
NINE

TWENTY

Hardcore

Later that afternoon we received word from the rear that we would be going to LZ Hardcore as the securing force for its perimeter. The monsoons had reached their peak and most of the rice paddies were under water, which made it extremely difficult to move from one village to another. Not only that, but the company had been in the field for close to a month now and rear command had a policy of rotating each company out of the field, in turn, for a week of rest whenever possible. It was fortunate they had the sense to maintain such a policy because battle fatigue became a dangerous companion to men continually facing the prospect of enemy ambushes.

LZ Hardcore, like LZ Jane, was located about thirty miles below the DMZ and Southwest of Quang Tri. Hard-Core sat at the junction of a main road, or redball, as roads here were called in military jargon, and a small river. A perimeter of heavy bunkers had been built on both sides of the road, including a stretch of the river bank which ran parallel with it. This caused the perimeter to be an ellipse about a hundred and fifty yards long and fifty yards wide with the road running through the middle the long way.

At one end of the perimeter, and right at the side of the road, stood a large church which was still being used for services by the local people. Directly across the road from the church was another building that had originally been part of the church complex, but was now being used by the Army as a headquarters facility.

At the other end of the perimeter, down the road, was a portable pontoon bridge, which the Army engineers set up to span the river. As soon as one crossed the bridge to the other side, there was a fairly large Vietnamese village where all the Coke and boom-boom girls, who serviced the Americans, lived.

Coke girls were simply girls from the local villages who bought Coca-Cola on the black market and sold it to American GIs whenever they were in their area. In 1968, back in the States, a 12 oz. bottle of Coke was going for thirty-five cents. Over here the girls were selling that same bottle for a dollar. The reasons why we put up with such an outrageous price were twofold.

First, we had money in our pockets with nowhere and nothing to actually spend it on, other than whatever the local Vietnamese could deliver to us in the field. And secondly, though the supply people in the rear sent rations of beer and soda out with the supply Huey whenever it was feasible, the Coke girls had one up on them. They obtained a block of ice, along with their case of soda and kept it cold while it was strapped to the back of their bicycle. As far as we were concerned, anything cold in this sweltering country was worth the extra we had to pay for it. We didn't much like it, but we put up with it. Here we had an interesting case of economics. The *Communists* were using the doctrine of *supply and demand* to furnish equipment for their army. With the money they *demand*ed from us, for *supplying* us with cold soda and other items,..clearly luxuries,..they bought weapons for their own people in the field. Pretty capitalistic of them, wouldn't you say?

LZ Hardcore couldn't really be considered that far removed from being out in the field, but for men who'd spent so much time completely isolated from any form of civilization, its bunkers and French-built stone buildings were a welcomed relief.

The road from one end of the perimeter where the bridge sat, to about half-way up to the church complex, at the other end, was under a foot of water because of the monsoons. The part that was dry was like an island in the middle of the flooded paddies.

Each day at lunch and suppertime the men on the perimeter strolled up, a few at a time, to a mess tent that was set up in the courtyard of the church. Compared to C-rations in the field, this was like a little bit of heaven, if you'll excuse the connection.

One day, while I was standing in line for the mess tent, I watched a Vietnamese woman and her small children, who had come up the road from the village across the river. Whenever it was mealtime these people just stopped what they were doing and squatted down to eat. I was fascinated by how she spread a group of white and blue enameled metal bowls on the ground, right at the side of the road, and filled them with rice, vegetables, and fish parts, for her little ones. I thought it pretty amazing that all of the ingredients for the meal, including the full service of bowls and the produce she was taking to market, were carried in baskets she had slung across her shoulders on a wooden yoke. The meal lacked for nothing, and yet, had been completely carried on her person.

Another reason for my interest in this little group was that there were American Army personnel going about their duties or standing in line for the mess tent all around them, yet it no more bothered them than if they were having a picnic somewhere alone under a shady tree. As poor as they might be, their self-reliance was nothing short of remarkable.

Unfortunately there was the occasional man who felt that these people were nothing more than an annoyance who did nothing but get in the way. He might bother them with rude comments or even force them to leave the area with his uncalled-for harassment.

