

A person wearing a green bucket hat and a green tactical jacket is shown from the waist up. They are heavily equipped with various pouches and gear. On their chest, there is a black magazine and a small white device. A green pouch is on their left hip, and a tan pouch is on their right hip. A black belt is visible around their waist. The background is a blurred green forest.

PROMIS

#1

JACK MURPHY

05MAR70

Border region

Laos

Staff Sergeant Sean Deckard spun on his heel, taking a knee in the dense foliage and shouldered his CAR-15 rifle as enemy gunfire cut through the jungle to his side. Letting the rifle's front sight post nose up into the center mass of a charging North Vietnamese soldier, he stroked the trigger, dropping his target with a single shot in a spray of crimson.

Behind him, Pao threw a fragmentation grenade, its flight path riding a lazy arc in the enemy's direction before disappearing into the jungle.

Expending the rest of his magazine, Sean put suppressive fire down range, the carbine heating up in his hands as he fired on automatic. Screams sounded as Pao's grenade detonated, shrapnel cutting through NVA flesh. With the enemy advance temporarily stalled, Sean grabbed the American crouched beside him by the sleeve of his flight suit and dragged him to his feet.

Now it was Pao's turn to fire. Sean bounded back with the downed fighter pilot, their actions choreographed as they executed the well rehearsed battle drill.

Tom quickly extended a Claymore mine's metal legs before sticking it into place in the jungle underbrush. With the command detonation wire back stacked onto a wooden spool he was the next to bound back just as Sean set down near a thick tree with his package in tow.

Vang jumped over a fallen tree trunk covered in slick green moss, his AK-47 in hand, taking cover behind it just in time.

“Fire in the hole!”

Tom squeezed the claymore clacker, detonating the mine. Hundreds of explosively propelled steel ball bearings ripped through the NVA skirmish line that had threatened to over run them for the third time in less than an hour.

Even as the front line was cleared out by the anti-personnel mine, Sean knew they weren't going to make it. Loading his rifle with a fresh magazine,

he shook his head. The dice had been loaded against his team from the beginning.

There were just too many of them.

Hot brass glinted as spent cartridges were ejected from his CAR-15. The sickly sweet smell of gun power wafted with the sour sulfur stench left by explosive residue, all combining with the ever present rot that existed in the jungle. Tracking from one target to the next, Sean squeezed his trigger in rapid succession, knocking the enemy down like bowling pins. As he burnt through magazine after magazine, the NVA kept coming. They were like rows of shark teeth, automatically replacing themselves by rotating into position.

Pivoting at the hips, a Chinese made bayonet ripped through the commando's OD fatigues and sliced across the surface of his skin before burying itself in the bark of the tree he had taken cover behind. The North Vietnamese soldier yanked at his AK-47 attempting to free it. The khaki uniformed soldier had come out of nowhere, emerging out of the foliage from their flank.

RPD machine guns opened up, more lead tracing figure eights across Sean's Recon Team.

The pilot jumped to his feet and tackled the NVA troop to the ground. As they wrestled each other, Sean was left pinned to the tree until he tore himself free with a grunt, his bloodied uniform hanging open where the bayonet had nearly killed him.

Finally, Vang stepped forward and pressed the muzzle of his rifle against the NVA soldier's head. Sean turned to the disheveled pilot as Vang's AK barked.

This time they ran together, with Vang close behind as Pao and Tom provided cover fire. The other two Montagnard mercenaries assigned to Recon Team Key West had been killed a kilometer back where the team had dumped their rucksacks. Weighted down with heavy loads, they would have been unable to maneuver as they attempted to break contact. Dropping their rucksacks, they had each initiated a short time fuse just as the NVA hit them a second time.

The time fuse detonated soap dish charges in the bottom of each team members ruck, destroying the excess military equipment, leaving nothing for

the North Vietnamese to scavenge and exploit for intelligence value. They hadn't had time to even consider recovering their dead comrades before the enemy was pouring over them.

Running light on supplies, Sean spoke into the hand mic trailing from the single radio they still carried, the long whip antenna wobbling behind him. For some damn reason command wouldn't authorize close air support, Cobra gunships or Phantoms, but didn't seem to have a problem with B-52's carpet bombing well into Laotian territory, the territory they currently occupied. After calling in a *prairie fire*, all he could do was hope for an extraction.

Sweat poured down his face, stinging his eyes, as the garbled voice came through the receiver. It was barely audible above the gunfire.

“-andby, five mike-”

Sean choked down his frustration, sweeping gunfire into the jungle as Pao and Tom bounded towards him. In between shots he could hear angry shouts in Vietnamese, they were still damn close. The pilots told him five more minutes but they would be lucky to last five more seconds.

With the Recon Team back on line with each other, Vang and Sean hurled smoke grenades between themselves and the enemy. With a hiss, the grenades began billowing clouds of high concentration white smoke. Now that the NVA's line of sight was obscured, the team collectively picked up and ran further into the jungle, once again attempting to elude their pursuers.

Gunfire continued to crack behind them as the Vietnamese forces popped off random shots. Once they had moved a sufficient distance, the team moved into a file, cutting through the jungle as fast as they could. Sean muscled the pilot into the center of the formation to make sure he could keep tabs on him.

Good men had already died on the rescue mission, and Sean would be damned if he was going to lose the pilot now.

The Recon Team scrambled downhill, sometimes sliding down the slick undergrowth on their backsides, before combat boots broke their fall in the stream at the bottom of the gully. After the briefest of glances at his map, Sean motioned for the team to continue downstream.

He was known as being *good in the woods* among the operators who

made up their covert paramilitary unit. Staff Sergeant Sean Deckard came alive out on patrol, instincts flaring and keeping him alert. Tactical decisions were weighed and acted upon in fractions of a second. He was the One-Zero, the team leader of RT Key West.

Reaching for his hand mic, Deckard raised the Huey pilots who were inbound to their position. Quickly, he made them aware of their situation and gave them new grid coordinates he wanted them meet them at. They didn't have time to find a landing zone, but it would be a hot extraction, of that there was no doubt in any of their minds.

“Roger, One-Zero. Gator Three-Five, out,” the pilot's voice crackled over the handset.

Sean gritted his teeth as the team continued to splash through the stream. He could hear more shouts and the occasional gun shots nipping at their heels. The enemy hadn't reestablished contact with the team, but would shortly if they didn't extract soon.

“That way,” Sean ordered, pointing up hill.

There were no clearings for the choppers to land. All they could do, was find some high ground and hope for the best.

As they slogged their way up hill, pushing branches out of their way, the radio came back to life. Their extraction was one minute out. Down below they could hear the NVA sloshing through the stream, looking for spoor they almost certainly left behind in their haste.

“I'm popping smoke,” Sean informed the pilots in between pants as he struggled to catch his breath. The bayonet had only opened a glancing wound against his side, but it still burned like hell.

Twisting and pulling the pin on another smoke canister, Sean tossed it to the top of the hill. When the grenade began to billow yellow colored smoke, he spoke back into his hand mic.

“Confirm my smoke.”

“I've got yellow smoke, One-Zero.”

“That's us. Coming in hot.”

In the distance RT Key West's One-Zero could hear the buzz of rotor blades.

At the summit of the hill the Recon Team dug in as best they could, taking positions behind dead fall and the fan rooted jungle trees. The Khaki clad NVA troops were now scurrying up the side of the hill, pith helmets bobbing up and down as they negotiated a path, following in the footsteps of their quarry.

Sean motioned for his men to stay behind cover and concealment. Wait for the enemy to come within hand grenade range.

Freeing his final hand grenade from his web gear, he yanked the pin with a index finger while holding the spoon down. Breathing shallow breaths, his uniform was now soaked through with sweat. His arm pits had gone soppy, grit gathered in the corners of his eyes.

Dropping his free hand, the surviving members of the team lobbed M33 frag grenades downhill. They detonated in quick succession, their efforts rewarded with screams of agony. Now that contact had been reestablished the NVA opened up, dozens of muzzle flashes lit up with staccato bursts of gunfire.

Suddenly a shadow appeared overhead, rotor blades beat at the jungle foliage, whipping broad leaves back and forth.

Tom moved underneath the Huey with their package, the Navy pilot. A rope ladder was kicked and dropped from the helicopter, uncoiling it's way down to the ground. With the rest of the team burning through what little ammunition they had left, Tom got the pilot into a climbing harness and snap linked him into the ladder.

Next, he called the two Montagnards over from the defensive perimeter. Each team member wore a STABO extraction harnesses as their standard equipment, which magazine pouches and canteens were attached to. The short, indigenous tribesmen quickly snapped into the ladder. A nervous look passed between them before all eyes turned to their team leader.

Sean hammered another long burst downhill before turning and making a mad dash, darting under the helicopter. NVA were just cresting the hill as he got his snap link around the last strut on the ladder. Before he could even signal that he was hooked up he found himself yanked into the air, no longer moving under his own power.

