

CHAPTER 17 - THE MONSOON

“THE CLOUDS ADVANCE LIKE RUTTING ELEPHANTS,
ENORMOUS AND FULL OF RAIN. THEY COME FORWARD
AS KINGS AMONG TUMULTUOUS ARMIES; THEIR FLAGS
ARE LIGHTNING, THEIR THUNDER IS THEIR DRUM.”

- - - by the Poet KALIDASA, India, 15th Century.

The word “monsoon” comes from the Arabic “mausium”, which sounds like “nausium”. From May or June through August or September, winds from the southwest bring heavy and constant rains throughout Southeast Asia.

Monsoon winds constitute one of the largest weather systems in the world, and are a major part of the global heat transfer system which keeps this planet habitable. Without the monsoons, much of the earth would be exposed to our sun’s rays with attendant atmospheric filtering in a manner which would cause some land masses to burn with heat and other terrain to crack from unbearable cold.

The monsoon therefore, is a heat engine - - one hell of a cycle of air shoved around by temperature gradients, caused only in part by the actual tilt of the earth on its axis. The “Coriolis Effect” from our planet’s spin is yet another contributor.

I found the scientific studies and statistics very complex, but somewhat understandable. The juxtaposition of the sun and the earth is not all that hard to visualize and conceptualize. I was once surprised by the statement of a so-called “certified” grade school teacher who had taught my kid’s class, that the reason South America experiences winter while we have summer is simply because it is a “lot further from the sun at the time.” Wow! And we taxpayers actually pay people like that.

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The monsoon has been dubbed by Asians the “verdict of the gods” since if it arrives late, the resultant drought will cause severe famine. If the monsoon is early or too intense, rampant flooding and storms will cause famine and violent deaths. The very survival of half the world’s population is directly linked to such monsoon activity.

It will rain for weeks at a time, until the ground swells with epidemic crawling and swimming life, and the bamboo walls of hootches become slick with thick green and gray slimy mildew. If you are in the area, you will become consumed with hopes for warm sunlight and dry earth.

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Of course, all that technical business about monsoons is purely academic, unless you happen to be *out* in one, with only a poncho liner between you and the elements. Like everything else in life.

The Vietnamese farmers and other Asian outdoor people surely consider monsoons somewhat of a nuisance. However, they are accustomed to them, and take them in stride. They know which simple protective measures will ameliorate the adverse effects on their persons and property.

These people have dry and warm homes, albeit ever so humble, to crash in each evening. They can dry out their skin and clothing and sit down to a hot supper every night. They know how to use anything available to their advantage. I have seen them walk along wearing just one giant elephant-ear plant leaf as expedient yet effective raingear.

But the grunts in the bush during a monsoon were destined for a special type of misery. And of course, such was the case for D Company, which as expected spent the entire monsoon of mid-1969 out there.

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Ask any grunt whether he would swap his time destined to be spent in the bush for prison time. He would trade his stint in the bush during a monsoon for even Turkish prison time.

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Walk around in wet clothing for an hour and feel really refreshed. Walk around in wet clothing for twelve hours and experience discomfort. Wear wet clothing for two months, and you will find yourself right up against the Thin Red Line of insanity.

At first the novice grunt would attempt to stay dry by donning his issue “poncho liner” of that era. The Army poncho liner consisted of a square piece of foul-smelling plastic/asbestos or somethin’ with a hole in the middle for the head, with a drawstring hood sporting a metal slip-knot device sure to drive one wild and eventually split his rain-softened fingernails. The material was impervious to water, wind, and probably molten lead.

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Unfortunately, the poncho liner didn’t “breathe,” and was self-defeating because when worn in warm climates it immediately converted itself into a portable sauna - - as real estate brokers and appraisers would say, its “highest and best use.”

After such use, the next best use was a tossup between wrapping fish and carrying corpses. The poncho served as a very tangible statement of Murphy’s Law.

Poncho liners did, however, make excellent roofing material. They would have, that is, if someone could have found a way to plug up the hooded holes in the center and make the entire square watertight. This might have been possible if one had a merchant marine’s mastery of knots and a good second-hand blowtorch.

A grunt was well advised to kiss any underwear and his socks good-bye during the monsoon. Retention of water on the body’s outermost dermal layer was an absolute and unconditional

guarantee of “jungle rot” -- of course, that’s just the layman’s term.

