THE MOMENT BEFORE THE MOMENT

The Holy Ghost sends a sense of humor to men for times like this. Not everyone, but some. The men with the best senses of humor seemed to handle life better.

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There is a moment—just before the world is going to change forever—in which you contemplate everything you know, everything you have planned, everything that can go wrong, and all of your fears. It is the moment before the moment when you take that final step, and nothing—nothing thereafter can be changed. You turn yourself over to your fate, your training, your limited experience, and your luck.

And you hope—you pray—you are lucky.

The lieutenant briefed the sergeants for what seemed like the tenth time that afternoon. Sitting under the shade of a tent in the still sweltering heat and the sticky humidity made them want to escape the briefings. Trying to stay awake during the briefings was almost as difficult as trying to stay alive would become. But they had to stay alert. The lieutenant required all the sergeants to “brief back” the plan and then the sergeants made the soldiers do the same.

They had reconned the location by air. The map was almost worn out by their hot, intent eyes and probing fingers. A sand table—a faithful replica of the site—was at their feet. Nobody was going anywhere until they all got it perfect.

The raid plan had been memorized, and the frequencies for artillery support, medevac,
ammunition resupply, and evacuation had, similarly, been committed to memory and written in hard-covered, green notebooks. The same notebooks wherein they would write the names of the KIAs and WIAs if the plan didn’t work well. 

The casualty collection point had been designated. The chain of command—who was in charge if the lieutenant got killed—was set.

There was nothing left to do.

The company commander and the battalion commander came by for a chat. It was a very important raid, and the orders had come down directly from division. Division intel had found a place that displeased it mightily and wanted whatever was there to be destroyed and all the occupants killed. The 101st Airborne Division, one of the Army’s most elite combat units, supervised its brigades, which in turn tended to their battalions, which mother-henned their companies, which fought their platoons. When something came down from division—directly to a single platoon and its platoon leader—it was a big deal.

The death sentence had been pronounced after a high level of radio traffic was triangulated by two eavesdropping Mohawks. Mohawks flew around listening for NVA (North Vietnamese Army, hardened professional soldiers, not part-time guerrillas like the local Viet Cong cell) chatter and then shot an azimuth—a compass direction—from their known location in the direction of the source. They then flew to a spot about ninety degrees from their original known location and repeated the process. Where the two azimuths—now lines on a map—intersected was the source of the radio traffic.

There had been two such planes and four intercepts all indicating the same location. The evidence was overwhelming, and nobody doubted it. Even the normal skeptics nodded their
heads. There was definitely something and someone there.

There were several recorded transmissions. When the division G-2—the colonel in charge of intelligence gathering and analysis—read the translated transcripts and studied the level of traffic, he said, “That’s got to be a corps or army headquarters. They have some powerful radios. They’re talking to Hanoi. Send someone in there to destroy the headquarters, capture those radios, and kill everyone. We may be able to bag some generals, maybe a corps commander. Whoever we send, send the best we’ve got.”

That conversation set in motion the raid that was going to be launched today.

“Everything set, Lieutenant Collins?” the battalion commander asked, knowing it was.

Jack Collins was the best lieutenant in his battalion. Had a Ranger tab sewed on his left shoulder and had proven himself in some tough fights. Had been awarded a Silver Star. They were not giving Silver Stars out in Cracker Jack boxes. No accident he had gotten the assignment.

“Yes, sir.” The only possible answer given the situation. Get the fuck out of here, sir! Leave me alone. Let me do my job was not amongst the possible winners. Though it held first place in the lieutenant’s mind.

“You need anything?” asked the battalion commander, because he couldn’t think of anything else even remotely intelligent to ask.

“No, sir. We’re ready to go.”

The lieutenant spoke with a confident, low voice. He had already been to the latrine four times in the last hour. That much purging is good for your confidence. At least he knew he wouldn’t shit in his pants.
The helicopters—their ride to destiny—were spinning up now and making their preflight checks. The raiders would not move to load until they got the word the choppers were ready to go. Eight of them holding six men each. It was a big raid. Division said they would need that much bayonet strength to do it properly.

Everybody was looking in the direction of the choppers as they increased their revolutions. You could smell the exhaust, and it smelled like funeral incense. The air usually smelled like diesel and burning shit, so funeral incense was a decided improvement.

The assistant patrol leader, the next in command in the event the lieutenant got killed, came by for a nervous chat. Smacking his index finger into his hand, counting off each point, and hopping from foot to foot, he said, “Checked everything. Got plenty of ammo. Grenades. Explosives. Blasting caps. Water. Bandages. Spare batteries for the radios. Checked with intel—nothing new. Ready to rock and roll. Choppers are doing their thing. Anything I need to know?” He was pointing at the departing company and battalion commanders.

“Nah, just wanted to make sure we got a good eye fucking before we took off. Might have to ID the bodies.” He stopped to see if the assistant patrol leader appreciated his morbid humor. “Everything is just as we planned. Feeling lucky?”

They both laughed. They had been on a number of similar raids together, but it never changed. The torture of it. The lieutenant would have voluntarily endured a barbed-wire enema if he could have gotten a “get out of jail” card.

