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Bombolini

David Aldridge

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It was October 1970 and I had just gotten a call from my new battalion commander. It was a simple request: Take First Lieutenant Bombolini under my care and teach him how to be a combat leader. I said,

“No thanks, sir. I’d rather walk through a mine field blindfolded.” He laughed and said,

“It’s his last chance to earn his CIB before he goes back to the states.”

The ‘CIB’ was the Combat Infantry Badge. Only Infantry soldiers who had been in combat were allowed to be awarded the CIB. It was so highly prized that it is worn above all other awards and decorations on the dress uniform. We were on our “secure” radios so we didn’t use a lot of proper military radio procedures. No one but others with the right “key” could listen in and 1LT Bombolini was out of earshot back in San Juan Hill, our base camp just west of Duc Pho.

Bombolini wasn’t his real name. It was an affectionate *Nom de Guerre* I had given him after the character played by Anthony Quinn in the movie *The Secret of Santa Vittoria*. It seemed to fit his personality, so that’s how I referred to him. He was an officer, but he was constantly fucking up, and as I told LTC Albert Coast, “I’m sorry, but I don’t want him to get someone killed, sir.”

“If you supervise him correctly, no one will get killed.”

How could I refuse the offer after that?

“OK, sir. But before he comes to the bush, I want him to prove to me he can set up a MECH without any help. If he can do it, then I will take him on the next operation. If he can’t, then he goes back to Combat Indoctrination Course (CIC) School in Chu Lai and then he can come to the bush.”

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LTC Coast merely said, “OK. You are due to come back to San Juan Hill in a couple of days. See you then. Out.”

I was the first sergeant of Delta Company Fourth Battalion Third Infantry Regiment (Old Guard). We were part of the infamous Americal Division in I Corps. I was twenty-five years old and on my third tour in Vietnam. Our beloved LTC Albert Coast thought that because I was on my third tour some sort of magical pixie dust would rub off me onto El Tee Bombolini and turn him into a real, bona fide combat soldier. When the day came to return to our base camp at San Juan Hill, we couldn't get any air transportation. My pixie dust wasn't working. We ended up walking back from ten kilometers out. Every infantryman's nightmare; up and down hills and through triple canopy jungles. By the time we got to the top of San Juan Hill (1,250 feet elevation) we were exhausted. I had half of our company go get some chow and the others started cleaning their weapons. The mess hall had closed an hour before, but our very thoughtful cooks were holding some hot food for us.

After I made sure that everyone had eaten, I found 1LT Bombolini and gave him one of my MECHs. A MECH is short for Mechanized Ambush, consisting of a Claymore mine, the blasting cap, electrical wire, a battery, and a trip wire attached to the handle of a plastic spoon. It is basically a booby trap. Under the Geneva Conventions we Americans were allowed to use them because each MECH was plotted on a map at headquarters with coordinates showing where it was emplaced. We used wooden clothespins. The exposed tips of the electrical cord were attached to the clothespin's jaws. We inserted the plastic spoon handle between the jaws to keep the circuit from being completed. When the enemy walked down a trail and hit the almost invisible trip wire, it would pull the spoon out and the jaws would close the electrical circuit thereby detonating the blasting cap, thus killing whoever it was aimed at.

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I told the El Tee to set up the MECH for me. But **not** to put the blasting cap inside the Claymore mine. I stood back and just observed. It was like watching Jerry Lewis or one of the Three Stooges go to war. He promptly almost blew his fingers off.

I said, "Sorry, El Tee, but you're going back to CIC School."

He whined, "But I've already graduated."

"I don't see how you did that, sir." I walked over to LTC Coast's hooch and hollered, "Sir, he almost blew his fingers off. If you want him to come to the bush with us, please send him back to CIC School again." LTC Coast told me that Major Frakes, his S-3 Air, would handle it.

Two weeks later, a newly re-graduated 1LT Bombolini was flown out to our combat lager position with resupplies and some mail. The world's only two-time graduate of the Combat Indoctrination Course hopped off the Huey. I signaled to him to come over to me. Well, maybe he would get his coveted Combat Infantryman's Badge on this operation. I wasn't convinced they had transformed him in the weeklong course.

