STEEL MY SOLDIERS' HEARTS

The Hopeless to Hardcore Transformation of 4th Battalion, 39th Infantry, United States Army, Vietnam

Colonel David H. Hackworth
and Eilhys England

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To all the grunts and to all the guys in the sky and behind the tubes
who served in Vietnam. And especially to the Hardcore.

O God of battles! steel my soldiers' hearts;
Possess them not with fear; take from them now
The sense of reckoning, if the opposed numbers
Pluck their hearts from them.

—*Henry V,* Act IV, Scene 1

Contents

PROLOGUE

Debt of Honor

Somewhere inside my head, I've constructed a bunch of double-locked doors to hold back my memories of Vietnam: the stench of swampy Mekong paddies, the angry *snap* of AK-47 rounds, the *crump* of incoming mortars, the billowing red and yellow flames of exploding napalm, the sour smell of gunpowder drifting in the black smoke, and the one-million-candlelight flares lighting up the battlefields where American men and boys, who knew the whole lousy enterprise was futile, fought and died.

Not something you want to dwell on. Not something you can ever forget.

In late January 1969, I helped a group of badly led, dispirited soldiers transform themselves into the Hardcore Battalion, probably the finest infantry fighting team in Vietnam. These men were not specially trained Rangers, SEALs, Special Forces or other elite troops. Most were ordinary citizens—draftee soldiers who became great fighters because they found themselves in a war and figured out that the best way to stay alive was to become better than their enemy.

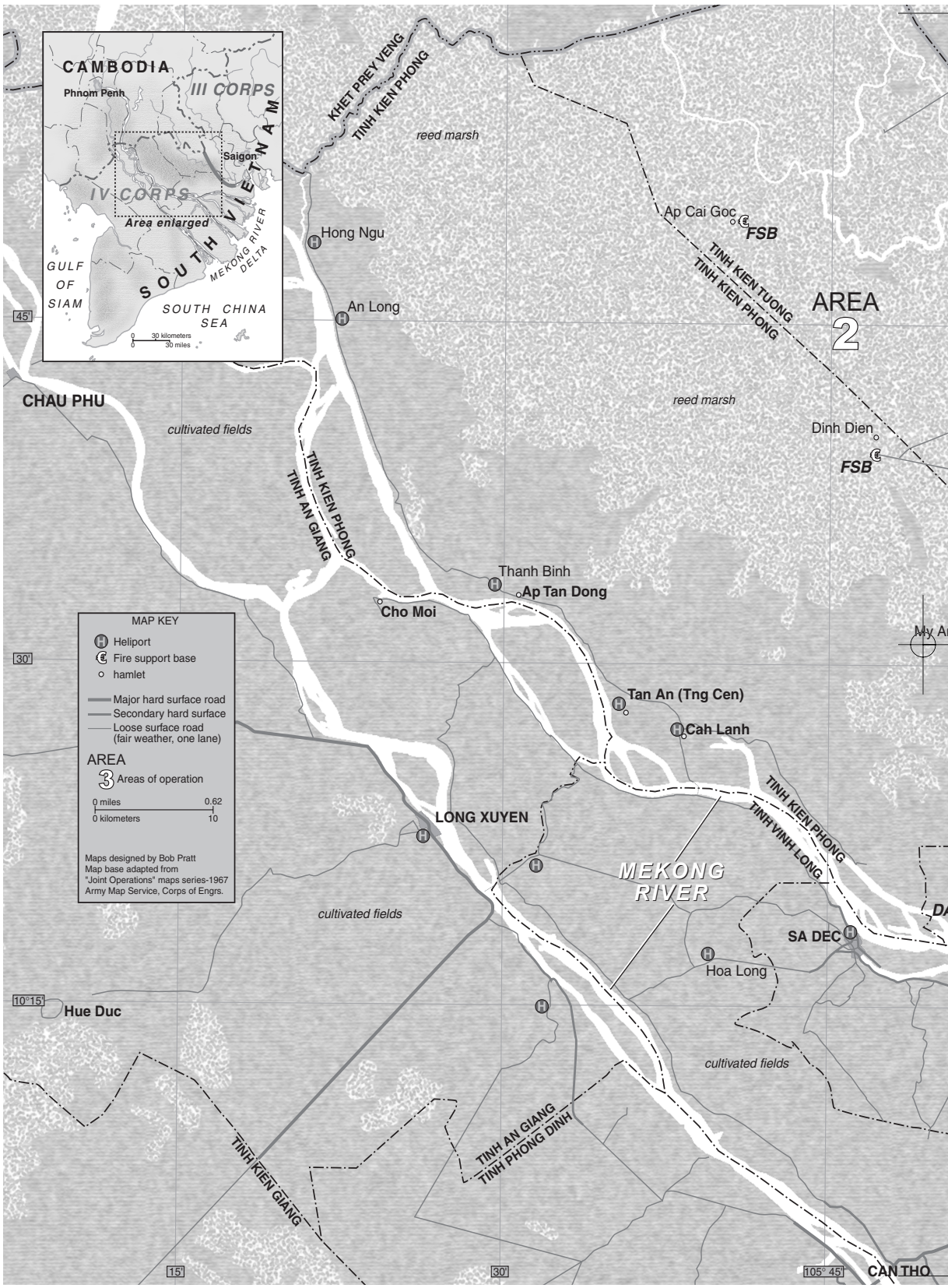
When I first became their commanding officer, a lot of them hated my guts. When they called me a GI Joe prick and "the Big Meat," they weren't far off the mark. To have a shot at getting them home, I had to be hard-nosed. Now, all these years later,

I hope with all my being that the bottom line is that I led from up front and never let them down.

The warriors of the Hardcore Battalion fought like hell. And they showed their country and the U.S. Army that there was a smarter way to fight in Vietnam. In telling their story, I want to honor every last one of these amazingly brave soldiers.

I salute you, my brothers-in-arms. This book is by you, about you and for you. What a privilege it was to lead you.

