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Matterhorn

Written by Karl Marlantes

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KARL MARLANTES

MATTERHORN

A NOVEL OF THE VIETNAM WAR



CORVUS

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El León Literary Arts is a private foundation established to extend the array of voices essential to a democracy's arts and education.

Excerpt from Ian Tyson's 'Four Rode By' used by permission of the artist.

The characters, units, and events in this novel are fictional. The Twenty-Fourth Marines is a reserve regiment that did not serve in Vietnam. Matterhorn, Helicopter Hill, Sky Cap, and Eiger are fictional places and Mutter's Ridge doesn't extend as far west. The novel, however, is set in Quang Tri province, Vietnam, among other actual places. Novels need villains and heroes, and the ones in this novel are invented. I served under two fine battalion commanders, one of whom was killed in action, and their S-3 was a crackerjack infantry staff officer.

I am proud to have served with officers and enlisted men who exemplified all the character, skill, and bravery that make one proud to be a Marine. These Marines fought fatigue and the failures of courage, judgment, and will that make me proud to be human.

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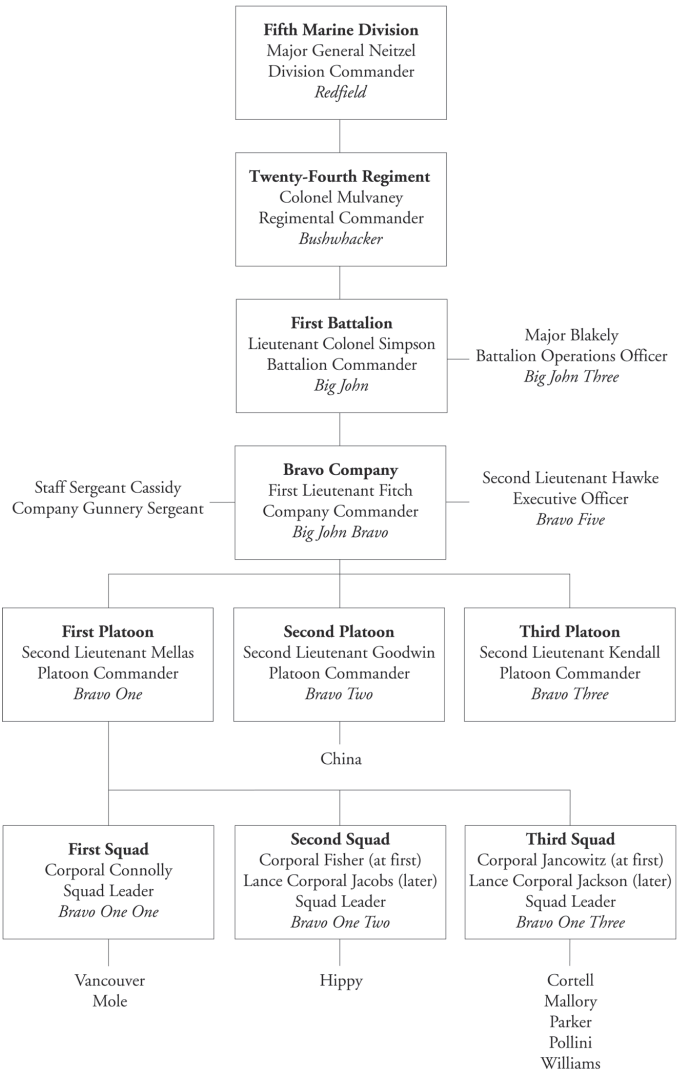
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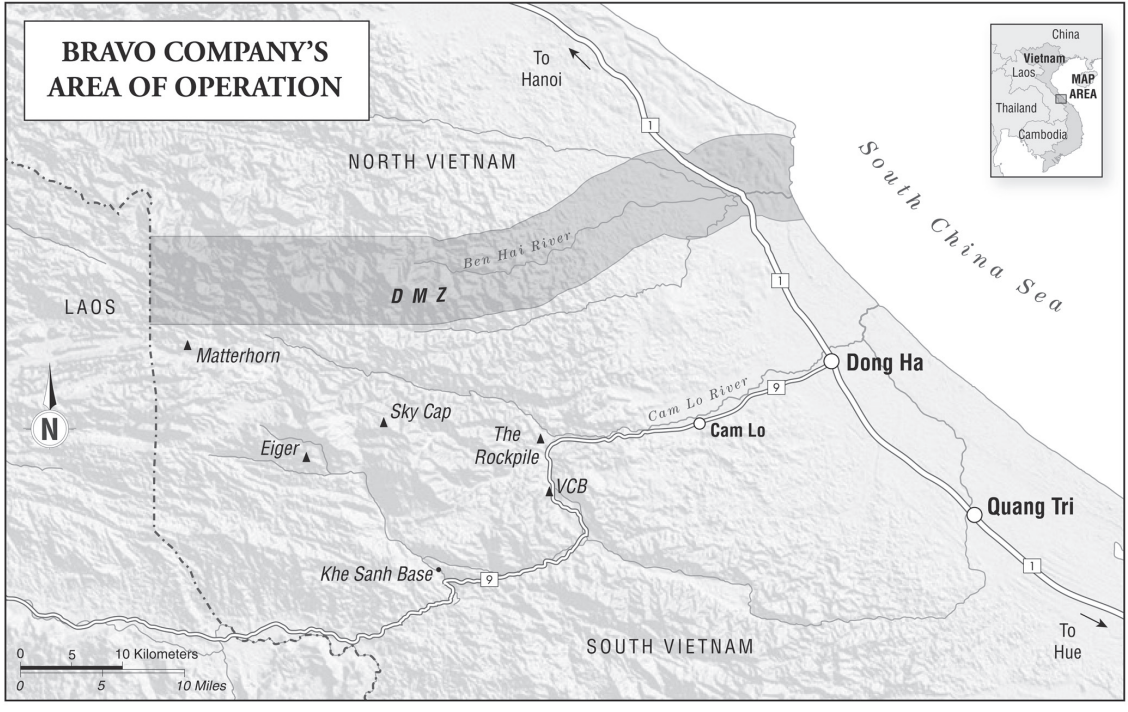
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A glossary explaining slang, military jargon, and technical terms has been provided at the back of the book.