With his CAR-15 hanging over his shoulder by it's sling, he was lifted straight up and through the jungle canopy, Kalashnikov fire chasing them

away as they made their extraction.

Undulating waves of green moved beneath them as the pilot banked hard, taking them on a heading back towards South Vietnam.

Sean strained in his harness. The STABO rig was uncomfortable as hell, but it was better than being dead. Feeling something wet dripping on the back of his neck he swiped a hand across the back of his head. It came back coated in bright red blood. In a moment of panic he ran his hand all over his scalp, fingers probing for a wound that wasn't there.

Looking up, he saw Pao's body slumped lifelessly in his harness. The corpse rocked back and forth in the wind as they were towed under the helicopter, bouncing off a terrified looking Vang every few seconds. Pao must have eaten a round on the way out. Half the team cut down to rescue one pilot.

It was a long flight, made longer by the straps digging into his thighs and the thought his dead comrade dangling above him.

* * *

Command and Control North or CCN headquarters was little more than a collection of oblong military buildings along the shore of the South China Sea and surrounded by concertina wire. The extraction Huey had thankfully landed at a Special Forces Camp after crossing the border, allowing the Recon Team to detach from the ladder and climb into the helicopter. Pao's body was wrapped in a poncho and sat between the surviving SOG members.

The Huey, or slick, as the men called them, circled around the CCN camp, establishing radio contact before coming in for a landing. Peering down below at the landing area, Sean could see a half dozen slicks with rotors spinning.

They would have gotten word about RT Key West's successful extraction. The only explanation was that another RT was in contract somewhere else. At any given time multiple teams were running operations in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. In the past, they had inserted teams

who never even established contact with HQ at their first comms window. Entire Recon Teams swallowed up by the jungle.

When the helicopter finally set down, a team of doctors and medics was waiting with stretchers. They led the fighter pilot away, his eyes reflecting the fact that his mind was still somewhere back in Laos. His psyche would be playing catch up for a long time to come.

Pao was carried away and Tom laid on one of the stretchers. He had suffered a grazing wound across his shoulder. The flesh wound would require some stitches but he'd be back on patrol in no time. Deckard knew from experience.

One of CCM's medics, named Jim, came running up to Sean and pressed a bandage against his side where he had almost been skewered by the bayonet.

Looking over at the Montagnard mercenaries boarding the slicks on standby with their American advisers, Deckard leaned in and yelled in the medic's ear.

“Where is Hatchet Force going?”

Hatchet Force was the quick reaction team composed of American SOG commandos leading the Montagnard tribesmen and South Chinese Nung mercenaries that responded whenever the smaller six man recon teams got in over their heads.

“We got two teams inserted over the fence a few hours after yours,” the medic yelled back. “Both are in contact and we're just waiting for the green light from higher. Now, let's go, we need to get that cut cleaned out.”

The team leader nodded his head, holding the gauze in place over his wound. Grabbing Jim by the collar he screamed over the sound of the helicopters.

“Hey, my boy Vang took a round through his shoulder,” Sean lied. “You better catch up with him and make sure the docs know about it. You know how some of these 'Yards are about shit like that. Sometimes he thinks you can just suck it up or some shit.”

“Fuck yeah,” Jim grunted. “I'll go take care of it. See you up at the aid station, okay?”

“Sure thing,” Sean replied patting the medic on the back as he chased

after Vang.

Looking around to see if anyone was watching, Sean quickly tied the combat bandage around his abdomen to hold it in place before buttoning up his spray paint covered OD fatigues. Running over to a water basin next to the airstrip he refilled both of his one quart canteens and secured them on his web harness.

Dashing over to the helicopters, still on standby, he found Rogers, one of the supply sergeants, handing out bandoleers or ammunition. Grabbing two for himself, Sean flung them over his shoulder and jumped on the nearest Huey as the rotors cranked at a higher pitch.

Seconds later, Jim was left wandering the camp looking for the Recon Team leader as the olive drab colored helicopters shot over the camp, heading for Laos at full speed.

11MAR70

CCN Headquarters

Republic of South Vietnam

A trio of men walked down the corridor, the occasional Sergeant or Private noticing with just a glance at how odd they looked side by side.

One walked forward confidently with long strides. Powerful forearms bulged from rolled up sleeves. Vietnam wasn't his first rodeo and it showed. He was the one wearing an Army officer's uniform and Colonel rank on his collar. On his chest he wore the much coveted Combat Infantry Badge with a star at the top, signifying that Vietnam was his second war.

A second man walked more carefully, each step a little smaller than that of the Colonel, as if each move was a calculated one. He was in civilian attire, slacks and a button down, aviator glasses hung from the pocket of his shirt. The most remarkable thing about him was how unremarkable he was.

The third man was slightly hunched over. Although the youngest of the three, he appeared to be the most feeble. His eyes darted nervously as they entered the briefing room. He wore thick prescription glasses, his forehead

coated in a perpetual slick of sweat, regardless of the temperature at any given moment.

Colonel Chapman walked around the conference table and poured himself a mug of brown sludge from the coffee maker in the corner of the room.

“I suppose we can get Mr. Petraska read on,” the CIA agent said dropping a thick manila envelope marked Top Secret on the table.

“Might as well,” the Colonel remarked without looking up as the coffee dribbled down and into his mug.

Agent Jacobsen took a seat at the table, motioning for the overweight spectacle wearing man to sit across from him. The scientist set down an old fashioned Gladstone bag with a heavy thud before taking a seat. Sitting next to him, the Special Forces Colonel sipped his coffee as the intelligence agent began his brief.

“You are now being read on to OPLAN-Three-Four-Alpha.” Jacobsen began. “This information is classified Top Secret, pertaining to information regarding national security.”

Pulling out a form, the CIA man handed it over to Petraska before producing a pen.

“Review that and sign on the dotted line.”

It was a Non-Disclosure Agreement. Petraska skipped to the bottom and signed his name. It wasn't his first rodeo either.

“Studies and Observation Group, or SOG, is a Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force. Our stated mission involves a number of special projects relating to cross border operations into Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam,” the agent continued as he accepted the NDA from Petreska.

“SOG consists of personnel drawn primarily from Army Special Forces, but also from the Navy SEALs, and Marine Recon units, and fused with the intelligence gathering capabilities of the CIA. Our men conduct harassment, diversion, political pressure, prisoner snatches, search and destroy, intelligence gathering, insertion of propaganda, and assassination missions in all three nations by covert and clandestine means.”

The Pentagon scientist grinned.

“Perfect.”

"I don't know about perfect," Colonel Chapman corrected, his voice like sandpaper. "But appropriate for what you have in mind."

"SOG was initially stood up in 1964, an outgrowth of the CIA's agent infiltrations across--"

"Hold on," the Army officer interrupted. "I think I hear them outside."

Setting down his coffee, the Full Bird opened the door, ushering in one of his SOG commandos.

The man was filthy, his OD uniform stained with white splotches where sweat had dried around the collar. He smelt like an equatorial outhouse, not having showered in days. The soldier bristled with weapons, grenades and ammunition pouches stuck on every available open space on his web gear. He had a shortened M16 carbine slung over his shoulder and wore a Colt 1911 on his hip, with a smaller pistol secured in a leather shoulder holster.

"Leon Petraska," the Colonel said. "Let me introduce you to Staff Sergeant Sean Deckard."

"How's it goin'," the Sergeant grunted, sticking a hand out for the scientist.

Petraska accepted it with hesitation as he noticed the red stains around his shirt sleeves.

"When did you get in," Colonel Chapman asked.

"Few minutes ago, sir," Deckard shrugged.

"Why don't you pull up a chair," the SOG commander said. "Mr. Petraska has something he wants to show you."

Sean moved to the side of the room where he propped his rifle against the wall and dropped his web gear. The .45 on his hip and the suppressed .22 pistol under his left arm pit remained in place as he pushed a chair up to the table and sat down.

With his web gear removed Petraska could see Sergeant Deckard's name tape sewn above the breast pocket on his fatigues. In place of his name were two words. *Fuck* followed by *you*. On one wrist he wore a brass wire Montagnard friendship bracelet, not something to be taken lightly. He'd probably been initiated into one of the local tribes. On the other wrist was a Rolex watch, a fake if the scientist surmised correctly. It wasn't a fashion statement but something to bargain for your freedom with if captured by the

enemy.

“It's great to meet you,” the scientist blurted out a little too fast.

The CIA officer cleared his throat, flipping his file closed now that the formal portion of the brief was apparently over.

“Nobody back in the states would ever dare to mention the name SOG. Not at the Pentagon, Bragg, or anywhere else, but it seems like everyone knows the name Sean Deckard.”

No one at the table looked more surprised than the Staff Sergeant.

“I guess I get around, huh?”

“Is it true that your base at Khe Sanh got over run during Tet?” Petraska asked referring to the Tet Offensive last year.

“Actually, it was Lang Vei, but I was just visiting at the time. Some of those stories are a little exaggerated,” he added as an afterthought.

“Major Donaldson down at CCC was telling us that you used to do some work in North Vietnam as well.”

