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GUARDIAN ANGEL
Robert H. Waldruff

Tom loved being with the Marine grunts of India Company. He enjoyed their raw expressions of fatality; tough characters with big hearts.

Word came for India to move to the bush on a company sized operation. Destiny headed them to the Arizona Territory, a dangerous area of jungle, hedgerows, and endless small villages always contested and full of bad guys. With no desire for medals and souvenirs, Tom knew all the fools were dead. This opportunity to get some war stories and talk shit in the officer's club with fraternity brothers was exhilarating though. Initiation time.

At 0430hrs began the ritual of organizing stuff, filling canteens, checking ammo, and eating as much hot chow as possible with C-rats on the menu for the next several days.

Grunts trudged to the pad, bitching about the dangerous and nasty Arizona, and why the fuck did India Company get this mission? Moaning and groaning was a Marine tradition. Birds landed to fill up with men and equipment. India Company headed out with more than a hundred riflemen, dressed in flack jackets and steel helmets, carrying all types of hand-held weapons to inflict maximum death and destruction. With his .45 holstered and M16 in hand, Tom gritted his teeth and slowly nodded. Like a rock! Lock and load, let's get some!

Tom boarded the third chopper with the company commander and his staff. Last night the CO briefed officers and NCO's that the mission required providing security for peasants of My Hiep village as they harvested a huge and vital corn crop planted by VC and their NVA advisors to resupply rations stored in their mountain sanctuaries. Not sharing this bounty with the locals, made possible by Marine protectors, offered the potential of a tremendous psychological victory. The skipper cautioned of enemy resistance but not to worry due to the presence of our awesome

firepower. Afterwards, the CO grabbed Tom, “I know you’ve only been in country five weeks and this mission will be OJT, but it’s no sweat. We all start this way. Stay close, pay attention, and you’ll be fine.”

Tom fluttered over the Vu Gia River watching it meander and knife through thick canopy. Huge bomb craters scarred the earth—memories of recent battles. Tom stared at the endless vistas of beautiful lush green crisscrossed with open wounds of devastation; fields filled with dead trees covered in the thick powder of Agent Orange’s malignant death. The juxtaposition of natural beauty and man’s ugly destruction recalled Greek tragedy.

Tom landed, checked radios, pulled out maps and compasses, and got oriented. Soon all the Marines disembarked, formed up, and the long green line slowly moved to My Hiep. Tom and India Company followed a winding narrow trail overrun with brush. Sniper holes from long ago ambushes punctured the trail, slowing the march. The company labored to its destination, walking through a furnace of July heat and humidity. Harassing sniper fire, concealed by endless hedgerows and thick canopy, tracked them.

At My Hiep straw huts circled the compound, a poor man’s subdivision. Several large huts for social and political events stood in the center. Peppers and other vegetables, fermented fish, and rice dried on racks of twigs and bamboo. A single well supplied water. Small people shuffled around purposely, chattering softly. Things seemed calm and routine. Outside the village sprawled the cornfield bordered by large open spaces and long rows of 10 feet high hedgerows.

The menacing jungle enclosed this checkerboard. The An Bang Mountains, sanctuary to the VC and NVA, rose in the distance.

Resting from the long, sweaty hump, Tom's helmet and flak jacket fell off. Four canteens emptied long ago, he eagerly accepted refills. Radios hissed and crackled as the captain positioned his platoons to form a 360 perimeter. All eyes followed the FNG, trying to act like assault. Tom faked boredom, giving the grunts a grin. He noticed every Marine dug a fighting hole so he sheepishly unstrapped his e-tool and began digging a deep hole. Dusk crept in and the LP's were set. Darkness fenced them in.

Next day the villagers fanned out into the cornfield to harvest bushel after bushel of the corn. Tom plotted the map, identifying locations of possible enemy infiltration, and locked in coordinates. He talked of home and families with the CO, ate C-rats, fought the malaise, and tried to stay alert. Night returned, this time filled with sounds of movement reported by the LP's. The skipper didn't seem concerned. For sure the VC knew uninvited guests occupied their neighborhood.

The third day, at 1000 hours, the battalion staff chopped in with resupply, got a sitrep from the CO, and filled their bird with fresh corn for the colonel's evening mess. The S-3, fearing the VC marked the chopper's position, ordered the captain to shut it down and relocate across the cornfield. The staffers boarded and flew to safety and hot chow. Word came to break down camp and saddle up; time to move out.

With fighting holes filled and flank security called in, India casually formed up. Grunts milled around the large open area separating My Hiep from thick hedgerows, checking packs for unnecessary weight, bartering C-rats, and bitching about humping in the noon heat to set up a new perimeter. Helmets and flak jackets laid on the ground.

Hedgerows erupted in a cacophonous terror. Tom hit the ground, pawing for protection from his just covered fighting hole. A hurricane of sound and fury howled through the kill zone. A VC

Battalion moved into heavily fortified emplacements at the tree line behind the hedgerows to ignite an ambush—a cauldron of destruction. The next 20 minutes lasted five seconds. Under continuous gunfire, marines lay unprotected in the kill zone. Maximum firepower was urgently needed to get on these killers; fear and inaction were not options. Tom jumped up, zig-zagging madly through the tempest. He flopped next to the two-man 81m observer team. 81's, less powerful than the 105 howitzers but light and nimble and able to get out rounds fast, were first up. Bullets pounded the ground. The two marines froze with eyes wide as saucers.

Tom grabbed their handset to shout target coordinates to the battery with no time to adjust. He had to execute with precision; there were no second chances. Tom then grabbed the handset from his own radio operator to call fire missions to the company's artillery battery. Smoke rose behind the hedgerows. The 81's came out fast and landed exactly on target. Get some!

