

CHESTER BONNER

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“If they belonged to me, I’d court-martial the both of them.”

Captain Chester Bonner splashed another finger of bourbon into his aluminum canteen cup, spilling a bit in the process, and added some water—which made the booze taste like purification tablets. Last night, when the company got in after policing the battle area at Sergeant Paxton’s firefight, Battalion gave him a day to rest and resupply.

He stretched, gave his paunch a leisurely scratching and absently rubbed his receding hairline. He was slightly more than medium height, and just a bit heavy. He swirled the contents of his canteen cup and decided the alcohol would kill any crud in the water. Still, he always used purification tablets. The hepatitis they brewed in Nam could kick ass big time and he didn’t want his liver falling out his trap door.

After a few seconds, he remembered he was reading. *Those two sorry centurions.*

He returned to the battered copy of "Caesar’s Gallic Wars" he’d used as a pony in high school, exerting himself to bring the pages into focus. *Have to cut back on the sauce*, he thought, and took another sip. Pullo and Vorenus were neck and neck for a promotion, he read. And once, when the stockade was under heavy ground attack by the Gauls, this turkey Pullo says to Vorenus, come on—let’s show everybody which one of us is the best fighter. And Pullo charges out of the stockade and across the ditch toward the Gauls, takes one out right away with a javelin, and there’s Vorenus right on his heels. They each get in a crack out there and they each get the other guy out of it. And then they

just traipse back into the old stockade—probably have a good laugh over a drink, the dickheads. If anybody in my company risked that much rank cowboying for a promotion, I'd bust their ass back to private, by God.

He took another sip out of the canteen cup and a jagged little smile broke across his face. When he read this as a high school sophomore, struggling through the Latin with old Mr. Thornton, the story had gripped him with an excitement that made him want to cheer the two centurions. Now, out of school and in a war of his own, he was ready to throw the book at them. What the hell, he thought. Push come to shove, I'd put them in for a medal. Wonder which one Caesar promoted?

That Caesar now—he was good, really good. Hell of a combat leader, like that time the Nervii almost overran the camp he was setting up—got within a whisker of it, too. He flipped through the pages:

...the enemy in front kept streaming up the hill...pressing us
hard on both flanks...extremely critical, no reserves...I
snatched up a shield and went forward...called to the
centurions by name...my arrival put heart in the
men...fighting under the eyes of their commander...

Like William By God Westmoreland leading his own bayonet charge. He laughed long at that, looking out the door at the late afternoon sun, and took another drink.

Then he came to the section where Ambiorix and the Gauls wiped out an entire Roman legion. Recollection of the story turned him instantly grave and he set the canteen cup down. He skimmed the bitter argument between Sabinus and Cotta, the legion's two commanders; how the legion, abandoning its fortified camp, was ambushed in a deep

defile and badly savaged; and how a remnant fought its way back into the compound.

And then he came to Lucius Petrosidius. The standard-bearer of the legion's eagle, Petrosidius made it back almost to the gate, but the Gauls caught up with him and surrounded him. With a great effort he threw the eagle, mounted on its pole, over the palisade and into the compound. And then the Gauls overwhelmed him and killed him.

As he lingered over the death of Petrosidius, he noticed a bit of Caesar's Latin he'd scrawled in the margin—

ipse pro castris

fortissime pugnans

occiditur

—and remembered how Bo Russell correctly translated *pro castris* as 'in front of the camp,' and then, to show off, started arguing with Mr. Thornton about whether *occiditur* was a compound of *caedo* or *cado*.

The teacher settled that one peremptorily and then turned to Bonner. "Chester," Mr. Thornton said. "How did you translate *pugnans*?"

"Fighting. It refers back to Petrosidius. He, Petrosidius, fighting."

"Good. And *fortissime*?"

"Most gallantly."

"An interesting choice—but 'gallantly,' I don't believe, is in our textbook's dictionary under the meanings of *fortiter*. How did you come to pick that word?"

"Well..." Young Chester Bonner hesitated, wishing he'd used his pony's 'most bravely.'

"It didn't by any chance come out of one of those translations in the library, did

it?”

“I found it on a couple of my Dad’s citations from Korea.”

He remembered how still the room became with this intrusion of the personal and how uneasy it made him feel—even fearful, because he didn’t know what the other boys were thinking about him.

As Mr. Thornton reminded them every so often, he’d been a doughboy in France in the First World War. “A very appropriate word,” he allowed, “from a very appropriate source. Keep in mind now, that *fortiter* and its degrees can refer either to physical or moral capacity. Here, with the superlative *fortissime*, it means that Petrosidius was fighting at the extreme of his capabilities in both his physical strength and his moral courage. High praise indeed from Caesar. Now then, Chester, why don’t you translate that whole sentence for us?”

As nearly as he could recall, he rendered it: “Outside the camp, fighting most gallantly, he was himself cut down.” But Bo Russell said you couldn’t get ‘cut down’ out of *occido*, that it would have to be *trucido*, which was a compound by the way of *caedo*. Mr. Thornton said no, ‘cut down’ was an English idiom that translated the idea in *occiditur* quite satisfactorily indeed. Then Mr. Thornton said that he would have to translate the last sentence of today’s assigned section about the Roman remnant in the compound because they were running so late—a clear rebuke of Bo Russell’s chronic grandstanding.

“*Noctu*—that night,” Mr. Thornton translated; “*desperata salute*—despairing of help...” Bo’s hand went up and Mr. Thornton said, “It’s an ablative absolute.” The hand came down and he went on. “*Se ipsi interficiunt*—they killed each other; *ad unum*

omnes—to the last man.” And the bell rang and everyone headed for the door except Bonner.

“Mr. Thornton, wait,” young Chester Bonner had said. “What does that mean? Did they have an argument that night and start fighting each other?”

“No, Chester. It means they knew the Gauls would overrun their camp first thing in the morning before any help could arrive. So, they committed suicide.”

The boy paused, trying to grasp the significance of this new information. “Why didn’t they just surrender?”

“Because the Gauls liked to torture their prisoners.”

“So they—what did they do?”

“They paired off and ran on each other’s swords.” Mr. Thornton let that sink in a second, looking at the effect of his words on the young Bonner. Then he said, “Don’t be late for your next class.”

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Bonner sipped some more bourbon and sat back. He’d tried a few times during the intervening years to think himself into the mind of Petrosidius the standard-bearer, and he felt most successful when he related him to his own father.

