

Chapter Nine

Suzanne Logan's attention was drawn to the student protesters demonstrating in front of the administration building. She sat quietly in thought on a grassy knoll in front of the Business School at Columbia University while she waited for her fiancé, Michael Collins. It was March 27th, 1972, and the Vietnam war was at an impasse. The end was nowhere in sight, although President Nixon had brought home most of the ground troops, struggling to find a political solution to get out and save face with the American people.

Suzanne had not taken a political stance on the war until Ray Vaquero had decided to leave her and enlist. She was clearly opposed to anything that might put him in harm's way, she thought sadly now, concerned about his safety and afraid to accept the dangers that pursued him. She worried every time she watched the war on the evening news. And although she could never fully grasp why he left her, Suzanne still yearned for him, struggling with emotions that whispered to her softly that she still loved him. And there was the guilt. It was never easy to admit that Michael was no more than a substitute, a vehicle to force Ray out of her mind. She fought to contain the overwhelming panic and repressed tears that began to uncontrollably flow at the thought that Ray would be out of her life forever. She wiped the tears off her soft, tender face as she remembered his strong possessive hands. The dimple on her left cheek began to take form as she half-smiled, reminiscing and finally conceding that she could no longer live without him. *He made her feel like she belonged to him.*

Suzanne moved her soft, shoulder length, chestnut-colored hair behind her ears then quickly wiped the tears away one more time and feigned a smile for Michael.

The monotony and boredom infuriated him as he slowly slid back inside the aircraft, convinced that the evening's mission would end as it had begun . . . uneventful. There was no guilt of conscience or concern over intentionally exposing the crew's back as he reached for the thick rubber pad that cushioned him against bumps and jolts during the long five hour missions. Duane Shaw carefully rolled it

into a pillow and fell into a deep slumber. Spectre 09 was on its fourth hour search for an elusive truck park south of the Laotian town of *Savannakeht* along Route 13. The night was clear and vibrant as cirrus clouds brushed the evening sky at twenty-thousand feet. Major Stuart Marks cautiously glanced at the jungle below, ignoring the "moon flashes" that brightly burst across scores of ponds and river beds. They were often mistaken for muzzle flashes by inexperienced, gun shy flight crews. A single 37-mm round suddenly brightened the night sky off Spectre's nine o'clock position, five miles from their spiral search pattern. Marks, the flight engineer Bud James, and co-pilot Ryan Scott watched the bright orange air burst, aware of its significance as a warning to convoys and anti-aircraft batteries in the area that gunships were near.

"Did you catch that, Shaw? Keep your eyes open, they could open up at any time." Marks' remark stung with open distrust and suspicion. Duane Shaw had already flown ten missions with Marks but failed to display the esprit de corps Marks had expected from a member of his crew. As a result, Marks felt ill at ease and vulnerable whenever Shaw was on board his aircraft. Marks had protested vehemently, but he'd finally given in to Colonel Roberts persistence and agreed to give Shaw a chance to prove himself. Marks' contact in personnel had combed through Duane Shaw's personnel record to look for any glaring flaw that might suggest that he would put Marks' crew at risk, but there was none. No write-ups that revealed any deficiency or past reprimand for dereliction of duty. Shaw had more than fifty missions under his belt with various flight crews. That was the peculiar thing about his record, thought Marks. No one really sought after Shaw to be their I.O. Instead, Shaw had spent most of his tour filling in for other I.O.'s that were grounded with severe colds and ear blocks or away on R & R. He exuded a cold and detached demeanor from the very first day Marks and his crew had set eyes on him. And it was that air of aloofness and insubordinate cockiness that concerned Marks. It instinctively told him that Duane Shaw was bound to fuck-up one day, and he didn't want it to happen during his watch, nor on his aircraft.

The intercom was dead silent. Usually a double click on the intercom switch would have been sufficient acknowledgment of a command, especially when you were too busy looking for enemy ground fire. Troubled stares were exchanged throughout the aircraft while everyone waited for

the Shaw to acknowledge Major Marks' order. Duane Shaw was in a deep slumber.

"Shaw," Marks shouted into his headset. His voice was tense but controlled. Still, the intercom was silent.

"Gramps?" Barked Marks in an imposing tone.

