

PROLOGUE

Laos
May 1968

IT WAS THE ABSENCE of sounds that alerted him.

The jungle, itself a living, breathing creature, spoke to those who knew its secrets.

A pause in its natural rhythm was a warning; intruders had violated its sanctity.

The jungle is neutral.

That's what Dad used to say after he got into the brown water.

That was a different time. A different war.

The jungle remains neutral.

Supposedly so did Laos, but only on paper. In reality, Laos allowed the NVA, the North Vietnamese Army, to resupply units in South Vietnam in direct violation of the 1962 Geneva Accords. To do so, they used the Truong Son Strategic Supply Route, known in the West as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. That was where MACV-SOG came in and why Thomas Reece, Gunner's Mate First Class, SEAL, United States Navy, lay sweating on the jungle floor in the oppressive humidity beneath the triple canopy that kept his world in a perpetual state of dusk. His ears, nose, eyes, and mouth were under attack by hungry malaria-ridden mosquitos while the

leeches that had found their way under his clothing were swelling to the size of thumbs with his blood.

MACV-SOG was the rather innocuous name for Military Assistance Command, Vietnam—Studies and Observations Group. With operators selected primarily from the ranks of the 5th Special Forces Group, MACV-SOG Recon Teams were tasked with prosecuting the secret war across borders in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. Though the team did “study and observe,” more often than not they brought death and destruction to the enemy on their home turf. They had become so effective that the NVA had deployed specially designated hunter-killer teams focused on neutralizing the SOG threat. Trained by the 305th Sapper Command, the NVA enlisted the assistance of expert local hunters and trackers, offering sizable bounties for any SOG personnel—dead or alive.

Tom ever so slightly tightened his grip on the chopped Soviet-designed Chinese-made 7.62 x 39 RPD machine gun. He had modified it by shortening the barrel and removing the bipod to give him a weapon that felt closer to Eugene Stoner’s famed Stoner 63 that Tom had carried on his last SEAL deployment in the Rung Sat Special Zone in the swamps of the south. Things were different in the mountains of Laos, but what remained the same was the need to unleash as much chaos as the gods of war would allow when there was no choice but to go kinetic.

A Montagnard mercenary lay an arm’s-length to his left. Another to his right. The name Montagnard came from the French and translated as “inhabitant of the mountains.” The indigenous fighters came from tribes of the Central Highlands and had formed a close alliance with American Army Special Forces teams.

The ‘Yards had sensed it too; the specter of death that hung over them in the perpetual mists of the highlands was descending. Once the rain started, it would make it hard for aircraft to identify the small element on the ground, a complication that meant no air support. They would be on their own. A benefit would be that the rain would allow them

to move more quickly through the jungle, masking the team's movement. As they were well aware, it did the same for the enemy.

At present, it was not the twenty-two varieties of poisonous snakes that infested the jungle that concerned Tom Reece. Neither was it the venomous spiders or foot-long centipedes and their toxins, nor the tigers that would trigger the ancient superstitions of his Montagnard teammates. It was not even the elephants that had once trampled a SOG hide site. Tom's primary concern was the element of NVA soldiers converging on his team's position.

Don't fucking move.

The team was arranged in a tight circle facing outward. As the One-One, Tom was second in command. The leadership role landed on Frank Quinn—the One-Zero—a veteran SOG operator with Native American blood who had forgotten more about running ops across the fence than Tom thought he would ever know. Their fellow SOG brethren called them the Odd Couple after the recent Neil Simon film starring Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau, though none of them had yet seen it; new releases were hard to come by at FOB 1 in Phu Bai. Their partnership—one young Navy SEAL and one older Army Special Forces veteran—was unique in the annals of MACV-SOG, but it was hard to argue with their results. Quinn demanded the best, and Tom gave it. Even in the highly compartmentalized world of SOG, they had developed quite the reputation.

This operation was a typical wiretap mission to record transmissions along an NVA communications line. Upon returning to base, they would turn the physical recordings over to the intelligence analysts for exploitation. What made this task not so simple was that it was taking place across the border in Laos along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Though they had removed the tape from the recording device and respooled the wires from where they had attached them to what amounted to a phone cable, their scent lingered. That meant they could be tracked.

Nothing was overlooked or left undone when it came to blending in.

They had only eaten Vietnamese food with no spices for four days prior to the op. In Indian Country one wanted to smell like an NVA soldier. The entire team was under a no showers, no soap, no deodorant, and no smoking order in the lead-up to a mission. Detergent was never used to clean their olive drab fatigues. They had worn their op uniforms for three days before insertion and even took constipation pills to stuff them up while they were across the border. *Leave no trace.*

The two Americans and six Montagnards all wore sterile uniforms—no name tags, unit patches, rank, or any other insignia adorned their clothing. No dog tags were worn around necks or attached to boot laces, though Tom wondered why they bothered; the NVA knew all about SOG Teams and was well aware of the impact they were having in Laos, which was why Hanoi had diverted critical resources to training the teams hunting them.

In the jungle, one could *feel* an enemy before the other senses registered their presence, before one heard a twig snap, observed the unnatural movement of a branch or leaf, or smelled the dried hot peppers or strong nuoc mam fish sauce favored by the Vietnamese seeping from sweat glands. Sometimes an enemy element would patrol right through a SOG perimeter and continue on, never knowing how close they had come to discovering the teams that dared venture into denied territory. It was the smell of fear-laced sweat that could give one away in the jungle. You had to become a part of it and make it a part of you.

While Tom carried the RPD, Quinn armed himself with the CAR-15 as did each of their Montagnard teammates, aside from their point man who dressed like an NVA soldier and carried an AKM Type 56. Six members of the eight-man team carried three claymores each. The 'Yard point man and M79 gunner carried one. That gave Recon Team Havoc—as their FOB commander had designated the joint Frank Quinn, Tom Reece, Army-Navy team—twenty claymore mines, which was more than any other operational SOG element. Quinn had insisted on it. That stan-

dard operating procedure had allowed Havoc to chain-link seven claymores just 10 feet away, the bold FRONT TOWARD ENEMY emblazoned on their green fronts. They were set against thick tree trunks to protect Havoc from the violent back blast of an amassed ten and a half pounds of C4. The detonation would send a combined 4,900 steel ball bearings ripping through the jungle at 4,000 feet per second, turning any living creature on the receiving end into pink mist.

