THREE DAYS AND TWO NIGHTS

THESIS

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By

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This novel of the Vietnam War examines the effects of prolonged stress on individuals and groups. The narrative, which is told from the points of view of four widely different characters, follows an infantry company through three days and two nights of combat on a small island off the coast of the northern I Corps military region.

The story's principal themes are the loss of communication that contributes to and is caused by the background of chaos that arises from combat; the effect of brutal warfare on the individual spirit; and the way groups reorganize themselves to cope with the confusion of the battlefield.

The thesis includes an explication of the novel, explaining some of the technical details of its production.
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PROLOGUE

MAI LOC ISLAND

Running north from Da Nang to Hue, Highway 1 passes through a strip of mountains that fall, on their eastern slopes, straight into the South China Sea. By 1968, everyone in the two northernmost provinces had at least once traveled the switchback road up one side, through the pass, around mountains and back down into the dark chaos of Northern I Corps.

For the Americans who traveled the road, the last peaceful and undisturbed sight on the trip was a tiny island a few hundred yards offshore. There the highway was chiseled into the mountainside about halfway between the summit and the water, and the island floated below, almost filling a small cove surrounded on three sides by thousand-foot hills.

Mai Loc -- the Isle of Flowers -- was itself the top of a ridge too low to clear the water and link up with the mainland. It was shaped in a shallow angle with its open end toward the mainland, sloping gently up from the landward side and pointing out to sea. At its apex was a thick grove of trees that covered all but a few of the huts that had housed five families -- about 250 people -- who made their livings farming terraced rice paddies along the north shore of the
island, and tending the fishtrap their ancestors had built between the beach on the island and the rocks on the mainland. Life there was pleasant and productive: At one time the village provided fish for coastal communities up to 10 miles in either direction.

The island looked so pleasant to the travelers on the steep, dusty road. It was in the shade of the surrounding hills from mid-afternoon on, and it was worth slowing the pace just to look out at Mai Loc before the descent into the lowlands.

So when the doomed convoy rounded the mountain late in the afternoon, its harassed drivers imprudently turned on their headlights and slowed down to take in the view. The enemy on the island was alerted by the whine of the overworked engines, and sighted in on the headlights immediately. They waited long enough for the command jeep at the front of the column to round the mountain out of sight. When the lead truck was within a few yards of safety behind the mountain, a 10-pound shell was dropped down one of the mortar tubes on the island. It belched back up with a sharp THUD! and sailed out over the water to pierce the cargo bed of the lead truck and burst on the road below. A second shell dropped into the wreckage.

Next to go was the truck at the rear of the column, and the other vehicles and their terrified drivers were trapped between two piles of flaming junk to be picked off like vermin.
A few men survived because the sergeant in the lead jeep -- who had been allowed to round the mountain out of sight -- had done this before, in Korea, and had planned ever since how he would react this time.

He gave clear, simple instructions to the driver to go on to get help, lifting the radio from the vehicle and hurrying up the safe side of the mountain. When he reached a point where he could see the island and the disintegrating convoy below, he fished a map from his pocket and called for artillery. He ordered airbursts over the trees on the island while drivers collected their wounded and fled. Well before the artillery had forced the enemy to cease fire and take cover, the sergeant had picked up his radio and descended into the screams, the fire and the confusion on the road to organize an evacuation.

There the first round of the battle for Mai Loc ended.
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MAI LOC ISLAND: FIRST DAY

ENEMY MORTARS HIT CONVOY;
PRESERVING FOR INVASION BRIEF;
MISSION ORDER IS ADDED TO
ROUTINE ROAD SECURITY JUSSD.
"... nothing but easy time ..."

The flash from the long guns lit up even the gloom inside the tent, and by the time the sound of the muzzle blast reached Hoach, he had already awakened with a violent gasp.

He was lying on his back on the soggy mattress with his arms at his sides. He did not have his glasses on, so when he looked toward his feet and saw the sweat running in rivulets from his chest, he thought for an instant he was seeing a hill from a great height. Hoach's natural terror of heights sent another surge of panic through him, which gripped his stomach and jerked him straight upright.

He caught hold of himself with a deep breath. The damp night and the cigarette-fogged day before it had half-filled his lungs and made breathing painful. Hoach spent several minutes clearing his respiratory equipment in thunderous coughs.

The noise did not disturb his sleeping tentmates, who slept on in such silence that Hoach gazed down the aisle to see if he was alone in the tent. When he looked at the row of cots in the softly blurred dimness, he saw a row of crypts, draped with mosquito netting like olive-drab cobwebs. It was
on that note that Hoach wiped and put on his glasses to face the day. His bladder ached. There were things to be done, preparations to make.

As he reached the door and was tying the tent flap behind him, the long guns fired again and Hoach finished the last knot with a startled jerk.

"Simmer down," he mumbled to himself. "It's the same way we've started every morning for the last four months."

He started toward the latrine, scratching his eternally itching crotch and hunching his shoulders as the wind blew across the oily dirt that coated him, making him shiver a little.

"It's going to be a decent day," he said, finally. "We're doing road security. That's nothing but easy time."

The guns fired again and Hoach did not jump this time, but the brisk wind blew the smoke his way.

--------

The smoke from the Colonel's cigar was blowing toward Coleman, and at that early hour it was making the young second lieutenant a little ill. He glanced over at Benger, the captain who commanded Coleman's company, to see if the blue cloud was affecting him. But Benger was staring intently at the maps on the plywood wall of the operations bunker, so Coleman forced his attention back to the briefing.
"Your people were scheduled to start patrolling the highway here," the Colonel said, pointing to a spot on Highway 1 not far from where they were standing. "But the convoy was hit at about 1700 hours here," the Colonel's finger dropped to a point where the highway merged with the rough coastline, "and the fire came from here -- Mai Loc Island."

The battalion operations officer came forward with another map in his hands and a couple of pushpins clenched in his teeth. His jacket identified him as a major of armor named Smith, but he was known to his colleagues in the battalion as the S-3. He was standing in for the battalion commander, who was on leave. The Colonel was his immediate superior, two levels up from Benger, three from Coleman.

While the S-3 pinned the map to the wall to the right of the Colonel's finger, Coleman took up the hot stainless steel pitcher from the table behind him and offered another round of coffee. Benger accepted, then lit up a cigarette, adding to the smoke that had Coleman close to tears.

As soon as he had the map up, the S-3 pulled from his jacket pocket a telescoping metal pointer, extended it full length and laid its point on the coastline.

"They hit the convoy here," the S-3 said, bowing slightly to read the coordinates on the map. "The highway is sunk back into the mountain. It isn't wide enough to turn around, yet."

"So what you'll do is start your road security sweep at the island," the Colonel said. "After you've secured that,
you'll come back up the road this way. The island is a little south of your original operating area, but we're sort of strapped for troops, so we tagged on a few extra miles to your road march."

Coleman had been rubbing his eyes from the smoke, but he looked suddenly up at the map when he heard the Colonel say that. He saw at once the few extra miles were all uphill and began doing mental calculations of how long it would take to march them, and what that added to estimates of food, water and a half-dozen other items.

"Well, did you finally get the sleep out of your eyes, lieutenant?" asked the Colonel with a smile and a wave of his cigar. "You've been rubbing them vigorously for five minutes."

"Sorry, Sir," said Coleman mechanically, fading back until he had Benger between himself and the Colonel, who turned back to the map. As acting company executive officer is was Coleman's job to attend these briefings without intruding on them.

"You'll be airlifted out to the island this afternoon," the Colonel said. "We expect you'll have it secure by tonight, and you can walk off the extra miles tomorrow."

Benger nodded, and Coleman made a few notes.

"We got enough aircraft to take you out in two lifts," the S-3 said. "But I took a look at the area last night, and it looks pretty tight in between the hills. You better be
safe and make it in three lifts, with supplies on the last two."

Benger took notes of his own while Coleman made calculations converting movement into time and time into supplies and ammunition.

"We can get tanks up the road to provide close support from across the water," droned the S-3. "We don't expect you'll need it. I imagine Charlie's gone by now. Any questions?"

Coleman started to ask if they would be given an extra day to make up the extra miles on their sweep, but Benger interrupted.

"What about medics?" he asked.

"We're spread pretty thin," the Colonel said. "It's about 35 minutes' flying time from here, so your medevacs will sortie directly from the hospital. They usually have two or three ships on their pad."

On the word "usually," Benger made a note with a firm flourish, and as the Colonel continued to cover the details, Coleman looked over Benger's shoulder at the notebook.

There, Benger had written and twice underlined the words, "medics. medics. medics."
Flossy had been up to see the sun rise. It was Wednesday morning, the day after malaria pills, and he had spent most of the night in the rough wooden latrine. Now he was packing his heavy aid kits for the mission that began in a few hours.

He had been told the company was pulling road security. After two weeks' rest, the company would be marching up and down Highway 1, patrolling the adjacent countryside and manning checkpoints along the route. Flossy had never pulled road security before, and with the discomfort of his illness, he was having trouble concentrating on sorting out the supplies he would need.

First, on common sense, he packed the usual devices for the feet and legs and all the problems that came from carrying heavy packs on the hard road surface. That meant ace bandages, powders, creams and jels. Splints. The standard load of gauze and tape, mostly tape.

Then there were nostrums for sunburn, insect bites, scratches and abrasions. Flossy paused, letting a cramp pass, and then stuffed into the nearly-full pouch a double handful of tampons he had bought himself for bullet wounds. Then he packed his surgical tools.

He looked at the pile of supplies that was to go into the last pouch and knew it would not fit. He thought again of the hot sun and the unshaded road, and opted for an extra load of salt tablets. Figuring on more weariness than pain on the
road march, he discarded most of the morphine and substituted a large bottle of amphetamine.

Those men who were not recovering from the malaria pills would have hangovers from their last night in basecamp, so he set aside a bottle each of keopectate and aspirin but found no room in the pouch for them. He dug into his personal gear and discarded his mess kit. He could eat from his canteen cup, and that left room in his own pack for the extra medicine.

With nothing left to do, Flossy had time to dwell on his own problems, which were many. The company had done 45 days in the lowlands before flying up to this basecamp to rejoin the scattered battalion. It was in the lowlands that the trouble had started.

The mail had stacked up while the company was down there, and it had all come through at once. Flossy had received a thick packet of letters from a friend at home, back in college. As the clerk passed the mail out to the company, he had noted that Flossy's letters were all from a man and made a good-natured joke about it.

Back in basecamp the kidding turned sour, and Flossy had been shut out of the fellowship of the company. The first sergeant, he learned, had heard rumors about him. By the second week of rest and refitting, the company had Flossy in a state of seige. They had nicknamed him Flossy months before because of his pale skin and his pudgy build, but they had never before called him queer. Now he spent his time alone in his tent, enduring their hissing as they walked by.
The morning before, Flossy had found a razor blade in his bedding, and that afternoon he had borrowed a .45 pistol from a friend. The night before, as he lay on his bunk fighting off the nausea of the malaria pills, a crowd of drunks had gathered outside his tent, and Flossy had chambered a round in the bulky automatic and waited for the jeers to give way to violence.

Suddenly the jeering had stopped, and Flossy could hear the low drawl of Hoach -- the acting sergeant Flossy had dismissed as a bumpkin -- telling these fully armed lunatics what would happen to them if the harassment of the medic did not come to an immediate halt.

Flossy interrupted his reflections to wait out another cramp, and then braced himself to go outside and see if Hoach's warnings the night before had any effect this morning. He picked up his toilet kit and headed for the shower. It was still early, and he hoped he would be alone.

"Road security," snorted Maxwell, letting the cold yellow shower clear his head. "Shit, I'm going to get nowhere with mother-fucking road security."

He was confiding in Roberts, another platoon sergeant, with whom he had spent the past evening belligerently drunk at the NCO club, cataloging a long list of wrongs the army had done him.
"Last tour over here they put me in a god-damned trans-
portation outfit, unloading boats, just like in North Africa."

He paused to scrub his face, and Roberts braced himself
for the tirade he had heard twice through the night before.

"So then I get stuck in grade at Fort Jackson, and when I
finally get back over here, first combat this chickenshit com-
pany sees, I only hear about cause I'm flat on my ass in the
god-damned hospital with dysentery." He paused, his mind
somewhere else. "Road security!"

"Well, you're in an infantry outfit now, there'll be
plenty of rank," Roberts reassured. "There'll be action, if
that's what you want."

"What you mean, if that's what I want?" he said, defen-
sively. "That's my job. This here army don't promote you,
you don't do your job. Besides, I need the money."

"Well, we all could use more money, but . . ." Roberts
trailed off, seeing Maxwell's mind had left him alone again.

It didn't register with Maxwell when his friend towelled
himself dry and left the shower without a word.

Money, he thought. Got to get some money.

He turned to the door to see that the young acting ser-
geant -- Hoach was his name -- had entered and was carefully
hanging his shorts and towel on a nail in the wall. The boy
nodded a polite good morning and moved to the far end of the
shower bay. Maxwell looked him over, and he turned away.
Maxwell noted that Hoach was in good shape, and did not jerk when the cold water hit him. He was also using surgical soap -- unscented -- that would give off no warning smell to the enemy.

These white boys always go around smelling like flowers. You can smell them a mile away, he thought. It's a wonder there's any left alive.

The image of a column of white soldiers, reeking of aftershave and deodorant, marching down a road reminded Maxwell of his mission, and he left the shower bay to shave, grumbling to himself, "Road security. Mother-fucking traffic cop."

Then, still queasy from the night's drinking, Maxwell gagged at the reek of soap, sweat and mildew that saturated the shower. He hurriedly dried off and rushed past Hoach to the fresh air outside.

By the end of the meeting, Coleman was almost choked on tobacco smoke, and fled the bunker for fresh air. Outside, the Vietnamese day laborers had arrived and the diligent latrine orderlies were burning up a malaria pill night's deposits. The oily black smoke nearly knocked Coleman off his feet. Benger looked plainly concerned as the two paced off toward the officer's mess for a hot -- if hurried -- break-
fast. If there was going to be trouble, Coleman felt he should know about it.

"Think the extra distance to the patrol is going to be a problem?" he asked.

"What?" replied Benger, distracted.

"The extra miles on the march," Coleman clarified. "Think they'll give us trouble?"

"Oh. No, that shouldn't be any problem," Benger said. "Tell you the truth, this whole assault on Mai Loc smells."

Coleman sniffed at the smoke from the burning shit, and waited for Benger to sort out his thoughts and explain himself.

"For one thing, the convoy was hit by heavy mortars," the company commander said. "You can't move heavy mortars at night over water very easily. I've tried it before."

"You think the island is still occupied?" Coleman asked. "You don't think the enemy's moved out?"

"No. He wants to tie up the road," Benger said. "As long as those mortars are on the island, we don't move anything up that road, whether Charlie fires them or not."

"Well, they can't hold the island forever," Coleman said. "Why would they want to tie up traffic for -- what -- a couple of days at most?"

"We got units in contact all over the division," Benger replied. "Cut off the supplies for just two days and it's got to run up the odds for Charlie somewhere."
"Well, then, we just take the island and that's it," Coleman offered.

Benger almost stopped in his tracks, and turned a long look of appraisal at Coleman.

"I don't think it's going to be that easy," Benger said. "That's tight airspace around the island, and if Charlie has air defense the landing could be a real bitch."

Coleman mulled that over, and then Benger asked, "You know anyone in intelligence?"

"Yes. I've talked a couple of times with a Lt. Wright in division order of battle," Coleman said.

"I want you to look him up and get what you can out of him," Benger said, with a trace of urgency. "Try to get something together for when we brief the platoon leaders."

Coleman nodded and Benger looked at his watch, then turned and strode off toward the company area. Coleman found Wright in the officer's mess. He had finished his breakfast and had started on his second cup of coffee when Coleman stepped up to his table.

"Wright?" he began. "Got a minute?"

"Sure," Wright said, offering a chair. "Sit down."

"No, thanks, I can't stay," Coleman said, fidgeting with his cap. "I wonder if you could drop by my orderly room."

"Want some coffee first?" Wright asked hopefully.

"It's pretty urgent," Coleman said.
Wright sighed and dropped his cigarette into his coffee cup, then rose and put on his cap. "It better be," he said, smiling with effort.

"Know a place called Mai Loc?" Coleman asked as they crossed the motor pool, guiding around huge spots of grease.

"Yes, on the road from Da Nang," Wright replied. "Why?"

"We've got to sweep it this afternoon," Coleman said. "We don't know if we're going to be opposed. Battalion doesn't think so."

"Well, I can get you together what we have," Wright said.

"I'd appreciate it very much," Coleman said, relieved that he had made the intelligence connection so quickly. "I've got to check out something with my motor sergeant. Could you meet me at my orderly room?"

Wright nodded and started back toward his office at division headquarters. Coleman started for the metal shack that housed motor operations. If the helicopters failed in the tight skies over the island, Coleman could at least arrange for backup transport in the company's trucks.

He was too preoccupied to notice the big guns had stopped firing.

Hoach still waited in the chow line, even though his acting sergeant's stripes entitled him to buck it. He had thirty
days left before the acting sergeant stripes became permanent with a pay raise. If and when that happened, he had decided, he would take some of the privileges of rank, and not before.

Holding on to his stripes had taken on a special importance since his last letter from home. In it, his mother told him that his brother-in-law had been drafted, leaving Hoach's sister and their baby with the farm and only seven months' mortgage payments made. On a private's pay, it looked like his brother-in-law was going to lose the place.

Hoach had worked it out on paper and figured if he made sergeant, he could help with the payments until his brother-in-law made some rank. That responsibility had almost paralyzed Hoach with doubts. He knew he had made acting sergeant because he kept his uniform spotless and did what he was told. That and the death of an NCO while the company was in the low-lands put him in charge of a squad. But he knew it would take more than good laundry and shiny boots to remain squad leader.

That thought was interrupted by the sight of Lt. Coleman, the company exec, rushing into the officer's mess and emerging with an officer who wore military intelligence insignia. As Hoach watched, the two officers walked to the middle of the motor pool and then parted, trotting off in opposite directions.

That didn't look right, Hoach thought. The company was supposed to be going out on routine road security, but this didn't look routine, and Hoach wanted to be ready if there was
going to be trouble. Half his men were prostrate with hangovers. They would have to be cleaned up and fed.

"Well, if we're going to be squad leader, we're going to have to lead the squad," Hoach said to himself. "Chow line closes in twenty minutes. Time's a-wasting."

Folding his mess gear, Hoach fell out of the chow line and ran all the way back to the company area.

----------

Flossy was eating a breakfast of saltines and water in his tent. If he could keep it down, he hoped, it would give him appetite for lunch, and he would not have to make the jolting move to the road on an empty stomach. The tentflap parted, and the light blistered his eyes.

"Franklin," said the silhouette at the door.

"Who's there," he said, alarmed.

"It's Sgt. Hoach," came from the shadow. "I've been thinking about you, and I want to ask you something."

"Yes," Flossy said, cautiously.

"If I've got any medical problems with my men, I want to be able to bring them straight to you," Hoach said. Flossy made no response.

"If you have any other problems, with my squad or anybody else, you can bring to me," he continued.

"All right, thanks," Flossy said.
"Franklin, I want to ask you something," he paused, shying away from coming to the point. "Is it true about you, what they're saying?"

"What are they saying?" Flossy said, teasing bitterly. "You know what they're saying." Hoach said, embarrassed. "What do you think?"

"None of my business," Hoach replied. "What I said just now, goes anyway."

"No, it's not true," said Flossy, looking down at his pudgy hands.

"I'm sorry I asked," Hoach said. "You don't have to take any crap off these guys. You have anymore trouble, run it by me."

Hoach left. Then, in the next tent, Flossy heard Hoach shaking a grumbling rifleman hard. Flossy stepped out into the street to watch.

"Get up, John," he heard Hoach command. "You haven't got much time."

"Hey, what is this, man?" came the plain cry from the PFC in the cot.

"Get out of that bed, John," said Hoach. "Get dressed and get washed up and get to the mess hall. Time's running out."

"Aw, fuck off, man."

"John, this is Sgt. Hoach," his voice through the canvas sounded like a growling dog. "Look at me, John."
There was a pause.

"Good," Hoach said. "Wake up Hostzinger in the next tent, and then shave."

The tentflap burst aside and Hoach strode out, paused to look up the street at Flossy, and then disappeared into a tent immediately across the street.

"Time for breakfast, Stuart," Flossy hear Hoach say as he turned to go back into his tent.

So Hoach is tightening up, Flossy thought, returning into his tent. So that's what I've got to do: stick close to Hoach and keep my head down. He sat down on his cot and weighed the hazards of his position. Hoach offered security, but Flossy didn't know at what price. He knew he had no chance at all if whoever put the razor blade in his bunk really wanted to waste him. It just took one maniac in a moment of frenzy, he thought. Not even Hoach could stop it.

So Flossy reluctantly took off his jacket and put on the shoulder holster with the heavy pistol. It had seven bullets in the magazine, and Flossy put the spare clips in his footlocker. If he needed the gun at all, he figured, seven shots would do it.

That done, Flossy sat back down on his cot, rubbed his eyes, and then went slowly back to eating his water and crackers.
Maxwell had his face in his hands, his hands on his knees and his still-naked hindquarters on his cot. He was alarmed at being so preoccupied at the shower that he had walked all the way to his tent wearing nothing but his dogtags and a scowl. His head hurt, and he couldn't recall if he had passed anyone on the way. There had not been any officers: he was at least sure of that.

Beside him on the bunk was the real cause of Maxwell's dark mood. It was a worn letter from a lawyer in California -- a community property state -- where Maxwell's wife had moved shortly after he had returned to Vietnam. The gist of the letter was that Maxwell's wife was suing for divorce. At issue would be Maxwell's savings, car, and a mobile home he had paid off. The cost of contesting the divorce would be about half-again the total value of the property.

So after a 28-year career, Maxwell would have nothing to show. His pension, if he retired as a platoon sergeant, would be around $100 a week. Which made the prospect of a non-descript road security mission particularly galling. Maxwell felt like weeping, but he could not force the tears to start.

He heard a white boy clear his throat, and looked up to the company clerk.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"The captain wants you in the orderly room," the clerk said.
"What do you mean, the captain wants me in the orderly room?" Maxwell replied, returning to more immediate problems.

"He said he wants all the cadre in the orderly room," answered the clerk smugly. "He wants you down there right away."

"Okay, tell him I'll be right there," Maxwell said. "Get a haircut."

The clerk left and Maxwell started mechanically to put on his uniform. His head was pounding, but through the pain he made a simple resolution to let the divorce take place on its own. He would work something out later, he hoped.

He picked up his rifle, and before he left for the orderly room he looked into his mirror to see if his uniform and grooming were in order. His face looked very old.

--------

In the orderly room, Coleman was growing uneasy as he listened to Benger's half of a telephone conversation with some medical service officer at the hospital across the base-camp.

"What does 'usually' mean, exactly?" Benger demanded, rolling his eyes toward Coleman. He paused for the reply.

"When you say 'dispatch pattern,' how many choppers are we talking about?" he said. During the pause, Benger's face reddened and he groped with his free hand to find a cigarette.
Coleman stepped forward and took one out of the pack on Benger's desk, offered it to the company commander and lit it for him. Benger nodded his thanks.

"Well, just who's idea was that?" Benger asked, straining to sound calm. There was another wait, and then Benger said, "Yeah, well, thanks," and hung up the phone.

"Jesus Christ," he said through clenched teeth, turning and walking over to the orderly room's single window. "Hate this view."

"What did they say?" asked Coleman.

"Said they didn't have any medevac choppers designated for the mission," Benger answered without turning to face Coleman. "Said we were on the bottom of the priority list because we're on road security. Said their dispatch patterns usually -- usually, for Christ's sake -- usually put medevacs within an acceptable -- that was their word -- flying time from us."

Benger turned back to Coleman then. "Never seen any place like this in my whole life."

Coleman did not know what to say to that. He had done all he could so far. He and the first sergeant had culled the morning sick list, checked the heavy weapons in the arms room, and made spot checks of the men's personal gear. Lt. Wright
was on the way with an intelligence update, and Coleman had arranged for trucks to stand by to carry supplies if something went wrong with air transport.

He was inclined to agree with Benger on the state of the division. It was a systems analyst's nightmare. The division had come over intact from the States almost a year to the day before the Tet Offensive. That meant that nearly every man in the division was due to rotate when Tet broke loose. Worse, the casualties the division took in the Highlands during Tet were dreadful. What was left after Tet was raw and green.

Then the division moved north, but Benger's company had been peeled off and sent to the lowlands to support an armored cavalry regiment. The regiment had taken what it felt was a much-deserved rest, and the company had carried most of the load for 45 days before it, too, moved north two weeks ago. Coleman joined the company while it was still in the lowlands. As the senior of four new second lieutenants, Coleman was the acting company exec. He was only a little less green than the rest of the men in the company.

"Well, maybe they're right at brigade," said Benger finally, not sounding convinced. "Maybe there's nothing on the island. Maybe we'll just sweep it for form's sake and then get out and patrol the highway."

"Sure," said Coleman. "Frankly, I'm not worried about resistance on the island so much as trying to make the extra distance they tagged on. That will be pretty tight."
"Yeah," said Benger distantly. "Still, we've got to be ready for the worst." The two men were silent, and then Benger took a look at his watch and said, "Where is everybody? Why don't you go see if you can scare up the NCO's and let's get the briefing started."

Coleman nodded and left the company commander gazing out the window at the motor pool. He was beginning to feel Benger's misgivings himself.

Flossy was trudging up the road to the battalion aid station to pick up more supplies and leave off his load of morphine when he encountered another medic headed toward Flossy's company area. The battalion medic said he was attached to the company.

"For how long?" Flossy asked, keeping his voice even against the thought that the rumors about him had cost him his job.

"For the duration of the action," the other medic said.

"What action?" asked Flossy, growing alarmed. "We're going on road security."

"Man, where you been?" said the other medic. "We're making a landing on Mai Loc Island. They're flying your company out at one o'clock this afternoon."

"Why?" asked Flossy. "Why take Mai Loc?"
"Man, you have been gone," came the reply. "Charlie's set up heavy stuff on Mai Loc. He wiped out a convoy on Highway 1 last night. Didn't you hear the big guns firing out over the mountains all night? That's what that was all about. Hey, I got to go, man. Check you later."

Flossy was left alone by the roadside, relieved that he was not being replaced but shocked that the company might move into heavy action in -- he looked at his watch -- less than five hours. His feet were moving him toward the battalion aid station before he had even decided on what to do next. It was to be his first action in Northern I Corps, and the rules up here were different from anyplace else he'd been.

For one, he thought, there was a lot of riot gas being used up here. He was sure the men in the company had let their gas masks deteriorate unused in the lowlands, so he would have to scrape together some filters for the masks and get them distributed. While he did that, he could make sure each man wore an undershirt so the salt air wouldn't give him a rash.

That still left him with a hundred other details, and time was growing short. With all that on his mind, it didn't even register with Flossy that the bag he left off at the battalion aid station held most of the company's supply of morphine. Clutching at his stomach to ward off another cramp, he just dropped the bag at the pharmacy counter and raced off to the chemical company area for gas mask inserts.
One by one the company cadre broke loose from starting their men moving, and trickled into the orderly room. Benger turned first to Coleman and the first sergeant.

"How do they look?" he asked.

"About 148 men effective," the first sergeant said without expression.

"Lot of hangovers," Coleman observed.

"The flight will straighten them out," the first sergeant offered.

"All right," Benger came to the point. "This is part of a road security mission. That means we're securing a road, not taking terrain."

Coleman nodded. The others waited for the rest.

"Mainly, we're supposed to go in and see what's there," Benger continued. "If the island is empty, we go on and patrol the road."

He paused. No one brought up the other possibility.

"If Charlie is holding the island, we can still take it," Benger said. "It's a company-sized operation. The only problem will be controlling fire."

They all gathered around the map, which showed the island was shaped like a T-bone steak, with ridge-lines intersecting where the bone would be. The pointed end of the island was to the south. Along the east were nearly-sheer cliffs. The west side of the island sloped gently toward the road. The north side of the island was walled off into four terraces between 80 and 100 yards wide.
"We'll drop one platoon onto the terraces to keep the enemy from circling along the north," Benger said. "We'll drop the rest of the company into this hollow on the west -- with the heavy weapons -- and then move up and sweep the ridges."

Coleman saw Spinetti, the First Platoon leader, glance over at the first sergeant. Coleman knew what he was thinking. The two elements would be on opposite sides of the ridge. They could not hit each other with their fire, but they also could not support each other directly. Each element would be on its own. He did not like it, but the terrain allowed no other plan.

Benger then turned to Spinetti. Because of his competence as an independent leader, Benger had allowed Spinetti to finagle men and supplies at the expense of the other platoons. Today Spinetti led 41 men, and the others each had fewer than 30. So everyone knew before Benger spoke that Spinetti would have to take the terraces on the north.

"Of course you'll have help," Benger assured him. "They'll have tanks along the road to give you close fire support, and you'll be in direct touch with battalion."

Spinetti made a note to work out details with battalion communications and to check his radios. In Northern I Corps, they had all learned, communications were always uncertain.

Benger then dealt, in turn, with the missions of each of the other elements of his company.
Hoach's preparations had been delayed more than half an hour by the four men he had awakened earlier and sent off to breakfast. It was not the first time the squad was held up by Riles and his three-man fireteam.

When they finally did arrive, Hoach saw he had done the right thing by sending them off. They looked scrubbed and fresh. Riles even had on a clean head-band. He had gotten his job -- like Hoach -- through attrition. He was never a particularly eager worker, and now that he was down to his last three weeks in the army, Hoach found him almost intolerable.

But the thing that worried Hoach most about Riles and his little clique was not his rebelliousness or his sloth, but that he had no starch. They talked big among themselves, but they had backed down too easily when Hoach confronted them outside Flossy's tent.

Now they ambled back into the company area, preceded by a blast of rock music from a transistor radio. If any of them was aware that the company would move out into possible action that afternoon, none showed it.

"Where have you guys been?" demanded Hoach.

"Hey, we just went to breakfast," Riles answered, smiling. "Just like you told us, Sarge."

He drew out the word "Sarge" and it amused the other three, prompting a round of snickering.

"The mess hall closed a half-hour ago," Hoach said, letting the jibe pass.
"We just had an after dinner smoke," said one of Riles' men with a leer at the others. Ramos, Hoach's other fireteam leader, came up and Hoach felt more confident. Ramos was a good soldier and a valuable friend, whose family lived only a day's drive from Hoach back in Texas.

"All right, that's enough," said Hoach. "I want every man carrying the usual load, plus nine pairs of socks. We'll be changing socks a lot out on the road."

"Aw, man, where we going to put nine pairs of socks?" said Riles, giggling.

"Put one pair on your feet. Put the others wherever they'll fit," Hoach snapped, bringing the laughter to an abrupt stop. He walked over to within a foot of Riles. "You want me to write that down, or do you think you've got it straight?"

Riles gave Hoach a long stare, then dropped his eyes and retreated sullenly toward his men.

"Also, I want the ammo packed tight," Hoach continued. "I want 300 rounds in pouches and sidebags. I don't want any bandoliers. It's too easy to snag them getting on and off the trucks."

It was also too easy to shed them when they weren't needed, and then not to have them later, Hoach had learned from the senior NCO's.

He dispatched the men to pack, and then called Ramos back.
"Listen, I think something's up," Hoach said. "I don't know what it is, yet. But the brass has been awfully busy this morning for a routine road patrol. You hear anything?"

"No, nothing," said Ramos. "Last I heard, we were going out to the mountains and then walk back."

"Well, just the same, keep your people on their toes," said Hoach. "Get Riles to do the same."

Ramos nodded and left. That gave Hoach the chance to take care of his own business. He would have to get a letter off to his sister-in-law, explaining allotments from the Army and his plan to make payments on the farm. If he were hurt or killed, his GI insurance would take care of it, but that was not going to happen. There were a lot of casualties in this war, but there were more survivors and Hoach had resolved to be one of these.

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Maxwell's juices were flowing. There, laid out in four-color one-to-fifty thousand scale was Mai Loc Island, the fantasy he'd had on every trip to Da Nang.

Benger was explaining how he was going to take it.

This was manna. A routine road security mission was turning into an air assault. And on Mai Loc! Maxwell salivated.
When Benger told him what his part in this scheme would be, providing security for the command post, with Benger himself watching, Maxwell almost felt faint.

Maxwell's mind reeled at the thought of the chances he'd have to be noticed.

"Sgt. Maxwell?" Benger asked.

"Sir," he said, locking his knees and bringing his shoulders back.

"You will also be responsible for loading and unloading the heavy weapons platoon," Benger droned.

Loading trucks, Maxwell through, taking notes. North Africa again.

"They're strapped for manpower, so you'll also help dig them in," Benger continued.

Strapped? What do the sweet little darlings think I have to work with? Twenty-three privates and three sergeants, he thought, scribbling furiously. And those that aren't white are green. He smiled at his own pun.

Benger turned to single out the next man on his list, and Maxwell caught up his notes. He pushed out of his thoughts the prospect of going through another divorce, with him in Vietnam, trying to catch up from the year he'd lost as a stevedore on his first tour. His wife, and the money, was all in California.

He did not have to go far in that line of thinking, because Benger had concluded the briefing, and Maxwell could
soothe himself with the rhythm of planning and executing a maneuver. He would have an army lawyer fix him up when he got back. In the meantime, he was going to do his job well.

Out in the street, he slipped to the left of his lieutenant, caught his cadence, and marched along, waiting for orders.

They were long in coming. Maxwell reviewed the outline of what he was to do. They would go in the second wave, into the sloping west side of the island. There were three patches of trees. The command post would be in the southernmost of these. Their objective, the map said, would be a village in a clump of trees on the right-angle intersection of two ridges. On the other side of the ridge to their right were the cliffs that formed the eastern, seaward side of the island. Dead ahead of them, to the north, the ridge sloped up and then climbed down into four stone-walled terraces.

Spinetti would land there, with his big platoon, and come up those steps toward Maxwell. Another rifle platoon would take off up the eastern ridge, a third would move up the middle from the two other clumps of trees, and his would stand by at the command post. If his men were going to be hanging around the captain, Maxwell intended for them to shine.

"Maxwell, I want you to hustle getting the men ready so we can get over and help weapons platoon saddle up," the lieutenant said, finally. "I imagine they'll have us tied up most of the morning. We won't need much planning to pull reserve."
Not much planning, Maxwell thought darkly. Shows what this punk knows.

"Yes, Sir," he said. "I can have them ready in an hour."