"Yes, sir," responded Louie Grimes sharply. The lead aft gunner was responsible for the management of the four-man gun crew. Gramps' form was barely visible as he stood quietly in the darkness between the 105-mm Howitzer and the 40-mm Bofors.

"Go wake-up that son of a bitch . . . he's asleep." Marks leveled off the aircraft, disengaging from the search for the truck park, while Grimes climbed up the ramp door to check on Shaw. Marks was seething yet pleased. He had Shaw by the balls now, confident that he would never fly again once they landed back at *Ubon*. He'd make sure of that. Louie Grimes tapped Shaw on the shoulder several times but got no response. He then shook him a little harder. Shaw swung his left arm around blocking Grimes third attempt to stir him.

"What the fuck do you want?" retorted Shaw, startled that he had been caught dozing.

"It's not what I want, asshole. Marks knows you were asleep." Grimes grinned sarcastically while looking at Shaw's unnerved expression then stepped back down off the ramp. Panic suddenly gripped Shaw as his ass uncontrollably puckered and began to sweat.

"Fuck," blurted Shaw while Marks banked the aircraft west toward *Ubon*.

"I'm going to visit a Buddhist Temple outside the city today to offer incense and prayer to my ancestors. Would you like to come along with me?" *Toi Dasananda* stared at him with her uncommon round-shaped eyes and infectious smile.

Finishing a bowl of spicy *Thai* soup with coconut milk, chicken and cabbage, Vaquero nodded in agreement.

"Sure, I'm ready whenever you are." Vaquero had planned to spend part of the day with her before catching

the afternoon C-130 shuttle to *Phu Bai, South Vietnam* to visit with Manny and Cano for a couple of days. As they left her apartment, Vaquero saw that there was a *spirit house* outside of her dwelling. Spirit houses were dollhouse-like shrines where flowers and food were offered daily to the spirits. A fresh glass of wine stood at the foot of the wooden shrine.

Toi hailed a cab. After several minutes of highly intensive negotiations she finally reached agreement on the fare. She turned to Vaquero, politely smiled and said, "We will be there in about ten minutes." Her dogged stubborn facial expression transformed into one of an angel. Ghostlike faces ringed the two saffron-robed Buddhist monks as Vaquero and *Toi Dasananda* approached. They sat cross-legged on a circle of cushions inside the temple sanctuary. The monks closed their eyes and chanted mantras as *Toi* led Ray by the hand and knelt quietly in front of them for several minutes before one of them moved. The oldest of the two appeared to be a man beyond the reach of time thought Vaquero. *Toi* whispered in Vaquero's ear and told him that he was over eighty years old. His close-cropped hair was scarcely gray, and his face was softly creased with smile lines.

"The Buddhist renounces the world to cultivate the inner spirit. To us, that is the highest type of man." *Toi's* faced radiated with gladness that Ray was there with her. Her voice was soft and melodic while she spoke with the older monk momentarily. The monk nodded then took hold of Vaquero's left hand and tied a cotton string around his wrist.

"*This is a Sai Sin, and it's to guard the thirty-two souls of your body, my son,*" translated *Toi* with smiling eyes.

He stared deeply into Vaqueros' hollow eyes, sensing the pain within him. "*Nothing in life is permanent, my son. We foolishly make plans, dream, and have many desires. All our wishes and desires control our lives. But it is like grasping at one's reflection in water. You must look inward for the calm . . .*" Mantra chants resonated throughout the temple as the monk sprinkled blessed water on both of them. But Ray Vaquero abruptly broke eye contact with him pondering his only passion thousands of miles away, and his unwillingness to let Suzanne Logan go.

Ray studied the amulet around his wrist while *Toi* knelt by another shrine and prayed.

"My ancestors are pleased that you came here today with me," *Toi* said shyly.

"Oh, so they talked with you, did they?" Ray asked, knowing that *Toi* was pulling his leg. "What did they say?" he asked jokingly.

