

The Cambodian Adventure



Austin D. Torney

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Preface

I met the General, ‘Magic Dragon’, at Long Binh, Vietnam, while I was delivering the Army Supply System and Intelligence computer tapes from Fort Shafter’s CSC-PAC in Oahu. My pilot and I had just barely made it back intact from the northern bases, having helped them from. Being overrun. The General commended us, and made us an offer—on the spot. We signed up. We had to. The General was my Commander back in Hawaii.

The ‘DIA’ had its own military arm; it was a phantom limb. All this and more I learned—as a fine end to a long and desperate day of flying in a wounded helicopter.

Dedication

Somewhere, in the darkest night peace will come, as the spirit flies, as we weave a spell by another name, one that causes the hail to fall with the summer rain in the Cambodian Jungle.

I flee though the jungle, as the boy who was once on the cross country team. Then I will come to you, my love, with the passing of the days, and I will set you free each time, your round-eyed, half-bred beauty to be more appreciated in Hawaii, where East ever meets West, and blends, and will remove the chains that bind the heart and the mind.

Innocents may die, and wiser men will yet remain the same, but you and I will take our place in time, and find a better way to fly, far beyond the roughest seas. I hear all your whispered dreams, and the endless signs of the ones who loved; they live on in the stars above.

Then I will come to you my love, with the passing of the days, and I will set you free each time...



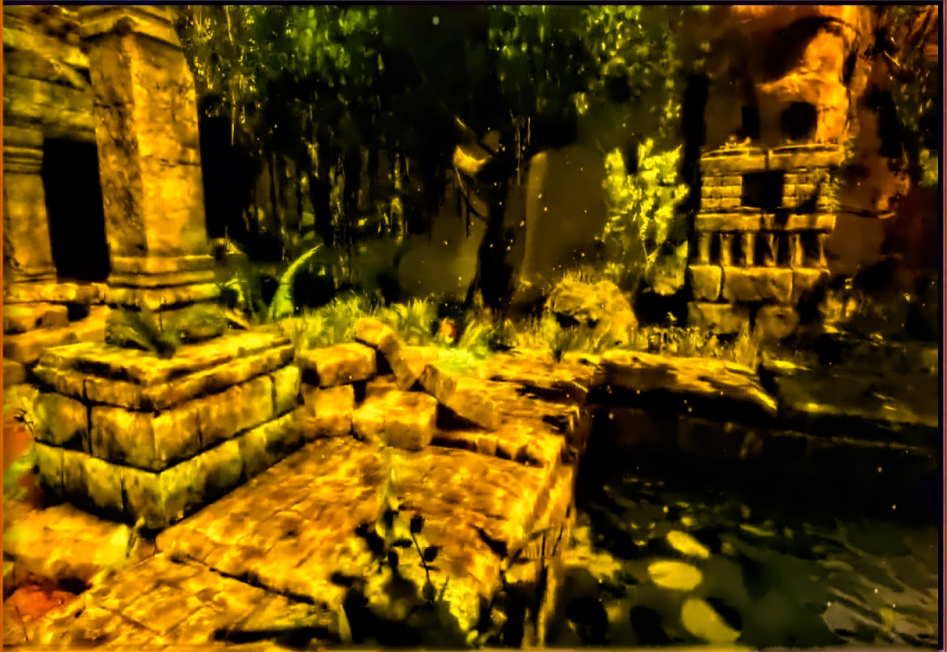
Foreword

The Rouge were killing the doctors and the professionals, and the General could not take this. His will and valor transferred onto all of us. *Come away to fly; we will set them free.* I 'volunteered' Intelligence Agent assistance for ground missions.

There was an ebb and flow to the General's prey and charges: There were large successes, like the surprise one I will next describe, although a setback to us at first, we losing several troops and an officer, when stumbling onto such a large Khmer contingent, these followed by failures or lulls in which intelligence was analyzed back in Hawaii, as it was from there that the overall Pacific was commanded.

"You sped my step," he said to her and to me from here to long ago, whilst everyone attempted to retard it, as even now the four winds are ever warning of the reports, of the last resort, of the tip of the iceberg that has now globally warmed away, for spring is sprung in spurts, and it is yet of the joy that never left."





On the Wrong Side of the River

A Cambodian Tale

We were on the wrong side of the river, by purpose, in Cambodia, which was fine, for we barely existed, with no records kept. We were in the wrong place, too, one of our rare mishaps, as it turned out, and actually one very early on, born of a cascade of unfortunate events that were not totally unplanned for. Always have an out, for there will be those times of woe.

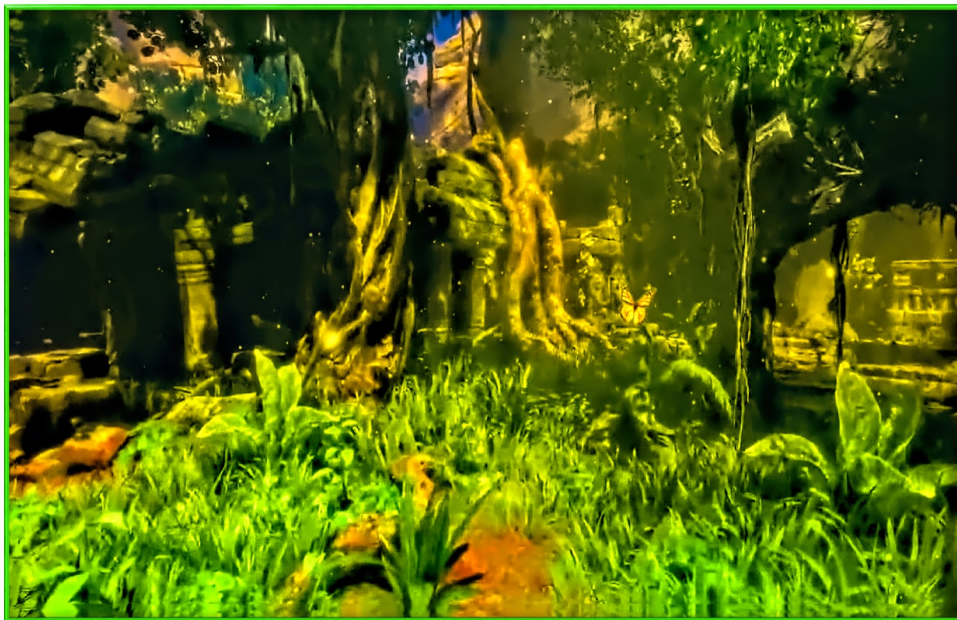
We, the intelligence officers, had been inserted along with the DIA, 'special troops', another nameless non-designation, and they with us, for we each supported the other. The action had been going fairly well, as planned, the many opposing rampagers led not so much by reason but by the beast that was ever part and parcel of man.



The fire-engagement was over, for now, in the main, as a retreat had been called by the Captain of the section upon detection of a larger than expected approaching ground force,

this fallback being hindered by some opposition stragglers whose spirits had been bolstered by the sight of an entire Khmer Rouge division boldly crossing a long and open field, which could become good luck, or not, for either side. The tail end of our section retreaters was further slowed by the carrying and stretchering of our dead and wounded.

Actually, the surprise incursion had gone well enough, but for the fact that we two IA's remaining were now pinned to the ground just inside the front edge of the tree-line, for all hell was now breaking loose, shattering the forest trees and their branches. The special troops had just begun their slowed retreat, and we could leave no one behind but ourselves, my Major friend and I.



