

PROLOGUE

I'd been handed a routine mission, but it ended in fire and blood.

I was a Special Forces Captain, one of the legendary Green Berets, assigned to the premier covert operations unit in Southeast Asia, MACV-SOG; performing a duty that was little more than a junior finance clerk's task.

It pissed me off. I looked out the aircraft window, remembering how it had happened.

The Executive Officer for SOG, a lieutenant colonel, had called me to his office. When I reported to him, he had a smartass grin floating above his starched fatigues and spit-shined boots.

"Captain Brinson, I have an important mission for you."

He paused, maybe expecting I'd say something. I did.

"Yes sir."

"You're going to be the paymaster for the troops who want to be paid in cash. Lieutenant Baldwin, from the finance section has contracted a case of dysentery and can't travel for hours from place to place in remote locations. I nominated you to replace him. What do you think of that?"

"When?" I said.

"You'll meet your transportation tomorrow. Finance Section will handle all the details. Check in with them. Do you have other questions?"

"No sir."

"Dismissed," he said.

Prick. I did have other questions, but wouldn't ask the jackass.

The asshole hadn't even identified the division properly. It was the MACV-SOG Comptroller. I talked to the branch chief, a Lieutenant Commander. He was a little surprised, but arranged everything and loaned me a Browning High-Power 9mm pistol and one magazine.

"Brinson, you'll take off from Tan Son Nhut in the morning at 0600. You'll need to start in Da Nang and work your way south. It'll take you two days. I'll have someone

meet you here at 0500 and give you the briefcase. You'll count the money and meet your aircraft. Good luck."

When I left my quarters, it was a bit after 0430. So early that the stench from the fish market nearby hadn't had time to rise to its full olfactory grandeur. *Nasty enough though*. The traffic was still light enough that I didn't choke on blue haze hanging above the streets.

The unfortunate soul who met me in the Comptroller Branch was an Army sergeant. We counted the money, I signed for it and he drove me to Tan Son Nhut. The briefcase, full of cash, was shackled to my left wrist. I had the key, but was tethered to the thing like the Ancient Mariner with his albatross.

"Sir, I'll pick you up when you return. Just call."

"Thanks."

We exchanged salutes and, as he drove away, I boarded the little Cessna 0-1 Bird Dog.

The aircraft was already warmed up, so we were airborne almost immediately after strapping in. I was given some headphones, and the pilot, an Army first lieutenant, gave me the flight plan in brief.

"Captain, we'll land in Nha Trang to refuel in about two hours, then be on our way to Da Nang. We should be there about noon, or so. Settle back, it'll be a long, boring flight, we hope."

He was right about boring. The little one-engine workhorse drummed along above spotty clouds. Green hills, green valleys and slopes sparkled with thousands of miniature lakes—artillery shell holes filled with rainwater. Deceptively peaceful. The South China Sea was beginning to be visible in the distance, on my right, to the east.

The pilot spoke.

"Something's wrong Captain, make sure you're buckled in. The control tower in Nha Trang says there's been a mortar attack, but it's supposed to be over. We're landing, but going in fast and hard."

He was right. I watched out the window. As our two wheels touched down, we

bounced a bit and something that looked like a short telephone pole hit the tip right wing from behind and ripped it away. The plane flipped over on its back. I grabbed the briefcase handle and drew my pistol, yelling at the pilot as I cleared the harness.

“Get the hell out of here, I smell gasoline.”

I glanced through the flight deck door and saw that the co-pilot was hanging upside down, bleeding heavily. Something had hit him in the right temple.

The pilot was struggling to get free of his harness. I grabbed the straps, cut them away with my sheath knife, dragged him to the door and kicked it away. Cool, fresh air rushed in. The stench of gasoline was growing. No flames yet.

“We’ve got to get my buddy,” the pilot yelled.

“I’ll go back to check. You get out of here and find a fire truck. Now!”

I pushed him away. Covering my nose with my left arm, I started back through the door. Outside, I could hear the pilot shouting.

“Over here, over here.”

The co-pilot was dead. Time to get out before a fire. I looked over my shoulder as I started through the door. A Jeep with MP markings was barreling across the runway. The pilot ran toward it, waving both arms. He was cut down by machine gun fire.

The vehicle was heading toward the aircraft, which lay like a dead seagull on the runway.

And me.

I’m not a particularly good marksman with a pistol. The one I was carried, I’d never shot, but the asshole standing behind the machine gun in the Jeep wasn’t aiming at me. He was aiming at the airplane, trying to make it explode. I jumped to the tarmac and went to a two-hand stance with the money bag dragging at my left wrist. I cranked off three or four shots at the machinegunner as fast as I could pull the trigger. One of my first rounds hit him in the right thigh. He grabbed his leg and swung the weapon toward me. I fired three more times and hit him in the throat. He dropped, gushing blood over the driver, partially blinding him. The vehicle swerved away.

