The War Hero

A week after Bernie Waldman arrived, the Tet offensive swept over South Vietnam. Tens of thousands of Viet Cong guerrillas and North Vietnamese regular army troops simultaneously attacked hundreds of American and South Vietnamese installations all over the country. Despite their vastly superior firepower, the American armed forces struggled to regain control of the situation. Bernie's rifle company was sent to the Mekong Delta to back up Navy units at a Vietnamese base near Rach Soi. There were three platoons in Bernie's company. He commanded one of them, twenty-two men in all.

On the landing, he directed his men into a lumbering T-152 boat, called a Tango. His boat was Tango 6. It was their second day in Rach Soi, and they were going on night patrol alongside Charlie Canal, a man-made waterway that was long, narrow and straight as an arrow. The Viet Cong had mounted attacks near a village on the canal. The Tango would transport Bernie's platoon until a point two miles short of the village. Then they would track through the jungle, while the Tango continued up the canal as a decoy to draw the fire of the concealed Viet Cong. The Marines would come in behind the attackers and cut them to pieces.

That was the plan.

The Tangos were old Second World War landing craft converted to riverboats and outfitted with cannons, grenade launchers and machine guns. They were slow, unwieldy craft over fifty feet long; the landing ramp alone weighed four and a half tons. The men in Bernie's platoon and the sailors in the crew all crowded into the boat that night.

As the boat headed up the canal, the daylight disappeared. The brown water turned black in the moonlight. The fronds and branches waving on the shore were like tortured spirits whispering warnings to the river traffic. At the Tango's snail's pace, it would be a two-hour trip to the first village, but the Viet Cong caught them by surprise.

Five miles north of Rach Soi, rocket-propelled grenades struck the boat front, aft and amidships. It was the first taste of combat in Vietnam for Bernie and the men in his platoon. The explosions were deafening, and gunfire rained down on the boat from the trees. The men were in a panic, their frenzied shouts competing with the screams of the wounded and dying. The floor of the boat was slick with blood and body parts. Bernie gagged as he took in the sight. The attack was only seconds old, and the destruction was already horrific.

The sailors were firing their guns into the foliage alongside the canal, but they were shooting at an unseen enemy.

"Turn the boat," shouted Bernie at no one in particular. He quickly surveyed the land and chose a spot. He pointed to it. "We have to land over there. Right now!"

The lumbering boat turned with excruciating slowness and dropped its landing ramp. The shooting had stopped, as if the enemy were waiting for the Americans to make the next move.

"Let's go, men," shouted Bernie. "Off the boat. Follow me!"

Those of his men that could still walk followed Bernie off the boat and into the jungle. Bernie secured the perimeter and took stock in the moonlight. His sergeant was bleeding from a wound on his cheek, but he was all right. His two corporals were also there. Of the twenty-two men in his platoon, he counted fourteen. The rest were casualties.

The sound of soft weeping caught Bernie's attention, and he turned around. One of his men was sitting on the ground, his back against a tree, weeping into his cupped hands to muffle the sound. A few feet away, a gangly black teenager was doing a soft jitterbug, listening to the music in

his head with his eyes closed. His hands were trembling violently.

Bernie put his hand on the dancer's shoulder and squeezed.

"You okay, man?" he said loud enough for the man sitting on the ground to hear.

The dancer opened his eyes and nodded, but his hands still trembled.

"It's okay to be scared," said Bernie, "if you see something like this. I'm scared, too. You okay?"

"Yes, sir. I'm cool."

Bernie saw that the trembling in his hands had subsided. "What's your name?" he said.

"Guys call me Soul Man."

"You like that?"

"Yeah. It's cool."

"Okay, Soul Man. Time to move out."

The man sitting on the ground, no longer weeping, was looking at them. Bernie tapped him on the shoulder.

"You, too, soldier," he said. "Time to go."

The man clambered to his feet with a sheepish look and picked up his rifle from the ground.

"All right, men, spread out," Bernie commanded. "Penetrate into the jungle for forty yards, then turn around and sweep toward the canal. Keep your eyes peeled. Shoot at anything that moves. And look out for snipers."

The men, raw and inexperienced, moved into the jungle, their rifles at the ready, hunched forward as much in fear as in vigilance. Bernie remained at the landing site, to coordinate between his platoon and the boat and to keep an eye on the overall situation. One of the sailors was training the machine gun on the trees. Another was calling for medevac choppers for the wounded.

A strange stillness descended on the canal, punctuated only by the soft sounds of wildlife and the whimpering of the wounded. There was no more gunfire from the tree line, no signs of the enemy at all. They had vanished

as suddenly as they had appeared, leaving behind carnage and confusion.

In the stillness, Bernie heard the footsteps of his men as they approached the canal. Soon they all emerged from the jungle and stood there awaiting further orders.

"Relax, men," he said, "but keep your eyes open."

He went back on the landing ramp into the boat to check on the rest of his men. Three were dead, five wounded, four of them severely. He heard the thwap-thwap of choppers coming in, two medevacs escorted by a gunship.

The activity for that night was over, as were the lives of three of his men. Boys actually, a farm boy from Minnesota, a carpenter's apprentice from New Jersey and a college kid from California. Hopefully, the wounded would recover, but they would be scarred for life emotionally; they hadn't even had a chance to lift their rifles.

Bernie did not blame himself for the decimation of his platoon. In fact, he was gratified that his decision to turn and land had saved the platoon from further destruction. But he was angry. He was not sure about what or at whom. But he was angry.

He ordered the remnants of the platoon to walk to the base through the jungle. It would be good training. Perhaps they would be better prepared next time. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and set out with his men.

A slender figure completely clad in black separated itself from the shadows. The figure was carrying a rifle with its bayonet fixed. The moonlight glinted off the steel. Without a sound, the figure charged straight at Bernie, bayonet extended. He had no time to react or put up any defense. In a second, he felt the bayonet press against his chest.

With a start, Bernie pulled himself from his trancelike state. His face was covered with sweat. He closed his eyes again for a few minutes, reliving the memory. It was real. It had all happened exactly that way, everything but for the figure attacking him with the bayonet. The march through the jungle back to the base had been as uneventful as in training

camp. Except that a third of his platoon was missing.

Bernie's platoon, or rather what was left of it, was withdrawn from the Mekong Delta three days after having arrived there and transferred to the air base at Pleiku in the central highlands. The base was a huge installation with airfields and thousands of Army, Air Force and Marine personnel. Bernie and his men arrived in the evening under heavy cloud cover and were assigned to quarters. The men were bone-weary. Bernie ordered them to turn in right after supper. An hour later, they were asleep. Only Bernie remained awake, sitting on the steps in the warm night and talking to a Marine captain from Oklahoma.

