

A Few Comments Regarding the Plants and Animals of Southeast Asia

By Thomas L. Cuni

I joined Charlie Company of the 1st Battalion of the 506th Infantry Regiment while it was in the field. That regiment was part of the 101st Airborne Division. Our area of operations was in the northern provinces of the Republic of South Vietnam. I was flown out in a Huey with the mail and a resupply of rations. Everyone seemed pretty happy to receive mail and food. My reception was a bit more subdued. Being the FNG was, in my experience, not a particularly good thing. For those who are unfamiliar with the terminology, an FNG is shorthand for 'fucking new guy'. For several days I was very conscious of being closely observed. I was the artillery officer attached to that infantry company as its forward observer. I directed a number of fire missions using tube artillery and aerial rocket artillery in my first few days with the company. There was a noticeable improvement in my social standing after I managed to avoid killing or maiming myself or any other Americans while directing those fire missions. After shedding the status of FNG, I became eligible to receive advice and instructions about life in the infantry.

The advice I received covered a wide range of topics. Food was an important item on the agenda. How to prepare rations was useful information. It primarily consisted of the advice to have someone at home mail a bottle of hot sauce to me, but there were a few helpful hints and recipes that made the rations easier to eat. Other food related advice proved useful in unexpected ways. There was a persistent superstition that eating apricots brought bad luck. Although I am sure that many of my companions in arms thought that I was foolish, I ate the apricots. In fact, because of the artificially created oversupply of apricots, I enjoyed an abundance of that fruit. Mixed in with the culinary advice were practical suggestions about how to live in the jungle. A very serious private first class took the time to caution me about the Wait-a-Minute vine that we would encounter when we moved into the mountains to the north. His descriptive powers were not the best. Telling me that it was a vine with green leaves did not produce a very precise mental picture of the plant he was advising me to avoid. He suggested that it might be better if he showed me the plant when we encountered it.

A day or so after that conversation, we were sweating and swearing our way up a mountain which was covered in dense vegetation. We were moving in a single file. At one moment I was just hot and miserable. In the next I was a lot more than just hot and miserable. I experienced a pain across the front of my upper legs like I imagine it would feel to be hit with a bullwhip. When I looked down, I saw that I was tangled up in a thin vine with downward curving spines. The thin spines had penetrated through my fatigues and had buried themselves under the skin of my legs. With a rucksack on my back and a rifle in one hand, it proved impossible to pull free of the vine with only one hand. Seeing that it would take time to get out of the plant trap, I said to the man in front of me: 'wait a minute'. From behind, a familiar voice said: 'that's it lieutenant'. Despite the intense pain I was experiencing, I laughed. I had no defense against a good joke – even when it was on me. It was the first incident I remember of what would prove to be many encounters with the plants and animals with which we shared the jungle.

Several days later the company was given an objective which required us to travel until after it was dark. Swinging machetes around in the dark to clear an area in which to dig fighting positions and sleeping areas is not very wise, very practical, or very safe. In circumstances such as this, draping a poncho like a cape over the shoulders and falling back into the underbrush was the remaining choice for sleeping accommodations. We called it 'crashing'. It was not a particularly satisfactory solution, but I eventually did fall asleep. I was awakened in the night by something walking across my chest. When I grabbed it, it felt to be about the size of a golf ball. I tried to throw whatever it was as far away as I could but the critter had spines on its legs which had lodged in the material of my shirt. Several of the detached legs of my visitor remained stuck to my shirt. Pulling off those twitching legs has, over the years, been replayed in a number of my less happy dreams. I am pretty sure that it was a big beetle that woke me that night. J. B. S. Haldane, a British biologist, was once asked what he might infer about the mind of the Creator from his study of nature. He is quoted as answering that it appeared that the Creator had '...an inordinate fondness for beetles.' My particular experience led me to very different theological prospective concerning beetles.

The tokay gecko and the golden-throated barbet provided a sound track for our experiences in the jungle. They were respectively referred to as the 'fuck you lizard' and the 're-up bird'. I had the opportunity to hear the calls of both animals. Some soldiers claimed to have heard the calls in sequence, but I never did. The lizard had a call that sounded like the word 'fuck' followed by a pause and then the sound 'ouu'. It seemed an appropriate commentary on our circumstances. The bird's call sounded as if it was admonishing us to re-enlist, that is, to re-up. I do wish that I had been privy to the short, but probably meaningful conversation consisting of 're-up' followed by 'fuck you' but I did not get to enjoy that particular experience.

