

Eating Out Was Not Always a Treat

It seems I missed more meals in Nam than any place I have ever lived. We had to make due. This may explain why when I stepped on the bathroom scales when I got home it only read 145 pounds.

Because the Phu Loi Patrol was such a small unit we did not have a mess hall of our own. We were needed to meld into the population of a nearby unit that served regular meals. Let me define regular meals: Breakfast, 7:00 am to 8:30 am; Lunch, noon to 1:00 pm; and, evening mess was from 5:00 pm to 6:00 pm. Note: I did not say normal meals; that's another story.

The patrol varied in strength; we at, one time, were as few as 5 and, in the beginning, we were about 30 members. When we were operating with only 7 to 15 men, which was most of the time, we were either coming off a patrol or we would be about to go on another one. Sometimes, we needed to go on day sweeps, when ground surveillance radar or an outpost spotted enemy movements in the area, there was no one else was available. We were it.

Needless to say, many times our schedules did not match the meals served in the mess hall. I remember times leaving our ambush position at 5:00 am while it was still dark; this was done so we could travel without much notice. I would call the command center about 15 minutes before we would enter the perimeter; this would keep the bunker guards alert and keep us safer. About 5:45 am, we were on the truck heading to our area; by 6:00 AM we were back at our huts.

Now you're looking at a patrol that might be soaking wet from lying in a full rice paddy all night: cold, very tired, and hungry. It is still an hour until the mess hall opens. Once I walked over to the building about 45 minutes early to see if I could get served early. The Army is very strict about what time they serve breakfast. All I managed to do is add another 1,200 meters to my walk for the day. I was too tired to wait.

I found if I lay down for a few minutes on top of the bunk, fully dressed with my feet hanging over the side, I could make it to chow in time. This only worked during the dry season. During the monsoons, our clothes were wet and one did not rest on the bunk. This left the floor. No way! I had a foot locker I could rest my back with my head on the edge of my bunk my legs bent at the knees and my feet on the floor. Most of the time this was uncomfortable enough to keep me partly awake although I have awakened a few times from this bizarre position in time to eat for lunch.

At times, we would sleep through lunch, if the heat of the day did not wake us in time to get to chow, and if we arrived too late, the Army had regulations for that as well. If another member of the squad would wake you in time to eat lunch, then the choice was yours. Eat now and fill up, or try to get back to sleep and hope the day's heat will allow you the comfort. Most of the time if you could make it to the mess hall for a meal, you would.

When a man slept through lunch, they probably would have an alternate plan, for food. We were on a large fire base and were able to get to the Post Exchange. It was possible to purchase canned food and crackers. Most of the time I bought cans of wieners and sodas, lots of soda. It's a wonder I had any teeth without cavities for all the carbonated soft drinks I consumed in two and a half years. The P.X. in the early days of the patrol was close to our area and we got to it often. However, once we moved to the northwest sector of the fire base, we had several miles to hitch hike, most of the time hick.

That leaves the last meal of the day in the mess hall or the first of the day if you planned poorly and overslept. Woe is the man that this would happen to, especially if you were called to go on a night patrol and needed to get your equipment clean and ready for the mission. We always got at least one meal a day.

I remember a few times I arrived in our ambush position very hungry. It makes for a long night. If it were at all possible, we would carry food into the field with us; C rations were the food of choice. Sometimes we had LRRP's they were the forerunner of today's MRI's; you needed to add water to reconstitute them. Although I read on the package that they could be eaten dry. I did that once, only once. Luckily I was back at the base and could quench my overpowering thirst. Another mistake, don't wash it down with soda. I thought I was going to explode.

Only twice do I recall having to pay the price for poor meal planning in the field at night. The first time we were on a night ambush about 2,000 meters from the compound. It was dry and hot that night. With the claymores in place, we were deciding what shift we were going to take; I noticed we were in a field of some sort of crop that was ready for harvest. I was really hungry that night and I could feel a fruit or vegetable hanging from the bushes. I was thinking to myself it won't take me long to satisfy these hunger pangs. I chose first shift; that way I could eat my fill and be able to rest easier when my shift was complete.

The others were making themselves comfortable and I was ready to enjoy something tasty. It smelled great and the bushes were heavy with the crop. I picked my first one, I

could not see the color, but the texture was smooth and shaped something like a carrot only not so long. Must be a bean; I remember eating raw beans from my grandfather's garden when I was younger. I took a bite. What the hell is this! It felt like hell. My mouth was on fire and I needed my canteen of water fast. Oh, no, I forgot to fill the canteen from when I was out last; it was only a quarter full. I would have asked someone else for water, but that is one of the things you don't do, if I ate some dirt maybe that would help. No, I can't do that I know what these farmers use for fertilizer. It took a while to ease the burning, and lots of small sips of water. I learned my lesson.

I learned not to trust what farmer Hong planted in the field. From then on I made sure I carried all my food provision including lots of water. It had been a year or so later; again the fields were dry and it's another time I needed something in my belly to keep away the hunger through the long night. Only this time I carried a treat in the lower right pocket of jungle fatigues; it would melt in my mouth, not in my hands. It was a large bag; one I could share with the other 4 members of the squad. That night I remember we positioned ourselves in a cemetery about 500 meters to the west of village of An My. It was a quiet night. You could hear some of the lizards chirping a short distance away. Somewhere, far to our north, some activity was taking place; we could not hear the fighting but the parachute artillery flares were slowly drifting down. The light would not reveal our secure place concealment among the parapet wall of the grave sites.

I had eaten about a fourth of the bag when I noticed these tiny morsels of chocolate had a spicy taste to them. I thought this was interesting; I wonder if the other guys will notice. So I offered them and they all took a handful. They agreed the candy had kind of a bite to it.

Enough was said about the chocolate morsels until daylight when I decided to help myself to another handful. That is when I noticed what gave these treats their bite: ants.

Yes, ants! As we were eating the candy so were the ants. In addition, as we were eating, the ants they were trying to eat our tongues. I tried to keep it a secret, but once I started jumping around, the jig was up.

Therefore, if you are interested in losing a few pounds you might want to try some of my proven successes. That was over 40 years ago and, like a lot of diets, one has to stay with it or you will gain the weight back and perhaps a little more. I could lose a few pounds.

