

Preface

Have you ever been afraid; Truly afraid?

I'm talking about gut-wrenching fear - the kind you might experience when your very life is in danger. If so, chances are high that your feelings of terror occurred at night.

And why is night, in particular, the scariest part of the twenty-four-hour day?

We all know that the dark of night can be daunting and may hide mysterious things. It's the time of day when sound carries, and a person may be unable to identify sudden strange noises, shifting shadows or other potential threats that may or may not be real. As a result, the imagination kicks in - supposedly to help the brain make decisions - but that just adds to the uncertainty and fear.

So, what exactly is fear; The Dictionary defines it as, "an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous and likely to cause pain. A threat: something that causes feelings of dread or apprehension; the anticipation that something unpleasant will occur."

Impending danger, evil, pain - whether the threat is real or imagined - arouse this distressing emotion. Most of the time, what you don't see is more unnerving than what you do see.

Fear is a human adaptive response. It's normal and even helpful to experience fear in dangerous situations. It serves a protective purpose, activating the "fight-or-flight" response in all of us. Without fear, we'd jump headlong into things we shouldn't. With our bodies and minds alert and ready for action, we can respond quickly and protect ourselves.

Protect us from what? In most cases, the unknown!

Experiencing fear as children, the usual reaction was to call out to our parents for help. If they weren't around, then diving under a blanket or running away as fast as our legs could carry us seemed like the solution.

Of course, it's only natural that at that young age, certain events were terrifying to us. As adults, in retrospect, we may laugh at the memory of many of those things that frightened us when we were adolescents. However, other harrowing episodes

may have left unhealed scars in our psyche, and looking back, they are not the least bit humorous to us.

For some, the very memory of being in hair-raising situations is nearly as traumatic as experiencing the actual event. Think about those men and women in the military who had deployed to a war zone, be it Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, or anywhere else in the world. Step into their shoes for a moment and join them during a single patrol to seek out the enemy. It's like walking through a House of Horrors at a carnival. Everyone on the team expects something to happen at any moment. It might be an attack from an enemy soldier poised to kill you or a fellow infantryman, an unseen booby trap, or some other potentially fatal danger lurking around any corner. Fear is constantly present, and running is not an option!

Bravery is the quality of spirit that enables you to face danger or pain, while conquering your fear. It demonstrates having the utmost confidence in your training. That is how many of us in the military survived.

'When Can I Stop Running?' is a story about fear and how the author ('Polack') dealt with it, both in Vietnam and throughout his childhood. Readers will accompany the author and his friend and fellow grunt ('LG') during a night-long mission in the jungles of Vietnam. The two lone soldiers are manning a "Listening Post," hiding in the dense shrubbery, some 500 meters outside the firebase perimeter. The author juxtaposes his nightmarish hours in the bush with some of his most heart-pounding childhood escapades. Readers may relate to the childish antics with amusement; military veterans will find themselves relating to both captivating collections.

"The Only Thing We Have to Fear Is Fear Itself"

- FDR's First Inaugural Address

ONE - Firebase Lynch & Listening Post

John Kowalski and Louis Gladwell (aka 'Polack' and 'LG') drew the short straws earlier that afternoon, which meant they would be spending the night by themselves in a Listening Post roughly 500 meters outside the wire – deep in the Iron Triangle jungles of Vietnam. In that morning's company briefing, First Squad of First Platoon was delegated to provide two warm bodies to man one of the four Listening Posts (LPs) for that night. As there were seven members in the squad, they elected to use varied lengths of straws; the shortest two drawn would get the “coveted” assignment – the assignment dreaded by all.

Four LP teams of two would be going out that night, each heading out on a compass azimuth to position themselves evenly around Firebase Lynch. Dubbed “human early warning systems” and “bait for the enemy,” their job was only to hide, listen, and report any potential threats to the firebase. Polack and LG were assigned the approaches from the east. Ambush patrols were also leaving at the same time, but those squad-sized elements would be looking for a fight and would set up two clicks farther out. Two companies, Alpha, and Charlie, were providing security for the forward artillery base and would remain on ready alert in the event of a ground attack on the base, or in case one of the ambush teams got into trouble.

Both soldiers were from the Detroit area; their homes were only four miles apart on the east side of the city. The two 'hometown boys' quickly discovered each other in the base and gave one another a complete run down of any news from their common neighborhood – an extremely welcome touch of home some thousands of miles away.

John was six feet tall, weighed 170 pounds, and was normally fair-complected, but the hot tropical sun had baked his skin to a dark bronze. He sported medium-brown hair, somewhat bleached out now, and a light mustache, both slightly longer than regulation. He'd been away from the main base camp and forward fire support bases for almost a month. Out in the jungles, personal grooming is way down on the list of daily priorities. There's no one to impress, and nobody cares how you look. His shaggy hair was definitely not an issue.

