

WASHED OUT at AVILA and BURIED at UOLANTUN:
A DAMN FINE DAY WITH DENNY

My job in the Tikal Project was that of doing detailed architectural recording on buildings marked as "standing architecture" on the central Tikal base map but not slated for testing or investigation in any other programme. By 1968, I was coming to the end of these and Denny had identified another series that showed up in his brecha maps at various places out beyond the central zone. So it seemed natural to him that I should venture out into Dennyland and deal with his buildings as well. So I did that. And had a couple of memorable seasons tramping through the bush, camping overnight, and trying to get as much on paper as I could in usually just one day's work at any one place. It was an arduous programme, but very satisfying to be overnighing, trying vainly to sleep in a hammock slung under a champa at some aguada, miles away from everything. I enjoyed it very much.

At one point during this programme, Denny asked me to come out to Uolantun where he had been cutting an axial tunnel into the pyramid. I was to locate the position of a small burial in a cist that had turned up right at the end of the tunnel. On the way out there, at Denny's strangely vigorous insistence, we took a short detour, entirely for my benefit you understand, so I could have a look at a this amazingly well preserved little building at a place called Avila; a small single room with an nearly intact vault on a low substructure. I dutifully inspected with a suitably critical scrutiny; it looked like pretty ordinary, undistinguished, Late Classic vaulted building as I recall - though remarkably well preserved. Denny was especially keen that I should climb up onto the roof. So we did that. And the scheme he had been gleefully cooking all along was then finally revealed to me.

There was this tree, see, growing just the right distance away so you could take a flying leap and grapple on to it and elegantly slide down. Any other way of getting down was just contemptible. The thing was, the tree was far enough away from the building so that you could not get a hand grip on it before jumping. You had to get fully airborne and sort of fly at the trunk and hope to stick. But it was just perfect for this. Watch. With that Denny did a short run across the roof, gorilla-ed on to the trunk, and slithered down, twigs, small branches and strips of bark flying around in all directions. Easy. But sort of exciting because of the airborne part. Where else are you going to find an opportunity like this! Well, it was my turn, next, so I did the run across the roof all right. But that was as far as I got. Just at the edge some internal switch flipped over. My autonomous nervous system evidently was not programmed for leaping into space. I got this strange empty feeling in the region of the bowels and nothing in God's earth could have induced me to make the leap. Denny, down on the ground, only maybe ten or twelve feet below, found this highly entertaining, as I have no doubt, he had anticipated. He actually fell over sideways and rolled off through the underbrush laughing

uproariously. After a bit he got up, wiped off some of the weeds and small bushes, and announced that this just would not do - I had to overcome this despicable weakness! To help me he would film my leap on his video camera and surely the prospect of the whole world seeing my spectacular funk would bolster me to do it. So I took another determined rush as the camera rolled, but with the same result. This time I thought Denny might really injure himself he was thrown into such a state of hilarity and afterwards we had to look around for a while to find where the camera had landed. So out of consideration, and so as not to waste any more video film, I quietly descended by roots and branches, and was able to help him up, weakened as he was with convulsive merriment. Somewhere, I guess, there is a video showing a shadowy figure baulking and teetering at the edge of a low precipice deeply buried in the woods.

We then continued on to Uolantun, Denny chuckling intermittently, and I set up my measuring lines and prepared to locate the burial. It was a small stone-lined cist at mid-height, squarely on the end of the tunnel. I remember, in the roof of the tunnel, there were leaf impressions that had been made when fresh mortar had been placed during construction. Just as I got squared up with my tape and drawing board, the whole tunnel end caved in with a whoosh, and a wave of soft, marly limestone washed over my legs. Denny, who was up on top of the pyramid at the time, heard the rumble, and came rushing down, thinking that I had been crushed and buried in collapse. When he arrived, and saw me sitting there, my drawing board and measuring tape both disappearing into a heap of debris, and myself looking like a shred of flotsam stranded by the flood, he had an even more awesome attack of hysterics and flopped gasping with laughter up and down the length of the tunnel for quite some time. I guess he was relieved, even though the burial had been sort of instantly excavated, though luckily, nearly all of it had actually remained in place. So between not losing the burial, and not finding a new and more recent one, I guess his reaction was understandable. Eventually, he did dig me out, and we excavated my measuring tape and drawing board, and we did plot in the burial, and afterwards marched back to camp where we had a great time relating our hilarious adventures and viewing my monumental achievement of non-levitation. He had a term for it -- doing a wash-out, or something like that. As I recall it was a source of great glee for days afterward. All in all, I would chalk it up as a damn fine day with Denny.

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