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No Man's Land

This is a story I have told several times in the thirty-five years since the happening. It's a story, or I should say, stories, about the Vietnam War, that long-ago trauma that has too often been stuffed into the recesses of national memory, to be brought out into the light of consciousness only on Veterans or Memorial Day. September 11th and its aftermath, the Afghan War, and now the new Iraqi War, have, in their fashions and as expected, obscured Vietnam. The veterans who will emerge from the new wars will have their stories to tell, and Vietnam may be pushed even further back in our collective memory.

But there is still much to be told by many about Vietnam, and my story here is certainly just another small part of the tale. I hope that there are still listeners willing to hear a combat infantryman's memories of Vietnam. And perhaps my story can illuminate today's wars. All wars need to be brought to the light, and these latest episodes are certainly in need of examination, full of American power and "clarity of purpose" though they may be.

I say that I have told my story several times in the last thirty-five years. "Several times" is no great frequency. It is not something that I often do—talk about Vietnam—not because of the gruesome quality of my experiences, or because of deep-seated trauma or fear of confronting past demons, or for any other reason or stereotype that the popular imagination has conjured up about war in general or Vietnam veterans in particular. I do not think that combat veterans are reticent about their war experiences because of the nature of the experiences themselves. Nor do I always agree with Tim O'Brien's famous dictum, "A true war story is never moral." For many ex-soldiers some war stories *are* moral. They have to be, in order to find meaning in the meaninglessness. And for that reason we'll tell our stories. But not too often.

Why do so many veterans hold back? The answers are found in the truly *authentic*. Where is the *authentic* in the telling of war stories? I have read the work of professionals: *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young* by Hal Moore and Joe Galloway, I've read Michael Herr's *Dispatches* and Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*, to name three of the best accounts of Vietnam. But when I speak of the *authentic*, I am speaking of another kind of war literature, the vast body of largely unknown writings, books written by men

who in some cases seem barely literate themselves. Books written from memory, in the absence of notes or documentation, books written in the everyday vernacular, in unpolished prose, full of the amateur's mistakes and awkwardness, but, for all that, books full of true heart and memory, the memory of real courage fulfilled in combat, and real lives lost and mourned.

I found an insight into the real one day, a glimpse into the wisdom that I had not been able to articulate. I was reading Reynel Martinez's *Six Silent Men: 101st LRP Rangers, Book One*, which is part of a trilogy about the long range reconnaissance soldiers of the famous 101st Airborne. Martinez is one of those salt-of-the-earth types who served with distinction in Vietnam. His unvarnished memoirs are much like those of others like him who have written their stories and who must number in the hundreds, or even thousands. Like others of its kind, his book is not a professional writerly account, but it is an account of a true professional, a man who excelled in the profession of arms.

It was in a passage in Martinez's book that I found the reason for the reluctance of many combat veterans to tell their stories. I felt the instant truth in what Martinez said, and that feeling was a long-delayed relief for me. For too long I had labored under the misapprehension that it was something in me that was not right, that I should not be so silent, but should be able to open up, to go ahead and talk, to speak the stories. It was what everybody said they wanted to hear, so why not tell them? But then I read what Reynel Martinez had to say, remembering a quiet night at the 101st base camp, when *he* was about to hear a comrade relate a war story, and I understood.

Mad Dog (Sergeant David Dolby) had told me that he'd been put in for the Medal of Honor during his previous tour with the Cav. I knew some of the story, but Dave had never gone into detail on what had really come down. I wanted to know but had too much respect for him to ask the details. Everyone in that circle felt the same way: nobody wanted to be a punk and ask a Medal of Honor nominee to recite a war story. *The telling of a war story is a very personal matter. It has to be offered. Real, honest war stories almost always deal with adrenaline rushes; moments of sheer, naked terror; and the suffering and death of good friends.* (My italics)

Like Martinez, I have sat in the circle of combat veterans, and my best times in Vietnam were the quiet nights when men told their stories. How often have I wished that I was in that circle again, respectfully waiting to hear and to be respectfully received in my telling. But that cannot be in the

civilian world, because those outside the circle can never wait for the story to be offered. The sentiment expressed by Martinez—“to much respect for him to ask the details”—is not the feeling of those who must hear the story. They must have it on demand it seems, and that is not the right thing, because the respect for the soldier is lost. And that explains my reluctance to tell my war stories.

