

Monday, February 6 1:18 p.m.

From: <lear@amedd.army.mil>
To: <pkiernan@harvard.edu>
Date: Monday, February 6 1:18 p.m.
Subject: Satellite linkage is up

Paul,

Greetings from the jungles of Bolivia, landlocked armpit of the Andes. From where you sit in frigid Cambridge, watching the snow fall, I'm sure a month in the tropics doesn't sound like a bad deal. But believe me: this is not St. Barts. Yesterday I saw a snake the size of a submarine.

The trip down was uneventful—sixteen hours in the air to La Paz, then a smaller government transport to Concepcion, in the country's eastern jungle basin. From here, there aren't really any decent roads; it's pure backcountry, and we'll be traveling on foot. Everybody on the team is pretty excited, and the roster keeps growing. In addition to the group from UCLA, Tim Fanning from Columbia caught up with us in La Paz, as did Claudia Swenson from MIT. (I think you told me once that you knew her at Yale.) In addition to his not inconsiderable star power, you'll be happy to hear that Tim brought half-a-dozen grad assistants with him, so just like that, the average age of the team fell by about ten years and the gender balance tipped decidedly toward the female. "Terrific scientists, every one," Tim insisted. Three ex-wives, each younger than the last; the guy never learns.

I have to say, despite my misgivings (and, of course, yours and Rochelle's) about involving the military, it's made a huge difference. Only USAMRID has the muscle and the money to pull together a team like this one, and do it in a month. After years of trying to get people to listen, I feel like a door has suddenly swung open, and all we have to do is step through it. You know me, I'm a scientist through and through, I don't have a superstitious bone in my body. But part of me just has to think it's fate. After Liz's illness, her long struggle, how ironic that I should finally have the chance to solve the greatest mystery of all – the mystery of death itself. I think she would have liked it here, actually. I can just see her, wearing that big straw hat of hers, sitting on a log by the river to read her beloved Shakespeare in the sunshine.

BTW: Congrats on the tenure decision. Just before I left I heard the committee voted you in by general acclaim, which didn't surprise me after the department vote, which I can't tell you about but which, off the record, was unanimous. I can't tell you how relieved I am. Nevermind that you're the best biochemist we've got, a man who can make a microtubule cytoskeletal-associated protein stand up and sing the Halleluiahs Chorus. What would I have done on my lunch hour if my squash partner hadn't gotten tenure?

My love to Rochelle, and tell Alex his uncle Jonas will bring him back something special from Bolivia. How about a baby anaconda? I hear they make good pets as long as you keep them fed. And I hope we're still on for the Sox opener. How you got those tickets I have no idea.

– Jonas
Satellite linkage is up

From: <lear@amedd.army.ml>
Date: Wednesday, February 8 8:00 a.m.
To: <pkiernan@harvard.edu>
Subject: RE: Go get 'em tiger

Paul,

Thanks for your message, and of course for your very sage advice, re: pretty female post-docs with Ivy League degrees. I can't say I disagree with you, and on more than one lonely night in my tent, the thought has crossed my mind. But it's just not in the cards. For now, Rochelle is the only woman for me, and you can tell her I said so.

The news here, and I can already hear a big "I told you so" from Rochelle: it looks like we've been militarized. I suppose this was inevitable, at least since I took USAMRID's money. (And we're talking about a lot of money— aerial recon doesn't come cheap, twenty-thousand bucks to retarget a satellite and that will buy you only thirty minutes worth.) But still, it seems like overkill. We were making our final preparations for departure yesterday when a helicopter dropped out of the sky at base camp and who should step off but a squad of Special Forces, all done up like they were ready to take an enemy pillbox: the jungle camo, the green and black warpaint, the infrared scopes and high power gas-recoil M-19s—all of it. Some very gung-ho guys. Trailing the pack is a man in a suit, a civilian, who looks to be in charge. He struts across the field to where I'm standing and I see how young he is, not even thirty. He's also as tan as a tennis pro. What's he doing with a squad of special ops? "You the vampire guy?" he asks me. You know how I feel about that word, Paul—just try to get an NAS grant with 'vampire' anywhere in the paperwork. But just to be polite, and because, what the hell, he's backed by enough firepower to overthrow a small government, I tell him, sure, that's me. "Luke Cole, Dr. Lear," he says, and shakes my hand, wearing a big grin. "I've come a long way just to meet you. Guess what? You're now a major." I'm thinking, a major what? And what are these guys doing here? "This is a civilian scientific expedition," I tell him. "Not anymore," he says. "Who decided this?" I ask. And he tells me, "My boss, Dr. Lear." "Who's your boss?" I ask him. And he says, "Dr. Lear, my boss is the President of the United States."