"They wish peace and harmony in your heart, Raymond." *Toi*'s smile suddenly turned seductive as her dark eyes revealed what she had secretly wanted to do the first moment she had set eyes on him. "And my prayer is that you come back safely after every mission." Ray stood motionless as they gazed at each other. Then *Toi* softly rubbed her cheek against Vaquero's, slowly maneuvering her open mouth with his. Ray responded to her desires, not in passion, but with mild affection. *Toi* also fought with her emotions and memory of Willie Santiago. It had been four months since Willie Santiago had died. Santiago's friends were distant and vague about the details except that he had died during an emergency landing at *Ubon*. A sense of shame flowed through her while she silently embraced Vaquero. The last two days with Vaquero made her realize how hardened and detached she had become after Santiago's death. The *Buddhists* were right, she thought, her eyes closed as she rested her head on his chest. You must live your life abundantly, each and every moment as if it were your last.

"I need to get back to the base, *Toi*," Vaquero smiled at her warmly, concealing his deep-seated devotion to Suzanne Logan.

"Will you come see me right away when you get back?" *Toi* asked as the cab parked within ten feet of the base main gate.

"I'll come by the *Thai Palace* as soon as I get back, *Toi*," Ray assured, pressing her hand. "Thanks again for everything. I'll be back in three days." *Toi* leaned over and kissed him gently on his forehead. Ray could see the cab driver's hardened stare through the rear view mirror, resentful of the affection *Toi* shared with the foreigner. Ray stood on the curb as street vendors engulfed him. Ray waved good-bye and gazed at her beaming smile as the cab

steered back onto the main road. Toi's faced glowed with joy as she gazed back at him from the rear window until Vaquero's form was lost in the crowd. It was a stare he would never forget.

The elite NVA mortar sapper team was two days ahead of schedule. After crossing the *Mekong River* a week earlier, a very young and determined jungle fighter quietly went over the plan of attack with the four-man team. The sappers listened carefully as *Le Thanh* reviewed the plan for the twentieth time. Huddled in a tight circle in an abandoned wooden hut on stilts three miles outside *Ubon RTAFB* they schemed to demolish the Spectre gunships of the 16th Special Operations Squadron. Information obtained by communist sympathizers and informants that worked on the base had been invaluable. Inconspicuous barrack housekeepers, gardeners, and bar maids that worked at the Officer's and NCO clubs had easily acquired a wealth of information from intoxicated and the generally talkative Americans. When the orders were finally authorized by *COSVN*, *North Vietnam's* southern command, to strike at the American airfield, it was only a short period of time before inside sources had meticulously mapped the airfield and the weak security defenses and routines. *Le Thanh* opened an eight and a half by eleven color-coded drawing that detailed the exact location of fourteen gunships in their revetments identified by model and tail number. *Thanh* snickered. It was all too easy. Americans weren't very good at preparing for the unexpected, he thought confidently.

Thanh was in excellent physical condition and fit to go on the mission despite the battalion's political officers' objections and insistence that his place was with his anti-aircraft battery in preparation for the spring offensive. *Thanh* had trained with sapper units and had gone through nearly twelve months of training at *Son Tay, North Vietnam* where they learned to penetrate enemy defenses and master the use of various types of weapons and explosives. As a member of the *Lao Dong Party*, *Thanh* had cleverly manipulated his influence and status as a distinguished and highly decorated anti-aircraft gunner to get himself assigned to the sapper team through his contacts in *Hanoi*. Political officers didn't know shit about executing military objectives, *Thanh* thought sarcastically as he tightened the straps of his rucksack. They were only

efficient at extolling the virtues of the *Party* and its revolution, and how the political objective took priority over military operational goals. He stood motionless in thought, surprised at the realization that his adversary most likely grappled with the same dilemma, and assholes. *Thanh* slammed a fresh magazine into his AK-47 as he walked outside the hut, turning the selector switch to armed. The team was sanguine as they prepared to march the two and a half mile trek toward the air base armed with an 82-mm mortar. And they were driven with the knowledge that their side was ready to sacrifice more of themselves over the long haul than the Americans were prepared to bleed for the South.

