

Time's tickin', Davy Boy. Been shot through the feet, and your luck's running out.
by Tim O'Brien | Jul 01 '00

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON, July 16, 1969. In four days, Neil Armstrong would walk on the moon. But now, a world away, in the mountains west of Chu Lai, Second Lieutenant David Todd lay in the grass along a shallow, fast-moving river called the Song Tra Ky, badly wounded, thinking Dear God, listening to people die all around him. Hector Ortiz had been shot in the face. The boy was dead, or seemed to be, but his transistor radio still crackled with the evening news out of Da Nang. Apollo 11 had lifted off that morning. There were prayer services in Sioux City, progress reports in Times Square, and all across the republic, in small towns and big towns, under bright summer skies, crowds gathered in front of appliance stores to witness the latest updates from Mission Control. Vince Mustin was crying. He had been shot in the stomach. Up ahead, on the far side of the river, Staff Sergeant Bus Dexter yelled something and crawled toward a clump of boulders. He almost made it. David watched the big man push to his feet and begin to run, three or four clumsy steps, then something exploded behind him and lifted him up and jerked him sideways and dropped him dead on the riverbank. Buddy Bond and Kaz Maples had died in the first burst of gunfire. Happy James had been shot in the throat. Doc Paladino had vanished entirely. Minutes ago, during the platoon's rest break, Doc had been kneeling a few meters behind David in the grass, listening to Ortiz's radio, grinning and shaking his head—"Fuckin' moon," he'd said—and then there was a crashing sound, followed by a glare, and Doc Paladino had been sucked away into the tall, powdery grass. Others were still dying. David could hear them making animal noises along the riverbank and in the brush behind him. He had no idea what to do. He had been shot through both feet. He rolled sideways through the grass, toward the river, then covered his head. It was his nineteenth day in country; he was partly terrified, partly amazed. It had not seemed possible that he could be shot, or shot so quickly, or shot through both feet. The noise amazed him, too, and the way Doc Paladino had been sucked away dead, and how much his feet hurt, and how Ortiz's little transistor radio kept playing while people died. Touchdown was scheduled for 8:27 P.M., Greenwich mean time, July 20, at a spot in the universe called the Sea of Tranquillity.

David was too afraid to move.

It occurred to him that he was an officer, and that he should do something, except there was nothing to do, nothing to shoot back at, just the dry, brittle grass all around him.

Ten or fifteen meters away, Ortiz's transistor radio played a transmission from Apollo 11.

Somebody near the river was laughing.

There were Vietnamese voices, chattering sounds.

For a few seconds the gunfire seemed to ease off, the way a rain ends, but then it started up again, louder and much closer, and David told himself to move. He took a breath, crawled forward a few feet, stopped, listened, and then crawled again. It seemed absurd to him that he could be shot the way he was. The pain was terrible, but not nearly as bad as his fear, and so he squeezed his eyes shut and talked inside himself and kept moving until he reached a pair of saplings at the center of the clearing. Oddly, even with the gunfire, he could still hear Ortiz's radio. Vince Mustin was no longer sobbing, and along the river, where most of the platoon had been trapped, the return fire had died out. The Vietnamese were yipping, sometimes laughing. Now and then a single gunshot rang out. Mopping up, David thought. And it then became evident to him, for the first time, that he would almost certainly die here, and that he would die alone, no buddies, no Maria Dempsey, shot through both feet.

Panic made him start moving again. He dragged himself through the grass, mostly on his belly, and after what seemed an impossibly long time, he reached a thicket of reeds along the Song Tra Ky. The rest of the platoon had to be somewhere downstream. An hour ago he had allowed half his men to march off for a swim; back then the universe had still been a universe.

David wiggled into the muck, hugged himself, briefly pictured his own corpse. He also pictured Maria Dempsey. No doubt she would show up at his funeral. She would drape a flag over his coffin and blink hard and feel guilty. She would do her very best to cry.

The pictures made him want to live.

