SWORD AND SCALPEL

A Doctor Looks Back at Vietnam

Larry Rogers

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Sword and Scalpel
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Dedicated to:

Parker

Francie

Jane

Charlie Arch

Drake

and

Alex

And To the Memory of:

Major Albert G. Maroscher

First Lieutenant Randy G. Radigan

Sergeant Chuong

and

Cô Bay

True Heroes

CONTENTS

Foreword by General Brigadier General James E. Shelton, U.S. Army (Ret.) VII

1. Search and Destroy 1
2. Coming of Age 15
3. Fort Sam Houston, Texas 23
4. Lai Khe 35
5. A Party, a Revelation, and Studying History 67
6. Jungle School, Snakes, and Whorehouse Medicine 81
7. October 17—The Battle of Ông Tranh 95
8. Lazarus 117
9. Memorable Patients: A Commander, a Grandfather, and Two Sorry Bastards 133
10. Cô Bay's Story 159
11. 18th Surg: A Portable Hospital 175
12. A Tar Heel Tank 189
13. Jungle Capitalism and a Hollywood Christmas 201
14. The Medical Civil Action Program 219
15. Tet I: Thunder Four 231
16. Tet II: Lai Khe 249
17. After Tet 275
18. Murder, Confusion, and Moving On 287
19. Pleiku—71st Evacuation Hospital 303
20. Bill Fisher and Challenges Ahead 331

Epilogue 343

Appendices 357

About the Author 359

FOREWORD

Doctor Larry Rogers has written one of the most exciting books about war I have ever read. It is the fascinating true story of two wars in Vietnam—one about killing and destroying, the other about conserving human life. Saving lives under combat conditions demands great confidence and unerring performance. The author's spellbinding descriptions of managing medical challenges under enemy fire amount to a tumbling waterfall of medical maneuvers and procedures, each presented in a staccato style that will have readers scrambling to keep up. An example includes the amazing jerry-rigging of a device to convert a soldier's "dying heart" rhythm by connecting nearby scraps of wire and metal to a little-used generator. That episode proceeds with the tempo of a boxing match.

There is no pretentiousness here. *Sword and Scalpel* is full of stunning action in a do-or-die environment. Readers will find it difficult to control their emotions as lucid explanations of the actions of doctors, medics, and corpsmen fighting for life unfold and pile up. What could be more exciting than combat medics stealing life from death? This book is full of exactly that, told in a rapid-fire cadence.

—Brigadier General James E. Shelton, U.S. Army (Ret.), author of *The Beast Was Out There*

1.

SEARCH AND DESTROY

Beware the Ides of March.
Julius Caesar, Act I, scene ii

On March 15, 1968 I was pinch-hitting for the battalion surgeon of the 1st Battalion of the 16th Infantry Regiment (1/16) on a search-and-destroy mission somewhere north of Lai Khe, roughly half-way between Saigon and the Cambodian border. A "battalion minus" operation involved combining two of three rifle companies (typically approaching one hundred men per company) plus a weapons platoon (roughly two dozen infantrymen with machine guns, mortars, and RPGs, or rocket propelled grenades). Division policy dictated that a medical officer be part of any operation under direct command of the battalion's commanding officer as a means of enhancing troop morale. The thinking was that infantrymen would expect the same access to medical care as the CO. I was skeptical about what a soldier-doctor could do in the boondocks that an experienced combat medic couldn't, but nobody asked my opinion. Dust Off helicopters typically retrieved casualties to a fully equipped medical facility within twenty minutes from almost anywhere.

We moved out at 0830, single file, spaced five-to-seven yards apart to minimize casualties from a single incoming round. I was to stay within voice-communication distance of the CO, but instinctively I understood the danger of being too close to him. Generally the CO was immediately ahead of his RTO (radio telephone operator) in the column. Charlie was trained to search for the RTO's ten-foot radio antenna waving back and forth above what vegetation there was. That made the RTO as vulnerable as the point man, the fearless guy at the head the column. For Charlie to lob a grenade at the RTO could paralyze our entire operation. Plus, I understood that being too close to the CO or his RTO could be hazardous to my health.

