

**GRUNTS,
GRAMPS
& TANKS**

A Soldier's Tales

Rick Bogdan

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DEDICATION

To the men who trained me, who led me
and to the Soldiers and Officers I was honored to lead.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For telling me “You outta write a book,” my golfing buddies Dave Bolton and Bruce Wallick got me inspired. Leslie Atkins, an author and writing instructor provided valuable feedback throughout my writing journey. John Knight, an incomparable editor who tightened and strengthened my work considerably. Scott Fuqua, an author and artist, who provided valuable content feedback and inspired the book’s cover art. Finally, my wife Teresa, who provided great encouragement and used a keen editing eye throughout.

CHAPTER 1: EASIER TO ASK FORGIVENESS

July 1975

4th of July. Normally, a time for celebration, but for Tyler Gordon Willett this would be no normal 4th. Today's fireworks would be personal. All day Willett's knotted stomach reminded him of the difficult task ahead, but he knew today had to be the day.

Three days earlier, Willett strode into the U.S. Army recruiting station in downtown Evanston, a Chicago suburb, where he told an astonished recruiting sergeant he wanted to enlist and serve in the infantry. That same morning, Willett submitted his two-week notice to Ms. Dorothy Prince, the Human Resources lady at the Henry C. Lytton and Co. headquarters in downtown Chicago, home to the flagship store on State Street. Willett's excellent performance in the company's executive training program resulted in some swift promotions, and after almost three years he was the men's outerwear buyer. So, it was quite a shock for Dorothy when Willett told her of his Army enlistment, and then said goodbye to the other stunned buyers and salesmen.

There was only one problem. With a reporting date of July 15, Willett hadn't yet told his wife of almost four years, Nancy, of the impending seismic change to their lives and that of their sixteen-month-old son, Sean.

Day turned to early evening at the Willett's two-flat apartment in Evanston, where they occupied the second floor. With Sean already fed and down early, Willett went onto the small wooden porch outside their kitchen door and grilled some bratwurst. With gray peeling paint, the porch nonetheless served them well as a place to relax. Willett and Nancy downed the brats and drank some cheap beer as they sat in lawn chairs overlooking the small backyard and the other apartments across the narrow alley.

"You're not gonna like this, but I quit Lytton's," Willett started, his heart racing.

After a moment of silence, a stunned Nancy exclaimed "WHAT! Why, for God's sake?" A middle school teacher in Evanston where they'd lived for the last two years, Nancy's tanned face grew ashen.

"I knew when the Cole's sold Lytton's to that conglomerate you mentioned changes were unsettling, but Tyler . . . this is crazy! Where are you going to work? When? What about Fields or Carsons . . .?" as her voice trailed off.

"Look, the folks running things now are screwing people left and right. Remember when I told you what they did to Bill Wolney? He was an institution at Lytton's, but they sent him to California for a 'promotion' to merchandise manager, and then less than two months later, they fired his ass."

Nancy sat in stunned silence.

"Other weird shit too," Willett continued. "So I talked to Witner about all the personnel crap going on. I trust him, and he's

been around the block. Know what he told me? You have to jump from firm to firm in retail in order to climb the promotion ladder. I'm just not built that way, Nancy. I want stability."

Nancy's green eyes glared as she leaned forward in her chair. "Are you shittin' me? You call quitting your job of four years, at which you've done well, stability?" the words darting out of her mouth.

"Well, I've already found another position, if you want to call it that. You're not gonna believe this, but I enlisted in the Army," Willett blurted out.

Nancy's face grew slack as she sank back into the lawn chair, the sky darkening over the wooden porch.

"My God, have you completely lost your mind? The Army? Why the fucking Army? What does that do to us . . . have you even thought about that? And you do this without even talking to me. What in God's name possessed you? Tyler, you can't do this. You can't," as her voice slowly sank into a desperate cadence.

Willett had to respond positively, for he knew this could not be undone, and he didn't want it undone. He wanted Nancy to understand and accept.

"Look, you've gotta believe I did this for us. For you, me, and Sean. I know it sounds crazy but listen. In the long run, the Army provides stability. Yeah, there's always the risk of war, but with Vietnam just ending, I don't see any conflict on the horizon. After I complete training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, we'll be stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia. I signed up for that because that's where the officer candidate school is at. I'll be able to apply for that early on, get commissioned, and think about it, after twenty years, I can retire with a great pension. We get free medical care. Oh, and because I enlisted for the

infantry, I'm getting a \$2500 bonus," Willett emphasized, working to put a positive spin on the whole situation.

"And just what in the world do we do?" Nancy retorted. "You're going to be gone for this training how long? Weeks, months? So what, I stay here alone with Sean, while you go off and play soldier boy? I cannot believe what I'm hearing Tyler. Can this shit be undone?"

"Nope. Done deal. Nancy, if I'd come to you and laid this all out, there's no way you'd said, 'Oh sure Tyler, sign right up,' so I decided to do it and let the chips fall where they may. I'm telling you Nancy, in the end this will all work out for the best. You stay here and keep teaching. We already have Dushanka here every day, so no worries about Sean during the week, right? My training is scheduled to be completed by mid-December, so I'll be home for Christmas. Plus, your folks are close and I'm sure if you need help, your Mom will be there for you."

"Again. No way out of this? You've really quit Lytton's? Oh no one, and I mean no one will believe this shit." Nancy wiped the back of her neck with a tired hand. "The Army. How long are you stuck? How many years?"

"It's a three-year enlistment, but again, the recruiter said, based on my education level and experience, I should have no problem getting accepted to the officer school," he offered.

"There was no way you could just go directly to officer school?" Nancy asked, her tone less confrontational.

"No. You have to serve in a unit, and then submit an application from there. One other thing Nancy, the age limit to enlist is less than twenty-eight. If I'd have waited any longer, this wouldn't be an

option, and that's another reason I decided to sign up before it was too late."

"What a nightmare. Unbelievable. When do you leave?" she asked with a sigh.

"I report early morning of the 15th. It's called a delayed entry, so we've got ten more days before I go," Tyler answered just as the sound of a baby's cry made its way out onto the porch.

Nancy got up from the lawn chair, looking down at her husband. "I'll get him. You stay here. Right now, Tyler, I don't really want to see you. I've got to get a handle on this. You've forced your hand, and I suppose I'll deal with it. But tonight, just leave me alone. The couch will do you good," and she swung open the screen door and went into their apartment.

Willett sat in his lawn chair. The sky darkened and the faint reports of fireworks dotted the silence. Seismic change indeed. Ten days to mend the marriage fence and then off to do what he signed up to do.

CHAPTER 2: DICKHEAD

August 1975

Willett adjusted the chinstrap of his camouflage covered helmet. There were two parts—the plastic, webbed helmet liner, over which fit the “steel pot.” Heavy on a newbie’s head. One of the drill sergeants called the contraption a “brain bucket.”

At least the trainee company was now in route step. No need to march to any cadence called out by the drill sergeants. Two columns of trainees moved in field uniform, with a full pack and, of course, their M-16 assault rifles fitted with blank adaptors. Sweat was dripping down Willett’s forehead and his green field uniform’s back and his pits were soaked with sweat. The southern Louisiana summer heat and oppressive humidity were taking their toll on the marching trainees, now only a month into their infantry basic training.

They’d been marching for over two hours and Willett hoped they’d soon be back in garrison. The red clay tank trail they marched on, one column on each side, snaked its way through thick pine trees. Willett swatted at clouds of mosquitos while they tried to feed on his bare arms, his uniform sleeves carefully rolled up.

Willett grabbed his green plastic canteen from the holder on his web belt. He was in about the middle of the column on the left side of the scarred tank trail, and the boots hitting the red clay provided the dominant sound. Only an occasional bird's cawing could be heard. He took a short swig from the canteen, the water now warm and sullied with a faint taste of the canteen's plastic. Willett was twenty-eight and already known as "Gramps" by others in the company, since most of the other trainees were eighteen or nineteen years old. They had been transported to Fort Polk, Louisiana as part of a post-Vietnam war experiment called OSUT, One Station Unit Training. In this case, it meant putting trainees through Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training as one unit. Same drill sergeants and commander throughout.

Willett could care less about this experiment, but he did know that when this march was over, they were supposed to get paid for the first time. Plus, they would finally get released to use a bank of pay phones. Thus far, they'd only been able to make two calls, and Willett badly wanted to talk with Nancy, and hear little Sean's voice. He wanted her to know about the pay, and to check on how things were going, how she was coping.

With four drill sergeants marching along, each man a seasoned combat veteran from the Vietnam War, the company of trainees was forced to maintain a vigorous pace. After all, the object of Basic Combat Training was to turn these men from regular Joes to legitimate Soldiers. Willett glanced across the trail at the column of trainees on the other side. He had already found out that these men had come from all over the United States, but mostly from the south or from big cities in the north. The majority were white, but large numbers of Blacks and Hispanics filled the ranks. Willett was only one of two men who were college educated.

Physically, it was clear that the rigorous training program was a necessity. The drill sergeants were merciless as they chided, goaded, humiliated, exhorted, and rewarded the performance of the trainees in their respective platoons. Willett, 5'9" and 160 pounds, started at a reasonable level of fitness, and in the month since training began, he could already see and feel a difference in his overall strength and stamina. For many others, the journey was proving difficult. Already several men had dropped out or been recycled for injury or illness. However, the majority were beginning to adapt to the environment much harsher and stricter than what they left behind.

Individuality began to disappear when the Army barbers at the Reception Station sheared off the hair of each man. The uniforms replaced the garb that signaled something about each of the individuals who were now about to begin their transformation to green.

"QUICK TIME, MARCH," Drill Sergeant Brannon bellowed. "One-two-three-four, your left, your left, your left, right, left," he sang, as the march cadence began and the company of trainees fell into step. "OH HERE WE GO, WE'RE AT IT AGAIN. WE'RE MOVIN' OUT, WE'RE MOVIN' IN."

And so it continued. Willett guessed, based on the other shorter previous foot marches, that the change to quick time meant the unit was closer to garrison, and thus, closer to the first issuance of pay.

"COMPANY HALT!" Brannon commanded. "LEFT FACE." The trainees did the facing movement and stood at attention. "Platoon sergeants, take charge of your platoons. We'll reform at 1500 hours for the payday formation. Ensure each of your trainees knows exactly how to report for pay prior to the formation. Time now 1405 hours. Carry on."

Drill Sergeant Dyson marched Willett and the rest of the 2d Platoon over to the front of the platoon barracks. Dyson kept the men in formation, but put them at rest, meaning they stayed in their three ranks, but not at attention or parade rest.

“Smoke ‘em if ya’ got ‘em,” Dyson said. A large, thickly muscled black with the rank of Staff Sergeant, Dyson wore a Combat Infantry Badge, as did the other three drill sergeants in Bravo Company. With the sleeves of his combat uniform rolled up, Dyson’s impressive forearms glistened with sweat in the heat of the afternoon. Though Dyson’s skin was deeply black, Willett noticed a pure white circle in the middle of Dyson’s left forearm. Much later Willett found out that during a combat operation in Vietnam, Dyson’s arm was shot clean through by a .50 caliber round.

“All right, you yardbirds are fixin’ to get paid. But you gotta report to the Commander to collect your pay. You’ll be in line in front of the company headquarters, and one-by-one the First Sergeant will call the next man in line to ‘report’. You’ll then smartly move up the steps, through the door, come to attention, render a salute, and loudly state ‘Sir, Private Jones reporting for pay, sir.’ He’ll return your salute and say, ‘Stand at ease.’ Then he’ll hand you your pay in cash. At this point you again salute, drop the salute, do an about face and move out smartly to the side door to exit. Understand?”

“YES DRILL SERGEANT!” the 2d platoon shouted in unison.

“We’ll see,” Dyson said. “Starting with the first rank, I want you one-by-one to report to me just like you’re gonna report to Captain Garza, and don’t fuck it up.”

Each man in the first rank, including Willett, successfully reported to Dyson, and returned to the formation. However, in the middle of the second of three ranks, Private Jenkins failed to

even come close to doing it correctly. Dyson had Jenkins, a small, baby-faced black trainee move to the side of the formation and await instruction. Only one other in the platoon erred in reporting, but quickly recovered and Dyson let him move on. Finally, the platoon had all successfully practiced reporting for pay except Private Jenkins.

Dyson had him try several times, and Jenkins, now clearly more nervous and intimidated, continued to make one or more errors. Either his salute was terrible, or he'd forget how to do an about face, or he'd stumble with his name. Dyson became frustrated and finally exploded.

"Goddammit, you report like this. 'SIR PRIVATE DICKHEAD REPORTING FOR PAY SIR,'" as Dyson came to attention, saluted as if the captain were there, came back to attention, did an about face, and then moved out as if he were leaving. "That's what you gotta do, shithead!"

Jenkins nodded, saluted Dyson and went back to his rank in the formation.

"FALL IN. We gotta move out so we get there by 1500 so you yardbirds actually get paid!" Dyson ordered.

B Company, 1st Training Battalion lined up single file at the stairs leading up to the company headquarters, where Captain Garza and First Sergeant Thompson waited. Garza sat behind a field table with a large, steel cash box directly in front of him. On the right of the cash box was a loaded .45 caliber M-1911 combat pistol. First Sergeant Thompson stood to the left rear of the captain. Thompson had a loaded M-16 rifle at port arms.

1st Platoon made it through getting paid with no incident, and Willett and the rest of 2d platoon took their place at the base of the stairs. The first rank of 2d platoon trainees, including Willett, all

made it through the pay gauntlet. They stood near the headquarters waiting to see if Jenkins could actually make it as well. They watched as he made his way up the five stairs and through the door. He came to attention, and then in a loud, but squeaky voice he shouted “SIR, PRIVATE DICKHEAD REPORTING FOR PAY, SIR.”

Willett and his companions tried to hold their laughter. CPT Garza, with nary a smile, looked down at his list of trainees, then looked up and matter-of-factly stated, “I do not see any dickhead on this roster, trainee. However, I DO see a Jenkins. Might that be you?”

Jenkins nodded, still holding his salute. The captain reached into the pay box, counted out Jenkins’ money, handed it to the private, returned the salute to then watch the forever labeled Private Dickhead exit the headquarters building, money in hand.

CHAPTER 3: SWEATY CAN OF COKE

October 1975

PFC (Private First Class) Willett continued to piece together his field kit for the day's training exercise. The open-bay World War II barracks buzzed with activity as the AIT (Advanced Individual Training) trainees collectively gathered their gear for what they all hoped would be a successful day.

Drill Sergeant Tyree noisily tromped up the wooden stairs into the open-bay to survey progress, since the company formation was only fifteen minutes away.

“Jenkins, what in God's name are you doin' boy? Your gear looks like shit. You continue to be a ragbag. I ain't sure you gonna make it outta here. Not on my watch. Get movin'! The rest of you shitheads better get your ducks in a row. This exercise gonna separate the men from the boys, and too many of you lookin' like boys to me.”

Tyree, like the other drill sergeants, was a decorated veteran, and he looked and acted the part. He was feared by many of the trainees solely because Tyree left no margin for error. Attention to detail was his particular hallmark.

“Alright, get your sorry asses outside and fall in right in front of the company headquarters,” Tyree bellowed. The men of 2d platoon, Bravo Company AIT battalion scrambled with their packs and rumbled down the stairs.

Willett again thought about those stairs, and how many soldiers had trundled down them during training going back to World War II. He had been in training for thirteen weeks, and now was literally a soldier, having completed Basic Training. Willett looked forward to completing AIT in about two more weeks. Then he would finally be an infantryman.

Willett and the rest of Bravo Company waited in formation for the appearance of Captain Garza, the company commander. Since the drill sergeants seemed to run all the training and discipline, Garza and his two lieutenants were rarely seen. So this formation was out of the ordinary.

“Gramps, you gotta tube I can bum?” Private Ortiz asked as he turned to Willett. Ortiz often bummed cigarettes, but Willett didn’t mind since Ortiz was a good Joe and had really excelled in all facets of their training.

“Nah, taco. Not for you compadre. Anyway, not enough time to smoke it,” Willett replied, having routinely traded banter and barbs with the Tex/Mex.

“COMPANY, ATTENTION!” commanded Drill Sergeant Weaver, the senior drill. Bravo Company came to attention and Weaver turned the company over to Captain Garza.

“Men, today you will undergo a field training exercise that will tax you physically and mentally,” Garza began. “You will perform infantry tasks that form the very basis of your combat training. In this exercise you will be transported to Training Area 26. In that

area, each platoon will be assigned a defensive sector. You will be required to dig two-man fighting positions that provide interlocking and overlapping fires. You will conduct recons to determine the best positions and coordinate with elements to your right and to your left. You will also place claymore mines forward of your respective fighting positions, and if time permits, you will also build overhead cover for your fighting positions. You will be transported to TA 26, but following the exercise, you will foot march ten miles to an assembly area for transport back to garrison. Your drill sergeants, my lieutenants, and I will be in the area to evaluate each and every one of you. You will work in two-man teams. These tasks and the strength and endurance to complete them to standard are critical to your successful completion of AIT. I expect the best of you and will accept nothing less.”

For every field exercise that was further than five miles from garrison, B Company trainees mounted up into the silver cattle cars that the men hated, but by this time accepted as the norm. The Louisiana heat and humidity were already building, and the inside of the cattle cars was putrid from actual use by cattle, coupled with sweaty GIs and cigarette smoke. Each man knew who they were paired with, and at this stage of training, the attitude was “cooperate and graduate”, as Drill Sergeant Reynolds had put it one day. Most of them had an M-16 rifle, while several men were issued M-60 7.62 machine guns. Others had been issued a LAW (Light Anti-tank Weapon).

Once they reached Area 26, each platoon drill sergeant gave their platoons grid coordinates to their respective defensive sectors. Part of the training involved the map reading ability to even get to the right location.

Willett was glad he was paired with Ortiz. Drill Sergeant Tyree confirmed they navigated to the correct location. With binoculars, Willett and Ortiz surveyed the ground in front of them. They knew the maximum effective range of their rifles, and they had to ensure clear fields of fire out that far. Each fighting position oriented to the left and the right, not to the direct front. Frontally, soldiers built up a dirt wall for protection. Willett moved out to coordinate with Phillips and Collins to their left, while Ortiz coordinated with Thompson and Sullivan to their right.

Once convinced their positions were correct, Willett and Ortiz broke out their entrenching tools so they could start digging into the clay soil that immediately seemed unwilling to allow any easy digging. These fighting positions required digging to chest height, or as they say in baseball, at the letters. The dirt was used for the parapet in front of the position, designed to protect against direct rifle and machine gun fire.

Both Willett and Ortiz liked the idea that they could be firing from each side while their front was somewhat protected. What they were learning began to make tactical sense. Stripped down to t-shirts now totally soaked with sweat and stained with body salt, both Willett and Ortiz could at least take satisfaction that one of the company lieutenants had inspected their progress and gave them a hearty thumbs up.

“I’m not shitting you man,” Ortiz grumbled, “I can’t imagine doing this too many times. This goddamn dirt is a bitch. I’m in good goddamn shape and after digging this hole, I’m almost too tired to fight,” as he took a swig of warm water from his near empty canteen and lit yet another cigarette bummed from Willett.

“I hear ya man,” Willett answered softly. “I’m totally beat. There’s gotta be an easier way than these shitty little shovels,” cracking a weak smile.

“Don’t feel too bad though. Did’ya see what the lieutenant did to those guys next to us? He made them move their position after they’d been digging for over an hour! I saw that when I went back to take a leak. Geez, they were not happy to say the least.”

Ortiz grinned. “If that motherfucker had done that to us, I think I would have hit him with the shovel and buried him in the hole we already dug!”

Both men laughed in exhaustion, knowing that shortly they’d have to muster the energy to march with a full pack to the assembly area for transport. Right now, even the thought of a ride in the cattle car seemed comforting.

As Willett and Ortiz, and the other men in Bravo Company, finished their fighting positions, they were startled by an unfamiliar rumble in the distance. Willett could see the drill sergeants and the lieutenants looking across the wide expanse of open field at the sparse tree line to their front.

Soon there was dust visible through the stand of thin pine trees, and just like that, first two, then three, a total of five M-60 tanks rolled into the very ground the men of B Company had been defensively preparing.

While the tanks crossed the ground before them, with main guns firing and turret machine guns blazing, Willett and Ortiz froze. Willett looked at his M-16 and even the LAW carried by Ortiz and shuddered at the thought of trying to stop those tanks had they been on the attack, moving with speed greater than any man could run, with guns spewing training lead.

It seemed no one had expected an encounter with a tank platoon, especially from the reaction of the Drill Sergeants or the officers in attendance. However, the experience proved to be memorable, certainly for Willett and Ortiz.

“A ten-mile foot march. Are you shittin’ me? I can hardly move, let alone march,” Willett grumbled to no one in particular as the men of Bravo Company began to fall into march formation.

“Get your funky, sorry, tired asses in gear,” shouted Drill Sergeant Tyree. “We got ten big ones ahead of us, and then you can mount those silver queen cattle cars y’all are so fond of.”

A column formed on each side of the tank trail. There was no cadence, only route step, meaning each man marched but not in step with each other. The pace, however, was not too bad, as it seemed even the drill sergeants were somewhat spent. Willett had managed to fill his canteen from a lister bag, a canvas bag filled with gallons of nasty water. But any water was better than none at the moment.

As the men trudged along the dusty, uneven trail, they again heard the rumble. The ground beneath them began to quake as the five-tank platoon grew closer. At least they weren’t firing thought Willett. Following the lead tank, Willett’s eyes then riveted onto the third tank in the column. In the tank commander cupola, the soldier in an olive drab t-shirt had a cigarette in his mouth and his left hand held a can of Coca-Cola. As the tank moved past, the tank commander looked down and made eye contact with Willett, weighted down with a full pack and an M-16 rifle. The tank commander raised his left arm, his hand holding the sweaty can of coke, in a mock salute and then, after taking the cigarette out of his lips, brought the can of joy to his mouth and took a long swig.

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Two more tanks followed, dust started to thicken the air. That did it. Right then, Willett knew, if ever given the choice, he'd be a tanker.

CHAPTER 4:

CERRIES IN THE SNOW

December 1975

PFC Tyler Willett lay quietly in his bunk. The wooden “temporary” barracks from World War II at Fort Polk had housed Willett and fifty other trainees since mid-July. Now, some five months later, only a couple days remained before completion of infantry One Station Unit Training (OSUT). As Willett would find out later, he and his compatriots were part of an Army initial- entry training experiment, as they moved without interruption through Basic Combat Training into infantry Advanced Individual Training (AIT).