What he planned to do was to strip off one squad and send it up to load, send two or three more men if weapons platoon screamed for them, and have the rest getting cleaned up.

The lieutenant dismissed him and left. Maxwell ducked up the company street, checking his platoon's tents, taking inventory and scheduling manpower.

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Flossy returned to the company area and found that word of the afternoon's landing on Mai Loc had already reached the men. From the motor pool to the rows of tents, there was unrestrained bedlam. Sergeants were darting among grumbling privates. Orders were being snapped, machinery was being cleaned and tempers were being tested.

"The sabers are being rattled," Flossy said as he walked up to Hoach, who had gathered his squad next to a bunker to check equipment. It appeared half the squad -- trim and starched -- was responding with gusto, while the other half -- shaggy and rumpled -- was making only a token effort.

"What?" responded Hoach, distracted.

"Nothing," Flossy, drawing the sergeant aside. "Listen, you've got a couple of bad foot infections in this squad. I imagine they'll need extra socks."
"Oh. Yeah, sure," said Hoach, realizing he was getting valuable advice. "I've got them packing nine pair. What else?"

"See that they carry towels," Flossy continued. "The flight out there will chill them and then it will be hot when they touch down. Keep them from catching cold."

"Right. Carry towels," said Hoach, making mental notes. "And get them on salt. They're going to sweat gallons out on the road," said Flossy, gazing over toward Riles and his companions. "If they argue, tell them sunstroke causes impotence."

"They won't argue," said Hoach. "Anything else?"

"Tell them to pack handkerchiefs," said Flossy, backing away and then turning to leave. "They can cover their mouths against the dust in the daytime and then blow it out of their brains at night."

Flossy hurried on. Before the company went out, he would have to inspect the men he knew were sick, and then the ones he believed to be sick, and then the ones most likely to get sick. On the average, each man would be worked over and graded twice.

"Like so many cattle," said Flossy, aloud, to himself. "Like so much meat."
Coleman had just brought in fresh coffee when Lt. Wright from intelligence walked into the office. He was sorry he had missed the briefing, and hurried to spread photographs, packets of three-by-five cards and classified folders across Benger's desk.

As Coleman ordered another coffee and the company commander looked on, Wright arranged the aerial photos to form a rough mosaic of the island. Coleman spotted immediately that key details were missing from the map.

There were craters, for example. A promontory on the southern tip of the island had a deep crater with a high rim that overlooked the sea on the east and the mainland on the south and west.

"How did that get there?" asked Benger, pointing to the small fort.

"Air Force 2,500-pound bomb," said Wright, reading from a card. "Shows here it's a destroyed enemy observation post."

"Observation post?" Coleman asked.

"Yes. What probably happened was that this is the highest point on the island, and the Air Force didn't have many targets that week," Wright explained. "So the computer picked it up as an observation post and ordered it bombed. Happens all the time."

Coleman looked across the desk at Benger, who rolled his eyes in disgust.

"So the Air Force dug Charlie a firing pit," said Benger. "Nice, real nice."
"And how about this one?" Coleman interrupted, pointing to a second crater in the middle of the northern ridge.

"Navy 5,000 pounder," said Wright. "Crossroads."

"Crossroads?" Benger said, a little too loud.

"That's what it says here," answered Wright, waving the card.

"Here it is," said Coleman, bending over the photos with a magnifying glass Wright had brought. "This foot-path runs up from the beach on one side of the ridge, and this one runs up the other side from the terraces. They intersect and go on into the village."

"Well that changes everything," said Benger, tracing a line from one crater to the other. The line ran through the middle of the company's landing zone. "That's a tailor-made cross-fire. We can not land the third lift until these craters are secure."

Coleman understood what it meant, too. The simple plan of moving in on the village and ending the mission in one day was to be scrapped. In its place, a new plan had to be written, with assaults on the craters first, and then an assault on the village from different directions. Benger then probed for any other surprises from Wright's card file. The intelligence officer rummaged through his stack and came up with only one other bombing record.

"Naval base," he said, finally, as he put down the card and looked over the aerial photos. "Here, these pilings are all that's left. They must have really plastered it."
Wright's fingers danced over two ragged lines of pilings that stretched between the ruins of what looked like a rowboat landing on the beach, and the rocks on the mainland below the wreckage of the convoy.

"Naval base?" said Coleman, seeing the water was too shallow for a seagoing vessel. "That's a fish trap. The tide moves the fish into one set of nets when it comes in, and into the other set when it goes out."

"Computer again," said Wright, smiling. "See, the computer is programmed to list anything that shows up on the photos. It also has to kick out so many targets a day. When things are quiet, it goes pretty far down on the priority list. So this becomes a naval base. They haven't gotten all the bugs out of the system, yet."

Coleman knew from graduate school how the computer systems worked, but he had never heard anything like the tale Wright was telling. He wanted to discuss it further, but Benger had Wright reading down a list of enemy units in the area. The list and capsule descriptions ran into thousands of troops and tons of equipment. Coleman's company would be, in effect, a reconnaissance force gauging the enemy's strength. If the company ran into a buzz saw, then brigade could reinforce, and the island would grow more important. Meanwhile, the company was expected to try to take unknown terrain from an enemy of unknown size.
As Benger called in the company clerk to gather the cadre for new orders, Coleman's heart sank. The mission had started out looking so easy. He even had his own jeep.
Ramos left his fireteam with Hoach, the squad leader, waiting to move to the airfield, and went out to collect intelligence of his own. In the four months he had been in Vietnam, Ramos had picked up a command of the language, and it had paid off at times like this. He knew at least one Vietnamese worker on the base had come from Mai Loc among the refugees of the Tet Offensive, and he meant to find out how the island looked from the ground, which was how Ramos would see it when the company landed.

He found the young woman out behind the mess hall, scrubbing pots and pans in a garbage can full of steaming, soapy water. They exchanged greetings in pidgin English, and Ramos took up a wire brush and helped her with her work.

"You come from Mai Loc?" he confirmed, in English.

She nodded.

"How long since you come from Mai Loc?" he asked.

She paused, searching for an answer in English.

"When was it that you left Mai Loc?" Ramos repeated, in Vietnamese.

"This spring," she answered. "The VC came."
"What happened when the VC came?" he asked.

"The village chief asked them to go," she said. "The VC killed the chief, so we left."

Ramos waited, trying to frame his questions so he would not compromise the fact that the company was going to land on the island. He reckoned that the best way to get the information was to conceal the queries as small talk leading up to a proposition, but the young woman interrupted.

"The chief told the VC if they did not leave, the Americans would bomb the island," she said.

"Why did he think that?" he asked.

"They bombed it already -- one, two, three times," she said.

"Why?" asked Ramos, puzzled. "Did the VC come before then?"

"No one knows why they bombed us," she said. "The first time, they dropped a bomb where we used to sit and watch the sunset. It made a big hole, but no one was hurt."

"And the other times?" Ramos coaxed.

"They dropped a big bomb on the paths from the terraces and the boat docks," she said. "It killed my cousin and his wife, and it knocked over some houses. Then the rains came."

"The path from the boat docks?" Ramos asked, unfamiliar with the last Vietnamese word. "What is a boat dock?" he repeated the word carefully.
"Where we put the boats when we weren't fishing," she said. "We used to catch many fish in the trap. The trap was very old, and we sold many fish. Then they bombed it and we were all very poor."

Ramos squatted down and traced a rough map in the dust, trying to remember the contours of the island as he had seen it from the road. He explained what he was doing, and oriented the woman to the map. He had to explain the concept of a map, and the woman was bright enough to understand it at once. She pointed out where the bombs had fallen, traced the outline of the fishtrap and ran her finger to the steep shoreline of the mainland.

"We took the boats and came here," she continued. "We climbed up to the road and walked north, down the mountains."

She paused and Ramos looked up from the map at her. She looked away and he could see tears welling up in her eyes.

"Some of us did not get off the island," she said, struggling for composure. "And the current was strong. I think the VC were very angry at those who stayed."

Ramos gave her a moment to collect herself, and then gently probed for information about the island itself. The woman told him about the terraces, which were walled off with stone and divided into small rice paddies. The tops of the ridges were covered with low scrub, and the depression on the mainland side of the island was barren. There were thick clumps of trees -- three of them -- along the beach, and there
was no way to scale the cliffs on the seaward side. Finally, she said the villagers had kept the scrub cut when they were there, but that the island had probably become over-grown in their absence.

Ramos took careful mental notes, trying to imagine what the overhead view on the map looked like on the ground. When she had exhausted the subject, Ramos thanked her, pulled a handful of Vietnamese money from his pocket and offered it to her. She looked at the ground, embarrassed. He flushed at his clumsiness and pocketed the money, nodded and thanked her politely and formally in Vietnamese.

"Good-bye today, may tomorrow good-bye, too," she said in English. "Don't fuck up."

Ramos turned to leave. Her warning stayed with him all the way back to the company area.

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Benger paced the perforated steel of the helipad, pausing every few steps to pick his nose, chew the ends of his moustache, and watch the first lift take off. The dust had merged with the sweat on his face to form a yellow mud deathmask. When the last troop carrier was airborne, he turned back to the road and nearly ran into Coleman, who was standing directly behind him, staring through his binoculars.

"Coleman," Benger snapped.
"Sir?" Coleman said, lowering his glasses but continuing to watch the horizon.

"Coleman, what do you think, we still got time to get some mortars into the second lift or what?"

"I wish we'd avoid last minute changes," he said, bringing his eyes to bear on Benger. "The closer we get to the crisis, the more muddled our thinking becomes."

Coleman instantly regretted his bluntness and braced for a rebuke, but Benger seemed to collect himself and turned away. Coleman followed his gaze toward the edge of the airfield out to the hospital beyond.

"While we're waiting, I want you to run up to the hospital," Benger said, with resolution. "I want you to shake a few hands, learn a few names, satisfy yourself we got all the medical help we need."

"Sir," he nodded, pleased. He went off to politic. It was something he enjoyed, anyway. Better than standing around, waiting.

Benger waved over Maxwell, who had just then arrived. They went over terrain and weather. Benger seemed pleased to learn Maxwell was well studied on the lay of the island. The quizzing picked up pace.

Coleman looked over his shoulder through the dusty wake of the jeep and saw Benger and Maxwell sitting cross-legged on the helipad. Benger had out his piece of tailors' soap and was drawing a map on the steel planking.
The thought of Benger carrying around a piece of tailors' soap amused Coleman, but his smile faded when he looked down the hill and saw there were no helicopters on the hospital helipad.

Alarmed, Coleman told the driver to speed up, which he did. Coleman was suddenly serious about his busywork.

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The lift had taken off by the book, which was straight up. Hoach was fighting off nausea by holding his breath, and at the high altitude it was making him giddy. He looked over and grinned at Lt. Spinetti, who had been watching him since the lift-off.

It's going to be fine, Hoach told himself. Smooth landing, quick sweep of the island, pack up and hit the road.

He let his breath out and ventured a look below. The hills had vanished and he was flying over the sea. The rising sun was directly ahead of him, just behind the horizon. Hoach fought the chills in tight little shivers.

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On the ground, Benger had returned to the motor pool and loaded up the troops of the second lift. In a flurry of last-minute jitters, he had pulled out one rifle squad and sent in a mortar section.
Now Benger's jeep, with Maxwell in the truck behind it, led the second lift to the helipad. The choppers were already down and mechanics and crew chiefs were making final inspections.

The lift assembled quickly, a mass of lethal looking cattle with sergeants and officers worrying among them, squeezing and sorting them out into lines. As the loadmaster signalled for each load, in turn, Benger motioned them toward their choppers with baseball coach's clapping of hands and patting of shoulders. Finally, the last section loaded, Benger walked over to headquarters section's ship and heaved himself inside.

With a surge from the engine and a lurch underfoot, the chopper was airborne. Isolated from his company, Benger did what idled commanders always do: took out his map and scanned it, over and over, looking for one last unturned stone.

Coleman, waiting to load the third lift at the motorpool, had a bad feeling as he watched the second wave roar overhead and rise toward the mountains. He fought off the urge to wave goodbye and looked instead toward the patient troops around him. The squad and fireteam leaders were quizzing the men about socks, ordinance and equipment, so he decided against disturbing them just to kill time with a final huddle.
Likewise, the medic was passing from man to man, apparently working from a checklist, examining feet or dispensing pills to a few. Seeing this, Coleman's doubts faded slightly. For hours he had heard nothing but gloom and misgivings from his fellow officers, but the men appeared relaxed and confident.

They all know what they're doing, he thought. Just let them do their jobs and everything is going to be fine.

There was nothing left for him to do, so Coleman leaned against the truck and waited for the first lift choppers to return from the island and pick up his group.

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The helicopter swung into a tight turn to the right, banking to show Hoach an immense span of whispy blue sky through the open door in front of him. He gasped and pressed his feet against the deck, bracing against the imagined danger of falling out.

His breathing was forced and the shivers had become almost constant. From the corner of his eye, Hoach saw Lt. Spinetti stirring, adjusting straps and preparing to exit. Spinetti spoke into the intercom, and then inched forward until his butt rested on the edge of the seat.

With a shock Hoach faced his worst fear, for Spinetti's moves meant they would ride in on the helicopter's skids, hanging onto the airframe, exposed in midair.
The chopper was beginning its fast descent toward the north shore of the island. Hoach tried to will the passing seconds to slow down, but too soon Lt. Spinetti stood up and swung out onto the skids.

Gripping the edge of the door with both hands, Hoach gingerly eased his feet out onto the skid. At this point he didn't care what impression he left with the lieutenant or anybody else.

He was out there, he thought, that's all they can ask. Nobody says I have to like it.

The wind blew the slung rifle off Hoach's shoulder so that it dangled from his left elbow, the stock slapping against his thigh. Cautiously, steadily, as if in slow motion, Hoach made sure of his footing and grip, and then caught the rifle in his hand and held it at his side. Braced between the skids and the body of the chopper, Hoach felt a little easier, but then the fear made his knees tremble, and he thought for an instant they would buckle, releasing him to plunge into the sea.

God, he prayed earnestly, please God get me to the ground. I don't care what's down there, God, just please get me to the ground.

With his every muscle stretched to the limit and every joint locked, Hoach watched the island zoom up at him.
The first fireteam was down and deploying along the wall, Flossy noted with relief. There was no fire coming at the choppers. To Flossy that meant that even if the island was occupied, he would not have to face pulling out and leaving those men behind, even for long enough to reorganize.

Charlie, if he were down there, was going to fight this one out on the ground. Flossy did not venture to hope the island was deserted. If Charlie were down there, the company would deal with him.

Hoach lowered himself into a crouch, ready to spring from the skid. He was close enough to the island to see the stones in the terrace walls. The first terrace -- the one nearest the sea -- was the widest, and he saw the first fireteam jumping from the chopper and fanning out along its wall. A second chopper swung out to the right and then cut across his path, dropping troopers in a line across the terrace.

Then, it was his turn. He hugged the helicopter body next to his ear as the chopper made a bank to the left with Hoach hanging below. Then it straightened out and swooped downward, leveling off with the rice-stubbled ground racing by about five feet below. As the front man, Hoach had to jump first.

This is as close as I'm going to get, he thought, here goes.
Hoach flung loose from the helicopter and landed badly, flipping head-over-heels and disheveling his gear. His knees and elbows were skinned, which he heardly noticed with the relief of solid earth once again under his feet. He made a mental note that the next time he would have his sleeves rolled down, and then hurried, limping slightly, toward the wall.

He took cover, listened for incoming fire, and then raced down the squad line, stopping at each man to check for injuries or equipment damage. That done, he started back, pointing out to each man the zones ahead each would have to cover. The men began scanning their areas for movement or camouflaged positions.

He met Lt. Spinetti about halfway down the line, coming back toward him doing the same chore. Hoach reported succinctly that there had been no losses. The choppers were disgorging rapidly behind him. There was nearly a full platoon down, and the platoon leader ordered Hoach to take the squad and start over the wall to the next terrace.

Hoach, his adrenalin running high, assembled his men and hurried over the wall.

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Flossy knew the enemy would wait until the advance element passed and would then open fire on the main body. So he
also knew Spinetti's plan was to deviate from the book, which advised the platoon to scale the terraces one at a time, sending up first a squad, then the rest of the platoon. What they would do instead would be to send the advance squad up to the base of the topmost terrace wall before moving the main body up. It would isolate that squad, but it would force the enemy to open fire on it or face being pinpointed with Hoach's squad in contact and uncommitted reserves to the rear.

The net effect, Flossy reckoned, would be to spare most of the men the ordeal of drawing fire from a hidden enemy.

Flossy -- and Spinetti -- knew that Hoach was eager and was trying really hard, but he was green. So the lieutenant sent up the platoon sergeant to take charge if Hoach were pinned down.

Then he waited, watching through field glasses as the squad reached the base of the second wall, with Plt. Sgt. Roberts scurrying to catch up. They're up two levels. Two more to go, Flossy thought. No fire yet. We may be alone.

The squad started up the second wall, and Flossy watched as one man, anonymous with distance, reached the top, clutched at his throat and fell backwards to the terrace behind him. The rattle of rifle fire reached him, and Flossy's heart sank.
Hoach recognized immediately the crack of bullets overhead, and hugged the wall for safety. Above him, he heard the thump and wet wheezing of a severed windpipe, and looked up to see Roberts roll by to the terrace below. In an instant he realized the men's first instinct would be to return to the safety of the main body of the platoon. That would take them across bare ground with no chance to return fire.

He leaped free of the wall, and ran up and down its base, cajolling, threatening, and bodily lifting his men back up the wall. When they were all crouching just under the rim, Hoach cleared his throat and braced them for what they would have to do.

"All right, first fireteam moves, second fireteam covers," he bellowed. "First fireteam moves, second fireteam covers."

"At my command, first fireteam will move to the middle of the..." he faltered for the words, "...of the flat area and let the second fireteam catch up."

Scrambling up the wall, he repeated, "At my command, first fireteam moves, second fireteam covers."

Reaching the top of the wall, he adjusted his gear, checked for a round in his rifle, and then screamed, "GO!"

Rolling over the top of the wall, Hoach gained his feet, lowered his head and ran across the stubble, which was now spewing up little dust geysers as the bullets hit. From behind, the tracers from the second team shrieked overhead and
played like a hose into the tops of the walls and the treeline beyond.

Hoach took an illusion of cover behind a rice paddy dike and looked to his left and right to see if he were alone. To his relief he saw the rest of the fireteam settling reluctantly into firing positions. The incoming fire shifted from the field to the wall behind him, tipping him off that the second fireteam had started in. Hoach traced the incoming fire to the top of the second wall ahead — the topmost of the four — and started putting single tracer shots into it. The other picked up on this, and the enemy fire seemed less premeditated as the second fireteam caught up. The entire squad, firing off the hip, dashed to the base of the third wall.

"Did it!" Spinetti exclaimed, watching the assault reach the wall. "Roberts did it!"

It still wasn't going to be easy, but the platoon now owned a piece of the island, contested though it might be. Waving over the radio operator, Spinetti reported back to the company commander that an advance party had made contact on the north side of the island and his platoon would now press inland.

Flossy figured Spinetti was trying to tie up the enemy, allowing the balance of the company to make the ascent up from
the west unopposed. They could do it. The enemy had dug in on
the high terrace, and could not escape without crossing open
ground. Apparently Charlie figured the platoon held the whole
strength of the attack. Spinetti would trap him on the ter-
race and let the artillery pound snuff him out.

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Benger's helicopter -- with Maxwell in it -- left the
formation and raced ahead to the island to make a preliminary
survey of the area surrounding the island for helicopter
wreckage. That done, the chopper swooped down for a closer
look.

First platoon was already engaged, Maxwell saw that right
away. Through his jiggling binoculars he saw the platoon was
divided, with one element of the first terrace from the beach,
and the other at the base of the second terrace from the top.
In that element, and in the next terrace up, Maxwell could see
an occasional grenade flash.

As Maxwell watched the island through Benger's field
glasses, the company commander ordered the lift behind him,
which was at that moment on its way over the mountains, to
turn and wait until he had checked out the situation below.
There were angry requests for confirmation from the
pilots 10 miles to the north, but they agreed to turn and
hover over the plain behind them as long as the fuel held out.
Then, as Maxwell scanned desperately for casualties or for anti-aircraft fire from the ground, Benger made contact with Lt. Spinetti's first platoon.

"Rapid Sleeper Six to Rapid Sleeper Two, switch to band Oscar Six," Benger shouted into the radio telephone mike.

"Rapid Sleeper Two to Rapid Sleeper Six, how copy? Over," came Spinetti's voice over the speaker.


Spinetti's voice came cack and said he copied five-by-five: He heard Benger clearly. At Benger's order, he began his report. Using code words as necessary, Spinetti said he had taken no casualties in landing, but he had lost a man in Hoach's squad in the rush up the terraces. That squad, with Spinetti's platoon sergeant in charge, was on the last step onto the ridge top itself. Spinetti's group was firing over their heads at a dug-in enemy of unknown size or composition. The squad was pinned down, but were deployed in an orderly manner.

Being, as they were, in a crossfire, Roberts was deploying them pretty calmly, Maxwell noted to himself. Benger threw the switch again and asked Spinetti if there were any signs of a counter-attack.

No, the platoon leader replied. There were none, and no heavy weapons fire from the ridge, either. Just steady, well-aimed small arms fire.
It was possible, then, that the enemy had already pulled his mortars off the island, and that his men had run up on the rear guard or work detail. It was also possible they had merely interrupted the enemy dismantling his mortars, and they were even now zeroing in on first platoon.

So Benger asked if there had been any fire on Spinetti's aircraft, calculating if the mortars were still down there, their air defense would be as well.

No, Spinetti answered emphatically, there had been no opposition to the landing, only to Hoach's intrusion onto the terraces. Then all hell had broken loose.

The pilot's voice came to Benger over the intercom. "Captain, we're running out of gas."

"OK," answered Benger, "Order the others up."

"Spinetti," he shouted into the mike. "Hang loose, we're on our way."

Maxwell was embarrassed at the image they must have left, viewed from the island, the commander's reassureance drifting down from a helicopter as it sped off in the distance. At least there are no dogs barking after us, he thought, grinning.

Flossy had known Roberts was going to die as soon as he saw the wound. But the man was still conscious, and had
looked up at the medic with such pain and terror Flossy couldn't possibly have left him, even if there were other wounded on the hill.

He had placed a tube to help Roberts breathe, but couldn't stop the bleeding. Still, it took the platoon sergeant almost a half-hour to slip away from him. With his lips set in a white line and his eyes dry and burning, Flossy gently removed Roberts' personal effects and placed them in a plastic bag to be sent home. He wiped one of the dogtags clean and noted Roberts had been a Baptist. He left the tags for the company commander.

Tracer fire from the beach still arched overhead as he finished, but the hill had fallen nearly quiet. It would be as good a time as any to try catching up with Hoach.

Every gun on the hill above him opened up at once, paralyzing Hoach with their blast and the screaming bullets. To add to the madness, Hoach heard a police whistle down the hill behind him, and turned to see Flossy, canopied with green tracers going down hill and yellow tracers coming up. He was dashing across the terrace toward Hoach's wall.

Looking beyond, Hoach saw a sergeant pick up some reluctant rifleman and fling him across the rice paddy two terraces below. And beyond the platoon, the specks above the mountain
were growing into helicopters. Over a dozen, swinging off to the left in some sort of approach pattern.

"God, what am I supposed to do?" he prayed aloud.

Below him, Flossy slammed into the wall and paused to catch his breath. Then, still gasping, he scrambled up to Hoach's perch just below the rim.

"Roberts dead?" Hoach asked.

"Yeah," panted Flossy. "Yeah, dead."

That made him senior man on the hill, he realized heavily. Spinetti reached the base of the third terrace and paused, so Hoach called Ramos and Riles for a huddle.

"Aw, it's his fucking attack, man," said Riles, agitated. "Let Spinetti pull it off."

"Ramos?" Hoach nodded.

"Riles got a point," Ramos said. "If Spinetti got a plan, maybe we should sit tight and stay out of the way."

"Look," Hoach said, pointing to the every closer helicopters. "Spinetti's going to try to take this hill before the second lift gets down."

"So what are we supposed to do about it, man?" demanded Riles.

"We go over the wall, that's what," Hoach answered evenly, staring coldly into Riles' eyes. "We stick to the paddy dikes, under cover, and move steadily forward. We draw their fire, and let Spinetti catch up."
"Yeah, sure," said Riles, turning his face away in disgust. "You want to draw fire, why don't you get up on this wall and moon them?"

Flossy stifled a laugh, and Ramos glared at him. Hoach said, "Why don't you blow some smoke at them and we'll stone them to death."

Riles gave in, evidently preferring a fight with Charlie to a fight with Hoach, whom he could deal with later. He and Ramos set out to pass along the word.

They still had some colored smoke grenades, which they tossed over the wall. The wind from the north blew the smoke back in the enemy's faces. With blood pounding in his ears, Hoach slipped over the wall and crawled along the thinning smoke plume, hiding under it and moving forward.

Small arms fire probed for him, but Hoach was a little relieved to note it was not well aimed. He reached the first paddy dike, somewhat surprised at seeing no sign of the enemy on the terrace.

The paddies got wider at that point, and there were two abutting the one they had just crossed. He would be spread much too thin there, so he ordered the squad to dig in behind the dike. When their foxholes were complete, they would open fire at the next dike and see what happened.
As soon as Hoach's men were dug in, Flossy returned to Spinetti's group. When he showed the platoon leader Roberts' body, Spinetti paled.

Flossy knew what Spinetti must have been thinking. If Roberts were dead down here, it meant Hoach was in charge up there. Hoach had never been tested. He was an unknown quantity, and officers did not like to deal in unknowns. There was no question about it; Hoach would have to link up with the main body at once.

Spinetti tried once again to raise Hoach on the radio, but got no response. So he sent a runner ahead to try to contact him. The man made it to the base of the next wall, but could go no further. Spinetti's view of the wall was obstructed by the paddy dikes between them. Then he heard the sound of small arms fire come rolling over the wall and across the paddy toward him.

"The silly bastard has taken to the top terrace," Spinetti said. "He's going to try to take that hill on his own." Nearly choked with rage, Spinetti looked up to see the choppers circle the mountain to descend across the water into the other side of the ridge.

"Well, that's it, Hoach," Flossy said. "You're on your own."
Maxwell stared uneasily at the two soldiers across from him. They had been giggling through the whole flight, and were now whooping obscenely about the island ahead.

"Look at that ridge, man," said the one with tinted glasses. "Looks like a broad with her legs spread, man."

"Hey, yeah, and look at the clump of bush in the crotch, man," said the one with the slogan on his flak vest. "What a patch!"

They giggled until tears streamed. Maxwell would have words for these two, once on the ground.

"Yeah, I mean," said the one with tinted glasses. "That's some piece of meat."

Benger seemed not to notice. "Rapid Sleeper Two, the question is, do we hold the hill?" he demanded into the radio, his patience gone.

Spinetti explained the situation once again. One of his squads could bring the north slope of the ridge under fire. The rest of them were waiting two terraces below.

"Waiting for what?" asked Benger.

Waiting for communications with Hoach, Spinetti said, assuring him all their original options were still open. They could take the hill by moving the platoon forward, and they could pull Hoach back and call in artillery.

"All right, stand by," he told Spinetti. "We will proceed as planned."
The choppers lined up and started in. As they shot in over the water toward the beach, green anti-aircraft tracers drifted up from the patch toward them.

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The last of the smoke rolled off the terrace up the ridge crest in front of Hoach. Off to his right, the choppers dropped out of sight behind the ridge and came on in. Along the ridge Hoach could see clearly the clumps of camouflage masking the bunkers dug into the hillside. There were five of them, and Hoach had long since marked them with his tracers for the other men to work over. They were firing single shots, making their rifles effective and conserving ammunition.

As the choppers came close enough for Hoach to hear them even behind the hill, men emerged from the bunkers ahead and hurried up the ridge. Hoach let himself imagine he had run them off, that they were retreating.

Then he realized they were heading toward the choppers of the second wave, to place it in a crossfire. He laid his sight at the most distant figure and squeezed the trigger. Again, at another. And at a third.

The squad responded without orders, and soon the few enemy that still could ran or crawled back into the bunkers, which issued a ferocious fire at Hoach. The two sides were
stalemated on that end of the battlefield, just as planned, Hoach thought with some pride.

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Maxwell's eyes darted all along the beach, along the tops of the ridges and up the slope of the island below. He had given up on pin-pointing the guns that were throwing up a glowing green hail storm at him. They were concealed somewhere under in the trees in the middle of the ridge line.

What he was searching for now was any sign of movement along the ridge -- which would mean a crossfire -- or, worse, down the ridge toward the beach. He wasn't sure the company was ready to face heavy machine-guns from the hill and small arms fire from the landing zone itself. So far, there had been no movement, just the goddammed tracers.

The chopper ahead of him and to his left lurched as the stream of bullets sliced through its floor, into the crew compartment. Maxwell watched it for any sign of fire or engine failure until the pilot came over the intercom and announced they were starting in. Then he watched again for movement on the ridge, and saw none.

He got the last man onto the skids by threatening to throw him out of the helicopter. He was in no mood to wetnurse white boys. His chopper and five others whipped off to the right, circled the island sharply to the left, and then pulled up on the beach.
Maxwell's men were slow in jumping off the skids, and the chopper was already on its way back up before he got a chance to spring off. This threw Maxwell in a shallow arch that covered about 20 feet of ground, and he stumbled to his knees as he landed. He had been able to take impact like that, had even been a boxer once, but that was two wars ago, he thought, and he was pushing 46.

"All right, Second Platoon," he bellowed. "By me and into the trees. Yeah, you over here."

As each run came in, he gritted his teeth and tightened his stomach until the men were safely off, then picked out his lot and herded them into position. They began digging immediately.

Then Third Platoon made its run. By that time, the heavy machine-gunners in the trees had turned their sights from the duel they had been waging with gunships hovering over the cliffs on the other side of the island.

The first chopper in the string made it through, although the men were forced to jump too fast, resulting in one injury that Maxwell could see, and very possibly others.

They really laid into the second aircraft, which was not able to pull out of its run, dropped its men and hit the north ridge, then floated skyward as a ball of orange flames.

The third chopper made it through, but Maxwell saw one man shot off the skids over the water, and another hit the beach and not move. Soon there would be nothing left of Third
Platoon, he calculated, and then the enemy on the hill would turn his full attention to Maxwell's platoon.

Then he could hear the wailing of newly wounded men, just realizing the nature and severity of their injuries. Around him, men of the Third Platoon were dragging each other out of the sand and into the trees. Maxwell looked back down the beach and saw the medic pause over the man who'd fallen, and then move on, leaving him as he lay.

Hoach saw the fireball rise like an angry moon over the ridge. The enemy in the bunkers ahead of him were firing hysterically to disengage and bring their weapons to bear on the helicopters on the other side.

His situation was tenuously stable. The squad had centered at a point where a paddy dike running up the ridge intersected a longer one running parallel to the crest. Ramos was off to his left, his men concentrated into a well constructed rifle pit harrying each of the five bunkers in turn.

Riles' men were spread out along the dike to Hoach's right, firing well-aimed shots into the bunkers at random, but changing positions with each shot. The net effect, Hoach hoped, was to make their numbers seem much greater than they were.
Hoach had dug through the dividing dike, which was no easy task, so he could have concealed access to each of his fireteams. Now, on his latest pass along his lines, he saw the ammunition supply was dwindling. He could only hope the enemy was having the same problem, or that Spinetti would come on up the hill after him.

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Maxwell had a hell of a time shaking the men to their senses. Now was a crucial juncture. They had to forget the shock and go on about their business. He had done so himself at least a hundred times; he knew it wasn't easy, but it could be done.

He detailed every third man to dig, furnish fresh ammunition, and act as reserve in the event of injuries. The rest he turned loose to open fire on the clump of trees the men were calling Patch, at the top of a slope they called the Crotch. They probably weren't doing much more than denuding the trees, he realized, but they were getting acquainted with the enemy.

He looked up to see Benger sprinting toward him, and he turned away to face up the hill and provide cover. Benger nodded to him and then trotted past to confer with the lieutenant. Then Maxwell was called over.

"Sergeant Maxwell," the Lieutenant opened, "It appears we're going to have to carry the sweep of the ridge. Third Platoon will move into our positions here."
Maxwell nodded his understanding, battlefield etiquette procluding a formal answer that would give away the officer's rank to a hidden enemy.

"You'll take three squads and secure the crater at the southern end," Benger joined in. "From there you'll move along the ridge toward the trees."

Maxwell looked beyond them at the promontory at the south tip of the ridge, then to the left at the graveyard about halfway to the grove and the village beneath it. The guns would be in the village.

"One of your squads will prop up Third Platoon, which I'll take up that slope there," Benger said, pointing to the Crotch. "Your job will be to keep Charlie off the ridge. Keep him bottled up in the village."

Maxwell understood perfectly, frightened and exhilarated. Then the lieutenant spoke.

"I'd like to stay with the squad down here," he said. "They'll be in the main attack, and I'd like to be with them. Maxwell can handle the ridge."

So there it was, Maxwell realized. It will only be the secondary attack, but he was going to lead it by himself. The after action report would have his name in it.
"Well, the second lift is down, so there's no point in trying for artillery fire on the ridge," Spinetti was saying to Laplante, the squad leader who had stepped in to Roberts' place as platoon sergeant. "We're going to have to link up with Hoach and try to secure the crest."

Flossy watched the runner, who had managed to crawl back off the terrace and deliver his report, excuse himself and rejoin his squad.

Pointing to the right end of the terrace wall ahead, Laplante said, "Look, the paddies are narrowest over there. Maybe only 50 yards. We can cross to the base of the wall, and then slide along it or along the dikes until we find Hoach."

Spinetti surveyed the area and found Laplante correct. Flossy then projected the coming rounds of the match. Spinetti would link up with Hoach and they would take a hold on the ridge. The enemy would either give up then or counter-attack. If Charlie opted for the latter, Spinetti would soon expend his dwindling ammunition supply.

Schaut and Lightfoot, the two other squad leaders, joined them.

"Schaut, how are your men fixed for ammo?" Spinetti asked, without greeting.

"About 150 rounds per man," Schaut said, after checking his own personal supply.

"And grenades?" Spinetti pressed.

"Still four per man," Schaut replied. "We haven't thrown any to speak of."
"And you, Lightfoot?" he asked, turning to the other squad leader.

"About the same," Lightfoot said. "Where we're hurting is machine-gun ammo."

