

CHAPTER SIX

The choppers flew at a high altitude over the deep green jungle and hills. Occasionally, they passed over clearings on the peaks of hills - prior landing zones created by soldiers with C-4 explosives or possibly the result of dropped bombs and fired rockets from past encounters with the enemy.

It was ironic how beautiful everything appeared from this height; it seemed to be a tropical paradise - like photographs seen in a National Geographic magazine. There's a war going on here? How can that be? Unfortunately, for those aboard, it was the one and only time they would think of this place as paradise.

During this sightseeing excursion, each Cherry sat nervously on the chopper with his weapon held tightly in his hands. Eyes displayed fear, and they cast frenzied glances throughout the aircraft. Most chewed gum, moving their jaws rapidly in nervous anticipation of landing in the hostile bush for the first time. The speed of the choppers seemed slow from this height, but in reality, they were traveling over one-hundred knots per hour.

After twenty minutes in the air, a chimney of yellow smoke rose from the corner of a small clearing ahead. The door gunners, alerted to the impending landing, moved into action. They raised the machine guns toward the surrounding jungle and peered over the top for any signs of the enemy.

The chopper banked slightly and began to drop toward the smoke-filled clearing.

"Nice knowing you, Bill," John said, looking into Bill's sympathetic eyes.

"Likewise, buddy" Bill responded.

Two soldiers, stood sixty feet apart in the waist-deep elephant grass, holding their rifles high overhead - the pilots bore down on the men and landed just to their front. Once down, groups of soldiers dashed into the clearing and ran toward the choppers.

"Get the fuck off the bird and hurry into the tree line," one of them hollered over the noise to the helicopter full of Cherries. He pointed toward a large bamboo thicket on the edge of the clearing.

The Cherries pulled themselves across the floor and leapt from the chopper, running as fast as they could toward the protective cover of the jungle tree line. Once there, the eight soldiers bent over at the waist, gasped for air, and awaited instructions. The new arrivals, fascinated by

the group of soldiers in the clearing, watched intently as they unloaded the choppers. They pushed and threw everything out of the doors and onto growing piles on the ground, emptying the supplies in thirty seconds. The guide-on soldier, patiently waiting in front of each chopper, gave the pilot a thumbs-up sign when everyone was clear of the aircraft. Acknowledging, the pilots prepared for departure. The whining pitch of the turbines increased and the chopping sound made by the rotors intensified; on cue, the pilots jerked their birds back into the sky.

When they were gone, the unloading party picked up and began carrying boxes and sacks to different locations around the small clearing.

“Hey, guys follow me,” one of them said as he passed, carrying a case of C-Rations on each shoulder.

He led them through the brush to a spot where a group of ten men sat around, some conversing in a small circle.

“This is the Company Command Platoon (CP),” the stranger informed the Cherries. “Stay right here and somebody will help you in a minute.” He continued to move across the area to deliver the supplies he was carrying.

The captain was in a conference with his four lieutenants. They sat on the ground in a small circle, individual maps laid out in front of them. Two of the lieutenants were drawing symbols and sketching reference lines on their maps with grease pencils as the captain discussed his plan for the next three days - reviewing routes of travel, prospective ambush sites, and potential hot spots. The other soldiers outside of the circle, sat and lay casually on the ground in small groups. Their rucks and attached PRC-25 radios sat beside them; two of the radios had long, twenty-foot tall antennas attached. The radio operators continuously chatted on their handsets, coordinating with the firebase and Battalion HQ in Cu Chi.

When the staff meeting ended, the captain was the first to acknowledge the new group of Cherries.

“Gentlemen,” he said to his officers, “it appears our new replacements have arrived.”

The lieutenants turned and candidly glanced at the group. The captain, a short man appearing to be no older than the Cherries themselves, stepped out of the circle and moved toward them.

Waving to them with his shorter, modified M-16 rifle, he quipped, “Welcome to the war. I’m Captain Fowler.” He stopped, turning toward the four second lieutenants, who were rising

slowly from the ground, folding their maps. He motioned to the four officers and turned his head to address the Cherries.

“These men are the officers of Alpha Company,” he began, “Lieutenant Ramsey is from the First Platoon.” A tall, blond-haired man with wire-rimmed glasses acknowledged the group with a smile. “Lieutenant Monroe is from the Second.” A light skinned, black man with the right brim of his boony hat folded up Aussie-style raised his arm in greeting.

