
SIX

FIFTY

Surrounded In The Dark

The patrolling in the rubber continued for several more weeks. I don't know exactly how much area the plantations actually covered, but I do know that it was an immense territory. We spent each day, during this time, walking through rows and rows of rubber trees, often from sunrise until just before sunset. Even more amazing was that there were so many small villages interwoven among the fields. We passed by or through as many as four on any given day, yet very seldom saw the same ones twice.

There was, however, one particular village that really stood out from the rest. It was built originally by the French, along the lines of a compound or garrison, with a lime-white stuccoed wall, some ten feet high, all the way around the outer perimeter. The wall was several feet thick and the only entrance was a pair of massive wooden gates, something like the ones on a foreign legion outpost.

When I passed through the gate, I noticed long pieces of thick, jagged, green glass jutting up out of the top of the wall all the way around its circumference. There were small, individual dwellings, built against the inside of the wall, also constructed of white stucco and situated in the middle of the complex was a large main building, with a red terra-cotta roof. This must have served as an administration building.

The first and second platoons split off cautiously, in both directions, around the inner perimeter of the wall, searching each dwelling as they came to it, while the second and third platoons moved slowly, straight up the middle.

Most of the smaller buildings had tunnel entrances in the floors, which connected into a fairly large underground complex, but there hadn't been much enemy activity in this area, so that there was no real reason to suspect they'd been used recently.

Still, the squads moved from one building to the next, dropping HE or smoke grenades into the tunnel openings as a security precaution. They also searched any personal baggage that the few people in here carried with them. There was no telling what might be hidden.

When the search was completed, all we'd found was a mere handful of old people and small children. For a complex as well-built as this, it seemed rather odd that there were so few occupants. Having come up pretty much empty-handed, we pulled out and continued patrolling the rubber.

Two days later, at about the middle of the afternoon, the captain received word from the rear that there was a fairly large VC unit operating in this general area. Since I was on radio duty at the time, I got all the details.

An informant had revealed that the Communists were terrorizing most of the smaller villages into supplying food and whatever other supplies they needed. The source also revealed that their main base of operations was the French compound we'd searched just two days previously.

Captain Boatner decided to try a somewhat unusual ploy for an American company. There was a saying here that became popular during the war and was even used many years later by Billy Joel in his hit tune Goodnight Saigon. That saying was, "We ruled the day, and they ruled the night".

That's a fairly accurate description of what the situation was like, but, when something is considered the "norm", a deviation from that norm can be used as an advantage. Surprise is the key.

Just before sunset, rather than digging the foxholes for a perimeter, as we normally did, he had everyone remain prepared to move out.

Seldom did an entire company travel at night, simply because, with all the gear we carried, a hundred-and-ten men made too much noise to be effective that way. The word was passed that everyone was to be as quiet as possible and keep any conversation to a minimum.

As soon as it was totally dark, we formed up into two columns and began walking a straight line in the direction of the French compound. It was about a thousand yards from our starting point. Frankly, I

was surprised at just how quiet everyone was able to be. Of course, the fact that we were on perfectly level ground, and that there was practically no wild vegetation to contend with, made all the difference in the world. We passed through furrowed farmlands and what were literally the backyards of the local people who lived for a good ways out around the compound.

Even though the going was as easy as anyone could wish for, there was still a certain amount of tension because it was so miserably dark.

I kept a constant watch on the almost imperceptible silhouette of Wada who was about seven feet in front of me. If anyone lost sight of the man he was following, and strayed off in the wrong direction, all those behind him would be lost in the darkness too.

Occasionally we heard the lonely, distant barking of a farm dog, whom we hoped was the only one aware that we were on the move, or the flapping of a bat's wings overhead in the darkness. I couldn't shake the feeling that this was very much akin to what it would be like skulking through people's backyards at home, late at night when most everyone is in bed sleeping.

At last, we came to within about twenty yards of the compound's outer wall. At that point the captain had the columns split off to the left and right, keeping approximately the same distance between ourselves and the wall. When the two point men met on the opposite side, effectively surrounding the garrison, we lay quietly on the ground in the same four-man units that we would if we'd dug our nightly foxholes. However, instead of this perimeter being formed to keep the enemy out, it was intended to keep them in,....we hoped.

Now it became a waiting game. If this village really was the VC's basecamp, then there might be a good chance we'd trapped them inside. The only thing to do now was wait until the sun came up and see what happened.

The maneuver appeared to have been executed perfectly, without a sound, and we set up the captain's CP in a small clump of trees, right on our perimeter, about thirty yards directly in front of the

main gate. There was very little conversation, even in the CP, other than an occasional whisper. The most important element of this operation was surprise and nobody wanted to jeopardize our edge.

Following the usual procedure, we radiomen set up our watch so that there would be someone constantly listening for any word from the perimeter. Since the VC were known to move mostly at night, anything could happen between now and morning.

I sat a few feet from Water Buffalo, who was also sitting cross-legged on the ground, with my handset close to my ear. I had my radio tuned to the ones around the perimeter, and watched while he contacted the rear, on his, to let them know we were in position. Speaking in whispers, Buffalo also read off a list of needed supplies that the platoons had given him. He sat hunched low, a flashlight with a deep red lens, for obscuring most of the light, pinned between his chin and chest, shining down at the list in his lap. For the moment everything was tranquil and quiet.

Just after midnight, however, that all changed.

The men located a short distance down to the left of our CP, called in and reported they had movement out to their front. The radioman now on duty, Wada, woke the captain and everyone else in the CP. He barely had time to relay the message when the muzzle flash of an M-60 machine-gun, over at that position, lit up the darkness like a strobe light.

Then a very eerie situation developed. No sooner had everyone scrambled to the ready, listening intently for any movement in front of their own positions, than we heard a female voice call out desperately from the darkness.

“Please!...No shoot!...I have babysons!”

“Please!...I have babysons!”

The plea, with clear sounds of pain and sobbing in the voice, came several times from somewhere between the perimeter and the gate of the compound. Whomever the girl was, she'd definitely been hit by the M-60 fire.

There was a brief lull in the cries, with the exception of an almost inaudible whimpering that riveted everyone's attention to the inky darkness. Those of us who had heard the pain in her voice could feel our own hearts beating, it was so still around the perimeter. Then it came again, this time more feebly.

“Please!...No shoot!...No shoot!”

Then there came another burst from the machine-gun, it's muzzle flashes, once again, making a sharp contrast to the darkness,...and all sounds ceased completely.

She was almost certainly dead, though no one could see anything out there to be sure.