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Aftermath

David Aldridge

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The big, double-bladed Chinook helicopter was still at 1000-foot altitude when we banked left and flew counterclockwise in a huge circle. The .50 caliber gunner poured a steady stream of rounds into enemy soldiers on the ground. Looking out the porthole, I couldn't see anyone. I was looking at the wrong angle. Mortar rounds exploded on the earth underneath us, but I couldn't see who was firing. Bullets slammed into the Chinook and ricocheted off the metal hull. My breath came in short gasps.

After firing at least 200 rounds, the gunner looked at me to explain proudly, "Gooks in the open! Fucked 'em up real good!" He smiled as he chewed his cigar, a wild look in his eyes. I nodded as if I understood and this was just a common everyday experience for me. It wasn't. It slowly sank in what he meant. A .50 caliber round will punch a hole in you that you can put a fist through. It is normally fatal.

Down below was LZ X-ray. My imagination ran wild with images of carnage and the wounded. The inside of the helicopter was covered with blood, but it wasn't my blood and it wasn't the gunner's blood. I was the only passenger on this flight. All the blood came from the previous passengers. The blood was on the seats, floor, ramp, and even the walls. The Chinook had been used as a medevac unit all that day as dead and wounded troops were picked up from the battlefield and dropped off at our base camp. Fresh troops were loaded and carried out to be inserted into the battlefield. This had been going on for six hours.

My battalion, the Second Battalion of the Twenty-Eighth Infantry Regiment in the Big Red One, had been in the long-lasting battle that day, along with the First Battalion Sixteenth Infantry, as they fought off an estimated two thousand North Vietnamese. It was June 17, 1967. Later it would be called the Battle of Xom Bo II, but that day it was simply called the Battle of Billings. Our two battalions had 189 casualties that day, killed and wounded. The first of the

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sixteenth had so many casualties they were taken out of the battle in the middle of it and the First Battalion Eighteenth Infantry was inserted in their place. LTC Dick Cavazos was their commander and was nominally in charge on the ground at our NDP. He had been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross in the Korean War, so most of the officers deferred to him and his greater experience.

The big Chinook leveled off in the dimming light of dusk and dropped quickly to the ground. The ramp was lowered. I staggered to my feet; my rucksack weighed me down. I slowly walked down the ramp. I almost slipped on all the still wet blood. Four soldiers rushed past me with a body bag. They laid their cargo on the floor of the chopper. My eyes weren't accustomed to the dimming light yet. I bumped into a soldier. I asked, "Which way to Bravo Company, Second of the Twenty-Eighth? I'm supposed to report to Captain Turner."

He said, "They're over there," indicating a group of soldiers, "but I wouldn't fuck with Captain Turner right now. That was his RTO, Spec 4 Morrow, they just put on the chopper. He was just killed in a mortar attack three minutes ago."

Oh, my God. I saw Morrow's smiling face in my mind's eye immediately. Oh, Jesus. Morrow was the only person besides CPT Turner who had been nice to me since I came up from Saigon. Most of the guys in my company had been very hostile to me. They all acted as if their lives were now in great peril because of my presence. Some had outright hatred for me that they weren't shy about expressing as they called me the "Fucking New Guy" or "Fucking Twink" every chance they got. It had been Captain Turner who told me to report to him when I got to the field, so I trudged over to where the soldier had pointed. I found some men sitting around a foxhole. "Captain Turner?"

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Slowly, one of the soldiers turned to look up at me. It was Captain Turner; he seemed to be in pain. After a pause, he recognized me and said, “Aldridge! Welcome to the field.”

I offered, “Sir, you said to report to you when I got to the field and I just arrived.”

Captain Turner barked, “First Sergeant! Aldridge is here. Put him with the Third Platoon. They had the most killed and wounded today.”

Not knowing if I was supposed to salute or not, I just said, “Yes, sir!” I wanted to say something about Morrow, but I couldn’t get the words out.

The first sergeant had me follow him over to the perimeter where a bunch of soldiers dug foxholes. “Staff Sergeant Jimenez, this is PFC Aldridge, a replacement, who volunteered to come to the field from Saigon. He’s in Third Platoon now.” There were all sorts of hidden meanings in what he said, but I didn’t allow myself to begin deciphering them. SSG Jimenez didn’t say anything to the first sergeant, who walked back toward Captain Turner.

Then SSG Jimenez said, not even trying to hide the disgust in his voice, “A fucking twink! Jesus Christ! You can stay in this foxhole with Clinger.” He indicated a foxhole about fifteen feet away. “Hey, Clinger,” Jimenez hollered, “Here’s a brand-new guy for you.”

