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## A MOMENT TO KNOW

Writing has been a sort of below the surface passion of mine for many years. I take great pleasure in it, yet time so often manages to quell the yearning to break through. It has a way of being quite time consuming, and life for the likes of me tugs toward other compass settings, mostly out of routine, home–fire burning type necessity. Discouragement, of various natures, can also act to harden the surface as yet another stumbling block. Now and then I drift back several years to a party my wife and I attended. Each person in the gathering was to share what they would enjoy doing if they had a second shot at life. When it rolled around to me, I stated that I'd like to be a writer. There was much low tone laughter. Being a good sport, and knowing it wouldn't be very party–like to contentiously question the group as to what that response meant, I resigned to just meditate on those chuckles for the rest of the evening...and for many years to come.

Those thoughts being posted, I now feel compelled to be like grass coming through the cracks in a sidewalk, maybe even a cedar growing from a rock cliff, God willing. There could be giggles. This time it doesn't really matter. I'm going to write. What will I write about? Stuff...real stuff! Actually my heart will do the honors. I believe that the two most important instruments needed by a guy like me to lay down words are the heart and a good dictionary. Oh, a mind would come in handy, but the heart is the hammer in the tool box, and a dictionary is the tape measure. My heart does still beat with a desire to expound...thank God, and my neighbor gave me a Doubleday some years back. So, blessed with decent health, a bit of

modern technology (Word), and some old fashion back-up...I'm good to go.

In this reach I want to do some time traveling. Perhaps someday I'll do here and now, but for the moment I feel the past calling...louder with each passing day. The past can be a wealth, you know, more valuable than a safe full of gold and jewels. We can glean from it profitably for the sake of vigilance and insight, or be fools and rush headstrong down the highway of liberty without the safety of a rearview mirror in the vehicle of common welfare.

I want to carefully flash back to the year 1969. It was an interesting year for America, and pretty good if you were there. I wasn't, and though it might smack of foolishness to most, I'm somewhat glad. How could I or why would I say that? After all, by most honest standards, there was a gut wrenching war going on half-way around the globe, and I had left behind a wife of less than a year to be right in the midst of it. Glad? Not in the sense that I deliberately or joyfully left my loved ones and homeland for a year, but rather that my dutiful draft calling proved to be a unique experience in human enlightenment. Please don't let me be misunderstood, as Eric Burdon put it. I would not care to be forwarded again to such a degree of intense personal development...ever. An edge doesn't hurt a thing insofar as the realms of carnal or spiritual insight, but I leave any further such whetting to my younger fellow countrymen. Considering the continued bravery and sacrifice of those in place today, I am comfortably compelled to share that Asian tour with others, as an exercise of one of the blood born freedoms due our heritage. My hope and prayer is that some of my experiences may prove to be inspiring to some...certainly not for my gratification, but for the

remembrance of those who so gallantly gave life and limb to take a pledged stand for human liberty in a far land, and for the sake of those warriors, both present and former, who may yet be struggling with life's purpose or lot upon this earth. It is for a special group of these subjects that I proudly lay my heart and soul to human record, and while I and others were near but not technically present with them, it is they, those special ones, in the early hours of March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1969 who gave much more than I could ever literarily convey or personally repay. My very existence today is owed, without the slightest discount, to my fellow troopers of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, Company B, 2nd Battalion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, and great honor and respect is due those units' commissioned and non-commissioned officers, and to those in both aviation and artillery support units of the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry Division.

The time portal is now open. The place for our night location was to be a spot just a few kilometers from what was referred to as the Angel's Wing. On a map it is a pointy-looking protrusion of Cambodian real estate that is a northern portion of a greater beak-like looking map or land boundary, appropriately called the Parrott's Beak, not far from the town of Cu Chi. For the most part, the area was rice paddy. It was the dry season. There was no crop, only a concrete-like soil base. It was so hard that digging in was not considered. Shovels were useless, and even a pick instigated snicker-like expressions of futility. No big deal...we had rice paddy berms, and besides, for us there had been no contact for some days. Seemed like a fairly relaxed area of operation for us so far, complete with occasional cold sodas and beer, all marketed during the day by the local village kids, and offered from ice filled tote bags mounted on sticks. This was like a bonus to our regular log, which

in itself was more fitting here than in other more inhospitable locations to date.

