
NINETEEN**China Mountain's Backside**

That afternoon and for the next two days we were made familiar with what conditions in the field would be like.

We were issued our new M-16 rifles and taken for a hike around the base of China Mountain, to the opposite side, where we zeroed them in. Zeroing the weapon simply meant that each man adjusted the sights of his rifle to his individual preference, so that the rounds he fired would go where he was aiming. We also spent a night on guard duty just inside the last row of concertina wire. Though we were still within the first line of defense of the base, we could get a feel for what it would be like when we were actually out in the enemy's territory.

On our last day at An Khe, we went around the back of China Mountain again and climbed to a wide ledge about half-way up the side of the peak. From there we could look out over the flat plain of the jungle stretching away to the horizon.

I was deeply impressed with the incredible view. We were about a thousand feet above the canopy of dark green treetops that covered the plain below, and the sky was a beautiful blue with billowy white clouds drifting slowly across the wide-open panorama.

At the same time, I had the eerie feeling of looking out over the countryside that lay far outside the confines of the base. That territory might just belong to "Charlie" and it was a chilling sensation to

realize that he could be close at hand. I likened the feeling to being in a haunted house and not knowing exactly where the ghosts were.

While we were up there, we were given a demonstration of the various artillery rounds that the Army had at its disposal. The instructor radioed for several different types to be fired out from a nearby LZ which gave cover to the base here at An Khe. No sooner had he finished speaking on the radio than we heard a faint boom. Then something whistled past, high overhead, and there was a tremendous crack of sound over a group of abandoned military vehicles about six-hundred yards out on the plain below us.

That crack was so powerful that it vibrated the very air all the way back up to where we were standing. The feeling of the vibration passing through my body was something like the awesome power of a thunder clap that cracks very near when you're not expecting it.

At the same time, a thick cloud of gray smoke appeared around the grouping of vehicles and obscured them from view for several moments until it drifted slowly away on the gentle breeze. This was an HE or high explosive round.

We were also shown a cluster round, which bursts open in the air above a target, dropping dozens of smaller charges to the ground in a wide pattern, and a white phosphorus round that covers the area with that lethal chemical. If the phosphorus comes into contact with the skin, it burns through like a highly corrosive acid!

When the artillery demonstration was over, the instructor had us move back away from the edge of the ledge and sit down on the ground. Out of our hearing range, one of his assistants made another call on the radio while he began to instruct us on how the medical aide corps here functioned.

During the lesson, I began to notice the low hum of engines coming from somewhere in the distance. At first I brushed it off as one of the multitude of sounds common around a base, but, as he continued speaking, seemingly unaware of the growing sound, it increased rapidly.

Finally, he stood to one side and held his arm out in the direction of the ledge, at the same time finishing a statement he'd begun, "And this, gentlemen, is the Medevac Corps."

Right on cue two Huey Medevac helicopters, with throttles wide open, shot up at about a forty-five degree angle from below the edge of the ledge and zipped past just feet over our heads. They continued to climb and circle on their way back to the base on the other side of the mountain.

I must say that this demonstration was beautifully planned and executed. The instructor had moved us back from the edge of the ledge so that we wouldn't see the two Hueys approaching, at full speed, just above the treetops on the plain below. He'd timed the end of his lecture perfectly to coincide with the appearance of the birds from below the ledge. Having those two helicopters streak by at such close range, and at such speed, sent a genuine shiver of excitement up my spine. It was something none of us would soon forget.

We did gain quite a bit of practical experience from our three-day training course, but I also became familiar with some of the other facets that contributed to the overall picture of our military stay in this country.

For one thing, there were three distinct odors that constantly permeated the air and would be clearly noticeable at any base we went to.

One was the ever-present scent of diesel exhaust from the variety of military aircraft and ground vehicles operating in those areas. If you've ever been unfortunate enough to be stuck behind a school

bus in traffic, when it pulls away, leaving that thick, gray cloud of smoke, you know the smell I'm talking about. It was everywhere.

The second was the pungent odor of black, gummy creosote, or coal tar, which was spread on the major road surfaces to keep the dry, powdery dust from constantly rising into the air. Though it performed its function well, its pitch black color held the blast-furnace heat from the tropical sun close to the ground and the powerful odor took some getting used to.

The third smell was the strange combination of diesel fuel and human excrement which were mixed together and burned as a means of disposing of the waste. This duty, assigned to the men on a rotational basis, much like KP, was designated by the aptly descriptive term of, "burning shit"!

Most of the toilet facilities on these bases were nothing more than wooden outhouses with fifty-five gallon drums cut off to about a third of their height and placed under the round hole of the seat. When the drums became fairly full, they were pulled out by the man whose duty it was that day. He would pour in a quantity of diesel fuel, stir the concoction with a long stick and then set it afire. Every so often, he'd have to re-stir it to keep it burning. You can imagine that it was as gross as it sounds, but, unfortunately, someone had to do it.

As a form of disposal it worked well, but it did make for one hell of a potent aroma all around the area. The only good thing I can say about the job is that I was only too thankful I was never picked to perform it.

The morning of the fourth day I and two other men, who'd been assigned to the Second Battalion of the Fifth Cav, boarded a C-130 headed for the far northern province of Quang Tri. The province capitol, also of the same name, was located near the shore of the South China Sea.

At the huge military base there, we found ourselves once again in the sweltering sun and white sand of the coast.