Chain of Command and Principal Characters

(Radio call signs in italics)





Matterhorn, Eiger, and Sky Cap are fictional places; the other locations are real.

CHAPTER ONE

Mellas stood beneath the gray monsoon clouds on the narrow strip of cleared ground between the edge of the jungle and the relative safety of the perimeter wire. He tried to focus on counting the other thirteen Marines of the patrol as they emerged single file from the jungle, but exhaustion made focusing difficult. He also tried, unsuccessfully, to shut out the smell of the shit, which sloshed in the water that half-filled the open latrine pits above him on the other side of the wire. Rain dropped from the lip of his helmet, fell past his eyes, and spattered onto the satiny olive cloth that held the armor plating of his cumbersome new flak jacket. The dark green T-shirt and boxer shorts that his mother had dyed for him just three weeks ago clung to his skin, heavy and clammy beneath his camouflage utility jacket and trousers. He knew there would be leeches clinging to his legs, arms, back, and chest beneath his wet clothes, even though he couldn't feel them now. It was the way with leeches, he mused. They were so small and thin before they started sucking your blood that you rarely felt them unless they fell on you from a tree, and you never felt them piercing your skin. There was some sort of natural anesthetic in their saliva. You would discover them later, swollen with blood, sticking out from your skin like little pregnant bellies.

When the last Marine entered the maze of switchbacks and crude gates in the barbed wire, Mellas nodded to Fisher, the squad leader, one of three who reported to him. "Eleven plus us three," he said. Fisher nodded back, put his thumb

up in agreement, and entered the wire. Mellas followed him, trailed by his radio operator, Hamilton.

The patrol emerged from the wire, and the young Marines climbed slowly up the slope of the new fire support base, FSB Matterhorn, bent over with fatigue, picking their way around shattered stumps and dead trees that gave no shelter. The verdant underbrush had been hacked down with K-bar knives to clear fields of fire for the defensive lines, and the jungle floor, once veined with rivulets of water, was now only sucking clay.

The thin, wet straps of Mellas's two cotton ammunition bandoleers dug into the back of his neck, each with the weight of twenty fully loaded M-16 magazines. These straps had rubbed him raw. All he wanted to do now was get back to his hooch and take them off, along with his soaking boots and socks. He also wanted to go unconscious. That, however, wasn't possible. He knew he would finally have to deal with the nagging problem that Bass, his platoon sergeant, had laid on him that morning and that he had avoided by using the excuse of leaving on patrol. A black kid—he couldn't remember the name; a machine gunner in Third Squad—was upset with the company gunnery sergeant, whose name he couldn't remember either. There were forty new names and faces in Mellas's platoon alone, and almost 200 in the company, and black or white they all looked the same. It overwhelmed him. From the skipper right on down, they all wore the same filthy tattered camouflage, with no rank insignia, no way of distinguishing them. All of them were too thin, too young, and too exhausted. They all talked the same, too, saying fuck, or some adjective, noun, or adverb with fuck in it, every four words. Most of the intervening three words of their conversations dealt with unhappiness about food, mail, time in the bush, and girls they had left behind in high school. Mellas swore he'd succumb to none of it.