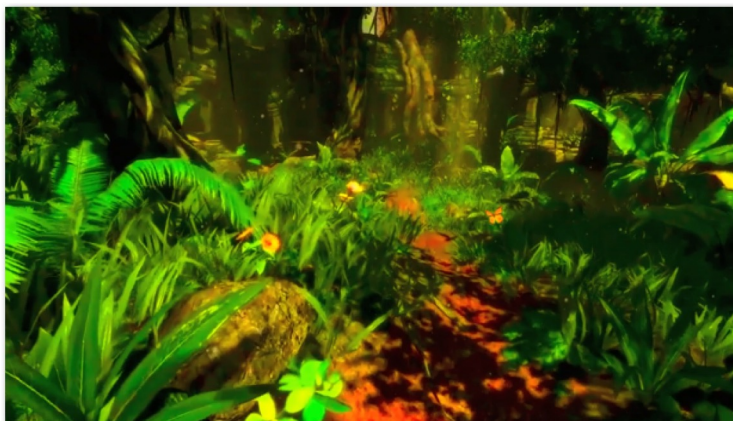
The lead Rouge were advancing, haphazardly, with some old, assorted mini-artillery, with an entire battalion or division some ways behind. We would not last where we were, but we had to stay behind for yet another reason, for we were the information and intelligence gatherers when in the field and on the ground. All we had was a machine gun, but a large one, hidden a bit further back in the woods, recently dug out of the ground, where we had left it on a prior occasion of recon. Always think many moves ahead.

Yet, it was not quite the right time to retrieve it and use it, which is of knowing when to move, not just where, on the chessboard, for we'd have to be somewhat exposed to use it, plus it wouldn't be that useful against the machines firing into our area, and it would draw attention to our troops' retreat path, for the Khmer didn't exactly know where we were, or if any of us still were. Do not show yourself until you have to. We had to survive at least 10 more long minutes.

The fire was beginning to converge on us, whether by luck or a good sense of sweep, from either side, but not yet straight on, where a medium size boulder sat, just up ahead in the grassy field, which was why we had chosen the spot.

Do or die. We dashed out and crept up to the the big rock, it already having an end having been just split off. We needed more time. We dug out the ground behind the really big rock a foot or so deep, exposing the part of the boulder yet underground, and laid in the depression.

Another minute or so and the above ground portions of the rock would be gone, and soon they were, shattering and flying away. The enemy would see no one behind the rock which was no longer there, but just might figure it out. I raised a small bending scope and noted the yet noiseless jets approaching on the horizon, behind the battalion, as well as a vanguard approaching at 600 yards. We needed 60 seconds now, or even half, as it turned out. The music played upon the drama...



At 30 seconds, the enemy first heard the sounds of the jets, crying to all the rest to retreat, yet some of the vanguard still ran toward our woods, perhaps preferring that over an open field. Not good, neither for us nor for the special troops that were still retreating through the forest, who could still become targets at the river shore clearing, while boarding.

At 0 seconds, the air-strike landed on the main battalion, a fine diversion for us IAs, and so we rose from our would-be graves and ran back into the woods, rolling out the machine gun, blasting most of the on-comers away for quite a while. The chess moves had come to pass, although still ongoing and into new territory.

The machine gun finally overheated and jammed. We made no pause, which is more of the training, and so we were up and off into the jungle like bats out of hell, not wanting to become meat-loaf.

The enemy, a bit shocked at the silence, had taken rather too long to give chase, but that they then did, yet still a hundred yards off or more, their bead and their one lucky projection blasting the Major to bits and instant death with some great munition, just twenty yards behind me, he an older man and of a higher rank, as I was a Lieutenant.



The rock had been hard, and the road of the trail was long...

Yet I knew that the General would not leave me behind, as long as I was relatively on time and/or could give him some indication that I was alive, pending, of course, the fact that we weren't supposed to be here, and the less attention on it to the world the better. The arriving enemies at the shore, if more came in greater numbers, could be better dealt with by firing on them from the other side of the river.

I reached for the radio, but then remembered that it had been assigned to the Major, my mentor and my friend, even though I wasn't even a Captain yet... nor now even the total captain of my fate, for the chess board had now crashed and fallen to the ground.

He, this young Lieutenant of myself of 50 years ago, believed that luck would never fail, so he ran like the wind through the jungle, surely knowing. He had what he'd come for, now hopeful to find the help at the shore. The relentless ones were not far behind, that ill-fated menace of the bad kind.



Miss Fortune laughed, and said, *“No road could be too hard to tread, for we are fearless. To those, a boon, for they ever seize the opportune.”*

“I see you, fairest happening.”

Just past a sharp turn, in the trees, he suddenly dropped to his knees and fired into his pursuers mean as they came upon the scene, using all his ammo but for one round, then hurried on, with nary a sound.

“I am wide aware, Miss Karma, of this continuing dharma, that chance shines as my sun, for, she, in turn, happens on everyone.”

“Oh, say it is your lot, my friend and lover,” she answered back, granting him cover.

Listening, he could hear ever more troops rushing through the night, in groups, about a half-mile back, around the loops, far enough away.

“I gratefully welcome thee, Miss Lady Luck of Dice, though I may pay a late fee for my pick up so precise.”



Ms. Destiny Serendipity smiled, saying, *“The game is on; we are yet alive and playing. Let joy and innocence prevail; believe that luck will never fail.”*

He moved on, ever faster, cheating lame old Death, a third wind becoming of her vaporous breath, it blowing this DIA operative toward to the shore, ever onward. He could hear the whirling chopper, but now receding was its doppler, he thus grieving of its leaving.

Am I much too late; still too far? Shall I curse you all, destined stars?

“No,” said Lovely Dear Twist of Fate, *“for you have one bullet left for chance, not to use to sleep or dream perchance.”*

The chopper was rising nigh, up into the star-crossed sky.

“Shall to self I take this bullet now that the bus has left?”

“Oh, no,” Miss Lucky Break encouraged, *“Do not be at all discouraged, for you know it shall not be so and what with it you now must do.”*

“Yes, perhaps it shall be so in some plight coinciding in a most kempt and hapful night.”

He smiled and then knelt to ground, and sent his last bright tracer round just ahead of the copter now departing, his minor wounds yet sorely smarting.

“I bless you with all my lucky charms, my good and well-fated man of arms.”

The door-gunner noted the red tracer and whence it came of the river vapors.

“Captain, turn back and take a look; here awaits a fortuitous accidental fluke.”

“I am an uncursed, non-jinxed agent man. Let my joyous innocence prevail again.”

He jumped into the rescue’s hovering haven, directing the door-gunner’s firings, wavin’.



“Fare thee well, my nightly knight,” Dame Fortune wished upon his sight. *“You recognized me even in the dark.”*

“Oh, my angel, lovely lark; I might have know it was you who would ever see me through.”

We retrieved what was left of the Major. A ceremony was held at the Oahu Punchbowl, a volcanic crater that is the National Cemetery of the Pacific.



I hardly recognized the General, in his full dress uniform. He spoke, ending with a famous saying, changing it a bit: “Ask not for whom the bell tolls, for it tolls for all of us.”

His helicopter later landed in Fort Shafter, on the grass in the center of Palm Circle, causing quite a stir, but, indeed, here he was the official Commander, and not the man who never was.



“All is never as it seems,” the DIA General reminded the Lieutenant. Your guys came through for me, in a heck of a turnaround. The rescuers could stay but for a minute, as they were bound by their orders, but they would have waited all night for you if they could have. One must not be late.”

“Indeed, I was almost the late Austin, but for a lukish luck-ish wind that carried me on its wings.”

“But for that you would have been on time for your funeral.”

“Good one, General, but I am now reborn to punctuality.”

“That you are. What do you make of this so-called enemy that cuts down all the professional doctors and others of such high caliber?”

“They are steeled, and will never know until the end draws nigh.”

“The pity that man is yet an infant species.”

“We see many good and bad things directly, person to person, via the actual.”

“Such are the good civil laws and good human values taught.”

