

War Dogs

We'd been soldiers so long we can't remember a time when we didn't follow orders. We served the United States of America with unquestioned loyalty. In the end, we had no regrets. We knew we were tools. Each one of us did what we were expected to do. It was our job to find them, set 'em up, and let our boys have at it.

No one needed to pull any one of us out of our hammocks each morning, or pry us out from under our ponchos. We had to find it in ourselves to get up. If we could get up, you could set up the enemy. Anyway, we didn't sleep. Not the way we did as civilians. Eyes might close, but you wouldn't be assigned to do covert ops if you snored.

And us? Hell, my team was invisible.

Towards the end our group got small. This mission, just three of us.

You pretty much always had a nickname when you served.

Everybody except Ronnie.

He was a good-looking guy, judging by the stuff chicks sent him. He had that fifties look, you know the type. American greaser with a James Dean edge. Always wore a T-shirt with cigarettes in the sleeve, his hair as slick as wet slate, and a smile that made you grin right back at him. Like you were in on his joke, and he was laughing at somebody, all the time. When it came to traps though, he was serious as a bullet, and could have been half VC.

I was "the Big Man." Pretty obvious I know. Then there was "Devil." After we'd met, I did very little thinking on this. He was soot dark and came off sneaky, but there was something in his dead leaf brown eyes that could cut you down faster than a bayonet. He didn't just look through you; he could see what you'd left behind. When he wanted your attention you were held fast, as if hearing an old song and now you're stuck trying to remember who sang it.

Viet Nam was like no other place in the world. It didn't just fly in the face of common sense. It flew by screaming. We quickly learned that our very lives had to become about motion. We had to move. Move from the smell of putrid wood, moldy soil, and dead fish. When death has an identity, you can learn to move away from it.

Devil sucked on that smell. It drove him.

There were days it seemed the VC were everywhere, like the bush. Like the bugs. Devil could read the land the way I read letters from home, and because he could hear just about anything before it happened, we felt safe. He heard sounds nowhere near us, things that meant nothing in particular. He'd lift one eyelid, then another, and wouldn't be satisfied until he knew he could ignore it. Some of the guys who served with him passed along a kind of legend; they started to think he was a reincarnated Green Beret.

Soldiers together, day in, day out can learn to live life by what's not said. Survival was rooted in your sixth sense. I knew the enemy was our shadow just by the way the hair stood on the back of Devil's neck. This was a soldier who could smell right from wrong. He knew the VC well. He knew they were wrong.

He'd spy on the VC all the time and report their positions back to us with such a surgical accuracy we'd sometimes call him Mr. Devil. We'd bomb where he told us. We'd go, or not go, where he'd show us. We learned to mimic him. It was either that, or cash out in a jungle in the middle of nowhere.

There was nothing good about Nam. There were moments that poked through the way sunlight can take a punch at weighty clouds. Then those damn clouds came lumbering back in, shutting out any semblance of civility and hope.

Watching Devil work, showed me that beautiful could still exist. The way he moved. I almost envied the way he skulked. He was the snake sizing up his date for the night. He was sultry air, sliding over rocks, around dead trees and right under the noses of enemy camps. He could slip through the bush, and with a flick of his top lip, give us a signal that it was time to move again. While many were frightened by the lure of the country, Devil was awed and challenged by its mystery.

When I think of Devil it's easy to see him. There he is-sharing dinner with me under a drab khaki moon. We're not too far from an army of pain-in-the-ass monkeys. Just before sunset, they're laughing in the trees like muted trumpets, rivaling sundown with soft baires, awash with irritation that we're here at all.

I remember one night Ronnie had just come back after setting trip wires around our camp. God's flashlight was full and bright, hanging low in the western sky-moonlight so bright Ronnie had to set his last few feet of trip wire crawling around on his belly.

Devil had given us the okay to set down, and was doing one last look around before calling it a night. When he headed back this time, he wasn't walking.

I rose slowly, alerted by a hard swoosh, again and again. Devil scrambled through the jungle's web, but didn't come straight at me; he was zigzagging. By the time I rose to my feet, he was no more than twenty yards away and then I saw it. A tiger was gaining on him.

A cat, even one that big, is nearly impossible to see at night. Unexpectedly, orange fur looked like smoky gray lightning. Black stripes across his body became as space. Were it not for his weight crushing surrounding brush and Devil's hard rasp, I would have never known what was coming.

Devil tore to his left. I hunched and ran low, cutting to my left to distract the cat. As I ran, I pulled out an eight-inch blade and headed towards the nearest trap.

The cat spotted me at once, and hesitated. Then he charged. I ran about twenty feet, neared the trap, and then bolted to my left with a hard cut. I slammed to the ground and flipped over in time to see the cat approach, my blade pointed north and ready. I would shoot him only if I had to.

The trap was to my left. He was so close, I could see the decision on his mammoth face as he read the terrain, changed direction, and avoided some of Ronnie's finest work.

Shots rang out in the distance. The cat vanished. I sheathed my knife, ran low to get my weapon, fired off a few rounds, and waited. A hard crack of bullets in the clearing abruptly stopped. Since we were covert ops, we were issued the enemy's weapon instead of standard military issue. When they heard my shots, they thought they were shooting on their own people and ceased fire.