All Willett really cared about was that in two days he’d be done. Tonight, however, his mind raced in several directions. He had a plan with his buddy Jimmy Donavon to sneak out of the barracks, catch a cab, and head to Leesville for a little R&R. Totally unauthorized of course. Alongside thoughts of drinks and naked dancers, Willett’s mind brought up the series of events that led him into the Army and Fort Polk, Louisiana not that long ago, although it seemed like an eternity. The commuter train rides downtown, the three-piece suit and valise, the club car on the way home, dealing with hard to please customers, pressure from merchandise managers—all trappings of

a career now gone. At least Nancy now seemed more resigned to the reality of the situation. The occasional phone call from the long bank of phones provided Willett some hope that his marriage would survive this totally unexpected life change. Willett got a strong sense of Nancy's attitude shifting toward a growing acceptance of their reality. Their calls reflected the need for each other, and the belief that this unexpected change might actually work out for the best. Willett certainly felt on the right path, and he knew the pride he felt in being a soldier, not just a guy working to make a profit for some uncaring corporation.

Willett glanced at his watch. 2215 hours. He and Donavon were gonna bust out at 2300. Both men, in their respective bunks, were under wool blankets dressed in their civvies. Windbreaker, long sleeve shirt, jeans, socks and deck shoes for Willett. They knew sneaking out of the barracks unnoticed would be difficult, and if caught, the price could be steep, but they agreed to give it a shot. With SSG Dyson on duty that night, their chances of success were better than if it were Reynolds or Weaver. They'd heard Dyson snoring from his post more than once.

The minutes slid by. Finally, 2300 hours. He unfurled the olive drab wool blanket, sat up and slid his legs over the edge of the bottom bunk as his deck shoes softly touched the old wooden floor. Willett glanced toward Donavon's bunk. His buddy was moving quietly to the barracks door, the stale air punctuated by several snoring GIs. They slid passed Dyson's small sleeping room. As they got to the barracks east door, Donavon lifted the metal latch and began to push when the metal squeaked. Oh, for some WD40. He moved it open, held it and the two men crept down the four outside wooden steps to the red clay ground. They were out.

They glanced around to ensure no walking guards were in sight, and quickly made their way to the large bank of pay phones about an eighth of a mile from their barracks. Fortunately, there was little moonlight, making spotting them more difficult. At the phones, Donavon called one of the numerous cab companies in Leesville. Taxi service was big business, since none of the trainees had wheels. Soon the cab arrived. Willett and Donavon wanted to go to the Shangri-La-La Lounge.

“Good choice men,” the young black cabbie excitedly relayed. “They gots the best dancers and the cheapest booze. Y’all gonna do good. Want me to wait? Only cost ya’ coupla’ drinks.”

“Sure,” Donavon said. “You hang at the bar. Just don’t go batshit. Then you can bring us back. Okay?”

“Shoow ‘nuf” the cabbie replied. He clearly had executed similar missions before. During the few trips to the PX mini mart they were allowed, Willett and Donavon made sure to get as many dollar bills as they could muster over the past few weeks. Gotta please the dancers. Plus, they needed cash for the cab.

The taxi pulled up to the club’s crowded parking lot at 2335 hours. The night was young here, but Willett and Donavon knew they had an early up. The final foot march of training awaited. Inside, the music blared. Heavy beats of Motown carried the night. Glittering lights, smoke hanging in the booze-sodden air. GIs sat close to the stage, hooting at the various dancers that made their way around the stripper’s pole, then to the edge of the stage, down to pasties and g-strings, where men placed bills anywhere they could.

Willett drank scotch, neat, and Donavon beer. Lots of beer. Both men knocked down drinks, watching the women cavort on stage, and enjoying the pulsating music. A scantily dressed server

returned at frequent intervals, and no one let her down. All the men bought drinks as if there were no tomorrow. Willett occasionally glanced at the bar in the far end of the club to see if their cabbie remained. He did.

Willett shakily made his way to the head. While capable of consuming a great deal of scotch and not getting shit-faced, Willett realized tonight he might have gone overboard. He took a leak in the head that any health inspector would condemn. Carvings in the wooden stalls, writing on the walls—women’s names, phone numbers, obscene sayings, crude drawings. It all made Willett think about the shitters he had to clean as part of their “training” in basic. Had to be pristine. Ha!

He glanced at his watch, 0150 hrs. *Damn*, he thought, *we gotta get back*. 0500 wake-up for a full-pack ten-mile foot march.

Back at the stage, Donavon sat transfixed and clearly drunk.

“Jimmy, we gotta go,” Willett exhorted.

“What time is it?” Donavon slurred.

“02. Come on. I’ll get the cabbie.” Willett got up and gingerly moved toward the bar, feeling very queasy. As Donavon got up, he smiled at one of the dancers whom he had enriched, and she returned a yearning look. After all, Donavon was a handsome dude, but Willett figured the yearning was actually for more money.

Donavon punctuated the short cab ride back twice with requests to stop so he could puke. Willett, though sicker than a dog, held back his desire to yack. Maybe later. After settling with the cabbie, the two men oriented themselves on how to get to their barracks. The buildings were all identical. Despite their complete inebriation, the two men got to the correct building, grabbed the handrail and

slowly moved up the steps. Quietly, or so it seemed, Willett opened the door and grabbed Donavon to get him in without stumbling.

Donavon made it to his bunk where he plopped down, not even getting under the blanket. Willett made his way toward his bunk, when suddenly he knew he had to hit the head. Quick. He made his way there and found the first toilet, where he kneeled and violently prayed to the porcelain god. Finished, he rinsed out his mouth at the sink, and got to his own bunk. Willett pulled back the wool blanket, crawled in, and immediately was out.

“Alright you yard birds, get your sorry asses outta the rack, NOW,” SSG Dyson shouted. 0500 hours. “Shit, shower, shave. Quick chow, and then formation. Ten-mile foot march. Chop, chop, Bali, Bali.” he exhorted. “Get movin’”

“What the fuck happened to you Gramps?” Duncan asked, staring at Willett fully dressed in civvies and looking totally disheveled.

“Got cold, asshole. Thought we were off today . . . fuck off,” Willett snarled as he stripped to skivvies and made his way to the head. Though somewhat better after cleaning up, making his bunk, putting on his uniform, and getting his gear together, Willett still felt like ten pounds of shit in a three-pound bag as he made his way to the chow hall. Even the smell of bacon turned his abused innards.

After the company drew their M16’s and put on their heavy web gear and field packs, they gathered for the formation. SSG Reynolds walked up just as Willett was about to light a cigarette, though his lungs felt coated with tar and his tongue swollen.

“PFC Willett, you look like shit,” the most feared drill sergeant in the company observed. “Your goddamn eyes look like cherries in the snow soldier. What the fuck happened to you?” Reynolds suspiciously asked.

“I’m alright, Drill Sergeant. Allergies, I guess. I dunno. I’m fine,” Willett lied. Falling into his platoon’s position, Willett marched in the humid Louisiana air. Almost oblivious of the initial cadence, and grateful when the company went into route step, Willett appreciated not having to march in unison.

After covering about four miles, Willett’s bowels rumbled. Seriously rumbled. As the company marched along the now familiar red clay tank trail to god knows where, Willett knew he was gonna have to break ranks and shit in the pine woods. He scrambled out of formation into the adjoining wood line and took care of business just in time. *My god, the shit paper in C-rations*, he thought. Then he remembered the drill sergeant’s exhortation in Basic: “the paper’s not to wipe your ass; it’s to clean off your fingers.”

Now Willett had to double-time to catch up to the formation. With his rifle and all that gear, it was a bitch.

“Soldier, GET BACK INTO FORMATION, and do not break ranks again!” Drill Sergeant Weaver shouted.

“YES DRILL SERGEANT. EMERGENCY DRILL SERGEANT,” Willett shouted in reply.

Thankfully, Weaver shortly brought the march back into a cadence as the company approached a field chow area, marked by stand-up-tables that each accommodated four soldiers. Willett and his platoon moved to their designated area. Willett found the same table as Donavon and two others.

“Gramps . . . little Montezuma’s Revenge?” Donavon chided.

“You ain’t lyin,” Willett quietly answered as he found his rations and began opening the scrambled egg can, while ensuring the cigarettes and more shit paper were present. He wished they could be

sitting down, but at least this was a break. The men ate quietly for which Willett was grateful. No small talk today.

Suddenly, Drill Sergeants Reynolds, Dyson and Weaver approached Willett's table. All the men stiffened.

"PFC Willett, you need to leave your chow, grab your weapon and gear, and follow us. The company commander, Captain Garza, needs to see you ASAP," Reynolds commanded in a staccato tone.

"Drill Sergeant, what's going on?" Willett asked, his stomach churning and his mind racing.

"Follow me," Reynold said, as he and the other drill sergeants moved out.

They approached Garza's table. The First Sergeant and the Command Sergeant Major of the battalion were there too.

Oh brother, this is gonna be bad, Willett thought, mentally racing to find an explanation to give his wife about what happened.

SSG Dyson strode alongside Willett. "You report to the captain. Do it right."

As they got to the table, Willett rendered a perfect salute while clearly stating, "PFC Willett reporting as directed, Sir."

Garza returned the salute. "At ease, private. Do you have any idea why you've been summoned?"

"No sir," Willett lied, certain his Army career was about to end before it really began.

"PFC Willett, we are proud to announce that you've been selected as Trainee-of-the Cycle for Bravo Company, 1st Training Brigade. Your outstanding demonstrated duty performance meets the Army's highest standards in this tough training environment,

Rick Bogdan

and you've earned this distinguished honor. Congratulations PFC Willett. Well done."

Willett did not know whether to shit or go blind, but his heart leaped with both pride and relief in an emotional blend never before experienced. "Sir, I truly appreciate the honor and I am humbled," was all Willett could muster.

"Good job, Willett. You can return to your chow and get ready for the return march. Oh, and by the way Private, get that allergy treated at the clinic."

CHAPTER 5: THEY'DA ISSUED YOU ONE

May 1976

Willett's eyes opened to the dark in the bedroom. Alone, his wife and young son were not yet with him. It had been five months since Willett had seen Nancy and Sean. The short Christmas leave following completion of AIT passed too quickly. Nancy agreed to finish out the school year, understanding that Tyler needed to get to his first duty assignment and figure out where they'd live once she and Sean could join him. At least during the leave, he and Nancy reconnected and the marital outlook improved. Even her family, and Tyler's own stepparents seemed accepting of his unexpected career decision.

He glanced over to the small alarm on the nightstand. 0450 hours. Still ten minutes before the alarm goes off. Pulling his arm from under the covers, Willett reached over and tapped the alarm button down.

Physical Training formation was at 0600. Pulling the covers away, Willett swung his legs over the side of the double bed. As his feet hit the area rug, his right hand reached for the Marlboro hard pack and Zippo lighter next to the clock. Flipping the lighter open

and thumbing the wheel, the flame sprung up and Willett brought it to the cigarette. He turned on the nightstand's small lamp and took a deep drag. He stood up and opened the curtains at one of the two bedroom windows. Very beginnings of daylight, or Beginning Morning Nautical Twilight, as the Army would call it. So, today's PT run would be in daylight.

He walked into the small kitchen of the modest ranch house in Columbus, Georgia he rented off-post from Fort Benning. Every day Willett wished Nancy would finally arrive with their young son Sean. He'd been working hard in his minimal off-duty time to get the house in the best shape possible before they came. Nancy was particular, and Willett worked inside and out to get the place up to speed. Still more work to do, but there was another three weeks before Nancy and Sean were scheduled to make the trip down from Evanston. Nancy really did want to continue to teach middle school until the end of the school year. Made sense, and they needed the money anyway.

After putting the coffee pot in motion, Willett went to shit, shower and shave, and put on his PT uniform. He'd need to be out the door no later than 0530 in order to make it to formation on time. He did not ever want to be late. The hardass commanding officer of B, 1-29 Infantry would slap you with an Article 15, and boom, extra-duty plus some sort of monetary fine. No room for that.

With business in the head taken care of, Willett went back into the kitchen and poured the brew into a thermos. No time for any chow. He'd eat in the mess hall with the rest of the Joes after PT.

The morning Georgia air was still crisp this early in May as Willett opened the creaky door to his trusty, hand-painted Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser station wagon with a gazillion miles on

it. Wishing he still had his unreliable Austin-Healy Sprite, Willett knew it was right to sell it before he took off on his enlistment. Nancy wouldn't drive it, and she needed the money anyway. Their FIAT coupe would do fine for her. When he finally got to Columbus and reported in after Christmas of '75, Willett stayed in the company barracks for a month until he could rent a place off-post. Then he bought the station wagon from Buddy's, "The Walk'n Man's Friend" used car lot right off-post.

With light traffic, Willett made it to the parking lot, and walked to the barracks, waiting outside for the call to formation. He left his duty fatigues, boots and Dopp kit in the car. He'd police those up after formation and grab some chow in the mess hall. Willett had grown addicted to SOS, or shit on a shingle, as it was known. Sausage gravy on biscuits, along with some scrambled eggs and black coffee. The mess sergeant's version here was top notch.

With over one hundred GIs assigned to B, 1-29th Infantry, every formation was good size. Of course, not everyone made it to every formation. Some on leave, some on sick call, some AWOL, so the usual gaggle was about eighty to eighty-five. The men gathered in the hallways and front steps, the fresh morning air soon mixed with cigarette smoke, as men bullshit with each other, while the more fitness oriented did some stretching. Willett finished another cigarette but did do some stretching. His work in the yard of the rental house had left his back a little stiff. The usual routine after roll call, would be stretching, calisthenics, and then the run in formation. Usually at least a two-mile run, since two miles was the distance on the PT test taken twice a year. Willett never really ran much before coming into the Army, but now he'd grown to like it, and his PT test times were excellent, along with his scores in the other events. He maxed out his last test, and now he wanted to keep that standard up.

First Sergeant Wilson usually conducted the PT formation. Willett couldn't help but compare the NCOs here to his Drill Sergeants at Fort Polk, and the men here did not hold a candle to his drills. Plus, the pace seemed slow, but Willett understood the objective was to run as a unit, so he didn't mind. He knew, however, that he'd have to do some training on his own in order to still max out on the next test.

But today's run would be different. The company commander, the infamous Captain O'Donnell, was a West Pointer. At least those guys who got sent to his office for counseling or an Article 15 said he was. West Point stuff all around like it was a big deal, which in some respects it was. Free education. Yet, a lot of the men despised him, and most just chose to ignore him. Not today. After the First Sergeant Wilson took roll, he turned the company over to the commander, to start the run and call the first cadences.

O'Donnell set a brisk pace, and he seemed to be in good shape. Willett noticed when he was first assigned that the captain wore both a Ranger patch and Airborne wings, but those were no guarantee that a man couldn't be an asshole.

First Sergeant Wilson took over from the CO, who then moved up and down the formation, either shouting encouragement, or chewing out a soldier starting to suck wind. As usual, an NCO in good shape stayed at the back of the formation to prod any stragglers, and today there were only a couple of the usual suspects.

The run ended with no incidents, and the first sergeant released the company for chow while announcing the usual 0800 formation time. Quickly the men made it into the barracks, while Willett went to his car so he could get cleaned up and into the mess hall. Today he was particularly hungry, and as always, there'd be a line.

After hustling into the mess hall, Willett grabbed a tray and joined a line thankfully not too long. As he made his way to the folks dishing out the goods, Willett got his beloved SOS, plus some scrambled eggs, and took his tray over to a long table with several spots open. Since he'd spent less than three weeks in the barracks before moving out, Willett hadn't gotten really close to anyone yet. At least here, he wasn't Gramps. The enlisted soldiers included men as old as him, or older. Several men had served in Vietnam, gotten out and found life on the outside not to their liking, so they re-enlisted.

In this infantry unit, which supported the training for the Ranger School, the Infantry Basic and Advanced Courses, the men of the 1-29th really were living training aids. When the school needed an opposing force for an exercise, men from the 29th were it. Additionally, the unit had to meet regular training standards for all the different ranks in the unit so men could remain competitive for promotion and schooling. Willett found in the few exercises he'd been a part of, that it was good training. There was some real satisfaction if, in a mock battle, you kicked the ass out of a bunch of lieutenants or captains. However, Willett already experienced an evaluator telling the NCOs to back off, or take it easy, and that didn't sit well.

The mess table started to fill up. Enlisted sat with enlisted, NCOs with NCOs. And it always broke down racially. Not directed, just happened. Yet during missions, all that mattered was whether you could do your job and be counted on. Everyone mixed.

At 0800 Willett stood in formation as part of 1st Platoon, B Company, 1-29 Infantry. Captain O'Donnell stepped up. "At ease," he ordered. "Smoke 'em if you got 'em." With that the eighty plus men in formation relaxed, and most lit smokes.

“I’ve an important announcement to make. I’m proud to say that B, 1-29 is missioned to deploy to Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, where we will provide support to the third and final phase of Army Ranger training. This represents a unique opportunity for B Company, since we usually remain here, in support of the school. Now we get a chance to support the cream of the crop, Army Rangers, and the men who are striving to become Rangers. We will become part of their training that will test their skills and abilities to meet the extremely high standards necessary to earn the coveted Ranger tab. First Sergeant Wilson will provide specifics, but we will deploy in three days, so pay strict attention to the deployment instructions. Are there any questions?”

Momentary silence, but then a hand raised from the back and a voice called out, “Sir, Sir . . . Captain, Captain . . . I have a question.” Eyes turned toward the voice. It was Lincoln, a man almost as new to the company as Willett.

Captain O’Donnell seemed surprised by a question. He ordered “At ease, bring it on in,” in an attempt to lessen formality, but in all likelihood it was so he could hear the man speak and look at him. “Yes private, what is your question?”

Lincoln, a young black soldier, now clearly nervous, said, “Sir, it’s my wife. She’s fix’n to have our first baby in about two weeks. Sir, I gotta be there for her. I gotta. I can’t be gone with the baby comin’. I need to be on leave sir, I really do.”

O’Donnell’s face grew stern. Willett couldn’t wait to hear the answer since his own wife and son were due to arrive in three weeks. Already Willett’s mind raced. *How long would they be deployed? Would he have to delay their arrival? Would she still be able to stay in the apartment?*

“Lincoln, if the United States Army wanted you to have a wife, they'da issued you one! Understand. All of you. No leave. No passes. No excuses. Your mission, all of our mission, every swing'n richard, is to execute this deployment, and yes, it's certainly going to be longer than two weeks. So deploy we will, including you Private Lincoln, and don't even think about going AWOL, because that will not end well for you or for your wife and new baby.”

Willett's head was spinning. He knew Nancy was not going to be pleased. He also knew he'd never quote this commander.

CHAPTER 6: FIRST SOME SUGAR, THEN NOT SO NICE

July 1976

The Willetts were happy. Finally. Nancy and Sean's move from Evanston to Columbus proved uneventful, and the household goods made it intact. Tyler rented the house in a quiet, modest neighborhood once he realized he was not eligible for post housing for his family. He had seen an ad in the Columbus newspaper for the listing, and immediately he knew this place would be fine. The red brick ranch's exterior and minimal landscaping amidst the numerous pine trees exuded a quiet warmth, and the separation between homes was nice.

Unoccupied for some time, the large back yard, dotted with numerous mature pine trees, was strewn with an incredible amount of pine needles. For days, Willett raked and bagged the needles, revealing mostly dirt and red clay beneath, but he hoped that in time he might be able to coax a lawn to grow. The home's interior combined wood paneled walls, some wallpaper, a basic kitchen with original cabinets from the '50s when the house was built, a small dining room, and an adjoining living room graced with a nice picture window overlooking the backyard. The worn carpeting at least wasn't threadbare throughout the house, and it seemed clean.

There were two bedrooms. The master could hold a queen-sized bed, two nightstands and a dresser. The closets were small but would do. The second bedroom was small, but since Sean was only two, it didn't really matter. The single bathroom's yellow and brown tile and pale patterned linoleum floor could only be topped by the faded green tub and shower. The matching sink showed wear and lack of routine scrubbing as well. It had taken Willett hours of intense labor to bring the tub and sink back to a reasonable shine.

On this Saturday morning, Willett decided to wash their green FIAT 128 coupe, while Sean ran through the sprinkler, whose four arms sprayed water as they continuously circled, watering the grass and weeds in the front yard. Sean clearly enjoyed the cooling water in Georgia's summer air.

"Tyler, I hope y'all don't mind, but I baked y'all some cookies," called out Cassie, a lovely young woman who lived next door with her husband and their young daughter Christie, same age as Sean. "Just a welcome of sorts. Terry and I are so glad some nice folks finally moved into the Franklin's old house."

Christie walked cautiously behind her mama as Cassie carried the wrapped plate of chocolate chip cookies onto the Willett's black-top driveway. Tyler turned the hose nozzle off and threw it down, turning toward Cassie.

"How very sweet. Thanks much. I'm sure we'll enjoy them, and we're glad to finally be mostly settled. It's been a couple of weeks, but we've both been pretty busy, so sorry we've not been able to socialize much," Willett said as she handed him the plate. "Nancy's inside or maybe in the back, but I'm sure she'll appreciate your neighborly gesture." Willett noticed Sean looking shyly at Christie. He had really not been around too many other kids his own size and age.

While Willett went inside to drop off the cookies, Cassie and Christie approached Sean. The two towhead kids glanced at each other, and then Cassie said, “Sean, Christie wants to give you some sugar,” and the little girl moved to Sean and pecked his cheek and smiled. With that, they turned and walked back onto their lawn and went into their house.

Willett came back out and Sean looked puzzled.

“What’s up little buddy?” Willett asked.

“The lady said they wanted to give me some sugar. I don’t want any sugar,” Sean’s voice was puzzled.

Willett laughed. Only recently had he realized that in Georgia, giving some sugar meant giving a kiss.

“What are you two up to now?” Nancy asked as she made her way out of the kitchen.

“Where’d the cookies come from?”

“Cassie baked ‘em and said just a welcome for us. She seems very nice. Told her I’d want to meet Terry and share a brew.”

“Yeah, that sounds fine. You done washing the car? I think we should move the hose or shut it off before the yard turns into a mud pit.”

“Just gotta dry it off and finish the wheels. Oh yeah, our little guy got his first kiss, or better said, got some sugar from little Christie. She’s a cutie. I think he was dumbstruck,” Willett laughingly said.

The day wore on as the Willetts continued mundane chores around the house. Sean took a nap in the afternoon, and by dinner time Willett decided to grill some burgers on the little patio. In the two weeks since Nancy and Sean arrived, life in the Willett house

had taken on a rhythm. Nancy got acclimated to the house, the climate, the neighborhood, the stores, and even the Army post itself. She admitted liking the commissary and the post-exchange, but just could not understand why they couldn't live on post. For that, Willett had no good answer, except that once he got a promotion or two, they'd be eligible. At least they got a housing allowance.

That evening, they turned in rather late. Nancy had been reading, and Willett looking over some field manuals. His unit would be deploying on a field exercise soon, and Willett wanted to ensure he'd keep making good impressions. He knew he'd need recommendations for Officer Candidate School from his commander and his First Sergeant.