With that information, Spinetti took the speculations one step further. If the assault carried -- and it would -- the platoon would resist a counter-attack. They had enough men -- having taken only one killed and two wounded -- and it didn't matter if they expended their ammunition. They would be able to link up with the beach and take in some of the supplies off the third lift, which was scheduled to make a drop into Spinetti's side of the ridge.

"All right," he said, "here's what we're going to do."

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Hoach's squad giving a good account of itself, Flossy noted when he rejoined them on the terrace. They are following their best instincts and keeping low, aiming well, and leaving him nothing to do.

So he kept out of the way, which left him with unwanted leisure time. He stuck close to Hoach's position at the intersection of the two dikes, and kept watch on the stretch of wall downhill that he reckoned would hide Spinetti.

"Wonder if there were any wounded in Spinetti's move up from the beach?" Flossy thought aloud.
"Didn't see any," answered Hoach, who was reloading his rifle. "There will be if you try to get back down this hill."

Hoach turned to pump carefully aimed shots into the bunkers ahead. Flossy stared back toward Spinetti as he listened for calls for medics from the men around him. He was out of place among these healthy troopers. His place was down among the wounded.

"Franklin?" said Hoach, interrupting his firing. "You thinking about trying to make it back down there again to see about the others?"

"Yes," he admitted. "Really, Hoach, they may need me down there. I'm going to try it."

"I sure wish you wouldn't do it, Franklin," Hoach counseled. "Look, if you just sit tight, Spinetti will come on up. There'll be wounded in that move. Where will they be if you get hit trying to get back down the hill?"

"I won't get hit," Flossy said, trying to convince himself as well as Hoach.

"There won't be any medevac choppers until the third lift is down," Hoach continued. "Wounded'll be in a sorry state if you're not there."

As Flossy mulled that over, Hoach returned to his firing. Then, as Flossy stared down at the wall, he thought he saw signs of movement. Nothing definite, just the appearance of an extra gun muzzle, or a freshly filled sandbag, over the rim of the wall. But there was a sense of premeditated violence
in it. He pointed it out to Hoach, after borrowing the squad leader's binoculars and confirming what he saw.

Hoach went off to huddle with the others. Flossy went to work. He calculated if the entire platoon were going to move up to their terrace, it would be best to place the aid station there, where he was crouching. Later, when the ridge was secure, he would lay out helicopter landing panels on the next terrace down, which was wider. The medevac would leave from there.

With haste, though without cutting corners, Flossy began laying out his tools and preparing to make the wounded comfortable.

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Ramos' concern about the ammunition had almost turned to panic when Hoach slithered up to him like an alligator.

"Something's up. Look," Hoach said, handing Ramos his own field glasses with a wave toward Spinetti. Though Spinetti was only a couple of hundred meters away, the glasses gave distance as they enlarged the busy platoon below. Ramos saw traces of dust blowing, and the machine-gun muzzles were distinct over the wall.

"You know what we've got to do, don't you?" said Hoach. "We've got to form a base of fire for them to home in on."
Ramos knew perfectly what the occasion demanded. He had read the same manuals as Hoach, and had heard his uncles talk of war, besides. The problem was, they were just a pipsqueek squad that was tying up at least 25 of the enemy. They were low on ammunition. It was possible the platoon attack would fail, and then there they'd be, facing counter-attack with empty guns.

"Have you talked to Riles?" Ramos said, evading Hoach, whose eyes had taken on the gleam of a horse in a storm.

"Riles?" Hoach snorted impatiently. "What's Riles got to do with it?"

"He is a fireteam leader, and he's got more experience than either of us," Ramos answered, trying to soothe.

"Shit, Riles," Hoach said to no one in particular. "Riles' a goddam hippie."

Ramos was inclined to agree, but this was a special situation, with Roberts dead and no orders from Spinetti. In a case like this, you've got to get it right, he explained to Hoach, who seemed to agree just to appease Ramos.

They crawled down the dike to Riles, Ramos straining to keep up and wondering at Hoach's energy.

"Well, it can be done," Riles said, leaving Ramos feeling somehow betrayed. "We can squeeze in on your corner, and let Spinetti come right uphill along the paddy dike. Sure."

"What if he doesn't make it?" Ramos said, trying to inject reason into this dangerous talk. "What if we shoot up all our ammo, and then Charlie comes down after us?"
"That's easy," Riles said, lighting a cigarette. "We load up one fireteam with, say, 50 extra rounds each from the other fireteam. That one covers the retreat of the other."

"But if Charlie could kick us off this terrace, he would have before now," Riles continued, relishing having the floor. "It's to his advantage, really, to make Spinetti's job harder."

"Of course, they could have wanted to wait until the second lift was down," offered Ramos, drawing the glares of Hoach and Riles.

"Well, let's count on the platoon making it to us," Hoach responded. "There's no future in thinking any other way."

Shocked by Riles' bravado and stung by Hoach's rebuke, Ramos kept further doubts to himself and hurried off to move his men to their new positions.

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On the other end of the island, Maxwell's scouts reported the crater was deserted, near as they could tell.

"Just how near is that?" Maxwell pressed.

"We got within 25 meters," answered the insolent specialist.

"Could you see over the rim?" Maxwell demanded.

"We were close enough to hear . . ."
"Could you see over the rim?" Maxwell repeated, with a trace of angry impatience.

"No, we couldn't see over the rim," the specialist confessed. "But we were close enough to hear any movement."

"So you don't know for sure if there is any Charlie in the objective," Maxwell summed up, as the scouts looked at their boots. "Is that it?"

He didn't wait for an answer, just dismissed the two riflemen to return, cowed, to their squad. Not that Maxwell had expected any better. It was too much to ask, to crawl up and peer into a contested crater. But Maxwell's patience was nearly exhausted by the ineptitude he had encountered in his men. They were sluggish, and he hoped the move to the ridge top might give them a lift.

Spinetti had done all he could. The plan was simple enough, a variation on the one that had brought him this far. While two squads covered, Laplante would slip away to the right and cross the narrow edge of the terrace to the base of the last wall. They would provide cover from there, while the other two squads moved straight ahead.

From the last wall, they would cross the terrace until they found Hoach, and then they would assault the bunkers and carry the hill. From the time he ordered the assault to com-
mence, they would be committed. They would be too close to the enemy to retreat if the attack failed, and even if that were not the case, Spinetti could not leave the men on the other side of the hill to face the guns he would release if he ceased his pressure on the enemy.

He received on last call from Benger, whom he had not bothered since the second landing. Spinetti knew his place was to maneuver at his own discretion, allowing Benger to concentrate on his immediate problem, communicating with the company commander only to coordinate.

This they had done. First Platoon was not to move near the village, which would be under supporting fire. Spinetti was to time his final push with Benger's assault up the area called "the Crotch" in radio chatter.

The barrage started in fifteen minutes, which gave him five to start up to the last wall. The men had taken their places, and awaited his signal.

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Benger checked once again with artillery, this time ordering a white phosphorus shell air burst over the Patch. The artillery dutifully complied, and was on target with the first shot. Benger was mightily relieved by that, for it meant the barrage that followed would not fall short into his own lines, nor would it sail over the island into the sea with no effect.
He read his watch, noting the passage of two minutes since his last time check, leaving ten minutes until the shit hit the fan.

Then he called over the Second Platoon lieutenant for a final, redundant conference. Then a last cigarette, and a last glance at the map, and a last exchange with Spinetti, who was really too busy to be bothered. That left him with nothing to do but wait.

Maxwell was not going to tell the two stoned privates to shut their mouths again. They had been giggling between themselves since reaching the jump-off point in the southernmost of the three groves of trees. He had personally checked the rifles, letting the men know he meant business by ordering a couple broken down and cleaned properly.

He had a lot to show folks today, he thought, as each tip to the green youth he was leading brought back memories of how he had learned. He had worked hard to make his way to that island, and he would either walk off in triumph or they would give him a hero's funeral. The island and the situation called to mind the many lows of his career, as a laborer in North Africa, years between wars going up and down the sergeant ratings. He had joined a still-Negro regiment in Korea, only to find out it had bugged out earlier in the war, and was
going to spend the duration guarding prisoners. He had volun-
teed for Vietnam, only to mark time unloading ships in some
backwater logistical unit in Cam Ranh Bay. Now, he had
gambled on a second tour, and had won the gamble with this
assignment. His bones told him retirement was all too near,
and today he was going to stand tall.

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Spinetti took in a gallon of air and blew it out through
his whistle. As the first note reached the men at the wall off
to his left, it was drowned by an avalanche of noise from the
guns and shredded by the hiss of outgoing bullets.

In front of him, Laplante rolled out over the wall,
turned and seized the packstraps of the man behind him, and
hauled him out onto the terrace. The first dozen men were
already over the wall before the enemy, desperately trying to
suppress the fire from the covering element, even noticed the
movement at Laplante's end of the terrace. Then it seemed to
Spinetti as though every gun on the island was firing at him.
His men heard a scream, and glanced over to see Spinetti fall.
Then they turned to face their own perils.

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Hoach realized his men were like a horsefly to the enemy, irritating but doing little real damage. Still, the frightened little group had to be dealt with, and every distraction to the enemy gave an advantage. The fire shifted away from Hoach when Spinetti started firing up the hill.

Ramos grabbed Hoach's sleeve, and shouted over the din of the gunfire to look behind them. He saw Laplante coming over the wall, and then saw two men collapse. But Laplante and ten men disappeared under the wall, and then the 20-odd men that formed the rest of First Platoon started forward. Hoach looked back up the ridge to see Riles' group had given up on trying to thread shots through the bunkers' firing ports, and were instead concentrating on kicking up dust in front, blinding the enemy inside. Ramos saw and ordered his men to do the same.

In what seemed like an age, the first men from Laplante's squad reached and joined Hoach.

"Let's go, gentlemen," Maxwell thundered. "Pick up your bags and come with me."

Ten men fanned out in front of Maxwell, in a ragged skirmish line, and started the long walk up the hill.

"Spread out, goddam it, spread out!" he screamed. "You two. Yeah. Either spread out or hold hands."
The line looked even and steady as it reached the halfway point and started firing off the hip at the rim of the crater. Maxwell, standing behind them in full view of the enemy, turned and shouted back into the trees.

"See how easy, gentlemen? Well, come on, follow me."

There was a general commotion from the crater rim, and one of the men in the first line stumbled. Jesus!

"Go on, dammit!" he bellowed, running up to brace the front rank. "Keep moving."

He kicked one kneeling soldier to his feet, and turned to see the second line dashing to keep up with him.

The front rank was within 20 meters of the rim, close enough for grenades, and looking for cover. So he halted the second rank, about 15 yards behind them, and told them to keep firing at the rim.

Then he gave the order for the front rank to heave a hand grenade apiece into the crater. All but one man hit his mark. Maxwell aged five years watching the grenade that missed roll down the hill toward them, but it exploded at a safe distance, only stunning some of the men with the noise. He hustled the second rank up, and all 20 men stormed the crater.

Peering cautiously over the rim, Maxwell saw the corpses of the three-man observation post that had the misfortune to be in the crater that afternoon. He arrived at the three-man figure by counting parts and averaging, for the grenades had been thorough.
Well, there they were. The southernmost crater had become Maxwell's Crater.

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Hoach and Laplante found each other, and Flossy hurried down the hill to attend to Spinetti. Then the two other squad leaders joined them and they took inventory while they waited for Flossy's report.

"Spinetti has had it," Flossy said. "He'll make it, but I'm going to keep him on morphine. He's down for the count."

No one spoke, until Hoach looked to Laplante.

"Well, you're it," he said. "How do you want this done?"

"Oh. I don't know, fellas," Laplante stammered. "You think we ought to wait for orders?"

"Way I see it, we got our orders," Hoach replied. "Unless you don't think First Platoon can take this ridge?"

"It ain't that, you know," Laplante said, obviously uncomfortable.

"Well, you don't think you can't lead us, do you?" Hoach pressed. "Because if you think that, you're wrong. You just give the word and we'll commence kicking ass and taking names."

There was silence, then Laplante said, "All right, we'll move out when the captain's barrage hits the Patch."

"The what?" asked Hoach.
"The Patch," Lightfoot answered, pointing to the clump of trees off to their left on top of the ridge. "That's what they been calling it on the radio all afternoon."

"The Patch," Hoach repeated, learning the new word.

Benger's artillery rumbled overhead and crashed into the trees. He waited for the second salvo to hit and then ordered his men up the hill.

They immediately took fire from the heavy machine-guns that had raked their aircraft during the landing. The enemy gunners evidently were unsteadied by the shelling around them, so the defending fire was frightening but not particularly effective. Then, about a third of the way up, Benger saw the camouflage drop from in front of a line of bunkers, spread out in a semicircle covering the entire Crotch.

Benger's heart stopped. The shells on the hilltop drowned out the sound of the small arms in the bunkers as they opened up. He could sense the angry slugs buzzing around him, and felt the one coming straight for him.

The crater was half-filled with rain, and Maxwell had been reflecting darkly that they would have had plenty of
water for washing if the shredded enemy hadn't spoiled it for them. He had to take charge of the cleanup for the benefit of the squeamish, but now the dead were antiseptically bagged and hauled off.

That task was just complete when the barrage hit the treeline. The fire was terribly accurate, but it was close enough that some of the men still hugged the walls of the crater, near the water's edge.

Looking down the hill, in the Crotch, Maxwell watched Benger lead off the move up the hill. Then he saw the bunkers along the rim of the flat of the Patch. He counted four, assumed there would be at least that many again out of his sight.

He ordered everything he had to open fire on those four bunkers, but they continued to rake Benger's faltering lines. Then Benger himself took a hit and went down. The assault ground to a halt, its men picking up their wounded and making the grove -- and their base -- in good order.

Maxwell thought for an instant that all his efforts were gone for nothing, since Benger had been the only witness qualified to write him up for citation.

Then, deeply ashamed, he resolved to forget about the glory and get on with the job. It was advice he had given many younger troopers -- good advice -- so he took it himself.
Hoach saw with exhilaration and relief that the enemy was making only a token show of defending the bunkers against First Platoon. The assault line crunched steadily upward, blazing away from the hip, by the book.

Gaining the hill was anticlimactic. As usual, the enemy vanished, though the newer troopers would wonder at how he had done it. A few enemy dead were left behind, evidence of haste, and they were examined for documents and disposed of.

Flossy reported Spinetti's condition was stable, and three others were wounded in the assault. One of them had been Ramos.

Hearing this, Hoach rushed off to see about his friend.

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CHAPTER III.

"... there'll be no mercy in this fight . . ."

"No," Flossy said firmly, stepping between LaPlante and Spinetti, who was lying semi-conscious just out of earshot. "I'm telling you, the lieutenant is in no shape to talk, never mind giving orders. You leave him alone and let him rest."

"Look, Specialist," LaPlante said, with grave formality. "We got to find out what to do. Spinetti's got to be told what the situation is."

"You don't even know what the situation is," Flossy said with a firmness that drew a look of surprise from LaPlante. "You're running this platoon. You're it. You can't shift the burden onto a wounded officer."

"Maybe he has something planned," LaPlante countered, now pleading. "We've got to know."

Flossy said nothing. LaPlante drew himself up and ordered, "Specialist, step aside and let me talk to the lieutenant."

"LaPlante, you set foot anywhere near Spinetti and I'm going to put him under so he can't talk," Flossy declared. "Either way, you don't talk to him. You take charge of this post right now."
"I could put you under arrest," said LaPlante, bringing the quarrel to the brink of confrontation.

"You do that, Sergeant," replied Flossy instantly. "Then we'll see what happens when you're hit."

LaPlante looked stumped on that one, and Hoach, who had been standing off hoping the senior sergeant and the medic would work it out between them, now intervened.

"Maybe you're both right," he said, pausing until he had their attention. "Maybe we ought to size up things first, do a little reconnoitering, and deliver a report. Spinetti will feel a little better with some rest, and we can give him all the facts without wasting any of his time."

LaPlante backed off to think it over, staring out to sea at the rain clouds massing on the horizon. Hoach watched LaPlante, relaxing as the seconds passed and the tension in the air dissipated.

Flossy was a little surprised at Hoach's diplomacy. There was more to Hoach than the good-natured bumpkin of Flossy's first impression. Now Hoach had interceded twice in Flossy's behalf, and Flossy was puzzled about Hoach's motives. The reputation Flossy had picked up in the lowlands confused all relationships with the company. Did Hoach think he had found a special friend in Flossy, to fulfill a particular need? Flossy put the thought out of his mind for the time being, making a note to deal with it when there were no more immediate problems.
"All right," LaPlante said, finally. "Hoach, you take your men and pick out five from my squad, and mount a patrol toward the village. Take an extra machine-gun and an extra grenade launcher. I'll leave a squad to cover the crater, and take the rest along the terrace to the cliffs."

Hoach nodded agreement and went off to organize. With a last hostile glance at Flossy, LaPlante left, too. Flossy returned to his patients.

Spinetti was lifting his head, trying to peer out from under the bandages that covered his eyes. Ramos was sitting up, gently restraining the lieutenant from taking the bandages off, soothing him softly in Spanish.

"What are you doing sitting up?" Flossy scolded Ramos as he prepared another dose of morphine for Spinetti. "That wound will never close if you keep stretching the muscles."

"I just can't stay on my back, man," Ramos replied, massing his leg. "And the lieutenant started getting rowdy."

"Well, you better lie down, or else stay up until the medevac gets here," Flossy admonished. "One way or the other, don't move."

Ramos nodded absently and lit up a cigarette. Flossy saw the rain clouds were moving in faster than he had expected, and went off to look for help in erecting a shelter for his patients.
Maxwell had known the value of the Graves from the morning's briefing.

Even when he thought his only function in this fight was to hang around headquarters, Maxwell knew the threat of the Graves was one that bore close watching. Now, there they stood, halfway between Maxwell and the menace of the village and the Patch.

The cemetery was a tailor-made firing position, going either way. A Vietnamese grave is a small, oval-shaped tomb surrounded by a low stone wall. Each about the right size for two or three men, the Graves were a tight cluster of stone forts. They would fit his platoon perfectly.

The trick was taking them. Maxwell had waited all afternoon for word from the beach, new orders, some sign he was still connected with the rest of the company. A single runner had come through, telling Maxwell of Benger's death. Maxwell's platoon leader, though only a second lieutenant, had taken over the company until Coleman, the executive officer, arrived with the third lift. He would bring weapons platoon with him, and they would take the village. They had no word from Spinetti.

"Fine," Maxwell had said, "what does the lieutenant want me to do?"

"Just sit tight," the runner had said, and had scurried back down to the beach.
Maxwell had sat tight all afternoon. It would be dusk pretty soon, and Maxwell would not spend the night in that stinking crater. He was going to move into the Graves, where he would be safe.

No, he thought, not yet. If we don't hear from the beach by nightfall, we take the Graves then. In the meantime, the third lift might come in. The whole operation would take on a different shape then.

Maxwell pulled out one of his canteens and took a drink. It was half full. He had emptied the other an hour before. He knew how to conserve water from North Africa, where the white divisions had disarmed his outfit and dismantled it into labor gangs they called engineer battalions.

Army issue back then was one canteen per man, and you filled it twice daily. Maxwell and his friends from Harlem had done shovelwork on roads, airstrips, trenches, graves and latrines from Morrocco to Iran, on a half-gallon of water a day.

That was a long time ago, Maxwell reflected. I could take a lot more then, because you had to take it then. I got my corporal's stripes out of that war, and I learned how to conserve water.

But the men were still young. While they were energetic enough to give a 46-year-old sergeant a run for his money in the short run, they tired too rapidly in the long stretches. They didn't know how to conserve.
So if Maxwell was down to a half-quart of water, most of his men would be out of water altogether. It would be foolish to make them exert themselves while the sun was still beating down on them, and then have them try to stay alert all night. Better to wait until night, when it was cooler. If they had to rush the Graves, it was better to do it then.

Their thirst for water frustrated for the moment, the men were giving in to another urge, which was to set up a home, Maxwell noted. They had stopped moving, caught their breath, unpacked C-rations and eaten, and now were unrolling ground-sheets and settling in for the night. As a result, their packs were getting scattered, making them slower to respond in an emergency. Maxwell was tempted at least to let them heat up some water and make coffee before making them pack it all back up and get ready to move. But they were short of water, and then when he heard a transistor radio blaring hard rock music (those damned beatniks again), he knew it was time to call them back to order.

It's probably just as well, Maxwell thought with sinking spirit as he watched the line of rain clouds gliding rapidly across the sea at him. There goes the third lift. They'll never try to land it in the rain. That meant it was up to him and Spinetti. Maxwell would start by moving into the Graves, after dark and after the rain passed over.

He got the men packed up and into a night perimeter, and waited for the storm.
Hoach watched LaPlante take about half the platoon down the wall and onto the terrace, disappearing in the dark. Leaving about half the remainder behind in the crater, Hoach slipped out into the dark and began the crawl toward the Patch.

He ran into problems immediately. LaPlante's men were moving rapidly along the wall below, racing into position to turn and attack across Hoach's direction of travel. That would put the enemy into a crossfire.

To keep the enemy from doing the same to him, Hoach placed men to move off and protect his flanks, or cover his ass, as it was known in the trade.

The flanker on the left drew ahead of Hoach's group, apparently trying to keep up with LaPlante. He had not listened to Hoach earlier. That left Hoach unprotected from that direction.

The flanker would stop at a phase line, in this case the near end of a freshly plowed garden between the Patch and Hoach's Crater. It was about 75 yards ahead, which looked like a long way to Hoach, especially with an unprotected flank.

So he slithered over to Riles and had him send a reliable man off to do the job. Then he took his place at the center of the squad and crawled on.

The day was beginning to wear on him, and he felt it almost everywhere. His head ached and his ears rang from
firing his rifle; his back hurt from lugging around a pack
during the long climb up the terraces; his eyes watered from
gazing into the sun; and his elbows, upon which he was now
crawling, felt like they had worn through, with the initial
outrage from the landing compounded by the crawl across the
rice paddies.

Still, Hoach tried to keep his attention focused into the
void ahead. Every sign of movement had to be examined and
eliminated as routine background noise.

His men were moving in total silence, Hoach noted with
mixed feelings. He was at once relieved his men were not
likely to be detected, and uneasy at the thought that Charlie
could be just as quiet. Might, in fact, be crawling straight
at them, like so many red ants.

Hoach caught himself on the brink of panic when he saw
the edge of the field was just a few feet ahead. They would
stop there until LaPlante's runner arrived with word to move
on to the far edge of the field, and there would take up night
positions within striking distance of the Patch. At dawn,
they would open fire.

The grass vanished under his palms, and Hoach felt the
damp, fragrant earth of the garden. He turned and slid along
its edge, coaxing the line into a shallow semicircle to wait
for orders to move on. Finally, he checked his watch, care-
fully covering the iridescent dial with his palm and peering
underneath it.
It was nearly nine o'clock. It would take another 30 minutes to work across the field. Maybe less, with the furrows to guide on.

Then there would be the nine-hour wait for dawn. Hoach couldn't smoke and couldn't move around during the wait, and he reflected on the boredom that lay ahead.

He was watching off to the left of the Patch toward where LaPlante would be, waiting for the runner to come from that direction.

When the enemy opened fire out of the village, Hoach was looking straight at his firing line.

At first he thought it was LaPlante opening up, and he lost valuable time wondering whether he should go ahead and move up to join him.

Then he saw a line of muzzle flashes coming from the other end of the field, the bullets cracking over him and hissing on toward the Crater.

Off to Hoach's right, someone returned the fire, and the sound snapped the men out of their opening shock. They began firing across the field, mostly on full automatic, each consuming 10 rounds a second.

"Save your ammo," Hoach shouted, his voice early cracking. "Use single shots, aim at the flashes. Save your ammo!"

Riles picked up the cry and relayed it, adding, "Fire one and roll over!"
Yes, thought Hoach, fire one shot and roll away. Vacate the enemy's aiming point.

Gradually the firing died down to serious shooting. Then Hoach thought he saw the enemy firing line moving steadily forward. He was caught with a choice: move forward and meet them, sit tight and wait for them, or pull back to the Crater. Hoach tried to weigh the options. The pressure made coherent thought seem impossible.

The decision was made for him. Parachute flares popped overhead, bathing the field in their garish white light. Hoach felt he could drown in it.

LaPlante! He knew with sudden intuition that LaPlante had ordered the flares to light up his disengagement. The son of a bitch had left Hoach out there to fry.

"Move off to the left!" Riles' cry brought Hoach out of his stupor. "Get off this fucking ridge! Move off to the left."

Hoach, thinking at first Riles, too, was deserting him, started to order a halt. Then it dawned on him that the only cover against the guns across the garden was the ridge itself.

"Move off to the right!" Hoach shrieked to the men on his right. "Get down the slope! Move off to the right!"

He caught up with them in the shelter offered by the slope of the ridge. Above them the enemy's guns still kicked up dust. Some of the men started to bolt back to the Crater.

"Hold it, goddamn it!" Hoach shouted, halting them. "Cover the others."
Hoach took them back up the ridge to where they could fire down the length of the garden but still stay more or less out of harm's way. Across the ridge from him, Hoach saw Riles open up, then stop, and open up again about 25 yards back.

Then Hoach ordered his group to withdraw, and halted them even with Riles to take another turn laying down cover. It was there he noticed that the party in Hoach's Crater, no longer pinned down under the full weight of the enemy's weapons, was sending a hail storm down the garden. The enemy evidently was intimidated, for the hostile fire receded to a token.

Charlie's letting us go, thought Hoach. We got this thing cinched.

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Maxwell levitated up from his back, clearing the ground by the breadth of a matchstick, spun over in midair and landed with his face in the dead earth of the crater.

The bark of the mortar in the trees across the ridge had hurled him into action, and when the shell roared into the trees along the beach, he was fully awake.

He realized instantly that the shell fire was aimed at the troops massed below, and not at him. So he slithered up to the lip of the crater and peered down the ridge. There were sharp flashes, followed almost immediately by the face-
slapping blast of high explosives and the dim whine of shrapnel.

Across the ridge, in the Patch, he could see the muzzle flashes of the mortars, their light softened by the foliage. Somehow Charlie had unpacked, set up in total silence and begun plastering Third Platoon. The company commander -- the late company commander -- had been wrong in calculating that the enemy could not engage a target as close in as the beach. His mortars were too heavy. They could not elevate high enough. That was a crock.

Benger had told that to everyone but Charlie, Maxwell thought sadly. At the rate the shells were falling into the trees, Third Platoon would disappear altogether by morning.

Behind him, some of Maxwell's men were beginning to whimper, not having seen shells that big fall that close. They had to be calmed or they would lose their will and would not regain it until after the battle. Maxwell knew this: he had himself experienced it before in a dozen clashes.

"Hush that up," he whispered sharply. "They not shooting at us. You still safe."

The men fell silent. He peered into the dark until he located one of the stoned soldiers. The man would be sober enough to function by now, Maxwell figured.

"You there," he said, pointing. "You pick out a buddy and get out toward the Graves. Listen. You hear anything, you come on back."
"How am I going to hear anything with them fucking mortars?" the youngster protested, frightened.

"Listen real hard," Maxwell replied, unmoved. "If we don't hear from you we'll know something has happened."

"Aw, man . . ." the young soldier whined, collecting his gear. "Do I got to pick a partner?"

"No, I'll pick him. You," he said, pointing to the other stoned soldier. "You two beatniks get on about your business. The password is 'apple', the countersign is 'heifer.'"

The two sentries paused at the rim on Maxwell's crater as at least three of the enemy's mortars fired in unison. Maxwell heaved one of the men over the brink and into the dark, and the other followed with a reluctant sigh.

"Now, listen up, mens," he whispered to the still-cowering figures below. "You ain't getting no more sleep tonight, so it's no use trying."

They relaxed slightly.

"Never mind the noise," he continued, coaxing, "Just listen to me."

Overhead, parachute flares had lit up the island with eerie white light, and Maxwell could see the faces of his men, each with a ghastly pallor. He peered into each man's eyes and when he felt they were calm enough to receive orders, Maxwell began outlining their next day's work.

They would fan out in front of the crater and press toward the Graves. Teams of riflemen would cover the slopes
of the ridge to their left and the cliffs behind them and to their right. The main body would stretch out to the north, facing the village and the Patch.

If the enemy hit them from that direction, he would run into resistance sooner than he expected. The platoon would retreat to Maxwell's crater. The initial shock of falling under unexpected fire would cripple the enemy, Maxwell explained, and make it easier to resist further thrusts.

If the enemy did not attack by morning twilight -- well before dawn when the sun was still behind the horizon and reflecting off the air itself -- then the platoon would rush the Graves. It would not be easy, he conceded, but they would carry the load. Would have to, for they could not count on anyone else on the island.

The men appeared solemn and uneasy, and that was good, Maxwell thought. They would be careful. But they were no longer terrified. They had a mission: they were not helpless.

The shelling seemed to go on without end. Flossy, who was curled into a tight ball in Hoach's Crater, was almost choked with fear waiting for the gunners to tire of flattening the trees along the beach and turn their attention to the ridge.
He was at the edge of the pond that half-filled the crater, where he had been feeding a biscuit to the dozen or so ducks some farmer had been raising. The noise shattered a calm that had gone on since Hoach's return, disturbed only by Spinetti's soft moaning. When the firing started, the ducks had run in confusion briefly, and then had scrambled panic-stricken around Flossy, pecking at him as though he were responsible.

When the shelling stopped, Flossy checked his watch and was surprised to find the firing had been going on only five minutes. There were parachute flares overhead, and the ducks, disoriented by the noise and evidently thinking it was daytime, took to the pond in search of fish.

Flossy listened for wounded, and heard none, so he kept watching the ducks until Riles came over. Riles was his main antagonist: his presence meant danger. Flossy disguised a comforting fondle of the pistol under his jacket as a scratch of the armpit.

Riles gave no acknowledgement that he was aware Flossy was there. He stood in a shallow crouch, his feet spread and his knees bent, and turned his left ear toward the rim of the crater. Apparently hearing nothing, Riles slung his rifle and dropped to his hands and knees, scuttling up the wall of the crater like a crab. He poked his head up like a woodchuck, jerked it back down, and then cocked his left ear out until it touched the ground.
Flossy watched Riles silhouetted against the harsh, flickering light of the flares. After dealing with the ducks, Flossy found Riles' behavior only slightly eccentric. Still, he was curious about the odd little dance, so when Riles returned to the pond, Flossy stepped close enough to be heard to ask about it.

"What was that all about?" he began.

"They were trying to fuck up Third Platoon," Riles explained, sizing up the events of the last few minutes. "I seen it before, where they don't have much ammo, so they dump it all in one spot."

"What are you talking about?" asked Flossy, feeling he had come into the middle of a conversation Riles was having with himself.

Riles turned to Flossy, impatiently puzzled. "The god-damn mortars," he said. "They got three targets -- Maxwell, the beach and us -- and they got too little ammo to hit all three, so they bring smoke on one of them."

"Didn't the Captain say they couldn't fire those mortars onto this island?" Flossy, now on Riles' wave length, demanded. "Didn't he say they couldn't elevate?"

"They take the tubes off the mounts and pull them up with ropes or chains," Riles explained. "It's not accurate and it's dangerous, but Charlie comes up with some weird shit."

"You think they're going to open up on us?" Flossy pressed, his elation at surviving the last barrage turning to alarm at the notion of facing another, this one aimed at him.
"No. No, my guess is if they got anymore ammo, they'll use it on Third Platoon or save it for later," Riles assured him, and then slipped off at the crouch for responsibilities elsewhere.

Flossy heard Spinetti cry out, the last dose of morphine wearing off. When he checked his ready-bag, Flossy found he had exhausted the morphine supply in it on Ramos and Spinetti and on Roberts back on the terraces. He dug into his reserve supply bag, down to the bottom where he kept the speed and the morphine, and drew back a bottle of salt tablets.

It was then he realized with a slow chill that he had been too worried and frightened to repack the bag since that morning, when they all thought it would be a routine road security sweep.

Almost stunned, Flossy leaned back against the wall of Hoach's Crater. There was Spinetti, in pain right then and there. If he ever linked up with the beach, Flossy would find many more wounded down there, in addition to those who would accumulate during the next day's fighting. And the fact Flossy finally brought himself to face was that he would have nothing to offer but bandages and salt tablets. The need to open the island to landing of medevac flights took on a new gravity. Flossy wondered who he should tell.
At least the rain had cooled things off, Maxwell consoled himself, wishing his uniform were dry into the bargain. The soil had soaked up most of the downpour, leaving the ground moist but not muddy. It would be so nice to stay there all night and let someone else take care of the fighting. Since the shelling of the beach, the night had passed without incident. It would soon be dawn.

Maxwell was feeling his age. He knew if he only could get moving, he would feel stronger. But he had been robbed of his sleep two nights in a row; last night by the shelling, the night before by the letter from the lawyer. He wanted rest. He was ready to kill for it.

He had briefed his men carefully on what they would have to do. Some of them were green, so he had taken special pains to make sure they understood. There would be no mistakes, he assured them. The assault on the Graves would come off like clockwork. Their morale and confidence were high.

Then they had watched what looked like disaster on the far end of the ridge. Just following the muzzle flashes and tracer streams, any greenie could tell what had happened. Our people moved out and were pushed back, with no telling how many casualties. That and the rain and the shelling had dampened their spirits.

So instead of resting before making his move, Maxwell had to talk up the men all over again. He had taken a different approach with them. They were not assaulting the Graves
because it would move them to within striking distance of the village, but because the Graves were within striking distance of Maxwell's Crater. None of them would be safe until they held the Graves.

Then he went over the plan again and again. With teams of riflemen covering the ridge slope to their left and the cliffs behind them and to the right, the main body of the platoon would start toward the Graves. They would halt on signal, and then wait for the second signal to squeeze in on Maxwell. When Maxwell opened fire, his six strongest grenade throwers would throw a grenade apiece. The men would count them off. When the sixth exploded they would move in staggered skirmish line, firing off the hip, until they were at the outer wall of the nearest grave. Then everyone would be on his own.

Maxwell went over the plan again for flaws. He had worked out a system for keeping the whole herd together until the jumping-off point. Counting the grenades would keep some clown from jumping up and dashing into their own shrapnel. Keeping them together until they reached the Graves should prevent one of them shooting the other. If he had missed something, Maxwell thought, it was too subtle to matter now.

He peered out into the darkness, straining to see or hear any sign of movement from the enemy. He could only half hope the Graves would be empty when they got there, but he knew Charlie would see the value of the Graves, too.
Off beyond the cliffs to his right, Maxwell could see the early morning twilight flattening out the horizon into a thin line at the bottom of the sky. He would have a few minutes' light, and then more darkness. He whispered an alert to the men.

