

The Thirty-Six Hour Patrol

Eric Hannel

This was going to be a long patrol through dense Philippine jungle that held the humid summer heat like an incubator. From insertion to completion, we had thirty-six hours to make it back to the extraction point or we failed. It was practice, but sometimes practice holds a reality all its own.

From deep in the never-ending mountain range, we heard the unmistakable sound of blades chopping the air. The helicopter came for us and we mounted up: Staff Sergeant as the team lead, Higbo, Shoe, Ziggy, Dixie, me, and a linguist who was added at the last minute. Each team member gave a thumbs up and we were on our way.

As I dangled my feet from the chopper, like a kid at the edge of a swimming pool, we lifted off, a sea of green beneath us. The pilots flew nap-of-the-earth—a very low altitude to avoid enemy detection—and I felt as though I could almost touch the waves of green. As we flew deeper into the jungle, I took mental images of the terrain, noting directional changes and landmarks on the ground: large or strange-shaped mountains, valleys, and conspicuous trees. I tried to remember as much as I could, but the sun was sinking and darkness distorted everything into shades of dark green and black. The flight seemed to take forever, which told me that the next two days on the ground were going to suck terribly.

Just before insertion, we were hit with a torrential downpour. “Monsoon,” the crew chief said, his voice lost to the wind, rain, and noise from the rotors. “Oh, joy,” I shouted back, as if someone could hear.

The helicopter slowed, descended slightly, and hovered about ten feet off the ground as we slid down the insertion rope, using it like a fire pole. In seconds the helo was gone, its beating rotors covered by the sound of the rain and wind that

consumed the jungle. It wasn't that I thought our present couldn't get any worse—I knew it could. We moved away from the insertion point and gathered under a tree, using the large leaves to deflect the water. We rested for a short time, got our bearings, and then used the foul weather to cover the sounds of our movements, standard procedure whether in training or a real operation. We slid through the jungle as though we were a part of it.

A few kilometers into our patrol, Ziggy, our navigator, stopped to take a bearing on his lensatic compass. We were due for a course change in order to avoid moving in an easily detectable straight path, but the heavy rains had ruined his device. We all checked ours to see if they still worked. Two of six were inoperable. But we were not worried: we still had four.

After a few hours the rains dwindled, then stopped. We slowed our pace to keep down the noise and continued through the endless darkness. Another compass was broken in a fall; another seized up, leaving us with two. As we continued toward the extraction point, we passed a jungle farm with a few animals but no noticeable human presence. *Eerie*. I wondered if the occupants were asleep or watching us. We passed the farm, cautious and quiet. No animals announced our presence.

Our last working compass failed, and we were still hours from our destination, tired and hungry. The staff sergeant asked me if I could navigate by the terrain. I moved from the rear of the patrol to the front, and off we went. Dawn crept through the layers of jungle foliage. Steam rose from the tropical floor, the humidity rose, and we baked. Dreams of a desk job floated in and out of my mind as I periodically sought an opening in the jungle canopy. I needed to see beyond the heavy green blanket to the landmarks beyond: maybe one of the rock formations or trees I'd seen on the flight in, anything that would indicate what direction we were going.

We didn't want to get lost in the jungle. We wouldn't starve given all the edible plants that grow, but we *could* wander endlessly. We continued throughout

the day, exhausted, hungry, and dehydrated. Time was running out and I couldn't be certain that I was on the exact route. If I was off just a little here and there, we would end up off course by hundreds of meters. The sun was going down again. Hours upon hours of walking with 110-pound packs wore on everyone's patience and the pressure of time running out increased the tension.

Just when it seemed as though we might not make it, we emerged from the jungle onto a dirt road. I recognized the road but didn't know which end of it we were on, just that base camp was somewhere in between. "This way," the team leader said. I hesitated. Then everyone hesitated. He looked at me and promised, "It's this way." We only had minutes left before our thirty-six hours were up. We hoisted our overweight packs higher on our backs to distribute the weight. Then we ran.

With seconds to spare, we entered the base camp; the Marines there looked on in astonishment as we reported for extraction. No doubt, we looked like hell. But God bless 'em, they had food and water; and we needed both. As we rested and ate, Higbo reported that Ziggy wasn't looking well. I jumped to my feet, followed Higbo to Ziggy, and asked him how he was doing. He was pale and I couldn't make out his words. I felt his skin: hot and dry. We loosened his clothes and tried to cool him by pouring water on him. He was not responsive. Drool seeped from his open mouth. His unfocused eyes rolled back in his head. I ran over to the lieutenant and reported the situation, indicating that Ziggy needed immediate medical attention.

"Why?" he asked.

"I think he's going to have a heat stroke," I replied.

