

LARRY FARR  
IF MEN  
WERE GODS

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If Men Were Gods  
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*This work is dedicated to Nancy and Nikkie  
who has provided us with angels and Hope.*



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Although this novel is set in locales of actual existence, the characters and their dialog are products of the author's imagination and do not portray actual persons or events. Any resemblance to anyone living or dead is entirely coincidental. To all who have given me instruction germane to this novel many thanks are given.



*“Democracy would be the finest tool for the governing of civilizations, if men were gods.”*

- Critical remark attributed to an anonymous citizen-philosopher, Athens, Greece, circa 550 B.C.



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## PROLOGUE

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APRIL, 1968 – 2 A.M.

At zero two hundred hours, twelve hundred feet above Fort Benning, Georgia, the sixty-four graduates of the grueling ten-week United States Army Basic Training “boot camp”, plus an additional two months of Advanced Individual Training – Infantry, were now fresh recruits for the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions. These young men spent the last few moments before “Hook up” in mental states ranging from nervous resignation of the inevitable to abject, barely controllable fear. After ten days of jump school training, they were waiting for their first “free fall.” Unfortunately for this newest group of airborne personnel, the winds during the day had prevented their jump during the more salutary daytime hours, but with the increasing casualties of airborne troops in Vietnam, it was necessary to expedite the company through the jump phase and final graduation ASAP. Therefore, their first jump, usually scheduled for daylight hours, would be in the fifth or last jump slot – the night jump. Over the roar of the C-130’s four powerful turbo-prop engines and the nauseating bouncing through wind turbulence, the pervading sense of the sixty-four men seated in four rows in the jump bay was impending, undiluted terror, and all senses were on hyper-alert as eyes twitched and skin tingled. Testosterone and anxiety caused secretions to gather at armpits and groins, combining to form a cloying funk within the confines of the large-belly aircraft.

Two para-doors at the rear of the plane, one on the starboard and one on the port side, were unlocked and raised on sliders by the sergeant jumpmasters. The cold air immediately chilled the sweat-moistened skin of the recruits. Two other, more senior jumpmasters checked each doorway with extreme care for sharp metal splinters that could snag canvas and spurs that might tear silk. The recruits gained some solace and confidence from this solemn and sensible ritual. The more senior jumpmasters got to their feet and turned to face the seated recruits.

“All stand.” With arms stretched out to their sides and palms up, they motioned their charges over the slipstream noise of wind current and prop wash pulling the plane at one-hundred-twenty miles per hour – just over its stall speed.

Sixty-four recruits obeyed.

“All hook up.” The instructors mimicked the hooking of the main parachutes’ static line to the half-inch-twisted-steel anchor cables running the length of the forward bulkhead behind the pilot’s cockpit past the jump doors: one cable dedicated to the starboard side and the other for portside personnel.

Sixty-four recruits obeyed.

Other jumpmasters checked each recruit to make sure his static line would not foul in his jump pack. If it did, the jumper would be in the air and tethered to the plane and have no choice but to use his M3 trench knife secured in a scabbard at his chest to cut away the static line and rely on his reserve parachute – never a pleasant experience, as seen in the training films to which they had paid acute attention the previous week.

The first ones out the door were termed number one jumpers. These were often, though not always, experienced paratroopers, occasionally a class instructor and they stood by the two openings acting with the good intention of a Judas goat. On a signal from the senior jumpmaster and leading the two sticks of thirty-one men each, they straight-armed their static lines to the two sergeants stationed at the port and starboard doorways. During post-jump, these two sergeants would be responsible for gathering the lines “in the wind” back into the plane by the tried-and-true method of strong hand over strong hand. On a hand-tap signal on their back thigh the number ones propelled themselves out the openings and the line of recruits dutifully followed.

*Private George Slay is tenth in line on the starboard side and as he quick-shuffles behind the man in front of him, he repeats a simple mantra – “Push off firmly. Six ‘n thirty-six. Push off firmly. Six ‘n thirty-six.” One training film had shown a recruit faltering at the door, fear and apprehension making his legs quiver, and instead of a firm push off, he fell to his knees at the doorway and was unceremoniously kicked off into space by the attending jumpmaster closest to him – the one receiving the static line before the trooper stumbled at the door. It was a humiliating scene to George and he swore he would not get jelly ankles at the push off point. The man in front of him disappears out the door and George steps forward and stiff- arms his static line to the*

*jumpmaster who secures it in his hand and motions the private to the doorway. Private Slay moves to the opening and time slows down in his mind. Even as he takes the two shuffle-steps to the open door, he takes in and remembers in precise detail the next seconds of his life.*

*He faces the dread of cold wind and black void filled with nothing but the harsh growl of the two starboard turboprop engines and the accompany slipstream noise. Overcoming man's natural inclination to not leap out the doorway of a perfectly good aircraft, George's left foot finds the push off edge and he firmly propels himself into chilled air as black as pitch - towards oblivion.*

*Veterans referred to this as a Hollywood jump without the additional weight of weaponry and combat gear. Thus, George Aristotle Slay - his given name a continuation of his paternal line as his father sought self-replication and unintentionally created an upgrade - while his middle was a mother's hope for the ever-continuing quest for wisdom. Aristotle was a dubious christening since George had just exited from said perfectly good aircraft with a six-inch step up and a thirty-six-inch stride out, thinking he might float, as he had off the two-hundred-fifty-foot tower at jump school at Fort Benning with an attached parachute already opened. But he did not float – he felt the full gravitational pull of Mother Earth as the frigid wind tore at his face and knew he was plummeting toward the ground at 120 miles per hour. He experienced four full seconds of frightening free fall, the most vivid and profound experience of his eighteen-year-old life, and was tempted to pull the ripcord to deploy his reserve chute when his main canopy caught air and jerked him abruptly with nary a tangled line. He held on to his risers and, as he descended, had the impression he was floating through a divine and physical hush, a silence so total it was as if God Himself was holding His breath and had sucked up all noise. As far as George was concerned, Private Slay was earning a perfect score on his first jump.*

Until he realized he was coasting toward Earth at fourteen miles per hour and still had to land with a minimum of damage to himself as well as his equipment, which belonged to the United States Army – much as George himself belonged to the United States Army. He sensed more than saw the ground seconds before he hit, and that was enough time to prepare him for the shock of landing, rolling, and coming up on his feet, much like an alley cat used to hard knocks. Gathering his chute, he heard other jumpers

cheering their successes and joined in. He knew the other four jumps - daytime jumps - after this one would be a piece of cake. And George, having grown up surrounded by confections, had developed an appreciation for cake.

# Book One



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## CHAPTER 1

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**MAY, 1968**

**A**t zero six-thirty, the morning sun an hour into the cloudless sky, the Bell UH-1 Huey, carrying four fresh replacements for the 3rd Battalion of the 187th Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division, landed in the pickup zone. This flattened piece of real estate had been recently blown out of the jungle in the A Shau Valley by numerous “Daisy cutters”, 15,000-pound bombs exploded just above the ground, clearing away trees and all types of vegetation without creating blast craters to impede the soon to arrive transportation helicopters. George Slay was first to hop out of the ship onto the pickup zone, followed closely by three others, and was immediately met by a tall, raw-boned man who reminded him of a hard-scrabble farmer. The man announced his name as Sergeant Wilcoxon and said, “Follow me,” and the four new guys were quick on the sergeant’s trail. George observed about five hundred troops of the 3rd Battalion milling about, some giving the four new guys a look-over before returning to their conversations, letter writing to the folks or girlfriend back home or perusing well-worn paperback books. Many were smoking cigarettes, for some their last. A few tended their weapons, some napped. The sergeant led them to Alpha Company’s First Platoon and introduced them to their commanding officer, Lieutenant Warren Wylie, a West Point graduate and already a veteran of two tours in Vietnam. He was a sturdily-built, no-nonsense young officer who chose to lead his men from the front, not drive them from the rear which won a warrior’s confidence and respect. He looked up from an acetate-filmed map and made eye contact with four expectant faces.

