
FIFTY TWO**A Case Of Mistaken Identity**

During the week following the typhoon our company experienced three major events which were extremely unique. Each dealt with heavy trauma in its own particular way, though not a single man was lost, and there was a minimal amount of contact with the enemy,...at least not the enemy we were used to dealing with.

We continued patrolling the same general region of the mountains, fighting the heat, jungle and horse flies by day and the mosquitoes at night. The weariness of the climb never really left, although it had become at least more tolerable because of our physical stamina.

Two days after the storm and late in the afternoon, when the sun was beginning to turn orange, we were moving along on the level ground of a wide, flat valley between two peaks. The heavy jungle had given way to a forest type growth, with tall trees whose tops formed a thick canopy high overhead, and sparse, bushy growth on the ground. In fact, it was difficult to see any of the clear blue sky because it was so obscured by the canopy.

A good ways in front of us, however, like looking through a tunnel, the trees opened out into a clear area where I could see the late sun shining against far off peaks.

I knew that it was almost time for the company to find a location where we would set up for the night, and that knowledge always seemed to give me the necessary strength to carry on, despite the weariness of days end.

From somewhere far behind us, I could just make out the putt-putting of a Huey growing steadily louder. Hueys had their own very distinctive sound, like no other aircraft. Their best flight characteristics required that they be flown right on the verge of stalling, which gave them a sound like rapid, continuous backfiring. On more than one occasion, when we'd been in flight, I'd watched with amusement as some new guy tapped a pilot on the arm and pointed nervously to the minimum r.p.m. warning light flashing on the dashboard. Sometimes, the pilot would even play along, feigning shock that he hadn't noticed the indicator. Naturally, we who were more experienced with these flights would get a kick out of that.

The front of the column had been slowed down by a huge, dead tree lying in their path. Each man waited in place, like marchers in a parade who are stopped until the front begins moving again. I removed my steel pot and wiped the sweat from my brow. Even at this time of day it was still hot.

Forgetting that it was difficult to see the sky through the trees overhead, I looked up briefly to try and catch a glimpse of that Huey, which had moved steadily in our direction. It sounded like it was almost directly overhead now, but very high.

When a way to get around the dead tree had been found, the column began moving again. Just as I was coming to the massive upturned roots of the fallen behemoth, which towered over us, that Huey made an unusually low pass over the top of the canopy and, incidentally, the company. It always gave us men on the ground a good feeling to know that our air support was somewhere nearby, because it also tended to scare off the enemy should they be in the area.

The Huey moved out in front of us and then circled, in a big arc, off to our right. Eventually it made its way around behind us until it was in the direction from which it had come when I first heard it.

Then, as if the whole world had turned upside down, a string of machine-gun rounds zipped crazily along the ground, tearing up chunks of earth and fallen leaves! It passed across the column at an angle and moved off into the woods, chewing things up as it went.

At the same time, that Huey flashed by just above the treetops, brass casings from its fired rounds dropping all around us with a dull, metallic tinkle, and our entire line of men diving to the ground or to any kind of cover that was available. It was all too clear that the crew of that bird had mistaken us men on the ground for the enemy!

Yells of “Pop smoke!” rang out all up and down the line.

Different colors of smoke, red, yellow, and green appeared all over the place with a powerful smell of burning sulfur filling the air. The thickness of the leafy canopy was such that it prevented the pilots from spotting the smoke, and blocked any wind that might have blown it up to where it could be seen from the air. It hung close to the ground like a dense, multi-colored fog.

I could see the captain, just a short distance ahead, standing among his CP who were all squatting on the ground around him. He was looking up and yelling to his radiomen.

“Who the hell is that son-of-a-bitch?! Get the rear on the horn! Tell them to find out who that guy is and inform him he’s firing on his own men!”

The Huey made one more pass before the people in the rear were able find out his call letters and radio frequency, so that they could get the emergency message to him.

Ironically, those same leaves that had blocked the smoke had also prevented the Huey’s door gunners from getting a good bead on a target. No one was hit during the incident.

I could feel my heart thumping crazily after the second pass, while we all waited tensely for word that the rear had gotten in touch with the pilot. On that last pass some of the falling brass had come down uncomfortably close to where I was lying. Too close for my liking!