The story goes that the Company Commander proudly announces: “Men, I have good news today. Today, we *all change underwear!* [A happy cheer goes up.] Jones, you change with Ryan; Ryan, you change with Jackson, . . . ”

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Luckily, I was a bona fide graduate of the United States Army Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia. As such I had already resigned myself to forego any attempt at staying dry once I felt the first drop of monsoon rain. I already well knew that any contrived measure to achieve such creature comfort would be not only futile, but eventually turn into a self-inflicted wound.*

*We seem to learn only from adversity, failure and mistakes, don’t we? And then only *some* of the time. I look back at the shallow rewards and perks earned from successful legal cases, projects and other undertakings in life. Their benefits are eclipsed by the hard lessons learned from *bad* decisions, impulsive behavior, and woeful lack of proper preparation. *Those* lessons hit you like a hammer, and you either “learn”, or you repeat the mistakes. When money is earned or status is achieved from easy success, it is tantamount to having Caesar lay dimestore plastic laurels on your head while you admire your beautiful house of cards. (Even Julius Caesar failed to learn from success, and had failed to notice the treachery of his henchmen --- to the point that he actually expected Brutus to remain loyal to him as he asked with his dying breath: “Et tu, Brutus?” Caesar was shocked when Brutus mocked him with a smirk: “No man, I ain’t ‘et’ nothin’!”)

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Consider the inexperienced grunt’s unfounded reliance upon the efficacy of the Army issue “blow up” air mattress. (I just hope the military-industrial complex spread the wealth around from *that* item.) It was an extra five pounds or so to hump, and the effort and time to blow it up at night and deflate it in the morning would have been far and away better spent getting some sleep in the dirt. (And five pounds could be almost an extra six-pack of beer in the rucksack.)

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When the first drops of the monsoon rains hit, the smart grunt would shuck his socks and throw them away, color in a day on his “shorttimer calendar”, and stuff it inside a plastic bag along with his rabbit’s foot, cigarettes, and Ursula Andress Playboy centerfold. Now that’s the professional and approved military way to prepare for the rainy season. It’s all one *can* do, anyway.

Having carefully followed this procedure, the soldier next should have leaned back and contemplated the negative impact of the opaque sky on his air support and chopper resupply. Grounded pilots love monsoons, and many become graduate alcoholics by anchoring themselves to the officer’s club bar for weeks at a throw during the rainy season.

Speaking of air support, a grunt in I Corps should have also considered the upside of this hiatus in “death from above,” on the North Vietnamese Army Regulars, who at that very minute were probably jockeying for position on the Ho Chi Minh Trail like runners at the Boston Marathon. The NVA soldiers would smile at the overcast sky and anxiously await Comrade Nguyen’s firing of the starting pistol.

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I tried to think of one positive thing to say about the monsoon, but failed.

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I will not get into the gory details of the spectacular infections and festering diseases I had triaged for possible medical evacuation during this inordinate period of dampness, despair, and dermatology. Nor will I dwell on the monsoon’s negative impact on morale, “esprit de corps,” paper products of every nature, and tobacco items.

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The “incident” which occurred during the monsoon that comes to mind is that involving a real character, whom I shall never forget, my Battalion Sergeant Major.

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Every Infantry Battalion has a senior non-commissioned officer, its “Sergeant Major.”

His insignia of rank is a set of three stripes with three rockers underneath, and a star in the middle. Whereas, the top sergeant at the Company level, its “First Sergeant,” has the stripes and rockers with a diamond in the middle.

First Sergeants are required by Army Regulations to kiss Sergeant Majors’ asses at least once on weekdays and twice on weekends and holidays.

The only Sergeant Major I ever got along with in my Army career was the one from my Battalion, during the monsoon of 1969. He was a prince among men, and a king among princes, as far as I was concerned.

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Our Battalion Sergeant Major appeared to be perhaps half-Native American (you know, like an Indian). He was stocky, and kept his gray hair in a classic crew cut, with “white sidewalls” (shaved head over the ears with no sideburns.) I had first noticed him as always sitting like a stone gargoyle at the side of my Battalion Commander in the command-and-control Huey as it roared by or hovered over our site.

In fact, he was right there grinning like a Cheshire Cat when my Battalion Commander and I had our little helmet-throwing episode (Chapter ____); and he seemed to really be enjoying that show. During the time of the monsoon, the Sergeant Major had dismounted the Huey for some reason or another, and ended up being stuck out in the field with me and my Company for almost a week.