His dad wasn’t a drinking man, but every so often, after he got back from Korea, he would settle in at the kitchen table with a fifth of Crown Royal. Right next to it would go the snapshot that someone took of the elder Bonner and a sergeant friend, Rick Thurman, arms around each other’s shoulders buddy style, all grins. Rick had been lost in the opening assault of the Chinese across the Yalu, when American forces had been hard-pressed in the extreme and an entire battalion had ceased to exist as a fighting unit. The

last sighting of his father's friend came when a soldier saw Rick take a round in the leg. Missing, presumed dead.

When his father got into the Crown Royal it was usually over Rick, who never got the rites owed him after being killed in battle. Instead of being honored with taps and the triple volley, his friend had almost certainly been left to the elements. His father came out of Korea with a Silver Star and two battlefield promotions that had made him one of the senior NCOs in an infantry regiment in combat. But none of that seemed to hold much importance at the kitchen table.

The Roman standard-bearer Petrosidius hadn't wanted his legion's eagle to fall into the hands of the enemy and suffer another kind of dishonor, so he'd flung the standard back into the compound. First, they'd burn it to avoid its capture, then they'd exchange death with each other.

Sometimes, he could picture them doing it. They'd hold the points of their swords a foot away from each other, then a strong surge forward with each close enough to put a hand on the other's shoulder. They'd touch for just a moment, heads sinking against each other. Then they'd meet the darkness together.

As a company commander, Bonner always thought of himself as a centurion, but in his heart he believed that title belonged to his father alone. When he was commissioned at infantry OCS at Fort Benning, he felt he'd put himself on an entirely different plane from his father. He'd removed himself from any possibility of that intense personal experience of war. Or rather, not the experience of war, but war from that unique perspective—*within* the vortex. He was aware in his mind of the intellectual flaw in such thinking, but the fact that infantry company commanders died weekly in Vietnam

couldn't alter his emotional conviction.

The difference for him, at its most basic, lay in decisions. Officers made decisions, enlisted carried them out. Go here, do this. Sergeant Paxton, take your squad five clicks south and recon the area. Paxton goes, and takes seven casualties killed and wounded. Or the time Bonner's lead platoon wanted to recon by fire into the nipa palm across the paddies, to make any NVA return fire and reveal their positions before the friendlies got too close. They were skirting a small village of eight or ten huts, and Bonner had told them to hold their fire so as not to hurt civilians. A minute later, the whole tree line opened up, and in five seconds he had half a dozen men dead or dying. He particularly remembered a young soldier named Barksdale from upper New York state because he had only ten days left in country. He lay there, still conscious, but the color of his face gave the prognosis. Doc Watson said he needed albumin, and right now. To no avail.

Bonner made the decisions and his troops lived with the consequences.

Chaplain McCurdy tried to console him by telling him that he'd wanted to save innocent lives. But he was anguished, and always would be, that he hadn't made his own people his paramount concern. The next morning, they stacked the bodies inside a Huey. Cargo. That afternoon, he reported to his battalion commander to answer one question: What happened out there? After the interview was over, Bonner realized it had been an informal investigation into his competence to command. He stared into the canteen cup for a long moment, then slowly drained it. He knew he'd spend the rest of his life grappling with the human consequences of his decisions.

“Sir?”

Bonner looked up from the bottom of his canteen cup to see the first sergeant standing in the doorway of the orderly room.

“Yeah, Top?”

“A bird just set down on the pad, Sir. An aviator major’s headed our way.”

Bonner wondered how a helicopter could land without him noticing. “Right, Top. Thanks.”

He took the bourbon and canteen cup over to a file cabinet and stashed them in a drawer, then popped a piece of hard candy into his mouth. No sounds of a helicopter engine now, which meant he shut it down as soon as he landed. Here on business, and it’ll take a few minutes.

“It’s Major Tolliver, Sir,” Top said, looking down the path from the doorway.

Russ Tolliver was what the personnel people called a front burner. A West Point grad, he’d distinguished himself as an infantry platoon leader on his first tour. Now a major, he was commanding a company of gunships. One of his aircraft had been shot down yesterday flying cover for Sergeant Paxton.

“Hey, Sir. How’s it going?” Bonner was crunching casually on his candy.

“I thought I’d come by and see how Sergeant Paxton’s getting along.”

The Old Man needed to clear his head. He crossed over to the coffee pot and poured a cup. “After you dropped him off last night, he sort of went off the deep end. Coffee?”

Tolliver moved toward the pot and shook his head. “Looks like day before yesterday’s.”

Bonner took a quick sip, burning his lip in the process. A glob of coffee slopped

over and landed on the toe of his boot. He stared at it dumbly for a moment. Tolliver was looking at him funny. As he took another sip, he moved away. "It still chews pretty good," he said. He hoped the coffee would absorb some of the booze smell.

"Yeah, I heard he lost it last night. How is he?"

"They ran him up to the shrinks in Saigon this morning." Bonner sat on a folding chair and waved Tolliver to a beat-up swivel on the other side of the clerk's desk.

"They've got good turnaround rates getting guys back to duty," the major observed.

"Gomez is acting squad leader now. Squad of two. We'd better get some replacements soon."

"Were you going to put him in for an award?"

Bonner had just about decided on another Bronze Star. "I thought I would, yeah," he said. His head felt like old chewing gum. He sipped more coffee.

"I'll take the lead on that. I want to put him in for the Distinguished Service Cross," he said. The DSC was second only to the Medal of Honor.

Bonner froze in mid-sip. "What?"

"Think about it a second. A seven-man patrol gets ambushed by a platoon of probably 40 NVA. They shoot down a cobra gunship. There's four killed, three wounded. He gets hit himself, but pulls two of the wounded over to his CP under heavy fire. Then he coolly calls in artillery on the ambushing force and gets 18 known enemy KIA."

"When you put it like that, it makes sense." It occurred to him that a cigarette would help mask odors, too. He fished one out of the pack on the desk.

"He's probably got a fair to good chance of getting it." He watched Bonner trying

to find the end of the cigarette with a match.

“Those are kind of low odds, aren’t they? I mean, you just convinced me.” He absently shook the match without extinguishing it and dropped it on the orderly room floor where it fluttered a moment before going out.

“It would have been much better if he’d seen the whites of their eyes, you know? Maybe pitch a hand grenade under one of their machine guns. And it would have helped if the whole firefight had gone on longer—been more sustained. But he put accurate artillery on them so fast that it really didn’t last that long.”

