

18 HOURS TO **FREEDOM**

Most fantastic escape of the Vietnam war—the Silver Star survival saga of the crew of the heli-gunship "Viking Lead"

By Dick Halvorsen

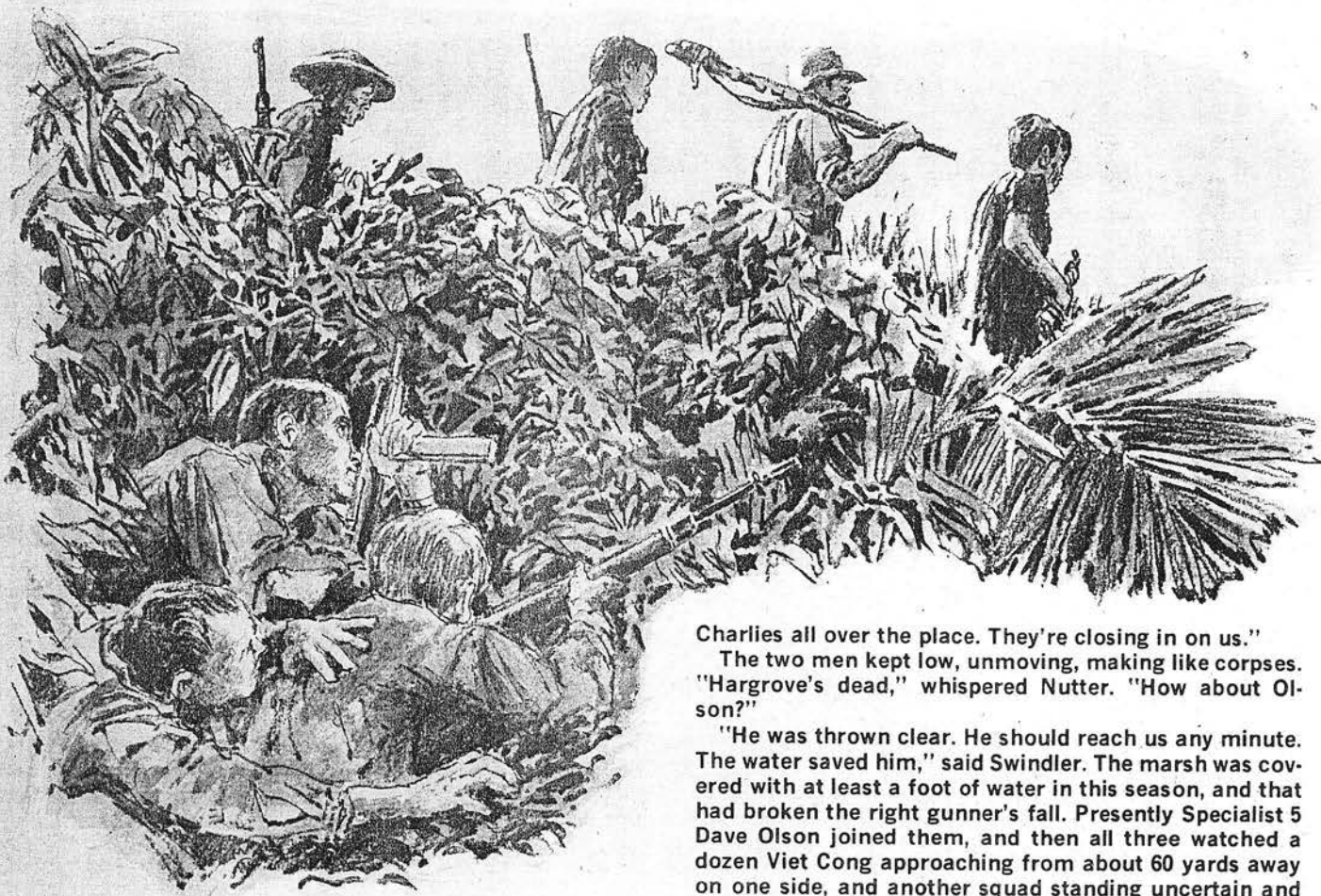
THE NORTH VIETNAMESE AND VIET CONG gunners had zeroed in on the helicopter gunship, blasting away like there was no tomorrow . . . and there would be none for the co-pilot; in that instant some heavy stuff slammed through the windshield and killed him.

Blood splashed over the pilot alongside as he wrestled the HU1 Bravo chopper up from an imminent touchdown on the fiery landing zone to an altitude of about 30 feet when another shot knocked out his cyclic control, leaving Maj. Ray Nutter and his crew riding a crazily careening aircraft. Out of control, the chopper veered to the right as the rotors kept clacking, and then plunged downward finally crashing into a tree with such force that it flipped one side-gunner out of the hatchway into the muck of the Mekong Delta; the other landed on a rounded knoll, nearby. Nutter clung to a steel support in the cockpit as the broken bird death-rattled through the branches and settled in the oozy marsh.

There was no need to check the co-pilot to see if he was dead but Nutter did it anyway. He heard the last sounds from the radio as he grabbed his .45 grease-gun: "The bastards knocked down Viking Lead," he heard one of his chopper pilots say. "They got the major." He had a bad thigh wound and his ankle hurt like hell as he pushed open the twisted door of the cockpit. Blood dripped from his face into the water of the stinking marsh below as Staff/ Sgt. Roger Swindler, the left gunner, pulled him free from the settling craft. "Shut up, sir," said Swindler, "there's

Illustration by Tom Beecham





Slithering through mangrove swamps swarming with guerrillas, quietly silencing VC sentries in deadly hand-to-hand combat, crawling across enemy bunkers and past machine gun nests, the three men painfully made their way toward the landing zone—when, at the last moment, friendly ARVINS opened fire, mistaking them for commie commandos!

Charles all over the place. They're closing in on us."

The two men kept low, unmoving, making like corpses. "Hargrove's dead," whispered Nutter. "How about Olson?"

