

Five Man Ranger teams patrolling the jungles during the war in Vietnam and those who fought the many small battles that seldom made the evening news.

Chasing Romeo

The Jungle War

by Gregg P.J. Jorgenson

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A soldier in camouflage gear is shown from the chest up, holding a rifle. The soldier is looking down and to the left. The background is a dense jungle with large green leaves. The text is overlaid on the image.

CHASING ROMEO

THE JUNGLE WAR

KREGG P. J. JORGENSEN

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Chapter 1

It was a sweltering 101 degrees and weeping humidity. The staggering steam bath that was the remote stretch of Vietnamese jungle along the Cambodian border, in this far reach of Tay Ninh Province, had U.S. Army Specialist-4 Darrell Thomas feeling like a worn and wrung-out, dirty sponge.

The dark blotches of salt-stained sweat that had spread out from under his armpits and lower back had the sun faded and damp camouflage jungle fatigue blouse sticking to him like badly peeling adhesive tape. When he wasn't lazily slapping at mosquitoes or wiping away the small, annoying beads of perspiration that had pooled and were slowly dribbling down his forehead, ears, and upper lip, he was flicking away predatory blood-sucking leeches that were looking to latch onto any exposed flesh they could find. The heat, bugs and leeches only added to the fraying strain of the daylong wait in a jungle that Thomas figured time had either forgotten or had seriously overlooked.

High up above the jungle floor a once promising breeze that had pushed in from the South China Sea one hundred miles to the east, had withered in the heat and distance. What little remained barely stirred even the thinnest leaves in the canopied treetops where the jungle met the sky, 140 or so feet above him.

Thomas, like his four teammates on Ranger Team Nine-One, passed the time he wasn't on watch in the their makeshift 360-degree perimeter, stretched out and leaning back against his rucksack trying to find a modicum of comfort.

The mind wearies and wanders during the slow and quiet moments in the heat on these long-range reconnaissance patrols, so the 21-year-old's thoughts went from the '*Greeting: You are hereby ordered for induction into the Armed Forces*' Draft notice to thinking of better times and much better places.

His thoughts drifted from the war to the wonderful redhead he'd met on his R&R in Australia the week before, and he was smiling to himself, oh so happy in the remembering.

When he and his two Army buddies had spotted the three swimsuit clad young women sunbathing on the crowded beach at Nielsen Park in Sydney they made their way around the beachgoers, and casually laid out their towels beside them.

While the other two GIs got busy with introductions to the young women in the bikinis they'd eagerly targeted, Thomas nodded and smiled at the attractive red haired, emerald eyed twenty-something that had turned and looked up questioningly at him. He was also thinking that she had filled out the one-piece bathing suit quite nicely.

"My, oh my, oh my," he said, by way of hello in a pronounced East Texas drawl, "ain't this the prettiest part of the beach?"

"A Yank, is it?" she said, holding up one hand to shield her eyes from the sun.

Thomas leaned back, held a contemplative pause, and then grinned.

"Well, I must admit that's a pretty straight forward and tempting offer, Missy, and while I'm not necessarily opposed to it, I think we should begin by introducing ourselves to one another first and then see how it goes from there. I'm Darrell, Darrell Thomas," he said, maintaining his grin as he held out his hand.

There was a brief hesitation and a slow chuckle as she sized him up with a sidelong glance and exaggerated sigh. The American GIs on their seven-day leaves from the war in Vietnam seemed to be all over Sydney these days, but this was her first personal encounter with one. That he was sandy haired, fit, and smiling with a likeable lopsided grin, helped with his brash banter.

"Trying for clever and naughty at the same time, are we, Darrell Thomas?" she said.

"Could just be a simple misunderstanding due to both of our wonderful accents," he said, with pleasing ease and charm.

The young woman chuckled again as she reached out to shake the proffered hand.

"Mattie, Mattie Lindsey," she said.

"Mattie? Wait! As in Waltzing Matil..."

"...As in, I *prefer* Mattie," she said, cutting him off. "Are you always this simple and bold?"

"I am simply a man who believes that fortune favors the bold, Mattie Lindsey."

"Oh, and why do I think you don't have a fortune?"

"Well, I've heard beaches are the best places to find treasure, and low and behold missy, here you are."

Lindsey rolled her eyes and laughed.

"Has that line ever worked for you before?"

Thomas shrugged. "Never tried it before. Is it working now?"

"No, not really," she said. "Anyone ever tell you you're an idiot?"

Thomas' grin widened.

"Frequently," he said, "but I'd be a bigger idiot if I didn't at least try to chat you up. You're so pretty you make my eyes blur, Miss Mattie Lindsey!"

There was more laughter, more small talk, of course, and a lot more flirting in the days that followed. Fueled by youthful surging hormones, lustful loins, and shared yearnings, it was the best and happiest week he could ever remember.

She was, she said, *'just a sales clerk at a downtown store, refolding clothes, arranging small displays, nothing all that exciting or amazing, actually,'* but the night before he was to leave to go back to Vietnam and the war, Darrell Thomas was excited and amazed with what she had on display for him in his hotel room.

"*Oh, Army boy,*" she cooed playfully standing in the bathroom doorway wearing only a sly smile and a white cotton hotel room towel that served as a sexy sarong.

Her left arm was up along the doorframe with her head seductively leaning in and resting against the crook of her elbow while her right hand was pinching the towel closed at the top.