“Long enough to draw blood.”

“True, but he’ll probably end up with a Silver Star. I’m putting him in for the DSC because, if we do it right, they’ll likely only reduce the award one level to the Silver Star. Anyway, I want statements from the people who were out there. And here’s a first cut at a proposed citation.” He stood, pulled a typewritten sheet out of a pocket on his thigh and unfolded it. “Read it over and make any suggested changes. Mark it up. It’ll get a lot of massaging before it’s done.” Tolliver walked over to him with the sheet. His face wrinkled up. “Jesus Christ, Bonner. What have you been drinking, peppermint schnapps?”

Tolliver spun on his heel and crossed to the orderly room door. “I want those statements by close of business tomorrow. And any recommendations on the citation.”

“Yes, Sir.”

As Tolliver strode past outside, the first sergeant seemed absorbed in relacing his boot. When Top looked in the orderly room door, the Old Man had already gone into his small sleeping room and flopped down on the cot. The first sergeant retrieved the

proposed citation from the floor and went to a file drawer for the statement forms Gomez and Schiller would have to fill out.

Back down the path, Tolliver's copilot jumped to his feet when he saw him coming, but the major waved him off. "Going over to battalion," he said and walked briskly past.

Fifty yards farther on, he arrived at the battalion's Tactical Operations Center: several CONEX containers that were butted up against each other and heavily sandbagged. The colonel was aloft deploying his other companies for the night. The XO, also a major, was in the TOC making final plans for the night's helicopter resupply.

When the exec saw Tolliver, he smiled. "Hi, Russ. What's up?" He noticed the grim set of Tolliver's face and the smile faded.

"Don't give Bonner any sudden missions before sunset," Tolliver said to him. "He's smashed on his ass."

Bonner finally pulled into the driveway a little after 7:00. Judy knew he hadn't been delayed by the Fort Benning traffic. She wondered if work had kept him again, or if he'd stopped at the infantry bar. Again. Maybe both.

The car door slammed and a moment later, he came through the side entrance. He was tired.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

Bonner sat down on a stool in the small utility room by the side door and began unlacing his combat boots, loaded with mud from the firing range. "If that fougasse doesn't ignite, I'm dead in the water." He set his right boot on a layer of newspaper and started taking off the left.

Right before leaving for the States, Bonner had turned over command of his infantry company to young Pete Gannon, a first lieutenant who'd been an officer just under 13 months. Bonner arrived at Fort Benning on the same day that the new promotion list to major was released. He was a due course officer, having made the list at the expected time for an average career. His battalion commander in Nam had given him a lukewarm efficiency report littered with faint praise, but the promotion list, though not released, was already complete. When he checked in for duty, they immediately put him in charge of the Mad Minute, a spectacular night live-fire demonstration of the infantry company in the defense. Because it cost big bucks letting 200 soldiers off the leash with live ammo for 60 seconds, the exercise was staged only twice a year. Being put in charge

was a bit of a plum. How well he did would determine what his long-term assignment would be.

They went into the kitchen. While she tore lettuce, he built himself a substantial bourbon on the rocks from a fresh bottle and talked wearily about the mechanics of the fougasse. Thickening the fuel was no problem. It came out the consistency of napalm, and it should blow like the stuff the Air Force dropped. Loading the 55-gallon drum wasn't the issue either—a charge of plastic explosive first, followed by the wooden piston, cut to fit snugly against the wall of the drum. Then they loaded in the thickened fuel, though not all the way to the top—they didn't want any spillage. That would invite a fire, and once napalm catches, it's very unforgiving.

“The piston works fine.” He was building another drink as she waited for a signal to serve the food. He would ask what was for dinner, or if he could help carry anything, or he'd simply lift up a lid to see what was inside. What was there right now were badly overcooked pork chops, rice gone to a starchy mass, and sodden green beans well on their way toward gray.

“When the plastic detonates, the piston pushes the napalm out into a big fan-shaped area,” he said, gulping another hit of bourbon. When he was in his second drink like this, he became animated, voluble, deeply concerned—about anything. She knew that as he got to the end of the second and began to build his next, his speech would begin ever so slightly to slur and his enthusiasm to dissipate. Then he'd start a long, slow descent into alcoholic melancholy and a profound pessimism about everything. In the process, she would gradually fade out of his awareness.

His consciousness would steadily turn inward to some bleak combat terrain of the

mind, where he would engage in bizarre hostilities. Sometimes after dinner, when he reached his fourth, or his seventh, she would hear him begin his arguments with himself. He had an urgent need for gunship support, or critically wounded troops needed an immediate air medivac. But no one would respond and his voice would begin to rise on a crest of urgency. He'd left for Nam focused and ready for what lay ahead. He'd come back—she paused a moment to find the right words to describe her husband now, and found them: he'd come back fragmented, inside himself.

He would wake her briefly when he finally shambled into their bedroom. She was grateful that sex was the farthest thing from his mind at these times. He'd drunk himself to a point where he would simply fall into bed and pass out. In the morning he'd wake without having rested. Sometimes he'd give a puzzled look at a letter he'd written the night before, and open it to see whether it made enough sense to mail. Usually, he tore it up.

“But the explosion doesn't always ignite the napalm,” he was saying. “It spews the stuff out, but it doesn't do anything. It's useless.”

Field expedient demolition techniques weren't her best topic of conversation, but she'd picked up some technical odds and ends listening to him talk to his bourbon. “Why don't you attach some det cord to the plastic explosive and run it through a little hole in the piston?” She took the lid off the pork chops, hoping the smell might make him hungry. “You could make it long enough to tie it into a knot or something on the napalm side, and when the cord detonates maybe it'll ignite.” She looked at him. He was oblivious to the meat. She put the lid back on the pan.

“You're on to something.” He was getting excited. “Maybe the det cord would do

it, but if I wrap it five or six times around a white phosphorus grenade... Listen, when that goes, it *all* goes. Hey, can I help you carry anything?"

He was upbeat and conversational at dinner. He particularly liked the white phosphorus grenade because when it blew, it would add a bit of glitz to the light show. There was a conscious element of spectacle built into the demonstration to emphasize the heavy firepower of a full infantry company. The M16s and machine guns would fire only tracer rounds. The mortar platoon would be firing illuminating rounds as fast as they could drop them down the tubes. The centerpiece of the spectacle, however, would be the fougasse. Bonner would use the PA system like a command radio and call for Final Protective Fires, starting the clock on the Mad Minute. As all the weapons on the range opened up with everything they had, a half dozen 55-gallon drums of fougasse would simultaneously blow off across the entire width of the bleachers. This maximum effort would continue until he called the cease fire. He was definitely up now, and even helped carry the dirty dishes back into the kitchen.