"Ahhhhhhhh!" the piercing scream startled Willett awake.

"OH GOD . . . THERE'S A FUCKING RAT IN THE GODDAMN TOILET," Nancy screamed.

Sean woke and the screams caused him to burst into tears as he came out of his bedroom. Willett ran into the hallway. "What?!"

"You heard me. There's a rat in the toilet! I swear it was about to bite me in the ass . . . oh God this place sucks. Why in God's name are we here in this dump? Do SOMETHING about that rat!" Nancy's voice faded as she headed toward the kitchen to sit.

Willett went into the bathroom. The toilet seat cover was down, but he could clearly hear splashing in the water. Gingerly, Willett lifted the lid a couple of inches.

"Jesus! That's a big goddam rat," he exclaimed as he slammed the lid down. With Nancy sobbing in the kitchen, and Sean wailing in the hallway, Willett had to figure something out quick. He knew he couldn't just flush it away, so he'd have to kill it in the toilet without letting it get out.

He went into the kitchen and grabbed a box of saran wrap. Then he went out back for the charcoal lighter fluid. Back in the bathroom, the rat was still splashing around in the toilet, trying to escape. Willett uncapped the lighter fluid, opened the lid and squeezed the can mightily. A line of fluid shot into the toilet, directly hitting the rat, who dodged, but Willett kept squirting, motioning back and forth.

He slammed the lid shut, and immediately began sealing the lid with the saran wrap. He hoped the fumes and the toxicity of the lighter fluid would soon kill the rat, and then Willett could pull it out and dispose of the horrible creature. Thus, the wait began. He went into the kitchen where Nancy was now with Sean, trying to comfort him and calm herself down.

“I’ve got that sucker trapped in there breathing lighter fluid. Hell, I squirted it all over him too. I think he’ll be dead real soon, and then I’ll get ‘em outta there,” Willett explained. “Why don’t you guys go back to bed, and I’ll stay up and take care of this business. Hopefully, you won’t have to pee for a little while,” said Willett, trying to lighten the moment.

“Fine,” Nancy said, more calmly now. “You do whatever it is you need to do, but there better never, EVER, be another rat come up that toilet, or we’re gonna be gone,” Nancy spitting out the words. Sean remained quiet, not entirely understanding what was happening, but knowing that whatever it was, could not be good.

It took hours before Willett no longer heard any noise in the toilet bowl. But, was the rat playing possum? Better safe than sorry, Willett waited longer. Hell, it was almost daylight anyway.

Finally, Willett lifted the lid. Dead rat. He’d brought a small trash bag with him, and he grabbed the rat by the tail, instantly

reassured it was, in fact, dead, and dropped the carcass into the trash bag. Willett brought the bag out to the metal trash can, opened the lid and dropped the bag into the half-full can.

What a night!

He crawled back into bed, thankful that it was now Sunday, so no early up. He was careful not to awaken Nancy. No point in that. Not now.

CHAPTER 7: NOW WHAT?

October 1976

Last formation. Weapons maintenance plus barracks clean up don't make for special days. When a PT run is the best part of the day, you know it's time to go home.

"At ease, smoke 'em if ya' got 'em," First Sergeant Warren called out. "Mail call."

This did not interest Willett since he and his family lived off-post, but he'd have to wait until the company got dismissed before he could leave. He lit a Marlboro, and patiently waited as the First Sergeant called out names, and GIs hustled up to grab their mail.

"Specialist Willett," came the shout. A surprised Willett moved toward the First Sergeant and grabbed the envelope. Moving back to the formation as names continued to be called, Willett's heart leaped as he looked at the official Department of the Army envelope, Office of Personnel Management. Momentarily Willett feared opening the envelope. Months ago, he had submitted his application to Officer Candidate School. Now, in his hands was an envelope containing his future.

Willett decided to wait until the First Sergeant dismissed the company. He wanted the moment he opened the envelope to be private. If he got selected, he could hoot and holler tomorrow. If he got rejected, he could just keep it to himself and tell the select few men he actually could call friends.

“Fall out,” the First Sergeant ordered.

As the company dispersed, Willett quickly walked to the parking area, got to his ancient Oldsmobile station wagon, fumbled for his keys, unlocked the door and sank into the driver’s seat. Lighting another Marlboro, he slowly opened the envelope, and pulled out the folded paper.

Hands shaky, Willett’s eyes quickly scanned. “Non-select” jumped out and the rest of the words became meaningless. His heart sank, his head slumped, resting on his left arm across the steering wheel. He moved to crush the cigarette into the ashtray and sat upright.

For several minutes, Willett could not move. His whole career plan was crushed, and possibly his marriage. Non-select. Nancy seemed to have overcome the shock from Willett’s unexpected enlistment in the Army, and life for her and young Sean certainly appeared tolerable and often enjoyable. However, underneath was the premise that life as the wife of an enlisted man would be changed to life as the wife of an officer. Tears welled in Willett’s eyes. He rubbed them, took a deep breath, and turned the ignition key.

Twenty minutes later, Willett pulled into their driveway. Nancy’s car was parked, and Willett could see the lights through the kitchen window. It was 1805 hours, and likely she’d have dinner almost ready. Willett didn’t think he could stomach any food, but as

he slowly walked toward the front door, he decided not to say anything until after dinner and Sean had gone to bed.

It was an agonizing dinner. Sean picked this night to decide the meal wasn't to his liking, so Willett and Nancy tag-teamed feeding him and threatening bed on an empty stomach. The parental disciplinary action momentarily took Willett's mind off the task in front of him. Following the usual nightly routine of a little TV time and a story, Sean went off to sleep.

"What's on your mind, Tyler?" Nancy asked. "You've been really odd since you got home. What, you didn't like dinner either?" she continued teasingly.

Willett reached into his fatigue uniform pocket and pulled out the folded paper from DA. He thought about just handing it to Nancy, but then stopped.

"I got rejected for OCS. I got this letter today at mail call. Nancy, I can't believe this shit."

Silence. Just silence as the words hung in the air. Then finally, "Now what?" Nancy spit out. "Now what are we going to do? My god, Tyler . . . all this time, and now you're rejected. I thought this was going to be a done deal. You sure as hell made it sound that way. Oh honey, we'll go to Fort Benning, that's right where OCS is, and then I'll get a commission. Blah, blah, blah. Now what?"

"Nancy, I don't know. I do know I'm stuck for another year and change, since it's a three-year enlistment. Shit, I don't know. I can't believe I wasn't selected. I mean I was trainee of the cycle in Basic and AIT, and I know I've done a good job in the 29th. I mean, I got an endorsement from Captain O'Donnell and First Sergeant Warren. I know the paperwork was in order. I just don't know what happened."

“Well, buddy boy, you’d better figure something out, and do it quick. Tyler, I feel bad for you, but really, you gambled on this, and you’ve lost, and now we’re all here, stuck.”

“Yeah, I know. Look, all we can do now is ride this out. As I get closer to my discharge, I’ll contact folks at Lytton’s or Fields or Carson’s to get back into retail, but it’s too soon to do any of that,” Willett paused. “Fuck it. I’m just gonna stick it out best I can. Nancy, I’ll work like hell to try and make this something we can live with until it’s time to go back home.”

“Yeah, we’ll do just fine on specialist pay, and the little they pay me to teach down here. I’m just glad Sean’s too little to realize how screwed up this is. Tyler, I’m counting the days until this nightmare ends. I’m disappointed for you, but I’m also disappointed in you because this hurts us all, not just you. I’m going to bed. Why don’t you just stay up longer, and think about what’s next,” her words bit as she stood up from the couch and moved toward their bedroom.

Willett lit a cigarette and opened a bottle of beer as he sat alone in a chair by the front window of their small ranch house now enveloped in darkness. Yeah, now what?

CHAPTER 8: LEGAL BEAGLE

March 1977

Specialist 4 Willett dialed the phone, ready to take care of some official business for his First Sergeant.

After several rings. . . “Staff Sergeant Cooper, Weapons Committee, Training Brigade.”

“Cooper, this here’s First Sergeant Matteson, Staff & Faculty. You’re the Personnel Specialist, ain’t ya?” The Tennessee drawl pulled out the words.

“I’m callin’ ‘cause y’all are settin’ on your asses with Article 15 and Courts-Martial paperwork that shoulda been here with me days ago.”

“First Sergeant I know we’re behind on some of these, but I’m trying...”

Matteson cut Cooper off.

“Tryin’ my ass. Look, you’d better get your shit together, and get that paperwork up here to me ASAP ‘cause I guarantee you sergeant, you do not want me a comin’ up your way to make this happen. Do you roger that?”

“Yes First Sergeant. Roger that. I’ll get on them, and get it all to your headquarters soonest,” Cooper promised.

“You best do that. Out here,” Matteson concluded, and hung up the phone.

“Specialist Willett—or should I say First Sergeant Matteson—what the fuck? Every time I hear you make one of these crazy calls, I just bust a gut,” Staff Sergeant Lewis, the company supply sergeant said. “How’d you ever manage to get him to let you do this, presuming you even have his permission?”

“One day when Top and I were playing racquetball, I made a joke using a dialect. I mean I can do most any dialect, but this one was southern, and he laughed his ass off. Not so much at the joke, as the fact that I could sound just like him. He said, ‘Son, you’re gonna be makin’ some calls for me,’ and that was the beginning,” Willett relayed.

Lewis smiled. He liked Willett, who eventually revealed the disappointment he carried about not getting picked up for Officer Candidate School. In the Army Reserve, Lewis was actually a captain, an oddity from his service during the Vietnam War. Lewis told Willett that maybe Matteson and their commander, Captain Thompson, could help out with another application, but they hadn’t discussed it any further.

“Sarge, you gonna be here for a while?” Willett asked. “I’ve gotta go, and I know Top will be back soon, so if you could hold the fort until then, I’d appreciate it.”

“Sure, go ahead. I’ll stay,” Lewis replied.

At 1615 hours, Willett headed out from the post to his part-time job at Johnny Shelton’s Texaco, where he pumped gas, cleaned windshields, swept up, and when not busy, smoked cigarettes with

his buddy PFC Turner who usually worked the same schedule. Willett was grateful for the job. He'd promised Nancy he'd try to earn more money so they wouldn't be living paycheck to paycheck. It was one way to ease the tension following the disappointment of not getting into OCS.

Willett parked in the back of the station and went into the shabby restroom to change into jeans and his Texaco shirt. He saw Turner pumping gas for a young lady and laughed at how his friend would try to flirt with most any female who stopped at the station.

"How you doin' Mister Tyler?" came the slow greeting from one of the two bays. Ol' Toothache, an elderly black man smiled as he pushed a broom aimlessly in the bay. Toothache had worked for Shelton for years, but he wasn't a mechanic, just someone to clean up. Shelton not only owned the Texaco station, but also two catfish houses, one in Columbus, and the other across the river in Alabama. Willett had only met him once. That was when he heard Shelton chew out Toothache about something, and all Willett could remember was the old man pleading, "Yes sir Mr. Shelton, whatever you say, Mr. Shelton . . . whatever you say sir . . . I'll do better next time Mr. Shelton."

"Hey, Tyler, . . . Did'ya see that ol' T-Bird back there, the one covered in red clay?" Turner asked excitedly. "Mr. Shelton wants us to GI that baby inside and out, and he's gonna sell it, so we gotta get crackin."

Turner drove the T-Bird around to the side of the station, and for several hours, he and Willett hosed and scrubbed the old car, uncovering what turned out to be a pretty nice T-Bird, especially since it had the 428 cubic inch V-8 with triple Holley carbs. Entranced by the engine, Turner and Willett took turns driving the

car as fast as they could, and literally watching the gas gauge move lower, but the sound, the power, and the excitement made that particular night memorable.

A week later, Matteson called Willett over to his desk late in the morning. His dentures were in a glass next to his grimy coffee cup, and Willett wasn't sure what was coming. Matteson's service in Vietnam got him a Silver Star and a Purple Heart. The limp in his right leg from shrapnel wounds and his dentures were the result of what Matteson called some sort of jungle rot that caused his teeth to fall out.

"Willett, you gonna reapply to OCS?" the First Sergeant asked.

"Not sure First Sergeant. I know Staff Sergeant Lewis asked me about it, and he did say you and Captain Thompson might be of some help, but I thought I had a good packet the first time. Why would this be different?" Willett asked.

"Sit down. You've done a great job for us here. You're smart, resourceful, dedicated, in good shape . . . all the stuff the Army wants out of an officer. But you gotta understand your packet's gotta have some serious endorsements. Captain Thompson did some checkin' an' those folks in the 29th did you no favors. So look here, me and the post Sergeant Major are close; we served together in 'Nam. I talked to him about you, so you're gonna go see him. An interview. He's best buds with the Sergeant Major of the goddam army for chrissakes, and push come to shove, he can get ya' an endorsement from him. Plus, Captain Thompson's gettin' you an interview with the brigade commander, and if you don't fuck that up, he'll endorse your butt. Are ya' hear'n me Willett?"

Willett did not know how to react. Momentarily he sat there, looking at Matteson's round face, his mouth without teeth, and a

combat infantryman's badge sewn onto his fatigues. The man had entrusted Willett with so much and named him Legal Beagle for all the work Willett had done cleaning up administrative snafus. And his friendship with Johnny Shelton got him the part-time work at the gas station to help make ends meet. Willett knew he would always owe this man.

"First Sergeant, you caught me by surprise," Willett answered. "I'll reapply, and Top, I promise you, I won't fuck up the interviews. Wow. When do I do these?"

"Gonna be next week. So get your Class A uniform up to snuff and bring it in here so you can jump through your ass when the calls come down. Alright Legal Beagle, back to work," Matteson said with a gummed smile.

Two months later, as Willett hung up the phone, Matteson hollered, "Willett, get your goat smell'n ass over here ASAP?"

Willett quickly got up from his desk and walked over to the clearly agitated First Sergeant.

"Top, what'ya need?" Willett asked.

"Here...this come for you," and Matteson reached out with an envelope and handed it to Willett. "Well, open it goddammit!"

Willett's hands were shaking, his heart racing. Department of the Army, Office of Personnel Management. Willett wanted to take the envelope and escape to the latrine and open it privately, but clearly, he had to open it now, with Matteson's eyes piercing him. Slowly, Willett tore open the envelope, and unfolded the paper. This time the words he saw were "Officer Candidate School, Class 4-77."

Willett smiled, and Matteson hollered out, "I knew you wouldn't fuck up those interviews . . . goddamn. The Sergeant Major told me about a week ago you got selected and said the paperwork

would follow. I had to hold this in for all that time. Willett, you almost gave me a heart attack,” as the First Sergeant smiled, got up from his chair, extended his hand, and the two men shook.

“Well, I see you finally got the news,” said CPT Samuel G. Thompson as he strode across the floor and extended his hand to Willett. “Congratulations there Specialist, you earned it, and we’re truly glad we could help make it happen.”

“Sir, Top, I don’t know what to say. I can’t thank you both enough. It’s a dream come true. Boy is my wife gonna be surprised—she needs a smile on her face, and this oughta do it!”

“Well then Legal Beagle, get your ass outta here, and go home and celebrate with Mama,” Matteson ordered.

With a big smile and a salute, Willett exited the headquarters and began the happy trip home.

CHAPTER 9: PULL YOUR RESERVE

November 1977

“Stand up. Hook up. Shuffle to the door,” the commands given to the “stick” of jumpers, the day’s first out the door. Willett, the newly minted armor officer from Officer Candidate School, was the stick leader.

The Black Hat, a non-commissioned officer, airborne instructor, motioned Willett forward. “Stand in the door,” he commanded.

Lieutenant Willett took his position in the aircraft’s open door, arms outstretched holding onto the metal door frame. This, his third day jump, still brought the lieutenant’s heart racing in anticipation of the intoxicating combination of thrill and fear. By this time, however, confidence in the equipment and training were paying off.

“GO!” the Black Hat screamed, overcoming the noise of the rushing air and the four propellers of the storied C-130 Hercules aircraft.

Out the door he went, counting silently. One thousand, two thousand, three thousand. Ooommpphhh! Willett’s chute opened and jerked his body, dutifully slowing his descent. It made a beautiful sound, drifting downward, body swaying. Willett tugged on the

chute's risers looking down, preparing to do a parachute landing fall, while Black Hats in the landing zone watched his every move.

Willett's technique felt good as he landed, and he looked skyward to see the air filling with parachutes, as one by one, jumpers exited the plane.

"JUMPER WITH THE MALFUNCTION . . . PULL YOUR RESERVE!" the Black Hat's bullhorn bellowed ominously.

Suddenly, with jumpers cascading downward there was a BOOF, BOOF, BOOF, the sound of reserve parachutes being deployed filled the air. The opening of numerous reserve chutes, when the regular chutes were actually okay, caused several main chutes to collapse, or cigarette roll. Other jumpers fell into the deployed chutes, collapsing them, since they'd picked up speed and lost some control, so airborne chaos ensued for a few desperate moments.

Clearly, when jumpers heard the malfunction command, many thought *Who? Me? Shit, I'm pullin' the reserve!* And, so they did. The sight of all those reserve chutes pulled at once seemed very funny that moment. Fortunately, whomever actually had a malfunction did resolve it by pulling their reserve, since there were no injuries from the jump other than aches and pains from jumpers who failed to execute a proper PLF.

As Willett gathered up his chute, and dozens of jumpers slowly drifting safely to the turf, the lieutenant couldn't help but reflect on the school's introduction only a short time ago.

"Airborne trainees, you are about to witness a HALO jump, that's high altitude, low opening, executed by two distinguished airborne officers," the Black Hat non-commissioned officer blared out through his hand-held bullhorn.

Almost two hundred wannabe jump qualified students looked to the sky, where momentarily they'd witness a parachute jump used by special operations soldiers. Designed to impress the incoming class, the dozen or so instructors stood by, eyeing these "legs", as non-airborne soldiers are known. Their Black Hats, ball caps adorned with silver jump wings, distinguished this group of master parachutists as the best of the best.

The Black Hats already established their proficiency in ass-chewing, in-your-face intimidation, with pride in the Silver Wings associated with being "Airborne" evident in all actions. These men, most all combat veterans during the Vietnam War, knew that of the two hundred-plus newbies now under their control, many would not even make it through the first week of training.

With the C-130 in sight, two tiny figures became visible, hurtling downward. Jumping from approximately twenty thousand feet, the jumpers would free-fall until about three thousand feet when they'd deploy their chutes. At least that was the plan.

"CLASS 1-78, ABOUT FACE . . . NOW," the command booming from the bullhorn of the senior Black Hat. However, with the trainees not in any given formation, total compliance to the order proved elusive. One of the two jumpers chutes opened, but for those trainees who did not turn away, the other jumper simply smashed into the turf of the landing zone some two hundred meters away. As an ambulance raced out to the fallen jumper, Willett knew no one could survive that fall.

This was not the planned introduction, but it immediately became clear that training would begin and continue. However, within hours, at least fifty or more students dropped out. Willett presumed the death of a skilled, experienced jumper proved too much to consider, and becoming "Airborne" not worth the risk.

That afternoon, the school released the name of the deceased jumper. It was Willett's old platoon leader splattered on the ground—a man Willett admired and respected.

With jumpers all on the ground, Lieutenant Willett collected the other eleven members of his stick and they got into formation for the return trip to post. Only one more day jump and then the only night jump. The Black Hats would joke that, for the newbies, every jump was a night jump since all the cherry boys jumped with their eyes closed anyway. Didn't seem to matter. You get this far, eyes closed or not, those wings were gonna be worth it.

CHAPTER 10: BOLO WAGON

March 1978

Second Lieutenant Tyler Willett's nerves were on edge. He was about to report to his first commissioned officer duty assignment. He'd been on leave following graduation from the Armor Officer Basic Course at Fort Knox, and he and Nancy managed to buy a house in Copperas Cove, Texas, a town bordering massive Fort Hood.

He parked his creaky '69 Chevy station wagon in the parking lot designated for his new tank company. Willett walked up the stained concrete stairs to the entrance of the three story, blond brick headquarters building, noticing the entrance sided by a weapons clearing barrel and a large butt can for smokes. He understood the weapons clearance barrel, but the one for smokes seemed strange, since most everyone smoked in the buildings anyway.

Attired in his Class A uniform (dress uniform, green jacket, shirt, tie, trousers, and black, spit shined dress shoes, or low quarters), Willett felt overdressed. But, since no one was in sight, he surmised it didn't really matter as he made his way up to the third floor, where the company commander's office was listed. The barracks

seemed empty as he made his way up the stairs. Nary a GI in sight, which seemed quite unusual for this time of day. Maybe they were all in the motor pool, Willett mused. He opened the double doors to the third floor and saw the commander's office. Grey steel door, a rectangular window with triangular wire mesh within the glass. As he knocked, he could see his new company commander seated at his desk, dressed in a field uniform and looking worn out.

Captain Schaefer looked up, nodded and waved Lieutenant Willett to enter. Willett strode to the front of the captain's desk, came to attention and saluted.

"Sir, Lieutenant Tyler Willett reporting for duty, sir," stated in his distinctive command voice. Willett knew from his experience as an enlisted soldier, and his time in Officer Candidate School, his voice served him well, for it resonated and carried the "I mean business" tone needed to generate respect and compliance.

Schaefer returned the salute. "Be seated lieutenant. Welcome aboard. Glad you made it in. Your timing is likely to be a blessing. The unit is at the tank gunnery range, and we've already completed Tables I-III. But, since you've just come out of Basic, you won't be too far behind the power curve. Plus, your platoon has excellent NCOs, who should be a real asset for you."

Though seated at his desk and looking somewhat weary, Schaefer's aura was matter of fact. He struck Willett as a man who read the book and then lived by it, which as Willett later discovered, tracked with the man being a West Point graduate.

"You have family?" Schaefer flatly queried.

"Yes, sir. I'm married and we have a four-year-old son. While on leave, we bought a house in Copperas Cove since I found out that, as a new lieutenant, we weren't eligible for post housing. But,

we're more or less settled in," Willett relayed, still wondering about the housing policy but not wanting to initiate any discussion about it, at least for now.

"Good. Well, when you get home tonight, advise your wife that you'll be gone for at least the next ten to twelve days during tank gunnery. It varies based upon the weather. This is the big one lieutenant, the annual crew and company qualification, which I presume you know means we'll be not only going through Table VIII, but also through Table X. You're gonna get your feet wet in a real hurry. I certainly hope you're prepared and can do well. How each platoon does reflects strongly upon the company, and thus upon me, so it behooves you to do well. Does that make sense?"

Schaefer's words spilled out in a staccato pace with little inflection, before ending with his purely rhetorical question.

"Yes sir, I understand," Willett answered quickly.

"Report here tomorrow at 0500 hours. You'll link up with First Sergeant King, and he will transport you and your gear out to the range. I presume you picked up your TA-50 when you checked into post?" the captain asked.

