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Alone in the jungles of Vietnam

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As a young man, Bill Messer served in the Army Special Forces during the Vietnam War. For months at a time, he'd sneak through strange jungles — sleeping by day, moving by night — entirely alone, save his beloved German Shepherd, Blackie, by his side.

Blackie saved his life "many a'times," Messer says from a living room recliner in his Waynesville home. So imagine the heartbreak he must have felt when, after his tour of duty was over, he had to take Blackie out and shoot him.

That dog had been trained for Messer alone. He'd have been no good for anyone else. And Messer couldn't bring him back to the States, because the Army was worried about diseases.

"Sometimes we have to do things we don't want to do — things we don't think we can do," Messer says. "But we do."

Messer has done many things that, truth be told, average men probably could never do. The story he tells about his time in Vietnam is cinematic, nightmarish, phenomenal: a country boy, raised on a farm in Panther Creek, sneaking around Vietnamese jungles, collecting intel, calling in airstrikes, occasionally eating monkeys and doing things that — in a just world — no human being should ever have to do.

The worst thing is hard to imagine. He'd been spying on a village that he felt the Viet Cong were using as a stronghold. But he wasn't sure, so he snuck a little closer. Then someone spotted him and started firing. All hell broke loose. United States helicopters flew in and started hitting the village, and before he knew it, a Vietnamese girl was standing in front of him with a gun.

"She was pointing it right at me," Messer says. "And I pulled the trigger first."

The worst thing is hard to imagine.

"And that haunts me. She was a child," he says. "A child ain't supposed to be fighting in the war. I'd have been glad to stand in front of 15 of their men — me, by myself — as opposed to shooting a woman or a child."

When he returned home from Vietnam, Messer flew into the San Francisco airport. He was spit on and called a baby killer. But those who jeered didn't know him. Those who belittled the then-21-year old, from a perceived moral high ground, had never been alone in the bush. They didn't have to pick leeches off of their bodies. They didn't have to eat rattlesnakes. They didn't have to kill their dog — their best friend, their lifesaver. And they certainly never had to make the decisions he had to make.

"I came home to find out that the American people knew very little about the war itself," Messer says. "I came home to find out that...they just didn't know."

A special kind of warrior

Messer was 18 years old when he volunteered to join the military. He was the sole surviving male of his family, so he didn't have to go. But most of his friends were already over there, so he figured he'd enlist.

He took a bus to Charlotte, where he completed tests that determined which branch he was best suited for. Afterward, all of the test takers sat in an auditorium, awaiting their fates.

The Marine Corps came out and selected their recruits. The Navy, the Air Force, and the Army did the same, one after another. Messer and four others were still sitting there.

"I thought, well, we're either flat-footed or too ugly, because they ain't going to take us," he says. "About that time, the biggest, blackest drill sergeant walks out, with his hands folded behind his back, and says 'I'm gonna be your momma. I'm gonna be your daddy. I'm gonna be your girlfriend, and I'm gonna be your lover. You might as well kiss your butt goodbye, because you're sold as mine.'"

Indeed, Messer tested well enough to qualify for the Special Forces. So that's where he was headed, whether he liked it or not. He went to Fort Bragg for basic training, then down to Fort Polk, Louisiana, to learn how to survive, alone, in the bush. The heat and humidity at Fort Polk mimicked what he'd experience in Vietnam. So did the intensity — and the stakes — of the training.

He was given a pistol belt, a knife, a canteen and some purifying tablets. He had two weeks to get from Point A to Point B, through the forest. Between the two points were mock Vietnamese camps. If Messer was caught, he'd be tortured — actually tortured, he says.

"They did that so we'd know what to expect if we got taken in Vietnam," he says. "I got close to being caught, but I made it all the way. When they were close, I'd stay really still, and breathe through a little straw, you see."

During training, Messer hated his drill instructor. "There were times when I wanted to shoot the guy, or cut his throat — he was that rough on us," he says. Yet when Messer returned from Vietnam, he went back to Fort Polk and found the guy.

"I asked him how big of a steak he could eat," Messer says. "I wanted to buy him the largest steak I could find, because he kept me alive. If it wasn't for him, I probably would have died over there."

Jungle delicacies

When Messer went on solo missions, he was given a certain amount of food. But when he'd run out, he'd have to resort to his wits — and some relatively primitive meals — to stay nourished.

Monkey, of course, is the most shocking. Messer hated monkey meat — God, how he hated it. He'd hunt the primates with a small bamboo bow and arrow, because sustenance was sustenance, but as he recalls "you could cook it for a damn week, and the more you'd cook it, the tougher it'd get."

Rattlesnake was a bit more appetizing. Messer found it tasted like chicken. There was a trick to catching rattlesnakes, though: you couldn't let the snake bite itself, otherwise the poison would be transferred to the sweet meat, rendering it inedible. But, if done right, snake was a scrumptious meal, indeed.

"You chop the head off, and go right down the belly," he says. "Then you cut off the rattlers, get the skin started, and peel it. Just like a kielbasa, you see."

