

Ambush

By

Larry Massoletti and Tom Reed

I guess the first sign that it was going to be a tough mission was the chattering of the machine gun overhead as we ran toward the tree line. We didn't know why he was shooting. It had been a clean insertion. The insertion chopper had dropped down onto the grassy hillside that served as the LZ and the chase ship had passed over the top to ensure only a short visual gap in the time a watcher would have a helicopter in view. We were off the bird in a flash and headed toward the tree line. Then the door gunner opened up.

What was he shooting at? Did he see the enemy? There was no answering fire, no sign of movement in our front. It wasn't a long burst, but it was long enough to destroy the stealth of the insertion.

"What was that all about?" I asked Massoletti as we settled into our defensive position just inside the tree line with our backs to the LZ.

"I don't know," he said. There was a look of disgust on his face. "Maybe he was just taking target practice."

We sat there for about an hour, just to make sure that no bad guy had come around to investigate the firing. Then we headed off into the jungle. There were four of us; LRRPs out of the 2nd Brigade base camp at Fire Base Marylou. Massoletti was Team Leader. He walked point and carried his own radio. Plaskett was next in line, assigned to keeping his eye on the left flank. Finch, who went by the nickname of Putt-Putt, walked third, watching things on the right. I brought up the rear. My duty was to make sure we weren't being followed and to cover our trail as best I could without falling too far behind.

Even though we hadn't been there before, we knew the territory. It hadn't been more than a week before that Massoletti, Plaskett and I had been sitting on top of a mountain on the other side of the valley watching this section of jungle for any telltale signs of the rockets the NVA were firing at LZ Bass, a small American outpost near the village of Polei Kleng. We never did see them launch any rockets but the North Vietnamese hit us pretty hard after we broke up their ambush on a line of APCs by calling in artillery on them. After we were extracted, the team Putt-Putt was on got put on the same mountaintop and had their own encounter with the bad guys.

On this mission our objective was the same, to find the enemy unit that was firing on LZ Bass, but the tactic had changed. Now, instead of watching the hills from the vantage of the tallest mountain, we were to do the job on the ground, to go into the crucible, to find the enemy and to destroy him.

We kept moving until late afternoon, then pulled twenty or thirty yards off the trail and set up our night location. We didn't tempt fate by heating our LRP rations; the smell would carry too far. We ate them cold instead. We shot the bull in low whispers until dark, then Massoletti established the guard rotation and we turned in for the night. Around three in the morning Putt-Putt woke us. "We've got movement," he whispered to each of us as he gave us a gentle shake to bring us around.

In silence we reached for our weapons and pulled them close to our bodies. Four pair of highly attuned ears swept the night. Four pair of hands took their weapons off safe and made them ready to fire. Four bodies coiled to spring into action in the merest instance and four hearts pounded just a bit faster. There are always noises in the jungle; insects and reptiles slithering through the undergrowth or up the bark of trees, small animals scurrying to their dens and the occasional night stalking predator seeking its prey. There are always noises, the problem is separating the normal from the threatening.

Thirty, maybe forty minutes later – nothing. "Sorry guys," Massoletti finally said, "go back to sleep."

We didn't move out until mid-morning. It's best to stay in your night location for the first two or three hours of sun light because that's when the bad guys are prone to be on the move. If your night location is close to a trail they may pass in front of you without seeing you, allowing you to call in artillery on them without being discovered. But they didn't pass by us this morning. Around 9:30 or 10:00 we got ready to take to the trail. It was while we were packing that I realized that I had lost my knife. I always carried a British Commando Knife strapped horizontally across the back of my web belt. My brother had sent me a half dozen of them from the States. I'd given four of them away and kept two for myself, I'd lost one earlier, and now I had lost the second one.

We explored until about noon when we pulled off the trail once again to eat our lunch and listen.

So much of what we did involved listening. In the jungle you could hear a lot farther than you could see. Unmuffled voices, a cough, the clanking of equipment or the snapping of a twig could warn you danger long before your eyes confirmed the presence of the enemy. When the army tested my hearing before discharge they found it much more acute than when I went to Vietnam.