The captain rolled a joint and took a drag. He held the smoke in his lungs as long as he could and exhaled. The pungent smell of marijuana assailed Bernie's nostrils. The captain offered him the joint, but he shook his head.

"I don't know what I'm doing here," said Bernie, talking more to himself than to the captain. "I've only been here a few days, and I've already lost a third of my platoon. Dead and wounded. Just kids. They land here, and before you know it, they're dead. Ambushed on a boat in a canal. Shot down like clay pigeons in a shooting gallery. And what did their deaths accomplish?"

"Where'd this happen? Down by the Nine Dragons?"

"Nine Dragons?"

"That's what the Viets call the Mekong Delta. Because of the nine mouths of the Mekong River. That's bad country down there."

"I mean, what were we doing there?" said Bernie. "We're on patrol floating down this canal that's straight as an arrow. They shot us up from the trees, and we never even saw them, just the flashes of their muzzles and the blood and gore all around me."

The captain took another toke. "Hey, man, bad trip. But that's Nam for you. You're fighting against shadows. And the people, are they with us or

against us? You never know. So what are we doing here? Good question."

Suddenly, a mortar round struck a truck parked about twenty yards away. The truck, which must have been carrying a load of ammunition or fuel, exploded in a spectacular ball of orange flames. Mortar rounds started raining down all over the base.

The captain staggered to his feet, stoned and confused. Bernie's first thought was about his men. He ran into the barracks yelling for them to grab their weapons. Just then, a mortar round struck the wall. The windows were blown out, sending glass splinters in all directions.

Bernie led his men through a maze of burning barracks and vehicles. The air stank of destruction. The dead and wounded were everywhere. He got to the perimeter of the base, where a Marine colonel was deploying the men into lines of defense. He assigned Bernie's platoon a forward position. Bernie led his men through a hail of small arms fire and spread them out behind the piles of sandbags. An Australian photographer followed close behind.

Bernie felt his men were safe for the moment. The mortar rounds were falling into the base behind them, while the sandbags protected them from enemy gunfire. The photographer hunkered down beside them and began to assemble his equipment.

A new sound joined the cacophony of the night – the whoosh of fighter jets taking off from the base. The fighters streaked into the dark clouds and came hurtling down with blazing cannons. But the enemy positions were well-concealed, and the attack continued unabated.

Suddenly, flares lit up the sky and exposed some enemy positions. For the second time in three days, Bernie heard the thwap-thwap of helicopters overhead. Gunships swept over the perimeter and attacked the exposed enemy positions with cannon fire and missiles. The explosions were followed by the screams of the wounded and dying enemy.

The captain with whom Bernie had spoken earlier ran by. He recognized Bernie by the light of the flares and stopped. The captain still looked

disoriented. Bernie felt sorry for the men under his command.

"Hey, man, how you doing?" the captain asked, breathing heavily.

"All right," said Bernie.

"Small correction. I said you may be dead by tomorrow night. Well, I'm gonna change that. You may be dead by tomorrow morning."

"Thanks for sharing."

"Hey, no problem," said the captain. Laughing harshly, he continued on his way, crouching and dodging as he went.

Meanwhile, the light of the flares allowed the gunships to fly in close and hover overhead, and they were doing serious damage to the assault.

More flares lit up the sky, and the gunships kept on strafing the enemy. As Bernie peered through a crack in the sandbag barricade, he saw a dark figure about two hundred yards away holding a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, an RPG, on his shoulder. The dark figure tracked a gunship across the killing field and fired. The grenade struck the gunship's rear rotor and blew it off. The gunship spun out of control and corkscrewed downward.

The photographer put his camera to his shoulder and began filming the descent of the crippled helicopter. Soul Man stood at his shoulder, mesmerized by the spectacle.

"Stay down!" Bernie yelled as he dragged Soul Man to the ground, expecting the photographer to follow suit.

But the photographer was getting rare footage, and he couldn't tear himself away. A bullet struck him in the face and sent the camera flying. The gunshot obliterated his nose and the right side of his face and showered blood on Bernie. The blood-splattered camera fell beside him.

The black teenager doubled over and vomited onto the sandbags.

"You okay, Soul Man?" said Bernie.

Soul Man nodded, then he doubled over and vomited again.

The battle raged for another hour, while Bernie and his men huddled behind the sandbags. The photographer's corpse remained where it had fallen.

At last, the battle was over. The enemy had suffered heavy casualties, but the base was a shambles. Bernie took stock of his platoon and was relieved to discover that they had taken no casualties, not even a scratch.

Bernie had heard that the ancient city of Hue had once been a beautiful place, the cultural and intellectual center of Vietnam, the historic and picturesque capital of the Annamese emperors who had once ruled over central Vietnam. He had heard that the storied Citadel, the part of the city north of the Perfume River, had been second only to the Forbidden City of Beijing, full of parks, shops, pagodas, villas and palaces covering several square miles, surrounded by high, thick walls, with the river on one side and a broad, deep moat on the other three sides. But this was not the Hue that Bernie saw in February of 1968. He saw a city ripped to pieces by artillery shells, aerial bombardment and house-to-house and room-to-room combat, a city in ruins, a city that reverberated with heartbreak and death.

Until the Tet offensive, Hue had been an undeclared open city, free of the fighting and destruction that characterized most of South Vietnam during those bitter years. But Hue had not been spared during the offensive. On the last day of January, thousands of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army regulars seized the city. They entrenched themselves in the Citadel and raised the gold-starred, blue-and-red flag of the Viet Cong high over the city.

For most of February, American and South Vietnamese forces fought to retake the city, street by street, house by house. They established bases and artillery positions in the highlands overlooking the city from the west and cut off the supply lines to the Communist defenders. The blockade broke the back of the Communist occupation, but the defenders still fought ferociously.

When Bernie arrived at the Marine combat base at Phu Bai, eight miles south of Hue along Route 1, the Battle of Hue was in its final phase. Although the outcome of the battle was no longer in doubt, the enemy still

held pockets of resistance in the Citadel. Bernie's platoon was thrown into the clean-up operation. They were transported by truck to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam compound in southern Hue. The compound, known among the men as MACV, was located across the Perfume River from the Citadel, a block from the Nguyen Hoang Bridge. Bernie found himself among a few hundred American Marines and Australian advisers to the South Vietnamese army. His platoon was attached to a company under the command of Captain Sugar Ray Loomis from Savannah, Georgia.

That was actually the captain's legal name. Sugar Ray Loomis. The captain's father was such an admirer of Sugar Ray Robinson, the great black boxing champion of the Forties, that he had named his first son after him. Robinson himself had not been named Sugar at birth, but Captain Loomis had the distinction of having Sugar as part of his legal name.