But on that day of my College Homecoming in 2002 I felt that I must tell war stories, and this time I found it not a difficult thing to do. I think this is so because I created the opportunity for the telling, to a public audience of my own choosing. After several years of thinking about it, I organized a meeting of war veterans and our friends and spouses at the annual alumni reunion of Colorado College, my alma mater. This location, I felt, would be the appropriate place to gather, the safest occasion in which to run the risk that all such endeavors must. In a real sense, the meeting of the college war veterans is in itself a war story, apart from all the stories that were told there. But that story can only emerge in the context of the others, the real war stories. It cannot be told like a war story. It is more accurately an antidote to the war stories, a curative for the human illness of which war stories are symptoms. But I cannot relate it straightforwardly. I can only say that you, the reader, must pay close attention to the telling, and see if indeed you can detect the story around the stories.

The group was one that I had called into being. It was not the perfect group. It was not at all “the circle” that Reynel Martinez describes. I had wanted more WWII and Korean War veterans, but that did not happen. Most of the attendees were Vietnam veterans. More importantly, the perfect group for me would have consisted only of combat veterans: no rear-area types allowed, REMFs (Rear Echelon Motherfuckers), as we called them in Vietnam. And, of course, no civilians at all. Still, I felt I had to compensate for the non-military nature of much of the group. To help compensate for a lack of core knowledge, I thought it would prove useful for everyone to read Tim O’Brien’s story, *The Things They Carried*, beforehand, which is one reason why I allude to that work in this essay.

The primary aim of the Veterans’ Reunion within the larger context of the alumni reunion, especially for the Vietnam veterans, was to heal old wounds, the psychic wounds of the battlefield, and the even more well-remembered college wounds. These are the wounds of the painful rejection and scorn that professors and fellow students on campus inflicted on us in the late sixties and seventies, but which we do not acknowledge. In fact, so hurt were they by the treatment they received when they were fresh from Vietnam—their combat trauma so recent, the scabs of their psychic wounds so easily torn off—several Vietnam veterans refused to attend the Veterans’ Reunion. We had to have some of those people present—the perpetrators—

so that they would hear our pain (even after all these years) and finally understand it. At least that was the intent. But we would never announce that aloud.

When it came my turn to speak, I spoke about my first encounter with death in Vietnam. It is a vivid memory, as most first memories are. Here is what I told them, but maybe it's only what I think I told them about what I think happened, because in a war story you think something happened, but maybe it didn't.

I had just come out to the Company, flown on the chopper to the clearing in the heavy forested region of the Ia Drang Valley in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The group of new replacements of which I was part had spent the night before in a place called "The Oasis"—an artillery fire base set in the middle of a wide flat jungle clearing. Huge trees had been bulldozed around the perimeter, and the intact jungle of tall trees formed a ring about two or three hundreds meters away, completely surrounding the artillerymen. There was nothing oasis-like about "The Oasis." Truly it was one of the ugliest places I have ever seen. But no matter, it was not meant to be pretty, just functional. The distant tall trees beckoned with their promise of cool shade. The dark shadows, visible inside that forest, promised something else.

We were grabbed immediately by a gang of vagabonds—other GIs—and consigned to the bunker line for guard duty. These "old guys" saw us FNGs (fucking new guys) as ripe meat for the taking. What they wanted was to sleep the night, while we stood guard for them. And stand guard we did, petrified with fear, staring unblinkingly into the blackness beyond the concertina and the double-apron barbed wire, expecting at any dark moment in that never-ending night to be swarmed by hordes of VC. We did not yet know that there were no Viet Cong anywhere close by. Only the regular soldiers of the North Vietnamese Army, the NVA.

Then, when we simply could not stay awake anymore, envying those other fellows who were snoring the night away, we heard a flurry of activity behind us, in the 4.2 inch mortar pits. The mortar crews roused themselves for a fire mission, we could hear them calling out the settings, the increments, God knows what. Some rounds went out, sounding with a loud *thoop* as they left the tubes. We heard them land far away, the explosions sounding completely harmless. The big mortars were silent for a few minutes. I remember wondering what the four-deuce guys were going to do next. Then another round went out, but this time there was no clean *thoop*, no quick whistle of the projectile—no, this time it fizzled, going up like a slow Fourth of July rocket, sparks trailing behind it, a red stream like some kind of fiery diarrhea that reached all the way back to the ground. Then it landed.

