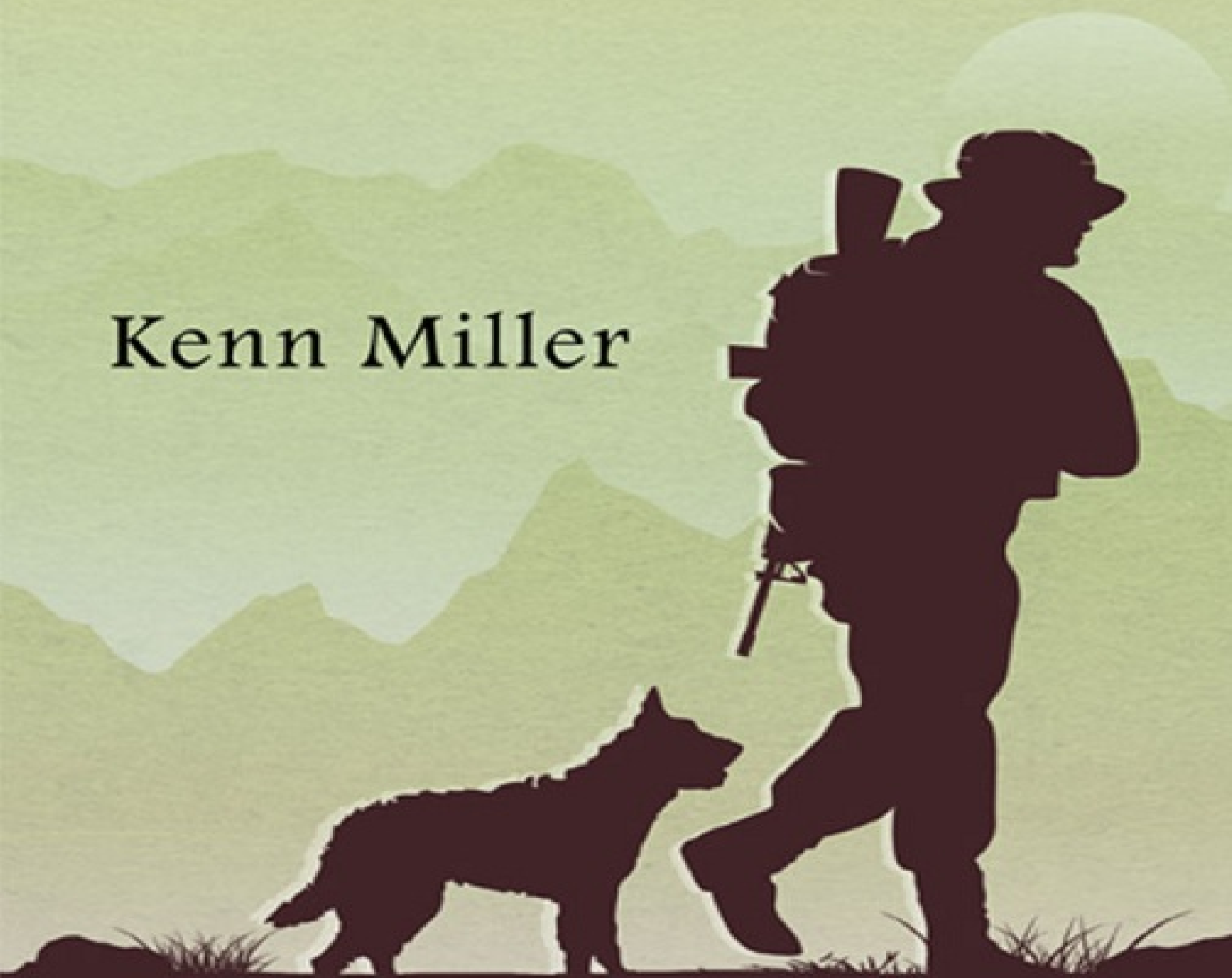


TIGER the LURP DOG

a novel

Kenn Miller



Tiger the Lurp Dog

Kenn Miller



This book is dedicated to all those who fought or suffered in the Vietnam War, but especially to the

men of the following units:

“A” Troop, 2/17 Cavalry

Brigade L.R.R.P., 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division

“F” Company (L.R.P.), 58th Infantry

“L” Company, 75th Ranger Infantry

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Chapter ONE

TIGER THE LURP DOG scurried away from the tent and ducked behind the trash barrel as his main man Mopar, stormed past smelling of adrenaline and anger. Mopar was trying to contain his anger, but his nose never lies, and Tiger knew enough to get out of his way.

Cursing under his breath about his eleven months in the field going unrewarded, Mopar shouldered his way into the tent and strode over to his cot. He kicked at his rucksack and missed, the cot deflated, sat down on his footlocker and shook his fist in the direction of the operations bunker, where the lieutenant and Pappy Stagg were processing the new man into the platoon. There was no one else in the tent but Marvel Kim. Marvel could tell that Mopar was angry, but he refused to be impressed by his anger.

“What’s got you so teed off?” he asked, looking up placidly from the M-79 grenade launcher he was cleaning. Marvel was strong and stocky. He had a chubby Buddha face and an Airborne haircut so short that it was little more than a dark shadow on top of his head. He was Mopar’s best friend, but the normal things that upset Mopar rarely got a rise out of him.

“It’s not good for you to get so pissed,” he said. “All this anger is dangerous. Everybody knows that hotheads die young. Now, what’s wrong this time?”

Mopar scowled. “It’s Pappy Stagg and the lieutenant—a couple of real backstabbers! Here it is not a week after I sign my extension papers—not two days after they say we’re gonna get sergeant’s stripes—and what do they do? They bring in a lifer E-6 and tell me he’s gonna be our new team leader! Can you believe this shit?”

Marvel Kim shrugged and ran an oily rag through the barrel of the grenade launcher. He had no trouble believing that shit. That was the way the Army went about its business, and unpleasant as it could be, there was no use crying about it. The only thing to do was to wait with an open mind, and see what sort of luck the new staff sergeant brought with him. But Marvel knew better than to try to persuade Mopar of this. Poor Mopar had had his heart set on wearing sergeant’s stripes home on his extension leave and bragging to that girlfriend of his, that Sybill Street, about his duties as a recon team leader. And while Marvel figured he owed him a sympathetic shrug, he couldn’t see much good in helping him bitch about something that should have been expected.