At dawn the next morning, the company crossed into the smoldering ruins of the Citadel and headed for the enemy pockets around the Imperial Palace, a fortress within a fortress with massive walls and fortifications, about a mile from the bridge. Virtually all the civilian population had fled into the countryside, and the outer districts of the Citadel had been cleared. The men walked through the eerie silence in double file, their weapons at the ready.

After ten minutes, Captain Loomis called a halt to the column and sent for Bernie. He led him into the ruins of a house. In the dining room, they found a mahogany table covered with debris. At one end of the table stood two delicate porcelain cups half-filled with a dark liquid that was once tea. The captain swept away the debris with his forearm and spread a map on the table.

"Now listen up, Lieutenant," he said. "In about fifteen minutes, we're gonna be deployed in the palace grounds. It's gonna be fun and games. I been thinking you should join up with us later. First, take your men and go here." He stabbed the map with his finger at a point two blocks south of their avenue of approach. "That's the Sacre Coeur school and church. We

got a report that the padre and some other folks are holed up there. Check it out. Make sure there's no bad guys there. I don' want the rear of the column exposed. Here, take the map. Y'all join up with us here." He stabbed at the map again.

Bernie folded the map and put it in his pocket. "Anything else, sir?"

"Okay, we been here five minutes –"

Bernie lunged at the captain and pushed him to the ground. In the same motion, even as he was falling on top of the captain, he spun around and fired his rifle into doorway behind him. The bullets slammed into a black-clad Viet Cong fighter with an AK-47. The guerilla screamed and discharged his weapon as he fell, the bullets thudding harmlessly into the ceiling overhead.

In an instant, Loomis was beside him with his sidearm drawn for close quarter combat. They spread out and approached the doorway. It led into a salon, which proved empty. The guerilla's chest was blood-soaked, and blood ran from his mouth and nose. But he was breathing. Loomis fired into his temple. The man twitched and lay still.

"Filthy dog," said Loomis.

The shots brought a lieutenant and two sergeants running.

"Check this place out," the captain told them. "And all the houses on the avenue from here to the palace grounds."

The men went off to do as they were ordered.

"That was real good shootin', boy," said Loomis when they were alone again. "You can come huntin' with me anytime."

"I thought that's what we're doing now, Captain."

Loomis chuckled. "You saved my life, boy. Thanks."

The search took an hour. The sun was well above the walls of the Citadel when the column resumed its progress. A gauzy fog settled over the city, and a light drizzle typical of the winter monsoon season was falling.

The sounds of automatic rifle fire and mortars grew louder. A helicopter gunship circled overhead, providing information and gunnery support to the

advancing Marines below. The sun broke through just as Bernie and his men veered off toward the Sacre Coeur complex, while the rest of the men penetrated the palace grounds.

The school and the church, two small buildings attached at the hip, sat in the middle of a large playground. The buildings seemed deserted, but Bernie took no chances. He examined the building through his field glasses top to bottom and side to side. Nothing. He ran his field glasses over the building again. Still nothing. He dispatched two men to reconnoiter from up close. They ran across the field in a zigzag pattern, crouching low to the ground, and reached the school building without incident. They took up positions below the windows and signaled for others to join them.

Bernie was about to dispatch more men across the field when he saw a momentary flash of light from an upper story window. It seemed like a ray of sunlight reflecting off glass or metal. He motioned to the men to stay down and fixed his field glasses on the window. He saw only shadows and darkness. Patiently, he kept the glasses trained on the window, and as his eye slowly became accustomed to the shadowy interior, he saw the outline of a figure holding something that could have been binoculars. Bernie continued to observe, and he saw the figure pick up an object that could only have been a rifle and move away from the window.

Unaccustomed to urban warfare, Bernie ordered his RPG man to put a grenade through the window. The first grenade exploded against the stone wall and did very little damage, but the second grenade found its mark. It exploded inside the room sending smoke and flames through the window.

Bernie waited a few more minutes, then he ordered his men forward on the double. As soon as they emerged in the open field, they were greeted with heavy automatic fire from all the windows on the upper level and a few on the lower level as well.

A few of his men took cover behind some trees and a large boulder and laid down a covering barrage at the windows to give the others a chance to reach the buildings safely. As Bernie ran toward the school building, bullets

whizzed by his head, and one of them nicked his left shoulder. Finally, he reached the wall and took stock of the damage. Two of his men were wounded, but not seriously. His own shoulder throbbed a little, but there was very little blood. It was most probably a graze, no more than an abrasion of the skin.

Not knowing how many fighters were inside the buildings, Bernie ordered his men to surround the building before they began their assault. Half the men poured rifle and grenade fire into the windows, driving the defenders deeper inside, while the other half stormed the buildings.

They found a half dozen defenders on the lower levels, and they quickly killed them or drove them upstairs. The upper levels proved a much greater problem. Each of the four stairways was heavily defended, making it difficult to get up the stairs without being cut to pieces. The only solution was to fire grenades up the stairs and then come charging through the smoke before it even had a chance to clear.

The Marines took one stairway at a time, driving the defenders into an ever smaller area. The explosions ripped huge holes in the walls and the roof and ignited several fires. The fire spread into the nave of the church and ran up the draperies. Weakened by the explosions and the fire, the beams of the sanctuary gave way and the roof collapsed, burying the fire in dust and debris and extinguishing it.

The battle raged for two hours. Three Marines were killed, as were all eighteen of the defenders. Six Marines were wounded, one seriously. Bernie called the base for assistance with the dead and wounded; the enemy dead, bloodstained and broken, were left to rot where they had fallen. Then he sat down on a pew in the church, took off his helmet and put his head in his hands. What was he doing in this place? Why had he come here? This was a place for the Loomises of the world, not the Bernie Marshes. He did not belong here. He did not have the stomach for it.

As he sat there, a trapdoor opened in the floor, and a priest clambered out. The priest took stock of the American soldier and the shattered church.

With tears running down his cheeks, he screamed at Bernie in Vietnamese. The words came too harshly and too quickly for Bernie to understand. He spread his hands in a gesture of incomprehension.

"*Je ne comprends pas*," he said. "*Parlez vous Français*?"

The priest responded with a torrent of invective in French. "Look what you've done, you vile American," he screamed. "You destroyed my beautiful church. This is a holy place of God, and you desecrated it. Who needs you here? Who wants you here?"

"I am truly sorry for your loss," said Bernie, feeling the absurdity of his words even as he spoke. "We came to liberate you from the Communists. While you were hiding in the cellar, we eliminated all of them. You are free."

The priest glowered at him. His lips worked, as if he were trying to say something but couldn't manage it. He spat on Bernie's feet and walked away.

The dead and wounded were carted back to the MACV compound, and Bernie's platoon continued into the imperial palace grounds to join up with the rest of Loomis's company. There was still some sunlight left, but the sounds of battle had just about subsided. The enemy is probably finished, thought Bernie.