Flossy had to face that he had done all he could without pain killers for the wounded. He had dragged a log from the edge of the crater down to make a wall for his aid station, and had laced together shelter halves to keep the men reasonably dry. Neither the firefight, nor the shelling, nor the rain had reached them.

Spinetti had grown steadily worse. With Ramos to nurse him, the lieutenant stayed as comfortable as could be expected. But the infection in Ramos' leg had become angry and inflamed as the night wore on, until Ramos had more than he could handle with his own pain.

The wounds from the skirmish on the hill were relatively light. There were three: one had broken a rib as he tumbled over the edge of the terrace wall in the retreat; one took a bullet wound in the buttock; and one had dirt, kicked up by a ricochet, in his eyes.

All were resting comfortably, so Flossy took a break. He shifted the shoulder-holster that was chafing under his arm, and wondered if he ought to take the silly thing off.
Hoach came up to check on Ramos and the others.

"I got him to sleep," Flossy said. "He'll make it all right if we can get him off this island. The others are fine. Except Spinetti."

"Is he going to make it?" Hoach asked.

"Maybe," Flossy said. "I can't say for sure."

There was a long silence. Flossy did not want to be alone, so he brought up the morphine shortage again, apologizing in hopes of prolonging the exchange.

"Forget it, Franklin," Hoach said. "I know how bad you feel. You just weren't briefed."

"Well, I knew something was up," Flossy confessed. "I wish I had been on my toes."

"Look, Franklin," Hoach consoled, "you aren't responsible for these people personally. You're part of the outfit, and this whole outfit got shafted today."

Another silence. They moved over the edge of the pond and risked lighting cigarettes, cupping them carefully in their palms.

Hoach opened the conversation again. "How did you get into the Army, Franklin?" he asked. "Just curious. None of my business."

"Oh, that," Flossy said. "I was drafted. Studying pre-med..."

"Pre-med?" Hoach said.
"Yes, I wanted to be a doctor, ever since I was a little boy," Flossy explained. "Only I didn't get into medical school."

"What happened?" Hoach asked.

"Sponsor flaked out on me," Flossy said. "I was pretty down about it, and just sort of gave up on school that semester."

"Then what?" Hoach pried.

"I got drafted," he replied, and then paused for a minute. "I didn't want any part of this war, and I didn't know what to do. One of my professors got me into the medics."

"You like it?" Hoach asked.

"Yes, company medic is all right," Flossy said. "In the hospitals, the doctors treated you like a janitor. Arrogant bastards. You get it twice, once because they're doctors and once because they're officers. Out here, nobody messes around with you too much."

"The doctors don't come this close to the action," he continued. "If you do your job, and if you think of everything, and if you deliver the patients to the operating table in good shape, they let you be the doctor. You take a lot of risks for that."

Hoach had fallen silent. Flossy asked what he was thinking.

"I didn't know you could just choose to be a doctor," Hoach said.
"How do you think people get to be doctors?" Flossy asked.

"I don't know. Never thought about it," Hoach said. "With me, it's always been the farm. The farm will come to me, and I'll pass it on. Never thought about being a doctor."

Flossy thought that one over, and then Hoach spoke again, first clearing his throat, reconsidering what he was about to say.

"If this is personal, you don't have to say nothing," he began. "And I won't ever tell anybody."

"Yes," Flossy said, cringing a little. "Well, it's about those letters, and what the fellows have been saying."

"The letters," Flossy said. "The letters were from that teacher. He knew how depressed I was and he felt a little guilty about advising me to go in the Army. Nothing more than that."

"Oh," said Hoach, a little surprised.

"Can I ask you something?" Flossy queried.

"What about?" Hoach said, grinding out his cigarette.

"Why all the interest after those rumors started?" Flossy asked.

"What do you mean?"

"What's in it for you?" Flossy pressed.

"Nothing," Hoach said, with perfect innocence. "It just pissed me off the way everyone ganged up on you. People can gang up on one person, but they always back off from two."
"Oh," said Flossy, now a little surprised himself. "I shouldn't say this, but I was afraid you were coming on to me."

"Me?" said Hoach, shocked.

"Yeah, I guess it was kind of silly," Flossy conceded. "I was just a little paranoid."

"Well, that doesn't matter now," Hoach said.

From the shelter came Spinetti's moaning again. "I got to get back to work," he said, offering Hoach his hand self-consciously. "I'm glad we got to talk."

"Yeah," responded Hoach, shaking Flossy's hand firmly. "Keep your head down, Flossy."

They moved off in opposite directions, each feeling lighter.

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Maxwell tapped once on the stock of his rifle, paused for a five-count, and tapped again. The line moved forward into the gloom.

Like his men, Maxwell crawled with a swimming stroke, stretching his hand out and gripping the earth, then pulling himself forward until his nose touched his hand. It was a trick he had worked out himself, and if all the men kept a precise count of strokes, they would arrive at the jumping off point in an even line.
Maxwell closed his eyes and focused his hearing out to the sides, straining to listen for any betrayal of movement from the platoon. He could hear -- or thought he could hear -- grass being uprooted, but he calmed by remembering that the wind would drown out that racket to anyone listening in the Graves.

The wind came in off the sea, and carried the heat from the men's bodies to brush against his face. That, too, would dissipate with distance, even if the wind shifted back toward the graves.

But if it shifted, he realized in the pit of his stomach, it would also carry their smell. Closing his eyes again, he sniffed to make sure their sweat had washed away the perfume of deodorant soap and after-shave lotion. He thought he caught just a bare hint of unnatural sweetness, but the smell from the sea drowned it. Still, Maxwell prayed silently that Charlie had a cold, or had been smoking, or had eaten fermented fish sauce -- anything to screw up his nose.

They were 25 yards -- 50 strokes -- out from the Crater. The halfway point. He could turn back from here and the listening posts could cover a withdrawal. Once the platoon passed the LPs it was committed.

Maxwell halted, listening again. No movement ahead. No sound other than the low moaning of the wind in the Graves. No smells of gunoil, sweat, corroding brass or digesting food. But he could feel the presence of life in the Graves.
No, man, you're just getting panicky, he told himself. If there's anyone in the Graves, they're going to have to leave. It's going to be our graveyard come sunrise.

He tapped twice on his rifle stock, waited, and then repeated the signal. The platoon started forward, picking up momentum. Behind him the listening posts swung their attention from the direction of the Graves and covered the flanks.

Over to Maxwell's right, someone coughed. The whole line froze, and Maxwell gnashed his teeth, waiting for the sky to fall. It did not. He fought down the urge to slip over to the offender and deliver a kick, but waited instead for the blood to stop pounding in his ears before moving on. He gave a signal to start up again, hoping none of the men had lost count of the distance in their wait for disaster.

Then they were there. The bleached white outline of the Graves was plain in the dim twilight, only 15 or 20 yards ahead. To help him hear, Maxwell took off his helmet and carefully laid it off to the side, within easy reach. He indulged the desire to scratch his itching head, and then listened. He thought he heard the rhythmic whistling of a man breathing through stopped-up nostrils, but he couldn't be sure.

Twilight was coming on stronger now, and Maxwell lifted a cupped palm to his face to block the light from his right.

Then he saw it. Silhouetted against the dim whiteness of the tomb was a man's head covered with straight, thick black
hair. It appeared for an instant and then vanished below the wall of the tomb.

We've been spotted, Maxwell thought in terror. He started to spring the assault right then, but no sound came from the Graves except the howl of the wind.

All right, he thought, putting his helmet back on. If he sticks his head up again, I'm going to blow it off.

There was nothing else to do. The men would be ready. He gave the signal to close in, and with painful silence the line contracted on itself until all the men were within arm's reach of each other. Maxwell's muscles were so tight he was afraid they might tear loose from his bones, and he forced calm, starting from the neck and working down.

The head appeared again, and Maxwell carefully lowered his sights on it and squeezed the trigger. The muzzle flash blinded him to what happened next, but he listened.

He heard the clatter of the other rifles cutting loose, firing singles. Then in front of him, the safety spoons clinked away from six hand grenades. He heard all six.

"One!" he bellowed with the others trying to be heard over the blasts. "Two! Three, Four! Five! Six!"

The count disintegrated into a hollow roar of warcries, but before it drowned out every other sound in the world, Maxwell noted there had been no sound of firing from the Graves, no orders shouted in foreign tongue, no scrambling of startled men, nothing to deny the enemy's surprise.
"Well, it's finally happened," he shouted as he hauled himself upright. "We finally caught Charlie flat-footed."

The men of the first line had already started forward, and the second line followed without hesitation. The stride of the men had a bounce to it, as though they were trying to restrain themselves from running.

Maxwell joined. Firing a shot each time his left foot hit the ground, he goose-stepped forward, closing the distance between himself and the long-hidden enemy.

The first one he saw was standing astride the wall of the nearest tomb, firing his assault rifle frantically in Maxwell's direction. The bullets were going over him, and Maxwell dispatched the man with two shots from the hip.

As he fell, a second man rose up, blinded by the blood streaming down his face from the cut on his forehead and groping for his weapon. He danced like a puppet when at least three of Maxwell's men found him in their sights.

Then the platoon was at the outer wall. Charlie had pulled back to the far half of the Graves, teetering in the edge of panic and trying to protect their wounded.

Maxwell cried out in the general direction of four or five men in the second line to follow him, and then peeled off to the right, racing around the seaward side to flank the enemy in his last stand. They drew up even with Charlie just in time to cut a few down as they broke for the village. The rest of the platoon was not slowed by the defense line, and
came on across the Graves howling like werewolves and scurrying over the tombs.

Listening to their profanity hurled at the retreating enemy, Maxwell knew the assault was over but for the shouting, and moved in to calm the men down and brace them for the counterattack. He hoped it would come soon, while the platoon's blood was still up.

Ramos got tired of Spinetti's moaning and the stuffiness of the aid station, so he dragged himself through the dark to the rim of Hoach's Crater.

The firing started from the other end of the ridge just as he reached the rim. From the muzzle flashes and his mental picture of the map of the island, Ramos placed the fighting at the Graves. Then he saw the tracers ricocheting straight up, as if hitting rock or concrete, and his worst fear was confirmed.

"Holy Mother," he said softly to himself. "They are fighting in a graveyard."

With a rush of dread, Ramos remembered the admonishments of his childhood. If you disturb the dead, they will exact their price.

Flossy joined him. "What are you doing up here?" he demanded, then turned toward the fighting. "What's going on out there?"
"Charlie is running Maxwell out of the Graves," he guessed. "That's very bad."

"Can Maxwell take them back?" Flossy asked.

"I hope not," Ramos said, peering earnestly into Flossy's face. "God has no patience with those who violate holy places. If you have no respect for the dead, you can have no respect for the living."

They listened to the fire die down. A silence fell over the island, disturbed only by the parachute flares that popped to life overhead.

Then, in that quiet, they heard two shots from the Graves. Then a third, after a long pause. Flossy and Ramos were silent, and then Ramos spoke.

"There, you see," he said. "They are shooting the wounded. There will be no mercy in this fight."

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"What was that?" Hoach asked rhetorically.

"You know goddamned good and well what it is," answered Riles, whom Hoach had joined on the outpost line. "They're shooting the wounded."

"Shooting the wounded," Hoach said, letting it soak in slowly. "Son of a bitch."

"Charlie can't handle them, man," Riles said, trying to comfort Hoach, whose shuddering breath betrayed the rage he was trying to conceal. "Better than just letting them die."
"Those are Maxwell's wounded," Hoach whispered, turning his glare at Riles. "You're talking about Maxwell's wounded."

"Take it easy, man. I'm on your side," Riles said. "This is 'Nam. That's the way things are done in 'Nam. It's their religion."

Hoach snorted in disgust and was silent. Then he spoke with a coldness that frightened Riles. "Okay for tonight, but tomorrow Charlie's going to be the sorriest mother-fucker that every lived."

He crawled off into the dark to try and make some sense out of what he'd just seen.

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"You stupid honkey faggot!" Maxwell raged at the stoned soldier, his boot missing the man's groin and striking his stomach with a clear thud. "Those were wounded! You just smoked three wounded!"

"Just gooks," the stoned soldier gasped, doubled over from the blow.

"Just gooks!" Maxwell almost shouted, grabbing the man's pack straps and hauling him off the ground until his chest was nearly at eye-level. "Just gooks? They were wounded gooks, and every fucking gook on this fucking island knows what happened to them!"
Maxwell flung the man over the wall of the tomb, shook off the hands that tried to restrain him, and went after the stoned soldier.

"We had them running," said Maxwell, almost calming. "Now they want revenge."

"Hey, what's the hassle, man," said the stoned soldier, trying for defiance.

"You goddamned . . ." Maxwell's profanity failed him, so he slapped the stoned soldier's face, bruising his thumb on the lip of the man's helmet, which went clattering off across the floor of the tomb. He shook the injured hand, and then grasped it with his other. Behind him, from the direction of the Patch, came the voices of the enemy, threatening their retribution, growing louder and bolder as more joined in.

"Listen to them," Maxwell snarled, taking a handful of the soldier's hair and jerking him up, twisting his head so he faced the village. "Just listen. I ought to just give you to them."

They all listened in silence. "... you never happen, you GI mother-fucker bassue . . . we crocodile you now, and number ten thousand shit . . ."

"I'm going to watch you, boy," growled Maxwell. "I'm going to watch you real good. If I don't like what I see, when we get back to the base, I'm going to have you court-martialed. You going to spend the rest of your long, miserable life making gravel at Leavenworth."
"I ought to have you taken out and shot," he continued, his voice almost cracking with anger. "Now get out of my sight!"

The voices from the village were loud and plain as Maxwell tried to collect himself, and they had shifted from threats in broken English to derision. Maxwell could endure no more.

"Shut up!" he screamed at the village, firing a long burst from his rifle at them. "Goddamn it, shut up!"

His rifle emptied, the last shell casing jingling on the stone floor, a great silence fell as the island waited for dawn.

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CHAPTER IV

"... Good-bye, close support ..."

Dawn was blazing at the airfield and Coleman could see that weapons platoon -- the company's reserve, the long awaited third lift -- had disintegrated overnight.

Completely reversed were the effects of two weeks' rest: the sudden shock of combat orders, the afternoon unprotected in the blistering sun at the airfield, the long night on the cold ground in the fog and rain, had all combined to leave the men awakening stiff and congested to a cold breakfast.

It was just as well that none of them knew what was going on at the island. The command element and Third Platoon had disappeared entirely: their radios had gone suddenly dead, in the middle of a gruesome account of the platoon running smack into a row of hidden bunkers.

A sergeant named Maxwell, the Colonel had explained, had come on the air briefly and said the company commander was dead. Then they had heard from a sergeant named LaPlante, who was in charge of First Platoon by attrition, giving an hysterical plea for illumination.

On hearing this, the battalion commander, who had just returned from a well-deserved rest leave, nearly became hysterical himself.
He demanded to know by what demented frame of mind one of his company had been committed to combat without his approval. The Colonel answered blandly that it was a new development that had to be exploited immediately. He added it was that sort of spirit that would be needed to win this war.

The battalion commander rashly asked if the Colonel thought he were not aggressive enough.

The Colonel, even more thoughtlessly, asked Coleman for his opinion, which placed Coleman in the middle of an argument between superiors.

He weighed his words carefully, but he threw in with the battalion commander, his immediate supervisor. He reasoned that if he sided with the Colonel, he would be remembered as some anonymous brown-nose. By siding with the battalion commander, he would be singled out as a valuable loyal subordinate.

It turned out to be his first decision as company commander, provisionally. He would still have to carry the attack on the Island. Afterwards, the battalion commander talked as if fired up by the Colonel's speech on aggressiveness, and as if he had taken it to heart.

In fact, he was just that moment telephoning Coleman at the airport for his hourly check on why the third wave hadn't taken off, according to the slightly insolent Spec. 4 from airfield operations.
Coleman thanked the man and said he would be right there, he could find his own way to the office, and the messenger left.

The men were still sleeping, despite the sudden sunrise, and Coleman decided not to awaken them.

"Coleman," the battalion commander's voice asked over the phone. "Is that you, Coleman?"

"Yes, sir," Coleman said, stifling a yawn. "I'm still here."

"Well, why? What am I going to tell them now?" the battalion commander asked impatiently. "The rain grounded you all night, but the weather people just told me it was going to be clear all day."

"Well, sir," Coleman suggested. "I'd like to fly in first and look it over."

"Coleman, there are supply convoys stacking up along the highway down at Da Nang," the battalion commander said. "We need that stuff. We got all three brigades in contact. Now you better get with it."

"Sir, I'd like to prep the position first," Coleman replied carefully. "I could get the elements on the high ground into position to cover the landing."

"You get your people down on that island by noon," the battalion commander said, after a long pause. "If it's too hot for you, we can send in another company. Just remember we can't spare any for long."
The battalion commander hung up. Coleman breathed a long sigh and leaned against the flight dispatcher's desk, where he replaced the receiver on the phone cradle.

His watch said it was near 7 a.m. He had bargained for -- and gotten -- five hours for his company, or what was left of it, to prepare and plan. There were two sergeants now on the island, one of whom seemed to have his situation under control. The other he could coach during the action.

In addition, he still had a strong cadre of his own: an officer -- the Weapons Platoon leader -- and five sergeants, counting the armorer and the mess sergeant.

It could be worked out, he decided. First, he would try to put the men in good health and high spirits by feeding them a hot breakfast and getting them into dry uniforms. They could do that and shower, too, while he put together some sort of communications link with the island.

Tarrying inside the office only long enough to roll some stiffness out of his shoulders, Coleman strode out onto the steel-planked runway to wake up his men and put them to work.

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One of the disadvantages of fighting from the Graves was that the stone walls ricocheted viciously, which the former occupants knew only too well.
They had been firing into the Graves all morning, and the screeching, whining bullets had claimed three of Maxwell's. So Maxwell thought it was just as well the Executive Officer -- and current Company Commander -- had come on the radio and ordered an assault on the village within two hours.

It was Maxwell's only consolation. The choice of Coleman to head up the company was a disagreeable one for him. Coleman was a college man -- not a West Pointer, but one of the scientific types he had seen coming in since the early 60s -- and Maxwell had always felt out of place around him. That feeling was especially uncomfortable to Maxwell, who had been a soldier since his teens.

He would have to work especially hard around Coleman, who was probably a bigot, Maxwell thought darkly. Still, it would be only a short time to retirement. He was down to counting months. But the months were all the time he had to make enough rank for a comfortable pension.

Which brought him back to the island. There was no easy way to pull off an assault across open ground to the heavily-wooded village. You couldn't count on anything -- not air-strikes, nor artillery, not even armor if they'd had any -- except men and rifles to subdue an enemy with his back to the sea.

Maxwell wasn't quite ready to face the prospect, and he thought briefly about going forward under a flag of truce and asking for Charlie's surrender. He smiled at that.
His thoughts wandered from there to Korea, where his outfit -- in 1952, surely the last colored unit in the Army -- spent the war guarding Chinese prisoners. The high point of that year had been one of the prison riots. There was a United Nations observer -- Swiss, Maxwell recalled -- present, so tanks and dogs were out.

One of the white officers from Maxwell's outfit had gone into the compound under a flag of truce to negotiate.

The Chinese hanged him.

No, thought Maxwell, there won't be no flag of truce here.

The low point of the tour, he remembered, was the divorce from his first wife. They had been stuck in Missouri for years, with Maxwell advancing to sergeant. He went to Korea to pick up an extra stripe. She moved to California to get a divorce.

Maxwell took the loss of his property -- the accumulation of six years overseas -- harder than the loss of his wife. He had grown tired of her anyway.

She was a German. He had met and married her in the rubble of West Berlin. He used to joke, "Some fellows bring home Lugers, I brought home a white woman."

But as soon as the naturalization papers came through, she had gone to work on the divorce.

What Maxwell took hardest was that he got the news right before he left Korea. He was supposed to go home, but he got the orders changed to Japan.
There, one night in the NCO club at an engineer depot near Yokohama, Maxwell had taken two steps back. He was drinking heavily and singing to the Japanese girl at the next table. One of the white sergeants had told him to knock it off. Maxwell didn't remember what he had said in reply, but he said the same thing to the white MP, just before the night stick broke his nose.

The court martial left him with the corporal's stripes he had earned in World War II. He was released to serve in the supply room of an armor outfit in Texas.

Next to that, the situation on the island was not nearly so gloomy. He and his three skinny squads would work out some plan for taking the village.

His reflections and the lack of sleep put Maxwell in a black mood. He looked for someone or something to take it out on. Following the sound of distant laughter, he spotted the stoned soldier and his buddy on a giggling jag over in an adjacent grave.

It angered him to see the young man so unrepentant over his crime that morning. So while they waited for orders to proceed with the attack, Maxwell called the stoned soldier to receive some justice.


The stoned soldier picked up his gear and trotted over to Maxwell.
"What, now, man?" he said on arrival.

"I'll tell you, 'what now, man'," Maxwell said, almost losing his temper at the stoned soldier's insolence. "You're going to take your foxhole shovel and drag those three Charlie bodies out next to the crater and you're going to bury them. That's what. Now, man."

"Aw, man . . ." the soldier began.

"Trooper, that don't call for no discussion," Maxwell cut him off. "You get your ass out there."

Somewhat cowed, the stoned soldier crawled off. Maxwell watched as he tried unsuccessfully to talk his friend into helping with the grisly chore, and then ambled over, looking harassed and abused, to collect the bodies of his victims. Maxwell felt better, and set about getting the men organized for a quick breakfast before their next action.

As soon as the sun rose, Hoach saw the enemy had been busy that night. Two of the wires leading to the directional mines had been cut: Charlie had come to within 50 yards of Hoach's crater and departed in total silence.

To do that, he had to slip past the outpost line. He had strangled one of Hoach's men on the way. Hoach was ready to storm the village that instant, and damn the risk.

Riles was arguing in long, coaxing bursts to restrain Hoach.
Flossy was trying to make a palatable breakfast for his patients. The argument was distressing him, so he intervened.

"Fellows," he said, and neither Hoach nor Riles responded. "Riles. Hoach. Listen. Why don't you go out and take a look for yourself before you decide what to do?"

"Hoach, I'm telling you man, he's just baiting us," Riles pleaded. "Charlie's got the two claymores and he's turned them on us. It's fucking suicide, man."

"I don't care, Riles, Hoach reasserted. "We don't have to sit here and take this. Charlie's shot Maxwell's wounded and now he's down here at our end of the ridge coming after our own people. No, sir, we don't have to take that."

"Hoach, Flossy tried to interrupt, "Look, why don't you hold off until I get this batch of patients fed and bathed. We can't take in any more wounded until we get these dusted off."

That seemed to make some sense to Hoach, and Flossy could see the light of reason returning to his face.

"Yeah, man," said Riles, picking up the cue. "Look, we haven't heard from LaPlante. The third lift may get here, and it will have heavy shit on it."

Hoach paused, silent, to mull it over. He looked into both their faces, and then turned a long gaze toward the Garden and the village beyond.

"All right," Hoach said finally. "Riles, you and me will go out and have a look. If we don't find anything, we'll push on in to the other end of the Garden."
Riles tossed Flossy a look of resignation, and then turned to leave with Hoach. Flossy watched after them until they paused at the rim of the Crater, scanned the ground before them with field glasses, and then disappeared over the edge.

Having dealt with that problem, Flossy was brought back to take on the day's routine concerns. He started by returning to the shelter and moving out his three ambulatory patients, putting them to work turning C-ration meat into a useable broth. It happened one of them knew how to break open a directional mine and plunder it for its plastic explosive, which burned hot and long enough to warm canned food and make coffee. The practice always made Flossy nervous, but he had been assured many times it involved no risk. It also afforded the patients a hot breakfast.

So while they were busy cooking, Flossy put down clean body-bags -- which doubled as ground sheets -- and undressed his nonambulatory patients. This morning that included Ramos, whose thigh was badly inflamed and who had developed a fever. That worried Flossy, who had never seen a wound deteriorate that fast.

Flossy sorted the ground sheets and clothes out for laundering and sunning to remove the heavy smell of human fluids. He set the reeking pile on the rim of the crater to let the wind carry the stench away. The idea was to take away from the patient as much of the experience of illness as possible.
Flossy was ready for breakfast just about the time it was finished. Spinetti, Ramos, and the jaw wound from second squad would have a mild chicken broth and a little bread. Everyone else would share bacon and egg yolk, pork slices and juice made from canned apricots. For Flossy there would also be a hit of dexedrine.

"Well, what do you think, man," Riles asked Hoach, who was lying in a pocket of ground scanning the gentle rise of the slope ahead.

"I don't think it looks right," Hoach replied, straining to see why. "I don't know Riles. It just don't look right."

"How, man?" asked Riles, coaxing Hoach into discouraging himself. "What do you see?

"Wait a minute," said Hoach, absently dismissing Riles' intrusion. "Well, would you just look at that."

"What?" asked Riles, swinging up his binoculars. "Where?"

"The Garden," said Hoach. "There's freshly turned earth in the Garden. That's what Charlie was doing here. He was digging in the Garden and he sent some people forward to give warning if we moved in."

"Hey, yeah," Riles said, having just spotted the dark, flat mounds across the edge of the Garden. "Wow."
"Wow, my ass," replied Hoach. "What does he want with bunkers? Is he going to try to hold this island forever?"

"They're spreading themselves awfully thin," Riles commented. "If they're spread out from the Graves to the Crotch to the Garden to the terraces, there must be a bunch of them."

The remark made Hoach's breath catch, for he realized suddenly that he had not speculated until that instant on the enemy's manpower. He had always assumed the two sides were about equal: had not needed to question the assumption, because he had -- until then -- been carrying out other people's orders. Now that he was making his own plans, there was much he would need to know.

First of all, he asked himself, what kind and how many? The uniforms had been North Vietnamese Army issue, but this far north, that could be damn near anybody.

If they were NVA, there would be more of them. If they were Viet Cong, they were likely to be fighting on their own ground, which was even more dangerous.

Realizing he was only an acting sergeant with less than four months' combat experience, Hoach prudently looked for any information he could find. Riles was right there, so Hoach started with him.

"What do you think, Riles?" Hoach asked. "How many does he act like he's got?"

"Well," said Riles, considering what he had seen in the last 18 hours. "If they'd had enough to do it, they would have
pushed us off the island. I don't see why they were committed here in the first place."

Hoach mulled that over, and then began trying possibilities.

"Well, suppose they wanted to suck in as many of us as they could," Hoach began building an argument, "and then slam the door behind us and set us up to kill us at their leisure?"

Riles paused for a moment, as if he were a foreigner trying to translate a difficult tongue, and then said, "That's too expensive to bag a company."

Hoach kept his own counsel for a second, and then tried, "Well, they came here in the first place to hold up the convoys, don't you think?"

"No, man," Riles asserted. "They know we got more shit than they could burn in a million years. Only gain they can make is for us not to have it when we need it."

"Okay," Hoach took it up. "So they just want to keep the convoys bottled up. Best way to do that is just to be here. As long as they have those mortars nothing's coming through."

"Yeah," Riles agreed. "Charlie's best shot is to keep this fight going."

"Which means they're working in a bigger program," Hoach concluded. "Which means they're NVA."

Now that he had that figured, Hoach reckoned on what to do with the knowledge. Riles did not help him there.
If they were NVA, Hoach reasoned, they would have good equipment and experienced officers. Hoach strained to get a clear picture of his enemy, and how his mind worked. Nothing in his upbringing had prepared him to match wits with Asians, he thought with dread.

But Hoach caught himself short of despair when he grasped the simple truth that Charlie was a man, Asian or otherwise, and certain things applied to all men.

Putting himself in the enemy's place, Hoach imagined how he would feel, given a hopeless mission and told to carry it out to the end. They had to be more dedicated than he was.

And they had their backs to the sea, and they had burned all bridges toward surrender by shooting Maxwell's wounded in the Graves. For Charlie, the only gain to be made would be to take down as many of Hoach's battered men as he could.

If Hoach was to keep that from happening, he realized, he would have to plan carefully and with caution. First he would make sure his own nest was protected and free of menace; then he would deal with the danger in the Garden.

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Maxwell noted with grim pleasure that the stoned soldier was too shaken to eat. From the man's listless manner, Maxwell could tell the lesson had not been lost.
The rest of the men were holding up pretty well. The long night's thirst had braced them up to face drinking from the Crater, water that was fouled and saturated with chemicals and did not refresh, and they had made breakfast and assembled their gear without being told.

Now half of them were standing watch and the others cleaning rifles and changing socks. Maxwell could see his squad leaders putting the men on a business-as-usual routine, and it pleased him. Morale was still good.

Trying to add as much as he could to garrison atmosphere, Maxwell repeatedly and loudly referred to the Graves as "this post" rather than "this position," a term that suggested the tenuousness of close combat.

Coleman had a sound plan, which proceeded in three phases. First, tanks were on their way up the road that passed along the mountainside just across the water and slightly higher than the top of the ridge. Three of them would halt on the road and give close support to LaPlante as he linked up with his element on the ridge. The whole group would close with the village and wait for the signal to begin phase two. Artillery would barrage the village, and when it lifted, Maxwell and LaPlante would move to the edge and keep the enemy pinned down, unable to use his mortars.

Then phase three would bring in the third lift, which would contain Weapons Platoon. They would set up their mortars and cover an assault by the remnants of Benger's group up
the Crotch to the Captain's Bunkers. The village would then have to capitulate.

Maxwell had faith in the plan, giving Coleman -- or whoever else was its author -- credit for bringing every available force to bear without making it so complicated it would break down under its own weight.

He took out his binoculars and again scanned the perimeter of the village. Charlie had masked its edges well with freshly cut foliage, so its contours were obscure. By filtering out the greenery that did not look as though it belonged, Maxwell was able to sketch a rough mental outline of his target.

The village was anchored on four clumps of big, twisted trees, one exactly at each corner of the compass. The south end of the village thrust like a wedge into what would be his skirmish line. That was bad, because even when the center of his line took the point of the perimeter, the rest of his people would still come under fire from the sides.

So Maxwell planned to put his fire elements out on the wings of his assault line. With a machine-gun on one end and three good riflemen on the other, the oblique faces of the treeline could be scathed, leaving the center of the line to deal with the clump of trees at the apex.

He would put an extra fireteam in the center, where it would hit the point hardest.
It was good, balanced deployment, which was fortunate because it was the only option he had, Maxwell reflected. In the attack, it would carry, because it could be formed and launched with only a few basic commands.

But if the attack failed and they had to retreat, it could be a setup for disaster. For one thing, a collapse on either of the wings could leave the line unprotected. Even if that did not happen, reforming the line so it could disengage and make it back to the Graves would need close timing and tight management. Right then he was the only one who could pull it off, Maxwell concluded heavily. To prepare for the possibility that someone else would have to take up the job, Maxwell called over his three squad leaders to brief them on how it was to be done.

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Hoach felt his nerve failing from the instant he and Riles returned from looking over the Garden. So he set to work at once, trying to drown his doubts in positive action.

First he mounted a patrol of the area around the Crater, including the slopes of the ridges on three sides. There was no evidence Charlie had been there, but Hoach did note that one side of the ridge was within range of the Captain's Bunkers, across the Crotch. Running along the south base of the ridge, masked from Third Platoon on the beach, was a cor-
ridor of dead space that could not be seen from the Crater. It would have to be covered somehow.

And then there was the north slope of the ridge. Evidently Laplante was concentrated down on the far end of the terraces, near the village. Between their position and Hoach's crater there did not appear to any screening force. Hoach was shocked when the patrol reported that, because between the two elements there was an enemy position -- Spinetti's Bunkers -- that was known to be occupied.

Then, to the front, along the edge of the Garden, the new bunkers seemed to stretch all the way across the ridge, linking up on the north with Spinetti's Bunkers.

Having no map of his own, Hoach drew all this in his notebook, and the picture that emerged was that Charlie now claimed more of the island than Hoach, Laplante, Maxwell and Third Platoon combined. The victories of the day before were all illusion. Charlie was dug in along a line that was anchored out in the Graves, swung through the Crotch with the Captain's Bunkers, broke briefly and took up again at the near edge of the Garden. From there, the line swung east and faced the terraces, presumably all the way to the cliffs.

That empire was being challenged by whatever remained of Maxwell on the southern tip of the island; whatever remained of Third Platoon huddled on the beach; Hoach with barely a dozen men in a fool's haven of a crater on his end of the ridge; and Laplante clinging to the terraces.
Hoach wondered why Charlie had let them live so long. Then he brought himself to grips with the problem at hand.

"Well, what do you think, Riles?" he probed for more information. "Just how much of that can we take on?"

"Tell you the truth," said Riles, after a long reflection. "I think we'd be smart to just sit tight and wait for the third lift. If Charlie wants us, right now all he has to do is come after us, and we'd be doing good just to hold him off."

"I don't know," replied Hoach. "I don't like just sitting here and letting Charlie call all the moves."

"Yeah, I hear you, man," Riles agreed. "But look, we're just barely a good squad; we haven't got enough muscle to try to take on anybody big. Besides, we're low on ammo."

Which was another problem Hoach had kept at the back of his mind, and now forced himself to face. He took inventory through Riles and the leaders of the two other fireteams -- his and the one Laplante had lent him -- found it critically low. Barely a hundred rounds each for the rifles, two boxes of machine-gun belt, and only a double handful of grenades, added up to enough for one serious clash.

So there it was. Hoach was good for one fight between now and the coming of the third wave, with its supplies. One fight only.

"Look here, Riles," he said, thinking aloud. "There's three things working here: men, guns and position. We're
weak in men and guns -- or ammo, same thing -- so we ought to make up for it with position. Don't you think?"

Riles considered for a minute, and then said, "Makes sense. What do you suggest?"

"I suggest we don't wait for Charlie to come to us," Hoach argued further. "I think we ought to carry it to him."

"How?" asked Riles, apprehensive.

"I'm with you about it being silly to attack from here," Hoach said, pointing to the floor of his crater. "But we lost a man cause Charlie didn't have to fight to get here. I think we ought to move up, as close to the Garden as we can, and throw up a line. Leave a couple of men here to cover the Crater. They'll also cover us from the back and sides."

"Sounds good," Riles admitted. "Be a bitch to try digging in in broad daylight. I still wish we could wait and see what the third lift is going to do."

"We can dig in while we're waiting," Hoach replied. "Give us an advantage no matter what."

