

on the pad, and when the men had lowered the body to the slab inside the wide door, they returned and helped him into the building. The Huey sat for a time, dripping on the white pad, then rose and flew away toward the Song Bo.

They landed in the milky shallows on the gravel shoal and shut the engine down. The blades had almost stopped before anybody moved. Caccini was doubled over behind his unattended gun, making wrenching, moaning sounds like his breath had been knocked out. The others were chalky and silent. Suddenly Caccini leaped out with a roar and fell facedown in the water, thrashing around and yelling. Then Dooley and Kitchen stepped out and stood numbly in the river, not talking. Roark unbuckled and climbed over the console into the cargo bay, slipped and fell in the blood, then jumped out and stood beside Caccini. The gunner had stopped yelling, but was moaning again, sitting with his knees drawn up in the water. Roark turned around and looked at the blood. Then he saw that it was on his hands and pants, and he knelt and began to wash. Caccini was quiet now, and in a moment Roark reached out and took his helmet from his head and hung it over the grips of his machine gun. Kitch was washing, and Dooley was helping him, both of them still silent. Roark got his cap from the chin bubble and began dipping water from the river, splashing it across the cargo bay. Dooley stripped to his waist and used his T-shirt as a mop while Kitchen waded around to see about Caccini. A tapered swath of bloody water moved slowly away.

The helicopter turned as it reached Truong Tien bridge in Hue, still descending. On the wide Perfume River, a number of covered sampans, floating homes, lay anchored near shore before the ancient walled Citadel. A few motored quietly toward the market in the downtown district, spreading wide Vs across the glassy pool. The Huey slowed and gradually turned toward the south shore until it came to a hover in a vacant lot between the river and a busy morning street.

Beside a waiting jeep parked near the shaded avenue stood a captain and his interpreter. While the crew eyed the slender, delicate girls passing along the sidewalk or riding sidesaddle on backs of mopeds, the two men climbed aboard. Their mission for most of the day, the captain said, would involve a series of hops between ARVN compounds, bridge defenses, Vietnamese clinics, schools, and homes for orphans. It would be pleasant and boring. The captain slipped a pair of elasticized dummy sleeves over his bare arms so he would not have to spoil his starch. The Huey hovered at the

river's edge, checked for traffic, then swung out low across the water, buzzing a sampan before climbing away to the east. Where the river passed the southeast corner of the Citadel, hundreds of covered sampans were jammed together around the tight knot of metal roofs at the market. The helicopter soon left the clutter of the city. At the edge of the hovels stood a grand and stately Catholic church with a red tile roof, unblemished, seemingly untouched by war.

Roark was still thinking about the girls. The flapping ao dais, revealing nothing, were distinctly alluring. The Vietnamese girls, he noted, were not nearly so ugly as they once had seemed.

Suddenly all he could see was the blood and screaming men of yesterday. His hands began to tremble. "You take it awhile," he said to Dooley, and he lit a cigarette and sat looking out the side window. Then a glimpse of something from the early morning came: As they were preparing the ship they heard the sound, and when they looked there were two Medevacs coming past, tails high. They passed low across the flight line, straining hard, headed north toward Phu Kinh.

The day was predictably dull, but relaxation never came to the crew. Each time they landed at the edge of a hamlet the gunners sat tautly behind their weapons, watching the people. They were a ship alone, far from help, and it would have been easy to knock them out with a single rocket. At lunchtime, a jeep was waiting for the captain and his ARVN at the pad, but the crew declined an invitation and ate a quiet meal beside the water. They took turns sleeping and watching the street.

The afternoon was tedious, and everyone felt a lift when they were finally given their last assignment—to deliver a thick manila envelope to the American adviser with the ARVN regiment based at Firebase Nancy, northwest of Evans. They departed toward the west and, after calling artillery clearance, dropped to low level and raced northward across the foothills. When they crossed the Song Bo, Roark made a tight turn and dropped near the water, still hoping to see the sampan again. The river was empty, so they continued toward Nancy low level. Nothing had been said, but everyone realized what they were doing. When they flashed suddenly across the streambed near the spot where the deer was killed, they all understood at once what was about to happen.

"Gooks!" Caccini yelled. Roark made a tight flaring turn, and in a short moment the Huey was hovering above two terrified boys, naked in the clear stream. Like the herd of deer, they had been surprised, enjoying a refreshing swim on a sunny afternoon. They appeared to be about twenty and apparently had left their weapons

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