

Hotel

Overrun

★ ★ ★

As I walked to the comm bunker that evening, I saw a young Vietnamese man squatting in the four-foot by four-foot barbed wire cube that the local troops used as a jail. He had a sad and submissive look on his face. Two RFs stood by, heckling him. A third came up and began to urinate on the prisoner, much to the merriment of the others.

I relieved Wolverton of radio duty at about 1800. Lieutenant Stamper had used Tiddy that day to work on strengthening our defensive positions around the perimeter, so he had missed his shift. Wolverton and I would now split the radio watch duty into two, twelve-hour shifts—except if we were attacked. In that case, as senior radio operator, he would immediately assume that duty once again.

Defending the village that evening were about thirty Americans and 140 indigenous troops dispersed at several locations in the vicinity, with the bulk of them at the district headquarters compound. I spent most of that night reading a paperback book about Bob Hope's previous USO tours and chuckling intermittently at his jokes. I radioed my hourly situation report to the base with a brief, "Intrigue, this is Mutter. Sit rep all secure. Out." (Intrigue was the call sign of the 26th Marine Regiment; Mutter, the call sign for CAC-O.)

I checked to see where they kept the spare batteries for the radios and eventually found a couple. The three-volt batteries were the size and shape of a brick. They had a life of only an hour of actual transmitting time, so I was glad I had a couple of extras. We had two radios, one belonged to the

CAC and one was a backup I brought from the base. I was surprised at how relatively relaxed I began feeling as the night wore on, fooling myself into believing that each passing hour of peace was a positive sign that the enemy might not come.

At approximately 0500 the following morning, January 21, I heard a radio transmission from the Khe Sanh Combat Base putting all forces in the area on red alert. This was not the usual drill. I recognized the voice on the radio as that of PFC French. French had been a tent mate of mine when I was up at the base. A big guy who kept to himself and slept with his eyes open, French scared the hell out of the rest of us. Yet that morning his voice was so calm and controlled, it gave no hint of the fact that they were under a sizable enemy rocket attack.

I left the radio bunker and crossed the thirty meters to Lieutenant Stamper's room. He occupied what had been servant's quarters in a small apartment behind the headquarters building. I banged on the door and went in. The lieutenant sat up in bed, taking a moment to shake off sleep.

Stamper then ordered me to wake the troops who were not already guarding the perimeter, then return to the radio. I walked the short distance to the barracks. Everything was dark and quiet. When I arrived there, everyone was already awake, dressing, and putting on gear. The muffled rumbling explosions coming from the base two miles away had awakened some of them. I had not heard those distant sounds, perhaps because I had been in a sandbagged bunker. I then walked back to the comm bunker to await further instructions.

About 0530, automatic weapons fire erupted from what sounded like the south and west sides of the district headquarters compound. Sound can be misleading when you are in a bunker because everything appears to be coming from the direction of the largest opening, in this case the doorway. The gunfire soon encircled the compound and, mixed with our outgoing fire, created an unbelievable racket. The deafening roar in the center of a pitched battle nearly defies description: a seamless earsplitting blend of chattering bursts of semi-automatic rifles, the oscillating knock of machine guns, teeth-jarring detonations of rocket-propelled grenades, and the deep, reverberating thump of exploding mortar shells. At times, the sound would shift away and then return, like waves on a beach. At other times, the volume would decrease in intensity on one side of the compound for a few seconds, but long enough to have me anxiously wondering if the defenders had been overwhelmed.

Alone in the bunker, fear cramped my neck muscles and tremors shook my head like a seizure. Tears filled my eyes and I started to repeat the same question aloud, "What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do?"

Just then, Wolverton staggered through the doorway. He was clearly in shock. Blood flowed from his right hand, which he was holding carefully with his left. A piece of shrapnel had nearly ripped off his middle finger, which now clung to his hand by a half-inch wide flap of skin. A fractured stick of bone protruded through the translucent fat. I quickly wrapped his hand with a large bandage from a first aid kit and laid him down on the cot across from the radio desk. He stared up at the ceiling, panting and frightened. Though he had made his way back to the comm bunker to relieve me of radio duty, he was clearly in no condition to do so.

With great effort, I forced myself to breathe normally, to get calm. What to do? What to do? A few days before, I had received prearranged artillery fire coordinates to transmit to the artillery battalion back up at the base, in case the enemy overran us quickly. I had written them on the acetate-covered map with a black grease pencil. Then I saw my scribbling, down in the lower right-hand corner: AT110, AT111. These codes targeted both the Marine and Special Forces compounds with variable-timed (VT) artillery. This meant the shells were timed to explode in the air about twenty feet directly above the compound. The idea was to create a shower of shrapnel deadly to anyone caught out in the open. If I radioed these target codes back to the Fire Support Control Center at Khe Sanh base, hundreds of these artillery shells would be unleashed upon us. No other authority was required to start the barrage. Nevertheless, I continued to wait—a minute, perhaps two.