Devil was panting close by and I was sweatin' my own piss, I was sure of it. It was the only time I think I ever saw Devil scared. Ronnie and I laughed about it later. But our Lieutenant caught hell for it. Mission: failed. Still, we thought it was funny. You had to remember those scraps of laughter; it's like light in a cave, slowly feeding on darkness inch by inch. When the light gets close enough, it might even warm your heart. If you lived to tell, those memories could keep you from going crazy. Otherwise, you grow old and

bitter, just because you were lucky enough to survive. And I'm told bitter old men who served, become that smell of death we shot our way out of, long before they die.

In November of '72, we were near Mytho in the Mekong Delta. Our team was on a rescue mission. The area was thick with VC. They were the jungle. They were the dirt. They could become the trees so easily; when they hid you were convinced you were looking at nothing but tropical landscape.

Devil came back from patrol and his face told me all I needed to know. Bird whistles raced across treetops with their own Morse code of fear. Heartbeats pushed hard against my throat. Hanging silence set down, and it all began again. We knew what was coming.

I called out in a harsh whisper, "Ronnie! Devil's got 'em in his sights! Cover!"

Within thirty seconds, enemy mortar pummeled us like the fist of hell. I was thrown thirty feet from where I stood. Devil was nowhere to be found.

I raised my head and threw up. Gunfire raced overhead. Wide palms, weighed down by gunpowder and smoke, almost touched my face and neck, and appeared as though in mourning. The best my eyes could afford me were intermittent snapshots of ground and sky. Sound quickly warped-my ears nothing more than worthless canals on the sides of my head.

Pain rolled over me. My throat offered up dry spit. I reached for my weapon. I could see cuts through my fatigues; quarter holes in my pants from shrapnel tearing through skin, nesting in muscle.

I heard a soft whine. I tried to pull my body up onto my elbows, but I couldn't move, burning pain riveting up and down my legs.

The whine became a sorrowed moan and kept calling me.

It was Devil.

I inched towards him. Automatic gunfire churned to a series of short pops. I got to him and was sick again. Not from my pain, but from his massive wounds.

I forced myself to fight panic the way I'd fought the enemy. Devil's blood was everywhere and was welling fast, matting his black fur-making him feel tarry and cold. I pressed my hands across his chest. I wanted to use my whole body to cover him. Protect him. Hide him from death now breathing a hoarse croak in my ears, calling for his next victim.

Devil looked into my eyes. I whispered to him that help was on the way. As I leaned in to hear him, he was telling me he was all right. Somehow he told me he was 'all right.'

Where's Ronnie? I have to get Devil out of here. Let's grab him, Ronnie. Let's get him out of here! We can't leave him. You don't leave your dog. You don't. Trust no one. Trust only your dog. Only your dog! They'll cut off the ear, Ronnie. You know what they do. There's a bounty on this dog. They'll cut off his ear for their reward! They cut off the ear ... they'll cut off his ear...they cut ...

Days later, my CO was at my bedside when I woke up. He told me Devil was killed in action alerting us that two of our incoming squadrons were on top of a large force of VC and didn't know it. He told me the teams were saved because of Devil. He said I was going to receive the Purple Heart. He told me I was going home.

I need my dog. Get me my dog.

Literary/Short Story

He opened my hand and gave me Devil's dog tags and his collar. I held them close to my face, but not too close, just near enough to smell him. I didn't want my tears to wash away the scent of him. I didn't want to know what became of his body. I didn't want to ask if they had taken his ear. Inside the ear is his serial number: the VC would get huge rewards for killing these dogs, and even more money if they bagged the handler's special annotation from his fatigues.

Those German Shepherds saved thousands of us. Anytime I see one I can't help but think about Devil. Seldom do I reflect on my medals. It's as if they were pieces to a puzzle I could never quite solve. Cool pieces of metal and twine that can't be assembled in any way that would make sense—much like losing Devil. Much like war when you're in it.

There are dozens of stories I could tell you about him, enough to fill a book. Our time together was much like two sides of coin. One side was always ugly, as we faced the decay of freedom in a relatively unknown part of the world. Toss that same coin, watch it revolve and catch a ray of light, and you could end up seeing a moment of beauty that causes such pause as to be unforgettable, I could think only of it as hope.

The path that threw us together permanently binds us to this day. When memories flex they are involuntary, much like a yawn or a sneeze, in that they are virtually impossible to stop. As thoughts come to mind, elbowing their way into some of the ordinary beats of my life, it's not up to me to let it happen—it has a life of its own.

I do not know of things others claim are certain in this world. I have trusted few in my life. What I can tell you is that sure as I live to wheeze the dusty plains of my home, I know I've seen God. He was present in the eyes of my partner. He was not only the finest soldier I'd ever known, he was my friend: Echo Seven, Sergeant Devil.

War Dogs – written by Barbara Bitela

Dedicated to Wayne

Winner: First Place – CNW/FFWA Writing Competition: Florida, Statewide
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