no one had seen him do it. Luckily, they hadn't. Krakauer and Danforth were already sleeping and hadn't even bothered to take their dirty clothes off before going to bed. Coletta was still concentrated on unpacking his stuff while Berry was getting his stuff ready to go and take a shower.

Messner glanced down at his dirty rucksack again. The thought of having to work over his equipment was enough to make him sick.

He fucking needed a cigarette, so he decided to despite it being his first in almost three weeks. Christ, over three weeks ago.

Boy was that ever going to be wicked.

Back in Dak To, Messner remembered asking one of the nurses for a smoke. Instead of doing the expected, she handed over her half pack instead, on the condition that he wouldn't smoke in the hospital.

That was about a month ago, and it explained why his mouth was watering just thinking about it.

He dug into his rucksack and pulled his zippo out.

That's when he thought of Linda.

His Linda.

Messner couldn't help thinking about her as well as the morphine too.

If he'd felt like it, he could have easily taken a shot and no one would have been the wiser.

It was kind of funny that the two things he loved the most, Linda and morphine that is, had both popped into his head at the same time.

Messner had re-enlisted to forget the first and have the second at his disposal.

That's fucked up.

Did he really end up in that inferno, just to forget some broad?

Fucking hell – he thought, as every muscle in his body ached after that last damn mission.

If he'd known what it really took to get missions like theirs done, he probably wouldn't have re-enlisted for the Special Forces.

Are you serious?

Your first op. across enemy lines and you're already falling to pieces.

Messner realized that he was thinking and talking nonsense because his brain was fried. It was time to call it a night. That was definitely an understatement.

That night he'd have given anything to get a litre of that shit shot up his arm but only God knew why. He'd never considered using it on himself while he was with the team. Not even when they spent the whole night resting in the jungle in one place. Doing it when you're as tired and malnourished as he was at the time, would have probably have ruined it anyways. He'd have fallen asleep and then suffered like a dog the day after without even having enjoyed it in the least. This was the first time he'd felt this tempted in a while but he knew his life was a lot better without it.

His cigarette dangled from his lips, waiting patiently for a light but he was perplexed about whether to smoke it or not.

Lighting a cigarette had never been such a Goddamn issue before.

Fuck am I really out of it tonight – he thought, as he brought his zippo to his lips and finally lit the cigarette.

The first drag was a little rough going in despite its soothing effect.

The time had come to get his zippo engraved the same way practically everybody else did after they'd been sent to 'Nam. Yeah. He'd get someone to carve the SOG logo on it. Otherwise, he'd get the Baker Team logo instead. He hadn't decided yet, but he was going to give one of them a go soon.

Messner laid down on his bunk to have his smoke without bothering to undress.

He knew there was the chance he'd fall asleep in that position, but he didn't care.

He felt too shitty to get undressed.

Now a blow job, well, that on the other hand, that's different.

A blowie would definitely do the trick at a time like that. Well, then again, maybe not.

He was probably too fucking tired to even enjoy it.

Okay, okay.

He'd fucked around long enough.

It was time to think about the things that really mattered.

Handing in a sketch of the enemy base he'd made for Trautman for instance, was definitely in that category. Sure, there was a lot of stuff he could post-pone doing until tomorrow but he was worried about forgetting important bits if he did. So, he decided it was best to pull the sketch out of the rucksack now. That way, the next morning it would be in plain sight and there was no way he'd forget to take it with him. Satisfied with his line of reasoning, Messner got up again and started rummaging through his stuff which was still all dirty and sweaty from the thirty days he'd just spent in the jungle.

He had to dig in his backpack a while before finally pulling out his map-holder.

It was still mud drenched and barely legible.

Look at this fucking mess.

As he moved his fingers along it, he noticed an unexpected bulge.

What the hell is that?

He undid the clasps, flipped it over and to his surprise, a dog tag fell onto the floor

clanging as it did.

Robertson – recalled Messner.
He'd suddenly seen a ghost.

As the adrenalin rush shot through him it all came back suddenly. The dark cellar, the guy's fractured skull and the shot of morphine he'd shot him up with. He may have died with dignity but he was *dead* nevertheless, and the war raged on in the meantime right outside. War didn't give a shit about what you' were going through. *It didn't give a flying fuck whether you were the one dying or if you were helping someone else do it. It cared fuck all about any of that or anything else for that matter.* Then, without any warning, Messner was there, in that cellar once again, on that mission. Luckily, it didn't last long.

In fact, not even a second later, that feeling had disappeared. Messner was back on his bunk, sitting quietly in the dark. He was no calmer or less exhausted than before. He could hear some of his team members, the ones who were fortunate enough to be sound asleep, snoring blissfully while the others either continued to unpack or were lost in their own thoughts.

This time however, back where he was, there in the tent and nowhere near the cellar, this time the difference was, the lump that had formed in his throat.

He'd actually had to assist a combat-euthanasia, for Christ's sake.

A real, Goddamn combat-euthanasia, and he'd fucking done it on an American POW. With all the other shit that had happened since then, he'd essentially forgotten about both.

Shit – he thought.

Shit, shit, shit.

He'd promised Robertson that he'd bring the dog tag back to his wife and that's what he was going to do even if that absolutely wasn't the standard procedure.

Technically, protocol required that Messner give the dog tag back to the authorities as evidence of Robertson's death. Needless to say the idea of violating protocol just didn't go down well with him.

They're all fucking excuses – he said to himself.

You're just trying to get out of bringing that fucking dog tag back to his wife.

The fact that it was the guy's last wish was the real fucking problem. He had to keep his word. He didn't have much of a choice.

Fucking hell.

Besides, he wasn't giving her any old dog tag, he was giving her a dog tag with four mysterious letters scratched into the back of it. it was anything but your average tag. Those four letters were actually a message for his wife.

A message that Messner had promised to deliver.

Just calm down – he said to himself.

You only promised to give it to his wife back home. You didn't even say when you'd do it. Come on, get serious.

It shouldn't be that hard.

Sure, he may have been the only one who knew it actually existed, but he didn't consider himself to be a fucking asshole. I mean, he'd been an asshole plenty of other times in the past for Christ's sake, but never to that fucking extent.

Not even remotely close, actually.

He'd just have to keep his word then.

Attacking the base was a decision they'd made on their own. A decision which, had cost two American POWs their lives, along with ten or so Laotian civilians, and Johnny and Jorgenson to boot.

I don't know... I mean, Trautman & Co. are breaking out the champagne as we speak. What I'm saying is that if despite everything, that mission was what they'd call a huge success...

then who fucking knew what the unsuccessful ones would be like.

No fucking way, come on.

Messner clenched the dog tag in his hand.

He'd keep his word.

Yeah, he sure would.

He examined it closely, and realized he had to find a way to get her that Goddamn tag and its four letter message, even if it was the last thing he'd ever do.

WMLW

He looked down once more at the four awkwardly scratched letters on the back of that tag.

Robertson had probably scratched the letters on while he was in captivity, using some kind of pointy object. It could have been a nail maybe, a rock or something like that. In the end, whatever he'd actually used didn't really matter since they were both pretty dangerous objects for a POW in a prison camp to have. The guards could have considered them to be potential weapons.

Still, it was a risk Robertson had been willing to take, as long as the message would eventually reach his wife in the case he didn't make it.

He had to admit, he was curious about what the letters actually meant.

If he really wanted to know however, that curio would take up his entire discharge the next time was back in the US however, and he sure hoped to get one after a doing that Goddamn mission.

Then again, what else was there to do in the US if he had to go back?

Not a fucking thing.

He definitely wasn't going to meet Linda, that was for sure.

If he wasn't going back for her, there sure wasn't anybody else he was going back for either.

Messner put the dog tag in a safe place and laid back down on his bed to smoke the other half of his cigarette.

It was nice to smoke just lying there in the dark, but as soon as his head hit the pillow he started to see things.

He was so tired he was having delusions.

It had only happened to him once before, at boot camp, but never to that extent. No way.

He'd never felt that tired in his whole life.

What's worse is that Johnny and Jorgenson are still out there and fighting some place.

Here you are trying to sleep, all cosy in your warm tent while they're still out there somewhere.

As Messner swallowed the cigarette dropped off his lip, and the cherry landed on his finger long enough to burn it before he shook it off to the ground.

He thought of Linda for some reason and a vivid picture of her popped into his head. Her lovely blue eyes and her red lipstick the one she always used to wear, made her out to be a work of art.

And she was... fuck was she ever!

A true work of art.

Messner wasn't day dreaming now. He was watching the film that was playing in his head, and this time he wasn't afraid.

Actually, it was quite the contrary.

It all seemed perfectly natural.

Only seconds later, it was gone.

Coletta sat down on his bunk once he'd lit a cigarette.
He was too tired to do any unpacking right then and there.

What a crazy fucking mission – he thought to himself.

Rockets flying overhead, the whistle of the bullets, civilians being killed, and Rambo and Jorgenson end up missing in action.

Not to mention the raid itself. The attack had its very own unique, downright frightening charm. It was almost attractive, like a switchback. All in all, it hadn't ended too badly, except for the civilians of course, God Dammit.

That was an ugly story in itself, but the days they'd spent in the jungle after that, well, that was even uglier.

Coletta wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

He was shaking from exhaustion.

That fucking jungle, for Christ's sake.

Coletta took a deep breath, took his gear off first and then started on his uniform.

Once he got down to his t-shirt, he took that off too.

His chest had become small and narrow, adolescent-like.

He had neither eaten nor drunk enough on that mission.

Not by a long shot.

Even when he could have, he hadn't. At times because of the state of tension he was always in while on other occasions, he literally "forgot." This was especially true near the end when they had problems making it back. In fact, they never did.

Not to mention the route they'd eventually agreed on taking, which included crossing that damn river for fuck's sake.

That damn plan had cost them Rambo, Jorgenson and Lowell, and they were only sure with certainty that is, that 1 out of 3 of them was actually dead.

Maybe, if we'd just waited a few more days, there in that fucking jungle, Rambo and Jorgenson would be here with us now, safe and sound.

We probably should've crossed somewhere else.

If we'd come up with a different plan altogether, it might have made the difference.

It's hard to tell – answered a voice inside his head.

You shouldn't be giving up hope yet anyways.

That's true, I shouldn't

Maybe they're still alive.

Johnny...

They could both still be alive.

Coletta looked over at the M14 he'd left leaning up against the tent wall.

He cared about both of them of course, and they were all good friends. Yet for some reason, when it came to Rambo it was another story. More so now, considering how weird Jorgenson had become after he miraculously survived operation Black Spot. Coletta certainly cared about him too but Jorgenson had changed. He just wasn't the kind of person you enjoyed having around anymore.

He had become weird, lonely and distant.

He had bonded with Rambo and in effect, everybody loved Rambo.

Even Trautman seemed to have a preference for him.

The two of them used to talk quite a bit, and it looked as though Rambo was his protégé or something. It could have been because Rambo always considered and took care of others first. Nevertheless, Ortega should have had that kind of relationship with the Colonel considering he was team leader.

In any case, who didn't love somebody who always put others first?

Coletta closed his stinging eyes and thought about how much he really cared about them, both.

It's just war – he thought.

People die at war.

Either that or they're simply never found.

He knew it and had known it from the start.

So, why did he feel that bad about it anyway?

Because he should have helped them, that's why.

Never again – he thought to himself.

From now on, I will never leave anyone behind. Never again.

Not even for the sake of the objective.

Even if takes screwing the mission. If that's the price then that's what it'll take.

He was lying to himself though and he fucking knew it.

He knew perfectly well that had anyone assigned him a mission in which other POW lives were at stake, he would have done everything all over again.

There was no denying it, because it was the fucking truth.

Since that's the way missions worked and he knew it better than anyone did. No one is indispensable if it means getting the job done. Nobody.

That included Rambo or Jorgenson.

That didn't exclude him either if you really thought about it.

Coletta swallowed at the thought.

Dying - he said to himself.

Everybody dies.

There it is, that's the fucking line so-called professionals used as a consolation.
Nice fucking consolation – he thought.
Even so, he'd met a lot of soldiers who actually found solace in that.

Everybody dies, whether its sooner or later.
It doesn't make the slightest difference because you were going to die anyway.

That's not the way he saw it though.
Needless to say however, that neither he, nor anyone else on the Baker team for that matter, would shed any tears over the fact that they'd eventually have to die. As is the case that nobody from the Fifth Special Forces would fret much about knowing their time would eventually come either.
He did wish to get back home one day though, and he wanted to get back there alive and in one piece, if possible.

Coletta looked blankly into the darkness.

Yeah...
One day he'd have gone home.
Yet, strangely enough he would rather have been in Johnny's place right now and not safe and sound where he was, just standing around doing nothing.
Doing absolutely fuck all while his two team members were still out there.
With a firm voice Coletta said repeatedly in his head:

Never again, so help me God.
I swear to God I will never leave anyone else behind, ever again.

*“Never again...
Whatever the price”*

Ricardo Coletta, 1969

At a slow, somewhat drawn-out pace, and with a slight limp, Berry made his way towards the shower area. Looking more like an old geezer than anything else, curved and clumsy because of the pain he was in.

It wasn't late at all, as the clock had just struck ten. Yet if you considered how heavy-eyed and drowsy he was, it could easily have been three in the morning.

Maybe even later.

He'd have sworn that he'd been living that same day for at least thirty hours by now, the same way you would patiently wait for the end of an eclipse.

"Hey," he heard someone say behind him.

Berry turned towards the voice.

"Are you S.O.G.?" asked a young man.

Berry didn't answer.

"Come on, man, rumour has it, well actually everybody knows there's an SOG team sleeping here tonight."

Berry didn't answer the second question either, and just stared blankly at the kid still standing there in front of him.

"Oh come on... We don't talk here. We've been backing the Secret Services for a lifetime."

Berry, still expressionless continued to look the young man over further.

He didn't seem to be listening.

"Mm-mm, suit yourself. Whatever the case, I'm supposed to leave a present for the team on boss's orders. Are you guys Special Forces at least? You could at least tell me that."

Berry finally nodded.

"Good. You know, I just needed to be sure that it was you. Okay?"

Again, Berry stood there without uttering a single word, but this time the stranger seemed taken aback by something there at that moment instead.

There was something definitely wrong with Berry.

His eyes for starters, told the story of a month long mission.

A month of sleepless nights getting two hours a night at best, marching constantly

with heavy rucksacks and, worst of all, in a state of constant risk. The constant risk of losing your life.

“Listen...” said the young man to him.

“Just go and take it easy, buddy. No one’s going to shoot at you while you’re in the shower, okay? Enjoy your gift. See ya’ tomorrow.”

The young man smiled and then left.

Berry watched him leave and then set off again for the showers.

At that hour all the mad hatters were out apparently.

Berry got into the shower, turned it on and a freezing gush of water hit up against him making him tremble all over.

That temperature was making every pain in his body seem to multiply one-hundred fold.

He could feel the pain shooting from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet so acutely that it almost woke him up

What the fuck.

To fight off the cold, Berry contracted every muscle in his body and started trembling. He knew exactly how to fight off the cold, even as he stood stock-still completely still in a shower, for instance. It was something he’d learnt in boot camp. Be that as useful as it may, just like everything else they’d learnt in training, you got tired doing it. Unfortunately, he was already tired. Tired? Actually, he wasn’t just tired or even exhausted. He was absolutely done in.

He could barely stand on his own two feet let alone ward off the cold.

Something seemed different however didn't seem to be as icy as before.

It could be that he was just getting used to it, or maybe...

In fact, within seconds, the water had warmed to a temperature fit for humans shall we say, there in Vietnam. Only big water tanks had hot water available despite being in such a hot country. The water had become warm, and Berry, who was now showering at the same temperature he usually did couldn’t help but be suspicious. He couldn’t help but notice that the water had passed from one temperature to another in such a quick, unnatural way however.

Berry kept still, almost in an effort to listen.

The water went suddenly from warm to scorching hot in an instant, almost to the point of burning him, and before he knew it he was feeling a whole, lot better.

A powerfully warm feeling came over him, the same way sunshine warms a part of you at a time, and the sensation moved from his neck to his shoulders and then downwards.

Wicked!

How many bases could there possibly be in Vietnam with water as hot as that? Three maybe?

Had Trautman really sent them there by accident? No fucking way. He didn't do things by accident.

That was their gift, exactly as the young man had said.

You're great, Trautman.

You're the cat's ass.

Every part of him burned blissfully and he felt a couple of muscles loosen up to the point that he could have even fallen asleep. Had he been sitting in there, he would have.

Good God... I fucking love you, Trautman.

I'd even plant a wet one on ya'!

Berry slowly let himself slip down the shower wall onto its floor.

No, no, no... don't do it, you'll fall asleep fell asleep.

Within seconds, he was actually feeling fever-like!

Come on.

There you go, that's it.

Fucking rights.

That's better.

All this warmth, after so many days of cold and so much damn humidity – was intoxicating him more than getting plastered could.

Berry would have stayed there all night long, if he just could have.

That was, probably, one of the best showers he'd ever taken.

Alone that was.

Ortega walked into the storage room on his own two legs. As he slowly pushed his drip-bag on the wheel-pole around, his manner seemed a little unsure, and he was still quite pale.

The bandages he had on his arm had already become red and blood stained.

The Dak To Hospital had temporarily allocated a small room for Secret Services personnel, being in this case Garner and Trautman as such.

“Colonel,” said Ortega as he closed the door behind him. His voice was low, without energy.

“Ortega,” said Garner.

“How you doing, Skorpio?” asked Trautman.

“They gave me enough morphine to put down a horse. I thought that, I really thought I was never going to wake up again. It was...”

Ortega stopped mid-sentence, just sitting there as he stared into thin air.

“Given the morphine for starters, followed by the surgery itself, I’m sure I haven’t got everything out of my system yet Sorry about that.” Trautman and Garner listened on quietly.

“Yeah, I still feel quite groggy actually.”

“Sit down,” Trautman said as he pushed a chair in his direction.

Ortega sat down

He then went on to say:

“Apparently, I lost a little too much blood, but I won't suffer any side effects because of it. They said I can go back to fighting again.”

“Well, that’s very good news,” said Trautman.

“Especially since replacing you would be a full blown pain in the ass to say the least.”

Ortega smiled.

That’s what people like us liked to call a sense of humour.

It was time to get the briefing underway, so Ortega thought back to the very beginning.

He began by informing them about their two full days of march, at full speed of course, in order to reach the objective and then about the quick (and EXTREMELY dangerous) recon which was all done before 'the hit'.

He then went into details about the interrupted radio transmission and how that brought about his 'decision by opportunity'.

A decision he had made on the field and thus accepted full responsibility for. Ortega told them about how some civilians were killed in the process and then gave details about the state they found Robertson in, clarifying the reasons Messner had decided to use morphine to end his life. He ended his update with the details about the jungle itself, and the events that had occurred the days they were there.

He didn't tell them hardly anything about the difficulties they'd encountered on their way back however.

He informed them that there were up against an elevated number of enemy guards who were on duty, which in turn made it difficult to foresee and block all the potential attack routes or plans. So eventually, although famished, thirsty and fatigued, they decided to just chance it.

Then he gave a thorough explanation of the diversion attack Rambo and Jorgenson had done, and his own decision to cut the rope.

Trautman and Garner repeatedly interrupted him with their questions, making his already-long briefing even longer.

They asked about the number of enemy they had killed or how many structures they'd destroyed.

Afterwards, they inquired about how civilian casualties, their approximate age, gender and ethnicity.

The kind of equipment the enemy used, their level of training.

Trautman and Garner also wanted to know about Vuong's absence since it was the mission's first and foremost objective. Judging by the kinds of questions they had inquired about however, it was clear to Ortega that in the end, they hadn't found Vuong after all. He wasn't in either of the two structures Trautman had launched SOG missions to do. The three missions may have taken place simultaneously but he hadn't been found in any of them.

Fucking Christ – Ortega thought bitterly.

Trautman's need for such specific details became somewhat morbid however, and Ortega couldn't help noticing the way his debriefing was quickly turning into an interrogation.

After a while, it seemed as though they wanted him to contradict himself somehow.

He thought about how single and unique that mission had been, especially in that its objectives, which had changed during its course. Ortega figured therefore that this kind of interrogatory must have only been standard protocol for cases this dynamic.

What's more, SOG soldiers were known for lying about their missions. Almost all of them did.

They'd lie because they could (there were no witnesses out there) or for ego-related reasons.

Yeah.

The guys from the Special Forces had enormous egos, and if you ever had to sit through one of their debriefings, you'd think they were Superheroes that never made mistakes either.

With the exception of Ortega that is, who just wasn't like that, not by a long shot, and

neither was anybody else on the Baker team for that matter.

The reason being that the Baker Team was meant to evolve and consistently get better... not to simply 'be' the best.

So Ortega always made sure his debriefings were thorough telling the Team everything.

Well, *almost* everything that is.

When Ortega and Lowell were underwater and Ortega had to kick him off so they both wouldn't drown. That was, one of the few examples of the minor details Ortega preferred to keep to himself. Not to mention that the mere thought bothered him.

Being able to talk it out was therefore out of the question.

The longer the debriefing lasted, the sterner and inflexible Trautman became.

"It sounds like you've got regrets about this mission, Soldier."

Ortega didn't say anything.

"Don't feel you should," Garner added.

"Those civilians," Ortega began.

"What's that?"

"I said the civilians, Sir. We should have done the reconnaissance more thoroughly."

"So why didn't you then?" the Colonel asked sternly.

"To avoid taking any risks."

"Of course you did," Trautman said.

Ortega gave the Colonel a perplexed look. He wasn't sure if the Colonel was kidding or not.

Trautman noticed his confusion, so he added:

"All recon ops are extremely dangerous, Ortega. That's why there's no such thing as a 'perfect' reconnaissance. Now let's move on."

After all was said and done, and all the necessary figures had been taken into account (such as the number of men lost, casualties sustained, hostages freed and those lost) only then could an assessment be made. Trautman and Garner estimated that, in addition to destroying three logistic warehouses, approximately sixty enemy soldiers were taken down which made for an average of about seven soldiers a head.

In view of Robertson's poor health conditions, his death was deemed inevitable right from the start. Having died in combat, Lowell's death was chalked up to being involuntary. Despite having rescued three hostages rather than four, and not finding Vuong at the objective site as expected, Point of No Return's result was seen in a positive light.

Essentially, Trautman finally declared the Mission Accomplished because of that.

"Good work," Garner added in the end.

A long silence ensued his concluding statements, but it looked as though Ortega wanted to say something more.

Eventually, he said:

“What about Johnny and Carl?” he inquired, somewhat hesitantly.

“After you left, we immediately launched an offensive using everything we had at our disposal. We kept sending as many air planes and helicopters as we could, but when we got there the zone was hotter than ever, and we weren’t even able to set up a single LZ. The main problem was not having any visual contact with them and that they couldn’t give us their position either, considering the enemy was on their tracks. All we knew was that they were there somewhere, and basically, from that point, we lost them from there. But try not to think about it now,” said Trautman.

“With all due respect Sir, it’s impossible to not to think about it.”

“I know, son. What I meant was, don’t lose hope just yet.”

Ortega nodded.

“Good. I’d say you’ve earned your fair share of medals today, Baker Team. Most importantly however, is that you’re still alive.”

It was dark when Ortega woke up in his hospital bed. It was half way through the night by then, but severe exhaustion, along with losing Rambo and Jorgenson, compounded by all the drugs in his system had really messed him up. He was somewhat disorientated, and now he couldn't get back to sleep. He lit himself a cigarette and sat quietly smoking it. He could hear the other patients breathing deeply and slowly all around him.

Only one person wasn't sleeping however, and that was Gary. Gary was nineteen, had just lost a leg and never stopped moaning. Actually, he mumbles, most of time. Nevertheless, there was a sort of dignity in the way he moaned. Gary never raised his voice and suffered quietly through the night so as to not wake anyone else.

He did it all despite how painful losing a leg must be. Yet, that night, Ortega was too tired to think or feel any pain for that matter. Most importantly, he'd decided not to get his hopes up about Rambo and Jorgenson. The SOG stats were as clear as day: once you make the missing in action list, you never came fucking back. Not fucking ever. It's hard enough to go missing in conventional warfare, but down here in Laos, as an SOG, it's even worse, especially if you got caught. Okay, although it was true that every now and again, the Vietcong could be civil to your average American soldier in uniform. When you got caught fighting undercover in Laos however, you didn't have a hope in hell. Even if you were "just" missing, that fucking country wasn't only enormous, it was infested with Vietcong as well. In any case, everything was harder across enemy lines when Rambo and Jorgenson went missing. It just happened that they were missing in the place they shouldn't even have been in, and definitely not fighting in. So, if caught they'd have been treated far worse than any simple soldier would have. As far as the Vietcong were concerned, they were criminals. As such, the Vietcong had 'the right' to do anything and everything they wanted, to them.

Using them as Guinea Pigs or laboratory rats was naturally included.

You let some fucking psycho use your best friends as lab rats.

You didn't have to be a Nazi to do this sort of thing. Quite the contrary, it happened a lot more often than people would have liked to believe.

Ortega couldn't help but recall the infamous Japanese group of so-called scientists, known as 'Unit 123'. Unit 123 were the Japanese "scientists" who had used American POWs as Guinea pigs in World War II.

Primarily they studied the effect certain poisons had on internal bleeding.

As you can probably imagine, they didn't stop there.

The Japanese soldiers in that unit used to organize decapitation contests. Whoever decapitated an American POW best with a Katana, won. By 'best', they meant in the cleanest possible manner.

Ortega knew that story well, and yes, it was true.

It was all there, black on white, clear as day in every fucking History book he'd had to study during his training course. He'd read them all, each and every one of them. *Entirely.*

That's why he wasn't going to kid himself about how it would end with Johnny and Jorgenson.

People think what a soldier fears most is death, but that's not true.

There are some things that are even worse than death, if you can imagine.

Only the thought made his eyes sting.

He wasn't actually crying, but had an strange feeling inside.

Before long however, he had broken into hiccupping sobs and could barely breath.

He was almost convulsing.

He was completely beside himself that night.

The next morning, Trautman put the loss of Rambo and Jorgenson aside. It was necessary to start dealing with what had really taken place on that mission.

Baker Team B had proved their ability to be well beyond any previous expectation. God only knew what could have been achieved had there been two Baker Teams instead of just having the one in charge of fifty Montagnards.

They could bring half the Ho Chi Minh Trail down to the ground, for fuck's sake.

In fact, if you launched an ad hoc campaign and then repeated it continuously, they may have been able to destroy the whole-damn thing.

Trautman looked over at the map of Laos and Cambodia again.

It's possible – he thought.

It really is.

In six months, Fort Bragg was going to make six more Baker Teams.

Six more badass Baker Teams.

He would make them take turns, alternating between defensive and offensive roles, giving them the time they needed to get their strength back between one mission and another.

One hundred and twenty men always on the field and always on a mission.

He intended to keep Baker Teams A and B, who were the first and best of them, as his own. Moreover, he had decided to use them solely for the most important missions.

They'll be my personal SOG Rapid-Response Teams.

Most importantly, I'll be the one commanding them.

Despite his ambitions, for the time being, he knew he needed to keep both feet on the ground.

Presently, there were only two Baker Teams at his disposal. One of which was full of soldiers that he considered to be “average” substitutes, simply men he hadn't trained personally himself. The other Baker Team, Team B, was temporarily burnt out, justifiably so after completing the mission they had.

'Point of No Return' had lasted too long, had been too tiring and risky considering the team's level. Those men deserved to take a leave lasting at least a week or even longer if possible. If he could arrange more time between missions, he'd give them

the chance to spend a few days in the 'real world'.*

Absolutely.

Now that his report for Washington report had been written all he'd left to do was debrief the Minister of Defence, along with a few of the other Baker Team project heads.

Politically speaking, the Baker Teams were like bombs set to go off. The Colonel's training program would become a milestone for the Special Forces in the generations to come.

He was sure of that by now and no longer had any doubts.

Results.

I've been striving for these kinds of results, this entire Goddamn war. Now that they're finally documented they're on their way to Washington. The president was even going to read them in person.

That wasn't all however.

Trautman had big plans in mind for his men.

In addition to providing hope, that is.

Vietnam, and this Goddamn war in general, was, from the very beginning, a Special Forces kind of war – he thought.

The only problem was that they weren't ready yet.

They sure fucking weren't, not by a long shot.

When the United States went to Vietnam in 1965, it had no idea what jungle combat was really about. The new battlefield was the vast, jungle-covered territory in South Vietnam.

As far as Trautman was concerned, that was a thing of the past.

Two years – he thought.

Two years from now, our Special Forces will be completely different.

They'll be bigger, stronger, but most importantly, much more qualified.

Not only that but even smarter, for fuck's sake.

I'll make them so fucking smart they'll be able to win this Goddamned war all by themselves. They won't need any help from us.

It was possible.

It sure was.

Not the tanks, the air planes or infinite bombs were of any use when in Saigon, any old asshole could put a bomb in a school whenever he wanted.

That was where Trautman was going to make the difference: in the field of intelligence.

Exactly that.

Finally, that morning, for the first time in two years, Trautman felt optimistic.

He had both optimism and hope.

The Next Day

Trautman's briefing at MacV headquarters didn't really go exactly as he had planned. It was clear that everyone was impressed by how his teams had performed, particularly Baker Team B. Nevertheless, Trautman was taken aback by how much importance they had given to the fact that his men had gone there to kill a V.I.P. but come back with three POWs instead. He hadn't expected it. When the Colonel left the room, General Ericsson followed him.

"What does the immediate future have in store for your men?" Ericsson asked turning to Trautman as he did.

"I'm going to send them on leave, so they can spend some time with their families if that's what they want to do with it."

"Sounds fair, I mean, after completing a mission like the one they just did."

The two of them continued walking down the corridor together quietly, before Trautman broke the silence and said:

"Okay general, spit it out. What do you want exactly?"

Ericsson took his time to mull it over, but eventually said:

"Trautman, listen to me for a minute. Has it crossed your mind that they may not actually believe you?"

The Colonel didn't reply.

"Your men marched into enemy held territory doing far more kilometres than anyone else had done before them. Once there, they didn't just take the chance and attack an enemy outpost, but even managed to disappear afterwards as they dragged four POWs along *with them*.

Fucking hell.

That's a hell of a lot of records to break all at the same time, don't you think?

Maybe, and that ended up being the very problem.

Maybe they were just a little sceptical in there.

I mean, when all was said and done, what did those men really bring home? Five POWs, three of which made it home alive, and two didn't. As for the rest, technically speaking, we don't know a single thing about what went on in there and there's no way of really confirming anything they've said. If that wasn't unsettling enough, now you're asking us to launch more raids exactly like this one, pretty much everywhere, and that includes North Vietnam. This and more, all in the hope that it'll end up being the last blow needed to get the job done. The same job the Tet offensive hasn't been able to do until now.

You want to send a thousand other teams exactly like yours, right into the 'lion's mouth' so to speak. I see what you're saying and, it's fine by me. Once enough men have made it through your training program with the necessary know-how, you'll have my unconditional support in there.

"Thank you Sir."

"Frankly speaking Colonel, any proposal that really puts forward a new stratagem, making a serious attempt to break the gridlock... is all right, by me.

Those proposals in particular that seem to have a rock-solid base, especially interest me, and that includes yours.

Unfortunately, those kinds of decisions are, well, it's complicated.

When they get to this level, military decisions become political ones and I'm sure you know this better than I do, Colonel.

Long gone are the days when us Generals could pretty much do anything we wanted. We're not in the fifties any more, that's for fucking sure.

Good old times, those were...

You probably can't remember them because you were too young, but back in those days we brass heads had free reign to do whatever we fucking well wished.

Nowadays, decisions like those no longer pertain only to us. Those days are long gone.

In this day and age, everything is more problematical.

As for you, just keep on doing your job, Trautman.

I am one hundred per cent behind you on this thing.

Make ten or twenty teams the same as yours and start dog piling the successes.

You'll see Colonel. There'll be new people jumping on your bandwagon with every day that passes.

Most importantly however, don't be in such a hurry with the brass heads.

Let them mull over the facts for a while.

Let the rumours about what your men got done spread around.

In the coming months, you'll get the credit you deserve here in the Department Of Defence and maybe then, this war will finally turn a new leaf.

You're a good man, Colonel. You won't have any problems becoming a General one-day, if the facts keep proving you're right like they're doing now.

Then again, who knows.

It may be you double-crossing everybody else on the other side of that door someday."

The following morning, Danforth went to the Dak To hospital to meet Shelley and Ortega.

Truth be told, Ortega was first on that list.

Duty first – he thought.

Outside the hospital walls, the sun was shining and the city seemed relatively peaceful.

Danforth found Ortega sitting in the corner all on his own.

After some small talk and the usual jokes, Danforth pulled up a chair and sat himself down right in front of Ortega. It didn't take them long before a sort of private debriefing got underway, as per team leader and the next in command would have on their own.

Initially, their conversation was coherent and professional-like, but neither was able to keep up their civil demeanour.

As to be expected, the topic of casualties and losses eventually came up. The lost hostages as per Lowell and, most of all, of the loss of two team members, Johnny and Jorgenson.

The two men openly discussed the plan they had, which was to reunite with Johnny and Jorgenson after their diversion. It was a plan that, considering the outcome of events, had failed miserably.

They were supposed to create a diversion but that's all – thought Ortega.

Not instigate combat.

Besides, in hindsight, it was suicidal right from the start.

We all knew how it would end.

Those thoughts may have passed Ortega's mind, but he certainly didn't say them out loud.

Not exactly in those words anyways.

Ortega and Danforth relived those moments together, contemplating the options they were unaware of at the time, and when they acted irrationally, too slowly or generally performed badly overall.

The benefit of hindsight and ample time to contemplate your options obviously produces hypothetical results that pan out better than the real ones did.

You can't always make the "right" move when everything around you is moving at the speed of light. You're never able to manage everything perfectly, or at least not entirely anyways.

They gave vent to how they were feeling, and especially how the previous months had changed them. The entire team had changed.

From the time their fight in Vietnam began, they grew to become much more than close friends. Time had made them brothers.
They continued for an hour.

When neither had anything more to say, they sat across from one another in silence. Danforth put his hand on Ortega's shoulder and the two of them sat there for a while longer

Despite “taking” a bullet in the chest, Ortega still felt guilty.

Between the two of them, he was the one who felt dirtier for sure.

-In the end, the burden was on his shoulders and nobody else's.

He was the one who allowed the team to blatantly disregard initial orders and instead proceeded with the raid.

He had decided against doing anymore recon, to avoid unnecessary risks, completely unaware that there could be and were civilians present in one of the structures, and that decision had cost about a dozen civilians their lives.

It was his decision to use a diversion, the very one that cost Johnny and Jorgenson their lives.

Last, but not least, Lowell's death was on him too.

Despite being shot in the chest as he covered his team on the exfiltration, it wasn't nearly enough to shut his conscious up. If anyone should have died in there, it should have been him.

That's not the way Danforth saw it though, at all.

“Manuel. Johnny and Carl had volunteered so in the end, they offered themselves up.”

“That's true, but if we hadn't attacked in the first place, there wouldn't have been so many Vietcong all over in the first place. By no means was attacking that damn outpost a smart decision either. If we hadn't attacked, we could have marched with no POW's and a lot less Vietcong too.

It would have been completely different.

It would have been a walk in the park”

“We knew all of that beforehand, but we still made the decision we did. Once we made sure Vuong really wasn't there for ourselves, we could have turned right around and gone straight home. We all knew we could, but still didn't. You may have given the final order, but we all made the decision together. Don't you remember?”

Ortega nodded.

He nodded, but there was something else.

There was always something else.

-

Danforth took a better look at the clear signs of suffering on Ortega's face, and it only

served to convince him more.

Absolutely.

There was definitely something else bothering him, and since Danforth had been a close friend to Ortega for such a long time, it didn't take him long to notice it.

Something else, something big

Unable to dismiss it, he decided to ask.

-

“What's the matter with you, Manuel?”

For a moment or so, Ortega hesitated, but ultimately decided to tell him. Let them go ahead and court martial me. He might have felt a lot better if someone had actually done it.

“I let go of Lowell.”

“Meaning what?”

“I couldn't hold him any longer and he was dragging me down with him. So, at that point, I got rid of him, you know, to save my self.”

“So what?”

“So, I killed him, that's what.”

“You were dying, Ortega: I saw it. We all saw it. If you hadn't done it, you'd both be dead now. You did the only reasonable thing there was to do. What's the matter with that?”

“What the fuck, Eagle. Come on, I killed him to save my own life.”

“Well, you know what, you may be right. If you had gone down with him, you'd be a fucking dead-hero but at least you'd have a medal already. That's exactly what we need a lot more of. “Well, you know what?”

Danforth pointed his finger directly at Ortega.

“I'd rather have a living soldier than a dead hero any day. Dead heroes, on the other hand, are completely useless if the fucking war on this side, is going to last a few more years at the very least!”

Ortega shook his head anyway.

“Okay, then listen to me,” said Danforth.

“Lowell's arm didn't work and he couldn't drag himself along that damn rope and you know it. I was there. You gave this fucking mission one hundred and twenty per cent. No one can blame you for a single thing.”

Danforth concluded, giving Ortega a few pats on the shoulder and rose from his chair.

“Trust me: there's no way you could've saved the two of you. It was impossible.”

“I slept for twelve hours last night.”

“Then you should probably get a nurse to wash you up a bit. You smell like a goat, for Christ's sake.”

Danforth came out of Ortega's ward.

He had come to meet Shelley too, obviously, so he made his way towards the ward she was working in.

Danforth hung back a little in an effort to buy time because truth be told, he was tense. He wasn't ready to meet with her yet. It was as if he needed to change his 'mask' before meeting up with her. He didn't want her to see who he really was.

Danforth focused, took a deep breath and tried to relax. He tried to remember how it felt, back in the days, when he was a normal person after being a soldier for an entire month.

So, after procrastinating a little longer, Danforth realized that deep down, he hadn't really come to just meet Ortega or get his second in command duties done. Not in the least.

Deep down, the main reason he was there was because of her, and he had, in effect, just found her.

Shelley was working, of course.

She was doing well and it was great to be watching her.

Danforth paused one last time to fix the image of her in his mind as she simply stood there reading her patient reports.

He would have stayed there, just aweing, forever.

It would have been nice if she hadn't notice him at all, but shortly thereafter, she turned in his direction and recognized him immediately.

She opened her eyes wide when she saw him, but the instant she realized what she was doing, she quickly returned to her calm, collected self. It took her no time at all to regain her composure as she turned away from him nonchalantly and went back to ignoring him.

Once she'd finished jotting something down in her notebook, she flipped over its cover, slid it into her pocket and hurriedly walked away in the opposite direction. She didn't even remotely glance his way after that.

"Shelley?" he said calling out to her.

He couldn't understand what was going on

He started following her, quickening his pace in an effort to catch up.

When he was close enough to reach her he grabbed her arm – and finally managed to stop her.

"Shelley" he whispered moving in front of her. The moment their eyes met however, he saw a fountain of tears and realized she was weeping.

“You...” Shelley said in a voice as sharp as a blade.
“You said you’d be gone for *five days!*”

Danforth didn’t know what to say.
He was absolutely and positively petrified.

“And look at you! You don’t even have anything to say me, nothing at all, you asshole.”

She began punching him in the chest crying all the while.
Danforth moved his arm gently around, pulling her as close as he could to him stopping her.
Unable to fight him off, Shelley pressed her face up against his chest as she sobbed even harder.
She eventually gave in but still went on crying.

“I thought... I thought you were dead!”
“I’m sorry Shelley. Something unexpected came up and I was late. That’s it. I’m really really sorry Shelley.”

She looked in his eyes through her tears. They seemed to be pleading with him.

“I love you, you stupid, fucking idiot.”

Danforth got the shivers, not unlike an electric discharge he got once, and he didn’t like it at all.

I love you too – he immediately said in his head. Just thinking it wasn’t nearly enough though, and it echoed a few times more in his head before he could even think straight again.

Me too – he thought.
I love you too.

“I love you too,” he finally managed to say aloud to her.
It was his first time ever.

It was the very first time that Joseph Danforth said those words aloud, ever, in his entire life.

After saying it, Danforth lowered eyes, almost unable to bear seeing such a beautiful face so weary with tears.

Worst still, they were tears *he* had caused.

“The thing is, well, the thing is that it was tough, over there,” he said, apologetically.
“I’d already got that, you asshole” she said.
“I’d already got that because I know what’s going on in those eyes. I know what death is, you prick. I know it better than you do.”

She continued to cry softly and snuggled back into his chest again.

To Danforth, those words really hurt.

They burned his insides and felt as painful as a poison probably would.

He turned to look straight into her eyes and said in a firm voice:

“But I am alive, Shelley, and now I’m here.”

Danforth tilted his head slightly, even managing a smile.

“...And I told you that I love you too.”

He was well aware of how much more could have been said than just that.

To start with, it should be pointed out that the thing he had just said to her was something he had never, ever, not in his life and not to a single other person ever said aloud before to anyone.

Honestly, it was his first time.

No kidding.

He’d have liked to tell her that, then and there.

He wished he could explain how much all of this meant to him, but he couldn’t.

The fact that he’d told her he loved her too would have to be more than enough for one day and today in particular. He was so beyond himself, truly overwhelmed and couldn’t find the words. All the same, he’d get around to it eventually because he meant to.

There was no denying that the talk he had with Shelley could have turned into, shall we say, 'problematic', but he definitely hadn’t expected this.

Despite not having slept together, at least, not as of yet they hadn’t, she already loved him.

And he loved her too.

He just hadn’t noticed it before.

“I survived Shelley. I made it through,” he said.

“Did you risk your life?”

Danforth sighed.

“To tell you the truth, it’s a miracle I’m alive. It’s a miracle any of us, team and all, are alive actually...”

“Well then, leave... Give your notice, go back to the US and find a new job.”

“I can’t.”

“Of course you can.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

She didn’t reply.

Then he added:

“This job gave me *you*, Shelley.”

His eyes met hers and it was as intense as the first time and a sort of reawakening.

Her face was tear stained from all the crying she'd done.
His expression on the other hand, showed signs of a smile.
That was because Danforth finally felt happy.
A strange kind of happiness, the odd kind. The kind of happiness he'd never experienced before.

"I..." he stammered, but Shelley cut him off mid-sentence.
"The fact that the Special Forces unit you're in isn't just a plain, old, run of the mill Special Forces unit, has been rather obvious for a long time, and I get it, Joseph. Be that as it may, sooner or later, one way or another, you all end up in here. Whether it be you guys personally, or maybe your officers, or even your corpses. So I asked around and you're not the person you claim to be."

Danforth looked up above.
There was no point in lying anymore, not now.
Letting the lies go on this way would only serve to make the situation worse than it was.

"Okay, okay. I'm not exactly in the Special Forces any more. Now I'm in the Secret Service."
She became suddenly serious.
"Is it that dangerous?"
"Yes it is. But I really do love my job, Shelley. Well, you see, occasionally, we do save some lives. Not every single time, but sometimes we save lives too. Just like you do."
She looked away from him and then shook his head.
"I knew it. I knew I shouldn't have fallen in love with someone like you. You always die. All of you, each and every one of you always dies, you assholes. Are you going to leave me all alone too, Joseph Danforth?"
"No, I won't."
"You'll leave me, and I'll be all alone. You all do it sooner or later," she said in a broken voice.
"No baby, I won't let you down like that. I'll never leave you like that."

He saw that her lips were trembling with emotion as he put his arms around her in a protective embrace.
Joseph Danforth had never known anyone, in the entire world, who regarded his life that highly or that worthy.
His own parents hadn't even cared about him the way that woman was doing for him now.
If she really did care so much about him, then maybe, just maybe, his life really was worth *something*.
Danforth hugged her tightly and pulled her close up against him, as his face slowly moved towards hers.

“I’ll survive, baby. I’ll do it for you.”

“Is that a promise?”

“I promise.”

She hugged him back squeezing him so hard that some of the bruises from his last mission actually started to hurt again.

“I’m going back to the real world in a few days, honey. I have a few things to take care of back home, and once I’m done I’ll come right back. I just wanted to tell you before I left.”

Immediately her lovely eyes darted straight up at him and stared with such sincerity it almost worried him. She turned facing him directly and whispered:

“Stay the night, Joseph.”

Her eyes were still teary and, almost imploring. She stared at him the same way a weapon would have locked onto its target and would probably never look away. “I want to be with you tonight, please, I’m begging you.”

“Okay, sweetie”

That night was the first time Joseph and Shelley made love. It was reminiscent of a dance their love created together and that only they could share.

Their tenderness became passion, their passion became pleasure and their pleasure turned wild.

They slowly and articulately passed from one phase to the next, living each to its fullest.

A few hours later, they were both out of breath and damp with sweat.

Danforth was genuinely shaken-up by the feelings he was having.

It was the first time he had undergone an experience as moving as that.

His yesteryear had seen many women, all of which he'd made love to many times, but never like that before. At no time had he shared quite so many shades with anyone as special as that before.