A Fire Support Base named Landing Zone Terry had our back with the big guns, east and slightly north. Other Cavalry units were scattered about to our north, south and southeast. There was an unmistakable tree line at the Cambodian border, to the west. It was close, eerily close. Everyone knew where the enemy lingered, assembled, and freely moved about. It was somewhere over there, beyond those trees. Maybe not right where we could look, but someplace or another beyond that border, perhaps not necessarily near, there were well trained enemy soldiers with the ability and determination to move fast and kill the likes of us. But we hadn't seen any lately. This was, after all, an Angel's Wing. What could happen here?

After dark our 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> platoons moved away from the Command Post night location, one southwesterly and the other slightly northwesterly. This put them even closer, by about half the distance, between the CP and the border. The intent was to act primarily as platoon strength ambushes. By fate and sheer luck, I wasn't part of that physical plot, but from my humble perspective as part of the mortar platoon with the CP defense, I couldn't help but to feel an underlying sense of insecurity by not having Ridge Runner in one piece. I kept thinking about that too easy to see tree line and what it stood for, and that nearly half of our trusted associates were dividedly somewhat on their own, even closer to those trees than we were.

Aside from split night location arrangements, the evening proceeded quite par, in retrospect to previous defensive positions in this area of operation. Defensive instruments were placed and the

bug juice was ritualistically smeared on our exposed flesh. Not far from the assigned section of paddy berm, a spot was chosen where you could call home for the night. Watch shifts were established, and night discipline went into effect. If all went well, tomorrow's first light would be an inspiration for another 'X' on the '365' check-off calendar. Mine had what seemed an eternal display of blanks on it, while others, even among those nearer that tree line, had but few unchecked spaces to gleefully mark.

Between midnight and 1 a.m. the word was that 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon 'green-eyed' a half dozen enemy soldiers coming from the west...the border. The night silence would soon end. Upon request, L.Z. Terry pumped a couple dozen 105 rounds onto the area of movement. This barrage directed the now fleeing enemy toward 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon, pressing them as close as 25 meters from the night ambush position. The enemy was engaged, and returned fire while high-tailing it south toward the wing-tip border protrusion. 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon reported no casualties among themselves, and wouldn't know about the enemy's status until first light. Wait and watch would resume for all, again being the dark's demand. Perhaps the short-lived incident would prove to be nothing more...but in this place, you just never knew. Thinking the best could get you a body bag, but make no mistake, death could come here regardless of what you thought.

The silence of the night was as if a 'thought stick' had somehow been surgically implanted into my mind, stirring it up and down, to and fro, here and there...and then back...always back. There was the cold soda yesterday, the fun teasing the kids and seeing them laugh, the relentless mosquitoes, the pup at L.Z. Terry, the hot meals and clean clothes, the oozing jungle rot on my hand, a

shower from a barrel, the Fire Base 'mad minute,' the short timer's calendar, the trip flare locations, the big 'bird' home, letters, my wife, mom and dad... the half dozen enemy a short while ago, the noise, my firearm and ammo supply, my hand grenades, my canteens, the hard ground, the smell in the air...and lastly those trees that are still faintly visible under the glowing moon.

For those who were not on watch, a semi-conscience state of rest could now again be carefully sought, since a few thought filled hours had quietly passed since the previous contact incident. Though any semblance to real sleep was out of the equation now, you could still briefly fade off, all the while legitimately being pretty much aware of even the slightest disturbance. Deep sleep, and the ensuing recovery time from potential disorientation and grogginess to full mental function, could be another unofficial reason for body bag requisition.

At around 2:30 a.m. 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon eyed five enemy soldiers coming from the southwest...out from that tree line at part of the wing-tip. This was a somewhat gutsy move, if it was the same handful of extremely lucky enemy troops that got sprayed by small arms and chased by two dozen 105 rounds not more than two hours earlier. On the map it would appear that the original group may have just made a border-safe circle around the wing-tip, and came back for more. Coming back for more was not uncommon for them. Often their first presence was just to force your location, even if it meant death for the probing soldier(s). Whoever they were, this time they brought help. The Platoon Leader, using the green-eye, estimated that behind the first five there were at least 200 enemy soldiers heading straight toward all of us, due east. With this information, the Company Commander authorized artillery support and also