Drawing a map in the soil at their feet, Riles and Hoach, with most of the squad gathered around and looking on, diagrammed the planned defenses. Hoach then gave the first batch of instructions and the men saddled up to move.
The battalion commander told Coleman the tanks were on their way down the road to cover Laplante on the terraces. There would be artillery to flatten the village -- level the trees in the Patch if necessary -- and Coleman was to move out at once. The Colonel had been quite specific about this: clearing the island was intended to be a one-day operation. The delay of nearly 24 hours had thrown timetables off all over the region. Convoys were choking the roads all around Da Nang. It was intolerable.

Coleman acknowledged he understood the order and listened for the battalion commander to hang up. Then he called over the radio operator and began giving instructions to his men on the island. He dealt with Maxwell first, getting the sure thing out of the way.

"Roger that," Maxwell acknowledged his receipt of the plan. "My people are ready to move. They will hold here until the barrage lifts and move in. Over."

"You understand there will still be shelling in front of Laplante from the tanks?" Coleman asked. "Over."

"Roger," Maxwell said. "That will be directed by Laplante. Over."


Coleman was relieved by Maxwell's competence. Whatever else happened, that end of the ridge would be secure. He could count on it.
Laplante was a different matter -- nervous and erratic, but effective if properly supervised. Coleman went over the plan again, shouting over the roar of the helicopters, which were coming in from sorties all over I Corps to carry the third lift.

"That's affirmative, you will direct the tanks from your position," Coleman repeated. "It will be direct fire, so call it as close as you need to. Over."

"Roger, Rapid Sleeper Six," came Laplante's voice over the speaker. "You will approach from the south and land along the beach, we will cover the north end of the village from here. Over."


"Wilco, Rapid Sleeper Six," Laplante replied blandly.

"Can you have Hoach give cover for the landing zone?" Coleman asked. "Over."

"Uh . . . Hoach's situation not known at this time," Laplante said. "Over."

"Repeat that, Rapid Sleeper Two," said Coleman, hoping the sound of the helicopters had caused him to hear incorrectly.

"We have had no contact with Hoach since dark," Laplante replied slowly. "He was in contact at about 2200 hours."
Coleman closed his eyes and let it sink in. When he calculated Hoach's role in covering the landing, Coleman had assumed someone on the ridge would be in a position to give cover. He also assumed Laplante spoke for Hoach. He had assumed too much.

"Rapid Sleeper Two," Coleman said, forcing restraint. "You get in touch with Hoach immediately and brief me at once. Out."

Laplante would have only a few minutes to do that, Coleman thought bleakly. If the third lift was not airborne soon, Coleman feared the battalion commander would relieve him and take charge himself. And, with a chill, Coleman saw the battalion commander's jeep coming up the road toward the airfield.

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Flossy's latest bout with diarrhea was a much closer contest than the struggle the morning before. His body was covered with the oily sweat of exhaustion; his mouth tasted as if it were stuffed with cotton; there were pains in all his muscles, and the cramps had nearly doubled him over.

As he fought to remain upright, Flossy realized he was probably sicker than half his patients at the moment. So he didn't recognize at first the man Hoach was talking with was from Laplante's group.
"Hoach, you've just got to do something about Ramos," Flossy interjected, his cramps putting a priority on his business. "He's going to lose that leg if you don't keep him still."

"What?" demanded Hoach, who had been too deep in thought to hear Flossy the first time. "What are you talking about?"

"Ramos," Flossy repeated. "While I was doing laundry he dragged himself out of the shelter and he's now up on the rim sunning himself."

"Oh," said Hoach, absorbing the problem and scowling with impatience. "Well, put him to sleep."

"We're out of dope," Flossy snapped.

"Well, then tie him up," Hoach nearly shouted. "The aid station is your problem."

"Oh, what's the use," grumbled Flossy as he turned to go back to the shelter.

"Tell him I said to do what you say," Hoach called after him. "That's all I can do right now."

Flossy left the two soldiers talking, and returned to the shelter to change bandages. On laying out his supplies, he realized he had used the staples too lavishly on the few wounds he had treated so far. It was fortunate the medevacs would be there soon, and there would be extra supplies on the third lift.

Flossy pushed aside the flap of the shelter to have a look at his patients. Skinner, the jaw wound, was taking it
very well, and inflammation wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been. The man with the broken ribs thought he was having trouble breathing, and complained loudly about it. Flossy told him gently but firmly that he couldn't bitch if he wasn't getting adequate air supply, and ordered him to remain quiet and still.

He then moved on to the bullet wound.

"Bleah!" he joked when he peeled aside the bandages and looked at the wound. "That's just awful!" The patient laughed politely at the attempt.

It really was awful. Flossy had gotten the bullet out and plugged the hole with a tampon, but it was festering much faster than it should. So he explained the situation matter-of-factly to the patient.

"Look, what hit you was one of those damned cheap Chinese bullets," Flossy said. "They don't hold up as well in our tough Nordic hides as the Russian round, and there's a sliver still in there. It's going to have to come out."

While the man gave a tired nod of understanding, Flossy paused to let another cramp pass.

"I'm going to get everything else squared away, and then we'll fix you up," he said.

Flossy moved on to Spinetti, who was unconscious but not comatose, and was holding his own. All of his wounds could have been treated successfully, Flossy thought sadly, if they had gotten him off the island sooner. As it was, he would
probably lose his eyes and Flossy would have to fight to save the lung. He was glad the poor man was not aware of what had happened.

He stepped out of the shelter and shivered a little in the cold morning wind, then stepped over to Ramos.

"Ramos, I'm not going to tell you again," he said sternly. "You don't get back in the shelter and rest, you're going to lose that leg. That's a fact."

"Fuck off and leave me alone, man," said Ramos. "You can't do nothing anyway. I'm not going to get off this island."

"Aw, quit your whining," Flossy said, losing patience. "You guys are all alike. One little scratch and you just go to pieces."

Ramos looked up at him with jaundiced eyes, letting Flossy know silently that he meant what he said.

Flossy had dealt before with men who talked gloom just to draw encouragement. Others, Ramos among them, took some perverse comfort in pessimism. Flossy knew no argument to bring a man out of that depression, so he said, "Look, I've got surgery to do. If you're still here when I finish, I'm going to drag you back to that aid station. You'll be too weak to stop me, if you're as bad off as you say."

"Why don't you just leave me be, man?" Ramos sniffed. "Just let me have a little while without being hassled."
Flossy was too worn and harried to bother with an answer. He turned and left Ramos to feel sorry for himself, and went back to the aid station.

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Hoach listened for awhile without comment as the runner from Laplante's group laid out Hoach's part in what was about to happen. The third lift was coming in, and to land safely, they would have to depend on Hoach, Maxwell and Laplante to pin down the village.

When the runner got to that part, Hoach interrupted to ask if Laplante was aware of the new line of bunkers Charlie had dug across the Garden.

"No," said the runner. "He didn't mention it."

"Well, then, does he know we only have 12 men this morning?" Hoach asked. "We lost three wounded last night."

"He said you were to link up with him, not the other way around," replied the runner blandly. "Doesn't sound like he thinks you're down to a dozen."

"Well, sir," said Hoach, "Tell me this: has Laplante been anywhere on the ridge all night? Has he sent out any patrols at all?"

The runner, seeing where the line of inquiry was running, paused, looked down, and rubbed the nape of his neck. Then he looked up and said, "No, no patrols. Guess we all figured
Charlie was throwing all his heavy cards in against the terraces and Spinetti's Bunkers."

Hoach fought to restrain himself from talking to the runner as though he were responsible. He looked away, in the direction of Laplante, and pondered what to say. The runner was silent for several minutes while Hoach collected himself. Finally he turned back to face the runner.

"Well, tell Laplante Charlie's playing with a stacked deck," Hoach began. "Tell Laplante the enemy is dug in all across my front. Tell him I am also having security problems on the other three sides. Tell him the best I can do is crawl up and dig in closer to Charlie."

Hoach stopped while the runner caught up with his notes. He tried to second guess Laplante's reactions, to try to cover every complication.

"You see, we can keep Charlie from shooting down toward the beach from the end of the ridge," Hoach explained, making sure the runner had the full concept firmly in mind. "But tell Laplante if we try to assault the new bunker line, we could be knocked out of action and then Charlie could take the Crater and have a clear shot at the beach. Tell him that."

The runner nodded that he understood, and Hoach believed that he did. So when the runner put his helmet back on and stuffed his notebook into his jacket pocket, Hoach extended a hand to seal the bond. The runner took it, said good-bye, and slithered out of Hoach's Crater and down the ridge out of sight.
Hoach glanced over toward the aid station shelter, decided he hadn't the time to check in on the wounded again, and crawled out to supervise the digging out toward the Garden.

Coleman listened patiently as Laplante explained what he heard from Hoach. At last, Coleman thought, I'm getting a clear report from that end of the ridge.

"Hoach says he can't take the bunkers without support," Laplante paraphrased the runner's verbatim account of Hoach's summary. "He says he's down to a dozen men."

Coleman flinched at hearing troop strength over a clear radio frequency, and mentally added it to his growing list of things to discuss with Laplante after the operation ended.

"Stand by," Coleman said, and switched off his radio. Gathered around him were the weapons platoon leader and the six sergeants that made up Coleman's staff.

Pointing to the map location of Hoach and Laplante and their positions, Coleman summed up what he knew from the island. The new line of bunkers, as yet unnamed, cut across the east-west leg of the ridge roughly at the knee. Hoach's Crater was roughly at the ankle, or a little above. To advance across open ground would be disastrous if the enemy could shoot at all. Charlie would have to be under constant
bombardment, to keep his head down the entire time it took Hoach to close with him.

So Coleman got back on the radio and raised Laplante.

"Your group will advance under cover from the gunships," Coleman decreed. "I'll send them ahead. You must make the top of the ridge. They will only be able to support you until the lift arrives."

"Hoach will receive close support from the tanks," he continued. "You must get me the precise location of the bunkers, and tell Hoach I'll try to give him a heavy advance shelling. He's to run in behind it."

"Yes, sir," said Laplante respectfully. "I'll sure tell him. I agree."

"Thank you," said Coleman, closing his eyes. "Out."

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It took Maxwell almost an hour of brooding, rearranging, surveying and revising orders before he was satisfied his tactics would carry out his part of Coleman's strategy. He dismissed his squad leaders to fuss over the platoon's equipment, and talked to the new company commander over the radio for the last time before the assault would begin, paving the way for the landing of the third lift.

What continued to worry Maxwell after Coleman signed off the radio was a sort of general uneasiness: for this operation
didn't feel right. There was no energy mounting and no feeling of kinship with the rest of the company. It went beyond the fact that he and his platoon had been isolated for almost 24 hours.

There were specific reasons for this, Maxwell thought as he tried to face the fears head-on and defeat them before they wore away his nerve. First, he had not received his orders, as he always had in the past, in a meeting of the cadre where information could be exchanged laterally. He had only the word of Coleman that Laplante was able to take the north end of the ridge. Maxwell would have been more comfortable if he could have seen Laplante and his group, and judged for himself if he could expect them to carry their assignment through.

Second, Maxwell worried that the attack on the village, even if it did keep the enemy pinned down long enough to get the third lift down, would carry against a foe whose size was unknown. All Maxwell knew for sure of the enemy so far was that he had successfully resisted every thrust except the attack on the Graves -- a position Charlie might want to concede for any number of reasons.

Finally, Maxwell knew if the third lift arrived and did not overrun the island, it was very likely he and his people would be written off as the operation was upgraded in importance. Maxwell had never been listed as expended before, but the fluid nature of the Korean War produced many accounts, several of which Maxwell had heard first hand from the shattered survivors.
The answer to all these misgivings, Maxwell realized wearily, lay in taking the village and subduing its occupants. He could leave nothing to chance on that score: as many of the enemy as he could possibly kill would have to die in the opening rounds of the fight. He must not let up from the instant the first shot was fired.

Maxwell noted with relief that his conscience did not bother him. That was his final test: if he felt no guilt for the killing, it was because he was satisfied there was no other choice. He was committed now. All his options were closed.

"Laplante says you got to hit the bunkers," said the runner without expression. "You're going to get close support."

Hoach felt sad for an instant that things had fallen apart the way they had, and then the anger started to rise. Some of it he felt personally for this placid, cold-blooded Yankee who was standing in the protection of Hoach's Crater reading Hoach his death warrant without any apology.

"How does Laplante reckon I'm going to do this thing?" Hoach interrupted the runner to ask, with a trace of sarcasm.

"He didn't say," replied the runner. "He says you got to jump off when he does."
"What, has he worked out some kind of deal with Charlie?" said Riles, jumping up from his seat some fifteen feet away, and storming over exhaling a cloud of exotic smelling smoke. It reminded Hoach of a cartoon he had seen of a bull breathing fire. That triggered a laughing jag his exhaustion had been setting up for hours.

"Go on," Hoach said, giggling. "What does Laplante want us to do after we jump off with him."

"He says he'll direct the fire from the close support," the runner said.

Riles caught the laughing fever. Some of the men who had finished digging their foxholes and returned to the Carter for their packs, heard the laughter and paused.

"That will be nice," Hoach said, trying unsuccessfully to contain himself. "Never was worth a damn at directing my own close support."

Riles was sitting on the ground, rocking back and forth laughing from the gut. One or two of the bystanders joined in. The runner began to look around him, uneasy. So this is how to crack a Yankee, Hoach thought gleefully.

"He says to open fire when he does, and put all the fire you can down," the runner continued, shifting his balance for a good start if he needed to run.

"That's swell," said Riles, whooping. "We'll quarry up some rocks and do that very thing."

"That's all he said," the runner concluded, eager to leave. "You got any messages?"
"Tell him I'll assault his bunkers," Hoach said, wiping tears from his cheeks. "Tell him I'll see him in an hour -- someplace."

The runner nodded and left, and Hoach and his squad collapsed into a heap on the floor of the crater, sending a whirlwind of laughter out over the island.

When it subsided, Hoach told his men what was about to happen and then led them out to their new line.

Flossy was glad to see them go. He had found the bullet sliver after a half hour of probing, during which the flawlessly stoic patient had almost gone quietly into shock. His stomach had cramped at inconvenient times, and he had to fight doubly hard to keep his hands from shaking from weariness and jangled nerves.

Now that he was finished, had cleaned out the wound and put on the best bandage he could manage, Flossy was forced to convince the man that he wasn't dead, that the laughter he heard wasn't coming from the angels.

Now the men were gone, and Flossy and his patients were left to bear their misery in peace. He went outside the rim of the Crater to squat. As he gripped at his belly against the surges of pain, he heard a rumbling sound he had not heard before on the island. It was not thunder, he realized,
because it was not coming from the sky. It might be the echo of a distant storm, the cliffs distorting it, except the sound was sustained and the volume grew. And he could hear in it some mechanical quality, like the screeching of metal against itself.

Whatever it was, it did not interest Flossy enough to distract him from his battle against his own intestines. He just shut it out and moaned softly to himself.

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Maxwell was struck dumb by the sounds he was hearing. When the laughter rolled across the Crotch from Hoach's Crater, a dozen conversations in the Graves ceased and heads turned to face it.

In the tension of the moment, it was eerie. It made Maxwell cold.

Maxwell could imagine the effect the laughter was having on Charlie. To face an armed soldier, a man like yourself, was terrifying enough. To face a maniac was too dreadful to bear.

Because it had not occurred to Maxwell to have his men fake laughter to confuse and dismay the enemy, he ruled out Hoach's having the experience to contrive the laughter for psychological effect. No, Maxwell thought, they're laughing for real. Hoach has gone insane and so have his men.
Maxwell's men evidently were thinking the same thing, as they turned to each other to show sober faces.

Then he heard the tanks, and watched them with awe through his field glasses. These were not the squeeky clean machines he has seen coming off ships, or had washed and painted endlessly in the States.

These were low and fat and dirty and lethal. They waddled along the road, grinding soil into talcum-fine dust and shaking it loose to flow like liquid down the mountainside.

Maxwell could see they were dripping with spare parts, tools, rolled canvas, gas cans and undefinable shapes. The fenders were caked with hundreds of pounds of dried mud, which the monsters ignored. Plastered between the track and the hull of the lead tank, Maxwell thought he could see the remains of a dog. The second tank flew a Confederate flag from its main radio mast and the third -- and last -- tank had the word "Iron Butterfly" painted with psychedelic letters in day-glow green on its main turret.

The flak jackets and drab intercom helmets of the tank commanders stuck out of the smaller turrets on top. The upper halves of their faces were covered with tinted eyeshades they had slid down to their upper lips. The lower halves were covered by microphones on arms connected to the helmets. Their clothes and headgear were covered with the same fine dust as their machines, and Maxwell marveled at how they looked like every other metal fixture of the grumbling beasts.
Swinging out in front and to the sides of the column, the cannon scanned the bay and the island. At the muzzle, each gun had a blast suppressor jutting out at right angles from the barrel, which reminded Maxwell of a warthog's nose. They continued to sniff at the air over the water with their snouts even after they stopped, hunkering down and dripping oil onto the roadbed.

Laplante may make it after all, Maxwell thought with brightening spirits. He certainly has him some mean looking close support.

Coleman interrupted Laplante's report on bizarre developments from Hoach's Crater when the battalion commander pulled up. Leaving a driver and a lieutenant in the jeep, the spotless officer strode up to Coleman.

"Getting ready to mount up?" the battalion commander asked without greeting.

"Yes, sir," Coleman replied evenly. "My man on the north ridge tells me the close support just pulled up on the road, and I'm going to take the gunships on ahead."

"Who's going in with the landing?" the commander probed.

"Weapons Platoon leader, sir," said Coleman, not hesitating to appear to have planned for every contingency. "I can put down anytime."
"Good," the commander said. "If you get stuck down there, we can have a reaction force in, but it would take up to five hours."

Coleman's heart sank, and the battalion commander waited politely until Coleman had braced himself for more bad news.

"The choppers can only cover you until the lift is down," he continued as Coleman's breath caught. "The tanks you can have for as long as you need them."

"Sir, that leaves two sides of the objective without covering fire," Coleman protested. "What do we have there?"

"That's what you have rifles for, Coleman," the battalion commander snapped, drawing himself to full height. "To reach those hard-to-get-at places."

Coleman glared and said nothing.

"It's the best we can do, Coleman," the battalion commander said, softening. "I got you everything I could find. But the Colonel wants us to go now."

Coleman believed him and relaxed a little himself. He signalled the need for privacy by nodding his understanding and remaining mute. The battalion commander, who had surely been in Coleman's place before, allowed the informality.

"Okay," he said faintly. "Go."
Hoach knew how close he was to the enemy and wondered how the little band had managed to dig in without being heard. He considered the possibility that Charlie had heard and watched and had held off anihilating them for reasons of his own.

But they were in position now and it didn't matter what the enemy had in mind. The foxholes were dug and the weapons placed. They were a fact the enemy had had to live with.

The tanks had shut down their engines and sat sulking on the road, swinging their turrets, pausing and elevating their long guns, occasionally firing a burst of machine-gun fire into the village, the terraces and the Garden. Hoach knew the crews were making up range cards, noting gun settings for targets they would have to engage when the shooting started.

"Well, what do you say, boy?" Hoach whispered to Riles. "Reckon that's enough to scare Charlie off?"

"I don't know," Riles replied, staring through his binoculars at the tanks. "They're scaring the shit out of me. I wish they were closer and we could talk to them."

"Never look a gift horse in the mouth," Hoach admonished with a smile. "Any close support is better than none."

Rile said nothing. There was now nothing left to do but wait.
Ramos lay with his head on his arm and winced at the throbbing of his leg. He could not get comfortable. Flossy came up.

"There is more rain coming in," he said. "You better get back to the shelter now."

"I'll get there, man," Ramos growled, batting at the swarm of flies around him. "I got enough sense to get in out of the rain."

"Look, Ramos, I got better things to do than try to lure you back into the aid station," Flossy said with heavily restrained impatience. "I got rank on you, and I'm ordering you back in."

"Take your rank and wear it on your butt," Ramos said. "I got no use for you, fairy."

Flossy clenched his fists until the knuckles were white, and then said, "All right. Stay here and feed the fucking flies."

He turned and staggered off, clutching his stomach.

Ramos wished Flossy hadn't gone. He did not want to die alone.

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Coleman was standing in the door of the helicopter straining into the cold air that was blasting his face. He was loaded for the nerve-shattering job of organizing under
fire. At his feet were flares, smoke grenades, dayglow orange marking panels and 25 clips of tracers for his rifle.

The helicopter started to descend. Behind Coleman and on either side were the two gunships that rounded out the heavy fireteam. Coleman's standing in the operation and his intercom link to the flight commander gave the lieutenant the power to bring four machine-guns and 48 light rockets to bear on the island. At that moment, Coleman had every intention of using all that power and more.

Once more he withdrew into the compartment and checked his map. He was having trouble squaring the map picture of the island with the accounts he had received from the men down there. Maxwell said the broad expanse of the Crotch was baren, and the map showed it to be covered with low vegetation. The village did not seem as large on the map as Laplante had described it. Coleman knew he should ascribe some of the difference to the individuals, but he did not have the experience yet to judge how much.

"Mai Loc Island will be coming up on your right in a minute," said the pilot over the intercom.

"Roger that," said Coleman into the mike at throat. "Crew chief?"

"Yes, sir," said the crew chief, a sergeant with a heavy drawl.

"I'm going to want to flush some of them out of the brush," Coleman said. "I want you to fire short bursts as I order them. Can you do that and watch for counterfire?"
"No problem, sir," the crew chief said.

"Bruce?" Coleman said to the pilot.

"Here," the pilot answered.

"You think we might want to swing out and come in from the left?" Coleman asked. "We can take a look at the terraces on the north first and Charlie can't get a line on us."

"We can come in below the tops of the cliffs," Hummel said, "and swing around by the terraces first. The gunships will cover."

"Roger that," said Coleman.

He looked again at his map. The craters didn't show, but the graveyard was marked. Maxwell would be there. The terraces were plain enough from the contour lines. Laplante would be on the topmost of these. Hoach and a reinforced squad were somewhere on the northernmost leg of the ridge, opposite a garden, which also was not marked.

"Mai Loc on your right at two o'clock," said the pilot.

Coleman heaved himself at the portside door, braced his shoulder against the post and peered through his field glasses. The aircraft was shuddering too violently to permit him to focus, so he squinted across the open void.

The island did look like a garden, even at their low altitude, Coleman noticed at once. He could see the grove of trees the men were calling the Patch. The terraces were smaller than he had imagined, and as the helicopter swung west to circle and approach the island from the sea, Coleman could see the Graves, standing out like tiny white blisters.
Coleman swung over to the starboard door to watch until the chopper passed behind the mountain, which would block the view. Just as he caught a glimpse of Hoach's Crater the road flashed by underneath and the mountain side shot past in front. The change was so startling that Coleman thought he saw to rows of foxholes, one along the edge of the plainly visible Garden and one closer to Hoach's Crater.

Laplante had mentioned nothing of the second row of bunkers, and Coleman tried at once to reach him by radio, but the mountain blocked radio transmission. The second row could mean any number of things, all of which had a direct bearing on how the third lift fared in landing. The only thing that kept Coleman from dismay was that he could remind himself that he would have to bring the third lift in whatever was down there. It really didn't matter what the bunkers boded. The phrase "at all costs" tagged on the end of his marching orders made it a moot point.

So Coleman turned away from his view of the mountainside and carefully marked the Garden, the Bunkers and Hoach's Crater on his map.

"There," Coleman said to himself. "They're a part of history."
Maxwell heard -- or sensed -- activity in the trees ahead when the three helicopters rounded the mountain and swung wide over the water toward the island. He wished that Coleman had come straight in with the third lift rather than come ahead for a look. The way he figured, Coleman could find out anything he needed to know once he was on the ground. Though it would make the landing easier for Coleman, this scouting flight would arouse the enemy and make Maxwell's job more difficult.

Coleman and his escort dropped out of sight below the edge of the cliff, but the racket was enough to wake the dead. The chopper rose enough to clear the ridge down at Hoach's end, and then raced over the Crotch and back out to sea.

The three helicopters circled there, deciding what to do, and then returned to hover straight overhead. The scream of the engines was enough to split Maxwell's skull, and the whooping of the blades stirred up a cloud of dust despite the past night's rain. Maxwell felt the wind sucked from his lungs, and as he gasped for more only solid earth came in.

Maxwell felt the final insult when he saw the spent machine-gun casings bouncing on the floor of the tomb, and then a hot piece of brass smacked onto his helmet and bounced off to burn the back of his hand. He didn't need to see the tracers coming from above him and showering the treeline to know the choppers had opened fire.
But when he saw the green tracers of the enemy's heavy machine-guns shooting back, Maxwell was deeply afraid, because there was a good chance the helicopter might crash directly on him. Then the brass stopped and the air cleared and the helicopters were gone, moving over to the Crotch and blazing away into the Captain's Bunkers. Maxwell could see that the bunkers also were returning fire and that there was some movement over near the Garden.

One of the choppers unleashed four rockets -- two at a time -- into the village. The first two exploded into the trees, about halfway up their trunks, and Maxwell saw a shower of ripped treelimbs falling into the village below. The second salvo hit the ground, and Maxwell could see only their flashes, muted by the foliage. The door gunners continued to rake the trees and the bunkerline ahead of it.

Then the lead ship flitted over and dropped smoke grenades into the ridge about halfway between Hoach's Crater and the Garden. Maxwell wondered what they were for, but was distracted when one of the rocket ships returned to his end of the ridge. It hovered behind them this time, near Maxwell's Crater and almost directly over the freshly buried victims of the stoned soldier's mayhem. The ship discharged two salvoes deep into the Patch. That was doing Maxwell no good and he was quickly on the radio.

"Rapid Sleeper Six," he shouted over the din. "This is Rapid Sleeper Three, requesting fire direction, over."
"This is Rapid Sleeper Six," said Coleman through the receiver. "Where do you need it, over."

"They're putting it in the center of the village," Maxwell said. "I need some for the treeline."

"Roger that," said Coleman.

The next salvo went into the treeline, right at the apex. Maxwell thought he saw a body flung from one of the trees, but it fell too fast. The next two salvos hit along the legs of the angled treeline, but Maxwell could not see what effect they were having. The chopper then turned its attention to the center of the Patch, and Maxwell lost interest and kept his head down.

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"Aw, thanks a hell of a lot, Coleman!" bellowed Riles when the smoke grenades fell, plainly marking their freshly dug line of foxholes. Hoach, Riles and two other men all scrambled to the sources of the billowing clouds of colored smoke. One of the men tried to cover the grenade nearest him with his helmet, but the smoke continued to seep out. So, like Hoach and the others, he scrabbled a hole in the ground with his bare hands and buried the grenade.

Hoach had hoped the line could be dug and occupied without tipping the enemy. It now occurred to him that Charlie
within the brush between the Crater and the Garden, extinguishing the grenades may have alerted him.

Hoach took comfort in knowing there was nothing the enemy could do with the knowledge now, because the choppers of the third lift appeared like ascending motes over the tops of the mountains. And the noise from the gunships drowned out all other sound.

Which was why the opening salvo of the artillery barrage came as such a surprise. It was impossible to tell how many shells exploded at once in the Patch, but the concussion bounced Hoach up off the ground and knocked his eyes out of focus. A sheet of smoke and fire rose from behind the trees.

The three helicopters, one of them knocked briefly off balance, apparently were caught off guard by the blast, and flitted away like dragon flies to wait out over the sea for the barrage to lift.

In the silence the choppers left behind, the second salvo came in. This time Hoach could heard the shrapnel buzzing and moaning back toward him. Riles was at his side, tugging at his sleeve. He shouted something Hoach couldn't make out.

"What?" yelled Hoach, his ears ringing.
"They're using medium stuff!" Riles screamed, louder. "Medium guns. We're too fucking close for mediums."

"Stay down," Hoach bellowed back, as a round fell short and landed in the far end of the Garden, blowing Riles' helmet off. "Tell the men to stay in their holes!"
"What?" Riles shouted, cocking his left ear toward Hoach. "Get back in your hole!" Hoach shrieked.

The shelling had broken up from tight salvoes and was falling in a constant stream. Riles got his helmet back on.

"Fuck this," he yelled. "I'm going to get back in my hole."

He scrambled off and Hoach hunkered down in his foxhole, digging deeper as one of the guns -- evidently with a worn barrel -- kept on dropping its load into the Garden, showering Hoach and his men with dirt and rocks.

There was nothing else he could do for the moment.

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Flossy was aghast at the effect the shelling was having on his patients. Ramos, who had stayed on the west rim of Hoach's Crater all morning, dragged himself over to the edge closest to the Garden to watch the fireworks. But the shells seemed passing directly over the Crater on their way to the target.

The wounded held up fairly well, considering their spent condition, until a defective round came buzzing end-over-end -- they all held their breath waiting for it to hit the Crater -- and exploded in the terraces below. Hot shrapnel burned through the canvas-and-rubber roof of the shelter, and when the men saw sunlight streaming through, some of them panicked and tried to take action.
Flossy realized that, precarious as their situation was, they were probably in the safest place on the island there in the Crater. Still, he worked to do what he could, which wasn't much after the toll the illness had taken on him.

He and the jaw wound pulled the shelter off and stashed it aside, removing a fire hazard. Then Flossy reasoned a shell exploding in the pond would have some of the concussion and shrapnel absorbed by the water, so he and the other man dragged the log down to the water's edge to give close protection on two sides. He moved his patients into the space between the log and the water, covered them with their flak vests, and then moved from man to man trying to soothe them. The jaw wound, unable to speak, crawled over and patted Flossy on the chest to gain his attention. When Flossy looked, the man jerked his thumb over toward the mountains. With the incoming third lift thundering over them, the three tanks had opened fire, and Flossy felt his bones creak as the shock of the first shells rolled into the Crater.

He looked over toward the Garden and saw the tank rounds were falling way short of the Garden, and appeared to be walking back toward him. He and the jaw wound dropped to the ground, Flossy shifting slightly to put a protective arm across Spinetti's body. The noise rose until it seemed to have a substance and texture of its own, and Flossy was so frightened he felt himself shrinking.
Maxwell didn't wait for the shelling in the village to lift. Big as the risks were in standing up and moving toward the treeline, there were bigger risks in letting the enemy regain his composure.

The noise was too much to allow him to be heard, so Maxwell vaulted out of his tomb and ran from grave to grave, alerting the men.

They formed up quickly and started in toward the treeline. It wasn't until the lurching line was close enough to the village for Maxwell to feel the heat from the shelling against his face that the enemy opened up. Three men were cut down in mid-stride, and the rest dropped to the ground, stunned.

"Use your weapons," Maxwell bellowed. "Shoot back! Use your weapons!"

They couldn't hear him, so he ran from man to man coaxing, berating and bullying. He would not allow them just to roll over and die.

Their fire rolled forward like a thin wave at first, but the sound of their own rifles brought the men back to their senses and the shots quickly focused on what could be seen of the enemy.

Under the pressure of the moment, the men fell back on the basic fire-and-move maneuver they had learned in boot
camp, and they divided themselves into pairs, one man covering while the other dashed forward, and then reversing, leapfrogging across the open field into the thin scrub next to the treeline.

By the time the shelling lifted, Maxwell and his crew were close enough to the enemy to smell his sweat and feel the muzzle blast of his weapons. Maxwell braced into the storm and returned as good as he was getting.

All along the line, individuals would get up and try to rush, only to be beaten back or felled on the spot. The attack had stalled, Maxwell realized. It would not move without further support. They would stand fast where they were -- within spitting distance of the treeline -- and wait for the lift to land.

He got to the radio and called Coleman to tell him what was going on.

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Laplante was reading Coleman his disaster report. Seven men down, the rest pinned behind a paddy dike facing Spinetti's Bunkers. There was no sign of Hoach. Coleman told him to stand by and asked his pilot to swing over to the terraces for a look.

When they passed over Hoach's Crater, Coleman almost gagged at what he saw. There were two lines of bunkers
exchanging tracer fire. Obviously the line closest to the Crater was filled with Hoach's men.

Two of the tanks were firing into the bunkers along the Garden. The enemy was ignoring their fire and crawling toward Hoach's foxholes, firing as he came.

The third tank was firing on Hoach.

Coleman switched his radio to the command frequency and gave one of the most drastic orders he knew.

"Check fire!" he screamed. "Cease firing! Check fire!"

Hoach looked at his hands and saw his fingernails were torn and bleeding from gripping the earth. He had the metallic taste of blood in his mouth and could not decide whether it came from his nose or his ears. Riles was screaming in his face, "Come on, let's get the hell out of here!"

Hoach hunched over as a tank round burst close by. He wasn't sure how much more he could take. His instincts told him to run away.

"Hoach, they're going to waste us all," Riles shouted. "Come on, let's get back to the Crater."

Hoach turned back toward the Garden. The enemy was firing automatic weapons from in close, and the slugs were whistling in on Hoach and his group, throwing dirt into their faces and leveling the low scrub that now concealed them.
"Hoach!" Riles screamed. "Hoach! Get us out of here man!"

A tank round burst close enough to snap Hoach's head back, and it hit hard on the edge of the foxhole. That was enough.

"Okay, get them out of here," he shouted at Riles. "I'll cover!"

Riles scrambled off and Hoach started firing single shots from his rifle into the brush ahead. The enemy had him zeroed in, and bullets from at least three weapons hit the dirt in front of him, spattering it into his eyes and blinding him. Then Riles was back.

"Come on, they're moving out," he said, almost calmly. "What's the matter?"

"Go on," Hoach ordered. "I can't see, go on."

Riles hauled Hoach up out of the foxhole and they started back to the Crater. The air around them was thick with flying metal. Something slammed hard into the side of Hoach's face and he blacked out.

Flossy saw Hoach and Riles coming in and recognized immediately that Hoach was hurt. He vaulted over the rim of Hoach's Crater and dashed toward them. Off to his left Flossy could see another man become disoriented in the smoke and con-
cussion and stumble over toward the terraces. Flossy changed direction and started out to turn him around when he saw the man's helmet fly over and strike Hoach in the head. The man's headless body fell limply to the ground. Flossy gagged and closed the distance between Hoach and Riles. Each grabbed an arm and they dragged Hoach back to the crater.

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Ramos saw the whole thing, but he couldn't figure out why Flossy had turned away from the wounded man to go and help Hoach. Riles could have brought Hoach in himself.

He concluded that Flossy hadn't seen the other man fall, and that he, Ramos, was the only one to know there was a wounded comrade out on the field, directly in the path of a rapidly advancing enemy.