An hour or so later we were on the trail again. It wasn't long before the trail entered a narrow valley and wound down toward the valley's head. Massoletti stopped and pointed down into the valley. "Look at that," he whispered. We followed his finger with our eyes and made out, between the trees about sixty yards ahead, the vague outline of bunkers. "Let's check it out," Massoletti said.

Putt-Putt turned and looked at me as if to say "is he crazy, why does he want to go down there?" I just shrugged my shoulders. Putt-Putt didn't understand Massoletti. Massoletti saw the job that had to be done and didn't hesitate. Our job was to gain intelligence on the enemy, and that intelligence lay in the valley, among those bunkers.

Larry Massoletti remembers:

When we walked down into that valley we were surrounded by triple canopy jungle. The first canopy was heavy under growth, then some taller trees and finally those towering, gigantic mahogany trees. You could hardly see the sky. The first sign that things were not as they should be was the sight of a grass hut, about six feet wide, just as long as it was wide, and about five feet tall. It was pretty startling because I knew it did not belong there. As we walked a little closer I looked deeper into the valley and saw all the bunkers. We left the trail and moved around the contour of the hill toward the head of the valley where we could get a clear view of the whole complex. "If there's anybody down there we could probably stir them up with a few artillery rounds," I whispered. I unslung my pack and switched on the radio. While I made contact with the fire base, Plaskett and Reed retraced our steps a few paces and set out Claymore mines to guard against any unwanted visitors from the trail. I called in the artillery and adjusted it onto the complex. When five or six, one-five-five, H.E. rounds landing in the middle of the complex brought no response, we knew it was empty and safe for closer exploration. We retrieved our gear and moved into the bunker complex.

There were about a dozen bunkers in the complex built in two tiers along the western slope of the hill. The grass hut, the communal area and the kitchen were on the floor of the valley, along the creek that flowed from the valley. There was little of value in the complex, the North Vietnamese carried everything of value with them at all times, but the newness of the bunkers and overall maintenance of the area showed the complex's recent habitation. The place was so fresh it was as if the NVA had been there just a few hours before...

Tom Reed remembers:

At the far end of the complex we found the trail leading up the ridge on the other side of the valley. We climbed steadily up the ridge for about an hour before we reached a plateau where the ascent became more gradual. Just as we reached this level we pulled off the trail to take a rest. Between the trail and us, just where it assumed a steeper descent, was a large dead log. On the other side of us, no more than a couple of yards from where we sat, the jungle opened up into a large field of elephant grass, which swept down the opposite slope of the ridge. It was a good location from which to monitor the trail.

After an hour or so of just sitting and watching Massoletti made a decision. "Set out some Claymores," he said. "We're going to make this our night location."

As a night location this spot had definite strengths and one very distinct weakness. Having an open field that could serve as an LZ at our back was a strength. The log along the trail hid us from the enemy's view until they were right on us, another strength. But our proximity to the trail, no more than 20 feet, meant that any encounter we might have with the enemy would be at point blank range, and as we were almost sure to be outnumbered – this was a distinct weakness. Putt-Putt got another of those looks on his face that indicated that he didn't like the idea and, though I had to admit that I would have chosen a location farther off the trail, I'd been through enough with Massoletti that I trusted his decisions. As for Plaskett, I knew that he too trusted his Team Leaders decision, though if he had had his druthers, he would have preferred to set up in the

bunker complex, where he would have the best possibility of getting into a fight.

We set Putt-Putt's Claymore against the log aiming up the trail and guarding the opening to our location. My Claymore was set just opposite the opening, pointing further up the trail. Its' back blast guarded the opening. Plaskett's Claymore was held in reserve.

We settled in for the night, we ate our LRP rations, we talked or we read. I'd finished the paperback I was reading so I asked to borrow one of Massoletti's "Guide Post" magazines. "I didn't know you went in for this stuff," he said handing me one of the inspirational booklets.

"You'd be surprised," I said, "Haven't you heard that there are no atheists in foxholes?" I shouldn't have been taken aback by his skepticism, after all my gambling, drinking and trips to town to visit the 'ladies' weren't exactly secret.

"I just never took you for the spiritual type," he said.

"When I first got in country, I had a Bible," I said. "The minister at my church gave it to me when he heard I was being sent to Nam. It had a steel plate in it and you were supposed to carry it over your heart. When I was in the hospital at Nha Trang somebody stole it. I didn't complain. I figured that he might need either the content or the steel plate more than I did."

