

*Joseph T. Cox*

## Notes from Ban Me Thuot

**A**t zero-nine-ten, I wandered into the operations section where Jess, Major Witherspoon, and assorted operations staff were silently listening through the static on the tactical radio. Over the buzz, a voice cracked, “Oscar-six-alpha, how many were on board, four or five? Hell, we’ve got enough parts here for six body bags, over.” The big Okie radio operator replied, “Romeo Zulu, according to our manifest there were only four, over.”

Major Witherspoon spat on the dirt floor and wiped his sweaty face with a dusty rag. SGT Stevenson, a muscular red-head, whistled, “Damn, I just saw ole’ Captain Ray and the el tee at coffee.” Jess just stared at the radio hard, his blue eyes never blinked.

Jess and I had been scheduled to make the flight north to the industrial site named Waite-Davis but gave up our seats on that morning’s aircraft to the Group surgeon and our refrigerator repair man, a favor granted as casually as one of Colonel Buckton’s insults. With the Colonel’s final threat that if the refrigerators were not up by noon, he would have Chief Lopes’s “spic ass,” the junior officers left the morning briefing and adjourned to the mess tent for coffee and a parody of the good colonel’s morning performance.

The only West Pointer, other than Colonel Buckton himself, Jess had commanded a remote, land-clearing company for six months where his wounds earned him purple hearts and authenticity, estimable stock in a combat zone. Much to his chagrin, he was finishing his tour in the relatively safe Engineer Group Operations TOC (Tactical Operations Center). Jess was the longest in country, the biggest soldier on the compound, and our acknowledged and undisputed moral authority.

If Jess thought something was wrong, we paused to reassess our position. Of course, Jess hardly ever questioned the most hare-brained scheme, thus his unchallenged supremacy in the unspoken hierarchy of the informal bureaucracy.

In fact, about a month earlier, it was Jess's idea to pitch rocks on the tin roof of the field grade bunker and scream, "INCOMING!" In the dark mad scramble, the fat major broke his arm trying to get to the fighting position. Major Witherspoon, who hated the fat major as much as we did, had to use Jess's West Point credential to argue the colonel out of pressing charges against us all.

I looked to him to see me through this crisis, too. Jess would be able to make sense out of our very close call. His silence and distant stare unnerved me, and I felt a chill in the crowded heat of the TOC. In the dark of the sleeping bunker, I lay on my poncho, my mouth full of ashes, morning coffee acid boiling in the back of my throat, fumbling to pull the flip top on a warm Falstaff beer.

Ray, Dan, Doc, and Mr. Lopes had tried to fly below the highland clouds but slammed into a mountainside. "Romeo Zulu, according to our manifest there were only four, over."

Drinking the second warm beer, I stared through the dust particles that rose in the slivers of sunlight and listened to roaches scurry across sand bags, the buzz of a fly, the distant crackling refrain of a tactical radio, and the steady stroke of my heart beat, louder and louder. Jess found me around noon and asked me to help him get the dead guys' kit in order.

We didn't say a word as we inventoried the footlockers. I yearned for a wise-ass comment that would make small sense of second lives. I thought back to the morning coffee and how in his best Buckton voice Jess had lampooned the oh-six-hundred briefing, "Lopez, you better have that refrigerator perturbation under control by lunch, or I'll *find* someone with half a brain who *can* do the job right."

Lopes stirred his coffee and muttered in his cup, "Can you believe dat asshole. I've only been working for the shithead for seven months, and he doesn't even know my damn name."

Captain Gage, the Intelligence officer who was always sweating added, "I couldn't believe how he reacted to that shit about the kid at Whiskey Mountain. The one who got his leg caught in the rock crusher."

Jess pointed out, "You could see wheels in his head turning. His first question was, 'How long did you say the plant was down?' He never asked if the kid was alive, did he lose his leg? No, 'How many hours did you say the plant was down?' He was trying to figure out how hard the battalion was working before the acci-

dent. He had to make up his mind if they were using the accident to cover up their poor statistics, if he had to go down there and kick some ass.”

Gage added, “What a cold blooded bastard! Lopes, just cut the asshole’s heart out and carry it with you up to Waite and stick it in the fridge—permafrost!”

“Did we ever find out what happened to the kid? Did he lose his leg?”

“Everything is numbers. People are numbers. Production is numbers. It’s a war of attrition, and Buckton’s a cold-blooded, heartless computer. Every stretch of pavement is one more step on his path to a star, and he knows that the higher-ups have their calculators out measuring his leadership just like he’s measuring us.”

Tired of what he considered work talk, Ray Lanning, a stringy Texan with an exaggerated drawl, adjusted his aviator sun glasses and theatrically drew out what he hoped to be the last word on our esteemed leader, “Hey, it’s the only god damned war we have. What do you all fuggin’ expect? Ghandi, Martin Luther King, or somebody who gives a rat’s ass about some numb-nut, pot-smoking private who slips and falls in a rock crusher? Shit, as long as the kid didn’t loose his nuts, he’ll be back home in a month and collecting full disability!”

