

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

With Joe and Willie out it made it a little easier sleeping in the nasty bunker. I was still concerned about their welfare, and would soon learn that this was going to be a constant feeling throughout my tour. I was beginning to feel my fears more I hands seemed to shake, and the sleepless nights were beginning to take their toll. I still wondered, what am I doing here?

I looked around the dark bunker, I noticed Otis was gone. I quickly made my way over Pearce and Frank and out the small door. Outside I looked around and noticed Otis talking to someone near the CP. My gut cringed, for I knew it was another mission, and Pearce and I were the only ones that hadn't been out.

“Okay, Rusty get your shit together, me, you and Pearce are going out today.

“Who with?” I eagerly asked holding back my stomach which was about to be on the outside.

“The same company Frank and I went with, they are a bunch of good guys,” Otis said trying to reassure me that things were going to be all right. “I’ll get Pearce. We will be leaving in about thirty minutes.”

Pearce hurriedly packed his Ruck and I was trying to shove C-rations and dog food rapidly into my Ruck. Otis was gathering the thirty or so quart canteens to fill them. The dogs used a large amount of water. After loading everything that we would need for the mission our Rucks weighed about fifty or sixty pounds.

“God I’ ready for this, Pearce yelled loudly, excited about his first mission.

“Fuck you, Pearce,” I yelled back I wish like hell I could stay here with the rats.

“Man this is great I hope we make contact right away,” Pearce said aflame with desire for a good fire fight.

“The fucker is crazy,” I said to Otis shaking my head.

“Pearce, you know you would shit in your pants if a gook took a shot at you,” Otis said at him. “You’re just a little kid.”

That shut Pearce up for the time being. The chopper came in like a whirl wind and Sig leaped for a spot inside the Huey. Aboard the chopper with feet hanging out the side door, the chopper took off in a cloud of flying sand and dirt.

The chopper ride was exhilarating, for the first time since I stepped off the C-141 Starlifter I was actually cool. But not for long. The chopper started its rapid combat descent.

“As soon as this bird touches the ground you guys get off,” The door gunner yelled over the loud noise that the chopper made.

Hell I knew that I thought to myself, how stupid. He wasn’t bull shitting as soon as the chopper touched the ground it was on its way back up. Sig and I made it out about five feet off the ground. Picking myself off the ground I quickly checked Sig to make sure he was okay.

“What a ride,” Pearce said ecstatic that he was now officially in combat.

I quickly noticed Otis limping around, he had bad knees from his football playing days with the suicide squad for the San Francisco 49ers.

“You okay Otis?” I asked concerned about the grimace on his face.

“Yea, that mother fucker didn’t have to do that,” Otis complained.

“Yes he did,” Came a voice from a young sergeant. We had a chopper shot down yesterday trying to drop re-supplies.”

“Sorry,” Otis said still grimacing from the pain in his knees.

“Follow me,” the young sergeant said heading down a small trail. “ The CO wants to talk to you.”

Following the sergeant down the narrow trail that led out of the rice paddy and into a village that was surrounded by thick jungle and underbrush. I looked up and right

in front of me was an M48A1 tank. A gristly looking monsters that I had only seen a few times at Ft. Benning. Somehow here it looked far more magnificent, with the mighty 90mm cannon, and the Tank Commander (TC) sitting up near the 50 caliber machine gun pointing toward the vast open space of the rice paddy. How could those little gooks even try to fight with these 48 ton monsters? I thought to myself. Right in the middle of the tanks and infantry positions was the CP (Command Post). It was really easy to distinguish it, there were ANPRC 25 radio antennas sticking up like flag poles. A shelter had been erected using a poncho, this did keep the sun off the CO.

“Sgt. Johnson,” the CO said looking at Otis’ name tag. “I need one of your teams to go with second platoon, and the other two to stay here.” Second platoon will be on our left flank in this operation.”

“What type operation? Otis asked.

“We are going to sweep this village tomorrow,” The CO replied.

“I’m sorry sir these dogs don’t work well on an online sweep,” Otis protested.

“Look sergeant I was told these dogs could find booby-traps, and this village is full of them. And that’s it,” the CO ordered in a very serious tone.

“I’ll go to second platoon,” Otis said. “you guys can stay here together.”