“Well,” the Colonel interrupted. “Sergeant Deckard comes to us from a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol unit. Unlike most of our troops who came from Special Forces, Deckard was a *lurp* before hand.”

“So you had to go to some Special Forces training before you came to SOG?”

“Nope,” Sean said shaking his head. “I did go to the MAC-V Recondo School during my lurp days though.”

“Deckard proved himself to us in combat. We asked him to come to our unit straight from his lurp outfit, a Ranger company,” the Colonel elaborated.

“How many missions?”

“With SOG?”

“Yes.”

“I don't know,” Sean frowned. “Forty or so.”

“About twice as many as anyone else in CCN, or probably all of SOG then?”

“Maybe, but it's nothing to brag about. With our casualty rate most guys never get the chance to go outside the wire as much as I have. I'm just lucky I

guess.”

When the commando looked across the table at Petraska, the scientist suddenly looked away for reasons he wasn't consciously aware of.

“Sergeant Deckard is being humble is all,” the Colonel assured Petraska. “He's the best we've got.”

Deckard swallowed hard, wondering what they had in store for him.

Agent Jacobsen remained stone faced.

“Who do you represent exactly,” Deckard asked, casting a glance Petraska's way.

“Mr. Petraska comes to us by way of a firm based out of Virginia,” Colonel Chapman answered for him. “He has worked for the Technical Services out of Langley in the past.”

“I've got something I want to show you,” the scientist smiled, his bushy sideburns bouncing on his jowls.

Unzipping the bag at his feet, the chubby civilian reached down with a grunt before lifting something heavy and placing it on the table. Sean squinted, eyes running over the brown clump.

“Well, I don't think you came all the way from Virginia to show me a rock, so what does it turn into? Does it make pancakes and give twenty dollar blow jobs or something?”

The CIA agent squirmed in his chair. Apparently the Sergeant's language was unfamiliar to a former member of the Harvard rowing team.

Spinning the rock around, Petraska ran his fingers down a long black wire running out of the back end.

“This is the transmitter. It's only disguised as a rock in case someone happens to dig it up or it is impossible to bury the device due to terrain or weather. Inside is a state of the art seismometer. I developed it myself.”

“Don't we already have these? I remember the Air Force dumping these things all around Khe Sanh during Tet.”

“This is different than Operation Igloo White, Deckard,” the Colonel explained. “Those were phase one devices dropped by airplanes inside oversized lawn darts. These babies are much more sophisticated.”

“That's right,” Petraska said, proud of his creation. “With my phase two

model we will be able to tell the difference between vehicles, how many enemy troops are nearby, and even the direction they are heading in.”

“But they have to be buried, which is why you're talking to the Army rather than the Air Force this time around?” Deckard asked.

“Correct.”

“Ho Chi Minh trail?”

“You got it,” The Colonel said before taking another slurp of coffee.

“Laos,” Deckard muttered to himself.

* * *

Gunfire ripped across the shooting range.

Sean had been tagging along with Hatchet Force for over a week since RT Key West's final mission. Without a team, he was just a strap hanger. Finding an empty seat on a helicopter, he'd head off to one hot extraction or casualty evacuation after the next. Now things had changed.

With a new mission, came a new team. Key West was reformed with new members. On Sean's request, he wasn't given cherry troops that needed to be broken in. Instead he got experienced 'Yards with Tom coming back on the team. They also had Jared, a Special Forces medic assigned to them.

Even with experienced soldiers, it was important to train together, get to know one another to the point that each man knew how the other would react when the shooting started.

Tom and Jared fired their CAR-15 rifles, the Montagnards shooting their AK-47's. Walking the firing line, Sean called a cease fire to move down range and paste up new targets. Next they worked with suppressed weapons. The point of their mission was to get in and out covertly and quietly as possible. They had several High Standard H-D suppressed .22 pistols on the team for just such an occasion. Their new point man, Phong, practiced with his suppressed Sten gun.

The five foot tall 'Yard's body shook in his OD fatigues as the sub-machine gun chirped out a barrage of 9mm bullets into the paper target fifteen meters down range. He held on to the built in suppressor with his support hand, grabbing the canvas laced around it to prevent the shooter from burning his hand. With hot brass flying all over Tom and Jared, the British made gun cycled through it's thirty round magazine, the breech locked back in a cloud of smoke.

Phong laughed at the two Americans as they shook blistering hot empty cartridges off their backs and shoulders. Deckard laughed too.

The little fuckers were cocky, but made damned good soldiers.

Turning around he saw the portly mad scientist waddling down the dirt road to the range. The Recon Team Leader groaned. It seemed as if every few months some egg head rolled through CCN trying to cash in on the super science racket and score some government contracts. For some reason, each of their inventions needed to be validated in the field. The field meant Vietnam, and validation meant soldiers nearly getting their asses shot off.

Letting the team take turns firing the Sten gun and their two suppressed .22 pistols, Sean went to intercept Petraska before he inadvertently walked on the firing range and ate a handful of .22 plinkers. Tom might call a cease fire, but there was no telling if Phong would listen.

"What's up?" Sean asked as he approached.

"I have something I want to talk to you about," he answered after carefully looking around for potential eavesdroppers.

Great. Conspiracy talk. In Sean's experience that normally didn't start until at least insertion, or a few days without sleep when some jackass left his rifle in the patrol base, motivating young soldiers to try to cook up a war story to explain it. The fact that Petraska wanted a heart to heart during mission rehearsals didn't bode well.

"Let me show you something," he said reaching into his Gladstone bag once again. Pulling out a handful of yellow papers torn from a legal pad, he thrust them in Sean's direction. Taking the papers, the Staff Sergeant began looking them over.

"Oh," he said with a look of recognition in his eyes. "This is that flying saucer man language, right?"

“No,” Petraska snorted. “Look here,” he said pointing to one of the formulas.

“What is it?”

“Do you have any background in mechanical engineering?”

“No.”

“Physics?”

“No.”

“Lasers?”

“Masers, but not lasers.”

“What about statistics?”

“I took High School Algebra but they kicked me out.”

“I invented these formulas, the brass doesn't even know about this yet.”

“What the hell is it?”

“I combined statistics, analytical programming, and game theory to create a predictive algorithm.”

“Meaning?”

“Remember what I told you about what data the phase two device collects?”

“Numbers of personnel, troop concentrations, cardinal directions, yeah?”

“After we correlate all that data, I can calculate them into aggregate numbers and then plug them into these formulas. If my theory is correct, it won't just tell us where the enemy is, but where the enemy will be.”

“You mean like a crystal ball?”

“Precisely.”

“You bought acid off that supply clerk in Phan Rang,” Sean stated bluntly.

“This is for real, I want you to know how important it is to bury these devices at strategic locations.”

“Look, cheese dick, you can't predict the future. Ain't possible.”

Key West's Team Leader began to walk away.

“A lot of impossibles have disappeared since the beginning of this war, Sergeant,” Petraska said over his shoulder as Sean walked by.

Sean stopped in his tracks and turned around to face him.

“You want to know why it isn't possible? I'll tell you.”

“I wait with baited breath.”

“When I was in down in fishhook last year, across the fence and inside Cambodia, I wasted a handful of Viet Cong who were charging our position. VC, black pajamas and shit. When I crept up to their position to finish them off I saw that one was still alive. He looked confused or something, who knows. He bent over to one of his dead buddies, his head split open like a canoe. He reached over and scooped up a glob of his buddy's brain, put it in his mouth and started the chew.”

Petraska looked green around the gills.

“You can't predict the future because people are inherently unpredictable. Sure, they got basic survival instincts which are all pretty much the same, flight or fight. Some of that can be controlled though training, but people are not rational or reasonable. People do shit that doesn't make a damned bit of sense and never will. You can't predict crazy.”

The scientist stood frozen.

“I've been out on patrol and had one of my guys walking behind me step in my own foot print and set off an anti-personnel mine. Real life doesn't have to make sense. Try predicting that shit. Try predicting chaos.”

13MAR70

Airborne

South Vietnam

Sean held on tight to one of the hard points on the deck of the Huey as the helicopter nosed downwards, plunging them towards the treetops.

They flew nap of the earth, the helicopter skids sometimes brushing across the top of the jungle canopy. The pilots laughed at Sean's reconstituted

Recon Team as they braced themselves, fearful of a crash one second to the next.

The covert insertion into Laos had to fly low in order to avoid detection. They flew blacked out through the night, just a enough back light in the pilot's dials to see how much fuel they had left. Absolute radio silence would be maintained unless they took enemy fire. All of these measures were necessary, especially to avoid the electronic surveillance of several Russian *fishing trawlers* idling off the coast of North Vietnam.

A second Huey flew chase, a hundred meters behind them. Door gunners and a medic rode on the chase bird in case things got hot. They could also evacuate the pilots and passengers of the first slick in case they were shot down prior to insertion.

Petraska, the worrier that he was, lobbied hard to be allowed to ride in the chase bird and make sure that RT Key West was inserted into the right area. Thankfully, Colonel Chapman shot that idea down. No way was a civilian going on a sightseeing tour into Laos.

