

CHAPTER 12 - THE GRAVEDIGGERS

You have to admit that I've gone easy on the gore during the last few Chapters, so I'm giving fair warning that if its around lunch time, especially if you plan to have Spanish omelet or something like pigs feet, have lunch first and read this tomorrow.

Whenever I see a tombstone, I think of Stanley and Laza.

I really liked Marlon Brando's performance as "Stanley" in "Streetcar Named Desire," and think of his portrayal of Fletcher Christian in "Mutiny on the Bounty" in association with my "Beardbuster" Chapter.

But I refer here to Sylvester Stallone's early appearance as "Stanley" in the 60's film "Lords of Flatbush," specifically the part where "Bernstein the Jeweler" sucked him into buying the \$1,600.00 engagement ring with money he had saved up for a hot rod. The protagonist was the very pregnant and whining "Frannie", egged on by her friend "Annie".

After Stanley finally gave in, he ordered Frannie and her cohort outside the shop "to see how the ring looks in the dark or whatever."

Young Bernstein was licking his chops over the sale, and was grinning like a Cheshire Cat when Stanley got right in his face and softly announced, "If you ever show that girl a \$1,600.00 ring again, you know what's going to be written on your tombstone? 'I was dumb enough to show Frannie _____ a \$1,600.00 ring!'"

This unforgettable Infantry incident must have occurred very early on in my tenure as D Company's "old man," since no experienced (or self-respecting) Company Commander would have stood for it.

I must confess that at the time I was eager to please my bosses, since I wasn't yet familiar with the whole score over there. I naively believed that if we hustled and followed orders down the line, we would be better off in the long run. I thought that if the Battalion staff got a windfall in terms of "kills", they might be sympathetic and allow us to rest for a couple of days.

I should have known that the only place one could possibly find "sympathy" in the Republic of South Vietnam was in Webster's Dictionary, somewhere between "shit" and "syphilis".

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The Company was on the move under full rucksacks since early that morning, having had a sunrise chopper resupply of beer, ammo, food and God-knows-what.

It was mid-to-late afternoon, and we were exhausted. The straps of our rucksacks were cutting into our shoulders, and the insects hovering around us were regrouping for the night assault.

We had set up the night before just yards from the South China Sea in sandy soil, a few kilometers east of the Redball (Highway One, aka the "Street Without Joy." Every attempt to dig an adequate protective hole was frustrated by the viscous sandy earth, the sides caving in and filling the bottom. Our RON (Rest Overnight) site was located just beyond the first treeline separating the white sandy beach from the rest of the steaming coastal countryside.

Since our marching orders took us almost due north, we paralleled the sea and trudged the soft ground, which never got any firmer. Our ankles and calves were screaming for mercy under the heavy loads.

To make matters worse, there hadn't been a cloud in the sky all day, and our water supply was down to about a third of a canteen across the board. No stream, rivers or rice paddies were in our path. As one of my classmates had commented regarding his bad luck and abject hunger during the survival phase of Ranger training: "I couldn't catch anything, and nothing would die!" We would have to make do with good ol' hot Canadian beer.

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Just when I began entertaining thoughts of giving up the ghost as far as trying to get to our destination, and started looking for a good area to “crash” (settle down, dig in and relax) for the night, I received a call from the S-3 (Battalion Operations Officer, a Major) advising us to hold up and sit tight for a while, and to await further instructions from my boss.

A chopper was flying back and forth at about three thousand feet, and somewhat to the northwest of our position.

We all just fell down wherever we could find shade from the ever-lengthening shadows of the tall pines. Nothing happened for about a half-hour, and I thought we were home free. I opened an olive-drab painted can of “C-Rations - Ham and Lima Beans” (known within the trade as “Ham and Mother-Fuckers.”)

After ingesting some of those fat and slippery beige beans packed in white grease, and commencing my search for the illusive ham, the PRC 25 radio started to crackle again, and my ever-loyal and long-suffering RTO (Radio-Telephone Operator), Mitch took the call.

My Battalion-net RTO Mitch had a Masters Degree (or maybe even a Ph.D.) from some college in the Midwest. Considering all the exemptions available for the rich and/or educated, how Mitch ended up trudging next to me in that hellhole also had to be a rhetorical question.

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His major was in something like Social Studies, and he had left a good position with some State social work agency for infinitely more humble duty. Mitch’s favorite jokes were: “What does a woman do the minute she gets home from the Battered Wife Shelter? - The dishes, if she knows what’s good for her.” And: “What do you say to a woman with two black eyes? Why say anything, she’s already been told twice?” (I don’t know if there were “Battered Wife Shelters” back then, but that’s basically the way I remembered his jokes.)

Mitch was obviously a very intelligent guy, and he was a great RTO. He was uncanny at impersonating me. I noticed that nine times out of ten he even used exactly the same words I would have used in response to some inquiry or order. While wading across a rice paddy or being otherwise unduly exposed, he would take the calls himself and handle them just right, instead of running up to me with that big swinging whip antenna, and giving Charlie the target he had been holding out for. A lot of names on The Wall are those of small unit leaders who took “urgent” calls from a demanding boss while crossing a rice paddy.

Parenthetically, Mitch could do “the whistle” just right, too; and he knew how to piss off and handle the “Hot Mikel” creeps and other staff members.

Choose your bodyguards and henchmen for their crudeness, viciousness and boldness; and your RTO’s for their intelligence and being resourcefull. The Infantry School at Fort Benning should provide a textbook containing these nuggets. I would write one, but no hopes for money.