In what seemed to be his natural state, Ray was nursing a serious hangover. As an Engineer Group aviation detachment commander, he felt he was missing the shooting war of gunship pilots but made up for his deep and bitter disappointment by sitting in a lawn chair on top of the O Club bunker raising beers every time incoming rockets randomly tore up the airfield.

Dan Dougherty, Ray’s copilot, on the other hand, didn’t drink and carried a Bible. He quietly stirred his coffee, shook his head at Ray’s exaggerated cynicism, and knew what was coming next. As usual, in part because of Dan’s squeamishness, and in part because Ray’s imagination never strayed far from the mostly fictitious world of his sex life, Ray quickly turned to a conversation you might hear if dogs could talk.

Dan tried to look bored as he sipped his coffee, but Ray smiled his gat-toothed smile and continued, until Jess added the last word to the morning coffee klatch, “Ray, I sure am tired of your disgusting bullshit! Let’s get to work.”

Following Jess’s benediction, Ray and Dan picked up their hats, swatted at the flies, and raised the tent flap. Ray adjusted his aviator glasses, breathed in the heavy air, and exhaled, “Awh-he-yauh!, the fresh smell of burning shit! Lovely Vietnam, the civilization that took two thousand years to learn to carry two piles of shit with one stick and eat a pile of shit with two.” We answered Ray’s host-

country cultural synopsis with our wishes that he go screw himself and have a safe flight.

“Romeo Zulu, according to our manifest there were only four, over.”

That day I had my fill of haphazard, senseless destruction. Almost a year of booby traps, mines, casual rockets, unseen snipers. The desultory violence and the random waste of lives. American and Vietnamese. Soldier and civilian. The very young and the very old. Victims of accidents in the air, accidents on the roads, ambushes, and, always, a pervasive and wanton disregard for life and decency that characterized this war.

The teenage woman on the back of a moped hit by a speeding GI truck lying face down in sticky, fly-covered blood. Her hips shattered, body twisted so that her small feet pointed up. Her dark, flitting eye the only sign of life.

The dead, dismembered Vietcong's torso and limbs planted in Montagnard earthenware pots and left, fly-covered, on the hairpin turn of a mountain road as a warning, a sign.

The two soldiers who feigned engine trouble to stay behind the convoy for the wet of warm beer and sex, ambushed a few miles from the work site. When I got to the bullet-riddled vehicle, stepped up and opened the door, the driver's pooled guts and blood splashed over my legs and feet and soaked the red dust of the road. The dead driver's partner sobbing a half mile back where he had jumped and hid in the open sewer that ran next to the road.

For weeks after that ambush, every time I walked by the bullet ripped truck, clouds of flies would rise from the cab where remnants of viscera rotted in the still, hot air.

It was the same stumbling hum of flies I heard every time I went into the latrine to take a dump. The same murmur that rose in a cloud over the woman dying in the road and from the swarm that feasted on body parts in Montagnard crockery. It was the zoom that greeted those who found an airplane disintegrated on a mountainside, its human freight smashed, sliced, and scattered in the elephant grass.

“Romeo Zulu, according to our manifest there were only four, over.”

Imagine those who found the wreck, bent over like farmers planting rice in the valley below. A rescue party harvesting bone and body parts from among shattered airplane pieces, solving the puzzle of mangled flesh, trying to make whole a scene of schemeless mutilation. Did they ever sort out the gore? Does Ray's family know that perhaps it is Dan's

mutilated hand folded on their son's torn chest, or what is left of Mr. Lopes's shattered leg stuffed alongside Doc's torso in the cheap tin coffin. All as one making its way home on slow cargo planes.

Buried in small towns, different body's body parts stacked as are the names on the granite wall. What do we carry from that wreck? Memory and monument. Time and death fold in on themselves.

And that night in Ban Me Thuot, in the old French hotel with the high ceiling and empty bar, after we spent the afternoon inventorying their footlockers, and in the process lifted a bottle of Ray's Jack, Jess and I sat silently drinking neat whiskey like cowboys in a bad movie. Perhaps it was a dream, or is a dream now, but it happened, and that night in Ban Me Thuot is with me still. As is the piano up against the dark wall and Jesse picking notes carefully, trying to play Mozart, through a drunken haze to the rhythm of the distant echo of B-52 strikes just over the Cambodian border.

The big, balding, dirty soldier, playing beautiful music deliberately on a dusty, untuned piano. Two of us alone, as head-ache drunk and silent as that night after Jess helped me get the truck and the dead boy back to the compound, and I tried to wash the blood off my legs and boots but could never get rid of the smell. The smell, the dust, the dry headache, and Jess's sweet notes leaving the big room for the night air and beyond—his big, filthy fingers picking just the right small notes.

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