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"15 Miles"
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15 Miles

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Gollancz
An imprint of The Orion Publishing Group

London

The following chapter was deleted from an early draft of the manuscript. There may be subtle differences between this story and the bound version of the novel, due from Gollancz in August, 2010.

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While I appreciate you navigating this far, I encourage you to read the novel prior to this excerpt. You'll encounter several significant spoilers in the next few pages.

Enjoy.

--RS

September 12, 1968
Pleiku Air Base
South Vietnam

Lloyd Hollis dumped his pack onto the concrete floor, lit a cigarette and said, 'Jesus everything's wet.'

Jerome Stansfield motioned for Lloyd to lend him a smoke. He nodded thanks, and rested against his own pack, also wet. Too wired to sleep, Jerome contented himself with watching Lloyd unpack and repack his gear.

'You hear what I said, man?' Lloyd manhandled his backpack, as if bullying it might help. 'I aint slept, not even a catnap, in forty-eight hours. Hanson's off his leash if he really thinks I can sleep, sitting up, while rollin' cross country in a deuce and a half.'

Jerome smirked, shook his head.

'You hear me, man?'

'I heard you,' Jerome's cigarette was a smoldering red firefly. 'But what do you expect? It's been raining for as long as anyone can remember.'

'Two weeks.'

'Two weeks, what?'

'It's been raining for two weeks,' Lloyd said. The wiry but tough farmhand from Indiana had signed on with the Marines in '67 rather than get drafted into the Army. Lloyd's father had been with the Twenty-Ninth Marine Regiment when they took Sugarloaf Hill on Okinawa in 1945. His grandfather fought with the decorated Fifth Marine Regiment when they broke the German Army's back in World War I. Lloyd Hollis had no choice: if he was going to Vietnam, he was going as a Marine.

'Lloyd, I've been in your immediate company for eleven months, three weeks, two days, and about fifteen hours,' Jerome said. 'I've had fiancés I didn't see as much as I've seen your hillbilly, redneck ass. Do you really think I didn't notice the rain? It just don't get to me like it gets to you.' Taller than Lloyd and thicker through the shoulders and arms, Jerome hadn't lost as much weight in the bush as other Marines from the company and maintained much of the high school football physique he'd built over four years on Patterson, New Jersey's gridirons. A player with college level skills, Jerome failed to achieve college level grades. He didn't make muster with the admissions offices, and found himself at Parris Island with an entire division of grunts who had barely earned or barely failed to earn their diplomas.

The two Marines sat with the rest of Second and Third Platoons, two-thirds of Alpha Company, Eighty-Third Battalion of the Eleventh Marine Regiment, en route from Khe Sahn, on the Cambodian side of the DMZ, to the Mekong Delta – with two glorious days leave in Saigon. Nearly six thousand Marines had fought at Khe Sahn and were now being redeployed. Most remained north along the DMZ, but the Eleventh Regiment had been ordered south into the vast Mekong swamp. No one knew why for certain. Captain Bruckner and Major Watts weren't saying anything, *if* they knew. Marines from other companies claimed that the Eighty-Third would be deployed across the Cambodian border with orders to intercede along the southern end of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, cutting off supplies and reinforcements to Vietcong in the delta.

But now, Alpha Company was alone, waiting in a damp hanger at an air base in a highland town none of them had heard of before.

Pleiku. Gia Lai Province.

An O-2 Skymaster taxied onto the runway. Two airmen from the 17th Air Commando Squadron handed the pilot what looked to be a map and a brown office envelope through the cockpit window. They saluted as the tiny plane took off, banked south into the hills, and darkened its lights before leaving the Pleiku city limits.

'Recon plane,' Jerome said. 'Look at that. He's already dark, not half a mile off the ground.'

'Shit, man, that's another on the long list of jobs I'm glad we don't have,' Lloyd interrupted his packing to watch the little Cessna blink off like a neighbor's porch light. 'Flying dark in this shit? No thanks.'

'He's probably heading to Ban Me Thout. It's down that way, Dac Lac Province.'

'How do you know that?' Lloyd looked skeptically at his squad mate. They'd seen action together against the NVA and the Vietcong, had lived, eaten, slept, pissed, dressed, even jerked off within ten feet of each other for almost a year, and Lloyd had never heard Jerome even pretend to have any idea where they were. Where they *weren't* was easy; it was an ongoing joke between them. In Khe Sahn, they clearly *weren't* at Disneyland, certainly *weren't* at Shea Stadium, *nowhere near* the Rocky Mountains.

'Ban Me Thout,' Jerome said again. 'It's near a hot zone south of here. I looked at the map while you were chasing down chow in the mess hanger. LT had one on him, but he didn't have any idea what we're doing here while the rest of the regiment is headed south without us.'

