

Ants and Scorpions

Howard Carter

Jeff and I were patrolling at night on the Colombia-Panama border. A river-laden roadless region that had been a bombing range for our air force during World War Two. Now, fifty years later, we discovered a crater in the jungle floor. An old bomb hole that made perfect cover for our reconnaissance. The hole was on a finger that jutted into El Río Atrato from the south, providing dead space to the water on our west flank. The enemy, members of the 57th regiment of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, were encamped on the riverbank to the east. We were about one hundred yards from the target.

During the night we watched the target from our bomb hole. I looked at Jeff as I handed him a night vision camera lens. He was a short and strong Navy Chief, with a balding blond head, chiseled chin, and cliché penetrating blue eyes. My boss for the past five years. We both had on woodland fatigues and floppy hats that were well worn and dirty. *The dirtier you are, the more you blend in.* We were looking for the leader of this regiment of revolutionaries – Antonio Vidal. The mission was to capture Vidal once we had established his pattern of life. This was a joint operation that involved both Colombian and American forces. Jeff attached the lens and began to take pictures.

Prior to first light, we covered our optics with pantyhose, attached by rubber bands. This technique dulled the glint of the glass and scope shadow that could give away our position when day came. It's an old trick of the reconnaissance trade. Magnified lenses punch through the small holes in the fabric of stockings, while the fabric blocks the glint from the sun. We had rubbed a fresh cover of camouflage paint on each other's exposed skin.

The FARC camp came into naked-eye view at dawn. Their makeshift encampment sprawled fifty yards along the shore of El Río Atrato. It was a hasty bivouac, made up mostly of black trash bags strung in trees, with some tarps and ponchos. Their officers occupied the one thatched roof hut built by native fishermen. A few *campesinos* appeared from trash bag tents and began starting fires to set camp for breakfast. We took pictures of the men through our high-powered optics as they began to boil water and prepare fish. Peacock bass was a favorite, but an introduced population of freshwater Oscars was starting to dominate the basin. No doubt that parasite population of Oscars was introduced by foreigners, who at one time fished in the local rivers of the Darién Gap. Before the FARC dominated this region. Fishing tourism eroded as kidnapping foreigners for ransom became common.

The rest of the FARC camp awoke at dawn. The watchman who had slept through his shift acted dumb when approached by his officer. El Capitán barked orders and a group of about twenty armed *campesinos* formed a line into the jungle. The first patrol of the day wore dark green uniforms with black berets. They shouted in unison as they locked and loaded Galil rifles. "Viva la revolución carajo, ni un paso atras!" Then the patrol marched into the darkness of the Darién Gap triple canopy jungle. They disappeared past massive tree trunks and sprawling man-high Silk Cotton buttress roots that jutted out of the jungle floor. I picked up the radio handset with my thin black leather gloved hand. *Show no skin. Skin shines in light.* Then I sent an activity report to our headquarters.

As first light came, Jeff and I thought we heard a slight rain beginning to fall. The crackling of leaves and fauna in, on, and above the jungle floor. The rains in this part of Colombia had a habit of creeping up on you with a sprinkle during the dry season. We heard the crackling rain-like sounds quietly at first, but it grew louder. Then, suddenly, the ants began falling on us from above, like raindrops. Tank ants with

reddish orange bodies, broad heads, and long pinchers. Pinchers that could cut leaves and capture prey. A menacing scout patrol of ants.

We bit our lips.

An army of ants soon followed. The half-inch long creatures created a torrent of biting earth. They gushed into our makeshift foxhole. It was a red and belligerent swath, like an active stream that appeared and disappeared in the jungle behind us. The swath of ants was about a yard wide and flowed as far as we could see, south into the dense jungle of the Darién. They swept us out of our hole and off to one side of each other, with the ant river in the middle. The ants were close enough to see the hairs on their torsos.