Fifty meters away, barely audible now, Ortiz's little transistor radio kept droning on about mankind's destiny, how Apollo 11 had brought the world together. None of it seemed real: not the newscast, not the moon. "Come on, partner, hang tight," a voice said, smooth and southern, a low Texas drawl. Crazy, David thought. The voice seemed to be coming from Ortiz's radio. He pressed himself down into the reeds, trying

to think clearly, but all he could manage was the hope that he would not leak to death through his feet, that he would not be finished off like the others.

At one point he heard Vietnamese voices close by. He smelled something fishy and sweet, maybe hair tonic. He imagined a rifle muzzle against his temple. "Hey, Maria," he said, and then felt himself slipping away.

Later, he heard himself mumbling about baseball.

Later still, he watched his feet being eaten by ants, a whole colony.

THE ANTS AWAKENED HIM just before dark. He lay still for a few moments, and then the pain in his feet hit him hard. He sat up, brushed the ants away, pulled a canteen from his belt, drank it empty, rubbed his eyes, stared up at a purple sky. There were insect sounds, a few frogs, nothing else. The temptation was to sleep again, to float away, and he was surprised, almost frightened, to hear a polished Texas voice say,

"Let's go, my man. Move out. Time's tickin', ants lickin'."

David scanned the tropical twilight.

"I'm serious, Davy. Move."

Dark had set in by the time he dragged himself back into the grassy clearing. Already, the place had the feel of memory. He followed the sound of Hector Ortiz's transistor radio, which now filled the night with Sly and the Family Stone. Ortiz's corpse lay nearby. Closer to the river, in a rough semicircle, were the bodies of Kaz Maples and Buddy Bond and Vince Mustin and a young Pfc. whose name he could not remember. They were all dead, pale and plastic, as if they had never lived, but to be sure David examined each of them for a pulse. Afterward, he sat and listened. He was twenty-four years old. He was a baseball player, not a soldier. Part of him wanted to weep, or go crazy, but he was too afraid and too bewildered even for craziness, and Sly was spooking him.

He switched off the radio, put it in his pocket.

Two notions struck him at once. He knew for a fact that he would die here. He knew for another fact that it was mostly his own fault.

THE NIGHT PASSED IN FOG. Sometimes he prayed, sometimes he surrendered to the pain in his feet. Periodically, when he thought he could tolerate it, David tightened up the laces on his boots, hoping this might stop the bleeding. His thoughts came at him in color, like fireworks: a flash from childhood, then darkness, then another flash that opened up into some half-forgotten face from college. He saw Maria Dempsey dancing in the Darton Hall College gymnasium. He saw his mother hanging up clothes in the backyard, his father planting a lilac bush, his brother Mickey tossing a baseball at the garage.

Like getting shot, David reasoned.

None of it cohered.

Late in the night he switched on Ortiz's little transistor radio. He kept the volume low, the Sony tight to his ear, and listened to a tired-sounding master sergeant in Da Nang chat about the Apollo moon shot. "No potholes, no bumps in the road," the announcer said, "and we got ourselves a nice wrinkle-free trip to the rock. So all you troopers out there, all you wee-hour trippers and dippers and war-wiggies and scaredy-cats, you can take heart in that." The man chuckled. "The technology works, guys."

AT FIRST LIGHT DAVID MADE a systematic search of the grassy clearing. He found what was left of Doc Paladino. It was a quiet morning, perfectly still, like a snapshot of reality. Even the grass did not move. Off to the west, David could hear the frothy bubble of the river; otherwise there was no sound at all. He opened up Doc Paladino's medical pouch, pulled out twelve Syrettes of morphine, shot himself once in the thigh, popped a penicillin tablet, taped three square bandages over the holes in his boots, slung the canvas pouch over his shoulder, picked up Doc's M16, and began the long crawl down to the Song Tra Ky.

It took him well over an hour to cover two hundred meters. Twice, he fell into something very much like sleep; another time he lay watching a pair of jets passing high overhead, their trails perfectly parallel in a neon-red sky. When he reached the river, the morphine had taken him into a new world. It was no longer a war, and he was not shot and not alone and not leaking to death through the feet. He almost smiled. He filled his canteens, took a nap, joined Maria on the dance floor, married her afterward, planted lilac bushes in their backyard.

