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Color Red

Dan Thompson

I sat buckled into my seat in the hold of a C7-A Caribou heading to Mai Loc, near the Laotian border, 1968. I was wedged against boxes of LRRP and C-rations, ammo cans and a tightly tethered water buffalo, with a brass nose ring. The camouflaged bush plane smelled of dung and ammonia, crated chickens. The Caribou, designed for short take off and landings, drifted, dropped, and rose again in the Asian thermals as the powerful flanks of the buffalo edged ever closer. The Pratt & Whitney engines strained as the plane lifted and fell. I glanced upstairs into the cockpit as it rattled and rolled. The co-pilot knitted his brow and studied his checklist. I strained to see out the port window as the din and discord of hydraulics squealed, flaps lowered, engines slowed, and wheels dropped.

At last the tailgate folded down, exposing a vast checkerboard of emerald paddies and rolling hills and jungle. I stood intrigued, removed my web gear and stepped perilously close to the ramp's edge. Allured by the vivid splash of colors, I slipped my hand through a nylon handhold and looked down. The plane bucked violently. My tethered hand felt a vicious tug, my feet lifted, and my body stretched into the slipstream; a rider hung on a Brahma bull. My arm shook until my hand tore loose and I tumbled through space until I arced my back into a stable free fall position. I was exhilarated and amazed that I was alive as I studied the ground and hurtled towards a bright red strip of clay surrounded by jungle green. I reached for my rip cord and realized I had no chute.

The screen went red. I awoke, took a deep gulp of air and sat up in bed.

"Same dream?" said a soft voice. I felt the soothing touch of a hand rub my back.

"Yeah," I said. "Same dream. Go back to sleep."

"Its all right," said the voice.

"Yeah," I said, "Just a dream. Nobody gets hurt."

I sat at my desk in the small bullpen at Harrison Realty. Directly behind me sat "Big Lynn's" office, a square window with Venetian blinds always drawn. When he held court his voice boomed like the Wizard of Oz.

Big Lynn fought with the 504th Airborne Regiment in Italy during World War II. How many times had I listened to the same stories? "We were in the mountains—on the line in winter

for sixty-six days.” He closed his left eye when he talked, as if sighting a rifle. “The Germans called us Devils in baggy pants.” Big Lynn’s chest expanded and his spine stiffened when he recalled his war.

The phone rang as I read *The Wall Street Journal*, a habit developed from my brief but unspectacular career with Merrill Lynch. The starched white collar of my shirt was open as I cooled from an early morning workout at Nautilus Center. I’d abandoned the free weights of my youth for precision weight training machines.

I reached for the phone as Colleen sashayed into the office. Her spiked heels left red bird tracks the length of the narrow room. She was Big Lynn’s most productive real estate agent, had curvaceous credentials and knew how to sell it. She ignored me and headed to the back room to make coffee.

“Harrison Realty,” I smiled into the phone. Zig Zigler, a combination of motivational speaker and zealot, said that customers could hear the smile in your voice. The wall clock read 8:28, early for Colleen.

“This is Major Evans.” His voice was officious, verging on pretentious. “I’m a career councilor at OPPERCEN, in St. Louis. Your commission is about to expire.”

“Send the paper work when it’s over,” I laughed dismissively. I didn’t recognize the voice and it was way too early for a staff officer to be up, let alone cold calling. Anyway, OPPERCEN, whatever the hell that was, didn’t have my address, where I worked, or what I did for a living. How could they?

“Is there any way that you would stay in the Reserve?” he asked.

“How’d you get this number?” I strained for a clue. “That you Don?” Maybe it was my old friend who served with the 173rd Airborne in Viet Nam. He was prone to play prankster. He’d stuffed a dead seagull in the grill of my car after I hid one under his seat.

“We need a few good men,” he said.

“Tried the Marines?” I asked. I remembered how Jarheads had almost gotten me killed a couple of times, but I was never one to return the favor. “Who put you up to this?”

“What’s your current home address?”

“*Street Without Joy*,” I said. I’d just finished Bernard Fall’s book, *Hell In a Very Small Place: The Battle of Dien Bien Phu*, written 1966, the year I enlisted in the Army. It was a case study on how the French lost Vietnam in 1954 and a blueprint for our disaster.

“I understand your anger,” he said. “I talk with a lot of officers.”

I recognized the technique. Show empathy to gain trust, and ask for the order. “Is this a fucking joke?”

As I listened to the mystery voice, Big Lynn pulled into the parking lot and stepped from his brand spanking new camper with a pop-up roof that slept six and had all the accouterments of a home. The tires were freshly coated with clay, running boards and mud flaps spattered.

“Is there any way you’d stay in the Reserve?” he asked, again.

“There is *NO* fucking way,” I said. Sweat dripped. I lifted a towel from my gym bag and wiped. “Are we clear?”

“You had good assignments, Special Forces, MACV SOG, good OER’s, line and staff duty.”

“Good for whom?” I rubbed my scarred little finger as I grew agitated. It was numb and curved like a scimitar. “What don’t you understand about NO?”

“Who’d you serve with in Nam?”

