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## Moaner

David Aldridge

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## Moaner

David Aldridge

Every Infantry unit I have ever been assigned to has had one. They are everywhere. There is no getting away from it. It is practically pre-destined. Even if you were able to handpick every soldier for your unit, somehow, it would still happen. It's as if the universe has a secret and absolute law that requires a perfect balance of personalities in order for the unit to function as a whole, so someone has to be the designated asshole. Moaner was ours.

The nickname 'Moaner' was his well-earned *nom de guerre* in our Infantry unit. He was the single most negative person I have ever run into. He never stopped bitching. With Moaner, the fucking sky was always falling. Nothing was ever good enough. One of his favorite complaints was "They're trying to get me killed!" Then he would proceed to fill in the blanks why someone was trying to get him killed. He would say, "They're trying to get me killed. Just look at the Fucking New Guys they send out on L.P. with me!"

Our cooks went out of their way to prepare great meals for us out in the field and I never heard Moaner compliment them. Most of us went out of our way to praise our cooks, our supply guys, and our payroll clerks. We couldn't do our jobs without them. They were doing their best and not only needed to be praised, they deserved it. But it just wasn't in Moaner to say something positive to another human being. Even at mail call. He would bitch if he didn't get any mail and he would bitch if he did get mail. No matter what he was tasked with, he just had to complain. Ambush, Listening Post, Observation Post, going on Cloverleafs, cleaning his weapon, filling sandbags; it just didn't matter. Biblical pestilential horrors waited around every corner. The only way I could ever get him to shut up was to threaten to shoot him if he uttered one more fucking word. Unsure if I would actually do the deed, he would shut up for a while.

After almost three months of continuous firefights and blown ambushes I needed a break from all the negativity. That shit wears you down. Thank God, I was offered an R & R to Hawaii to marry my pregnant girlfriend. I jumped at the chance. Before I knew it, I was at the 90<sup>th</sup> Replacement in Long Binh. That same day I boarded a plane at Bien Hoa Air Base bound for Hawaii.

The R & R did not go smoothly. I had never been to Hawaii before, but it was a paradise compared to Viet Nam. Unfortunately, my wife had 'morning sickness' morning, noon, and night. We got married at Fort Derussey's Chapel on 17 September 1968. She barely held it together for the conclusion of the ceremony. Everything seemed to make her sicker. I thought a little sightseeing would be just the thing, so I rented a car and drove us to Kaneohe Beach. We got out of the car and parked our asses on the beautiful sand far from any other tourists. It reminded me of the famous beaches of California; I soaked it in. My wife, being a little insecure in her new status, immediately accused me of flirting with a girl who was 75 yards from us. I scanned her face for any obvious signs of insanity that I had perhaps missed before. Seeing only pain in her eyes, I decided to go for a long swim in the ocean just to clear my mind. When I got back from my swim my wife said she felt ill from the intense heat and humidity. For the next five days, we spent the majority of our time in the rented room on Ala Moana Boulevard eating lots of take-out and watching T.V. We tried sex a couple of times, but nothing kills ardor like your partner vomiting before you even get halfway started. I nursed a half-gallon of Jack Daniels until it was time for our flights. At the airport, we kissed goodbye and swore we would write as often as we could.

Having been gone for 10 days, I returned to my company at the end of September 1968. I missed my platoon and was glad to be back in Viet Nam. I caught a resupply chopper out of Lai

Khe and joined up with our battalion. They were operating in an area northeast of Lai Khe called the “Trapezoid” due to its geographical shape on the maps we were issued. With thick, triple-canopy jungle everywhere, there were a thousand places for the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese to hide, train, relax and recuperate. This was the same area as some of our Battalion’s greatest battles, like Ong Thahn and Xom Bo II. Not a good place to be. During my absence, a brand new ‘butter bar’ Lieutenant had been assigned to us. I heard from others that Moaner went into high gear on his rants, saying, “They’re trying to get me killed by giving us a twink Lieutenant. A fucking newbie!”

