

LULLABIES FOR LIEUTENANTS

Screenplay by

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Based on the book by

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LULLABIES FOR LIEUTENANTS

FADE IN:

INT. TENT - NIGHT

Dark, dense, filled with a humid jungle mist and a Marine's world of haversack, helmet, cartridge belt, poncho and stacked C-rations. An EXPLOSION off, a SCREAM in the tent...

... and 23 year old First Lieutenant FRANK COX rises from his cot, leaping out of his latest nightmare. Finds himself in a living one as he reacts to the violence outside his quarters. Dressed in boots and jungle utilities, he grabs his M-14 and powers from the tent...

EXT. ECHO BATTERY 2/12 COMMAND POST - NIGHT

Structures and vehicles, men and equipment. Illumination flares bursting overhead, MORTAR BURSTS kicking dirt fountains. HUEY gunships rotoring through the air. Turmoil par excellence.

Frank charges through the chaos, past six 105 mm HOWITZERS in front of a perfectly aligned row of sandbagged gun bunkers, all BLAZING AWAY in sequence. The uproar is literally earth shaking, the noise earsplitting. Frank races for the largest tent, busts through its flaps...

INT. THE FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - NIGHT

General purpose tent, a dozen personnel, radios, charts and maps, fire missions being radioed in. A first looey, call him DUNBAR, yells at Frank over the din of raised voices and MORTAR EXPLOSIONS.

DUNBAR
Sleeping in, Frank?

FRANK
I'm a growing boy. Need my beauty sleep. What's my slot?

DUNBAR
Foxtrot and Hotel Companies of 2/9 are in heavy contact and need our arty. Hopefully Echo Company will neutralize the VC mortars crews that have us bracketed.
(MORE)

DUNBAR (CONT'D)

We just got a fire mission request
from the Forward Observer with
Hotel.

(to no one in particular)

Get that dog out of here.

A little yellow dog is barking at Frank, nipping at his
heels. Frank kicks at the mutt, who dodges under a map table.

DUNBAR (CONT'D)

How long you here at the battery?

FRANK

Just today and tomorrow.

DUNBAR

Have fun playing in the mud with
the grunts when you go back to 2/9.

FRANK

Can't wait till Mr. Charles pays a
personal visit to you here in the
rear. Your balls will curl up into
your stomach.

DUNBAR

But my cock will still swing down
past my toes.

FRANK

Keep dreamin'. Where's the mission?

DUNBAR

Five clicks south down by Ha Dong.
VC with machine guns and RPGs. Our
FO with Hotel Company is screaming
blue hell. You're the boss now in
the Fire Direction Center.

FRANK

What's your job?

DUNBAR

Emergency evac to the head, then
the rack.

He slams his handset into Frank's hand and rushes out. Men
scream, mortars explode, and the dog barks as Frank grabs the
radio handset.

FRANK

Echo 4, this is Sunrise. Send your
mission!

We leap away from Frank, rising up and up, through the top of the tent...

... and into a sky awash with moonlight. To the north, we can see the lights and energy of the giant Da Nang air base, its twin massive runways lit like a small city's power grid. To the south, the s-curved Song Cau Do River.

We fly toward the river, over the wide and deep green-brown waterway. Over the fertile rice bowl valley that stretches endlessly to the west and south.

Dark blue-green mountains in the distance. Glimmering wet rice paddies. Scores of villages. A maze of cart trails and dirt roads.

We race above this vast tapestry of colors that would make Paul Gauguin salivate with an artist's envy. Until we dive down toward a particular collection of low slung, primitive dwellings...

EXT. HA DONG VILLAGE - NIGHT

... and into an intense firefight where a company of Marine grunts is hugging the ground, shooting into the dark, their red tracers racing toward gun flashes from a treeline of Ha Dong 200 yards away.

A corpsman is applying a fresh field dressing to a badly wounded Marine while a KIA lies in the dirt nearby, his poncho sheeting his face.

A FORWARD OBSERVER battles to remain calm while checking his compass and his map before he snatches the radio handset from his sweating RTO.

FO

Roger, Sunrise. This is Echo 4.
Fire Mission. Coordinates: 998642
Azimuth: 4800. Enemy company in
treeline with automatic weapons.
Friendly casualties. Will adjust.
Over.

RETURN TO:

INT. THE FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - NIGHT

Frank plots the location on a wall chart as he repeats the FO's data for clarity both for the FO and the men in the tent.

FRANK
 Roger, Echo 4. Fire mission.
 Coordinates, 998642. Azimuth: 4800.

A STAFF SERGEANT, using a RANGE DEFLECTION PROTRACTOR, calculates the range and deflection to the target and calls out the numbers.

STAFF SERGEANT
 Deflection 2950. Quadrant 1875.

Frank uses a slide rule to reckon the given elevation and deflection to gauge the right number of charges.

FRANK
 Charge three.

The FDC CHIEF, a Gunnery Sergeant, checks and confirms.

FDC CHIEF
 Three bags it is.

While he struggles to ignore the ugly yellow mutt still yapping at him from under the map table, Frank grabs a land line and shoots the dope to the battery.

FRANK
 Echo Battery. Fire Mission!
 Guns 3 and 4 adjust, Charge 3,
 Deflection 2950, Quadrant 1875.

EXT. ECHO BATTERY - NIGHT

The battery's Executive Officer passes on the dope over his microphone, which is wired into each gun leader's headset.

EXECUTIVE OFFICER
 Fire Mission! Guns 3 and 4 adjust,
 Charge 3, Deflection 2950, Quadrant
 1875.

The cannons manning the battery's six Howitzers spring into action; their procedure quick, smooth and professional. High explosive shells, followed by the powder bags, are shoved into two breeches. Lanyards are yanked, Guns 3 and 4 FIRE in unison. Twin rounds head downrange.

RETURN TO:

INT. FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - NIGHT

The dog is still yapping, Frank still ignoring him.

FRANK
Echo 4, this is Sunrise. On the
way, over. Get some!

Frank loses it and kicks at the dog, who just yaps and yaps.

CUT TO:

EXT. JUST OUTSIDE HA DONG VILLAGE - NIGHT

Behind a paddy dike, staring at the treeline as enemy fire shreds the air above his head, the FO stays on point.

FO
Roger, this is Echo 4. On the way,
wait.

The FO and the nearby grunt Marines glance skyward while the shells scream overhead and crash into the dirt short of the treeline. While the relentless enemy fire continues, the FO screams into his RTO's radio.

FO (CONT'D)
Sunrise, this is Echo 4. Add one
hundred. Fire for effect! Over.

RETURN TO:

INT. THE FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - NIGHT

Frank responds to his radio...

FRANK
This is Sunrise. Roger, Echo 4.
Wait.
(to his team)
Repeat range. Add one hundred.

The STAFF SERGEANT calculates the fresh range and deflection and calls out the numbers.

STAFF SERGEANT
Deflection 2944. Quadrant 1874.

Frank uses a slide rule to reckon elevation deflection and therefore the charges.

FRANK
Still Charge 3.

The FDC CHIEF, a Gunnery Sergeant, quickly checks and nods.

FDC CHIEF
Confirmed.

Frank grabs the battery land line, shouts orders, kicks at the yapping dog.

FRANK
Battery 3 rounds. Charge 3.
Deflection 2944, Quadrant 1874.

EXT. ECHO BATTERY - NIGHT

The cannoneers load the six guns, fast and furious.

TRACK a shell into the ass end of a 105, followed by powder bags. The breech is shut.

The six guns fire three salvos in quick succession, eighteen shells in all. The earth shakes, the air explodes, and dust rises from the sandbags anchoring their positions.

FOLLOW our first shell as it explodes out of the cannon and tears through the humid, moonlit Vietnamese night...

... Over the river, over rice paddies, past the fields and villages, beyond the cart trails and roads...

Until it powers down toward the Ha Dong treeline full of VC firing tracers with muzzle flashes.

EXT. JUNGLE - NIGHT

A VC LIEUTENANT is directing his unit in a staggered firing line in a thick tangle of trees, brush, and grass, the dark outline of Ha Dong Village behind him and the flashing M-14's of the Marines visible across the field.

The officer shouts an order that dies in his throat as the incoming barrage screams toward them from above. He looks up. His men follow his gaze...

... and the shell howls down from the dark. We follow it right into an upturned VC's shocked face.

An EXPLOSION fills the screen.

The jungle erupts in flame and smoke and concussive explosions.

Trees shatter, dirt fountains geyser the air, body parts fly, VC scream and die.

On the other side of the rice paddy, huddled behind its dike, the Marines watch the fireworks with eyes as wide as any rookie's. No matter how many times they've seen it an artillery barrage will always be a mesmerizing sight.

In the jungle treeline, the enemy fire dies away as battered and bleeding VC scatter, carrying their dead and wounded.

The last to leave is the VC LIEUTENANT, pausing just long enough to shoot a glance at the Marines, vivid with rage and malice, before he follows his troops away from Ha Dong Village.

And as he watches the enemy leave, a sweat soaked and trembling FO sighs with relief. Speaks into his radio handset.

FO

This is Echo 4. Excellent effect. Flaming fucking perfect. Many VC casualties. Over.

CUT TO:

INT. THE FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - NIGHT

Just as relieved, Frank acknowledges.

FRANK

Any time, Echo 4. This is your friendly FDC. Out.

Frank grins at his team. Scowls at that barking dog. Kicks at it under the table.

The beast suddenly counter attacks and -- impossibly and insanely -- flies through the air, glistening fangs bared.

Right at Frank, right at his throat...

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

A middle-aged Frank Cox awakes startled in his bed beside his sleeping wife and looks about. He is both confused and relieved. Until he realizes a dog is barking.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Scratching at his butt through his pajamas, Frank stumbles to a window to look out at his backyard at a barking dog. A nasty, grungy yellow mutt just like the one in his dream.

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY

The dog barks furiously at Frank as the man leaves his house. The two watch each other, Frank bleary eyed from yet another of many hard nights, the animal just barking and snarling.

Frank suddenly raises his black metal service .45 pistol and FIRES at the dog. He empties the clip and, by the time he's done, the sharp stink of gunpowder has filled the air. Making him cough.

FRANK'S WIFE (O.S.)

Frank?

He faces his wife and the two young children standing at the rear of the house in their bed clothes. Watching him.

FRANK'S WIFE (CONT'D)

What are you shooting at?

Frank frowns. Impatient.

FRANK

The dog. Damn dog.

He gestures toward the backyard. But there's no sign of any canine, dead or alive. Just bullet holes in the back fence.

CUT TO:

EXT. FRANK'S HOUSE - DAY

Dressed in charcoal suit, starched white shirt, red Hermes tie, and Gucci loafers, Frank heads for his shiny new '87 Mercedes 380SL roadster. Ostrich-skin briefcase in hand, perpetual scowl on his face. His wife watches him from the front porch. He catches her concern and tosses back anger.

FRANK

What?

She just shakes her head and re-enters the house. With a disgusted look, Frank slumps into his car and drives away.

CUT TO:

EXT. ATLANTA - DAY

Frank's Mercedes joins the morning rush on a busy Peachtree Road.

INT. MERCEDES - TRAVELING - DAY

In a sequence of motions that display ample practice, Frank snorts blow, sips from a flask, and lights a cigarette, all while driving to a Led Zeppelin cut on the car's Becker sound system.

EXT. MONARCH PLAZA OFFICE BUILDING - DAY

Frank heads for the parking entrance of one of the newest and tallest high rises in late 80's Atlanta.

EXT. PARKING ENTRANCE - DAY

He leans out the driver's window of the Mercedes and cards his way past the barrier while a surly looking Vietnamese attendant watches him from the kiosk.

FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE)
What's your problem, little man?

ATTENDANT
Your Vietnamese sucks.

FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE)
You are a boy born from a dog.

ATTENDANT
(impressed)
Better.

Frank drives on.

INT. PARKING LEVEL - DAY

The level is packed with vehicles, not a space to be had, which forces Frank to plant his Mercedes in an unauthorized, reserved parking space. As he hustles for the elevator, glancing at his watch, he encounters a young man in a suit with an over-sized Motorola cellular pressed to his ear. The kid is grinning like a loon.

SWALLOWS
Crinkle or natural cut?

He nods and smiles at Frank, who glowers in return as they enter...

INT. ELEVATOR - DAY

Where they stand together while the car rises.

SWALLOWS

Both. Never met a French fry I
didn't love. Like I love you.

Frank pretends to gag but the kid's cheer is unshaken.

SWALLOWS (CONT'D)

Medium well, medium rare, medium, I
love it all. Yeah, like I love you.

Frank rolls his eyes. Oh, come on!

INT. HENLY, RAPPOLD, AND FINCH (NYSE) - DAY

The two leave the elevator and enter a workspace already in full financial maelstrom; brokers, traders, and their assistants in noisy flux; phones ringing, voices rising, Quotron screens alive with buy and sell activity. As Frank and Swallows move along...

SWALLOWS

Can't wait, cuteness. Should I
bring anything?

As Swallows moves on, Frank stops at a glass walled office, gestures at his smooth, superbly dressed office manager, GEORGE BRICE, who is seated at his desk.

FRANK

Should we tell him it doesn't last?

BRICE

They're not even married, Frank.
Let the poor kid enjoy the illusion
of true love for a while longer.

He drops hot coffee on his leg, steam rising. Doesn't react.

FRANK

Don't look now, but your leg is
smoking.

Brice taps his leg with a stapler, metal on plastic.

BRICE
And enjoying it less.

FRANK
Miss the real ones?

BRICE
Like I miss my ex-wife. Legs are overrated. I stub a toe...

FRANK
You don't have any toes.

BRICE
Exactly.

A shout from the far side of the bullpen...

MAKULSKI (O.S.)
Cox!

BRICE
The pig calls.

MAKULSKI (O.S.)
Hear me, Cox!?

FRANK
You're glad you don't have legs and I wish I didn't have ears.

BRICE
Kick him for me, will ya?

INT. MAKULSKI'S OFFICE - DAY

Cluttered and disordered, a sales manager of the year award hung prominently and haphazardly on the wall. A framed picture of his fat wife placed at his elbow, MARVIN MAKULSKI, a huge, greasy slob of a man, is slouched at his desk, wolfing down his bagel and eggs breakfast with his fingers as Cox barges in.

MAKULSKI
Cox... !

FRANK
I'm here, I'm here. Whatdya want?

MAKULSKI
Hong Kong is crashing, the chinks are screaming, and opportunity is calling.

FRANK

For my clients to buy the Sank Heng Index? That's your advice?

MAKULSKI

Oh is for opportunity, Cox. Want your numbers to rise, right?

FRANK

Not off slant stocks. Don't trust 'em far as I'd spit a chopstick.

MAKULSKI

Oh is for opportunity. It's also zero for your future at this firm if you don't respect or abide my leadership.

FRANK

Yawhol.

Cox leaves. Makulski frowns.

MAKULSKI

What the fuck does that mean?

INT. FRANK'S OFFICE - DAY

Frank slams his briefcase on his paper-piled desk in his cramped office. A calendar is open to OCTOBER 19, 1987, and a worn little plastic American flag is attached to the wall above his phone.

FRANK

(to himself)

Means yes, asshole.

He grabs at the mail piled across his IN box. Shuffles through the varied correspondence with disinterest...

Until he finds a letter. In a worn, tattered envelope. Dirty and aged. All that's written on it is "Anonymous Marine Lieutenant."

Upset and not knowing why, Frank tosses the letter in the trash, sits at his desk, and fires up his Quotron. Freezes at...

OLD LADY (O.S.) (IN VIETNAMESE)

There, the yellow butterfly, there, the yellow butterfly...

The man turns to face an OLD VIETNAMESE LADY in a maid's uniform, an off-white bandana tied in a knot above her forehead, holding her grey hair in place in a tight bun. She is pushing a coffee cart through the bullpen while she sings a lullaby to the tune of Frère Jacques.

OLD LADY (IN VIETNAMESE) (CONT'D)
Spreads its wings, spreads its wings...

She stops, steps into Frank's office and offers him a cup of java with a smile. He takes it cautiously, as if it were acid, and watches her move on, singing.