"Yes sir, I did. Complete," Willett replied.

"Good. You'll need it all, as well as field uniforms to last the ten to twelve days. We won't be coming back here to garrison, so ensure you pack smartly." Schaefer already seemed tired of this session. "Any questions lieutenant?"

"No sir. That seems to cover it. Thanks for your time sir." Willett rose, came to attention, and saluted the company commander.

Schaefer cast an inquisitive look at Willett, as if trying to see what sort of man had been thrust upon his unit and returned the salute. "That is all. Dismissed," then immediately looked down at

some papers on his desk as Willett did an about face, strode back to the door and exited the commander's office.

Are you shit'n me! Willett thought to himself as he made his way back to his vehicle. Annual tank gunnery can make or break any tanker, officer or non-commissioned officer. The first set of tables are all preparatory for Table VIII, individual crew qualification. Professional reputations, as Willett would find out more definitively, could be made or shattered based upon this arduous test of skill. Willett thought about the Basic Course training. He'd passed all of it, and did quite well, but his experience told him that school prep and the real deal are two very different animals. So yes, Lieutenant Willett drove home with a pucker factor.

The next morning Lieutenant Willett parked his vehicle in the B Company parking area, opened the wagon's tailgate and pulled out his A Bag, B Bag and ALICE pack. He figured he'd bring all of his kit, not knowing for certain what he'd actually need at the range. Though he'd fired a tank once during the Armor Officer Basic Course, Willett had never spent ten or more days on a tank range, so better safe than sorry.

He was early, since he'd learned as an enlisted soldier that if you're not early, you're late. Plus, he wanted to make a good first impression upon First Sergeant King. Willett slung his duffel onto his back and carried the rest of the gear in his hands. Dragging the gear up the three flights of stairs, Willett thought it might have been wiser to leave it at the door. As he made his way through the double doors on the third floor, he could smell fresh cigarette smoke and as he turned toward the CO's and ISG's offices, he saw the lights were on.

Willett dropped his gear in the hallway, and purposefully strode through the door. He spotted First Sergeant King for the first time. King, an angular black man, rose from his desk chair. His uniform was freshly starched, and he came to attention and saluted. His lean form was obvious and his salute, letter perfect.

“Good morning lieutenant,” King stated matter of factly. “On time and under budget,” as he cracked a thin smile. “First Sergeant Horace B. King, lieutenant. Welcome,” he said warmly.

Willett returned the salute, and replied, “Pleasure to meet you First Sergeant, and glad to be here.”

“Got all your gear? We’ll be at the range for over a week, but I presume the captain told you all that.”

“Yes, First Sergeant. I dropped it all in the hallway. I’m ready to go if you are.”

King, still standing, looked at the new lieutenant. His initial impression was favorable, though he gave no visible indication of such. “Lieutenant, before we go, there’s something I want to show you and explain,” King stated in his east Texas dialect. “See that little yellow wagon settin’ over there in the corner? That’s the Bolo Wagon, lieutenant. You got any idea what that means...Bolo?”

Willett glanced in the direction of the little yellow wagon. Just like the one he had as a kid, though his Radio Flyer was red. This downtrodden wagon had been painted yellow, and obviously done with a brush without much attention to detail.

“First Sergeant, not sure what bolo means, or the connection with the wagon, but I’m guessing you’re gonna fill me in,” Willett answered.

“Lieutenant, you’re gonna go through qualification gunnery. You and your tank crew. There’re only three outcomes. You can

qualify, which is okay, you can fire distinguished, which is the best, or you can bolo. You bolo means you failed to qualify. Not what a shavetail lieutenant like you wants to do, now or ever. So I'm gonna tell you about the wagon. You bolo out there, you'll be pulling that bolo wagon back and forth to the motor pool every day for the next six months. Every day. Not what you want to do. It will be another six months before we do another gunnery. I do not want any lieutenant of mine be the yahoo hauling that little wagon around, understand?" King's tone had turned commanding and authoritative.

Willett looked at the sorry little wagon, and his stomach churned a bit. "First Sergeant, I will do my level best to ensure I qualify, 'cause I want no part of any bolo wagon, I assure you," Willett said emphatically, hoping no nerves showed through in his reply.

"Alright then. That's what ol' First Sergeant King wants to hear. More importantly, that's what ol' First Sergeant King wants to see. Lieutenant, you're gonna have to work your ass off out at the range. You're a newbie, and these tanks can eat you up. But, you got a good crew and outstanding tank commanders. They'll help get you ready, but push come to shove, it'll be on you at nut cuttin' time. Let's get movin'."

With no salutes or formalities, the two men turned to exit the office: the seasoned First Sergeant with a combat patch from Vietnam and a demeanor that bespoke knowledge and experience, and with him, a freshly minted lieutenant, on his way to his first qualification tank gunnery.

CHAPTER 11: SUDDENLY I'M SIR

March 1978

BOOM! The M60 tank's 105-millimeter main gun spit out the sabot round with a startling report and a force that lurched the 49-ton tank. The round traveled over one mile per second toward the enemy tank target Willett had sighted. Specialist Hughes, the crew's loader, twisted out of the way as the shell's large brass casing violently ejected from the breech, noisily falling onto the tank turret's steel floor. Lieutenant Willett and his gunner, Sergeant Gregory watched the round's flight.

"Target, cease fire!" Willett exclaimed through the microphone in his helmet. "Driver, move out," Willett ordered, thrilled that his crew's first Table VIII day run engagement resulted in a target hit, and quickly. PFC Garcia, Willett's tank driver, began moving B-31 down the tank gunnery course road.

Willett, Gregory and Garcia all began scanning for the next target to present itself on the course. Hughes, the loader, had no view outside the tank.

Sitting on the outside of the crew compartment, the TGAT NCOIC (Tank Gunnery Assistance Team Non-commissioned officer

in charge) reset his stopwatch and wrote down his observations from this first engagement. Each engagement was not only timed, but all aspects of each engagement were recorded and graded for a review the next day, including a videotape from the tank range control tower.

“Troops in the open, eleven o’clock,” Gregory shouted into his mic. “Roger,” Willett replied as he grabbed the controls and quickly swung the tank’s turret toward the troop target, as Garcia brought the huge tank to a halt.

“FIRE!” Willett ordered. Sergeant Gregory had simultaneously opened fire on the troops as he took control, sweeping the troop target with machine gun fire from the weapon embedded in the turret, mowing the targets to the ground, as Willett swung the commander’s cupola around, scanning other directions for possible targets.

“Cease fire,” Gregory stated. “They’re cooked.” He was amped.

Willett swung the commander’s cupola, which moved separately from the main turret, to the two o’clock position. “Enemy truck. Caliber 50,” as he pushed down on the butterfly trigger. The M2-HB caliber .50 machine gun, set on high rate of fire, sent rounds bursting down range. Every fifth round a tracer, and within seconds, Willett had destroyed the truck target.

“Cease fire, cease fire,” Willett commanded, pleased at his crew’s success in a multiple target engagement. LT Willett’s crew was off to a splendid start.

Three Days Earlier

At 0615 hours, King dropped Willett off at the 3d platoon’s tents in the tank gunnery range complex. Willett grabbed his bags and was looking around for the tent opening when suddenly Sergeant

Rick Bogdan

First Class (SFC) Moreland, his platoon sergeant, approached from behind.

“Welcome there lieutenant. Set your bags down a moment.” Willett turned to face the man who would be instrumental in Willett’s performance as a tank platoon leader. Sergeant First Class Jesse T. Moreland, a Vietnam veteran, was thin and wiry with a Texan’s drawl. With no saluting in a field environment, the two men just shook hands.

“Get your gear and bring it in the tent. We’ve a cot for ya, and I presume you’ve packed all the shit you’ll need for the next ten days or so,” Moreland offered as he looked his new lieutenant up and down, for each new lieutenant was indeed his. His project. His responsibility. Some had been good, a few great, with a couple of shitbirds mixed in over time.

“Let’s head to the chow tent. I’ll introduce you to your tank commanders and crew. It’s a good one. Each of them has been through at least one other gunnery, and they’ve performed well. Hell, I trained ‘em. As for your TC’s, they are the best. All combat veterans and outstanding tankers. They’ll expect a lot from you lieutenant,” Moreland said bluntly.

As Willett unloaded his gear and laid out his fart sack onto the cot, Moreland lit a cigarette. “You smoke, lieutenant?” he asked.

The two men exited the tent, smoking together and made their way towards the mess. The tank gunnery complex was huge, housing both the 2d Armored Division and the 1st Cavalry Division, both armor heavy. Willett would find out that competition between the two divisions was fierce.

Moreland continued “The next coupla’ days gonna be real busy for ya, lieutenant. Real busy. The tanks have already been boresighted

and all the pre-fire checks been done. We're gonna start actually shootin' today. Stationary tank, stationary target. Coax machine gun firing, and for you especially, the TC's caliber .50," Moreland's words spilled out quickly with a clipped twang.

Inside the mess tent, carefully laid out long tables and folding chairs filled the space. Soldiers with their trays of breakfast immersed themselves in conversation, while gobbling down their SOS and endless cups of coffee. Those already finished, took a few moments to smoke cigarettes before the duties of another hectic training day began.

The 3d platoon tank commanders (TC), Staff Sergeant's Stanley Cleer, Ricky Conley and Leroy Blake were about to depart the tent when SFC Moreland and LT Willett approached.

"Men, this is our new platoon leader, Lieutenant Willett," Moreland interjected. The three TC's looked up from their seats, nodded, but did not rise.

"Grab yourself some chow, lieutenant," Conley offered, in a voice sounding like a permanent sore throat, tones stretched thin and wrinkled.

"Sarge, we gotta get movin'," Cleer added. "33's got some sort of transmission issue and I gotta get with the wrenches work'n on it ASAP"

"Sorry, lieutenant, that we can't stay now, but we'll see ya' on the range later, I reckon," Cleer said.

With that, the three NCOs got up from their chairs, nodded at SFC Moreland, and made their way out of the tent.

"Don't worry, lieutenant, you'll have plenty of time to jaw with them later. Come over here," Moreland said while pointing to another of the many tables in the large mess tent. "I'm gonna

introduce you to your tank crew.” Moreland knew that there were only a few days left for these men to meld into a proficient tank crew, one capable of qualifying during this all-important annual qualification tank gunnery.

Willett looked at his three crew members, nodding at them during the introduction, and then said, “Men, give me a few to knock down some chow, and I’ll meet y’all on the tank line so we can get started. I know there’s lots to do, and I’ve got to get up to speed in a hurry.”

Sergeant Steven Gregory, the B-31 gunner, looked directly at Willett, and clearly stated “LT, the tank’s in great shape. We’re ready to go. We just need to add you to the mix. This we can do.”

“Roger that,” Willett replied. “We’ll meet out there and get started.”

Meld into a proficient tank crew they did. In the three days that followed, Willett focused on his TC duties as never before, while the crew worked their way through the preliminary tank gunnery tables. The Tables I – VII brought crews through a variety of tasks designed to prepare each crew for Table VIII, where there was both a day and a night run.

SGT Gregory and Willett worked seamlessly together. Their communication during shooting engagements quickly meshed. Concurrently, Specialist Hughes, a seasoned loader, proved a true asset. His actions were always quick, correct, and very timely.

Private First Class Garcia, the driver, though very quiet and unassuming, quickly demonstrated that he was in complete control of the 49-ton beast that is the M-60A1 tank. It was as though Garcia could anticipate the lieutenant’s commands; “Driver, move out” or “Driver, stop.” Also, during several of the preliminary firing

engagements, Garcia proved invaluable in spotting targets in conjunction with Gregory and Willett.

Even First Sergeant King got into the action of ensuring the new lieutenant could carry his load as a tank commander. During a preliminary table where the TC had several engagements with the caliber .50 machine gun, King noticed the lieutenant had the .50 on low rate of fire. BAP. . .BAP . . . BAP. . .BAP.

“Lieutenant, you fuckin’ up with that .50. Low rate of fire ain’t shit. You gotta put that baby on high rate of fire and make that bitch talk,” his words loud and quickly spilling out. “It’s about both time and lethality, lieutenant. You got’s plenty of ammo. Send that shit down range. Watch your tracers. Walk that baby into the target if you have to. She’ll sing for ya,” he continued, as he flipped the machine guns switch to high rate of fire. “Next engagement, show me what ya’ got. You’ll see what ol’ First Sergeant King’s talkin’ ‘bout lieutenant,” he added, as he made his way back down to the tank’s left fender, and then down to the ground below.

Sure enough, during the next engagement, Willett fired decisively and the BAP, BAP, BAP, BAP, BAP of the weapon on high rate of fire energized Willett’s confidence, and the weapon from then on proved significant during firing engagements that counted. Lieutenant Willett’s ears loved that heavy, pounding metal-on-metal staccato produced by the .50 as lead flew down range. This weapon provided him with a significant battlefield damage dealer, and he now felt progress in mastering this deadly tool.

The Table VIII night run awaited. While Willett and his crew fired a splendid day run, Willett knew the night run presented significant challenges. Although the M-60 A1 tank had IR (infrared) sights, there was no question that target acquisition was more

difficult than during the day. Also, both the tank commander and the gunner had to be careful to protect their own night vision as the tank fired. The brilliant flash from the main gun knocks out a person's vision momentarily, so it's vital to close at least one eye the moment the main gun fires. Every single task becomes more difficult at night.

Moreland approached Lieutenant Willett and his crew as they awaited their turn to make the night run. "You set there, lieutenant?"

"Yeah sergeant, we're ready," as Willett took a drag on another cigarette. It was nervous smoking, for despite an excellent day run, thoughts of the bolo wagon crossed Willett's mind. No margin for error really existed. Each crew member had to perform perfectly, and Willett knew all eyes were on him to prove himself as a tanker.

"Quick and smooth, lieutenant. Gregory's really good at target acquisition. Trust your crew, but trust yourself even more. You'll do just fine. You're ready." Moreland's comments meant a lot to Willett. He already knew his platoon sergeant never blew sunshine. If he felt Willett wasn't ready, Willett would know. He remembered back to a few nights ago, before they all tried to get some rest, Moreland said, "Lieutenant, I'll let you cut yourself, but I just won't let you bleed to death."

"Lieutenant Willett, get your tank to the start point on the course. You're next," Captain Schaefer shouted at Willett from the ground, looking up to Willett in the tank commander's cupola. Willett had not seen much of his company commander in the last several days, but he didn't mind. He knew the captain had to prepare he and his own crew to fire.

“Good shooting tonight, lieutenant,” the captain shouted, and motioned Willett to have B-31 pull out from the company tank line and move to the night run start point.

The night sky was clear. The early spring air crisp with a half-moon so at least there was some ambient light. The noise of the tanks idling, the ever-present smell of burning diesel from the huge tank engines, the sounds of main guns firing, machine guns rattling and spitting rounds down range, all set the stage for the entrance of B-31’s opportunity to add to this symphony of combat training.

As with the day run, the TGAT evaluator mounted the tank, settled into the bustle rack and made his radio check with Lieutenant Willett. “Lieutenant, your time starts now,” the evaluator’s orders hit Willett’s ears through the CVC helmet’s earpieces. Willett ordered Garcia, “Driver, move out.”

Garcia rumbled the tank slowly down the course road with Willett, Gregory and Garcia all scanning for targets.

Willett spotted the movement of a pop-up tank target down range. Before the target was even totally upright Willett commanded, “Gunner, HEAT (High explosive, anti-tank) tank.”

Garcia immediately brought the tank to a smooth stop. Before the treads had even stopped rolling, Hughes, the loader, shouted “UP” meaning he’d thrown a HEAT round into the breech of the 105mm cannon. Willett slewed the tank’s main gun onto the target as Gregory excitedly shouted into his microphone, “Identified.”

“FIRE,” came the immediate command from Willett, and almost simultaneously, Gregory’s “on the way” as he pulled the trigger sent the HEAT round surging downrange toward the target, the flash and blast from the round lurching the tank and the crew inside.

“TARGET. Cease fire,” Willett exclaimed as he could see the tank target get hit by the round and fall backwards. The whole sequence of events took only a matter of seconds. The evaluator clicked his stopwatch and annotated his critique sheet about all aspects of the engagement.

“Fuck yeah,” Gregory shouted into his CVC mike.

“Great work, men. Let’s get us some more,” Willett exclaimed, knowing that at least the beginning of the night run was off to an excellent start.

The run continued. Move, shoot, communicate. Tank targets, troop targets, truck targets, multiple targets. Didn’t matter. B-31’s crew hit ‘em all, and their times were excellent, and their actions smooth, seamless.

Sergeant Gregory did save Lieutenant Willett on one multiple target engagement, when Willett got blinded by the main gun firing and did not immediately spot the armored personnel carrier with an anti-tank weapon. It was obvious to Gregory that Willett was blinded, since he shouted, “I can’t see shit!” Gregory took control of the turret and fired a HEAT round to quickly destroy the second target.

“You saved our ass Gregory,” Willett said, and he could hear Garcia’s chuckle as the driver readied to move the tank out toward the next engagement.

Otherwise, there didn’t seem to be any glitches during the run. Upon completion, Willett stopped the tank, made final intercom communication with the evaluator and final radio contact with the tank gunnery control tower. All that was left now was the debrief.

The evaluator’s impressive debrief trailer included folding chairs for each tank crew member. These four chairs faced a large

white movie screen, and to the side was a lectern and a controller for the projector. The 2d Armored Division command took incredible pride in their TGAT team, populated by the best of the best tankers in the division. Almost all were combat veterans from Vietnam, and all were highly skilled in all aspects of tank gunnery and maneuver. Also in the trailer were seats on each side for commanders. Occasionally the division commander would appear, but always the brigade and battalion level commanders of the respective crews, as well as the crew's platoon sergeant. It was an impressive dog-and-pony show.

The trailer door opened, and Willett and crew were motioned inside. Willett and Gregory put out their cigarettes with their glove fingers, and each put the butts into a pocket of their tankers' coveralls as the crew climbed the stairs, entered the trailer and took their seats, labelled commander, gunner, loader, driver. Willett noted that Captain Schaefer, his battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Fuller, as well as his brigade commander Colonel Reilly, were present.

Master Sergeant Charles, using his notes and the projector, went over each engagement, briefly recounting the results of the day run, and then going over each night run engagement in detail. As Charles spoke, Willett glanced over at his crew, seeing their faces filling with pride having engagement after engagement proven successful. Willett tried not to look around at his superior officers, since he'd have to jerk his head around to see them, and that would be too obvious.

There was some levity when Master Sergeant Charles recounted Gregory's save when Willett let the main gun round blind him momentarily. The laughter in the trailer bespoke an appreciation for that moment, since it was likely that each man laughing had

at one time or another been blinded the same way. Then Charles threw up the final results.

“Lieutenant Willett, you and the crew of B-31 can be proud of the fact that not only did you qualify as a tank crew, your performance ranked as distinguished, since you met the very highest standards as a composite of your day and night runs. Well done. This concludes my debrief, subject to your questions,” referring not to Willett and crew but to the brigade and battalion commanders.

Lieutenant Colonel Fuller spoke. “Master Sergeant Charles, I appreciate your thorough and very professional debrief and professionalism as you evaluated this tank crew. Lieutenant Willett arrived when the unit was already in the midst of the early tank tables. This crew’s performance warrants credit to not only the lieutenant and his efforts, but also his platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class Moreland, and the crew itself. This distinguished rating is in keeping with the high standards 1-66 Armor Battalion strives to meet in all endeavors.”

With that came the “Dismissed” and Willett and crew exited the TGAT trailer and headed back to their tank to move it to the company tank line, and then to see how the rest of the platoon fired, since it was customary for the platoon leader to fire first in the platoon.

Willett and crew hooped and hollered about how they did once the platoon’s runs were complete. All were quite exhausted, and ready to hit the fart sack. They made their way to the billeting tent, when suddenly First Sergeant King came around the corner and addressed the men.

“Lieutenant, you need to come with me. It’s urgent. All of you need to follow me. Sergeant Moreland needs all of us to meet ASAP.”

“First Sergeant, what’s up? Is everything okay?” Willett quizzically asked.

“Not sure, but I just got word he needs y’all to meet up with him ASAP, so let’s get movin’. By the way lieutenant, great shootin’ out there. You made that .50 talk.”

The crew followed King from the billeting tents down a trail to a large gravel parking lot Willett had no clue existed. It was dark and getting colder, and Willett wondered what in the hell was going on. The elation he felt from the gunnery results had begun to wear off as fatigue set in, and a release from the mounting pressure ended by the crew’s performance. A lone station wagon’s profile took shape, and the outlines of several soldiers and a woman. As the group strode toward the vehicle, Willett recognized Sergeant First Class Moreland, and Staff Sergeants Conley, Cleer and Blake.

Gregory, Hughes and Garcia broke into a trot and got to the station wagon, where Moreland and his wife were standing. A large red cooler sat beside the wagon’s right front door. Suddenly, the platoon members formed two ranks in front of the station wagon. As Willett approached with a puzzled look on his face, King commanded “Attention” and the eight soldiers simultaneously rendered perfect salutes and held them.

Willett halted directly in front of these men and returned the salute. As Willett dropped his salute, so did the men before him.

Moreland spoke. “Sir, we just want to congratulate you on your outstanding performance as a tank commander, and as our platoon leader. You sir, set the standard. Goddamn, you even outpointed me, and that shit don’t happen too often. So sir, we’re gonna do a little celebratin’ right here and now.”

Mrs. Moreland came around from behind the station wagon to join the group, and Moreland made all the introductions. In the meantime, Conley opened the cooler and started breaking out the

Budweiser. As Conley moved to hand one to Willett, Moreland intervened.

“Nah, he ain’t drinkin’ beer tonight. Not now,” as Moreland’s wife handed him a bottle of Jack Daniels and shot glasses.

All the men present grabbed a shot glass, setting their beers carefully onto the ground. Moreland poured the lieutenant’s glass, then the rest of the platoon, and finally his own.

“To Lieutenant Willett. Sir, your performance as a tank commander during this gunnery clearly earned our professional respect. More good shootin’ to come. To a distinguished tanker, cheers.”

“CHEERS!” and the men all poured the Jack down the hatch, and then refilled. Cigars, cigarettes, Jack, beer, stories, bullshit, laughter ensued—it was a glorious time. Willett realized that tonight was the first time any of his men had called him Sir, not just Lieutenant. He smiled at the thought, for he remembered a Drill Sergeant advising, “You can call them by their rank, but you don’t have to call them sir unless they earn it.”

Second Lieutenant Willett now relished Sir. He had earned it.

CHAPTER 12: WALTZ YOUR TANKS

June 1978

Sergeant First Class Moreland hurried up the B Company, 3d platoon tank line to find his platoon leader.

