# *Come the Foxes"*

# From the Book West to Cambodia

# by S. L. A. Marshall

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***"Come the Foxes"***

**When the company started its long march at 0800, moving northeast from Hill 637 in the hope of bivouacking at Hill 292, all hands were content with one thing—the man on the point for Second Platoon.**

**That was a phenomenon compounded, because the point man is the eyes, ears, and nose of an infantry column thrusting into enemy country; if his senses fail, so may the unit. Yet Spec. 4 David E. McLemore, age 19, had been with the company only five weeks.**

**More about him later. The unit was Charley Company, Second Battalion of the 35th Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, under command of Capt. Michael R. Tryon, age 25.**

**The day was 28 October, 1966, and it turned out to be hot and fair, a dazzling sun boosting the temperature above 80 before mid-morning, with not one cloud appearing in the sky thereafter.**

**The scene was the western Central Highlands. The march, should one wish to be technical about it, was to extend from coordinate YA 778-567 to coordinate 796-597 on the same map sheet. It was very rough country—straight-faced, slab-sided hills for the most part, with interspersed jungle patches, the canopy of which occasionally rose to 70 feet, the undergrowth so dense that the column front had to hack its way through, though there was little bamboo and no bamboozles (great snarled clumps of the stuff at ground level) whatever.**

**The mission was to "search and destroy," a military euphemism meaning that, if any enemy force gets in the way, it is to be bopped. If nothing of the sort transpired, the column might link up with Task Force MacDonald, a name that sounds big, though the TF consisted of a headquarters company, recon platoon, and an understrength C.I.D.G. (Civilian Irregular Defense Group) company, all under command of Capt. Michael MacDonald, USMA '62. The TF was about five kilometers east of Tryon's outfit, and both bodies were beating out the countryside directly north of the Se San River.**

**Expectations were not high. No promising or specific piece of intelligence had pointed them in the direction taken. Still, they went heavily loaded. The average rifleman carried 500 rounds for his M-16, two frag grenades, and one smoke grenade. Some toted as many as four frag grenades and three smoke grenades besides the rifle ammo. There were two claymore mines per squad. Fountain, a machine gunner, was loaded with 900 rounds for his M-60. Marsh, a grenadier, had his M-79 launcher, 50 rounds to fire from it, a .45 Colt pistol with 40 rounds, and, at the last moment, added five canister rounds to the 50 high explosive rounds that he was already packing for the M-79. A human pack mule, he must have been burdened with 70**

**pounds (not counting the clothing he wore), with almost no chance that he would need even half of it**

**The variation was greatest in the food department. Some men carried three rations. Others had none, or a fraction of one. Those who went foodless were big eaters who had already downed everything they brought to the field**

**So we get to McLemore, the point man. He carried 520 rifle rounds and half a ration, well-conditioned to heft the one and do without the other. He is a tall, handsome Negro, with the build of an all-American end A high school graduate from Fort Worth, he had starred in football, baseball, and track For other reasons, perhaps better ones, he stands out in the crowd. A member of a motor unit, he had volunteered for infantry duty Then, in the brief time he had been with the unit, he had memorized the full name and home town of every one of its 129 members He radiated self-confidence and some special quality in him, possibly his quiet manner and directness of statement, won the trust of all the other men So he was quickly made an acting NCO There is no explaining his prodigious memory. He had no special training; he had worked only in a metal-processing plant while going to school. One can imagine such a man going far in politics.**

**It proved to be not a big day for McLemore on the point, or for Second Platoon, which slogged along behind him, or for First Platoon, which had stepped out earlier and was at least 1,000 meters away throughout the march, or for Third Platoon, which moved separately from Second by about the same distance. They did not move by the same trace, nor did any platoon hold to one azimuth. They had been told to zigzag to confuse the enemy, and they followed instructions. Also, they had been warned to stay away from trails "as much as possible." But, as things went, much wasn't possible. There were too many trails, all could not be avoided, and, as men grew tired, the temptation to take a trail rather than to hack through thick brush became less resistible.**

**Without incident of any kind, the morning march was simply a sweat, bone-wearying, nervously irritating, and blister-forming. The only open country the men saw were a few rice paddy strips, most of them completely dried out, the few under cultivation badly tended. Not a person was to be seen. Otherwise, their route carried them alternately through narrow flats thickly grown with elephant grass, brush, or reeds, and over the sharp ridges, rock-ledged at the base and halfway up the slope, crowned with jungle growth spliced heavily with wait-a-minute thorn vines and creepers.**

