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The Sentry

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In Vietnam I chose to walk point for my company all the time. I was very good at it. Even though it entailed more hardship for me, I preferred it, because I wanted to control my own destiny. Otherwise my fate was in someone else's hands. My experience had been if I let others walk point everything went to shit and we got people killed. I didn't trust others to do the job right, and so I took the awesome responsibility on my own shoulders of keeping us all alive. When I walked point I had to put all intrusive thoughts out of my mind. I could not allow anything else to affect me; not bad news from back in the states, the unbearable heat, the monsoon rains that came at you like a Biblical wall of water that blotted out the sun, nor a hundred other distractions. None of it could be allowed to keep me from doing my job as a point man. I couldn't allow myself to consider the numerous snakes, the jungle spiders as big as your head, the leeches, the multitude of possible booby traps, punji sticks, ravenous tigers, and unexploded ordnance everywhere. My focus had to be laser-sharp on staying alive. The normal chatter going on in my mind had to cease. I had to wipe the slate clean and truly listen to what was out in front of me. Hearing a twig snap could mean life or death. As the point man I had to be able to spot the slightest movement and zoom in on it for any sign of danger. When I walked point I was in charge. We moved at my speed. When we made contact with the enemy I was the one who decided how close the artillery could come.

In the middle of October 1968, I was beginning to feel the combined effects of combat. After 40 continuous days of firefights and blown ambushes I began to feel a loss of balance in my life. I already knew it's not normal to kill other beings. But no matter how much training you have had in preparation for war nothing could ever really prepare you for the horrid reality of killing someone. Sadly, it is the only way to survive in combat. When the enemy is shooting at you and doing their best to kill you, it simply becomes an act of self-preservation to shoot back.

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But still, it wears you down. Killing others takes its toll on every aspect of you; mentally, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually. It grates on your soul and with each death you inch closer and closer to the precipice of insanity. Others avoided that fate by concluding they were doing God's work in killing the godless commies. I knew in my heart that that wasn't true. Even communists had families and friends they loved

Religion didn't help alleviate the feeling that I was becoming less by killing more. Periodically, after a big firefight or ground attack, a chaplain would show up, hold services, and then get on a chopper and fly back in time for supper at the officer's club. I knew the chaplains had their jobs to do, but what they had to say seemed hollow somehow. It all seemed superficial, shallow and perfunctory to me. It just never soothed my soul to hear someone throwing out clichés and the same old tired phrases about 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust.' When I felt troubled enough to speak with our chaplain, I told him an inner voice speaks to me sometimes and warns me of danger and it seems to come from my heart area. I told him that voice had saved my life many times. He just stared at me like I had just set myself on fire. Then he muttered something like 'God moves in mysterious ways' and hurried away. No shit. Big fucking help there, Padre.

We were operating in War Zone C and we set up a company sized ambush. I made sure that we had 50% awake while the others dozed. I managed to get three hours sleep between my turns for radio watch. My whole company was all sleep deprived and had borderline heat exhaustion on a daily basis from the extreme heat and humidity of the jungles of Vietnam. We had just finished a trek to Phouc Vinh from the Cambodian border where we had no sleep for five consecutive days. When we were finally allowed to lay down, I slept for 24 hours straight. We were chronically exhausted and desperately needed a stand-down.

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After the sun broke the horizon, I stood up and stepped off towards the kill-zone to take a piss. What issued forth was an orange syrupy liquid that would have freaked out any urologist. I didn't know if it was because of dehydration or the malaria pills we had to take every Monday. I decided I needed to try to drink more fluids. I rubbed my sore shoulders after I buttoned my fly. I had almost recovered overnight from the deep grooves cut by the ammo straps and my web gear. The extra weight we carried rarely varied. Each of us carried extra ammo for the machine guns, extra hand grenades in addition to our normal equipment, C-rations and six quarts of water.

I took a chunk of C-4 explosive and set it on fire to heat up some coffee. As I stirred in the coffee and cocoa mix my thoughts turned to my new wife. The previous month I had returned from an R&R to Hawaii to get married and it was on my mind more than it should have been. When you pay too much attention to the errant thoughts in your head you can become preoccupied and miss signs of the enemy. My new wife was expecting a baby and I was mulling over the possibilities of how we would continue our relationship when I got back to the states. I tried to shake all that off and get ready for the day. To be eternally hyper-vigilant is the curse of every point man. So, I pushed all that out of my mind as I prepared for another day of walking point. My company commander Captain Zap radioed that Alpha Company was joining us and would be taking point for a search and destroy mission. I welcomed the respite as we left our ambush position and hooked in to the tail end of Alpha.

