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FORTY SEVEN**“Short Round!”**

The birds returned us to the French airstrip where we would spend a couple of days securing its perimeter—in actuality, recovering from our battle fatigue. While we were doing that, the other four companies of the battalion would chopper out into the countryside in hopes of picking up the trail of the NVA we’d uprooted. The Captain received word from the higher-ups in the rear that we had done an outstanding job holding our own against at least a battalion of the NVA’s best. Having been there, they sure as hell didn’t have to tell us that. We knew how good the enemy was at what they did. And we also knew that, if we wanted to stay alive, we had to be just as good, *or better*.

The brass back there were particularly ecstatic because we’d accomplished two very important things. First of all, we’d discovered a major NVA basecamp—something that rarely happened—leading to its destruction. And secondly, we had a high body count of over sixty enemy to our credit. To some that might sound morbid, but it must be borne in mind that, in a war where there was no permanent capturing of territory, no clear-cut boundaries showing who held what, the only way to gage who was winning was by the number of people one side or the other had killed. Sure, it stank,...but it was reality in Vietnam.

Naturally, we appreciated the praise, but it didn’t go a long way in easing how we felt about losing our buddies. Still, we were a hardy breed and, when the word came to move out again, we’d be ready.

For the next two weeks, all five companies humped daily through the bush looking for any sign of the enemy, but, having to find another secure location for building a new basecamp, they'd cleared out of the area. And, as usual, whenever it got too quiet, we could almost count on being moved out too.

I didn't mind the way we were shuttled around the country so often, because during the moving process we could catch up, at least somewhat, on much needed rest. It was when we were out in the "boonies" that we had to be constantly on guard against enemy ambushes. That's where the stress built up. It was also much easier traveling by plane or chopper than cutting through the jungle on foot.

Late one afternoon, while we were still at the French airstrip and pretty well relaxed, there were two unexpected explosions directly across the runway from us, where Bravo Company was set up. We all dove to the ground, thinking we might be getting in-coming mortar rounds, but that assumption didn't last long, because no one had heard the dull poofs in the distance that warned of rounds leaving the tube

A mortar was a tube, the base of which rested on a metal plate on the ground. A guy dropped a round, that looked like a rocket with small tailfins, into the upper end so that it slid down inside butt first. When it reached the bottom, the powder bags, fastened just above the fins, ignited and it shot high into the sky. At the top of its arc it lobbed smoothly over so that it was turned head down and fell on its target.

Though the mortar was a devastating weapon when it landed on the mark, unlike artillery it did give warning that it was on its way. It usually took anywhere between ten and twenty seconds from the time the round left the tube until it reached its target. That was a considerable amount of reaction time for us. Even during those occasions when we were fast asleep, in the middle of the night, and someone on

watch began yelling, “In-coming!”, the moment they heard the distance poofs of an enemy tube, we had enough time to snap awake and scramble into our foxholes.

The fourth platoon in each of our own companies was designated, by job description and training, the mortar platoon. Whenever the terrain permitted, they would have their tube sent out for the night on the supply Huey. It was reassuring knowing that we had the added advantage of the tube in the event of enemy contact.

Similar to artillery procedure on an LZ, whenever the tube was out with us, a round was fired off, every-so-often, just for harassment. There’d been more than one occasion however, on nights when it was raining, that a round was dropped into the tube and the powder was damp. When that happened, instead of the normally healthy “poof”, there was a loud hiss, something like the sound a Fourth of July bottle rocket makes. The man loading knew immediately that he had a problem and yelled at the top of his lungs, “*Short round!*”

What happened was that, because of the damp powder, it only went forty or fifty feet in the air and a very short distance from the company. A round like that could be devastating if it came down close enough to the perimeter. As soon as that shout was heard, everyone scrambled like crazy from their sleeping positions into the bottom of their foxholes until it went off.

Quite often, and especially when it was raining, we’d each set up our own individual ponchos into what we called a “hooch”, like a small, one-man canopy, built using string and branches. This afforded at least some protection from the miserable wet. We could all recall, more than once, ripping down our hooches in the mad scramble to get into the hole when the sudden warning for a short round came.

When we realized that the explosions across the strip weren't in-coming, everyone got up from the ground and looked for an explanation as to what they could have been.

Within a short time, word came over that a sergeant, an older man, had straightened the cotter pins on two hand grenades he'd had hanging on his belt. Evidently he'd done that recently when B-company was in contact with the enemy. Just now he must have somehow bumped them and they slipped off the pins. The sad part is that the sergeant was killed in the explosions.

Here was yet another example a man who'd lost his life senselessly, because of a fatal mistake. Just about everyone in the field, including myself, carried at least two hand grenades hooked onto the front shoulderstraps of his pack. The ring that was pulled from a grenade, just before it was thrown, was attached to a cotter pin that went through the handle and prevented the firing mechanism from arming. The two ends of the cotter pin, where they stuck out the other side of the handle, were bent over so that it couldn't accidentally slip out, and no one ever straightened those ends unless they were going to use the grenade right after they did.

That was what made this particular incident so odd. Even the least experienced man knew not to straighten those pins unless he was actually going to throw the grenade, yet this sergeant, who clearly should have known better, had just given his life for something so simple.

At the end of the two weeks, our Hueys came out and flew us back into Cu Chi. It was time for the "Gypsies" to move on again.