
SEVENTEEN**Giant Chain Saw**

A short way up the road from the village we came to the main gate of the base, although “gate” wasn’t really the proper description for it. It was more simply an opening in the concertina wire which encircled the entire compound.

Concertina was large rolls of barbed wire that were stretched out like giant Slinky toys lying on their side. There were several rows of these, one in front of the other, hopefully forming a barrier against anyone trying to sneak into the base.

Once inside the compound, the truck pulled up in front of a one-story, gray clapboard building and we jumped out of the back.

While we were waiting for someone to show us where to go, I had a chance to look the area over. The one feature that dominated everything else was a single, low mountain which rose up out of the flat plain directly behind the base. This was China Mountain. It appeared so imposing because, though there were fairly long ridges, like the one over on the other side of the airfield, this particular peak stood all alone like some giant sentinel.

During our stay at An Khe, I would hear that the Marines had lost a staggering amount of men taking that mountain from the enemy earlier in the war. Because of its commanding view of the countryside, and its obvious strategic importance, the First Cav had built their headquarters around half the base of the mountain and set up a radar and weather post on its peak.

This was also the first opportunity I had to see directly what the term “defoliation” really meant. A good two thirds of the mountain’s surface, from the base up, was devoid of any substantial vegetation. All that remained were the bare trunks of lifeless trees no larger than three or four inches in diameter and a few bristly bushes which looked more dead than alive. There wasn’t a single blade of healthy green grass, or any other green for that matter, anywhere on the sun-baked, powdery surface. It meant that nothing larger than a field mouse could possibly hide up there and that was the general idea.

Another plainly visible feature was a wooden tower approximately sixty feet tall that stood near the center of the compound. Looking like one of the Martian machines from H. G. Wells’ *War Of The Worlds*, it had four massive telephone pole legs, one at each corner, and a ladder dropping straight down to the ground from one side of a small platform at the top. The only thing I could relate it to, at the moment, was a water tower with the tank missing from the top. I would find out soon enough what it was really used for.

The rest of the day was spent stowing our duffel bags in a large warehouse where they would remain for the next year,..or at least until we were eligible for R & R,..getting our paperwork taken care of, and lastly, going to the mess hall for supper.

After supper we were free of duty. Naturally there wasn’t anyplace to go without leaving the base, and, being new, we weren’t about to do that. Some of the people who were stationed here did occasionally go into the village to an area dubbed “Sin City”. Most every base had a Sin City somewhere nearby where prostitutes could be had for a very cheap price. Unfortunately, the Clap and other nasty little venereal diseases were also easily had.

There was, however, a beer hall for enlisted men, officially called an EM club, located next to the mess hall.

Just as the sun was setting, I and two of the other new arrivals decided to see what it was all about. The contrast between the quiet of the night outside and the noisy din inside was like entering another world.

The beer hall was nothing more than a long room with a short bar at one end and rows of bench-like tables filling the rest of the space. It seemed to me that there must have been a hundred guys crammed into a room which was barely capable of holding half that many. A juke box was playing at full volume in one corner and the cigarette smoke was so thick that it was difficult to see one end of the room from the other.

That didn't appear to phase any of the guys in the least, however. In fact, they were singing along with the music and drinking their 3.2 beers as if this was the last party they'd ever attend. For a lot of us, it probably would be.

We made our way through the throng and ordered a couple of beers each. It was easier to order two or three at a time than to try and fight the crowd jammed four deep at the small bar.

While we waited for the bartender, an enlisted man himself, to return from the coolers stacked against the back wall, I looked around at this crazy scene. A strange feeling of *deja vu* came over me that I couldn't quite explain, though it may have had something to do with the abandoned gaiety of the men singing.

The atmosphere of this place made me think of what it must have been like for the soldiers of World War II. There was probably very little difference between the GIs partying in a smoke-filled,

European bistro back then, and those here now in Vietnam. The times and the wars might change, but human nature remained constant.