“The problem becomes when we ‘see’ from no direction but the imagined, via the unreal.”

“These ‘good’ things, merely pronounced, also define their ‘bad’ counterpart.”

“One then ‘forgets’ their source, leaping into adoption, becoming with them one; thus, the ideas must be protected.”

“Anger arises toward the contrary, as emotion stains the brain.”

“Then, evil is done in the name of ‘good’.”

“And all these ‘good’ things eventually come to a bloody end.”

“Yes, all of these ‘good’ things...”

“...must come to an end.”

“Say and do what you will, before it’s too late.”

“Good words, soldier. Any hostile casualties?”

“An accurate count of 106, plus up to 20 indeterminate from the chopper fire, upon its departure, plus an uncountable but large number from the air strike.”

“How do you feel about all that?”

“What was there in the bloody end was there in the healthy beginning. I am fine about it.”

“About what I thought.”

“Yes. You knew?”

“I figured. Then what was left of them were drawn to you.”

“It was so.”

“Effective but not very good for one’s health, yet unavoidable. Your tardiness is excused.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“‘Sir’ is not required here, but I’ll take it as a compliment. Since our unit does not exist, the use of ‘sir’ could become a bad habit that continues in public.”

“Thank, you, s-.”

“Work on it, for even when you don’t say it, you do. The village will only be safe for a short while. I am sending in Sec-

tion 2 to meet the coming challenge. Would you like to lead them from the shore to the environs of the village?”

“Will gladly do.”

“All of this never happened.”

“No, it didn’t, whatever it was. I have forgotten it.”

“True, for I heard nothing. How about dinner?”

“I hear that; I’m famished.”

“You used a portion of your ration space for extra ammo.”

“Do you know everything?”

“Yes, for that is my job.”

“Thanks for your being, Gen—.”

“And, you, too, but I cannot call you a ‘Lieutenant’.”

“Since I don’t exist?”

“No, because you are now a Captain.”

“Thanks.”

“And with that comes...”

“...even more responsibility and satisfaction.”

“I’d give you some insignia but...”

“...They don’t exist.”

The new action with Section 2 went fairly well. Section 2 was now into the sub, it casting off ballast, the Section 2 leader finally arriving and telling the General of for whom the bell may have tolled, while he oversaw the stowage of his wounded.

“He did what!” the General asked rhetorically. I called in an air strike on the Khmer division. And that was not exactly the initial plan for the extra ammo.”

“He knows about the air strike, non sir; perhaps he is on the way. He bought us time, and he has run this course before.”

“Ah, yes. How did I know of that non happening?”

The General paced the shore, knowing that but 60 seconds remained. He had a feeling that his new Captain would be on time this time.

“You’re one second early, my good man,” said the General as they both clambered into the top hatch while the submarine submerged its bulk.

“I didn’t want to have to shoot at the sub to ping it.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to go back to hang out and use up the rest of your time?”

“No, it’s really rather unpleasant out there.”

“So, what happened at the end?”

“Nothing happened there or anywhere else around here.”

“Please; humor me.”

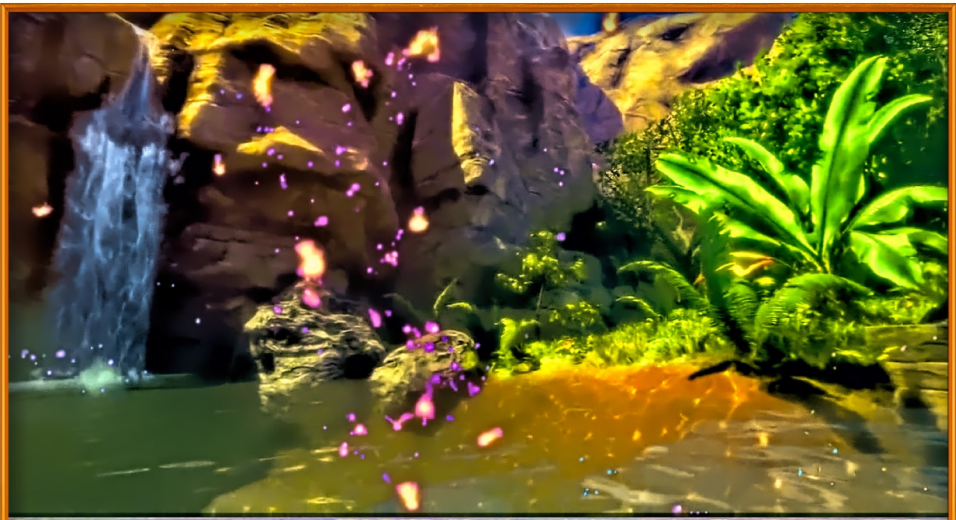
“From what I could see back through the woods with the third eye in the back of my head, but mostly heard with my ears, was that the air strike was dead on target.”

“Lucky for you.”

“I live on luck.”

“Probability has no memory, Major.”

“Major?”



“Yes, and that is as far as you go, if you wish, for anything beyond that is rather mostly a desk job with no desk.”

“Agreed, but how is it that you are out here in the field?”

“As for me, my desk does not exist.”

“That’s the clean desk policy. So then of what use is a desk if nothing can be placed upon it?”

“None at all whatsoever in any way.”

“Good answer, in triplicate. Now, come to think of it, I haven’t noted any Colonels about.”

“We don’t have any Colonels. It’s the economy.”

“And no desks?”

“None; there have been several cutbacks in middle management.”

“Because we need a quick response team.”

“Yes, indeed. So the big gun still worked?”

“Yes, but it jammed again, toward the end of its ammo.”

“Jammed! Darn piece of junk. I will find a new supplier. So, staying there longer would have made you late?”

“No, I would have made up the time.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“I’ve written the full report.”

“I’ll read it.”

“What’s next on our list?”

“Have you ever been to the Philippines?”

“Yes, as a tourist.”

“Good, for there is a Filipino General of the Army who has been consorting with the Muslim insurgency.”

“I am now becoming very concerned about his health.”

“Me, too, as some Generals cannot be trusted—to go on living.”

“May he lie in peace beneath the ground which he lied above.”

“C’est la vie.”

“Finis.”



The Philippines

Section 1 had been already prestaged to provide support. An official not to be named in the Philippine Armed Forces had reviewed the information and had approved the DIA assassination mission. The General and his new Major flew tourist class over Leyte Gulf towards Manila, getting to know one another deeper.

“Um, General,” said the new Major, “Since we never wear insignia, would it be to forward of me to inquire how many invisible stars you have on.”

“No sweat, for one must know the total situation. 7 stars.”

The Major pondered this amazing fact for a few seconds. “Well, if we consider that the President is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, then this seems to give him the equivalence of 6 stars. So, are you, somehow, higher than him, but wouldn’t you still have to report to the Pentagon and/or the President?”

“Glad you asked, Major. The Pentagon reports to me, in a sense, although they don’t know it, for I receive their Defense Intelligence directly. As for the President, while he gave me the initial authorization, he does not wish to be informed, except in certain rare cases. Thus, in a way, I am indeed above the President.”

“This is all so that there are no paper trails, e-mails, desks, phone messages...”

“...His phone line can be ultra-secured when it needs to be, but he really does rather more enjoy reading about some of the events in the newspaper. As for us, there are no medals, commendations, or any kind of mention whatsoever in any way.”

“It’s amazing that a part of the military has gone paperless.”

“We still have some in the bathrooms.”

“Ha. Suppose, um, you happened to overdo some questionable assignments in some persistent fashion.”

“Assassins might eventually hunt me down.”

“Might?”

“If they could find me.”

“Um, General, I wouldn’t have to call you ‘General’ if I knew your name.”

“Well, we don’t use real names here, and I don’t even know your full name either. This prevents any torturers who may get a hold of us from learning anything about that.”

