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The Redwing Blackbird

from *Show Time*

Sparrow Hawk! Sparrow Hawk! resounded throughout the camp. Bobby grabbed his gear and headed out of the Quonset hut. In formation, he adjusted his webbing, tied his boots, checked his weapon for dirt and rust, listened.

"A CAP unit's in trouble, big time," said the Captain. "Recon expects they'll get overrun by nightfall. We're going in to get them out."

"Which hamlet?" Bobby asked.

"Phu Loc," said the Captain.

"That's where Jimmy is."

Jimmy was Bobby's bootcamp partner. Graduated, they'd been assigned to different units. Bobby went to 2nd Battalion, 26th Marines; Jimmy to the Combined Action Platoon in the small village of Phu Loc north of Danang; "to win the hearts and minds of the people," they had told him. Jimmy had been grateful for the opportunity to actually help the local citizens rather than search and destroy the countryside like Bobby, like most Marines. They wrote letters back and forth to stay in touch. Bobby slammed a loaded magazine into his M-16, clicked the safety on.

The chopper descended through the clouds like a heavy sinker through water. Suddenly there was Phu Loc, directly below. Bobby could see the surrounding paddies, the river and Danang to the south, Highway 1 to

the east, mountains to the north and west. Yellow smoke rose up near a hootch. Bobby assumed that marked the LZ. Dozens of villagers and Marines crouched on the perimeter of the smoke. Sniper fire broke out, and green tracers arced toward the chopper. "Show time," thought Bobby.

Monster, the door gunner, returned fire with his M-60 machine gun, his red tracers mingling with the incoming green. Bobby chambered a round and clicked off the safety. He felt like a sitting duck and wondered what it would feel like to take a round up his asshole. "Some enema," he thought, "or some fucking doctor's finger. Or maybe it just travels up your intestines, through your stomach and trachea, then out your mouth like a lost tooth in a fist fight. Or maybe it just takes the whole fucking top of your head off!" He had shouted out this last part. Monster looked at him like he was nuts.

Suddenly they were landing. Villagers crowded around, the rotors kicking dirt into the door. Bobby tried to bury his nose into his flak jacket.

"Keep 'em off," shouted the pilot. Bobby fixed his bayonet and stabbed at the villagers as they tried to board. He noticed they were women, and many of them nuns in habit. They backed away fast. Loud Vietnamese chatter tore at his ears. So too did the noise from the rotors. But he couldn't stand the chatter and wanted to just open up on the women until the noise stopped.

A Marine muscled his way through the crowd to jump aboard. Then another and another. They could take on four more before endangering the lift off. Bobby looked toward the hootch and saw Jimmy.

"Come on, Jimmy!"

Jimmy looked up and let out a laugh that got lost in the noise. "Bobby," he mouthed and stepped into the crowd. The villagers spooked and shoved closer. One of them jumped up on the runner. Bobby poked his bayo-

net into her, not deep, just enough to draw blood—let her and the others know he meant business. Bobby looked back up and saw Jimmy couldn't plow his way through to the chopper. Bobby signaled to Monster who worked the M-60 out of its mount, stood on the runners, leaned back against the ship, then started firing from the hip over the Vietnamese women's heads in the air. The villagers dropped, and Jimmy leaped across several backs, but fell some seven or eight feet away from his goal. Two more Marines clambered on board, then a third. The villagers were panicking now. They knew they were about to be left behind to face the VC. They knew they wouldn't stand a chance. Jimmy looked terrified he'd be left too.

The chopper started to lift. Bobby turned toward the pilot and screamed at him, "We gotta get Jimmy!" The pilot glanced over his shoulder and set her back down. Jimmy was scrambling, swinging his rifle. Monster fired over the heads again. Jimmy was closer, just three feet away. Bobby reached out his M-16. Jimmy grabbed, but sliced his fingers on the bayonet. The nearest villager, a young girl, saw the blood. She screamed. The villagers shoved closer. "Ten seconds," yelled the pilot. "Ten-fucking-seconds-my-ass-is-outta-here!"

The villagers elbowed Jimmy out of the way. One jumped up on the runner again. Bobby pulled the trigger point blank and she flew off the runner, blood and flesh into the crowd. Jimmy made it to the chopper again and with a bloody hand grabbed the warm barrel of Bobby's M-16, hung on tight, and stepped up onto the runner. The chopper started to lift. A villager fell against Jimmy's legs, pinned him as he struggled to board. Monster kicked at the woman. Another villager stabbed at the M-16, to grab a hold too.

Bobby felt a jolt travel up his arm. It felt like someone had jump-started his heart. He stared at the

surprise on Jimmy's receding face as the chopper began gaining altitude. Blood poured out a hole in the center of Jimmy's chest. Bobby looked over at Monster. Monster stared back, mirroring Bobby's open mouth, then shouted, "Don't mean shit, man. Don't mean a damn fucking thing."

The women were pulling the pack off Jimmy's body. Bobby opened up on them spraying the area on full auto. Monster opened up too, the M-60 deafening, tearing up dirt and flesh. The chopper was gaining altitude, 100, 200, 300 feet. Monster, a balance of man and machine, still stood on the runner, screaming as he fired the big gun. Bodies lay scattered below. Blood was everywhere, red on black and white. Jimmy lay staring up. Bobby stared back until there was nothing left between them except whiteness. He lay back against one of the Marines behind him. Someone put a hand on his shoulder. "You ain't alone. We lost two dudes yesterday." Bobby wrapped his arms around his knees and buried his head. He thought about the Redwing Blackbird. He thought about executing a forward roll out of the chopper, just tumble a thousand feet to jungle. Then he reached out and grabbed Monster by the cartridge belt, hung on for dear life to keep him from falling. ❑