“We are going to ‘saddle up’ and C-A in about two hours,” he informed the four newbies calmly - as if piling into a Huey for a combat assault was an everyday experience, which, for Wylie, an army lifer, it was. To the sergeant he ordered, “Wilcoxon, you divvy them up two in First Squad, one in Second Squad and one in Fourth Squad. Make sure their squad leaders give them

extra ammo and topped off canteens.” He continued to look the four new men in the eyes, taking their measure and pointed over his shoulder with a thumb. “We’re going up that hill five miles behind me to win the hearts and minds of the misguided natives and establish a command post for the colonel to monitor his military operations. He wants us to secure a base camp today so we can C-A to the crest tomorrow and by nightfall he can have the high ground advantage in this valley. We expect some resistance so keep your senses about you and remember your training. Keep your head out of your ass and you should be okay. Good luck.” With that the lieutenant returned to studying his map.

Sergeant Wilcoxon led privates Slay and Griffin to the first squad, introduced them to Specialist 4th Class Zaricki, and told him to settle in the new guys with ammo and water. Wilcoxon departed with the two other newbies, leaving George and Griffin in the care of a thick man with a shaved head and an olive drab towel around his substantial neck to absorb the sweat from the 80 degrees Fahrenheit heat building on the denuded pick-up zone before 7 a.m. With his name stenciled in black above his shirt pocket Zaricki’s huge shoulders rolled in his camouflaged fatigues as he approached the two new guys with the heavy gait of a pit bull. These were fuckin’ new guys to the combat vets. They would be fuckin’ old guys if they performed well during their first time of combat. There was no time in between experiences for incremental growth. This attitude, cemented in Zaricki’s mind was never far from his rhetoric.

“How tall are you?” he asked gruffly, addressing Griffin.

“About five-ten,” Griffin answered back in a friendly Southern drawl.

“Didn’t know they stacked dog crap that high,” Zaricki retorted loud enough to draw chuckles from the other members of the squad.

“Hey, listen. . .,” Griffin objected, and Zaricki responded by taking a step forward and getting nose to nose with Griffin.

“You listen up, fuckin’ new guy – you do not talk, you do not think. Until you’ve been out in the high-grass shit and put in some combat trigger time and I can trust you to cover my back you just watch and learn. Got that? Watch and learn.” Zaricki, who’d been “in-country” for six months and had seen plenty of combat trigger time, turned on George Slay. Rather than being nose to nose, he could look down on George - all five foot six of him - and George’s ruddy face held contempt that Zaricki recognized. “Well, numb nuts, what’s your problem?”

“Assholes are my problem, Zaricki. But not so much a problem as a minor inconvenience,” George answered without raising his voice. His father had moved the family on an annual basis, always searching for a better environment to ply his only entrepreneurial skill - a chocolatier, of

the neighborhood store variety. George, always behind on the growth curve - perhaps due to genetics or poor nutrition or height stunted by child abuse - had drawn the attention of class bullies at each new school, usually on the first day. By the fifth grade, he'd given up on trying to talk his way out of fist fights and instead took his lumps. By junior high, his fighting skills had improved such that he had a respectable 50-50 win to loss ratio. During his senior year of high school nobody messed with George Aristotle Slay. But Zaricki was unaware of George's pedigree and in front of the squad the bigger soldier had no choice but to respond like a brute – the mark of a man who talks before thinking.

“You little shit, are you challenging me?”

“Believe me, Zeke. You're no challenge.”

Zaricki had never been called “Zeke” before, but he liked the nickname. Still, the little redheaded guy - red on the head like a dick on a dog - ballsy as he might be, was going down. He liked his ‘Red on the head like a dick on a dog’ comparison and wished he had voiced it but had missed the timing. Instead he responded with the common school ground taunt, “You just shovel bull shit or back it up some?”

George placed his M16 rifle against a fallen tree, followed by a bandolier of ammo. His trench knife was next and once taken from his chest scabbard he sportingly flung it to the ground as a prelude to the liability awaiting the bigger man; sticking it deep and within six inches of Zaricki's left boot.

The large man did not flinch. “We aren't playing Mumbley-peg.”

“That's true,” George said and grinned at Zeke, the same confident way he had smiled at all bullies since entering high school; since he had taught himself how to throw punches and avoid them. “Fighting talks and bull shit walks.”

Zaricki was cautious now. Things were not going as he'd planned. “You know what I'm going to do to you?” he threatened.

“You are going to bleed on me, Zeke. That's what you are going to do.”

The rest of the squad and most of the platoon had gathered and was paying attention to the confrontation, hoping for a fight and curious about how the little fuckin' new guy was going to fare against the strongest member of their company. Not well, was the consensus. Lieutenant Wylie happened to stroll by, headed to the officer latrines for his pre-C-A dump. Zaricki sought an ally.

“Hey, lieutenant, check it out. This carrot-top titmouse wants a bite of the big cheese.” Zaricki immediately felt pleased that this time he had found the words to his quick-thinking estimation of his opponent. He was unaware that ‘titmouse’ referred to a small bird.

Wylie stopped and took in the amassed interest of his platoon. The upcoming C-A momentarily forgotten, the soldiers appeared relaxed and curious about the confrontation. Pre-battle nerves quieted for a moment was beneficial to all, except maybe this little new guy who was sure to get his ass kicked. But who isn't expendable for the greater good? Wylie mused. The lieutenant sat on the log next to George's M16, lighted a filtered cigarette, and crossed his arms – ringside seat secured. "So, what's the beef?" he asked the question to both men.

George answered first. "Zeke was figuring since I'm a fucking new guy, he can dig in my ass and come out smelling like a rose."

The lieutenant pondered this statement for a moment and grinned. He nodded his head, giving his blessing on the enterprise, loving the answer Slay had given for all to hear.

Stripping off his shirt to display an abundance of width and large muscles, Zaricki knew he had to fight, which surprised him. He thought the little guy would back down and when he didn't – well, there was nothing to be done about the situation now. Zaricki was a formidable foe. He knew his size usually intimidated others, so a fight, an actual fist fight between two angry combatants, had not often occurred in his history. It appeared this was about to change because the little guy had also removed his shirt and, with a pinched waist, a flat-plated chest peppered with small, circular scars and long, ropey arm muscles, was standing tall and bouncing on the balls of his feet in his combat boots. Zaricki noticed that, for a small guy George had oversized hands and when forming fists working to pump blood into his forearms, was creating a network of veins the diameter of pencils and knuckles the size of quarters.

The little guy was looking around for someone to ring the bell, which was just what the lieutenant did by mimicking pulling on a lanyard and saying "Ding-ding."

