

The Major Won the Croix de Guerre

The Major won the Croix de Guerre...

Paaaaaaaaaarlez-vous?

The Major won the Croix de Guerre...

Paaaaaaaaaarlez-vous?

The Major won the Croix de Guerre,

But the sonuvabitch was never there...

Hinky dinky parlez-vous?

--World War One trench song

It is the curious duty of an officer in war to impress the stamp of human will on the random array of nature and event and not infrequently to disregard or even disdain the driving surge of fact and certainty which could forestall action. But to impose will is not to impose order. You can beat the odds, but you can't change them. Sheer dogged, dumb, blind, human obstinacy--*grit* we might call it--can often countervail the insistency of a real and physical world, of the genuine and relentless momentum of destiny. To do so, of course, an officer must galvanize the inevitable inertia of those he would lead... often by taking that *first* step first out beyond safety's embrace. Follow me! Just to shatter that illusion of limit or circumscription or perimeter to the designs of human passion. This precarious imposture is precisely what makes soldiers follow leaders beyond reason—beyond reason—and what

implants in soldiers a contempt evermore—contempt evermore—for reason and her haloed scowls and her stern guardians and acolytes. Yet an insidious affinity has established itself, a perilous equation between will and intellect and in turn between intellect and order. Order, we know now, makes armies run. But, oh, it is *disorder* that makes them win! The best officers scorn Logic, Fact, Method, System. And the others? Well...

"Putain dgieu de merde de bordel de dgieu de merde de bordel de dgieu de merde de merde et merde!" Nhiao-A, the montagnard platoon sergeant, lets loose his best string of genuine strung-together French invective, then punctuates it with a Vietnamese: "dix mille fois!" This singing indictment of divine justice, Nhiao has picked up from some *tirailleur colonial* in the 50's: the savory art of expletive, wherein all the dark terror and somber joy of a soldier's life commingle brutally: God, shit, whore. "Nomdedgieu," he spits once again, though the "god" whose "name" he thus invokes he knows not at all. What he does know is that the *bou mis*, the two Big Dumb Americans, have buried a deuce-and-a-half up to its hubs in the muddy track that snakes from the 'Yard Camp down to the training range. Steinhagen, my buddy, sits in the cab, mashing remorselessly on the accelerator and frantically slamming gears in and out, reciting the same litany as Nhiao but in Anglo-Saxon: "Goddam it, you whore! ...shit!" The big truck, all six drive wheels engaged, shudders, sidles, lurches, slings fetid black mud in all directions, but sticks fast in her syrupy wallow.

"Sonuvabitch!" Steinhagen roars, revs up the diesel to a high pitched, sniffling whine,

flings the shift lever back and forth, stomps on the clutch. Raaaaaaaaaaa-
oooooooo! Winds her up. Ga-lunk! Back she drops into the sinkhole.

"Sonuvabitch!" Up to my knees in the slime, I lay a shoulder halfheartedly against the massive iron bumper while mud gushes up from under the wheels, coating me from head to foot with the slick ooze. 14 montagnards, one-half section of the 11th Airborne Raider Battalion (Indigenous), jostle each other for a fugitive purchase on the monster. We all shove, more or less in unison.

Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-oooooooo! Ga-lunk! "Sonuvabitch!" "Turn it off!" I shout. The motor chugalugs to a stop. We all clamber out of the hole, soaked in mud, gasping, stinking, steaming now under a noonday sun. We flop down on the bank, stare at the defiant beast sunken into the mire, primal mud sucking at her swollen feet.

In a minute or so, the sun begins to bake the mud. We lie there, flat on our backs, sheathed in a chrysalis that crackles and flakes if we move, and we soak up heat and radiance and peace and forgetforgetforget... Till I feel a brooding shadow steal across my face. I pop open my eyes, squint through the brilliant light, see a head backlit above me, a great swollen, neckless face from whose puffy contours two immense ichthyoidal eyes peer down with unspeakable disdain. I crane my neck backward, try to identify this intruder into the tranquility of our moment: it's Greunwald, the Raider Battalion Exec. Now, everyone knows that an Executive Officer has no job, no task, no

