

# 십육

## Chapter Sixteen

**T**he final weeks of NCO Academy were nonstop combat patrol—on the move night and day through the wooded swamps of southern Georgia, Army Rangers playing the part of the Vietcong, probing our perimeter during the night, ambushing us during the day, attempting to separate us in fire-fights and take prisoners, everybody exhausted and short on sleep—and as Shaughnessy later commented, “Maybe the best training the Army put together during the entire Vietnam War.”

The only time we were safe, we soon learned, was in the late afternoon, when we halted and dug in. An hour or two before sunset we would secure a defensible position, establish a perimeter, and call in our coordinates on the radio—which were promptly relayed to the Ranger teams opposing us.

The Rangers, however, utilized the hours around sunset as a sort of shift-change. This freed us for a short space to take off our boots, swap cigarettes, and cook C-rations before the evening’s activities began. It was possible, I discovered, to heat the C-ration coffee along with hot chocolate in your steel canteen cup, adding sugar and cream, to create something that tasted so good with a Winston that I spent the rest of my life as a smoker trying to replicate the sensation (not under-



Securing an LZ (Savino in the foreground), Ft. Benning, GA—  
October 1969

standing that it had everything to do with being nineteen and high on adrenaline).

Several times a week during this brief hiatus, we would secure an LZ (Landing Zone) and pop smoke, whereupon a chopper would appear and drop C-rations, bringing in new Observers.

We also used this interval to refill canteens at nearby waterholes, adding a couple iodine tablets and shaking up the contents to make the water potable.

Savino and I received this assignment one afternoon as the sun was sinking, both of us loaded up with the patrol's canteens. Our Observer, an older Ranger, showed us on the wilderness topographical map where the waterhole was located.

As we folded up our maps, he unstrapped his .45 in its holster and handed it to me with a single word. “Snakes,” he said.

“Okay,” I thought, as I strapped on the .45, “this is maybe being a little *over* cautious.” We navigated our way to a pond about half a klick (half a kilometer) away, where Savino knelt at the edge of the water and began filling canteens. The pond was overhung with low trees—very peaceful, very pastoral, the last rays of the sun just touching its iridescent surface—



On patrol (Chattahoochee River Valley), Ft. Benning, GA—October 1969.  
Top from left: Winship (NY), Savino (NY), Toni (TN); Bottom: Tyler (TX),  
Thompson (OK)



On patrol (Chattahoochee River Valley), Ft. Benning, GA—October 1969  
From left: Zimmerman (MI), Shaughnessy (OH), Sertich (?)

and I watched as an enormous cottonmouth moccasin slowly detached itself from an overhanging branch and slid into the water, its black triangular head making silent ripples as it swam directly toward us. I stared transfixed for a moment, before grabbing Savino by the collar and hauling him backwards.

The simulated combat in the Chattahoochee River Basin was conducted with magazines packed with red-tipped, blank M16 rounds and belted blank ammo for the M60 machine guns, but was otherwise in deadly earnest. Most nights we

were under attack, Ranger teams dressed as VC and playing their role to the hilt. Early in the exercise, they caught a guy from another platoon asleep on the perimeter, and his buddies



Candidate Lawrence Savino on patrol (Chattahoochee River Valley), Ft. Benning, GA—October 1969



Cooking C-Rations (Chattahoochee River Valley), Ft. Benning, GA—  
October 1969. From left: Warren (MS), Winship (NY), Thompson (OK)

discovered him at daybreak, bound and gagged and hanging upside down from a tree.

Of the daytime patrols, I remember being ambushed: a sudden, deafening explosion from the front of the patrol, everybody hitting the ground, and weapons opening up alongside us (they had us flanked), while you're frantically trying to dig your way into the dirt and lay down answering fire.

Our Observers were older Rangers who silently watched and graded us, as the command passed from one member of the Fourth Platoon to the next. I have no idea how the other

platoons operated; we formed the habit of huddling every evening to discuss the tactical situation, everybody in the patrol knowing and understanding each other's particular strengths and weaknesses.

My only other memory of this training took place one night as the full moon was coming up. Gene Toni and I were lying under cover on an LP (Listening Post) outside the perimeter. We'd made a nest of brush to conceal ourselves, and the rising moon illuminated the Georgia woods as we watched and listened for enemy movement.

"Check that out," said Toni—and he pointed to a pair of eyes regarding us from the wall of brush immediately to our front. "What is that, some kind of frog?"

We discussed its probable ancestry—it appeared to be a frog or a large bug—as the eyes stared at us, unblinking, in



LP (Listening Post), Chattahoochee River Valley,  
Ft. Benning, GA—October 1969

the moonlight.

Toni's curiosity was piqued. It looked like a pale, bulbous frog perched in the wall of brush we'd constructed, and he reached for it, ammo pouch in hand.

"Do not touch that goddamn thing with your bare hands," I told him (everything in southern Georgia had begun to seem toxic to me). He pulled his hand back and got his bayonet out instead, with the intention of dislodging it.

The creature's head suddenly lunged forward at us, revealing itself to be attached to the body of a pygmy rattler—and we catapulted out of the back of the Listening Post like we were shot from a cannon.

Toni captured it and carried it back inside the perimeter to show our Ranger/Observer—who promptly cut off the snake's head, skinned it, and roasted the meat over a small cook fire, offering this delicacy around the circle. Several tried a bite. I did not.

This three-week exercise in combat in the jungle wilderness was capped off by a ritual that involved a final challenge: Each of us had to walk upright across an elevated timber (forty feet high) suspended above the Chattahoochee River. In the middle, they had erected a set of blocks (creating two steps up and two steps down) and you had to negotiate this without dropping to your hands and knees.

This was a particular challenge for the guys who had issues with heights—easily identifiable, as they were the ones sweating ferociously standing in line (this included Shaughnessy)—and several fell into the river, before everybody eventually made it across.

We were transported back to Ft. Benning, jammed into the back of a deuce-and-a-half, the ride marking the end of





Elevated River Crossing (Chattahoochee River Valley), Ft. Benning, GA—  
October 1969

our three-month ordeal at NCO Academy, the entire platoon on a euphoric high—Texan Terry Tyer singing “Wooly Bully” in his Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs’ voice, everybody bel-  
lowing the chorus. The truck pulled up at the 84th Company barracks, and everybody dove for the showers, most guys simply throwing away their underwear and socks after weeks in the mud and grunge.

At some point during the final few days, we were herded into a large conference room and shown a movie called *WHY VIETNAM?*—the only time in the Army I ever recall being

shown something with political overtones.

The film was narrated by President Johnson, and I can remember LBJ's voice, with his Texas intonation, asking rhetorically: "*Whaah Vietnam? Whaaah Vietnam?*"

The movie, replete with historical footage, had been made at the beginning of the war, in '65, during the Johnson administration. It was now four years later, however; Nixon was president, and the situation had morphed well beyond the original rationale for America's involvement.

Several guys raised their hands to comment after the lights came up, Savino among them.

*"Put your fucking hands down! Sit the fuck down!"* snarled our Tactical NCOs.

Here again was the sense of incipient violence I'd seen on Memorial Day, back in Canandaigua, when the issue of patriotism arose.

"Hey, send me wherever the fuck you're gonna send me," said Savino after we exited the conference room, "just don't expect me to swallow this political horseshit."