Zaricki figured he would steamroll the smallish new guy using strength, mass and banzai aggression. Zaricki charged. Unfortunately, he had come up against a man skilled in speed and finesse. George feinted to his left then moved to his right and left jabbed the bigger man over the heart, following with a hard right-cross, getting his shoulder and hip into it. Zaricki stopped, turned and raising a hand to his face confirmed the sensation of blood dripping from his mouth. He now stalked George with more cunning.

Zaricki was quicker than he looked; a lesson George paid for by being late getting under a wheelhouse aimed at his ear. George ducked but not fast enough and caught a meaty fist across his scalp that nonetheless nearly knocked him over. George, nimble getting his feet under him danced

backward letting Zaricki believe he had done some damage and when Zeke took a too-confident step toward George expecting him to react by dancing another step backwards George caught the big man off guard and instead took two quick steps into Zaricki and gave him a left to the nose and another right to the mouth. Zaricki's blood flowed freely from his nose and the strike had the added dual bonus of blackening the sacks under his eyes to the color of eggplant and puffing his eyes affecting his vision.

He spit out a tooth and commented with the expletive, "Thit!" Still he came at his opponent, making George revise his opinion of Zaricki. He might've been a bully but he was no quitter. It was time to end this, George decided, and slipped a poorly thrown left hook by the larger man and stepped inside to pummel Zaricki with three hard shots to the solar plexus. Zaricki went down to his knees with a gasp.

The lieutenant watched without comment, and with playful, understated applause rose off the log and continued toward the latrine.

The first post-fight words out of Zaricki's mouth were, "I lope a front tooph."

"A lateral incisor," George said picking the bloody object off the dirt and returning it to its owner; not the first dentition he had provided for an opponent. He helped Zaricki to his feet. Someone said, "Lost a tooth, gained a nickname. Good try, Zeke."

Zeke responded with a gapped smile. With his new identity established, he tossed the trophy in his hand, a souvenir to remember his Vietnam christening.

George had won a new identity for himself as well. His victory over the reputed strongest man in the entire company had provided the new guy with certain bona fides; credentials associated with genuine respect, definite admiration, an unvoiced degree of envy and yes, a measure of visceral fear from his fellow soldiers; comrades-in-arms who had already endured the 'high-grass shit' of Vietnam. George was now seen as a legitimate fighting man, his reputation starting with First Platoon and spreading to Alpha Company and finally through all of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. With his combat-creds firmly established without so much as firing a shot in anger George Slay deployed in the first of many dangerous missions in Southeast Asia.



Alpha Company's one hundred troops moved out on time, sixteen Huey personnel carriers taking six men per ride. The five-minute flight to the landing zone at the base of the colonel's mountain had been without incident, meaning they had received no enemy fire. In one of the first two Hueys to land simultaneously in the small landing zone were Lieutenant Wylie, 1st Sergeant Wilcoxon, George, Zeke, Griffin, and the 1st Platoon radioman. They all leaped from the Huey as it hovered five feet off the waist high elephant grass. "Establish a perimeter to the east," Wylie ordered and pointed.

The three soldiers from the lieutenant's helicopter and all six from the second proceeded east one hundred feet, grasping their weapons in one hand and with the other holding their chin-strapped lids from bouncing on their heads. The first sergeant stayed with the lieutenant and the radio tech to establish a temporary command post.

As the perimeter of the landing zone was developed and expanded with the arrival of seven more pairs of Huey's, talking and hearing became impossible. Thus, the first rocket-propelled grenade that struck the tail rotor of the last Huey and forced it to auto rotate into a controlled crash that flattened its landing gear came as a surprise. Some sniper fire from the tree line was followed by additional RPGs, and a couple of North Vietnam Army machine guns began to chatter. The landing zone was heating up and the men from Alpha Company were swift to respond. Lieutenant Wylie's First Platoon set up skirmish lines to the east, concentrating on the tree line from which many muzzle flashes could be seen. With the last of the Huey's on their way back to bring the rest of the four companies of Third Battalion, the sounds of a hot landing zone were becoming all too apparent. The thwack-thwack of supersonic AK-47 rounds filled the air as Alpha Company moved forward on all four sides to repress the incoming fire, and expand the perimeter for the next waves of arriving Huey's completing the five hundred-man battalion.

On the east side, George Slay was first into the jungle filled with a triple canopy of one-hundred-foot high dipterocarp hardwoods with full foliage at their tops. Between these giants, smaller trees and thick groupings of bamboo stood; portions of vines as thick as a man's wrist grew horizontally as well as vertically, eventually reaching toward the tops of the trees. This ancient vegetation hampered movement and provided excellent hidden positions for NVA troops. The G.I.s' vision was reduced by the jungle's thick canopy as if morning daylight had suddenly turned to dusk. Into the dusk advanced First Platoon, twenty-eight men led by Wylie's subordinate, Second Lieutenant Wilbur Davis, a rangy black man recently graduated from Virginia Tech, and three staff sergeants, all advancing to seek out the

enemy. George spotted AK-47 muzzle flashes and returned fire using half of his M16 twenty-round clip. Led by a sergeant, First Squad took up positions to suppress hostile fire and then advanced toward the enemy. Overhead they heard the arrival of Bravo Company, and with that Alpha's morale and fighting spirit soared. First Squad rose up and advanced one tree at a time, and two hundred feet further into the jungle ran into five heavily-fortified flat-roofed bunkers built from thick trees and piled with three feet of dirt. They were camouflaged so well that First Squad nearly walked into a trap. An experienced nineteen-year-old point man screamed "Bunkers!" even as the first RPG round was fired, and George watched in horror as the round wobbled in flight and struck the point man in the chest, blowing the teenager into countless bloody parts. The sergeant in the "slack" position twenty feet behind the point was covered in bloodied tissue and began to cry hysterically as he attempted to wipe body parts off himself. The squad was quickly morphing from fighting unit to frightened mob until George Slay rose up and emptied a clip into the aperture of the first bunker and was rewarded with NVA screams. The action bolstered the platoon's morale and as a cohesive unit they began fighting again.

George yelled, "Bring up the grenade launcher," and seconds later a baby-faced specialist was behind him. From George's position, the aperture of three bunkers lay exposed, and the specialist, with George providing covering fire, rapidly put high explosive rounds into all three. Zaricki saw two NVA regulars, race from the remaining bunkers and yelled, "They're 'bugging out!" He leaped to his feet and with two others charged after them. Without a sergeant to guide them, First Squad turned into something like a lynching mob with automatic weapons, and the five remaining members of the squad were in a chase, whooping and hollering. A couple of the squad's southerners were reminded of a gang of good ol' boys chasing a hapless black. George ran after the men, who expended ammo in such a disorganized manner it was amazing they were not creating casualties in their own ranks. Discovering a small trail behind the bunkers they covered almost two hundred feet deeper into the jungle before Zaricki stopped and the others nearly ran into each other in the process, like Keystone Kops, George thought, arriving last. Behind them, the rest of the platoon secured and searched the NVA bunker positions.

Zeke's blackened and swollen eyes at the hands of George Slay were still good enough to spot blood smears. "A blood trail, a blood trail," Zeke cried happily, and like a hound he followed the blood-streaked vegetation another ten feet before discovering a recently discarded pith helmet and NVA rucksack with blood smears.