"He was thrown clear. He should reach us any minute. The water saved him," said Swindler. The marsh was covered with at least a foot of water in this season, and that had broken the right gunner's fall. Presently Specialist 5 Dave Olson joined them, and then all three watched a dozen Viet Cong approaching from about 60 yards away on one side, and another squad standing uncertain and looking at the wreck from another direction.

Nutter surveyed the scene and saw a stand of mangroves nearby. "We got to get into those trees," he said. He saw that Swindler had an M-14 and a bandolier of ammo and his own gun had a second clip taped to the first so he had 60 rounds. Olson said he had no gun; he'd lost it in the crash. But he and Nutter had their eight-inch survival knives.

The Viet Cong were coming closer but apparently didn't see the three men hiding behind the wreck. Instead of stopping to inspect the riddled copter, they kept crawling through the mud and water toward a heavily wooded area, passing the mangroves as they went. It looked good for a few moments for the hiding Americans; then the unexpected occurred. Several of the enemy stopped abruptly, turned, and looked at the sinking helicopter . . . desperately the wounded men moved more directly behind it, trying to make themselves smaller. Suddenly bullets started flying, churning the water near the copter into foam where the men had been crouching only a moment before. But the Viet Cong were only shooting at the wreck as a precaution—they wanted to be sure the crew were dead. . . .

After waiting for the Cong to disappear into the forest, Nutter, Olson, and Swindler dragged themselves to the nearby mangroves where they rested briefly in their temporary shelter. One close-call finished, their real ordeal was just starting—for they had dropped into a pocket of *several thousand enemy troops!*

If they wondered what had gotten them into their predicament, the answer was clear. The stage for the drama had been set by shortcomings in the original mission. From the beginning, the entire operation had gone badly. The choppers working out of Eiton had been in the staging area at about 1400 hours when a gunship platoon was scrambled to relieve a hairy situation about eight miles west-northwest of Eiton. There, a force of some 30



Emergency lift was effected by support chopper team.

Nungs, Chinese mercenaries fighting with the Allies and led by two Green Berets, were pinned down and getting a pasting from an overwhelming force of Viet Cong.

Maj. Raymond T. Nutter was overall commander of the platoon, which consists of two teams of two choppers, a lead and a trail ship, with Nutter in the fifth ship calling the signals. It was raining, and the visibility was zero-zero from the miasma steaming off the rice paddies, as the choppers made for the landing zone where the Nungs had been dropped earlier. They too had been on a rescue mission, to try to retrieve an American prisoner the Viet Cong were reportedly holding. Nutter split his platoon into teams to the west and east of the LZ as they escorted 20 "slicks," troop-carrying choppers, to the site to evacuate the Nungs.

"Aircraft were almost running over each other the visibility was so bad," Nutter described it. "And one slick pilot complained that he had to make three passes before he knew he was over the LZ. The way he knew it was because of the antiaircraft fire he was drawing. We were used to the .50 caliber stuff—but they were throwing up heavier stuff and in more concentration than we'd ever seen—maybe those Chinese 37 mm shells we'd heard about. It was a bad scene, and we knew we couldn't stay long. We couldn't last."

While all the gunships were swooping down almost to deck level to blast away at the enemy, the "dust-offs," the medical rescue choppers, tried to move into the LZ, but were driven off, as were the slicks, by the withering fire from the flak and the .50's. Bullets were chunking into the Bell Bravos, but these craft can take a hell of a beating as long as the vital parts aren't hit. And they can dish it out too. Nutter and the others had effectively silenced a few gunposts with their rockets and cut a deadly swath in the Viet Cong hordes with the .60 machine guns that spit out their 7.62 slugs at incredible speed.

But still the overwhelming enemy kept brushing away the unarmed rescue and mercy choppers, and suddenly a voice came over the radio. It was from one of the Green Berets heading the Nung platoon—or what was left of it. His call sign was "Papa 3."

"Viking Lead!" came the desperate and high-pitched cry. "They're ripping us to pieces. The slicks can't even get in here. You think *you* can get us out?"

On his low passes just skimming the rice paddy Nutter had seen the Nung bodies on the hummocks or in the bloodied water of the landing zone perimeter. He knew it would be a hell of a concentrated fire if they tried a rescue,



Left to right: Spec. 5 Olson, Maj. Nutter, Sgt. Swindler.



Ground contact via radio-pack helped coordinate air cover.

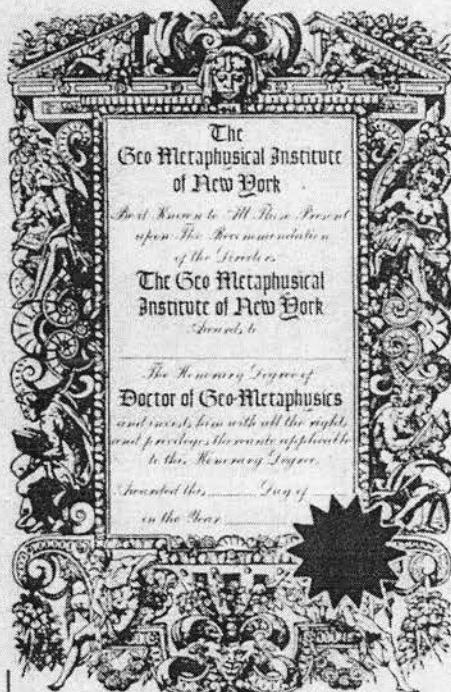
and he turned to Warrant Officer Hargrove. "How about it, Jim? You think we should go in and try to get 'em out?"

"You're going in anyway, right?" Hargrove replied, and added with a smile, "So let's go."

"How about it, you guys?" Nutter asked, turning to the two door-gunners. Slugs kept chunking into the chopper and in the rain and fog sometimes the only thing visible was the trail of sulphurous spent tracers curling past and the pinpoint of orange-red from guns on the ground. "We ain't doing too good

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SOUND OFF

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as friendship-and it can exist.

Those are your three reasons, and I plan on adding something, so read on. You say you love animals, you hate people. Have you tried to understand people, not just cope with but understand?

