

HEART OF DARKNESS

When describing such a place there's no time frame. Past, present, and future don't factor. It's born of monstrous forces, and lives in your mind more than a river or jungle. The same malignant moment remains now as then...waiting. Italian writer Cesare Pavese put it best in his suicide note, "In the end the thing most feared seems easy."

Hatch had counseled me on accepting the essential horror deep in each psyche...obviously having embraced his. I'd followed one mentor after another most of my life, to insulate me from that lonely ordeal we all must face sooner or later. I wanted to remain the fisherboy...but had flirted too long, as if immune to its coming. Time had run out.

Rolling back its shroud, I think the beast crawled aboard in the darkness on the Mekong, as much through the soles of my feet. I put thousands of barrels of Agent Orange, Blue, and White into Phan Rang, Phan Thiet, and Da Nang. The Army's mindless forklift operators stuck holes into pure dioxyn, the most deadly compound on earth, and mixed it in a slurry of napalm, asphalt, and methyl ethyl ketone. I spent months barefoot in it and hours scraping off its residue with a butter knife and kerosene.

It's just karmic ketchup, isn't it? Running from the law, I met fate head on, not through creatures already twisted by theirs, but in a singular fulfillment of my own. A hideous sucker wraith got a grip on my soul, and enough chemicals seeped in to destroy my brain. Come back to understand our sorrow, distortion, and mortal wounding...war babies born of another great conflict, but caught in one that rivaled our poppas' in its own splendid, little way.

I'd been in country well over a year, having explored one end to the other on anything that floated, flew, or crawled...from the most remote fire bases to cocktail parties on the international circuit. None of it prepared me for the Mekong. Its inky flow is the bleeding artery of Asia...more an aorta pierced near a dark heart. Civilized man's tried to capture this essence since first being lured in.

I went knowing fully the course chosen...wending my way to the very wellspring of my own fear. Hatch said it was the only cure...we must make the demon an ally. As we passed the delta's sandbar, turning up its pulsing flow, I shuddered at some slithering presence beneath our keel that pushed freedom further away with each brown swirl, for I alone knew where we were going. One can think there was a choice, but like I said in the beginning, destiny played a part in this, greater than appears.

Running light, having left the barge of napalm at Phan

Rang for New Year's fireworks, we sailed into the steaming morass of jungle looking for a dredge near the border of Cambodia. If I'd known we were gonna test a covert supply run all the way to Phnom Penh and become floating guinea pigs, the juiciest target for every swingin' dick in those mangroves, I might have turned around...

After we forged that sinister tributary, we were utterly forgotten and abandoned by the military, our government, and God Himself. Our mission fell victim to deadly sappers and their underwater charges. "Abort" was all I heard, then vapors wrapped so thickly around our tiny tug we simply vanished...or were never there at all.

The closeness got me long before anything actually happened. Invisible eyes followed us from behind a faceless green curtain draped all 'round. We were unable to get out of rifle range...even the middle was a clean shot from either side. A grotesque fear grew on me day by day as we slipped further into the formidable clutch of prehistoric trees and vine drenched biomass.

What was coming over me? Was I destined for Hatcher's disease, killing before being killed? I didn't seek God anymore, but waited for movement...green whirring streaks of incoming tracers and the thrill of firing back. My only refuge was in the steel cabin between Mimi's legs. There I felt like a coward, an atheist in a foxhole.

The river swallowed me then, taking a large chunk of my youth in trade for survival. It didn't feel like growing up. I just transcended thoughts of death, no alternative coming to mind, and learned to kill first and discuss who later. Truth is conditioned by your environment. In the pilgrimage of my soul, some demented foundation of manhood was laid on my saturnine passage to an inner station of my own making.

MSTS Saigon, our company's overlord, took Tom to skipper another super tug, leaving me Captain, in consolation for my loneliness. Oh, they sent some bodies to man her, but not a mind like his to share, in vigil, that doom on the River Styx, nor so much as a guide to protect me from myself...a severely more deadly aspect.

It was afternoon when a chopper set down at an LZ near My Tho. We heard a bullhorn call across the still smoking waters, and took the skiff to a muddy bank where an odd assortment of grinning faces waited.

Young Marines were unloading machine guns and rocket launchers, with the help of what appeared to be two Filipinos in aloha shirts. The pilot handed Tom a sealed packet and mail for the boat, saying something about picking him up at sunset. I sat disconsolate, dangling my feet in the current, trying to face a new reality as he read our orders.

Tom had known this was coming. I did too, because in passing I'd heard him say, "Definitely, sir, he's capable" to Saigon Base. So when he looked up and said, "You're gonna run her from here, Cap," a mixture of surprise and sadness

neutralized each other and I just mumbled, "Oh really," thinking like Huck Finn taking his raft to the ocean. But tears were choking my thoughts.

