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Crispy Critters and Earning Your Stripes

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It was almost eerie looking at the sky. A reddish glow radiated from the sun. Sunset wasn't far off and the contrast of the red sky outlining the green foliage of the rubber trees throughout the base camp was a sight that made me pause in my tracks. I wished I had my camera; this would make a great picture. Later I would think about the old saying, "Red sky in morning, sailors take warning. Red sky at night, sailors delight." Too damn bad I wasn't a sailor this night.

It had been a long, tiring day. I was walking down the red dirt road at Quan Loi that encircled the airstrip, heading to my hooch. We had departed early that morning for the AO and made several insertions. We must have walked several miles through the "bush," most of it triple canopy, and I was hot, sticky, and just worn out. My jungle fatigues were coated in dust caked on by the dried sweat. My hair was still damp under my boonie hat. On top of that I smelled like a wet, mildewed rag.

At least my stomach was full. We had returned just before the mess hall had closed for the evening meal and went directly there after being dropped off the Slicks. Now I was headed to the hooch, still wearing all my gear and carrying my rifle. My thoughts were centered on one thing and one thing only: stripping off these clothes and getting to the shower before we ran out of warm water.

Our shower was a simple affair; a small open-sided hut that would hold up to four men with a water tank on top that was filled every morning from our water truck. We didn't merit an immersion water heater like I had seen at other base camps. We just depended on the hot sun. To conserve the warm water, the first sergeant had banned anyone from taking a shower during the day. The rule was showers were allowed in the evening after chow. No exceptions.

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Before reaching my sanctuary, the siren started blaring and in the near distance several people yelled. I came to a quick stop and just stood there. Now what? The siren was only used in an emergency, which usually was for incoming or if a ship was down. If it was incoming, the siren going off was always preceded by explosions from rockets or mortar rounds impacting. My mind swirled with ideas on why the hell the siren was going off. There were no explosions; I thought all the aircraft had returned with us.

I decided that I should get to my assigned bunker on the perimeter. But as soon as I started to beat feet in that direction people started running towards me, headed to the flight line. Leading the pack was WO2 Richard Fleenor, "Flea." He looked like something out of a cartoon. He was soaking wet, wearing his combat boots, wet OD green underwear, and carrying his flight helmet. Apparently, he had skipped the chow hall and gone straight to the shower after returning from our mission. Before reaching me, he yelled that the "Ash & Trash" had called in a mayday and had gone down.

I had flown on many combat assaults with Flea as the pilot and, dressed or not, I wanted to be on his aircraft. I followed his lead. We went to the farthest revetment where a crew chief was untying the main rotor. Flea climbed in the left seat and I took my seat on the floor behind the right seat. We were the first onboard. Flea immediately hit the start switch and the big turbine engine began to whine.

In no time at all the flight line was filled with pilots, grunts, crew chiefs, and door gunners. From my vantage point I could see everyone running full tilt to their aircraft. To an untrained eye it would have looked like a startled flock of birds getting away from a hunter once he's fired his first shot. In reality it was like a choreographed exercise. In no time at all we had the co-pilot, crew chief, and door gunner strapped in and ready to go. Six grunts from the aerial

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rifle platoon had also joined me, filling up the Slick. There was little organization with the grunts. They just picked a ship and climbed on.

Normally the pilot would run up the engine a minimum of two minutes before coming to a hover, but not this time. I guess Flea wanted to be first. At least he showed that he was in a hurry and didn't have time. It was just a big-assed scramble at this point. Normally the Slicks waited for the Loaches and Cobras and would follow them out. Because of the way the revetments were laid out, everything was backwards. We were first off; my crazy pilot had won the race.

As Flea put the nose down, we picked up speed and in no time, we were climbing over the southeast perimeter. Through the opposite door I saw the most magnificent sunset of my life. The sky was still tinged in red and the sun sank on the horizon; only the top quarter was visible. I looked over to Flea and was struck by how many pimples he had on his back and how white his skin was. He really needed some sun. I started to laugh but instead just shrugged my shoulders. Another crazy sight in 'Nam. I can still see him there, sitting in the left seat behind the armor plating with his flight helmet, wearing only his underwear.