It landed 100 meters inside the perimeter. It landed on top of the mess tent. It exploded in a fast flash of brilliant orange. It landed, exploded, then nothing happened. In a few moments, I heard running footsteps. Someone shouted. I was looking out into the darkness from the back door of the bunker. Then I heard the sound. From a football field away I could hear it. It was a loud, raspy gurgle, coming out of the heap of canvas that used to be a large tent. I could see the faint smoldering edges of a fire on the canvas. The rattling, gargling noise went on, and on, then stopped.

Next morning we heard that the cook had been sleeping in the mess tent. A piece of shrapnel from the four-deuce round had gone into his throat. That was him. I had heard him. That was him, choking to death on his own blood. That was the sound of his death. I was weak, I felt weak and tired. That was my introduction to the war.

But this was not the story I'd wanted to tell. It was really nothing, just an accident after all. Worse things happen. Had happened. So I went on talking, watching them all, the professors, the wives, the invited guests, and the other veterans. I saw that the warriors did not disclose any particular reaction—not interested, but not disinterested—just there. I suppose it was the professors I'd wanted to reach that day. Not really the other combat veterans this time. Some of the professors in the room had been my teachers, oh so long ago. But here they were, still here, no apparent stress in their lives, just the usual aging. They had enjoyed good lives. I wanted to communicate something to them, something about me that set me apart from them, even if they had never realized it. But then I became afraid, afraid that I would miss some point of logic, knowing that they would question me at the end of my presentation, my assigned topic not fully developed to their liking. I was still in class.

“When I got to the Company,” I said and stopped. (Did these people even know what a “Company” is?) In my mind I stopped for a moment, but it was for more than a moment, at least in my remembrance. In the mind's eye I could see that day well. The chopper landed in a clearing. We had been doing an up-and-down roller coaster kind of ride for about fifteen or twenty minutes, going up and over the clumps of big trees on the edges of the grassy clearings, the landscape at first a type of park-like savannah interspersed with clean, clear streams and then wider and wider tracts of dense forest. We had left The Oasis, and I realized why it was called by that name. It was an oasis. An oasis in the middle of a wilderness. Then suddenly we landed. I couldn't figure out why we had stopped there. Did these chopper-jocks know what they were doing? Nobody paid any attention to us. Then I saw them, coming at us. A long thin line of ragged figures coming out of the tree line. They weren't GIs. No, these people had on reddish uniforms, torn to shreds. They came closer, running headlong at us. I could

see that they were filthy, dirty and unshaven, long hair whipping in the wind of the rotors. One of the door gunners waved at us. "Get out!" He was yelling. Then the bedraggled men were grabbing at the cases of C-rations and ammunition from the floor of the chopper. They did not look at us. I realized that they were American soldiers.

They took us into their perimeter. They began to look at us with faint contempt. We felt naked in spite of being the best clad there. The red mud of the Central Highlands in the monsoon season had caked their green uniforms, giving them a rusty tinge. Many were wearing trousers torn by the thorns and branches of the forest. Since no one wore underwear, a few of them were indecently exposed. But there was no re-supply of new uniforms. This was the way of Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, Eighth Infantry, of the Fourth Infantry Division, the forgotten Division.

I ended up in the second platoon, *el pelotón de los hispanos*, as the company RTO, a Puerto Rican, told me. So I went down to the platoon of the Hispanics, and was assigned to the second squad, headed up by a buck sergeant named Manuel (I can't remember his last name). He was from Beeville, Texas. He was a taciturn guy who had a little battery-powered record player, one of those Woolworth specials, with a plaid blue-and-black pattern on it with the little metal clasp on the lid like a suitcase, that he carried in his rucksack. He would set the player up on a sandbag and drop on his favorite 45, some *Tejano* lament about a Chicano soldier in Vietnam, whose *novia* had run off with the soldier's best friend. *Mi amigo la va gozar*, the song went, "my friend is going to enjoy her." I never knew how he kept that little record player dry and clean and playing out there, and how the other guys in the squad didn't kill him the 200th time he put on that scratchy record, and how he was so sure that his *novia*, his girlfriend, back in Beeville would never cheat on him.