mission of his own. He freights the scowls, the smiles, the curses of the Commander out among the troops, chiding this one, upbraiding that one, correcting another, doomed endlessly and without hope of redemption to parrot the same anodyne, soulless indictments and lusterless lauds to men who already have the job in hand or who have clearly no intention of taking it in hand: "Good work there, men"; "Better check that alignment there, men"; "Better police that stuff up there, men." A sacral mandate to amble and to stumble and to snoop. To watch where there is no need of watching, to goad where there is no need of goading, to be, in short, where there is no need of being. Some there are, naturally, who have the gift for this sort of thing. So Greunwald. So today our turn. He stands with legs spread, arms akimbo, starched jungle fatigues and stateside insignia, braaaaaaaaaaand new jungle boots, spitshined. A great, burly, barrel-chested specter, with a basketball head set onto broad but sagging shoulders. Red face, red hair, red mustache.

Steinhagen and I try to figure out who is senior and therefore in charge of this mess. I stand up. Greunwald harumphs and snuffles through his mustache.

"Got her stuck in the mud, eh, trooper? Poor tactical driving skills."

"Yes, sir."

"You men try putting her in all-wheel drive?"

"Yes, sir."

"Try rocking her back and forth?"

"Yes, sir."

"Try pushing her back out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Try stuffing brush under the wheels?"

"Yes, sir."

Steinhagen has gotten to his feet.

"We already tried everything dumb, sir," he volunteers, smiling helpfully. Greunwald pretends not to hear that. He brings his somewhat circumscribed powers of deduction to bear on the problem.

"Decision-making process," he muses out loud. "Managerial matter. Enlisted men like little children." Then: "You men try a lever to work her out of there?"

"Lever, sir?" We stare, expressionless, at the six tons of steel.

"A lever. Elementary principle. Enlisted men like little children. Oh, hell..."

Greunwald shuffles heavily down the bank, delicately stepping from the grass to the running board of the deuce. We move to follow him.

"Stay away," he barks. "I'll take care of this."

He fumbles around in the cab.

"Tactical ignition, sir. Got to squeeze it."

"I know. I know."

Fumbles around on the dash.

"Starter button under the steering wheel, sir."

"I know. I know."

Engine cranks over, and a searing buzzzzzzzzzz fills the cab.

Greunwald frantically pokes and pulls buttons and switches.

"Air brake warning, sir. Goes off when the system's pressurized."

"I know. I know."

Greunwald throws the shift lever into low, lets out the clutch, floors the accelerator. Big truck shudders and whines, wheels whistle through the mud. We can see the muscles in Greunwald's jaw go taut. Grim determination bursting from his bulbous features. He has set himself the inglorious chore of correcting us, of illuminating us, of suffusing this inert moment of stalled vehicle, stalled activity with the winging spirit of crisp precision and professionalism, pushed perhaps just a

shade further, just a whisker more determinedly, just a touch more insistently into action than we have been able, bridled as we are by our sullen, enlisted passivity. The things we have done, if only done in the right order, to the right measure, with the right fidelity! Then we'd see! The Major buries his foot in that accelerator as if he were trying to break into a new--and airy--dimension.

The rear end responds perversely to the massive torque, shifting wildly sideways but not an inch forward. Resisting, you might say, an ontological impulsion to transcend. Greunwald, pitiless metaphysician, persists. Engine wails, bellowing in protest. Greunwald has seized the steering wheel in two great red fists. More. Harder. More. He has clearly pushed the refractory machine beyond some looming threshold before which Steinhagen and I, out of misdirected and timorous

reverence, have up till now shrunk. Beyond the pale. What lurks?

As if to reply, the vehicle bucks straight up out of the pit, shuddering crazily, all ten wheels off the ground, with the roar of an engine suddenly without load. A long, unearthly moment, she hangs in the air. Greunwald, passenger--pilgrim--hovers on the brink of Discovery. But it is not to be. Down slams the truck heavily--temporized once again--with a clangor of steel slats and sprung fenders. Greunwald has still got his foot jammed to the floor. One set of wheels seems to bite, slewing the vehicle, which now rolls over sideways with a jolt, top end over chassis, tumbling--but slooowly, but laaaangorously, but iiiindolently, but voooooluptuously down, down, and down the slope. The last sight we have of Greunwald is through the split windshield of the deuce, huge paws gripped to the steering wheel, mustache a bristle, eyes popped wide and peering forlornly at the imaginary horizontal about which he turns twice, three times, four times, to land upright, hands still on the wheel, eyes still glued front. In the wake of this maelstrom, the still-quivering truck retrieves its footing. As stillness descends upon the scene, we scramble down the slope to the truck.