As I rested the radio handset against my cheek, still trying to decide whether it was time to make that call, Lieutenant Stamper burst through the doorway. He was out of breath and had a large wet stain on the front of his trousers. My first thought was that he was wounded and didn't yet realize it. He started yelling for artillery, "Arty! Arty! Arty!" I squeezed the button on the handset and began transmitting as calmly as I could, but realized I could not hear my own voice over the din. Although I'd been taught that this radio handset would both amplify my voice and filter out background noise, I was too much a novice and too scared to accept that as fact. So I took a deep breath, re-keyed the transmit button, and shouted the prearranged artillery fire codes as loud as I could into the mouthpiece. Miraculously, PFC French, the radio operator at the base, was able to understand my request and passed it quickly on to the Fire Support Coordinator.

Little of the enemy gunfire had yet penetrated the narrow window in the bunker that faced the Buddhist shrine, but I wasn't sure what the shrapnel from our own artillery airbursts would be like. I immediately took clothes, books, whatever loose items I could find, and stuffed them into the slit, which was the only opening in the bunker other than the doorway.

During the interval, Stamper and I remained speechless. We anxiously glanced at each other, both knowing that it was now a race between the arrival of the artillery shells and the rapidity with which the overwhelming enemy force could push past our perimeter defenses and reach the shelter of our covered fighting holes and bunkers.

Although it was less than five minutes, it seemed like an eternity. The first shells exploded overhead with an extraordinary sound, like thunder reverberating in a narrow canyon. Part of the bunker window was still unblocked and through it I could see the white-orange splashes of flame against the still dark morning sky. Once the artillery support finally stopped, it was deathly quiet for several minutes. The airbursts caught much of the 66th NVA Regiment out in the open, decimating them. Sporadic NVA small arms and machine gun fire soon resumed, along with an occasional flurry of mortar rounds, but with nothing of its previous intensity.

At first light, we were able to see just how close we had come to being completely overrun. Enemy dead littered the ground right up to our fighting positions. Near Tiddy's dugout, an NVA soldier slumped dead on his knees in a mess of concertina wire. The enemy may have concluded this was a weak spot in our defensive line because in the first minutes of the attack, Tiddy shot and killed five of them just a few feet in front of his position. Some of the surviving attackers now dug in close to our barbed wire and continued firing at us.

Despite our successful defense of the district headquarters compound, the NVA had taken the rest of the village. They set up one machine gun on the roof of the rice storehouse just outside our wire to the east and another one on top of the Buddhist shrine, just as Whiting had predicted. Though they had briefly taken part of our compound near the LZ, the enemy had been repelled by sunrise. Approximately twelve defenders were dead and twenty-five wounded. Nevertheless, we had held.

Lieutenant Stamper then told me what had happened to him after I woke him up. While checking on the Marines around the perimeter of the compound, Stamper realized that he had not relieved himself yet that morning, so he went up to the LZ where the piss tube was located. As he was urinating, he happened to glance out across the LZ. There, twenty meters away, he saw a squad of NVA soldiers stealthily advancing toward him from out of the morning gloom. They were directly under the ARVN machine guns in the adjacent Special Forces compound, yet no one had noticed. Stamper turned and dashed back through the narrow opening in the barbed wire fence, yelling the alert—the stain on his pants as testament to his interrupted mission. The enemy opened fire on him but missed.

Despite the fact that we were anticipating the enemy's arrival, nearly 500 of them silently entered the village that morning. In fact, they had almost walked through the backdoor of the district headquarters compound undetected.

After sunrise, I went outside to take a leak and look around. I kept low because of the sniper fire. I noticed the jail cage was empty. The prisoner from the previous night probably would not have survived our artillery airbursts, so someone must have either let him out before the attack or had already taken his body away.

Our first close air support arrived about 0800. An air observer in a single engine airplane, call sign "Covey," circled above us directing flights of fighter-bombers. The precision of the bombing was often remarkable. I watched as a napalm bomb tumbled from the bottom of a Phantom F-4, which was traveling at over 400 knots. The bomb was aimed at a sniper who had dug-in close to our barbed wire. It actually nicked the top of the barbed wire, causing it to jiggle slightly, before going on to explode just a few meters on the other side.

Later in the morning, the air observer radioed me that he had spotted about 100 NVA moving out in the open approximately one mile southwest of the compound. He requested permission to target them, rather than continuing to work on the enemy troops dug in around us. I was the only one in the comm bunker at that time, but readily gave him approval. He radioed back a few minutes later, in a clearly excited voice, that the napalm had run right through the column, killing all. I later learned that these were not NVA reinforcements, as I had assumed when giving the air observer the approval, but rather a column of wounded being evacuated from the field.

In the morning, after Lieutenant Stamper had guardedly radioed Colonel Lownds about our extreme shortages of ammunition—particularly machine gun ammunition, mortar shells, and grenades—the colonel ordered a relief force sent to us. By early afternoon a platoon from Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, had moved from the Khe Sanh base to the north edge of the village without incident. Although less than a mile from us, the platoon had halted because they suspected an NVA ambush ahead. Lownds radioed the platoon commander of the relief force to advance no farther and await his orders.