**At 1100 they entered upon a well-used enemy base camp. Their early caution was in vain. It had been stripped bare. Its one-time occupants had cleared away, leaving nothing that was worth destroying. But there they rested briefly in the shade. At about 1730 Second Platoon came to a hamlet with four hootches. But the day was going fast, the column still had a far piece to travel, and so McLemore kept going, not pausing to check the village out. One hour earlier, First Platoon had come that way and had stopped for a look**

**In two of the houses there were fires, or there had been, and the coals were still warm. In all four there were jugs of water and the taste was sweet. Each had a supply of rice and eggs, with salt and other pantry stuff. Two had henhouses; the chickens were feeding The nests were checked by the platoon sergeant, Glenn Gladue, there were no newly laid eggs. Outside each house was a foxhole.**

**One joker commented, "Looka there, foxes next to chicken roosts."**

**Gladue, the first to sight the houses, said to Lt. James Lanning, I would say these are fresh signs.**

**Lanning nodded**

**"What do you think it means?" Gladue asked.**

**Lanning shook his head.**

**Gladue subsequently dismissed the subject with a comment appropriate to the entire day's exercise "That's the one thing about the VC. You can't tell him from a simple farmer, especially when you don't have a chance to see either."**

**First Platoon moved on 1,000 meters to Hill 292, which had already been designated for the nighttime defense. It closed on the knob at 1700, but did not feel too cheerful about it. The ground was high enough, but there were many tall trees, and the ground was littered with large boulders and rubble, though there were patches of loose earth. The men had time to send out a watering party to a clear stream that lay about 300 meters to the west of the position, some distance beyond the open ground that would be used for a landing zone. By the time the party had returned with the water First Platoon's third of the perimeter was already well foxholed, and the crew-served weapons were in place.**

**McLemore led Second Platoon into the rim just 90 minutes later. Its watering party was sped to the creek because the night was now coming with a rush, as it always does in these latitudes. The rest of the platoon fitted into a sector and began looking for the softer spots where digging was possible.**

**McLemore saw a relatively tight position, approximately egg-shaped, measuring about 70 by 100 meters, if two lines were drawn through the center, configured so because it followed a crestline overlooking narrow and sloping fields of fire. Although hardly a desirable spot for defense, it was better than the average in Vietnam and was preferable to any other prospect in the neighborhood. However, it was the presetting of the LZ that had determined where the perimeter would form.**

**Only 29 men were in First Platoon. Second Platoon was also thin, mustering just 31. Counting the men around Tryon in the headquarters group, the force as of that moment totaled 73, which is less than three-fourths of the minimum figure that the experts say is needed for a rifle company to "be in business." Unsatisfactory is the word for it.**

**The Second Platoon sweep that would go out that evening once the perimeter had shaped up was already standing by, one squad armed and ready to go, but awaiting, as were Captain Tryon and the others, the return of the watering party. The patrol out of First Platoon, under S.Sgt. Jesse Johnson, a 31-year-old Negro from St. Louis with nine years of Regular Army service, had made its round trip, scouting one main trail that ran past the perimeter for 250 meters to the northwest.**

**"Negative," Johnson had said to Tryon "We didn't see or smell one thing."**

**First Platoon's outposts had been pulled in and no LP's had yet gone out.**

**So among the men of the main body within the clearing there was no general feeling of alarm or awareness of immediate danger. Yet there were exceptions. The dark was coming ever**

**faster, though it was not yet full in those few minutes before the moon would rise. It was the eerie time of day when the imagination plays tricks and the eyes see too much and too little**

**Both machine-gun positions in First Platoon were well forward on the rim and the crews, working hard at it, had about finished the task of setting the weapons and digging a hole in very loose earth Pfc Michael Edwards, the assistant gunner on the right, straightened up and peered at the brush line 30 meters to his front**

**"Surer than hell," he whispered, "I see eyes out there Can't you see them?"**

**His audience was the gunner, Pfc Dennis W Fountain, 21, of Lansing, Mich. Fountain quit digging to take a look. Several moments passed, then he answered, "I see something that looks like eyes." He paused, looked back over his shoulder, and added, "Mike, the moon has just come over the trees What we see may be a reflection from the leaves"**

**At the other gun, Pfc "Chick" St Clair, head gunner, was also stirring and staring "Mac," he whispered, "I am not kidding—I see something out there. Maybe it's my imagination You take a look"**