Louis stood a couple of inches taller, but his build was slightly on the lankier side than John's. He was African-American, with light, caramel-colored skin. His face was long and narrow, and his forehead and cheeks were lightly pitted with old scars. His frizzy black Afro was picked out a little more than three inches into a perfect circle surrounding his head. An olive drab-colored boony hat rested atop his puff of hair, swaying, and shimmying about, reacting to each movement. LG tried growing a goatee since arriving in-country but had only acquired a dozen or so half-

inch long hairs that spread across his chin. He checked his hand mirror daily, anxious for any signs of goatee progress, not willing to give up the plan.

LG played basketball at Detroit's Pershing High School and was named to the "All-State" team during his final two years. He carried a newspaper clipping detailing his success in his wallet and was extremely proud of that achievement. John also played basketball, but he had attended a Catholic high school with only two-hundred students. Both graduated in 1969, but never had a chance to play against one another because of the separation of leagues within the city. St. Thomas Apostle was a 'Class D' school due to its small size, and Pershing, a 'Class A' with over a thousand students. LG flunked some classes in his first semester at college and had his scholarship revoked; Uncle Sam was quick to find him afterward. Whenever Alpha Company spent a day or two in Cu Chi or one of these firebases, John and LG would both play basketball wherever they found a hoop mounted on a backboard. Pick-up games were always available, but they never played on the same team. LG's team, always the dominant force, seldom lost a game.

Polack had arrived at the main base camp for the 25th Infantry Division in Cu Chi a month before LG – which meant he had experienced a full thirty more days of bunker guard, going out on patrols, and living through ambushes while humping through the jungle. You learned fast in-country – there was no other choice – but time passed slowly, and a month of experience was worth a great deal there. Because he was grateful to his own mentors after his arrival at the camp, Polack was eager to help other 'Cherries' learn the ropes. LG – as irrepressible as he was – sensed Polack's sincerity, and appreciated his camaraderie. LG had a quick smile, and a mischievous sense of humor. It wasn't long before the two became best buds. Although they were not in the same squad, both were part of the First Platoon, 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Wolfhounds, which operated in the areas northwest of Saigon.

"Hey brother man," Polack called over to his partner, a smirk growing on his face, "you gonna tie down that boony hat?"

LG looked at Polack with an incredulous look on his face. Before he could respond, Polack added, "You do know that if you sneeze, or there's a sudden breeze, that hat's gonna take flight and fly with the wind."

LG realized the dig, rolled his eyes, and shot Polack a one finger salute. "You know, man, I don't understand why I gotta wear this thing at all. It's fucking up my 'do!" LG reached up to ensure that his boony hat was still in place, and the ball of hair remained centered above his head.

"You're trippin, man! If you go out without a hat, you'll come back with a commune of bugs living in your hair. You should put it on the right way," Polack suggested.

“It ain’t gonna happen, my brother. I sprayed bug juice in my hair - notice the sheen?” LG primped his hair again. “That should stop them bugs from getting in. Besides, I’ve worked too hard on this over the last week just to let it get fucked up on an overnight.”

Polack laughed, “Don't forget that RTO's get picked off by snipers because of their antennae, which, by the way, are much shorter than you and your floating lid.”

“Ha – Ha,” LG mocked sarcastically, “It don’t mean nothin’.”

Just as LG finished his sentence, another shirtless African-American soldier arrived. His Afro hairstyle was identical to LG’s, but instead of a hat, a long, black metal hair pick (“rake”) stuck out from his ball of hair. It sat off to the side, and was worn like a tilted crown, reminded John of how Jughead wore his hat in the 'Archie' comic books. His skin color was like dark chocolate, and there was a twenty-inch braided black shoelace encircling his neck; a four-inch braided cross hung from the necklace and dangled over his chest. A similarly fashioned two-inch wide black bracelet ringed his right wrist. His boots were untied and unlaced from half of the eyelets; the laces tucked inside. *'Exceptionally casual today...he must think he's back home in Alabama,'* John thought.

The soldier wore a black leather holster on his right hip, the flap securing a military .45 caliber pistol. His jungle fatigues were worn, faded, and two sizes too big. James smiled and his perfect white teeth gleamed in the receding sunlight. A member of the First Platoon, he was a scrawny guy from Mobile and stood at least six inches shorter than the rest of his brethren in the platoon. As a result of his size, James often volunteered to check out enemy tunnels whenever the First Platoon uncovered them. As a tunnel rat, he’d soon find himself spending a lot of time underground after the Wolfhounds would discover dozens of tunnels and caches in this area during the coming months.