'Not good, man,' Lloyd crammed two boxes of C-rations into his pack, along with a Goofy Grape canister. 'Splitting us up like this, that's not cool. What the hell are they thinking?'

'They aint thinking of us, dumbass. And you know how this works: any time you get anything out of the ordinary, any orders that look different from the orders you had the day before, you're fucked.'

'We're fucked.'

'Fucked,' Jerome crushed his cigarette and flicked the butt toward the hanger doors and the rain swept tarmac. 'The entire battalion rolls on, with First Platoon, and we get shuffled off here – not another jarhead company in sight, no way, not cool. We're going to find a world of dinky dau shit in the next twenty-four hours, you trust your brother, my hillbilly friend.'

'What time is it?' Lloyd asked.

'Shit, who knows,' Jerome threw his hands in the air. 'I stopped wearing a watch months ago. Unless I get promoted–' he scoffed at that, '–there aint no reason for me to know what time it is.'

'We got a while yet before dawn,' Lloyd fastened the buckles on his pack, lit two cigarettes and passed one to Jerome. 'You gonna try and sleep?'

'Nah, fuck it,' Jerome sat up to watch an Air Force Blue Canoe, an old reconnaissance plane, taxi for takeoff. 'Someone's got to have coffee up soon. Guys're starting to wake up now anyways.'

'They still at it?' Lloyd squinted toward the far end of the hanger. He hadn't worn his glasses in weeks, not since the rain started.

'Mm hmm,' Jerome stretched, then yawned deeply. 'They been huddled over that map for the past hour.'

'I thought you said you didn't have a watch?' Lloyd teased, leaning back and closing his eyes.

'I have an internal clock. It's a black thing, hillbilly. You wouldn't understand,' Jerome said. 'Carver's in there now, with Captain Bruckner and Lieutenant Hodges, from Second Platoon. Those two'll brief the sergeants. Then we'll know how bad it's gonna sting.'

'Unless Bruckner briefs us himself,' Lloyd said without opening his eyes. 'He's done that before, you know, when it's just us, just Alpha Company.'

'True,' Jerome watched the Blue Canoe take off and blink out. 'Damn those airmen have got to be soaked, even in those ponchos. Imagine running out on that runway every ten minutes in this rain.'

'They're Air Force,' Lloyd said. 'They don't know enough to come in out of the rain.'

Jerome snorted. 'That was funny, Lloyd. You made a joke.'

Lloyd said, 'shut up now. I'm going to sleep.'

'There's a burning cigarette in your mouth, dumbass.'

'It's a hillbilly thing, Jerome. You wouldn't understand.'

'Gotcha.'

'Wake me if you hear Santa on the roof.'

'Shut up, redneck.'

Captain Bruckner's meeting with his platoon officers lasted another forty minutes. Jerome dozed, breathing noisily through his nose. Lloyd wasn't able to sleep, despite being up for two days. Not knowing why they were in Pleiku had him wound up. He rolled back and forth on the concrete, trying to ignore the lumps in his pack and the dampness in his utilities. Eventually, he gave up, chain smoked three Camels, and watched the blurry outline of Lieutenant Carver, Third Platoon's LT, brief Sergeant Hanson in a quiet huddle over a fuel drum. When they finished, fifteen minutes later, the rain had slowed from a jungle torrent to a regular Indiana pisser.

A handful of others from Third Platoon roused themselves. A couple guys had chased down a five gallon decanter of coffee. An ACS colonel's staff assistant, a hulking, dopey-looking airman, followed a few minutes later with a cart loaded with waffles and bacon, real orange juice, even syrup.

Lloyd kicked Jerome on the soles of his boots. 'Hey, wake up. Breakfast's here. Looks good. Real food, no bullshit.'

Jerome groaned, then stretched without opening his eyes. 'I swear if I ever get out of here I am going to sleep for the entire month of February. I don't need one of the long ones; February will do me just fine.'

'Nice thought, but let's get moving. I want to eat while it's hot.'

'We'll be leaving soon.'

'What're you talking about?' Lloyd pushed his pack against the wall, then grabbed his smokes. 'How do you know? It's gotta be three hours until dawn. And it's still raining like a bitch.'

'No mess hall for breakfast,' Jerome said. 'They're bringing us food. My brother-in-law, he works for the county road crew, eats like this all the time, calls it a *working breakfast*.'

'I don't like the sound of that.'

'Me neither, hillbilly,' Jerome said. 'There's Hanson, over by the coffee with the LT. Let's go see what's what.'