Tim was plenty ticked off, because he only gets to be a captain. I wouldn't know a captain from Colonel Sanders, so it's all the same to me. It was Claudia who really kicked up a fuss. She actually threatened to pack up and go home. "I didn't vote for that guy and I'm not going to be part of his damned army, no matter what the twerp says." Never mind that none of us voted for him either, and the whole thing really seems like a big joke. But it turns out she's a Quaker. Her younger brother was actually a conscientious objector during the Iran War. In the end, though, we calmed her down and got her to stay on, so long as we promised she didn't have to salute anyone.

The thing is, I can't really figure out why these guys are here. Not that the military would take an interest, because after all, it's their money we're spending, and I'm grateful for it. But why send a squad of Special Ops (they're technically "special reconnaissance") to babysit a bunch of biochemists? The kid in the suit—I'd guess he's NSA, though who really knows?—told me that the area we were traveling into was known to be controlled by the Montoya drug cartel, and the soldiers are here for our protection. "How would it look for

a team of American scientists to get themselves killed by drug lords in Bolivia?” he asked me. “Not a happy day for U.S. foreign policy, not a happy day at all.” I didn’t contradict him, but I know damn well there’s no drug activity where we’re going – it’s all to the west, on the altiplano. The eastern basin is virtually uninhabited except for a few scattered Indian settlements, most of which haven’t had any outside contact in years. All of which he *knows* I know.

This has me scratching my head, but as far as I can tell, it makes no difference to the expedition itself. We just have some heavy fire-power coming along for the ride. The soldiers pretty much keep to themselves; I’ve barely heard any of them even open their mouths. Spooky, but at least they don’t get in the way.

Anyway, we’re off in the morning. The offer of a pet snake still stands. – Jonas

From: <lear@amedd.army.ml>
To: <pkiernan@harvard.edu>
Date: Wednesday, February 15 11:32 p.m
Subject: See attached
Attachment: DSC00392.JPG (596 KB)

Paul,

Six days in. Sorry to be out of touch, and please tell Rochelle not to worry. It's been hard slogging every step of the way, with dense tree cover and many days of constant rain—too much work to get the satcom up. At night, we all eat like farmhands and fall exhausted into our tents. Nobody here smells very nice, either.

But tonight I'm too keyed up to sleep. The attachment will explain why. I've always believed in what we were doing, but of course I've had my moments of doubt, sleepless nights when I wondered if this was all completely hair-brained, some kind of fantasy my brain cooked up when Liz became so sick. I know you've thought it too. So I'd be a fool not to question my own motives. But not anymore.

According to the GPS, we're still a good twenty kilometers from the site. The topography is consistent with the satellite recon—dense jungle plain, but along the river, a deep ravine with cliffs of limestone pocketed with caves. Even an amateur geologist could read these cliffs like the page of a book. The usual layers of river sediment, and then, about four meters below the lip, a line of charcoal black. It's consistent with the Chuchote legend: a thousand years ago the whole area was blackened by fire, "a great conflagration sent by the god Auxl, lord of the Sun, to destroy the demons of man and save the world." We camped on the riverbank last night, listening to the flocks of bats that poured out of the caves at sunset, and in the morning, headed east along the ravine.

It was just past noon when saw the statue.

At first I thought maybe I was imagining things. But look at the image, Paul. A human being, but not quite: the bent animal posture, the claw-like hands and the long teeth crowding the mouth, the intense muscularity of the torso, details still visible, somehow, after—how long? How many centuries of wind and rain and sun have passed, wearing the stone away? And still it took my breath away. And the resemblance to the other images I've shown you is inarguable – the pillars at the temple of Mansarha, the carvings on the gravesite in Xianyang, the cave drawings in Cotes D'Amor.

More bats tonight. You get used to them, and they keep the mosquitoes down. Claudia rigged up a trap to catch one. Apparently, bats like canned peaches, which she used as bait. Maybe Alex would like a pet bat instead? – J

Saturday, February 18 6:51 p.m.

From: <lear@amedd.army.mil>

To: <pkiernan@harvard.edu>

Date: Saturday, February 18 6:51 p.m.

Subject: more jpgs

Attachment: DSC00481.JPG (596 KB), DSC 00486 (582 KB), DSC00491 (697 KB)

Have a look at these. We've counted nine figures now.

Cole thinks we're being followed, but won't tell me who. It's just a feeling, he says. All night long he's on the satcom, won't tell me what it's all about. At least he's stopped calling me 'major.' He's a youngster, but not as green as he looks.

Good weather, finally. We're close, within 10K, making good time.