I sure was glad Otis was my squad leader he tried his best to take care of us, as much as possible.

Otis smiled and headed down the jungled path toward the second platoon.

It was getting late and the sun began to disappear below the bamboo tree line of the village, or what was left of it.

“Lets find a place to spend the night,” I said to Pearce, turning a circle looking for what might be a safe place to bed down.

“Lets set up near a tank,” Pearce said thinking these gooks would never attack a tank.

“Sounds good to me,” I replied feeling a false sense of security being close to those big M48A1’s (tanks), they looked mean, and I could not see those poorly equipped gooks trying to take on a tank.

I was beginning to feel a little better seeing the other GI’s wondering around doing menial tasks, such as washing and drying socks shaving and finishing up their C-rations, some were shaving and some just relaxing.

We were slowly moving toward the safest looking tank that had positioned its self about ten yards from an old blown apart cinder block building.

All of a sudden a bright orange flash appeared and headed what looked like it was going to hit me between the eyes, a strange fear came over me I froze for a fraction of a second as the bright ball of fire went over the tank and over my head landing with a loud explosion only feet away from me. I almost shit my pants. Then all hell broke loose loud explosions from the tanks all firing was deafening. the RPG (rocket propelled grenade) rounds were falling all around us. The green and blue tracers mixed in with the red ones were a sight. I immediately ran with Sig toward the old building, Pearce was right beside me. We dove into the rubble. I grabbed Sig and held him as close to me as I could. Tears were beginning to hinder my vision and now the fear of dying was a stark reality. I was scared to death and did not know what to do. All the training I had gone through had not really prepared me enough to face death face to face.

“What the fuck do we do?!” I asked Pearce, as I was clinging onto Sig as he was trying to jump and run.

“Fuck! I don’t know I thought you did,” Pearce replied, holding on to Prince, He was just as scared as I was.

Fragments of debris from the building that was being hit from small arms fire were stinging the back of my neck. The sounds were so horrendous that I knew this was it for me.

Then!

Just as soon as it started it was over. The quiet was almost as bad as the noise. I couldn't do anything. Slowly I could hear rustling and yelling as the tankers and Infantrymen began to appear from the positions that had been doing all the firing.

Regaining my composure I noticed that there was a strange euphoric feeling coming over me. I felt really good, I supposed it was because I was alive, or perhaps it was an adrenaline rush, never the less I felt great.

"Where the fuck were you guys?" a grunt asked, as he laughed.

"In that old building," I replied sharply, and confident I had found the best place to be in a fire fight.

"Worst place you could get," came a reply from SP4 Stienbeck, an experienced combat veteran. Who was medium height and short blonde hair he was a quiet spoken serious type. "That is what we call a target of opportunity, when those RPG's miss the tanks that wall is in the way so it hits it, you guys were lucky this time. Find a low place in the ground and set up there, it is safer, and you won't make a big target."

I felt more like a cherry (New Guy) now than if I would just have kept my mouth shut. I felt like a complete idiot. I kept thinking I'll never make it through the next ten months. On the other hand Pearce was just sitting next to Prince with that shit eating grin.

"Well! What the fuck you grinning about?" I asked. "You were just as scared, if not more than I was."

"Yea but I didn't say anything either." Pearce replied knowing that if I would not have said anything then no one would know just how scared and how little I knew about what to do.

Pearce and I finally found what seemed to be a better place to sleep. All night long the gooks kept firing harassing fire, just enough to keep us awake, and me scared. I pulled Sig as close to me as I could, It was like having a real live army issue teddy bear.

Once sleep overcame the noise I dozed off into a nervous sleep.

It seemed like I had just closed my eyes, when.

“Hey!” the PFC (Private First Class) yelled. “You guys gotta get up we are moving out in about twenty minutes.

“The fucking Army won’t even let you sleep in the field,” I sleepily replied.

“If it’s not the gooks it’s the Army no one likes sleep in this fucking world,” Pearce replied, even as gung-ho as he was he hated getting up in the morning. By this time all the tanks were running and making all kinds of noise.

Sig was full of piss and vinegar and wanted to run, but I knew better, no telling what kind of booby-traps were around this place. I was too attached to him just to let him run.

“One of you guys will come with me,” SP4 Stienbeck said walking past us heading for the other members of his squad.

