
TWENTY THREE**My First LP**

Just before supertime the corporal and a man from the mess tent loaded full mermite cans aboard a Huey, along with other supplies that C company had radioed for. These included various items such as clothing, cases of C rations, and a case each of trip flares and radio batteries. Finally, we three new men got aboard wearing our fully loaded aluminum-framed backpacks.

This was our first ride aboard a Huey and it was truly an exhilarating experience. I watched the supply people drop away, in a cloud of dust, as we lifted into the air. When we got about thirty feet off the ground, the bird pivoted slowly in place, tipped its nose down and headed out over the edge of the LZ.

Suddenly we were on the ride of our lives. The pilots zipped along just above the ground, until they came to something like a farmhouse or treeline. Then they'd rise just enough to clear the top and, as soon as it was past, dropped down close to the ground again.

I'd never been in anything that moved so fast, so close to the ground without actually touching it. Occasionally we'd see a Vietnamese farmer working the fields close to our path. He'd look up just in time to see our bird zip by and then it would rapidly disappear from his view.

In a matter of minutes, we reached the company's location where the Huey dropped down into a cemetery that was situated in the open rice paddies. Each farm out here was separated from the others by what looked like scrawny hedgerows that had never been trimmed. Those bushes were a good eight

feet tall and could be easily passed through where there were numerous gaps. They clearly weren't meant to keep anyone in or out but simply acted as boundary markers.

The nearest farmhouse, about sixty yards to our north, could just be seen through the hedges. It was a two or three room, mud-walled building with a thatched roof. In the small front yard there were a couple of wire pens for pigs and a half-dozen chickens scratching in the bare, dry soil.

We three jumped out of the bird, keeping low and holding onto our helmets against the downdraft from the rotors. While we were moving away from it, several men from the company unloaded the supplies.

Someone pointed us in the direction of the captain's command post, or CP, located at the center of the company perimeter.

Captain Conrad shook each of our hands, "Welcome to Charlie Company, men," and then turned to one of his radiomen, "Freeman, call first, second, and third platoons and have them send someone over here to escort these new men to their locations."

The company consisted of four platoons, that is, three infantry and one mortar platoon. I'd been assigned to the first, which numbered approximately thirty five men.

Each platoon was under the charge of a lieutenant and his platoon sergeant and contained four squads of eight or nine men each. The squads, in turn, were each headed by a squad leader who was the senior man in terms of both rank and time in country.

I shook hands with the platoon lieutenant who gave me the simple advice, "Just follow everything your squad leader tells you to do and you'll be all right."

I was then escorted to the second squad of which I would now be a member. The squad leader, Ron Dixon, made me feel as much at home as possible, under the circumstances.

Ron was a tall, lean, handsome guy from Seattle, Washington who had the facial features of a young John Kennedy. With his sleeves rolled up past his elbows, wearing a pair of pilot's sunglasses, and a forty-five pistol in a holster belted to his waist, he looked the perfect choice for the job.

Each platoon was responsible for the security of one quarter of the circumference of the company perimeter. The perimeter was a large circle, set up much the same way in which the wagon trains of the Old West formed a circle at night for protection, and the captain's CP was located in the center.

Just before sunset each day, the captain chose a good location to set up for the night. Then the members of each platoon dug their foxholes, at short intervals, all around the perimeter with four men to a hole.

Ron brought me over to one of the holes that his squad had dug, this particular one being one man short, and introduced me to the others.

"Guys, this is our new replacement, Bob Hutton." He was kind enough not to call me an FNG, (Fucking New Guy).

The three men were Rick Lamars, "Whitey" Rhinehart and a fellow named Lange.

Rick was a tall, thin kid with an easy-going smile and a gentle manner. When I got to know him better, I'd feel that he projected the perfect image of a soft-spoken country preacher. In fact, when we got to talking, Rick mentioned that he was engaged to a local girl back home and that, when he got out of the Army, they planned to marry and open an orphanage.

Whitey, on the other hand, had extremely fair skin and the platinum blonde hair and eyebrows that were common to albinos. Those outstanding features were the reason he'd been nicknamed "Whitey". He too wore a pair of pilot's sunglasses, which enhanced his rugged appearance, but were probably just as much for protection of the sensitive eyes that are also common to people of such fair complexion.

Whitey had the kind of personality that made it easy for anyone to like him almost immediately. He loved laughing at a good joke, and it didn't matter if he was the butt of that joke, which he often was.

Lange had brown hair and the chiseled features of a young executive. His personality was very different from the others in that he was much more aloof, until you got to know him. He gave me the feeling that he was mainly interested in getting on with the job and getting it over with so that we could all get the hell out of here. Rick and Whitey called him simply by his last name.

"You're lucky you're coming out now instead of last week," Rick told me as we all sat around the edge of the foxhole.

"Why is that?"

"We just moved down here from Khe Sanh up near the DMZ. Up there we were in range of NVA artillery." He shook his head slowly, "It was really bad."

Whitey let out a sardonic breath, "Bad isn't the word for it,...more like shit!"

