

# FIRST PATROL

By Michael P. Lambert

**T**he heat was a rancid, sweat-soaked blanket smothering him the moment he jumped down from the helicopter door. He hitched up his olive drab canvas duffel and his backpack and stared across the airstrip, a metal grate pressed into the unending sea of red earth.

Through the shimmering haze in the distance, round-topped mountains printed themselves against the sky.

On the airstrip, a voice was bellowing over the incessant thumping of the thick air by the blades of dozens of choppers,

“Fall in on me! Like today, ladies!”

He took his place in a ragged line of the sleepy-eyed, grousing soldiers. They were from different parts of America, fresh from stateside Basic Training. They were replacement personnel, fresh fodder for the big green Army machine.

The depot staff processed the arriving troops, feeding them piecemeal out to dozens of field units, where they suffered the fate of being the most recent entry on the unit’s morning report. The assignments were made on the basis of what the units in the field needed that week, not on what branch of the Army a soldier was from, or what his advanced training had been.

A cigar-chomping Staff Sergeant in battle dress greeted them.

“Welcome to your new life in the ‘Nam.

Collect your gear, and then follow me to that there hut over yonder,” he said as he pointed to a squat metal building a football field away.

“Y’all just have 364 and a wake up to go,” said the Sergeant, looking back at them and laughing huskily, as they followed him in a ragged line, humping their packs and gawking around at this beehive of diesel-fumed activity.

**H**e awoke after a fitful sleep, his first night in country. Following breakfast, he reported for orientation briefings and a series of “Listen up, this could save your life” lectures delivered by a parade of senior NCOs and company grade officers, captains mostly. None of the briefers expressed any interest in the soldiers in front of them, who were sitting like stunned mullets and not taking any notes. They had heard this claptrap many times before, back in the States.

The briefers offered up their mindlessly rehearsed lines, from enemy activity in the region, field sanitation, to how to write a letter home, to the weather. The jokes were stale and tasteless, and the gallows humor the old hands among the briefers affected was insincere.

The newly arrived soldiers were nameless “new guys,” and since this was a way station for troops on their way to the field, why should the depot cadre invest any energy in getting friendly with them? They would be gone in a few days.

He tried desperately to stay awake for the lectures, but the droning voices put him to sleep. The air was thick with cigarette smoke and the ventilation was laughable, despite the attempt at air conditioning, and staying awake was a losing battle.

A rangy, raw-boned, and sundried First Sergeant walked in the room, his black and yellow Air Cav “horse shoulder” patch that advertised, “I am a member of the Army’s best fighting division. Look upon my insignia and be envious.”

“Let’s get down to the OK corral,” he announced. “And we will get to take our first walk in the park, where I will unlearn you all the crap on how to walk patrol that you picked up at some Boy Scout camp in Arkansas from some clueless banana bar who couldn’t find his ass with both hands.”

The following week, at his new infantry unit in I Corps, in the far north of South Vietnam, he reported for duty. He accepted the fact that he was just another grunt, and with the customary fatalism of every grunt in this long war, which had been dragging on for over 4 years, he knew the futility of trying to escape his assigned role.

As a new guy, the other men—boys, more accurately—in his squad had not bothered to ask his name or where he was from, affecting a nonchalant attitude toward him that said that it didn’t matter whether he was there or not. Until he had survived in a combat zone for at least a month, until he had proved himself in a firefight, he would remain an expendable cog in the machine.

His father’s parting words to him as he left the boarding area for his flight to his induction center was pointed: “Under no circumstances should you ever volunteer for anything. And don’t try to be a hero.”

**I**t was his first patrol in the bush. He was walking alone, out on the flank, through the jungle on a squad-sized patrol. He was

thankful he was not near the “dead zone” of the patrol, the place where the RTO, the guy with the radio pack on his back, scrambled to stay next to the patrol leader, in this case a Second Lieutenant, who was a primary target for most sniper ambushes, or so the accepted wisdom among the veterans of such patrols held. The radio antenna, even bent in half as it was today, was a virtual invitation for the snipers to shoot the guy next to the RTO, the guy with the binoculars around his neck and the .45 on his hip. The patrol leader.

It was hot, incessantly humid and as still as a cathedral nave. Invisible insects were feasting on the exposed arms and necks of the soldiers, in standard combat patrol intervals, as they quietly moved through the bush in thoughtful steps.

He was lost in thought, having been walking alone for nearly two hours, over 20 yards out on the flank of the single-file procession, experiencing a pleasant reverie about hunting ruffed grouse with his father in Western Pennsylvania, this time last year.

He was told by his fire team leader to be on the alert for trip wires, land mines, punji stake holes and any kind of movement in the trees.

But thinking about grouse hunting won out over these mundane tasks.

You never really saw grouse; you simply shot at the sound of them, exploding from the cover of thick hemlocks when you walked up on them. The last thing you do in bird hunting, he was taught, was to aim your shotgun. You won’t hit anything if you aim. You must feel the target, and let your sixth sense take control of your actions.

His boot slipped off the side of a tree root, and he was jolted back to the jungle. He froze, his M-16 at port arms, with the selector switch on full auto, and strained to hear where his patrol was. There was only silence and heat.

He saw that he was at the bottom of a well-worn trail, edged on each side by thick jungle that sloped gently upward, away from where he

was standing. He knew in an instant that he had wandered too far away from the squad. There would be hell to pay. He could see or hear no one.

He stood stock-still and sensed movement coming down the trail, seconds before he saw him.

A young boy, surely a VC partisan, dressed in black pajamas, with a conical straw hat hanging down his back, wearing sandals cut from truck tires, was bouncing down the trail toward him on a bike, maybe 45 yards away, but coming on fast.

The boy was jamming his feet on the ground, trying to stop. Viet Cong bikes, he was told by somebody, had no brakes. At the same time, the VC boy was grabbing his rifle sling, trying to get his AK-47 that was slung on his back and into firing position, all the while steering the bike with one hand and trying to stop the bike.

He stared into the face of his enemy, who was now fully arrested in place and looking straight at him. The boy's AK-47 was now down off his shoulder and coming up to a firing position in a rehearsed, smooth movement.

He could feel his heart beating through his soaked fatigues, could feel the sweat trickle

down his temples, could hear a roar, like a waterfall cascade, in his ears, and could see the fear in the coal black, crystalline eyes of the boy before him.

It seemed an eternity as they faced each other, frozen forever in time.

**W**ithout thinking, without feeling, without conscience, he felt himself squeezing the M-16 trigger, hearing three quick popping sounds, watching as the high velocity bullets stitched his adversary across the chest in tiny explosions of red mist against the black cloth, the rounds of lead tumbling end over end on impact through the chest cavity, catapulting the rider backwards off the bike and forever into his mind.

**I**t has been 43 years since his confrontation with a death delivered at his hands, a moment in time that took place at the foot of a mountain trail in a far-away place in a time he cannot quite envision any longer.

He closes his eyes and tries desperately to escape into sleep every night. But the terror-stricken face of his long-ago enemy is always there to greet him, staring his cold-eyed stare.

