

## The Vietnam War

By Theo McCowen

The sound of the helicopter blades pierced my ears, like daggers. I shivered, and quickly changed my train of thought. I glanced out of the open door, trying to find some kind of mental peace, from the seemingly endless war. All that was in sight, was jungle. Thick, green, impenetrable jungle. I tried to think of monkeys dancing, of parrots squawking, but I couldn't escape the thought of children burning, of bombs detonating, of panicked, innocent screams. I turned away again.

In the Huey with me, were my pals - Tommy and Lonnie, but also another man. His name was Sam. He was young, I thought maybe 18. He was nice, short-cut blonde hair, deep-set aquamarine eyes and a short, stocky build.

I wanted to talk, but I bit my tongue. He wouldn't be able to hear me over the whirring blades and blaring boom box leaning against the back of the 'copter.

When I looked over at it, my mind went back to dark thoughts; it was next to a rack of weapons. M16s, M14s and more. All types of killing machines. Next to them were a few grenades and M79 launchers. It all brought me back to the horrible, horrible war. I looked at Tommy for reassurance, but in his hand was an MAS 35 – I couldn't get away from the fighting going on below me in the jungle and in in my brain.

I looked again out of the window, and thought I saw something in a clearing below, I closed my eyes and looked again. Yes! There was something down there; two men, with rice-farming hats, holding rifles.

I tugged on Lonnie's arm and pointed, for a second he stared at me, confused, but then he looked. As soon as his mind took a grip on the situation, he nodded and got up.

'Sarg, we got two stragglers, west side.' His voice was deep and sturdy, he wasn't scared of anything, or so it seemed.

'Copy that. Tommy, two tangeros at three o'clock. Take 'em out.' Sargent Walkers didn't seemed bothered by the fact that he was ordering the deaths of two men. He just stated the sentence, not making a big deal out of it.

'Roger.' Tommy stood up and took a hold of the mounted machinegun. Lining up the sights, he fired a short burst of bullets. I watched in horror as the men fell to ground, as flowers of scarlet red, spun out of their chests. Smoke rose from the end of the gun and Tommy made his way back to his seat. 'Targets down.' I shivered at the words as they came out of his mouth.

The journey took another half-hour. It was probably the worst half hour of my life, more invasive thoughts about the war raging on below me, endless lists of things that could go wrong piling up in my brain, next to the thoughts of napalm canisters and cartridges.

The mission was to drop into a weapons factory, steal any advanced files, blow the place sky high and get the hell outta Dodge. Sounds simple enough, right. But there was one snag, one problem with the seemingly faultlessly constructed plan. The Huey had to fly real low to hide under the enemy radar. We get spotted, and we might as well dig our own damn graves. If we even made it as far as the main building, we would have to drop down on ropes, and pray to God almighty we don't fall.

Suddenly the helicopter began to slow, then it came to a stop. It was just hovering. Hovering above a large compound, constructed from many small buildings. In the centre was a large black building; directly underneath us.

Next to the open door of the Huey was a large bulb, emitting a strong beam of red. A bead of sweat rolled down my forehead. The light stayed red. I closed my eyes. Please. Wake up. It's all a dream. Wake up, wake up! A large ping sound rang out and I opened my eyes again. The light was green.

In that moment, every thought of trouble that had nagged me, nonstop throughout the journey came flooding back; a tsunami of fear crashing down in my head, eliminating any grip on sanity I still had.

Tommy stood up and made his way to the door. How was he not scared? That was the thing with Tommy. You never really knew what was going on inside his head.

He suddenly grabbed the rope that was wrapped around his arm and threw it out of the helicopter. When it had gone taut, he tied the other end to the exposed framework of the UH-1. He signalled to Lonnie, who was already out of his seat. He took a hold of the rope and slid out of the helicopter.

I leant out of the door, and could see him on the roof of the building below.

A muffled voice crackled through our radios. It was Lonnie. 'We are all clear. I repeat we are all clear. Move on my command.' His voice still sounded deep and strong through the radio. 'OK, Sam. You're up.' The voice crackled again. The poor guy went rigid and I could tell his heart had dropped into his boot. 'Sam, do you copy?' He quickly snapped out of his terrified paralysis. He shakily brought his hand to his radio. His finger pressed down the button on the side, and a trembling word came out of his mouth.

'Copy.' He brought his shaking hand down. He made his way to the weapons rack. But before he could make it halfway, Sgt. Walker spoke.

'Hurry up, Goddammit! We don't have all day!' His harsh words made Sam speed up and quickly pick up a rifle. He gripped it with reluctant hands; he knew he was holding an instrument of death. He took a deep breath and walked back to the door.

He stood there looking down, fear crashing through his innocent eyes. 'Tinkerbell, if you don't hurry the hell up, this chopper will be ripped apart by lead and we'll all be buried in a giant aluminium bird.' Sgt. Walker's words cut deeper than any dagger ever would.

