

TAKE TEN ...

PATROL

10 minutes to Paradise

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Take Ten... The word came down the line. They had patrolled half the morning outside the wire around the giant sprawling Air Base. The defoliant stuff had done a great job clearing the jungle back a few hundred yards and several centuries from the perimeter, but it never hurt to unexpectedly rove into the dense forest for a mile or so now and then. You would think the jungle-like forest canopy overhead would cool the ground-fall trail, instead it acted like an oppressive lid on a boiling pot and even muffled aircraft sounds from the base.

He eased off the path and eyed the tall grass and brush for a reasonably dry spot to sit. A hard-shelled *thumb-knuckle* sized critter fell from overhead and scurried for the spot he had decided on. *Tell God hi*, he muttered and planted his heel mushing the bug into the dead fall compost, pleased with the squishy-crunchy sound.

He hunched down in the dark shadows beneath elephant-leaf palms. Sweat-salt stung his eyes and though he knew better, he tried to rub the sting away. *Quiet ... temp's* at least a hundred-plus ... humidity's about maxed without raining. He eyed the surrounding brush, and wondered for the thousandth time why the new guys thought it okay to break noise discipline just because they took a quick break. He started to say something when Sarge told'em to shut up. They settled in ones and twos. A quick chug from a canteen or something from a C-rat stash. K-9 on point quietly scanning ahead.

Although midday, it was strange how a canopied forest stole away the sunlight ... it seemed as if night would fall any moment. As he settled in for the brief rest, sweat soaked and tired, he thought of his last Christmas at home with family and the crisp winter air. Somehow he didn't think the coming Christmas in Vietnam could even be a close-second in comparison. With a shrug of shoulders, he wondered how he had ended up squatting in a Vietnam jungle, which he noted really does steam. When he had enlisted in the Air Force after high school, ground-pounding in a rancid jungle was the last think he had expected, and somehow not mentioned as a possibility by the recruiter.

Nevertheless, there was no denying it...except for bugs of all sizes and colors, spiders, ants (red and black like in Texas), flies, scorpions, centipedes as big has a hand, scorpions, bees, knats, mosquitoes, razor-grass cuts, oppressive heat, and rot-stink aside ... the jungle-forest, whatever you called it, had a primeval-beauty he had never seen before. He'd given up trying to describe what it was like in letters home.

Funny what he noticed just setting still: *There must be a hundred shades of green in the brush and trees* about him, he thought, wondering if each hue had its own name. Light from somewhere above teased broad leafs with a taste of sunlight cascading its way down toward earth through countless gentle swaying branches and foliage.

Incredible, he thought, how detailed the giant palm leaves seemed...almost translucent, and when backlit you could see water, or whatever, coursing through its veins. He watched a dark silhouette of something scurrying across a leaf top then free fall onto a patch of ferns and disappeared. He could see the leaf's veins as another thing methodically munched a growing half-crescent bite from one side. Yet another chewed a hole through the leaf and a beam of laser-light stabbed through, flaring glistening dew drops on a giant umbrella-like spider web he had not noticed.

His eyes followed silver hair-like strands of web as they trailed away, secured to branches and limbs unseen. One broken strand wavered to the ground, and he watched a bug-eyed hairy spider dance away where the strand anchored, then maddeningly-skitter across a near-invisible thread-tightrope across the path. Odd, he thought, floating dew drops, glistening; sparkling in brilliant sunbeam-winks, like the most delicate string of magic-pears he had ever seen. Slight movement caught his eye and looking closely could see a mass of black ants reducing a rodent's carcass patiently. New workers arrived as others departed holding high a prized morsel, following in line to wherever it was they were going. Looking around he could see the ground fall teaming with life, and forest-things being consumed. As a kid one of his favorite toys was the shovel he used to smack, but rarely killed, black ants and tarantulas. He watched similar black ants now, doing their duty, no noise discipline problem, moving across the trail in single column with sunlight lighting-them-up. They moved through dancing shimmering laser spotlights unconcerned. He cocked his head, curious, ants can't fly, but there they were spurring along a few inches above the trail carrying their prizes. Then his heart jack-hammered -- an ant-bridge trip wire others somehow missed lay taunt inches above the trail, just waiting for him.

Without Sarge's call to rest, he would likely have tripped the wire—most certainly—and his last Christmas would really have been his *last* Christmas. Sarge was pissed half the squad had passed over the tripwire without noticing it—unspoken was the fact that he was also pissed he had missed it as well. After a show-and-tell butt-chewing, the patrol moved out, each man quiet with his own what-if thoughts. He knew fate had intervened: but for the bugs ... but for the hole in the leaf ... but for the hairy spider deciding hunting was juicier on the other side of the trail, and, but for the impossible chance angle of sunlight stabbing through a chewed leaf—and all at that exact moment twinkling the ants who scurried along on the wire ... *Lord, if bugs go to heaven, choi-hoi the one I stepped on.*

Move Out... his thoughts turned inward and he resolved never to squash a leaf eating bug or stomp ants again. He would have to think about if mosquitos counted. A few seconds later, the insect he had stomped clawed its way from the soft earth and indifferently bulldozed away.

From: John P. Webster Jr.

Don,

Nice "outside the wire story". This article brought to my mind our **1041st USAF Security Police Squadron (Test)** time in Vietnam. You know there is not much about our **squadron's "outside the wire" experiences at and around Phu Cat Air Base**. Every day I go to the VSPA web site reviewing base attacks and SP contacts with "Charlie" Phu Cat didn't receive very many stand off attacks during the war especially during our time there.

During our time (Jan – July 1967), the base was not hit at all nor were there any sapper attacks, but the 1041st had a recorded 43 shooting contacts with the VC and at least 2 confirmed VC KIAs killed in "outside the wire" night ambush patrols. Actually they were very important KIAs. One was the District commander of the local main force VC and the other was very important as well carrying important Intel documents about Phu Cat. I think these KIAs were in May. Actually we had Charlie so confused about our activities. I always wonder why Charlie never hit our base camp or attacked the base. Maybe it was in fact that we did have them so confused and our "outside the wire" activities stopped them every time they even probed the base. Most all our 1041st activities were "outside the wire."

The 37th SPS were "inside the wire" maintaining vital perimeter security, and we were "outside the wire," and together the base was not clobbered as heavily as it might have been when compared to other major Air Bases! The 1041st and the 37th helped to keep Phu Cat Air Base safer the first 6 months of 1967. Prior to our leaving in July we trained the 37th in outside the wire operations, which as I understand developed into the Cobra Flight.

Like I mentioned, I check the "This Day in Vietnam" section every day and there is nothing about our many VC contacts. Anyway I really enjoy the VSPA web site and greatly appreciate your work on it.

Thanks,
John P. Webster Jr.,
Phu Cat Air Base, 1041st SPS(T), 1967

From: Tony Shaw
[Take Ten] ... reminds me of the entrance to VC Island.
Tony G. Shaw,
Phu Cat, 37th SPS, K9, 1968-1969