Toi Dasananda smiled incessantly as she hurriedly dried herself off after a hot shower, unable to get Ray Vaquero out of her mind. She frantically stumbled around her small apartment looking for something to wear before heading out toward a remote part of *Ubon*. *Toi* stood frozen in front of the mirror, suddenly remembering that Willie Santiago would often take her there to watch the roaring aircraft fly overhead at dusk. She zig-zagged in and out of traffic as she raced toward a deserted road a mile outside the base in her Honda two-seater motor-scooter to get a glimpse of the C-130 that would carry Ray Vaquero to *Phu Bai*. *Toi* parked the motor-scooter under a very old, well-shaded hundred foot Teak tree. Heat waves rose slowly off the ground as she wiped the sweat off her brow. It was two-thirty; *Toi* looked in the direction of the airfield. She knew she had arrived in time to observe the imposing olive-colored camouflaged transport climb above her position. The surrounding jungle was unusually quiet with a dead stillness in the air. Birds nestled in the trees abruptly raced in flight as two pair of F-4D's suddenly appeared, soaring overhead and frightening her momentarily. The roar of the aircraft was deafening as the pilots kicked in the afterburners, then slowly banked to the left on a course that would lead them east across the *fence*. *Toi* then heard the familiar whine of Allison T-56 turbo-prop engines as they slashed their way into the dense tropical air propelling the aircraft down the runway. She stood on her toes on top of her motor-scooter as she watched the fully loaded transport utilize most of the nine thousand foot runway to get airborne. She waved frantically hoping that Vaquero could somehow see her as it flew directly over her

position stirring the trees and brush around her. *Toi* stared at the lumbering aircraft until it was just a dark spot in the fiery afternoon sky.

The black pajama-clad sapper team reached the thick bamboo sanctuary below a grassy knoll that would hide them from view long enough to fire nearly fifty 82-mm mortar rounds that had been hidden in a tunnel under some shrubbery. One of the sappers immediately headed toward higher ground with his Soviet *Dragunov* sniper rifle slung over his shoulder to hold off any assault from the airfield defenders or anyone else unlucky enough to wander into his kill zone. Two other sappers quickly assembled the bipod, base plate, tube and sight of the 82-mm mortar while *Le Thanh* laid several U.S. claymores along the dirt road path. As expected, the airfield was buzzing with activity as maintenance and munition crews prepared the aircraft for the evening missions. *Thanh* counted fourteen black tails jutting out from the top of their revetments as he privately admired their destructive force through high-powered binoculars. The Spectres' were in the nest.

A flimsy wooden guard tower stood out in the open fifty yards outside the west end of the air field's weak defensive perimeter. The afternoon sun was bright orange and extraordinary as it hung motionless in the western sky. A lone *Thai* sentry desperately looked for shade in the cramped wooden tower leaned up against one of the posts that faced the airfield. He looked at his watch then cursed out loud at the thought of another two hours of guard-duty before being relieved.

The sniper had a perfect panoramic view of the watch tower and dirt road. It was the most probable approach that would be used by the base security forces he theorized. He scanned the kill zones through the telescopic scope of his weapon. He came back to the tower again, made some minor adjustments on the focusing ring, then centered the cross-hairs of the scope on the back of the young sentry's head. His peripheral vision suddenly detected movement to his far right. *Toi Dasananda's* form appeared unexpectedly from behind the giant tree, catching the sniper by surprise. She was walking beside her motor-scooter slowly back down the trail. Slightly out of range, the sniper was unable to adjust his position without compromising his primary target on the tower. While she was out of his firing range, she could certainly hear his gun fire and alert the base

security to the location of the mortar crew. But it was already too late. The *Thai* guard was hurriedly awakened by the hollow metal whooshing sounds overhead and the immense terrifying explosions as 82-mm mortars struck the airfield, showering shrapnel across several F-4D's. maintenance crews instinctively scurried for cover in anticipation of additional volleys as the sapper team walked the deadly rounds between the airfield and the Spectre's. Curled up in a fetal-like position, the sentry screamed into his radio for backup, disclosing the direction of the incoming mortar fire. The guard threw the radio on the floor as he frantically attempted to become one with the tower. In his uncertainty and preoccupation with *Toi*, the sniper now realized that his blunder cost the team precious seconds to inflict maximum destruction to the gunships and the airfield before the base security forces had located them. He failed to execute the objective instantly without hesitation or thought, neutralizing the sentry immediately and preventing him from disclosing their firing position.

Toi, overcome with fear, instinctively dived into the elephant grass and rolled into a ball, covering her head from the thunderous explosions. With cold indifference the sniper efficiently squeezed-off two rounds from his *Dragunov* rifle striking the Thai guard in the right thigh shattering his leg. The impact of the round elevated the guard off the ground providing the sniper a better view of his quarry. Another round ripped through his lower spine exiting through his chest. The sentry gasped for a brief moment before the next round shattered his skull.