I walked towards the soldier near the foxhole. He said, “You can throw your shit to the side and grab a shovel.” I put all my equipment behind the foxhole and looked around the encampment. Lots of soldiers smoked openly, their cigarettes burned brightly when they took a puff.

I asked Clinger, “Okay to smoke?”

He said, “Hell, yeah. Can I get one from you? You’re the guy who volunteered to come to the bush, right?”

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I offered him my pack and said, “Yeah, I volunteered to come out to the bush. After today I’m questioning my own sanity.” We both laughed. I asked, “How did you know I volunteered?” He said that the word had gotten around the company after I signed in three weeks ago. He asked if I finished CIC School. CIC School was the Combat Indoctrination Course everyone was required to go through, run by the First Infantry Division. It was a basic course to teach brand new guys how to do clover leaf patrols, what to look for out in the jungle, how to set up an ambush, and how not to blow yourself up with the Claymore mines or hand grenades. The course lasted six days and probably saved hundreds of lives from accidental deaths.

When we were both smoking away, he told me about the battle. He had never heard such gunfire in his life. He added that the noise was probably what it had been like at Gettysburg. Clinger said there had been a thousand rifles firing, hand grenades and Claymores going off, mortars landing and exploding, with machine gun fire and .50-caliber fire screaming in every direction on top of everything else. Here he made a deep guttural sound like the big caliber machine guns, “Doot—doot—doot—doot!” He said then the artillery started coming in and the jets dropped napalm. He said that there may have even been a few short rounds that hit our boys with the artillery.

Afterwards, we settled into a nice rhythm of taking turns digging deeper and making the foxhole bigger in case of attack. I told him about my job in Saigon and why I had volunteered to come to the Big Red One. I discovered that Clinger was from Pennsylvania; his first name was Guy, but his family called him Mick. I told him my middle name was Martine and most of my family had called me Marty growing up. Clinger walked point and he told me about the kinds of things a point man encountered: snakes, bamboo with poisonous thorns, wait-a-minute-vines. He told me about leeches and how to check for them after you cross a stream. He mentioned that

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you have to constantly look for booby traps of every kind like punji-pits, trip wires, and Bouncing Betties.

As he was telling me all this, I distinctly heard someone out in the jungle say, “Fuck you!” I jumped over to where my rifle was and got back down in the foxhole, ready to kill the invading hordes.

Clinger started laughing. “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! That’s not the enemy! It’s a fuck-you lizard.”

I could hardly breathe. I said, “You’re pulling my leg!”

Still laughing, he said, “No. It’s true. There is a lizard that makes noises like it’s saying fuck you!” I was embarrassed as well as flabbergasted that one of God’s creatures could sound so much like a human being. It was eerie to say the least.

All I could think to say was, “It’s a good thing we’re not out on ambush because I would have fired everything I had at it!” We both laughed and got back to taking turns digging. SSG Jimenez came around at 11:00 p.m. and said that we were going to get a B-52 strike around midnight, so stay in the foxhole for safety.

Right on time, the B-52’s began bombing the area around our two battalions. Clinger and I were both thrown out of the foxhole several times as all the earth around us made a huge undulating motion. As we were thrown out, we would scramble back and drop into the foxhole, just to be thrown out again. After a few minutes of silence we were rained on by huge amounts of dirt and debris from the pulverized jungle. Clinger and I grabbed our helmets in case half a mahogany tree came crashing down. We stayed awake all night. I had not slept the night before either so that was two nights in a row. We made our foxhole into a nice-sized bunker and filled enough sandbags to cover the roof. Now all we needed was some engineer stakes and we would

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have overhead cover against mortars and hand grenades. Dawn came slowly. The whole area had been transformed into neat little bunkers and orderly packed sandbags everywhere within the night defensive position (NDP).

I peered into the jungle beyond my bunker. Noises that emitted from it were cause of concern to me and kept me constantly on alert. I couldn't tell what kind of animals or birds were calling out, but there seemed to be ten different species vying for attention as the sun gained the horizon. Each shrieking call or whistle was cause for me to pull my rifle closer and take it off safe. The bird calls and high-pitched monkey shrieks seemed to be a warning device and an objection to our presence. I was hyper-vigilant, expecting enemy soldiers to come bursting forth from behind the nearest trees.