Sunday, February 19 9:51 p.m.

From: <lear@amedd.army.mil>
To: <pkiernan@harvard.edu>
Date: Sunday, February 19 9:51 p.m.
Subject:

[No message]

Tuesday, February 21 1:16 a.m.

From: <lear@amedd.army.mil>
To: <pkiernan@harvard.edu>
Date: Tuesday, February 21 1:16 a.m.
Subject: none

Paul,

I'm writing this to you in case I don't make it back. I don't want to alarm you, but I have to be realistic about the situation. We're less than five kilometers from the gravesite, but I doubt we'll be able to perform the extraction as planned. Too many of us are sick, or dead.

Two nights ago we were attacked – not by drug traffickers, but bats. They came a few hours after sunset, while most of us were out of our tents doing the evening chores, scattered around the campsite. It was as if they had been scouting us all along, waiting for the right moment to launch an aerial assault. I was lucky: I had walked a few hundred yards upriver, away from the trees, to find a good signal on the GPS. I heard the shouts and then the gunfire, but by the time I made it back, the swarm had moved downstream. Four people died that night, including Claudia. The bats simply engulfed her. She tried to get to the river—I guess she thought she could shake them off that way—but she never made it. By the time we reached her, she'd lost so much blood she had no chance. In the chaos, six others were bitten or scratched, and all of them are now ill with what looks like some speeded-up version of Bolivian Hemorrhagic Fever—bleeding from the mouth and nose, the skin and eyes rosy with burst capillaries, the fever shooting skyward, fluid filling the lungs, coma. We've been in contact with CDC but without tissue analysis it's anybody's guess. Tim had both his hands practically chewed to pieces, trying to pull them off Claudia. He's the sickest of the lot. I seriously doubt he'll last till morning.

Last night they came again. The soldiers had set up a defense perimeter, but there were simply too many – they must have come by the hundreds of thousands, a huge swarm that blotted out the stars. Three soldiers killed, as well as Cole. He was standing right in front of me; they actually lifted him off his feet before they bored through him like hot knives through butter. There was barely enough of him left to bury.

Tonight it's quiet, not a bat in the sky. We've built a fireline around the camp and that seems to be keeping them at bay. Even the soldiers are pretty shaken up. The few of us who are left are now deciding what to do. A lot of our equipment has been destroyed; it's unclear how this happened, but sometime during the attack last night, a grenade belt went into the fire, killing one of the soldiers and taking out the generator as well as most of what was in the supply tent. But we still have satcom and enough juice in the batteries to call for evac. Probably we should all just get the hell out of here.

And yet. When I ask myself why I should turn back now, what I have to go home to, I can't think of a single reason. It would be different if Liz were still alive. I think for the past year some part of me has been pretending that she'd simply gone away for a while, that one day I'd look up and see her standing in the door, smiling that way she did, her head cocked to the side so her hair could fall away from her face; my Liz, home at last, thirsty for a cup of Earl Grey, ready for a stroll by the Charles through the falling snow. But I know now that this isn't going to happen. Strangely, the events of the last two days have

given my mind a kind of clarity about what we're doing here, what the stakes are. I'm not one bit sorry to be here; I don't feel afraid at all. If push comes to shove, I may press on alone.

Paul, whatever happens, whatever I decide, I want you to know that you have been a great friend to me. More than a friend: a brother. How strange to write that sentence, sitting on a riverbank in the jungles of Bolivia, four thousand miles away from everything and everyone I've ever known and loved. I feel as if I've entered a new era of my life. What strange places our life can carry us to, what dark passages

Tuesday, February 21 5:31 a.m.

From: <lear@amedd.army.mil>
To: <pkiernan@harvard.edu>
Date: Tuesday, February 21 5:31 a.m.
Subject: RE: don't be dumb, get the hell out, please

Paul,

We radioed for the evac last night. Pickup in ten hours, which is the nick of time as far as everyone's concerned. I don't see how we can survive another night here. Those of us who are still healthy have decided we can use the day to press on to the site. We were going to draw straws, but it turned out everyone wanted to go. We leave within the hour, at first light. Maybe something can still be salvaged from this disaster. One bit of good news: Tim seems to have turned a corner during the last few hours. His fever's way down, and though he's still unresponsive, the bleeding has stopped and his skin looks better. With the others, though, I'd say it's still touch and go.

I know that science is your god, Paul, but would it be too much to ask for you to pray for us? All of us.

Tuesday, February 21 11:16 p.m.

From: <lear@amedd.army.mil>
To: <pkiernan@harvard.edu>
Date: Tuesday, February 21 11:16 p.m.
Subject:

Now I know why the soldiers are here.