The ants in Vietnam were not noticeably different from those I had previously known in my life back in the World. However the number of ants which I encountered one night was something akin to a cheap horror film from the 1950s. A late evening encounter with a nasty little part of the North Vietnamese Army produced a lot of noise, smoke, cursing, sweat, and adrenaline but no casualties. The company commander selected a nearby low hill on which to set up the night defensive position. There was just enough daylight left to prepare the position. Dead bamboo stalks lay horizontally across the leaves of the living bamboo plants. Cutting away the low hanging bamboo tubes produced a shower of many thousands of black ants that had been using those tubes as a habitat. Digging foxholes produced shovelfuls of ants by the thousands. The entire hilltop was honeycombed with ant colonies. Laying down to sleep in that mess was not even a remote possibility. While not particularly large, those little beasts had stinging bites that left welts. It was too dark to change positions, so we sat on our spread out ponchos all night and put drops of insect repellent around the edges to keep those little bastards away. By first light, I think I had savored every incident I could remember from my childhood when I had incinerated the cousins of those little fuckers with lighter fluid or a magnifying glass.

No one I know is fond of snakes. There was a certain viper in Southeast Asia that I now know is called a many banded krait. During the war, that particular snake acquired several names based on a numerical designation. In the area where I served, we called it the seven-step snake. The story was that once bitten, a person would die after taking only seven steps. From other veterans of the war, I have heard

that snake called the two- step, the five-step, and the twenty-step snake. I am not sure what the science was in determining the relative levels of lethality of the snake in different parts of the country, but my rule was to avoid any contact with snakes of any kind or description. It is still a rule which I follow.

Not all reptiles in that part of the world were dangerous. I once helped eat a lizard that we skinned and cooked. My recollection was that when mixed with rice and sprinkled with an adequate amount hot sauce, lizard meat was not awful. However, I do not remember if it tasted like chicken.

There are hundreds of species of monkeys in Vietnam. I do not have a clue as to the kind of monkey which was involved in this next episode. I do know that there were thirty or more of the little buggers. It was late afternoon and the company was going about the daily tasks involved in preparing for the coming night. There was always much to do. Foxholes had to be dug. Claymore mines had to be setup along likely avenues of approach. Sleeping areas needed to be cut. Improvised shelters, which we called 'hooches', were prepared using ponchos as a kind of tent structure that was open on all sides. And, of course, dinner needed to be prepared and eaten. An unfamiliar sound brought all of this activity to a stop. I cannot adequately describe the sound made by a troop of monkeys traveling through the jungle canopy. The leaves rustled and there was a cacophony of loud chatter as a blurry cloud of little brown creatures travelled over our position. The sound grew in intensity as the monkeys approached, reached a peak as they passed over, and diminished as they moved away. I think of it as a monkey Doppler Effect. The troop of monkeys found food and shelter for the night in some nearby trees. We returned to our work.

It was just another miserable night in the jungle until some time after midnight. We were awakened by a scream that conveyed a full measure of fear and terror. I am sure that every soldier in every war has compiled a personal hierarchy of dreadful things that might happen to him. Near the top of my list was the idea of having a battalion of the NVA walk over our position in the dark with fixed bayonets and killing or capturing my young ass. When I heard the scream, my first thought was that the devils were on top of us. A flare popped and lit up the position for a moment before travelling above the canopy. In the monetary flash of light, we saw our medic rolling around on the ground with a small monkey on his head. The monkey had a pretty firm grip on the medic's hair and it only let go when one of the guys grabbed the little beast around its neck. The medic had been taking his turn on radio watch when the curious monkey had dropped down from a tree and landed on his head. Our medic never had a fondness for monkeys after that experience.

The prescribed length for this paper prevents me from inflicting upon you another dozen or so vignettes involving the plants and animals from my long ago war. I will end by saying that my jungle training more or less prepared me for sharing the jungle with Charlie. It did not, as you have heard, prepare me for all of the other things that lived there.