About midday, a helicopter came on my radio frequency. The pilot advised me that he was currently above the district headquarters compound with boxes of machine gun ammunition for us. He could not land because he was taking sniper fire. I grabbed the radio and ran outside. There,

hovering about 100 feet above the headquarters building, was a silver and white UH-1E helicopter (commonly referred to as a “Huey”) with no discernable military service markings. I later learned that it was an Air America chopper. Air America was a commercial airline company whose helicopters and fixed wing aircraft provided civilian air transportation throughout South Vietnam. The company was also owned and operated by the CIA and used for a variety of clandestine purposes as well. I’m not sure why they called me on the Marine radio frequency and not the Special Forces radio operator next door.

I was holding the radio set in my left hand and the handset in the other, pleading with the pilot to drop the ammo on to the roof of the headquarters building. He refused, believing there was a good chance it would fall outside the wire and into the enemy’s hands instead. From where he hovered, the line between the NVA and us was nearly undistinguishable. I tried to convince him they had all the ammunition they needed and could get more—but we couldn’t!

While the whopping of the chopper blades drowned out other sounds around me, I could distinctly hear the occasional ping of a sniper bullet striking the chopper’s fuselage. Both the pilot and I were now shouting into our microphones at the same time. I picked up the last few words of his transmission (“ . . . out of here!”) as he sped off toward the east—without dropping a single bullet.

Corporal Russell had manned the bunker that would have been my responsibility if I had not been on radio watch during the attack that morning. The doorway into the little dugout was directly behind where the machine gunner would kneel and was screened by a low blast-wall. Rocket-propelled grenades and hand grenade concussions knocked Russell completely back out of that bunker doorway—twice. Both times, he shook off the effects and went back in. He continued firing that ancient machine gun until it ran out of ammunition. For his heroism in stopping the enemy from overrunning the east side of the district headquarters compound that morning, Russell was later awarded the Silver Star.

Now suffering from numerous shrapnel wounds, Russell lay bandaged and resting on the floor of the comm bunker. In the early afternoon, I went over to check on his condition and offer him a cigarette. I asked him if he had tried to hit the drum of “napalm,” as he had instructed me to do. He shot the big can several times, he replied, but could not get it to explode. He speculated that we had probably failed to stir the mixture often enough or perhaps the locals stole the fuel when no one was looking.

Russell then told me that he had been listening to the work I was doing on the radio, calling in artillery and bombing strikes and continuously prodding the regiment for reinforcements; he wanted me to know what a good job he thought I was doing. His words lifted my spirits, as by that point I had been talking continuously on the radio for over twenty hours and was wearing down a bit. But, more importantly, his words represented a kind of vindication. Earlier that week, Corporal Russell had been on the patrol that I failed to acknowledge on the radio because I had fallen asleep. He was the one who subsequently put the hand grenade in my sleeping bag. What poetic justice, I thought—atonement for having fallen asleep then by not falling asleep now.

Throughout the afternoon, we continued to take enemy mortar and automatic weapons fire. Our air observer reported that the NVA had put a mortar tube in the village infirmary, about a block to the east, and torn a hole in the roof through which to fire at us. He called in an immediate artillery strike on the clinic and silenced the mortar. I hoped no civilians were in the clinic waiting for medical treatment at the time, but never found out.

With only an hour of daylight left, Stamper took my radio handset and made a personal plea to Colonel Lownds to have the Marine relief force advance the rest of the way to us. Several minutes later I received a radio call back from the base. It was Colonel Lownds' voice, rather than a radio operator's. I knew it couldn't be good news. He asked for Lieutenant Stamper. Lownds then advised Stamper that, because of the high likelihood of being ambushed while moving through the village, he was ordering the platoon to return to the base. Stamper gave it his best "Yes, Sir," and ended the transmission.

I knew how little ammunition we had left and that we had taken about forty casualties already. I believed that without reinforcements we would not make it through the night. I could not fathom them forsaking us and desperately searched for an explanation. Then it occurred to me that the platoon commander of our relief force was Captain Chapman, the son of the Commandant of the Marine Corps. If Chapman died unnecessarily, it might be bad for Colonel Lownds' career. This had to be the reason. A surge of anger gripped me, intensified by a stinging sense of betrayal. Marines never left other Marines behind. You would risk your life to save your buddy, that was the code. I stood by the radio bench stiff and silent, trying to come to terms with the potential consequences of this abandonment.

Within a few minutes, Captain Clarke came charging over from the Army side of the comm bunker. He had just learned the relief force was

not coming and was furious. Clarke snatched the handset from me and called Colonel Lownds. Once Lownds was on the radio, Clarke demanded that the colonel send back the platoon. He went on about how the Marines had guaranteed the safety of the Special Forces troops and that it was Lownds' duty to meet that obligation. Clarke complained at length in unencrypted language about our lack of grenades and mortar and machine gun ammunition.