"You OK, sir?" asks Steinhagen.

The door swings open, Greunwald, staggers out, peers at us from still goggley-eyes:

"Harumph."

His knees buckle, he bobs back up; they buckle again, he steadies himself.

"Harumph. Hope that will be a lesson to you men," he says, and with a tug at his fatigue blouse to straighten it out, he lurches off unevenly up toward the

camp. Wordless, Steinhagen and I watch him stump drunkenly up the hill. We peer at the deuce, tight-lipped witness to the Major's triumph over the Resistance of Things. We stare at one another. We look at the 'yards. A pall has settled on that languid afternoon. The shadow that awoke me from the Snooze of the Blessed now menaces all of us. It announces in an unearthly, disembodied voice: A dangerous Man! A man who would upend the limpid peace and dear-bought equilibrium of an innocent moment; who would tamper with the primordial forces and immutable decrees of chaos; who would waste the fragile resources of human will for a petty lesson in vanity! And so it is that Steinhagen and I swear together a mighty swear that Greunwald must go.

* * * * *

Doolan and Macomber, on duty in the Commo room, jerk around with the radio teletype rig. In sullen fits, it spits a perforated tape out at them in response to jiggles and thumps and threats and brutal jabs into the somber mystery of its carcass with a bent screwdriver. Macomber remains persuaded that if they dump a Coke down it, things will happen. Doolan wants to smack it again. I pick up a scrap of the tape. Run it through the decoder: WEATHERBY SENDS. He's the Commander.

"GRNWLD EXEC OFF FM COMUSMACV?"

"None other," says Doolan, a paperclip in his lips.

"Did you guys decrypt this?"

"In the file basket."

I pick up the text of the TWX. The Augmentation Commander in Saigon orders Greunwald, Executive Officer of Detachment Central, Kong Tum, I Corps, Vietnam, Republic of, to submit soonest report incremental activity all targets, FGUAO (Friendly Guerrilla Unit Area of Operations: the Ho Chi Minh Trail).

"Did you show this to the Exec?"

"Naaaaaaaa. We've been dicking around with the RTT rig for an hour."

"I'm going back up. Take care of it for you. Log it out, OK? And if

Greunwald asks you to verify, tell him you got a good copy."

"We got a good copy."

"Maaaaaybe not."

I stuff the message into my trouser pocket and find Steinhagen in the club, chewing the label off a beer bottle with his teeth. He reads the TWX.

"So what?"

"You know what 'incremental activity' is?"

"Can't say I do."

"What you bet Greunwald doesn't, either?"

Steinhagen sits upright, hunches his shoulders, swivels his neck: readying for *thought*. Takes a preparatory pull at his beer. This is a not easy for him. I can see him reasoning: "We have text. Greunwald not have text. Text from Commander.

Greunwald obey Commander. We dick with text. We dick with Greunwald!"

Quod erat... Epiphany! Another pull at beer. I say:

"Greunwald doesn't know what 'incremental activity' is. Wonder if he knows what 'excremental activity' is?"

"Hmmm..."

"Let's go see Doolan and Macomber."

For the next few days, Greunwald lays low. We see him in his office, scowling at papers, referring to manuals, scribbling notes. A plan is forming behind that great, smooth, red forehead!

He shows up at the Raider Battalion orderly room one morning, asking for an interpreter.

"Vietnamese or 'yard?" asks the First Sergeant.

"Montagnard," Greunwald corrects.

"Fahey!" shouts the First Sergeant. I come running up. "Go with the Major. He's got a job for your strikers."

"Yes, top!"

I follow Greunwald (one step behind, one step uncovered) across the compound. He has assembled a sheaf of papers which he has compressed onto a clipboard.

"Sergeant," he begins...