As more light refracted through the leaves on the highest trees I had to readjust my eyesight to distinguish one plant from another. The jungle looked dark and ominous. There were palm fronds three feet long and other bushes and leaves with thorns on them. The whole scene was as foreign to me as a lunar moonscape. I saw trees as tall as any eucalyptus in California. Vines hung down as if suspended from heaven itself and swayed gently to and fro. I could see spider webs high up in the trees that stretched from one strange tree to another. Birds flitted from one tree to another so fast I couldn't tell what kind of birds they were. The foliage was ten shades of green, from an effervescent emerald green to a dark green that was almost black. No artist could replicate all the various shades of greens, browns, blacks, and grays. The jungle was in varying stages of life from new growth to rotting and putrefaction. The smell of rotting leaves and vines from the jungle floor was mixed with an oxygen-rich aroma that was invigorating and uplifting. During the previous night, Clinger and I had stood watch and seen a kind of bioluminescence that illuminated the jungle floor. Clinger said it was like a trillion lightning

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bugs had died and fallen to the jungle floor, but in daylight they were not to be seen. I was left breathless and in awe at the verdant beauty of the primordial splendor I faced.

After breakfast, SSG Jimenez came by and said we were going on a sweep of the area and to get saddled up. I wandered to the headquarters command group area and found a case of hand grenades. I emptied them from their cardboard sleeves, making sure none of the pins would accidentally pop out. The killing radius on each of the grenades was five meters. Then I loaded both side pockets of my jungle fatigue pants with five grenades each. I already had twenty magazines of ammo and five other grenades, so I figured I was armed enough for the day. A helicopter escorted by two gunships flew over our NDP and landed. Four soldiers in starched fatigues got out to shake the hands of LTC Cavazos and our battalion commander. There were also a couple of civilians with them; one carried a big movie camera.

After a few minutes of waiting, we found out it was General Westmoreland and a CBS Camera crew. We got the order to move out and our platoon, which consisted of five guys, was told to fall in on the right flank behind the point platoon. It was only 8:30 a.m. but the heat was already oppressive. I was glad I had brought four canteens of water with me. Within thirty minutes one of the canteens was empty. As we swept along through the area where most of the battle had raged the day before, we started finding more and more bloody bandages and North Vietnamese equipment. We discovered unexploded ordnance everywhere, blocks of C-4 were placed close to the hand grenades and mortar rounds with a long fuse sticking out of them. The fuses were set to go off five minutes after the last guy had passed by. The whole company hurried along to make sure no one got injured from the explosions.

After about an hour, the CBS crew demanded to be escorted back to the NDP where Westmoreland waited. We found hundreds of fresh footprints on the trails. The CBS guys were

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spooked. Captain Turner had no choice but to accede to their wishes. He had the point platoon escort them back. The Third Platoon was called to the point and told to check out a hard-ball trail that had been discovered. We moved forward to the trail. Clinger was on point with a black guy named Sergeant Glover right behind him. Clinger had told me Glover was a hell of a soldier and was supposed to go to the West Point Prep School in a week or two. Behind Glover walked a tall blond guy, the RTO (radio man), followed by SSG Jimenez. Jimenez told me, “Just follow me, and shut the fuck up.”

Clinger started down the trail. In front of him it curved to the left and then back to the right. Everyone followed a few paces behind. Jimenez and I were still close together when I heard a very distinctive metal-on-metal sound, like someone jacking a round into the chamber of a rifle. I asked Jimenez, “Did you hear that?”

He spat out, “Shut the fuck up!”

I heard another round jacked into a chamber and I said, “There it goes again.” Why didn’t anyone else react to the noise? Jimenez started to tell me to shut up once again when he was cut off by a loud burst of continuous automatic weapons fire. Simultaneously there were several hand grenades that went off to my immediate front. I felt the heat of the explosions on my face and rounds zipping past my head. I tried to figure out which way to go. The small arms fire was joined by several machine guns adding to the terror confronting us. I never heard one round of return fire up to that point. I danced around on the trail, trying to figure out if I should go left or right. Finally, I decided to go to the right of the trail and plopped in the middle of knee-high grass. I had absolutely no cover to get behind. No trees, no rocks, no ant hills.

Jimenez came running by me and said, “I’m going to get help!” He disappeared the way we had come.

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I raised my head and looked to the right. A flurry of hundreds of little whiffs of air flashed by my nose and eyes. I felt the same thing on my left. I thought in a panic, "Oh my God, I landed in a beehive! I'm in a firefight and I landed in a fucking beehive!" Again, to the right, I felt what I thought were hundreds more bees flying past my head, ears, and eyes. Those were not bees. A lot of people were trying to shoot me. All my muscles locked up and immediately cramped. I was seized with an ungodly fear that I had never felt before. I lost control. My heart beat wildly. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. My blood pressure skyrocketed, blood thundered through my arteries and veins, and my entire body jerked with every powerful beat. I was afraid I would pass out. I had to force myself to breathe.

