

A FOREST DARK

Written by

Ben Wolf

"Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost."

- Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*

FADE IN:

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

1975.

Hands untie a headband. Remove a denim jacket with a V.V.A.W. pin. Work boots kicked off followed by torn jeans.

They're replaced by slacks. Dress shoes. A collared button down. A blazer.

PULL BACK to REVEAL ANDREW "SHEP" SHEPARD smoking a cigarette as he eyes himself in the mirror. He's 30s with long hair and a thick mustache. Brazenly counter-culture. Has that keyed up vulnerability of Pacino in "Dog Day Afternoon".

He adjusts the jacket, uncomfortable in it - uncomfortable in his own skin, really - but trying to look presentable. He smooths his long hair back over his ears.

He sighs heavily. He still looks like a freak.

Shep opens his closet and rustles around. Top shelf. Way in the back.

He pulls a duffle bag down and opens it to reveal Army dress blues. He pulls the necktie off the uniform and puts it on.

His HANDS TREMBLE in the mirror as they knot the tie and he freezes.

He holds a hand in front of his face to study its tremor. His reaction tells us that this has happened before. And it's not good.

SHEP
Jesus Christ.

EXT. ARMY BASE - DAY

Wet leaves cover the roads of a North Carolina winter.

Shep guides his pickup to an entrance. A sign reads:

FORT BRAGG

Home of The Airborne and Special Operations Forces

AT THE GUARDHOUSE the truck stops and Shep rolls his window down. The GUARD eyes Shep's hair with disdain.

GUARD
ID.

Shep hands him his license and refers to a letter.

SHEP
I'm Andrew Shepard here to see
uh...
(reading)
...David Kearney.

GUARD
Here to see who?

Shep hands him the letter, pointing.

SHEP
Kearney comma David.
(then)
He's with CID.

The Guard looks him over again, not sure what to make of that.

The Guard checks him off on his clipboard and waves him through. He shakes his head as the truck passes, a peace sign painted on the tailgate.

CLOSE ON: AUDIO TAPE reels spin. A tabletop MICROPHONE.

KEARNEY (O.S.)
August 19th, 1975. This is the
testimony of former Sergeant Andrew
Shepard. Questioning conducted by
Investigator David Kearney.

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

Shep sits in a folding chair across from KEARNEY, whose demeanor is as starched as his shirt.

Shep's already sweating.

KEARNEY
Mr. Shepard, thank you for joining
me today.

SHEP
Oh, sure. Yeah. Great to be here.

KEARNEY
Do you know why I've asked to speak
with you?

SHEP
You want to ask me some questions
about the war?

Kearney doesn't respond.

SHEP (CONT'D)

I got a phone call from a couple of the guys in my old unit. Like a heads up after they sat down with you.

KEARNEY

And they told you what I've been asking about?

SHEP

Sure, yeah.

KEARNEY

And do you have a reaction to that?

Shep laughs, oozing discomfort. He lights a cigarette.

SHEP

Um. I suppose I do, man.

KEARNEY

This doesn't have to be difficult. I'm not here to accuse you of anything. You were a part of a very special group of men.

SHEP

So special we weren't supposed to talk about it. The experience was to be held as closely as possible.

KEARNEY

I beg your pardon?

SHEP

That's what they told us on day one. Does not and will not ever exist.

KEARNEY

I see.

SHEP

Now I'm getting phone calls, I'm getting letters, you got questions. I dunno. That part of my life never existed, you know?

KEARNEY

Unfortunately recent events have made this conversation unavoidable.

(MORE)

KEARNEY (CONT'D)

I want to assure you that my clearances are in order and that this conversation, along with your service record, remain classified.

SHEP

...Sure.

KEARNEY

To start I hoped you could help me understand the culture of the unit.

A thudding BEAT builds.

SHEP

The culture?

(grins)

I don't remember seeing a lot of culture in Vietnam.

KEARNEY

What did you see in Vietnam?

Too much. Shep shakes his head.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)

Just generally. What kind of impression did it leave you with.

SHEP

Have you been there?

KEARNEY

No, I haven't.

Shep nods.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)

Why don't we start with what you can tell me about Bronson Donnelly?

SHEP

Donnelly? Jesus. You wanna jump in the deep end.

KEARNEY

Can you tell me when you met him?

SHEP

Look, I can't explain the unexplainable. I've tried to before but it just comes out unsatisfying. Incomplete.

We realize the BEAT is ARMY BOOTS ON A TRAINING RUN.

KEARNEY

How so?

SHEP

(struggling)

Let's say... Let's say that you
saw the face of God.

Shep holds his arms out like Moses.

SHEP (CONT'D)

You saw Him and someone asked you
what sort of impression it made on
you. You think you could tell them
what he was like?

KEARNEY

I don't know.

SHEP

Well, what's harder than that?
Standing nose to nose with the
devil. With- with reckless,
unprejudiced evil. And you're
asking me what kind of impression
that made on me? That's- that's
really hard, man.

KEARNEY

Why is that?

SHEP

Cause you describe the devil and
you realize that you're more like
him than you care to know. We all
are. You, me, anyone. I seen it.

As we PUSH IN on Shep falling backwards in time we HEAR a
Vietnam era MARCHING CADENCE.

DRILL SERGEANT (V.O.)

*Shoot the sick, the young, the
lame,
We do our best to maim,
Because the kills all count the
same...*

The VOICES of a platoon of marching soldiers respond at the
chorus.

SOLDIERS (V.O.)

...Napalm sticks to kids.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

- A PLATOON on a long run. Army Infantry training.
- Marksmanship training.
- Hand to hand combat training. One overzealous SOLDIER breaks another SOLDIER's nose.

DRILL SERGEANT / SOLDIERS (V.O.)
*See those farmers over there,
 Watch me get them with a pair,
 Blood and guts just everywhere,
 Napalm sticks to kids.*

- US Marines land at Da Nang.
- Viet Cong prepare punji traps, camouflaged holes with sharpened sticks lining the bottom.
- A napalm canister tumbles through the trees and EXPLODES.

DRILL SERGEANT / SOLDIERS (V.O.)
*Cobras flying in the sun,
 Killing gooks is lots of fun,
 Get one pregnant and it's two for
 one,
 Napalm sticks to kids.*

- NVA SOLDIERS execute wounded AMERICAN GIs.
- An American SOLDIER shoves a bound NVA PRISONER out of a helicopter to his death.

DRILL SERGEANT / SOLDIERS (V.O.)
*Shoot civilians where they sit,
 Take some pictures as you split,
 All your life you'll remember it,
All your life you'll remember it.*

- An EMACIATED AMERICAN GI lies on the ground with his hands and feet bound in a POW camp.
- A helicopter sprays a rice paddy full of farmers with their machine guns.
- A SOLDIER stands silhouetted against a BURNING VILLAGE, a flame thrower in his hands.

THIS IS A DIFFERENT KIND OF WAR.

We FOLLOW the flames upwards as they lick the NIGHT SKY.

END MONTAGE

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Da Nang. 1968.

Shep wears the uniform of the Green Berets. He's an altogether different man than we saw earlier. Crew cut. Serious. Confident. He's hot shit and he knows it.

He stands at attention before two Army Officers, BLAKE and REED, as they flip through his personnel file.

A MAN IN SUNGLASSES leans against the wood panelled wall. Watching. He's CIA.

All but Shep smoke cigarettes.