Moving closer to her, Joseph glimpsed down at her face.

That face was beautiful. Simply wonderful.

The most beautiful in his eyes, and he was the one there making love to her.

How the hell was that possible?

It nearly made him think that love actually did exist. I mean, that movie-like version of love, the one you usually referred to as surreal or imaginary. This time that version of love not only appeared to be real, it seemed to be giving him a free spin too.

Yet Danforth had the feeling there was something amiss.

After all, he was a man, not a child.

Over the course of his life, he'd made love many a time. Why would that time be any different from any other time?

There was something, a feeling or impression maybe, which implied he should be considering things more carefully. Listen more attentively and open his eyes wide.

He never imagined something like this could genuinely exist, and now, there was a kind of inner conflict going on inside of him, because of it.

On no occasion had love been anything more than just physical pleasure and fun. Not once.

No different from jerking off, nor had he expected it to be. Until now that is, because being with Shelley, was a lot different. Fuck was it ever.

With Shelley, it was an entirely different matter.

For that reason, Danforth couldn't help wonder, what the fuck he was supposed to do next, given how far they'd just come.

Stop having sex with whores perhaps?

Should he turn into an entirely different person?
In effect, giving up whores wouldn't be hard at all.
Especially given that, after being with Shelley, whores would be nothing more than inflatable dolls. Nope, after Shelley, there was no going back. The feelings he had for her felt so good it was unsettling.

What the fuck – he thought.

I must be getting old.

Yeah, that must be it.

If he'd known those kinds of feelings really existed, maybe some of his choices would have been less extreme.

He might have got his shit together because of it and tried to find a girl like this sooner rather than later and not do crazy shit like rob gas stations or apply for the Special Forces for that matter. You can say that again.

Considering the way he was feeling for Shelley, his whole life seemed to be pure madness.

Shelly had a look of satisfaction on her face, as she whispered through her soft, half-closed lips.

He lost his train of thought however.

Things that didn't pertain to anything, came to mind, and he couldn't do anything about it.

Joseph remembered the Laotian slaves he and Jorgenson had blown up, thus killing them and dismembering their bodies.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Civilians Joseph Danforth hadn't killed with his bare hands, but just about: women and children that he and his team had ripped to shreds thanks to a so-called 'technical mistake'.

Calling it a 'technical mistake' made the whole thing a lot worse in his eyes.

Why is that?

He considered Lowell, the hostage who had drowned.

Then he thought about Johnny and Jorgenson who were still missing in action, followed by the look on the Vietcong he'd shot in the chest or head. For the hundredth time he could see the expressions of pain on their faces and their blood squirting all over the place. Their AK rifle made some rather noteworthy holes when it did hit someone dead on though. Especially when it came to exit wounds, because you could see blood vaporize into thin air or red filaments fly everywhere.

Danforth gave his head a shake; those runaway thoughts were ruining everything.

He tried to concentrate on her face.

There was a look of pleasure on her face and she looked wonderful.

This time making love was different.

This time it was *real*.

The only thing he had to do was hold tight and keep those pictures out of his head. Joseph needed to hold her, tight, right up against him, and so he did. He felt the need to feel her against him and to kiss her neck repeatedly. After a few more flashbacks however, and that unsettling feeling began to interrupt his love making to Shelley. He tried to block them out, but they only got worse. Goddammit were they ever!

Danforth slowed his movements down and Shelley immediately looked at him, worrying that there might be something wrong.

He stopped.
She touched his face and caressed him.
Danforth had started to cry.
“What's happening?” she said.
Danforth didn't know what to tell her.

He would have given anything to not have killed those civilians, or to have somehow saved Johnny and Jorgenson.

He would have given his own life.
He would have killed the whole world if it had made any kind of difference, but at that moment, while he was making love to Shelley, he couldn't even be angry about it.
The only thing he could do was cry.
All because it was over.
He had killed innocent bystanders and lost two friends, and was now doomed to live with that 'version' of the story forever.

For reasons beyond his understanding, the love he was feeling for Shelley now was making everything even more real.

Was it ever.

God only knew why.

Maybe because as two of his best friends were either dead, missing or prisoners, while he, on the other hand, was warm, safe and making love to the most beautiful woman in the world.

Him, the most undeserving of all.

The thug.

Joseph Danforth the pusher, the pimp, the thief and murderer, had killed civilians, lost a POW not to mention two team members. Instead of being dead or lost in Laos himself, he was there, in a hotel room in Dak To, making love for the first time to the only woman he had actually ever loved.

In no way did he deserve it.

He didn't deserve any of it.

“I love you,” said Danforth despite it all.
All because he wanted nothing more than to make it real. It had to be.
No, he wasn't going to give it all up simply because he felt guilty about it.
“I love you, Shelley,” he said again.
She smiled softly and pushed him against her, in an attempt to comfort him.
“I love you too, Joseph.”

Then they started to make love again, and this time it was even sweeter.
After a while, his demons finally disappeared, and when he and Shelly reached the climax, they did so together.
Subsequently, they collapsed into each other's arms.

The embraced each other tightly and Danforth needed to be there with her.
Leaving her would have been like making a get-away after you've stolen something.
After a while, he did let go of her, but laid there beside her, he was still covered in sweat and gazing at softly flowing brown hair that gently slept beside him.
She had the most beautiful hair he'd ever seen in his life.
On the one hand, Danforth felt at peace as he looked at such a lovely vision.
On the other however, he was a little restless because this feeling was like nothing he'd felt before.

'You are getting soft, Joseph' – the team would have told him if they had only known what was going on in his head.

A smile came to his lips as his eyes closed and he began to watch the far away figures dance.

He was still very tired from the recently concluded mission and was fast asleep in no time at all.

The following morning Danforth woke and was pleasantly surprised to find himself on an actual hotel bed, for a change.

There was a stream of sunlight beaming in through the window.

It hotel was clearly of a certain calibre, the kind wealthy tourists stayed in, with crisp pleated bedsheets and new, morning-fresh scented blankets.

There was a heap of brown hair on the bed still laying beside him.

As his face moved gently towards it, the wonderful fragrance of her hair sent him into bliss.

It was the first time Danforth had woken up in bed next to a woman. As he rose to sit on the side of the bed, he looked attentively at her.

He hadn't done drugs or drunk heavily for quite a long time and thanks to continuously having to work out, he was in better shape than he'd ever been.

Well, at least he would be once he gained back all the weight he'd lost on that fucking mission. The same fucking mission they lost Johnny and Jorgenson on.

Even Shelley had noticed how much he'd gone down in weight.

The sight of his hollowed out chest had brought sadness to her eyes for a brief and painful moment.

Even so, they'd gone on loving each other.

At long last Joseph possessed two of the very things he'd always wanted, but never had, a job and a future.

He had it made, apparently.

Apparently, it would seem so.

A touch of underlying uncertainty was always mandatory, of course.

There were still plenty of occasions and time for him to mess it up somehow.

He could fuck things up with Shelley in some way, manner or form.

The Army could kick him out for one thing or another.

He could end up killed since it was, after all, it was a fucking war.

If, he could just find the way to keep doing everything they way he was doing now though... Wow.

He had become well respected and had important responsibilities.

He had an extremely important job, and was part of an equally important team, despite having been an addict, a pusher and even a thief.

It was nice to finally have reasons to live.

Joseph Danforth took out a figgy and lit it using his Zippo, looking at the SOG emblem on it.

It was almost too good to be true.

Three days after 'Point of No Return' had ended, the search for Rambo and Jorgenson still hadn't lead them to anything, not even a lead. The Jungle had seemingly swallowed them up, along with any trace they may have left, with them. Despite that both the helicopters and Bird Dogs had continued to fly over the tribal No Man lands between Laos and Vietnam, at a certain distance in Laos for political reasons mind you, no concrete leads were unmasked.

The National Liberation Front radio hadn't broadcasted any new information regarding the death or capturing of US soldiers either.

Not once those two days, were any in-code emergency radio communications received, nor did they intercept any beeping signals.

There were some fake SOS calls – in English, by some Vietcong naturally, in an attempt to ambush, which, for some, proved that the two were still alive and hunted by them. Those were just theories naturally, given that fraudulent requests had become a daily matter. The lack of news on the National Liberation Front radio didn't necessarily mean anything either, because when were the Vietcong catch you. nobody generally knows about it.

The Vietcong tended to parade their American prisoners around, but, as always, there were exceptions to the rule.

This, for example when they desperately needed info from some recently captured prisoner. In those cases, the Vietcong didn't go public about the capture, so no one would come looking for them while they were being cut up into pieces. Then you could make the bodies disappear, so that no one would know what they'd done to them.

The absolute, most discouraging thing about Rambo and Jorgenson missing in action was that in almost five years of SOG history, no one had ever came back excluding Baker Team B itself. To be more precise, no soldier who had been declared missing came back on his own two legs at least, which explained why no one expected Rambo or Jorgenson to return any time soon. On the contrary, most believed they'd been killed right after the failed get-away.

Hence, after three days of abundant food, water, sleep and rest in general, the members of the Baker Team B were on the road to recovery.

In the meantime, Trautman was evaluating some Fifth Special Forces recruits to replace the two missing men, but since they weren't trained in his special program, it was nowhere near the same.

Trautman knew it all too well.

The brothel was luxurious and high-end, the kind frequented by French business executives who were close to the regime and US officers. In order to get in, Berry and Krakauer had to put on some nice clothes and even though they weren't crazy about the idea they did it anyway.

God willing, the two Baker Team members would have finally left for their leave back home the very next day.

As I said before, in the case that God was willing of course.

The two of them had been in there for a couple of hours, and it was about three in the morning already. It was late enough for the booze to get the upper hand over them both.

*

Berry was sitting beside a big four-poster bed, his shirt was unbuttoned and his tie undone as it hung off his neck while a Vietnamese girl slept soundly on his lap. He had a long pipe dangling from his mouth and there was a cloud of smoke right above him that was moving overhead practically in slow motion.

"Sure, being cool is cool," he said.

"Still, I don't always understand why we smoke this shit."

Krakauer, who sat in the chair just in front of him, didn't seem to have heard a word he'd said. He was staring directly ahead, but his eyes were half closed, almost dream-like.

His girl was sitting at the foot of his chair, her head resting on his knees the way dogs slept next to their masters.

"I mean..." Berry began, taking a break to look at his pipe mysteriously.

"What I mean is that this stuff is totally the opposite of what we are. Not only of what we are but also what we do."

Krakauer opened an eye as Berry continued his monologue.

"We went through hell trying to become the fastest, the smartest and at the readiest motherfuckers of all time. Fuck, what am I saying? We are the fastest and smartest motherfuckers in the whole universe. Then, as soon as we were on our first day of leave, we fuck ourselves up beyond any recognition using this shit."

Delmore Berry tried to get up on his feet but feeling the girl's weight, quickly changed his mind.

“Fucking hell,” he said in a resigning voice.

He took the pipe from his mouth placing it next to him on the bed.

“You’re totally right, man,” said Krakauer.

Then he stretched a hand out to get the pipe and started smoking it instead.

Not long after, he said:

“We probably shouldn't fucking smoke this shit at all you know.”

Puff

Puff

Puff

Lawrence looked on with dreamy eyes under his half-closed eyelids.

“No I’m serious – Delmore continued – all this effort to be the best, and then we ruin it all using this fucking shit. Think about the night after Black Spot. Don’t you remember? The night they attacked Dak To for the second time.

No, think about this instead. Imagine what would have happened if Johnny and Manuel were high that night when the VCs attacked, when they were on their own in there. Ortega nearly got fucking wasted, for Christ’s sake. Think what could have happened if they’d been fucked up *‘because they were on a leave.’*”

Berry inhaled deeply, but then coughed up phlegm.

“I’ll tell you what the fuck would have happened, man.”

“Fuck do you ever talk a lot, buddy.”

“I know, I know. If Johnny and the boss had been fucked up on this shit when the VC attacked the brothel, they’d be dead.”

Berry spit phlegm right next to the bed and on top of a brass plate full of dirty handkerchiefs and used condoms.

And phlegm, of course.

“You’re such a ball breaker with this bullshit talk, Berry. Go get yourself a fuck or something.”

“I can't man. I think I pushed everything pretty much to the limit. I feel like puking and my dick fucking hurts, I fucked so much tonight. I need a break man, at least for a second.”

The voices downstairs seemed to get excited unexpectedly, and so did the excitement in Krakauer’s eyes.

“Just give me half an hour, that’s all I need.”

“Sssshhh,” said Krakauer.

“Half an hour, and then I’ll take this lady for another spin.”

“Ssssshhhhh!”

Something was happening downstairs.

The voices were only a little agitated, and it was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

Krakauer was sure about it: the high pitch tone of their voices wasn't fear.

It was excitement about something or other.

“What the fuck is happening down there?” said Krakauer.

“Nothing,” said Berry, but Krakauer got up and staggered to their room's half opened front door regardless. He then took a quick look into the alley and added:

“Let's go check it out.”

“No, Krack. I can't even fucking stand.”

“Let's go!”

Krakauer gently pushed the girl away and Berry rose unwillingly from his chair.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he said buttoning his shirt up and doing up his belt.

*

It took a while for the two Baker Team soldiers to see the small figure at the centre of everyone's attention.

The girl was small and under age for sure, maybe not more than twelve. She was too small too skinny, so certainly undernourished and was crying in the middle of the living room.

Her nose dripped from all her crying, and she was frowning.

It took the two of them a moment to understand what was actually going on, but when they finally did, their blood turned ice cold.

It was an auction.

They were selling the child's virginity to the highest bidder.

-

Krakauer's eyes widened as his face turned redder. It was a telltale sign that Berry understood, so trouble was already on its way.

He knew his friend.

He knew him well enough by then to recognize that look in his eyes before a mission and while he was on it, Goddamn it. Not during the regular missions mind you, but when a full-scale *shit storm* was on its way.

Jesus fucking Christ – he thought as the adrenaline started pumping in his chest waking him from the opium's induced torpor.

Krakauer was obviously right about everything.

Auctioning off a twelve year old girl at an auction, held in a brothel *really* was weird shit.

What could the two of them possibly do to keep this from happening though?

Not to mention the fact they were both stoned.

Don't forget to include that they were SOG as well, always, and no matter what.

Getting attention was never a good idea for people like them, and looking for trouble was even worse. The way Krakauer was about to do for instance.

Berry could feel the incoming shit storm all the way up his backbone.

He could feel his friend's rage fill the air the way radiation would after an atomic bomb went off.

Worst of all, he was dizzy, felt heavy, moved slowly and could hardly focus.

Had things really gone south, he couldn't fight properly. Maybe, he wouldn't even have reacted.

Maybe they could somehow end up saving that girl from that particular auction, but protecting her from that fucking country was considerably out of their reach. Not to mention that the guy selling her was probably her father in the first place. Of course it fucking was! No girl could end up in a brothel like that, if she wasn't being sold out by her own fucking father. No, everything was on the "up and up" so to say.

What a fucking asshole – Berry thought angrily.

Anyway, those kinds of things were routine in Vietnam just like they were in any other third world country. Meaning that for every life you save, thousands of others would meet the same fate the same day.

That's why Delmore thought saving her was useless. Sooner or later, that girl would meet her destiny anyway. Either that or he was just too stoned to care. He wasn't sure to tell the truth.

Being as high as he was at the time, he'd never know. There was nothing more than a lot of confusion going on in his head.

On the other hand, you only needed one look at Krakauer to understand for him, it was a completely different matter.

The first costumers started to raise their hands to bid.

No matter what Krakauer wanted, fundamentally, they had a problem: neither he nor Berry could let anyone find out they spoke Vietnamese, because speaking Vietnamese in that place would have been like attaching a bull's eye on their backs.

For an American, speaking Vietnamese meant you were either part of the Special Forces, or you were a military advisor. Enemy spies could be anywhere, and, in fact, they were everywhere.

Krakauer moved slightly closer to the little girl, in order to get a better look at her face.

There he goes – thought Delmore.

"Beautiful baby isn't it, *giai?*" said the man who was collecting the offers.

"You can't take her. You bid like all others! You not can take. You buy like everybody," added an old woman beside of him.

Krakauer ignored her
He walked into the middle of the room and grabbed the girl by the arm.
Berry looked up.

“I’m not fucking paying for shit, *Madame*, ” mumbled Krakauer.
Then he added:
“And if I ever find you doing something like this again, I will kill every single one of you the way we’d knock off Vietcong.”
“But she is old, *giai*. She looks young to you, but she is old, *giai*.”
“Bull fucking shit.”

Berry saw some of the men in the room move into position *surrounding* them.
Fuck – thought Barry feeling the adrenaline and fear start to clear up his head.
Fucking insane, considering not even a moment before he was so stoned he could barely stand. Now he could probably recite the whole NATO alphabet, backwards.
All thanks to the adrenaline.

The old woman standing at the front suddenly put her hand up in the air however, and everything in the place seemed to stop. A seemingly innocent gesture, but one that had instantly blocked the men behind Barry and Krakauer exactly where they were.

“I don't want to discuss, *giai*, but don't forget that we cut your throats, throw you in alley and no one ever know. Then police ask many questions, but that’s all nothing else.”
“And you would undoubtedly succeed *Madame*, certainly. Then, one night, you’d get knocked right down to the ground by one of Uncle Sam's bombs.
We’re not alone, ma’am.
We never are.
We can go anywhere because everybody knows where we are wherever we go.
Once you’re dead, you won’t be able to sell your opium or your whores to anyone else.”

Two threats – thought Delmore.
Krakauer had just made a double threat.

“I no sell opium. I have nothing to do with none of this.”
“You don’t really think you can kill a couple of Americans and keep trafficking opium at the same time, do you? You work for Van Loc.”

The 'Madame' had suddenly became purple in the face.

Van Loc played both the role of being her boss and her main adversary when it came to drug trafficking, at the same time. Other than being up on the drug distribution chain, he was, even more importantly, the leader of the city’s self-defence forces.

What this meant was, whatever 'Madame' got was nothing but leftover crumbs from Van Loc's trade, and only when he agreed to her taking it.

The key to Van Loc's power was his outright friendship with the Americans. In the case that Madame for one reason or another killed a couple of US soldiers, Van Loc wouldn't have had second thoughts about wiping her off the face of the earth and then taken over her businesses too.

Krakauer had threatened the woman, but in all actuality he had done much more than that.

He had clearly illustrated that he knew more than a 'normal' US soldier could ever know.

It was like admitting you were more than they thought you were, and 'Madame' and her men would have dealt with them accordingly. By them, I meant us, of course.

Krakauer took the young girl's hand this time, and she started shaking in fear.

"Pay up," Krakauer grunted to Berry.

"What?"

"Don't we have enough?" insisted Krakauer obviously referring to the money.

Considering the auction had come to a halt the way that it had, I'd say, it was quite likely that they had enough money.

They could probably get away with it too as long as nobody pulled out any guns unnecessarily.

That wasn't exactly their biggest problem though.

The problem was that they were about to tip the intricately complicated balance of kickbacks, opium trade and favours' exchange that kept the city at peace. In other words, the balance of power Trautman had worked months on to create.

That poor girl's life wasn't worth that kind of risk, either.

Cynical as it may sound, one girl's life wasn't worth the hundreds of deaths that tipping the scales would cause if the fighting started again.

If this situation was the cause, and it actually took place, it would be like betraying the Colonel outright.

Jesus fucking Christ – thought Delmore.

Please God, make them take the money.

Let us go without a hitch.

Berry dug deep into his pockets pulling out all the money he had, and counting it as he did.

Lucky for him, that night he'd brought plenty of money with him.

Krakauer for some reason had done the same.

Thus, the two of them made their offer, the Madame accepted and no one else dared to bid further.

In fact, most of the auctioneers had already vanished.

Delmore and Krakauer therefore made it out of the brothel with the little girl in hand.

That next morning, Trautman screamed at the top of his lungs for almost twenty minutes straight.

He roared about the truce, the balance he had built after years of effort and negotiations between the army, the police, the mob, the weapons smugglers and drug traffickers. Everything in Dak To was hanging by a thread, and the two of them had just risked everything to save what, exactly? A drop in the ocean when there were others that ended up far worse than that poor girl did, and on a daily basis?

It didn't make any sense.

Those two idiots – because at that point, Trautman had completely lost it – those two fucking morons had no fucking idea what the big picture was or how many lives they'd put at risk with their fucking nonsense! No fucking idea!

Krakauer was shaken and embittered by those words, but it was true and he knew it. A step out of line with the wrong people could have made the civil war regress twenty years overnight.

Once his rage had worn off, Trautman didn't say another word for quite some time, and only then did he finally calm down.

He didn't comment further but contemplated quietly for such a long time that Berry and Krakauer almost felt embarrassed.

Eventually, he broke the silence.

“What we need now is to find her a family. I'll see what I can do,” the Colonel concluded.

“Now get the hell out of my sight!”

Some days later, as promised, the Colonel had found a family, trustworthy enough for the task.

A good family, the kind that had values, and one which had lost one of their own daughters recently to this damn war.

Krakauer would have paid, hence providing for the little girl on a monthly basis, but at least Trautman was sure that no one would risk selling her again.

In the end, although Krakauer was upset by the potential problems he'd caused, he at least felt at peace with himself about what he'd done that night. It was true that SOG may never have put things right in that war, especially after the TET offensive. No one believed they could still win the war. Krakauer may have even died before the

end of his first tour, or on a mission, which was highly likely if the following missions were as over the top as that damned *'Point Of No Return'* had just been. At least Krakauer felt like he had succeeded in actually changing something, despite it being only for a single life. It was a wonderful feeling.

In the days that followed, the search for Rambo and Jorgenson become increasingly dangerous, as did the price itself of continuing. Since it wasn't yielding positive results however, it didn't come as a surprise when they decided to decrease the efforts, significantly.

A lot of the Baker Team B hadn't fully recovered from the 'Point Of No Return' mission so some of them decided to spend some days in the US anyhow.

Messner Goes On leave

Messner gave a sigh of relief the moment his flight took off from Saigon. He was finally leaving Vietnam. He may not be gone long, but the feeling of finally breathing again was immediate. He looked down at the clouds. He was going to the US to keep the promise he'd made to Robertson before he died. Keeping his promise however meant Messner wouldn't be making it home this trip. When he thought about the letters he wrote Linda however, and the fact she hadn't replied to even one made it a lot easier. Not stopping in his hometown to see her or anybody else for that matter didn't make a bit of difference this time around. He'd spend his whole leave just getting what he had to do for Robertson done then. He was landing on the other side of the United States compared to where he usually did, and this time it suited him fine. He was certain about not wanting to see anyone down there. Messner was the kind of guy who was rather indifferent when it came to hearing from people, and that included his own parents as well. He got to Louisville early the next morning. Despite the jet-lag or that the side effects of operation 'Point Of No Return' hadn't worn off yet, he didn't feel too bad and was set on getting what he had to do done. With that in mind, he hailed the first available taxi, and gave the driver the address. He didn't look forward to the task itself but he was anxious to get it over with.

*

Once out of the cab, Messner felt somewhat out of place wearing a serious grey suit with his beard and long hair. He was certain they'd mistake him for a preacher as he walked towards a perfect stranger's doorbell. He sure hoped he didn't end up scaring her looking the way he did. Robertson's house was white, colonial in nature, and had a little garden which was very well kept. The closer Messner got to the door the more uneasiness he felt, but in the end, he rang the bell.

After it rung, the wait seemed endless. On his first tour of duty he had helped somebody kill himself. In all actuality, he'd done it several times already, but as an overseas doctor, he never had to talk to any of their familiars. He had spoken to a fellow soldiers at the very most, and in a place, such as Vietnam, where dying was somewhat commonplace. It was quite different from the real world. Fucking hell was it ever! That would be his first time! In the real world, no one ever seemed to get killed and people didn't get diseases. You

lived forever. Yeah right, that's it.

In the real world, death always looks like it's an accident.

In reality however, it's the most common thing in the world.

Messner swallowed in an effort to relieve some tension.

A part of him hoped no one answered the door.

The other part just wanted to get this whole damn thing over and done with.

He only had seven days of leave so he had no intention of wasting even a single minute more than he needed to. He would much rather spend his time drinking and having fun in a city he'd never been in.

WMLW – he thought to himself looking at the small, steel plate for the last time.

What the fuck does that mean?

Messner could sense someone standing on the other side of the door when it finally opened.

The woman in front of him had blond hair and blue eyes. She wore her long and messy hair in a half ponytail with soft curls flowing all over the place.

Maybe she looked a little too well groomed to be a POW's wife, especially a POW that had been missing in action for years.

Truth is she was a lot to process, and that suddenly gave Messner the idea she wasn't even the right woman. At a second glance however, he noticed her eyes were slightly swollen and the tip of her nose a little red, the kind of red you got from crying.

She'd been crying, so it had to be her.

Still, the red colour of her cheeks was barely noticeable if you took into account how recently she must have cried. It was instead giving her a natural kind of make-up look, which, honestly speaking, was making her even prettier than she already was. Her voice suddenly woke Messner and brought him back to reality.

"Okay listen, whatever this is about, I'm really, well, I'm not interested," she rambled on to him.

"Ma'am..."

"This isn't a good time at all, really. We've just..."

"I met your husband."

She suddenly stopped and stood silently for a moment staring blankly at him. She seemed to be pondering who Messner could have possibly been.

At long last, she said:

"I'm not sure I really want to know about it."

Messner tensed up.

He stood there and let it sink in. He was going to take the time he needed, and after he had made his choices with great care and thought to be ready. When he finally came round to say what he's planned however, it didn't end up being exactly what he'd hoped.

“Listen, my name is Daniel Messner and I’m keeping the promise that I made to your husband in the event that something – let's say – “of a certain kind” happened to him. Please... I’ve come a very long way to come.”

Once more, she stared for some time before replying.
At long last, however, she said:

“Come in.”

Following her request, that’s what he did.

The entrance gave onto a big and tidy living room.

If the house was any indication, Robertson was quite well off and that explained how elegant his wife was even at a hard time like this; she was clearly used to it.

She was used to looking elegant all the time, and would keep looking that way even after the news of her husband, despite not hearing back for years

“So, Messner,” she said coldly, giving the impression she was in a rush or something.
“What’s this promise you were talking about?”

This wasn’t the way Messner had expected it to go in the worst-case scenario. Maybe he was just being naive but he was expecting something more along the lines of:

'Were you with him when it happened?'

'Did he suffer?'

No, this was definitely not what he’d expected to hear, at all.

Fuck, he needed a strategy change so he took a deep breath and decided to drop the courtesies and get down to the point.

“Your husband's last wish - before he passed away - was for you to receive this. He made me promise I’d get it to you.”

Messner then stretched out his arm and handed her the little plate which she took from him with much indifference.

She glanced up and turned her back to him while she examined it. She flipped it over a couple of times in the palm of her hand before coming across the four unattractive letters scratched onto the back. Once she laid her eyes on them however, she became still.

Messner began to feel a little uncomfortable, shifting his weight from one leg to the other just waiting to see how she’d react.

That hiatus lasted for an eternity and unable to keep silent any longer, he eventually felt obliged to break the silence for her.

“Listen, I didn't want to bother you, I just had to keep the promise I made to your

husband before he died. If it wasn't for that, I never would have come.

WMLW – Messner repeated to himself occasionally glancing up at the stock-still woman.

Then, to his surprise, she unexpectedly turned around to face him. Her eyes were so wide-open that she looked as though she'd seen a ghost.

Initially she frowned slightly, but in no time at all her entire face seemed to wrinkle up in an attempt to fight back the tears and sobs.

Her composure didn't last long however and before you knew it she had broken-down in sobs and the tears were streaming down her face

She covered her face with one hand and stomped her feet at the same time in rage.

“Ma’am...”

Messner tried to get closer to her, but she gestured him away with her hand, almost implying *'don't touch me, don't come any closer to me'*.

“Ma’am, I’m sorry. I... I don't know what to say... I...”

What she did next seemed so unbelievable to Messner that he seriously thought she'd gone crazy.

She took one-step and then another, stopping between each one, moving closer and closer (God only knew why) to the record player, so it looked like she wanted to turn it on.

What the fuck – thought Messner.

In fact, the woman looked through her records and then put one on the turntable.

What the fuck is going on?

Good God.

What the fuck is this?

Messner felt so awkward it was embarrassing.

It was a lot harder to keep your cool in the real world than it was in Vietnam.

Jesus... Jesus fucking Christ...

Messner would have given anything to be somewhere else at that moment. Even war would have been better than being where he was now, and that was absolutely ridiculous, of course. At that very moment, without warning the record started to play and with it he lost his train of thought.

The song was famous, so famous in fact that Messner recognized it as soon as it started to play.

It was *'When a man loves a woman'*.

Then all at once, it came to him. He'd figured out what the letters stood for.

It was the title of the song “When a man loves a woman” ...*'WMLW'*.

When a man loves a woman

*Can't keep his mind on nothing else.
He'll trade the world...For the good thing he's found.*

“Robert and I were practically separated when he left for Vietnam. Nevertheless, he still wrote me on daily bases. Almost every single fucking day and he kept doing it till he disappeared.

For five long years my man was gone, along with my love... Right after our separation. I honestly didn't think he'd come back ever again.”

*If she's bad he can't see it,
She can do no wrong.
Turn his back on his best friend...
If he put her down.*

“That was our song as far as he was concerned anyways, and he used to say that line to me all the time. See what I mean? He always said that he was the one who was really in love, and that he loved me but that I didn't really love him back. Even when we just started dating years ago, he used to say the same thing but as a joke. Eventually though, it became the truth and that was when he started saying it for real.”

Whimpers.

“When we broke up he truly meant it. That song would always be ours for better or worse and in good times and bad.”

*“When a man loves a woman
Down deep in his soul
She can bring him such misery
If she plays him for a fool
He's the last one to know
Lovin' eyes can't ever see*

“A part of me wished, well wished he would die rather than have to wait any longer. All those years... I kept hoping he'd stop loving me. Is any of this making sense Daniel Messner?”

When Messner heard her say his name like that it was like someone had punched him in the stomach.

“Do you know what I mean? I'm not a bad person. Please just tell me you know what I mean when I say that, please...”

When a man loves a woman

Messner didn't know what to say.

He opted for a nod, and only a nod, almost hypnotized as he did it. He was upset.

He was absolutely devastated.

*He can do no wrong
He can never own some other girl*

As a member of the Special Forces, he'd had the guts to do pretty much *anything*, until then that is. In that particular moment however, there was nothing he could do to help her.

He felt overwhelmingly bad about it. He felt guilty, as though he'd played a part in what had happened between that woman and her husband, but that wasn't the case at all.

*Yes when a man loves a woman
I know exactly how he feels
'Cause baby, baby, baby, you're my world*

"Now leave, Daniel Messner. Let me be alone with my Richard," holding the small plate tightly in her hand as she said it.

When a man loves a woman....

"Go away."

Dak To

As soon as Ortega was discharged from the Hospital, he decided he didn't want to leave for the US or take any other kind of leave for that matter. That ended up being the reason why Trautman – who was always short on personnel – went to meet him personally in the hospital he was staying.

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Trautman sat down on the chair next to Ortega and got things started with his usual update regarding the search for Rambo and Jorgenson, despite not having any news. He then went on to talk about his “private war”, the one he was fighting against the conservative side of generals.

Afterwards he discussed how impressed the Brass had been with operation POINT OF NO RETURN and how the Baker Team program had been renewed and granted its funding.

Ortega was pleased to hear that.

Pleased because they had a good reason to fight, something that couldn't be said for the thousands of other soldiers there.

Something as fucking important as actually winning the damn war so that losing Rambo and Jorgenson wouldn't have been in vain. That's only if they won, of course. In the end, it all came down to one thing: winning the war.

It's too bad they were still a long way from declaring victory though.

After they discussed the debriefing Trautman and the generals had, the subject moved onto ops currently in progress, and potential future ones.

Trautman decided in favour of mentioning operation NO MAN'S LAND to Ortega, and even went as far as telling him how he hoped Ortega would be well enough and want to take part in it. He went on to explain that due to the number of casualties and losses the SOG teams had had, the whole operation was now, at risk. When Ortega told him what he really thought about this new op, or about taking part in it, Trautman was taken back unexpectedly.

Ortega wanted in.

Even if he was still recovering, there was nothing he could want more.

Despite how willing Ortega was however, Trautman felt a little guilty about having “talked” a wounded soldier into doing a mission he could easily have given to someone else.

“You're still recovering, Ortega. You don't have to go at all costs. You know full well there'll be other ops.”

“No Sir, I'll run this one.”

There's no denying that at the beginning, a part of Trautman hoped Ortega would be well enough to go right from the start. In hindsight however, the Colonel was starting to get a little concerned.

Regardless of his condition, the more Ortega thought about it, the more he seemed to like the idea. Yet as Trautman observed him more carefully, he was getting the impression that Ortega was still in pain and not actually fully recovered at all.

"You just wrapped up a long and dangerous mission, Ortega and it's your second one. This time you got shot in the gut and last time you almost snapped your back in half when Dak To was under siege. Now you don't even want to go back to the US on leave even though you can. You're starting to worry me."

Trautman paused for a moment before adding:

"To tell you the truth, on second thought, you don't look so coherent. I hate to say it but that's the truth."

"With all due respect Sir, I should be the one deciding whether or not I'm up to doing it, or be the one to choose which two men I'd recommend for this mission."

Trautman kept changing his mind.

"You can't volunteer if the doctor tells you have to stay in bed."

"Yes, I can."

The two of them stared at each other in silence.

"So you've already decided then and you think I can't keep you from going."

"With all due respect Sir, no, you can't. It would go against everything you've taught us in all those years of training. *Commanding ourselves is up to us*. Right?"

"Ortega..."

"I'm going, Sir, and I'll take that dickhead we call Eagle with me. It'll be a Baker Team leader thing, and we'll get it done better than anyone else ever could."

Trautman stood up.

He couldn't understand what was going on in Ortega's head.

He seemed possessed.

Trautman stared at him a while longer before saying:

"If we were on a battlefield, you'd get a medal for stepping up."

"...But this is a fucking civil war – said Ortega, quickly interrupting – and we're fucking SOG soldiers, meaning we're assassins. That's how the rest of the world sees us anyway, nothing more than a bunch of fucking murderers. It doesn't matter. Medals are for losers, not people like you and me. You don't go giving medals to those men who are just doing their duty."

"Yeah," replied Trautman, still more perplexed than ever.

He looked Ortega straight in the eyes again, in an attempt to shed light on this

madness.

“I’ll see to making the details available for you,” he said somewhat reluctantly.
The Colonel saluted Ortega for the last time, then turned around and left.

-

What the Colonel didn’t know was that, deep down, Ortega had a debt to settle. He owed blood.

He’d lost Johnny and Jorgenson to operation 'Point Of No Return'.

They were neither dead nor wounded: he had literally lost them, the same way you lose a knife crossing a battlefield that’s waste-high in grass somewhere and there’s fuck all you can do about it besides leave it there.

He couldn’t help but feel there was a price to pay for the mistake he’d made.

He really had no other choice.

If he spent a single day more in bed he’d go crazy.

*“There are no heroes at war.
Most of the time
we’re made into heroes...,
by the demons we’ve got inside”*

Manuel Ortega, 1969

OPERATION
NO MAN'S LAND

The sun was shining that morning when Ortega and Danforth got to the harbour. The harbour was alive and vibrant.

Operation 'No Man's Land' – thought Ortega, who was walking along one of the narrow piers.

No man's land.

There were people coming and going in all directions and many of them had on characteristic cone-shaped straw hats typical to the area. Rural folk and farmers crowded the waterfront transporting heavy bundles either by bicycle or over their shoulder tied to a pole, while small local boats known as Klongs created the same kind of havoc, except they were in the water.

Judging from his age, the old skipper had probably seen a few wars and had managed to live through them all.

Once they'd paid him the agreed amount, they watched the old man walk scurry away on the dock before unleashing the moorings.

The engine muttered lazily as the small boat moved away from the bank at a pace that could easily have been a leisurely stroll.

Ortega let out a deep sigh and walked towards the shade to sit down. He needed to rest and under the awning was the right place to do it.

He wasn't feeling so good.

Not so good at all actually.

He looked down the river to see where they were headed.

Within hours, they'd be in No Man's Land.

Two hours later, Ortega descended under the deck, unbuttoned his black farming shirt and checked his bandages on both his arm and chest.

It was a very firm bandage, almost compressed and it served to protect the bullet hole under his arm. It was unique and made especially for that mission so it should have, in theory, protected his wound from brusque movements. Well, at least, he hoped it would.

Ortega kept a Browning High Power pistol behind his back, under his belt without a holster and a small push dagger knife in his boot, just to be on the safe side.

He generally used his butterfly knife, which he always carried with him but for this type of mission, he preferred two knives to one.

Then he had a hidden money belt with two hundred thousand Vietnamese Dongs, which was more than enough money to get yourself killed over in a country like

Vietnam. Not to mention the fact that it didn't even look that real so that didn't help much either.

The CIA had the best forgers in the world at their disposal, and had them strategically placed in every corner of the world. On very rare occasions and unusual circumstances, when the CIA had to make counterfeit money, it could actually count on bundles of federal funds to make it. The money Ortega was carrying that day only had to look real enough for them to pay, and nothing more than that. It would never have passed any kind of Vietnamese bank check and that's all Trautman was really interested in. It only had to work for one transaction and nothing else. Needless to say, the risk that Ortega and Danforth were taking on that mission was a high one. Had the South Vietnamese police caught the two of them with that kind of money on them, no one would have believed they were just Special Forces soldiers. Only God knew what it would have taken Trautman to get them out of it. They'd end up in prison or something, for good.

The reason they needed that money to look so real was that Trautman couldn't just kill his target. Not this time. The target was too sensitive to just waste and the area where it was going down was a problem in itself. As a consequence, Trautman couldn't simply kill him... although he could get someone else to do it. Considering the kind of people the target used to work for, pushing someone else into killing him wasn't going to be that hard either.

Once he'd made sure the bandages were holding up, he secured the money belt around his chest and put his shirt back on.

He swallowed a few pills and made his way onto the upper deck. It was almost dusk by then.

The area Ortega and Danforth were heading to was considered strictly off limits for any US personnel. It was neutral territory, but frequented by everyone, and by everyone that meant the Vietcong, the North Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese, the FULCRUM terrorists (right-wing terrorists that, for some reason, had sentenced the US to death as well).

A place where everyone, with the exception of no one, worried about going in, you always had to be at the ready and you needed to be unequivocally well armed. When boats crossed one another in a place like that, they didn't salute or anything of that manner.

Everyone would stand on deck, pointing their guns at the other boats and waited for the other to pass.

It was supposed to show that you weren't game for anyone and it had to be done calmly and with composure. Keeping your cool meant everything would go without a glitch. In any case, Ortega hoped they wouldn't cross any more boats.

*

By the time they got to the tavern night had fallen, but they were still a few hours

early for their rendezvous.

The wooden tavern sat on the riverbank and looked like an integrated part of the dock practically only held up by poles.

There were red candles lit all over it illuminating it enough so other boats wouldn't collide into it.

Mu-Wow was a type of duty-free zone in Tu-Do where killing, the act in itself, was prohibited. Anyone caught trying to kill someone else was taken out himself by local security.

The boat the Baker Team men were on, docked very slowly among numerous other rickety boats.

Ortega looked towards Danforth and the latter acknowledged with a nod. It was time to move on.

The two then stepped onto the dock and walked to the tavern entrance.

The tavern entrance faced onto an open square that was at the time full of mud, so they decided to avoid it and keep their shoes clean. There were two well-built men smoking outside the entrance who immediately caught their attention since it was rare to see men built like that in Vietnam. They were probably from Thailand or somewhere else.

Ortega and Danforth went into the Mu-Wow.

The place was a haze of smoke.

It had high-ceilings, a wide bar and was jam-packed with people drinking, smoking and playing cards.

It was no different from any other happening bar back home in the US swampy regions, like the Everglades in Miami, for instance.

There were whores, pimps, arms dealers, deserters, opium traffickers, Vietcong terrorists, right wing terrorists, Filo-French terrorists and even Montagnard independents. There was a little bit of everything in there.

A big, happy family of killers and they were all taking their break in there at the same time.

They drank, fucked the whores, smoked the opium, played cards and maybe even became friends despite being enemies.

In the end, what really mattered was not running into each other on the outside for any reason.

That place was also, amongst other things, a meeting place for roughly half the US deserters in the area. They were men who had decided to flee their former units and get back to the US on their own or by means to be found at a later date.

A good many of them deserted because they were tired of risking their lives.

A few of the others however, were genuine traitors. They were extremely rare, but there were some.

The vast majority of them were those who had figured out a way to become rich in Vietnam and they wanted to build a new life with a new identity for themselves there. Be that as it may, Ortega had his own theory about it, and he took it very personally.

In Ortega's opinion, some disappeared because they had already “disappeared” back home.

Yeah, that’s right.

Sometimes, you fight so much you become unexisting.

That's exactly what Ortega thought.

He saw at least two or three men who had Caucasian traits.

He couldn't rule out that maybe they were with the CIA or some other Special Operation Unit with roles not unlike theirs in the past. Even so, Ortega had a feeling that wasn't the case now. He was under the impression those guys were there because they wanted to and it was a choice. That’s right, their choice.

Those men were completely at ease in there, you could see it a mile away.

Ortega took his eyes off them to survey the room for a sign of who might be their contact for this mission.

Shortly thereafter Ortega had second thoughts and reconsidered. It was unlikely his contact would be there already given that they had arrive so far ahead of time, so he decided to take it easy.

Besides, those Americans were far more interesting than his mission at hand was, and it could be his only chance to *find out*.

To *understand*.

Indeed, a part of Ortega wanted to *genuinely find out*.

They had a few drinks while they were waiting and when the first American passed in front them, Ortega offered him a drink

“*What the fuck are you doing?*” whispered Danforth through a tight jaw but unfortunately, it was already too late.

The American's name was [-----] and he felt like talking.

Boy did he ever.

“I defended Khe Sanh in ‘68,” he said.

“Alongside the Marines even if I was Army and I ended up stuck there by chance. I fought side by side with them, all of us trapped in there during the God-damn siege.”

Ortega nodded. It had been one of the bloodiest battles ever fought in that war and everyone knew it.

The man drank some more but apparently still unsatisfied, he continued:

“Do you have any idea what it means to be under siege? No one gets in or out until *the fucking siege is over*. First we ran out of food and then we ran out of water. We were even dreaming seeing snipers.

Do you know what it’s like when someone says something to the likes of:

'Man, my tour was supposed to end today but since no one can get in or out, I have to stay and fight. Well you know, that’s because any plane trying to land or take off, gets

taken down by machine guns, and if the Vietcong ever try over-run us, we're dead. So there's no getting back to the real world for me today. Do you know what they had the nerve to tell me? 'If you want to go home soldier, you'd better pick up a rifle and fight.'"

"Is that why you deserted?" Danforth asked.

"No, man, that didn't happen to me. If I only had that much left to do, I'd have gone home. No. I was nine months short when I decided to flee. Do you know what the point is though?

Do you know what the real problem is?

The real problem is that the friend I was talking you about before, the one who got himself stuck inside during the siege on Khe Sanh's and was supposed to be back home already by then, well that guy got his fingers burnt.

He died two days after he should've been home already.

He was killed here and when he was supposed to be with his wife and kids two days before that man.

What's even worse is that it doesn't end there," he went on.

He shook his head and clenched his teeth in anger.

"Two days after his death, the fighting stopped and the first plane finally landed on that damn runaway. You know how the story goes.

We all know.

A month later, we left fucking Khe Sanh, it was all over."

The man had lost his breath he'd talked so much.

He was delirious, probably drunk, but that wasn't all. There was something else too, but it wasn't drugs going through his system. As was often the case in Vietnam, it wasn't uncommon to come across someone on the street, who, for all intents and purposes, seemed drunk, but in all actuality hadn't had a single drink. They had simply gone *crazy*.

Being in such a state of mind or ending up in circumstance and context in that mental state in a place like that was dangerous.

Extremely dangerous.

Even though being noticeable or attracting attention to oneself wasn't easy in a place like that, Ortega didn't want to take any chances.

"You've already been here about a year so what are you going to do next? I mean, what are doing here?" asked Danforth. He didn't think Ortega should have been talking to that guy in the first place, but now that he had, well, Danforth was just as curious about him as Ortega was.

"I am working for the Fulcrum now – replied the man – we move opium around mostly. Everybody is interested in opium around here which means there's no risk of anybody trying to knock us off, or at least not extensively I mean. Obviously, sooner or later someone will try to keep the money and the stuff by force, but that kind of

risk is calculated and part of the job. Believe me, when I was in the army I risked a lot more, every hour of every day. At least I have all the money I want here, and I enjoy it too. How about you two on the other hand, what do you guys do?"

Ortega was almost tempted to tell him the truth, but then, of course, he used the cover story.

"We deal arms."

"Buyers or sellers?"

"Buyers."

"I get it, but you're not deserters."

"No man, we're civilians and that's our 'second job'. We're with General Electric."

"GE has two plants and they're both in Saigon. You're pretty far away from home."

