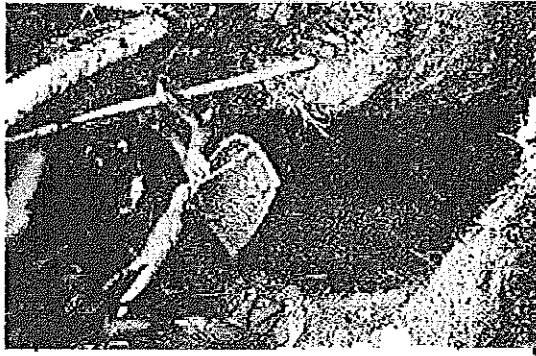


Vietnam War -- Fighting in the Tunnels
excerpted from *The Tunnels of Cu Chi* by Tom Mangold & John Penycate}

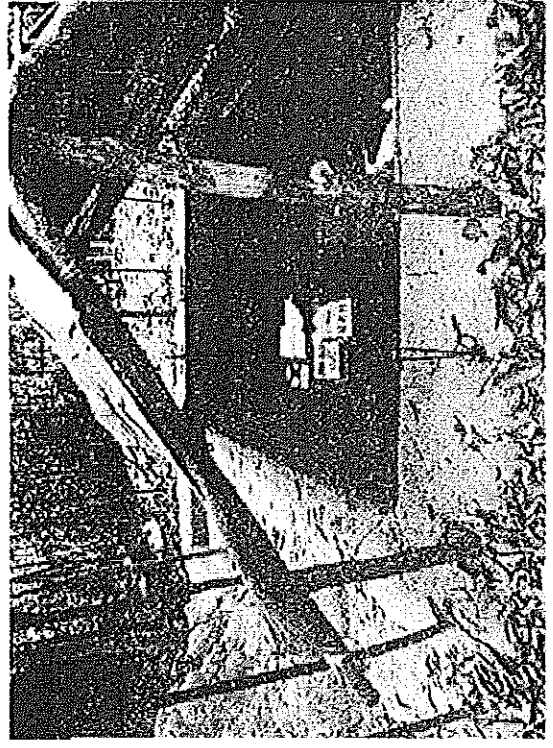
As he grew up, it was the Americans who took the place of the French, and their hairy arms and large frames were no joke to the handful of village children who had been selected by the Communist party to receive a full education. He soon hated the Americans. A friend from Hanoi had told him the Americans called the village fighters Viet Cong, to him an insulting and derogatory term. Now, at thirty-three and still unmarried, Thuan was waiting for the call to join the regular soldiers, but the party had deliberately kept him as a village commander of the part-time self-defense force. He had fought a brave war. He was cunning and ruthless and, above all, he was one of the few cadres who knew the geography of all the eight miles of underground tunnels that the villagers had built in the area. Sometimes he was the only man who could guide the soldiers from Hanoi along the tunnels on their secret journeys through Cu Chi; the men from the North marveled at being able to travel safely under the Americans' noses.

