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Blue Devil 2

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Blue Devil 2

Dark clouds persist after a light morning rain. The platoon passes the beaver dam then fords at the spot recon identified last night. Just beyond the west bank of the dammed stream hundreds of tree stumps reveal the dam's construction. Gnawed stumps stretch in a straight line north and east over two hundred yards to form a fan-type clearing parallel to the stream. Blue Devil avoids crossing the clearing here but leads the platoon north inside the tree line near the bank. Satisfied there's no danger he turns right, crouches like a lion and stalks across. Blue Devil motions for slack man Guerrero to wait. The gesture requires Guerrero to delay a gap of ten feet before following.

The platoon performs this maneuver in every open field crossing. In turn, each man gives the same silent motion before crouch-walking into the open space. The slack man is also obliged to scour the left, the opposite direction of the point man. The third man searches a zone similar to the point but farther to the right. The fourth man searches farther left of the slack man. It is right-left spacing duty that creates overlapping search fields. Properly performed, the unit's eyes cover the 180-degree expanse.

In an open space assault, the men flank to the right or left based on their right-left spot in line. Blue Devil silently signals "fan out" by extending his right forefinger, then his left. The soldiers race to their zones in a frontal assault. Each notifies the next to fan out.

Before leaving bivouac, they softly sound off "right" or "left" so that each knows where to assemble. Blue Devil asks every soldier his position. Since Warnf confessed that he will not

shoot at the enemy, Blue Devil assigns the second left assault position to Paul Czuk; Warnf swaps to the rear. Placing Warnf at the rear is risky but forces him to fight or die.

Blue Devil hears youthful laughter; he sees Vietnamese playing with children. He slows, stalks lower, scours the area at two o'clock where the clearing ends. He hurries his assault gestures and, when done, fires his grenade launcher into the area of the laughter. Body parts fly. He advances, rushing to keep the advantage. He empties his M-16 on automatic; while firing, he ejects the grenade shell, then reloads. Blue Devil steadies the weapon with his left hand, shoots another grenade, then reloads the M-16. He fast breaks the position. The fleeing enemy frantically grab bodies during their fallback. Amid the chaos they return fire; the onslaught presses. Blue Devil sees the entire battlefield like Willie Mays sees the seams of a pitch. One of his grenades blows a body in half; the enemy drags it in retreat. The point man has never seen this behavior in combat.

Blood is everywhere. The enemy scurries: hundreds of men, women and children, peripheral view left, peripheral view right. In the adrenal rush, Blue Devil leaps over a 50-caliber machine gun. In mid-leap, he barks assault directions to his men. He empties another automatic magazine. Trees temporarily prevent using his grenade launcher. He sees the main trail, wide as Fifth Avenue—busy. The dirt is red, littered with arms, legs, intestines, brains. The enemy is escaping. A grenade opening appears: destruction again, more blood. He barks more directions. The sanctum is huge, teeming with life: scores of abandoned weapons, cooking pits, clay pots, sleep stations, half-dressed humanity—fleeing. Blue Devil yells for “Terry” and “Ray.” The

camp center is big enough for an outdoor track. He needs the machine gunner and his assistant for cover. The men don't come or answer.

Blue Devil yells for Terry and Ray again. He searches to his rear. The entire platoon lays in the grass. They cling to tree stumps. He stops the assault. Keeping both eyes on the enemy, he creeps back fifty feet to the machine gun. He turns to his men, screams and waves for them to come. Their response is slow. Behind him, the enemy retreat goes on. The enemy is not shooting, but only covering their escape. Blue Devil's soldiers creep to their feet, crouching to avoid phantom bullets. Screaming to heaven he commands: "They're getting away. Get your asses up here. We need the machine gun to advance; get up here." Three speed up. Blue Devil jerks his head around to the rear again. He wants to engage the fleeing enemy. He waits for his platoon, for his machine gunner, for his slack man, for the enemy to take it all back.

The platoon arrives slowly. They rave about the assault. They heard bullets zipping overhead. How did Blue Devil shoot like that? This machine gun is awesome. It is inane babble. He gives them directions to spread out, to establish a perimeter; to protect against a counterattack. Jaeger is mute. His terror-filled eyes surrender leadership. Pressed to duty, the men deploy. They go past blood and body parts, eyes wide, mouths agape. They hesitate to enter the camp center. Dark clouds persist. No sun, nor rain.

A rock cave on the left of the clearing has an entrance two stories high. The platoon tosses in hand grenades before entering. There are hundreds of weapons in the cave, too many to spot-inventory. They find automatic Russian AK-47s, mortars, Chinese stick grenades, pistols,

sniper rifles, ammunition of every type. The grenades do not blow the ammunition. Blue Devil reprimands two soldiers for prematurely using the explosives. Jaeger brags it was his order.

