

THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME

A unique loneliness was born. In my monotonous vigil on the river I came to trust nothing. A surety that no one else would live through this registered, while bullets zipped by me on other errands. Their selections dropped dead right next to me and I barely noticed. Like Hatch, I was invisible, immaculate, and destined for an ending far more sinister than some anonymous shot outta the blue. Charley was just a target to me now...no longer a threat.

A smile crossed my face. Up ahead, a guy was water skiing naked behind a jet boat. There was hope! As I got closer to the barge we'd anchored near the sunken dredge, I saw the crazy group of SEALs had put their armored fortress aboard. Sky cranes had planted air-conditioned quarters, and antennae of all sorts bristled above. A huge net held trained killer dolphins, and kennels with pacing Dobermans told me I'd stumbled upon the fountainhead of horror at last.

The first movement was an English bull terrier running around their deck, smelling the air and watching the river banks. He took one discerning look at me and continued. The whole area had changed dramatically, and reeked of raw power. They'd called napalm clear-cuts for miles on both sides, and mined it, as well, placing tiny video cameras on posts. These worked with sensitive listening devices on a master board from which they could preemptively take out anything within three miles. It was impressive at first glance, but became mind-boggling in short order as I fathomed the full depths of their mission.

There are complete other worlds hidden within ours. These guys were from one all their own. They were at war with themselves, the CIA, military, or whoever ventured into their area of operations. This I found extended into Cambodia, Laos, and even portions of Burma...but expanded and contracted with their group mood swings. Red, white, and blue phones in their command center went directly to Arlington, Langley, and Washington. They dressed like civilians, spent money like drunken sailors, and killed for thrill more than reason.

Henry agreed the safest place on the river was moored to that lethal houseboat, but their chief told me, "to fuck off and get lost!" After hours of dickering, trading drugs, and playing my stereo loudly to show off our amenities, they argued amongst themselves, coming up with a compromise to let us settle some hundred yards aft on a trial basis. That suited me, and I compensated for currents, their demands for privacy, and protruding lances of the wreckage, placing two stern anchors far apart in a vector that kept us in place for the duration of what became summer vacation.

Rumor was we were finally going to blow the dredge and clear the river, but with Saigon involved it would be a miracle. I was stoked to have some bizarre company again, and started hanging out with an old surfer from California named Meers who'd been here since the early sixties under cover of the Rand Corporation. He was actually CIA, and had assassinated undesirables in four countries. I became his kid brother.

Our differences were far beyond age. I sensed he'd come into his own through formidable rites in the deadly game these guys perpetrated. Thus began my schooling as Meer's disciple, crossing borders of far more than manhood. In those months up river when time stood still, I confronted myself...subtly graduating to another level without evaluation. He was the final mentor at that gate where the Devil and His beast had awaited my coming.

To hear him boil it down, their concept of war made perfect sense. The dredge had been pumping mud spread by giant Rome plows to create a mile-square artificial island for a Riverine Base. This would expand the former "Phoenix" and "Game Warden" programs into a larger operation called SEALORDS for Southeast Asia Lake, Ocean, River, Delta Strategy.

They had names for everything, like it was a football game or something. I liked SLAM for Search, Locate, Annihilate, and Monitor. Meers laughed like the Joker in Batman, "Where do we get all these toys?" as a Boeing Hovercraft, big as the Nez, flew by on the water with fangs and a bleeding mouth painted on its gaping bow.

It wasn't funny at all. We were systematically turning the entire delta into a defoliated free-fire zone, and moving all the villagers into Strategic Hamlets, or Agrovilles, where misery was the common lot. This was not a concern at the think tank, where "more" was the answer to everything. Throw enough money at any problem and it'll go away. Meers was convinced if we kept up our current pace, Communism itself would soon hide in a cave. He should know, having worked for Colby in the Saigon station from its beginnings, and responsible personally for Diem's death. He was a very spooky guy and I had to be very careful what I said and did.