I knew the NVA were monitoring this radio frequency. In fact, they had been trying to jam my radio all day, blowing a shrill whistle and screaming at me in what I took to be, from their rather hysterical tone, Vietnamese threats and obscenities. At first, this was annoying and ominous. Despite the fact that they were nearby, judging from the strength of the transmissions, I was always able to override them due to the relative superiority of my own radio's output. (In situations when it was obvious the enemy was listening, radiomen often employed a simple method of encryption when discussing numbers or radio frequencies. This included expressions we hoped the enemy would not understand. As an example, if we were saying the number ten, but wanted to mask that information we would say something like, "Mickey Mantle's uniform number, up three." If we wanted a helicopter pilot to meet us on radio frequency 34.5, we would tell him to go to "a perfect bowling score, up forty-five." I don't know if it fooled the NVA, but it made us feel secure and clever.)

I felt that Captain Clarke's careless language was providing the NVA with too much information, that he was compromising our security. Stamper could see my concern and thought I was going to grab the handset away from Clarke. I was, by that point, so witless from fatigue that I might have tried something that stupid. Stamper was standing behind the captain. As I looked from Clarke's face to his, Stamper held my eyes in his gaze and with a slight shake of his head, silently instructed me to "let it go." Clarke was the senior officer at district headquarters and, despite the fact that he was Army, was in command of us all.

Having yelled himself out at Lownds, Captain Clarke left the bunker with Stamper following. It was quiet outside now. I sat on the floor with my back up against the radio bench. Wolverton was asleep on the cot from a morphine injection administered an hour before by a short-tempered Army medic who had been making the rounds of the wounded and had not passed up the opportunity to scold me for how poorly I'd bandaged the hand.

Through the narrow window, the setting sun cast a warm ray on my face. I soon felt a great sense of peace, as though some enormous weight

had lifted. This was due in part to the exhaustion of having already been on the radio continuously for nearly twenty-four hours. I thought of my family and friends and how they would react to word of my death—and the lack of a body to bury. I pictured each of them for just a moment, as if checking them off some private list in my heart. By the time I finished, I was resigned to my fate. There was no help coming, we were nearly out of ammunition, and the NVA, now that they knew all of this too, would be coming back at dark—maybe with a tank or two.

As darkness approached, I envisioned the end. I had kept one fragmentation grenade under the radio table. If still alive when enemy soldiers came through the doorway, I would have the pin already pulled and the grenade pressed to the side of my head; painless, I thought. No capture, no torture, maybe even make a “dink” or two bleed a bit for the cause. It wasn’t the best idea I had ever had, but at least it was a plan. I was relieved to have an alternative to simply not knowing what I would do. In reality, however, no one can be sure what they will do until the instant they actually face death.

Sitting there on the floor of the bunker, I looked down near my boot and saw something shiny pressed into the damp, packed earth. After scratching it out with my finger, I saw that it was a brand new Kennedy half-dollar. It was illegal to possess U.S. currency in Vietnam, but even more unusual was to find it in such a remote place as this. I put the coin in my pocket. Maybe it would bring me luck.

With the Marine relief force now returning to the base, the Army took action. By 1730 that evening, ARVNS and U.S. Army Special Forces advisors in a dozen helicopters manned by U.S. crews were enroute to reinforce us. The hastily adopted plan was to blast a landing zone in Felix Poilane’s coffee trees just northeast of the village, then march the half-mile to the district headquarters.

An Army air observer was assigned to direct the bombers that would create the LZ. However, he had trouble making radio contact with the Marine air observer who was flying near the village to direct the air support bombing around us. Worried that this lack of communication might lead to a collision with the other aircraft, the Army air observer radioed the lead assault helicopter, advising them of the need to delay the air strike.

U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Seymoe, the officer commanding the rescue operation, was in the lead chopper. Believing the mission was about to be cancelled and not wanting to abandon us in the village, Seymoe ordered the pilots to land instead at the old French fort.

Earlier that morning, just after the attack on the district headquarters had been stalled by the blanket of artillery fire from the base, I briefly heard anxious radio transmissions from another American unit operating in the area. They were evidently an Army SOG patrol. They described themselves as “down by the bridge,” which probably meant they were in the vicinity of the old French fort, east of the village. With our district headquarters surrounded and hundreds of enemy soldiers now installed in the village, the SOG patrol was certainly in a precarious position. By late morning, their radio traffic stopped and I didn’t know what became of them. Their sudden radio silence may have been a hint of the tragedy about to unfold.

Unknown to those of us in the village or, more disastrously, to Lieutenant Colonel Seymoe and his men, the fort was now occupied by a platoon of NVA ordered there for the express purpose of preventing relief forces from landing. An enemy RPG hit and destroyed the lead chopper. As the remaining choppers landed to drop off their troops, they too came under intense enemy fire. Within minutes, it was over. Twenty-seven Americans and seventy-four Vietnamese soldiers lay dead.¹²

Captain Clarke, next door in the Army side of the comm bunker, learned about the failure of the mission almost immediately, possibly from ARVN survivors of the ambush who had eluded the enemy and made it to the district headquarters. I had mixed feelings when I heard the news. I was grateful for the attempt they had made to save us, yet angry they had failed. Mostly, however, I was filled with dread. For it now seemed as if there were thousands of enemy soldiers between the Khe Sanh Combat Base and us.

