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Quirt Alerts!

Randy Harritan

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He sits on his haunches in the middle of the trail. Nose held high, bouncing like a fishing bobber, pointing towards the ten o'clock position.

He looks back at Harry but does not move. Waiting for orders.

Harry's senses go into overdrive. Which way is the wind blowing? How hard? Is anything out of order ahead; a turned leaf, a tuft of grass, an overturned rock? A quick glance encompassing all of his surroundings provides no feedback. The jungle opens ahead of him. It's a perfect place for an ambush.

Harry gives Quirt the hand signal to stay. The dog will not move. His orders given, he sits tall and rigid with an occasional sweep of the area with his nose. Analyzing.

Having no cover Harry, as casually as his internal tensions will allow, meanders back to the next man in line.

At slightly above a whisper he says, "Enemy personnel at ten o'clock."

Afraid of springing the ambush, Harry does not look back in the direction indicated by Quirt but nonchalantly shrugs and looks around the jungle as if taking a break. He can feel the rifle bores pointed in his direction. Silent. Deadly. Waiting. He wants to flop on his belly and crawl away. His instincts tell him run, but he waits.

"Enemy personnel at ten o'clock," relays back man after man. No adlibbing, no changing the verbiage. Repeating what is said until the sound dies out along this snake-like string of men stretching along the ridgeline.

Waiting. The interminable wait.

Beads of sweat run down Harry's back. Pools form in his armpits. Harry hopes the company commander is flanking the dinks and will turn the tables, taking the pressure from the front. He isn't sure how long he can maintain the subterfuge.

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Voices low and mechanical, louder with each new voice, comeback up the line, “Move out and engage the enemy.”

Harry knows that the captain is under orders to engage the enemy—but walking into an ambush? Why doesn't he come up here and engage the enemy? Shit, shit, shit!

He turns, recalls Quirt, praises him, and again orders him to “search.” Quirt will not alert again on these people. He has done his job, at least as far as these people are concerned. Still, it is comforting having him out front.

On shaky legs and at a snail's pace the column moves out, watching, scanning the tree-line, moving no faster than necessary. Each step winds the jack-in-the-box awaiting the monster's release. A hundred meters. No one really wants to make contact, but this is the business they're in.

The jungle opens in a solid wall of fire. Harry and the others are caught in an ambush along their left flank. The noise is incredible. Heavy machine-guns, AK 47s, RPGs, all aimed at the Americans and firing at once. Harry dives away from the guns. The ground slopes downward providing some protection. Quirt, as trained, takes his place on Harry's left side and lies as close to Harry as he can get. Protecting. Doing his job.

The fighting is vicious. Harry goes through several magazines in a few minutes. Can't stop and conserve ammo. They keep rushing forward. He must continue firing or they will flank the unit on the right. Grass is being cut over his head and falling on him from the enemy fire. They have him bracketed.

Boop, ping. Boop, ping. Boop, ping. The grenadier to his left is firing 40-mm grenades as fast as he can load them. Thank God for him. Helping to keep the enemy at bay. Troops down

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the line to the left are giving it to Charlie in spades but they are firing in the same direction as Harry and giving him no cover fire.

Chi-com grenade!

It's on Harry's left side, just beyond Quirt. He can almost touch it.

It lies there. No ticking, no sound. Just a gruesome inanimate object lying in its own cloud of dust. Time stops.

Boom! Quirt takes the full blast. He slams into Harry and then, almost as if in slow motion, rolls over him. They both are suspended in air. He lands and does not move. Harry comes down with a grunt, a loud whine in his ears.

An NVA soldier, a good-looking young man with a fresh haircut and clean green fatigues, walks from the foliage thinking he has killed Harry and the dog. He wears no hat and is looking over his shoulder, talking to other troops behind him. Harry puts three rounds into his chest and the man falls backward in a heap. Legs akimbo. He is lying there dead no more than five feet from Harry. Harry must move.