For some reason, our Company Commander wanted us to operate in company-sized formations rather than the General Abrams-dictated platoon size or smaller. We split off from the Battalion and traipsed around the woods all day without making contact. We had walked about five kilometers that day and needed to get situated in an ambush site before it got too dark. Walking point, I received a radio call from Captain Zap to halt. He asked me to come back to his position for a conference. After setting up security, I dropped my rucksack and walked back to the C. O., who had his maps out on the ground. He pointed to an oasis of vegetation on the map about 1000 meters from our position. He said that was where he wanted to set up a company-sized ambush tonight. The new Lieutenant, El Tee Bob S. positively beamed. “Good choice, Sir!” I saw that the oasis was in the middle of a huge open field. It looked like a bull’s-eye target on the map. The clearing was more than 1000 meters long and 100 meters wide and stretched from West to East. The oasis was like an island of land, 75 meters in diameter, that showed a slight rise in elevation from the surrounding area.

I pointed out that an ambush at the far end of the clearing would be a better tactical decision. If we put the whole company up on the island, we would have no way to retreat if we

needed to. We could easily be surrounded and could catch hell from all directions. My suggestions fell on deaf ears. In a dead monotone, Captain Zap stated,

“We’re going to set up on the plot of land in the middle of the clearing. Move out.” End of discussion. I went back to my platoon to tell everyone what we were going to do. Moaner started right away. “Jesus fucking Christ! Are all these assholes trying to get all of us fucking killed? We walk all day in the blazing sun, and you’d think we could find a good ambush position at night.”

I’d had enough. I walked directly at Moaner.

“Moaner, we’re in fucking Indian Territory right now and you need to fucking chill out and shut the fuck up! Nothing that you have ever said adds to the commonweal of the platoon or the company.”

“What’s commonweal?”

“It means the common good or well-being. I’ll tell you something else: you are putting us in grave danger with your constant bitching and bellyaching. You’re constantly making noise and giving away our position all the fucking time. You think every time you bitch about something that it’s justified and it’s not! I want you to stop! When I walk point, I need absolute fucking silence so I can hear the fucking NVA out in front of me! That keeps all of us safe. And none of us needs the fucking fear that you generate all day long. Goddam it! I’ve seen it dozens of times in my two tours, that what you fear you draw to you like a big fucking magnet. You end up pulling that experience to you that you fear the most. So put that shit out of your mind. We **all** have to conquer our fears in order to do our best out here. So, get smart and knock off the doomsday bitching!”

“I ain’t afraid.”

“Yes, you are, and it’s becoming more apparent every day. So, do us all a big favor and keep your thoughts to yourself.”

I put my rucksack on and resumed walking point. We were at the large clearing within an hour. I cautiously walked up into the island of trees and vegetation. My whole platoon followed. I chose where our platoon would set up ambush. The rest of the company filed in behind us, then moved around to take their places in the remainder of the circle. The C.O. and his RTOs set up in the middle of the ambush. I chose a big ant hill to hide behind. Ant hills were like having a massive mahogany tree as a shield. We put out our claymores and set up for the night. I had a feeling we were being watched, so I called for 50% alert in our platoon. The new platoon Lieutenant, El Tee Bob, asked if he could go sleep with the company C.P. group. I said,

“Yeah, Bob, why don’t you just do that? We’ve got everything under control here. Maybe some of the C.O.’s magic will rub off on you.” He looked at me quizzically as he walked away to join Captain Zap.

The night went peacefully. We all managed to get at least 5 hours of sleep. When the sun hit the horizon, we had already finished breakfast. When Captain Zap called for a conference with all the platoon leaders, I joined up with them uninvited so El Tee Bob wouldn’t leave me out of the loop. Captain Zap said that the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon would walk point for the company along the southern edge of the clearing and the rest of us would fall in behind them. My platoon would bring up the rear. I personally hated it when others walked point for the company, but what the hell. Maybe they wouldn’t fuck it up. We had to keep at least a few soldiers in the wood line as

we moved along it to the far end of the clearing. This was to make sure we didn't get caught completely out in the open; the going was slow.

