

---

**FIFTY FIVE****The Bee Ambush**

It was time for the gypsies to move again, this time headed for the province of Binh Dinh, farther south and nearer to the coast. These moves may have been frequent, but they always presented us with a different situation. In this new area of operations we'd be patrolling in acres and acres of rubber plantations. The "rubber", as we referred to it, had a character all its own.

The trees, which were as tall as oak or maple back home, had been planted in straight rows that went on sometimes as far as the eye could see. When you stood in one of the isles between rows, and looked down the corridor, it was like staring down a long tunnel almost as wide as a city street. And sometimes, if the edge of the plantation was within sight, you could see the bright sunlight at the far end. It almost had the feeling of a set from the Wizard of Oz.

The canopy of leaves overhead obscured most of the direct sunlight so that it was usually cooler in these shaded areas and allowed very little ground vegetation from taking hold. That, in turn, made the walking easier.

At times, during our patrolling, we would come across work gangs of Vietnamese civilians who were driven out daily in trucks to harvest the rubber. These people moved from tree to tree emptying little cups that had been fastened to the trunks by spigot hooks something like the way maple syrup is harvested back in the States. After they emptied the white, liquid sap into larger pails that they carried with them, they sliced a new spiral strip about an inch and a half wide around the trunk with what

looked like a curved carpet knife. Finally, the little cup was re-hung at the bottom of the new slice and it was on to the next tree.

The rubber harvesters weren't the only people we ran into out here. There were roads running along the edges of the growing fields, and through the towns, so that trucks carrying the harvesters could get to any area. It wasn't unlike the flat farmlands of the central United States with roads running past the endless fields stretching away on either side. Instead of corn or grain, however, there were rows of trees.

These oiled roads were also used by a horde of civilians who always seemed to know exactly where our company was at any particular time. If we were anywhere near a redball, early in the morning, we'd see a long caravan of three-wheeled mopeds with backs on them, like small enclosed pickup trucks, come tooling along. As soon as they got close to us, they'd pull off the road and drive right into the rubber until they were just outside our perimeter.

Whenever they showed up, which, at times, was almost daily, it was like carnival season. These people were real hustlers. They were out to grab their share of the handsome profits to be made off the "rich Americans" and, in the bargain, contribute to a rather ugly little "catch twenty-two" situation.

South Vietnamese money was worth less than a tenth of the equivalent American currency on the black market. These people knew that. They also knew that the American soldier in the field had money in his pocket and really nowhere to spend it. Therefore, they brought out goods to sell. We could buy anything from silk jackets emblazoned with a map of Vietnam on the back, to switch blade pocket knives, which were illegal in most places back in the States, to Christmas cards during that season.

In fact, there was such a large gap between the two currencies that a standing deal was always available to any American foolish enough to accept it. The “venders” would be willing to trade ten Vietnamese dollars for ten American dollars, straight across, and throw in three or four of the items they were selling as a bonus. Even with that, they still made a nice, tidy little profit!

Then, of course, there were the ever-present boom-boom girls who ranged in age anywhere from thirteen to sixty, (it was amazing what some would try to cover up with makeup), and the unremitting “Coke girls” who sold the thirty cent can of soda for a dollar.

On the other hand, the VC used the money made on all these items to buy weapons on the black market. These, naturally, ended up being used against us.

And so it went, round and round.

There was, however, another, though somewhat more subtle benefit to having these people around. Because of their obvious connection with both sides of the conflict, they always knew exactly when we were going to be hit by the enemy. Of course, they never gave us that information directly, but, one minute they’d be there, selling their wares and just generally lolling around, and the next they’d pack up their goods and scramble from the scene. This became a kind of early warning signal to the men of the company so that we knew when to be on the alert. It was also one of the main reasons why we tolerated having these people constantly in our hair, much as they could be an absolute nuisance.

At first the novelty of the goods they were selling, including and especially boom-boom, made it bearable to have them around, but when that wore off, it was a chore to put up with the continuous hawking of wares. It was one thing to hear the hard sell, when you intended to purchase something, but it became old real fast when the dealer was constantly on your back, even when you weren’t interested.

Whether it's a salesperson in a fashionable clothing store back home, or one of these people trying to get you to buy something out of the back of his moped, the high pressured sell is just as annoying, the world over.

In a short, two-day span, a couple of things happened that brought all these factors into play.

On the first day, our company was patrolling in the rubber when, at about the middle of the afternoon, the captain decided to leave the growing fields proper and move into a heavily overgrown area on the other side of a small, gently sloping valley. Whenever we left the relatively easy walking of the plantations and moved out into the hot, dense growth of the undeveloped countryside, I felt a sense of tiredness before we even began. Not only that, but, if we were going to run into the enemy, it would probably be out there. That was simply due to the fact that there was so much more cover in which they could hide.