**McLemore squinted long and hard. "I see nothing," he said. "I hope I keep seeing nothing. You better hope, too."**

**At that precise moment a whistle was blown somewhere out beyond the company circle. As the sound died, a green-star cluster rose above the hush not more than 10 meters to their front.**

**Among the watering party, now legging it back to the company position as fast as men could beat through the bush, there were none of these equivocal doubts and false hopes. Approaching the landing zone on the return journey, Pfc. Gary Lynn Finney was certain he saw a movement off to his right, and told the others. Finney, a 23-year-old welder from Bay City, Mich., the father of two children, may have felt a pang that he had extended his tour in Vietnam for six months.**

**As they swept past the LZ, they all felt the presence. They saw no one and heard nothing. But the reeds on both sides of them were bending and billowing, and they knew the movement marked the passage of crawling men because the night was windless. The perimeter was 50 meters farther along. Wordlessly, and by common consent, the men broke into a run. Spec. 4 James E. Pell, who had charge of the Command Post security detail, rushed on ahead to tell the news to 1st Sgt. Huey P. Danley, a Louisianan. Not quite making it, he was five meters from Danley when the first hot rounds beat against the company's ground.**

**One casualty was calling for an aid man before the bullets arrived. Pfc. Terry Kellam, a rifleman, had been standing when the green-star cluster was fired. It hit him in the chest and shoulder. Pfc. Thomas V. Browne, a 19-year-old high school grad from Denver, serving as assistant gunner, tried to help by saying, "You got a nice Purple Heart burn." That was small consolation for Kellam, and there was none for Browne. He had eaten all his rations much too early during the march, and his belly was feeling empty**

**Less than 30 seconds later came the blast of rifle and machine-gun fire. It broke more raggedly than shatteringly against the half of the company circle that faced the LZ, engaging all positions of Second Platoon and three positions of First Platoon Blazing at them were two machine guns and perhaps 20 other automatic weapons. The North Vietnamese fire base was**

**at least 30 meters from the company line as the action began. This is a greater distance than is their custom in staging a surprise. Sergeant Johnson kept wondering about it. Had the rush-through of the watering party spoiled what the enemy had intended?**

**Certainly something—whether it was the dash of the watering party or some deranging element known only to themselves—must have made the enemy charge in planlessly, and without first reconning their target. For, in staging it, this was a fool's exercise. They engaged entirely and directly half of the one platoon that was solidly set, while at first striking hardly more than a glancing blow against the platoon that was footloose and unprotected. And on the far side of the oval was open, unguarded ground, a broad and inviting avenue, Where other troops should have been.**

**They—the enemy—had come over the same trail from the southwest that Second Platoon had taken from the hamlet, had, in effect, shadowed the Column for that distance, then lost themselves in the tall grass when they saw the watering party doubling back toward their rear. All things that happened that evening, and every sign that was studied on the following morning, so indicate. Whether the shadowing had begun much earlier in the day is beyond saying. There is only the mute proof suggesting that the people in the little settlement had been warned in time to clear away. Yet that had happened 90 minutes before Second Platoon came up, a circumstance that implies the NVA was somewhere in the vicinity and had latched onto the company's movement rather late in the day.**

**Seeing the opening act from another angle, McLemore was still more mystified than Johnson. Enemy skirmishers had gained to within 10 meters of his position when the first round was fired. He could see them dodging about now in the underbrush, lunging here and there for better cover, though they were not shooting. Although McLemore's own M-60 was chattering away, the ground dropped off so sharply just beyond the muzzle that he could not bring fire to bear on these dodging figures without standing, and he figured that that would be a silly way to die. He said to his partner, St. Clair, "Chick, we're throwing away bullets."**

**Sergeant Wendell Wilson of Second Platoon, from Scottsville, Ky., was killed instantly in the first second. He had been sitting, back to the enemy, feet dangling in a shallow hole, as he spooned beans from a C-ration tin. Two bullets, not more than an inch apart, entered near his spine and tore through his heart. He slumped over, doubled up in the fox hole.**

**Seeing it happen, not five feet away, Fountain knew Wilson was dead and did not bother to check the body. At the same time, Pfc. Aaron Cowan of East St. Louis, a rifleman on the other side of Fountain, was hit by a bullet in the left thigh. Bewildered by the suddenness of the wounding, he yelled to Fountain, "Hell, they didn't let me get started."**

