
SIXTY ONE**A Personal Apology**

I stood there staring at the handset, unable to believe what I'd just heard, but when I looked over at Captain Boatner, I could certainly believe the anger I saw welling up in him.

“Who the hell does that son-of-a-bitch think he’s calling a dumbhead?!”

He paced a couple of steps, hands on hips, his face red with anger and then turned to Wada.

“Call the rear and tell them I want to speak to Colonel Ashe immediately.”

Also stunned by the inbound major’s comment, Top Soloway had been standing there shaking his head slowly. Then directed his attention to our CO with apprehension.

“What are you going to do, Sir?”

The captain was still pacing back and forth rapidly, with nowhere to vent his anger.

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to tell Ashe that I want a bird sent out here to pick me up right now. And then I’m going in and resign my commission. I certainly don’t need *this* bullshit!”

After a long pause, the first sergeant spoke in dead earnest.

“Well, Sir, if you do that, I’m going in with you to tell them I want out too.”

I couldn’t have felt more pride for Top than I did right at that moment. Here was a career military man who must have had close to the twenty years necessary for retirement. Yet, in that one short statement he’d told the captain that he would chuck it all if that was what the other man intended to do.

It might seem like a rash statement from someone with so much seniority, but that was the kind of respect Captain Boatner had garnered from his men...all of us.

The reason for the Top's willingness to back the CO to such an extent wasn't hard to understand when one knew the facts. Since Captain Boatner had come out to the field around the sixth month of my tour, there'd been a noticeable difference in attitude throughout the company.

To be entirely fair, I'd known very little about our previous CO, Captain Conrad, because I hadn't moved up to the CP until after he was gone, but he seemed to be the kind of officer who went strictly by the book, remaining fairly aloof from the men on the perimeter. That's not necessarily a bad thing, because the CO had to have a clear mind when it came to leading a company of infantrymen through the strategies that a war like this required.

But Captain Boatner had a real talent for balancing his clear-minded leadership with a genuine affection for the men on the perimeter. He took it upon himself to make his men feel that they knew him personally. For example, I'd seen more than one occasion when one of the guys on the perimeter received pictures from home, of his wife and children, and brought them to the CP for the captain to see. Captain Boatner would remember the kids names from conversations he'd had with the man previously. I might add that it amazed me too, because retaining that kind of information, on top of all the headaches it took to run a company of this size, was quite a feat. But that was the kind of man he was.

How often I'd seen him stroll out to and around the perimeter, just to shoot the bull with some of the guys manning their foxholes. That meant a lot to them too. It showed that he had the guts to be with his men, even when it wasn't at the safest part of the perimeter, if there ever was such a place.

His ability to make them feel such loyalty showed in the performance of their duties as well. There were few among us who wouldn't have followed him into the jaws of hell, if those had been his orders. And, unfortunately, they often were. That was the nature of war.

We, in the CP, had been taken aback by the Major's crude remark too, because it was contrary to military protocol for a superior officer to belittle a company commander in front of his men. It just wasn't done.

We knew that Captain Boatner had made the right decision in sending the prisoners back with the first bird to arrive on the scene, if for no other reason than a humanitarian one. Any human being is entitled to the quickest medical treatment possible when he's in the condition this man had been, enemy or not. But the decision was correct from a military standpoint too. If the people in the rear wanted to have the prisoner around long enough to interrogate, it was imperative he receive immediate attention.

We may have been taken aback by the major's uncouth outburst, but weren't too surprised by the attitude it displayed. It was known that many higher echelon officers, in the rear, liked to have it appear as if they'd been instrumental in bringing in prisoners. It *looked good* on their permanent records.

I was beginning to feel something else at that moment too,...worry.

If the situation wasn't resolved to the captain's satisfaction, and he and Top left the company, the morale of the men would be adversely affected. These were the two men we respected most.

The people in the rear had also overheard the major's transmission and realized what the situation must be out here, especially when Wada told them what Captain Boatner wanted. He had no trouble at all getting Colonel Ashe personally on the radio. The colonel instructed Wada to tell the captain he would be on his way out to our location as soon as a Huey was ready to fly.

There was a really strange aspect to this particular transmission too, when we all heard it come over Wada's external speaker. Before he signed off, the colonel had said, "Tell him I said, please, don't do anything until I get out there."

