

JACK HIGGINS



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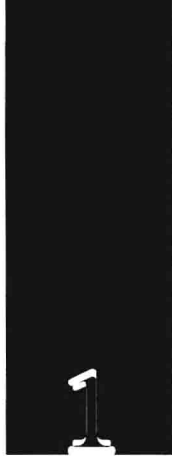
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IN THE

BEGINNING



DANIEL QUINN WAS A GOOD ULSTER NAME. BELFAST IRISH Catholic, as a young man, his grandfather had fought with Michael Collins during the Irish War of Independence, and then, a price on his head, he'd fled to America in 1920.

He'd become a construction worker in New York and Boston, but it was as a member of that most secret of Irish societies, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, that he'd begun to gain real power. Employers learned to fear him. Within a year, he was an employer himself and on his way to becoming a millionaire.

His son, Paul, was born in 1921. From an early age, Paul was obsessed with flying, and in 1940, while a student at Harvard, he'd traveled to England on impulse and, using his father's name, joined the RAF as a fighter pilot, an American volunteer.

His father, anti-Brit, was horrified and then proud of him. Paul

earned a DFC in the Battle of Britain, and then moved on to the American Army Air Force in 1943 and earned another one there. In 1944, however, Paul Quinn was badly shot up in a Mustang fighter over Germany. Luftwaffe surgeons did what they could, but he would never be the same again.

Released from prison camp in 1945, he went home. His father had made millions out of the war, and Paul Quinn married and had a son, Daniel, born in 1948, though his mother died in childbirth. Paul Quinn never completely regained his health, however, and contented himself as an attorney in the legal department of the family business in Boston, a sinecure, really.

Daniel, a brilliant scholar, also went to Harvard, to study economics and business administration, and by the time he was twenty-one, he had his master's degree. The logical next step would have been to go into the family business, which now numbered hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of property, hotels, and leisure, but his grandfather had other ideas: a doctorate, and then a glittering future in politics, was what he had in mind.

Strange how life often swings on small things. Watching TV one evening, seeing the death and carnage in Vietnam on the news, the old man expressed his disapproval.

"Hell, we shouldn't even be there."

"But that isn't the point," Daniel replied. "We are there."

"Well, thank God you're not."

"So we leave it to the black kids who never stood a chance, to the working-class kids, to Hispanics? They're getting slaughtered by the thousands."

"It's not our business."

"Well, maybe I should make it mine."

"Damn fool," the old man said, a little fearful. "Don't you do anything stupid, you hear me?"

The following morning, Daniel Quinn presented himself at the downtown Army recruiting office. He began with the infantry, and then joined Airborne as a paratrooper. His first tour brought him a Purple Heart for a bullet in the left shoulder and a Vietnamese Cross of Valor. Home on leave, his grandfather saw the uniform, the medals, and cried a little, but Irish pride won the day.

"I still say we shouldn't be there," he said, looking at his grandson's tanned face, the skin taut over the cheekbones. There was something in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"And I say again, we are, so we have to do it right."

"What about a commission?"

"No, Granddad. Sergeant is fine."

"You're crazy."

"I'm Irish, aren't I? We're all a little crazy."

His grandfather nodded. "How long have you got home?"

"Ten days."

"Then straight back?"

Daniel nodded. "I'm going into the Special Forces."


The old man frowned. "What's that?"

"You don't want to know, Granddad, you don't want to know."

"Well, try and have a good time while you're here. See a few girls."

"I surely will."

Which he did, and then it was back to the green hell of Vietnam, the constant throbbing of the helicopters, death and destruction all around, all the roads inevitably leading to Bo Din and his own personal appointment with destiny.

amp Four was deep in the bush north of the Mekong Delta, the river snaking through marshland and great banks of reeds and the occasional village. It was raining that day, a monsoon kind of rain that

hung like a gray curtain, making it difficult to see much. Camp Four was a jumping-off point for Special Forces deep penetration operations, and Quinn had been ordered there just as they'd lost their master sergeant.

As usual, he'd hitched a lift in a medevac helicopter, but, things being stretched, this contained only one pilot and a young medicum-air gunner named Jackson, who sat at the heavy machine gun and peered out the open door. The helicopter dropped lower as visibility became worse in the rain. There were paddy fields below, the brown line of the river, and Quinn stood, held on, and looked down.