I guess in order to maintain his “dignity,” Mitch always called something by its “other-than-Army,” generic name. He would call in a “lavender” smoke canister instead of “purple;” and his entrenching tool was his “little shovel.”

Mitch took the detailed radio message that afternoon, but it was so outrageous that I called back my Battalion Commander (a Lieutenant Colonel) to confirm its meaning.

My boss had spotted a bunch of “fresh” graves in a nearby village cemetery, and ordered us to make a detour to dig them up, disinter the bodies, and determine if any of the corpses could “possibly” be counted as valid “kills” for the glory of the Battalion.

Now, think about it. This action was destined to really endear us to the Vietnamese people and win lots of minds and hearts. Let's all desecrate their graves and dig up their relatives for the "count", which we celebrated.

I didn't think of it at the time, but the basic fallacy staring me in the face was that the bodies probably had already been counted by some other unit just days before. Getting credit for the double count would be akin to a Federal Civil Servant "double dipping".

Moreover, characterization of these darker-than-usual mounds of dirt as "fresh", turned out to be totally inapplicable to the underlying objects, which were not very "fresh" at all, considering the heat and humidity. -3-

Of course I should have protested and conjured a way to avoid this disgusting and probably illegal task; or "in the alternatively" (as said in the legal profession), waited for darkness and called in some phony information.

The whole thing was going to be bullshit anyway. But as I said, I was the new boy on the block, and still green as grass when it came to the clear thinking and solid reasoning required to pull off such a subterfuge.

We saddled up and headed due west for the graveyard. Before long we could see multiple dark mounds in a sea of beige bulges, even from my vantage point on the far edge of the cemetery. I noticed that some of those "fresh" graves had no headstones at all, and other dark mounds were located adjacent to old, rather crude cement tombstones, like those in a horror movie, most sitting at angles.

After we established a rough defensive perimeter, scores of grunts set out digging like hell with their "little shovels." Laza and I bellied up to a fresh grave in front of an old large gray rectangular tombstone sporting some indecipherable foreign inscription, with a fresh grave smack out in front. We surmised that the locals sometimes buried their familial dead on top of each other, a common practice even in our Midwest.

There was a big difference from Stateside afterlife practice. After Laza started scattering dirt and commenced his cursing, we learned that the Vietnamese peasants use something like a Hefty bag as the coffin, and the dark plastic shroud materialized after only a few strokes of Laza's hot entrenching tool. His next stroke cut into the bag, and the smell was overpowering, triggering two grown men to vomit their white beans and ham right then and there.

At that same retching instant came the "Blam! Blam! Blam!" of three 82mm mortar rounds exploding in the middle of the cemetery, which had obviously been previously registered by the enemy mortar crew. Everybody fell down where they had stood, and several automatic rifles opened up on us from the dense treeline to the east of the cemetery.

My particular tombstone took the brunt of that heavy automatic, which struck with such ferocity that the guy had to be determined to eat right through it to get to me. I fell down behind the thin stone next to the partially exposed plastic mass, and began frantically digging my way under the cadaver with my bare hands and elbows, as pieces of cement rocketed off the old tombstone. Laza was nowhere to be seen, and I was choking on my own vomit and burrowing my way under the foul smelling body at the same time.

The rounds ceased hitting my tombstone for about five seconds, then started up again once I moved; and there was no way I could have returned fire or rolled out and away. With that in mind, I somehow was able to catapult the eighty-or-so pound body up and away from the grave, and watched it being immediately chewed up by the automatic weapon fire, causing a new and more intense wave of stench, and second episode of choking nausea to add to my misery and tighten up my throat to the point of suffocation.

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I felt some sort of putrid fluid all over my arms and chest, and couldn't begin to control my convulsions after this quick inventory.

Luckily, within not more than a couple of minutes, the Viet Cong shooters took off. Miraculously, not one of our guys were wounded, except for their pride (which can grow back.)

I stood up, looked around, and dry heaved until I fell back onto my knees, relying upon the shattered tombstone for support. Someone - I would guess Laza - was laughing in the background.

We all beat feet and made a hasty retreat to the east for about a half-kilometer, and then regrouped, took headcount and inventory, and headed north again until I could find a decent place for the night defensive perimeter. The whole time we were thanking God that our opponents were not NVA, who do not run off but stay and fight, and I was cursing myself for letting it happen in the first place.

I couldn't get away from the unbelievable smell that evening, and poured mosquito repellent and every other scented liquid all over myself, including several cans of Canadian beer. That was my supply of liquid. Laza had something like Old Spice, and anointed me like a Catholic priest, while laughing his ass off.

About twenty minutes after settling down in the final rays of the setting sun, Mitch received a call from the S-3, and in impersonating me to a "T", responded, "This is Nefarious Six, hold one, over." He turned to me and said, with very sad eyes: "The Major wants to know about the bodies."

I screamed at Mitch, "Fuck those bodies!!"

Mitch depressed the handset and transmitted slowly, "Lightning Four, this is Nefarious Six. Fuck those bodies, out!!" He was leaning against a tree, and let his exhausted body slowly slide down onto the soft earth. The radio crackled with the Major's irate voice, but nobody really paid the slightest attention.

As I said, all this took place just a handful of kilometers east of the Street Without Joy, and I was beginning to see just why they called it that.

end of chapter twelve