As Zeke reached for the prize George shouted, "Stop!" and everybody froze. "Think booby trap," and the squad backed away slowly. George found a vine thick enough to catch on the rucksack, and from twenty feet away and laying on the dank soil dragged it far enough to be satisfied that a grenade had not been placed beneath, making it a pressure-release bomb. With the others standing beside him, George opened the rucksack and found a half-filled canteen, an American G.I. poncho, extra clothes, letters from home with associated pictures of what George surmised were a family of three generations (starring a lovely Vietnamese girl in her early twenties, about whom some of the squad made crude comments) and three fist-sized rice balls that an NVA soldier could stretch into a week's worth of rations. Zeke wanted to wear the pith helmet as a souvenir but George pointed out such an accoutrement would draw friendly fire. Zeke grudgingly surrendered the helmet and George placed it into the rucksack. He slung it over his shoulder and began retracing their trail back to the landing zone. Lieutenants Davis and Wylie would want to hear of their contact with the NVA and most definitely want to examine the rucksack and make sense of the contents.

The minor skirmish with the NVA secured the landing zone and the rest of the five hundred troopers of the battalion were choppered-in without incident. The colonel's command post consisted of an olive drab tent with one cot, an executive officer as second in command, and many radios and a radioman to monitor frequency activity 24/7. The cot was not for the radioman or the XO.

Lieutenant Wylie was indeed glad to receive the contents of the NVA rucksack but displeased with the less than military-like actions taken to follow the blood trail. As a result, First Platoon's First Squad was detailed to guard the command post, including the colonel, that night. George and Griffin had drawn the 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. watch, and after spending the rest of the day digging their shared stand-up fighting hole and filling sandbags, they found enough time to wolf down C-rations, clean their weapons, and wipe enough dirt from their bodies and cammies to be presentable for guard duty in "officers' country" - the singular tent and a fifty-foot perimeter. As night fell the temperature dropped, the winds becalmed and from the moist jungle floor a fog rose above the valley floor. George was reminded of Halloween without the benefits of "treats," but his imagination conjured up many NVA "tricks" evolving through the thickening mist.

The colonel was a large man possessing "command status" conveyed by size alone. He was authoritative, opinionated, and belligerent, which did not bode well for subordinates who used the thinking parts of their brains. The colonel demanded respect and obedience; he had given both

in great quantities on his climb up the command ladder and he demanded no less from those on rungs beneath a lieutenant colonel. The rank of full bird colonel was next for him with a brigadier general star in sight and he damned well was going to earn those promotions no matter how much blood was necessary to grease the way. At 2300 that night, one hour into George's four-hour watch, the colonel was enlightening the five captains of Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta, and Echo companies. The battalion's executive officer, a recently promoted major, stood behind his superior officer acting as a silent witness. It was a discourse laced with profanities, and although the flaps to the tents were secured so that the illumination from the battery powered light could not be seen from the outside thus giving enemy snipers something to ponder, the colonel's monolog carried out to both sentries.

"Goddamn it, I want this command post on the military crest of that mountain tomorrow afternoon and an observation post on the actual crest while there is still some daylight! No excuses, no bullshit. These gooks will put up some token resistance just to find out if we're serious, so after a couple hours of napalm and high explosives prepping from the Air Force, your five companies are going up and secure me that military crest. Tomorrow evening from the OP I'll be watching those gookers running down the western side of that mountain into Laos and I want a couple of platoons in that connecting valley to kick their ass for their ticket outta Vietnam." Military Ops 1, George translated into soldier-speak.

George heard a muffled comment from one of the captains and the colonel responded, "That sounds like a half-assed idea to me, captain, but since you're from Texas you probably consider it a bull's-eye. Personally, I don't give a rat's ass about snipers and spider holes and bunkers and trenches and tunnels and the decades those gooks have had to put all that shit into place. We'll bomb them out, burn them out, and run them out. You will go up my hill and reconnaissance in force until the enemy is off my mountain and out of my life. The operative word here, gentlemen, is 'out.' I want those gooks rified off my mountain. Can I make this any clearer?" The colonel wore hubris as a uniform accoutrement.

George was no longer listening to the colonel's tirade. He was watching the fog begin to thin and lift and what he saw prompted him to go to the tent's flap and announce, "Colonel, I think you had better come out here." George did not want to pull back the tent's flap even a little to let light escape into the dark night.

"What!" the colonel exclaimed. "Who the hell is talking to me?"

"Sentry Private Slay, sir. There is something the colonel needs to see out here and I might suggest you secure that light before exiting the tent."

"Goddamn it, I am in the middle of an important tactical meeting, private."

"Colonel, you need to see what I'm seeing."

"You better have Ann Margaret out there in her army issue squirrel covers, soldier, or I'm going to have your ass for breakfast." A moment passed before the colonel, followed by the major and five captains exited the darkened tent.

"This better be good, soldier." The colonel towered over George and was surprised when the private exhibited none of the signs of being cowered, unlike most of his junior officers including the XO.

"Over here, sir," George said, and took the seven officers to the position where he had spent this last hour on sentry duty. He pointed to the mountain's east facing military crest rising three thousand feet above them - the colonel's mountain - where hundreds of tiny lights appeared over the tree line and four hundred feet down from the actual crest.

"What am I supposed to make out of that?" the colonel bellowed.

"They're fires, sir."

"So what? Maybe the gookers get cold at night. Maybe they're celebrating the year of the monkey or the year of the dog or the year of the penguin. Who gives a shit?" George heard snickers from some of the five captains. The major was as still as a statue.

Remembering the rice-balls he found in the bloodied NVA rucksack, George explained, "Those aren't celebration or warming fires, colonel; they are cooking fires. Those troops are cooking up their reserve rice. They're not bugging out to Laos any time soon, and they're not trail watchers or snipers for harassing maneuvers. Those troops are dug in on the military crest of this hill - for the long haul."



Familiar with military nomenclature from boot camp, George had learned that the "military crest" of a hill actually referred to a more flattened area on the forward slope of a hill facing the opposing forces positions, and just below the actual topographical crest. From the military crest, maximum observation and direct fire covering the entire slope down to the base of the hill could be exploited, as opposed to the changing and less acute angle from the actual crest. An additional advantage to the defending troops was that they would not be silhouetted against the skyline as they would be at the

topographical crest of the hill (after the Air Force high explosives denuded all trees and vegetation, George was hoping). The main defensive positions could be located at the military crest, which gave the defensive force the maximum ability to not only see the approaching attacking force but also bring maximum firepower to bear at the earliest opportunity toward the hills base, where 3rd Battalion was now bivouacked under the cover of trees and darkness. As opposed to the eastern slope of this mountain, its western slope had no military crest under the actual crest, and the clear line-of-sight angle down the western face would give an unimpeded view of the NVA bugging out into Laos from the colonel's OP tomorrow evening, if all went as planned. To George, a hill without a military crest would resemble a pyramid. A hill with a military crest would be a pyramid with one portion from its top less acutely angled down to its base, more akin to a Babylonian ziggurat.

As a reward for casting a critical light upon the colonel's strategy and tactics session and with the colonel abiding by the rule of "kill the messenger," George and his platoon were assigned the lead point of a four-pronged attack, one company per prong. Echo was kept in reserve though weakened by supplying the two platoons on the mountain's west face to "kick the gooker's ass as they fled into Laos." It was a solid military operation, the company captains told the platoon lieutenants, who told the squad sergeants, who told the troops. A solid military operation if the gookers would just cooperate, George thought as he began moving up the east face of the mountain which had been covered in three canopies of one-hundred-foot-high teak trees intertwined with vine and vegetation and plenty of bamboo from one to twelve inches thick. A light rain began to fall from a heated sky.