Another five claymores were arranged behind them in a layered defense pattern attached to time fuses that would be primed as they passed by, beating a hasty retreat. To their flanks, the team had put out four toe poppers and two frag grenades on trip wires. Tom had replaced their standard 4.5-second fuses with smoke grenade fuses that had a zero-second delay.

Best-case scenario, the NVA would pass by completely unaware. Countless times Havoc had remained motionless as enemy soldiers stepped within feet of the camouflaged team, never the wiser.

Tom used all his senses to filter and assess information, including the sixth sense that Quinn preached was the most essential of all. *If they can see you, they can hit you; if they can hit you, they can kill you. Don't let them see you. And if you see them, you better shoot first. Do not hesitate.*

If this went to shit, Tom would clack off the seven linked claymores. Four of the seven had Willie Pete grenades attached to their fronts, which would disperse gobs of burning white phosphorus into the approaching enemy. Tom's element would then fall back, tapping Quinn as they passed. Quinn's squad would remain online while Tom set up his section of the team at a slight offset. Quinn would then light the time fuse that would detonate his five additional claymores three minutes later.

In the resulting chaos, Havoc would make their escape. That was the hope. But as they all knew, things in the jungle rarely went as planned.

Forty millimeter—or mike-mike—grenades from their M79s were to be used next, followed by hand grenades. Their rifles and machine

guns were a last resort. As soon as they started shooting, the NVA would know their precise location and concentrate all their fire in that direction. Weapons like the claymores, grenades, and 40mm mike-mikes kept the enemy guessing and would be Havoc's primary means of deterrent until they had no choice but to go to the guns. They would then continue to fall back toward an emergency extraction point to be picked up by H-34 Kingbee helicopters flown by South Vietnamese Air Force pilots. If they could summon fast movers for CAS—close air support—they would bring down a world of hurt on their pursuers. *If*. . .

Tom remembered the days of his first deployment with SEAL Team TWO in the Mekong Delta where, as a new guy, he had carried the Ithaca Model 37 pump-action 12-gauge shotgun with duckbill attachment when walking point in blue jeans and Converse All Stars. That seemed like a lifetime ago when he and his fellow Men with Green Faces rained down hell on Viet Cong patrols from ambush sites in the mangroves along the River of the Nine Dragons as it meandered its way toward the South China Sea. The amount of firepower carried by his twelve-man SEAL Platoon caused the Viet Cong to think their force far exceeded their actual numbers. That was a different mission. Those were VC. In Laos they were dealing with the NVA, an army that had been trained by the Soviets.

Even at midday it was gloomy beneath the triple canopy. At night it would be pitch black. Tom felt comfortable in the dark. It provided a blanket of security. It also meant that an extraction was highly unlikely, keeping them behind enemy lines until at least sunup.

They traveled heavy, much heavier than Tom had when operating in the deltas of the south. Laos was an area that by international law was off limits, which meant it might be a while before they could contact the FOB through an overhead air asset or their top-secret Hickory radio relay site to request extraction. In these situations, extra magazines and grenades were more useful than anything out of a C-Ration. As Quinn was fond of pointing out: *I'd rather be hungry than dead.*

Tom's first-line gear consisted of a Browning Hi-Power 9mm pistol in a black leather holster on his right side, and an integrally suppressed .22 caliber High Standard H-D semiautomatic pistol on his left. A Randall Made Model 14 knife with its seven-and-a-half-inch blade and black Micarta handle in a weathered brown leather sheath was on his right hip behind the Browning. Bo Randall's company in Orlando, Florida, had been crafting knives since 1938, blades that had accompanied U.S. servicemen into the Second World War, Korea, and now Vietnam. The base tailor had modified Tom's fatigues and added extra pockets specifically sized for his signal mirror, notebook and pen, maps, morphine syrettes, a pen flare, whistle, compass, and his URC-10 emergency radio along with a frequency and code book. A fluorescent orange marking panel to signal aircraft and mark landing zones was stashed in one of two large cargo pockets on his pant legs. He wore black gloves with more breathable cloth on the tops and leather under the fingers and palms. The thumb, index, and middle fingers were cut off at the first joint. A Swiss Army Knife in his right pocket was tied to a belt loop with green parachute cord. Everything had a purpose.

Tom didn't dare look at the watch on his left wrist, a Rolex Submariner on a black nylon strap with two marine-grade snaps to which a leather cover was affixed to prevent reflection. A small Waltham compass was attached to the band just below the stainless-steel case of the timepiece. The watch reminded him of Saigon, of the CIA . . . of Ella.

Not now, Tom. Stay focused.

Like most SOG operators, Tom's second-line gear was attached to modified World War Two-era BAR—Browning Automatic Rifle—web gear. In Arctic canteen covers attached to the belt were his four additional RPD drums lined with strips of linoleum to prevent the open-link metal non-disintegrating belts and rounds from rattling. He had increased the length of each belt from their standard 100 to 125 rounds per drum—every round mattered and could mean the difference between life and

death for the entire team. A cut-down M79 was secured with a D-ring through the trigger guard on the left side of the harness. Additional BAR pouches carried two high-explosive 40 millimeter rounds, two flechette 40mm antipersonnel rounds filled with steel darts, four frag grenades, two smokes, and a white phosphorus grenade. A canteen and a gas mask were situated behind the ammo pouches. An extra claymore was attached to his chest—blasting cap removed. Also on the web belt was a Frank & Warren Survival Ax Type II, which he thought was superior to a machete due to its sharp hook that allowed him to cut vines regardless of which way it was swung. Anything that shined was covered with black tape. Anything that rattled was modified to keep unnatural sounds to a minimum. Of primary importance was a 12-foot section of green rope, coiled and attached to his web gear. It would be used to tie a Swiss Seat harness to clip into a rope, the operators called strings, dropped from a helo to hoist them out of the jungle. Then it was a freezing ride at 7,000 feet for the hour-long flight back to Phu Bai.