"I hate this damn quiet," the guy in front of me growled at nobody in particular.

"Roger that, good buddy," somebody replied. "The birds always know where Charlie's at."

"Why don't you guys knock it the hell off," snapped somebody behind me."

I knew I was scared. I was on my first patrol. I had a right to be jumpy, but these guys were veterans at this shit.

We heard a bird or two over the next couple of hours but found no sign of Charlie. By 1100 we came onto a room-sized dugout nestled beneath a roof of limbs, brush, and dried mud. Its walls were reinforced by split saplings. It seemed to be an abandoned school, at least a classroom. But there was no sign of recent habitation. It was strange. We had to be miles from anything like a village.

Mildewed, hand-written booklets were stacked on a rough-hewn wooden table at one end of the room. Subject titles and owners' names were handwritten in Vietnamese on the covers. Inside were pages of lists of vocabulary words in neat columns, one in French, another in English, followed by a short phase in Vietnamese. The writing suggested a soft-lead pencil. The words were simple, like rice, water, rain, et al. Another booklet, presumably a math primer, was easier to understand. It listed multiplication and division tables, each figure and character precisely inscribed. The vocabulary lists seemed to be appropriate for persons of any age, but the arithmetic had to be aimed at nine- and ten-year-olds.

A reddish-brown carving of Buddha was perched on a miniature mantle projecting from a wall. It was almost a foot in height, of stunning workmanship. The statue had long, flat ears, a patrician nose, and delicate lips. The eyes were vaguely closed, and a tiny crack extended from above an eyebrow to one cheek, then reappearing briefly at the breast, and again across a clothed forearm, finally widening at the base. I could understand finding a religious relic in the middle of nowhere, but this seemed truly a work of art.

Finding tangible signs of culture, ambition, and belief deep in a war-torn forest got my attention. Who had lived here and when? The primers suggested multiple families, but where were they now, and why had they left?

With a sense of guilt I dumped two of the notebooks and the carving into my medical bag. Technically it was stealing, but I couldn't resist. To me they were abandoned property, amazing souvenirs.

When we stopped for chow I got the bright idea to back into the trunk of a tree and ease myself into a seat in the underbrush. It seemed reasonable enough so I ignored the looks of others as I dug into a can of pears with my pocket knife. Within minutes fire ants swarmed inside my fatigues and spread up my back and down my thighs. The guys around me broke into laughter as their doctor-for-the-week hopped up and down, slapping himself in the ass.

Hours later the column descended an overgrown bank toward a river twisting and turning in the sunlight. Soon water cooled my feet as I scanned the trees and vines ascending the opposite bank. I couldn't imagine a better spot for an ambush, with the command group wading and no cover in sight. They were sitting ducks for Charlie, and I wasn't far behind.

The current was gentle at knee-deep, leading me to loosen the shoulder webbing to let my medical bag float gently downstream. It was full of dressings, morphine and lesser analgesics, IV tubing, antibiotics, various topical ointments, a mini-surgical kit containing scalpels, hemostats, extra blades, sutures, and tracheotomy canulae. As I watched the soldier in front of me sink to his waist, though, I had a decision to make. He was a head taller than me, and there was no question I couldn't manage my weapon and the bag at the same time when I reached where he was.

As water reached waist-level I could still monitor the bank on the other side. So far there was no movement, but Charlie could be almost anywhere up there, high in the trees or prone in the underbrush.