James and his squad spent the day humping through the jungle and turned up in the general area where Polack and LG were staying that night.

“Hey, Blooooooods,” he called, dragging out the pronunciation of the second word in a long drawl. In his left hand, James held an ice-cold can of Coke, which sweated profusely in the humid air, moisture running down and dripping onto the ground. He moved in front of LG, held out his right fist waist-high between the two men, and then began a ritual handshake referred to as ‘DAP.’ Their hands moved up and down each other’s arms, touching shoulders, snapping fingers, beating chests, slapping palms, bumping fists, and eventually ending in a traditional brotherhood handshake.

“Y’all need to be careful out there tonight,” he stated without missing a beat. “We saw beaucoup signs out on the trails today; a blind man could see that Charlie - and I mean lots of them - are out there just diddy-bopping along like they own the place.” Finished with the greeting, James moved to Polack, and they began the ritual while he continued, “This be a bad mofo, my brothers, the smell of death is everywhere. Every hair on the back of my neck stood tall the whole time we humped today. There was also something in the air...hard to explain...a feeling! You know the one you get when you think somebody’s laying back and watching you from the shadows?” Finishing his greeting, James stepped back a couple of paces.

Polack and LG both listened intently and could only shake their heads in affirmation while waiting for James to continue.

“Well, that’s how it was, my brothers. We didn’t see any of them today, but I do know for sure the man’s out there, scoping us out and putting a plan together. You brothers keep your heads down and don’t be no heroes out there.” James raised the can of Coke and chugged it until it was empty.

“Damn, this shit is good! You want me to get y’all one?”

“No time, James, but thanks for the offer, brother,” LG responded for the pair.

“Well, look here,” James drawled, crushing the empty Coke can and tossing it into the nearby garbage barrel. “I just wanted to make sure I caught y’all before leaving so I could throw some luck your way! I’m hip about spending the night in the dark jungle, especially as part of an LP – I do know it can be a motherfucker! The beast is out there and will try to fuck with your head. Stay sharp, be strong, and don’t let it in!”

Polack and LG smiled and chimed together in responding, “Thanks, brother man!”

“We’ll be cool,” Polack added.

“Well, alright then! See y’all in the morning.” The three soldiers slapped low outstretched hands and James turned to leave. Before walking away, he looked up to LG’s head,

“I like what you doin’ with the new ‘do, brother. Lookin’ good!” The compliment resulted in an enormous smile from the tallest of the trio. “But that hat got to go, my man!” LG’s smile disappeared, and replaced by the frown he’d worn earlier. James raised his right fist and softly beat it against his chest once then walked away toward the mess tent shaking his head back and forth in amusement.

The two men returned the salute and then turned to one another.

“So, what you think, Polack?”

“About what; Your hat?”

“Naw, man! Fuck the hat!” LG kicked at the ground in retaliation, his toe upending a divot of dirt that sailed toward his partner, found its mark, and covered his boots in a shower of red dust.

Polack jumped in surprise. “What the...?” he started to say in annoyance, but stopped when he saw LG's wide grin. Both men burst out laughing and after a few seconds slapped hands before continuing to gather their supplies.

LG was first to speak up,

“Come on, bro, let’s be serious here.” The tall man spread out his hands, palms up, in a pleading gesture.

Polack’s demeanor changed.

“Okay, okay! Lay it on me,” Polack conceded, tucking his hands into the back pockets of his trousers, and appearing more attentive.

Polack couldn't help but notice that the scene surrounding the two men was a beehive of activity. Dusk was only thirty minutes away, and troops across the firebase were scrambling to prepare for the coming night. The artillery crews worked on the battery of six Howitzers. Men were busy removing 105mm rounds from storage containers and tossing the empty wooden crates onto the other side of the wall of sandbags surrounding the guns. In the morning, a work detail will fill these with dirt and use them to build living quarters for others on the firebase.

The teams leaving the firebase at night would travel light without the extra weight of rucksacks, helmets, and food. Each man carried only the bare necessities: weapons, extra ammo, trip flares, Claymore mines, grenades, camouflaged poncho liners tied to the back of their web gear, and one PRC-25 radio per group. The heat and humidity took a toll on everyone during the day, but the nights were extremely chilly and damp. Poncho liners kept them warm; soldiers cocooned themselves, using the liners as shields against the jungle bugs – especially the swarms of mosquitoes. All four ambush squads carried an M-60 machine gun and extra belts of ammo; each member also had a single belt of one hundred rounds to support the gun.

