Barking in the Wind

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Dennis Underwood

I spent 1969 stationed in Long Binh, Vietnam, at an open-air ammunition supply depot, a massive square cut into the jungle, four miles on a side. It had all been cleared with machines and chemicals, but by the time I arrived, areas were once again green. New stands of bamboo had even sprouted near the perimeter. Some animals had returned as well. One day I saw a porcupine waddling along one of our roads. And I heard the barking deer. Native to Southeast Asia, they rarely grow to be over two feet tall, weigh less than forty pounds, and sound like barking dogs when they call to each other. Along with the wildlife came packs of wild dogs that roamed the far reaches of the supply depot.

Though animals might make it through our perimeter, we were protected from a Viet Cong ground attack by rows of concertina wire, land mines and flares. Inside the depot, the entire area was covered with pads that each held about twenty tons of ammunition and high explosives, everything from rifle bullets all the way up to sixteen-inch artillery shells.

My four-man squad spent about eighteen hours a day out on the ammo pads doing inventories, unloading new shipments and pushing out fresh supplies to the guys in the field. I tried to anticipate needs based on previous patterns and radio reports, so that no soldier ever had to worry about having what he needed to survive. Sometimes, when there was an emergency need, we would load up huge nets with ammo for the

helicopters to haul out into the middle of a battle. Although we were not front-line combat troops, the war was with us every moment of our lives.

Most of us really thought that the U.S. shouldn't have been in Vietnam in the first place. We were not killers, just guys who got sent to a war. People were dying all the time, and it made me sick if I thought about it. It was so much easier to just concentrate on the daily routine, without giving thought to the consequences. I knew that every shell went to protect our combat troops, but at the same time, I knew those shells were killing enemy soldiers. I believe this kind of thinking was what pushed most of the G.I.'s into drinking or drugs. When you are smashed, you can't think. Numb is much, much better than reality.

The four of us in the squad were all draftees: "Tiny", (the biggest man in the company at about 6 feet 6 inches and 250 pounds); "Baby Bull" (not much smaller); "Rico" Oliveria (a Puerto Rican kid from the wrong part of Chicago); and me (A skinny college graduate from Detroit). The guys called me "Doc" because I had a bachelor's degree in Psychology/Pre Med, while most of the men in our company were lucky to be high school graduates.

As squad leader, it was my responsibility to make the rounds of our assigned pads to make sure our work was done and done properly, which meant I was the last man to get to the break shack at the end of the day. It was a shack, for sure, built from all sorts of different materials, with a corrugated metal roof. But we were lucky: the shack had electricity. That meant we had a fan, and the best of all, one of those old-fashioned soft-drink coolers—the kind where the bottles ride on tracks, hanging by the bottle caps while submerged in cold water.

I had just finished checking out the last of the ammunition pads late one afternoon. It had been a long, hot day, and I started walking back to the break shack, thinking about the fan and the cold soft drink waiting for me.

I tried not to think about the Viet Cong. We were completely exposed all the time. The Viet Cong would run out from the jungle cover, lob some mortar rounds at us, and disappear back into the jungle. All we could do was wait for the mortar shells to crash down. We had nowhere to go, and even if we did, there was no time to get away from all of the high explosives stacked on the pads. We all knew that if one hit anywhere close to us we would all be dead. Even though we had perimeter guard towers and machine gun bunkers, we rarely even had time to fire on the attackers before they disappeared. And just to make life more interesting, the VC occasionally took sniper shots at us when we were on top of the ammo pads.

A mortar round had hit a pad a month before I arrived in Vietnam. Tiny told me about it. "There I was, just like always, sitting on a monster pad of ammo," he said. "All of a sudden, we heard the *whump* of a mortar launching. I looked up just in time to see the second round hit one of the pads about a mile away from where I was. It was a really huge explosion; you have never seen the Fourth of July like that! Bam! Everything went up at once. Our pad shook like an earthquake was under us. We were always a bit jumpy out there after that."