The post-fight silence creates hair-raising echoes. The mind bounds from fear to fear. Next to the cave, a blood trail rises up a hundred-foot ravine. A smaller stream of blood trails away east. Terry and Ray guard the road with the machine gun. Can the platoon withstand a counterattack? Maybe a retreat to last night's bivouac site would be wise. The First Sergeant and Blue Devil advocate retreat. They want Thunderball notified. Jaeger wants to give his commander a higher body count. The lull in the fighting seems to have awakened the young lieutenant; heroic possibilities sleep here. He orders Blue Devil to pursue the heavier blood trail.

The trek up the steep hill is deliberate, duly cautious. At the top stands is a boulder 200 feet tall and twice as wide. Blue Devil leaves the three-man recon team behind the boulder where the blood trails intersect. He belly crawls across blood soaked leaves. He sees bloodstained tree stumps extending west into the uncut jungle. Scores of sheared stumps create a rectangular field, one hundred yards to the tree line, twenty yards across. The retreating enemy is visible in the thicket: too many to count. The overcast day projects a grey tone, like an old television show, over the enemy. Blue Devil's vantage point is not good. He considers shooting a grenade but that will betray him. He crawls backward to the boulder to tell his men what he saw. They plead with him to return to camp. He needs a better assessment.

He crawls around the boulder for a safer view of the thicket from sparse cover. He inches behind the nearest tree. AK-47s crackle. Blue Devil jerks back his head. He goes motionless. A hail of bullets strike the tree, more zip by. The crackling continues. The enemy seems to be

trying to fell the tree by shooting. The hill slopes below him, there is safety lower. He slides down two feet, still needing to assess the odds of a counterattack. The enemy is small-statured as they treat their wounded. Blue Devil could launch grenades but this is war, not suicide. Time flies. This is taking too long. The enemy is not running. They are waiting.

Blue Devil crawls to the team where he greets panic-stricken eyes. The young radio operator is in tears. Guerrero repeats “Hail Mary’s” in Spanish.

Blue Devil gives his squad the assessment; he observed an enormous contingent. Some of the enemy treat the wounded, others flee, many wait. “Leave ‘em alone,” Kenny blurts. “Please, please,” Guerrero chirps in his native tongue. He seems to forget the team only speaks English, but the message is clear. Blue Devil tells them to pray there is not a counterattack. He assures his men they will not follow the blood trail. Screw Jaeger.

The men implore Blue Devil to rejoin the platoon. He takes the radio mic to call Jaeger. “White Fox, there is a skyscraper boulder. Beyond is a kill zone, like the approach. Request permission to return to your ballpark.”

“No, damn it, I told you to pursue that blood trail; get me a body count.”

The platoon huddles. Blue Devil asks why the unit is not ready for a counterattack. Jaeger says the platoon will chase the enemy. He assigns a different point man, Paul Czuk. Blue Devil is to bring up the rear, not Warnf. The lieutenant’s tone is nasty, condescending. Blue Devil has heard that tone before. From cops in the neighborhood, from store clerks fearful he is a shoplifter, from bus drivers and riders moving him to the rear. He checks his emotions; lives are at stake.

Blue Devil pleads for counterattack defense. He tells the lieutenant that their death waits beyond that boulder. He shares details of what he saw: the enemy is retreating but also waiting. There are scores of tree stumps; a kill zone. “You heard the AKs. I was pinned behind a tree.” Jaeger turns away. Blue Devil looks to the First Sergeant, who shrugs. Orders are orders.

The men move. As they pass, some look puzzled—others terrified. Blue Devil tells them all, “Be careful, catastrophe waits; there’s a boulder, tree stumps, an ambush.” Urgency is in Blue Devil’s voice, close to panic. He needs them alive. He begs, “Be careful. Be careful.”

He returns to the lieutenant: secure the camp, wait for reinforcements. He explains the wait for help is going to be longer than map views suggest. He reminds Jaeger there are no unit casualties, that every man is needed to hold the camp. He warns that Thunderball will not be happy if the weapons cache, left unattended, is lost. Jaeger pauses, his eyes dart up and down, back and forth. He orders the recon team to stay, to guard the weapons, to defend against a counterattack.

He marches the other twelve men up the hill.

The platoon passes the boulder-ravine junction, then follows the blood trail left. They pass red-stained stumps. Jaeger orders a frontal assault. AK-47s crackle again: quickly, five soldiers are knocked down, maybe killed. The others run for cover. Most are pinned down behind stumps. A few retreat to trees right of the boulder. Clarence Way, the radio operator, is killed following an order to bring the mic to Jaeger behind a different tree. Way is green—less than a month in country. He recently turned eighteen. Shot in the chest, he radios for help while dying.

Blue Devil rushes to Way's distress message. Warnf cowers alone behind the boulder. Rivers of tears roll over his half smile. He points to his right foot where a wound bleeds. "You are not getting a Purple Heart for shooting yourself, Paul. Way's dead."

"I'm hit," screams Barnes.

