

Jungle Ambush!

By Chuck Hawkins

What did we dread more, the enemy, or losing a piece of our soul?

Somewhere northeast of FSB Rakassan in September 1970.

The trail meandered along the side of a ridge to a stream below. He couldn't see it, but he knew it was there. Sam was to his left, a thump gunner. "What the hell good is a grenade launcher going to do in this thick stuff," he wondered? But they both had claymores to their front along the trail. That would be enough, if they did it correctly.

To his right was the new guy, Tiny they called him because he stood over six feet. On the far right was Sarge. There were just four of them, lying flat in the dense brush, waiting.



He fingered the cover on the feed mechanism to his M-60 machine gun. He had a teaser belt of 30 rounds fed into the gun with a round locked into the chamber. It, too, would be enough, unless he screwed up. "How long we gotta be here," he thought to himself?

"Until they come," a Little Voice flickered in the back of his mind. "Until they come."

Besides, where else was he going to go. Back to the World? What a joke. "Ain't going nowhere but here," he thought, "and it don't mean a thing. Just doin' my time."

High above the sun beat down on the triple canopy rain forest, turning the jungle into a steam cooker. What light that filtered through the leaves gave the terrain an eerie, primeval feeling. A rivulet of sweat ran down his nose and plopped onto the "sixty."

He thought about what they were supposed to do. Last evening when they discovered the trail, it had been recently used. Quietly, the captain had sent out two small ambushes to catch whoever else might come along. The other ambush was off to the left a hundred meters or so. If the enemy came from the left, that ambush would get them, if the enemy came from the right, it was their show. The rest of the company was behind them a few hundred meters, dug in on a small knoll. He felt very alone for a moment, then pushed the thought aside.

"Waiting is the hard part," he thought. There was no rush of adrenaline, nothing to keep his body tense, his mind alert, just his self-discipline. The heavy stillness of the air and the sound of insects buzzing about made him drowsy. He tried to shake it off, tried to focus on the wall of green directly to his front.



"The Old Man will call it off at noon if we don't get any action," he thought. He looked at his watch. The hands pointed to 1030 hours. "Nobody's gonna come by here," he argued to himself, "they already used the trail, yesterday. Ain't no enemy gonna be stupid enough to use it again so soon." Still, he kept focused on the green tangle to his front.

Suddenly, he felt a presence to his front. Something was out there, moving ever so cautiously. Something dangerous. The hairs on the nape of his neck raised, sending a chill through his body. His gut tightened. Now his

mind was racing, thinking, remembering, flushing all thoughts away except for those things he would have to do in the next few moments.

Then he saw it. A dull flash of khaki blending in with the green foliage. "It's them," his mind screamed, "they're directly in front of me."

"Patience," his Little Voice said, "Sarge will initiate contact."

The enemy presence multiplied. Now there were two of them, now four. Their point team poking into the dense underbrush along the trail, suspicious, looking, searching. Warily they continued, AK-47s at the ready. His whole body tensed, "It's gotta be now," he thought, "C'mon Sarge, do it!"

At the far right of the kill zone, Sarge squeezed the clacker to his claymore. It erupted with a terrifying blast. Instantly the other three members of the team squeezed their clackers. The rippling explosions swept along the trail, spewing thousands of double-ought steel pellets ankle to waist high across the trail, shredding leaves and brush and human flesh and bone.

Before the reverberation of the explosions had time to die down he found himself clawing his way forward, stepping into the kill zone, firing the "sixty" at human shapes still dazed and standing. Short, six round bursts coughed out of the barrel of the machine gun. He heard the clinking sound of expended casings and ammo links falling to the ground. More firing from his left and right. Sam had buckshot in his thump gun. "Crazy," he said to himself as he fired, "I didn't think of that."

Sarge was hollering now, "Secure the trail! Secure the trail." Tiny lumbered to the right, sighting his M-16 down the trail, looking for more enemy. Sam was doing the same on the left. "Gunner," Sarge yelled, "cover me while I check the bodies." It seemed surreal.

He looked up and down the kill zone. There were six dead North Vietnamese soldiers. Three had weapons, three had packs full of supplies. They were all dead. Some of the bodies had legs missing. All were shot through with bullets from head to toe. One's torso had been ripped in half. "I did that," he thought, "I did that with the gun."

Sarge was on the radio now, calling the Old Man, giving a SITREP. Shortly, the Old Man and the rest of their platoon would come to join them. He looked back at the bodies in the kill zone. He breathed heavily, the adrenaline rush subsiding now. "That was quick," he thought, "very quick."

"Good job, Gunner," Sarge was saying, smiling. "Good job. We did a damn-damn on 'em."

He looked at Sarge, thought, "This was plain murder, pure and simple."

"Yeah," Little Voice said, "And they would have done the same to us."

Aloud he said to Sarge, "Yeah, the Old Man's dick is gonna get hard when he sees this."

He sat down, then, next to one of the men he had helped to kill. He fingered the feed tray cover on the M-60, popped it open and inserted a new teaser belt of ammo, then slammed the cover shut. He looked away into the jungle, tears welling up in his eyes, mingling with the salt-taste of his sweat. Drops fell from his face and landed on his machine gun.

"Why," his mind screamed at him, "why does it have to be like this? These men had families! They had a home! They had people who loved them! Why?"

"Easy, man," Little Voice whispered in the back of his head, "It don't mean nothin'. It don't mean a thing."



Chuck Hawkins commanded Alpha Co., 2nd Bn., 506th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, during the Siege of FSB Ripcord, July 1-23, 1970.

Pictures:

Top: View of the Coc Muen massif from Hill 805. The Coc Muen overlooked FSB Ripcord from the south. Hill 805 was barely two kilometers southeast of Ripcord. Photo by Bob Smoker, C/2-506

Bottom: LZ east of Ripcord, with Hill 805 in the background, far right. Photo by [unknown].