

## Moral Failure 1

Don Western

Radley was shot in the back. It had taken time to persuade the medivac helicopter and its gunship escort that the ravine we were in was reasonably secure, then maneuver the sling down through the jungle cover while we ducked the debris from the downwash.

We were now headed back to our fire base, had one wounded Vietcong with us. He slowed us down. We decided to kill him.

Earlier that day my platoon with about 18 soldiers began the patrol by following a trail up a mountainside. About three kilometers up Neuman, on point, smelled smoke from the west and then so did the rest of us. With some searching a narrow path was found that led off to the left into the ravine that cut into the mountainside. We had to check it out. It was an area where only Vietcong or NVA were expected to be active. We could not continue the patrol and leave this possible threat behind us.

The path went beneath rather than through the vegetation and we were on our knees as we went down it in single file. Near the bottom of the ravine the vegetation thinned out. We could see what looked like a camp, then forms of movement, and then in no understandable order, we pushed forward toward the partial clearing in the jungle, Vietnamese voices were yelling, Marines shouting, the clack of AK-47s firing, M-16s at burst auto, several grenades exploding, and blooper rounds thumping into the rise of rocks on the other side of the clearing. Then all firing stopped.

We set up a crude perimeter around the camp. It was quiet.

Some of us stood around Radley while Doc dressed his wounds. He couldn't walk, but it did not look like he would die, and a haze of morphine was taking him to a place we could not go. We began calling in the medivac.

I had the fireteam radio but the medivac was being handled by Clabow, the platoon radioman. The radio and its equipment was heavy, and awkward to carry, and I looked for every chance to put it down. I placed the pack with the radio on the crude wood table in the clearing and then

sat on the bench next to it. While sitting I looked around the rough camp. I noticed a ledge under a rock overhang. Then I saw a hand and an arm. For a blink of time I froze, and waited to be shot. Then I stood up and yelled "I got a vc in the rocks to my right." Every grunt reacted: "Where - is he near me?" I aimed my M-16 at the opening as Billings and Parker approached it from either side and dragged out the Vietcong. He was wounded, but could move.

The prisoner was checked by Doc. We tied his arms behind his back at the elbows. Radley was gone, spiraled up through the jungle canopy into the guts of the helicopter. We collected the military gear and left the way we came, up the path, out of the ravine, back to the trail.

The day was late and we had a long way to go. We did not know how many enemy had been in the clearing and expected pursuit and harassment on the way down the mountain. The prisoner was an impediment. The platoon stopped, and after a discussion with the Lieutenant and sergeant we took morphine syrettes from Doc, held the prisoner on the ground and injected three, an amount we thought would be fatal. We left the prisoner tied up on the path.

The platoon saddled up and started down the trail. After about two hundred yards we stopped. Our sergeant was concerned that the amount of morphine would not be fatal. Several of us went back up the trail. A few minutes later we ran back down. The prisoner's body was not where we left it. Through the platoon went a common ripple of fear, that we were being pursued. We pushed down the mountain, across the valley floor, and back into the fire base at hill 52.

We were told Radley lived, but we did not see him again.