“Lieutenant, you ain’t gonna believe the eyewash I just witnessed,” Moreland hollered over the ever-present noise on the tank line. Willett turned toward his approaching platoon sergeant. “I’m comin’ onto post from Killeen . . . wife’s baby appointment . . . anyway, a chopper’s fly’n low and, no shit, spray paint’n the goddam field lead’n into post, spraying the dried out, brown grass or whatever it is, green. Passing back and forth, paint’n it all green. Can you believe that shit?”

Willett smiled. The visit in less than a week by President Jimmy Carter could be the only reason for such a weird spectacle. Eyewash indeed.

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want our Commander-in-Chief to think we’d let some grass turn brown, now, would we,” Willett sarcastically replied.

“Look at it this way sarge, we’re fix’n to do more live fire shoot’n in the next several days than we’d do in two years of gunnery cycles,

maybe more. This dog and pony show is gonna be a big deal, and we're front and center. But paint'n the fuckin' grass is too much."

"We'll just keep gettin' ready, 'cause we're gonna have some fun. Thanks for the update. I needed some unexpected humor," said Willett as he and Moreland moved toward their respective tanks.

The 2d Armored Division commander picked 1-66 Armor to be the lead for this presidential fire power demonstration, and B Company, based on tank gunnery performance, would be the battalion's lead element. Willett's 3d platoon would be center-mass, and the men were proud and psyched for the opportunity.

The rehearsal schedule piqued Willett's interest since, as hoped, there would be significant opportunity for live fire practice. The whole operation involved all the combat arms branches except Air Defense. There'd be attack helicopters, artillery and mortar fire, as well as the direct fire provided by tanks and armored personnel carriers. And dismounted infantry units would conduct the final "assault" on the objective. Willett and his men found that last part amusing, since it was quite clear that whatever "enemy" started out on Blackwell Mountain would be obliterated once the aviators, artillery, tanks and APC's got through with their firing.

The control tower, built especially for this demonstration, looked impressive. Word had it the glass was bullet-proof and the speaker system state-of-the-art. The senior officers from 2d Armored Division headquarters, running the show, seemed to enjoy using the loudspeakers to bark out orders and instructions to the maneuver units as the rehearsals began.

Orders seemed straightforward. There'd be artillery prep fires, followed by the helos firing some missiles at targets on the mountain.

Then the tanks and APC's would maneuver forward, stopping at designated points to fire at the "enemy" vehicles.

Those vehicles teased experienced tankers like tassels on strip club dancers. Dozens of cars from local junk yards, some of which seemed mostly intact, were set at various spots on the mountain as practice targets. Thus, when 3d platoon got their first opportunity to fire live ammo at these targets, the devastating results got an initial reprimand. Somehow, units were only supposed to shoot for near misses, at least until the final rehearsal, but that word never came down clearly, and the first volley from 3d platoon, B Company destroyed most all the cars and trucks up there. Some even had fuel left because the explosions were so impressive.

"CEASE FIRE. CEASE FIRE." The commands came over the radio network, as well as the ultra-powerful loudspeakers. Whatever miscommunication about what to directly hit or not hit got cleared up in a hurry, but Willett and his men didn't really care. They'd literally devastated real targets, not the usual plastic, one dimensional, fall down when you hit 'em targets found on the gunnery ranges. CPT Schaefer did summon Willett and Moreland once the firing stopped, and admonished them for not following orders, but also admitting the orders hadn't been too clear.

As D-Day, (the "demonstration day" as it became known), approached, the rehearsals became more intense, and sometimes confusing. The combined arms involved, and the timing of all the elements proved difficult to coordinate. The senior officers in the tower, loudspeakers blaring and radios crackling, worked to smooth out any rough edges. Clearly, they wanted to impress a Commander-in-Chief not known as a big exponent of the military. They also knew that his whole visit would only be for two hours.

The plan called for the 3d platoon to first move, in a line formation, to a designated spot from which they'd fire at specified targets. Quickly, the mechanized infantry unit behind 3d platoon, would advance and pass through the tanks to their designated position. When they halted, they were supposed to fire their caliber .50 machine guns at truck and vehicle targets and their 7.62 machine guns at the troop silhouettes.

At the time specified for movement, Willett ordered the platoon to move out, take their positions, and then begin firing. As his tanks moved, the radio crackled and the loudspeakers blared "HALT. HALT. Waltz your tanks . . . I want you to waltz your tanks when you move."

Willett ordered his platoon to halt. The tanks halted. On their internal radio net, Moreland spit out, "What the fuck does waltz your tanks mean?"

The lieutenant replied, "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot, over. I'm dismounting to find out what the hell they're talking about," since no manual included instructions for waltzing a tank.

Willett crawled out of the tank commander's cupola, got onto the tank fender and jumped down, looking for his company commander to get some guidance.

Climbing down the tower stairs, a full colonel made his way toward the tanks, in full stride, seeking out the armor lieutenant. Willett could see the colonel's brass showing Signal Corps, so the lieutenant considered the source of the waltz your tanks order.

Schaefer caught up as the three men converged. "Captain, you need to get this lieutenant to maneuver his tanks properly. I mean like this . . ." as the colonel motioned his hands in waves that looked like some convoluted swimming stroke.

“That’s how they should be moving, to dodge enemy direct fires,” the signal officer emphatically stated.

“Lieutenant Willett, do you understand what the colonel wants to see?” Schaefer asked.

Willett looked at the captain, and then the colonel. “I get the picture,” as he moved his arms in the same motion as the colonel had done. “We’ll waltz the hell out of ‘em, sir.”

Willett turned and walked back to his tank platoon. He motioned Moreland to get the other tank commanders on the ground so he could explain how they were gonna move after repositioning back to their original start point.

“You’re not gonna believe this,” Willett explained, “but first, we go back to our start point. Then, when we get the command, we’ll move out to where we halt to shoot. BUT, this time when we move, we gotta zig-zag the tanks. He actually said waltz the tanks, and went like this,” Willett replicated the colonel’s motions, trying to keep a straight face. “I reckon that’s not likely to show up in the next maneuver manual, but we gotta do what they ask, at least for now.”

Repositioned, the “Move out” command from the tower sent 3d platoon into the waltzing movement, and the tanks quickly got to their firing positions for the last live-fire rehearsal before the real deal. This time, Willett and his platoon of tanks managed to near miss the targets, especially since they were all shot to hell anyway. The tanks ceased fire on Willett’s command, and the command for the mechanized infantry platoon behind them came across the network.

Even with the tank engines idling and with CVC helmets on, Willett could hear the initial movement of the Armored Personnel

Carriers that were supposed to pass through the tank platoon to their own firing positions.

THAP, THAP, THAP...ping, ping, ping...snap, snap...in an instant after the APC's moved, the air filled with the sounds of caliber .50 and 7.62 machine gun fire. Willett could feel the rounds hitting his tank grill doors, and the snapping sounds of rounds passing close to his head. Willett glanced right and saw Moreland and Conley duck into their cupolas, and Willett followed suit. The lieutenant had never had rounds come so close on a tank, but he remembered the sound from his infantry training when he low-crawled under obstacle wire while rounds were fired closely overhead.

"CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE!" Willett hollered into his microphone on the command net, as the APCs passed through the tanks, their weapons suddenly silenced. Willett poked his head up and looked around, seeing the APCs now safely beyond his tanks. Commands from the tower ordered the infantry to resume their firing, and the rehearsal to continue. Willett couldn't believe it, but presumed the show must go on, and guessed the tower never realized his tank had been hit.

"31, 34 over," Moreland radioed on the platoon net.

"31," Willett answered.

"We got a dose of those rounds ourselves. Those shitbirds just transferred here from Korea. Straightlegs. No real mech training, and they throw them into this with a prime role. We're goddamn lucky no one got shot." The decorated Vietnam veteran certainly did not want to buy the farm during a bullshit demonstration rehearsal, his attitude clearly understandable.

"Roger that 34," Willett replied. "We'll see if anyone even acknowledges what happened."

“ENDEX...ENDEX” commanded the tower once the entire rehearsal completed. The respective units turned around and moved their vehicles to their original start points, and closed down until the next day, when the actual demonstration would take place.

The daily After Action Review, attended by CPT Schaefer and the rest of the company and battalion level commanders, did make mention of the friendly fire incident, and stressed fire control and fire discipline. The crew of B-31 examined their tank and the power of the caliber .50 was evident, as some steel louvers on the grill doors were bent and with the doors open, the damage to the engine heat shield was clearly visible.

The actual fire power demonstration itself proved almost anti-climactic, but impressive. Eyes on the range strained to watch for the President of the United States to arrive, which he did on the new helipad built for the occasion. He was accompanied by Secret Service personnel and staffers, as well as all the post general officers. All was ready for the attempt to impress the new Commander-in-Chief with the combined arms power of the U.S. Army.

Willett and his men, especially those who'd never been in combat, or never seen all of the elements of firepower working together, were impressed and proud. Thus, when the first artillery rounds landed on Blackwell Mountain, quickly followed by missiles from attack helicopters, the battlefield concert began in earnest.

On cue, 3d Platoon, B Company, 1-66 Armor moved out, waltzing, to their firing position, and began to engage targets. Today, the raggedy, decimated targets from the rehearsals were gone. Instead, the tankers got to engage actual military vehicles: 5-ton, and 2 1/2 ton trucks, jeeps, and various other seemingly serviceable vehicles, including an old half-track vehicle.

The highlight of the firing came when Willett laid the tank's 105mm main gun onto a 5-ton truck with the command "Gunner, HEAT, truck."

"Identified," SGT Gregory replied, as SP4 Hughes, the loader, threw the round into the breech.

"Fire! Hit the fuel tank."

"On the way." BOOM!

In less than one second, the truck exploded, as the HEAT round, normally used strictly against armor vehicles, overkilled the truck, but created an explosion fit for a president.

Soon, it was over. As the smoke cleared, and Blackwell Mountain lay littered with destroyed vehicles, President Carter descended the tower, and walked to his chopper, his two-hour visit to Fort Hood over.

An article the next day in the *Fort Hood Sentinel*, described the "show" and the "waltzing" tanks. The story mentioned the president clapping when a tank crew hit a particular target. Willett and his platoon were certain he clapped when that 5-ton truck exploded. When Willett got to the tank line in the motor pool the following day, to his surprise and delight he noticed B-31's cupola emblazoned with WALTZING MATILDA.

CHAPTER 13:

BAD BREAK

July 1990

Sean Willett pumped his right arm in triumph as the batter swung and missed on yet another slider. A no-hitter! Seven complete innings and only two walks to blemish the otherwise dominant pitching performance. The Leavenworth Kansas Travelers won yet again, in a baseball summer off to a terrific start.

Sixteen-year-old Sean met his burly catcher halfway between home plate and the pitching mound, hugging in the finest baseball celebratory tradition, as teammates poured out of the dugout and position players all gathered in a circular cluster, jumping up and down and hollering about the “no no” they just witnessed.

The home field fans sitting in the wooden bleachers joined in the celebration, as many moved to the chain-link fence to offer congratulations, for several player’s defensive efforts proved instrumental in preserving the no-hitter in the 4-0 victory over a very solid traveling team from Kansas City.

Sean, now just over six-feet-tall, and a solid 180 pounds just demonstrated one of his best athletic abilities. He excelled at football and basketball, but baseball had his heart.

Tyler and Nancy Willett accepted the laudatory comments from the team's parents, folks they now knew quite well, since most made it to all the games, even those hours away in various parts of Kansas and Missouri.

The team gathered in the shade of the dugout, where their manager and two coaches began to pass out ice cold sodas and savor the game's special outcome. This was a game where you take your time packing up the gear to clear out.

As Willett discussed the game and the team's outlook with other fathers, Nancy stepped to the side, moved under a shade tree, and by herself reflected on an event years ago when moments like today hung in the balance . . .

September, 1980

Bedside Manner

Lorna Dobbin sat at her kitchen table savoring the last of her black coffee on a lazy Saturday morning on Lower Brick Row, the historic set of Army quarters for captains at Fort Riley, Kansas. The two and three-story quarters, built in the 1880s, formed a circle around a large grassy area with some lovely trees and one area with playground equipment for the smaller kids.

Suddenly screams pierced the quiet air. Lorna quickly got out of her chair and went to the screened kitchen window overlooking what they all called the courtyard. She saw a small group of kids around one of the large shade trees and her nine-year-old son Alex running toward their quarters.

“Mom, Mom, come quick. Sean fell out of the tree! His arm, it’s his arm!” he hollered as loud as he could.

Lorna Dobbin, a registered nurse, ran out toward the tree, and the six boys backed away as she approached. On the ground was Sean Willett, his young face contorted and his body in shock. Clearly a compound fracture as bone protruded from Sean’s right forearm.

“Boys, you need to go back home so I can take care of Sean, okay? Please. Sean, can you hear me, honey? I’m calling an ambulance, sweetie, and then I’m gonna get your Mom, okay? Just stay still, and Alex, stay here and watch him.”

Nancy Willett, a junior high school teacher on post, had been upstairs putting away clothes, having made the three-story trek from their basement laundry. As she made her way into the kitchen, she heard the screams and commotion from the courtyard. Only thirty minutes ago, Sean had once again let the screen door slam as the six-year-old raced to join his new buddies outside and begin the day’s adventure.

Stepping onto their wooden porch, Nancy saw her friend Lorna running toward her.

“Nancy! Sean’s fallen from a tree. He’s hurt bad—broken arm. I’ve called the ambulance,” she blurted out as she approached the Willett’s quarters.

Nancy ran down the four wooden steps to meet Lorna, and the two women then ran toward the tree where Alex had dutifully remained, watching Sean. The faint sounds of an ambulance siren grew louder.

The sight of Sean’s arm left Nancy faint, but Lorna grabbed her. Nancy knelt down to look at her son. Sean moaned constantly, bones protruding from his right arm and blood everywhere.

“Oh, Sean . . . they’ll be here soon, the ambulance. Can you hear it? They’ll get you to the hospital and get you fixed up. Please sweetie, this will all be okay,” trying to assure the young boy as well as herself.

The ambulance from Irwin Army Hospital pulled around the one-way circle surrounding the quarters, stopping just outside the Dobbin’s. As the medics made their way toward the two ladies, Nancy said, “Lorna, do me a favor. Call the CQ (Charge of Quarters) at Tyler’s company, B 1-34, and tell them to get him to Irwin ASAP. Accident with Sean, okay?”

“On it,” Lorna answered as she hurried inside to make the call.

“Don’t move little man,” the medic said matter-of-factly. “What’s your name, buddy?”

Nancy blurted out “Sean,” for the boy was not talking at all, only moaning in pain.

The medics gingerly placed the boy on a gurney and worked their way down the concrete stairs to the circular roadway where they parked the ambulance. Nancy followed.

“Ma’am, you can ride in the back with him. That would be a good thing,” the medic suggested, but Nancy would have gone regardless. Not the time to leave her son alone. Sirens blaring, the ambulance sped off to the hospital.

“Lieutenant Willett, Lieutenant Willett. We got a message for you,” Sergeant Gibbs, the company motor sergeant shouted as he ran toward the B Company executive officer.

“What message?” Willett answered, in the midst of looking at a parts requisition he needed to authorize and sign.

“Sir, the CQ said you need to get to Irwin ASAP. Your boy’s been in some kinda accident. Not sure what, but your wife said to meet her there. She went on the ambulance. That’s all I know, sir,” Gibbs finished.

Willett dropped the requisition. “Shit. Thanks, Gibbs,” Willett replied, as he rushed to get out of the company motor pool and to the hospital.

In the emergency room entrance, he frantically asked, “My son...my wife said meet her here. Some sort of accident. What can you tell me?”

“Your name, lieutenant?” the nurse in reception asked, oblivious to the nametag sewn into Willett’s fatigues.

“Willett. My son’s name is Sean,” his urgent tone reflecting his angst.

“Sir, they took him to Ward Charlie. I don’t know what happened, but he has a broken arm. You should find your wife there.” The nurse’s monotone was annoying to Willett, but he thanked her and made his way to the specified ward.

Finally spotting Nancy, he hollered down the hallway and saw her turn toward him. She rose and walked toward Tyler, who ran toward her.

“How is he? What the hell happened?” he asked.

“He fell out of a tree in the courtyard. It’s bad, Tyler. A compound fracture of his right arm. God, the bone sticking out of his skin. I almost passed out. Thank God for Lorna” her voice trailed off, as tears welled again in her eyes.

“Where’s he now? Who’s the doctor? Can we see him? Geez, this is a goat screw,” Willett’s frustration growing.

“They’ve got to operate, but no doctor’s seen me yet. I’m glad you got here so fast. At least we’ll hear everything together,” Nancy tried to calm her Type A husband down.

As they sat down to wait, pensive and anxious, a nurse opened the nearby double doors. “Lieutenant and Mrs. Willett?”

The Willetts stood up, Tyler answering, “Yes. What’s going on? Where’s the doctor? How’s our son?” the questions spilling out rapid fire.

“Dr. Thompson is examining your boy and he’ll be out shortly to discuss his situation and what will have to be done. Please be patient for just a bit longer,” she stated, and then turned to go back through the doors. Already it had been nearly an hour since Willett had arrived at the hospital.

The double doors flew open, and a wiry man in a lab coat briskly walked toward them, the only two people in the sparse waiting area. “You the Willetts, I reckon,” the man with closely cropped black and gray hair stated with a slight drawl. “Dr. Thompson. I’m takin’ care of your boy,” his words spilling out quickly.

The Willetts stood up. Tyler could see the doctor’s lieutenant colonel leaf, and the man’s bleary eyes as he approached.

“Gonna get right to it,” Thompson continued. “Y’all best set down, ‘cause this ain’t gonna be easy.”

Startled, Tyler and Nancy sat together on the worn bench.

“Compound fracture, right arm. Serious. Worst case, the boy’ll lose part of his arm. That’s possible. More likely, his arm’ll be atrophied, pretty seriously I reckon, where that arm will be significantly thinner, shorter, that sorta thing. Best case, if I can manage to reconnect everything in his arm—blood vessels, nerves, everything—well, his arm will likely be okay, but I’m just bein’ straight,

that's unlikely. We'll know in a few hours. Sit tight. You'll know when I come back out."

"Sir, can I just. . ."

"Lieutenant, no questions now. I've gotta get goin' on this," as Dr. Thompson abruptly turned and went back through the double doors to work on Sean's arm.

The Willetts sat in shock and dismay or paced. Nancy wandered the halls, though not venturing too far. At times, the two would converge, and sit back down on the bench. The hours passing, and their son's fate yet to be determined.

Already Sean had showed athletic ability. He learned how to throw and catch early, and his right arm could already throw a baseball with some zip, and a junior football as well. Plus, the boy couldn't wait to learn more basketball skills. Tyler truly enjoyed their hours together, playing sports. He knew there was a bright future ahead. Especially since the boy also excelled in school, at least when he completely applied himself. Now, waiting to see the results of the surgery, Tyler could not help but worry about a broken future for his son.

Nancy remained silent and pensive, not wanting to discuss any future. She only wanted her boy to be okay, whatever that was going to look like. Yet, she too still could not believe the callous outlook the doctor presented. So much for bedside manner. Tyler tried to explain that, based on his rank and apparent age, the doctor likely spent time trying to fix up hundreds of GIs wounded and scarred from the war in Vietnam. Tyler could only speculate that what the doctor witnessed and what he had to do in that combat theater must have hardened his demeanor and his outlook.

The double doors opened, slowly. Dr. Thompson shuffled out of the door but spotting the Willett's he straightened up and his pace quickened.

"That young man in there is one lucky young man, I gotta tell ya," he started. "I'd be lyin' if I told ya' it wasn't a struggle, but by God, I do believe your boy's gonna make a full recovery."

The Willett's collectively let out a joyful sigh of relief.

The doctor continued, "I managed to get the bones fused, and far as I can tell, all the nerves connected. If all goes well from here, as he continya's to grow, that arm might actually be stronger than what it woulda been. Now, the nerves, well, those take a while to re-awaken, but I'm believ'n they will. Like I said, one lucky little son-of-a-gun."

"Oh doctor, thank you so very much. We were frantic. Now, we're simply thankful, and grateful for what you've done," Nancy sincerely said.

"Yes sir, we were on pins and needles, and I've gotta tell you sir, your initial assessment scared the crap out of us," Willett stated.

"Lieutenant, I learned long ago to cut to the chase. I aim to fix, and that's what I do, but same time, I'm never gonna spout false hope. Just straight skinny. Now, if y'all will pardon me, I've gotta get outta here 'cause I must be back early, in fact in a few more hours. Y'all take care and go see 'em. He'll be wait'n for ya," Dr. Thompson implored, and then he simply turned and walked down the hallway.

A final team holler jostled Nancy out of her recollection, back to the moment. As the boys finished their sodas and gathered up their gloves and bats, making their way out of the dugout, Nancy walked to catch up with Tyler, about to greet his son, the pitcher. Nancy's eyes got watery as she watched her two men, husband and son. Seeing

their happiness and pride on this day, she looked up into the sky and silently said “thank you,” not sure to whom, but just wanting to give thanks anyway.

Nancy went up to Sean. “Give me a big hug, my young man, quite a game you pitched.”

As Sean reached for his mother, Nancy spotted the now faded scar on his right arm, yup, the one now likely stronger than it would have been except for that bad break.

CHAPTER 14: IN CASE THE RUSSIANS COME

October 1981

Stammtisch

CPT Tyler Willett and SSG Jimmy Burton rolled their 1/4-ton M-151 jeep into the *gasthaus* parking area in a small Bavarian village. Burton, who spoke passable German, having been assigned there for three years, convinced Willett they needed a break after their morning of reconnaissance.

Willett, the S-3 Air, was responsible for liaison with U.S. Air Force close air support during combat operations. Burton's job as the S-3 NCOIC paired him with Willett. The two men were in Germany as part of a massive annual training exercise involving NATO forces that had been conducted since the late 1960s.

"Sir, you're gonna love the food, and of course, the beer is incredible. I fell in love with this country while stationed here. You've never been, right?" Burton asked.

"Yeah, this is my first time here. In fact, this is my first overseas deployment, so all this is new to me. Gotta say, the countryside and these little villages are beautiful," he said as the two soldiers entered the *gasthaus*. To Willett, the interior seemed storybook German,

affirming that the German restaurant in Chicago his stepfather frequented was indeed authentic. Since it was near lunchtime, the bar and tables were busy, and the two soldiers, in their fatigue uniforms, found seats at the end of the bar.

“Sarge, I’m gonna let you do most of the talk’n here,” Willett said. “I only know ‘*ein bier bitte*’ and ‘*danke*’” he continued.

“No problem,” Burton smiled. A lanky mid-westerner, Burton seemed to Willett one of several NCOs he’d experienced who would have made an excellent officer. In fact, Willett even told that to Burton back at Fort Riley. Burton only laughed and replied, “I’m an NCO sir, and I work for a living” and left it at that.