Manuel could hump. He wasn't that big but he could hump and hump, hardly breaking a sweat, even in the heat, even going up and down those mountainsides. "Humping" is not what you think it is. It was that rucksack that we humped. That's what we called it, the walking through the jungle carrying the 75-pound load or more of gear that the Army told us we needed. It took me weeks before I could get tolerably accustomed to the load, before I could even begin to hump. That's what nobody understands, that the hardest thing we did was to carry the things we carried. Tim O'Brien has it right in his book. So read the story.

A few days later, after I felt I'd already spent an eternity of time in that hellish valley of the Ia Drang, sweating out buckets of whatever excess weight I had to sweat, at the same time becoming a love feast for a horde of biting insects until every exposed surface—hands, arms, neck, face—swelled, and I felt that I had contributed enough blood to the cause, we got

into my first firefight.

One hot afternoon, a small force of NVA soldiers had maneuvered themselves between us and our sister unit, Delta Company, or Dufus Delta, as they were known. We had just come up on the crest of a low hill, a place where some GIs at one time had dug foxholes and attempted to clear a field of fire. Delta Company was about three or four hundred meters to the west of us, across a low valley of dense brush. The enemy, of course, had a plan. Once in place, the clever NVA fired on both U.S. elements simultaneously. Hidden in the brush, they opened up with small arms fire, AK-47s and RPD machineguns. I remember hearing the sudden bursts, the clatter of the automatic weapons. Everybody around me was on the ground before I knew what was going on. They had dropped their rucksacks and were now crouched behind them. Manuel pulled me down. The second platoon was on the flank, the side receiving the enemy fire. I remember that moment. The hail of bullets—yes, it really is true—bullets come at you like hail from the sky, was hitting all around. I saw the dirt spurt as the slugs hit the ground. That's supposed to happen only in the movies, I remember thinking. Then the bullets were coming through the trees on the hill, a few green tracers (I didn't know what these were until later), a whole storm of lead, whipping through the branches, snapping off twigs and leaves and pieces of twigs and leaves, so many bullets that a rain of green began to descend on us. I remember how beautiful it all looked, that green rain hitting the ground with a pleasant patter. I remember that: how I could hear that almost silent sound in the midst of the noise of the battle. And then I heard the solid *thunk-thunk* of rounds hitting the tree trunks, and then the shouts and screams of men, NCOs yelling at their squads, and officers yelling at the NCOs. Then, finally, I lifted my face to look. I saw for the first time, the twinkling orange lights in the brush, the muzzle flashes of the NVA shooting at us. *And* I realized: "Those people are doing their best to kill me. *Me. Me.* They want to kill *me.*" It was a powerful revelation. For a moment I felt deeply that I had to stand—stand up from behind my rucksack, stand up boldly, and shout: "Wait a minute, there's been some terrible mistake! I'm not supposed to be here. I really never wanted to be here. Can you please stop for just a minute and let me leave?" I felt that I could do it—just get up and leave. Walk away. "I'm not cut out for this," was my thought. "I have no quarrel with you!"

My hands were shaking so badly that it was difficult to hold my rifle, much less fire it. I saw Manuel calmly laying some extra M-16 magazines in front of him. He would fire one off, remove the empty, insert another, and blaze away. He tore the rifle out of my hands and fired off the 18-round magazine. He pulled at my ammo pouches so I handed him another magazine. He inserted it and gave me the rifle. My hands were steadier now.

Slowly, I began to imitate him. I forgot the danger of the bullets hitting around. I didn't think of that anymore. I heard somebody scream for the medic, but that didn't mean anything to me. I saw that Manuel had taken some of his frag grenades from his web gear and had laid them out next to the magazines, after straightening the pins.

Second platoon did some fire and maneuver, but our squad stayed in place. We became the pivot around which the other squads turned. I don't know if we'd hit anything—if *I'd* hit anything, if *I'd* killed someone. The fighting seemed to be about putting out a high volume of fire.

