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Blue Devil 1

Malik Hodari

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Blue Devil 1

Jungle thicket slows Squad One's progress. The afternoon monsoon rains fall fast and thick, forcing an hourlong cessation. Blue Devil extends his arm and has difficulty seeing his hand. There are no attacks during these seasonal downpours. "No one is dying today," the boys joke with each other. It's a truism; the NVA and the Viet Cong do not initiate assaults when Nature calls a brief moratorium on killing. There is no enemy engagement and no fear of it. There is a temporary eerie peace. Waiting for the rain to subside, sitting under parkas, it's safe to relax, sleep, talk, joke or fix a meal. Vigilance is not required.

Then the rain slows, sun peeps through the canopy, and the respite ends.

Blue Devil resumes whacking through the hilly jungle. He reaches a ravine. The estimated location of the NVA Regimental base camp is at least two and a half days away. Jungle travel time and distance are not measured easily. On the map, the platoons are not far apart and the destination seems close, but on the ground the undergrowth, foliage and elephant grass slow travel immeasurably.

Ben Jaeger is fresh from R.O.T.C., a new second lieutenant. The genteel hillbilly is on his first combat mission. He is assigned Platoon Two because Blue Devil is adept at finding the enemy. The company's first sergeant, Gray Wolf, is not a good map reader, but he commands respect. Gray Wolf frequently travels with Blue Devil's squad and leaves the company commander to go with Platoons One and Three who deploy together. Besides the company commander, there is no other proficient map reader in the understaffed company. Platoon Two is a seventeen-man operation, short four men. The 2/327 Battalion Commander, Thunderball, assigns Jaeger to Platoon Two because the unit does not need Jaeger's leadership to navigate.

He is ambitious but a slow learner. Blue Devil tells Gray Wolf the unit can make up time here. The route is easier to travel than chopping through virgin brush. Gray Wolf explains the plan to Jaeger who loves the prospect of moving faster. Jaeger tells Gray Wolf he wants to impress Thunderball by getting to the NVA camp first. The orders require a coordinated attack on the NVA; if found, 2/327 Battalion HQ is to be notified, then Thunderball will coordinate the assault by radio. He designates deployment strategy so escape routes are sealed because mission success is a career-building bonus. Gray Wolf reminds Jaeger that Platoon Two is the vanguard of the entire Battalion; he entreats the overanxious neophyte to relax, to trust Blue Devil. "He'll get us there soon enough." Blue Devil's levelheadedness is to be trusted.

Squad One proceeds down the ravine. The gully floor is sweltering despite the canopy and the recent rains. A familiar sweat soaks the troops' lightweight fatigues. The weight and space in every rucksack is reserved for necessities like ammunition and food, not deodorant. An hour into hacking at the overgrowth, Blue Devil drops his machete and brings his weapon to the ready. He is transfixed. Before him is the khaki uniform of an NVA soldier, brown fatigue hat with a big red star. The soldier's AK-47 and Blue Devil's M-16 are muzzle to muzzle. Blue Devil can smell his sweat-soaked enemy. This is a boy; he can't be more than fifteen. His skin is pimpled and tanned, his eyes are brown. NVA infantry are Chinese-trained professional soldiers who will die before retreating. Blue Devil's slack man Guerrero interrupts the stillness and quiet: "What is it, Blue Devil?" Simultaneously a voice behind the adversary whispers in Vietnamese: the frozen boy's blank face shifts to fear; he turns to flee. Blue Devil breaks the silence to kill him, unloads an entire magazine on automatic. He reloads while chasing other startled NVA soldiers down the ravine, past the dead soldier. He shoots another in the leg. The rest escape leaving a faint blood trail.