I ran away from the plane, pausing and firing at the driver until the 13-round magazine was empty.

Now what, Brinson?

The driver, wiping blood from his eyes, aimed the Jeep at the airplane for an explosion run. His head dissolved in a red spray of death. Someone had finally been called in to stop the guerrilla attack. Damned good shooting.

I managed to walk to the fire truck that had come to put foam on the Bird Dog. I sat there, on the truck's running board, head down, trying to keep the pulse pounding in my neck and chest to a minimum. The briefcase shackled to my left wrist threatened to drag me to the runway.

A pair of jungle boots and camouflage fatigue pants were in front of me when I opened my eyes. I looked up. He was wearing a green beret with the 5th Special Forces Group's identifying flash.

"Name's Bill Abner," he said

I stood, introduced myself and told him where I was assigned and what I was doing in Nha Trang, lifting the briefcase to make the point.

"This stupid paymaster duty was supposed to be a boring piece of crap. I was given this pistol mostly as a formality."

"Did pretty well with it, though, but you've gotta thank one of our snipers for greasing that last VC. Let's go by the headshed and call Saigon. In this damned war, shit happens fast."

"I'm going to need some ammo and another magazine. I was standing out there with an empty pistol with a pissed-off VC heading my way—until his head blew up. Damned good shooting."

We went to Group headquarters near the end of the runway. I called the Comptroller and explained that he needed to inform the bases that pay would be a bit late. When I related the details about the shootout, I waited for a reaction. There was dead air on the phone for several seconds.

"Do you need a replacement? Can you go on?" he said.

Tempting as it was, I was now determined to complete this bullshit assignment.

“No sir. I do need transportation, ammunition and another weapon to go with the pistol.”

CHAPTER 1

Kontum—South Vietnam—Late May, 1967

One of the bases I visited on the paymaster tour was the dusty little city of Kontum. While I was there, I met the commander of the SOG Forward Operations Base (FOB 2), a lieutenant colonel named Grimm. The troops had nicknamed him Bourbon Bill. He'd sat down beside me at the pay table I'd set up in the club, to chat.

"Word is out that you wasted a VC on the Nha Trang runway, Brinson. How'd that happen?" he said.

I told him the story, not mentioning how pissed I'd been to be a glorified cashier. He held his long chin in his right hand and looked, unfocused, into the distance.

"Pretty damn good shooting with that thing attached to your wrist."

He nodded toward the briefcase and continued.

"We'll be getting some new equipment to use on The Trail. Should be an improved model of the wiretap devices you brought earlier. I'll ask the Old Man to send you back to work with my people."

"Sir, I'd be happy to come here and work with your men. I hope that I won't have this damned thing shackled to me when I do."

He grinned, shook my hand and left.

On the first day back in Saigon, I got the word. I'd be going to back Kontum to demonstrate the new wiretap equipment the next day. A quick turnaround, but Vietnam was like that, particularly SOG.

Although grungy, Kontum was a relief from the big-city crush of Saigon. The Jeep that picked me up was covered with red dust. I was, too, within a mile of traveling. The place smelled of wood fires and the awful stench that flew up the nostrils when the GIs poured kerosene into latrines and burned them off. *Ah, the smell of burning shit in the morning. Great timing Brinson.* Thankfully the FOB was only about five or six kilometers from the airstrip.

Montagnards, the hill people of Vietnam, squatted beside the road. Some sold

trinkets. Some sold a cheap, useless copy of their deadly crossbows.

Through the haze, mountains loomed to the West. Over there, in Laos, was the target for wiretaps, the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

I reported to Grimm in his office. He'd just come in from a volleyball game and was wiping sweat and dirt from his face.

"Brinson! You shoulda got here earlier. I'd like to teach you combat rules for volleyball!"

"Thank you sir, I'll join you soon, to learn."

"Gotta get cleaned up and check in at the TOC (Tactical Operations Center). Several recon teams are out. Meet me in the chow hall at 1800. Food's pretty good and we'll go to the club later. My people have a bunk ready for you."

I had come, as Grimm had requested, to train the FOB's Operators on a new piece of equipment the CIA had provided. It was a non-intrusive wiretap, which meant that it worked on an electronic induction principle, without physically cutting into the telephone wires. Because of that, it had a much lower chance of detection. SOG tapped the North Vietnam Army's (NVA) wires along the Ho Chi Minh trail gathering intelligence about troop movements. This information would be the basis for a pinpoint raid by a company-sized SOG group called a Hatchet Force, or could result in an Arc Light strike by B-52s, devastating everything for hundreds of yards.

During dinner, I met several of Grimm's staff and team leaders. They all looked at me as if surprised by something. I wondered what the colonel had told them.

