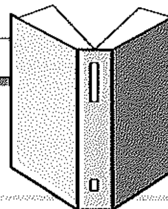
LITERATURE ACTIVITY



# Experiences of a Young Soldier in Vietnam

Charles Coe recorded his experiences as Marine lieutenant in Vietnam because he believed that "what happened on a daily basis was important to record. Not the 'big' things historians write about." In the excerpt below from *Young Man in Vietnam,* Coe describes his first patrol.

*As you read, think about how this experience, representative of thousands of Vietnam War experiences, may have affected those who served in this war.*

You only have a few hours to ready the patrol—so elaborate preparations and rehearsals are out. You check your equipment. There will be little demolition work so there's no need to carry satchel charges and plastic explosives. You will carry extra ammunition instead. But you don't want to burden your men with excess gear. You have a long way to go and you have to be prepared to move fast. You will wear soft caps and jungle uniforms instead of helmets and flak jackets. You check your men and brief them and joke with them. And you hope the war will be over before you leave. . . .

It's a hot day. The monsoons are months away. Your mind begins to wander in spite of your efforts to concentrate on the things you have to do as patrol leader. The soles of your feet sting as the heat from the ground works through your boots. . . .

Your Nung guide speaks very little English, but he has worked with Americans before and he understands the hand and arm signals you worked out at the CP. He is taller than the Vietnamese and with his shaven head he looks like a Malay pirate. He walks on the balls of his feet and is very quiet and watchful. You decide he won't give you away. But you keep your eye on him.

By the first nightfall you have come almost twelve miles. You move your patrol off the trail and up a little finger of ground. You have them fan out into a 360-degree perimeter for the night. No fires are allowed. Smoke could give your position away. There is no talking. You designate a brief time for opening C rations and eating. The cans will be buried in the morning. After you have whispered your instructions to the squad leaders you settle down. It is still hot and will be all night. There is nothing to do but endure it. . . .

Everyone is ready to go before first light. No one has slept very much. You finish the last of your G.I. water. You motion to your squad leaders to have someone collect canteens and fill them in the stream near the ridge. They will have to last the day. . . .

Your patrol moves through the clearing and is swallowed up by the jungle again. It is very hot now—well over 100 degrees. You begin to feel dizzy, but you look at the ground and force yourself to walk ahead. By late afternoon you can hardly see anymore. The sweat drops into your eyes and stings them as fast as you mop your brow. Your clothes are soaked and they cling to your body and scrape it raw. You halt the patrol and have the corpsman issue salt tablets to the men. The Nung isn't sweating at all. He just hunkers down and grins.

Some of your men have been sick. You feel sick yourself. But you know you are close to your staging area and you want to reach it by nightfall. The troops can rest there. . . .

You reach your staging area just at dusk. The men are too tired to eat. They just lie down and go to sleep. After posting sentries, you take your squad leaders and the Nung and move off to recon the guerrilla camp. . . .

You wake your squad leaders at midnight and have them prepare their men. You are anxious to get it over with. You are too tired to think about casualties or ambushes or traps. The mission is the only thing that matters. You have your plan and you will not change it. You have no imagination left to think up a new one.

Moving at night is always slow. And this close to the enemy it is slower than usual. The terrain is rough, and you have to concentrate all your efforts on it. You forget about the enemy for a while. But at every snapping branch you remember why you're here. By this time you are committed. Your memories of the mutilated

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bodies of captured Marines, your thoughts of home, your desire to do your job—all are lost in the simple logic that after this operation is over you will rest. One way or another.

The night is so dark you have to maintain physical contact between the men or the column will be broken. You can hear the stream in the distance and you think about the enemy sentry. The water is very cold when you reach the stream. After walking in it for a short while your feet grow numb and you seem very clumsy trying to feel your way along.

*"In less than five minutes there are no more guerrillas—there are no more huts—there is no more firing. The camp smells of smoke and gunpowder and death."*

You smell the base camp before you see a smoldering cooking fire and the outline of some huts framed against the night sky. All the enemy appear to be asleep. You halt the patrol and your squad leaders take their men to the preplanned positions. There is nothing to do now but wait until dawn—about an hour away. . . .

There is a stirring in the enemy camp and you realize you have been dozing. You curse yourself and look at your watch. It is ten minutes past BMNT (begin morning nautical twilight)—it is first light. The guerrilla base camp is a maze of shadows and huts—all the grayish color of the early morning. You are with the base of fire and the signal for the attack is to be the firing of your automatic rifle. You notice some of your men looking at you and you nod at them and push off the safety.

You pick a hut on the extreme left of the camp and rest it on the front sight blade of your rifle. You press the trigger and squeeze off a long burst. The hut shivers and pieces of it fly off at all angles.

The morning explodes with the deafening stutter of automatic rifle fire. Enemy soldiers fall out of their huts and run a few steps before a burst cuts them down. Someone has kicked over a pen of chickens and they are flapping about adding their presence to the chaos. . . .

In less than five minutes there are no more guerrillas—there are no more huts—there is no more firing. The camp smells of smoke and gunpowder and death.

Your troops drag the enemy bodies into a row and you photograph them for intelligence purposes. The bodies are searched for maps and papers. They won't need them now.

The Nung slips quietly up to your side, grinning, and you remember the enemy sentry. He shows you a small Chinese carbine the VC like to carry. You don't have to worry about the sentry.

At last you can call for helicopters to take you back to the battalion area. And to rest. You have taken three casualties—none serious. One man stepped into a *punji* trap and tore his leg and foot. The others were wounded by their own grenade fragments. There are eighteen enemy dead. . . .

You burn what is left of the huts and throw tear gas down some escape tunnel entrances. But nothing comes out. You leave the enemy dead behind. You don't have time to bury them and they will have a good effect on their compatriots. They won't be quite as sure of their safety anymore. They won't be as good soldiers for their worrying.

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## Questions to Think About

1. What were some of the conditions men on patrol were forced to endure?
2. **Predicting Consequences** How do you think this experience and others like it might affect a person who served during this war?

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