

BLUE

On the first night with alpha troop I was taken around the troop area and introduced to everyone in the troop. I met Captain King the guns platoon leader. He seemed happy to see me as he mentioned he was short of cobra pilots. I met the scout platoon leader and the slick platoon leader but I can't remember their names. I met many of the pilots in the troop and they seemed less than friendly. In fact some were very rude. They seemed delighted to point out the fact that I was just a new guy, an FNG or NFG. You can imagine what the "F" stood for. I was definately a fucking new guy and I tried my best to make a good impression. I didn't let anyone know that the hazing bothered me. I just took it and laughed it off like a good newbie. Finally I was introduced to Blue.

Blue was the infantry or grunt platoon leader. He was sitting alone at the officers' club bar leaning on his elbows over a can of beer. His jungle fatigues were faded. He had an army issue ball cap on, the kind that the bill was always crooked. He turned to shake my hand. He didn't say anything. He just nodded. He was a very young man but he didn't have the face of a young man. His eyes were dark brown, widely spaced and very intense. There was no expression on his face that I could understand. I certainly couldn't tell what he was thinking. He didn't look at me like I was an FNG. It was like he was looking at a dead man or, perhaps, another dangerous cobra pilot that might accidentally kill some of his men. Blue returned to his beer and his solitude. It was time for me to have a few drinks and reflect on my situation. I wanted to go home. I already hated that place.

As time passed I learned that everyone in the troop loved and respected Blue. When Blue walked by, entered the mess hall, or entered the officers' club, everyone including the troop commander would stop what they were doing and greet him. He would only nod. Very seldom did I hear him say anything. He kept mostly to himself or with his men. He had thirty-five men under his command and cared deeply for their safty. When the grunt platoon suffered casualties Blue would take it very hard. You could see it in his face. He had an awesome responsibility. Several times I noticed Blue writing to the families of his men that were killed or wounded in action. What a tough thing to have to do.

During a mission when we "inserted" the grunt platoon to check out a bunker complex or some other enemy activity, Blue would take over the mission. He would direct his people on the ground and advise the command and control helicopter or cobra lead on the FM radio. That's when Blue did all his talking, on the Fox-Mike radio. He ran a professional operation. He would direct rocket and minigun fire from the cobras and artillery fire as needed. He would turn in spotting reports of any enemy

activity to the cobra lead and the information was passed on to our liaison officer. Our liaison officer was located at the headquarters of the unit we were supporting, usually the Fourth Division at Camp Enari.

Blue was in his element, on the ground commanding his troops. He was very efficient. He and his men could find the bad guys. On one occasion he found a cache of SKS Chinese rifles; on another an underground hospital; on another an NVA, North Vietnamese Army, pay officer with bags full of dink money. Blue led his men in many fire fights, but he was very careful not to over extend his platoon and receive unnecessary casualties. He seemed to always know when to break contact or call in a reaction force that was usually on stand by in case we ran into a large enemy force. Of course Blue always had cobras, LOHs (armed light observation helicopters), and the slicks overhead in case he needed a little help. We could "extract" Blue and his men in a matter of minutes if they ran into trouble. In an army term Blue was simply OUTSTANDING! The best grunt I ever saw.

Blue wasn't his real name. It was his call sign. In fact "Blue" was used by the slick platoon as well as the grunt platoon. Each slick pilot would use Blue followed by a number thirty to thirty-nine. An example would be "Blue-three-two this is Blue-three-six on Uniform (UHF radio), over." The scout platoon call sign was Red followed by numbers in the teens. The cobra or guns platoon was White followed by numbers in the twenties. Blue's actual call sign was Blue-six. The number six indicating commander as in this case platoon leader. All the pilots talked to Blue-six so much on the radio that we simply called him Blue all the time. It became his nickname. Later we changed our call sign scheme around the chess board. Knight was for cobra pilots; Rook for slick pilots; Bishop for LOH pilots. The grunts were the pawns but they certainly were not expendable. However, Blue was still Blue.

When Blue's year was up he extended for six months in Vietnam. The Army had a special program for this type of extension but I can't remember what it was called. If you extended for six months you got a thirty day leave and after the six months you could be discharged from the Army. It was actually an early discharge and it was attractive to some. When Blue returned from his leave he took over the grunt platoon again. It was good to have him back.