Lange stood up and looked over to where the Huey had come in. "It looks like they're lining up." Then he walked off in that direction with his M-16 slung over his shoulder behind him, so that the barrel was pointed down at the ground.

Rick nodded to me as he and Whitey got up too.

"Come on, it's time to go over and get our supper."

Each man received plastic utensils and a Styrofoam plate with good helpings of ham, boiled potatoes, and corn. At the end of the serving line another man ladled iced tea into our canteen cups.

Rick was standing in front of me in the chow line. He turned and smiled, “Don’t get too used to this kind of service. We don’t get it nearly as often as we’d like.”

Whitey, who was behind me, added with a smile, “Yeah, there are the finer things in life you’ll be getting used to, like C-rations.”

All in all, the food wasn’t too bad, but it wouldn’t be until I’d gone for a month or more, eating nothing but C-rations, and often those cold, that I’d really come to appreciate these occasional hot meals.

After supper, there were still a few minutes left before the sun actually set, giving everyone time to relax and read whatever mail had also come out on the Huey. I wouldn’t be getting any mail for at least two weeks, since it would take that long for it to catch up to me. This gave me the opportunity to ask Rick about something I’d been trying to figure out since we arrived.

“Why is it that all the grave sites in this cemetery are small, round humps?”

Rick had just finished reading a letter and was lying with his back resting against one of the very humps I was referring to. They were each no more than a foot high and, on average, three to four feet in diameter. Most had a white, stone marker standing on top and many of those markers had the impression of a backward swastika sculpted on them. That in itself was pretty eerie, considering the more recent history of that particular symbol, but, in this case, it had nothing whatever to do with the Nazis. Thousands of years before Aldolf Hitler came along to pervert what we know as the swastika

into an evil image, it was a sacred symbol of peace and love among ancient peoples. It was still that for the Buddhist faith, many of whom were buried in these cemeteries.

He Looked around at the dozens of humps in our general area, “They say these people bury their dead in a standing position. It may have something to do with their religion, but I think there’s a more economical reason for it.”

“Economical?” I ask.

He raised an arm and swung it around slowly, pointing to the flat rice paddy fields surrounding the cemetery.

“You see how much land is used for farming around here? That doesn’t leave a whole lot of room for unproductive places like cemeteries. They probably bury their dead standing so that they can get more of them into a smaller area.”

I nodded, indicating I hadn’t thought of that, “That makes good sense.”

“In any case,” Rick continued, “it’s good for us too. The mounds give us decent protection in case of snipers in the treelines out there,” he slapped his hand, palm down, on the grassy ground, “and, a lot times, these old cemeteries are the only dry ground anywhere out in these paddies. They come to be good friends.”

After sunset, the squad leaders were called to the platoon leader’s location for the night’s instructions. When Ron returned, he told Rick and Whitey that it was their turn to pull an LP. He also told them to take me along so I could get the hang of it.

Very quietly Rick and Whitey strapped on their canvas pistol belts, which held the magazines for their rifles, and I did the same. We'd be traveling light, leaving everything but our weapons, munitions, and one of the platoon radios back in the perimeter.

"What's an LP?" I whispered. After dark, everyone tried to be as quiet as possible for safety's sake.

Whitey finished hanging two hand grenades on his belt.

"An LP is a listening post. You remember the tall hedgerow about sixty yards out that way,...the one that passes by the side of the nearest farmyard?"

"There's a footpath just this side of those hedges that goes out toward the hills. It might be a trail used by Charlie when he wants to come down out of the mountains for food. Our job is to spend the night next to that trail, with the radio, and call the company if we get any movement."

"You guys all set?" Rick whispered.

As soon as it was pitch dark, we moved out of the perimeter and walked silently toward the hedgerow. When we reached the trail, we sat down in a clump of bushes next to it. Each man was to keep a two-hour watch while the others slept.

Since I was new at this, Rick and Whitey gave me the first watch. The first watch was usually the easiest because it was still early in the night and I wouldn't have to pull another one until the early hours of the morning.

There was very little conversation, and even when it was needed, it was done in the softest of whispers. If someone did come along the trail, our job wasn't to confront them unless it was absolutely necessary. It was more to report enemy movement to the company, a sort of early warning system.

Before Whitey laid on the bare ground to sleep, he moved over next to me and whispered, “If you see or hear anything, don’t make any noise. Wake us up quietly and we’ll call it in.” He patted me on the shoulder for reassurance, “You’ll be all right.”

My second turn for watch came at about three in the morning. I sat alone, cross-legged, with my rifle in my lap, while the others slept. It was so dark that, try as I might, I couldn’t see more than a couple of feet up the trail. If someone did come along, I’d probably hear them long before I could see anything.

Nothing unusual happened during the night, except that by sunrise I was covered with cold, wet dew. Even though we were in a tropical climate, it was fairly cool before the sun came up. And wearing wet fatigues didn’t help at all. I found myself shivering as the three of us made our way back to the company’s location.