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Gait of Power

David Aldridge

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There was a flurry of activity in the Bravo Company area at LZ X-Ray as Sergeant Colombo gathered up his stray members of the ambush squad. There were twelve of us. SGT Colombo called it a "Squad-Plus Ambush," meaning we had a squad of nine men, plus extra members. The extra three guys carried a second machine gun and extra ammo for it. Everyone was required to carry machine gun ammunition. I had two hundred M-60 rounds on top of my normal weapon load. Having given up my malfunctioning M-16 rifle, I carried an M-79 Grenade Launcher that fired 40-mm rounds. Some called the weapon a "Blooper" or a "Thumper" because of the noise it made when a round was fired from it. I had fifty high explosive (HE) 40-mm rounds in a large canvas bag with a strap that cut into my shoulders. Additionally, I carried ten canister rounds for the M-79 in a large bag that was strapped diagonally across my chest. Eight hand grenades were in the side pockets of my jungle fatigue pants. On my army-issued rucksack were three smoke grenades, four canteens of water and a poncho liner with assorted C-rations. There was no way to get comfortable carrying all that equipment. I could only pray we weren't going too far for the ambush. The extra ammo for the machine gun was inside my rucksack. I was on the verge of praying for a firefight just so I could get rid of the extra ammo.

The M-79 was an unusual weapon. It was three feet long, a break action gun that broke open like an old shotgun. The HE rounds it fired were accurate up to 400 meters. Where it exploded, the killing radius was five meters. It could be fired straight up like a mortar round. If you practiced, you could put out six or seven rounds before the first round landed. I liked it because it was never known to misfire like the M-16 did. If I was going to die, it was going to cost the enemy dearly. The only problem with the 40-mm HE rounds was that they would not arm themselves until they had travelled at least thirty meters. It was probably a good thing that the rounds had to complete so many revolutions before they could explode. In the jungle you

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rarely got a clear shot with the M-79. There were always trees and vines in the way and trying to fire HE rounds through them could prove hazardous to your health. You had to make sure that you had a hole in the jungle ceiling you could shoot them through.

Not so with the canister rounds, which were like large shotgun shells. They were deadly from zero out to twenty-five meters. Each one packed between twenty to twenty-seven steel balls in the shell, depending on who the manufacturer was. Wielding a breech-loaded weapon meant you had to crack it open and put the round in the chamber from the rear. When it was closed with a round inside, the safety was automatically engaged. With a slight push forward on the safety, you could pull the trigger and it would fire. If you had a round in the chamber and the gun was closed, it didn't take much to accidentally fire the weapon. If you were carrying the M-79 and you tripped on a vine in the jungle floor, you could fire it straight into the ground, or into the back of the guy in front of you. It was guaranteed that he would not be happy about receiving an HE round in the back. The golden rule was, as they taught us in Combat Indoctrination Course, never walk with a round in the chamber and in the closed position. Always walk with the M-79 either completely empty or cocked open to guard against accidental firings. Your comrades would always thank you for this.

Sgt. Colombo checked each of us out personally, pulling on our web gear and equipment straps. It was absolutely forbidden in our Battalion to carry hand grenades the 'John Wayne style,' hanging off our web gear. Vines would catch the ring on the safety pins and pull them out as you maneuvered through the thick jungle. The resulting explosion would kill the soldier and perhaps one or two of his buddies near him. I showed Sgt. Colombo my empty M-79 and my empty web gear, with no dangling hand grenades. He made one soldier put his shiny aluminum canteen in the side pocket of his jungle fatigue pants.

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A guy from another platoon started out walking point into the jungle next to my bunker on the perimeter. I noticed that he checked his compass first. Sgt. Colombo told us we were going in single file and to always keep five meters between us and the guy in front of us. He said we were supposed to go out 1000 meters on this ambush. One thousand meters in triple canopy jungle is a long way because sometimes it is so thick that you have to cut your way through the jungle. I carried a machete that was razor sharp in a sheath on my web belt. It was my last resort if, God forbid, I ever had to engage in hand-to-hand combat.

When you first look at triple canopy jungle, it looks impenetrable. You can't figure out which way to go because it looks just like a solid wall of green vegetation. As you begin to walk in it you start to see where animals, or perhaps humans, have made a trail already. I had already learned to stay off the trails during my first firefight that day. I never had to learn that lesson again. It looked like the point man was making his own trail through the jungle and I felt relieved. Periodically, I heard him cut at bushes or vines with his machete.

