

## **Snow Along The DMZ**

The DMZ is a miserable place any time of the year, especially in winter. I was an infantry soldier in the U.S. Army stationed on the DMZ in the winter of 1968. The DMZ is a demilitarized zone partly in North Korea and partly in South Korea. The actual boundary between the two countries was in the middle, but nobody explained to us where one country started and the other ended. Maybe that was the point; the lack of demarcation created plausible deniability.

The DMZ is a two-kilometer buffer that runs across the Korean Peninsula, from the Sea of Japan on the east to the Yellow Sea on the west. Our base camp was a few miles south of the DMZ, and my unit was responsible for patrolling a ten-mile-wide sector. Each afternoon, the Army sent a squad of soldiers to the DMZ for night patrols.

Our patrol squads consisted of ten to a dozen soldiers armed with M16 automatic weapons, plenty of ammunition, and a few hand grenades distributed among the squad members. You might say that at night, the buffer becomes a militarized zone.

We had just returned from a night patrol, and I was headed to the mess hall back at camp when our sergeant called my name.

“Hey, we are on patrol again tonight,” he said.

“Why am I not surprised?” I muttered to myself as I looked for confirmation on the bulletin board outside the mess hall. This assignment made eleven consecutive winter nights of assigned DMZ duty. The normal process was for a rotation of squads doing patrols. We had been told our company had a personnel shortage, which put pressure on the platoons to supply patrols every night.

“Spread the word. I’m getting some sleep,” the sergeant advised as he headed for the barracks.

Our mission was to patrol within the south one kilometer of the DMZ to make sure nobody else was also patrolling our sector. When they created the DMZ after the Korean war, they picked an area with challenging topography, filled with places to hide and no man-made shelters. It was land nobody wanted to fight over, and any farms or villages in the buffer area were removed.

The south border of the DMZ was fortified with a chain-link fence and guard towers stationed at intervals consistent with the topography. I don't know if there was a fence along the northern border in '68, but it would not surprise me to learn there was no fence since nobody from the south was trying to escape into North Korea or even invade their country.

After confirming our assignment, I went through the serving line in the mess hall and got a tray loaded with SOS and a cup of hot coffee. I won't explain what SOS is, but think of it as chipped beef and gravy on toast. I looked around and saw my squad members sitting at a folding table. They were the only soldiers still wearing camo paint from last night's patrol. I took my tray over to join them for breakfast.

"Have you boys heard the word?" I asked as I sat down.

Private Sammy Thomas looked up from his scrambled eggs and said, "Don't tell me, let me guess," as he put a camo-painted hand over his closed eyes, pretending to concentrate. "Does it involve a weekend pass to Seoul?" he guessed, removing his hand from his face and seeking my concurrence.

Sammy Thomas was a young white man from rural Alabama who was popular among the squad members. In fact, he was liked by almost everybody in the company. He had a southern drawl that could turn a single vowel into a triple. Thomas flattened his "a" sounds and ignored the "g" sounds. He talked so slowly that even a sundial had to wait for him to complete a sentence.

"Sorry, no weekend pass for you," I replied with a grin. "Sarge says we go back to the DMZ tonight."

The laughter turned to groans at the news. We all understood that this meant we had to get our sleep during the day and get up by mid-afternoon to prepare for duty that night.

"Maybe we just been lucky," Slappy said, referring to our present lack of casualties on patrol.

Billy Slappy was a Black man from Georgia who had pulled part of his tour of duty in Vietnam with the First Cavalry Division in 1967. He wore the distinctive 1<sup>st</sup> Cav patch on his fatigues, which earned him respect among infantry soldiers.

Slappy didn't talk much about Vietnam, but we knew he had been wounded, sent back to the States for recovery, and then sent to Korea for the remainder of his tour.

"You think it's just luck?" I responded. "I mean, there ain't nobody shooting at us, which would explain why we all are still healthy."

The squad members started to nod their heads in agreement and looked to Slappy for a response.

"They just ain't seen us yet, man. Only way we are getting out of here alive is to stop patrolling or get invisible," he offered and looked around at his audience. "You white boys need to double up on that camo paint if you don't want to go back home in a pine box," he advised. The squad broke down in laughter, which is why we all loved Slappy.

