

Be Prepared

Every patrol has its moments of tension: sometimes it's a dark area in the brush about 150 meters away that looks out of place, and you don't remember seeing anything like that on the day patrol a few days ago.

Now it is dark and the moon has just begun to climb on the southeast horizon. Could this thing be moving? I better turn the scope over to Fred and ask him to look over the tree line near the village; perhaps he might notice the same thing. Most of the time the enemy will not venture out while the moon is overhead; they choose to travel under a cloak of darkness or heavy monsoon rains. If they travel while the moon is present, they either have lots of armament, outnumber our patrol, or they are high on drugs. Whatever the reason, it's not usually a good sign for the patrol, and the Viet Cong really doesn't give a damn.

Sometimes it's just a bad feeling; it happened to me a few times. One time I was making the last stop inside our base before the patrol was to leave for the night's activities. I asked at the command center if all the friendlies were posted. What I wanted to find out were all the known ambush positions plotted and their times of arrival and departure recorded. This is important, as it could be devastating to walk into an ambush on your way to or from your night position. I was told only two more needed to report in. I said; that I would check with them again a little later.

I left the command center and the team was getting used to the weather and the night condition; it was raining hard. I was not their favorite squad leader, because it mattered little to me what the weather was like as most of the time it was to our favor if it was raining. We had a mission and we were going to get it done. As I was clearing the last of razor the wire, before venturing into the open fields, I began to wonder about the two patrols in the area that were not plotted. As we made our way into the first muddy rice paddy, an uneasy feeling began to settle over me. The closer I got to our nighttime objective, the more concerned I became. We were about a third of the way to our position when I stopped the patrol and told the men to settle in for a temporary stay; we were going to hold short for a while.

I radioed back to the command center inquiring the whereabouts of the unknown patrols; the reply was they were still waiting. On a night like this the other patrols were most likely not even going to go out. I told the Major on the other end of the radio we were holding 700 meters out from the fence and will wait until we get his report on the other patrols. We sat there in that muddy paddy with the rain beating against our backs and faces for over an hour and half. Finally, we received the radio call not to proceed any further; we were walking into one of the ambushes.

Sometimes it was the lack of noise.

People say you can tell what the air temperature is by counting the number of times a cricket chirps in 15 seconds and add 37 to that number. If it is 87 degrees, you will hear 50 chirps. I wished I knew what causes all the crickets to stop all at once. It's like the unseen choir director who waved his hands and the chorus stopped all at once. All I

know is whenever we were in position, not moving, and this occurred, it scared the hell out of us.

I will never forget the time we were scheduled to conduct a night roving patrol east of the compound and around the village near the main gate. Roving patrols were always a little more risky than the normal ambush. We would plan two to three ambush positions to set up during the night and stay in each for a few hours before going to the next. If the enemy anticipated where we might go next, they would set up an ambush for us to walk into on the way to our next position.

It was late afternoon and the dark gray clouds were heavy on all horizons. Our clothes and equipment were clean, dry, and felt snug, but we knew this would change soon. As our five man patrol jumped off the truck, we took a few minutes to go over our objectives and answer any questions while we could speak in normal voices. With that out of the way, we headed out the main gate. A light rain began to fall as we crossed the highway toward the brick factory. The smell of burning wood from the factory and the mist hung heavy in the twilight. We headed for our first of many wet paddies we would trudge through before we returned to the fire base at Phu Loi.

The team was spread out far enough to keep within sight of each other, yet close enough to assist team members if we encountered unfriendly fire. All members of this small patrol are critical and each has a special function.

The point man needs to be aware of everything in front of him. He is constantly taking the patrol into a new area. Where he steps, the others will try to follow in his every foot step. This man will stop often to look around with the starlight scope, or just to listen. All his senses are keen as he lightly walks over the enemy's turf. We all are sensitive to our surroundings as we are dependent on each other to stay alive. In a five man team the second man will carry the M60 machine gun with at least 200 round's of ammo. The third man is the leader of the patrol and carries a rifle or a grenade launcher, I most of the time carried a grenade launcher. The fourth man was the RTO he carried a rifle and most important piece of equipment we have, the radio. The last man was always watching what was happening behind us. He carried a rifle. We all carried belts of M60 ammo, hand grenades, claymore mines, hand flares, and food. Anyone member can bring this small group of men to halt with a whisper and or hand signal.

We were a small, heavily armed group of fighters for a special reason: When we had the enemy near our kill zone, we will call artillery or air support before we would engage. We didn't always get this opportunity; these were the times the enemy spotted us first.

While the patrol is moving, and when we set up our ambush positions we stay in constant contact with the command center, they forward this information to the artillery unit covering us. The first thing needed in a night operation when the enemy is present is light and the call goes out for artillery flares. Most of the time when the light comes on the Viet Cong would stop the fighting, and run away.

One night, as we were moving near the village, we stopped near the hamlet to observe if there were any unusual activities. Many of the huts were open on one side to allow free access without any doors or windows. The temperature never dropped below 70 degrees and rarely was there a need for a fire except for cooking. A large portion of the

roof extended beyond the walls in this area to prevent the heavy rains from entering the living areas.

While we were stopped, one of the members of the patrol came up to me. I could tell he was extremely concerned about something behind us. We were in one of the worst positions we could be in. We had no defensive perimeter established and were caught in the open with out any known cover; the light from candles in the nearby hut was casting our shadows to the open area behind us. Many of these huts would have hidden holes where anyone could be ready to fire on us; we were in their kill zone. My heart was pounding so hard I could barely whisper, "Where are they and how many?" He said I don't know how to tell you." Now he really has me going, and he knew I needed to make some quick decisions. My mouth was so dry I could hardly part my lips to speak again. I said (in my most excited whisper), "You better tell me something and tell me now!" He stalled again, I held quiet hoping he could tell me something. When he spoke I was sure I heard him wrong. It sounded like he said it was a "Blue Moose." I looked at him and said, "What did you say?" He repeated, "It's a blue moose."

It would be difficult to explain to you the emotions my mind was going through at that moment. When I finally got it together and realized this guy was hallucinating from something, I was ready for anything, and had no place to vent it. Needless to say I was not worried about his blue moose, but I was on edge the rest of this operation. How does a 22- year old get prepared to work through these issues?

Perhaps through this guy's instability, it prepared me for a fuller life of stability.