The name "triple canopy jungle" itself sounded awesome. It also means it was as thick as any jungle anywhere on the earth. Just about impenetrable. There was a growth of vines and small bushes up to approximately waist level. Then another growth of plants and foliage up to 15–20 feet off the ground. On top of all that was a growth of various small, medium, and large trees up to fifty feet high or higher. Once in a while, when walking in the jungle, we would encounter trees that were much larger than those and I soon learned that they were mahogany or teakwood trees. The hardest wood in the world. You could survive an atomic bomb hiding behind one of those trees.

It was slow going as the point man was extra cautious and would pause frequently to just sit and listen to the jungle. The sun was not completely down yet, so we still had plenty of light.

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The weight of the ammo I carried cut into my shoulders. After a couple hundred meters I wanted nothing more than to stop and take everything off. On we trudged. Once, Sgt. Colombo came back to ask me if I was OK. I told him, “Yeah, I’m fine, but I’m going to need a new pair of shoulders when we get back to Lai Khe.”

He laughed and said, “It’s not too far now.”

Just when I thought I couldn’t take it anymore we halted and the guy in front of me said, “Get down. We’re there already.” It was still twilight and one by one Sgt. Colombo put each of us in place where he wanted us. I was the last one; he put me on the far-right flank of the ambush. I was three feet from the next guy. Sgt. Colombo said that there was an old trail out in front of us and to put our Claymore mines out ten meters in front of us. I dropped all my gear and spread my poncho liner on the jungle floor. I made sure to get rid of as much of the twigs and leaves from around my area as possible so I wouldn’t make noise during the night. It felt good to have circulation back in my shoulders. I took out my M18A1 Claymore mine and unwound all the electrical cord. I walked out to the trail and emplaced my Claymore, making sure to aim it properly, that is, away from me. For soldiers who were a little slow and couldn’t remember which way to point the Claymore it had printed and embossed on one side “Front Toward Enemy.” I put the electric blasting cap from the M4 blasting cap assembly in the mine and walked back to my place on the ground. I then plugged my cord into my M57 firing device “klacker,” which was a small hand generator that was used to detonate the mine. One squeeze on the klacker would set off a huge explosion. There was no need to ‘test fire’ it to see if it worked. I already knew that my comrades wouldn’t appreciate that at all. I made sure the safety was on and began laying out hand grenades right in front of where I would rest my head. Everything was

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ready. I slowly opened some C-rations cheese and crackers. I felt relatively secure sitting there. The Claymore was the reason why.

The M18A1 Claymore was a vicious anti-personnel weapon named by its inventor, Norman MacLeod, after a large Scottish medieval sword. Like the sword, the mine could easily cut men in half. It was effective out to 55 meters and could be deadly out to 100 meters. If aimed correctly, one mine could take out an entire squad of the enemy in one fell swoop. It had over 700 little steel balls embedded in a sheet of epoxy resin plastic and behind all that was a pound and a half of C-4 explosive. The steel balls came out at a speed of almost 4000 feet per second and very cruelly shredded whatever was in front of it.

After eating my crackers, I sipped on some of my water. It was almost dark. PFC Clinger had showed me how to light a cigarette the night before so that no one could see it. I got under my poncho liner and fired up a cigarette with my Zippo lighter, carefully cupping it with both hands it like he had shown me. There was no wind in the jungle, so I blew the smoke straight up. It seemed like ages since Clinger had been killed, earlier that day. Time was not what it once was. It seemed more ephemeral now. Was it really only eight hours since the firefight? I couldn't allow myself to think about what had happened earlier that day. I forced my attention out into the dark jungle and listened closely.

I listened for anything that sounded like people: walking or talking or stumbling around. I also listened for any metal-on-metal sounds. After an hour, Sgt. Colombo crawled over to me to see how I was doing. He said, "Hopefully, nothing will happen tonight. Maybe the gooks have departed the area already."

I said simply, "I hope so."

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As he was kneeling by me a noise began to rise out of the jungle a couple hundred meters away. The noise gained in volume and sounded like it was coming our way. It sounded like a huge beast was shaking the trees and jungle foliage with a huge sweeping motion. I prayed for whatever it was to go in a different direction. I dreaded what would happen if it came to us. The noise got louder. Sgt. Colombo bent down and whispered to the guy lying next to me, “Do not fire your weapons until you hear me fire mine! Pass the word to the next guy!”