“What’s happening, blood?” one of the black Cherries asked, raising a clenched fist in the air.

“At ease, troop!” Lt. Monroe replied, his stare hard and glaring.

The captain, glancing between the two men, wondered how far this would go. Satisfied, he continued, “This is Lieutenant Carlisle from the Third.” He motioned to a slightly overweight and shortest of the four men, who smiled broadly.

“Most of you are assigned to my platoon,” he volunteered cheerfully.

Captain Fowler smiled in acknowledgement. “And finally, we have Lieutenant Quincy from the Fourth Platoon.” The partially bald man and oldest of the four, removed a corn cob pipe from his mouth and smiled, exposing a mouthful of crooked, yellow, nicotine-stained teeth.

“We work as a team in the bush,” the captain continued. “Every one of us wants to get out of this alive and return to our families in one piece. So listen to your squad leaders and follow their instructions.

“The company will be leaving in two hours. You men already know your platoon assignments, so join up with your respective officer and they will show you where the rest of your platoon is camped. So let’s get this resupply over with and get out of here.” Captain Fowler was all business and did not give any of them a chance to ask questions.

Seeing Lt. Ramsey gathering up his gear, John quickly left the group of Cherries and moved toward him.

“Excuse me, sir, my name is John Kowalski. It appears I’m the only one going to the First Platoon.”

The L-T picked up his rucksack with the left hand and swung it over his shoulder. He then offered John his right hand. “Glad to meet you, John,” he said, shaking the soldier’s hand warmly. “Did you join this man’s Army or were you drafted like many of us?”

“I was drafted, sir.”

“You can dispense with the formalities out here in the bush. There’s no need to call me “sir”; L-T will be fine.”

“Yes sir, I mean L-T,” John replied.

Lt. Ramsey chuckled.

“Come on and follow me. I’ll show you where our position is.”

John followed Lt. Ramsey as he led him around the outskirts of the clearing to the other side of the LZ. En route, they passed various groups of soldiers lying about in the underbrush. They were writing letters, eating, sleeping, playing cards, or packing their rucks with new supplies. A few of them looked up as the two passed, offering a nod of encouragement. Others made comments from the shadows.

“Welcome to Hell, Cherry.”

“Just look at this! Uncle Sam is robbing the cradle and sending them over right out of grade school.”

“Somebody throw this boy a towel, so he can wipe behind his ears.”

“Fuck him, he probably won’t last the night.”

There was laughter as the men congratulated each other for their ingenuity and quick wit.

“Don’t pay any attention to them,” the L-T offered, “it’s kind of an initiation, and we all go through it.”

The two-man parade continued.

When they reached their destination, only a handful of grunts were sitting in the shade around twice as many rucksacks.

“Just park it right here,” Lt. Ramsey instructed. “You’ll be in Sixpack’s Squad.”

“Where are they now, L-T?”

“They’re on Listening Post (LP) about two-hundred meters out, watching for Charlie in case he tries to surprise us during the resupply. I’ll introduce you to them when they get back in.” The L-T walked away.

John sat on the ground away from the others and waited, leaning against a thick trunk. He scanned the dense vegetation and thought about the woods on Belle Isle back home.

Belle Isle was a small island in the middle of the one-half-mile wide Detroit River, located between the shores of downtown Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, Canada. The island was notorious

for many reasons, and was used as a loading point for bootleggers, ferrying alcohol from Canada during Prohibition. One obtained access to the island by crossing over a quarter-mile long bridge from the east shore of Detroit, unless, of course, he had a boat - there were several marinas with docks in which to moor any size watercraft. In 1926, it was from this very same bridge that the famed magician, Harry Houdini, attempted a dangerous water-escape trick. It ultimately resulted in his death – he drowned in the murky waters below.

The residents of Detroit came to the island for relaxation and to escape the heat and stresses of big city living. During a summer weekend, the beaches, picnic areas, athletic fields, zoo, aquarium, and flower gardens overflowed.

As an alternative to visiting the crowded public areas, many people simply cruised the loop around the island, driving slowly to enjoy the cool island air. The panorama of freshly manicured lawns, ornamental flower beds lining the road, and lovers paddling canoes through the many internal canals was enough to tranquilize the senses.

It was common to see families either sitting on blankets at the shoreline or parked in cars on the side of the road. Everyone watched in awe as the large lake freighters and pleasure boats passed in both directions.