"Oops!" Mattie said, giggling as she let the towel drop. The giggles gave way to a startled flight of birds high up in the trees that instantly brought a startled Thomas out of his musing and immediately on alert.

His eyes went wide, darting towards what little he could see of the trail in front of him, as he realized where he actually was, and what had caused the disturbance.

Mattie, the joyfully smiling redhead, the hotel room, and the lusty thoughts of his R&R were gone in an anxious blink, along with the familiar noises of the rain forest, all replaced by an unnatural and unnerving silence.

His adrenaline was pumping and he had to force himself to take in slow and steady breaths to remain calm, or as calm as he could be considering the circumstance. Carefully and very deliberately he rolled over, leaned forward on his elbows, and took up the hand-held triggering device to the three daisy-chained Claymore Anti-personnel Mines set up in ambush ten yards out, facing the small trail.

During his eight months in-country on other recon missions and patrols he'd taken part in, he'd gotten familiar and even somewhat comfortable with the natural sounds of the jungle. Somewhat. But it was those telling moments of abrupt and awkward quiet, like now that had set his nerves on edge and the veteran Lurp team members in motion. For these long-range patrols it was just a series of staggering hikes and bad camping until the war, once again, reached out to find you.

The East Texan Assistant Team Leader, the A-T-L on the patrol, watched and waited with three of the other experienced members of the five-man team who had recognized the warning for what it was. Like him, they quietly went on alert and began readying themselves.

The four were keyed in on the path in front of them; their designated kill zone. Their hide site was well hidden behind a living screen of broad elephant ear-like leaves, tangled branches, and plush, tropical underbrush. There were just enough small openings in the natural screen to target that section of the trail while remaining unseen by any casual observer.

It was the jungle's alarm system that told the Lurps of Team Nine-One that, someone, or maybe even a few someones, were moving on the trail to the east and working their way towards their kill zone.

With no friendly units operating within the Lurp Team's patrol area, and the team deep in enemy territory just this side of the border, Thomas had little doubt just who that *someone*, or those *someones*, could be.

This isolated part of the Province along the Cambodian border served as one of the primary off-ramps for the Sihanouk Trail, a Khmer stretch of the better-known Ho Chi Minh Trail. Every day thousands and thousands of enemy soldiers that had made the long journey down from North Vietnam, through Laos and Cambodia, had used the cover of the massive swath of jungle to slip across the border to attack South Vietnam, and the sudden flutter from the disturbed birds told the GIs some of those NVA units were using it again.

Four of the five members of the team were down, in position, and ready; the exception was the team's FNG, Private First Class John Blake Bowman.

Bowman, 18, who looked like somebody's kid brother playing army, had graduated from William Wyatt Bibb high school in Alabama seven months before, and from Romeo Company's intense and compacted three week, in-country, LRRP/Ranger training course a day prior to the start of this mission. He had a plastic spoon upside down on his tongue and was busy digging through his rucksack. Blissfully unaware of what was going on around him, his determined focus was on finding a better tasting, freeze-dried, dehydrated Lurp ration that he'd packed for his very first combat patrol four days before.

Spaghetti, maybe, he was thinking? Yeah, it wasn't bad, or better still, nom, nom, nom, Beef and Rice.

"Oh yeah, baby, definitely Beef and Rice," he said to himself as he sifted through the contents of the rucksack, pushing aside the other O-D colored freeze-dried ration packages, extra radio batteries, Claymore Mines, other assorted mission related items he was required to carry on the five-day mission. He knew he'd packed two of the Beef and Rice ration pouches and had one yesterday, so he was sure he had one left. Finding it in the heavy and crowded rucksack, though, was another matter.

Ah, but when he did, he'd mix his lukewarm canteen water into that sucker, and stir it like whirlwind to bring it back to edible life. It wasn't fine cuisine, but it was fine for the jungle. Never mind the occasional leg or wing of some dead insect, or the one or three mixed in mosquitos, let alone trying to spoon them out. That was just part of

the mission menu, too. Protein on the fly, *a la Carte*. No extra charge. Enjoy! Well, enjoy or go hungry.

The rations would be eaten cold. There would be no campfires or heat tabs or pieces of C-4 to light and heat the Army rations on Lurp missions. Sergeant Ben Carey, the Team Leader, made that abundantly clear during the team's Op Order mission briefing back at Camp Mackie. He wouldn't allow it. Nor would he allow smoking.

"Wafting food odors, tobacco smoke, or other man-made smells carry," he said, "and there is no mistaking their origins. Everyone copy?"

Heads nodded, and the word, *copy*, echoed from the team members during the pre-insertion mission briefing. There was more.

"Did he just say, wafting?" Thomas said to Warren, the team's Radioman, who nodded and grinned.

"He did. And I don't believe he was referring to those little rubber boats, either."

"He wasn't. As he is our talented and articulate team leader, his wisdom wonderfully wafts for our benefit."

"We are indeed amongst greatness."

"Indeed."

Carey frowned as he stared them down. "As Lurps you're supposed to remain unseen and quiet. It says so in the job description. So, if you two are done blowing smoke up my ass and will let me finish the Op order, later, I'll introduce you to a few other big words for your edification as well."

"Damn! I hope he brings a dictionary."

"He will. He's our Team Leader. He's thorough."

