

Random Objectives

The column arrived inside the 63rd's perimeter not long after midday. The march in from the landing zone had been a slow one. The trail was not wide, and they had to make room for the stretcher-bearers as they came down the trail to meet the med-evac helicopters waiting at the landing zone. The 63rd was up against a reinforced North Vietnamese regiment. They had spent the night under fire and sustained a number of casualties.

Gunships milled in the sky over the dense tangle that lined the trail. Still, the tension in the column by mid-morning had increased rapidly toward the breaking point. The air was hot and hung heavily around the troops. The heat and the tension crusted their bodies in a salty sweat that flared tempers and made the march more difficult. Joe could hear soldiers in front of him in the column cursing without letup as they wound their way up the narrow, airless corridor.

Joe's outfit was not only reinforcing the 63rd but also re-supplying them. Each man not only carried his regular gear but a ruck of supplies for the 63rd as well. The weight of the additional gear and the heat pressed in on Joe. The moist air seemed to suck oxygen away from his overworking lungs. Every ounce of strength was spent to place one individual step ahead of the last and gasp for air again. The march seemed to take forever.

By the time Joe and Reynolds reached the 63rd's position, the area was bursting with troops. The men waited while the gunships pounded the area on both sides of them, and by early-afternoon the deployment had begun.

The objective was to keep the North Vietnamese from moving down the trail system and attacking the village of Doc Trang, but the enemy outnumbered the Americans so badly, they

were going around them with ease. The reinforcements were to fan out and check the North Vietnamese advance around the 63rd.

Joe and Reynolds headed out to the northwest with their platoon once the helicopters had finished their operation. They were to set up ambushes and wait until the North Vietnamese passed in the night and neutralize them.

The corporal had a map with three spots marked on it. A fire team was to be left in each location along the trail. Joe, Reynolds, and Hopkins, the big kid who liked war, and two other soldiers—a third rifleman and a radio operator—were to man the top of a small hill where they could see down on both sides. They were fire team three. The others were to be deployed a little distance away along the trail where the enemy could be caught out in the open.

“Okay, fuck-faces.” It was Olivetti.

“Fire team three up on that hill there.” The corporal was pointing out a low rise in the near distance and off slightly to the right. “Reese, your vast seniority makes you team leader for the day.

“Welcome to command,” Olivetti said with mean-spirited humor. “Enjoy.”

Olivetti’s mood shifted as he looked back at the hillside Joe and his men were about to call home for the night.

“I want you to keep things squared away up there until someone comes to relieve you. Got that, Reese?”

“Work together and for Christ’s sake don’t smoke. Bastards can smell that stuff a mile away.”

Joe had paused to light a cigarette and was looking up the hillside for an easy route to the top.

“Okay, bullet balls, move it,” Olivetti bellowed angrily as he returned abruptly to his normal frame of mind.

Hopkins unsheathed his machete. He began to cut through the dense brush with his usual enthusiasm. The vines were so tough the machete flew back at him with almost the same force as he swung it. Sweat began to soak the rag he had tied around his forehead to keep the salt out of his eyes, and after a few more swings of the blade, he began to curse.

The rest of the men stood around watching him. “Hey, Hopkins, why don’t you use the trail we built up there last time we were here?”

“It’s right there.” Someone pointed to a partially overgrown scar running up the side of the rise.

“Sure, and run right into some motherfuckin’ booby trap,” Hopkins said as he swung the machete. “No, thanks. I think I’ll do it my way.”

“Okay. But it took us the whole afternoon to get all our gear up there.”

“You mean you’ve been here before?” Joe asked, his spirits sinking.

“Well, hell yes. Ten months ago. Us and the French before us. You won’t even have to dig a hole.”

“Just look out for snakes,” another soldier cracked as he ground out the last of his cigarette.

The men laughed and moved off to their own positions, leaving Joe and his fire team to fight their way to the top of the rise.

“Jesus, these creepers are something else,” Joe grumbled irritably. “They wrap around the blade and, God, they won’t let go.”