'Sir, yes sir.' He clambered out of the Huey, gripping the rope as if it was his life, and it was. He slid down. The gun was slung over his back, and he awkwardly fumbled to grab a hold. Lonnie noticed him struggle for about half a minute and finally get a grip. Only of the gun, his mind was still frozen with dread.

'You're new to this aren't you,' Lonnie's voice was suddenly reassuring. Sam looked up from the mess that was his tangled strap and his eyes met Lonnie's. He looked down and a slight humoured chortle came across him, it still almost seemed forced. He opened his mouth but thought better of embarrassing himself in front of a senior soldier. He thought again, and this time he spoke.

'I was told by my dad to get a proper job, to stop jumping between low-paid, part time café shifts. He thought for a while that the military wouldn't have any use for me. I just...' He closed his eyes. 'I just wanna make him proud, you know?' He looked back to Lonnie, who nodded.

'I understand,' he spoke. 'But never let people see you with your guard down, you're vulnerable. They'll get into your head.' Sam gave an agreeing nod, as the rest of us came down the rope. The Huey flew away, and we made our way to the entrance point.

Tommy was in front of the squadron. He gripped the sides of a huge steel trapdoor and signalled to Lonnie, who twisted the handle. Tommy lifted the round lid and held it open. The rest of us began climbing down the ladder that the now-opened door revealed.

First, Sam clambered down, still shaking uncontrollably. After him, was Sgt. Walkers, he was still mumbling angrily about how he shouldn't have brought Sam along on the mission. *He was too naive and undertrained; his body wasn't ready, and neither was his mind.* He might have been right, but Sam would do what he was told and protect his friends until the end. That is what Sgt. Walkers didn't notice.

After Sgt. Walkers, Tommy and Lonnie climbed down the ladder, rifles slung across their backs. Finally, I clambered down, being careful not to make too much noise. When I reached the bottom, I looked around to see the other soldiers, readily poised for any attack. Lonnie was on one side of a large, metal door and Sam was on the other, managing well to keep calm under this pressure.

Tommy was on one knee cradling an M1D Garand in his arms. The barrel of the weapon was just protruding from an open window. With his non-shooting hand, he adjusted the focus on the scope.

Sgt. Walkers was in the centre of the room, on one knee. He was aiming his gun at the door, ready for attacks or guards entering the room.

The room appeared to be some kind of bunker. There were three sets of bunkbeds and a few tables, with books and pistols, pens and bottles of alcohol.

On the beds were blankets, some scruffy and some neat. I walked over to one of the tables, to find a book. On the front of the book, were the words, *Nhật ký*. I had been set some books to read on the Vietnamese language, but it had all gone over my head. I thought maybe it was a name.

'Sarg, what does this mean?' I questioned, showing the book to him. He turned from his position and looked over at the book, but his eyes widened, and he raised his gun.

'Let him go!' Sgt. Walkers shouted. I turned my head, but a cold hunk of metal pressed against my temple. My hands naturally came up. *It was an instinct. An instinct of a coward!* No, I couldn't think like that. I had to stay strong. All of my training had come down to this.

Suddenly, all of my thoughts about weapons being terrifying went away, like the tide escaping from the shore. This was war. Life or death. I couldn't continue to be scared throughout the mission. I slowly brought my hands down, being careful to not make any sudden noises or movements.

I quickly brought my arm up, sweeping the arm with the gun away. The gun fired, but I ignored it and tackled the soldier to the ground. Sgt. Walkers fired a shot into the man, and he stopped struggling. I climbed off of the soldier and got up. I was still shaken from the adrenaline, but I wanted to continue with the mission.

'No, no no no no no. This is not good,' Tommy brought his eye away from the scope of the rifle. 'Sarg, we have a problem. The guards on the west side heard the shots and they're on the radio.' For the first time that day, Tommy looked panicked. 'They're moving away from their position! Do I have permission to fire?' Sgt. Walkers stayed calm and gave the permission. Two muffled shots were heard only by the people in the room, thanks to the suppressor.

'Now move it men, pretty soon this room is gonna be full of angry Vietnamese men.' Sgt. Walkers gave the command, and everybody stood up and got ready to leave.

At that moment, the door began to open, and two men walked through into the room. One of them fell straight to the floor, bleeding through a knife wound in the side of his neck.

Lonnie stood beside the dead man, knife dripping. He looked across to see Sam leant against the wall. He was clutching his arm, blood seeping out from under his crimson-stained hand. He glanced down and through his blurry vision, he saw his bloody hand.

Lonnie jumped forward and plunged the knife into the other soldier's back, but the damage had already been done; Sam was injured badly, he was rapidly losing blood and also consciousness. Lonnie swung the knife again, and this time it slashed the life out of the soldier. Dropping the knife to the ground, he ran over to Sam and knelt down.

'Are you ok?' Lonnie looked around at the dead man who injured Sam. Next to him was his rifle; smoke was slowly pouring out from the barrel. Lonnie now knew what the cause of the injury was. *That was strange*, he thought. He hadn't heard any shot firing. He guessed the abruptness of the attack had been so shocking that his senses just shut off.