At about 2000, Lieutenant Stamper had me call on the landline telephone from the comm bunker to tell those in the district headquarters building he was coming over. Despite the fact that the building was only fifty feet away, it was now dark outside and there were many nervous trigger fingers within our compound. He then left the bunker.

Stamper returned an hour later holding a nearly empty bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label scotch whiskey. My first thought was that he had decided to get drunk at this crucial time, and I began to seethe with anger. He soon explained that he had gotten the bottle from his room and taken it around to the Marine positions on the line, giving each a gulp before advising them we were nearly out of ammunition and ordering them to fix bayonets. No soldier or Marine in any war likes to hear that particular command because it means you will likely be ending your life in a one-sided knife fight.

Swirling the remaining contents of the bottle for emphasis, he said to me, “I can’t give you any, radioman, because you have to keep your head clear. But when we get out of this, I’ll buy you a whole damn bottle.” I replied that I would hold him to that.

As the evening went on, enemy automatic weapons and mortar fire increased. A C-143 flare ship arrived in the sky over us at 2100. It remained on station for about four hours, dropping flares at regular intervals over us. The illumination it provided took away the cover of darkness from our attackers and made them reluctant to attack. Occasionally, when there were long delays between flares, the exchange of gunfire became more vigorous, but with the next flare burst, it quickly diminished. I watched through the little window to make sure the flares were dropping over us regularly.

After the first flare ship left, we were visited by Spooky, a flare ship enhanced with several electrically-fired Gatling guns that could generate an amazing six thousand bullets per minute. Stamper and I climbed on top of the comm bunker, staying low against the corrugated steel roof because of snipers in the nearby Buddhist shrine. In whispers, we directed Spooky to fire to the south about 1,500 meters. This was the direction from which we believed the main NVA force had come, which might indicate a troop staging area in that vicinity.

As it slowly circled, a curved, nearly continuous stream of glowing tracer bullets flowed from the left side of the aircraft. “Like pissing molten steel,” someone once described it. But the real “spooky” part was the sound. The groaning of those guns was fearsome, almost animalistic, like the lament of a dying bear. It gave me chills to hear it echoing out of the night. I can imagine the terror it must have instilled in those it was targeting.

After Spooky departed, we went back inside the bunker and soon another flare ship arrived. Stamper and Sergeant John Balanco sat in the comm bunker with me, taking turns finishing off the remainder of the scotch. They soon nodded off.

Balanco was a recent arrival to the CAC, joining us just the day before, but he acted like a veteran of this kind of combat. He refused to wear a helmet, despite Stamper’s constant shouting at him to do so, and moved confidently through the sniper fire. Balanco seemed to be everywhere at once and his optimism was infectious. He would say things like, “We’re getting out of this, easy” and “We’re walking away from here, no sweat.” We soon began to believe him. He seemed to be everywhere. Two CAC Marines would win Silver Stars for their actions during the defense of the village (an unusually large number for such a small unit). Balanco would

be one of them. During a conversation with him in the comm bunker that night, I learned that he was from my hometown and had gone to Oakland High School. We even had mutual acquaintances.

As the night wore on, my lack of sleep really began to catch up with me. I could no longer remember the call signs of the flare ships. One had the call sign "Basketball." I soon was calling it "Baseball," then "Beach ball," and finally just "Ball." Occasionally, I would press the transmit button and forget the call sign entirely, broadcasting "uh . . . uh . . . uh" for a few moments while I tried to remember it.

The pilot, who could tell how exhausted I was, tried to keep me awake by talking. He asked me questions about myself and, upon discovering I was from the Bay Area, actually found an old copy of the *San Francisco Chronicle* on board the plane. Letting the copilot take the controls, he began to read me the local news and sports sections. I couldn't believe my good fortune. I started feeling homesick and consequently less resigned to the idea of dying there. When he left, the pilot told me to look him up when I got to Da Nang, so he could buy me a beer. I liked the sound of that "when," but was almost too tired to care.

I tried staying awake by rocking back and forth and slapping my own face. I didn't want a repeat of the last time I fell asleep on radio watch, particularly now that I had finally been vindicated. About 0200, however, I dozed off for a few minutes and suddenly all hell broke loose. Furious small arms fire and grenade explosions erupted all around the perimeter. Our troops responded with long nervous bursts of precious ammunition. Some PFs had already fired all their rifle ammunition. Two Bru were killed by the searing back-blast of a bazooka-like anti-tank weapon, which one of them fired from the confines of their tiny dugout. Other, less enterprising PFs could only lay low with empty rifles and watch. It was pitch dark outside, and the battle was underway again. I had let the flare ship drift off course and did not know the direction it had gone.