One day I was flying lead cobra and running the mission in an area north-west of An Khe. Two LOHs or scouts were hovering over the tree tops looking for bad guys. Two cobras circled overhead to provide cover for the LOHs. We were on station for over an hour and hadn't found anything. Our liaison officer called me on the FM radio and advised that a LRRP (long range reconnaissance patrol), usually just one man, had made contact with a small enemy element. I was given location, call sign, and

FM radio frequency. I advised the LOHs and we went to look for the LRRP. I made radio contact with the LRRP and in a whisper he advised me of his situation. I sent the LOHs down to find the LRRP's exact position and to locate the enemy. It wasn't long before I noticed puffs of smoke coming out of the jungle. I asked the LRRP about it and he said he had called for artillery earlier. The puffs were marking rounds of artillery and I advised the LRRP that we were moving off to a safer distance until he could shut off the artillery. I advised our liaison officer of same. We circled near by out of the way waiting to go back in to assist the LRRP. I received a call on the VHF radio that our replacement team was on their way to relieve us. I briefed the cobra lead on the situation and returned to An Khe for fuel.

We refueled, ate C rations, relaxed, checked the aircraft and just killed time. We had to be back on station within two hours. A few miles short of the LRRP's location I called the lead cobra on station for the situation briefing. What came back over my radio head set was and still is a source of nightmares. In a calm voice that belied his tension and grief, cobra lead let me have it.

The LRRP had been hit and was in trouble. Our cobras and LOHs provided support with rocket and mini-gun fire but the bad guys were still there. Our command and control slick had arrived on station with our troop commander, Major Maxson, and Blue. It was so desperate for the LRRP that Major Maxson landed his slick in a small clearing near by. He and Blue got out and proceeded toward the LRRP's position on foot. Blue was hit and down. Major Maxson had part of his ear shot off and was getting treatment. The LRRP and Blue were still on the ground. Their condition unknown. No communication. The grunt platoon was being inserted. As cobra lead left station he told me I had to get Blue out of there. I told him I would do my best.

We covered the slicks as the rest of the grunts were inserted. It was quiet on the ground as the grunts carefully moved toward Blue and the LRRP. Finally the grunts made contact with the bad guys and the fire fight was on. The grunt platoon sergeant advised me on the FM radio of the enemy's position and directed our rocket and mini-gun fire. He had no word of Blue or the LRRP. Major Maxson returned on station in the command and control slick and took over command of the operation. He seemed to be OK. After nearly two hours of fighting I received the radio call on VHF that our replacement team was on the way. The cobra lead immediately asked about Blue. I gave him the briefing. My team returned to An Khe for fuel and ammo.

Two hours past and we were on our way back. Again I called cobra lead for my breifing. As soon as I made radio contact I asked about Blue. Here it was again, coming out of my radio head set, something I didn't want to hear. This time cobra lead wasn't quite so calm. His voice connoted a trace of outrage

and grief. Blue had been shot in the chest and he bled to death before the grunts got to him. The LRRP was dead too. They were stripped of valuables and weapons. The grunt platoon had been extracted and was heading back to An Khe with the bodies. I dodgered the briefing and took over the mission.

There were several enemy killed but I'm sure some got away. We spent the rest of the day looking for them but we didn't find a trace.

Blue was dead and everyone in the troop was sick about it. I was very upset but I carried on as if nothing had happened. That's the way I dealt with things like this. I couldn't let it get to me. But I couldn't get it out of my mind. I have never been able to get it out of my mind. I have thought about this event many times since the day it happened.

There were some mistakes made but it was no one's fault. It was simply the way things happened. It was the nature of combat. You couldn't control every aspect of a series of spontaneous events. Immediate decisions had to be made as the situation developed. However, with the aid of hind sight there were two big mistakes that stand out.

When we initially made contact with the LRRP we gave up his position to the enemy with the LOHs hovering over him for a visual contact. We had to know exactly where he was so, in case of a fire fight, we wouldn't hit him. As we looked for the enemy we had to clear the area because of artillery spotting rounds. By the time the artillery was shut off and the other team of cobras and LOHs moved back in, the enemy had found and wounded the LRRP. This series of events was the first mistake.

The second mistake was the fact that Major Maxson tried to save the LRRP with just himself and Blue. Major Maxson should have taken the time and inserted the grunt platoon. It was already too late for the LRRP when his position was compromised with no one to cover him. The enemy used the LRRP as bait in a trap. It was a common trick and Major Maxson should have known better. Blue was always careful with this type of situation and would not have jeopardized the safety of his men with gung-ho heroics. Yet Blue followed Major Maxson, knowing that it was a bad move, to his death.

Another sad thing. I can't remember Blue's name! Often, Blue is on my mind yet I can't remember his name. I know it is on that black wall in Washington along with the other betrayed. But that's little comfort. Someday I'd like to look for Blue on that black wall. Perhaps, I will remember when I see it.