Quinn was similarly outfitted but ran his CAR-15 with thirty twenty-round magazines, each loaded with eighteen rounds. For his secondary he opted for the 1911A1 .45 pistol, one of only a few SOG pistols customized by gunsmith Armand Swenson. Instead of the Frank & Warren Survival Ax, Quinn carried a Special Forces-issued Peter LaGana hatchet from the American Tomahawk Company as a nod to his heritage, and because it was more effective than a blade for dispatching sentries.

A specially designed Indig Ruck, the brainchild of Conrad Bennet “Ben” Baker of the obscure Counterinsurgency Support Office hidden away in Okinawa, Japan—SOG’s own Q Branch from the popular James Bond films—held Tom’s third-line gear. In it, he stowed an extra canteen with water purification tablets taped to the outside. They supposedly killed whatever microorganisms lived in Laotian streams, and he hoped counteracted the Agent Orange defoliation chemical the U.S. blanketed over the jungle from the air. The pack also contained a medical kit, six

extra grenades, three more smokes, eight M79 rounds, additional claymores that now lined the perimeter, and a small plastic tube of indigenous rations also developed by the ingenious Ben Baker that consisted of precooked lightly seasoned rice with fish, shrimp, or meat laced with vitamin B. Though most recon teams carried a single large man-portable radio, Tom and Quinn both carried PRC-25s, hefty, unwieldy communications devices that were their lifeline. They both believed it was worth the extra weight to have a backup. The PRC-25 was the most essential piece of equipment in their arsenal, capable of connecting them to A-1 Skyraiders, F-4 Phantoms, F-100 Super Sabers, A-6 Intruders, and AC-130E gunships. To prevent the radios from falling into enemy hands, a thermite grenade was taped to the sides to melt them into oblivion if the team was about to be overrun.

Each team member also carried handcuffs. They were always ready to grab an enemy combatant for their intelligence value. A live prisoner also meant five days of R&R in Taiwan or Thailand and one hundred U.S. dollars as a reward. Someone higher up the chain of command had figured that operators on the ground needed an additional incentive to carry an unwilling captive soldier out of the jungle when it might be much more efficient to simply slit their throat. Higher had been right. Instead of money and a vacation, the little people, as SOG affectionately referred to their Montagnards, on a successful prisoner snatch op would be honored with a new Seiko watch from supply.

If rain didn't ground the aircraft, Havoc would make contact with the Air Force FAC aircraft overhead—call sign Covey—in a low-flying O-2A Cessna Skymaster or possibly with a C-130 command post high above southern Laos. Coming over the radio with Prairie Fire Emergency would shift priority for all aircraft in the AO to the SOG Team under fire. Next to the pilot was a Special Forces MACV-SOG soldier, a Covey Rider, who could speak directly with the unit in contact on the ground, help direct strikes, and guide the recon team to their LZ for pickup.

A favorite aircraft amongst all SOG Teams was the slow and highly maneuverable A-1 Skyraider, a venerable single-prop plane of Korean War vintage that could carry more than its own weight in ordnance. While jets typically had about fifteen minutes of loiter time and had difficulty dropping ordnance closer than 250 meters to a team in contact, the A-1 could provide support for over an hour. It had an array that included cluster bombs, napalm, 250-pound white phosphorus munitions, and a 20mm cannon that could cut down the enemy within 5 meters of a SOG Team in contact. This was extremely helpful as most contacts in the heavy jungle took place at distances of less than 20 feet. All SOG operators at one time or another had prayed to hear the distinctive growl of a low-flying Skyraider screaming in just above the canopy. Recon Teams out of FOB 1 were usually supported by A-1s from the 56th Special Operations Wing in Da Nang. They were the best in the business.

Havoc had made contact in eleven out of their last thirteen missions as a team. All of them had been wounded, but, so far, they had not had any fatalities. Tom knew that one day his Frogman luck would run out. All he could do was hope that day wasn't upon them.

Did Dad ever feel like this, Tommy gun in hand, battling the Japanese in World War Two?

Dad didn't have claymores.

Tom shifted his eyes to the right. Even though he was less than four feet from Mang Hai, their Montagnard team leader, Tom couldn't see him. Mang was Tom's age but looked younger. He had been a replacement for Amiuh. Tom missed Amiuh. Quinn still carried the Montagnard's rosary in his pocket. Amiuh's wife had insisted upon it. His death had hit Quinn particularly hard.

Mang lived for one purpose: to kill NVA. The AK round that had grazed Mang's scalp on their last mission only added fuel to his fire. The Montagnard hated the North Vietnamese more than the Americans did. Truth was, the 'Yards hated all Vietnamese. They had history.

Rain began to fall through the mist.

A part of the SEAL prayed they would continue on, none the wiser. Another part was itching to cut them all down. This was war, a war that had claimed too many of his friends.

It took all of Tom's strength not to wipe away the sweat that crept down from under the green cravat do-rag that obscured his dark blond hair. The salty liquid traversed over his camouflage face paint to sting his eyes. He found that the cravat worked better for him than the boonie hat favored by Quinn. He also liked the fact that the prop wash of an approaching helo wouldn't blow it from his head.

Maybe we're going to get lucky.

Then he heard the clacking.

NVA trackers would signal each other and the main element by tapping two pieces of bamboo together.

Perhaps the trackers didn't have dogs.

Then Tom heard the barking.

Shit.

This is about to get western.

They had unclipped the phone cable tap and were fading back from the trail into the shadows of the jungle when the enemy patrol appeared, forcing them into their perimeter, behind the claymores. They had covered their scent with a mixture of CS powder—a potent irritant—and black pepper as they respoled the wires attached to the communications lines along the trail. The mixture was highly effective, though it did not work if the dogs had been fooled before. Bloodhounds used by the NVA were smart. If they had previously encountered the countermeasure, they would stop before getting close enough for it to destroy their sense of smell. Some would even circle around the concoction to pick up their quarry's scent on the other side.