A sudden explosion came over to the right, flames mushrooming, and as the pilot banked, a village emerged from the rain, some of the houses on stilts on the river. Quinn saw canoes and fishermen's flatboats, people crowding into them, some of them already pushing off. He also saw Vietcong in straw hats and black pajamas, heard the distinctive crack of AK47s, and below him people began toppling from boats into the water.

As the helicopter approached, the VC looked up in alarm and some of them raised their rifles and fired. Jackson returned fire with his heavy machine gun.

"Christ, no!" Quinn told him. "You'll get the civilians, too."

The pilot called over his shoulder, "We'd better get out of here," and banked away as a round or two hit them. "That's Bo Din. Lots of VC activity in this area."

It was at that moment that Quinn saw the mission on the edge of the village, the tiny church, the small group of people in the courtyard, Vietcong moving up the street.

"It's a nun with a dozen kids," Jackson said.

Quinn grabbed the pilot by the shoulder. "We'll have to put down and get them."

"We'd be lucky to get off again," the pilot shouted. "Look down the road."

There were Vietcong everywhere, at least fifty, swarming between the houses, hurrying to the mission.

"Courtyard's too small. I'd have to land in the street. It won't work."

"Okay, just drop me off, then get the hell out of here and bring in the heavy brigade."

"You're nuts."

Quinn looked down at the nun in her white tropical habit. "We can't leave that woman or those kids. Just do it."

He stuffed the pockets of his camouflage jacket with flares and grenades, slung pouches of magazine around his neck, and found his M16. Jackson fired a long burst down the street that scattered the Vietcong and knocked several down. The helicopter hovered just above the ground and Quinn jumped.

"I guess I'm nuts, too," and Jackson followed him, clutching an M16, a belt of magazines around his neck, a medical bag over his shoulder. There was a storm of firing as the Vietcong started up the street again, and the two Americans ran to the entrance of the courtyard where the nun was coming forward with the children.

"Back, Sister," Quinn called. "Get back." He pulled his grenades out and tossed one to Jackson. "Together."

They pulled the pins, counted to three, stepped out, and lobbed. The explosions were deafening. A number of Vietcong went down, the rest retreated for the moment. Quinn turned to the nun. She was in her early twenties, with a pale and pretty face. When she spoke, it became clear she was English.

"Thank God you came. I'm Sister Sarah Palmer. Father da Silva is dead."

"Sorry, Sister, there's only the two of us. The helicopter's gone for help, but God knows how long it will take."

Jackson fired a burst down the road and called, "What the hell do we do? We can't hold this place. They'll be all over us."

The wall at the rear had crumbled over the years. Beyond, great banks of reeds at least ten feet tall faded into the downpour.

Quinn said to Jackson, "Take them into the swamp, do it now."

"And you?"

"I'll hold things here as long as I can."

Jackson didn't even argue. "Let's move it, Sister," and she didn't argue either.

Quinn watched them go, the children greatly upset, some crying. They scrambled across the crumbling wall, and he took a grenade from his pocket and pulled the pin. He heard the sound of an engine, and when he peered round the wall, a battered jeep was coming up the street, two Vietcong standing up at a machine gun behind the driver. God knows where they'd gotten it from, but more Vietcong sheltered behind. They started to fire, and Quinn tossed the grenade at the last possible moment. It dropped neatly into the jeep, and there was a hell of an explosion, bits of the vehicle and broken men tossed in the air, flames everywhere.

The rest of the Vietcong ran for their lives. A silence descended, with only the rush of the rain. Time to go. Daniel Quinn turned, ran to the crumbling wall, scrambled across, and made for the reeds. A moment later, he jumped into those reeds, pausing only to fit his bayonet to the M16, then he plunged forward.

Sister Sarah Palmer led the way, holding the hand of one child and carrying the smallest, the others following. She spoke softly to them in Vietnamese, telling them to be quiet. Jackson followed at the rear, M16 ready.

They came out into a dark pool and she stood there, thigh deep, her habit hitched up to her belt. The rain thundered down, and there was a kind of white mist. She looked over her shoulder at Jackson.