“Do you have a stage name?”

“Yes, I was going to say that you could call me ‘Magic Dragon’. I will call you ‘Questor.’ These are code names that are just between us.”

“The President must have a lot of trust in you.”

“If I have earned it, then he has it.”

“Do we ever take out heads of state?”

“No, but the CIA can now do that.”

“Does the CIA have a 7-star General?”

“No, for they are somewhat more accountable.”

“And they focus more on espionage and politics?”

“Indeed, while we focus on military defense. There is some overlap, however.”

The plane was landing. “I’ll see you on the other end, Dragon.”

“Hope so, Questor. You do know that there are sometimes hidden variables that can arise in these far and foreign missions?”

“Yes, for this is not so straightforward as crossing the border into Cambodia from Vietnam.”

“True, and while the Philippines is a friendly ally with U.S., it’s not like they can all be in the know, excepting for my contact there.”

The Major bid farewell and switched to another plane that would take him far to the south, then a ferry to Mindanao, a region of over 7000 islands. After hiking for a few miles in the dark, the Major located a box containing a sniper rifle, just where it was supposed to be, and loaded it.

Halfway up a hill, he had a decent view of the Philippine Army outpost. He settled in and waited for the glow of tropical dawn. His target was an early riser who never stayed up late partying.

At the hint of twilight dawn, the Major, or Questor as we may call him, spotted his target’s office, it having the man’s rank on it, of all the stupid things to do. The man must have felt safe here. The Muslims had a kind of a temporary base about ten miles south, putting our Questor very much between a rock and a hard place if anything were to go wrong.

It was time, for the target was coming out for his morning stroll alone, another silly move. The shots rang clear and true and the man was no more. As one might imagine, some troops came running out, heading for the fallen man, again something they should not be doing, in case they were all targets as well.

Questor didn't move yet, as all eyes would be looking around now. Most looked in the wrong direction, for the echoes from the hills had confused their ears. He then disassembled the rifle and packed it, and headed off very slowly, but with much stealth, toward the path-road blocked by many obstacles, over which he clambered easily. The mission had been routine so far.

A few minutes later he was surprised to receive a call, since radio silence was supposed to be in effect. "This is Magic Dragon. There is a problem; the Muslims are unexpectedly on the move, and the Philippine Army has made a wild guess, hitting the nail on the head, and is now heading right for your road. There will soon be eyes everywhere, even above, so your ground pickup plan has been aborted. Are you well on the path past the obstacles?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good, for they are not quite onto you exactly, yet, for you are just the receiver of this call. They can try to trace us, but not you; however, they will never find us. Here is the plan, until further notice: run like the wind, right on past the pickup point! Call us in about 12 minutes or so, sooner if there's a problem."

"That's the extent of the plan: run like Hell?"

"Ready, get set, go!"

Questor was off and did about two miles in about ten minutes, then slowed and stopped for a look about the ridge. To the north, a tank from the Army outpost was clearing the obstacles from the beginning of the path-road. To the south could be seen some Muslim helicopters warming up. The insurgency might drop troops near one end of the road while the Philippine Army jeeps approached from the other direction. He noted swamps everywhere, a bit inland on both sides of the path. They would be infested with Dengue fever. It seemed that Lady Luck was nowhere to be found in this

far land. Well, at least it was not storming or raining, but the vise was about to close and there was no way out.

*Wherefore is the vaporous lady
Who rains good fortune upon me?
Her portal to the net must yet be broken.
Probability has regained its memory and spoken.*

*And yet a spirit in my feet
Still leads me—who knows how?
To her chamber window, sweet,
Or 'tis closed or run out now.*

*The vaporous airs, they faint
On the dawn, the silent stream,
The perfumed odours fall,
Like sweet thoughts in a dream.*

*The nightingales complaint,
It dies upon her breast,
As I must die on thine,
Oh, beloved as thou art.*

*Oh, lift me from the grass!
I die, I faint, I fail!*

*Let thy love in kisses rain
On my lips and eye-lids pale;*

*My cheek is cold and white, alas,
My heart beats loud and fast.
Oh press it close to thine again
Where it will break at last.*

(Adapted from Shelley)

Was Magic Dragon just going to leave me here, whether intentionally or because now he had to? What did he mean initially when he said to trust no one, not even him? Ah, he meant that trust had to be earned. But it's not like some foreign aircraft could bomb the Philippines and create some in-

ternational incident upon their tracking it. Besides, the Filipino troops were fine, and the successor to the dead General was a very good man.

*A poem-like story came to mind:
So you must not be frightened
if a sadness rises up before you
larger than any you have ever seen;*

*if a restiveness, like light and cloud-shadows,
passes over your hands and over all you do.*

*You must think that something
is happening with you,
that life has not forgotten you,
that it holds you in its hand;
it will not let you fall...*

— Rilke

Now rested enough to speak, Questor dialed up Magic Dragon, unfortunately now broadcasting his precise location to his foes, but he had to, saying “It’s all turning to shit. I’m going to be surrounded soon. I know when all is lost. It’s OK. That’s the breaks.”

Dragon answered, replying “Indeed, they have you surrounded but only in two dimensions.”

He gave these instructions: “Get off the trail slightly. You have about five minutes to dig a hole; the mud is soft. Then get in it, and cover yourself completely when you hear the slightest hint of a screeching sound. We are sending two massive pulses, a bit north and south of you; there will be some residual overlap; plug your ears and hold your breath for as long as you can, and then emerge. You will then note a small package descending, it chuting and floating down slowly at the last minute, for we have your GPS location now just as well as anyone does.”

Questor was already digging the fastest hole he’d ever dug. It was quite wet at the bottom. He looked to the sky but saw nothing. He soon heard a whining sound and quickly swept in the remaining dirt upon his head. The decibels were al-

most deafening, and lasted for a while. He was probably turning blue as he crashed back up through the dirt and gasped for air. *What the hell was that*, he thought, *and, this package, it had better be good*, but he held little hope for it.

The package landed, looking like oxygen tanks, but it was a jet pack. The instructions said to take it straight up, pointing up the exhaust if the air got too cold, presumably so he could rise up through the warmth of it. He was off.

Upon reaching a decent height, he noted that very many trees had been flattened from the pulses. It would probably be reported on the evening news as some kind of cyclone, for they don't call them hurricanes in this part of the world. Yet, there was nothing up here in the sky that he could tell, and certainly no sky hook. Up and up and up he went, the air getting much cooler, so he pointed the exhaust upward. *Did they want him to come back down in some other place yet crawling with problems?*

He suddenly felt drawn, as if in a magnetic field. Yes, that had to be it; it was an attraction upon the tanks of his jet pack. He let it happen, having a feeling of being swept into nowhere. Ah, there it was, a giant black bird. The plane had suddenly become visible. Was this some new kind of stealth aircraft that was invisible to the eye? *What the heck; I never heard about this!* He was pulled into a rear port, and then was steadied by the General himself.

"What a surprise, Magic, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because we've never tried it before."

"How come?"

"There were no volunteers!"

"Ha, good one. I do believe in magic now, and so I do fully trust you, Dragon General Magician."

"Shit happens, Questor, or almost did. Nothing is for sure in this business. I do like the part where you recognized that the situation was a failure."

"What of the Philippine Army?"

"They'll live; they just got the wind knocked out of them."

"And the Muslims?"

"We accidentally made the pulse too strong on their position."

"Ha, General. I must be dreaming. All of this never happened."

Passiona appeared and gave Austino an all embracing hug. There was coffee and smokes on the plane, along with some snacks, made all the more sweet by the day's exertions. The plane headed for Guam.

“General Jackson Magic Johnson, or what ever your name might be, you remember my record two mile running part? It was not entirely that much fun.”