**Private First Class Evander Marsh, a 20-year-old Negro from Newark, had time to get off two rounds from his M-79 launchers; he aimed toward the spot 15 meters off where he had seen the flare go up. The reason he had taken position behind a tree was that he had found too late that the foxhole was not large enough to hold both himself and his buddy, Pfc. Thomas Leak Jr. of Kansas City, Mo. So he yielded the better cover to his friend and within 30 seconds afterward heard Leak crying, "I'm hit, Marsh, hit, hit, hit." Marsh crawled over from the tree. Leak had a bad sucking chest wound from a bullet. "You'll have to wait," Marsh said. "The medic has his hands full." Starting back to the tree, Marsh ran into Pfc. George Thomas, a rifleman. A bullet had creased Thomas' left shoulder blade; it was a slight wound. Thomas was crawling to his position to get his rifle, though he had no intention of using it. He said to Marsh, "I been shot through and through. I'm finished."**

**Browne, the assistant gunner, had no sooner finished giving aid to Kellam than he heard a cry his own position: "Oh, my eye, my eye, my "It came from the chief gunner, Spec. 4 Robert Martinez of Denver. A grenade fragment had blinded his left eye. Browne pulled out his handkerchief and handed it to Martinez, saying, "That will have to do you till the aid man comes." Together, they kept working the gun, firing at the flashes they saw in the bush. Careful with their aiming, they fired not more than 100 rounds in the first minute and were enormously pleased when they saw some of the flashes from enemy ground wink out, to stay that way.**

**Sergeant Johnson was also having his moments of satisfaction. When the fight had been going less than one minute, he crawled along, checking the platoon line from end to end. Every man in position to fire was using his weapon.**

**In Second Platoon's sector both machine guns were going, and one was going too well. Whereas young Fountain was firing in short bursts, Pfc. Glenn Young on the other gun was letting everything go. "Slow down a bit," Fountain yelled to him. "Take it easy, save that ammo." Young shouted back, "OK, I will," and just then a bullet hit him in the right shoulder. Badly hurt, he slumped over and rested on the gun, waiting for an aid man.**

**By the time the fight was three minutes along Captain Tryon became concerned that the men on the embattled sector were firing excessively, though somewhat less than half of the perimeter remained nonengaged. He sent Sergeant Danley over from the command post with instructions to crawl along the foxhole line and pass the word: "Ease off on the fire; make it semiautomatic." Then for emphasis, the captain himself yelled it loud and clear: "Fire semiautomatic!"**

**Finney, who was working as radio telephone operator for the captain, got the word along to the others. And he also heard the echo. Back from the bush where the enemy lay came the mocking cry in good English: "That's right, boys. Make it semiautomatic, not automatic. Do what your captain says." The enemy is funny that way. Other voices from the bush were chorusing: "Hello, hello, hello, hello," chattering along like so many magpies.**

**With the fight only five minutes along McLemore tested the claymore mines he had buried and found that the wire had been cut, which could only mean that skirmishers had moved to within 15 feet of him. Thereupon Edwards tested his claymore and in the wake of the blast heard several voices screaming only a few yards to his front. He had fired the mine in the nick of time.**

**His partner, Fountain, was reserving his mine for the big push that he thought would be coming soon. A cool head this one, though he is so slight and so blond that the nickname Baby Face would fit him. Fountain worked on the Oldsmobile assembly line before becoming a soldier. Married to a girl from Remus, Mich., he got news that their first child, Laurie Linn, was born at just about the time of this battle. It was his first action and he was making the most of it. He knew that there were enemy skirmishers within 10 feet of his gun, but, like McLemore, he could not bring fire to bear on them without standing in the clear.**

**Fountain's first good opening came when a figure bounded out of the dark and straight for the gun where Young had collapsed from the shoulder wound. Before Fountain could swing his M-60 around, the Vietnamese, standing directly above Young, put two more bullets in him, one in the right leg, the other in the left chest. So died Young, much too young. The skirmisher started back over the piled-up logs in front of Young's gun. He was standing again and starting to run when Fountain's M-60 fire cut him down.**

**By then—five minutes after the fight began - artillery was supporting the American infantry. The lines were too close-joined to permit effective help by killing shells, so the guns were firing only illuminating rounds. The flares made the foreground almost as bright as sunlight would have, but they were also falling so close that the defenders were almost blinded.**

