



CHAPTER 1

SECRET ORDERS

Lieutenant Colonel Tuttle, the commander of all Special Forces in the IV Tactical Corps of South Vietnam, spoke in a whisper, “Dan, if you take command of A-424 and accept this TOP SECRET mission, you’ll be on your own. When you leave this room, it will be as if we never met. We can’t and won’t stand behind you if you are caught doing what I am about to tell you to do. Got it, Captain?”

It was a sobering moment as together we looked out across the border from our command bunker toward the enemy’s Cambodian Sanctuary. There a 2,400 man Viet Cong Regiment stood poised to attack our irregular forces who manned outposts and ambush sites all along that common border. It was 18 June 1966. Though outnumbered and outgunned by the Communists, we knew from past victories that we could defend the thirty kilometer stretch of border and maintain a secure area for our 64,000 people — if the enemy were our only concern.

Major Phoi Van Le and I, emotions temporarily masked, stood silent on either side of the .50 Caliber machine gun whose octagonal barrel pointed out over the defenses of our special operations camp and toward the Cambodian border.

Today was profoundly different from the previous times, ushering in an experience that would be forever seared into the very fabric of our wartime recollections. Major Le, my Vietnamese counterpart, was a courageous and truly stoic leader of men and a veteran of eighteen years in combat. I held him up as a five foot five equal to my film hero, John Wayne. “For the first time,” he told me, “I fear what might happen in An Phu.”

It was a fact he was not proud of, but it was the truth that he shared unashamedly with me as he would a brother. We had achieved that degree of closeness. Major Le was one of those rare leaders who had always stood tall, had never wavered from honorable conduct nor backed away from danger. He had always led his men into battle and was known for doing what he could to safeguard noncombatants whenever possible who had trusted him for their safety and security. For a brief period he was understandably unsure and perhaps most distraught by the thought he might no longer be capable of protecting the people of An Phu.

Why such a momentous shift in confidence? Just two days prior I had ordered CIA Agent Walter MacKem to leave my camp and he had left showing his anger at what I'd done, even threatening retribution, shouting "You can't fight the system, Captain, because you can't win."

It was the 20th of June 1966 when Major Le and I together pondered the situation and our alternatives. Only moments before we had received word from one of our agents in the Province Capital of Chau Doc that a heavily armed 1500 man ARVN Regiment with US advisors was being assembled immediately in front of our B Team compound in preparation for an attack on our camp. US Navy LCU's that would bring them, with their massive firepower, up the Bassac River to attack our camp, formed what seemed an endless line of vessels waiting their turn to load their deadly cargo. Major Le turned toward me, reached out and we shook hands. Both of us were very much aware that our time together could now be short. It was time for a miracle and I prayed for just that. Major Le looked into my eyes as he liked to do when he was real serious. "I hope our emissary from the Hoa Hao people reaches General Dang in time to stop the slaughter." Tears welled in his eyes. I'd never seen Major Le cry, but I knew he loved his men and that his real concern was that others would suffer, even die at the hands of the ARVN troops.

"And I hope General Dang is on our side," I returned, not knowing the General or his loyalties as well as Major Le. As military advisor to the Hoa Hao Central Council, he had collaborated with General Dang on military matters in the past.

Major Le glanced at me, smiling weakly, "Of that I have no doubt, Dai-uy. No doubt at all."

I would never have believed that when I gave my oath to defend our country, the US bureaucracy would turn full-force and order the death of my team and those whom we were there to help. It was shocking testimony to what can be a hidden danger in covert operations. What appeared to be truly catastrophic events threatening to engulf and destroy us came to pass because I stood my ground for what I truly believed to be the right and honorable course of action while going against the unconscionable dictates of the CIA. Those final, tense days now seem almost unreal, but they were indeed real and are relived in these pages as I unfold the truth I experienced as a 32 year old Green Beret Captain in Vietnam.

Secrecy was demanded during the many months of rigorous guerrilla and counter-guerrilla warfare training. Once we'd passed the acid test and had earned the right to wear the coveted Green Beret, we discussed little of what we'd learned

with family or friends. That secrecy fostered strained relations within family, non-SF friends and wives. When Kate and I exchanged vows in October 1956, I was a 23 year-old Sergeant First Class and a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. We'd first met some seven years earlier at a square dance in Enfield Center, New York. I was sixteen, the stepson of a farmer who had bought a horse from her father when she was 13 years old.

