

Monster of the Mist

By
Eric Wilder

September saw temperatures reach a hundred degrees here in central Oklahoma but when October arrived, it was if someone had pulled a temperature switch. We have already experienced fifties and even forties, and day after day of drizzly weather. Today was no different.

After work, as I set out on my walk, a misty haze cloaked south Edmond. Walking is good exercise and great stress relief. It must also increase the blood flow to the brain because I always seem to solve my toughest dilemmas, or remember something from my veiled past whenever I walk. Tonight, I remembered something that had occurred many years ago. How I forgot this incident, I will never know because it was one of the most singularly frightening moments of my life.

I was a freshman in college at what is now the University of Louisiana at Monroe. My brother Jack had started there the prior year and convinced me to join an ROTC precision drill team called the Fusileers. I did, enjoying the camaraderie immensely. Toward the end of the first semester, we underwent an initiation called Hell Week.

During Hell Week, we initiates had to go to class everyday in full dress uniform, and then hang around the student union in case a senior Fusileer wanted to make us do push-ups, or recite the memorized, rhyming answer to specific military questions. I can't remember a single rhyme, but I knew them all by heart during Hell Week.

Hell Week culminated with Hell Night. There is a giant, mostly abandoned gravel quarry on the outskirts of Monroe. During Hell Night, the initiated Fusileers dropped off us uninitiated in the darkness to try to find our way to the entrance. Along the way, the upperclassmen would ambush us with firecrackers, cherry bombs and M-80's - legal fireworks at the time. The night was dark and hazy and we had no flashlights. During a particularly frenetic ambush, I somehow got separated from the group.

I must have walked a mile without calling out because I didn't want the upperclassmen to capture me – having heard about the dire consequences the entire week. I soon realized that I was lost and began calling out.

The gravel pit was like the surface of Mars, rugged, rolling and completely barren of vegetation. Hazy rain had soaked my fatigues, my socks and boots wet from running through pooled water. When I stopped to listen for the other Fusileers, I heard something quite different and unexpected. It was the whumph of some large animal, coughing to get the attention of anyone near it. I didn't know what it was, but it scared me. Not having a good grasp of what direction I was moving toward, I started away from the sound.

There was no moon or stars, only darkness and a persistent mist rising up from the broken gravel beneath my feet. I called out, "help." No one answered.

I heard the whumph again and realized it was not my imagination. My heart began racing as I also realized that the sound was drawing ever closer. I tried moving faster which resulted in a face-first plunge into a cold pool of water. Another chill ran up my spine as I heard a low growl on the hill directly behind me. Unable to get away, I lifted myself into a sitting position and turned to face whatever was stalking me.

On the rocky hill above me, I could just make out the moving shadow of some dark, four-legged beast. With my heart racing wildly, I prepared for its attack, something that never occurred. Over the hill behind me appeared the old World War II Jeep the head Fusileers used to move about the rock quarry. I could see its lights coming up from behind. When it topped the hill, the lights flashed briefly on the beast at the top of the hill.

All I ever saw was the red demon eyes of some misty apparition. Lights from the Jeep blinded me when I turned around, the beast gone when I glanced away into the darkness.

"Wilder, where the hell have you been?"

"Lost, Sir," I said.

Major Pfrimmer glanced at his watch. "Damn good thing for you it's after midnight or I would have had to wash you out. You may be a sorry sack of shit, but you're a Fusileer now, so get in the damn Jeep.

I crawled into the open vehicle, regaling in the smiles, handshakes and shoulder slaps from my fellow initiates that had also survived Hell Night. Someone passed around a bottle of cheap whiskey and I imbibed forgetting about the monster of the mist with glowing red eyes until forty years had passed, during my walk through a hazy Edmond neighborhood.