I don't know what you were fighting before "quitting" as you said. If you mean fighting for life, sanity and individuality, then why the hell did you quit? It got too rough? It seemed hopeless? Succeeding over a rough or hopeless situation gives the best kind of satisfaction. Try talking to other animal-lovers, talk to anybody, write to pen-pals from those stupid screen magazines, but keep at it, at anything constructive. And not at the destruction of your sanity.

Also, I'd like to add kindling to the fire the Marines started over their skill. I'm a clerk-typist in an air-conditioned office, so they may well figure I'm not qualified to talk. I like a number of Marines, and I'm sure there are many more I'd like.

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up here," someone said, and first Olson, then Swindler, took a hand off the machine guns they cradled and made the thumbs-up sign.

"Papa 3! Papa 3! This is Viking Lead
..."

There was no answer, and Nutter repeated the call.

It was another voice this time, a tired one. "He's dead," the voice rasped. "An' I'm hit bad . . ."

"We'll get you out," the major said, and headed for the LZ, letting go with the rest of his rockets and blasting the pimples of flame from the enemy positions with his machine guns. Olson and Swindler exhausted clip after clip of ammo at the Viet Cong, and then came a new voice:

"Hurry, hurry, choppers!" came the scream with an Oriental inflection. A Nung. It meant both Green Berets were gone.

And when they came into the path of the heavy stuff, the tracers weren't curling and twisting, but coming straight and true. And then came the shot that blasted out the windshield and caught Hargrove in the chest, and a moment later the slug that smashed out the cyclic control, sending them sashaying through the soup and rain and finally down to some uncertain fate. . . .

In the muck amid the mangroves the three men moved slowly to prevent splashing sounds in the knee-deep water, seeking the comparative safety of the thicker forest. Nutter led the way, his thigh-wound bleeding as much as his face but nothing hurting as much as the wrenched ankle. The pain was providential in a way, because it meant they had to stop every little while, and when they did they peered cautiously around. And one of these times they paused, then froze, and then slowly sank like melting statues into the water as a Viet Cong pa-

I'm only talking to the John Wayne-types who plan on staying in 20 years after they've won the war in Vietnam.

The Marines I'm referring to, keep up the idea they're the greatest thing that ever walked. They chew bullets, sleep with flak jackets on, kill Cong with an arm tied behind their backs.

I knew a Sgt. E5 who landed at a small beach in Chu Lai. Reporters and photographers pushed him and his men off the beach so that they could take pictures of the "initial Marine assault."

I'm not knocking the Marines, but I think that they should recognize that the Army is not merely a bunch of immature pantywaists who aren't hip to what's going on. You don't get casualties from playing solitaire. I could point out a lot of Marine fiascoes, but everyone has them and the Army, much larger and entitled to a few more, is certainly not immune.

William A. Howes
Long Binh, Vietnam

trol not a dozen yards away splashed noisily past. The patrol gone, they resumed their halting pace. But Nutter knew that soon the Cong would check the wrecked chopper, find one body—and *know* that three men had survived.

It wouldn't take much of a brain to figure out their escape route through the nearby mangroves. And pursuit would follow quickly. The trio plodded warily on.

Suddenly Nutter let out a half-stifled cry of surprise and just managed to stiff-arm a warning to the others to halt. He had slid off an underwater ledge and was up to his armpits in water. As his feet touched he felt relief at the coolness of the deep current. He was in a stream that just might be an avenue of escape. His grease-gun hadn't gotten wet. Fine. He beckoned to the others to follow, and they moved 100 yards deeper into the mangroves, Swindler and Nutter holding their guns high over the neck-deep water.

The sounds of battle hadn't abated, but they were dulled by woods and foliage around them, and at the moment even their heartbeats seemed audible; a ripple of water could give away their position. Mortar shells crumpled in the distance and machine guns chattered, and the lulls were punctuated by the staccato rifle fire of snipers trying to take their toll of the ARVN's (South Vietnam's army) pushing out from the perimeter of Eiton. The rain and the fog was a damper on the battle as well as the sound, but what Nutter knew and the trio feared was that in any battle a stand of forest is a welcome refuge for fleeing or cautious soldiers, and the ideal hunting ground for snipers.

The nearby gunfire and occasional clatter of choppers overhead was no cover for sounds they might make. Anything they took for a bush or other foliage in this vaporish weather might suddenly materialize into a camouflaged Viet Cong

sniper. It was a breathless business at best. Now Nutter heard something and he cautiously held up his hand and the two men behind him stopped. Not far away he heard the gabble of voices and then he saw a group of Viet Cong in their rag-tag black outfits coming their way.

He felt as though his eyes were operating independently, like some strange jungle creature's as he swiftly scanned the scene, taking in everything at once. He saw some lily pads off to the right and he made a flat, horizontal gesture with his hand, like a conductor quieting a symphony orchestra, and sank to his eyes and made for the lily pads. The others understood the gesture and followed suit. He stopped abruptly, letting Olson and Swindler go past him. Only their hair showed above water as they merged with the lily-pads, and then, with a feeling of horror, Nutter saw Olson's red hair standing out like a beacon. And so he reached out and grabbed Olson's hair and pushed him under and held him there until the Cong had changed course, slowly disappeared, and the danger was past.

Olson came up sputtering, and whispered fiercely at the major, "What the hell are you trying to do, drown me... sir?"

The combination of outrage and military protocol was too much for Nutter and Swindler and their laughter came out in snorts which they finally had to muffle under water. "Sorry, Oley," the major said, "your hair just doesn't blend with the terrain." He moved over to the bank and grabbed a handful of mud and glopped it over Olson's hair. "That'll help," he said, and they moved on. They had only gone a short distance when more Viet Cong appeared and this time they had to remain motionless under creeper-vines along the bank for over half an hour until the party, resting, was snapped back into action by the NCO.

