

TERRY HERTZLER

## *How We Lost the War*

The hamlet sat at the north end of a long valley, squad taking a break, LT talking to the village headman. A young radio operator stood near the lieutenant, watching the ridgeline, half-click away, a dozen shades of green broken near the top by tan and black of shadowed rock faces, individual trees crowning the canopy like camel humps, edges silhouetted against a sky the blue of old jeans. A papa-san squatted near him, face wrinkled and impassive, black marble eyes reflecting everything. The soldier wondered what the old man had seen in this small Vietnamese hamlet in his 70 years, what changes inscribed the map of his face, what victories and sorrows etched those lines and fashioned the patience of his posture, squatting buttocks-to-heels in the red dirt, arms relaxed across his knees. *He's seen this sun rise 25,000 times.* Suddenly, the soldier felt absurd—19 years old, dressed in olive-drab fatigues, jungle boots, web gear, bandoleers of ammunition, canteens, M16, PRC-25 radio on his back, code words and call signs echoing through his brain, a trained communications expert who spoke only one language, but who on the LT's command could call in artillery, gunships, air strikes, could turn this village to smoke and ash. He wondered how many languages the old man spoke: Vietnamese, possibly French, Chinese, some of the dozens of dialects spoken by various Vietnamese ethnic groups, maybe even English. But he'd probably never driven a car, flown in a jet, watched a sitcom. And the young soldier waited for some epiphany, something to justify the air he was breathing, the sun on his face—but then Sergeant Jaines walked by, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, wondering out loud if there was any gook pussy to be had in this shithole, and the young soldier turned his back, embarrassed, moved away from the old man, missing his quick glance, those eyes filled for a moment with an emotion the soldier might have almost recognized had he still been looking.