It took us three trips to get all their crap aboard, while I silently reviewed my life and times aboard the Nez--from my youth in Alaska's beauty to this bewildering ugliness. Before he left I asked these questions: "What if they go for Mimi? What if they don't follow orders? Where am I headed?" and "What the fuck, over?" I didn't ask the one I really wanted answered.

Tom was never much of a talker anyway, and after that pregnant moment we both just laughed, but I cried that night in my bunk as swirling rotor mists took him away like the rest. In the distance, a steady rumble of another Arclight drop from Guam shook the Iron Triangle to remind me life went on. I understand that sadness now...Tom was the last friend I ever allowed to get close to me. Vets know what I mean.

I went below and found ol' Henry bolted to a paperback novel. He slipped me a big grin, but I didn't get his remarks about "retiring a few years back" until later. The VHF crackled, and our location verified, I acknowledged orders to make contact with the dredge. "Shall I fire 'em up, Captain?" Henry asked with his most serious old-salt look. It broke the tension in the air and we laughed nervously at our situation so full of the unknown.

He chuckled down the gangway to get our diesels rolling, muttering, "One helluva war." I went forward to show my crew the winch and anchor procedure. These two turned out the best towboaters ever, and they gave the Nez a thorough face lift after the spotty care I'd given her. I'd run away to a greater calling than painting...though secretly wishing it would never come. Here it was, ready or not!

The Marines liked the wood deck and were busy setting up camp there, weapons spread all over the place, already peering into my stateroom to get a look at Mimi. Good grief! Command came upon me at once, and rising to it I had them clear "e-fuckin' mediately from our private area," getting one into my bunker topside and the other aft of the stack for coverage on our starboard side.

It wasn't a matter of outranking these kids or their actual age. Time in country was what mattered, and by those terms, I was old. Being Captain of the Nez Perce, on the other hand, meant I'd stepped into a long line of historic mavericks with no time to wonder whether I was worthy or able. I assumed the role muttering quietly to myself.

I told them Mimi was off-limits, and after a terse briefing on towboat rules of watch and wheelhouse etiquette, seemed to have a fair grip on them. At least they knew who was in charge from the outset. As most of the time I was shirtless, the Colt bristled its own austere authority. I called down to Ben and Juan to raise the anchor, and as night fell, we sallied forth into the unknown.

Henry and I chatted for five hours in the pitch dark wheelhouse, longer than I'd ever seen him do with anyone. I took this as a sign of encouragement and respect, and wonder now if he knew how much it meant to me. Social interaction was rare for him. I tried taking advantage of his mood to query subjects of immortality and the afterlife...wasn't this like becoming acquainted with death before you died?

He was one of those guys who touched on delicate subjects of love, life, and the future like a mechanic would a hot manifold. The silence was punctuated with his "humms and aahs" as I continued my philosophy on the river and time, avoiding the subject of drugs and religion as best I could. I think he actually appreciated my views, but guess he just didn't want to get involved any deeper than he already was. Being on board seemed more than enough for him. True towboaters have an inordinate respect for the variant storms and trifles nature heaps upon them. In his stoic resignation, born of fifty years at sea, he stood by my side.

A few black PBR's swished by in silvery whooshing wakes. Hardly anyone moved on the river at night--it was a sure way to get your ass shot off by these jet-powered jockeys with their tendency to overkill. Nobody fired on us as we neared the Cambodian border where, lit up like a blazing factory, a huge dredge vibrated in some surrealistic painting of man's insignificance and futile grubbing at the very end of the earth.

I couldn't believe my eyes! It was the same Walter F. Dillingham I'd played on as a boy when my father had toured his jobs. It was walled in completely now, with steel landing mats covering her from far below the water-line to the top of her third deck. Hovering alongside, I got his radio frequency by alternately yelling up and turning the side band 'till I got the chief engineer.

I never met him, but he lowered a five-gallon tub of ice cream from his high perch and invited us to tie alongside for the night. I was about to accept when Henry blurted out something about the "biggest fuggin' target on the river," so we demurred and anchored a half-mile downstream.

That wasn't the first or last thing I learned from Henry Dobbs, a man for all seasons. You had to be one, or just plain lucky, to survive that place. We should've been further away, as we took shrapnel damage and lost our Loran unit from all that flying mat. It was the familiar "ker fuckin whampf" again without a warning snicker. The VC got even that night, and the old Walter F. went to the bottom in twenty seconds, her innards ripped out by a massive underwater charge. Someone was teaching Charley to dive.

