

Days in country grew shorter for me but the intensity of the war became steadily more radical. Bernie and me spent most of our time in an ARVN compound outside Saigon in the heart of bad man's land. Sappers got into the wire every night, medevacs flew in and out at all hours hauling away our dead and wounded. Fire missions kept us awake at night and scared during the day. The crunch was close at hand. Charlie Cong was up to something big. Every day we sent patrols out into the bush to bust up whatever he was massing against us but we never got close to finding it. One day the senior American advisor — a colonel Bernie called "South Carolina Jim" — flew to Saigon for a briefing. "When the brassass splits, company's coming," Bernie said. That night we were hit with a mortar strike that caused epidemic diarrhea among ourselves and the ARVNs. The big stuff followed, Russian T-34s, high velocity rounds that impacted in the wire, blew up bunkers and drove the ARVNs wild. In the morning mortars laid down an intense demoralizing fire that air strikes and artillery from Saigon were not able to find and dislodge, and the pounding kept up all day.

Bernie was in charge of one section of the compound and I had the one directly adjacent. South Carolina Jim hadn't come back and I had ten days left in the country. There was no way we could hold out against an attack. If Charlie came through the wire, Bernie and me and the ARVNs were going out any back door we could find. My run-gun was in my pack — a Swedish K-9mm with ten forty-round clips — along with two days worth of LURP rations, three full canteens of water and a survival kit with mirror, garrote, amphetamine tablets, radio-rescue-sounder, and a knife. Bernie had the same.

That night was the worst in my life. At dawn we were ordered to blow up our positions and abandon the compound. Saigon had decided it wasn't worth the cost and we were to fall back to Loc Ninh. Most of the ARVNs and advisors bugged out. Bernie and me were left with ten ARVNs as a rear guard, and we started blowing up or booby trapping what little Charlie had missed. I felt like I was in a department store that was advertising a sale: "Everything must go." Finally in the afternoon, at sixteen hundred hours, we got the call that birds were coming to get us out at eighteen hundred. We were in the last three bunkers, sitting alongside the landing strip. Adrenalin poured through me so hard I felt like I was having a succession of heart attacks. My mouth was like rotten meat, my lips and cheeks were bleeding from being chewed.

At fifteen forty-five the first jets came over, made a pass, and started to unload. My normal radio cool was gone. The handset was my lifeline and my life was flashing. "Okay, good buddy, lay it right in on that old treeline. I'm gonna give you a red smoke out'a my old seven-niner in about fifteen sierras. I want you to bring the pee right down on those fuckers. You got a good copy there, Big Stick?"

"Charlie on that, Little Brother. We're gonna be there. You keep your shit in one sock and your head down."

The first pass had the treeline on fire, the second pass blew it away, and the third pass buried it. Two Hueys flew in fast and hard, flanked by two Cobra gunships and another covey of jets, which started blowing up everything around us. I looked over at Bernie's bunker and was astounded to see him sprint toward a hootch we'd shared for two months. The birds were coming in closer, closer; Bernie ran faster and faster, then he was out of my line of sight. The helicopters were now thirty seconds away, coming in low and fast, their prop blasts sending a rush through me.

I saw Bernie coming faster than anything I'd ever seen move. I stood up and screamed, "Let's go!" and the ARVNs sprinted out of the bunkers toward the Hueys, which were making their controlled crashes on the strip. Their miniguns started ripping up everything but us. Bernie was still twenty feet away when I threw myself into a helicopter. He was fifteen feet away from the Huey's skid when the real craziness hit me. "Come on Bernie!" I yelled. "Last one out's a dirty nigger!" He was aboard, we were off, and bird was taking hits. "You crazy fucker," I shouted at Bernie. "What were you doing going back there?"

"Man, you left your stash," he shouted back, almost choking for breath. "That's the best shit I ever smoked. You dig?"

I started laughing. So did he.

"I hear you Bernie," I said.

PATROL

We were on patrol in the fields and village hamlets outside the perimeter of an infantry battalion. The paddies were dry and brown, stubbled from harvest. Banana palms and small trees and bushes that surrounded the hamlets were withered and lusterless in the baking late autumn sun, and the hamlets themselves seemed shrunken and listless. The people in them, who had become accustomed to American marines walking through their streets, paid us no attention. Women bent over streams and washed laundry, chattering among themselves. Old men sat at rickety tables in the shady sides of their mudwalled huts and played endless games of cards or just dangled brown home-rolled cigarettes from their mouths and stared out at the bare fields. As usual the younger men and women were seldom apparent. If they were in the villages they stayed inside their homes until we passed. Only children scampered around us, teasing us for food, candy, cigarettes, and especially gum which they loved to cram into their mouths by the fistful.