STEEL MY SOLDIERS' HEARTS


CAMBODIA
Phnom Penh
III CORPS
Saigon
IV CORPS
Area enlarged
SOUTH VIETNAM
MEKONG RIVER DELTA
GULF OF SIAM
SOUTH CHINA SEA
0 30 kilometers
0 30 miles
KHET PREY VENG
TINH KIEN PHONG
reed marsh
Ap Cai Goc
FSB
Hong Ngu
TINH KIEN TUONG
TINH KIEN PHONG
AREA 2
An Long
45'
CHAU PHU
cultivated fields
reed marsh
Dinh Dien
FSB
TINH KIEN PHONG
TINH AN GIANG
Thanh Binh
Ap Tan Dong
Cho Moi
MAP KEY
Heliport
Fire support base
hamlet
Major hard surface road
Secondary hard surface
Loose surface road (fair weather, one lane)
AREA
3 Areas of operation
0 miles 0.62
0 kilometers 10
Maps designed by Bob Pratt
Map base adapted from "Joint Operations" maps series-1967 Army Map Service, Corps of Engrs.
30'
Tan An (Tng Cen)
Cah Lanh
TINH KIEN PHONG
TINH VINH LONG
LONG XUYEN
MEKONG RIVER
cultivated fields
SA DEC
Hoa Long
10°15'
Hue Duc
cultivated fields
TINH AN GIANG
TINH PHONG DINH
TINH KIEN GIANG
15'
30'
105° 45'
CAN THO


CAMBODIA
KHET SVAY RIENG (SVAY RIENG)
NAM PHAN VIET NAM
VIETNAM
TINH HAU NGHIA
TINH LONG AN
AREA 2
FSB
MOC HOA
P L A I N O F R E E D S
Dinh Dien
FSB
Kinh Cung
Nhon Ninh
Ap Bac
reed marsh
Tuyen Nhon
AREA 3
THE POCKET
My An
FSB
TINH KIEN TUONG
TINH DINH TUONG
AREA 1
My Phuoc Tay
Ap My Dien
cultivated fields
WAGON WHEEL
FSB MOORE
Long Dinh
KHIEM ICH (CAI LAY)
AREA 5
AREA 4
DONG TAM
xx
9
MY THO
TINH KIEN PHONG
TINH VINH LONG
FSB Tombstone
FSB DANGER
Cai Be
SA DEC
Giao Duc
VINH LONG
TRUC GIANG (BEN TRE)
TINH KIEN HOA
TINH VINH LONG
TINH VINH BINH
105° 45'
CAN THO
106° 00'
15'

ONE

9th Infantry Division Headquarters, Dong Tam, Vietnam

15 January 1969

"It's a pussy battalion, Colonel. I want tigers, not pussies."

I had to hand it to Major General Julian Ewell. Twenty-five years after his kick-ass command in Bastogne, the old paratrooper was still firing for effect. He had sent stateside for me to fix one of his busted units—4th Battalion, 39th Infantry of the 9th Division—right then out in Indian country getting its clock cleaned.

"The 4/39th is the worst goddamn battalion I've ever seen in the Army, Hackworth. It couldn't fight its way out of a retirement home."

He thumped the desk in front of him.

It took some doing to keep a straight face. As a lieutenant colonel with over two decades of my life invested in the Army, though, I wasn't about to piss off General Ewell. You didn't spend a day in green without learning about his reputation for ruthlessness. He swung his ax with a high-pitched war cry: "You're gone. You're history." And you were.

We sat in his office in Dong Tam, half an hour by chopper from Saigon. The 9th Infantry Division's flagpole was planted—as if anything but rice could be planted in the Mekong Delta—just outside the general's window. Ewell's flagpole. Ewell's

division. And Ewell's reputation at stake. And the poor, sorry 4/39th was letting him down.

He unconsciously jiggled his hand in a tight semicircle, thumb and pinkie extended like the hands of a watch, ticking off the points he wanted to emphasize.

"Pussy battalion." Tick, tick.

"I want tigers. . . ." Tickety, tock.

His hand gyrated like a whirligig.

I'd known Ewell for years, a combat veteran gone long in the tooth, his days as a warrior behind him. Sure he was steamed, but if you looked closely you could see that the heat hadn't taken the creases out of his immaculately ironed fatigues. But before the starch, Ewell had earned a formidable reputation as a battalion and regimental commander with the 101st Airborne in World War II, serving under the legendary General Maxwell Taylor. After the war, he hooked himself to Taylor's coattails and took a peacetime trip up the chain of command to collect a shoulder full of stars. Right now he was a tightly wrapped, thin-lipped, hard-charging West Pointer who meant to drain the Delta before the Delta pulled the plug on him.

General Ewell and I were not alone. And the man standing a dog bone's throw behind him did nothing to improve my mood. Ira Augustus Hunt was a tall, good-looking bird colonel, as polished as a new Rolls-Royce and—with his Ph.D. in engineering—about as useful in combat. The Army considered him one of its best and brightest. And just as Ewell had ridden upward in Taylor's jet stream, so Hunt was cruising in Ewell's, having served under him as commander of his engineer battalion in Germany and now as the 9th Infantry Division's chief of staff. The two made quite a pair. Between them they had more naked ambition than a Harvard Law School third-year hustling the Supreme Court for a clerkship.

My take on Hunt? A whiz with a slide rule and a dunce with

a sidearm, or any other kind of weapon. I met him in Italy right after World War II, when I was Private Hackworth of the 351st Infantry Regiment and he was Lieutenant Hunt of the command's engineer company. Even then he was a piece of work. We were TRUST soldiers (Trieste United States Troops), so tightly disciplined that if a private even blinked at a sergeant he'd find himself running around the parade field with his rifle over his head shouting "I'm a big-assed bird" until he dropped. In Italy, I learned that exacting even-handed discipline is crucial when the bullets start flying, but Hunt worked overtime inventing infractions, gigging good troops and basking in his power. The GIs I knew who felt his lash or sting thought he was a first-rate bastard. Now he was General Ewell's consigliere.

I'd been back in-country less than three hours. Earlier that morning I'd stepped off a commercial charter jet in Saigon. The Army's own FTA flight, free trip to Asia. All expenses paid by the Department of Defense of the United States of America. Three times before 1969, I'd made the same eighteen-hour trip across the Pacific to Southeast Asia. Nothing had changed. The plane was full of FNGs, fucking new guys—nineteen- and twenty-year-olds, pink-cheeked, dry-mouthed, wide-eyed, eager but scared—one more load of fresh meat for the Vietnam grinder. I couldn't help wondering which of them the KIA Travel Bureau would be bagging up for the return trip home. Even the lucky ones, the ones who made it out alive, would never be the same.