"You done?" asked Carey.

The two nodded with smartass smiles and the mission briefing continued.

Carey was correct. The primary goal of a Lurp mission was to remain unseen and unheard in the jungle on patrol, which was why he was adamant about the team members eating their freeze-dried or canned C-rations cold, or what passed for it in the jungle heat.

Even if Bowman couldn't find the ration pouch of Beef and Rice, the best he could hope for was something that had a little better flavor

when he poured in the tepid canteen water, stirred the contents until they became less crunchy, and took the first bite.

Yeah, it would taste like oddly flavored lumpy oatmeal, complete with a Rice Krispies snap and crackle. Adding more water, he knew, eliminated the pop.

It wasn't a cheeseburger and fries, but after three days into the patrol, it would do. Now, if he could just find the damn thing.

On this, his very first '*cherry*' mission, and with his focus on finding his lunch, Bowman hadn't recognized the startled birds that had suddenly taken flight, or the odd silence that followed for the danger they foretold.

Sergeant Carey angrily snapped his fingers twice in his direction to get the new guy's attention. Sound carried in the jungle, but the finger snaps would barely be audible more than a few feet away.

When the teenage soldier looked up from the opened rucksack, he found the stern-faced team leader pointing to his right ear before pointing back out at the trail. The Sergeant had his short-barreled CAR-15 submachine gun leveled on the path even as he looked to Bowman. Over Carey's shoulder the team's Radioman was sneering at Bowman and quietly mouthing, '*FNG.*'

Being new was never easy, but the now surprised Bowman had gotten the unspoken message. He immediately stopped what he was doing, gave a slow nod, and picked up his M-16.

Thumbing the selector switch from SAFE to FIRE, he spit out the plastic spoon as he eased himself down to the ground, and used his rucksack as a tripod.

When it came to FNGs-those '*Fucking New Guys,*' in the jargon of combat, and their cherry missions, the more experienced veteran team members were never sure how a new guy would act and react under fire, or in the stressful calm that preceded it, so Carey watched for a critical moment to see how Bowman was managing the threat.

With, quite literally, a handful of Rangers making up the team and operating deep within enemy-held territory, the Team Leader needed to be sure that Bowman wouldn't panic, and that he'd do what needed to be done when trouble came.

It would be a critical moment, and for Carey and the others, a necessary one. Two weeks earlier, another FNG, two days into his first mission, had panicked when the team was pulling surveillance on another similar jungle trail along the Song Be River when 20 to 30 unsuspecting NVA soldiers began passing in front of the Ranger team's hide site.

Just as the line of heavily armed enemy soldiers were filing by that other FNG violently began to tremble. Overwhelming fear overtook him, and when he started to cry out and get up to run both Carey and Warren, the Radioman, quickly and forcefully held him down. The muffled cry in angry hands kept the team from being compromised and thrust into a deadly firefight they likely couldn't win. The NVA soldiers never saw or heard the scuffle.

They walked on.

Once Carey was certain the last of the North Vietnamese Army soldiers were well passed the team's position, and seeing that the FNG was still terrified and whimpering, the Team Leader got on the radio and called for an immediate extraction.

With a five to six-man team, a panicking soldier was a deadly liability, and with three more days to go to complete the long-range patrol, they couldn't trust him from doing something else just as dangerously foolish. You didn't have to be John Fucking Wayne on these patrols, but you had to be cowboy enough to rein in your fear, and do what was necessary.

After making their way to a pre-designated pickup zone and being flown back to Camp Mackie, Carey was met by a less than pleased Ranger Company Commanding Officer on the helicopter flight line wanting to know just what in the hell had happened, why the immediate extraction was called in, and why the mission had been cut short.

As the frustrated Carey explained what had taken place, Thomas and the other team members nodded along. The hang dog look of the new guy's embarrassed face confirmed it.

"I...I can't do this, sir," the FNG quietly admitted. "I can't go back out there."

The Ranger Company Commander nodded. "And we can't allow you to," agreed the CO. "Pack your bags."

The next morning the FNG was transferred out of the unit.

Fear was a given on long range patrols but managing it was a desperate necessity for these small teams operating in enemy occupied areas. It wasn't always courage under fire that sustained them, either. More often it was fright and fight and making that fear work for you and not against you. A healthy amount of caution and worry kept one on alert and focused on task.

With that ill-fated patrol still fresh in his mind, Carey kept a cautionary eye on Bowman. But other than looking a little nervous by squeezing and re-squeezing the stock and grip of his M-16 and taking in slow and steady breaths to calm himself as best he could, Bowman seemed to be handling it as well as could be expected. If he was scared shitless, then he was hiding it well. Good.

It was one thing to train for a fight, but something else entirely to step into the proverbial arena, and face off against an equally determined enemy whose sole purpose was to kill you as quickly, brutally, and efficiently as possible.

When Bowman caught his team leader staring at him, he gave Carey a nervous chin-up nod. The Team Leader nodded back then turned his attention back to the jungle trail.

For the last eight hours and change, the team from MAC-V's Company R, 75th Infantry-Ranger, had been set up in the hide site to observe the trail with little to show for the daylong wait. Patience may have been a virtue in long-range reconnaissance, but it was also a physical pain in the ass at times.