“Sorry, Questor, that you had to run for your life. Once in a great while we have to really scramble, when snake eyes roll or the double zero slot collects the ball; however, there are always options and alternatives.”

“Some better than others.”



Foundations

Long before all this, in Oak Park, Illinois, I was a student. One by one, my friends from high school who hadn't gone on to college had died in Vietnam while I was obtaining a B.S. degree in Information Engineering, in the new field of computer science. The years went by, and my best friend, Joe, returned safely from the ongoing war, telling me all the gory details, and also how to be an effective helicopter door gunner. For example, "Don't sweep from the direction behind the fleeing enemies and into them, but sweep from ahead of them and back into them, so that the leads don't escape, so that they all may run into your fire."

I doubted if I would ever need this information, since my college deferment was holding up fine, and surely the war would end soon. I graduated college, and worked for IBM for a year or so, and then the dreaded draft notice finally came, in January, 1970.

I flew the tapes of the Army Supply and Intelligence Systems into Long Binh, installing them there, after having done the same in Okinawa. We were grounded until the next day's morning, due to rockets landing within the fort.

The new Warrant Officer, from the 1st Aviation Brigade & II Field Force, who would courier me and the tapes northward came knocking, saying: "Our previous heli was shot down, all perishing. We have a substitute ship, and a new pilot, me. We are clear to go alone."

It wasn't the best helicopter, but it functioned, and was armed at the doors and had cannon in front. We had made one installation and were on to the next, when we took some fire from the ground somewhere. We had a fuel leak and some smoke. We headed towards the nearest firebase, for an analysis and repairs, although there was no answer from them.

Upon descension we discovered that the base had been overrun. They were soon firing at us, and the copter strained to

ascend, the pilot emptying his cannons, yet, the onslaught continued. I looked at the pilot and said, “I can do this.” And so I took to the left door gun and emptied it into the North Vietnamese troops, putting the box of tapes in front of my legs and feet for more protection.

We were ascending, but still within range, so the pilot rotated the ship, and I took to the right door gun, our limited ammo soon running out. I then fired a few useless shots with my pistol.

“Thanks, Joe,” I thought, as we cleared the area, and our ship limped very many miles to the next firebase, from which we got an answer, and a fine welcome.

I had but a minor scratch. I had arrived in the war zone, seemingly the twilight zone.

So it was that the DIA General had read the Warrant Officers’s report, and had appreciated our initiative, and so we were invited to meet with the Wizard. I signed up.

My life had completely changed in a day.



The CSC-PAC unit I ended up in after my Selective Service Draft expands to ‘Computer Systems Command for the Pacific [theater]’. It was located on Palm Circle, back toward the rear gate of Fort Shafter, on the Hawaiian island of Oahu and was composed of Special Army, Civil Service, and DIA ‘spooks’, it being home base for the Army Supply System, Intelligence, and Nuclear Concerns.



There was no internet, for this was long before Al Gore claimed to have invented it. These days, I believe the place is still called CSC, but as Computer Sciences Corporation. It was also Computer Security Concerns, at some point.

Since I had college learning yet fresh in my mind, as well as a year at IBM, I did well on the Army tests, and so was able to choose my destination and duty, even though drafted.

The Captain, back at my basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, had pulled me off of a nearly departing bus bound for my initial, and apparently provisional advanced training in artillery at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, an order that had taken all this time, weeks, actually, to get changed. He said I was going to work on a nuclear reactor. Well, that wasn't quite it, or

even close. I remained as a Drill Sergeant for a month before the Army got their act more together on the new order.

The Oakland, California, transfer station was both hell and boredom for a while, as I guarded a dumpster at night, lest anyone steal uniforms, although having become a Spec-4 already, and then several days alter a noisy cargo transport took us, some tanks, and munitions, onto Honolulu. We put in our ear plugs.

It was glorious flowered, water-falled, and tropical, that open air international airport terminal, with the breathless surroundings plainly revealed just outside the unglassed wall portals. Little did I know, then, that I was seeing a mountain off in the distance where I would build a retreat, just a tent at first, but where I would first think about the Theory of Everything, at night, under the stars.

Spurning the barracks after a few days, which were RA (Regular Army), and therefore wild, and before further OC/DIA training, I moved into a waterfront Waikiki apartment. They had given me the first three weeks off.

Meanwhile, and even in-between my training at the hardcore Schofield Barracks, I enjoyed some 'vacation' trips to the Army bases in the Far East, some dangerous and some not, delivering computer tape updates of the Army Supply and Intelligence systems. It was and was not a big deal, but they surely didn't want any of this stuff to fall into the wrong hands, which would only be the Chinese or the Russians, the North Vietnamese probably not even knowing what a computer was for. The previous courier had been just shot down, and none of the civil service guys, having families, wanted to go, so they, and all, said, "Hey, let's send Austin, so he can get a taste of the theater of operations."

The first trip, to South Korea, was rather uneventful, but for having to take a train 300 miles south from Seoul to Taegu, and Pusan, and then an ox-cart from the train. I enjoyed the odor of the open sewage canals alongside the street, saw bicycles piled six feet high with crates, noted the complete dis-

order of all traffic, saw a thousand Buddhas gazing upon me, and had suits and leather coats made for but a few dollars. No one tried to steal the tapes.

To avoid the barracks of the ROK (Republic of Korea) troops, I stayed at a sort of 'Bed and Breakfast', for the long time, not the short time, and ended up purchasing Cho's life from her farmer step-father for \$300, since her mother—the madam—had been expecting her to soon start working there. Her actual father was a GI in the Korean War. All thought that her round eyes made her look strange, but that was only from their cultural view. She looked fine, even beautiful. We entered the U.S. in Guam and settled her in Hawaii, in my mountain retreat of a cave, but that's another story.

On my next trip, to Long Binh, and places north, I met the DIA General. I would later transfer into CSG, called Computer Support Group, but the 'Computer' part was really 'Counter-insurgency'.



Another Cambodian Tale

The Long Road Home

The DIA, run by its hands-on General, Magic Dragon, had a military arm of its own but could also call upon any of the armed services, and so it was in a near-overreaching operation deep inside Cambodia that the Marines and their long distance choppers were employed along with us IAs.



That they all had their targets pinpointed ahead of time was always the best strategy, but even more so for this mission since they could only engage for about 30 minutes and still have enough fuel to make it back from where they weren't even supposed to be.

It all went well enough, but near the end a report of a well-hidden supply depot complex came in. We, more as the IA observers, still had firepower left, as well as more fuel, we being only three, including the pilot, and so we elected to veer off to investigate, meaning to put the place out of business.

While the copter fleet turned and headed back toward Vietnam, we found the depot site and sent most of our missiles into it, but, just as we were preparing to leave, took a really

bad hit from something very luckily or accurately fired from the ground.

We were in a half-controlled descent, our power gone but the rotors still whirling, from the downward rush, which would end neither in a soft nor a full crash landing, but tending toward hard, which was slightly less than a crash.

We saw the depot's ammo dump blow very large and sky high, and although this destroyed all the the guards and forces on the ground we were coming down about 600 meters in front of the blast. The jungle for kilometers around would soon be in flames.



I tightened my belts and closed my side door. We seemed to land upright but it was much too fast and hard, and so we tipped and rolled. The main rotor broke and sliced through the pilot's cabin, killing him instantly. The other door gunner's belts broke, or were cut, and he flew out, the copter crushing him beneath it.

I released my belts and climbed out my door, which was now on the top of the heap, wondering how long it would be before any curious or angry enemies would come to see what had happened to their supply depot.

I had to get through the inferno, onto the other side of the depot, where every road would lead toward home. I moved laterally, about a quarter kilometer north, the heat still very intense, even backing off somewhat, at times, and there it was, a gap in the flames, possibly due to a wet swampy area.