Normally after takeoff we would climb up to 2000 feet altitude. This was the "safe zone" from small arms fire, unless of course they had either .51 cal. or 37-mm weapons.

Our altitude never got that high. Before we cleared the town of An Loc, located four miles south of Quan Loi, we saw it. With the exception of the door gunner sitting in the well on the left side, we all saw it.

At first, I thought it was the biggest flare in the world. It was such an intense blinding white flame concealing the Huey that it had once been. I swung around on the floor with my legs

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dangling out of the aircraft, holding my M-16 in my right hand. I silently said a prayer hoping that the people on board had escaped.

Looking back for our other Slicks I only saw two Cobras at our seven o'clock who came up fast. I expected we would circle the area and wait for the other Slicks. Instead it looked like we would be going straight in. This was confirmed when I saw the crew chief and door gunner cock the charging handles on their M-60 machine guns and point them outwards.

My three guys on the center seat scooted down on the floor in preparation to follow us off the skids. As if on signal we locked and loaded our weapons, ready to unass the aircraft. This was when your stomach would tighten up just enough to get your attention. No grab-assing, no talking. Just grit your teeth and concentrate on the job at hand. Just look straight ahead, ready to deal with whatever was to be. We had done this too many times to count and had become proficient.

By now the sun had sunk under the horizon with just a hint of light. The fire from the downed Huey was so bright we had no problem seeing the ground. The aircraft came straight without circling. When we were five feet off the ground, Flea flared the nose up, slowing the ship. That was our signal to jump off.

When making a combat assault (CA) we did not actually land. Done correctly, the skids never touched the ground. Coming to a complete stop was hazardous to the aircraft and crew. The pilot needed to attain transitional lift and get back up where he belonged. This is also why the doors were locked back on all our Hueys if they had doors. As soon as our feet hit the ground, we set up a perimeter around our landing zone (LZ). I immediately knelt and scanned the area after finding a large bush that offered some cover. To my left the Huey was still burning brightly with a thick plume of whitish-grey smoke lifting straight upwards in the black sky. Even

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now, forty-five years later, I can still recall that horrible scene. Even though the flames made a dull whooshing sound, and it was fully engulfed, it was sitting on its skids as if the pilot had landed it there.

One of our two Cobras circled overhead, reflected by the light of the burning Huey. He was no more than 200 feet above us. I could not see his partner but from the sound of it I knew he was flying higher, ready to roll in with his rockets if needed. For the next twelve hours there would be a pair of Cobras from our gun platoon circling overhead, protecting us. Just another of the perks to being a grunt in the air cavalry.

As I ran over to check the rest of my men, I heard the other Hueys coming in. They, too, made a beeline straight towards us. I was surprised to see three of them flying in trail. Normally we only had three Slicks with seven men each on a CA, but I guessed that under the circumstances they were bringing the whole platoon. At this point we had no clue what caused the ship to go down. It could have been ground fire or a mechanical malfunction. I assumed ground fire just to be safe.

Standing in the light from the burning Huey, I held my rifle overhead with both arms extended showing the lead pilot exactly where to drop off the men. As soon as everyone was off and the ships had departed, I ran over to Sergeant First Class “Happy Jack” Jackson standing with his radio telephone operator (RTO), Spec 4 David “Reb” Rutland. They both were staring at the burning ship.

By this time, the flames had changed from the bright white to a smaller, orange-yellow color and the smoke had turned oily black, wafting over the ground. It was no longer recognizable as anything made by man. The struts had given way and were completely consumed as was the main body and tail boom.

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After reporting to Happy Jack that I had set up a partial perimeter with the men I had from the first ship in, he asked if I had searched for survivors. I replied that I hadn't, and he showed me where he wanted the perimeter using the rest of the platoon. I asked him whose aircraft it was, as I was under the impression that all our ships had come in earlier when we returned from the AO. His reply was that it was ours, that it was the Ash & Trash coming in from Di An. He then took off with the RTO to search for anyone who may have survived.