Pieces were still splattering into the water and clanging onto our decks when I ducked into the wheelhouse. Trying the radio's side band, but noticing no lights where she'd been, I raised Saigon, remembering how un-captainlike my voice was, and just told 'em the dredge was gone. Ben and

I struggled with the skiff on the still quivering river, as we followed a telltale line of flotsam, while Henry turned our looming spotlight into the smoky void where she'd been.

It was a sad scene, all nine of the crew were Hawaii boys. After an hour's search, we pattered back to wait for morning. All I found of value was a floating gallon jug of pills from their sick bay. I had enough pain pills and benzedrine to carry me through the war now! Two PBR's showed up. Then some Cobras lit up the gloom, hovering above the mirage, dipping like dragonflies for sips. I just stood at the wheelhouse window wondering what had become of our mission.

Our orders were to stand by for salvage operations, and we anchored over their grave in an ethereal silence while the jungle stood sentinel, brooding over our presence as if we weren't obliged to stay. I felt its lackluster gaze would soon exact some merciless vengeance upon us, and decided to go on the offensive rather than wait. I took to cruising in Turk's patrol boat, popping bennies and drinking Jack Daniels, as we exercised savage rites on carney rides of brutality, broken-out in fullness now like some contagion on the river.

Raging through the darkness, I watched lavender blips marking sampans on Turk's radar screen vaporize, as we spread destruction in all directions, even the mangroves writhing to escape. It made me feel better, so I called Kela on his radio and asked her to marry me, which thrilled her no end. I was due for ten days R & R in a month or two, and she could come out and live in Bangkok to be near me. Then I pulled both triggers on the water-cooled sixties, squeezed off half a dozen rocket grenades with my thumbs, and asked her how she liked the sound of war. She couldn't hear anything and I figured it was just as well.

It wasn't the ever-present death on the river that bothered me. Gazing from my shot-out windows, a Camel hanging from my lips like Jack and Tom before me, suddenly I knew what it was. This was where they'd stood, guiding us through uncharted regions, hand on the wheel, steadying our course as well as our destinies.

Responsibility of this magnitude had shifted hands. I was in charge of my life! I shuddered from the realization worse than the spectre of death, which seemed no more than a nuisance in comparison. The two Marines were intent on watching for the enemy. Mine was within...

The boat wasn't a problem at all. I'd been a waterman all my life and could spin the Nez mid-river full throttle, three screws forward and two astern, while Henry screamed cuss words from below. I slammed her into mud banks and whirled her off sandbars, sometimes diving to clear her bowels from tangled wire and wreckage. It was second nature to me, like automatic pilot, but there's more to being in command than eating, sleeping, and eliminating. It's not the

mechanics of life that get you when you're facing your own demons.

Driving my little tug through time itself, the actual threat of being responsible for my own acts, if not my crew, crept over me...and I lived in a darkness of my own peculiar making, quite like Lord Jim or other tragic characters stuck this deep before me. I didn't know whether to shit, shout, or burst into tears. Without exit as an option, a mentor to follow, or a guardian to call upon, I wondered if I should pray, but figured the B-52's would probably get in the way.

Days on the river turned to months. I brought up the bodies...all I have to say about that. The clean-up operation stalled, some legal jurisdiction with the wretched Vietnamese, and we began hauling barges of every description and cargo up and down the river. I stood bolted in that steel encased spot as bullets dinked around me and an internal conflict raged within. Everything told me I must face my demon soon...

When blood trickled down the brass stanchion from above, I didn't even move, just pointed to it after getting Henry's attention where he lay on the bunk by the chart rack. I sent the aft Marine guard topside. Sure enough, young Billy from Arkansas had bought one in the temple. Stoicly I put through a call for an airstrike to the PBR dock, and in short order, the village nearby vaporized in fitting revenge. These assholes were gonna learn the hard way, it seemed. Under cover of darkness, Juan scrubbed the thickened coagulate, but it was never my refuge again. Beyond the gore-soaked sand bags, it had been vilified by Charley, and belonged to Billy's spirit. I never went there again.

We slipped him into a body bag, with his dog tags nicked and wedged in his front teeth so he wouldn't get lost on his way home, and he was clean enough for an open casket funeral. There'd be yellow ribbons on the tree outside the church, rouge and lipstick on his face, and a few stanzas of "When Johnny comes marchin' home again," which seemed fine and dandy with him in his peaceful composure as he left. It wasn't gonna be so simple for me.

That sense of knowing nothing could touch me, something I'd shared only with Hatch, had formed solidly in my mind. Even the thrill of war passed by me like it was a movie. A dangling cigarette burnt my lip, the Colt snuggled near my heart, the AK-47 and M-79 "blooper gun" waited coldly by my side...but I knew no friend, and the spark of my youth was extinguished. Maybe manhood had begun unravelling without my permission. I'd become the captain of my soul.