

SNAKE BIT

There were many ways to die in Vietnam. One of the ways was what the Vietnamese called the Haboo, others called it the Bamboo Pit Viper. We called it a Step-and-a-half. Rumor had it that once bit by this snake you had a step-and-a-half to live.

We had just left the waterfall logger near OP 1 and were heading into the mountains toward Laos. It was hot and humid, as usual. As we were heading into the jungle we began quietly talking about the possibility of encountering the Step-and-a-half. They were supposed to lie in wait, then sensing the warmth of prey passing below would release and drop on to whatever was unfortunate enough to be passing by. There was little whispering of booby traps or VC, mostly the snake.

By the time we humped a klick through the paddies and arrived at the sharp inclines leading into the mountain jungle, we were beat. We started up the steep narrow trail until the company was out of the rice paddy and out of the oppressive sun. The captain called a break so we could gather our strength before the long climb ahead of us. Carrying extra mortar rounds for the mortar crew as well as my regular pack I didn't want to sit down since it meant someone would have to help stand back up again. It was easier for me to stand and just lean back against the steep side of the mountain.

I had just found a comfortable position when something stung me in the back. Everything stopped, including my heart. I knew I had just been bitten by the snake and had about two seconds to live. All I had time to do was just say "Shit" and waited for the last two seconds of my life to pass, no point in taking the steps.

Then someone shouted, "Incoming". Since I wasn't dead yet I figured maybe I had only been shott. Relief at not being bitten rushed over me until it dawned on me that I really been shot. I dropped my pack and reached behind me under my fatigues and my hand came back covered in blood mixed with some kind of clear viscous fluid. I realized I had been hit in the spine and the clear viscous fluid was spinal fluid. My legs gave way and I collapsed to the trail. I was paralyzed.

I heard someone shout "medic" and one of our medics came running up the trail. It was my friend Rocky. I told him I had been shot in the spine, that spinal fluid was running down my back and I couldn't feel my legs. Rocky rolled me over and pulled up my shirt. He wiped the blood and spinal fluid away from my back... then started laughing. He was my friend. I was paralyzed. He was laughing.

"It's not your spine." Rocky said with a smile on his face as he reached for my pack. He reached in and pulled out a can of peaches I had saved from our C Rations.

Canned peaches were one of the prized acquisitions from the cases of C Rations we would receive. They go best over the normally dry pound cake which was found in another box. I was saving mine until I got a box with Pound Cake or could trade with someone, often for a ridiculous price.

The small caliber bullet had passed through the can of peaches and just nicked my back about an inch from my spine. Rocky cleaned the wound and put a bandage on. He told me to get up just as Captain Jordan came up the trail. He asked Rocky how badly I was hurt and that he had a medevac helicopter on standby to come get me. Rocky said I was just nicked and didn't think I needed a dustoff. A mixed blessing, as a little R&R in the aid station would be righteous.

The feeling had come back into my legs though and I was able to stand up. Red, our platoon sergeant wrapped a tee shirt and a towel around my back so my pack wouldn't rub against the wound. The 80mm rounds were distributed to other guys who were still just able to walk with their own loads, thus lightening my pack as we resumed our trek into the mountains.

We continued to live in fear of the Step-and-a-Half, but I never saw one. There were other nasty buggy encounters, an eight inch centipede in my poncho liner, a spider the size of my fist that crawled over my face. Then there was the ribbing. "Hey Peaches" was one of the favorites, sometimes just a hissssss. They were all Bastards, my band of brothers.

Writers note: This did not happen to me. After seven months in the field I was offered a job in the rear as Awards and Decorations clerk as well as Casualty clerk. One of the first tasks I encountered was a request for a Purple Heart that had been returned from Battalion Headquarters as DENIED. I read through my predecessors original application and found it so poorly written that it sounded as if the soldier in question had been wounded when his canned peaches blew up.

I asked for and was granted a trip back out to the field to interview the parties involved and determine if there was an actual injury caused by hostile action. The above story was related to me by the wounded soldier and corroborated by the medic and Company Captain.

The story stayed with me and I am glad I can finally share it in this form. I used a first person account as that's how it was told to me and the only way I could think of to try to capture his internal dialogue and convey some of the events we encountered in the jungles of Vietnam.