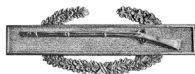


Chapter 10



On the March

The point man, first in the long line, moved cautiously. Point men tied their jungle-fatigue trousers tightly to their legs to prevent the swish of loose cloth against leafy vegetation. Some claimed they'd be able to feel an unseen tripwire against their legs if their pants clung to their skin. Alert, silent, moving into the unknown, they earned their comrades' admiration and gratitude.

Mid-column, my company command group advertised its location with radio antennas swaying above the RTOs. The end of the column looked to the rear, guarding against an attack from that direction. Healthy men assisted straggling soldiers who, weakened by malaria or recovering from minor wounds, couldn't keep up with the main body. Accordion-like, the column expanded and contracted, undulating toward the next firefight. We approached a river that intersected our route across the coastal plain.

River crossings were dangerous operations that required planning and caution. Guards spread out to protect the vulnerable river crossers against enemy snipers. A sergeant stripped to his shorts,

swam across the river, and strung a rope from bank to bank, creating a lifeline against the strong current. With their arms and hands encumbered with the tools of an infantryman, and with their heavy packs pulling them off balance, the soldiers struggled to stay on their feet in the brown, swirling water. All troops crossed safely, and the enemy, if he was hiding in holes along the banks, remained unseen and unwilling to fight.



*Crossing a river near Tra Binh.
November 1970*

I could smell dinks on occasion, which aided in avoiding an ambush or leading us to a recently abandoned enemy position. The odor, a mix of sour rice and old fish, was quite easy for me to detect, although few of my troops were able to identify it. I sniffed about like a bloodhound near the riverbank, but all I smelled was the faintly musty, pungent odor of my canvas pack.

We moved quietly through the trees, heading away from the river. The squish, squish of soggy boots following one another down the trail created an aqueous rhythm, a liquid accompaniment to the ragged beat of marching feet. We approached an open area where we would receive a resupply helicopter. The pace quickened.

“Pop smoke!”

The pilot of the in-bound Huey had radioed and asked me to mark the LZ with colored smoke. My RTO pulled the pin on a smoke grenade and tossed it into the center of the clearing.

“Smoke’s out,” I told the chopper pilot.

“Roger, I got your goofy grape,” he replied.

“Affirmative on the goofy grape,” I said.

Because the VC knew about our habit of marking a landing site with smoke, enemy soldiers sometimes tossed smoke to lure pilots into an ambush away from the real LZ. We had learned not to identify the color of the smoke we would use until after the pilot saw and named the color.

The chopper landed and off-loaded mail, rations, and other supplies, and then lifted off in a cloud of dust and disappeared into the afternoon sun.

Sitting on steel helmets turned upside down to accommodate their buttocks, soldiers read letters from home. Barefoot, hatless, drying their soreness in the sun, they escaped their miseries for a short time while words of loved ones spoke softly from scented pages of letters always too brief. Eyes glistened unnaturally in the sun’s glare and focused on photographs of wives and sweethearts, children, and parents. Other soldiers, those whom the mail chopper disappointed, stood guard, cleaned their weapons, brewed coffee, or pretended to doze while concealing their dejection. They wondered when the next mail bird would arrive, and if they would be one of the lucky ones. Meanwhile, they dreamed of a land that grew more perfect as the days went by, a land so far away that the only measurement of distance was time. How many days left in this land of booby-trap-dragons and mine-monsters, its air frequently filled with steel and lead? They wondered how they could spot the dragons, avoid the monsters, dodge the metal.

The sweet, home-cooked smell of chocolate chip cookies yanked at my heartstrings when I opened a care package from home. I opened an envelope of lemon-scented instant tea, dumped it into my canteen cup, and added water from my canteen. Tea and cookies. Life was good. I saved the raspberry Kool-Aid for the next day.

The leaders distributed C rations, the troops tucked their precious letters away in watertight plastic bags that once protected new PRC-25 radio batteries, and the medics examined and treated sore feet. Grunting and groaning under packs now full of heavy cans of rations, extra ammunition, hand grenades, claymore mines, and flares, the infantrymen of Charlie Company continued their day's work, marching toward the jungle-covered mountains and the next engagement with the enemy. The sun sucked sweat from every pore, but at least the mosquitoes took a break. The biting swarms would return in force when night fell.

Night smothered the jungle with a suddenness that was astounding as the sun plunged into the mountains. Mosquitoes swarmed, injecting the darkness with an incessant hum that maddened us. Head nets protected heads and necks from the tiny attackers, and mosquito dope smeared on hands and around boot tops kept the critters hovering just inches away from sweaty bodies, at least temporarily. Even with the best protection available, some mosquitoes penetrated our defenses and stabbed our skin.

Malaria was a constant threat, and we swallowed one small white pill daily and a large orange pill weekly as a precaution against two types of malarial fever carried by the buzzing mosquitoes. Even so, some soldiers caught the disease because they failed to swallow the pills or forgot to smear themselves with insect repellent. And some deliberately tried to catch malaria as a way to leave the field and avoid any more combat.

Jungle nights suffocated our senses. Peering into the surrounding vegetation was like closing my eyes inside a dark closet while trying to inventory its contents. False images soon appeared, drifting across my mind, causing fear and excitement. Was that really something moving out there, or was it my imagination? Was that object there a few seconds ago? What was that noise? Should I order my troops to throw grenades? Pop flares?

Nights in the jungle were endless, a suspension of time and space, filled with crawling, biting insects, snakes, blood-sucking leeches, and fear and decay and threat of death.

Demands of command interrupted the long nights. Because my RTOs, working in shifts, repeatedly awakened me so I could clear artillery fire into my area of operations, sufficient sleep eluded me. Harassment and interdiction fire (H&I) denied the enemy unchallenged use of suspected rest areas and supply routes along remote trails. Artillerymen on LZ Stinson targeted trail junctions and clearings, but first I had to verify the grid coordinates and confirm that no friendly troops patrolled near the impact areas. Night after night I granted permission to fire, then lay awake while bursting shells shattered the stillness.

On other nights, I accompanied a platoon that I had ordered to raid a village that intelligence reports claimed harbored VC, or I coordinated fire support for a separate platoon engaged in battle. When the enemy attacked our positions, usually at night, no one thought of sleep. Therefore, I slept when I could, taking brief naps, day or night. After nights of heavy combat action, I declared a day of rest—that is, provided the enemy also took the day off, or I didn't receive orders to move to some distant location in reaction to a nebulous intelligence report.

My men slept no more than I. They had to perform perimeter guard duty, lie alert in ambush sites, or conduct night raids on suspected VC villages. Sleep became a precious interlude, and I fantasized about an uninterrupted night of it, in a bed, safe from ground attack and the savage bursts of enemy mortar fire that ripped the night apart.

Gradually, then with increasing swiftness, daylight flooded our positions, expanded the known, and pushed back the unknown and the imagined. Night fears surrendered to the day, replaced by a heavy pack and the furnace-like heat of the merciless sun.

A faint clink sounded, announcing the locking of a canteen cup handle. A soldier prepared to heat water for a cup of instant coffee on a stove handmade from an empty C ration can. He rummaged through his pack for a can of C ration ham and eggs, chopped, while he waited for the water in his cup to boil. The rustle of his searching reminded other troops that they had survived one more night in the Nam.