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In-Danger Animals

James Crawford

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Last week I walked by the US Patent and Trade Office Campus in Alexandria, Virginia, at mid-afternoon. I passed through its “green area” outdoor mall with the water fountain. A man passed on his bicycle, then suddenly stopped. A small dog pranced across the campus avenue. That dog was a scruffy red fox. It stopped in the middle of the biker’s path and looked at him, then slowly pranced off as the biker pulled out his smartphone to record.

Animals are taking over the city while humans shelter in place. Damn coronavirus. Living in Alexandria, I don’t see many wild animals day to day. That wasn’t always the case. A long career in the army placed me in proximity to many wild animals around the world. Training areas and combat zones are usually depopulated. It is enough for wildlife to thrive.

Snakes are a common one. Thanks to my army travels, I’m an amateur herpetologist. Every deployment or overseas assignment comes with a country handbook. I’m an avid reader of the “Dangerous Plants and Animals” section. There are some damn venomous snakes out there! In Afghanistan, it’s the common krait. US Army Medical Command describes its venom as “about fifteen times more deadly than the Indian cobra.” In Iraq it’s the Levantine, or blunt-nosed viper, whose venom is hemorrhagic. Kosovo has the horned viper. According to the book, it’s “likely the most dangerous snake to be found in Europe.”

Less exotic was the western rattlesnake at Fort Hunter-Liggett, California that swallowed three baby cottontails in their den as I watched.

In northern Georgia during the ranger school mountain phase, the instructors gave us a class on the different local wildlife. The eastern diamondback rattlesnake was on every ranger student’s mind when the field exercise began. Hiking up and down steep Appalachian Mountains wore down our fear. During tactical halts, the students take cover prone behind a tree. During one halt I looked at my ranger buddy next to me. He was lying on the head end of a long brown

snake. Fortunately, no rattle was attached. I thought to mention this but didn't want to panic him. I grabbed its tail, pulled, and flung it down the mountain in one swift motion.

Fort Polk, Louisiana, was its own odd biosphere. I was in a hide site with my RTO for several days during a JTRC rotation. We slept on the open ground with a poncho for overhead shelter. It was hard to sleep at night because of the overwhelming cacophony of a gazillion insects. Our rucksacks were always packed in the event we needed to expedite leaving. At 0300 we heard something scratching around the rucksacks a few feet away. Risking giving our position away, I switched my flashlight to white light. A family of racoons were doing their best to get into the rucksacks. They were the size of medium dogs. Shouts brought no reaction. Thrown sticks had no effect. We tried beating them with sticks, but only got growls. Next, with my RTO holding the flashlight, I tried to bludgeon them with a small log. Reluctantly, they departed.

Moving up the animal kingdom are the bears. In Kosovo there were European brown bears, a Euro relative of North America's grizzly. My company set up a series of squad-size ambushes along the mountain trails. Albanian insurgents would use these small trails to infiltrate into Macedonia and attack FYROM army camps. My soldiers would lie in wait watching the trail through their night vision goggles. One night a large brown bear ambled down the trail, stopped five meters from a squad, sniffed and looked in their direction. The squad leader rotated his M-4 selector switch to fire. The metallic click was enough to start the canny bear back on its way down the trail.

One foggy morning during a foot march in the Fort Lewis, Washington, training area, our unit rounded a bend in the road and abruptly stopped. The lead NCO shouted, "We got a bear!"

An exceptionally large black bear was sleeping on the hardtop road about thirty yards ahead. Wildlife often slept on the training area roads because they retained heat throughout the night. Three of the braver NCOs moved forward a few feet and yelled with no effect. The bravest of the three moved forward more, yelled, and waved his arms. Still no movement.

"Fuck this! I'm not going any farther!"

Fortunately, one of the NCOs followed a few hundred meters behind in a pickup truck in the event someone twisted an ankle. He was called up and passed our formation. He revved the engine and honked about twenty-five feet from the bear.

The bear slowly got up and lazily moved into the woods.

