

A Helmet Wearing Bambi

by Tom Peters

During monsoon season, everything was wet. A wet that had its own unique way of changing the scent of everything. Flowers for the better, human and animal waste for the worse. A wet that made everything heavier. Especially, one's boots. A wet that tripled the number of hungry mosquitoes and made a morning ritual of burning leeches off one's skin with a lit cigarette.

Monsoon season also brought constant cloud cover, making night in the forests around Tay Ninh a deadly dark. The kind of dark that had every evening seem like a game of Russian roulette. Sergeants would call their squad together to let them know if it was their turn for ambush duty.

The men of 4th Battalion owed a debt to dead and wounded comrades of the prior year. Command headquarters issued a battalion-wide order in December 1968. No movement after nightfall.

However, one squad from selected platoons was sent out at dusk to set up ambushes a specified distance from the basecamp. The enemy had no such order, they moved almost exclusively under the darkness of night.

It was Clyde's leadership duty to let his squad know it was their turn. Each grunt had their own way of preparing. Some had been in Vietnam for a long time, some were newbies. All feared ambush duty.

Clyde trembled and regretted accepting sergeant stripes. Nesbitt kissed a worn photo of his mother. Ricky prayed silently. Malcolm nervously cleaned his M-16 and hummed a Motown tune. Mike wrote a short letter to his wife. Pete sat trying to remember the lines of a Mary Oliver poem as he checked his ammo and supplies. John decorated an envelope meticulously with beautiful artwork once his weapon was clean.

Jerry smoked cigarettes constantly. He worried excessively about friendly fire. Friendly fire, being wounded or kill by one's own troops or allies. Though mentioned during training months prior to war zone duty; most seasoned troops knew of countless incidents of this nature.

Clyde said, "Saddle up." The trip through the forest west of the basecamp was timed to allow an ambush site to be set up just before dark. The forest was dense enough to keep the point man's machete moving constantly until an opening gave his arm a rest. The first opening was only 20 meters across to the other wood line with waist high reed-like grass.

Once through what seemed like a never-ending thick, wet forest, Clyde stopped the squad as they finally came to a second opening, a clearing about 30 meters across to a similar dense and dark wood line on the other side.

"We set up here," Clyde ordered. Everyone knew the drill, setting out trip flares and claymore mines in front of each position spread out along the wood line. The focus of the ambush site was out towards the open field. Pete and John dug in on the left flank, Clyde and Malcolm had the middle position and Nesbitt and Mike settled in the right position. Each position was 6 meters apart. Jerry and Ricky guarded the squad's rear, towards where they had come from.

The two-man teams typically chose two hours of guard duty, then sleep for two hours throughout the long night. It was a buddy system that called for mutual trust. Falling asleep during one's watch was a court martial offense.

Just moments before total darkness set in, Clyde thought he saw movement in the opposite wood line through his binoculars. Word was passed down to the other positions that everyone stays awake for the first two hours. Clyde's order brought sighs, and a light rainfall.

Whispers, muffled by the rain and night sounds, came from most positions.

"Swear to god Malcolm, I saw an outline of a helmet!" Clyde whispered a bit too loud. "A helmet, you sure?" Malcolm countered. "Couldn't tell, it moved quickly between the trees," Clyde said excitedly. "Probably just a deer," Malcolm said, hoping to calm down his sergeant. "Right! A helmet wearing bambi! Look, I saw movement isn't that enough god dam it," Clyde said, staring at Malcolm.

Mike told Nesbitt about the letter to his wife. "I lied to Cheryl; said I got a clerk's position in the rear. Figured one of us having nightmares is enough, don't you think?" "You're a good man, Mike," Nesbitt replied.

Jerry longed for a cigarette as Ricky nudged his rosary staring at the open field. "This is one dark ass night," Jerry whispered into the wet air. Ricky mumbled the Hail Mary prayer, over and over.

"Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Pete finally remembered his favorite line from the poem. John sighed

and whispered, "If we ever get out of this alive, it will be quite precious my friend, and wild indeed."

Time passed and regular guard duty delivered turns of sleep to the weary grunts. The rain turned to a steady downfall for an hour. Clyde was afraid the rain pounding on ponchos would give away their position but knew better than to ask his men to bear the rain without the poncho's protection.

Trust in one's team and exhaustion were essential for actual sleep at night, in the rain, on an ambush, in a war zone. A teammate might end up grabbing a partner's mouth during heavy snoring or dream scream. Everyone's life depended on total silence.

The darkest of nights welcomes a dawn that reveals a different scene for everyone.

The rain stopped an hour before first light. Everyone let their partners sleep except Malcolm. Malcolm nudged his sleeping Sergeant when he saw the first grunt from Bravo company stand and stretch.

Clyde had indeed saw a helmet outline. The squad from Bravo company had mistakenly set up an ambush directly across from Charlie company's ambush site.

Any movement during the dark night would have created a friendly fire incident to their 'wild and precious life'.