OLD LADY (IN VIETNAMESE)(CONT'D)
Takes its flight, takes its flight.
We contemplate it, we contemplate it...

Frank faces the credenza behind him and stares at a framed photo. He grabs it, rubs the dust off it. Stares...

... at a picture of Frank Cox, 23, in uniform, sitting in a yard in a Vietnamese village somewhere. Smiling at an old Vietnamese woman.

Frank stares at the picture. The old lady grins back at him. She's identical to the woman who just served him coffee.

His phone suddenly and loudly rings, making him jump. As he drops the picture and it crashes to the floor, glass breaking, he fumbles for the phone. Barks into it...

FRANK
This is Cox. Yeah, Bernie. Right here between my legs. You're a real comedian. Yeah, I'm up on the latest. The proverbial shit has hit the spinning fan. The New York Stock Exchange is in a meltdown and Hong Kong is crashing, the chinks are screaming, and opportunity is calling...

He glances out at a bullpen in abrupt turmoil. We can see the brokers' faces twisted in emotion as they struggle to reassure panicked customers via their phones.

FRANK (CONT'D)
And it looks like the whole world is suddenly scared shitless.
(reacting to his Quotron)
Jesus, my client book is getting lit up like a flamethrower hit it!
(MORE)

....FRANK (CONT'D)

Coke is down 10 points in the last hour! Go away. Goodbye.

He hangs up and goes to work. Tries not to stare down at the picture on the floor, its broken glass spider-webbed over the old lady's face.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BULLPEN - DAY

Late in the morning and even more frenzied. Panic in the air, desperation incandescent on a hundred faces.

INT. FRANK'S OFFICE - DAY

Frank is barely holding his own as he screams into the phone while he searches through pile of paper and junk on his desk.

FRANK

It's a sell order, Paul. You don't have those in New York? Want me to spell it out? S-E-L... yeah, the whole lot, the entire fucking Hong Cong enchilada. Just hit the fucking bid at the market.

He hangs up, continues his hunt through the clutter. But all Frank finds is that letter -- the dirty, worn tattered envelope with "Anonymous Marine Lieutenant" written on it.

Frank glares at the trash can and stares at the letter. Didn't he throw this away already? Angrily trashes it again.

Then he glances through the glass wall of his office at the bullpen. Does a double take and stiffens as...

... a gorgeous young woman glides by. Alabaster complexion, deep blue eyes, killer body, long blonde hair, tailored suit. She looks Frank's way and smiles a dazzling, white, perfect smile.

WANDA

Good morning, Frank.

He's almost speechless. Barely gets it out...

FRANK

Morning... Wanda.

The woman moves on and Frank watches her go. Until...

CRACK. Something breaks. Loud.

Frank looks up at the glass wall of his office. At the nice neat crater in the glass. Like a bullet hole.

Frank just stares at it. What the fuck?

Then a whizzing noise. He stares up at the flag. There's a neat, black hole in the field of stars, a wisp of smoke rising.

Frank instinctively ducks beneath his desk. Looks frantically about. Another whizzing noise. Another crack.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Hey! Hey! What in the shit... ?

People walk past his office, ignoring him, ignoring the whizzing noises.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Don't you hear that?

Then he hears it. Yapping. Barking. Yapping.

He looks behind him. It's that damn yellow mutt, snapping and snarling at his feet. Its sharp little teeth catch in the cuff of his pants leg.

Enraged, Frank kicks at the dog, but it dodges away and runs out of the office and into the bullpen.

Frank leaps to his feet and launches himself out of his office and after the dog...

INT. BULLPEN - DAY

... chasing it down the narrow aisles through the cubicles. He knocks aside Swallows, who is smiling into his cell, at his fiancée no doubt.

SWALLOWS

Hey! I'm talking here!

Frank barrels on, hammering past Brice, causing him to spill yet another cup of coffee.

BRICE

Frank! For God sakes... !

But our hero ignores him and charges on, pursuing that little yellow mongrel across the length and breadth of the bullpen...

... to the Men's Room just as Makulski appears from inside it and that nasty little dog dodges between his legs. Frank heedlessly shoves the fat man aside and powers into the rest room after the fleeing animal.

MAKULSKI

Cox!

INT. MEN'S ROOM - DAY

Panting and sweating, beside himself but not really sure why, Frank stares frantically about the white, tiled facility. But there's no sign of the dog, no trace of any living thing.

He moves down the line of stalls, kicking them open one by one. Until he reaches the last stall. Kicks it open...

... and the Vietnamese parking attendant charges out, bayonet in hand, and tackles Frank! The two fall back onto the tile floor and wrestle like dock fighters.

Frank kicks the man off and leaps to his feet, but his opponent quickly counter-attacks. A fierce, intense and intimate battle follows; Frank using his fist, elbows, a steel trash can, the doors of the stalls, whatever he can grab, to counter the attendant's knife and feet. The tight, tiled space becomes a blur of flying limbs and flashing metal.

Frank finally knocks the knife out of the other man's hand, then kicks the entire attendant back into the stall, the door slamming shut behind him.

Breathing heavily, soaked in sweat, Frank throws open the stall door...

But it's empty. No sign of the crazed attendant.

Glass breaks. Frank turns.

The attendant is outside the bathroom, his face visible past a broken window. He pokes the black muzzle of an AK-47 through the shattered opening and starts FIRING...

... at Frank, who dodges for cover as a relentless stream of 7.62x39 ammo tears up the stall around him. He dodges across the room, bullets ripping into tile and fixtures, water spurting from broken pipes and faucets, until he takes cover behind the last stall.

Frank huddles there, disoriented, shocked, beyond terrified. The rain of bullets around him actually seems to increase, the furor of battle rising to an earsplitting level.

He covers his face with his hands and arms, and huddles behind the stall. Quivering, lost, overwhelmed. And then...

... silence. Utter and total silence. Frank sits in the stark hush for a moment, face still covered. Afraid to look up, afraid to breathe.

JANITOR (O.S.)
Mister Cox? Mister Cox?

Frank finally lifts his head and looks about. And what he sees is beyond his belief...

He's kneeling on a clean, unmarked tile floor in front of a row of untouched stalls free of bullet holes. The Men's Room is untouched, its window intact and unbroken. There is no sign of any murderous Vietnamese parking attendant, armed or otherwise.

But there is a uniformed JANITOR, his hands on the handle of a mop in a rolling bucket, standing by the open door, watching Frank. Concerned.

JANITOR (CONT'D)
You okay there, Mister Cox?

Frank rises to his feet, stumbles out of the rest room, and back into...

INT. BULLPEN - DAY

Lifeless, abandoned, devoid of humanity. Frank careens past the empty cubicles and offices, the Janitor following him.

FRANK
Where is everybody? Swallows,
Makulski, Brice...

JANITOR
Who?

FRANK
Brice. Guy with the plastic
legs. That's his office.

He points at Brice's office, now as empty as the entire bullpen. Frank is flummoxed.

FRANK (CONT'D)
What about Makulski?
(to Janitor's look)
Makulski!
(MORE)

FRANK (CONT'D)

Fat fuck, eats with his fingers.
Has a shit can office right over
there...

He points at Makulski's office, which is now stacked high
with file boxes. Frank is baffled; the Janitor nervous.

JANITOR

Been here longer than anybody,
Mister Cox. Never heard those
names. Don't know those people.

FRANK

They work here.

JANITOR

Nobody works here, Mister Cox.
Office been closed since the crash
six weeks ago.

FRANK

But they work here. With me.

JANITOR

No you don't. Not anymore.

Off Frank's reaction...

CUT TO:

INT. PARKING LEVEL - DAY

Empty save for Frank's Mercedes. Briefcase in hand, the man
trudges toward his vehicle.

INT. PARKING ENTRANCE - DAY

Frank stops at the barrier to key his way out. Stares at the
female black attendant in the kiosk. The woman stares back.
Frank drives on.

EXT. FRANK'S HOUSE - DAY

Frank parks. Gazes at his house. His wife appears from inside
it. Their eyes lock.

CUT TO:

INT. FRANK'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Frank is seated on the couch. A thousand yard stare. His wife enters with two highballs, hands him one, sits beside him.

FRANK'S WIFE

I was worried when you left so abruptly this morning. Didn't even say goodbye to us. You've stopped returning calls, stopped seeing friends. Stopped... stopped being Frank, at least the Frank I know.

Her husband rises to his feet and walks out.

INT. FRANK'S HOUSE - STUDY - DAY

Frank tears through his desk, his bookshelves, his cabinets. His wife enters and watches, frightened, as the man rips the room apart. Until he finds a worn looking letter with "Anonymous Marine Lieutenant" written on it. He stares at that for a moment, then puts it aside. Keeps searching until he finds a framed picture.

It's the one of him and the old Vietnamese lady, sitting in front of a hooch in some hamlet.

He puts this aside. Finds another picture. Stares at it intently. Eyes wet, he slumps into his desk chair, transfixed by...

... an image of three men together, standing in the central square of a Vietnamese village. Frank Cox, twenty-one years younger, plus Swallows and Brice, all in jungle utilities and field gear, grinning at the camera.

Frank absorbs the image, allowing it to sink deep into his soul. He finally, for the first time since we met him, begins to relax.

FRANK'S WIFE

What is it, Frank? What's happening to you?

FRANK

What happened. *It's* what happened. *THIS* is what happened.

FRANK'S WIFE

Just tell me one thing. Do you know what you need to do?

He looks up at her. And slowly nods.

CUT TO:

EXT. HARTSFIELD-JACKSON ATLANTA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - DAY
To establish.

INT. AIRBUS CABIN - DAY

Frank is seated in coach, staring out the window.

PILOT (FROM PA)
... our flight to Da Nang
International Airport, in service
to Ho Chi Minh City, will take
approximately twenty one hours,
including a short stop in Seoul..

As the pilot drones on, Frank leans back in his seat, glances down the aisle...

... at an old woman seated just ahead of him, the off-white bandana tied in a knot above her forehead holding her wispy bun of grey hair in place.

Frank sits up in his seat, his eyes locked on this woman.

And as if sensing the attention, the old lady turns to frown at him. Blue eyes, goldframed glasses, Texas accent.

WOMAN
Excuse me. Do I know you?

Frank just shakes his head. With a shrug, the woman turns away and settles into her seat.

While Frank sits back in own. And closes his tired eyes.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. TENT - DAY

... and our 23 year old Frank opens his eyes and sits up in his cot again, but with considerably less alarm this time. He yawns and stretches, then reaches for his first cigarette and his M-14 in one, smooth gesture.

EXT. ECHO BATTERY 2/12 COMMAND POST - DAY

Still yawning and stretching, Frank stumbles through a tranquil encampment that is a stark contrast to the hot battle zone of last night. He falls into step with Dunbar, who is eating from a can of C rations with a Ka-bar.

DUNBAR
(offering)
Breakfast?

FRANK
I'm kicking the habit.

DUNBAR
Heard you did yeoman's work last shift for Foxtrot in Ha Dong.

FRANK
Yeoman? Isn't that a Navy term?

DUNBAR
I'll speak Marine then. You fucked those gooks good.

INT. THE FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - DAY

As they enter...

FRANK
Considering my gook fucking abilities have been well established...

Dunbar shades his eyes and pretends to peer at the horizon.

DUNBAR
What do I spy in the far distance? Why it's a happy little Arty Liaison dude with the grunts for the duration. And it's you.

FRANK
I know I'm not here for keeps. Just need a break from the bush. A week?

DUNBAR
The bush will still be gnarly and snarly when you get back.

FRANK
I'm fine with that. Just need a few days to decompress.

DUNBAR
Directing fire missions 24/7 during
mortar and sapper attacks is your
notion of a vacation?

FRANK
Like you just said, the bush can
get gnarly, especially in
firefights.

DUNBAR
How long you got?

FRANK
Thirty two days and a wake up.

DUNBAR
Short timer, huh? Hearing the angel
wings?

FRANK
(getting pissed)
I'm hearing a ton of shit. Can you
use a part time fresh Fire
Direction Center Officer, or not?

Dunbar considers. Finally nods.

DUNBAR
I'll plant a word in Makulski's
ear. But you'll have to follow up
with a sales talk.
(as Frank groans)
Hey, he's the Battery CO. We don't
make the rules, the rules make us.

CUT TO:

EXT. ECHO BATTERY 2/12 COMMAND POST - DAY

A downcast Frank leaves the FDC just as a deuce and a half
almost runs him down. Its driver grins at him.

SWALLOWS
Getting yourself run over is a
lousy path to a medical ticket back
to the world, my Cox man.

Frank's face explodes into a huge smile as he jumps on the
truck's running board and converses with his buddy as the
vehicle continues on its journey.

FRANK

Stealing a motor is a dead-solid
lock for a court martial.

1st Lieutenant GEORGE BRICE, riding shotgun (literally; he's
armed with an Ithaca pump) chimes in.

BRICE

Don't get so high and mighty just
cause you saved some asses lately.

SWALLOWS

That's Wardaddy's way of offering
thanks for the quick artillery
response. Hotel was in the hurt at
Ha Dong.

FRANK

De nada, hoss. Maybe some day you
can repay the favor.

SWALLOWS

Hope not. You don't EVER want that
shit.

BRICE

Not that you could handle it after
playing summer camp back here in
the rear at the FDC.

FRANK

Least I'm working for a living, not
grand thefting transports.

SWALLOWS

This isn't stealing.

BRICE

We're hauling.

CUT TO:

EXT. DA NANG HELIPORT - DAY

Ramp agents are unloading the truck's burden and placing it
in the bowels of a green H-34 chopper while Frank, Swallows,
and Brice observe.

FRANK

Claymores, sixty mortars, eighty
one mortars, M-60 belts, and is
that like a thousand .762 rounds
for M-14s?

BRICE

Don't forget the flak jackets.
Perfect summer wear for the well
dressed grunt.

SWALLOWS

And extra entrenching tools. New
troopers don't have 'em.

BRICE

When we're out of bullets and
fighting the gooks hand-to-hand
that's the only thing left to kill
'em with.

FRANK

Didn't know you could haul that
much heavy ordinance in a single
six-by.

BRICE

Minimum requirement for Dodge City.

Frank reacts. Shocked.

FRANK

So 2/9's headed below the La Tho
River?

SWALLOWS

Not headed. Planted.

BRICE

In the heart. Like a stake.

SWALLOWS

It's not so bad. Not much ground to
cover.

BRICE

Oh, yeah. Five miles wide, three
miles long and more tunnels, spider
holes, punji traps and Victor
Charlies per square inch than all
the Mekong combined. Every Search
and Destroy is a kill or be killed.
Fun times in Dixie lie immediately
ahead.

SWALLOWS

Thank your luck and rub your balls
you're out of it, Cox man.

FRANK

I'm on temp duty here. Hope they don't cut my slack.

BRICE

You're already short. How many days?

FRANK

Thirty two plus a wake up.

BRICE.

Kiss ass and grab every shift in this Hawaiian Hilton you can.

SWALLOWS

Do the same if we were you.

FRANK

Like Hell you would.

They don't respond. They just watch that chopper get loaded.

EXT. DA NANG HELIPORT - LATER - DAY

The chopper is lifting off, its heavy rotors stirring a whirlwind of dust and dirt. Swallows yells down at Frank from the open hatch.

SWALLOWS

Free ride on us.

He tosses the truck's keys down to Frank, who catches them. As the chopper rises into the sky and heads south, Frank watches it go. Feelings severely mixed.

He mounts the truck and keys it. The engine grinds and grinds but doesn't turn over. Frank has to laugh.

CUT TO:

INT. BATTERY CO TENT - DAY

Elegantly surrounded by many creature comforts and treats, including a basket of Hershey Kisses and Snickers. Frank sits uneasily in a field chair while Captain Marvin Makulski sits at his desk, devouring steak and potatoes with his hands. A framed picture of his fat wife is placed at his elbow.

MAKULSKI

Dunbar tells me you know your shit when it comes to artillery liaison plus the FDC, Lieutenant Cox.

FRANK

Yes, sir.

MAKULSKI

He tell you I run a tight ship?

FRANK

Is that a naval term, sir?
(to Makulski's look)
Little humor, sir.