BLAKE

Infantry. Rangers. Recondo.

REED

And now you're volunteering for special assignment. You just can't get enough of a good thing, can you?

SHEP

No, sir.

BLAKE

So what do you want from us?

SHEP

I've heard the rumors about the Studies and Observations Group. SOP doesn't apply. They work directly with the CIA. They operate in Laos.

Blake and Reed glance at the Man in Sunglasses.

REED

Those are some specific rumors.

BLAKE

Green Berets are worse than a fucking sewing circle.

REED

Too bad they can't be right. The ground war is in South Vietnam.

BLAKE

What do you even know about Laos?

REED

Yeah. Geography quiz. What's the capital?

SHEP

The NVA use Laos as a staging ground. They retreat across the border -- where we can't follow, -- to resupply and regroup. They operate with impunity while the Laotian government looks the other way. I want to be with whoever's taking the fight to them.

(then)

And the capital is Vientiane.

Blake and Reed chuckle.

REED

Fuck me, did he get the capital right?

BLAKE

How should I know?

REED

Wish we could help you. The Laotian ambassador has been very clear that a ground war will not spread across the border.

BLAKE

Sure would be nice, though. If we could go in there and get some work done, wouldn't it?

REED

Cut off supply routes, destroy NVA infrastructure...

BLAKE

Rescue POWs.

SHEP

That would be very nice, sir.

REED

But that would be in breach of our treaty with the sovereign nation of Laos.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES

Maybe we should do it anyway.

Blake hands the Man In Sunglasses Shep's personnel file. He flips through it as he sizes up Shep.

SHEP

I'm sorry. I don't think we've been introduced, sir.

BLAKE

He's a spook. Get used to it.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES

(reading)

You spent two months captive?

SHEP

65 days.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES

That's tough. Mentally.

SHEP

Yes, sir.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES

What got you through it?

SHEP

Faith.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES

I might have felt abandoned by God in that situation.

SHEP

He will not fail you nor forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES

Where'd you hear that?

SHEP

Deuteronomy.

BLAKE

Holy shit, it reads.

REED

He's gotta be an NVA spy then. Can't be our Special Forces.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES
And you feel prepared...
(struggling to find the
word)
...emotionally?

SHEP
You don't need to beat around the
bush with me. It was bad. But
they took too much from me not to
take it back.

The Man in Sunglasses drums his fingers on the personnel file
as he considers this and then hands the folder back to Blake
and Reed.

MAN IN SUNGLASSES
Brief him.

REED
Hey kid, you wanna go kill Charlie
in Laos?

EXT. SPECIAL FORCES A CAMP - KHE SANH - DAY

A Huey helicopter lands at an air strip. Shep jumps from the
back holding a duffle bag.

A single, dirt runway separates one story office and supply
buildings from a grid of hooches.

At the end of the pad stand two OFFICERS. Shep approaches
and salutes. They don't return it.

INT. BLACKBURN'S OFFICE - LATER

The Officers lead Shep in.

NOLAN BLACKBURN's a strict Army lifer, a veteran of WWII and
Korea. He's the Chief SOG.

CAVANAUGH, a Mississippi good 'ole boy, takes Shep's duffel
bag and rifles through it. He removes anything that could
identify Shep as American and drops it in the trash can.

BLACKBURN
I'm Colonel Blackburn. This is
Sergeant Major Cavanaugh. Welcome.

SHEP
Thank you, sir.

BLACKBURN

Everyone gets the same speech on their first day. This unit does not exist nor will it ever exist. Your experiences here shall be held as closely as possible.

SHEP

Yes, sir.

BLACKBURN

You have a standing order to maintain deniability at all times.

CAVANUGH

That means there can't be nothin' about you that says American. You got a tattoo of your old unit? We got a feller that can black it out if you do.

SHEP

No, sir.

CAVANAUGH

(rifling through the
duffel bag)

Where's your cigarettes?

SHEP

I don't smoke.

CAVANAUGH

No American cigarettes, if you smoke we got Chinese ones.

SHEP

I don't.

BLACKBURN

We operate exclusively in target rich environments. Another way of saying that is you will always be outnumbered.

CAVANAUGH

We got the highest kill ratio in the history of these armed forces so if'n you ain't yet had your fill of killin', you will.

Blackburn chooses his words carefully as he walks to Shep.

BLACKBURN

Son, if any of this doesn't suit
you get back on that bird, go back
where you came from and nobody ever
needs to know of this little
discussion. My men make a
different sort of commitment. Do
not take it lightly. I certainly
don't. If you're going to be SOG I
need you to want it. Understood?

Cavanaugh holds out his hand.

CAVANAUGH

Dog tags.

Shep pulls his dog tags over his head and hands them over.
Cavanaugh trashes them.

EXT. SPECIAL FORCES A CAMP - ARMORY - DAY

Shep, lugging new gear, follows Cavanaugh who points across
the air strip.

CAVANAUGH

Your hooch is that one, find
yourself an empty bunk. Your team
is on Bright Lights detail.

SHEP

What's Bright Lights?

CAVANAUGH

Can't tell you, new guy. It's
classified.

SHEP

Excuse me, sir? But I'm-

A splash of prop wash interrupts them. A smoking Huey spins
down into a rough landing on a nearby helipad. The chopper's
punched full of holes, the windshield's so spiderwebbed from
bullets it's opaque.

Cavanaugh yells over the noise.

CAVANAUGH

These your boys. Recon Team
Carolina. Come on.

From the back of the chopper a BALD SOLDIER steps out, his
face and head are covered in camouflage paint to resemble a
GREEN AND BROWN SKULL. He's wet with blood. Not his own.

Cavanaugh approaches with Shep.

CAVANAUGH (CONT'D)
Andrew Shepard. You go by Andy or
Drew?

SHEP
Shep.

CAVANAUGH
Shep then. This here's Bronson
Donnelly. He's your SO.

The bald soldier, BRONSON DONNELLY, is the epitome of the
Special Forces. Huge. Severe. Heartless. He's a fiery-
eyed madman.

Donnelly takes a deep breath of air now that he's safely out
of the shit. He retrieves a necklace of human ears from
beneath his shirt that he kisses and replaces like a
talisman.

He eyes Shep. Then grins.

DONNELLY
Welcome to SOG.

CUT TO:

TITLES

EXT. JUNGLE - DAY

Shep, BEARDED and EMACIATED, races through the bush on high alert. Sweat pours down his face.

Behind him ANOTHER POW struggles to follow, weaker and slower than Shep.

Smoke wafts across the trail. Shep holds a hand up to the POW, telling him to stop, and the other POW collapses to the dirt.

Shep creeps towards the source of the smoke, pushing through foliage as he comes to a clearing.

The ROAR OF A BONFIRE builds.

Shep pushes into the clearing and freezes. A terrible fire that produces not light but darkness burns.

Within the shadows of the fire stands a DARK MAN.

Shep's gaze follows the shadowy flames to the sky. Amidst the clouds float a set of GIANT SCALES weighing bars of gold.

Shep stumbles further into the clearing. This isn't possible.

The Dark Man beckons to him from within the fire. Shep walks to him in a daze.

BACK ON THE TRAIL the other POW's wheezing is quicker, shallower, panicked. Approaching VOICES call out in Vietnamese. He breaks down into tears, too weak to run.

IN THE CLEARING Shep stares at the scales in the sky as he stumbles towards the flames shedding his rags.