As he set the plates down on the counter, he found the letter from the postal inspector. He had to read it twice. Brief and businesslike, it summarized the status of their investigation into the obscene mail that had been left in the Bonner mailbox three months ago.

He looked at her uncertainly. "What's this?"

She hadn't meant to leave the letter where he could find it. At least she didn't think she had. After waiting over a month for a vacancy, they just moved into these old on-post quarters ten days before. While Chet was in Nam, Judy rented a one-bedroom apartment in town, in a fourplex near where she taught. The mailboxes were in the

unsecured front hallway. Coming in from school one day, she found a penciled note, folded and slipped into the box among a couple of bills and a letter. It indicated in raw detail the kind of service the writer hoped she would perform for him. Next day, she showed the note to her principal and he immediately called the postal authorities. She made arrangements to phone one of the other teachers every day as soon as she got in from school. If she hadn't made contact by a certain time, the police would be notified.

This arrangement held for just over a week until Judy realized her apartment was becoming a prison. She deflated the phone contact to a more informal level, and made a point of taking herself out to dinner and a movie every week. At the same time, she grew even more circumspect about where she parked. She added a loud, shrill whistle to her key ring and reviewed the instructions Chet had given her once on the most efficient way to gouge an eye, collapse an instep, or flex a knee in directions not specified in the original design. These were all reasonable precautions, yet somehow they didn't seem enough. Helpless anger followed whenever she realized how afraid she still was. The note's writer could be dead or in Antarctica, but his hands were still around her emotional throat.

"Oh," she said, and gave a little laugh. "Some scuzzy type dropped a nasty note in the apartment mailbox a while back." She tried to keep it light and hoped the effort wasn't too obvious.

She looked carefully into his eyes and had the odd feeling she was in the process of disappearing from his vision. Before he went to Nam, he would have occasional dark periods. Once he got back, it didn't take her long to figure out that his moodiness had intensified to a deeper, more frequent instability, which she linked to a marked increase

in his drinking. A few times since his return he'd lurched from the house in such moods and driven off, to return closer to dawn than midnight. The latest credit card bill contained a charge slip from a gas station in central Alabama, same date as one of his excursions.

Judy was coming to realize this wasn't the man she married, certainly not the man she once loved. But when her mind, on its own, conjured an image of him wrapping his car around some bridge support, she was instantly anguished to an intensity that made her wonder what she really felt for this stranger she shared her bed with.

When the phone rang, she picked it up. "Hello."

"Mrs. Bonner?"

"Who's calling?"

"My name is Jasper Hite. I was your husband's first sergeant in Vietnam. Is he home?"

"Oh, yes. He'll definitely want to talk to you."

Bonner looked up at her out of his haze. "Who's that?"

"Chet, it's your First Sergeant from Nam."

His face broke into a smile. "What? Jasper?"

"That's what he said." Bonner was on his feet in a second. She gave him the phone and headed toward her little office to correct papers.

"Top! How the hell *are* you? When'd you leave Nam?"

"About a week ago, sir."

"Did they finally figure out where they're going to send you?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm going to Fort Gordon, and help train up new infantrymen."

“Lucky for them, Top.”

“Look, I’m calling because I’ve got a piece of bad news, and I know you’d rather hear it from me.”

Bonner frowned as he went through scenarios that would prompt the First Sergeant to call like this. “What’s happened?”

“You remember Lieutenant Gannon, don’t you?”

“Who, Pete? Well, sure. He took over the company. Is he okay?” he asked, certain that he wasn’t.

“He didn’t make it.” Bonner’s face darkened. “One of the last things we did before I left was his memorial service.”

Bonner shook his head. “Small arms?” he asked.

“Booby trap.” Bonner wedged the phone between his ear and shoulder, picked up the half-empty bottle and poured a large bourbon. “The NVA found an unexploded artillery round,” Hite went on, “and rigged it up. When he stepped on it…”

“Jesus.” An artillery shell could cause serious casualties 50 yards away and it had gone off right under Pete Gannon’s feet. Bonner was horrified. “Nobody could survive that. Nobody should.” He swallowed a mouthful of bourbon.

“Sorry for the bad news, Captain. He was our best platoon leader. I know you set a lot of store by him.”

“I did, Top. You’re right. It’s a hell of a loss.”

“I’ve got to get going, sir. My wife and I are still packing for the movers tomorrow.” Bonner stood in silence a moment. Hite added, “I thought you’d rather hear it from me than read it in Army Times.”

“You’re right there, Top. Good luck at Gordon.” He emptied the glass.

As Judy came back, she heard the side door slam and hurried into the kitchen. The half-full bottle of bourbon was gone and she could hear the car backing out the drive into the street. She opened the side door just as Chet drove off, and watched the car till it turned the corner. She had real doubts about whether he would get back in one piece and wondered how long she could live this way.

Once around the corner, he pulled over and fished out a soft drink cup from under the seat. He took off the lid, leaving the straw in it, filled the cup with whiskey and replaced the lid. He sucked warm bourbon through the straw, then put it in the plastic drink caddy hanging at the driver’s window. He decided he would go to the infantry bar and hoist one for Pete Gannon. As he pulled away from the curb, he made a mental note to watch his speed. The MPs didn’t add any fudge factors to the limit.

Thinking about Pete took his mind back to Nam and an early afternoon when the company had nothing to do until they set out their ambushes for the night. He let his platoons go by turns into the nearest village, where a mama-san sold a little hot food, a young lady made herself available and a barber finished his haircuts with a potent scalp and neck massage. One of his other platoon leaders came back tired, happy and depleted, complaining amiably about the lady’s no-mattress mahogany bed, and what its unforgiving wood surface did to his knees as he shifted around on it for leverage.

Pete’s platoon went in last. When the young lieutenant came back, he told Bonner how he stumbled on a small Buddhist temple during evening prayers. Three or four monks were chanting and every so often one of them would ring a small hand bell, while incense from joss sticks drifted through slanting shafts of sunlight. Pete had lingered, rifle

slung and helmet cradled in his arm. He seemed utterly at peace when he described the scene to Bonner. The hundreds of chunks of steel from the artillery round must have ripped his legs clear to the groin. Groin, too, he decided grimly. But it had to be instantaneous—a blessing. Except no trip home, none he'd remember. Bonner noticed his car drifting over the center line and pulled it back sharply.