"If I've got my bearings, there should be a road over to the right."

"And what good will that do, Sister? They'll run us down, and to be honest, I'm more concerned about Quinn. There hasn't been a shot fired since that explosion."

"Do you think he's dead?"

"I sure as hell hope not."

Suddenly, a young Vietcong stepped out of the reeds behind him, a bayonet on the end of his AK, and stabbed Jackson in the back under the left shoulder blade, missing his heart by inches. He cried out and went down on his knees. On the other side of the pool, three more VC emerged, all very young, one of them a girl, clutching AKs.

Jackson tried to get up, using his M16 as a crutch. In silence, the Vietcong watched gravely, then there was a sudden savage cry and Quinn burst out of the reeds, firing from the hip, ravaging all three in a kind of slow motion. The fourth, the one behind, surged forward, too late, as Quinn turned and bayoneted him.

Quinn put an arm around Jackson. "How bad is it?"

"Hurts like hell. But I'm still here. There are some battle packs in my bag, but I think we better get out of here first."

"Right." Quinn turned to Palmer. "Move out, Sister."

She did as she was told, following with the children. They came to a shallower spot, a knoll sticking out of the water. There was room for all of them. Jackson sat there and Quinn ripped at the jagged rent left by the bayonet, exposing the wound.

"Battle packs in the bag?"

Sister Sarah Palmer reached for it. "I'll handle it, Sergeant."

"Are you sure, Sister?"

She smiled for the first time. "I'm a doctor. The Little Sisters of Pity is a nursing order."

Behind in the reeds, they heard many voices, like foxes crying. "They're coming, Sarge," Jackson said, clutching his rifle and leaning over as she went to work on him.

"Yes, they are. I'll have to put them off."

"How can you do that?" Sister Sarah asked.

"Kill a few at random." Quinn took a couple of flares from his pocket and gave them to Jackson. "If the cavalry make it and I'm not back, get the hell out of here."

"Oh, no, Sergeant," Sister Sarah said.

"Oh, yes, Sister," and he turned and plunged into the reeds.

He could have used his bayonet, a silent killing, but that wouldn't have caused the panic he needed. His first target was providential, two VC standing so that they could survey the marsh, their heads and shoulders above the reeds. He shot both in the head at a hundred yards.

Birds lifted in the heavy rain, voices called to each other in anger from various areas. He selected one and moved in, shooting another man he found wading along a ditch. He got out fast, easing across the reeds, crouched by another pool and waited. Special Forces had developed a useful trick for such situations. You learned a few Vietnamese phrases as fluently as possible. He tried one now and fired a shot.


"Over here, comrades, I've got him."

He waited patiently, then called again. A few moments later, three more men appeared, wading through the reeds cautiously.

"Where are you, comrade?" one of them called.

Quinn took out his last grenade and pulled the pin. "Here I am, you bastards," he cried in English and lobbed the grenade. There were cries as they tried to scramble away and the grenade exploded.

By now there were shouts everywhere, as the panic he had sought for set in. As he moved on, he saw a road, Vietcong scrambling onto it. He eased back into the reeds to get his bearings and became aware of engines throbbing close by, but by then the late afternoon light was fading and it combined with the tropical rain to reduce everything to minimum visibility. A flare shot into the air, disappearing into the murk, a Huey Cobra gunship descended three hundred yards away and he heard others whirling above, but the Huey was too far away, and he plunged forward desperately, already too late.

he flare that Jackson had fired had worked, and two crewmen jumped out of the Huey and bundled the children inside quickly, followed by Sister Sarah.

The black crew chief lifted Jackson by the arms. "Let's get out of here, man."

"But the Sergeant's still out there, Sergeant Quinn."

"Hell, I know him." Shooting started again from the reeds and bullets thudded into the Huey. "Sorry, man, we've got to go. It'll be dark any time and we've got to think of these kids."

He raised Jackson to the waiting hands that pulled him in, followed and called to the pilot at the controls, "Let's go."

The Huey lifted. Jackson was actually crying and Sister Sarah leaned over him anxiously.

"But what about the Sergeant?" she said.