Mopar was beginning to come down from his first flush of anger and disappointment, but he was still sore.

“A new lifer!” He frowned and slapped his thigh. “From the way they were carrying on about it a few times, he’s another one of Pappy’s Special Forces protégés. That’s all we need—another ex-Greener Beanie running around telling us how soft we have it, not having to go in the field with gooks!”

Marvel Kim let the word “gook” float past without comment. It was the one Korean word he

knew of that had found its way into the military vocabulary, and it would have been impossible to object every time he heard it without sounding like some kind of softheaded peacecreep. He even used it himself from time to time, although he much preferred “dink” or “zip” or one of the other words that had been coined in reference to the Vietnamese.

Marvel sighed, then looked up at the doorway of the tent. “Can it, Mopar,” he whispered. “Looks like we got a visitor.”

Mopar turned around just as the staff sergeant he’d seen in the operations bunker stepped into the tent. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence as he and Marvel looked first at the new lifer, then at each other, then back at the new man, who was standing there with his hands on his hips, seeming to fill the doorway of the tent.

Marvel smiled and waved an invitation. “Come on in, Sarge!” he said, and the new lifer stepped out of the gloom into the middle of the tent with the light streaming in behind him.

If anything, he looked tougher and meaner than he had when Mopar first saw him in the operations bunker. He’d been standing next to the gaunt and towering Pappy Stagg then, and he hadn’t looked as tall as he did now. He had thick shoulders and the neck of a wrestler, but he stood light on his feet—light and alert, and yet relaxed.

He wore a teal blue Special Forces combat patch on his right shoulder, master parachute wings and a Combat Infantry Badge over his left breast pocket, and on the pocket itself there was a subdued olive-drab Pathfinder patch with wings and torch of black thread. On the other pocket, beneath a barely legible name-tag, was an arrowhead Recondo patch. There were Vietnamese jump wings sewn above the nametag, but no wings on the new lifer’s green baseball cap, and the cap itself looked like it had just come out of a box in supply. The new man’s face was dark from the sun and seemed somehow too long and thin for his neck and shoulders. He smiled, and a network of tiny white scars wrinkled his upper lip, turning his smile into a leer.

“My name,” he announced with the faint drawl of a professional NCO, “is Staff Sergeant E. Wolverine. But being as how I don’t stand on ceremony, you can just call me Wolverine.”

He nodded in Marvel’s direction.

“You must be Spec Four Kim. Pappy tells me you’re a halfway decent radio man, and about the best M-79 gunner in the Army.” He smiled again, a little more warmly this time. “But tell me, where in the hell did your mother come up with a name like ‘Marvel’—outa a comic book?”

Marvel smiled politely. He’d heard the same line in Jump School and then again from Pappy Stagg when he’d first come into the Lurp platoon, so it wasn’t unexpected.

“And you ...” The new man looked over at Mopar and tried not to frown. Mopar was a wiry young troop, gray-eyed and thin of face, with a head of light hair too short to comb, yet long enough to stand up in clumps and cowlicks. His uniform seemed to be in order, but there was a thin gold earring in his left ear, and a knotted bodycount rope of green parachute cord around his neck.

“You must be Spec Four Mopar. I hear you’re going to be my assistant team leader.”

Mopar shrugged. He’d been Farley’s ATL when he was alive, and before that he’d been J. D.’s number two man on a few missions, and he wasn’t exactly bowled over by the honor.

Staff Sergeant Wolverine hadn’t had much authority as an E-6 in Special Forces—at least not over American troops—and he tried to remember how to sound commanding but fair as he looked around the tent.

It was a regulation U.S. Army General Purpose Medium tent, with room for ten cots. There were four of the tents in the Lurp compound, three for the troops, and one for the team leaders, Pappas, Stagg, and the lieutenant. This tent was the closest to the operations bunker, but by far the shabbiest. Instead of tent poles it was supported on a large wooden frame that allowed for a screen door in front, but the canvas was old and patched, and there were puddles on the ground to show where it leaked. Even so, the bunks were even and well spaced; each man had a foot-locker and hooks on which to hang his gear, and for a nice homey touch a few of the bunks were partitioned off from their neighbors by sheets of plywood on which were taped pictures of cars and monsters and naked women.

Sergeant Wolverine pointed to one of the pictures and grinned.

“Now that’s what I call a bloodflushin’ rodraiser of a *huliding*,” he said, throwing in the Vietnamese for “fox spirit,” just for the cameras, just to show a little class. He pointed again, with his chin this time. “That one there—with the red hair and the shaved bush and those bouncy little pignose tits. Let me tell you troops, I’d eat a mile of commo wire just to hear her fart over a field phone!”

He grinned and ran the tip of his tongue over the little white scars on his upper lip. “Just who’s bunk is that? The man has got some excellent taste!”

“Used to be Jessup’s,” Marvel answered. “He’s dead, but we kept the picture. The guy who sleeps there now is on R&R.”

Sergeant Wolverine took this in with a judicious nod, then decided to change the subject. “No more these footlockers,” he said with a wave of his hand, “I want them moved off to the side of the bunker. We start taking rockets, everybody’ll be scrambling for the bunkers, and I don’t want nobody tripping over the footlockers. Get them back out of the way.”

Wolverine wasn’t sure he should have said that. It wasn’t a good idea to come into a new unit and start changing things around. But now that he’d committed himself, he knew he had to go on. He pointed to the candle on Marvel’s footlocker and frowned.

“Them candles got to go. They’re a fire hazard. Why don’t you have electricity in this tent?”

Now Mopar spoke up. “I been asking the same thing myself. They got lights in the team leader’s tent, which is a damn sight further from the generator. I guess we just don’t rate.”

Wolverine decided to ignore the sarcasm. “Well you rate now,” he said. “If I have to kiss ass all the way up the chain of command to LBJ himself, I’m gonna see that you have lights in this tent. I don’t take no stumbling dicksteppers out on my team. You’re gonna need lights, because before you

load up on any insertion ship with me, you *will* have your maps and codebooks memorized. Got that?