Our night patrols started when we entered the DMZ late in the day and continued until the following morning. There was no reason to patrol during the day because we had our people stationed along a fence on the south side of the DMZ, and they could deal with any suspicious activity. But the nights belonged to my squad as we moved in the dark, observing radio and light discipline. No fires, flashlights, flares, or anything that would produce light. The field radio was used as little as possible and then with minimum volume.

"Put out the cigarettes, lock and load," the sergeant instructed after we dismounted a tactical truck that dropped us off at one of the few gates installed on the DMZ fence. It was 1800 hours and just past dusk.

We put on our backpacks and inserted ammunition clips in our M16 automatic weapons. The sergeant walked among the nine soldiers and checked to ensure we each had our safety on as we lined up to walk into no-man's-land. He checked our face camouflage paint to ensure there was no shine or reflection and added paint to the backs of the hands of those who he thought needed more. Nights are bitterly cold on the DMZ, so our backpacks were loaded with extra winter clothing and field C-rations. There were no sleeping bags because sleeping on patrol is prohibited.

As we lined up, an officer arrived in a Jeep and walked to the gate to process our arrival and departure. He opened the lock with a key and swung the

gate open. The protocol was not to salute officers at the DMZ because a North Korean sniper might favor an officer as a high-value target. Each soldier was numbered by order of march. Normally, the sergeant was third in line, followed by the radio operator. This night, I was in the lead, mostly because I was proficient in map reading and thought to have better night vision than others in the squad.

Someone above my pay grade gave us a map with instructions to patrol for so many meters to checkpoint A, observe for a period of time, then patrol in the dark to checkpoint B, and repeat the process for the rest of the night. When we got to these checkpoints, we used our field radio to communicate with headquarters on an assigned frequency by a set number of clicks on the audio hand unit to let HQ know we had arrived.

Once the maneuver begins, there is no talking above a whisper, and all eyes scan our surroundings for any sign of any living thing. Since we are supposed to be the only soldiers on night patrol, the assumption is that anybody we see is the enemy.

Checkpoints A and B were uneventful. Checkpoint C was another 300 meters northeast, very close to the invisible border. It was not unusual to come close to the border, knowing that at some point, we likely crossed the line. The protocol at each checkpoint was to set up a perimeter and stay in a prone position, always facing outward with weapons ready. We were setting up checkpoint C at about 2300 hours as clouds moved in, and a light breeze stirred the foliage.

By 0130 hours, we were covered by more than an inch of snow, and the temperature was dropping. Snow is a game-changer for night patrols. On a clear night, the contrast of olive-drab camouflage fatigues against the white background makes moving soldiers more visible. The snowfall was peaceful, but it brought tension because we understood what it meant to the safety and success of our operation.

At 0230 hours, the sergeant went around the perimeter and whispered that we were leaving for the next checkpoint. It was too dark to read the map, but I knew the instructions were to head 150 meters north.

Slappy was lying beside me and asked, "Where and how far?"

"150 north," I whispered.

The sergeant confirmed that was his understanding also.

"We'll be in enemy territory," Slappy suggested.

"Yeah, keep your head down," the sergeant advised.

By this time, we were lying in several inches of snow. We got up, quietly shook off the snow, and I took the lead. The radioman folded the radio antenna down to make himself less of a target. We all knew North Korean soldiers were conducting similar operations in the DMZ, with one crucial difference: They were trying to get through the DMZ into South Korea, either to cause terror or hit specific targets. Our job was to engage them before they got to the fence.

Arriving at the next checkpoint, we were in about eight inches of snow at 0300 hours. As we settled into a perimeter, the night was still, the cloud cover was dissipating, and there was a half-moon, which increased visibility for both our squad and anybody else out there in the dark. We waited for the next transition. Slappy was to my right and Private Thomas to my left. As the clouds parted the temperature started to drop. Korea is known as the "Land of the Morning Calm," and this morning was very calm and cold.

At about 0330 hours, we heard a noise that sounded like somebody or something had stepped on a tree branch. The snapping sound came from in front of my position in the perimeter. I estimated it was about 50 meters northwest. The sergeant crawled over between Slappy and me and asked if we saw anything.

"Negative," I whispered. We lifted the wool liners under our steel helmets to hear better and waited. The assumption was that a sound in the night was an enemy patrol, although it could be a deer or other wildlife.

Slappy said he heard rustling from the same general direction. The sergeant crawled over to him, and they whispered. We all knew that Slappy had the most combat experience in our unit, so it was natural that the squad leader should consult with him. A few minutes later, the sergeant crawled back to his position.

