

Twenty-second and Last Patrol: A Struggle against Bad Luck

by Robert C. Ankony

Ankony, a bored and rebellious kid from Detroit with only a ninth-grade education, joins the army just days after his seventeenth birthday. While serving as a paratrooper in Europe, he dreams of combat service and of refocusing his misdirected life, and before long he has volunteered for Vietnam. There he joins the elite U.S. Army LRRP/Rangers—small, heavily armed long-range reconnaissance teams that patrol deep in enemy-held territory.

He arrives in country at the peak of the war, 1968, and is mentored by one of the finest LRRP team leaders, Sgt. Douglas B. Parkinson. Participating in some of the war's major campaigns and battles, including Tet, Khe Sanh, and A Shau Valley, he earns his stripes and becomes a team leader, only to discover that now everyone's life hangs on his decisions. Before embarking on his last patrol, some team members voice the superstitious concern that bad luck will make it not just Ankony's but *everyone's* last patrol. Ankony is determined that luck will have nothing to do with it. But perhaps that isn't how luck works.

After their insertion, a Cobra gunship spots the team in the dense, short brush and mistakes them for the enemy. Firing four rockets that narrowly miss the team, the Cobra quickly banks to one side to come in for the kill. The terrified Lurps pop a smoke grenade to identify themselves as friendlies, when suddenly two scout helicopters appear. This emboldens the Cobra crew, who reason that the smoke has been dropped by one of the scouts to mark the team's position.

Faced with rockets from the Cobra and miniguns from the scouts, the team is finally saved when one scout, realizing the mistake, blocks the Cobra's path. Saved for the moment, the team plods ahead on its mission as the weather turns cold, wet, and miserable. Their troubles grow when they find themselves stalked by two tigers, who become increasingly bolder each night. And each daybreak, as the tigers melt back into the forest, F-4 Phantoms resume their bombing runs directly overhead. And another helicopter gunship attacks.

The compelling narrative and realistic dialogue make the reader feel like the sixth member of the team, experiencing both the horror and the humor, the brotherhood of comrades in arms, and the baffling randomness of who lives and who dies.

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At dawn, Friday, August 30, 1968, I woke inside my cockroach-infested hooch at LZ Betty, sixteen miles south of the Demilitarized Zone, to go on my twenty-second and last patrol. I was the sergeant and team leader of a five-man long-range reconnaissance patrol assigned to the First Cavalry Division's First Brigade, whose area of operation was from Quang Tri City, near the coast of South Vietnam, to the heavily forested mountains out west, halfway to Laos.

I was a Special Forces Recondo School grad, and though just nineteen, I had been in the battles of Tet, Khe Sanh, and A Shau Valley, where I learned that surviving in combat rested not just on skill but also on sheer dumb luck. Since luck was purely arbitrary, I figured that improving my skills was the only real way to increase my odds for survival. Fortunately, I was mentored by the legendary Sergeant Douglas B. Parkinson, a marine biologist turned LRRP team leader, whose quiet strength of character, sound thinking, and kind, fatherly manner brought out the best in every man he led.

As I got into my fatigues and boots, I looked out at the rice paddies and jungle-clad mountains growing slowly visible under a faint blue sky, unaware that I would soon have to call on all my skills and an extra measure of luck. I daubed on the facial camouflage wax, slung my rucksack over my shoulders and grabbed the CAR-15, and crawled out of my hooch to meet my team, gathering outside.

My front scout was Cpl. Charles Williams, a mild-mannered new replacement from Ohio. I followed as team leader, with Cpl. Bill Ward from California behind me as radio operator. Then came my friend and assistant team leader, Cpl. Tony Griffith from Tennessee, who always seemed to have a smile on his face. Cpl. John Bedford, a stocky black man from Pennsylvania, was rear scout. But since the front scout was so vital to team security, and everyone else was best suited in his assigned slot, I took Williams's position so he could gain experience following me.

Our area of patrol was four miles southwest of LZ Betty, two miles south of the Quang Tri River, on the east side of a half-mile-long reservoir that had once irrigated a wide expanse of rice paddies. The terrain consisted of small rolling hills perhaps a hundred feet high. Although few trees grew there, all the hills were covered in five to eight feet of dense brush, with plenty of vines and thorns. Our mission: set up a fixed observation post (OP) on a hill across from the reservoir and keep constant surveillance on the north-south trails along its shore.

