

Shots

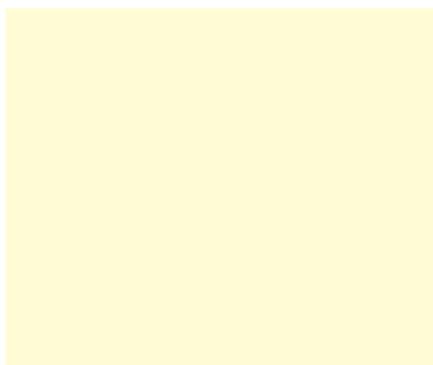
Some say killing a person changes you. Here's how shooting a man dead changed this writer, who has withheld his name.

In films and on TV people die quickly, quietly, and immediately after being shot. In real life it is different. A heart shot or brain shot will kill quickly, but in the heat of battle, firing an accurate shot is very difficult.

It was summer 1964, in Borneo, at one of the forward bases. We heard gunshots at around 12:30am. The bullets hit the sandbags and whistled over the compound. The sentries returned fire, not knowing where to aim. In the jungle the darkness is thick and black. In the trenches you

can't even see the man next to you. The compound was on a hill with vegetation cut back to give a clear field of fire for 100 yards. But once the enemy had fired, they moved quickly to a new position, so not even the gun flash would show you where to aim.

By the time we were in the trenches the officer of the day had fired a flare, giving us a couple of minutes of light to look downhill at the thick, dark treeline. Nothing moved. But we knew they were there. We could only wait, peering into the blackness illuminated at random intervals by a flare. Between flares a shot or two would be fired but by 2am it had gone completely quiet. You strain eyes and ears to see and hear but...



in the dark

nothing. If you are not careful your imagination plays tricks on you and you see movement that is not there.

Just before 3am, another flare went up and, as it did, we again looked for danger. Suddenly, bullets whistled past me just yards away. Then I heard the GPMG (General Purpose Machine Gun, which can fire a thousand rounds in a minute) cracking off a burst, and I wondered what they were shooting at. Discipline kicked in and I fired my own submachine gun. Immediately after I held down the trigger, ten or twelve bullets exploded into an enemy's body. For a moment he disappeared but then, in the dying light of the flare, I saw his boots maybe a yard or two away. The

bullets had thrown him on his back and for a second there was silence. Then a groan of pain, a gasp for breath.

Another flare shows the enemy stretched out, his boots facing us, his weapon a few feet away from his outstretched arm. For about 45 minutes, we listen to his groans of pain, his gasps for breath, the gaps between them getting longer. No one leaves the trench to investigate and the night goes quiet.

It is a long wait for the dawn as I fight the urge to be sick in the darkness. Dawn comes and we cautiously check the ground in front of us. A patrol goes down to the treeline very carefully and disappears into the trees. About fifteen or twenty minutes later they emerge, giving the all clear.

We climb out of the trench and examine the dead body. We count eight bullet holes across his ribcage and stomach. With instant medical attention in a first-class hospital he may have survived but that wasn't available here. He died slowly and painfully, and the groans stay in my head for a long time. At the bottom of the slope, just in front of the treeline, another enemy lies dead, his head removed from his body as neatly as if done by a skilled surgeon. He had been kneeling in the arc of fire from the GPMG.

We all try to act casually and calmly as if this is an everyday occurrence.

As soon as I can I slip away to the latrine, brushing off congratulations from my fellow soldiers. I'm briefly sick and then dry heave for several minutes as the enormity of what I have done hits me hard. A long-serving sergeant, who has seen action elsewhere, has seen me leave for the latrine. He comes and pats me on the back, says quiet words of encouragement, but does not attempt to make me stop heaving. He is calm and understanding, having experienced what I now was experiencing. He tells me this is what I was trained for, praises my reaction and discipline, tells me to get something to eat and drink in the cookhouse, then quietly leaves.

I asked myself some deep, searching questions. What will happen to those two dead enemies? What will happen to me at the end of my life? I found myself wondering, is there a God?

It was 10 long years before the urge to know God overwhelmed me. This led me on another journey, another kind of training. I started studying the Bible, and going to church became a vital part of my life. I came to understand Christianity and began to experience a peace of mind that I had not experienced before, even finding peace with my Borneo experiences. I came to find answers to the questions I had asked myself all those years ago. Sometimes it takes a crisis in our lives to make us face up to and ask the tough questions. I found the answers by seeking God and starting a relationship with him. I found God was ready for me. And I believe, when the time is right, he will be ready for you too.

