

Point

28 September 1969

It was probably half an hour before the sun would begin to illuminate the eastern horizon and there was a quiet bustle of activity on the hilltop where the 1st Platoon, Delta Company, 4th of the 21st Infantry had established their laager the previous evening. No night patrols or listening posts were sent out during the night and the plan was to move out in about 10 minutes.

I had borrowed a flashlight and was just finishing the letter to Dad that I had begun during my guard duty.

27 Sept 1969

Dear Dad,

Received your letter dated the 19th and appreciate your concern about me walking point but when I missed out on the radio (RTO) job, I jumped at the chance to join the 1st squad as A team leader. They need me in 1st squad and a friend of mine is the squad leader. I can read a map better than anyone else in the platoon, so when we go on patrol and I walk point, I'm in charge. As A team leader, it's my call who walks point and why should I ask someone to do a job that I do the best? I also get recognition from the officers because when we go out into the field, on a large company operation, 1st Platoon, 1st Squad always has point. I'm hoping that I'll make Specialist 4th Class (SP/4) by this time next month.

My platoon is currently on stand by status because today the 3rd platoon came under heavy fire but so far they haven't taken any casualties. E Company, our recon company, was hit Thursday and Friday and lost 12 men which may effect what my platoon does for the next week or so. My old platoon leader, Slick, is now Delta Company Commanding Officer.

During stand down, someone stole my pants which contained my wallet and the calendar you sent. I recovered my wallet, but it was soaked. Could you please send me another calendar because it drives me crazy not knowing what day of the week it is? So far your packages have been great and I'll send some pictures home soon.

Also, you will notice the checks that I am including with this letter. Poker winnings! I've been playing a little poker with the guys in the platoon, when things are quiet and they keep donating to my college fund.

Love,

Ralph

P.S. 302 days left

I stuffed the letter and 3 checks into the envelope and worked up some spit to seal it, placing the sealed letter in my ammo can, which contained anything that I wanted to keep dry. It would be a day or 2 before I could get the letter out on a resupply chopper, so I stored it with my deck of cards, my pen and writing paper, my C-Ration hot cocoa and crackers, Dad's pre-sweetened Kool Aid, my tooth brush,

soap, heat tabs, matches, a Zippo lighter (which had an engraved peace sign on one side and on the other side a Combat Infantry Badge – a musket, on a light blue background surrounded by a wreath of laurel), a dry pair of socks, a transistor radio, a camera, and a well worn Playboy magazine.

Pulling a full canteen of water off of my ruck sack, I carefully began to pour a pack of pre-sweetened cherry Kool Aid into the tepid water. By now I had adjusted to doing many things in the dark, using my sense of touch to align the opening of the canteen with the Kool Aid package and feeling the sugary mixture run between my fingers as I cupped them around the mouth of the canteen. I screwed the black plastic top onto the canteen and shook it for a few seconds before I shoved it back into the canteen holder.

I closed and sealed the ammo can as Gerber, my squad leader, came over and squatted down next to me.

"We'll be moving out in a few minutes. I want you to walk point this morning. Are you ready?"

As I secured my ammo can to my rucksack, I nodded to him and returned the flashlight to Gerber.

He had a map and spread it on the ground in front of me. He pointed the red beam of the flashlight on the map and used his finger to point at our current location. The hill top where we had laagered for the night was 5 kilometers east of the South China Sea and in the rugged, dry hills that created the southern border of the Rice Bowl, the focus of the 4th of the 21st.

He traced a line from our current position to a village on the coastal plain. "We are supposed to rendezvous with a company of Regional Forces at lunch time to run a coordinated operation along the coast this afternoon. Do you see any problems?"

Regional Forces were the local militia, the Vietnamese equivalent of the National Guard, and many of our operations were coordinated with them. They were poorly trained and disciplined. Most of them were too young to carry a weapon and we called them "cowboys", which was not intended to be a compliment.

The distance and terrain didn't look like a problem and we had been patrolling these hills for the last 2 weeks, which gave me a sense of confidence. "Shouldn't be a problem. I want Tom walking second. Tom and I work well together and he knows how to stay quiet."

"That's what I thought." Gerber whispered as he folded the map and slipped away, making sure that the rest of the men in his squad knew their assignments.

The men of the 1st platoon quietly finished their individual preparations for the day's operation, checking weapons, ammo and their backpacks before moving out toward their rendezvous.

I stood up, shaking out my green headband and then folding it neatly before I wrapped it around my forehead and reaching around behind my head, I tied it in a knot. I stretched, trying to limber up, unsuccessfully.

Taking a bandolier of M-16 ammunition, I put it over my head, hanging it on the right side of my chest and then tossed the 2nd bandolier over my head so the 2 bandoliers criss crossed my chest. Each bandolier contained four clips and each clip containing 18 rounds of ammunition for my M-16. I carried 6 additional bandoliers of M-16 ammunition inside my ruck sack. As point man, I wasn't expected to carry any M-60 ammunition, like the other riflemen in the platoon.

