

The Headache is Gone

One evening, the medics of the artillery unit across the field from us were having a party in their bunker, a few of us from the patrol were invited. I was hobbling around with my leg in a cast due to a poor step in judgment on my last patrol so I did not have a patrol that night or for several patrols to come. I went to the gathering as this gave me something to do for the evening. The punch had gone a little bad, but it was palatable; most food or drink will taste peculiar from time to time in Nam, but the chow was good and the conversation friendly, so I stayed a while.

The monsoons were doing their best to wash Southeast Asia off the map. These rains have been working this area of the world for a long time. Every 6 months began a new wet season that lasted for about 6 months. When I return to Seattle, Washington where I was born and grew up I will stay long enough to find a place where it rains a lot less. I was surprised this bunker didn't leak being it's located below the ground. The bunkers were set up to handle most medical situations with lots of light, clean examining rooms with tables, even the floor was tile. I bet if they needed; they could perform surgery in there. Everything near the ground gets wet this time of the year. This bunker was sealed from the heavy rain, not like ours.

Our bunkers were constructed over earth floors with sandbags for walls; they were piled on top of one another about three and a half feet high. The roof was made of perforated steel planks covered with a few more layers of sandbags. I think it might have stopped direct hit by a mortar, perhaps even a rocket. I know: I built a few of them. One never knew what to find in those dark damp spaces. The country was crawling with snakes, spiders, and things I don't care to remember. Unless the shells were coming in close, I would take my chances outside the entrance.

Now when the medics have a party they go all out. There must have been 20 guys there drinking punch and eating sandwiches. The punch was made in a container from the mess hall it must have held 5 gallons. I later found out why the medics punch tasted a little peculiar. Did you know they use 100% grain alcohol to clean their instruments? Somehow this got into the punch.

The conversation was going well. Most people were always interested in what we were finding outside the fence and we were always eager to share what we knew. It was better than talking to ourselves about it. As the evening wore on and as the punch was getting a little lower in the container, they added more ice and alcohol. It seemed like the friendly thing to do; anyway no one complained. I did not notice the punch had a little more kick, and it tasted so good on this hot damp evening.

I don't remember much more of the evening. It seemed everyone had a great time and I had to take their word for it. The guys would laugh and make some comment about my behavior during the evening. The next day was not so humorous; my first recollection of the next day was burned into my memories forever.

The day was warm and humid as always, but the smell; the smell for some reason was worse than ever and my head hurt like I have never felt it hurt before. I knew if I were to open my eyes, my brains (what little remained) would fall out through their sockets.

I took a chance. I opened my eyes.

Oh my God what was I looking at? It seems I was a little unsteady when I left the party the night before. Some friends made gallant efforts to get me back to our patrol area. I somehow must of convinced them I would get back just fine. (I might have done well if I tried my hand in sales).

I had managed to get across the open field between the medics bunker and our patrol area. Some of the guys said they never thought anyone could low crawl that far through tall grass in a pouring rain. It only took me two hours.

I was lucky I found my way. I must have crawled into the first shelter I could find. The old green crapper! Now I faced something I would never have been able to prepare myself for. I was laying across the open holes with my head over the last one (I think I had gotten sick) at least I should have. I do remember the white crawling creatures moving about 24 inches from my face. About 5 seconds later I was out of there and on my way to the rack. I was contemplating different ideas about what needed to be done with the little house out back.

Later that afternoon when my brains managed to return to their rightful place, I noticed the cast that was once formed around my right leg had somehow turned to mush, and needed to be replaced. The thought returned of where I woke up this morning and what needed to be done to restore hygiene in the area.

Somehow I needed to get the crapper replaced. I found an agency at this base that built structures when needed, and we needed one. I called PA&E, the civilian company, and explained we had a crapper that needed replacing they asked what was wrong? I explained it was rotting and was loaded with maggots. They told me the only way it would be replaced was if the building was destroyed.

Now that I knew what the game was, all I needed was a game plan. This took me about three minutes to put together. First I needed to find the next available outhouse we could use if this one was destroyed, it turned out we were within 300 feet of our neighbors' facility, and we could share theirs until we had a new one. That is, if anything should happen to ours.

A few days later the new cast for my leg was in place and my head was clear. I set out to put the game plan to work. The patrols were out and no one but me knew what was about to happen. The Phu Loi Patrol had a storage unit surrounded with sand bags. This above ground bunker contained our supplies. The patrol kept all its ammunition, hand grenades, claymores, plastic explosives or (C-4), blasting caps, and fuses here. I had the key and I knew how to use what I needed.

It was about 9:30 pm the patrols were settled in their positions for the night. The rain had stopped and the moon was out, so I felt the patrols would have a quiet night. I got up from my bunk, found the ammo bunker key and flashlight stepped outside and walked over to the heavy steel door to unlock it. I looked over the wooden shelves to find the C-4 there was secured in its wooden box. I opened it and retrieved two sticks, a pound each. I thought to myself this should about do it. I left the blasting caps and fuse alone, I would not need them for what I had in mind.

I made a stop by the jeep to get a little gas from the spare gas can. I filled an empty coke can with it, and then headed toward the old maggot infested building. I cut open the C-4 wrappers and began to distribute the soft white explosive around the floor and bench with the three holes in it. C-4 does not explode if set on fire. We sometimes would use it for cooking. It is nearly impossible to extinguish once its set ablaze. Now that it was in place, I soaked everything with the gasoline. I gave one last look at everything with the flashlight; I opened the door to make sure no one was coming to use the place, before I struck the match. The area's clear, so I light it up.

I hobbled back to my room and watched as the flames cleansed the area where the maggots had lived. I let it burn for about 5 minutes before placing the call to report a fire. I wanted to be sure it would be not be worth saving by the time the fire department arrived. About 7 minutes later the truck with the flashing lights came around the turn. I knew it was a lost cause; the old green building was nearly gone.

It took about two weeks for a crew of men to start building a new structure. The new one was made of cedar and it was almost a pleasure to use it first thing every Tuesday morning. Monday is when we took the large orange pill that prevents malaria, while it cleaned your insides.