
THIRTY EIGHT**Walking A Bowl's Edge**

Once the area was cleared of major obstructions, the engineers would return to the rear on the supply Huey when it came back out. Then we'd dig our foxholes around the edge of the perimeter, read our mail or write letters and settle in for the night. Usually one or two LPs would be sent out a short distance from the perimeter.

Sitting up on watch in the jungle was entirely different from what it had been like in the lowlands, because there was no clear, open area to the front. In fact, the only open area anywhere was within the circle of our perimeter.

I looked up at the night sky where, again, because there were no bright lights or cities nearby, it seemed I could see more stars than I ever had before. The stars were so clear that the sky almost looked like a 3-D mural.

As soon as my gaze moved down below the black silhouettes of the treetops, however, I could see nothing in the inky blackness. If someone were standing out in the open just fifteen feet from my location, I wouldn't be able to see them!

Fortunately, I knew that there were trip flares set up about forty feet out to my front in case someone did come up the slope.

In the mountains we'd also begun to set out claymore mines along with the flares. A claymore was a directional mine that consisted of a Bakelite casing, about ten inches long, by five inches high, by one

inch thick. On the inside, there was a layer of C-4 explosive spread across the back, and imbedded all across the front surface of the C-4 were chrome ball bearings, about three-eighths of an inch in diameter. There was a blasting cap detonator inserted in the top, attached to a long length of common, brown electrical cord, exactly like the type used in homes to plug in table lamps.

The mine stood on small, metal legs which folded out from the bottom and could be pushed into the ground, so that, when set up, it looked something like a camera on a little tripod.

The cord was extended back to the perimeter where a squeeze type plunger was affixed to the end. If there was movement outside the perimeter, or a trip flare went off, the man on watch could squeeze the plunger and cause an explosion that blasted the ball bearings out to the front of his position like a huge shotgun blast.

There wasn't much that could stand up to the terrific force of a claymore, but we did have to be particularly careful with them. Being the sly devils that they were, the NVA had been known to sneak up in the darkness and turn the mine around so that it faced back toward the perimeter. It isn't hard to imagine the terrible results when the man on watch squeezed the plunger and the mine blew toward him and the other people on his part of the perimeter.

The one thing that never failed to become immediately noticeable, when the sun went down, were the mosquitoes. During daylight hours we were constantly plagued by large horse flies with a nasty bite. They usually left a bloody welt on the back of the neck, their favorite place to strike. At night the mosquitoes replaced them. It almost seemed as if the flies and mosquitoes had a contractual agreement. The flies worked the day shift and the mosquitoes the night, without crossing over into each other's turf.

Sometimes, at night, when it was dead quiet out here, I could swear I heard the high-pitched whine of a generator running somewhere way off in the distance. It turned out that what I was hearing was the combined sound of thousands of mosquito wings buzzing in the darkness!

On this particular night, as on many another, I was asleep when, sometime during the early hours of the morning, a trip flare was set off on another part of the perimeter. The man on watch over there hit his plunger and the claymore went off with a tremendous explosion. Needless to say, that blast slammed us all awake and we scrambled into our various foxholes. In the yellow light of the burning flare, our weapons at the ready, we could see all kind of debris—leaves, twigs, and clumps of earth raining down, as well as the thick cloud of smoke from the mine itself drifting off into the jungle, but there was no sign of whomever it had been that tripped the flare. And that was usually the case. The enemy didn't like tangling with us when they walked into our company-sized ambushes. Naturally, they preferred that we walk into theirs instead. When that flare and mine went off, they immediately made a hasty retreat and gave us a wide berth. The flare burned out and the quiet of the pitch darkness returned once more. Within a matter of minutes we who were not on watch resumed our positions of lying on the ground, beside the hole and went back to sleep. And that was a typical experience at night out here.

The next morning, we had our breakfast of C-rations and then began the long trek down the slope toward the next declivity. Part way down we came across one of those stairways and made pretty good time. When the head of the long column was just getting to the bottom, however, the captain and his radiomen, who were about a third of the way back in the column, received a call from the fourth

platoon. They were the last platoon in line, bringing up the rear, and still higher up on the slope, but they'd discovered a single shallow grave at the side of the trail.

I happened to be within earshot of one of the radiomen in my own platoon so that I could hear the conversation which took place between the captain's radioman and the fourth platoon. There was a brief pause after the men who found the grave reported it. Everyone stopped in place and waited. Then the captain's radioman came back on the air.

"Four-six India, this is Six India. Six says you'll have to dig it up, over."

"Roger that, Six India."

"Six wants you to try and determine if it's a November Victor Alpha (NVA), and what the cause of death was, if possible, over."

"Roger."

