
THIRTY

Back To “Churchville”

During the week the company spent at Hardcore the monsoons had diminished considerably and the rice paddies had dried up. The transformation was startling. Where, before, the LZ had appeared to be an island in the middle of a huge lake, the land all around was now flat, sun-baked paddies once again, with the familiar berms separating them.

For most of the time we were there, everything seemed to have been at a standstill, but on our last day a convoy of heavy vehicles, including tanks and armored personnel carriers, came up the road to cross over the pontoon bridge on their way north. There must have been a hundred or more, which took most of the morning to pass through, because the bridge could only handle the weight of one vehicle at a time. As they passed, the men of our company stood along the sides of the road waving and yelling greetings above the roar of the engines. Then, with the vehicles all safely through, it was C company's turn to be flown out.

As always, the flight on the Hueys was exciting. Since the rice paddies were now dry, the sortie landed in the grassy area off to the side of the road. That way they didn't blow the red dust of the parched roadbed up into a cloud.

The wind whipped by as we zipped low over the flat countryside, giving us a refreshing respite from the mid-day heat. I always enjoyed sitting on the edge of the floor with my legs hanging out over the Huey's landing skids.

Only about a hundred feet away from the bird I was in, was another Huey full of men. They waved across and I, and the man sitting next to me, waved back. It was obvious that everyone enjoyed these rides, as brief as they usually were.

It occurred to me that very few people, other than the men who were actually here, would ever know the thrill of such flying. And that was a shame, because it was simply incomparable. Back in the States there were strict rules preventing people from riding in helicopters with the doors open and their feet hanging out, for obvious safety reasons, but in Vietnam those rules didn't apply.

Looking up ahead, I could see eight other Hueys, in two columns, side by side. Whenever they came to a treeline or other obstacle, they rose up just enough to clear and then dropped down again on the other side. This gave the sortie the appearance of a huge snake undulating over the countryside.

The one unfortunate aspect of these flights was the fact of having to reach the final destination. This time we came down in the rice paddies of "Churchville", almost at the same point where we'd left to go into Hardcore. Though it wasn't a hot LZ, in the sense of being fired on when we landed, the depressing heat was like a heavy shroud after the coolness of the flight out.

For the next week and a half the company went back into the same routine of walking from village to village in a never-ending search. Now that the monsoons were over, however, we didn't even have the half-hour or so in the afternoon when the clouds would roll in and cool things off briefly. Not only that, but rear command had gotten one of the "bright ideas" they tended to come up with occasionally, out of nowhere, and decided that we should wear the flack jackets sitting in a warehouse somewhere back there.

Flack jackets were green vests with heavy plating inside both the front and back. Their purpose was to protect the vital organs from shrapnel in the event of a rocket or mortar attack, but the problem was that they were far too heavy to be worn in this kind of heat. This was one of those situations where the people back there thought they were doing something useful for we men in the field...and with good

intentions, but hadn't asked what we thought about it. Truth of the matter was, we'd rather take our chances without them than suffer the burden of the extra dead weight.

What we'd do was wear them for a couple of days or so, until the idea was forgotten, and then send them back in on the daily supply Hueys a few at a time, so that no one of any importance back there would notice them being stored back in the warehouse.

Another problem with the heat was the drinking water.

Each evening, when the supply Huey came out, if the terrain permitted, it airlifted what we called a "water buffalo" and left it with the company overnight. This was a large water tank mounted on two wheels with a hitch on the front, so that it could be pulled by a truck. Unfortunately the water was so chemically treated for purification that it was actually almost syrupy with a bitter, metallic taste. I'd gagged on more than one occasion trying to drink even a small amount of it. Not only did it taste terrible, but it did nothing to quench the thirst. Most of the men carried little packets of Kool-Aid to try and smooth over the taste, but even that didn't help. I found myself, like most everyone else, filling my canteens from the water in the rice paddies. Even though it often had dead fish floating in it, it still had a hundred percent better taste than the processed stuff. We preferred trusting in our iodine purification tablets to clean the rice paddy water than in trying to down that other crap.