Loomis was waiting at the rendezvous point. His face was green.

"I heard about your little fracas, lieutenant," he said. "Good job. Things are pretty much over here. Come, I wanna show you somethin'."

Bernie followed the captain through the rubble of the Citadel to a clearing that a squad of Marines was digging up. Loomis led him to the edge of the excavation.

It was a vast mass grave with stacks of blood-covered bodies thrown in helter skelter. Most of them showed signs of having been shot to death. Bernie doubled over and vomited.

"Pretty awful, huh, boy?" said Loomis.

"Who are these people?" said Bernie. "I-I don't understand."

“Then lemme explain. When the Commies came in, they rounded up loads of folks they ... uh ... didn’ like. Those folks basically disappeared. No one knew what happened to ’em. Until now. Here they are. Massacred. Looks like there’s hundreds, maybe thousands of ’em down there.”

“Unbelievable,” breathed Bernie.

Loomis lit up a Marlboro. “Sure is. Those Commies are dogs. Filthy dogs. They don’ deserve to live.”

The Battle of Hue was over. The Americans and South Vietnamese had driven the North Vietnamese Army regulars and Viet Cong guerillas from the shattered city into the countryside of Thua Thien province. The next objective in the counteroffensive in the I Corps Tactical Zone, the northern provinces of South Vietnam, was the relief of American forces under siege at Khe Sanh. This American combat base was located in the northwest corner of Quang Tri province, about ten miles from the border of Laos and less than twenty-five miles from the Demilitarized Zone and the border of North Vietnam.

The base at Khe Sanh sat on a flat mountaintop surrounded on all sides by hills and mountains infested with enemy forces. The continuous trench works circling every side of the mountain below the camp were under constant bombardment by artillery and mortar fire. The enemy artillery was positioned in deep bunkers in the surrounding mountains beyond the reach of American air power; air strikes were only effective against troop concentrations during the periodic assaults on the base. Khe Sanh was isolated, surrounded, under constant attack. The only entry for supplies and reinforcements was the air strip on the mountaintop, which came under withering fire every time an aircraft approached. The situation of the five thousand Marines at Khe Sanh was precarious in the extreme.

When France had still controlled Vietnam as part of French Indochina, the Communist insurgents, known as the Viet Minh, had dealt the French a devastating defeat at Dien Bien Phu in the extreme north of Vietnam not far

from the border with China. The French were driven out of Vietnam, and the country was partitioned between the Communist north and the Western-oriented south. Khe Sanh threatened to become another Dien Bien Phu, and the relief of Khe Sanh, strategically, politically and symbolically, became the highest priority of the war effort.

In early March, Bernie's platoon, along with the rest of Captain Loomis's company, transferred to the Camp Evans staging area on Route 1 north of Hue. They were to join the push to eliminate the enemy concentrations to the north, then head west into the mountains toward Khe Sanh.

Loomis's company was among the first sent off to the north. The company strength stood at three platoons and a total of fifty-eight men. Bernie had seventeen men in his platoon. The convoy traveled in ten canvas-covered military trucks with a light Marine flamethrower tank riding at the point and Bernie's platoon bringing up the rear. Captain Loomis, who had taken a liking to the college boy, rode with him in the last truck.

The month of March was still monsoon season. Torrential rains poured down on the convoy. Progress was slow on the mud-clogged road. They passed quiet villages, submerged rice paddies and swollen mountain streams headed for the sea. Bernie sat on a bench, swaying with the motion of the truck and listening to Loomis and the men chat about home as they smoked.

Around noon, they entered a stretch of road that rose toward a low mountain ridge on the border between Thua Thien and Quang Tri provinces. As they climbed toward a pass, Bernie saw small villages on the slopes a few hundred yards from the road. He wondered idly what these people did to pass the time when they were trapped in their minuscule huts by the monsoon rains.

The convoy laboriously climbed the incline to the pass and started down the other side. Bernie peered through the windshield of the driver's cab into the dense curtain of rain and saw only three trucks up ahead.

As he watched, there was a series of thudding explosions of mortars. Fountains of earth and mud and a billow of black smoke erupted around the lead truck and toppled it over onto its side. Mortar shells and small arms fire rained down on the entire length of the convoy on both sides of the pass. Muzzle flashes indicated that the attack was coming from the eastern slopes in the vicinity of one of the villages.

Loomis ordered the men off the trucks to assume defensive positions. He ran up ahead to assess the damage. One truck had been destroyed and two others damaged. The tank had suffered some damage to one of its tracks and was effectively immobilized. The company had taken light casualties, with two killed and six wounded. Loomis radioed for a medevac helicopter to evacuate the wounded and the dead. He also called for gunships to support his assault on the mountainside village, but he did not wait for their arrival. He ordered his men to begin an immediate advance up the mountainside.

While several men remained at the roadside to provide covering fire, the rest ran forward through the drenching downpour. Loomis joined Bernie's platoon as it pushed up the mountainside. They forged through the underbrush until they found a dirt track and followed it up the mountainside to a point just south of the village. As Loomis and Bernie crept toward the huts, they realized they had arrived undetected. The attackers were deployed outside the village and were concentrating their fire on the mountainside. Small arms fire was also coming from the six huts on the perimeter of the village.

"Okay, here's the plan, college boy," Loomis whispered to Bernie. "We'll deploy the men in the trees as close to the village as possible. Then Val Reuther and that other RPG guy will take out those six huts with grenade fire."

"What if there are civilians inside those huts?" asked Bernie.

"Their problem," Loomis snapped. "As soon as those huts blow, the shooters are going be confused. That's when we hit them with a full attack.

They're gonna run. Take no prisoners. Kill as many of the dogs as you can. Don't be squeamish, and don't let me down." He laughed. "Hey, I know you won't, college boy. You're a great soldier. You just hate what you do."

The grenades destroyed all six huts in one wave. Stunned by the explosions and the unexpected attack from their flank, the Viet Cong fighters broke and ran for the jungle with Bernie's men and the other Marines coming up the mountainside spraying a hail of automatic rifle fire.

In the heat of the battle, many of the village huts were taking heavy fire. As Bernie charged through the village, he saw a black-clad figure in a conic straw hat emerge from one of the huts carrying a heavy item. The figure began to run away. He was about to shoot, but something in the posture of the figure made him hesitate. Loomis, however, did not hesitate for a moment.

"Stop!" Bernie shouted. "Don't shoot!"

The figure glanced back. It was too late. Loomis opened fire and riddled the figure with bullets.

Bernie ran to the fallen heap. It was a young woman covered with blood, her mouth a screaming maw in the death mask that was her face. She held a tiny little girl and was in an advanced state of pregnancy. Apparently, she had feared her child would get hurt by the bullets whizzing through the hut, and she had made an ill-advised attempt to escape for the safety of the jungle. Instead of safety, she had found death. For herself, her daughter and her unborn baby, who now lay together in a pool of blood that the rain was quickly washing away. Bernie put his head in his hands and wept.