It was getting brighter now, and we were forced out of our hole. The dense jungle of the Darién Gap still provided some concealment, but we watched as the FARC commander looked through binoculars toward our location. We pressed our bodies against the floor of the jungle. With green painted faces we flashed teeth at each other across the river of ants. All the while the ant army kept coming from under the darkness of the triple canopy. The ants were flowing by the Black Palm trees near our location now. Then the monkeys awakened and began howling. From the trees they always howled in the mornings. Birds were not yet stirring. The tropical sun was not yet fully upon us, but it would be soon. The ant river continued as the FARC Commander put down his optics and sat down to eat breakfast.

I was taking pictures of the Commander eating when a dark flicker to my immediate right caught my eye. Jeff and I both saw it, perhaps at the same time. A black scorpion that had climbed up on a root sticking straight out of the jungle floor. The scorpion was over the ant river that separated Jeff and I. It was a large scorpion, about four inches long. The armored arachnid shifted about on a tiny bend at the top of the root. It was flicking its stinger, nervously contemplating the carpet of ants below. The scorpion looked prehistoric as it teetered and shifted on its twig-like root perch. There had to have been millions that made up the ant river below. Jeff and I watched intently for a few moments. Looking at each other and between us at the ants and scorpion.

But the pictures. We have to keep taking the pictures. So, on each side of the ant river with the trapped scorpion, Jeff and I lay quietly, looking through optics, sending reports on our radio, and taking pictures of the camp. There were native

watermen stopping at the camp now, picking up blue fifty-five-gallon drums with their dugout canoes and other small craft. Drums full of Coca Paste. You could hear the life of the boat traffic on the many tributaries. A part of the Cocaine Highway heading north to American cities and towns. All the while we glanced with morbid fascination at the ant torrent and the scorpion imprisoned on the twig-root above.

We pushed our camera, radio, carbines, and optics into some low-lying brush as it got brighter. We set makeshift concealment by gently sticking fauna in the ground around us. All while listening to the monkeys, watching the ants, the encampment, the *campesino* fishing boats, and that damn black scorpion stuck on the twig-root. Jeff and I were still both about four feet on either side of that scorpion, the scorpion between us and above the ants. The ant army continued moving through us like a mean orangish-red stream. It was a flash flood of ants that moved through us towards El Río Atrato.

Still no sign of Antonio Vidal as the ants flowed below the scorpion. We lay silent, watching and listening to the camp within the crackling raindrop sounds of the ant river. We took pictures while scribbling our observations on waterproof paper. Then, Jeff did a curious thing. He picked up a small stick, and he swept the scorpion from its twig-like root perch. It fell into the river of ants. In less than a second, that black scorpion was gone. It snapped its tail once with an audible click within the crackling of ants and was then devoured. The ants enveloped it like rust colored water. Like a lobster going into a boiling pot. *The scorpion is prey, not predator.*

We continued after the death of the scorpion, still quiet and mostly hidden. Driven from our hole in the ground, taking our pictures, our pictures, our pictures without a sound, watching the ants, watching the camp. We heard machetes cutting brush. The patrol of revolutionaries we watched leave the camp at dawn was moving towards us. Unseen but close enough to hear. *Time to beat feet.* Close to the earth we quickly, quietly bundled our gear and inflated our UDT lifejackets. Once ready to move, Jeff crouched and made a deliberate slow step over the ants to get to my side. Then we slid on our bellies down the bank into the water, along the dead space of our west flank. In the water we picked our way through tall grass in the defilade, moving away from the encampment and the patrol.

We moved a couple hundred yards through the water to be separated from immediate compromise, hiding in the reeds from boat traffic when it passed by. Then we crawled out onto the bank of the river. Once my feet were dry, I reached into my waterproof bag. I retrieved the handset and winced as I brushed aside some ants that had hitched a ride. Then I passed the codeword for mission abort.

We made it to our extract site by noon after patrolling eight hundred yards. A bend in the river. Three Colombian Navy riverine boats came. Two boats provided overwatch on both ends of the bend while the third touched the shore to pick us up without being seen. Jeff and I smirked in the midday sun as we hopped on the boat to sit in concealment below the gunnels. Looking at each other in sweat laden fatigues, we shook our heads. *This is the drug war. Ants and scorpion.*