

Most people hate loose ends. Me, I don't like loose ends either; but I'm used to 'em. I'll try to tie the ends up regarding the missing P.R.U.s. from Chapter One.

If it **had** happened, they probably would have ended up, of course, "missing in action" (M.I.A.'s) One step down from "killed in action" (K.I.A.'s) On somebody's books, in some government office in the Republic formerly known as South Vietnam.

Their limo chopper would have arrived without much prior notice early that afternoon. "Shark Eleven here, pop smoke!" the helicopter pilot would have advised over our company commo net.

Should that have happened meone within hearing would immediately have pulled the pin on a smoke grenade and the acrid haze would have swirled upwards (red, gray, white, yellow, blue, or green) and the RTO would yell the color into his depressed hand-mike. The pilot then would have known that he had the right location, and as a bi-product of the smoke, he would have been able to have sufficiently judged the wind velocity for his hazardous landing.

We might have already departed the village and might have been about two kilometers into the bush near a clearing suitable for the Huey. We had always taken care to call in our map grid coordinates, in code, after every significant movement, as a matter of self-defense from some other unit's defensive fire; and it would supposedly all have been coordinated from the Battalion Tactical Operations Center (TOC), a bunker on a distant firebase.

Down it would have come; the pilot, ever impatient and anxious to leave, and verbally to the point: "Where are those assholes?"

I would have run over to the Warrant Officer seated on the right and yelled over the scream of the hot turbine that the P.R.U.'s had taken off on their own, like the jackasses they were. And that they probably had no radio.

Off would have blasted the still empty Huey, in a cloud of dust and hot gasses.

I would never have heard from anybody else again about it. Typical Vietnam human accounting.

Nobody in the Company would ever have mentioned it again either, as would have been typical. For once an "incident" was over, we only looked forward to and wondered about the next, like "What Could Possibly Be Next, For Godsake?"

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I don't know if the Wishing Well was "next" in time. Maybe it was.

In I Corps, a field soldier was forced to ingest two types of prophylactic malaria pills, a large red bastard and little white ones. Because two distinct types of nasty mosquitoes were indigenous to the area. While the pills may have prevented malaria, the disease could very well have been the greater good, when compared to the assault they made on the digestive system.

The only drinking water in our life was rainwater and that which could be found in rice paddies, rivers, streams, or village wells.

To prevent another type of slow and horrible death, any such water ingested had to be first treated by the grunt with little purple pills, which had an extremely unfavorable synergistic effect directed towards the human gastro system, when combined with the red and white pills.

Nevertheless, these disks from hell were supposed to make water somewhat potable.

After rainwater, we preferred wells; since we usually didn't see large live things swimming in well water.

The well we came across that day was smack dab in the middle of a totally abandoned, bombed out village about two kilometers east of the Street Without Joy. Another kilometer east, and we would have been dealing with seawater. So it was time for a fillup.

After a hasty basic defensive perimeter was set up (it was a bomb damage assessment "B.D.A." operation), we started looking around for the effects of the shelling, and making our rough inventory to report back to the Battalion Operations or Battalion Intelligence Officer. (The "S-3" or "S-2," respectively.)

Counting human legs and arms found around the village, and dividing by four, had usually resulted in a fair approximation of "bodycount."

The higher authorities, in receiving our reports, didn't seem to care what sex or age, only the "count." (See Chapter Twelve: "The Gravediggers.")

To the way higher-ups, by some circuitous logic and accounting methods, I guess big numbers totally justified the expense of the 105mm and 155mm heavy artillery barrages.

My super-liberal F.O. (Artillery Forward Observer) lieutenant had a lot to say about that, *ad nausium*

So it was also time to fill canteens. Each grunt had four or so plastic, olive-drab one quart canteens. They were fungible, like money. You gave the guy working the rope at the well your empties, and you got the same number back, full. Forget about germs and grit.

You popped in your purple pills and let them sit in the slimy water for a while before drinking. (To this day, I think they may have been nothing but placebos.)

Parenthetically, we were also advised to take multiple large pink salt tablets, consisting of pure sodium chloride in a binder, during the course of the day. The Army later 'fessed up to its knowledge that these pastel cartwheels were the cause of lots of ailments, such as bleeding stomach ulcers and serious hypertension.

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I heard some commotion over at the well. "Hey Chief, look at this shit!" yelled my F.O. lieutenant. (He always called me "Chief", not the Army rank but I assume the Indian type.

I bellied up to the cylindrical concrete wall next to a platoon member sucking greedily from a canteen, and looked down into the abyss illuminated by the lieutenant's flashlight, until I could focus on a sight that made me gag like a dog on a gutwagon.

I greenish torso was floating upright on the darkened waters, and the maggots and other larvae gave a putrid tan stain to the entire rippling surface.

The stench was indescribable.