Of all the wild places the Army has taken me, the Korean DMZ was the strangest. The DMZ, or Demilitarized Zone, is a four-kilometer-wide, 250-kilometer-long belt cutting the Korean peninsula in two. Inside, the MDL, or military demarcation line, divides the four-kilometer-wide belt in half with each side controlling their respective side. Both agreed to no armor, artillery, and other heavy weaponry within the boundaries. Only soldiers equipped with small arms could patrol their respective side.

Because of the no civilian habitation restriction, the DMZ is a wild, green belt in one of the most densely populated parts of the world. It can be seen from space as a dark belt across the peninsula. Forests long gone have come back within the DMZ. The air is clean and pure. Artificial noise is almost nil. Wildlife is abundant with Siberian musk deer, cranes, ducks, geese, Asiatic black bear, and an uncountable number of pheasants.

In April 1996, I was nearing the end of a one-year tour at the JSA as the UN battalion's scout platoon leader. Most call the battalion the JSA. Much handier than United Nations Command Security Battalion-Joint Security Area. It was responsible for security inside the

south's portion of Panmunjom, the official meeting location between the two sides, and the surrounding area of operations.

The scout platoon stays outside of Panmunjom unless there is a security concern. We patrol the woods, fields, and foothills adjacent to it. Our platoon was more a heavy-duty rifle platoon versus scout platoon. The forty-five American infantrymen were heavily armed with the typical US Army weaponry at the time: M16A2s, light-to-heavy machine guns to include the M-2 .50 caliber, and automatic grenade launchers on our Humvees. Handheld anti-tank missiles were kept secured inside our vehicles.

The DMZ mission was for one week before rotating out for three weeks of training, maintenance, and R&R. Routine made it difficult to keep high speed, energetic troops from becoming complacent. Our DMZ home was a combat outpost on a small mountaintop overlooking Panmunjom. Located a few meters from the MDL and North Korea, it's a big middle finger to them and probably in the crosshairs of hundreds of howitzers. A chain link fence encircled the outpost, cloaked with no-see-through cloth, and topped off with German razor wire. In front of the fence was tangle foot tied to trip flares. Tons of reinforced concrete were used to build the bunkers and living spaces. It bristled like a porcupine with crew-served weapons cloaked in camo netting. There were enough Claymore mines in place to blow an assaulting infantry battalion to kingdom come. High resolution thermal CCTVs were always watching.

We rested inside our outpost between day and night patrols. The soldiers who were not on patrol stood guard. Our operations cell monitored all the surveillance CCTVs for enemy movement.

Inside the DMZ could be eerie. The North Korean side, with no lights, was like looking into the sea from a ship at night. Nothing but black. The north played creepy propaganda songs through a system of loudspeakers along the MDL. The South Koreans played K-pop, or, if we were lucky, American rock. Soldiers call Korea the Land of the Not Quite Right. A play on Korea's motto, land of the morning calm.

Winter winds blew Gobi Desert dust down the peninsula. It enveloped everything in a yellow fog from December through late spring. Monsoon rains brought flash floods down the gullies and ravines we patrolled. Even the four-legged animals were creepy. The musk deer, the size of a Doberman Pinscher, has protruding fangs and barks. The soldiers called them vampire deer. The ubiquitous pheasants held to point until someone almost stepped on them during night patrols. They would then flush in your face. Watching a new soldier's reaction was, besides a DMZ patrol ritual, a way to assess his nerves. No nervous nellies wanted here.

Inside the DMZ it's the two-legged animals, not the four-legged kind, who are dangerous.

The North Koreans would send two-man teams across the MDL at night to test and probe. Probably gathering data for future infiltrations. Our night patrols would find the luminescent markings they left on trees left to guide them back. Electronic eavesdropping intel always relayed suspected infiltration missions. We would set up ambushes or surveillance on these areas but never caught anyone.