MAKULSKI

Very little. Tiny as your dick, small as your brain, you think you can smart ass yours Captain truly.

FRANK

I really wish to help out, sir. And I know you're short handed.

MAKULSKI

You don't know fuck all. Wet eared, diaper dressed lieutenants, they never know nothing, not even which way to piss or crap. You do know you don't know fuck all, right?

Makulski shoots Frank a look that could crack concrete.

FRANK

Yes, sir. I do know I don't know fuck all.

Makulski relaxes just a little.

MAKULSKI

Then maybe, just maybe we'll get along.

FRANK

Sir?

MAKULSKI

Where you bivouacked?

FRANK

Empty supply tent behind the gunline. Suits me fine.

MAKULSKI
Has to. Got nothing better.

Despite his misgivings, Frank is thrilled.

FRANK
Thanks, sir.

MAKULSKI
Don't thank me. Thank Dunbar. His sales job was loads better than yours.

FRANK
I will appreciate the duty, sir.

MAKULSKI
Just you remember to tell me that after your next ten hour shift.

CUT TO:

INT. THE FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - NIGHT

Midnight, the vast operations tent a sultry bath of sweltering heat. Frank is slumped in a chair with the rest of the FDC supernumeraries; sipping a coke in between smoking a cigarette. The Staff Sergeant glances at a wall clock.

STAFF SERGEANT
Fifteen minutes to go, and we're safe and comfy in our bunks, jerking off.

FDC CHIEF
Speak for yourself. I'd rather sleep.

FRANK
Don't speak at all. You'll jinx us...

The radio crackles, a shrill sound that startles everyone. Frank shoots his guys a hard look as he grabs the handset.

FRANK (CONT'D)
This is Sunrise, over.

The voice that responds is barely audible over heavy fire, static, yells and screams.

GOLF FO (FROM RADIO)
Sunrise, this is Echo 3 with Golf
Company. We are face deep in our
own shit, over.

FRANK
Roger, Echo 3. What's your fire
mission?

GOLF FO (FROM RADIO)
Coordinates: 991692, Azimuth: 2600.
VC in treeline with automatic
weapons and RPGs, friendly WIAs.
Will adjust. Over.

Frank plots the location on a chart as he repeats the data.

FRANK
Fire Mission. Coordinates: 991692,
Azimuth: 2600.

The Staff Sergeant calculates the range and deflection...

STAFF SERGEANT
Deflection 2440. Quadrant 1433.

Frank slide rules the numbers on the charges...

FRANK
Four powder bags.

The FDC CHIEF checks and confirms...

FDC CHIEF
Four bags it is.

Frank grabs a land line to alert the battery...

FRANK
Echo Battery. Fire Mission.
Deflection 2440. Quadrant 1433...

DUNBAR (O.S.)
Cancel that Fire Mission.

Dunbar has entered. Indicates a wall chart.

DUNBAR (CONT'D)
Golf is on station near the Cam Ne
village complex.

FRANK
So?

DUNBAR

So didn't you read the fresh new rules of engagement?

(quoting)

"Stringent burden of proof is required to insure no friendlies are in harm's way before a fire mission is initiated."

STAFF SERGEANT

That's for shit!

DUNBAR

That's collateral damage. Dead friendlies are, as of today, officially off limits.

FRANK

I can't conduct this mission?

DUNBAR

Not without approval from battalion headquarters and our own C.O.

(to FDC Chief)

Get me Captain Makulski.

But the Chief is already on a land line, shaking his head.

FDC CHIEF

Trying to locate him. First Sergeant can't find him.

STAFF SERGEANT

Chowing down or stealing Z's, most like.

An explosion of gunfire and yells from the radio, the Golf FO screaming over the chaos.

GOLF FO (FROM RADIO)

(close to panic)

Will adjust, over!

Dunbar snarls at the Chief...

DUNBAR

Get Makulski's second to give us the word.

FDC CHIEF

(to phone)

Request permission for Golf fire mission.

(frowns, faces Dunbar)

(MORE)

FDC CHIEF (CONT'D)
No will do. Not without Makulski's
okay.

As Dunbar grabs the landline and starts yelling at it...

... Frank is staring at a wall chart while he listens to the
turmoil of screams and firefight erupting from the radio.

GOLF FO (FROM RADIO)
Sunrise, where is the fucking arty?
Sunrise?

Frank considers just a moment. Arrives at a hard, fast
decision.

FRANK
This clusterfuck is over.
(grabs the battery phone)
Echo Battery. Fire Mission.
Deflection...

Dunbar reacts, drops his own phone, yanks at Frank's.

DUNBAR
Cancel that order. You have no
authority...

Frank gestures at the wall chart.

FRANK
But I got eyes. There are zero
friendlies in this fire zone. Those
coordinates rest three hundred
yards outside Cam Ne.

DUNBAR
According to the new ROE, that's
still too close.

More explosions on the radio. More screams. Frank grabs the
radio headset and offers it to Dunbar.

FRANK
Tell 'em. You tell em while they
burrow behind rice paddy dikes
alive with black ants with tracers
burning at their heads that the new
ROE are worth more than a company
of your fellow Marines.

Dunbar can feel the accusing looks of the men in the tent,
boring through his skull like tactical lasers. As he shakes
his head, defeated, Frank barks orders into the phone...

FRANK (CONT'D)
 Echo Battery. Fire Mission.
 Deflection 2440. Quadrant 1433.
 Four bags. Gun Numbers 1 and 3.
 Fire!

We hear twin Howitzers FIRE off. An instant later, twin explosions over the fracas on the radio.

GOLF FO (FROM RADIO)
 Sunrise, this is Echo 3. Right one hundred. Repeat range. Fire for fucking effect! Fire everything you got! Fire pistols and flare guns! I want to see the kitchen sink dropping from down on high. Over.

Frank grins at his team.

FRANK
 This is Sunrise. Roger, Echo 3.
 Wait.

EXT. THE SKY OVER VIETNAM - NIGHT

Peaceful, quiet, dark. Then the glowing trails of red hot 105 shells arc into the sky, howl past us, and scream down into the jungle, a huge, green chunk of it erupting in a flaming, seething cauldron of lethal pyrotechnics.

INT. FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - NIGHT

Frank, Dunbar and the rest of the men in the FDC wait tensely. Until the radio's speakers finally crackle. The Golf FO's voice is still excited but relieved, the small arms fire around him limited and scattered.

GOLF FO (FROM RADIO)
 This is Echo 3. On target!
 Excellent effect. We just zapped a bunch of dinks. Out.

Grins and high fives all around. Frank slumps into a chair. Dunbar claps him on the shoulder.

DUNBAR
 Shit, Frank...

FRANK
 Yeah. That's the shit.

EXT. ECHO BATTERY 2/12 COMMAND POST - NIGHT

Cheeks billowing and scarlet with rage, Captain Makulski charges toward the FDC and blows through its entrance...

INT. FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - NIGHT

... to glower at all and sundry.

MAKULSKI

Who gave permission for that arty?

Frank pulls himself to his feet.

FRANK

I was in charge of the FDC, sir.

MAKULSKI

Lieutenant Cox, you issued the order?

FRANK

Yes, sir.

MAKULSKI

Were you aware you did not have the authority?

FRANK

Yes, sir.

MAKULSKI

Were you aware your arty could have brought harm to friendlies?

FRANK

I was aware I had no choice since no decision appeared to be coming from your people. Or you. Sir.

Someone stifles a laugh. Makulski glares about, but doesn't find the culprit. Latches his watery eyes back on Frank.

MAKULSKI

This is not acceptable.

FRANK

I agree. Golf Company was taking casualties and the artillery was ready and the FO was screaming.

(MORE)

FRANK (CONT'D)

There were no friendlies in the area so I decided it was not acceptable for a company of Marines to die for no reason... sir.

Makulski explodes with rage, spittle flecks flying.

MAKULSKI

You are officially relieved! You are officially fucking banned from this FDC! You are, you are...

FRANK

Officially confined to my quarters. Sir?

Apoplectic, Makulski just gestures furiously at Frank, who walks out. Another snicker and Makulski glares about in vain, sweat running and chest heaving.

CUT TO:

INT. TENT - DAY

While heavy monsoon rains pound at the roof of the tent, Frank is living a life of quiet leisure, playing solitaire. He looks up as the Sergeant on mail call duty enters, poncho dripping. The trooper reaches into a strapped pouch for a handful of letters. Which he passes over to Frank, one by one.

SERGEANT DOWD

Got your mail, Mr. Cox. One from your mom, one from your sister, special offer from Ford on the new Fairlane 500, an overdue notice from the City of Atlanta Library...

FRANK

Just can't let go of *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

Dowd hands Frank a final letter.

SERGEANT DOWD

And this one is addressed to an "Anonymous Marine Lieutenant." Found it stuck in the pouch crease. Must be ten months old. Thought you might want it. Sure smells sweet. Maybe you'll get lucky when you return to the world. Merry Christmas, sir.

FRANK
It's not Christmas.

SERGEANT DOWD
For you it is. After what you did
to that fat fuck... excuse my
French, sir.

FRANK
You're excused.

Dowd leaves. Grinning, Frank opens the letter. Finds a
printed card. Under a shining Christmas star...

BECAUSE of YOU
America Breathes
a Little Easier
America Sleeps
a Little Sounder
And
Americans Walk a Little Taller
Merry Christmas And... Thanks

Phi Mu Sorority, University of Texas, Austin, Texas

xoxo - Wanda

A photo drops from the card onto the floor. Frank retrieves
it. Stares at an image of the most stunning woman he has ever
seen. Alabaster complexion, deep blue eyes, killer body, long
blonde hair. Mesmerized, Frank's eyes caress the image.

He starts as Dunbar breezes in and shakes the rain off his
poncho. Glances at the letter and photo in Frank's hands.

DUNBAR
Fan mail from some flounder?

FRANK
Don't have any fans.

DUNBAR
You got lots. But Makulski is
definitely not one of them.

FRANK
What's the bad news?

DUNBAR
You're headed back to 2/9, but this
time to act as Foxtrot's FO. Unless
Makulski can invent some way to
court martial you.

FRANK

(shrugs)

Didn't plan to make a career out of
this green motherfucker anyway.

Dunbar sits on the bunk beside Frank.

DUNBAR

Careers do end. Like Makulski's.
Roster of officers advancing in
rank just came in. By the
clairvoyant wisdom of Headquarters
Marine Corps, our good Captain has
been passed over for Major. And
it's all thanks to you.

FRANK

Me?

DUNBAR

Word is the word on your little
debate with Makulski scored a
direct hit with regimental command.

FRANK

So little birdies do talk.

DUNBAR

Even in the jungles of Vietnam.

FRANK

Wonders never cease.

DUNBAR

But Makulski does. He's on his way
out. Thanks to you.

FRANK

He did it to himself. I just took
notice.

DUNBAR

Just promise me one thing,
Lieutenant...

FRANK

Not to get my ass shot off in Dodge
City?

DUNBAR

Not to get mad at me like you got
mad at Makulski. Truth is, I do
want to make a career out of this
green motherfucker.

Dunbar shakes Frank's hand and leaves. Grinning, the young man picks up the picture of Wanda. And kisses it.

CUT TO:

EXT. SKY OVER JUNGLE - DAY

An H-34 Choctaw lumbers past us, rotors twirling.

INT. H-34 CHOCTAW - TRAVELING - DAY

Frank is jammed shoulder to shoulder with other Marines in the noisy cabin. Our hero is garbed in full battle dress, loaded with gear and rifle, ready for bear, but not looking forward to Dodge City.

He looks out the open hatch past the door gunner manning an M-60. Then he sits back and closes his eyes. We hear a distinctive chiming noise...

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. AIRBUS CABIN - DAY

Our 1987 Frank opens his eyes as an alert chime rings.

STEWARDESS (FROM PA)

... we have entered our approach to Da Nang International Airport. After we land, please remain seated until the Fasten Seatbelts light is turned off...

While the stewardess continues her spiel, Frank reaches into his jacket and pulls out a familiar looking letter and photo. Stares at the iridescent image of Wanda from Phi Mu.

CUT TO:

INT. DA NANG INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - DAY

Packed with Vietnamese and airport personnel. Val Pak in hand, Frank leaves the Arrivals tunnel and battles his way through the chattering, bustling horde. It's a difficult journey and Frank is having a tough time dealing with the noise, confusion, and tension.

FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE)

Excuse me. Please let me through. I need to get through please...

The crowd just gets denser and noisier and more impossible. Frank pushes and shoves and pushes.

FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE) (CONT'D)
Please let me through. Need to get
through please...

The crowd is closing in. All those Vietnamese faces, all these people, all this humanity demanding space and access.

FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE) (CONT'D)
Please, please...

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. HA DONG VILLAGE - 1966 - DAY

And a 23 year old Franklin Cox is battling his way through a crowd of angry, screaming VILLAGERS, a squad of grunts at his back.

FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE)
Please let me through. I need the
bossman. Village elder. Head
honcho. Let me through, please.

Choppers roar overhead, landing and departing from an LZ as they deposit Foxtrot 2/9's men and gear. Portable loudspeakers mounted on the choppers blare in Vietnamese...

VOICE FROM LOUDSPEAKER (IN VIETNAMESE)
All villagers will report to a
detention center by the river. All
villagers will report to a
detention center by the river...

As troopers mix with villagers, it's chaos personified. And Frank is trapped in the heart of it.

FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE)
I need the boss. Guy in charge. You
got a mayor? Is there a mayor?

Swallows steps up.

SWALLOWS
Golf and Hotel Companies have
sealed off the south and east
approaches.

FRANK
What the hell are you doing in the
bush?

(MORE)

FRANK (CONT'D)

You're supposed to be back in the operations shop as Arty Liaison.

SWALLOWS

I told 'em a sea story. It's boring as shit back there.

FRANK

(smiles)

You're just a fucking dumb bonehead grunt at heart, aren't you? Any enemy contact?

SWALLOWS

Nada, so far. But there's tripwires, booby traps and punji pits in every hedgerow, trail, gate, and square inch of this wasteland. Golf found a kidnapped Claymore the hard way. One friendly KIA, two WIA.

FRANK

And we've been here five minutes.

SWALLOWS

I smell a goat fuck.

FRANK

What's the sitrep on the evac of these villagers?

SWALLOWS

Women and kids are on the way.

He points at a queue of children tightly grasping the steadying hands of their mothers.

FRANK

They can board the outbound choppers. Where's the men?

SWALLOWS

You're looking at 'em.

He gestures at a handful of yelling male villagers, none younger than retirement age.

FRANK

Where's the young guys?

SWALLOWS

Dead, detained, or in the bush,
waiting to shoot us.

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. JUNGLE - BINOCULAR POV - DAY

A MASKED SHOT of Frank and Swallows standing together in the heart of Ha Dong village, surrounded by angry old men.

A VC Lieutenant lowers the glasses to reveal his cold, angry eyes. We recognize him as the man who led the incursion on this same village some weeks ago. He is also identical to the parking attendant who attacked Frank in the Atlanta bathroom.

We will call him THO SAN.

The Lieutenant turns to his men and nods, and the entire unit melts away into the trees like ghosts. Off the mask of thick green foliage, we return to...

INT, HA DONG VILLAGE - DAY

FIRST LT. EVERETT ROAN (Foxtrot Executive Officer) approaches Swallows and Frank and the chattering old men.

ROAN

Which of these gooks is the mayor?

FRANK

All I get is fucking "Khong biet" and looks that could kill. None of them ever knows shit.

ROAN (IN VIETNAMESE)

Who's in charge here? Who's the mayor?

The chatter simply increases. Brice steps up, watches the debate for a moment.

ROAN & FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE)

Mayor! In charge! Mayor!

Brice suddenly grabs the nearest villager by his cotton blouse.

BRICE

Mayor. Now. Or die.

All the villagers go silent.

CUT TO:

INT. MAYOR'S HOOCH - DAY

The Mayor, the oldest man in the village, sits at a desk that dates back to the French colonial days while his daughter, a young woman in her early twenties, call her TUYEN, stands by. The old man is lecturing Brice, Roan and Frank.

