
FORTY TWO**Daddy-Longlegs**

The C-130s took us approximately two hundred miles south to an airbase near the city of Pleiku, in the province of the same name. This was an area of Vietnam known as the Central Highlands.

The company spent three days in a barracks area a short distance from the airstrip. During that time we went out on patrols around the immediate area of the base. Every night the strip took several mortar rounds which were fired in from just outside the wire, and the unit that was here prior to us was unable to catch them in the act.

Each time the rounds came in, a Huey Cobra was immediately dispatched to try and catch them before they could clear out. It only took the Cobra a few minutes to get up and over the area where the rounds were fired from, yet it never seemed able to get there fast enough.

Our captain figured that there was no way a crew, carrying a heavy mortar tube, could move out of the range of the Cobra that fast, unless they weren't running at all!

Whereas it had always been assumed that the rounds were fired in, and then the VC escaped into the bush of the surrounding countryside, he had a hunch they were escaping by actually moving through the wire and back *into* the base!

The Captain had his radioman report his suspicions to base security and, sure enough, the very next night, after the rounds came in on the airstrip, the perpetrators were caught slipping under the wire, mortar tube in hand.

About a week after our arrival we received orders to check out a tunnel complex under a village that was a couple of hours walk from the base. The countryside here reminded me of pictures I'd seen of the African plains, where the animals roamed in herds eating what we called elephant grass. This really wasn't grass in the sense that we think of a lawn back home. It looked more like straw, anywhere from a foot to three feet tall. The only difference was that the animals weren't here.

Because it was fairly open, and we could make good time walking, the usual procedure of being flown to our destination by Huey, when the distance was more than a thousand yards, was bypassed.

Early in the morning, the company headed out through a gate in the wire. With this kind of terrain, and the men walking one behind the other as usual, I felt more like I was part of a safari than on patrol.

By mid-morning the sun was beating down unmercifully so that I could see the huge trees, growing sporadically throughout the plains, shimmering in the heat. Word came back through the line that we were going to take a fifteen minute break. I and the man behind me, Richie, a tall, lanky kid from North Carolina, took off our packs and sat down under a single bush which was growing beside the trail we were following. The bush was about ten feet tall and provided the only shade for a good distance around.

"Shit, it's hot!" I exclaimed, removing my steel pot and wiping the sweat from my forehead with my sleeve.

"Yeah, we're lucky. A lot of those guys are sitting out there under that sun." Richie replied.

The two of us sat with our backs resting up against the stems of the bush and our legs stretched out in front. The only leaves on the bush were way up near its top, making it more like an umbrella than a plant.

Up ahead, I could see men sitting in groups of two or three, along both sides of the trail, for a good distance. Some were smoking a cigarette, others just shooting the bull where they'd removed their steel pots to wipe the sweat from their brows. Back the way we came, it looked the same. When the company was on the move, in a single file formation, it could actually stretch out for two-hundred yards.

Suddenly, from a fist-sized hole, where the stems of the bush we were leaning against entered the ground, thousands of daddy-longlegs spiders came pouring out, covering the ground for about ten feet all around! There were so many of them that they literally carpeted the area, including our legs. We were completely surprised by this sudden appearance, though neither of us moved from our shady spot. Since we knew these creatures didn't bite, and we were used to being around every kind of insect or animal one could possibly imagine, we felt no fear.

After approximately a minute, in which they appeared to peruse the area, they suddenly reversed direction and poured back into the hole, almost like a movie running in reverse.

I looked over at Richie and smiled in amazement, "What the hell?!"

"You got me," he answered, staring at the now quiet hole.

A few minutes later the same incident occurred, exactly as it had the first time. The spiders came pouring out of the hole, appeared to scout around the area briefly, and then poured back into it again. Richie stood up and called to a couple of men sitting on the ground a short distance up the trail, "Hey, you guys. Come over here. You gotta see this!"

"What's up?" one of them asked when they approached our bush.

"Just stay here for a few minutes and watch," Richie said.

I hadn't moved from my sitting position and we didn't have to wait long before the whole crazy process was repeated again. The two other men stepped back so they wouldn't step on the horde of little creatures.

"Wow! That's weird," one of them exclaimed, laughing as the last few disappeared down the hole again.

"What the heck are they doing?" the other man queried with a smile.

I lifted my gaze from the hole right beside me up to him, "I haven't got the foggiest idea, but it's pretty strange."

"You can say that again."

"Movin' out!"..the word came back through the column.

I slipped my pack straps back over my shoulders and got to my feet. As I walked away from the bush, and started up the path with the others, I looked back to see the ground covered one last time before it was out of sight. I'd never seen anything like the behavior of those spiders before. What could the purpose for what seemed a kind of ritual be? Were they scouting their area for other insects that had wandered into it—potential food? Or was it some kind of crazy mating habit? It just seemed so unusual and comical, because the time intervals were so regularly spaced. The thought came to me that, if it wasn't for this war, I could really enjoy exploring the many interesting sights we'd encountered along the way. Maybe someone from something like the National Geographic Society could explain what those spiders were up to. We sure couldn't.