

—FINAL DRAFT

by Mark W. Worthen

“How do those bastards move so quietly?” I wiped at my dripping forehead with a sodden sleeve. Moisture from the muggy air formed on the thick leaves of the dense jungle around us, and the wetness mingled with sweat and dust leaving muddy trails down our faces. Even at dusk, it sopped hair and created dark camo triangles on our backs and chests and sides. My hands were so slick I could barely hold on to my M-16.

“That’s the thing, Jared,” replied a voice from my left. “The Viet Cong can go anywhere without making noise. It’s damn creepy.”

And the smell. The constant cloying foulness of the rotting plants made my throat clench, and my A-rations, never quiet, signaled an imminent return, coming up from my half-filled stomach into the swamp. My thighs and ankles ached from hours of trudging through shin-deep muck.

I nodded, holding a little tighter to my slipping weapon. “Like Death himself.”

The only response I got was a snicker. We slogged on in silence, or our version of it, though we knew the *suck-thwock* sounds of our boots signaled our presence to VC for miles around. Finally, Poet Williams, a tall black man, intoned in his drawling southern Georgia basso:

“Upon his shield came the warrior home
His face, transformed by Death’s unholy grasp,
Become a mask of calm serenity. . .”

“So who wrote that one, Poet?” A new voice, one I recognized as Andy Tyler’s.

“I did,” Poet replied.

“It doesn’t rhyme.”

“So what?” I shook my head in the semidarkness. “Who decided poetry always needs to rhyme?” Surrounded by a squad of hard-ass soldiers, how could I say it was beautiful, that it reflected the heroism I saw in the Army that made me want to join up in the first place?

“Nicely metered though,” came the voice that had complained about the creepiness of the VC. “Iambic pentameter.”

“Thank you, Justin,” Poet acknowledged.

That’s when I saw it.

I don’t know why it caught my eye there in the dark-and-light pattern left by the retreating sun, but it did. The muzzle of a Russian AK-47, North Vietnamese

weapon of choice, protruded from leaves in the jungle just ahead. My feet froze. I tried to speak, to shout a warning, but fear closed my throat. I screamed and screamed, but no sound came out.

Looking back, we shouldn't have been talking like that. If the enemy hadn't heard our mucky footsteps, they'd certainly heard our blithe conversation as we passed. Too late; we'd made our mistake.

Crack! A single shot, a firecracker sound, and time slowed.

To one side, Andy grabbed his neck and just stood there, suspended like a marionette, fingers dark with blood, all the muscle control seeping out of him. He looked toward me as if to ask for help, but I had none to give.

Puppet strings cut, I watched him fall into the mud.

I bent forward and raised my gunstock to my cheek, wet from tears, humidity, or sweat, and scanned the rest of the foliage for unfriendlies. I could see nothing, only the shadows of trees and bushes. I couldn't even find the AK muzzle I'd seen before. Then, *crack, crack*, two more shots, and then the shattering chaotic staccato of fire from both sides.

I lurched forward and squeezed the trigger.

And I didn't see or hear anything further. My mind focused only on the pain that shot up my right leg, a searing, blue electric streak that blocked everything else. Hallucinogenic lights colored my vision.

Then everything faded.

When consciousness returned and things swam back into focus, I saw a vision of chaos viewed from the ground. All proverbial Hell had broken loose. Nearby, Poet triggered his weapon into the wall of foliage, which answered in kind. Screams. Gunfire. The backbeat rattle of choppers overhead, counterpointed by the booming of grenades all around.

I reached out for my dropped weapon with the thought of adding a few shots to the fray, but a new pain flashed down my side, taking my breath away. Lying on my left, pinning my arm, I couldn't move my free shoulder at all and still continue breathing. I panted, and with each breath, sharper and sharper the flare, as though someone had knifed me.

Lying there in the muck, afraid to move, I closed my eyes. When I opened them, I saw Poet's face.

"Jared. You all right, man?"

"Don't. . . don't know." I had to cough the words out as though they'd lodged in my throat.

"Hang on. We'll get you help." Poet stood up just as shots erupted again from the trees. Along the ground, successive bullets kicked up a path of splattering mud. For a moment Poet watched it, then looked at me and winked.

And stepped into it.

His body shook with the impact. Then the crackling gunfire stopped, and I watched him crumple to the ground.

That trail of spray would have led directly to me.

More noise, more light, blurring in and out, and then everything went quiet.

It was over.

I heard the battle break out again in another area, far to my left. As the choppers