The Air Force had bombarded the east face and military crest of the hill for three hours earlier that morning. First Squad led the way for First Platoon, with George walking the point position out in front of the platoon by one hundred feet and Griffin taking slack. This was their reward from Wilcoxon for earning the colonel's wrath and winning First Platoon this shit-bird assignment of first-up in the gooker's iron sights – the scrappy red-headed new guy getting to be first of the first. It quickly became apparent to George that even though the aerial bombardment cleared the canopy, it also deposited that canopy, gravity being what it was, on the ground on which First Platoon was now traversing. With the sky open above and the sun beating down upon them even through the mist (a confusing weather pattern indigenous to Vietnam) George led the way up the mountain crawling over one felled hundred-year-old teak tree after another. He began

to realize that all the Air Force accomplished this morning was creating much improved fields of fire for the NVA dug in on the eastern mountain side and a tough obstacle course for the ground troops.

George moved cautiously but with bursts of speed as he sought cover position after cover position and First Squad bebopped its way up the mountain face. They progressed at a rate of two hundred yards per hour, and although they received some sniper fire, George's zigzag technique was not producing the result the colonel wished. That bit of news was delivered by Lieutenant Wylie no less, who moved passed First Squad and sided up to George.

"The colonel wants to know what's taking so long. He reminded me that this was no stroll with my point man playing grab ass with Hot Pants Mary Malone. And that is a quote."

"Very colorful," George commented. "I suppose the colonel has noted that we have yet to take a casualty."

"The colonel is more interested in progress, not casualties. He wants us bivouacked on that military crest tonight, no ifs, ands, or buts. We've covered six hundred yards this morning and it's not ninety degrees yet but I'd say the humidity is 100 percent." Rain dripped off the lieutenant's lid. "Pick up the pace, Slay, or I'll get someone up here who can."

George and the lieutenant watched as the squad, the platoon, and then the company made their way following his zigzag path and cover to cover technique. Neither soldier could find a better point man than what they had. George did not press the advantage. "We got two bunkers ahead. Two for sure – maybe more."

The lieutenant searched the thick vegetation in front of him and shook his head. Although many of the great trees had come down during the preparatory bombardment, many survived and the sunlight slanting through at that time of morning presented a mottled and excellent camouflage effect throughout the jungle – both canopied and cleared out areas. "I don't see them."

"Two hundred feet at one o'clock and another thirty feet up-hill to the left."

"Got 'em," said Wylie. To his radioman just behind him he ordered, "Get me Lieutenant Davis." A moment later he passed the handheld set to Wylie. "Bring up the M-90 with high explosive rounds and some flechetts. We've got at least two bunkers to clear out." He looked over at George. "Maybe more. Pass the word to the company. I want all grenadiers up here. All of them."

A minute later a three-man recoilless rifle team made its way to the

lead position. The lieutenant pointed out the targets and thirty seconds later both bunkers were destroyed. "First Squad, check out that bunker complex."

George, Zeke, Griffin, and three others moved out under the command of Sergeant Ted Cassavetes, known as T.C. to his squad. Cassavetes led the squad in the zigzag maneuver and got close enough to the bunkers to toss a grenade in each before feeling satisfied they'd been cleared. Cassavetes was in the act of peering into the business end of the downhill facing aperture when a volley of automatic weapon fire erupted uphill from the bunkers and caught Griffin across both legs. He screamed and bedlam arose. From multiple bunkers one hundred feet past the two that had been used as bait, muzzle flashes from machine guns and AK-47s dotted the landscape. Connecting trenches offered up plenty of fire from AK-47s and stick grenades were being tossed hard to bounce down the hill toward First Squad. From spider holes, NVA troops popped out to let off a half magazine of fifteen rounds only to disappear as M16s sought them out – only to pop up again to empty out a thirty-round clip. Many GI's were reminded of a pinball machine by this effective and deadly tactic.

George grabbed Griffin by the collar and dragged him behind one of the two cleared bunkers. Someone was crying for the medic and George took his knife and sliced open Griffin's pants to expose the wounds. Bullets had entered and exited his thighs but no bones had been shattered. George comforted the soldier by announcing, "Griff, you've got a million-dollar wound. It's the Purple Heart and a ticket home for you, you lucky Dogface."

"I don't feel lucky, George," Griffin said weakly as the medic arrived and George helped bandage the wounds and watched the medic start an IV drip.

"We'll medevac him out as soon as we can secure the area," the medic told George and with a pat on Griffin's shoulder George brought himself back into the war.

George saw that First Platoon had hustled up to form a skirmish line against the entrenched enemy and was laying down suppressing fire.

Lieutenant Wylie was on the horn, no doubt to the company commander for fire base and air support. He had his map out and with his handheld compass was shooting a coordinates-bearing toward the line of bunkers and trenches and spider holes for a Call to Fire request. But before the field artillery began and the planes arrived with their cargo of napalm and hi-drag explosives, First Platoon was still taking casualties at a surprising rate.

"Damn it!" Wylie exclaimed. "We've got those bunkers and trenches suppressed and we're still taking casualties. The entire platoon is well into cover and we're getting creamed. They're not firing from the trenches,

bunkers, or spider holes.” Wylie figured his After-Action Report to the colonel was not going to be well received. “This is impossible. Where’d they go? Where in the hell are they?”

George Aristotle Slay, using wisdom to seek an answer and recalling his Sherlock Holmes, quoted to himself, “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.” Returning fire in the prone position behind a fallen tree George turned over on his back, put his fire selector switch on “auto” and burst a half clip into the nearest tree top. An NVA sniper fell to the ground making a distinct thump. During the interim between the last air force bombing run and the arrival of First Platoon a resourceful NVA tactician had managed to place his most dedicated personnel in the most effective, but vulnerable to the point of suicide, positions. “Treetops, snipers in the treetops!” George emptied his magazine and another sniper fell. First Platoon, seeing George and the results, turned its attention to the treetops. M16 rounds racked the tree line above them.

“Launch grenades!” Wylie ordered to the newly arrived grenadiers. “Give me flechette rounds into those treetops.” The ten grenadiers stood up and responded as if with impunity to enemy fire - seemingly bulletproof with immunity from NVA bullets - and with handheld grenade launchers sent one-pound rounds packed with 950 one-inch steel nails into the treetops; the military’s answer to the civilian shotgun. Flechette-shredded snipers began falling with nearly every round. Then, from the jungle’s floor, the beast arose. The troops of First Platoon stood yelling at the top of their lungs and expended ammunition with rewarding results. Snipers of the NVA and their bloodied flesh filled the jungle air, and as the fight raged a riot of the basest profanity poured from airborne mouths now incensed to insanity over the bodies of their own wounded, dead and dying comrades. George Slay would only remember the words of the most profound cry that day.

From Lieutenant Warren Wylie, West Point graduate, come words that would go down in the lore of the 101st Airborne Division, the Screaming Eagles. Standing erect and slowly turning with his hands outstretched and his face tilted to the sky and becoming wet with blood-mist, Wylie marveled, “It’s raining gookers! We’ve won their hearts and minds, boys. It’s raining gookers!” Two hundred yards up the mountain from Wylie, F-4 Phantoms following green smoke set out by First Squad worked over the area held by the NVA. First Platoon watched NVA troops thrown into the air by howitzer rounds and hi-drag one thousand-pound bombs and cheered when the napalm canisters fell from Phantom wing tips; all this mayhem before lunch.



