
THIRTY ONE**Medevaced**

The only consolation in doing this daily search of the villages, on the other side of the treeline, was that there wasn't a great deal of contact with the enemy. The reason for that was simple. Although we did see the occasional two or three regular, uniformed North Vietnamese soldiers watching us from way off in the distance, this was mainly an area of operations for the local VC or Viet Cong. They were people who hadn't come down from North Vietnam, but lived right here and sympathized with their Communist neighbors to the North. They were what are known as gorilla fighters.

The VC wore the same clothes as all the other local people, so it was extremely difficult to tell who our enemy was and who wasn't. It didn't surprise us in the least to find an elderly woman, looking for all the world like somebody's sweet old grandmother, firing a thirty caliber machine-gun at us from inside one of the villages,...or a nine-year-old child, (boy or girl), tossing grenades into the backs of trucks on the road, as had happened at Quang Tri.

Since the VC were less heavily armed than the soldiers in the regular army, their tactic was to have one or two individuals snipe at us from concealed locations, like a church bell tower, a thick hedgerow, or just about anywhere that gave cover.

Following our regular routine, we had just walked through one village and were crossing an open field of paddies to the next. It was about mid-morning and I was really feeling the scorching heat.

There were times when it seemed almost impossible to put one foot in front of the other, yet I kept going, just as all the others did, because my pride wouldn't let me be the one to hold up the company. Every man had dark, circular patches of moisture around each armpit of his already grungy fatigues and the horse flies were raising large, nasty welts on the backs of sweaty, unprotected necks. Most of us had an olive drab bath towel which we kept slung around our necks to prevent the flies from alighting.

A good number of guys had already gotten rid of those miserable flack jackets, but some, myself included, were still wearing them. Our turn hadn't yet come up to send them in.

As I walked along on top of a rice paddy berm, at about the middle of the column, a single burst of automatic weapons fire came out of the trees some fifty yards off to our left. Whitey was in front of me and Hanh, our Vietnamese scout and interpreter, which we men called a "Kit Carson", was about five yards behind. Everyone dove to the ground, on the opposite side of the berm from where the firing had come, and the entire company opened up on the treeline.

Everyone, that is, except me.

In the middle of my stride, when my left arm was extended to the front, something had slammed into it near the elbow. I say something because, at first I didn't realize what had happened. My hand had gone instantly numb like the feeling one gets when an elbow is bumped on the funny-bone. Lying on my back behind the berm, I moved my gaze slowly, with puzzlement, from the hand to the elbow where I saw a dark, red stain spreading steadily on the sleeve of my fatigue shirt.

Since, surprisingly, there wasn't any pain at all, I called calmly to Whitey who was lying only a few feet away. "Whitey, I've been hit."

He paused briefly in his firing and began yelling, "Medic!...Medic!"

The word passed along until it reached Doc Clark farther up the berm. Doc was a handsome guy from Hurt, Virginia whom you couldn't help but like because of his easy manner and mild Virginia drawl. The fact that he had crystal clear blue eyes and a genuinely friendly smile, that he flashed readily, only added to his likable nature.

As soon as the word reached him, he sprinted along behind the men sprawled on the ground firing over the berm. Just before he got to where I was lying, there was a powerful explosion that nearly made me jump out of my skin. I looked up at Whitey who was kneeling just above my head.

“What the hell was that?!” I said, half stunned.

Whitey was chuckling to himself. He'd just fired an M-72 LAW, which was the small, throw-away bazooka. In his haste to get the round off, he'd aimed way too high and it soared up over the tops of the trees. It exploded in the open paddies on the other side of the treeline, far beyond where the shots had come from. He looked down at me and grinned with an almost boyish embarrassment.

“Holy shit!...I guess I missed!”

It would be some time before the other guys would lay off razzing Whitey about how he'd tried to launch a LAW round into orbit.

Then Doc was at my side.

“How you doin' there, guy?”

Working fast and efficiently, he used a buck knife he carried to cut away my shirt sleeve above the elbow.

“Is there much pain?”

“No,” I said, still surprised by that fact. “There's really no pain at all, but my hand is numb.”

While he worked at cleaning the elbow and wrapping a gauze bandage around it, he spoke in a continuous, reassuring manner.

"You just take it easy. We'll have this wrapped up and get you medevaced out of here in no time. Actually, you've got yourself a nice little wound here. It looks like the bullet went cleanly through the elbow without breaking any bones."

Then he flashed me that million-dollar smile of his and said, "That ought to be good for some decent slack time back in the rear."

He had Whitey and another man help me remove my backpack and flack jacket.

"I don't believe it!" I said, as I rested my head back down on the ground in what must have appeared a state of ecstasy.

"You don't believe what?" Doc asked.

"You can't imagine what a relief it is to get that damned flack jacket off. A minute ago I was dying from the heat. Now I feel light as a feather."

Again the medic gave me that warm, country smile, "I know exactly how you feel, and you won't have to wear one of those things for quite awhile. Do you feel like having a cigarette?"

"No,...I don't smoke."

"You will by the time you leave Nam."