The sky flickers behind the scales. Blood red. Blood red. Blood-

DONNELLY (V.O.)
Bright Lights.

SMASH TO:

INT. HOOCH - NIGHT

Shep startles awake from his nightmare to a red flashlight blinking in his face. Donnelly turns the flashlight to illuminate his own camo-skull painted face.

DONNELLY

Let's go, we got Bright Lights.
Cavanaugh says we gotta bring the
FNG. Grab your shit.

SHEP

What's Bright Lights?

DONNELLY

It's classified, new guy.

Donnelly stalks off.

SHEP

But- Shit. Wait, what's an FNG?

DONNELLY

(over his shoulder)
The Fucking New Guy.

EXT. AIR STRIP - NIGHT

1968.

Shep joins the team as they assemble on the helipad.

Most of the ten man team is made up of Montagnards ("Yards"),
indigenous mountain tribesmen trained and outfitted by SOG.

DALLAS, a keyed-up Green Beret from Texas, runs over to greet
Shep beside the helicopter. They shout to hear each other
over the rotors.

DALLAS

You the FNG?

SHEP

Yeah. Shep.

DALLAS

Dallas. Welcome to SOG.

SHEP

Thanks.

DALLAS

You up for this?

SHEP

I don't know. What's Bright
Lights?

DALLAS

Can't tell you, new guy, it's classified.

SHEP

Cut the shit.

DALLAS

They keep a team on 24 hour alert for search and rescue ops over the border. Usually it's a downed pilot but not tonight.

(uneasy)

Tonight it's RT Georgia.

INT. HELICOPTER - NIGHT

The helicopter buzzes over jungle treetops.

In the back of the bird everyone checks their gear.

A Kingbee in the air above them streaks by. Dallas explains to Shep...

DALLAS

That's our FAC, Delta Papa Two. He'll be up there monitoring and relaying as long as we're on the ground.

DONNELLY

It's nice to know someone up there's watching out for us.

Donnelly stands on the edge of the chopper, feet on the skids, staring into the jungle below.

DONNELLY (CONT'D)

Recon Team Georgia came into heavy contact. Comms were confused but we think they were overrun by a platoon sized force of NVA. So expect heavy resistance.

Donnelly shoots a glance at Shep to see if he's rattled by that bit of information.

He's not.

EXT. JUNGLE - NIGHT

Flares burst in the sky illuminating triple canopy jungle.

The helicopters drop ropes and the SOG team slide down them. They hit the dirt and silently press into the darkness. The helicopters bank around and disappear.

The infiltration takes just seconds.

EXT. JUNGLE - LATER

Donnelly creeps through the bush with the team behind him. They push through the darkness to a break in the foliage.

A manicured dirt road cuts through the middle of the jungle. Donnelly peers up and down it. Empty. He motions the team to follow.

Shep can't help but stare. The road is immaculately maintained and the canopy of trees above act as a natural camouflage.

Dallas creeps behind him and whispers in Shep's ear.

DALLAS
(whispers)
Ho Chi Minh trail.

Shep nods. He looks back down the trail, squinting. Something looms in the darkness. He moves to investigate.

In a shaft of moonlight an ELEPHANT sits tied to a stake. Shep and the elephant hold eye contact for several seconds.

Surreal.

Shep turns to rejoin his team.

Donnelly checks a map and stops. He looks around. The team take positions around him.

The shadows are so deep the enemy could be five feet away and you'd never know it. Silent. Spooky.

Donnelly motions to Shep who runs forward with the radio.

DONNELLY
(whispering into radio)
Delta Papa Two this is Almighty.
We are in position with no visual.
Repeat, no visual.

RADIO - DELTA PAPA TWO (O.S.)
Copy Almighty. Come in Woody.
Come in Woody. We need you to
update your coordinates.

RADIO - WOODY (O.S.)
Please God, help me. Please!

Woody sounds unhinged.

RADIO - DELTA PAPA TWO (O.S.)
Where's your team at?

RADIO - WOODY (O.S.)
They're dead, Evan.

RADIO - DELTA PAPA TWO (O.S.)
Callsigns only, Woody.

RADIO - WOODY (O.S.)
They killed them all.

RADIO - DELTA PAPA TWO (O.S.)
We're gonna bring you home, Woody,
but you gotta help us find-

RADIO - WOODY (O.S.)
Why did they let me go?!

Donnelly stares into the darkness as if he's seen something.
He mumbles under his breath.

DONNELLY
(whispers)
What the fuck are you doing,
Charlie?

SHEP
Where?

Shep follows his gaze but sees nothing in the inky blackness.

RADIO - DELTA PAPA TWO (O.S.)
Try to stay calm. Try to-

RADIO - WOODY (O.S.)
I don't know where I am.

Donnelly straps his rifle over his shoulder and grabs the
radio's handset.

DONNELLY
Fuck this.
(whispering to radio)
Woody, just follow the sound of my
voice.

SHEP
 (whisper)
 What?!

Donnelly stands and bellows into the night.

DONNELLY
 WOODY!

The team panics, their eyes darting around in the darkness.
 The Yards curse under their breath at each other in
 Vietnamese.

This is *not* protocol.

DONNELLY (CONT'D)
 WOODY! OVER HERE!

Shep grabs Donnelly's arm and pulls him down.

SHEP
 (whisper)
 What the fuck are you doing?!

DONNELLY
 WOODY!

SHEP
 You wanna get us all killed?!

The trees RUSTLE. Twigs SNAP. The jungle menaces them with
 noise from all sides.

Shep spins with his weapon up, sighting down the barrel,
 ready for anything.

DONNELLY
 WOODY!

There's movement in the bushes.

The rest of the team swing their guns around and train it
 on...

WOODY
 PleaseGod! Oh,pleaseGodhelpme!

WOODY, an Okie teenager turned SOG, stumbles out of the
 jungle shirtless, dragging a radio behind him.

He falls to the ground at Donnelly's feet and sobs with his
 whole body.

WOODY (CONT'D)
Why didn't they kill me?

Donnelly looks out into the jungle.

DONNELLY
They want you to tell us what you
saw them do to the rest of RT
Georgia. So that we know what
they'll do to us if they catch us.
That's why they're watching us
right now.

Shep peers into the darkness. Are they being watched?

DONNELLY (CONT'D)
They're making sure we take you
back.

Donnelly pulls a .45 WITH A DISTINCTIVE ETCHED BLACK SLIDE
from its holster and points it at Woody's head.

WOODY
I want to go home.

DONNELLY
I'll take you home, Woody.

Donnelly fingers the trigger. Horrified, Shep realizes what
Donnelly's considering.

In a flash, Shep snatches Donnelly's wrist, twists and pulls
the .45 from his hand.

Donnelly glares down at Shep. Shep glares back.

In Shep's hand the gun trembles. Shep crams the .45 in his
waistband and clenches his fist, trying to stop the tremor.
He can't.

Donnelly notices. He grabs the radio.

DONNELLY (CONT'D)
(to radio)
Delta Papa Two this is Almighty.
We have Woody, lone survivor of RT
Georgia. Proceeding to LZ Ivy.

Donnelly marches off.

Shep helps Woody to his feet and follows. He crams the .45
in his waistband.

EXT. SPECIAL FORCES A CAMP - KHE SANH - DAWN

The helicopter touches down back at base. Donnelly, Dallas and Shep exit to find Blackburn waiting for them.

