
FORTY FIVE**The Hill**

Again, the Cobras were called out to pour everything they had into the top of the hill. Right after we got down from the firefight, and while the company was waiting for the Cobras to arrive, Rick, Whitey, and myself had a chance to sit down on the ground with Eddie, our machine-gunner. We were behind a low, soil-eroded bank jutting out from the side of the hill. Whitey began digging a small hole in the ground, between his upraised knees, with a twig he'd picked up.

"You know, you're a hero there guy," he said almost matter-a-factly, and then looked up at Eddie. The other man, a quiet, unassuming person, smiled sheepishly when their eyes met and Whitey continued, "What the hell made you stand up in the middle of that clearing like that?"

Eddie stared down at the hole Whitey was working on. He thought for a moment before answering, "I...I don't know. I saw that you guys were in trouble and just did what I had to do,...that's all."

Then, out of nowhere, when the realization set in, his whole body began to tremble. He put both hands up to his face and rubbed it deliberately.

"I don't believe I did that!"

None of us could help noticing his open shivering and Rick put a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey, you all right?"

Eddie chuckled nervously, "Yeah,...Yeah, I'm okay. It's just that this is the first time I've thought about it,...and right now it seems like it was a pretty dumb thing to do."

Whitey tossed the twig away, rested his elbows on his knees and tilted his head to the side for emphasis.

"I'll tell you something, Buddy. Us guys who were up there didn't think it was so dumb. You kept a lot of our asses from getting blown away. In fact, the lieutenant is putting your name in for a silver star."

Eddie looked amazed and I gave him an appreciative pat on his knee.

One of the other guys in our squad came over and sat down. He showed us his steel pot with a bullet hole through both the front and back, a seemingly impossible feat without its having gone straight through his head. I wasn't completely taken aback by this strange sight since I'd seen it happen before. The bullet entered through the front, spun around the inside, in the space between the helmet and the headband that held it away from the scalp, and then exited out through the back. As strange as it might sound, we'd heard that this was the way the helmet was designed to function. In any case, it just went to show that the old steel pot really did provide lifesaving protection.

Unfortunately there were some who felt encumbered by its weight and chose not to wear it when they should. In fact, one of the men they were medevacing out had gone up the hill wearing only a soft bush hat. He was pulled back down with a bullet wound to the head serious enough to raise doubts as to whether he'd even make it back to the hospital.

When the Cobras finished their runs, the captain called for the third platoon to send squads up the hill. He was determined not to leave those bodies behind.

This attempt was almost identical to the last one in that, when the men approached that treeline, all hell broke loose and they had to retreat back down the best way they could. Their platoon lieutenant reported that the enemy had dragged the bodies in front of their machine-gun positions knowing that was what we were after. They were using the bodies as bait to draw us in front of those positions!

During the early afternoon a call came over the radio that it was supposed to be Charlie Company's turn to go in and see the Bob Hope USO show. But because we were engaged with the enemy, rear command decided that only two men would be allowed to go in. Before it was decided who that would be, it almost looked like a comedy routine with just about everyone in the company raising his hand and proclaiming, "I'll go! I'll go!"

The two, one from the first platoon and one from the fourth, were chosen fairly, by lots, and left on a supply bird that came out to drop off more cases of ammunition down at the edge of the swamp. The rest of the company had no ill feelings toward the men who'd been picked, because it might have been any one of us, but we did feel a strong disappointment at missing the only chance we'd probably get to see the show. Not only that, but it would have been such a relief to get away from here. We knew that while we were out here lying on the hot, dusty ground, contemplating our next assault up that God-forsaken hill, the higher-ups back there weren't going to be missing out on the fun. We'd bet a month's pay on that!

After the two attempts at trying to get up the hill, and being blasted back down, the captain called in the Air Force for a strike. At first, Snoopy, seeing our situation from the air, said that we were much too close to the enemy for his jets to drop their five-hundred and thousand-pound bombs with any degree of safety. In an unusual move, indicating the desperation of our situation, the captain took the

handset from his radioman and talked to the pilot directly. He told him that he would assume full responsibility for whatever happened.

Finally, Snoopy agreed, because the captain had convinced him we'd be okay since we were below the crest of the hill. Being on a lower level would give us some protection from the blasts.

Word went around the perimeter for everyone to lie as flat on the ground as they possibly could, in order to have some measure of protection. The drop would be less than a hundred yards from us, much closer than we'd ever been before to the massive explosions of such a strike.

While Snoopy passed overhead and fired a marking round into the center of the enemy stronghold, we moved around to get behind fallen logs, rises in the ground,...any small spot that would put something between us and the top of the hill. At the same time, several men, closest to the enemy stronghold, tossed smoke grenades out to their front, so that the jets would have an indication of where our most forward positions were.

Then an intense quiet settled over the area like a shroud.

We could hear the jets circling out in the distance, in preparation for their runs, though we couldn't see them through the trees. I felt that old knot, in the pit of my stomach, begin to tighten. We'd all seen the tremendously destructive power of an air strike, at one time or another, and knew that, with this one, we were well within the range of where one of those huge bombs, misplaced by only a few yards, could blow the entire company into oblivion.

Scanning the area, I saw that everyone felt the same tension by the way they were hugging the ground where they lay. No one spoke a word.

We didn't know it, but the pilots had decided that the best way to approach the top of the hill, so that they could give us the greatest possible safety factor, was to pass directly over our heads and release their loads from there. That way, if any of the bombs should overshoot the target, they'd go down the opposite side of the hill from us.