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I remember that he used to say “F’rChris’Sake!” a lot; and remember that he was mouthing it with a broad smile while our colonel and I engaged in that lid-throwing incident.

During the first couple of days out there with us, he did what all good Sergeants Major should do, he took the opportunity to visit with the enlisted men from the platoons, monitor them, and professionally guide them, giving them the benefit of his sage and experienced counsel. He also drank up a lot of our beer.

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But mostly he hung around me and my unique C.P. group, like a moth attracted to the light, bitching and awaiting a break in the weather, “F’rChris’Sake.”

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He and I talked a lot, and even shared digging and sleeping in the same defensive hole every night. We each went through our entire repertoire of jokes and anecdotes. At least I went through mine.

Red and Prince were buggin’ me to let him know that he was “fucked up to a farethewell” simply because he apparently didn’t realize that he was wearing the “Americal” Division’s official patch, the four silver stars of the Southern Cross on a dark blue shield, on the *wrong* shoulder of his jungle fatigues; and that everybody seemed for some reason to notice this unforgivable offense.

If we grunts *had* such unit patches in the field, they would have been worn on our *left* shoulders, where soldiers are authorized to wear their *current outfit’s* designation. If one had served in combat with a unit *previously*, that unit’s patch belongs on his *right* shoulder.

While in the field, we were sent (somewhat) clean generic jungle fatigues each week. They bore no rank, name, or patch of any nature, for obvious reasons. But the Sergeant Major, performing basically RAMF duty, hadn’t planned on being stuck out there with us. So he was wearing his “rear area” fatigues with the “subdued” gray and black insignias, and Americal Division’s patch.

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The official 1969 U.S. Army press-release write-up for the Americal Division went like this:

Born in the steamy jungles and mountains of New Caledonia during World War II, the Americal Division is the Army’s only named Division on active duty. It is also the largest Infantry division operating in South Vietnam, with 3 light Infantry brigades and a squadron of armored cavalry. The current Americal Division began in Vietnam as Task Force Oregon in April 1967, marking the first time that Army troops were employed in I Corps. The Division is under the operational control of the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force, and is the only Army unit that works directly for the Marine Corps. The rugged terrain of the area worked by the Americal Division runs the gamut from marshy,

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coastal lowlands to triple canopy jungle on steep mountain slopes, and contains elements of the 2nd and 3rd North Vietnamese Army Divisions besides the Viet Cong guerrillas and main force units.” [from Tour 365, For Soldiers Going Home: 1969]

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Red and Prince couldn't contain themselves about "the patch." Yet despite all their guts and courage, they seemed afraid to personally confront the Sergeant Major regarding his supposed transgression.

There came a time when I got tired of their nonsense, and (tactfully) blurted, "Hey, Sergeant Major, you really fucked up! You let some dumb asshole sew your Americal patch on the wrong shoulder."

He squinted and said, "No, F'rChris'Sake, I was with the Americal in New Caledonia." This *had* to make the Sergeant Major the true "Old Man" of the Battalion, and perhaps the entire United States Army.

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The next day, with the rain continuing to fall alternatively at rates between light drizzle and arc-building deluge, we saddled up and walked west toward a wide, fast-flowing jungle river. Across the river was a dense hill which the map indicated sharply rose from the river westward to a height of about 500 feet.

We arrived at that river about noon, and could see over the gnarly mangrove-like treeline on our side, that the hill was triple-canopy lush jungle. It's never good to be exposed across something like that, especially during the monsoons.

Any enemy taking up position in that dense rise would enjoy elevation, concealment, and most probably, good cover to boot. If the whole 2nd North Vietnamese Army was dug in on that hill, we wouldn't know it. Moreover, we wouldn't be able to get the necessary air support in that weather to fry it with napalm.

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I quickly ordered the lead platoon to change its movement to due south, along our side of the treeline. The old Sergeant Major and I briefly had brainstormed our predicament, and he concurred that it would be best for us and the rest of the Company to stay put until the lead platoon had made significant progress.

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No sense in not taking advantage of having a guy right next to me who had been in 3 times as many wars as I, with 5 times as much military service. I wasn't proud. Frankly, I wished he could have stayed with us the rest of the year.

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Then it happened.