I ran outside with the radio and crouched in a shallow trench, poking my head up in quick jerks amid the gunfire, desperately looking for flares. I asked the pilot to keep dropping them, which he said he was doing. The plane was already too far away, I couldn't even make out a glow in the sky. Nor could the pilot see the flashes of the weapons and grenade explosions around us. I went back into the bunker and called Mortarman on the landline telephone. He had a couple of illumination rounds left, our last, but fired them anyway.

The flare ship, now several miles away, spotted our last mortar illumination flare as it floated down over the compound and was back over our

position within a few minutes. The shooting subsided. This last flare ship departed at approximately 0430, which left us with about ninety minutes before first light. The NVA did not attack again. At dawn, it seemed apparent that most of the enemy had moved out of the immediate area. A Marine helicopter gunship soon arrived, circling low to see if it would draw enemy ground fire. It did not.

Sergeant Balanco asked me to cover him while he went to collect some intelligence information—identification cards, maps, orders, and such—from the bodies of the dead NVA in the cemetery on the west side. Later, Lieutenant Stamper arrived and ordered me to take the radio up to the LZ and direct the medevac choppers.

As I talked the first choppers into the LZ, Tiddy came by. Seeing how badly I needed sleep, he relieved me on the radio. I lay down on the cot in the comm bunker, covered myself with pages from a Stars and Stripes, and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

About 1030, Tiddy woke me to ask if I had called any artillery fire missions into our area lately. He had stepped out for a few minutes to find some chow and heard some unusual incoming. I told him I had not made any calls while he was out. Just then, there was a huge, resonant explosion. I jumped up, went over to the radio, and called the base. The Fire Support Center radio operator there advised me that they were not firing any artillery in our direction. Tiddy and I looked at each other with exactly the same expression: let's be on the next chopper out of this place!

The enemy was now shooting at us with large artillery. We did not know it then, but this was the first use of the 152mm guns the NVA had hidden in Laos, six miles to the west on Co Roc Mountain. I was incredulous that they had such weapons.

Now wide-awake, I left the comm bunker and went over to the barracks to get my gear. The back of the building was gone, completely blown off, and shrapnel had extensively perforated the corrugated metal roof. Sunlight streamed through the shrapnel holes, dappling the interior. For the first time that morning, I noticed how quiet the place was now.

I had come to the village with my belongings in a green duffel bag, which I eventually found in the debris, still packed from my anticipated departure two days before. Picking it up, I headed back to the comm bunker. Villagers were now frantically crowding into the district headquarters compound. Some had broken the lock on the small supply bunker next to our barracks and were carrying off cases of C-rations.

Down the alley between the administrative buildings, I noticed our big, 6×6 truck was still parked in the front of the district headquarters. I

wondered if we were going to leave it and if so, should someone destroy it before the NVA returned? I soon lost interest in the problem and moved on. As I walked past the back of the district headquarters building, I noticed it was horizontally stitched, at close range with automatic weapons fire from the direction of the LZ. I looked in that direction and realized the person who fired that burst must have been inside the compound. Yet, I did not see any bodies there.

Upon reaching the comm bunker, I encountered Gunny Boyd (actually a staff sergeant, but everyone called him “Gunny”), the senior enlisted Marine in the CAC. I asked him what we should do with the radios. “Leave ’em,” he barked, then headed for the LZ. Tiddy and I were rather fresh out of radio school at Camp Pendleton. We tried to remember what Sergeant Ski told us to do in this situation. The answer soon came to me: thermite grenades.

Thermite grenades were not designed to explode like fragmentation grenades, but rather to burn with an intensity that would melt metal. Sergeant Ski had instructed us to use these to burn the radios in a hopeless situation in order to keep them from falling into the hands of the enemy. I remembered there was one grenade stashed at the back of the radio table.

I located the confidential radio code booklet, put it in my pocket, then stacked the two radios on top of each other. I tore the map off the wall and laid it on top of them. Pulling the pin on the grenade, I set it on top of the map. It erupted with a bright flash and a great, thick cloud of green smoke.

Of course, the correct procedure would have been to take the radios with us. They weighed just twenty-five pounds each and were quite portable. It was the logical thing to do. However, I was too weary to reason. Staccato pieces of my radio school course work from two months earlier were the only tunes playing in my head at that moment.

Outside the comm bunker, I began searching through my duffel bag, doing a calm inventory while troops and civilians ran about in soundless pandemonium. I took each item out of the bag, looked it over as if I had never seen it before, then threw it away. I tossed everything: my extra clothes, rain gear, webbed gear, personal effects, and gas mask. Finally, when the bag was empty, I threw it away, too. It was as if I were sleepwalking.

I picked up my rifle, a bandolier of ammo, and my helmet. About this time, Tiddy told me that the last chopper was coming in and we should get up to the LZ right away. If we missed it, we would be in “deep shit.” We jogged up to the LZ and crouched down near the wire beside Mortarman and three or four other Marines.