OLD MAN (IN VIETNAMESE)
This invasion is not necessary.
There are no VC here.

ROAN (IN VIETNAMESE)
Oh, yeah? How come a Marine patrol
was ambushed right here two weeks
ago and two men were wounded?

OLD MAN (IN VIETNAMESE)
An anomaly. This is a secure
village.

FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE)
And soon to be an evacuated
village. Your people will be moved
to a safe camp nearby until this
community has been properly
searched and cleared.

OLD MAN (IN VIETNAMESE)
This is an outrage. There is no
need...

Brice loses patience.

BRICE
Shut up.

OLD MAN (IN VIETNAMESE)
Excuse me?

BRICE
Shut up as in close your mouth and
stop talking.

Tuyen steps in.

TUYEN
You have no right to speak to my
father in such an abrupt fashion.

BRICE

I have every right, considering who he is.

TUYEN

He is the mayor of this village.

BRICE

He is a facilitator for VC incursions.

TUYEN

Ha Dong is peaceful.

BRICE

Ha Dong is a hornet's nest. A staging area and way station for main force VC units harassing Da Nang.

TUYEN

When you search this village you will find no VC.

BRICE

But we will find weapons caches in every hooch and haystack and grenades rigged on every gate and trail. When it comes to Marine casualties, Ha Dong is number one on the hit parade, but the fun stops today.

He draws his .45 service weapon.

BRICE (CONT'D)

And I'm done talking. Get on the next chopper or get dead.

CUT TO:

EXT. HA DONG VILLAGE - DAY

Roughly handled by Marine riflemen whose collective frustration has reached the boiling point, mothers howl as they and their children are shoved toward waiting choppers. Fifteen villagers at a time are shoehorned into the belly of each machine before they rise into the air, rotors whirling.

In the cloud of dust raised by the departures, Brice is on the move, Frank, Swallows and Roan hard on his heels.

BRICE
Engineers deployed?

SWALLOWS
Twelve of 'em combing the vil.

BRICE
And every field and hedgerow, every
bunker, treeline, trench, and
spider hole. This village's armed
and fortified positions are to be
eliminated with extreme prejudice.
Do not spare the C-4.

ROAN
Yes, sir.

As Swallows and Roan hurry off, Frank grins at Brice.

FRANK
You're still senior LT, George.
Don't have to talk like a Captain.

Brice grins as he produces a set of shiny Captain's bars and shows them to Frank.

BRICE
Just got these from Colonel
Ellenberg.

FRANK
Perfect! You got your promotion and
Makulski didn't. Wardaddy wins big.

BRICE
Sometimes the Corps gets it right.
But I'm not about to put 'em on out
here in the bush. I'd go mad with
power.

CUT TO:

EXT. HA DONG VILLAGE - DAY

A treeline is vaporized in a flaming conflagration...

... as is a barn, burning bits of thatch and wood flying.

... followed by spider holes, hedgerows, and bunkers.
Explosion after explosion, blast following blast.

And Brice strides through the clouds of dust and smoke, Frank
and Roan at his side.

ROAN
The south, east, and west sides of
the village have been cleared.

BRICE
Treelines?

A fireball rises in the distance.

FRANK
Working on 'em.

BRICE
Soon as the north side is clear,
set up third platoon in defensive
positions. Every Marine of mine
will dig a fighting hole. A sentry
awake for each squad and an LP out
75 yards at dark.

LANCE CORPORAL GARY LOUDERMILK, Brice's RTO, rushes up,
handset extended.

LOUDERMILK
Skipper, battalion S-3 wants a
sitrep.

Gunfire at the edge of the village. Brice scowls.

BRICE
SNAFU.

As they all dash toward the sounds of battle, Loudermilk
snaps into his headset.

LOUDERMILK
Wagon Master, this is Fox 6.
Situation normal all fucked up.

AT A BOUNDARY WALL

With a peasant's hut visible some distance beyond it, gun
flashes exploding from within its dark interior. Brice,
Frank, Roan and Loudermilk join the squad crouched behind the
clay barrier.

BRICE
Casualties here?

KRONERT, the company gunnery sergeant, speaks up.

KRONERT
 Jerkowsky sprained his ankle eating
 dirt.

Everyone can't help laughing. Brice takes a quick peek
 through a crack in the wall.

BRICE
 Count one, maybe two shooters.

More fire tears into the top of the wall.

KRONERT
 Your math is off, sir. Half a
 squad's hunched in that hooch.

FRANK
 Too small a target for arty.

BRICE
 (nods in agreement)
 In this case my faith lies with
 gunships.

Brice gestures at Loudermilk, who passes him the handset and
 a map. He refers to the latter, speaks to the former...

BRICE (CONT'D)
 Wagon Master, this is Fox 6.
 Request air support at...

The firing suddenly stops. While the troopers positioned
 around the hard point emit warning shouts, Frank peeks past
 the wall...

FRANK
 What the flying fuck?

FRANK'S POV

A very old lady -- off-white bandana holding her wispy grey
 hair in place, brown blouse with maroon brocade, black pajama
 pants -- is calmly approaching the hootch on her bare feet.

A horrified Frank tries to wave her off.

FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE) (CONT'D)
 Stop, get back! Danger, danger!

As the old lady ignores him and continues on her way, Frank
 and the group beyond the wall watch with disbelief.

ROAN
How old is that crazy bitch?

BRICE
As old as the dirt beneath your
knees.

The old lady disappears into the hootch. A long beat; the troopers tensely watching. Kronert shrugs.

KRONERT
Scratch one Bà lão.

Then the old lady reappears, dragging an AK through the dirt by its sling with one hand while using the other to push along a thin boy who is very scared and barely thirteen.

She escorts the youngster to the wall and the troopers behind it. Frank stares at her, stunned, until Brice nudges him.

BRICE
Ask her if there's anyone else in
the house.

OLD LADY (IN VIETNAMESE)
Be at peace. This boy was alone.

FRANK
(to Brice)
That kid, he's it.

Brice rolls his eyes at Kronert.

BRICE
Half a squad?

The old lady drops the AK in the dirt and shoves the boy into Frank's arms.

OLD LADY (IN VIETNAMESE)
Please do not harm this child. He
is an orphan full of rage and
devoid of sense.

As she strolls away, Brice blinks. Turns to Kronert.

BRICE
Gunny, grab a squad and flush the
house just for fun.

KRONERT
Yes, sir.

As Kronert rushes off with his men, Brice nods to Roan.

BRICE
 Everett, take charge of the kid and
 request his evac to division.
 Frank, round up that old lady.

FRANK
 She just helped us out...

BRICE
 And earned a free first class
 ticket to the safe camp. Get to it.

As Brice and the others move off, Frank reluctantly follows
 the old woman.

CUT TO:

EXT. HA DONG VILLAGE - DAY

Frank walks through the empty and abandoned heart of the
 hamlet, but there's no sign of the object of his search.

FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE)
 Madame... Miss?

He sniffs the air; what is that amazing aroma? It draws him
 to...

... a house nearby. Bricks are missing from the arch that
 attaches the grain bin to the right side of the structure,
 which is shaded by coconut trees. A shelling from years
 before has pockmarked every surface of the dwelling but it
 still exhibits an aged and refined dignity.

Frank surveys the building for a moment.

OLD LADY (O.S.) (IN VIETNAMESE)
 Come in, if you like.

After a moment's hesitation, Frank enters.

INT. LINH'S HOUSE - DAY

Close, dark, and primitive but comfortable. The old lady is
 kneeling by an open hearth, boiling a fish stew with
 vegetables in a pot hung over an open fire.

OLD LADY (IN VIETNAMESE)
 Are you hungry? Of course you are.
 Americans are always hungry.

Frank kneels on the dirt floor beside her.

FRANK
 Je parle vietnamien. Préférez-vous français?

The woman grins. Responds in English.

OLD LADY
 We can converse in French if you like. Or English. But my Japanese, it's not so good. Baka!

FRANK
 I'm impressed.

OLD LADY
 Don't be. If the Swiss had invaded us, I would also speak German. So it goes.

She ladles a healthy portion of soup into a bowl and hands it to him. Frank sips it. Moans with pleasure.

FRANK
 Like a bouillabaisse I tasted in New Orleans a few years back.

OLD LADY
 Does that mean it's good?

FRANK
 Very good.
 (offers hand)
 Frank.

She shakes his hand with a grip that surprises him.

OLD LADY
 Linh.

FRANK
 Gentle spirit.

OLD LADY/LINH
 (smiles)
 Now I'm impressed.

They react to a series of M-14 bursts followed by the distinct sound of an M-60 machine gun and the shouts of excited Marines. Frank rushes out...

EXT. LINH'S HOUSE - DAY

... to watch from the portico as a squad of grunts hurry by. He accosts the nearest non com.

FRANK
What's the skinny, Sergeant?

SERGEANT
First Squad was flushing a granary
when three VC broke for it.

FRANK
Score?

SERGEANT
Three dead Charlies and one wounded
Marine. Private Armstrong. Neck
shot. Don't look good.

As the staff sergeant hurries off, a chopper roars overhead, a medical evac already on its way. Frank re-enters the house.

INT. LINH'S HOUSE - DAY

Frank shares a long look with the old lady.

LINH
Why are you here?

FRANK
To help you. Keep you safe.

LINH
From who?

FRANK
The enemy.

She sighs and shakes her head.

LINH
I must show you something.

CUT TO:

INT. SIDE ROOM - LINH'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER - DAY

Linh pulls up the fold of a tapestry to reveal the handle of a trap door. Frank is astonished.

FRANK

We searched this house. We should have found that.

LINH

That's exactly what the Japanese and the French would have said.

She pulls the handle up to reveal a pitch dark, narrow crawl space.

INT. CRAWL SPACE - DAY

Linh shuffles on her stomach through the black dirt of the tiny tunnel, Frank close behind her.

INT. BUNKER - DAY

A chamber dug underground, the foundation of the house at eye height. Daylight streams in from vents where rifles could shoot through at approaching enemy soldiers. Linh smiles at Frank as he wriggles out of the crawl space and rises to his feet; forced to duck his head to avoid the ceiling.

LINH

Take a look.

Frank peeks through a narrow embrasure...

... to see the backyard of the house and the row of the barely discernible six inch high bamboo stakes planted ten yards out.

Frank shoots a questioning look at the old lady.

LINH (CONT'D)

The stakes help guide the bullets into the killing zone where the foreigners are likely to approach.

FRANK

Americans?

LINH

(shrugs)

Whoever is invading at the moment. In 1942, a Japanese Lieutenant stood by the stakes. My son and I watched as he drew his sword and decapitated my husband. In 1953, it was a French Lieutenant.

(MORE)

LINH (CONT'D)

My grandson and I watched as he
drew a pistol and shot the boy's
father.

FRANK

And today? What do you see today?

LINH

You tell me.

Frank takes another look through the firing slit...

... to see Brice and Loudermilk just a dozen yards away, the
C.O. speaking into the RTO's handset.

Shaken, Frank turns away from the vent. But Linh is calm.

LINH (CONT'D)

The uniforms and the languages
change. But the invaders, they are
always the same.

FRANK

And the VC? What about them?

LINH

How are people who were born here
invaders?

Frank has no answer for that.

CUT TO:

EXT. LINH'S HOUSE - DAY

Linh follows Frank as he leaves the small house.

LINH

You did not finish your stew.

FRANK

And neither will you. You're coming
with me.

LINH

No.

FRANK

You have no choice.

LINH

The Japanese and the French could
not make me leave.

(MORE)

LINH (CONT'D)

And neither did the Xích Tys, Qins,
or Hans when they marched through
this village in my past lives.

FRANK

It's just a short ride to a short
stay in a safe camp.

LINH

(rising heat)

I'm not mounting any helicopter. I
will not be "safe" anywhere else. I
was born here. I have spent eight
decades here. In this house, I
birthed my children and fed them my
milk to make them strong to work
beside me in the rice paddies and
the grain fields. My father, my
son, all my ghosts are here. And
when I am a ghost, I will join
them. Right out there.

She walks off and into the bush. Dazzled and dazed, Frank
meekly follows.

EXT. VILLAGE GRAVEYARD - DAY

An eons old clearing of immaculate white gravestones
reverentially marked with Buddhist prayers and shaded by
small trees. Urns to burn incense sticks rest by each grave;
a few are adorned with yellow and violet flowers.

As Frank watches, Linh kneels before a group of weathered
stones. Points at each one in turn as she explains their
heritage...

LINH

My maternal grandmother, who was
related to Trung Trac, the eldest
of the two sisters who drove the
Chinese out of the Nanyue kingdom.
My husband, who fought the Japanese
and died for it. He was buried with
the rituals extended to a chief.
And my son. My son...

She places her hands on each side of a particular grave
marker. Presses her lips against the cool stone and kisses
the name etched there. Then she faces Frank with tears
trickling down her weathered face to drip from her chin.

LINH (CONT'D)

He was extended the same burial courtesies as his father. He took many French lives before they extinguished his own, and he died with honor. But honor doesn't give you grandchildren or help you till the fields. Honor doesn't hold you at night and say the things a wife wants to hear from a husband. Honor only takes and never gives, save for dust, bones, and headstones. But it's all I have now, and I will die before I leave it.

She turns her attention back to the gravestone. Unable to watch any longer, Frank turns away...

... to face Brice. Who has clearly heard it all. He shares a hard look with Frank and walks off. Frank follows.

EXT. LINH'S HOUSE - DAY

Loudermilk and the FO team radio operator, LANCE CORPORAL JEREMY WALSH, sit under the expansive shade of a large banyan tree, their PRC-25 radios stacked nearby. As Frank and Brice join them, Grenades explode in the distance.

BRICE

I hear ordinance but don't see any gooks di-diing.

WALSH

Engineers clearing caves with grenades.

FRANK

Any word on Armstrong?

LOUDERMILK

All we know is he got medevacked to Charlie-Med.

WALSH

Paid for his Purple Heart the hard way.

LOUDERMILK

Did receive a request from command, sir. They want to know where you're locating your CP.

Brice considers. Faces Frank.

BRICE

Don't I recall a regulation that, when a unit of the United States Marines is stationed on private property said owner of said property may maintain a presence out of commercial necessity?

FRANK

I don't, but I'm sure you do.

Brice turns back to Loudermilk.

BRICE

Inform command I've found the perfect spot for our company CP right here in this old mama-san's yard.

LINH (O.S.)

Do not call me that.

They all react as the old lady joins them. Frowning.

LINH (CONT'D)

Mama-san. That is a Japanese term for a bar owner, a madame, a supervisor of sex workers. I do not run a geisha house or a brothel. I am not a mama-san. I am Linh Thac Chuyen, the Khi of this làng, and my word is final.

She strides into her house.

FRANK

Gentle spirit.

(to Brice's look)

That's what Linh means. Gentle spirit.

BRICE

Whatever she's called, she's your responsibility, and my word is final.

As Brice strides away, Walsh and Loudermilk struggle to stifle their laughter while Frank sighs, resigned.

CUT TO:

EXT. LINH'S FRONT YARD, FOXTROT COMMAND POST - DAY

The rifles, helmets, and packs that belong to the members of the C.P. group are stacked along the side of the yard. As RTOs Walsh, Loudermilk and Cassidy settle in around a cook fire for their dinner, the grenade explosions continue in the background.

When Frank and Swallows join them, Cassidy indicates twin pots simmering on the fire.

CASSIDY
Beef stew or chicken soup?

SWALLOWS
I'll take the stew.

FRANK
I don't have a cold.

As Cassidy hands out pans of stew, they all sit and eat.

WALSH
I get back to the world, I'm never eating no beef stew never again.

CASSIDY
This ain't beef and it ain't stew, it's C-rations.

SWALLOWS
Mystery meat.

WALSH
Fine by me.

LOUDERMILK
Fine? You call this crap fine?

WALSH
If it don't bite my face, I eat it. Don't care about my food, but my ride, I will not abide a ride that is not an abject object of admiration. When I get back to the world I'm gettin' me a black '56 Chevy. I'll drop a power-pack two carb setup in her and get me more chicks than you can shake a stick at in east Kansas.
(to Frank)
Bitchin', sir, bitchin'.

Cassidy shakes his head.