Scanning the camp, Polack noticed individual groups of four soldiers strolling toward the eight perimeter bunkers. Weapons and web gear hung limply from their shoulders; lightweight poncho liners poked out from under arms, some rolled, and others just gathered up into a ball. Most carried a single green sock in one hand, usually filled with C-Ration canned desserts such as peaches, apricots, pound cake, or pecan rolls – popular treats, but difficult to obtain. Those highly-prized items were

frequently used in bartering with others for something the men might need to help get them through the long, boring night: books, magazines, letters or writing materials, which stuck out of pockets all around. Most soldiers hoped to read and write what they could before it became too dark to see. Troops tossed empty soda cans into nearby trash barrels in passing and shared laughs among themselves en route. They pulled guard duty in the bunkers from 1800 hours until 0600 hours – two men on, and two sleeping, switching every two hours.

Farther away, other foursomes played “grabass” and horsed around, tossing pebbles at one another, then snatching each other’s boony hats while playing “keep away”: a single moment of innocence and an opportunity to act like other boys their age back home.

Before long, it’s shift-change on the bunker line and time to relieve the two soldiers who’ve been there since daybreak. They’ll be given just enough time to catch a meal at the mess tent, and then relax a bit in a square, makeshift structure fabricated from artillery wooden crates, perforated metal planks (PSP), dirt, and sandbags. Each of those windowless units was large enough to provide shade and shelter for a squad of soldiers sleeping in hammocks. Fortunately, they were newly constructed, and rats hadn’t had a chance to move in yet. Sleep would come easy for them until the scavengers invaded!

“I’m talking about what James said about all the gooks out there,” LG ranted, breaking through Polack’s observations. “It’s going to be bad enough out there in the pitch black jungle with us having to fight bugs and creatures, and lay there and smell that rotten, dying shit because of that damn weed killer they sprayed all over, and now we gotta worry about gooks sneaking up on us this close to the firebase.”

“Relax, G. Tonight won’t be any different than all the other times we pulled LP or went out on night ambushes. Nothing has changed, my man.”

“Yeah, but this is the Triangle, bro. The area’s got a rep, and folks sayin’ there’s nothin’ but gooks and death everywhere.”

“So, it’s got a rep - big deal,” Polack looked directly into LG’s brown eyes. “We’ve been in places just as bad, if not worse.” LG’s eyes glinted; a questioning look crossing his face. Polack continued, “Did the Hobo Woods have a rep?”

“Yeah,” LG mumbled.

“What about the Michelin Rubber Plantation?”

“Yep.”

“Xuan Loc?”

“Okay, okay, I get it!” the gangly soldier groaned. “All of the 'Nam has a rep.”

“And we’re still here, right?”

“You right, my brother,” LG acknowledged, “but tonight just feels different to me.” LG looked at the ground, awaiting encouragement.

“It should feel different.” Polack emphasized. “This is a new place for us, and it’s the first time we’re going outside the wire. Neither one of us knows what’s out there. The unknown will try to fuck with us tonight. I know it can be a bitch. Just don’t freak out on me, G!”

LG looked at his partner. “You mean to tell me that this shit don’t bother you?”

“I didn’t say that bro. I hate the night. Always did! The night scares me more than the gooks,” Polack hesitated for a moment, trying to vanquish the disturbing sensation he felt. LG stood in place, wide-eyed, listening intently and looking stunned. “I do feel better knowing that you’ll be out there with me, G. And tonight, we only have to hide and listen. We’ll be invisible, and the Beast won’t find us. Let it go, brother!”

LG looked relieved. “Yeah, you right, we’ve got each other's backs. Fuck the Beast!”

The two men slapped hands again.

Polack looked toward the main gate and noted that the rest of his group was painting up. “We need to finish up here and head over to Rock’s squad for our final check.”

LG glanced over to the gate and rolled his eyes, “It’s time for make-up.” He stepped in front of Polack with two camouflage sticks, immediately rubbing alternating black and green stripes on his friend’s face and hands. When no more white skin was showing, a satisfied LG handed the sticks to Polack and waited for him to reciprocate. “Now we almost the same color, brother!” he grinned.

The PRC-25 radio attached onto an aluminum frame with a “quick drop” harness. When engaged, it allowed the RTO to dump his rucksack in the event of an ambush or some other emergency. That night, however, LG left the frame behind and instead connected a strap to the 26-pound radio, letting it hang from his right shoulder. To balance the weight, a canvas bag filled with baseball grenades and two claymore mines hung heavily from his left shoulder. Polack carried a canvas bag on each shoulder, both filled with flares, grenades, one claymore mine and smoke grenades.