He heard a movement behind him and looked up. Loomis was glowering at the scene.

"She was a mother," Bernie managed to say even though he was choked up. "She didn't deserve to die."

"You blamin' me for this, Lieutenant?" he said. "You gonna report me? You think I shouldn't've shot?"

"I don't know."

The entire engagement had taken less than a half hour. By the time the gunships arrived, the fighting was long over, and Loomis sent them away. The village headman, a slight man with a wispy white beard, apologized to the American troops for the ambush. He identified the village as Hien Tuong and claimed its people opposed the Viet Cong. He waited meekly until he was dismissed and hurried away as fast as dignity and his elderly legs allowed.

After the medevacs removed the dead and wounded and the tank crew repaired the damaged tread, the men piled into the undamaged trucks, and the convoy moved on. They arrived in Dong Ho without further incident.

The next day, the company was attached to the rear of a battalion headed west on Route 9. This time the convoy was much more spread out and the tank brought up the rear. Their objective was to penetrate as far as they could on Route 9 and establish a presence at strategic points that could be used for staging grounds for further penetrations to the west, eventually relieving the besieged Khe Sanh. As they raced westward, they could hear the sound of intense battle in the jungles and plains just a short distance away.

Bernie was frightened. He felt vulnerable and exposed, and indeed he was. He knew he was heading into the lion's den. But he clung to the hope that the heavy fighting around Dong Ho would draw the attention of the enemy and allow the convoy to slip by.

The attack was sudden and devastating, and it came from everywhere. Units of the North Vietnamese regular army were deployed on both sides of the road for a distance of several miles. They attacked with mortars, grenades and automatic rifle fire. At many points, they also had artillery and tanks.

The tank at the rear of the convoy took a direct hit from an artillery shell and exploded in a ball of fire. Loomis got his men out of the trucks right away and deployed them on the south side of the road, where the fire was lighter. Moments later, most of the trucks were in flames. The company,

badly exposed to the withering fire, was taking heavy casualties. The screams of the wounded and dying filled the air. Loomis saw that a stretch of the tree line a hundred yards across a field to the south of the road and to the rear of the column seemed to be free of enemy fire. He rallied the men who could walk – there were nine, including Loomis and Bernie – and charged for the trees.

Hope hung in the air as the men surged toward the shadowy safety of the trees, but at the last moment, a heavy machine gun opened fire directly in front of them. Loomis took two bullets to the chest and went down like a bag of cement. Bernie felt a bullet bite into his left shoulder and spin him around. Val Reuther raised his RPG to fire at the machine gun nest, but his legs were shot out from under him, and he collapsed to the ground.

Bernie lifted his head and looked around. They had taken one hundred percent casualties; every one of them had been shot. Four of the men were clearly dead. Val Reuther was grimacing in pain. Loomis, twenty feet away, seemed badly hurt, but Bernie thought he detected a slight movement of his chest. Soul Man lay groaning on the ground near Loomis. He couldn't tell for sure about the two others, but they seemed alive.

Their only chance of survival, Bernie realized, was if he could take out the machine gun nest about twenty yards away. He motioned to Val Reuther to cover him. Val nodded and fired off a grenade in that direction. It exploded against a tree about a dozen feet behind the nest.

The explosion interrupted the barrage momentarily, and Bernie sprang to his feet, charging at the nest and firing his weapon as he ran. Instinctively, he veered to the right just as the machine gun opened fire again. He felt a bullet graze his left arm just as he charged over the top of the nest and shot the three gunners. He rolled a few feet away, tossed a hand grenade it into the nest and pressed himself to the ground. The grenade exploded and left the machine gun a mangled mess of metal. At least, he wouldn't have to worry about reinforcements using that nest again.

He had bought the handful of survivors from his company a little bit of

relief, but how long would it last? The battalion was being cut to pieces. American fighter planes were flying sorties, but they were largely ineffective. They took out a tank here and there, but the enfilade of machine gun and rifle fire and the mortars had turned Route 9 into a killing field. Bernie had to get his men back to Dong Ho if they were to live to see another day.

He needed a truck.

Through his field glasses, he examined the trucks smoldering on the road. Only one of them seemed in any kind of operational condition, and even this one had all its tires blown out. He would have to drive on the rims.

He went over to Loomis and turned him onto his back. The captain was dead. Nearby, Soul Man lay covered with blood. His breathing was regular, and he was not bleeding from the mouth, which meant that the bullets had not punctured his lungs. Ignoring the pain in his left arm and shoulder, Bernie lifted Soul Man and slung him over his right shoulder. Soul Man was heavy, and Bernie thought he would collapse, but he willed himself forward. He struggled across the field and placed Soul Man gently on the bed of the truck.

He looked up at the tree line. No enemy soldiers had reappeared yet near the ruined machine gun nest. He might still have time to get the others. He ran back to his men. Val Reuther was alert, but the two others still alive were unconscious. Bernie carried them, one at a time, back to the truck. When he went back for Val, he was relieved to discover that the soldier did not have to be carried. He had been wounded severely in the left leg, but he was otherwise unharmed. Bernie put Val's left arm around his shoulder and his own right arm across Val's back, and together they hobbled back to the truck. Bernie took the wheel with Val riding shotgun beside him.

The truck started up after only three attempts. Bernie radioed to base that he was trying to bring the wounded back in a badly damaged truck at the rear of the shattered column. He asked for air support and a medevac helicopter to meet them as soon as possible. Then he put the truck into gear

and maneuvered it around the smoking hulk of the tank and onto the road back.

The truck had rumbled forward on its rims for only three hundred yards before he saw in the rearview mirror that they had pursuers. A squad of North Vietnamese regulars had emerged from the jungle to the north of the road.

Bernie looked at Val. “Think you can drive with that bad leg?”

“Yeah, I think so. All it’s got to do is work the clutch. Why?”

Bernie stopped the truck. He grabbed an RPG launcher and his rifle and jumped out.

“Drive!” he shouted. “It’s up to you, Val. Go!”

He ran for cover as Val struggled into the driver’s seat and got the truck moving again. Bernie laid his rifle on the ground, placed the RPG to his shoulder and looked through the viewfinder. The enemy was coming closer. Twelve of them were running lightly and swiftly down the road. With the truck struggling on its rims, they would overtake it in minutes. He had to stop them. But how long could he hold them off? One against twelve, even with the element of surprise, was impossible odds.

From the distance, he heard the thwap-thwap of an approaching helicopter. It must be the medevac he had requested. There was still hope.