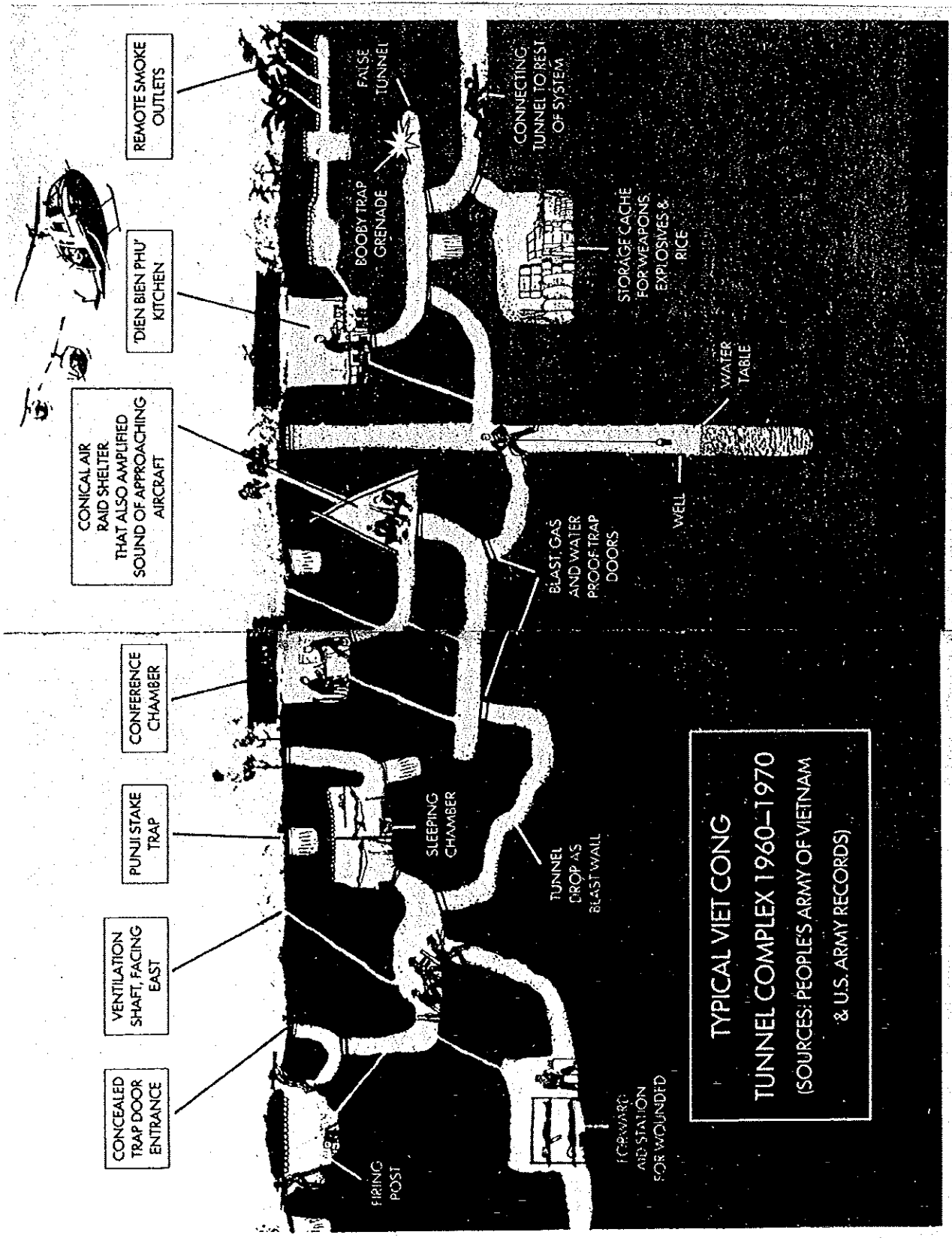
A small earth-fall from the exposed tunnel entrance warned Thuan that the first American tunnel soldier was descending. He had purposely ordered that the first shaft be dug just over three feet deep; it meant the American would have to descend feet first and then wriggle awkwardly into the long communication tunnel where Thuan waited, hidden in an alcove. In the past, as a GI's feet had touched the bottom, Thuan had stabbed the soldier in the groin with his bayonet. This time, as the green-and-black jungle boots descended, Thuan leaned out of his alcove and, using the light from the tunnel entrance, shot the soldier twice in the lower body.

Above ground, the Americans were now in trouble. They



Tunnels in Vietnam were dug by hand, using hoes as scoops and baskets to take out the earth. Sometimes the Viet Cong could only manage a few feet a day, yet they dug over 200 miles like this. A captured VC document stated "tunnels will turn hamlets into fortresses." There were large "conference chambers" at ground level (*below*), protected by camouflaged roofs, but when the land was shelled and bombed they became too dangerous to use.





TYPICAL VIET CONG
 TUNNEL COMPLEX 1960-1970
 (SOURCES: PEOPLE'S ARMY OF VIETNAM
 & U.S. ARMY RECORDS)

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ould not drop grenades down the shaft because their mortally wounded comrade jammed the hole—anyway, he might still be alive. Slumped in the narrow shaft, he prevented other soldiers from making their way down to chase Thuan. He guessed it would take the Americans at least thirty minutes to get the ropes slipped under the dying man's arms and then haul him out. The Americans' concern for their dead and wounded remained a source of bewilderment and relief to the Communist soldiers. Anything that delayed the battle inevitably favored the weaker side and allowed reloading, regrouping and rethinking.

