

A Room With a View Previously titled "Oh What a Night"

by [Duke Barrett](#) on Thursday, November 10, 2011 at 12:51pm

1. A Room With a View

Bong Son, Vietnam-1966

At approximately 3 PM on yet another hot and humid September day, the 2nd squad of the reconnaissance platoons 8th cavalry, 1st airborne brigade, left our firebase and headed down a steep heavily forested hillside to set up an ambush. The mission? To kill bad guys I suppose. As a Specialist Fourth Class I wasn't privy to much information. The one thing I did know, it was dead on monsoon season and we'd be sleeping out in the rain again.

At the firebase the platoon had been temporarily assigned a secure location, secure for a recon platoon that is. Perched high on a hill many clicks north of scenic downtown Bong Son, we provided perimeter security for an artillery battery. Unfortunately the high elevation of our position brought us even closer to an unforgiving sun. The poncho liners hung over our dug in positions mitigated the sun's glare but failed to ameliorate an overabundance of mosquitoes and humidity.

Making sure we didn't get too comfortable in our new digs, battalion hierarchy found something useful for us to do. Conduct another patrol. Wow, how'd they come up with that idea? It must have been at least twenty-four hours since our last patrol. They definitely had an imagination deficit, or so it seemed. I guess it must have been put away in a lock-box somewhere. Battalion would order up a patrol, we'd saddle- up

Redundancy and boredom were an ever-present problem because at times it seemed like all you did was follow the guy in front of you, who followed the guy in front of him, who was following orders from somebody who told him what to do. To stay sharp we had to fight off the cobwebs that tried to form in our mind. Aw, to daydream.

Sergeant Bishop was the patrol leader that afternoon as our squad of eight paratroopers descended down the hillside cutting, dicing and slicing our way into an even denser triple canopied covered valley.

We stopped to take a break at dusk. It seemed to turn from dusk to dark in a matter of seconds in the belly of the beast, the jungle. We'd stopped alongside, not on, but alongside a trail, a rather wide trail, to take a much-needed break. A good recon team almost never took the trail. Besides, that'd be too damn easy. We walked off of the damn things. Kept us alive.

At that point Sergeant Bishop checked his map to find out where the hell we were and then confirmed our position by radio with battalion. Hungry as hell, we broke out the c-rats and sat down in a tight circle perimeter on an already wet jungle turf for supper.

With our p38's in hand, aka can openers, the feast was on. The menu consisted of ham and lima beans, ham and eggs chopped, chipped beef and other culinary specialties. These mouth-savoring entrees were

only to be followed up with a small can of warm fruit. That and a canteen full of warm iodine tablet tasting water made one wonder what more could life possibly offer?

Stomachs filled, it was back to business. Following a short after-dinner stroll, we'd apparently reached our objective; a well-used trail, a possible corridor for enemy troops. The mission, to watch and listen for enemy movement and if possible, kill 'em. Just as I thought, great!

We set up fields of fire on a steep embankment overlooking the trail by clearing the lanes of dense foliage, set up claymore mines to our immediate front and then settled into two-man positions for another comfy evening. You couldn't beat these accommodations with a stick. Well-concealed only yards up and off of the trail, we followed strict noise discipline. Faces painted and dressed to the teeth in the latest camouflage look, we blended right into the terrain. Quiet as the surrounding greenery and ready for some shuteye, we followed the standard sleep and guard duty schedule of two hours on, two hours off, per individual.

Battalion, we've got a problem; our sleeping arrangements. See, that steep embankment wasn't conducive for a good nights sleep. Oh well, who's complaining? Gotta make the best of it. Battalion wouldn't have cared any damn way.

Lying back on the wet ground, we swatted away mosquitoes and stared up at the pitch-black tripled canopied ceiling as we awaited our prey. Couldn't see a damned thing. It was black as the ace of spades, certainly not a room with a view. Extremely uncomfortable, we longed to be in the comforts of that dug in foxhole back on the mountain's top. You know that saying, "you don't know what you got till its gone?" Sho 'nuf is true. A little sun, no matter how hot, sounded pretty good. Lord only knows what was crawling around us. Compared to where we were, that firebase seemed like a Holiday Inn.

Just when you thought things couldn't possibly get any worse, they did. Damn rain, and lots of it. After all it was monsoon season and Mother Nature didn't disappoint. All of a sudden the thought of lying on your back on the wet ground, on a steep embankment, sounded pretty good. See, that was before the rain started. It rained so hard it became impossible to lie down without feeling you were being waterboarded. To make things worse we started to involuntarily slide down the embankment toward the trail and literally dug in our heels to stop our forward motion over the claymore mines that we'd so carefully positioned.

Try as we may, it became more than an effort to keep from being washed down the embankment. In our haste to stop our downward motion we were forced to grab onto available vines and branches, all the while hoping to God that no one would accidentally squeeze one of the mine handles by mistake, causing a premature explosion. The mission, like us recondos was in peril. Virtually blinded by the dark and with no idea of how long the intense rain would continue to fall, things couldn't have gone more swimmingly, so to speak. The only thing we could do was hold on, onto anything that is with the exception of those claymore handles.

Fearing the deluge could have swept us onto the trail, we became nostalgic for the immediate past. The reason? The trail, that big trail we fought so hard not to be swept onto, had taken on a new life. Real life, that is. Life in the form of troops, wet enemy troops, like hundreds of live, wet enemy troops.

Outnumbered approximately a hundred to one, our options became limited. We held on for dear life and selfishly prayed for our own survival as an enemy company, if not regiment, passed by only a few feet from our sixteen wet feet. I prayed to God that we didn't have a hero amongst us who felt it his patriotic duty to "open-up" on the enemy. He or She apparently answered my prayers. Not a shot was fired in anger, or fear for that matter. Hell, the weapons were so waterlogged they probably wouldn't have fired any damn way.

In the dead of night, the only thing we feared was fear itself. Well, fear and the hundreds of passing disgruntled enemy soldiers. The only thing we could see were the moving vines and branches pushed aside by the heavily armed, water-logged alien beings to our immediate front. The fact that we were damn near on top of them, or possibly right under their feet, damn near speed bumps, proved to me beyond a doubt that they were about as anxious to confront us, as we were they. Misery loves company.

For more than an hour, possibly two, or what seemed like an eternity, the enemy passed by, all the time unaware of our existence. I am certain that we, the recon team, invented "stealth" that soggy evening. The sound of the pouring rain fortunately drowned (no pun intended) out any sounds one with normal hearing would've been able to hear. To insure our well-being we turned off our radio, clamped our mouths shut so as not to hear our teeth chatter and prayed our hearts wouldn't rip right out of our new fashionable but yet functional tropical jungle fatigue shirts.

Mercifully, dawn arrived right on time. In what could very well have been the longest night of our lives, mine for certain; proof of the existence of a large enemy force had been left behind. The trail, covered with hundreds of footprints, discarded wrappers, cigarette butts, human waste and trampled foliage, bore witness to what we almost saw.

Relieved and happy to be alive, we turned on our PRC-25 radio and called in our sit-rep. Oh, and by the way, our painted faces were damn near lily-white by early morn. Aw, you just can't beat a good shower. They're really refreshing. Know what I'm saying?

Following a thorough recon of the immediate area, we again broke for a meal and a smoke. Those that did smoke lit up to settle frayed nerves. After consuming more tasty c-rats and some now lukewarm water, we took a new look at our even newer lease on life. We then climbed back to the mountaintop to the Holiday Inn where one could see life from rooms with a view, for a well-deserved rest.