It wasn't difficult to understand how some could feel that way when, most of the time, it was all but impossible to tell the enemy from the rest of the people. Still, I felt that, whether they were friendly or just totally indifferent to us Americans, as most appeared to be, this was *their* country.

While our company was at this LZ, an incident occurred that only served to emphasize the fact that a large number of casualties sustained by the American forces were due to the carelessness or inexperience of the men themselves.

Since I'd been in the field for over three weeks now, the tension I'd felt upon my arrival had all but vanished. It was interesting how, even as unorthodox as this job might be, it still had a routine to it like any other ordinary occupation. Once you got into the regular routine, it became far less unsettling than it

originally had been. Of course, whenever we were in contact with the enemy, that sickening tension was always right there in the pit of your stomach, but when we weren't in contact the boredom could be just as disturbing.

This particular night I was finishing my watch and preparing to wake the next man. Nothing out of the ordinary had occurred during the two hours I'd been on vigilance, other than an occasional splash in the river when a piece of the bank broke off and fell in. The bunker that my squad was occupying was right on the edge of the river, looking down on it. Because of the heavy rains, now and then, a large piece of the steep, muddy bank broke loose on the opposite shore and fell in with a loud splash. That hadn't bothered me because it also occurred all through the daylight hours when we could see the pieces fall in, but the next man on watch had just come out to the field and I could tell he was nervous from lack of experience. I wasn't sure if he'd be able to cope with the surprise splashes in the darkness.

Sure enough, as soon as I awakened him, he turned the selector switch on his M-16 from "safe" to "semi-automatic" fire.

Remembering how I'd felt when I was new to the field, I tried to ease his mind.

"This is a pretty secure area. You don't have to set your rifle to fire. In fact, you should never take the safety off unless you intend to use it. That's a standing rule out here."

He still sounded unsure, speaking softly, "Yeah, yeah,...okay."

In the darkness I saw him look down at his rifle and appear to put the selector switch back on safe. Thinking back to how Rick and Whitey had kept me under their wing until I was more sure of myself, I offered to stand part of his watch with him until he got used to it.

The two of us stood in silence for quite some time leaning against the sandbag wall on top of the bunker which faced out over the river. It wasn't long before a piece of the opposite bank fell in with a loud splash.

"What was that?!" he whispered, almost on the verge of panic.

Don't worry, it's nothing. It's just part of the river bank breaking off and falling in," I told him calmly.

"No!...No! I think somebody's out there! Somebody's coming across the river!"

I put my hand on his tensed shoulder, trying to ease him off.

"Listen,...I'm telling you it's only the bank falling into the water. Those banks are almost straight up and down and about twelve feet from the top to the surface of the river. As soft as they are, it would be almost impossible for anyone to climb up without your knowing it,...so relax. There's nobody out there."

I pointed out to him that the river was about thirty feet across and there was nothing on the other side for a good five hundred yards but flat, water-covered rice paddies. There were no trees or other obstacles of any kind in front of us so that we had a clear field of view all around. Even at night you could see for quite a distance over the shimmering water out there.

Still, there was no convincing him.

About half-way through his watch another piece broke off and fell in, but this time there was another sound that accompanied it which completely baffled me. I was standing directly in front of and facing him with only about a foot of space between us. He was holding his rifle across his front, at waist height.

"Did your rifle go off?" I asked in puzzlement.

No sooner had I said that than one of the men sleeping on the ground behind the bunker began to yell, "My foot!...My foot!"

He hadn't put his rifle back on safe, as I'd thought he had, and, when the splash occurred, he inadvertently pulled the trigger with his nervous flinch. The round went through the foot of the man behind the bunker. Because of my close proximity to him, with the weapon between us, it was difficult to tell that it had actually fired.

Fortunately for the wounded man, the bullet didn't do as much damage as it certainly could have. He'd be out of commission for some time, however, and it was considered extremely lucky that he hadn't been sleeping with his head where his feet were!

Unfortunately for the new man, when the other guys found out what had happened, they instinctively avoided him. They felt it was dangerous enough out here without being around someone who would put his weapon on fire when there was no reason to do so. It would take him some time to win back their confidence.