
TWENTY SIX**Butch Cassidy**

Shortly after sunrise everyone was up and ready to move out. I had a quick breakfast of cold scrambled eggs with small bits of ham mixed in, which I ate directly from a green C-ration can. The date stamped on the lid of the cardboard carton, in which the twelve boxes of rations were originally packed, read 1948. It was amazing how food in airtight cans could remain edible for twenty years.

Of course, if you asked most of these men what they thought about C-rations, they'd probably tell you, in no uncertain terms, that they doubted very much if they were *ever* very edible. They didn't look particularly appetizing, but then, anything will do when you're hungry.

Now that it was daylight, the company was going to move through the villages, on the other side of the treeline, to see if any of the snipers could be found. But it was a pretty safe bet they expected just such a move and had skipped out to a safer location.

There was a single thatched hut, just this side of the treeline, that we had to pass in front of on our way in. As we went by, out of curiosity, each man glanced casually in through the open doorway. When I looked in, I could hardly believe the sight that met my eyes. There was a young Vietnamese boy of about fourteen or fifteen lying on the floor, on his back, his feet toward the door. An old woman, in typical black pajamas and straw hat, was wiping his forehead with a damp cloth to give him some kind of comfort.

The boy had no clothes on and appeared to be in a delirious state. Between his legs, where his penis and testicles should have been, there was a gaping hole with what could only be described as black pus oozing slowly out of it. It was plain that he only had a short time left to live and that nothing could be done for him.

Back in training I'd heard rumors of a form of syphilis called "the black syph" which was supposed to be particular to this part of the world. It was also rumored that anyone in the military who contracted this disease was sent to a small island off the coast of Japan where they simply waited to die. There was supposedly no cure, since it was believed to be an antibiotic resistant strain caused by diluted black market drugs sold over the years of the war.

It was said that those Americans with the disease were prohibited from making any contact with their families back in the States. The relatives were simply told that the man had died in action. Strangely enough, because the military denied that it even existed, the disease had an almost legendary quality to it. Seeing that boy lying there, I now had no doubt about its existence. It seemed incredible that the poor kid was still alive!

The company entered the treeline where the napalm had been dropped the previous afternoon. The amount of heat that had been generated was made evident by the fact that there were small pockets of ash on the barren ground with tiny whiffs of smoke still rising out of them. The treeline itself was only about ten yards deep from the open field side to the side that the villages were on. Every piece of vegetation that lived in the shade of those trees, including the leaves of the trees themselves, now lay as a thin coating of gray ash on the ground. Even the bark had been turned black by the heat.

When our point men, up at the front of the column, entered the village, there was a brief period in which the line was held up. It just happened that I was about halfway through the treeline when we stopped. While we men back here waited, with little to do until the line began moving again, something caught my eye on the burnt bark of one of the trees. I stepped over and took a closer look at a glob of clear, thick liquid, about the size of my thumb. It was a small amount of napalm that hadn't burned. Out of curiosity I sniffed at the substance to see if it had any distinctive odor. To my surprise, it smelled exactly as it looked, like airplane glue!

Even though the sun had only come up a short time ago, the temperature was already well over a hundred degrees and I could feel the heat from the still-smoldering ground actually making the soles of my jungle boots hot. That combination of natural and man-made heat was almost unbearable, even in what little shade there was left of the treeline.

Once we crossed into the open area, on the other side of the trees, we worked our way slowly, one behind the other, into the village with its mud and thatched huts lining both sides of what would be considered the main thoroughfare. The column split off so that a line of men made its way up each side of the dirt road. Actually, it was nothing more than a clearing in the center of the village.

Everyone moved cautiously, his weapon at the ready. There were any number of places where a hidden person could suddenly open fire without warning.

At the far end of the small complex, and dominating everything else, stood the Catholic church whose steeple we had seen above the trees the previous day. The first order of business was to insure that there were no snipers still perched in its high bell tower.

This done, a hut by hut search was conducted. Wherever there was a place of possible concealment, such as a haystack or a grain bin, a machete was run through several times as insurance. To no one's surprise the only people in the village were small children and very old adults. There were no younger men because they were either in the South Vietnamese Army or with the VC, and the young women were either off in the larger cities, where there were jobs available in the American PXs or in the lucrative business of prostitution. Or they too were working with the VC.

One thing I became immediately aware of was that every single hut had a wooden trapdoor, hidden somewhere in the floor of its interior, which lead down to a tunnel complex running under the entire village. Since every village around here had the same thing, and the tunnels were probably connected together from village to village, I got a pretty good idea of just how extensive these tunnel complexes were.

When the search of this village was completed, including tossing smoke grenades down all the tunnel entrances, the company began moving along to the next one, only fifty yards farther down the treeline.

Suddenly, there came a burst of automatic weapons fire from a small bunker hidden in a vegetable garden between the two villages. Everyone hit the ground where they were and the M-60 machine-gunner in the third platoon set his weapon up on a small rise about fifty feet directly in front of the entrance to it.

Now I saw the company come alive amid shouts of directives from platoon and squad leaders. The other men of the third platoon, who were closest to the bunker, scrambled up on both sides of the garden. The people in there must have figured they faced the probability of a grenade being tossed in

when we got near the opening. In a sudden move, they came running out, firing their weapons wildly in front of them Butch Cassidy style. The second they were in the open, the M-60 cut them down.

I got to my feet with the other men nearby and we moved slowly, keeping low, toward where they fell.

The two turned out to be a young man and woman. It was hard to figure why they hadn't moved out of the area with their comrades, since they must have realized we'd be coming through on a search, unless they became more involved with each other, in that confined space, than with their own safety.

The man was carrying a Russian SKS bolt-action rifle with a high-powered scope attached, which meant that he was obviously one of the snipers who'd been taking shots at us the day before, and the girl had an AK-47, a standard Russian automatic assault weapon. Needless to say, there was little sympathy for these two because either one of them may have been the unknown figure who'd killed our man on the perimeter last evening.