Lieutenant David Carver, a lean, clean-shaven New Englander with a fresh commission and a Bowdoin College T-shirt beneath his flak vest, ate from a plate of waffles and bacon. He stirred several sugars and some milk into his coffee, and only spoke with Sergeant Hanson between bites of breakfast. Carver ate with a knife and fork, sipped his coffee, and even dabbed his mouth with a handkerchief he pulled from his back pocket. He, like so many rookie officers, clung to the social niceties of home, hoping they might shield him from the shitstorm gathering on the horizon. Kyle Hanson, a career NCO and walking tree trunk, was in his late thirties and, to Lloyd, appeared entirely unperturbed by the possibility that Third Platoon would see action in the next few hours. Hanson ignored the waffles for a plate of bacon and several cups of black coffee. Lloyd wouldn't have been surprised if the sergeant topped breakfast off with a few swigs from the fuel drum he and Carver used for a makeshift table.

Crossing the hanger with Jerome, Lloyd chuckled at the lieutenant's faggoty, New England manners. But eating your life's final breakfast with Sergeant Hanson would have most any college boy shitting his pants. Carver was no exception.

'Jesus, look at the LT, will you?' Lloyd said.

'That's fear of death.' Jerome reached into Lloyd's pocket and bummed another smoke. 'Sniff him when we get closer. Smells tangy, like spoiled meat.'

'Bullshit. What are you, a dog?'

'Sniff him,' Jerome fired up the nail. 'You'll see.'

The two Marines waited on the periphery until Hanson finished whatever he'd been saying. While poking fun at the new lieutenant was acceptable, even expected, interrupting the platoon NCO was treasonous. Jerome and Lloyd would have stood, waiting awkwardly until the end of time if Hanson hadn't acknowledged them.

'What do you guys need on this lovely beach morning?' Hanson finally grunted, slurping coffee.

Lloyd hesitated, waiting to see if the sergeant would eat the mug. 'Just wondering what's happening, Sarge.'

Carver said, 'Get breakfast, men. You'll need it. Then spread the word: I want Third Platoon gathered over here for a quick briefing, ten minutes.'

'Yes, sir,' Jerome and Lloyd replied in tandem.

Lloyd fell in behind the rest of Second and Third Platoons in the chow line. He helped himself to half a dozen waffles and as many slices of bacon, slathered the whole mound with syrup, then grabbed what was left of a quart jug of orange juice, bypassing the cups. Finding a comfortable place on the floor was a losing proposition; so Lloyd settled down beside Jerome and a few of their squad mates, close enough to hear Lieutenant Carver but far enough off to one side as to avoid eye contact and what Jerome liked to call *other duties*.

Lieutenant Hodges, Second Platoon's officer, gave similar orders to his men, and soon the seventy-three Marines of Alpha Company were seated together, eating breakfast, and watching as recon flights took off and landed behind the machine-gun polyphony of the South Vietnamese rain.

Carver spoke first. Standing beside Hodges, he said, 'May I have your attention, men?' He had addressed the entire company when he arrived a week earlier, but that had been morning muster and just long enough to introduce himself and promise to learn the ins and outs of Alpha Company culture, whatever that meant.

He stood a bit taller, raised his voice slightly, and said, 'May I have your attention, please?'

Most of the men quieted; no one stood or saluted. Eventually, Sergeant Hanson barked, 'Alpha Comp'ny!'

Immediate silence intensified the white noise from outside the hanger.

'Thank you, Sergeant,' Carver said. Then, smiling, addressed the Marines. 'As most of you have deduced by this time, we will not be traveling south with Major Watts and the rest of the battalion. Captain Bruckner assures Lieutenant Hodges and me that we will reunite with our fellow Marines in the next few days. However, first, we have to complete a brief assignment for the Army's forces serving in the bush here in Gia Lai Province.'

Murmurs of discontent; while everyone wore the same flag on their uniforms, Marines were not in the habit of diverting from an assignment to play wet nurse to any Army force, however *brief* the assignment.

Lloyd cocked an eyebrow at Jerome, who gestured with one finger, *Hang on. Let's listen*.

Carver continued. 'Shortly, we will be boarding three Chinook CH-47 helicopters to assist in the transport of an important shipment of munitions, ordnance, and especially several 150 millimeter howitzers to a platoon of Green Berets serving in the Central Highlands . . . where we are now . . .'

Lloyd whispered, 'Not fuckin' Disneyland.'

Lieutenants Carver and Hodges took hold of either side of a large map, and Carver awkwardly indicated the city of Pleiku, the airbase, and the surrounding mountains. A small circle, drawn in red marker, denoted the landing zone, what Carver called *LZ Nancy*. He said, 'We will travel by Chinook from Pleiku, where we are, to this remote location in the mountains, deliver the howitzers and the munitions to the Special Forces deployed at that location. Third Platoon will secure the landing zone, while Second Platoon, working with members of the 17th ACS, will transfer the cargo as expeditiously as possible.'