The noise continued to rise as it approached our ambush site. My bowels jerked around in my gut involuntarily. I lay as low as I could to the ground. The noise rose to a cacophony of a hundred trees shaking and the rustling of a million leaves at once. I felt the beginning of the paralyzing fear I had endured earlier that day in the firefight. My heart raced. I got my klacker ready to blow someone into the next world. The noise was fifty meters from us now and coming fast. We could hear loud grunting of some kind along with the leaves shaking.

Sgt. Colombo got on the ground with me and took up one of my hand grenades. “Hold your fire! Pass the word!” The guy next to me passed the word down the line. The noise of the rustling leaves and shaking trees got louder as it came right up to our ambush and then veered to our right flank. Sgt. Colombo said loud enough for the next guy to hear, “Fucking monkeys! Fucking monkeys!!”

There were thousands of monkeys who shrieked and bellowed at us. Apparently, they could see us, or smell us, but we couldn't see them. What did we do if they attack? Did they have rabies? They seemed to object mightily to our presence. I never took my hands off the klacker. This continued for five minutes. Slowly they continued their nocturnal journey through the jungle. I put the klacker down so I wouldn't accidentally fire it. My heart was still racing when Sgt. Colombo returned to his place in the middle of the ambush. Holy shit!

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After my heart rate settled down, I pulled my poncho liner over my head and fired up another cigarette. At that point I really didn't care if the enemy could smell the burning tobacco or not. My muscles were fatigued from all the adrenaline I experienced that day. I enjoyed my cigarette immensely as I listened for human beings and sipped on some water periodically. Two hours later I heard rustling in the leaves in front of me again. I presumed everyone else heard it, too, because Sgt. Colombo passed word down to me to "Be ready!" A few minutes later he showed up at my side and said he was going out to check the Claymores and to not hit the klacker or shoot him. A few moments later he was back and said, "Someone turned the Claymores around backwards!" My heart began to gallop in my chest. Sgt. Colombo moved down the line of the ambush to notify everyone. There was more rustling in the bushes and to our right flank. Sgt. Colombo came back again and said, "We're going to blow the ambush! When you hear my Claymore go off then blow yours. Then we all throw a hand grenade and run back and you cover us. After we run back, I want you to get up and fire a canister round and throw a hand grenade out in front of you. Then you can follow the rest of us."

The "you cover us" part bothered me quite a bit. I wanted to argue that I shouldn't be the last one to leave the ambush site, but I just said, "OK, Sarge." I swallowed the acidic bile in my mouth and felt in front for my klacker and a hand grenade. I made sure I had a canister round in my M-79 and waited. BOOM! BOOM BOOM! In rapid succession, everyone's Claymores went off and then their hand grenades exploded. They each fired a magazine from their rifles out into the ambush kill zone, then jumped up and ran back. I fired my Claymore shortly afterwards using my klacker. As soon as my Claymore exploded, I threw a hand grenade into the air so it would land twenty-five meters straight out from me and got up on one knee to fire my canister round. I

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shouldered the M-79 and fired. In the explosion of the canister round a North Vietnamese soldier's face was illuminated three feet from the end of the barrel. Fear seized me again.

I jumped up and grabbed my large bag of 40-mm rounds with my left hand. In my right hand I still held my M-79. I abandoned all my water, rucksack, hand grenades and poncho liner to the enemy and ran away from the ambush site. As I ran, I heard the POP POP POP POP of numerous AK-47s. I didn't want to get shot in the back, so I bent over at the waist and crouched low. I held the bag of HE rounds close to my body. My right hand held my M-79. Immediately, in a shocking revelation, I could see the jungle out in front of me. It was like looking through a light green mist as I ran. Everything was visible! The whole jungle, which had been pitch-black before, was illuminated by a diffused light-green opalescence. I could see every tree and vine. I was stunned. I thought I had entered a separate reality, not of this world.

I had never run all bent over like that before in my entire life. It was uncomfortable at first, but within ten paces I couldn't stop myself. I ran at full speed. I stayed low to the ground with my back straight as I pumped my knees almost to my chest and did my best to avoid each and every tree, branch and vine. The logical part of my brain was not engaged as the jungle to both sides of me became a blur. Everything in front of me was still crystal clear and distinct. I had no difficulty breathing. I had no time to ponder what was going on. The jungle I ran through commanded my attention. I knew somehow that I had to keep focused to the front. My breathing took on a regular rhythm of its own and it wasn't labored or spasmodic as before. My arms weren't tired as they should have been from carrying the heavy M-79 rounds. Power surged through me as I ran. I could see every tree, every branch, every bush and fallen tree or vine. I easily jumped the fallen limbs when I had to or dodged left or right as needed. I had a general

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direction I wanted to go and never really thought about it. I just ran; juking left or right, ducking, hurdling or sidestepping when necessary.