“I’ll go,” I said, thinking that from my first impression Stienbeck knew his shit.

Grabbing my gear I hurriedly moved out with the tough looking combat veteran. Walking away I noticed Pearce was approached by another grunt and started walking off in another direction. In my mind I knew that this was it, the beginning of my tour in a combat zone.

“All right, here is what we are going to do,” Stienbeck said, pulling out his grid map and spreading it out in front of me. “The tanks are going to leave us and go on another mission, and we are going to move up this trail to this point,” he continued pointing at the map. “Then we will get on line and sweep this part of the eight click ville (a village that was eight kilometers long extending from Hue north east to the coast of Vietnam).”

“My dog won’t work well on line, there will be to many disturbances around him,” I explained hoping he knew at least a little about Scout Dog operations.

“Well I don’t know about that. Can he at least get us there safely?” he asked.

“That’s no problem, Sig is the best and he won’t let anything happen to us,” I said confidently, and assured that if there was a mistake it would probably be mine, I thought as I removed the choke chain and placed the working harness over his head and around his body.

We then started out down the trail through the sandy, thick bamboo.

“Search boy, search,” I commanded as Sig eagerly moved down the trail, with that serious look. By this time I knew he was working, and working good.

About fifty meters down the trail Sig’s big ears perked up, he buried his paws into the sand and refused to move. I stopped

“What’s up?” The grunt walking behind me asked curiously.

“I think it’s a booby trap,” I anxiously replied.

“How do you know?” The grunt asked looking in front of us, and not seeing anything.

“What’s the fucking hold up,” Stienbeck yelled from further down the column.

“The dog handler thinks he has found a booby trap,” the grunt yelled back.

“Where is it,” Stienbeck said moving up to my position.

“All I can tell you is that it is on this trail right ahead of us,” I nervously replied, knowing that the integrity of Sig was on the line.

“You sure?” Stienbeck asked, in a I don’t believe this tone.

“Positive,” I replied.

“Well move on out slowly and watch your step,” Stienbeck said impatiently.

“Sorry,” I nervously said. “I’m not allowed to move in front of my dog after an alert.

“What the fuck is this shit?” He angrily replied. “Exactly what are we supposed to do?”

“You are supposed to send someone out to check the alert out,” I replied.

Angrily Stienbeck walked out about ten meters in front of Sig and rapidly returned.

“Now move out,” He ordered.

Sig was nervously moving off the trail, then he moved back onto it.

“Hold up,” I said to the grunt behind me. “Don’t take another step.”

“What now?” The grunt asked a little irritated.

I began to move Sig closer and closer to where I thought the booby-trap was.

“What the fuck you doing now?” Stienbeck angrily asked.

“Just a minute,” I said. “I’m going to find that fucking booby-trap you didn’t think was there.”

I eased my hand down along the sand and felt a small lump under the white sand.

“There it is,” I excitedly said.

“Where? I don’t see a fucking thing,” Stienbeck said becoming more and more irritated with me.

I carefully brushed the sand away from what appeared to be a small ball of C-4 plastic explosive. It had a small detonating device on it. Just enough to blow a foot off.

“WOW!” Stienbeck said a little shaky. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“When Sig says that there is something there, then you know to watch out,” I said with a smile, that made my day. I was more confident now than ever about Sig.

“Man I don’t believe that,” the grunt said. “That could have blown my foot off. Man thanks for making us wait.”

“Bring the radio up front,” Stienbeck ordered.

I could hear Stienbeck on the radio over the excitement from the other members of the squad now gathered up around the booby-trap. Funny, everyone wanted to thank me for finding this new type device, all I could do was tell them Sig is the one to thank



not me.

“Roger, I never seen anything like it before,” Stienbeck reported to the CO over the radio. “Will blow in place, Roger out”

The device was blown in place with the C-4 explosives the grunts carried. We once again started to move out. It was hot so hot that the white sand seemed to burn Sig’s paws, and my feet were burning. The heat was coming from the sun and reflecting back up from the ground from the white sand. It was about an hour more down the trail when.

“Hold up,” I said quietly as Sig stopped in the trail again.

“What is it?” The grunt eagerly asked.

“I see about three of those booby-traps,” I replied.

There in the trail were several small balls of plastic explosive as if someone was throwing them out while they were running.