"He – started Ortega, pointing to Danforth – is a bigwig in there, not a guy like everybody else. He comes and goes as he pleases."

"No man, if someone ends up in a place like this, he's no bigwig. You're bullshitting me, but it doesn't matter. I don't care. See those guys? That's my crew. One's a Hmong, and the other is half-French, a bastard in all senses. They know their shit though, and no one messes with us. Are you sure you guys aren't with the CIA or something? You can tell me."

In a place like that, and to a man like him, if anything, Ortega could have admitted to belonging to the SOG, and yet he preferred not to. Given that he and Danforth were still waiting for their contact to show up, he felt it was probably better not to trust anyone as of yet.

So, he decided to change the subject.

"You've still got a family, haven't you? A wife, parents, whatever. Do they know that you are still alive down hear? Have you tried to get in touch with them?"

"Ha!" he said.

"A family, well, sure I do, what the fuck! My parents, well those cocksuckers were the ones who pushed me into enlisting the in the first place despite me not wanting to. I was so lucky too! I didn't even get fucking drafted, God damn it! I didn't give a shit about the reds or about the North Vietnamese government killing their own people with bombs in South Vietnamese schools or hospitals,, blah, blah, blah.

I cared even fucking less about the domino theory.

I didn't give a fuck about anything or anyone and they knew it. I didn't give a shit about my girlfriend either; and I still can't understand how the hell I ended up with such a bitch in the first place.

Probably just to unload, so basically for the same reason as everybody else.

I fucking hate them all, man. I really do despise them all. My motherfucking parents, who made me enlist and end up in the siege of Khe Shan's. They made me suffer like a fucking bastard at home and then they made me suffer like hell, insisting I enlist in Vietnam. I risked dying like a dog because of them.

What's even worse is that knowing them, they were probably fucking disappointed to

discover that their only son wasn't even killed in combat, but just missing."

Those words left both Ortega and Danforth horror-stricken.

They thought they'd seen and heard pretty much everything by then, especially in that war, but that never seemed to be the case however. They were uncomfortably surprised; something they didn't think was virtually possible anymore, not after fighting so long as soldiers for the Special Forces it wasn't.

Jesus fucking Christ— thought Ortega.

This guy's the devil.

He's fucking Satan, he is..

"Anyway, you can tell me if you're CIA or not. I know the CIA doesn't drag deserters back by force. It's too much work so they just ignore them. Besides, the CIA wouldn't have the nerve to grab any deserters in here either, considering how this place works..."

"You're drunk," Ortega said to him.

He turned to Danforth and said:

"It's getting late so we should probably get going. I guess our contact isn't coming after all."

"Oh come on, the next round's on me, guys. Let's fucking drink on it. I hardly ever get to fucking speak English anymore, I almost miss it."

Ortega and Danforth looked at one other.

"Come on, I'll sell your fucking weapons for you, assholes. I'm the one you guys were waiting for. Who do you think you're gonna' sell them to? The South fucking Vietnamese maybe, or to the Pro-American illegals? Not that I actually give a flying fuck about it."

The stranger guzzled down the rest of his drink, looked back at Ortega and Danforth and saw the look of surprise on both their faces.

Smiling, he retorted:

"Seriously, I'm your contact gentleman. Come on, let's go outside and have a smoke."

They agreed without commenting but acknowledged with a nod, turned and left the bar.

As the three of them walked across the muddy square on their way to the docks, they noticed the deserter stumbled somewhat as they did.

When they were almost at the boat, the man took out his cigarettes, put one in his mouth, and turned to Ortega and asked for a light.

"Let me have your Zippo, will you?" he said to Ortega, in a taunting voice.

Ortega passed it to him.
“It’s nice. Mind if I borrow it?”

Ortega looked over at him not hiding the expression of how annoyed he was getting on his face. He nodded in accordance all the same however.
Not walking far behind them, Danforth undid his jacket slightly and slid his hand in to where he was packing. He was getting the feeling he needed to keep an eye on what was going on around him.

“Hey, Mr. General Electric, you won’t be needing that anytime soon so why don’t you just show me the fucking money, and let’s get down to business.”

Ortega lifted his black shirt up a little so he could take off the money belt he'd on. He undid its front pocket baring a large wad of money, one of the many it had inside. “Good,” said the deserter obviously satisfied. He then turned around and quickly walked towards the dock, stopping short of the water.
He lit the Zippo waving it above his head so it was visible from afar, and then handed it back to Ortega.
“Here, you can even have your zippo back now.”

Not long after, a boat docked and two of the crew on board began unloading the crates onto the dock stacking them one on top of the other.

“I’ll go get the boat,” Danforth said, looking at Ortega, who then nodded in compliance.
He then turned and walked away, leaving Ortega, the deserter and the other boat’s crew.

As they were waiting, Ortega turned to the deserter and said under his voice:

“Weren’t those men on your crew as well?”
“No way, they’re nothing but two fucking assholes I’d love to see six feet under. I’ve been doing this trick for more than a year now and no one’s been knocked off yet. It’s all part of the job. There are a lot of precautions that have to be taken, man.”
He shifted his sight back to the crates still being unloaded.
“Anyway, I’ll find a way to get those bastards wasted somehow. You’ll see, man. You’ll see.”

The smugglers stood steadfastly on their deck as they attentively watched on while Danforth manoeuvred the two boats closer and closer. When the vessels were finally situated side by side, no time was wasted and the crates were quickly moved from one deck onto the other.
Once done, Ortega passed the money belt to one of the two men, who then, in turn instantly handed it to the deserter. That was the moment when there was no longer

any doubt that the deserter truly was the one in charge.

“See what I mean? Easy money, man, easy as pie,” he said to Ortega.

Just like that, the vessel, along with its smugglers seemingly disappeared into the night, as quick as it had come. Gone without a trace. Well, almost without a trace.

The guy was still there.

Danforth was opening every single crate one at a time, checking to see if everything was in order.

“They left you here?” Ortega asked him.

“It's a gesture of good faith,” said the American deserter, as he lit himself a cigarette. This time however, he used his own lighter.

“If you don't care for the goods, you can always try to do me in.”

“That won't be necessary - answered Danforth - it's all in order.”

“Awesome. That being said, I think we can say our goodbyes here then.”

“I'll walk you back,” Ortega said looking over at him.

Danforth shot Ortega a nasty look, but Ortega gave him a nod back, implying everything was under control.

Ortega and the American walked across the square getting their shoes full of mud for the second time.

Now that the deserter felt happier and somewhat relieved, he let himself go back to being drunk too.

He had had a lot to drink and now that the tension had dropped, the alcohol was starting to hit him again.

“My man, my man...” he stammered to Ortega.

“Tonight boom boom. I'd offer you a lay, but this money needs to last me a long time.”

“Here we are,” said Ortega once they'd made it to the door.

He then, looked at him before adding:

“Let's shake on it.”

The man agreed and Ortega reached out for his hand gripping onto it firmly, but rather than letting go immediately, he held onto it instead.

In seconds, Ortega's head had moved forward and was right up in the deserter's face. When he leaned up to his eardrum, he told the deserter, in a low voice:

“They're gonna' kill you, man! You've got to get the hell out of here, now and make sure you never come back.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Shut up you stupid mother fucker. Shut the fuck up, just listen. Get away from this place and don't ever bother coming back. Get outta' here now and get it through your

thick fucking skull: I'm the one who screwed you this time, and screwed you good, without you even catching on. If you go back to your men now, you're a goner. All you can do now is find the nearest US base and give yourself in, and I mean tonight if you value your life. Most people have one life to live. Tonight, I was the one who decided you'd get a second chance. Got it?"

At first, he stared at Ortega in confusion.

It didn't take long at all for the reality to set in however, and, his expression changed to one of fear.

"I'm not joking, *you asshole*. This time, I was the one who fucked you over, and if you don't leave right now, you're a dead man."

Ortega finally let go of his hand and stepped back away from him.

The deserter remained stock-still a moment longer gawking until he finally turned to leave. He froze and was stunned by what he'd just heard.

Ortega left.

"What the fuck did you just do, Skorpio?" said Danforth outraged, as Ortega climbed on board.

"Nothing, let's just get the fuck out of here though. And fast."

The boat rumbled moving forward.

"Trautman was right," grunted Danforth.

"Jesus Christ, look at this equipment. It's all electronic shit and Trautman was right, if we hadn't taken this guy's stuff of the market..."

"Jesus," Ortega said brusquely looking behind them and now somewhat worried.

"Okay," answered Danforth closing the crate again.

The two Baker Team soldiers, along with their boat vanished into the darkness.

The two of them sat silently, observing the darkness in front of them, as the engine mumbled lazily.

Ortega checked the time on his wristwatch and gestured a 'go ahead' to Danforth.

Unrolling the waxed cloth Danforth pulled out Coletta's M14 with its night vision scope fastened tightly onto it.

He picked up the rifle, turned the device on and pointed it directly behind him.

"It's like you said Skorpio, they're following us and they look pretty operative too. I would almost say 'pissed off' and your buddy is with them."

Danforth took his eye away from the night scope.

"What exactly did you do, boss?"

Ortega shook his head but didn't reply because truth be told, he had seen it coming. He'd hoped it wouldn't. He'd given that fucking asshole a chance to get away. Well, at least one, anyways. Now, it was his fucking problem, not Ortega's anymore.

Ortega carefully moved a metal drum to the edge of the boat, trying not to make any noise as he did. Then he took off the cap tipped its mouth overboard and poured all its contents into the water.

Danforth repeated everything Ortega had done, except with another drum.

Then they continued with others.

Shortly thereafter, with still another.

The liquid they were pouring into the water gave off a harsh smell.

This time Ortega was the one who picked the M14 up and stared into the night vision device

as Danforth began pulling out phosphorous grenades and took the safety off of one of them.

There was no need for the two of them to say anything to one another because they had planned it all ahead of time. They called it 'Plan B' and Baker team *always* had one.

"Not yet," sad Ortega staring through the night scope.

They kept quiet for about a minute longer, and all you could hear was the engine muttering beneath them.

Ortega kept looking through the scope and Danforth stood at the ready holding his grenade.

“Now,” said Ortega finally.

Danforth leaned back and threw the grenade so hard and so fast that he could have been on a baseball field.

The phosphorus grenade started sizzling in mid-air, casting light on everything before even hitting the water.

The flames seemed to ignite in unison, almost simultaneously. Almost immediately thereafter, the entire riverside from one side to the other was ablaze. The boat following them had burst into flames consequently, and you could clearly hear the crew on board screaming.

The flames razed and glowed to the point that one side of the entire valley had lit up not unlike daybreak while the wails of pain echoed in the distance.

“Nice throw,” said Ortega.

Someone was trying to put out his burning arm in the air while making towards the bridge probably in hopes of jumping into the water. He didn’t make it.

He gave up eventually falling to the ground, his face in flames.

“Just how did they figure out the money was counterfeit that fast?” wondered Danforth.

“Come on Skorpio, tell me the truth, what exactly did you say to our contact?”

Ortega didn’t say anything

There was a splash, which could only mean someone had managed to throw himself into the water. Someone had at least.

Since the river was on fire from top to bottom, diving in was of no use now. In fact, if you wanted to get out, there was a “minor,” yet fundamental detail to consider before you did. Resurfacing meant you’d catch fire. That therefore left you two choices to make either drowning to death or burning alive instead.

What a fucking brutal way to go – Ortega thought to himself.

Just brutal.

Even for a traitor.

Coletta Goes On Leave

By the time Coletta got to the Saigon airport it was half way through the night. He was on a small plane, one of those charter flights with a maximum capacity of fifty passengers certainly not more. Someone on the base had found the flight for Coletta at the last minute.

The whole thing was so incredibly last minute that when the young Baker Team soldier crossed the runway, making a dash for the boarding stairs, big bag in hand, that the aircraft engine was already running.

There was hardly anyone on the small plane with Coletta, who was the last passenger to make the boarding call.

He was glad to be on that flight alone since he was in no mood to talk to anybody. For some reason, the idea of going home albeit only for a few days, made him uncomfortable. After he pondered it further, he realized it actually scared him.

As the plane made its way to the runway, he could feel his heart pounding. Yet, it wasn't only because Rambo and Jorgenson had disappeared. No, that was only part of the reason,

Things like that happened all the time when you were at war.

There was more to it than just that going on in his head.

He had this heavy burden on his shoulders.

Yeah, that's what it was, a burden, and it was making hard for him to breathe.

When the plane was in position on the runway, it began its acceleration procedure. As it sped up slowly, Coletta couldn't help but notice how differently it picked up speed compared to the planes he was used to being on.

For a split second at lift off, Coletta got a feeling of weightlessness.

That's it – he said to himself.

He was leaving Vietnam.

Yet, it was far from being over.

Quite the contrary however.

This was nothing more than a short leave, and he knew it.

Be that as it may, what it did give him was an opportunity to forget.

He had an entire week to forget about Vietnam, or how dangerous the work he did there actually was, not to mention how lucky he was to be still alive as well. Thus, he was going to make that feeling last as long as he could despite knowing it couldn't.

He could hardly wait to see his mother and father again as well.

He had written to them a few times during the months he'd spent at Fort Bragg, but

once in Vietnam, he'd kept in touch much less.

As he sat there, he tried, although he wasn't sure why, to recall each one of those letters and in part he somewhat did. He had a much harder time remembering the ones he'd sent or received either before or after his 'Point Of No Return' mission. Any of the memories in, or around that time, seemed to be in a cloud of confusion. Missions of that magnitude turned his mother and father into figments of his imagination and he worried they would come to terms with just how unreal everything had become for him since he'd joined SOG. No matter how bad it sounded, no other catchphrase fit the reality of it all more than that: when you were in Vietnam, the rest of the world didn't exist.

In fact once you'd been there a while, the very idea that regular, every-day life could exist on the other side of the world *as well*, sounded absolutely ridiculous too. Nevertheless, Coletta was on his way back to that very kind of life, even if it was only for a few days.

Coletta gazed out of his window and sighed.

Who knew if he would still enjoy hunting in the mountains with his father despite everything he had seen in Vietnam.

The door opened and Coletta hugged his father immediately while his mother, who was not more than a step away, began to cry.

"Son," she whispered to him, hugging him tightly as she did.

That's when the smell of home suddenly came back and hit him.

A succession of scents lingered in the air with lavender being the most prominent as his mother absolutely adored it. Yet, there was much more than that. There was the smell of the wood from the furniture itself and the ashes in the fireplace, which are exactly the kind of smells you expected to find in any mountain house.

"Son," said his father looking him in the eyes.

"I really missed you, you know that? And so did your mother. You should try to write more often to her though."

"I know, dad."

"Come on, let's eat. Come on son, you know the way."

Coletta managed to avoid any mention of Point of No Return, be it directly or indirectly, and he certainly wasn't planning on discussing it either. Not then, not ever. Not in his lifetime, at least.

He still had a lot of signs on his body from that mission and more likely than not, his parents would have enjoyed hearing the way their son had freed some American POWs. Nevertheless, it wasn't something he could talk about freely, due to military

protocol regarding that sort of thing and because, honestly speaking, he really didn't feel like discussing it.

One of the main reasons being he didn't want to live those moments again. What he especially didn't feel like detailing however was the exact nature of what they did to get those POWs back.

Consequently, Coletta talked to his parents for a while about the war in general, the kind of atmosphere cities like Dak To and Saigon had and about the sort of terrorist attacks those cities were used to having. Just regular every-day things like that.

His father was particularly interested in hearing what the way of life was over there and whether they felt the Americans close to their cause or not. That, and much more obviously.

Coletta politely replied that the orient and the US would never be alike, and that they probably would never grow to love each other either.

There was one thing however, that the orient did understand, and that was freedom.

Not 'our' kind of freedom mind you – which, in those parts was seen as downright anarchy -, but freedom from oppression. It may have been a slightly different kind of freedom, but it was freedom just the same.

In effect, there were a great number of people fighting for freedom back in Vietnam.

The problem was that some of them believed that struggling for freedom in Vietnam meant fighting the US too. That ended up being a huge problem, for them as a people. Of course many of them were fighting for the sake of power outright, which was, in itself another matter. Not all of them were though.

There were Vietnamese heroes too, and Coletta had met some of them when he was training the ARVN.

“What's working with them like, Ricardo?”

“What are they really like?”

Training the Vietnamese was odd.

Especially since not a single member on the Baker Team considered himself a teacher, particularly the kind you'd find seated at a desk. That wasn't the main reason though. It was quite the contrary: teaching after all of the shit they had been through whether in recruitment or boot camp actually felt good so that wasn't an issue. The strangest thing was getting to know the Vietnamese more and more every day. It gave the whole conflict thing a new spin and you started seeing it in an entirely different light.

You came to realize they were smart and deep too.

They had an extremely ancient culture, like the kind Italians had and every so often, you could see it. You could also feel a strong sense of spirituality now and then that would take you by surprise. That, together with the idea that there *had to be* something more to life than just eating, sleeping and struggling to survive day in and day out.

They really deserved their freedom if anyone did.

In effect Coletta wasn't surprised that many of them believed there was something 'higher' in communism. They used to think that because they were naturally 'pushed'

forward towards a superior cause, no matter what.

Coletta knew therefore, without a doubt whether Vietnam wanted to be free or not.

The real problem was that most Vietnamese, who were not unlike many other populations, preferred living as a slave to dying free.

Sound familiar? Heard it somewhere before? Well, of course you have. It was a joke, and probably the one US soldiers used the most when they talked about the Vietnamese – Vietcong relationship. Whoever said it usually had a smirk on his face, because it was hard to admit things never would change. The Vietcong and the cruelty they bestowed scared the Vietnamese a lot more than the Americans ever could. That was the truth, nothing more and nothing less, period.

Nevertheless, for Ricardo Coletta, even talking politics was better than 'Point of No Return' that night. At a certain point however, Coletta couldn't help thinking about Rambo and Jorgenson.

While the team was on leave, Trautman and many others had stayed behind to coordinate search efforts or even personally run some of them. As crazy as the Colonel may be, despite his importance, he was well grounded and did whatever had to be done if deemed necessary.

Sometimes, when you were with Trautman, he made you feel like his equal whether you actually were or not. You obviously weren't, not by a long shot. That was however, the kind of bond he had developed with his men.

Fundamentally, that was the very nature of, and the reason for war, to bond. Creating bonds not unlike those Trautman and his 'creatures' had, or the one the Baker Team shared with the South Vietnamese. It was not the kind of bond two colleagues, friends or relatives could form in regular, civilian life however.

Coletta was referring to an entirely different kind of bond.

Another thing Coletta had accidentally discovered just before leaving was, that both Baker Teams A and B had been granted leave at the very same time.

He found that to be, from a military stand point, absolute nonsense.

As such, only two possible scenarios could explain that type of occurrence. Either the Baker Project needed a break to lick its wounds, or it had been forced into taking one giving some bigwig time to think.

In all actuality, there was a third possibility, and that was suspension. When it had to do with bigwigs, you could pretty much expect almost anything. You could never say. Coletta had heard that Point Of No Return had been viewed favourably by the brass heads, but there was continuously somebody working against you.

That was the way the world worked and the competition was ruthless

Coletta had dinner together with his parents and once they'd finished, he joined his father on the veranda for an after-dinner cigar.

When his mom finished her tea, she announced her plans to retire for the night whereas both Coletta and his father agreed to stay up a while longer.

For the first time in their lives, Coletta senior had decided to get plastered together with his son.

A little while later, exactly as Coletta had expected, came the inevitable and never forgotten query. The one “question” every soldier in those times had to bear: What was it like to fight? Which was then immediately followed by “And, how about the killing someone part?” Asking as though every single person sent down there had shot someone in the head at a close range. That actually almost never happened.

Everybody knew that when you were at war, about ninety percent of your shooting time, was actually just shooting at everything and anything that even remotely resembled the enemy, in the direction you thought the enemy was in. Maybe then, and only then, and it was at best still just a “maybe” you actually hit someone. Everybody knew that. Well, everybody who had been to war that is. The number of people who had no fucking idea however tallied up to almost every other stinking person in the US of A.

If Coletta was truly dead-set against answering “the question,” he, could have easily made up some bogus story about pretending to fight alongside a conventional unit. As for shadow statistics, he really had no idea whether he hit the shadows or not.

Generally speaking, that’s how he’d handled questions like that up until now. This case scenario was however, completely different and unlike anything, he had side tracked before. Here we were talking about his father. What that meant was Ricardo Coletta could neither avoid the question nor lie about it.

Coletta hesitated before giving his answer.

There were green and black ghosts flashing before his eyes, the same ones in his night vision device and during operation Black Spot. They were the ghosts of those enemies whose heads he had literally blown off with his M14’s 7.62 bullets.

Those ghosts were subsequently followed by the heads of other ghosts being blown off but this time in the light of day.

Unlike the others, these flashbacks were sponsored by 'Point Of No Return', and he remembered them just as clearly. All of them for fuck’s sake. Every single last one of them.

When he'd gathered the necessary strength to respond, he ended his long pause and got back to his father’s question.

“It's just like shooting a bear, dad,” he said.

“Killing isn’t the hardest part dad.
Watching your friends die is much harder,
and I know it’s going to happen to me one day, I know it will already.
So I really can’t say.

I don’t know what to tell you dad...
I don't know if I'll be strong enough when that day comes.”

Ricardo Coletta, 1969

It was night In Dak To, and Trautman and Garner were standing on the terrace of one of the many buildings down town.

“We’re still using too many resources to search, Colonel” Garner said.

“And with every day that passes the chances of finding them goes down, while the probability of some type of diplomatic incident, on the other hand, goes up.”

That was the truth.

The search for Rambo and Jorgenson had been scaled down once already, but it was still very active, as well as very expensive. What’s more, as Garner had already said, all that commotion they were making in Laos looking for them would, sooner or later, get noticed by someone.

Trautman looked down towards the city, which was now dark thanks to the night curfew.

“Why Trautman? Why risk that much?” Garner asked, perplexed, but quickly corrected himself.

“I mean, I got to know them both really well personally so it obviously hurts me too. But in the end it’s only two men, and we have to keep a whole war going.”

Yes, Rambo and Jorgenson were only two men out of almost a thousand other men, both American and South Vietnamese for whom Trautman was personally responsible for.

Trautman sighed.

In the dark landscape in front of him, where in times of peace there would have been lights and life, there was now nothing instead, all because of that bloody civil war, of course.

Trautman ran his hand through his hair, in an effort to fix it.

He had made great strides in recent months, especially with both the Baker Teams having done their first missions, but he couldn’t win the whole war on his own and was still only half way through his personal mission to change the generals' minds. He might even succeed in eliminating all the VC infiltrators, an effort that was already underway and proceeding successfully thanks to the Phoenix program. Through SOG he could even succeed in destroying the entire Ho Chi Minh trail. That would finally turn this civil war into the kind of conventional war the US actually had a chance at winning.

What really worried Trautman that night however, was not being able to save South

Vietnam from itself.

Yeah. Because that...

That could actually end up being impossible.

Dammit...

Why was he so negative that night?

Maybe because he had to quit looking for Rambo and Jorgenson?

Probably.

That was the best explanation for his outright pessimism, given that Black Spot and Point of No Return had both been such a success.

Driven by the grief he felt over his two lost men, he reflected further about the potential dark outcomes to expect in the future.

He was making significant progress on the American side. The fact that the Baker program was successfully achieving its objectives made a lot of generals see Trautman's new strategic proposals in a whole new light. The American presence wasn't Vietnam's only problem however.

Trautman also feared that South Vietnam would never have a strong army or valid government therefore never having a fair chance at becoming a truly democratic country.

The Vietnamese weren't the only ones to blame for all of this because, honestly speaking, it wasn't just them.

Giving democratic rule to a country like South Vietnam that not only battled with civil rife and civil war but also had human rights issues, was equivalent to playing Russian roulette.

What seemed to happen in Vietnam was, the minute someone around you sensed fear you'd get disposed of, mercilessly, right then and there. The same way a martyr would.

Even best friends turned into arch-enemies at the first sign of weakness.

The reason being an unquenchable thirst for grandeur. Everybody wanted to become a dictator, an emperor or a king. You were hard pressed to find an exception, and those who have had little or nothing in their lives, dream it even more than the rest.

That's when Trautman realized Garner was right.

Going to all that trouble for the sake of two men made absolutely no sense.

The same way there was no point in going to Laos by helicopter or plane in hopes of picking up a radio-signal or whatever else either. After all that time, it was more like looking for a needle in a haystack than anything else.

Until then, Trautman had let his judgement be influenced by the fact that he knew them personally. An unquestionable lack of professionalism on his part he had to admit.

Johnny and Jorgenson knew perfectly well what the rules of the game were when

they decided to join SOG and they knew the risks they would be up against when they signed up.

Being left behind was a just one of a long list.

They had signed and accepted back in the day.

“Colonel?”

He had let himself go a little, been less vigilant because he had gotten to know them both personally.

It was only one case example that would now be a case in point however.

It wasn't going to happen again.

“Colonel?”

What's more, Jorghenson had already made a miraculous escaped once before.

There wouldn't have been a second time.

“Colonel? Are you all right?”

“Yes, Garner.”

“So?”

“You're right of course. I guess I just got a little carried away with it. Go ahead and call off the search.”

It was a bright and sunny morning in Dak To and Ortega was taking a stroll down a rather busy and crowded street.

There was a procession making its way down the road just left of him.

The last junta South Vietnam had had (there tended to be a new government put into place almost every six months) celebrated its veterans and victories on a regular basis. The parade that was taking place that day for instance was in honour of the Army rather than The Navy, The Police Force or some other body as it had been in other cases.

Judging from the size of the crowd on that particular day, South Vietnam could have been mistaken for a country that believed in itself. At least it looked like it did.

The traffic wardens were wearing their usual ultra-white police uniform, while the Police Force sported a number of medals (the number was, in itself, bordering on ridiculous) all of which hung off their chests.

There was a band playing in the middle of the road and the crowds followed slowly behind it, paying homage to an absent Van Thieu, who was no one but the last of a long series of Colonels who had alternated filling the role after the last Diem's deadly 'demise'.

In sharp contrast to the splendour of the parade, the buildings delimiting the roads showed evidence of both recent and long past episodes of "disorderly" outbreaks.

Despite being only the background of the lively parade, they represented an unwavering example of the harsh reality hidden behind the country's facade.

Ortega stopped to watch the parade and its crowd of followers when suddenly, the sound of shots being fired echoed distinctly on the other side of town.

The crowd in front of him seemed to hardly notice, quite possibly mistaking the sounds for firecrackers or something. That was the kind of mistake Ortega didn't have the liberty of making, and in any case, he knew exactly what the sounds weren't. He had spent months listening to the sound of shots being unloaded by each and every single Goddamn calibre ever created in the story of mankind. After all that training, not only could he tell you the calibre of the shot fired but which way the muzzles were facing too (in case you needed additional WOW effect.)

Ortega turned around, and as he'd expected, well beyond the area where the procession came to a stop he saw signs of smoke coming from the ground. Then he noted that very few people had turned to see what was happening.

People were so used to living in times of war that they disregarded potential danger if it wasn't in their immediate surroundings.

In fact, as crazy as it seemed, he didn't care about guns going off on the other side of town in the least either.

Turning back around he resumed his leisurely stroll, ignoring whatever other shots he

may have heard sound, and simply minded his own business like everybody else was doing.

His plan was to spend his entire leave just loafing about and he couldn't wait to start. After the disappearance –*or death?* – of Jorgenson and Johnny, which coincidentally he considered entirely his fault, not much meant anything to him anymore.

Not knowing what had actually happened to his friends made the situation even worse than it was already, and he certainly believed morning them would have been less painful.

Eventually, death is something you can come to terms with and accept. It's normal and a part of life.

The way it had already happened during both World War II and the Korean War, the fate of some, occasionally remains an unsolved mystery.

That was the hardest part to accept.

Ortega couldn't imagine going back to the US without knowing what had happened to Rambo and Jorgenson. No, he wouldn't be able to do it especially after living with them at this point, for almost two years.

Maybe that's why some people ended up staying in Vietnam forever.

Maybe that's how you became a war junkie.

Ortega had met people who had been fighting for four fucking years.

Anyway, it was too soon to be despairing about Rambo and Jorgenson particularly since the search was still on, for now anyhow. The longer they went without news the lower the chances they'd find them.

What Ortega meant by 'found' was either dead or alive.

On that particular day, Ortega had decided to buy himself some booze, cigarettes along with a few other things, and spend his leave getting wasted to new unprecedented levels right there on the base.

Ortega wasn't going back to the US because he couldn't face his own family at a difficult moment like this. What he knew he had to do at the very least however, was write his parents a few letters one for his half-brother and most importantly of all, to Helen.

Ortega pushed back the curtain that hung in place of a door and stepped into the small shop.

The shop was full of American style crap - liquor that was strong enough to knock out the Pope's liver, unfiltered cigarettes that not even a ninety year old would smoke, Zippos, cowboy hats and a whole other sea of junk.

Ortega walked up and down the aisles and then picked up two cartons of cigarettes. Being in that store made him feel very American.

There was smoked meat, all kinds of sauces, coffee, barley and anything else that kept for a long-time or tasted like home was piled up in there, all of it made right in the US and coming straight off the black market.

Ortega picked up a pack of gum, two bottles of wild turkey and few Peanuts comic books.

Enveloped by his own thoughts, he'd placed his stuff down to pay and an outstanding mamasan – even if she was definitely too old for Ortega – smiled right at him and looked him over through her ultra-made up eyes.

“Do you want opium? Tell me, sexy G.I... Do you want some opium?”

“No m'am, I don't.,” replied Ortega as he rummaged through his pockets getting out his change “That stuff is bad for you.”

“It makes you feel good, jiai. You sleep long and make dreams, then feel better. You have sad eyes JIAI.”

He looked at her as if he'd seen a ghost, but the feeling left as quickly as it came so he passed her the dongs to pay.

The woman picked up a paper bag and put everything except the two heavy whiskey bottles in it for Ortega.

Ortega felt something behind him.

He turned to see a young girl, who was surely mamasan's daughter. They both had the same shaped eyes and body composition being straight and long-limbed.

The girl was wonderful.

Her mouth was imperfect but that was the beauty of it, brazen somewhat, with that lipstick.

Her youth gave her a fresh kind of look like the scent of a new beginning or a new life.

He was watching her restock the store shelves when he got a warm feeling inside.

Her almond shaped eyes were quite large and unusually light in colour than generally seen and her long black hair lay straight down her back.

Their eyes met momentarily.

He turned back to the woman behind the counter again passing her his money.

She looked at him and said:

“Do you want bum bum GIAI? I find bum bum too... Beautiful gils, few dolla”

“No mam. No...”

Ortega tilted his head a little down, in the way the Vietnamese used to say goodbye to each other. He then started picking up what he'd purchased off the counter, but seemingly, in distress, the young woman offered her help.

He smiled.

“I got this,” he said

“I help you... I help you to the base. Close.”

“It doesn't matter. Really.”

Ortega knew that being courteous or acting like a gentleman towards her would make her cold and distant so he just agreed to accept her help.

By the time they left the store, the shooting has ceased so the VCs had probably fled the scene by then. There would be bystanders in the streets some crying over the dead

civilians, others walking aimlessly looking among the dead for survivors.
Ortega and the girl walked awkwardly in silence.
When they got to the base, Ortega decided to take a chance.
You only live once – he said to himself.
And if I don't say something now, I'll probably never see her again.

“Can I see you again?”
“I not understand.”

Ortega smiled.

“You are beautiful.”
“Thanks.”

Ortega felt a little stupid.
He couldn't talk Vietnamese – even if he wanted to – because it was like admitting you were a military advisor or even a spy.
He just couldn't do it, the same way he couldn't rule out she could even turn out to be some Vietcong bitch.
She was worth taking the risk for however.

Three Days Later

Ortega, Danforth, Berry and Krakauer had, without giving any prior notice, shown up unannounced that morning. The only exceptions were Messner and Coletta, who were still on leave in the US at the time. They had all showed up with the intent of wanting to talk to someone, so they needed to be fit into someone's schedule and get an appointment with Trautman, a chance to meet like the one people always scheduled in. They wanted to schedule the kind of meeting you book when you need to talk to someone but for the sort of chat, the sort you have without an appointment. Ok? It didn't take Trautman long to figure out there was something wrong. The guys were there to give the Colonel a hard time about calling off the search for their missing team members. There was a bitter-sweet surprise coming up for Trautman too... It took a really long time for them to get to point.

Finally, after a 20-minute "run of the mill" discussion about how unproductive the search had been, Ortega finally made his move.

"This decision is just something we can't accept, Colonel," he eventually blurted out.

Determined to make his point, Ortega added:

"It's impossible. It's unacceptable."

"So what? What do you want me to do about it?"

No one said anything.

"What are all of you doing here anyways?"

Ortega looked at his team one last time, and from the look on their faces, he knew he'd their support so, at long last, Ortega was about to say what he had gone there to say.

"We're going back, Sir. "

You could cut the tension in the air with a knife.

"What?"

Trautman looked over at Ortega and realized he was serious. What quickly became more evident however, was that perhaps he was being informed of a decision *they* had already made.

"We still have dozens of choppers searching the border," Trautman objected.

"There's no..."

This time it was Danforth however, to interrupt the Colonel.

"If they were captured over enemy lines, we'll never find them, Colonel, not that way.

We have to go back there and find out what happened.”

Trautman couldn't believe his ears. His glare shifted past each one of them but still couldn't bring himself to believe it.

“What the fuck is going on soldier?” he roared.

“We’re going back there, Colonel,” Ortega answered back.

“And we’re going with or without you.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” he bellowed again.

“Just come out and say it.”

“You know exactly what it means.”

“No, I don't think I do Soldier,” he rebutted.

Trautman glared at each of them again, but unlike before, this time they stared right back at him, in resilience.

So it was true. He’d heard right. It was fucking true.

All of it.

Just as Trautman had sent them out to do unauthorized black ops in the past, this time they were planning on launching an op, all on *their own*.

That’s when Trautman completely lost it.

“NO!” he said, as his fist came banging down on his desk.

“You’re not authorized to do it! You can't!”

Danforth approached the Colonel and then, with a look of defiance, he said:

“We can't? You mean, the same way we couldn't go to Laos either?”

If that wasn't enough, Ortega joined in as well.

“You were the one who started this game in the first place, Trautman. Now we’re just taking it to the next level.”

“YOU DON'T HAVE MY ORDERS!”

“Oh really? And what orders would we be talking about, Colonel?” Ortega answered back.

“Like the same orders that didn’t exist when two of ours went MIA.? The same orders we were free to refuse at any given moment specifically because they didn’t exist in first place?”

“Don't push me, Ortega.”

“We went to Laos without orders, and we’ll go back exactly the same way we did then.”

“Don't you dare challenge me. Don't you even think about fucking trying it, any of you.”

Ortega said nothing.

The reason being he didn't like going against Trautman this way.

After about a minute, Delmore intervened.

Look, Colonel, we're here to ask. We're not challenging anyone. We're planning a mission. We're gonna' go get Rambo and Jorghenson back, and we're gonna' do it with or without you, but we'd rather you were one of us."

-

This time Trautman didn't say a word

He moved his hands up and down his face trying to wake up from what had to be a nightmare.

He was going to lose them.

It had happened in the past with other teams that had fought *without orders*, sometimes even across enemy lines, on their own initiative, without anyone granting them the permission to do so..

They went out there on their own, for personal reasons, with no help at all – not that SOG had any help anyways when they were fighting out there. When they did to go there on their own however, they had even less help than usual.

The few times something like that had happened in the past, the consequences had been strategically devastating, and often deadly. In those cases, the army ended up having to lie about the whereabouts or consequences.

They couldn't understand the true consequences of something because they were only soldiers, of course. They didn't get the big picture. Even if they certainly had a better understanding of what the big picture was, compared to what most other soldiers would. That was due to Trautman's teachings. Nevertheless, they would have to put their personal matters aside anyway. .Trautman was going to lose trust in Baker Team B, and that's what hurt the most...

Most of all however, he couldn't afford this sort of thing, especially not now when the Baker programme was in the spotlight more than ever before. Ultimately, that put him at a disadvantage. The fact that they'd already come to a decision, a unanimous one at that. He knew exactly how it would all end There was very little the Colonel could do to prevent an SOG team, set on doing a mission "under no one's orders'.

Nothing could stop them nor would anyone have asked for any kind of authorization. Moreover, with the kind of resilience Ortega had, remedying a lift on some chopper for the lot of them wouldn't have proved to be so difficult at all.

When and if they eventually made it back, the Colonel would have had no other choice but to kick their sorry asses out of the SOG for good.

Consequently, whatever choice Trautman believed to have at that moment, it was, in all respects a no win situation for him anyway.

That's why he knew, he had to accept it, despite being completely against his will. He picked up a notebook, and began to write.

-

"You leave in forty-eight hours, Russian weapons and sterilized gear. Before going wherever the fuck you're going want to, you'll have to recon some coordinates from my intelligence."

Trautman kept on writing as he spoke.

“You can go and fucking kill yourselves, for all I care.”

When he was through writing, he handed the paper to Ortega and then with little care, went on to dismiss them.

“Now, get the fuck out of my office, all of you.”

*What if they shoot you?
We plan our next move, Sir.
What if they hurt you?
We plan our next move, Sir.
What if they kill you?
We plan our next move, Sir.*

Fort Bragg, 1967

Rambo and Jorgenson stood stock-still hoping to be neither seen nor heard. They were up to their necks in stagnant water, with their backs up against the mud bank taking cover..

Their faces weren't just deformed by the weight they'd lost, but their eyes had almost become stiff inside their skull-like sockets. They had aged, were full of insect bites and welts while their sweat had assumed such an unhealthy colour that it seemingly indicated they were dying already. The putrid water they were taking cover in was a brownish-yellow colour, and dirty to the point of looking almost viscous like.

Jorgenson was injured.

He had taken an AK bullet right in the neck only 24 hours earlier. The wound had started bleeding again and was now seeping through the bandages, which at that point then become old and filthy. To make matters worse they were also the last ones they had.

Rambo had used his fair share as well, not long after they'd made their getaway. He had cut his foot open.

Jorgenson grimaced in pain.

"I can't let these bandages get dirty with this fucking water."

"*Shut up!*" Rambo said forcefully yet under his breath.

"They are right fucking there, damn it."

His bandage had obviously gotten wet, because there was a red liquid altering the murky yellowish colour of the water right in front of where Jorgenson was standing.

They didn't just a little wet either, he'd managed to get them downright soaked.

It hadn't been in contact with anyone for almost 6 days. If that wasn't bad enough, on day 5 or of that fucking getaway, or yesterday to be precise, the VC had spotted them and they ended up having to fight.

That's when Jorgenson got hurt.

Jorgenson had been hit almost instantly, and yet he continued the fight anyway...

Luckily for Rambo. Because yes, without Jorgenson's fire during that fight Rambo – on his own against twenty, maybe even thirty Vietcong – would have find himself stuck by fire behind his corner, and then the Vietcong would have just put him down like a rabid dog.

The first contact - which was the proper and real part of the fight, when Jorgenson was wound – lasted for no more than a few seconds.

An ultra violent bunch of seconds during which dozens of rounds had been flying on both sides and despite being immediately wounded, Jorgenson didn't gave up the fight. Not at all.

He continued shooting and reloading and shooting over and over, and he did with one hand only while using the other to keep the pressure on his wound, in order to slow the blood loss down.

He let the pressure on the wound go while reloading only, and that was when blood started squirting all over the place and out of his neck.

And yet, Jorgenson did not give up the fight thus giving he and Rambo a proficient way to cover each other while retreating. They retreated by shooting like there were no tomorrow - three, four magazines each, something like one hundred bullets each – and they then run away into the jungle.

Once out of range, the two of them made a ninety degree curve to the west, in order to get lose of their own tracks, then they then started running away like hell and with no particular direction in their minds.

On the other side, the Vietcong – after that first contact - did never stop chasing Rambo and Jorgenson.

Rambo and Jorgenson had no idea if their pursuers had dogs or not (the Vietnamese dogs practically never used to bark). Nor that it would have made any difference on their choices for fooling their noses was impossible anyway.

Since twenty four hours before, Rambo and Jorgenson did nothing else than run away day and night in any direction, even random ones.

They were entirely out of the grid anyway and since two days before, thus one direction was as worth as any other.

With no more maps at disposal, their last plan was a pretty basic one: go east.

Cross the border and let themselves be found by some friendly force, or rather find a way of communicating because their beepers's were do die pretty soon too.

The two soldiers had rationed their batteries since the beginning (they understood pretty soon that they were doomed to stay in the jungle for a long time) and yet the batteries were now going to dry out anyway.

And they were still hunted.

The Vietcong had been hunting the two of them for the last twenty four hours, but this time the moment of the truth had come for real.

*

With one arm, Rambo was holding Jorgenson under his shoulders - in order to avoid him from sliding under the surface of the water - while with the other arm he was holding the muzzle of his AK over the water, and ready to fire.

Now that they had lowered themselves inside the water, there was nothing else they could do other than waiting and hoping to be found not

(...if they don't have no dogs with them, of course.

'Cause if they do, there's no hope left).

Given the fact that they could hope only, Rambo used the time at disposal to check his equipment out.... And think about his next move too, of course. Even during a time as desperate as that one was, Rambo never stopped thinking.

In theory, his AK should be able to fire even after a shallow plunging under the water such as that.

In theory.

In reality, no matter his esteem for the AK as a reliable weapon platform, Rambo was hoping he hadn't to bet his life on to it. Also because that water was dirty.

And so tomorrow (provided – and not granted - that he had survived the day) he would have rather used some clean water to rinse his AK. Just to be sure.

Don't think about the noises.

Keep thinking, just not about the noises.

I can't do anything about it from where I am now, anyways. Come on, think. This may be a pretty good hiding place but it wouldn't be a good place to return fire from, right? Right.

So think for fuck's sake.

You might have to make a run for it any minute now and once you're back on the run, you won't have the luxury of reasoning the way you can now.

So get fucking to it and think.

Taking his own advice, that's exactly what he did. Rambo waited and waited maintaining his calm all the while. In an almost zen-like in manner, he used his time wisely to contemplate all the potential scenarios.

In addition to having dipped his AK in that shitty water, what worried Rambo now was the integrity of the remaining bits of first aid kit.

His kit may have survived the wear and tear from his last two falls, but this time it wasn't just broken but soaking wet as well.

So now, candidly speaking, the shit was gearing up to hit the fan.

For those of us who know very little about treating wounds or medical supplies, here's what this all meant.

If there weren't bandages or whatever necessary to clean Jorgenson's bullet wound, he probably wouldn't just bleed to death. Not most certainly get some kind of rare infection or disease you can only be lucky enough to get if you happened to spend time in a jungle, or you'd been shot while spending time in a jungle.

Not that Johnny had expected anything different for Jorgenson if all things were considered.

In all honesty he hadn't expected anything rose-coloured for himself either.

Even if by miracle, they somehow managed to hide from the Vietcong again, they both had a life sentence, anyway.

*Voices... Fuck, it's them.
They're here.*

Rambo didn't have any of them in sight, couldn't see any signs of them— but he could hear them —and with that kind of information, he could do wonders. Rambo heard the noises, he knew it was them and it was thanks to those noises that he not only knew how many of them were there, but even how armed the fuckers were too.

The only thing he couldn't tell was what the story was with the dogs. (*God damn fucking dogs*).

Those 24 hours of continuous pursuit, had served Rambo in that he now had a pretty good idea of exactly how well they were trained.

In order to pursue the SOG, non-stop, for twenty-four hours, without a break you had to, and could only be North Vietnamese Special Forces soldiers.

They couldn't have been anything else.

Trautman was dead right about the North Vietnamese: whoever was up there North commanding and training them all was someone who had *years* of guerrilla warfare experience in the jungle under his belt, and left nothing to chance.

God, please don't let them have dogs with them.

The first minutes passed - slowly and seemingly without an end in sight — during which Rambo could simply wait in the water, and hope they weren't found.

Then an hour passed, and during those waiting moments, Jorgenson passed out twice.

*

At about the ninety-minute mark, Rambo was finally convinced about the Vietcong being gone.

Okay, so there's about twenty of them, mainly light weapons, very experienced, highly trained and no dogs. Obviously, they don't have dogs because if they did, we'd be dead already.

“Hold on tight,” exclaimed Rambo, but Jorgenson had already passed out.

Rambo dragged the two of them up and over the embankment.

He was short of breath and feeling light-headed because of the extra effort.

Fuck, I'm starving.

Nah, that's not it.

I just stood still for too long.

It's a sign of starvation, John. You're dying of starvation.

No, you're not.
I have to do this.

“Let me go,” Jorgenson whispered with great effort, interrupting Rambo’s train of thought
“Let me die.”

Rambo rested his forehead against the ground for support, knowing he couldn’t stop for long, at all. From where he was he could see the water streaming down Jorgenson’s filthy uniform.

“Let me die, Johnny, just leave me here.”