As they stood immersed to the mouth in water, blood-sucking leeches clamped onto their bodies and they could do nothing to dislodge them. It takes a carbolic compound to relieve the ghastly itching of these slimy things, and sometimes only a knife can remove them. The pain from them is one thing, but along with it comes the overwhelming need to scratch, and the combination of agonies was like being tickled to death by barbed wire. Now as they surged on they could do nothing until they had gotten out of the water, nothing but scratch at the vile worms under their clothes which only drove the sucking heads deeper under the skin, heads that continue to chew even after the blood-bloated bodies have been sheared off.

At last they crawled up onto a bank, seeing none of the enemy around, and began busily plucking away the leeches they could see from their forearms, and pricking at the ones under their clothes with the knives Nutter and Olson had, working on each other until they removed all they could get to. Any first aid stuff they had was soaked or befouled, their shirts a mess of mud, and they couldn't treat their bites any more than they could attend to the cuts on Nutter's face or the gaping wound on his thigh. The sprained ankle had ballooned, and Nutter knew

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this mud-slogging was going to be hell compared to the practically weightless walking through the stream.

Resting, and making sure their guns were relatively clean and functional, the three men took gulps of water from a canteen and Nutter tried to get his bearings. He knew they had been shot down on the regimental perimeter of ground held by the ARVN's, the South Vietnamese Army, and with the Cong striking it would be hard to tell which side was where. Suddenly, as if to emphasize the validity of this thought, shells came screeching into the mangroves and exploding not far away. Looking up, the men saw through a gap in the trees that though it was still raining lightly, the ceiling was lifting. Nutter knew that the choppers would soon be working over the area.

Bursting shells coming closer, the clatter and roar of gunships growing louder, and the sight of rockets flaming across the sky to a point just beyond where they clung to the bank, forced Nutter to make a decision.

"We've got to get the hell out of here!" he snapped, grimacing as he got to his feet and tested his ankle. "We'll get knocked off by our own guns."

"Duck!" yelled Olson, hurling himself into the brush as the others followed suit. Machine-gun bullets from a gunship ripped into the bank they had left. The artillery shells kept bursting in the mangrove forest, and the concentration of ground and airfire seemed no haphazard thing. Nutter motioned the man to follow him down into the underbrush, hand-signaling them to silence.

"We've got to be awful careful," the 37-year-old major said in a low voice. "It's no accident they're zeroing in on this neck of the woods—the chopper crews must have seen the Viet Cong ducking in here." He parted the foliage and looked out. "There'll be plenty of them around, so keep your gun ready, Swindler..." He checked his own grease-gun, and then told Olson, who had only his knife, to stay between them. He led the way out of the thicket and Swindler brought up the rear. Although shells and fire continued to erupt in the woods, the rattle of groundfire off toward where they believed Elton to be, indicated that the fiercest fire-fighting was going on some distance away.

The heavy cloud-cover was hastening the twilight, and glancing at his watch Nutter was astounded to see that the trio had been hiding, ducking, and playing possum for almost three hours since they were shot down at about 1415 hours. If the sky lightened, gunship fire from above would become more deadly—yet when it became dark they could accidentally stumble into death-dealing trouble. They didn't have much choice. Nutter reckoned as he limped along on the swollen ankle, headed, he hoped, for a link-up with his own side. And they were often hard to distinguish when you consider that under the American helmets could be the faces of ARVN's, Nungs, South Koreans, Filipinos, and even the turn-around Viet Cong called the Kit Carsons.

Pain in every step. Nutter and his crew, pushed to the limits of exhaustion and

bleeding from bloodsucker bites and the whiplash wounds from thorny branches, forged on for another hour. Many times they fell exhausted, but the fear of a lurking enemy, who might bring death, sparked them on to further efforts. At last they hit dry ground, and presently spotted a ramshackle hut in a clearing. Nutter held a hand up as they came to the edge of the woods, casing the hut for a full five minutes from their cover. There wasn't a spot around the clearing his eyes didn't search. Finally, they ventured out and made for the hut. It was considerably lighter in the clearing and dusk didn't seem so imminent. Nutter wondered whether the hut might be an obvious target for the gunships, but decided to have a look inside for stuff that could be used as bandages. They went in with GI caution.

It was dank and musty inside, and seemed to be some kind of general store with candy and unidentifiable dried foods and herbs on the shelves. Olson and Swindler kicked a door open, knife and gun ready. It was just a small closet storeroom; and no one was there. There was a picture of Ho Chi Minh on the wall, and the irrepressible Olson was just about to pick up a crayon from a box on the shelf when the 33-year-old Swindler stopped him. "Hold it!" he said.

"I just want to write something on that poster," said Olson.

"This stuff might be booby-trapped," the staff sergeant said, and checked things out. "It's O.K.," he concluded at last.

Olson wrote an appropriate obscenity under Ho's picture and they all laughed. Their search for bandages, sheets, or cloth suitable for binding wounds was fruitless, and then Nutter said, "We'd better cut out." The sounds of cannonading continued all around them. "Any pilot spots this, he's going to blast it."

They bent low as they emerged, spreading out as they started for the other side of the clearing and the "safety" of the mangroves. Suddenly a Viet Cong darted out of the edge of the forest, his gun leveled at one of them. They all flopped and rolled. Swindler landing on his elbows, prone, and letting fly with two quick shots from his M-14 as the Viet Cong's slugs kicked up dust. Swindler's second shot dropped him, and as they crossed to the mangroves Olson picked up the dead man's gun and a bag of bullets. The gun was an M-14!

It gave Olson a lot of satisfaction to heft the gun which had to have been heisted from a dead Allied soldier.

Then the trio plunged into the thicket of mangroves and tried to lose themselves from the enemy. "No matter which direction we went," Nutter said later, "we were within 50, 60, or 100 yards of a platoon, or larger force. Farther beyond there were battalions fighting in the regimental perimeter. We sort of made a half moon circle in this trek—looking for a place to sneak through—and always feeling the Charlies were behind every tree as well as breathing down our necks." They had the feeling all the time that they were always within a mile or a half-mile of their own battalion headquarters, but knowing which way to go was another matter. And keeping a straight course, even if they did know, was impossible be-

cause of the danger of Viet Cong popping up just about anywhere...