Jerome pretended to cough into the back of his hand, then whispered, 'What the fuck is this? Now we're goddamned bellhops? Are they going to tip us when we leave? Sonofabitch, this is all wrong, hillbilly. All wrong. Where the hell's the Air Cav?'

Hanson heard, and interrupted Carver long enough to shout, 'Stansfield!'

Jerome froze. 'Yes, Sergeant?'

'You got a question, Marine?'

Jerome had been in the bush long enough to know what he was getting into, but a quick glance around the hanger confirmed that others shared his question. He looked briefly at Lloyd, and said, 'Actually, yes, Sergeant. I was wondering where the Air Cav is. Aren't those Chinook buses theirs? Why are we breaking up the battalion, *breaking up the company* to play Sherpa for the Army?'

Hanson reddened; veins bulged in his neck. Lloyd looked down at his empty plate and whispered, 'Shit, man, you just bought the whole farm.'

Lieutenant Carver saved Jerome's life. 'Good question, Stansfield. And the answer is . . . with all the changes at MACV recently, what with the appointment of General Abrams and General Westmoreland's departure, there has been some shuffling of officers and positions at HQ in Saigon, and in the interests of accommodating . . .'

Lloyd read the disdain on his platoon mates' faces. Carver might as well have drawn his sidearm and shot himself in the foot. He made things worse for himself with every word. Seasoned grunts might grant him a bit of slack, because he was a virgin, but about the worst thing Carver could tell Marines risking their lives was that their efforts would lead to someone's promotion, someone they didn't know, didn't care to know, and didn't see in the bush with them, ever. Hanson felt the wheels coming off the wagon and glared at the Marines of Alpha Company, nonverbally promising an agonizing death to anyone who uttered a sound.

Oblivious, Carver prattled on, indicating key geographical features on the map, detailing the layout of the landing zone, describing the means by which the platoons would secure LZ Nancy.

A few of the Marines went back to their breakfasts. Some sipped at orange juice. Others whispered. Carver had lost them.

Lloyd lit a cigarette and nodded at Jerome. 'You were right,' he whispered. 'We're fucked.' He turned away to spit a mouthful of phlegm toward the tarmac. Lloyd didn't see several Marines sitting opposite him jump to their feet. Others followed, dropping utensils, coffee cups, and cigarettes to stand in a hurry.

Jerome hissed, 'Get up, hillbilly. It's the captain.'

From somewhere behind the lieutenants – no one had been paying much attention – Captain Carl James Bruckner materialized out of the shadows.

With the CO on deck, Hanson shouted 'Alpha Comp'ny!'

Lloyd and Jerome joined the others, jockeying for a place in the ranks, then dressing up their lines. They stood at silent attention until Captain Bruckner, without a wrinkle on him after nearly two days without sleep, finally spoke.

'Good evening. As you were.'

The Marines of Alpha Company stood at ease. No one sat, smoked, or moved to retrieve their breakfast plates.

Captain Bruckner paced unhurriedly. 'I suppose I should say "good morning," but no matter. Marines, as you may not know, the NVA has been trying for some time now to cut across these Central Highlands to the South China Sea, effectively cutting South Vietnam in half. Only the Army Green Berets, scattered in small fighting forces throughout this region, are holding them back. Those soldiers are living off the land, eating what they hunt or harvest. While we control the cities and the main roads leading into the mountains, this rain has made it impossible for M35 trucks to breach these forests . . . yes, even our deuce-and-a-half Tonkas that can go about anywhere on God's green Earth. To complicate matters further, several Special Forces squads are so deep in the highlands, they can only be resupplied by Air Cavalry during dangerous exchanges at key landing zones cut from the very jungle foliage. It is to one of these landing zones that we will be traveling shortly.

'US Army officers and soldiers living in the bush near here have befriended a fiercely independent and anti-Communist hill people called, "Montagnards." The Army has provided these people with weapons and some minimal tactical and munitions training. The Montagnards, or "Mountain People," if you prefer, are fighting alongside our Green Berets, helping to keep the NVA well behind the Cambodian border to our west.

'Tonight . . . this morning . . . we'll be delivering three, 150 mm howitzers, sling loaded beneath CH-47 choppers. We're headed to a landing zone deep in the highlands and inaccessible to trucks due to flooding in a valley west of Pleiku. It is my understanding that while the hills around the LZ are hot, the landing zone itself remains under Special Forces control. Air Commando crews will accompany us, but we will secure the LZ and assist with the rapid deployment of these howitzers to the Montagnards and the Green Berets meeting us shortly before dawn.