For families of modest means - such as John's – Belle Isle offered the closest thing to a vacation they'd experience, and for many, it was their only frame of reference for the great outdoors.

At night, however, the island took on an entirely different aura. The woods on the island were always dark and mysterious. Sometimes, while driving through the shadowy forest, deer and other forms of wild life suddenly made their presence known to the people venturing into their domain. Vines and bushes surrounded the tall trees, growing wild, reaching up from the ground to choke them. The brush was so thick it was near impossible to enter beyond twenty feet of the road. Insects thrived both in the island air and on the ground.

Sometimes at night, teenagers would dare each other to make their way through the woods on foot. Tales of murderers, thieves, bums, and the ghost of The Great Houdini lurking around in the eerie shadows, compelled the jittery youths to bolt through the dark abyss.

The foreign sounds of jungle wildlife interrupted John's reverie. The sight of a weasel-like monkey swinging through the branches above further catapulting the young soldier back to reality.

It was difficult to see the bright sun through the thick foliage; the jungle was filled with creeping shadows, making it appear late in the afternoon. John glanced at his watch and was stunned to find it was not yet noon.

The damp ground and musty smell made him feel uncomfortable. When he looked into the clearing of the LZ, the bright sunlight affected his eyes as it did when exiting a dark movie theater in the middle of the day.

The radio operator nearby could be heard calling out, "L-T, both LP squads are coming in."

"Thanks Bob. Notify the rest of the perimeter," the L-T ordered, "No reason at all for an accident."

As his eyes gradually adjusted to the change in light, John made out the forms of approaching men.

Even from a distance of fifty feet, he could make out the noticeable and jagged scar on Sgt. Holmes' face; it started just above his top lip - a thick black mustache concealed most of it - and then continued across the left side of his face, ending abruptly below the ear. John would find out later that it was the result of a car accident twelve years earlier, that claimed the life of his older brother. Holmes' shaggy and curly black hair appeared longer than most, a green bandanna tied securely around his head kept the hair out of his eyes. At six feet, six inches tall, he towered above the rest of the soldiers.

Larry carried an M-60 Machine Gun across his shoulder. An unbroken belt of ammunition wrapped around his body from his waist up to his chest. His build was similar to Sgt. Holmes, but stood almost a foot shorter. Somehow, he had managed to find a black beret, which covered the blond hair on his head. Larry wore a pair of oversized plastic-rimmed glasses, which, at first glance, appeared to be goggles. He was the first to spot John.

He pushed Sgt. Holmes to get his attention. "Hey, Sixpack, look, it's the Polack," he hollered out in surprise.

"I'll be damned!" Sgt. Holmes said, surprised to see John sitting there.

Both raced over to where John now stood, wrapping their sweaty arms around him.

"Polack, what a surprise," Larry exclaimed.

"Am I ever glad to see you guys!"

"So am I," Sgt. Holmes added, "it's always good to see a friendly face."

“What squad are you in?” Larry asked after releasing John from a bear hug.

“The L-T said I was going to Sixpack’s Squad. I’m waiting for him to show up.”

“Look no more,” Sgt. Holmes said, “you’re looking at him.”

“No shit?”

“No shit, Polack.”

“Why do they call you that?”

“I’ll tell you later when there’s more time.”

“Hey, Sixpack,” Larry interrupted, “we better get our supplies before they’re all gone.”

“You’re right. Polack, stay right here, we’ll be back in a short.” Grabbing their rucksacks, both headed over to the stash of First Platoon supplies. A red nylon bag with ‘U.S. MAIL’ stenciled in bright white letters lay off to the side. Larry dropped two letters into the bag and picked out a pair of washed fatigues from a pile of delivered clothes. Both he and Sixpack were in dire need of new fatigues, as theirs were torn and heavily soiled with sweat. While changing, John noted neither of them were wearing underwear or a belt.

“Junior wasn’t bullshitting me,” John said to nobody in particular.

After the change, they quickly picked out their supplies and began packing them into the deflated rucksacks. In ten minutes, both returned to the area with bulging rucksacks.

“Polack, come with me,” Larry said upon reaching John, pulling him up by the arm. “I’ll introduce you to the rest of the squad.”

They walked over to the only remaining people who were busy packing their own rucksacks.