BLACKBURN

Drop your gear and report back to me immediately. CIA in Saigon wants a full briefing.

The SOG men nod.

BLACKBURN (CONT'D)

And someone get him cleaned up.

Behind them Woody stumbles out of the bird. In the light of day it's now clear that he's shit himself.

INT. CIA OFFICES - SAIGON - DAY

Woody sits before two CIA AGENTS. Blackburn, Shep, Dallas and Donnelly observe.

WOODY

The ambush was so fast. Specialist Duncan was KIA. It was just Abrams and myself left. At some point I realized they were trying to catch us alive.

Woody chews at his nails, his eyes faraway.

WOODY (CONT'D)

They flashbanged the recess we were in and they had us. They tied me to a tree and then and then and-

SOBS wrack Woody's body.

WOODY (CONT'D)

And then they took Abrams and they cut him open. They put the nozzle of the flame thrower up in his gut. They burned him inside out. They burned him.

Shep looks down. His hand shakes violently in his lap.

Donnelly notices, as well.

WOODY (CONT'D)

And he was *screaming*.

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

1975.

Kearney interrupts.

KEARNEY

When did this begin?

SHEP

The hand thing started right after
I joined SOG.

KEARNEY

Were there any other manifestations
of your mental state?

SHEP

Mental state? There's nothing
wrong with my mental state. My
hand shook is all.

KEARNEY

Let me ask another way. What were
you feeling at that time?

Shep lights another cigarette.

SHEP

I was jumping out of helicopters
shooting at anything that moved. I
was scared shitless.

INT. CIA OFFICES - SAIGON - DAY

1968. Back to scene.

Woody sobs.

BLACKBURN

Son, why don't you help yourself to
a seat outside?

Woody exits, mewling like a child.

The CIA Agents look amongst themselves.

CIA AGENT 1

This was not an accident, Colonel.

CIA Agent 2 throws a folder of pictures on the desk.
Blackburn flips through them.

CIA AGENT 2
That's a unit within the NVA's
305th Airborne Battalion. All
Soviet trained.

CIA AGENT 1
Special Forces. Anti-
reconnaissance.

CIA AGENT 2
They were looking for your guys.
Specifically tasked to fight SOG.

BLACKBURN
Then we know what we're doing is
working.

CIA Agent 1 shakes his head, that's not what he's saying.

CIA AGENT 1
It's too hot out there.

CIA AGENT 2
Your unit's casualty rate is
already over 80%. Before long
every man under your command will
be injured, missing or dead.

CIA AGENT 1
And we're telling you it's about to
get worse.

BLACKBURN
It wouldn't be a war if it wasn't
like this somewhere. It wouldn't
be a war unless someone was asked
to make these sacrifices. That's
how you win. We know that. It's a
game of chicken and we will not
turn first. The thing about my men
is - hurt, missing or dead - they'd
all do it again.

Dallas and Shep share a look. Is this what they signed up
for?

CIA Agent 1 sighs. There's no helping men like these.

CIA AGENT 1
Was there anything else we should
be aware of?

SHEP
An elephant.

The room turns to look at Shep.

SHEP (CONT'D)

There was an elephant in a rope harness tied to a stake on the Ho Chi Minh trail. I could show you on a map. I think they're using them to transport supplies.

The Agents share a look.

CIA AGENT 1

An elephant.

CIA AGENT 2

(almost sotto to Agent 1)

I guess the dope in Laos is as good as they say.

SHEP

Fuck you.

CIA AGENT 2

Fuck you.

CIA AGENT 1

Do you have any evidence of these supposed elephants?

SHEP

(incredulous)

Evidence? Last I checked I'm recon. That means if I saw it then it was there.

CIA Agent 1 shoots Blackburn a withering look.

CIA AGENT 1

I don't know, Blackburn. Maybe your guys could use a break. Sounds like they might be cracking up.

Blackburn bristles at this as he snaps his beret on his head. The SOG men exit.

INT. HOOCH - DAY

Donnelly kneels before a panther skull at the end of the hooch lighting candles. He drops a severed finger in a bowl of oil, lights it on fire and inhales the smoke.

Shep walks in.

DONNELLY

What's wrong with your hands?

SHEP

What?

DONNELLY

I saw it with the spooks and I saw it back in Laos. Is it a problem?

SHEP

You're worried about *me* out there?
Yelling into the bush. Endangering
the team. Putting a gun to the
head of a fellow soldier.

Shep reaches into his jacket and retrieves Donnelly's .45
with the ETCHED BLACK SLIDE from the jungle.

SHEP (CONT'D)

SO or not if you ever pull any of
that shit again I'll kill you
myself.

Shep presses the gun against Donnelly's temple and squeezes
the trigger.

CLICK.

Donnelly smiles as he takes his gun back.

DONNELLY

Shep, buddy. You're gonna fit
right in around here.

SHEP

Tell me why I shouldn't report you.
Because I'm really struggling to
find a reason not to.

Donnelly puts an arm around Shep's shoulders.

DONNELLY

Look. That was a rough
introduction. Bright Lights are
like that, there's no time to prep.
We got a few days before we're back
in the shit. You, me, Dallas.
We'll train with our Yards, study
maps, terrain models, whatever it
takes. We'll be air tight.

SHEP
You could have gotten me killed.
Could've gotten you killed.

DONNELLY
You're new, Shep. You haven't
heard yet. I can't be killed.

Donnelly crawls back in his bunk leaving a befuddled Shep to
shake his head.

DALLAS (PRELAP)
He said that?

INT. SPECIAL FORCES A CAMP - NCO CLUB - NIGHT

Dallas and Shep drink beers at a table with JACKSON and
MILLS. Jackson's from the mean streets of Brooklyn, Mills
from the cornfields of Nebraska.

Both of them wear the blank uniforms of SOG.

SHEP
'I can't be killed'.

JACKSON
Crazy cracker saying that shit out
loud now?

MILLS
Dumbass gonna jinx it.

SHEP
Jinx what?

The veteran SOG look around the table. Who wants to tell the
new guy?

SHEP (CONT'D)
Jinx what?

Dallas shrugs.

DALLAS
What if it was true?

SHEP
What if what was?

JACKSON
Let me lay this trip on you:
Bronson Donnelly's motherfucking
bullet proof, man.

SHEP
You're joking.

MILLS
If he ain't then he got a real bad
habit of ending up a lone survivor.

JACKSON
Hot LZs, ambushes, helo crashes.
Donnelly walked through the deepest
shit and on the other side he come
out clean. Every time.

SHEP
Well, I don't want to be standing
next to him when it catches up.

JACKSON
There ain't shit catching that
crazy ass white boy.

MILLS
You know he don't even got no
purple heart? Who here's got one?

All hands go up.

DALLAS
Two.

SHEP
Same.

MILLS
He was recruited by SOG. He's
makin' that much contact and he's
never been touched? Not shrapnel,
not a broken bone, not a goddamn
splinter?

DALLAS
It's spooky.

JACKSON
I don't believe in that jungle
shit, you know? All that tribal
hoodoo bullshit. You know what I'm
talkin' about?

SHEP
Yeah.

JACKSON

But...

(shrugs)

I believe in Bronson Donnelly. You dig?

Dallas and Mills solemnly nod in agreement. Shep shakes his head and swigs his beer.

BY THE BAR a Green Beret GUITAR PLAYER picks out a couple of chords and starts to sing "Old Blue", a melancholy folk song.