He pulled his machete back, and a long rope of creeper pulled out of the jungle. It had tiny greenish leaves and tight little yellow buds along the stem. Joe crushed the liana under his boot and jerked the machete blade free.

Hopkins was the first to reach the top. He and Joe set up the machine gun while Reynolds scouted the area and the radio operator checked out his gear.

“For God’s sake, here they are,” Reynolds said suddenly.

“What ya’ got?”

“Foxholes, And they’re dry inside.”

Joe and Hopkins went over to the place where Reynolds stood peering at the overgrown holes.

“Well, I’ll be damned. I thought they were pulling my leg,” Hopkins said. “At least it saves us some work.”

Hopkins retrieved the machine gun and set it up near one of the holes.

“Perfect. Look at this, Joe.”

Joe lay down beside Hopkins and sighted down the machine gun’s barrel. “Right, this’ll do fine. Let’s get some rest.”

Joe lit a quick cigarette and opened a tin of ham and eggs. He picked out the chunks of ham, leaving the cold eggs behind, and settled near Reynolds and Hopkins to wait through the long night.

The shadows were already beginning to lengthen, and the heat of the day had broken. The jungle around the men was hushed and still as they drowsed near sleep, exhausted following the long, grueling day.

Hopkins went over to his ruck and started digging through his gear. He reached down into the bottom of the pack and fished around a bit. With a half-guilty look on his face, he pulled out a beat-up old canteen. "Guess what's in here."

"Well, it can't be water or you wouldn't look so damn guilty," Joe said.

Reynolds grinned. "Orange juice, maybe?"

"So why didn't I think of that?" Hopkins had a big grin on his face now too.

"Guess what tomorrow is.... My half birthday."

"I guess this is close enough," Reynolds said. "Pass it on over here. How many are we celebrating?"

"Nineteen-and-a-half."

Joe took the canteen as it was passed to him. "Well, you son of a bitch. You beat me by a couple of weeks...I think. Pretty close, anyway." He stopped to think about it. Joe wasn't keeping track of days any longer, except the one that got him out of there.

He held the canteen high. "Anything for a celebration, right?"

Joe took a swallow. It burned his mouth and on down into his gut.

“Jesus,” he said when he could. “Why didn’t you mix it with something? That’s terrible.”

“I didn’t think of it.” Hopkins had the canteen back and took another small swig. “That’s it. The rest is for tomorrow if we can get away from that wop, Olivetti, long enough. The bastard.”

The evening’s darkness had crept down upon the men without notice. Enough moon hung in the sky somewhere above them to cast a faint, silvery luminescence over the jungle. The night birds awakened, shook out their feathers noisily, and disappeared into the darkness with joyous screams of delight. Then all was quiet once again.

The five men stirred as little as possible. Lost in solitary thoughts, the time passed unnoticed until the chill of the night air reached them. Reynolds was the first to dig out his poncho and the others followed. The night was still in the upper seventies, but down so far from the mid-afternoon high it felt chilly.

Joe lit a cigarette.

“Goddamn it, don’t do that.” Hopkins whispered.

Joe was careful to keep the flame hidden inside his poncho. He took a couple of welcome drags on the cigarette and promptly put it out. He tore off the burned end and put the good end back in the pack.

“It’s okay. Everybody night-smokes out here. They can’t smell that little bit,” Joe said easily.

“It’s too early for anyone to be on the trail yet, anyway,” Reynolds said.

He got up and checked the machine gun. “Is all the ammo right here?”

“Everything for the M60, yeah.”

Silence fell between them again. Hopkins shifted positions and Reynolds jumped in surprise. Joe’s nerves were beginning to frazzle as well. He wanted a cigarette more than anything.

The men strained to see up the trail. Hopkins was in his foxhole, swiveling the machine gun around on its base between the stakes they had pounded into the ground during daylight. Joe and Reynolds were still lying on the ground outside their foxholes.

At last, far up the trail, they detected Vietnamese voices heatedly discussing something in an undertone. And almost immediately the quiet footfalls as the North Vietnamese came down the trail.

“Okay, Hopkins, take it easy,” Joe whispered. “Let them pass.”