"Sergeant. We are tasked by a TWX from Higher Headquarters to complete a study of excremental activity along the target complex."

"Excremental activity, Sir?" I ask, blinking at Greunwald with the sincerity I reserve for Communion.

"Yes. Chief MACV does not articulate his reasons, but we can surmise that it has to do with health and morale conditions along the Trail. Fecal analysis can be most revealing, you know, of dietary problems and that in turn of ration and logistical problems and so on."

"You're going to do a report on shit, Sir?"

"Noooooooooo! I'm not going to 'do a report on shit!' You enlisted men are just like little children. We are engaged in analysis of military intelligence, gleaned from the battlefield. It is our superiority in this sort of thing that is going to win us this war in the end. Now what we must do here is establish what we call in statistics a 'control.' Then we can measure what we find along the Trail. Need something for comparison. Proper accumulation of data. Control set. That's where you come in."

"Going to study our own shit first, Sir?"

Greunwald glares at me, only momentarily interrupting his explanation.

"Now, what I want from your men is to establish this control set. Statistical validity for our study. I want you to set up a gridded area along this side of the wall, number the grids, and cause one man to excrete in each grid. Then we'll photograph, weigh, catalogue, and preserve the samples." I bite my lip. This canard is taking on an alarming momentum. The Major hands me a roll of 550 cord and gestures wordlessly at the laboratory of this adventure in experimental method. We drive short lengths of reinforcing bar into the baked earth, stretch a web of parachute cord across and between them, and tie stiff paper tags on each square: A-1, B-2, C-3 and so on. Then he selects members of the section, logging each man into a grid square, noting his size, age, and

body shape, permitting himself the occasional marginal observation when this man or that man offers what I can only guess is an intriguing profile of excremental potential. Then he orders me to assemble the platoon.

"Tell them that I want each man to defecate in the numbered grid that corresponds to the number I have given him."

I am not certain my French is up to this. The 'Yards, standing in ranks now at parade rest, peer at me earnestly, awaiting the translation. I honestly cannot predict how they will take this. Fill sandbag! Qui, chef. Clean weapon! Qui, chef. Go patrol! Oui, chef. Shit in square! Non, chef. Nonnonnonnonnonnetnon! Gruesome forebodings fill my imagination. I swallow hard.

"Chef dire. Lui vouloir un type-lit [I hold up one finger] chier [sheeee-yay: I say it twice] un carreau-là [I point to one grid square]. Numéro carreau mêmechose [I point to the tags] numéro type-là. Chef dire comme ça."

Silence. Twenty-seven sets of coal-black eyes stare back into mine, expressionless. The first sergeant at last turns around and speaks to them in *so-dang*, their dialect. Animated whispers, waving of arms, agitations of hands. Or is it fists? Evidently there are passionate viewpoints on this matter. Is there a limit, then, to the nonsense they will put up with in the dubious name of Whatever It Is we are doing out here? Even Greunwald harumphs with an unaccustomed malaise. Finally, the montagnard first sergeant spins on his heel and announces:

"Z'ef! Type-là pas moyen chier. Venir quand venir."

"What's that?" asks Greunwald, strain etching his voice a little.

~

"What's that?"

"Sir, he says that they can't do it just any old time. Happens when it happens. "

"Well, then. Tell them to fall into their barracks and... harumph, well... when 'it happens,' to come out and use the grid. Long as it takes. Want the grid filled. Tell them that."

"Yes, Sir."

And so the section retires to the shade of the tin-roofed barracks to lounge in glorious leisure till nature stirs them. I slink over into the Team House, suck up Coke and occasionally sneak back out to check the grid, now shimmering sullenly under a midday sun. And though I catch no human activity, I do see upon each subsequent inspection the small squares filling up, by ones and twos, here and there, at random as first this man and then that fulfills the Major's mandate, the amphitheater of this investigation into primal causes, where the sad little heaps of shapeless human soil gradually fill in a row, resembling nothing so much as an immense bingo card: C-4, B-4, A-4, D-4, E-4! Do we have a winner?