When it became too dark to read we turned in. Each man took his watch, an hour on and then three hours of sleep, repeated through the hours of darkness. It was an uneventful night. My last watch began when the first streaks of dawn were painting the sky. I didn't wake my replacement when my hour was up; I called in the 'sunshine' report and let the others sleep a bit longer. Back in the world I wasn't a morning person, but over here and in the jungle, it seemed right. A cup of coffee would have been nice but we were in a cold camp, and GI instant coffee didn't blend to well in cold canteen water. I sat with my thoughts and smoked. I thought of home. I thought about Karen, the girl I'd broken up with just before I came to Nam. I thought about my family, and, I thought about war.

Before too long the camp came alive and I had to leave my reveries. I could tell that Massoletti was trying to figure out what to do next. We had found the bunker complex where the enemy had camped, we had followed and monitored trails that were well worn by their travel, but we had not found the spots where they launched their rockets and we had not found them. I never found out if he made that decision, things began to happen that made his decision inevitable.

The sound that we heard wasn't a distinct sound and it wasn't very loud. It's hard to describe, but it's the sound of heavily laden packs shifting from side to side as they are carried up a hill. Massoletti's arm reached out and pointed silently toward the trail. We turned and watched as first one, then two, then three heads appeared above the log. They looked neither left nor right, but trudged ahead under the weight of the heavy load they carried, up the hill, past the opening and on past us down the trail.

I was closest to them; I swung the strap of my Swedish K over my head and stepped out onto the trail. I dropped the bolt down from its' safety position and squeezed the trigger. Nothing – I tried again – and again nothing.

Plaskett was close beside me. "Use your knife!" he whispered. I reached behind me only to be reminded that the knife was gone. I looked down at the submachine gun and saw that the bolt had hung up in the safety position and had never fallen into the channel that would allow it to fire. I readjusted it but it was too late. The bad guys had disappeared around a bend in the trail.

Massoletti got on the horn and called in artillery trying to drive them back in our direction, but the time lapse and the lack of knowledge of how the trail twisted and turned, doomed the attempt.

"We'll stay here," Massoletti said. "Those three may decide to come back, or there may be more coming behind them. We've found a good hunting spot so let's use it. But let's put out the other Claymore to make sure that next time they don't get away."

We placed Plaskett's Claymore about 15 yards further down the trail pointing in the direction the bad guys had gone. The charging handle was placed beside the one for the Claymore that was just to the right of the opening. There was nothing to do now but watch and wait.

The morning drifted by, then the early afternoon. Then came the snap of a twig. I was sitting cross-legged facing the open field when I heard it. I spun around and grabbed the two charging handles. Four pair of ears tuned toward the trail, four pair of eyes watched the top edge of the log. One head – then two heads – then three heads – a fourth – and more – appeared above the log. The heads grew bodies as they ascended the hill. But, now, the point man looked left and the point man looked right, and when he looked right he stopped and he turned. He stood staring at me sitting cross-legged and at Plaskett crouching behind me. He was not more than twenty feet away and he was not more than five feet from the back blast of one of the Claymores in my control and not ten feet from the Claymore that Putt-Putt controlled. All was quiet; the only sound was the chattering of Putt-Putt's teeth. Then the point man slowly reached up and carefully hooked his thumb around the sling of his AK-47 and in the same moment pointed his index finger in our direction. I squeezed down hard on the charging handles.

The world in front of me exploded. The body of the point man flipped fifteen or twenty feet into the air and came back to earth with a hollow thud. All of the heads and partial bodies that we had seen above the log, disappeared from view and then another explosion as Putt-Putt's Claymore delivered a coup de grace to any of the lead group who survived the back blast.

Gunfire was crackling all over the place. Massoletti cradled his Car-15 in his arms and started crawling toward the opening. "Where are you going?" I asked.

"I'm going to get the pack off that guy." He said nodding toward the body that lay near the opening.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Let me soften them up first."

I pulled the pin on a grenade, released the handle and let it cook off for a four count, then tossed it over the top of the log. After it exploded I raised up to a squatting position and fired off a magazine from the Swedish K, spraying down the area as best I could. "Go for it," I said coming back down to my knees.

