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2016

Rain

Richard H. Geisel

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Rain Richard Geisel

Fatigues are glued to my skin, rain of a thousand years, rhythms and waves. I am sitting on my helmet, towel around my neck, and a Cambodian green rubber sheet covering me. This is my silent waterproof armor. The issued poncho is noisy, as water striking a galvanized roof, shielding the necessary sounds of oncoming danger. Was it designed to say, "Here I am, come and get me?" Doesn't anyone know? Who's in charge? Nothing can touch me with my cone of safety.

Tears glide along the channels of the leaves, cascading, forming pools and streams around my helmet. My butt is dry for a couple of hours. This is the third night of the weeklong ambush. Some genius decided to keep making the teams smaller, so more can be deployed, four to five men depending upon availability. The code name is Shotgun.

Shotgun teams are the ambush du jour; small teams scatter, more chance to meet the enemy. The captain can't contain his excitement. "The first man that gets a kill wins a bottle of scotch."

I try to control my enthusiasm. Let's see; less sleep, fewer men, outnumbered by your opponent, opportunities for advancement. Advancement, maybe I could win a Purple Heart or a Med Vac. The briefing includes ambush coordinates, pickup dates, and aerial photos of the site.

"Are there any questions?" Are there any questions? Who thought up this shit? Are you crazy? Does the captain qualify as a kill?

The choppers are waiting. I'm running across the field holding my helmet and gear. I know the blades can't hit me, but I squat as I run. Legs hang out the side of the door and off we go.

The pilot motions to me that we are approaching the site and to get ready. The chopper comes in high and starts a quick descent. The serpentine trail was cut into the bush with a scythe

Rain Richard Geisel

and disappeared at ground level. The photos of the site were perfect and I can see where X marks the ambush position. The pilot gives me the signal to jump.

I look down as the bush is fanned by the blade wash. It is not opening up to show the ground. We must be twenty feet above the bush and who knows where the ground is. I am not having my men jump thirty or forty feet into the unknown just so a pilot can get home early. I yell for him to put it down. I can't see his eyes under the flight helmet, but he can see mine.

He turns and yells, "This is it, jump!"

Well, this might be my chance to win the scotch. I lean forward from the door towards the pilot, my whole body and M-16 pointing at his helmet, "Put us down, now!"

I don't win the scotch that day and don't worry about being reported. What are they going to do, fire me?

We have to hike 500 yards to get to the site. Claymores and trip flares set, small tight perimeter facing the trail. There is no grass growing on the trail. This must be a small artery off of the Ho Chi Minh funneling the NVA south. I have three men; no talking, no moving, cold meals. Silence is the command. After three days of quiet, heat, humidity, and rain I can hear a Loch coming toward the position. No communication on the radio, but sure enough it circles and then starts to touch down fifty feet in front. Thanks a lot. My well-orchestrated ambush is now public knowledge. I know at any moment all the NVA in the world are coming to lunch.

The Loch settles on the ground and out pops a general who must have arrived from Abercrombie & Fitch trying to perform his best Patton impression. I walk out to meet him in my best torn fatigues. In his hand is a map. "Do you know where you are, son?"

I think about that for a second, trying to keep the scotch out of my mind. "Yes sir, I do."

"Son, you're supposed to be 500 yards that way."

Rain Richard Geisel

“Sir, do you know where you are? That chopper is sitting in front of my Claymore, and at any moment the static from the blades is going to blow you and the chopper away.”

There is no further instruction about my map skills and our meeting adjourns as quickly as it started.

Dusk creeps and the tears from the ski start to fall. It is time to cocoon with my gift from Hwan, my Cambodian scout, and sit on my helmet.