At Tan Son Nhut, the U.S.-controlled air base in Saigon, customs greased me through like a four-star general, and I went directly to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) helicopter pad, where a 9th Division chopper waited. The bird rose and veered to the southwest, Saigon fading behind under its haze of camphor smoke. I watched the chopper's shadow

racing above rice paddies where tiny figures worked—men and women in black pajamas with naked children in tow, a few followed by the dark silhouette of a water buffalo.

Thirty minutes later, the bird circled Dong Tam. From the air, the place looked like a huge, dirty, nineteenth-century Nevada mining town squatting in its own tailings—prefab wooden buildings with tin roofs, dusty roads and miles of green sandbags, the bunkered 3rd Surgical Hospital, a PX and an outdoor movie theater, one short runway of perforated steel planking and a huge helicopter pad. Home away from home to rear echelons of ten infantry battalions along with aviation, signal, engineer, artillery and military police outfits and every other kind of logistical ash and trash.

To build the place, U.S. Army engineers had brought in a monster machine that sucked several square miles of silt from the bottom of the Mekong Delta to create enough solid land for the 9th Division to set up shop. Four hundred acres in all with the rest heaped into an earthwork berm that gave the perimeter the look of an ancient Roman encampment—twentieth-century innards surrounded by second-century ramparts.

As the chopper dropped toward the pad, under the whump, whump, whump of the rotors, I saw a World War II–style ammunition dump in the middle of the base. Great call. One enemy mortar round, and the whole place would be history. I walked off the pad and jumped into a jeep with a kid behind its wheel waiting to run me over to General Ewell's headquarters.

The ride was an eye-opener. Nearly ten thousand rear-echelon motherfuckers—REMFs to the grunts out on the line—were stationed in Dong Tam surrounded by all the creature comforts. I saw a miniature-golf course and a swimming pool. I caught a glimpse inside a barracks, decked out with clean beds under mosquito nets. These guys pulled down the same combat pay as the young soldiers in the bush who lived in the mud,

watching their feet rot, burning leeches out of their crotches and laying down their lives.

Dong Tam crawled with Vietnamese civilians, doing chores, changing the sheets on the beds of the generals and colonels, shaving the brasses' jowls, ironing fatigues and shining shoes. It took only one sympathizer to report every U.S. burp and fart to the Vietcong. But what really got my heart pounding was that ammo dump. What kind of commander would squat on top of his own powder keg?

General Ewell's briefing lasted half an hour, with Colonel Hunt bobbing his head in agreement every time Ewell spun his hand to make another point.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

After that, they sent me on my way.

I left that meeting unsure of myself, anxious. I wasn't sweating a sick unit or leading troops. I'd enlisted in the military before I finished puberty and in the two decades since, I had commanded two infantry battalions and nine companies—two rifle companies and two artillery batteries, and one each of raider, heavy weapons, armored cavalry, combat support and headquarter companies. But here, the chain and the terrain both spelled trouble. Pragmatically, I could do nothing about the chain of command and the tactical operational stupidity of Dong Tam. I'd be out of Ewell's and Hunt's eyesight soon enough, and worrying about how combat operations were being handled from above was a waste of time at best and got men killed at worst. There'd be ways around that. But the terrain was another matter. The Mekong Delta was an unknown to me—a vast swamp riddled with a tough enemy who'd been fighting in it forever and who had every furrow down cold.

I knew that I couldn't count on my earlier in-country combat

tour to guide me. In the Vietnamese Highlands, where I cut my teeth fighting the North Vietnamese Army (NVA), the enemy wore uniforms, there were few civilians in the jungle areas and the terrain, except for the coastal plains, consisted of mountainous, lung-busting jungle—a bitch, but a manageable one. The Delta, mainly flat and open, was turf made for a chopper war. Not only didn't I know much about using choppers, it had been almost two years since I'd smelled enemy gunpowder. Over and over in my mind I asked myself: Will I be able to handle it? Will I remember what to do when the bullets sing?

I tracked down and spent the rest of the afternoon with the 9th Division's G-2, Lieutenant Colonel Leonard A. Spirito, bringing myself up to speed on the intell coming out of Dinh Tuong Province. Dinh Tuong was the swampy home court of Base Area 470, the Vietcong's Mekong stronghold. A capable intelligence officer, Spirito gave me the skinny on the basics of what the 4/39th faced every day—enemy, weather and terrain. "Don't expect the enemy down here to fight or think like you do," he told me. "In the Delta, the enemy is strange, tough. He wrote the book on guerrilla warfare—and he just keeps adding new chapters."

Colonel Spirito backed up what I'd learned stateside. Before leaving Fort Lewis, where I'd been running a training battalion, I called up an old friend, Colonel Hank Emerson, who was back in the States recovering from severe burns after his chopper was shot down in the Delta. Hank was a legend in Vietnam, a warrior's warrior, the guy the troops called "the Gunfighter."

Until the crash, Hank had been commanding the 9th Division's 1st Brigade—he had, in fact, been the one who persuaded Ewell to send for me—and he knew the Delta the way he knew his own service record. "It's like fighting in the Everglades," he'd told me. "Except if you don't have your shit together, the VC take you faster than the 'gators. Everything there is an infantryman's worst nightmare."

The problem I had to figure out was how to "out-G the G," out-guerrilla these guerrillas. But regressing to General Ewell's—and the entire Vietnam chain of command's—visions of World War II–era glory days and tactics was not the answer. That evening, Ewell organized the most worthlessly theatrical show-and-tell I'd ever seen: starched briefers, maps, charts, sitreps, stats, kill rates, body counts galore; the whole deal, all of them shining brightly. All of them pure-grade crap that made it perfectly clear I couldn't take anything coming from Ewell and Company at face value.

I managed to button my lip until Ewell's boys trotted off. Then I told him my overall plan. I intended to steal a page from Hank, use his checkerboard tactics, Eagle Flights and jitterbug strikes to fix and fuck the VC while adding a few tricks of my own.