The day President Kennedy was assassinated we were stationed at Yuma Proving Grounds in Arizona. I immediately volunteered for Special Forces, my passion being to earn and wear the Green Beret he had personally authorized. I wanted more than anything to be one of those unconventional warriors he considered as the "elite" within our military.

As the wife of a Green Beret, it would be psychologically heart-wrenching for Kate to be ready at a moment's notice to bid me good-bye, not knowing where the mission was taking me, how long I'd be gone, or what danger was involved. Duty demanded I tell her only superficial "fluff." If and when I could write, those letters were void of even the smallest detail of covert activities, code names or reference to unconventional warfare.

Though Kate knew in general terms where I was during my entire career, it would be twenty years after I earned the Green Beret before I shared with her what I'd actually experienced of an unconventional nature. I hadn't considered the negative mental effect telling the truth would have on her, thinking she would be happy to at last be aware of what being a Green Beret truly meant in all aspects of its secret, unconventional nature. After learning of the dark side of guerrilla warfare, special demolitions, interrogation methods and operations that ignored, even defied the International Law of Land Warfare, particularly assassination and terrorism, Kate was emotionally blown away. One day in the Spring of 1984 she blurted out, "You are **not** the man I married!" and she had never been so right. This way of life, though foreign and distasteful to most, was what made my adrenaline flow as nothing else could.

On 22 December 1965, 64 of us who wore the Green Beret arrived over South Vietnam at 10,000 feet, anxious to get on the ground and join in the counterinsurgency we'd all asked to be a part of. As we approached Saigon's Tan Son Nhut air base in a plush Southern Air Transport jet, we peered out cabin windows and saw flashes of artillery and rocket explosions in the distance, too far to disturb a perfect, though hurried, landing. As the big jet rolled to a stop, we gathered our gear, deplaned and were instantly introduced to the reality of 100 degree heat and high humidity.

A young sergeant from 5th Special Forces Group met us and led with quickened strides for 100 yards to a waiting Army Caribou aircraft. Its two propeller-driven engines were kept running as a load master motioned us up the ramp to the deck where we were told to stow our gear and strap ourselves into the canvas seats. In a few minutes we were airborne and on our way to Group headquarters at Nha Trang, situated 215 miles northeast of Saigon on the South China Sea coast.

Two days earlier I'd said good-bye to Kate and our three girls at the airport outside of Ithaca, New York. I'd also said good-bye to several inches of snow, a bitter wind and 25° temperature. I'd wanted to wave good-bye from my window seat but the swirling snow made it impossible to see the terminal where I knew they would be standing. I hoped that Kate would be safe driving our new Volkswagen Beetle home, some three miles distant, and I knew in my heart that she would take our separation and all that went with it in stride. Ithaca, after all, was where she was born, where we met and were married. If any problems arose while I was away, all of her family lived in the area and I was confident they would look out for her and the girls. The flight from Ithaca to the municipal airport in Fayetteville, North Carolina, was uneventful and the taxi trip to Pope Air Force Base, adjacent to Fort Bragg, quick and pleasant. Base operations personnel at Pope checked me in and quickly led me on board a large Southern Air Transport jet, its engines running and 63 other Green Berets already on board. The CIA played a big part in clandestine activities worldwide and Green Beret troops were routinely flown to various destinations in one of their proprietary airlines' aircraft. It was indeed a plush ride, with gorgeous stewardesses, free drinks, good hot food and a seemingly endless assortment of John Wayne movies.

We landed at Nha Trang Air Base, parked on the blacktop and deplaned into the midst of a scene of furious activity. It was immediately evident, even to the casual observer, that logistical support of all Special Forces (SF) camps in South Vietnam was a demanding and consuming task.

We were shown the mess hall on the way to our transient quarters which weren't fancy but good enough for some shuteye.