He repacked his equipment, "Okay, as soon as we get to a clearing where it's safe, we'll get a medevac out here to take you in."

Doc and Whitey helped me to my feet and I was still surprised that there was so little pain, other than a mild burning sensation. There'd been no further shots from the treeline, since the men had literally sprayed the area with bullets, grenades, and the misguided LAW round that Whitey launched.

The company now headed further out into the open paddies where a Huey could be brought in with relative safety. Before we got there, however, we had to cross a canal that had been dug for irrigation purposes. I always dreaded these crossings, even when I wasn't injured, but the loss of the use of my arm made it all the more difficult.

The reason for my consternation was that the foot bridges across these canals were nothing more than a single stalk of bamboo, spanning from one bank to the other, which was negotiated like walking a tightrope. There was a rope handrail directly above it to hold onto, but that didn't offer much assurance. What bothered me most was that these bridges had been constructed by the local people so that they could cross the canals during their daily treks to and from the paddies.

The Vietnamese people are very thin and small compared to us Americans, and when you considered the extra fifty or sixty pounds we were carrying on our backs, the bridge was taking far more weight than it was intended to. I'd seen several men slip on the thin rail and only keep themselves from disappearing in the muck at the bottom of the canal by hanging onto the rope railing.

As I crossed the bridge, Doc had a man stay on each side of me for support. Also, my crossing was made easier by the fact that all my gear had been split up among the other guys of my squad, so that I didn't have to carry anything, something I was extremely grateful for.

It might sound odd, but this was the second ecstatic feeling I'd had in the brief period since I was hit. The first, of course, was when my flack jacket was removed. The second was walking along with

only the weight of the clothes I was wearing. In all the time I'd been in the field, with the exception of when we secured the LZ, like everyone else, I carried the full weight of my pack and weapon wherever I went. Walking so lightly now gave me the strangely unfamiliar feeling of being more like a tourist than one of the guys.

When we were well out into the open paddies, the company stopped and set up a temporary perimeter. This would be security for the Huey when it arrived,...*if* it arrived!

I sat on the ground and waited while Doc Clark went over to the center of the perimeter where the captain and his group were located. I couldn't hear what was being said, but I could tell that something was going on over there. Doc was pacing back and forth, in front of the captain, with hands on hips and his jaw firmly set. Evidently, something the captain said had brought him to the boiling point. Doc was a hell of a nice guy, but someone you didn't want to cross.

This was one of the few times I would ever see a specialist four, which was the equivalent of a two stripe corporal, speak to a captain as if he was of equal rank.

Medics had a special place in the hearts and minds of the men in the field. To most people, if they'd been there to see it, the infantrymen of the company performed what would be thought of as acts of bravery just about every day. To the men themselves, however, this was just considered part of the job. The people they looked on as brave were the medics.

There were five medics in the company, one for each of the platoons and one in the captain's CP. They were actually a separate unit from the company, having been assigned to it by the medical corps in the rear.

The medics usually carried no other weapons than a .45 caliber pistol in a holster on their hip. When the company came under fire, and everyone else was ducking for cover, they immediately made their way to any man who was hit. That often meant going out into the no-man's land between where the company and the enemy were exchanging fire! There would be many an occasion when I would wonder how they'd gone out into the open like that and survived. Truth of the matter was that, all too often, they didn't.....survive, that is. They were a hell of a brave lot.

The medics also had the last say when it came to anything of a medical nature, even over the captain, if there was a conflict of interests taking place.

Doc came walking back over and sat on the ground beside me.

"How's the arm?"

"Not too bad, but the burning sensation is getting stronger."

I nodded in the direction of the CP, "What went on over there?"

He broke off a grassy reed and put the end of it in his mouth so that it dangled out in front of him.

"The captain and I had a slight difference of opinion. He thought maybe you should stay out here overnight and go in on the supply bird in the morning."

"Why's that?"

"Aw, some foolishness that you should be able to make it until morning. Anyway," he gave me a sly look out of the corner of his eye, "I convinced him that it wasn't such a good idea."

There was a brief pause as I felt the burning becoming steadily more uncomfortable. I knew that by the expression "convinced", Doc had laid the law down to the captain and I certainly appreciated what he'd done.

“Thanks, Doc.”

He took the reed out of his mouth and gave me that disarming grin of his. He knew what I meant.

“No problem.”

Just then we both heard the distinctive sound of a Huey approaching in the distance. We stood and walked over to where another man was preparing to guide it in. As soon as the bird’s skids were on the ground, Doc walked me to its side, fighting the downdraft of the rotors, and helped me climb in. There was no one else aboard, so I sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor. Just before he backed away from the open door, I shouted to him once more over the roar of the engine, “Thanks again, Doc.”

He nodded and gave me a thumbs-up.

I watched him move forward to the pilot’s window and make a spinning motion with a clenched fist and index finger pointed toward the sky. That let the pilot know everything was set for him go.

Finally, as the bird lifted off, and Doc dropped away below, he waved up at me and I returned the wave. This would be the last I’d see of the company for quite some time.