The midday heat brought him out of it. Presently, more or less with resolve, he decided to move downstream. The rest of the platoon had to be hunkered down somewhere. He could not be the only survivor—his luck had never been that good, or that bad.

After a few minutes David slipped into the shallow river. The cold felt good for a moment, then it hit the bones of his feet, and his heart clenched up, and both legs seemed to snap, and something blunt and

icy struck him between the eyes. For a few seconds all he knew was his own biology. The river was at most three feet deep, barely a river, but even so, the muscular current spun him over and dragged him facedown along the bottom. He felt himself passing out, and then he did, and it was some time later when David found himself tangled up in a web of roots along the bank.

He sat up in a foot of water. Directly to his left, almost touching him, Private Borden Manning bobbed on his back, his face gone, the current gently fishtailing him against a big gray boulder. Several others floated nearby, caught up in roots and rocks. Sergeant Gil Reiss lay dead on the bank. Tap Hammerlee and Van Skederian and Alvin Campbell lay side by side farther down the bank, as if on display, their boots stripped away, and their feet, too, the stumps shiny and reddish-purple in the lurid sunshine.

There were butterflies along the bank. The bodies were naked and badly swollen. They had been killed naked, frolicking, like a Boy Scout troop.

David pulled himself out of the water and moved into the shade of a little betel palm. The carnage was bewildering. He took a Syrette from his pocket, stuck himself again, and wiped himself dry with his shirt. White-and-yellow butterflies circled all around him. He danced with Maria Dempsey for a while, scooped up a sharp ground ball, wept at the pain in his legs and at how alone he was and how afraid of dying. Later, he began to count up the dead. Twenty-four hours ago, when they'd stopped for a break in the grassy clearing, there had been nineteen of them altogether, a stripped-down platoon. Now there was no one at all. Not even himself, because the morphine had made him into a child, and because he was dying fast. And it was his own fault. He had failed to put out flank security; he had permitted half the platoon to move down to the river for a swim; he had said nothing, and done nothing, when Ortiz turned on his transistor radio to get news about the moon shot. Taken together, or taken separately, these blunders had violated even the most minimal field discipline.

So stupid, he thought.

There was no longer any point in moving. He should be hungry, but he wasn't. He should also come up with a plan, something smart, but all he could do was shut his eyes and wonder when he would be dead.

It was not a war now.

A war stopped being a war, David decided, when you were shot through both feet.

"SEVENTY-SIX HOURS AND COUNTING, all systems go," said the tired announcer in Da Nang. It was late evening, July 17, 1969. Ortiz's transistor radio was still working, even after its passage through the river. "Two days and a wake-up, then we check the place out for little green communists." The man sighed a heavy, exhausted sigh. "So come on, fellas, let's finish up this two-bit police action. Time to hit the beaches of Tranquillity."

In other news, Rod Carew had stolen home for the seventh time in his career.

JUST AFTER DAWN, A PAIR OF helicopters swept in low over the Song Tra Ky. Maybe it was David's imagination, or maybe the morphine, but for an instant he found himself looking up into the eyes of a young door gunner, rapt, prep-school blue, caught up in the murder of it all. David tried to raise a hand, but the effort made him dizzy. It was all a blur, part of some distant world, and after a few seconds even the blur was gone.

THE PAIN CAME AND WENT. Sometimes it was nothing. Other times it exceeded physics.

In the heat of midday, David took out his seventh Syrette, punched up, dragged himself down to the river, slipped in, and waited for his feet to quiet down. He tried not to look at the bodies all around him. The smell was enough. He lay on his back in the shallow stream, his shoulders against the bank, and for twenty minutes he let the icy water bubble over his legs and swollen boots. The morphine helped. He was dying, he knew, but his thoughts were baseball thoughts, Maria thoughts, and the sky was a smooth, glossy blue. After a time he turned on Ortiz's transistor radio. He propped it up on the bank, closed his eyes, and hummed along to familiar tunes, sliding up and down the scales of his own puny history. If there was a sad part to this, he thought, it was that his life had gone mostly unlived, all prospect. Maria, for instance. And also baseball. In his senior year at Darton Hall, he had been scouted by a couple of big-show clubs, the Twins and Phillies, and with some hard work he might have made it all the way. He had the good glove, the hot bat. For a few minutes, with morphine clarity, David Todd replayed a number of highlights in his head. He was back at shortstop, gunning it to first, and then soon afterward he was married to Maria Dempsey, who adored him, and they had a couple of kids and a nice stucco house in Edina, and in his reveries he would not be dead for another fifty years.