"You just go ahead and do what you need to do," Ewell said dryly. Either tactics bored him or even he'd had enough of the dog-and-pony.

So much for defining the mission. But that night, I hit the sack knowing that my commanding general had given me what I needed most—enough rope to hang the enemy. Or myself.

The next morning I did more recon, but moved down the line to the point of the actual spear. I needed someone I could trust to help orient my compass, get my combat bearings. So I paid a visit to an old buddy who'd been running the 2nd Battalion of the 39th Infantry for over six months, Lieutenant Colonel Don Schroeder. A fierce, charismatic soldier, tactically brilliant but even better in the bush, Schroeder was the finest infantry battalion commander the 9th Division had. We'd been captains together at Benning and majors together in the 101st, where Don had served as Hank Emerson's battalion executive officer (XO).

Schroeder was a stud on his way to stars, every one of them well deserved. During the next six days, he taught me more

about fighting in the Delta than I could have picked up from a year in a classroom. He also slipped me some priceless intell. Over a beer one night, he told me that after Hank Emerson's chopper went down, Colonel Hunt had cut Hank out of the burning bird and saved his life. Everyone respected Hunt for it and the men were ready to get behind him after he took over temporary command of Hank's brigade. But the esprit de corps didn't last. "That son of a bitch rode us too hard and always put us away wet," Schroeder said. "He never knew when to stop. He's bad news." Pushing back his can, he sent up a million-candlelight flare over Hunt and Ewell.

"Watch your back," he warned. "They're a couple of rattlesnakes."

But by then I was raring to get out with my troops and walk the walk. Before I moved out, though, I made one last stop to see the new commander of the 1st Brigade. Colonel John P. Geraci was Ranger, Airborne, Special Forces and a grizzly, all-animal fighter. His radio call sign was "Mal Hombre"—loosely translated, "mean motherfucker." During the Tet offensive, his 1/506th Airborne "Centurion" Battalion had racked up 1,294 VC KIA in exchange for eleven of his rock-hard centurions.

Geraci ate staff officers uncooked for breakfast, but the troops idolized him. "Here's what I've got for you," he'd tell them, laying out a mission. "Any questions? No? Good. Now go out there and knock their cocks stiff." Not a guy for euphemisms. When I asked him for the straight skinny on the 4/39th, he grinned and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Worst battalion I've seen in twenty-six years of service, Hack. You got your work cut out for you."

The 4/39th's area of operation, Fire Support Base Dizzy, was set on the Wagon Wheel, deep in bandit land where five canals converged like spokes on a hub. From my chopper vantage point coming in from Dong Tam, the place looked normal

enough, but when I landed, I couldn't believe my eyes, or nose. The whole base smelled of raw shit and rotting morale. Toilet paper blew across the chopper pad, machine-gun ammo was buried in mud, and troops wandered around like zombies, their weapons gone red with rust.

These were the sloppiest American soldiers I'd ever seen, bar none. Unkempt, unwashed, unshaven, their uniforms ragged and dirty, hippie beads dangling alongside their dog tags, their helmets covered with graffiti. Where did these troops think they were, a fucking commune?

In the middle of this shithole stood the command post (CP) of Lieutenant Colonel Frederick W. Lark,* the officer I would replace in a change-of-command ceremony the following day. He'd snuggled his CP next to a 155mm artillery battery at the hub of the wheel while deploying his four rifle companies raggedy-ass around the perimeter in defensive positions that would have melted away under a water buffalo's charge.

The firebase was loose as a goose. My brain went into overdrive, sorting out priorities, assessing problem areas and trying to keep cool. From what I saw in the first thirty seconds on the ground, I knew I'd need all the seasoned warriors I could find to turn the battalion around. And I needed them now.

I meant to start by canning the outfit's S-3 operations officer and the 250-pound heavy drop sergeant major. To replace them, I'd sent for two men of my own. The first was Robert Press, who had served as first sergeant under my command in the 101st. We'd also served together in the States as well as in Vietnam, and our partnership went all the way back to the same unit during Korea. Lean and mean, Press would be my new battalion sergeant major, the noncoms' chief ass-kicker and role model.

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*A pseudonym.

I loved this warrior. He was smart as a whip, tough as a one-dollar steak, an NCO right out of James Jones's *From Here to Eternity*. From the time he was a teenager during the Korean War, he'd been training and leading soldiers, and he knew his job the way a master carpenter knows his toolbox. On the flight up, we divided the chores. He'd concentrate on the non-coms. I'd work on the officers. And we'd meet in the middle with the troops.

For my S-3, I'd brought in Major Neville Bumstead,* whose near fluency in the Vietnamese language was a big plus. He'd served with me during an earlier in-country tour as a platoon leader and staff officer and I thought he'd make one hell of an operations officer. He was West Point, Airborne, a school-trained Ranger who'd seen combat in the Mekong Delta with the Vietnamese Rangers. Another two dozen good men were also on the way.

Press came back from his first circuit of Dizzy shaking his head.

"I wouldn't even call it a firebase," he said. "I don't know what it is—it kind of looks like a picnic area. I mean, it's like some kind of outing with the local Kiwanis or something. I looked around and seen no one wearing helmets. No one carrying their weapons. Everybody in the CP group was sleeping above ground. I didn't see a foxhole anywhere. Sir, this outfit stinks worse than we thought."

"Top," I replied, "as soon as I take over tomorrow, I want you to have the company commanders and staff assembled. While I meet with them, how about you getting together with the first sergeants? They haven't been doing their jobs, or this outfit wouldn't be in this shape. Really smoke 'em. Between us, we'll get things straightened out."

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*A pseudonym.

He shot me a pitying look.

"Right, Colonel. You, me and John Wayne."

Press was right. We were in serious trouble, open to attack at any moment, with only a bunch of demoralized and badly led troops loitering on the perimeter to fight off any assault by the VC. If Dizzy were hit, we'd go down as quickly as a sandcastle smashed by high tide.

All that night, while Press worked the perimeter, talking to the NCOs and the troops, Bumstead and I sat back to back, pulling our own private stand-to.

We took up our position at a safe distance from Lark's brightly lit tactical operations center (TOC), which was glowing like a circus tent in the darkness. The VC could have taken it out with a barrage of well-aimed rocks.