Bonner wondered whether his own feet would have tripped the artillery shell if he'd still been in-country. He leaned over and took a long pull from the straw, but the thought refused to go away so he flipped on the car radio. A blaze of rock music hit him. He reached toward the soft drink cup again, and then frowned as the involuntary image of Major Russ Tolliver rose in his mind: “Jesus Christ, Bonner, what have you been drinking—peppermint schnapps?” Bonner scowled. *So I had a couple of drinks that time the company was standing down. Everybody does. Well, fuck him,* he decided. *Tolliver will make general and live happily ever after, but just fuck him.* He turned the radio up a couple of clicks.

Some kid was botching a newscast big time, detailing an international meeting in Cara-Cackis Venis-walla. Where did they get this guy? Then he started talking about a local real estate broker who was being indicted on interstate wire and mail fraud, and that made him think of the postal inspector's letter. While he was in Nam getting shot at, some sicko was keeping tabs on Judy—maybe following her back to the apartment after school, maybe just plain hunting her. A deep dejection seized him, which started with not being able to protect his own wife and then tainted everything else that came into his mind.

When he approached the turnoff to the infantry bar, he decided the hell with it. He

pulled over and put the last of the bourbon into the cup, then slipped the empty bottle under the seat. He thought maybe he'd go off post the back way and go for a drive. *Got to pick up another bottle.* He knew right where he'd stop.

He pulled away from the curb and almost hit a late model Ford that was just going around him. The other driver honked and pulled sharply left across the center line. Bonner threw the driver the finger, visible in the dark to no one but himself, then checked his mirror to make sure there was nobody else he had to worry about. There was just a single set of headlights a good quarter of a mile or so behind him.

The housing area ended abruptly. Suddenly, he was in open country, rolling down the two-lane road that wound through the numerous firing ranges. He clicked on his high beams. Pete Gannon returned to his mind's eye, almost a dream figure, wrapped in drifting incense.

Bonner pulled the cup out of its holder and took a deep draw. With his free hand, he guided the car into a sweeping curve and began running alongside a high berm that marked the end of one of the firing ranges. Bonner pushed down hard on the accelerator despite the curve, fleeing the figure of Gannon in the clouds of incense. Suddenly half a dozen machine guns opened up with a deafening clatter.

Ambush! His heart rate instantly doubled, stampeded by a flood of adrenaline. He cried out in stark fear, every muscle taut. His hand reflexively crushed the paper cup, the lid angling away and the bourbon scattering across his face and shirt. The stinging whiskey blinded him momentarily and the wheel jerked from his hand. The car hurtled across the center line and up the inclined roadbed of the curve, launching off the pavement and into the air. Then it nosed over and down toward the culvert on the other

side. The impact sprung the door open and threw Bonner headlong. As the car rolled over and came to rest on its side, he struck midway up a pine tree, gashing his cheek and ripping a jagged tear across the top of his head. He fell 15 feet to the ground and lay dazed a few seconds, his face covered with blood. Then he began screaming in agony.

The MP had his emergency lights flashing before the car came to rest. When Bonner forced the Ford onto the other side of the road, the cop had started following him. Now, he pulled onto the shoulder and called for backup and an ambulance. He was halfway across the culvert when he heard Bonner.

With his flashlight, he saw that the captain's cheek was deeply gouged. A lot of blood was running from his scalp down into his face. But it was his left arm that focused the MP's attention. It hung oddly, the shoulder obviously dislocated. With his right hand on the tree trunk, Bonner pulled himself to his feet. As he writhed in pain and reached toward his left arm, he bumped his shoulder against the tree and yelled sharply.

The MP looked at the name tape on the fatigues. "Captain Bonner, you need to sit down, Sir. The medics are on the way. They'll be here any minute. Calm down now, or you'll hurt yourself worse."

He moved to sit Bonner down and lean him against the tree. But Bonner's yelling increased in volume and he grabbed the MP with his good hand, knocking the flashlight to the ground. The cop momentarily lost his balance and almost fell, then tried once more to get Bonner to sit. In the face of renewed struggling, he used his leg to sweep Bonner's feet neatly out from under him, while keeping a firm grip on Bonner's fatigue shirt and easing him to the ground. Bonner immediately tried to get back on his feet. Finally, the cop knelt astride him and immobilized his flailing right arm with his knee and hands. The

flashlight lay out of reach, its beam lighting up a deadfall.

When the medics arrived, they ragged the MP for sitting on Bonner to keep him down, so he got up and showed them why. He and his backup had to hold Bonner down, while the medics strapped him to a stretcher.

Doctor Chase, the emergency room physician, and the anesthesiologist, Jackie Mack—John Emmett McDonnell, M.D.—were waiting at the hospital.

One of the medics spotted Jackie Mack. “Hey, you better shoot this guy up before we take the straps off. He’s a real berserker.” One of the nurses was starting to cut away Bonner’s uniform, ignoring the groans punctuated with expletives.

Chase looked at Bonner straining in pain against his bonds. “How bad was he?” he asked.

“It took four of us to tie him down,” the medic answered.

“Why don’t I give him the sodium pentothal right away then?” Jackie Mack suggested.

“Right. Then I’ll put in the trach tube,” Chase replied. “You follow with a muscle relaxant and I’ll reduce the dislocation.” Another nurse began sponging blood off Bonner’s head and face.

“Then all you’ll have to do is sew up his scalp and face.” Jackie Mack looked at Bonner’s cheek. “Pretty deep.”

“We probably ought to call in the plastic surgeon. This guy’s an officer. We don’t want any ugly scars to ruin his career. In the mean time, we can do the x-rays and neurologicals.” The nurse who’d gotten Bonner naked now threw a sheet over him.

Jackie Mack readied the sodium pentothal. “Three hundred and fifty milligrams

should do it.” Bonner calmed down almost at once, but when Chase tried to insert the trach tube he resisted feebly.

“He’s not all the way under, Jackie.”

“He doesn’t look that heavy. I’ll give him another 50.”

Again, Bonner resisted the tube. “Jackie?” Chase said.

Jackie Mack was frankly puzzled. “What’s going on here?” he murmured, more to himself than to Chase. Then he noticed the small red blotches on Bonner’s chest. Understanding began to spread across his face. “Look at this,” he said, pointing out the rash to Chase. He began palpating Bonner’s liver.