At day's end, Major Greunwald jeeps back into the compound with a dispirited little Spec 4 he has pressed into service for this project. I watch the apprentice carefully photograph, then scrape each sample into a small specimen bottle as Greunwald logs commentary into a notebook. Soon the grid is emptied and the Exec and his amanuensis en route back to FOB with their harvest. Next

day, Standing Orders are emended to direct all field-deployed detachments, Priority One, to seek out and retrieve samples of fecal matter in the operational area. This directive is, naturally, a source of great hilarity among my buddies, who gleefully scoop up and repatriate vast quantities of dung, scat, offal, effluent, and excrement from every unhappy creature indigenous to that lousy jungle: bird, cat, rodent, ruminant, and of course human being. "Shit for the Major," is the order of the day, duly smooched into the regulation specimen bottles, duly logged with ten-digit coordinates, date-time group, weather condition, and on and on, and then soberly delivered to the Major's office, there to join a burgeoning collection of "samples" which Greunwald studies with the intensity of a passion for the task thoroughly done and in proper order and with the assurance that system, once ordained, will prevail: "Chinese," reads one entry I recall. "Mustard yellow and semiliquid consistency, mean weight 16.3 grams." He scribbles sheaves of notes, scratches out long passages, refines his prose, dismissing the smirks and giggles of watching troopers with a harumph of paternal indulgence: "Enlisted men! Like little children."

Mid-afternoon three days later. A quivering languor has settled over the camp. It's pot time, the daily break while the sun is at its blistering zenith. Humming of flies. Heat waves corrugating a wispy horizon. Slouched down against a pile of sandbags, I pretend to clean my weapon, poking heavyheartedly a cleaning rod in and out of the bore with slow, voluptuous strokes, lids lowered,

a whisker... away... from... Suddenly: wham! wham! wham! A series of sharp explosions pops me awake. I jerk upright, start to run, slam into a wall, pick myself back up and lurch off in the direction of the reports. A batch of us arrive at the same time: Greunwald's office. The first couple of guys on the scene burst in through the door, then recoil choking and fanning wildly as a wave of unspeakably foul air envelops all of us. Another explosion. And another. We suck in the acrid, stinging, nauseating odor of human waste. Grabbing gas masks from the nearest bunks, we plunge into the swirl of dust and stench. Then we see what has happened: in the blazing heat, the gasses released by the Major's decaying "specimens" have expanded and begun to shatter the glass bottles! The room--no less than its occupant--is coated with a glistening, stinking, amber sheen of excrement. Greunwald, apparently knocked senseless in the initial explosion, has staggered to his feet, soaked and reeking, his fatigue blouse blotched with dark stains. Here and there clinging lumps of his once-glorious "control set" speckle his puffy features. Dazed, he peers wistfully at the ruins of his "laboratory," at the sheaf of papers that was his "analysis," now puddled with the object of said study, calmly seeping from chapter to subsequent chapter in sodden testimony to his achievement.

We drag Greunwald out of the office, as others and still others of his "data" shatter the specimen bottles to merge with the stomach-churning cloud of dust and stench now billowing out into the compound. Whap! Pop! The Major

weaves slightly on his feet, flinching reflexively as each new explosion reconfirms the disaster. Pow! Wham! Gradually he finds himself at the center of a widening circle of silent onlookers, who edge farther and farther back as the smell from his saturated fatigues wafts outward. Pop! Pap! Blam! Wordless, disoriented, mouth lolling agape, knees pudically pressed together, arms drawn in against his chest, he stands riveted, a small child ringed by gawking schoolmates on the playground. From one ear dangles fitfully a loop of string with its tag: D-4.

* * * * *

If you spread your hand out, wide out, the distance from thumb to little finger covers about eleven kilometers on a 1:50,000 scale tactical map, the approximate range of a 105mm field gun. Combat officers have a habit of plopping a soiled hand across the operations room map like that. To see if the fire base can support their operation. To see if they are operating outside the fire-support fan. To judge risk. To devise strategy. Greunwald--who has never seen combat--loves to splay his thick red fingers across the tactical maps in the Operations Center. He dreams grandiose dreams of flinging his battalion far behind enemy lines, of scoring daring coups with his raiders, of "bringing the enemy to his knees," as he will say, "by denying him the use of his rear." On such occasions, his eyes will glaze as if fixed on distant battlefield vistas and a *harumph!* of suppressed desire will sometimes well up from deep inside him, gurgling like the gush of oil struggling up from deep inside a lie of petro-shale.