'You might be asking, "Why us?" Well, I'll tell you. As Lieutenant Carver mentioned, our regiment has been ordered south, to a town called Bien Hoa in the Mekong Delta. We have a new officer on General Abrams's staff, an old classmate of Major Watts, Lieutenant Colonel Lake. In a show of timely support for the Army Special Forces teams living in the bush, Colonel Lake and Major Watts agreed to assign a Marine company to oversee the transport and deployment of these howitzers and ordnance to the mountain people. Hearing of this assignment, I knew immediately that there was no company in the Eighty-Third better suited to this task than Alpha Company. So I agreed to supervise this joint effort for Major Watts in exchange for another day's leave for you men when we return here to Pleiku. I expect that we'll be back on the tarmac by noon and en route to the Mekong by 0700 tomorrow morning.

'With General Abrams in command at MACV, I believe we will see more cooperative efforts such as this pioneer undertaking in the months to come. Marines, I leave you to Lieutenants Carver and Hodges and wish us all Godspeed as we depart this morning.'

Lloyd leaned forward, just far enough to whisper, 'Did you get any of that?'

Jerome gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head. 'We're fucking bellhops. That's what I heard. Because Watts wants to impress the new sheriff in town with the size of his dick.'

'I've heard about those Special Forces guys, living in the soup all this time, eating snakes and bugs and shit. I mean they're tough like hockey players, you know?'

Jerome, only half listening as Lieutenant Carver gave final orders, shrugged. 'Man, I'm more scared of the goddamned helicopter ride in this frigging storm. With my damned luck, we'll crash into a tribe of Montagwhateverytheyares who hate colored folks.'

'I hadn't thought of that,' Lloyd said. 'Funny the way the captain's all fired up about it, though. Huh? And did you look at him? Shit, he's got to have some kind of secret to keep his damned clothes dry. I know it's voodoo magic that he's never got any wrinkles, and his shirt's never untucked, and his leather's always so damned shiny, but I have been wet for two weeks. I've got gills growing under my collar, and Captain Bruckner's dry. How is that? Is it a Virginia thing? Like Jefferson and Washington? They were from Virginia, too. Weren't they?'

'Nah. Rain's scared of him is all,' Jerome said. 'C'mon hillbilly. We gotta go before Hanson remembers that I interrupted him and decides to make an example of me.'

'He does look hungry enough to eat your spleen on a hoagie roll.'

From the front of their ranks, Lieutenants Carver and Hodges turned Alpha Company over to Sergeant Hanson, who shouted, 'Alpha Comp'ny! Semper Fi!'

With the rest of Third Platoon, Lloyd Hollis and Jerome Stansfield snapped to attention, and barked like horny bulldogs.

In the meager light under the airplane hanger, Lloyd thought he might have seen Hanson crack a smile before shouting, 'Fall out!'

When the lights inside the titanic, Chinook CH-47 helicopter blinked out, less than a mile from Pleiku Air Base, Lloyd tucked his M-16 between his knees and surreptitiously slipped his wrist into the canvas cargo netting lining the bulkheads aft of the parallel troop benches. He didn't want anyone, Jerome especially, to know that he was confident the helicopter would plummet into the jungle highlands. He closed his eyes tightly shut and tried to escape to the interminable summer days of his childhood in Indiana. Lloyd and his sisters would sit on the Hollis's porch, tossing a ratty baseball for their dog and watching storm clouds, towering thunderheads, gather over Illinois. When hot and breezy mornings gave way to humid afternoons, Lloyd would seek solace in the basement, just outside his mother's canning cellar. Cool and dry there, never a degree above sixty-eight and always smelling of corn and slowly rotting fruit, the cellar provided a safe haven from the lightning and rain. Young Lloyd read *Superman* comics by candlelight – the naked bulb dangling from the overhead beams never quite did Clark Kent justice – and dreamed of one day being able to fly. Lloyd had always wanted those summers to end quickly, for time to push him along, hurrying him into an unknown, exciting future.

Flying now, contending with impregnable darkness, and wearing clothes that hadn't felt truly dry in weeks, Lloyd would have given years off his life to return home and relive even one of those never-ending summer days.

Jerome elbowed him in the ribs, shouting above the astonishing noise of the Chinook's twin, sixty-foot rotors. 'You okay, hillbilly?'

'Yeah, just fine!' Lloyd managed without puking. 'I'm thinking this would make a great addition to Kennywood Park. They've got the Thunderbolt. Now they can have the Death Chopper!'

'It'd scare some grandmothers, I bet! Old Walt Disney'd be poopin' his drawers!' Jerome howled like a lunatic at every unexpected lurch and dip. 'Don't worry. I checked Carver's map. The LZ is deep in the shit, but the good news is that we don't have to fly far from Pleiku to get deep in the shit.'

'It's still raining. It's windy as hell. It's dark. We have twenty-five Marines in here with thirty crates of deadly explosives lashed to the floor, and a 150 mm howitzer dangling from the cargo hooks beneath us—'

'Like a big weight!' Jerome added.