"*Please*",.....from a colonel?! You can bet the farm that none of us had ever heard that one before.

While we awaited the arrival of the colonel's bird, he'd instructed the pilots of the Huey carrying Major Brickton to circle the area until he got out here. He wanted a chance to speak with Captain Boatner before Brickton was present.

It felt like we were stuck in a kind of limbo, waiting for the colonel to arrive and the major's Huey circling our location. The captain was still pacing, but with less stringent anger in his stride. Evidently, during this waiting period, he'd been running things over in his mind. As usual, he wasn't thinking entirely of himself. He made his way over to Top and stood beside him, keeping his back to the rest of us, with the intention that we not overhear his conversation. Even though he spoke softly, I could still catch some of it.

"Look, Top, you've put a lot of years in to get those stripes. I don't want you throwing that away on account of me. This is my problem."

Top stared at the ground for a moment and then his eyes came up to meet the CO's.

"Sir, if this is the way they treat the people who are putting their asses on the line out here, then I don't want any part of it either. I'm doing this as much for myself as for you."

The captain rested a hand on the first sergeant's shoulder. He knew that wasn't really true.

"Well,...let's just wait and see what Ashe has to say before we make any decision."

A few minutes later a second Huey came in low over the treetops and landed in the open field just outside the company perimeter. Colonel Ashe jumped out and made his way to the CP. He was a stocky man with graying hair. He shook the captain's hand warmly and the two of them moved off to the side to talk. The CP area was pretty tight so I was still close enough to hear some of the conversation.

"Look, Phil, I know how you feel about what Brickton said, and you're right, but we need men like you out here. This company has an outstanding record of accomplishment and that's mainly due to your leadership. I just can't afford to lose one of my best company commanders."

Captain Boatner paced slowly back and forth in front of the colonel, arms folded, listening to what he had to say. He appeared to be standing his ground. Then, he stopped in one place and the colonel, leaning in close, whispered, so that I could only make out some of what he said.

"Sometimes we all—deal—assholes. You just happened—run into—of them."

With those last words, his eyes shifted up toward Brickton's Huey, still circling. It wasn't hard to fill in the gaps. Then he spoke normally again, sounding like he'd decided to play his ace in the hole.

"Look, I'll tell you what I'll do. Brickton is young and inexperienced. I know that's no excuse for what he did, but I'm asking you to take that into consideration. If I have him come down here and personally apologize to you, will that be satisfactory?"

The captain thought about it for several seconds and then eased up a bit,..."All-right."

Colonel Ashe appeared to have had a great weight lifted from his shoulders.

"Good. I'll go speak to him now and be right back to you."

The colonel told Wada to call the other bird in for a landing and, as it dropped into the field, walked out to meet it. When it was on the ground, we could see the two men standing beside it, the colonel doing most of the talking. We'd all love to have been the proverbial fly on the wall to hear that conversation.

It was clear, from the colonel's attitude toward Captain Boatner, that he wasn't about to let a blatant screw-up deprive him of one of his ablest men. Not only that, but command officers in the field were always in short supply, and those with the outstanding leadership qualities of our CO were extremely hard to come by. Rear echelon desk jockeys, on the other hand, were far easier to replace and there were a lot more of them, simply because few ever risked their lives in the field.

The experience of a good field commander wasn't something that just anyone possessed. We men on the line wouldn't have given a wooden nickel for most of the officers back there if it came to having them lead a company in the field.

The two officers finally came back over to our location where Major Brickton apologized to the captain in front of all of us in the CP. With the apology, he also shook Captain Boatner's hand.

I was somewhat surprised at the major's appearance and demeanor. He looked almost too young to have the rank of major—dark-haired, handsome, well-built, fatigues meticulously starched and pressed, probably an academy graduate. He humbled himself more than I would have expected a man, working his way up the ladder of higher rank, was capable. I'd have figured that a major, forced to apologize to a captain in front of the enlisted men would, at the very least, have been noticeably curt. Evidently, whatever the colonel said to him must have amounted to no less than an ultimatum.

For the captain's part, he took the apology and handshake with the air of a man who was definitely the commander in charge out here, and that's the way it was.

When this highly unusual ceremony was over, the two senior ranking officers returned to their respective Hueys and left for the rear. It was now our job to secure the perimeter of the open field, so that the new LZ could be built.