The Company Commander called in an air strike. "Pop smoke!" he yelled. Some soldier who must have been really excited stood up and threw a yellow smoke grenade into the center of our hasty perimeter. The captain cursed at him. I saw the platoon sergeant from our platoon run after the smoke bomb, pick up the hot canister and loft it out toward the NVA. A moment later two Skyraiders—slow propeller jobs dating back to the Korean War—came in and laid down a barrage of rocket fire on the NVA. Those rockets came down with a whoosh. They would have hit us, if the smoke hadn't been tossed toward the North Vietnamese.

After a half-hour of Skyraiders and M-16 rifle and M-60 machinegun fire, the enemy fire petered out. But then Dufus Delta decided to go on the offensive. They opened up with their own barrage. But true to their name, they fucked up. They were shooting high and hitting us. Of course, the NVA had planned it. We dove for cover. I spied an old foxhole just ahead of me. Three other guys saw it too. I won the race and dove in, the others piling in on top. I was flattened by their weight. Then I smelled it. Some bowels had loosened, fear striking at the beginning of the firefight, and the owner had used this very same hole for a latrine. He was gone, but his calling card was not, and I had landed face first in the middle of it. That was my first firefight.

My public telling of this firefight sped by. The audience was suitably respectful. I noticed that the pretty wife of one the civilians present had bright little diamonds at the corners of her eyes. I was glad for that. It was good to be paid in that precious coin for my troubles. And I went on.

There were other parts of my story that had to be told. It was a long year of course—my time in Vietnam—and much happened. There was the fight at the hilltop artillery fire support base up north of Dak To, which is north of Kontum, which is north of Plei Ku, which is north of Ban Me Thuot. All these sites are in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, the area of operations (AO) of the Fourth Infantry Division. For two or three weeks we were hit every day and night with North Vietnamese artillery, large caliber stuff that was situated across the border in Laos. This was none of the usual mortaring and rocketing. No, this time it was Russian 152 mm howitzers,

the kind of heavy artillery that conventional armies use. Those big rounds came whistling in onto the large firebase with a fair amount of accuracy. Other than the Marines at Khe Sanh, we may have been the only unit in Vietnam to be subjected to such pounding by big guns over an extended period of time. It was a taste of our own medicine, and we were not used to it. We had deep bunkers and trenches, and that saved us. But soldiers were killed and wounded anyway.

One cloudy night, the NVA artillery was particularly heavy. The platoon was scattered over a long section of the trench line guarding the perimeter. We had only one radio, and we had it at the platoon command post (CP). There was no way to communicate with the squads, other than by runner. I was that runner. The platoon leader, a green 2LT, wanted me to run out to inform all squad leaders to stay 100% alert. One-hundred percent meant everybody had to be on the firing line. Leaving my weapon inside, I pushed the poncho that shielded the door and ran out of the platoon command post bunker. I would be gone for only a few minutes. The CP was uphill from the rest of the platoon. There was a communications trench that ran down the slope of the hill towards the main trench that was the main line of resistance (MLR). I had intended to stay in the trench, but there were too many obstacles, men with their rifles, grenade launchers and machineguns, their entrenching tools and machetes—blades shining with filed edge—leaning against the dirt walls of the trench, rows of green egg-shaped fragmentation grenades on the sandbagged lip of the trench, and the bunkers, which were connected by the trench, empty now, because everyone knew that it was stupid to stay inside a bunker right on the line, but still full of all the GI stuff. It was 50 meters to the furthest squad, so I jumped out of the trench. I would take my chances running on top. It was much faster that way. So what if they were firing big guns at us. I don't remember any fear. I just did it. I was not a hero. I just had to finish the job.

I ran to the end of the line, where we connected not to another one of Bravo Company's platoons, but to another Company. Was it Delta? I think it was, but I don't really remember. I checked with each squad leader as I ran by. Hard Rocks, a hard-bitten black NCO growled at me, "Zip up that flak jacket, RTO." I was the platoon radio telephone operator by that time.

Everything was in order. Everyone was up and ready. Now to get back to the CP. I ran back the way I came. I was about half-way back to the CP when I heard a 152 mm round coming. I dove to the ground. The round exploded up the hill, 30 or 40 meters off. Shrapnel whistled overhead. Another round came in. This one was closer. Then another, and another. Closer and closer. I felt the blasts. There was a shock wave each time. I clamped my eyes shut. I clamped them tighter. I could still see the dirty yellow flashes of the explosions.