The team had been inserted by helicopter into their area of operations three days earlier, two and a half clicks from their insertion site. Their mission was to reconnoiter a remote four-grid map section of the vast jungle adjacent to the border. They would check out if there were recent enemy activity in the area, and if so, they'd plot the enemy's numbers, direction of movement, equipment, and other pertinent information to pass along those findings to the Intel people upon completion of the mission.

Over the course of five days of humping heavy rucksacks through the jungle searching for the elusive enemy, they would note any Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army hidden jungle bases and bunker complexes and record them on their operational map, without being seen or compromised. If possible, they were to ambush small patrols as *targets of opportunity*, capture any POWs they could, and then *di-di-mau* to a pre-planned exfiltration point.

POWs were a highly sought after prize for the teams. The Romeo Company Commander made it so by offering an in-country, three day R&R at Vung Tau for any team member who captured an enemy soldier, brought him back alive, and in a better mood to talk.

For Team Nine-One, though, the first forty-six hours into this five-day mission were a bust. Prior to finding the well-used trail near sunset the day before, they hadn't found squat. They had spent the time much the way they had on other long-range reconnaissance patrols, slowly and carefully pushing away large fronds and vines as they quietly moved through the vast stretches of primordial jungle searching for the fresh or recent signs of enemy activity.

Some parts of these vast and ancient swaths of rain forests were so far removed and remote from what passed for civilization that they even held arrays of flora and species of fauna yet to be scientifically discovered or named. But the opposing armies weren't there for scientific or geographical exploration. They weren't botanists or explorers. They were there to remain hidden and unobserved, and when the time came, ready to capture or kill their enemies in an ugly and deadly combined game of military styled *Hide n' Seek* and terminal *Tag*.

When the five Lurps took a much-needed break and rested in place, or remained in overnight positions on patrol, the team would set up in a wagon wheel formation with weapons facing out in a tight circle. At night they kept watch using a rotating guard system between the members of the team in two-hour shifts until sunrise.

Then the team would repeat the process. Focused vigilance, in the morning gave way to bored yawns and the stretching out of kinks after the previous long, shivering night of woeful sleep on the jungle's cold and often wet ground.

The month of September in this part of the world meant steaming heat followed by heavy rains in the late afternoon. The Monsoon Season's on-again/off-again downpours fell on the treetop canopy above them, and indirectly worked their way down to the fetid ground below. There were open spaces in the jungle canopy, but not many. An army could hide unobserved in the vast swaths of jungle and often did.

The tropical rain was moving in but the sunlight that had filtered down through the foliage had the various shades of green vegetation momentarily glistening like precious emeralds. The hothouse light that added flickers of radiance to the colorful and sweet smelling wild orchids and other blossoms peaked through the brush and trees and dazzled the senses.

But this abundant and naturally verdant beauty would be muted in the next downpour; when the wind-whipped rains out of the South China Sea pelted the jungle, its overhead tangle of broad leaves, twisted vines, and scribbled branches would then only make a poor awning.

Like the previous evening the five Rangers would once more be soaked and sitting in wet, soggy soil, struggling through the night and in the early morning hours trying to stay warm until the inevitable heat of day could take over, evaporate the layers of mist, and turn the jungle once again into a living greenhouse.

This was the seasonal Monsoon cycle and directional change in the winds that repeated daily. Sweat, rinse, and soak. Shiver, dry out, and repeat. The dry season wasn't far off and then there would only be the miserable heat.

For these Lurp Rangers there were no tents, shelter halves, or sleeping bags in the field; there were no air mattresses, or even ponchos to keep them dry, warm, or even moderately comfortable on the five-day surveillance and ambush patrols.

What poor and little material comfort there was came in the way of small sections of O-D olive drab colored towels or the short pieces of camouflage poncho liner they used to cover their faces when it was their turn to sleep.

Although the small, wash-cloth sized pieces of camouflaged cloth helped keep the swarms of mosquitoes at bay, they didn't do much to stop the bites or stings from red ants, centipedes, and other painfully annoying insects on the back of exposed necks, ears, or hands.

During the near pitch-black night, when the two-hour guard shift was done, the team member would wake the next man in line and pass over the handset to the team's backpacked radio before settling in to find some something that was a poor substitute for sleep. Sleep, on combat patrols in the jungle, always came in fits and starts, when the jungle wasn't yet a battle zone and something unseen slithered, groaned, or grunted nearby through the thick brush.

The croaks from *Fuck You Lizards* kept some new team members, like Bowman, nervously awake at times while veteran team members and those who'd been, in-country, in the jungle, for any length of time, recognized the offensive sounding calls as little more than a peculiarity.

"Sarge! Sarge!" whispered Bowman to his sleeping Team Leader the first time he'd heard the sound the night before. "I think I hear..."

"It's a lizard," said Carey, without opening his eyes. The lizard was still grunting away.

"A lizard? But..."

"It's a lizard," he said, again. "Don't wake me up again unless it's my turn for guard, you actually see an NVA out on the trail, or something chuffs or growls. You got that, new guy?"

"Yes, sergeant," said the embarrassed FNG.

The uneventful night wore on.

Low or even loud chuffs and growls from the occasional tiger, weren't out of the scope of probability in the Southeast Asian jungle. On other patrols, when the unmistakable sound of one was heard, everyone on a team came awake wide-eyed, on guard, and anxious. Those nights were infrequent, but when they happened, or when a poisonous snake bit someone, or a crocodile stared at you as you crossed a muddied stream, soldiers on both sides of the conflict were reminded that the jungle war was being fought in a zoo without cages.