“Yeah. You?” The question went unanswered. “Couldn’t pound a ten-penny nail up my asshole with a sledgehammer,” the assistant patrol leader said when he’d gotten no answer. He tried to spit to add emphasis but couldn’t find or summon the spit. His mouth was like the
“Yeah, me too. Be ready to go in about five minutes.”

The lieutenant’s RTO (radio telephone operator, the guy with the radio that was the lifeline to assistance) said, “Time to saddle up, LT.” RTOs called their lieutenants El Tee. The flight commander had called him on the radio saying it was time. No call from the governor offering a reprieve.

Without saying anything, the lieutenant circled his finger in what seemed like slow motion over his head several times. He didn’t need to say anything because every member of the patrol was watching him and had been for the last five minutes. Nobody exclusively owned the moment before the moment—everybody was in it. Drowning, and trying to swim to shore. Heavy-laden with real and imagined concerns. Trying not to think about it. Hiding their apprehension with meaningless chatter. Trying to draw life out of the last half inch of a cigarette and then crushing it and fieldstripping it, removing all evidence it had ever existed.

The patrol stood up—their gear silent, having been taped into submission—and began to shuffle down toward the concrete pad from which the choppers would take off. They looked lethal. Deadly. Expectant. Scared.

The lieutenant watched them, and they watched him back. The little white crows’-feet at the edge of his eyes—the product of squinting into the sun, looking for who wanted to kill him that day—and the hard edge to what had been a boy’s mouth a year ago waited their turn. The lieutenant would be the last one to load. He liked watching them load, just like he liked knowing that mothers had entrusted their sons’ lives to him. At the same time, he dreaded it and didn’t want to have to write another letter to a kid’s parents telling them how he, the lieutenant, had
failed. Failed to keep their son alive.

It was why he was so diligent in his planning, so painstaking in his preparation, and why it was so suffocating—trying to find the one thing undone that would somehow tip the odds in their favor. The one thing that would diminish the number of dog tags in his hand when he returned. That was what was going on—staring down death and trying to make it blink.

He could feel it. He could taste it. He could hear it. He could smell it. He hated it. He hated the sense of powerlessness that meant death won and he lost. And so he anguished and tormented himself, wanting to suffer now to avoid the penance of failure.

They formed up by chopper loads. It was an orderly march toward their fate.

A private first class, draftee with a degree in journalism from Yale and the old man in the platoon at twenty-five, asked, “How’s this turn out, Lieutenant?” His age made it easier for him to ask. He also knew the lieutenant would answer him. He was trying to assemble material for a book. This felt like “material” to him.

“Piece of cake. Walk in the park. Has to work out; I have a date tomorrow night.”

This made the PFC laugh and others asked, “What did the lieutenant say?” It passed through the ranks like dysentery. Everybody laughed.

The lieutenant was good at his trade, and they had come to trust him. It was a hard-earned trust, and the thrifty way he wagered their lives was at the core of it. Would sit on the radio for an hour, calling in artillery, Cobras, fast movers, spending taxpayer money—like a Democratic congressman running for re-election—before committing a single soldier to see what was in that tree line he’d been shooting up. Never asked a man with a bayonet to do something that could be done with an artillery round. Never asked a man to do something he himself hadn’t done.
They had seen a lot of his back following him into combat.

He had bled along with them. He ate last and if there wasn’t enough chow, he went hungry. Made sure the medics treated everyone and everything and made sure his men got the awards, R&R, promotions, correct pay they deserved. Almost went to fisticuffs with the battalion adjutant about some lost paperwork that meant nothing except to the man whose name was on it.

And so they trusted his judgment. He had earned that trust. They put their lives in his hands. Willingly. And he accepted them.

The Holy Ghost sends a sense of humor to some men for times like this. Not everyone, but some. The men with the best senses of humor seemed to handle life better. The ones who could laugh at themselves and not take themselves too seriously were the best of all.

The Holy Ghost had taken good care of this lieutenant, sending him a sense of humor to match his size. Maybe even one big enough to accommodate some growth. It’d been worn smooth by use, and it was natural.

If the lieutenant had run the sums and been brutally honest, he would have said, “According to recent experience, we get into a gunfight with some shitheads and lose two KIAs and four WIAs. Could get a lot worse.”

But he did not say that because what the patrol really wanted to know was—was the lieutenant feeling lucky? They needed the lieutenant to feel that way because when he did, more of them lived to see the next dawn. And for many of them, the only real strategy was “Alive at dawn.”

A long enough series of dawns and then you got to go home to the land of the big PX and round-eyed beauties who graced the pages of Playboy and told you this was what you were really
fighting for. In the end, many of them were fighting their own little wars for big, firm, American breasts. Not a single one of them ever mentioned the Constitution. Not one.

Nobody ever said they were there “…to protect and defend the Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic.” They were there to kill gooks, burn shit, drink beer, smoke dope, endure jungle rot, get laid, humor their draft board, and try to get home in one piece. Most did not intend to join the VFW or the American Legion or run for office when they got home.