The CO formed a counter attack leading Marines straight at the hedgerows with breathtaking bravery. Brothers started to fall, seeping blood. The hailstorm pelted their unprotected position. Sniper rounds struck around Tom and the FO team. Young village women got caught in the crossfire. Tom tried to drag them to safety, but the VC bullets cut them down. The 105's bullied their way into the brawl. Huge explosions tore open the VC emplacements showering metal, tree limbs, and debris into the sky. Tom, coordinating this onslaught of mortar and artillery rounds filling the sky, called mission after mission. The VC finally surrendered to the continuous artillery barrage, retreating to their mountain caves. The only gunshots were Marine rifles. Captain yelled cease-fire and called for medivacs. Tom rushed into the field to comfort the wounded and help the corpsmen gather the warriors for extraction.

Clean-up finished, Battalion air lifted. A Husky, a tracked vehicle mounted with a .50 caliber machine gun, provided more firepower. Seemed everybody got the message. For sure the VC did. The captain signaled to move out and pointed to Tom, "Good job Lieutenant, proud of you." Confidence soared; he had stared into the eye of the gorilla and not blinked. Initiation successful, the sacred brotherhood offered acceptance; so, it happens like this.

Tom humped the corn field and through thick jungle into a cemetery filled with tall dirt mounds, elevated vaults to protect the dead from monsoons. In this sanctuary for the dead, the skipper decided to spend the night. The command center set up next to the Husky. Exhausted by today's action a perimeter quickly formed, deep holes were dug, and sleep shifts were organized. Tom registered H and I targets on likely avenues of approach and slipped into his hole for rest.

Around 0100 hours an RPG hit the Husky, exploding into a rainstorm of shrapnel in the darkness. A hunk of ragged metal, motivated by decades of conflict and hate, blew open Tom's gut, releasing blood and intestine in a torrent of gore. Other chunks tore holes in his arms, legs, and sliced open his head and ear. Drifting into a long corridor of brilliant light while feeling a wonderment of calm and peace, Tom's eyes suddenly opened. Screams, yells, and gunfire filled the night. Hell was in session. Seemingly from a long distance, the captain screamed, "Hold your fire, hold your fire!"

With order temporarily restored, the skipper asked, "Everyone alright?"

Feeling a slimy wetness, Tom calmly said, "I think I'm hit."

Gunny shined a light, "My God Lieutenant, corpsman up! Get a medivac."

After several agonizing minutes, "Captain, Marble Mountain's ordered a stand down of all birds for the night."

CO grabbed the handset and screamed, “I’ve got a Lieutenant that needs a chopper right now, losing a lot of blood. Sir, yes sir, understood, will do, roger, out. Mission too dangerous and too far. Colonel says not til dawn. Doc how long does he have?”

“They’re bad wounds and he’s losing a lot blood, maybe 2 hours. Fuck! Do what you can!”

Unimaginable hurt swept over the wounds. Tom struggled for comprehension through the unrelenting pain, “Doc, morphine!”

“Wounds in the abdomen and head, can’t do it.” Helpless, self reliance abandoned, groaning in pain and begging to be saved, screams rose from a hopeless soul pleading for life.

“Captain, there’s an Army Warrant Officer on our frequency. He says he’s two clicks out. He heard our medevac call—saw the explosions and tracers. He wants to come down to extract.”

Most of us live on a continuum of expectations for physical and mental outcomes. Coincidence intervenes but, ultimately, things are reasoned and accounted for. Spiritual wonderments occasionally occur, but are explained in our context of experience and intellectual relativity. What causes an army warrant officer at 0130 hours to fly solo in a Chinook into a Marine TAOR? Certainly the army didn’t authorize a night joyride in Indian Country. Why get involved? Common sense requires self-preservation. Marines in the shit and a hot zone. Surely this pilot had family and loved ones desperately needing him, no need for glory, just a cadre of scraggly Marines to appreciate any act of courage.

“Get me the biggest piece of open land you can find and pop some flares to mark. I’m coming down.”

Captain screamed, “Pop some flares. Mark the space between those two mounds.”

The vessel of mercy slowly drifted down into the madness. From the back of the perimeter a firefight erupted, the VC firing at the unprotected hovering angel. An RPG sailed over the propellers challenging, "Go home, seek protection." The angel refused and circled the death trap.

"Pop some flares closer to the perimeter and lay down some fire. I'll get in. Prepare him."

Captain whispered, "It's suicide."

More shots missed their target. The miracle continued, comprehended only through appreciating the source. A brave soul not seeking glory labored to save a fellow traveler, his courage and mercy changing Tom forever.

What do you say to a man risking everything to save your life? Don't underestimate the grace of your fellow man, it will amaze and bring love to your heart.

The Cong punched through the perimeter, creating mayhem and chaos. The angel landed in the midst of a Cong-Marine slugfest. Bullets ripped at the hull as the angel patiently waited while Marines placed Tom on a poncho to deliver him to his salvation. The vessel, with agonizing slowness, clawed its way through darkness seeking light.

The marines screamed, "Go! Go! Go!" No one shot at this vulnerable and fragile silhouette. Finally, the ship and the two strangers reached calm waters and set sail to safe havens.

This guardian angel had rescued Tom, revealing the veil of salvation. Suffering and abandonment of earthly things brought a transformation. He had been saved and he surrendered to the promise of The Cross.

The need to talk shit in the officers' club vanished. Home, just born daughter, and a new life beckoned.