He took careful aim with the RPG and fired. The grenade exploded, and four soldiers were flung to the ground. The other eight immediately spread out. Bernie fired his rifle and hit another one. The remaining seven all returned fire together, and Bernie dove to the ground. He felt a sharp pain stab him in the back, and everything turned black for a moment. But then his vision cleared. He fought the pain and fired again. The enemy soldiers dropped to the ground, unsure of how many Americans they were facing.

Bernie glanced back over his shoulder. In the distance, he saw the medevac land beside the truck. He knew he would not be evacuated with his men, but nonetheless, he felt a surge of pure joy at the sight. He turned back to face his attackers and fired off a long volley. Then he crept along the

ground until he was deeper into the jungle foliage. He stood up and began to run.

He heard the helicopter lift off and fly away. His men were safe! The thought gave him a surge of adrenaline, and he ran harder despite the searing pain in his back and the agony that shot through his left shoulder with every swing of his left arm. He ran until his lungs were on fire and his legs turned to rubber. He neither saw nor heard any sign of pursuers.

Bernie sank to the ground against the trunk of a jungle palm. He felt waves of nausea wash over him. His face was covered with a cold sweat. His body began to tremble, and he realized he might lose consciousness, which could mean death. He struggled to stay awake, but he a feeling of lassitude stole over him. If he recovered consciousness, he would try to find his way back to Dong Ho. And if he died, he died. He had done his best. He could not have done any more.

There was one more possibility. He might be discovered and taken prisoner. He didn't want his captors to know that he was the son of Charles Marsh, senator from Massachusetts.

Bernie pulled off his dog tags and all his insignia and buried them in the soft earth along with his helmet. The canopy of the jungle two hundred feet above his head obscured the sun, but shafts of sunlight did manage to filter through. The shafts grew brighter and brighter and brighter until they merged into a single iridescent pool of light that flickered for a moment and was gone.

Only blackness remained.

It was cold in the jungle. That was the first thing that entered Bernie's mind when he opened his eyes. He had no idea where he was or how long he had been there. He only knew that he was shivering with cold even though bright sunlight streamed in through a window and the humidity clung to his face like a wet rag. He remembered running through the jungle until he could run no more, collapsing against a jungle palm, bleeding from

his wounds, his chest and legs on fire. He remembered the sharp shafts of sunlight engulfed by a wave of blackness. And then nothing.

He heard steps and quickly closed his eyes. The door opened and someone came in. It was a woman, humming softly to herself. He heard the swish of water and felt the cool touch of a compress on his forehead. It felt good. He cracked his eyes open until the lashes of his upper and lower lids were barely touching. Through the sheer curtain of his lashes he saw a young Vietnamese woman with long glossy hair, large almond eyes, high cheekbones and creamy caramel skin. She was looking straight at him.

"You is waked up, American," she said, struggling to find the English words. "I am happily."

There was no use pretending anymore, so Bernie opened his eyes. The young woman couldn't have been more than twenty years old. She smiled at him with kind, intelligent eyes. Bernie realized they would not get too far with her English or his Vietnamese. Perhaps French would work better.

"*Qu'est-ce que je fais ici? Quel est cet endroit?*" he said. "What am I doing here? What is this place?"

"*Vous parlez français?*" she said with delight. "*Merveilleux!*"

"So where am I?" said Bernie, continuing in French.

"In a safe place," she said. "My name is Hoang Nhung. What is your name?"

Bernie had buried his name tags, but he had given no thought to an alternate name. He needed something with an American sound, not too distinctive, yet not too generic.

"Jerry Sayers," he said.

"Zherry," she repeated. "That is a nice name."

Bernie tried to turn to his side. A spear of hot pain immediately shot through his chest, and he cried out and fell back. A cold sweat covered his brow, and Nhung wiped it with a damp cloth.

"Lie still, Zherry," she said. "You're not ready to move. You have high fever, and your wounds are not healed. It's a miracle you're alive."

"Where am I?" he said. "How did I get here?"

"You're in Loc Binh. It is a village near the north border. My father, Hoang Van Tien, is the headman. He was on the way back from Dong Ho, where he had bought a water buffalo and a cart. He saw you through a bamboo hedgerow. You were almost dead, he says."

"Why did he rescue me? Why didn't he just leave me there?"

"My father did want to leave you there. What business did he have with a half-dead American soldier? But he says you had a pure and gentle face, so he took pity on you and brought you home in his cart. Also, we are Catholic, and my father believes deeply in the sanctity of life. Except where it is not practical, of course."

"Of course. How long have I been here?"

"Almost two weeks."

Bernie was stunned. "Two weeks! I've been unconscious for two whole weeks?"

"Yes, Zherry. You had bullet wounds in your right leg, your chest and your back. Some ribs were broken. You lost a lot of blood, and you were full of infection. You were hanging on to your life by a thread. Thank God, the crisis seems to be over, but you still have a long way to go."

"I guess I owe your father my life. Is there a doctor here in Loc Binh?"

"My father is a medicine man, too. He uses some Western methods and some Chinese medicine. He is very good with herbs. And I also helped a little. I studied nursing at the University of Hue."

"So I owe you my life as well. Why didn't you take me to a hospital?"

Nhung laughed. "Enough talk," she said. "You need some rest."

Over the next few days, the picture came into sharper focus. Bernie met Hoang Van Tien, who turned out to be a tall, middle-aged man with serious dark eyes and a thick head of hair. Considering his administrative and medical responsibilities, he did not have much time for Bernie, but he answered some questions. Nhung answered the others.

Loc Binh was a village of about thirty families five miles south of the

Demilitarized Zone between North and South Vietnam. It was a peaceful place, ignored by everyone because there was nothing of significance nearby, no roads, no airfields, no factories, no military installations. The only access to the village was a single track through the jungle barely wide enough for a pair of water buffalo. Hoang Van Tien lived alone with his daughter in a hut; his wife was dead, and his other children were grown and on their own. He had brought Bernie to Loc Binh in the dead of night. No one had seen him bring the American into his house. No one knew he was there.

One day, Bernie noticed Nhung giving him a perplexed look.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I don't know what to do," she said. "You're getting better slowly, but it's important that you begin to walk around and get some fresh air."

"Fine," said Bernie with undisguised eagerness. "Let's go. I'm ready."

"It's not so simple."

"Why not?"

"Because the people in this village don't like Americans."

"What are you saying?" said Bernie. "That this is a Viet Cong village?"

She stiffened. "The sympathies of the people are with the freedom fighters."

"You consider the Viet Cong freedom fighters?" said Bernie.

Nhung's dark eyes flashed. "So who are the fighters for freedom? The Americans? The corrupt stooges in Saigon?"

"That's right," said Bernie, more with defiance than conviction. "The Americans have come here to liberate the Vietnamese people from Communist oppression."