**For the first time McLemore could clearly see five enemy soldiers crawling toward his position. His partner, St. Clair, taking a chance, jumped up and shot three of them with the M-60—range, seven feet. A fourth skirmisher, five feet to the trio's left, which put him on McLemore's right, jumped to his feet, SKS carbine in hand with shining bayonet fixed, and came on.**

**He was moving on a diagonal, passing up St. Clair. McLemore had moved a few feet away when St. Clair was firing. Spec. 4 Allan Jarrett, now standing in his foxhole, yelled to McLemore, "Mac, he's charging you!" But McLemore, for the moment, could see nothing; he had been blinded by the flares. Without taking aim, Jarrett fired an M-79 grenade at the man. The range was too close; the grenade bounced off his chest without exploding, giving him no pause whatsoever. Jarrett dropped his M-79, whipped out his Colt .45, and emptied the clip at the charging figure. At least four bullets hit the Vietnamese around the chest and shoulders and part of his jaw was shot away. Yet not one bullet dropped him and he kept coming, though a little slower. McLemore was now with it; his eyesight had adjusted and he could see the target in silhouette. He emptied a full magazine from his M-16 into the enemy soldier The shots tore his guts out—McLemore saw the abdominal cavity open and the intestines spill forth—but he still was not stopped. The Viet dropped to one knee, paused for a second or two, rose, and came on again. McLemore emptied two more magazines in him as he tottered forward. The man dropped at McLemore's feet, a bloody pulp, riddled by more than 50 bullets. Even so, the American had had to step back several paces as the Vietnamese. came on to avoid collision.**

**"He got to kissin' distance," said McLemore, shaking.**

**"Did you ever see anything like that?" St. Clair remarked.**

**To both of them it seemed that in that moment they had played out an act quite alone, an act in which no other person in the world had the slightest interest. Looking at the bayonet and the smashed SKS, McLemore shook his head in surprise at himself that he had blown so much ammunition.**

**After six minutes of the action it seemed to Finney that the ground beyond the perimeter suddenly quieted. Then he heard a whistle blow, and as the sound died two grenades came in on his machine gun. Both were duds. He waited a few seconds before throwing them out, then he heard grenades popping elsewhere along the line. Eight potato mashers sailed in on McLemore and St. Clair; all failed to explode. Marsh was less fortunate. He was diving head first for his foxhole when the grenade shower started. His legs were in the air when one potato masher exploded five feet from the hole. One slug tore into his kneecap.**

**Private First Class Timothy Rooney, First Platoon's aid man, was next to Second Platoon's flank when the grenading began. One missile blasted out next to his legs; miraculously, no metal touched him, though the explosion lifted him bodily and threw him outside the perimeter. In the fall he pulled the muscles of his left arm. Crawling back, he started toward Martinez to give him first aid. A North Vietnamese charged in to stop him, flashing a knife. Rooney took out his .45 pistol, got to his feet, grappled with the man, then conked him in the head and continued on, paying as much heed as if he had been swatting a fly. Finney then**

**saw someone flash out of the darkness and empty an M46 clip into the prone figure. Rooney was already working on Martinez.**

**Private First Class James Stewart, a Second Platoon rifleman, was lying next to a tree and using it for cover. As he rolled over, a grenade came in and exploded under his body. The metal tore into his groin, scrotum, and lower bowel. Rooney looked him over and figured he had little or no chance. He gave him morphine. Sgt. Phillip Hord, a First Platoon squad leader, had a grenade explode in front of his foxhole and was peppered with metal in the chest and shoulders. Also out of First Platoon, Spec. 4 James Springer was hit by fragments in the hack and right arm; this happened less than a minute after a bullet, first stripping the sight from his rifle, became lodged in his right arm.**

**Fighting next to McLemore, Pfc. Harry Williams was hit by a large grenade shard in the right thigh. "Mac," he said, "I think I got a bullet in my leg." McLemore stripped down his pants, felt him Over, and said, "So far as I can tell, you got nothing there but blood." A minute or so later, Rooney was in the hole bandaging Williams. It was his first fight.**

**The grenading lasted about four minutes. By the time the fight was 10 minutes along, the U.S. artillery was working over the ground outside the perimeter, feeling its way carefully, gradually coming closer, firing three shells at a time. The light battery support came from A and B of the Second of the Ninth Field. There was also fire from the 175's of A/6/14th, based at Pleijerang. Guided by Lt. James Stutts, a forward observer who had been promoted that day, the fires ranged all around the outer circle, except in the south-southwest quadrant.**