The pungent odor of cordite and other hydrocarbons mixed with burnt flesh came to the nostrils of First Squad as it advanced into the killing field devoid of living vegetation. They had to medevac ten more members of First Platoon along with Griffin; the depletion of fighting men forcing the colonel to bring up elements of Echo Company being held as reserves. That further prompted the colonel to transfer the two platoons from the west side of the mountain waiting to ambush fleeing NVA troops spilling into Laos as soon as his troops took the mountain. Those two platoons would now be held in reserve, and when the colonel's battalion pushed the gooks off his mountain, the Air Force would be called in to give the commies a hotfooted ass-kick into Laos from whence they shall never return, according to the colonel. His best Military Ops 2 plan since the gookers hadn't cooperated with his Military Ops 1.

Climbing up a twenty percent grade, George Slay was first into the still-smoldering kill-zone and his discriminating nose was offended. This surprised George because until now nothing in his brief and tumultuous stay in Vietnam had particularly caused him angst. Yet here he was on the verge of nausea, wishing he'd brought a handkerchief to Vietnam, perhaps with a drop of after shave to replace the cloying, coppery, pungent stink of fresh battle.

Zaricki moved up beside him. "Ain't this the shits." He kicked at a two-foot section of gray intestine. "I'm being literal here." With both eyes blackened he reminded George of a raccoon.

George, looking for a silver lining said, "It could be worse."

"How so, troop?" This was Zeke's verbal shorthand for any ground-pounding grunt, paratrooper or not.

"Could be our shit."

"Point taken. George, I think you are an optimist. Maybe, like a song says, a cockeyed optimist." Missing a tooth, his swollen upper lip fluttered over this last word.

"I'm a chocolatier," George answered.

"A what?" Zeke had developed a slight lisp.

"A chocolatier."

"You're a chocolate maker?"

"No," George explained. "A chocolate maker is someone, usually a big company, who purchases large sacks of dried cacao beans and roasts and

grinds and processes them into pure chocolate and ships large squares to shops like my dad's where we melt it down and combine it with a variety of sweet fillers and nuts to make product. So, I don't make chocolate, I make candy - chocolate candy. My dad has tried to make a go of running a neighborhood candy store for most of his life. I emphasize the word 'tried.' He's the kind of ornery guy who can't work for anyone else so he's tried to be an entrepreneur so he can be his own boss. His specialty is chocolate. As a young man, before he was married and I came along, he sent himself to Switzerland to one of those fancy cooking schools. Before they kicked him out for telling them how to run their school - which, by the way, they had been doing successfully for two hundred years - he learned the process of creating chocolate candies and came back from Europe with some knowledge of chocolate but no people or business skills. Dad could make chocolate candies with the best of them but his personality rubbed his employees and customers the wrong way and we moved from city to city, state to state, trying to find a neighborhood to ply his product. By the time I was ten I was working after school every afternoon until evening as his singular employee. I started out by sweeping floors and gradually learned confectionary skills from Dad, which pissed him off because as a student I surpassed the teacher. One day I hope to be able to control all the complex factors involved in producing a 'cacao bean-to-chocolate bar' operation. Whatever these factors are, I've got some learning to do after I get out of this place, this army."

"So, you make sweets, George?" This came out as "Tho, you make thweets, George?"

"The George Slay Fine Confectionary Shop of Portland, Oregon specializes in fine confections and chocolates for the discriminating palate. 'Often imitated, never duplicated' is our motto but I think Dad plagiarized that from someone. Anyway, Dad finally found his neighborhood. If you make good chocolate, Portlanders are very tolerant, though nobody sticks around the store making small talk with Dad. The customers grab their chocolate and hightail it out the door. Still, Dad's been able to upgrade some old equipment and he's doing okay but wants me back to help him run the shop. It's just him and Mom now and she just does the books. She can't stand to be around Dad either in the shop. She calls him a tyrant and that's one of the more presentable things she calls him."

But never, ever to his face, George remembered.

He stopped and looked back at the rest of the platoon fifty yards behind him making their way across a two-hundred-yard debris field which, until ninety minutes ago, had been a thriving jungle for thousands of years.

Another hundred yards and they would be back in elephant grass and another hundred yards would put them in jungle higher up the east face of the mountain. Another thousand yards and they would be on the military crest of the mountain - a tough climb but their goal for today, as set by the colonel. "Lag back until I get thirty yards ahead, Zeke, then take up your slack position."

"Rock n' Roll time, troop," Zaricki said and watched as George proceeded up the mountain.

George cleared the debris field and made his way carefully through burnt, then single, to finally elephant grass which had not been affected by the Phantoms' numerous bombing runs. He slung his M16 over his shoulder and with his point man's machete began hacking out a new trail for First Squad, which would be followed by First Platoon, which would be followed by Alpha Company. By the time the last G.I. walking the "drag" position for the company passed this spot George blazed, the trail would be quite manageable – comparable to a State Park hiking path.

Clearing a trail at a steady mind-numbing pace in humid, now one-hundred-degree heat, George was able to ponder the possibilities of prey seeking out a predator. The Vietnamese military machine had some twenty years to fortify this mountain, fortifications laid down before they kicked the French colonizers out, fortifications lately improved upon by the NVA over the last decade. The mountain represented a tactical advantage that the NVA would deem advantageous and here was George Slay, leading one hundred visiting interlopers with ideas contrary to the local establishment. As they got closer to the top, advancing toward the military crest, George felt they should be making contact with more dug-in and well-defended defensive emplacements. He was not worried about running into snipers or trail watchers as he hacked out his own trail, but he was concerned about cutting his way into a concealed battalion with only a machete to wave back at the enemy. So, when, with the determined stroke of a machete at the end of a sweat soaked arm, a hard packed ten-foot-wide road appeared, he had the expression of a modern-day hunter cornering a unicorn. He held up a cautionary arm to Zaricki, who relayed the gesture to Lieutenant Wylie leading First Platoon. A minute later, Wylie was beside Zaricki and George, and saw the hard-packed road.

"This is no hump and grunt trail," Wylie stated the obvious. "They brought artillery up this road, probably Russian ZPUs. Heavy anti-aircraft guns."

"And saved them for us and the flyboys on our final push," George said. "They will keep the Air Force from supporting ground operations while

blowing us off the face of this mountain.” Which was probably the plan all along, George thought. A little harassing fire at the landing zone to get everyone’s attention, and then spring a trap with bunkers in front of Alpha Company. Add snipers above to piss off the G.I.s and you get the entire battalion charging up the hill, to provoke a major battle with one side mad as hell - blind as hell.

“Thit,” Zaricki commented.

George looked up when he didn’t have to. There the jungle’s triple canopy had only been slightly affected by the recent bombing sorties, receiving minor collateral damage. The road would be impossible to spot from the air and probably was fed from Laos, wrapping around the mountain from the west to produce an acceptable grade.