Rambo heard him, but knew he couldn't sit for a second more: Jorgenson's wound was filthy with rotting water. He had to put the last bandage he had left on him. Assuming the kit had resisted of course. Rambo dragged himself over to Jorghenson.

“You have a better chance on your own. Let me go.”

The two of them may have had mud all over and clothes soaked in putrid-water, but their level of exhaustion kept them on the ground and panting for a while longer.

Rambo would have laid there forever, but it was out of the question.
It was time to bandage Jorghenson properly, or he’d bleed to death.

Rambo put his backpack down on the floor, opened it up and pulled-out the first aid kit.

It may have been a superficial wound, but they hadn’t eaten much for the past few days and couldn’t boil any water either, without running the risk of being spotted. They were very close to the limit.

Rambo stripped Jorgenson down to the bare chest and his blood started mixing with the mud.

Thank God, the last bandage was still intact.

He cleaned the wound using some of the boiled water that was still left in his thermos, opened the jar where he kept the disinfectant powder, and carefully poured it over the wound.

“Just leave me alone,” said Jorgenson.

Concentrated on the task he'd at hand, Rambo unwrapped the sterilized bandage and began covering the entire area around Jorgenson's wound.

“I said leave it,” repeated Jorgenson.

Just as Rambo was pulling the Baker knife out of its cover, he stopped suddenly to listen.

Voices... Vietnamese voices, Vietcong voices.

Rambo cut the bandage off with one brisk slash.

Fuck, that's right, the Vietcong had left, sure, but they were on their way back.

Rambo rummaged through Jorgenson's equipment as fast as he could until he found the first aid kit along with everything else.

"Let's go!" he said turning quickly.

"I can't," said Jorghenson reaching towards his gear in vain.

"Don't bother," said Rambo, picking it up before he did, and throwing it quickly down the embankment, straight in the water, never to be seen again.

"Get the fuck up."

Rambo pulled Jorghenson up this time by force and loaded him across his shoulder.

"What the fuck are you doing Johnny?"

"Shut up. We're leaving."

"You can't fucking do it John."

It was true, he couldn't. Jorgenson seemed to weigh a ton.

Rambo had never lifted anything that heavy. Not even at boot camp. Not ever.

Come on, he isn't that heavy, you're just in bad shape too.

Just suck it up you can't let him die. Don't let him die.

Just don't.

"You can't fucking do this," said Jorghenson to Rambo again.

"Shut the fuck up for Christ's sake. Can't you fucking hear them? They're already here."

Rambo tested his new load briefly before setting out, and he was managing it.

He was keeping his balance.

He was moving, despite the extra weight.

It wasn't a matter of fatigue then, but of pain. Excruciating pain, but he had to do it.

Besides, he couldn't let Jorgenson be the one who died because he was the one with a baby girl of his own. Not him. As far as Rambo was concerned, Jorgenson's life was worth more than his was.

Precisely.

You're not gonna' make it – his body said to him.

Too many days with too little food, too much dysentery – his mind quickly reminded him.

He closed his eyes.

*Enough already, that's enough,
Shut the fuck up.
Concentrate.*

After a few uneasy steps, it wasn't long before he was able to quicken his pace but by then, they were close, very close.

He had the advantage of a head start on them though, and a good one at that. Now, he could go in whatever direction he wanted and they shouldn't be able to tell which one he took.

With that thought, Rambo decided he'd carry his friend like that from then on in. That meant until the very end, if need be.

Until the end.

*He's the one who's got the little girl, God.
So please, if you're gonna' take someone today, take me.
Just don't take Jorgenson.*

The Next Day

Back In Dak To, when the radio receiver heard the message, he thought he must have been hallucinating.

“Let me hear it again,” he said to the man who first intercepted it.

A small crowd had gathered around him and they waited agonizingly for a confirmation. The silence was absolute, the tension palpable. It was only after what seemed like an eternity, did the response arrive.

“Yes, that’s right, gentlemen. It’s affirmative, we have a signal, and it’s a strong one, at that. I think it may very well be *their* beeper.

A chorus of applause broke out.

“Sector Six,” shouted the commander taking off the headphones.

“Yes!” someone shouted loudly.

“Get Trautman, now!” ordered the commander.

“Awacs two: trace that signal. Trace that fucking signal and send us the coordinates. Divide the area into operational sections and start surveillance shifts. We’ve got to locate them.”

“Zone's hot, Sir. The sniffer is picking up on everything.”

“Affirmative, it’s the beeper the two MIA were carrying,” said the communications officer over the phone, then sliding off his headphones.

“They were last sighted a week ago, alive. This rescue retrieval has top priority. Repeat: top priority. Divert all available units to them. I want radio planes along with attack and rescue choppers.”

The man put took the headset off completely.

“I want everything, and I want it now,” he ordered.

“Copy that, Sir.”

“Get Trautman,” he said, “call 'The Beast' now. I want him here coordinating the operations.”

The radio head didn’t calm down and take a break until he saw all his men moving out.

“I can't fucking believe it,” he said in a low voice, to himself.

For the millionth time, Rambo put his beeper away.
He had to save the batteries.
He came down from the hill he had just climbed, in hope of improving the signal and walked back down to Jorgenson.
Every time he took a step he got a cramp in his leg.
He wouldn't even have been able to run if he'd had to.
On his way down Rambo thought about who might be listening: a base off the border? An SOG Patrol Team that happens to be nearby? Rambo concentrated, almost in prayer but he just couldn't come up with the answer in his head.
He felt overwhelmed for a moment, by feelings of despair.

It's over.

This time it's really over.

The weight on Rambo's chest was making it hard to breathe.
From the time they'd been spotted and Jorgenson injured, Rambo had given Jorgenson all of what little they still had.
He hoped to fight the blood loss by making him eat more, but in doing so, he hadn't eaten in over twenty-four hours himself.
In the end it had been a strenuous month with the mission itself and then followed by circumstances that were near to starvation in their MIA period. Together, they had lead them into a state of mind that Trautman used to call 'The Cycle'.
The starvation cycle.
John still had its symptoms memorized from when he'd learnt them in Fort Bragg.
They'd taught him about the cycle itself, what caused it, its subsequent symptoms and about a thousand other details as well.
That's how he *knew* he was dying.
He didn't just 'feel' it.
It's wasn't only a feeling, or a mere impression.
Rambo could feel the pressure in his chest, the same pressure that was making it hard to breathe, and he knew exactly what it meant.
His muscles were killing him and he was having problems keeping his balance too.

You should have left Jorgenson behind long ago instead of carrying him over your shoulder for, how many miles already?

I have no fucking idea.

You have to know how long you've marched and in which direction. You have to have

a plan.

I know I'm heading East and that's more than enough.

He could feel the pressure spreading all over him, like a cramp.

You can't carry Jorgenson any more, just leave him.

There's nothing else you can do.

Either you leave him or you'll both end up dead.

That's fine by me – thought Rambo to himself.

I happen to be okay with dying with Carl.

He's one of my best friends.

You haven't got a chance if you go on this way.

You're still too far from the nearest friendly village.

He has a little girl, and not just that. He's got a baby girl and a wife there.

I, on the other hand...

Rambo clenched his jaw.

There's nobody waiting for me at home. I don't have anything to go back home to, so I'm fine with it.

I'm fine with having carried him all this way.

I'm fine with having given him what little food we had left.

I'm fine with dying with him, if that's the way it's supposed to be.

The thing is however, it could get even worse than that, John.

On his way back to Jorgenson, Rambo was mindful of how much pain his body was in, and it was excruciating. Every single, damn step served to accentuate it, like a needle going deeper into his skin.

The two of you may not necessarily die, John.

The VCs could find you and you may not have the strength to fight back anymore.

No...

They could capture you, John.

No.

Never.

Anything but that.

Not that.

I'd rather die.

Just calm down, calm down... - said Rambo to himself, but he couldn't.

Ultimately, he fell to his knees and began to sob, he felt, and was truly broken by then.

He was falling apart and he knew it.

He knew exactly what was going on.

His body convulsed with sobs, his head fell forward almost unable to support himself any longer, His uniform was so filthy and torn.

Tears streamed down his face until finally, he fell to his knees.

It was then that his stomach clenched violently in pain.

Yes, of course, there was more dysentery on the way.

It'll never end.

It'll never come to an end.

Even so, you've already been here before – said another voice inside of him.

That may be, but it just hurts so much.

You've already been through this before.

Back in Fort Bragg, remember?

Of course, I do.

It's true.

It was during try-outs.

Hence, it'll pass.

It'll pass the same way it did last time.

You're not gonna' die right there on the ground where you are. Not today.

No, I won't die here, not today anyway.

Just for a second – he thought to himself.

I'm just gonna' stop here for a second.

The Jungle went on murmuring its millennial-old whispers, completely indifferent to him. In fact, to that Jungle, he was non-existent.

He had never existed.

His pulse was getting stronger and his breathing returned to normal.

The attack was subsiding.

We're running out of water – Rambo thought to himself.

His damn head never stopped working, even against his will. At that moment, he just wanted to stop, rest and disappear. The only thing worse than the pain itself was not being able to stop thinking.

Trained as it was however, his head didn't give a shit if he was tired or anything else. His head just wouldn't let up however, and after trying for some time, he decided he might as well just get up. So he did, despite his unsteadiness.

It was only a moment of crisis– he thought.

Not of weakness mind you, but of genuine concern, which is altogether different.

It's because I'm dying, that's why.

Those are all just symptoms.

From now on in, my days are numbered.

Rambo took a few unsteady first steps.

Oh well – he thought.

It doesn't matter anyhow.

You're dying, but that's not what's important here.

Just do what you can and don't give up, no matter what.

Yeah, that's the important thing; never give up.

Nothing else mattered.

So that's what he did, the same way he always had.

Like a machine.

Rambo continued to take it one-step at a time.

He ignored the voices in his head until they finally stopped for good.

By the time they did however, he'd already lost a piece of himself in the process.

A part of him that would *never* be his again.

He'd lost it because it was something he had to let go of.

He had to keep pushing for Jorgenson's sake, not for his.

Neither for himself, nor for his own life. He had to make it, for the good of his friend.

You can hardly walk.

How the hell do you expect to walk and carry Jorgenson over your shoulder the rest of the way?

It didn't matter.

He had to give that little girl her father back and he needed to figure out how to do it. That's what his mission was.

Before getting back to his friend, Rambo waited insofar as to regain his composure.

He couldn't let his friend sense his anxiety.

This was especially true because Jorgenson was even worse off than he was.

Far worse.

After going up and down for the millionth time – with Jorgenson across his shoulder all the while, – a new landscape finally unveiled itself right in front of their eyes. That new piece of jungle between Laos and Vietnam was unlike any they'd seen until then.

Being as flat as a billiard table, it would certainly make looking for clean water much harder.

The upside was however, that at least walking would be much easier.

After a while, the two finally stopped for a break. Carl could barely find the strength to even sit himself down so he decided to literally fall to the ground instead.

They sat quietly and rested for a few minutes until Rambo noticed, from the corner of his weary eye, a snake slithering around on the trail. Despite his fatigue and other ails, he found the energy to attack it, the way any other predator would have.

Rambo managed to catch it on his first try by grabbing it right behind its head. On his way back to where Jorgenson was waiting, he finished decapitating the snake with his Baker knife.

In no time at all, Rambo had skinned it, sliced it in half, and was now trying to make his friend eat the guts.

"Hey dickhead, aren't you gonna' eat?" said Jorgenson with blood around his mouth.

"I'll eat the leftovers. You need it more than I do."

Jorgenson swallowed everything eagerly and as quickly as Rambo's pale, blood stained hands could feed him.

"I'm good," he said when he'd had his full.

Jorgenson let out a hearty belch and purposely blew his breath at Rambo. It reeked of blood.

"There you are, lunch is served," he said.

Jorgenson handed Rambo what was left of the out-of-joints snake.

"Hey prick, how far have we gone today? In total I mean," Jorgenson asked him.

"'Bout twenty miles I'd say."

"That's not bad at all asshole, especially in the state we're in."

As Jorgenson went on insulting him, Rambo handed him the second thermos containing the only water they had left.

Jorgenson risked dying from both dysentery and blood loss and it wouldn't have taken long either. If Rambo hadn't given him precedence over their food and water, he'd have dropped dead a lot faster than they cared to admit.

The problem now was that they were almost out of water, and given the new terrain, they weren't going to find water any time soon.

In other words, despite all the food and water Rambo was giving him, thus not consuming himself, Jorgenson probably wouldn't make it anyway.

Rambo was sacrificing as much as he could, but Jorgenson needed more than what was readily available. Without better treatment and more to consume, he most likely

wouldn't survive that much longer.

Rambo, who was severely sick as well, risked concluding this adventure, all on his own.

Fucking Hell, – he thought.

The idea itself worried him, but he could think of a multitude of scenarios that were much, much worse. That was, in a nutshell, the whole fucking problem with the Vietnam War. There was always, without question, 'something worse'.

A part of him hoped his friend would just hurry up and die already. No kidding. There was no other way to put it.

He wished Jorgenson would get on with it already, because he was sick and tired of carrying him and on his own he could go back to marching at a slower and much easier pace again. He was fed up with sharing and couldn't wait to eat and drink everything he caught or found himself. He couldn't even look him in the eyes anymore. Those were therefore, a few of the reasons everything would be easier for him to do alone, and if they were sufficient, he could list at least a thousand more. Rambo could toy with whatever idea he pleased, but the hard truth of the matter was, if Jorgenson died, his chances of surviving went up tenfold.

His rational side was the one that worked twenty-four seven, making no exceptions even in light of losing a friend.

That part of him knew how things really stood.

As such, it diligently reminded Rambo about the stats, over and over again.

Just get fucking rid of him.

Get rid of him and maybe, just maybe you've got a chance.

He would never have offloaded him intentionally that was obvious. Not in a million years.

His head was just toying with the idea whenever he felt like complaining.

Besides, it was just the reality of things, the cold hard facts.

Regardless of what circumstance may have presented itself, Rambo wouldn't and couldn't, deliberately ignore the facts.

Like the fact that Jorgenson was going fucking mad, for instance.

He hadn't been himself for a while.

"I hate you, Johnny. I fucking hate everybody, but you the most."

He'd gone on like that saying those kinds of things for days at a time.

As one point, Rambo had contemplated taking their last handgun, away from him.

He'd been somewhat obliged to leave the 1911 with Jorgenson for self-defence purposes. As it stood now however, Jorgenson had reached the point where he was no longer capable of pulling the bow the same way he wouldn't be able to stab someone either.

This time, as Rambo looked his friend in the eye, he wondered if he was thinking

about killing himself.

Jorgenson was sitting there with his back up against a muddy wall, with the handgun on his lap, trying to catch his breath even though they'd been sitting a while already. Who knows.

Jorgenson was sick and just being alive seemed to require impossible efforts. Not to mention his eyes.

He continuously shot looks, looks that could kill, at everything and anything around him.

They were just oozing with hate. He gave you the impression that there was something not working inside him.

There was something not fucking right.

He looked exhausted and worn-out most of time with the only exception being when his expression changed into blind fury, and for no apparent reason.

He wasn't the same Jorgenson who'd made it through Fort Bragg with them, back in the day.

No way, not by a long shot.

He was an entirely different person.

He wasn't right.

He was like a dog with rabies, on the brink of death.

This had gone on for days on end. Even though Rambo could manage him, he worried the whole time that sooner or later, he'd fly off the handle.

Sure, he'd been successful so far, but there was something odd about how Jorgenson was actually changing.

He was becoming a monster.

Once he'd polished off the snake, Rambo stood up, grabbed his bow and went patrolling again. He wanted to get a better idea about which direction to carry Jorgenson in.

*

Whenever Rambo walked, he kept his bow and arrow pointing downwards, but always at the ready.

Sooner or later, he was bound to run out of arrows too, and would need to craft some up himself. That would have meant even more work for him, not to mention the time he'd need to actually do it. That would slow them down further and he just didn't want to think about it now.

He began his tour walking the area around Jorgenson's hiding place.

He was going around a giant old tree that looked like an American secular-oak when two Vietcong appeared, they were standing right in front of him.

A man and a woman dressed as civilians but armed to their teeth. It only took Rambo one look at their weapons to realize they were two Goddamn fucking Vietcong.

Rambo thought he'd just made the last fucking mistake of his life. A mistake that had only come about because he was starving and sick for fuck's sake. Regrettably, war

wasn't like being at school, it didn't give a shit what your fucking problem was, whether the whole fucking thing was really wrong or right, or how much you deserved it for that matter.

Rambo hadn't managed his hunger, thirst and fatigue, and now he'd pay the price.

The couple stood there without moving until together they pointed their Kalashnikovs both at once, at him.

With that, Rambo let his bow drop to the ground.

The man started screaming at Rambo in Vietnamese, telling him to put his hands up, but Rambo pretended no to understand. John had fucked up once already so there was no way he planned on doing it again.

When the VC gestured his AK rifle upwards, Rambo eventually did what he asked and put his hands up in the air.

They asked Rambo where 'the others' were, but Rambo didn't reply.

They went on to ask his name, what unit he was in, and insisted he tell them where everyone else was. Rambo kept the blank look on his face the whole time however, almost as though he wasn't listening.

The man exchanged a few words with his female comrade, who was, all the while looking around quite nervously, almost in fear.

Rambo thought it was quite funny actually funny how scared she was of him.

In reality, they both were.

They were expecting an ambush to pop out of nowhere at any moment.

Captured by a couple of Vietcong – thought Rambo to himself.

Not by the North Vietnamese, but by a couple of fucking Vietcong.

Everyone knew the Vietcong were far worse than the North Vietnamese.

VCs weren't soldiers they were fucking war criminals.

Nothing more than a bunch of armed-psychopaths, who were backed by a bloody dictatorship.

Anything but regular soldiers.

They were a lot like the kind of far-right militias you might find in the US.

They were motherfucking fanatics without rules.

That's why they'd probably end up doing whatever they bloody well wanted to him.

Now that Jorgenson was alone, he was a dead man too.

Rambo started contemplating any and all the offensive scenarios available to him.

There were many to choose from but he wanted to use the simplest and easiest one to knock that guy off.

He could try to kill the first with his bare hands but that would get him shot by the second.

He could make a desperate attempt to escape, but get shot in the back as he did it.

Being unarmed, the first thing to do – no matter what he decided, – was to shorten the distance between them.

So he moved his hands, which were still up in the air, closer to them every chance he

could get.

“I am a civilian. Geneva Convention. Civilian,” he said to them.

They yelled (*Keep your distance you dirty pig! Stay where you are!*), but Rambo, true to his character, advanced further still pretending he couldn't understand a word.

He could go after the woman first, hit her, and push her AK straight at the other guy, all at the same time. That could put her at risk, either by her reacting emotionally to him, or by becoming a target herself if her comrade started shooting.

Rambo drew slightly closer to them, keeping his hands high up above him.

One step at a time, he shortened the distance between his hands and her barrel. The further forward he managed to go, the higher her barrel unavoidably went.

Rambo could change the direction of fire with little effort if the barrel pointed upwards rather than straight ahead or at him. After all, dodging a gun that was pointed at his head was always less complicated than dodging one at shoulder height.

He slowly took his first step.

Then another.

Another one still, then the last.

Rambo struck as fast as a snake.

With one hand he hit the barrel of the woman's rifle so hard that it ended up pointing right in the man's face. With his hand still firmly against the barrel, Rambo kicked the man in the chest knocking him over.

As the man staggered backwards, Rambo grabbed the woman's AK barrel by the fly and pushed it violently backwards, breaking her nose. When she finally let go of her AK for good, it slid right into Rambo's hands. John spun around to face the man the moment he landed on the ground.

The Vietcong rolled over toward Rambo, but instead of pointing his AK at Rambo, he covered his face trying to protect himself, no longer interested in the girl.

With that, Rambo went ahead and shot him in the face.

The shot echoed distinctly in the jungle, rumbling between the valleys.

A covey of birds rose to fly away.

Rambo looked up at the sky with a worried expression on his face.

That shot would get the attention of whoever happened to be in the vicinity, both good and bad.

Damn it.

The woman, who, in reality, was only a girl, got down on her knees, surrendering.

As she looked over at her dead friend in horror, she joined her hands in a prayer.

Almost instantly, she burst into tears.

Now Rambo was really in fucking trouble.

He had no idea what the hell those two Vietcong were doing on their own in that part of the jungle. Nor did he know where they might have been going. What he'd bet on

however was that there were others around for sure and they couldn't be far.

He had to get back to Jorgenson. On second thought however, he needed to figure out what was really going on first.

He had to make her talk and then decide if killing her was a good idea or not.

Could he find any use for her? Perhaps.

Maybe he could use her as a human shield if need be.

Since that probably wasn't the case however, she may have had some food with her (food that Rambo and Jorgenson would waste no time in eating). She was bound to become another mouth to feed and if she did, Rambo would be obliged to kill her.

Shit.

Rambo hoped that mission would come to an end before having to go as far as that. The girl looked like she was in perfect shape she'd survive a while without eating and wouldn't get sick before getting sick, and Rambo was sincerely hoping to get out of that damn jungle long before that. Perhaps dragging her along as a prisoner was the best solution.

Rambo turned his back on her just long enough to pick up the AK lying there on the ground next to him. When he looked back at her, he saw Jorgenson lifting her off the ground by the neck with his bare hands.

He was strangling her.

His nails were piercing her skin and he was trying to split her throat wide open.

It wasn't long before blood started squirting everywhere, and when it did, it followed the rhythm of her heartbeat.

I'm gonna' kill you, you stupid Vietcong whore.

Jorgenson lifted her higher up with his hands and it didn't come as a surprise when her neck bones began to give under pressure.

I'm 'gonna kill you.

He could feel her heart pounding under his fingertips as her heart rate went faster.

The blood was making his hands warmer and warmer.

Then, without warning, they heard a CRACK! and with it, everything stopped. The pulse under his fingertips stopped. Her jerking and twitching stopped. Even the blood streaming down his arms had stopped.

Everything had stopped.

Jorgenson let go of her eventually and she fell to the ground the same way a puppet would.

His hands were full of blood.

At the time, Rambo couldn't bring himself to speak.

When he gathered enough strength however, he said:

“What the fuck have you done?”

Jorgenson didn't say anything.

“For God's sake Jorgenson, what the hell have you done?”

“I don’t know. What’s the matter?” was his answer.

Neither spoke after that as Rambo, who was still somewhat dumbfounded, continued to stare at the body in disbelief.

They had to get the hell out of there and they had to do it fast. It may have seemed like the logical thing for the both of them to do, but neither could move.

They stood where they were without uttering a sound until Jorgenson, – as if in a trance, – finally said:

“She was attacking you.”

“Oh my God, no she wasn’t. She was already disarmed, I’d already disarmed her.”

With a confused look on his face, Jorgenson glanced back and forth from his bloodstained hands to the mangled body.

“She was attacking you,” he repeated again, like an robot.

There wasn’t time for that.

There wasn’t even enough time to think about what had actually just happened there.

With great difficulty, Rambo forced himself to look away. He’d seen and done so much in his life but as he walked away from the battered body, that was one of the hardest. He reached into his pocket for his Baker knife, unscrewed the handle and pulled out the compass.

“We should almost be there by now,” he said to Jorgenson.

He knelt down next to the bodies and hurriedly searched them. Without any hesitation, he pulled out two flasks full of water and a little more than five balls of rice neatly wrapped up in paper from the pockets.

There were probably about six rations in rice alone.

Six whole rations - it seemed too good to be true.

An actual ration, they’d get a whole one each for God’s sake.

Rambo made space for them in his jacket.

“Ready?” he said getting back up.

Jorgenson nodded so Rambo lifted him back over his shoulder, for what must have been the millionth time.

“Wait Johnny, wait.”

Rambo paid little attention to the request and tossed him over his shoulder like a lamb again.

A 48 Hours' march later

“I can’t breathe Johnny, put me down.”

Rambo propped him up against a tree.
Once he’d caught his breath, Jorgenson looked to Rambo and shook his head.

“No, uh-uh, that’s it, enough is enough, It’s over, Johnny.”

Yet, it wasn’t over and Rambo knew it.
It all actuality, it wasn’t even remotely close to being done.
Like hell it was.
Not for Rambo anyways.
As long as Jorgenson was alive, he wouldn’t leave him.
Not for any reason.
Not on his life.
Then, for no reason, Rambo suddenly got up.
He stood there just staring up at the sky, the same way a dog would when it listened for noise.

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s been over for a while, Johnny,” continued Jorgenson.
“Shhhh!” hissed Rambo.

Almost instantly his hand had moved forward to cover Jorgenson’s mouth.
Neither of them moved a muscle after that, still looking intently up at the sky.

It sounded like distant thunder, but with a beat.
Johnny felt a lump in his throat, and his eyes began to burn.

It was a chopper, maybe even more than one.

Johnny took his hand off Jorgenson’s mouth, rummaged quickly through his pockets and pulled out his beeper.
He turned it back on as quickly as he could.
Then, knife in hand, he unscrewed its handle and took some matches out of it.
He only had three left.
Gathering a bed of leaves together, he set fire to the remaining bandages.
Before long, there would be thick, dark, smoke funnelling upwards into the sky and over the jungle’s canopy.
Rambo was still hoping a chopper would show up so he grabbed his bow and arrow and checked the area out while they waited.

He could feel his heart pounding hard in his chest.
He surveyed the area repeatedly, making sure there wasn't anybody there.
He could hear the helicopters getting even closer.
They had probably tracked the beeper signal. They must have.
The sound of the engines moved once more and slowed down.
It was then that Rambo was certain that they'd just stopped above Jorgenson.
Too soon – he thought.
There may still be some Vietcong around.

Rambo started running towards Jorgenson. After only a few yards, he was close enough to see what was actually going on.
Jorgenson had somehow gotten back on his feet and leaning up against a tree and was waving his arms all about at the helicopter flying above him.
It was a real-life Huey.

Rambo knew he had to fight back the emotion because it was far from being over. Even if it wasn't over yet, he still couldn't get over that there was actually a Huey in front him.
Rambo looked everywhere for potential enemies, but there weren't any around. His heart was beating like crazy. After being in the jungle, just waiting for all that time, he truly couldn't believe how everything was happening and all so fast. It was crucial that he keep calm and stay focused up until the very end.

Putting a winch through that kind of vegetation was dangerous because of how easily it could end up getting tangled in it. It had happened before and that was exactly the kind of flora it could happen in.

Rambo saw the cable come down through the trees, slings and all, so he set off running towards Jorgenson. He was still looking out for the enemy especially in the surrounding trees as he did.

Jorgenson pulled out his 1911.
The winch made it through the trees down to the ground carrying its two safety harnesses.
Once close enough, Jorgenson put one leg through the harnesses and then the other. Then he stretched his hand out in Rambo's direction and signalled to hurry.

Calm down, just calm down – thought Rambo running as fast as he could.
There was no way he could though because it felt beyond him. He just couldn't stay calm.
All he wanted to do was get the hell out of there.

Rambo made it to Jorgenson although in great disbelief! Stepping into the harness too, the two of them put their arms around one another and stood face to face. With

the rope between them and the Huey above, they were about to fly.

Rambo jerked the rope two times, and the helicopter began its lift off, taking them off the ground.

The chopper slipped through the branches easily as it climbed higher.

Once out of the jungle, rather than ascending further, the helicopter moved forward, in its final effort to get the hell out of there.

The fact that they hadn't run into a single Vietcong team at lift off was, nothing short of a miracle. A miracle, indeed.

Rambo didn't think he'd seriously be able to outrun them, not after killing those last two Vietcong two days earlier, but especially because of having to carry Jorgenson over his shoulders for such a long time. Being there now, hooked onto that cable in the sky seemed surreal.

Rambo lowered his head in a prayer-like manner, as to thank God.

A while later the jungle had faded quickly out of sight and out of bullet range.

All they could see under their war-torn combat boots now were clouds.

“Yes, Yes, Yes, yes, yes, yes!” yelled Garner.

He threw his headphones onto the table and jumped out of his chair.

He turned to Trautman and all the other base personnel present. There were radio telegraphists, officers, even some of the pilots on the base who had heard the rumour going around. They had come to see if it was true for themselves.

“There are two of them, and they’ve been confirmed and already identified, one of which is wounded.

Guys, you’ll never believe this. *It’s Grizzly and Raven.*”

The entire room broke out in chorus.

People were hugging, jumping, and applauding while others raised their arms up in the air.

Trautman, who had given all the orders in the background, fell into his chair, exhausted.

They’d found them. It was unbelievable.

They’d actually found them:

‘Already Identified’, yes...

Trautman had that checked, alright.

He wouldn’t dream of not doing it, just to be sure there were no doubts: Rambo and Jorgenson were safe.

Thank God – he thought.

That wasn’t the only reason the Colonel was thanking God for however. He was glad he’d found them before Baker Team B embarked on that crazy mission.

That mission *they* had given commands to the Colonel about, and not vice-versa. A mission that would have been an act of force against the Colonel’s will and as such, would have changed the relationship between him and the team forever.

That was why the Colonel was grateful, because that mission no longer had a purpose. He hadn’t been that lucky in *Years*.

Unbelievable – he thought.

These guys are performing at record breaking levels in this damn war. What’s more, they’re breaking the rules as they do it.

They can hit further than the rest and free any POWs they come across whether it’s on their mission or not. They can survive in the jungle longer than anyone else and

can even make it back alive after being MIA.

What they're doing is unbelievable, and even if I'm the one that created them, I can hardly believe it myself.

None of all this was 'official'— it had no real military value, so-to-speak. Trautman and everybody else along with all those goddamn Generals were impressed by it and that actually meant a lot.

That was why Trautman, for the first time after so many years his feelings of joy overwhelmed him. So full of joy were that that they almost hurt considering what a tough guy he was! It was just one of those things, and no one in Washington DC would have ever understood it. To those of them who were there, in the field, risking their lives day in and day out, saving Rambo and Jorgenson meant something else.

In fact, if the Colonel took a step back and looked around, he'd have sworn everyone in the room had gone mad. Someone picked up a pile of paper off a desk and threw it up in the air the way one tosses confetti at a wedding.

Garner had left the room and brought back some imported beer. Clearly, it had been smuggled in some way although no one knew exactly how,

He grabbed one, gave it a good shake, cracked it open in front of his radio guy and sprayed it all over him.

The nightmare Trautman had been living had finally ended. Even though that rescue operation itself had no effect what's so ever on the outcome of the war, it was, at least from then on, no longer his concern.

At that moment, all he wanted was for SOG to celebrate and to enjoy the light in their eyes. What he saw was the kind of look he hadn't seen for a long time, maybe too long actually. It sure looked a lot like victory. Trautman got to his feet as everyone continued celebrating, put his hand on Garner's shoulder and said in his ear:

"Get a jeep, let's go to the hospital."

-

Ortega was coming back from town, and as such, that evening he was dressed in civilian-like clothing. He walked into his tent and made his way towards his cot holding a bottle of booze in one hand, and a carton of cigarettes in his other.

Quite unexpectedly, he heard commotion coming from right outside his door and then, out of nowhere, he found Berry standing right there in front of him.

"Jorgenson and Johnny..."

Ortega felt his jaw drop.

"They found them. They're alive."

Ortega threw his cigarettes and liquor onto his bed.

"What? When? How? Where are they?"

"They've already been rescued, and they're fine. They'll be landing at Dak To

Hospital in a few minutes.”

Ortega frowned, the way a child would when on the verge of crying.

“Oh God,” he said suddenly, putting his hand in front of his mouth.

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

In the end, he broke into tears.

Delmore, who was almost half a meter taller, gave him a hug but the smile disappeared off his face.

He’d suddenly become serious as he looked directly at Ortega.

“You’re a good team leader. Actually, Ortega, you’re excellent. Don’t second-guess yourself.

Ortega went ahead and nodded in agreement even though he wasn’t absolutely convinced.

He didn’t think it was as simple as that.

In fact, it wasn’t.

When they arrived on the hospital rooftop, the roaring sound of the incoming Huey was deafening. There were people everywhere so Garner ordered to Berry and Ortega to keep them out of the immediate area.

“We don’t have any details about what state there in,” said Garner, keeping an eye on the Colonel, who was already waiting for the helicopter in front of him.

“We can’t let this crowd keep the doctors from doing their job.”

Ortega and Delmore nodded in agreement, but as they both turned to move towards the crowd to form a human rope, Berry put his hand up against Ortega’s chest to push him back, and said:

“I got this.”

“You sure?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ll have two of those guys from the military police over there with me and that’ll be enough. Now go Manuel, just go...”

Garner is right, - thought Ortega as he started walking out into the crowd.

They knew nothing about their physical condition so people couldn’t just jump at them the way they would if it had only been a couple of days.

Then, unexpectedly out of the darkness, the Huey roared.

-

Trautman, Garner and Ortega were standing a few meters away from the landing circle waiting for a seemingly lazy helicopter to lower itself to the ground.

When the hold door finally opened, the first one out was Rambo. He was limping, but he got off on his own two legs.

Jorgenson on the contrary, was on a stretcher, but his eyes were open and he looked conscious.

Thank God – thought Trautman.

His sense of relief was short lived however once he realized the state he was actually in.

Considering how much gear Rambo had when he set off, he didn’t have any of it now.

He had a torn uniform on and the knife still in its cover.

Then there was his face.

Rambo's face was black and hollowed out.
Even his neck was haggard.

He looked so much smaller because his body had shrunk from starvation. His badly torn uniform showed all the sores and bruises that covered him in certain places.

His face showed no sign of life.

Trautman flinched at the sight of his blood shot eyes.

He was making his way across that rooftop as though he was still on his mission.

Feeling perplexed by this, Trautman tilted his head unconsciously as he reflected, and then it came to him.

He realized that they'd given up over there. Both of them had.

They had programmed him to keep going.

Programmed to move forward and trained to do it.

Whatever they had to do or whatever it took, all for the mission's sake.

Just like a machine.

They'd turned into machines.

If there was anything that mission had spared his body, it had, in any case, taken its toll on his mind. His suffering had turned into hate, his hate transformed into rage, and that rage eventually killed a part of him. He'd died inside, and once he had, everything else was just a reaction.

It's about actions and reactions because for every action there had to be a reaction.

You run out of water, you look for more.

Run out of food, you look for more.

Trautman was well aware of how that felt and recalled his time spent in Korea.

Fighting for days at a time, when the time of day made no difference and breaks were a luxury at best.

Rambo slowed his pace, to the point of staggering until eventually having to kneel down, unable to go on. The time had come for the medical staff to step in, he knew it, and for the first time, he had to let them do it.

Everyone in the vicinity became quiet as Berry and the MPs made sure they all maintained a safe distance.

Trautman took a moment to look over Jorgenson who was lying on a stretcher.

The bandage on his neck was the first sign of injury the Colonel had noticed. He couldn't tell if he'd given up hope because his eyes were closed.

Despite his physical exhaustion, Rambo pushed the doctor away, gesturing restlessly as he insisted they bring Jorgenson up to OR before checking him.

Trautman couldn't help wondering if there was still a way to save him, or if what they were witnessing was, in all actuality, the end. He'd already seen this kind of thing in the past. Teams came back from missions quite different from how they'd left. In many cases, they were no longer capable of fighting again.
Seriously.

Rambo's career could have been over because of this or a thousand other reasons such as the vast number of tropical diseases that were so widespread in that damn country.

*Rambo – he thought.
John Rambo.*

The Colonel thought back in time, up to the day where he'd met the young man for the first time.

Initially, Trautman had had some reservations regarding how much younger the soldier was in comparison.

As far as he was concerned, Rambo was too much of a loner, too aggressive and far too impulsive for the Special Forces. Special Forces meant that a single man was equivalent to nothing, and teamwork and self-control meant everything.

Natural born loners like Rambo, on the other hand, are always on the side, because they give too much thought to themselves often considering their mates to be uncontrollable variables.

With the passing of time in Fort Bragg however, the team worked better and better together. As such, they acquired the same kind of brotherly love for Rambo that the youngest of any family would get.

Then, in Vietnam, Rambo proved to be one of the best, and did so, from the get-go. He had even received a recommendation for a Medal of Honour right after his very first mission Black Spot.

A Medal he probably wouldn't receive owing to the secret nature of SOG missions. Respecting his wishes, the doctor left Rambo as he was, kneeling on the ground. He then walked over to the paramedics, recommending they take away his knife before attempting to examine him further.

After that, the doctor made his way to Trautman.

"He has suffered extreme dehydration and malnutrition, probably has malaria and a nasty infection in one foot. I want that foot in surgery in fifteen minutes. As for the other guy..."

"Grizzly," said Trautman.

"Yes, that's right the one you refer to as Grizzly. His condition is worse. An AK bullet hit him in the neck, but that was two days ago. Lucky for him, Raven had some penicillin and streptomycin left and was astute enough to treat him with it. Frankly speaking, if he's made it till now than with nothing but that drug treatment, he's likely to make it."

The doctor paused briefly, before adding:

"The pilot filled me in on how long they'd actually spent out there. He also told me where they'd got lost and then, subsequently found.

On the last two days Grizzly couldn't even walk and Raven had to carry him over his

back.”

The physician shook his head in disbelief.

“What that young man did for his team, under such circumstances almost seems impossible.”

“But it’s not.”

“I realize that.”

“We’ll need to talk to them.”

“You can’t. Grizzly is unconscious. I put him to sleep myself because he looked upset, whereas the other one...”

“The other one walked in here on his own two legs,” said Trautman.

“Not exactly, he got to there more or less,” said the doctor as he pointed a finger to the ground

“Then, he fell to his knees.”

Trautman didn't comment.

“Fine,” the doctor said looking at him.

“I’ll give you five minutes but not a single minute more.”

Rambo pushed away all the prodding hands as hospital staff attempted to sit him on a wheel chair so he stood on his own two feet instead. As he made his way towards the hospital entrance, with every step he took he could feel his strength coming back.

John Rambo - thought Trautman.

It was hard to believe that he was the same curious soldier, the one who was always asking the Colonel questions on absolutely everything, the whole time they were at Fort Bragg. It felt like such a lifetime ago.

Yet, in that particular moment, Rambo wasn’t acting like himself at all.

He was acting like a completely different person.

Trautman asked himself who that young man in front of him really was.

“You can only really understand who a person actually is when you break them,” thought Trautman.

If that was the truth, and it was years that Trautman believed it was, then there was no better time than now to figure out what kind of warrior John Rambo actually was.

Trautman wasn’t sure if Rambo had seen him or not.

Someone had given Rambo the message to go into a sort of hospital storage room, and the wounded soldier had complied.

“Colonel, you do the briefing. I’ll take care of everything else,” said Garner.

“You sure, Garner?”

Garner smiled back at him.

“If not, how else can I be of any Goddamn use to you?”

Trautman nodded thankfully and gestured for Ortega to follow him so they walked

into the storage room together.

Trautman, Ortega and Rambo were the only three people in that room once that door closed.

Almost zombie-like, Rambo eventually turned to face them but his reaction was entirely unexpected.

He didn't bat an eyelid at Trautman. He didn't even acknowledge that the Colonel was actually there. No recognition, whatsoever. Rambo was staring directly, and only at Ortega, and when he finally realized it was really him, he went off like a bomb.

"YOU LEFT US OUT THERE TO DIE, YOU GODDAMN FUCKING BASTARD!" Rambo shouted furiously at Ortega.

Then he jumped for him, grabbed him by the collar and lifted him up off the floor by his shirt.

"RAMBO!" yelled Trautman frantically.

The stitches on Ortega's chest opened straight away, and without warning, a bright red stain appeared on one side of his white shirt spreading by the second.

"Johnny, I..."

"YOU SENTENCED US TO DEATH! BY CUTTING THAT DAMN ROPE YOU CONDEMNED US BOTH TO DEATH!"

His bloodshot eyes glared at Ortega almost in a demon-like fashion. In fact, if looks could kill, they would have cut right through him.

Without warning however, a sound, maybe some kind of radio frequency pierced him so fiercely, he suddenly felt confused.

Perhaps in reality it was the sound of a sudden doubt, or second thought. Whatever it was however, if it was inside his head, it was telling him to stop.

Rambo let go of Ortega at once, and he crashed to the floor.

He fell on his back and hit the floor hard, painfully grasping at the unstitched area under his arm with one hand.

Not more than a moment had passed before Rambo found himself right back at it, lunging for him a second time.

"RAMBO!" Trautman bellowed yet again, trying to stop him, but in vain.

The young man managed to hit Ortega with a left hook straight in the jaw, in all fury.

"WE WERE FRIENDS, MANUEL!" Rambo continued, almost in tears this time.

"WE WERE friends."

Ortega spit blood onto the floor and lifted his head back up again looking at Rambo straight in the eyes. Ortega turned his head and offered Rambo his other cheek for a

second punch.

It was when Rambo was looking at Ortega that he seemed to realize what was really going on.

“FUCK!” he shouted, incredibly frustrated with himself.

Trautman was finally able to get between the two.

Rambo turned to one of the steel lockers, picked it up off the ground and threw it to the other side of the room. He shouted again in frustration watching it hit the other wall.

“AAAARGH,” he shouted.

“Goddammit, that’s enough, Johnny!” bellowed Trautman.

“Do you hear me soldier? That’s enough! Look at me!”

Trautman pointed at Ortega, who was in pain still lying on the ground.

“Ortega made a field-decision, Rambo.”

“He made the decision he needed to accomplish his mission. Do you hear me soldier?”

Rambo turned to face the Colonel.

The young man was breathing loudly, almost hyperventilating and for a split-second, he looked as though he was going to hit the Colonel too.

“The prisoners were the mission, Johnny.

You weren’t the mission’s fucking objective Rambo nor were Jorgenson or Ortega. You weren’t indispensable.

Ortega was the Goddamn team leader and he proved he could live up to the role. When the time came to cut that rope, he almost drowned doing it.”

Those words made Rambo grit his teeth even harder, like a hard pill to swallow. Those words just made him even angrier.

“Ortega did what he had to do to save that last hostage, Lowell, if I remember correctly. You see, I do know everything that went on during that mission Rambo.”

Rambo turned away.

“And do you know why that is, Rambo? It’s because my Goddamn men know better than to feed me any kind of bullshit just to protect somebody’s sorry ass. No fucking way. I know the whereabouts of where you got lost. I know everything and I do because I Goddamn care enough to know it.”

This time Trautman was the one who turned his back on Rambo.

He pointed outside the room and continued:

“Could Ortega have done any better? Maybe he Goddamn could have, but then again, maybe he couldn’t. When all’s said and done, we’re talking about a fucking field-decision, Johnny. We aren’t talking about a run-of-the-mill decision some asshole makes as he sits in a fucking office somewhere drinking coffee at his Goddamn desk. Those pricks have all the time in the world at their disposal to do it. For fuck’s sake, you of all people should know better than that. A decision made on the field is never fucking perfect. It can’t be. It can be good or bad, better or worse, but never fucking perfect. Understand?”

Rambo didn't say anything while Ortega, who was still sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, looked up.

The bloodstain on his shirt had spread all the way down to his belt.

“Maybe there was some other way to save Lowell,” said Trautman.

“Or maybe, considering how badly he was wounded, he might have been a goner right from the beginning, but we’ll never know for certain. That’s war and that’s how it fucking is Rambo. War doesn’t give you any Goddamn dry runs. It’s not a school and there’s no right or wrong answer when you’re at war.”

Trautman stopped and studied Rambo attentively.

Then, almost whispering, he added:

“The reason I’m sure is because of my Goddamn front line, and first-hand experience, the same as yours.”

Rambo finally seemed to have himself under control so at least it was a start.

Trautman went on to say:

“You’re behaving like Goddamn kids, the both of you.

Yes, and I mean you too Ortega. You and your Goddamn, self-inflicted breakdown I’m going through a crisis bullshit.

‘I don’t want to kill this’ and ‘I don’t want to lose that’, then there’s ‘it’s my fault... no, it’s yours ... no, it’s no one’s fault’.

So, enough is enough Ortega. I’m really fucking sick of your bullshit.

You both knew it from the beginning that when you’re at war ‘being the best’ doesn’t always cut it and that sometimes someone dies anyway.

That’s right, people just die, no matter what you do and that’s that, got it?

Somebody has to die while someone else has to get his hands all bloody.

This shit happens because it’s war for fuck’s sake and wars are dirty things. That’s it.

If you aren’t ready to get your hands dirty for this job, then you’d better get the fuck out now, and I mean the both of you, you fucking pussies.”

Rambo shifted his weight from one leg to the other as he stared down at Ortega, not

knowing what to think.

Ortega on the contrary, didn't take his eyes off of Trautman.

"You have to learn how to live with this Goddammit and you're both going to do it. The reason I'm telling you this is because Baker Team B is moving on anyway, whether it's with or without you two pricks.

Therefore, either we put an end to this Goddamn nonsense right here and right now, or I don't want either one of assholes in SOG from this point on so you're out. Have I made myself clear?"

The two soldiers stood quietly, staring at each other. Although he was squinting, Rambo made no effort to hide the rage in his eyes.

Unlike Rambo however, Ortega looked on at him calmly, almost submissively and glossy-eyed.

Trautman sighed.