To Harry's amazement Quirt rises and on shaky legs assumes his place again on Harry's left side.

Time to go.

Harry and Quirt move down the mountain, then angle to the left in hopes of linking up the rest of the unit. Harry sees movement and yells, "It's the Dog Handler," in hope it is his guys and not the enemy. There is no answer. He moves closer and repeats, "It's the Dog Handler."

This time a welcome voice says, "Come on in, we thought you were dead."

Harry doesn't know how much time has passed. It seems like hours.

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The entire unit withdraws. Artillery is called; the big guns, 155s and 8-inchers. The ground rumbles and shakes. Metal shards cut through the trees. Cutting them in half as easily as a scythe through hay. Hell has been unleashed upon the dinks.

Even now, Harry has a certain admiration for the dinks. What brave young men they must be. They know what's coming, yet they attack and endure Armageddon. A baptism of fire and brimstone.

Firing stops and the unit moves to mop up. There are pieces of human beings but no whole bodies. They took them. The rancid smell of cordite. Spent brass. There's plenty of blood and bandages. It's always the same. They try to make the victories hollow. No proof, no bodies. Always an estimation of kills.

They killed one of us. It is absolute. Not estimated. We have one KIA. Shot through the chest. Lying on his back in a pool of sticky red, already congealing, returning to the earth. Some wounded, but not bad. We won. Big fucking deal. We won.

A resupply bird comes in and unloads water and ammo. Harry and Quirt hitch a ride back to base camp with the dead man zipped into a body bag. After landing Harry prods Quirt. He will not move. Can't. He died on the way home. He had no more to give. There are two dead soldiers on this helicopter.

The shock is instant and severe. Disbelief. It can't be. He was fine. Harry knew something was wrong. He knew.

Harry dismounts, cradling a limp Quirt in his arms, and begins to walk with him. His tongue hangs. His eyes are glazed. The crew on the chopper look on with sympathy in their eyes, saying nothing. What can they say?

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It is more than a mile back to the war dog area. Harry will not stop. Will not rest. He pushes on to find Doc, the vet tech. Maybe he can help. It's hard to see through the tears, salty and bitter. Each leaves dirt trails on his cheeks. The heaviness is not his arms but his chest. He thinks he will burst open and spill on the dusty rotten ground. He wants to scream. Run. Run until the hurt stops. Run until all this goes away but his legs won't let him. They are no longer a part of him but simply appendages to move him and Quirt over this godforsaken patch of earth. Doc meets him at the kennels, but Harry won't let Doc have Quirt. He slides down and sits against a wall holding him. The crying is over. He talks to Quirt as he always has. Thanking him for his protection, his dedication and love for over a year.

Time means nothing to Harry. He has no idea how long he's been there, but eventually relinquishes Quirt to Doc. A wound has opened that will never heal. Harry heads for his hooch, alone for the first time in Vietnam.

A short time later the war dog provisional first sergeant tells Harry that the battalion commander of the unit he had worked with inquired about the soldier named Quirt. He wanted to give him a medal for his heroism during the battle. When informed that the soldier was a large German shepherd, the colonel simply laughed. Dogs were considered to be equipment. Nothing more.

A month later Harry receives a letter from one of his dear friends and fellow dog handlers assigned to the Twenty-Fifth Division near Saigon. He says he heard that a dog named Quirt was coming to the main veterinary center near Saigon for a necropsy and immediately knew who it was. There was only one Quirt. He tells Harry that he met him at the landing pad, accompanied his body to the vet, and stayed with him. Both his eardrums were completely gone, which Harry already knows. This happened in an earlier engagement but had not been reported.

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Harry had known the army would retire Quirt for this, so he kept it quiet. Quirt also had severe internal damage. Mortal damage. He was given a proper burial, complete with headstone, in the War Dog Cemetery. Pete said a prayer over Quirt and wants Harry to know he was treated with respect. Another soldier laid to rest. Gone to flowers.

Goodbye, Quirt; serial number 7A97.