Without having to be told, the platoon had already formed a good defensive position around the crash site. Not surprising as this was in our job description. In the past thirteen months that I had been in the troop, we had secured dozens of downed helicopters. This was different though, never a burning Slick, never with so many men on board.

After taking a head count of how many men we actually had on the ground I made my way over to my friend, Spec 4 Donald "No Dot" Bates. Donny was the M-60 machine gunner assigned to my squad. He had been in-country almost a year. He had a twin brother, Ronald "Dot" Bates who was also a grunt in our unit. Ron had been drafted and deciding that where Ron went Don also had to go, he volunteered for the draft and here they were.

Pretty soon Happy Jack and Reb came back to where I was lying in the prone position next to Bates. He stared down at me and said, "Tedder, come with me, I need to show you some weird shit." He told Reb to stay and I got up to follow, noticing that Reb stank of puke and seemed a little lost.

I got up and followed him through the dark, passing around the still burning Huey. He asked me if I had any idea where we were and I replied, "Not exactly, somewhere south of An Loc near Highway 13."

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He said, “That’s right, we’re practically on top of one of the old French forts surrounding An Loc.” He said that he and Reb had found a lot of concertina wire and a concrete bunker just past the Huey. He thought that the pilot must have been trying to land it inside the fort as it was pretty wide open.

Still following him we passed around the rear of the Huey. As the flames diminished the smoke had turned oily black and was wafting across the ground instead of going straight up as before. Passing through the smoke we both started running to get through it as fast as possible. The smoke carried the smell of burning flesh. It was so thick that it stuck to you, invading your body and clogging your nose.

We came to the edge of the fort and he stopped. I could just make out the bunker that he had described earlier. He shined his flashlight downwards and told me, “Look at this poor bastard.” He explained that when they had found him earlier Reb had upchucked and that he needed help getting him out of there.

Looking down was the body of one of the guys on the Huey. His body was frozen in the crawling position with his arms extended and one knee bent. He had gotten tangled up in the barbed wire and had burned to death. His back and legs were horribly burned from the heat of the fire. I could tell that he was part of the four-man crew as he still had his flight helmet on. It was also partially burned away and exposed his skull. The hair and skin had melted off.

It was pretty difficult, but the two of us managed to push down the old rusty wire using our boots and pull him out by his arms. We discovered that his face, chest, and stomach were untouched after turning him over. He had compound fractures on both shins. We discussed how he must have been fairly high up when he jumped out to avoid the fire. The weight of his chicken

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plate, the laminated armor plate worn by army aircrews to protect the chest and back, had to have helped cause the broken legs.

Happy Jack removed the chicken plate and pointed his light at the name tag above the pocket on his shirt. We knew who it was, Green.

“Do you know him?” asked Happy Jack.

“Oh yeah, he was a crew chief, hell of a nice guy.” Of course we always spoke in good terms describing those we lost, but I meant it in this case. I had been his platoon sergeant for a short while and had gotten to know all the guys in the Lift platoon. Vernon Green was an extremely nice guy. A lifer like myself.

After wrapping the body in my poncho, we carried him towards the front of the now smoldering Huey and placed it on the ground. Happy Jack and I were joined by SSG Middleton who suggested we do a perimeter check.

At some point while checking my squad I discovered that no one was near the area where the stinking smoke was blowing low over the ground. No big deal, Bates’ M-60 had a good field of fire on one side and the other side was covered as well.

During my check I came upon the number one screw-up in my unit. Spec 4 Schrader. Schrader was out of position, not surprisingly, and was talking to one of the FNGs, a new guy. I heard Schrader telling him, “Yeah, we do this all the time, you think this is the first bunch of crispy critters we’ve pulled out?”

That hit me like a load of bricks. I had never heard that term before. Crispy Critters? The only other casualty they had pulled out burned was my friend Flieger who had been killed two months ago. Was Schrader talking about him?

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I had never cared for Schrader; he was a screw-up and a worthless piece of shit. Without giving it any thought, I reached down and grabbed him by the arm and stood him up.

“Come on, Shithead, I need you over here.” I pulled him along to the area where the smoke was still rolling. I yelled, “You will stay right here and you will not move. If you do, I will personally blow your goddam brains out!”