I was still a half mile from the break shack, and thinking about the huge package of homemade cookies my Mom had sent. The whole thing would last about ten minutes when the other guys got to it, a small pleasure in a world of unpleasantness.

As I started up a little rise, I heard a pack of dogs snarling and growling up ahead. I stopped, and was going to change direction to avoid them, when I heard the terrified cries of another, smaller animal. I walked to the top of the rise, looked over the top, and saw a pack of about eight or ten big, lean and hard-muscled dogs closing in on a barking deer. These dogs had never belonged to people; they were wild, and vicious enough to attack a man.

The lead dog of this pack was a short-haired brindle with scars on his left side from some previous battle. He probably weighed close to sixty pounds. The other dogs were not much smaller and their coats ranged through browns and tans; good color for camouflage on the base. They were all very lean and I could see the muscles ripple when they moved, even from as far away as I was.

The dogs took turns dashing in and snapping at the bleating, shivering deer. I was certain that at any moment they would all rush in for the kill. The only weapons I had with me were a clipboard and a pen—not very effective against a pack of wild dogs. Without thinking, I grabbed as many rocks as I could carry, and started running down the hill, yelling at the top of my lungs.

The pack leader turned from the deer to deal with me. His hackles were up, his teeth bared. At that moment I realized what a spot I was in. This predator and his pack could injure, or even kill me. But running downhill, I was committed to the charge, too close now to change direction without having the whole pack after me. I charged at the lead dog as fast as I could, yelling and throwing rocks. My childhood snowball fights paid off. I hit the leader in the shoulder with a good-sized rock. He yelped in pain and retreated. The rest of the pack followed him, barking and complaining all the way.

When I reached the bottom of the hill, I was shaking and out of breath, but I felt great. I had faced the pack of wild dogs and forced them leave the little deer. It was lying on its side, eyes glazed with fear, panting with shock. It had a few superficial wounds, but seemed to have avoided any serious harm. As I examined the deer's wounds, I discovered that it was a doe. I knelt down and, speaking softly to her, picked her up. She collapsed into me.

I still had a good walk ahead of me to get to the break shack, where my men and three others squads would be gathered. I didn't know what I

would do when I got there, but I knew I was supposed to save the doe. The further I walked, carrying her shivering body, the heavier she seemed. I stopped a couple of times to recover before setting off again. All the while I was worried about the dogs deciding to make a return and attack me. Of course there was also the threat of the VC lobbing a rocket, or even taking a sniper shot at me, since I was so exposed and clearly not moving fast.

The deer and I were both pretty done in when I got to the break shack. I was soaked with sweat and shaking from fatigue and she had bled enough to smear my uniform in front. I can only imagine what I must have looked like, staggering in, late and covered with blood.

"Doc's hurt!" Tiny yelled. "Get over here you guys!" He, Baby Bull, and Rico came over to see what had happened. When they realized that I wasn't hurt, they were pretty relieved. Everybody started talking at once about what we could do to help the little deer.

Tiny took the deer from me as gently as if it were a baby. This was a guy who, when he got his "Dear John" letter, got drunk and threw the entire bar at the MP's who had come to take him into custody. Three of the MP's spent the night in the hospital after they got him down. He was a big guy, but he had a heart to match.

Rico and baby Bull took me to the break shack for cold water and some shade. Most men from the other three squads came out to see what was going on. Everyone wanted to do whatever he could to save this little doe. One of the guys somehow knew that there was an American veterinarian in Saigon. The Warrant Officer's jeep driver, Corporal Green, volunteered to take her. The Warrant Officer was not at the site, but we loaded up anyway, borrowing the jeep for our mercy run. I was worried that we would get in trouble, but, like running down the hill earlier, there was no turning back now.