"Hah! You spout the propaganda, but you talk wind. What kind of freedom are you bringing us by killing our people, bombing our villages and destroying our crops? Who needs your kind of freedom?"

Bernie was reminded of the priest in Hue whose church he had destroyed. "So what are you saying?" he said. "That the people here want

the Communists?"

"We don't want Communists or anti-Communists. We want Vietnamese, that's what we want, not American puppets. If the Communists will prevail, we will accept them. And if they fail, we will get rid of them. We want to deal with our own problems. We don't want the Americans here."

"So you look at me as an intruder?"

Nhung's eyes softened. "Not you, Zherry. You are nice. You can stay here. Just send all your friends home."

Bernie smiled. "But in the meantime," he said, "I'm finished if I step outside, right?"

"Who knows? Someone may kill you or report you. Or they'll just drag you off to prison camp."

"So I guess I'll have to get my exercise right here in this room."

Nhung shook her head. "There is no room here for more than two steps." She bit her lip and fought back a tear. "I don't know what we're going to do with you, Zherry. How is this business going to end? Should we patch you up and send you back to kill more people?" Then she left the room before he had a chance to reply.

The next day, she was distant and cool when she brought him his food and medications.

"I had an idea, Nhung," he said, "about how we can go outside safely."

She arched her eyebrows. "This I want to hear."

"Do you speak Russian?" said Bernie.

"No. Maybe one or two words, but no."

"Well, I do speak Russian. We can tell the people in the village that I'm Russian."

"But they will recognize your American accent," Nhung objected.

"Really? Do I speak French with an American accent?"

"No, you don't," she admitted. "You speak very well."

"I'm good at languages, Nhung. I can speak a fairly good Russian

without an accent, and" – he switched into an exaggerated Russian accent – "I can speak French with a Russian accent."

Nhung laughed in spite of herself. "You know, we may just be able to pull this off. But we will need a good story to explain your being here."

"No problem," he said. "Let's prepare a story. It needs to be strong and simple. Let's see, I'm a Russian journalist attached to a North Vietnamese regiment that was attacked by American gunships. I was wounded and escaped into the jungle. Your father found me and brought me here a few days ago to recuperate. I am on my own time and can write about whatever I wish, as long as it promotes the ideals of the proletariat."

"Who do you work for? As a journalist, I mean."

"Good question. Sharp. I write for *Trud*, a labor newspaper."

"Good. A fast response. You will also need a new name, of course."

"How about Alexei Kuragin?" said Bernie.

"All right, I understand Kuragin. That's from Tolstoy. Why Alexei?"

"I like it."

"That's as good a reason as any," she said. "I'll speak to my father."

And so Bernie Marsh, who had become Jerry Sayers, now became Alexei Kuragin. The village people greeted him warmly. The called him The Russian. They crowded around Bernie and Nhung every time they strolled through the village and plied him with questions about life in the Soviet Union and about his personal life.

He flourished in the fresh air of the village once he was able to go outside. His sickroom pallor disappeared, and he grew stronger by the day. In the beginning, he hobbled along with the aid of a bamboo cane, but soon he was able to walk unassisted. The simple village diet of rice, vegetables and a little bit of fish slimmed him down and made him fit.

The daily walks with Nhung increased in length. They walked out into the fields and rice paddies. Sometimes they ventured into the jungle to watch the birds and the monkeys. Bernie marveled at the beauty of the place. It was a paradise, lush, green, alive. Most of the terrain he had seen

thus far in Vietnam was branded by the killing machines, but in this remote corner of the countryside, the landscape was still pristine.

On their walks, Bernie and Nhung would talk about politics, life in America, life in general, books, music and anything else that came into their young minds.

"What does Zherry Sayers mean?" she asked on one of their walks.

"What does it mean? Why, I don't know. I suppose it once meant something, but I don't think it means anything now. It's just a name. What does Hoang Nhung mean?"

She smiled. "In Vietnamese, all names have meanings. Hoang is my family name. It means royal yellow. Nhung is my private name. It means velvet."

"That's a lovely name."

"I also have another name. In French, I am Nicole."

"Also a beautiful name. I'm not sure which I like better, Nicole or Nhung. And what does Loc Binh mean?"

"Loc Binh means blessings of peace."

"What an appropriate name. This place has really been blessed with peace. There is a war raging twenty-five miles away, and it's as if we're on a different planet."

She gave him a sidelong look. "Are you happy here, Zherry?"

The question took him by surprise. "Yes, I'm happy."

"You are a very good person, Zherry. The better I get to know you, the more I recognize your noble spirit. This is not a war for you."

A shadow fell over his face. "I have a duty."

"To whom?"

"To my country. To my comrades. To my family."

"And to yourself? What is your duty to yourself?"

Bernie remained silent.

"Zherry, I know you. You yearn for freedom, but you don't know what it is."

"And you do?"

"More than you, Zherry," she snapped, but then her voice softened. "Freedom means to live by your beliefs and ideals. But you live by other people's beliefs. You came to Vietnam to destroy our country so that we too can live by the beliefs of those other people. And you think you are bringing us freedom?"

"So what's your point, Nhung?"

"I am asking you to stay here. You are strong. Your wounds have healed. You'll have to decide soon. Don't pick up your rifle again. Break free."

Late that night, as Bernie and Nhung's father played a game of chess, the older man put his hand on Bernie's arm.

"According to Vietnamese custom," he said, "fathers sometimes speak for their children. I offer you the hand of my daughter in marriage. She is agreeable. Are you? Don't answer me now. We will talk in the morning."

After the household was fast asleep, Bernie went out for a midnight walk under the stars. His mind was in turmoil. As far as his battalion was concerned, he was dead. The men evacuated from Route 9 by medevac had seen him single-handedly holding off a dozen enemy soldiers. They knew it would take a miracle for him to survive. He had undoubtedly been listed as killed in action, and his family had been informed. No one was looking for him. No one knew he was alive. He was really free to follow his own heart. So what did he want to do? Did he have the stomach for more killing and destruction, for more blood on his hands?

But the issue involved more than that, much more. Here at last was his opportunity to break free from the grip of his father and pursue his own life. As long as he was Bernie Marsh he would always be under the thumb of the tyrannical old man. Here was his chance to start a new life with a charming, intelligent and passionate Vietnamese young woman who occupied his thoughts day and night, whom he loved as he had never loved anyone before.

In the morning, Bernie went to Hoang Van Tien and told him he would be honored to marry his daughter. Six weeks after Bernie was brought to Loc Binh in a buffalo cart, he married Nhung in a Catholic ceremony with Hoang officiating and the entire village in attendance.