My mind shifted into overdrive as I went back through every combat trick I'd learned over the years. Throughout the afternoon, I'd scribbled ideas in a sweat-stained pocket notebook that was now overflowing. Bumstead began a new one.

"Remind me about automatic claymores," I'd tell him, and he'd duck beneath his poncho, click on his red-lens flashlight, and write it down.

We spent the whole night like that. Every now and then, there would be an enormous *bam,* and someone would scream, "Medic!"

Just before sunup, Press came back. For a moment I thought he was going to blow away the TOC tent himself.

"You're not gonna believe this, sir."

Colonel Lark had set Dizzy dead center in a Vietcong minefield.

TWO

Fire Support Base Dizzy, Dinh Tuong

31 January 1969

There are no bad troops, just bad officers—an axiom as old as the profession of arms. Through tightly clenched jaws, Press gave me a sitrep from his all-night recon. "There's no one to blame for the rotten condition of this battalion but Colonel Lark."

During the days that the battalion had been set up at FSB Dizzy, eighteen soldiers had been wounded inside the perimeter from mines and booby traps. Morale, understandably, was lower than Death Valley. How could Lark put his firebase in such a dangerous spot? Hadn't anyone done a recon before the outfit deployed from Dong Tam? Why hadn't the engineers cleaned up the place? And if all the basics had been too hard for the guy, why the hell didn't he just *move* the battalion?

The troops agreed that Lark was a decent guy, an officer with good intentions. But only a general like William Westmoreland—Lark had been one of Westy's dog robbers in the 101st—would have entrusted him with an infantry battalion in combat. In the fourth year of the war, Lark had arrived in Vietnam still scratching for his Combat Infantryman's Badge, a barebones combat distinction of having served in the line of enemy fire for at least thirty days, and his troops paid the price for his inexperience.

If you wanted a symbol of Dizzy, you didn't have to look any further than "Lark's Throne." That's what the grunts—the name comes from the sound an infantryman makes when he pulls himself up from the mud with a full rucksack and all his other gear—called the compact white portable toilet parked an easy amble away from the TOC tent. It had come in with the Chinooks that choppered in a battery of 155mm howitzers but no ammunition. Instead, they unloaded a jeep trailer filled with beer and ice—and the colonel's own Porta Potti. Up on the forward edge where things were hairy, the grunts had no covering fire, while back at B Battery, it was Happy Hour and the commander had everything he needed to take a nice warm crap.

The results of his approach were recorded all too clearly on the outfit's "Dich Board." *Dichs*—"enemy dead" in Vietnamese—dinks, gooks, slopes were all racist slurs aimed at the VC. The slurs served a useful purpose, dehumanizing the enemy, which made it easier to kill him before he killed you. They also helped grunts blow off some steam when Charley—the handle for the Vietcong came from the Army's phonetic alphabet, Victor Charley for the letters *VC*—sat out there in the darkness behind the tree line screaming: "Fuck you, GI! Tonight you die!"

Lark had tasked the battalion operations sergeant with keeping track of casualties. When we arrived, the score Sergeant Jerry Slater had entered on the Dich Board looked like this:

Dichs: 127 KIA

Friendly: 32 KIA . . . 307 WIA (wounded in action)

The reality behind the stats knocked me out. After six months under Colonel Lark, the 4/39th had suffered the equivalent of nearly 40 percent casualties without ever meeting a significant enemy force in open combat. Rockets, mortars, booby traps and friendly fire had done most of the damage.

In fairness to the man, according to my pre-taking-over-command homework, the 4/39th had started to unwind well before Lark took over. The 9th Infantry Division had been in-country since December 1966. Originally part of III Corps in the early stages of the buildup (Vietnam was divided into four corps of operation with I Corps the most northerly and IV the farthest south; III Corps surrounded Saigon, but did not include the hellish Mekong), the 4/39th had distinguished itself against Vietcong main-force units. But the warm-up did nothing to prepare it for war in the Big Swamp. The trouble began the moment the 9th was sent into the Delta to take it back from Charley.

Again, the terrain was just a flat sonofabitch. "All armies prefer high ground to low and sunny places to dark," Sun Tzu wrote over 2,500 years ago. "Low ground is not only damp and unhealthy, but also disadvantageous for fighting. If you are careful of your men, and camp on hard ground, your army will be free from disease of every kind, and this will spell victory." I don't think General Westmoreland or the U.S. commanders running the war in Vietnam knew Sun Tzu from Sonny and Cher. If they had, the U.S. Army would not have been fighting in the Delta.

Dry season or wet, the place was a tropical hell where the grunts were always soaked, either from rain, wading across canals and rivers or from sweat. During the monsoon season, May through September, standing water greatly hampered airmobile operations. Mud from the waterway banks and swamps coated communications equipment, fouled weapons and made infantry operations a soggy, slow-motion nightmare. In just forty-eight hours in soaking jungle boots, foot rot set in. Mosquitoes zapped them with malaria, leeches sucked onto their balls and even up dicks and morale vaporized before Charley fired one shot.

Dinh Tuong Province, where Firebase Dizzy operated, was wide open except along the waterways, which were flanked by light jungle vegetation—single canopy trees and nipa palm thickets—and overrun with civilian-tended rice paddies. The low ground, flat as a surfboard, averaged only about two feet above sea level. With six major rivers connected by a maze of canals and streams making up the drainage network, water runoff was poor in the best of seasons. In the wet season, with the rivers and canals overflowing, it became debilitating.

The rice paddies themselves offered little concealment. But the paddy walls provided the VC good cover from direct fire weapons. The only way for a GI to get a clear shot at Charley was to scale the dike and hope he wouldn't get blown away by a lethal stretch of mines and booby traps planted in and around the paddies. Within the patches of jungle bordering the paddies, the VC, masters of camouflage, had excellent concealment from air observation. And the dense year-round Mekong undergrowth cut the grunt's field of vision to little more than the nose in front of his grimy, sweat-stained face.

Farther outside Dizzy's perimeter and in the patches of jungle bordering both the paddies and the actual Delta, the VC built fortified camps with their perimeters almost as bomb- and artillery-proof as the German Siegfried Line in World War II. If the VC chose to defend a position rather than slip away after an assault, which they rarely did, they could count on great natural cover augmented by wall-to-wall mines and more than enough of their own totally committed soldiers.