GUITAR PLAYER

(singing)

*I had an old dog,
And his name was Blue,
And I'll bet you five dollars,
He's a good 'un too.*

The rest of the bar joins in the chorus.

SOLDIERS

(singing)

*Singin' come on Blue.
Oooooo-ooooo.*

Dallas leans over to Shep.

DALLAS

Company tradition. We sing "Old Blue" when a SOG dies.

SHEP

More since last night?

DALLAS

Woody blew his brains out.

Shep crosses himself.

JACKSON

Sheeee-it. All that fuckin' work to get him out and he goes and does the slopes a favor.

SHEP

No, Jackson. I think he might have done himself the favor.

They nod grimly.

Shep looks at the singing crowd and notices Donnelly at the end of the bar, singing his heart out.

SOLDIERS
(singing)
Singin' come on Blue.
Oooooo-ooooo.

Donnelly locks eyes with Shep. He smiles.

Over the singing SHEP HEARS DONNELLY'S VOICE IN HIS HEAD.

DONNELLY (V.O.)
Shep, buddy. You're gonna fit
right in around here.

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

Back in 1975. Shep stubs his cigarette into a half full ashtray and lights another.

KEARNEY
You heard a voice in your head?

SHEP
Donnelly's voice.

KEARNEY
Was this accompanied by any sort of
a vision?

Shep's eyes narrow.

SHEP
Why'd you ask me that?

Kearney refers to some paperwork.

KEARNEY
Refresh me. How long were you
stationed in Da Nang before you
were captured?

SHEP
About 8 months.

KEARNEY
While you were there do you
remember any discussion of an
Operation Ranch Hand?

SHEP
Ummm... Helicopters spraying
herbicide all over the place to
kill jungle cover.

KEARNEY

And do you remember seeing barrels
with an orange stripe around them
at the base in Da Nang?

SHEP

Agent Orange.

KEARNEY

Are you aware that exposure to
Agent Orange has been linked to
neurological disorders?

Shep frowns, not sure what Kearney's getting at.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)

Do you think that these visions
could have been the result-

SHEP

There. You said it again.
Visions. That's what my old VA
counselor called them.

KEARNEY

Why did you seek counseling after
you returned to the states?

SHEP

Did that son of a bitch say
something to you?

KEARNEY

How would you describe your mental
state since your service?

SHEP

Did he talk about me? Those
sessions were held in confidence.

Kearney shrugs.

KEARNEY

I'm sorry but apparently they
weren't.

Shep shoves his seat from the table and stands.

SHEP

I'm done, man. I am out of here.

KEARNEY

Mr. Shepard, you only hurt yourself
if you go.

SHEP

Says you.

Kearney motions through a two way mirror behind him for someone to come in.

SHEP (CONT'D)

You want to assign logic to the whole thing but I'm telling you it just doesn't work that way, man. It just doesn't-

The door SLAMS open as an MP walks in. Shep jumps.

The MP drops a folder on the table and leaves, Kearney nods at it.

KEARNEY

Photographs. Your buddies tell you about these, too?

Shep stares at the folder without answering.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)

We're talking about murder, Mr. Shepard. And unless you can make me understand what happened back in that jungle... I've spoken with every surviving member of your unit-

SHEP

That couldn't have taken long.

KEARNEY

You make my point for me. I'm running out of people to point the finger at.

Shep stands by the door, weighing his options.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)

I want you to help me. I want you to help yourself.

Shep retakes his seat. He rubs his face with his hands. His eyes focus in the distance.

EXT. SPECIAL FORCES A CAMP - TARGET RANGE - DAY

1968.

CLOSE ON a bench mounted AK-47.

Cavanaugh pulls a string attached to the trigger and the gun SHATTERS, the receiver violently exploding.

The rifle bolt lands in the dirt at Cavanaugh's feet. Dallas, Shep and Donnelly cackle at the display.

Blackburn grins as well. He holds up a 7.62 cartridge.

BLACKBURN

We call them Eldest Son.

CAVANAUGH

AK rounds the CIA thunk up.
Charlie fires one of these it'll
pop the rifle bolt through his
squinty little eye socket.

DALLAS

Why are we so good at such terrible
things?

BLACKBURN

Destroying ammo caches just slows
them down. But if we start salting
their supplies with these, mixing
it in with the real ammo, we can
breed a paranoia. A distrust. We
can make them scared to fire a
weapon at all.

DONNELLY

Psy-Ops.

BLACKBURN

That's right.

SHEP

So how do we get it to them?

Blackburn spreads a map over a table.

BLACKBURN

Charlie moves their stashes
regularly but we know there must be
munitions between...

(pointing)

...here and here.

CAVANAUGH

And cause the Chinese supply their
ammo they don't waste manpower
protecting it. Easier to just
replace anything we destroy.

BLACKBURN

(pointing at map)

Your team will insert south of
Laotian Highway 9 and follow the
trail north. Avoid contact at all
costs, locate their ammunition
caches and leave as much Eldest Son
in them as you can. We anticipate
the mission to take between four
and seven days to complete.

Donnelly rolls an Eldest Son round in his fingers.

DONNELLY

Almost seems like cheating.

BLACKBURN

I'm certainly not above it.

CAVANAUGH

And if you ever wanna leave Vietnam
you won't be neither.

DONNELLY

Cavanaugh, you ought to know better
than that. None of us are ever
leaving Vietnam.

Off Shep's reaction.

INT. NCO CLUB - NIGHT

Shep, Jackson and Mills sip beers at the bar. Shep's lost in
thought.

SHEP

Jackson, Mills. How many rescue
missions have you two been on since
you joined SOG?

JACKSON

Oooo... Maybe a dozen?

MILLS

Gotta be more than that.

JACKSON

Nah. But it feel like a hundred.

MILLS

Mmm.

SHEP

Were they all pilots?

MILLS

Yeah.

SHEP

What about POWs?

MILLS

Don't happen next to much.

JACKSON

By the time there's intel the
motherfuckers move our man
somewhere else.

MILLS

What you askin' for?

Shep shrugs.

A quiet BEAT and then-

An EXPLOSION outside triggers an ALARM through the base.

SHEP

(off the sound)
Satchel charge.

JACKSON

Shit shit shit, sappers at the
wire, I'd lay you anything.

The SOG men race outside into...

EXT. SPECIAL FORCES A CAMP - KHE SANH - CONTINUOUS

...*Chaos*. AK-47 FIRE and SWEEPING SEARCHLIGHTS everywhere.

They kneel behind sandbags to retrieve their weapons from a
rack by the door. They peek over the barrier to see...

BY THE FENCE Viet Cong, some in their boxer shorts
("sappers"), race through a hole in the fence throwing
satchels of explosives.

AT THE NCO CLUB Jackson grabs Shep's shoulder and points to a
darkened guard tower near the fence.

JACKSON

The fuck's the tower 60?

SHEP

Let's go! Move!

They race for the tower moving from cover to cover.

Another explosion ROCKS the base, throwing them to the ground. The base's lights FLICKER OFF.

MILLS

They hit the gall-durn generators.

JACKSON

Where the flares at, man?

They sprint through the darkness towards the tower, TRACER FIRE streaking over their heads.

IN THE SKY FLARES illuminate two more sappers crawling beneath the fence. Shep opens up with his SMG, killing them.

They scramble behind a jeep. Glass from the vehicle's windows rain down on them as the enemy returns fire.