Marvel nodded like a good soldier, but Mopar had had enough of this new lifer and he didn't care who knew it. "Got what? Got enough of you coming in here throwing your weight around, Sarge? Sure, I got enough of that! Got enough sense to study our maps and codebooks? Yeah? Well we got that too, damnit! You can't come in here treating us like a bunch of goddamn Basic Trainees!"

Marvel was trying desperately to shut Mopar up before it was too late, grimacing, shaking his head, rolling his eyes, and tapping his lips with his finger, but Mopar ignored him and went on.

"I've had just about all I'm gonna take of this shit. I don't care who you are, or what you've done—you can't come in treating us like we don't know our job! We don't fuck up—we don't half-step, and that's why we're still alive!"

Marvel thought that Mopar was fucking up pretty seriously, but he sure wasn't half-stepping. He was going all the way, and from the look on the new staff sergeant's face, Mopar was talking his way into either an ass-kicking or an Article 15 and bust back down to slick-sleeve Private E-2. But suddenly the little scars above Sergeant Wolverine's mouth tightened and pulled his lip up into another leering smile. Wolverine held up his right hand and shook his head, still smiling.

"All right, all right. I've heard enough. Pappy said you'd be a might touchy, and I can see the old buzzard was right. He also said you're a good man, and maybe he's right about that, too." Wolverine paused and tugged on the bill of his baseball cap, then sighed and shook his head once more.

"Now, I'm gonna let you slide this time, Spec Four Mopar—just to show how big my heart is. So let's have no more of this contentious bullshit, and we'll get along fine." He glanced over at Marvel and then turned back to Mopar and nodded. "Now, I want you to round up the rest of the team. I'm gonna go stow my gear, and I want everyone here when I return. I don't care what sort of detail they're on—pull them off it and get them back here. You got that?"

Mopar nodded unhappily. He got it all right, but he wasn't going to say so out loud.

Wolverine turned and started for the door, then stopped and turned back around.

"One more thing," he said, suddenly worried that he'd come on a tad too strong and was getting off on the wrong foot with the troops. "I told you my name and I expect you to use it. Let's have no more of this 'Sarge' bullshit. You just call me 'Wolverine' or 'Sergeant Wolverine' and we'll get along fine. Got that?"

Marvel nodded, but Mopar waited until the new staff sergeant was gone before answering.

"Got it Sarge." He hefted an imaginary foot-long penis in his hand and shook it at the doorway of the tent. "Got it *dangling*, you fuckin' Lifer Pig!"

He turned on Marvel Kim, who was grinning that goofy grin of his, and appeared to be on the verge of giggling.

"You think this is funny, don't you, you silly gook? All your talk about luck and omens and figuring the odds, and you can't spot bad luck and trouble when it comes walking into the tent. Always

looking to the future, huh? You think he's got two, maybe three tours? Shit, Marvel! You're looking so far down the line you miss out on the bad luck that's at your feet. If that prick hadn't come into the platoon we'd both be making sergeant, and I'd be a Team Leader! That's bad luck. Marvel—bad luck in the here and now!”

Mopar swung his boots up on his cot and stretched out with his hands clasped behind his head.

“Giggle away, you goofy dork!” he said, breaking into a smile now, in spite of himself. “Anyway while you're at it, you better step outside and police up Tiger. He was avoiding me the last time I saw him.”

Wolverine shook his head and sat down on one of the foot-lockers. They were still in the aisle, still blocking the way to the bunker, but he decided not to say anything about that now. He wasn't feeling as much like a hard-driving leader of men as he had ten minutes before. He took off his baseball cap and scratched the top of his head, and even Mopar, who was still reluctant to give him the benefit of the doubt, had to admit that he looked a good deal less formidable than he had on his first visit to the tent.

“This is the whole team? Two Spec Fours and a raggedy-ass little brown and black dog?”

He glanced over at Tiger, who was curled up on a pile of dirty fatigues, chewing contentedly on an old green field sock. With his dirty brown coat and black stripe markings, Tiger looked like he'd been born in a camouflage suit. He was a medium-small dog, lazy and self-indulgent, yet alert and shifty—a true recon dog. He looked up at Wolverine and wagged his tail in casual greeting.

“What's he do? Carry the support radio?”

Marvel Kim looked over at Mopar and saw that he wasn't in the mood to answer, so he answered for him.

“Tiger's the sneakiest little thief and coward in the world,” he said. It was exactly what Mopar would have said, but Marvel didn't say it quite as well. “Mostly he sleeps and eats and pisses on things. But when we come in from the field he's always there on the berm above the chopper pad wagging his tail to welcome us back. It's good to see him there, even if he won't come down off the berm until the pilots kill their engines.”

This wasn't the answer Mopar would have given, but it was much closer to the truth. Mopar credited Tiger with all sorts of unlikely wisdom and insight, and it was just as well that he hadn't bothered to speak up, even though Wolverine had directed the question to him in the first place.

“So this is it? This is Team Two-Four of the Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol?” Wolverine sighed and put his cap back on his head. “Where the hell is the rest of the team, for chrissake?”

Now Mopar spoke up.

“Two of them's dead. Gonzales is on R&R, and Ketchum got out of the Army. We've been floating—filling in on the other teams and pulling more than our fair share of radio relay.”

Mopar hated radio relay. While Marvel Kim thought it was deceptively dangerous duty, sitting at a fire base with nothing but straightleg artillery for security, Mopar just hated the boredom and frustration of following the teams on the map and missing out on all the fun they were having out there in the mountains.

“Well, you can forget about that.” Wolverine was pleased to note the impatient scorn with which Mopar had mentioned radio relay. “I’m the ranking team leader in this platoon, and I’ll go tooth and nail to get us missions. If you guys are as good as that old buzzard Stagg says you are, I’ll see that we spend ninety percent of our time in the field.”

It was an extravagant promise. There was no way any reconnaissance unit could get that much field time. But Wolverine was determined to spend as much time as possible out in the field, even if it meant volunteering the team for rinky-dink security patrols or even point work for the infantry. Just about anything was better than sitting on radio relay or filling sandbags in the rear.