When the point man made it across, the likelihood of an ambush would fall precipitously. Once in the stream though, monitoring the progress of forward elements amounted to little more than a guess. When the current picked up, I assumed I was almost a third of the way across. Then the water rose sharply, requiring more energy and focus to keep my balance and feel with my feet for river bottom holes and boulders. I cinched up the shoulder webbing, pulling the medical supplies closer to me. My weapon was now my number-one priority. For the fiftieth time since breakfast I made certain the firing mode was set to "semi" rather than "auto." I had never fired an M-16 on automatic and had no idea how quick the magazine could empty, a situation I would avoid whatever it took. I'd take my chances firing one round at a time over running the risk of carrying an empty weapon.

As I got deeper in the stream, it dawned on me that a single misstep could leave me swimming. I wouldn't lose any medical supplies—however soggy they got—but my M-16 could definitely become a casualty. Even glancing at the far bank was unthinkable.

Finally, just as water threatened to lap into my armpits, it began to recede. Seconds later I made out the RTO's antenna ahead as LTC Benedict began to make his way up an unseen trail. He was the tallest guy in the battalion, and he was carrying his helmet under an arm. I did a double-take as I watched the reflection of the sun from the top of his bald head. I felt enormous relief. I knew no sniper would pass up Benedict for a shot at me, and Benedict wasn't worried about a damn thing.

…

An hour later the pace slowed, then stopped. Word came back that we were about to enter a mine field. I didn't know the first thing about land mines, but I imagined a GI ahead sweeping a Geiger counter back and forth, with the rest of us playing follow-the-leader. I mumbled a prayer of thanks that I was nowhere near the head of the column.

I was sweating again. My fatigues, long since dried out from fording the river, were again soaked. We were on dry, hard-packed ground now, with little underbrush to hide a mine. I no longer dwelled on the broad shoulders ahead. Instead I focused on his boots, noting precisely where he set them down. I did the best I could to match his foot prints.

Some time later, when the "all clear" got back to us, I began to relax. I was weary of worrying. Eventually I calmed down and stopped imagining danger. But the guys around me were still quiet. I wondered what they were thinking.

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We returned to the NDP (night defense position) an hour before sundown with nothing to show for our day's work. We had seen not a single VC and no weapon had been discharged. Cooking fires blazed, and the smell of steak was in the air. Some guys climbed into the field shower contraptions but I planted myself at the front of my tent and peeled off my boots and socks. I sat there a long time, wondering what tomorrow would bring.

•••

At shortly past 1600 hours on March 16 we escaped the glare of the sun as we entered a stand of trees. The underbrush thinned out, making walking easy for the first time all day. It seemed a peaceful place, possibly even a safe place. Trees limited any sniper's fields of fire. That was always a plus. Soon we would be back at the NDP, ending my second day of patrol and still no contact with Charlie.

I had no idea where we were or why we were here. I concluded that contacting Charlie would be a matter of chance, pure guesswork. An infantryman's duty amounted to keeping on the move and dealing with whatever turned up.

The pace was relaxed for the first time all day, giving me the idea we were taking a break while continuing the march. We continued to maintain column integrity but even that seemed relaxed. My mind wandered as I searched out the treetops. It had become a habit. There was nothing new up there, and any VC on the ground had little cover and dozens of tree trunks between him and us. It was a reassuring thought.

The first shots rang out from deep in the woods to our left. Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Ungodly sounds. There were four: flat and crisp, like tree trunks split by unseen strokes of lightning. They were nothing like the sounds of firing down range at Fort Bragg.

The big guy ahead was down, six or seven paces away. His helmet tumbled then rolled toward the sound of the firing. He was flat on his face and perfectly still, his fatigues beginning to saturate with blood. Almost certainly he had a through-and-through chest wound, and dead already.

I heard a groan behind me. It was deep, guttural. On my belly, I twisted to face it. The soldier was face up, motionless, with blood spreading across his belly. He made not another sound. He was gut-shot, and miles from an operating room. I had heard the last sound he would ever make. If he wasn't dead, he would be in less than a minute. He was even closer than the guy ahead of me.

Hugging the ground, I twisted back toward Charlie, heartbeats pounding in my ears. Were those bastards on the ground or in the trees?

