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The pig on his right shoulder twisted his neck to the left and the rucksack holding all his worldly possessions kept his back humped forward. When he walked or even moved he sometimes made the sound he was known by: grunt.

Mud washed off the top and down the sides of his helmet. The orange rain provided a curtain for Mac to look through. He had a three foot view to the front and he saw everything to his left through a misty screen. When he tried to look up he felt like he'd drown.

Mac had never seen rain like this and his platoon sergeant had said it wasn't even monsoon season yet. Sergeant Fast Eddy—God and platoon daddy to them all—was good at showing Mac and the other Fuckin' New Guys the ropes. The M-60 machine gun—23 pounds unloaded—was kicking his ass. *No wonder they call it a pig*, he thought. With a 200-round starter belt in the feed tray and the gun resting on the sweat towel next to his neck, he felt like he was carrying a baby elephant. *At least out here in the rice paddy it isn't getting caught on everything like it does in the jungle.*

Fast Eddy came toward him, following the line. He leaned over and told Mac they had a small creek coming up and to hump up front and get ready to cover the crossing. Eddy was going to get the other pig gunner up on the flank

to cover the other side. One step and he disappeared. *Fuck*, Mac said to himself, *I need pontoons on my feet to keep on top of this mud.*

Magnetized mud. Stepping in the footsteps of the man ahead of him made him sink to his knees. Since he was already bent over, avoiding boot holes full of water was easy.

Mac knew they were not a full platoon. Only nineteen of them. Fast Eddy said not to count the second lieutenant because he didn't count for shit. The platoon had been shot up a week before Mac got there and FNGs were coming in as fast as they could be gotten out of the replacement school.

Word came back, passed man to man: "Guns up."

Slipping and sliding at the fast pace of the slowest turtle, the mud wouldn't let go. The cold rain, running everywhere in everything didn't help. Finally making his way to the front of the platoon, Fast Eddy was waiting for him. *Shit*, Mac wondered, *how did he get up here already?*

"Get your pig over and cover that side of the creek. Set the gun on that stump so it doesn't sink!"

"OK, Sarge."

He slithered through the mud and lowered the gun onto the stump. Crouching down, he took off his helmet and pulled out the plastic bag previously used to hold a radio battery. Carefully, he removed his stash of dry cigarettes. The Zippo lit even in the breeze. The first puff of smoke escaped his cupped hands. *Ah, what a feeling.*

Crouching tight against his shit, he looked up. *Sarge, you lyin'motherfucker. That's no creek. It's a fuckin' river!*

Red, fast-moving water. Foam in the eddies. Tree limbs and pieces of the bank were all rushing downstream. He continued cupping his hands around his smoke and took another drag. That was the end of it. The water off his hel-

met put the sucker out. *Creek, my ass. There's no way we can cross that!*

Eddy slid in beside him. "Unwrap your starter belt and get that gun ready to fire. Fuckin' newbie. Fuckin' gooks fire your shit up before you know whassup."

"Ah, Sarge," Mac said, "ain't no way we get over that river. Lookit that shit. Whole fuckin' country floatin' by."

"Shit, Rookie, the map says it's a creek, it's a creek."

Staring into Eddy's face, Mac knew he wasn't joking.

Eddy turned to his point man and said, "Now here's the plan." Mac couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Wait a minute Sarge," Mac said. "How in the fuck is he gonna do that? Swim?"

Giving Mac his dumb rookie look, Eddy sighed. He turned Mac's head, pointed it toward the river-creek and said, "Listen up. See the log that goes all the way across? Now, point man first, then me. Then you follow with the pig." Eddy used his chin to indicate Mac's next move. "You take up a good fire position over on the right, there, by that log next to the anthill. The radio will be coming behind you, so keep your shit together and your eyes on that little opening in the trees there. Got it?" Turning Mac's head again with that muddy mitt of his, Fast Eddy stared at him, then said more loudly: "Got it? Understand the plan, my man?"

"Yeah, Sarge. I got it."

Peeking through the rain toward the wood line, all Mac could think of was that hungry river creeping over the bank into the paddy. He felt a tap on his shoulder. "Yer up, Mac."