**There was good reason for the omission. The company's Third Platoon was still out there somewhere, wondering what to do. With the fight 11 minutes old, the platoon called in for the first time. It had held up at a river bank, and was approximately 700 meters from the perimeter to the south-southwest. What to do? "Don't try to come in," Tryon said. "Stay right where you are until morning." With the pressure still building against the company, that was the toughest decision made during the night, and its wisdom is beyond question. The platoon stayed in place. One man was killed by a sniper in early morning; its experience otherwise was uneventful.**

**When the grenading tapered off, Pfc. John M. Mucci saw a large figure loom directly in front of his foxhole. Because of its size, he thought he was looking at a GI. "Come on in!" Mucci yelled. The figure dashed toward him. A little late, Mucci realized it was a North Vietnamese. He tried to fire Upward with his M-16; there was only a click—the magazine was empty. He made a football tackle at the man's knees and dragged him down into the (foxhole).**

**Mucci had already reached for his machete as he now slashed away at the tall enemy.**

**Specialist 4 Robert Prunier jumped to help Mucci and got a throttling hold on the NVA soldier's neck. Suddenly Mucci's blade broke, leaving half the steel in the man's shoulder. Prunier, maintaining his stranglehold, was now on top of the Vietnamese and bearing down on him with his full weight. Mucci, freeing himself from the tangle, picked up Prunier's M-16. By then Prunier had the body so well covered that Mucci had only the man's legs for a target. He fired two bullets into the thighs and the figure went limp.**

**Figuring he was dead, Mucci and Prunier picked him up out of the foxhole and heaved him toward the outer darkness. The body came down heavily on the back of the aid man, Rooney. Rooney grabbed for one arm and was astounded to see it swing around in a complete circle; Mucci's machete had cut through the bone and the arm was dangling by flesh alone.**

**Sickened, believing the man dead, Rooney started crawling away. Mucci, meanwhile, had lost interest, having resumed fire from his foxhole. He glanced that way just by chance and saw that the "dead man," too, was in motion, pawing his way along, using only one arm. That was too much. Having used everything else, Mucci went after him with an entrenching shovel, at last killing the enemy by bashing in his head. It took two or three minutes.**

**Maybe a minute passed after Mucci got back to his foxhole. Then from the outer darkness came a mocking voice in English: "Hey GI, how is your company commander?"**

**Undaunted, Mucci sang out, "He's fine. How about yours?"**

**"Not very well," came the answer You have just killed him."**

**There could be little doubt about it. What had once been a fine figure of a man was ornamented with an officer's belt and was carrying a pistol that had remained undrawn, its firing pin broken.**

**With that incident, the curtain dropped, concluding the first act. Beginning at approximately 1930 there came a quiet that lasted for 30 minutes. Preceding it, a derisive yell came from in front of McLemore: "Hey GI's, we are backing away. But don't worry. We will be back. So don't go yet."**

**But unlike the effect of Chinese Communist music on Gen. Walton Walker's Eighth Army in Korea in November, 1950, these bizarre and macabre touches to the enemy's behavior neither awed nor added special tension to the Americans present who were fighting the NVA for the first time. McLemore, Fountain, and the others talked it over. They concluded that the enemy was "hopped up" from some narcotic. There was another mark of it; the enemy were pressing the attack very indifferently. They had numbers but no unity, signals but no system, madness but no method.**

**How far the North Vietnamese had pulled back, no one knew, and, in the circumstances, there was no thought of scouting after them to find out. Tryon and the others around the command post had their hands full too soon afterward. Two Air Force Husky medical-evacuation craft were being brought in to take out the most critical cases among the casualties. Spec. 4 Clarence Young was on the radio, mg the lead Husky into the proper spot; he would shortly be relieved by Finney. Other men were moving around inside the perimeter, waving flashlights, or ready to throw out flares to illuminate the scene. The company simply risked it that the enemy had withdrawn far enough and would stay away long enough.**

**The lead Husky made it to the right spot and dropped its hook. An Air Force aid man slid down the cable and joined the men on the ground. With his help, Cowan, Martinez, and Leak, all critically wounded in the first minute of the fight, were made comfortable and lifted up to the Husky in that order. It took about 10 minutes.**

**Then the Husky made a sudden lurch and the cable got snagged in the treetops. Captain Tryon came running to help free it, tugged hard for several minutes, and at last yelled to Finney, "Everything's OK now!" Finney put it over the radio telephone:**