CASSIDY

Never happen, dipshit.

(to Frank)

Sir, this pogue here ain't not only never been laid, he can't even speed shift gears. I'm getting' a '55 Ford as red as the dick on a dog. I'll stick a three quarter Isky cam in her and blow the doors off every Chevy I see. Fords are groovy, sir. Fuck Chevys.

WALSH

Blow it out, shitbird. You ain't no fuckin' scivvie honcho yourself.

FRANK

Chill the friction, gents. They're both super cars.

LOUDERMILK

What kinda wheels you like, Mr. Cox?

FRANK

Just ordered mine last week. She'll be parked in my mom's driveway when I get home in nineteen days. A brand new burgundy GTO convertible with four on the floor.

SWALLOWS

Outstanding!

WALSH

Talk about a pussy wagon!

CASSIDY

Get fucked, Walsh. The only pussy you know lives in trailers. You oughta see the picture of the college girl wrote the LT here. Prime, my man, prime.

Everyone stares at Frank, who turns scarlet.

SWALLOWS

For shit sakes, Frank. Are you actually blushing?

CASSIDY

Didn't mean to embarrass you, sir.
Caught you looking at it, and
caught a peek and, well, I was
massively impressed. Big sorry.

FRANK

Relax, Marine. It's just a picture
from a girl I don't know who I will
likely never meet.

SWALLOWS

She got a name?

FRANK

Wanda.

CASSIDY

(in wonderment)

Wanda...

They all react and reflect. Just the name makes them hot.

WALSH

Sir, I, uh, don't want to step out
of or overstep or make you...

CASSIDY

What this shithead is trying to ask
is if he can see it.

Frank shrugs. Pulls out the envelope. Removes the picture.
Hands it to Walsh. Who stares at it, astonished.

WALSH

She can't be real. This bitch is
airbrushed or something.

CASSIDY

Give it over, turd.

LOUDERMILK

Don't bogart the pic, boot.

As the troopers pass the picture around, they emit suitable
sounds of awe, lust, and amazement. Even Swallows is wowed.

SWALLOWS

Makes Raquel Welch look like
Quasimodo.

CASSIDY

What I'd not do to get some of that
there college girl tail.

FRANK

First up you must learn to diagram a simple sentence. College chicks are not into retards.

WALSH

Hell, I've never even talked to a college girl. What they like, sir?

FRANK

It's embarrassing. Can't take 'em anywhere. All they want to do is fuck.

Everyone laughs. Until Brice approaches.

BRICE

Swallows, Cox. We need to talk.

While Brice heads to his CP HQ, the group by the fire share a tense look.

FRANK

What's he want?

SWALLOWS

Wanda's picture?

CUT TO:

INT. FOXTROT CP - DAY

Under a lean to, Brice and Roan pour over maps and operation orders with the three platoon leaders while Frank and Swallows watch.

BRICE

Jack, pack your gear. You're on the next chopper to Da Nang.

SWALLOWS

I don't remember saluting you in a combat zone.

BRICE

You're not in the shit, you're in the cotton. Thanks to a certain ex arty liaison officer, turmoil has arisen in Echo Battery's chain of command.

FRANK
(translating)
I got that fat fuck Makulski fired.

BRICE
Now Dunbar is in charge and he
requires a new battery Fire
Direction Officer, which means you,
Jack.

SWALLOWS
Oh.

BRICE
Now that was eloquent. Shakespeare
must be shitting in his grave.

SWALLOWS
Thanks?

BRICE
And William Buckley is pissing.

SWALLOWS
Thanks, sir?

BRICE
Kill the monologue and get your
gear.

CUT TO:

EXT. HA DONG VILLAGE - LANDING ZONE - DAY

Frank follows Swallows to a waiting, whirling chopper.

SWALLOWS
A few days, a week tops, they'll
rotate me back to field duty.

FRANK
If you're feeling guilty about
this, apply for a psych eval.

SWALLOWS
Ha Dong is the anus of Dodge City,
and Foxtrot is the suppository.

FRANK
Things will be so slow back in the
rear you'll sit on your ass in the
FDC, throwing paper balls at a
jerry can.

SWALLOWS

You're not making me feel better.

FRANK

Not my job. Too busy being an FO with nothing to do. Give my best to Dunbar.

SWALLOWS

You got my best. Right here.

He offers a hand, and they shake. Frank watches as Swallows jumps into the chopper and it rises into the air.

CUT TO:

EXT. HA DONG VILLAGE - NIGHT

As Frank approaches the CP, Loudermilk intercepts him, Walsh in attendance.

LOUDERMILK

Walsh and I worked up an operational report for battalion, Mr. Cox.

FRANK

Let's hear it.

The RTO refers to a clipboard.

LOUDERMILK

Foxtrot 2/9 has destroyed the following: 700 meters of treeline, 450 meters of fence row, 15 one-man fighting holes, 250 meters of trench lines, 300 tunnels, a large amount of railroad ties, 15 gates, 18 caves, and one 60 millimeter booby trap. The company has also killed three Vietcong and captured six VC suspects while suffering only four casualties.

WALSH

(quiet)

Two KIA.

FRANK

Armstrong didn't make it?

Walsh nods and fumes.

WALSH

Sir, I'm even shorter than you. So short I could sleep in a matchbox. And when I get home I'm out. Outta the crotch. Worst mistake I ever made was the day I took the oath to join this green weenie. Should have never listened to that recruiter in his fancy dress blues. Told me I'd learn engineering. Looked me straight in the eye and told me what split-tails would do for a dude wearing this uniform.

FRANK

Sorry he was such a lyin' sack of shit, boot.

WALSH

That's affirmed, sir. The only engineering I've learnt is how to rig a claymore.

FRANK

Look, Jerry, let me put you in for Officers Candidate School. You've got excellent leadership skills and your IQ has got to be north of 120.

WALSH

Pardon my French, LT, but no fucking way, Jose. After rolling around in the dark brown shit with these grunts I got nothin' left to give the Marines. All this incoming and ambushes and booby traps has me wound so tight I can barely sleep, even in the rear. I wake up every day with the dry heaves and yellow craps. I am done with this Semper Fi stuff. You know what they say, eat the apple...

FRANK, LOUDERMILK & WALSH

(together)

Fuck the Corps.

The three of them enjoy a good laugh. But their humor dies at the ugly sound of an explosion in the distance.

WALSH

Claymore. I'd know that sound on the moon.

FRANK
Sentries be picking pieces of VC
out of their hair.

LOUDERMILK
Better than pulling ka-bars from
their backs. Good night, Mr. Cox.

FRANK
Good night.

Walsh and Loudermilk move off. Then Frank turns to see...

... Linh watching him from the portico of her house, the
smoke from her pipe wafting through the night air.

INT. LINH'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The old lady is serving Frank hot tea from a brass kettle.

FRANK
Thank you, your Majesty.

LINH
Your Majesty?

FRANK
If there's any royalty left in this
kingdom, it's you.

She slaps him playfully.

LINH (IN VIETNAMESE)
Silly child.

Frank grins. Then turns serious.

FRANK
Sorry for, well, all of this. But
your people will be back soon.

LINH
After your people launch yet
another search and destroy mission.
How does your General Westmorland
put it? The point of the spear must
be aimed at the enemy's heart?

FRANK
I should report you to
intelligence.

LINH

There are no secrets in the Nanyue kingdom. Even the tree monkeys can follow your tracks. Be cautious.

FRANK

Why should you care? I'm an invader, right?

LINH

You Americans are kinder than the French and Japanese. And harder to hate.

FRANK

But we all bleed the same.

LINH

Exactly. You are learning. There is hope for you yet.

As they share a smile...

CUT TO:

EXT. HA DONG VILLAGE - LANDING ZONE - DAY

Bathed in the bright red light of a new dawn, a flight of choppers are evacuating Foxtrot, carrying the Marines away a squad at a time.

Frank stands at the edge of the landing zone near Brice, Roan, and their RTO's.

He turns as Linh approaches him. The old lady presses a tangerine into each of his hands.

LINH

For good luck. The golden color of the fruit signify plenty. At least to the Chinese.

FRANK

More invaders?

LINH

Who also failed. The kingdom has never been truly conquered.

FRANK

I run into Westmoreland, I'll fill him in.

LINH

Be cautious. I wish to see you
again, my second son.

A final chopper arrives, raising a wicked cloud of dust. When
it clears, Linh is gone.

BRICE (O.S.)

Frank! Last ride out!

Frank dashes off...

... to join Brice as he hurries to the chopper, the pair
forced to yell at each other over the racket of its rotors.

FRANK

What's next? Rest and refit in Da
Nang?

BRICE

No rest but we will refit.
Battalion's launching a fresh
offensive in this sector and
Foxtrot's...

FRANK

The point of the spear aimed at the
enemy's heart.

Off Brice's tight look, they jump in the chopper just before
it rises into the air.

INT. H-34 CHOCTAW - TRAVELING - DAY

Frank looks out the open hatch past the door gunner and
watches the village get smaller and smaller. He tries to spot
Linh's home but all he can see are the tops of the banyan
trees.

CUT TO:

EXT. LINH'S HOUSE - DAY

The old lady is gazing up at the sky as the chopper recedes
into the distance. She frowns. Turns...

... to face that VC Lieutenant, Tho San. Standing in the
banyan trees. Watching her.

CUT TO:

EXT. 2/9 BASE CAMP - DAY

In the dusty, humid, noisy, adrenalin-filled base camp, the Marines of Foxtrot Company are preparing for battle. Cartridges are being fed into magazines, boxes of grenades are being cracked open, and M-60 machine gun teams are draping linked belts of ammo around their shoulders like giant, deadly, brass necklaces.

Sweat flows in the hundred degree heat as young faces betray tension with clenched jaws. Zippo lighters ignite, light C-ration cigarettes, and click closed as smoke gets trapped in the stultifying air. And there are prayers; abundant prayers are being quietly said in many private corners.

It's organized chaos which loses some of its tight control when a 60 mm mortar tube is dropped and resoundingly smashes into a stack of M-14 rifles. Squad Leader STAFF SERGEANT BOWERS screams at the culprit, a green private named RUSSO.

BOWERS

You in a rush to die before the VC
kill you?

RUSSO

Sorry, sir.

BOWERS

Don't call me "sir!" I'm a
Sergeant. I work for a living.

ASSEMBLY AREA

As Brice confers with his XO, First Lieutenant Roan, and his three Second Lieutenant Platoon Leaders, the officers mark objectives on plastic map covers with grease pencils. A radio crackles nearby and an RTO responds inaudibly while last minute orders are dispatched and noted.

Frank is making his own preparations, stuffing his pack with the required essentials, when 19 year old CORPORAL TOMMY PURDUE (Frank's Scout Observer on the FO team) approaches and displays his haversack, which is jammed with C-rations.

PURDUE

Gotcha covered at chow call, Mr.
Cox. Chicken and noodles, special
of the day!

FRANK

You cherry pick from two cases?

PURDUE

Three.

Frank laughs.

FRANK

Thanks, Tommy, but you gotta stop taking care of me. Why don't you and Walsh start off with the first platoon while I stick to the skipper like white on rice?

PURDUE

(mildly disappointed)

Okay. But you get hungry you know where to find me.

As Purdue moves off, Frank finishes packing. Reaches for the last item. And reacts. It's the picture of Wanda. He considers it. Is this a good luck charm, or a distraction? He finally decides on the latter and slips it into his pack.

SWALLOWS (O.S.)

Smart choice.

Swallows steps up, grinning.

SWALLOWS (CONT'D)

Maybe Wanda will bring you luck.

Frank frowns, pulls Swallows aside.

FRANK

What the fuck are you doing in the assembly area?

SWALLOWS

Everybody in the rear thinks Foxtrot's headed for a helluva fight. So I told the C.O. at the FDC that battalion needs extra eyes on the ground. In case we require a bunch of batteries to fire in tandem with Echo.

FRANK

Horsecrap! Get lost! I know what to do when the shit hits the fan...

A Huey gunship roars overhead, drowning out Frank's curses. And Swallows's laughter. As the chopper recedes, Frank stares.

FRANK (CONT'D)
What's so fucking funny?

SWALLOWS
C.O. refused my request. I'm stuck
back in the FDC.

FRANK
So you're here just to give me
shit?

Swallows turns serious.

SWALLOWS
And some advice. Lay low. Take it
easy. No gung ho stuff. Okay?

FRANK
I'm no hero, Jack. I'd swap with
you in a dead man's minute.

SWALLOWS
Like Hell you would.

They shake hands.

FRANK
Just promise me. You see Makulski
in the rear camped out at the
shrink's office... tell him to get
fucked.

As the friends share a good laugh...

CUT TO:

EXT. 2/9 BASE CAMP - LATER - DAY

Wearing his new Captain's bars. Brice is addressing the
assembled rifle company.

BRICE
Today, we expect to make major
contact with VC forces. Remember
the Marine way: locate, close,
destroy. When they fire upon us, we
will charge and engage their
positions. Wherever and whenever we
engage them, we will kill as many
as possible. Be assured, the VC
will not stand and fight against a
concentrated Marine effort.

(MORE)

BRICE (CONT'D)

They will not dare face the finest Marines in Vietnam. Fight smart, fight happy, and fight for each other. Semper Fi.

He nods to his XO, Roan, who takes over.

ROAN

O.K. gents, time to saddle up and move out! First platoon leads off, followed by second platoon...

CUT TO:

EXT. DIRT ROAD - DAY

Attended by their flankers, the three platoons of Foxtrot Company, 150 Marines in all, head south in one continuous column. Brice and his command group, Roan (XO), Frank (FO), 1st Lt. SPENSE HAMEL (Forward Air Controller), and their RTOs are embedded in the center of the second platoon.

ROAN (V.O.)

... which will contain the command group. Third platoon is caboose. Platoon leaders; I want flankers out at all times. And watch where you step and who you shoot at.

CAPTION: 1300 HOURS

We observe the unit as it slogs along the rough road, their heavy boots raising dust while the disparate pieces of their equipment make contact, chiming that distinct metallic melody that is familiar to any field soldier.

As he marches along in the second platoon with the command group, Frank offers his sweaty RTO, Cassidy, a concerned look.

FRANK

Hope you scrounged an extra canteen of water for yourself, Randy.

CASSIDY

Sure did, sir. Copped it from a desk pogue takin' a nap in the middle of the fuckin' day.

FRANK

Serves the asshole right.

CASSIDY

Yo. Now don't you concern yourself,
LT. You need me, I'll be seven
paces back, right on your tail.

As Frank grins, we move back up the column...

... to where the green 18-year old replacement, RUSSO, is
plodding along with his buddy KOHLER. Their eyes shift
nervously, their heads swivel apprehensively. A cloak of
vulnerability and helplessness smothers them.

KOHLER

When we land at Da Nang?

RUSSO

Seventy two hours. Why do ya keep
asking?

KOHLER

Three days. We've been in Vietnam
just three days. Can't believe it.

RUSSO

You make an effort and believe it.

KOHLER

Heard Sergeant Bowers and some
corporal talkin'. Say we're headed
for the deep shit.

RUSSO

It's so hot I can't barely breathe.

KOHLER

They say we're humpin' down into
Charlie's territory where no
Marines ain't never been yet.

RUSSO

You reckon one canteen is enough?

KOHLER

They said the VC's been wastin'
lots of Marines. Like they know
ahead of time what the fuck we're
gonna do.

RUSSO

Should have brought three.

Sgt. Bowers steps up behind them. Listening. Disapproving.

KOHLER

Know what I'm really afraid of?
Getting' my balls blowed off.
Don't give a shit if I get hit in
the arm or leg, just not there.
I'm spooked cause I keep thinkin'
bout it.

RUSSO

Then stop thinking. Stop worrying.
We got Captain Brice for our C.O.,
and the skinny's good on him. He's
smart, he's cool and he don't give
a rat's ass what his orders are if
it means we might get fucked. He'll
take care of us.

KOHLER

(smiles)

Thanks. That there is what they
call positive thinking.

RUSSO

And that balls thing. Never happen.
You might get drilled in the
running lights but your balls will
stay tight.

