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2019

## Vipers, Dilettantes, and Tigers

David Aldridge

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The monsoon season hit us hard. We were picked up and inserted further away from Chu Lai, closer to Laos. I didn't mind being far from Chu Lai. That's where the general of the division had his sumptuous headquarters. It was said that there were more air conditioners within a hundred meters of the division headquarters than soldiers. The closer an infantryman is to the general, the more they want to play human chess with you. In the CG's helicopter from 1500 feet up it looks like a simple task to order an infantry company to move two grid squares in any direction. On the ground, those 2000 meters may take three days to traverse. That was because the jungles of Vietnam can be impenetrable and we had to cut our way through. When we had to hack up the mountains it got brutal. We carried machetes made of high-grade heavy steel that we honed every few hours after whacking through all the wild bamboo, twenty different types of bushes, palm fronds, small sapling trees, and wait-a-minute vines. That kind of activity depletes your energy and you're not as sharp mentally. Your arms and your back fatigue and someone else has to step up and be the trailblazer cutting the path.

We'd been dropped off in the valley floor and ordered to ascend the nearest mountain. I had half of the company; the captain had the other half. The captain headed for the small river north of where we had landed. He figured it would make a good ambush position by the river. I took my men up the mountain. There were no trails so we cut one. I told everyone to rest up, then ran the edge of my machete across my sharpening stone and a few drops of oil. Two soldiers joined me. When I had the edge razor sharp, I put my rifle on my right shoulder and held it to my body with my left hand. I wielded the machete with my right, and we moved up the mountain. I'd been cutting for half an hour when Roger, a former outlaw gang biker from New Hampshire, said he'd take over.

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“Thanks, Roger. I’m going to take a smoke break and catch up to you guys in a few.” I was drenched in sweat. I let Roger and the other soldiers move on up the slope. Roger was a very strong guy and he bulldozed up the mountain fifty meters then out of sight.

Suddenly I heard a blood-curdling scream. I faced uphill, ready to shoot anything that moved. The screaming kept up and my mind went wild. Someone galloped down the new trail and flew past me bellowing his head off, so fast I couldn’t tell who it was though he wore no helmet and carried no weapon, machete, or web gear. The screaming continued downhill. I ran up to see what had happened. The soldiers were laughing their heads off.

“Jesus Christ! What the fuck happened?”

“Roger hit a bamboo viper with the machete and he totally freaked, man! He screamed this fucking ungodly scream! I about pissed myself. I’ve never heard anything like it! The next thing I knew he fucking vanished!”

I ran back down the mountain to see if Roger had been bitten. When I got to the rest of my team, they said that Roger had run past them and was running out in the valley below.

One of them offered, “Doc Jones went after him down in the valley. He’ll bring him back up.”

When Doc and Roger returned, Roger was as white as a sheet and babbling to himself. Doc Jones said he wasn’t bitten or anything, so he was alright. That’s how we all found out that Roger was petrified of snakes. His fear of snakes knew no bounds. He would never again wield a machete on a cutting team.

Bamboo vipers are some of the most poisonous snakes in the world. Perfectly camouflaged, they’re a beautiful emerald green that blends in like a thin bamboo vine until you cut through it. Then the two halves of the snake whip and flop around in the air like a big green

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noodle spraying blood as the snake tries to bite the machete wielder. I have chopped half a dozen of those little beauties and every time I did the Dance of the Seven Veils while swinging my super sharp machete in a whirlwind. But I never got bit.

While everyone was still resting, I scanned the valley. North Vietnamese soldiers were making their way towards the river. I pointed them out to my soldiers.

“You want to kill them, Dave?”

I said I was so tired of killing and mayhem. “Let them go.”

I hollered at the enemy soldiers in Vietnamese to stop and don't go to the river. They looked up at me. I shouted it again. They all took off running, right at the captain's position in the valley. Minutes later came the sound of claymores going off and machine gun fire. One of the NVA soldiers came running back the way they'd come. The captain got on the radio, gleeful they'd killed four enemies.

Dryly I said, “You missed one. I suggest you move to a new site now that everyone knows where you are, sir. Out.”

At the top of the mountain, we got orders to climb the next mountain to the south. That's when the monsoon rains began in earnest. We only had six days of rations and after two days I told everyone to reduce their intake to one meal a day. Two days of steady rains hit us. I reasoned the trees would have most of the dust and crud washed off so we could collect water without getting sick. I had everyone fill their canteens with rainwater just in case we didn't get resupplied soon.

