
SIXTY THREE**A Most Embarrassing Experience**

That night we set up our perimeter in the same general area, about a thousand yards from the border. This time we were dug in along the side of a dirt road that came toward us from the direction of Cambodia. Again there was no vegetation, other than an occasional tree, between our location and the border, the only visible man-made structure an old, abandoned farmhouse about thirty yards behind us. It sat right at a point where the road curved around the house and continued on.

Everything was quiet during the early evening, but there was an unsettling feeling in the air. We could actually see bright headlights constantly moving around in the thick treeline that sat right on the border. These were convoys of trucks that the NVA were using to bring in supplies and fresh troops. It was perfectly clear that they hadn't the slightest worry about us Americans, only a short distance away, being able to see their headlights as plain as day. This was still at a time when we weren't allowed to cross the border or even fire over it, so that they knew they had total immunity on the other side. And they used that immunity blatantly!

At around 11:30pm two Huey Cobras appeared, coming from the direction of the base at Tay Ninh, about twenty clicks behind us, and passed directly overhead. They were at a pretty high altitude, but their running lights were plainly visible. I thought it odd that they would fly out over the border, but that was exactly where they headed.

While we watched, sitting on the edges of our foxholes, the sky out there suddenly filled with anti-aircraft fire. White flashes of light went off all around the two birds, leaving small puffs of smoke floating in the night air, looking like a fireworks display. Everyone was riveted with interest to see just what the Cobras were up to. This was the first time any of us had actually seen anti-aircraft fire and, again, it looked like something out of an old John Wayne movie!

Evidently the pilots of the two ships decided they'd had enough of this game of "get shot at, but you can't fire back, because you're over the border". They flew back in our direction until they were out of range of the flack. Then one of them seemingly disappeared when he turned off his running lights. The Cobra with his lights off moved higher in altitude than his companion and the second one, with running lights still on, headed back toward the border. He was flying low and slow so that, as soon as he got over the treeline, the flack began bursting all around him again. He was the decoy!

The second Cobra, remaining virtually invisible, dove on the gun positions with rockets firing out of his pods in what seemed a steady stream.

This went on for some time, with each bird taking its turn as decoy, until it became apparent, from the sound of their engines, that one of them had been hit.

Fortunately, though his engine was sputtering and coughing, he was able to make it back to this side of the border, passing low over our location. If he'd been severely damaged, and had to land a good distance from Tay Ninh, we probably would have been called to make our way to him for his security. Evidently he was able to make it, if not all the way, then fairly close to the base, because the call never came. The other Cobra followed him in, remaining in the air until help could get to him.

Nothing further, other than the continuous movement of those headlights out there, happened during the night. The next morning was a different story however, with an incident occurring that none of us would soon forget.

At the crack of dawn, just when the sky was beginning to lighten, there was a dense fog lying like a heavy blanket over the flatlands. Visibility was no more than thirty yards, and that was really straining to see anything.

Wada, who's been up on radio watch, had just awakened us in the CP and I was shaking the sleepiness away when a call came over his radio from the third platoon. Their part of the perimeter was closest to the border.

"Six India, this is Three-Six India, over."

"Go ahead, Three-Six India, over," he answered.

The third platoon radioman was whispering, but Wada could hear the clear sound of nervous tension in his voice.

"We have movement to our front. There's something big coming down the road from the direction of the border, but we can't make out what it is in this fog, over!"

"Stand by one."

Wada whispered to the captain a short distance away.

"Sir, third platoon says they've got movement to their front."

The word "movement", being heard by all the platoon radiomen, made its way quickly around the perimeter and men began scrambling into their holes. There was also the subtle sound of M-16 bolts sliding home in readiness.

Captain Boatner moved close to the hole we radiomen had dug.

“Ask them if they can make it out yet.”

Wada made the call and listened to the answer.

“There’s something definitely coming this way. It’s a big, dark mass moving slowly. Some of the guys say it looks like a tank, over!”

When Wada relayed the message, the captain just stared at us for a moment. Then he went into action.

“Tell them to try and get a solid confirmation on it!”