Like most areas of patrol, ours would be four thousand meters by four thousand meters, with the outer thousand meters serving as a no-fire zone to protect us from friendly fire by our own ground, artillery, or aviation forces. Our team wouldn't venture into that zone, and our ground forces wouldn't enter without notifying us first.

The air was hot and humid, without a breath of wind, when we were inserted at 0715 hours near the reservoir, a few hundred meters north of the hill where I wanted to establish our OP. After our insertion ships flew away, the bushes around us gradually came alive with birds and whirring insects. I whispered to Williams, standing behind me, "You always wanna stop, look, and listen right after you land, so you can hear and see what's going on." He nodded. "And you wanna keep doing it every so often—oh, and one more thing," I said, pulling on the heavy leather gloves worn by the front scout, "always take a zigzag path to make it hard for anybody to pull an ambush."

At that point I started the slow, laborious task of making a path through the six-foot wall of vines, thorns, burrs, and branches we'd jumped into, prying them apart with my hands and body or trampling them underfoot to clear a way for the next man. Drenched in sweat and constantly harassed by the bugs and leeches, we had inched our way south, halfway up a hill, when we heard a helicopter approaching from the north.

As we hurriedly took cover behind the walls of our path, I looked back and saw a lone Cobra gunship from our division, with a shark's mouth painted on its nose, flying low three-quarters of a mile away. Since the Cobra had plenty of speed and hence a wide area of patrol, I figured the aircrew had little idea of its exact location, let alone ours, so we stayed hidden inside the vegetation, waiting for it to leave.

Within seconds the Cobra flew out of sight, so we came out into our path. Glancing back one last time at the hills and sky, I saw no sign of aircraft, so we moved on.

But minutes later, just as we neared the top of the hill, we heard another helicopter approaching from our rear. Looking back as I scrambled for concealment, I saw the same gunship, at a much higher altitude now, diving straight at us to attack. Knowing that it was armed with seventy-six 2.75-inch rockets, a 7.62mm minigun that could fire a hundred rounds a second, and an automatic 40mm grenade launcher, I had little doubt what we were facing.

Worse, not knowing what unit the gunship was from and thus with no way to determine its frequency—and with no time to radio them even if we had known—I yelled to my team, “Pop smoke!” hoping that this customary self-identification procedure would cause the Cobra to break off its attack. As it continued to dive at nearly 170 miles an hour, I stared at the four rocket pods on its sides and yanked the phosphorus grenade off my pistol belt, hoping it could substitute for one of the smoke grenades on the back of my rucksack, which weren't close enough to grab quickly.

But as I grabbed the cotter pin and struggled to yank it out, I found that I couldn't because I had bent it too much to keep it from snagging on vines and brush. Terrified, I dropped my rifle and grenade on the ground and reached for the luminous red cloth signal panel in my pants pocket.

But just as I grabbed the signal panel, with the Cobra three hundred meters away and closing fast, I saw puffs of black smoke on both sides of the fuselage. The worst of my nightmares was coming true, and I thought, *Aw, shit, we're gonna die!*

The four rockets struck just meters north of us in a series of thunderous explosions and blinding flashes. Dropping my signal panel, I wrapped my arms around my face and dived to the ground, feeling a blast of leaves and hot, swirling air. After the cloud of smoke and dust shot past us, hearing a high-pitched ringing in my ears, I picked myself up off the ground and glanced at my team. Everyone was okay, and I realized that the dense vegetation that had once tormented our every step had saved us by absorbing the blast.

Unfortunately, there was no time to rejoice, since the gunship, still thinking we were the enemy, was quickly banking to one side to make another pass. Just then Griffith popped a smoke grenade in front of our position. Not certain if one was enough, I dropped my rucksack and grabbed a smoke off the back.

But just as a thick cloud of yellow smoke drifted up from Griffith's grenade, a LOH and an OH-13 suddenly appeared and started flying in wide circles around us. Shocked by all the noise and aware that we were now facing two scout helicopters as well as a Cobra—which would be emboldened by the smoke grenade Griffith had popped, reasoning that it had been dropped by one of the scouts to mark our position—I dropped my smoke grenade and reached to the ground for the dropped signal panel, now our only hope.

By now the Cobra had completed its turn and was diving at us for the kill. As other team members shouted, “Get 'em on the radio, Ward!” and “Hit the dirt!” I opened and closed my cloth signal panel high over my head, desperately hoping the Cobra could see its bright red in spite of the smoke.