"The next encounter," continued Nutter, "was when we were shoulder to shoulder crawling and pushing to get through this underbrush and we came up on a VC—I guess he was a messenger an' he had his weapon in one hand an' a kind of ammo box or something in the other—an' I guess we almost touched him when we bumped into him. At this time I was in the front left—Olson in the middle—and swindler on the right—an' Olson had his M-14 ready and the VC whirled and then we jumped up an' Olson and the VC were kind of standing there facing each other—all of us real startled—"

"But Olson got over his double-take of surprise quickest—an' he was so close he couldn't fire the gun so he gave the Charlie a backhand club over the head with the barrel of the M-14 an' then I jumped on him as he fell an' got him with the knife."

Momentarily all three of them were shook by the bloody encounter. Nutter looking away with a grimace as he pulled the eight inch blade from the dead VC. Olson, just 22 and with his first hand-to-hand combat with the enemy only seconds behind him, still stared transfixed at the dead man.

"Snap out of it!" hissed Nutter, shaking Olson and then hauling him down by the shoulder into the cover of the brush. He sheathed his knife after wiping off the blood on some leaves and then told the two men to follow him at an interval of several paces as he went ahead to reconnoiter. Where there was one Viet Cong there should be more, he reasoned, and a moment later saw half-a-dozen in the distance. They spotted him at the same time. He let go with a burst from the grease-gun before they had a chance to fire, and one VC threw up his hands and the others fled as the deadly slugs from the .45 ripped the foliage around them. The man who was hit slowly crumpled and lay still. Nutter signaled to the men behind him, and veered to the left away from the scene, shifting silently through the woods until they came to a kind of canal.

"It was 30 or 40 feet across," said Nutter, "we could see that, and there was a bank leading down to it. Somehow Olson got ahead of us and I called him back—and then I got 20 or 30 feet ahead of the others and I came up on this one individual and he saw me at the same time. Those VC may be small but they're awful tough and wiry—he came at me with a knife because he had dropped his gun—and the ground was as slippery as we were. We went at it for a spell and then I fell into the inlet to the canal—and we kept trying to get each other's head under water..."

The wounded major, operating on pure nerve and reflex now, summoned up the strength for the terrible combat. The others, slithering their way toward the scene, were unable to come to his aid. Tempted to use their guns, they knew firing would bring other VC running. And a shot at the writhing, entwined combatants would be too risky; one moment the VC was on top, a target, but a split second later it was Nutter who was in the sights. They

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grunted and gasped as Swindler and Olson drew nearer on uncertain footing, watching apprehensively.

They saw the fighting figures disappear from view beneath the water . . . once . . . twice. Though the bigger man, Nutter was weak from the long trek, from loss of blood. The VC was quick and used to the footing: the swampland had long been his bailiwick. The watching Americans saw the VC get a grip on the wrist of the major's knife-hand, lashing out with his blade. The knife slipped from Nutter's bleeding fist, and then splashed into the water. The VC missed once, then stabbed again, and this time Nutter grabbed desperately for the other's weapon, *catching it by the blade.*

The major's indrawn gasp of pain as he wrenched at the razor-sharp knife sounded loud and clear over the splashing. He clubbed the VC with his other fist, twisted the knife free from his hand, and then shifted it so he was holding the hilt and looking for an opening. It came as the VC slipped, came at him again, and then Nutter plunged it into the VC's chest up to the hilt.

The enemy fell, and Nutter stood there tottering a moment, looking at his gory palm as Olson and Swindler came up and grabbed him before he slumped and joined the dead man in the canal.

The encounter opened the thigh wound and the VC had added a few more deep cuts to Nutter's grisly store of wounds. The major was fast nearing the point of exhaustion from the loss of blood and the long and arduous trek through the forest, mud and water. But the three of them managed to get across the canal, Swindler picking up Nutter's grease-gun, dropped in the melee, and bringing it over. It was choked with mud. Groggy as he was, Nutter had reacted instinctively and pulled the knife out of the VC's chest and sheathed it, so he still had a serviceable weapon to use.

On higher ground, they sought refuge in a thicket, a moment or two for breathing. Later, they were to wonder whether they'd gotten more tired from expending their energy in combat or holding their breaths in apprehension. Hopefully they washed out the grease-gun, bathed their

wounds and hoped the blood would stop flowing. Caked mud sometimes draws the sting and poison from leech bites, but in their sodden march through swamp and streams and rain, the mud they applied couldn't stay dry long enough to cake. At last, leg throbbing and mind reeling, Nutter rose to resume the seemingly endless trek when he suddenly realized it was dark. A glance at his luminous dial showed the major that they'd been almost ceaselessly on the go for five hours.

It made no difference. They had to keep going if they ever expected to get back to Eiton, and at least now the gunfire was slackening off. Nutter figured, too, that the enemy troops would use the cover of darkness to rest, lowering their guard a bit.

He was right, up to a point; the next two VC didn't get the drop on them first. The last experience made them wary of every move, every dark shape, every opaque silhouette. But suddenly their silent progress was marred and one of them tripped, and cursed under his breath. Then Nutter saw two dark shapes in a hole ahead of him, and hurled himself at them. "In this next encounter there wasn't any resistance," Nutter said, in his description of that night of hell. "These two VC dropped their weapons and put their hands up in a kind of praying motion—an' we clamped our hands over their mouths an' held them so they wouldn't yell. There were VC 50 or 60 yards away in all directions—an' then when we had them we didn't know what to do with them."

"I put it to a vote an' we were two-to-one against killing them. I guess there was a little self-preservation involved in the decision. If we got captured after killing them, the other VCs might kind of get mad. I really don't know why we decided that way. But I knew that even if they are small, they've got a lot of energy an' if you try to kill them they get mighty hard to get along with. An' we were pretty pooped."

"So they'd surrendered—we played it right, I guess—an' we tied 'em up and gagged 'em an' threw them off the path an' we forgot about them because we had a lot of things on our minds. Like getting away from the scene of the crime."