The miserable nights became the routine until dawn, or what passed for it in the rainy season, as the Lurps rose for the day to continue their patrol.

They were young men, and at times their thoughts wandered to an always better elsewhere before their focus returned to the task at hand, and taking care of the basic necessities.

They knelt when they had to take a piss and ventured out a few meters to take a dump and then bury it while another Ranger kept guard over the activity. Weapons were always kept within reach, regardless of what they were doing.

And now because of the frightened birds that took wing they were hugging the ground, facing the trail from their hide-site, and waiting for the enemy to show. The much too calm jungle, the oppressive heat, and the wait only exacerbated the tension.

Team Nine-One was in position and ready as the war, at least the war they knew was coming towards them.

Chapter 2

The weather was turning, again. The once sunlit afternoon sky, or the little that could be seen through the heavily canopied trees towering above them, was turning grey and foreboding. The jungle was on the verge of being pounded by another seasonal downpour.

Like clockwork, the Monsoon's rain would begin shortly before sunset with a trickle and later there would be another long, miserable night of heavy rain before it pushed on. But that would be later. The *now* was the pending ambush behind enemy lines. The trickling rain was not the problem. There was another storm coming closer.

While there were some who naively believed there were no actual enemy lines in the war in South Vietnam, there were those that knew that the ownership lines in the jungle areas outside of the cities and villages, were clearly defined. The jungle belonged to their enemy. Everyone else was just visiting. While chemical spraying of Agents Orange, Blue and White killed large sections of the Tropical forest and its trees, broadleaf plants, brush, and grasses, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army adapted by moving through these areas under the cover of darkness.

In these remote and troubled regions throughout the four tactical Corps regions of South Vietnam, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army Battalions and Regiments relied on the protection of the seemingly endless stretches of canopied tropical rain forest, swamps, mountains, and caves to hide their bases and covert staging areas. It was their concealed sanctuary, their masked refuge where they planned, prepared, and positioned their forces for coordinated attacks on the villages, cities, and people of the Republic of South Vietnam.

The five Lurps from Team Nine-One were indeed operating behind enemy lines and the well-used, heavily trodden trail they'd found said as much. There was no mistaking the many imprints from the soles of the NVA's soldiers canvas issued boots, nor the deep bicycle tire tracks in the wet or damp orange soil. The NVA were strategically shifting their fighters again and Nine-One had found one of their operational routes. The NVA were on the move.

They were set and ready to ambush a small patrol, and hopefully snatch up an enemy POW or two.

Hot and grubby as he was, Thomas was thinking that a little in-country R&R in Vung Tau was a nice little incentive right about now.

Yep, we bring a stunned or wounded NVA soldier back with us and pack our bags, swimsuit, and sunscreen! Oh Hell, I'll even chase one of the little suckers down and tackle his ass, if I have to!

These five-day long-range reconnaissance patrols in enemy held territory took their toll of these soldiers; physically and psychologically, so the R&R incentive loomed large to these young LRRP/Rangers.

Officially, they were designated as 75th Infantry, U.S. Army Rangers, but were better known as *Lurps*, for the job they did. The initials, L-R-R-P proved too long and awkward for most people to say or spell out, so it became *Lurp*, much in the same way *As Soon As Possible* became abbreviated to *A-SAP*, and the acronym, *REMF* stood for *Rear Area Mother Fucker*. GIs had their own, distinctive lexicon and applied it liberally, especially when it came to REMFs.

Those doing the actual fighting, humping the boonies, slogging through the mud one wet and sucking boot step at a time, and staring into the pitch black jungle at night, swallowing panic at the sound of something or someone, slithering or creeping through the brush, didn't just despise those military personnel working and living in the safer rear area support centers, they envied them. They envied the clean barracks, the access to snack bars and readily available hot pizza, Enlisted, NCO, and Officers' clubs with rock bands and Go-Go girls, and other support services and comforts the likes of which the combat soldiers seldom, if ever, enjoyed.

More so when an inch-long green slime-colored leech attached itself with its teeth to an exposed piece of flesh and gorged and plumped up on a victim's blood, or when a swarm of mosquitoes flew in like determined Kamikazes at night in the jungle and attacked a GI on his eye lid one too many times so that even opening the eyes the next morning became a struggle. The jungle sucked in ways most people could only imagine and not fully comprehend.

But there was pride too in the combat jobs and some distorted braggadocio in the shared misery. In their forward operating basecamp the LRRP/Rangers proudly sported black berets with *Sua Sponte* crests, and the red, black and white 75th Infantry scrolls sewn high on the sleeves of their left shoulders over their parent unit patches to show that they were U.S. Army combat Rangers. The bulk of those serving in combat Ranger units in Vietnam received their training in-country, with any fine tuning coming from MAC-V's Recondo School up north in Nha Trang.

But the clean and decorated jungle fatigues and highly polished boots they wore in the rear areas were for award ceremonies and base camp formations only. On patrol in the jungle, they wore sterile camouflaged fatigues with no patches or symbols of rank to identify them. They camouflaged their faces with green, black, and sand-colored grease paint, camo paint, to better blend into their jungle surroundings on their surveillance or ambush patrols.