LG snatched his rifle from the wall of sandbags and held it by the handle in his right hand.

“You ready for this?” he asked.

“Let’s do it!” Polack shot back.

They walked to the gate and got into line with the nine other soldiers in Sgt. Rock’s squad. The non-commissioned officer wore a holster bearing a .45 caliber pistol on his hip and had just started a personal inspection of each man in the line. When he came to LG, the esteemed NCO reached up with both hands and snatched the sides of LG’s boony hat, forcefully yanking it down hard until the brim bottomed out on the man’s ears; the crown strained to fit over the thick puff of hair, and forced clumps of unruly frizz to poke out comically from the sides. LG was stunned and stood with his mouth agape, mollified and speechless.

“This isn’t the time to make a fashion statement, LG!” Sgt. Rock snarled. He folded his muscular arms across his barrel chest, backed up a step and glared into the tall soldier’s eyes, soliciting snickers from the line of soldiers.

LG, embarrassed now, decided to leave his hat right where it was. He looked down and stammered meekly, “Sorry, Rock!”

Rock pursed his lips and nodded to the man,

“Don’t do that again, troop!”

When Rock walked away, Polack couldn’t resist and stifled a chuckle.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn ya, bud!”

LG could only scowl at his partner, still taken aback at what had just happened.

Sgt. Rock spread a map out on the ground.

“Okay guys, gather around and listen up.”

Firebase Lynch stood on a patch of land not far from the city of Xuan Loc and within the footprint of an area identified as the Iron Triangle. Three lines were drawn on a map outlining the 125 square miles of thick forests and rubber trees. The three points of the triangle connected the towns of Ben Cat, Ben Suc, and Phu Hoa. The Boi Loi and Hobo Woods bordered the Triangle along one side and the Fil Hol and Michelin Rubber Plantation on the other. The Iron Triangle was known to be an enemy stronghold filled with miles of tunnels, underground hospitals, training centers, base camps and rest points dating back to before World War II. In the early part of the war, American and Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces destroyed most of the villages in the Triangle and relocated those families to new facilities in a different area of the country. Much of the Triangle became a “free fire zone” meaning that curfews didn’t apply and anyone out and about was considered the enemy - soldiers were expected to shoot there first without requiring clearance. Those remaining villages on the outskirts of the Triangle were extremely supportive of both the Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops, making the

fight to drive out the enemy almost impossible. The Triangle was always a major gateway between the infamous Ho Chi Minh trail in Cambodia and Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam.

The Iron Triangle had lost much of its concealment over time, a result of the U.S. military spraying a defoliant called “Agent Orange” throughout the zone. A majority of the foliage had since rotted and decayed, leaving swatches of thinned out and barren earth in its wake. All the porous tree stumps became havens for red ants, spiders, horseflies, and other crawling insects, which feasted on the rotting vegetation. Red ants stung unmercifully; horseflies left painful welts after biting their victims, and a hundred different varieties of spiders sent chills down the spines of young soldiers from both sides.

However, a large portion of the jungle within the Triangle remained intact and continued to provide concealment for hundreds of active infiltration routes. The U.S. Army deemed it necessary to build a firebase and inserted the 1st Battalion Wolfhounds of the 25th Infantry Division into this quagmire to try once again to stop the flow of fresh enemy troops and supplies.

During the previous few days, recon patrols operating around the firebase had located different trails, all showing recent heavy activity, and some were within a couple of clicks of the firebase. The battalion leadership, concerned about their proximity, concentrated their efforts on these trails and kept squad-sized units patrolling within four clicks of the wire. Colonel Smith and his staff identified primary and secondary ambush locations and places where the LPs could hole up each night. During the briefing two hours earlier, squad leaders were given small topographical maps of the area; routes were identified, and final destinations circled with a red grease pencil. Team leaders would conduct final briefings with their teams just before departure, which is what Sgt. Rock was doing at the moment. He went over the assigned primary and alternate bush locations, radio call signs, and had the men conduct a weapons check. Just before leaving, Rock conducted another physical inspection of each squad member to ensure shirt sleeves were down completely, all exposed skin was covered with camouflage paint, all specified supplies were available, and nothing rattled. Afterward, the men hurriedly took last drags of their cigarettes before stomping the butts into the earth. Once outside of the firebase, there was no smoking, talking, or eating until their return the following morning.