MILLS

Shit!

Shep fires from behind the jeep but he's shooting at shadows. Bullets smack the side of the vehicle.

SHEP

Motherfucker!

MILLS

Look!

AT THE GUARD TOWER a lone American soldier climbs the ladder amidst heavy fire. It's suicidal.

BACK AT THE JEEP Shep's hands shake. He's not in control. He fires wildly into the dark.

JACKSON

Watch your ammo, man. Watch your-

Shep's slide locks.

SHEP

I'm out. I'm out!

Shep hyperventilates.

SHEP (CONT'D)

I'm out, man!

JACKSON

Just stay down!

Mills and Jackson return fire but they're in a bad spot.

Suddenly a machine gun ERUPTS FROM THE TOWER.

TIME SLOWS DOWN as Shep turns to look up at the shooter.

SHEP'S POV - The M60 above them showers the enemy with lead.

The DARK MAN thrashes the enemy with the machine gun, his EYES GLOWING BRIGHT RED in the darkness.

Shep blinks. This can't be happening.

The base's lights FLICKER BACK ON revealing it's Donnelly on the machine gun breathing THICK BLACK SMOKE.

Donnelly dominates the attacking sappers across their flank, stopping the advance. It's a massacre.

The machine gun finally fires dry.

PAST THE FENCE, in the darkness, Vietnamese footsteps fade away in retreat.

Shep catches his breath. The din of battle decrescendos. He falls back against the vehicle and slides down to his knees. His hands palsy violently.

Jackson grabs his shoulder.

JACKSON (CONT'D)

Hey. Yo. It's over.

MILLS

You hit? Y'all right?

SHEP

(realizing)

No.

BY THE FENCE a voice CALLS OUT in Vietnamese. Shep turns to see...

Caught in no man's land a teenage girl, WOUNDED VIET CONG, drags herself toward the fence. She fires her AK but it CLICKS.

AMERICAN VOICES IN THE DARK

She's out of ammo! / Get her alive,
get her alive!

The Wounded VC SCREAMS at the American voices.

WOUNDED VC

FUCK YOU, AMERICAN GI! FUCK YOU!

Mills races to the Wounded VC to take her prisoner.

SHEP

No, wait!

Mills approaches the girl, shouldering his weapon. He kicks her AK away and grabs her.

SUDDENLY, she latches on to Mills and tears out a GRENADE pin with her teeth. A suicide attack.

MILLS

NO! NOOO!

Mills can't escape her grasp. He can't reach his weapon. He's done for.

BANG.

Her head flops back, shot dead. Mills sprints away.

AMERICAN VOICES IN THE DARK

GET OUT OF THERE! / RUN! RUN! /
MOVE!

BOOM.

Mills leaps to safety just as the grenade explodes.

Shep, his hands suddenly stable but fear gripping him like a disease, lays with a SMOKING PISTOL in his grasp. An outstanding shot at that distance.

An arm grabs Shep and helps him to his feet. Donnelly, preternaturally calm, his eyes burning red.

DONNELLY

If it wasn't like this somewhere I
guess it wouldn't be a war.

Donnelly's eyes cool back to a human blue color as he claps Shep on the back and heads off.

DONNELLY (CONT'D)

Hell of a shot, new guy.

Shep gazes back at the girl's body for a moment before turning to find Donnelly's disappeared.

A SERPENT slithers away from where Donnelly was standing.

KEARNEY (PRELAP)

Sergeant, forgive me.

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

1975.

KEARNEY

You must know that these were
hallucinations.

SHEP

No. No. I saw what I told you.

KEARNEY

I'm sure you did.

SHEP

Because it was there.

KEARNEY

That's just not possible.

SHEP

There was a pattern. An
escalation. You don't see where
this is going?

KEARNEY

No.

SHEP

You'll understand when I've told
you the whole thing.

Kearney flips open the folder on the table.

Crime scene photographs. A murder. Grisly.

KEARNEY

Bronson Donnelly's body was found a
little over two weeks ago. What
was left of it, anyway.

SHEP

That's not him.

KEARNEY

And how do you know that?

SHEP

How do you know that it is?

KEARNEY

It's his blood type. In his home. He's been missing ever since. And we have reason to believe that his murderer is familiar with his service in Vietnam, specifically SOG. Are you aware of anyone who had a reason to kill him?

SHEP

Everyone who ever met him.

KEARNEY

Is that really the response that you want on the record?

SHEP

Eldest Son.

KEARNEY

Excuse me?

SHEP

Just let me tell you about Operation Eldest Son. The exploding AK rounds. I promise I'll make it clear.

INT. HELICOPTER - DAY

1968.

Shep and the SOG team grab their gear as the chopper descends into a clearing.

They leap from the bird before it touches down.

WE FOLLOW INTO A CLEARING as they sprint to the tree line.

Their heads on a swivel, guns up, full speed.

They burst into the JUNGLE.

KEARNEY (PRELAP)

I don't see how this is relevant to my investigation.

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

1975.

SHEP

It is. If you'll just listen.

KEARNEY

I understand you were under a lot of stress out there.

SHEP

Don't do that, man.

KEARNEY

And it's not your fault that you're thinking this way.

SHEP

Just listen to what I'm telling you.

EXT. JUNGLE - DAY

1968.

The SOG team creeps on hands and knees to the crest of a hill.

Looking down the other side they find a camouflaged repository of ammunition crates. Hundreds of them.

Donnelly looks back at Shep and Dallas. He smiles. Jackpot.

EXT. AMMO CACHE - DAY

The SOG team pull ammo boxes from the crates and place Eldest Son rounds in the boxes at random.

They carefully replace the boxes, disguising the fact that they were ever touched.

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

1975.

KEARNEY

You're married, aren't you?

Shep bristles at the interruption.

SHEP

Yes, I'm- I'm-

KEARNEY

You're separated.

SHEP

Temporarily.

KEARNEY
Why did your wife leave you?

SHEP
She hasn't left me.

KEARNEY
Were you violent? Do you drink?

SHEP
You'll understand the whole thing
in a minute. If you'll just let me
finish.

KEARNEY
Bronson Donnelly was married. He
left behind a little boy. Did you
know that?

Shep shakes his head in frustration.

EXT. JUNGLE - NIGHT

1968.

The SOG team lies on the ground covered by brush, asleep.
All but Shep. He leans back against a tree keeping watch.

There's a RUSTLING in the bushes. Shep snaps to attention.
He tip toes behind a tree trunk for a closer look.

He peers around. An ELEPHANT sits staked to the ground.
They make eye contact.

Surreal.

Shep formulates a plan.

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

1975.

KEARNEY
Are you a member of a congregation,
Mr. Shepard?

SHEP
I don't see how *that's* relevant to
your investi-

KEARNEY
Were you asked not to return to The
Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish-?

SHEP
Why are you asking me-

KEARNEY
-after a frightening incident-

SHEP
Why are you asking questions that
you know the answer to?

EXT. JUNGLE - DAY

1968.

GUNFIRE.

The SOG team sprints through the jungle.

Dallas looks over his shoulder just in time to catch a BULLET
IN THE HEAD. He crumples. Dead.

SHEP
Dallas!

Shep runs to help him but Donnelly intercepts and shoves Shep
away from the advancing NVA.

The jungle whizzes past, branches slapping Shep's face. He's
disoriented. He GULPS for air, panicked.