requested ARA, which was ordinance delivered by Cobras in the form of Aerial Rocket Artillery. The tube artillery from a nearby Fire Support Base was always the quickest to use for heavy close in support. Aviation support usually took several minutes to reach the contact point, and would serve to take up the second or maybe third round of heavier ordinance expenditure against the enemy. The Forward Observer, an artillery officer assigned to operate on the ground with a rifle company, could mark a locational target and have the heavy stuff (high explosive rounds, H.E.) coming in a matter of seconds. This took the remarkable combination of training and skill, not only on the part of the F.O., but also from the guys manning and plotting those big guns who were a good distance away. Having experienced our F.O.s bring 105 rounds within mere meters of our well defined and plotted locations, I have to relate both a form of horror and relief. The relief was the seemingly melodramatic comfort of a fair improbability that the enemy could get through such a slaughter wall. The horror is self-explanatory to an infantryman...the rounds could be slightly off, and on you! During my time with the Company, they never were...a tribute to the expertise of the gunners, the plotters, and certainly to the man calling the shots, the F.O.

It was evident that the enemy unit would cover in as short a time as possible the remaining five to six hundred meter distance from the border to a point in line with 1st Platoon, then 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon only moments later. Our location was sure to be soon after that. They didn't want to be in the open as a perfect target any longer than necessary, considering the unparalleled fire supports that could rain down on them. One of the enemy's noteworthy tactics was to get in up close and personal as soon as possible. This could serve to

demand extreme caution and flawless precision among our supporting units (artillery and air), and certainly among those on the ground calling for it. At a time of ear-splitting noise from incoming and outgoing rounds of all sorts, there is great potential for confusion, which in turn can result in wounds or death from friendly fire, along with that of hostile origin. If the enemy's close proximity is undefined and scarcely distanced from you at the bursting radius of whatever type of support round to be received, then he could be benefited by a fair likelihood that it (support) could or would be outwardly maintained as an enemy retreat block or halted altogether for our overall safety. The small arms of the engaging force (our units) would then be the enemy's primary strategic concern. It might be likened to an armed killer that has targeted you and your home at midnight during a sudden violent baseball-size hail storm. Unless he picks a window or door that's under your porch, and gets there quick, his life will be at stake, and his deed thwarted. If he successfully enters, he will still have to contend with you, but under the relative safety of your roof.

During the enemy's sprint to the engagement point, the guys of A Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 77th Artillery at Terry stirred them up with nearly fifty H.E. rounds of 105 over a period of about fifteen minutes. It got real noisy very quick once that marker round was approved and a fire command was given. The enemy unit closed in on their targets, in spite of the barrage of 105's. They unleashed their own supporting fire just prior to the ground assault. There were mortars over at that tree line...many mortars. From our position with the C.P. we could see the flashes, one after another in near perfect sequence, from left to right. Several of us in the mortar platoon were in agreement that there were six tubes coming our



way. Detail is important...if for no other reason, just to know. In combat, knowing won't necessarily save you, but it can aid you in doing all that is possible under the circumstances. In this case, circumstances were not good. B-40 rockets were also engaged by the enemy, and flying mercilessly at any target that was remotely discernible. The mortars were now starting to 'splash,' or land...seemingly everywhere. Two tubes appeared to be adjusting on each of the forward Platoons, and two were 'walking,' or adjusting on our location, one from behind, and one to our front. Snipers had worked their way to positions where they could easily engage us in the light of a bright moon. We could hear the mortars and rockets detonating at both platoon locations. It would be soon known that they were fulfilling their fateful intent.

All or most of us at the C.P. are hugging the base of a paddy dike by now, which could only provide part protection from ordinance on the opposite side of the elevated dirt structure. The walking rounds, to the front and behind us, were closer and louder with each splash. The rounds landing behind, or East of our paddy square, stopped a relative safe distance from the berm. The rounds to our front were still coming at approximately 10 to 12 meter intervals, and directly in line with the spot that I and another platoon member had chosen to use for sanction, in a head to head, flat out position. This path of direction was anything but good. An attempt to move, though, would have drawn fire, some sure 7.62 rounds, or rockets, or both. After all, the berm was only equal to the height of a tightly prone person. The slightest movement could have been discernible to enemy eyes. Staying could result in a close landing by an 82mm mortar round. We both were consciously but understandably frozen behind that dike, risking a peek at the spot where each progressive

round was landing. It was somewhat a 'die if you do, die if you don't' situation. Besides, moving and drawing fire would endanger others inside the berm. At this moment in time I was vainly trying to pull my steel pot down over my whole body...my brother in arms holding a cross necklace in one hand, and using a pocket knife to desperately chip at the rock hard dirt with the other. Deathly fear can produce irrational physical responses where no sound remedy exists.