IN HIS SENIOR YEAR AT Darton Hall College, David had tried to instruct Maria in some of the finer points of baseball: the intentional walk, the delayed pickoff, the hit-and-run. He had little luck. Maria was

an art major; she had trouble caring. "It's what I'm good at," he'd tell her. "I can't see why you won't pay attention."

"I do pay attention."

"What's a bunt?"

"A bunt? It's like..., it's sort of like a dribble, right?"

"Right," he'd say. "Sort of."

Sometimes Maria would laugh. Other times, though, she would murmur a word or two about men and their macho games. "I'll pay attention," she once said, "if you explain how baseball feeds the orphans in India."

"It doesn't," he'd said. "Does art?"

"No. Art feeds something else. Come on, now, let's not fight, David. Tell me about those huge, gorgeous bunts of yours."

And then they would both laugh. Even so, he could see the dullness in her eyes as he talked about the function of a bunt, how in certain ways it could be as beautiful and fulfilling as any brushstroke. Maria would listen and nod, but in the end she would remember almost nothing.

This frightened him. It made him wonder about their future, what love meant to her, how long it would be before she executed her own hit-and-run.

"THE TIME," SAID THE ANNOUNCER in Da Nang, "is fifteen hundred hours on the dot, sharp as shitola, and the mercury here in downtown Slope City reads—holy moly, this can't be right—a fuse-poppin' 97 degrees." There were then sound effects: the announcer chugging down a glass of water. "What a war-hot as home! So all you boonie rats out there, I want you to gobble down the salt tabs, keep pumpin' in those fluids. That's rock-solid advice from yours truly, Master Sergeant Johnny Ever." He paused and chuckled. "Which goes double for you dudes up in the mountains, the weak and wounded, poor fuckups like David Todd."

Then came the news.

Apollo 11 was thirty-two hours from touchdown.

IN LATE AFTERNOON DAVID eased off his left boot. Blood trickled from a hole in his instep and from a larger hole just above the toes. He filled his socks with gauze from Doc Paladino's pouch, laced the boot as tight as it would go, took four penicillin tablets, and passed out. He awoke in the deep of night. The pain had moved through both ankles, up into the shinbones, and for a time he listened to himself converse with his feet. He talked baby talk. He made ludicrous bargains with God.

Later, he tried to sort out the realities.

There were five remaining Syrettes of morphine, which he hoped to conserve for when things got worse. He told himself to wait twenty minutes. He looked at his wristwatch, counting off the seconds, but after one sweep of the hand he shrugged and shot himself up. In the dark, there was the stench of mildew and dead friends. He could smell his own feet rotting.

"HERE'S THE STRAIGHT POOP," said the announcer in Da Nang. "Baseball speaking, you would've made it. Tough rookie year, I'll be honest, but after that... I don't want to depress you."

"After that what?" said David.

The announcer made a commiserating sound with his tongue. "Well, hey, we're talking four seasons in the big circus. Nothing spectacular, I'll grant you, but what the hell. It ain't Little League."

David was silent. He reached out and turned the tuning knob on Ortiz's little radio.

There was static, then laughter.

"Nice try, my man. Thing is, nobody dials out Johnny Ever. I'm like—how do I say this?—I'm network. I'm global. I'm Walter Cronkite gone planetary."

"Right," David said.

"As rain, my friend. Exactly as rain." The announcer sighed. "Anyhow, like I say, four sweet seasons, it was in the cards. Real pity, you know? Sad, sad, sad." He paused. "Anything else you need to know?" "Go away."

"Want to hear about your love life?"

"Just stop."