Joe and the other four men watched as the heavily laden Vietnamese passed in front of them in near darkness. The enemy looked so small they hardly seemed dangerous.

Joe wiped his sleeve over his face and waited. It seemed like hours since the column had come into view. Joe glanced at Hopkins, who was sighting down the machine gun barrel onto the North Vietnamese, waiting for the order to fire. Reynolds was beside Joe, but Joe couldn’t see the other two members of the fire team.

There was a steady flow of dust-encrusted, gray-clad soldiers silently passing by the men in the eerie light. Each spaced exactly the proper distance from the next, they seemed to move across a stage in front of Joe like little marionettes in someone’s fantasy.

Joe's ears strained for the sound he was waiting to hear. It came as an enormous crackling burst from a claymore mine in the jungle down the trail. The front of the column had reached the first fire team.

A flare lit up the sky. "Go," Joe croaked harshly as he delivered a short burst from his M16.

The jungle went wild as the North Vietnamese broke rank and dashed for cover into the thick underbrush.

Hopkins had turned and was firing a steady deadly stream as far up the trail as his range allowed. Joe and Reynolds were spraying the underbrush on the other side of the trail with short bursts from their rifles, trying to take out the enemy soldiers who had dashed in there. Then the flare died.

The ambush was deadly. Ranks of North Vietnamese soldiers lay out in the open along the trail as if someone had dropped the marionette strings and left the soldiers to fall helplessly in their tracks. They still did not seem real to Joe.

Joe saw a flash from the jungle. At the same time, he heard a thud into the dirt next to his head. He let the spot where it had come from have it with his M16 and dropped into his foxhole. They were going to get fire returned.

Hopkins jerked his machine gun off the tripod and repositioned it to concentrate on the underbrush where the broken ranks of North Vietnamese had taken cover.

The remnants of the North Vietnamese column desperately tried to put Joe's fire team out of action. The enemy rounds came right in on top of them. The hill gave Joe and his men their only advantage—a superior fire angle. They pumped the jungle full until nothing could have

survived, and then in the silence they waited, their ears straining to pick up the slightest sound that might mean someone was trying to advance on their position.

During the firefight, Joe had forgotten his fear. But as the minutes wore on, the knot of fear began to grow back in his gut. The night air around the fire team hung heavy with the nauseating smell of cordite from the gunfire.

Joe flinched as the jungle below lit up. In the same instant, a projectile exploded against the hillside. Each man involuntarily shrank farther down into his foxhole as the ground beneath their feet reached up to meet them.

“Shit, the bastards have a mortar,” Reynolds cursed half to himself.

“Let them have it, Hopkins,” Joe yelled as the men recovered and leaped into action.

The second round from the mortar came in rapid succession and marched up the hill toward them.

“Get some artillery in here, for God’s sake,” Joe yelled across the top of the firing to his radio operator.

“I can’t hit the fuckers. What the hell’s the matter,” Hopkins growled from behind the machine gun.

The next mortar round hit the edge of the clearing.

“Get your fire down, Hopkins, get it down,” Joe yelled.

“They’ll be on top of us with the next one,” Hopkins muttered.

“Where’s the goddamn artillery,” Reynolds shouted as he tried to spot the radio operator in the near darkness.

In desperation, Hopkins leaped from his foxhole and grabbed the machine gun to get it into the jungle where he could continue firing. Reynolds, leaning way out of his hole, grabbed Hopkins in a hopeless effort to drag him back to relative safety.

“Don’t, Hopkins....”

The next mortar burst caught Reynolds in mid-sentence. The fragments from the mortar tore into both Reynolds and Hopkins, and the impact sent the machine gun tumbling end-over-end down the hillside.

It seemed as if the ground beneath Joe’s very feet was being split open. He dropped his weapon and spun around in the foxhole. Instinctively, Joe crossed his arms over his chest and sank to the bottom of the hole. The burst from the mortar was so close Joe felt as if he had fallen into the bottom of an exploding volcano. The edges of the foxhole crumbled in, and Joe could feel the dirt and rubble pelting him on the helmet and shoulders.