After things settle, Blue Devil's squad teases him. They cannot believe he froze. He preaches immediate action but in the ravine standoff he hesitated, a shocking response. Months ago, Andy taught Blue Devil to learn to love killing or be a casualty. The day's lapse for the troops is scary. They depend on Blue Devil's aggressiveness. Andy taught Blue Devil to distinguish the smells of each environment for survival clues. When smelling something distinctive, wait for further clues; the enemy may be nearby, above or belowground. Jungle walkers have unique body odors, they cook and discard food with distinctive odors. These clues betray human presence. Listen to the animals, to the forest, for clues. Birds suddenly flying are evidence an enemy is near. Where they take off may reveal the location. These are interruptions of the jungle's natural order. Blue Devil teaches others these pearls from Andy.

His squad mates' confusion about the freeze bothers him. Blue Devil blames the dead soldier's youthful look; he expresses remorse over the kill. Kenny Claypool, the unit grenade launcher, a 19-year-old military brat, reminds the small group there are children killing U.S. soldiers everywhere in country.

The ravine firefight is evidence the NVA is patrolling nearby. 2/327 reports firefights with Viet Cong and NVA warriors are growing more frequent. Thunderball wants a higher body count, so orders Platoon Two to set up an ambush. Blue Devil leads a recon mission to find a suitable site where the platoon can set up. Claymore mines are concealed on both sides of the approach to a small hill along an old jungle trail. Blue Devil's squad is camouflaged on the hilltop to spearhead the mission. The other thirteen men are in teams of two, spaced twenty to thirty feet apart extending 200 yards.

The silence is deafening, whispers are not permitted in this hyper-vigilant wait to kill. Hours pass. The nobody-dies-today rain comes and goes. Thirty minutes after the downpour, an

NVA infantry unit enters the ambush. Heart racing, Blue Devil resists the temptation to shoot. The enemy's size is unknown; they could overwhelm the undermanned platoon. The enemy's familiarity with the terrain gives them an advantage. The red star on each cap identifies them as more of the professional soldiers encountered yesterday.

Fleeing in the face of American forces is uncommon for NVA soldiers. The claymore mines at the hill's approach will help if there is a large force. Guerrero holds the switch but Blue Devil, the point man, will determine if it is triggered. Blue Devil alone initiates the attack. He waits until the last enemy passes—he has counted seven—before he starts the assault. M-16s blaze along the 200-yard stretch but there is no return fire, only futile attempts to run into the virgin jungle opposite the assault line.

Thirty seconds later the small NVA patrol is decimated. There is no transitory freezing today, no hesitation to kill. Fear wanes. Raging adrenaline subsides. The claymores are not used. A traditional perimeter is established to await a counterattack and to communicate with Thunderball. The enemy bodies are strip searched, mutilated then left to rot. Legend has it that the Vietnamese have a superstitious fear of the ace of spades. Sharp machetes chop one ear from each carcass; the space is filled with the card. Blue Devil has never before participated in this ugly practice, but inexplicably, this time, he grabs the ear of one kill and swings his machete to cut it off. The blade strikes the skull then bounces off and cuts his hand, drawing blood. It's barbarism, this act, but there is no rule of engagement against it. There is no command against mutilating enemy corpses. Andy railed against it. Blue Devil's trusty blade has served him well, nipping his hand thus sparing him from taking part. He does not despise the Vietnamese. He does not call them "Gook" or "Chink" because no Vietnamese ever called him Nigger.

The lone enemy survivor is another fifteen-year-old, who is treated then medically evacuated to battalion intelligence. The kills confirm 2/327 is near the enemy base camp. Thunderball expresses his pleasure and orders the Platoon to resume locating the enemy camp. Platoon Two returns to the route pursued before the day's tactical detour. Evening approaches, and an exhausted Blue Devil searches for a bivouac spot.

Every evening the unit stops in time to dig shallow foxholes for the night before eating. They never sleep at dusk or dawn. Blue Devil usually conducts a perimeter recon that plots the path forward for the coming day. He is accompanied by the unit's main radio operator who's an 18-year-old enlistee, plus his Slack man, Guerrero and Kenny. They form the core group Blue Devil trusts to accompany him on these treks, often venturing far from the night camp. The recon is critical to night safety and to craft the next day's movement strategy. They search for the easiest way forward and for clues to enemy presence.