Once the American's body had been removed from the shaft, Thuan anticipated that his comrades would probably drop a grenade or two down the hole, wait for the smoke to clear, then climb into the shaft and crawl quickly into the first communication tunnel, firing ahead with their pistols. They would be smarter this time and they would be angrier. He would not wait where he was.

His next fighting position was the second shaft, some four feet deep, which connected the first communication tunnel with the second lower one. There was a trapdoor at the top of the second shaft, but Thuan had to remove it for his next operation to succeed. He prayed the Americans would not be using gas at this early stage to flush him out. If they did not, and he was very lucky, the Americans would follow him, using flashlights. Thuan hid in the second shaft, its trapdoor off. He crouched low enough to be invisible to the Americans as they groped their way along the communication tunnel toward him. And yes, they were using flashlights. They might as well have been using loudspeakers to announce their intentions.

The tunnel soldiers had not thrown grenades but they had fired their pistols in volleys to clear the tunnel ahead. From his crouching position in the shaft at the end of this tunnel, Thuan could look up and feel sharp splinters of clay falling on his face as the bullets struck the end of the tunnel above the open shaft. The noise of the firing was deafening. Now the tunnel soldiers were slowly advancing. As soon as their flashlights saw an open shaft entrance ahead, they would roll a grenade down it and Thuan would be blown to pieces. The timing was now critical. He waited for a pause in the pistol volleys and then popped his head and shoulders out of the

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shaft. He saw at least two flashlights, they blinded him. As a foreign voice shouted, he fired the first clip from his AK-47, loaded the second by touch, and fired that, too. The tunnel exploded in a roar of noise, orange light, and screams of the wounded. He ducked back into the shaft, picking up the trapdoor from the bottom and replacing it above his head. He wriggled down the shaft and slipped along the second communication tunnel far enough for safety should the Americans be able to remove the trapdoor and throw grenades down after him. He lay breathless and sweating on the earth.

From his hiding place above ground at the top of the secret shaft, about 120 feet away from the American position, Thuan's observer watched as the Americans slowly brought out their dead and wounded from Thuan's attack. Three helicopters arrived for the victims. Thuan carefully noted all the information the messenger brought him from above ground. It gave him the basic material to make his next plan for below ground. Thuan's deputy was convinced that now, surely, the Americans would dynamite the tunnel. Thuan was not so sure. It was four in the afternoon, and the Americans would want to leave, spend the night in Dong Zu base, next to Cu Chi town, and return by helicopter at first light. They still had not discovered the second secret tunnel entrance; they had lost surprise; they had lost men. They might hope there was a tunnel complex large enough to be worth exploring for documents or Communist military equipment. Thuan still had his box of grenades and a perfect escape route behind him. He gambled on another battle.

That night Thuan developed a mild fever and went to a small sleeping hole inside the tunnel. Just large enough for one man but with the luxury of a specially dug air ventilation hole leading in from the surface three feet above, the hole was also used for the wounded before they could be taken by tunnel on the longer trip to the underground tunnel hospital at Phu My Hung. Indeed, there were still bloodstained bandages in the hole. The guerrillas had been unable to burn them or bury them since the last battle. The incessant heavily armored sweeps mounted by the 25th Division from their huge fortress next to Cu Chi town had kept the Communist defense forces pinned inside their tunnels for weeks on end. Sometimes there had been surprise raids by the tunnel soldiers; sometimes there had been many deaths. As Thuan sweated his way through the night, he as-

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sumed the new tunnel soldiers would be more careful and cautious than the last squad. Success would depend on the Americans' not knowing the layout of the system, and anticipating that the Communists had now fled.

This time, he would allow the Americans to crawl forward without any impedance and let them travel much farther than they had gone before. Their journey would take them down the first shaft and along the first communication tunnel, then down the second shaft (scene of the previous day's attack) and along the second, or bottom, communication tunnel. They would then reach a third shaft, one that led up. The tunnel soldiers would know what Nam Thuan knew, that this was the most dangerous and critical moment of any tunnel exploration. Thuan would be waiting for them.

He called one of the village boys and ordered him to fill a bag with earth. Then he checked and rechecked his grenades. The American ones were infinitely superior to the homemade ones or even the grenades the Chinese had sent, but tunnels had a way of destroying sensitive mechanisms. In the kind of war that Nam Thuan fought in the tunnels, there were only first chances—never seconds.