Until their vision adjusted to the night, Nutter decided to keep to the edge of the canal which stood out from the black of the land and therefore provided a path to follow. Hobbling slowly, the major fell behind the others, and then he heard a gasp up ahead and a moment later found Olson and Swindler climbing into a sampan moored to the shore. It was a temptation, because it would be an easy mode of travel, but Nutter roughly ordered his NCOs out of the boat.

"It would be murder," he whispered. "If the VC didn't get us, our own gunships would." It was scarcely necessary to point out that the VC would challenge a moving sampan, and expect a counter-sign in their own tongue. And they knew from their own experience that gunships roving at night shot at anything that moved. "We got to walk."

"Kill-joy was here," whispered Olson to Swindler, and Nutter smiled to himself as they pressed on, taking a natural fork away from the canal once their night-vision had adjusted and they were able to distinguish trees and bushes in the darkness. Once again they were in the woods and then suddenly Nutter found himself stepping into a clearing, and then stepping back quickly and bumping into Olson and hissing a warning to stop.

Dimly they could see in the clearing what looked to be a Viet Cong command post, and the silhouettes of men moving around and the outlines of what looked to be guns.

"What a target," said Nutter, raising his grease-gun.

"Jeez, skipper!" whispered Swindler, aghast. "We couldn't—"

"I know. Don't worry," sighed Nutter. "But we'd have a ball for a while."

Slowly and carefully, pushing branches aside and threading gingerly through underbrush despite the overriding noise the Viet Cong in the clearing were making, the trio went around the impromptu compound. You could never tell just where they might have a sentry posted. They kept going until they were clear of the woods and then emerged onto gradually rising ground.

Whatever posture Nutter assumed on the long march, the others imitated. As he climbed a hillock in this new clearing, Nutter bent lower and lower to present less of a vertical silhouette in case enemy eyes were searching the slightly luminescent horizon over the hill. Suddenly he heard voices scant yards ahead of him and he stopped in his tracks and gently eased himself flat on the ground. Olson and Swindler following suit. They elbowed up silently so they were abreast of the major. "Stay where you are," Nutter whispered. "I'm gonna have a look."

The major squirmed forward, soundlessly, looking into the darkness to see whose voices he'd heard. Again he heard them and suddenly he came to the abrupt end of the hillock—and then looked down. What he was able to dimly make out was a rifle—then another—sticking out of firing slits in the sheer face of the hillock. "Good God, what a spot!" he thought, painfully elbowing his body back to the others.

"That was a close one," he said, wiping sweat from his face. Sweat and blood.

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"We're right on top of a VC bunker. Let's get the hell out of here!"

They struggled their way down the hill, or mound, and found they were still exposed in the clearing, and Nutter looked around, hesitant, trying to guess which way was best to skirt the dangerous bunker.

"You think they heard us?" Swindler asked.

"You never know," Nutter whispered back. "Let's move this way."

It could have been the slowest end run in war, but the three Americans managed to get around the big bunker without discovery and then suddenly they halted again.

"It's another bunker," Nutter cautioned the others as they started up a rise. He backed down, and then he heard the cries of babies and women; it was a bunker being used as a refuge for villagers in the area.

"They must have found it themselves," Nutter said as they wended their way around this obstacle also, and then made for the trees. "The VC would never provide it."

The trees they came to were not a real forest, but a kind of thin fringe for a dike which Nutter remembered from a little-used chart in his map-case. They got by this and found themselves on reasonably firm ground amid tall grass in a clearing. Now he ordered a pause for a rest; it was the kind of place that was fine at night, but would be alive with VC in the daytime. "Maybe we can get some sleep here," he told Olson and Swindler. In the distance they could see the sporadic flash of an artillery piece being fired, then followed long moments later by its burst on landing far off. The clatter of rotors told the men choppers were aloft on night business, searching for something, bend on destruction. All this seemed almost soothing after what they'd just been through.

But as if to punish them for such thoughts of security, a gunship wheeled overhead and dropped a flare, turning night into day in the vicinity of the spot where they now stood stooped in head-high grass. They didn't—they couldn't—move, and they just offered up silent prayers that the VC didn't spot them. But the flare died as it dangled in its parachute, and they were in darkness again.

"I hope that's the last one for a while," Nutter said as they made themselves comfortable, deciding to rest, and even sleep, here for a while. They sank to the ground and found it almost dry. It was the first time in over seven hours they'd been on land that didn't ooze under them.

But it was a short-lived break. Minutes later they heard a concerted roar in the distance, and sensed that trouble was heading their way; it was something that their minds could have anticipated when they saw that flare, if they hadn't been so exhausted. The probing helicopter had been looking for the enemy in the light of the flare, and the pilot probably had spotted the bunkers they'd just skirted, or the ant-hill of Viet Cong they'd seen scurrying around the previous clearing.

Whatever it was that had caught the recon man's eye, a jet strike had been or-

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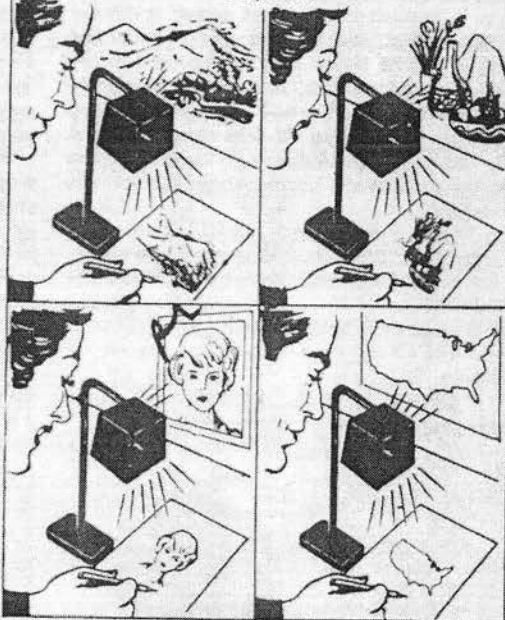
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dered, and presently the fighter-bombers were roaring overhead, circling high and then screaming down out of the overcast. Nutter quickly estimated the angle of the flame from the tail-pipes and yelled, "Grab that earth and hold on!"