In the club, I ran into an NCO I'd known at Ft. Bragg, Chancellor. He was the One-Zero (or leader/commander) of Recon Team Georgia. He invited me to sit at a special table, poured a drink for me and began to tell the story of his most recent mission.

As soon as he began the tale, the club became quiet. Empty chairs at the table filled. Someone unplugged the jukebox and all attention was on the storyteller.

This was Chancellor's tale:

"The chopper didn't land—as usual lately—just hovered about five feet above the

elephant grass, we got the hell out and hit the ground...”

He paused, getting knowing nods of agreement from others at the table.

“ It was damned near dark when we were working through the grass, which was probably eight or ten feet deep. Then, by the time we hit the tree line—about a hundred meters from the insertion point—it was dark. After all, we’d just gone into double and triple-canopy woods. We stopped for a fifteen-minute security halt. I checked my compass and started to move the team as best as I could toward the RON (remain over night) point we’d planned.”

He took a sip of cognac and Coca-Cola that many of the troops in-country had adopted. It was, to my taste, ghastly and probably a leftover from the French days. I sipped too, but slowly. I had been invited to sit at the One-Zero Table, and wasn’t about to jeopardize my chances of hearing the war stories told by these men. I’d drink what they were drinking.

Chance continued:

“My team is damned good. They were good when I inherited them from Markey—when he rotated back to ‘the world.’ Then, after me’n my One-One (Assistant Team Leader/Radio Operator) here had worked with them for a while, we became an even better team.”

Chancellor nodded toward the man, a staff sergeant named Jamison, seated next to him, who smiled his agreement.

“ But, we’d only moved the team for what I’d guess was about a coupla hundred meters in what was damned near total dark when I called a halt. First off, there was a shot in the distance. Just a single shot. And, as you guys know, that sometimes means that NVA (North Vietnamese Army) trackers are on your trail. Secondly, we were making enough noise to sound like a bunch of elephants on acid. Then, just as everybody went into a quick perimeter formation, something moved just ahead and off to the right of our line of march.”

He had everyone’s attention. There were three other One-Zeros and two of their One-Ones at the round table. A Recon Team normally deployed with two Americans and

five Montagnards—mountain tribesmen of Southeast Asia—sometimes referred to as “Yards”. Several teams had Nungs, who were ethnic Chinese mercenaries born in South Vietnam. They didn’t mix with the Yards, though.

Chance, a Sergeant First Class, took another sip and nodded to the Forward Operating Base (FOB) commander, Lieutenant Colonel “Bourbon Bill” Grimm who’d brought the bottle of cognac as his price of admission to sit at the table. The table was exclusively for One-Zeros and those they invited. The commander read all the official reports, but learned just as much or more from the tale telling at the table. These men: the One-Zeros, and their One-Ones, were the elite of the elite. They were truly the keen edge of the blade.

Chance lowered his voice. Those at the table leaned forward.

“Everybody froze. I heard the tiny little snicks of safeties going off. That was all. I eased over toward the area where the sound had come from. I heard it again. It sounded like somebody crawling through the brush, moving toward us. I made damn sure that my safety was off. It sounded like only one bad guy, but we were out there trying to find the 325 Charlie NVA Division. And, you know there might have just one clumsy dude backed up by a regiment. In that kind of darkness, you don’t take chances.”

“ I put my hand on the Yard point-man’s shoulder and, by pressure, told him to move left. I eased to the right with Jamison behind me. The movement stopped. There was no sound except the occasional monkey howl and the buzzing bugs that loved my hide so much.”

He paused for another sip—increasing the dramatic effect with his silence—then continued in almost a whisper.

“We all stopped and strained our eyes as much as we could, and saw nothing. I couldn’t smell anything either. You know how, sometimes you can smell the NVA bastards because of their body odor—then I did smell something nasty. I was picturing a patrol of about ten NVA easing toward our position and felt my nerves zinging, getting ready to fight. About that time there was a big, loud ‘Whuff!’ and this damn hog came running through our position. Big sonofabitch, probably a boar, but I didn’t have a

chance to check for balls! He didn't do anything but snort and charge ahead, slamming through the brush right down the middle of the team's perimeter. I told you that our team was good! Not one guy popped a cap when he came through. Turns out that that was really good considering what happened later. I didn't check closely, but I'll bet that a couple of our guys damn near pissed their pants."

He paused and sipped again, winking broadly as he put down his glass.

"I know I damn near had wet shorts!"

There was general laughter and a freshening of the cognac and coke by Bourbon Bill accompanying the banter by the other team leaders. The unit at Kontum was one of three FOBs in South Vietnam. The missions these Special Forces men ran were across the borders into Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam. The fact that SOG even had an operational capability at all was classified SECRET. All missions were approved at the Joint Chiefs of Staff level and frequently by the White House itself, because of their sensitivity. They were all classified TOP SECRET with a special code word indicating severely limited access. PRAIRIE FIRE was for Laos, DANIEL BOONE was for Cambodia.