As we neared the end of the clearing, Captain Zap ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> platoon and my platoon out into the clearing so we could cross en masse. He wanted us to go off in a northerly direction. Being ordered into the clearing didn't sit well with me. I didn't like it when we didn't have cover. I held my men back as long as I could. Finally, we started across the clearing. Most of the platoon was out in the open. Suddenly, the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon point man yelled out,

“I see gooks and some bunkers!”

Why in the world he didn't just shoot the bastards, I will never know. Gunfire erupted all over the end of the clearing and the distinctive sound of dozens of AK-47s firing filled the air with POP POP POP! I heard the swoosh of a couple of RPGs as the NVA poured everything they had at us. Hand grenades exploded and the RPGs exploded behind us in the woods. We all hit the ground and shed our rucksacks to get as low as possible. The whiffs of air from a thousand bullets whipped overhead as we lay there helplessly with no cover whatsoever. I hid behind my rucksack and others followed my lead.

Miraculously, within a few minutes we had a couple of Cobra Gunships on station and they were ready to expend their lethal cargo on the enemy. The guys at the point were told to pop smoke and I saw bright yellow smoke rising from the battlefield. I could hear the Cobra pilot identify yellow smoke. He asked the point squad where they were from the smoke. I couldn't believe my ears when he radioed back,

“This is Delta 1-3 Romeo, we are North of the Yankee smoke!”

What? That would put them in the wood line on the other side of the NVA bunkers.

The Cobra pilot came back,

“Roger that!”

The sound of the minigun firing a full blast is normally a heart-warming sound to an Infantryman. But when I heard the huge buzzsaw sounds of the minigun my heart sank and I said out loud,

“Oh fuck, we’re fucking dead!”

The Cobra lit up the entire clearing with his awesome weapon. I had been lying on my back to present the lowest possible profile. Feeling no bullet wounds anywhere on my body, I instantly flipped over and low crawled over to Louie Ragusa, my RTO. I grabbed the handset from the radio,

“CEASEFIRE! CEASEFIRE! FRIENDLIES IN THE CLEARING, GODDAMMIT!”

The Cobra pilot, who was highly upset at having just fired on a whole company of friendly Americans, said over the radio net,

“Get someone on the fucking radio who knows North from South, goddammit! Let me know when you’ve got your shit together.”

At night, when the M134-D minigun with its six barrels is fired, the incredible number of tracer rounds make it look like a reddish liquid fire being poured out upon the earth. It resembles molten steel being poured in a foundry; only the tracer rounds are visible. For every tracer round there are 4 non-tracer copper-jacketed ball rounds. The rate of fire is 6,000 rounds per minute and that is a lot of lead coming at you. When the minigun is used to hose down troops in the



open, like our company was, a round would normally hit every six inches and the gun could kill everyone within a football-sized area within a few seconds.

I checked myself out and quickly asked my platoon members if anyone was hit. Everyone answered,

“No!”

Then I heard one soldier gasping for air and gurgling. It was Moaner. I crawled over to him, still mindful of the NVA in the bunkers who were firing at us. Sucking chest wound. I rolled him over and opened his shirt. Air bubbles exited his chest wound and the exit hole in his back. Through and through. I hollered,

“Medic! Moaner’s hit!” Our head medic, Doc Dennis Inverso, crawled over to us. He saw it was a sucking chest wound and treated him accordingly. Moaner kept saying,

“Oh fuck! I knew it! I fucking knew it. Don’t let me die, Doc.”

“You’re going to be just fine, Moaner. Don’t worry.” Doc Inverso didn’t sound all that convinced, but he did his best to be positive and to prevent Moaner from going into shock. Shock was the real killer.

No one else in the entire company had been hit. Just Moaner. After someone else took over the radio duties with the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon, we destroyed the bunkers with the Cobra’s rockets. Then we assaulted the bunkers and killed any surviving NVA inside. Only then could we get Moaner a dust off. He survived the wound to his chest and was shipped off to Japan and then back to the world.

Funny; but after Moaner was dusted off, everyone's attitude changed for the better. People were kinder to each other. It was clear to everyone that you can't curse your own life with impunity. Sooner or later it will catch up to you. We would need all the positive thinking we could get in the next six months. Hell was just around the corner.