The scene in front of me jerked constantly left and right with each heartbeat. I grabbed my head with both hands and jammed both elbows into the earth to steady my eyes in case someone walked up on me. I began a conversation with myself: "Don't lay here and die like a coward, goddammit! Do something!" I fired my M-16 in the direction of all the noise. There seemed to be at least a platoon of soldiers trying to kill me. I pulled the trigger, one round fired, then the rifle stopped. I pulled and pulled on the trigger. Nothing happened. A round got jammed. I tried to get it out by ejecting it but couldn't. I had a cleaning kit for my M-16 on my rucksack. I had to pull it around to get to it. I pulled out the cleaning rods and put them together. All the while the North Vietnamese firing at me never let up. Hand grenades exploded all around me. I put my cleaning rod in the rifle barrel and pushed out the empty round in the chamber. I jacked another round in the chamber and fired. It jammed again. I used the rod to clear it again. It jammed once more. I changed magazines thinking that might help. It still jammed. I remembered the hand grenades in my pockets. I pulled one out.

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It was a World War II grenade called a Pineapple and it was heavy. I wouldn't be able to throw it very far if I just lay there in the prone position, so I quickly got to my knees and threw it straight in front of me. The enemy fired at their new target with a vengeance. Hundreds of rounds whizzed by my head. The grenade rolled into the wood line just past all the grass in my little field and exploded with a WHUMP! I got back down. That stopped some of the firing. The smell of gunpowder and cordite filled the air. I fished out another grenade, one of the newer baseball-types. I threw it high enough to get an air burst out of it as it came back down in the thick jungle in front of me. I threw four or five hand grenades in quick succession, using them like mortars. The firing was considerably less now, with lots of groaning out in front of me.

Another soldier from my company came up behind me and said, "Captain Turner says to pull back."

I said, "What about Clinger, Glover, and the RTO?"

"I don't know, but the captain said to pull back, so come on!" He clearly didn't want to stay in the area as we were still receiving fire. A steady pop, pop, pop was the sound I learned to be the peculiar noise an AK-47 makes. I followed the soldier. I felt like I was abandoning Clinger and the others. We were quickly back with the rest of the company. Jimenez stood off to the side looking sheepish, avoiding eye contact. I told the captain that Clinger, Glover, and the RTO were still up at the point and I had heard lots of groaning. I added that my rifle was useless and kept jamming. He asked for volunteers to go back up and get Clinger and the others. Three soldiers I didn't know volunteered to go back up.

The captain said, "Aldridge, you go show them where everyone is." Fear struck me again. And my legs turned to rubber. My right knee buckled. I disguised it by acting like I was trying to get a better stance and stepped forward.

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I said, "Yes, sir. I'll go." I paused a little to get strength back into my legs and to take a deep breath. Thankfully one of the soldiers took off down the trail first. I followed. My legs didn't shake as bad after a few steps. It felt better being with others as we walked back down the trail. As we neared the place where I had first heard the metal-on-metal sound of a round being loaded, I told the others to slow down. We all crouched and listened. We could hear moaning in front of us.

The guy in front yelled, "Glover? Can you hear us?" I told everyone that this was where everyone got hit and we should throw some hand grenades out in front in case the NVA are waiting on us. Everyone agreed. We all pulled out grenades and pulled the pins.

I said we should throw them to the other side of the little opening one after the other for maximum effect and get Clinger and Glover and the RTO out of wherever they were hiding. I threw mine, then the guy in front threw his. They both exploded in the underbrush twenty meters in front of us. The others quickly threw their hand grenades. After they exploded we all rushed forward, whispering loudly, "Glover, Clinger?"

Sergeant Glover and the tall blond RTO came out from hiding and joined us hurriedly. The RTO said, "Clinger's dead." The RTO's left arm was hanging by a few muscles and tendons. The wounds on his arm had been cauterized. There was nothing to put a tourniquet on. Glover had a huge bandage around his face and part of his jaw was hanging down. They were both covered in blood. We turned to go back to the rest of the company. Someone had popped yellow smoke at the edge of the company position, and we had to walk through it.

