

April 24, 1968
5th Special Forces Group Headquarters
Nha Trang, South Vietnam
1000 hours

Mikey tucked his Green Beret under the shoulder epaulet of his class A uniform jacket. He sat on the bench outside the C Company, 2nd Battalion, 5th Special Forces Group office and placed his service record book in his lap. Waiting to be summoned was the hardest part. You never knew what you were getting into with a new commanding officer.

Sweat rolled down his neck and soaked his collar. If he thought the humidity of Kansas was terrible, the stifling heat of Vietnam was like breathing pure water. He wanted to loosen his tie. His uniform shirt stuck to his skin. Thirty minutes went by, and no one came for him. Had they forgotten he was there? At the fifty-nine-minute mark, the door opened, and a master sergeant stood there.

“The major’s ready for you, Sergeant Roberts,” the sergeant announced.

Mikey stood, handed his SRB to the sergeant, ran a hand over his face, and followed the soldier inside.

The sergeant disappeared into the inner office.

Mikey waited next to the desk in the outer office. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the dust off his jump boots.

A minute or so later, the sergeant exited the inner office and held the door open. “Go in.”

Mikey marched into the office and came to attention in front of the desk. “Sergeant Roberts reporting as ordered, sir.”

The blond, tan, muscled-up, and rather young-looking major glanced up then down at the form on the desk. His green fatigues resembled boards, stiffly starched with military creases so sharp they would cut paper. The badges above the left pocket and US Army tab told an impressive story. Second award Combat Infantry Badge, Army Aviator Badge, Parachute Rigger Badge, Master Parachutist Badge, and Master Military Freefall Parachutist Badge. This man loved adrenaline.

A Green Beret with a gold oak leaf centered on the black, yellow, and red 5th Special Forces Group flash rested on one corner of the desk. Hanging on the coatrack behind him, next to a helmet, a tiger-striped camo boonie hat, a flak jacket, a complete set-up of combat web gear with a holstered Colt .45 caliber pistol, and a Marine Corps K-BAR in an Eagle, Globe, and Anchor embossed brown leather sheath. An M16 with a thirty-round magazine was leaning against the unadorned wood-paneled wall. What hair the man had was high and tight, and his piercing eyes resembled the deep blue of the ocean. The wrinkles on his brow said he took everything seriously.

Remaining at attention, Mikey stood unmoving. Sweat rolled from his forehead into his eyes. He didn’t wipe it away. The major hadn’t given him permission to relax yet.

After signing a form, the major placed it in his inbox and leaned back in his chair, flipping the pen in a practiced arc around his fingers. “At ease, Sergeant Roberts.”

Mikey placed his hands behind his back and spread his legs shoulder-width apart.

The major picked up Mikey’s SRB from the desktop, opened up the cover, and looked over the paperwork. “First off, I’m Major MacKenzie. I like what I see in your service record book, Roberts. Above-average ratings on all your evals. Expert marksman in six different weapons. Proficient in French, which will help you around these parts. Good marks in tactics and NCO school. Says here you were the distinguished honor graduate of your combat medic’s school.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You have an Army Commendation Medal with valor device and a Good Conduct Medal to go with your campaign ribbons...Do you think you’re ready to get thrown into the fire of real combat?”

Mikey paused at the strange question. He had only one answer. “Yes, sir.”

“Good man. So do I.” Major MacKenzie stood, came around the desk, and sat on the edge. “Sit down, Roberts. Let’s talk for a moment. I want to get to know you a little better.”