The next year was the happiest time in Bernie's life. Hoang gave the young couple their own hut, which they turned into a pleasant and comfortable home. They worked hard, lived simply and were exceedingly fulfilled. Bernie learned a serviceable Vietnamese – in which he managed to sound ponderously Russian – and he used it to teach mathematics and science to the village children. The youngsters laughed good-naturedly at his errors and mispronunciations, and they loved every minute of it.

Spring turned into summer and summer into fall. Toward the end of the winter, almost exactly a year after Bernie arrived in Loc Binh, Nhung gave birth to a little girl. They named her Mai, which means cherry blossom in Vietnamese. She was a beautiful child, with jet black hair like her mother and pale blue eyes like her father. Bernie was infatuated with her. He also felt that somehow she represented atonement for the pregnant Vietnamese woman and the child Loomis had killed in the village on Route 1 in what now seemed like another lifetime.

A month later, Nhung's brother arrived in Loc Binh. His name was Hoang Van Quang, and he was an officer in the Viet Cong. He greeted his new brother-in-law cordially.

"My father and sister speak very highly of you, Alexei," he said. "So I accept you with open arms as my brother. But I was wondering about your plans. Eventually, you're going to have to go back to Russia, won't you?"

"Eventually, I will go back to the *rodina*, the motherland," said Bernie. "That is my home, and it will become the home of my wife and daughter. But for now I can stay here until the end of the war. Soon I will start sending dispatches back to Moscow. I believe they will like my work, and they will be happy to leave me here."

“My brother, how can you report on the war from Loc Binh?” said Quang.

“Oh, I’ll have to travel around the country. But this will be my home until I am ready to go back to Russia.”

“I have some information for you,” said Quang. “Russia will soon be coming to you.”

Bernie leaned forward. “What do you mean?”

“The North Vietnamese Army is cutting a road through the jungle near here. They should be here in a few weeks. They have Russian engineers with them. I’m sure they’ll have bottles of vodka, so you can share a few rounds and catch up on what’s happening in good old Mother Russia.”

Bernie smiled with feigned pleasure. “It’ll be great to see faces from home, but it is too bad the road will bring an end to peacefulness in Loc Binh.”

Quang shrugged. “It can’t be helped. When this war is over and the Americans are driven out, we will restore the peacefulness of our village and the whole country.”

Late at night, Bernie told Nhung about the road and the Russian engineers. The serene world of Loc Binh would be sucked into the war, and Bernie would be in dire danger of discovery. He could fool the people of the village and even Quang, but he would never be able to fool real Russians. It would even be difficult to fool battle-hardened North Vietnamese regulars.

“Zherry, you must begin to travel right away,” she told him. “You are a journalist, and journalists travel. You were wounded terribly, but now you’re recovered and ready to report again. You’ll go down to the Dong Ho area once or twice in the next few weeks, so people will get used to your traveling. When we hear that the Russians are coming, you’ll leave again and stay away until they move on. This war cannot go on forever. We’ll get through this, Zherry.”

Bernie acknowledged the wisdom of her advice and began to behave like a Russian journalist on assignment in Vietnam, spending more time

away from Loc Binh than at home. Five weeks after Quang's visit, word of the imminent arrival of a North Vietnamese Army battalion reached Loc Binh. Thirty minutes later, Bernie left Loc Binh. But he didn't go too far.

Over the previous year, Bernie had become familiar with the ways of the jungle in the vicinity. He found a hiding place no more than a few hundred yards from the village. He waited until he heard the sounds of mechanized vehicles. Then he took a pair of binoculars he had bought on one of his journalistic excursions and climbed a tall tree. He settled himself securely into a notch between two thick branches and fixed his binoculars on the village.

As he watched, the North Vietnamese column broke through the foliage into a rice paddy just to the east of Loc Binh. Light tanks and halftracks streamed from the jungle in a steady flow and crossed over to pitch camp in a large open field. Three command cars, escorted by tanks and halftracks, peeled off and headed toward the village. A man was coming out to greet them. Most of the villagers were gaping at the armored column. Bernie sharpened the focus on his binoculars a little and recognized Hoang Van Tien, his father-in-law, who was directing the visitors into the village. Bernie breathed a sigh of relief. The North Vietnamese didn't appear hostile, and they didn't seem to be inclined to remain in Loc Binh more than a short while.

Bernie felt the vibration of the air before he saw them streaking across the sky. All at once, the sky was full of F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers streaking down with cannons blazing toward the North Vietnamese Army camp. The North Vietnamese were caught completely by surprise, and the carnage was horrific. One squadron of jets caught sight of the command cars and armored vehicles in Loc Binh, and they dropped bombs and directed cannon fire at the defenseless village.

From the south, helicopter gunships strafed the enemy camp and the village from closer range. The gunship fired rockets into the village, and within minutes, the village was ablaze. Bernie saw his father-in-law cut

down, tossed about like a bouncing ball by a hail of bullets. He also saw dozens of people from the village fleeing into the jungle, away from the North Vietnamese camp, but he could not tell if his wife and daughter were among them. Bernie could only pray that his wife and daughter had escaped.

Suddenly, an orange blanket of fire exploded over the jungle to the north of the village, where the bulk of the North Vietnamese column still remained. The Phantoms were dropping napalm, the jelled gasoline that burned like hellfire. Even in his perch high up in the trees, Bernie could smell the stench of burning flesh.

The battle, if it could be called a battle, was over in less than an hour. The exposed North Vietnamese units and the village were destroyed, and the remnants of the column retreated toward North Vietnam. American gunships and troop carriers ferried in a large contingent of Marines to occupy the killing field. They established a wide perimeter and sent out patrols in all directions.

Bernie sat in his treetop and wept until he felt his heart would break. His wife and infant daughter were somewhere down there, maybe alive, probably dead. He couldn't go down there and declare himself. How would he explain his presence there? How would he explain his yearlong absence from his battalion? Time to go back, he finally decided. There was nothing left for him in Loc Binh.

He waited until twilight and slipped away into the night, heading east and south in the direction of Dong Ho and ultimately Hue. He concocted a story about being captured and held prisoner by the Viet Cong in rat-infested pits for over a year until he managed to escape. He would say he'd been unconscious and disoriented for long stretches, and his memory often failed him. He would claim he could not pinpoint the location of the places he had been held prisoner. All he knew was that they were somewhere to the west.

He stayed in the jungle for three weeks eating only berries and herbs.

By the time he emerged, he was emaciated, bruised, thickly encrusted with filth and half-devoured by jungle insects. He looked like a man who had been kept prisoner for a year under inhumane conditions.

Bernie was given a hero's welcome in Camp Evans, as well as a hot meal and a clean bed in the hospital. He learned that he had been awarded a posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor for his courageous actions on Route 1; his coming back to life after a year of torture and pain made him all the more of a hero. He also learned that the new president in Washington – Richard Nixon, of all people – wanted him to come to the White House as soon as he was released from the hospital. His war was over.