The Americans came, as they always seemed to, shortly after eight in the morning. A team crawled with exaggerated care through the tunnel system that had seen such havoc the day before. They moved by inches, looking for tunnel booby traps, but Thuan had dismantled everything—he wanted the soldiers dead, not saved through their own vigilance. He waited until the first dim hint of light announced they were now on their way along the second, the lower, communication tunnel. The leader would find himself facing the shaft at the end of the tunnel. He would shine his flashlight up. He might even have time to see the grenade that would fall to end his life.

In the five seconds before the grenade exploded in the middle of the Americans—Thuan never knew how many there were—he had time to slap the trapdoor shut and heave the heavy bag of earth on top and himself on top of the bag. The explosion just managed to lift the trapdoor with its extra weight. Afterward there was complete silence.

Before American soldiers later destroyed the tunnel with Bangalore torpedoes—chains of explosives linked by detonating cord—Thuan's men had time to retrieve four working

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pistols, all .38s, and two broken flashlights left by the Americans. His platoon escaped from the secret exit. In fact, the explosions destroyed only some seventy feet of the tunnel complex, and the system was usable again within a few weeks.

Fourteen months later, Nam Thuan was invited to join the regular forces as an officer. He became fully responsible for the defense of the six hamlets of Phu An village. Three years later, in November 1973, the Americans were gone and the war was being fought only by the South Vietnamese army; Thuan was a member of the district party committee when the guerrilla forces of Cu Chi, strengthened by regular troops from North Vietnam, went on the offensive for the first time in five years. They wiped out forty-seven South Vietnamese military posts in one month alone. Two years later, on 28 March 1975, Thuan was with the forces who raised the flag of the Communist National Liberation Front over the town of Cu Chi. He is now a major in the People's Army of Vietnam.

Sergeant Arnold Gutierrez, thirty-eight years old, five feet six inches tall, weight 125 pounds, sat in the undergrowth eating his C-rations and cursing his luck. He had been in and out of the service for decades—joined the marines in '45, did a spell in the New Mexico National Guard, did a bit more in the Marine Corps reserves, joined the army in '62, made sergeant within two years, and staff sergeant just in time to make it to Vietnam and real action. It was April 1966. There was still no action. Instead he was with a unit of grunts, poking around looking for holes in the ground. With a curious mixture of restlessness and deviousness he had managed to maintain some control over his military career—the ultimate ambition of nearly every professional soldier. He knew he probably would not rise in rank much during this war, but at least he would see some action, he would win a couple of Purple Hearts, and he would find out how good a soldier he really was. But hole hunting—that was for beagles.

Nothing in training with the 25th ("Tropic Lightning") Division in Hawaii had prepared him for this kind of work. He had shone at all the gung ho jungle-warfare training courses. He was immensely sinewy and strong; with his New Mexican background, he tolerated the heat and humidity without complaint. But in Hawaii they had trained for the kind of war the

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GIs had fought in Korea—human waves of screaming Chinese. No one had said anything about holes in the ground. When the 25th had finally arrived in Cu Chi, it seemed to have set up its base camp on a former peanut plantation that was either directly over or pretty damn near some weird kind of underground city. With increasing embarrassment, the 25th had been unable to secure its own perimeter. Now they needed special little guys to go down the tunnels and dig Charlie out. It was this that had brought Arnie Gutierrez into the jungle; NCO in charge of A company of the 4th Battalion of the 23rd Mechanized Infantry.

It had been a bad day so far and it was still only eleven-thirty in the morning. They had been looking for Viet Cong tunnels, which were about as easy to find as truffles in a Kansas cornfield. Tunnel entrances were wonderfully camouflaged, and if you did get too close, snipers usually hit your point man, there would be panic, and you still did not find the entrance. If you were lucky enough to be around on the rare moments that an entrance was exposed, some officer would call your name, and with that sweet and sour mixture of anticipation and fear, you would prepare to crawl in. Holes were hot (active) or cold (empty). Arnie Gutierrez had never had a hot hole yet.