I slighted my head upwards a moment after a very close and near deafening round explosion. I had to know where it hit. It was at the 10 or so meter mark, right outside of the berm. I could see the dust. I knew what that meant. In only a moment or so, the two of us would take a round directly on top of us, and there would be no escape.

It's amazing what the human mind can process in just a few moments. Amid the near heart-stopping fear, you can simultaneously make peace with your Maker, and virtually reflect on nearly all of your recallable years on earth, the final computes being of those you love and cherish, a solemn goodbye of sorts.

The round that very likely would have made young widows of our wives never landed. The one that prompted the fatalistic compute was the last of the barrage. There could now be a very brief moment of peaceful relief, along with thanks to a Divine Power for sparing our lives at this particular instant. Out of necessity though, that whole process had to be short-lived, not much more than a deep breath's worth...because this battle was anything but over. Tranquility and thankfulness were history. It was back to the business of being in the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry, on the Cambodian border.

1<sup>st</sup> Platoon was now engaged with, at the very least, a three company size force. Near simultaneously, 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon was in contact with a large sized unit. 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon evaded to a nearby irrigation ditch for more cover while under the heavy mortar and B-40 rocket fire. They suffered many casualties from the initial attack and the move, and yet were engaging a company size enemy force from both sides of the ditch. By now, 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon had lost both of their radios, due to the initial mortar and rocket fire. Communication with them had ended. Grimm thoughts were now haunting.

From our location we could easily hear and faintly see indications of the ground assault upon our forward Platoons. Again, raising your head up above the paddy dike to bear witness was a sure way to make yourself a rocket or sniper target, as the bright moon was sure to tell on you. Yet putting your head up from time to time, at least as far as a single eye line of sight, was necessary to see if the enemy was coming in. There were so many of them, it just seemed inevitable that they would mass toward us as well. At one quick peek I could see line upon line of the enemy walking, strangely enough, atop the dike system at the area where 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon was under assault. Our Troopers had done some scoring, because I could easily make out that the enemy unit was aiding the transportation of many wounded as they moved about on the top of the dikes. For some time now, I have pondered that curious practice of movement in the strange, seemingly intentional elevated manner. Perhaps it was their way of lessening confusion among themselves within the battle area, knowing our guys weren't going to be walking about erect, and certainly not atop the dikes. It's never a sane practice to deliberately wound or kill your fellow soldiers,

whether friend or foe, and if there are safeguards to be exercised, then you do so, even if they might have a peculiar nature. I think it a possibility that this was an enemy safeguard. Perhaps they also felt assured that we, from our position, could not and would not fire at their lines. Any small arm engagement would have been long, probably ineffective shots, but would have served more as a deadly threat to 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, who was also directly at that range and point of vision. Our orders were not to fire anyway. It would have served little purpose, unless assaulted, but would have been a greater danger to those platoons forward. There was little to do, but wait for the enemy to turn fully toward us, at the C.P.

By around 3:30 am, aviation support was on station and over the contact area. Because of safety concerns for the ARA Cobras and Spooky birds, artillery had been cut off, and would later be focused on the area west as a blocking fire. By official accounts, both aerial entities were having difficulty engaging targets due to the platoons struggling with marking their positions. The heavily engaged platoons tried desperately to give the supporting aircraft the only thing they needed most to help repel this enemy onslaught...a bit of concentrated light to allow discernment of their locations from the air. They tried heat tabs, trip flares, and ignited puddles of the highly flammable bug juice, or insect repellent. The latter resulted in drawing too much accurate fire from the enemy. The most successful was when they soaked their wadded shirts in the bug juice, lit them and threw them outward as far as they could under the circumstances. They also fired small arm bursts with red tracer rounds to the west, which would be visible to pilots above.