“Hey, guys, we have a new member in the squad. I want you all to meet Polack. We go all the way back to Basic Training,” Larry informed them, placing his arm across John’s shoulders.

John smiled to each of them as Larry said their names and pointed them out. “This is Zeke, Wild Bill, Doc, Frenchie, Scout, and the Vietnamese is Nung.”

They all acknowledged John, either nodding or giving him a faint wave when Larry introduced him.

“I can see you’re all busy, so we’ll talk to you guys later.” Larry turned to leave with John in tow.

“Why is there a Vietnamese with the squad?” John asked.

“Nung is our Kit Carson scout. He used to be an enemy soldier, but changed sides after some renegade Communists killed his family. He once fought against us in this very same area,

so after retraining in Saigon, he is now our scout. Nung usually knows when something is not right. The other guys have said that his intuition had saved this platoon many times already; they have a lot of respect for him.”

“Can he really be trusted?” John asked.

“Hell yes, man, he’s like one of the family.”

After returning, they found Sixpack sitting on the ground, leaning against his rucksack and smoking a large cigar. Both sat down on the ground close to him.

“Hey Sergeant, how about telling me why they call you Sixpack now,” John asked.

“I guess now is as good of a time as any,” he replied after exhaling a puff of cigar smoke in John’s direction. “I brought a six-pack of beer to Nam with me from Oakland. It’s stored back in the rear with my belongings, and I plan to open the cans and suck them dry in a celebration during the flight home after my tour. The guys in Cu Chi were pretty amused by this and began calling me Sixpack, so the name stuck.”

“Did anybody else we know make it to the 25th with you?” Larry pushed his glasses up higher on the bridge of his nose.

“Only one I know for certain is Bill Sayers. He went to the Third Platoon.”

“No shit. Do you remember him, Sixpack?” Larry asked.

“Not really.”

“Bill Sayers is that red-headed hillbilly who looked like Howdy Doody. We met up with him in Oakland?”

“Oh yeah, I remember him now. Everything fascinated him.”

“That’s the guy!”

The three of them collected their gear and then joined up with the rest of their squad.

Before they had a chance to start any conversations, the L-T walked over. “I can see you found the right squad,” he said, looking directly at John. “The three of you act like old buddies. Do you know each other from back in the world?”

Sixpack responded, “Polack and Larry were both in my AIT Platoon back in Fort Polk.”

“Polack - is that his new nickname?” L-T Ramsey asked.

“No, he got it in Basic. We’ve been calling him that since,” Larry volunteered.

“That’s great – Polack it is! I do hate to break up this reunion,” he said, turning to address the squad as a whole. “The bird is on its way to pick up the mail and extra supplies. We will be

moving out as soon as it is airborne. Third Platoon will be on point, and we will follow with the Company CP. Get your people ready, Sixpack.” The L-T turned and walked back to join his RTO, Bob.

“Oh, just fucking great!” Zeke protested. “Those motherfuckers make one loud noise while they’re with us, I’ll shove those radios right up their asses.”

“What’s wrong with the CP?” Sixpack asked.

“Those guys don’t know what it’s like to be quiet. They’re forever yakking on their radios, cussing and complaining during the humps, breaking branches, and always slowing things down.”

“That’s not fair, Zeke,” Sixpack interrupted, “we need those guys and their radios in the bush.”

“I know we need the radios, but I just don’t care for the fuckers that carry them. They make me too nervous.”

“Relax, Zeke, let’s see how it plays out. Maybe there’s been a change since you moved with them last.”

“Okay, but if they . . .” Zeke stopped abruptly at the sound of a smoke grenade popping out on the LZ. The familiar whipping and chopping sound of an impending Huey helicopter echoed through the jungle, getting louder as it approached. It soon landed, picked up the unused supplies, and was airborne again within fifteen seconds.

After the sound of the chopper faded, the RTO called out, “Third Platoon is coming through, and we’re starting to move out.”

Within a minute, two soldiers approached and headed toward the hole in the jungle, where the two squads had come through earlier. The lead person (point man) held a machete in his right hand and carried his M-16 by the handle in his left. The person directly behind him carried a shotgun and followed the point man closely. There was a twenty-foot gap, and then a line of soldiers began to pass.

As they went by, those knowing each other exchanged words of encouragement.

Every one of them was bending forward at a thirty-degree angle, trying desperately to manage the heavy loads they carried. They would be lighter the next day, when some of the food and water were gone.