Rock led his squad through the gate, leaving the relative safety of the firebase. The engineers had plowed back the jungle 200 meters beyond the wire, providing those guards on the perimeter an unobstructed view to open fields of fire to repel enemy ground attacks. However, the ground was uneven and covered with large, deep tracks from the heavy equipment. Exposed tree roots, pieces of tree bark,

branches and bowling ball-sized chunks of clay added to the obstacle course, making the march in the twilight hazardous for the single file of eleven soldiers. The point man followed a compass azimuth of 90 degrees (due east) leading into the jungle. Once they entered, most of the light disappeared, forcing the line of soldiers to tighten up their distance between one another and not lose sight of the man in front of him. After advancing along the trail for about ten minutes, Sgt. Rock stopped the squad when they came upon an intersecting path, then touched Polack and LG on the shoulder, and pointed silently to a clump of bushes about twenty feet to their left. The two men stepped out of line; the remaining soldiers began moving again, each man offering either a thumbs-up or a peace sign to the two soldiers as they passed. Within seconds, they had vanished into the darkness.

Polack led the way down the trail, moving twenty paces before stepping off and breaking a path through the chosen clump of thick brush until reaching a small hollowed out depression twenty more paces above the trail. This was a great spot for the night listening post. Two small trees, only inches apart, stretched up from the ground at the rear of the eight-foot diameter depression, their trunks, as thick as Polack's thigh, would provide adequate back support for both men. Their position was encircled by thick, thorny brush, hanging vines, and other seemingly impenetrable jungle vegetation. One hundred feet overhead, the jungle canopy swayed gently in the breeze, releasing leaves to fall and gather on the damp ground.

Polack looked inquisitively at LG, awaiting his concurrence. LG scanned the area and gave his silent approval by raising his right hand and giving Polack the "OK" sign.

With visibility at just ten feet, both men had to hustle and ready their position before it was too dark to see. Polack took the radio, placed it between the two trees, then double-checked the frequency. Finding the dials locked in the correct positions, he snatched up the handset, depressed the button on the side, and whispered into the mouthpiece, "Thunder 3, this is Lima Papa 1. Radio check, over."

"This is Thunder 3, we have you, Lima Charlie, how me; Over," a monotone voice responded, informing him that the transmission was heard "loud and clear" on the other end. The volume was somewhat blaring and metallic in his ear, but Polack recognized the voice belonging to Red, a member of the Alpha Company CP.

Smiling, he turned down the volume and responded, "This is Lima Papa 1, have you same-same. Be advised we are in our designated position, over," Polack answered quietly.

"Roger Lima Papa 1, stay safe, out."

While Polack conducted the radio check, LG crawled out and positioned his two Claymore mines so one pointed toward the large trail and the other to their front. He fed the wires back through the brush, plugged the ends into a clacker (arming device), and set them on the ground in front of the radio. After the commo check, Polack crawled out diagonally to his left about thirty feet and positioned his claymore mine to cover the left approach of the trail. He returned after two minutes, armed his mine, then laid the trigger next to the other two. The three firing devices lay on the ground side by side, pointing in the direction covered by each mine. In the event that their position became compromised from one of those directions, the correct device was readily available and could be fired within seconds. The last thing they did in the fast fading twilight was to straighten the safety pins on their grenades and place them in a row in front of the Claymore firing devices.

In this LP, both men understood their assignment: sit, listen, and report any enemy movement during the night. Firing a weapon in the darkness would immediately expose their position, enabling the enemy to find and kill them. The mines and grenades offered a line of defense without giving away their position. If discovered, both men were to take whatever action necessary to protect themselves and evade the enemy while attempting to return to the firebase.

Polack and LG sat in the depression and used the two trees for back rests, the radio and armaments were in place on the ground and within reach between them. Trying to get comfortable, both men happened to catch each other's eyes, barely visible in the darkness. LG offered a weak smile of confidence which Polack quickly returned. Both bumped fists in a mini-DAP and settled in for the long night.

Polack picked up the radio handset, cradled it on his shoulder, and then tapped LG to get his attention. Seeing only the whites of his eyes, Polack pointed to himself then to the luminous dial on his watch, and held up two fingers close to LG's face, hoping LG was able to see them. LG responded with the "OK" sign, equally close to Polack's face, then covered himself with his poncho liner, understanding that Polack was taking the first watch and would wake him in two hours.

At not yet seven in the evening, the light of the crescent moon wasn't bright enough to penetrate the thick foliage. Soon it was so dark that Polack was unable to see his own hand moving only inches in front of his face. He blinked a few times just to verify that his eyes were open. It was no use; whether they were open or closed, he could see nothing.

As the nocturnal creatures awoke, the cacophony of their various sounds carried through the darkness. This symphony was sure to grow louder as the night progressed. Right then, it was calming in a way, and one could imagine that all the

individual mating calls were timed and repeated in a closed loop. If the noise stopped, then it was time to worry.