Wearing the paddy's mud he stood and wearily stretched his back. He grabbed his sweat towel from the gun and twisted the water out of it, making a stream of OD green. Folding the wet towel against his neck he jerked the gun into his arms. He wrapped the ammo over the feed tray and around the gun, then finished hoisting it up on its rest in

the crook between his neck and the towel.

As he slid through the mud toward the log bridge, Mac saw that the point man was already across. Halfway over the log, Fast Eddy didn't even look back.

Muddy boot prints were turning the gray of the log bridge crimson and slick. Mac stepped out onto the old log. It was bent in the middle and the river's current had it vibrating like a violin string. He felt the power of the river coming up through the soles of his boots. *Oh, fuck.* He humped the pig up a notch on its towel bed and took a step further out on the log.

All of a sudden the foot-and-a-half-wide log began to look like the edge of a razor blade. Mac's added weight made the log bow a little deeper into the current. He tried not to watch the water, but the mud ball of a dead rat slamming into the log held his attention as he took another step. His shifting weight helped the water flow a little faster over the log. The rat moved and was swept away.

With the gear and gun wet, Mac's skinny ass must have weighed in at over 200 pounds. His helmet kept slipping down over his eyes.

He glanced over the "creek" to see how far he had to go. Fast Eddy had already disappeared. Another step and Mac was committed to making it to the other side. The thought of falling into the river didn't bother him. He had grown up on a lake and was a strong swimmer. Sliding forward, balancing the gun, his right hand holding onto the left leg of the bipod, he slid the weight of the pig in small movements across his shoulder and neck. With the machine gun as a balancing pole he inched his way further out onto the razor's-edge bridge.

Still mud-covered, his right boot slid down the log into the water cascading over the gray, greasy log. With his right foot in the mini-stream, he froze. Movement out of the

corner of his eye. Tilting forward he saw a three-foot snake sliding at an angle across the water. *Shit*. All the horror he had ever heard of unrolled in the water screen before him. Left boot in mid-step, he felt his balance going, tilting first to his left, then to his right. Left foot back on the log, his mud-covered ballet slippers never had a chance. Falling to his right, the pig pulled him in the direction he didn't want to go. Ass over teakettle, into the creek he went. The gun held him like an anchor. Unwilling to let go, he had figured the river was only four feet deep. *Bullshit. I can't touch bottom!*

Now he was underwater. He let go of the pig and it fell away, but its tail of ammo—still locked in the feed tray—was caught on the right shoulder strap of his rucksack. Frantic, he grabbed for the quick release. Choking, he bobbed to the surface and the current slammed him into the log.

“Help!!!” he gasped.

Laughter was what he heard as the river pulled him underwater and under the log, where unseen branches tried to hold him. He felt the quick release pull apart and the rucksack got sucked off by the current. Two belts of ammo were still around his neck. To get rid of it he twisted some of the bullets. The belts broke apart and were swept away.

Busting free of the bottom branches he popped to the surface. Gasping and trying to get a breath through snot and sand he hollered for help.

The laughter was a roar in his ears. The words he heard didn't encourage him: “Swim, motherfucker.”

The second lieutenant skated over to Mac, who'd pulled himself onto the bank. “What the fuck happened out there?” he asked.

“Sir,” Mac said, looking up at him, “I fell in the river. It's way over my head and I fuckin' near drowned.”

Squatting down beside him, the “Old Man” lieutenant

handed Mac a lit cigarette.

That puff and first drag tasted so alive, and the cough finished clearing the water out of his lungs.

“Where’s all your shit?” he asked. “What happened to the gun?”

“It’s in the river, Lieutenant. All of it. You’re gonna have to order me all new shit, sir.”

Quickly, the lieutenant stood. “Who’s my best swimmer? Who’s going in the river to find that gun?”

More laughter, hoots, and catcalls.

“Fuck that shit, Loot.”

“It don’t mean nothin’.”

“If we don’t find that gun,” the lieutenant said, “the gooks will, and they’ll use it against us.” Wild-eyed, the lieutenant stared all around.

His young soldiers continued to hoot and holler. “Fuck that, sir,” someone said. “You want the gun, you go get it.”

The lieutenant turned to see which mutinous soldier had said that. Bodies clad in green, at least from the waist up, legs and feet dyed red from the mud, they just stared off into the rain.

Fast Eddy danced back across the bridge, his number twelve boondockers hardly touching the log. Slipping up to the lieutenant he asked, “What the fuck’s going on here, sir?”