**"You are free."**

**But the air medic was still on the ground, so the pilot tarried. Tryon came running to Finney, shouting, "Tell them to get out. They have been here far too long." Finney didn't get a chance to relay the message.**

**Sergeant Johnson was at his position along the perimeter, paying no attention to the Husky. From about 20 meters to his front, he saw a rocket rise from the ground, moving slowly at first, almost vertically. One of his riflemen fired a burst of tracers that way. Johnson yelled, "Look out!" and jumped outside the perimeter to get a better view of the course of the rocket, a Soviet-made RPG-7.**

**Finney saw it coming. The Husky was hovering about 15 feet above the treetops, roughly perpendicular to the command post. The rocket exploded into the trees, maybe 20 feet below the helicopter, but the trajectory was dead on and the full force of the explosion blew upward into the aircraft. The Husky came nosedown, at first gently, as if making a normal descent to a landing zone. Finney thought to himself, "They're going to do it."**

**Browne, the gunner, was in a foxhole, directly under the falling Husky. He, Spec. 4 Ronald Blank, and Pfc. Earl Huff, followed the rocket in flight, looking upward. They saw the explosion and all jumped together to clear away from the collision area. They made 10 feet, then were mowed down and swept aside by a great tree limb that, falling, bounced them out of the perimeter, knocking them cold.**

**Finney, eyes riveted on the Husky, saw it sheer off to the right when 30 feet above ground and crash into the trees. He jumped up and ran blindly. The dying craft hit earth exactly where he had been sitting, its body closing down over the command post foxhole.**

**That put the wreck just 20 meters from the hole where Evander Marsh lay. Sergeant Hord yelled, "Run! Run!" and jumped from the hole. But George Thomas, wounded and down, was also there. Marsh knew he couldn't run. So Marsh made his choice, stayed in the hole, and covered Thomas' body with his own. The sacrifice nearly cooked him.**

**The Husky was already burning when the drop started and the rush of the descent worked on the fire like an updraft, so that when the craft struck earth with the nose wedging between two trees the flames were already licking toward the high branches. Being at dead center, the pyre illuminated every corner of the perimeter. The men—and most of them stayed put in their positions—could feel the heat in the farthest foxholes.**

**"It was like daylight all around us," they said.**

**McLemore had been picking up grenades, his back to the scene, when the crash came. Assisting him in the tidying-up chore was his platoon commander, Lt. Ramon T. Pulliam, an Alabaman, who was standing and looking the other way.**

**McLemore heard Pulliam scream, "God damn! God damn! Cod damn!" the voice rising higher each time. Those few seconds contained more horror than Pulliam had known in his entire life and he was momentarily paralyzed. Then the white Alabaman turned back to the big Negro from Texas, whacked him on the back, and yelled, "Mac, for God's sake, get in there and fight it!"**

**Pulliam was already off and running toward the blazing Husky. One other volunteer was ahead of him, Cpl. Clyde Shell, an artillery forward observer. As they moved in, all other sounds were drowned out by the chorus of screaming from inside the ship.**

**Sergeant Johnson also jumped from his foxhole and came on the run to join the rescue party. Next came Rooney, the boy medic who had already been through the ordeal of a lifetime in one evening.**

**Shell ran for the crew compartment, blistered his hand in coping with the panel, but somehow managed to force the opening. He grabbed the crew chief by the hands to yank him out. The man was a torch and already burning to death. His flesh came off in Shell's hands. Shell fell back to earth as the figure, convulsively, fell over backwards inside.**

**McLemore stood next to him with an entrenching tool, heaving dirt on the fire, shoveling like a madman His mind had closed out all but one thought, even that of danger; he had to keep fighting the blaze so long as there was a chance to get anyone out. That was how he toiled for 10 minutes, while his hands blistered—beyond all fear for his Own safety.**

**Pulliam and Johnson worked as a team at the front of the fire. The Husky's plexiglass had been shattered by the crash, a fact that helped to feed the fire, though it was a blessing in disguise. They could get to the pilots. Johnson had grabbed the air medic's ax. With Pulliam helping him, he used it to cut away the pilot's harness. Then they pulled him out, his clothing ablaze, a small problem left to other hands. For they were already back, struggling to save the co-pilot, first cutting the harness, then hauling him bodily through the aperture. It was not easy. A large man, he was in dementia from his physical agony and resisted with a giant's strength.**

**Rooney looked him over and passed judgment. The man was so badly burned about the neck and mouth that he was losing the fight to keep breathing. The one chance was to perform what Rooney called a tracheotomy, but what was in fact a cricothyroidotomy.**