Tom prayed these were not those kinds of dogs.

The barking stopped. Tom shut his eyes and focused on his hearing.

A dog was moving around the countermeasure.

He slowed his breathing.

Steady . . .

Tom gently removed the integrally suppressed .22 caliber High Standard H-D semiautomatic handgun from the holster on his belt. The World War Two-era pistol had been modified by Bell Laboratories for the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor to the CIA. With the type of ammunition that made up the ten rounds in the magazine and one in the chamber, it suppressed the shot to 20 decibels, or the sound of a light cough. The longer Tom's team could go without revealing their exact location, the better.

Tom brought the pistol up as deliberately as he could. Havoc's advantage was stealth. The NVA had to move to find them, making noise, while Havoc could remain still, silent, and camouflaged.

Get ready.

The barking was getting closer, now from the flank.

Havoc's claymores were set up facing the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was to Tom's twelve o'clock. The dog was approaching from his right flank, so the .22 would have to do.

The barking stopped, but Reece could hear movement. An NVA tracker would not be far behind.

You won't see him until he's almost on you.

In SOG they treated the dogs the same way they treated the NVA, as an enemy to be dispatched.

From Tom's position on the jungle floor, the dog appeared much larger than it actually was as it materialized out of the brush. The hound registered the prone American at the same instant a .22 caliber round left the pistol's muzzle without so much as a whisper. It was followed by four more. From experience Tom knew that dogs, and humans, could soak up a few rounds before going down.

The brown and black-colored bloodhound dropped inches from Tom's face.

Sorry, friend.

What was not expected was for his handler to appear right behind him as quickly as he did.

The sound of the approaching dog had disguised the noise of the tracker.

Reeling in shock at the sight of his dead dog, the NVA soldier's eyes went wide as the jungle floor came alive at his feet.

Tom put a .22 round into his neck and another in the underside of his chin. At the same instant, the man's finger depressed the trigger of his Kalashnikov, sending a burst of $7.62 \times 39\text{mm}$ rounds into the dirt just to the left of Tom's head.

He stumbled and fell on top of the SEAL, who put two suppressed rounds into his temple and another through his ear. More than one SOG operator had been killed by men they believed were dead. *Learn from the mistakes of the departed.*

Once the shooting started, if you weren't moving, you were dying. The NVA with their superior numbers would flank you in a heartbeat. Hence the toe poppers and frag grenade trip wires.

And now, the shooting had started. The jungle in front of Tom and his team erupted in automatic fire all concentrated in the direction of the dead dog and handler.

There was no need to yell "contact" or "fire in the hole." Havoc knew what was coming next.

Tom depressed the claymore's trigger, sending three volts of electricity down the firing wire into a blasting cap embedded in C4. This caused the detonation of a shaped charge that propelled the embedded steel ball bearings into a directional sixty-degree arc of pain, tearing through the jungle foliage and the enemy marching through it.

The backblast felt as though it dislodged Tom's teeth from his skull when the shock wave passed through his body, compressing his brain and internal organs in a nauseating surge of violence. The concussion

and smoke were accompanied by a barrage of dirt, rocks, leaves, roots, and branches that showered the Americans and their Montagnard teammates with the vestiges of death. The explosion immediately robbed them of hearing, which quickly returned as a piercing ring that would follow them like devils on their shoulders. It was as if the universe suddenly inverted and just as quickly set itself straight, now a few souls lighter.

Time to move.

One thing to do first.

Tom reached into his gas mask pouch and retrieved an AK mag, a special Eldest Son AK mag with a bullet six rounds down modified to contain a high explosive in place of gunpowder. Certain to destroy the rifle firing it, the bullet was also capable of maiming or even killing the shooter. Tom quickly removed a magazine from the dead man's canvas chest rig, secured it in his gas mask pouch, and replaced it with the Eldest Son mag, making sure to refasten the wooden toggle.

Tom then slapped the Montagnards to his right and left. Staying as low as they could, they turned and moved through Quinn's squad, setting up about 20 yards behind and offset in the direction of their primary extract point.

With any luck this was a small NVA element, and those claymores had decimated most of them.

Luck . . .

Was it bad luck that an NVA patrol had appeared on the road just as RT Havoc had been removing their wiretap? Or was it something else?

Recon Teams were disappearing with increasing frequency these days.

Not now, Tom, damn it.

You can discuss it with Quinn over beers in the Green Beret Lounge at Phu Bai.

But first you have to get to Phu Bai.

The jungle erupted in gunfire, most directed at the position Tom's element had recently occupied.

They don't know exactly where we are, not yet.

Good.

Tom could see Quinn's element moving toward them, which meant they had less than three minutes before their five linked claymores detonated.

"Tommy-son, *beaucoup* VC. Charlie," Mang whispered, pointing to the left flank.

Even though these were NVA, VC and Charlie had become colloquial terms for "enemy," to include NVA and Pathet Lao.

If you see them, you better shoot first. Do not hesitate.

Tom let the RPD hang on its leather sling, transitioned to the cut-down M79, broke open the action, switched the flechette for a high-explosive round, closed the action, thumbed the safety forward, aimed, and depressed the trigger. He was rewarded with the distinctive low-pressure thump of the projectile operating precisely as designed, a sound that resulted in the M79's nickname: Thumper. He reloaded and fired another 40mm grenade into the flanking enemy. He was joined by the team's dedicated Montagnard M79 gunner who carried the full-size weapon. The 'Yard sent three HE projectiles before reloading with a flechette round, ducking and falling into the line of march.

The team had practiced this immediate action drill time and time again at their Monkey Mountain training area to either break contact, continue mission, or as in this case, break contact, move to extract.

Keep moving. To stop is to die.

They could move faster now, with the rain and the confusion caused by the first set of claymores.

Tom pivoted his head toward the smoke that still lingered after the linked claymore detonation to see figures moving through the haze.