“All right,” Wolverine stood up and stretched. “Now that we got that out of the way, I think I’ll take me a little stroll around the compound—get in some terrain familiarization. Anyone want to show me around?”

He addressed the invitation to both of them, but since Marvel Kim had finished cleaning his M16 and was now working on his rifle magazines, it was up to Mopar to accept. He got to his feet slowly and took his time putting on his floppy Lurp hat. He pulled on the brim and styled it until his eyes were lost in shadow, then reached down and snatched the sock away from Tiger.

“Come on, you mutt!” he said, smiling slightly now that he was done with his snit. “Let’s show this cherry E-6 around the Lurp compound.”

Tiger sprang to his feet, snapping at the sock and wagging his tail happily.

Mopar had no idea how much better he smelled with his anger blown away.

Chapter TWO

NESTLED BETWEEN THE CHOPPER pads of the 23rd AirCav on the north and the muddy brown warehouses, tents and dark green conex containers of the 7077th Support and Supply Battalion on the south, the Lurp compound was not in the most distinguished company. To the east of the compound, separated from the sleeping tents by a couple of rolls of concertina wire and a shallow trench, was the neat sandbagged Cav mess hall and a corner of the sprawling Cav motor pool, with its sheds and oil drums and trucks and burned-out helicopter hulks. Directly across the road from the Cav mess—the Slop Shop—was the fenced-in compound of Brigade S-2 Intelligence—the Two Shop.

Although neither of these institutions contributed much to the tone of the neighborhood, they were important even so. When the Lurps weren't in the field, when they tired of their own freeze-dried Long-Range Patrol rations, they were always welcome in the Cav mess, even though they pointedly ignored the Cav's uniform code and insisted on dining in their grubbiest "tiger-stripe" camouflage fatigues.

The Lurps—all of them except the lieutenant, Pappy Stagg, and the commo chief, Sergeant Johnson—were much less welcome in the Two Shop than they were in the Slop Shop. The Lurp platoon was normally under operational control of Brigade S-2 Intelligence, and the results of their patrols supplied most of the information that the Two Shop wizards processed and analyzed and turned into what passed for intelligence. But the Lurps were boisterous, loudmouthed, and far too curious to be welcome in the Two Shop, and a great deal of hostility existed between the enlisted members of the two detachments.

To the west of the compound, beyond the concertina wire at the far edge of the Lurp chopper pads was the bunker line, and beyond that the perimeter of the base camp. Abandoned rice fields stretched a few miles from the perimeter into the foothills. Some of these foothills had only a few years' growth on paddy terraces that had once gleamed like jade stairways on the slopes and in the draws. Even now, from the air, the terraces looked like steps, but mossy steps, treacherous steps that led into the dark and foggy mountains behind them.

While Tiger sniffed the guylines and lifted his leg against the antennas on top of the operational bunker, Mopar and Wolverine paused on the high ground between the bunker and the tent, and looked out at the mountains.

"There must be a million gooks out there," Mopar said, shaking his head in awe at the thought of there being that many gooks in the whole world. There was an odd, wistful tone to his voice that Wolverine noted with approval. A good recon man was, above all, curious, and Wolverine was glad that his new ATL could look out at the mountains and get to wondering what-all was waiting out there for him.

They jumped off the bank onto the muddy compound driveway and trudged down to the gate. It wasn't really much of a gate—just a barricade of steel and barbed wire that could be moved across the drive, a plywood sign announcing that this was the compound of the Headquarters & Headquarters Company Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol Platoon, and another, smaller sign warning all visitors to report to Brigade S-2 for entry clearance—but everybody called it the gate for lack of anything better.

“Don’t pay no attention to that sign,” Mopar said. “We don’t get many visitors. But anyone who wants to can just walk on the compound. We only pull the barricade across at night. But hell, we know it ain’t enough to keep anyone out. The only thing to challenge any unauthorized visitor would be Tiger’s barking—and he’s the quietest dog I ever saw.”

There had been plans to put up a real gate and a real sign, an arch with jump wings and Ranger tabs hanging from it, but Pappy Stagg had vetoed that idea. Pappy felt that it’d be a waste of time and money, and anyway, he already had his hands full trying to get the Lurps to keep a low profile, and a gaudy compound sign wouldn’t help things at all.

“We don’t really need a gate,” Mopar explained. “None of these rear-echelon Legs ever come poking around. They figure the least we’d do if we catch them nosing around would be to laugh at them, and the most we’d probably make them play catch with a baseball grenade. They don’t come around, so we don’t need a gate.”

Whenever he came out of a snit Mopar became garrulous and friendly, as if in compensation for having been a sulky prick while the snit was still on.

“Now down the slope there’s the chopper pad,” Mopar said with a wave of his hand. “You know the ropes and rope ladders and McQuire rigs—we even have a bunch of parachutes we’ll probably never get to use.”

Mopar wondered if Wolverine had ever infiltrated into a real-life target area by parachute, or if all of his jumps had just been training. He started to ask him what he’d been doing in Special Forces, but then thought better of it. If he’d been doing anything interesting, Mopar realized, he probably would not be willing to talk about it right off with someone he hardly knew.

“Over there—hell, you can smell it from here—that’s the shithouse.”

Mopar waved at Team Two-Two’s pointman, Bill Kemp, who was pulling the shitcans out the back of the latrine so that he could burn off yesterday’s accumulation of shit with diesel fuel.

“It’s a three-holer, and Pappy scrounged up some real toilet seats, so we don’t get splinters in the ass every time we sit down to relax.”

They paused next to the rigging shed while Tiger sprayed the skids of the helicopters on the pad, then moved on past the supply tent and commo shed for the ammo bunker and the sandbagged firing pit where the men tested their weapons before each mission.

“We got to turn in all of our demo and grenades and special weapons when we come back from

mission,” Mopar said when they passed the ammo bunker. “Seems chickenshit to me, but Pappy runs a tight ship when it comes to some things.”

Wolverine wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and lit a cigarette with a survival-pack lighter.