Larry Massoletti remembers:

Reed's Swedish K was going off like crazy, the NVA must have thought it was an M-60 machine gun. Sometimes when the firing got quiet, you could hear an NVA shouting orders to his men. The NVA were so close.

I crawled to where the NVA point man was to get his pack. The first thing I saw was three bodies, the point man and two others. "There's three of them down out here," I yelled back to the team. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw an NVA stepping out from behind a tree. He raised his AK and let go a burst at me.

Stuff was flying up in my face. Plaskett had crawled down behind the log. He saw the guy who was shooting at me at the same time I did and returned his fire. "Got him!" he yelled. If he had not fired when he did I would not be here. He saved my life and I've never properly thanked him.

I pulled back without the pack that had been so important to me only seconds before. I knew I had to call in the contact. "Two Romeo, this is Two Echo we have contact! We're in the same location as last reported. There are a lot of them. Get me artillery!" In a flash I had the battery at LZ Bass. I called for a marker round, but it landed so far off you could hardly hear it. There wasn't time to direct fire from so far away. "That's no good," I yelled into the hand set, "send us some gun ships."

Tom Reed remembers:

War is a dangerous thing. Not only should you be concerned with the damage the enemy can do to you, but you have to realize that the same equipment that can chew up the enemy can also bite you. As the enemy was hunkered down along the hillside out of our view, my Swedish K wasn't much good, so I grabbed my M-79 and tried to lay a few rounds on them. But the hill was too steep; the rounds flew harmlessly well into the valley below. So I increased the angle, still no luck – increased it again till it was nearly perpendicular and wham, a H.E. round crashed into a limb above our heads. Luckily it had not traveled far enough to arm and fell harmlessly to earth in our midst. Putt-Putt tried a more direct approach, he pulled the pin on a white phosphorus grenade and threw it at the bad guy. It hit a tree and bounced back at us. All four of us hit the ground an instant before the white-hot shards went flying over our backs.

I don't know how long we fought – it didn't seem like more than four or five minutes – then we heard the flip-flip-flip-flip of the rotors of the approaching gun ships. A no more pleasant sound was ever heard. Plaskett and Putt-Putt retreated into the field while Massoletti shoved a primer fuse into a bar of C4 and pulled the pin. He tossed it onto the ground that we were evacuating and then lit out to join the others. When he had gotten past me I sprayed down the area with a final blast of submachine gun fire as I backed my way into the high grass of the field. By the time the C-4 exploded I had reached the safety of the group crouched in the grass 50 or 60 yards from the fight.

Larry Massoletti remembers:

When we heard the gunships coming, I told the LRRP on the other end of the radio, we were getting out of there and making a break for the elephant grass. I threw down the C-4 in our position and we all tossed a grenade down the hill to break contact with the NVA. We started running through the elephant grass as hard as we could. We ran in the elephant grass for about fifty yards it seemed and then I made a half circle like a "J ", so we could tell if anyone was following us. We had to stop because I thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest, and I knew the rest of the team were feeling the same thing. That is the hardest my heart had ever beat and it has never beaten that hard since. We waited and no one followed. The gun ships showed and they could see us down in the grass. I guess they could see the bad guys too, because they just opened up on them when they got there. You could see the shredded leaves falling from the trees from the gunfire of the cobras, and I could even see the faces of the pilots as they flew by.

Tom Reed remembers:

One after another they would fly in unleash a salvo and peel off to be replaced by another craft. While this was going on Massoletti got word from base camp.

"They're not going to pull us out," he said. "They're sending in an air-rifle platoon to reinforce us and we're supposed to lead them back to where the North Vietnamese are."

Timing is not always perfect in war. In a perfect situation the gun ships would have been able to remain on station and keep up the fire until the reinforcements arrived. That way the enemy would not be able to get back to the site and retrieve their dead and the intelligence that those bodies might carry. The timing here was far from perfect. The gun ships expended their ammunition and returned to their base and we were left to wait in the LZ for the promised reinforcements.