That's a lot of NVA.

This is more than just a simple patrol.

His eyes met those of an NVA soldier. As the enemy combatant pivoted his AK toward the SOG man, Tom brought up his M79 just as Quinn's three-minute time fuse detonated the five linked stay-behind mines.

A thunderous explosion shook the jungle, as 3,500 steel ball bearings ripped through the bodies of the NVA point element.

Move.

The SOG Team opted to sacrifice security for speed to take advantage of the chaos. Though they didn't know if weather would ground air assets, their top priority was making it to extract before darkness set in.

Tom heard Quinn calling "Prairie Fire Emergency" through the handset. Now someone just had to receive the transmission.

Nothing.

Need to get somewhere we can make comms.

A smaller explosion reverberated to their rear; one of their toe poppers or grenades on trip wires. Whether it killed or maimed, those devices should cause the NVA to think twice before they took another step.

Havoc continued to put as much distance between their element and the NVA as possible. Even in the gloom of triple canopy rainforest, they could tell it was getting darker. They were on the clock, compromised, across the fence in Laos, being hunted by an unknown number of NVA.

Just another day in SOG.

Quinn passed back the hand signal for a hasty perimeter at the edge of a small clearing of elephant grass and keyed his handset.

"Covey, this is Havoc. Troops in contact! I say again troops in heavy contact!"

Still nothing.

"Prairie Fire Emergency! I say again, Prairie Fire Emergency!" he transmitted.

Radio silence, when extraction was a team's only means of survival, had a way of infecting the psyche of even the most hardened of warriors.

Quinn and Tom shared a glance.

As Quinn gave the signal to move out, the radio, turned to its lowest volume, broke squelch.

"Havoc, this is Covey, say again your last, over."

The voice from the heavens, heavy with an American southern accent, was a lifeline. A chance to survive.

"Prairie Fire Emergency! I say again, Prairie Fire Emergency! We've been compromised and are in heavy contact! Request extract ASAP!" Quinn said, throwing a VS17 orange panel at the edge of the small clearing.

As Quinn relayed their coordinates Tom scanned the jungle to their rear.

Pretty fucking convenient that the NVA just happened upon us.

Happens frequently.

Yeah, too frequently.

Later. Keep your head in the game.

Game. It's no fucking game.

I need a cigarette.

When you get back to Phu Bai.

The buzz of the Covey aircraft caught their attention.

"I've got you, Havoc. I identify an orange panel. Tough to see through the clouds. You have a company-sized element moving in your direction, two hundred yards to your November."

Company sized? That's anywhere from three hundred to five hundred soldiers.

"Kingbees and CAS inbound but I need you to move . . ."

The FAC came off the radio as the NVA element caught sight of the aircraft through the clouds and began firing.

Though it could be hard to tell in the jungle, they seemed closer than 200 yards.

“Havoc, I need you to move about a klick and a half to your Sierra,” the FAC said, using the military terms for kilometer and south. “Hit a creek and follow that another klick downstream to a clearing for extract. Get there. I’ll keep an eye on your six.”

“Roger, Covey. We’re moving.”

Quinn gave the hand signal to move out, his squad in the lead with Tom’s trailing.

Air support changed the equation. If weather grounded them, Tom knew that with a company-sized element in pursuit, the odds of surviving this mission were not in Havoc’s favor.

Fuck the odds.

As Quinn’s squad disappeared into the thick vegetation, Tom removed a claymore from his tail gunner’s pack and primed a ten-minute time fuse.

That should slow them down.

Tom felt the humidity fall as evening shifted toward night. If they had to RON—or remain overnight—the NVA would not be their only enemy. The rain soaking their cotton fatigues paired with the wind off the mountains would chill them to the bone. They would survive the elements, but the cold would make them far less combat effective. Tom knew all these concerns were on the mind of his One-Zero. Quinn would get them out. He always did.

Tom would never know if he heard movement over the ringing in his ears or if a gut instinct caused him to turn to his left. When he did, he found himself less than 15 feet from a man in a loincloth carrying an AK. *Pathet Lao?* Had it been an NVA soldier Tom knew he would already be dead.

The Pathet Lao in Laos were the equivalent of the Viet Cong in Vietnam. Not highly skilled or trained like professional soldiers of the NVA, both the Pathet Lao and Viet Cong were expendable insurgents, bodies to throw against the Americans.

There was no time to throw a grenade and sink back into the protection of the thick brush. It was time to go to the gun.

The RPD had two settings—safe and fire—and was designed so a shooter's finger could sweep seamlessly from the selector to the trigger, which was what Tom Reece did.

The man swung his AK toward the American.

He never made it.

Tom's five-round burst stitched him up from his pelvis to his heart. Another five rounds tore through what was left of his chest. As he crumpled to the ground his head caught in the Y of a teak tree, which arrested his fall, leaving his soulless body upright; a human scarecrow hung in effigy.

AK fire exploded from the jungle, only muzzle flashes visible through the dense vegetation. Havoc had already turned toward the contact and was sending rounds into anything that moved.

Another loinclotted figure was cut to shreds as he charged toward the SOG Team, screaming and holding a ChiCom stick grenade that dropped to his feet as Havoc's 5.56 and 7.62 rounds sent him to the afterlife.

The grenade detonated and propelled one of his dismembered legs past Tom's head.

Are the NVA using Pathet Lao as some sort of shock troop force or suicide bombers?

They sacrificed the VC during the Tet attacks. Maybe they are doing the same in Laos?

The jungle behind them came alive with gunfire.

That's NVA.

How did they counter us so fast?

Not now, Tom.

Now it's time to kill your way to extract.

He pulled a grenade from a pouch and slid his RPD back under his

arm just far enough to allow him to hook the ring of the safety pin on his front sight, a trick he had learned in the Mekong Delta. This allowed him to stay on the gun and more efficiently make use of his grenades in a firefight. He then made sure that the ball of death wouldn't careen back on them after bouncing off a nearby tree. The path was clear, so he sent it flying.