“Sig is also getting a personnel alert,” I excitedly exclaimed.

“Where?” The grunt excitedly asked.

“Between ten and one o’clock,” I excitedly answered trying to control Sig and prepare to fire if I had to.

“Stienbeck, get up here now!” The grunt yelled.

“On my way!” Stienbeck yelled back.

“What’s up?” Stienbeck asked as he came hurriedly up from behind.

“More toe poppers (small booby-traps designed to blow toes and feet off),” The grunt replied anxiously. “Dog says there is gooks out in front.”

“How far?” Stienbeck asked moving his head and eyes across the thick jungled area in front of us.

“Not far,” I said with confidence in my voice. “Sig has a real strong alert.”

“We need to get around these booby-traps,” Stienbeck said.

“Lets mark off the spot where they are and let Sig take us around them,” I

suggested.

“Will he do that?” Stienbeck asked with astonishment.

“He’s always done it for me before back at Benning in training areas,” I said with all the confidence in Sig.

“This ain’t Benning,” Steinbeck nervously remarked.

“I know but I trust him,” I said with that glow of certainty.

“If you will follow him, then I will,” Stienbeck said still a little unsure of the situation.

We set up markers and passed the word back and Sig once again took point, an moved cautiously around the booby-traps, then back onto the trail.

“I don’t believe this shit,” The grunt said astonished at how carefully Sig had left the trail and moved ever so close to the booby-traps without hitting a one, we found them all.

We moved cautiously down the trail and Sig’s ears stood up, and he stood on his hind legs.

“There he goes!” I shouted, as the gook jumped from the brush and headed down the narrow trail. I was unable to fire because Sig became so excited his one hundred pound body was almost dragging my one hundred thirty pound body down the trail. The grunt walking behind me started firing, then everyone that could see the gook opened up.

There is a new kid on the block, I thought to my self, and you are not going to be able to hide anymore.

The grunt started to run down the trail.

“Hey man wait!” I excitedly yelled.

“Oh yea,” the grunt said, putting on the brakes realizing this was probably the ass hole putting out the toe poppers.

The shooting had stopped and we gathered our senses back from all the

excitement. I began to feel like one of the guys now. I had met the enemy and was still alive I reeked with confidence. Things were not going to be so bad after all, I thought.

We had found several other toe poppers just where the gook had ran. He was trying to get us excited enough to run after him and hit the explosives. But with Sig that just didn't happen. An hour later we approached the main part of the eight click ville. It took several minutes to get the whole company on line and move out.

In a heart beat there was a loud explosion to my left flank.

"Hold up," came the order from someone near by.

"We got WIA," Stienbeck said as he slowly approached me, and gave me that oh shit look.

"One of the wounded was a dog handler," He said putting his hand on my shoulder.

"Who?" I asked feeling those butterflies that I had not felt since early morning.

"I don't know, them one with second platoon," He said sadly.

"Aw fuck, how bad? I asked almost in tears, knowing it was Otis.

"I'll see if I can find out," Steinbeck said reaching for the radio that was strapped to the back of the RTO. (radio telephone operator).

All of a sudden it hit me I was concerned about Otis and never even thought about Rolf (Otis' dog). No one cares about what happens to them, I thought. Well I am. I looked at Sig and decided it was time to see what I could do to buck the Army's policy of not returning the dogs home. I'll write my congressman.

"The handler is hit pretty bad," Steinbeck solemnly said. "looks like he will be going home."

"What about the dog?" I asked a little shaky.

"They are going to send him in to Mongoose on a chopper," Stienbeck said. "He wasn't hurt at all.

Fucking booby-traps, I thought.

Later on that evening we sat up for the afternoon in the village. I worked my way over to second platoon to see if I could find out what happened, and how bad it really was.

“Hey Doc,” I said. Can you tell me how bad the dog handler was hit?

“He got his legs messed up pretty bad,” the Medic stated.

“Is it gonna fuck up his football career up?” I curiously asked.

“He ain’t going to play any sport that requires the use of his legs,” the Medic said.

“He got some real bad wounds.”

“What happened?” I asked, wondering why Rolf didn’t alert on the booby-trap.

“Another guy, hit the trap the handler just caught some frags. We had several wounded and lost two KIA, It was a nasty mess. The handler was lucky he didn’t get it worse.