“First Infantry.”

“A big red one.”

“No Sacrifice Too Great.”

Big Lynn nodded as he entered, thin hair, broad shoulders, tweed coat and striped tie. He headed straight for the back room. I swiveled in my chair and looked away pretending to gaze at a picture of General Robert E. Lee on Traveler on the paneled wall.

“I reviewed your records,” Evans said.

I clamped my jaw and pressed my lips to the phone. “Review this!” I forced the words through my teeth. “I ain’t fucking interested!” I was surprised by the anger that resonated from my chest.

“Maybe you can help us get it right next time,” he said.

“There won’t be a *next time!*”

“How does that go? ‘Wars and rumors of war . . . but the end is not yet,’” he said.

“Well I’ve beaten my bayonet into a Time-share.”

“What about those hard won memories?” he asked.

“Here’s one, I read in the *Journal* where Uncle thinned the ranks, RIF’d officers with combat experience for the ‘convenience of the Army,’ and now you need weekend warriors to take up the slack?”

“Needs change in every business,” he said, “but there are benefits.”

“Weekend drills, two weeks active duty and then it’s ‘All The Way With LBJ?’” I asked. “What about the next Texas tough guy looking to play sheriff?”

“If I found you a slot in a Special Forces Unit would you stay in?”

“Special Forces?” My throat cleared. Something shifted slightly but I didn’t take the bait. I wiped my face with my shirtsleeve and squinted at General Lee’s picture, something I’d never noticed before was his mud-spattered boots.

“I’ll see what I can do, Captain.” His voice soothed. I knew an assumptive close when I heard one. It was right off the training tape, *No Doze—How to Close*. I didn’t expect that from a Major. My hair was on fire.

“NO.” I slammed the phone. My armpits were dark moons. I was anti-war, anti-army, anti-Nixon, anti-Republican, and we were just coming out of a recession. I had a family to feed and no intention of going into Reserve. Not now, not fucking ever!

I walked to the rear of the office. Colleen stood with her back toward me at the coffee maker. Big Lynn stood close behind her. His hands slid down and away from her hips. He turned as I entered the room. Colleen straightened her crumpled collar, pulled it above her exposed neck and walked into the main office.

“Who was on the phone?” Big Lynn asked. He squinted with one eye.

“Some Major from St. Louis.”

“You know I don’t abide that kind of talk in this office, no matter how despicable the character,” he said. His elegant drawl rankled.

“They want me back in the Army.”

“People in hell want ice water,” he said. His feet were spread, knees locked, drill instructor style. “Expect another war if The Trilateral Commission continues to foment.”

My eyes glazed over and I returned to my chair. I tuned out the rant about the Trilateral Commission and Bilderbergers. Even now he was convinced Dr. Martin Luther King was a communist. His unchecked resentments had devoured him and everything around him, maybe even me.

Colleen sat erect as a swan at her desk. Just above her up-turned collar was a yellowish bruise.

The Major's phone call had sparked some latent thirst, ignored or denied. It was tantamount to a dry alcoholic watching a beer commercial.

I looked down at my daily action planner. "If you don't have daily objectives, you can't qualify as a dreamer." That's what Zig Ziglar said in *See You at the Top*. I knew about objectives. An infantry officer learns the importance of priorities, objectives, and regimen. Is that what he meant by "getting it right?" Did I have to believe in perpetual war or suspend disbelief?

Two words, Special Forces, threatened to pierce a façade of normalcy. I'd worked hard to rebuild my identity in the years since Vietnam. I'd remembered too forget. Too much remembering can kill you. I replayed the phone call. I prided myself on my forceful and unequivocal response. I'd sent a clear and convincing message that shored up my resolve.

I dug through the bottom draw of my desk and found *Principles of Sun Tsu*. I'd studied the book while working for Mother Merrill. My branch manager used *Principles* to inspire a new class of financial warriors. It turns out the client was the enemy, so I surrendered.

I flipped through the pages to an underlined passage. "*Victorious warriors win first and then go to war—while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.*" The Joint Chiefs never imagined a tiny, third world country would slay Goliath and route the Philistines. I had greater appreciation for the vanquished.

Big Lynn stopped beside my desk. "Colleen and I are going to preview some properties," he said. "We'll be back in a couple hours."

"Which ones?" I asked.

"We'll have a sit down when I get back." Colleen strutted out the door, leaving a second set of bird prints. Big Lynn's brogans tracked behind.

Two months later the dust had settled and I had all but forgotten about the phone call. I hadn't mentioned anything to my wife, Elizabeth. It was March and I'd moved on.

The phone rang and as I drew the receiver close, a waggish tune filled my ear.

"*You're in the Army, now, you're not behind a plow. . .*"

"Who is this?"

"Major Evans from OPPERCEN."

“We’ve had this discussion,” I said.

“I pulled some strings—found you a slot in a Special Forces Company.”

“I appreciate your persistence, but I’m not interested!” But something between nausea and bliss informed my disposition.

“Look Captain, I forwarded your 201 File to Company-B, 3rd Battalion, 12th Special Forces, in Richmond. They’re expecting you for a MUTA-5 drill next weekend.”