"Yeah, if only." Briefly, the man seemed to ponder the metaphysics of stopping. Then his voice brightened. "Come on, now. Don't be shy. Ask me questions."

AT DAYBREAK DAVID TOOK two penicillin tablets, punched in a Syrette, and waited for the inner music. Today he would move downriver. Probably futile, he realized, yet he needed to pretend he was saving

himself, to make believe, and so he spent the morning on his belly, sometimes crawling, sometimes dragging himself down the shallows of the river, mostly dozing. By midday, when he called it quits, he had moved less than half the distance of a city block. The effort had made him feverish. He had lost track of his spiritual whereabouts, his time slot, his place in the overall dream of things. Through the fierce afternoon heat David lay in the shade of triple canopy, listening to the river a few feet to his left, then at twilight he sat up and inspected his wounds. The right foot and lower calf had gone yellow-black; the left leg seemed in better shape—more painful, but not nearly so discolored.

He had three more Syrettes. Once these were gone, David knew, he would no longer be wholly human. Even now it was hard to think beyond the next fix. He took out one of the Syrettes and placed it in the grass beside him.

To make himself wait he switched on Ortiz's transistor radio.

Apollo 11 was twelve and a half hours from touchdown. "Bad Moon Rising" had hit number two on the Billboard charts.

"And for you die-hard baseball fans," said the announcer, "it's a season for the ages. Dave, my man, can you believe them raggedy-ass Mets? Bunch of has-beens and never-will-bes, they're surprising all of us, even ol' Master Sergeant Johnny Ever. And I'll guarantee you, this here is one hip ten-thousand-year lifer who don't get surprised. Spartacus, I guess maybe he surprised me. Davy Crockett. That's it, though." The man coughed into his microphone. "So listen, Lieutenant. What's the score out there? Down a few runs? Bottom of the ninth?"

Narcotic babble, David thought. He did not reply.

"I don't mean to make light of it," the announcer said, "but you got to remember, man, this dying crap, it's just one more lopsided game. Everybody wants a miracle—like with them shaggy-ass Mets. Got half a mind to help 'em pull it Off." Something coy came into the man's voice. "Maybe you, too."

It was a temptation, but David said nothing.

"Not interested? Can't sell supernatural?"

David stayed silent.

"See, the thing is, I got this special sale on today. Two miracles for the price of one. Ask polite, I'll throw in a virgin."

"Are you God?"

The announcer laughed. "Fuck, no, I'm not God. Use your head, man. Does God say 'Fuck, no'?" There was a moment of thoughtful silence. "I'm like—how do you say it?—I'm like a middleman. Billy Graham without the sugar, Saint Christopher without the resources. All I can do is put in the request, ask for a chopper, hope for the best."

David closed his eyes and tried not to cry.

"Not that you'd be missing a whole lot," the announcer said. "Pitiful future, I'm afraid. Face it—who wants a one-legged shortstop? I could run the future tape for you, but I think it might end up real, real depressing. Twenty-four years old, career finished, nobody gives a crap about war wounds. Your bubble-gum cards, Davy, they won't fetch top dollar. Anyhow, if that's not enough, pretty soon you start getting the bad dreams. Ten, twenty years down the pike, here comes the survivor guilt. Ghosts galore. All these dead guys—Bus Dexter and Vince Mustin—they talk your ear off about what happened here. Wasn't totally your fault—a live-ammo war, for chrissake—but try to tell them that. So one thing leads to another. Did I mention booze? Trouble on the home front. Tough divorce. I hate to say it, but that cute Maria chick, she just wasn't for you. Not for anybody."

David's eyes opened. "What do you mean?"