We had waited in the valley at the bottom of the mountain for him to be flown in. I distributed the supplies and mail. I made him take out the magazine from his weapon and eject the round in the chamber so that he wouldn't accidentally shoot someone in a firefight. I just didn't trust him yet. When his weapon was empty, I told him where to fall in because we could only go up the mountain in single file. I tried to keep it as simple as I could.

"El Tee, we're just going for a little walk up the mountain. I am walking point. If we hit any shit, then me and Doc Lansing will handle it. If we need any more help, then we'll holler for the machine gun to come up. You stay right where you are behind the medic. Do **not** fire your weapon unless I come back and tell you to. Understood?"

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“Okay, Dave.” He seemed to understand what I was telling him, so I took off.

Four hours later we were near the top of the mountain where it leveled off. I decided this would make a good ambush position. I positioned the rest of my forty-five men around in a box-like shape.

I told the El Tee, “Look, in the bush everyone is responsible for setting up their own MECHs. If your MECH blows then **you** are the guy who has to go check it out. No one else knows where you put the damn thing so remember where it is. Okay?” He looked at me like my dog used to look at me when I was scolding him.

“Sure, Dave. I understand. If it blows then I have to check it out.”

I told the El Tee that I would give him the place of honor for that night and let him set up his one and only MECH facing uphill from our position on the hard ball trail heading to the top of the mountain. I showed him where to put his MECH and drifted back downhill where I placed two MECHs to cover our rear and on a small trail that branched off the main hard ball trail. I finished and headed back to where I had my gear. I fired up a cigarette and drank half a canteen of water.

I pulled out some LRRP Rations (US Army Freeze Dried Rations) and started cooking some water to mix in with the freeze-dried chicken stew. I readied my tabasco sauce and toked on my cigarette. Life was good. We had climbed one of the biggest mountains/hills near Laos that day and had not had any firefights or hit any booby traps. **BLAM!!!!** Someone’s MECH exploded and we all hit the deck, crawling behind trees and rocks for cover. I was showered with bits of rock, dirt, and debris from the surrounding trees.

Adrenalin surged through my body as I whispered as loud as I dared, “Whose MECH was that?”

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One after the other my soldiers said, “Negative, Dave. Wasn’t mine.”

Finally, I yelled, “El Tee?” I got no answer for the next couple of minutes.

Cursing, I told everyone, “Son of a fucking bitch! I fucking knew it! It has to be the El Tee’s MECH. I have to go check it out. Someone get up and come cover me just in case. Bring a few hand grenades with you.”

I threw on some bandoleers of extra magazines and put three hand grenades in my side pockets. I moved up the hill slowly at first. It was almost dusk, so I decided to hurry. I knew that the El Tee’s MECH was fifty meters to the front, so I covered the first thirty meters quickly.

I started whispering, “El Tee? Where the fuck are you?” No answer.

The jungle was eerily quiet. I moved closer to where I had last seen Bombolini. As I got closer, I could smell cordite from the Claymore. I saw some movement and almost let loose with thirty rounds, but I held my fire.

“El Tee, is that you?”

I crouched low in case someone shot at me. I could make out the outline of a human being just standing there shaking from head to toe. I strained my eyes to understand what I was seeing. I moved up to five feet away from him and saw the crater in the ground at his feet. The crater was three feet wide. His jungle fatigues were shredded and he was covered in dirt and cordite from the mine. Blood ran from both ears onto his neck and then onto his fatigue shirt. \

I said, “What the fuck happened, El Tee?”

His breath came in spasms and he finally pushed out, “I just wanted to test the trip wire.”

My mind reeled. “You tested the fucking trip wire? Oh, Jesus Christ!”

I helped gather up all his equipment and looked for his helmet. It had been blown ten meters behind him. I picked up his weapon and put my arm around him and we moved back to

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our lager position. I asked the head medic to check him out on his legs and arms for other wounds. I made the radio call to LTC Coast to get the El Tee picked up the next day. I put lots of extra tabasco on my chicken stew that night just to get rid of the taste of cordite.

EPILOGUE: 1LT Bombolini survived his tour and went back to the states. LTC Albert F. Coast was killed in Vietnam on 20 April 1971. God bless them both.