“Are you deaf?” I asked.

“You know how hard it is to get an A-Team Commander slot?”

“And you’re doing this because?”

“The Company has a jump laid on this weekend.”

“As tempting as that is—”

“They just returned from England, training with the SAS.”

“I’ve got commitments.”

“You’ll get more training in the Reserve than you did in the regular Army.”

“For what?”

“Maybe I was wrong and this isn’t for you,” the major said. “People change, lose their edge.”

“Like you.”

“This isn’t about me,” he said. “It’s what you bring to the party, your experience. Think about how you could impact unit readiness. Now, ‘Stand In The Door.’”

“Like I said.”

“Green light, Captain.”

“Not so fast.”

“Well that’s a start.”

“No chance.”

“One chance,” he said, “at some unfinished business.”

“All done,” I said.

“You sure about that?” he asked. “Take this down.”

“Anything to make you stop.” I took down the info.

“Airborne!” The phone clicked. He was gone. Silence rang in my ear. I crumpled the paper and through it in the trash.

She found me rummaging through mildewed boxes in the cellar after I'd tucked the kids in bed and told them a story. The writing on the boxes was indecipherable. I tore through boxes stacked along a parapet. Cinderblocks and sand reinforced the crumbling foundation. A sour smell of mold filled the dank basement.

"It's late," Elizabeth said. Her auburn hair shone in coppery light.

"Where's my jungle boots and camouflage fatigues?" I tore open the soggy cardboard flaps.

"Going hunting?"

"I've been assigned to a Reserve Special Forces Company."

"What?"

"I report this weekend." I tore open another box.

"What are you talking about?" she said. "You had your fill of all that!"

"I'm just going to check it out." I pulled out a crumpled set of jungle boots, covered with a green sheen.

"What about work—the kids?" Her eyes flashed.

"It's just one weekend," I said. I wiped the mold from a boot and pulled the dry-rotted lace. It snapped.

"Maybe that's a bad sign," she said.

"It's the Reserves, for God's sake," I said. "I'm just checking it out."

"What does that mean?"

"It's just one weekend a month."

"So you've already made up your mind?"

"Maybe I can train some men to—"

"Survive?" she asked. "Really? When were you going to tell me?"

"I can't explain," I said. "They called. Offered a slot."

"You've got a slot," she said. "A family slot. Right here!"

"You know how hard it is to get an A-Team?"

"Life's a bitch."

"I know."

She shrugged and retreated in silence.

“I’m just checking it out. Nobody gets hurt!”

Buckled in the hold of a C7-A Caribou I stared across the floor at another A-Team rigged for a combat jump with rucksacks and rifles. Ashen faces and drool betrayed their steely constitutions. An hour into the flight the plane dropped precipitously into a roller coaster plunge and I floated in zero gravity. I looked down the line at my newly assigned A-Team as the plane reversed its plunge and lifted violently. My stomach compressed into a ball and tried hard to exit my ass. I gripped the seat webbing over my shoulder with one hand and the aluminum bar of my seat with the other. Each vicious sheer and upward reversal torqued the aluminum frame as wing grommets groaned and innards sloshed.

A slim faced sergeant across the aisle looked at the ceiling, his Adams apple bobbed rapidly. He swiped drool from his mouth. His pallid face and wondering eyes betrayed a desperate need to exit this plane. Some jumpers covered their mouths with both hands, struggling not to be the first to breach. If one man blows we all go.

The gangly co-pilot in a baggy flight suit climbed slowly from the cockpit. He sat and scooted along the floor with one hand over his mouth. His cheeks stretched like a trumpeter. He gripped the anchor line cable that stretched from the bulkhead to the tail of the plane. He floated momentarily and slammed to the floor. A stream of vomit shot across the floor.

The air smelled of rotten eggs and Limburger. Puke splashed across the floor and triggered a spontaneous eruption of blowholes. I gagged and swallowed an acidic lump.

The red light blinked on and the jumpmaster yelled, “Stand up!” The tailgate folded down, exposing a checkerboard of black and gray. Barren trees brushed the gunmetal sky. The steady blast of cold air numbed the fingers and froze the toes.

The Jumpmaster shouted, “One minute!” I careened against the bulkhead, slipping in the slick viscous vomit as the plane rose and dropped. I gripped the nylon netting with the right hand and the static line in the left. A jumper slipped and crashed to the floor. I bent my knees and spread my legs intent of ending this nightmare.

The plane bucked and shimmied on the final approach. Green light lit to a chorus of groans. As I reached the edge of the ramp I hopped and awaited the pop of the chute opening. I felt a savage jerk on my left arm and my body unfurled like a banner. My head snapped back and something ripped. I reached for the toggles of the MC-1-1 but one arm hung limp along my side.

I pulled the other toggle and my chute spun like a top. I drifted toward a set of electrical lines strung between two transmission towers. I blinked hard and tried to wake. As I fell to earth I realized I had no control. Everything was red. I listened for her soft voice, “Same dream?” and the soothing rub of her hand on my back. It never came.