The rifleman from Yale had openly announced his intentions to write a book, but everyone else just wanted to get home in one piece. Most were looking forward to growing their hair long and forgetting about Vietnam. They intended to continue the beer drinking, the dope smoking, and were looking forward to getting laid a lot more.

The lieutenant shook the assistant patrol leader’s hand. “See you on the high ground.”

The choppers lifted off. It felt majestic when they rose, leaned forward, felt the whip hand, and soared. It was the biggest thrill you could get in that place. At altitude, the air was cool. The roar of the engines made it impossible to talk, which condemned them to think.

Sometimes thinking about what was going to happen next felt like punishment, being reminded that men would die and not wanting to think about being one of them. Too much thinking could get in the way of doing, and doing was what kept you alive.

The lieutenant had a headset on, his helmet in his lap, talking to the pilot, up front, who was telling him how far out they were from the landing zone. It was a thirty-minute ride.

When they were five minutes out, the lieutenant doffed the headset, giving it back to the crew chief. He put his helmet back on, which told everyone in the chopper they were nearing the LZ. Theirs was the first one in. The lieutenant liked it that way—being the first ship onto the
landing zone. Get on the ground, take charge, and sort it out. Sort it out before the enemy is able to react.

The choppers began a rapid descent that felt like a ride at the county fair, roiling your guts and making you feel like you were falling. You were. You descended fast to cheat any angry lurkers of a chance to kill you. The crew chief and the door gunner were strapped in, hanging out the door, looking forward, riding their bullet-belted machine guns, and waiting for trouble. Their fingers were on the triggers, ready to twitch at the first sign of it.

The lieutenant slid into the door, hanging his feet over the edge and holding onto the seat behind him. With feet dangling, rifle in one hand, he was ready to jump. The butterflies had become condors. Condors with great big talons trying to rip their way out of his acid-filled guts.

The first chopper—the lieutenant’s—hit the tall, elephant grass. There was fire coming in from the same direction the choppers were facing. That was not bad. Fire from the flanks was much worse.

The lieutenant hopped out of the chopper when it was four feet off the ground. He landed on his feet, rolled away from the chopper like a parachute-landing fall. He was a paratrooper and had been taught how to do that safely. He waited for his RTO to catch up and then they lay down, full-length in the grass, facing where the fire had come from.

On the way out, having deposited their almost fifty raiders, the door gunners worked over the direction from whence the fire had come, spraying the edge of the landing zone with a steady stream of bullets, trying to buy the troopers enough time to get organized and off the LZ.

“Eagle 6, Eagle 36, we’re down. Hot LZ. Light fire coming from the north. Nothing we can’t handle. Over.” His calm, almost-serene voice made it sound like a weather report—mostly
sunny with light showers expected, wind from the north at three knots. A fine day, indeed.

He was actually reporting to the company commander that they had stumbled on some enemy soldiers who were likely in the area accidently or as “trail watchers.” Trail watchers observed trails and likely landing spots, waiting for the Americans to show up, whereupon they would send out an alarm.

“Eagle 36, Eagle 6—let me know if we can help. If you need an extraction, let me know. Good hunting. Out.” The plan called for radio silence until the lieutenant called for an extraction.

The choppers—having delivered their cargo and tamped down the enemy’s interest—disappeared immediately, running like scalded dogs for the horizon and safety. In a minute, their chirpy, joyous noise was already missed and it got quiet. Very quiet. The quiet itself was disquieting.

The lieutenant sent the assistant patrol leader and four men to run off the enemy to the north and to report back. They took off while the lieutenant checked with the sergeants to ensure nobody had been hurt getting out of the choppers or hit by the gunfire.

Ten minutes later, the assistant patrol leader returned. There had been a quick exchange of gunfire and then silence.

“Killed two NVA,” the assistant patrol leader said between breaths, trying to recover from his exertions.

“Look like trail watchers. Checked their AKs, and all the rounds came from them.”

He had checked the ejected brass on the ground next to the bodies to ensure that they had, in fact, been the men firing at the choppers as they landed. He had also checked the magazines in the weapons. The casings on the grass and the voids in the magazines told him nobody else had
been there, and hopefully nobody had been sent to alert another unit. This was the calculus the lieutenant needed to make a decision.

The lieutenant made the first big decision of the patrol, deciding to proceed with the mission and not calling for an immediate extraction because the enemy trail watchers had compromised the raid’s op sec (operational security).

Standing, the lieutenant wordlessly circled a hand and pointed to the south, the direction of their objective. They morphed into a single file and headed in that direction. After five minutes, everyone was sweating like New Orleans stevedores in August.

The sweat relaxed the patrol—and the lieutenant—and they went about their business of finding, fixing, and killing the source of division intel’s displeasure. They moved slowly and carefully through the tall grass, carrying death certificates for whomever awaited them.

The moment before the moment? It’s a real thing. When you break a sweat, it passes and then it’s just “Game on!” Time to keep that rendezvous with death. Time to see how lucky you really are.

THE END