I returned to my position next to Don Bates and he asked me why I had done that with Schrader. I replied, “Because I could, therefore I did.” He laughed. Not long after Happy Jack came over and asked the same thing. I told him how Schrader had been out of line and trying to impress the new guy with his being a badass. I also reminded him about the incident with Schrader’s mom and the congressman. He agreed and PFC Schrader stayed there. Luckily for him the smoke finally dissipated to nothing.

Even though it has been forty-five years I can still recall that awful night. Once we had recovered Green, we all just laid there on the perimeter waiting for daylight. You couldn’t see more than five meters. Once the fire had burned out it became extremely dark. Clouds rolled in from the west masking the moon and stars. As the fire was still burning, I could see large black lumps inside being consumed by the flames. You knew that you were looking at all that remained of your comrades. Comrades who were no longer human.

My thoughts turned to the guys around me. I was worried that some of my other friends had been on the Huey. It had only been ten days since the ambush when Kipo, Dien, and Captain DeCelle had been lost along with twelve other men wounded and medevacked out. Several had returned, even Bruce Dykes “Tennessee” who still wore a cast on his leg from being shot in the

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calf and foot. He just up and left the Ninety-Fifth Evac Hospital and came back to be with his “family.”

Half of the guys in my squad had been in-country a year, well past their normal twelve-month tour. They were draftees and had decided to extend their tours for a few months in order to get an “early out” to sooner return to the “world.” The other half was mostly FNG replacements for the guys lost ten days ago. But even with all that had happened lately, we had responded like soldiers when the siren went off. One minute, I was walking to my hooch thinking about a shower and twelve minutes later I was jumping off the skids into this little piece of Hell. A Hell complete with flames and brimstone.

As soon as the sun came up a Huey landed in the center of our perimeter. Major Rafferty, the troop commanding officer, got out and SFC Jackson and SSG Middleton saluted as he approached them. I was too far away to hear what was said but Sgt. Middleton yelled for a few guys to help the crew unload the cargo. The major had brought out a few cases of C-rations and a bunch of body bags. Not surprisingly, no one touched the rations. Many of the guys had emptied their stomachs during the night. We didn’t know it, but the horror was going to get worse.

Sgt. Middleton came over to me and said, “Tedder, we are about to earn our stripes. Happy Jack wants the NCO’s to get the bodies out. He doesn’t want the men to do it. We can spare them that.”

I followed him over to where Major Rafferty and Happy Jack were and the medic joined us, carrying a back board used when extracting wounded men with broken backs. Unbeknown to me he had requested that Happy Jack radio in to Quan Loi that it be included with the body bags. I was about to learn just how smart a medic he was.

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We also learned from the major that no one from the rifle platoon had been on the aircraft. The pilot was WO1 Goelz and WO1 Bennett was the co-pilot. I had flown many insertions with them and knew both pretty well. The four of us, Jackson, Middleton, Doc, and me were given repelling gloves to wear and set to work. Doc also passed around a tube of mentholated crème to put on our upper lips to mask some of the smell. It didn't quite do the job.

The three guys that had been sitting in the cargo compartment had been crushed by the engine and transmission when the walls had given way. The four of us had to manhandle them off. The three were stuck together and we used our hands to pry them apart. The door gunner was the easiest as he was still lying in what had been the left well behind his M-60.

Mr. Bennett and Mr. Goelz had to be pulled out of their armored seats by hand. Surprisingly, they still were in human form. Though unrecognizable, you could tell they had once lived as men. Goelz's right leg made a popping noise as we were lifting him out. His leg just popped out of its socket. One minute I was holding both legs and the next the damn thing came off and I had just the one leg.

As soon as the last bag was zipped, we stacked them on top of one another in Major Rafferty's Huey. A few minutes later the Hueys came in to carry us back to Quan Loi. Upon reaching my hooch I stripped off my uniform and gave it all to Mama-san, telling her to burn them.

I stayed in the shower a longtime, ignoring the cold water and using a lot of soap. I even washed the inside of my nose and mouth, but it would be a while before I could no longer smell it. It would be even longer before it no longer bothered me, especially at night.