As Burton ordered two beers, a voice cracked out in a heavy dialect “*Hauptmann, Hauptmann!* Captain, vy don’t you join us here?”

Willett and Burton glanced over at the round table in a corner of the room. An elderly man gestured to join them at their table.

“Sir, this is great. That’s the *stammtisch*, a special table for regulars, usually older folks who’ve been around,” Burton stated as the two men left the bar and walked over to the table.

“Sit, sit,” the man insisted. As Willett and Burton pulled out chairs to join the group, the same man continued, “Americans, ya?”

“Yes sir,” Willett answered. “Thanks for the invitation to join you.” The four other men at the table nodded and smiled. The waitress brought the beers to the table Burton ordered.

“Zo, you are here as part of ze vargame zats being held across Deutschland, ya?” the man asked, as the others leaned forward. “Ve recognized ze uniforms. No Americans here since the end of ze war,” the gentleman who clearly served as the spokesman continued. “Ve all served in ze war, but ve fought only ze Russians, not ze

Americans. Ze Russian vinter proved costly. Klaus lost his right foot. Ve all suffered without ze necessary equipment, but at least some of us survived.”

Surprised at the quick revelation, Willett decided introductions were in order. “I’m Captain Willett, and this is Staff Sergeant Burton,” Willett offered, as Burton then repeated in German, presuming the rest of the men at the table did not speak English, or were hesitant to try. The spokesman introduced himself as Henrich, and then proceeded to point to the other men at the table, Frederick, Klaus, Bertrand, and Joseph. Each man nodded and smiled as Henrich called out their names.

“Zo now ve must be prepared to again fight ze Russians, ya?” Henrich asked.

“Seems that way,” Willett answered as Burton translated. “Americans, Germans, Brits, French, the whole NATO forces—we’re all prepared to stop ‘em here.”

“Good and zen, maybe zen ve can have Deutschland whole again,” Henrich stated, and after Burton translated, the other men at the table nodded vigorously. “Hauptmann, you and ze sergeant must eat something. Ze Weiner schnitzel mit pomme frits. Ze best.”

As the discussion slowly continued, Burton translated questions from the other men, and Willett smiled as they all nodded approvingly when they found out Willett was an armor, or panzer officer. All the men at the table had been tankers, and this turned the discussion to modern tanks. Even through translation, Willett realized the commonalities all soldiers possessed, past and present.

Completing their delicious meal and downing the last of their beer, Burton said in German that they were going to have to leave

and thanked the men for their hospitality. The men smiled and raised their glasses in a hearty toast.

Willett and Burton got in their jeep and headed to the next site to recon. As they drove on, Willett asked, “Ya really think those guys only fought the Russians? I was waiting for the ‘and ve ver only following orders. Ve ver not Nazis either.’”

Burton laughed. “Yeah, that was special, but at least Klaus had a plausible story. Could have easily lost his foot from frostbite or whatever in the Russian winter.” Willett knew from their conversations back at Fort Riley that Burton’s knowledge of military history seemed extensive. While Burton navigated, Willett started to put this whole deployment into perspective. He knew that 1-34 Armor’s mission included being sent to Germany and drawing pre-positioned equipment, i.e., their tanks and combat vehicles, held in secret sites and maintained by the Germans in case the ‘balloon went up.’ But the enormity of the undertaking across all of Germany was truly impressive.

The exercise replicated exactly what Willett would experience were war to break out in Europe, and knowing that soon he’d be in command of a tank company, Willett paid close attention to all aspects of the exercise: the load up of take-along equipment, the flight out of Forbes airfield in the C-130, the landing in Newfoundland for refueling. Plus, in their pre-deployment briefs, Willett realized that only one brigade from the 1st Infantry Division was deploying, and 1-34 Armor was part of that brigade. Willett felt this experience would prove valuable for his Army future, since war with the Soviet Union always seemed likely to pop over the horizon.

French Concern

Having just finished their reconnaissance, and heading toward the 34th's assembly area, the PRC-77 radio in the jeep crackled. Burton answered while Willett was driving.

"Damn sir, we've got to go link up with the Frogs at their *kaserne*. They're going to be providing some of the close air support, and the colonel wants us to link up with their S-3 and make the initial coordination for the brigade and the battalion," Burton relayed the orders as they pulled over to re-orient and determine the route.

"Frogs. We've always called them that. You know the saying, 'French tanks - the only tanks with five speeds in reverse,'" Willett said. Disdain for French forces was prevalent, at least among the officers and soldiers Willett knew. Burton clearly shared the view.

"Sir, we're gonna have to hustle up, since it's about thirty miles to get there, and then we've gotta find their headquarters, and hope the 3's available," Burton said. "This has goat screw written all over it."

Willett glanced over at Burton, smiled, and said, "Just lemme know when to turn and where, and when we get there, we'll pull this shit off and make the best of it. But, yeah, it'll likely be dark by the time we're done. Hey, maybe we can catch some chow there—the frogs can't fight, but they can sure cook," and Burton laughed.

Soon their jeep approached the gate to the *kaserne*. The French tricolor flag waving in the slight breeze as they pulled up to the gated entrance. Neither Burton nor Willett spoke a lick of French, but they pulled out their ID's and hoped the guard spoke English.

Nope. However, he looked at the ID's, eyed the jeep, and waved them through, and Burton turned back and saw the gate guard on the radio, likely alerting someone that American soldiers were coming in.

“This is gonna be weird,” Willett commented. “It is all based on the presumption that we can communicate, and neither of us speak any French.”

“Sure seems awful quiet around here,” Burton commented as they drove slowly through the grounds of the small *kaserne*, likely to hold no more than a battalion of men, maybe less. “Well, pull up to that building there. Looks like some sort of headquarters, and hopefully someone’s in there. You’re right sir, this is eerie, like everyone’s gone, or they’ve all deserted and forgot to tell the gate guard,” Burton laughed again.

“Sure as shit not bilingual,” Willett commented as he shut down the jeep, and the two men got out and headed up the steps into an impressive two-story building. The signage all in French, so neither man had a clue of the building’s true function. It reminded Willett of the officer quarters at Fort Riley built in the mid to late 1880s.

Willett pulled on the handle of the building’s tall, thick wooden double door entrance, and he and Burton walked in. They stood in the entrance and looked left and right down long hallways. Directly in front of them was another long hallway, and they decided to go forward. Still, no one in sight.

“Hello? Hello? Parles vous English?” Willett said loudly. No response.

It became apparent that the building was H-shaped as they got down the hallway and came to another entrance. Willett looked into one of the windows on the double door, and exclaimed “My god, this is a banquet hall. And there’s been a banquet, a big one,” as he pulled the doors open.

Willett and Burton slowly walked into the room and their jaws dropped. The linen covered tables were strewn with dishes holding

remnants of food not eaten, empty wine and champagne bottles, chairs turned over. The entire room looked like whenever the party ended, everyone simply got up and left, and no one had been back since. There was at least a half-dozen long tables with candelabras. Willett imagined that when the party began, it must have been an impressive sight, but now, it was a disaster. The room's stale odors combined booze, cigarettes and cigars, mixed with the scent of too many men without deodorant.

"Let's get the fuck outta here," Willett ordered, and Burton nodded. As the men turned to leave the banquet hall and go back to the entrance, they saw a French soldier coming toward them, waving. Willett and Burton stopped in the hallway, allowing their greeter to come to them.

"*Tu parles Français?*" the soldier asked as he approached the Americans.

"No," said Willett. "Parle vous English?"

Thankfully the Frenchman said "Yes," and the GIs breathed easier. "I have a packet for you, about close air support for the upcoming exercise," the French soldier said. Not being familiar with their uniforms, neither Willett nor Burton could really tell the man's rank, but Willett presumed him to be an officer.

"*Merci,*" Willett said, essentially exhausting his French vocabulary but trying to be polite. "Can you tell us, where is everyone? We saw the banquet room . . . quite a party, but you're the only person we've seen except the gate guard."

With a sheepish look the Frenchman replied, "We had a very great celebration. We found out that we are going to be redeployed back to France, at least most of us. Some will return to Algeria, but most of us will be posted in France. So yes, big celebration."

Willett immediately decided to not ask about the mess, and based on the soldier's answer, he could only presume that everyone was bagged out in their barracks, and no one expected any sort of threat. "Thank whoever prepared the packet, and we will ensure this gets to our brigade headquarters this evening," Willett relayed.

The Frenchman extended his hand to Willett and they shook. Same with Burton. With that, the two Americans continued down the hallway to exit the building, get in their jeep and return to their own assembly area. Both men wanted to exit this *kaserne* ASAP, given the time of evening and the surreal nature of their brief visit to a slice of the French army.

Squashed Like a Bug

Willett exhibited obvious excitement about this day's tactical road march, as it involved the greatest number of combat vehicles in one march that he'd experienced. An infantry battalion and an armor battalion, as well as support vehicles would hit the German *autobahn* briefly and then move onto two lane highways and end up on narrow village streets.

The pre-march briefing included the usual: march order, vehicle interval, march speed, road guard instruction, etc., but Willett had never experienced this large of a road march, let alone one conducted in a foreign country. He would be the vehicle commander of a M-113, Armored Personnel Carrier, and he'd be accompanied by Burton and the driver, Specialist Ramos.

After scarfing down a quick breakfast, Willett made his way to the PC for pre-checks, and found Ramos already at it. Burton was inside setting radio frequencies and making the necessary commo

checks. They were fueled up and ready to go, now just waiting to take their assigned position within the march.

Their PC would trail the last tank company of 1-34, along with the other battalion headquarter APCs. 1-34 Armor would be the lead element in this road march, and the infantry battalion would trail them. The collective sound of these combat vehicles starting and idling was music to Willett's ears. This was another reminder for the former enlisted grunt that riding was the way to go.

The fall Bavarian weather was beautiful. Crisp and clear, although the thunder and fumes of so many diesel engines did sully the air. 1-34 Armor took off without a hitch, and they cleared the assembly area, and hit the two-lane highway that would take them to the *autobahn*, where they'd only travel a few miles before exiting to highways where drivers didn't regularly hit over 100 mph.

Burton mentioned to Willett prior to departure that he did not relish traveling any distance on the *autobahn* because of the speeds and noting that German drivers all seemed to be Type A when they got behind the wheel. Combat vehicles, mostly track vehicles traveling at about 25 mph, would be a disruption many drivers would not appreciate. However, once on the *autobahn*, with some American flags flying, Willett enjoyed the several drivers who waved and beeped their horns at this curious collection of U.S. Army combat vehicles traveling their road.

Soon the convoy made their way onto a two-lane highway that would take them to an exit close to where the first simulated combat exercise would take place a day later. Willett and Burton were both pleased with how smoothly the march proceeded. Suddenly though, the move to the two-lane highway changed the whole dynamic of the road march. With a tank and an infantry battalion in a march,

the line of vehicles stretches a long, long way. A tank battalion alone had fifty-four tanks, each at an interval of at least twenty-five meters. Add to that all the headquarters vehicles, and then add a mechanized infantry battalion, and you've got a seemingly endless line of vehicles.

Willett noticed early on the impatience exhibited by some German drivers. Already, several Porsche 911s had wound up their air-cooled engines and screamed by their PC, lights flashing until an oncoming vehicle would force them to execute a delicate squeeze between combat vehicles. Then Willett could see the drivers look for an opening, shoot back out into the now open lane and start the race all over. Porsches, Audis, Peugeots. Thus far, at least, this dicey game played with no incidents.

But now, a Volkswagen Bug moved up the open lane. As it rounded a curve, Willett lost sight of it, but then shortly after, radio traffic ordered a halt in place. Gradually the entire force came to a stop. Sure enough, the Bug got caught between two tanks as it tried to squeeze in, likely trying to avoid a swift oncoming vehicle. The tanks were slowing down for a curve, and apparently a tank driver simply did not have enough distance to sufficiently slow down. The Bug pulled right between the two tanks, and BOOM, the trailing tank hit the Bug and literally squashed it, killing the driver as it turned out. Fortunately there were no other passengers.

As the road march finally resumed, the VW Bug's wreckage was visible on the side of the road. Willett did not know how to react. He knew himself to be an impatient driver, and he'd already owned several VW Bugs. He could not help but wonder if he'd been in the same situation, would he have attempted the same maneuver. Willett said to Burton "Guess I'd better get a Porsche," and left it at that.

English Nurses

“CPT Willett, you’re going to be part of the mass casualty evacuation exercise, now that the maneuver portion is over,” said Major Reilly, the battalion S-3 and Willett’s rater.

“What’s that mean, sir?” Willett asked.

“Means you’re gonna be evac’d along with a bunch of other soldiers to some hospital in England so the evac system can be tested,” Reilly answered. “Ya need to report to the brigade headquarters area. They’re gonna hand out casualty cards. That card will tell ya whether you’ll be on a stretcher or ambulatory.”

“So, us lucky folks go to England while y’all get to go home?” Willett asked.

“Yup,” the major replied. “Look, they need a certain number of officers, and I thought this would be a good experience for you,” as he smiled.

“Roger that, sir. I’ll head over there now and hold my breath I’m not laid out on a stretcher,” Willett stated as he nodded and walked away from his boss.

Out of the entire brigade there would be about fifty GIs evacuated, and Willett found out he was one of only four officers tagged to go. As more soldiers showed up in the brigade vicinity, the medical personnel started to hand out the waterproofed casualty cards. With no formation, Willett just joined the gaggle, and stuck out his hand to get his card when the medic approached. The card read:

DISLOCATED LEFT SHOULDER; SLING; AMBULATORY

Willett wiped his brow, glad that he’d at least be able to stay on his feet during the flight, as well as when they got to wherever they were headed.

Shortly, a Medical Corp major using a bullhorn got the gaggle into an informal formation to provide instruction for the evac. That was Willett's first clue this operation was loosey-goosey. With a report time/place at 0600 hours the next morning, Willett headed back to 1-34 to pack his gear for this final adventure.

The next morning, with most of his gear packed to return with the battalion, Willett only carried one small bag with enough kit to last the two days of the medevac exercise. Immediately the soldiers were sorted by ambulatory and stretchers and loaded onto the 5-ton trucks for transport to the airfield. Willett intellectually understood the need to exercise this system, but he really wished that he was headed straight home. He wanted to get back and see Nancy and Sean.

Able to doze off during the flight, Willett awakened when the plane began the descent. The GIs on the plane jabbered a bit, but Willett remained quiet, seeing no need to socialize, and not really in the mood for small talk. Disembarkation went smoothly at the English airfield, and medical vehicles and buses awaited the casualties. About half the participants were on stretchers and the rest on their feet. Willett's left arm in a sling made him smile since he'd actually had dislocated shoulders twice—once from a dirt bike accident, and the other from a drunken bar fight in college.

The bus ride through the English countryside was pleasant. Rolling hills, small villages with quaint cottages. Willett presumed they weren't going to some hospital in London or another major city. The buses and medical vehicles arrived at the countryside hospital. Clearly an older facility, it had an immediate charm. Pale white stucco facade, with a beautiful multi-colored slate roof. Stately trees and landscaping surrounded the two-story hospital set on a lush hillside.

The setting reminded Willett of a hospital in some Hemingway novel he'd read in college.

Nurses, in uniforms that seemed old fashioned compared to stateside, stood lining the stone walkway to the entrance, as technicians began to deal with those on stretchers. The ambulatory personnel, on orders from the ranking officer, a Signal Corp major, formed two columns and route stepped toward the entrance. With the enlisted personnel in columns, the senior NCOs stayed on either side of the columns, and the officers trailed as they made their way up the long path from the circular drive to the entrance.

Some of the nurses held small American flags, and Willett smiled as they waved, and he noticed the subtle eyeballing done by the GIs in the respective columns. Without a doubt, several of the English nurses were quite lovely, and Willett surmised some of the folks none too happy about this part of the exercise were already changing their minds.

The nurses directed each 'patient' to their bed, and the four officers to "our small rooms on the second floor." A loudspeaker advised that dinner would be served at 1800 hours, either bedside or in the dining hall for those on their feet. In the forty-five minutes until dinner, Willett unpacked his duffel and washed up. The trip made him feel groggy, and it seemed right to clean up for the meal.

The hospital dining hall was plain but comfortable. Tablecloths covered the long tables, with several candles on each, though unlit for the moment. China dinner plates and silver flatware seemed almost elegant. There were very tall ceilings and windows with many panes so lots of light came through. Willett couldn't help but think that the folks who worked at this hospital were quite lucky.

Whether by design or good fortune, there were very few regular patients present. Willett could count only about fifteen, split almost evenly between men and women, and most seemed middle aged or older—at least those able to make it to the dining room.

Willett and the other three officers went to one table while the NCOs and soldiers sat together. The British patients remained separate, but they did manage to shout out greetings to the ‘Yanks’. With no menu in sight, Willett wondered what would emerge from the kitchen as he and the others waited. Of course, the enlisted men already had grown somewhat boisterous by the time the kitchen doors opened and the first batch of hamburgers and fries made their way toward the tables. Happy GIs did some happy hollering.

One of the cooks came out of the kitchen, and in a thick British dialect, loudly shouted that the burger and fries dinner was done as homage to the American allies, and they hoped they’d done them right. Willett, along with everyone else, thought the gesture to be very thoughtful and much appreciated.

“Anyone have any idea what the hell they’re gonna do with us?” asked Lieutenant Smiley, an infantry officer in the brigade.

Major Chester, the ranking officer said, “Far as I know, they have to go through the procedures they’d do if we’d really been sent here out of a combat zone, but honestly, not sure how that’s gonna happen.”

Smiley laughed. “Shoot, I don’t care ‘cause I’ve already seen several nurses that could care for me! Too bad the rest of y’all are married.”

Chester snapped, “LT, keep your shorts on. I mean it. You can shoot the shit with the nurses but don’t start anything else. I damn sure don’t want any sort of incident goin’ on while we’re here. Got it?”

“Yes sir. But ya gotta admit sir, some of these ladies are fine,” he said as he glanced at the rest of the men at the table.

Willett looked at Smiley. “Your eyes aren’t failing you lieutenant but leave it at that. Plus, since you got hit with an ugly stick, what makes you think any one of them would be interested in you? Best I can tell, none of ‘em seem blind.” The men at the table laughed, including Smiley.

That evening Willett observed several doctors and nurses going through the motions of checking on their respective patients. Willett needed no attention at all, and after checking both floors to see what transpired, he crashed in his room. While not like home, the bed clearly surpassed the cot Willett used during the field exercise, and he slept like a baby.

Bells rang at 0600 hours. English wake-up, Willett surmised as he got up and made his way to the shared latrine. After the shit/shower/shave routine, Willett went downstairs toward the dining hall, desperately wanting some coffee and hoping he wouldn’t have to settle for English tea.

The dining room was soon filled with talk and banter, for the men knew that sometime after lunch, they’d be picked up and transported to the airfield that would begin their journey home. Plus, once all the medevac boxes had been checked, the men on stretchers could at last get up and move around. Based on the increased number of men in the dining room, it seemed to Willett that box was already checked. Thankfully, a pitcher of black coffee greeted them, soon followed by scrambled eggs and some sort of sausage. The only remaining task was filling out some paperwork, and then getting packed and ready to go.

Willett enjoyed the respite in the English countryside, and none of the GIs caused any trouble. For Tyler Willett, English nurses or not, he could not wait until the buses arrived, and he could head home.

CHAPTER 15: SHOULDA TAKEN THE CAB

May 1982

“Sir, ya’ got a few minutes?” First Sergeant Ross asked Captain Tyler Willett his tank company commander.

“Yeah, Top, what’s up?” Willett answered.

“DWIs sir. The Sergeant Major got on our ass in this morning’s meeting. Too many in the battalion, and the shit’s hit’n the fan from brigade. You know sir, shit rolls downhill,” Ross smiling as he stated the obvious. “We’ve been lucky so far. Only Gorsky’s fuck up a few weeks ago, but I really don’t wanna press our luck,” Ross reasoned.

“Yeah, I know. The colonel mentioned it in our meeting too. Goddamn, these yahoos are gonna drink, and they go off-post ‘cause the EM and NCO clubs are slim pickin’s for women,” Willett said.

“No shit, sir,” Ross smiling as he replied. “I’ve got a solution sir. I know the guy who owns Yellow Cab in town. He’s a retired Sergeant Major, and he bought the cab company. I ran into him at the NCO club. All our guys have to do is call for a cab if they’ve drank too much, leave their cars in the club lot, and the cab will take ‘em to the barracks or their quarters. They show their ID, the cabbie takes the name, and then bills them through us if they don’t have any

money to pay right then. Once a month we get the bill, name-by-name, we collect and then pay the cab company. No excuse to drive while shitfaced.”

“Top, that’s excellent. Wow. Great solution, if you think they’ll actually do it,” Willett replied.

“Sir, if they don’t, it’s a lick on them. No excuse. Plus, I’d let the colonel know what we’ve set up. That way, he knows we’ve taken every possible step to prevent DWIs, and anyone who fucks up can’t really come back to bite us,” Ross said.

“Yeah, who knows, maybe the colonel will adopt it as a battalion SOP, but you’re right, I’m gonna let him know what we’ve set up. Let’s make up some cards to issue with the cab number to call, and then you can brief ‘em this afternoon before they’re released for the day,” Willett recommended.

“Sir, already had Abbott make up the cards since I was pretty sure you’d buy in. Figured you wouldn’t mind,” Ross said.

Willett smiled. “You know me too well. You’re right about one thing, if any of these men don’t take advantage of this, they’ll have no excuse, and we can throw the book at ‘em with an Article 15. Maybe then, anyone stupid or drunk enough to not do this will learn when we hit their wallet and saddle ‘em with a shitload of extra duty.”

Ross smiled. “Wilco, sir.”

Two Weeks Later

SGT Barlow shoved open the door to get out of the Starlight Club, his buddy Specialist Phillips right behind. The chilled autumn air slapped their faces, a stark contrast to the stale smoke, sweat, beer, and booze now behind them.

“Damn, I’m pissed!” Barlow exhorted as they stood in the gravel parking lot. “I really thought I had something going with her. I mean we really seemed to hit it off.”

“Well, you bought her enough beer,” Phillips chided. “And now she’s gone, and I feel like shit and you look like shit.”

The two young soldiers had become good buddies since being assigned to the same tank company at Fort Riley. Barlow, twenty-three, looked like the linebacker he was in high school, only now with a buzz cut. Thick, yet athletic, Barlow could indeed be a lady’s man. Phillips, twenty-two, was smaller in stature. Wiry and lean, he moved with a quickness reflecting his skills as a point guard.

Now, these two men started to amble through the still crowded parking lot toward Barlow’s trusty Silverado pickup.