"You've got the rest of your Goddamn lives to torture yourselves and one another about what went on during that mission.

As long as you're part of my unit, you've got to get the fuck over it because if you can't play the game, you've chosen the wrong job."

Trautman made a gesture of finality and then said:

"Now, leave us alone Ortega. Johnny needs to debrief."

Ortega went to reach for the door, but Trautman put his hand in front of the knob first and said:

"Get your stitches checked."

*

When the door closed, Trautman found himself alone with Rambo, so alone it was uncomfortable.

"Debriefing," he then went on to say.

Rambo however didn't reply.

He just stood there. His head may have been down but he was looking straight up at Trautman through the top of his eyes and was still taking quick and short breaths. He was a tiger ready to attack, but Trautman wasn't intimidated.

"Debriefing," he repeated again, with a different tone.

Giving no reply, Rambo moved closer to him instead, until their chests were little

more than centimetres apart. They were now in the kind of stance men took right before a fight. Trautman had a look on his face however, that showed no sign of backing down.

“Look at me, Rambo. Take a really good fucking look,” said Trautman.

Rambo looked like he was going to explode.

“You need to understand that I know exactly what’s fucking going on inside of you,” Trautman told him taking a half step back from him.

“You’ve got one chance and one alone to take back every Goddamn thing you had before, and you have that chance now. If you waste it, you’ll never get it again, or your old life for that matter.

It’ll be over for you, and your fucking life hereafter will be nothing else short of hell. Even in the US.”

Rambo’s upper lip went up in disgust but he took a step back away from Trautman, following his lead. He was still taking short breaths, almost hyperventilating, but in the end, looked away.

“And now, DEBRIEF SOLDIER!” Trautman bellowed.

This time Rambo jumped back startled, almost woken out of a dream.

Staring blankly ahead, the look in his eyes became increasingly distant and confused. It was slowly starting to come back to him.

“Enemy fire had cut us off from the rest of the team so we got to the rope late,” he began.

“Ok, so we were late, but the intensity of enemy-fire we were up against made withdrawing impossible. When we finally managed to break away from them, we couldn’t just run to the rope because they were still on our tails and we risked getting shot at if we were out in the open water as we crossed. We then proceeded with yet another evasive manoeuvre taking us even longer. When we finally got to the rope safely, with the head start we needed to cross it, it wasn’t there anymore.

Crossing that river with no rope was out of question so we ran north hoping the team would have done the same in order to help us cross but in a different place. There wasn’t anyone there however. They’d given full priority to the prisoners.”

Rambo paused and stared blankly not adding anything else.

“Go on, son,” Trautman said to him, and with no further hesitation, he went back to telling his story.

“From the operative point of view, the first two nights went reasonably well, all things considered, but there was, nevertheless something not right with Jorgenson.”

Rambo turned to Trautman in an effort to underline that point.

“There was something, subdued but in place from the very beginning. Jorgenson has something wrong with him, Sir”

Rambo dragged a chair in front of Trautman and sat down on it.
He was exhausted.

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t know, Sir. I’m not entirely sure how to say it. He was, well what I mean to say Sir, is that he became aggressive. This hostility didn’t pertain only to the situation we were in but he got aggressive, to the point of being violent with me as well. He acted cruelly, insane-like at times. I’m not a doctor so I can’t explain it. Whatever, it the reason for it was, it wasn’t normal, Sir”

“It’s all right son, just go on.”

“Once we realized we were really on our own, we decided it was best to keep moving the same way we that had got us there, Sir. What ended up happening was from that point on we weren’t able to shake them. They were unceasingly at our heels. We had those Goddamn’ motherfuckers right behind us, and it went on for days on end. We didn’t sleep more than fifteen minutes at time, eating what we found while going forward so nothing substantial, just Vietnamese tubers and roots. We never actually stopped again after that, and especially not at night.

I always had a general idea of how far they actually were behind us. At times we were able to distance ourselves more because they coordinated with other teams or temporarily lost us and hard to start looking all over again combing the entire area. We never completely got rid of them though, so hunting under those circumstances was almost impossible.

We had to ration everything obviously, but in the end, we finished it all anyway. At that pace and under those conditions what we found didn’t measure up to what we needed.

Then, two days ago, the VCs engaged us directly and that’s where Carl got wounded. Nevertheless, we managed to get away that time too despite it all.

Even though we’d been so careful about using what little ammo we had, shortly then after we ran out. Any of the hunting I did after that involved using little more than my bare hands and if we did actually pause, it was only briefly. So, we barely had anything to eat or drink those remaining 48 hours in the Jungle, and since Jorgenson couldn’t walk I threw him over my back and carried him pretty much until we were rescued.”

“What?”

“The last forty-eight hours we were in the jungle, before you found us, about fifty miles of march, more or less, I was carrying him on my back.

Jorgenson couldn't go on Sir, and he wasn't only referring to the pain.

He'd given up.

He was doomed. He was convinced the VC would find him and that they were right behind us so he preferred giving up to going on under those circumstances.

Even when they finally came and got us, I think that the Vietcong were there.

They were probably setting the usual L-shaped ambush up when the helicopter arrived sooner than expected, before they were in position, so engaging would have been suicidal on their part.

I think you were too early for them. The crew had no idea how risky picking us up actually was.”

“No Rambo, believe me when I tell you that they knew fully well how dangerous it all was.”

Rambo was quiet.

“Tell me more about Jorgenson,” inquired the Colonel.

“Yes.”

“Rambo, about Jorgenson.”

“Yes,” he repeated.

He's out of adrenaline – thought Trautman to himself.

Once the adrenaline stops running, he'll feel much worse than he already does now.

Come on Rambo, it's the last stretch.

I know there's something else you want to tell me.

Once you make this last effort, it'll all be over.

I promise.

“On our third night, Jorgenson tried to kill himself,” Rambo said to Trautman quietly who couldn't believe his ears once he'd heard it. Rambo however, went on with his narration despite being dazed, leaving Trautman unsure about what he'd heard.

“We were just talking and he was explaining something or other to me. Then, out of nowhere, he grabbed hold of the 1911 and I had to take it away from him. Only then did he go ahead and actually confess.”

“Confess? Confessed to what?” inquired Trautman.

“What did he say exactly?”

“He told me he hasn't been able to sleep since we've been back. Those rare occasions when he did manage to asleep he wasn't waking up feeling rested at all anyway.

He said that when he got ready for a mission he could never remember where he'd

put his gear away the last time he used it, or he always needed to stop and rummage through all his packed gear once he'd made his bags because he couldn't recall where exactly in his backpack to find it.

There were certain noises which had become intolerable, almost driving him crazy and that he was always full of rage but didn't know why.

Honestly Sir, believe me, it's all true.

He gets furious, even regarding unimportant issues.

He'd train too hard, complaining of acute muscle pain and yet wouldn't stop.

That night he told me he had no choice but to train that hard or he'd have gone insane. He said he couldn't do otherwise."

This was the first time anything like this had found its way to Trautman. There was no question about how serious it was however. He could feel it.

"Then when he got his neck injury, he became a demon, Sir. I wish I knew how to describe it better but there's no other way really. The things he used to say, and do..."

Rambo suddenly leaned up a little further against the back of the chair in exhaustion.

"But I brought him back, Sir. I saved his life. I saved my friend."

"You did an exceptional job, Johnny."

"I saved my friend," he repeated, again in a daze.

The young man glanced up at the Colonel.

He looked like a dog after a beating.

"You were unbelievable, Rambo, and your country won't forget it. I promise you America will never forget what you've done."

The two of them looked at each other.

Trautman moved his hand to help Rambo up from the chair.

"Now, stand up, come on. Everybody's waiting for you, and by everybody, I mean all your friends Johnny. Your friends, they're all waiting to see you."

Rambo stood up.

"My family," he said.

"Yes, that's right, your family Johnny. Go on and tell them you're fine."

*“You were unbelievable, Rambo, and your country will never forget it.
I promise...”*

America will never forget”

Samuel Trautman, 1969

Rambo opened the door and Trautman heard the sound of applause breakout. Everybody hugged Rambo despite how filthy he was, still covered in jungle mud in some places.

Some of the base personnel who'd come to welcome him back he'd actually only ever seen but never actually met. In other circumstances, this may have made him uneasy but now, he just didn't care. Those people had spent days enduring the situation together, saddened by it, and painstakingly continued to search in hopes of a happy ending. They were the ones who would have suffered a great deal more had he not returned at all.

There were so many of them. Many more than Rambo would have ever dreamed.

Unlike ever before, a true sense of belonging filled him.

He was part of something that was grandiose and actually had a sense to it.

It not only accepted him for who he was, but actually valued it and *loved* him for it. That day marked a true milestone for Rambo. He had finally understood what being part of a *real* family truly meant.

Once he'd made his way around the room and hugged each and every one there, Rambo caught sight of Ortega, who was standing at the very back, almost off to the side. His eyes were shiny and looked tear like.

He hadn't gone away to have his stitches checked but had stayed instead, patiently waiting for Rambo to get out of that little room.

Yeah, he must not have gone to get his stitches checked out after all.

Hang on, what stitches? Rambo thought to himself.

He suddenly realized he didn't know anything about what had happened to Ortega.

A chest wound.

Don't tell me they shot you in the chest, Manuel?

When their sights crossed, the room seemed to go silent.

Manuel was still sporting the same bloodstained shirt he had before.

For a few moments, the pair of them just stood looking at one another.

It didn't take long for Rambo to open his arms up to Manuel, in a forgiving, brotherly fashion.

When they finally did hug, there was a general outcry of happiness by everyone else in the room.

Once Rambo was within earshot, Ortega turned to him and said:

“Thanks John.”

It's essential to understand the true importance of Rambo's act of forgiveness. Had he not done so for Ortega, he would never have been able to move on.

In other words, he couldn't have lasted much longer with SOG.

Without forgiveness, living would have become hell, forced to live his remaining days in complete self-disgust.

It wasn't uncommon to feel that kind of self-disgust at war because when you made mistakes somebody else paid for them.

That event showed Ortega how to be, in the future.

If he ever found himself in a situation like that, he wouldn't cut the rope again.

Not under any circumstance.

He'd rather die than not do the right thing.

In that case, he would have done so *gladly*.

It was the middle of the night and Danforth and Krakauer had been drinking in the otherwise empty tent, for quite some time.

“It sure looks like we’re really going home. Sure, it’s only home on leave mind you, but, in any case, its home just the same,” he said.

The base seemed a lot calmer than it usually was that night.

“At least Ortega isn’t leaving after all,” said Danforth.

“Yeah, I know. He’s always wanted stay in Vietnam, even before we did Op. ‘No Man’s Land’ so I guess he has his reasons,” Krakauer replied. “If you ‘wanna know what I think, spending your leave here is definitely not a good idea. Trautman will sucker him into doing something dangerous because the Colonel *always* seems to need one thing or another. He’s never let Ortega be, at least not for an entire leave he hasn’t, and definitely won’t if he stays in Vietnam. Come on, give me a break.”

Krakauer nodded because it was the most likely thing to happen.

What he didn’t bother saying to Danforth was that Ortega probably knew it better than they did and that was precisely the reason he stayed in the first place.

Krakauer was of the opinion that their team leader had “crossed” the line.

He was an adrenalin addict and had been for a very long time.

“What’re you gonna’ do, Krack?” Danforth asked.

“I don’t know,” replied Krakauer losing his train of thought. “I’m not too crazy about going back to the US though.”

“Jesus Christ,” Danforth said somewhat surprised.

“Come on, not you too! What the fuck’s going through your heads for Christ’s sake? The same shit? I wish somebody would just tell me what the hell’s so fucking special about this place. I don’t know about you, but I feel like it’s been ten fucking years already and not a day passes that I don’t risk my fucking life because of it. Jesus. Even when we’re on the base I’m worried about getting attacked or something for Christ’s sake.”

Krakauer stopped for a second to think about it and then added:

“I haven’t got a life out there man. I mean, out there in the real world.”

“Oh, come on,” Danforth insisted. “How can you not have anything there, you must have someone waiting for you. Not Even I have someone for God’s sake, even if he probably wants to kill me, I guess.”

“Come on, please.”

“Seriously, I’m not joking. The Lodestone Sheriff can’t wait to give it to me.”

Krakauer chuckled at his friend’s comment.

“I’m telling you, he wants my ass, and wants it bad,” Danforth repeated. “I can’t show my ugly face back there again, especially not in my old neighbourhood, believe me. If I do it won’t be fun.”

For a moment, they were lost in their own thoughts.

Krakauer lit himself a cigarette, took a few drags and then said:

“I don’t want to stay here, but I wouldn’t know what to do in the US either. I’m telling you man, I haven’t got any kind of life in the real world right now.”

“Oh come on, what the fuck are you saying!”

“I mean it. There isn’t anything there for me.”

“Ok, alright, I believe you, I believe you.”

“No, you don’t. I can see it in your face.”

“Listen Krack, here’s what we’re gonna’ do. You’re goin’ back to the US because we’re goin’ together. Then we’ll go to Lonestone together: get stoned together; go to the movies and we can even hit the casino that’s less than a mile from my house together. Besides, it’s only five nights so it’s like being on a holiday or something.”

“I suppose we could,” replied Krakauer.

“Of course we could. It’ll be fun, you’ll see. If the Goddamn Sheriff starts busting our balls, it won’t be a problem either. We’ll just blow his fucking head off if he does and dump the body in a trash-bin because it really isn’t that different from Vietnam. It’s practically the same when it comes to dumping bodies I’m sure!

That’s only if you really don’t have anyone to say hello to back home.

‘Cause if that someone finds out you were back, but didn’t bother stopping by, then they could get pretty fucking pissed off.”

Krakauer exhaled a cloud of smoke, and finally said:

“I knew you didn’t believe me.”

He turned to look at Danforth.

“There’s nothing for me back in the US, so don’t ask me again, please.

I don’t have a past.”

Dak To

Ortega gave the Vietnamese girl who worked at the store a kiss.

He hugged and kissed her like it was the natural thing to do but he did feel a bit odd as he did it.

They were at the back of the store, in the warehouse, and the sun was shining brightly through the windows.

Kissing her was like a long-awaited breath of fresh air but it still seemed orchestrated. It almost seemed redundant. Yes.

Ortega couldn't help but feel like a stranger even to himself.

Eventually, when the air finished, the kiss did too.

After their lips parted and they let go of each other gently, her hand softly brushed the arm Ortega had injured while he was on the Point Of No Return mission. She saw the painful expression he had on his face but didn't comment or ask him about it.

He looked into her eyes.

She had big, dark eyes, slender arms and small, delicate hands.

She had a wonderful back, long and graceful that reminded him of a glass stem.

Then there was her beautiful jet-black hair.

Ortega stroked it softly, captivated by it.

A smile came to her lips when her eyes met his.

He softly put his hands on her head and rocked it gently.

Their faces moved towards one another and then they embraced.

They were leaning up against each other so closely that their foreheads touched.

Ortega closed his eyes.

He could feel something warm inside.

He could almost feel some kind of rest, between the arms of that wonderful girl.

He finally felt at home, his *real* one, not the American one. He was *scared* to go back to that one.

The reason being I've become a killer.

A contract killer.

Home, love, family... Everything he had always believed you'd want to come back to... No. His brother and parents had, in his view unexpectedly, turned into complete

strangers. What's more, his pre-war life and native country itself now felt incredibly distant, far away and at times imaginary to him.

A foreign country.

Everybody used to refer to the US as '*the real world*', although he felt the exact the contrary. To him, Vietnam was the real world, whereas the US – inevitably – wasn't.

The real world – Ortega said in his head giving it further thought.

Maybe, those who coined that term would do well to remember the nutty ones, like him for instance. They were the ones who seemed to lose their way and subsequently forgot who they were in Vietnam.

Not that he gave a shit or anything like that.

He didn't care about his father, his mother or even his brother any more. Helen was part of the real world too though.

They may have broken up, but Ortega was still in love with her.

Ortega was half-naked and laying on a bed in the Hu chi Hotel.

He embraced the girl next to him; he buried his face on the side of her neck.

She smelled like flowers. She was intense and awesome.

He glanced down to stare at her.

Ortega was as tense as a violin cord. He was anxious and ready to spring at any instant. Yet, as he looked at her, he got the feeling his insides were melting.

A sense of exhaustion seemed to come over him leaving the impression he'd finally gone back to being his old self again.

Her neck was long and perfect, and her jet-black hair flowed down her back.

He slowly took in the rest of her.

She was tiny. She had petite breasts in a petite bra and her bellybutton looked like a small dimple in the middle of nowhere.

He placed his hand on her back, softly. A gesture as simple as touching her naked back with his hand touched him so profoundly that she truly was the ultimate escape from reality for him.

Embarrassed by how intense his feelings were, made it difficult to look her in the eyes. No matter what Ortega used to talk to her about, as soon as he did his eyes were practically already fucking her. He looked at her with such intensity it embarrassed her. In all honesty, it embarrassed them both.

The problem was that it had been virtually impossible, for Ortega, to address her without staring at her lips, her eyes or entire face. It was impossible to be in front of such beauty without it overcoming him or to be awed.

It surprised him therefore that in spite of feeling overwhelmed, he still managed to seduce her.

Beauty...

Female beauty was the only thing that could make him feel better *instantly* since he'd begun that godforsaken life. It always would.

When she inquired about what part of the military he actually belonged to, he even had a hard time lying to her.

The following day Ortega wanted to meet Trautman personally, but in order to do it he had had to go up to Saigon.

It may have been a long and dangerous journey, but Ortega went given that he didn't really have any other choice

He had to go back to the US and he had to do it now while the entire Baker team was on leave and before it was too late.

Manuel Ortega was concerned about *losing* himself in Vietnam because he didn't want it to happen.

He wanted to keep both feet on the ground.

Therefore, the first thing he did was get himself a helicopter ride, and then a couple of truck rides and in the end even took a bike to make it. The SOG Command Centre was located inside the US embassy. When he arrived, he noticed some of the embassy walls still showed signs of the Tet attack, which had taken place a year earlier.

Once he had identified himself to the guard crossing, they announced his name at the office entrance and asked him to wait.

Trautman came down in person to pick him up at SOG Command.

He showed him the Command Centre where an enormous map of Vietnam and its neighbouring countries hung on the wall.

The room stank of smoke and sweat and there were many small groups of people talking to each other.

They had just ended a meeting that had lasted several hours, Trautman told him.

It was a good thing he arrived in the morning or he would have had to wait for hours.

"Do you want a job, son? A mission? RT Missouri is leaving right now. You're still in time to prepare, equip and join them."

"We weren't a recon team like the others were, Sir."

"I know that son," Trautman smiled.

"I created you."

"Right."

Ortega collected his thoughts and then added:

"Can we speak privately?"

"Of course, son."

Trautman left room and they went into the corridor.

His office was nearby.

The two of them went in. Trautman closed the door behind him and sat down at his desk.

“At ease, Ortega,” he said with a smile.

“You’re not in the army any more you know, you belong to Secret Services now.”

“Yessir.”

“Go ahead, shoot. What’s on your mind soldier?”

“It’s just that, well, I know I told you that I was planning on staying at the base, in Dak To Sir. However, well Sir, in all actuality, I’ve changed my mind, Sir. I would like to spend my leave in the US, Sir, that’s all, if I still can of course.”

Trautman didn’t hide his surprise.

“Christ...” he said.

In all honesty, Ortega had expected Trautman to get angry about his change in plans. Judging by the expression he generally had on his face however, he looked angry already.

Yet, to Ortega’s surprise, he didn’t get angry, or at least, he wasn’t the kind of angry Ortega imagined he would have anyway.

“For Christ’s sake Ortega,” Trautman began. “Are you trying to tell me that you came all the way to Saigon to say that? Have you lost your mind? Wasn’t a phone call enough? Or a message even?”

“Sir?” Ortega said a bit unsure.

“You’re already on leave soldier. You could’ve left for the US without giving anyone any kind of notice and you would have done well, in full right doing so.”

“Well, with all due respect Sir, I had informed you however that I would be at your disposal despite being on leave.”

“Am I speaking a language you don’t understand, Ortega?”

“No Sir,” he said looking up at the Colonel instantly and suddenly put himself at the ready.

“Good. You can do what you want, soldier. If you want to leave, leave. If you want to join RT Missouri, they’re locked, loaded and ready. Therefore, there’s no doubt you’re welcome to go if that’s what you’re looking to do. Otherwise, you can go out with any of the other recon teams ready to dispatch, and if you’re worried it’s too soft for you, don’t be because I assure you their missions are just as hard as yours are!”

“I want to go and meet my family, Sir.”

“Of course that’s what you want soldier,” Trautman responded.

Then, for the first time, Trautman’s voice went cold.

“Right, I heard you loud and clear soldier. What I’m trying to get at is why you didn’t want to meet your family *before*.”

“Well Sir, I ...”

“It’s a simple question, soldier.”

“I don’t know what to answer, Sir.”

“That’s just as well, Ortega.”

Trautman shifted position in his chair moving it forward so he was up close to

Ortega. The Colonel altered his tone for a second time, and said:

“Let’s cut out the ‘*Sir*’ formalities for a second. What I’m about to say I’m gonna’ say as a friend and that’s not something I like to do often or regularly. As a matter of fact it probably won’t happen again, so open your ears and listen very carefully because I’m gonna’ say this one time and one time only.”

“Sir?” said Ortega not following the Colonel at all.

There was an awkwardness overcoming Ortega that he hadn't felt since elementary school.

“You don’t look so good in my opinion, Ortega,” Trautman said, finally spitting out what was really on his mind

“In fact, in all honesty, you don’t look good at all.”

Ortega was taken aback by the Colonel’s candid comment.

Unexpectedly, Ortega was having a vision, and it was playing out right before his eyes.

Initially somewhat blurry there seemed to be an open area in front of him, and right in the middle of it, there was blood.

As the scene unfolded before him, there was a chopper and it looked like it was down. Yeah, it was down and there was a figure just lying there, not moving. Looking more carefully, he realized it was Jorgenson; it looked like his skull had been crushed, and someone was shooting incessantly from the downed chopper right bloody well next to him.

Looking around the vicinity, he saw a body of water, and almost inevitably, a hand emerged from within it. It was Lowell’s and he was grasping at anything and nothing because the rapids carried him away.

“You just don’t look good at all, in my opinion,” the Colonel repeated to him.

Ortega came back to reality.

“I don’t think you have the nerves for this job right now. Now, don’t get me wrong: I said nerves and nothing but nerves. You’re the best officer I’ve ever had and I’d be willing to swear on it. I raised you, damn it. I moulded you into the leader you are and you’re my personal masterpiece, and I’m not kidding. I did the exact same thing with Rambo, as a *shadow-man*, and now he’s my personal masterpiece in that too.

Your problem is you suffer too much.

You also care too much I might add.

I get it, I get it. You’re a fucking perfectionist.”

Ortega lowered his head somewhat defeated.

He felt awkward that the Colonel could read him the same way he read any old open book.

He felt vulnerable and was in no means used to it.

“You are a perfectionist Manuel, but that doesn’t always work at war, you know, and especially not between the operatives in particular. The fact of the matter is, and you know better than anyone else does, perfection has never existed at war, and never will.

There’s nothing dirtier, rougher or more imperfect than war.

At the end of the day, just the fact that there’s a fucking war going on means everything has gone very wrong already. It means that we couldn’t reach it and had to try on the field.

You know...

War is always bad business.

Then naturally, with all of these films coming out made by people who haven’t the slightest idea of what war really is, give everybody an outright wrong idea about it, but you and I know how it works for real.

You never walk away with a clean conscience from it.

Sure, you can be victorious, of course. That’s possible and someone always does.

Can you get the job done with a clean conscious? That’s impossible, and it doesn’t even happen when you win.

There’s no such thing as a victory without loss.

The cost of victory is always too high: too much blood, too many civilians or too much money. Then at the end of it all, there’s always something not one-hundred percent right about it.

There’s no such thing as a seamless victory because that’s the way war is, period.

That’s its nature.

Is that clear?”

Ortega nodded.

“Of course it’s clear. It’s clear to everyone by now. It’s just you and despite knowing it, you just can’t accept it. You’re the one who still hopes to go back to the base to find everything perfect. Jesus Christ.”

Ortega didn’t reply.

“I know that’s the way you reason. How many friends is capturing a VC officer worth? How many dead friends will it take before my victory starts looking more like a disaster than anything else does?

To you and people like you, a single loss equals a defeat, but in exchange for a single loss, you can save a hundred lives.

Sometimes I see it that way too, in a certain respects. Of course I do.

The problem here Ortega is that that suffering in silence is a part of a being a soldier.

It’s a duty.

I’m not telling you that you have to stop suffering, or that you have to be a robot either.

I’m just saying that you’ve got to work at being stronger, because quite frankly, I don’t think you’ve been strong enough this far out.”

Ortega didn't flinch.

“You’ve gotta’ learn how to not give a fuck, soldier.

You’ve gotta’ learn to give your best while not giving a fuck about the unimportant details.

After all, you’re one of the best already.”

Trautman quietly reflected for a moment but then went on to say:

“Son, I can’t teach you how to do it, but there are two things I can do for you. I can point the problem out but then it’s up to you to fix it before it’s too late, and I can tell you how I solved it.

How many have to die? *However many it takes.*

Not even failure phases me anymore.

I lose men – and trust me, I’ve lost far more men than you ever will – expecting nothing less from them than I expect from myself.

They know damn well they won’t be squandered, and that I’m ready to die with them at any moment if that’s what it takes.

They can’t expect more than that however, nor do they.

To save those prisoners in ‘Point of No Return’, you sacrificed two of your men, and you see this as a failure, or a mistake made on the field. That’s not how I see it, however. It was a calculated play made on the field logically based on combat judgement and there’s a medal in your honour to prove it.”

Ortega nodded.

“There’s one last thing, Ortega.

If you don’t change your course, it’s not going to get any better. It’ll just make you feel worse actually.

Been there, done that.

The dark moments will outnumber the rest.

You’ll wind up looking forward to getting back to the base at night just to get drunk, so you can forget.

You’ll carry on day in and day out thanks to the booze you drink or the black-O you smoke and nothin’ else. Then one day you’ll end up injured and you won’t understand if it was an accident or if somehow, some way you let it happen because – all things considered – you wished you were dead.

You’re in bad shape, Ortega, you and Jorgenson both, and in the long run, one day your problem is going to become *my* problem.

Nevertheless, if you eventually give up because you don’t think you’re up to this, keep in mind whoever takes your place will be a lot worse at it than you think you are.

You’re the best, Ortega.

And I certainly can’t afford to lose my best.”

“Thank you Sir,” replied Ortega, taken aback more by the fact that he had mentioned Jorgenson than by being told he was the best.

His impression of Jorgenson was spot on and couldn’t be better.

There was something the matter with Jorgenson too.

This “something” was in place long before ‘Point Of No Return’ ever transpired.

Then, looking straight at the Colonel, Ortega went on to say:

“I don’t think Jorgenson is in good shape either, Sir.”

Trautman sighed in resignation.

“Tell me about him then,” he said, changing the subject at long last.

Finally - thought Ortega to himself but after reflecting a moment replied:

“There really isn’t much to say.”

“I don’t think it’s a question of the time he spent in the jungle. Even before he ended up missing in action there, he kept making all kinds of mistakes. He was always distracted, tired, and largely, without a good reason. Worst of all however, he was aggressive with everybody. Everything irritated him before that mission. There isn’t a single person in Dak To right now that doesn’t hate Jorgenson, except us of course. Let’s have him checked, Colonel.”

Trautman looked down at the papers on his desk.

“Yeah, we might do.”

Then, a moment later, he added:

“Considering he is on leave in the US, I could get him checked by a specialist back home and fix the matter with a couple of cables.”

“Do it Sir, please. Do it as a personal favour to me, if possible.”

“I have a few strings I can pull, yes. I might just do.”

“We can’t work with him if there’s something wrong, Sir.”

“Right.”

Trautman looked outside the window at the clear blue sky.

“That’s just it, Manuel.”

Danforth and Krakauer on Leave

Danforth and Krakauer were on a US bound flight the very next day.
Once landed, they hired a rental car and arrived that night.

Lonestone, Texas

Danforth was pleased to see his shack was exactly the way he'd left it, just a bit shabbier and weather-worn. A thief would be interested in a house like that. The two young men dropped their sacks at the front door, while Danforth pulled some keys out to open the door.

"Well..." said Krakauer.

"I can't say that I expected to spend my hard-earned leave in a dump like this."

Danforth chuckled out loud looking around as they walked in.

Krakauer looked out the back window, just to see the yard. The land was flat all around them, with the occasional bush here and there. The main road ran parallel to the horizon. It was a straight, long and dark road, with no extra lightning whatsoever.

"There isn't much traffic around here, is there?"

"Nope, and if a car comes within the vicinity, you can hear it five miles away."

Danforth busied himself putting around his shack for a bit. He made sure the pilot light lit, switched the power back on and checked if the counter was still working while Krakauer brought their two sacks inside.

"Okay Krak, everything's still in working order here. What now? Do we feel like hitting the sack or would we rather have some beers out?"

"Are you kidding me? Let's go get some drinks in town somewhere. Does this dump have running water?" he said snickering.

"I heard something come out of the taps when I opened the water valve. Anyway, I paid all the utilities in advance before I left on tour so the water better be fucking running!"

"Don't call it a tour, man: we are professionals. Words like 'tour', 'the real world' is the kind of jargon rookie's use."

"Uh-huh, whatever. Let's give the water a try, shall we? Let's see what the hell's coming out of those pipes!"

The two had a shower, put on some civilian clothes and by the time they got back into the car, it was half-past twelve already.

"So, man: where are we off to at this hour of night?"

"We're going to the *Burnin' Sun*, seeing as it's the only place open until late."

The Burning Sun had three tables, a billiard table, a jukebox and there were less than

a dozen customers including two women who were standing on their own – undoubtedly prostitutes. There was also a truck driver, a couple of bikers in another corner, and everybody just seemed to be minding their own business. Not exactly, what you could call a regular party-hub.

Danforth greeted the bartender he knew well, and asked him if he had some marijuana or anything else along those lines.

The bartender smiled, so he obviously did.

Danforth and Krakauer drank all night, smoked outside the bar and played billiards.

It had been a quiet night up until a biker asked to have a game with them.

There was tension in the air almost instantly.

It was very clear that both Danforth and Krakauer were military personnel, probably on leave, and young military personnel was notoriously known for wasting their money when they came back. That had apparently made the biker think those two soldiers might have been ‘easy prey’ so-to-speak.

Back in those days, soldiers were easy prey primarily for two reasons.

The first was because there weren’t all that many places in the Vietnam jungle where one could spend money and have fun so soldiers on leave usually found themselves with a whole lot of money and fuck all to do with it.

The second reason was that many soldiers quite probably considered their leave be their *last time* in the US – alive, that is – and so some of them used to spend everything they had before they headed back. The reasoning behind that was they were sure they wouldn’t see the light long after they’d returned.

Danforth got his stick ready while quietly laughing to himself and patiently waited for the man to suggest a friendly wager.

He was playing against a man who was quite big and tall and had a protruding belly evident from the leather jacket. He went on to ask for a hundred dollar bet but Danforth agreed to a tenner instead.

Danforth wasn’t looking for trouble.

The two then played without even grinning at one another all under Krakauer’s watchful eye as he sat quietly in a corner just drinking away.

When Danforth sunk the last victorious ball, Krakauer’s sixth sense seemed to kick in, so he hung onto his bottle of beer with great nonchalance. His grasp on it reminisced of event-filled nights. One never knows what will happen, so better safe than sorry.

All things considered, it wasn’t hard for a brawl to get underway even if it was over ten bucks.

The biker however, smiled instead, gave Danforth a pat on his shoulder and said: “Bravo, man.”

Danforth handed him the joint he was smoking and asked him if he wanted a drag.

“Nah,” the biker replied.

“And you shouldn’t be smoking either,” he added.

Danforth squinted and stared right in the middle of the guy’s chest, just like they’d taught to do in hand to hand combat situations.

“When the two of you arrived here the bartender called the sheriff, man. He told him

you were here. You should probably be hitting the road ‘bout now.”

Danforth was very surprised by that last comment. So surprised in fact that his body became rigid and suddenly feeling his muscles tighten up like a coil or a compressed spring, and ready to bounce back on demand as it saw fit.

In light of the distance between them, he could have killed that man in ten different ways, and all of them instantaneously.

“You know what, I know you, we’ve met before,” the biker told him.

“You were Lucille’s pimp.”

Lucille’s pimp.

The name Lucille took Danforth by some surprise.

Two women who came to mind when he thought carefully about the name Lucille, but only one of them had worked with him there, years before. It was quite likely therefore, that both he and the biker were referring to the exactly the same Lucille.

He certainly remembered her. How could he forget?

She used to be his, and by his, he intended she’d been one of his whores. As such, Danforth had loved her, loving her at the time, in his own way.

One might even go as far as saying that they had become friends.

“So how’s Lucille doing then?” said Danforth.

“She passed away three months ago actually, of an overdose.”

Danforth looked away.

Fucking hell - he thought to himself.

“Jesus; I’m sorry” he went on to say.

“Thanks, man. She talked about you a lot, you know.”

Danforth loosened his grip on the billiard stick and finally started to feel a little more at ease. Something had changed in the biker’s tone of voice, giving him the impression he was no longer a threat.

“I hope she told you good things at least.”

“Yes, she always spoke positively about you. She always said you were crazy because you volunteered freely for all this and that your life was probably hell on earth by now. Even if you were her pimp, she always talked about you as though you were friends. You were good to her, Joseph Danforth.”

Joseph shot the bartender a quick look.

The man had become pale assuming an almost ghost-like colour, and the two women who were sitting at the front counter, disappeared as soon as they heard what Danforth’s surname was.

That doesn’t look very good – he thought.

He was right, it wasn't.

It seemed that although Danforth hadn't been there for over than two years, everybody remembered him exactly the way he was the day he left.

All things considered, it was to be expected.

On the other hand, in that town, people knew him as the one who killed the old man and got away.

In Lonestone, people didn't forget easily.

What the fuck was I thinking when I decided to come here on leave?

Why the fuck haven't I sold that dump yet and move elsewhere else?

Because you haven't had time to even think about it yet, that's why— another voice answered back in his head.

You were a soldier in Vietnam and when they gave you your leave, you did exactly the same thing everybody else does.

You went home.

"You know... - Danforth said to the biker, but keeping his eyes on the bartender – When I was in Vietnam, a rifle backfired right in my face. Can you see the scar?"

"Yeah, I can."

"It happened right before a Vietcong jumped into the hole I was hiding in and I had to stab him to death while I was still in shock from the explosion."

The bartender swallowed as he listened on.

"So, how hard could killing a bartender who's a fucking prick possibly be?"

At first, the bartender didn't move.

With some difficulty however, he said:

"Y-you... You're the one who k-killed old Bob."

"Maybe, maybe not," Danforth replied.

Then he turned back to the biker:

"Fucking hell," he said.

"Fucking hell is right... in fact, when you decided to come back to town you pretty much just screwed yourself over, all on your own."

Danforth looked at him coldly.

"You don't have a clue about what your name means to Sheriff Hatfield. He took it personally, and he doesn't just forget. There's no way to get around the Sheriff either, so you shouldn't have come back in the first place."

"Why didn't you tell me that when I got here?" said Danforth.

"I wanted to see who you really were Goddammit, that's why. I wanted to know whether Lucille was telling the truth about you or if she got fucking taken in, because you know, women constantly think they're in love. Absurdly they don't even have

problems falling in love with men that try to beat sense into them for fuck's sake. Let's not forget that Lucille wasn't exactly known for how well she picked men judging by any asshole she's been with in her life."

Danforth turned to leave, but the Biker held him back grabbing onto his arm.

"Hang on man, I'm not finished yet."

Danforth stopped.

"The old man was a friend of mine too."

Danforth got a shiver down his back.

"Now that we've actually met and considering what Lucille used to say about you, I don't think you're a bad person. Then again, don't get me wrong, I know you're the one who killed him, but I can see you're no criminal either. I guess it must have been an accident or something."

Danforth swallowed.

"The two of you look like killers and I can see it written all over your faces. Everything Lucille said about you was right. You're the kind who will strike when pushed, Joseph Danforth and maybe you enjoy it too, but you only do it when pushed, or to survive."

Danforth retreated a little surprised from that man, almost tripping as he did. Not only was he sure that he and Krakauer had to flee now but they needed to do it fast too.

Danforth threw the billiard stick onto the table, nodded casually to Krakauer and the two of them moved quickly out of the premises.

Out in the open, the night was dark, the sky was clear and the stars hung in a vault like fashion over their heads.

The two Baker Team men moved quickly toward their car.

Before jumping in, Danforth looked left and then right first, to make sure there wasn't anybody following them.

"We have to clear out," he said slamming the car door in rage.

"Come on, we're talking about a Sheriff here, Joseph. How dangerous could he possibly be?"

"Listen, I told you man..." Danforth said, shaking his head.

"I told you I'd be needing some pretty good backup here on leave."

"Shit!" he cursed turning the car on.

"Yo, Danforth, why don't you just chill out, eh? Now what's the problem?"

Danforth pulled out of the parking abruptly onto the main road making the tyres screech as he did.

"Maybe you don't get it..."

"Don't get what?"

“This time, that Sheriff... This time he’s gonna’ kill me. He wasn’t that far from succeeding last time already.”

“What do you mean?”

“When they accused me of using force against a public official two years ago, well, it was all bullshit. It was nothing more than a charade set up by the cops trying to frame me. That old man Bob the biker was talking about, well, old Bob wanted me dead so that’s why I wasted him. They didn’t have any evidence against me so the Sheriff went ahead and framed me for something else.”

Krakauer looked at him in confusion.

“Oh fuck... Do I have to spell it out for you, for Christ’s sake? Let me put it this way, Has anyone ever told you to ‘*drop your weapon!*’ when, in all actuality, you’re not even holding one?”

“Oh, Jesus,” said Krakauer.

“Yeah, that kind of game,” he added.

“Now do you get it? That fucking Sheriff tried to kill me in cold blood last time and I still don’t know why he didn’t end up doing it.”

“Got it,” replied Krakauer.

Everything finally made sense in his head. For that Sheriff, Danforth was a pending debt.

“Shit, shit, shit.”

“Alright, alright, but next time, just tell me it’s a matter of murder *before* we go on vacation,” said Krakauer.

“I mean, I thought we were going to deal with a pissed off Sheriff, not with some psychopath cop on a vengeance for murder.”

“I am no fucking murderer, GOD DAMN IT.”

Danforth beat his hands down hard on the steering wheel.

“Okay, okay,” said Krakauer.

“So, what do we do now?”

“It’s my call and I say we run away, and we do it fast, God damn it.”

“For fuck’s sake, give me a break, will you,” said Krakauer.

“ ’Cause if he gets his hands on me, fuck it’s over. If he doesn’t kill me he’ll try to throw me in the slammer again and there’s no way I’m going back to fucking jail.”

Danforth hit the steering wheel for a second time.

“Shit, shit, shit! It was fucking ludicrous of me to come back here!”

“Hey man, just calm down eh?” said Krakauer turning to look straight at him.

“And most of all, don’t forget who the fuck you are!”

Danforth took a deep breath.

“Who the fuck are you soldier?” Krakauer pressed him but Danforth continued to stare at the road.

Krakauer then replied on his behalf:

“Ok, then I’ll tell you who the fuck you really are. You’re fucking SOG and not only. You’re Trautman’s fucking SOG a.k.a Baker Team B. And what the fuck are you going to do about it now?”

Danforth still didn't say anything in reply.

“You’re going to plan your next move, asshole. Is that clear?”

“There’s something moving over there,” interrupted Danforth, shooting a quick glance at the rear-view mirror.

“What? Where?”

“I see something, moving.”

Krakauer turned.

“I don’t see a...”

The impact was so strong it not only sent the car flying out of control Danforth was almost unable to keep hold of the steering wheel control as one of the lights popped and they were suddenly screeching blindly in the dark.

It was dark outside the car it was like floating aimlessly in space – yet they weren’t floating at all, as another car had just rammed them full on

Krakauer turned around, stared into the darkness when out of nowhere, he saw a police car moving towards them with all its lights turned off.

“Jesus Christ,” said Krakauer.

“Speed up!” he added then.

Danforth did as his friend suggested, and sped up.

“Fucking Hell, those cops aren’t on duty. Not with their lights off they aren’t.”

Krakauer smiled.

“This is serious, man.”

The Sheriff’s car began to speed up.

“What the fuck is he doing now?” asked Danforth.

“He is going to slam up against us and push us right off road. Are you ready? He’s

coming back for seconds.”

“I was born ready!”

Danforth was barely able to keep the car under control right from the initial impact, and they were skidding off road at such a speed they were risking their lives.

Danforth tried to think fast since that’s what he trained all day and every day to do, particularly in situations like this.

They didn't have any weapons and pulling over meant the Sheriff would have just shot them down showing little or no mercy.

There was no way they could let what had just happened go however. Given the fact that their car was slower and dangerously light could only mean that sooner or later that police car would’ve found a way to drive them off the road.

Paying attention to the feelings inside him, Danforth realized he was actually afraid. Although he'd lived through and seen far worse situations and circumstances in Vietnam, those things had happened there. Now that he was back in the US, being in a situation liked that seemed surreal. It was far more frightening than its counterpart could ever hope to be in Vietnam.

The problem was that he needed to focus if he wanted to get out of this alive.

More focused than he was managing to have right then and there, at least.

“Fasten your seatbelt!” Danforth yelled out.

“What’re you gonna’ do?”

“I’m gonna’ let him ram us.”

“Man... He’ll destroy our car and then he’ll get out of his and shoot us. With the two of us stuck in the wreck it’ll be like taking Candy from a baby.”

“In any case, we have no other hope, at least with this car that is. On the other hand, if we manage to get out of the car alive, it may just work.”

“Okay,” said Krakauer.

When the County Police car reached them, it rammed them again, hitting them in the middle of the bumper. That made pushing them off road impossible.

“Don’t let him get right next to us!”

“I know, I know!”

-

Krakauer tried to come up with some ideas but couldn’t. If there was a solution, it sure wasn’t coming to him now.

He couldn’t even see if the Sheriff had brought back up with him.

Danforth was zigzagging down the middle of the road so he wouldn't get side swiped, and he couldn’t slow down because it was too dangerous.

“Hit the brakes!” Krakauer yelled out to him.

There was nothing else he could do, so Danforth decided to give it a try. He jerked the steering wheel as hard as he could to the right and headed straight for the Sheriff slamming on the brakes.

“No! Not like that!” screamed Krakauer.

Unfortunately, it was too late. The car spun out and the tires started burning out on the concrete.

Krakauer held on to the dashboard for his life.

The Sheriff’s car overtook them and drove straight past them as fast as a missile as they continued to spin off road.

The car lifted off the ground onto two wheels, but it then fell back down to the ground without flipping over.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” shouted Krakauer.

The Police car slammed its hand brake and did a three-sixty right before their eyes.

When it finally stopped, you could see the engine smoking in the cold night.

The two young men could smell burnt rubber in the air.

“What now?” said Danforth.

Krakauer shook his head, unsure of what to say.

“I think we’re fucked, Eagle.”

The two cars sat facing each other the way two cars would after an accident, while the desert all around them was silent. It was silent and nothing moved.

The Baker Team guys didn’t get out of the car and waited to see what the Sheriff’s next move would be.

After what seemed as long as an eternity, the sheriff’s car door finally opened and they watched him slowly put one foot down on the ground.

He shouted out to them and his voice echoed through the air.

“I just want Danforth! The other guy can go!”

Again, total silence.

“Do you hear me, Joseph? Tell your friend he can go. This doesn’t concern him. It’s between you and me!”

Not long after that, the Sheriff stepped out of his vehicle. He had yellow tinted shooting glasses on and was by himself.

He was holding his revolver and pointing it right at their car.

“This is between you and me, Joseph!”
“Something I should’ve done years ago!”

-

Unexpectedly, the Sheriff saw the car door thrust open by a man who jumped out once it did and took off running. He was heading in the opposite direction, running down the side of the highway, straight to nowhere, and sure enough, it wasn’t Danforth.

Fucking coward – the sheriff thought to himself.

As the figure became smaller and smaller, he'd managed to distance himself quickly, leaving only the Sheriff and Danforth behind.

Or so it seemed.

He was alone and unarmed. Danforth remained seated in the car that still parked in the middle of a road. He was out in the open, and there was nowhere to hide.

This time Joseph Danforth was really his.

Sheriff Hatfield looked around at the desert by night and gave careful thought to where he was. As far as he was concerned, everything was perfect.

It was all so fucking perfect.

All he'd to do now was shoot Danforth and simply drive away as though nothing had happened.

No one would have known.

Not at the bar, not in town, nor anywhere else. Not a single person would have said a word about it.

Finally – *yes, finally!* - He would have settled that damn score he really couldn’t live any longer with.

A score he'd patiently waited to settle for the past two years and instead of fading away into a distant memory, as the years passed, it simply got worse.

You’re mine now, you asshole.