Today's patrol had been fruitless, and the man chewed their rations silently. It was that time of day when you didn't believe it could get hotter; the very oxygen in the air seemed to fry. Some of the larger men took it very hard. Skinny runs like Gutierrez suffered far less. But tempers always ran parallel with the heat of the day, and Gutierrez could feel his rising. His SP4, sitting just ten feet away, had been staring at him for some time. It was beginning to unnerve the sergeant, when suddenly the corporal spoke softly: "Don't move one single inch, Sarge." Gutierrez froze. It was either a snake or a booby trap, and he prayed it was a snake. The corporal pointed a finger and said: "You're sitting on a bamboo stake that's rigged. It's maybe rigged to explosives or to a mine. Look to your right."

Gutierrez swung his head round as if it were on a well-oiled ball race and had no relationship with his shoulders or spine. The piece of bamboo was obviously part of the booby trap. The bad news was he had not spotted it when he sat down; the good news was that if he was not sitting on a pressure-detonated

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mine, then he might survive. "We're bound to be near a tunnel entrance," the corporal said unnecessarily, as he inched toward Gutierrez to examine the bamboo stake. "They always have these things to protect the entrance and keep us away." The SP4 carefully explored the area around Gutierrez and then told the sweat-soaked NCO it was safe to get up. The bamboo stake was not wired but was the trigger for a mine directly beneath it. The two men told their squad to leave the area, then dug themselves a small trench hole with their bayonets. They hid inside it and the corporal tossed a grenade at the bamboo stake. The mine detonated with a roar and, as an added bonus, exposed the entrance to an underground tunnel. The corporal went back to his unfinished C-rations.

It was now long enough into Arnie Gutierrez's mercifully short career as a tunnel soldier for him to have pondered the harder realities of tunnel work. He pretended to be the hunter, but in truth he knew he was the hunted. Almost nothing worked to his advantage in those holes, with their appalling smells, except that sometimes, in the heat of the day, they were still cool and dank from the night. Otherwise they generated claustrophobia, fear and physical fatigue. All this, and he had not even met a VC in a tunnel yet; there had not been one single firefight. Yet one small part of him, a part he feared, produced enough adrenaline for him to want to go down there; that little unquenchable flame, fed by curiosity and an instinct more primitive than he cared to admit, now warned him for action.

He took his personal .22 pistol, his flashlight, some wire and rope, a small stick, and a bayonet. He left his helmet and fatigue top behind, and wore only a green T-shirt, boots and trousers. The mine had blown away a large jagged opening, revealing no less than three separate small tunnel entrances, each one just large enough to take one thin man. For no reason at all he chose the right-hand tunnel. The coward in him kept repeating that Charlie would be long gone with all that mine-blowing outside; with luck it would be a short trip. Even so, the tunnel was bound to be booby-trapped. He would have to use the flashlight to spot the worst danger—old GI communications wire used by Charlie to act as a tripwire that set off a booby-trapped grenade. A grenade exploding in a tunnel on top of a human being did unspeakable things. All the blast was concentrated and bounced off the tunnel walls. You could put

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a man inside a handbag after one of those went off.

The tunnel swung in a slow arc to the right. The air was good, and there was no smell of body or excrement. As long as the tunnel bent round, Charlie should not be able to see the flashlight at too great a distance. There were no booby traps on the ground or the roof, and Gutierrez stuck to his own golden rule in tunnel crawling. He had figured out that the VC had earned that impatient Americans always took the shortest distance between two points—and consequently the VC tended to wire booby traps at places where an American soldier would be tempted to take a short cut. Gutierrez's golden rule was to stay with one side of the tunnel *all the way*, never cross over, never walk across a chamber if he found one, but hug the wall and try to finish up where he started.

As he inched through the tunnel, and the familiar fear gripped his sphincter muscle, and earth and sweat began to fill his eyes, he stopped for a moment to apply golden rule number two—and in doing so spent two minutes in saving his life. The tunnel was beginning to straighten out. He had to use his flashlight to search for booby traps, but the light was a perfect target if Charlie was up there. Gutierrez took the small stick and some wire, tied his flashlight to the stick, and began holding the light in his left hand as far above his left ear as the low tunnel roof allowed. He sheathed his knife, with which he had been delicately probing suspicious-looking roots that stuck through the earth, and unholstered the little .22 and placed it in his right hand. There could be no more uncomfortable, or difficult way of traversing a tunnel, but it was the only way that made sense. The sergeant cursed at not having brought his homemade knee pads, as he saw blood coming from the knee. He began to sense that he had gone almost far enough without a backup, who would have carried the TR-12 radio. He decided to give the tunnel one more bend, look for a lay-by in which he could turn around, and then return.

