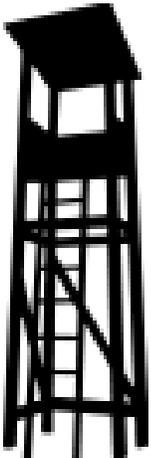


# The Tower

by  
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It starts somewhere deep. I can feel it grow, a soft oooh, oOoH, followed by a full scream by a stranger inside me. My wife startles and is terribly frightened. She shakes me and I laugh. I am no longer afraid of it, once I am awake.

There are circular mounds in the rice paddies of Vietnam. This one was just big enough for an antenna field circled by bunkers, circled by wire, circled by claymores, circled by a clear field of crossfire from the mounted M60's.



In the center of all this was a tower. Not a living soul ever bothered us.

Most nights I was alone in that tower, often looking through the night scope, staring through the night scope. Rice swaying in a breeze can look like many things through a night scope. It becomes an eerie glowing sickly green.

The strange things that happen during the day are very real and don't bother me. I watch ROK soldiers across the road dig graves and put a foot on the bodies, taking turns taking trophy pictures before they smash the bodies into too short holes. I think the bodies would rather be over here.

Another time we gather around. Sarge wants to show us his new modified flare. It explodes as it exits the barrel. I see blood flowing from between his eyes. Dazed and deafened I wander off, but someone has the wherewithal to radio for a medivac chopper. We grab a case of beer and gather a safe distance to watch it land, load and leave.

But night time is different. Whoever thought it was a good idea to build a base on a burial mound, a grave yard, didn't stick around to watch through a night scope the moving rice stalks spread and return to their upright swaying as the empty gap moves closer and closer to the line. A gust of wind? Rain begins. I hear sucking sounds of bare footsteps coming closer across the muddy interior of the compound. The sound of footsteps can barely be heard above sound of the rain, or maybe not heard at all. Why am I not relieved when the sound stops? Why do I shake and fear to look down the ladder? With my back to the tower wall, with my gun facing the top of the ladder, I wait for dawn to come. With the sun up I climb down the ladder, barely pausing to wonder about the muddy prints from the ground to a third of the way up the ladder. What, me worry? Only two more days here and I'm on my way home.



Sarge thought it would be a good idea to dig trenches between the bunkers, a little more than shoulder width and five feet deep. "If you find any bones just toss them back in," he laughed. We did as he said, but he didn't foresee the trenches filling with water when the rains came. What were we supposed to do if we needed them? Swim to our positions?

I think I'm at least as brave as the next guy. I remember a couple of us taking a duce and a half to Cam Rahn Bay to pick up supplies we didn't need. We rounded a curve and a group of Vietnamese soldiers were standing in the road. We stopped and they piled in the back and relaxed as we drove on. After several miles they cut loose with their weapons in the jungle on our right. I flinched but didn't jump, just leaned low and stuck my rifle out the window. They laughed and waved for us to stop. They got out and headed through the brush. We drove on. I tell this just to let you know I am braver than some.

Before guard duty tonight I chuck a couple of hand grenades in the trench. Two of guys see the fun and join in. They like playing war and watching the water fly in a high plume. I have my own reasons, but I learn tossing grenades into trenches doesn't help solve my problems. God, won't this rain ever stop? Tonight and tomorrow night in the tower and I'm headed home. I pace the 5X5 floor, scanning the perimeter and beyond. With a flash of lightening I can see the distant village of the people that used to come here. What do they think of our blasphemous use of their sacred land?

Later, with my hands over my ears, I curl in a ball in the corner of the tower and I pretend I hear nothing. Sometime the rain stops and sometime later the warming sun helps me uncurl. I climb from the tower aware in my retreat of the drying mud two thirds up the ladder.

I'd be damned if I was going to spend my last night there in the tower. Sarge owes me. Big time. He is crazy, but I never told anyone. I don't plan to if he just lets me spend my last night in my own bunker, eyes on the entrance, sky in the opening, gun at ready. Sarge may be crazy, but he is a good guy and understanding.



The sun came up. I took my gear and walked down the path to highway one. I looked back one last time, but didn't stop walking as I heard the yells and commotion and saw in the distance the pale face of the guard tower relief as he reached the top.



I don't scream in my sleep anymore. Georgia has learned to awaken when I begin to moan and then wake me. I know why she wakes me, but she doesn't know why I need to scream. She might have to do this two or three times before I fall back into a quiet but restless sleep. I'm glad she wakes me because I don't want to frighten her, but I do need to get the terror out of me.

There are circular mounds in the rice paddies of Vietnam. This one is now bare of wire, bunkers, and antennas. Not a living soul ever bothers visitors.