But even worse, there was no way to tell the good guys from the bad guys. Six million Vietnamese—nearly 35 percent of South Vietnam's entire population—lived in the Delta, caught in the crossfire of a cruel civil war. The VC in the Delta seldom wore military uniforms and intentionally mixed in with the population, most of whom tended to the thousands of shim-

mering rice fields. If surrounded, the VC ditched their weapons and military gear under water and, presto change-o, they came up looking like everyone else: just another bunch of hardworking rice farmers clad in black pajamas.

Conditions improved during the dry season, October through April, when the place became one giant, dusty landing zone. But no matter what time of year, early morning fog and low clouds interfered with tactical air operations (Tac Air) and chopper ops. It doesn't take a Napoleon to figure out that a straight-leg infantry unit's ability to maneuver is limited by the weather and terrain, or that dense civilian populations greatly restrict firepower. If it was tactically critical to send troops into those swamps, they should have been U.S. Marines with the equipment and experience to fight in an amphibious setting, not draftee Army grunts.

The overall mission of the entire 9th Division under General Ewell was to control a big chunk of the seemingly endless Mekong waterways, rivers and canals, great natural supply routes from Cambodia to South Vietnam that the 9th was somehow supposed to take away from the tough folks who'd been using it—particularly at night—to resupply their fighting units for decades. Not exactly a slam dunk. Intelligence estimates from the show I got at Dong Tam put the number of VC operating within the ten-mile radius of the division's headquarters at anywhere up to three or four thousand guerrillas.

Before I came on board, the 4/39th had the bad luck to draw the assignment of patrolling the VC's "Rocket Belt" surrounding Ewell's headquarters—a mission that was a perfect example of the madness that went down every day in Vietnam. Here's how it worked. When General Ewell ordered, "Stop the rockets and shells from striking my base camp," his colonels replied, "It will be done, sir." But while they were snapping off their salutes, the VC were busy protecting their gunners by planting even

more mines and booby traps. To allow the brass and especially General Ewell to sleep better at night, grunts had to wade straight into a well-prepared hell.

Most 4/39th soldiers knew that each time they took a step they risked the ugliest of wounds. A bullet makes a hole, a chunk of shrapnel may take off an arm—but a mine turns a soldier into a splattered, shrapnel-punctured basket case.

Many troopers in the battalion had concluded that waging war consisted of crossing a field, hitting a mine, calling for a medic, patching up the wounded, getting a medevac; then moving out again and hitting another mine. They also did the math and figured out that not many of them would be lucky enough to make it through the 365 days it took to rotate home.

"The very words 'booby trap' bring back the smell of blood whenever I hear them," recalls Jim Robertson, a tall, lanky C (Claymore) Company squad leader from Long Island. "The damned things were so numerous, so varied, and Charley was so good at making and concealing them, that the feeling was that if you stayed in the field long enough, you were going to fall victim to a booby trap. It was just a matter of time."

In a firefight, the grunts knew they had a chance to fight back. If you got ambushed and you didn't get hit in the first burst, you could get your licks in. "But with a booby trap," Robertson remembers, "it was BANG, game over. Somebody was down. Sometimes more than one guy was down. And we'd get mad. But there was nobody to fight. That was the worst—the frustration and the helplessness." At least Robertson didn't have to deal with that form of frustration for his complete tour. Because of bad feet, he was eventually transferred to supply.

The VC used anything and everything to build their devil's devices. There were toe poppers—normally a single bullet no bigger than a pencil, set on top of a nail; step on it, and the bul-

let pushed down into the nail and fired through your foot. And grenades with trip wires, U.S. and Chinese claymores, Bouncing Betties, land mines, artillery shells, RPG rounds in cans filled with explosives. "All sorts of creations from hell," says C Company squad leader Jerry Sullivan, a six-foot-two regular soldier from Ohio, as gangly as he was gung-ho. "And they'd come up with new contraptions to bring us down every day, some as big as bombs."

The wounds were vicious. Young men blinded, legs and arms and dicks and balls ripped off, bodies punctured with dozens of bleeding holes. For the VC, mines and booby traps were economy-of-force weapons—easy to deploy, cheap to produce. Besides causing heavy casualties, they produced a lot of psychological stress. Soldiers never knew when they would lose a foot, a leg or a life, and the frustrating part was there were few ways to fight back. Many grunts concluded the civilians in the Delta helped set the mines, which fanned a widespread I-hate-the-gook mindset.

One study made by the 9th Division showed that the majority of all booby-trap casualties occurred when a soldier, plodding through slush and mud often up to his waist in steambath conditions, became tired and lost concentration. Roughly 34 percent of all booby traps were located along trails and rice paddy dikes, with another 36 percent in the jungle growth. POWs told us that the VC commonly employed booby traps as a defensive measure around their perimeters and bunkered positions.

The biggest problems, besides tired soldiers who'd lost their alertness and focus, were from not keeping five yards and not yelling out "Hit it" and going for the ground whenever anyone heard the pop of a booby trap. Green troops were the worst. Too often, when they heard the dread signature pop, they froze and got the crap blown out of them. Significantly—and

tragically—throughout the Vietnam War, the Army training establishment never fielded an effective mine training curriculum or doctrine—or even something as simple as a training device that would go *pop* and *bang* to teach young soldiers about the apparatus that accounted for the greatest number of casualties.

Three out of four booby traps employed trip wires attached to grenades. Of these, the majority were Red Chinese. Nineteen percent of the mines and booby traps came from dud U.S. bombs and shells, the explosive material scraped out and then placed in C-ration or coffee cans careless GIs left behind.

Generally, seasoned soldiers detected these visually and set them off with some sort of heavy Rube Goldberg–style grappling hook thrown ahead and dragged backward. Commo wire and 155mm shipping plugs also made good dragging devices for setting off trip wires as did claymore mines, M-79 grenade launcher fire or a dose of artillery fire and napalm along the avenue of approach.

Thirty-five percent of the booby traps were pressure activated. Found along dikes and trails as well as in the jungle, open fields and—during the dry season—in rice paddies, these were the real bastards, as you generally didn't know you'd tripped one until you heard that ominous pop or click, followed all too soon by an explosion.