The lieutenant motioned for his radio tech to come forward and immediately contacted the company commander to report the discovery of the road and request alternate orders. Going up the road was no option, as everyone knew heavy machine gun nests were going to be the lightest weaponry guarding this quick access to the summit. Captain Hoquest, Alpha’s Commander and one of the five captains who had chuckled at the colonel’s “year of the penguin” rejoinder to Sentry Slay the night before, told Wylie to stand by while the colonel was apprised of the situation.

“Pass the word,” Wylie said. “First Platoon take five, and tell everybody to keep their heads up and ass down. We’ve got our butts hanging out over the great abyss here.” The word was passed and First Platoon awaited word on their fate from on high - meaning the colonel. Seven minutes later they heard the combat sounds of other companies making preliminary contact with the enemy, and monitored radio chatter that confirmed Bravo and Delta had engaged and were moving up the mountain. Charlie Company was refraining from radio communications, but Wylie assumed it was accomplishing something other than sitting on its ass, like another company he knew, glancing over both shoulders at his own troops. He thought about suggesting they move all companies back down to the Valley and call in the B-52s to pour hardened-steel thousand-pound delayed fuse “bunker busters” on the military crest until the Vietnamese mountain top resembled the Mohave Desert where Wylie Survival Camped as an Eagle Scout. But he knew the colonel wanted his mountain with a top he could use as an observation platform, not a crater in which he had to “look up to see down.”

Five minutes later the colonel contacted Hoquest who relayed the colonel’s wishes that First Platoon move up ASAP or face some serious military court-martials with him as prosecutor. This message was repeated word for word by Hoquest from the colonel. Or, from God’s lips to Hoquest’s

ear, Wylie amended, and so on down the military food chain – known as the command structure.

Wylie ordered his point man, “Find an opening on the other side of this road we can move First Squad through.”

George, who’d used the downtime to draw an edge on his machete, put his small whetstone back into a pocket and searched for a rabbit hole in the jungle on the other side of the road. What he saw was vegetation so overgrown that vines normally searching a way to gain sunlight grew horizontally, their vertical path impeded. Thus, a mat-like barrier was created for him and all who followed. Undaunted, with his M16 still slung across his back, Wylie watched his little point man quick crawl across the hard pack on his belly and slither into a space Wylie hadn’t suspected existed. Three minutes later, Wylie watched an opening in the vegetation appear and expand, and there was First Platoon’s point man waving First Squad across with his machete.

Sergeant Ted Cassavetes said hoarsely, “Let’s go, First Squad,” and Zeke and four others bent at their waists and covered the distance at a scamper. The sudden chatter of two NVA machine guns coming from the high ground direction of the road sent pebbles against shins and calves, and dropped the last two men crossing.

George unslung his rifle and emptied an entire clip, on full auto to suppress the machine guns. He spotted one muzzle flash but not the second which, he guessed correctly, was on his side of the road. Wylie had been quick to get Second Squad in position to follow First Squad, and when the machine guns opened up, Second Squad put up suppressing fire on the NVA nest George had been unable to spot. Four members of Second Squad were able to reach their First Squad comrades and drag them back to a relatively safe position to have the platoon medic treat their wounds. Now no one was going to get across this road since the element of surprise had been negated.

Cassavetes, with fear in his voice, said, “We’re cut off from the rest of the platoon - from the rest of the company.”

“Not to worry,” George said, and his calmness was reassuring to the other G.I.s. “Wylie will call in a couple of gunships to take out those machine guns.” If the ZPUs let them, but George did not articulate this last thought. “Let’s move out and get clear of the area. We do not want to be collateral damage when those gunships arrive.” Without getting the now jumpy sergeant’s approval, George led the squad downhill parallel to the road and away from the NVA machine guns. He figured another one hundred yards and they could safely get back across the road and hook up

with First Platoon, unless a G.I. with a case of the jitters heard them first. It was with this thought that he told the squad, "Heel and toe," and the men stepped quietly, first with the heel seeking sound footing, followed by the toe. The muted pace was slow, but that was all right with the five-man remnant of First Squad. The temperature on the jungle's floor was over one hundred degrees Fahrenheit, and the humidity, even without any rain, was close to one hundred percent. The chances of going down with heat exhaustion were about the same as going down from hostile fire, George figured.

Thirty yards down trail, he ran into a stand of bamboo so thick his machete was useless. The bamboo continued to the road, so he had to find a track around it away from the road. Stepping quietly for another one hundred yards, George caught the scent of tobacco smoke and halted the squad. Hand gestures told the squad to remain, and George cautiously advanced in the mottled light of the jungle, where everything blended in with everything else, including American G.I.s in full cammies, George thought as he spotted a poorly-disciplined NVA soldier enjoying a cigarette. Then, from behind the soldier, a portion of undergrowth raised up just a bit and a hand reached out and tugged at the man's trousers. The man crushed out the lighted end of the cigarette with his fingertips and carefully placed the butt in his shirt pocket. Waste not – want not, George's mother would have commented. He then disappeared into what George surmised was a two-man spider hole. George quietly advanced, taking a dozen steps and, with the barrel end of his M16, now for sure on full auto, he flipped over the spider hole top cover and – was met with empty space.

His finger had tensed on the trigger but now eased some. Surprised at what he had not found, he discovered that it was not a spider hole but an air vent or an escape route covered with a framework of loosely woven vines. He signaled the squad over with hand signals imparting the characteristics of stealth and alacrity. Five sets of eyes stared into the three-foot wide opening. George whispered, "Tunnel entrance into the mountain or exit out. It's got to connect with the underground grid of this entire complex; for us a back door. If we get in their tunnels, the NVA won't know what hit them. We'll change out our M16s for the AK- 47s we take off their dead so they can't tell by sound who is shooting who."

Cassavetes wavered. "I don't know about this. The lieutenant has got to know about it." He shook his head at the dark opening offering up so many possibilities and decisions that his twenty-year old brain was not used to dealing with.

In that moment of Cassavetes' doubt, George dropped into the hole,

followed by Zeke, followed by a Black Spec 4 with sixteen days and a wake up left in his one and only Vietnam tour, followed by a troop with just thirty-three days in 'Nam clipped off the links of his Vietnam short-timer's chain strung multiple times around his neck like a choker, followed by Sergeant Cassavetes, who hated to be left alone.

What caught George's attention first was the dank, stale smell of an atmosphere lacking air movement. The ventilation for these tunnels may have been cleverly conceived but was woefully inadequate when it came to exchanging poor air with good. He figured they must remove the ventilation covers only at night as a precaution against what was happening to the mountain defenders right now: enemy infiltration. His eyes took a moment to dilate, and he eventually became use to the limited visibility provided by clay candle-bowls at the floor's edge: the first fifty feet ahead. As George moved forward, he heard Zaricki say,

"George, George. I gotta tell you something."

"Quiet, Zeke," George snapped.

"George, I gotta tell you something," Zaricki persisted.

George stopped and turned. "What?"

"I'm claustrophobic."

"What!"

"I'm claustrophobic. I get anxious in confined spaces. I can't help it George, it runs in my family."

