
SEVENTY**Rita Overrun**

The next day we spent making our way back to LZ Rita. Rear command had received word that there was going to be a major offensive against Rita within the next couple of days. Their sources indicated that there were several battalions of crack NVA troops heading south along the border inside Cambodia. B company was still at the LZ and we were being brought in to give them support.

I was beginning to get pretty nervous now, because I only had about two weeks left before my tour was up and enemy activity in this area had been increasing steadily since before we arrived.

At just about dusk, on our first night back at the LZ, I felt Mother Nature's call. The toilets here were nothing more than a couple of empty, wooden ammo crates stacked one on top of the other, over a hole in the ground. They stood randomly around the firebase, completely out in the open, which allowed for absolutely no privacy, but when you've spent the better part of a year digging holes in the jungle floor with your entrenching tool and squatting over them, just having a place to sit verged on pure luxury.

While I sat there, my fatigue pants bunched up around my ankles, I happened to glance over at the 105mm howitzers, the artillery pieces on the LZ. The closest gun was only about twenty yards off to my right. Although the sun had set, there was still plenty of light to see them clearly by.

I was daydreaming, my gaze resting on that particular gun when something odd began to manifest itself upon me. I straightened slowly, my daydreaming easing over into intense concentration.

The barrel of that gun was lowering down from where it had been aimed, up over the tops of the trees. It stopped when the muzzle was pointing directly into the treeline outside the wire, the barrel parallel to the ground. I noticed, too, that the other guns of the battery were doing the same thing. My first impression, not knowing a great deal about the maintenance of these big guns, was that maybe they were going to clean the barrels out or something.

Suddenly, the nearest gun went off, the round exploding just inside the treeline only about fifty yards away from where I was sitting! Shrapnel, dirt, and large chunks of wood from the trees flew in all directions! Then the other six guns cut loose too, so that the treeline around half the perimeter exploded into a haze of smoke, dust and flying debris!

Small pieces of shrapnel zipped past my head as I grabbed for my pants and yanked them up. It wasn't far to the bunker where the CP was located, but you can bet that I made that run in record time!

I'd never heard of artillery firing at point blank range like that before, but I learned the reason for such odd behavior when I reached the bunker. The NVA were trying to overrun the LZ!

I didn't know exactly how to take the fact that they'd chosen the moment when I was sitting on the john to make their big attack. It was a powerful reminder that big things could happen, in a war, at the most inopportune times. If nothing else, I'd always have an interesting answer to the question, "What was your most embarrassing moment?".

When I got to my radio, the transmissions were coming hot and heavy. Each of us CP radiomen was now staying in constant touch with the platoon radiomen around the perimeter. It was difficult to make out half of what was being said,...or I should say shouted, over the continuous blasts of the big guns. Everyone's adrenaline had shot through the roof!

A quad-fifty, which was four fifty-caliber machine-guns mounted on the back of a truck to fire in synchronization, opened up on another part of the perimeter. I watched, through one of the small gunports in our bunker, as its big rounds literally cut down trees when it swept across the treeline.

It seemed as if all hell had broken loose when a human wave of North Vietnamese Regulars came storming out of the trees to run directly into the concentina wire on the northern side of the perimeter. We men in the bunkers fired furiously at them through the gunports.

We could see that quite a few of the enemy were wearing large backpacks, which meant that they were sappers. These were people who carried a huge explosive charge on their back with the intention of penetrating the LZ until they could get to a bunker. If they did, they'd run in and detonate the charge, killing themselves and everyone else inside.

There's no way to describe how truly frightening and horrible a human wave attack is unless you go through one personally. The frightening part is seeing a huge stampede of human beings charging directly at you with every intention of running right over you. This first wave was simply trying to get to the wire to flatten it down, using their own bodies, so that those behind could run right over them and onto the LZ. With so much concentrated firepower going out from the LZ, however, it was horrible watching them literally turned into hamburger by the time they reached the first coil!

Their tactic of overrunning an LZ, by sheer numbers, had worked on many another occasion, but fortunately, this time, we were able to hold them off. When the attack became clearly hopeless, the NVA who could still walk retreated back into the woods. Even then the quad-fifty and artillery were pouring rounds into them, along with the support that was being fired from the other two firebases, tremendous blasts ripping up the treeline, bodies and pieces of bodies flying into the air.

When there was no more discernible movement out there, all the firing stopped. The abruptness of the dead silence was almost as stunning as the initial outburst had been. Racing heartbeats took time to calm down—cotton mouths tried to work up a little spit—breathing slowly relaxed.

It was difficult to see much of anything with the thick cloud of gray smoke that, like an unnatural fog, drifted across the firebase, finally disappearing into the jungle. Even then, because it had gone from dusk to dark, there was little to see unless someone was willing to leave their bunker for a closer look. But nobody was crazy enough to do that

No further attempts were made during the course of the night, but it goes without saying that everyone remained at his post and alert, just in case.

The next morning, when our people began moving around the LZ in the open again, we saw a gruesome sight. There were arms, legs, hands, feet, all kinds of severed body parts hanging in the concertina wire for a good part of the perimeter. There were also bodies covering every inch of the no-man's land from just outside the wire to the treeline where the NVA had retreated!

At about mid-morning a message came into the Tactical Operations Center, or TOC, in the middle of the LZ, that another attempt was going to be made shortly. This time the NVA would have the aid of the other battalions that had come down through Cambodia, to assist them, and it was highly doubtful that we would be able to hold them off again.

Within a half-hour of the message, a sortie of fifty to seventy-five Hueys came in and landed, as many as could fit on different parts of the small firebase at one time, while the others circled, waiting their turn. Everyone on Rita was being emergency evacuated.

Our CP was among the last to lift off when we saw a Sikorsky Sky Crane heading toward Rita with some kind of huge device suspended beneath it by a long cable. The crane hovered directly over the center of the base, the cable released the object, and it plummeted to the ground. A massive mushroom cloud of pure white smoke rose several thousand feet in the air, entirely hiding the LZ from view, for quite some time, until it slowly dispersed.

We were told later that this was the equivalent of a ten thousand pound bomb, filled with tear gas, that did no physical damage to the equipment we had to abandon on the LZ, including the artillery pieces, but covered everything with a thin coat of the crystalline powder. It would be extremely difficult for the enemy to get anywhere near the place for a very long time. By then, we Americans could return and reclaim our equipment.