Voices around me were sporadic, urgent yet with thundering calmness. Some guys fanned out to the right, others in the opposite direction, their weapons discharging brief bursts. Nobody went directly at Charlie.

I was terrified. The bastard who knocked out the guys ahead of me and behind me could see me too, at least where I'd been standing. Was there more than one? There had to be at least two, real marksmen, and not shy about flaunting it. I was committed to staying alive, and that meant presenting no easy target. I pressed myself into the ground, hardly breathing, my heart pounding.

The soldier ahead remained frozen in place, still face down, awkwardly covering his weapon, his arms at weird angles beneath him. His fatigues were soaked in blood.

I inched my legs apart at an angle to Charlie's line of fire, my chin lightly touching the stubby undergrowth, then slipped my weapon into a firing position, fighting off terror. Finally I nestled my face into the dirt and lay there, blocking out everything. The shame would come later.

…

Later I was aware of LTC Benedict behind me, standing tall and straight, his steel pot again tucked under an arm, sunbeams streaming between the trees behind him, gleaming off his bald head. *Damn, Colonel, get down!* But I could not utter a sound. Was he out of his mind?

He was smiling, pure joy in his eyes. He had to be crazy. Did he think he was bullet-proof?

"You okay, Doc?" he said. "You hit?"

I struggled to my feet. I tried to answer him, but words would not come. "I'm fine, sir," I mumbled finally. "I'm just . . . It happened so fast . . ." I couldn't finish. What was I trying to say, anyway?

"You'll be okay, Doc," he said, slapping me on the back. "You'll be fine."

Maybe, I thought. I doubted it. I was no longer afraid, only ashamed of my fear, the paralyzing terror I had felt. It was behind me now, for a while.

It was the best and worst day of my life, the best because I was still alive, the worst as the realization sunk in that I was not who I had hoped I was.

…

A helicopter arrived, collecting our two dead. Benedict informed me we had killed two VC. Two? I'd missed it. I had been focused on the VC ahead of me. Had they been holed up somewhere and decided to take as many of us as possible before they were discovered? Or did their comrades withdraw as we approached, leaving two to face certain death? Charlie was brave and cunning, but he did not fight when the odds were against him. When I finally formulated a question, Benedict was gone.

…

After chow I sat outside my tent, trying to make sense of my thoughts, replaying what had happened out there. I knew sleep wouldn't come for a while.

A young soldier appeared before me, the last rays of sunlight behind him. I could make out a single bar on his collar, but his face and name-tape were in shadow.

"I'm Lieutenant Peeler, Doc. I was behind you back there," he said calmly. "Second platoon." When I didn't reply, he continued, "You did good." Then he stood there, motionless.

What was he talking about? I got up, and faced him, trying to decide whether he expected me to shake his hand.

"I saw a new medic get himself killed once," the soldier said, "thinking about being a hero, trying to help a dead man."

"He must have been very brave," I said finally, forcing a grin.

"He was a fool. Your duty is to stay alive. We need you. We'll do the damn fighting."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," I said when it was clear he had nothing else to say.

He left, and I don't think I ever saw him again. In twenty minutes I was sound asleep.

…

The next day, at mid-morning, we came onto a tiny community of friendly Vietnamese in a wooded area. The surroundings were beautiful—dense jungle on one side but solid underfoot. Mangoes hung all around. I needed no engraved invitation. I suppose it could have tasted better if it wasn't so warm, but I doubted it.

There seemed to be several families, with kids of all ages. We stopped to speak to them. Through our interpreter, we exchanged greetings and began to quiz them about VC they might have seen or known about. They gave no useful information, but they pointed to an old man who hobbled behind them. His foot was grossly deformed.

He was short and hump-backed, but he possessed a beautiful toothless smile. He leaned on the club of a stick he had fashioned from a limb. His foot was wrapped in perfectly hideous, rotting rags. They were damp, almost black, and wreaked a wretched smell.

