

Oh What A Night

(A Room With a View)

Bong Son, Vietnam-1966

by Duke Barrett

At approximately 3 PM on yet another warm September day, our reconnaissance squad assembled at the command post of a fire base perched high on a hill many clicks north of scenic downtown Bong Son. The Recon platoon had been temporarily assigned a secure and comfortable location, secure and comfortable for a recon platoon that is and our squad, 2nd squad, 1/8 Cav, (airborne) 1st Air Cavalry Division was being called upon once again to carry out the wishes of battalion command. What possibly could they want us to do now?

The platoons assignment on the hill was to provide perimeter security for a division artillery battery and to make sure we didn't get too comfortable in our new digs, battalion hierarchy found something useful for us to do at the squad level. Conduct another patrol. Wow, how'd they come up with that idea? It must have been at least twenty-four hours since our last one. They definitely had an imagination deficit, or so it seemed. I guess any new ideas must have been put away in a lock-box somewhere. Anyways, the routine, and I mean routine was, battalion would order up a patrol, we'd saddle up.

In reality, the comforts of our new digs were called in to question from the get go by an already unrelenting sun. The mere fact that the elevation of our position brought us

even closer to the sun didn't go unnoticed. Yes, even in the monsoons, the sun makes appearances that only enhance its abilities to suck the life right out of you. The poncho liners hung with care, over our newly dug in positions, minimally mitigated the sun's glare but failed miserably to eradicate an overabundance of heat, humidity and mosquitoes.

The patrol we were to run was to be an ambush, an overnigher. As a Specialist Fourth Class I wasn't privy to a whole lot more of information than that so it only reasoned the ambush would result in the killing of bad guys. The one thing I did know for sure, it was dead on monsoon season and we'd be sleeping out in the rain again. So, once again we left the firebase and headed down a steep, heavily forested hillside to the valley below to patrol and set up the ambush.

Redundancy and boredom were an ever-present danger, so, to stay sharp one had to focus hard on the mission at hand to ward off intrusive thoughts that tried to inhabit one's mind. If you weren't the point man, focusing could be a challenge because at times it seemed all you did was follow the guy in front of you, who followed the guy in front of him, who was following orders from someone who told him where to go. Aw, to daydream. What a luxury.

Sergeant Bishop, an eighteen year-old Davy Crockett incarnate who hailed from North Carolina, was the patrol leader that afternoon as our squad of eight well-armed paratroopers descended down the hillside, cutting, slicing and dicing our way into the dense triple canopied valley.

We stopped to take a break at dusk. It seemed to turn from dusk to dark in a matter of seconds in the belly of the beast, the jungle. We'd stopped alongside, not on, but alongside a trail, a rather wide trail, not a good sign, to take a much-needed break. A

good recon team almost never took the trail. Besides, that'd be too damn easy. We walked off of the damn things. Kept us alive.

At that point, Sergeant Bishop checked his map to find out just exactly where the hell we were and confirmed our position by PRC-25 (radio) with battalion. Hungry as hell, we broke out the c-rats and sat down in a tight circle perimeter on an already wet jungle turf, for supper.

With our P-38s, (can openers) in hand, the feast was on. The menu consisted of such culinary specialties as ham and lima beans, ham and eggs chopped and chipped beef, all made tolerable by the ever present jungle peppers. These mouth-savoring entrees were only to be followed up with a small can of warm fruit. That and a canteen full of warm iodine tablet tasting water made one wonder what more could life possibly offer?

Stomachs filled, it was back to business. Following a short after-dinner stroll, we'd apparently reached our objective; a well-used trail, a possible corridor for enemy troops. The mission, to watch and listen for enemy movement, ambush and kill 'em. Just as I thought, I knew I was on to something.

We set up fields of fire on a steep embankment overlooking the trail by clearing lanes of dense foliage, set up claymore mines to our immediate front and settled into two man positions for another comfy evening. You couldn't beat these accommodations with a stick. Well-concealed only yards up and off of the trail, we followed strict noise discipline. Faces painted and dressed to the teeth in the latest camouflage look, we blended right into the terrain. Quiet as the surrounding greenery and ready for some shut-eye, we followed the standard sleep and guard duty schedule of two hours on, two off, per individual.