As our pursuits expanded I gathered bits of information about his larger-than-life mission. He liked me and I earned his trust. I didn't know that Kerry meant "dark" in Irish, but he did, and he'd expected me to come along. He said it was ordained. Although he counted on me to perform in private witch-hunts, I was never included in his cohort's fraternity. Core unit for CIA orchestrated acts of disruption, murder, and terrifying atrocities...they did whatever pleased their fancy...rape, robbery, and "getting even" everyday events.

They held far-reaching powers and on one "op," when ambushed, they called an Arclight, which vaporized an entire

hamlet of 6,000 souls. Nobody fucked with them...that was the bottom line. Meers liked showing me his stuff, and since the boat just sat there while Ben and Juan did their thing and the Marines drilled and cleaned their weapons, I went ahead and did mine. I was drawn to him like some powerful magnet, and both of us accepted a brotherhood based on destiny's allowance. We were meant for this much...

Turk would bring his PBR at night and deposit us at varying rendezvous points with Mui, their "chieu hoi" or Kit Carson scout, and on foot we'd enter the beyond...a place more thrilling than words can say. Painted in camouflaged colors and wearing black pajamas, we waded barefoot down irrigation ditches, slithered through elephant grass, and melted into bamboo thickets, as Mui directed us silently to his target for the night.

We used Chinese weapons so our scenarios would look like Cong work. We took no ears and left only bare footprints. We kept money when we hit tax collectors, and gold teeth from village headmen who'd collaborated with the enemy, but left most of our victims intact, rather than blow our cover. Much of this seemed Meers' way of paying Mui for his help in the grander scope his group was working on. I only got to go on these payback missions.

As a Viet Cong platoon leader, Mui had been shot in the ass and left to die by his comrades. I don't know if that's what changed his mind to join us, but Meers completely trusted him. There was a special affection between them. After watching Mui in action, I was glad he was on our side, as he was prone to extreme choler and horrific retribution. I saw him empty his AK into one of his enemies, then slap in another clip and turn the corpse into a puddle of hamburger...broken bones protruding from a froth of bubbling splatter. We helped him in a personal vendetta I guessed had to do with his wound.

Meers, on the other hand, was an extremely sophisticated assassin, and I held my breath 'til I could hear my heart pound as he'd stalk toward a hootch in the jungle. We would cover him while he operated with his double-edged blade or signaled Mui to talk quietly to the family while he took his mark for a chat in the bush. He was a booby-trap freak, and always rigged our escape routes with claymores, and fragmentation or fleschette grenades on tripwires, which we often heard on our way out. I learned a critical key to survival from him...always have an alternative plan.

It was a merciless game, played for keeps, and much of the time we didn't even know who'd be in it with us. The devices Meers would plant around these villages knew no difference between children and cadres, G.I.'s or Cong. The willipeter phosphorous grenades, Bouncing Betties, and toe poppers he hid were far from Easter eggs. He'd leave a grenade with its spoon flattened under all his kills and scattered what he called "forget me nots" in VC-controlled

sectors. These were grenades altered to explode immediately when the trip handle sprung, as he'd unscrewed their tops to remove the delay fuse. His booby prizes were of a terminal nature and, sadly, lotsa little kids found them. I mentioned this to him and it nearly got me killed.

He was furious at me for making him feel guilty about the random destruction sowed out there. "What the hell are you doing here, punk?" he snarled in a low hiss, as he covered a toe popper's plunger in soft dirt, and backed down a trail. "You wanna know the thrill but can't handle the kill, huh? Well, go fuck yourself. I got a job to do, and I do it good!"

Whoa, I thought, this is no place for moral judgment, particularly from a novice like me. There were values here beyond all previous knowns, composed primarily of survival and terror. That's all there was. Far past any doctrinaire military norms, we engaged an enemy of the "guerre sans fronts," a war without boundaries, and everyone was fair game. When we didn't have a particular mark for the night or they weren't home, Mui would act the part of a wounded VC, and if any hootch offered assistance they became our target.