Then the bombs came whistling and moments later they were bursting all over the field around them, hot splinters of steel falling among them as the bombs fragmented and tossed shrapnel every which way. Screams from all over the area told them they were not alone in the field. One strike over, the choppers moved in over a wide area and dropped more flares, and the roaring jets shrieked high in a monstrous night-song, a lively death-dirge, and sighted on things in the light of the flares and let go with more bombs and rockets that flamed down toward them, and beyond—to produce more agonizing screams. It was small comfort to the scared Americans to know that the good guys were taking their toll of the enemy.

"Split, you bastards, split!" Olson kept repeating, and the trio clawed the earth, prone, and wishing they at least had a slit trench.

It was only a short strike, really, but it seemed to the men that it had lasted for hours.

"They'll be back," Nutter said, "let's get cracking and find some woods."

They hadn't gone far when they saw a few dozen Viet Cong passing along the horizon in single file, and they held fast until the enemy disappeared. They were back in the swamp in a few minutes, and they were suddenly surrounded by clouds of mosquitoes clustering around their leech-bites and the bloody wounds on Nutter's face. The insects' needles darted into their faces and forearms, and finally Nutter, who'd used most of his own T-shirt as bandages, told the NCO's to rip out theirs from under their shirts and cover their faces as a protection. With Viet Cong all over the place, even the ripping of cloth might reveal their position, so they timed their ripping efforts to synchronize with the bomb blasts. At last they succeeded, and moved on with masks covering all but their eyes. But the painful bites on their exposed arms didn't abate.

Fear of discovery by the Viet Cong worked as a counter-irritant and, reflecting on it later, the men decided that the agony of the mosquito attack wasn't so bad after all.

Suddenly Nutter's fagged-out brain had a moment of perception, of understanding what the bombing attack had meant. It wasn't so long ago, though now it seemed an eternity, that he had been back at battalion HQ and had been privy to the knowledge of a planned

seek-and-destroy mission which was interrupted by the search for the alleged American prisoner held by the Viet Cong, resulting in the probable annihilation of the Nungs. It now came back to him in sharp focus.

"We've got to hold on until morning," he whispered to Olson and Swindler. "Then the South Vietnamese 21st Division will be sweeping through this area. We'll get more fighter-bomber strikes and there'll be gunship cover for the operation. We've just got to stay hidden until they find us."

The 21st, a Ranger type group of ARVN's, was a crack outfit, and had a reputation for always advancing when the chips were down. It might have been a soothing thought if the mosquitoes weren't harassing them so, and the Viet Cong couldn't be heard calling to each other and moving all around the vicinity.

"Try to get some sleep," Nutter said softly, and Olson and Swindler managed a kind of succession of quick naps which were only the twilight zone of real sleep. The artillery ceased fire as if by mutual consent, and there was a bombing halt and all gunship activity seemed to disappear. From the comparative quiet that prevailed, Nutter guessed the Viet Cong were loading their wounded onto sampans in the meandering canal, and either shifting to another area or bringing in reinforcements. The flurry of activity could only be guessed at, and in his pessimistic mood Nutter could only expect that there'd be more Viet Cong around them come morning.

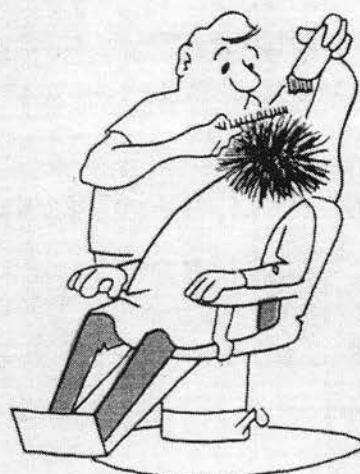
First light broke around 0630 a.m. and though the two NCOs could hardly be described as eager, they'd gotten some rest in their fitful sleep. Nutter was bleary-eyed, but his blood had mercifully clotted around his wounds and when dawn crept in, the mosquitoes went into hiding or went off after fresh targets. They might be settling for the unresisting bodies of dead Cong. Through the night Nutter had kept sweeping them away from the faces and arms of his sleeping friends.

"We'll just sit things out for a while," the major cautioned, "and hope we can get spotted by the choppers when they come over."

They didn't have long to wait. Like a distant rumble of thunder the artillery burst forth, and then presently the helicopters came clattering through the sky. An orbiting chopper whirled overhead, and the temptation to stand up and shout, though impulsive, had to be checked. The men managed to keep cool heads, and lay on their backs, desultorily waving the grimy green rags that had served as face-masks. Suddenly Nutter was off his back and in a crouch looking into the distance, keeping beneath the level of the foliage. The others followed suit, and watched as a gaggle of helicopters swarmed into a spot in swift succession about three-quarters of a mile away.

"They're landing the ARVN's," Nutter whispered, and then he saw the gunships loosing their rockets, and the path of tracers from the machine guns disappearing into the terrain in support of the operation. Slowly Nutter and his men crept in the direction of the LZ, careful

(Continued on page 92)



Gilligan

(Continued from page 90)

not to disturb foliage whose movement would be a telltale indicator of their position. Nutter's swollen ankle was an agony to drag, but biting his lip to counter one pain with another helped some. Finally he raised a hand and the men halted.

"Let's check our guns and rest a bit," the major said. Their elbows were scraped and torn from the crawling, and they gasped wearily from the use of unaccustomed muscles.

The weary men went over their guns with the multi-purpose T-shirts and laid out their ammunition on the ground, wiping everything as clean as they could get it. Olson and Swindler knew that it was just an excuse for a breather; they could see that Nutter had just about had it. But obediently they went through the motions, pretending it was necessary.

Then once again they heard voices, the sing-song of Vietnamese which could mean instant doom if they were discovered. Nutter parted the brush and looked out, recognizing the American helmets and outfits of the men of the 21st.

"They're ARVN's!" he said, and with a thrill of anticipation they moved into the open.

Instantly bullets slammed around them and kicked up dirt around their feet for the split second it took them to react instinctively and dive back into cover.