My platoon was on the right flank and progress was slow. There were frequent breaks and my mind began to wander again as we trudged along. The area we were in contained a profusion of tamarind trees and bushes with beautiful red, yellow, and even pinkish colored flowers. It looked like we had stumbled into Eden's back door. I marveled at the great variety of trees. There were banyan trees with their gnarly roots and teak wood trees that soared above the

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triple canopy jungle. I saw huge stands of impenetrable bamboo that meant water was nearby. That also meant it was a good place for an enemy basecamp. After three hours of sheer boredom the point began receiving sniper fire. All along the flank we took up positions behind some teak wood trees. We listened to the radio chatter for half an hour as soldier after soldier was wounded when Alpha tried to maneuver on the sniper.

Finally, I called out to Renner, my M-79 guy, to go forward and kill that son of a bitch. Renner dropped his rucksack and carrying his bag of M-79 rounds he took off running forward. After five minutes we all heard the distant ‘BLOOP’ of an HE round leaving the barrel of the M-79 and a few seconds later the explosion. The sniper returned fire and there was another ‘BLOOP’ and another explosion. I could hear the guys from Alpha hollering ‘YEAH,’ ‘Got him!!’ A few minutes later Renner came back to our platoon smiling from ear to ear.

“Great job, Renner!” He picked up his rucksack and moved back along the flank. Schenone, my machine gunner, got my attention from up ahead. He had passed over what looked like a small trail leading off perpendicular to our direction of travel and was motioning me to come forward. As I approached him he motioned for me to stop just shy of the trail. He said:

“Dave, just down this trail I just saw a gook pop his head up from his spider hole and when Renner came running by me the gook ducked back down inside. Everybody has been walking by here all day and no one ever saw this.” I peeked around the corner of the foliage, spied the hole and knew immediately what I had to do. I had dreamed this situation almost a year ago when I was back in California. I told Schenone:

“Give me your pistol. Cover me with the machine gun after I throw a hand grenade in the spider hole and get ready to move forward to me after it goes off.”

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I dropped my rucksack and pulled a hand grenade out. I jacked a round in the chamber of the .45 and pulled the pin from the grenade. I started running towards the spider hole and immediately saw the trip wire of a booby trap. I leaped over it and continued. As I neared the spider hole, I let the handle fly on the grenade and waited a couple of seconds before dropping it in the hole. Two seconds later there was a muffled blast deep in the spider hole. I hollered back to watch out for the booby trap. Black smoke wafted up out of the hole and I heard a loud tortured wailing as I surveyed the surrounding area for more of the enemy. Schenone and some others joined me as I waited for the smoke to clear. When I heard the misery the NVA soldier was in I was seized with an attack of conscience so overwhelming that it took my breath away. Suddenly, the soldier was no longer just another faceless enemy to be killed, but another human being who I was connected to in unseen and unfathomable ways. Something in me seemed to break and I gave Schenone his pistol and climbed down in the hole to pull the soldier out. He had multiple wounds to his torso and head and was already in his death throes as I handed him off to our head medic Doc Inverso. My throat and chest area were constricted and I said meekly through the raw emotion I felt:

“Try to save him, Doc.” I was on the verge of tears. I said loudly, “What the fuck? He’s just a fucking kid!”

The soldier looked to be no older than 15. His pitiful gurgles and struggling for life giving air made me feel sick to my stomach. My RTO Louie Ragusa came running to me and said:

“Dauntless 6 and Delta 6 are on the horn and want to know what the fuck is going on.” I took the radio handset from Louie and said:

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“Delta 6, this is Delta 3-6. We killed one-each November Victor Alpha. He was most likely a sentry for their base camp. Do you want us to clover-leaf the area?”

“Negative. We’re moving out in five minutes to an LZ for extraction. Start moving forward. Out.”

An hour later we were picked up and flown back to Di An for another operation. The dark mood that descended on me was impenetrable. No one said a word to me the rest of the day. I just could not shake the feeling that I had fucked up somehow. I didn’t need to explain to anyone that I was one step closer to the precipice. I could not change what I had done, but I did resolve I would not do it the same way again. From then on, I would give the enemy a chance to surrender if the opportunity ever came up again.