Unfortunately, the only working strobe light (an instrument designed for such circumstances) in the company was at our CP location, where it could be of no value to either platoon. War is always short of perfection, even in small ways... which can result in huge problems. Regardless, the brave men utilized what they had, by trial and error, to help get the support needed, all the while creating enough resistance themselves to keep the communist attackers concentrated on them. A quick, decisive victory over these two platoons, with plenty of night left, would have undoubtedly resulted in a terrible fate for us at the CP location also.

Using what position marks they could, the birds laid down periodic fire during the remainder of the night. Spooky, a revised AC-47 ( a military version of the old DC-3), was capable of putting 7.62 rounds from General Electric developed mini-guns on nearly every square foot of ground surface from thousands of feet up. The aircraft were equipped with three such weapons, and could easily cover areas as large as a football field. They sheltered us at night many times, cruising counter-clockwise and spraying the outer edges of our perimeters for hours on end. The guns were on the pilot's side in two windows and a cargo hatch, and could be controlled individually or in unison. The Cobra helicopters also had a mini-gun, and a 40 mm repeating grenade launcher, along with the rocket launcher pods for the Aerial Rocket Artillery. For those of us with a ground unit, a certain degree of fear was a 24/7 given, yet when these birds were present there was always that ray of hope that whatever the enemy initiated against you, the end result would be lessened, likely in your favor. They were mechanical instruments of resolution, operated by patriotic professionals who risked their lives for us, the most vulnerable of military conflict.

From our position we were mandated—for lack of a humane term—to watch and listen to the bloody battle that was occurring between us and those trees. The CP, under the charge of the Company Commander, had to stay in tactical defense form for communication and strategic coordination. Anything different would have surely proved a total Company loss. It was haunting but evident that those men needed more help than the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry could give them on this morning, and little to nothing in battle field procedure of that time, that instant in history, could have changed things greatly.

As the morning progressed closer to dawn, there was virtually little to no resistance noted from our platoons. That observation, coupled with a full failure of communication with either platoon would instigate the worst of thoughts concerning their circumstances. Discernible weaponry was that of the aviation units, then, near dawn, 155mm rounds from LZ Tracy and 105mm rounds from LZ Terry, used as blocking fire on a retreating enemy. At first light, the air was full of aviation, including 5-2plane sorties of F-100s (10 fighter-bombers). The air units were engaging the communists at and around the tree line border, hunting them down from the air, now with some visual contact. Tall Comanche, Company C of our Battalion, had humped before dawn from the northeast to link up with what was left of our 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, at around 4:30 am. Shortly after 5:00 a Platoon of Lean Apache, Company A, was air assaulted to link up with our 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon.

From my perspective, our fate at the CP that night had been markedly altered. By a greater proportion, combat related fate is commonly unexplainable when put in context to the rest of a lifetime. It can be a mental struggle for which even the Creator may hesitate or refuse to bring resolve. It is most unexplainable in

context with a life ended too soon in a place too far. To everything there is a Divine purpose, and that purpose may only be comprehended by Divine disclosure, if it is to be disclosed at all. Of that I am convinced. Many who survive combat will go to their grave silently pondering the fate of their fellow comrades, and even their own personal fate. They may in part or even fully understand the eventful 'how' of the matter, but never the 'why.' It was what it was, yet there is little or no peace in that determinant. There is always a reason, and whatever that might be, revealed or not, can at least be reflected by the more fortunate as thankfulness and remembrance of those involved in the 'how,' regardless of the 'why.'

In this case, as we would soon conclude, our overall fate was the result of a dutiful blood sacrifice, spilled over a period of several hours by brave Americans clinging to a will to survive, doing their sworn macabre duty in detail...desperately persisting, perhaps unconsciously, as a blocking force for us. We were now relatively safe, living witnesses...they, our forward associates, had become physically or even mortally wounded intercessors. Before the morning light, eleven men had given their lives, and thirty seven incurred wounds of various natures.

For those of us who had been spared that direct, personal confrontation with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 272 Regiment of the 9<sup>th</sup> Viet Cong Division, life forward would never be without it's solemn moments of retrospect concerning those early hours of March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1969...at, of all places, an Angel's Wing.

R. D. Blake

