



THAI MOON SALOON

by
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PROLOGUE

Penn Gwinn, code named Penguin, halted his group. He held his finger over his mouth to signal quiet. He listened to the sounds of the jungle, or actually, to the lack of sounds. The distant birds stopped chirping, singing their mating chorus. The silence meant trouble, that something was going on somewhere other than where his group, trained in stealth of movement, quietly moved through the jungle.

The jungle was hot, humid, as any jungle was supposed to be, but this afternoon it seemed hotter, more dangerous. There was something in the air, something nearby. Something that raised the hair on the back of his neck.

He waved his hand, instructing his group to take cover, and listened. Soon, the air filled with voices of enemy soldiers bustling along a trail near their position. They were laughing and joking, being unusually casual for their purpose, not concerned with the clanking and rattling of their mess gear, their rifles, and other trappings of war. Their sounds increased in clarity as they drew closer to Penn's group.

The birds in the trees set up a cacophonous cawing and screeching as they flew away, signaling the presence of intruders.

Penn and his group accomplished their purpose, but completing their mission meant returning to the rendezvous point for pickup and return to headquarters with news of their accomplishment. However, they were still less than 200 yards from the enemy training camp that was the focus of the mission. He worried the soldiers might be from that camp.

Slowly, carefully, Penn pushed aside a giant fern. The appearance of the soldiers puzzled him. They weren't Viet Cong soldiers, but the nearby training camp was a V.C. facility.

Jim Starret, code named Starman, stepped up beside Penn. He was Penn's field operations partner. He cautiously peered through the brush at the soldiers. "What the hell?" he whispered.

"Who are those guys?" Penn asked.

"You're asking me?" Starret responded. "You're the expert on Asian affairs, remember?" He turned to their Laotian guide. "Lunao," he whispered. "Who are they?"

Lunao studied the soldiers. "I no know," he whispered, "They Burma, maybe. Maybe Shan State."

"They're armed with Uzis, for Christ sake," Starman added. He recognized the danger in those weapons. They were designed for short range rapid fire and quick maneuverability in brush and jungle.

“Burmese?” James ‘Madman’ Moran whispered too loud for safety, as he crept forward from his position of safety behind a vine wrapped jungle tree. He peered through the brush to take a peek. “What’re they doing here?” He stepped back behind the tree. “They’re not going to believe this in Washington. I better get some photos.” He drew his camera out of his field pack and prepared it.

A squad of Army Rangers, an elite jungle combat group, was chosen to escort the unusually dangerous Defense Intelligence Agency mission. The squad sergeant got nervous. “Hey, you guys,” he forcibly whispered. “Shut up! The problem with you spy types is you ain’t been given no combat training. You wanna see Charlie up close? Keep up your chatter!”

Penn ignored the warning. “Starman,” he whispered to his partner. “Did you get your C-4 set around the buildings in that camp?”

“Set, and ready,” Starret replied. “But, damn it,” he added. “Tell me you’re not going to blow up the place already. It took a hell of a lot of effort to get those microphone bugs in place. We at least ought to give them a chance to work before you blow them up. There could be a lot of intelligence gathered from that place.”

Penn agreed. After all, their mission was to plant those bugs. That’s what they were trained for as Defense Intelligence Agency Field Operatives. They were agents who didn’t officially exist. The D.I.A. wasn’t sanctioned for field agent operations, but the D.I.A. didn’t trust the C.I.A., so they trained their own field operatives for the placement of covert listening devices. Field Operative was a noble name for someone sometimes assigned a dirty and less than noble job.

Explosives were always added to the devices during placement. The military brass who developed the missions believed the explosives would protect the integrity of the mission if the bugs were discovered.

Penn hoped these bugs weren’t going to be discovered. He didn’t like thinking of what would happen to the people who discovered them, soldiers, or not. Soldiers were supposed to die in combat, not by surprise and secret explosion. He hoped there wouldn’t be some emergency which necessitated the destruction, but he realized his hopes were in vain.

The leader of the enemy soldiers stopped. He lifted his Uzi and curiously peered around him into the jungle.

The other soldiers stopped with him. Following his example, they began peering into the jungle. Suddenly, one of them shouted an alarm. He was shouting in a Burmese dialect, but one of his words was unmistakable: “G.I.!” He raised his Uzi and fired into the jungle at Penn’s group.

“Jesus!” the squad sergeant shouted. “I told you this would happen with all your yapping. Get...!” The enemy’s next rounds struck him. They tore into his body from his waist upward through his heart. He was dead before he finished the command to his squad.