Tom lay down another burst from his RPD into an NVA soldier as he heard the grenade detonate. The accompanying screams told him he had hit his mark.

We've got to move.

As he turned, he saw Sau, his tail gunner, writhing on the ground.

"Phe—cover!" he yelled to the Montagnard who was next in the line of march.

Phe turned back and took a knee next to his wounded comrade as Tom pulled a claymore from the 'Yard's pack and attached a two-minute time fuse. He then threw Sau over his shoulder and slapped Phe on the back before turning to follow Quinn into the depths of the jungle. Phe sprayed an eighteen-round magazine on full-auto toward the enemy to the rear, changed magazines, and then threw a grenade before following his squad leader.

Tom charged ahead, following the 'Yard in front of him.

Move, Tom.

A little over a klick to the river, then south another klick to a possible LZ. Then home to Phu Bai.

You need to get there before darkness falls or you will disappear just like so many other SOG Teams have recently.

Imprisonment, torture, and death awaited at a prison camp in Laos or North Vietnam if he or any of his teammates were captured.

No fucking way.

His legs and lungs burned with an intensity that had become the norm on missions across the fence.

Sau was only nineteen years old. And now he was bleeding out on

Tom's back. At least their "little people" were, for the most part, just that; little—shorter and thinner than most of their American teammates—which allowed the larger SEAL to make good time even with the extra weight on his shoulders.

Tom heard the explosion as the stay-behind claymore's time fuse reached its terminus. He kept moving.

Always keep moving.

They would have to stop to treat Sau before long or Tom would be carrying a dead man to extract.

The SEAL almost tripped over Hoahn, the tail gunner of Quinn's squad.

Quinn had called a hasty perimeter. Tom threw Sau to the ground and immediately started stuffing the stomach wound with gauze as Quinn quickly evaluated the wounded soldier while raising Covey on the radio.

They were moving into the wind, which was bad for tracking purposes, especially if the NVA had more dogs, but it was good for CS or smoke to mark locations as it would push that smoke back on the enemy.

"Covey, what's the status on CAS?"

"Two F-4s inbound. Two mikes out."

"Ordnance?"

"Napalm."

Quinn prepped a smoke and threw it behind them.

"Marking," he said into his handset.

"I identify white smoke," came the reply from Covey.

"Have them put everything they have north of the smoke. How does our route look to extract?"

"Hard to tell through the clouds. Appears clear."

"Good copy, Covey. We're moving."

Quinn looked at Tom, who had finished stuffing Sau's stomach. There was nothing more they could do at the moment.

"Havoc, recommend you cross the stream," came the composed voice over the radio. *"Nothing moving on the other side, then di di mau south for half a klick. Then another klick to the clearing. I'll guide you in."*

"You got him?" Quinn asked his One-One.

Quinn was shorter than Tom's six feet but was thicker by a good margin. Three days of black stubble protruded through his camo face paint and blended with his Fu Manchu mustache that was well out of regulations.

Tom nodded.

"Hiep, tell them," Quinn instructed their interpreter.

Hiep made his way around the inside of the small perimeter, whispering in the dialect of his tribe, one that was the primary language of Havoc's Montagnards.

"Fuckers knew we were coming," Tom said to his One-Zero.

Quinn nodded.

"Later. Right now, we move to extract."

They heard the high-pitched howl of the F-4 Phantom's twin engines when the main element was halfway across the stream. Even though it impacted over 200 meters away, they felt the heat of the napalm wash over them as the sheets of fire torched the NVA below. Napalm was one of the most feared and devastating weapons in the American arsenal. Conceived and developed at Harvard University during the Second World War, the burning gelatin was brutal and horrific if one were on the receiving end. As the second F-4 turned onto its glide path, Havoc heard the weapons of the NVA turn to the skies in a futile effort to bring one of their tormentors down.

Havoc worked their way into the jungle on the opposite side of the stream and heard the jets make another pass, this time on gun runs tearing up the NVA column with their 20mm cannons.

"Havoc, I don't have eyes on your location. Keep moving toward extract. F-4s are Winchester. Spads inbound," he said, referring to the A-1

Skyraider. *"Ten mikes out. NVA has split into two elements and are still moving your direction."*

"How much of a lead do we have?"

"About a klick."

"Roger, Covey."

Quinn turned to the SEAL.

"Let me know when you need a spell."

"I got him," Tom said.

Quinn signaled the direction of travel to the rest of the team before pumping his closed fist up and down, which meant to double time—*di di mau*.

The team knew that Covey was clearing their path to extract. They were going to make it.

"Talk to us, Covey. What do you see?" Quinn said into his handset as they continued through the jungle.

"Banking left over your target box. Looks clear. Kingbees fifteen mikes out. Skyraider will be here in six. Keep moving, Havoc."

Quinn keyed his mike twice in acknowledgment.

Tom had carried wounded comrades before. It didn't get easier. He tried to block out Sau's groaning in his ear over the ringing caused by the claymore detonation and gunfire, trusting his team to provide security. His focus was on maneuvering around trees and root systems that threatened to trip him up and avoiding two-step pit vipers and cobras that could be coiled up on the other side of any decaying log.

The detritus-tinged heat of the day began to give way to the chill of the night. The smell of decaying plants, rotting logs, and stagnant water lingered in his nostrils even as he forced air out of his nose in a losing attempt to fight off the constant infiltration of gnats, flies, and mosquitos looking for any open orifice or uncovered skin to exploit. Tom could not tell if it was sweat running down his back or if it was Sau's leaking blood. It was probably both.

One foot after the other, Tom. Think of those beers at Phu Bai. Think of getting Sau to the docs.

Tom crashed into another hasty perimeter. Quinn was at the far side on the radio. The team had formed a circle. Through the foliage, Tom caught sight of the clearing.

We're going to make it.

Don't get cocky.

It's not over until you touch down at Phu Bai.

Tom checked Sau's pulse. Weak. He pulled up the Montagnard's shirt. Gray intestines had slipped out around the gauze. The Montagnard's face was ashen.