Bowman, the new guy, was worried about more than just remaining unseen and unheard by the enemy. What bothered or maybe even worried him more than a little were the Claymore anti-personnel mines that his team leader- the T-L, and his assistant team leader, his A-T-L, Specialist Thomas, had placed and hidden just a few yards off of the trail.

During stateside infantry training he was taught that the minimum safe distance for the back blast for a Claymore was sixteen meters, which was what, forty to fifty feet?

Romeo Company, though, had another take on it.

"Out in the jungle on patrol you'll be lucky if you can maybe see fifteen to twenty yards in any direction. The jungle's thick, which means you don't have the luxury of distance when you're setting up your Claymores," explained Sergeant Rob Shintaku demonstrating the working placement technique during the ambush phase of their training. "So, you set them up twenty feet or so away."

"Twenty feet?" questioned one of the remaining would-be Rangers in Bowman's class with upraised eyebrows and a pretend *I'm not really worried, but damn it, I'm actually worried* tone.

The Ranger trainee doing the asking was a Sergeant E-5 on his second tour of duty. During his first tour of duty he'd served as a combat Engineer and was very familiar with explosives.

Of the forty-seven volunteers that had begun the Company's LRRP/Ranger training and selection process, only seven had remained.

"That's right," said Shintaku.

"Isn't that, like, you know, danger close?"

"You need to be able to keep them close enough to keep an eye on them so Charlie doesn't turn them around on you," said Shintaku. "That's the real danger."

"Okay, but what about the back blast?"

The southern Californian shrugged off the concern. "You angle the mines away from the hide-site, and yeah, you'll feel the heat and force of the blast before you'll hear the BOOM, and it'll be a massive amount of bell ringing in your ears, but, here's the thing; you'll survive, the bad guys don't. Now, let's get started."

To Bowman, the twenty feet, and never mind the fucking *'or so'* distance from the trail was much too close for comfort to safely serve as an effective ambush hide site.

While Bowman still had his concerns about the proximity and placement technique of the anti-personnel mines none of this seemed to bother Carey, Thomas, Doc Ryan Moore, or Jonas Warren, the team's Radio Telephone Operator, the RTO.

"Good Lord!" thought the new guy. Warren is smiling. He's either way too Gung fucking ho or crazy, but then it occurred to Bowman that maybe they all had to be a little gung ho and crazy to be out on patrol behind the lines in the first place. Bravery, or what passed for it, always seemed like a good idea before it was confronted and called into play.

Still, he doubted he'd ever smile at times like these and instead, took in another slow, deep breath, and stared out towards the trail, hoping he wouldn't freeze up when it came to the fight. No, not that. Never that.

The trail the team was monitoring was little over three feet in width at most and, with the exception of an open area beneath the

trees across from the kill zone, it was walled in by heavy vegetation and brush.

Both the trail and the open area below were protected from any aerial observation Scout helicopters or any other low flying aircraft by the heavily foliated canopy, so the NVA Companies and Battalions believed they could move and operate with impunity.

The trail that snaked its way through the jungle wasn't *the* main off-ramp for the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail, but the many boot imprints and deep bicycle tracks showed it to be at least a lesser exit and something Carey knew would be well-worth noting and monitoring when Thomas, who was walking point, found it.

Unable to move large, motorized vehicles through these trails, the Viet Cong and NVA used specially modified bicycles to transport heavy weapons, equipment, and war materials through the jungle maze. The bicycles could cart and carry hundreds of pounds of war materials stacked high through the jungle via the labyrinth of a trail system.

After finding the well-used trail and calling in the find to Romeo Company's Tactical Operations Center, the TOC, Carey set the team up in a small but tight, three hundred-and-sixty-degree perimeter to keep anyone from sneaking up on them. Attacks could come from any direction, so they planned for it accordingly.

Once the hide site was selected, both he and Thomas had crept out closer to the trail to set up the Claymores. They selected two ideal target locations that covered both avenues of approach, and another that split the difference in the center. While one man covered the other they took turns planting the Claymores in the ground. Using the folding scissor-like metal adjustable prongs that were attached to the mines, they tilted the anti-personnel mines up to better aim them to take out anyone caught in their destructive path.

Before returning to the team's perimeter they blanketed the Claymores with clumps of brush and leaves, and covered any disturbed ground or sign they'd left behind. Pulled vines, bent or broken branches, and turned leaves left markers or natural flags for an observant enemy point man, so Carey took his time to carefully cover any traces of their actions.

When it came time to trigger the anti-personnel mines, Thomas would be the one to do it once Carey gave him the nod. A fourth Claymore was set up behind them to protect the way they had come, and if need be, Carey would trigger it, if they, themselves, had been tracked or followed.

Nobody spoke, so communication was kept to an operational minimum with barely audible hushed tone whispers and the use of hand signals. It was rumored that the North Vietnamese Army leaders had placed a bounty on Lurps who they called the 'men with their painted faces.' Whether the rumor of a bounty was true or not, the Lurps weren't taking any unnecessary chances.

A clear and distinct crack of a branch snapping in the near distance, followed by another a few moments later, told the five Americans someone was moving on the trail just east of their position so they remained motionless, breathing slow and steady breaths, much like hunters in a hide, waiting for their prey, and waiting to see who, and how many, would show.

What they could make out of the small section of trail in front of them through the interlaced leaves and branches was empty, and then suddenly it wasn't, as the first enemy soldier came into view and stopped.