Something evil was headed our way. Over our secure radio I received orders to move to high ground ASAP! We were ordered to get to the highest elevation possible because a Typhoon was coming. I saw nothing on our maps but intermittent streams. To get to higher ground, we'd

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have to cross a big whitewater river, thirty feet wide with rapids raging downhill in a torrent. There's only one way to cross a river like that: have one guy cross it carrying a rope, tie the rope to some immovable object, then everyone can waltz across holding on. Theoretically, a wonderful idea. I went across, but no one could follow me. We almost lost two soldiers. Finally, I gave up and returned to the other side to join my half of the company. I almost didn't make it.

Gasping, I said, "Fuck it. We're staying here." I radioed my captain and battalion that we were not going to move from our happy little place. We started a little base camp. We set up our MECHS in the pummeling monsoon rain. We hung our hammocks from tree to tree and tied our ponchos over our heads for cover and waited.

On day ten, we ran out of food. On day twelve, I told everyone to start foraging for grass and bamboo shoots. We ripped apart our Claymores for the C-4 inside so we could cook the grass and baby bamboo shoots. We were on our thirteenth day on patrol, without food, when God found a pilot with huge balls and a soft heart who volunteered to fly rations, ammo, and water out to us in the middle of the monsoon rains. We'd been hammered by two Category 5 Typhoons back-to-back, for twenty consecutive days of steady downpour. I had everyone pick up their equipment to move to the valley so the pilot could find us. The Huey helicopter flew the whole way from Chu Lai ten feet off the jungle floor because of low cloud cover and fog. The monsoon alone would have been tough to fly through.

I made radio contact with the pilot ten minutes before he reached us. Finally, we heard the Huey in the distance. Everyone roared with joy. I guided him in slowly, but there was so much water in the valley the Huey couldn't land. One of the door gunners kicked the ammo, rations and water off the chopper.

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As the pilot turned for home, I told him on the radio, “God bless you, brother, and your crew.”

I told everyone not to eat too much of the rations. After two weeks with little or no food our stomachs had shrunk. No one paid any attention. Inside fifteen minutes I had forty men in excruciating abdominal pain. We were inoperable for more two days. I managed to force everyone a little higher up the mountain. We made camp just short of the crest.

Something told me to stay right where we were. There were hardball trails in every direction. I set up my MECH on the main trail and we waited out the day.

Near sundown, while sitting in my hammock, my MECH went off. I could tell the blast was mine because it was up the main trail, so it was my responsibility to go check it out. I grabbed my rifle and a bandoleer of magazines and told a soldier to cover me. I picked my way slowly up the trail. I rounded a corner when there was as a massive tiger.

In one long burst I fired thirty rounds into it and reloaded. Adrenalin had knocked the wind out of me. My reaction to seeing the beast had been visceral, pure survival. The encounter seemed to dredge up memories of another place and life when I had nothing but spears and swords to fight with.

I approached the animal slowly, ready to fire again. The MECH had blown away most of its body from the shoulders back. The tiger was propped up on its front legs where it had died. It looked like he was ready to spring forward; that added to the eeriness of its death. Another senseless death. But the alternative would have been to wrestle with it, a losing proposition. The tiger's head was so massive it took two of us to lift it. The beast must have weighed six hundred pounds. The pelt was covered in scars from fights, bamboo thorns, and maybe even shrapnel wounds. I had absolute respect for this animal to survive so long in a war-torn country.

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I radioed my CO and the battalion CO to let them know we had a body count of one tiger. Within half an hour I received orders from the commanding general to find an LZ so the tiger's head could be picked up the next morning. We had to go to the top of the mountain to chop an LZ for the Huey. The next morning the Huey throbbed into sight; we popped smoke to guide it in. The bird settled down and we placed the tiger's head on board.

On the radio I asked the pilot, "Didn't you at least bring us a sundry pack? We haven't had any smokes for two weeks."

"I just have orders to pick up the tiger. Sorry."

My soldiers asked if the chopper had brought us any rations, sundry packs, or water.

"Not a fucking thing. The sorry sons of bitches just wanted the tiger for the general."

Their morale was crushed. The assholes in charge didn't give a fuck about our health or welfare. Somewhere there was going to be some kind of war story told about this beautiful animal, but it would not be true. We moved quietly back to our little camp.