As soon as we got back to the captain, we told him that Clinger was dead. He said, "Jets are coming in. Get down." As soon as he said this, we lay prone and we heard the jets begin their strafing runs with their 30-MM cannons. It sounded like the world's biggest foghorn when they

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opened. Empty cartridges fell on all of us laying there. My neck got burned from the super-heated cartridges. I rolled around on the ground frantically trying to get them off. After five passes the jets dropped two bombs each.

Someone said, "Those are the 250-pounders!" Once the jets expended all their ordnance, word was passed around to get ready for the artillery.

The captain said to everyone, "Stay down! They're going to bring it in close!" The rounds cut through the air; the first hit a tree fifty meters from us. A Spanish guy named Moreno was lying next to me on my left. He had his sleeves rolled up and his very large triceps were exposed. When the first round hit the tree, a large piece of shrapnel sliced through Moreno's triceps to the bone and sprayed me with blood. His arm had only been a few inches off the earth, next to my head.

Moreno got up and started running in circles, screaming, "Medic! Medic!" I tried to bury my face and whole body into the jungle floor. I was inhaling dirt through my nostrils when more rounds exploded in quick succession, throwing leaves and debris over us. Finally, someone tackled Moreno and a medic tried to bandage him. After ten minutes of walking the artillery all around us, the barrage was called off.

The captain asked for volunteers to retrieve Clinger's body. Three soldiers stepped up and once again he turned to me and said, "Aldridge. Take them back up there and show them where Clinger is."

I didn't want to go but I said, "Okay captain, but does anyone have a rifle that doesn't jam?" Someone handed me their rifle. I said thanks and gave up my useless weapon. This time I walked point as we all returned to claim Clinger's body.

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When we got close to the area of the firefight, I told the other three guys that we were going to recon by fire as the NVA may have come back into the area after the artillery stopped. They all agreed. When we got to the place in the trail where we could see Clinger lying, we all stepped forward, threw hand grenades, and fired one magazine each into the jungle. We crouched waiting for the grenades to go off and then, after reloading a fresh magazine, rushed forward to grab Clinger. One soldier stayed with me as we went past Clinger and fired our weapons into the jungle foliage low to the ground. The other two grabbed Clinger and started dragging him back. I grabbed his rifle and helmet as we backed up. After moving only ten meters we realized it would take the four of us to carry Clinger. It was still a struggle. I caught a glimpse of Glover and the blond guy and it was clear the medics had worked on them and their wounds. Glover's whole head was swathed in blood-soaked bandages and the RTO's arm was bandaged to his torso. I prayed that they had found a way to tie off the arteries on his arm. Our company began the walk back to the NDP. Westmoreland and the CBS crew were long gone, but I'm sure they were in time for the Five O'Clock Follies back in Saigon.

All my water was drunk when we arrived back at our bunkers. I re-filled every canteen. It was already 1 p.m. I hadn't urinated since before breakfast. SSG Jimenez said I was to go with Sergeant Colombo and ten other soldiers on an ambush at 1700. I looked around the First and Second Platoon areas until I found SGT Colombo and introduced myself. He said to eat some chow and be ready to go at 1700 hours. I told him I needed to take a catnap because I hadn't slept in three days.

He very kindly responded, "No problem. I will wake you up in three hours and you can get ready then." It took me ten seconds to fall asleep. When he shook me awake at 1600 hours, I felt refreshed like I had had eight hours of restful sleep.

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I was worried about my rifle. I had switched out mine with the good soldier who had loaned me his to go back to get Glover and the RTO. He came and got it as soon as we were back in the NDP. I needed to get mine fixed. The unit armorer was back in Lai Khe. I asked SGT Colombo what I should do, rather than Jimenez. SGT Colombo led me to another bunker and pointed at an M-79 and a large bag of HE rounds. He said, "You can carry the M-79. Make sure you have 50 HE rounds, and you can take as many of the canister rounds as you can carry. Also bring hand grenades."

I found some canister rounds and said, "Doesn't look like this could do much damage."

SGT Colombo said, "Believe me. This is like ten shotgun shells with double-aught buck shot in it." I loaded up as he directed and ate some C-rations. I waited by his bunker for the orders to move out. If today was any kind of measure, tonight was going to be pure hell.

The horror of Clinger's death and the horrible wounding of SGT Glover and his RTO, who I learned died on the way back to Long Binh, filled my heart with immeasurable pain and my eyes with tears. If I didn't bury my emotions, I would crumble under the weight of so much tragedy. So, I gritted my teeth, breathed deeply, and forced myself to push all the emotion I was feeling back down inside. I wiped my eyes with my dirty hands.