Toi Dasananda cried out in terror as the mortar fire multiplied in intensity. The impact violently shook the ground, spraying dirt and shrapnel everywhere. An AC-130A was pelted with razor-sharp metal fragments across the left side of the aircraft's fuselage and wheel-well, imbedding itself into the protective four-inch thick armor plating. Tires of another aircraft caught fire and exploded as a 82-mm mortar found its mark inside the protective shield of the revetments.

Le Thanh spotted the racing convoy of security personnel headed east in their direction. The base security response had been faster than he had expected, he thought. He took a deep breath, openly disappointed that his focus was now forced elsewhere. *Thanh* adjusted the firing coordinates to fend off the enemy forces to buy time for a

speedy departure. From his vantage point *Thanh* could see the airfield was severely cratered in several places. The damage was significant enough to keep the U.S. aircraft on the ground for a few days. But more importantly it would keep the Spectres grounded long enough to sit out the battle that was brewing across the *fence*. Two F-4's and three gunships were severely damaged, ripped and torn, spewing JP-4 fuel from under their wings.

A barrage of mortar fire halted the U.S.-Thai assault in their tracks as thirty base defenders bolted for cover around the surrounding trees and brush. Burning red tracer lines from two fifty caliber machine guns mounted on jeeps blindly showered the distant slopes and tree-line attempting to locate and silence the attackers, pelting *Toi* with dirt and rock as bullets from the base security forces impacted all-round her. Anything was better than just staying put, she thought, consumed with fear. The tall elephant grass to her left was scythed by a ferocious volley as the soldiers continued to blindly probe the thick brush-covered fields. She stood up and ran for safety toward the bases barb-wired fence that encircled *Ubon* RTAFB. Her heart raced uncontrollably as the deadly rounds zipped close to her head.

The sniper invisibly crept back toward the mortar location, picking off several of the security force along the way when they foolishly exposed themselves. *Le Thanh* continued to walk the mortars back and forth keeping the base security forces pinned close to the ground as they prepared to exit the area. A final barrage intensified again as one of the sappers stayed behind to fire the 82-mm mortar, showering his enemy with sheets of hot shrapnel while the rest of the sapper team faded into the jungle.

Toi Dasananda was suddenly hurled into the air by the force of multiple explosions. In shock now, she helplessly staggered aimlessly along the dirt road while thick streams of blood flowed down her forehead, nose and ears. Hobbling, struggling to stay conscious, telling herself that she could escape through the barbwire fence several feet away. But *Toi Dasananda's* life was abruptly extinguished after setting off multiple claymores. An innocent victim, entangled in a conflict not of her choosing.

The stench in the air overwhelmed Vaquero as he stepped off the C-130 transport. A forklift operator patiently waited in the shade off the right wing in full view of the off-loading passengers to stack dozens of caskets into the stomach of the aircraft. A scorching afternoon heat, reeked with rotting flesh and burning shit combined with gasoline, forced Vaquero to cover his nose and mouth with his hand. *Phu Bai* was a confined area, laid out in neat orderly rows of tents that seemed to go on forever. The *Montagnard* compound was built close to the safety of the base as well. But the constant pounding of rockets and mortar fire forced the *Jeh* villagers to sleep in bunkers and tunnels that honeycombed throughout the compound.

"Fuck me. . ." Vaquero blurted. After getting directions to Rodriguez and Rincón's unit, Vaquero could hear *Jimi Hendrick's* "Voodoo Child," blaring from their tent. He quietly entered the tent, noting an old wooden trunk at the foot of their cots and a large flag of Puerto Rico hanging on the wall. Their cots were each covered with a thin mattress and a worn-out mosquito net. A small table and four straight-back wooden chairs were in the middle of the dusty tent, serving as a place to play cards and writing letters, he thought. Claymore mines, grenades, weapons, and ammunition were haphazardly stored throughout the hooch, and it made Vaquero a little uncomfortable. Beer cans were scattered throughout the confined tent. But Rodriguez and Rincón had just returned from a long and arduous trail watching mission and were catching up on some much needed sleep. Sound rest was something fugitive for Manny and Cano.

Vaquero threw his soft overnight bag on Rodriguez's head, then he jumped onto Rincón's back as he slept.