One behind the other, in three spread-out files, we moved the hundred yards or so across the open valley. On both gentle slopes were scattered a series of crude, thatched wooden huts, each standing high off the ground on poles located at the four corners of the structures. This was an abandoned Mountainard village.

The Mountainards were the aboriginal tribe of people who co-existed along with the Vietnamese in this country.

I was behind Wada when we got about twenty five yards into the heavy, tangled growth on the other side. Suddenly, there was some kind of commotion up ahead. We stopped where we were, Wada turning around to look at me with a puzzled expression. There'd been no shots or explosions of any kind, yet we could hear guys yelling incoherently out there.

Almost without warning, the yelling grew louder when the men up front came barreling back through the bush in a headlong rout. It was only a fraction of a second when Wada, I and everyone else in the line behind us found the air full of angry, stinging bees! We too joined in the stampede in the direction from which we'd come.

I could see Wada, just ahead of me, darting this way and that toward the open valley, his shirt pulled up over his helmet like some kind of headless entity.

When we got back out into the open again, the bees seemed to disperse and the medics began hurriedly tending to those who had been severely stung. Though I was directly behind Wada the whole time we ran, I hadn't received a single sting, whereas he was covered with them. In fact he even had a bee stuck in each of his ear canals!

Several men, including Wada, were medevaced out for more intensive medical treatment, after which the rest of the company moved back across the valley, into the rubber, to re-group.

While we were walking, it struck me how ironic that the company could run up against any size enemy ambush and we'd dig in for an all out fight, if that's what was called for. Yet, a swarm of bees could send us reeling headlong in every direction, with no thought whatsoever for organization or safety.

When we were back in the rubber, word passed around that it had been discovered the bee hives were buried in the ground, by the local VC, just for the purpose of catching us Americans the way they so successfully had.

The frustration caused by this incident was added to the next, which occurred the following morning. We were packing up, getting ready to move out for the day's patrolling in the rubber, when a French-made automobile came up one of the access roads and parked a short distance from the

company perimeter. This in itself was a pretty big shock because it had been a long, long time since many of us had seen a car.

A tall, handsome, clean-cut man, with an aristocratic air, got out and walked toward the captain's CP. He was dressed in a light blue, Izod Lacost sport shirt, open at the neck, spotlessly white tennis shorts, and immaculate white socks and tennis sneakers. If one didn't know better, one would swear he'd just stepped off the courts! To a lot of us, who'd spent so many grungy months in the field, without contact with any sort of real civilization, he almost looked like an alien from another planet!

Following a short distance behind him, and circling around to the sides, were a pair of full-grown Doberman pinschers, that had gotten out of the car when he did. Whomever he was, he was obviously a man of some means.

He spoke to Captain Boatner with a very thick French accent and proceeded to explain what amounted to a demand that we get off his property, here in the plantation, because we are littering and digging holes!

While this unbelievable conversation was taking place, the two Dobermans circled the immediate area, sniffing nervously at different men around the perimeter.

The captain had Wada contact the rear for instructions on how to proceed with the Frenchman's outrageous demand. It wasn't that he didn't know what he wanted to do about it, or tell this individual just where he could go. That was pretty clear from the expression on his face and the tone in his voice.

As we waited for a reply, Top Soloway paced angrily back and forth. At one point he stopped beside the captain and the Frenchman and shook a cigarette out of a pack he pulled from his shirt pocket. If it wasn't clear to this arrogant Frenchman how the rest of us felt, he sure as hell couldn't

mistake Top's temperment. When Top continued his pacing again and got abreast of me, he leaned over and scowled, "Why don't we just shoot the son-of-a-bitch and be done with it?" He also stopped in front of two of our guys, who were standing nearby and told them to keep their weapons at the ready. "If those dogs make a wrong move toward anybody, you shoot them."

It wasn't hard to see that everyone in the company felt the same way. This man was a throwback from the French occupation here. When the French Army pulled out, the "businessmen" found it just too intolerable to leave all those lucrative rubber profits behind. From the look of this character, some of them had opted to stay and simply pay the Viet Cong not to bother them. The VC, being the crafty, dedicated Communists they were, saw all the advantages of maintaining a purely capitalistic business relationship with these people. They got a cut of the money pie, with which to supply themselves with weapons, and were able to insert their spies among the plantation workers to keep a close eye on us Americans to boot. Not too shabby a little setup.

It was bad enough that this bit of "business as usual" was costing American lives, but to have this pompous ass demand that we get off his property, with the lame excuse that he didn't want us littering, was tantamount to folly. A more logical explanation was that his VC associates were pressuring him into harassing us so that our job would be just a little bit tougher.