We were as bored as everything else that slumped through the hot day, most of us walking through thinking of no more than the taste of a cold beer. We walked in single file, hardly conscious of seeing anything but the helmet and flak jacket in front of each of us, our eyes unthinkingly swiveling for unseen dangers that might burst from a hiding place. Though we all wore flak jackets, which we detested, most of us had taken off our shirts and tied them around our waists above bulging cartridge belts. Rifles hung from our right shoulders in extended slings and each right hand carelessly fingered the triggers. None of us said much, even Willie Mac, who was behind me and who loved to talk most of the time.

I chain-smoked several cigarettes, a habit when I was outside the usually protective confines of the Chu Lai base, sometimes in nervous fear, other times to burn off leeches when we moved through the jungle, and at times like this when there was nothing else to do with my left hand on long hot walks. I was just putting fire to a fresh cigarette with the smoking butt of another as we walked along the single dirt path through a hamlet when Willie Mac came alongside me.

"Butt me," he said.

"Butt you?"

"Butt me."

"What's this 'butt me' shit?"

"Butt me."

"I think I saw this in an old war movie."

"You did," he said. "Butt me."

"A Walk in the Sun" it was."

"What the hell do you think we're doing."

"You're butted," I said, giving him a sweat-soaked cigarette. He dropped back in place behind me, puffing vigorously, his face wreathed in smoke that seemed to disappear into his helmet.

A few minutes later we emerged into an open field. The point man started out along a dry, humped paddy dike. A shot screamed from some trees fringing the hamlet, hitting a man high in the side. The rest of us dropped to the ground the same instant he fell. He tried to crawl on his hands and knees in the dirt, then collapsed and curled into a fetal position. While the others fired their rifles into the treeline I jumped to my feet and ran over to him. Blood was spilling from his mouth. He was dying and there was nothing I could do. I dropped to my knees and bent over him, oblivious to a second shot from the trees.

His eyes were crowded with pain and bewilderment, and for a second he tried to talk to me and shake his head, but no sound came and he was unable to move. Tears dropped from his eyes and his face wrenched into a stunned anguish that could not understand nor believe that only a second had turned him from life into death.

I interrupted the suspension, cradling his head in my lap, softly brushing my hand across his forehead and along a tear-stained cheek. I could think of nothing to say except for a soft crooning, a lullaby almost, telling him to go to sleep like his mother must have done. In a few seconds he was dead.

I lifted his head and lay it in the dirt. I brushed at bloodstains that had run from his mouth and dripped onto my leg, and stood up. The others had stopped shooting and some of them were running toward the trees. I noticed for the first time that I had not removed my rifle from my right shoulder, that it still drooped against my hip. I looked around and saw Willie Mac standing quietly only inches away. He was looking at me, his face thin with sorrow. He shook his head and shrugged. I nodded and walked toward a clump of banana trees, sat down and broke out a canteen of halizone-flavored water.

I heard shouts from the trees. "The fucker's



gone," a voice yelled to us who remained in the field. Then I saw the others emerge from the trees and walk toward us. A few moments later all of them stood around the dead marine.

"The poor son-of-a-bitch," one of them said.

"At least he didn't feel nothin'," another said.

"That's how I want to get it," the man who had been on point said. "Fast and no pain."

"What were you saying to him?" Willie Mac asked as he hunkered down beside me.

I shook my head. "Nothing," I said. "I guess I was just singing him to sleep."

He nodded. "Makes you wonder."

"Always does."

"Sometimes I can't get straight what's worse, a whole bunch of guys blown away in a firefight or just one guy like him going down."

"I don't know."

"It makes you wonder," he said.

We had to wait for a helicopter to pick up the dead man and take him back to Chu Lai. We had not carried ponchos with us, which meant there was nothing to wrap his corpse in. One of the marines covered his face with a banana leaf.

"Superstitious bastards," Willie Mac muttered.

"He was their friend," I said quietly. "They don't want to look at him anymore."

"They don't want to see themselves like that, you mean."

"That too."

"Don't cover me up if I get it," he said.

"Matter of fact, I want you to promise to strip my ass naked. I don't want to go to my Maker in these fucking threads."

"Alright, I promise."

"I'll do the same for you."

"Thanks."

After awhile a helicopter appeared in the air. Most of the patrol sat against the paddy dike in a group, which was dangerous. I understood why. Death made them want to touch each other. Willie Mac and I sat together for the same reason. The dead man, who had left us, was left to lay alone where he fell. His body was beginning to stiffen and it was also beginning to smell. A knot of flies buzzed around him. We could have moved him into the shade but none of us wanted to touch him. Until the helicopter landed. Then three men ran over to his body and handed it up to a helicopter crewman as if it was a piece of freight. All of us watched the helicopter climb back into the sky and we stared at it until we could not see it anymore.

"Let's get this fuckin' patrol over with," the patrol leader said.

We walked across the paddy in single file, along the same dike we had started out on.

— Michael Paul McCusker

(McCusker was a sergeant in the First Marine Division in Viet Nam. "Patrol" is taken from an unfinished book.)

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