'I was getting to that,' Lloyd said. 'And best of all, we're flying through uncharted, mountainous jungle terrain that is crawling with NVA who would love nothing more, before boning their bunk buddy, than to shoot down . . . an exploding charter bus!'

Jerome said, 'My favorite part is knowing that there are two other choppers less than a stone's throw away, in thirty-mile-per-hour winds, and we can't goddamned see each other! Whew, my hillbilly brother, if that doesn't make you feel alive, nothing will!'

'I'd rather a couple beers and a blow job from Sara Ann Michaelson back home. I wouldn't want to ask for too much.'

Howling again, Jerome slapped him on the back. 'I have a newfound respect for the Air Commando guys. If this is their day job, they're frigging crazy! Down-the-road loony tunes!'

'I watched the pilot when we strapped in. He's got a cup of coffee! Like he's sitting at a desk reading the paper!'

'It's probably motor oil.'

The Chinook listed sharply to port, over corrected, then dropped fifty feet before clawing its way back on course. Lloyd spoke out loud to God, then yelled to Jerome. 'I'm glad you're enjoying the ride.'

'It's a love-hate thing, I think,' he shouted back. 'It's exciting, but I've pissed my pants twice already.'

In a sustained burst of lightning, Lloyd caught sight of Captain Bruckner sitting on the opposite bench near the cockpit. Still dry, the captain flipped calmly through a stack of photographs he kept rubber banded inside his shirt. He glanced at a new picture with each flash. Lloyd had seen them up close once, while on duty in the officer's quarters outside Khe Sahn. There were a half dozen of the captain's wife, a young but plain-looking woman with a wooden cross on a conservative chain. Another five or six photos were of a baby girl, cute enough as she played with a cat on a whitewashed, wraparound porch, but with something amiss. Lloyd hadn't delved too long into the captain's private life, but the photos of that little girl, with her bemused look and her one eye roving slightly left of center, had chilled Lloyd's blood. He struggled to explain it to Jerome once and gave up after a few minutes. Lloyd Hollis felt proud to serve under Captain Bruckner, particularly when he saw the hard-as-nails, indefatigable leader looking sadly through those snapshots.

Twenty minutes later, the sky had begun to whiten. Rain still fell, but dawn elbowed its way over the horizon. Lloyd could just make out members of the ACS crew as they hustled about the cabin. Two gunners mounted an M-60 near the port hatch.

'We must be getting close,' Jerome said.

Sergeant Hanson spoke with one of the Chinook's crew, briefly passed information to Captain Bruckner and Lieutenant Carver, then moved along the bulkhead benches, giving terse orders. To Lloyd and Jerome, he shouted, 'Intel is that the LZ is hot. ACS is going to man the M-60.'

We'll make a few passes, strafe the east side of the hill, then rendezvous. It's not a good morning to dilly dally, boys. Baker Squad will deploy to the west, with me, we'll establish a perimeter at the edge of the cut. Hold there until the howitzer's detached and the ordnance is off loaded. Once the Army's clear, we reboard, cover formation out and back. These are NVA, Marines: a real fight.' Hanson moved along the line, reiterating his orders, checking weapons, and ensuring everyone knew their responsibilities. It was going to get confusing; firefights had a way of doing that, no matter how confident the NCOs were going in.

Jerome snapped a half dozen clips onto his belt, along with three pineapple grenades. He unhooked an M18, Goofy Grape canister in exchange for another grenade. Dropping the smoker in his pack, he said, 'Fuck it, right? I don't need that.'

With the M-16 still tight between his knees, Lloyd let go the cargo netting and took the purple smoke grenade. He clipped it to his own belt. 'You never know.'

When the ACS gunner slid open the hatch, the first thing Lloyd saw in the gray morning was a Huey with a side-mounted M-60, raining fire down on a steep jungle hillside. It hovered there for a few seconds, then banked north for another pass. He hadn't known the Chinooks needed an escort.

Maybe two hundred feet off the snarled foliage, their own gunner opened up. The M-60's roar was deafening, as thousands of rounds tore the hillside to shreds. Lloyd couldn't see any NVA below. Either they were hidden, they were home in bed, or they were dead. Nothing could survive an M-60 barrage from two hundred feet. NVA soldiers would be more than killed; they'd be reduced to paste.

'Damn, but I gotta get one of those,' Jerome shouted. 'Makes my M-16 feel like a pop gun, you know?'

'We should make another pass,' Lloyd said. 'Hit them again. What the hell, right? Are we in a hurry?'

'Looks like it!' Jerome unfastened his shoulder harness, then reached over to unhook Lloyd's. 'Can't go anywhere with your seatbelt on, hillbilly!'