He, or she, must have been at the well and cut in half by the big 155 howitzers some time ago, the upper half of the shattered body maybe tipping on in, probably with a spectacular splash worthy of a Hollywood special effects technician.

I slapped the canteen out of the swigging private's face, and made him look down there. He started to dry heave immediately. Everybody got empties back, fast.

Typically, we all put the incident behind us; and moved on with our sorry task.

As the guy in charge of the Company in the field is the final appeal authority for a trooper claiming to be ill, or otherwise claiming to be entitled to be transported to a relatively safe firebase, I saw a lot of daily traffic. (Everybody, even the Captain, tries to get out of the field whenever he can.)

Looking back, it was medical and personnel triage at its best.

I have heard of men rubbing the thorny stems of plants, dipped in water-buffalo dung, between their toes, in order to quickly give birth to an ugly and disabling foot infection: a guarantee of at least a month "in the rear with the gear."

I confess to have considered keeping these types out there **with** the infection for so long that I could technically be Court-Martialled for neglect of duty. (Which, in turn could possibly have gotten **me** out of the field for a while.)

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I digress.

The incident of The Sorry Supply Sergeant comes to mind:

I had hated to lose an extremely competent Platoon Leader First Lieutenant, but in all honesty, and with sincere gratitude for having backed me so well and so often, I found myself literally giving him away by highly recommending to the Battalion and Brigade Commanders that this young lieutenant forthwith get his own Rifle Company within the Battalion (which had five line Companies, and a Headquarters Company).

He was given a sister unit, Company __, upon that company commander's departure. He was a natural soldier, and would be able to do a lot more good with a lot more power than he had wielded as one of my lieutenant platoon leaders..

Since we had a battalion commo net, an inter-company communication net was available on our stone-age PRC 25's, merely by changing frequencies. So I would later call him and check out how he was doing once in a while as a company commander. We were friends, and now phone-friends.

One particular scorching afternoon, he says as if in passing: "We're all having our cold beer just now." (Vietnam was a place you could always get a good, **hot** beer.) "You're full of shit!" was my considered response, as he had expected. He laughed and laughed into the handset, and continued to tease.

"Maybe so, but I'm having a cold beer!"

It was true! He went on to explain that he had his company supply sergeant get off his ass and do something positive, for a change.

The supply sergeants, typically born thieves and cultured drunks, stay in the rear with the gear, on the firebases. Their job was to take orders over the company net from the Company Commander or his representative, and fill them - - getting arms, ammo, C-rations, boots, clothes, etc... on the next chopper out to the unit in the bush.

Relatively, they lived the life of Riley: no danger, hot food, cold beer and plenty of sleep and rest. The only time they had to worry was when they pulled bunker duty on the fixed positions of the perimeter of the fire base, a couple of hours every evening. But they didn't have to **dig** the positions each night, as did the guys in the bush.

Firebases were typically located on the top of strategic hills. They usually had an Artillery unit with three or more 105mm or 155mm howitzers firing day and night in support of all the Infantry out there, so they had to be within range of the targets the Infantry guys faced, say within a few miles. Consequently, hundreds of fire bases were all over South Viet Nam like spots on a Dalmation, and were given names, like "Landing Zone Dragon" or "Fire Base Jackson." They were also used as the supply relay points, from the big bases and depots, to the ground troops like us.

Accordingly, we all rode the supply sergeants hard; out of jealousy probably.

The new __ Company C.O. went on and on about how his supply sergeant took his very own money and every week made a point of traveling by admittedly dangerous convoy on the Street Without Joy (the infamous Highway One) to the nearest big small town, only to purchase a huge block of ice, protecting it with burlap, sawdust and canvass bags, until the next resupply chopper was about to leave the firebase. The sergeant waited down at the landing zone and loaded smaller canvass bags with ice and beer, such that each and every __ Company grunt out there could at least get one cold one at least once a week.

The "beer ration" in I Corps at that time was about three beers per day per man. By keeping the names of deceased and evacuated wounded on my lists, I was about to get mine up to about six per day, until I got caught. (Another story of its own.)

I had been ratted out by some religious fanatic who belonged to one of those organized religions which was against drinking, gambling and dancing. Probably it was against sexual intercourse even between married couples, because that looks too much like dancing.

Parenthetically, our Company would have had to be about five hundred men strong order to justify those seven beers.

Anyway, I was bound to get caught eventually; and it was hell carrying a week's supply on our backs in addition to the other seventy-or-so pounds of equipment, food, water, and ammunition. (The RTOs had an extra twenty-or-so pounds to lug, God bless 'em.)

One day a father of one of the enumerated individuals penned me a letter in red ink, that how dare I keep his son's name on such a list. (I had obviously been dimed out by the son's friend, who probably had written the old man in good faith.)