“Petechiaie,” Chase said, looking at Bonner’s chest.

“Feel the size of this thing,” Jackie Mack said, grinning.

Chase did, and was impressed. He told the nurse that he wanted blood work on the patient’s liver function and she told him Bonner’s fatigue shirt smelled like the bottom of a punch bowl. “I believe we’ve got us a class one alcoholic here,” he said to Jackie Mack.

“And I think you’re right,” Jackie Mack replied. He reached for more sodium pentothal.

A little after 2:00 a.m., Chase and Jackie Mack went to the waiting room to talk to Judy. She was with Colonel Hoover, Bonner’s boss.

“How is he?” Judy asked.

“It could be much worse than it is,” Chase responded. “Nothing’s broken, although he dislocated his left shoulder, and he has a lot of stitches in his scalp and face. But that should all heal nicely. We’ll keep him overnight. If all goes well, we’ll release

him in the morning. The best thing you can do right now is get some sleep yourself.”

“He’s in charge of the Mad Minute the end of this week,” the Colonel said. “Is he going to be able to see that through?”

Chase shook his head. “I’m putting him on quarters, Colonel.”

“There’s one more thing,” Jackie Mack said. “Mrs. Bonner, how much does your husband drink?”

Judy paused, then looked him in the eye. “A lot,” she said simply.

The lack of weasel words told Jackie Mack a great deal. “I used sodium pentothal as the anesthetic. The usual dosage is 350 to 400 milligrams. He’s built up such a tolerance, I had to nearly double that before we could work on him.”

“Good God,” the Colonel murmured. Judy said nothing.

“His liver function’s abnormally elevated and the organ itself is enlarged,” Jackie Mack continued.

“In the bigger picture,” Chase said, “alcoholism is much more dangerous than any of the injuries he got tonight. It’s chronic, addictive and incurable. If he doesn’t stop drinking, it’s going to be fatal.”

Again, she seemed unsurprised. “What can we do?” she asked.

“We’ll bring in the head of the drug and alcohol abuse program. He’ll probably arrange one-on-ones with a psychiatrist, as well as small group therapy. You and Colonel Hoover can help by insisting that he keep his appointments.”

Colonel Hoover spoke up. “Send him to me right from the hospital. He’ll do what the shrinks tell him, believe me.” The Colonel had made up his mind. “As of now, he’s relieved of all duties. He needs to deal with this and not have anything else on his mind.”

Judy shook her head. “That’s going to be hard on him.”

Next morning, the hospital Executive Officer escorted Bonner through the lobby and out to an army sedan in the driveway. The Exec told him the car would take him to Infantry School headquarters, where he was to report directly to Colonel Hoover.

The colonel was in his conference room, at the head of the table. On one side were the MP who was first on the scene, the anesthesiologist Jackie Mack, and a civilian with some kind of unreadable name tag attached to his breast pocket. And Judy.

They put him at the foot of the table. *Shit rolls downhill*, Bonner thought, and then it started.

Colonel Hoover spoke tersely. “You’ve got a drinking problem, Captain Bonner.”

“No, Sir, I do *not*.”

“You’ll get your turn. Right now, just listen.” The Colonel turned to the unknown civilian. “Frank Jenner directs Benning’s drug and alcohol program. This is really his session.”

Jenner was clipped, businesslike. “I’ve asked these people to tell you how they’ve seen alcohol operate in your life. They’re going to show you a side of yourself you need to take a real hard look at.” He nodded to the MP.

Bonner bristled at being forced to listen to this kid. He’d commanded scores of soldiers just like him in Vietnam. Now, he was being subjected to this kind of treatment. He glowered, but the MP was crisp and methodical, referring to a pocket notebook as he talked. Bonner got the impression he’d done all this before.

The MP spotted Bonner, he said, when he almost forced a car off the road. He followed and actually watched Bonner cross over the center line at the machine gun

range, veer off the road and crash in the woods. The Captain had reeked of alcohol and despite his injuries, had resisted attempts to help.

Bonner admitted to a drink, maybe two, before dinner. But he vigorously denied the kind of drinking the MP implied.

The MP reached down and pulled an empty whiskey bottle and a paper cup out of a briefcase and set them on the table. “I found these in your vehicle last night, sir,” he said. “The cup still had a little bourbon in it and your shirt was soaked with it. The whole inside of the car smelled.”

Then, the anesthesiologist began. “Last night,” Jackie Mack said, “I had to give you enough anesthetic to stun a steer.” Nobody smiled. “The alcohol’s got you so inured that it took twice the normal dosage before the emergency room doctor could work on you. Your liver’s clearly enlarged. You’re a mid to late stage alcoholic, Captain Bonner. Cirrhosis is a real possibility, near term. If you keep doing what you’ve been doing, it will kill you.”

That got Bonner’s attention and his eyes began to show fear.

Jenner turned to Judy. “Mrs. Bonner?”

She paused, anguished. “He’s always been a drinker,” she said finally, looking at the tabletop. Her voice was quiet. “But it’s worse now—much worse since he got back.”

“From Vietnam?” Jenner asked.

“Yes.” She looked at Jenner. “Since then, it’s been...he drinks every night.”

“How much?”

“A lot. Sometimes after I’ve gone to bed, he’ll leave the house and drive away. And he won’t get back till...” She paused, taking stock. Bonner listened riveted, his

mouth half open. "One night, he charged a tank of gas almost 70 miles away in Alabama." She shook her head. "When he goes, I never know where he's at, or if he'll even get back." Her eyes were filling up. "And it *scares* me." A tear began to roll down her cheek.

Bonner looked at her a moment, aware for the first time of the pain he was causing her. Jenner let him absorb it all in silence for a minute. Finally he spoke.

"Captain Bonner?"

He looked up at Jenner.

"Comments?"

Bonner sat a moment, then shook his head.

"You'll join group therapy today," Jenner said.

"What?"

"By the end of this week, you'll be working with one of the staff psychiatrists. You'll have individual sessions with him and he'll probably put you on antabuse."

"Wait a minute..."

Hoover cut in. "You'll do *what* you're told, *when* you're told, or I'll have you court-martialed for drunk driving." He watched Bonner's face turn white, as the implications dawned on him. "Got it?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Be at my office in the hospital at 1255 hours," Jenner said.

"Yes, Sir."

