

IT'S A BEAR!

By Doug PARKINSON

It was our first mission together in October of 1967. We had trained together in An Khe and attended Recondo School together. Our team leader was Bob CARR, who had a previous tour with the 25th Division; the ATL was Don GLOVER a transfer from another line unit from the Cav. Steve "Swamp" FOX and myself were definitely 'Cherries'. Our other member, Ray PATTERSON was from a previous training cycle but had not been on any patrols yet. The Montagnard scout Shren, collectively possessed more combat time than all of us.

Other than being inserted out of our intended AO (which led to difficulties when calling in artillery and gunships later in the mission) the beginning of the mission went rather smoothly. Well, accept for the fact that the base for the long antenna had not been included with the commo kit and as the RTO I had neglected to confirm its absence. Amazing how small you feel when five pairs of eyeballs are trained on you in disbelief when you've nearly rendered inoperable a critical piece of equipment to a patrols success

Our first setup for the evening was on a small ridge in small canopy vegetation with not much undergrowth. The claymores were set out with the wire zig-zagged and somewhat taut. We finished our LRRP ration meals and discarded the empty containers at the edge of the perimeter and settled in after radio check.

The radio checks went on through the night without incident. Upon being wakened by PATTERSON to my right to perform my one hour watch, Ray informed me that he'd heard a noise out beyond the perimeter. During later patrols, his ability to hear noises that the rest of the team could not detect were confirmed when he heard a circling tiger long before the tiger soundlessly revealed its presence.

My one hour watch passed without event, but near the end some faint sounds could be detected coming up the hill directly below my position. I awakened the TL, Bob Carr, to my left for his watch. I passed on the same observation that Ray had to me about the unidentified noises. The TL acknowledged and continued the watch. Since the noises had occurred at the end of my watch, I decided to stay awake and peer in the darkness directly in front of my position. There was some ambient light filtering down through the low canopy allowing a faint contrast to the dark under story.

Slight noise continued below my position, but were unheard by the TL on watch. Focusing on the small patches of light under the canopy I became aware of some lighter patches that would silently turn dark. The faint noises became more audible and frequent, but only to me and not the TL. Then a dark form began to take shape through the darkened tunnel of vegetation below my position. The solid dark form was low the ground as in a squat stance and slowly swaying side to side taking one careful step at a time and proceeding up the hill in a careful swaying motion.

At this time I recalled one of the war stories we 'cherries' eagerly listened to gain some sort of instant wisdom to guide us in this unaccustomed activity we were engaged in. The teller had recounted how an approaching VC/NVA had been in low crouch, advancing slowly in a swaying motion with the careful placement of each foot.

The approaching form met all the previous visions of a carefully approaching enemy. Mesmerized by the image, and yet, not deciding whether to engage with my M-16, give away position or wait. But still the dark low form of a crouching enemy was closing the distance. Still the TL did not detect the quiet slowing approaching form that was only visible through the tunnel of vegetation below my position. Not really knowing what to do and frantic with indecision I leaned over to the TL and whispered about the approaching enemy. This was the first he knew of the approaching enemy. His reply was how far away was the threat? I whispered I'd check. Sliding back to my position I stared back down into the tunnel the form had been approaching. There was no tunnel to peer down. Just complete blackness. Attempting to get a better view I lowered my head to the ground to peer up at the sky and look for some contrast. About 6' in front of me there sky lighted was a roundish form with two smaller round forms set on top. It resembled a bears head with a pair of rounded ears. It's a bear! Simultaneous to the thought a slight low guttural rumbling began to resonate from a chest and progressed into a piercing and frightened roar.

I do not recall my immediate response. However, Ray Patterson, lying to my left and covered with a poncho was levitating vertically from his position on the ground. From under the poncho legs and arms were vainly and frantically searching for purchase on something. The entire team assembled weapons to the fore were oriented in the direction the bear had first announced its presence. Nervous whispering about what was out there, but no response from out there. While we were all oriented in the direction of the first roar, a second piercing roar originated from about 10' behind us. Why nobody accidentally discharged a weapon, in our keystone kops attempt of six people to suddenly reverse ourselves to meet this new threat from behind, was testimony to our training or a simple form of divine assistance to beginners.

The bear perhaps sensing overwhelming odds, abandoned the frontal and rear piercing roar approach and would silently change positions and emit a low guttural rumble out of the darkness from about 10 to 15 feet away. The tension was too much for Ray, a short burst from his M-16 suddenly silenced the bear. That is until the bear silently changed position and issued a shorter growl from further away. The growls continued for about an hour from different locations, with decreased volume and progressively further away until nothing else was heard.

Bob Carr checked in with our nearest friendly force, a line company with the call sign "Black Bear".

Authors note: "Cherry RTO" Parkinson's ability to identify bears was acquired while working for Alaska Department of Fish and Game for two seasons (65-66) where he developed this ability from some uncomfortably close and personal relationships (phobia) with much larger cousins of the Southeast Asia, Asian Sun bear, the likely culprit of the story.
Other witness' stories vary slightly from this truthful version.