At 0700 the next morning, with a hearty breakfast to sustain us, three other officers and myself reported to the briefing room and attended a series of orientations by the Group Commander, Colonel William McKean, and his staff.

We were briefed on logistical support, including emergency air re-supply operations and channels of communication for ordering critical ammunition and other combat support needs by radio to the Logistical Support Center. 5th Group parachute riggers, commanded by First Lieutenant Peter Teasdale, using the SF bundle code¹ system, would drop desperately needed ammunition into the requesting camp's drop zone within a few hours of their request.

Lieutenant Teasdale had served as my assistant S-4 at Fort Bragg and was familiar with the early development of the bundle code system. The code grouped common items such as weapons, ammunition, medical supplies, communication equipment, demolition material, petroleum, rations, and other supplies critical to the mission. Pre-rigged quantities of each bundle were then placed in isolated storage areas with parachutes attached. Each bundle's three digit code, readily transmitted by Morse code or using one time message pads, made it simple and quick to get the right thing to the right place at the right time.

The Intelligence Officer (S-2) was the next briefer. Beginning with a summary of significant activity that had affected SF camps in South Vietnam for the preceding 24 hours, he went on to give us an overview of intelligence operations, a synopsis of the current enemy situation and an experience-based look into anticipated enemy activity. He made us acutely aware of the need for a good intelligence network using local assets available to each SF Camp. He warned us of the danger of buying intelligence based on the numbers reported as potentially rewarding agents for providing useless, even dangerous, exaggerations of enemy location, strength and weaponry.

The S-3 followed. Using a long, wooden pointer with a shiny brass tip, he directed our attention to the locations of SF Camps posted on a floor to ceiling map of South Vietnam. The security classification SECRET was stamped at the top and bottom in big, bold, red letters. He pointed out the seventy-eight CIDG camps, beginning in the north at Khe San, and moving southward. Many camps were located on or near South Vietnam's border with Laos and Cambodia and a lesser number in the interior, extending south to a former French customs outpost at Ha Tien, separated only by a narrow inlet from Cambodia in the Gulf of Siam.

Counting us there were 1,592 SF in country, with most advising approximately 28,200 Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) fighters. Others were leading those 2,300 irregulars assigned to Mike Force units. The CIDG were trained, equipped, and led by Vietnamese Special Forces A Teams, but were paid, housed, fed, supplied and advised by American SF A Teams. Most CIDG personnel, he said, were recruited from local areas to protect and defend their own homes and lands, fighting the Viet Cong insurgents and North Vietnamese regular forces that attacked their area. The program included ethnic Cambodians, members of the Buddhist Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects, ethnic Chinese and the mountain tribal warriors known collectively as Montagnards. He took the time to tell us of the unique nature of the Mike Force. They were equipped as a mobile reaction force with certain of their units on stand-by and available around the clock to go to the aid of SF camps in real danger of being overrun. All Mike Force units were commanded by American Green Berets. In addition, a total of 28,800 Regional Force and Popular Force paramilitary soldiers operating in certain areas under Group control were advised by SF personnel. He stressed the importance of reports: The Monthly Operational Summary (MOPSUM), Situation Reports (SITREPs) and Spot Intelligence Reports (SPOTREPs). Every report was reviewed at Group headquarters to make sure that Group staff knew what was going on out in the field. Timely and accurate reports were essential to the task of developing sound plans for logistical support of unconventional operations in the field throughout South Vietnam. By pin-pointing enemy activity in each team area they could better place close air support and medical evacuation resources on stand-by at locations within range of those camps most likely to require emergency assistance.

He paused to sip from a glass of water on the podium, asked that we hold our questions until the briefing was over and told us he'd then be in the back of the