In early April 1996, the North announced they would no longer abide by the Military Technical Agreement. The MTA, the mutually agreed rules since 1953, governed what type of soldiers and weaponry are allowed in the DMZ. In flagrant violation, the north brought in a heavy infantry battalion with mortars and recoilless rifles. They staged tanks and APCs just inside the DMZ. The JSA battalion faced them down for three tense days. We didn't bring in

tanks, but there were F-15s in the air and a MLRS "grid square killer" battery on standby. The 1/506th Air Assault infantry battalion was staged down the road if needed. Then, without notice, the North Koreans departed along with their heavy hardware. Undoubtedly, their saber rattling put us on edge.

A couple of weeks later, things calmed and the normal routine resumed. The scout platoon was inside the combat outpost for the night. Soldiers rotated through guard duty and sleep. One squad was out on an ambush patrol. I was in my hooch working on the never-ending paperwork. My platoon sergeant was in the operations cell monitoring the squad on patrol. Per SOP, either he or I would be in the operations cell during an active patrol.

A runner knocked on my door.

"Sir, you're needed in ops. SFC Howell sent me to get you. We're at stand-to." I grabbed my body armor as I headed out. Soldiers were flying in the darkness to their battle positions while NCOs gave orders. A clank from a dropped squad automatic weapon followed by an NCO's string of profanity added to the urgency.

SFC Howell was on the radio talking to Camp Bonifas, our higher headquarters. An NCO pointed to the thermal CCTV monitor.

"Sir, we got three North Korean soldiers outside our wire." Indeed, there was a group of individuals closely huddled together just outside the barb wire tangle foot. The large white heat blob was unmistakable. The NK soldiers were bunched up together in one blob. Just sitting there. Not moving except a twitch here and there.

The NCOs in the bunkers reported all personnel at 100 percent stand-to. All weapon systems green. Ready to fight! SFC Howell told the squad on patrol to remain in position and not move until further notice.

"Sir, what do you think?"

I didn't know what to think. For three NK soldiers to boldly huddle outside our outpost was unheard of. Surely they were aware we had modern surveillance and detection equipment. Maybe this was more saber rattling.

I talked to headquarters at Bonifas. They were as perplexed as I was. Their only advice was to hold our fire unless they tried to enter. Keep 360-degree surveillance in case this was a feint or distraction.

I sent word to the NCOs controlling the bunkers to maintain 360-degree security. Report any gaps in coverage and we'd fill it in with CCTVs. There was a fire team in reserve if reinforcements were necessary along the perimeter.

Minutes turned into fifteen. Everyone in the cell speculated what these three were up to. What was their game?

Finally, an NCO reminded me about the Claymores.

"What about the Claymores? Oh yeah, bring me the clacker can."

An old ammo can was used to store the Claymore clackers, the detonation devices. The can had a padlock and only SFC Howell and I possessed the keys. It was a compromise between readiness and avoiding an untoward mistake. In a high state of readiness, either of us could issue the clackers. The large number of Claymores around our outpost would shred any size unit into a red vapor.

As the ammo can was passed to me the three North Koreans began to move. All eyes were riveted to the monitor. Word went out on the squad radios. "They're moving!"

The three soldiers stood. In the thermal white heat, we could see a large head and blocky body. It looked straight at the CCTV. Its head had two stubby, protruding ears. A long tail, defined by the thermal camera, was clear.

This was the mythical Siberian Tiger long rumored to be in the DMZ but never confirmed! In no hurry, with svelte cat-like movements, it walked across the MDL into North Korea a few meters away.

Camp Bonifas asked me to repeat my report three times. The battalion commander called to confirm once more.

Fortunately, the incident had been recorded. No one would believe us otherwise. I was told the VHS tape made its way to four-star General Luck in Seoul.

The squad on patrol was ordered to return immediately. The patrol leader broke radio protocol and military bearing.

“Fuck that! We’re not moving until daylight!”

I’ve often thought about how close we came to vaporizing an endangered animal. Animals are always on the short end of the stick in human encounters. As with humans sheltering in place during the coronavirus pandemic or along a 250-by-four-kilometer war separation zone. Once humans are out of the picture, or nearly so, wildlife proves to be resilient. When humans run amok, we really are the most dangerous animal.