Sometimes he'd eat the meat raw, but other times he'd cook it — though he had to be careful, because the smell could carry to nearby villages and tip off his presence to the enemy.

Oh, he'd devour insects, too — "for the protein," he says — and sometimes he was lucky enough to happen upon a banana plantation, or a village, where he could sneak off with some eggs, and maybe even a chicken.

"I'd go about 50 clicks, cook it and eat it," he says. "You did what you had to do."

Hard times

Messer has lived an objectively hard life. He recounts his Vietnam stories from a chair in his living room, which is where he's forced to spend much of his time now, due to a recent fall in the kitchen that broke his back.

It was the third time he's broken his back, and now doctors tell him he shouldn't lift anything heavier than a gallon of milk, or mow the grass, or climb any ladders, because if it happens again, he'll "either be paralyzed from the neck down, or it'll kill me," he says.

He's also had a couple of heart attacks. And a bout with sepsis last October that nearly left him dead. In the end it didn't kill him, though he was placed in a medically-induced coma for a week. When he emerged, he had to relearn how to walk and eat. His short-term memory was affected, too, though his memories of Vietnam remain, clear as day.

And goodness, the way he contracted sepsis: one of his sisters, who lives in Fletcher, had become depressed after her husband died. She stopped cleaning the house and became a serious hoarder, to the point that the place was unfit for habitation. "She'd have somebody get her biscuits and gravy from Hardees, and she'd just chuck the empty container behind her," Messer says. She'd also repeatedly pee on the mattress and not clean it up.

It got to the point where Messer was making the drive from Waynesville to Fletcher two-to-three times per week to help tidy up the place. One day, he took the urine-stained mattress outside, planning to cut it up and toss it. He was working without gloves, and also smoking, thus bringing his fingers to his mouth frequently. "I think that's what got me," he says.

Not long after, Messer got a terrible case of the shivers, and began projectile vomiting. So he went to the VA, setting off a chain of events that would lead him to that medically-induced coma.

Through it all, Messer's sister never got sick. Eventually a hazmat team was brought in to finish the cleaning. All in all, it cost \$6,000.

That sister is doing OK now. And Messer isn't holding any grudges.

"She's doing much better," Messer says. "I told her if she didn't keep the house clean, I'd never come back."

Santa Claus, as salve

For years, Messer — with his white hair, white beard and twinkling eyes — played Santa Claus at his church, and elsewhere. He had the look down pat, and that period of his life is immortalized in a pristine photograph of him dressed up in yuletide garb, looking exactly like Old Saint Nick.

His poor health, his limited mobility, don't allow him to play that role anymore. But he has fond memories of his time as Kris Kringle. It was the starry-eyed looks he'd get from kids that he valued most. Sometimes, he'd be recognized as "Uncle Bill" by a particularly observant child. But then Messer would plant seeds of doubt — "Are you sure I'm Uncle Bill?" — until the kid would think, well, maybe this is Santa Claus.

It's a strange juxtaposition: Messer, in the bush, doing the things he had to do, and Messer, decades later, dressed up as jolly old Santa Claus, doling out Christmas joy. The schtick was for the kids, sure, but it also helped Messer patch up old wounds.

"It done me a whole lot of good," he says. "It kept my PTSD, the bad memories, in check, and brought me a lot of happiness."

Simpler times

Messer's mother, who was half-Cherokee, committed suicide when he was 8. Not long thereafter, his father, who'd been a policeman in Haywood, split for Washington state. His grandparents on his father's side took him in on that farm at Panther Creek, which is where Messer learned the value of hard work, self-sufficiency and responsibility.

He had jobs to do, as did everyone who lived there. He'd milk the cows and feed the farm animals. He'd fetch firewood for his grandma, plow the fields, drag in the corn. Then, at the end of a normal work day,

after supper had been eaten, all 13 family members who lived on the farm would hang out on the porch and chit chat.

And if Messer didn't pull his weight, his grandpa would let him know he'd done wrong. Says Messer: "He wouldn't whip you, he wouldn't smack you. He'd say 'Look at those people on the porch. Those are the people you're letting down when you don't do your job.'"

Messer believes his ability to survive in the jungles of Vietnam stemmed from his upbringing, rich as it was with lessons of self-sufficiency and carrying one's weight.

One of Messer's sons, Chad, is a painter. Some of his work hangs on the wall of the living room, within eyeshot of Messer's chair. One of the paintings is of a barn from Messer's childhood. Once Chad asked: "When's it most pretty there?"

"In the morning," Messer said. "When the mist is over the fields, and coming through the trees."

So that's the scene Chad painted, and that's what now hangs from Messer's wall, for him to look at, and become utterly immersed in, whenever the mood strikes.

"By the time I was a teenager, all I wanted to do was leave [the farm]. I thought there was a better life out there," he says. "But now, I don't know how many times I've looked at those pictures and thought to myself 'If I could just go back.'"

"Simpler times," he adds.

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