Nostrums from the apothecary of that conflict were simply more...more of everything and anything goes. The long-range social problem, of course, from exposure to free-fire killing is the decompression time sanctified players must go through to reenter society. I wondered what they'd do with Meers when he got home...give him a security guard badge? His only understanding of life was taking it, a consummation of death and his weapons. It's odd...I didn't consider what they'd do with me when I got home.

That night around our hallowed circle, a flickering fire cast shadowed vestiges of guardian apparitions far beyond the physical perimeter of our weaponry. Spirits of the dead, whose heads were stuck on poles around us, severely affected Charley's religious mind-set. Right in the middle of that rusted barge was the safest place in the entire war, even though they knew we were there. The skulls glared from totems of truth, significant stratagems underpinning our reality, while Lucifer and his agents of the antichrist maintained watch for the menace beyond, and dolphins swept beneath us to kill sappers. Sheltered by our collective immunity, we flourished in as savory a comradeship as I've ever sampled...homicidal centurions at an outrageous stronghold, urging our adversary to enter if he dared.

There, with a communal grip on the nature of the beast, we glared with animal indifference past constraint and reason...our hardened ring of reference lending credence to a conviction that ours were proper actions. Meers' sensitivity to my questions about the kids only reminded us both in diversionary moments of reflection that previous concepts were no longer valid, healthy, or appropriate. We were bent on degeneration, not review...and marked by a secular coin of

the realm, killers were all we could be together. Secretly I held it wasn't so in my case. I just wanted to share a sense of belonging, power, and some of their adventure.

Although Meers had a broad base of vaguely authorized operations, I was never invited when other SEALs went with him on commando raids around the Iron Triangle or into the Thanh Diem or U Minh Forests. Their stories were mind-boggling, and these guys were delighted to begin waging war the way Charley did. No longer fighting the jungle, we were using it, holding sanctuaries from which we could strike at will.

My little boat and their armed barge reminded the CIA men we drank with of the French "dinassauts," armored flotillas that were so effective during their time here. Beyond committing gruesome atrocities, we were honing the art of guerilla warfare and were very effective at it, holding as well the trump of awesome devastation, which we could spread with a simple radio call. The dogs never stopped their ceaseless circling, and our collective thinking never ran short of fantastic scenarios of horror...a sanctioned game of the most monstrous carnage imaginable.

On nights when they'd go without me, I'd sit alone in the wheelhouse and wonder what it was out there that intrigued me so. There was a raw excitement in hunting other men, and a sensation of power that came from passing fear. It beat drugs, alcohol, and sex combined. I knew what fueled Hatcher's obsession, and shivered at its infectious nature. I liked it! It was shocking...where once oceania had filled my few square feet of sanity, now a malignant madness was contracted, as if some rabid bane from dogs of war had taken its place.

I was going through the jug found in the wreckage when I discovered pink balls from the Darvon capsules. Some had opened in the bottom of the jug, and suspecting them to be the core of these pain pills, I gobbled five or six. Lo and behold, it was one of the highlights of the war! When Turk and Meers returned, we went on a binge that lasted most of a week and caused more damage to our camp than the enemy ever did.

After the paint war, which altered their barge to something between the magic bus and a modern art show, we got so screwed up we lost Turk's PBR sneaking across the river to get some girls. I guess we didn't tie it good, or maybe someone stole it. We were really gonzo. Looking for it in the morning with a sampan, we finally gave up. It was only about three-hundred grand!

Remembering my heads, we went back to the barge to see how they were doing. We'd left them boiling in a fifty-gallon barrel the day before and, sure enough, they were done. We set the gleaming skulls on four poles around my once spiritual retreat, now Billy's grave, where they reflected a new attitude in command, and marked the tug a

target one should consider carefully. Turk showed up about ten, having found his boat with a chopper twenty miles down the river, so we took some benzidine and a few pink balls to celebrate. Meers and I snuck over to the Nez and dropped acid without Turk knowing, after all, he was our "designated driver." We were ready for anything, and that's exactly what we got!

About midnight, we located Mui crouched in the mangroves with his bag of tricks. Squatting in the mud, he told Meers about a set-up with one of his most-hated enemies. I was far away, tripping on the beauty surrounding us, when his bag began moving around stangely and I nudged it with my weapon. It jumped with hissing shrieks and a great commotion!