This was not a time to wait around and so I endured the heat while splashing through the wetland, latrine sewer, or whatever it was, running until the air was bearable, then dropped to the ground and looked around for a while.



Monsoon season had not yet begun and so the jungle, though always moist, was relatively dry. It was all catching fire so quickly that it threatened to engulf me within a matter of minutes in this firestorm of all Hells. Projectiles would soon fill the air.

There were two one-lane paths serving as roads coming into the back of the loading docks. From the tire marks and their dirt shoots it seemed that I was on the inbound path, and then I saw a sign post, it's unreadable wordage on the other side, facing away from me, confirming this to be the path for arrivals.

I don't like taking a path that has incoming traffic, and so I would soon cut through the jungle a short way to get on the outbound path, which no one else would be traversing for quite a while. Meanwhile, I placed explosives and a trip wire on the inbound path, which might lead any enemy survivors to believe I had taken that path. No one could miss that a chopper had crash landed.

I tried to call the copter fleet on my ground radio but got nothing but static. Well, there was no climbable canopy that I could be plucked off of, anyway. I was on my own; apparently, no one knew yet.

Over a hundred kilometers to go. Had to put some distance in between while I was still fresh and energized but not overdo it, then walk on steadily only through the deepest night and sleep long by day, for not only could the jungle day roast one alive, but the Khmer Rouge might be about.

I was now on the outbound path for departures but this didn't mean that no one would be coming this way, especially after the big blast, which meeting's thought was still a disagreeable feeling, but I like approaches from behind me even less.

I checked my boots. I like tight boots, for they give a better feel for the ground, and one can't always see too well at night. I tightened them. One boot had a slight cut; I patched

it with all-purpose tape. My canteen was full, for now, and I drank deeply, then ran like the blazes, once again a boy on the cross-country team.

The sun was setting. This was the last evening that I'd use for travel. I just didn't want to stick around the scene. Much later, I slowed and then stopped to eat. I had a few days of MREs, Meals Ready to Eat, and after that the jungle would have to feed me.

I walked briskly through the night, when possible, still high on adrenaline, but kept 10 meters off to the the side of the path. I didn't need any surprises. I made good time.



I heard a truck, oncoming from ahead, its driver unaware of the traffic pattern, which was common in the third world. I dropped and froze, my camouflage making me part of the foliage. I really should travel further from the path, I thought, but if I did I would hardly be able to see it. The truck passed. I waited a while, and then continued on.

Sunrise was nigh. I headed into the jungle to find a place to sleep, finding two good places, but proceeding on to a third, just to be safe. I would either be found, by a lucky fluke, or not, and so I slept soundly, for that's what I needed.

I slept 12 hours through that steamy day, in the most shade I could find. I didn't resist the heat and the sweat but made friends with them. It was now early evening, and way too soon to move, and so I remained, eating two meals, and finishing my canteen. I would spend the next two hours refilling

it by swiping dew from the broad leaves. I had not come across any good water sources yet.

I heard sounds from what must have been a village off in the distance somewhere. They would not come here, and didn't.

I surveyed my equipment. Most of it had remained: one small pack of explosives, a pistol, a knife, a useless radio, two more days of MREs, no ID, as usual, spare socks, bullets, jungle ills pills, matches, some coins, a pad and pen, for taking intelligence notes, antiseptic, a small flare, and a survival pamphlet. I had always dreamt of traveling light, with no big heavy pack; now my dream had become all too true.

Then I heard the Rouge out there, probably out on a local recon to secure the night around their camp. They went off the path, too, a good practice, but not as far into the jungle as I was. After they returned, an hour later, I waited a few more hours. At midnight I was off. I might manage to go 7-8 kilometers a night, on average, considering the slow-going portions. I began to slowly add edible vegetation to my diet, as there are reasons to eat other than taste.



All went well for two more nights and days, the jungle food fully supporting me now, but now I was stuck. A whole Khmer division was getting on the move somewhere nearby. I stayed glued to my deep spot for three days, until they were long gone, which gave me more time that I needed to think, and so I thought about everything, first about my journey.

It was really beyond me how I would ever make it, for after the long jungle trek there would be too many villages and clearings before I could get to the river and swim across it. Well, all I had to do was to travel unseen, quite an unlikely proposition.



It was not that long ago that I was a 16 year old boy who had filled the walls of his room with scenes of faraway places from National Geographic magazine and now I was, well, really far away.

I had even written a kind of poem on the subject of remembering the War in Vietnam before having even gotten there:

Recollections of War

*A fading eagle flew frozen in fear
Past deserted flowers in desperate land,
As a rising earth halted for a hasty madness
And time awaited a dead sun.*

*Remember now the beginning, one fine day,
When we came out of nowhere!
In no cradle birth, one thunderous heartbeat
Separated animal from plant,*

*And, we stood up straight one day,
Our minds still a drunk's uneven crawling.
Later, in the breath of life, we knew that
A churchyard must yawn now and then.*

*But now we are helpless—
We must fight to our worthless deaths, dying,
Screaming forgiveness, but, die as we must
When peace is a barren land.
Daily now,
One grips less firmly his last integrity,
The essential life slips.*

*Where are the grown men, stuffed and rigid?
Where are they? Where?
They are so silent and meaningless to us now.
They are no longer with us.*

*And throughout the aftermath
We could almost grasp it in our dreams,
And hope that we might live to die
Far from the River of Perfumes.*

*Meanwhile, we are dying to live everyday,
As we surrender our souls.
Around us we see the bodies—
They lie upon us; they died among us.*

Rising to our last stand we look:

*Where are the grown men, the old men?
We thought that we were loved then,
But we've been betrayed, sold, lost ...*

*Shall I try for fading woods,
Scrambling over the trails, searching for my life?*

*I'll flee and fly over the leaves of yesterday—
They crumble before my eyes.*

*And there I'll come out of it all
With firm desire to laugh, love, and live—
There in a hilly grove
Near swelling stream by daisies, grass, and tree.*

*Once more I escape the horrid death
As the grown men approach;
I try to see my way past
The swiftly moving figures of the human race.*

*Even now, those men with guns so loud
Are silently dying in the strife.
Living in a time nigh for sighing,
We rise for dying.
Can this be life?*

*Of course, all this it was our duty to bear;
We bled our blood; we served.*

*And during the lull of the monsoon rains,
I began to drink, to honor my life—
To hope, as dawn comes,
Much like a Chinese painting—
Too real to be true.*

*I wake the artillery-man,
And cross the Song Ba to disarm the claymores.*

*Now it is lovely April and we're dying,
On this fine day in the time of our life.*

*Slightly sighing for crying Charlie,
My bayonet blazes in scarlet, in death,
And yet another hasty man
Gropes for the earth and escapes this horrid life.*

*And there, on a cloud of thought,
We fly by their ways with a life for ourselves.
And, then, they wither with the wind,
Those thoughts that once echoed,
Where they once were teeming, fighting...
The forums now emptied.*

*There is only room to say
“Let us kill him,” as wrath’s way becomes us,
And there in the cells of a brain
Where currents of feeling once surged,
The mind’s will falters, and waivers
Between the Emotion and the Intellect.*

*A shrill siren chilled with ill will,
Then, when he was yet young and fine—
Houses were crumbling, streets were heaving,
People were weeping, dying.
And others wished to live,
From brothers to mothers—all lived but the father;
Can you see the tears in the young one’s eyes
As the death-man cometh?*

*The love and the feeling were nowhere,
The men motionless and rigid,
And, too, the air was not worth breathing,
But, was filled and smothering,
Leaving the men breathless, helpless,
And, of course, so lifeless.
The blight was so death-taking;
The sight of goodness never so breathtaking.*