Sean sat with his feet dangling off the edge of the helicopter as they raced across the border. To his right sat their new medic, Jared. Blacker than midnight, he was the only team member who refused to wear the green combat cosmetics that the rest of the team wore on the grounds that he was born with natural camouflage. Sean had began to argue the point that the camo face paint wasn't about subduing the color of your skin but reducing the glare off of the face, human skin being a reflective surface. In the end he decided to let it go, some things just weren't worth it.

Next to Jared sat Phong with his suppressed Sten gun, eyeballing the jungle below skeptically. On the other side of the helicopter sat Tom along with their two other 'Yards, Vang and Toby.

The Huey banked hard. With the aircraft flipped on it's side as it turned, Sean found himself looking straight down at the jungle. Being held in place by centrifugal force alone, he felt his stomach bottom out. Finally, the aircraft righted itself and the pilots flared, stopping all forward motion and bringing them to a hover over a desperate clearing at the precipice of a hill.

No one moved a muscle as their eyes scoured the moonlit jungle for enemy. Tracer fire was expected to cut through the night sky at any moment. After tense seconds, the pilot's peeled off. With the first false insertion

completed they now flew to their real Landing Zone.

It was known that any larger open areas that could have been used as an LZ were under enemy observation, so pilots were required to make increasingly risky infiltration landings at smaller clearings. This time the rotor blades chopped away at the leafy treetops as the Huey hovered a few feet above the forest floor. The second Huey orbited over head, prepared to provide cover fire.

Each RT member held their rucksacks on their laps, waiting for Sean to give the order. As soon as one of the pilots looked back and gave him the thumbs up, Sean dumped his ruck and followed it down into the jungle, disappearing into the darkness.

Five more rucksacks, followed by five more bodies fell down beside him. The helicopter lifted straight up and out of the labyrinth of branches and vines before disappearing into the night. The sound of the helicopter gradually turned to that of a mosquito before fading completely.

Nobody talked. The only sound was that of uniforms scraping against the canvas ruck sacks as the soldiers shrugged into the straps and stepped off. Sergeant Deckard took the lead initially, leading them into the bush.

Suddenly the team found itself alone in the dark sweltering hot jungle.

Reality check.

Once again they were in enemy territory with nothing but what they carried on their bodies and each other to depend on.

Walking in a file through the bush they stood within arm's length of the rucksack in front of them, resting on the back of each soldier. Under the dense jungle canopy it got so dark that you sometimes couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Despite the difficulty of moving at night, the patrol couldn't afford to wait around the LZ until day light. Even with a few false insertions to confuse the enemy, they were bound to come looking sooner rather than later.

It took several hours but eventually the team cut through enough brush to put a terrain feature between themselves and their LZ. So far, no one had seen or heard any trace of the enemy and that was a good thing. Dog legging into their patrol base to foil any would be trackers, Sean established a circular perimeter with his six man team.

Tom placed Toby facing back on their own trail with his cut down RPD machine gun. If they were being followed, Toby would ambush them with automatic fire. Vang and Jared put out their Claymore mines while Sean drew a hasty sector of fire sketch. They'd sleep in shifts, two men on guard rotation at a time.

Sean took the first watch, laying in the prone behind the RPD with Phong at his side while the others slept. The Recon Team only got a few hours sleep, all of them restless. As the first wisps of light shown through the trees they began breaking down the patrol base after a quick breakfast of Lurp rations and John Wayne crackers. Tom set up their radio and called in the proper operational code words to higher at a prearranged communications window. Claymores were rewound and stowed in the rucks. Tom sterilized the bed down site, making sure nothing was left behind.

Each team member opened their map and a few minutes was spend on a team brief before moving out, Phong taking point.

Stepping over roots pushing through wait-a-minute vines, Phong never even looked down, and only glanced at his map once. Unlike most of the NVA forces, the Montagnards had grown up in the jungle. Many of them were scary good out in Indian Country. They made excellent trackers as well, able to read terrain and the passage of man with equal skill and cunning.

It wasn't long before they came upon their first high speed trail. The Ho Chi Minh trail itself split and fractured into hundreds of foot paths that crossed from Laos and into South Vietnam where the NVA could smuggle troops and war material across the border.

Moving through the jungle was difficult and moving along a trail was a recipe for an ambush. Sean decided to bank on the enemy being unaware of their presence in Laos and allowed the team to hop on the trail and speed across some terrain rather than spend the day hung up in the wait-a-minute-vines.

The trail itself was well made and heavily traveled. Impossible to see by a simple air reconnaissance, it was wide enough for the communist troops to stand shoulder to shoulder on. Where the trail became steep, Charlie had considerately built in steps and bamboo railings for the SOG team. In the past Sean had even seen sub-surface bridges built to traverse rivers. Sunk just a few inches below the waterline, you would never know it was there until you

saw the man in black pajamas walking across it.

Phong suddenly froze, the Sten pointing down the trail and waiting for action. Sean motioned for his team to move off the footpath and into the jungle. Phong had heard something up ahead. RT Key West moved into the wood line and took up prone positions behind whatever cover they could find.

They weren't looking for a fight, but if one came looking for them they'd make Charlie earn his ration of rice balls for the week.

Everyone's heart beat a mile a minute as they occupied the ambush line, waiting. Finally, footsteps approached. Above the elephant grass, Sean could see the tops of NVA troops moving down the trail with heavy satchels. A few walked bicycles loaded down with supplies. Above the bird calls in the trees he heard something click off to his side.

Turning his head he saw Jared winding up his Pen E-E camera. Recon Teams always did a full debrief, sometimes even flying to Saigon to hash it over with the brass, post-mission. It was a regular occurrence to have some intel analyst with a big forehead and shiny bars on his uniform question the on the ground intel from SOG teams. Pictures proved it. Sometimes it was as if nothing was true without pictures for the REMF's that occupied headquarters.

Under other circumstances Sean would have initiated the ambush, maybe even tried to snatch a prisoner to bring back for interrogation. This time they needed to remain undetected for as long as possible. When compromised behind enemy lines, an extraction needed to be arranged as soon as the Hueys could make it out to them.

Once the enemy supply caravan had moved out of sight and sound down the footpath, the Recon Team jumped back on the trail and continued towards their objective. Another thirty minutes and they came to a fork in the trail. Following Sean's directions, Phong took them on the westward path. It was only a few more minutes before the team found what they were looking for.

Alongside the trail was a single black telephone line strung through the jungle. Moving back into the jungle they formed a security halt and Vang dropped his rucksack. Reaching inside he retrieved their team's induction wire tap device and cassette recorder.

The induction based tap had a set of rubber clamps that attached over the

telephone wire and picked up electrical signals without cutting through the insulation of the wire itself. Plugging in the cassette recorder and pressing play, the decision was made to leave the tap in place to record while they continued with the mission. They'd pick up the device on the way back. The odds that Charlie would find it in the thick jungle vegetation were slim to none.

The team continued down the trail. Toby, the RPD gunner, brought up the rear. The path twisted into switchbacks as they snaked their way up hill. For tense minutes they climbed, gaining in elevation until the SOG team emerged from the low hanging fog that rested along the tops of the trees. Sean's guts were tied in knots. If they made contact with the enemy they'd be ripped to shreds as they climbed the cliff face.

Jungle boots covered in mud, the soldiers came to the top of the hill where the foot path intersected with a road. The main artery of the Ho Chi Minh trail. Deckard knew that if they followed the trail long enough that they would come upon a junction. The road itself was large enough for two and a half ton cargo trucks and curved around trees with as few cut down as possible. The NVA forces were experts at camouflage and made sure that their truck convoys couldn't be spotted from the air, going as far as to cover the tops of their trucks with recently cut foliage.

At altitude, the jungle was sparser than below but still provided cover and concealment for a hasty patrol base. Sean reached into his rucksack and pulled out one of Petraska's rocks. They had a half dozen of the seismic sensors carried amongst the team. The plan was to bury all of them at key trail junctions over the course of forty eight hours before calling for exaction. Wire taps, photographs, and other reconnaissance were icing on the cake.

While the Recon teamed maintained a three hundred and sixty degree security perimeter, Sean extended his entrenching tool and locked the handle into place. The sweaty scientist had given the team a very thorough class on how the phase two sensors worked and how to place them. It wasn't rocket science. Stick it in a hole and throw some dirt on top of it. He just had to make sure the transmitter wasn't covered up.

Once a cluster of the devices was in place an electronic surveillance aircraft would fly over the area every couple days and gather whatever information the sensors had collected by transmission. The data would be correlated, and according to Petraska, he had some of his own magic to work.

It sounded like some witch doctor stuff that his 'Yards believed in more than hard science.

With a decent sized hole made, Sean placed the sensor inside and began packing dirt around and on top of it, making sure the black wire extending from it remained exposed. Packing more soil over the top he patted it down with the blade of his shovel and covered it over with vegetation.