This black kid wanted out of the bush to have his recurrent headaches examined, and some of the brothers were stirring things up in support. The gunnery sergeant thought the kid was malingering and should have his butt kicked. Then another black kid refused to have his hair cut and people were up in arms about *that*. Mellas was supposed to be fighting a war. No one at the Basic School had said he'd be dealing with junior Malcolm X's and redneck Georgia crackers. Why couldn't the Navy corpsmen just decide shit like whether headaches were real or not? They were supposed to be the medical experts. Did the platoon commanders on Iwo Jima have to deal with crap like this?

As Mellas plodded slowly up the hill, with Fisher next to him and Hamilton automatically following with the radio, he became embarrassed by the sound his boots made as they pulled free of the mud, fearing that it would draw attention to the fact that they were still shiny and black. He quickly covered for this by complaining to Fisher about the squad's machine gunner, Hippy, making too much noise when Fisher had asked for the machine gun to come to the head of the small column because the point man thought he'd heard movement. Just speaking about the recent near-encounter with an enemy Mellas had not yet seen started his insides humming again, the vibration of fear that was like a strong electric potential with no place to discharge. Part of him was relieved that it had been a near miss but another part acted peeved that the noise might have cost them an opportunity for action, and this peevishness in turn irked Fisher.

When they reached the squad's usual position in the company lines, Mellas could see that Fisher could barely contain his own annoyance by the way he nearly threw to the ground the three staves he'd cut for himself and a couple of friends while out on the patrol. These staves were raw

the slope in front of him. The fog that swirled around them obscured their goal: a sagging makeshift shelter they had made by snapping their rubberized canvas ponchos together and hanging the ponchos over a scrap of communication wire strung only four feet above the ground between two blasted bushes. This hooch, along with two others that stood just a few feet away from it, formed what was called, not without irony, the platoon command post.

Mellas wanted to crawl inside his hooch and make the world disappear, but he knew this would be stupid and any rest would be short. It would be dark in a couple of hours, and the platoon had to set out trip flares in case any soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army—the NVA—approached. After that, the platoon had to rig the claymore mines, which were placed in front of their fighting holes and were command detonated by electric wire; they delivered 700 steel balls in a fan-shaped pattern at groin height. In addition, the uncompleted sections of the barbed wire had to be booby-trapped. If Mellas wanted to heat his C-rations he had to do so while it was still daylight, otherwise the flame would make a perfect aiming point. Then he had to inspect the forty Marines of his platoon for immersion foot and make sure everyone took the daily dose of dapsone for jungle rot and the weekly dose of chloroquine for malaria.

He and Hamilton stopped just in front of Bass, the platoon sergeant, who was squatting outside the hooches in the rain making coffee in a number-ten can set over a piece of burning C-4 plastic explosive. The C-4 hissed and left an acrid smell in the air but was preferred to the eye-burning stink of the standard-issue trioxane heat tabs. Bass was twenty-one and on his second tour. He emptied several small envelopes of powdered C-ration coffee into the boiling water and peered into the can. The sleeves of his utility jacket were neatly rolled into cuffs just below his

elbows, revealing forearms that were large and muscular. Mellas, watching Bass stir, set the M-16 he had borrowed from Bass against a log. It had taken very little coaxing from Bass to convince Mellas that it was stupid to rely on the standard-issue .45 pistols the Marine Corps deemed sufficient for junior officers. He pulled off the wet cotton ammunition bandoleers and let them fall to the ground: twenty magazines, each filled with two interwoven rows of bullets. Then he shrugged out of his belt suspenders and dropped them to the mud, along with their attached .45 automatic, three quart-size plastic canteens, pistol ammunition, his K-bar, battlefield compresses to stop bleeding, two M-26 fragmentation hand grenades, three smoke grenades, and his compass. Breathing deeply with relief, he kept watching the coffee, its smell reminding him of the ever-present pot on his mother's stove. He didn't want to go check the platoon's weapons or clean his own. He wanted something warm, and then he wanted to lie down and sleep. But with dark coming there was no time.

He undid his steel-spring blousing garters, which held the ends of his trousers tightly against his boots as protection against leeches. Three leeches had still managed to get through on his left leg. Two were attached and there was a streak of dried blood where a third had engorged itself and dropped off. Mellas found it in his sock, shook it loose onto the ground, and stepped on it with his other foot, watching his own blood pop out of its body. He took out insect repellant and squeezed a stream onto the other two leeches still attached to his skin. They twisted in pain and dropped off, leaving a slow trickle of blood behind.

Bass handed him some coffee in an empty C-ration fruit cocktail can and then poured another can for Hamilton, who had dumped his radio in front of his and Mellas's hooch and was sitting on it. Hamilton took the coffee, raised the

can to Bass in a toast, and wrapped his fingers around the can to warm them.

