

# The Quiet Time

BY MARC LEVY

After a blistering hot day marching up and down mud-slicked hills, or tramping wide-open fields, or steamy jungle, imagine setting out booby traps on enemy trails, lying in wait, then ever so carefully breaking them down.

At dusk, after planting trips and Claymores round the NDP, after finding a spot for pack and gear, after eating tinned C-rations of beans and franks, imagine curling up on the cold, wet ground.

Now, fast asleep, being woken twice in the night by a man gently tapping your resting arm. "Your guard," he whispers, for the first of two one-hour shifts.

Leaving that foxhole the second time, grenades, machine gun, Claymore detonators all in place, imagine two hours' sleep, rising at dawn, shrugging off bugs and wet bamboo, rubbing rheumy eyes, brushing sticky teeth.

Before the grueling day begins, there is the welcome taste of GI coffee. Here is how to make it:

*Seated cross-legged, take a chunk of C4 the size of a thumbnail, shape it into a ball, set it carefully down.*

*Tear open the packet of instant coffee saved from last night's C-ration meal. Pour it into a canteen cup half-filled with water.*

*Tap the brown powder over the cup, stir with a C-ration white plastic spoon.*

*Strike a GI match and light the C4. Do not breathe in the white smoke; the fumes, it is said, are harmful.*

*Hold the canteen cup over the burning explosive until the water boils, about thirty seconds.*

*Remove the cup from the bright yellow flames. Let the C4 burn itself out. Those who step on it risk losing a foot.*

*Tear open and pour in one or two packets of non-dairy creamer. Repeat with sugar. Use the white plastic spoon to mix and stir. With eyes closed, inhale the savory vapors; cup to your lips, feel the hot, inky brew flood your mouth, scourge your tongue, roll down your willing gullet. The taste is awful, but it will do.*

Grunts savor this quiet time, before every inch of our bodies is salty with sweat. This quiet time before seething mosquitoes, snapping ants, creeping leeches bite or sting or drink our blood. This quiet time before sudden shots fill us with dread. This quiet time before the shrieking air sings of the wounded, smells of the dead.

It is the all-too-fleeting quiet time, which ends with the softly echoed "zero two," followed by the dim rustling of one hundred packs, helmets, and weapons reluctantly lifted, slung, shifted to place.

See how the flock of helmeted cranes slouch against their rifles, feel how the sweat drips down narrow cheeks, collects at the chin, free falls, forming small dark spots on half-bent knees.

Listen, as moments after the hushed command, one hundred grudging soldiers, one by one, reluctantly trudge forward, into the grim unwinnable jaws of Vietnam. ■



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