The North Vietnamese knew they were directly on target and put two more rounds right in on top of them. Joe was gasping for air as the world filled with dust and light and motion and sound.

The artillery found its mark, and gradually Joe realized the jungle around him was silent. He fought against muscles that had locked into a position of instinctive security and forced himself out of his foxhole. Joe was startled to find the moon casting its pale light from the other side of the jungle.

In the shadows next to him, he caught sight of a heap that had not been there before. Joe tried to call out to Reynolds and Hopkins but a great tight knot forming in his throat choked off the sounds.

He reached out in dread, touching Hopkins' hand, and ran his fingers back over the wrist. There was no pulse.

“Oh, my God,” Joe whispered, “they should have been in their holes.”

Joe crawled around to Reynolds. He touched the dark spots on Reynolds' face and shirt and rubbed the jelly-like substance between his thumb and finger. Then he scrubbed his fingers ruthlessly in the dust when he realized what it was.

The radio operator lay crumpled in the bottom of his foxhole with his face missing, the battery pack of his radio shattered. The other young soldier lay inexplicably dead, out on the ground nearby.

Joe paused in the dirt beside Reynolds, his head in his arms. He couldn't force his thoughts together. Eventually, he gathered the energy to crawl over to Hopkins' untouched pack and got it open. His fingers searched through the things in the ruck until they found what he sought—the battered old canteen that contained the next day's celebration.

Joe took it and made his way to the edge of the clearing. He crawled into the dense growth of creepers and vines and tucked the canteen as far back in under the mass as he could reach.

He rested there, exhausted by that simple activity, and tried to collect his thoughts. Joe was afraid for the rest of his squad. Not knowing if he were the only one left, and realizing fully his desperate situation, Joe's thoughts were frozen before they could begin to take shape. The vacant forms of his friends, so still on the ground in front of him, filled Joe with grief and remorse. He lay on the ground with waves of grief and guilt assaulting him as the moon set and complete darkness filled the jungle. His fire team was gone.

Sometime later a start ran through Joe as he remembered that he hid in the jungle totally unprotected. His M16 lay where he had left it, beside his foxhole. Terror raced through Joe as he realized the jungle might well be alive with North Vietnamese trying to steal up on their position to make sure it was neutralized. And he had no weapon to protect himself.

As quietly as Joe could, he worked his way back through the darkness to the foxholes and retrieved his rifle. He clenched his teeth over a sob rising inside him and with trembling fingers took the ammunition from Reynolds' body. As the threat of tears twisted Joe's face, he picked up Reynolds' M16, as well, and worked his way back into the jungle to wait in terror until dawn came.

"Here, this'll help," someone said, putting a cigarette into Joe's fingers. Reynolds and Hopkins, zipped into green plastic body bags, were being carried down the trail toward the landing zone. Joe was sitting by himself on the ground watching them go. He had wanted to know the simple ending fact of which bag held Reynolds and which of the bags held Hopkins. It seemed odd to know two people for months and, when they were killed, lose such a basic tie as that.

Joe watched them being carried down the trail until it made a sharp turn. It was odd that he couldn't identify them by looking at the bags. Hopkins had been so much larger, but the bags revealed nothing.

Joe watched the first bag disappear around the corner. Had it been Hopkins or Reynolds? Such an easy thing to know about a man. Such a difficult thing to know about a corpse.

Joe looked at the cigarette he had been given and absently rolled it between his fingers.

“I wish to hell I could get out of here,” he said, echoing his bleak thoughts.

“Take a drag on that. It’ll help. Believe me, I know.”

Joe did and felt the smoke travel down into his lungs. It was grass. He quickly pulled in more of the smoke.

“Major bad-ass Thai. Good stuff, huh?”

Joe nodded, hungrily pulling in the smoke. It was good stuff. It had already begun to hit the mark. The edge was coming off; he could feel himself beginning to steady a bit.

“I can get you more of it.”

Joe nodded in agreement.

“Don’t get caught. Be careful.”

“Sure, sure. I’m always careful,” Joe said bitterly.

The days began to drift into one another for Joe, then. A kaleidoscope of fear, pain and boredom, and the numbness of nothing at all.

