

## **Bass Fishing on the Mekong**

Completed - July 2012

The sun hovered over the sweltering Mekong Delta as our landing craft snaked up a jungle-lined tributary. Under the drone of the diesel engine we searched the edge of the tangled shoreline.

A pilot had reported seeing two bodies in this area. Wardel, Jenkins and I were with the Army Graves Registration unit out of Qui-Nhon and had been sent in to recover them. The gunners-mate, the boat coxswain and the ensign were Navy, attached to the landing craft, USS Sussex County, on station nearby in the Mekong River.

There had been heavy fighting in this region over the last couple of months and it was now designated as cleared of enemy fighters. But as the stream narrowed and the jungle loomed over the water you had to wonder just how they knew that. Everyone in the boat was on high alert. We came around a bend and the coxswain pointed, “There they are.”

Two bloated bodies, Marines, lay together near the opening of a small ravine at the edge of the water. They were both in their camo pants and dark green t-shirts; one was face down in the mud, his legs still on the bank. The other man was on top of the first, crumpled into a semi-fetal position.

“Can you get the boat in there?” the ensign asked the coxswain. Trees and branches extended into the water.

“I can get close,” he said. “But the boys are going to have to get their feet wet.”

“Let’s do it.”

The machine-gunner stood ready on the thirty-caliber. We raised our weapons as the boat headed toward shore. Ten feet away, the coxswain jammed the motor in reverse and revved the engine. The boat drifted into the shallows and stopped in a tangle of submerged limbs and branches, twenty-five feet from the ravine. The engine continued to thrum and sputter in the water as the coxswain lowered the bow-ramp. The stench of rotting flesh wafted into the open boat.

“Okay, Perez. Let’s make this quick,” the ensign said. “Supposed to be cleared out around here but I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“Yes sir,” I said.

“Oh, shit,” the coxswain said as the smell reached him. “God that’s bad.” He wrapped his fingers around his nose and mouth.

“Get on with it!” the ensign said. He moved to the back of the boat.

I stayed on the ramp and unfolded the heavy body-bag as Wardel and Jenkins made their way through the ankle-deep water, ducking and twisting around the thick

jungle brush. In the ravine, Jenkins held back as Wardel squatted down and inspected the bodies. He slipped his hand between the two dead men, felt around, then moved to the other side and did it again.

“What’s he doing?” the ensign said. This was his first experience with combat remains.

“Checking for booby traps.” I said.

Wardel stood up and motioned to Jenkins who joined him. They turned the top man over and Jenkins grabbed him by the arm and slid him off into the mud. Jenkins retreated again as Wardel carefully rolled the second man onto his side. “We’re clear,” he said. Jenkins rejoined Wardel and they both grabbed the man under his armpits and pulled him toward the boat, his boots dragging, his stiff, outstretched arm catching awkwardly against saplings and branches. Five feet away, Jenkins slipped and fell face down into the water. “God damn it!” he said as he pushed himself back up. He pulled a handful of sea-weedy muck from the neck of his flack-jacket. “Son of a bitch!”

Wardel laughed, “Quit fooling around, Jenkins. We’ve got work to do here.”

“Fuck you, Wardel!”

Wardel chuckled as they brought the man the rest of the way and the three of us lifted him onto the open body-bag. I did a quick ID check, found his dog-tags and made a note. Then we straightened things up as much as we could. Cartilage crunched as Jenkins forced the man’s arm against his chest. Behind me, one of the guys in the boat crew muttered. I zippered the bag shut.

“These boys been shot in the head,” Wardel said. “Prisoners I’ll bet.”

“That’s how they ended up piled together,” I said.

The three of us lifted the heavy load by the sewn-in handles and laid it on the deck against the bulkhead. I unfolded another bag as Wardel and Jenkins went back for the second man. When they got to him Jenkins reached down but Wardel stiffened and held up his hand. He was focused on a spot further up in the ravine.

“Look alive!” the ensign said. I turned to see him shoulder his M14. The gunners-mate swung the machinegun toward the ravine. I grabbed my weapon and looked back. Jenkins had squatted down and pulled out his pistol. Wardel was hunched over, gun in hand, picking his way slowly along the bank. Then he stopped, straightened up and waved us off. He holstered his piece. We all breathed a sigh of relief.