**The co-pilot still lashed out wildly when anyone tried to touch him. Somehow they got him down on the ground and laid him behind one of the tallest trees, about two rods from the plane. But that did not subdue him. McLemore was the largest and strongest soldier present. Pulliam told him that he would have to take on the job. So McLemore tried to hold the man still, covering him with his own body. It was next to impossible. He kept screaming through a mask of blood and dirt, breaking off the scream now and then only to gasp for air. His spasmatic writhing was like that of an epileptic in a fit, and when his hands broke free he tried to beat on McLemore s face. The Negro was tossed this way and that, with Rooney trying to help him**

**The struggle went on for 20 minutes before the co-pilot quieted. Midway, the Husky blew up. The explosion spread flaming gasoline over McLemore's back as he covered the man. It also set Rooney afire and hurled him up against the big tree, stunning him. Both returned to their work, badly burned, weakened. Now Pulliam and Shell had to take a hand, as did Spec. 5 George Kraklio, the senior medic.**

**The operation was performed. The whole thing had been hopeless from the beginning. Soon after, the co-pilot died.**

**More ironic still, Cowan, Martinez, and Leak, the three soldiers who were shot before they had a chance to fight, all burned to death in the Husky.**

**Tryon, through the crisis, had been doing as a good commander should—moving around the circle from position to position, talking to the men, steadying them. The captain was certain**

**the enemy would come back, and because this conviction never left him he continued with his rounds throughout the night.**

**A few shots from snipers hidden in the outer darkness kicked up dirt within the company circle during these minutes. Men wondered then, and wonder still, why this strange enemy did not return in strength in that catastrophic hour when, morally and physically, the defenders were completely vulnerable. Every fighting position was under high light, and the crash of the Husky had shocked, Stunned, and demoralized a rifle company that had gone through a grisly fire fight undismayed. The failure to seize the opening was but another lunatic reaction, as baffling as the aberrant actions of the individual skirmishers.**

**There is proof of a negative kind that the enemy had not pulled far away and were not yet headed or base camp when the explosion took place. At 0300 a slow drizzle began falling, and shortly thereafter a light ground fog from the bottoms shrouded the perimeter. Visibility was reduced to about five meters. The sniping ceased about then. A more pressing requirement had taken over because the opportunity had arisen. The enemy came back in strength to collect bodies.**

**Finney had shot one sniper out of a tree within the perimeter. The Vietnamese fell 40 feet, landed on his head, and broke his neck.**

**McLemore had shot a second man next to his foxhole—not more than eight feet away—emptying half a magazine in his chest before he fell For five minutes he watched him die under the lights.**

**Then there was the officer whom Mucci and Prunier had worked over, who had given them such a hard time, and the hard charger whom McLemore and Jarrett had together killed, this within the perimeter.**

**None of these bodies were there when morning came. On the slope, St. Clair had mowed down three men with his machine gun and the bodies lay there when the Husky burned; by morning light, one body remained.**

**Here and there lay a corpse that the enemy had overlooked in the dark and the fog. They counted 16 all told, and officially reported a "body count" of 19, so slight an exaggeration that it was more ii a little bit honest.**

**But that was not why they felt so low when they marched toward the landing zone a little later in the day, shortly after Sergeant Johnson had taken out a sweep to the northwest of the perimeter. It had been good hunting. The patrol had run into three NVA soldiers where they lay sleeping on a rock, killed the men, and got their weapons, two AK-47 rifles and a machine gun. That gave Johnson his moment of bitter satisfaction. Second Platoon, on its sweep, had done as well, capturing two NVA prisoners.**

**Even so, as the men of Charley Company moved on, they spoke their regret that they had ever seen this field. Johnson said why:**

**"We had it made. Our fight was won. We had all done well. And we knew it. Successfully, we got our worst wounded off. We felt relief. Our hearts were high. Then the Husky was shot down and we plunged to despair with it. I felt like a part of me had died."**

**Some months after the action reported here, David McLemore was killed in battle. Though I did not hear of it until much later, I wrote his mother, Elizabeth McLemore of Fort Worth. From her letter in reply, which was moving throughout, the following several sentences, at the least, are appropriate to this writing:**

**"We know that David not only died for his country; during his short time in service, he won many wonderful friends. I, being his Mother, have some special reason to feel proud. I taught David to be a kind and respectable person. I know now it was not all in vain."**