"What the hell . . ." Rodriguez shouted.

"Wake-up you bean-fartin, banana-eatin' faggots." Vaquero razed them while he held Cano in a headlock. "You guys ain't so tough." Vaquero teased. Rodriguez laughed at Vaquero's heckling and Cano's predicament.

"Watch out for him, Ray, he'll think you're *Hanghe* and he'll poke you." Vaquero leaped from the bed and ran over to Rodriguez for protection.

"Who the hell is *Hanghe*?" Vaquero asked, out of breath from the horse-play.

"*Hanghe* is Tuan's sister, our *Montagnard* scout I told you about in my letters." Vaquero nodded.

"She wears him out more often than Lupo's sister ever did. *Hanghe* wants his Latin seed real bad man." Manny and Ray broke into uproarious laughter. Cano sat up slowly, impervious to their badgering, scratched his nuts for a moment then ran over and leaped on Ray and Manny.

"*Hanghe* wants to have my baby; is that so wrong?" Cano replied innocently.

"Yeah, she's got this thing about blondes." Manny countered. "She wants her baby to have his skin, Ray. *Hanghe*'s got this thing about Cano's skin."

Vaquero caressed Cano's face. "Yeah, it's because it is so sensitive," he goaded in an effeminate tone. Cano pounced on them again.

Three very close friends got shit-faced while they sat on a dusty, red, clay-filled floor half a world away from home. They laughed so hard at Cano's spirited tales with *Hanghe* that tears ran down their cheeks as they rolled on the floor. The war seemed distant and illusory now as three despondent hearts were warmed by the bonds of brotherhood, yearning for that time of innocence that had long past. Manny and Cano looked thin and ashen, and their skin was taut and colorless. It was the jungle. The jungle was devouring them, Ray mused sorrowfully.

"Well, it's that time to visit *Hanghe*," Cano announced happily. Rodriguez shook his head and grinned.

"Let's go, Ray. I'll introduce you to *Tuan* and look for someone's sister," he said jokingly with an exaggerated Spanish accent. "The *Montagnard* village chief is usually hitting the brew right about now." Rodriguez was slightly wasted himself. "You ain't lived until you've had *Jeh* brew." His words slurred.

"Yeah, that shit will definitely give you a brain spasm," chuckled Cano as he scratched his head. Manny led Ray into the *marao*, the *Jeh* communal house for guests. He

greeted *Tuan* and his family, and introduced Ray. The three Americans sat in a circle with other *Jeh* members while the village chief prepared his concoction near the center of the room.

"*Tuan Bang Ong* is a member of the *Jeh* tribe. His people have occupied the mountain highlands of Southeast Asia for centuries," commented Rodriguez while Vaquero watched nervously. "*Montagnards* are thirty different primitive tribes, and they account for fifteen percent of the population in *Vietnam*. They've always lived in these mountains, Ray," pausing momentarily as he offered cigarettes to the group. "They're good-natured, loving people, *Montagnards* feel no compulsion to become involved in the shit happening around them. It's not their nature." *Hanghe* walked in casually and bare-breasted into the *marao*, taking her place behind Cano. Vaquero watched Cano and *Hanghe* exchange lover's glances, while Cano contemplated the right moment when he could slip away with *Hanghe* and fill her with his seed.

"They only want autonomy, and the ability to direct their lives the way they see fit. I'm sure you can see that they have been victimized by the circumstances of this war, but it doesn't matter to them which side wins, Ray, the *Jeh* just want to go on living." Vaquero cautiously stared at the draft of rice wine that was rigged to flow through a plastic gasoline siphon. Rice husks floated atop the beverage.

"I was looking forward to an ice cold beer. In fact, I'll even settle for a warm bottle of beer," whispered Vaquero hoping that their host didn't understand English.

"If you refuse to drink the rice wine, Ray, you will insult the chief, and he will think he'll die." Rodriguez said firmly. The village chief was about forty five-and wore only a black loincloth. "*Jeh* life is governed by spirits and superstition. The *Jeh* believe in the *Yang* and the *Kanam*. The *Yang* are the rulers of the mountains, the earth and sky, and river. Are you with me Ray?" Rodriguez asked, not wanting to go over it again. "The *Yang* is considered to be a good spirit since it is able to control *Kanam*, the evil ancestor of spirits that roams the forests. The *Kanam* torments the lives of men and requires appeasement. To control the evil spirits, the *Jeh* sacrifice buffaloes, chickens and pigs to the *Yang* so they will help control the *Kanam*."