Slappy moved over and put his left arm on my back. "Sarge says you and I need to go scout over there," he whispered in my ear, motioning with his M16 in the direction of the noise.

We waited for Sarge to alert the other squad members so they knew to hold fire until we returned to the perimeter. Slappy led the way out of the perimeter, and I followed, both of us in a crouch. We felt exposed as our dark silhouette contrasted against the snow, and we were leaving a trail of footprints.

About twenty meters out, Slappy stopped, put his M16 at the ready, and I did the same. He motioned with his free hand for me to come closer. In a crouch, I slowly moved closer to him, looking for any movement ahead of us.

"See something?" I asked.

"Thought I heard something," he whispered.

I turned my back to him, keeping a low profile in the snow. Two men back-to-back in a stationary position allows for the best field of vision. Finally, Slappy turned and whispered that he thought it best for us to continue forward.

"Slappy, we are leaving a trail even a blind man can follow," I whispered.

Slappy looked back at our tracks in the snow, agreeing that we were vulnerable to anybody out there who wanted to track us. It also made our squad vulnerable because the trail could easily be followed back to the perimeter. We had no choice but to continue our mission and hope for cloud cover to shield the moonlight.

We continued to walk in single file, with Slappy in the lead, when I heard a noise behind us. I turned, crouched lower, took the safety off, and pointed my M16 at the brushy landscape. Slappy did the same.

After a few minutes of silence, I whispered in Slappy's ear, "If there is somebody between the squad and us, we cannot return the way we came." He understood.

We waited, afraid to make noise, knowing somebody or something was between us and the safety of our squad. Being with our squad meant firepower, which meant a sense of security.

There was no real safety in the DMZ. Rescue plans did not exist in this no-man's-land. Going back to the gate at night was only for an emergency, and it required radio communications so that our fellow combatants along the fence could be instructed to hold fire during an evacuation. If we were captured in North Korea, there was no going back.

Walking on an alternative path back to the squad carried two dangers for us. The first was leaving a trail in the snow, which made us vulnerable to anybody who wanted to terminate our mission. The other danger was friendly fire from our own squad by approaching them from a direction that was not the same as from where we left the perimeter. Our training was to always return to the perimeter from the same direction you left, even in daylight. The option of turning around to follow our own footprints was too risky because we knew somebody or something was between the squad and us.

"Slappy, we need to head east," I said, pointing at a cluster of small trees on a hill that could provide cover. "From there, we head south toward the squad, get close enough, and wait for daylight," I reasoned.

Slappy agreed to the plan but pointed out, "Whoever that is out there can follow our tracks."

"I'll lead," I offered, "you step in my footprints." He understood, realizing it was the only way to minimize our tracks. I took the lead because his combat experience was needed to deal with what was behind us, not so much for where we were going. We had about 50 meters of open land between us and the cluster of trees on the hill.

We started walking east in a single file, with Slappy following in my footprints. We carried our weapons with the safety off and our wool caps pulled up so we could hear. By this time, my ears were starting to feel the symptoms of frostbite. When we finally got to the clump of trees, we knelt behind the largest tree and waited for any sight or sound of movement behind us.

After about ten minutes, I started to get up off my knees into a crouch and motioned for Slappy to follow me south. When he didn't respond, I noticed he was looking back at the area of snow where we had just walked. Maybe he saw something, so I turned and pointed my M16 in the direction he was looking.

“What do you see?” I whispered.

“Nothing,” he said without turning his head to whisper in my ear.

“OK, let’s move.”

“I mean nothing,” he said again, this time in a stage whisper.

I moved beside him and looked at his face. He was wearing camo paint, so all I could see were the whites of his eyes. I looked to where he was staring and realized there was nothing. All there was to see was fresh snow; no footprints in the snow – nothing. It took me a minute to compute the situation. We were not leaving tracks, which meant anybody following us must have thought we flew into the air from where the tracks ended.

“I don’t get it,” I whispered.

“I get that somebody up there is protecting us,” he said, pointing his M16 in the air. “We just became invisible,” Slappy declared.

He flipped the safety back on, sat down, pulled the wool helmet liner over his ears, and rested his back against the tree. I stood up and looked back to the place where there should have been tracks in the snow. A sense of relief came over me as I realized Slappy was right. I looked down at Slappy to make sure he was not invisible, sat down beside him, and waited in the morning calm for the sunrise.