Leaning my M-16 against a convenient rock, I put my green sweat towel over the barrel and leaning down, I grabbed the loaded rucksack by the right strap and jerked it up as I lowered my shoulder and caught the weight of the over stuffed pack. I quickly shifted my body and grabbed hold of the other arm strap with my left hand behind my back and swung the weight of the rucksack on to my lower back. After a few seconds of adjustment, I was ready to go.

Leaning over, I grabbed the towel and wrapped it around the back of my neck. I used the towel to keep the sweat, which soaked through everything within minutes, out of my eyes during patrol.

As I reached for my M-16, Tom walked up and whispered, "Are you ready?"

I just nodded, appreciating that I didn't have to wait. I made my usual comment to Tom, "Cover my ass" and moved out toward the east, where the horizon was just brightening in anticipation of the day's blazing sun.

I preferred to walk point and the rest of the men in the platoon appreciated my willingness to take on a job that no one else wanted. I grew up in the country and was in the woods hunting at a young age and those experiences transferred well into my job as a combat infantryman.

The sun was inching over the horizon and I was heading east, so I tried to mark a trail that avoided moving directly into the blinding morning sun. I walked slowly, being acutely aware of any noise as I broke through a line of sparse vegetation. The air was still which I appreciated because too many of the men behind me had splashed on bug juice in an attempt to keep away the ever present flies and mosquitos, but when there was a breeze that odor could be detected down wind, giving away our position. My nose was alert for the pungent smell of the local hand rolled cigarettes, the tell tale fragrance that warned me of the presence of a gook, and in this area there were no friendlies.

The squad leaders were very effective behind me, making sure that the rest of the platoon moved along quietly through the rough terrain

As I walked, I shifted the weight of the rucksack on my back without even thinking about it, just like rolling over in my sleep. The sweat had already soaked through my green t-shirt and bandana which was wrapped around my head to keep the sweat out of my eyes. The green towel, at the base of my neck, was beginning to get heavy with moisture and I decided to swap it out on our next break.

One foot in front of another – over and over – thousands of times a day. Exhaustion and the constant rhythm of each footstep made day dreaming easy, but this job didn't allow any break in attention and I had to constantly focus on what was going on in front and around me.

I avoided trails which could contain the deadly booby traps we all feared. My focus was on the terrain out in front of me – light under brush and small trees scattered on low hills that stretched east toward the South China Sea, just a few miles away.

The underbrush began to thin out and ended with a line of eucalyptus trees bordering a small glade. The glade was covered with twelve inch high brown grass and floating above the grass was a thin layer of morning mist which gave the clearing in front of me a surrealistic appearance.

As I stepped into the clearing, I saw movement to my left and immediately dropped to one knee. The man behind me did the same and I knew that behind him the string of more than two dozen infantrymen all dropped, alert to possible danger ahead.

Staring at the brush that had attracted my attention, I studied the area as my M-16 followed my eyes, searching for danger. Scanning the brush line with my finger caressing my trigger, I was ready to unleash a quick spray of .223 caliber steel jacketed destruction across the clearing. As point man, my weapon was never on safety, and behind me I could hear the quiet metallic clicks as everyone, down the line of men, prepared their weapons for action in response to my movements.

There was the movement again, a bush swaying slightly and after a few nervous seconds, I realized that it was an animal that had stopped me in my tracks. Relaxing, I watched a small brown furry head stick out of the bushes and within a few seconds a mongoose, with beautiful brown fur and large alert eyes, stepped into the clearing and intently scanned for danger. Her ears rotated like radar disks, seeking out the slightest sound as I remained motionless about fifty feet away. Her tail seemed to have a life of its own, twitching anxiously as it stuck up from her smooth, sleek body.

She turned, glancing back into the underbrush before she began to walk slowly across the glade. Behind her, emerged five perfect little innocent versions of the mother mongoose. They followed her into the clearing with perfect spacing, triggering a silent chuckle as the parade marched along. Mom's tail cut though the layer of mist, extending above it like a periscope cutting through a soft white sea of mist. Her little ones followed obediently behind, with tails that could not quite reach the mist above.

As the ceremony continued across the clearing, I noticed that the mist left tiny droplets of moisture on their tails, which caught the early morning sunlight as they exited the southern side of the glade. I followed the family's departure until the tails disappeared into the background.

I let out a sigh and spent a moment enjoying my unsuspected reward for walking point that morning and felt human for a few seconds. But it was back to work and as I stood up, I grunted, readjusting my ruck sack, and motioned to the men behind me that everything was OK and we continued to move forward in deadly silence.