
FORTY FOUR**A Walk Into Hell**

When the airstrike was over, a couple of squads were sent into that treeline to look for dead and wounded. They found the bodies of seven NVA Regulars, but no survivors. The rest of the force had left the area shortly after initial contact was made.

That was the usual procedure for an enemy ambush. They'd make their hit and then move out as soon as they could, knowing that it wouldn't be long before the Americans had the area saturated with air support and artillery.

One of their biggest fears, other than their own superstitions, were the Cobras. Many of these gunships had shark's teeth painted on the lower front end for psychological affect and, due to the narrow fuselage, looked every bit the monster they were meant to portray. It was easy enough to understand that fear. I'd seen Cobras approaching from head on and, though I knew they were on our side, never failed to feel a slight chill at the back of my neck.

Add that psychological edge to the firepower of its mini-gun, rocket pods, and automatic grenade launcher, and you definitely had a great deal to fear.

Fortunately only two of our men had received minor wounds from the engagement. As soon as they were medevaced out, the company continued along the same bearing we'd been following originally. Now, however, the going seemed more difficult than it had before. Every enemy engagement

was physically and psychologically draining on the entire company, especially when someone was wounded,....or worse.

It might seem easy to understand the psychological aspect of that drain, with someone having been hit,....but it went deeper than that. Everyone knows how it feels when someone close to them dies, whether it's a friend in a car accident, a relative in a house fire, or a loved one who passes away of natural causes. It hurts inside for a long time.

We felt that heavy hurt with two important differences. First of all, whereas the average person goes through it only on occasion, thank God,...we had to live with it every single day. It was the norm.

And secondly, there were no natural causes here. Every casualty was a violent one, no exceptions. One minute you might be kidding around with a buddy, and the next he was lying face up on the ground, covered with blood from automatic weapons fire, or blown into a bloody pulp by a booby trap, the life gone from his eyes. The effect was made even worse because you were always right there when it happened,...a terrible burden to bear.

The physical drain was due to the extreme adrenaline flow that occurred during a firefight. Suddenly the heart beat faster, breathing increased dramatically, and the senses became extraordinarily sharp. Like a high performance race car running at top speed, for any length of time, this caused a rapid drain of energy along with a great deal of wear and tear on the body. Even though the entire episode we'd just gone through had taken place in less than half-an-hour, counting the time it took for the Cobra to get out here, I felt as bone weary as if I'd gone for twenty four hours without sleep.

The top of the hill we were crossing, when we were hit, turned out to be the easiest part of our walk. Shortly we reached the far end of it and made our way down the slope to the bottom about fifty

feet below. It was unbearably hot and sticky down there because the lowland proved not to be land at all, but a full-blown, steamy swamp!

Unfortunately, we had no alternative but to go directly through that swamp. As we made our way slowly, one behind the other, in waist-deep water with a murky white color, almost like that of milk, I felt that this must have been how the primordial earth looked millions of years ago. The air was so hot, heavy and still that it was almost suffocating. Occasionally we'd see long water leaches break the surface, but we had our pants bloused inside our boots so that these hideous creatures couldn't get to our skin.

Not only were the leaches on the prowl down here, but the mosquitoes and horse flies were like kamikazes zeroing in on any exposed skin and a wary eye had to be kept for poisonous snakes hanging from the limbs and vines of the plants growing out of the murky water.

But leaches, flies, mosquitoes and snakes were the least of our problems right now. Each man was gingerly feeling his way along while holding onto hanging vines, leaves, or anything else he could grab for support. The reason for that was that there was absolutely no solid bottom beneath our feet. We were literally walking on the slippery roots of these swamp trees!

Using my feet, I could feel that the roots were approximately five or six inches in diameter and that there was nothing over or under them but water. If a man slipped off into one of the wide spaces between them, he'd disappear into the depths and probably never be found. That was especially true with the weight each of us was carrying.

I found this experience almost as nerve-racking as coming under enemy fire. The thought of disappearing into that murk seemed like something out of a nightmare!

Suddenly, when I was about halfway across to where the base of the next hill rose out of the swamp, what sounded like a hundred automatic weapons began firing up ahead, as if all hell had broken loose! I could see the line of men, to my front, stretching up the side of the hill and over the top, but couldn't see what was going on beyond the crest where the shooting was taking place.

There were two designated radiomen in each platoon, so that they could take turns carrying the lieutenant's radio. One would carry it one day, and the other the next. That way one man wasn't constantly stuck with the extra weight. This particular day I happened to be off and there were approximately seventy or eighty men in front of me.