Pointing with his chin, the lieutenant said, “Mac fell in the river and lost all his shit. Now we’re short one gun.”

Giving Mac a glance, the platoon sergeant asked, “You all right?”

“Yeah, I just needed a bath, that’s all.”

Fast Eddy turned to the lieutenant. “We need to get these men over the river right now. It’s getting higher as we speak and this fuckin’ rain ain’t helping.”

“Don’t we have a rope or something?” the lieutenant

asked.

“Sir, have the men straddle the log and hump across like that, and that way we’re not going to have anybody fall in. We can’t afford to lose any more shit. Get them across.” With that, Fast Eddy turned and disappeared into the sheets of rain.

“On your feet. Fun’s over.” The lieutenant gestured to the RTO. “You’re next. We can’t lose that radio, so straddle that log and caterpillar your way over. Move out.”

Voices. “Fuck this shit.” Sounds that sighed, or maybe just the rain, giving ammo to the rising river.

“Hey, Lieutenant,” someone said, “there better be some new shit waiting for me on the other side of that river.”

Shaking from shock and the close call of the river, Mac found his feet. The idea that war was fun had gone the way of the dead rat. The close call and the realization that Vietnam had lots of ways to kill you without a shot being fired had the light bulb flashing in his mind.

“Keep your shit in one bag, Mac!” the lieutenant said. “You get your ass over that river and you’ll get new shit sometime when we can get a resupply bird in here. That’ll teach you to throw away your shit.”

The young Pfc, still in shock, couldn’t believe it. Dumbfounded, he looked at the lieutenant. “Fuck you, sir. I ain’t goin’ nowhere without a gun.”

Lt Olson, his mouth open, spraying spit and dragon breath, rabbit-hopped over to the young private, his own frustration coming to a boil as he stared down at the shaking, wet soldier.

Training to play soldier at the ROTC school had in no way prepared him for this Disneyland of a war.

“You little chickenshit coward motherfucker. You threw away your shit on purpose. If you don’t get your butt across that river I’m going to leave your yellow ass out here and

Charles or one of his VC buddies is going to fuck your shit up and Uncle Sam won't even have to bury your sorry ass. Now move!"

Most of the platoon was already on the other side, fanning out to provide cover for the individuals coming off the log bridge.

Finding himself with a set of brass nuts, Mac looked up at the lieutenant. "Fuck it," he said. "I ain't goin'. Uncle Sam has plenty of guns and tools for all the grunts he can get into the field. Fuck you, sir. I don't have to be in war with no weapon."

That did it. The 6-foot-3 Lt Olson grabbed the Pfc by the collar of his jungle shirt, spun him around and kicked him in the ass. "Get the fuck out of here and don't come back, quitter. The rear is back that way." Turning, the lieutenant slid toward the bridge, not looking back, but feeling the soldier looking after him. The lieutenant knew the scared young man was not going to leave and try to make it back on his own.

Straddling the log, feet and legs astride the log, the officer made his way—hump by hump—across the raging torrent. Grinning inside, he was certain that when he got to the other side that scared little shit private would be right behind him.

One of the things they hadn't taught him in officer's school was how to motivate his men, that giving orders was not enough. Especially out here in the bush, these young Americans questioned everything.

Knowing that he'd finished the job of instilling the fear of God in the private, the lieutenant stood up at the end of his ride over the bridge. Expecting to see the man right behind him, he saw nothing but the empty log and the foam of the muddy torrent going by. "Oh, shit."

The soldier couldn't be seen on the other side of the

river either. The wind streamed the rain in blowing sheets, hitting the mud then rising to bounce off the downpour.

The lieutenant turned in a complete circle then faced back over the river. Between wind gusts the image of the forlorn soldier standing there pissed the officer into doing something he hadn't done since high school. He sent his middle finger skyward and flashed the bird at the rain-drenched soldier on the far bank. Giggling and laughing, the lieutenant turned to chase his command, already disappearing into the jungle. *God, that felt good.* The lieutenant was laughing and thinking how good it felt to finally get to use his rank. That Pfc would think twice about fucking with him ever again. *Shoulda shot the sonofabitch. If this was World War II, I would have. Eleven months to go and out of here and back to the world—the USofA—and out of this insanity.*