room to answer any questions that remained. The Civil Affairs Officer (S-5), responsible for civic action and psychological warfare operations, was next to brief. He engaged us in an energetic, challenging and thought-provoking mental walk through those areas his office managed and supported, with particular emphasis on the importance of winning the hearts and minds of the people. He inspired with his enthusiasm and helped us to understand why at least half of our team effort on the ground must involve civic action projects and psychological warfare activity if we were to succeed. "For many years," he told us, "the Saigon government had been insensitive to the needs and aspirations of the Montagnards, Hoa Hao and Cao Dai Buddhist Sects and ethnic Cambodians. As a result, little if any loyalty to the Saigon regime existed among the people in these groups. All together," he explained, "they made up the majority of the rural population, but lacking a patriotic spirit, were fair game for Communist propaganda." One of our major challenges would be to help lessen and gradually set aside government apathy, and in some cases, open hostility toward these groups. He explained how most civic action programs would be developed by our A Team members working with their South Vietnamese Special Forces (LLDB) counterparts, local village leaders and district officials. They would initially determine the realistic needs of the people and assess the capability of local government and SF to satisfy those needs determined to be critical. Programs included bridge, school and dock construction, road building and medical patrols. SF medics were easily the most appreciated men in the operational A teams because they were out in the district on a daily basis, even into the smallest hamlets, easing pain and suffering among the local people, particularly children and the aged. All of what the teams did for and with the people helped to develop trust and foster the loyalty needed to count them as our friends in the struggle against the Communist insurgency. "Trust is earned and loyalty follows," he emphasized, "An important function of each A Team member is to then attempt to redirect that loyalty to the Vietnamese government. No easy task," he concluded, "but you best keep that first and foremost in your minds. We will all be gone back home some day and the worst thing we could do would be to leave a vacuum." He then introduced the Adjutant and stepped down.

The man each of us was anxious to hear from and who would tell us where we were going — now stood facing us, smiling and holding a number of personnel folders in his hand. Every SF Captain worth his salt hoped to command an A Team and I was no exception! At the same time, I thought my fate was sealed, that I'd have to stay in Nha Trang and work in the LSC due to my logistics background. At 32, I was the oldest Captain in this group, and I was pleasantly surprised when he called me up front, handed me a set of orders, and informed me I'd be going to Can Tho in the IV Corps Tactical Zone. He told me to report to Colonel Tuttle, the C Team commander. He directed me to the flight operations center where I was to ask for the earliest flight to Can Tho.

As I was leaving the briefing area I could hear him tell the remaining officers that they would probably get an A Team if they had combat experience. Knowing

I'd served as a combat engineer Lieutenant during the final days of the Korean War, I sensed that I might yet realize my dream of commanding an A Team.

The flight to Can Tho in an Army Caribou aircraft didn't get off the ground until shortly after lunch on Christmas Eve. Four of us strapped ourselves in canvas seats behind the cockpit, looking out over a cargo compartment loaded with supplies destined for Saigon and Can Tho. My three companions were Green Beret Sergeants on their way home and anxious to share with me some of what they'd experienced. I was treated to personal accounts of the many battles, triumphs and tragedies they'd each survived. They gloried in recounting in vivid word pictures many of the battles they'd fought alongside their irregulars, always emerging victorious, yet bloodied with many combat losses. One sergeant spoke with a slight tremor in his voice of Viet Cong "phantom warriors" who would suddenly appear, as if out of thin air, attack where and when least expected, and then disappear back into a jungle area. He was familiar with the region where he'd wait in ambush for our expected counterattack into the unknown. He was quick to point out that his team was ready for the enemy, the guerrilla warfare training he'd received on Smoke Bomb Hill had paid off. He looked at me, smiled and said, "Dai-uy, we got the job done and we made believers of those Cong."

Dai-uy, pronounced "die we" was Vietnamese for Captain. I'd better get used to that, I thought.. It was now second nature to these men as were other Vietnamese words and expressions they'd picked up working with and fighting alongside the people in their area. I listened intently, wanting to absorb as much as I could to help me get off on the right foot when I got to where I was going.

They each expressed regrets that most of the men coming to Vietnam were conventional soldiers who arrived in country lacking proper training. Because of that, they didn't stand a chance against an elusive, well armed, combat-experienced enemy. Conversation ceased as we began our descent on the approach to Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport. They were eager to get on the ground and it showed. From Saigon they'd board an aircraft for the final leg of the journey home to the States. We taxied to the passenger terminal, allowed the sergeants to deplane, then rolled on to a warehouse area where a pallet load of supplies was quickly pushed down the rear ramp's roller conveyors and on to the ground by the crew.