Higbo ran back up and told me that Ziggy couldn't keep water down and had started convulsing. I looked at those in charge. They said nothing. The other Marines in the area stood silently and watched. I felt pressure to act. I didn't think we could get a chopper in here on short order, leaving few alternatives.

"I'm taking this hummer," I said.

“You’re not going anywhere Marine,” the senior Marine responded. But I had already tuned him out, hearing little other than the threat of court martial.

“Court martial me later,” I said.

We put Ziggy in the passenger side of the vehicle. Higbo climbed in the back and wrapped his arms around Ziggy, becoming his human seatbelt while I drove. We were high in the mountains and darkness had settled in. Our only hope was to find a hospital, but I had no idea where one was. I simply drove. After several miles I noticed lights in the far distance and we headed in that direction.

“I don’t feel a pulse!” Higbo yelled over the sound of the engine.

“Check again!” I said.

“Nothing!”

“Hit his chest!” I shouted, while making the gesture of beating his chest.

He did. “Nothing!”

“Hit him again. HARDER!”

“I feel a pulse!” Higbo yelled.

Shit. I had to get down the mountain. The winding road was costing us precious time. As the assistant team leader and their friend, I promised these guys that I would get them all back alive from our six-month deployment. I scanned the slope of the mountain for an opening that could get us off the road while not sending us over an unseen cliff or into a tree. Seconds felt like minutes; minutes felt like hours.

“He’s gone!” Higbo yelled.

“Hit him!”

“Nothing!”

“Beat the hell out of his chest, but keep him alive!” I shouted.

Higbo complied. He worked up a sweat and Ziggy returned to us.

It was pitch black except for the swath of jungle illuminated in the headlights and a small puddle of lights in the distance. I *had* to get off this mountain. A leap of faith: I jerked the wheel to the left and swerved off the road. If ever I needed

divine intervention, now was the time. We plummeted down, swerving around trees, bouncing, all while Higbo held onto Ziggy. He was taking a beating to his own body while holding our comrade's life in his hands.

The engine roared as we crashed down the hillside, and the jungle fought back. Limbs slapped the vehicle in protest as small trees gave way and disappeared underneath. Large jungle leaves and bushes clung to the side as if they, too, needed medical attention. The jungle finally vomited us out onto a hard road. Pieces of green, brown, and black shot out from behind us. It seemed in the moment that God must have made that opening in the jungle, just for us.



I pressed the gas pedal to the floor. The engine bellowed in compliance as we raced toward the lights to our front. Don't ask me how, but it was the base hospital. We rolled up to the front entrance and Higbo ran inside to get a doctor. Ziggy was in bad shape. I draped him over my shoulders and a fireman carried him inside. He was beginning to stiffen. "Oh, hell no!" I yelled in defiance. I didn't know why he was stiffening, but given that his heart had stopped twice, I knew it was bad.

"Medic!" I yelled as I entered the Subic Bay Naval Hospital. They went to work like spiders with new prey, and I wondered if Ziggy would come out all right.

Divine intervention might have helped us get off the mountain in one piece, but I didn't think it could get me out of trouble with the command. I took the hummer in violation of a direct order, ridiculous though it was. I consoled myself with the fact that I did what was right, and to hell with the rest of it. Higbo and I stood in the hospital lobby and I gave him a pat on the back for keeping Ziggy alive. We were exhausted.

"See if you can find a way to contact the unit. Let them know where we are," I told Higbo. It was a tall order, trying to contact a unit in the field from a hospital base, but I knew he'd find a way to let them know where we were. Higbo was always good in a pinch.

The doctor who had been working on Ziggy came to me several minutes later. "He's not dead," he said, "but if you had been any later getting here, he wouldn't have made it."

"He died twice en route," I said.

The rest of the medical staff turned and looked at me.

"What did you do?" the doc asked.

"We beat him in the chest until his heart started," I said.

"No shit?" one of the staff said.

"No shit," I murmured.

I asked the doctor about the stiffening of Ziggy's joints and muscles. He said this was induced by the excessive internal heat, and would lessen as his temperature dropped. I went to his bedside and put my hand on his foot. "I'll be back for you," I said. His eyes were closed and he did not respond, but I didn't expect him to. Then I went to find Higbo.

"I got the message to the LT," Higbo said as he walked towards me. Good in a pinch indeed. The lieutenant, the senior Marine, and my team leader arrived at the hospital soon after. They spoke with the doctor in the hallway then came to Ziggy's bedside while I sat nearby. Ziggy was beginning to wake now. He slowly rolled his head in my direction. I rose to my feet and went to him.

"You saved my life," he said weakly.

"You're my brother," I said with a tired smile. "You would've done the same for me. Get some rest and I'll see you soon."

And we left him to rest.