DIARY FROM THE VIETNAM WAR

October 21, 1970. We’re now bivouacked in the Que Son Mountain range. Our home for the next thirty days is tactical LZ Vulture. Constant rain, steady wind and enemy contact are a daily occurrence. While patrolling the surrounding hills, laughter and witticism are a scarce commodity. But on one occasion, a little macabre jocularity hit the platoon. This humorous event, The *Episode of the Blooper Round*, caused continuous laughter for the rest of our stay on Vulture.

The M79 Grenade Launcher got its name, Blooper, from the sound the round made exiting the barrel … bloop. The Blooper is a single-shot, shoulder-fired, break-action launcher that fires a 40mm grenade. Each fourteen-man squad had one Marine (grenadier) humping the Blooper. Jersey was our grenadier. He carried an assortment of 40mm rounds, including smoke, CS gas, high explosives, and white phosphorus illumination (colloquially referred to as Wilson Picket)

The 40mm grenade round had a spin-activated safety feature that would not arm the explosive round until it left the barrel, rotated approximately twenty times, and traveled 15 to 20 meters downrange. This safety feature prevented the grenade from detonating as it left the barrel, killing the grenadier. This rotational safety feature with the 40mm grenade played an essential role in Jersey's life expectancy, his continued good Karma, the focal point of this diary entry, and stories to come. It also provided a large cudgel used on Jersey for the next month.

It was early evening, the time when your eyes began transitioning from bright daylight to complete jungle black. Some guys would take their red-lens flashlights, pull a poncho over their head, and try to improve their night vision, thinking they were enhancing their "rods and cones." There was some science in that, pioneered by the Air Wing flight surgeons. I just stared into the dark for a few minutes, and my night vision was fine.

Because of the enemy combatant we killed earlier with our "relief in place" tactics and the listening post action a few nights before, the anxiety level was high. Tension increased to maximum after the battalion sent an encrypted radio communication, "Charlie was on the move in the AO." The Lieutenant decided to do a fifty percent foxhole watch: four to a position, two to crash, and two to be on watch.

Just before dawn, with the light beginning to move across the valley and eyes adjusting to the morning aurora, we heard a sound down the mountainside in front of our platoon. I was in the foxhole next to Jersey and saw some shadowy activity inside his position.

I awakened the rest of my team and waited to see what happened with this block party next door. Was there a changing of the guard, did someone need to empty their bladder, or was it enemy movement?

Everyone was quiet—breath-holding funeral quiet, a Hail Mary quiet. Then we heard it—the cracking of a branch. The next sound was a "bloop." Jersey had launched a high-explosive round from his M79 Blooper. Three seconds later, we heard a thud and a loud expletive.

The shadowy activity in Jersey's position now seemed to be on a chaotic pace, with more invective diatribes rolling out of the foxhole and a half-mumbled shriek, "GRENADE!"

My experience told me that once someone barked the mayday call "grenade," it would be followed by an explosion, killing or maiming anyone that couldn't get at least ten yards away.

Seconds passed, no explosion, no AK-47 fire, only eerie quiet.

The Lieutenant approached us and asked, "What the hell is going on?"

I said, "I'm not sure, but it looked like Jersey had contact."

We both started crawling to Jersey's position when laughter pierced the morning hullabaloo. "No screaming eagle shit, Lieutenant," said Anderson, one of Jersey's foxhole mates. "Jersey fired off a blooper round. It hit a tree and bounced back into our hole. The shit-for-brains tried to kill me."

The M79 40mm high explosive round hit a tree in front of Jersey's foxhole. It didn't make the required twenty revolutions, so the safety feature was still active, leaving the grenade safe. The killer round ricocheted back to Jersey's foxhole with what was now a dud, landing next to Private Anderson.

Once we discovered the source of the morning's entertainment and Jersey's newfound religion, what to do with the dud was still an issue. The Lieutenant gave the perfect answer (I told you he was squared away).

He called for a block of C-4, a detonation cap, and a det cord. We cleared the area, placed the C-4 with the selected widgets next to the dud, and lit the det cord. "Fire in the hole" rang around the perimeter. An explosion was followed by a shock wave and an impressive plume of smoke with dirt filling the area.

That was it, no more fun and games. It was time to light up some C-ration coffee and turn on Armed Forces Radio. They just happened to be playing "Light My Fire" by the Doors, no kidding. *It don't mean nothin'*, just another day at the office.

Charlie owned the night, and for Marines, nights in the bush had an elevated vulnerability in their blackness. With the action, uncertainty, and fear of the unknown, the stress would be oppressive and, for some, a challenge. But one evening seemed darker than most.

Lance Corporal Robert Gordon (Gordo) Vincent was a squared-away, reliable, combat-tested Marine. His attitude was always confident and constructive, an asset to the platoon. That's why an evening's installment of *Battlefield Acrimony* surprised us, bringing everyone to their knees. Each Marine felt the pressure in different ways and would find their own coping mechanism. Gordo decided to handle the situation using his own baneful coping mechanism.

Earlier in the week, a resupply helicopter came in with the red mailbags. The platoon sergeant opened the bags, and five minutes later, the mail call was over. Gordo received the first letter anyone can remember Lance Corporal Robert Gordon Vincent every receiving.

No one would notice his change of attitude and vacant expression after the mail call. Gordo's casual conversational tone began to change, focusing on the pending Marine withdrawal from Vietnam. He ended every soliloquy with a whisper, *I don't want to be the last Marine to die*.

On a rainy, cold evening in the Que Son Mountains, Gordon Vincent's demons took control of his decision-making process. The reality of his struggles vanquished any thoughts of a psychic counterattack. Gordo committed himself mentally to the task at hand.

Accepting the consequences of his action, he crawled into his fighting hole and pulled a plastic bag filled with white powder from his rucksack. Gordon Vincent couldn't tame his spasmodic upheavals. His inner voice kept pleading “Help me please.” But now he needed escape from the dark chasm he ascended into.

After a few deep breaths, he gathered all that was left of his outer life to complete the task swelling up from his inner life. He had devolved into an abnormal cerebral process that challenged his cognitive ability for rational persuasion. His life's spiritual formation was rendered mute. His puerile parochial catechism offered no compromise.

Shaking, he attempted to open the package, inadvertently spilling some of the skag on the ground. Ignoring the spillage, he quietly smirked, *It don't mean nothin'*. He inserted the powder into his nose and began a familiar process of insufflation. Gordo took a heavy snort, producing a sense of immediate euphoria and reinforcing his course of action. He began his intoxicating journey to pacification of the beast.

After ingesting three more lines, the powder was gone. Gordo then pulled four red pills from his pocket, grabbed his canteen, and swallowed the quadruplet. He scribbled a note to his parents explaining why he was committing this remediation. He asked them not to be angry and apologized for the pain his actions would cause.

He leaned back on a sandbag as his heart rate slowed. A heaviness in the arms and legs made Gordo feel like he was in a slow-motion movie. He begins to experience drowsiness and hummed the chants of a church plainsong, realizing it was to be his requiem. He made the sign of the cross, pulled his poncho over his head, closed his eyes, and quietly resigned.

The next morning Gordon was found in his rain-filled foxhole, face down. His soul had passed from a fragile, broken body.

A routine medevac was radioed in. The helo would be arriving in three hours. A toe tag with Gordon's name, rank, and serial number was placed on his big toe. He was then packaged into a rubber olive drab body bag and placed next to the landing zone. Once the medevac landed, Lance Corporal Robert Gordon Vincent, USMC, unceremoniously began his journey home.