Gunfire tears down the Yards as Donnelly and Shep sprint
towards a clearing.

EXT. HILLY CLEARING - CONTINUOUS

Donnelly and Shep, the only surviving members of the team,
burst through the tree line towards a hill covered in tall
elephant grass.

They race into the grass with the enemy nipping at their
heels.

Shep squats in the grass at the top of the hill. It's thick
enough to hide in but impossible to see more than a foot or
two in any direction.

VOICES call out in Vietnamese all around him. The enemy
could be anywhere.

An NVA SOLDIER charges into view and Shep unloads his machine
gun. The Soldier falls dead just as Shep's clip runs dry.

He pops the mag out. He's out of ammo.

Just then another NVA Soldier emerges from the grass and aims his rifle. He SCREAMS at Shep on Vietnamese.

Shep covers his head with trembling hands, prepared for death.

The gun EXPLODES in the Soldier's hands, the bolt shooting backwards through his eye socket. An Eldest Son round.

Shep can't believe his luck.

Another figure emerges from the grass. Donnelly. He grabs Shep's shoulder.

Shep collapses, emotionally and physically drained.

They look around, catching their breath.

Listening.

The voices around them have disappeared.

SHEP
(whispering)
Are they gone? Did they leave?

DONNELLY
(whispering)
You smell that?

Shep sniffs the air.

SHEP
(whispering)
Smoke?

Donnelly nods.

DONNELLY
(whispering)
They set fire to the hill.

Donnelly and Shep stand to look.

A platoon sized group of soldiers surrounding the hill melt back into the jungle as they watch a FIRE burn up towards Donnelly and Shep.

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

1975.

KEARNEY
You read the papers, Shep?

Shep SLAMS his fists on the table.

SHEP
(shouting)
JUST LISTEN!

Kearney startles.

SHEP (CONT'D)
You think I want to talk about
this? Do you think I ever tell
anyone what I've told you today?
(calming)
I can't get what I did out of me.
It's in my dreams and fears and
self. I bury this shit because I
know what this sounds like, man.
It's madness. It's impossible.

Shep leans across the table and lowers his voice.

SHEP (CONT'D)
But that's what SOG was.

Shep wipes the sweat from his brow, his hand shaking, and
takes a breath.

EXT. GRASSY CLEARING - DAY

1968.

Atop the hill. The smoke's thick now. Black and oppressive.
Shep coughs as he radios.

SHEP
Delta Papa Two this is Final
requesting immediate extraction.

RADIO - DELTA PAPA TWO
Copy, Final. En route.

Above them a helicopter descends. Just as the bird is nearly
in reach the jungle erupts in gunfire.

Hidden amongst the trees the NVA pelt the helicopter with
bullets.

The helicopter retreats to the sky.

SHEP
No, no, no. What are you doing?!

RADIO - DELTA PAPA TWO
It's too hot down there, Final.
You gotta cool it down.

SHEP
Then send air support!

RADIO - DELTA PAPA TWO
I have F-4s standing by. Can you
direct them?

SHEP
They're just- They're just there.
They're in the trees. In the
jungle. They're everywhere!

RADIO - DELTA PAPA TWO
It's all trees from up here, Final.
I need you to be specific.

Shep panics, COUGHING in the smoke.

SHEP
It's- Ahh... I can't. I just can't-

Shep loses it. The radio falls from his trembling hands and
he falls to his knees.

SHEP (CONT'D)
Arthur, I'm sorry. I'm sorry.
Arthur! Arthur!

Donnelly calmly looks up at the sky and closes his eyes. He
sings to himself with his arms raised in the air.

DONNELLY
(singing)
*I had an old dog,
And his name was Blue,
And I'll bet you five dollars,
He's a good 'un too.*

Shep weeps atop the hill. The fire moves in on all sides.
There isn't much time left.

DONNELLY (CONT'D)
(singing)
Singin' come on Blue.
OOOOO!

At the height of the tune Donnelly's arms fall...

And with them FIRE AND BRIMSTONE BURST through the clouds and
explodes at the treeline, erupting in a wall of flame.

The SCREAMS OF DYING NVA prove the HELLFIRE hit its mark.

Shep crawls to his feet, amazed by what he's seeing.

More fire and brimstone rains from the sky torching the jungle below.

Donnelly stands silhouetted by the conflagration. It's an apocalyptic sight.

The radio squawks in the grass.

RADIO - DELTA PAPA TWO
Coming in one more time, Final. Be
ready.

The helicopter descends. Donnelly pulls Shep with him and they leap on board.

The helicopter takes off. They're alive.

CLOSE ON SHEP, shell shocked, as he watches the fiery jungle fade into the distance below. His face...

FADES TO:

INT. INTERVIEW ROOM - DAY

1975.

Shep. The same expression of mute horror locked in his features.

Shep flips one of the crime scene photos around and pushes it to Kearney.

SHEP
I don't know who this is, I don't
know why they're dead or how they
died. But I know that isn't
Bronson Donnelly.

KEARNEY
Because you can't kill the devil.

SHEP
Devil. Demon. Something. What
I've seen him do... It is not of
this world. And I saw more, I saw
so much more. But if you wanna
boil it down then that's it. You
can't kill the devil.

Shep struggles to admit...

SHEP (CONT'D)
Matter of fact, I tried. But
that's this whole other thing.

Shep drops his head into his hands.

Kearney flips a switch and the audio tape reels stop. He
slides the microphone away.

KEARNEY
(gently)
It was napalm.

SHEP
What?

KEARNEY
The fire and brimstone that you
saw. Napalm. Most likely.
Donnelly's eyes when the sapper's
attacked? Probably tracer fire.

Shep tries to protest but-

KEARNEY (CONT'D)
I know. You saw it. But hear me
out. You suffered intense trauma -
I think before you even joined SOG,
as a POW - you were subjected to
things the mind was never designed
to process.

Shep takes this in.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)
You were exposed to chemical agents
that, frankly, we're just beginning
to understand the effects of.

Kearney shrugs.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)
It fits. The chemicals, the
trauma, the religious fervor. You
saw it - you felt it - but that
doesn't mean it was there.

Shep considers this for the first time.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)
Do you read the papers, Shep?
The United States Army is not
interested in another scandal
related to the Vietnam war. And
this...

Kearney gestures to the photographs.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)
This whole mess. It's got all the
makings of one. That's why I'm
here. I don't know if you killed
Bronson Donnelly or whoever this
is. And it's not my job to find
out. I'm here to make this all go
away. I want you to come back
tomorrow. We're going to have a
little chat. I'm going to tell you
what to say and what to sign and
we're going to close the book on
this. Can you do that?

Shep nods.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)
The sacrifice stops here. The Army
asks you to risk your life but
sometimes it takes a little more.
But make no mistake. You are a
hero, Mr. Shepard.

Shep winces.

KEARNEY (CONT'D)
I hope you feel that way.

Kearney stands and offers his hand.

Shep stares at it.

EXT. SUPERMARKET - DAY

Shep stalks away from the store with a case of beer under his
arm. He's FURIOUS.

He jumps in his truck and SLAMS the door.

EXT. LAKE - DAY

Late afternoon. The parked truck overlooks the water.

INT. TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

Shep stares out over the lake.

He chugs a beer, finishes it, crumples the can and tosses it on the floor.

He pulls the tab from another can. He's on a mission.