*Once in awhile I’ll wince in a smile for truth,
Cringe at the fringe of love;
It is my dream,
A star shining somewhere in the universe—*

*I can see it there in all of its dimness,
Through the plight of my brightness.*

*It is there forever and still;
It is there while the thinkers thought for ages,
As dreamers dreamt time after time,
When hoped even the hopeless,
As slept the sleepers into oblivion,
While philosophers pondered infinitum,
As wept the weepers for a long time,
When pitied even the pitiful . . .*

*All that I saw on Earth was lost.
There hated the loveless in the wasteland.
There the dying lived for a lifetime
As all the wise men greyed and died.
So now I'll let my 'enemies' grow old
As my wine yet flows sweet and pure.*

*Here comes the slush of doom
Seeping over us,
Belching with contagion.
The pleas of the corrupt fly out;
They cry out; their lives are snuffed out!
The Good Friday mourners yet weep for man,
For everyone, for eternity.*

*At life's end
The silent men array themselves, finally—
There for the asking
In the stead of the dead,
Prisoners of themselves.*

*Cautious Pilate ponders,
As there my star shines in the springtime of life.
The star is a beacon in the night of terror,
Fading in the search for the valiant.*

*How can I live, how can I die?
Look around—there are other worlds!
See, the grass is high and green*

On the far side of never.

*Find for me the sun shining,
The streams flowing,
The forests, the fertile meadows.*

*The soldiers moved slowly now
To make their lives last,
A searching band;
And fighting has flared on the border.*

Now hurry death or hurry darkness.

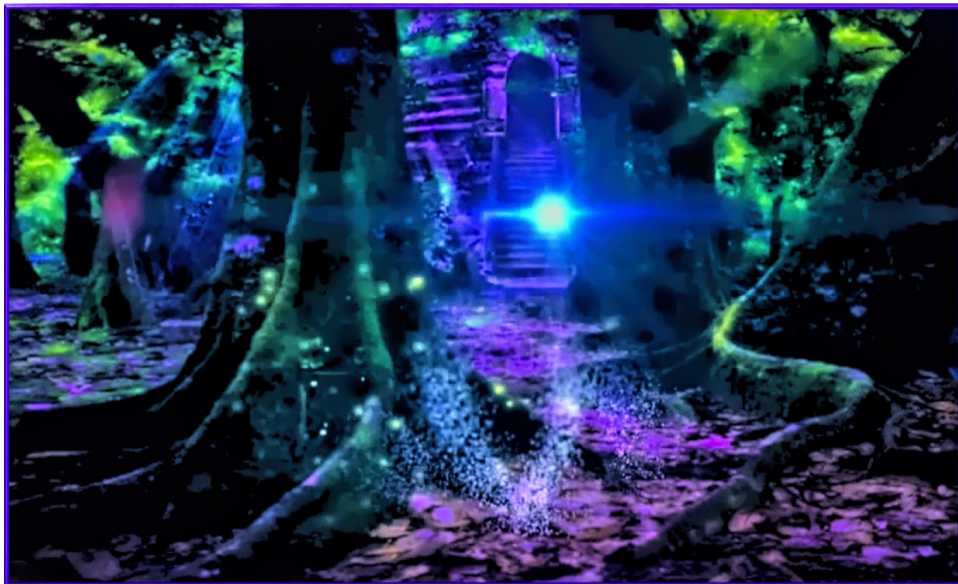
*Deciding at last, I made an easy day of it,
Staring life in the face, indulging
In a vast wonderland and wilderness
Of childish fancy and fantasy,
And I laughed a lot louder then,
Feeling no need to weep in pity for them,
Or to cry for the scoundrels
Who would grasp at life from graves in war.*

*It was then that I saw the life,
The awe, the infinite,
The good, and my end.
To see where my youth
And laughter could go,
I lived and died to be free;
My mind took no mind;
Yes it was good to be loved then,
To be young again.*

Well, of course Magic Dragon would know that a helicopter had been lost. Strangely, it had not blown up right away, but the fuel was leaking, and it would go to blazes, and this within a larger blaze, erasing all trace of it. He would indeed know where we were headed. We both knew that he could not have come to me there, and that I wouldn't have stuck around anyway.

This forced rest was good for me, for my legs had been dehydrating, just as what could happen when playing a long match of tennis on a hot day. It had been days since I'd found the last rivulet, and the dew could not keep up with my needs.

And then it rained for a day, which was as cooling and refreshing as one could imagine. It seemed that I drank gallons of it. I was restored to my old self just in time to move on with a full canteen.



Four more days passed. I was becoming energized by the walking, though perhaps having lost about 7 pounds. Night was my friend. I could even see the stars sometimes, those ancient fires of home. We are those stars, I thought, but what the heck was I doing on a planet with so many war zones?

Every so often I would stop and listen, to hear them before they heard me. Nothing, usually. Then a mother and her children, at a watering hole, up ahead, even though it was late evening. I, too, now again desperately needed water. I waited, but ever more villagers kept coming. After an hour of no one, I drank. A woman appeared suddenly, quickly run-

ning off when she saw me. The whole village would soon know.



So, I backtracked for many kilometers, erasing half of my recent progress. They would still pursue me, though, eventually. So I headed deep into the jungle at a left angle to the road path. Just before dawn I intersected the path that I had once identified as the inbound path to the depot. Well, what else could I do but take it. I was known on the other path, but this would soon turn into a legend left far behind. I stepped up my pace, expecting to pay dearly for it in lost energy.

I found a sleeping spot, this time making sure it was four times removed from the path, then collapsed, exhausted and full of thirst, sleeping 16 hours. The rains saved me again. I floated awake and drank the elixir from the sky. It took me another day to regain my strength, aided by the untasty jungle salad.

I walked for three more nights and then the jungle began to thin. I went back in and sat there for a day, not wanting to leave it. I needed a miracle. Another day and night went by. I was tired anyway.

I had a Cambodian hat that I'd found along the way somewhere, but my skin was not the right tone, although I could possibly work on it. I would have to find the right clothes, too. Yet it wasn't going to work, for people might approach me, and then the jig would be up. A better scheme would have to present itself.

I was a bit lost in the jungle's heart of darkness that was called the 'rain forest' to soften its menace. Now I had to find the trail head where the path resumed after a large and recently cleared open field that the Khmer were going to use for something. It wasn't a place to be seen wandering through, for one, nor wasting time trying to find an entrance that was probably covered by bush, for two. I needed information.



I waited for hours; no Khmer. I waited some more. Then way across the large clearing some lynx-like cats came out from the jungle, and I made note of the spot. Here I would find the continuing trail.

I dashed across and there it was. I entered, all the jungle noises resuming, the odour of dead vegetation returning. I walked on for about five kilometers. I shouldn't out during the day, but I was out of water and also needed to put some distance in on the path.

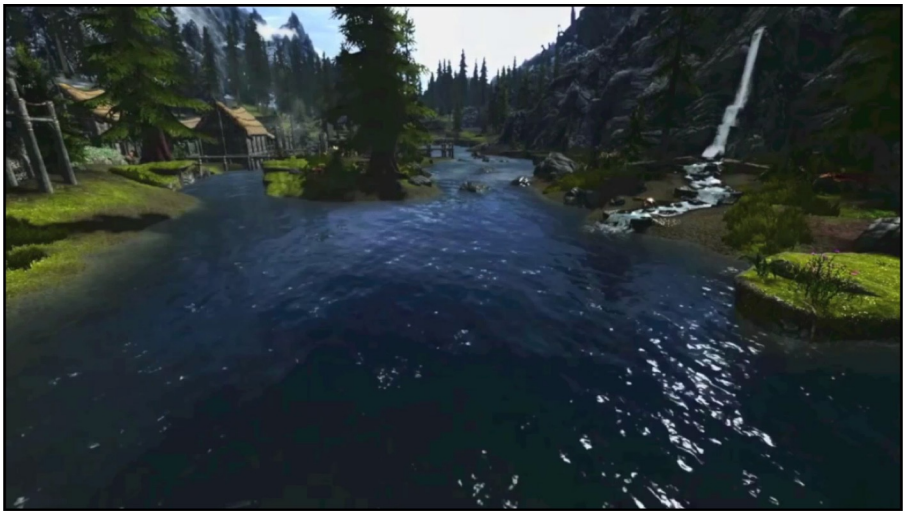
A few kilometers later, the bird sounds suddenly stopped and so I rushed silently off the side of the trail, deep into the rain forest. The birds knew that someone was coming, which may have been just me, but they had tolerated me so far; so it had to be a group.