In less than 20 minutes we were back in the air and flying south over the rice paddy rich Delta area toward Can Tho. By early evening we were descending along a glide path that crossed the mighty Mekong River before touching down on the C Team landing strip. We taxied to a stop. Immediately the rear cargo ramp was lowered and the hot, humid air rushed in. I picked up my gear, walked out on the blacktop and was greeted by the C Team Sergeant Major. A big, burly man with huge, blacksmith-like arms, he grabbed my duffel bag like it was filled with feathers, strode through the main gate, led me past the mess hall and on to the transient barracks. With his free arm he pointed to a two-story wooden building

with a metal roof. "That's headquarters, Dai-uy. Colonel Tuttle's office is up there. The map room and briefing area are just outside his door. The 'old man' will see you at 0800 hours sharp," he shouted.

After leading me through a door into the north end of the transient quarters, he showed me to a small cubicle where he set my duffel bag down just inside. No door to the cubicle, just a bamboo curtain for privacy. Pointing down the hall he told me where to find the shower and latrine. He let me know that the mess hall started serving supper at 1700 hours and that they might have some warm chow left over, suggesting that I'd better "hustle" if I wanted any. He turned to leave, hesitated a moment, stared at me and asked if I was the "Dangerous Dan" he'd heard about from the Group Sergeant Major. I said nothing, just smiled. He scratched his head, grinned, turned and ambled out, muttering something under his breath.

Muffled sounds of distant artillery and rocket fire were audible but the atmosphere in and around the compound was festive, as if there were no war. It was, I remembered, Christmas Eve!

I hurried over to the dining room and arrived in time to be served a hot roast beef sandwich, mashed potatoes, peas and black coffee. It was cooked just the way I liked it, bringing back memories of many similar meals I'd eaten in a Howard Johnson's Restaurant. On our trips home from various stations in the United States Kate and I would stop at Howard Johnson's whenever possible. I always enjoyed their hot roast beef or hot turkey sandwiches and seldom ordered anything else, except for breakfast.

Christmas decorations, including a six foot tree with all the trimmings, made memories of home surface. One of our favorite family things was to cut our tree. The camp kitchen and dining hall doubled as a bar and game room for any American Green Beret that happened by, regardless of rank.

I decided to get a good night's rest before my morning meeting with Colonel Tuttle. Three cups of coffee later, I made my way back to my cubicle. Within minutes I was in between the sheets, the mosquito net tucked securely under the thin mattress, and sound asleep.

I woke at 0700 hours on Christmas Day, sweat oozing from every pore of my body and soaking the flimsy cotton sheets and foam rubber pillow as the penetrating heat and high humidity challenged my entire system.

My mind had embraced the culture, the climate and the time zone change several days before, when I was yet back in the States. It was time now for my body systems to catch up with my thinking. I'd asked to come here. I wanted to be where the action was and I'd heard from others who'd already been down this road just how much the Vietnamese appreciated that we had volunteered to come here to help them. Being flexible and possessing the ability to adjust to changing situations with an open mind and a willing spirit were part and parcel of being a good Green Beret.

A bare light bulb dangling from a rafter just above me came to life and stirred me from sleep. The gruff voice of a duty sergeant reminded me of my early morning meeting with Colonel Tuttle. “He wants you to join him for breakfast in 30 minutes, Dai-uy,” he shouted as he turned and walked out, not waiting for a response.

“Merry Christmas to you too, Sarge,” I hollered out as he left the building and headed back to his duty desk. He’s not in a real Christmas spirit, I thought to myself.

Colonel Tuttle greeted me as I entered the dining area. I echoed his “Good morning” and glanced around. Not another soul was in sight except for kitchen staff. I thought that odd until I noticed the sign above the bar that read “Christmas Breakfast: 0900.” I knew then that Colonel Tuttle wanted privacy for our first face-to-face meeting. We shook hands. I sat down and a young, quite attractive Vietnamese waitress, wearing a spotlessly clean white dress and apron, placed a mug of hot, black coffee on the table in front of me and took my breakfast order: bacon, two eggs over medium, pancakes and toast. I was hungry. Colonel Tuttle had ordered prior to my arriving and was finishing a mug of black coffee. The inviting aroma of bacon filled the room.

