

As the lieutenant walked away, Morelli stared after him for a moment, shaking his head. He spat in the dirt again. “You heard him, boys,” he called over his shoulder. “Let’s get moving.”

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” Del whispered to Bobby.

“Yeah. Something isn’t right.”

They fell into formation, with Bobby and Duke on point at the front of the procession and Walkowski walking just behind Bobby as coverman. Delvin and Jesse went to the rear of the unit, where Lt. Jackson pushed his sunglasses up on his nose and gestured to his sidekick RTO to move in beside him.

The stillness of the jungle was unsettling. The heat seemed to hang in the air and cling to the body. The sounds of insects were accompanied only by an occasional distant hum of aircraft and the lone rattle of artillery. The patrol moved steadily forward, the gentle swish of grasses and leaves recording their passage.

Bobby kept his eyes on Duke as he’d been taught to do. It had been difficult learning to rely entirely on the instincts of a canine partner, but Bobby now felt reassurance in relying on Duke to lead him forward. He knew that his own senses were far inferior to Dukes and that there was a gentle balance in what they each had to offer the other. He could feel Walkowski moving just over his shoulder, gun across his chest. They were a band of individuals moving as one. Right now, the sight of Duke’s slow and steady progress was the only thing keeping Bobby’s fear at bay.

The lead hitched slightly in his hand. Duke’s ears twitched. They had been walking for a good thirty minutes, uninterrupted, and now Duke slowed, came to a stop. Bobby felt pin pricks of fear in his chest, stomach, the back of his neck. He came up short behind Duke, honed in now on the lift of his dog’s ears, the turn of his head. Right. Then left. That’s when the fear solidified. Bobby dropped to one knee behind Duke and raised his clenched fist to signal the rest of patrol to drop.

Bobby tried to gauge which way the air was moving. In the stifling heat it was nearly impossible to tell, but he’d been sure that Duke was downwind. They’d taught him in training that if the wind shifted it would be impossible for the dogs to discern which direction a scent was coming from. Bobby glanced up at the leaves just above their heads, zeroed in on one green leaf. It rippled slightly and Bobby took a deep breath. What breeze there was definitely coming at them. He glanced back down at Duke.

Right. Then left. Duke shifted his stance a little.

Walkowski dropped down alongside Bobby. “Whatcha got?” he whispered.

Bobby knew that Duke’s behavior meant one of two things: he wasn’t able to determine which direction the danger was in or the danger was all around them. The only certainty he had was that there

was danger present. He trusted Duke unequivocally on that issue. “There’s something out there on both sides,” he whispered back to Walkowski. “Can’t quite make it out.”

At the back of the patrol, Lt. Jackson frowned and looked at his watch. “We’ll never make it at this rate. What’s going on up there?” He peered over the other soldiers and glanced out into the jungle. “There’s nothing out there!” Turning to Morelli, he delivered his orders. “Replace that dog team and send them back here.” It was clear he was irritated at the interruption in their forward progress. “Maybe they’ll get it right,” he gestured to Delvin and Jesse, but the look on his face expressed his doubtfulness.

Morrelli hesitated, then slowly moved forward with Delvin and Jesse, passing the patrol members, all of whom were now crouched down with weapons trained outward. Morrelli motioned for Delvin to stay in a low crouch.

When they got to the front of the patrol, Morrelli leaned in to Bobby’s ear. “Lieutenant wants you—now.”

“But—“

“Doesn’t matter,” Morrelli interrupted. “No buts. Now.”

Bobby moved as he’d been commanded and turned to face Delvin. “Don’t go any farther,” he said, and his tone indicated that this was an order and not a request.

Delvin nodded and slipped into the space Bobby had just vacated, Jesse on the lead now at the front of the patrol.

Morrelli eyed Bobby for a moment and chewed on the inside of his lip. Bobby was aware that Morrelli could have used that moment to order Delvin and Jesse to keep the unit moving and a tension hung in the balance between them for a moment. Then Morrelli nodded slightly to himself. He said nothing, but led Bobby to the rear of the patrol and Lt. Jackson, who was playing the part of petulant child to a T.

“What the *hell* is holding us up?” Jackson asked.

“My dog threw an alert,” Bobby said.

“Damn greenie on his first patrol. There isn’t a VC within fifteen clicks of here!” Lt. Jackson’s voice rose a few octaves. If the enemy was out there, they were certainly aware by now of their presence.

Bobby didn’t want to add fuel to the fire, but he knew the alternative could have direr consequences. “I beg to differ, sir. My dog—“

“—is worthless!” Jackson’s cheeks became round, red apples of fury. “You’re just holding us up, greenie!”

Taking a moment to think about how best to handle the lieutenant, Bobby turned to face the front of the patrol. He saw Sgt. Morelli shaking his head, drawing his gun up to his shoulder. He knew they, too, could hear Jackson. He saw Delvin coiled next to Jesse and saw the dog turn. He could tell, rather than hear, that she was emitting a soft growl. He saw her ears stiffen. He heard Jackson’s voice above all of this, and then silence. No insects, no air, no time.

“We’re screwed,” someone muttered.

Bobby watched as Delvin stood, his eyes wide, hands motioning for everyone to get back. What happened came in a single moment of panic and chaos. And in that moment, sound came ricocheting back, colliding with the stillness of the afternoon. Automatic fire pierced the quiet. Delvin screamed as ammunition pounded into his back. The dogs released a cacophony of barking and all around the peace of the jungle was betrayed by explosives and bullets.

“Ambush!” Morelli yelled.

Debris flew and clouded his vision, but Bobby saw his friend get hit first. Bobby raised his gun as Delvin fell.

They retreated as quickly as they could, the front line firing while the rest of the unit fell back. Bobby fired at the unseen enemy as the lines retreated, one by one, he and a few members of the squad holding their positions and allowing the rest to fall farther back.

Morelli had quickly pulled Delvin out of the line of fire. The medic rushed to his side. As Bobby fell back to reload, he searched frantically for Del. Instead, his eyes fell on Lt. Jackson, who stood motionless at the rear of the platoon, his face a mask of terror, unresponsively staring at the wounded soldier on the ground. Bobby followed his gaze. He could see that Delvin still had Jesse’s lead in his hand. His grip was loosening.

Morelli jumped up, leaving Delvin in the medic’s care and grabbed the radio from the RTO, who Lt. Jackson seemed incapable of commanding, and shouted something into the handset.

“My dog,” Delvin muttered.

“I got ‘im,” Morrelli said, returning and firing off another volley of shots.

Delvin’s eyes flickered.

Excerpt from FORGOTTEN HEROES – The Novel

Bobby offloaded the last of his ammunition just as the roar of aircraft engines could be heard on approach. The gunfire waned as the aerial ammunition found its target. Portions of the jungle—and perhaps the enemy—were being torn apart in the air strike. Debris rained down on them and the bullets stopped, giving them a precious moment to retreat.

Bobby scrambled to Delvin, seeing in an instant that he was losing too much blood to remain conscious for long.

Delvin's eyes closed. His head rolled back.

“NOOOOOO!” Bobby shouted, his voice carrying through the jungle.

But there was nothing left to disturb.