Wiping sweat from his brow, Sean set aside the shovel for a moment and consulted his topographical map. Eyes scanning the terrain ahead he let out a sigh.

Five more to go.

26MAR70

Border Region

Laos

“I will be god damned,” Sean said under his breath.

A B-52 bomber had rocketed overhead, dropping it's payload of five hundred pound bombs on the Laotian high country.

With the bomb bay doors open the massive bombs fell like rain drops from above. Streaking through the sky they sunk into the jungle before tearing it apart. The earth literally separated, making way for the carpet bombing. Tan colored clay erupted into the sky, one crater formed right after the last.

As the bombing run struck hidden enemy caches and weapons depots, smaller secondary explosions rippled and bounced across the country side.

Pay dirt.

Over the last two weeks RT Key West, RT Cobra, and RT Panama, had all been inserted multiple times to deploy the new seismic sensors. Sean's initial patrol validated the project once the first electronic warfare bird flew overhead and gathered data from each device a few days after extraction. Once SOG had proof of concept, more teams began deploying the sensors. Sixty and counting so far.

Petraska would approach Sean and the other One-Zeros in the bar at CCN with more of his crazy talk. He would whisper to them in the dark corners of the bar that he had been crunching numbers. With the data from his sensors, a scientific calculator, and some voodoo math were all it took for him to predict what the enemy would do next. None of the team leaders believed a word of it of course.

Until twelve hours ago. RT Panama had radioed in a boots on the ground confirmation. Suddenly, Petraska's mythical caches were not so mythical anymore.

They were exactly where Petraska had pointed them out on a map several days prior.

Three more RT's, including Key West were quickly infiltrated over night to help direct fire support at first light. Colonel Chapman was the kind of guy who capitalized on good intel regardless of where it came from. Rather than wait for clearance he just lied to the Air Force and told them he had several teams about to be overrun at any moment unless he got air support and got it yesterday.

The second B-52 blasted passed RT Key West's position and dropped it's payload. The follow up salvo of forty two dumb bombs devastated the country side. From their vantage point Sean watched the action from a distance. The craters appeared as miniature divots in a golf green. Tom fiddled with the radio antenna with the hand mic pressed to his ear, listening to the chatter of the flight crews.

More secondary explosions blossomed as the bombing run struck fresh targets. The valley was littered with NVA ordinance. No one had suspected that the area was being used as an enemy way station, all the intel analysts had put the action further north. Somehow, Petraska had one upped every single one of them.

Sean scratched at the stubble on his chin just as the third bomber came on station, the pilots asking Tom for a terrain feature to vector in on before they released their load.

At this rate they'd be calling in fire missions all day.

30MAR70

CCN Headquarters

South Vietnam

Sean edged his way out of the bar.

He'd completed his daily ritual of a six beers while cleaning his Colt 1911 pistol and it was time to move on to a new venue. It wasn't that he was among bad company, far from it. He felt more at home with SOG than anywhere in his life other than perhaps his old Lurp unit. It was just that people weren't really his thing.

Checking to make sure that the .45 was snug in the waistband of his fatigues, the SOG commando began walking back to his hootch. That was when he started thinking about Petraska. The man had become a kind of pariah around the camp.

Colonel Chapman was keeping everything on the down low, Saigon thought that SOG was destroying all of their targets by identifying them with good old fashion recon, but everyone around CCN knew. They knew that Petraska was working behind the scenes with the Colonel and Agent Jacobsen. Since the bombing, he'd been ordered to keep his mouth shut but his prior conversation with Sean had been illuminating to say the least.

Changing direction, he made his way to the scientist's hootch on the other side of the camp. He had grievances to air.

Approaching the hootch, Sean kicked open the door and walked inside. Petraska looked up from his notebook with the start. A line of sweat dripped down his forehead.

“What's up?”

“You know I'm not supposed to be talking to you.”

“But here I am anyway,” Sean said closing the door.

“What do you want?”

“I want to know how you are doing it, how are you able to know where these caches are?”

Petraska sighed at the ignorance of a mere foot soldier. The room was a mess with half eaten food laying on the floor, papers scattered in every

direction. An ash tray sat on the table beside him packed full of cigarette butts. The scientist had sat hunched over into the late hours of the night with his Texas Instruments calculator and a number two graphite pencil, calculating the fate of South East Asia.

“It's complicated.”

“Try me.”

Key West's One-Zero walked over to the table, reaching for Petraska's pack of smokes under some paperwork. Tapping out a cancer stick, he lit up with a flick of a match before shaking it out and tossing it in the corner of the room.

“The formulas are based on probabilities.”

“So you don't actually know what is where at what time?”

“Let me put it like this,” Petraska paused to light up a cigarette of his own. “If I gave you grid coordinates and told you that there was a ninety percent chance that Hitler, Mussolini, and Ho Chi Minh were having a party there, would you crash it?”

“Fuck yeah,” Sean said exhaling a cloud of smoke.

“I take data from the seismic sensors, where the enemy is and what direction he is heading in, and put it up on a big map. This way I'm able to chart where the concentrations will be and when. I take the numbers and just extrapolate ahead a few days. It's like baiting a trap on a game trail. Check it the next day and the odds are strongly in your favor that something tripped it.”

“Like baiting a trap,” Sean Deckard repeated absently.

“Of course, you still need to take into account geography and on the ground intelligence reports. As you expressed in our last conversation, numbers don't tell the whole story.”

Taking another drag on the cigarette, he walked over to the large map that Petraska had tacked to the wall. Colored pins had been placed all over Vietnam and Laos with a few further south into Cambodia.

Sean looked down at his burning cigarette and uttered a single word, almost a whisper.

“*COSVN.*”

“It's a myth,” Petraska said incredulously.

“What if it isn't? The Central Office for South Vietnam. We've been hunting for it for years-”

“And haven't found a single shred of evidence.”

“It's the Viet Cong headquarters, it's clandestine, highly mobile.”

“The VC are decentralized in nature, they don't need a headquarters.”

“Not to run their shadow government in South Vietnam but someone is coordinating the distribution of the weapons and ammunition that is flowing across the borders of three countries and into South Vietnam.”

“Bullshit.”

“Listen, Petraska, I've had my finger on the pulse of this thing for years. COSVN exists, we just don't know what form it takes or where it is located at any given moment. We've captured NVA and VC alike on cross border operations. They spilled their guts to us about COSVN. They told us about the Chinese and Russian advisers-”

“Bullshit!”

“You were the one who came here talking about how many impossibles have disappeared during this war,” Sean said storming across the room. “Shutting down COSVN could end it, end the whole god damned war.”

Petraska stared straight ahead, the burning cigarette barely clinging to his lower lip.

“COSVN,” he mumbled as he looked down at his notes.

Sean leaned forward, his palms on the table.

“Find it.”

09MAY70

COSVN

North Vietnam

The Air Force pilot tugged on the helicopter's yoke while plowing his

aircraft into a storm of tracer fire. Green and red streaked across the sky, lighting up the night like Christmas tree. The entire fuselage of the helicopter vibrated as ground fire plucked at the thin metal body. Sean Deckard held on tight as the pilot swung them around, bringing them in on final approach.

RT Key West was back in the shit.

The Huey dropped altitude at an incredible rate. The pilots were prepared to go extreme lengths to ensure that the team was successfully infiltrated onto their target. The blocky white building rushed into view as the pilots hovered alongside, one skid barely brushing up against the side of the structure.

Tom manned the M60 machine gun mounted in the door, letting a long burst rip across the rooftop. An entire line of advancing enemy troops was cut down in their tracks. Slick intestines slipped through bloody wet fingers as one of the communist soldiers attempted to hold his guts in. Deckard managed a short burst from his CAR-15, putting him out of his misery just before the aircraft finally came to a halt.

With automatic fire ripping into the Huey from all directions no one was waiting for permission to dismount. Heavy duffel bags were kicked out of the aircraft and onto the roof. Sean leaped out first, his boots making contact with the cement roof before tucking into a combat roll. Tom, the team's One-One, and Jared, the One-Two followed their One-Zero, landing on the roof in a heap with their Montagnards right behind them.

Down below at ground level, a NVA gun team spun the traverse wheels on a massive double barreled 12.7 Anti-Aircraft gun. Looking through the wire cross hairs, the gunner sighted in on the Huey, prepared to turn the American helicopter into a sieve.

F4 Phantom fighter jets dropped out of super-sonic flight, coming in low and slow for a strafing run. With a start, the NVA troops attempted to realign their barrels on the new, and greater threat, coming up a few seconds short the twin Phantoms blasted overhead.

Napalm blossomed, the fireball nearly turning night into a day. Sean could feel the heat on his arms in face even from the rooftop on the other side of the compound.

The Huey pilot peeled off, prepared to provide support until they called for extraction when a missile snaked right up behind it and exploded. The

detonation knocked the helicopter out of the sky, sending it spinning sideways through the air as it dumped altitude and disappeared behind an adjacent building. The resulting explosion left no doubt as to the fate of the pilots.