I took a moment to study this intense man whom I’d been told was a good field commander. He was lean, stood tall in his chair, appeared stern, and was bald as a ping-pong ball. About an inch shorter than I and somewhat slimmer, his penetrating stare and powerful presence left no doubt that he was in charge here.

I sensed him giving me a similar once-over as the waitress walked away, leaving us to ourselves. Apparently my reputation had preceded me. He said he’d been with Special Forces since 1953 and was surprised our paths had never crossed. He let me know that an old friend of his, Colonel C.W. Patten, had told of my serving as his S-4 in the 6th Group at Fort Bragg. “Said you were tough as nails, could work out of your hip pocket and that you got the job done no matter who or what tried to get in your way.” Having said that, Colonel Tuttle leaned across the table, lowered his voice, grinned and told me that Colonel Patten had told him candidly that I could be very devious if that’s what it took to accomplish a mission.

I knew then and there that he had discussed my modus operandi with Colonel Patten. In Patten’s final written evaluation of my performance as his chief logistics officer in 1965, he used almost those exact words in discussing my attributes that were, as he wrote in the formal report, “well suited for unconventional warfare.”

Looking unflinchingly into my eyes, he let me know that he’d been through my file and that he felt like he knew me, my strengths, my weakness, and where I could best serve him. He said he needed a man like me to command Team A-424 in Camp Dan Nam, northwest of Can Tho in An Phu District. “I’ll fill you in when we get to the secure briefing room after breakfast.” The clatter of plates being placed on the table in front of us signaled the end of conversation.

We ate in silence as my thoughts went back in time to those days I served under Colonel Patten in the 6th Group at Fort Bragg. We had to be devious to provide adequate logistical support to our many Mobile Training Teams deployed in far off countries on secret missions whose very identity and location had to be masked by subterfuge. When using the international mail system or the Embassy and CIA courier services to ship important supplies, even ammunition and demolition materiel, we would list the contents of boxes and cartons to indicate that something relatively bland and harmless, such as canned goods, foul weather clothing, etc. were being sent. There was also the mid-1964 excitement and challenge of my assuming command of a six man team of Green Berets with TOP SECRET contingency missions.

My thoughts returned to the reality of the moment as Colonel Tuttle finished his breakfast, cleared his throat, and asked, "Thinking about home?"

"No Sir," I answered, "just another time, another place."

We filled our mugs with fresh coffee and then he led me out of the dining room and across the compound to his office. As we entered, Colonel Tuttle told the duty sergeant that he wanted total privacy. We were not to be disturbed. The duty sergeant nodded, got up from behind his desk and secured the entrance door. Using a map with several overlays showing friendly and enemy positions, a brass-tipped pointer and a few aerial photos, Colonel Tuttle briefed me on the tactical situation in and around An Phu District. He began with the Phu Hiep Forward Operations Base (FOB) located eleven kilometers northeast of Camp Dan Nam and two kilometers south of the Cambodian border. He pointed out a large enemy support base under construction three kilometers north of the FOB just inside Cambodia. It included a 50 bed field hospital, ammunition and gasoline storage pads, warehouse buildings and sufficient barracks to house a battalion of 400+ men. The "Bung Ven Secret Base," as it was called, was supplied with construction material and war goods through South Vietnam and into Cambodia via the Mekong River on ships of international registry. In Phnom Penh the cargo would then be put on smaller ships headed south on the Bassac River to Prek Chrey where they would enter the Bak Nam River and off load their cargo inside the secret base onto recently constructed docks.

"Within the last six months," he explained, "the VC have taken and occupied an area 1,500 meters deep and 3,000 meters wide between Phu Hiep FOB and the border. It was, in reality, an enemy-controlled buffer zone meant to protect the secret base. More than 5,000 pipe mine booby traps had been set in the dense thickets between the FOB and the Cambodian border. A VC security battalion of an estimated 400 men was quartered in that area to defend water and land approaches to the safe-haven. An NVA antiaircraft gun platoon was recently attached to the battalion to guard against aerial surveillance."

