

CHAPTER NINE

It wasn't hard to wake up at LZ Sally before daylight choppers and trucks were loud enough to wake the dead, especially when the choppers stirred up so much dust I could hardly breathe.

"Come on Rusty get up," Otis said as I lazily laid on my cot thinking of how scared I was about going to the field. "We got to get our shit together and move to Mongoose today."

"I'm coming, I'm coming," I answered sleepily.

It was a slow process getting up and shaving out of Sig's feed pan, and washing myself with a washcloth at the water trailer since the engineers had not completed the shower yet. The toilet was a wooden building with holes cut out for seats, it was common to get splinters in your ass.

"Rusty," Joe yelled out in a nervous sound. "Would you ride with me to the 1/501st heli-pad. Otis and Frank are going out on a mission this morning."

"I thought we were going to move to Mongoose today," I answered curiously.

"We are," Joe replied. "The rest of us will move our stuff today. We will have to move their stuff with us."

My stomach was beginning to feel those ever growing number of butterflies moving around. Both Otis and Frank were very good close friends of mine. Especially Frank we had planned our R&R (Rest and recuperation) together in September. Frank talked me into choosing Bangkok, Thailand. I was really worried about these guys. I was scared for them.

"Be right with you Mac" I answered Joe McMahon's request.

I walked up behind Otis, who was loading Rolf (his dog) on the truck.

“Otis.” I said.

“Yes, Rusty what you want.” Otis said in his calm low voice.

“You be fucking careful, and watch where you step.” I nervously said.

“Look Rusty,” Otis said noticing how worried I was about him. You guys just move our stuff, and have us a place set up when we get back in.”

“Sure, Okay see you in a couple of days. I said.

I eased around to Rebel’s (Frank’s dog) stake out area and noticed Frank gathering up his gear for the trip.

“Frank,” I said anxiously. “Don’t forget we have R&R together in a few months, so be sure to watchout while you are out there.”

“I’ll be all right you just meet us at Mongoose,” Frank nervously.

It was easy to see that those two were just as scared as I was. It was just a few minutes later when we were moving down that dusty road. With dust pouring in the truck from all directions. It was hard for me to breathe, it must have been hell on those poor dogs.

By this time it was eight O’clock and the temperature was already approaching one hundred plus. The dogs were miserable, I just couldn’t see how they could work properly in this heat.

The wait at the heli-pad was a short fifteen minutes. Not much was said as we solemnly awaited the Huey to come in blowing the dust everywhere.

“Here it comes,” Yelled the Sp/4 that had been waiting to load resupplies for the company the handlers were headed.

“Okay Frank,” Otis said. “Lets go.”

Frank silently put his ruck sack (field pack) on and stood diligently awaiting the dark speck in the sky to approach.

"Good luck," Joe said worriedly.

"Keep your heads down and those steel pots on," I said trying to not sound worried.

The chopper came in with hurricane force winds, settled its rotors on a slower idle and everyone began to hustle and load the bird. The dog handlers put their dogs on then sat down with their feet hanging out the door. The Huey began to speed up the big rotors and slowly lift for takeoff. Frank and Otis waved as the bird headed off toward harms way. I could only wonder if I would ever see them again. That was the beginning from then on one could only wonder when a handler went on a mission. We sat at the heli-pad until the chopper was out of sight.

"Lets get back," Joe said quietly.

"Okay," I replied not knowing what else I could say.

"Look," Joe said. "Youtz went out earlier this morning. So it's started, expect many more. We are just lucky we didn't have to go today."

"Where is Pearce?" I asked.

"Aw Sprowl had him on some shit detail," Joe said.

"Sprowl doesn't like him much does he?" I asked curiously.

"I don't know," Joe replied. "But he sure seems to ride him doesn't he?"

"Him and Willie both," I replied.

It took us all morning to load our gear in the intensive heat and humidity. Arriving back in the 47th area we were met by Jon Wahl.

"Hey guys Youtz was wounded a few minutes ago," John said excitedly.

"How bad," I asked, thinking of Otis and Frank.

"I don't know," Jon said. "But it must of been pretty bad, they Med-vac him to Phu Bai, and all that was left of his dog Willie was his ear, and they sent that in to John Carter. (The vet Tech).

"Man that could have been me," Jon said looking a little pale. "You know Willie was my dog until Youtz and I traded places and I became clerk."

"I'll bet he will never be a professional bowler now," Pearce said.

"You know he would have made it too," Tommy said in a concerned tone. "He was really good."

"You know what I remember about Youtz?" I asked trying to escape the reality of what happened.

"What?" Joe asked.

"One day on a training lane at Benning I heard Youtz scream no Willie, Willie I no, oh no Willie, I turned and looked and Willie had shit right on his foot, a big pile too," I said smiling at the memory of James Youtz training encounter.

"Imagine that first mission for the 47th first day and already had a WIA what next," Jon Wahl said worrying what might happen to the rest of the handlers in the platoon.

Later in the tent I was packing the rest of my gear for the move to Mongoose. My anxiety was really running high. I couldn't help but to think what next. Willie was a damn good dog and James was a good handler. What was going to happen to me. I stepped to the end of the tent and took a long look at Sig. I was more worried about him than I was about me. He had to stay the rest of his life in this fucked up shit hole.

"Tommy, what is going to happen to us?" I asked seriously.

“Rusty, I’ve been thinking. I think that there is not much chance of us getting out of here unhurt. I’ve just about come to that conclusion.” Tommy said in an unusually quiet solemn tone that I have never heard out of him.

“You think maybe Hank was right?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, but it sure doesn’t look good,” Tommy said. “I was over by the medi-vac area last night and they were busy as hell.”