So it is that under the spell of this wistful ambition, Major Greunwald succeeds in persuading the Old Man to let him conduct what he names ominously a S.L.A.M. (Search, Locate, Annihilate, and Monitor, as he later reveals to those of us chosen to share the adventure with him). His plan is to dump a "kick-ass detachment," or so he lordly announces in his briefing, onto a main artery of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and block traffic. "We'll dig in on the road at night. By dawn we'll have trucks backed up from here to Hanoi." Gestures vaguely at the map. Greunwald peddles this concept with such vigor that one morning two weeks after the Major's briefing, the RTT spits out an operations order tasking A Company, 11th Airborne Raider Battalion (Indigenous) to "take up a blocking position along the LOC [Line of Communication] designated 538 and detain, deny, or destroy all vehicular traffic attempting to negotiate said LOC."

Steinhagen and I are stuffing C-rations into our rucks. Loading magazines. Cammying up. Steinhagen is grouching: "By dawn we'll have trucks backed up all the way to Hanoi! By dawn we'll have every Nguyen, Dinh, and Dong who can carry a piece down there to blow us off that roadblock." We fall out the Company on the chopper pad, and as the lumbering, thup-thupping H-34's set heavily down, Major Greunwald strides out in full panoply: sunglasses, shoulder holster, and the shiniest, newest, unfiredest M-16 we have ever set eyes on. The sections clump over to the aircraft, sagging under the exceptional load of ammo and grenades. I squeeeeeze through the hatch and crash down onto the deck of one chopper with a clatter of canteens, smoke grenades, bandoleers,

magazines, strobe, Kabar, radio, ration cans, and extra batteries like a trout in a fishing creel, flopping helplessly around. Greunwald appears in the doorway and from a great, meaty red fist drops a chainsaw onto my chest. "For my bunker," he announces, then disappears as the big Sikorsky heaves, roars, grunts, and is airborne.

Down on the jungle floor, we have no trouble locating the "artery": it's forty feet wide, crowned, and flanked by foot-deep drainage ditches. Machine-maintained, heavily-traveled, *recently*-traveled . Some trail! The 'Yards set to planting mines and digging in on both sides. Greunwald beckons to me and Steinhagen, points out into the jungle behind the roadblock. "My bunker. Two hundred meters that way. Two feet overhead cover. Before dark." Sullen, we snag the montagnard platoon sergeant, and the three of us cut off into the jungle with the chainsaw and our entrenching tools to dig the Major in.

We sweat, we puff, we grunt, we curse under the steaming, oppressive canopy to hack out a six-by-six in the fetid, black, root-tangled soil. Each slice of the E-tool into the fragrant ground sends up a sweet exhalation, the breath of the jungle. Bathed in sweat, gasping from exertion in that heat, we suck at a canteen and then lie back onto the cool, damp diggings to gaze up at the thatch of vegetation overhead. Oblique shafts of sunlight pierce the dense foliage, intersecting at crazy angles to illuminate odd-shaped patches of leaf-strewn, overgrown earth.

Steinhagen rises up painfully, hand to the small of his back: "OK. Overhead." We amble through the timber, lugging the chainsaw, thumping trees

to cut for the Major's overhead cover. Nhiao, the chef de section, knows all the local wood types. "Pas bong, z'ef," he hisses, thumping now this trunk, now that.

"Pas bong, ce'ui-là": "Him no good." Absently, I point to a tree with coarse, grayish, shingles of bark, about eight inches in diameter, more or less straight.

"Moyen ce'ui-là?" I ask, trying to help: "How 'bout this one?"

"Paspaspaspaspaspas bong, z'ef," comes the reply: "Veryveryveryveryveryvery bad, sar'n." Piqued--and bored--I use a word I have learned only to utter with circumspection: "Pou'quoi?" Why? Nhiao walks over to the tree, balls a gnarled brown fist, and thwacks the trunk. A fat, wriggling shape drops to the ground with a plop! Then another: plop! Steinhagen and I look down at the things.

Centipedes. "Brak drahak," corrects Nhiao, citing the local name for them.