Sean turned his attention to the duffel bags as Toby pulled security on the doorway that led down into the building. He was already holding off the NVA with his RPD machine gun when Vang showed up for an assist, lobbing a hand grenade down the stairs. A hollow *thump* sounded deeper in the building as it obliterated enemy troops.

Opening the duffel bags, any member of RT Key West not on security began digging inside and removing their equipment.

It had taken weeks and several more insertions of SOG teams to plant sensors deeper inside Laos and North Vietnam, but somehow Petraska had done it. He had backtracked the ground traffic on the Ho Chi Minh trail. Small foot paths, the capillaries, led to the main arteries which in turn led to the heart. He had followed the flow of a river of weapons and munitions upstream, all the way back to its source, using statistics and probabilities to finally pin point the location of COSVN.

The Viet Cong central command center was located over twenty kilometers inside enemy territory in North Vietnam, its location confirmed by RT Rattlesnake several days after Petraska briefed Colonel Chapman. Knowing that the physical location of the VC headquarters changed monthly, if not weekly, all of CCN suspended further operations, immediately moving into mission rehearsals for the COSVN raid.

SR-71 Blackbird spy planes were rushed into theater from the continental United States. Refueling in Guam, the Blackbird made a number of Reconnaissance flights, its sophisticated camera lens snapping high speed photography which was in turn rushed to the Pentagon for development and analysis. Copies were simultaneously forwarded to US military commanders in Saigon via diplomatic courier.

Using the photographs taken by RT Rattlesnake and the classified Blackbird spy plane, CCN made true scale mock ups of their target with plywood, laboring through the night to get the training site put together. Rehearsals were conducted again and again until every leg of the mission was done smoothly and flawlessly. By the end, they could nearly run through the

entire mission blindfolded.

Unfortunately, no good plan survived first contact with the enemy.

Sean Deckard made sure that his Recon Team was selected as the main effort of what had been dubbed Operation Dark Lightning.

COSVN was sprawled out across a fairly large compound with multiple buildings and bunker complexes connected by telegraph lines. Hatchet Force had been inserted several hours prior and was currently attacking from the south west as indicated by the barrage of machine fire being exchanged between the Montagnard mercenaries and the NVA. Two other Hatchet Force platoons were acting as blocking forces to the east and to the south. RT Rattlesnake maintained position in the hills with an Air Force commando who directed air support.

Inside the compound itself, RT Panama and RT Cobra had been landed on other rooftops and were in the process of taking down their targets.

Deckard had wanted his element to be the main effort because it was the MAS-COSVN, the Military Affairs Section that telemetry and radio interceptions had pinpointed, that was considered the priority target. MAS-COSVN was the head of the snake and Sean wanted RT Key West to be the ones who hacked it off.

Struggling against its weight, Sean heaved a thirty pound rivet gun out of the duffel bag. It was specially modified by the technical services people who worked down in some sub-basement somewhere for the CIA. The gun had just enough juice for two strikes forcing them to bring three rivet guns to install the three hard points they needed.

Making sure it was loaded, Sean pointed the gun into the cement and pushed his weight down on it by the handles as he pulled the trigger. A pop sounded and the rivet fired into the roof, wedging itself in the cement. Pulling the trigger again fired the pneumatic hammer a second time and ensured the rivet was secure. Dropping the heavy device out of the way, the One-Zero began threading a climbing rope through a hole left in the top of the rivet like a needle.

To his side, Tom and Phong were repeating the same procedure.

He winced as a *whoosh* sounded from Jared's position on the corner of the roof. He had fired a LAW anti-tank rocket at something, or someone

below.

With the rope securely in place, Sean began rigging it through the snap link attached to the climbing harness that he wore, identical to the ones worn by the other members of his three man assault element. Testing the rigging to make sure that he was able to break, the SOG team leader backed up to the lip of the roof.

Tom looked over at Sean with his typical, *who gives a fuck* look. It wasn't like any of them were expecting to catch a freedom bird back to the States anytime soon. Phong backed up alongside them. He didn't seem to know any better. The Montagnard didn't show even a hint of fear. Having grown up with it, war was the only life Phong had ever known. Sean wasn't sure which was worse.

"Let's go," he shouted to the rest of his team.

Toby, Vang, and Jared grabbed wooden poles out of the duffel bags that had been folded on themselves with metal hinges. Locking them open, they reached about ten feet, the distance down to the windows of the top level of the MAS-COSVN headquarters. At the end of each stick was fragmentation grenade, held in place with duct tape.

With the other half of the Recon team prepped, Jared gave Sean a thumbs up.

"Do it," Sean said gritting his teeth.

As one, the grenadiers pulled the pins of the frag grenades and quickly lowered them on their sticks to the windows below. The One-Zero squatted on the lip of the roof, his knees bent, muscles flexed as the numbers ticked down in his brain.

Over pressure washed over the assault team, heat rising up to meet them as shattered glass went everywhere.

Sean kicked off and into mid-air. Dropping over a dozen feet in the space of a second, he held the trail running end of the climbing rope in one hand, bringing it behind him to break, slowing his decent. With the rope pulled taut, he swung forward as the gaping window swallowed him alive. Sliding through the dark opening, gunfire flew in three hundred and sixty degrees.

Tom ate a AK round in the neck the moment he appeared in the window.

Phong got hung up, cutting himself on some broken glass before crashing inside. Sean slipped on some of the shards of glass scattered across the floor and fell to a knee, auto fire cutting through the space where his chest would have been a split second earlier, enemy rounds passing just over the top of his head with a snap.

Cordite stung his eyes as the SOG commando zeroed in on the first muzzle flash he saw through the smoke. The CAR-15 moved in a blur as he traced fire from target to target. To his left, Phong's Sten gun chattered back and forth with Vietnamese rifles and pistols. Everything happened so fast he didn't have time to use his sights but instead simply pointed with his rifle's barrel and squeezed the trigger. In close quarters the results were devastating.

One uniformed Vietnamese was reaching for the pistol on his hip when Sean caught him with a burst. Another fired a shot that went wide, tugging at the One-Zero's web gear but leaving him unscathed. Centering his front sight post on Charlie's chest, he pulled the trigger and watched the Viet Cong leader go down.

The room was so full of gun smoke that tears streamed down Sean's face from stinging eyes. For one, brief, surreal moment he and Phong were suddenly alone in the room with dead bodies and expended shell casings. Distant machine gun fire brought them back to reality.

"This is One-Zero," Sean shouted up the stairs. "We're clear."

"Can we come down?" Jared asked from above.

"Come on down."

Tom's body still hung outside the window, suspended by his repelling gear, the rope knotted up somewhere on his kit. They would have to cut him down later.

Jared arrived with Vang and Toby, just as Deckard loaded a fresh magazine into his rifle and stacked on the next door with Phong. On his signal, Phong kicked open the door. Vang underhanded a grenade, rolling it into the room. As it detonated, RT Key West followed the explosion into the room.

The office space was torn apart by the grenade, the survivors offering desperate return fire. None of them had expected an attack. No one thought the Americans could launch an assault so deep into North Vietnam.

The Recon Team lined up along the wall firing across the office, cutting down anything that moved. Toby's RPD let off one long staccato burst of machine gun fire, raking the entire room while the rest of the team took more precise shots.

Papers and office litter were thrown into the air, screams pierced short lulls in gunfire, it was a scene of chaos. Toby collapsed under a torrent of AK-47 fire. Jared's rifle locked open on an empty chamber. Reaching for the RPD in Toby's limp hands, he was struck, a bullet ripping across his scalp.

Deckard caught the last VC running for the door. He aimed carefully, putting two rounds between his shoulder blades.

Vang retrieved the RPD before they continued. Repeating the process, Sean kicked the door and Toby threw a frag grenade. The team was moving through the structure but losing the battle through attrition. In the moment it took for the grenade to blow, Sean wondered if they could hold out until Hatchet Force arrived.

Charging through the smoke, a fresh round of gunfire broke out. This time Sean was sideswiped, taken out and nearly tackled to the floor. With his CAR-15 pinned between himself and his attacker he drew the fighting knife mounted on his web gear. Cold steel flashed and the Viet Cong had an eight inch combat blade sticking into his throat. His eyes rolled into the back of his head as he collapsed.

Vang raked the entire office with Toby's RPD machine gun. The action cycled back and forth, emptying the hundred round drum of 7.62 bullets in seconds. Uniformed NVA officers and Viet Cong in civilian garb attempted to take cover, a moment too late as the machine gun fire sprayed back and forth, spinning their bodies around in a grim dance of death.

To Sean's opposite side, Phong stitched a NVA troop from crouch to face, letting the Sten gun's barrel raise with the recoil it produced as the sub-machine gun fired.

A crouched figure shifted on the balls of his feet, leaning from behind a file cabinet, a Makarov pistol held in his hands. Sean fired a snap shot, catching him in the shoulder, dropping him to the ground. With the CAR-15's breech locked open on an empty chamber, the One-Zero drew his 1911 pistol before advancing.