The next instant, the LOH suddenly flew low into the Cobra's path and faced us. As vegetation whipped from the rotor blast and the air echoed with the whine of its engine, I looked at the minigun on its side and continued to collapse my panel, knowing there was nothing else I could do.

Just then the Cobra broke from its dive, and the LOH started to land in the small clearing the rockets had made. Falling to my knees in relief, I picked up my rifle.

After I could find my feet, I stood up and worked my way through the vegetation to the LOH on the ground, waiting with its engine running and rotors spinning. When I approached, the warrant officer piloting the craft leaned out and shouted, "Is everyone all right?"

"We're okay," I replied, still numb.

"Do you need anything?"

I shook my head in a silent reply.

"I knew that smoke wasn't ours," the pilot said, grinning, "but with things happening so fast, I didn't have time to radio the Cobra, so I just blocked for you guys!"

Still dazed, ears still ringing, I nodded and waved.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, we're all right."

"Well, you Lurps take care," he said, giving me a salute.

As I returned his salute, he increased engine power and pulled back the stick, lifting off and heading west to meet the other helicopters.

Silence returned, and I worked my way back to my team.

"What'd they say, Sarge?" Bedford asked when I returned.

"The pilot said he knew that smoke wasn't theirs, so he blocked the Cobra so it wouldn't shoot."

"He didn't see your panel?" Williams asked.

"No, just the smoke."

"Shit!" Ward cried. "If it wasn't for that guy, graves registration would be out here now sponging us up!"

"You mean that guy and Griffith," I added.

"Yeah, you're right," Ward said.

"The sad thing is, I forgot to thank him."

"Hey, nothing you can do about that," said Bedford.

"Yeah, there is," Griffith said, smiling. "You can thank *me*!"

"You're right, Tony," I said, looking at his warm, smiling face. "We owe you."

With nothing else to do but continue the patrol, we mounted our gear and resumed our slow trek south through the continuous wall of vegetation. By 1300 hours we had moved another three hundred meters and reached a seventy-foot hill, where we set up an OP on the west side because it provided a clear view of the reservoir and two trails. But after several hours passed and we saw no sign of the enemy, we set up claymores around our perimeter, and Bedford and I worked our way west a hundred meters to check out one of the north-south trails.

That night at 2200 hours, Griffith caught sight of several small lights heading east toward us a couple of miles away. "Take a look, Sarge," he whispered, nudging me with his hand.

"Damn, that's gotta be gooks with flashlights!" I said, watching the lights bob and then suddenly disappear.

With such a brief sighting, we had no accurate range for a fire mission, but just in case, I notified our tactical operations center (TOC), who confirmed that we had no friendly forces in

the area. But after spending a couple more hours without another sighting, I allowed all but one man to sleep, since I was confident the enemy wouldn't continue toward us with all the hills and the water reservoir in their path.

However, at 0210 hours that night, Bedford woke me and the rest of the team, whispering, "We've got movement!"

"Okay," I said, clutching my rifle as my heart began to pound.

By then each of us was sitting, straining to hear under the black, moonless sky, when we caught the sound of vegetation and branches moving fifty meters west. The crickets must have heard it, too, because they stopped singing.

"What do you think, Sarge?" Williams whispered as the sounds grew closer.

"I don't know. . . . Hold your fire!" I said as my mind raced with questions: *How'd they see us? How'd they get here so quick? Is it just by chance they maneuvered around the reservoir and back to us? Are they coming because of the rocket attack? Did they see Bedford and me when we went to the trail? How many men are coming? Are they coming from other directions as well? Should I fire our claymores? Should I tell my team to just throw grenades so we don't give away our position? If I do, will one of the grenades hit the vegetation and bounce back? If I tell 'em, will the enemy hear me? What should I do? Where in the hell did I go wrong?*

Recovering my senses, I whispered to Ward, "Give me your handset." After he gave it to me, I put it to my ear and signaled TOC that we had movement nearby, by breaking squelch a certain number of times, hoping that if things did go to hell, TOC would know our situation and could mount a rescue.

But with our position so far from friendlies, and TOC unable to do anything in so short a time, we sat huddled in the dark vegetation with our rifles and claymore generators, knowing we were on our own. Just then the noise came to within twenty meters and then suddenly diminished from a loud, steady ruckus to a quiet, stealthy advance that I knew only a large predatory animal could make.

