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**TWENTY ONE****Some Old Friends**

LZ Jane wasn't more than seventy-five yards in diameter. It was little more than a low hill with the top cleared off to completely bare ground, a layer of fine, powdery dust on its surface.

The farms, which were located all up and down the coast, fronted on the main road running from Quang Tri south to Phong Dien. The growing fields, behind these farms, on the inland side of the road, extended back to a stretch of low, rolling hills mainly covered with tall scrub brush. Those hills then went back another couple of miles to the foot of a chain of mountains that also ran parallel to the coast. Jane sat right on the dividing line between the back of the farmlands and the front of the hills.

The light, powdery surface of the LZ was in stark contrast to the lush, green vegetation growing in the farm fields on both sides of it. Only the rolling hills out back looked brown and burned out.

There was a battery of six or seven 105mm artillery pieces around the center of the LZ and a small landing area, off to one side, where no more than two Huey helicopters could land at any one time. There were also a couple of large canvas tents set up, one for supplies and the other for mess. The only other structures were a series of sandbag bunkers every twenty-five feet or so around the outside perimeter, and two or three in the center for the command personnel. The entire base of this small hill was encircled with coils of concertina wire.

Just before supper, I watched as large, green mermite cans were loaded aboard one of the Hueys for the men in the field. Mermite cans were thermally insulated containers used to deliver hot meals out

to the companies whenever possible. Having a hot meal every two or three days, when conditions permitted, was one of the advantages of being airmobile.

Each company had one or two Hueys assigned to it so that supplies could be flown out on a daily basis. They also took out the mail and a beer ration, whenever it was available, usually two cans per man, with the military equipment that had been ordered by the company radioman the previous night.

Just after sunset, I sat on top of one of the bunkers and stared out over the countryside. Once the sun was gone it became somewhat more comfortable, as far as the heat was concerned, but it would have been pure hell with the hordes of mosquitoes that showed up in the cooler night air if it wasn't for the "bug juice", or mosquito repellent, I'd spread on my arms and face.

During the day it was so quiet, the sluggishness of the tropical heat broken only by the drawn-out shrills of an occasional katydid, that the feeling in the air was comparable to a lazy Sunday afternoon back home,...but the night was an entirely different affair. At least once every fifteen minutes, one of the artillery pieces on the LZ fired a round into the mountains to our rear. This was merely harassment fire to keep whatever enemy might be in the area on their toes. If any of the companies came into contact, the guns would be turned and fired for effect, using coordinates supplied by that company's forward observer.

Looking out over the level farmlands, to one side of the LZ, I could see little points of bright yellow light in the sky. These were flares affixed to small parachutes so that they'd drift slowly until they burned out. They'd appear at several different locations all through the night.

At the same time, I could turn in another direction and see the pink line of a distant Cobra's mini-gun spraying down into the rolling hills. It was far enough away that the mighty chainsaw sound we'd

heard at An Khe was only a subtle buzz. Added to that was the sporadic sound of far-off gunfire that was just barely heard, now and then, from any direction.

Having had no experience in the field, and sitting within the relative safety of the LZ, I could only relate the feeling of all this activity to the eve of the Fourth Of July, back home, when fireworks were shot off around the neighborhood. I would learn soon enough that these sounds had nothing whatever to do with celebration.

Around eleven o'clock I decided I'd better get some sleep. Tomorrow I and the other two guys would be going out to our new company, and there was no telling what that was going to be like.

Since the others were already inside the bunker, and I felt it was much too warm to sleep inside anyway, I spread my poncho liner on top of it and laid down on my back. Before I fell asleep, one final thought occurred to me.

Ever since I was a kid, I'd been interested in astronomy and the stars. Looking up at all those points of light made me feel that I was with some old friends. I knew that since it was about the middle of the night here, it must be about the middle of the day back home on the other side of the world. Only a few hours ago they were able to gaze up at some of the same stars I was looking at right now, and in a few more hours they'd be able to see them again. That simple connection with home felt very comforting, and in this environment of uncertainties, even a small comfort was welcomed. With that thought in mind, I drifted off into a deep sleep.