I climbed into the back seat and Tiny handed the deer to me. It was a long drive and she was in pretty bad shape, but I just held her and kept

hoping she would be all right. Every bump we hit--and it was all bumps--shook us both. Amazingly, she never tried to break free of my arms. Driving from camp to Saigon at night was hardly safe. It was absolutely dark; the only light came from our headlights. The enemy might have been anywhere along our route, which would have been the end for us and the deer. My thoughts kept going to scenes of dead from both sides that I imagined were just out of sight all along the road. Every horror story about that awful war snuck into my head as we drove.

The drive must have taken an hour; I thought it would never end but eventually we did get to Saigon, with its shops shuttered for the night, people scuttling out of our way, laundry lines everywhere, and a palpable fear. In Saigon, you never knew who was on which side of the war. Every turn down a different road put us at greater risk of stumbling upon someone who would capture or kill us, given half a chance.

We found veterinarian's office, which was also his residence, and pounded. "Captain Walker, sir, we apologize for waking you, but Doc here saved this deer from a pack of dogs. We were hoping you could treat her to try to keep her alive."

He stared at us, and at the deer in my arms.

"Alright," he said, "since you were crazy enough to come all the way from Long Binh in the dark of the night, come on in and I'll see what I can do." He gave her a tranquilizer, an antibiotic, and a vitamin shot. Then he cleaned and wrapped up her wounds.

"You guys are certifiably crazy," the captain told us. A week earlier, four soldiers who had come into Saigon on a pass had been killed by the Viet Cong while visiting a local "establishment" in the neighborhood. "Their bodies weren't found for two days," he said.

He finished treating the deer. "She is pretty terrified, even with the tranquilizer shot," he said. "These animals are very delicate. She may still die, just from fear." We both thanked him and offered to pay, but he

refused any money. He seemed happy to have been able to do something positive in the war. “Get back safely,” he said as we turned away.

We loaded back up in the jeep and sped back to the camp. The deer was unconscious from fatigue and I was pretty well done in, too. I was glad we had found the captain, but I did wonder why the Army had sent a military veterinarian to Saigon. I don't imagine it was to treat stray dogs and cats—or injured deer. Back at camp, even Corporal Green shook his head when I asked him. “I don’t know, Doc. Maybe the brass has a pet cat or something.”

While we were gone, the other men had built a stockade for the doe from scrap materials lying around from old jobs. It was a funny mess of boards, corrugated steel and whatever else they could get their hands on. They were so proud of themselves for getting it built. I’m surprised they didn’t rip boards from the break shack. These soldiers, weary from a long, hot day, had built this safe haven for a wild deer instead of sleeping. They had even “liberated” stainless steel serving bowls from the company mess hall and dug out places in the rock-hard ground to set them in. One bowl had a salad; the other had fresh, cool water from our own supplies.

We sat near the deer's pen and talked all through the night about our families back home and what we missed the most. Tiny got all blubbery about hurting the MP’s. “I didn’t mean to hurt any of our own guys,” he said “I was just so drunk and angry that I don’t really remember anything.”

“What I miss right now is a great big burger from any fast food place in the States,” Baby Bull said.

And Rico put in his sentiments: “I miss all those lovely round-eyed girls in Chicago, man.”

I rarely said anything about myself, especially since I was sort of their minister, therapist, squad leader, but that night I talked about home, too.

"I miss my wife," I said, to which the guys hooted, "and being able to listen to classical music."

We shared our best memories of before the war, too. Rico talked about the Chicago girls. Tiny said he had wanted to play football in the NFL. Baby Bull told us about the flower shop his parents owned, and where he had worked.

"Hey, Baby Bull, send me some flowers when you get back to the States, O.K.?" It went on like that until dawn. Tough guys just keeping it up.

Every minute or so, one of us would look over at the stockade to check on the deer. She just lay there, curled up on her legs, shivering. We all knew that she might die from the fright she had been through, but we needed her to live. She represented something better in life than war. Instead of all of the killing, maybe we could save the life of this beautiful, fragile creature.