You are not dead yet, Sau. Fight for me, Tom pleaded as he poured water from his canteen on the intestines. He stuffed them back inside his teammate and followed with additional gauze.

Quinn turned and took a knee. The grizzled warrior didn't need to ask how Sau was. He knew. It didn't look good.

"Covey is going to talk the Skyraider onto the NVA to our six," he said. "Kingbees are about four minutes out. There's enough room here to land so we won't have to come out on strings."

Tom unsnapped one of two buttons holding a side of the leather flap over his Rolex and swung it to the side: 1855. 6:55 p.m.

"It's getting dark," he said.

"They'll be here," Quinn responded.

The South Vietnamese 219th Helicopter Squadron was based in Da Nang. Piloting their camouflaged unmarked H-34 Kingbee choppers, they were fearless. Most had personal reasons for flying, and the United States government paid them an extra \$25 every time they inserted or extracted a team across the fence. That added up. The old helicopter with its huge nine-cylinder Curtis-Wright R-1820-B4 piston engine, similar to those that had once powered the B-17 Flying Fortress, could soak up enemy rounds even as its overhead lines

leaked pink hydraulic fluid. As long as they kept leaking you knew they had not run dry. It was when they stopped leaking that you had to worry. Armed with a single .30 caliber machine gun mounted in its lone starboard side door, the H-34 was the helo you wanted to see coming when the odds were against you. With its distinctive bulbous nose cone that acted as armor and unique raised cockpit, the Kingbee stood out amongst its contemporaries in what some were calling The Helicopter War.

Tom nodded as Quinn and Hiep went to brief the team.

An A-1 screamed by overhead, offset of the team, on its approach, the reverberations of its engine echoing through the jungle in its wake. The Skyraider would keep the NVA at bay. Havoc was going to get out of there.

The sheer size of the NVA element was concerning. *An entire fucking company? And what of the Pathet Lao flanking them in what appeared to be a suicide run?* That was new.

There had to be a mole at Phu Bai, Da Nang, or Saigon. Someone had sold them out.

Come on, Tom. You need to get out of here.

What was the old adage? *You can't control the wind, but you can control the cut of your sail.* If he ever had kids, he would pass that bit of wisdom along.

Tom crept to the twelve o'clock of their perimeter—their direction of travel—and narrowed his eyes, assessing the clearing that was their LZ.

The A-1 made another pass to their six o'clock, dropping bombs that sounded to Tom like 500 pounders.

"Havoc, this is Covey. Kingbees are two mikes out. Mark your position."

Tom looked back at Quinn, who was working his way around the inside of their perimeter making sure each member of the unit knew the plan. He nodded at Tom, who then tapped the point man, an old 'Yard hunter named Tuan who had been at Dien Bien Phu, to let him know

he was moving beyond the perimeter. The Frogman snuck toward the clearing, RPD at the ready. As he approached the edge of the tall elephant grass, he paused to look, listen, smell, and feel.

Did he catch the scent of something in the air? Or was it his imagination? The wind was swirling now. With the bugs still attacking his nostrils and the smell of decomposing rainforest mixed with the distinctive odor of charred bodies from the napalm, it was hard to tell.

He keyed his handset.

"Covey, this is Havoc, I mark you identify," Tom said, pulling a VS17 panel from his cargo pocket.

His eyes continued to study the clearing.

"I identify orange panel," came the reply from their eyes in the sky.

"Roger, request a low pass over the LZ. Tough to see through the grass."

"Roger. Commencing pass."

Tom could hear the twin push-pull engines of the unique-looking aircraft. The pilot passed so low Tom could make eye contact with him and his SF Covey Rider.

"Appear to be clear. Climbing to spot for CAS. Tossing you to Kingbees for extract."

"Roger," Tom replied over the radio as Quinn appeared at his side.

"What do you think?" Quinn asked.

"I think we are either lucky or dead."

"I'd rather be lucky."

"Yeah, me too."

The distinctive whomp-whomp of the large Kingbees filled the air.

"Let's go home. Squad two first," Quinn said.

Tom nodded. The One-Zero was always the first off a helo on insertion and the last out on an extraction.

Tom turned and checked Sau's pulse one more time. Even weaker.

Hold on, buddy.

Tom hoisted his 'Yard teammate onto his shoulders. The remaining members of his squad took point and rear security.

He looked up to see a monstrous helo. It appeared to fall from the sky in a maneuver called a Falling Yellow Leaf, in which they autorotated in a downward spiral out of the clouds to drop as quickly as possible into an LZ. The first time Tom had been aboard for the maneuver he almost threw up.

The Kingbee came to a hover and settled to earth, its powerful rotor wash beating down the dense, thick elephant grass. The H-34 landed so that its only door faced the ridgeline to the west, giving the door gunner a clear line of fire into what was unknown territory. Tom was halfway to the helo when he heard the machine gun open up.

"Contact!"

A second later an RPG ripped under the tail of the helo, impacting the ground and showering Tom's squad with dirt.

He heard shouting in Vietnamese as the helo lifted off just as a second RPG sailed under its fuselage.

Tom's element reversed course and sprinted to the relative safety of the tree line as the first mortars impacted the LZ.

The mortars didn't even need to bracket, Tom thought. They knew we would come here and were already sighted in.

Motherfuckers.

All they had to do was wait another minute and we would have been dead.

The enemy's impatience had cost them.

Tom could hear Covey on the radio talking with the Skyraider, directing them toward the new threat on the opposite side of the clearing. The calm with which the airborne assets communicated was always in stark contrast to the chaos on the ground.

"Havoc, this is Covey, marking contact with rockets for Skyraider. Move five hundred meters to the southeast. Pickup on strings."

Quinn keyed his handset twice as he led the patrol to their new extraction point.

With Covey and the A-1s making passes at both enemy elements, Havoc was in direct comms with the Kingbees.

“Drop the ropes,” Quinn said when they could hear one of the big birds hovering just above the trees.