A short grouping of automatic rifle firing followed, as the rest of the enemy group took positions and began firing. Yelling, shouting of orders, followed as the enemy pushed forward into the jungle toward the American G.I.s. Bullets whizzed past the intelligence group, penetrating the jungle, breaking branches, tearing apart the jungle foliage.

The ‘chunk’ of mortar firing punctured the silence between the automatic weapons firing. Fortunately, the enemy didn’t take time for proper placement and aiming the mortar. The first round demolished a tree thirty yards away. The jungle brush and trees blocked the shrapnel, but the shock wave stunned the remaining members of the group nearest the explosion. They needed time to regain their composure. The enemy’s weapons fire decimated most of them in their dazed state.

Penn ducked and pulled the remote trigger from his pack. His group was discovered, and that meant the commander of the training camp would search the entire camp for electronic bugs. Penn couldn’t let the bugs be found.

“Damn it!” Starret loudly swore. There was no longer a need for whispering. “What’re you waiting

for? Let's go!"

Penn armed the remote trigger, sighed, and pushed the button before scrambling off through the brush with Starret hard on his heels, followed by Madman and Lunao.

Behind them, the buildings in the training camp blew apart. The ammunition dump ignited first. Mortar shells, cannon shells, a string of loose rifle rounds, all went off, sending flares, lead slugs, and pieces of buildings everywhere.

"Jesus!" Madman exclaimed in awe, glancing over the jungle tree-tops as the flames and munitions shot skyward. "A damn Fourth of July show!"

"Yeah," Penn shouted, glancing up while continuing his running. "But I don't think we have the time to enjoy the sparklers. Move it!"

Madman stopped long enough to take some photos. "So much for this mission," he shouted over the roar.

Penn and Starret stopped to give him cover. Penn glanced at Starret, and fired in Starret's direction.

"What the hell?" Starret shouted in dismay, dropping to the ground.

One of the enemy fell a few feet behind him.

"Jesus, Penguin," he shouted with relief. "You keep that up and I'll end up owing you."

"We go now, Penguin!" Lunao shouted, eyeing the advancing soldiers.

"We go now," Penn affirmed.

The few remaining Rangers kept up covering fire, changing positions, keeping moving so they would be harder targets for the enemy. They maintained their covering fire as the intelligence agents ran past them in full retreat.

It took only a few minutes for the intelligence officers to get separated from their escort, and forced to cover their retreat by themselves. They fired behind them as they ran through the jungle, with the branches and vines tearing at them, with three of the enemy in hot pursuit.

Madman stopped long enough to take another picture of their pursuers, but that was a mistake. An enemy Uzi spewed forth. Madman fell. Half a dozen slugs blew apart his leg. He tried to get up. His adrenaline kept him going, his good leg kept moving, pushing, trying to find footing in the humus covered ground.

The enemy soldier raced up to Madman. He took aim at Madman's head, and fired one round. Madman's suffering ended in a violent splattering of flesh, skull and brains.

Penn fired three quick shots at the enemy soldier with his .45 automatic. The soldier fell with the front of his head missing.

Lunao screamed. Blood spurted out of his shoulder. He staggered, stumbled, and fell against a tree for support, slowly sagging.

Starret's .45 blasted away the head of another enemy soldier while he and Penn grabbed Lunao by the arms. They half lifted, half pulled him on their continued retreat.

The last enemy soldier drew back, not sure he wanted to continue the chase.

Ten minutes later, Penn and Starret, still dragging the conscious Lunao, reached a clearing. They stopped and stared across the empty field. The hushed sudden quiet of the jungle noises was consuming, while the continued explosions of the training camp ammunition dump faded to an occasional thump of mortar rounds, intermingled with a few bursts of rifle cartridges. The battle of the escorting Rangers was no longer heard.

"Where's the chopper?" Starret yelled, as they sat Lunao on the ground, propping him up against the trunk of a tree.

"Yelling isn't going to help," Penn said with surprising calm. "What time is it?" He sat on the ground to rest.

Starret's adrenaline flow kept him from sitting. "Fourteen damn forty!" he said, checking his watch. His voice revealed his anxiety. "They're late!"

Rapid rifle shots erupted from the other side of the clearing. Half a dozen of the enemy broke out of the jungle and ran across the clearing towards them, firing short bursts as they ran.

"That's what happened to your chopper!" Penn yelled, as he got to his feet and tried lifting Lunao.

Lunao screamed in pain. "No!" he shouted. "Let go! Damn!" He screamed. "No! You go. Now! I cover you!"

Penn and Starret ignored him.