"What the fuck!" I sputtered, wiping mud from my face.

"Velly hongry ratsis, makee VC talk plenny much, you see," he replied, grinning with his black and gold teeth.

Turk took his coordinates and time synch, and after a last beer, slipped into the darkness on the river to wait and listen to our very breathing with miniature walkie talkie things each of us wore in a black headband. We strolled inland looking like three local fisherman. The rats were very uncool, so I fell back, clear of Mui, as Meers and I gritted our teeth with each volley of shrieks.

We'd definitely come on to the acid full-blast now, and our senses were acute to the max. I loved creeping in the jungle, feeling every vibration like a samurai warrior, expecting death, and living life fully in each moment. We crossed a paddy's narrow dike and headed for a small village shrouded in trees. The rats calmed, starry heavens stretched forever, and the whole world shimmered in silver clarity.

I was wondering whether it was the drugs or that awesome state of awareness I reckon only manhunts instill, when suddenly my heart froze. There was a figure pushing a bicycle towards us! Mui kept walking. Meers and I squatted on our haunches in the short reeds, as if we were taking a crap. My mind was empty and scanned the opaque surroundings for any life force, my finger tamping the full-auto lever as cold steel grazed my blackened cheek. No plan formed, no thought came, and no fear lurked...just an awareness of everything and a calm within a calm. Fuck, man, this was Hatcher's view! I knew how he lived, and how he'd die, at the savage edge like a panther in a distillate of predatory senses.

I couldn't believe my eyes! Just as I was thinking of him a huge tiger padded parallel to us on the other side of the dike. Meers winked at me when I tapped his shoulder. "He's been with me before. They're sole profiteers of our program, like wolves in Patton's Italian campaign. All the other animals split for Cambodia to get away from the defoliants, but carnivores love Congburger, and we never let him down."

A rat shrieked. Mui walked back, muttering to Meers in Vietnamese while the interlocutor on the bicycle pedaled away. Evidently the man Mui had been after for years was visiting a young girlfriend, without his customary bodyguard. The location was crucial, as a major tunnel artery lay beneath the hut. Our tiger crouched calmly waiting for us to perform.

Nothing mattered but my courage. The acid was so strong my knees wobbled when I stood up! In the reeds, a sparkling path appeared...whether a spiritual or murderous one hardly a concern. We slipped into the village like teenagers getting home late from a hot date. It must have been the drugs, because other ops like this had frozen blood in my veins. I became a post outside the hootch while they began their routine. Moments of silence were followed by slight scuffles and a strangulated gurgle. Mui's arm groped through a crack and he whispered, "Ratsis!"

The jungle flickered in haloed light, no strange vibrations registered, and I crept to the tree where the bag hung in limpid silence. As I touched it, the rats broke into a frenzy of screams! What could I do, kick them? I chuckled at the insanity of it all and strolled into the hootch where the recalcitrant gook and his cute consort were gagged, behaving well with Meers' terrifying blade at their throats.

Mui lifted the fire's brazier with two hooked rods. A tunnel appeared under it, and he beckoned me with a sarcastic grin. Poking my flashlight into the dank gloom, I lowered myself through an archeological carapace back into the dark ages. It reminded me of ammonia and bazookas from a tunnel in another time and place in my life.

No wonder we couldn't exterminate these little beggars with saturation bombing. The bunker was enormous. It was stocked with every conceivable necessity, bamboo trussed, and ran off in four directions like a freeway interchange. I was amazed at the details of its structure, but our missions were always quick in-outs, so we went to work. Mui wrapped tape around the girl's head a few times, sealing her mouth, then pushed a rope through an overhead beam and hoisted her upside down just off the floor.

He slipped the bag of rats over her head and pulled the noose. I watched the Cong boss as he realized what all this meant. The rats went crazy and the girl's body lurched in arched contortions of a most urgent nature. It was appalling! Her torso shook so furiously dirt began to fall from the matted ceiling. Suddenly she went completely rigid and the smell of feces and urine cloyed in the fetid air.