He was uncooperative in his first group meeting, sitting slumped in his chair. When the facilitators asked him questions, he responded in single syllables and thought about the

first drink he'd have that night. *Not at home, in the car.* By mid-session, a couple of the other clients started to ping him for being so sullen. Near the end, a facilitator wondered aloud if he wouldn't do better in an inpatient status, and Bonner began grudgingly to loosen up a little. The inpatient threat also made him decide to leave off drinking, at least for tonight, and that made him thirstier.

He beat Judy home and called his replacement on the Mad Minute to tell him about wrapping the det cord around white phosphorus grenades. They had already solved the problem by talking to someone who'd worked on previous demonstrations. His replacement was pleasant, but it was clear that Bonner's help wasn't wanted. He felt useless, that his links were falling away. His resolve not to drink wavered and he checked under the counter where he kept his liquor. Judy had cleaned it out.

When she arrived he was sullen with her, too, thinking about what she'd said in Hoover's office. The larger impact on his career began to sink in and it distracted him from conscious sulking. She simply faded from his mind while he pondered his inner landscape. They'd keep him in service for a while, if he could stay reasonably straight. But the war was bogged down and couldn't go on like it was. *One way or another, they'll get us out of Southeast Asia,* he thought, *and then there'll be massive reductions in force. They'll look for people to dump and any official mention of this will act like chum to feeding sharks.* Even if it wasn't explicit, Hoover would work between the lines in his next efficiency report: You don't need to know the details, but get rid of this guy. And coming on the heels of his C minus report as a company commander, it all boiled down to the handwriting on the wall. His thirst got stronger.

Grimly, he began accepting that this incident was the beginning of the end of his

military career and, oddly, the realization prompted a fatalistic little smile. Soon, it took root in his mind that not just his current career but everything in his future was headed for major catastrophe, that his whole life, like his car, had careened off the road somehow and totaled itself in a ditch. His silence in front of Judy came from the contemplation of this pervasive, impending doom, and the feelings it created cried out for his peculiar medicine.

And when he was invited to leave the army, what would his father say?

His sleep that night was spasmodic. First light brought the day of the Mad Minute, and his participation in the group session after lunch was fitful. A facilitator told him afterward that he'd see one of the psychiatrists next day. He told Bonner he'd do better on antabuse, and grinned. "Drink on top of that and you'll puke your guts out."

Closing in. His hands were sweaty.

He left post in the late afternoon in his rental car, drove to the civilian liquor store just off the traffic circle and bought two fifths of Wild Turkey. As soon as he was back in his car, he cracked the seal on the first bottle and stretched out the swallowing to feel it go down. It spread around in his belly, somewhere between a smolder and an outright burn. He closed his eyes and smiled as the tensions fell away. *Antabuse tomorrow, Wild Turkey today*, and he took another good hit.

He headed for the Columbus Veterans of Foreign Wars. As usual, Clyde Eberhardt was behind the bar, downing a shot every three or four minutes. Korea still owned his crazed memory and the VFW membership kept him in work and booze as the day bartender, almost like a mascot. Bonner drank two, while Clyde worked through a good part of a bottle. Back in his car, he took a hit from his own stock, thinking about

Eberhardt. *I'm not near as bad as old Clyde*, he decided with a satisfied smile and washed the thought down with another swallow.

He drove slowly back onto post against the rush hour traffic, answering the gate MP's smart salute with a grin and a wave. He went out the range road, looking for signs of his accident as he took the curve where he rolled the car. Finally, he pulled into the side drive for the Mad Minute, parking at the far end of the lot.

In a few hours, the bleachers would be full, with well over a thousand spectators, mostly students, waiting for the show. He could hear a couple of people on the firing line as they talked to each other with bullhorns, then a muffled "Fire in the hole!" and a substantial charge of plastic explosive detonated down range. With the absence of any breeze coming through the open car windows, little beads of sweat started to form on his scalp and make their way down his forehead, neck, and behind his ears. He settled in and got serious about the open bottle beside him.

As he drank, the bullhorns started another conversation. In due course, he heard the sharp snap of exploding det cord, followed by the ponderous whoosh of blazing napalm as it fanned out and blanketed a large wedge of terrain with jellied fire. He jerked around in his seat and had a good view of the brisk flames through the lattice of empty bleachers. He was almost as close to the fire here in this controlled environment as when he'd called in the F-4 Phantoms in Nam. He could faintly feel the radiating heat on his face. As he drank, the bullhorn chatter sank to a drone, punctuated now and then by the full public address system. *God's in the control booth*, he thought cynically. With an inch of bourbon left, sleep overtook him, but he kept a firm grip on the bottle.

He woke with a start when a good chunk of plastic explosive blew down range,

simulating an artillery registration round. It was full dark and the parking lot was crowded with cars. His tongue felt thickish and furred, and he could hear a soft buzz inside his head. When he turned to look at the explosion through the bleachers, he saw only legs and backsides.

He knew the script by heart. They'd already introduced the infantry company's weapons one by one, not just the rifles and machine guns but also the mortars and the 106 mm recoilless rifles. Now, they were about to begin the tactical game of being attacked by an enemy force. The notional enemy would push closer and closer until the company commander called for Final Protective Fires. Then, all hell would break loose. He raised the bottle to his lips and got a mouthful of paper.

He turned on the overhead light and found that someone had wrapped a torn sheet of paper around the neck of the bottle, with a rubber band to hold it in place—all while Bonner had been gripping the thing in his sleep. He took the paper off and unfolded it. 'If you want to quit drinking, call me', the note said. It was signed 'Nick' and there was a phone number.

Bonner was livid. Why did everybody think he needed saving from demon rum? *Fuck you very much, Nick.* He drank down the last inch in a single take, threw the empty bottle out the window and began opening the second. *You and the horse you rode in on.* He lurched out of the car with the fresh bottle, angrily slamming the door.

He moved off from the left flank of the bleachers toward the extreme side boundary of the range, his gait heavy but determined. He achieved the path marking the edge of the range on that side and continued down it without pause. The voice of the notional company commander on the loudspeaker had everyone focused midway down

the other side of the range where a mortar was about to drop an illumination round.

Another 30 yards and Bonner paused in a large cluster of thickish brush, concealed from the bleachers. He took another drink.

The illumination round popped and the tempo of the fictitious attack rapidly picked up. In the new light, an Observation Post reported sighting a strong enemy force deployed across the company's front. The voice of the soldier at the OP rose excitedly, as he described the movement of the enemy toward the company position.