"No! Damn, G.I! I not make it," Lunao persisted. "I stay here. Cover you!" he shouted with impatience.

Penn and Starret exchanged understanding glances. There was no time for argument. They had to leave Lunao. They ran into the jungle. They heard Lunao's shooting as they ran, tripped, stumbled, and ran some more for several hundred yards. Several grenade blasts followed the shooting. They were the results of Lunao's final efforts in covering their retreat.

Penn and Starret continued for another twenty minutes, running, jumping over fallen logs, pushing through brush, trying to follow the merest semblance of a barely passable jungle trail to its end.

When the jungle ended, though, it wasn't at the edge of another clearing. It was at the edge of a cliff, a wide chasm with sides too steep to climb down.

"Well?" Starret asked, nervously glancing back along their path, hoping their jungle jaunt didn't leave too much evidence of their passing. "Ain't this just ducky? Now what?"

"That's a damn good question, old buddy," Penn responded.

They stared at the obstacle. Below them, at the bottom of the gorge, was a slow flowing river.

"Damn it, anyway!" Starret shouted.

Rifle firing penetrated the jungle beside them. The enemy soldiers were persistent, carefully making their way, scanning, searching, picking up the trail created by broken branches and trampled brush.

In their pursuit, the enemy continued shooting at anything that moved, without waiting to determine whether or the movement might be caused by one of their own, or by some hapless jungle animal fleeing the noise and confusion of war in its home territory.

"Great," Starret complained. "Now what?"

"You already asked that," Penn responded, studying the river in the bottom of the gorge.

"It don't look too good, do it?" Starret added in grim humor.

They turned back to the jungle, but some of the enemy's movements were already visible through the brush. They ducked behind a nearby tree for protection, firing around the tree trunk without bothering to aim.

The thunderous pounding of fifty caliber machine guns erupted from the gorge, and the enemy stopped firing.

"Now what?" Starret complained.

The chop-chop-chop of helicopter blades flooded the air between the machine gun bursts, as a Huey helicopter sped swiftly up the canyon, paralleling the cliff edge, firing at the enemy's movement through the jungle.

The enemy soldiers jumped for cover. Some covered behind the trees that weren't already blown apart. Others ran as hard as they could away from the canyon, but they couldn't outrun the machine gun.

The chopper slowly pivoted back and forth with its forward guns blasting the jungle. A round of

rockets were added for support, and the jungle exploded with fury.

“Holy Christ!” Starret whispered against the noise, watching the chopper, awed by its destructive power.

The chopper turned sideways to put the loading door near the cliff edge. The co-pilot looked through the side window at Penn and Starret. He mouthed the word: “Jump!” His shouting would have been useless in the noise.

A burst of automatic weapons fire surged from the enemy. Bullets pierced the side of the chopper, and the co-pilot lurched forward, dead.

More shots erupted from the enemy. They regrouped when the chopper stopped firing, and renewed their offensive.

Starret studied the distance between the chopper and the edge of the gorge. “It’s a helluva jump!” he shouted.

The tree beside the two agents blew apart from more automatic weapons fire from the enemy.

“Time to get a move on!” Penguin shouted. “That chopper’s our only choice! Come on! We’ll jump for it!” He quickly took a few steps back, glanced at the enemy once more, and ran for the chopper.

“You’re crazy, man!” Starret shouted. But he followed.

They lunged for the open helicopter doors as another burst of weapons firing erupted behind them.

The chopper lurched forward and up, pulling away from them while they were in mid-air, halfway to the chopper’s side door.

As he fell, Penn glimpsed the pilot through the side door struggling to regain control of the wildly gyrating machine. It slowly spun, and smashed into the cliff on the other side of the gorge.

The fireball from the exploding fuel tanks singed Penn’s hair as he and Starret fell into the gorge, splashing into the river fifty feet below. They surfaced, but they weren’t yet in the clear. They had to dodge falling chopper parts and flaming fuel, with the enemy firing, hitting the water around them.

The swift river current bounced them over a few rocks, but it dragged them around the bend out of range of their pursuers. They managed to climb out of the river where the gorge lessened into a broad jungle plain. They wearily plopped down on a short stretch of muddy river bank to rest, dry out, and regain their composure.

“I knew it,” Starret finally said. “I knew it from the first day I worked with you, man.” He shook his head. “You’re crazy! You’re goddamn crazy!”

“Now what are you complaining about?” Penn retorted, as he took off his shirt and wrung it out. “At least you’re not full of holes.” He grinned. “It looks like I saved your ass again.”

“Yeah?” Starret replied with a sardonic grin. “Just don’t make it a habit, okay?”