Despite their name, Air-Rifle Platoons were not equipped with Daisy BB guns. The airmobile concept was born of Vietnam and LRRPs were an integral part of the concept. In concept LRRPs would find the enemy and then would be supported by a rifle platoon that was on constant alert and was able to be helicoptered to where they needed. But even when they are on alert it takes some time for them to get their equipment together, travel to the helicopters, load aboard and then reach their destination. In this instance we waited for nearly an hour for the Hueys to arrive with our reinforcements.

But in time they did arrive. Massoletti briefed the Platoon Leader and First Sergeant and just before we were ready to head back to the contact site he and Plaskett came over to me. "Plaskett wants to walk point on the way back," he said, "but he wants to carry your Swedish K when he does."

"Sure," I said to Plaskett, "if your crazy enough to walk point, you ought to have something with a bigger magazine than an M-16." I handed him the submachine gun and the leather case containing extra magazines and took his M-16 and ammo pouches.

The LRRPs lead the way. When we reached the area of the contact, Plaskett suddenly took off running. He raised the Swedish K and let go a three shot burst, then took off running again. When we got to the top of the ridge we saw him coming back up the hill carrying three North Vietnamese packs.

“When I got to the top of the ridge, I saw an NVA making off with these packs,” he said when he got back to the top. “I fired at him but the Swedish K jammed after three shots. He dropped the packs and took off.” Twice in that mission my submachine gun had displayed idiosyncrasies, first when I had been unable to remove it from safety to fire at the three NVA that had passed us, and now, when for the only time while I had it, it had jammed. And in both cases the idiosyncrasy had proved to be fortuitous. In the first instance if I had been able to shoot the three NVA we might have been extracted without having found the larger body of enemy troops. In the second instance, the jamming had prevented us from destroying a valuable piece of intelligence. In a metal box in one of the packs we discovered, what we later learned to be, the first sights ever captured for a 122 mm rocket. The box had three neat 9mm holes through it, but each shot had missed the delicate instrument inside. Had the gun not jammed Plaskett would have put more holes through the box increasing the risk of destroying the site.

All of the bodies had been carried away except for one. The point man lay where had fallen, near the opening to the place where we had been hiding. His pack was still on his back and his AK-47 still slung around his arm. Through the barrel of the AK was a shiny grove, made by one of the ball bearings from Putt-Putt’s Claymore. Even so, I knew that when he was hit with the force of the second mine there was little if any life left in him.

Larry Massoletti remembers:

When we went back up there to contact area with the Air Rifle Platoon, we went over that dead NVA like vultures. I’m not proud of it but we seemed to want all of his gear for souvenirs. I still have his backpack, belt and brass belt buckle with a star on it, and a picture of a little girl that he carried. Every time I look at that picture I wonder about that little girl, what she knows about her father and what has happened to her since. I also have a piece of the 122-rocket site, it’s about the size of a silver dollar, flat and chromed with a small slot going to the middle. I don’t know how I ended up with that. I do know that S-2, Brigade Intelligence, was very happy with what we brought in.

The pack of the point man, who would later be identified as the Platoon Sergeant, was crammed with ledger books and documents, the records of the platoon and of the rockets that they had launched. In each of the four packs that we recovered, were packets of rations. Each man carrying a portion of his squad’s supply. Also, thanks to the misguided kindness of some Americans, in each of the packs were first aid kits, supplied by the Quaker Church. The packs were repacked and loaded aboard a helicopter which took them directly back to S-2 at Fire Base Mary Lou.

Tom Reed remembers:

Its not easy to look on the body of a human being that you've destroyed. The emotions are so mixed within you that you feel both shame and pride; shame that you've taken a human life, yet pride that you have faced the ultimate life and death challenge and have prevailed. And as the pride begins to well up within you it is tainted by disgust that you had taken pride in the taking of a human life.

The Air-Rifle Platoon decided that they too would spend the night on our battlefield. The platoon leader and first Sergeant sent out listening posts and established a perimeter. Then the Sergeant reached into his own pack and brought out a six pack of beer. It was warm and I don't remember the brand, but I'm sure I've never drunk a better beer in my life.

Plaskett tried to console me that maybe I hadn't killed the man that was laying only a few feet from us, that maybe he wasn't dead when the second Claymore hit him. "Besides," he said, "when you blew that mine you saved my life."

"I tend to think that I would have been in his line of fire too," I said.

The internal struggle between my conscience and my pride continued well into the night, until sleep caught up with me.