
TWENTY TWO

Frags

The following morning a corporal from supply came over to the bunker where I and the other two guys had spent the night. Each company in the field kept one or two men on the LZ to put together the supplies they needed sent out each day.

"You guys will be going out to C company this afternoon. I'll get the things you'll need to take with you," he said with a friendly air.

"Can you tell us where they are right now?", one of the other men asked, "Are they in the mountains?"

"No. They're about a click and a half out that way."

He pointed in the direction of the farmland south along the main road.

"A click is a thousand yards on the map, so that puts them about fifteen hundred yards away from here. ...Do you have the magazines you were issued back at An Khe?"

We'd been given twenty empty magazines apiece for our M-16 rifles.

"Good. I'll bring over a case of rounds and you can start loading up."

He wasn't gone long when he returned riding a vehicle I hadn't seen before. It was a small flatbed, about six feet long, with balloon tires and no sides or back to it. There was an engine hanging under the back that looked like it came from a lawn mower, and the driver sat on a cushion up at the front corner where the steering wheel stuck up. It was used strictly for carrying supplies around small areas like LZs and was called, appropriately enough, a "mule".

If the seriousness of the job we were being called on to perform hadn't sunk in before this, the contents of the wooden boxes the corporal brought over made the point perfectly clear. All through training we'd handled no more than one or two magazines with, at the most, ten rounds, and each round was treated as an important entity all its own. One of the boxes he opened contained a thousand rounds, far more than any of us had ever dealt with.

We each took a cloth belt, full with strips of rounds, out of the box and began loading our magazines.

In training we'd learned that the M-16 was less likely to jam if a magazine only contained eighteen rounds, rather than the twenty it was designed to hold. We decided to stick to that rule of thumb.

While we were busy loading, the corporal unbanded another wooden crate that contained twelve black, cardboard cylinders. Then he stood up.

"You guys won't need all these frags, but you can take the extras with you and pass them out to the other guys."

With that, he left us to finish what we were doing.

When he was gone, I pulled one of the cylinders out of the crate. It was actually two pieces separated at the middle and held closed with a strip of electrical tape wrapped around it. I removed the tape, slid the two halves apart, and pulled out the packing. What remained was one brand new fragmentation hand grenade.

I slipped it out and slowly hefted its heavy weight in my hand, the other two men staring fixedly as I raised and lowered it.

Back in training, each grenade had been handled under the strictest supervision. Not only that, but they were only dealt with one at a time. I could distinctly remember the feeling I'd had the first time I held one. There was something quite awesome about having so much deadly potential energy in the palm of your hand. Here, however, there was clearly a more casual regard for them when a supply clerk

simply whipped a case on the boys. Eventually we'd get used to the feeling and take them in stride, like a pack of cigarettes or our steel pots.

In time we'd even come to realize that the effectiveness of a particular weapon wasn't always as paramount as its weight. Anything that the man in the field wanted with him had to be carried on his person; every single ounce of weight was balanced against every other ounce and considered for its order of importance.

A man could potentially carry four or more grenades, but that might mean he had to give up something like his letter writing materials to compensate for the extra weight. Those personal items were just as important to his sanity as his firepower, and he wasn't about to give them up. So, he learned to balance the amounts of what he carried like fine tuning,...not too much, not too little.

We were also given aluminum ruck-sack frames and packs, like the ones used by mountaineers. We would discover what extremely valuable items these were as time went on.

We spent the rest of the morning packing until around noon when I sat down on top of the bunker and looked out across the area of the LZ. The sun was beating down mercilessly so that I could see the stagnant air shimmering just above the ground.

Because of the heat, there was very little activity, with the exception of a man walking over near the makeshift landing pad. I could see little puffs of white, powdery dust rising from the soles of his boots as he went. Anyone who didn't have to be out in the sun at that time of day wasn't.