Thomas was thinking that the soldier was surprisingly tall for a North Vietnamese soldier and that either he was Chinese, or his Grandfather was.

He was maybe five-eight or nine, and weighed, what the A-T-L estimated was a good one hundred and twenty pounds. He looked like a ranked bantamweight complete with a veteran fighter's confident scowl. His sun-faded, lime green uniform was weathered and worn, and his issued pith helmet was branch scratched, sun mottled, and aged from both the jungle and the war.

A khaki-colored backpack hung from his shoulders and he was gripping a well-maintained Chinese-made Ak-47, which he held at the ready. He had a light brown carrying vest strapped to the front of his chest that held three additional thirty round magazines for his assault rifle. He was ready to fight as he carefully turned and studied the small, natural opening beneath the trees to his right before slowly

sweeping his gaze and assault rifle to the much thicker wall of jungle to his left.

"Spot us, you little peckerhead! Recognize the ambush for what it is and you're history!" thought the Texan, ready to blow him away.

He and the others watched as the lone NVA soldier continued his cautious look around, and then when the enemy soldier seemed satisfied that all was good, he shouldered his weapon, and turned around, and stood facing back down the trail with a heavy, frustrated sigh.

The short wait brought two more North Vietnamese soldiers into view. They, too, had stopped in place on the trail, directly in line with the three hidden anti-personnel mines, and turned and faced back the way they came.

All three of the enemy soldiers were unaware that they were in the Lurp team's ambush kill zone, and only seconds away from dying.

Bowman glanced over to Warren and, for a stunned moment, gaped at him.

The RTO's smile had grown wider.

Chapter 3

With a quite literal death grip on the *clacker*, the Claymore's hand-held triggering device, Thomas was ready to squeeze it three times as fast and as hard as he could to detonate the mines. Although, he was holding the fate of the enemy soldiers in his hands, that wasn't his only pressing concern.

The young soldier from Athens, Texas was fighting the panicky urge to slap at his left trouser leg where something, a large spider, centipede, or scorpion perhaps, had crawled inside his pant leg and was slowly moving up his left calf. He knew it wasn't a leech because it was moving too fast. However, knowing that didn't provide much in the way of consolation.

He squirmed as he felt the tiny needle-like legs tapping against his skin as, whatever it was, was working its way up towards the inside of left knee and thigh.

Tap, tap-tap, scurry, tap, pause, and then once again, tap, tap-tap, scurry, tap, and pause.

Thomas was doing everything he could to keep from jumping up, dropping his trousers, and yelling, '*Fuck, fuckity, motherfucking jungle!*' as he slapped away whatever it was, only he remained motionless. He kept his eyes glued to the jungle trail, where they needed, and had to be. One wrong move would give the team's position away and the gates of hell would burst open in an instant.

He was thinking; *maybe if I was careful enough I could slide one hand down, find the head of whatever it was and pinch it inside the pant leg between my thumb and index finger until it popped like an ugly zit, then maybe I wouldn't get bitten or stung or whatever the hell a large spider, centipede or scorpion did that might not necessary kill me, but would certainly fuck up my day, thank you very much.*

Yeah, thought Thomas, and maybe all would be well, too, if the Viet Cong or NVA patrol didn't spot us before we spring the ambush.

I squeeze the clacker, three times real fast, and KA-BOOM! We eliminate the three little yellor fellers; gather up their weapons, maps, equipment, or any stunned survivors, and then *di-di the fucking mau* to the designated pick up zone.

Job done. Mission completed. Adios, and hopefully not hasta fucking manana!

But Ranger Thomas couldn't kill the spider, centipede, or scorpion because he had to remain calm, and had to keep both hands holding the clacker so he could blow the enemy soldiers away once Carey gave him the nod.

With his eyes on his Team Leader and his peripheral vision on the NVA soldiers out on the trail, the spider, centipede or scorpion that was crawling up his pant leg wouldn't get crushed, pinched, swatted, or flicked away just yet. The pattern continued.

Tap, tap-tap, scurry, tap, and pause. Tap, tap-tap, scurry, tap, and pause.

Whatever it was was now almost up his thigh and his family jewels, and it was scaring the piss out of him. And that's when it occurred to him that there was one thing that might work and he wouldn't have to move all that much to do it.

Putting his weight on his knees and easing his hips up just a bit to find the right angle, he began to urinate. The warm urine spilled down his thigh and pant leg and the steady flow and stream drove the unseen pest back the way it had come in a flooded frenzy.

As good as he momentarily felt there was little in the way of any actual comfort or relief. The three enemy soldiers were still out on the trail in front of them. The bug was the least of his problems.

Come on, Ben! What in the hell are they waiting for? Thomas wondered but the question was soon answered. They were waiting for a pudgy, disheveled looking, moon-faced young soldier, who was caught up in several low-hanging 'wait-a-minute' vines, and struggling to free himself.

The fourth and final NVA soldier's uniform was soaked in sweat in dark blotches and displayed small torn flaps from sharp thorns or broken branches showing that the jungle was just as hard on the NVA and Viet Cong as it had been on the Lurps. His newer looking pith helmet had been knocked askew by low hanging vines and tangle of branches, and had dropped down over his eyes, blocking his vision and a goofy-ass apologetic smile. FNG's apparently were universal.