“What about smoke grenades?” he asked. “You don’t turn those in, do you?”

Mopar nodded. “Smokes, frags, gas, det cord, Claymores—everything but our ammo. Pappy says he don’t want us getting ourselves blown away back in the rear. Says it’s unfair to the poor gooks who got to live out there with the leeches and snakes for us to kill our own selves off and keep them from getting a fair shot at us.”

Mopar paused and looked over at the jeep that was coming through the gate.

“Did you know Pappy Stagg before coming to the platoon?”

Wolverine nodded but didn’t volunteer any specifics.

“Well then you know how he is,” Mopar said. “He’s the best Top in the whole fucking Army. But he does have his ways.”

The jeep had pulled up on the drive beneath the operations bunker, and Pappy Stagg was down there next to it, joking with the driver, who was off-loading two red nylon mailbags.

“I gotta go, Sarge,” Mopar said. “I’m expecting a letter from this girl. And I want to beat Marvin to the newspapers.” He waited for Wolverine to nod in dismissal, then raced off for the bunker with Tiger bounding along beside him.

Wolverine watched them for a few seconds, then threw down his cigarette and ground it under his heel.

“Sweet Jesus,” he said under his breath, “don’t let them catch up with me here!”

Chapter THREE

WOLVERINE WAS NOT NAMED Wolverine when he first joined the army. He'd been only seventeen then and he'd enlisted under his original name, over the forged signature of his father, the Reverend Doctor Matthew Wolverton of the Living Message of God Full Gospel Church.

The recruiting law was very specific: No one under the age of eighteen could be enlisted without parental consent; and there was no way that the Reverend Doctor would have given his consent if it had been sought. He had already secured a clerical scholarship for his son, and if Three Rivers Bible College had been good enough for him, than it was good enough for the boy. The Reverend Doctor Wolverton had always struggled to do the best he could for his only begotten son, and it was his God-given responsibility to guide him along the paths of righteousness and Christian living, and having preached the Gospel at revival meetings outside military bases from Alabama to Washington State, he knew that soldiers were a sinful lot, given to the evils of strong drink, foul language, and immoral women. There was no way he would have signed, and so Wolverine was forced to sign for him. The recruiter was behind on his quota for the third month, so was forced to overlook the obvious forgery and send the young recruit on his way with a few words of advice: "Keep your mouth shut and your ears open, and you'll do all right."

All through Basic Training and Advanced Infantry Training, Wolverine strove to follow this advice. When the drill instructors spoke, he listened and tried to memorize everything they said. At night during his stint of firewatch in the barracks, he would pace up and down between the racks of sleeping men, practicing his drawl, repeating memorable phrases, and checking his posture from time to time in the reflection of the barrack's window.

When the other trainees sat around talking about women and cars and home, Wolverine always stayed on the edge of the conversation. He nodded when the others nodded and laughed when they laughed, but he tried to keep his mouth shut and his ears open, just as the recruiter had suggested. It wasn't until he got on the bus that would take him to Fort Benning to qualify as a paratrooper that he felt confident enough to join in laughing and shouting and badmouthing back and forth with the other guys. He had purged the last vestiges of evangelistic hyperbole from his speech, he no longer had to worry about sounding like a preacher's kid, and he was determined to leave his Full Gospel past behind him.

It wasn't until the morning of his fifth parachute jump that the past caught up with him for the first time. He was "Scrolling his parachute on the Drop Zone, and feeling high and happy and excited to have that last, qualifying, jump behind him, when a tall, bald chaplain, a major, drove up in a jeep and checked the roster number on his helmet against a list on the top of his clipboard.

"Excuse me, son, are you Private Wolverton?" the chaplain asked, his voice genial with Christian

fellowship and the assurance of rank.

There was no use in lying, so Wolverine just nodded, mumbled an unhappy “Yessir,” and finished rolling his chute.

“And is your father the Reverend Doctor Matthew Wolverton of the Living Message of God Full Gospel Church’s Roving Outreach Mission Bus?”

Again there was nothing to do but nod and mumble another “Yessir.”

The chaplain opened his zippered notebook and took out a sheet of orders.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news, son,” the chaplain said, and Wolverine—worried that he was about to be thrown out of the Army for illegal enlistment on the very day he qualified as a paratrooper—turned away to hide the tears of frustration that had welled up so suddenly in his eyes.

“There’s been an accident, son,” the chaplain said, looking down solemnly at his clipboard and notebook. “A very bad accident. Both your parents are in the hospital in Washington State. Here, these are emergency leave orders. It took a while for us to track you down, but I had them cut as soon as we found you. Hop in, you can turn your chute in for a shakedown and I’ll give you a lift back to the barracks.”

Against his wishes, Wolverine got in the jeep and, after turning in his parachute, rode with the chaplain all the way back to the barracks, trying his damndest not to smile, or whistle, or let on how he felt. The chaplain had said nothing about a discharge.

By six that evening Wolverine was on a plane bound for Seattle, and by noon the next day he was sitting in a chair by the window in his mother’s hospital room, looking out at the green lawns and the mountains beyond. His father was in surgery, and his mother was busy praying. When she finished her prayers, she cleared her throat and reached over to touch the copy of *Peyton Place* on her nightstand. She pulled her hand back as if it had been burned, then turned her pale blue eyes’ on her son.

“Trash!” she hissed, unable to rail in her full church voice because of her broken ribs, but still capable of the righteous venom that had made her the ideal wife for the Reverend Doctor Wolverton.

“Pornography! Ungodliness! Unclean profanity!” She struggled until she was sitting half upright and could point at the paperback detective novel she’d thrown to the floor. Wolverine rather liked the blonde on the cover, but he didn’t feel combative enough to say so.

“Crime!” she said. “Immorality!” She paused to gather her strength before flinging her hand toward the book on the chair next to the door.

“*The Ugly American!* I know what that’s about! Treason! Godless Communism! Race-mixing! Oh! The things they print these days!”

“You read it, Ma?”

“Never! Praise the Lord!” She patted the Bible on the bed next to her pillow. “I have my book here. I have the Good Book, the Word of God!” Her eyes narrowed and she glanced suspiciously at the doorway.

