

Snake Killer

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I had been in country about 10 days, on base at Phu Bai about a week, and was mostly through my in-processing. That meant I have been issued a weapon, tactical gear, helmet, flack vest, field pack with accessories and been processed by payroll, personnel and security. I was still unassigned to a unit or a job so I was living in the transit billets. This day I was scheduled to go to the range to zero my weapon and then was to report to the A company First Sargent. OK, no idea but hoping I was going to get moved from transit to a unit, if for no other reason, the transit billets was so far away from anywhere that it was unpleasant to walk in the oppressive heat of Southeast Asia. After about 20 people, myself included, qualified with our personal weapons, we were taken back to the base and dropped off at the mess hall for lunch. I had barely entered the mess, and the 1SG from Alpha Co. growled, "Gueck, join me for lunch, we need to talk." Now no young troop desired to be invited to join any 1SG for a conversation at any time and knowing we were going to meet in a few minutes anyway, my nerves were suddenly on edge. The 'Oh Shit, what is happening now?' was going through my mind.

Top and I walked through the mess line, got our food and then we moved back to the area reserved for very senior NCO's. We sat at a table somewhat removed from everyone, and a Master Sgt joined us. I looked at Top and he just said, "Listen, and then make up your mind." Suddenly, my appetite was missing. I just sat there and knew I was not going to like what was going to happen. The MSG introduced himself, and we shook hands, and Top said that he was a good man, a good NCO and a good team leader.

OK, who has the biggest shovel for the cattle manure everyone wants to spread around, and am I suppose to believe all of this BS.

Several questions about my qualifications, language skills, weapons skills, security clearance, and at Top's nod, informed him that I did have Operations Building access. I was asked if I had spent any time being trained in communication skills, and I said no. Once we started talking, I began to realize I was undergoing a job interview. This did not happen in the Army; you were assigned and you went. As we finished lunch, Top suggested we move to his office, and we were able to ride in the 1SG jeep across the post.

Once inside, the MSG informed me that he would like to have me as an addition to his recon team. I looked at him, at Top and blurted out the first thing that came to mind, "I am not Green Hat (Green Beret) qualified." Both of the NCOs burst into laughter. I was not expecting that response, so I continued, "I have little grunt training beyond basic training and what little I picked up in Language school." I was quickly informed that I was not being selected because I was a super grunt in training, but I did have a clearance, and was trainable and was currently unassigned and hence would not be as missed. "So you are asking me to take long walks in the weeds, visit Indian country and do what, hump an PRC-73 radio? Thanks Top, thought you liked me."

What the hell is going on here. I am a linguist, an Intelligence Specialist and these people want to turn me into a grunt. I am asking myself if this what I truly want to do for the next year? Or do I want to stay in a compound and try to stay alive and safe?

At this point, the MSG took over the complete introduction process. I was being looked at because of my Language Training, my weapons ability, and the fact that I was cleared to access OPS and hence could use the associated communications equipment that was being assigned. I was not so gently informed that my grunt skills were of little consequence in the big picture of the team's mission. Besides, they felt I could learn with on-the-job training. Then I was asked if I was a right or left handed shooter. The moment I said left, I could see two sets of eyes light up because left handed shooters are a rare happenstance. So, the moment of truth when I was asked if I would be willing to join the team, and become a part of what would become a major part of my life for the next 12 months. A decision I would never regret.

I was moved into the team billets, introduced to the rest of the enlisted team members and then presented to the Team Commander. I was not ready for a Major commanding, but he quickly put me at ease, tossed me a beer and said, let's talk. At that point, I realized that I was to be the second point of contact for the team to outside commands, via radio or through orders from higher commands due to my access to the Operations building. I was informed that over the next 2-3 days the team would help me outfit and prep for inclusion into the team. In four days, we were scheduled to do a Remain over Night mission, basically a walk in the woods so we all would begin to function on the same page and hopefully at a compatible level. Those days vanished in a blur of training, equipment preparation and actions drills. Suddenly, the next morning we were going to head off compound and begin to function as a Recon Team. I was scared to death, not that I was worried about me, but that I would not be able to measure up and my lack of training would get someone hurt or worse. I think I slept, but I have no assurance of that fact.

The next morning we did a strip down inspection to make sure no one was carrying any tobacco products, or any other material that could threaten our mission, scented soap, deodorant, aftershave.

A strip down inspection is just that, we strip buck naked, and then as each item is inspected for banned items, we begin to dress and reload our packs so we can proceed. Most do not realize that the items we take for granted, the odors of western life can be smelled several hundred yards away if downwind.

After completing the inspection, we dressed, loaded our packs, and following the Major, began to walk to the main gate. We were met by a truck and loaded up, and after about a 20 minute drive down the road, were off loaded and into the brush we headed. We all had basic information regarding the direction and speed of march, and the last thing we heard before we left the highway was make sure your weapon is on safe. Of course I checked to make sure my weapon was on safe, and then moved the selection lever to full automatic fire, rock and roll. One of the first things a left handed shooter learns is that a US Army issue M16A2 Fully Automatic Rifle is a right handed shooter's weapon and being left handed means that everything is misplaced and difficult to use. Hence, rock and roll at the ready. Just remember to keep your finger off the trigger.

We had been moving about two hours and we were beginning to understand how those around us moved and reacted. It looked good and felt that perhaps this might actually work. As we walked through the jungle, we were brushing our shoulders on the vegetation on each side. The sun was not visible through the double canopy trees and whatever, but the oppressive heat and humidity let us know it was there.

I was beginning to believe that perhaps I could be an asset to this team not get anyone killed due to my carelessness. I was almost comfortable or as comfortable as a ranch kid from the sand hills of

Nebraska could be in a Southeast Asian jungle, knowing people were out there hoping to shoot me and I was thinking about how this was not that bad a choice for my year in Vietnam if I lived through it.

Suddenly, the jungle exploded in gun fire. One continuous roll of weapon fire. The sound no soldier ever wants to hear as nothing good has ever resulted from rock and roll except to blow away ammo. As quickly as it had started, the fire stopped and everyone was looking at the smoking M16. As the Major moved down the column, you could hear his voice filled with profanities wanting to know who was the dumb SOB, what caused anyone to open fire, and why, how many enemy were now casualties.

I turned and looked him straight in the eye and said, “I swear his mouth was two foot across and there was no way I could not shoot him.”

To this day, it was the biggest snake, a boa, I have ever seen nose to nose. And out of 20 rounds in my weapon, at least 19 had flown through his mouth and head. As the team realized that no one was hurt, the next thing I heard was, “OK Snake killer, let’s head out and prepare to return to base. Everyone in 5 clicks knows exactly where we are.” I wore that nickname for the next 6 months.