Ramos thought for an instant of fetching help from the just-returned squad, but the Charlie was closing too fast to permit it. So Ramos put a stick between his teeth, heaved himself up to his feet and headed out into the brush, dragging his wounded leg behind. The pain blazed from his knee to his armpit, and within fifteen yards -- half the distance to the wounded man -- Ramos had bitten the stick in half.

When the fire spread to his chest and stomach, he didn't recognize it as fresh wounds until the air went rosy and he fell hard with his face in the soil. There, he felt the island
drinking his blood and a quiet began to settle. First his legs and arms, then muscles in his back went numb, and he realized without shock that he was dying.

I can't die with my face in the dirt, he thought. I want to see the sun.

With the last of his strength he rolled over onto his back, and the sun caressed him and warmed him. With the steady flow down his sides and into the earth, Ramos felt as if he were dissolving. He grasped a handful of the dirt.

All you leave with is a fistful of soil, he thought. You have done well, son. It is a brave thing. You were much man.

Ramos closed his eyes and let the darkness in. Then he, too, left the battlefield, but like a feather in the wind.

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Maxwell could feel the enemy stiffening up ahead of him and knew at once the attack on the other end of the ridge had collapsed. His men were holding their own, but he heard the call for medics and knew that his platoon was being whittled away.

It looks like it's all for nothing, he thought, seeing the tracers of the enemy's heavy machine-guns swing up and play on the incoming choppers of the third lift.

He got on the radio and shouted out Coleman's call sign. There was no response, so he repeated. Coleman came on the
air and told him to stand by. There was a long pause, and Maxwell could hear over the firing his wounded screaming.

"Rapid Sleeper Six," he shouted into the transmitter. "I ain't going to be here much longer."

"Rapid Sleeper Three," Coleman said, sounding agitated. "You're to hold there. Do not pull out."

"I'm not talking about pulling out," Maxwell said. "In about five minutes there ain't going to be no more of us."

Something slammed against Maxwell's chest, knocking the wind out of him. He was shocked because he was lying prone, with his chest to the ground. Then he realized a heavy round had hit his pack, jerking the straps tight.

"Rapid Sleeper Six" he pleaded. "We are taking heavy casualties. Right now we are having no effect against the anti-aircraft fire. If we don't pull back to the Graves, Victor Charlie will overrun this ridge. That's the situation. Please advise, over."

There was a long pause, and then Coleman was back.

"Roger, Rapid Sleeper Three," he said. "Hold in place until the lift starts in, and then we'll cover your withdrawal."

Maxwell signed off and dropped the mike to fire back into the treeline. Behind him the helicopters dropped down to a few feet over the water, and Maxwell turned to see them lining up for a run. A stream of green tracers sizzled close overhead, probing for the targets the enemy could not see from the village.
Coleman watched from the sea a few hundred yards out from the cliffs as his cargo choppers went in. The door gunner was spraying the Patch, but at this range the fire was falling wild into the trees.

Coleman had moved the landing zone south, landing the Weapons Platoon on the southern tip of the beach, as far as he could get them away from the Captain's Bunkers bristling along the edge of the Patch. The arrangement would land the troops in relative safety, but would expose the aircraft longer to the enemy's scathing fire.

The choppers dropped their bundles and boxes onto the beach, and then raced north along the low edge of the island, with the anti-aircraft fire pounding into them the whole trip up the side of the ridge and out over the terraces to safety.

Then the troopships came in, their cargoes vaulting off the skids and scampering over to the bundles. Coleman could see one helicopter drop its load and then wobble erratically, the blue-white flashes from inside the cockpit signalling a terrible electric fire. The crew, obviously struggling, kept the aircraft under near control until it cleared Hoach's positions on the ridge. Then it crashed into the sea.

Coleman looked back to the beach. The enemy had zeroed in on the cargo bundles and were dropping their heavy mortar fire when the men tried to break cover and retrieve their weapons. He was needed down there, so he gave instructions to land him and return to cover Maxwell's withdrawal.
Every eye in Hoach's Crater was riveted on the chopper that raced toward them. Hoach's breath caught as he calculated its path, which would bring it down right on top of them. Then the huge machine loomed over them and dived into the sea. It vanished into the water, and no one appeared above the surface.

That was that. Hoach let out a gallon of breath and shook his ringing head.

"Ramos is dead," said Riles, raising his voice so Hoach could hear. "He went out after John. Must have been crazy."

"Dead? Ramos?" Hoach shouted, not sure he had heard Riles correctly. "Bullshit! He was right here!"

"Flossy said he saw John go down and started out after him," Riles said, looking at his feet, embarrassed at having to carry the bad news. "Flossy went out and checked him. Dead. Charlie came in too close, and Flossy had to leave him."

"We can't leave him out there!" said Hoach, outraged. "Come on."

He tried to regain his feet, but his knee wouldn't lock, and he fell against Riles.

"Easy, man," Riles said, soothing. "You're not going anywhere for awhile."

Hoach looked around and saw that his view was flat and blurred. He put a hand to his temple and felt a bump over his right eye the size of a small egg. The hair was matted and his glasses were gone.
"Where's my specks?" he asked.

Riles handed Hoach the GI issue glasses he had been wearing. One template was missing and the right lens was shattered. They were useless.

"I got a spare pair in my pack," he muttered, groping for his gear. "Where's my pack?"

"I'll get it," said Riles, and disappeared.

Hoach looked down toward the beach and saw the columns of smoke and sand from the enemy's mortars. He tried to think of some way he could help, but his chest and arms were too heavy to move and he couldn't put together a coherent thought.

Riles returned. Hoach dug his glasses out of the pack and gingerly put them on. The pressure from the templates hurt his head and face so badly that he had to take them off again.

"What are we going to do now?" he asked Riles. "Coleman's getting the shit kicked out of him down there."

"Do?" said Riles. "Wait. It'll be our turn soon."

Maxwell raced from man to man, kicking them to see who was still conscious. As near as he could count in the confusion, he had about a dozen left, and these loaded up the dead and wounded on their backs and waited for cover fire.
It came after an eon. The chopper with Coleman in it swooped over the beach and then returned to hover over Maxwell's Crater, machine-gunning the treeline until the door gunner had to reload, and then turning to bring the other gun to bear. The rocket ship joined, firing a salvo into the patch, blowing leaves, branches and God-knew-what-else back in Maxwell's face.

The men didn't wait for the order; they rose and bolted back to the Graves. Maxwell and the machine-gunner waited behind, laying down cover. Maxwell saw one of the men fall, and two others leave the safety of the Graves to return for him and his burden.

That done, Maxwell sent the machine-gunner back. When he was set up in a tomb and firing again, Maxwell crawled to the edge of the brush and then dashed, crouching, across the open ground back to the Graves.

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Coleman saw when he picked himself up off the beach that the recoilless rifle crew had braved the heartless barrage that was falling on them, and had set up their weapon to try to silence the mortars in the Patch.

He ran over and told them to forget that and concentrate on the Captain's Bunkers. From the clump of trees they could only hit the three or four on the near end of the line, but the crew quickly zeroed-in on those and started belting them.
Coleman picked a detail to retrieve the mortars, which were still wrapped and boxed on the beach. He set the rest to work digging in and led the detail out to get the remaining equipment. As they crawled across the open sand the heavy mortar shells from the Patch crashed around them, sucking the wind from their lungs with the blast.

The group made three trips out into the exposed landing zone before Coleman's luck ran out. He felt a searing heat in his arm and his hand went numb, tingling as though it were asleep. Coleman retched from the pain and shock, and buried his face in the sand.

Then Coleman felt a strong hand reach under him and grasp the collar of his jacket. He relaxed and let the man drag him back to the trees.

The enemy ceased firing and everyone in Hoach's Crater relaxed, except Flossy, who was near panic at having three new wounded and almost no supplies to treat them.

The excitement and illness had almost drained him, and he leaned against the log in a cold, exhausted sweat, having cleaned the wounds off and calmed the victims as well as he could. Riles came over to him, one trouser leg wet.

"Too bad about Ramos," he said.

"Yeah," said Flossy. "Too bad about all of us."
"Hoach going to be all right?" asked Riles.

"Head wound," said Flossy. "Never hurt a Texan."

"Really, man," said Riles, gravely. "I need to know. Charlie's coming in and I got to know if I'm going to have to run this outfit."

"Yeah, he'll be all right," said Flossy. He'll have a hell of a headache and he'll be short tempered, but he'll stay on his feet."

Riles sat down beside Flossy and lit up a hand-rolled cigarette. He took a long pull, held it in, and offered the cigarette to Flossy.

"No, thanks," Flossy said, rubbing his eyes. "I'll go to sleep."

Riles nodded, exhaled, and took another drag. "Sure is quiet, man," he said, as they watched the helicopters disappear in the distance.

"Yeah," said Flossy, listening to the soft moaning of his patients.

They sat for awhile, saying nothing, until Hoach came up. His right eye was swollen shut, and his thin face was haggard and hollow.

"Just looked out front," said Hoach, sitting down beside Riles. "Charlie's taken over our foxholes."

"Aw, man," said Riles. "I don't want to hear about that shit now."

"He'll be coming in tonight, I guess," Hoach continued, not hearing. "Lucky the tanks got those foxholes zeroed-in."
"That's for damn sure," snorted Riles. "Wish the mother-fuckers had waited till we were out of them first."

"Yeah," said Hoach. "Anyway, we got close support. We're going to need it. Ammo's down to -- what? -- about fifty rounds a man?"

They sat in silence for a long time, shutting out the sounds around them and blanking their minds.

Then they heard the bark of the mortars off in the Patch, this time with the shells hissing over them toward the road.

"Oh, God!" groaned Flossy. "Not again."

He and Hoach rolled over prone, waiting for the shells to blast them to bits. Riles sat tight, taking another puff on his cigarette and watching the mountain across the water. Four shells burst among the tanks, none hitting them directly.

"They're not after us," he said. "They're saving us for dessert. Look."

Flossy looked up and saw the second salvo hit. This time one of the shells struck the rear deck of the lead tank. While the third salvo homed in on the tanks, Flossy saw smoke begin to drift out from under the leader. A second shell hit the rear deck, above the engine compartment, and the crew bailed out. The tanks returned with fire that fell ineffectually into the Patch. The dismounted tankers climbed up on the second tank, and the two survivors backed, still blazing away, down the road and around the mountain.
They watched silently. Then Riles, wearing a distant smile, said, "Good-bye, close support."

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Mai Loc Island: 3rd Day:
Maxwell's Assault Fails; Enemy DIGS IN ALONG GARDEN FACING
Hoach; Weapons Pit, Brings Captain's Bunkers Under Fire
CHAPTER V

"... maybe they'll tell someone ..."

Coleman, his arm in a sling and his temper short, listened to the last in a parade of sergeants delivering reports on the situation.

First there were the casualties. Coleman already knew Benger was dead, but he was not prepared to learn that the Third Platoon leader had been killed in the shelling the night before; that the first sergeant was comatose with shock primarily from a badly broken leg; that the mess sergeant and the motor sergeant -- on whom he had been banking to stiffen up the remnants of the company -- were dead in the landing; that at least two-thirds of the 120 riflemen who had come down in the first and second lifts were either dead or wounded; that the men on the ridges were physically spent and almost out of ammunition. There was more, but the upshot was that in the last 24 hours the company had come to the brink of disaster.

The enemy still held most of the high ground. There was no way to saturate his position with artillery because Hoach and Maxwell were in too close. There was no place for them to pull back to because the island was too small. There appeared to be no way to reinforce from outside, first because just about every other company in the brigade was probably enduring something similar elsewhere, and second because the enemy put
up too heavy an anti-aircraft screen to permit a landing without compounding losses.

That would be like throwing good money after bad, Coleman realized. If he were the Colonel and it were up to him, he would not lose half of two companies when he could do the same job and just lose all of one. If any part of the company were to survive, the objective would have to be taken. The fight would not be over and they would not be safe until the island was clean and the road was clear.

It would have to be done quickly, the battalion commander was saying over the radio from the light helicopter circling overhead. Division headquarters was in on it now, and they wanted to be able to move some supplies before dusk. Da Nang was four hours away. Their deadline was 2:30 p.m.

"Sir, I don't think Division knows what's going on down here," Coleman said, stunned. "I don't think this company's going to be able to move anywhere until morning. We want to soften up the objective. Over."

"How much softening up does it take?" said the battalion commander over the receiver. "You soften it up anymore and it'll melt."

"Sir, as I said, your officer casualties are 100 percent," Coleman said, growing irritated by the distance of the battalion commander and the immediacy of his pain. "I don't think I could organize a coordinated action for at least 12 hours."
"Then perhaps you could give me the name of a lieutenant who can," said the battalion commander. "I don't see what you can do in 12 hours that you can't do now."

Concentrate, for one thing, thought Coleman, wiping a cold sweat from his face and glaring at the buzzing gnat of a helicopter.

"Sir, I have no radio link with one of my flanks," he said.

"Send a runner," said the commander.

"The troops on both ridges are short of ammo," said Coleman, growing desperate.

"Let the runners carry ammo with them," said the battalion commander, impatiently.

Coleman held himself back long enough to frame an answer. He appeared to be getting nowhere by merely stating facts. He had bargained away putting off the assault until dawn of the next day and was now willing to settle for midnight that night. Taking a deep breath, Coleman reasoned he should first quash any idea that he was arguing with his superior.

"Sir, we'll do this any way Division says," Coleman began. "But for planning purposes, Division should know that this island probably will not be secured until morning."

The battalion commander was silent, which was a hopeful sign.

"Why morning?" he patiently asked.
"We are bringing heavy weapons onto the island for the first time. It will give them cover of darkness to dig in and register," Coleman said, counting off points on the fingers of his good hand. "It will give us time to tighten up. This is a reinforced platoon now, deployed like a company."

Coleman paused there, knowing the battalion commander would need to consult the map, and then continued.

"I have had only radio contact with First Platoon," he said. "I have had only second-hand contact with the elements on the north end of the ridge, and that was before the landing. All observers report heavy fighting from that area, and I had to call a check fire when they were hit by friendly artillery."

Coleman paused there. Military communications procedures reserved long, discursive conversations for emergencies. It was not a privilege a lieutenant could abuse. There was no reply from the battalion commander, so Coleman ventured a parting shot.

"Sir, I don't think it prudent to assume we still hold the north ridge, which overlooks our flank," Coleman said, and then was through.

"You don't, huh," said the battalion commander.

"No, sir," said Coleman.

"All right, I'll tell that to Division," said the battalion commander as the helicopter rose to leave over the mountains. "They'll say okay for tonight, but there'll be
convoys released from Da Nang in the morning, and you better have the island cleared by the time they get here."

The battalion commander's helicopter was now a dwindling speck over the mountain. From the radio the battalion commander said, "Coleman, I'm taking your word to the Colonel. Don't let me down, now."

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Maxwell had monitored the whole conversation on the radio, in a tomb away from the men. How the hell does he expect us to take this island? Maxwell thought, outraged. If the casualties are anything like Coleman says, we don't have nearly as many men now as we did when the attack failed this morning.

He glared after the battalion commander's chopper, for a moment vowing to shoot it down next time he saw it. Then he reminded himself where he was, and got back on the radio to call Coleman.

"Rapid Sleeper Six, do you want me to send down a runner?" he asked, eager -- if he must act -- to act while the men were still alert from their last firefight, and before the exhaustion followed.

"Negative, Rapid Sleeper Three," said Coleman. "But would you coordinate with Laplante and find out what's going on at Hoach's end?"
That was the first real request any officer had ever made of Maxwell, in his 28 years in the army. Other than orders for food and drinks while he was a mess boy. Maxwell sat up with his back to the wall of the tomb, not sure how to answer. Yes, of course, he would be happy to link up the company.

"Wilco, sir," Maxwell said, preferring to respond by the book. "I'll report back to you at once."

"Please do," said Coleman. "Out."

Maxwell lit a cigarette, relishing the moment. Then he got in touch with Laplante.

"No, we haven't contacted Hoach," Laplante said, sounding weary and frightened. "I can't spare anybody and I don't think we can get a man through, anymore."

"But you haven't tried, boy," said Maxwell. "You get a man through to him and find out how long he can hold out."

"Roger," replied Laplante after a long pause. "I can give you an estimate already. Before the assault Hoach told me he had enough ammo for one good firefight."

Well, ain't that some shit, thought Maxwell. He didn't say anything about Hoach being that weak before, and now he's using it as an excuse to weasel out of risking a man to see if there were any survivors. Maxwell had to remind himself the radio was being monitored before speaking again.

"Laplante," he said, forcing patience. "If Hoach can't hold that ridge, you're going to take it. You understand?"

There, that's all I can do for now, thought Maxwell. If I don't hear from Coleman, I'll wait for Laplante's report and have everything taken care of.

Maxwell ground out his cigarette and took a drink of the rank Crater water. Then he eased himself down flat on the trampled grass by the wall of the tomb and stared at the silent north end of the island. He shivered a little as the wind drew the sweat from his back, and as he thought of the sound of Hoach's laughter.

Hoach felt so tired he was fantasizing about stumbling and falling down, and of not having to get up. He looked out across the field at Ramos, ignoring the occasional stirrings of the enemy in the bushes. They did not have enough ammunition in Hoach's Crater to shoot at every sound, so the three men still strong enough to fight fired on actual sightings. They had killed five since the landing of the third lift, and the enemy was moving closer.

Hoach knew he wasn't taking the loss of his friend very well. Most of the men were sympathetic, but two or three were embarassed and did not conceal it. Hoach did not care one way or the other. Ramos was the best friend he had ever had, and he had earned the right to grieve for him.
Riles scrambled up. He was respectfully silent for a few moments. Hoach did not wait for him to speak, knowing it was time to forget the dead and get on with it.

"Okay," he said, turning reluctantly away from the field and facing Riles. "Let's hear it."

"Well, the worst is the ammo," Riles said with a heavy sigh. "We're down to less than 300 rounds for the rifles. There is no more machine-gun ammo, no grenades, no flares and no smoke."

"Then we're going to have to shoot mighty straight," Hoach said without emotion.

"We got seven men left," Riles continued after briefly pondering Hoach's last answer. "I thought it was eight, but Stuart got a busted ankle."

"That solves the problem of securing the aid station," Hoach said. "We'll leave Stuart to guard it. What next?"

"Charlie's in our foxholes," Riles continued, looking puzzled over what Hoach had said. "He's set up outposts as close as 25 meters."

"Those bunkers were on low ground," Hoach said. "We couldn't hold them, no reason to think Charlie can. And I'm glad he's putting out pickets. Now he's going to find out how it feels to have his men strangled in the dark."

Riles looked alarmed, and stared closely into Hoach's eye as if looking for something inside Hoach's skull. Then Riles cleared his throat and spoke.
"Hoach, I don't know what you got in mind," he began, "but we're shot. Charlie's wiped us out. We've got to get relief."

"No, Riles," said Hoach with a voice laced with righteousness. "We're not spent yet. What we're going to do is, we're going to take our foxholes back . . ."

"Take them back! We can't take them back," Riles interrupted. "What would we do if we did take them?"

"I'll tell you, Riles. I'll tell you what we'd do," Hoach said, a little sharply. "We'd push through to Ramos' Bunkers, and then we'd take that stinking Garden and we'd push into the Patch. Then . . ."

Riles tried to cut in, and Hoach raised his voice to drown him out.

"Then we'd push Charlie over these goddammed cliffs and then we'd burn his fucking village to the ground," Hoach said, glaring directly at Riles. "That's what we're going to do as soon as we eat and get cleaned up."

Riles looked at Hoach in near disbelief, and then said, "Hoach, you've been on this fucking island too long . . ."

"Maybe I have, Riles, maybe . . ." Hoach tried to interrupt.

"The only way we're going to get near that village is if Charlie's laughing so hard he can't keep us in his fucking sights," Riles shouted, turning from Hoach, stepping a couple of paces, and then turning back to face him. "We can't even cover an assault, let alone . . ."
"Maybe I have been on this island too long, Riles," said Hoach, determined. "Maybe I should have left before they killed Ramos and Maxwell's wounded and -- what's his name, Laplante's man -- before they choked him in the dark."

"But I want you to understand, Riles, that we didn't get off this island and those things have happened," Hoach ranted. "This island is ours. Charlie's got to leave."

"Hoach, goddam it, we're losing our ass," Riles said, pleading.

"No," said Hoach, his voice almost cracking. "We're going to stop losing right now. We're going to dust ourselves off and we're going to start to win."

"Dust ourselves off is right," muttered Riles between clenched teeth as he flung his helmet against the side of the Crater.

"Where are you going?" said Hoach as Riles stepped over to pick up his helmet and kept on walking. "Riles, where are you going?"

Riles did not answer, but walked on until he reached the far side of the Crater. Then he lit a brown cigarette and stared down the ridge at the sea.

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Flossy had been squatting outside the leeward end of the Crater, and was hitching up his trousers when he smelled
Riles' smoke wafting over toward him. He looked up and saw Riles plainly silhouetted on the west rim. He shuddered and edged over toward him.

"Hey, Riles, you better get down," Flossy said. "They're getting in fairly close."

"Oh, yeah," Riles said, looking over his shoulder at the Garden end of the Carter. "Yeah, I'll do that."

Riles turned and eased himself down the inward side, sliding down on his back until he came to rest with his feet at the pond's edge and his knees at his chin.

"Hey, Riles," Flossy said softly as he brushed a duck aside with his foot and sat down beside him. "What are you going to do about Hoach?"

"That's the question," said Riles distantly. "What am I going to do about Hoach?"

Riles paused, staring into the pond and taking another pull at his cigarette. He offered it absently to Flossy, who answered politely, "No, thank you."

"Oh, yeah," said Riles, returning his attention to Flossy. "Hoach has this fantasy about overrunning the village. All seven of us are going to march up to Charlie and beat him to his knees."

"God," said Flossy, "does he mean it or is he just talking?"

"I think he means it," said Riles.

"What are we going to do?" Flossy asked.
"I don't think there's anything we can do," Riles replied. "Charlie's not going to let us out of this fucking crater, that's for sure. He'll finish us off here."

Flossy was startled. At this point, the only thing that would save the wounded was close protection from the men who were still whole. If they were off on some fool's errand, Flossy's wounded would die -- just like Maxwell's wounded. It was something he could not countenance.

"But what if Hoach takes you out to meet Charlie head-on?" Flossy probed.

"It would take, maybe, five minutes," Riles said flatly. "We'd march straight to hell."

"You mean you'd go along?" Flossy asked, astounded.

"Out there or in here," he said. "It's going to be the same either way."

"But the patients," Flossy pleaded. "What's going to happen to the patients?"

Riles said nothing, but turned and looked at Flossy without expression through red eyes. He opened his mouth and took a breath as if to speak, and then looked down and took another pull at his cigarette.

"Riles, I think you're all a little unbalanced," Flossy said. Riles said nothing for a moment.

"Man, I want to say it," said Riles. "I'm scared shitless. This is the worst I've ever seen it."

Riles pulled his arms in close and shivered delicately in the wind.
"I can't think of nothing that would bail us out," he continued. "Hoach may be crazy, but he isn't very crazy. We hit this island three times and still Charlie hasn't let up. I think Hoach was right the first time. Charlie's just trying to suck in as many of us as he can."

"But surely they'll send us reinforcements?" said Flossy. "If the island is that important, surely they'll send in more men to take it?"

"Yeah, they will," said Riles. "They'll send in as many as it takes. But in the meantime, we're going to be among the 'preliminary losses.' Hoach knows that. He just wants to give it a good try."

Flossy was silent, and gazed across the Crater at Hoach, who was staring through his field glasses at the direction of the Garden. Riles finished his cigarette and threw the butt in the pond. One of the ducks swam over to it and gulped it down, and Flossy and Riles both chuckled.

"Bad enough the poor ducks have to put up with the noise," said Riles, smiling. "Now they're going to have to face it stoned."

"Maybe he'll think he's a hawk," said Flossy, "and bring us back a rabbit."

"Maybe he'll think he's a helicopter," replied Riles, "and fly us out of here."

As they stared at the duck, watching for symptoms, Hoach got up and rounded the pond toward them. Flossy did not look
up until Hoach was standing between him and the pond, blocking his view.

"Riles, I want to tell you what I got in mind," Hoach said.

"Aw, man, save it," Riles said. "Tell me what to do and I'll do it."

"Here's what we're going to do," continued Hoach, ignoring Riles and sitting cross-legged beside him. He spread out a map he had drawn in charcoal on a white T-shirt, and Flossy could pick out landmarks with arrows sweeping across the ridges at them. It looked like a coach's diagram of a football play.

"We're going to leave three men on the rim and the rest of us are going to take 20 rounds each and spread out along the base, here," he said, pointing to the map sketch of the rim of the Crater, at a point only a few yards from where they were sitting.

"That will give us elevated positions for the support, and put the rest of us down where we can skirmish."

Riles glanced over at Flossy while Hoach droned on, his voice growing hoarse.

"If Charlie comes in tonight, we'll hold him off," Hoach concluded. "In the morning we'll rush Ramos' Bunkers and jump into the village. If he doesn't come in, we'll leave the three inside the Crater to fire into the brush. That'll make Charlie think we're out of ammunition."
"Think we're out of ammunition?" said Riles, his temper wearing thin again. "Hoach, we are low on ammunition. If you get Charlie to think we're out, he'll come in after us for sure."

"If he does," said Hoach coldly, "he'll be the sorriest bastard that ever lived."

Flossy was glad for any plan that would keep the squad close by the Crater for the night, but Riles persisted.

"Hoach, face it," pleaded Riles. "We just can't lick him alone."

"You said that before," said Hoach. "I wish you'd be positive about this. I have a real good feeling about it. We've been losing so far because we've acted either like it was a cinch or like we were losers. I still think we can start winning. Charlie will just have to give it up."

Riles moaned and rubbed his eyes, and then said, "All right, man, what do you want us to do?"

"First, we'll dig in around the Crater and straighten it up," Hoach began, as though he were organizing a police call. "Then we'll eat chow, and then, while we still have some light, we'll all bathe and shave."

Hoach rose, and folded his map, and said, "Everyone get rested up. Relieve the men at the rim. Take a bath and shave."

He turned and walked away, leaving Flossy and Riles to stare after him. Then, with a sigh, Riles bent over the pond
and drew a helmet full of water, pulled his toilet kit out of his pack and prepared to shave.

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The pain was coming on like a slow moving freight train, and Coleman knew he would have to hurry while he could still think straight. Laplante was going over Maxwell's head, telling Coleman some horror tale about losing two men trying to work their way through to Hoach.

About the only good it would do to have a runner link up with Hoach, Coleman reasoned, was to make sure Hoach was still on the ridge at all. The sound of small arms fire told him that, so he reluctantly countermanded his senior sergeant and called Laplante off.

Coleman rested his head against the shattered treetrunk and mulled it over. Around him were the 20-odd men that were still effective from the second wave, and about 20 more that had survived the third lift, all trying to operate crew-served mortars and recoilless rifles. The bright spot was that the enemy had tapered off with his heavy mortars and was confining the counterfire to a couple of shells every 15 minutes for harassment. But it was effective, and the men were being drained without any gains to show for it. Even with the diminished shelling, Coleman had lost four men between the landing and the time they had finished digging in. Now it was getting
on toward late afternoon, and Coleman had no idea how to proceed, and no one to ask for advice.

The more he looked over the barren ground of the Crotch, the less future Coleman could see in trying to take the Patch from the low ground. He would do it from one wing of the ridgeline. Maxwell would be in the best position to hit the village, so he would do the job. Coleman, who knew he would not be able to lead the final assault himself, decided on Maxwell to take full charge. Coleman would remain on the beach and direct the heavy weapons. He would have radio links with Maxwell -- to whom Coleman would send the 20 remaining riflemen -- and Laplante, who would make a secondary thrust with his battered platoon across the ridge. If that didn't work, the survivors would gather at Maxwell's Crater and wait for help.

They would start moving at dusk, when the enemy would be sunblinded from facing west and watching Coleman. That returned him to the problem of what to do in the meantime, during the four-hour wait.

The men were as ready as they would ever be. The harassing fire from the hill would tire them only a little more than they were now, though the most exhausted of them would probably be able to catch some short naps. Coleman was worried that the pain -- which the medic had assured him would get worse -- might take him out of action before the crisis. He thought of calling over his successor and carefully briefing
him, but then noted the next man in rank was the company armorer, a buck sergeant, so he dismissed the idea. The armorer was capable of managing the little firebase on the beach, but Coleman could not have him coordinating the other two elements.

Maxwell would have to do that, if Coleman were not able. Coleman hoped Maxwell had a good second in command if anything were to happen to him, but he refrained from asking because he didn't feel he could take anymore bad news.

So Coleman called the mixed sergeants, specialists and senior privates that now made up his cadre and gave them instructions on propping up and organizing the company for an assault at dusk.

When they were gone, Coleman reflected idly on why he hadn't thought to check all this with the battalion commander first and arrange for artillery. Anyway, Coleman thought, it can't do the men any harm to be busy at a time like this. On that note, Coleman picked up his radio and started his struggle to contact the battalion commander.

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Maxwell stared at the reflection of his face in the water in his canteen cup. His eyes were red and vacant, and they turned sadly down at the outer edges. The man he saw was so old and weary it startled Maxwell, and he jerked his face back away from the spectre.
Breathing heavily through his gaping mouth, Maxwell looked at the faces of the men around him. They were children. He had a son somewhere that was Coleman's age. His youngest daughter was older than some of these men.

For a moment, Maxwell felt lost, out of place. He wondered where these children had been when he was crushing riots in Korea: whether their parents were even out of school when he was digging latrines in North Africa. What, he asked himself, was he doing here among them?

One of the men felt Maxwell's eyes and looked up at him. The face Maxwell saw on the youth was burnt out and hard, and belonged to a man who was willing to confront any sin. And at that moment, Maxwell saw in the man's eyes no sign of a conscience.

Maxwell looked away, fighting a thought he had never had before. With the immediacy of death, Maxwell's thoughts had taken a religious turn. He had many times reflected on the sad loss of life in combat, but this boy looked as if he had lost his soul. The war had taken the child and put this face on him, Maxwell thought in awe, and he was one of many whose souls had been lost.

The young man turned his face lazily away from Maxwell to peer down the sights of his rifle at the treeline. Maxwell forced his attention from his brooding, rubbing his eyes and dismissing the thoughts as hallucinations from loss of sleep.
As he looked down the sights of his own rifle, Maxwell thought of the wife who had moved to California. Maxwell had met her in Kansas City, while he was on leave from pushing basic trainees at Fort Leonard Wood. They were married as soon as Maxwell had made platoon sergeant, and they had lived comfortably until the Vietnam orders came. She went back to Kansas City and Maxwell went to serve as foreman to a gang of stevedores in Cam Ranh.

Their next assignment was at Fort Bliss, in the desert of West Texas, and the heat, flies and sand took the same toll on Maxwell's marriage as it had on so many others. Maxwell volunteered for a second Vietnam tour without telling his wife, partly because he wanted to get away from the constant fighting and partly because a war zone assignment would bring him closer to another stripe. She had maneuvered into position to take him for everything he was worth and split for California.

If he survived this, Maxwell told himself, his next promotion was assured. Before it came through, Maxwell would get the divorce finalized so the alimony would be figured on platoon sergeant's pay. He would invest the difference.

Maxwell's attention was diverted by what looked like movement from Hoach's end of the ridge. He raised his binoculars and saw Hoach's men marking something off in the churned up mound that formed the rim of Hoach's Crater. Up at the top edge a crew was filling buttoned-up shirts, trouser
legs, rolled ponchos and whatever bits of cloth they had, to make crude sandbags. Along the outer base, facing the Garden, the man in charge -- evidently Hoach, though it was too far to make him out -- was sitting other digging projects. All of them ducked occasionally as small-arms fire came in, but they continued without letup to fortify their post.

Well, there it is, thought Maxwell. That boy is going to keep on trying until he gets it right. He may be a crazy Texan daydreaming about the Alamo, but he's not going to quit. He got no more of Laplante's flares or Coleman's smoke bombs or tanks bringing smoke on his ass, so he may just make it on his own. Maxwell was moved to speak.

"All right, men, listen up," Maxwell said clearly and evenly, just loud enough to be heard across the Graves, no farther. "I want you all to look over yonder at Hoach. See what he's doing?" He paused while they all looked toward Hoach's Crater.

"No one told him to be doing that, but he's doing it anyway. Now that's the way we've got to do. It's still our job to take this village," he said, pausing to gather himself. "I don't want you moping around about what's going to happen to you if we don't, because we're going to do it. That's what's going to happen, nothing else."

Maxwell waited for it to sink in. A couple of the men -- the stoned soldier among them -- looked at Maxwell as though he were a fool. Two or three others looked bored and
indifferent. But most stared obediently over the island, and Maxwell could see he had hit home.

"Now eat your dinner, and get some rest," Maxwell concluded. "The night's going to be a lot rougher than the day, but we're good enough to do it."

That done, Maxwell sat down, changed his socks, and radioed Coleman to tell him his men would be ready in an hour.

Hoach was pleased at the way the new line was shaping up. After some moaning a little at first, the men were building up an impressive little fort. While Hoach's snipers covered, he and the others had dug a neat three-man firing pit and lined its forward edge with a row of makeshift sandbags about two feet high and a yard thick.

Firing over the top of it from a height of almost six feet above ground-level, the snipers would form the fire base for four foxhole lines along the outer base of the rim. Hastened by incoming sniper fire from Charlie in the brush, the squad dug the foxholes deep and narrow, sturdy enough to hold up all night. Each had a man's pack in front, filled with sand, to act as both a stop for ricochets and a handrest for a firing rifleman.

Across the tops, the men laid branches that had been blown, smoldering, over from the Patch. A sleeping bag liner
atop stopped any seepage, and the men then covered the structure with sand. Under normal circumstances it would be a hard and well-done job, Hoach thought, but under fire the men had shown a calm and restraint that was rare. He felt really good about the way they were behaving.

Hoach got no arguments as he ordered each man back into the Crater to take a whore's bath at the pond, shave in his helmet, wipe off his shoes and clean up his uniform. That done, he would draw a dexidrine from Flossy and wash it down with a hot cup of tea and Tang. Most of them tarried long enough to smoke under the pretext of cleaning their rifles. Hoach did not discourage it, and the men came back, one by one, to the firing positions looking fresh and alert.

Hoach himself felt much better, after blowing the dust out of his head. His hands were shaking a little, so he had knicked himself shaving in a few spots, but there were enough scratches on his face from the brush -- in addition to the goose-egg over his eye -- to camouflage the fresh wounds.