Something wasn't right.

Stepping forward the commando kept the muzzle of his .45 trained on his injured quarry. A sickening smear of blood traced a short path as the would-be shooter struggled to move. Phong immediately picked up on Sean's changed disposition and followed close behind, his smoking sub-machine gun held at the ready.

The injured man looked up at Sean with disgust.

His eyes were as cold and blue as his own.

11MAY70

Military Assistance Command-Vietnam (MACV) Headquarters

Saigon, South Vietnam

"We're just glad to have you back," the General said, the words almost obligatory. "I just wish we could have pulled you boys out sooner."

Sean eyed the old man wearing the General's uniform cautiously.

"Four helicopters and dozens of men lost," he continued with puppy dog eyes. "I know you were in a tight spot out there Sergeant."

The fuck you do.

"No problem," Sean said flatly. He'd finally been able to catch some sleep on the flight into Saigon for the briefing. *Hold out another hour for exaction, then another, then another. Only three of us left to defend the building from a company sized element of angry North Vietnamese soldiers. Yeah, no problem.*

A projector in the back of the dimly lit conference room splashed some overhead photography of the COSVN headquarters against a white screen hanging from the wall. Generals and Colonels were seated toward the rear of the room, with General Farnsworth, the MACV commander, in the center. He was the main man in charge of all US forces in Vietnam. Sean stood to their front at the position of parade rest, the General having told him to be *at ease* soon after entering the room.

Agent Jacobsen leaned against the wall in one corner of the room, smoke from his cigarette lingering in the air and casting swirling shadows in front of

the projection machine.

Sean felt an irresistible tug at the corners of his lips. Not a single person in the conference room knew anything about the contents of the map case slung over his shoulder. He had explained to the guards stationed outside that it held some maps, notes, and other briefing material for the General. If anyone in any position of authority knew the truth, the meeting would never happen in the first place.

“My staff is still analyzing the intel as it comes in, but the last Blackbird flight seems to confirm significant damage to the compound. Whether or not that compound was in fact, the so-called COSVN headquarters remains to be seen, but we'll see what our people can come up with.”

All you had to do is ask the men who were there. The men you sent.

“However, Colonel Chapman back at CCN assures me that you have additional information for us,” the General smiled. “Is that true Sergeant?”

“Yes, it is, sir,” Sergeant Deckard began. “As you know, SOG teams have been planting seismic sensors deep behind enemy lines.”

“Yes, I've been a supporter of that project from the beginning,” the General interjected.

“It took months but Dr. Leon Petraska was able to correlate seismic readings to future enemy activity, which is what allowed us to identify where COSVN was after years and a significant investment of men and material put forward in the search for it. Next slide,” Deckard told the projectionist.

The slide displayed a map of Laos and the border region between north and south Vietnam. Red dots indicated where the seismic sensors had been buried.

“Petraska used the readings taken of enemy troop movements to actually predict where COSVN would be at any given moment by using advanced statistical models and probabilities-”

“Hold on second now Sergeant,” General Farnsworth interrupted. “We don't even know for sure if this was in fact, COSVN, as you people call it. Now what is all this gobbledygook about statistics and numbers?”

“Petraska invented new mathematical formulas to predict where the enemy would be in the future. He came up with an algorithm that predicts the future.”

Jacobsen suddenly upped periscope for the first time, listening intently.

“Now Sergeant, I won't have this kind of nonsense in my briefing room. The target location was identified by your own Recon Team, Rattlesnake if I remember correctly.”

“Yes, sir, several days *after* Petraska identified the site on a map, having used his mathematical models to predict where it would be.”

“Impossible,” the General said with a snort. No one ever disagreed the General, not to his face anyway. “That's not what happened. Who is this Petraska?”

“It is what happened and I can prove it,” Sean said reaching into his map case. Pulling out torn pages from Petraska's yellow legal pad he slammed the notes down on the table. “This is real, it's all here.”

“What is this,” the General said slipping on his reading glasses. “I can't read all this, what is it?”

“Equations, sir. Equations that predict the future.”

Agent Jacobsen stubbed his cigarette out on the wall.

“This briefing is over,” the CIA man said, his voice just above the whisper.

“You're damned right it is,” the Army General confirmed. “This is bullshit, someone get me Colonel Chapman on the phone right now. I'll have this goddamned kid here cleaning latrines by the end of the day. The both of them, wasting my staff's time with this shit.”

“Yes, sir,” one of the other officers was quick to reply.

“No, this isn't over,” Deckard growled.

The General looked up at him furiously.

“How dare you-”

“We found COSVN, we found it and we did it using some kind of voodoo math. I don't understand it myself but you can't argue with success.”

“Get him out of my sight,” the senior officer said. “Get him the hell out of here now.”

“Yes, sir,” a young Major said, seeming to materialize out of thin air. “Come with me,” he said laying a hand on Sean's shoulder.

Pivoting, Sean swung around and grabbed the officer by the throat. Driving him backwards into the wall knocked the wind from his lungs.

“Get the MP's in here goddammit,” the General hissed.

Releasing his grip, the Major gasped for breath.

“I've got the proof right here you fucking assholes!”

Sean grabbed the map case off his shoulder and upended it in the General's lap. The contents spilled onto the General's legs like water from a faucet.

The Major attempted to move but found himself pinned to the wall by something.

General Willem looked down at the Soviet military insignia in his lap. Russian officer pins and patches along with ID cards and dog tags.

“My team found them, we found the Russian military advisers,” Deckard shouted. “They were there all along!”

The General took on a thousand yard stare that he certainly hadn't earned in combat.

“I think I have a hearing problem,” He said as he stood to his feet, the Russian military pieces scattering on the floor. “Please, excuse me.”

General Farnsworth made a beeline for the door and walked out of the room. Jacobsen slammed the door shut.

“You are all to remain exactly where you are, no one moves for anything,” he yelled until he was read in the face. “JAG will be down here in seconds with paperwork for you to sign. Anyone talks, even to each other and you'll be in a fucking prison the rest of your goddamned lives”

“Fuck you Jacobsen,” Sean began. “You can kiss my American ass, motherfucker!”

Just then a squad of military policemen burst into the room.

“Cuff him,” Jacobsen ordered. “We're containing this situation here and now.”

The SOG commando kicked the first MP in the balls before making a seamless transition to the second, cold cocking him across the jaw. The third drew his baton just a moment too late as Sean came from below, slamming a clenched fist into the MP's diaphragm.

Finally, the four remaining MP's rushed Sean, taking him down in a pile of swinging fists and kicks, his voice still filling the room with profanity.

Jacobsen moved frantically, handing out Non-Disclosure Agreements, gag orders, and any other federal document he could think of off the top of his head.

“FUCKING GODDAMNED MOTHERFUCKERS!”

The Major found what was pinning him to the wall by his uniform. Tugging on the object stuck just under his armpit, he pulled it free. Looking down at the object, he found himself staring at a Soviet Special Forces dagger.

The Major uttered a single forbidden word.

“Spetsnaz.”

Now sample a scene from Issue #2 of PROMIS:

The Vietnam War had been like a good television show. It had a nice long run, got renewed for few seasons, and then suddenly, inexplicably, the network canceled it.

Sean Deckard was out of the Army and back on the streets, coming home to find out there was nothing to come home to. After everything he'd seen and done there was no turning back. No going back to the way things were, the way thing had never really been to begin with.

Being a National Guard recruiter or stocking shelves at a grocery store just didn't cut it after running recon with SOG. Even after they shit canned him over the fiasco with General Farnsworth, he had gotten to tag along with the Phoenix project. He'd spent the next year with them doing to the VC in South Vietnam what SOG had done to them in the surrounding three countries. Then the network execs pulled the plug and it was all over.

He snorted at bitter memories. The COSVN raid was supposed to end the war; instead it ended in a cover up.

Sean fixated on a point somewhere in the distance and began walking towards it. It was just a lump of a hill several kilometers away, barely visible against the night sky. The former soldier cursed himself in frustration. Looking down at his watch, he squinted to see the hands, knowing he would never make it in time.

Linking up with some old buddies in a dive bar back in the States, he'd heard stories. Stories about Montagnard refugees hung out to dry after Uncle Sam turned his back of them. Arriving in Thailand he heard more. Rumors of American POW's sold down the river by Tricky Dick and his boys. He'd spend months walking the filthy back alleys of Bangkok with a suitcase full of gold coins, looking for answers.

Families of the missing soldiers had even gotten word to him that they were offering rewards, huge ones in some cases. Sean worked *pro bono*, accepting only what he needed to survive. Teaming up with a few other vets and some locals they had made several deep penetration patrols into Laos. Despite their best efforts, they never caught more than a whiff of the POW's, just enough to encourage them to keep looking.

It had gone on like that, one long booze filled spiral. Meeting with informants in smokey bars. Fist fights in Singapore. Hung over in Chaing Mai. Plotting and planning on cocktail napkins late into the night. Eventually he had realized what was happening to him and knew he needed to get back into the action or he'd lose himself forever.