Polack hated the dark, especially when it was like this. Everything was shaded either dark gray or ink black without a sign of color anywhere. With eyes opened or closed, it was all the same, and he felt as claustrophobic as if sitting in a small closet in the middle of the night. In addition, the rotting smell of dead vegetation caused by the defoliant Agent Orange made him nauseous. His hearing now enhanced, his mind actively tried to absorb all the sounds, applying filters to help recognize those which did not belong. Adrenaline was ready to soar - just waiting for the right signal.

LG's breathing settled into a steady rhythm, making it clear that he was sound asleep. Without any visual stimuli to keep his mind occupied, it tended to wander, and in this case, caused Polack to get lost in his thoughts. A memory jumped out, sending him back to the age of seven.

TWO - The Basement

Let's face it, darkness can be scary. Being in the dark can sometimes give you the unnerving feeling that you are being watched. Children everywhere may feel nervous about closets and the "spooky" space under their beds, but while those patches of darkness can be intimidating for some, for me, there was a much creepier place: our basement. Built in the 1930's, our house in Detroit had an unfinished basement typical of most in the neighborhood, and its basement was dark and cellar-like. When my parents sent any of us kids downstairs on an errand after dark, it was considered a sure death sentence.

Early one day, at the tender age of seven, I accompanied my mother into the basement when it was time to change loads in the washing machine. Although shafts of sunlight glared brightly through the high window panes, she did turn on the light over our old wringer-style washing machine. Nevertheless, I followed right on her heels, making sure that I stayed close, and that I kept her in between me and that monstrous old furnace.

I watched Mom as she pulled an article of sopping wet clothing from the barrel of the washing machine and fed it cautiously into the mouth of two horizontal rollers just above the basin. Clothes were crushed by this powerful squeezing process resulting in a steady stream of water that fell into a nearby washtub. A wild whirlpool of water spun over the drain in the center until the last item of clothing fell into the basket with a thud.

Why is it that when somebody tells a child that he or she shouldn't do something, it seems more like a dare? While Mom continued to feed articles of clothing through the crusher, she cautioned me, "Be very careful of these rollers. They'll catch your fingers and crush them if you're not paying attention!" (Note to self: "Investigate that roller thingy when I get a chance.")

While Mom was busy with the laundry, I used the time to study my surroundings. Several four-inch wide cast iron poles stood like sentinels every ten feet. Old furniture, stored haphazardly on the floor and draped with white bed sheets looked eerie, even during the day. Wooden boxes contained tools and other miscellaneous junk. Dozens of them were stacked adjacent to the ghostly-looking furniture that ran the length of the remaining wall. Then, of course, the huge, ugly furnace - looking like a torture chamber from the Dark Ages - took up much of the floor space near the rear corner.

Our basement lighting was sparse and comprised of just a few lights strategically placed on the ceiling. Every light had a pull-cord or chain attached to turn it on and off. A bare light bulb above the washing machine hung from the end

of a foot-long electrical cord and swayed back and forth, casting animated waves of light into the shadows, worsening any sense of foreboding that already existed.

Three small storage rooms lined the far end of the basement. I wasn't sure if the homemade plywood doors were meant to keep the things inside hidden from strangers, or to keep the things inside from getting out. The left-most room stored coal and kindling wood for the winter. The middle room was full of Christmas ornaments, Halloween decorations and out-of-season clothing, which hung from hangers on a horizontal metal pipe. The far right room was a pantry filled with dozens of home-canned glass jars of vegetables and fruits stored on shelves, in addition to boxes filled with empty jars, lids, and screw-on rings. I should also mention that the pantry door was in the corner behind the behemoth furnace.

It was time well spent, as I was able to plot a mental route from the stairway to the storage rooms at the far end of the dungeon-like setting. I felt the need to have a plan just in case I ever had to come down here alone, which by the way, happened later that night.

After dinner, while Mom was busy washing dishes, she asked me to run down to the basement and bring up her short, brown winter jacket with the fur collar from the center storage room. She mentioned that the weather had turned chilly and that she would need it to wear to church the following morning. I stood there for a moment, stunned, and thinking hard for a way to get out of it! I was pretty sure that something evil lived behind each of the doors down there, waiting patiently in the pitch darkness for some unsuspecting schmuck like me to let it out. I was extremely anxious and felt veritably rooted to the kitchen floor.

My mother, seeing my apprehension, usually had to prod me (and sometimes threaten me) to get me moving. I remember her exasperation, finally warning me: "There's nothing down there that can hurt you. Get moving before I lock you down there for good!" My father's voice then boomed from the living room, "Johnny, be a man!" Hell, I was only seven years old and far from being a man, but I couldn't let my father down. There was no way out of this; I had to do it!

