
ONE**A Grotesque Monster**

It was one o'clock in the morning when Lange shook me out of a troubled sleep. I couldn't see his face hovering almost directly above me, only his dark silhouette against the starlit sky.

"It's your turn for watch," he whispered.

My hand went immediately to my M16, lying on the ground beside me, and I slid forward to the back of the foxhole. Quietly, I sat on the edge, facing out with my legs hanging down into it. Rick, Whitey, and now Lange all lay on the ground, on their poncho liners, just a few feet behind me so that, in case something should happen, they'd have no problem scrambling into it.

With all that had happened since I came out to the company, only a day-and-a-half ago, it didn't take long to shake off the sleepiness.

The closest treeline, about sixty yards out to our front, was barely discernible as an inky smear in the darkness. There were no city lights to cast a hazy glow in the sky, like back home. When it got dark out here, it *really* got dark! In fact, the only thing I could make out clearly was the multitude of bright stars shining overhead. They reminded me of the starlight scope lying on the ground nearby, so I picked it up.

The starlight scope was an amazing piece of technology. It was about a foot-and-a-half long and some four inches in diameter, like a stubby telescope. Instead of magnifying the image, however, as a

normal telescope would, it gathered the light from the stars and increased it so that the viewer could see, albeit with a green tint, almost as clearly as daytime.

I peered through at that treeline out there, which was a boundary between the rice paddies, where we were dug in, and a series of small villages over on the other side of it.

First I satisfied myself that there wasn't any movement out there. Then I turned the scope at an angle to the right. There was a small copse of trees about thirty yards from our perimeter, an island of growth in this flat sea of paddies. The captain had sent three men over there with a radio to act as an LP (Listening Post).

I had no problem making those men out, one sitting up on watch and the others lying asleep around him. They were a form of early warning system if anyone came toward our perimeter from out of that treeline. For the moment, all was quiet.

I put the scope back down on the ground and rested an arm across the rifle lying in my lap. Despite the fact that we were in the tropics, it wasn't long before a heavy dew settled on my fatigues and sent a damp shiver through my body.

This was the first quiet moment I'd gotten to dwell on everything that had happened on my first full day in the field. I wasn't sure if it was because of my own lack of experience, or that maybe all these guys had the same feelings, but I hoped to God that each day wasn't going to be as filled with gut-wrenching experiences as this one had been.

My insides felt like they were a jumbled mess, not so much out of fear, but because, since early yesterday morning, I'd witnessed the violent deaths of two people at close range. It was one thing to watch the evening news on TV when a reporter gave the number killed in Vietnam on any particular

day. Viewers just naturally thought it a terrible thing and then, cushioned by the buffer of distance, went on with whatever they were doing. It was easy enough to understand how it could be that way because, until I got over here myself, I was one of them. But when you were right smack in the middle of it, up close and personal, it was a whole different ball-game.

The best analogy I can think of, for anyone who's never been in a war, but wants to try and understand the feeling, is to think of a murder mystery you might have seen on TV or read about in a novel. When you experience death in that way, you become absorbed in the "who done it" aspect of the story,..the plot,..rather than the death of the victim. No matter how realistically it might be presented, you know it's only a story,..make believe. The death of the victim passes you by easily. You might even get upset that, in some cases, it's so graphically portrayed. Still, you have that safety buffer of being able to tell yourself it's not real.

But, try and imagine how you'd feel if you saw the murder victim in real life, lying right there at your feet—especially if it was someone you knew. That's the kind of turmoil that was churning me up inside. And to make matters even worse, I had no way of knowing whether I'd have to witness that same kind of nightmare every day for the next year!

It felt especially bad too, because two young men had had their lives snuffed out, gone forever, by something that seemed no more than a shapeless form, like some kind of ugly specter skulking around out there. If there'd have seemed at least a logical reason for their deaths it might not have been so hard to stomach. But there wasn't. There was nothing more than that they'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. What kind of reason was that for anyone to die?

When I thought about the enemy out there, I knew they were no more than human beings like ourselves, but, since I hadn't seen anything of them, other than a faceless silhouette in the darkness, they took on an alien quality like some kind of sick, grotesque monster that killed senselessly.

