
FORTY ONE**The Horse They Couldn't Ride**

The company spent the rest of the day patrolling through villages near the one we'd surrounded. Any NVA or VC who'd been in the area had cleared out so that, once again, we encountered only old people and children.

Later in the afternoon we received word that the entire battalion was going to move from around Quang Tri to a more southerly province where enemy activity was reported as heavy. The sortie of Hueys picked us up and flew us back to the area just outside the wire at LZ Jane. There we joined the other four companies, who had also been flown in, and set up to spend the night.

This was one of the few occasions when all the companies of the battalion would come together in one place and we found it to be a most enjoyable experience. With approximately five-hundred men in the battalion, there was little chance that the enemy was going to try anything. For that reason, we were able to relax with a light watch around the area.

At suppertime, all the supply people came out from the LZ and set up barbecue pits using fifty-five gallon drums that had been cut in half lengthwise and placed on metal legs. They cooked up steaks for everyone and the beer flowed freely.

There was a rule that Army radios were to be used for military communications purposes only, but on rare occasions like this one, the officers in charge allowed that rule to be bent a bit. Only a few of the radios were kept on military frequencies, for obvious reasons, while the rest were tuned to the

Armed Forces radio station. Wolfman Jack's raspy voice could be heard clearly drifting across the huge field of men, along with the Beatles, the Stones, and all the popular tunes of 1968.

Woodstock was still a year in the future, but the good feelings here were a prelude, although on a much smaller scale, to that kind of event and the ones who were already enjoying such a gathering were the men of the Second Battalion, Fifth Cav in Vietnam. It just went to show that we were as much in tune with the spirit of the sixties as was the younger generation back home. If you think I'm kidding, I'd seen the string of beads that Swede and a few of the other guys wore around their necks, under their fatigue jackets and almost everyone in the company had at least one aluminum love bracelet around their wrists.

Hard drugs, such as heroin, hadn't yet taken the firm grip they would later in the war, at least not for the guys in the field. That would come when the war was winding down and boredom became a real problem. At this point, some were into marijuana, but only smoked it when it was relatively safe to do so. Out in the field, we were our own conscience and had to rely on one another to stay alive. Therefore, few broke the rule about getting high when we all needed to be totally alert. At a party like this however, no one was too worried about what anyone else wanted to do. We lived hard and we died hard, but we partied hard too. And there was no one who could say we hadn't earned it.

The next morning the sorties of Hueys moved the companies to the air field at Quang Tri where we would board C-130 cargo planes for the trip south. While we waited along the side of the runway, we watched Chinooks, which were the banana shaped helicopters with a rotor at each end, come in and land at regular intervals. These were Marine helicopters dropping off their companies to replace the First Cav when we moved out. We'd see this routine on a fairly regular basis.

It occurred to me that the reason the First Cav was usually the first unit to be sent into an enemy territory had to be because of our standing here. At this point we had the reputation of being the most feared American unit in Vietnam. That may sound a bit self-inflated, because I happen to be a member of this unit, but it had nothing whatever to do with ego. There was a very good reason for that reputation.

Every member of the Cav had heard the story of how the First Cav patch, worn on the shoulder of our uniforms, came to have the coloring it did. The patch was in the shape of a shield, with a bright yellow background. Running diagonally across the patch was a solid black bar and, in the upper right yellow area was the silhouette of a horse's head.

It was said that, during the Korean conflict, a unit of the Cav was overwhelmed by the enemy, at which point the officers ordered a retreat and ran. Because that incident was considered an act of cowardice, the Cav lost its standard colors, the background of the patch being changed from its original olive green to bright yellow, representing the cowardice. Along with that, a very derogative slogan was attached to the patch. It went: "The horse they couldn't ride; the fence they couldn't jump; and the yellow was the reason why."

Of course, the horse referred to the horse's head on the patch. The fence meant the diagonal black bar and the yellow was the color the background had been changed to.

When the Vietnam war came along, the Cav had a chance to win its colors back, which it did with a vengeance. We had the highest kill ratio in the country.

Because of our ferocious reputation, the Cav was banned from entering any of the large cities in Vietnam, like Saigon. Whenever we were operating near such a city, we were not allowed to enter, as

a group, within the city limits. Not only had the Cav won back our colors in Vietnam, but we'd also received a unit and a Presidential citation. I was proud to be a member of such a fine team, but I was also amazed at how often our reputation preceded us into an enemy area, giving us a clear edge that no other unit over here commanded, and no amount of firepower could instill.