"Shit!" Meers hissed. "They were too hungry this time." Mui acknowledged, "Velly hongry ratsis," loosening the noose and jerking the vibrating bag off her head. He lowered the girl's body into the dripping gore that had been her face and immediately raised our guest cadre for an encore. Mui looked at me. "Girl weak, man strong. Rat no scare him!"

Cong-san indicated he'd rather talk, so off came the gag and a series of bantering in the gook tongue ensued, while Mui took notes. I was most uncomfortable and a sensation to vomit came over me a few times during our cryptic encounter. I longed for the river, the jungle...anywhere but here. Besides, I thought, how can this guy think he's gonna miss the bag trick. Even I knew how it would end...like those helicopter rides.

Sure enough, they seemed to be arguing and the tone was getting louder, although we were at least ten feet underground. There was something personal about their discussion, with reference to Mui's wound and abandonment. Tensions were rising when Mui closed his notebook. Meers taped up our friend's still-babbling mouth, and into the bag he went.

I previewed a host of nightmares during my two years there, but the last I had of that sorry player hanging in the dark chamber was Mui slitting his stomach open. Then he ripped the bag off, and as the rats fled, pounded the gold teeth outta the guy's head while its eyes blinked in horror at life's end. On particularly bad nights, charismatic re-runs appear, complete with ammonia, rat screams, and eyeballs dangling from their sockets on bloody strings...price of my ticket to the most dangerous game.

If I'd offered free passes on the next ride, no takers would've shown for sure. Leaving Meers to perfect his deadly cat and mouse hunts, we were sent further up the Mekong than our government will ever admit, into the no man's land of Cambodia right to the dock in its beseiged capitol! The bird-dog spotter plane waved goodbye at the border, and with no friendlies anywhere, we sailed into the Cong's sanctuary where all the worst assholes on earth ran loose. I was so brash, immune, and full of piss and vinegar from Hatch and Meers, I probably would've gone to Hanoi if the right guy told me it'd be fun!

Some bald wizard in the Pentagon must've dug this from an old history book. With two small barges piled high with gravel alongside for protection, the 'ol Nez struggled along like a turd in a toilet, the slowest target in the whole war. We painted red crosses on the sides and somehow made it to Phnom Penh towing a barge of medical supplies and food for the starving refugees.

I never checked the stuff and didn't really care what was back there. I mean what for? The Cambodians went out of their minds with joy at our coming, and Charley shot the shit out of us going both ways, which is all I'd expected. Gravel flew all over the place and nasty RPG rockets whanged and whirred off the piles past the wheelhouse to spread gravel everywhere.

I convinced the Marines and they dug machine gun nests deep in the piles, sand bagged 'em, and lived out there with their C-rats in little tents, bustin' caps at invisible gooks

and casting furtive stink-eyes at me whenever I'd peer down on their progress. It was a fuckin' joke! They nearly melted their gun barrels off blazing away all day and most of the night. I'd never seen so much ammo expended without seeing a target. They were a great diversion, making us slightly less than a perfect sitting duck. Lu Duc, Mimi, and Henry gathered on the party deck where our tiny family snuggled between those Palladian shields as the boat, sandwiched and groaning, throbbed on.

If it wasn't for the "crachin" monsoon fog on the way out, we never would've returned. Its impenetrable mist sat on the river long enough for our deliverance from evil. Back to drydock in Vung Tau, I began planning my retreat for a ten-day respite in Hawaii. Returning from base that evening with the AK over my shoulder, I found Mimi and Lu gone, along with eleven-hundred in cash, my blooper, sixteen grenades, and the whole goddamn stereo system!

I assumed they'd been through this before. Since nobody came back from the world, they'd simply cashed in early to avoid the mushy ending. Unphased by their creepy mutiny I grabbed a few things, walked up the beach to an LZ, and jumped a chopper to Saigon. Below, the Nez bobbed like a toy in a bathtub as she'd done in the Bering Sea, waiting for me to return and put life into her. Man, I loved that boat!