When I finished my beers, I decided to go over to the barracks and get some sleep, while the other two men I'd come in with figured they'd hang around for awhile and have a couple more.

My particular barracks was only about fifty yards directly opposite and facing the EM club. As I walked, I looked first to my left, across the road outside the concertina wire. The airfield was out that way and I could hear the steady drone of one or two C-130s.

Then I looked to my right, up at China Mountain, the base of which was no more than a hundred yards away. There was a thin fog settled over the peak, but I could plainly see the glow of incandescent bulbs from the radar station glowing through the haze at the top.

As far as the weather was concerned, I was completely comfortable at this time of night in my jungle fatigues. I would even go so far as to say that it was a downright pleasant evening.

There were quite a few guys already sleeping when I entered the barracks. The lights were out, but there was a fair measure of illumination coming in through the screening from the mess hall and other buildings, over near the EM club, that kept their lights burning all night.

I laid on my bunk, wondering about what tomorrow was going to bring, when I heard the sound of approaching thunder.

Most people will tell you that thunderstorms bother them at night, but I'd always found them soothing. Rather than helping to put me to sleep as it usually did, however, I slowly opened my eyes and listened. There was something really peculiar about this particular thunder. The booms were much too regular to be natural.

After three or four strings of regularly spaced booms, the night was quiet again. Then, suddenly, I heard a tremendous sound that caused me, and everyone else in the barracks, to sit bolt upright and listen intently.

The closest I can come to a description is that it sounded like a giant chain saw ripping across the sky.

We all jumped up and ran out the front door. What greeted our eyes was truly stunning. It was impossible to make out its solid form in the darkness, but we could plainly see the running lights and hear the engine noise of a helicopter. It was circling over the top of the ridge just on the other side of the airfield.

What gripped our attention, however, was a line of pink tracers that extended down from its nose to the ground along the side of the ridge. It looked like a solid line of light snaking back and forth, the same way a thin stream of water plays from a moving hose.

There was an older sergeant standing out there with us, watching just as we were. Not knowing exactly what it was we were seeing, I moved over next to him without taking my eyes from the incredible sight.

“What’s going on, Serg?” I asked.

He folded his arms and nodded in the direction of the airfield.

“Those dull booms you heard a few minutes ago?...Sounded like thunder? They were mortar rounds being fired in at the airstrip by the VC.

“That out there is a Huey Cobra gunship that was scrambled as soon as the rounds came in. It happens just about every night. They lob in a few rounds and the cobra tries to nail ‘em before they can get away.”

As he finished speaking, that chilling sound of a giant chain saw ripped the air again and the solid line of pink from the cobra scoured the ridge once more.

“But what makes that horrendous noise?”, one of the other new men asked.

“That’s the sound of his mini-gun firing. ...You see that line of tracers coming out of his nose? Even though that stream looks almost solid, there are four regular rounds between each tracer that you can’t see. The mini-gun fires thousands of rounds a minute, which is so fast that you don’t hear any spaces between the bullets like you would the rat-tat-tat of a regular machine-gun.”

I had to think about that for a moment. All of us new men were stunned by such an awesome display. Here was a weapon that was literally spraying bullets out like water from a hose! I wondered how anyone could possibly stand such a deadly barrage.

“Not only does the cobra have a mini-gun,” the sergeant continued, “but it also carries fifty six rockets in pods on each side of its body, and an automatic grenade launcher that fires grenades out like a machine-gun.”

Shortly the ripping sound stopped and we watched the Cobra’s running lights as it drifted slowly down toward the airstrip. Finally it disappeared behind the trees that were between us and the field.

“Well, I don’t think we’re going to see anymore fireworks tonight. You men had better go in and get some sleep. You’ve got a long day ahead of you tomorrow.”

Lying on my back in the darkness, I found it difficult to doze off. I couldn't help but think about the incredible sight we'd just witnessed and wonder what other surprise advancements in weapons technology might be in store.