

ELEPHANT COMBAT ENCOUNTER

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tel: [REDACTED]

Gary Wallen served in Company M with Stan Beesley before Vietnamization got them both reassigned. Stan went to Company H, Rangers, 1st Cavalry Division and Gary was reassigned to 25th Infantry Division in a regular infantry unit to finish the last couple of months of his tour.

On reflection, any soldier or infantryman would surely tell you without hesitation that the enemy he faced and feared and fought was of the two-legged species, *Homo sapiens*, like himself. But on an early February day in 1970 in the remote Asian jungles of Vietnam, this soldier discovered there can be an exception to even that staid generality regarding "who is the enemy"? On that particular day, the enemy who commanded a small patch of disputed jungle real estate stalked his territory on four legs.

As was the case during those times of conflict, when fresh meat in the persona of a new arrival to a squad of combat infantrymen made his appearance on the scene, that new arrival could pretty much count on immediately inheriting one of the least desirable of all the duties for which he was trained. Such were the circumstances that befell this rifleman on assignment to Company M, Ranger, 75th Infantry, 199th Light Infantry Brigade in the area designated as War Zone D, III Corps, Vietnam.

You may have guessed my fate. The least desirable position where most any of us wanted to be during a jungle patrol was first man in line, i.e., point man. So, on that fine morning our insertion helicopter gunship dropped off our 6-man team of LRRP's (long range recon patrol) onto the edge of a small jungle clearing.

The moments of the helicopter troop discharge were always intense due to the uncertainty of whether or not there would be a concealed enemy welcoming party lurking inside the jungle fringe. With rifle safety's off and weapons set on full-automatic fire, we raced into the unknown seeking cover in the tree line. I was at point position.

Having already spent a couple of months in-country with a regular infantry line company by that time, I was not new to the deadly activities of combat in its many permutations. On reaching the wood line my hackles immediately went up and all senses were registering a cacophonous internal alarm. The jungle foliage had been heavily disturbed; and very recently so! A few more cautious meters were advanced with the feelings of impending doom descending on all of us in the squad. Were we already targets in the enemy kill zone?

Then ... movement! I dropped to the jungle floor. The soldier immediately behind me (his name was McCluskey) was in a completely exposed position as was I. We had neither cover nor concealment between our prone positions and the activity just spotted. The remaining four of our squad mates had that extra split-second to find and take cover when they saw us drop down.

In those next tiny increments of time, what was not computing was the fact we had not yet been fired upon! Likewise, and almost as confusing, was that neither I nor McCluskey had opened up with our own weapons directing automatic fire toward the movement we had spotted. Why not? Something wasn't right. Then, another flash of movement. McCluskey breathed out the words, "It's a water buffalo".

Immediately following, a giant head slowly appeared as branches parted. Unbelievably, the giant head had a tusk! It was, in fact, an enormous bull elephant. We didn't move for a few more seconds as we digested this new revelation. So far so good, I thought. We had not been mowed down by enemy ambush machine gun fire. That indicated things couldn't be all bad, could they?

But, back to the situation at hand. McCluskey and I both realized in about the same instant that we needed cover from this beast that was maybe 15 meters away from us. We raised up off our bellies with the intent to move back. Our minimal

movements, however, drew the strongest of objections from the big bull elephant. He stopped his foraging, and with extreme malice of forethought that was communicated perfectly to us, took 3 or 4 menacing steps in our direction. Homicidal intent was clear. Needless to say, McCluskey and I resumed our vulnerable positions.

Now the fun started from the peanut gallery of the four squad-mates safely to our rear who were protected with solid cover. As a LRRP team, we were armed to the hilt. But, we all instinctively knew we probably did not stand a chance to shoot and drop the elephant in time to save our own necks. He was way too close. The small .223 caliber round of an M16 rifle, even though it had a massive powder charge behind it for high velocity, we reckoned would not stop the elephant in time. One of our less-than-helpful squad mates suggested, "Frag him". We knew hitting him with a grenade would really adjust the elephant's attitude in all the wrong ways. So, that was not an option, either.

Devoid of other more palatable options, McCluskey and I made the decision neither of us liked one bit. On the count of 1-2-3, come hell or high water, we'd make our simultaneous break for cover with me going left and McCluskey going right. That was a soldier's way of drawing straws. The elephant could only go after one of us; short straw loses. Guess who momentarily would be shown to have drawn the short straw?

So, we didn't waste seconds pondering our decision. It was time for the count, after which I would head left in order to get behind a large termite mound. It stood about 5 feet high, and was maybe ten feet away. On the count of "three" we each raised up and continued in motion with our break-away attempts. Our pachyderm friend, in that simultaneous heartbeat of time, took his cue as if from one of those "Tarzan of the Apes" Johnny Weismuller movies we all had watched a hundred times when we were kids. He raised his trunk in the air; he let out an earth shattering, trumpeting bellow; he lowered his massive head and charged at full speed.

My memory replays that instant in slow motion: I raised up, then stood up, sensed the blood in the enraged elephant's eyes as he trumpeted and commenced his charge. I made my quick left pivot with rifle across my chest in both hands. Imagine, for a moment,

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the physical proportions of an M16 rifle: on the business end, just above and behind the muzzle flash suppressor, is an inverted V-shaped sight 4-inches high above the rifle barrel. It was this protruding sight that got caught up in a dangling vine as I made my swing. Instead of just dropping the entwined rifle and rushing behind the termite mound, military training took precedence over what my brain was suggesting. I fought the resistance of the vine, hanging onto my rifle.

So, why am I here, 47 years later, to tell this tale? In his blind rage, and with his sole intent being to stomp me to smithereens, the elephant either did not see, or he neglected to adequately compensate for the measly 5" or 6" diameter tree from which the offending vine was suspended. If an elephant has a tender spot on his body it must be his trunk. Because when the beast squarely blasted the tree at full speed with his sensitive trunk, his surprise and shock of the painful nasal impact momentarily stunned him. He executed a thundering and clumsy about-face, reversed course, and stormed off in the direction from whence he came!

In the aftermath of his primary collision with the rooted tree (and instead of colliding with an insignificant 150 pounds worth of soldier) he made his awkward turn-around. During that quick maneuver, he smacked me a glancing blow with the right flank of his huge body knocking me down, as well as crushing the wind out of my sails.

Not being one to particularly worry about the things in life that cannot be controlled, still, I have from time-to-time wondered: What might happen to a person if he gets scared half-to-death TWICE?

The enemy that day was of the four-legged variety. Mercifully, somebody up there was looking out for me!