“I’m watching these people here,” she whispered. “I’ve got my eye on these doctors and nurses and that woman—that shameless woman with the book cart. They can hide from each other, but we know, and the Lord knows, what—what obscurity they deal in!”

Wolverine sighed and turned his gaze back to the window. He’d learned years before that it was useless to correct her English. As long as he could remember, “obscure” had meant “obscene,” “trivial” had meant “travail,” and “fellowship” had been a verb—something that good, decent, God-fearing Christian people did when they got together over churchyard potluck suppers.

“The Christian people in this country ought to get together and put a stop to this sort of thing,” she said. She patted her Bible again, closed her eyes while she recited a passage from the first letter of Paul to Timothy, and then after wheezing and coughing and sputtering into a Kleenex, she went back on the offensive.

“There has to be a way to find out who reads this sort of trash. We need an organization of Christian librarians to keep an eye on people for their own sake—for the sake of their souls.”

Wolverine stood up to excuse himself.

“Listen, Ma, I got to go to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

“Sure—go on. Do whatever you want. Walk out on your mother, just like you did before. Go on! Your father—God preserve him!—is still in the operating room, but you can’t sit still long enough to find out if he’s dead or alive. You have to be on your way. Back to your disgraceful ways—sinning and drinking strong drink, and Heaven knows what else! Someday—someday you’ll wake with your internal soul lost forever, and you’ll cry out to Jesus. But it’ll be too late. Go on! Walk out on your dying mother—I’ll pray the Lord to forgive you!”

“Ma! I only said I was going to the bathroom!” Wolverine had protested, but it did no good. His mother had opened her Bible and was reading to herself, her lips moving and her finger tracing the words, and she refused to acknowledge her prodigal son.

That was the last time Wolverine saw his mother. Six months later, a few weeks past his eighteenth birthday, with the help of his company commander and the Catholic battalion chaplain—both of whom were sick and tired of having to respond to postcard inquiries about the moral health of his companions—Wolverine petitioned the Judge Advocate General for a change of name. He got the name change he wanted and in the process won a twenty-dollar bet from his first sergeant, who had doubted the Army would approve a name like “Wolverine.” From then on, Wolverine always said that he came from the logging country, where men were men, and sissies who couldn’t take the work and ran off for the soft life of an Airborne soldier were unwelcome to return. It was a good lie, a classy lie. And since Wolverine always told it with a grin, for the most part people believed it.

But there was still no running away from the past, still no escaping the eye of the Lord and the undying concern of his vigilant Christian librarians.

“Sweet Jesus, let’s make us a deal,” Wolverine said as he sat down on his bunk in the team leader’s tent and lit another cigarette with his survival-pack lighter.

“You keep your propaganda out of my mail call, and I’ll promise that if I die with a weapon in my hand I won’t blindside you when I get to Heaven!”

Chapter FOUR

WOLVERINE WAS NOT THE least bit embarrassed the next day, when he came thundering into the tea tent, hollering for Mopar and Marvel to get their gear together and meet him down by the chopper pad in an hour, ready to pull a five-day radio relay on Firebase Alexine. Only the day before, he'd promised to kiss ass all the way up the chain of command to LBJ himself—if that's what it would take to get them out in the field where they belonged. But with Gonzales still on R&R and the team already understrength to begin with, Pappy Stagg was as high up as he had to go, and another dull stint on a radio relay was the best mission he could get his new team.

Mopar and Marvel grumbled and bitched as they got their gear together and trooped on down to the chopper pad, but by the time they climbed aboard the helicopter that would take them to Alexine their attitudes had improved considerably, and they seemed glad to get away from the compound for a while—even if they were only going to dull and muddy Firebase Alexine.

“I know what you're both thinking—I promised you better than this,” Wolverine allowed when they were finally set up in the radio bunker on Alexine and could lay back, drinking C-ration coffee and waiting for first light, when Team Two-One's mission—and their own in support of it—was scheduled to begin. “I know it must rag your asses to hear the way those chumps on Two-One were carrying on about their mission—all that bragging about how ‘J. D.'s Rangers’ gonna do this, ‘J. D.'s Rangers’ gonna find that, and so on. But that's just tough shit. As soon as your man Gonzales gets back, soon as we have a full team, we'll get our chance to show that crazy nigger J. D. and his band of red-neck cut-throats the proper way to run a Long-Range Recon Patrol. I know I promised you more field time and an end to this radio relay bullshit. But this is the Army, not some pie-in-the-sky Sunday school, and you're gonna have to get used to the fact that promises don't count—not even when someone as upright and honest as your new team leader makes them.”

Wolverine smiled, and stretched, and farted contentedly. He and Two-One's team leader, J. D., went way back. When Wolverine had first come across J. D., they were both young privates fresh out of Jump School, newly assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division and determined to make names for themselves. J. D. had always had more flair than foresight, and back then he'd always been the first to volunteer for anything exciting, difficult, or dangerous. He was the first of their group of new paratroopers to jump number two man, behind the stick leader, where he could see out the door beforehand—which had then seemed a daring and prestigious thing to do. J. D. was the first to make PFC and Spec Four, the first to smart off to their terrifying bear of a platoon sergeant—and the first to be busted back down to Private E-1. J. D. was always the first to wade into any beer-hall brawl, the first to drain his mug in chugalug contests—and, of course, he was always the first to tell the world about his exploits.

Wolverine and J. D. had started off together in the same platoon, and then they'd gone their separate ways—J. D. off to Ranger School, first as a student and then an instructor, and Wolverine off to Special Forces. Now, at last, they were in the same unit again, and Wolverine was looking forward to this stint of radio relay as a chance to find out whether J. D. was half as good as he said he was.

"There's a lot of interesting missions coming up," Wolverine promised. "And you can count on us getting our share of the fun. Old Stagg might have stretched things a bit to con me into this platoon but I know he didn't flat-ass lie. Still, my Mama—bless her holy little heart—she didn't raise no fool. I don't take no dicksteppers on my team. If you want to stay with me and come out of this tour alive, you gotta be smart and you gotta be hard. Do you got that?"