Since a copy went through the Battalion, I was ordered to write an apology, but I couched same in terms that I knew that his son would have wanted, and took care to give permission for my own name to be used in the future if necessary for such an important end. (Sort of a Beverage Last Will and Testament, with the Company survivors as beneficiaries.) I never heard back.

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Anyway, I immediately swung into action after being told such a fanciful tale (about ale) by my friend: I took care to personally speak with Sergeant ____ and ordered him to proceed forthwith to __ Company's supply area at the Herge firebase, and instructed him to set things up for **us** the very next resupply chopper.

He initially sounded incredulous and awfully "iffy" on the radio; yet I set my mouth for a cold beer next Wednesday: Great Expectations.

You guessed it. Wednesday came and no cold beer with the resupply. Only my CP group knew of my expectations, and they had been unanimous in their opinion that Sergeant ____ would crap out. (But none of them gave each other odds that he wouldn't regret it until his fuckin' dying day.)

So even before the chopper pulled its pitch and disappeared into the Wednesday noonday sky, I called Sergeant ____ and calmly said "Get a basic load (of ammunition and supply) and be on the next chopper." He stammered and I hung up: "Out."

He had to draw his full field gear, rucksack and all; put on his generic jungle fatigues (none of us ever wore rank or name while in the bush) and, most important, put his ass on the line with the rest of us.

When he arrived the next week, he tried frantically to report to me, ostensibly to explain himself and maybe beg for mercy; but I told Prince to physically intercept him and inform him the he was now an Assistant Platoon Sergeant with the Third Platoon, which by not so sheer coincidence set to go out on a night ambush ("snake") while the rest of the Company formed an extensive perimeter and began digging in for the night in relative safety and comfort.

American troops out there typically patrolled by day and set up defensive positions in the bush at night, with one or two snakes strategically placed. A **lot** more on that later: like, one of the reasons we lost the war.

So he had his first night out with the boys, and I was confident that it would be a special and graphic hell for him when I saw his overloaded body jump off the hovering Huey helicopter and tumble into the rice paddy earlier that day.

You can pretty well gauge an Infantryman's life expectancy by the way he carries his load and equipment. Everything on him was fresh factory green, but nothing fit. He was clearly destined for Infantry misery.

The next morning, he again tried to level best to seek a reconciliation, but was intercepted by Red and sent back to the Third Platoon. (I had my own ambush already set up for him.)

After a few days, the Third Platoon convinced their Lieutenant to ask me why the "Third Herd" was being picked on. Did it have something to do with "that asshole supply sergeant?" Night ambushes, the worst patrol terrain, and the hind end of everything for almost a week. It took almost a Third Platoon mutiny for me to call Sergeant ____'s torment to an end.

After then being ordered to get on the next chopper back to the fire base by his Platoon Leader, he **still** asked to see me.

He headed up the slope to my shaded C.P. position and I saw out of the corner of my eye that he had lost about twenty unnecessary pounds. His ill-fitting gear was really chaffing the hell out of the sunburned and blistered flesh that remained.

He was trying to select the right words to assure me that there would be cold beer every week, every week, well into the millennium. He seemed to be particularly careful to **not** select the **wrong** words.

I assumed the posture of being preoccupied with something else on the radio and said "yea, ok, go home and call me later."

I never once took any of his plethora of radio calls from the rear, but often heard Prince say something over the radio like "well, it didn't be!" with a thumbs up gestured in my direction, during the next week or so.

As you can guess, whenever physically possible, there was a cold beer for every man in D Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Light Infantry Brigade on that and every succeeding chopper resupply flight during my relatively long tenure in the Republic of South Vietnam.

I remain convinced nothing short of this would have worked, and we HAD to have some cold beer.

Back to that "well" story. Well, It was long forgotten and, we thought, put behind us; but not for the unfortunate soldier who had been greedily gulping from that first contaminated canteen. I forgot his name, but if I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget his emaciated, red face.

I can place it a week or two after Sergeant ____ went back, since I was definitely having a cold one, when the First Platoon Leader and our in-house medic brought him to me, their hands under his armpits - - supporting him as he drew near. They were both sympathetic yet unable to technically recommend his petitioned transport to the rear for medical reasons, since they saw no real symptoms from the complaining patient. He just looked bad and acted "slow".

I never connected him to the well until he sneezed practically in my face.

Literally hundreds of tiny worms of obvious multiple lineage flew onto us all. Upon inspection, he had even more tiny worms coming out of his nose, mouth, ears, eyes and probably every other orifice of his now deteriorating body. As a fact, they might have been literally eating him alive.

I heard second hand that he went to Okinawa for some specialized treatment or even Voodoo, but never learned of his eventual fate.

But I'm sure he **wished** he never had the "wishing well" that sorry day, somewhere to the East of the Street Without Joy, in the country then known as the Republic of South Vietnam.

end of chapter two