Whereas the line had been moving at a snail's pace before the shooting broke out, we guys still in the water now managed to slip and slide our way quickly to the shore at the base of the hill. When contact with the enemy was made, standing out in the open, in waist deep water, wasn't exactly what you wanted to be doing.

Since the continuous firing was up beyond the crest of the hill, we at the bottom weren't taking any incoming rounds at this point, but we heard a sound that literally sent chills up our spines and caused the roots of our teeth to ache.

From the amount of fire up there it was pretty clear that the front of the column had walked into another ambush, a major one. Moments after the initial outburst, piercing screams, like nothing I'd ever heard before, filled the air. As many times as the company had had men killed or wounded, this was the first time I actually heard someone screaming in pain, at the top of his lungs, and it was an incredibly horrible sound.

I looked over at Swede, who was squatting next to me on the shore where we'd stopped, and he stared back with a glazed look in his eyes. Those screams were having the same affect on all of us.

Word came back for everyone to move up. Much as the screaming made us want to cringe, we knew that the guys up there needed us. Without saying a word we scrambled up the side of the hill, to the edge of the crest, where we could see what the situation looked like. From where we were now, the land leveled out somewhat, but still continued up with a very gentle incline. The men furthest up had pulled back from the area of contact and were lying, pretty much out in the open, on their stomachs. They were about twenty yards away from us, in a line across our front. A few yards behind them, the medics knelt, working feverishly on the wounded.

A couple of huge trees, off to each side, cast shade over the area, but there was basically very little cover. The ground had virtually no growth, other than some sparse, two-inch high scrub grass, and the sulfurous-smelling gray gunsmoke, from the massive initial outburst, hung heavy over the entire scene.

Since it was quiet for the moment, we got up and began making our way, rifles at the ready and squatting low, toward the men at the front of the makeshift perimeter.

The man who'd been screaming was a young black guy who had taken several rounds in both of his legs. He was lying on his back with the medics working feverishly over him, and a couple of others, when we moved past, on our way up. At the moment he was quiet because he'd been given a heavy dose of morphine, but I really felt for the poor guy. It was obvious from the tears running down his cheeks and the spasmodic shivering of his arms, crossed in front of his chest, that he was in a great deal of pain.

Since most of my platoon had been below the crest of the hill, and unaffected by the initial ambush, we were moved up to the front of the line about forty yards below the dense treeline where the enemy were located. As soon as the column pulled back, the firing had ceased so that now there was an eerie, uneasy quiet.

From the amount of fire that came out of that treeline, it was obvious that this was more than a small enemy squad in a hit-and-run ambush. As this engagement continued, it would become all too clear that a company of one-hundred-and-ten American infantrymen was pitted against a battalion, and possibly two, of well seasoned North Vietnamese Regulars. They were the cream of the enemy's forces!

In fact, the ambush we ran into earlier was a small contingent of this same force which was sent out to try and divert us away from discovering their main base at the top of this hill. When they broke off that contact, they must have moved back up here to the main unit. Soon enough we'd discover that they were dug in at the top in what could only be described as an impenetrable fortress!

When we reached the front line, we laid on the ground, on our stomachs, with the men who were up there when the initial shooting broke out. We were immediately filled in on the situation.

The man lying two men over from me pointed a finger up the hill.

“You see that treeline up there on the other side of the clearing?”

He spoke in quick, heated bursts, the stress unmistakable in his voice.

“When we got to those trees a mass of rounds came out of there and cut down the guys at the front of the column. We had three killed outright and seven wounded. Robinson back there was one of them who took the opening barrage.”

He was referring to the guy we'd heard screaming.

“Doc Bovie was able to pull him back behind us. It was a bitch with him screamin’ like that all the way.”

About fifteen yards away, looking up the hill, I could see several thin, young trees, no more than three or four inches in diameter and five feet apart, across our front. Another ten yards beyond those was a small clearing which went up another fifteen yards to a dense treeline where the enemy fire had come out of. That further treeline was so thick with foliage that it looked almost like a solid wall, very much like a hedgerow back home. Stare as I might at it, though it was clearly within our view, there wasn't the least sign of movement. Still, I knew there were a lot of people concealed just inside it's shadows. This was another testimony to the skill of the enemy with camouflage.

“What's going on right now?”, one of us asked.

“We managed to drag the wounded with us when we pulled back, but the three bodies are still up there in the clearing. The captain says we've got to get them out and I guess they're having a meeting to decide who's going up there to get them.”

The captain had set up his CP just down from the front line of the perimeter, behind us, where we could see all the platoon lieutenants gathered for the meeting.

While this was going on, the sound of a helicopter's engine became noticeable approaching from the distance.

“Here comes a Cobra!”, one of the men said as we all looked to the sky.