Within ten minutes, I could see our Night Defensive Position at Landing Zone X-Ray up ahead of me and I hollered out, “Friendlies coming in! Hold your fire! Don’t shoot.” I slowed down as I neared the bunker line and finally stood more erect. The light-green mist I had run through that made the world visible at night slowly dissipated. It became pitch black again. Suddenly SSG Jimenez was in front of me asking me where everyone else from the ambush was.

I told him, “I don’t know. I was the last one to leave after we blew the ambush.” He called me a liar and said I panicked and ran away and left everyone. He was screaming at me that I was a fucking cowardly twink. I had had enough of him and his verbal abuse.

I cut him off and said, “Listen to me! I’m not a twink, goddammit, so stop calling me that. I did exactly what Sgt. Colombo told me to do. Ask him yourself when he shows up.” He didn’t say another word.

Captain Turner walked up to ask me what happened. I told him everything. I included the fact that an NVA soldier was right in front of me when I fired my canister round. It took Sgt. Colombo and the rest of the ambush personnel over an hour to get back to the NDP. I had no explanation whatsoever as to what had happened to me; it seemed supernatural to me and I knew I would not be believed, so I just shut up. I never felt any compulsion to tell anyone about being able to see at night in the jungle. My whole company already thought I was weird for volunteering to come to the bush from my cushy job in Saigon. I didn’t need any extra shit from them.

I walked over to Sgt. Colombo and reported what happened when he blew the ambush. Captain Turner, who had been listening, said he would request a Tracker K-9 Team at first light

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and for everyone to get some sleep. He ordered 50 percent watch for that night. That meant I would get at least some sleep while someone else was on guard duty. I managed to get three hours' sleep before someone shook me and told me to get saddled up to go back to the ambush site.

The tracker dog was a very big German shepherd. His handler said to let him know when we got close to the ambush site. After an hour and a half, Sgt. Colombo told everyone that we were about 100 meters from the site. The handler brought his dog up to the point and it started walking briskly along our man-made trail from the day before. Twenty-five meters from the site the dog alerted. The handler said, "This is where we stop. My dog alerted. There is a dead body up there somewhere." The guy seemed scared to me. How did I know? I was now an expert on fear.

Sgt. Colombo took over walking point and we were soon at the site. The smell of death and cordite hovered in the air. Over in front of where I had lain there was hair, blood, and brain matter on all the bushes and on the bark of the trees. Sgt. Colombo came over and said loud enough for SSG Jimenez to hear, "Good job, Aldridge. There are lots of blood trails. They lead away down the trail to the left and also to the right. It looks like you got another one with your Claymore." Jimenez never apologized. I gathered up my gear from the ground. We headed back for the NDP.

I never really had time to ponder what had happened that night on ambush when I ran through the jungle. The rest of my tour in Vietnam came at me a thousand miles a minute up until the day I left for the States. I had filed the experience away under the title of "Strange and Unbelievable Things That Happen in Combat" and never really knew what to think of it.

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Many years later I was reading one of Carlos Castaneda's books about his adventures with Don Juan Matus, a Yaqui Indian sorcerer from the Sonoran Desert of Northern Mexico. The book was titled *Journey to Ixtlan*. Don Juan had explained that he wanted Carlos to utilize one of the ancient sorcerer's techniques and urged him day and night to try it. Carlos explained that he just wasn't made for the life of a sorcerer; it was useless information for him. Don Juan prodded him to try it. Don Juan showed Carlos time and again how to do it by sprinting off into the desert night. After practicing unsuccessfully for a long time and crashing into bushes numerous times Carlos was finally able to do it. He ran at full speed, all bent over at the waist, his knees pumping up and down almost to his chest. Carlos could see out into the Sonoran Desert where it had been pitch-black before. Everything was crystal clear for him. He was able to avoid the crevices and cracks in the desert floor. While doing the Gait of Power, Carlos encountered different entities that frightened him witless and spurred him on. Carlos asked about them as the sun came up. Don Juan said that those entities almost killed Carlos. Don Juan added that Carlos had only been spared because he had followed Don Juan's instructions correctly in doing the Gait of Power.

I knew at that moment that Carlos Castaneda and Don Juan were not imaginary characters in a book, but very real people, and that Carlos's books had the ring of truth in them. I thought, "So that's what it's called." Afterwards, I would pay closer attention to all of Castaneda's books. There was much to be learned.