He turned to Lieutenant Thompson, “Get your people on the horn and tell them to be ready for a fire mission!”

We’d heard of rare occasions when the NVA had moved tanks down through Cambodia, but never this far south. The prospect of having to take one on wasn’t exactly a pleasant thought.

Everyone in the company began straining their eyes, over the edge of their foxholes, to see if they could catch a glimpse of the approaching vehicle. The silence grew ominous.

It wasn’t long before we, in the CP, could just see the dark form of the massive object, which was definitely coming slowly up the road from Cambodia. It had a ghostly feel, because of the way it faded in and out of view in the thick fog, yet was never clear enough to make out any detail.

Lieutenant Thompson lowered the radio handset, he’d been using to contact the big guns in the rear, from his ear and placed it against his chest, as if to prevent anyone on the other end from hearing. Of course, that would be impossible anyway, with the push-to-talk button not depressed, but it was something of a force of habit.

“Sir, the people back there say they can’t do a fire mission into another country. They say it’s against the neutrality agreement we have with that country.”

Captain Boatner’s brow furrowed, “What are they talking about,...another country? Tell them we’re on this side of the border and we need that fire mission now!”

We listened to Thompson argue with his people back there and then he lowered the handset again, “They say we’re too close to the border. They can’t give us the mission.”

“Give me that damned thing.”

The captain took the handset from the artillery officer with clear anger.

“This is Comanche Six. What the hell do you mean you can’t give us a mission? We’ve got a possible tank bearing down on our heads. We need that god-damned mission right now!”

We still couldn’t hear what was being said on the other end, but it was easy to figure that they were repeating the same line of crap.

“That’s just great. And what do I tell my men?!”

The CO didn’t wait for an answer, but threw the handset down on the ground, next to the radio, and turned to Wada.

“Get the platoon leaders on the horn and tell them we’re not going to get any help from the rear. Tell them to have their people just keep their heads down.”

“Yes, Sir.”

It was strange that, only yesterday, we were able to get the fire mission on the area where we’d been mortared, but, evidently, that was considered more than a thousand yards from the border. Here we were a tad closer and couldn’t get one.

In the few minutes before the vehicle came clearly out of the fog, there was a deathly silence all around the perimeter. The guys in their holes stared intently into the fog, along the sights of their rifles, although an M-16 suddenly felt mighty inadequate for what lay ahead. This was a truly unusual feeling for me, because I couldn't remember a time when I hadn't felt comfortable with the firepower of my trusty old friend.

The vehicle approached the abandoned farm, staying on the dirt road, as if it didn't know we Americans were here. Finally, it got close enough to be recognizable and turned out to be a two-wheeled cart, filled to overflowing with a tall pile of hay, being pulled by a water buffalo. There was also a little old man, with a long switch, walking in front of the buffalo.

As he passed along the side of our perimeter, a strangely confused expression came to his face. He began walking sideways, continuously keeping his front in the direction of our guys in their foxholes, just a few feet away. To say the least, it must have been something of a shock to find over a hundred rifles pointing directly at him!

The realization that our approaching tank had been nothing more than an ox cart began sinking in around the perimeter. Everyone eased up on their weapons and began to breathe again. Now the silence, that had been so ominous only moments before, was permeated by the sound of laughter. It was the laughter of relief.

Wada and I, who were right next to each other in the foxhole, turned our gaze from the sights down the length of our rifle barrels, to stare at each other intently. Then we both slid down to sit on the floor of the foxhole, our backs resting against the dirt wall, laughing along with everyone else.

After this incident, there was an unspoken understanding that no one would mention, to anyone who hadn't been here to see it, the embarrassing day when C company, of the mighty First Cav, had nervously prepared to do battle with a hay wagon!

It also served to point out that there might be times when our rear support couldn't back us up. We realized that the people operating the guns back there didn't have much choice in the matter, since they had orders preventing them from acting, but it did anger us to no end.

The collective thought of the guys was that they'd love to get their hands on the son-of-a-bitch, no matter what his rank, who'd given those orders and then had the gall to put our asses on the line out here. It was so easy to play the diplomat when you were sitting on your duff, safely in the rear!