The ground heaved in spasms, rose to meet my body and slapped me hard. I was so tightly pressed against the earth that I cursed the buttons on the front of my shirt for keeping me from flattening even closer. I should have zippered up that flak jacket. I wanted to crawl inside my steel pot. I had my hands on each side of my helmet, pressing it against my head. I knew that if I pushed hard enough I could squeeze myself inside the brain bucket.

There was an explosion so close that the breath was sucked from my lungs. Clods of dirt rained on me, like punches. But no red-hot steel. Though there were still rounds coming in, I got up to run. Up the hill, some of our own artillerymen were yelling that they had got hit. They had casualties up there, and they couldn't fire back, the enemy barrage was too intense. But I didn't care. I just wanted to get inside the CP bunker and be safe.

To this day I can see the dirty yellow flashes, like the hottest sunlight but mixed with a dull gray horrible color, when I close my eyes. That's all it takes, just closing the eyes. And there it is. Don't mean nothing.

I ran out and did the same thing again and again that night. I zipped up that flak jacket tight against the neck. And I had my rifle in my hand, and all my web gear and ammunition. So out I went. I can still remember opening the blackout flap over that bunker door and running out into the night, leaving the lieutenant sitting in the bunker with his radio—*my* radio—on the Company net, his little candle stuck in a C-ration can.

"Don't fire unless you have a good target—don't give away your positions. Give me a sitrep..."

There was even more artillery, and a rain of 82 mortars, the occasional 75 recoilless rifle, even some RPGs. Again, I ran through the NVA artillery. Then the North Vietnamese hit the far side of the perimeter with a ground attack. They were out there in front of us, outside the wire, but didn't come up. They fired at our side with automatic weapons but did not come up the steep hillside we were defending. I thought we were going to get off easy. But then we had to go and rescue the other side, where the North Vietnamese had got in some of the bunkers and killed GIs. But, that's another story...and now, let's hear from....

So, the day came to an end. I find it hard to remember now, did I tell the whole story to the group? I mean the rest of the story, or the stories, because they're too long to be just one story. Was it later, over the informality of dinner and drinks that I told my other story, the one about the true No Man's Land, the area east of Saigon, out in the abandoned rice paddy land around the village of Hoc Mon?

No, it must have been right there and then, in that old house on the campus of the old college where they had put us, away from all the rest of

the Homecoming activities. I do remember that I had to stop talking. I felt that all of these people knew me, or at least some of them were just getting to know me, but that they didn't want to know me that well. The telling of war stories risks giving away too much. You will emerge out of that episode and you will look for something of yours that you lost, something that you had not intended to give away, but that you gave to your listeners, wanting them to understand. And that thing that you gave away is yourself, but many times they don't want it.

Anyway, I thought I had seen another thing that morning at the Veterans' Reunion, and that was the tinge of envy, the jealousy that comes over a man's face when he finally understands that he has missed his chance to tell of adventures, because he's never really had any. I didn't think of the women. But I said, "Everyone has his or her place, and his or her job to do. We all contribute." I must have said that several times in the course of that meeting, just to make everyone feel that there was no superiority here, just equality. But I don't think anyone believed me, even if they did appreciate the sentiment.

I went on and talked some more. They would hear me out. But not just me. Others were talking. The World War II veteran, a retired professor at the college, who had never once mentioned his combat experiences when I was a student there, told his story.

On D-Day his ship had been sunk by a German E-boat. That was something. But he had never wanted to reveal it to us when we needed it most. He had floated in that cold Channel water for hours. Helped to save others. He was a hero. But why had he been silent for so long? He must have his own dark secrets about rejection, too...

Anyway, I said to myself... Anyway... Another Vietnam veteran, a man who said, "I'm a warrior, not a soldier," and who had lost a leg in an ambush in the Delta had told his story. He had been pinned down for half-a-day. Lucky he didn't bleed to death. He was a much-decorated combat veteran, a former member of an elite unit in the 9th Infantry Division. "You know," I told him, "they used to set their machineguns to shoot no more than knee-high to a GI. They wanted to wound, not just to kill. They knew we would call in the medevacs for the wounded, and that's what they wanted to do, shoot one of those down."

The rest of the group was docile now. At least I felt that they had come to accept their lot at this moment. They had no more to do than to hear us talk about the way it had been, and the way it was.