They brought the man back and as Jenkins and I were getting him organized on the bag, Wardel sat on the ramp and scanned the edge of the river. “You ever go bass fishing, Perez?” he asked.

“Yeah. My grandfather lived on a lake in Michigan.”

“That’s cool. Down in Arkansas I fish the lower Spring River. It looks a lot like this.” He pointed at the broken shoreline, the windblown trees extending into the water. “Those’d be hot spots right there, lots of structure; good places for bass to hide. I’d get in there with my johnboat, work all the possibilities.”

“Jigging and Pigging, eh?” Jenkins said.

Wardel smiled and pushed Jenkins shoulder. “You know about it, don’t you?”

“Move the leg so I can get this zippered,” I said to Jenkins.

He rolled the man on his side and the edges of the bag came together.

“There’s two things I take seriously, Wardel.” Jenkins said. “Fishing and fucking.”

“Shit. You might know about fishing, but no woman’s gonna go anywhere near your stinky ass. Here, watch this.” Wardel pantomimed holding a rod and making a cast. He waited for the bait to hit the water. “Ploop,” he said. He cranked his imaginary reel and then set the hook on a fish. “Look at that, first cast.” He slapped Jenkins on the chest and chuckled.

“Let’s wrap this up,” the ensign said. He stood next to us, a rag over his nose and mouth, his gaze deliberately avoiding the dead man.

Wardel looked up at him. “There’s another one, sir.”

“What?”

Wardel nodded toward the ravine. “It’s just around the corner, lying in the water.”

“Well, goddamn it, go get it and let’s get the hell out of here.” The ensign went back to the stern and, facing the river, removed the rag for a few seconds and took a deep breath.

I ID’d the second guy and cleaned off some of the river muck that had accumulated on the body. I zippered the bag and the three of us laid it on the deck next to the first.

Wardel nodded at me. “The next one’s been there a while,” he said. “Must have been a floater. Ain’t going to be as pretty as the last two.”

“You need me to come with you,” I said.

“There’s nowhere for you to work. We’ll bring the guy out.”

It took a little while for them to reach the third body. They broke branches and tossed debris out of the way to clear a path. Then they were behind the bank and all we could see were their heads and shoulders.

“When’s this fucking nightmare going to be over?” the gunner said to no one in particular.

I turned around. He was in the gun turret, looking down on us. He wiped his forehead and flicked grimy sweat from his fingers.

“How did *we* end up with this funeral gig, anyway?” he said.

“Stow it, Rico,” the ensign said. He put the rag back over his nose.

The coxswain stared back at me, expressionless. The engine continued to burble and sputter at the stern.

I looked toward the ravine. Wardel and Jenkins were heading to the boat, carrying the corpse by its belt and the neck of its flack-jacket. The head dangled down and wobbled when they walked as if it were connected by a thin strand. Both arms were gone, one from the shoulder, one just above the elbow. Foul bugs and entrails dropped and splattered into the shallow water. An eye was missing and some of the facial flesh had been cleaned to the bone.

“Jesus Christ,” the gunner said.

Wardel and Jenkins carefully placed the body on the open bag and organized things. The guy had been blown up. I tried to find some ID but there was nothing obvious. We’d have to look more closely when we got him back to the unit.

Jenkins got the bag closed around the legs and started the zipper. I finished it off and we laid the bag next to the other two. I gave the ensign the thumbs up. He started to say something but then leaned over the side, retched several times, and vomited into the river.

Wardel, Jenkins and I sat down on the deck against the side bulkhead. Jenkins shook a cigarette from his pack and offered it to Wardel. The coxswain lifted the ramp, revved the engine hard in reverse and the boat slowly pulled away from shore.

The ensign wiped his face and sat down next to us on a rusted toolbox. He removed his helmet and stared at the bags. He was shaking. "Sorry," he said.

The gunner put the safety on the thirty. He lit a cigarette and took a long drag as we headed back to the ship.

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