"Bestiole beaucoup salope-là. Piquer toi, toi beaucoup mal le chien." "Nasty critter," that is: "Bite you and you get sick as a dog." Steinhagen pounds one of the trees. Plop! Plop! Plop! Two or so inches long, striped orange and purple unlikely enough, these little guys sport long rows of wiggly legs and two pincers at what we guess is the head. Nhiao points to the pincers, then spreads his calloused hands around his leg: make you swell up. Steinhagen nudges one of the plump, coiled sausages with the toe of his boot; in a wink, it uncoils and strikes with the pincers. Aggressive little buggers!

He looks up at me. A magical moment. A smile of ineffable and beatific satisfaction spreads slowly across Steinhagen's sweat-caked face. I feel the salt and filth dried on my own features crack as they mirror that unashamed, imbecile grin. Greunwald! Greunwald must atone with the forces of the earth. Greunwald

must placate the nature he has presumed to reorder. Greunwald, who would spurn the insistency of the real--of the irretrievably real--and hurl feeble human beings against actuality, must pay! Death in combat is not inevitable. Boredom, brutality, shame, imbecility, fatigue, banality are ! Greunwald, who will not respect degree, the delicate equilibrium of men at the precipice, must expiate!

Greunwald, who wants to be *of* the fight but not *in* the fight, must redeem his insolence. Greunwald! The montagnard cannot fathom why the discovery of this annoying little beast should so tickle the two big dumb *bou mis*.

Chainsaw! Gloves! To work! Gingerly we line the bunker with sections of trunk from these trees, being oh-so-careful not to dislodge any brak drahak in the process. We lay longer lengths of the stuff across the top of the hole, then pile and pack the dirt from the hole over them, leaving a small opening to squeeze through. Steinhagen cuts off the sputtering chainsaw just as darkness settles over the arena of this night's activity, and we offer our creation up for Greunwald's inspection with justifiable pride. Greunwald harumphs a grudging "Well done," and stalks off up the trail. He has "other things to do."

About an hour after dark we hear the first truck in the convoy laboring up the hill in low gear. He clears the crest--no lights--turns the sharp bend, and probably spots the roadblock just as his right front tire springs the mine. Ba-whooom! Tire blows off, sailing somewhere up into the night sky to come crashing down through the jungle canopy off the road with a racket of snapping branches and parting vines. We can hear it roll off into the bamboo. Down the road a kilometer or so: ba-whooom! One of our squads has blown the *last* truck

in the convoy. Doors slam. Drivers jump out, scurrying off into the underbrush in a terror. Now the 'yards run amok, up and down the file of stalled vehicles, joyously despoiling--mostly drums of rice this trip--the cargo beds and setting charges inside the engine compartments. A chain of explosions announces that this phase of our S.L.A.M. is complete. We hunker down into our foxholes, awaiting the inevitable riposte.

We don't have long to wait. Within the hour, we hear bamboo knock and vegetation rustle and the familiar whump! of mortar rounds on the way. The first detonations are wide of the mark. Then the gunners begin to fine tune and scour the perimeter beyond the roadblock. At the first explosion, Greunwald has lit out like a banshee for his bunker, from which site, we suppose, he is howling into his radio for tactical air support, and remembering ruefully that hand splayed out across the map with its ominous portent. Steinhagen and I squooch down into the damp earth, bury our faces in it, wriggle and writhe as incoming rounds chew up the dirt around us and explode in the trees, showering our backs with fragments. We can hear Nhiao from the other side of the perimeter: "Putain dgieu de merde de bordel de dgieu de merde de merde et merde... dix mille fois!" After a while, the intruders expend their initial load and have to hump back for more or wait for somebody to hump it in. Steinhagen and I crawl around to the other positions to check for casualties. No one hit. By common accord we slither back down behind the roadblock to where we have left Greunwald, pausing outside the bunker to listen.