The dim lightbulb at the top of the stairs provided just enough artificial light to expose the stairway and cinderblock wall beyond the final step. I remember venturing down the staircase ever so slowly, keeping my eyes focused on the darkness ahead and then taking a break to catch my breath on the bottom step.

I stood perfectly still, staring intently into the darkness, contemplating my next move. A chill ran down my spine when I heard a creak near the furnace. I was positive something evil was hiding in the shadows behind the old coal burner, patiently waiting for me to move forward into the darkness. My racing heart caused beads of sweat to gather on my forehead, a single drop broke away and found its

way into my right eye. My vision blurred and I began to panic. The last thing I wanted to do was close my eyes until the sweat washed away, and I could see again. That was not an option, as the monsters would be all over me within seconds. I wiped my eyes and forehead with my shirt sleeve, ready to bolt at the first sign of the slightest movement.

My route and timing had to be spot-on through this obstacle course, or I'd end up lost in the dark and probably die within thirty seconds. Ready or not, it was time to go!

I took one last deep breath and then leaped into the darkness, jumping up and pulling the chains of every light as quickly as possible to keep the hidden monsters at bay. Within five seconds, I was standing at door number two.

I don't care how many times I performed this task - the process never changed. The doors all opened outward and had small handles positioned on the left side, hinges on the right. Moving to my left a few steps, I'd hold my breath and approach the door from an angle, shuffling my feet only inches at a time. I made sure to keep my body clear of the door's swinging path in the event that somebody hiding inside tried to use it as a battering ram. Once there, I'd slide my right foot forward and jam it into the small gap at the bottom of the door. With shaking hands, I unhooked the latch. I had a rule about waiting a full five seconds to be sure that nothing tried to force its way out; then I'd swing the door open completely. Stale and musty odors permeated through the open doorway - nothing vile there, just typical old, unfinished basement smells.

The next element in this challenge was for me to step into the darkness and locate the hanging light in the center of the eight by eight-foot room. I raised my arms and waved them in front of my face, taking small baby steps, until I snagged the chain from the hanging light and pulled it to light up the room.

That evening, I lucked out and immediately spotted Mom's jacket on the overhead bar. Once I had it in hand, I had to execute my escape plan from this nightmarish place. After taking a few deep breaths in and exhaling out of my mouth, I yanked down on the light chain and jumped free of the room. Slamming the door, I leaned against it to prevent whatever might have been hiding in the shadows from getting out and grabbing me. All that remained was for me to lock the door and hightail it out of there. After re-hooking the door, I placed my foot at the base of the plywood door and prepared myself as a runner might in starting blocks.

After hearing a silent signal in my head, I launched myself across the length of the basement, pulling down on every light chain while aiming for the stairs. Once there, I charged up the steps, two at a time, and jumped headfirst through the open doorway, landing hard on the kitchen floor. My foot automatically pushed out and

caught the edge of the wooden door behind me, sending it on its arc at a speed slightly less than sound. The metal hinges screeched briefly in protest before a deafening slam, announcing the journey's end, and startling everyone in the house. Reaching up, I engaged the latch. Start to finish, the entire process took less than five minutes.

My mission into Hell was a success and I could now take a deep breath to celebrate. My feeling of self-gratification, however, was soon interrupted by Mom. She proceeded to scold me for making such a production out of a simple trip to the basement, citing that the sudden banging noise had stopped her heart. 'If she only knew,' I thought.

Of course, my fear of our basement diminished when I got older. When I was twelve years old, my father properly introduced me to the furnace. He taught me how to stoke a fire, add coal, and remove ashes through the heavy iron door at the bottom of the huge furnace. It still looked like a giant octopus hung upside down from the ceiling with tentacles (the round circular duct work) jutting out in all directions. It became my job to check the fire before and after school. It wasn't long before I was assigned the full-time responsibility of maintaining the furnace during the winter months, occasionally requiring visits in the middle of the night to get the fire going again. This job continued for the next couple of years until my parents saved enough money to purchase a new furnace. Thankfully, they converted to gas heat.

Later, when I discovered an interest in girls, the basement became my friend. I found a used couch and television set at the local Salvation Army and set up a small area to socialize with friends of both genders. At times, one or more of us spent the night amongst the shadows, not worried in the least.

As I got older, I do remember occasionally asking my younger sister or brother to fetch something from the basement for me. It was like asking them to descend into a crypt! Neither of them would go. Instead, they would become "busy" or disappear into their rooms, leaving me to retrieve the article myself. I became irritated with their attitude...until I remembered my own past fear of the shadows and unknown creatures lurking below!