Bowers laughs and the two rookies stare back at him. As their
Sergeant moves ahead, still laughing, Russo shrugs.

RUSSO (CONT'D)

Anyways, we're wasting our breath.
Bet we won' run into one fucking
gook today. Walk in the park.

KOHLER

Yeah. Walk in the park.

They stride on. Unconvinced.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. LARGE OPEN FIELD - DAY

Bordered by thick tree lines just north of the Song La Tho
river.

CAPTION: MAINFORCE VIETCONG R-20 DOC LAP BATTALION

Three hundred hard core Vietcong soldiers race into the tree lines on both sides of a large rice paddy field to set up a huge ambush, furiously slashing elephant grass to create fields of fire, quickly shoveling dirt to make shallow fighting positions.

Rapid movements, quick bursts of Vietnamese orders, controlled frenzy. Machine guns and RPG positions are prepared while 82 mm mortar crews stack scores of shells and traverse their tubes, taking aim on the field.

And in the midst of all the frenzy, very much in charge of his own unit, is the VC Lieutenant, Tho San.

THO SAN (IN VIETNAMESE)
Hurry, hurry. They'll be here soon.
Prepare your positions. Hurry.

CUT TO:

EXT. LO THO BAC VILLAGE - DAY

Marines sweep through the almost empty village, scoping out the hooches and hedgerows.

A bunker system is destroyed by C-4 plastic explosive. Punji traps are blown. Pigs squeal and run as a deadfall is intentionally tripped, its lethal, spiked log swinging harmlessly through the air.

Brice and his command group watch and manage the action; a babble of orders streaming back and forth via their RTO's PRC-25s.

A tense Frank warily surveys the village. Spots Kohler and Russo, flushing a hooch, their utilities so wet with sweat, their tongues are practically hanging down to their ankles. He intercepts them.

FRANK
How many canteens you bring?

Russo can't answer, the boy can only hold up a finger. Frank sighs. Hands him his canteen.

FRANK (CONT'D)
Make it last.

He moves off. Glances back to see Russo guzzle from the canteen, then Kohler grab it and guzzle the rest. Frank smiles ruefully, then snaps to attention...

... as gunfire erupts in the bush ahead. In the command group, Brice snaps his fingers for a handset.

BRICE
One, this is Six. Sitrep.

EXT. JUNGLE - DAY

As his men search a pair of VC bodies prone in the background, SECOND LT BOB AZAR (the 1st Platoon Leader) responds via his own RTO's handset.

AZAR
First squad encountered light enemy resistance. Two dead VC and blood trails, but no Marine casualties. Over.

BACK TO BRICE

The C.O. nods, pleased.

BRICE
Roger, One. Soon as we clear Checkpoint Two, we'll continue on to Three. Out.

CUT TO:

EXT. RICE PADDY - DAY

CAPTION: 1440 HOURS

Foxtrot is sweeping to the southeast through a complex of just-tilled crop fields and damp, squishy rice paddies, encountering a fierce heat with a heavy air that's hard to inhale.

Each grunt in the long column carefully follows the footsteps left by the rubber-soled jungle boots of the Marine five yards ahead. Horseflies strike and sudden streams of sweat break free, dumping stinging salt into men's eyes. A watercock screeches a creepy, mournful cry from a nearby marsh. After an hour and a half hump in the blistering heat, young faces show signs of exhaustion and disassociation.

Frank stares ahead at the back of the trooper's shirt directly before him; now no longer Marine Corps green but alabaster from the man's sweat-salt.

FRANK (V.O.)

We'll see the Elephant today. I know it like I know why my heart beats. This is why Marines exist. To find and kill. They call us Mother Green and her Killing Machine. So be it. Let the bastards finally stand and fight.

Frank looks off to the right. In the distance he sees...

... Wanda dressed in a flowing white dress, watching him. As she smiles and raises her hand in greeting...

Frank blinks. Looks straight ahead. Determined to win, to survive, to go home.

FRANK (V.O.)

Pay attention! Focus! Don't you want to get the fuck back home? Don't you want to sit in your den with the air conditioner on sixty degrees and a girl that looks like that, wearing only pink panties, feeding you a chunk of chilled watermelon, right before she unzips your trousers?

(trips almost falls)

Watch what you're fucking doing!

Cassidy catches up to him. Concerned.

CASSIDY

Okay, LT?

FRANK

Fine. I'm fine...

We see Lt. Azar with the lead platoon give the hand and arm signal to halt. Then all of Foxtrot comes to a complete unexpected halt, the men taking cover behind rice paddy dikes as per procedure.

Brice reaches for his RTO's handset.

BRICE

One, this is Six. Over.

AT THE TOP OF THE COLUMN

Azar responds via his own RTO's handset.

AZAR

Six, this is one. We are stalled in position. Got two FNG's down with heat stroke. Need immediate medevac. Over.

BACK TO BRICE

Furious and frustrated.

BRICE

One, six. Fuck! Every slope in I-Corps will know our location when that chopper lands. Okay, Bob, mark the LZ with green smoke and hi-diddle-diddle to the next objective when the bird exits. Out.

UP THE COLUMN

A green smoke grenade is tossed into a field to mark the landing zone as the soldiers stricken with heatstroke writhe in the dirt. It's Russo and Kohler, body thermostats gone haywire, the pair twitching from chills and puking yellow streams of vomit, in real danger of dying.

As the corpsman, DOC EURIBE, removes their packs and shirts, he snaps orders at the Marines nearby.

DOC EURIBE

Need shade and wet socks. Double time it, Marines.

While some grunts gather around to provide shade, others place wet socks from their haversacks under the rookies' arms and around their necks.

Sgt. Bowers steps up, scowling with scorn.

SGT. BOWERS

Hey, Kohler. Looks like your buddy Russo was right. Ain't no way you're gonna get your balls blowed away. At least not on this op. And Russo -- least you got a set.

They all look up as a chopper sweeps in.

CUT TO:

EXT. RICE PADDY - MOMENTS LATER - DAY

As the column moves on, the medevac sweeps off.

Frank looks up, watching it go.

FRANK (V.O.)
Lucky fucks. Out and gone. Lucky.

INT. CHOPPER - TRAVELING - DAY

Russo and Kohler lie beside each other on stretchers. Russo struggles to snag his dazed buddy's attention.

RUSSO
Kohler. Hey, Kohler!

KOHLER
Yeah?

RUSSO
What did I tell... ?

And that's as far as he gets before, KA-BANG, something explosive and lethal slams into the chopper.

EXT. RICE PADDY - DAY

The column watches in horror as the medevac, trailing smoke, spins into the ground. Flames rise from the wreck.

In his position in the column, Frank can't believe his eyes.

FRANK (V.O.)
What the fuck! WHAT THE FUCK!

In his position with the command group, Brice reacts instinctively, snaps orders into his RTO's handset.

BRICE
One, Six. Get this column moving.
Three, Six. Call for a second
medevac and detail a squad to
attend that downed bird.

Officers shout, men move, a chopper burns.

CUT TO:

EXT. JUNGLE GROWTH AT EDGE OF RICE PADDY - DAY

The men of Foxtrot sweep down a thick jungle trail while sunlight streams through its lush canopy, exposing strands of spider webs.

The lead elements of the company are already crossing onto the next paddy as the first platoon's leader gives arm and hand signals to his squad leaders to halt and go.

CAPTION: 1545 HOURS

Booted feet slog through mud and fresh rice stalks. The sun beats down, as merciless in its intensity as the malignance of the enemy. Sweat falls copiously from every Marine brow...

... which is when automatic weapons suddenly deliver bursts of fire from the treeline bordering the east side of the paddy, whining in high over their heads.

Roan, Cassidy and Frank fall next to each other at the base of a red, rusted fence strung along a hedgerow. Their eyes meet as they giggle like first graders, adrenaline pumping.

ROAN

Rockets up!

Two Marine bazooka teams race up to the fence and fire white phosphorous shells, lighting up and marking the enemy position in the treeline. As the enemy fire continues, Lt. Hamel, the Forward Air Controller, hits the ground, never losing control of his own RTO's handset.

HAMEL

Sky Shark, this is Red Rover. We require air support at grid 996615. Over.

PILOT (FROM RADIO)

Roger, Red Rover, this is Sky Shark. Snake and nape meet your needs? Over.

HAMEL

Roger, Sky Shark. Follow smoke to target and expend all. Over.

PILOT (FROM RADIO)

Roger that, Echo One. Coming in hot at the treetops.

Two Marine F-4 Phantom jets swoop in low to drop 250 pound high-explosive and napalm bombs on the treeline, lighting it up spectacularly. With the excitement of kids watching a Super Bowl half time show, the men of Foxtrot cheer and wave.

Frank is as thrilled as any of them.

FRANK

Get some!

CUT TO:

EXT. RICE PADDY - MOMENTS LATER - DAY

The column is on the move again, passing the smoking, burned treeline. As Brice walks along with his men, he speaks into his RTO's handset....

BRICE

Wagon Master, this is Foxtrot 6. At Checkpoint Two, two enemy KIA, multiple blood trails. No friendly casualties. En route to Checkpoint Three, chopper down, unknown casualties. Close air support eliminated VC automatic weapons at Checkpoint Three.

CUT TO:

EXT. LARGE OPEN FIELD - DAY

As established earlier, this is a vast, open crop field and rice paddy complex, three hundred yards long and one hundred fifty yards wide with thick treelines on each side and the Song La Tho river bordering its south end.

CAPTION: 1725 HOURS

The company pauses, its officers considering that vast open field. Brice confers quietly via radio with his platoon leaders while Frank observes.

FRANK (V.O.)

All that space, all that open dirt. But there's no way around, no other path. The whole fucking country's like this. Killing grounds and death traps.

Brice finally nods, speaks to his handset. We can't hear him, but we do see his lips say "Go."

The entire column of Foxtrot Company, three platoons, 150 men, sweep down the field toward the river, Checkpoint Four. The afternoon is hot, still, quiet, almost peaceful. Until...

Mortar rounds impact the heart of the first platoon, seventy-five yards in front of Frank.

Body parts fly, men die and scream. Violent noise and steel and flame engulf the forward elements of Foxtrot Company.

Automatic weapons fire and incoming rocket-propelled grenades join the barrage, homing in from the treelines on both sides of the field.

In seconds, Marine blood trickles onto the powdery surfaces of the open area that Foxtrot is ambushed and trapped within.

And then it all slows down. Frank stares at the smoke and flames rising from the explosions, but there's no shell bursts, no screams, no sound. Men fall, men howl, the earth explodes, but there's just an eerie silence...

... then it all returns, all the racket and confusion and the noise, and the company springs to life. While first platoon maintains position and returns fire, second platoon frontally assaults across the field toward the VC in the left treeline.

Third platoon does likewise, sprinting and firing into the enemy position in the right treeline.

Screams, cursing, continuous battle, incoming and outgoing.

INSIDE THE TREELINE

At the south end of the VC battle line, Tho San, that same VC Lieutenant we've seen before, re-deploys his platoon.

THO SAN (IN VIETNAMESE)
Fall back to the river. Cease fire.
Conserve your ammo.

IN THE FIELD

Cassidy, with radio handset dangling, grabs Frank, screaming.

CASSIDY
Mister Cox, Walsh and Purdue just
got hit!

Powered by adrenaline, Cassidy and Frank sprint at full speed toward the first platoon in front of them. Every step of the way, incoming VC fire kick up puffs of dirt and mud.

FRANK (V.O.)
 (in a wild rush)
 Gotta run faster, gotta run faster,
 gotta get to Purdue Hail Mary Full
 of Grace make me run faster I hear
 bullets passing me boy that would
 hurt and those puffs of dirt
 following us in this fucking potato
 field are meant for us and Blessed
 is the Fruit of thy Womb Jesus!

An explosion fills the screen with dust and smoke. When it clears...

We're TIGHT ON a corpsman's morphine syringe as it plunges into Purdue's thigh. We hear the boy's agonized scream.

Purdue is on the ground with four other wounded Marines and a KIA, face hidden under a poncho. As Purdue moans and screams, the Corpsman, Doc Euribe, struggles to bandage him.

DOC EURIBE
 Hey, hey!

FRANK (O.S.)
 Settle down, Marine.

Purdue shields his eyes from the bright western sun with an outstretched hand. The sun silhouettes a concerned Frank. Who faces the first platoon leader, Azar, as he joins him.

AZAR
 We already got a medevac in the air
 and gunships are scrambling.

Frank kneels in the dirt and grabs Purdue's hand. The boy is already spaced from the shot of morphine.

PURDUE
 But Mr. Cox, this company needs
 every swingin' dick. Ain't hurt so
 bad I can't stay. See?

With a wry smile, he turns over to reveal the blood oozing from many shrapnel wounds. We can also see his haversack is smoldering with charred and torn chicken and noodles C-ration cans spilling out of it.

Doc Euribe can't help smiling.

DOC EURIBE
 Lucky bastard.

FRANK

Lucky? He's bleeding like a stuck pig!

DOC EURIBE

Superficial lacerations. Wasn't for those cans, his spine would be full of mortar shell fragments.

Purdue relaxes as the morphine courses through his veins.

PURDUE

Love them chicken and noodles.

The sound of intense weeping attracts Frank's attention to...

... Cassidy, who is in tears as he kneels beside the dead Marine lying under the poncho. Frank joins him and pulls back the poncho to reveal the staring eyes of FO team RTO Walsh. Cassidy is white with grief.

CASSIDY

This ain't right. Dipshit was short. So short...

FRANK

He could sleep in a matchbox.

More mortar fire comes in, hitting the field so close, dirt showers them in a wave of black and grey. Ducking under the hail of earth, Azar kneels beside Frank.

AZAR

Frank, we're getting the shit shot out of us and we're trapped.

FRANK

We gotta kill those mortars.

He reaches for Walsh's radio, which is lying beside the RTO's body, and pulls it toward him. Grabs its handset.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Skipper, this is Echo 2. Permission to order arty.

BY THE LEFT TREELINE

Brice and the second platoon are huddled in a ditch, trading fire with the determined enemy resistance in the treeline on the left flank. The C.O. shouts into his handset...

BRICE

Permission granted. Call in every round they'll approve. Call it in as close as you can. Call it in until I order otherwise.

BACK TO FRANK

He nods in agreement.

FRANK

Roger, Six. On the way.

CUT TO:

INT. THE FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - DAY

Swallows is slouched in a chair as he throws a paper ball into a jerry can. The radio hisses and he grabs its headset.

SWALLOWS

This is Sunrise, over.

EXT. A DEPRESSION AT SOUTH END OF FIELD - DAY

Under continuous fire, Frank, Hamel and their RTOs scramble into a depression not far from the river to direct fire support.

FRANK

Sunrise, this is Echo 2. Fire mission!

INT. THE FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - DAY

Swallows reacts with shock...

SWALLOWS

Frank, that you... ?

FRANK (FROM RADIO)

Fire mission, I have a fire mission!

Swallows quickly gains control of himself and gets to work.

SWALLOWS

Echo 2, this is Sunrise. Send your mission.

EXT. A DEPRESSION AT SOUTH END OF FIELD - DAY

Frank has to scream over the relentless fire.

FRANK

We are trapped by a superior force. This is the first of many fire missions, starting south of the river where mortars are ripping us apart. Coordinates 002608, Azimuth 4600, fire for effect!

As a medevac chopper roars in to collect the wounded and the dead, we go to...

EXT. ECHO BATTERY - DAY

While the cannoneers load the six guns, fast and furious, the Howitzers fire multiple salvos in quick succession. The earth shakes and dust explodes from the sandbags anchoring their positions.

FOLLOW a pod of shells as they burst out of the cannons and tear through the thick, humid Vietnamese air...

Over the river, over rice paddies, past the fields and villages, beyond the cart trails and roads...

Until they shriek down toward the treeline full of VC mortar teams.

EXT. TREELINE - DAY

The men working the mortars freeze. They look up...

... and EXPLOSIONS fill the screen. The entire position erupts in flame and smoke. Trees shatter, dirt geysers the air, steel and flesh fly, VC scream and die.

EXT. A DEPRESSION AT SOUTH END OF FIELD - DAY

Marines cheer and Frank relaxes. His RTO is thrilled.