They survived the Chinese New Year and hung on into the monsoons. One afternoon Reynolds’ rack filled up. Joe paid no attention. He could not care, could not allow himself such a frivolous measure as caring again.

And the face of the war had changed. The men were no longer choked by the dust, they were mired in it. It stuck to their boots, and the water collecting inside rotted their feet. The rain drenched the men and soaked their gear. Being dry at all was a luxury.

The operations continued as before but were slower. Torrential rains kept the helicopters on the ground, sometimes for days at a time, while the trucks fought their way over the slippery roads and got stuck firmly in the heavy, red mud.

Joe could not see that the land had awakened and was in full bloom. Trees were filled with beautiful, crimson flowers, and the creepers in the jungle were ablaze with delicate, yellow blossoms. Joe was an old timer. He functioned automatically and effectively on missions and had developed a sixth sense about danger. But the enemy was still there. Always observant, always invisible, always waiting for the opportunity to strike.

The brief days between action floated by in a smoky haze for Joe. He killed his regrets and disgust in the only way he knew how. He silenced his rage by numbing his mind.

“Okay, Reese, get off your lazy ass,” bellowed Olivetti, the squad leader.

Joe was sitting on the edge of his bunk rubbing some white, greasy ointment issued by the army surgeon general into a bad spot on his foot that wouldn't heal.

“Your fucking feet aren't any worse than anybody else's.”

Joe didn't answer and finished rubbing the ointment into his foot.

Olivetti went on down the aisle between the cots and stopped to hassle Sanchez who was working the same white grease into his feet.

“You too, Sanchez?” Olivetti demanded.

“Rotten feet.”

“Well fuck you feet, Sanchez. Fuck a tu madre while you're at it.”

“*Chinga*, sir.”

Olivetti snorted. “Wise guy.” He kicked the leg of another cot and made it jump as he carried his tirade on down the aisle.

Sanchez laced up his boots around his sore feet and stopped at Joe’s bunk as he left the hootch.

“That son of a bitch spent too many nights in Juarez for his own good,” Sanchez hissed under his breath.

“Yeah, well, stuff a grenade up his ass, why don’t you. I’m quite sure nobody’d notice,” Joe said indifferently.

“Suppose it’s worth it?”

“Everybody wants to be a shit kicker, Sanchez.”

Joe hoisted up his pack, slung the strap of his M16 over the other shoulder and made his way down the slimy, red road with the rest of his squad to the motor pool. They were being sent out to run a routine patrol to the northeast of Doc Trang.

In the dim light of the cloudy pre-dawn hour, Joe threw himself into the back of a truck and slumped down on the bench, his gear between his feet.

“Shit, it looks like rain,” Sanchez said from beside him.

Joe turned and looked at the tall, billowing clouds mounting into the sky on the horizon. In the pale light they looked dirty and menacing.

“At least there won’t be any fog.” Joe adjusted his boot laces one last time to give his feet some relief.

Sanchez was watching him. “My feet are so fucking rotten, I’m not sure they’re going to make it,” he said.

He took a cigarette and offered one to Joe. They sat smoking in silence, watching the clouds build on the horizon. As dawn approached and the world around them grew lighter and filled with color, the mountains of cloud paled and became towering columns of white-whipped froth.

“One thing I can never figure out is why they get you out here this friggin’ early so you can sit around and wait,” Sanchez said as the convoy jerked into motion after a considerable delay.

“Adrenaline. They like to get you out here and make you wait so you get psyched-out real good,” Joe said. “They say it makes you more alert.”

“Like hell.”

“Well, that’s what somebody told me once.”

“The assholes can’t get it put together on time, that’s all,” Sanchez grumbled.

“I can’t even figure out why we’re going out that way,” a young soldier, newly assigned to the outfit, said. “Christ, we went through that area a few days ago and there’s nobody out there. I’ll bet it’s going to be a piece of cake.”

“Get screwed,” Joe said with no ill will, but not bothering to look at this new face, either. Anybody who thought yesterday’s empty sectors meant today’s pointless patrol had a lot left to learn.