The drinking continued through the night as the village chief spoke of life's destiny and the mysteries of the jungle. Then they listened to *Tuan* tell of his team's exploits and the failed rescue attempt of the downed Air Force pilot. Smiles rounded the *Jeh* member's faces in the *marao* when *Tuan* described in gruesome detail the fate of the NVA squad leader. The wine took over Vaquero's senses as the flickering camp fire cast eerie moving shadows everywhere. *Hanghe* and three of the *Jeh* tribesmen danced around the mesmerizing fire, chanting ancient songs of the *Jeh*. As Vaquero fell asleep, Cano helped Manny remove Ray's flight suit, laying him slowly down onto the ground. The *Jeh* village chief carefully studied the strange symbols on the piece of paper that Rodriguez had handed to him. He prepared to tattoo Vaquero's left arm the symbols that Manny and Cano both carried. When they were through, they carried him back to their tent and gently laid him down on Rodriguez's cot for the night. Cano slipped out to finally meet with *Hanghe* prepared to do his best to impregnate her. Rodriguez listened to Vaquero's moans as he hallucinated again with shadowy images, struggling in his nightmares to live beyond his fears. Curled up like a ball, Rodriguez slept soundly on the dirt floor next to his best friend, assured that Vaquero would come to his aid when he most needed him.

Spectre 07 was operating southwest of *Hue* in search of a sizable convoy that had been spotted by a *South Vietnamese* FAC. The FAC had mysteriously disappeared off the ABCCC radar screens. Russian Zils had been spotted with their lights on through a hole in the thick jungle carpet, racing down on a narrow path through a mountainous terrain and deep in a valley of hills that reached nearly four thousand feet. Spectre 07 attempted to contact the FAC to no avail. It had simply vanished.

Mike Walters cupped his hands and blew hard on his finger tips for warmth. They tingled from the freezing temperature at twelve-thousand feet. His nose started to run and drip into his bubble shield, occasionally obstructing his view. "This sucks big time, man," he blurted. Walters hadn't planned on wearing his thermal underwear since their original mission was planned at seven thousand feet. It was usually pretty warm and comfortable

at that altitude. But the thin flight gloves were no match for the frosty air that blasted through the open aircraft port holes. Walters wished they'd hurry and shoot something so the aft gunners could hand him a hot shell to warm up with. Suddenly, the bitter cold left him as he recognized the tell-tale glow of a SA-7 that was fired at the AC-130A from the top of the mountain.

"Strela at six o'clock, hold what you got," commanded Walters, calmly tracking the missile as it arched smoothly in the darkness toward the aircraft. The SA-7's motor burned with a spooky blue light porpoising back and forth the way the shoulder-fired weapon was supposed to as it honed-in on the heat exhaust of the Allison T-56 engines. Time appeared to stand still, and seconds were an eternity as Walters stared at the missile as it drew closer to the aircraft. When it was within three seconds of striking the gunship, Walters fired multiple decoy flares that hung under the gunship's wings. He then directed the pilot to make a tight sixty degree left hand turn, attempting to conceal the heat of the exhaust from the missile, but the path of the SA-7 didn't change as it surprisingly exploded into number three engine. The explosion jarred the aircraft, causing a bright flash then fire as the missile found its target in the darkness. Number three engine violently separated from the right wing.

The aircraft shuddered violently and it began to lose altitude rapidly. Frantically, the navigator radioed over the UHF frequency that Spectre 07 had lost an engine and needed to make an emergency landing. Walters instinctively came back inside the aircraft, disconnected the restraining hook from his harness and reached for his chest-pack parachute in the darkness. He had practiced hooking the rings to his body harness thousands of times in the past with his eyes closed, but now he was nervous as the aircraft bounced violently in all directions. Just when he finally hooked one of the rings to his chest-pack, the right wing violently came off the doomed gunship. It went into an uncontrollable cartwheel roll. The adrenaline surge affected his ability to stay calm under such circumstances. Walters had hooked only one side of his chest-pack to his body-harness when multiple explosions tossed him and two aft gunners out into the darkness.