CASSIDY

Fuck those mortars. Fuck 'em good!

Hamel crawls over to them, his panic managed but visible.

HAMEL

Shit, Frank! The gunships are almost on station but my radio's down. Gotta use your comm net.

FRANK

Frequency and call sign?

HAMEL

Freq is P39203. I am Red Rover. Birds are Sky Shark.

Cassidy quickly spins the dial on his PRC-25, sets the proper air frequency, and gives the handset to Frank as two Huey gunships roar into view.

SKY SHARK (FROM RADIO)

Red Rover, this is Sky Shark, at your service. Where do want our heat?

FRANK

This is Red Rover. Expend all ordinance on north-south axis on north side of river at machine guns and RPGs in treeline. And stick to the north side. I have artillery coming in just south of you.

SKY SHARK (FROM RADIO)

Roger, Red Rover. Enjoy the show.

And the gunships make two runs back and forth across the treeline delivering .50 cal machine gun fire and 2.75 inch rockets with gut-rattling explosions...

JUST AS another eighteen USMC howitzer high explosive rounds roar overhead like freight trains and smash into targets across the river from Frank.

It's quite a spectacle. A big chunk of Vietnam is being torn to pieces in the most colorful way possible.

Cassidy watches, tears in his eyes.

CASSIDY

Ain't that just... beautiful?

A few seconds of quiet, then VC small arms fire resumes but weak and scattered.

Hamel nods to Frank, satisfied.

HAMEL
Pulled their teeth.

FRANK
For now.
(to radio)
Sunrise, Echo 2. Excellent effect.
On the money!

SWALLOWS (FROM RADIO)
Thanks, Frank, I mean Echo 2...

FRANK
You can call me the tooth fairy,
Jack, so long as you keep that arty
coming. Jack? Sunrise?

No response.

FRANK (CONT'D)
Sunrise, this is Echo 2. Sunrise!

CASSIDY
Shit, fuck, shit!

Cassidy quickly pulls the radio off his back and places it
between himself and Frank as he checks its power levels.

CASSIDY (CONT'D)
Battery's dead. Gotta change it...

A series of EXPLOSIONS not far away astonishes Hamel.

HAMEL
Mortars?

FRANK
Back from the dead.

HAMEL
But that arty knocked them out.

FRANK
Tell that to the VC.

More EXPLOSIONS close by. Fresh dirt shower.

FRANK (CONT'D)
Cassidy!

CASSIDY
(as he works)
Just a minute.

More BLASTS, even closer. Grunts scream from shrapnel wounds. Men scramble for fresh cover. Frank is beside himself.

FRANK
For fuck's sake!

Cassidy finishes the install, shoves the radio at him.

CASSIDY
Done!

Frank grabs its handset.

FRANK
Sunrise, Echo 2, Enemy mortars have
been reinforced. Fire Mission!
Quickly. Left 100, repeat range,
fire for effect!

CUT TO:

INT. THE FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - DAY

Swallows turns to his team, practically screaming...

SWALLOWS
FIRE MISSION!

RETURN TO:

EXT. A DEPRESSION AT SOUTH END OF FIELD - DAY

Frank, Hamel, and Cassidy watch the latest artillery salvos hit the treeline across the river yet again, sending brilliant white sparks and plumes into the blue sky from phosphorous shells mixed with high explosive rounds.

The display reflects on their faces; Chinese New Years style.

CASSIDY
(in awe)
God created the Earth and then he
created arty.

Machine gun fire screams at their heads and they duck.

HAMEL
What is this? We blast 'em, we kill
'em, and they come right back!

CASSIDY
Fucking vampires with ordinance.

FRANK

Not vampires, reserves. Haven't you figured it out? We walked into a major enemy ambush, at least battalion strength.

As the fire increases and they hug the earth, Frank screams into his handset.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Sunrise, Echo 2, Fire Mission!

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. INSIDE FOXTROT DEFENSIVE PERIMETER - NIGHT

CAPTION: 2020 HOURS

Night has fallen and Foxtrot has regrouped. The company is deployed in a 360 degree circle in an adjacent wooded area with bamboo clumps spread among thin hardwoods.

The area is crisscrossed with hundreds of yards of trench lines almost four feet deep, and the Marines are thinly positioned in the trenches around the circumference of the perimeter every five yards or so.

In the middle of the circle, Brice has set up his Command Post in a trench. The C.O. is flanked by Roan and Frank, their RTOs adjacent.

VC small arms fire rakes across the pinned down Marines, the bullets making distinctive *craaacks* as they slam into bamboo.

Enemy mortar tubes continue to fire shells with a *whump* sound, followed by an agonizing delay as Marines burrow deeper into the trenches.

The shells rain down with an eerie whistling noise to explode in the midst of beleaguered Foxtrot.

As the barrage ends, a Marine looks up from his trench, nods to Bowers in the next.

MARINE

Whoever dug these trenches, I wanna kiss 'em.

BOWERS

Get ready to smooch a Viet Minh. They grubbed these holes fighting the French fifteen years back.

Another barrage makes them duck. Only a few shells this time.

IN COMMAND POST

Brice reacts, more angry than afraid. Snarls at Roan.

BRICE
Sometimes twenty rounds, sometimes
only two.

ROAN
Then they stop for awhile, only to
start up again.

BRICE
And half the rounds are wide.

ROAN
Maybe their spotters need glasses.

BRICE
Maybe they're fucking with our
heads.

Small arms fire and grenade explosions on the right flank.
But nothing is visible besides blackness punctuated by
brilliant flashes of light

BRICE (CONT'D)
Need a report on that small arms on
our right flank.

Kronert, the gunnery sergeant, joins them.

KRONERT
Enemy probe. They're crawling close
enough to throw grenades.

BRICE
(to Roan)
Everett, send an M-60 team to take
out those sons of bitches. Then
grab gunny and check our whole
perimeter. Make sure each man
knows who is on his left and right.
Stress ammo conservation. Pass the
word there are reinforcements on
the move to support us.

ROAN
Kronert, you're with me.

As Roan and the gunny hurry off, Brice smiles bitterly.

BRICE

"The VC will not stand and fight against a concentrated Marine effort." Colonel Ellenberg's exact words. And mine.

FRANK

Welcome to the crotch.

Brice shrugs. Gets back to work.

BRICE

Frank, I'm headed to the aid station to check on our dead and wounded. Get on my radio and tell battalion we need an emergency resupply chopper with water and ammo. We have to get our serious WIA's out.

As Brice moves off, Frank turns to the C.O.'s RTO and grabs his handset.

FRANK

Wagon Master, Fox 6. Need immediate resupply of water and ammo. Also must evac many WIA.

WAGON MASTER (FROM RADIO)

Fox 6, beat you to it. One bird already airborne to your position. But your reinforcements are now in heavy enemy contact and stalled.

FRANK

Roger, out.

Frank looks up. He can hear the chopper already approaching.

OVER THE TREETOPS

The Marine helicopter sound gets steadily closer, its rotors slapping against the thick, moist air. Loudermilk leaves the perimeter, hustles out to a tiny LZ and bravely stands alone in the open, signaling with a strobe light so the chopper can find its zone.

But as the machine swings in, sparks fly from steel as streams of VC machine gun fire hit the chopper just twenty yards above the LZ. It makes one more awkward circle and slams into a rice paddy just outside the perimeter.

The nearest Marine squad races out into hip high water, sets up a daisy chain, and off loads crates of ammo. Sergeant Bowers is in charge. Inhumanly calm.

BOWERS

Quick, fast, and smooth, Marines.
You drop that ammo in that water...

He never finishes the thought as VC bullets stitch his chest.

Two more men go down, wounded, as the squad pulls away from the burning chopper with what ammo they can grab along with their bleeding comrades.

Frank and Cassidy react as the chopper's crew, two PILOTS and a GUNNER, join them in their trench, shaking yet laughing.

FRANK

What's the joke?

PILOT

Heard the angel wings.

CASSIDY

We're all hearing 'em.

The chopper suddenly fireballs, burning fuel and exploding ordinance lighting up the night. Brice joins them. Reacts to the flaming chopper.

BRICE

That my medevac?

FRANK

(nods)

Can't count on support or resupply
with this level of incoming.

BRICE

Not acceptable. We've got WIA's
this close to being KIA's.

FRANK

Can't call in the Phantoms for
another nape run, gooks are too
close. They won't approve it in the
rear. Too risky till first light.

BRICE

Got to scalpel these fuckers out of
their holes.

FRANK
I'll circle the perimeter and
locate their positions from muzzle
flashes. Order close fire missions.

BRICE
Do it.

FRANK
We're talking real close. Close
enough to singe your eyebrows.

BRICE
And your point is?

They grin at each other, then Frank moves off with Cassidy.

CUT TO:

INT. THE FIRE DIRECTION CENTER - NIGHT

As his team watches tensely, Swallows speaks to his handset.

SWALLOWS
Echo 2, I got three different
artillery batteries prepped to fire
as many white phosphorous and high
explosive shells as you'll need.

BEGIN INTERCUT:

EXT. INSIDE FOXTROT DEFENSIVE PERIMETER - NIGHT

As Cassidy stands by, Frank is taking note of the bright
flashes the enemy machine guns are creating in the bush.

FRANK
(to radio handset)
I need 'em now, Sunrise, at
coordinates 995606.

In the FDC, Swallows reacts.

SWALLOWS
That's just outside your perimeter!

FRANK
Don't remind me. Fire for effect.
Over!

END INTERCUT:

EXT. ECHO BATTERY - NIGHT

The Howitzers fire multiple salvos in fast succession.

EXT. INSIDE FOXTROT DEFENSIVE PERIMETER - NIGHT

Frank and Cassidy watch while seemingly dozens of shells crack loudly as they burst on the hard ground, providing brief flickers of daylight from their explosive flashes.

Frank grins at Cassidy.

FRANK

That clears that nest.

More fire and flashes in another part of the jungle. Mortar shells strike inside the Marine perimeter, Frank shares a disgruntled look with Cassidy.

CASSIDY

When it rains mortars it pours.

Frank rolls his eyes and grabs his handset.

FRANK

Sunrise, this is Echo 2. Fire mission...

CUT TO:

EXT./INT. VARIOUS LOCATIONS - MONTAGE - NIGHT

A SERIES OF FAST, INTENSE SHOTS of the night's battle...

Frank calling in fire mission after fire mission...

The VC Lieutenant Tho San rallying his men for attack after attack...

In the rear, the howitzers fire so hot and fast, the cannoneers are forced to double glove their hands to avoid burning their fingers on the 105's smoking, red breeches.

In the FDC, Swallows, listening to the roar of the firefight erupting through the speakers of his radio, palms the heavy sweat away from his eyes.

And in the bush, M-14s chirp, grenades explode, tracers criss-cross the sky, and AK-47 bullets whack into the bamboo throughout the Marine position.

Another cascade of VC mortar shells shriek in to create more casualties. Wounded scream in the darkness. Chaos.

END MONTAGE on Brice, shouting into his RTO's handset over the melee surrounding him.

BRICE

Wagon Master, this is Fox 6. We have many additional casualties. We are low on water and ammo. We have incoming mortars. We have killed thirty VC by body count but many more than that in reality. At first light I request close air support. We will hold.

EXT. INSIDE FOXTROT DEFENSIVE PERIMETER - LATER - NIGHT

CAPTION: 2330 HOURS

Mortar shells are still coming in, men are still dying. An exhausted Frank, half-convinced this nightmare will never end, is examining his map, preparing to order his next fire mission, as an equally tired Roan approaches him.

ROAN

Frank, those mortars...

FRANK

(frustrated)

XO, I've targeted every side of our perimeter and across the river. Slammed every square foot those tubes could be, but they're still hitting us. It's magic.

ROAN

We're down to half a magazine each, Frank. They charge us, we're done. You have to...

A squeal of metal and kinetic force over head. He looks up...

A MORTAR ROUND

Dives out of the sky. Makes a direct hit in the command post trench. Smoke and dust fills the air.

When it clears, Lt. Everett Roan, Foxtrot Executive Officer, is lying dead at Frank's feet. Killed instantly. Wounded men moan all around him, but Frank is untouched.

And so is Cassidy, who stares at him, blinking with astonishment. He tries to speak, but Frank can't register the RTO's words. All he can hear is the ringing in his ears.

Loudermilk wanders by, crying like a child, tears in his eyes, holding what was his left hand with his right. It's been severed clean at the wrist.

Loudermilk moves off. Frank watches him go. Hearing nothing but that insane ringing.

Brice suddenly grabs Frank. Yells at him soundlessly. The ringing finally subsides.

BRICE

(becoming audible)

Frank, Frank, can you hear me?

FRANK

Yeah, sure.

BRICE

I'm organizing our final defense. Alert Wagonmaster. Foxtrot now has 40 casualties, including multiple KIA. We just repulsed serious VC probe. Foxtrot is in danger of being overrun. Require immediate support. Got that?

FRANK

Got it.

BRICE

Better set up a pre-planned big one right on our position. Just in case.

Brice moves off. At a loss, Frank settles into his trench. Places his M-14, .45, and Ka-Bar knife on the ground above its edge, within easy reach,

FRANK (V.O.)

Okay, so this isn't a dream after all. This is all real. This is Everett's real blood splattered all over me. And those are real bullets I hear whining past my ears. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, amen.

Cassidy settles in beside him; lays his own weapons out on the edge of the trench. He's almost matter of fact in his assessment of his own, imminent demise.

CASSIDY

So this is how it ends for old Randolph Cassidy, formerly of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Dead by enemy action on the wrong side of the La Tho River.

That hits Frank. Hits him hard. He grabs for his map, eyes it excitedly. Then, with Cassidy in tow, he crawls through the trench as fast as he can...

FRANK

Skipper, Skipper!

... until he reaches the C.O., who shoots him a questioning look.

FRANK (CONT'D)

Those mortars, we assumed the VC placed them just across the river.

(indicates map)

But what if they placed the mortars further across the river behind these hills.

BRICE

Barely in range.

FRANK

Which explains why half their rounds are falling wide. But half is too much, isn't it?

Brice considers. Finally nods.

BRICE

Throw the kitchen sink at 'em, Frank. Hell, throw the whole fucking kitchen.

As Brice moves off, Frank yells into Cassidy's handset.

FRANK

Sunrise, Echo 2. I have Area Fire Mission! Coordinates, from 001611 to 007612. All available! Continuous fire! Fire for effect! Now!

EXT. ECHO BATTERY - NIGHT

Eighteen howitzers fire simultaneously and repeatedly; the largest number of guns and the most intense fire mission ordered in this engagement so far.

EXT. RICE PADDY - NIGHT

Seconds later a massive series of salvos as over 120 Marine artillery shells light up the hills beyond the opposite side of the river. Then... silence.

In their trench, Brice rejoins Frank and Cassidy.

BRICE
What am I hearing?

CASSIDY
Nothing. Nada.

FRANK
(a smile)
Sounds great.

Cassidy reacts to a voice on his handset. Alerts Frank...

CASSIDY
Mr. Cox, got a call coming in from
a Bird Dog up top.

Frank takes the handset.

FRANK
Bird Dog, this is Echo 2. What's
the latest? Over.

INT. MARINE O-1 BIRD DOG - COCKPIT - NIGHT

The AERIAL OBSERVER seated beside the pilot grins down at the smoke and flames rising from the terrain below as he speaks into his headset.

AERIAL OBSERVER
Echo 2, saw large secondary
explosions where your arty just
hit. Must have wasted a stack of
heavy ordinance. Really lit 'em up.

EXT. RICE PADDY - NIGHT

Frank and Brice grin at each other.

BRICE
Let's di-di the fuck outta here.

CUT TO:

EXT. SKY - DAWN

The glow of a new red sun is visible on the horizon.

EXT. GRASSY LAND JUST SOUTH OF LA THO RIVER - DAY

Dawn breaks as a series of choppers whirl in with food, more ammo, water and to collect the dead and wounded.

CAPTION: MARCH 19, 1966

As the choppers fly overhead, the third platoon of Foxtrot is sweeping in a diamond formation away from the smoking battlefield. We're within sight of the dancing waters of the La Tho River. Frank, Cassidy and Brice are embedded in the second platoon coming up behind. In mid discussion...

