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**SEVENTY TWO****A Lifetime Over**

The following morning Top came out on the supply Huey for A company. I can't describe what a relief it was when I saw him jump out of that bird. There were two reasons for that.

First of all, he and myself were all that were left of the original CP. It was just good to have someone here with that connection.

Secondly, while he was away, word had come back to us that one of the Hueys he was traveling on had developed engine trouble and crashed. We'd heard that no one was seriously hurt, but were still worried until he got back out to us. I'd been his radioman for long as I was the captain's.

"Hutton, what in the *hell* happened out here?" he said with deep consternation as he walked over to me.

I shook my head slowly, "Top,...we walked right into the shit. They were waiting for us and man, they had us dead in their sights."

Top stared down at the ground for a moment and then spoke softly, "How did the captain get it?"

I gave him a brief description of the way the NVA were set up and explained how the captain had been hit, trying to get them to surrender.

He jerked his head sharply sideways, "Damn! I don't know how many times I tried to warn that man that he was leaving himself too open to enemy fire. He just wouldn't listen. Whenever we came under attack, he had to be right up front, trying to help his men."

When he turned away somewhat, to look out over the small clearing where the ambush had occurred, I could sense that this strong man's man was concealing the pain in his eyes. Much as he always exhibited the image of the tough career soldier, like myself, he hadn't been able to help growing fond of the kind of man that Captain Boatner was.

He turned to look at me again, "I stopped in at the hospital last night to see how he was doing. Do you know, he cried and told me the whole thing was his fault?"

I nodded slowly, "I know. He told me the same thing before he was medevaced out of here. Top, there's no way in the world it was his fault. Those bastards had us set up like fish in a barrel. Nobody could have foreseen that."

"Well," he said, letting out a long, slow breath, "we'd better get over there and help police up those bodies. They have to be sent in."

We went, with the men of Alpha company, into that deadly clearing between the two opposing treelines where the ground was charred. Now we began one of the most gruesome jobs of this hellish war. The bodies of the men who'd been killed had to be put into body bags and then placed aboard Hueys to be sent to the rear. From there they'd be flown back to the States and home for burial. It was bad enough when a man who'd been shot was laid on top of a bag and then zippered in, but it was even worse when there was nothing left to pick up but small pieces.

When the job was finally done, Top and I stood in the center of the clearing.

"Ya know, Top, when we heard that your Huey went down, they didn't tell us right away if you were all-right or not," I paused for a moment and then added with real sincerity, "I'm really glad you're here."

I'm sure he knew what I really meant, "Yeah,...me too."

He looked around at the remaining guys of our company, who were sitting around on the ground, with their backs against the trees, taking a smoke break. The burnt out look in their faces was still there and would be for some time. It turned out that, counting the killed, the wounded and the shell shocked who had to be taken out of the field, we'd lost about half the company.

No words needed to be said.

Then he turned back to me and put his hands on his hips, "Aren't you supposed to be leaving the field on your way stateside?"

I must have had the same beleaguered expression on my face as the other guys, "Yeah, I guess so. I've got less than a week in-country now." I couldn't help an ironic chuckle, "And I sure as hell can't say that I'm going to miss this place either."

Top folded his arms across his chest and looked at me with mock sternness. He was always good at that, "Ya know, that last Huey over there is just about ready to leave. If you don't get your butt in gear and get aboard, you're going to have to spend another night out here."

I couldn't, for the life of me, believe what he'd just said. I sputtered, "You mean,...I can leave,...right now?!"

"Yeah,...what the hell. I'm sure they can find something for you to do, for a couple of days, back on the LZ."

He extended his hand and we shook a farewell.

I'm sure he could sense the appreciation in my voice when I said simply, "Thanks, Top."

"Yeah, yeah,...get the hell out of here."

I grabbed my rifle and pack, ran over to the Huey, and, as soon as the supplies were all off, climbed aboard.

The bird flew higher than usual over the dark, green countryside, probably because there was so much more risk of ground fire in this area. The sun was warm and I was sitting alone in the middle of the floor. I felt like all the weight of the world had been lifted from my shoulders. It hadn't hit me, until just now, how much like an old man I'd felt for the past couple of weeks, knowing that I was so close to going home, but that there was still enough time to get into a few more firefights like that last one. If anybody's inclined to give up their youth in a hurry, just spend some time in a war. That'll certainly do the trick.

Top's unexpectedly releasing me from the field had lifted that weight so abruptly that now I almost felt as if I could fly without the bird. Even though I knew we were still well within enemy territory, I could look down on that heavily wooded terrain and actually feel good,...enjoy the ride.

Everything wasn't perfect. That's for sure. There were the guys still back there, the company, my friends, who couldn't leave yet. That didn't sit right. But I had to admit that getting out of there did feel mighty good.

I spent another week going through paperwork, turning in my weapon and other equipment and taking a physical exam.

But there were two more times when powerful emotions would sweep over me. One was when I was waiting in the airport building at Binh Hoa, for the flight that would take me out of this country and back to the States. Sitting there, in one of the seats of the terminal building, with a small group of other

guys who were leaving, I could look through the large window and see the Tiger Airlines jet that would be our ride home. I had such an overwhelming feeling that this couldn't really be happening.

This past year seemed longer than a lifetime. Something was bound to go wrong with that plane,...a flat tire,...engine trouble,...anything to keep it from leaving.

It was just hard to conceive of going back to the real world again. It was easier to recall laying on my poncho, in the darkness, thinking about how I'd kill for a chocolate milkshake, or imaging what it would be like to turn a faucet on and have running water come out of it. My God,...what was it going to be like to push a handle and flush a real toilet? Such simple things, yet so incredibly important when you didn't have them.

That plane finally did take me back to the States and it was after it had landed at the Air Force base in Oakland, California, and I'd boarded a military bus for transport to the Army base a short distance from there, that the second incident occurred. The bus stopped at an intersection in downtown Oakland, for a school crossing guard who was escorting a class of little second graders across the street.

Suddenly, staring at that little group, a whole range of powerful emotions flooded through me, the strongest being disbelief. Only a matter of a few hours ago, I left a bunch of guys, like myself, who were simply trying to stay alive in the worst kind of a hellish nightmare. Yet, back here, everything was carrying on as if that other world didn't exist. How was that possible? How could these people let something so horrible continue while they went about their daily affairs?

Then it struck me that, if they hadn't been there to live it personally, there was no way they could know what it was really like. The pain, the sorrow, the disillusionment, the guilt, the hate, the prejudice,

the fear, none of those things came through the sterile images that these people saw on the six o'clock news. They couldn't even imagine what it was like to lay, shivering for hours in leech infested water, up to their chin, in the darkness, with someone out there determined to kill them. Or walking across a field strewn with every kind of conceivable human body part. Or hearing someone screaming at the top of his lungs in excruciating pain. How could they know?

There were the men still there when I left, and the ones like myself, who'd been there and come back, who would never forget. How could we?