Soon the Bru houseboy came by and told us that Captain Clarke was about to lead the local forces up Route 9 to the base and that we should di-di (hurry up) to Howard Johnson's where they were forming up. We didn't mention the inbound chopper, and he soon left. For a few minutes, we thought about joining the Bru. The Khe Sanh air team had radioed Tiddy nearly an hour earlier that the chopper was coming. What if it had been diverted elsewhere? I had burned the radios, so we had no way of knowing (my mind was slowly awakening to the stupidity of that act). How long should we wait?

Just then, we heard the throbbing of a propeller and saw an old, olive-colored CH-34 approaching from the east. The chopper hovered for a moment, then landed. We raced the ten meters across the LZ and dove headfirst through the door. An ARVN officer and his dog then clamored aboard. It appeared the officer had decided not to walk to the base with the other RFs. The engine roared and the chopper lurched forward. We struck the wall of the Special Forces compound, bounced backward and down. The two big doughnut-like front wheels barely avoided landing on the punji stakes. The load was too heavy.

I watched the pilot turn around and look at the crew chief. He made animated hand and arm gestures. Despite the fact that they were conversing by intercom, the message was clear. Throw somebody out—and fast!

The engine noise inside the old chopper precluded any normal conversation. The crew chief turned to Tiddy and me, and gave a kind of butting motion with his head in the direction of the ARVN officer. Tiddy and I slid across the shiny, crenelated aluminum floor on our knees and, in a single motion, grabbed the guy and threw him off. His dog went to the edge of the doorway, stopped, and looked out—but did not want to follow. Its barking was soundless in the propeller noise. Tiddy tapped the animal on the rear with the toe of his boot, and it disappeared out the doorway. Though I never saw the man or his dog again, I assume they caught up with the other ARVNs walking to Khe Sanh Combat Base and made it there safely.

The crew chief signaled to the pilot and the engine roared overhead until the whole frame of the chopper shook. We pulled up, drifted backwards for several feet, then lurched forward, upward, and steeply up to the left, barely clearing the wall.

Sliding back over to the small open window on the port side next to the crew chief, who was now cocking the machine gun, I hooked one arm through the nylon webbing on the interior bulkhead to stabilize myself, then stuck the barrel of my M-16 out the window. As we rose and continued to

bank, we were looking straight down. The machine gunner and I both saw an NVA soldier lying near the edge of the LZ. The gunner reacted instantly, firing a long burst at the man. I didn't shoot. It was obvious from the way he was laying on his side that he was dead, but the gunner continued to fire at the body until we passed over the treetops to the south. I was glad he stopped shooting because the hot brass casings from the machine gun were bouncing all over me, going into my pockets and down my shirt.

The flight back to Khe Sanh Combat Base, which was only about two miles away, seemed to take forever. From my window, I could see an endless line of people walking up Route 9 toward the base. At first, I thought they were NVA, but with a longer look, it became clear they were mostly civilians. I was glad the door gunner didn't open fire on them. We took a wide swing out to the east, then approached the base directly over the runway.

At first glance, the place appeared enshrouded in fog, yet it was a bright, clear day. What I was seeing was smoke and my mind was having trouble registering the extent of the devastation. From where I sat, it seemed as if half the base was missing. I had been equating it with safety for so long that I was stunned to see it looking in worse shape than the battle zone I had just left.

The morning before, several well-aimed enemy rockets struck the ammo dump at the east end of the base, where 11,000 artillery and mortar shells packed in wooden crates were stacked in a series of open pits. The eruption of our own ammunition supplies caused the subsequent destruction. The shells cooked off in a kind of chain reaction, raining down on the base, exploding or starting fires.

The area where my tent had been was now just a large scorched spot. I was immediately concerned about my buddies who had lived there with me. I was later relieved to find them uninjured because they had moved underground just days before the attack. The thought occurred to me that, between what smoldered below in the ashes of my tent and what I had thrown away less than an hour ago in the village, my total worldly possessions consisted of only the clothes I was wearing and my rifle. We landed near the helicopter revetments on the north side of the runway, thanking the crew with raised thumbs and big smiles. It was good to be away from the village.

After crossing the runway, we turned east toward the COC. Tiddy and I wore helmets; Mortarman had on only a soft cover. Walking on the road near the LSA we passed two Shore Patrol guards leading an NVA prisoner. The man had his hands tied behind him and a woven nylon sandbag over

his head. As they came past us, Mortarman turned to the prisoner and spat, “Coc a dau, motherfucker!” (Roughly translated, “You had better talk, or else!”) The guards did nothing, but there was an officer following along behind them.

When he overheard the remark, he confronted Mortarman. “Where’s your helmet, Marine?” the officer asked. Mortarman replied with unconcealed mirth, “Back in the ville, Sir.” The officer advised him that it was now required we wear helmets and flak jackets at all times; he then moved down the road to catch up with the prisoner. After the officer was out of earshot, Mortarman finished his sentence, “. . . and I’d be much obliged if you would get it for me.” Our elation at being out of the village coupled with the ironic fact that Mortarman, like Balanco, refused to wear a helmet even during the most intense combat there, incited us to fits of hysterical laughter—the insane, uncontrollable, tranquilizing laughter of the spared.