Man if this is any sign of the way the next ten months are going to be I’m in big trouble, I thought to myself. I turned and headed back for the platoon I was working with. On the way back I ran into Pearce.

“You find out what happened?” Pearce asked excitedly.

“Yes, I did,” I replied explaining what the Medic had told me.

“Man I hope the fuck I don’t hit no booby-trap,” Pearce said, feeling a little less gung-ho and more vulnerable.

“Me too,” I said, thinking that I would rather die than get blown in pieces and live without parts of my body.

It was getting near dark and I was getting a little nervous, because of what happened the night before. Pearce and I were now together again as the company had formed up to spend the night together. I had already had my gear spread out and was planning for a long sleepless night, when.

“Get your shit together,” Steinbeck whispered as he was going from position to position. “We are moving out now.”

“What’s up?” I asked curiously worried of a night patrol, it was bad enough when I could see.

“Nothing we are moving to our NDP (night defensive position),” He whispered.

The company made it’s way out into the middle of a rice paddy that had to be a mile across. How stupid I thought, we are out here with no protection at all.

“Find a place to dig in,” a grunt whispered moving his M-60 machine gun into position.

Pearce and I had found a place in some very soft sand.

“Fuck this place is a graveyard,” I whispered to Pearce in a scared tone.

“I know this is cool,” He replied.

“Fuck you,” I said almost to loud.

In a few moments artillery smoke round fell extremely close to us.

“What is that?” I asked a grunt in the next position.

“Delta Tango’s (defensive targets),” he replied. “If we get hit we just call in and tell ARTY to fire DT’s, now shut up.”

We dug into the soft sand and I laid down. I started to feel this vibration in the ground like some wanted out of the grave. I didn’t say anything for several minutes. I really didn’t believe in ghost but I was feeling something unnatural under my body.

“What the fuck is that?” Pearce asked a little spooked.

“What?” I asked as though nothing was wrong.

“That vibration in the ground,” Pearce anxiously replied.

“I don’t know,” I answered, calmly not revealing my spooky feeling.

I laid there for several minutes then stood up, and there across the perimeter I

could see a silhouette of a grunt with his entrenching tool pounding the ground, digging his position. Each time he struck the ground I felt the ground vibrate. I kept my mouth shut and laid back down, wondering if Pearce ever figured it out.

Quite surprisingly the night was fairly quiet by Vietnam standards. The gooks had mortared the position we had left earlier, and had sniped at it all night. I now understood why we moved after dark. What I didn't understand is why we were not asked to walk point, but at that point I was glad.

The day seemed to start off hotter than the day before, and Sig was having trouble with the hot sand on his paws already. I knew he wouldn't last through the day, but it was our job to try.

Pearce and I were split up and I went with Stienbeck's platoon and was put on point heading for another place to sweep the eight click ville. Sig did good across the rice paddy, we found nothing. Then we entered the village.

"Rusty," Stienbeck said. "We are going to follow you we know there is a lots of booby-traps in this part of the ville."

"Okay, but Sig is not working well. His paws are to hot, and I don't know how long he can work," I said with much concern about Sig's welfare.

"Work as long as you can," he replied. "We can always revert back to the way we always do it."

An hour later Sig began to hop like he was on a hot plate and began to sway as if he was dizzy. I had carried nine quarts of water and was about out. I knew he was through, and it was no use endangering him, or the others on this mission.

"What's up?" Steinbeck asked, moving up to the point where I had Sig laying in the shade of some bamboo.

"Sorry man," I sadly said. "He just can't go on anymore, he's too hot"

"You need a medivac?" He cautiously asked.

“Yes,” I replied as I noticed Sig was breathing rather hard and just didn’t look good.

“No problem,” Stienbeck said reaching for the hand set of the radio.

“Medivac on its way,” He reassuringly said. “How can I get another dog team?”

“Just call Battalion Headquarters at Mongoose,” I answered. “And will you fill out this after action report for me.”

“Sure,” He said. “I tell you this, I was very impressed with the way the dog worked. I hope to see you again, you guys were a great help.

The medivac swiftly swooped down into a near by clearing and I carried Sig and laid him in the floor of the HUEY and climbed aboard. I was looking back at the vill that was such a terror to the guys that had to stay behind.

Next stop LZ Sally.