Truth be told, I don't remember that much about what the others said. That's the way it is. I can only remember what I said. "Let me tell you something," I said. "When I was with the Wolfhounds..." That's what the 27th Infantry Regiment was called—the Wolfhounds. It was in the abandoned

rice paddy land near Hoc Mon, out where the NVA 122 mm rocket launcher crews infiltrated at night, to set up their makeshift bamboo platforms and shoot their rockets at Saigon, and where the soldiers of the 25th Division looked for them by day, but where no Vietnamese civilians dared to go, just the GIs and the NVA, and maybe the occasional VC. It was a contested area, that's why it was called No Man's Land.

I was on point that day. I should not have been. I was getting short, and it should not have been my job anymore, to do that, to take up the most dangerous post on patrol. But I did it, because no one else would, or could. It was in the middle of the morning and we had already been up since dawn, penetrating deep into the No Man's Land. It was hot of course, and I was tired, as was everyone. Fatigue is a constant in the combat zone.

I was out in front about ten or fifteen meters. That was SOP. I was armed with my M-16, the weapon hanging on a sling from my right shoulder. The strap wound around the stock and threaded through the large front sight, all the metallic parts taped tightly with black duct tape. That was one thing about the M-16, it had no sling suitable for combat. We had to improvise. I kept my finger on the trigger, the muzzle always pointed at a spot between five or ten meters in front of me, but ready to swing in any direction instantly. The nearest man behind was a Navajo Indian, a guy named Jimmy, armed with an M-79 grenade launcher loaded with a buckshot round of double-aught. We were on a high berm that encircled an abandoned rice paddy. There were small trees growing on the edges. Ordinarily, the rice farmers would not let these trees grow on the berms or dikes that held in the rice paddy water, but like I said, these were abandoned paddies. I came up to one of these small trees. It had a straight stiff branch growing out at a right angle from the trunk. It was blocking my path. Carefully, gently, I pushed the branch out of the way. The instant I did so I regretted it.

There was an enormous paper wasp's nest at the juncture of the skinny little branch and the tree. The wasps were there, big ones, and the moment I moved that little branch they swarmed and attacked me. Big wasps—big as my little finger.

They were good Communist wasps, dark red, with huge brown triangular eyes, and they had stingers which they plunged into my face, hands, and neck, doing the same to the four or five men immediately behind me. The stings felt like red-hot knives. I yelled in spite of myself. Quiet and stealthy was the name of the game. But at that point I didn't care anymore. I was already tired, tired of the war, tired of combat, and angry that I had to walk point. The wasps were the last straw.

One of the men behind me immediately came down with an allergic reaction to the wasp stings. He was a large black man, and his thick lips

and dark face turned blue and he began to wheeze and gasp for breath as the venom constricted his windpipe. He collapsed on the berm. I was in the dirty water of the old paddy, throwing handfuls of the stagnant, evil-smelling, black water on my face and neck, which felt afire.

The rest of the men came running up, the medic was already calling in a dust-off for the allergic guy. The chopper landed and took the casualty, and inside ten minutes the incident was over. The red wasps, knowing their guerrilla tactics, had melted away. But I still had to walk point. There were too many new guys in that outfit, too many who didn't have it down yet.

So I did it. I walked on, coming to a deep wide canal. We had to cross it. I went in, immediately falling into deep water, which rose to my chin. The water smelled. I kept my mouth closed, but the vile water lapped at my lips and reached at my nose.

I tiptoed across, an inch at a time. There was no way to swim. I was loaded down with too much stuff—no rucksack—but all the web gear and ammo. I had my rifle above my head. I didn't know it, but my wallet, which I kept in a waterproof Ziploc bag in the cargo pocket of my jungle fatigues, floated out of my pocket and down the sluggish current of the canal. Sergeant Sims, my platoon sergeant, far back in the column, saw it in the dark water and retrieved it before it could float out into the bigger canal which the small one that we had crossed joined. He returned it to me some days later.

I reached up to grab some roots of a tree that on the bank of the canal. I pulled myself out, slipping on the muddy bank. It was the only place to come out of the canal. When I stood on the bank, I was festooned with dark green canal weeds and the black water ran off my clothes. I was trying to blot out the vile smells when I saw that the tender stems of some tall grass were bent down, but slowly righting themselves. I looked up the faint path. That's what it was. Someone had just passed and the grass was unbending itself. I remember it all very clearly.