Battalion, we've got a problem. I mean, come on, get real! It's about these sleeping arrangements. See, that steep embankment wasn't conducive for a good night's sleep. Oh well, who's complaining? Gotta make the best of it. Battalion wouldn't have cared any damn way.

Lying back on the wet ground, we swatted away mosquitoes and stared up at the pitch-black tripled canopied ceiling as we awaited our prey. Couldn't see a damned thing. It was black as the ace of spades, certainly not a room with a view. Extremely uncomfortable, we longed to be in the comforts of that dug in foxhole back on the mountain's top. You know that saying, "you don't know what you got till it's gone?" Sure enough is true. A little sun, no matter how hot, made for warm thoughts. Lord only knows what was crawling around us. Compared to where we were, that firebase seemed like a Holiday Inn.

Just when you thought things couldn't possibly get any worse, they did. Damn rain, and lots of it. After all, like I said, it was monsoon season and Mother Nature didn't disappoint. All of a sudden the thought of lying on your back on the wet ground, on a steep embankment, sounded pretty good. See, that was before the rain started. It rained so hard it became impossible to lie down without feeling you were being waterboarded. To make things worse we started to involuntarily slide down the slick, yet muddy embankment, toward the trail and literally dug in our heels to stop our forward motion over the claymore mines that we'd so recently and carefully positioned.

Everyone of us grabbed onto available "wait a minute" vines and branches and hoped to God that no one would accidentally set off one of the mines we'd just set up to kill bad guys. Try as we may, it became more than an effort to keep from being washed

down the embankment. The mission, like us Recondo's, was in peril. Virtually blinded by the dark and with no idea of how long the intense rain would continue to fall, things couldn't have gone more swimmingly. The only thing we could do was hold on, onto anything.

Fearing the deluge could have swept us onto the trail, we became nostalgic for the **immediate** past. The reason? The trail, that big trail we fought so hard not to be swept onto, had taken on new life. Real life, that is. Life in the form of troops, wet enemy troops, like hundreds of live, wet enemy troops.

Outnumbered approximately a hundred to one, our options became limited. We held on for dear life and selfishly prayed for our own survival as an enemy battalion, if not regiment, passed by, only a few feet from our dug in, sixteen wet feet. I prayed to God we didn't have a hero amongst us who felt it his patriotic duty to "open-up" on the enemy. He or She apparently answered my prayers. Not a shot was fired in anger, or fear for that matter. Hell, like us, the weapons were so waterlogged and muddy, they're performance was at risk.

In the dead of night, the only thing we feared was fear itself. Well, fear and the hundreds of passing disgruntled enemy soldiers. The only thing we could see were the moving vines and branches pushed aside by the heavily armed waterlogged alien beings to our immediate front. The fact that we were so close to them, possibly right under their feet, damn near speed bumps, proved to me beyond a doubt that they were as anxious to confront us, as we were they. Misery loves company.

For more than an hour, possibly two, or what seemed like an eternity, the enemy passed by, all the time unaware of our existence. I am certain that we, the recon team,

invented “stealth” that soggy evening. The sound of the pouring rain fortunately drowned (no pun intended) out any sounds one with normal hearing would’ve heard. To insure our well being we turned off our radio, clamped our mouths shut so no one could hear our teeth chatter and prayed our hearts wouldn’t rip right out of our new fashionable but yet functional tropical jungle fatigue shirts.

Mercifully, dawn arrived right on time. In what could very well have been the longest night of our lives, mine for certain; proof of the existence of a large enemy force had been left behind. The trail, covered with hundreds of foot and sandal prints, discarded wrappers, cigarette butts, human waste and trampled foliage, bore witness to what we almost saw.

Relieved and happy to be alive, we turned on our radio and called in our sit-rep. Oh, and by the way, our painted faces were damn near lily white by early morn. Aw, you just can’t beat a good shower. They’re really refreshing. No what I’m saying?

Following a thorough recon of the immediate area we again broke for a meal and a smoke. Those that did smoke lit up to settle frayed nerves. After consuming more tasty c-rats and warm water, we took a new look at our even newer lease on life. We then climbed back to the mountaintop we’d only hours earlier descended from, to the Holiday Inn where one could see life from rooms with a view, for a well-deserved rest.