This was the first time, since we'd been hit, that we had any reason to feel relief and it was more than welcomed. The Cobra was given the coordinates of the enemy's location and then proceeded to

empty it's entire load of rockets, mini-gun, and grenades into the top of the hill. When it was finished, a second ship arrived and did exactly the same thing. A short while later our platoon leader came up to the line and passed the word.

“First and second squads, get ready to move up the hill. You'll be traveling light. The other squads will cover the gap in this part of the perimeter.”

Traveling light meant that we'd leave our heavy packs behind, taking only our weapons, grenades, and ammunition.

Rarely had the company run into an enemy force that chose to stay and fight, rather than hit-and-run, so there was really no reason, at this point, to suspect that this time would be any different. Still, moving very slowly, one behind the other, up toward that treeline, we couldn't help feeling a sense of heavy foreboding.

We made our way past the first thin line of trees out into the small clearing where we began to fan out to the left and right. The depth of the clearing, from the thin line of trees we'd just come through, to the dense treeline in front of us, didn't give us a lot of room to maneuver. There were two large trees about halfway into the clearing, but spaced fairly far apart, with roots that projected out like the fins of a rocket before they disappeared into the ground. There were also the bodies of the three men we'd come to retrieve lying close up against the enemy treeline.

Rick had moved out in front of me when we left the perimeter. Now the two of us took cover behind a root on each side of one of those trees, I facing right and he left. We and two others, who had done the same over at the other tree, would provide cover fire for the line of guys who attempted moving forward toward the dense trees.

For what seemed an eternity, there was no motion in that clearing as the row of men stood side by side, an arm's length apart, some ten feet back from the treeline. We all stared up at it like some kind of impenetrable wall. The growth inside there was so thick that no light could be seen coming through it. Rick and I were only about fifteen or twenty feet back from it ourselves, but, again, as hard as I looked, I couldn't see any movement in there.

No one said a word so that, with the exception of an occasional caw-cawing of a distant tropical bird, a gloomy silence hung over the clearing. The sun beat down mercilessly, without the slightest hint of a breeze, the hot air shimmering just above the ground and, because of our heightened senses, the smell of thick jungle vegetation almost overwhelming. Everyone of us had beads of sweat sliding down his face, not just from the unbearable heat, but from the tension of the situation as well.

Finally, one of the men at the center of the row facing the trees took a slow, calculated step forward.

Then, as if the devil himself was in there, a hail of shots from thirty or forty automatic weapons blasted out of that wall and sprayed all over the clearing! The men standing out in front squatted where they were and emptied magazine after magazine of M-16 rounds back into the trees in all directions!

I, Rick, and the others behind the roots, fired higher up into the trees on semi-automatic, trying to hit individual targets, but, as close as we were to that treeline, we couldn't pinpoint a single one. It was as if the trees themselves were spitting out bullets!

The contrast, between the dead quiet only a moment ago and the intense firing of hundreds of rounds now, was a shock to the system. Immediately, the acrid smell of burnt gunpowder filled the hot,

humid air and the dry dust of the ground, kicked up by scores of rounds burying themselves all over the clearing, mingled with the blue-gray smoke from all the weapons!

During a firefight time seemed to slow down to almost nothing. After what felt like forever, but could only have been a matter of seconds, the men in the front line began pulling back as best they could while trying to cover each other's backs. I was already on my fifth magazine with bullets ripping holes in the tree inches from my face and popping up little dust clouds in the ground near my legs. I could tell, without turning around, that they were just missing Rick too.

Because of the extreme and varied angles of the rounds coming out of the treeline, we were forced further behind our own tree until we were literally back to back. Each time a bullet zipped into the trunk next to Rick, tearing out splinters of wood, I could feel his body jerk in reaction, and it was a sure bet he could feel the same from me.

Since he and I had some semblance of cover, little as it was, we continued to fire, trying to give the others, out in the open, a chance to pull back.

It was at this point that we witnessed an incredible sight. While everyone else was ducking low, trying not to get hit, our M-60 machine gunner, one of the men who was out front, stood up in the center of the clearing, with his weapon on his hip, and began spraying bullets back and forth. For an incredibly long time he stood there firing, rounds zipping all around him, as the rest of us scrambled to pull back down the hill.

When we were all safely away, he took off running and made it back down himself. It was nothing less than a miracle that he could have stood out there for so long without being shot to pieces!

By the sheerest stroke of luck no one had been hit,....this time.

No one had been hit, but, at the same time, we hadn't been able to get the bodies out either. Also, it was now clear that this was no small hit-and-run force, ready to back off in the usual manner. It looked as if we were going to be here for quite some time.