

Chickenman

by

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I had been in in-county barely a week and my new jungle boots still had the manufacturer's original shine on them. I was so new to Vietnam that the discovery was still fresh to me that this was a place where people I didn't even know were trying to shoot me. This was somewhat of a culture shock since from where I came (Climax, Texas), people had the courtesy to get to know someone before they shot at him.

Being an FNG, I was assigned to pull OIC (Officer-in-Charge) duty for the night perimeter guard at the Can Tho Airfield where I had been stationed. Late in the day, before sunset, I reported to the perimeter command post, a flimsy stack of ragged sand bags with a tin roof. I had envisioned something more substantial, like the storm cellar back home which was made of railroad cross ties and packed dirt. I had spent the greater part of my youth in that cellar, along with family and neighbors, weathering out tornadoes, hail, and lightning. I expected something of at least equivalent defensive structure for a command post. But, I rationalized, I was new; perhaps my expectations were too high.

I chatted briefly with the three or four other persons with whom I was to spend the night there in the command post. I was handed an M-16 rifle and a heavy, loose-fitting metal combat helmet called a "steel pot". The radio in the command post, essential for communications with the other posts along the perimeter, was issued to the sergeant-of-the-guard, someone who apparently the Army felt could be better trusted with a piece of gear like that.

I checked to make sure the M-16's safety was on since I didn't want to accidentally shoot any important piece of government property, especially myself. Then I assumed my duty of OIC by placing my steel pot in a corner of the command post, the rounded side up, and sitting on it.

The sun set and darkness prevailed. With the darkness came suspicion. I began to suspect there were Viet Cong lurking about. The splash of a frog in the swamp could be the footstep of a careless Viet Cong sapper. A sneeze in the dark could be a signal that, according to their prearranged plan, the wire had been cut. As my suspicions grew, I donned my steel pot and clutched the M-16 closer to me. From behind the sand bags, I would raise my head to peer into the darkness. Each time, the steel pot on my head would slide down and bang the bridge of my nose.

In the command post, it was too dark to see each other and no one spoke. Only once an hour, the radio came alive briefly as each of the stations around the perimeter checked in

with a brief and solemn radio check. As the hours passed, I became more convinced that there were hordes of Viet Cong gathering just outside the perimeter, ready to slither through the wire and pounce on us.

The night stretched eternally. Man-eater delta mosquitoes, ones that can guzzle a quart a minute, sampled me at their leisure. Throughout the long night, I expected the Viet Cong —“Charlie” as they were called—to throw themselves upon us at any minute.

As it neared dawn and Charlie hadn't come yet, I became even more convinced we were about to be overrun. I knew what those Viet Cong were up to. By waiting this long, they were trying to lull me into thinking they weren't even out there and then, just when they had me thinking it was safe to take off the steel pot and sit on it again, that's when they would spring on us.

I didn't know from where exactly along the perimeter the attack would come, but it occurred to me that Charlie might take a special pride in hitting the command post first. Being new, I was uncertain as to the proper protocol for attacks of this nature.

I hunkered down inside the sand bag walls and nervously fingered the trigger of the M-16 to assure myself I could actually find it when I needed it. Suddenly, the radio in the command post crackled to life. Someone was shouting, "He's everywhere! He's everywhere!"

This is it, I thought, the call to arms. I sprang up to the wall, pointing the M-16 into the darkness. Quickly pushing back the steel pot that had slid down over my eyes, I was ready.

As I waited for the oncoming assault, I had a moment to reflect. I reflected on the fact that my Army recruiter had specifically promised me as a condition of my enlistment, if I became a helicopter pilot, I wouldn't experience situations such as this.

I wasn't in a hurry for it, but it seemed to me the attack was taking a long time to get underway. There was no gunfire, no exploding grenades, no other sound besides the croaking of frogs and the buzz of mosquitoes. After a while, I began to think about what I had actually heard from the radio. Then I recognized what had happened. Somewhere in one of the bunkers along the perimeter, someone had been listening to the Chickenman show from AFVN on his transistor radio and had keyed open the mike of the bunker's radio transmitter just in time to pick up the show's trademark shrill chorus of “He's everywhere! He's everywhere!”

Although relieved to realize that there was no attack, I knew that by springing to the wall, I had confirmed my status as a FNG. As fortune would have it, however, it was so dark no one had seen me do it. Saved from both destruction and embarrassment, I gratefully relaxed to wait for the dawn. Taking off my steel pot and placing it in the corner, I sat on it -- like a chicken on an egg.