"Your future, Lieutenant. If you even want a future." The announcer made a snorting sound. "Sorry to bear the bad news, but you'll be in for the standard Jezebel stuff. Old as the crocodiles. Maria tells you how terrific you are, how you're the love of her life, but one day she takes off with this slick stockbroker on a Harley. Before she goes, though, she bawls her eyes out. Says she can't help herself, says she'll love you forever. Big deal, right? Boom, she's gone, and you waste the next six years waiting for the little lady to change her mind. Every day, you check your mailbox. Zip. Not even a Christmas card. I mean, could you tolerate it? Your own sorry life?" The announcer paused. Even his silence carried an edge of mockery. "So here's the deal, friend. Food for thought. Hypothetically speaking, let's say I manage to yank you out of this mess. Send in a medevac, scoop you up, get that right leg chopped off in Japan, retool the other one. Then what? You ready to go through the heartache stuff? You really want that? I mean, do you? Managing some sorry Triple Z outfit in East Paducah? Chaw stains on your molars? Gum cancer? Eating your guts

out over a fucked-up ex-wife?“

“What happened with Maria?” David said.

“So you are paying attention.”

“What?“

The announcer sighed in exhaustion. “Sorry, my friend, but I’m not allowed to spill details. Live and learn, that’s the theory. Let’s just say the gal was born in neutral. No overdrive. No gears at all.”

“She never loved me?“

“Your words, not mine. You didn’t hear it from Johnny Ever.”

LATER, AFTER A WEATHER UPDATE, the man said, “But Davy, here’s the good news. At least she liked you. Liking counts. Liking’s right up there with clean socks. I mean, seriously, if more people just flat-out liked each other ... well, you wouldn’t be in this miserable fix. Who needs passion? Give me a choice, I’ll take plain ol’ lukewarm liking. Not everybody’s an All-Star.”

The announcer made a sound of sympathy. He was quiet for a few seconds.

“Could you live with that?” he said. “If I save the day, send in the dust-off, could you live with it? Would you?“

David lay still for a while. “I’d lose a leg?“

“Yeah, man. Hopalong Cassidy.”

“And Marla, too? I’d lose her?“

“The Lone Gimp. Hi-ho, Silver.”

David waited a time and then turned off the radio and dropped it into the river. Oddly, though, there was still an electric hum in the air, jungle static, jungle gibberish, and after a time the announcer yawned and said, “Think it over. No pressure. Either way, pal, nobody’d blame you.”

AT 0430 HOURS THE NEXT MORNING, David Todd used his last Syrette. As dawn came, he lay on his back along the Song Tra Ky, not dead, not alive, listening to a delayed broadcast from the moon. “Amazing, isn’t it?” said Master Sergeant Johnny Ever. “All that firepower, all that technology. They put those two peckerheads up there, let ’em jump around, but they can’t do shit for the lost souls down here on planet Earth. Pathetic, isn’t it? I mean, hell, they don’t even know you and me exist. Back in the world, Davy, they’re all doing somersaults, uncorking the California bubbly. This whole goddamn war’s on hold.” He laughed. “A sad state of affairs.”

For David Todd, though, it was not sad. It was sad plus something else.

His feet hurt, he was alone and scared, he was too young for this, but twelve minutes later he felt a bounce of joy as the Eagle touched down upon the Sea of Tranquillity. It was almost elation, almost awe. He wondered if Armstrong and Aldrin and Collins would make it home.

A YEAR AND A HALF AGO Maria had agreed to marry him. Her language, though, had been scrupulous. “I care for you,” she’d said, “but I’m not sure it’s forever. Forever seems like—“

“Forever?” he’d said.

“I’ll try. I will.”

He had known all along.

Now he smiled at the river and murmured, “All right.”

“All right what?” said Johnny Ever.

“Send in the bird.”

“Even if?“

“Affirmative.”

“And you understand the deal, Dave? No joke. There’s most definitely a stockbroker in your future.” The announcer hesitated, then cleared his throat. When he spoke again, his voice carried a mix of compassion and resignation. “Truth is, I’m not supposed to give advice—promise you won’t let on to nobody—but in your case, well, jeez, I honest-to-God have to recommend bailing. Cut your losses. Check out. Right now, Davy, you don’t know what wounded is. Wait’ll the Maria war starts, all that heartache, all them Harley dreams. You’re in for a world of hurt, my friend, and morphine won’t do nothin’.”

“Understood,” David said.

“And?“

“Green light. I’m taking the ride.”

“You’re sure?“

“I am. Be. Yes.”

Johnny Ever chuckled. “Okeydoke. I’ll say this much, though. You’re one brave motherfucker.”