You’re all mine.

“PUT YOUR HANDS OUTSIDE THE WINDOW, JOSEPH DANFORTH. NO FUNNY BUSINESS, YOU HEAR ME? I’M BRINGING YOU IN!”

Nothing moved in the car.

It was too dark to see the inside of the vehicle, but it didn’t matter.

At least not from that distance, it didn’t.

As long as Danforth was unarmed and the Sheriff armed, all he had to do was keep his distance from the car and he was safe.

The Sheriff moved in a little closer, just to take a better look keeping his gun firmly pointed at the driver’s side of the car.

He wasn’t afraid, not in the least. Gun in hand; he had a feeling of *absolute* power.

He needed to be very careful and not shoot point blank.

Yup.

That could turn into a problem for him.

It couldn't look like an execution and the ballistics would if he shot point blank. The gun blast creates a very distinct burn on its victim.

No matter how small the risk, he was not going to risk being accused of murder.

He therefore needed to shoot from the right distance, but not too far.

He wanted to be close enough to look him in his eyes when he did.

He had to make it look like the prisoner was trying to escape.

Because it wasn't right, Goddamn it.

It wasn't right that a killer like Danforth could weasel his way out of jail time because the country was losing a shitty war. A war that, frankly speaking, no one really gave a shit about.

It wasn't right in memory of Bob.

It wasn't right for his town either.

Most of all however, it wasn't right for their United States, and it hurt him as a law enforcer because Sheriff Hatfield did believe in what he did and the town he protected.

Hatfield took his time moving forward slowly. Time seemed to have stopped.

You could hear crickets chirping.

Hatfield stopped somewhat alarmed because nothing had been no movement in the car as of yet.

“DANFORTH!” Hatfield yelled aloud.

“I'm right here,” said the soldier finally, and the Sheriff immediately recognized the voice immediately as though he'd heard it only days earlier. It was unlikely however, that he'd ever forget the voice that killed Bob.

His friend Bob.

At least he was sure it was actually him.

Danforth was the evidence that even a righteous small town like Lonestone could breed monsters. It did the very same way a human body sometimes grows a tumour. It happens for no particular reason and out of nowhere.

In any case, he was about to remove their tumour.

He cared very little about the fact that Joseph lived to 'serve' his country. Actually, it was quite the contrary.

That made him all the more furious.

It's all that Goddamn' Vietnam's fault – he thought.

From the moment that damn war started, the country has gone to shit.

“Put your hands outside the window, Joseph Danforth. Put them where I can see them.”

The car window lowered and two empty hands came out of it.
It was all going as planned.
Everything was so perfect...

“Sheriff,” said a voice behind him.

Hatfield jumped back, turning around and pointing his revolver.

A tall, dark haired man grabbed for his weapon before Hatfield had completely turned around. Once his hand was on it, the young man tightened and twisted it in his direction almost breaking his wrists as he did it.

The stranger was so strong that Hatfield soon found the barrel of his own gun pointing right at him. Had someone pulled the trigger, his face would have blown off. The young man smiled.

He then snatched the revolver from Hatfield and hit him in the face violently with it. A cracked open lip and a knocked out tooth were the result.

Hatfield fell to the ground and found himself with a mouth full of blood.

He was on his knees, hurt and unarmed. Everything had happened so quickly that he had no idea how it really happened.

A kick in the shins made him lose his balance, and he fell flat onto the concrete.

When he looked up, he was staring at the black bore of his own revolver pointing right at him again.

“Bang,” said Danforth’s friend.

He was nothing more than a dark figure standing over him.

“You’re dead, Sheriff.”

“Aren’t you going to kill him?” asked Krakauer.

“I don’t know,” Danforth replied, cocking his head to one side.

From the ground, the Sheriff glanced back and forth between them with trembling eyes.

Standing above him as they were made them out to be mere shadows under the dark sky and they discussed killing him indifferent to the fact, he was there, kneeling right in front of them.

From where he was and the way they were talking about killing him, there in the dark and in soft voices, they hardly even looked like humans.

Had there been any hate in their voices, or strain, or anything else for that matter, it would have been different. The way they spoke so nonchalantly about it made one thing clear: they’d obviously killed someone in cold blood before. In all actuality, the role quite suited them both.

For the both of them, Hatfield didn’t actually exist. He was inexistent.

It was true therefore, after all.

He *really* was going to die and it wasn’t anything like how he’d imagined it.

He had always thought about the odds of dying on duty, but not this way. Not in cold blood.

Yet, this was how it would end.

Those may have been his final moments but Sheriff Hatfield had nothing to say nevertheless.

He honestly didn’t.

“Well then Eagle?” asked Krakauer.

Danforth however, shook his head again.

“No,” he eventually answered.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I am. Let him go.”

“Ok, if that’s what you want.”

Krakauer lowered his revolver.

Turning to the face the Police car, he pointed directly at one of the tires, and fired.

BANG!

Hatfield moved out of the way despite his pain as the tire started hissing.

Then Krakauer aimed again but this time at the other tire.

BANG!

“What do we do with the gun? I’m sure this asshole has other bullets so he can reload stashed somewhere in that car. Or maybe, even on him.”

“Of course he fucking does.”

“He’ll try to kill us the second we turn to leave.”

Danforth turned to face the Sheriff, in thought.

“We’ll leave your gun about a half mile from here,” he told him.

“Right in the middle of the road. Got that, Sheriff?”

Hatfield didn’t answer.

He didn't have the nerve.

It looked like they were going to spare him, but that didn’t make things any less frightening than before.

He was sure that one wrong word – or a mistaken dirty look – could make them change their minds.

Danforth took the revolver out of Krakauer’s hand and the two of them made their way to the car.

As Danforth was about to get into the car, he turned to look at Hatfield one last time.

“You owe me a life.”

Hatfield spit on the ground in reply.

Danforth and Krakauer got in the car, turned on the engine and disappeared into the night.

Danforth never went back into his home town again.

Ortega's Leave

Ortega woke up and gave his head a shake to snap out of the drowsiness. They were still cruising over the US.

He hadn't expected to doze off, and was quite surprised about managing it. He hadn't slept well however, feeling restless and somewhat agitated once he woke. That sort of restless slumber happened every time he dreamt about Lowell, and this time had not been the exception. There was Lowell reaching out with one hand for support, while the rest of him went under. Swept away by the current.

The plane began its landing procedures.

Ortega had worn his green field uniform. Little did he know that twenty years from then, that would be the uniform to epitomize the Vietnam War and all of its veterans with it.

They were landing.

It touched the ground with a thud and slowed down to manoeuvre.

After a short pause, the speaker announced that the passengers were free to disembark.

Ortega reached up and grabbed his bag from up above and then stood to wait patiently together with everyone else.

He felt hollow.

Almost zombie-like.

His mind kept going-over missions like Black Spot and Point of No Return along with a whole lot more.

He was trying to understand how close he had really come to death and whether or not he'd made the right choice by joining the SOG.

He risked losing his life.

He'd come to close for comfort that time.

Worst of all however, the SOG had cost him Helen.

Ortega waited in a queue with the other passengers as the air hostesses opened the hold door.

He felt small, out of place and alone.

The US had that sort of effect on him.

I feel like I've just landed on another planet – he thought to himself.

Right... The US wasn't the 'real world' as they liked to call it. At least it wasn't for

him anymore. Being part of SOG and the war itself had messed with his head well beyond anything he could have imagined.

How did he end up as bad as this?

The fact that the war had that kind of an impact on him was absurd.

I mean, on someone like him, like *Skorpio*...

He was an SOG veteran and a Samuel 'The Beast' Trautman Baker Team leader. He'd lived to tell about various covert operations one of which 'behind enemy lines'.

A professional killer (Alvarez... - said a voice in his head – You killed Lieutenant Alvarez...).

You strangled him with your bare hands and he was American, not a gook.

He wasn't even a Vietcong suspect.

Ortega almost tripped walking along the corridor of the plane.

The hold door was finally open and the passengers lined up to get off.

The sky was little dark because it was overcast and windy.

Ortega lifted his jacket collar up and feeling alone and powerless again.

He even felt sad.

As he looked upon the faces in the waiting crowd, he saw her.

She'd come to meet him.

She'd come to meet him at the airport.

Even if she had dumped him.

Helen was crying her heart out as she covered her mouth in a futile attempt to comfort herself. Not far from her was a crowd of anti-war demonstrators that the police fought to keep away from the doors.

Get away from there, Helen – was the first thought to cross his mind.

As he continued down the stairs, he tried to mind his steps without taking his eyes off of her.

She had come there for him.

Helen.

His Helen.

Ortega felt something cold hit his face.

He touched his cheek and noticed it was wet. It was raining.

Not really.

He was crying too.

If the wind hadn't been so cold, he wouldn't have noticed his tears.

Actually, he wasn't feeling anything.

His eyes were teary – but as luck may have it, the rain helped him keep up appearances. If he really was crying, he sure couldn't feel it. He moved his tongue around in his mouth so he could feel the scar he got in boot camp. Feeling around for it had become a tic.

Forgive me Helen.

Forgive me.

Ortega stepped off the stairs and reached for the safety net separating him from the demonstrators and the police.

Helen had her arms up against her chest and was crying profusely, shaking gently as she did, while the rest of his family stood awkwardly by a crowd that was shouting out 'boooo!'

Fortunately, despite all the protesting, everything seemed to be under control.

I love you, Helen – thought Ortega to himself.

His fingers slid through the net and were immediately met by hers.

"Do you still love me, Helen?" said Ortega the moment they were within speaking distance.

She nodded, staring straight into his eyes as she did, despite the net was still separating them.

"Of course I do," she added softly.

Ortega walked across the entire terminal and finally through the door which lead directly into the airport. Once inside, he pushed his way through the crowd of demonstrators that, albeit reluctantly, let him pass.

When Ortega and Helen reached one another, at long last, they embraced amid all the demonstrators still protesting.

Locked in each other's arms for some time, the two of them wept quietly with joy paying no heed to the insults coming from the crowd.

Regardless of the chaos surrounding them, Manuel truly wished for that moment to never end.

Ortega was in bed just tossing and turning in discomfort but not from his injuries. That day he had spoken to his brother.

He seemed to be doing better. Perhaps keeping his distance from Manuel did him good.

The prolonged absence of Manuel Ortega the war-hero had brought him back to life.

Helen looked remarkably well too.

The sparkle in her eyes had changed however, since the first time he'd left for Vietnam. Soon after that, their relationship hadn't always gone exactly as it should have. At present however, Helen was beaming with self-confidence, as her outlook seemed serious, more adult-like.

Ortega sat up in bed.

He reached for the pack of cigarettes on his bedside table.

He couldn't sleep.

He was fidgeting nervously, the same way one would after drinking too much coffee, even though he hadn't.

It was probably because he hadn't worked out for days.

He was accustomed to doing, and had done every day for the last two years, the kind of physical training you could only define as ferocious. Therefore, in light of the last three days in which not a single push up or other type of physical activity had been done, was paradoxically, killing him. His body couldn't stand it.

They were driving him crazy. He was sure about it because from the moment he got back his thoughts had worsened, almost reaching a state of delirium.

Right.

When Ortega was back in the US, he always felt a step away from utter madness.

He knew he wasn't crazy but he also knew he wasn't fine either.

The spark from his zippo lit up the dark.

Ortega lit himself a cigarette, put down the lighter and took a long drag.

He knew that when he saw his mother the following day, she'd have smelt it on him lingering in the air, but he didn't give a shit.

Her son had returned home with a Silver Star and a Purple Heart, so telling him what he could and couldn't do, in his very own home seemed out of place, to say the least. It was also important to take into account the fact that he'd killed his fair share of people by that point too. Therefore, when all was said and done he was going to smoke when he wanted, where he wanted and as fucking much as he wanted, period. As such, if she did end up on his nerves, that's precisely what he'd tell her.

Listen mom, I'll smoke as much as I fucking feel like, and here's why. I let go the American POW who was the objective, the very reason we were on that mission in the first place, well, he drowned. I let him drown. I let him drown so I could save my own skin.

We lost Johnny and Carl on that mission too.

Ortega got out of bed and walked towards the window.

His eyes shifted from left and right as he nervously smoked his cigarette. He was going over potential escape routes in case there was a siege.

A car could stop right there, in the middle of the road, use the trees planted alongside

the path as cover and open fire on Ortega's house.

If it did, the best thing to do would probably just let them shoot.

At that point, Ortega would run out the back with his father's thirty-eight calibre, and hit them from behind.

His old thirty-eight calibre, the one his father kept hidden in a shoebox upstairs.

The same one he used to sneak peaks at, as a child.

Ortega stood there, looking down at the street. He stood and stared. Not even his mind stirred.

He was going crazy.

He hoped it wasn't a Jorgenson kind of crazy, for God's sake. Nevertheless, he was losing his mind too.

He knew how to deal with the situation however, since he'd gone mad already.

No kidding.

It must be about a million years ago now. The first time he'd ever come back on leave.

Comparing the long gone past to now had often helped calm him down somehow. All things considered, this was something he'd been through already and had always managed to find a solution

His thoughts drifted to Helen.

He thought of Helen and the Vietnamese girl from Dak To, who was waiting for him to go back to the shop in front of the base.

Most Americans would have preferred the Vietnamese girl to Helen simply because she was younger.

Others would have hated the *'gook whore'*.

The truth was that Ortega had a soft spot for both of them.

Besides, when Ortega had been with the Vietnamese girl he and Helen were no longer together.

It wasn't the same thing however, and he knew it.

He didn't feel the same feelings for both of them.

He would die for Helen, whereas he wasn't ready to do the same for the Vietnamese girl.

Helen was, after such a long time, family by then.

The other girl wasn't family, but just someone who made him happy.

Love wasn't only about being happy, at least not for the kind of man Ortega was.

That was therefore, the reason why Helen meant more to him.

That's why, on that night Ortega choose Helen.

Dinner at Ortega's.

"Son, you know I wasn't in the service. In this respect, I'm sure you'll reach high places. We'll be victorious too as our fathers were."

"What are you talking about, dad?"

"I am talking about victory... and that's victory with a capital V, like in the Second World War. This time the Ortega's will have their share of glory too."

Manuel didn't say anything because he didn't have any idea what his dad was going on about.

Alvarez, Lowell, the Laotian civilians: that's what war meant to Ortega. He couldn't imagine how victory could be sweet if he thought about what was actually happening over there. Extreme violence and inevitable mistakes resulted in death. He knew his father was talking about that sort of glory. He didn't understand or realize there was no such thing and that it wasn't like that at all.

Victory?

What victory?

The border Laos and Cambodia shared was a net at best.

Sure, SOG teams destroyed enemy outposts but at what cost? The risks were too high and the losses even higher.

In less than twenty-four hours, at best, those very same outposts were back and operational as though nothing of the kind had happened. All the while, no one was able to figure out how the VCs managed such efficiency. Where did all that money, men and means come from? From Russia?

Of course, all those weapons and means came from Russia. It couldn't have come from anywhere else.

Yet all the men and endless manpower, hadn't.

The men and the manpower were endless.

Trautman had taught him that there was no point in winning all the field battles if you did nothing to win the war too.

That pretext explained his rational behind pushing everything to its limit right from the very start. The moment you began your first boot camp, they trained you to become 'political leverage'. Generals had to command better and be smarter about it, otherwise the end was inevitable, and we were the proof.

That's the motivation at the root of it all – thought Ortega.

That's the pretext, our justification for doing it.

His father had no way of knowing any of that however. What's more, Ortega was not avid about explaining it to him either. All things considered, he just couldn't.

Everything he used to do or knew about regarding Vietnam was classified, and thus not something you make small talk with. He couldn't tell a soul.

“Now you tell me something son, have you ever killed a Vietcong? Have you ever had the chance? Jesus! I still can’t believe it. The service not only decorated my son, he’s good enough to be part of the Special Forces too.

Manuel didn’t say anything.

Actually, he got to his feet and made to leave.

“Hey!” said his father somewhat surprised as he attempted to keep him from going.

“Dad,” Ortega said without looking at him, and for a split second, he wasn’t Manuel Ortega any more.

For a split second, everything had changed. Manuel had undergone a transformation and what prompted it had come out of nowhere. He wasn’t Manuel anymore, on the contrary. He’d turned into Skorpio and had done so in his own home.

With that, he turned to face his father.

“You don’t know what you’re fucking talking about, dad, so you’d better quit while you’re ahead.”

His father ever so slightly distanced himself from him.

His son suddenly gave him the idea of being a stray dog with rabies.

“I’ve killed a lot of people, yeah,” Ortega replied to his father’s question staring him right in the face. With that, his brother looked down, and didn’t look up again

“I’ve also had to strangle one with my bare hands.”

He watched his father’s expression suddenly grow grave.

His mother, obviously shocked by her son’s revelations, covered her mouth in disbelief.

“I... I had no idea about that, son”

“Of course you didn’t, dad. None of you do. No one knows fuck all about it here in the US actually. You judge us on daily fucking basis without knowing fuck all about it.”

He saw his father freeze, immobile and his jaw dropped in shock, and his mother followed suit bursting into tears almost instantly.

“Do you want to know something else too?” Manuel asked rhetorically being fully aware his father couldn’t speak, much-less answer a question. He couldn’t hardly manage a nod.

“He wasn’t a gook either, or whatever you like to call them.”

“He was a God damn’ American.”

Rambo and Jorgenson
Six Weeks (in hospital) Later

Rambo didn't find out that Mary's father, otherwise known as Jorgenson's wife, was an important person till he was actually in the US

Important? Hell yeah.

Mary's father was a Goddamn' *general*.

What's more, on that afternoon at Jorgenson's house, the grandparents were visiting too. All of them, that is, as in both sets. The entire family was there.

As one could expect, there was a brand new baby girl too.

It was a big and white house, and the table was set with a lavish feast, Thanksgiving Day-like.

After the introductions, Mary's father – the General – brought Rambo to the side.

“Can I share a few words with you in private, son?”

“Yes, Sir,” answered Rambo instinctively, yet embarrassed nevertheless.

The two of them went into the living room where they could be alone.

The General, who was a little taller than Rambo, talked to him the way someone would talk to a son.

*

“I know what happened to the two of you in Vietnam.”

Rambo must have made an expression clearly revealing his how stunned he was by the comment.

“I have a six-level clearance,” said Williams.

Then he smiled.

“I am a General, son.”

“Yessir” Rambo replied now feeling like an idiot for not having thought of that.

“I know you have been mentioned for the Medal of Honour twice even if the chances you'll receive it are low seeing as you're still SOG.

More importantly however, is that I know fully well what you did for him.”

Rambo swallowed while the General pointed towards Jorgenson.

“And if you did it for him, I'm certain you'd do it for my daughter and my niece as well.”

The General pulled out his hand and Rambo shook it tight without hesitating, despite being more embarrassed than before.

“You see son...

When my daughter decided to come together with this Carl, I was against it. Humble

origins, a jar-head, no stripes.

Then he decided to join the green berets to get a better salary and I thought... Jesus Christ... this is only going to get worse. After all, you know better than I do that if you're always on the field – the way green berets always are – there odds of having a successful career are low. Consequently, as I didn't approve beforehand, I was pissed off even more after that."

The general paused.

"But I was wrong. I was wrong about everything."

The General smiled again.

"Now, I have a wonderful niece, son. My daughter has a splendid home and her husband, well, her husband is a hero."

Rambo didn't know what to say.

He was speechless.

"The truth is that I spent so much time behind the scenes that I had forgot what really happens in the field. I mean... Out there, in Vietnam, in the mud, it's complicated. Having a career that's too successful sometimes makes you forget who the heroes really are. The two of you helped me remember again. What you did for Carl, my daughter can't and must not know."

The whole thing moved Rambo certainly, and he let himself be, although he still had doubts.

He couldn't understand why the General was telling him these things a rather than tell Carl.

Maybe he'd already told him, or maybe never would given how few military men were willing to admit their own mistakes. Especially the bigwigs, and in particular, the generals. Rambo had to get rid of that doubt, and now.

So he asked:

"Regarding what you've just told me Sir, have you already told Carl as well?"

The General gave him another smile and nodded patiently, as if he were a child.

"Yes, son, and Lord knows it was hard, yet I did. The thing is, I wanted to tell you this too because I am not sure that you will ever get the medal you deserve for having saved my son-in-law. That's all."

Rambo lost himself in that man's smile, which, considering his age, could easily have been his father.

Lucky for Rambo however, he wasn't.

"Thank you Sir," he said to the General, after all.

"Okay, but let's go back in there now. Do you know what the only thing better than a wonderful home is? The smell of the roast coming from the kitchen, that's what.

There's nothing better in the whole world, I swear."

The whole family was gathered in front of the dining room and they were all standing around the baby cradle simply adoring her.

Rambo moved forward until he reached them and he did so slowly, as almost trance-like.

He stopped in front of the cradle to look at his friend Carl's daughter, the same way they all were.

The little creature's eyes were moving around fast and she was smiling.

The little girl was perfectly aware she was the centre of everyone's attention, and was loving it. It excited her. As a matter of fact she was whirling her little arms around with joy.

It was thanks to Rambo that that little girl still had a father.

Suddenly, Rambo felt sick.

A pain around his heart that was sharp and hit hard. The scene in front of him was breaking his heart.

"She is wonderful, Carl," said Rambo, in an attempt to keep up appearances.

Jorgenson smiled back at him.

Mary picked her up out of the cradle and held the little one in her arms.

"Come to mommy, sweetie."

Mary was beautiful too. The kind of beauty that took your breath away.

She had jet-black hair, skin as white as porcelain and she was holding her baby tight because she was obviously the most important and precious thing in the world to her. Rambo learned something right then and there.

Something he had never thought of before then.

Rambo understood that there were things that could give your life purpose. It hadn't happened to him yet, but for others, it had, and was real. Things like watching your wife embracing your son. Or better, witnessing the joy in your little baby girl's eyes, at that age when everything is still unknown and you have a mother who loves you, and protects you, and to who you are very important.

A caress and a sweet word were enough to transform tears into peace and tranquillity. It was priceless.

That was something worth killing for, dying for, or whatever necessary to protect things like that.

Rambo wouldn't hesitate for a creature like that if it had been his.

"You have a wonderful family Carl," Rambo told him, but he almost couldn't finish the sentence.

He had never felt this way before. Not once his entire life.

That was the kind of family he never had the pleasure or fortune of having. A family

full of love, where one lived for the other's happiness, but it wasn't only that. There was more to it than that.

There was strength too.

For those people, whatever the future had in store, they would face it together.

None of them would have left the other, under any circumstance, not at any cost and all because they truly loved one another.

John didn't get anything except a lump in his throat from all of it.

"I need to use the restroom," he said quietly.

"It's here" General Williams replied.

"I'll show you."

"It's no problem, thanks," Rambo assured him and immediately looked away trying to hide his teary eyes.

"You sure, John?"

Rambo stopped to put his hand on the door handle when he felt both his legs shaking.

"Everything's fine son," said the General.

"It's okay. Take all the time you need. We are right over there if you need anything."

Rambo nodded without turning and locked himself in the restroom as fast as he could. Once alone, he leaned over the sink and looked at his reflection in the mirror. He burst into tears.

There wasn't anything as good or even comparable in his life. He hadn't had anything similar as a child nor did he now as an adult.

There was the risk he never would either, especially if he continued living the way he was.

Rambo covered his eyes with one hand and cried quietly, hoping no one would hear him.

He needed a few minutes to calm down.

When he had, he washed his face and checked to be sure there weren't any signs he'd cried.

He realized however, that he couldn't go out just yet.

He washed his face again, but this time with much colder water, then he dried himself meticulously.

Once he felt confident that no one would be able to tell, he finally went back.

Part two

Take Me To The Devil

Quang Tri

The Huey roared high in the sky.

The jungle was dotted with a long series of small mountains.

If you looked down below carefully you could see the small rivers that cut through the vegetation at times, and Ortega was as nervous as a child.

Unlike Ortega, Trautman – who was sitting beside him at the time aboard the Huey – Ortega, seemed calm as he took in the panorama below them.

At one point, to make himself heard over the roar of the rotors', the Colonel shouted:

"In five minutes, we'll be 12 kilometres south of Quin Loa, and once there, we might be shot at with some anti-air shots. But no big deal..."

Ortega nodded although perplexed.

His flight back from the United States had only landed about six hours ago United States, so he was still feeling the jet lag and, after drinking some Vietnamese water, diarrhoea too.

"I brought you with me because occasionally a team leader needs to do a Colonel's job," Trautman said, interrupting his thoughts.

Ortega nodded as he continued to look down.

He moved his XM rifle forward, bringing it closer to him.

Little did he know that his gesture would turn out to be a premonition.

Below them, a light that seemed no larger than the head of a pin, lit up. Immediately afterwards, a tracer passed them, but clearly missed.

It was only then that they distinctly heard the shot.

"There they are," said Trautman.

Ortega turned to the cabin, and saw the pilot raise his hand.

"Don't worry!" he shouted.

"We're out of range. They're just doing it to let us know they've seen us. They think we're about to drop a recon team."

Despite the assurances, Ortega still didn't feel safe. Not in the slightest sense.

In fact, the machine gun on the ground fired a couple more shots before it stopped.

There were only, something like, five shots in all, and yes, every shot missed their Huey by far. They did however reach us as quickly as lightening despite the altitude and with ease, disappearing in the clouds.

In reality, what all this meant was that their Huey actually wasn't really out of range for that calibre in the least.

“Trautman,” Ortega began.

The Colonel turned around.

“Aren't you too important to run risks like these?”

“Son... If I never actually went out field to see what was happening, I'd be as stupid as the DC bigwigs idiots are. Those dickheads in Washington only know how to push buttons from a fucking desk.”

The two men reached their destination, later that same evening.

Surrounding the village was a wall of wooden poles that had sharp tips at the top. They were the kind you'd see in old movies set in the Wild West. Ortega had never seen anything like it.

The entire village welcomed them, and almost in a parade: they were dark skinned men with long beards. They were clearly of a completely different ethnic origin unlike anyone else in Vietnam.

In an effort to break the seriousness of the scene, about a dozen half-naked children took care of it. The group of children were playing right behind them, chasing each other in the mud left from recent showers, indifferent to them.

Nevertheless, the parade presented for Trautman's arrival had an official taste anyway.

The young men were all rigorously standing in front of the old and in silence.

Evidently, the village men knew of Trautman's arrival hours in advance.

Most women were naked up top, and one of them was breast-feeding the baby in her arms.

They were extremely different from anything else Ortega had seen before then.

He fell in love with them immediately however, right then and there, at the first sight.

After a while, the old man smiled at them, from ear to ear, as he left them.

He then walked up to Trautman, holding his arms wide and genuinely happy to see him.

As Trautman moved forward to greet the old man, he gave Ortega the impression – again, only an impression – that Trautman was quite touched by it all.

First, the two men hugged, and then patted each other on the back.

“I was afraid you couldn't make it,” Trautman said in perfect Vietnamese.

“There were days I thought the same, my friend, – the old man said to him - but you and Nelson taught us well. Also that Nelson is no longer with us, see? See? We are still alive, and more important of all, we are still here. We did it. You see?”

“Yes, I do! Besides, I knew how you were doing when I was back in the US, and I've always tried to do whatever I could for you. “

“There's no need for saying it, big commander. I know you are true friend already.

Everybody knows it here,” he said, gesturing to the people surrounding them.

Trautman introduced Ortega to the village chief. The Baker Team would not only live there from now on, but they’d be defending the village as well, if need be.

Prior to discussing business however, there were some pleasantries to get through.

The ritual consisted of sitting on the ground and drinking with the elders through long straws all together, from the same huge jug.

“Drink – Trautman said in English to avoid being understood by the Montagnards.

“And don't puke under any circumstances, got it?”

Then he raised an eyebrow and added:

"That's an order, soldier.”

The 'drink' in question was some kind of unidentified substance that smelt strongly of vomit.

Ortega drank and held back the spasms (like the true Baker Team man he was) with a smile. His show of appreciation for it was almost perfectly believable.

At least it’s high in alcohol – Ortega thought to himself, still smiling a smile of circumstance.

At any rate, there shouldn't be any germs in it.

In theory, that is.

When the Montagnards saw that Ortega could keep the stuff down, they burst into a chorus of approval. That’s when he realized that it was nothing more than of test.

Afterwards, during the chatter and laughing, Ortega turned his head slightly towards Trautman making sure no one was listening, he whispered:

“You’ve definitely made us eat shit these past two years, sir. But this....”

Trautman interrupted by giving him a hard pat on the shoulder.

“Drink some more,” he said.

“Oh Christ.”

Consequently, there was one more try, one more sip and one more round of applause from the Montagnards genuinely surprised by Ortega's performance.

Fortunately, the drink was strong tasting and high in alcohol or its vile odour would have got the better of him.

In fact, it was so high in alcohol that shortly after Ortega finished drinking it, everything he heard started sounding funny, and that included Colonel Trautman. At one point, Ortega was laughing so hard at Trautman that he fell off the chair.

Christ, am I fucking drunk already?

How pure is this stuff? Seventy percent proof? Eighty maybe?

That was then that one of the elders took Ortega by the shoulders and pilled him up a little.

The old man pushed his index finger against his stomach – and with a fair amount of strength as well – that Ortega had to hold down a belch and keep from puking.

The old man laughed.

What kind of a joke was that?

The village chief turned to Trautman and asked if the rest of the team were as tough as Ortega was. Trautman smiled and answered that they were. He guaranteed it personally.

With that, the old man got up and the Colonel followed suit, and as the others in the room noticed, they all became quiet and looked on with interest.

“They are my men and brothers, and I guarantee for them with my life.”

The old man sat quietly while he listened with interest as Trautman pledged, until finally nodding to show his accord.

After what felt like an eternity, and all was said and done there was a moment of silence before any cheerful chatting got underway. Ortega on the contrary, had a very serious expression on his face as he sat staring at Trautman.

The Colonel hadn't filled them in on quite a few things apparently, when it came to that village.

“Just a few final targets in Dak To,” said the Colonel, referring to the Phoenix program.

“Then you and your team will move in here.”

The Baker team spent the following months in that village, living side by side with the Montagnards. They dedicated their time training young people, showing them how to defend themselves against the Vietcong and how to skydive as well. Those young people who cared enough to join the SOG that is.

At the beginning of the monsoon season, Baker Teams A and B went on an undercover mission. Disguised as civilians, it was set to take place in the very heart of down town Saigon. That mission cost the South Vietnamese hostage they had gone to rescue, his life, not to mention the lives of a few other participating 'armed civilians', who belonged to several unidentified factions.

At the time, a few Western journalists happened to be there, at the scene. As a result, for the first time ever, an article setting the basis for a plausible conspiracy theory regarding the SOG and its very existence. The SOG expose stated plainly, black on white, what the team represented and the kind of role it played. In other words, from out of nowhere, here was this special corps used domestically as hired killers, and in covert operations, on unsuspecting foreign terrain.

Consequently, the number of foreign missions decreased temporarily until the dust had settled.

That brief interlude didn't last long however, and this was primarily for the reason that one couldn't simply stop doing them. Without SOG standing in the way as the obstacle to contend with, Ho Chi Minh had a free hand. This in itself effected the orthodox side of the war greatly, capable of devastating consequences.

They had only been in the village a few months when Baker Team B received their mandate for another mission.

The time had come to go 'over enemy lines' once more.

Next stop: North Vietnam.

Simply put, they were going right into the lion's mouth.

MacV Central Command, Saigon
SOG Operations Room.

Trautman, Garner, Ortega and General Loyd had been sitting around that round table with the oversized map on it for longer than they cared to admit. Despite discussing it these past hours, they still hadn't figured it out while the room smelt more and more cigarette smoke and sweat.

The aerial photos scattered over the map in an apparently random fashion may have appeared to be satellite photos of this day and age, only they weren't. They were taken within air parameters. had challenged the best Russian-made anti air weapons at North Vietnam's disposal. To take them, the F100 crews had challenged the best Russian-made anti-aircraft currently available to North Vietnam. Only there was something amiss with those photos.

After days of bombing, the command structures near the border resulted razed right to the ground. Yet radio Vietcong, which was, in all effects, responsible for coordinating attacks in the South had never ceased to transmit. In fact, that damn signal was coming straight from there as they spoke. Trautman and Loyd couldn't work out how they'd managed to carry on with radio traffic co, and why, there was so much movement detected, when there shouldn't have been any left at all. It was for that reason they had summoned Ortega, in hopes that he could shed some light on what was going on.

Where is this? - Ortega wondered as he looked from the photos to the oversized map. Where the hell is this?

Sure, chances are it is a hidden command centre. That could very well be, but for it to be large enough to command entire divisions of soldiers all over the place just South of DMZ seemed unbelievable. The idea that you could possibly hide a structure of that kind was, frankly speaking, borderline preposterous.

So preposterous in fact, that after Trautman and Loyd had discussed it for another two hours with Ortega, they had clearly reached the point of exasperation. They'd even gone as far as to contemplate bombing the zone with defoliants and that would be that.

Only if they could of course, but they couldn't.

At least not that far North they couldn't.

Regarding North Vietnam, Only the president of the United States himself, could

decide whether to drop bombs there or not and solely on the basis of the progress of the peace negotiations. Not always did Peace negotiators want what soldiers on the front-line wanted however, and often times it was quite the contrary. The Vietcong were extremely good at getting 'peace' concessions that always turned out useful on the battlefield too.

Trautman yawned in front of Ortega rather indifferently, and then covered his face with his hands.

Despite how tense Ortega still felt, the meeting had become pointless.

The Baker Team leader took subtle glimpses through eyes that were almost snake-like.

-

That's because even though he had no intention of going, he was already thinking about what might have happened if they sent him down there in his head. He had no intention of going to a place like that however, especially not for a recon like the one on Point of No Return, let alone on a mission.

-

"Maybe this command centre is much further from the border than we think," said Trautman, interrupting his thoughts.

"It may be further back and higher North. Maybe the triangulation is completely wrong. That would explain why the VCs changed their re-entry points to entirely different locations. See? They're all different."

"No Colonel," interrupted Ortega.

"It can't be where you're saying because it would take you an extra two days get to friendly territory so you'd need to carry more supplies with you and you'd get tired faster.

Nope. Judging by the way they're moving, and what they're doing, the base has to be close.

Jesus. The point is that everything still works even if we don't know how."

"What if they rebuilt further South?" asked Garner.

"Nobody has given it any serious thought till now."

"Structures like that? Here, with us?" Loyd interrupted.

"Many of them used to live here, General, and they moved up North when the Paris Peace Accord split the country in half. Most of them are playing a home game."

In hopes of putting an end to the discussion, Loyd nodded to show his lack of interest but his didn't surprise Trautman at the least. He'd got to know the general well by now and Trautman knew the two of them were completely different.

As far as the general was concerned, time spent trying to understand the enemy, was nothing more than time wasted. In other words, it was pointless.

Trautman turned to Ortega.

“What’s your take, Skorpio? Do you think they could have rebuilt everything just further south? Would that explain the change in their return route?”

“I’m not sure, Sir.”

Ortega tilted his head.

“We can't dismiss the idea completely even though it leaves a lot of questions unanswered and too many 'buts'. For instance, the Mike Force has a number of outposts, three to be exact, one here, the other here and the third one here. Therefore, the Mike Force has radio coverage, air cover and even a good artillery backup in this area.”

Ortega stopped suddenly where he was.

“What the fuck,” he said.

Reaching towards the middle of the table, he picked up a photo and turned it upside-down.

“Here they are.”

“They’re right here.”

Ortega tapped his index finger a few times on the photo in question, while Garner, Trautman and Loyd got closer to get a better look at it.

“They’ve always been right there under our noses this entire fucking time.”

“What? What did we miss?” asked the general.

“What son, what is it?”

“That’s them there, and this small black rectangle here too, beside the demolished buildings. Here as well, and look, there's another one here too.”

“Ventilation systems,” said Trautman looking away from the photo.

Then he added:

“The motherfuckers used air shafts.”

“Tunnels,” said Garner to the general.

“All the way this far North, you think? Is that actually possible?”

“A fucking air-raid bunker,” Ortega added.

“It might even be a bomb shelter. God only knows how big it actually is down there. They’ve never done anything like this before. Not so far north anyways, those goddamn sons of bitches. I really didn't see it coming.”

Trautman turned to general Loyd.

“Let's send a sniffer Sir, just to be sure. It'll pick up on piss, shit and the smell of that fucking rice they're always eating. They're all fucking down there, Goddamn it. I'll bet my ass on it.”

“Let me get this straight,” interrupted Loyd.

“You think that radio station we’ve been looking for is at the bottom of those shafts?”

“Everything is down there: the station, Central Command, the officers... They’re all right there.”

“They’ve never dug a tunnel base so far north, and you think something that big is

there already?"

"I'm positive." intervened Ortega.

"Look at the distance between those three shafts and divide it by the amount of air you'd need. Suppose there are a couple more of those shafts where we can't see them, and there you go. There's a whole fucking command centre down there."

"They're the same assholes who've been running the offensives these past three months," said Trautman.

"So how do you attack a place like that?" asked the General.

Ortega glanced at Trautman before giving an answer, ensuring he had permission before replying to the general. When the Colonel nodded, Ortega looked down at that damn map but this time almost reluctantly.

I knew it – he thought.

I knew they'd end up asking eventually.

He looked at the map and reflected some more.

How do you attack a place like that? - Ortega asked himself rhetorically.

Well, frankly speaking, you don't.

You don't attack it at all.

You don't attack a bomb shelter on Vietnamese soil where only God knows how many VCs are defending it. You also wouldn't attack something like that without any air cover and only an eight-man team rather than fifty hoping to avoid a diplomatic incident.

You'd need an entire army at your disposal, to say the very least.

That kind of attack would have been suicidal even for the Baker Team.

Damn Cold War – thought Ortega.

Fundamentally, they needed to address two problems.

The first was the structure itself. It was too big, too important and far too close to turn a blind eye.

In other words, they couldn't just leave it standing there.

That was out of the question.

The looks that Trautman and Loyd were giving him certainly spoke for themselves.

As for the Colonel and the general, what they wanted was a plan, and they wanted it now.

Nevertheless, it was suicidal.

It was equally dangerous for all of them, including the Marines, let alone a few undercover teams.

Ortega took a deep breath and kept analysing the risks.

The second problem was that, when push came to shove, only one operational group could possibly contemplate an op of this kind. One group alone had enough training

and obtained the field expertise to consider it and that was the Baker Team. They were the only ones who could conceivably get in and out alive. There was no doubt in Ortega's mind about the level of danger they'd face. Had Loyd and Trautman known, they wouldn't have risked sending the Baker Team and instead sent another one. Sending another team however would have only been a waste. A useless waste of human lives.

That's for sure. – thought Ortega to himself.

In case that still wasn't problematic enough, there was still the problem of getting in and all the difficulties pertaining to that. Then along with ascertaining what kind of Target it was they had to deal with the defence system that was protecting right there and then. No way, uh-uh.

Ortega couldn't let them sacrifice another SOG team for no reason.

His conviction that day was the onset of his own burial, a death wish you could say.

Even so, he knew it. He knew exactly what he was doing and would have to do.

After all, that was his job.

Dying was occasionally part of the job

At least it was part of *his* job, anyway.

“Well, what does it take to attack a place like that then?” Trautman repeated.

“A few men, given we have no other choice.”

Ortega stopped suddenly almost trance-like.

Then almost curtly, he added:

“Maybe, having a lot of men wouldn't make much of a difference. Perhaps a stealth approach may end up being your best bet.”

Loyd moved closer, curious about what he'd just heard.

Without hesitation, Garner nodded showing his approval.

“I like it,” he said.

“Carry on, Soldier.”

“It'll be complicated, maybe even borderline desperate. We're talking about well-entrenched people here and on their soil. Not to mention all their in-house defence systems, the active and passive kind, along with everything else. We have to get into the place without them even knowing it, preferably in the middle of the night, hitting fast and disappearing in a flash.”

“So do you have a general idea about how to proceed already?” inquired Trautman.

“More or less, yes, maybe I do. In theory. I'm just improvising however, and I need some time. Twenty-four hours at least, or even a couple of days if possible.”

Trautman turned to look at the general.

“That’s okay, by me,” said Loyd.

“Go on.”

Ortega swallowed. His mouth was dry.

He felt like he was tying a noose around his own neck.

Then, he turned to them and said:

“A Halo jump.”

“By night?”

“Yes. We could para-jump by night and get in position. When we’re ready, we signal the B52s to bomb.”

“With you in there?” asked Loyd.

“Yes, but we’ve done it before, and know how to get it done. Either we find shelter or wait hang tight a little further back. That doesn’t matter at all really.”

“Okay” said Trautman.

“Once bombing starts, the guards outside will either panic or make a run for it, while the others will all be in the hole, safe. That’s because no one expects a large-scale ground attack, not that far north anyways. Because it could set off World War III, right?”

If Ortega didn’t have everyone’s attention until then, make no mistake, he did now.

“Well, as I was saying, right after the bombing there’ll be the usual silent aftermath. That’s when a team of eight might be able to quietly slip into the perimeter, and back out fast.”

“If you get caught, it’s all over,” said Loyd.

“Fighting won’t get you out of there alive.”

Ortega looked over at Loyd raising his eyebrow as he did.

“As always tends to be the case, General,” Ortega retorted.

“If we get caught the mission is over and we are all as good as dead with zero probability of getting back out alive. Those conditions are no different from the ones SOG pretty much works in all of the time, General. Even if we were armed with nothing more than knives and we’d still have the same chance of accomplishing the mission and getting the job done.”

“Can we move on?” Trautman said intervening.

The General nodded.

“After the bombing, we’ll make for the ventilation shafts. The best thing to use would be ordinary propane gas, the civilian kind. Its only downside is that it’s got an extra chemical in it so it absolutely reeks. They put it in for safety reasons because you’re more likely to notice a potential leak if the smell is noticeable.”

Trautman nodded.

He'd a pretty good idea of where Ortega was going with all this.

"We're gonna' need some modified propane, the odourless kind. Since it's heavier than air, when we release it into the air-ducts, it'll head straight down the shafts. It won't take more than a few minutes to get everywhere."

"Couldn't we just use some phosphorus instead?" Garner asked.

"No. It's too big down there for phosphorus to work in. In fact, I think it'll take two tanks of propane to get the job done actually. Two tanks should be more than enough to knock the whole thing down."

"Sounds easy enough," said Trautman

"It isn't, Sir, not in the least actually. The bombing will have to be exactly on target and heavy too, or the VCs may catch on and make it out of their shelters in time.

In any case, we won't have more than a few minutes at our disposal before they all come rushing out of their rat holes. And if we don't do everything fast enough there'll be fifty or even one hundred men down there in no time and we'll get blown away before we know what's hit us."

"Maybe we should bomb them for an entire week, to tire them out a little before you guys get started," suggested Garner.

"I don't think we can afford it," Trautman replied.

Then the Colonel turned towards Ortega.

"I need those planes somewhere else. I'm sorry."

Ortega shrugged.

"What really matters here is that you can guarantee you'll nail them with another offensive, just as strong, the second we're gutta' there. I want to get this thing done between attacks and all within a matter of minutes."

"That's plain suicidal, that is," said the General, as Ortega looked on wide-eyed almost in trance.

Then before replying, he looked toward Loyd through squinting serious eyes and said:

"This entire fucking mission is suicidal."

Then he looked back at Trautman.

"Bombing won't be a problem."

"Good."

At that point it was Garner who intervened.

"So what you're saying is that the real problem is the number of troops that'll be

outside, because you have no intention of actually setting foot in the place.”

“Exactly,” replied Ortega.

“But there’s other issues as well. The GPL tanks, for instance, are heavy. We’ll have to parachute them on their own and then retrieve them later on so there won’t be a lot of time at to do it.”

“How about putting an infrared stroboscope on them?” said Garner.

“Invisible to the naked eye – he said to Loyd – but similar to a lighthouse in the night through night vision goggles.”

Ortega nodded. He had already used that kind of technology like that and it seemed reliable enough.

The only real drawback of any of this was that neither the propane tanks nor the infrared strobes were regular equipment.

Ortega hated working with special equipment without testing it beforehand.

“On second thought Sir, I’ll need more notice than only twenty-four hours.

I want all of the new equipment we’ll be using on the mission in advance to check personally beforehand. Every single piece of equipment and that includes the smell-free propane tanks, the infrared strobes, all of it. I can’t afford to find myself cursing, in the dead of night, surrounded by the enemy because I can’t find the crates I need to get a mission while the clock counts down to the next offensive right about us.”

“Loyd?” said Trautman.

“Well, if you ask me, we can hang off a day or two, even three if necessary. That outta’ give you the time you need to try everything out as well as the night equip too.”

“Alright,” Ortega answered.

“I’ll think about it.”

“There’s still one more thing. If the tunnel network doesn’t collapse, we’ll need to put the secondary charges by hand and that means going in. That’s probably the part where we die trying to get your mission accomplished.”

Trautman and Garner didn’t say anything.