Music! It's a tragic opera in that bunker. An aria, an exquisite, airy ululation of heart's agony rises, thin and wispy. We can hear thumps and crashes, grunts and slaps, percussive counterpoint. Now and again--do we really hear it?--a solitary, an ethereal, a divine... plop! Greunwald is at close quarters with the *brak drahak*, who for their part are apparently giving as well as they get. The swatting and slapping reaches a fever pitch. We can hear the Major slamming them in the darkness with the butt of his M-16, clomping them with the heels of his jungle boots, pummeling them with those great red fists. But he won't get out of that bunker. And still they come: plop! plop! We listen, breathless, in the darkness for minute after exquisite minute, not daring to move, savoring the symphony. Now and then a pause, as both adversaries regroup, the silence punctuated by heart-rending *harumphs* of anguish. Then back to the bashing and plopping. Ecstasy. But all things end. The mortars let go again, and Steinhagen and I skitter back to our hole to burrow into the darkness. There, side-by-side, huddled together in the night, breathing in a common rhythm, we bear aloneallalone the ageless solitude of soldier's fear.

For two days we remain in contact, doused with mortars and RPG's, raked with 12.7 mm fire from another hilltop a kilometer distant, scrambling in and out of our foxholes, desperately directing air strikes all around us, patching up wounded men as best we can between barrages. Steinhagen, catches an 82mm fragment right in top of his head. It bounces off his thick skull but parts the flesh, sending rivulets of blood down his face. Howling and cussing, he tries to slug me while I sit on his chest and swaddle a dressing around his head in the dark only

to wind up wallpapering his eyes and winding it across his mouth. "Thonuvabith!" he spits out through the gauze.

In the flushing sunlight of the third morning: silence. They have got tired of messing with us and have diverted their traffic along some other leg of the trail. We can hear the trucks running a kilometer or so away. Here, though, we have the jungle to ourselves and stand in dubious glory astride Route 538. The gutted chassis of six 1948 Chevrolet stake and platform trucks bear wordless testimony to our "interdiction." We lug our casualties out to an LZ, booby trap our roadblock, and--at long, long last--fish Major Greunwald out of his bunker. A great, bulky, ballooning tomato, he emerges into the daylight. His red skin crosshatched with scratches and welts, face bulging out in grotesque excrescences, fingers swollen and puffy, he lolls vacantly in an improvised stretcher, sucking in glucose through the clear feed tube of an IV draining a wrinkled plastic packet one of the 'yards holds overhead as the medic, biting his lip, thumbs in vexation through his manual in search of a classification for this particular injury: "anaphylaxis," he settles on, scribbles out a toe-tag, and waves the litter off in the direction of our extraction LZ.

A week later, the Battalion stands at attention as the Commander reads out a citation for the Bronze Star and Purple Heart Medal awarded to Major Ernest T. Greunwald, 045-35-4675, 11th Airborne Raider Battalion (Indigenous), Vietnam, Republic of, this 25th day of November, 1968, for heroism shown and wounds received in ground combat during protracted operations in denied and enemy-controlled territory. The Major, his face still distorted from swelling, his

legs still unable to support him without crutches, his skin now painted in bizarre, swirling patches of a bluish ointment, erks and harumphs his gratitude. He will, he announces on this proud occasion, be going down to Saigon where, evidently as a result of impact produced by his seminal Report of Excremental Activity along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and his bold and personal execution of the S.L.A.M., he has been assssssssumed into the bosom of that enormous, churning operations complex, an appropriate theater for the deployment of his gifts and vision. There, with the willing complicity of computers and graphs and readouts and charts, amid the comforting companionship of Order, Method, Efficiency, and Consistency, removed from the sordid world of Things That Happen, Greunwald will spend this war, tranquilly dreaming dreams and gathering patiently... data!

Out on the East wall of the compound that afternoon, filling sandbags with a dozen 'yards under a cloudless sky, we plump down the heavy sacks, Steinhagen and I, smeared with sweat and sand, warmed by a benevolent radiance of sun and survival once again. We peer off into the distance, toward Kong Tum, where a C-130 is lumbering off the strip, nosing South. Greunwald. Steinhagen takes off his salt-stained patrol cap, fingers gingerly the spikes of sutures along the top of his head. The 'yards point and chatter among themselves in *so dang*, which even after all these months I cannot understand, though this day its seems to me they are whispering to each other "brak drahak." I heft another sandbag, toss it to Steinhagen, who plants it on the wall with a whump! "Enlisted men," he spits. "Like little children."