Lonnie reached into his bag and pulled out a first aid kit. Unclipping it with adept fingers, he swiftly grabbed a bandage and shouted at me to bring him a bottle of distilled liquor from one of the tables. He twisted off the cap of the bottle, pulled Sam's sleeve up and poured a splash of the liquid over the wound. Sam cried out for a moment, but then bit his tongue so as not to attract attention to their location. Lonnie unrolled the bandage and wrapped it around the gash.

Crimson rapidly seeped through the white bandage. His face was losing colour like somebody had plugged a pipe into him and sucked the blood out of him. His breathing was slowing.

Sgt. Walkers muttered something under his breath, and Lonnie was still working hard to keep Sam alive. I helped as much as I could to look after Sam whilst Tommy was looking for the other guards.

Eventually, Tommy opened the door, and we made our way down the long corridor that was revealed. On either side was a line of windows, showing concrete ground for hundreds of metres. It was an airstrip. At the end of the runway, was a Sukhoi SU-22. The plane was of Russian origin, but the Vietcong would use whatever vehicles they could get hold of.

Suddenly, the door that we had come through swung back open, and five soldiers appeared there, pointing rifles us. We turned to run, but the other door opened, and another five soldiers appeared. It seemed like it the situation couldn't get worse, but if our luck so far said anything, it was that we were wrong.

The plane began to move. It seemed like it was meant to build up speed on the runway, that ended just past that corridor. That was when we noticed. The corridor was a bridge between two buildings. The plane would go under the bridge and then take off.

As the plane gained speed, Tommy brought up his rifle and fired. He had worried that the pilot might fire missiles at them, but it turned out to be a bad move. He had just moved us into checkmate.

The pilot fell back into his chair with the weight of the shot, and his hand came back with him. The plane's elevators turned up and the plane was off the ground. It was coming straight for us.

Tommy cursed and then decided to bring his hands up. We had no choice. Everyone else did the same. The best thing was to just admit defeat. They might have spared us.

Then he had an idea. He quickly brought his hands down and pulled out a pair of grenades. The soldiers at each end of the corridor shouted in Vietnamese, but he continued to pull the pins out. They dropped to the floor, and the sound rang in my ears. We were going to die.

Tommy threw the grenades at the soldiers. 'Drop!' He shouted, he simultaneously dropped to the ground, followed by everyone else. For a second, all I could hear, were terrified Vietnamese voices. Then boom. Everything went white and all I could hear was a piercing ringing.

The bridge came crashing to the ground, reducing it to a pile of rubble and glass. The plane scraped the top of the bridge sending it spiralling back down into the ground. The nose crumpled, and then the front half exploded. Fuel leaked onto the floor, spreading like butter on hot toast.

I awoke to the face of a soldier, but he wasn't American. He grabbed my arms, and somebody grabbed my legs. I would have struggled to escape their grip, but I could barely make out where the ground was through my blurry vision.

When I awoke, I was in a cage. A cage of bamboo. When I properly began to take in my surroundings, Tommy, Lonnie and Sgt. Walkers were awake, and scattered around the cage. It was only them and their thoughts.

I looked around for Sam, and I found him sitting in a corner. His knees were up to his chest and his head was in his hands; it was if he was straight out of insane asylum, and he might as well have been.

When I walked over to him and tapped his shoulder, his head quickly shot up. 'Don't take me away!' For the first time on the mission, the trauma had really cracked him.

'It's fine. It's just me,' I whispered reassuringly. He began to calm, his brain slowly realising that he wasn't in danger. He took a deep breath.

After a while, he was calm. I then walked over to Lonnie. He was standing at the edge of the cage, arms resting on the bamboo bars. 'You ok?' I tried to keep my voice controlled and calm, but Lonnie could clearly tell that I was panicking. He had always had a sense of what was happening in other people's brains; so much so, that you would think he was reading your mind. I guess he'd just had more experience with people than the average person. He'd seen people do crazy things for reasons he didn't understand. He'd seen innocent people suffer from the stupid mistakes of others and he'd experienced countless people that were important to him slip through his fingers. He knew loss more than anyone did, and it taught him to never get close with people again, but it hadn't taken his heart or his humanity.

'Yeah. I'm fine,' he sounded completely calm; then again, he was as good at hiding emotions as he was at reading them. 'How about you?' He had always been so genuine and pure of heart. This was probably why I had kept him closer than anyone else.

It was only now, at the apparent end of my life, that I had really thought deeply. About myself, about others. How I feel, how they feel.

All of a sudden, the door of the cage swung open. I turned to look – I thought maybe our boys had come to get us, but unsurprisingly, that would remain a dream. There, in front of us was a soldier, pointing a gun at us. Another man walked past him into the cage and grabbed Sam, pulling him up off the ground and out of the cage. When he was out of the cage, they pushed him into a pit. It was about two metres deep, with sand at the bottom.

The soldiers then went back to the cage to grab Sgt. Walkers. They pulled him towards the cage and pushed him in the pit, too. They shouted something in Vietnamese. Behind him, in the distance, was a huey. Our boys had come for us.