Relieved that we were facing an animal rather than the enemy, Ward notified TOC of our status just as the noise separated into two encircling paths, ten meters out.

"Tigers!" Bedford whispered, hearing snorting and heavy footfalls.

"Sounds like big-ass Bengals," I added. "Don't shoot unless you gotta."

"For sure," Bedford replied as the tigers circled at a constant distance.

But when they continued circling for a couple of minutes, Bedford said, "Let's try scaring 'em off with rocks."

"Yeah, why not, John?" I said, reaching to the ground and feeling blindly for rocks.

Once we all had some, we lobbed them over the vegetation at the tigers, which caused them to leap to one side, but they quickly returned. As this went on for the next hour or so, with the beasts not coming closer but not leaving, either, we knew we could keep them at bay as long as we could find enough rocks.

"I think we can forget about sleep," I whispered, reaching for another rock.

Just before dawn a cold rain developed, and finally the tigers left. With all of us exhausted, hungry, and wet, I had two men keep watch on the reservoir and trails as the others ate and went to sleep.

An hour later Bedford and Ward were sitting watch as Griffith and I slept, when a piercing scream suddenly came at us out of the dark clouds. Glancing up, I saw one of two camouflage-painted F-4s diving directly over our position, and we all hit the cold, muddy dirt, thinking it was coming at us. Within seconds it broke from its dive with a loud explosive noise as

the twin afterburners hurled the twenty-ton jet back up into the sky.

Still lying on the ground, we felt the earth shake and, a few seconds later, heard the air thunder as two 500-pound bombs exploded on the far side of the reservoir, three-quarters of a mile away. At that instant the second jet dived from the clouds and dropped two bombs as the first prepared to dive again. Curious why they were striking so close, I had Ward radio TOC, who told us the jets were targeting an area they had struck before.

Minutes later the Phantoms had dropped all their bombs, and low-flying helicopters started to roam our area, moving in and out of LZs Betty and Sharon. Frustrated by all the activity, we stayed buried in the vegetation, waiting for them to leave, figuring any enemy troops in the area would be doing the same.

It kept raining the rest of that day, and we stayed wet and shivering. But just after dusk we again heard movement, this time approaching from the south. Sitting in place with our weapons in hand, we realized that the tigers were back. But after nearing our position and circling us as before, they started to come closer, clearly less intimidated by our rocks.

For the rest of that night the tigers tormented us as before, departing at dawn just as the two Phantoms returned for another bombing run. After the jets completed their attack, the low-flying helicopters returned; the tigers came back again that night, and the cold, rainy weather continued. Then the cycle continued for yet another day, only without the Phantoms, with the tigers becoming more emboldened each night.

Just before dusk on our last evening of patrol, Griffith sat heating a cup of water for his usual chicken-and-rice LRRP ration. Ward sat under a poncho next to him, eating a spaghetti ration. But once Ward was halfway through, he suddenly stopped eating and said, "Hey, Sarge, I've been thinking about tonight."

"What about tonight?" I asked, eating the skin of an orange.

"There's no way those tigers can come closer without 'em getting one of us."

"We'll be all right."

"Maybe you, but not me."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because it's me they're after."

"What makes you say that?"

"'Cause I'm the biggest."

"Gimme a break, Ward; you're big but you're stupid."

"Oh, yeah? I'll show you who's stupid!" he said, picking up his half-eaten LRRP ration and crawling in the mud toward me.

"What the hell you doing?" I asked as he crawled over my legs and past my feet.

"I'm gonna put this by you so they'll eat your ugly ass!"

"Okay, Ward," I said as he set the ration at arm's length in front of my feet. "If that helps you relax. . ."

After he crawled back, I grabbed another orange from my rucksack, careful not to move Ward's ration and ruin his fun.

When night fell, the tigers returned like clockwork, and we started throwing rocks. But halfway through the night, during the early morning hours of Wednesday, September 4, one of them approached me. Unable to see anything in front of me but a black void, I pulled my feet in and sat up. Pointing my CAR-15 at the sounds, I flicked the selector to semi as the tiger paused and then cautiously stepped toward the ration Ward had placed by my feet.

I could hear it as it reached the plastic bag the ration was in and began to eat. As I

listened carefully, with my finger next to the trigger in case it should make a sudden move, it finished the meal and started to lick inside the wrapper. I couldn't help thinking how much it sounded like my cat, Fluffy, back home. At that instant the tiger stopped licking and stood silently. Apparently not satisfied with the skimpy meal Ward had left, it stepped toward me. Aware of every lump and contour of the ground after five days of stationary patrol in this spot, I knew there wasn't another morsel of food between the big cat and my team—*except me*.