“Okay, saddle up! We’re moving out right behind these guys,” the L-T ordered.

As the First Platoon members struggled to stand and help one another to their feet, the last person in the passing column, Bill Sayers, approached. His eyes were wide and a smile lit his face when he saw John, Larry, and Sixpack standing together.

“Hey there!” He called, “can I get a transfer to your platoon?”

“Not right now, but hang in there, and I’ll see if I can pull some strings.”

“I’ll be counting on it, Sergeant Holmes.”

“It’s ‘Sixpack’ to my friends.”

Bill hesitated, “Okay, Sixpack.”

As he passed, members of the First Platoon fell in, joining the caravan. The heat was unbearable, feeling like an inferno. Shirts were already soaking wet from sweat and they had only been moving for ten minutes. John continuously wiped the sweat from his burning eyes with the sleeve of his shirt. Beads of sweat ran down his back, collecting in an uncomfortable puddle where the rucksack frame rested on the small of his back. He tried to relieve the itching sensation but could not do so without removing the rucksack.

Zeke’s helmet bobbed up and down in front of John as they inched along. He had only thirty days left before his yearlong tour ended. He had been with the same squad the entire eleven months, and at nineteen years old, was one of the “old timers” in the platoon. The L-T occasionally called on him for advice before sending out patrols, and considered him the platoon’s most valuable asset. In his time there, he had witnessed many situations requiring a cool head, and saw enough VC tactics to quickly recognize potential ambush sites. He was aggressive and did not cut any slack, which helped him get through it all without a scratch. John was to find out later that Zeke had already received the Bronze Star with a “V” device for Valor for saving two grunts who were hit during a firefight and later trapped by the enemy. He had crawled through the gunfire and pulled them both to safety.

John’s steel helmet began to give him a stiff neck and the straps of the rucksack made his shoulders numb. Although he had always been fairly athletic and played football in high school, nothing he had ever experienced physically in his past even came close to this bone-deep exhaustion.

‘I hope we’ll be stopping soon for a breather. I can’t go on any further,’ he uttered to himself.

He continued to follow Zeke absentmindedly for another thousand steps. His only concern at that point was in finding a way to manage the extreme weight on his back coupled with the

hellish temperature. Finally, word made its way back to the men to take a five-minute break. John let the weight of his ruck pull him to the ground. Once he slipped out of the ruck straps, the circulation returned to his numb shoulders, but the throbbing pain continued. He unhooked one of his quart canteens, drank three-quarters of the warm water, and then poured some of the contents over his head.

“Hey! Dumbass! Easy with the water,” Zeke scolded in a hushed voice. “It has to last you two more days. You keep drinking like that, and you’ll be out of water in an hour, get all cramped up, and fall flat on your ass.”

John was embarrassed, looking around; he noticed others taking very small sips of water; nobody pouring any over themselves.

“Sorry, Zeke,” John whispered back humbly. “Thanks for the advice.”

Two minutes passed and John looked to Zeke, whispering, “Why does everyone have green towels hanging from their necks? Isn’t it too hot for that?”

“The towel doesn’t make a difference in this heat, but it is a great help when humping. It serves as a cushion under your shoulder straps, and comes in handy for wiping sweat from your eyes instead of using your shirt sleeve.”

“Thanks, teach.”

“Don’t mention it.”

John quickly pulled his towel from his rucksack and draped it over his shoulders.

Up ahead, people began to move about and help each other to their feet. The caravan was on the move once again.

This time, the towel helped to make it a little easier on John. When the next break came, he was not hurting quite as bad.

In the two hours of humping, the company had only managed to travel one click (one thousand meters or one kilometer) through the nearly impenetrable jungle. The column stopped and bunched up when the point man came upon a large, unmarked trail. It measured ten feet across and showed signs of recent activity. The Third Platoon sent out small recon patrols to investigate in both directions, the rest of the company dropped in place for a break. After a twenty-minute delay, the column began moving once again.

When Sixpack’s Squad reached the trail, they crossed it one man at a time. As John moved across, he noticed a few members of the Third Platoon crouched fifty feet away on both sides of

the column. They were watching for the enemy and providing security while the company traversed the open ground.

After the last man in the company had crossed the trail, the column halted once again. This time, however, it was to set up a Night Defensive Position (NDP).