I never found out who they were, but they had to be peasants or enemy military. I camped for the rest of the day at the fifth good spot off the trail, taking no chances. I emerged four hours after sundown. From here on every path would lead me more towards home.



The ground was getting spongy. Large banyan trees began to appear, as well as cedar and cypress. A swamp was near, but so then might be dengue fever. This drainage basin from the mountains of what were really very large hills would have good stream water up ahead, beyond the deadwood, and so it did, the place looking harmlessly pleasant and sylvan, here in the the land of the killing fields.

I crossed a rock field to gain the stream, deftly jumping from one to another, which seemed safer than walking slowly. I could not misstep; an ankle injury would doom me. Here I drank and stopped a while, to allow time for rehydration.

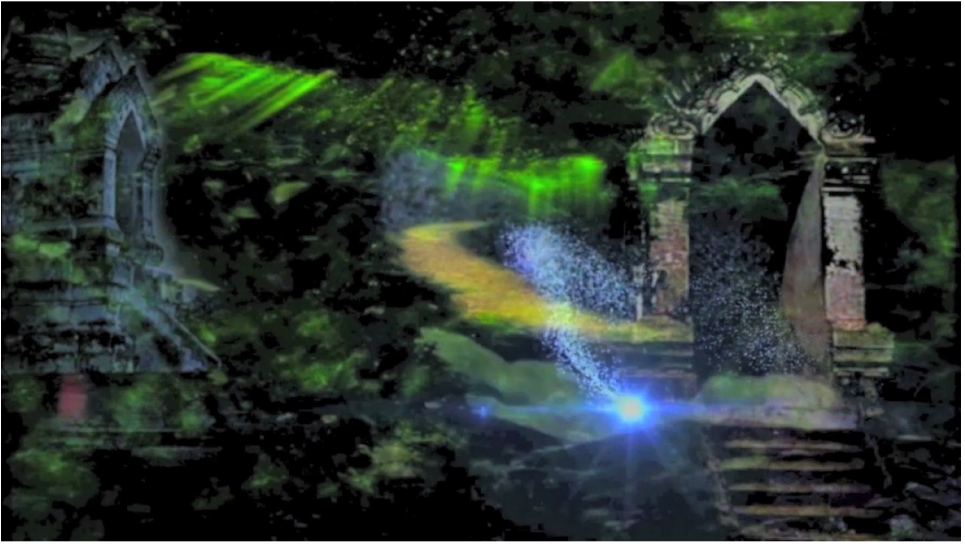


I would need more than information to carry me to the river, after which Vietnam began, but perhaps the General and his DIA troops were out there, somewhere, but I heard no rotors. Coincidence was too much to hope for.

From the bird's eye view at the top of the 'mountain' I would plot my next 50 kilometers unto the horizon, keeping out of sight. Last night I had accidentally walked right into a temple, but it turned out to be a deserted ruin. I was still as fit as my younger self who was on the track team, too, but here I was on the trail of madness and death.



*Onward.
We guide thee, we must carry thee;
We're illumination beside thee.*



Nothing happened for a few days, and then I heard the choppers, about a kilometer to the north. My radio had gotten soggy; it was now more than useless. I took off like a bat out of hell, remaining well inside the edge of the jungle. The choppers would not normally land, unless one or more had something to do by the hands of soldiers, but this was rare, as well as an invitation to trouble.

The choppers had found the Rouge and were engaging them near the village they were taking, but the choppers were not going to land. When it looked like they were just about finished mopping up I told myself, this is it, do or die, and so I sent up the flare.

Since they might think it was some kind of a trap, I ran out and presented myself in the open, in my mud-dried fatigues and gave the special salute, done with both hands at once. They circled, looking closer, but wary. I brought up both arms and hands to my forehead in salute, time and time again. I noted them looking through binoculars. They paused. I was a sitting duck if there were still any Rouge left around.

I used my knife to carve some letters into the ground: my short form ID. They looked; I waited, and waited some more. They landed.



Now I will always wonder if I could have made it through the villages and clearings at night, moving like the wind and going like water.



When the fleet landed back at Magic Dragon's Field Command and he came out to inquire about the mission and whether the headcount was intact. The pilot rushed over, acting puzzled, relating that while no one had been lost they seemed to have gained someone, and how could their count be at fault.



But no one could really put one over on the General, who said to the air in between us, without seeing me, “Questor, you’re late again, but I’m considering it as leave time to make up for it. Welcome back. It was that woman near the drinking hole who told everyone, and thereby me as well, for I have ears everywhere. I knew you would switch to the other path. Come out, wherever you are, and join me in my tent for a drink.”



“Austin is still drenched in the alluring fragrance of the vapor that permeated into his soul, ever there remaining.” He said, “the inundation of the bouquet of aroma is ever irresistible in its redolence.”



One fine day I rode my motorcycle to the Marine Base at Kaneohe, for a military meeting, on the southeastern point, passing along the scenic, rugged shore of fine blue waves crashing against the rocks and the body surfing paradise at Sandy Beach

Here the DIA General said that we had gained in the main, in the war against the Rouge, delaying them, which the Vietnamese would move on to. The Paris Peace accords were underway. He freed us from IndoChina service, and there was still near a year to go for me to enjoy Hawaii. It was indeed an honor when the great man of secrets revealed his new lady. Nimue had found her Merlin at last.

Whenever I returned from the afar deliveries to CSC PAC, I would stand in the center of the Circle of Palms, and Ben and Lina of Civil Service would come out to hear the stories, and about the Supply and Intelligence installations.



There were the exciting airports, both normal and military, and exotic locales in which to revel, such as Okinawa and Hong Kong, between the long flights with the tapes and their duplicates that occupied a first class seat beside me. Wine, women, song, and death made for a curious mixture of emotions on these 'vacations', but who really needed a vacation from Hawaii, the pearl and the paradise. And then it was up

the mountain again, to home and heart, after a stop at the PX to buy something to grill.

At the University of Saigon, I once saw a college student serving in tennis very distinctively, using an American Twist serve. In 1975, Son Ho fled the falling Saigon in an overcrowded boat, and had turned up at IBM within a few years. I saw him serving at the IBM Country Club courts and knew it had to be him. It had been a long way for him to flee and fly. He was also the one with the severe backhand slice that no one could retrieve. He became my tennis mentor. And then there arrived my Chinese friend to be, the now without a short last name—Stan Long.

Hawaii was a constant vacation, upon return, and we went to Tahiti. Here, in those southern islands, the DIA General Wizard had retired, with his Nimue, at a fine and youthful age, he the staunch seeker of evil with his pure and golden heart. Here in Papeete and Bora Bora it was all was dance, love, and song on the beach. Here the Southern Cross once again rose, and it was here that we learned so many more of the world events that had ‘never happened’.



We had one last drink, a very fine whiskey this time, raising our glasses to the valor of all the deeds, for the living and for the dead, over the bronze of the sea of the setting sun.



[Look for the continuation in another novelette, 'The MPs' Tales'.]

FINIS