The Chinook banked hard to the west, circling a jungle hilltop that, through the hatch, looked as though it had developed a bald spot. Tangles of emerald brush climbed the torrid hillside in a mad rush for the summit, only to be turned away by Green Berets and Montagnard armed with Agent Orange and chainsaws. Lloyd spotted the tree line on the west side of the muddy landing zone. 'There,' he pointed. 'I think that's where we've got to set up a line.'

'You see any Army down there?'

'No, but those guys are like ghosts,' Lloyd said.

'Or they're dead,' Jerome slipped a clip into his M-16. 'I don't think anyone was expecting a fight here this morning.'

'Arrive alive, brother.' Lloyd slugged Jerome hard in the shoulder.

Jerome reciprocated. 'Arrive alive, hillbilly.'

The Chinook circled LZ Nancy twice; all the while the Air Commando gunner riddled the eastern face with M-60 rounds. Lloyd felt better knowing the Hueys circled as well, strafing anything that moved.

Sergeant Hanson was the first Marine out the hatch when the howitzer, hanging ten feet below the Chinook, touched down. Three ACS crewmen leapt out the opposite side and vanished beneath the chopper.

'Let's go! Let's go!' Hanson shouted, and Lloyd, Jerome, and Marines of Baker Squad, Third Platoon, ready to fight, leapt – some rolling when they landed – onto the rain-soaked hilltop of LZ Nancy.

Lloyd was halfway to the tree line, his M-16 shouldered and ready to fire, when he heard a loud *whump, whump, blam* off to his right. He instinctively cringed away from the sound, then glanced over long enough to see one of the Hueys, her tail trailing oily smoke, spiral down the hillside, out of sight.

Sergeant Hanson shoved men left and right along the perimeter, shouting orders as he ran. Lloyd caught a few words then was blown off his feet by a cataclysmic explosion behind him.

Firing and screaming came from Lloyd's left, near the tree line. He pushed forward with his knees, glad he had bagged the M-16's muzzle before jumping out of the chopper. His helmet yanked too far back on his head, and he sat up, adjusted it, and watched as raindrops filled the indentation where his forehead had pressed into the soggy ground. A great billow of acrid smoke wafted past. Another, smaller explosion lit the morning; focused, intense heat from nearby flames warmed Lloyd's face.

One of the Chinooks had exploded over the landing zone, crashing in a burning heap of torn metal and melted plastic.

The heat was too much for the ACS crewmen unlash the howitzer. They ran west, toward Baker Squad, and for a blurry moment Lloyd wondered what would happen if the crates of artillery ordnance in his own Chinook went up.

It'll be over then; that'll do it.

Lloyd felt Hanson pass behind him, felt the sergeant's comforting hand on his shoulder, assuring him that there was still a perimeter to defend. He took a deep breath, cleared mud from his face, and watched the underbrush for movement.

Still on his knees, Lloyd greased an NVA soldier, then another. He fired at anything that moved, but wasn't certain of confirmed kills, not after the first two. He screamed. Firing and shouting, too tight to calm down, not with the searing heat singeing the hairs on the back of his neck. Something in the cordoned-off reaches of his mind said, *Either get down or get up*, but Lloyd stayed on his knees, firing into the trees until Hanson slapped him hard on the helmet, screaming, 'Get down Hollis! Down, you dinky dau fuck!'

A fallen tree jutted from the mud about ten yards to Lloyd's right. He ran, dove for cover, and changed the clip in his rifle. Hanson sprinted up and down the line, positioning Marines and calling for medics. He pulled up himself for a moment and fired his own M-16 into the tree line. Lloyd didn't see who had been there or if the NCO had hit anyone. When the grenade exploded near Hanson's boots, the sergeant was lifted ten or twelve feet into the air, tossed backwards in a spray of mud and grime, until he finally landed, face down, his body twitching in gruesome spasms.

Then the world lurched to one side, threatening to dump Lloyd Hollis into the cosmos. He wrapped an arm around the fallen tree and tried to lay as flat as possible. He saw and heard snippets of things, little of which registered with him as real.

Lieutenant Carver huddling beside a rock, unarmed and weeping. Screaming vowel sounds.

Trucks with trailers, emerging from the forest. Green Berets, looking like phantoms, hauling crates and artillery, while their brothers in arms, the Montagnards, fired rifles, machine guns, even crossbows at the NVA.

Jerome firing, shouting, firing, then falling.

Carver screaming, waving pasty, white hands at the sky.

Jerome beckoning from beside Hanson's body, shouting 'Dustoff! Dustoff!'

Captain Bruckner shoving a radioman toward Jerome.

Smoke everywhere, blowing about in haunted clouds. Hard to breathe.