Before assigning individual positions, Sixpack spoke to the other three squad leaders, coordinating the night ambush. Each squad had to give up two men. The eight soldiers would ambush the trail from two different locations. Zeke and Frenchie from the First Squad quickly volunteered.

“I want to be as far away from this CP as possible. With only thirty days left in this country, I don’t want to get hit because of some noisy-assed radio operators,” Zeke declared.

“I don’t blame you!” Frenchie added.

As the L-T briefed the ambush teams, Sixpack assigned the remaining First Squad members to sleeping positions around their sector of the perimeter.

They shared a few machetes among themselves to dig out sleeping areas - hacking away at branches, roots, and stones until they were sure nothing protruded from the ground to poke at their sleeping bodies during the night.

When ponchos and liners were in place on the ground and gear was stored properly, only then could they prepare dinner. Everyone had his own recipe and special additives from home to make the C-Rations taste better. Heinz-57 sauce and Tabasco were two favorites; squad members shared them freely.

After dinner, Sixpack instructed his squad on the placement of claymore mines and trip flares. The guard position had to be set up in a central location to be accessible to every sleep position; a clear and unobstructed path was necessary so very little noise was made during the night when changing the guards.

It was evening and there was still a bit of light in the jungle when everyone finished their tasks to secure the NDP for the night. Each soldier took a few minutes to familiarize himself with the immediate surroundings. During the pitch black of night, when it was impossible to see, it was essential to know the routes of travel, as well as the sleeping position of your guard duty replacement.

Sixpack assigned each squad member an individual time for the night watch. John had the shift from five to six in the morning. Since it was the last watch, he also had the responsibility of

waking everyone in the morning. He was ecstatic, and felt lucky to be able to get a full night's sleep on his first night in the bush.

John squeezed out some "bug juice" into the palm of his hand, wiped the repellent across his exposed skin, and lay on his makeshift bed. He was completely spent from the long hump that day.

Sixpack walked up to him. "Hey, Polack, are you all squared away for the night?"

"As good as I'll ever be."

"Good. Later when you are on watch, the CP will call you on the radio for a situation report. Our call sign is Romeo-six. If everything is all right, you do not have to say anything, just push the call switch of the handset once – we call it keying the mike. Make sure the volume is set low on the radio and then hold the handset close during the watch. The radio is our lifeline, so if called or something unexpected happens; it has to be available quickly without any stumbling around in the dark to look for it. If you get nervous, wake me, I can keep you company. I know the first night in the bush is a bitch, and I can sympathize with you."

"Romeo-six, keying the mike, keep the volume of the radio turned down, check, I think I have it," John recited.

"Hang in there," Sixpack replied, then turned to leave.

"Sixpack!" John whispered. "How about answering a question before you leave?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"The night before last, when I was on guard duty at Firebase Kien, we saw a Cobra working out. Junior, the guy with me, said that Charlie Company saw something and had requested the artillery and gunships. Did they find anything?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't sound too good. The L-T told us earlier that it was more than they had bargained for."

"What do you mean by that?"

"They sent out two squads on this routine patrol to check the area this morning and found six VC bodies. They began to celebrate and got careless, making too much noise on the return to their NDP. The VC heard them and immediately laid an ambush. When sprung, half of the men in the patrol went down. The rest took off, shooting wildly toward their ambushers to break contact. The intensity of the ambush made them believe they were greatly outnumbered. In their

haste to escape, they left the dead and wounded behind. When they returned within an hour in full force, all the bodies were gone.”

“What will happen now?”

“They asked for Alpha Company’s help. We’ll link up with Charlie Company tomorrow and make a sweep of the area to see what we can find.”

“You think we’ll find the missing bodies?”

“I don’t know. We may run into the VC first. So we should prepare for the worst and be ready for anything.”

John took a few deep breaths. “I sure hope there aren’t going to be any VC around.”

“I’m not too fond of a firefight either, but don’t lose any sleep worrying about it - that will just make you crazy.” Sixpack advised and then started to walk away. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

John lay back down and tried to make himself as comfortable as possible. The exotic sounds of jungle wildlife were especially loud tonight. In the twilight, he tried to spot stars in the sky through the thick overhead growth. He knew it wasn’t possible to see the sun through the dense trees in the daytime, but just maybe it was different at night.

