
TWENTY

Welcome To Vietnam!

When we got off the plane, we had to walk from one side of the runway, around the approach end, to the other side where the terminal building was located. Just when we were crossing the front of the runway, a huge, silver, four-engined Air Force jet, called a “Freedom Bird”, came in for a landing. It was loaded with troops coming from some other base and the three of us stopped to watch in fascination as something that big passed only a matter of feet over our heads.

Suddenly, to our astonishment, just before the wheels touched down, it tipped slightly to one side and the end of the wing just caught the corrugated steel of the runway. Though it appeared that the wing barely grazed the metal, with the three of us looking on in shock, it tore completely off the body of the plane and burst into flames! Both the plane and the severed wing slid crazily all the way down to the other end of the runway where they came to rest up against a chain-link fence.

Billowing black smoke from the wing rose hundreds of feet into the air as fire fighting equipment and emergency medical teams raced down to the twisted wreck. Even though my two companions and I were all the way at the opposite end of the runway, we could hear the screams of the men, most of whom were still trapped inside the body of the plane.

There was little we could do from where we were, so, bewildered, we made our way to the small terminal building where everyone inside was glued to the windows watching the inferno. The only fortunate part was that the wing, which caught fire almost immediately, had come to rest a good distance from the main body of the plane, so that the men inside weren't exposed to as much of the flames,...but there was some.

Once the excitement died down, we were told to take a seat and wait for the trucks that would be by shortly to pick us up.

Our next destination was LZ Jane.

While we sat on wooden benches along one wall, I had time to think about the fact that each leg of our journey, since we'd entered the country, had brought us one step closer to the meat of what this experience was going to be all about,...the field.

From Cam Ranh Bay, through An Khe and Quang Tri, and now to LZ Jane, each area was a little less secure than the previous one had been. What it amounted to was that all of these rear areas were basically backup support for the crux of the war, the men in the field. They were the ones who were meeting the enemy head to head.

Eventually, when I'd been out in the field for awhile, it would be somewhat of a good feeling to know that most of the people in the rear appreciated what we were going through out there. From the direct company supply people, all the way up to the Air Force jets, who gave air support when needed, and to the battleship New Jersey, which was stationed off the coast, they'd bend over backwards for the men in the field.

It wasn't long before three deuce-and-a-halves, which were large, powerful trucks, came along and stopped at the terminal. We three men jumped into the back of the last one and they drove off down the dirt road that ran along the side of the runway to our left.

Before veering off to the right, and going through part of Quang Tri proper, the road took us passed the far end of the runway where firefighters were battling the blazing Freedom Bird. Evidently they were having a difficult time getting to those who were trapped. Even over the rumbling of the truck's engine, I could still hear the screams of the men inside. It made me realize that we'd probably just witnessed our first casualties of the war.

At the edge of the town, our trucks had to cross a short wooden bridge that spanned a narrow stream. Suddenly, there was a loud explosion from somewhere up ahead. The truck we were in stopped abruptly and we all jumped out.

When we moved around to the front, we could see that the lead truck, just on the other side of the bridge, had smoke curling out of the back and the men who'd been inside were all standing around it. Word came back that one of the kids from the town, in the inevitable crowd that followed the trucks, had tossed a hand grenade into the back when it slowed to cross the bridge.

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By no small miracle, no one was seriously injured, since they'd all piled out as soon as they saw the grenade. The driver of the smoking vehicle was able to pull it off to the side of the road and the men who'd been stranded were picked up by the remaining vehicles to continue on.

The boy who'd thrown the grenade was long gone before it even went off, so there wasn't much use in going after him. And we were told, though it was hardly necessary at that point, to watch for any kids coming near the backs of the trucks.

After we passed through the main part of the town, which was just another ugly cluster of corrugated metal shanties, the truck we were riding in left what was left of the convoy and turned right onto a smaller dirt road that ran out into the flat farmland of the countryside. Some five hundred yards down this road it ended on a barren knob of a hill that was LZ Jane. This was the present "landing zone" and artillery firebase for the companies of the second battalion to which we now belonged. It was our last stop before actually going out into the field.