A second Chinook, taking fire, probably from a grenade launcher, smoking, listing back and forth, like a ship in high seas, then crashing down the rainy hillside. Its gigantic rotors mowing a path as it skidded and slipped away.

Bruckner again, barking orders at Green Berets, pointing, moving in slow motion, his sidearm drawn, his uniform wet, finally.

Then Jerome, screaming into a radiophone. 'Dustoff! Dustoff! LZ Nancy!'

A Huey circled above Lloyd's tree, its M-60 clearing any surrounding brush of NVA soldiers. Lloyd heaved himself up, fired several shots into the jungle, then sprinted for Jerome and Sergeant Hanson. There were Marines from Baker Squad, still lying where the NCO had left them. A few fired blindly; others lay silent. Thick mud made it difficult to run. Lloyd crouched beside Jerome, shouted, 'Get them here! I'll watch the tree line.'

Jerome grabbed his friend's upper arm and squeezed hard. It was a gesture Lloyd would remember for the rest of his life. 'Dustoff! LZ Nancy! Multiple Hueys! We need medics, multiple transports, and an air strike!' Jerome called the coordinates into the radio, repeated them, rechecked the map, and disappeared, running for Captain Bruckner. Lloyd thanked God, again out loud, that Jerome had taken time to read that map in the Pleiku hanger.

A grenade exploded nearby. On his back, Lloyd felt a sharp sting and the unmistakable sensation of blood filling his left boot. His rifle was gone along with his helmet. Bullets whined past, some only inches above his face. He rolled onto his side, crying out with the effort, and watched as one of the Special Forces trucks was lifted into the air. It hung there for a second *like Sergeant Hanson*, then exploded, wrenching free from its trailer and spilling the 150 mm howitzer off the side, where it landed on an ACS crewman and another soldier. Lloyd didn't know who.

A group of Montagnards joined several Special Forces soldiers. Together they rushed past Lloyd, one leaping over his body, to vanish into the jungle beyond Baker Squad's perimeter line.

Good. Go. Take the fight to them, you sick, spider-eating fuckers.

Another grenade exploded somewhere between Baker Squad and the last Chinook, splashing Lloyd with warm mud. He sat up, searched for his M-16, then used the weapon to push himself to his feet.

His left leg collapsed beneath him, and Lloyd crawled toward Jerome and the Chinook. He felt a hard slap and a burn on the outside of his left thigh and knew he'd been shot. He fell forward, struggled back to all fours and kept crawling.

Ahead, Jerome tugged a muddy soldier from beneath the overturned howitzer. Whoever it was had plenty of fight left in him but a ruined foot. It would be crushed to jelly under the weight of that cannon. Captain Bruckner reared up, still shouting orders, still gesturing and positioning Marines.

Together Lloyd Hollis and Jerome Stansfield, grunt Marines in the eleventh month of their tour in South Vietnam, propped Captain Carl James Bruckner between them. Bruckner's foot had been crushed, irreparably. It looked as if it had been run over by a steamroller and then crammed inside a bloody, misshapen jungle boot.

Bruckner didn't seem to notice. With one arm draped over each Marine's shoulder, he shouted orders, demanding they help him reach Baker Squad, then cross to Delta Squad and Lieutenant Hodges on the southeast side of the clearing, where the second Chinook had been swallowed by the jungle. Much of Second Platoon had been lost in the first explosion, but Captain Bruckner completed his circumnavigation of LZ Nancy, oblivious to the barrage of machine gun fire and the increasing number of grenades exploding inside the perimeter. All the while, he ordered Marines to gather up casualties and fall back to the surviving Chinook. His boot leaked blood in a grim trickle, staining the warm ground crimson.

When Lloyd's own leg finally gave in entirely, he lost his grip on Captain Bruckner and the two of them fell together. Lloyd screamed before losing sense of himself. Bruckner only grunted.

Before passing out, Lloyd felt the captain on his chest, using Lloyd's body to wrestle his own legs beneath him. Bruckner tore the M-18 canister from Lloyd's belt, pulled the pin, and tossed it into the clearing. With Jerome's help, the captain stood; Lloyd didn't try to get up.

Overhead two F-105s roared; the gray morning was lit with golden fire imbued with roiling purple clouds.

Lloyd slept. He stirred for a moment when he was hefted into a medical Huey, then slept again on the return trip to Pleiku Air Base. He never knew if the Green Berets were able to salvage their howitzers, their ammunition, or their supplies. He never saw the third Chinook helicopter return, nor did he know what had happened that morning at LZ Nancy. He and fourteen other members of Third Platoon, Alpha Company, Eighty-Third Marine Battalion – including Captain Bruckner – were airlifted to a Navy hospital ship in the South China Sea for surgery, evaluation, and initial convalescence.

Lloyd never saw Jerome Stansfield or Captain Carl Bruckner again.