So with no time to lose, I fired two quick shots.

As each shot echoed through the night with a bright flash, I heard the tiger leap to one side. Satisfied that it wasn't coming closer, I held my fire, not wanting to give enemy troops more of a fix on our position. But instead of falling or running away, I heard it pad calmly over to its companion, whereupon the two walked away.

"Man, that thing wasn't even scared!" I whispered. "I know I didn't miss it!"

"That cat just used two of its lives!" Ward muttered.

"Hey, Sarge," Griffith said, "since we're getting out at first light, why don't we zap 'em with claymores when they come back?"

"You know, Tony," I said, "they've dicked with us long enough. Let's do that."

But hours passed and daybreak came, and the tigers didn't return. We then prepared for our extraction by retrieving our claymores and gathering our gear. At 0705 hours TOC radioed for our extraction, so we headed north a short distance to a bomb crater we had passed, which would serve as a pickup zone.

Once there, we sat exhausted inside the wet vegetation surrounding the crater, and I dozed off. Just then a flock of birds flew up from the brush, waking me just before I heard the heavy *whump, whump, whump* of a helicopter rotor approaching.

Suspicious of the timing, I stood up and peeked out to see a lone Huey gunship a quarter mile to the north, a pair of gold crossed sabers painted on the nose, flying low directly at us.

"Stay covered!" I shouted, falling to the ground.

At that second the gunship's nose-mounted minigun opened fire with a long burst at a tall clump of vegetation two hundred meters north of us. As tracers ricocheted and whined through the air, the gunship started to work its fire toward us.

"They're from the First of the Ninth, Ward!" I hollered. "Get 'em on the horn and tell 'em we're here!"

Ward, who had already pulled his rucksack in front of him, quickly switched frequencies and was soon in contact with the gunship, yelling, "Cease fire, Blue Max! Cease fire! Slashing Talon Five Nine a hundred meters south, over!"

At that instant the gunship quit firing and the pilot radioed, "Sorry about that. We were reconning by fire, over."

"Roger, Blue Max," Ward replied as the gunship turned and flew away.

Shaken by the event, I pulled out one of my last fruitcake bars. "I told ya, Sarge, your last patrol was gonna bring bad luck," Griffith said, taking a seat.

"*Bad luck*, Tony?" I replied, staring at the exhausted, weathered faces of my team. "It's been a fuckin' nightmare!"

We saw several Hueys approaching below thick black clouds to our north, but we stayed hidden even though we knew that our extraction ships were in the air. Once radio contact was made, we crawled out of the vegetation into the crater's edge.

Bedford guided a Huey to a hover by holding his rifle high over his head as the other birds circled above. When it reached our crater we ran through the mud and rotor wash and

leaped inside as each door gunner trained his M60 beyond us, watching for the enemy. We lifted off into the cold, drizzly sky as I sat on the floor with my CAR-15 in hand and my wet, muddy feet hanging out the door. Speeding back to our LZ, I leaned against Griffith's leg, knowing that my patrols were over and I would make it home.

Five months later, during the early morning hours of Wednesday, February 5, 1969, Sergeant Tony L. Griffith from Company H, 75th Infantry (Ranger) led his five-man long-range reconnaissance team through thick fog and dense, short brush between An Loc and the Cambodian border, wearing my old flop hat, which I had given him for luck. Hearing wood being chopped not far off a trail they were assigned to surveil, the experienced Recondo School grad had his team set up an ambush. But members of the North Vietnamese Army had also detected the team.

At dawn several enemy soldiers stole through the fog and flung a grenade into the middle of the team, who were spread in a line by the trail, in sight of each other. The grenade exploded next to the front scout, Cpl. Richard E. Wilkie, showering him with shrapnel. As the enemy opened fire, the two team members on Wilkie's left panicked and fired in the direction of the grenade's blast. Caught in an intense crossfire, Wilkie, a Special Forces veteran, was shot five times—once by the enemy, twice by his team, and twice by bullets that passed through him. Miraculously, he survived. So, too, did the assistant team leader, Lewis D. Davidson, who was hit twice in the leg. Tony Griffith's luck, however, ended that morning, when he was hit by multiple gunshots to the chest, just days before his twenty-first birthday.

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