

EXCERPT TWO

Dwight noticed that the choppers were tightening up the formation and descending. His Hewey was in the middle rear of the formation. He had never seen so many helicopters at one time. White cloud was now swirling through the cargo bay, and the light dimmed to less than half its prior intensity as they quickly went through the thin cloud layer.

The gunners swung their machine guns forward on their web belts hanging from the roof and pointed at the receivers. Rich held his M16 out at arm's length, chambered a round, and put the safety on: the signal to lock and load. Dwight opened GG's dust cover and, using the black crucifix hanging outside his shirt, chambered a round and closed the dust cover, putting on the safety. Of course, the bolt was not yet hot, but he wanted to be sure to get in the habit. They broke out of the clouds at five hundred feet and dived to treetop level, skimming over the trees at a hundred miles an hour. Dwight tensed in his seat. He felt a twinge in his guts that felt like diarrhea; then it passed. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, watching the jungle for muzzle flashes.

Suddenly they were over a clearing, all of the Heweys rearing back on their tails; they were bleeding off airspeed as rapidly as possible, straining to come to a low hover before setting down. The grass was at least four feet high but partially flattening down under each chopper from the powerful rotor blasts.

Dwight heard loud *tink-tink-tink-tink* sounds as he realized the Hewey was taking hits. A green tracer round came through the cargo bay. Both door gunners held their triggers down. Shell casings from the left door gunner's M60 poured into the cargo bay floor, rotor wash spinning them in all directions.

Holy shit! The LZ's hotter'n a firecracker! How'd they know we were coming!?

"Go! Go! Go! Go!" the door gunners yelled. They were now jumping off the skids, two feet to the ground. The long elephant grass was lying down from the air pressure of the big rotor blades; the tree line was fifty yards away, soaking up red-orange tracers from the door gunners of thirty Heweys. The barrage of the enemy's green tracers had subsided significantly. Gunships—Heweys laden with forward-firing machine guns, rockets, and ammunition—were circling above the tree line, frantically firing at targets both seen and unseen.

Dwight's head cleared. He could see the situation clearly. There was

probably a small contingent of enemy troops at every possible LZ in the area. After all, the mobilization had begun in Bien Hoa with the arrival of hundreds of helicopters yesterday. The enemy wasn't stupid.

He was twelve paces behind Rich and to his right twelve paces, so that one machine gun burst or mortar round would have less chance of getting them both. The grass was too thick to run in, but they were doing the best they could. GG's safety was off, and they were both ready. They were thirty yards from the tree line.

Something's wrong!

"Rich, get down ... now!" he screamed as he crouched and turned, spreading his hands out palms down to the men behind him.

"Down! Get down!"

Seeing them dive to the ground, he turned back to the tree line and dived, burying his face in the grass.

The tree line erupted with muzzle flashes as pieces of elephant grass snapped off over his head. He heard popping sounds as rounds broke the sound barrier as they passed over. Rich's M16 was on full auto in front of him. He heard the *tonk* of Pensi's M79 twenty yards behind him as the big round whished over his head and exploded in the tree line, followed by another one not three seconds later.

Damn, Pensi reloads fast!

Dwight saw instantly that it hadn't been a second M79 round but that Rich had thrown a hand grenade and was preparing to toss another. Dwight pulled a grenade from its loop on his ruck strap and, holding the spoon down in the joint of his thumb and rising to his knees, threw it like a center fielder trying to throw a runner out at home, over Rich and into the tree line. Just then, a gunship opened up from above and behind them with both rockets and machine guns. The air was full of metal, all of it now going into the tree line; however, the rocket's explosions sent shrapnel back over their heads as Dwight buried his face in the grass again, and they all tried to get even lower to the ground than before. The gunship held its hover, twenty feet off the ground now and fifty yards behind them, hosing the tree line with its machine guns; its rockets were depleted now. Another gunship joined that one, and more rockets went into the tree line as a machine cannon on the second gunship joined in, its rounds screaming over the platoon and exploding in the trees.

Dwight looked back and to his left and could see the RTO's antenna above the grass, fifty yards back. The LT would be there, talking to the gunships. Dwight could see a man's head and shoulders running toward him; he could see that it was the LT.

Yep, the LT's got a pair of balls, all right. No one else is moving.
Strangely, Dwight could feel that it was relatively safe now. The immediate danger had passed. He stood up and ran toward the tree line, being sure to keep his distance from Rich, to his left.

“Let’s go!” he shouted.

Dwight was beside Rich now, to his left twelve paces; Rich was up and running too. They broke out of the grass into the tree line, both holding their triggers down, putting as much lead in front of them as possible. They moved on into the trees and brush about ten feet as their eyes fought to adjust to the diminished light, diving and skidding forward into a prone position, looking and listening now. Quiet. Dwight could hear the squad coming in behind and to the sides. The loudest close-by noises were gasped breath as the troopers arrived; they also assumed a prone position. The sounds of battle were three hundred yards or more to their left side and three times further to the rear, on the other side of the LZ.

Dwight looked over at Rich, who smiled and gave him a thumbs-up sign. He smiled back.

The LT, with the RTO close behind, ran into the tree line, beside Rich; he went to the prone position and yelled, “Holy shit, Rich! I saw you guys get ambushed! Shit! They were laying for you, and there’re no casualties! What the fuck!?”

“Doc knew they were there, LT. He yelled to get down just before they opened up!”