FRANK
You gotta be kidding!

BRICE
Battalion has ordered us to move south to Checkpoint 5 to check for damage assessments...

FRANK
Come on!

BRICE
... and to destroy all caves, trench lines, spider holes, tunnels and bunkers in the La Tho Nam village complex.

Cassidy shakes his head in disbelief.

CASSIDY
After all the crap we've been through, we should be headed to the rear.

FRANK
Welcome to the crotch...

That's when two anti-personnel mines buried below the earth's surface under green waving grass EXPLODE with no warning, spewing chunks of white-hot metal into American flesh.

The destruction is massive and several of the Marines at the rear of the formation are cut down, including Frank, Cassidy and Brice. Azar reacts to the mayhem, screaming...

AZAR
Corpsman, corpsman! Double time.
Captain's hit bad.

Marines run. Marines yell.

MARINES
Minefield! We're in a minefield!
Mines!

FAVOR FRANK

As he lies on the ground, his right shoulder and thigh bleeding. He grabs the edge of his neck and looks at his hand, covered in his blood. Looks ahead to see...

Captain Brice seated on the ground. The man is staring at the two stumps that were his legs, spurting blood, while Doc Euribe applies pressure dressings.

Frank blinks. Slowly sits up. Looks to his left...

At Cassidy a few yards away, lying motionless on the ground, eyes open and lifeless.

Frank just stares at his RTO as if he can't believe what he is seeing. Then there's yells and screams, the distinctive sound of multiple AK-47's, all firing at once.

Frank looks toward the jungle to see a line of black clad Victor Charlies firing his way.

We glimpse the VC Lieutenant striding ahead of them all. His face is distinctive in its rage and aspect. It's Tho San, the man who simply won't quit.

He raises a pistol and fires...

The bullet slams into Frank's helmet and he's thrown back... stunned momentarily.

Flat on the ground, barely aware of what he is doing, Frank looks to his left and spots a dislodged camouflaged cover of an old VC spider hole. He slithers into it, pulls its cover over his head with tremulous hands and passes out. Motionless. Done.

CUT TO BLACK:

EXT. FIGHTING HOLE - NIGHT

In the dark of night in the cramped, moist, earthen hole, with dislodged worms and beetles scrambling, Frank stirs awake. Looks about. Rises into a sitting position.

He finds his helmet in his lap. Shakily picks it up and examines the bullet dent in its crown, but he's too dazed to appreciate the miracle it represents. He looks about. Lost.

FRANK (V.O.)
Who... who am I?

CUT TO:

EXT. RICE PADDY - NIGHT

Under a full moon, Frank staggers through black mud and elephant grass. He loses his balance and falls face first. Lies there for a long moment. Seemingly finished.

Then Frank raises his head and starts low-crawling. Slowly but relentlessly he slithers through the mud, bleeding from the wounds that are turning his green utility shirt dark with dried blood.

He finally leaves the grassy field and creeps through spiny bushes and damp loam, headed he knows not where, running on impulse, adrenalin, and his intense desire to maintain his own life.

He hears an ugly, shrill yapping sound. Looks up at an animal we've seen before. A little yellow dog. A nasty, mangy, grungy mutt. And it's barking at him furiously.

Steps approach in the dark, and a wild panic erupts inside Frank so intense it almost slams his throat shut. He waves frantically at the dog.

FRANK
(a hiss)
Quiet! Go away! Quiet!

But the mongrel just barks even more intensely. The noise is huge in the night's silence. Like a fire alarm.

Frank is beside himself. Despite everything he's been through, all that he has endured, this is the most intense terror he's felt in this entire campaign. He throws dirt at the dog. Twigs and branches. No use. It just barks and barks.

FRANK (CONT'D)
 (begging)
 Stop! Please stop!

The dog suddenly and shockingly stops. Looks off at the approaching stranger; its expression clear. Oh, shit! With a frightened yelp, the canine tears off into the bush as fast as its little yellow feet will take it.

As the steps come closer and closer, Frank frantically reaches for his .45, but his holster is empty. He reaches for his ka-bar, but it's also missing. Beyond desperate, he grabs a rock and raises it in a futile, final act of self defense. Looks up and sees...

Wanda, a vision in white, standing over him, a sad smile on her perfect features. She opens her mouth and speaks...

LINH'S VOICE
 Is that my Number Two son?

Frank blinks. Wanda is gone, replaced by an old Vietnamese woman. It's Linh, her aged face tight with concern.

LINH
 Is your war finally over?

Frank's eyes close, and he collapses. Unconscious.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BUNKER - CLOSE ON FRANK - DAY

Frank opens his eyes. Disoriented and frightened, he looks frantically about.

Bare chested, the man is lying on a straw pallet under a thin cotton blanket on the dirt floor of the bunker beneath Linh's house. His face is pale, his skin wet with fever sweat, and his wounds primitively but carefully bandaged.

Sounds can be heard. Men talking, the words inaudible but the tone clear. Harsh voices. Stern, cruel commands.

It takes all his remaining strength, but Frank manages to leverage himself off the pallet and onto his knees. Then his feet. He lurches to the narrow embrasure set in the house's foundation and looks out at...

... the backyard of the house where a Japanese lieutenant stands over a defeated looking Vietnamese villager kneeling in the dirt. Shouting with rage, the officer draws his Nabu pistol...

Frank blinks, wipes the copious sweat from his eyes...

... and now the Japanese lieutenant is a French captain, and the man is pointing a Modele pistol at the villager's head.

Frank can't believe his eyes. And he shouldn't. Because after he blinks again...

It's the VC Lieutenant Tho San, and he is pointing a Chinese pistol at the head of a Marine kneeling in the dirt. It's Kronert, the company gunnery sergeant, too beaten, battered and bloody to care that he's about to die.

Tho San yells something, but Kronert doesn't respond. The VC shoots him, and the Marine falls dead.

Frank reacts. But, as he starts to scream, a hand slaps over his mouth from behind, and pulls him back.

Too weak to fight, Frank falls to the earth floor, Linh huddled beside him, her hand still on his mouth, her lips whispering into his ear.

LINH
Sleep, my second son. Sleep. Time
to dream. And to forget.

Frank closes his eyes and falls back into the black.

CUT TO BLACK:

INT. BUNKER - NIGHT

Night has fallen again and the dark, narrow chamber is lit with candles. Frank lies senseless on his pallet. We hear...

LINH (O.S.) (IN VIETNAMESE)
There, the yellow butterfly, there,
the yellow butterfly...

Frank's eyes flutter open, He turns to face...

... Linh, kneeling on another pallet nearby, pouring tea from a brass kettle into a porcelain cup.

LINH (IN VIETNAMESE) (CONT'D)
Spreads its wings, spreads its
wings...

She offers him the cup. He takes it. Watches the old lady continue to sing as she pours her own cup.

OLD LADY (IN VIETNAMESE) (CONT'D)
Takes its flight, takes its flight.
We contemplate it, we contemplate
it...

FRANK
Gentle spirit...

LINH
Yes.

FRANK
I saw...

LINH
Yes.

FRANK
Through that opening... I saw...

LINH
War. You saw war. A war that, for
you, is over. Drink your tea.

FRANK
What if it isn't? My war. What if
it isn't over?

LINH
Don't talk. Drink.

FRANK
(in tears)
What if what I saw, what I heard,
what I've done, what if it never
ends? Never stops?

LINH
Drink. Heal.

FRANK
What if I never come back from
this?

LINH
None of us ever come back. Life is
a journey through a jungle. One
way. No return. It doesn't matter
what you lose or gain, all that
matters is how far you go and what
you learn. Now will you finally
drink your tea?

As Frank sips the hot fluid...

CUT TO:

INT. BUNKER - DAY

A sleeping Frank is still lying on the pallet. He slowly opens his eyes and looks about. But he's alone.

EXT. LINH'S HOUSE - DAY

Weak on his feet but ambulatory, Frank leaves the small house and surveys the village square. Not a soul in sight.

EXT. RICE PADDY - LATER - DAY

Wearing a straw, conical hat, Linh is planting for the next harvest, methodically slipping the new seedlings in the mud as her forbears have done for centuries.

Frank is seated on a dike at the edge of the paddy, watching the old woman plant. She doesn't seem to be aware of him, but it wouldn't matter if she was. They are both at peace.

CUT TO:

INT. LINH'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Frank and Linh are seated together on the floor of the little house, eating Bún bò Huế from small bowls via chopsticks.

They don't speak. All that can be heard is the sound of night birds and insects.

CUT TO:

EXT. LINH'S HOUSE - DAY

Linh and Frank are seated on the steps outside the house's stone portico. He offers a Marlboro to the old lady. As he lights their smokes, an ancient goat wanders by, looking ridiculous in the way only an old goat can.

Frank grins, whispers something to Linh, and she laughs uproariously.

CUT TO:

EXT. RICE PADDY - DAY

Linh is planting again. Frank approaches her with a steel bucket from which he ladles water. She drinks, thankful.

INT. LINH'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Another evening meal, another quiet night. But the peace is broken by the sound of a chopper flying overhead. Frank looks up, and his expression is telling. At least for Linh.

The old lady rises to her feet, crosses to a cluttered corner of the house and searches through the jumble of miscellaneous objects stored there. She pulls out an old Japanese cap, a French shirt, and, finally, a stolen GI walkie talkie.

Linh carries it to Frank, hands it to him. Then she quietly leaves the house.

Frank stares at the WT for a long moment. Finally sighs. Resigned.

EXT. HA DONG VILLAGE - NEXT DAY

A squad of Marines are providing security about the village square, a six-by and a mighty-mite jeep with ECHO BATTERY in gold letters written on their sides in evidence. Wearing fresh jungle utilities, Frank is seated on a bench, a CORPSMAN in attendance, checking him out.

CORPSMAN

Can't believe I'm saying it, LT, but, considering you got more cuts than a show horse, you're in damn fine shape. Way you avoided infection, that's a miracle of medicine.

FRANK

It was the tea.

CORPSMAN

The what?

FRANK

Never mind. We done?

CORPSMAN

'Till we get back to Da Nang and the docs get their hands on you.

SWALLOWS (O.S.)

I told you I'm a field Marine! I belong out here.

As the corpsman moves off, Swallows approaches. The two friends hug and size each other up.

SWALLOWS (CONT'D)

Holy Jesus... you look like you took a knife to a gun fight.

FRANK

Wasn't for your arty I'd look dead. Can't believe I'm alive.

SWALLOWS

Alive. Wish I could say the same for, well, you know.

FRANK

How bad... how bad was the final count for Foxtrot?

SWALLOWS

Over thirty percent casualties, six of 'em KIA... uh, check the last. Russo and Kohler on the chopper makes eight. Should have been lots worse.

FRANK

The arty, the trenches, and Brice made the difference. Especially Brice.

SWALLOWS

Cost him his legs. Cost a lot.

FRANK

That's the green motherfucker for you.

SWALLOWS

Ready to move out?

FRANK

After I say goodbye.

CUT TO:

EXT. HA DONG VILLAGE - DAY

As the squad files into the truck, Frank bids adieu to Linh. Who hands him a photo.

LINH
When I nursed you I found this in
your clothes.

It's Wanda's picture. Frank considers it for a long moment, then tries to hand it back.

FRANK
Don't need this.

LINH
We all need our dreams.

Frank thinks about it, nods, and finally pockets the photo.

FRANK
This picture. It doesn't really
matter. But I know one that would.

CUT TO:

EXT. HA DONG VILLAGE - DAY

Frank and Linh sit by her house as Swallows snaps a photo.

SWALLOWS
Gotta make tracks, Frank. Road's
ambush alley after 1700.

As Swallows moves off, Frank has his last moment with Linh.

FRANK
I come back, promise me you'll be
here.

LINH
Where would I ever go? Safe
journey, second son.

FRANK
Good bye, Your Majesty.

They hug. A long, loving embrace. Then, a final look, a final silent farewell, and Frank mounts the jeep with Swallows and a driver.

Linh watches them go as they roar away with the other vehicle, raising dust and noise.

ON THE ROAD

We FOLLOW Frank in the jeep until it passes a TRUCK TAXI headed in the opposite direction. We STAY with the Taxi as it moves on into the village square and stops.

Its passenger door opens and Frank gets out, but it's the 1987 Frank in sweaty khakis and a ball cap instead of Marine battle dress. He looks about at a Ha Dong not much changed from his experience in 1966.

His expression is fraught with emotion. What is he doing? Why is here?

CUT TO:

INT. MAYOR'S HOOCH - DAY

The Mayor, a strong looking man Frank's age wearing an eye patch, sits at the same desk in the same hooch with Tuyen, now past 40, standing by. They survey Frank warily.

MAYOR (IN VIETNAMESE)
Why are you here?

FRANK (IN VIETNAMESE)
To see a friend.

Tuyen can't hide her disbelief.

TUYEN (IN VIETNAMESE)
How could you have a friend here?

Frank hands her a photo. Tuyen reacts to it. Hands it to the Mayor. He stares at it, then at Frank. Speaks in English.

MAYOR
Come with me.

CUT TO:

EXT. VILLAGE GRAVEYARD - DAY

As Frank observes, the Mayor indicates a particular, immaculate white gravestone carefully adorned with yellow and violet flowers.

MAYOR
Three wars, pestilence and famine,
the ruthless Japanese, the colonial
French, and the Americans with all
their weapons; she survived it all.
(MORE)

MAYOR (CONT'D)

Until a simple cold turned into pneumonia.

FRANK

When?

MAYOR

Two, almost three years ago. What would you have said to her?

FRANK

Asked. I would have asked her a question.

MAYOR

Then ask. Or don't you know a part of her is still here? I can feel her, can't you?

Frank stares at the gravestone for a long moment. Then...

FRANK

You told me life is a journey. That all that matters is how far you go and what you learn. But what if you learn you'll always do more things wrong than right? What if you learn you can't really love yourself or anyone else? What if you learn you can cower in a hole, right here, right in your house over there, and watch a comrade be murdered and do nothing? What do you do then, Gentle Spirit? Where does the journey go then?

The mayor sighs and shakes his head.

MAYOR

Forgive and forget. That's what she'd say.

FRANK

How could you know?

MAYOR

Because she said it to me the day I stood in this graveyard and screamed at my father's stone, demanding vengeance against the French.

FRANK
 (realizing)
 You're her grandson.

MAYOR
 If that's all I was, I could sleep
 at night without harsh dreams and
 bitter regret. But I'm also a man
 possessed of so little self
 knowledge, such scant humanity,
 that I could do what the French
 did. Shoot a helpless prisoner in
 the head while others watched.

Stricken, Frank gapes at the Mayor...

CUT TO:

EXT. LINCH'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - DAY

A dead Kronert lies at Tho San's feet as the VC Lieutenant
 holsters his Chinese pistol. The man looks up at us, his
 features clear. Tho San is...

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. VILLAGE GRAVEYARD - DAY

... the Mayor; older, wiser, but still wounded and pained. He
 offers Frank a weary look.

MAYOR/THO SAN
 However much you regret your
 journey, I regret mine more.

FRANK
 You should have listened to your
 grandmother.

MAYOR/THO SAN
 As should you. Forgive and forget.

He hands the picture back to Frank. Who looks at the Mayor
 for a very long moment. Finally, he offers his hand. They
 shake. Exhausted but relieved.

CUT TO:

INT. TRUCK TAXI - TRAVELING - DAY

Frank is riding in the passenger seat. He looks off...

... at a rice paddy. An old lady in a conical straw hat is planting seedlings in the mud. Could be Linh, could be any woman working any rice paddy in the kingdom any time in the last thousand years.

Frank looks ahead. Thinking. Considering. Healing. He raises the photo and stares at...

... an image of a 23 year old Frank Cox and Linh, the Gentle Spirit; the two of them together outside her house.

DISSOLVE TO:

COLOR PHOTO - FRANK COX AND LINH

The real photo of the real First Lieutenant Frank Cox and Linh taken in Ha Dong Village in March of 1966.

Off their happy, relaxed faces, grinning easily at each other, we...

FADE OUT.

THE END