Because they were coming directly toward us from our rear, there was a brief period when there was absolutely no sound at all.

That period, though it was only a matter of seconds, seemed like an eternity. We knew they were out there somewhere. Suddenly, a tremendous roar ripped over the top of us as the first jet passed just above the treetops. Then, an earsplitting crack shook the ground like an earthquake. We could actually see the leaves on the trees trembling violently from the shock waves and feel our bodies vibrate.

A few seconds later, a sound like the giant chain saw I'd heard when a Cobra fired its mini-gun, tore past directly overhead. Only, this time it was so loud and powerful that it was more like the roar of a huge tiger. These were the forty-millimeter cannons on the jets. They were similar to the mini-gun, in that they fired thousands of rounds a minute, but the rounds were so large that they'd go deep into the ground and explode like individual bombs!

After they made their last pass, Snoopy came on the radio to tell the captain that they'd expended their loads and were returning to base. He also said that two more fully-loaded jets were on their way out.

With such horrendous explosions, it seemed impossible that anything could be alive on top of the hill. Long after the jets left, the air was still full of choking dust drifting down from the mushroom clouds blown high into the atmosphere.

We spent most of the day with squads from the first, second and third platoons taking turns, in rotation, going up the hill and trying to penetrate that miserable treeline. And each time we were beaten back down. Then the Air Force would pound the top again.

Whenever squads were on their way up, we all hoped that the enemy had decided they'd had enough of the air strikes and pulled out. And each time they were still there.

Then it was our turn to go up the hill again.

Stubbornly, we clung to that small thread of hope when we moved slowly into the clearing and spread out, just as we'd done before. It was an awful feeling staring into that thick growth at close range. There wasn't a sign of movement that we could detect in there, but then again, there hadn't been all the other times either. If they were still there, we were no more than fifteen feet away from them.

We stood silently, the adrenaline pumping, until Ron, our squad leader, raised his hand for us to stay where we were and, ever-so-slowly, took that first critical step forward from our line. No sooner did his foot touch the ground than all hell broke loose, hundreds of rounds bursting out of that wall!

We ducked in place, firing our weapons, most on automatic, some on semi-, at all points, high and low, in the growth.

This was just too incredible! A hail of bullets was spraying at us from no further away than the length of a car. They were coming from down near the ground, just inside the bushes, to higher up in the trees, yet it was impossible to pinpoint any exact location!

A couple of our men were hit, the others near them grabbing hold and dragging them back down toward the perimeter as we continued to empty magazine after magazine into all parts of the treeline.

Finally, we all made it back down, firing as we ran. One of the men who was hit was already dead, a bullet to the head, and the other was seriously wounded. Every time we went up that hill we ended up calling in the medevacs, down near the edge of the swamp, to take the casualties out. Also, each time we came running back down, the captain called in the jets for yet another one of those pounding air attacks, and still the bastards were in there!

I'd been in that clearing twice now, and it seemed a miracle that, not only me, but the other guys who'd made it back down, hadn't been hit. With so many hundreds of rounds whizzing through the air, at such close proximity, I couldn't imagine how we'd been missed!

By sunset we were all past the point of battle fatigue. A full day of the four platoons in rotation, sending squad after squad up that hill and being blasted back down, had taken its toll. Not only was it horrendous having fifteen of our friends dead, and at least as many wounded, but the wounds were particularly brutal and well placed, most to the head. We certainly weren't dealing with amateurs up there.

Sometime, late in the afternoon, someone in the third platoon came up with an idea for getting the bodies out. They'd try tossing a rope, with a noose at the end, from behind a tree. If they could get the noose around one of the feet, they might be able to drag the body out of the open. It sounded like something straight out of the movies, the odds against its working extremely long, but necessity,...and desperation, are the mothers of invention and the third platoon came down with the bodies!

I was lying on the ground, on the part of the perimeter nearest the top of the hill, when they came running down carrying one of the bodies on a poncho stretched between them. The dead man's feet passed right by my face.

There was that feeling of total waste again. Only yesterday that body was a young, vital human being. Now those feet dangled limply with no more life in them than a sack of potatoes.

To try and prevent the enemy from slipping away during the night, the captain instructed the second platoon to circle around to the other side of the hill. They'd spend the night there as a blocking force, hopefully to keep the NVA from pulling out by the back door. The only problem was that the top of the hill, outside the enemy's perimeter was far too big around for one company to cover. There were large enough gaps where they could easily slip past us without our knowledge. And, if that should happen, rather than high-tailing it away from us, there was nothing preventing them from sneaking up behind us in the darkness,...if they chose to.

We each laid in the small depression we'd scooped out of the dry barren ground, our weapon by our side and ready. The tension had relaxed somewhat for the moment, but there was very little conversation. An eerie feeling hung in the air knowing that there were enemy soldiers sitting just a few feet away, in the darkness. They were, no doubt, trying to figure a way out of the situation before morning when the jets returned.

One of the other options the NVA might consider was a surprise rush straight down through the middle of our perimeter. If they should do that, and there was a battalion up there—something like five of them for every one of us—that would be no fun at all.. For those reasons, even the men who weren't on watch around our perimeter remained awake all night, listening for the slightest sound.

Sometime in the early hours of the morning, while it was still dark, a couple of shots were heard from over on the second platoon's side of the hill. They radioed that they'd had some movement to their front, but that it wasn't anything substantial.