"Got it, Sarge."

"Fine. By first light tomorrow—before Two-One goes in—I'm gonna quiz you both on the codebook. If you don't have it memorized, you're gonna be in a heap of trouble. Is that clear?"

"Clear, Sarge," Mopar mumbled unhappily.

"All right, now. If you got that down, we'll get along fine." Wolverine dug a pack of cigarettes out of his rucksack and lit up with his survival-pack lighter. He looked up at the sandbagged bunker ceiling and blew a lazy series of smoke rings. He was taking his time, but he wasn't through talking just yet.

"Enough of all that," he said. "We'll get our missions. But in the meantime, we got us a job of radio relay to perform, and we're gonna do the best damn kick-ass job of it that this platoon has ever seen. I expect you to practice strict commo discipline, you hear me? No talking over the horn—I want to hear nothing but whispers. You got that?"

Mopar and Marvel nodded glumly, unhappy at being told how to do their job.

"Now, the commo log will be perfect. No breezy bullshit—but I want every damn crackle and static recorded. The maps will be kept up to the minute and the overlays kept dry. You two got that?"

It was Marvel's turn to respond. "Got it, Sarge!"

"Fine." Wolverine nodded. "Now, one more thing we best get straight right now: When there's no officers around, you don't have to be so damn polite. I told you before, lay off this 'Sarge' bullshit. O.K.? I had to make my own name for myself, and I like it. So just call me 'Wolverine' and we'll get along fine. But don't go forgetting that my namesake's the meanest motherfucker in the whole North Woods—and I'm three times his size and four times as mean as he ever thought of being. You two bandits got that down clear in your minds?"

"Got it, Sarge," said Mopar, "we've got it coming out of our ears!" As long as Wolverine insisted on talking like a lifer, Mopar was determined to keep on calling him Sarge.

"Very good," said Wolverine with a smile. "I think we're gonna get along just fine."

They did get along just fine, cramped together, all snug and cozy, in the leaky radio bunker of

Firebase Alexine. And the field team, J. D.'s Rangers, got along just fine, out in the rain and wind and misty darkness on the rim of the Aloe Valley, for J. D. had grown himself a crop of good sense in the years since Wolverine had last served with him. Or at least it seemed that way, for he had stuck to the high ground, monitoring the trails that led over the ridges from the valley, and even when a twenty-man supply column struggled past his position, slipping and cursing in the rain, J. D. had resisted the urge to open up on them, choosing to sit tight instead, to report them but let them pass by, unaware that they'd been observed.

At the end of the mission, when word came over the horn that J. D.'s team was safely aboard the helicopter and flying home to the Lurp compound, Wolverine put down his canteen cup and lit a cigarette—his first that morning—out of sympathy with the men on the field team, who were certainly all lighting up now in the extraction ship, for such seemed to be the custom on every recon team in the Army.

“Not bad,” he admitted with an embarrassed grin and a fond shake of his head. “Not bad at all. Here I was all worried that crazy nigger would do something brave and stupid, but he kept his cool and right nicely. That's the way to run a recon mission—all sneaky and cool. It's not that hard, you know. But if you don't get wise, you don't survive—and by the time I'm through with you, we're gonna have the wisest and sneakiest Lurp team this man's Army has ever seen. That's an ironclad promise I'm giving you now, troops. An ironclad promise.”

Chapter FIVE

THE MAJOR IN CHARGE of the Two Shop was rather fond of the Lurps. Sure, they tried hard to live up to their reputation as troublemakers and mavericks, but they were unquestionably the elite of the Brigade, and without them the Two Shop would have to depend on the notoriously unreliable Reconnaissance Agent reports of indigenous spies and the murky conjecture of the Aerial Photo Examination Section in order to prepare intelligence summaries for the general. Without the Lurps there would even be a paucity of Electronically Derived Intelligence, for who else was there to plant the Black Boxes and other sensing devices along suspected enemy infiltration routes?

The Lurps were the only combat element of Brigade Headquarters, and without them the major would be just another staff officer, like all the other majors in the Brigade. But with the Lurps under operational command of the Two Shop, the major was at least in nominal command of American combat troops, and that would surely improve his chances of an early promotion to lieutenant colonel.

The major was so fond of the Lurps that he worried about their safety. It didn't bother him to lose an occasional man, or even an occasional team in the field—that young maverick lieutenant of theirs wrote all the letters to the next of kin. But the major was determined not to lose anybody, whether Lurp or an intelligence analyst, to an enemy rocket. He hated to think what would happen if a 120 millimeter rocket should impact on the chopper pad while the Lurps were waiting for insertion or practicing their rappelling. So he directed the lieutenant to have his men build a bunker alongside the rigging shed by their chopper pad.

Because Team Two-Four was still understrength and unable to go to the field, the task of filling the first batch of sandbags for the bunker fell to Mopar and Marvel and Gonzales, and the supervision of the detail was assigned to Staff Sergeant Wolverine. But because Wolverine had spent too many years in the egalitarian camaraderie of Special Forces to allow himself to stand idly by as his men did all the work, the overall supervision of the sandbag detail fell to that lazy little mutt, Tiger the Lurp Dog.

“Look at him, stretched out on top of the sandpile just as comfortable as can be while we’re sweatin’ our asses off, breakin’ our backs to fill sandbags,” Mopar said, shaking his head in admiration. “Tiger ain’t done a lick of work in his life, and he’s a damn sight happier than we’ll ever be.”

Tiger perked his ears forward at the mention of his name, but he didn't bother to move—not even when Gonzales scooped a shovelful of sand from beneath his tail.

“It ain't that he can't dig—hell, I've seen him throw more dirt than a backhoe when he wants to bury a bone. But that was fun, and this is work. And Tiger, he don't never confuse the two.”

Mopar tilted his shovel over the empty sandbag that Marvel was holding open for him, dumping

the sand half in the bag and half over Marvel's hands.

"Next time around, I'm puttin' in to come back as a dog. They might not live as long as we do but they have more fun, and I can see the advantages of a shorter tour of duty."