I thought too about all the details that had contributed to my overall experience up to this point—the things that had touched my senses.

There was my first night out here when I was on an LP and nothing had happened. That created the false impression this wasn't going to be as bad as I might have thought. Then, early yesterday morning, out of a clear blue sky, a man stepped on a booby trap and was blown in two just a few feet away from me. Suddenly it was perfectly clear that death could lie in wait around any turn.

There'd been the good feeling of swimming and romping in the river, like a bunch of friends out on a camping trip, something the captain had allowed to help us past the pain of our lost comrade.

That was followed, in the afternoon, by the deadly maneuver of flying on a CA (chopper assault) into a hot LZ (a landing zone under enemy fire), namely this rice paddy we were in right now with that treeline out there to my front.

There was also the powerful, sulfurous odor of burnt gunpowder that choked the air when we were firing at snipers in those trees right after we landed...and again, only a few hours ago, when we opened up on a lone figure who mysteriously appeared, standing just outside our perimeter. It was the same as the smell of fireworks back home on the Fourth of July, only much stronger, probably because we were right in the middle of it. This was something that didn't come across in books or movies about war. That powerful smell, mixed with the odors of lush green vegetation, the sound of small pieces of metal whizzing through the air, and the sweat of bodies scrambling for cover in the terrific heat was

something I knew I'd never forget,.... if I was lucky enough to make it out of here alive. A year is a long time to survive in a war.

I remembered how Rick and the others were both angered and hurt when they learned that one of our guys, lying out there in the grassy area to our front, was dead, killed by that same mysterious figure we'd fired on. He was one of those personalities who was well liked by everyone in the company; a gentle soul with a good sense of humor, who should never have died.

In fact, I hadn't had much conversation with Rick, Whitey, or Lange for the rest of the night because they were openly abrupt when I made an attempt right after the incident. That was easy enough to understand. I was a bit more fortunate in not suffering the amount of pain they did simply because I hadn't been out here long enough to really know the guy.

Whitey had sat on the edge of our foxhole and with deep emotion in his voice, spoken out to no one in particular.

“Why the hell did they walk right up to that son-of-a-bitch like that? They should have known better.”

Without looking over at him, Rick had answered in a tone that sounded critical of the guy's actions too, but revealed that he felt as much pain as his friend did.

“That's right! They should have known better...Dammit!!”

Although I'd never met him personally, I knew that the guy who'd been killed must have been pretty special when I heard him call out a warning to his friends, back on the perimeter, not to come out there after him, even while he lay mortally wounded. In my thoughts now, I could still hear the lonely sound of him crying out there in the darkness and feel how my heart had just about been torn out until

that crying faded away into silence. If Rick, Whitey, Lange or anyone else had broken down in tears, it wouldn't have needed any kind of explanation for me. But these guys were experienced,...and they didn't.

Sitting alone in the darkness now, it occurred to me that the sorrow felt by these men, when one of their friends was killed, was something else that was rarely, if ever, conveyed over the evening news back home. They laughed hard and they fought hard, but they also felt the terrible pain when they lost a buddy.

Suddenly, about an hour into my watch, the area inside the treeline exploded in an incredible display of tracers, along with the ferocious sound of hundreds of rifles firing simultaneously. The tracers formed an almost solid wall of pink lines zipping across my front from right to left.

B-company had set up their perimeter about a hundred yards up the treeline from ours and about the same distance out in the paddies away from it. They'd sent one of their platoons in there as an ambush and had gotten movement coming in their direction.

The other guys, lying around me, raised their heads from sleep to see what was going on, but didn't scramble for the hole. Since the shooting wasn't coming in our direction, they simply lay with rifles at the ready until the firing died down and finally stopped.

When I reached the end of my watch and woke Whitey, I found it extremely difficult to fall asleep. All the events of the previous day, and the firefight I'd witnessed a short time ago were an incredible mental drain. Add to that the awful stress that always seemed to be in the air, and sleep became a distinct luxury. I could only hope that, once I got used to it, I'd be able to catch up.

Actually, this unsettling atmosphere, so conducive to lack of sleep, had begun just over a week ago when I was still back in Washington State,...and I wasn't the only one feeling it back there either.