"Why is the enemy allowed to occupy and control that area?" I asked.

He explained that Major Le wisely chose not to clear the area and suffer the loss of many CIDG to booby traps and sniper fire so long as he lacked authority to pursue the enemy into Cambodia where he could force a fight and destroy him. “That’s where you come in Dangerous Dan. I’d like you to take command of Camp Dan Nam and A-424 as an independent operation. Your primary mission will be to take the war into Cambodian territory. You will be the first to do so.” He went on to explain that this was something the CIA had cooked up with Premier Ky. “What we discuss must never leave this room,” he cautioned. I was to give only those specific details to my team that were necessary to accomplish the mission. It would be a “compartmentalized” operation and the B Team would not be privy to any aspect of it. How I handled that situation with the B Team CO would be mine to decide. Keeping distance between us and the use of subterfuge would have to suffice. “If you accept, you are on your own,” he emphasized, “Once you walk out that door, it will be as if we never met. Understand?”

“Yes sir. What about combat support?” I asked.

He went on to let me know what he meant by the fact that I would be on my own. “When you cross that border you lose all support. No air, artillery or reinforcement. Not even medical evacuation. Nothing.” He said.

He went on to describe Major Phoi Van Le, the LLDB Camp Commander, as being “tougher than nails” and a Hoa Hao first and foremost.

I’d read about the Hoa Hao Sect² of the Buddhist religion and had spoken to other Green Berets who had fought alongside the Hoa Haos. They were known to be brave fighters and honorable people.

In a serious tone, Colonel Tuttle told me, that at Major Le’s request, Major Chuan, the LLDB C Team CO met with him and asked that the American Captain commanding the A team in An Phu be sent packing. Tuttle said he referred the matter to Major Arnn for action and Major Arnn reassigned the team leader, bringing him out of An Phu the very next day. “A-424 has been without a commander ever since,” he admitted.

He handed me a copy of the last monthly report from A-424. I saw that the Hoa Hao CIDG consisted of five 132 man companies. Under District Chief control for close fire support was an ARVN 155mm howitzer platoon. Two Regional Force (RF) companies were located in close proximity to the camp and reported to Captain Tuoi, the District Chief who was responsible for governing and protecting the 64,000 citizens of An Phu, who were mostly Buddhists of the Hoa Hao sect.

Thirty kilometers of common border and the Bassac River entry into Cambodia required security. The new TOP SECRET mission would be a real test for all of us. How we handled it, how successful we were in turning the tide of the war in our small area, could make a difference in all of Vietnam.

Colonel Tuttle explained that Major Le, who was also the Military advisor to the Hoa Hao central council, convinced Council Chairman Luong Trong Tuong to meet with Lieutenant General Quang Van Dang, the commander of Military Region IV, and secure the right to hit back at the enemy inside Cambodia. Mr. Luong met with

General Dang who took his request to the Minister of Defense, who then worked out a compromise with Premier Ky and the CIA Station Chief. This resulted in a TOP SECRET independent operational mission status for An Phu. It would be a test case. Major Le had even acquiesced to allow the American Team Leader to be Camp Commander which then gave them the right to pursue the enemy into neutral Cambodia. An Phu would be the first border district to deny the VC their safe havens.

I asked, "Why the secrecy?"

"Politics," he told me. "It seems the White House's official position is that there are no enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia." Without a doubt we both knew that to be a lie. Prince Sihanouk broke diplomatic relations with the US on May 3, 1965, but our State Department was not anxious to do anything that would give Communist China reason to enter the fray.

Ridiculous, I told him. They've been in the fray since day one, supplying weapons to the Viet Cong and the NVA regulars, weapons that were superior to what we provided the CIDG, RF, PF and even ARVN units. There was no argument from Colonel Tuttle. Instead, he looked me in the eye and asked if I had made a decision.

"I want An Phu, Colonel." I knew in my own mind that I'd work out the command relationship with Major Le. His men needed him as their leader, someone they could trust who had proven himself in many battles. It would be stupid of me to disturb that trust.

I asked if combat activity on our part inside Cambodia, including indirect fire missions, were to be recorded or reported?