The move to Fire Support Base Mongoose was pretty smooth. We arrived there with no problems. The convoy eased into the small artillery base.

“Fuck this place looks worse than Sally,” I said, a little apprehensive to the situation.

“You guys wait here I’ll go see where they want us to set up,” Joe ordered.

“This is worse than any place that I say in Chicago,” Willie Jones said in a worried humorous tone.

“I can’t imagine anyplace looking like this,” I replied.

“Hey man, this is a cool fire base,” Pearce said, in his gung-ho arrogant tone.

“Get your shit and we will be staying over there,” Joe said cranking the truck up and heading for what appeared to be a few old sand bags lying on top of the ground.

“What the fuck is that?” I asked inquisitively looking at the nasty looking sand bags.

“That my friend is our home,” Joe sarcastically said. “It’s supposed to be a bunker.”

It was a bunker with about enough room for three persons, four if you crowded together.

“Stake your dogs out over here,” Joe said pointing to a small area that was clear of any debris.

“We need sand bags for our dogs protection,” I said angry about the location they gave us.

“I’ll get us some,” Joe said, heading for what appeared to be some kind of command bunker.

“Pearce, this 101st has got to be the most chicken shit unit in the Army,” I said pissed off at Pearce because he was airborne, Joe was too, but he was not as gung-ho as Pearce. If it was up to him we would have never left the states.

“Who volunteers to go into that shit hole first,” I asked fearing of some kind of booby trap.

“Fuck, I will,” Pearce said with that gung-ho attitude.

“Be my guest,” Willie said laughing about the whole situation.

Pearce slowly entered the small opening that was almost ground level. It was really nasty looking from the outside.

“It’s okay,” Pearce yelled from inside the small crevice called a bunker.

“This place sucks,” I said entering the small hole.

“Wait Willie, I don’t think three of us can be in here at once,” I said trying to visualize the over six footer trying to stand in here, I was five foot six and I couldn’t straighten up.

“This floor is fucking muddy!” I shouted angrily.

“All right lets see if we can scrounge some canvas or ponchos,” Pearce said confidently.

“Hey, you guys, Joe said from outside of the hell hole. “

No sand bags for the dogs protection. Maybe in a few days.”

“What about our dogs,” I asked concerned about Sig’s well being.

“They should be safe where they are,” Joe replied. “Is there enough room for all of us in there?”

“As long as you don’t stand up we can probably at least sleep here,” I said a little upset about this place.

When all the gear was put away and our dogs were staked out in as safe a place as possible. It was about rime we ate.

“Where the fuck is the mess hall,” Willie asked, looking around the small base camp.

“They told me we had to eat C-rations two meals and the evening meal would be brought in by truck from Sally,” Joe explained.

“When?” I asked.

“I’ll see if I can find out,” Joe said walking toward the Command bunker.

“Man this is fucked up,” I mumbled to myself.

We finally got to eat and it wasn't any better than it was at Sally. The trucks brought out hot food but some of it was already cold by time we got to it, the hot sun was beginning to lower into the western sky, and shadows were forming all around. We sat on top of our so called bunker and watched as the 4.2 inch mortars fired DT's (Delta Tango's or defensive targets) all around the perimeter except on the side we were on. The main entrance was just around the corner from us and the road was close by. The area on our side of the perimeter was brushy and there was a small village just right side. Right next to us was a small canal, I thought sure that is the gooks wanted in they could come in this way. Luckily we had the dogs to give us some warning. The noise at Mongoose was terrible, seeing it is a fire support base, the big 105mm cannons fired constantly. Through all this ordeal my thoughts returned to Frank and Otis. We had watched the medi-vacs fly in and out all day long. We were in radio contact with the 47th at Sally but could only call a couple times a day. Night fall had set in the noises of war became more intense as the far off sounds of small fire fights sounded through the night. In the distance hot pink tracers raced through the air, and bright green tracers from the AK's answered them.

"Fuck it I'm going to try to get some sleep," I said. "These fucking mosquitoes are eating me alive. Good night Sig."

"Yea me too," Willie said sounding a little worried about the situation.

"Yea, lets all turn in," Joe said in a kind of ordering tone. "That means you to Pearce. You can get your rocks off later."

Inside the small hole we crowded ourselves into the most comfortable position on the wet floor covered by ponchos. I drifted off into sleep wondering what Frank and Otis were doing.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Joe screamed in total terror. "What the fuck is that."

“What!” the rest of us screamed in unison frightened to death, thinking a gook had somehow gotten in here.

“Look it’s a fucking rat!” Joe exclaimed as he shined his flashlight on the monster.

“There all over us!” I yelled. “Get the fuck out of here.”

We all dashed out of the bunker running over each other like the Keystone Cops. It was funny after it had happened.

“Man that thing was big enough to stand flat footed and fuck a turkey,” I laughingly blurted out.

“A big fucking turkey,” Joe replied as we all sat outside the bunker laughing.

“Who’s going back in first,” I asked jokingly.

The night was over quicker than I wanted it to be. It just seemed like I haven’t had any sleep since we arrived in this God forsaken country.

This was the beginning of the second day and still no word from Otis and Frank. Anxiety was really building up. I took Sig for a walk around the fire base. I met several other soldiers they seemed a lot friendlier than those assholes at Sally. I eagerly watched the choppers as they flew in on a regular basis, looking for my compadres, awaiting word on the next mission. All day we just sat around waiting until it was dark once again, the whole day all we did was walk our dogs and feed them. Now night was falling and still no word from Otis and Frank. I laid on the damp poncho liner and faded off to sleep thinking of my pals. I couldn’t even dream of the states it seemed as though they were a lifetime away, and they were.