But all this information did not register fully then. I saw the path and the grass, but I didn't process the information. Besides the fatigue and the strain of walking point, I was blind on the left side from the wasp stings, dizzy from the poison and the pain. So, I just walked on without waiting for anybody else to cross, except for Jimmy, who climbed up right behind me, with the usual inscrutable look on his face. If he had been stung by the wasps, he didn't show it.

I walked on, the faint path paralleling the big canal now. Behind me I could hear the rest of the company crossing the small canal. A light observation helicopter, a LOCH, flew overhead. About 50 meters down the path on the left some big bushes grew along the banks of the large canal. I walked past the bushes. I was about 20 meters past the largest clump, when

I heard Jimmy behind me calling to me. I didn't turn around. He had a mumbling kind of way of talking. You always had to ask him to repeat himself. I paid him no mind. But he kept saying, "Hey. Hey." So I turned around.

I couldn't decipher what he was saying. I walked back to him. "What?" I said.

"There's a gook in that bush."

"What?"

"There's a gook in that bush," he said, pointing at the large clump.

I heard him this time. "Where?"

"In there," he said, pointing at the base, where thick leaves grew close to the ground. The branched leaves flared out like the canopy of an upside down umbrella. My right finger on the trigger tensed. I approached the bush, seeing nothing, not believing Jimmy. Then I saw it. It was a round object, like a head. But it was not a man. It was a blackened rice pot atop a bed of smokeless coals, water bubbling from under the lid, the smell of rice coming to me now.

Beside the fire and the pot was an exquisite little bunker, a perfectly built shelter expertly camouflaged among the exposed roots and large branches of the round canopy which extended out from the trunk near the ground a good six feet or more. The round entrance to the bunker was a black hole in the semi-darkness of the green leaves. There was no sign of the cook.

Was he inside the bunker? Here I was standing right in front of it. He could have already shot me, killed me if he wanted. I took a frag off the loop on my ammo pouch, straightened the pin, pulled it, flipped the spoon away. I threw the grenade into the bunker and stepped aside. The explosion shot a cascade of black smoke, mud and leaves. The white rice spattered the leaves of the bush.

The others came running, wide-eyed. I took a second grenade and pulled the pin. I rotated the grenade in my hand as the lieutenant came up. He stared at my hands. I threw the grenade into the large canal behind the bush.

"Trail watcher," I said.

The others threw grenades into the water. Geysers shot into the air. A huge globule of mud inside a crystal clear bubble of water flew high into the air, arced over in the sunlight so that the bubble shone like a diamond, then descended and hit me in the stomach, splattering itself over my ammo pouches like so many guts. But no gook, no VC, he was gone.

"Jimmy," I asked, "what was he doing in the bush when I walked past?" We were back at the night defensive position, the NDP. Jimmy was already on his fourth or fifth beer.

“Nothing,” he said.

“What do you mean, nothing?”

“Nothing,” he said. “Just sitting there.”

“Why didn’t you shoot him?”

“I had an HE round in my 79.”

“An HE? You’re supposed to have buckshot when you’re that close to the point.”

Jimmy said nothing. Just getting him to say anything was an accomplishment, so I left him alone. I didn’t him any more questions. I drank my beer, a lukewarm can of Carling Black Label that the clerks and jerks back at base camp had not stolen out of the cases meant for us. They only stole the good stuff, the Miller’s and Schlitz, the Budweiser.

“He was sitting there,” Jimmy said, his flat black eyes piercing me. “He had his AK pointed at you. He was getting ready to shoot your ass.”

That was the end of the story for me. There’s much more that I can tell, but I’ll stop now. I’m lucky to be alive, to be here. I feel that I don’t deserve to be here, that I should have died with a burst of AK-47 fire into my guts back there in the No Man’s Land east of Hoc Mon. I never would have known what hit me. Just died thinking: “those goddamned wasps!” But it was not meant to be that way. I came back from Vietnam with a permanent case of jungle rot. And some other things, which I think you, the reader, may have deduced by now. Like I tell everybody, “My mother’s prayers must have saved me.”

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