Six or eight automatic weapons opened up from God-knows-where on the side of that mountain, with a couple of hundred rounds scattering everywhere, seemingly at once.

We all fell down and I got on the horn and did my best to get as many of our abundant M-60 machineguns down along that treeline as I could, so their 7.62mm massive rounds could begin cutting away the dense forest and keeping the enemy's heads down.

I did a fifty yard dash under full field equipment from the area of the C.P. group up to the treeline itself.

As I pulled out my heavy, steamy binoculars, probably the type issued in New Caledonia around thirty years before, a couple of those hot AK47 rounds zoomed right by my head.

Instead of simply dropping down, I made a beeline at full speed south by southeast through the gnarly entanglement, and seconds later was virtually clotheslined by a knotted hardwood overhanging branch. I took the blow full force smack on the bridge of my nose. I saw my feet jump out from under me, chest high, and I fell full force with the small of my back striking a sharp stump.

If you've ever had the ropes of your hammock snap, or had someone pull a chair out from under you, you know the feeling. Complete paralysis of the lower body for about five minutes, and you struggled to get your wind.

That, coupled with at least a pint of blood pouring from my nose onto my T-shirt, made the pathetic scene complete.

I had both hands over my nose and mouth, and was gasping for air, when I noticed Laza and the Sergeant Major coming at me bent over and at full gallop, like Dallas Cowboy tackles. I heard the Sergeant Major yelling: "Get his gear off, F'rChris'Sake!"

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Laza fumbled away, working the straps of my rucksack and load-bearing equipment around my elbows, which were joined in front, since I was trying in vain to stop the unbelievable gushing of blood from my nose with my palms.

They worked in tandem and put their shoulders under my armpits, and started dragging me due east. I was impressed! Laza was yelling "Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus!" I tried to speak and the Sergeant Major, in an unbelievably calm and soothing voice, said: "Don't try to talk, son." Then he was yelling: "Get that fuckin' Medic, F'rChris'Sake! Where's that asshole 'Doc'?"

They laid me behind some grey slimy boulders, and my drug-addicted Medic started fishing through his greasy bag, most probably for a scalpel and ball-point pen, muttering something about a tracheotomy, which is drastic but necessary emergency first aid when one's air-passages are closed off above the throat. The incoming rounds had stopped, probably because the whole affair was just a local VC hit and run. Of course, the rain picked up right about then and started pounding at our shivering bodies.

By that time I had my breath back, but very little feeling in my legs. So I sat bolt upright and started pulling off my T-shirt and wiping off the blood clotting on my face, the heavy rain splashing it all over hell. Laza was still mouthing, "Oh Jesus!" "Oh Jesus!" The Sergeant Major was looking suspiciously at me, squinting and with his head cocked to one side, like my dogs do when they are trying to figure something out.

I said, "Fuck, I ran into a tree!" and continued wiping my face and rubbing my dead legs.

Laza just stared at me, blinking, his mouth agape. Of course, with the M-60s going crazy and

with one guy really hit in the leg, things were going on all around us. But I focused on the old Sergeant Major, who was now walking around like a rooster or something, going: “Awk! Awk! Awk!”

After a couple of minutes, I could get up and test my wobbly legs. Laza ran back for my equipment, and Doc and Sergeant Major were busy attending to the wounded grunt and arranging for a dustoff (emergency helicopter medical evacuation). Those medevac pilots wouldn’t let a little rain stop them, they just took a little longer during the monsoon.

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During a brief break in the weather in the morning the next day or so, and in a much safer location, the Sergeant Major bolted for the hovering command and control chopper, saluted the Battalion Commander seated at the helm, and climbed aboard. I was right there behind him, and

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reached up and shook his hand as the Huey pulled its pitch, and yelled something like: “Hey, I really want to thank you and Laza for what you did the other day.”

The old Sergeant Major threw back his head, smiled and went, “F’rChris’Sake!”

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Looking back thirty years or so now on that seemingly endless monsoon in the country formerly known as the Republic of South Vietnam, I find myself paraphrasing William Bendix, who said at the end of every episode of “The Life of Riley,” something like, “What a revolting development that friggin’ ‘monsoon thing’ turned out to be!”

But mainly, my thoughts go back to the old Sergeant Major, and his truly magical presence during my temporary paralysis; as he hovered over me and the water streamed off his camouflaged helmet.

end of chapter seventeen