The recon mission patrols 1500 feet along the bank of the stream south to find a safe crossing spot. They discover why the stream is swollen. Ninety yards downstream is a beaver dam built from hundreds of small trees; below the dam is a perfect fording spot. Blue Devil asks his boys why he sees no evidence of beaver-gnawed trees in the approach on the bivouac embankment. The mystery is unsolved. Blue Devil's attention is focused on the mental checklist he uses for each recon trek. He is not concerned with the beaver activity but searches for evidence of NVA activity like mines, booby traps, sniper blinds. He searches for signs of imminent danger; of enemy presence. Satisfied there is no threat, the squad rejoins the platoon.

Napalm bombing on the camp side of the stream makes it easy to see in most directions. There is no evidence of the bombing on the opposite embankment where the platoon will hunt tomorrow. Napalm burns everything to a black crisp. When the recon team rejoins the overnight

encampment they, too, dig in. The sun sets behind the napalm destruction, a black, dead forest. The canopy is destroyed, and visibility is easy.

The group prepares c-rations and gets ready for the night. Thirty yards down an old trail, a wild boar eats a kill. The pig is pulling an arm from charred human remains; the arm separates from the charred remains easy as a chicken wing. Blue Devil witnesses this and tells the group. Kenney draws laughter when he says, “That damn pig is eating better than us.”

Nightfall brings renewed hypervigilance. Showers pounding their parkas make a different sound from the resonance made when rain strikes trees or the ground. Andy had cautioned against underestimating the Vietnamese cunning. “This is their land and they’re going to kick our asses out eventually. When they’re on the perimeter they’ll use their knowledge of the jungle to wipe us out. Sounds that are different from the jungle stick out like a sore thumb to them.”

Blue Devil sleeps without a parka cover; he fights the cold, wet night to stay ready. A more immediate threat comes from one of the platoon members.

Private Warnf from California goes to sleep on guard duty every night. Each time, Sergeant Barnes, a career soldier, hits him in the head with the butt of his M-16. Barnes hates Warnf because sleeping on guard duty endangers everyone. Barnes despises him more because Warnf is an educated 23-year-old Northern California aristocrat. Blue Devil, Barnes, and other squad members openly discuss the danger he poses. Two-hour single man shifts rotate nightly but the higher risk of enemy attack occurs at dusk and at dawn when there are two-man vigils. Warnf dozes on any shift; he is afraid, so he sleeps.

Tension between the two escalates beyond the tipping point. Barnes wants to survive, and is prepared to beat compliance into Warnf or make him a friendly fire casualty. Blue Devil and Kenny share Warnf’s night guard duty to help him stay awake and keep Barnes at bay.

On duty overnight, Warnf confesses he does not shoot at enemy soldiers in combat. He shares the news in confidence but misreads Blue Devil. Blue Devil accepts Warnf's sleeping because Warnf is fearful, but he seethes that the man is not shooting at the enemy.

At four in the morning, camped on the bank of a dammed stream near overflow from the monsoons, Blue Devil plucks leeches from the inside of his chest and off his legs and neck. Leeches thrive in the wet climate, they suck blood until they explode. Blue Devil has a scar under his heart, a reminder that these tiny creatures must be removed. Insect repellent or fire counteracts the blood suckers, but neither works during a deluge. Barnes is right; Warnf has to go. He tells Warnf, "Today I'm telling the squad and Barnes about your fucking pathetic ass."

Allowing Warnf to remain is suicide. Reporting him means a court-martial and maybe a dishonorable discharge. Still, to Warnf, being reported is a fate better than dying in Vietnam. He's deadweight, literally and figuratively. Before the unit leaves, Warnf asks, "Nobody's dying today?"

Blue Devil stares through him before replying, "Warnf, you're a leech."