A sandbag attached to a thick 120-foot rope fell through the canopy and crashed to the jungle floor. It was followed by three more—all from the single right-side door. All four operators hanging from the helo’s starboard side created a weight imbalance that increased the flying challenges for the Kingbee pilot.

“See you for beers at Phu Bai,” Quinn told Tom with a smile before turning to lead his squad farther into the jungle under the second helo that hovered over the canopy about 75 meters east.

Tom lay Sau on the ground and tied a Swiss seat around his unconscious friend’s waist and legs while Tuan and Mang held security. They could hear the A-1s pounding the enemy with cluster bombs, napalm, 250-pounders, 500-pounders, and their 20mm cannons.

“Kingbee, I have one wounded. He’s strapped in,” Tom said into his handset.

“*Roger, Havoc,*” came the reply in heavily Vietnamese-accented English. It was a voice Tom recognized—Captain An, a pilot who had hauled Havoc out under fire on multiple occasions.

Tom had purchased many a beer for An in the Phu Bai Green Beret Lounge following missions across the fence. He prayed he would be able to do so again tonight.

Tom quickly tied his own Swiss seat and then motioned to Mang and Tuan to do the same while he held security. Tom would be the last in his squad to clip into the rope that would haul them out of the jungle.

Almost there.

He felt a bullet impact the radio on his back, followed by two more in

quick succession, putting him in the dirt. It felt like he had been hit three times with a sledgehammer. He scrambled to his feet.

Mang and Tuan, though attached to the strings, returned fire with their CAR-15s.

Tom pivoted and began raking the jungle with the RPD.

He could tell that the helo was taking rounds as the NVA fired through the canopy. Even though the enemy couldn't see the Kingbee, they could hear it.

The giant helicopter began moving, dragging the three 'Yards through the jungle.

You are going to get left behind, Tom.

The radio was awash in Vietnamese from the pilots at the same time his Montagnards were yelling at him to clip in.

Tom ran to catch up to the remaining rope as it slid through the jungle. Grabbing it with his left hand, he struggled to attach with his D-ring, his eyes darting between the black carabiner, the rope, and the jungle. An NVA soldier emerged from the trees. Tom let go of the D-ring and grasped his M79. Pushing the safety forward, he fired a flechette round directly into the neck and face of the enemy soldier—the steel darts removing his head from his body and dropping him instantly.

Tom reloaded the RPD and let loose another 125 rounds into the jungle before turning to sprint toward the rope moving farther away through the trees. Bullets whizzed past, the distinctive green NVA tracers resembling lasers on a trajectory of death.

He reached for the rope. Missed, increased his speed and tried again.

Got it.

Clipping in, he keyed his mike and shouted, "Go, go, go! *Di di mau! Di di mau!*"

Green enemy tracers continued to zip through the jungle as the helo picked up speed, dropping slightly as it did so, dragging their marionettes on strings into the dirt before gaining speed and altitude.

The gunshots began to fade, only to be replaced by the sound of branches cracking as the four teammates were hauled through the trees.

A limb caught the shoulder strap of Tom's pack, tearing it away and whipping him upside down.

He was now inverted, being pulled through the upper reaches of the canopy, smashing through the thick foliage.

Tom felt the sling of his RPD violently twist around his neck, cutting off his oxygen supply. He frantically tried to pull it away only to be obstructed by his web gear, which slid down around his chest and face. His head hit the trunk of a tree and bounced him to the side.

His equipment was catching on everything.

He was getting torn apart.

You need to breathe.

Tom forced his right hand away from the sling at his throat and dug the fingers of his left hand between his neck and the leather in a vain attempt to create space for air. He smashed off another tree. The sling twisted tighter. A sharp branch slashed across his chin.

His hand found the handle of his Randall. He hit the snap with this thumb and unsheathed the blade, immediately slicing through the sling where it attached to the weapon.

Don't stab yourself or you will never hear the end of it.

He felt one side of the weapon give way, but the weight of the machine gun just yanked his head to the side as he crashed through branches.

This extract is going to kill us all.

Upside down hurtling through the canopy as the aircraft continued to rise, he found what he thought was the second sling attachment point and cut it away. The pressure continued to build. Tom realized he had sliced through a part of his web gear.

Find the fucking sling!

With the blood flow to his brain restricted, he cut away anything that felt like the sling as the darkness began to creep in around his vision.

You are going to black out and die upside down dangling from this damn bird.

No, you're not.

He found the other sling attachment point and sawed through it until he felt the RPD fall toward earth. Grabbing the leather sling still attached to his neck, he twisted it off, desperately sucking in precious oxygen as he attempted to right himself.

He felt the rope catch, pinning his leg against a thick branch, the pressure building as the rope strained under the force of the Kingbee's engine. The jungle was not going to give him up without a fight. Just as he felt his femur about to snap, the branch splintered with a thunderous crack, propelling Tom through the upper reaches of the canopy. He held fast to his knife as his web gear was ripped away before he was pulled above the trees into the evening mist.

Gasping for breath, he twisted his head and counted his men dangling from the other strings. Sau looked like a dead man, but he remained attached. Mang had lost his CAR-15, but he and Tuan were upright and alive.

Tom swiveled his head to look for the second helo expecting to see Quinn and his three 'Yards suspended beneath it.

The sky was clear. Tom's helicopter was the only one in the air.

He frantically scanned the jungle floor.

No!

Heart sinking, he saw the flames of a downed helo.

Kingbee down.

Quinn.

With his head dangling mere feet above the trees, he felt the H-34 begin to gain altitude and glanced up at the underside of the extraction bird.

Quinn is on the ground. His squad is on the ground.

They are probably dead.

But maybe not.

Never leave a man behind.

See you for beers at Phu Bai.

Tom looked back to the smoke of the burning Kingbee and made his decision.

He curled his body in an inverted sit up and lashed out with his knife. His first slash missed the string. The helo began to lift higher. *Last chance.* He summoned his final ounce of strength and pulled his body upright. Reaching up with his knife, he sliced through the lifeline connecting him to salvation and plummeted into the Laotian jungle.