His astronomy search ended abruptly when he spotted something he hadn’t noticed earlier. Just several feet above his head were two huge spiders, both as big as pancakes, and sitting in the exact center of their circular webs. A chill ran down his spine and goose bumps broke out on his arms. He was scared to death of spiders, and it was too late to move to a new area. Furthermore, by no means was he going to knock them from their webs to crawl around on the ground with him.

Now, finding himself in an uncomfortable position, there was no alternative but to keep an eye on them. He stared at them for ten minutes, just to make sure they did not move around. As he did this, he noticed swarms of flying insects above the webs. The larger dragonflies and horseflies dominated the airspace as they darted through swarms of buzzing mosquitoes. He hoped that a few of them would get caught in the webs so the spiders would be occupied for the rest of the night and wouldn’t drop in on him while he slept.

John covered up with the poncho liner and tucked it in over his head. It was enough to keep out the swarms of flying insects, but the buzzing around his ears was unbearable.

“Hey, Polack, get up, it’s your watch,” someone whispered in his ear.

He sat upright and tried focusing his eyes in the now pitch-black darkness. It was no use, and he wondered if it was possible to have gone blind while asleep.

“Who’s that?” John whispered.

“It’s Scout,” the same voice replied. “Take hold of my arm, and I’ll guide you to the watch area.”

He picked up his rifle and ammo then snatched a handful of Scout’s shirt, following him like a blind man. In spite of his best efforts earlier to memorize landmarks, John was very unaware of his location, which caused a feeling of total helplessness.

“Are you going to be alright, Polack?” Scout asked, sensing something was wrong.

“Scout, I think I’m blind. I can’t see shit,” John whispered.

“Give it a couple of minutes. Just sit down and I’ll stick around until your night vision comes to you.”

John sat quietly with Scout. After a few minutes, he could finally make out the shadows of a few bushes and trees to his front. When John turned to face him, he could see the sharply defined profile of the Cherokee soldier nicknamed ‘Scout’ sitting next to him in the darkness.

“Okay, thanks, I can see you, so I’ll be fine now.”

“I’m glad. It is always a bitch when you first wake up in the bush. It happens to everyone. Oh well, at least I still have forty-five minutes to get some sleep. Here’s the radio handset,” he said, holding it out and tapping him on the shoulder. “I’ll see you later.”

He vanished into the darkness, leaving John alone at watch.

John sat perfectly still, straining to see. He held the handset to one ear and tried to listen in on the eerie jungle sounds with the other.

“Thank God it’ll be light in half an hour,” he said to himself.

Just then, he heard a rush of static in the radio receiver and a voice whispering, “Romeo-six, this is Alpha-one, sit-rep, over.”

John squeezed the handset once, as Sgt. Holmes had instructed him earlier, which caused the noisy static to cease for an instant and then return after releasing the button.

“Sierra-six, this is Alpha-one, sit-rep, over,” the voice through the handset continued. A break in the static was their response. That continued for the next couple of minutes until all the elements of the company had responded - including the ambush teams.

The jungle began to lighten up a little at a time toward the end of John's shift. He watched as a fog began materializing. The moist dew appeared to move as it saturated everything within four feet of the ground. When he felt his poncho liner and fatigues, he found they were already wet.

At six o'clock, he took his rifle and walked over to where Sixpack was sleeping. After John gave him a couple of shakes, he opened his eyes.

"Morning, Sarge," John said cheerfully. It's time to get up."

Sixpack jumped to his feet and began to stretch.

"Thanks, Polack," he said. "Start waking everyone else in the squad and tell them to hurry and eat breakfast. We have to be ready to leave on a patrol at seven."

"OK, will do." John left to wake the other five men, making sure he passed on the information as Sixpack had instructed. As he was doing this, the two ambush teams had arrived at the NDP, and individual members were moving through and returning to their designated squad locations. Sixpack caught both Zeke and Frenchie when they arrived and personally informed them of the upcoming patrol.

When John returned to his sleep area to pack up his gear, he looked up and found the two spiders still centered in the webs. Had they not been there, he would have scoured the ground looking for them before sitting down.

He pulled out a heat tab and began to heat some water for cocoa. It was ironic for a person in this country to be so very hot during the day, yet so cold at the night.

John added a packet of cocoa powder to his canteen cup of boiling water, stirring the contents with a plastic spoon. Before taking a drink, he raised the cup as in a toast, and said, 'I made it through my first day in the bush, only 335 more days to go.'

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