Loyd on the contrary, without hesitating in the least, went on to say:

“I’d be happy if we just set the tunnels on fire for God’s sake and I don’t even care how much it costs to do it. If the network doesn’t come down on its own, I’m personally authorizing you to get outta’ there anyway,” said Loyd.

Ortega nodded.

If their objective was to hit and run, that mission had just become a hell of a lot easier.

“I’d say that’s it for now,” Trautman concluded.

Ortega sighed in relief.

“All you have to do now is tell me whether or not you accept the mission so we start

looking for another team to do the job in case you don't."

Ortega stood alone giving everything they'd discussed more thought.

He knew his answer already, but he took his time before saying it anyway. Whenever they offered him a mission, he'd always reflect a moment before answering. He was well aware that the answer he gave could cost him his life.

He understood how much of a burden his choice was by the weight he'd feel afterwards on his back.

Despite any feelings he'd to the contrary, that mission was possible.

As desperate as it was, the mission was viable and realistically speaking, could be done.

More than just feasible, the objective made it important as well.

A mission that was capable of becoming an event of great consequence.

"I accept," were the words Ortega eventually expressed aloud. He sure hoped he wasn't making the biggest mistake in his life,

"Let's do this thing."

"Ok, good, I'm glad to hear it," Trautman said.

Then he went on to add:

"So at this point, I'd say the plan's definitive and we're all set and good to go."

"Well, not exactly - said Ortega - I still want to look it over a few more times over the next few days."

"Of course," said Trautman turning back around to look him.

"This mission will now otherwise be known as Devil's Den."

The devil's den –Ortega repeated out loud in his head.

Rather appropriate as far as names go if you ask me.

This was the second time something reminded him of the deserter he'd met on his

"No Man's Land" mission. He brought to mind the devil himself in flesh and blood.

Therefore, when Trautman told them he'd named the mission Devil's Den, he got a strange feeling inside.

"I recommend you, Ortega," Trautman told him.

"No gathering intelligence, no damage assessing and no fine-tuning. Just do what you have to do and then make a run for it. Is that clear, soldier?"

Ortega nodded.

"The devil will be in there just waiting for you, and I don't want you staying a second longer than you have to. Got that, Skorpio?"

OPERATION
DEVIL'S DEN

In 1967, SOG made history by using the launch technique H. A. L. O. (High Altitude, Low Opening) on enemy territory, while at war.

Not even two years later, Baker Team B was following suit.

The eight soldiers sat quietly waiting in their row of seats, focused on the red light and at the ready for their 'go'.

They were all dressed in black and had their helmets, glasses and oxygen masks on.

They'd become one and the same and there was no way of telling them apart.

They took slow deep breathes under their masks to keep as much oxygen in as possible, hoping to decrease any side effects the launch could cause. Too much oxygen had side effects as well however, sometimes causing euphoria and faint. With so many variables to consider, it's easy to understand why HALO jumps were always that dangerous. Cold temperatures and adrenaline didn't work well together either because when your heart rate goes up, so too do your chances of passing out.

Surviving the jump was therefore, just a question of sang-froid.

“TWO MINUTES!” the pilot exclaimed.

Rambo sat in his seat tapping his foot on the metal floor breathing in and out of his high-altitude mask.

Almost all of them were armed with Uzis, a compact, Israeli-made sub machine gun, perfect for close-range engagements and much easier to jump with than a Colt XM assault rifle.

When they expected to have a real battle on their hands, Coletta and Jorgenson generally armed themselves with M16s.

The pilot looked at the team and said: “ONE MINUTE,” pointing his index finger up.

On cue, Rambo rose to his feet and stood under the red light.

He could feel the plane vibrating under him.

In succession, they all got up.

The team moved slowly to the launch pad and got into a straight line.

They all had the same mask on, including the man standing at the hold door, who, upon fastening his spring clip, reached for the button.

Freezing gusts of wind swept through the passenger compartment almost instantly, as the red probe light from the ear-piercing alarm sounded, filling the room with adrenalin.

Rambo looked into the darkness below.

He couldn't see anything at all, not a single city in the distance.

Therefore, they still didn't have any kind of reference point yet.

“GO! GO! GO!” said the man at the hold door as he pointed down below.

Rambo ran up the launching pad and threw himself right into the void.

There was pitch-black darkness surrounding him, with winds reaching three hundred knots hitting with explosive force.

Danforth, Ortega and Messner followed shortly behind jumping out and disappearing into the night instantly, as though they’d never been there.

Not long later, everyone was gone.

The jump had uncovered small area on his neck and Rambo could feel the freezing air stinging him.

He locked his jaw and opened his arms up to slow down.

Rambo had been the first to jump so he was the closest to landing and last in line.

If he wanted to regroup with the others however, he’d have to slow his free fall down.

That’s when for the first time he noticed some small, blue spots, attached to every member’s back, meant to show position.

Rambo had slowed down a little too much however, so he uncrossed his arms again so he could reach down the others.

Just a few seconds of free fall later, Rambo caught sight of the red dots they’d been looking for

Finally – he thought.

Those dots were the three villages he had to use as a reference point.

In the middle of the three, he expected to find the reflection of the moon in the water of a paddy,

because that was the place to land. It was probably too soon for that reflection to be visible though.

Rambo spread his arms and moved to adjust his position in the formation.

The one down there, in front of everyone, must have been Ortega.

Something whirled in the air and Rambo felt it moving past him.

Next thing you know, he was hit by some kind of thunder.

Rambo turned to look fast, with his heart pumping hard inside him.

Was that what he was afraid it was?

Easy – he told inside.

You can still run out of oxygen, if you panic.

Easy does it, slider.

Whatever it is, it isn’t important: stay calm, or you’ll pass out.

Passing out in a free-fall meant dying, of course.

Rambo could feel his heart slowing down like was controlling it. In reality, he was.

He was actually doing it. He had become a fucking animal.

Under any other circumstance, it wouldn't have worked.

That's always how it worked.

That night however, was different. That moment, on that jump, at that altitude, free-falling over North Vietnam was different. That night Rambo had even slowed his own heart rate down.

When the second burst of force hit, thunder followed and this time he saw a green blast flashing in the dark. It was as straight as a laser and almost geometric, as to confirm his terror.

High-calibre tracers – he told himself.

They're shooting at us with an anti-air weapon.

Rambo flipped over for a few seconds, and saw that the green light was finally starting to change its route curving as it slowed down.

They can't bloody well know about us.

There's no way.

Yet not only had they located them, they were shooting at them as well.

No, that's not possible.

Rambo saw other green lights draw various lines a bit everywhere, so it seemed as though they were looking for him.

As he and his teammates continued their fall, his inability to take cover made him feel helpless, almost naked.

There's no way they can see us – he said to himself.

Your heart, watch your heart. Watch your breathing.

Breathe slower.

Slow your heart rate down.

No one in the world even knows HALO jumps exist yet.

How could those goddamn Vietcong possibly know then?

That's the thought that calmed him down once and for all.

It was also the same thought that explained everything.

They were aiming at the plane.

That's it. They were aiming at the plane above them and if one of those giant bullets (because they were anti-materiel bullets) actually ended up hitting any of them it would have been nothing more than a terrible accident.

At that point, Rambo asked himself point blank what he should do about it: *nothing*.

He and the others had no way of communicating as long as they were free-falling and the only one who could decide whether to deviate from the original course was Ortega because he was leading the group. In the dark however, the only way to see him was by spotting the tiny, fluorescent sticker on the back of his neck. The reason for it being there was so that the team could see it as they looked down and consequently follow him, but the enemy he was facing in the other direction couldn't. The sticker made him easy enough to follow but wasn't a means of communicating. Ortega didn't change course, and the machine gun resumed fire. This time the green flash came so close to Rambo he felt the air shift again. Goddamn shots. Those shots were distracting him.

The village lights below grew clearer and he could now see the reflections in the water of his rice field objective.

He was exactly in position. The entire team was.

Rambo looked at the glowing, tritium-made hands of his Seiko watch: only seconds away.

Three,
Two,
One.

Rambo opened his parachute and the backlash was immediate.

Once the rebound had ended, he started manoeuvring the straps. Not only did he need to set the glide straight, but he also had to alter his speed and slow himself down.

The anti-air machine gun shot again, but this time the shots were much higher above them. That was what finally convinced Rambo the VCs were shooting at the plane and not at them.

The idea itself that the Viets were actually shooting at them was ludicrous, and had been from the start.

Messner was still recovering from the impact of landing in knee-deep water when he heard someone moaning next to him.

Krakauer.

He instantly let go of the wet parachute he was trying to pick up to hide, and went to his teammate lying in the water instead.
Grabbing him by the armpits, he turned his mate towards him.

A pointy iron bar had gone through his right eye and come out his temple.
His eye was gone.
Blood was streaming down his cheek the way a tear would.
The Baker Team doctor had never seen anything like that before.
Despite being a doctor, the sight of his friend lying there, in the state he was in, sent an awful chill up his back, almost electrocuting.
For a moment, Messner simply stood there, paralysed by the sight of his seriously injured friend. That pole had gone right through him.

He must have fallen right onto it as he was landing.

Traps.

The entire rice-field was probably full of them.

A man short.

We'll have to do the rest of the mission a man short.

Krakauer was supposed to carry one of the gas tanks.

What a fucking mess.

That was the trained part of him talking, the one that always kept going, stopping at nothing.

His soul was down there deep inside him too however.

I need to know whether he'll survive or not – he thought to himself.

Acting quickly, he pulled out his L-shaped flash light while his heart pounded harder and harder inside his chest.

Once turned on, Messner directed its soft red light to the iron bar. Although it went right through Krakauer's temple from one side to the other, it had come out the side of his eye. By doing so, it had missed the centre of his head, and the reason why Karaka

was still alive.

Jesus fucking Christ

He was alive, and that wasn't all.

He was alive and conscious too, given the fact he was still standing.

Messner saw Krakauer had his mouth wide open and his tongue was sticking out stuck but he wasn't making a sound (and that was good considering they were in enemy territory).

Meaning that the pain was so acute, he could hardly breathe much less moan.

His working eye was still, staring blankly ahead. The pain...

The pain had to be excruciating.

I have to get that fucking bar out of his head – was the first thing that crossed his mind, but that was rookie thinking.

No you don't.

No, you have to leave it in there.

The reason was for the sake of the arteries, of course. Had he pulled the pole out, the blood loss would have killed Krakauer long before he ever made it to the hospital, so he had to leave it.

Hospital? What fucking hospital?

He's not going to any fucking hospital.

Messner realized Krakauer's hands were starting to shake.

You have to stabilize him, Doc. You can still save him.

We'll leave him behind and complete the mission.

Then we'll come back and get him.

Yeah, that's what we'll do.

If he can walk, Krauk can still do it too.

Messner couldn't think straight. He couldn't just apply logic or rationale to get through this because they weren't just talking about any injured patient for Christ's sake. It was a friend, his friend, Goddamn it, and Messner couldn't help but be overwhelmed, almost infected it. The sensation he was getting from the eye itself and what his friend felt was incapacitating, because it was so strong. Too strong and that was it.

A sense of fear and horror, almost nausea overtook him.

Empathy had put him in his friend's place giving him a clear idea of what he might be feeling at that particular moment.

No, no, come on, what are you doin'?

Stop right there, get a grip on yourself.

You're in enemy territory, for fuck's sake.

Pull yourself together.

You can't give a fuck.

You can't stop thinking.

Whatever happens, just don't care.

Messner started taking the things he needed out of his rucksack to stabilize that... that thing.

That thing his friend Krakauer had just become.

The water and the mud at the bottom of the rice field not only softened Rambo's landing, but muffled it as well, almost making it silent.

He was rolling his parachute up into a ball by its straps when, out of nowhere, he heard something.

Rambo stopped dead in his tracks while his eyes stared blankly into space and focused instead entirely on his sense of hearing.

Not a sound.

He went back to rolling his parachute up into a ball again.

Once he was done, he put the bundle under his arm.

Uzi in hand, he dragged himself through the water moving towards the north-east corner of the rice field, which was the rally point for all of them.

He couldn't see a thing.

Nothing except the reflection of the moon on the water, that is.

Traps – he thought.

Yes... They may have looked like branches sticking out of the water, but they weren't.

Those were sharp iron bars, specifically designed to stab parachutists.

The water level must have dropped a little so when you were close enough you could see the tips pointing upwards.

Those weren't a problem as far as Rambo was concerned.

What did actually worry him was the dark. It was too dark.

Fighting like that, under those circumstances was absurd at best. It was non-sense.

There could be anything in that damn rice field for fuck's sake. If spotted, the Vietcong could have easily ambushed them just outside it. Rambo and the others wouldn't have a way out.

He continued moving through in the water, with his parachute in one hand and the Uzi in the other.

He couldn't wait to get rid of the parachute.

"Johnny," whispered a voice.

It was Ortega.

Once they were arm distance, Rambo realized Ortega was incredibly pale and his face was tense yet his eyes were wide and his mouth was open.

Something was wrong.

"There's something moving Johnny."

"Where?"

"Back there, behind us. I heard them. I'm sure of it."

“Let's round up the team,” Rambo said.

“Yeah, I got that. You stay in the water though, and I'll cover the bank from above.”

The two continued together along the bank with Rambo knee-deep water while Ortega moved on top. Both had their Uzis at the ready as they moved towards their meeting point.

They hadn't moved more than a few meters when Rambo heard something for himself in the distance, behind them too. He may not have been able to see anything, but at any rate, Ortega was right.

The problem was that it was pitch-black out there that night.

There was no moonlight that night and the light coming from the stars was faint, at best. The sounds they'd heard however were there, and were exactly where Ortega had said.

Rambo saw a couple of red lights flicker in the dark, but they were too close to belong to the enemy as far as he was concerned. It had to be the rest of the team.

Yet what the fuck were they doing, and why had they turned on their red flash lights? Ortega had disappeared ahead of him by then.

Where the hell is he going? The team is here.

Slow down Ortega, for Christ's sake.

Rambo heard some leaves moving, and then shortly after, other rustling.

His team mates were making too much fucking noise.

“Johnny” a voice whispered in the dark.

Messner appeared out of nowhere on the bank, and was gesturing Rambo to follow him, and fast.

“Messner,” replied Rambo.

“Come here, Johnny. Quick.”

Rambo climbed onto the embankment, therefore getting out of the water to follow wherever they were going into the jungle.

It was even darker in there than the rice field.

Rambo opted for his small red-beam flash light too (which the young man was partially covering, in order to soften the light even more).

Under Messner, lying on the ground was Krakauer and there was an iron bar sticking out of his eye.

The traps...

Those Goddamn fucking traps.

One of those Goddamn traps had done its job.

It certainly had.

Messner was busy holding Krakauer down while he tried to take the cap off a shot of morphine at the same time.

Rambo threw himself onto Krakauer to help Messner keep him down.

“Well done, Raven,” said Messner to him.

He instantly gave Krakauer two shots, one right after the other.

Only seconds later, Ortega appeared behind them again.

“They’re heading towards us in two directions, God damn it! The VCs are...” and Ortega stopped point blank in mid-sentence.

“Oh shit. Jesus fucking Christ.”

Ortega stooped down on Krakauer and took him by the hand.

“Hold on, Krack. Hold on for God's sake. Don't fucking play games with me!”

“Hold him still!”

“I’m fucking trying!”

“Shit.”

“We have to get out of here.”

“The others are still missing.”

“NNNNNFFFFFFF.”

“I know it hurts Krack, but you have to grit your teeth and shut the fuck up. Not a fucking sound!”

“No, not like that!”

“Keep your head still Krack – intervened Rambo – or you'll end up fucking killing yourself!”

“NNNNGH! NNNNNNGH!”

“How many?” Rambo asked to Ortega.

“A shitload John, and they’re serious too.”

“How serious?”

“Dead serious”

“Fuck.”

“The rest of the team is still missing.”

“No we ain’t,” said Jorgenson.

He’d snuck up on them without any of them even noticing him.

“Sniper stayed behind with his NVD and the others are all over there.”

Then he lowered his head looking down at their friend.

“Hang on, Krack. You’ll make it. We’ll get you out of here.”

That wasn't what Jorgenson was really thinking though. Neither was anyone else. Nobody was sure about anything, not at that moment anyway.

They had 'crossed enemy lines'. No one with serious injuries had ever made it back alive from there. Not ever.

Maybe on board a helicopter he would have had a chance. Yes, maybe if a Huey came to pick them up not too far from there. Then yes, maybe he'd have a chance but that was impossible, of course.

There weren't any helicopters coming to pick them up. Not there anyways, or probably not anywhere actually.

No fucking chance.

They were alone.

They were alone and Krakauer was going to have to walk.

What's more, he'd have to do so *after* completing the mission, if the entire mission hadn't already gone straight to hell considering those VCs looked like their mission was to find the Baker Team.

"We need to cut the bar," exclaimed Messner.

"There's no way we can move him otherwise. We need to cut it without moving it!"

Only then, at that point had the morphine finally hit Krakauer. It instantly calmed him down when it did so Rambo could let go of him and touch his forehead instead.

"Messner," said Ortega.

The team leader pulled Messner aside, but Rambo managed to hear them anyway.

"It all depends on the haemorrhage," whispered Messner.

"If we manage to stop it somehow and not give him too much morphine, he may be able to walk. At any rate whatever happens, the best-case scenario is he survives one or two days max with that kind of injury. We need to get him to a LZ in less than two days."

"We can do it," said Ortega, calculating clicks, routes and potential LZs as they spoke. It may not have been what their original plan called for, but with a few minor changes and by using LZ3 instead, they could actually make it.

"Yeah, that'll work," concluded Ortega.

"If we use LZ3 it's feasible."

As Ortega was finishing his sentence however, out of nowhere, a single shot fired in the distant jungle, broke the silence.

A 5.56 NATO shot.

"Coletta," Ortega whispered.

The whole team froze instantly and looked up at the leafy treetops.

That meant that they'd been spotted, Goddamn it.

Well, at least that means the mission's gone to pot then – thought Ortega to himself.

Trautman had been very clear about that case scenario. If, for whatever reason, the VCs identified or spotted them before completing the mission, they were to abort immediately, and that was an order.

Another shot echoed.

Then another only seconds after, and it was clearly Coletta's M16, that had.

It's over – thought Ortega.

Apparently, we landed in the rice field just as some enemy patrol happened to be moving in or out of the tunnels. It was plain bad luck and nothing else.

We knew there was a chance it could happen right from the start.

Even if we had talked about it endlessly while we'd planned. We'd even come to the conclusion that there was no way of ruling that particular risk out, Goddamn it.

Now, the worst case scenario had just become a reality.

It was over. The mission had failed.

Game over.

The only thing we had to worry about now was saving our asses.

“TAKE KRAKAUER AWAY!” cried Ortega.

“I WANT A BARRAGE FIRE TOWARD THE RICE FIELD,” he added, then went on to say:

“Messner, stop the bombing, for God's sake”

“But boss...”

“There's a chance we'll get stuck here, Doc. Don't you get that?”

Messner nodded reluctantly.

Ortega jumped out of the jungle and stepped into the water, pulling a flare gun out of his jacket.

The reflection on the water was still pitch-black and the only visible thing, albeit barely, was the ghost of the moon's reflection on top of it.

“You're not seriously thinking about shooting that thing right now, are you?” said Jorgenson.

Ortega didn't even hear him. He lifted his gun up in the air and shot the flare straight to the sky.

The flare shot up into the air first, then, when it got more or less about a hundred feet above the ground, it suddenly went off and like magic a red, almost blinding light spread across the entire area for them, exposing one section at a time.

When their rice-field was finally within the light's range, they couldn't believe their eyes. There were dozens and dozens of Vietcong combing forward almost in a line.

The almost magical red light twinkled above them exposing the entire field, along with every VC position, from one side to the other.

They ploughed forward not stopping for anything.

In fact, they weren't afraid of anything or anyone, because after all, they were home.

Holy mother of God – thought Jorgenson who, as dumbfounded as Ortega, stood paralysed and neither could believe what was going on.

Danforth and Delmore found themselves several meters behind Krakauer and the others and surrounded by thick vegetation. As such, without a moment's delay, they opened fire on the VCs right out in the open.

Ortega heard an Uzi crackle right under him. It must have been Berry's Uzi covering him.

Then again, what about Rambo? Where had Rambo been this whole fucking time? He had no idea of his whereabouts.

The time had come for Ortega to make a new plan.

He had to figure out how to get them the fuck out of there.

Danforth

When I saw the AK fire for the first time, shots lit up the dark sky like little green meteors all along the horizon.

There were so many and were so widespread that it was hard to think of anything else actually. There was a firestorm of bullets right before my very eyes with bright rocket flares and VCs moving around us like a dark whirlwind, in the shadows.

For a split-second, I even forgot about Krakauer.

I didn't ask myself where Coletta, Rambo or Berry was, or think about setting up line-ups or perimeters either.

I thought and felt like an animal.

I fired every bullet in my Uzi in a single, never-ending shot.

I hit two of the filthy bastards on the spot breaking up the barricade they'd formed in the middle of the rice field almost instantly.

Not long after, someone else fired their Uzi in quick short successions and it sounded like fire crackers were going off. Then after that, the shots I heard sounded a lot like thunder. So they were definitely the M16s and a lot more powerful.

That was Coletta and Jorgenson with the M16s. At that point it seemed like everybody was shooting, but actually there were still some of us missing.

I let the empty cartridge drop and dove into the water as I reloaded and without giving it any thought.

It was the same as being in some kind of trance.

There was a regiment of troops. We were on our own against an entire military regiment. It was real it was happening and we weren't dreaming.

It was comparable to having a nightmare and never waking up from it.

That battalion could even have been an automatic for all we knew, and if it had been during the day rather than at night they would have started shooting artillery weapons at us.

Just like it had happened to previous SOG teams, and they'd never made it back alive to tell it.

Now it was happening to us.

It was really happening to us.

I threw myself in the water, leaving out only the head and the Uzi, and fired the second endless charger. It never ended.

The Viet were out of range by then – apart from the two that I had hit,, who were still lying there face down in the water – but it didn't matter. The important thing was something to block them where they were, or, in short, to keep them away. As long as there was that a body of water to cross between us, we had some hope of keeping them at a distance, and then shaking them off.

Conversely, if they were able to get close, even just a little... Even if there was a high casualty price to pay. In that case, we'd have been dead, and that meant all of us.

Somehow, it was like it was already happening, if we were already dying, because the way things were going, it wasn't that different from a death sentence.

When I turned back all I saw was the occasional red streak in the green jungle vegetation, which was actually nothing more than the rest of the team's flash lights. I couldn't take care of Krakauer anymore either: in a situation of that kind he was practically already 'gone'.

We needed a gunner at that point. We needed Jorgenson.

He only had an M16 though and we'd left the sixty back home because of the HALO jump. He was covered from head to toe with brand new, thirty round cartridges, just like the ones the Vietcong were using against us.

"GRIZZLY."

We needed a machine gun and maybe even the flamethrower, since we would never get to the bunker. Not alive, at least. Yeah.

We might as well use it to set the whole jungle on fire, before making a run for it.

"GRIZZLYYY!"

"Here am I."

"We give up, Grizzly."

"What?"

"We give up. Where's your flamethrower?"

"I don't have it."

I turned to him and said:

How the hell could he possibly not have it on him?

"I lost it," he said.

How the fuck do you lose a flamethrower? - I asked myself.

"Then shoot God Dammit, shoot! I want you to shoot like you were holding a pig and not a Goddamn' M16."

"Kill 'em all, Grizzly."

Breathe - thought Coletta aloud in his head
Breathe or your lungs really will explode.

Coletta fired another shot at the VC's brain and it squirted up in the air before falling back down into the water, followed by the rest of the senseless body right afterwards. The moon's reflection on the water looked like it had just exploded as well

Calm down.
Take it easy.
Leave a checking fire. Let Ortega tell you in which direction to go and just act accordingly.
They haven't split up yet.
We can still get out.

It was the truth too. They could still make it.
But Ortega had to give his orders, and fast.

Because if he doesn't, you'll have to be the one who stays behind to stop them.
It's your turn to make the sacrifice.
There's no way I'm going to be the one to die though.
Not tonight, at least.

Coletta hoped that Messner, despite all the chaos, remembered to ask for *Prairie Fire* by radio (an SOS request). As far as Coletta was concerned, the mission seemed to have gone out the window already for him too. Yeah, it sure as hell had.
Coletta aimed again, but this time when he lifted his rifle, from the corner of his eye, he saw a flash and thanks to those reflexes, he'd saved his own life.
That little flash he'd seen from the side had made him dive for the muddy side of the rice field. In the dark, he'd lost his balance and ended up on all fours in the cold water.

Woosh.

RPG – thought Coletta pushing himself down into the water and against the muddy embankment.

BOOM!

In the end, the explosion itself ultimately pushed him down to the bottom. The

darkness above him lit up and he felt a sharp pain in his arm, the sensation of being on fire, but he was underwater. What was going on?

*Hit – he thought.
I've been hit.*

Coletta let go of his M16 and rolled over in the water as the flames continued to burn on the water's surface right above him.

The impact threw his back up against the muddy bottom and he hit it, but fortunately, however the water wasn't deep.

You've been hit – he kept repeating to himself.
Followed immediately by:

*Are you stuck in the mud?
Are you going to drown?
Are you wounded?*

No, he wasn't stuck. He wasn't going to die like a mouse in a trap under a foot of water.

Yet, he could feel the bullets whizz past him and get stuck in the muddy bank wall above him. He heard gunshots, explosions... all of it. The water transmitted sound far better than air did.

He had to catch his breath.

He had to get back to the surface and get his M16 back.

Therefore keeping as low as possible, he'd bring his head just over the water level anyway and inhaled deeply.

No one could see him there.

The Vietcong knew vaguely of his whereabouts of course – making it imprudent to stay in the same place for long – but as long as he has stayed that low, they wouldn't be able to see him and he had shelter too.

Coletta looked around for his rifle, but it had to be under water somewhere. It wasn't that likely it would still be working after having touched a bottom as muddy as that. There wasn't any time to clean it either. Certainly not as they were trying to escape from a terrible place like that.

The same held true for his night vision device too, of course.

Coletta drew his Browning Hi-Power from its holster, while he used the other hand to keep feeling around for his M16, so he could put it back on his back.

"I AM OUT!" he yelled to his team.
No one called out back.

*Here it is Goddammit... Here's my M16.
That's where it was.*

*Okay – he thought staring at his mud-coated completely drenched rifle.
Now for a quick check up, and then we're outta' here.*

Coletta finally decided to have a look at his shoulder, and, as expected, he had been injured.

Some RPG shrapnel had grazed his shoulder.

Nothing serious.

*Just get some stitches, take some antibiotics and you'll be as good as new.
What really matters now is getting the hell out of here alive, on my own and fast.
Because nobody's gonna' come all the way down here to this Goddamn inferno to get me.*

“RALLY POINT,” he heard somebody shout out from quite a ways away, somewhere behind him. It might have been Berry.

Well then , I guess they hadn't left without him after all. That's good to know at least. Actually, really good to know.

“ROOOOGER!” Coletta shouted back, quickly realizing from the sound of his voice that something was something definitely not right.

He was in shock.

He needed to catch his breath.

You know what being in shock means and you know how to handle it.

Just breathe deeply.

Done yet? Good.

Now then, pick up that Goddamn' M16 and get the fuck outta' here.

When he finally got around to picking it up and trying to toss it over his shoulder, he realized he couldn't. His arm wasn't doing what he wanted it to do. Geez.

He couldn't lift it past his head.

Fucking hell.

Now, why wouldn't he be able to lift his arm? Well, let's see.

Probably because what he had on his shoulder wasn't exactly what you'd call superficial or anything like that. Taking a better look, it was obvious that the RPG shrapnel hadn't just grazed him, but actually gone in. In actuality, it had gone in and out like a bullet.

I haven't got time to bleed– he thought.

Truth be told, he really didn't.

The most important thing at that point was getting the hell away from there, and

everything else would have to wait, and that included bleeding.

Anyways, all things considered, Coletta figured he'd about with the state his wound was in, he had twenty minutes at his disposal before he'd probably start feeling weak or something, maybe even disorientated. He could get lost in the Jungle in far less time than that. As for taking care of his bandages and like, he'd move on to that bandages as soon as he got out of range position.

And so, once he'd contemplated all the variables, his chances were still pretty good to make it out.

That's what he was hoping anyways.

As a rule, when you're bleeding to death and you're under fire as well, thinking clearly becomes a luxury is no easy thing at all.

So, with his M16 on his back and his Hi-power in one hand Coletta jumped out of the way and into the jungle, as the bullets flew recklessly over his head.

Once he had the vegetation as a safeguard, he took cover behind some boulders.

You did it – he thought.

You're in hiding.

He even had five minutes to spare meaning he could move deeper into the jungle for that much longer before he was actually obliged to stop and specifically take care of his bandages.

What's more, he'd even managed the time to mix up his tracks a bit and throw the VCs off his track.

One by one, Jorgenson aimed at every single VC in front of him. He was firing short-successive rounds as he specifically targeted each and every adversary. He quickly realized however, that maintaining that kind of precision wasn't enough and the situation was beginning to get out of hand.

They were losing control.

If they didn't change the way things were going, and fast, Team Baker would never make it to the rally point.

Consequently, Jorgenson made a run for the other side of the paddy in an effort to block the Vietcong upward advancement. The Team needed to keep them from widening any further as they advanced.

Stop right there, ass holes – he said to himself and continued blasting his M16 as he did.

Jorgenson quickly made his way across the field and only stopped long enough to shoot or reload. Once reloaded, he resumed his offensive, with a firestorm of bullets as he continued his sprint to cross.

No, no, no.

They were still advancing and it wasn't enough.

He needed to draw enemy fire elsewhere.

He needed to be the target.

He had to get the VCs away from where the wounded were, where the *dead* were actually – said the voice in his head before he could stop it.

Essentially, Krakauer is dead.

That's not true – said another voice.

Don't give up.

Keep 'em busy, give your team the time it needs to stabilize Krack and move him.

No one's giving up till he's really dead.

WOOOOOOSH HHH - hissed the second RPG.

This time however, they weren't aiming at Coletta.

This time, it was heading in his direction, directly *at him*.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Jorgenson dove behind the biggest tree he could find, just to the left of him. The

rocket exploded behind him, whizzing past him fortunately, only scattering mud all over the back of him, as he lay face-down on the ground.

As he fell, Jorgenson cradled his rifle in his arms, like a child, as he'd been trained to do when he was back in Fort Bragg.

"Fuck you assholes!" he cried out in a moment of rage.

Then, without even getting up, he fired his rifle, randomly straight to the sky, just to let the Vietcong hear that he still posed a threat to them. They needed to know that they couldn't advance, not yet anyways.

But he had seen the RPG shooter.

He'd got a good look at him actually, and as far as he was concerned, the shot was do-able.

But when he finally got up and came out from behind the tree to aim, he realized they'd reloaded the RPG with a warhead and it was ready to go.

Oh, Jesus fucking Christ!

Jorgenson took an extra split-second to make sure he didn't miss what may have been his last shot, but he was lucky. Jorgenson managed to hit the second shooter right square in the chest before he'd even shot the second rocket.

Now it's your turn to die, asshole.

As the RPG tube slipped off his shoulder, the man collapsed to the ground with his hand against his chest where Jorgenson had hit him.

Jorgenson could almost see the explosive warhead planted in the ground but he didn't have a

clean line of fire.

Someone else on the Baker team did however, and he's the one who hit it.

Someone with exactly the same idea but strategically speaking was positioned right in the middle of the paddy.

The device exploded right in front of two VCs tearing them to shreds and sending pieces flying through the air.

For a moment, Jorgenson could have sworn he saw a head go one way and its body in the other. In reality, it was far too dark to point out those kinds of details, and he certainly didn't have time to just stand there and figure out what he had actually just seen.

In fact, when there in the dark, right in front of him he saw something move, he began firing his M16 right back at them again.

*Gotta 'get to the rally point – thought Danforth to himself.
That's easy enough for you to say, considering you're not the one on the wrong side
of the rice field but I am.
I'm the poor bastard who's gonna' have to go all the way around.*

Then, out of nowhere, less than six feet away, a Vietcong had made his way right there in front of him.

Danforth dropped to the ground firing his Uzi as he did. He watched the Vietnamese head split in half, and blood shoot into the air above him.

“FUCK!” cried Danforth.

A group of VCs who were standing in the middle of the field turned towards him and saw he was trying to get back up. That's when all the VCs began shooting at him while he disappeared into the jungle.

I'm going the wrong way – he thought.

A lot of branches were too thick and intertwined so it wasn't long before he got caught passing through some and ended up stuck there.

“No! No! No!” he shouted.

AK bullets continued to fly past him and he knew that sooner or later he'd get hit in the back.

Danforth therefore decided to change positions. Without delay he dropped to the ground and laid down on the vines covering it. Turning over he pulled the Uzi in front of him, so he'd only need one hand to shoot.

BRAAAAK – sounded the Uzi.

“HEL...”

After Danforth had fired a second time he tried to get up and free himself but couldn't.

“HELP!” he yelled.

It was fucking jammed and he was stuck there.

Trapped there the way a fly would be in a spider web while bullets continued to fly right past him.

-

About a hundred yards away, Coletta watched everything unfold as he quickly cleaned his rifle's viewer. He had taken care of the bandages on his shoulder to some

extent, and it would have to do. With the state of their situation, he had decided to stay instead of heading directly to the rally point. Now that he was under fire as well, he had to come up with something, and come up with it fast, or Danforth was a dead man.

Thus ignoring the pain in his shoulder, Coletta kneeled, turned the shoulder strap around his left hand, and put the rifle on his leg, hoping it wouldn't explode in his face when he fired.

Let's see if this thing can still shoot – he thought to himself.

Hoping his rifle was truly as reliable as everyone claimed or he was about to get very, very hurt. All things considered however, he didn't have any other choice.

Coletta wet his lips and clenched his teeth.

The image was distorted at best, on account of the dirty lenses, and there were some green shadows that would have to be enough to give him an idea of what was going on.

There were about ten VCs chaotically heading towards Danforth.

Ten against one.

Coletta clenched his teeth again.

They did everything except run directly for him. They jumped here and there in his viewer, threw themselves to the ground, stood back up and started running again. They knew they were in range and good training had taught them to make things difficult.

Coletta wiped the lens once more with his finger.

The Vietcong were in line with Danforth, who was still stuck as well, so Coletta risked hitting him by mistake. The more he worried about hitting his friend, the less he was able to help him.

He therefore turned his head away for a second, and closed his eyes in a dire attempt to focus.

That shot's damn risky – he thought.

It's fucking dangerous at best.

You could hit Danforth, or the rifle could explode in your face...

Don't do it.

Let it go.

No – he told himself forcefully.

Focusing, he pulled the trigger.

BOOM! - went his M16 splashing mud all over his face.

Missed.

He may have missed the most dangerous VC but, at least, the rifle hadn't exploded in his face.

The Baker Team sniper aimed for a second time.

Those VCs proceeding in the water, continued to advance further towards Danforth.

They were so close that there was only a bank separating them and nothing more.

Once they'd climbed the bank, Danforth was at almost point blank range.

A step away. Not more than a step, a fraction of a second and not more.

Initially Coletta could feel that time was slowing down as he concentrated further, before it finally coming to a stop.

The effect was so powerful it was almost distracting, but he made sure it didn't.

Coletta had been through that before, many a time actually, and he welcomed it entirely. This time especially and without hesitation.

He shifted his aim once more, framed the green, human-like shape and then pulled the trigger.

BOOM

The bullet hit the VC right in the middle of his head just as he was trying to climb over the edge and when it did, the impact pushed him slightly forward before he quickly disappeared slipping into the water.

Danforth.

The thought of his team mate dying suddenly brought Coletta back to reality.

Slowly the sounds of battle surrounding him were audible again – the shots, the screams and the orders being given in Vietnamese.

One other Vietcong who was obviously hit by some other Baker Team member, fell down face flat in the mud, and he did dangerously close to Joseph the moment he'd finally managed to free himself from the tangled of vegetation he was stuck in.

Time to get the fuck out of here - thought Coletta.

Get the hell away from here.

Get the fuck away from here now, you fucking idiot!

Fucking out now!

And when Danforth finally stood up and made a run for it, not even a split-second later, Coletta disappeared somewhere in the vegetation behind him.

Jorgenson didn't let up and went on shooting as a good soldier would for some time, as though nothing had happened. In the meantime, he surveyed the situation.

The green flashes he'd seen at the outset, somewhere behind the bushes the branches were long gone.

Then he surveyed a little further out, past the paddy looking for Danforth, but he was nowhere to be found.

Then he scanned the area in search of Coletta as well, but he was nowhere to be seen either.

All of them had disappeared, for fuck's sake.

The black paddy, dark sky and infinite moving shadows blurred in front of him and his heart missed a beat.

They'd abandoned him.

Jesus fucking Christ...

They'd actually abandoned him.

Danforth had kept the VCs busy for quite some time. In the meantime however, they'd *all* turned their attention on him and were moving towards him, like some God damn robots.

Oh Christ.

Oh m-my fucking God!

Jorgenson turned slightly, shooting sporadically in all directions and made a run for it.

Besides, it's all my fault – he thought while running through the dark jungle.

He lost the second rucksack containing the flamethrower, and they had more than righteously left him.

In a desperate attempt to get away, it was so dark that Jorghenson banged his head on a branch so hard he cut his forehead open.

Almost instantly he heard the bullets cutting through the vegetation and speeding past him once more.

It took the Vietcong some time to figure out in which direction he'd gone,

Nevertheless, Jorgenson didn't stop to take cover, but continued running instead.

He was going back to where Messner had initially treated Krakauer, hoping to find them there despite there not being any red lights to indicate they were.

In fact, as expected, he found the place empty and abandoned.

Baker Team soldier turned on his red coloured flash light for a split-second and kept

it as low as possible to have a better look. Spilt blood was the only indication that he was in the same place.

Once he was sure that was the place, and they weren't actually there, he immediately took to running through the jungle again.

He was on his own now. He found himself running without being careful about where he was stepping since he couldn't turn any lights on. What was worse still was he didn't even know where he was actually heading for.

He couldn't think clearly.

He had to put some distance between the Vietcong and himself at the very least and for as long as he could.

As a result Jorgenson ran like that for some time, or at least until he heard the shots behind of him become more distant.

A voice in his head told him that from then on, it was in his interest to shoot as little as possible or at all of possible. That way he could make sure the Vietcong lost his tracks. More importantly however, it guaranteed he didn't end up in direct contact with them.

He knew he'd never have survived a situation like that fighting his way through it. Not a chance.

Trautman had taught him that.

if it was Jorgenson's choice, he would have turned right around and gone back and tried to kill all those motherfucking Vietcong. After two long years of training however, he'd learnt a lot in Fort Bragg. One of the most important things however, was how to sneak out and get your ass back home in one piece.

Provided you could, that is.

Jorgenson stopped and stood for a second in the dark.

The Vietcong behind him had definitely stop shooting and probably believed that the Baker Team was long gone and therefore decided to stay where they were, yammering their incomprehensible fucking *iaiaiai-lai-iai somewhere* in the middle of that fucking paddy.

What a shitty language – said Jorgenson to himself as he set his rucksack on the ground and pulled out one of the two claymore mines he still had with him.

As it came out of the bag, a map and some other paper fell out with it.

The map...

Fuck that's right, he had a map.

He had completely forgotten about it.

Having it made finding his way and reaching the rally point simple even if he did so at night and in a jungle as thick as that one.

I just need to calculate the azimuth – he thought.

Jorgenson coughed and then unexpectedly he gagged putting one hand over his

mouth.

Something was wrong with him.

He'd somehow lost the flamethrower, literally lost it in the dark, forgotten about the map and even temporarily forgotten where he was and all. He continued making the kind of mistakes rookies made forgetting things and he especially hated his companions the more time passed. All of them.

He hated them for no reason.

He hated everyone.

He even hated his daughter, at times.

Then Jorgenson hesitated briefly while unrolling the claymore's primer wire, because for the first time in a long time, soldier Carl Jorgenson had an excruciating doubt. The horrible doubt that there was something in him had just snapped. Something just didn't work the way it used to.

The sudden movement of something behind him brought him back to reality with a jolt. It wouldn't be long before the Vietcong would leave the paddy and start their manhunt for him in the jungle.

He needed to set up that Goddamn claymore mine fast.

In fact, since it was very probable that *all* of the Vietcong would end up chasing him and him *alone*, maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to hook up two claymores rather than one.

Once he'd finished hooking them both up. Jorghenson picked up the map along with all those other papers he'd unintentionally scattered earlier.

The very idea that he was there, picking up papers, at a time like this and in the situation he was in, almost seemed surreal. The trouble was however that he absolutely couldn't leave coordinates, mission orders or anything of that kind for the enemy to find by accident.

Once there wasn't anything left on the ground and both mines were in place (how could one ever be enough?) Jorgenson dove back into the jungle and resumed his blind get away.

He managed to hit his head for the second time, in the exact same place he'd banged it before. The difference this time was that his forehead started bleeding. Stumbling from the growing level of pain he was feeling.

For Christ's sake...

Then, afterwards, he'd even gotten stuck in dense, overgrown vegetation, but in a moment of rage, he managed to cut through it, free himself, and get away.

After running for not more than a few minutes when he heard, what must have been a Vietcong screaming in agony, resembling a pig about to be butchered. How could that be?

Fuck it – he said firmly to himself.

The only thing that matters now is getting the fuck away from here.

In fact, it so happened that while he was running he smashed his shoulder up against some kind of wall and fell backwards to the ground.

It wasn't a wall of course, but a giant tree that, despite its enormity, Jorgenson hadn't noticed in the least. He may actually have hit it harder than Wile E. Coyote generally did.

He just didn't see it.

For Christ's sake.

He almost broke his nose.

Jorgenson asked himself how much longer he could last before finally doing himself in.

As that thought drifted away, he took note of his surroundings, and how loud all the chaos was. He wondered what could have brought him there, or where he was heading for that matter.

In the midst of such a chaos he'd forgotten so he looked to his tritium Cammenga wrist compass for a clue.

West.

I guess the rally point must have been west.

He had just checked that damn map however, so how the hell could he not be sure?

What's more, why were those Goddamn Vietcong behind him screaming like pigs in a slaughterhouse?

The only way to make a VC scream like that was for Rambo to wait them silently in the dark, all alone while being completely immersed in paddy water.

John made sure that the entire line of VC soldiers walked past him first so that he could go for the one on the end.

With a textbook move, he'd taken them from behind. He'd put one arm around the guy's neck, in a choke hold, shutting his mouth to keep the noise down. With the other arm, he'd stab the asshole.

Rambo didn't want to slit his throat open, or anything quick like that. In cases like those, he would rather stab these assholes in the chest because it would drag on longer.

In other words, he wasn't keen on quick kills fundamentally because the Vietcong weren't meant to die quickly or painlessly

At any rate, he was going to be Rambo's decoy for his getaway.

Without easing up on his choke-hold at all, Rambo dragged him down onto the ground. Then, with much indifference and only one hand, he cut the tendons around the soldier's calves, paralysing him instantly. He then took the knife and stabbed him right in stomach, opening it and proceeded to disembowel him.

It'll take that Goddamn Vietcong at least twenty minutes to die in his state.

Still covering the Vietcong's mouth, Rambo put his knife back in its cover and took out a claymore out of his gear.

Once he had tied the mine to the soldier's leg he tossed it into the water next to him. The mine was set to go off as soon as his mates came to his rescue.

The time had come to go.

When Rambo finally moved his hand and uncovered the soldier's mouth, he started screaming and didn't stop as he crawled and limped precariously through the minefield, continuing until he was out of sight.

As Rambo distanced himself from there, he really hoped what he had just done, in his attempt to flee the enemy, would never happen again.

Despite everything, it hurt.

It really hurt a lot.

What he'd just done was the kind of thing a man deserved to burn in hell for. He never wanted to turn into someone like that.

He wouldn't, not him.

Anyone else could do, but not him, he wouldn't.

Nevertheless, that's what he'd become and done to survive.

Being able to forgive himself for something that terrible or trying to forget about it as well,

These things would become feats to get over for him.

Coletta looked up from his rifle.

There was nothing else he could do for his team from where he was now.

After spending so many years of hunting and training, a sort of radar had developed in his head.

The noises were very clear too: Danforth and Jorgenson had run off while Rambo was taking care of the soldier at the back of the line. Once he had however, he made a run for it too.

As for Ortega, Krakauer and the others, well, they'd disappeared and probably weren't having any problems getting to the rally point.. That's what he hoped at least.

Good – he thought.

Really good.

After I'd given Krakauer enough morphine to knock out a horse, he...
He got up instead.

*It was terrifying, like I'd seen a zombie stand up and walk, or something..
Krakauer pulled himself up and initially only stood there leaning on his rifle, but
before long, he started pointing it around all over the place, and seemingly, he was
looking for a target to shoot..*

"Krack," I said looking straight at him.