First Sergeant Gray Wolf yells "we need Puff or we need an airstrike." The urgency in his shouts belies his normal cool. Puff is an assault helicopter that will spew 60 cal. machinegun fire with a tracer every fifth round. The tracers glow fire red; there will appear to be a stream of fire from chopper to target, so the nickname Puff the magic dragon. Gray Wolf screams like God is deaf: "We're gonna die without air fire. We're gonna die without air fire."

Blue Devil directs the platoon to fire at the distant jungle. He races thirty feet into the tree stumps to pull Sergeant Barnes to safety. He tells Barnes that Warnf is wounded. Barnes says he knows the motherfucker shot himself at the junction. Blue Devil returns to the kill zone where he pulls another soldier to safety, then another.

He calls for Puff support. They survive for twenty minutes until the dragon arrives. The platoon tosses smoke grenades to mark their position. Puff strafes beyond the smoke. Enemy fire continues, the First Sergeant yells for more air support. He is still prone behind a stump. There are no smoke grenades left. Blue Devil radios coordinates: platoon first, then enemy. Air Command demands confirmation. The proximity bothers them. Drop it now! A test bomb falls beyond the tree line.

The ground shakes. Fire for effect; fire for effect.

Jaeger continues to shrink behind his small tree. The monsoon never intervenes. The sun never shines. Dusk arrives. The siege ends.

Radio traffic confirms help is coming. Firefights and thick jungle delay their arrival. Frequent skirmish reports pour in from other units: the battalion plan works. Midnight passes. A unit is heard slashing through distant brush. Two hours later the company commander breaks through with two platoons. They describe ambushing the retreating enemy. Afraid to use lights for assistance, the reunited company waits for dawn before they depart.

The stench of Way's decomposing blood makes a permanent place in Blue Devil's brain. A friend passes the night with guts in hand. The medic arrives with the company commander. In the dark he administers morphine. The friend groans on. Blue Devil sits a night vigil with his wounded warrior.

Another company arrives at dawn. Perimeter guards are plentiful; they rotate on two-hour shifts. The enemy is never far away. By radio, the company commanders confer with an engineer. They agree a landing zone is impractical. A hover zone for transfers is blown using C-4 to fell more trees. The task begins at noon and takes hours. Additional C-4 is lowered by helicopter. When the hover zone is finished choppers bring ammunition, supplies and hot meals. Three Intelligence officers arrive to assess the weapons cache. Manufacture sources may aid future decisions. They are fluent in Mandarin, Russian and Vietnamese.

The lowering and raising of men and supplies is perilous and painstaking. A tow line from each hovering chopper lowers a loaded metal stretcher that is unpacked, then reloaded with the wounded and hoisted to the ship. Next, the dead transfer; there is no field ritual, no open

grief, no prayer. The last helicopter takes Warnf. He is not permitted to ride with the wounded or the dead. Instructions that he is Purple Heart ineligible are radioed to staff.

Night falls again. The star-bedecked sky is close enough to touch, a pearl of beauty. Nineteen years she waited for Blue Devil to adore her. The sky over Vietnam is a source of brief and silent solace. The presence of two companies is comforting, too, like the heaviest monsoon.

The next morning, airlift shuttles resume. More hot meals arrive. Blue Devil is authorized a war trophy. He chooses a Chinese sniper rifle. It is tagged with his name and serial number to ship to the 101st Phan Rang base camp. Intelligence catalogs the weapons cache which is shipped to the forward base. Explosives seal the rock cave. The tasks take two days.

On the third afternoon, Thunderball visits. He commends the platoon for capturing the camp. The weapons cache is a distribution operation, a historic find. He announces an enemy body count north of 100. He is jovial. He expresses pride for his association with the 1st Brigade. He is happy the 101st legacy grows in Vietnam. He announces a memorial service to take place when the unit stands down in a few days.

Blue Devil fights tears. He detests the custom. A bayonet mounted M-16 is planted between a pair of boots. A camouflaged helmet tops the rifle butt. The symbolic soldiers are lined up like crosses in Flanders's Field. A standard eulogy praises freedom's new martyrs. Taps blow, Pandora's Box opens: tears gush in; memories find refuge. There is never healing, just pain. Emotions are survival's mortal enemies.

May 5, 2015

Thunderball mingles with the men, drinking coffee, small talking. He departs with his Intelligence officers. Gray Wolf and Thunderball are old friends. The First Sergeant learned that Jaeger will be removed and replaced with a West Point graduate during the stand down. The revelation is a temporary morale booster.

There are wagers over the number of days before the enemy returns. Kenny and Ray tease Paul Czuk with a song. Czuk's going home in a plastic bag. Do-dah, do-dah. Czuk's going home in a plastic bag. Yea da-do-dah-day. The objects of this group folly shifts from hour to hour, day to day.

Seventy-two hours later, after twenty-six days of search and destroy, 2/327 stands down.