

Chapter One

The Day My Life Changed

We weren't supposed to be there. But our captain wanted us to patrol the area one more time. Our job was to find the North Vietnamese army and report where they were so we could send bombs and helicopters to take them out.

The day before we went on that last patrol, I'd heard that a lot of people were being medevacked out of the battlefield. We were pretty far away from the group that was getting hit hard. Our captain told us to find that group and help them, since they were surrounded by the North Vietnamese. It was hot and we had to walk two or three clicks (kilometers) to get there. We were tired and our feet were worn out because we had move so quickly. When we finally reached them, they no longer needed us. Typical.

The captain was a gung-ho kind of guy. He didn't want the North Vietnamese to win. We were supposed to be on mandatory rest time, but the Army never honored that time. The captain decided we should go out on patrol again a day after we'd come back in, so we did.

After hearing about people in our company getting hit hard, all I could think about was when it would be my turn to be

injured in battle. It's hard not to think about that stuff when that's all you see and hear about. It's hard to have positive thoughts of any kind in that situation. It's the harsh reality of war: little to no sleep, tediously taking each step, ready for the next shot to be fired, and hoping like hell it won't hit you or anyone around you. Nobody wants to be injured, but the fact of war is that those things happen.

It was a clear, sunny day — much like the day I received my draft letter. The sun was about to set when we began patrolling. We were walking through the jungle when someone came over the radio telling our captain to leave the area. There were North Vietnamese all around us. Our captain was told it was too unsafe to be there, but he didn't want to leave. In other words, there was a high probability a lot of heavy shit was about to happen.

We continued walking through the jungle until our point man looked back at us.

“Bring the dog. We spotted something.”

Our scout dogs were highly trained to find and attack the enemy. I was near the dog and its handler when they walked past the point man. Then ...

Everything stopped and my ears were ringing. I must have been right on top of the explosion. I think I was blown six or seven feet in the air. Most of the fragments of the claymore mine scattered around me, shooting shrapnel in every direction. My ears had been ringing for a couple minutes. I heard gunshots and people yelling, and smoke was everywhere.

When I landed back on the ground, I didn't feel anything. I passed out for a little bit.

I saw a man. He was dressed in white and had a long beard. He said to me, "Don't worry, Ed, you'll make it." Was it God telling me I would survive? To this day I can't say for sure, but I believe it was.

I woke up after that. I looked down at one of my legs and all I could see was bones. I didn't look at the other leg; I guess I didn't want to know what it looked like after seeing the first one. Besides, it was chaos all over. I saw people in my platoon lying on the ground injured, and I couldn't help them.

I was in shock — and in so much pain. I registered almost nothing besides the smell. I vividly remember the stink of battle. It was a suffocating mix of acrid smoke and gunpowder — like fireworks — combined with that steamy, heavy, rotting odor of the jungle. It made me feel like I couldn't breathe. Trust me, it's a stench you never want to experience. All I could think about in that moment was getting to the hospital.

To say the situation was bad is an understatement. We still had to defend our position, but we felt helpless.

In the middle of everything, I overheard the captain, who was a few feet away from me, talking to his radio. The radio man had been killed, so our captain took it into his own hands to notify our company that we had been in battle and needed a medevac immediately.

"You've got to get down here!" he yelled.

He gave our coordinates and a brief run-down of what had just happened. It was a dire situation.

The medevac told him they couldn't come to our area because there was too much incoming gunfire. We were still under attack. But the captain wouldn't let up. Finally, he persuaded them to come get us. I don't recall his exact words, but they included some expletives and enough urgency to convince them it was a risk they had to take. If they didn't come, it was certain death for all of us.

After our captain had sorted everything out and put the radio down, I looked over at him and noticed something: His legs were gone, too. I was amazed he could continue to lead and try to protect our company while he was lying on the ground near death, like I was.

We waited about twenty-five minutes for the medevac to arrive. That whole time, I lay there thinking about what I needed to do to survive. I guess as animals, we have an instinct that kicks in when we're in danger.

The helicopter couldn't land on the ground because of the vegetation that surrounded the area, so they motioned for us to climb up. There was gunfire from almost every direction. The guys still able to defend our position were fighting furiously. This was the only way out while we were still alive.

One of the guys in my platoon who wasn't injured helped me get up into the helicopter. He helped me grab onto the skids, and one of the medics inside took my arm and pulled me in. He asked me, "How are you doing, Ed?" — he'd

obviously read my dog tags to find my name and blood type — and quickly got to work trying to save my life. He laid me down and put tourniquets on my legs to stop the blood flow. That's when I thought to myself, *Oh, no, it's bad now.*

He kept telling me, "Don't go to sleep. Stay awake." I never did go to sleep.

The helicopter ride out felt like forever. I was in excruciating pain. I couldn't think straight. The guys in the helicopter were working on me. I don't know what they were doing to me, but to keep my mind off it all, I watched out the window. We were low to the ground so I could see all the rice paddies we were flying over. It was the only thing I could look at to try to keep my mind off what was happening around me.

There were guys shooting at the ground from the helicopter, trying to defend our troops while we were flying through the air. They eventually stopped after we got far enough away from the battlefield.

The hospital was about thirty minutes away from where the helicopter picked us up. There were six of us who'd made it onboard. They sent another medevac for the rest of the guys who were still on the ground.

They took me into the rear area of the hospital where they laid me on the gurney and started working on me. I was immediately poked with a needle, and that was the last thing I remember from that day. I was put in an induced coma to minimize my pain.

Three days later, I woke up.

Geez, I'm in a hospital. I'm still alive, I thought.

I looked down and saw I didn't have legs. I thought to myself, *I don't have feet, but I'm still alive.*

When they'd poked me with that needle, I wasn't sure I'd ever wake up again. So, lying there, I was grateful. I was still in a lot of pain and I knew my life would never be the same again, but I was thankful I wasn't dead.

Of the eighteen people in my squad on that mission that day, nine were killed or injured. I think that's what made me grateful. Knowing I could have been killed put things into perspective early on.