Gently I unwrapped the nasty dressing and began to examine the old man's foot. It was massively swollen, and covered by dark, weeping skin that extended to within inches of his knee. Swollen toes projected from a misshapen ankle. I'd never seen anything like it. It was thick and oddly firm, but I could feel nothing clearly bone-like anywhere.

There was little I could do. It wasn't just that we were in the middle of nowhere; I doubted this man's ankle would be salvageable anywhere in the world. He needed an amputation in the worst sort of way. Septicemia and death lay ahead, maybe within a week. His nutritional state promised he would not linger.

Carefully I cleansed his wound with several quarts of water from an earthenware vessel and cut away bits of dead and infected tissue, then slathered on a layer of antibiotic ointment. In my medical bag I was surprised to find a medium-sized tube of something that looked like Unna paste, had the same texture and scent anyway . I applied a thick layer of it, as I'd been trained to treat ulcerated wounds of venous insufficiency. The old man's neighbors watched in silence. Then I wrapped his extremity in layers of cotton pads and gauze, fashioning it into more or less a respectable dressing, topped off with an elastic Ace athletic wrap. Under ideal conditions it might keep the wound clean and almost dry for two or three days.

"You must keep this dressing clean and dry," I explained to him, then demonstrated how he should keep his foot elevated as much as possible. His family and neighbors listened in wonder, their looks suggesting I had performed a miracle. My treatment would be no more effective than what an ancient shaman might have rendered.

"This will take many months to heal," I went on. "You need to have another doctor do essentially what I've done today, in a few days, less than a week for certain. Without additional medical care this wound will not heal. It will get much worse."

They listened with dazed looks, as though everything I'd said was perfectly reasonable, like another American medicine-man would show up in a few days and others in succession. Many of the old man's family and friends stepped up to shake my hand, some holding it reverently, embarrassing me further for what little I had done. It was all I *could* do, but it would amount to nothing. I felt like a fraud.

…

On March 18, at a little past 1100 hours, we took some mortar fire toward the rear but well wide of the column. No one suffered so much as a scratch. We promptly deployed into a defensive posture, shifting me to a platoon separate from the command group.

VC were spotted just over a hill some 150 meters away. The absence of trees and jungle gave us an excellent view for five hundred meters, all the way to the bend of a narrow stream. A sandy-haired lieutenant, his radio squawking for all to hear, pointed at the hilltop. "They're on the reverse slope, probably spread-eagled," he said. "No cover. They got no place to run."

He unfolded his map and spread it across my back, and studied it in silence. In a few minutes I felt him jot down a series numbers against my back. Then he was back on his radio, calling in the co-ordinates he'd calculated. I took a deep breath, imagining what was about to happen. The lieutenant seemed quite sure of himself, but I hoped he'd checked his calculations a couple of times. We weren't that far from the target. When he finished, his jaw muscles flickered briefly as he refolded his map. "Ordnance on the way." he said.

Four or five minutes later, a jet—an F4 Phantom, I was informed later—gleamed in the sunlight at a high rate of speed. He was high in the sky, moving from right to left. Minutes ago another twenty-three-year-old kid had converted the blond lieutenant's eight-digit coordinates to a point on his Air Force map, and now he was comparing the landmarks on his map with what he could see from four- or five-thousand feet. In less than a minute he was gone.

Some time later—it seemed a long time—the F4 reappeared, this time screaming from the treetops behind us. The noise was deafening.

The pilot bore in on the target and released his ordinance, ascending directly over the hill. His bombs fell with a forward momentum and did not tumble. There were at least three or four, maybe six. Flames flickered with the explosions, spreading like lava across the hilltop, the earth quivering at our feet. Brief flames gave way to black smoke that remained dense for long seconds, finally thinning and ascending.

Cheers went up all around but I only stared in awe. Small flames flickered at the top of the hill.

The battle was brief and done. I thought about it a long time. With that kind of skill and fire power winning this war would be only a matter of time. But hindsight would prove the matter to be more complicated.