A few hundred meters from the hill, he took a knee in the African bush country. After setting down his heavy rucksack he pulled out his map and compass and plotted the next leg of his journey. He had already taken a wrong turn twenty kilometers back, going in the wrong direction for several hours. There was no way he could make up that kind of time, no matter how hard he pushed himself across the rolling terrain.

Hearing the gentle gush of a stream downhill from his position, Sean nodded his head. It matched with the topography on his map. He was in the right place, if not at the right time. His back cracked as he shouldered the ruck. He'd been going like this for several weeks, moving from point to point, day and night.

He struggled to set the azimuth on his compass. He was exhausted.

Next came the Spanish Foreign Legion, high in the running as the stupidest mistake he'd ever made. He'd heard some war stories about La Legion from a guy in Hamburg and signed up on impulse. The French government by this time had had enough of coup attempts by their Legionnaires and was screening anyone who showed up at Legion Etrangère looking for a hot meal. In Spain, La Legion had no such qualms.

As it turned out, La Legion was not an infantry unit or anything of the sort. They were shock troops plain and simple. Franco literally had them as his disposal to throw against the enemy, use them up, inflicting as well as suffering massive casualties. Intake and training was a combination of sadism, marksmanship, and military drills. It was an experience that some recruits did not survive. Deckard kept his head down and his mouth shut.

Training often consisted of live fire assault courses, crawling under and over obstacles while Sergeants fired machine guns over their heads, usually, and detonated explosives next to them. The last straw for Sean was an airborne jump they did one afternoon. They jumped at five hundred feet over a mid-sized city in southern Spain, training for urban warfare. Over a dozen Spanish Legionarios died, dozens more were critically injured.

Sean had quickly jettisoned his rucksack the moment his parachute deployed, watching it explode on the cobblestone street below before slamming into the side of a building and breaking his arm.

Like so many before him, he had deserted.

Sean forced one foot in front of the other, his canteens long since drained. He felt like the tin man, his joints creaking, each step landing heavy, dragging his feet. He'd lost three toe nails in as many days, his feet covered in blisters, socks soaked in blood. Each night, before getting a couple hours of sleep, he was terrified of what he'd find when he took his boots off. By now his feet were ground into hamburger.

Looking down at the needle of his compass he felt himself getting delirious. Little sleep, food, and constant physical exertion had taken its toll on his mind and body. Pointing himself on the right heading he pushed himself forward, head down, half asleep.

Hours later he stumbled onto a dirt road, dragging his FN FAL rifle behind him by the barrel.

"This bloody bloke is completely out of his head," he heard a voice say.

Sean looked around thinking he was hallucinating.

"Your done number eight," the voice said.

Finally he saw the man standing directly in front of him. He wore green and brown camouflage shorts and shirt. Behind him were several Range Rovers with a small cluster of soldiers wearing sand colored berets nearby, smoking and laughing with each other.

"This way," the soldier turned around and led Sean to the vehicles. He trailed behind, slack jawed, barely hearing the words.

"Have a seat," the man handed him a canteen of water as he flopped down and shrugged out of his rucksack.

Sean drank greedy beginning to come to his senses. He was alone, not another recruit in sight. His detour had hopelessly sabotaged any chance he might have had. The others were already back at the barracks, racked out in their cots after a full meal.

"Get the bloody medic over here and cut this ouens boots off," the instructor ordered. "The blood has soaked right through the leather."

Emptying the canteen, Deckard hung his head. The sun was just cresting above the horizon, the brilliant red and orange hues lost on him at the moment. The medic came running and took a knee next to him, opening his aid bag.

“Congratulations,” the medic said smiling at the American. He passed something cold into his hand. Looking down Sean saw it was an ice cold beer. “You are the first one back.”

Sean's mind skipped a beat, left him struggling to catch up.

“Welcome to the Rhodesian Special Air Service.”

Author's Note:

The PROMIS series is intended to be serialized over the course of six or seven short stories, each taking place in a different location as the career of professional mercenary, Sean Deckard is followed. I expect that each issue of the series will run from between forty to eighty pages, culminating in a collected edition or omnibus.

It seems that with today's growing popularity of e-readers that we may be entering an exciting new era for electronic pulp fiction. That is to say, serialized shorts that readers can grab at low prices and read at their leisure on the train to work, on lunch break, or where ever a traveler may find themselves. I'm jumping on this hypothesis, but you the reader will decide what venue and what fashion you will read fictional works in the future.

You can keep up to date on future issues of PROMIS at my blog located at <http://reflexivefire.wordpress.com/> or you can get it touch with me directly at reflexivefire@yahoo.com. I'm always putting new content up on my blog, such as photo albums from my deployments when I was in the Army and adding commentary about military affairs. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for reading the first issue, I can't wait for you to see what I have in store for our protagonist in the near future.

-Jack Murphy, May 8th, 2011.

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Glossary:

AK-47: Avtomat Kalashnikova-1947, following the standard Soviet weapons naming convention. Avtomat meaning the type of rifle: automatic.

Kalashnikov comes from the last name of the inventor, Mikhail Kalashnikov and the year 1947 is when the rifle went into production. The AK-47 is the world's most ubiquitous battle rifle, having been used in virtually every conflict since the Cold War.

B-52: American strategic bombing aircraft. Saw service in Vietnam, taking part in the carpet bombing of Cambodia and Laos.

CAR-15: A carbine, a shorter derivative of the typical American service rifle, the M16. Used almost exclusively by Special Forces personnel during Vietnam. A precursor to the current American service rifle, designated the M4.

CCN: Command and Control North. The sub-division of Studies and Observation Group that took part in clandestine cross border operations into Laos and North Vietnam.

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency. America's foremost intelligence gathering organization.

Colt 1911: A single action, semi-automatic pistol that entered into service with the US military in 1911. Used by soldiers in every US conflict at least since World War I. Modernized versions of this handgun are currently used by US Special Operations units in Afghanistan and Iraq.

COSVN: Central Office for South Vietnam. Allegedly the headquarters for the Viet Cong that they coordinated operations in South Vietnam from. Whether or not COSVN ever existed remains controversial to this day.

F4 Phantom: American fighter jet which saw wide spread service during the Vietnam War.

Ho Chi Minh Trail: A series of trails throughout the theater of South Vietnam, stretching into adjoining countries. Communist forces used this hidden system of trails to covertly move war material into South Vietnam in order to fight US forces.

Huey: American transport helicopter which saw wide use during the Vietnam War.

JAG: Judge Advocate General. The judicial section of the US military.

LAW: Light Anti-Tank Weapon. A one shot 66mm rocket launcher. Includes a telescoping tube that needs to be extended by the soldier when ready to fire. This allows for a combat weapon that can be easily carried by the soldier.

LRRPs: Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols, pronounced *lurps*. Later in the war were re-designated as Ranger companies. As the name implies, they conducted long range recon patrols, acting as they eyes and ears for the units they were attached to.

Lurp: *See LRRP*.

M60: American belt fed 7.62 machine gun used extensively in the Vietnam War.

MACV: Military Assistance Command-Vietnam. The formal command structure for US forces in South Vietnam.

Makarov: Russian made semi-automatic pistol.

Montagnard: From the French word for “mountain men”. Indigenous people

who lived in Vietnam. They were known for their outstanding performance as soldiers when paired with US Special Forces troops. Never considered themselves to be Vietnamese.

NVA: North Vietnamese Army.

One-One: The second in command on a Recon Team.

One-Two: The radio operator on a Recon Team.

One-Zero: The Recon Team patrol leader.

Parade Rest: Semi-relaxed position with hands behind the back. A military formality.

Recondo School: In the Vietnam war, the Recondo course was held in country to train Soldiers and Marines how to conduct reconnaissance patrols, field craft, and other skill sets. The final event students had to pass in order to graduate from the Recondo course was a “live” combat patrol in enemy territory.

RPD: Ruchnoy Pulemyot Degtyaryova. A Russian made drum fed machine gun which saw service beginning in 1944 with communist forces. The RPD represented the Soviet effort to integrate a light machine gun into squad sized infantry units.

RT: Recon Team.

Slick: *See Huey.*

SOG: Studies and Observations Group. The euphemistic title concealed the true purpose of this covert para-military force. SOG conducted cross border operations in Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam throughout the war,

engaging in sabotage, reconnaissance, prisoner snatches, and other activities.

SR-71 Blackbird: Manufactured by Lockheed and highly classified at the time, the Blackbird first saw service in 1964 and wasn't fully retired until 1998. The Blackbird was the fastest aircraft at its time, able to outrun enemy surface to air missiles. The aircraft flew reconnaissance flights of enemy territory, utilizing high-speed photography.

STABO: ST*Abilized* B*O*dy harness used for high risk extractions by helicopter.

Sten: British made 9mm Sub-Machine Gun.

VC: Viet Cong. Irregular communist forces in South Vietnam. The VC operated a shadow government, having their own post masters, tax collectors, as well as guerrilla fighters.