If they were Gauls moving up against Caesar, they wouldn't take any prisoners. Bonner was sure of that. He took one more long drink and carefully laid the bottle, just over half full, at the base of a bush. Then he turned his attention to the company front.

The right side of the line was being probed and the company in that sector was starting to engage enemy troops, as they became visible in the garish light of the flare. Then the left flank, closest to Bonner. The company response was sharpening. *Caesar would know what to do.* Finally, the center of the line felt the probing and engaged the notional enemy with fire. Bonner squinted into the darkness, trying to make out the imaginary attackers. His pulse was responding to the increasing tempo of the battle. The enemy force slowed momentarily in the face of friendly fire, but continued its inexorable push toward the defensive positions. The company was taking casualties now and the enemy line was 40 meters out. The battle had reached its decisive moment. Now was the time to act. Bonner knew it. *Caesar grabbed a shield and went forward.* Bonner ran, bent over, out onto the range, putting a little rise between him and the bleachers. *He called the centurions by name.* As he reached the end of the rise, the company commander ordered Final Protective Fires.

Bonner emerged into the clear just as the company opened fire with 200 rifles and all the machine guns. *Fighting under the eyes of their commander.* Two hundred strands of orange tracers arced down range and explosion after explosion detonated across the entire front where plastic charges simulated artillery fire. So far, it was just small arms fire snapping around him and over his head, but then the force of the nearest detonation knocked Bonner to the ground. He rose at once, his ears bleeding, shaking it off. He continued toward the center of sector. An NCO on the firing line spotted him in the lurid illumination, gaping in disbelief for an instant. He screamed “Cease fire! Cease fire!” The battle noise almost smothered his voice, but behind him a sergeant with a bullhorn caught it and picked up the cry, pointing the instrument at the control booth. “Cease fire!” The Officer on the PA system heard the desperate call and repeated it at once: “Cease fire! Cease fire! Firing line, cease fire!” As the infantry company began to obey, the six drums of fougasse blew off simultaneously, spewing out blazing napalm and carpeting the entire inner defensive zone with flames from one side of the range to the other.

Bonner’s screams stood out starkly in the unnatural silence of the guns.

At the hospital, Jackie Mack’s face was grim. “His condition is extremely critical, Mrs. Bonner.” He watched his words register on her.

“How bad?” she asked.

“Second and third degree burns over 90% of his body.”

She nodded. *Critical, indeed.* “What are you going to do?”

“We’ve got him stabilized now, and we’re treating the burns and medicating for pain. We’ve inserted a feeding tube directly into his stomach. But the burns are too extensive for our capabilities here.”

“What’s next?”

“An air medivac to Brooke Army Hospital in San Antonio. They’ve got one of the best burn centers in the world. If anybody can pull him through, they can. You’ll go with him, of course.”

She pondered her two Chets, the one she’d married years before, and the one in intensive care. She reflected on the legal fact of their marriage and wondered if it still existed in reality. And if it did, whether she wanted it to. Then, she felt guilty thinking such thoughts while he was fighting for his life.

“How is he really?” she asked simply.

“Not good, Mrs. Bonner. Not good at all.”

The next day the Air Force flight nurse read Jackie Mack’s instructions for pain medication and lifted her eyebrows. She knew that Captain Chester Bonner, United States Army, would have a difficult time of it.

Judy stayed at his side as the flight droned on. The nurse checked her other patients from time to time, but none was as critical as Bonner. His blood pressure left her distinctly uneasy and she didn’t like having to give him such quantities of pain medication. It could have serious effects on his respiratory function.

He was drifting in and out of consciousness, restless even with the intravenous medications. Sometimes a memory would turn into a dream. Sometimes a dream would drift the other way and become the recollection of something that might have happened. He wondered vaguely how bad his burns were, and remembered a classmate in ranger school who almost lost an eye when he fired off a signal flare. Thinking of ranger school made him recall how they’d killed the goat for their survival meal and how the chaplain

said it was like an Old Testament burnt offering. Then he thought he remembered he was angry with the chaplain, or was that a dream? He dozed off again.

He dreamt a sky of deep blue dotted with jet black clouds. Far below, an earthbound kid probed with a bayonet until he found the goat's jugular. Blood spurted across the parched Georgia clay and onto the fire. His pain became more insistent and his breathing more labored, but he resisted the pull of consciousness. Better to stay inside, in the tangle of dream and memory.

As his pain sharpened, he concentrated on the sleek black clouds. Then he heard the desperate bleatings of the goat as the bayonet started its work. He dreamt the smell of burning blood, heard the crackle of it scattering across flame, could not determine if he was in the place of sacrifice or survival, glimpsed the blur of an eagle falling behind parapets. Profound shaking seized him and he sat stark up, wrenching against the tube in his belly and spilling a bit of cloudy pinkish fluid into the gauze at the incision.

Alarmed, the nurse tried without success to force him back down. A gurgling cry from very deep foundered somewhere on secretions. He coughed, propelling half out of his mouth a loop of greenish ooze tracked with white, which clung viscously to the side of his chin. She noted a few bits of esophagus in his expectoration as she adjusted the flow of medication. The napalm must have scorched his airway.

“What’s wrong?” Judy asked. He coughed again, thicker than before. More of the green-white bile draped his lower lip. She grabbed the nurse’s arm. “What’s happening?”

“The pain medication’s losing effectiveness. I’m increasing it.” She started wiping his mouth and chin.

“Khuh down.” He was trying to say something.

Judy bent closer to him. “What?”

“Khuh down. Pugnahn khuh down.”

“Say it again.” She stared at his mouth, frowning with the effort to comprehend.

“Pugnans,” he said again. The shakings tempered slightly with his struggle to articulate. “Fortiss pugnans khuh down.” The preciseness cost him and he fell back exhausted.

“What did he say?” she asked the nurse.

“Couldn’t catch it.”

His body arched rigidly, half off the stretcher, as new waves of pain contorted him in involuntary spasms. He tried to speak again, but choked on accumulating fluids. He sucked loudly for breath, but the effort began pulling saliva and bile into the singed nodes of his lungs. He gagged a long moment, trying to clear his airway, rapidly losing strength. Judy lay her hand next to his head on the pillow, repeating his name softly, almost to herself. Suddenly, the strangling sound ceased. His eyes held focus for a moment, then rolled up, away from the light.

The nurse told her with a look what she already knew. Even as the tears came, her face tightened at the realization: *This is a combat death*. It was intuitive. Neither of them knew Latin, so they hadn’t understood him. Though Caesar would have.