“We gotta get back. 05 wakeup and it’s already past midnight,” Barlow lamented. Fumbling in his jeans pocket for his keys, he dropped them into the gravel. As he bent over to pick them up, Barlow swayed and then awkwardly leaned into the fender of the car nearest him.

“Damn Sarge, you are in no condition to drive back to post. You’re shitfaced and so am I,” slurred Phillips, the crisp air making his wooziness even more apparent. “I sure as hell can’t drive, and if you get a DWI you’re gonna lose that stripe you just got, maybe more.”

“Get in the goddamn truck or I’m gonna leave your sorry ass here,” Barlow slurred as he lurched toward his truck.

“Sarge, remember what Top said about calling that taxi company?” Reaching for his wallet, Phillips said, “Wilkens did it last week and he said it saved his ass. They got him and dropped him off at the barracks. No sweat. You don’t even have to pay the cabbie. Come on man, don’t try to drive. Plus, it’s better if I puke in the cab,

right?” Phillips pulled out the cab company card from his well-worn leather wallet.

“We ain’t got time for all that. I’ll be fine,” as Barlow turned the key and started the old truck. He then reached over and opened the passenger door. “Get in.”

Phillips pulled his way into the truck. Both men rolled down the windows in the vain hope that cold night air could somehow clear their beer sodden heads. Barlow stomped on the accelerator and his rear tires spun in the gravel, the truck’s rear breaking loose momentarily and spitting gravel behind.

The Silverado hit the blacktop of Route 47, and they began the eight-mile run back to the post, country music blaring from the radio and cigarettes glowing in the dark.

Red flashing lights. Siren. Spotlight. Bullhorn. “PULL OVER.”

CHAPTER 16: STAIRWAY TO CHRISTMAS

December 1982

Tyler Willett's eyes slowly opened. Blurry. Pain. Head pain. Eyes slowly clearing. Looking up. Ceiling. Head turns left. Stairway railing. Lifting his head off the wooden stair, Willett realizes he's at the base of the long staircase in their quarters.

As he tried to sit up, head throbbing, Willett cringed. His back wracked with pain the moment he moved. *What? Hey, my legs won't move.* Willett's left hand grabbed a spindle on the stairway railing, as he tried to pull his torso upright. The back pain was excruciating. Enough that the knot on his head seemed immaterial.

It was the legs that wouldn't move that churned Willett's stomach. He glanced at his watch. 1135 hours. He remembered the phone ringing while he was upstairs in the master bedroom beginning to pack a suitcase for the trek back to Chicago for Christmas. Even though he was officially on leave, being a company commander, he knew some sort of shit could hit the fan that would cancel all plans.

Wearing T-shirt, skivvies and socks, he bolted out the bedroom door, into the hallway, headed to the stairs to get to their only telephone—a wall phone in the kitchen. All he could recall was the

sensation of his feet flying out from under him. The worn wooden steps in the quarters built in 1881 were slick from thousands of footsteps. He made it past the first curve, and that's all he could remember.

Nancy would be home around 1600 hours after picking up Sean at the primary school. It was her last day of teaching middle school before the holiday break, and she was counting on Willett to get the packing done so they could shove off almost as soon as she and Sean got home. He looked down at his stocking covered feet. *Okay, try to wiggle your toes.* He could see some movement with his big toes, and he could feel them rub against the wool sock. A good sign. He tried to bend forward enough to see if he could grab his left thigh and move the unresponsive leg around. *Maybe I can shake it back to life,* he thought. The back pain stopped that action before it began, and Willett's upper body sank back to rest uncomfortably on the stairs.

The plan was to take off for Chicago and drive the 662 miles straight through. It was almost eleven hours, but they'd switch off like they'd done before. Also, the weather report showed worsening conditions, and they had decided to drive through the night rather than risk getting stuck in a snowstorm. That plan not looking too good right now. She'd get home, and while there would be a touch of sympathy at his plight, Willett knew Nancy would be pissed at having to wait, or god forbid, even cancel. After all, this annual sojourn back to their hometown was for Nancy, one of the highlights of the year. Seeing her mom and her stepdad, and then all of her relatives as well as her high school friends, gave Nancy a link to a past Willett knew she had never really wanted to give up.

For him, it was a different story. He'd grown to dread Christmas, and the conflict and tension that seemed to annually increase. His stepparents, especially his stepmother, could not be pleased. It was

always, *Oh, you're going to have Christmas dinner with them?* Audrey was a true pain in the ass, as she'd always been since she replaced Willett's original stepmother a few years after she'd died of tuberculosis. Willett and Audrey never clicked. But he could at least see his two stepsisters and see how they were coping. While the atmosphere with his stepparents seemed toxic, Willett did enjoy Nancy's mother and her new husband John, an Italian who cooked like a Michelin chef.

Now, it was already 1315 hours, but at least Tyler sensed some movement in his legs. He could get them to bend slightly at the knee, and still wiggle his toes. He looked up at the wall phone in the kitchen. *Hell, who would I call anyway?* he thought. *Might as well wait and see if the legs come back to life.* He decided to pull himself into the living room and try to get onto the couch or his reading chair.

Willett managed to sit almost upright and used his arms to push his body clear of the stairs. He then twisted his body over so now he was face down and he could drag himself into the living room. He felt like a worm trying to wriggle away from a hook as he slithered toward the couch. As he got closer, he reached out with his right hand and pushed the coffee table out of the way. He'd need room to hoist himself up.

There. Made it. Willett adjusted one of the decorative couch pillows under his head. It still throbbed, and the knot in the back caused him to turn his head sideways. His back. *My god, the pain hadn't lessened,* especially after the crawl. However, as Willett laid on the couch, he finally was able to get his legs to move from side to side. He tried to lift each one, but that wasn't working yet. He was exhausted. His eyes closed. Out.

“Tyler . . . Tyler . . . hey there, we’re home,” Nancy hollered out. Willett’s eyes opened, and he could see Sean running toward him.

“He’s on the couch, Mom . . . taking a nap,” Sean said with a smile. “In his underwear,” he laughed.

“My God Tyler, what in the world?” Nancy asked as she took off her coat in the hallway.

“Hey, I fell down the stairs. Phone rang, and I dropped what I was doing and ran to get the phone. Slipped and went down ‘em all. I couldn’t even move my legs for hours, and I put a knot in my skull. I was out for a while,” Willett relayed trying to elicit some sympathy.

Nancy walked into the living room to look at her husband. “Can you move now?” she asked.

“I dunno. Haven’t tried since I was able to get to the couch,” Willett replied. “How was your day, honey?” dripping with sarcasm, as Willett swung his legs from the couch onto the throw rug. At least there was more feeling and responsiveness.

“I’m sorry, Tyler. You fell down all the stairs?” she asked.

“Yeah. And don’t ask about the packing. Maybe one-third done. I mean I was scared shitless when my legs wouldn’t move, so yeah, not finished packing. Look, there’s no way we’re getting out of here today. No way,” he stated.

“You mean you can’t drive?” she asked, already knowing the answer. “Well, fine. I’ll finish packing and ironing and fixing dinner, and whatever else, but we’re going to leave early tomorrow, presuming you can make it to the car. Shit. This means taking the bus. I hate driving it so far,” her voice trailing in a mix of frustration and anxiety. Their ’71 VW Bus was her vehicle and she only used it around the Army post and Junction City. But she hated driving Tyler’s FJ-40 Land Cruiser any distance.

“Look, we’ll make it all work,” Willett said as he tried to stand. He wobbled, and quickly sank back onto the couch.

“What’s wrong with Dad?” Sean asked, coming up from the basement.

“Your father managed to fall down the stairs in his stocking feet. Remember how I told you to be careful on those stairs? Well, he wasn’t, and so he hurt his back and his head,” Nancy’s tone that of a middle school teacher chiding a chronic misbehavior. “Sooooo, rather than leave this afternoon, we’ll leave early tomorrow,” she continued.

“Don’t worry buddy, I’ll be ready to roll tomorrow. We’ll get there, and you’ll have a great time. We all will,” Willett said with conviction, now determined to not set back the family Christmas plans.

At 0600 hours, the sliding side door of the brown and white VW bus opened, and Sean got in and put on his seat belt. The eight-year-old had managed to help his mother get the suitcase into the back of the bus, and then they helped Willett slowly get down the outside steps, trudge to the vehicle, and get into the passenger seat. It was a slow process, but he was buckled in and he said ready to drive when it was his turn. Nancy doubted that, but she cranked up the air-cooled engine after she cleared the windshield from the light snowfall whose flakes fluttered in the headlights as they pulled away.

If all went well, they’d be in Glenview by around 1700 hours. The light snow increased as they made their way to I-70, but road conditions weren’t too bad. However, the VW Bus heater and defroster, never a selling point, seemed particularly weak, especially with the temperature in the teens and increasing snowfall.

The bus trundled along and Sean slept in the rear bench seat. They got to I-70 and Nancy pulled into the first rest stop they came to so they could get a quick breakfast. They slowly made their way

inside, for Willett's movements were creaky at best. Willett and Sean went into the restroom, and as they came out and waited for Nancy, Willett spotted a weather report on an overhead television. It was not good. Heavy snowfall and deteriorating road conditions on 70 as well as I-55, which they'd pick up in St. Louis. They'd been through some precarious winter drives before, just not in the bus.

Willett offered to drive, but Nancy said she was fine, and so they continued. However, within about twenty minutes, the windshield began to fog and frost up. The defroster, as well as the heater, no longer were working. Nancy used her glove to clear the windshield, while trying to muffle a string of epithets about the splendid vehicle, mixed with why'd ya' have to fall down the goddamn stairs. She was not happy, but she was determined.

Willett felt both helpless and useless, not a familiar condition. At least traffic was light, but the visibility in the vehicle deteriorated.

"Nancy, we're gonna have to stop. I've no idea why the heat's crapped out, but this is getting hairy," Willett said. Although the bus seemed to be driving fine, and no weird sounds were coming from the rear engine compartment, the fact was no heat and no windshield defrost.

"Tyler, we can make it. I can see. Not great, but I can see. Just glad I don't have to shift on the highway. As long as I can keep using my glove, we should be fine," her level of confidence and determination got Willett fired up.

"Fine. Drive on, and we'll do whatever to make it. Just take it easy. At least the rear window defroster works."

Drive on they did. Eventually, it got to the point where Nancy's glove no longer cleared the window, but Tyler used a long scraper to provide some measure of visibility. He also kept his eye on the

shoulder and told Nancy to remain in the far right lane. That worked well for miles, and the rhythm of scraping and updates on the shoulder line kept the bus moving forward without incident. The scratchy AM radio kept some music in the tense air, as Tyler searched for new stations since they would fade off with distance.

“I’m really hungry,” came the voice from the back seat.

“Okay, sweetie. You’re right, we need to stop.” Signs showed an exit a short way ahead, and the Willetts did not care what sort of fare was available. Their VW Bus moved within a half-mile of the exit, when suddenly a car pulled in front of them, too close for comfort and instinctively, Nancy hit the brakes. The bus began to fishtail, and as she tried to counter-steer, it only got worse.

Sean screamed from the back seat. Tyler gripped the handle on the glove box. Nancy kept trying to gain control, but the bus finally spun completely around on the interstate—a 360-degree turn—and just like that, they were moving in the right direction without any catastrophe. Within a few hundred feet, they gingerly turned onto the exit, and headed for the diner that beckoned only a short distance away. They finally could breathe.

“That was fun!” said the little man who’d screamed as the bus spun completely around, and both Willett and Nancy laughed as they all slid into a booth, glad for some respite, and thankful they could laugh about what happened.

“Nancy, I’m gonna drive. I’ll be fine. I’m certainly more mobile than this morning, and you need a break. Just don’t break the scraper.”

“Okay. That’s fine. We’re not far from St. Louis, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, not far. We’re not gonna be there by 1700, but we’ll make it. That’s all that matters, and I’ll be fine,” Willett added.

Hours later, after conditions seemed to improve, sure enough, the Willetts pulled into Nancy's childhood home later than they wanted, but safe and sound. Now, Christmas could actually be celebrated, and before they went in, they made sure Sean would keep quiet about their perilous adventure. Just be happy they made it.

CHAPTER 17: SNAKE BIT

June 1983

“**S**ure as shit glad we’re not eatin’ C’s,” Captain Willett mumbled. First Sergeant Tom Ross nodded. The two men, standing at one of the dozen square wooden chow tables at the Fort Riley tank gunnery complex, briefly talked between shoveling in the beef stew the mess sergeant provided for lunch.

“Top, when you get done with your chow, send Sergeant Caldera over here. I need to get a maintenance update, especially on 32. Transmission issues during tank gunnery ain’t gonna work,” Willett directed his trusted First Sergeant. “Oh, and I’m gonna shag Hendrick over here after Caldera. I need him to let me know how the newbies are doin’.”

“Sir, Billie told me most of ‘em are fine,” Ross said. “Only Phillips is a bit shaky, but he believes once we get through the early tables, he’ll shape up. Good attitude, just not the brightest bulb in the socket.”

“Thanks. Part of my motive is just to ensure Hendrick takes a break. Thank God for him. What a tanker. His gunnery abilities

amaze me. Plus, he's a hard workin' human," Willett's sincerity evident in his tone.

As First Sergeant Ross turned from the table to bring his tray to the mess tent, Willett hollered, "Top, just send Hendrick and Caldera together. I'll kill two birds with one stone."

"Careful what ya' kill there cap'n," Ross snarled back in a tone familiar to Willett and appreciated. The two men led the tank company's men well, and the unit functioned professionally, but with a personal camaraderie evident in all they did, on and off duty.

Willett knew this would be his last tank gunnery as company commander, and he wanted it to go as well or better than the previous two, both very successful. This gunnery, however, would be the first with the new battalion commander. Thus far, the man had not shown much during their first field exercise, and rumor had it he wasn't gonna fire first during this gunnery. After all, the battalion commander always fires first. Willett remained unimpressed, and wary.

The early summer Kansas air, dry and still, began to heat up. The updated gunnery complex, now populated only by Bravo Company, made tank gunnery preparation doable without the unnecessary hiccups or issues Willett had experienced at a prior post. All seventeen tanks could be on the line at once, allowing the master gunner, platoon leaders and platoon sergeants to easily jump between their tanks, especially during the boresight and zero exercise, as they were doing today. In the moments when the air wasn't pierced by the sound of a tank round flying down range, Willett could hear himself think, and converse with men without ear plugs.

As he took a last slug of lukewarm coffee from his metal canteen cup, Hendrick and Caldera approached Willett's table.

“Sir, reporting as requested,” Hendrick announced. No salutes in the field or on a range.

The two NCOs each took one side of the square table. Hendrick, tall but built like a pear, directly faced Willett. He and Willett, together for the last two and a half years, had mutual respect. Clearly, they had learned from each other. Caldera, comparatively new to the unit, already had impressed Willett. The man’s can-do attitude matched his results. He’d gotten some maintenance issues resolved that his predecessor had not been able to fix. A small, wiry man, Caldera carried himself with bravado, and his dark eyes pierced, looking for a challenge.

“Y’all break for chow yet?” Willett queried.

“Nah, gotta get Phillips on track on 23. He can shoot, but it’s his commands. You know time is so important, and it’s his goddamn voice sir. If it wasn’t gunnery, it’d be funny. It’s like this sir . . . he stretches EVERY word out . . . I. den. ti. fied. Onnnnn the waaay. I mean, what’s supposed to take two seconds, takes about fifteen, so yeah, I’m workin’ on the deep, slow tone of his so he doesn’t cost us when it’s money time, but don’t worry, I’ll get some grub,” Hendrick answered.

Just then, one of the wooden doors from the half-dozen connected shitters burst open. PFC Snyder, field pants and skivvies at his ankles, hurriedly shuffled out onto the wooden landing screaming, “A snake bit me in the ass! A fuck’n snake bit me in the ass while I’m try’n to shit!” his hands reaching around where said snake violated him. He grabbed the railing on the landing that ran the length of the shitters, screaming “What the fuck am I gonna do?”

Willett, Hendrick, and Caldera looked on in amazement. The mess crew came out of the mess tent, and activity on the range ceased.

Hendrick, who was PFC Snyder's platoon sergeant, walked toward Snyder, and in his Buzzard Roost, Mississippi drawl, told his shocked soldier, "Boy you're gonna die, 'cause ain't nobody gonna suck venom outta your sorry ass!"

Snyder, a loader on B-24, began to pull up his skivvies and BDU pants, but continued to grab at his ass.

"Damn Sarge, the fuckin' thing just bit me. I mean that shitter's plum full—someone shoudda had that thing emptied . . ." Snyder's voice trailed off as he slumped at the railing.

Hendrick climbed the wooden stairs onto the landing, looked at Snyder, and then walked into the snake's stall. Willett followed up the stairs, and First Sergeant Ross was close behind, but stayed at the bottom for the moment.

Hendrick's flashlight moved back and forth trying to find the culprit and hoping it wasn't poisonous. The stench momentarily drove him out, and he put a kerchief around his nose and mouth. Back in he went as Willett stood by Snyder. By now, one of the medics attached to the unit made his way up onto the landing, and asked Snyder to drop his drawers again so he could see the wound.

Hendrick came out of the shitter, pulled down his kerchief, paused to breathe and said, "It ain't poisonous. It's a black rat snake—big sucker, but it ain't poisonous. Damn range control, I never shoulda signed for the range until they emptied these out like they promised."

"Sir, I'll take him over to our PC and clean the wound out. He should be fine," Specialist Collins, the medic stated. "You're sure it's not poisonous, right?"

"Yeah, I'm sure, so go ahead and move out with him and hustle it up," Hendrick snapped.

“First Sergeant get on the landline and get those folks out here to empty these out. Let’s look at the others to see how deep, and close this one off,” Willett commanded.

As the men cleared the landing, Willett walked over to his quarter-ton jeep, and sat in the passenger seat. His thoughts traveled back to his first gunnery at this complex. Now almost two years ago, Willett would never forget when a new tank commander somehow got his foot caught in the turret ring as he slewed the turret around after backing out of a firing position on the range. The newly minted commander’s boot was mangled, with his foot bones protruding and blood everywhere. A medevac carried the young soldier to the hospital, but he lost his foot and was then medically discharged.

Willett remembered fearing his unit might be “snake bit” and prone to unfortunate incidents and accidents. Little did he realize snake bit two years later would take on a far less ominous aura. Nothing more than a bite in the ass.

CHAPTER 18:

COMMAND PERFORMANCE

Locked Back Gate

July 1983

“3 1 this is 6, over,” Willett barked into his helmet microphone, wanting a commo check from his platoons prior to move out.

“Roger 6. 31 lickin’ chick’n,” Waller the tank commander of B-31, and 3rd platoon leader replied. Waller, a north Florida good ol’ boy was never one to follow radio/telephone procedure, but he certainly knew how to shoot a tank.

“11, 21 report.”

“6, 11 set.” “21 set.” Lieutenants Conley and Davidson reported.

All three platoon leaders had now been through numerous field exercises and two tank gunneries under Willett, and each man proved to be a quick learner, good leader, and a very good tanker. Plus, each of these platoon leaders had been blessed with seasoned, highly competent platoon sergeants, as would soon again be evidenced.

“5, where’s the yahoo with the key to the back gate? Still locked and chained and we’ve about 8 mikes until we move out. Get that goddamn key chop, chop!” Willett commanded Marsh, his executive officer. Lieutenant Marsh dismounted and ran over to PFC Barber, sitting in Willett’s M-151 jeep.

“Barber, find who’s got the back-gate key and get it unlocked, NOW!” Marsh shouted, as the 54 M-60A1 tanks, all idling their powerful diesel engines, filled the air with rumbling noise and familiar fumes.

Barber raced off to the maintenance offices to find whoever was supposed to unlock and open the back gate. It was the responsibility of the battalion maintenance company, and right now they were dropping the ball at a most inopportune time. Willett looked at his watch. He knew that in two minutes, Bravo Company, the lead company of 1-34 Armor task force, would have to depart the battalion motor pool in order to hit the Start Point for the tactical road march on time. This exercise was big and hitting the SP on time was only the first of many evaluated tasks his company and battalion would undergo within the next six days.

Willett’s tank was, of course, in the lead and idling only about fifty meters from the gate, part of a typical chain link fence with barbed wire along the top. Heavy duty chain serpented it’s way around the gate post and the first post in the fence, secured with a 200-series lock.

With time running down, Willett pushed the CVC lever to speak only to his crew.

“Piggly, I want you to get ready to roll. I’m gonna swing the turret around over the back deck, and we, my friend, are gonna go right through that fuck’n gate. Got that?”

PFC Tomkins, otherwise known as Piggly Wiggly, for his penchant for groceries from that chain, in addition to his portliness, which proved a constant personal battle given Army height/weight standards, was nonetheless a peerless tank driver. He'd been a tanker long enough to have much higher rank, but too many DWIs and weight issues held him back. But Willett would have no other driver. Tomkins knew these tanks inside and out and he could maneuver them where others feared to try.

“Bravo, this is 6. We're movin' out. I'm headed through the gate. There's no goddamn way B Company's gonna miss an SP time. Follow me. Just road march like we've trained, and we'll be fine. We'll laager in the assembly area per the order and meet then.”

“Yee haaahh!” Waller hollered on the company net. “Give 'em hell, Cap'n!”

Tomkins revved up the Continental 1790-2 750 horsepower diesel engine and slammed the transmission into gear. The 49-ton war machine lurched forward, picking up speed.

With the main gun safely turned over the back deck, B-6 smashed into the back gate, immediately severing the lock and chain, the gate doors flying open, with the center posts of the gate awkwardly bent by the tank's front slope, and the gate doors then slamming left and right.

Bravo Company, 1-34 Armor, with its 17 tanks, was on the march and on time to hit the tactical road march start point. This day was off to a smashing success.

Assembly Area

B Company, 1-34 Armor arrived in their designated assembly area and immediately began their cover and concealment actions,

which by now were automatic for this group of tankers. Already pumped up by Willett's busting down the battalion motor pool gate, the soldiers and NCO's talked excitedly about the great start to this Army Training and Evaluation Program (ARTEP) exercise.

As the tank crews, under the direction of their platoon sergeants, began to camouflage their tanks and start to run commo wire between tanks, the men were excited to find out what missions awaited them. Everyone knew that an annual ARTEP provided the single biggest measure of tactical proficiency, and the men of B Company reflected their commander's will to win, and his demand for excellence.

Willett's men knew what he'd say: "It's not practice that makes perfect, it's perfect practice that makes perfect." They could quote another of his favorites as well: "Show me a good loser, and I'll show you a loser." From Vince Lombardi, the ol' Green Bay Packer coach, but Willett liked the message.

As his own crew prepped B-6, Willett trooped the line, checking on each platoon's progress. He advised sergeants and lieutenants to be alert. When Willett returned from the initial brigade level orders group, he called for his own orders group.