"Anything to do with the covert mission must not be reported or recorded. No SITREPs, SPOTREPs, or reports of any action that violates international borders or airspace. It will be as if nothing happened," he emphasized, asking me, "Do you still want An Phu?"

I told him yes, but with one condition. The serious tone of his voice told me he didn't like demands coming from junior officers. "What condition, Captain?"

"I want to hand pick my team, no questions asked." "You've got it." I could keep any or all of the team already in An Phu. He would replace any I sent out as soon as possible. "Fair enough?" he asked.

I reached out my hand and we shook to seal the deal. "Be ready to go in the morning, Dangerous, and good luck."

After weighing everything Colonel Tuttle discussed about the independent operation, the risks involved, and the complete lack of protection from my own government, I decided on a covert plan that would guarantee protection of the truth of what happened under my command, no matter if I lived or not. I would document all that happened of significance during my command and send it to a trusted friend in the States for safekeeping. If something were to happen to me, he would take all I'd sent him to a lawyer we trusted who would then unseal

the envelopes and take that truth to the families of my men, to Congress, and to those in the media he trusted. Fortunately, I made it back, gathered the sealed envelopes and included pertinent details gleaned from those papers in the first draft of this book. I then mailed copies of the book draft to those team members whom I had located, asked for and received their corroboration, comments and additions to the text which have been incorporated.

On Christmas Day I stuffed myself with the traditional turkey dinner and thought of the many Christmas dinners Kate spoiled me with, especially with mincemeat pie, my favorite. After dinner I took a quick shower and then, pen in hand, I wrote and told her where I was going, what I had learned about the situation on the ground in An Phu and about the courage of the Hoa Hao fighters. “Not to worry,” I wrote, “because I am with good people.” I said nothing that would alarm her or cause her any concern and let her know how much I missed her. Once I got settled under the mosquito net and closed my eyes, even the heat of the night did not deter me from sleeping well, very well.

I was where I wanted to be.

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An aerial black and white photograph showing a large, rectangular, walled compound in the lower half of the frame. Inside the compound are several long, rectangular buildings and smaller structures. To the north of the compound is a wide, flat area with a grid-like pattern of fields and roads. In the upper portion of the image, a river flows through a landscape of fields and trees. The overall scene is a rural or semi-rural area with a prominent military installation.

Chau Doc River

Camp Dan Nam — View toward the west. 28 Dec 65

An Phu Village

Numbers 35:30 — *Whoso killeth any person, the murderer shall be put to death by the mouth of witnesses: but one witness shall not testify against any person to cause him to die.*



CHAPTER 2

MASSACRE WEST OF RACH GIA

“What’s going on, Colonel?” I shouted angrily to the helicopter pilot, “Your men just gunned down unarmed peasants, even women and children. Are you crazy?” “Calm down, Captain,” he retorted, “they’re just a bunch of gooks and we need body count!”

Shortly before 0900 the day after Christmas I reported to the operations center with my gear and was immediately ushered to a waiting helicopter where a young Lieutenant was already on board and strapped in, his back against the rear bulkhead. I stowed my gear next to his on the deck. After an exchange of thumbs up, the right door gunner signaled to the pilot and we lifted off of the landing pad and headed west across the Delta area. “I’m going to Ha Tien, Dai-uy. I’ll be team XO,” the young Lieutenant shouted in my ear, the smile on his smooth, unblemished face mirroring his excitement.

The roar of the engine and the deafening sound of rotors biting into the air at full torque drowned out my congratulations as we climbed rapidly to an altitude of 2,000 feet out of enemy small arms range. Our first check point would be the CIDG camp at Rach Gia, 70 air miles from Can Tho located just north of the city of the same name, a coastal municipality of 100,000 people. Two helmeted door gunners, fingers ready at the triggers of their .30 caliber machine guns, scanned the ground below for any sign of VC activity. Several metal canisters containing machine gun ammunition lay within easy reach of the gunners.

We flew over a number of large, forested plantations, each resembling a lush green carpet with a centrally located landscaped manor house encircled by a network of paths and dependencies. Once the pride of French colonialism, and later used in the early 1960s as “protected” relocation camps within the CIA’s failed strategic