Marvel brushed the sand off his hands and wiped them on his pantlegs. He'd been in the Airborne Infantry for five months and in the Lurp platoon for five and a half now, but he was just getting where he could listen to this talk about short tours without getting depressed, or pissed off and nervous. But he still wasn't to the point where he could hear too much of it and keep smiling. He was determined to live to be a hundred and six years old, topping his grandfather by twenty years to make up for his father's early death, and he would have felt a great deal safer if everyone on the team shared his lofty ambition. It was dangerous and foolish to talk about the advantages of a short tour of duty. But as he'd already pointed that out to Mopar at least a dozen times without effect, he contented himself with a frown and a grunt of disapproval. Mopar refused to admit that it was unlucky to make jokes about short tours and reincarnation, so there was nothing for Marvel to do but change the subject before it brought him down.

"Hey Sarge," he said, grinning over at Wolverine, who was holding sandbags for Gonzales, "I may be wrong, but it seems I remember you saying we'd spend ninety percent of our time in the field. Now, I can take an exaggeration as well as the next man, but here it's been two weeks and we haven't gone out yet. It isn't safe back here, and it's even less safe on radio relay—and while I think the field's generally pretty safe, I don't like going out on someone else's team."

Wolverine tied shut the sandbag Gonzales had just filled and tossed it onto the pile with one hand. He'd been trying to get two more men to fill out the team. He'd begged Pappy Stagg to break up one of the other teams—preferably J. D.'s team, because they all seemed to be good men—and he'd even offered to go recruit some new men into the platoon. But all Pappy ever did was say "Patience. You've got to have patience," and follow up with the suggestion that he use the dead time to train the men he already had.

Wolverine wiped his forehead with his sweat rag.

"We haven't been half-stepping these last few weeks, you know. We just about got our immediate action drills down, and as soon as I can convince you that slackmen aren't supposed to carry radios, we'll be ready for anything. I've run a four-man team before, and I can do it again."

Wolverine had tried to persuade Pappy Stagg to let him go with the team he had. Four men could move faster and quieter than six could, and Pappy Stagg knew it, but didn't want to admit that he did, citing the Table of Organization and Equipment of a Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol team, which specified six men.

Marvel smiled. He tied the sandbag that Mopar had just filled and lifted it to the top of the pile. He wasn't as strong as Wolverine was and didn't want to risk a dislocated shoulder tossing sandbags around, so he used both hands. He had to suppress a giggle at the vigor with which Mopar jumped in

the debate on his side.

“Bullshit! You can’t put the blame on Marvel for walking slack with a radio and then turn around and say we can go as a four-man team!”

Wolverine hadn’t intended to blame Marvel, and he couldn’t imagine how Mopar had come to that conclusion, but he kept his mouth shut and let Mopar rave on, because it was best to let things come out. He didn’t want Mopar to go off into a full-blown snit.

“I’m the ATL, right?” Mopar tapped his own chest with his index finger and favored Wolverine with a defiant stare so righteous and fierce Wolverine had to turn his face to keep from laughing.

“I’m the ATL, and I walk point, right? ATLs don’t often walk point, but I don’t hear you saying anything about that. Marvel might be a silly gook most of the time, but he’s good in the field, and I don’t want no one else walkin’ my slack or carrying the radio! We got four men only because you can’t round up anyone else, and unless you want me to strap a radio on Tiger and have him bark in our situation reports, you better just lay off Marvel. It ain’t his fault we only got four men, but you sound like he’s trying to hog things!”

Marvel giggled, Gonzales spat, and Wolverine shook his head but didn’t bother to defend himself because he, too, was hot, and tired, and bored with sandbags, and didn’t trust his own temper.

“You want to take Marvel’s radio away, then you can give it to Tiger for all I care!”

Once again Tiger perked his ears, but this time it wasn’t at the mention of his name. He lifted his head off his forepaws, glanced off in the direction of the operations bunker, and wagged his tail lazily. Pappy Stagg was coming down to the chopper pad with a clipboard and sealed manila envelope in his hands, and behind him, on the drive beneath the bunker, stood the Two Shop major’s jeep, although the major himself was nowhere to be seen. Tiger stood up slowly, shook the sand off his coat, and trotted off to meet Pappy and escort him down to the chopper pad.

Pappy looked at the pile of sandbags and nodded his approval, then glanced at his clipboard and frowned.

“You hoodlums think you’re ready for a mission?” he asked, and immediately everyone threw down his shovel or dropped his sandbag and turned expectantly to hear the good news.

Pappy Stagg had to smile. He knew he had a good crew in this platoon. Sure, they didn’t care too much about shaving and breaking starch, but they were good field troops, and that’s what really counted.

“Now this team leader of yours ...” Pappy rolled his eyes in Wolverine’s direction. “... He’s been bugging me all week to get you bums out in the field—feeding me so much bullshit about how sharp you are I was goin’ to have him arrested for false reporting. But the lieutenant wouldn’t go along with me on that, so here we are.”

He handed the manila envelope to Wolverine.

“Now the TO and E of a Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol team is six men, and don’t you bun

go writin' home tellin' your mothers I'm sending you out understrength, 'cause it wasn't my idea. But Staff Sergeant Wolverine here assures me you can handle it, and the major wants a team, so it looks like you're going."

Pappy Stagg shrugged helplessly and shook his head.

"May the mothers of America forgive me!" he said, while Marvel giggled, Gonzales nodded, and Mopar rubbed his hands in anticipation.

"There's a map and some aerial photos in the envelope, and Sergeant Johnson will have your codebooks and commo information as soon as he gets back from the relay site. Now you better get your move-on—overflight is set for 1700 hours, and insertion is first light tomorrow, so get your shit in order."

He looked down at his wristwatch, and Tiger cocked his head and perked his ears and stood at full alert because he knew what it meant when Pappy Stagg glanced at his watch.

"All right, move on out!" Pappy Stagg barked, and Tiger took a frisky leap to the side and pawed the ground in delight. "I said a *four-man* team! The dog stays here!"

Mopar, Marvel, and Gonzales sprinted off to return the shovels and extra sandbags to supply, and Tiger the Lurp Dog bounded along behind them, then raced merrily on ahead, hoping someone would chase him.

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