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## Night Fire

John Price

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## Night Fire John Price

The rhythmic whump, whump, whump of short bursts from Ma Deuce, the .50 caliber Browning heavy machine gun, followed by graceful streams of tracers etching the inky darkness, mesmerized me. My initial fears and doubts were replaced with a calm sense of purpose; confidence that I would complete the course. The sky was rudely illuminated by incredibly bright magnesium flares, guttering as they drifted gently to earth on small parachutes. The spell had been broken. Looking directly at these searing beacons would night blind you. Head lowered, eyes clamped shut, I hugged the sand, remaining motionless until they sputtered out. Any movement while flares were in the air revealed your position to enemy snipers. Ten weeks ago, I graduated from Penn State with a degree in business; now I was in this man's army. Once the flares burned out, I resumed low crawling into the darkness.

The Night Infiltration Course—"night fire," we trainees called it—was the capstone exercise at the end of the eighth week of Basic Training at Ft. Dix, NJ. It was Delta Company's final exam. Completing the course required the application of most of what we had learned during Basic, all condensed into one scary, noisy, confusing half hour. Most of the course was negotiated in the low crawl position, belly down, weapon cradled across forearms to protect it from sand.

Trainees traversed a long grid of crisscrossed barbed wire strung just two feet above the sandy soil. Other obstacles included two trenches, rumored to hold rattlesnakes, a water hazard, twenty-foot-long concrete sewer pipe and sandbagged demolition pits, where explosive charges simulated incoming mortar and artillery rounds. Movement through the course took place while an intermittent barrage of .50 cal. machine gun tracer rounds streaked overhead. Our drill sergeant warned us that standing erect anywhere along the course would be akin to committing

## Night Fire John Price

suicide, citing an unnamed trainee who had his head ripped off by a machine gun slug when he stood, rather than crawled.

Not everyone reacted to the orchestrated chaos of night fire in the same way. Reaching the second trench, I found a platoon mate who had started the course just ahead of me, huddled on the wooden pallet floor. A month ago, I would have left him there, more worried about myself. That was the “every man for himself” attitude we all had then. Since then, our platoon had jelled as a unit. The army ethos of “no man left behind” forced me to act. “Get up!” I exhorted, motioning with the butt of my M-16.

“This is as far as I go. Leave me alone.”

“Man, you are almost done. You want to be recycled and do this all over again?”

“No.”

“Then get off your sorry ass and follow me. When I see the end of the course, I’ll let you pass me, so we finish in order.”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t have time to fuck with you. Get your lame ass out of this trench now, and follow me, shithead. Do you understand!” Cowering as I threatened him with the butt of my M-16, he got the message.

Once he exited the trench, I crawled past him. “Follow me and keep your weapon out of the sand unless you want to do the course again.”

After five more minutes of low crawling through a water hazard, and several checks over my shoulder, I motioned for him to come up on my left side. “You’re on, cowboy.”

When he crawled out from under the final obstacle, Sgt. Lopes shouted at him to sound off, noting the time and checking his name off our platoon roster. I was right behind him. We

## Night Fire John Price

had completed night fire; the pressure was off. It was not nearly as bad as we had expected. We knew the DIs took a perverse pleasure in scaring the shit out of trainees, convincing us that half of us would fail the course and be recycled, extending Basic at least two more weeks.

Sgt. Lopes checked our weapons for function as a pair of Hueys thundered by at 100 knots just 200 feet off the deck; we both got the thumbs up. Some guys from other platoons in Delta had dragged their M-16s through the sand while negotiating the course, either plugging the barrel or jamming the action, rendering their weapons useless. They were rewarded with a humiliating ass-chewing, the threat of being recycled, followed by the opportunity to fieldstrip and clean their weapons in the dark before returning to back of the line for a second trip through the course. Shivering in our sodden fatigues, we watched as the others completed the course. Nobody in Delta Company failed their second attempt at night fire.

The dreaded exercise completed, sandy, wet, exhausted but exhilarated, we marched back to our bivouac area at 0200, thankful that blue phase was nearly over. Sgt. Lopes thumbed through a pile of bills before shoving the wad into the pocket of his starched fatigues. The DIs, competitive as hell, spent a lot of time trash talking each other's platoons. Tonight, there had been money on the line as well as pride. Our platoon had made Lopes proud, and a tad better off financially. The cash would be spent at the NCO club where he would buy drinks for the rest of the DIs with their own money while bragging on his platoon.

Earlier in the busy day, just after chow, I received a letter from my best friend at mail call. No time to read it then. I tucked it into my sleeping bag. After changing into dry clothes, I took first watch while my tentmate slept. I carefully slit the envelope and began reading the letter by flashlight. After opening with some small talk and jokes about me being in the army, my buddy Ken dropped the bomb. He and his pregnant girlfriend, Linda, had driven from Pittsburgh

## **Night Fire** John Price

to Maryland the previous Saturday to get married. There was no blood test requirement in Maryland, so couples from adjoining states often went there to elope. Sitting in the dark, cold, dog tired, sand in my wet boots, scratches from barbed wire stinging, with no clue as to what my branch assignment would be, I realized I wouldn't trade places with Ken.