They rode in silence scanning the jungle past the men's shoulders on the other side of the truck until the sun was well-up. Traveling deep into the hills, they could no longer see the columns of cloud on the horizon, nor could they see the sky through the thick, heavy canopy of greenery overhead.

The sun disappeared and the dense forest darkened. A rush of cooler air pulsed through the jungle. The convoy had come to a stop in a relatively flat area. The somewhat broken terrain was choked with down and dying timber, and the clay-like soil beneath was impenetrable to the daily monsoon rains.

As the men waited for their orders, the first huge drops burst through the canopy and fell into the puddles already standing in the road.

“Shit,” fumed Sanchez under his breath.

“Another fucking, goddamn bath,” Joe growled.

The men left the firm base the road offered their feet and slid over a slight embankment into the murky soup at the roadside to begin the patrol. The muddy, rotten water oozed up around their feet and over their boot tops. It trickled in cold rivulets into their boots and soaked their feet within a few paces.

Joe and Sanchez froze momentarily as a snake appeared from underneath an enormous, gnarled rootwad. It had a yellow belly and a fine red stripe running down each side of its spine. Its head seemed far too large for the slender body. As the men watched, the snake swam away into the underbrush, coiling itself back and forth through the foul water.

“Well, that makes my day,” Sanchez whispered to Joe. “I dream about those things latching onto my legs, and I can’t get them off,” he said. “That and my goddamn feet are enough to turn a guy into a red-eyed nut job.”

Joe laughed quietly.

They had advanced about 500 meters into the jungle. The rain was coming down hard and already covered even the high areas with a thin veneer of water. In places the men were nearly to their knees in the filthy soup as they fought their way in to find the always unseen enemy.

Suddenly, the world around Joe blew up. The blast threw him off his feet into the water. He struggled to stand but couldn’t get his feet back under himself.

In his confusion, Joe could feel a white-hot pain tearing through his side. Joe thought he must have hit one of the exposed roots sticking up out of the collecting rain as he was blown down.

But Joe could feel something warm spreading out over his skin—something warmer than his skin and thicker than the water soaking his fatigues.

The impact had knocked the wind out of him. Gasping for air, Joe desperately tried to get an arm over one of the roots to keep his head from sinking below the surface. But Joe lost his grip on the slippery root and fell back into the water. His lungs pumped desperately to replace the lost oxygen. Joe couldn’t stop them as he slipped into the water again. He thought surely he would drown.

My turn. The thought flashed through Joe’s mind as he began to fade from reality. His pain-numbed mind found no surprise in the fact that it had finally happened.

Sanchez, a few feet away, turned to check those close to the blast. Dropping behind a rootwad to avoid being hit in the firefight, he quickly made his way around to Joe.

Somehow, through the pain, Joe managed to reach up and clutch the root above his head for a second time. But this time it was the arm of his friend, Sanchez, that he had found.

“Teddy, Teddy. Help me get up,” Joe gasped.

Sanchez gripped him tightly, but the slime from the black root had made Joe’s arm unbelievably slippery. Sanchez lost his grip and Joe slid helplessly back into the brown water, now unable to struggle further.

Once again Sanchez found Joe’s arm and dragged him out of the water. And this time he was able to pull Joe up over the slimy, black rootmass and hold him there.

“Oh, God, Joe.” The wound in Joe’s side was huge and bleeding hard. It seemed to Sanchez as if half of Joe’s back were gone. Parts of broken ribs were visible through the tangle of flesh and cloth.

Sanchez grabbed a handful of gauze compresses and shoved them into the hole in Joe’s back. The pain from it turned Joe’s stomach upside down and twisted the muscles working his lungs into knots. He’d have screamed from the torment as he passed out, but his lungs were paralyzed by the pain.

In a med-evac helicopter, some hours later, Joe floated briefly to consciousness for what was to be the last time in many days. He raised his head and through the door, past the dark silhouette of a door gunner who was not there, he saw the warm, golden-red sun through the haze on the horizon—just before it settled below the low, rolling hills on the western edge of Vietnam.

It was so beautiful.