He had earlier felt a weariness that follows using up the last reserves, but the dexidrine was bringing him rapidly around, as his body began burning itself up. Riles crawled over to him. Hoach spoke first.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked, waving to the fresh diggings. "Looking better and better now, ain't it?"

"The rim will channel the rain right into the foxholes," said Riles, gazing off to the northeast, where the night's
storm was brewing up over the sea. "Wasn't much sense in getting all dressed up to drown like gophers in our own holes."

Hoach was irritated at hearing Riles' pessimism, and started to tell him so, but decided it would be no use. Riles had a lot more starch in him than Hoach had earlier estimated, but he was a whiner, which put Hoach off.

"Well, the rain'll also pack down the dirt in the sandbags," Hoach encouraged. "What I wish is that we were facing the other way. At sunset, Charlie's going to be throwing shadows 20 feet long. That would make him powerfully easy to spot."

"Yeah," said Riles, impressed at Hoach's insight. "Yeah, that would be swell. Well, I'm casting a shadow that big right now so I better get back into my hole. See you."

Riles crawled off to Hoach's right and left him alone. Hoach wanted to daydream for a little while before dark, to call up some of the memories of his home, but the speed was giving his thoughts a harsh texture and he couldn't think of anything pleasant in that condition.

Which brought him back to the problem. Though he felt sure he could fend off any intruders that night, Hoach dreaded having to greet the dawn by delivering on his promise to take the bunkers.

But he had made a promise, half to get the men looking ahead of the dreary moment and half to show Charlie he was
dealing with a first-rate warrior. Now Hoach wished he had not been so hot-headed. He could not back out now without shaming himself before the men. He could never lead them again if he did not do what he said.

Riles had asked all the right 'what-if' questions, and now Hoach faced his last few hours with a growing sense of doom. For an instant, Hoach wished his last few months alive hadn't been so hard. But Hoach was repelled at all forms of sniveling, even when he discovered it in his own conduct. So the thought vanished.

By God, no, Hoach said to himself. The enemy isn't good enough to bring me down. He's had help from America so far, but this time it's just going to be him and us. We're going to take him some hard times.

"Roger, Rapid Sleeper Three," said Coleman to Maxwell. "That sounds good, but we have moved the assault back until morning. Over."

"Morning?" barked Maxwell, obviously agitated at the thought of spending another night in the Graves, beating back counterattacks. "Say again your last signal. Over."

"That's affirmative," Coleman said, hoping the microphone did not pick up his sigh. "We're to wait until morning."
Coleman wished he could explain over the radio that the presence of the company's heavy weapons on the island had dropped the company on the artillery's priority list and there were probably several sharper fights in progress. The result was no artillery support. Coleman himself could only imagine the arcane calculations that had resulted in that order.

But Maxwell seemed to accept it without obvious disappointment, and Coleman left him to set out his night positions and wait. He returned his attention to the happenings on the north ridge. The small-arms fire indicated Hoach was still under seige, and the diminishing volume of his return fire told Coleman Hoach was running out of ammunition. Periodically Coleman would contact Laplante for a report, but Laplante could only repeat that he was still pinned down behind a wall, and the fire from Spinetti's Bunkers precluded his linking up with Hoach.

That exercise continued until darkness reduced Hoach to a tiny series of muzzle flashes and obscured Maxwell entirely.

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Flossy held his stomach and tightened up almost into a solid ball as he squatted outside the Crater and waited for another cramp to pass. He was sure by now his whole system would be empty, but the illness continued.
He watched forelornly as the rain blew in, until the sky darkened and he could feel only the wind and hear only the sporadic firing from the other side of Hoach's Crater. Flossy tried to hurry the cycle of cramps along, so he could return to the aid station before the rain began.

He had never been this depressed before. Riles had convinced him there was no hope left, but Flossy could not accept losing all the wounded he had tried so hard to sustain.

He had only confronted dying once before, and that was during the semester in which he had been turned down for medical school. Flossy had no idea what he would do if he could not be a doctor, and the thought of suicide crossed his mind more often than he cared to recall.

But, of course, this was different, he thought. Here, it was going to be done for him, and he was not ready. He still did not know what he would have done if he had survived, where he would have gone if he had gotten out of the army. At least if the wounded had lived, his being here would have counted for something. But now it looked like he was going to be snuffed out like a candle with no afterglow.

That last thought, and the pain of his illness, made Flossy weep, only he wasn't frightened anymore, just sick and sad.
The rain blew in and brushed against Maxwell's face, soaking his uniform and making him need to urinate. He slipped out of the tomb and knelt by the wall, relieving himself against it.

Anyone sees me like this, he thought with a smile, is going to think I'm praying. Then that thought got him to thinking about religion again, and he wondered if he could still pray.

Now when he was a boy, Maxwell recalled, he used to go to the revival meetings in Harlem and listen to the gospel groups from Philadelphia, Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis, even Atlanta. There was real religion then. He'd seen a lot of things since then, and committed sins he didn't even know about last time he was in church.

But there was more to Harlem than church, he recollected, letting the bad memories seep in with the pleasant ones. In his neighborhood, the Depression lasted well into the war. His father and brothers took off in search of work in the late '30s and had not returned by the time Maxwell left for Africa.

In the meantime, Maxwell -- the youngest son -- was saddled with organizing a household. Partly because they needed the dollar Maxwell made for each drill and partly because the weekends at the armory let him escape the shabby block he lived on, Maxwell joined a colored National Guard outfit when he was 16. By the time he was 18, Maxwell was overseas with it, shoveling shit and picking up rocks.
Between enlistment and North Africa, Maxwell had been the proudest man he knew. The carefully mended and tailored uniform and shiny shoes made him somebody special, and when the country needed fighters, Maxwell swelled to think he was among the first ones called.

But that was a long time ago, he reflected. He had come down a notch or two since he came to realize what the army was really about. Maxwell had since done everything he was assigned quietly and obediently, and accepted the breaks as they came.

Which returned him to the island. Later he would pray, but right now, through the rain, he thought he saw the tempo of the firing on Hoach's side increasing. Then a grenade flashed over there and Maxwell knew something was coming down.

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Hoach thought he had been dozing, when the muffled concussion of the enemy grenade snapped him alert. When he listened, he could make out the shallow splashes of duds coming down to the ground, some sputtering maliciously until their fuses were spent.

Hoach knew the enemy's grenades were crude and only effective if one went off at extremely close range. But their presence signalled the enemy was about to make his move. He strained to look out into the void, trying to catch any movement or sound he could.
Hoach heard the bullets cracking overhead and thumping into the revetment on the rim above and behind him. They were coming in heavier, and the grenades were getting worrisome. Hoach restrained himself from firing back, waiting -- as all four men in the foxholes were -- for Charlie to storm the Crater. When he was in the clear, Hoach and his group would level him from the ground. Hoach had 20 rounds in his rifle and he was going to hit somebody with every one of them.

Ahead of him, Hoach could plainly see the outline of a man setting up a light machine-gun behind a bush. It was a favorite Charlie trick, to leap up maybe 15 or 20 paces in front of you and open up. But Hoach quietly lined up his sights on the gunner and waited for the rush.

A shower of grenades announced it. Some of these sailed overhead and burst in the Crater. Get ready, Hoach told himself.

"Haw!" came the cry of the man who leaped to his feet and sprinted toward Hoach, gazing at the rim as he came. Hoach kept his head, and squeezed two shots off into the already-sighted gunner before raising the muzzle and putting a shot squarely into the running man's chest.

The rushing enemy was stopped cold and thrown backwards to the earth, as if pulled down by a string. Behind him Hoach saw two more, but these were cut down by one of the men to his right.
Behind them was the main assault line, spread out like a rolling wave as far as Hoach could see. He almost choked with fear, but he willed himself to pick his targets in sequence from the closest on back to the stragglers. They all fell flat, either dead, wounded or under cover. Ahead of him, Hoach could hear some VC sergeant whispering in Vietnamese trying to round up his men and give it another try. Hoach invested two of his three remaining shots probing the bushes in the direction of the sergeant's voice. It fell silent on the second shot.

That left him with one round and wondering what to do next. Then he noticed more movement. Peering with his good eye into the darkness, Hoach could see that the first man he had hit was on his back, crawling in a circle and moaning softly. Hoach noticed he was still clutching the sling of his automatic rifle, dragging it beside him, and that his belt and side pouch bristled with the long, heavy banana-shaped magazines for the rifle.

So Hoach crawled out of the foxhole and waited at a point the wounded VC would pass on his next loop. When the man arrived, Hoach placed the muzzle of rifle to the man's chin, turned his face away, and then reconsidered.

Placing his hand over the man's mouth, Hoach held him still while he quickly thought it through. He would take the man's rifle and ammo and leave him out here to lure his buddies into trying to rescue him. That would flush Charlie
into the open and make him think twice about an assault over his own wounded.

So Hoach stripped the man of his rifle and magazines, stuffed a handkerchief in the man's mouth to keep him quiet for the moment, and turned him over on his stomach so he couldn't move.

The rain muffled Hoach's sound as he crept forward until he had the bodies of six more Charlie's dead behind him. Taking for granted the squad behind him was following all this, Hoach held up two fingers and beckoned for them to come out. He covered the brush with his captured weapon as Riles and another man joined him.

"Pick up the rifles first," Hoach whispered. "Come back for the ammo, then get this machine-gun."

He pointed to the World War II vintage German-made light machine-gun Hoach's first target had been setting up. He counted four belts of ammunition for it -- at least 800 rounds.

The men nodded and went about their work quickly and quietly. Hoach knew the rifles made it back when he could hear the men in the firing pit break them down and start cleaning them. There was a general rattling of heavy metal objects, which Hoach knew was the magazines being collected. He knew the men would not have to be told to empty the magazines and clean the ammunition before reloading it.
Finally Riles was back to help Hoach with the machine-gun. They paused long enough on the way back for Hoach to explain the plan. The three men in the firing pit would make noises like men retreating from the new foxholes to the inside of the Crater. Then they would wait for Charlie to come again.

He reached over, jerked the handkerchief out of the wounded man's mouth and gave him a sharp kick in the side. As the man's screams drowned out the sound of Hoach's withdrawal, he and Riles scuttled back to the Crater, heaved the machine-gun up the rim and returned to their foxholes to wait.

Now, Hoach muttered to himself. Now we're all set. He hefted the alien weapon until he was satisfied he had the general feel of it, and then stared out at the brush.

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When Flossy heard the screams, he thought it was one of his own patients, and gave a startled jump. He was squatting outside the Crater and the movement made him soil his leg.

Flossy cursed softly and wondered what to do next. Then the rain started again and Flossy decided it didn't matter, that the rain would wash him off. The screams no sooner died in his mind than lightning flashed, and Flossy jumped again. Lightning was rare in Vietnam, and sudden flashes in the night usually signalled immediate and deadly danger.
Flossy folded his arms tight around his middle and shivered in the rain. He hurt everywhere, but he singled out the burning at his side where the shoulder holster had rubbed him raw. Flossy decided to jettison the useless weapon as soon as this spell passed and he could get back to the Crater. Still squatting, he unbuttoned his jacket and started to unhitch the shoulder harness.

The firing started again, riveting his attention. The sound was strange, different from what he had heard minutes before in the last skirmish. In the pit of his stomach Flossy realized those weren't American weapons blazing away on the other side of the Crater, and he rolled instantly to cover on the rim and peered across to the other side.

Another lightning flash, coming after anxious minutes, showed the little fort was still occupied by his friends, who were apparently using captured guns.

Flossy rolled over on his back and let out a gallon of breath in relief. As he collected himself he remembered that he still had his trousers down around his ankles. He sat up and pulled up his undershorts: another lightning bolt crashed into the top of the mountain across the water from him.

He looked up at it, and in the blue-white glare he thought he saw the silhouette of a man stalking toward him from the bushes on the rear of the crater.

Flossy froze. The lightning faded and the image of the man was gone.
Just a mirage, he thought. But the thought did not ease his panic, and he edged back up the rim of the crater.

Another lightning flash showed the man again, a few yards away and heading straight for Flossy. Now in terror, Flossy rolled himself uphill until he cleared the rim and tumbled down to the edge of the pond. He was on his feet before he stopped rolling, running for the other side to warn the rifle-men.

But he was hobbled by his trousers, and stumbled only as far as the aid station when the enemy cleared the rim and started at Flossy with a wicked spike bayonet leading the way.

Before Flossy's next thought, the man lunged at him with the weapon. Flossy fell to the left and the lunging man tripped and fell headlong into the prostrate patients. Flossy heard a 'thunk' as the bayonet struck something, and for a ghastly moment he thought the enemy soldier had stabbed one of the wounded.

Scrambling to his feet, the dazed medic looked around to get his bearings and found the enemy soldier by the log that formed one wall of the aid station. Flares popped overhead, and the soldiers at the revetment kept firing, oblivious to the menace behind them.

In the flarelight, Flossy saw a Vietnamese boy in his early teens, struggling and cursing to free the bayonet on an oversized rifle from the log, where he had plunged it into the wet wood.
God, thought Flossy. What am I going do?

Groping at his side, he located the big automatic pistol he had worn, unused, through two days of fighting. The soldier saw the piece, and planted his foot against the log, desperately trying to extract the rifle and bayonet. Flossy, in his panic, could not remember how to cock the pistol, and struggled with it as if it were a Chinese puzzle.

Flossy felt some part of it move, and pulled at it until the top half of the piece slid back and stopped. He let go of it, and felt the machinery working inside the pistol.

That instant, the enemy soldier's bayonet came loose, and the boy lurched to one side, falling almost at Flossy's feet. The youthful face looked up at him, and Flossy laid the muzzle of the pistol at the boy's nose and squeezed the trigger. The face vanished behind the muzzle blast.

Flossy, his nerves so charged he felt as though he would explode, stumbled backward until he realized he was standing in the pond, up to his shins in the water. The pistol slipped from his hand and landed next to him with a splash. He did not know what to do next.

The next thing Flossy saw was Riles standing at the pond's edge, holding his right arm and swaying back and forth. He had a mildly quizzical expression as he looked from the dead enemy to Flossy, and then back. Only then did it occur to Flossy that he still had his trousers down, and that they were
out of sight below the water. He looked up at Riles and started out of the pond.

"I'm hit," said Riles, the life gone from his voice. "I'm hit, Flossy."

Flossy snapped his attention away from the man he had just killed, and toward Riles. He could see from the position of the tear in Riles' jacket and by the way his shoulder hung, the man probably had a broken collarbone. Flossy reached out and took Riles' elbows firmly in his hands to immobilize the injured member, and then eased him gently to a seat on the log.

He was well into treating Riles when the tears came, and he was sure Riles wouldn't notice in the rain.

Hoach is going to do it, thought Maxwell, his misgivings of the past few hours lifting as he watched the muzzle flashes retreat once again toward the Garden. That hard-assed young hillbilly is going to make it through the night.

That would mean Charlie would still be bottled up, Maxwell realized. While it didn't mean Maxwell's company would be winning, it did mean dawn would break and they would have another chance to crack the stalemate.

So the final attack on the village was back on, Maxwell thought, disgusted with himself for not making plans.
Desperately trying to make up for lost time, Maxwell visualized what would happen next morning.

First, they would have artillery support. Coleman had told him they would be getting preparation from light howitzers this time, instead of the powerful mediums the division had hurled on them the day before. That would mean they could safely move in much closer and avoid having to cross open ground under fire.

Second, there would be an attack from the beach. That would shift the entire axis of the movement away from Maxwell's end of the ridge. What he would have to do, he figured, would be to get Coleman's group up the hill as rapidly as possible. If Coleman stalled, it would leave Maxwell between the village and the Graves with his ass hanging out.

So this time, instead of taking on the entire V-shaped tree line, Maxwell would divide into two groups. One of these would swing out and hit the face of the tree line nearest the cliffs. The other would move parallel to the first group and hit the Captain's Bunkers from the rear. The machine-gun would fire on the apex from a position in the middle. Maxwell realized he could strike only the two or three bunkers nearest him, and the recoilless rifles on the beach could fire on another two or three. That left the positions of the far end of the line -- next to Hoach -- free to rake Coleman's group as it moved uphill across the open ground of the Crotch. But it
was better than nothing, Maxwell thought. It would at least give them a chance.

Because of the hazards involved in the morning's assault, Maxwell decided to risk calling the men together to receive their orders as a group. The closeness would help brace them for what they had to do.

It took only a few minutes to get everyone together in Maxwell's tomb, and Maxwell had spent the time -- which he accepted as the last solitary moments he would have -- praying quietly aloud.

Then he explained the concept and mechanics of the platoon's mission. The group would move under the same drill as it had during the assault on the Graves. He carefully divided his men into two teams, picking the fiercest for the dash in full view of the treeline into the Captain's Bunkers.

They were ready to move right then, and had been since the dusk assault was called off. Maxwell could see no point in waiting, and slipped out of the tomb to scout ahead.

From a point about 15 yards out, he strained to detect movement in the brush ahead. Hearing none, he tapped his rifle stock, and noted with pride his men made no sound as they drew up even with him. In the dim light from the flare which was setting behind the terraces, Maxwell scanned his platoon up and down the line and he could see in the faces of the men nearest him an eagerness that surprised him. It would be an honor to die among these men, he thought for an instant, and then put thoughts of death out of his mind.
Maxwell tapped once again, and watched the line separate and slither toward the brush. He helped the machine-gunner with his load and crawled into the brush himself. The gunner set up his weapon silently in the dark. Maxwell gnashed his teeth while the gunner pulled back the bolt, but the man was good, and got the weapon cocked without a sound to alert the enemy.

There, he thought, finally. The rest is up to God and the artillery.

Coleman lowered his palms from his face and looked up at the Patch, which was silhouetted against the spreading dawn. Around him men were stirring, materializing out of the sand and foliage and becoming animate objects once again.

Coleman was almost shocked to be seeing sunrise. He had not expected to survive the sporadic shelling that had gone on all night. That thought had come in the aftermath of a fierce battle near Hoach's Crater. At one point nothing but enemy weapons could be heard, but then the firing went on longer than the enemy would need to finish off Hoach and him men.

So, though somehow Hoach still held Coleman's flank, Coleman could not shake the thought that his company was lost. But there was the dawn.
Coleman tried to move, but the pain in his arm was so bad he nearly fainted. He eased his head back against the tree stump and wondered what to do next. The problem was solved by a call from his battalion commander.

"Coleman?" the voice said. "You still there, boy?"

"Roger," he said hoarsely. "Still here."

Overhead Coleman could hear the buzzing of the battalion commander's helicopter circling the island.

"Well, let's get with it," the battalion commander said. "The trucks just started out from Da Nang. We haven't got much time."

Coleman motioned over his cadre, and they listened while the battalion commander told them the howitzers would register fire in just over an hour, and Coleman could order his opening barrage anytime after that. Coleman said he would take stock of casualties and organize, and then get back with the battalion commander. The commander acknowledged, said he would be back in an hour, and soared up over the mountain out of sight.

After the night's casualties, Coleman scrubbed the idea of reinforcing Maxwell and planned instead on a dash up the hill while the barrage was still coming in. He gave his instructions, and then contacted the artillery unit that was to cover them.

After explaining the situation and cautioning the gunners on the importance of accuracy -- due to the small size of the
target and the proximity of friendly forces -- Coleman settled back to wait.

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"Okay, fellows," Hoach was saying to squad assembled in the Crater. "This is how it is done. You grab the bird like this."

He seized one of the ducks by the feet and proceeded to demonstrate, step-by-step, how to kill the fowl and prepare it for roasting. As he was running a spit through it, Flossy walked over to investigate.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded.

"We're going to hit the bunkers this morning," said one of the soldiers. "Hoach is showing us how to roast a duck."

"Yeah, man," said another. "We're going to have a hot breakfast and then we're going to get cleaned up and then we're going to boot Charlie off this hill. Ain't that right, Hoach?"

"That's right," Hoach said, turning his meal slowly over the stove, which was made of C-ration tins and fueled with plastique. "You got to have a hot breakfast when you have a hard day ahead of you."

Flossy looked around to see three or four other stoves, all carefully fabricated with varying degrees of skill. Then it dawned on him what the soldier had said.
"You say you're going to do what?" Flossy asked, making sure he had heard correctly.

"We're going to have a hot breakfast," Hoach said, annoyed.

"No," said Flossy, pointing to the soldier who had spoken first. "He said you were going to hit Charlie. What the hell does that mean?"

"We're going to hit him from the side," Hoach said with an odd smile. "I thought about this all night. We'll go down the back of the ridge and come up behind that wrecked chopper. Then we'll take the path up the ridge and come out right on the foxhole line. They'll never know what hit them."

If Hoach had any idea of the danger in what he was describing, it did not show in his voice. He appeared absorbed in cooking his meal, as were the others, and talked only absently about the mass suicide he had planned. Flossy realized with a chill that Hoach was completely mad, and the others were infected by it.

"Hoach, you're talking nonsense," Flossy protested. "There are only five of you . . ."

"Six," Hoach corrected without looking up.

"Six," repeated Flossy. "You'll get shot to ribbons!"

"Franklin," said Hoach, looking up with red eyes and a self-righteous expression, "if you don't have something useful to contribute, why don't you just hush."
"Yeah," said one of the soldiers. "Why don't you help me fix this duck. We can save the bones and make soup for Spinetti and the others."

Flossy clenched his fists and turned away in anger and disgust. As he walked over to his patients he could hear one of the men muttering, "Wonder what's eating him?"

It's the same very time, Flossy thought bitterly. These lunatics go out on their adventures, and then come back expecting you to make them whole again. At least Spinetti and Riles and these others may survive, even if Hoach gets blown away.

Flossy sat down on the log with his back to the men and gazed at the spot where the enemy soldier's body had stayed until Hoach dragged it over the rim and out into the bushes.

The thought of Hoach's death brought a great sadness to Flossy. In his own way Hoach had been the best friend he had ever had, and Flossy knew he could not be replaced.

His reflections amplified his weariness, and Flossy resisted only for a moment taking the soldier up on his offer of breakfast.

Oh, what's the use, thought Flossy finally. If he's bound to die, I'll at least have a last meal with him. He got up and rejoined the others.

"That's the spirit we need," said Hoach cheerfully as Flossy sat down beside him. "You'll feel better after a nice breakfast."
Flossy forced a smile and nodded.

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Coleman heard the first rounds from the howitzers hissing in, and saw the flashes in the Patch. As the sound of their explosions rolled down the Crotch and reach him, Coleman saw movement off to the left out of the corner of his eye.

With his good hand trembling, he looked through his binoculars expecting to see the enemy massing on his flank, preparing to push him into the sea. Instead he was astonished to see a small group of American soldiers in helmets and flak vests -- carrying foreign weapons -- creeping through the brush at the base of the ridge, heading for the wreckage of the helicopter that had crashed in the second lift.

Coleman dropped his field glasses and seized the radio to call Laplante. Laplante had not talked to Hoach all night, he said, and had no idea what was happening. Coleman knew Maxwell was much too close to the village to risk radio noise, so there was nothing he could do but hope Hoach knew what he was doing.

Still, he put his men on alert to move at his command in any three directions.

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Hoach and his men flattened when they heard the shells coming in. As soon as they burst in the trees above them, Hoach was back up, moving at a crouch toward the wreck. The others joined him.

"Now, when we get to the top of the ridge, I want you to fan out," he whispered. "You, you and you, take the first hole. You and I will take the second. The machine-gun stays out on the right, so it can cover everything. Go it?"

There were nods all around.

"Okay," he continued. "Remember, take out everyone quick and come around to the next hole. Stay down. Charlie may still be in Ramos' Bunkers."

Gently parting the brush ahead of him, Hoach picked his way to the top of the ridge, where the path turned back toward the village. The machine gunner crawled along it and came to a stop, drawing his knees up, ready to spring up and fire over the bushes.

Hoach pictured how the foxholes would be laid out when viewed from what had been Charlie's perspective. The first would be over there -- he pointed it out to the three men assigned to it and they nodded their understanding -- and the second would be there. The man next to him also nodded.

Hoach felt his heart racing, took a deep breath and bellowed, "Go!"

He rose and fired a long burst at the startled men in the foxhole. There were two of them, and they vanished as the
bullets kicked up dirt all around the rim of the hole. Hoach dashed forward, fired a short burst down between his feet into the hole, and then raced past the third foxhole to the next.

By the time he reached it, the enemy was alert and firing wildly back. Hoach and his partner went flat and scrambled through the bushes toward the sound of their guns. They opened from a few feet out, and the hole fell silent.

The next foxhole was empty. By the time he reached the next, he could see enemy soldiers vaulting out and dashing toward Ramos' Bunkers.

"Cut them off!" he screamed to the machine-gunner. "Keep them away from those goddammed bunkers!"

The gunner responded at once, and several of the fleeing men tumbled head-over-heels into the brush. The rest turned and headed away from Hoach's fire, toward the terraces.

Good, thought Hoach. We'll have them to screen us while we come up on Spinetti's Bunkers.

"Fan out!" he shouted, spreading his arms to signal the axis the new line would take, parallel to the terraces. "Spread out and form a line! Herd them into Spinetti's Bunkers!"

Hoach dropped as the enemy fired at his voice. The squad melted into the brush, moving forward, popping up to fire, taking cover, moving forward again. Charlie tried to resist, but was forced steadily back. Off to the right Hoach took a last look at Ramos' Bunkers, which were silent. He pressed on toward Spinetti's Bunkers, firing as he went.
When the squad burst out of the brush onto the clearing that rimmed the ridge, Hoach saw the space between him and the bunkers was littered with enemy dead, and the troops in the bunkers were frantically trying to turn their weapons away from Laplante on the terrace and bring them to bear on Hoach. Hoach saw instantly that they would not make it.

"Go on!" he bellowed at his men. "Take them all out!"

Pausing to reload, Hoach let his partner fire on the most threatening positions, and then Hoach turned his squad line to the right and began repeating the bunker-to-bunker sweep.

"Come on!" he yelled down the terraces to Laplante. "Come on, Laplante, we got them pinned down for you! Come on!"

Below him, Hoach could hear the horse shouts of Laplante's group coming up the terrace. When he saw them swarm over the last paddy dike and disappear under the ridge crest, Hoach turned his attention to his next victims-- across the Garden and in the trees of the Patch.

Maxwell heard the cry "Come on! Come on!" carried on the wind from Hoach's end of the island. It took a moment to sink in that it was Hoach's voice, urging him to strike. Then he realized at once what had happened.
The lone artillery round had alerted the enemy to the barrage that would follow, and he was down in his holes waiting for it. Hoach, on his own, had sprung the assault and caught Charlie flat-footed. It couldn't have been planned better.

Maxwell would not lose the chance. He ordered his men forward and quickly radioed Coleman to tell him what was happening.

He caught up with his men in the brush less than 100 feet from the treeline. "Okay," he bellowed. "Let's go, gentlemen."

The machine-gunner fired a long, tightly-traversed burst at the point, cutting two small trees down. From ahead of him off to his right Maxwell could hear the shouts of his assault team moving in on the treeline. Maxwell left them to storm it and went to join his other detail at the bunkers.

Moving at a crouch to avoid fire from the Patch, Maxwell quickly caught up with them. Already they had taken out two bunkers and were working over a third when heavy fire from the beach hit close to it.

"All right," Maxwell snapped. "The CO takes it from here. Let's hit the village."

The little band turned and headed for the trees. Behind them they could hear the shouts of Coleman's men coming up the Crotch.
Coleman watched his men move forward. Two of them had fallen and the group was only halfway up the hill. They had to make it. Coleman had made no arrangements for withdrawal.

All around him his heavy weapons were pounding three of the Captains' Bunkers that were in range, and the assault group was trying to keep the others pinned down. But Coleman's calculations told him they wouldn't make the top of the hill with those bunkers still in action.

"Coleman," said the battalion commander over the radio. "What's going on? Why'd you call off the artillery?"

"We can't shell the village," Coleman answered. "Parts of it are in friendly hands."

"Say again?" the battalion commander responded, obviously confused by the sudden development.

"I said, we hold parts of the village," Coleman shouted back, his patience gone. "What we need is gunships. Victor Charlie has bunkers we can't get to. We need gunships."

"There are no gunships in this area," said the battalion commander.

"Then you're no use to me," Coleman said. "Get off the air."

He tossed the radio receiver aside and picked up his field glasses to watch his assault bog down and start sliding over to the cover of the wrecked helicopter -- the nearest cover -- over a hundred yards away. He wondered why the enemy's heavy mortars were silent.
Hoach dashed across the Garden and into the treeline without hearing a shot fired at him. Across the village, he could hear Maxwell's men coming in. Behind him he could hear the enemy in the Captain's Bunkers blazing away, and from his new vantage point, Hoach turned and saw Coleman's men struggling up the Crotch.

"Hit the bunkers first," he shouted to his men, who had paused for orders.

The squad moved down toward the bunkers, and the enemy burst out of them as soon as Hoach's fire found the entrances. Of the four dugouts that were untouched by Coleman's recoilless rifles or Maxwell's fireteam, only two were occupied. Their crews were cut down as they emerged to run away.

As Coleman's group gained the top of the ridge, Hoach turned and stormed the treeline again.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Maxwell, as he stood in the main path through the village. "Charlie's packed his mortars and unassed this place."

He looked around him at the men rampaging through the village, stumbling here and there on fallen foliage, firing short bursts into the flattened huts, probing for the enemy.
Right now the biggest danger was from his men shooting each other, there being no order to the formation any more. He ordered a cease fire, and the noise died down as the men contented themselves with torching the piles of grass that had once been houses.

How in the hell, he pondered, did Charlie slip off this island? Unless there were tunnels, he realized, he would never know.

Maxwell sat down against a tree and lit a cigarette, letting the weariness take him. As the tension drained away, Maxwell felt limp, as if his skeleton had turned to jelly.

Out over the mountaintop, Maxwell could see two light helicopters. One would be the battalion commander and the other would be the Colonel, he thought. Maxwell stood up, alarmed at the idea of the Colonel seeing him and his men looking like a disorganized rabble. He started through the village to gather them and spruce them up.

Hoach couldn't get his adrenalin down. The frustration of coming all this way and finding no victory at the end was too much to bear. He still believed there was enemy on the island and the end of the battle was still ahead. Then he saw the Colonel emerge from the helicopter on the beach below, and the staff officers and signal corps photographers recording
the triumph, and realised with a rush that he was safe. The presence of high-ranking officers on a battlefield often has that effect on American soldiers, he reflected.

Shucking his flack vast and belt, Hoach leaned against a tree to rest. It did not occur to him to sit. He was too tired even for that. Laplante emerged over the ridgecrest, apparently from checking his wounded, and Hoach stiffened. He and Laplante stared at each other across the Garden, but they had nothing to say.

As Laplante disappeared over the ridge, Hoach caught sight of Flossy stumbling out toward the foxholes, an empty black body-bag fluttering in the breeze. It was for Ramos.

That thought was too much for Hoach's worn nerves, and he broke into long sobs of mourning for his friend.

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The medevacs were landing, and the men had loaded Coleman on a stretcher for the flight to the hospital. The battalion commander came over with the Colonel to congratulate him.

"Well... Coleman, isn't it? ..." the Colonel said. "Benger's company?"

"He died," Coleman answered. "Day before yesterday."

"Yes, I know," said the Colonel soberly. "Well, you've done a fine job here."
"Thank you, sir," he replied weakly. "I'll pass that along to Sergeant Maxwell and my men."

"Where is Maxwell?" said the battalion commander. "Is he up on the hill?"

"Yes, sir," said Coleman, wishing they would leave. "I'll get him on the radio."

"Don't bother," said the battalion commander. "I can get him myself. You go on with the medevacs. We'll take over from here."

"Yes, sir," Coleman said as the medics hoisted his stretcher and started the chopper.

Hoach had just about collected himself when Riles wandered up, his arm bound tightly to his side. Riles stared out at the sea for a long time, and then said, "I wonder where Charlie went?"

Hoach could say nothing.

"You think he swam away?" asked Riles, to no one in particular. "Maybe he climbed down the cliffs and swam away."

"Maybe," muttered Hoach.

"Maybe he'll tell someone we were here," Riles said. "Maybe someone will remember."

"Who gives a shit?" snapped Hoach, his voice cracking, as he stared beyond Riles at Flossy struggling with Ramos.
"Relax, man," Riles said. "Hear the choppers? We're all going to live."

"Hey, why don't you buzz off, Riles," Hoach said around the lump in his throat.

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Yeah, I'll see you later, okay?"

Hoach nodded, looking at his feet in shame for crying. Riles reached out and patted Hoach on the shoulder, and then wandered off in the direction of the medevacs.

Maxwell put down the radio receiver, beaming after delivering his report to the battalion commander. He would form his men up and march them down the hill to get off the island. Maxwell knew he had been good in this operation, and knew he finally had his stripe coming.

Then he spotted Hoach, off by himself on the other side of the village. That boy really outdid all of us, he thought. He's really on his way up.

Maxwell strode over to him, his chest out and his face split with a smile.

"I want to tell you, boy," he said. "That's the best piece of soldiering I've seen in three wars. You really going to make it in this man's army."

Hoach's head snapped up, trying to find Maxwell's voice. Then Hoach saw him.
"You grinning nigger!" he sobbed. "Why don't you just save it for the other fucking lifers!"

The word stopped Maxwell dead in his tracks, but because of what Maxwell saw in Hoach's face, the anger did not come to him. It was the thin face of a young whiteboy, mutilated by some blow to the eye. The other eye was filled with tears of helpless rage, and the lower lip was curled like a frightened baby.

Why, this Hoach is just a lad, Maxwell thought. He's just been scared and he don't know how to handle it yet. I better just leave him be to get hold of himself.

"Son," Maxwell said, soothingly. "You're going to see better days and worse. You just put today as far behind you as it will go."

On that, Maxwell turned and went to his assembled men for his triumphant march down the hill.

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It took a long time to get Spinetti ready to move, so the lieutenant was among the last to go. As Flossy strapped him to the stretcher for the trip down the hill, Spinetti's hand raised a little and then dropped to his stomach.

"How long?" he croaked. "How long?"

"Three days and two nights," Flossy whispered into his ear. "Go back to sleep."
The last was the man Flossy had operated on. He was conscious, but apparently not aware of where he was. Flossy's hand was trembling too badly to hold the plasma bottle, so he handed it to one of the fresh medics and sat down on the log.

Flossy caught his breath, took one last look around the Crater, and then stood up to leave. He gulped down another dexidrine, and by the time he reached the bottom of the hill, he was good for another 24 hours.
EPILOGUE:

Spinetti recovered with partial damage to his eyes and now lives with his parents in New Jersey. Laplante was killed in action near the Laotian border a few weeks after the battle for Mai Loc. Riles returned to the United States with three months left to serve on his enlistment, and deserted at Oakland Army Terminal. He is believed to be working as a machinist in Sweden.

