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**EIGHT****TWENTY****Comic Relief**

For the next couple of weeks the daily routine remained about the same. We got up with the sun, had our breakfast of C-rations, and then patrolled through several villages in a clearing action.

At about the middle of the afternoon, after the expected showers, and when the heat of the sun made it too unbearable to move, we set up our perimeter in one of the many cemeteries or around the berms of the rice paddies.

On more than one occasion, after we'd set up, we spotted several people standing out in the open about five or six hundred yards away, down along the treeline with villages on the other side of it. Because of the distance it was impossible to make them out clearly, but we could see that their clothing was of a light colored khaki material, the same as that worn by North Vietnamese Army Regulars or NVA, and they appeared to be wearing the pith helmets common to those soldiers.

It became obvious that there was nothing more than a sophisticated game of cat and mouse going on here.

One afternoon Rick, Whitey, and I stood at the edge of the perimeter, shading our eyes from the sun and staring across the open paddies at the figures in the distance. Quite a few of the other men around the perimeter, and the captain at the center, were also watching the movement. The frustration everyone felt was readily apparent.

"Look at those bastards just standing out there watching us," Whitey said gritting his teeth.

Rick replied with his usual calm assessment of the situation, "They're smart. They know that standing out in the open like that, right under our noses, irritates the hell out of us. They realize that we can't touch them at this distance, and if we started out after them, they'd see us coming long before we could get anywhere near them."

"Then, when we entered that particular village they'd just move on to the next one," I added.

Rick nodded, "You got it."

It wasn't a situation with an easy solution. They also knew that we wouldn't call for air strikes or artillery whenever we saw them because there were often innocent civilians living in those villages right behind them.

Occasionally, rear command would use the enemy's cockiness as a means of beating them at their own game. When a company reported those people standing on the near side of a village, and if there was a second company nearby, they'd move quietly to the other side of that same village. Then the first company would head toward the NVA. Naturally, as soon as the enemy soldiers saw us Americans coming toward them, they'd pull up stakes and run back toward the next village. It's not hard to imagine their surprise when they ran smack into the second company waiting in ambush.

One particular day, when C-company was making a sweep of a village, we came across hundreds of propaganda leaflets, lying all over the ground, that had been left behind by the enemy. I read several with a strange kind of fascination. One displayed a very poor photograph, looking like it was done on a copying machine that was almost out of ink, of an American soldier and explained how he was captured about a year ago. There was also a statement, supposedly by him, that he was being treated well and that we were wrong to be fighting in this war.

Another leaflet said that two entire divisions of the American Army, as well as a flotilla of American ships, had been destroyed a month earlier by the People's Army of North Vietnam and that we should go home since the war was going so badly for us. This one got a good chuckle out of everyone simply because it was so preposterous.

I figured that if they were going to go through all the trouble of printing these things up, as a means of demoralizing their adversary, they should at least try to make them sound somewhat realistic. I knew that if the NVA ever wiped out two divisions and a flotilla, it would be the equivalent of a hunter bringing down an elephant with a pea shooter, and not only I, but probably everyone else from here to Timbuktu would have heard about it. As it was, this leaflet added a bit of comic relief to a hot, dusty situation.

Another fascinating sight was a message painted in large red letters, on the bombed-out, exterior wall of a church, which read:

“American soldier, why are you here so far away from your family and friends? Why should you die so far from home in a war that doesn't concern you?”

Again this message had no affect on me, other than the curiosity it provoked. If anything, it reminded me of the graffiti one often sees painted on the walls in a subway station.