"Thanks, Sergeant Bass," Mellas said, careful to use the title Bass had earned, knowing that Bass's goodwill was crucial. He sat down on a wet, rotting log. Bass described what had happened while Mellas was out on patrol. FAC-man, the company's enlisted forward air controller, had once again not been able to talk a resupply chopper down through the clouds, so this had been the fourth day without resupply. There was still no definitive word on the firefight the day before between Alpha Company and an NVA unit of unknown size in the valley below them, but the rumor that four Marines had been killed in action was now confirmed.

Mellas tightened his lips and clenched his teeth to press back his fear. He couldn't help looking down onto the cloud-covered ridges that stretched out below them into North Vietnam, just four kilometers away. Down there were the four KIAs, four dead kids. Somewhere in that gray-green obscurity, Alpha Company had just been in the shit. Bravo's turn was coming.

That meant his turn was coming, something that had been only a possibility when he had joined the Marines right out of high school. He had entered a special officer candidate program that allowed him to attend college while training in the summers and getting much-needed pay, and he had envisioned telling admiring people, and maybe someday voters, that he was an ex-Marine. He had never actually envisioned being in combat in a war that none of his friends thought was worth fighting. When the Marines landed at Da Nang during his freshman year, he had to get a map out to see where that was. He had wanted to go into the Marine Air Wing and be an air traffic controller, but each administrative turning point, his grades in college, his grades in Basic School, and the shortage of infantry

officers had implacably moved him to where he was now, a real Marine officer leading a real Marine rifle platoon, and scared nearly witless. It occurred to him that because of his desire to look good coming home from a war, he might never come home at all.

He fought back the fear that surged through him whenever he realized that he could die. But now the fear had started his mind churning again. If he could get into Hawke's position as executive officer, then he'd be safe inside the perimeter. There would be no more patrols; he'd handle admin and be next in line for company commander. For him to get Hawke's position, the current company commander, Lieutenant Fitch, would have to rotate home and Hawke would have to take Fitch's place. That was actually quite likely. Everyone loved Hawke, up the chain of command and down. Still, Fitch was new to the job. That meant a long wait, unless of course Fitch was killed or wounded. As soon as this idea went through his head, Mellas felt terrible. He didn't want anything bad to happen to anyone. He tried to stop thinking, but he failed. Now it occurred to him that he'd have to wait for Hawke to rotate home, unless something happened to Hawke. Mellas was amazed and ashamed. He realized that part of him would wish anything, and maybe even do anything, if it meant getting ahead or saving his own skin. He fought that part down.

"How's the wire coming?" Mellas asked. He didn't really care about the task of stringing the barbed wire in front of the holes, but he knew he should appear interested.

"Not bad, sir," Bass said. "Third Squad's been working on it all day. We're close to finished."

Mellas hesitated. Then he plunged into the problem he'd avoided that morning by going out on patrol. "That kid from Third Squad come to see you about going to the rear again?" He was still overwhelmed, trying to remember everyone's name.

"Name's Mallory, sir." Bass snorted. "Malingering fucking coward."

"He says he has headaches."

"And I've got a pain in the ass. There's two hundred good Marines on this hill want to go to the rear, better ones than that piece of shit. He's had a headache ever since he came out to the bush. And don't give me any of that 'Watch out 'cause he's a brother' shit, because there's a lot of good splibs out here that don't have headaches. He's chickenshit." Bass took a long drink and then exhaled steam into the cool damp air. "And, uh," Bass added, a slight smile on his lips, "Doc Fredrickson has him up by his hooch. He's been waiting for you to get back."

Mellas felt the hot sweet coffee move down his throat and settle into his stomach. He wriggled his water-wrinkled toes to keep from nodding off. The warmth of the coffee through the can felt good against his hands, which were beginning to run pus, the first symptoms of jungle rot. "Shit," he said to no one in particular. He placed the cup against the back of his neck where the strap of the magazine bandoleer had rubbed it raw.

"Drink it, Lieutenant," said Bass. "Don't make love to it." Bass took out his pocketknife and began carving another elaborate notch on his short-timer's stick. Mellas looked at it with envy. He had 390 days left to go on his own tour.

"Do I have to deal with it now?" Mellas asked. He instantly regretted asking the question. He knew he was whining.

"You're the lieutenant, sir. RHIP." Rank has its privileges.

Mellas was trying to think of a witty comeback when he heard a scream from Second Squad's area. "Jesus! Get the squid! Get Doc Fredrickson!" Bass immediately threw down his stick and ran toward the voice. Mellas sat there, so stupid with exhaustion he couldn't will himself to move.