C-company's official designation was "Tall Comanche". Anyone calling the company from outside, such as from the rear, from a Huey, etc., would begin with "Tall Comanche". The captain was referred to as "Six" and his radiomen were "Six India". Thus a call to "Tall Comanche Six India" was taken by the captain's radioman.

Each of the platoon lieutenants, that is, first platoon, second platoon, third, and fourth, were referred to as One-Six, Two-Six, Three-Six, and Four-Six, respectively. Their radiomen were One-Six India, Two-Six India, etc.

I thanked my lucky stars that I wasn't anywhere near the men who'd found that grave. There was no telling what condition a corpse would be in after being buried out here for some time. It wasn't but a short while later that the fourth platoon radioman came back on the air.

“Six India, this is Four-six India, over.”

“Go ahead, Four-six India.”

“Tell Six that the body’s pretty badly decomposed, but it’s definitely a November Victor Alpha Regular by the uniform. There don’t appear to be any wounds. It looks like he probably died of a heart attack climbing this mountain, over.”

“Roger, Four-Six India. Six says you can re-bury him, over.”

“Roger, out.”

When the fourth platoon had finished their gruesome task, the company continued on down the slope. As we got closer to the bottom, we began to notice the distant sound of a low rumble like nothing I’d heard before. The sound continued to grow in volume the lower down we went until, finally we came out on the edge of a ledge over a gorge with a straight drop of about fifty feet into a raging river. The rumbling was the sound of the water as it boiled over and around huge boulders that looked as if they’d been strewn in the gorge by some giant hand.

The gorge itself was about forty feet across and the shear, rock walls, on either side, rose almost straight up.

The immense size and power of this natural wonder made us feel insignificant as we watched the men up front move cautiously, one by one, along the narrow ledge, about halfway up the wall on this side. They had to stay pressed tightly against the wall because the footing was so narrow.

When it was my turn to negotiate the ledge, and I was slowly sidestepping along it, I imagined that this must be how someone who was stuck on a ledge, outside the upper floors of a tall building, must feel. We did have one other disadvantage however, compared to someone who might be in that

situation. With our backpacks on, we had to turn our upper body on an angle so that it didn't cause us to lean out away from the wall. One slip and a man would disappear in that frothing torrent with little hope of being found.

The ledge took the front of the column to a point downriver where the boulders formed an extremely dangerous crossing. The first two men in line removed their restricting packs and made it to the other side in a series of harrowing leaps from one massive boulder to another. Then they tied the end of a long rope they each carried, which the company had with it for just such purposes, to their belts, and began to climb the vertical face of the opposite wall. They used small cracks in the stone, and vine-like growths hanging down from the top, to make their way up.

The rest of the company waited in place, some of us still standing on the narrow ledge, while the two inched their way upward. The roar of the river made conversation all but impossible as we stayed pressed against that wall. We dared not lean any of our weight forward for fear of plunging headlong into the river below.

The two men, climbing on the other side, made it to the top of the gorge and tied the ends of their ropes to the trunk of a tree, so that the rest us could use them for support when we got across. Their climb had been a real feat of daring and skill. Seeing them perform such a dangerous undertaking, and the rest of the company climbing the ropes as if they'd done this sort of thing all their lives, made me feel proud to be part of such a team. I knew that professional mountain climbers spent years developing their skills at this business, yet, these young guys didn't allow their inexperience to get in the way. They simply used ingenuity and raw courage to conquer each obstacle as it came.

At the top of the ridge, on the other side, the land leveled off somewhat, but only for about twelve feet. Then it dropped straight down again into another gorge. Here we were greeted by a sight that literally took our breath away. We were standing on a high, narrow finger of solid rock that ran right up the center of the river. It split the original river in two, half going down along one side and the other half along the other side. At the head of this second gorge, up to our right, there was a narrow waterfall which fell about two-hundred feet straight down into a huge, natural, stone bowl. This bowl was all of seventy five feet in diameter!

Since the bowl was full to capacity, like a giant swimming pool, a sheet of water flowed gently over the side opposite the falls and continued on down the boulder-strewn gorge.

The point where the company had come out on the narrow finger was on a level with the outer rim of the bowl. One behind the other we stepped from the finger onto the rim and walked the fifty or sixty feet across to the other side. There are no words to describe the awe we felt while moving across that rim, like tiny creatures in a giant world of Gulliver. The falls roared down into the pool to our right, and the water passed over the rim to continue through the tumultuous gorge down to our left.

I looked down at my feet as I was moving across. The water was flowing over the edge at a depth of about half-an-inch for the entire length of the rim on this side. It exerted a slight tug on my boots, and the stone was so perfectly smooth from a millennium of water running over it, that I felt like I was walking on the rim of a gigantic ceramic coffee mug!

Once more it occurred to me that I and these other men could very well be the only people to have ever seen this magnificent spectacle out here in the jungle.