Jim Silva, a D (Dagger) Company squad leader—a draftee from California, handsome, compact, a natural hunter with an attitude who became one of the battalion's best—was moving to an ambush position when his point man tripped a booby trap. While looking for an LZ to bring in a dust-off medevac, he found and destroyed three more booby traps.

"Four booby traps in 200 yards in an area where the day before there were no booby traps told me Charley wanted our asses out of there," Silva recalls. "As I was returning to the platoon to bring the wounded to the LZ, I heard, POP. I looked

down and saw a puff of blue smoke. I whirled around, then leaped for all I was worth and at the same time yelled at the guys behind me to hit the ground. Then I started counting and praying. I'm not sure which came first. When I got to three, the explosion went off. Shit was flying all over the place.

"The wounded dude and the medic who were behind me jumped to their feet and asked if I was OK. I said I didn't know, the blast was so close to me—about two feet away—that my ears were ringing. Mud covered my legs. I thought they were blown off. The doc carefully scraped some of the dirt away and I started moving my feet and by the goodness of God everything was still attached. When I got up, I looked at the crater next to my legs and realized that this was no grenade; it blew a hole about eighteen inches round and about a foot deep. We all agreed that it was a giant land mine. To this day, I always say a little prayer for the gook who put it there. I guess he didn't have the balls to put an instantaneous fuse on it, and that, in turn, saved all three of our lives. In fact, that was the only booby trap that I ran into in Vietnam that had a long fuse on it."

Silva wasn't so lucky a few months later when he was hit by an RPG. Or maybe he was since his wounds got him medevacked back to the States.

"The grunts loved to find a VC splattered across a trail when the booby trap he was setting went off prematurely," division intelligence officer Spirito told me. He saw this happen on three separate occasions, which probably explains why the VC didn't use a more complicated fusing system.

Ninety-four percent of all booby traps and mines weren't covered by enemy fire. This didn't mean the VC were not in the vicinity, but that they used them to keep our troops away from occupied positions and as warning devices to detect our movement. Since VC infantry seldom protected mines and booby traps by rifle fire and observation, which is normally SOP for a

U.S. outfit, our troops learned they could take their time to neutralize the nasty mothers as they came upon them. And if our soldiers moved slowly and carefully they usually weren't hard to find—the VC signaled the presence of their booby traps to protect their own troops. They'd use a nipa palm tied in a knot or a straight stick pointing down a trail, or *Tu Dai* signs, *Tu Dai* being Vietnamese for "kill zone."

"We found these signs carved into gravestones and trees or written on a board nailed to a post or a tree," Robertson recalls. "Once you know what it means, you might think it's stupid to advertise something you want your enemy to blunder into, but Charley wasn't stupid. He knew that a sign on the side of a trail or road, most Americans would take to be the name of the next village. An inscription on a grave marker would probably be assumed to be the name of the departed. Charley had a diabolical sense of humor. It became sort of a game: finding the booby trap. We found a lot of major explosive devices and had we hit them, we'd all have gone up in smoke."

The signs meant "big danger"—and normally the troops would find mines within fifty meters. The next trick was to disarm, disable or destroy them, which was doubly dangerous duty because the VC booby-trapped many mines. One trap might be tied to another, and by disabling the one you found, you could find yourself in a world of pain from the other.

"Sergeant Morton was one of the best we had at spotting traps," Jim Robertson remembers. "The guy was positively uncanny. We swore he could smell them. He saved our asses more than once. I wasn't so skilled. I was walking point one day and ended up having to ford a stream. The embankment was steep and I was intent on my footing, trying not to slide into the drink."

" 'Freeze, Robby,' Morton yelled.

"I instantly played statue and asked, 'What?'

"'Trip wire,' Morton said. 'Don't move.'

"No problem. I was so scared I don't think I could have," Robertson says. "Morton came up behind me and pointed to a spot right in front of my face.

"'Right there,' Morton said.

"All I could see was the foliage overhanging the bank," Robertson says. "He had me back off and he pointed again.

"'Right there,' Morton said. 'What are you, blind?'

"I still didn't see it until he pulled me down and had me look up," Robertson says. "With the sky behind it, I could just make out a very thin line. It was monofilament, the kind we used for trip-flares, and it was at neck height. The VC had rigged it to snag some poor slob doing what I'd been doing—looking down as I entered the stream. If not for Morton's sharp eye, I would have hit the wire in the next step. We tried to trace the wire but it went into such thick stuff on both ends, we decided it was too risky and bypassed the thing."

Even Morton's expertise wasn't enough. He eventually tripped a mine, was badly wounded and evacuated to the States.

The brass, safe in the sky, too often failed to take the danger to heart. On one operation just before I took over, Sergeant Tom Aiken, a slight, wiry, soft-spoken draftee who put as much passion into soldiering as into playing country guitar, lost seventeen of twenty-nine men from his platoon to booby traps without ever hearing a shot from the VC. "Hell, we were down to like twelve men left in the platoon," he recalls in his Georgia country drawl. "We'd doubled down with the equipment of the wounded men—none of the choppers would take the rifles or the packs, we had to carry those—and Colonel Lark came on the radio and said, 'Continue to sweep the wood line.'

"That's when my platoon sergeant, Toby Hager, grabbed the radio from me and said to Colonel Lark, 'You sonofabitch, I'm

takin' what men I got left and I am goin' to the road because if I sweep this wood line one more time, there may not be a 1st Platoon in A Company,' and he handed the phone back to me and said, 'If he calls back, don't answer it.' Then he turned around and he looked at us and he said, 'I want every man to put their footstep in my footstep and I'm going to try to lead us out of here and try to get us to the road.' And he did."

Booby traps usually didn't kill. Except for the big ones—coffee cans filled with explosives, artillery rounds, recycled rocket rounds. But most mines maimed. The 4/39th grunts, mainly nineteen- and twenty-year-old kids, weren't really afraid of dying. Most thought they were immortal, if not bulletproof. "Most of us, I think, were afraid of being maimed, of going home missing an arm or a leg, and I think most of us felt we'd rather die than go home that way," Jim Robertson says. "That's why we feared booby traps. You don't believe you are going to die, but you do believe you can be badly hurt."