He actually saw the VC firing at him. He saw his face, saw the flash of the gun; the noise defied belief, and as it exploded around his skull, he was convinced he had been shot in the head. Stunned and deafened, he dropped the flashlight, fell, and fired blindly at where the face had been. He lay coughing in the acrid gun smoke, slowly realizing he was not only alive but unhurt. Why hadn't Charlie delivered the coup de grâce?

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Still deafened, he saw his flashlight lying on the ground and still alight. He waited, prone, a little longer, then gingerly edged toward the flashlight and picked it up. There was no more firing. Through the settling dust he could just see a figure lying about twenty yards away. If there had been a second VC, Gutierrez would be dead by now, so that was no problem, but maybe the second VC had fled, leaving his fallen comrade booby-trapped? Maybe the figure lying on the ground was not dead but just waiting. Gutierrez tried to work out how much time had passed between the shooting and now. His options were too limited to worry about. He could only move forward or move arse-end out. He began to crawl forward. The twenty yards took forever.

His adversary had been shot in the head. The bullet had made a small hole in the temple and the wound had stopped bleeding. The man was still breathing. Gutierrez took the wire he had brought and carefully wrapped it round the muzzle of the AK-47. If the gun was booby-trapped, this was the only way to find out. Gutierrez then holstered his .22 and began to back out of the tunnel, playing the wire out in front of himself, making sure the gun was never jerked. They were already coming in to help him as he appeared, but first, round a corner. He hissed at his corporal to back out, too, and one by one they reached the light and the air. Only then did Gutierrez pull the wire—there was no booby-trap explosion—and drag out the AK-47 as well.

He went back in carrying a rope, with an additional rope tied to his ankle in case they had to drag him out, too. Inch by inch he crawled back to where the wounded VC still lay. If the AK-47 had not been booby-trapped it was unlikely the body had been. Nevertheless, Gutierrez gently explored it for any telltale wires before tying the rope around the man's neck. He was not going to take the risk of lifting the body to tie the rope under the VC's armpits. Once again, Gutierrez backed out of the tunnel, playing the rope out in front of him. Once more, he had the squad pull the VC out. When the body emerged from the hole, the man was already dead.

For the last time, Gutierrez went into the tunnel complex. Nobody knew what was in there. They discovered they had killed a solitary guard, posted there to allow wounded VC from some earlier battle to be carried away from the small under-

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ground hospital at the end of the communication tunnel. Gutierrez's squad eventually found two chambers, with soiled clothes and bloody bandages inside. How and where the inhabitants had escaped was, as ever, the mystery. Gutierrez was now past caring. It was dusk and time to return to the comparative safety of the base.

Gutierrez sat silently inside the APC as they bumped and bounced their way back to Cu Chi. Everything he had learned about fighting seemed to have no relevance to what he had been doing today. Every infantry course, all the technology, the backup artillery and air support, the choppers that could fly half a division into and out of the battlefield within a few hours—what did any of this have to do with any enemy you never saw alive, who existed in holes in the ground, and against whom only a man's brute strength and luck seemed to prevail?

They had told him in Hawaii and during special training in Alaska that this was a war against only a handful of Communist terrorists. Yet wherever his unit traveled, the turf seemed to belong to the enemy. Even the American fortress at Cu Chi was not safe. How could this be, when it was so close to Saigon itself? Just how far away were they, anyway? "Only twenty miles," said his corporal, "and the tunnels stretch right up to the edge of the city."



Major Nam Thuan, a veteran Viet Cong tunnel fighter (left). He personally destroyed an American task force sent to flush him out from his tunnels. Another senior Communist tunnel veteran—Major Nguyen Quot (right). Like his comrades he was promoted through the ranks and spent a decade fighting from the Cu Chi tunnels complex. He once lived five months underground without a break.

In the early days of tunnel warfare, VC cells like this one fought hard to acquire precious American weapons. The VC guerrilla wears the identifying black and white check scarf. The women were discouraged from hand-to-hand fighting with the GIs.