With the situation in progress, an open-rack truck, full of Vietnamese harvesters, pulled up behind the car and stopped. The crew foreman, a chunky Vietnamese man wearing a khaki bush jacket, shorts, and a pith helmet, stepped out and leaned up against the door with his arms folded. He looked to be idly waiting for his boss to finish so that they could move on to the job. Our company would run into this man again.

After some time of dickering back and forth, rear command came back on the radio with no clear-cut instructions on just how to handle the situation. Up front they were suggesting that the captain exercise as much diplomacy as possible under the circumstances, but, in the undertones of their transmission, a clear sense of “Ignore the bastard” came through.

Finally, Captain Boatner told the Frenchman that we were getting ready to move out on patrol anyway, but that we’d leave at our own discretion, when we were damn good and ready.

The Frenchman walked back to his car, followed by the two dogs, and proceeded to drive away. Unbeknownst to him, however, was the fact that while he was talking to the captain, a couple of our guys, feigning admiration for his car, had slipped a handful of sand into the gas tank. They only wished they could be there to see his reaction when it died on the road.

It wasn’t long before the caravan of Vietnamese venders arrived, as they had like clockwork, just about every day. The kids, who always came out with them, seemed even more irritating than usual with their constant harping of “You give me money?”. One of the platoon leaders, Lieutenant Hernandez, chased them away once, at which they moved off a short distance outside the perimeter. Within a matter of minutes, however, they were back again like flies around honey.

Most of the men paid little attention to the annoyance, but Hernandez was still feeling the frustration of the bee attack on his men the day before, now compounded by the insult of the French plantation owner’s demands. Again he chased them away with a deep anger in his voice.

“Go on!! Get out of here you little bastards!”

Exactly as they had the first time, they moved a short distance from the perimeter for a few minutes and then eased themselves back in, as if nothing had been said.

“You give me money? ...Give me money!”

Their begging actually took on a demanding aspect.

They even went so far as to try and get their hands into some of the guy's pockets, feigning playfulness, but poorly concealing a real determination to grab whatever they could and run. This was no joke. On a previous occasion, I'd seen a man's wristwatch slipped deftly off his wrist during such activity.

No one was paying any particular attention when Hernandez chased them off a third time and then walked calmly over to where his pack sat on the ground. There he picked up one of his hand grenades, pulled the pin, and tossed it out in the direction of the horde of kids.

With lightening speed, they disappeared into a tangled thicket of brush where the grenade also sailed. After the four second delay it went off with the normal loud explosion and mass of gray smoke.

For several tense moments, and having been taken completely by surprise, everyone stood frozen where they were. Then two men in the lieutenant's platoon grabbed his arms and held on tight while he struggled in a momentary fit of frustrated rage.

Some of the men, nearest the part of the perimeter where the kids had gone into the bushes, dashed out to make a quick search of the area. I, who was still just as stunned as the others, thought it would be no small miracle if none of them had been blown to pieces. The grenade had appeared to drop down right in the middle of where they were headed!

It wasn't long before one of our men came out of the brush carrying a young boy of about eight in his arms. He was in tears because of a five inch gash in the calf of his leg from a small piece of shrapnel. By the grace of God, the wound wasn't bleeding heavily and didn't look to be as bad as it certainly

could have been. One of the other Vietnamese vendors managed to locate the boy's mother, who came running into the perimeter where the medics were treating her son's wound.

Captain Boatner, personally expressing the deepest sympathy for the woman and her son, conveyed to her that the wound wasn't really serious and even managed to get her to smile when she saw the genuine, tender care the medics were lavishing upon her son. The boy, rather than showing fear or pain, was now having more fun than a kid at the circus. One of the men had given him his soft bush hat to wear and he was obviously in seventh heaven with all the attention.

I felt a heavy sadness for Lieutenant Hernandez, who was sitting, with a numb expression, on a stump just a short distance from where the boy was being treated. Tears were sliding down his cheeks, at the thought of what he'd just done, and several of his men were trying to convey to him that we all understand.

Within a matter of minutes, a medevac Huey, that the medics had called for, arrived to take the boy and his mother in to the hospital. There he'd be treated so that no infection set in. There's no describing the elation on the boy's face when he found out that he was going to get a ride on a helicopter.

Sometimes all the frustrations and emotions of this farcical situation caused men to do things they'd never otherwise dream of doing. Hernandez had been with the company for quite some time now, so we knew he was a good man, far from the kind who would do such a thing with clear intent. What was tearing him up inside was the fact that the grenade could have done a lot more damage than it actually had. If the incident had had a tragic result he would very probably never have recovered from it. Someone "up there" was watching out for both him *and* those kids that day.