Old Joe

Ron Bland
Old Joe  Ron Bland

No matter how hard you try dodging a lifer sergeant, he’s going to find privates with no mission who need his guidance, like a stimulating morning of policing the area for trash out here in this war zone, or maybe guard duty, or my personal favorite, filling sandbags. With all hope almost lost of dodging some bullshit duty, company clerk Rodriguez comes waddling through the high grass, waving his stubby arms, reaching barely above the stalks, calling out toward Owen Cat and me. I can’t stand this jerk, I just want to frag his ass right there. Every time I present myself to him at mail call, he gives a quick glance up and responds, “No mail.”

“You didn’t even look!”

“No mail.”

Approaching closer, he shouts in his Puerto Rican accent: “You have mission, right now. Go to gunship Vulture, right away.”

I yell back with similar urgency: “Radio Captain Powers. Tell him to pick us up on Highway 14 outside the wire!” Owen Cat and I run for our weapons and gear, gasping, legs burning. I hear the gunship spin up and leave the pad. Just as we’re dragging the wire back together, our ride zooms overhead toward the high grass to keep from drowning us in dust. The skids skitter through the grass tops like a prancing horse; Owen Cat jumps first and lands perfectly on the deck, immediately reaching back for our 60’s (M60 machine guns) and ammo boxes. I step up on the skid and we gain altitude, moving away at speed. I scramble for balance and hook my 60 in the bungee cord hanging in the door. I feed it the first ammo belt. I sit on the deck with my feet on the rocket pod, looking out. Holy shit. Our rotator blades are arching up really high; we must be loaded pretty heavily with ammo and rockets.
Old Joe Ron Bland

What is this mission? I check the Montagnard village just beyond the wire; as usual, the “Yards” are out watching the spectacle of our passing overhead, almost as a salute. They’re ferocious warriors, and loyal to the special forces and long-range recon patrols, maybe to a fault.

Owen Cat casts me a big Native American grin as we leave behind the Yard village. I don’t have to ask why. On LRRP team insertions, usually made up of a couple of SF guys and eight or ten Montagnards, the Yards like to squat in the ship door openings with their toes just at the edge. They seem to like the thrill of the centrifugal force holding them to the deck when the ship banks. They giggle as they look straight down at the ground while the rest of us hold on for dear life.

Reaching speed and altitude, I climb on the jump seat out of the wind with my 60 ready to rock and roll. I grab a headset.

“Good morning, Captain. What the fuck. Over.”

Keying his mic, the chopper commander says, “Appreciate the effort, Private. We’re on convoy cover out to FOB Jackson Hole on the border. Should be windshield time. Over.”

“Sir, when we get to the old tea plantation can we do a once around to see if Old Joe’s okay? Over.”

“Will do.”

The last time we were on the airstrip at Pleiku by the Graves and Registration Building, I left the helo on the pretense of grabbing a coffee, but was really in search of some food. A bag of apples was left unattended by the mess hall door, probably just going to waste. I used my best judgment and grabbed them to share with hooch mates; I also hoped to throw some out of our ship for Old Joe. Better yet, I hoped we could set down and I might hand deliver them so she
could have some human contact, if only for a few minutes. But the pilot refused. We threw the apples out at altitude into the courtyard.

My first contact with Old Joe was a few months ago, on a night recon and listening post outside of base camp. On this night, five of us were insistent on being air lifted out ten klicks, intending to work our way back slowly during the night. Spreading out one hundred meters apart, we are able to find each other by our shadows cast by the moon. The easy walking, the grey glow of moonlight, and the quiet relaxed us. I eased ahead into the night, stopped, eased ahead, stopped, and sat in the sandy soil, listening. I replayed the latest rock song in my head, until there came a trumpeting roar just a few meters away! I jumped into a prone fighting position, bracing for the worst. Big Joe came lumbering over like a lost dog. She stopped trumpeting and approached slowly, lumbering up close enough for us to have an eye-to-eye standoff. I checked myself. Was I sleeping or was this giant elephant ambling out of the darkness close enough to eyeball me some kind of a mirage? She trumpeted again to say she was very real, then turned and sauntered off.

After several sightings of Old Joe, both from the air and at ground level, I understood she was a refugee on her own plantation. Scars all over her ribcage and legs show how mistreated she’d been over the war years. Old Joe She was finally abandoned on the old French tea plantation, no one to care for her. The main plantation residence had been demolished from the fighting, first the French, then we Americans, but somehow the walls around the perimeter had somewhat intact enough to contain Old Joe, and to provide her with some cover from GIs who thought it would be cool to bring down an elephant with their weapons. After my first contact with her, I campaigned all the troops in our squadron to fire warning rounds at the thoughtless
Old Joe Ron Bland

cretins committing that bullshit. Word spread and, before long, Old Joe had a large part of the 4th infantry watching out for her.

Asian elephants were native to our area of operation. Originally, they were used as transportation by Vietnamese peasants over long distances. Later, they were utilized by French colonizers on their tea and rubber plantations to haul the heaviest loads. During the French-Indochina War, Vietnamese rebels used the elephants along the Ho Chi Minh Trail to carry them and their weapons. Later, in our war, both the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong used elephants to move ammo and supplies south down the trail. With the inevitable devastation of the land, the elephants were abandoned, uncared for, and unloved. Old Joe wandered on her vacant plantation, sad and lonely following years of work and purpose.

When I returned home, I would question any troops I encountered from the 4th Division, only to hear, “I’ve never heard of Old Joe.” Like an old veteran, Old Joe would just fade away. Her war story is another that breaks my heart.