The prisoner was a defector by the name of First Lieutenant Than Tonc. Three days earlier, Tonc had surrendered at the east end of the runway under a white flag. Disgruntled due to lack of promotion, he gave up an incredible amount of intelligence information about the upcoming attack on Khe Sanh, as well as the forthcoming Tet Offensive that would begin in about two weeks. Most thought Lieutenant Tonc was a spy, sent over in order to mislead us. Nevertheless, nearly everything he described either happened or was corroborated by other intelligence sources. The information he gave about the NVA battle plan for Khe Sanh probably saved hundreds of Marine lives—perhaps even the base itself. Yet this intelligence also led directly to the deaths of thousands of his fellow soldiers. I’m not sure if being passed over for a promotion would justify having to live with something like that on your conscience. I’m glad he defected, but a part of me also hopes that he was not too successful later in life.

Meanwhile, the Special Forces unit at FOB-3 that had been monitoring the enemy radio frequencies now had reason to believe that the NVA would not reenter Khe Sanh Village until after nightfall. Captain Clarke, who had just walked to the base with his ARVNs, immediately organized a patrol of the indigenous FOB troops to walk back down to the village. Their mission was to destroy over a ton of rice warehoused next to the district headquarters compound. Denying food to an enemy as mobile and active as the NVA was nearly as important as denying them ammunition. The patrol met no serious resistance and destroyed the rice, as well as the truck parked in front of the district headquarters building. They went into the comm bunker and found my two radios, undamaged, with green crud

all over them. To my embarrassment, what I thought was a thermite grenade was actually a smoke grenade.

A few nights later, a Special Forces lieutenant who had accompanied Captain Clarke back to the village that day, came down to the COC looking for me. He found me on radio duty and began deriding me for leaving the radios behind and for my lame attempt to destroy them with a harmless smoke grenade. It was unusual for an officer to personalize, let alone publicly express, such loathing toward a subordinate. This was especially true of a lowly PFC like me who was, by my very lack of experience, generally considered an idiot anyway.

I was embarrassed, of course, yet still a bit euphoric at having gotten out of that place alive, so I let it go without comment. The lieutenant then continued talking about the unwillingness of the Marines to provide the village with necessary relief forces and support, and other issues over which I personally had no control. I would later wonder if Captain Clarke had sent this officer to the COC because he was still angry with Colonel Lownds for not sending reinforcements to the village. Lownds, who was within earshot of the lieutenant's lecture, may have been the actual addressee.

This episode did nothing to make me dislike Captain Clarke or his Special Forces people any less than I had at the village. Yet, I had to agree with him about the colonel's decision not to reinforce us. Over time though, I would reconsider things and eventually accept the colonel's choice as the correct one—despite the enormous peril in which it had left us. A week after the district headquarters fell to the enemy, an NVA deserter told our intelligence people that they were waiting to spring a sizable ambush on the Marine relief force as it entered the village. So, it is highly doubtful they would have made it to us anyway.

On their return to the village that day, Clarke's men captured an RPG-7. It was the first time one of these state-of-the-art grenade launchers had been captured. The rocket-powered grenade launched by an RPG-7 could punch through several feet of earthen defenses before detonating. I am still amazed the NVA were unable to capture the district headquarters that morning of the attack. They could have easily placed this powerful weapon within forty meters of the comm bunker, which was above ground and close to the perimeter. With all the comings and goings of the not-always-so-loyal indigenous forces, they must have known exactly where it was located. A single, well-placed RPG rocket in the first few minutes of the attack would have destroyed the comm bunker and prevented me from calling in the prearranged defensive artillery fire on the attackers. This would have probably insured them a quick victory.

The NVA were meticulous tactical planners, yet the assault failed. I would like to think that at the first sound of battle, PFC Whiting stepped out of his little cell and, heedless of the public relations problem he had caused two weeks before, fired yet another M-79 grenade on to the roof of the Buddhist shrine, killing an enemy RPG team and saving the CAC.

In the end, the NVA got what they wanted when we abandoned the Huong Hoa District Headquarters. This proved to be a significant propaganda coup because it was the first time a seat of governmental authority had been captured in South Vietnam. It also proved to be a tactical victory because it effectively cut off the Lang Vei Special Forces camp from the base, as well as any chance of overland relief to that outpost. But for this victory, the NVA paid a high price. Between Sergeant Balanco's body count on the west side of the district headquarters compound, the count given by the Special Forces later that morning, and estimates given by the air observers and other sources, it appears 200–300 NVA soldiers were killed, most in the initial attack. This figure was supported nine days later when a young North Vietnamese soldier surrendered just down the road at the Special Forces camp at Lang Vei. His unit had been among our attackers at Khe Sanh Village where, he claimed, the 66th Regiment lost over half its troops.

I was grateful to have survived the ordeal in the village and be back at the base. But I would soon find out I was no safer. Now, with over 30,000 of their troops assembling in the area, the NVA set their sights on an even greater propaganda victory—annihilating the U.S. Marines at Khe Sanh Combat Base.

* * * *