During one operation Robertson's squad walked along a tree-lined dike. "We weren't supposed to walk on the dikes," Robertson says, "but you had to give yourself a break from the mud or you'd drop dead from a heart attack. We got to an intersection with the gap bridged by a log and we were about to negotiate the log when a sniper opened up on us. Everybody hit the dirt, but we had to get through the growth in the middle of the dike to get to cover on the other side. The smart thing to do was to drop and roll, and I'd been out there long enough to know that by then. Something made me dive over, instead of through, the bush that was behind me. When I came up to return fire, I was staring at a grenade tucked into a C ration can wired to the bush. The C ration can held the grenade's handle down because the pin was already out. The wire would pull the grenade out of the can and BOOM. If I'd done what I was trained to do, the thing would've blown up in my face. I

couldn't even shoot back. I just stared at the thing with my mouth hanging open."

On another occasion, Sergeant Aiken, walking point, crossed a canal. "When I got to the other side," he says, "I looked up and there was a claymore mine five feet from my nose. I rolled back in the canal and started vomitin'. I seen my mother, my daddy, my wife, my dog all in one flash. Hager slipped around and disarmed it. The mine was one of ours. Some lazy GI gave it to the VC and it almost snuffed out my life."

Dud five-hundred-pound U.S. bombs rigged along Route 4 were the Hardcore drivers' biggest worry.

"When I got off the line and drove a truck on Route 4," Jim Robertson remembers, "I always volunteered to drive the ammo and gasoline loads. Not because I was brave; quite the opposite. I had seen guys torn up by mines in the road, seen them ripped apart and still be alive afterward. I always felt if I were going to go, I'd prefer to go in one big bang. I didn't want to lie in the road in agony waiting for somebody to throw the pieces on a chopper for the surgeons to sew back together as best they could. I was more afraid of living maimed or paralyzed than of dying, and if I was going to die, I wanted it to be quick."

No one saw this mess more clearly than the 4/39th's battalion surgeon, Captain Byron E. Holley—a skinny young doctor almost always wearing a floppy green swamp hat when he wasn't in his helmet, no shirt, baggy green jungle fatigue pants and combat boots. His dog tags bumped against his stethoscope and the Colt .45 in his shoulder holster. He wore dark glasses, drove a jeep with "Super Quack" painted on the hood and used "Big Band-Aid" as his radio call sign.

The mismatch recorded on the Dich Board wasn't a matter of numbers to Doc Holley. In his field surgery and in the 3rd Surgical Hospital back in Dong Tam where the wounded lucky enough to get a chopper ride out of the bush were brought, the arithmetic transubstantiated into flesh and blood—a popular, nice kid

from Alabama with a blob of gray brain matter protruding from a hole in his skull; a grunt with his aorta perforated by steel splinters; a boy rushed in from a dust-off chopper with a fractured tibia. Hey, no sweat. Until Doc looked higher and found that another round had turned the grunt's balls to mush.

"Mines composed a relentless, unforgiving carpet virtually everywhere underfoot, so your guts were in your throat with almost every step," Holley recalls. "The terror and the anger they caused ran so deep that most of the men weren't even aware it was there. Until suddenly it would surface."

So it went, day after day of looking into the eyes of soldiers with missing hands and arms, mangled legs, sucking chest wounds. One night they brought Holley a gut-shot sergeant who'd been smoking a cigarette under his poncho liner, a perfectly illuminated target for the VC sniper who nailed him. Five grunts risked their lives to hump him out of the jungle, only to learn that he'd died. Out in the field, after a full day of cutting and stitching, Doc Holley would crash for a few hours on a litter—when he could find one that wasn't still wet with blood.

"It's a helpless feeling," he wrote to his fiancée, Sondra, back in the States. "You know that some gook is sitting out there in the tree line, lobbing miniature bombs in at you, and all you can do is lie there and pray that one doesn't land on top of you. The vets over here say that as long as you can hear them, not to sweat it because you never hear the one that kills you—some comfort, huh?"

One night Captain Paul Morrison came into Doc's tent to shoot the breeze. In the previous two days VC booby traps had cost nine wounded and one KIA. "He was so upset that he wants to get out of the Army and is asking for my advice," Holley wrote home. "The KIA was a real nice-looking young guy. He had found a wired hand grenade, and an officer told him to disarm it and throw it in the river. Well, he didn't mean for him to pull the pin, but the young soldier pulled it anyway. It liter-

ally blew his head completely off at the shoulders, including his right arm, right before their very eyes! In your wildest dreams you can't imagine the effect that something like that can have on you or the troops. The captain had tears streaming down his cheeks as he relayed the story to me. 'Doc, I don't believe in what we are doing over here anymore,' he said. 'I can't stand the thought of losing any more kids so needlessly.' "

Twenty young men from the 4/39th were killed just before I took over, from November 1968 until 20 January 1969:

Raymond Glenn Beam*	Calvin Lewis†
William Ernest Brown†	Michael Miller, Jr.†
Donald Richard Carlyle†	Lawrence Ortiz, Jr.*
Douglas Dupree†	Glenn Haskell Rollins†
Latney Dean Ferguson†	Robert Henry Sinclair, Jr.*
Leon Roy Field†	Charles Ernst Smith†
Richard Joseph Forte†	Francis Craig Sollers†
David Ernest Gardner†	Francis C. Sullivan, Jr.‡
Richard Gerald Gillham†	Carlos A. Velazquez-Ortiz†
Robert Richard Hillard**	Ricky Lynn Wikle*

The tally of needless death in the 4/39th was well established before Colonel Lark took command. Lark's immediate predecessor, a gung-ho lieutenant colonel, drove the troops like indentured servants. One steamy day a company working its way across a rice paddy was plodding through several feet of water and muck, while overhead in the command and control (C&C) chopper, the colonel kept screaming "Faster! Go faster." It was never going to happen—the troops were already moving at max speed.

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* Casualty caused by small arms
† Casualty caused by booby traps
** Casualty caused by illness
‡ Casualty caused by drowning
Source: 9th U.S. Army Infantry Division Report "Roll of Those Who Gave Their Lives in Southeast Asia, 1966–1970."