The bantamweight in the lead was glaring at the sad looking straggler and then muttered something to the soldier that had the two other fighters in the enemy patrol chuckling and slowly shaking their heads.

It made for a good show, and his critics in the small enemy patrol didn't know that they too had an audience.

Three quick squeezes of the Claymore's *clacker* in rapid succession would send the hand-generated electrical charge to the three anti-personnel mines and set them off. Shintaku had taught them that one good squeeze might do it, but three guaranteed it.

"You keep squeezing it until you hear the boom. Got it?"

Thomas did and all of the trainees that went through their Lurp training did as well. This was deadly business.

The coordinated blasts from the three anti-personnel mines would send a combined wall of 2,100-buckshot size ball bearings and a hellish concussive wave of heat from the C-4 explosive that would rip and shred the enemy patrol and bug-infested section of jungle in its path.

Damp and wet as the day had been, the palms of Thomas's hands were unusually clammy. His heart was racing, and the spider, centipede, scorpion, or whatever the hell it was crawling up his leg hadn't helped calm things down.

'Come on! Come on! Come on, Ben! They're right in front of us!' Thomas said to himself, eyeing the kill zone and then his team leader waiting for the signal, but for some reason Carey hesitated.

What the fuck, Ben?

Instead, Carey, who was up on his elbows, looking to his right where the still smiling Jonas Warren had one hand holding his rifle and the other holding the radio's handset ready to call in 'Contact!' once the Claymores were detonated.

Carey turned to Doc Moore, the team's stoic medic, who was next to Warren and was covering their rear, then to Bowman, the new guy, who was covering their nine, and then back to Thomas on his left who was completing the protective circle like critical spokes on a wheel.

They were set, their weapons were ready, and the enemy soldiers were in the kill zone, dead center. Thomas was beside himself and his mind was screaming.

For crying out loud! What are you waiting for, Ben? We can take three of them out with the claymores and maybe even capture the Buddha-looking butterball, if he doesn't catch up to the others in the next few moments. Come on! Come on! Gimme the nod so we can blow them away, you can call for our extraction bird, and we can get the hell out of here. Nod, Ben! Do it! Damn it! Do it! Give me the fucking nod!

But the nod still didn't come. Instead, Carey motioned for Thomas and the others to lower themselves back down as the straggler finally bumbled his way out of the vines and branches that were holding him back, and caught up with the others.

After admonishing him a second time, the frustrated NVA Patrol Leader pivoted back around and led the other three out of the kill zone until, out of view, and further up the trail.

Seriously? What the fuck, Ben? Why did you let that happen? Thomas was frowning at his team leader when, out of the corner of his right eye, he caught new movement on the trail.

He froze as the first in a long and steady line of NVA soldiers quietly began to file by the five prone Lurps following the route of their comrades in the lead had taken.

The file and flow of NVA soldiers moving past their hide site didn't stop. There were no breaks in the seemingly endless enemy line. This was a Company size element or more. These weren't stragglers moving from a lost battle, just disciplined men moving with purpose.

Thomas took in a much slower and steadier breath concentrating on his new task of counting every tenth man to get an approximate average count of how many enemy soldiers there were trooping by, knowing that Carey was doing the same.

Later, if they lived to see a later, they'd compare numbers, if the 70-enemy soldiers he had counted so far, and the others that followed, kept walking. Any sense of bravado had disappeared. All that mattered now was for the long, continuous line to keep moving.

For a moment, as one enemy soldier turned and spit in the team's direction, the Texan held his breath, lost his count, and almost set off the Claymores. When the soldier turned back and kept walking with his shouldered AK-47, the A-T-L breathed a sigh of relief.

The long line of enemy soldiers continued with enemy soldiers toting the heavier RPD machine guns, RPGs, or struggling to push the dozen or more modified and overburden bicycles that were packed with mortar base plates and tubes, wooden boxes of mortar rounds, Chi-com grenades, ammunition, large fifty-pound bags of rice, and other boxed or bagged military supplies, along the muddied trail.

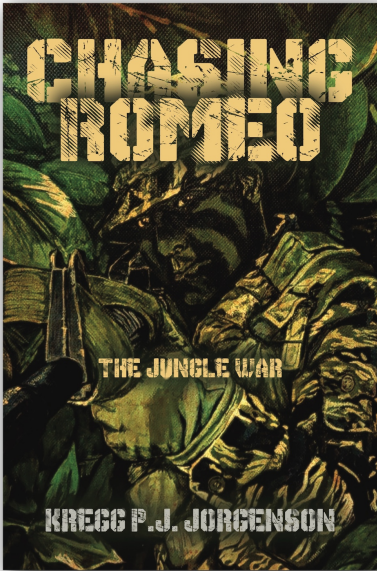
Thomas went back to the count. Taking in a calming breath, he let it out slowly, trying to regulate his breathing and heartbeat that his adrenaline was manipulating. He continued to quietly mouth the NVA's growing numbers. It was now looking to be at least two or three NVA companies, possibly a Battalion. The first four enemy soldiers were only the point element.

The A-T-L still had his hands on the claymore's firing device, but now prayed that Carey wouldn't give him the nod. He felt a slight tremble in his hands, and he fought to steady them as the enemy line trooped on by the hide site in a long, seemingly endless procession.

Keep walking! Don't stop, he said to himself. Jesus, keep fucking walking.

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