"There's nothing we can do. He's dead, he's got to be dead. You heard all that shooting and the grenade exploding. He took on all those bastards single-handed." The tears poured down his cheeks.

"What was his name?"

"Quinn, Daniel Quinn." Jackson moaned in agony. "Christ, but it hurts, Sister," and then he passed out.

But Quinn was still in one piece, mainly because the enemy had assumed he'd escaped in the Huey. He made it to the river as darkness fell, thought about it, then decided that if he were to stand a chance he needed to be on the other side. He approached Bo Din cautiously, aware of the sound of voices, the light of the cooking fires. He slung his M16 around his neck, waded into the water, and with his combat knife sliced the line holding one of the flat-bottomed boats. The boat drifted out with the current, and he held on and kicked, Bo Din fading into the darkness. He made the other side in ten minutes, moved into the jungle, and sat under a tree, enduring the heavy rain.

At first light, he moved out, opening a can of field rations, eating as he went. He hoped for a gunboat on the river, but there was no such luck, so he kept on walking through the bush and, four days later, returned from the dead, arriving at Camp Four on his own two feet.

Back in Saigon, the general attitude was disbelief. His unit commander, Colonel Harker, grinned when Quinn, checked out by the medics and freshly uniformed, reported as ordered.

"Sergeant, I'm at a loss for words. I don't know which is more extraordinary—your heroism in the field or the fact that you made it back alive."

"That's very kind, sir. May I ask about Jackson?"

"He's in one piece, though he nearly lost a lung. He's at the old French Mercy Hospital. The army runs it now."

"He behaved admirably, sir, and with total disregard for his own safety."

"We know that. I've recommended him for the Distinguished Service Cross."

"That's wonderful, sir. And Sister Sarah Palmer?"

"She's helping out at the Mercy. She's fine and so are all the kids." Harker held out his hand. "It's been a privilege, son. General Lee will see you at headquarters at noon."

"May I ask why, sir?"

"That's for the General to tell you."

Later, at Mercy, he visited Jackson, and found him in a light, airy ward with Sister Sarah sitting beside him. She came round the bed and kissed him on the cheek.

"It's a miracle." She appraised him quickly. "You've lost weight."

"Well, I wouldn't recommend doing it the way I did. How's our boy?"

"His left lung was badly injured by that bayonet, but it will heal in time. No more Vietnam, though. He's going home," and she patted Jackson's head.

He was overjoyed to see Quinn. "Jesus, I thought you long gone, Sergeant."

"Daniel," Quinn told him. "Always call me Daniel, and if there's ever anything I can do for you back in the States, just call me. You hear? And congratulations on your Distinguished Service Cross."

"My what?" Jackson was incredulous.

"Colonel Harker's put you up for it. It'll go through."

Sister Sarah kissed Jackson on the forehead. "My hero."

"This is the hero, Daniel here. What about you, Sarge?"

"Oh, Christ, I don't want any medals. Now settle down. All this fuss is bad for your lung. I'll see you later." He nodded. "Sister." And walked out.

She caught up with him at the rail of the shaded terrace, lighting a cigarette, handsome in his tropical uniform.

"Master Sergeant Quinn."

"Daniel will be fine for you, too. What can I do for you?"

"You mean you haven't done enough?" She smiled. "Colonel Harker was kind enough to tell me a bit about your background. With all you have, why did you choose to come here?"

"Easy. I was ashamed. What about you? You're English, dammit. This isn't your war."

"As I told you, we're a nursing order. We go wherever we're needed—it doesn't matter whose war it is. Have you ever been to London? We're based at St. Mary's Priory on Wapping High Street by the Thames."

"I'll be sure to look you up the next time I'm there."

"Please do. Now would you like to tell me what's troubling you—and don't try to say you're not troubled. It's my business to know these things."

He leaned against a pillar. "Yes." He shook his head. "I've killed before, Sister, but never like in the swamp. At least two of them at close range were young women. I was on my own, I had no choice, but still . . ."

"As you say."

"But still a darkness came over me. I saw only the killing, the death and destruction. There was no balance, no order."

"If it worries you, make your peace with God."

"Ah, if only it were that simple." He glanced at his watch. "I'd better go. Generals don't like to be kept waiting. May I kiss you good-bye?"