Plunging away from the pursuing slugs, the men grabbed, clawed, and crawled through sword grass and a moment later were stopped cold as the ground gave way and they sank up to their waists in mud.

"They think we're VC," someone understated as they tried to move through the morass. Bullets continued to zing over their heads. Nutter by now was exhausted and slumped in the mud while Olson tended to him and Swindler fought his way out, yelling everything he could think of to clue in the ARVN's that they were Yanks.

Finally he pulled out of the mud and the firing stopped and a gunshot swooped down on the soldiers from a distance. And then as Swindler raised his head above the grass, still yelling, the South Vietnamese platoon leader came running forward and grabbed Swindler, face beaming, and the two did a little dance as ARVN's in the back continued shooting in their direction. Their fire was, however, directed beyond them into the path along the dike where a Viet Cong had suddenly risen and was drawing a bead on the Americans. He fell dead, riddled with bullets, before he could pull his trigger.

The swooping helicopter hovered over them a moment, its pilot busy on the radio, and then went on to pour a hail of fire and rockets at the Viet Cong fleeing the area from where the three Americans

had emerged only a few hours before. Incredibly, they had slipped through pockets of VC squads that had been left as a rearguard during the night. The message from the chopper, which was one of Nutter's own platoon, brought others wheeling in.

"It was the first time I felt secure since our aircraft hit the ground the day before," Nutter said.

When the dustoff chopper came in, and Nutter managed to recognize and say *Hi!* to Maj. Don Bissell before he collapsed in the medical evacuation ship. There was no longer any need to display their courage and stamina or call upon an apparently inexhaustible supply of adrenalin to fortify them, so Olson and Swindler staggered to the dustoff, were lifted through the door, and flopped on the nearest litters and flaked out.

Then Major Bissell took the chopper in a wide semi-circular swing that passed over the dike, the canal, the mangrove woods, the stream, and Nutter's broken bird, and headed back for the staging area at Eiton, then on to the hospital at Soc Trang. The half-moon swing over that path, which the three determined Yanks had taken 18 hours to bull and fight their way through in one of the great war escapes of all time, was uneventful.

(Olson and Swindler got Silver Stars for their part in this action, and Hargrove a posthumous DFC.) ★ THE END

AMERICA'S TERRIFYING WOODLAND MONSTER-MEN

(Continued from page 37)

nine expeditions into the isolated areas of her country.

Even more interesting was a report from Dr. Koffman that a farmer in the Caucasus Mountain Range had successfully trained a Snowman to perform chores on the farm. The story is fragmentary; however, the farmer apparently discovered a starving snowman and the creature became very docile when the farmer fed him.

"The beast became something of an interesting pet," the report stated. "He followed the farmer around the farm when chores were done, and quickly learned to perform some of the simpler tasks. Eventually, the farmer taught his hairy hired hand to drive a tractor. The beast was very proficient in handling the tractor but was unable to learn how to start the machine."

There are persistent rumors from Russia that the Soviet scientific establishment has captured a live Snowman. The creature is reportedly being examined in Moscow in a top secret project. Some credence can be given to this possibility because there have been an untold number of sightings in the Caucasus Mountains over the last several hundred years. The *Agachikishi*, *Kaptar*, *Mesheadam* and the *Alimasti* are regional names in various parts of the USSR for the Abominable Snowman. Each year, there are hundreds of confrontations with Snowmen behind the Iron Curtain and communist scientists have launched a world-wide investigation.

If the thought of Snowmen trained to toil for farmers seems farfetched, the al-

ternate possibility of these creatures being judged human would be equally staggering.

"Your imagination wouldn't have to stretch too far to see some fascinating political problems if Snowmen are real," an attorney declared. "As a human, they would have the same rights as any other citizen. This would include the right to vote, own property, enter into legal contracts and, of course, be responsible for their acts."

The attorney reflected for a moment, then laughed aloud. "The government would undoubtedly decide they were wards of the state," he chuckled. "The politicians would create another government bureau to manage their affairs. Some politician would start thinking about the Snowman vote and we would have another poverty program!"

One of the most startling phenomena connected with the most recent sightings in North America has been the locality of the encounters. Traditionally, past glimpses of these mysterious creatures have occurred primarily in isolated mountain ranges. The "Oh-mahs" and the "Big Feet" prowled the western mountains while their cousins, the Sasquash, roamed British Columbia and western Canada. It appeared that these families, or tribes, of Snowmen liked the lush vegetation of the forest and the security of mountains.

Then, in the late 1950s, a rash of reports occurred in Missouri, Florida, Michigan and even arid desert areas. Game wardens and conservation officers in several northern midwest states claim the

Canadian Snowmen are migrating southward.

In the summer of 1965, Monroe County, Mich., was panicked by a hairy monster that terrorized residents during that summer. Teen-aged Christine Van Acker and her mother, Rose Owens, declared they were attacked by a man-like beast when their automobile stalled on a lonely highway. Dozens of frightening reports poured in from other residents who claimed to have experienced unnerving encounters with the creature. A migrant worker claimed to have battled a Snowman when the beast attempted to kidnap a young woman.

Another sighting occurred on the evening of Nov. 8, 1966, when William and James Cagle were driving toward Marietta, Ga., from their home in Oklahoma. They braked their truck to negotiate a sharp curve in the highway near Winona, Miss. As the vehicle slowed down, one of the huge creatures rushed down the slope toward the truck.

"When my headlights picked him up, he was on our left side," James Cagle wrote. "He was aggressive, angry and ready to attack. Personally, I don't believe he was angry at me or my brother. When I was out in northern California I heard these things dislike noise. He may have wanted to destroy my truck because the sound may have disturbed his sensitive ears."

"The creature was no more than 20 feet from us when we slowed down to seven or eight miles per hour," James Cagle continued. "The face looked like a mixture of a gorilla and a human. The arms and legs were very large. The chest was at least three feet thick. His eyes glowed in the dark and did not seem to have pupils."

"It looked us over, then slowly raised