"Piggly, get the jeep ready. Let me know when battalion calls about the operations order, okay? I'm gonna talk with the platoon leaders for a bit before we've gotta shove off, which I suspect won't be for another hour or so."

"WILCO (Will comply) sir. You wanna C-ration to take with ya? I heated up them scrambled egg ones you like," Tomkins asked.

"Nah. I'll wait for later. Keep 'em hot," Willett answered.

Piggly Wiggly had rigged a clamp, perfect for a round C-ration can, to the jeep's four-cylinder engine's head cover. When clamped in, the engine heat kept the can warm. This was especially

good for the otherwise horrible scrambled eggs C-rations that Willett favored.

Summer in central Kansas, so yup, the weather was hot and mainly dry. B Company's assembly area was ideal. Most of the seventeen tanks in the company found cover in a rare tree line, and the others professionally used their camouflage netting to provide the necessary concealment. It was still early on Day 1 of this important exercise, designed to last six to seven days, depending upon how quickly missions and battles completed.

Willett knew he was fortunate with the officers and non-commissioned officers assigned to him.

Bobby Davidson, a West Pointer, could be stubborn and arrogant as some Hudson High newbies could be, but he soon began to listen and learn, and his progress in dealing with soldiers and NCO's was rapid. Davidson finally realized the real world was not as black and white as life at the academy. A stocky, round-faced man, about 5'8", Davidson possessed great energy and strength. His get-it-done attitude was a great attribute. He soon learned how to work smart, not hard.

Donnie Waller, a Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) grad, was a good ol' boy in every sense of the word. From north Florida, Sellers lived for hunt'n, fish'n, boot scoot'n, and his wife and little son. With a clipped drawl and phrases akin to the southland, Waller could be a hoot. During one field training exercise, Waller called in a spot report over the company radio net, about "a whole passel of enemy tanks." A tall, lanky man with angular features and a peculiar gate, Waller loved being in the Army and he particularly loved tanks. He got along famously with his NCOs and soldiers in the second platoon, and they admired the skill he'd developed as a tanker. Waller could be counted on.

Bill Conley, another ROTC grad, proved to be the anomaly. A New England man, unusual enough, since it seemed most men at the time were from the south or the midwest. Conley was stoic, proper, somewhat distant and formal. However, he knew his business, and once he gained a comfort level, his wonderful sense of humor burst forth. Just guarded, that's all. A six-footer, Waller was Hollywood handsome, but career focused, so he remained single. The men of third platoon grew to appreciate Waller's quiet leadership, and Willett managed to break through the veneer, bringing out the best in him.

B Company's platoon sergeants proved one of the unit's greatest strengths. SSG Billie Hendrick, from Buzzard Roost, Mississippi, proved over and over his unparalleled abilities as a tanker. Serving as the company's master gunner, Hendrick's knowledge and skills truly aided each tank crew in all aspects of their training for gunnery and the results showed. Additionally, Hendrick knew tactics and maneuver, and he was particularly familiar with the Fort Riley training area, where this ARTEP would take place. Tall and literally shaped like a pear, Hendrick would never be a poster boy for the Army fitness program, though he did manage to pass each physical training test. But no commander could ask for a better tanker to help prepare and then execute a battle plan than Hendrick. Plus, Hendrick knew precisely just how to deal with Lieutenant Davidson, and the two men, so very different, formed a strong professional bond that benefitted the entire company.

SFC Phillip W. Franklin, half Cherokee and other half hard-ass, took no prisoners. A true warrior, Franklin proved again and again his technical and tactical proficiency. Standing about 5'11, Franklin's solid build and hardened features marked him as a man not to mess with. With a voice graveled by countless cigarettes,

Franklin led by example, and a fine example he set. Franklin and his men met the very highest of standards in all they did. Franklin was even able to tighten up LT Waller's act, and get the good ol' boy to improve in everything he did.

B Company's 3d platoon could be characterized as the strong but silent platoon. SSG Tommy Baird, a Vietnam veteran, quietly and efficiently went about his business in the most professional way. A man of few words, when Baird did speak, folks listened, especially since what he had to say always was on target. Coupled with his stoic lieutenant, the 3d platoon proved extremely capable, and Willett knew he could count on their performance. Baird, another constant smoker, looked formidable. 5'11" with a chiseled face, tanned, leathery skin, and forearms that would make Popeye jealous, Baird looked like the man you'd want having your back at a bar fight. Baird should have been at least a Sergeant First Class by now, but somehow he managed to get busted. Nonetheless, Willett knew that once he'd earned Baird's trust, the man would run through a brick wall for the unit.

Willett's confidence soared as the actual battlefield confrontation awaited. He knew his men were well-trained. Importantly, Willett loved the unit's collective ability to adapt on the fly. One of Willett's favorite truths: "No plan survives contact." Thus, even when a battle plan seemed well thought out and rehearsed, when each battle began, inevitably the unit quickest to adapt won the battle. With this being the final battlefield test of Willett's command, he wanted badly to go out a winner. His men knew their commander would soon turn the company over, and Willett could sense his soldiers wanted to win as badly as their commander.

“That asshole,” Willett blurted out as he and Piggly Wiggly headed out of the battalion assembly area in the commander’s jeep, back to Team Bravo’s assembly area.

“What’ja talk’n ‘bout, cap’n?” Tomkins asked.

“Their battalion commander, Thibidoux, they call him the Ragin’ Cajun. We get outta the briefing tent and I see him walk’n toward me. He calls my name, so I stop. ‘Yes sir’ and then he goes ‘This gonna be a good one there, captain, but me and my boys gonna kick your ass, and you’ll know then, you been had by the Ragin’ Cajun.’”

“Damn, sir. . .whad’ja say?” Wiggly asked.

“I stared at him for a few seconds, looked at him and said, ‘I reckon we’ll see how your BOYS fare against me and my men. . .sir.’ He just looked at me with darts, and we both turned and walked away. I couldn’t believe a battalion commander would do that shit.”

As they arrived in the Team Bravo assembly area, Willett commanded Tomkins to put out an orders call on the company landline they’d established. He wanted his platoon leaders, XO and platoon sergeants together to brainstorm the best approach for their upcoming attack on the Ragin’ Cajun’s reinforced company, now preparing defenses as part of this major field training exercise, the culminating battle of this ARTEP. The battalion commander designated Team Bravo the main effort, with Team Alpha in the supporting attack. They’d be attacking a company team comprised of an armor platoon, a mechanized infantry platoon, reinforced with a combat engineer platoon and a mortar platoon.

Willett’s Team Bravo consisted of two tank platoons, one mechanized infantry platoon, and primary support from the battalion

scout platoon. Team Alpha consisted of two mechanized infantry platoons, and Willett's 3d platoon led by Conley and Baird.

With his men gathered around, Willett let his men know not only the plan, but that today things had gotten personal. "Their battalion commander, after the OPOD came up to me and said, 'his boys' were gonna kick our ass,'" Willett said forcefully.

The men stirred in their folding chairs placed outside of the operations tent. Some muttered epithets, but Willett continued.

"So, I told him, 'we'll see how your boys do against my men,'" and immediately the assembled men began to holler.

"We'll get 'em sir!"

"Fuck with us, will they!"

"Good answer, cap'n!"

"We've got eighteen hours to prepare, and we've been given the battalion order and graphics, but I gotta tell ya' I ain't happy with what I see. I know the captain commanding the company/team that'll likely be their main effort. He's a West Pointer and I guarantee ya that their defensive positioning and preparation will be by the book. So, I wanna figure out a way we can surprise 'em. Hit 'em where they don't expect it," Willett said emphatically. "I've laid out the graphics from battalion, and I need y'all to take a look at what we've been given, and in an hour, come back to me with some alternative courses of action and avenues of approach," and with that he turned the men loose to see what they'd come up with.

More Torque in Reverse

An hour later the men reassembled. Hendrick stood up. "Sir, we think we've got a way we can flank 'em. West of here. Some really

steep hills, but if our tanks can climb ‘em, we get up to a plateau and from there we could go balls to the wall and hit ‘em before they knew what happened. But, we’re gonna have to recon, and see if a tank can actually make the climb sir. It’ll be close.”

Willett went to the field table with the map and the battle graphics laid out. Hendrick pointed to the position they’d found on their map reconnaissance.

“The key, sir, is gonna be how much slope. This here combat engineer guide shows how much the M-60 tank can climb, so that’s what we gotta check out sir,” Hendrick stated.

“Great. Sergeant Hendrick and Sergeant Franklin, y’all follow my tank to that location. Use my jeep. If me and Piggly can get up there, we’ll be a go, presuming it looks good when we get to the top. Bobby, I need you and Donnie to keep prepping the vehicles, and ensure all maintenance is good, and get the Hoffmann devices checked out. Lieutenant Hawkins, I need you to contact the Scout Platoon and remind them to get us any intel they get from their recons.”

Within twenty minutes, they arrived at the base of the steep hills found in the map reconnaissance. “Damn, you weren’t kid’n when you said they were steep,” Willett said. “How much slope does that manual say this baby will climb?”

“Well sir, based on the manual, and what we can eyeball here, it’s gonna be close. Plus, we’re talk’n ‘bout git’n eleven tanks up here, so we’d have to spread ‘em out some, and the angles aren’t all equal,” Hendrick answered.

“Hey sir, don’t mean to interrupt,” Tompkins piped up, “but why not try to climb ‘em in reverse. There’re two forward gears,

and they shift automatically, but there's only one in reverse, sir. So, I reckon you got more torque in reverse.”

“Piggly, you are right!” Hendrick exclaimed. “That’s absolutely correct. We’d get max torque, and that would be enough . . . least ways by the book, to get ‘em up that hill sir,” Hendrick continued.

Willett, his helmet off and three quarters of the way through his Marlboro, looked at the hill, then turned and glanced back at his tank. “Alright, let’s mount up and see if we can get this baby up there. You sure we can do this in reverse? I mean I know I’ve got to turn the turret over the back deck, and I’ll have to give ya’ directions, but are you gonna be okay knowing which way to steer? It’s all gonna be backwards, right?” Willett asked.

“Sir, you just let me know which way to turn if we have to, and when we’re fix’n to get to the top, ‘cause I reckon up at the top I’m gonna have to goose her a little,” Piggly said.

“That sounds like a plan. Let’s go,” Willett commanded, and he and PFC Tomkins got into Bravo 6, the commander’s 49 ton M-60A1 tank and maneuvered it to the base of the steep hill. Willett swung the turret over the tank’s back deck, and Tomkins neutral steered so the tank was facing the hill backwards.

“Driver, move out,” Willett commanded from the tank’s cupola with the main gun over the back deck. Immediately the tank lurched forward, the track grabbing the ground underneath, pulling the tank up the slope. Slowly, they continued to climb, with Willett occasionally ordering Tomkins, using clock readings. “11 hundred. . . back to 12 . . . straight . . . 14 hundred . . . back to 12 . . . yeah, baby keep climbing.” Slowly, Bravo 6 zig-zagged up the slope. While the climb only covered about forty meters straight line, the slow zig zag seemed to take forever.

“Great job Piggly. Keep her goin’—we’re almost there,” Willett said, his heart pounding. Suddenly, as the tank approached the top of the challenging hill, Willett realized there was a lip.

“Wiggly, gun it! Gun it good—there’s a fucking lip. We gotta have enough to get over that bitch,” Willett’s voice steady and firm, but his stomach suddenly knotted.

As the tank hit the lip, Willett and all 160 of his pounds leaned forward in the cupola, as if his weight was going to be the difference between the 49-ton tank making it to the top or toppling over backwards. Tomkins gunned the 1790 engine and all the torque the tank could muster propelled it over the lip, and then gravity brought it slamming into the plateau as they had hoped. They made it!

Take a Bow

“Gentleman, this AAR (After Action Review) begins in two minutes so take your seats,” said Colonel Phillip Comstock, the G-3 of the 1st Infantry Division.

Present in the briefing tent were the two battalion commanders, Lieutenant Colonel Thibidoux and Lieutenant Colonel James, Willett’s commander. Additionally, the respective company commanders, Captain Dolton, C Company 1-63 Armor, and Willett and Smalley from 1-34 Armor. Also present were all the independent evaluators who covered from battalion down to platoon level for this ARTEP evaluation field training exercise.

Major Barry Jenkins, the overall maneuver evaluator, began the AAR stating, “This exercise involved the conduct of a deliberate attack by two company teams of 1-34 Armor against a deliberate defense conducted by a reinforced company team from 1-63 Armor.

“Gentleman, make no mistake, this battle resulted in a rout. Elements of the 34th managed to achieve complete surprise by using an avenue of approach uncovered by the 63d. The 34th’s supporting attack elements commenced their attack at Beginning Morning Nautical Twilight with a mortar and smoke barrage, aided by morning fog. Team A, 1-34 then conducted fire and maneuver toward the 63’s deliberate defensive positions,” Jenkins stated as he used his pointer to outline the avenue used to move toward the 1-63 defenses.

“Based on direct observation and recorded radio traffic, it became clear that Team C believed they were being attacked by the 34th’s main effort. It was within the next eight to ten minutes that Team Bravo from the 34th, the actual main effort, executed a totally unexpected maneuver up steep hillsides at this location,” he pointed to the map, “where they managed to get ten of eleven tanks up the slope, onto the plateau, offering them open and unguarded access to the western flank of Team C,” as Jenkins continued to point to the movement on the map.

“The company level evaluators strongly emphasized that the only way Team Bravo tanks could make it up those slopes was by climbing their tanks in reverse gear, which provided enough torque to succeed, where in forward gears, such a climb would have likely failed. The single tank that failed to reach the top suffered an engine malfunction and remained out of the battle. This bold and audacious move, reluctantly sanctioned by the battalion commander, proved critical in the achievement of total surprise.” Jenkins turned to face the assembled officers and non-commissioned officers in the briefing tent.

Willett and his lieutenants, obviously aware of their total victory before entering the AAR, managed to contain their emotions, knowing a celebration would follow later. Willett did manage to

glance over at Thibidoux, sitting in the front row along with James. Willett figured Thibidoux wouldn't be seeking him out after this brief. For the moment, the Ragin' Cajun could only sit and listen. For Willett, it was all he needed both personally and professionally.

With the 'bottom line up front' detailing the complete defeat of Team C by the elements of the 34th Armor, the balance of the AAR went into details down to platoon level. As Willett and his officers listened, Willett felt it was like a post-game analysis of a football game, with all of the yardage, completions, and fumbles recounted by broadcasters. In this case, all that mattered was the final score.

As the men were leaving the briefing tent, James walked over to Willett and his lieutenants. "Great job. Outstanding. I'm really proud of how you executed the battalion plan," James said in the squeaky voice that GIs privately mocked.

Willett thought about the heated argument in the battalion headquarters tent that had ensued when Willett brought up his plan to attack from the hill. The colonel proved extremely reluctant to take any risk. Fortunately, the battalion operations officer managed to convince James to let Team Bravo make the attempt. James finally agreed, though not without a veiled threat that failure would be career costly.

"Thank you, sir," Willett said. "Glad you allowed us to use that alternate avenue of approach. It was critical to the element of surprise."

"I had my reservations, but in the end you managed to convince me, and I'm glad it worked out so well. Carry on," James concluded, and the men all headed toward their vehicles to return to the assembly area and prepare for the road march back to garrison.

As Willett began walking toward his jeep, he glanced to his left and saw Thibidoux standing by the briefing tent, his head and eyes following Willett's movement. As their eyes met, Thibidoux nodded, his head slowly moving up and down twice, and then he turned away. For Willett, this was the acknowledgement, job well done.

CHAPTER 19: SEMPER SCROTUM

May 1984

“Sir, sorry to interrupt your class, but Colonel Farrell wanted me to give you this message,” said the Lance Corporal, after he’d knocked and entered the small group instruction room of Lieutenant Colonel Paul Neal Bleyer, USMC.

Bleyer thanked the messenger, as the twelve-man class momentarily relaxed. They’d been keenly studying maps relating to General Stonewall Jackson’s Valley Campaign during the Civil War, or the War of Northern Aggression as Lieutenant Colonel Bleyer sometimes put it. The small group instruction proved a central educational benefit to the conduct of the U.S. Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School’s (AWS) methodology. Lieutenant Colonel Bleyer’s conduct of the training was exemplary.

“Captain Willett, the AWS commandant, Colonel Farrell, needs to see you ASAP in his office on the second deck,” Bleyer stated bluntly, looking at the only U.S. Army officer in his group, and the only armor officer in the entire AWS class of 83-84.

Willett’s stomach knotted momentarily. He wondered what the hell the AWS commandant wanted. Willett couldn’t think of any

egregious offense. As he got out of his seat, he could feel the eyes of his classmates focus on the Army guy they'd grown to know since he joined them in September. Now, with the class coming to a close, their looks made it clear that this call to 'the man' was a mystery.

"Sir, any idea what's up?" Willett asked Bleyer.

"Captain Willett, you're simply going to have to get up there and find out for yourself," Bleyer, one eyebrow lifted, replied in the soft Virginia dialect they'd all grown used to.

"Aye, aye, sir," Willett said, using Marine lingo, as he walked out of the comfort of their small group classroom to see what fate awaited him with the commandant.

Selection to attend AWS by the Army's Armor Branch stood as the highest honor achieved thus far in Willett's career, and he knew his performance met or exceeded the Marine Corps standards. He'd enjoyed the course, and the friendships he'd made with the Marines. Willett truly appreciated the camaraderie found in the Corps. At times, even the Marines would joke that AWS was a six-month course crammed into nine months, but it was rigorous, challenging and rewarding. The Army's combat arms branches each sent one officer every academic year, and Willett had good relationships with his Army compatriots as well.

As he made his way to the second deck in the academic building, Willett's mind raced through milestones this year brought. His baby daughter Kylie, born days before they had to shove off from Fort Riley, making the trip, and certainly keeping Nancy busy. At least Nancy could relax with their newborn and not have to teach. Young Sean adapted immediately, and his athletic skills shone brightly on the soccer field, basketball courts, and baseball field when pitted against kids living on the base in Quantico.

Plus, Willett had quit smoking. 2 November '83. He and his jarhead buddy Clifford vowed to quit after they completed their physical training test's three-mile run, and both men sat in Clifford's truck, doors open, spitting up pieces of lung after busting their asses on the run. Quit they did, and Willett knew once he made it through the annual Marine Corps Ball eight days later without a smoke, he could make it forever.

Reaching the second deck, Willett's mind refocused on what was about to transpire. He made a quick stop in the head for a uniform check and made sure no lunch was still stuck in his teeth. He knew Colonel Farrell's appearance seemed perfect, like central casting for senior USMC officer.

Willett entered the outer door, and approached the outer office desk, greeting the colonel's secretary. She looked up, saw Willett's name tag and said, "The colonel's expecting you captain, go right in."

Opening the door to the commandant's office, Willett saw Colonel Farrell sitting at his impressive wooden desk, with an American flag on one side, and the Marine Corp flag on the other. Farrell looked up as Willett approached. Reaching the front of the desk, Willett came to attention, rendered a perfect salute while stating, "Captain Willett reporting as requested, sir."

Colonel Farrell returned the salute and said "Have a seat. You're wondering why the hell I called you in here, I expect."

"You're right sir," Willett said, looking directly at the colonel.

"Captain, how've you liked this course now that you're almost done?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"Sir, it's been a great experience in every way. It's been an honor to be one of the officers representing the Army here and my respect for the Corps has only grown," Willett answered earnestly.

“You’ve done well . . . very well, based on feedback from Lieutenant Colonel Bleyer and others and on my own observation. There’s been considerable discussion about you. The reason I’ve asked to see you this afternoon is to discuss your career, your future,” Farrell said.

Puzzled, Willett asked “In what respect, sir?”

“Captain Willett,” he paused, picking up a packet, continuing, “I’m holding official paperwork that, if you sign, will complete an inter-service transfer from the U.S. Army to the United States Marine Corps. It’s official if you agree. The armor force in the Marines truly could use an officer of your caliber, and you’d bring a great perspective,” Farrell ended.

Willett sat stunned. He hadn’t seen *this* coming.

“I know it’s a big decision captain, and I expect you’ll want or need some time to decide, and that’s understandable,” Farrell offered.

Willett decided, right then and there. “Sir, it’s a tremendous honor. A wonderful professional surprise really. But, sir, I’m as committed to the Army as you are to the Marine Corps. Plus, with all due respect, there’s likely more tanks in the Georgia national guard as there are in the whole Corp. Plus, the high-speed Marines, they’re all infantry, like yourself, sir. I was an enlisted infantryman, but my heart’s with tanks sir. So, I’m going to decline the offer to transfer,” Willett concluded.

Colonel Farrell looked at Willett, silent, their eyes meeting, and Willett sensing a softening in the man’s face. “Frankly, I expected you’d decide that. We simply thought it was worth the effort. I respect your decision, captain. However, I do need to discuss one other issue before I let you go,” Farrell said quizzically. “I’ve been advised you’re the smart ass who decided to try and give the United

States Marine Corps another motto . . . is that correct?” he asked, his tone now stern.

Willett wasn't sure how to respond, his mind wondering how in the world the commandant had heard about the motto the Army captain coined.

“Semper Scrotum: always on the ball, that your creation captain?” Farrell asked.

With a sheepish grin, Willett replied “Yes sir, it is. In good fun, of course,” he added.

“Well, gotta tell ya. I heard that and I laughed my ass off,” Farrell said grinning, and he continued, “So if you're not going to be joining us, you've at least left us with the Army's take on our motto. That's all captain, and best of luck in the rest of your career. Now, get your ass back in your class so you can complete AWS in good standing,” Farrell finished.

Tyler Willett, still stunned, stood, saluted, did an about-face, and strode out of the office, his mind reeling, certain he'd made the right decision, but knowing one of the best years of his Army career would be the one spent with the United States Marine Corps.

WILLET'S BULLETS

- DON'T POLE VAULT OVER MOUSE TURDS
- NO PLAN SURVIVES CONTACT
- NEVER TIME TO DO IT RIGHT, BUT ALWAYS TIME TO DO IT OVER
- BETTER IS THE ENEMY OF GOOD ENOUGH
- 70% SOLUTION ON TIME IS BETTER THAN 100% SOLUTION THAT'S LATE
- KNOW WHAT RIGHT LOOKS LIKE
- STOP TRYING TO NAIL JELLY TO A TREE
- YOU WANT IT BAD . . . YOU GET IT BAD
- NO ONE WANTS WAR LESS THAN THE SOLDIER FOR NO ONE KNOWS MORE ABOUT WAR
- SHOW ME A GOOD LOSER AND I'LL SHOW YOU A LOSER: Vince Lombardi

Rick Bogdan

- IT'S NOT PRACTICE THAT MAKES PERFECT; IT'S PERFECT PRACTICE THAT MAKES PERFECT: Vince Lombardi
- COMMAND IS A BLEND OF ART AND SCIENCE