Coleman was promoted to first lieutenant while still in the hospital. While on convalescent leave, he completed his Master's at a highly regarded technical institute on the East Coast, and was promoted to major before his 30th birthday. He is now a lieutenant colonel in charge of a planning office in the Pentagon.

Maxwell retired as a first sergeant to a small town adjacent to an army base in the South. He invested his savings into a small business, put the profits into rental property and eventually purchased an auto dealership. He was subsequently voted in as the first black member of the town's chamber of commerce.

Hoach stayed in the army, returning from Vietnam as a staff sergeant and earning platoon sergeant's stripes before leaving the States for a tour in Europe. He married a Belgian girl, has two children, and currently serves as a senior corrections sergeant at the U.S. military prison in Manstein, West Germany.
Flossy returned to school and earned a Ph.D. in hospital administration. He now serves as a senior executive for a large hospital in the Midwest. He has never heard from any of his Vietnam patients.
AN EXPLICATION

Methods and Themes in *Three Days and Two Nights*

The problems that arise in writing war novels roughly parallel those that must be dealt with in actual military operations. Warfare on any scale invites chaos -- by some definitions it is chaos -- and methods that are adequate to peaceful pursuits, literary or otherwise, often fall short of the demands of combat. But in literature of the 20th Century warfare must be examined frequently, because it is a worldwide fact of life.

Since so much of Western, particularly American, literature has examined war so broadly, the techniques for dealing with it are fairly well established. In general, war literature differs from other genre in its demand for tight control over time, space and action. As in real military activity, the literature of combat, as distinguished from novels of the service, requires that the use of resources be judicious and restrained. Narrative must be kept pertinent, and every effect of the action must be taken into account. As in accounts of real battles, the testimony of the witnesses must be weighed and carefully edited. The human dimension to war literature examines people in extreme, desperate circumstances, so the writer must allow for distortions and gaps in their recollections.
Three Days and Two Nights is an attempt to fulfill a two-fold purpose. It is first a spiritual novel that examines the permanent effects of prolonged stress on the psyche. Second, it is an historical account of a representative battle of the Vietnam War, which examines in microcosm the nature of the conflict and the changes it made on the people who were involved. Its spiritual dimension is confined to the changes of spirit that are made to deal with violence and chaos.

It is a widely held belief that war offers some deep insight into the nature of the human spirit, based on the thought that humans show their "true" natures under stress. The assumption underlying Three Days and Two Nights, however, is that war is an experience that has no natural place in the human life cycle, and that is not possible to make a general statement about mankind from the actions of people who are afraid, angry, exhausted and sick. In such circumstances, wide areas of the emotional spectrum are lost completely, while the fact of war and its threat to survival call up resources on the battlefield that are useless elsewhere.

As the spiritual statement is thus limited in its scope, so the historical message is trimmed to include only the facts which proceed directly from the battle. To have summed up an 11-year war, spread out over drastically varied terrain through near-cataclysmic social upheaval, would have required a battle of such proportions that the military aspect would be obscured. Thus the novel avoids contrivance by concentrating
on the history of the soldiers who fought the war. It touches incidentally on the economic and social impact of the war on the Vietnamese populace, but it avoids the enemy's point of view entirely and records a brief history of one of the factions, the U.S. Army's combat arms.

Before any of this could be sustained, the story would need physical framework that would support it. Since the novel was to be an account of a battle, the basic planning was done as though it were an actual military operation. The control of space, or terrain, was the first demand to be answered. Basically, the battlefield would have to be small enough to keep the scale of the action down to manageable proportions. The reader would have to become quickly familiar with the terrain in order to follow the action, and a small battle would allow him to do this. In authentic accounts of war this is difficult, because clashes of any significant size and duration almost always draw in additional units on both sides. In many war novels, this problem has been solved through such cliches as cutting the involved unit off behind enemy lines, or sending it off on a secret mission. In a story from the Vietnam War, such a device would tax the credulity of any reader even casually familiar with that conflict and its methods. A unit in Vietnam could be isolated, however, in an engagement either on an island or in territory into which the unit was forbidden to enter and thus could not be reinforced if it encountered trouble. The latter setting would place a
unit in Laos or Cambodia, and since Americans fought so few battles there until late in the war, a fictional account would lose credibility when examined against history.

Placing the battle on an island, on the other hand, would allow full use of resources about Vietnam and create a setting that is geographically believable. There are a number of islands off the coast of Vietnam, all of which saw numerous battles. Any of these would effectively isolate a military unit if its mission were complicated by any one of a number of common variables. In selecting such an island, the general size would only depend on the size of the military population that would inhabit it. To avoid confusing and unnecessary sub-plots, the civilian population would have to be removed, which is a common enough occurrence in the history of the Vietnam War. To keep the cast of characters small, the unit to be engaged would have to be company-sized; no smaller unit would be engaged separately, and any larger unit would contain too many characters.

The development of Mai Loc, then, began with the requirement that it be just large enough to hold an understrength company of American infantry, which would keep the fighting on a personal level, and an enemy force large enough to keep it at bay for three days and two nights. There were many such islands off the coast of Northern I Corps, an area which saw sufficient fighting throughout the war to conceal a fictional account of a small clash. To make Mai Loc geologically
plausible, the island would have to be patterned after an actual formation. The island of Hung Cau, which is part of the Paolo Condore Archipelago off Southern IV Corps, was relocated 550 miles to the north and renamed Mai Loc. To give the account of the battle of Mai Loc geographic authenticity, the recollections of the participants would have to contain such details as the island's elevations and grades, the texture of its soil, the positions of its features in relation to the rising and setting sun, and many others.

To develop this kind of detail, a hill of Hung Cau's approximate size and proportions was found in Central Texas and paced off, measured and staked out to form the rough trace of Mai Loc and the battle that would be fought over it. As it happened, the northern and eastern faces of this hill abutted a river that is prone to flooding. On the eastern face, this had produced a bluff, and on the northern face the water had washed the soil away from limestone strata, leaving bare terraces. On the map of Mai Loc, these real features appear, respectively, as the cliffs on the seaward side and the rice paddy terraces on the northern edge of the island.

The survey was done in the height of summer, in temperatures approximating those in Northern I Corps at the time the battle at Mai Loc is fought. This made available details about the effects of strenuous activity on the behavior of the individuals in the battle.
All these measures would be necessary to give the terrain not only dimension, but also substance and texture. The inclusion of such details as heat, humidity and hostile insects, if restraint is employed, helps give the reader an empathy with the characters, and an understanding of the effects of their surroundings upon their actions. It can be overdone, however, and there are two hazards that need to be considered constantly in writing a battle narrative. First, detail can be set down in such volume that it appears as an attempt to impress the reader with the writer's knowledge of the story's background. If carried to such an excess, the mass of detail obstructs the movement of the plot. Since motion is a key element in novels of action, such as a war story, the effect of broken pace is pronounced. Second, the presence of small details to aggravate the characters has a decided effect on their actions, but when these small sufferings add up to a trite plea for the reader's sympathy, they tend to distract the reader's attention from the universal agonies of war. Their place in the story must be kept in proportion to the larger distress of fear and anger that combat invites. Most of the material that was later to be deleted from Three Days and Two Nights violated one or both of these principles.

The setting in a military novel has the same effect on plot as terrain has on an actual military novel. In Three Days and Two Nights, Mai Loc isolates the company, and further channels it into distinct groups. From this, a key theme --
fragmented communication and misunderstanding -- emerges from the setting alone. The actions of the characters proceed directly from this situation. To the men fighting on the island, its connections with the outside world would be academic, since the attention of the entire cast is focussed on the island. Their isolation from each other, and their concern with local emergencies sufficiently extreme to demand all their energies, make broken contact and distorted communication inevitable.

With setting established and practical limitations placed on the plot, the next step in building the narrative would be to outline the action. In actual military encounters, principal characters tend to emerge through their place in the operation, or through stress and attrition. Much of the individual's behavior is determined by the demands of the moment, so that the pattern of the action must precede the development of characters.

The story of the battle of Mai Loc was compiled by the same process as a factual battle account. First, the battle was summarized in a brief outline similar to a military after-action report. The key points of the engagement were then filled in from eye-witness accounts of the participants. Each of the fictional event was checked for plausibility against factual accounts of real battles, and adjustments were made for embellishment, exaggeration, and failures of memory by the witnesses.
At this point in the development of the story, when the testimony of the witnesses was to be orchestrated to give a complete account of the battle of Mai Loc, the control of time took on primary importance. In real military action, individuals are rarely involved in combat from the start of a battle to its resolution. In fact, any given point on the battlefield is apt to be contested for only brief intervals during the duration of a clash. The rest of the individual's time is spent with tedium and routine which, though it may performed in an atmosphere of anxiety, contributes little to the battle and has negligible impact on the participants. In the Vietnam War, the maxim was "days of sheer boredom interrupted with moments of utter terror." In controlling time in the narrative of the battle of Mai Loc, the primary aim was to condense the boredom and expand the terror. This would contribute to maintaining the reader's interest by keeping the narrative moving.

The problem that challenges control of time is that in moments of anxiety, the character is usually confronting rapidly breaking events. Indeed, it is widely believed that the basic human anxiety stems from an individual's inability to speed up his own actions or to slow down the events sufficiently to allow him to master them and bring them under his control. But at the time an individual confronts such a situation, his senses are heightened by his agitation and he tends to select and note a great many details. Recounting
these to a reader usually takes more time than the events themselves. The reader's subjective perception of time must thus be synchronized with time as the character perceives it. It is thus necessary to furnish the reader with frequent, plainly visible temporal reference points. The setting and plot must be scanned for opportunities to mark the rate of the passage of time, though these must be employed sparingly to avoid repetition. Such devices as the rising and setting of the sun, a character's glance at his watch, the serving of meals, etc., are obvious. Others can be contrived as the plot unfolds, either inform the reader that a period has passed during which nothing has happened, or to alert the reader that the event he has just witnessed has taken place in less time than he has taken to read it. In military narratives it is also necessary to account for time much more closely than in other genre. In a military engagement, while individuals may encounter lulls in the action, there is usually something transpiring somewhere that will have a decisive effect on the outcome.

To ensure that all important developments are covered in the narrative, it is necessary to place witnesses throughout the battlefield so that one account can take up where the other leaves off. This brings up the problem of point of view and narrative mode, or who will see the action and how it will be recounted. Since it is virtually impossible to experience the excesses of combat vicariously, it adds authenticity to
the account if the action is described from the perspectives and through the perceptions of the participants. The author's contribution would be to select material carefully, taking into account that there is at least one witness to every event and locating those witnesses. Explanations of action and what it portends for the characters is best left up to the characters themselves to describe, preferably in their own words. Beyond his orchestration of these separate accounts into a unified running narrative, the author should keep a low profile, because his intrusion into the story usually is made to emphasize points beyond their real importance to the battle. The participants alone know what is important and what is merely interesting, and the imposition of the author's sense of priorities tends to distract the reader and distort the message of the account.

Selecting the narrative mode is a simple exercise in deduction. First person narrative would place the reader closest to the perceptions and inner workings of the minds of the characters, but at the expense of objectivity. The same event viewed from several perspectives would be distorted by the stress under which it is perceived. Also the language in which an anxious, agitated character thinks tends to be flat and dry if it is authentically rendered, because the character remembering fragments and brief glimpses should not reasonably be expected to frame his recollections of moments of terror and fear coherently. Switching points of view while
maintaining a first person account creates more problems than it answers by raising the necessity of creating characters who are internally unique. To be able to distinguish between characters by their patterns of thought requires considerably more effort in developing character than is needed to accomplish the purposes of recounting the battle of Mai Loc.

Third person past tense, the only other reasonable alternative, solves the problem of switching points of view, and it enables the reader to differentiate between characters by external appearance, personal habit, and peculiarities of speech. This permits an economy of material that enables the characters to be established in a way that allows more time for setting and action. Third person also allows the character to recollect his experience, rather than to reexperience it directly as he would have to do in the first person. There is a danger in third person, however, of the writer's seizing control of the narrative and intruding directly into the account. If the author limits himself to observing and recording, the reader is taken as close to the action and as deep into the character as the narrative requires, without being burdened with trivial wanderings of the characters' minds.

Finally, to keep the action tight, the cast, in its role as witnesses, had to be limited to a size that would permit direct observation of key events. The locations of the scattered bands of soldiers had been established in the basic
outline of the battle, and the events they witnessed were
timed so that when action lagged on one part of the island,
witnesses on another part could take up the story. A minimum
of one witness at each of two places on the island and a third
witness in the rear area basecamp could keep the story moving
and account for all the action of the battle. This led to a
preliminary selection of a cast, and the actual account could
begin.

The writing of the account began with Chapter II, where
the company enters the battle. In that chapter, which
describes the afternoon and evening of the first day, the com-
pany is split into groups on each end of the ridge, a group on
the beach, and a group in reserve at the basecamp. Hoach
takes the role of observer in one group, with Flossy and Ramos
watching him. The contributions of the last two are needed
because Hoach's lack of experience makes him unaware of much
of what is transpiring. On the other end of the ridge,
Maxwell, the veteran, is seasoned enough to carry the account
alone. Originally, Benger was to have been the observer on
the beach, but for dramatic effect he was to be killed at the
close of Chapter II, and his contribution was subsequently
divided between Maxwell and Coleman.

Until Benger's death puts Coleman in command of the com-
pany, the green officer serves as a link between the company
and the rest of the army. It is through Coleman that the
higher command enters the story. That connection is broken
when Coleman lands on the island on the second day, and links
with the army are not reestablished until the battle ends. To
the participants in the battle of Mai Loc, the "big picture"
is unimportant while they are preoccupied with more pressing
and immediate problems.

In the original draft of Chapter I, the cast of charac-
ters was almost twice as large as the cast in the final draft.
An attempt to give identities to all the members of Hoach's
squad, all the squad leaders in First Platoon and all the pla-
toon sergeants in the company was abandoned. The presence of
more characters demanded description at greater length than
the events required.

With space, time and characters under control, certain
themes emerged to be further exploited in the narrative. The
most obvious of these is failure in communication. All of the
characters throughout the battle are responding with fear,
anger or grief to danger and death. Up to a point, the
responses to these stimuli are identical in all of us,
assuming identical perceptions of the stimuli. If the company
in the battle of Mai Loc had been responding to the single
perceptions of higher command, it would likely have moved in
precise unison through a simple military problem. But when
the link with the detached commander is broken and elements of
the company are left to gather their own information on the
scene, the actions of the individuals begin to differ rad-
cally. The narrative of the witnesses begins, then, at the
point where that link is broken. The novel opens with Hoach waking up to what he believes will be an easy and non-hazardous spell of road security, at the exact instant the company commanders find out the mission will involve much more. The rift between participants widens from that point through the entire account.

Early in the accounts of these witnesses, the theme of broken communication merges with the theme of spiritual change. The intensity of combat will change all but two of the participants at all levels. They will be altered in physical appearance, in pattern of thought, and in the very form of their souls. Only Maxwell and the Colonel remain unchanged throughout the battle, because to them the war is a way of living, and they have gone through their main changes many battles before Mai Loc.

The forces that envelop the characters can penetrate as deeply as their spirits because each has to face the horror alone. Because their links with others are shattered through intrusions as simple as noise or as complicated as personal prejudice, the men are forced to turn inward for their salvation from the battle and the death it offers. Even when they do get through to each other, the message is often garbled, or lost in repetition, or assigned meanings it is not designed to carry.

This collapse of the ability to communicate is a natural consequence of the circumstances. The men in Three Days and
Two Nights are all at the base of an immense military command structure that rises many insulated levels above them. They are the first to know what is happening at the forward edge of the army, and the last to learn about decisions that are made far behind them. They exist in a vacuum, between the time it takes superiors to absorb what the soldiers already know, and the time it takes the commanders' intentions to reach them.

Within this vacuum, where no information is reliable and where all reality is temporary, the characters must confront chaos. In an environment where literally anything can happen, for which none was adequately prepared, the characters must make many internal adjustments. Their positions with nature, God and each other are drastically altered. This change, for some, leaves the spirit weakened and sick. For others, the change in spirit adds strength and depth. For most, the war is a suffering that is endured with neither dignity nor glory, and the marks it leaves are best healed and forgotten.

The physical task these men are given is examined in Three Days and Two Nights, and found to be unnatural and impossibly large. The battle of Mai Loc is won by the Americans through a combination of innocent luck, reckless courage and close coincidence. The outcome of the battle, in the end, has very little to do with the aspirations of the commanders or the courage and energy of the men. The imagery in which this phenomenon is described is drawn directly from the battle.
The premise that war is not a natural function for mankind is a direct contradiction of a basic belief of both Western and Asian cultures. It is thus not a case that can be made metaphorically, but must provide proof from itself. It was therefore decided as soon as the theme of impossible demands emerged, in Chapter II, that comparison of war with other kinds of aberrations would weaken the theme. The characters themselves would see how unnatural their environment was, and not merely demonstrate it to the reader. They would find the evidence in the landscape, in the climate, and in behavior of their colleagues. Only one character, Flossy the medic, perceives how bizarre his own actions are. Hoach misses it completely, though before the battle ends, the young sergeant violates his normally just, compassionate nature many times.

The battle's insignificance leads into one of the historical points made in the book. The battle of Mai Loc presents a context in which the entire war can be viewed. It escalates from a minor skirmish to a sharp local clash, and then abruptly ends without victory. Like the war, the battle is not entirely meaningless: it forestalls an inevitable outcome as it deals with a problem temporarily. But in the end it is obvious that the exertions of taking the island are too much for the men and they must be withdrawn. Everything returns to the situation before the battle, except that the beautiful island is scarred.
The dangers that infest the island, which the men are facing over a natural impulse to flee, also provide the backdrop against which another theme is displayed. There is, in most of the men, a will to endure and flourish and an outrage that this desire is being thwarted. No two men in the battle have the same objectives in winning it. For some, the battle of Mai Loc is simply a challenge to be accepted in the absence of alternatives. For others, it is a job for which they expect to be rewarded. For all of the soldiers on Mai Loc, survival is a conscious decision that is reaffirmed continuously. But their resolve never contains the sort of glory that is attached to heroes, and their will to do well is demonstrated in sordid and inconsequential squabbles. The battle of Mai Loc starts as a minor attachment to a road-march order. As it develops into a clash of serious proportions, the battle rises only slightly from the bottom of the army's priority list. By its end, the battle only tenuously commands the attention of the Colonel, who is but two levels removed from the company on the island. The men are virtually expendable: they are important only to each other, and on that basis the individual fragments of the company return to the basics and form tribes, families and partnerships. In the end, even those ties are dissolved as soon as the crisis is past.

Historically, the battle of Mai Loc also offers several insights into the way things were done in the Vietnam War, the
way the war affected the Vietnamese people, and the place the war holds in the army's history. Guided by the account of the Vietnamese woman at the opening of Chapter II, the reader can piece together other evidence from the intelligence officer's briefing before the battle and observe first-hand the effects of the war on the island. What results is a brief, general view of the impact the presence of contending armies had on families and home of the peasants.

In the military scheme, circa 1968, Maxwell represents a generation of soldiers who won World War II and dealt with Korea, and who see in Vietnam evidence that their prime has passed. Maxwell leaves the army with some reluctance, partly because after more than half his life as a soldier, his lot in the army is just beginning to improve. Coleman, an Ivy League systems analyst, and Hoach represent a new generation of soldiers, whose first war experience is Vietnam, and who are thus emotionally prepared to face the changes ahead.

Seeded throughout the novel, topical references have been placed wherever they will not interrupt the narrative. While sustaining no historical message on their own, these details record the ascendance of 20th Century methods on warfare. The battle is essentially a 19th Century clash of riflemen marked with computerized command systems, weapons so complex that their crews are only interchangeable components, and an attitude that stresses the capabilities of material and mechanical impedimentia over the limitations of men.
Because the battle of Mai Loc is so brief, it creates a problem in timing the narrative. Digressions are almost impossible to conceal in a plot that proceeds directly from start to conclusion, and the battle has to be described sparsely because it was to come from the sketchy memories of exhausted, frightened men. To examine the themes fully in a compact narrative, it was necessary for each single, significant event to illustrate several points.

The manner in which broken communication, the basic theme of the book, is built illustrates this problem. To drive home the impact of broken communication, all information conveyed between the characters is distorted. The simplest way to achieve this effect is to capitalize on a narrative pieced together from several points of view, taking a single event and having each character view it and perceive it differently. The book opens with such a break in communication, as the men of the company drift into an easy road security mission while the officers prepare for a hazardous assault on Mai Loc island. The distance of the characters from the event that is about to transpire distorts their perceptions about it.

Later in Chapter I, the disparity between the information about the island that each element of the company receives is further demonstrated when Benger and Coleman listen to the intelligence officer's briefing. Their view of the island comes from maps and aerial photographs, as though they were seeing Mai Loc from on high. Ramos, on the other hand, views
the island from the ground, through a witness to whom the island is a lost home. He and the men will see Mai Loc in strictly human terms, because it is their very lives that will be affected by the battle, and not merely the larger movement of the war.

At the beginning of the battle in Chapter II, when the platoon sergeant of Hoach's platoon is killed, Hoach sees what has happened but fails to understand what it means to the mission of the group. Spinetti, watching through field glasses, thinks the dead man is someone else and that Hoach's group is still in experienced hands. On the basis of that misunderstanding, Spinetti allows Hoach to continue up the terraces, dividing the platoon and removing all options except to continue the assault without waiting for help.

Spinetti's mistake is a graphic illustration of the distortion that comes with the intervention of mechanical contrivance between an event and the witness. Even though he is on the scene, Spinetti is removed behind the lenses of his binoculars. What has happened does not penetrate until he looks directly upon the platoon sergeant's body and adjusts his plans accordingly. This is not to say that anything would have changed had Spinetti known what was happening, because Hoach himself knows instantly when the platoon sergeant is hit by enemy fire, and still makes the wrong decision to move up on the hill.
The pattern of broken communication prevails throughout the battle, but its most vivid example is the murder of three wounded Viet Cong in the Graves by a drug-crazed American soldier in Chapter III. Maxwell knows what has happened and what it bodes for the company. He is experienced enough to allow for distortion throughout the battle, and is seldom misinformed. But it never occurs to him that on the other side of the island, Hoach's group thinks the enemy has stormed the graveyard and has slain helpless Americans. To Ramos, this is an outrage against God and the signal that everything to follow will transpire without His blessing. To Hoach it is a direct affront, and from that point on he is obsessed with the righteous desire to inflict on the enemy what is in fact an unjust punishment.

Coleman is eventually made to understand how unsuited his scientific approach to war is in planning for human peculiarities. Until he enters the battle in Chapter IV, Coleman sees his men and their task statistically and analytically, and his only knowledge of what is happening comes from maps, charts and sterile briefings. He begins to comprehend during the first night, as radio communication from the island hints at the confusion "out there." But when he lands, and his arm is smashed by enemy fire, the pain is a reality that literally brings him down to earth. From that point on, Coleman must cope with the problem of conveying the plight of the company to the commanders behind him. If is an exercise in futility,
because as desperate as the company's situation is, the Colonel and his staff are involved with other, far worse, problems elsewhere, and the island must be seized in any case.

The breakdown in communication is also seen in the divided attention of the men. Flossy, for example, enters the battle preoccupied with his illness and his fear of the hostility of his comrades. In that state, he misses the significance of the switch in mission from road security to air-assault. Because of this, he jettisons the pain killing drugs that would be excess baggage on road marches. His trouble with the men, of course, stems from a physical failure of communication before the novel opens, when the delay of his mail brings to the company's attention that he has been getting daily letters from a man back home. He perceives Hoach's intervention on his behalf, which in fact is motivated by Hoach's sense of justice, as the prelude to a homosexual advance. Flossy's concern for his own safety is so great that he will accept help even on that basis. It is not until much later that Flossy discovers the innocence of Hoach's motives.

Hoach and Maxwell both are preoccupied with trouble at home, and both must advance in the army to deal with their problems, but their attitudes differ beyond that point. To Hoach, the road security mission will provide an easy opportunity to prove his capability as a squad leader. His rash action in the battle is motivated by the same desire, and indicates that he does not comprehend the gravity of his
situation. Maxwell, on the other hand, knows fully well what is expected of him, and is grateful for the chance to show he can deliver. Coleman is an inexperienced junior officer who knows his place is to observe and learn, and who is thrust into a situation he is barely equipped to control.

This breakdown in communication contributes to the narrative an air of artificiality about the battle, as though none of the characters has any business on the island. This point is made directly by the absence of the island's inhabitants and the presence, in their place, of two contending armies. The two factions are locked in terrible combat over ground whose value to each arises from the presence of the other. All the men in the company, and presumably all of the enemy, have better things to do. Each of the characters has had interrupted a pattern of living he has selected as natural for himself. Maxwell, for example, has been thwarted in two attempts to establish a family and home as a direct result of war. Flossy's education has been interrupted so that he can deal with totally unnecessary and useless suffering, and Hoach's talents as a farmer and manager are wasted in battle.

To drive home the interference of the war into the lives of the participants, the narrative is dotted with small examples of the way in which the battle interrupts simple day-to-day routine. Sleep is broken, meals are disturbed, cleanliness is impossible, and physical functions are postponed. The men continue in exhausting combat in spite of injuries for
which they would be hospitalized in civilian life. Flossy, for example, is too sick to work but must minister to the needs of others. The absence of officers forces Hoach to take responsibility for the lives of his men, a position for which he is obviously unprepared, and Maxwell continues to strive for success in the army despite the death of the commander he was initially trying to impress, and long after the army has written him off as expendable.

From the start of the narrative, nearly everything each man does is unnatural for him. Hoach, for example, is shown in the first passage of Chapter I as suffering from a terror of heights, and for a farmer from the prairies of Texas this should not be a problem he normally would confront. Yet in the beginning of Chapter II, Hoach must force himself out onto the landing skids of a moving helicopter in preparation for landing on the island. He displays a sense of justice and fair play when he comes to the aid of Flossy, a virtual stranger, simply because Flossy is the mistreated underdog. But by the end of Chapter IV, Hoach brutalizes a wounded, helpless enemy because the military situation demands it. In the midst of battle, the coherence of civilization has so deteriorated that Hoach uses the wounded Viet Cong as bait without a trace of conscience.

The breakdown in order is another indication that war is not natural. Flossy, for example, is a civilized, educated man who never means any harm to anyone. Yet circumstances
contrived by the military situation, circumstances he would
never have had to face as a medical student, make him the
focus of the hostility of his peers. He feels the need to arm
himself in his personal defense, and by Chapter V he is forced
to kill an enemy soldier. The circumstances leading up to
that episode suggest that order has collapsed, even in mili-
tary terms. If the army had provided medevac helicopters,
none of the wounded Flossy was forced to protect would have
been on the island. The army maintains that medics are non-
combatant auxiliaries, but for all its immense power, the army
can not guarantee Flossy's non-combatant status through three
days and two nights of battle.

For Maxwell, the battle is at once an opportunity and an
imposition. As a middle-aged man whose life has been
strenuous and chaotic, Maxwell has no business in deadly com-
batt. Further, Maxwell has endured two wars, and knows only
too well how brief will be the effect of this battle on
history. But he has been conditioned by 28 years in the army
to see nothing odd about gambling his life against the chance
of a promotion that will mean only a few extra dollars in his
retirement income.

Further contributions to the bizarre circumstances come
from the setting and background detail. The island is only
significant in a military context. Its real economic value
has been destroyed by the war. The phases of the island's
conquest consist of life-or-death clashes for control of
stinking craters, a graveyard and finally an empty, burning village. The machines which have been supplied ostensibly to give the Americans an advantage over their foe become enemies in themselves. Hoach's group is shelled by one of the tanks sent to give close support, and Maxwell is showered with hot shell casings ejected from a machine-gun mounted in a helicopter hovering overhead. When the mechanical devices can do some good, some natural fixture usually interferes: targets are obscured, guns are too large to be used with friendly troops in close proximity, the airspace around the island is too tight to allow helicopters to maneuver effectively, and so on.

Against all these complications and hazards, the men themselves maintain a stubborn desire to endure and excell. Each finds his own way of coping and does what seems right to him. Hoach epitomizes this spirit, but he is optimistic to the point of derangement. By force of will he keeps the squad together and deals with the threat from the enemy, but his madness is contagious, and by the final skirmish of the battle his men are convinced that a hot meal and a fresh shave are all they need to pull them through. While unquestionably heroic in military terms, Hoach's final assault is an insanely dangerous maneuver that crosses the battlefield twice in full view of the enemy. The fact that the enemy has already evacuated the village is all that saves Hoach's squad from anihilation.
Hoach's foil is Riles, the cautious hippie who copes with combat by staying stoned on marijuana and taking minimal risks. Riles feels nothing for the army and has made no spiritual commitment to the war. He is loyal to his comrades only because he expects their loyalty, and will risk his own safety only if one of his friends is in danger. However, Riles is willing to bring his military skills to bear on the problem the squad faces after it is cut off from the rest of the platoon, but only because the sole means for surviving the battle is to win it. For Flossy, the war offers the chance to act out his desire to be a doctor, but he does not hold the respect of the men for his proficiency and is forced to take part in the battle as an ordinary soldier.

All this brings deep spiritual changes on the men. Hoach's change is the most marked. As the story opens, Hoach is seen as a simple peasant whose only interest has been to do a good job. For this, Hoach has been rewarded with acting sergeant's stripes. But his family's plight forces Hoach to be ambitious, and in his sector of the military sphere success is achieved only through violence. Hoach rallies men into a savage attack on the enemy, and becomes angrier at the enemy for interfering with his advancement with each firefight. By the time he hears Maxwell attack the Graves, Hoach has set himself apart from every other faction on the battlefield. The sentry from Hoach's squad who is garroted to death by Viet Cong sappers is "his" man. The wounded Americans Hoach
mistakenly believes to be murdered by the Viet Cong are "Maxwell's" wounded. His outrage builds to a point where Hoach is ready to hold on to the Crater for one more night solely because it will offer him a chance at the enemy in the morning. With no more thought than he would give to hooking a grasshopper, Hoach brutally manipulates a suffering Viet Cong to serve as bait for "targets." It is his ambition, not his sense of justice, which is outraged by the battle of Mai Loc. It leaves Hoach hardened enough to give up farming and take up a career as a prison guard.

Flossy's deterioration of spirit accompanies his physical collapse. As his fluids drain away in sickness and deadly heat, Flossy's most cherished assumptions about himself are challenged and discarded. His patients have openly questioned his manhood, and thus his fitness to be among them. His confidence in himself as a doctor is destroyed when he allows his personal problems to distract him into an act of gross negligence. Finally, his compassion, the anchor of Flossy's personality, if found to be only an illusion when Flossy discovers he is able to kill a man while looking him in the face. By the time Flossy loads up the last litter case, his faith is too badly shaken even to take the patient down the hill. Flossy chokes down another dose of amphetamine, and shuffles off to bag up the dead. His desire to minister to the sick never returns, and when he resumes his career he stays out on the periphery of medicine, as an administrator.
Maxwell, on the other hand, is a man whose time has come. He proves his competence beyond dispute in the battle of Mai Loc, and wins the promotion he believes will give him a comfortable retirement. To Maxwell, the battle is a series of intricate puzzles, and all he has to do to win the prize is to pass through the maze. He is not especially bitter about the discrimination he has endured during his long career, but he has decided it is time for it to cease. With a full awareness of what he is doing and why, Maxwell experiences very little shock on his psyche, but he notices the effects of their first really desperate battle on the men around him. He reflects for the first time on the impact of the war on the souls of his men, and sees that some of the men will suffer damage to their spirits in the same degree as others will suffer harm to their bodies. However, Maxwell knows he has long since gone through all his changes, and accepts it as inevitable that some of the men who gamble on war, physically or spiritually, will lose. His personal triumph is unmarred by the misfortunes of others. Not even Hoach's outburst after the battle spoils his day, and he can afford to be charitable.

To Coleman, the battle is simply an extension of his Ivy League ROTC military education. For the first chapter of the account, Coleman is simply a green second lieutenant keeping a low profile and learning what he can. By the opening of Chapter II, he feels experienced enough to offer advice to a superior, but only once, and then only on impulse. He begins
to see, however, that the system is not perfect and depends on a number of human variables when Benger sends him to the hospital to lobby for pledges of medevac helicopters. By Chapter III, when he is asked to take sides between his two superiors, Coleman has realized that command is subject to human shortcomings. He maintains his problem with distance until the beginning of Chapter IV, when he is concerned about the reserve group spending the night at the airport, not fully comprehending what the rest of the company is facing on the island. But by the end of Chapter V, Coleman's understanding of military matters includes the shattering effect of war on frail men, and his perspective has cleared to a point where superiors are "no use" unless they can help him directly. Coleman is unconcerned with any men but his own, and has become the commander in spirit as well as in station.

All of these changes are made against a background of transition in the two groups that are vying for control of Vietnam. To the Vietnamese, the war is a natural catastrophe. For awhile the Vietnamese can cope with the raw destructiveness of the Americans, as illustrated on Mai Loc by the adaptation of a bomb crater into a duck pond. But the war escalates until one day, "when things are quiet," the target acquisition computer orders their fishtrap destroyed, and with it goes their way of life. The presence of the Viet Cong on the island makes life there completely untenable, and the Vietnamese farmers are uprooted and scattered.
To the soldiers, the outsiders, the war is a catastrophe that has neither beginning nor end. The battle of Mai Loc is already in progress when they arrive, and it does not end when the enemy is defeated, but when he grows tired of the battle and decides to leave. Like the entire American presence in Vietnam, the company's brief stay on the island counts for nothing. After the Viet Cong leave the Americans follow, but only to face each other again. Riles is one of only a few men who accept the insignificance of what has happened, and he reminds Hoach that only the company and the Viet Cong will remember the battle of Mai Loc. For the others, though, there is either Hoach's kind of rage at being robbed of triumph, or the release of a tantrum of firing into trees and setting fire to flattened straw huts.

In this respect, the battle of Mai Loc becomes a microcosm of the war as a whole. It starts out as a minor local problem in the midst of far greater catastrophes. It deteriorates beyond redemption before it even draws outside attention, is salvaged only by chance, and then is quickly forgotten. So the battle of Mai Loc draws to a close and its survivors go their separate ways. Its heroes, like Ramos, have died pathetically useless deaths, and calm returns for awhile.