He lights a cigarette. Stares at the burning end in his trembling hand.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. CIA OFFICES - SAIGON - DAY

CLOSE ON a cigarette in Shep's trembling hand. He looks like utter hell.

Blackburn and Donnelly sit nearby, debriefing the CIA Agents.

BLACKBURN

Despite the significant losses incurred we consider Operation Eldest Son a success. All modified rounds were delivered and our soldiers were able to mask any trace of their subterfuge.

CIA AGENT 2

Eight dead operatives, one of them an American. This is what success looks like?

BLACKBURN

Sometimes.

The Agents shake their heads.

CIA AGENT 1

We'll get started then.

DONNELLY

Get started?

CIA AGENT 2

We'll insert a memo into the North Vietnamese chain of command ensuring that Chinese manufacturing irregularities have been addressed.

CIA AGENT 1

The ammo boxes are date stamped.
We estimate it will be 6 months
before they see rounds manufactured
after today's date. Until then NVA
in the field will think every round
they shoot might kill them.

CIA AGENT 2

Wars are fought at the margins.
That small advantage could save the
lives of hundreds of Americans.
Nice work, everyone.

DONNELLY

'Wars are fought at the margins'?

SHEP

You almost sound like you know what
the fuck you're talking about.

Blackburn shoots Shep a stern look. CIA Agent 1 clears his
throat.

CIA AGENT 1

Was there anything else?

SHEP

Yeah...

Shep tosses a squishy plastic bag on the desk. CIA Agent 2
eyes it.

CIA AGENT 2

What's this?

SHEP

It's a bag of elephant shit.
They're using elephants to haul
supplies down the Ho Chi Minh
trail. If you need any more
evidence you let me know.

The SOG men exit.

CIA Agent 2 slides the bag of shit into a trash can with a
pencil.

INT. HOOCH - NIGHT

Shep, alone in the hooch, stares at the pages of his bible.
Not reading, just staring, as he smokes.

Donnelly walks in, drops his gear at his bunk and walks over to Shep.

DONNELLY

There's something going on with you
and I need to know if it's an
issue. Is it?

Shep sits up. Hands on knees.

SHEP

I honestly don't know.

DONNELLY

Why are you doing this to yourself?
You were... *beyond*... on that
hilltop.

Shep SIGHS. Unsure of himself.

DONNELLY (CONT'D)

Why'd you join SOG?

SHEP

To keep us from escaping the POW
camp the NVA fed us next to
nothing. We didn't have the
strength to even try it. There was
this pilot. He gave me his food.
We had nothing and he... He
thought if either of us could make
it out it was me. He was right.
And I told him I'd come back. I
joined SOG to save a POW held in
Laos. Arthur Murphy. Captain.
He's been in there over a year now.
I would do anything in this world
to free him. Or just to thank him.

Donnelly nods.

SHEP (CONT'D)

Why did *you* join SOG?

DONNELLY

Men only want danger and play. And
SOG is the best of both.

SHEP

This isn't a game.

DONNELLY

It's better.

Donnelly picks up Shep's bible, rifles through the pages.

DONNELLY (CONT'D)
You use this? All that "deliver of
us from evil" shit?

SHEP
Yeah, I do.

DONNELLY
Well, I deliver *them* from evil,
Shep. The slopes. I take the evil
in their hearts and I spray it
across the trees.

Donnelly's voice **echoes** as he asks...

DONNELLY (CONT'D)
So what does that make me?

SHEP
Are you...? What are you?

DONNELLY
I'm acutely aware of the difference
between what your God says a life
is worth and the actions of those
created in his image. I need you,
Shep. I need you to get your head
straight. Accept reality. What we
saw and did today? You'll never be
free of it. One way or another
neither of us are ever leaving
Vietnam.

(tapping his head)
Not up here. So you and me? We
gotta be in this together.

Shep mulls this over.

DONNELLY (CONT'D)
Make a deal with me.

SHEP
What deal?

DONNELLY
You have the skills. You can be
the beast. But not until you
accept that there is no moral world
order.

He hands Shep his bible.

DONNELLY (CONT'D)
Stop torturing yourself with
whatever it is that's holding you
back. Embrace the chaos. If you
can do that I promise you I will
help you find your man.

Donnelly offers his hand.

Shep stares at it, hesitates.

He crams his bible beneath his pillow, then shakes. Donnelly
exits.

Shep looks at his hands.

They're dead still.

INT. TRUCK - NIGHT

1975.

Dark. Hours later.

Another empty beer can hits the floorboards. They're full of
empty cans now.

Shep stares out over the water, tears in his eyes. He opens
the door and steps out.

EXT. LAKE - CONTINUOUS

He stumbles to the water's edge and peels off his shirt,
bends to pull off his boots and drunkenly falls over.

He crawls on all fours to the water's edge and pulls himself
back to his feet.

He looks up at the stars as he walks into the water.

SHEP
I'm sorry.

He doesn't know quite what to say.

SHEP (CONT'D)
He made me leave you. He lied to
me.

Shep creeps deeper into the lake.

SHEP (CONT'D)
But when I came back you were gone.
Please come back to me.

Tears fall from his eyes.

SHEP (CONT'D)
Come back. Please.

Shep falls backwards into the water as though baptizing himself.

INT. SHEP'S HOME - NIGHT

TIRES SCREECH TO A HALT IN THE DRIVEWAY. THE TRUCK DOOR SLAMS.

BANG. Soaked with water Shep walks in the front door. He stumbles over a PACKAGE in the doorway and falls on his face.

He crawls through the living room to the BATHROOM and RETCHES in the toilet.

Shep flushes, washes his face in the sink. He looks at himself in the mirror with disgust.

He stumbles back to the LIVING ROOM and grabs the package from the floor.

He collapses onto the couch with the box. Examines the label. No return address.

Shep pulls the box open to find a .45 WITH AN ETCHED BLACK SLIDE.

He freezes. His face goes white. He slowly reaches out, touching the gun just to see if it's real.

He picks it up. It's exactly the same as the one Donnelly had in the jungle.

SHEP
Is it you?

Shep puts the gun to his temple and pulls the trigger.

CLICK.

He releases the magazine and finds a piece of paper wedged in the clip.

He pulls the paper out. Unfolds it.

A plane ticket.

Destination: Saigon.

Off Shep reeling.

EXT. SAIGON STREETS - NIGHT

1975.

Motorcycles and cheap cars push through crowds of pedestrians in the city's red light district. There's a constant DIN of shouting in Vietnamese and honking horns.

We FOLLOW two canvas DUFFEL BAGS slung across the back of a hulking MAN as he pushes through the fleshy chaos.

INT. SAIGON HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

The Man, his face darkened by the overhead from the hallway, hurries in, locking the door behind him. Without turning on the light he checks the window.

He tosses the duffel bags on the thin mattress and unzips one. Surplus AK-47s. Shotguns. Flak jackets with holes in them.

He unzips the other. Grenades. Ammunition. Landmines. A small arsenal.

From a jacket pocket he retrieves a folded sheet of paper. A list of numbers. Grid coordinates.

Taking a marker he draws an 'X' on a map of Laos tacked to the wall for each number. Rumored locations of POW camps.

Silhouetted by the red neon of the bustling city below he steps back to review his work.

He removes his boonie cap. He's bald.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL writing at the top of the map:

"OPERATION FOREST DARK"

A POW/MIA flag tacked on the wall beside it.

The words at the bottom of the flag.

"You are not forgotten."

FADE OUT.