With the help of the first candle-bowl, George could make out movement in a larger tunnel bisecting the one they were in. "Don't worry about it, Zeke. In thirty seconds, claustrophobia is going to be the least of your worries." He secured his bayonet to the M16. Being five foot six inches tall and slender even by jungle-fighting standards, he still had to duck down to advance quickly. His taller comrades were slowed not only by their height but their width as the tunnels were sized to fit much smaller men, so when George arrived at the intersection, he was ten feet ahead of them and face to face with an NVA regular with a shocked expression forming on his youthful face. George thrust the bayonet deep in the soldier's throat before realizing the man was unarmed. Turning left where he heard the noise of more troops, he stepped over the man realizing that his first contact with the enemy underground could be considered more of a quick execution than hot contact with an armed hostile. This bothered him for the few seconds it took him to come across a room holding twenty soldiers sitting on the floor, eating their rice rations out of wood bowls with their fingers and carrying on conversations that were interrupted when George emptied his M16 into them. Before he could snap in another twenty-round clip, Zeke was by his

side hosing down any survivors, screaming, "Catch some hurt. Catch some! Catch some!" A rallying war-cry for Vietnam combat vets.

"Hey, George, I don't feel so claustrophobic anymore," Zaricki said, as if discovering the disorder's cure. But the cloying stink of cordite in those close quarters made all the G.I.s want to quit the area.

"Gather weapons," George ordered and slipped his M16 strap over his head so that the weapon was upside down on his back, blood dripping from the bayonet's point. He quickly examined two AK-47s before choosing one that was well oiled and spared from any M16 bullets. He grabbed three cloth bandoliers of ammunition off the dead NVA, and with the rest of the squad following his actions proceeded further up the tunnel, looking for the enemy.

They next found a large unguarded room filled with one-hundred-pound sacks of rice. Behind the sacks, George heard the excited scurrying sounds of jungle rats finding food. A large scorpion ran in front of George and he crushed it under his boot. He heard Zeke shudder.

On they pushed, five young men intent on slaughter, leaving destruction in their path, killing indiscriminately, seemingly invulnerable until an officer in a pith helmet shot Sergeant Cassavetes as he was changing out a thirty-round banana clip in his newly acquired AK-47. The kid with the short-timer's chain collared around his neck was fast to drop the officer. In the dim light George said, "Commandeer that helmet. The more we look like NVA the better." The Black Spec 4 checked Cassavetes and declared that the squad had lost its sergeant who had comported himself as well as the rest of them after overcoming his bout with timidity and a reluctance to dive into dark tunnels. Within minutes, all four wore pith helmets from recently deceased NVA soldiers and continued with their rampage, but knowing they were not invincible.

They climbed a bamboo ladder to reach the next level of this honeycombed mountain and discovered an unattended infirmary with fifty soldiers flat on their backs many with the sweat-sheened faces of sustained high fever. George looked closer and some were in comas and some had succumbed to what he guessed was some type of infectious disease. He concluded that life below ground in tunnels infested with vermin, poisonous centipedes, scorpions, spiders, and armies of ants exacted a high human price. The squad walked away from those sick and dying soldiers, who, in their various stages of delirium, hadn't perceived the Americans who'd compromised their tunnel defenses and spared their lives.

George was surprised that there were not more troops in the tunnel complex. They found another ladder leading to the next level nearer to the

mountain's peak, and that level was completely absent of any NVA. As they approached the next ladder entry, a soldier guarding the top let loose an undisciplined fire sequence of numerous rounds and George could see him retreating in fear. George was quick up the ladder and shot the man in mid stride and watched him tumble forward. He checked for other combatants and when he considered the top area secure, he called up the rest of the squad. Only Zeke and the other white kid came up the ladder to join George. The Black Spec 4 whose name George had never learned lay dead at the base of the ladder, an undisciplined round rewarded nonetheless.

George had a revelation and told the other two, "This is what I think: I think the NVA has learned that elements of the 101st Airborne have breached their tunnel defenses and the entire NVA are bugging out and heading to Laos. For all they know we're the spearhead of an entire battalion. That's what I think, and I think we should keep on pushing these troops up these ladders and see what happens when they catch some daylight above ground."

"Let's go for it, George," Zaricki said wide-eyed, his blood heated from all their killing. The other kid was nodding his head vigorously in agreement when a single rifle round struck his face. Blood sprayed George and Zeke and they both located the source at the same moment and emptied their banana clips into the soldier as he fought another round into his bolt action sniper rifle.

"You and me, Zeke," George said as the kid bled out in front of them. No amount of first aid could save him even if they were topside with a Huey evac nearby. When the eighteen-year-old soldier shuddered and died, the two remaining members of First Squad slipped in their last thirty round banana clips and bopped up another ladder. The top and final floor, a large natural cave, had been reached, and finally Zaricki was able to stretch out his big body to its full height. They had made it! Fifty feet ahead of them was a six-foot opening hidden from the outside by a couple of trees and bushes, but the last rays of a long day were shining through the west face of the mountain's actual crest, its topographical crest, leading the Americans out of the maze.

"Let's get some daylight and work on our tans," George said. For the first and only time since George had been assigned to First Squad, he did not diligently check out the path he was taking – they were taking - a point man's obligation. Both men, glad to be out of the tunnels, approached the opening mesmerized by the unfamiliar diffused daylight. Ten feet from the opening Zeke cried out, "George!" and George saw his friend of two days fall into a covered pit. He looked down in shock, seeing Zeke on his

back impaled, staring up at him with the same shocked expression that he, George, imagined he wore on his own face. Six sharpened bamboo spikes smeared with NVA excrement protruded through Zeke's body - Pungi sticks! The pit had been prepared for the attacking G.I.s charging through the cave's entrance, but the ancient trap worked just as well on inattentive soldiers strolling nonchalantly out of the cave.

"George, please help me," Zeke cried, and started thrashing about, trying to get free but only accomplishing more damage to his tissue and pain to his senses. Blood began spurting out like high pressure geysers as first veins, and now arteries were cut and Zeke's strong heart beat in greater desperation. "George, help me," Zeke pleaded, his cries already weakening and his blood flow lessening as George helplessly looked on. There was only one thing George could do for his friend, and if their fates were reversed, he hoped Zeke could find the courage and humanity to cease his friend's suffering.

Private George Slay shouldered his enemy's weapon and sent two quick rounds into his friend's brain.



As four companies of 3rd Battalion secured the mountain's military crest and began maneuvers toward the actual top of the mountain, the colonel ordered a fly over of the topographical crest in his command Huey. At first inspection, he was satisfied that the NVA had cleared the area and watched them scamper down the mountain's west face toward Laos even as he directed multiple sorties of Phantoms, five minutes out, to napalm the enemy, whom he considered cowardly scum. That would be quite a show and the colonel held the perfect seat. The fact that those hostile soldiers who survived would live to fight another day, that within a week's time those same NVA soldiers currently in retreat would begin returning from Laos and retake the mountain with nary a shot fired in anger, that the U.S. High Command would deem the mountain no longer a military asset with value, did not enter the colonel's train of thought. What caught and held his attention was a small solitary figure standing at the crests highest point. That soldier, bathed in the crimson hues of a setting Vietnamese sun on the American-held mountain, was undoubtedly 101st Airborne and vaguely familiar to the colonel. The G.I. carried an AK-47 in his right hand and was drinking lustily from one of his three canteens. A bayoneted M16

## If Men Were Gods

was strapped upside down across his back and a machete was tucked inside his belt without its scabbard. The colonel was angry that the G.I. was first on top of his hill - he wanted his pilot to touch down so he could step off and welcome his struggling troops making for the top. To add to his displeasure, the posture of the soldier was that of a man who held the proprietary claim to the colonel's mountain and all that the small soldier could survey from the crests high point.