"After having the crap scared out of us by the pig..." Chance said.

His audience was hot for the rest of the story.

"We waited about fifteen minutes to listen for more shots and to make sure that no one had scared that damned hog into us, and then started moving out. Again though, after having to nearly hold hands and daisy chain to keep track of one another, we were making much too much noise for my liking. I got on the radio and called back here to the TOC to tell them approximately where we were and let them know that we were going to RON (remain overnight) in place."

Chance was a medium height, slim man with longish blond hair and an easy grin. He rolled his hazel eyes at the FOB commander and took a quick bird-like sip of his drink.

"The guy on night duty was new. He's never been in the bush yet, so I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. He said, 'No, sergeant, you've got at least another klick (kilometer) to go. Press on.' I thought about telling him where he could press his klick,

but finally answered, ‘ Roger. Out.’ and turned the radio off.”

He glanced at Bourbon Bill again and, turning to the other team leaders with a confidential tone, continued the story. The colonel showed no emotion.

“I put the team in a tight perimeter on the best ground I could find close by in the darkness. All the Yards were in a star, facing out, lying on their bellies. Markey and I leaned back to back against a fairly large tree trunk.”

Jamison picked up the story.

“Chance was beginning to snore within twenty minutes, and making too damn much noise, so I woke him up and reminded him about the radio,” he said.

Jamison was, like most of the troops in the club, wearing cut off camouflage pants, an olive-drab tee shirt and flip-flops. He was a short—about five-seven — burly man with black hair cropped in a burr-cut. His five o’clock shadow was almost as long and dark as the hair on his head.

Chance took over again.

“Yeah, Jamison keeps me straight. He said he’d take the first watch if I’d call the FOB. So I called back to the TOC and got the same duty sergeant. I told him, in a whisper, ‘We’re there.’ He came back to me in a whisper—like he was out there with me—‘Roger. Out.’ So I turned the radio off, took a sip of water from my canteen and pulled my poncho liner up around me to catch a few Zs,” Chance said

If the team leader’s story about troubles with his TOC affected the colonel, there was no visible evidence.

“It felt like I’d only just stretched out when one of the Yards started tugging on my shirt sleeve,” Chance said.

“‘Sargie, Sargie!’ He was whispering, and too damned loudly. ‘Shhh!’ I told him. Be quiet and go to sleep. ‘Sargie, Sargie!’ he kept it up. Finally he got my full attention.”

“Sargie, VC wake me up. He want me pull guard. What I do?”

Jamison interrupted again, grinning broadly.

“ I’d heard the Yard’s question and slid around the tree just in time to hear Chance say, ‘Oh shit!’ Out loud, too,” he said.

There was general laughter and a couple of low whistles. Bourbon Bill commented as he broke a grin.

“Chance, that wasn’t in your after-action report!” he said.

More laughter and jibes bounced around the room.

One of the other One-Zeros broke in and asked Chance to finish his story. He had me, too. As a visitor, though, I was glad for someone else to get him to go on.

“ I told Jamison to get everyone in tight, then told the Yard to go back and tell the NVA troop that he’d take over. Then he was to come back to me and lead us out over the spot where he was supposed to be standing guard. I still hadn’t heard or seen anything, but now, maybe because my butt hole was squinched up so tight, I could smell distant cooking fires. Best Jamison and I could figure, then and now, we’d come into a NVA perimeter and they thought that we were one of their patrols returning. Hell, they couldn’t see either! Our guess is that we probably had landed on the perimeter of a company-sized unit. All seven of us!”

Everyone at the table leaned just a bit closer.

Chance spoke as if he thought the NVA could overhear.

“ We moved without making a sound and, so damned slow, that part of my brain was screaming at me —wanting me to get the hell out of the AO (area of operations). Jamison, who’s damned good with a compass, was up front with the Yard point man.”

He nodded at his One-One and lifted his glass, then continued.

“ I brought up the rear with one of the Yards trailing me.”

“As soon as we finally got clear of the area, I had Jamison take a heading for our primary extraction LZ (landing zone). Just before daylight, we stopped to catch our breath. Jamison put the team into a defensive perimeter. I got on the radio and called the TOC and requested an emergency extraction. The same asshole was still on duty. He immediately asked, ‘Are you under fire?’”

“Not yet, but if you screw around, we will be soon. Now get the duty officer to call for extraction now or I’ll kick your ass when I get back!” Chance said.

Grimm interrupted.

“That duty sergeant has been trained in depth and will soon go out with a RT to complete his education.”

The statement brought smiles of satisfaction to the One-Zeros. Everyone else refreshed their glasses with cognac and hoisted them in a salute. I skipped the cognac and poured in more Coke before joining the toast.