*He turned to me with the iron pipe and his temporary bandage, which he'd wrapped
around it and was now dripping blood down his neck.*

*This can't be real – I told myself.
I must be dreaming..*

*"Stay down! We've got to wait for everybody else," I said, as he simply ignored me.
"You're going to crash into the branches or something with this iron bar sticking out
like that."*

*After thinking about it for a moment, he came back and sat down on his knees.
He was coherent.
Despite all the morphine and the pain, he was rational.
He hadn't lost it yet.*

"If you can't pull it out, saw it off," he said.

*Jesus, he really was on the ball.
He may have been thinking more clearly than I was actually.
I was still somewhat paralysed on account of the horror of it all.
It wasn't professional, I know.
It was particularly unprofessional behaviour for someone in the Special Forces.
But I've known him far too long to not feel anything.*

*"We're going to carry you on a hammock, the same way we would on a stretcher."
"Pull-it-out," he said with a furry tongue.
"I'll walk," he added, banging his head like a rocker head as I jumped to close in on
to him, trying to keep him still.
I looked at my friend with that iron bar coming out of his head and I knew, deep
inside, that he was a dead man walking. Getting to the LZ and surviving the flight*

back was, I think, fucking impossible.
He had no fucking idea.
He was the one who didn't know.

After a while of just waiting for the team to show up, Messner made up his mind to cut that Goddamn pole off. At least, give it a fucking try anyways.

He pulled the bolt cutter clippers out of his gear bag, with the hope that it would be strong enough to handle a pipe as big as the one sticking out of his friend's head.

"Hey Krak, listen up. What do you say if we cut that fucking thing a little shorter?"

He turned, and nodded.

"You hold on to the bar with both hands. Whatever you do, you can't let it move so you've got to hang on tight."

Messner could see it now, he tries cutting that stupid pipe, it slips and Krak's head splits open or something.

"When it snaps it'll vibrate, so you'll have to hold on really fucking tight. Got it?"

"Yeah, alright."

Fucking hell – thought Messner, but he didn't have much of a choice.

The idea of carrying Krak while he lays on the hammock, through the jungle with that fucking thing sticking out of his eye was insane.

As he put the bolt cutter into position, he wondered if he could keep the vibrating to a minimum somehow.

By taking it all very, very easy, was his answer.

He couldn't do much better than that. Take it all very, very easy.

"Ready?" Messner asked him.

"Fuck yeah."

"Got it tight?"

"Yeah, yeah. Go."

Messner tightened the clippers as slow as he could but because the bar was made of iron and not steel thankfully, snapped making a loud *SNAP* sound as it did anyway.

Krakauer gave a muffled cry behind his clenched jaw.

Messner quickly put some more bandages on, to cover the rest of the iron that was still there in his eye socket.

The haemorrhage had just gotten worse, of course, and Krakauer was pretty pale already.

His remaining eye was getting more and more bloodshot as they spoke, shiny because of the morphine and distant, almost as though Krakauer was possessed or something.

There was an explosion.
Then another.
An AK firing.

“Fuck, they’re killing us down there,” said Krakauer.
“We’ve got to get out of here.”
“You can't walk,” replied Messner.
“Yes I can, I do it.”
“All right, then. Rally Point one meant LZ three. Right?”
“I think so,” replied Krakauer.
“That means west. I’ll go check the road first. If it's clear, we'll move together.
Okay?”
“Doc...”
“I’m not leaving you here in the dark in the condition you’re in. Is that clear,
Krakow?”
“Okay.”
“Good,” said Messner.

Then he disappeared into the darkness.

When he came back, Messner found Rambo watching over Krakauer. Krak's eyes were open, but he wasn't moving and Rambo sat there silently next to him, looking on with glossy, teary eyes. He was holding his head up like a baby. Krakauer was trying to say something, but his voice was fading and neither Messner nor Rambo would ever forget the words that followed. They would remember them for the rest of their lives.

"Easy, Johnny," Krakauer said in a whisper, near death.

“Don't cry over me dying, John

*It's better to die like this, in Vietnam and in my twenties,
than at ninety, in my bed,
pissing myself every fucking night.”*

Lawrence Krakauer, 1969

Only seconds later, Lawrence was dead.

The bandage Krakauer had around his head was so blood-soaked that it was dripping down his chin. It made him look as though he was crying blood.

“Lawrence,” Messner quietly repeated, like a broken record player.
He just couldn't believe it.

“Lawrence.”

“Doc,” Rambo insisted.

The Baker Team doctor was scared to put his fingers on Messner's neck to check his pulse.

That gesture would finalize everything for Messner, making the fact he wasn't coming back, final. If he couldn't find his friend's pulse, then that moment would haunt him forever, for the rest of his living days. As things stood however, that's how things really were. War.

That was war and they all knew it very well.

Messner closed his eyes, exhaled and stretched his fingers to his friend's neck.

He stood by for a moment - a moment that never ended.

Lawrence, Lawrence Krakauer.

Lawrence, my friend.

Messner waited for a long time for that pulse to come back, but it never did.

Lawrence, I am begging you, please.

Please, Lawrence, please.

But it was too late, and the pulse wasn't there.

End of the story.

“He's no longer breathing,” Rambo added, in a strange voice.

It didn't sound like him at all.

Goodbye, my friend – thought Messner, to himself.

“Krakauer died inside us long before he actually did.”

Daniel Messner, 1969

Danforth was one of the last to get to rally point number two on his own. Coletta got sight of him coming thanks to his night scope and watched him get closer. When he was within hearing distance, in an audible whisper, he called out to him. He was particularly careful to whisper his name as calmly as possible so that he didn't scare the shit out of him.

Danforth had made his entire way towards the clearing where they were by walking, albeit blindly, in the dark. When he finally reached his team's red light, he realized that they were all there and standing around him.

"Fuck, you guys," he said, but no one commented back.

"That was a fucking close call. Are we all here?"

"We're all here," said Ortega from somewhere nearby, but it was so dark that Danforth couldn't actually look him in the face.

The entire Team wasn't there however.

Danforth took his gear bag off his back for a second so he could check his equipment and give his stuff a quick look over as well.

The rest of the team didn't say anything, and just stood there staring at him.

Sooner or later, from the corner of his eye he would have glanced at each of them, unconsciously registering who was there and by default, who wasn't. Eventually, he would've noticed Krakauer's absence.

In fact, it didn't take him long at all.

"Where's Krak?" he said, but no one answered.

"I said where the fuck is Lawrence!"

Again, there was a long moment of silence, at the end of which Joseph 'The Eagle' Danforth began to shake his head.

"No," he said still shaking his head in disbelief.

"No, it can't be, no."

"That's all of us," – Skorpio said, interrupting him.

"Let's go."

"Ortega," said Danforth.

The group began to set off.

"No, no... ORTEGA!"

Danforth grabbed Ortega by the arm and he stopped without turning to look at him.

"I want to hear you say it, Ortega. I want to hear you say it at least."

Ortega looked down.

"Lawrence *is dead*," he said. Then he turned so he could look him in his eyes and understand whether it would be enough for Danforth or not. Obviously, it wasn't. Danforth stared blankly at Ortega as though he hadn't heard a word of what Ortega had just said.

"He's dead. He landed on a trap with his parachute in the dark. He didn't have a chance."

"Where is he?" Danforth asked.

Ortega was starting to lose his patience because he didn't intend to stay in Charlie's territory a minute longer than necessary.

One more word out of Danforth and Ortega would have told him to go back to where he'd just came from. He'd also help him get there with a swift kick in the ass.

He rolled his eyes up to the sky instead. A wasted gesture that no one saw of course, being as dark as it was by then.

He took a deep breath to calm down, and then said:

"Messner... No, I meant 'we'... We decided to leave the body. First because we had too many VCs on our backs and second because that's the way it works 'across enemy lines'. You know that as well as anybody else does."

"I'll go get him."

"What?" exclaimed Ortega almost in disbelief.

"I said I'm going to get him."

Danforth must have been out of his mind to say something like that and especially to Ortega.

What he didn't understand however was that Ortega had no intention of putting the team at risk.

He wouldn't let them get caught all because of Danforth.

Ortega grabbed Danforth by the arm initially, but quickly let go and raised his arms at him instead. He didn't want to get physical right from the start.

Berry Delmore seemed to have the same idea so he intervened.

"Let him go," said Delaware from somewhere out of the darkness, in an effort to back his team leader.

"He's dead Joseph, so just let him go."

"Did you hear me, Joseph?"

He didn't reply.

"They're right you know," Rambo said, coming out from the back.

Danforth didn't react or give an answer to either of them however.

He just couldn't do it. It was too hard for him.

"Pull yourself back together for fuck's sake," Ortega pressed on.

"Do you hear me? You're a Special Forces soldier, Goddamn' it! Get the fuck back in

you and get a grip of yourself, soldier.”

“It’s either that, or go,” said Berry Delmore.

“Go back there and get yourself killed in the process if that’s what you want. Better make your mind up fast though because there’s no fucking way we’re gonna’ get ourselves killed over a corpse. “

If you thought about it, the reaction Danforth had was actually quite normal. Ortega had seen it happen a thousand times before on his first tour of duty, back when he was a machine gunner on heli-ambulances.

It was always like that.

When a friend of yours died, you could never believe it at first.

You had to see it with your own eyes at least and if you didn’t, you just didn’t give upon it.

Without any concrete proof at their disposal, you could imagine a thousand scenarios before you actually got around to accepting it.

Ortega could imagine Joseph taking off on his own to look for a friend that “could still be” alive but only in his head. He might disappear into the night and never come back from there alive and well. Not with the Vietcong that close behind them. It would turn out to be quite the reverse and walk straight into the lion’s mouth.

Ortega drove away that thought with a shiver down his back.

He couldn't let him go, period.

“Come on Eagle, let's go,” he said in the end.

With a moment of uncertainty, oddly enough, Joseph agreed to leave with them, fortunately.

Ortega kept close watch on Danforth for a long time as they marched silently in the darkness.

He was close enough to see that Danforth stared blankly ahead, not caring where he was stepping, but at least he seemed calmer than before.

He had definitely cooled off.

Not before long Ortega went back to planning potential escape routes in his head and eventual pull-out points. There was a storm of theories and hypotheses in his head.

He was evaluating any potential route the VCs could take to hunt the team down.

That's the reason he'd ordered Rambo and Berry to keep on setting booby traps as they went.

The only good thing about that whole thing was that that mission would be over a lot sooner than expected, and Ortega didn't feel the slightest bit guilty about it. Getting that mission accomplished wouldn't have been easy in the least. In fact, blowing that fucking base up would have been a disaster.

Besides, he'd had more than enough for that night.

Despite his thoughts being elsewhere, Ortega glanced from time to time in Danforth's direction throughout the entire march. He still hadn't said a word and just kept walking in front of them.

Ortega went to wipe his forehead with the back of his hand.

He was sweating so much that night that his headband wasn't doing the trick.

He had to hold on a little while longer. The LZs weren't that far.

In a matter of hours from now actually, he could cross that shitty night out of his head.

The Vietcong never showed up.

According to Coletta – who knew a thing or two about these things – that night the VCs didn't even try to find them.

They probably decided to take cover and defend the base fearing the Baker Team was only a recon team proceeding a full-blown attack. Alternatively, they simply reputed Ortega and the others too dangerous to hunt at night.

Whatever the reason, when three a.m. rolled around, a Huey flew over the LZ
Messner had radioed and everything went as planned.

Before landing, the helicopter did a quick area check –the way dogs do before they lay down. Once satisfied, it landed and took off again in record time with all seven of them.

Seven of them, not eight.

Krakauer wasn't there, and would never be again.

Sam Lo, stopover base for 'Beyond Enemy Line' Mission

Danforth, who had yet to change his clothing, sat on a chair beside the empty cot where Krakauer used to sleep.

Some of his belongings were still on the night table next to his bed. Those things were his things, his stuff. The things he'd come and get if he were still alive.

Cigarettes, his lighter, an open can of beer and a few of his personal knives, the things he could be back at any moment for.

Krakauer, like the rest of them, possessed almost nothing.

Before they'd spent their leave together, when Krakauer used to say that he had '*no past, no present and no future*' Danforth thought the guy had a thing for melodrama or that he'd stolen the line from a film or something. Ironically however, it was true. There was no family to ship his belongings to, even if he had any real personal effects to ship.

There was only an adopted Vietnamese daughter, whom Krakauer had decided to keep after a night of partying.

Danforth hadn't noticed Trautman, who, from out of nowhere, was suddenly in the room with him.

The Colonel was standing quietly at the back of the room.

He was probably there on a bureaucracy errand.

In fact, shortly thereafter, he coughed quietly before saying to Danforth:

"Who has the letter for his family?"

"There's no such letter."

"What do you mean there's no letter?"

"What I mean is there wasn't anybody waiting for Krakauer 'back home'. He was an orphan."

"Oh, I didn't know."

"No one did actually. He never talked about it or anything. I'm the only one he told."

Danforth turned to stare at Krakauer's empty bed. When he eventually turned to look at the Colonel, he said:

"A few years from now, it'll be like he never even existed."

"Joseph..."

Trautman moved his hand slowly towards Danforth's shoulder but as soon as the Colonel touched him he jumped out of the chair and put his arms up irritated.

"Jesus Christ, Joseph..."

“Joseph... I knew Lawrence too. I trained him personally for two years, the same way I did with you and all the others. I found a home for that little girl when Lawrence decided he had to save her from that brothel, and that’s not all.

I’m telling you that Lawrence Krakauer died doing what he liked doing. He loved this job. He believed in it.”

“Oh come on, that’s bullshit Colonel.”

Trautman was taken aback; somewhat startled like when you’re looking in a drawer and you realize there’s a spider in it.

“Don't give me any of that bullshit about loyalty, country, honour or the corps itself – Danforth said to the Colonel, looking right at him. Then he added - Our unit doesn't even exist, does it? We’re so secret that some of us can’t get medals for acts we’ve done, in fear that the press might notice. If everything we do really is for the sake of country, then how is it that the country itself, doesn’t even know we exist?”

Trautman didn't know what to say at first.

It seemed ...

It seemed as though Krakauer’s death was bringing to light the real Danforth. It seemed his true colours were coming out.

“Not even God on earth could win this war. So tell me then what we’re really fucking doing all this for Colonel. The real reasons behind it and afterwards, while we’re at it, why don’t you tell me who the fuck we really are, since we don't even exist. Who are we, Sir?”

“Well, you’re Secret Service.”

“We are *soldiers!*” Danforth protested.

“You’re SOG,” Trautman said finally as he held his head up with pride.

“And not only are you SOG, but you’re the SOG *Baker Team*. You’re the diamond tip of it all

From this point on, you’ve become the benchmark that Special Forces will aspire to in the future to come.

Because what you’re doing here and now, what you are and the way you’re fighting will go on forever.

Do you know why?

Because every other war after Vietnam will be like Vietnam.

How do you think we’ll be fighting in future wars to come? Using atomic bombs perhaps? Oh, come now. No one can win using atomic bombs.

The enemy will no longer wear uniforms and will start attacking civilians from within rather than the military per se from without, causing their downfall from the inside rather than defeating them on the field. This war... You only see this war, while I see from this war onward.

That's why I did everything I could to make you the best.

The best – thought Danforth.

That put him in a bit of a predicament, because although a lot could be said about the two Baker Teams per se, nothing could be said about whether they were best or not. No other team in the world knew how to play chess with death better than they did. No other team knew how to run, march, orientate themselves, skydive or fight better than them. Not to mention how much they knew about that war at that point, and the extent to which they'd studied it.

They knew it as well as the generals did now.

“But there's always a price to pay, son. For everything, and the price to pay to be the best is the highest. We were all aware of that from the beginning however, and we accepted it. Right? You accepted it too, if I remember correctly.”

Trautman paused for a moment.

Then the tone of his voice changed.

“Listen Joseph... I've gotten to know you well these past few years too. I know it's the pain talking right now, because I know you're stronger than that.

Now, I know you'll swallow the pain the same way you always have before, and that you'll keep on doing it the same way you always have.

You also won't go on as if nothing has happened because you don't care about your friend, but because you are stronger than this damn war.

You're stronger than any pain this damn Vietnam could ever inflict on you.

Most importantly of all, it's just pain Joseph. It'll pass. It always does. It'll pass even if under these circumstances, Krack was your best friend.”

“He really was,” Danforth interrupted quietly, who now seemed in a trance.

“That's right, but do you know what your best friend is 'doing' now?”

“He was my best friend and now, because of me, we can't even bury his body.”

“Do you know what Krakauer's doing right now?”

Danforth turned to look at Trautman, but this time his frown turned into a smile and he began to cry quietly.

He knew exactly what Krakauer was doing at the time.

Did he ever!

Joseph wasn't ashamed to show the Colonel he was crying, but instead, still smiling, he went on to say:

“He's planning his next move, Sir.”

“You're damn right he is, son.”

Trautman loved that team too much. It was common knowledge by then. By working so closely with them and for such a long time, he'd let himself get carried away far more than he should have in the process. It wasn't professional on his part and those feelings could end up being dangerous, but fucking hell. Those weren't just any ordinary men. Those men were 'his' team.

Therefore, that night, and that night alone, the Colonel decided to let go of his sense of pride and instead, for the first time in a long time, felt something that resembled hope. With men like that, maybe even a land as tormented as Vietnam, had hope.

While Danforth and Trautman were elsewhere, there was a gloomy silence surrounding the rest of the team as they were changing in the special equipment tent. Only a few of the members on the six man Baker Team B had begun to change while the others continued to unload their weapons. Ortega however, was still missing.

Ortega was coming back from the Map Room where he'd just finished arranging some notes for the debriefing to take place. He'd been to confirm some of the mission coordinates because as a rule, he preferred writing them while they were still fresh in his mind. Now he was finally going to change with the rest of the team.

He had all his gear on including his backpack, the antics, an Uzi on his shoulder. He really couldn't wait to get it all off.

As he walked down the corridor however, he walked by the Shower Room entrance and distractedly glanced over at Jorgenson, who was sitting there on his own.

Jorgenson had taken all his equipment off except for his shirt, his dirty camo pants, and his belt.

Even though he was sitting on one of the benches in front of the showers, it looked like he was waiting for his turn. He wouldn't have showered with all that stuff on however, and Ortega couldn't understand why he was still wearing his belt.

Ortega knew right away that there was something wrong with his friend, so he slowed down, almost to a halt, trying to figure out what may have been wrong.

Jorgenson was short of breath.

His face was sweaty, and he continued to nod gently, so he seemed to be talking to himself, and constantly saying no, no, no.

Ortega caught a glimpse of him and eventually thought that as strange as it was, maybe Jorgenson just wanted to be alone for a moment, preferably somewhere where there was no one else to fuck with him.

On balance, that was far more likely than it was for his friend to be insane and waiting his turn to shower with all that stuff on.

What's more, at that time of night, the showers were all empty.

Therefore, Ortega thought that he was probably still upset by the death of Krakauer (not to mention by the shit he did during that mission, like losing the flamethrower)

and decided to simply leave him alone with his pain, pulling straight down the corridor.

A few minutes later, Ortega would rethink that decision and come to consider it as the biggest mistake of his whole life.

When Ortega walked into the tent where his teammates were changing, the whole team stopped and turned, almost expecting him to say something.

Among them was also Garner, who came from Saigon on purposely for the debriefing that was about to take place thereafter.

Ortega stopped for a moment to look at them, then looked down, and simply went to put down his equipment like everyone else, without saying anything.

He took the magazine off the weapon, opened and closed the Uzi shutter a second time – just to be on the safe side - then put it down next to the other weapons.

Shortly thereafter, Coletta walked up to him and put his hand on his shoulder, and looked him straight in the eye.

Initially, Ortega wasn't able to look back at him, so he went on taking the Uzi loaders out of his pockets instead.

“Hey,” said Coletta, and with that, Ortega finally stopped.

“You didn't do anything wrong today.”

Ortega nodded in thanks even though he disagreed.

Sure, he'd to admit, it was good to hear someone say it out loud, and he was grateful to his friend for saying it.

He still disagreed however.

You could always do more.

Always.

Especially when someone dies.

Trautman was looking at the oversized map when they informed him his men had were almost done getting ready and would be available for debriefing shortly. Trautman was thinking about how suspicious the VC presence in the rice field was and wondered if they hadn't somehow found out about the HALO jump beforehand.

Jesus Christ, let's hope not – he thought.

The only other alternative however, was much, much worse.

The alternative was somebody tipped them off.

That was a terrible assumption to make, but plausible.

That theory implied that Central Command in Saigon had a mole. Given the possibility of a diplomatic fallout, prior to the attack, various departments received updates regarding the attack itself. That theory however, no matter how remote, was an eventuality that made the Colonel uncomfortable even if it had briefly crossed his mind.

A mole in Saigon? In the MacV? Jesus Christ – he thought.

Let's hope it's just me being suspicious.

“Colonel, most of them are in there now and we’re almost ready for debriefing,” Garner informed him.

Being ready as well, Trautman therefore made his way out of Central Command without Garner, who stopped to pick up some documents first.

*

Trautman walked past some trenches where fluorescent cigarette cherries were floating around in the dark right before going into the tent complex that housed teams returning from their missions.

The Baker Team tent wasn’t far from the shower room located near the main hall. As Trautman proceeded in that direction, he glanced over at the showers, where he noticed a figure sitting alone, without moving.

It was Jorgenson.

He was in the shower-room sitting on a change-room bench, as stock-still as a statue. Trautman looked at him carefully.

The soldier still had the same t-shirt, pants and gun belt on from his last mission. He was completely covered in mud of course, with the only exception being the area

his gear had covered which was now, easily distinguishable down his back. Far more importantly however, was the 1911 ordinance that was dangling like a dead weight from his right hand. The second he came to terms with what he was witnessing, Trautman stopped dead in his tracks. Something was wrong. It was then that Jorgenson happened to turn towards him, but he seemed to look through Colonel. That's when the Colonel really moved closer to get a better look.

He could clearly see the hammer was up, which meant the gun was loaded and had a bullet in the chamber. The weapon Jorgenson was holding was ready to fire.

"Grizzly," Trautman found himself calling out, but Jorgenson was too far to hear. Jorgenson was in another world. His eyes on the other hand began to move rapidly past the Colonel apparently following something that only he could see. One got the impression he was daydreaming.

"Carl," Trautman said again in a low voice.

Perhaps that had done it, but Jorgenson seemed to snap out of his dream, turning towards Trautman while he did. His eyes were forlorn and distant. Perhaps he had actually heard the Colonel, but his attention was clearly somewhere else and the Colonel was only a distraction.

"Carl."
"Sir... "

Trautman didn't move. An interlude silence ensued between them, but at long last, Jorgenson was the one to break it.

"Could you make it look like I died in combat?" he asked him.

Trautman swallowed. There was suddenly a heavy weight on his chest making it impossible to breathe. The loaded handgun, the look on his face... Trautman was even afraid to make the slightest move. He was frozen. He didn't know what to say or do. He wanted to cry out for help, but that probably would have been a mistake too, so he remained stock-still for what felt lasted an eternity.

Trautman wanted to say something, anything actually, in order to buy time. Sooner or later, he was sure someone would have walked by, wouldn't they? He wished he could make him see reason, yet somehow...

He simply couldn't.

He couldn't even try.

He had the feeling that whatever he eventually said to Jorgenson, it would end with him pointing the gun anyway, and the Colonel wouldn't have been able to stop him. The truth of the matter was that there was no way for the Colonel to reach out. It was impossible because he had little more than a few seconds to answer Jorgenson's question, when he finally did. Not having time to think, Trautman replied, in the heat of the moment, saying the only thing that came to mind, which was the truth.

Could you make it look like I died in combat?

"Yes, Carl. I think I could."

Once he'd heard himself say it however, Trautman realized he had sentenced the young man to his death.

In fact, Jorgenson lifted the gun and put it up against his head

As Trautman heard him take a deep breath, his eyes burned like fire.

Think – Trautman said to himself.

Think.

Yet, he couldn't.

Jorgenson saluted in military fashion, using his gun rather than his hand.

His eyes were jerking back and forth struggling to follow what wasn't actually there.

Trautman wanted to pull the gun out of his hand.

He wanted to jump on him and do whatever it took to disarm him but he was well aware it wouldn't have worked under those circumstances, nor from that distance.

Nothing in the world could have made a difference at that moment.

Jorgenson froze for a split second, pointing the pistol at his temple in military salute, until he eventually said:

"Permission to be dismissed, Sir."

Trautman took a deep breath and looked up.

He could hardly breathe. There were tears in his eyes.

Jorgenson on the contrary, stared blankly into space, waiting for permission, and when finally turned, the Colonel saw his finger gently pull on the trigger.

"Wait!" cried Trautman.

At the end of hallway, some personnel had finally noticed there was something terribly wrong and moved closer to check for themselves.

When someone was actually at the door, Trautman quickly glanced towards him,

begging with his eyes. He was concerned that Jorgenson would see him do it and he'd react. Fortunately, he hadn't.

Turning his attention back to Jorgenson, Trautman sensed that something had changed.

When their eyes met, Trautman could feel how absent he was.

Jorgenson's eyes seemed infinite in depth, demonstrating the dark, bottomless well that his soul had become. They looked so dark it almost scared the Colonel and he didn't dare cross them. The sensation was so real he could practically touch it.

It was like falling into the abyss. A forge made of darkness, death, and dead bodies. It represented the kind of pain Trautman couldn't bring himself to deal with.

If that was what the young man had desperately tried to overcome, Trautman certainly couldn't deny him the right to free himself from it. No, he couldn't be that cruel to one of his own men.

Permission to be dismissed, Sir.

It was his right. As his commander, Trautman had no choice but to grant it.

Yet, he struggled.

He had sentenced many to death in his lifetime. He'd given orders to do horrible things and now, he was paying the price for every single one of them. Not once but *thousands* of times, and would continue paying for the rest of his life, of course.

He'd sent entire teams to their deaths or missions where they were lost in Godforsaken places.

He'd had Southern Vietnamese civilians and military killed, guilty some of the time but innocent the rest. That conflict had escalated into an all-out, full-blown war for a very long inside him, but accepted orders to fight it, using any and every mean necessary.

Getting his hands bloody was part of the job and he'd been doing it now for years.

Yet, for some odd reason, at that moment, he just couldn't let go of the only soldier who, of all people, really wanted "to go."

One who was actually asking for permission to do so. At least that's what the Colonel thought until those damn words finally came out of his mouth, on their own accord.

That was how, without thinking, Trautman was able to answer Jorgenson eventually.

"Permission granted, soldier," he said to him in the end.

Silence ensued. Jorgenson took his last deep breath.

Bang.

There was a loud noise when the bullet whizzed through the tent after passing through the back of Jorgenson's head.

Bits of skull had flown onto the tent floor, along with blood, hair and a greasy, grey substance. An entire portion of his head had literally exploded into thin air.

The pistol had dropped out of the soldier's hand and fallen to the floor with a loud thud.

Jorgenson slowly tipped to one side before collapsing onto the bench completely and his nose was bleeding so hard there was a puddle forming on the floor. The dead soldier's arm crossed his chest in a childlike position seemingly alive.

Jesus fucking Christ – gasped Trautman.

It was likely to be nothing more than a reflex. It couldn't have been more than a muscle spasm because the idea that Jorgenson was still alive in those agonizing last seconds was too hard to fathom even for someone like Trautman.

During the course of the incident, the Colonel had decided to stay still and right in his place. Actually, he'd managed despite the horrific show to keep still from its start to its bitter end.

His concern was that someone might have tried to help Jorgenson, in which case he'd be there to prevent it. Trying to help Jorgenson would have not only been harrowing but useless as well.

That night, Trautman chose to stay on site because soldiers did that kind of thing quite often. He was aware it happened more frequently when it involved friends. One always helps a friend, even when he's already dead and for good. Initially, one can't accept it has happened for real. Therefore, even in the case that there's nothing further to be done, we try.

Trautman had seen it all before in Korea and the notion someone could act the same way terrified him. Anyone attempting to *touch* Jorgenson right in front of him was unbearable.

The first to stand behind the Colonel was the man who had witnessed the whole thing standing at the hall door. Not long after, Rambo showed up too.

“JORGENSON!” he cried out.

Trautman watched a few other men from his staff come onto the scene, including Garner, and that's when Jorgenson's death truly hit him. The Colonel looked sadly back at Jorgenson.

He looked at *his* soldier, *his* man, almost a son, and then looked at what the hell he had just done to himself. Trautman knew exactly what the young man had battled against, all inside of him. He knew it was his entire fault too.

Suddenly Trautman found himself having to use force to block Rambo with his arm, from charging to Jorgenson's lifeless body.

Well, well, look who's here – he thought to himself.

Here's the absolute lunatic of a first responder to the rescue. It was all developing as Trautman had predicted out would.

He should have known that someone from the Baker Team would have been the one doing the job too. After all, it was customary for regular soldiers to become friends with time, but when it came to Special Forces members, they went a step further and became family.

“*JORGENSOOOON!*” Rambo bellowed with all his might for the second time.

“*Jorgenson, NOOO!*” He had lost all self-control almost to the point of seeming out of his mind.

-

Like scenes from a film, Rambo watched as the images flashed right before his eyes. There they were, only the two of them as plain as day in front of him. He watched while they plunged into filthy water in an effort to remain unseen by the Vietcong on their Point Of No Return mission. Unable to look away he stared passively while the dirty brown-coloured water just around them, was transforming into a darker murky red because of Jorgenson being shot in the neck.

Jorgenson had got *nasty* on that mission.

Jorgenson had acted maliciously towards Rambo, and since then, Rambo had felt there was unfinished business between them. He had the impression that Jorgenson presently seemed interested in settling that business, then and there. In reality, he wanted to take the very same life Rambo had made gruelling sacrifices to save. He thought back to the time when they were in Laos together, at the time he didn't particularly want to survive there either. Rambo had forced him into surviving, against his own will. In hindsight of his suicide, Rambo began piecing events and behaviours together and eventually understood.

Jorgenson had never wanted to come back alive from that mission.

He'd wanted to stay there and die a hero, but Rambo had stopped him from doing so. Now, as a direct consequence of that, he had taken his own life.

-

“*NO, NO, NO.*” Rambo continued to cry aloud Rambo while Trautman struggled to hold him back, using all his brute strength as he did.

“*NO, NO, NOOOOOOOO!*”

The young man was strong, extremely strong.

He could have got away from the Colonel easily had he genuinely wanted, but a part of him had started to accept the reality that trying to help Jorgenson was, in all actuality, futile.

Trautman kept his arms locked tight around Rambo, until he finally gave up, and stopped shaking for good.

Only seconds later, tears fell from his eyes, as he leaned up against Trautman.

-

Messner was next to witness the scene.

Contrary to what the others had done however, he kept himself from getting to close almost as though something worried him, almost afraid in a sense that what had happened to his friend could somehow have happened to him too. It may have been contagious, or a disease of some kind.

Consequently, he stopped once he'd reached the halfway point. Even at that distance, there were bloodstains and bits of brain and skull. He may have been a doctor, but in that situation, it didn't seem to make any kind of difference.

The feeling inside him made him sick, it was so disgusting and kept him from thinking straight.

There was a mixture of repulsion, horror and nausea inside of him, none of which he had felt for a long time. At least since when he'd been a medical student performing his first autopsy. In this case, only the smell was different.

There was fucking something about Vietnam. It could even make him regress at times. It never failed, just when he thought to have hit rock bottom, there was always a rockier bottom, ready to replace it. Much deeper and a lot rockier.

There was always something *worse* in that fucking war.

-

When Ortega walked into the corridor leading to the showers, he couldn't help but notice a small group of people that had gathered around its entrance. It didn't take more than the look on their faces for him to understand the nature of the shot he'd just heard and put together the whole picture. Once he overcame some initial reservations, Ortega continued down the corridor and towards the group of people still gathered at the door.

He needed to know. He really needed to know!

Eventually he found himself standing at the shower door entrance.

At first, he couldn't see anything past the people in front of him except for blood. As he slowly moved past them, he realized there was an arm dangling off the bench but that was it because Berry blocked him from going any further before he could get any closer. Once what he's seen had sunk in, the very thought was enough to make him start shaking.

"Grizzly," was all Berry said into his ear, still holding him back.

"It's Grizzly."

Not seeing was far worse for Ortega however, because it allowed his worst fears to prevail, as if the idea that Jorgenson could still be alive somewhere and there was no one there to help him. Thus, in the end Berry loosened his grip on Ortega just enough for him to get a glance. That glance made Ortega weak at the knees, and he wasn't

sure how he managed to keep on standing.

-

Still holding Rambo, Trautman had the good sense to stretch out his arm and pull the tent door closed. At least that hid most of the scene from the crowd now gathering around the doorstep.

“You alright?” asked Trautman shortly after.

“Yes,” replied Rambo.

“You sure?”

“I said yes,” answered Rambo brusquely as he wiped tears from his eyes and stopped fighting Trautman.

“Okay, fine,” said the Colonel, letting Rambo go.

Then he turned towards the crowd and said:

“That man died fighting,” he said.

Then he added:

“And there's no need for me to tell you why. Am I clear?”

Everyone nodded, whether they belonged to the Baker Team or not.

“Very well,” the Colonel said in closing.

He was referring to whether Jorgenson would receive a pension or not, of course. Had the soldier's suicide gone public, the army wouldn't have issued his pension to family members. That explained why Trautman not only used the tone he had, but also why he examined all their faces so carefully. When he finished, he'd the impression that he wasn't going to have any problems in the future because of them. That in itself was positive for it would have made things a whole lot easier.

“Fine,” Trautman added, but his voice broke with tears and it surprised him. He closed his eyes however, took a deep breath and pulled himself back together again.

He had to find a way to live in harmony with what he had done.

He had to take full responsibility for it. From that day and on, Trautman wouldn't have to just live with what he'd said (*permission granted, soldier*) but especially, he would have to live the rest of his life accepting what he'd done to Jorgenson *before* that.

Yes. Deep inside, Trautman knew it was his fault.

Trautman walked out of the showers where the incident had taken place and headed quickly towards to his accommodations. After only a few steps, the whole world seemed to be coming down on him and he couldn't breathe.

Trautman shut his eyes tight and then reopened them again.

He inhaled deeply and tried to steady his walk.

Nevertheless, his eyes were burning because, truth be told, it was his fault.

It was entirely his fault. No doubt about it. He was aware of the mental illness Jorgenson had had.

What made matters worse however was just how long he'd known it.

Trautman leaned against one of the poles outside his tent.

A feeling of anguish was growing inside him, almost painful.

Jorgenson had suffered brain damage on Mission Black Spot.

There was no doubt about it.

The problem was that his will to stay on the team was so strong that Trautman had decided to give him the chance despite this and Ortega had agreed. To grant him that chance however, Trautman had to ignore all the medical advice they'd received. At the time, he didn't have any other choice because had anyone heard what 'strange pattern of behaviour' came with 'severe cranial concussion', they would have considered Jorgenson nothing but an idiot 'an idiot', and he wouldn't have been allowed into the Army. That's how the Army used to work back then and there were no 'ifs' or 'buts' about it. In the sixties, the brain was still something completely unexplored and had anyone demonstrated behaviour that was believed to be unstable, they were immediately rejected because of medical reasons.

Nevertheless, men that used to drink, take drugs and mad were plentiful during that war, and very few of them were so, due to a concussion. Therefore, rather than making Jorgenson undergo a series of medical exams, the kind Rambo had recommended Trautman do after Point Of No Return, the Colonel rather let Ortega decide whether to keep the guy or not. It was a decision based on the kind of performance Jorgenson had given. What this all meant was putting him to the test, of course. Jorgenson had received orders to take a long leave after Black Spot. When he started back up again he had had to work out much more than the others and right from the get go in order to put himself back in shape. Ortega had therefore put him under an intense workout program that, should have served as the perfect circumstances for such a test. It would have been just like the type of test they used to do back in the good old days in Fort Bragg. That would have provided a real no-

bullshit-assessment with regards to the soldier's performance. Ultimately, Jorgenson had done it. He'd passed every one of the tests. As Ortega had put it:

“He is not the same man he used to be. Regardless of his current condition, he's still far better than anyone else from the Fifth. This therefore could only imply that despite his condition, every other man, compared to him would still be a far worse choice.”

Fact of the matter was that it was true. Every word of it rang true.

The problem was that Jorgenson had passed all the tests that Ortega had assigned because he was the kind of man who wouldn't give up. He hadn't passed because there was no brain damage. Hence, while on his Point of No Return Mission, those problems had come to the surface. They proved to be so evident indeed that Rambo, who knew nothing about the issue at the time, had actually suggested Jorgenson be visited by an expert upon their return from 'Point of No Return'.

Once again, Trautman preferred to give Jorgenson the benefit of the doubt. In the end, the idea of making that kind of decision based on field test performance both times was *his*, not Ortega's nor anybody else's. He believed it was the right decision as was the decision to go along with Jorgenson's last wish.

One last mission – thought Trautman after the messy outcome of Point Of No Return but before sending him to The Devil's Den. *Only one more mission is needed to understand whether he is still fit to fight or not.*

It was necessary to remove any doubts that could actually ruin his career without reason or based on brain damage that may not have actually occurred.

A calculated risk worth taking, or at least that's what he'd thought till then.

What a big mistake...

What a stupid mistake he'd made with him!

Trautman was more than surprised; it was shock once he ascertained the true gravity of what he'd done. Once he comprehended the severity of his actions, he had to cover his mouth in an effort to hold in his sobs. He was worried someone would hear him.

How many people have lost their lives because of wrong decisions he'd made?

How many in total?

How many in Korea?

How many in Vietnam?

Less than fifty maybe? Almost a hundred? Over a hundred perhaps?

Had his decisions made any kind of difference on the outcome of The Korean war itself? What about with regards the Vietnam War and its outcome?

How much blood did he have on his hands? Thousands of lives?

Was the number closer to the figures sustained by Westmorland had caused so in the tens of thousands. Could it be even more than that?

He felt queasy all of a sudden..
He was going to puke.

I can't afford it – he thought to himself.
I can't let myself go.
I can't let it go.
I have to be strong.
I have to be tough for my men

I've made many mistakes in my life, too many one could easily argue. Despite the mistakes however, no one else out there cared about those men the way I did. I would do anything for them.

There isn't anybody, anywhere who could do what I'm doing, or as well as I'm doing it.

This brought back a string of memories. Images started flashing before his eyes of his childhood, his friends, and his dog. He can remember playing cowboys and Indians almost the same way he was doing now. The only difference was that now they were adults and some of them were even generals of the US Army.

There was a knot in his throat again.

He knew that feeling all too well and he knew what that meant. There was no mistaking it.

He'd already felt the exact same way in Korea, but so many years had passed since then.

He was getting old.

He was getting soft, having too many doubts far too many flashbacks and always full of sadness and desperation. Only year ago, he'd have given his life no questions asked to keep South Vietnam from being wiped off the face of the map. If someone asked him the very same question now however, he wasn't sure if he'd be willing to die for them anymore.

He was giving up. He couldn't handle it anymore, even if a lifetime had passed since he'd too the last time. He wasn't used to fighting that kind of feeling at all.

Jorgenson, Jorgenson, Jorgenson...

Despite the desperation, it didn't take him long at all to calm himself down again. He looked up with tearful eyes and suddenly those feelings just seemed to stop.

The Colonel stood back up, straightened his jacket and adjusted his green beret. The look in his eyes was different now, full of confidence and distant, the way it did when he engaged distant targets even if his eyes were still swollen and his cheeks tears stained.

Jorgenson – he thought for the last time, but it was nothing more than an echo in his head and he was finally got out and in the open.

The Colonel found himself staring into the darkness right in front of him and then up at the dark mountain peaks which dominated from above.

He would have won that war without a doubt, and he'd win it in the name of Jorgenson and Krakauer.

Moreover, for Ward, Torrance, Perez... - he thought as began walking again.

Those were such painful memories and there were so many of them too.

The reality of this hit him suddenly and the more he saw, the more he saw it to be true. There were just so many he could remember them all, each and every one of them. Even those from a long time ago.

*Wood,
Diaz,
Colin,
Kirby...*

They were dozens of faces and names all tangled up together. Some were clearer than others, while some were nearly invisible, almost lost in that haze of memories, phantom-like.

Some of them didn't exist inside him anymore, but this did not keep them from adding to the weight that was building up on his chest. It made breathing almost impossible filling him with rage at the same time. Uncontrollable rage. It couldn't and wasn't going to end this way.

Not a chance.

Nothing was over.

Nothing is over – he thought to himself wiping his eyes dry.

Somewhere in the United States, six years later.

“Mommy, what does it feel like to die?”

“It's just like falling asleep, my dearest.”

“Do you think daddy is dreaming about us right now?”

“Of course he is sweetie. He's dreaming about us for sure”

Mary and Virginia Jorgenson, 1975

*“I can't say exactly when it was that I started to fancy war [...].
There's no other test like it, nothing as final as that in a man's life.*

*In violence on the other hand, you might say that a man finds, or rather finds again,
his own eminence. I don't know [...] initially I had my doubts but then a feelings of
eminence came over me and I started to enjoy being in Vietnam. Exultation only
comes from a certain type of act, like one of heroism and nothing else.
No one can act indifferently towards heroism, and the natural environment of
heroism. After all, it's war.”*

Oriana Fallaci, *“Nothing, and so be it”*, 1968

RAMBO YEAR ONE
TAKE ME TO THE DEVIL

THE END

To my readers,

What I'm about to tell you is one of those things that readers usually get wrong about writers and one that I'd like to clear up, or what I mean is, be as clear as possible about how it pertains to me. It's popular belief that a writer always enjoys writing something as much as the reader enjoyed reading it. In reality, that's not generally true however.

Well, not at all, actually.

In fact, it isn't only the contrary but the polar-opposite.

Writing that book hurt like hell, almost physical. The kind of pain that makes you lose your appetite during the day and keeps you awake at night.

But why?

Why did I feel the need to go as far as that? Probably since in the end, it didn't really matter how far I went because it was *never* far enough.

No matter how much pain I searched for from within, it couldn't suffice. Nothing seemed to do it justice and words alone, no matter how extreme, didn't proportionally demonstrate even a fraction of what that war had really been.

I really couldn't portray what was in my thoughts. There wasn't any way to render it in its entirety. This was therefore, the primary reason I never stopped. When someone comes to pass on the page of a book, you, I mean the author of course, have to die together with him, in a literary sense. Why? Well, that's how it works and that's the way it should work. When it doesn't, the story you're trying to tell just turns into a pile of shit. Shit over which you may be able to ponder a bit maybe, but it will never be authentic, or portray the kind of emotion that can reach out from your heart and get inside someone else's. As a result, I had no other choice when I began this journey writing this saga.

There's something I need to tell you, despite being at a loss and unable to explain the reason why. Writing "TAKE ME TO THE DEVIL" was, I have to admit, one of the most painful books I've ever written.

Okay.

I said it.

Now I don't want to talk about me any longer.
Nor about you neither.

No I would like to be clear about something else, but this time I want to come clear with the veterans in case of any of them will ever read a Rambo-prequel work. Whether any of them will ever actually do or not, it doesn't really matter. I want to clarify this thing anyway.

To Vietnam's veterans,

I hope you understood that this was a sincere tribute coming from the best intentions, and nothing else than that.

I don't envy for what you have suffered, don't misunderstand me for God's sake... I envy you for what you are now.

Because inside your books, websites and forums...

In every place where you gather and talk about yourself, I *always* found values so strong to be almost overwhelming in their mighty: solidarity, loyalty and that very strong sense of family that overcomes everything, always and no matter what.

Even when you never met in person you consider yourselves brothers to each other anyway, because you went through something terrible and it's something you can talk honestly about only to each other's and with nobody else because nobody else in the world can understand it, not even after all of those years. Not even the streams of books that have been written about of films shots.

Because it's not just something impossible to tell, but it's impossible to understand too.

I know a song that tells about feelings like those ones and I would like to dedicate it to you as an ending signature song of this novel.

It's called '*Nothing Else Matters*', and even if it wasn't written and doesn't talk about the veterans, it's perfect anyway both in terms of texts and music, so let me dedicate it to you veterans as if it was some kind of signature song at the end of this *Take me to the devil* novel of mine.

If you have it in a drawer, this is the right moment to pull this song out or searching it on YouTube as '*nothing else matters*', which is a very fast way to listen to it now, if you have an internet connection. Let's play it now, in some kind of salute to each others from this novel.

Thank you all for staying here with me for all of those years, all of you, whoever you are.

Thanks again.

Thanks from the heart.

Ciao.

Wallace Lee, 17-7-2019

Nothing else matters
- Metallica -

So close no matter how far
Couldn't be much more from the heart
Forever trust in who we are
And nothing else matters

Never opened myself this way
Life is ours, we live it our way

All these words I don't just say
And nothing else matters

Trust I seek and I find in you
Every day for us something new
Open mind for a different view
And nothing else matters

Never care for what they do
Never care for what they know
'cause I know

COMING NEXT

RAMBO YEAR ONE MOUNTAIN HUNT



WRITTEN BY WALLACE LEE

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

RAMBO YEAR ONE

MOUNTAIN HUNT

The beginning of the end -

COMING SOON