
THIRTY SIX**An Incredible Revelation**

The trip back out to the company was fairly uneventful. From the airfield at Cam Ranh I got a flight to Da Nang, and then on to Quang Tri, where I was able to catch a ride to LZ Jane. Since I arrived at Jane around suppertime, I remained on the LZ overnight and flew out to the company on the supply Huey the next morning.

Now, however, instead of being in the lowlands where I'd left them, they were operating in the mountains which lay back beyond the farmlands and rolling hills, away from the coast. The mountains formed a long chain that stretched, like a backbone, from above the DMZ, or De-Militarized Zone between the two countries, down into South Vietnam. They were covered with dense jungle, and weren't populated by anyone. The North Vietnamese Regulars used them as a kind of natural highway by which they could penetrate deep into the South.

Their movement was made easier by foot paths running along the crests of the chain, much as our own Appalachian Trail runs from New England into the deep South along that particular chain. Also, the cover that the heavy jungle provided made them almost invisible, especially from the air, from which they were most vulnerable.

When the Huey arrived at the company's location, it was literally impossible to see them on the ground. They were situated a short distance down the side of a peak and getting ready to move out.

The only give-away was a small, open area where they'd cleared the jungle so that a helicopter could get in.

As soon as the bird dropped me off, I moved out of the clearing and headed for the captain's CP to report in. Here I found a change had taken place while I was gone. The previous first sergeant's tour of duty had ended so that he'd rotated back to the States and a new one had taken his place. This man was a big, burly, red-headed fellow who looked to be about forty and gave the impression of being a tough character. Though I hadn't been in the field long enough to know the other first sergeant, I would come to know and have a great deal of respect for this man. Initially, however, it appeared anything but that. With hands on hips, and a critical eye, he looked me over when I approach the CP.

"You the man who's coming back from the hospital?"

"Yes," I answered casually.

He gave me a hard stare that could have turned jelly to stone, "Yes,...what?"

I'd just slipped my pack off and set it on the ground, resting upright against my leg. I straightened up slowly, suddenly aware of the situation.

"Yes, First Sergeant."

It had been a long time since I'd felt the cold formality of what was called military courtesy, and was hardly expecting anything like that out here. Anywhere else, the Army was adamant about such things as saluting officers, addressing NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers) as "Sergeant", and all the other protocol acknowledging higher rank, but here in Vietnam, or to be more specific, in the field, most of those formalities were put aside. It wasn't that the men had any less respect for superiors out here. It was more a matter of safety. If the enemy happened to be nearby, which was all too often the case,

and saw a man being saluted, or heard someone addressed as “Sir” or “Sergeant”, he’d be the first person they’d try to kill in an attack. No one, including officers or NCOs, wore any kind of insignia of rank on their fatigues. That way it was more difficult for the enemy to pick out the leaders.

The first sergeant nodded curtly, “Welcome back. You can go back to the platoon you were with before you left.”

“Yes, First Sergeant.”

I lifted my pack and made my way over to where Rick, Whitey, and the others were sitting on the ground, waiting to move out. As I walked, I had to suppress a smile at the new first sergeant’s stateside attitude, noticing that several of the men who were within earshot of our conversation were smiling too. It was just a matter of time before the new man would get used to being out here and drop the formalities.

In fact, sometime later, one of the men made the grievous mistake of allowing the first sergeant to overhear a reference to him as “Red”, because of his distinguishing hair color. Fortunately it was at a time when he’d been in the field long enough to have gotten used to the different atmosphere. Still, that was a bit less respect than was acceptable, even under these circumstances.

The first sergeant called the four platoon sergeants to the CP where he told them to pass a message along to the men.

“I want you to make certain that every man in the company gets this perfectly clear. Under no circumstances will I be addressed as “Red”, or “Carrot Top”, or “Hey, you”. ...If they want to speak to me, they can use “First Sergeant”, or “Sergeant”, or “Top”, (short for Top Sergeant). Any man who doesn’t use those terms will face my wrath.”

Since “Top” was acceptable, that was the designation by which he would become affectionately known to the men of the company when they learned what the true character of the man was, but it just went to show that even a hardy career man like Top Soloway soon eased his criterion for what was acceptable in the field.

There were many stories out here of officers who had gone out to the field and not been flexible enough to relax their standards to fit the situation. Like any other profession, where authority sometimes went to the heads of those in charge, this condition was apt to produce more stress on the men than was tolerable. In a situation like that, where stress was already at a maximum, it wasn't hard to imagine how such an individual could be *accidentally* shot by his own men in a fire fight. A good officer or NCO had to know when to be firm, and when to be flexible. If he met those requirements, his men would follow him to the death, which was often the case.

When I got back to my squad, I found that there had been a few changes there too. A new kid, Sherman Olson, whom everyone called “Swede”, had joined the squad. He was a very likable guy from Chicago with blonde hair and blue eyes.

Rick, Whitey, and the others all greeted me warmly and Ron, the squad leader, joined us for the few minutes before we moved out. Ron had some astonishing news to relate while the others all gathered round to attest to what he told me.

“The day you left on the medevac we all carried some part of your equipment until we set up for the night. I happened to have the ammo belt you were wearing and emptied out the pouches before I sent it in. You remember you were carrying the grenade launcher when you were hit?”

I thought back, “That’s right, I was.”

“Well I noticed there was a bullet hole in one of those pouches, so I checked the rounds for the launcher and found that one of the bullets fired at you went through the pouch, through one of the grenade rounds, and stopped between the two layers of the pistol belt!”

“You’re kidding!” I answered in disbelief.

“No, I’m not. In fact, I carried the bullet with me for some time, with the intention of giving it to you when you got back, but unfortunately I lost it somewhere along the line.”

As Ron finished speaking, Doc Clark came up to the group.

“How you doin’ there, partner?” he asked, flashing that handsome grin and shaking my hand.

“I’m fine, Doc.”

I shrugged with my arms out to the sides, “Hey, how else would I be with such skilled medical attention out here in the field?”

We all laughed and Doc took hold of my healed arm, “Let me have a look at what they did for you back there.”

I rolled up my sleeve and the medic carefully inspected where the bullet had both entered and exited.

“Looks like they did a fine job of fixin’ it up.”

He noticed my frown as I rolled my sleeve back down, “I’m afraid they did too good a job, Doc.”

The medic was puzzled, “What do you mean?”

I gave him a sly smile, “I’m back out here, aren’t I?”

Doc gave me a friendly fist to the shoulder and we both laugh. Then he became serious for a moment.

“You know, after you went in that day, we stopped for the night and a thunder storm rolled in on us. It rained buckets all through the night, keeping us soaking wet until the next day. ...I thought about you that night and how lucky it was that you went in when you did. If you’d have been out there with that arm soaking wet all night, I don’t know what kind of shape it would have been in by the time you got it taken care of.”

“Doc,...I have you to thank for that. If it wasn’t for you, I might not be able to use this hand now.”

The medic smiled and patted me on the shoulder, “That’s my job, Guy. That’s what I’m here for.”

Then he confirmed the amazing tale that Ron had related, “You heard about the bullet they found in your pistol belt?”

“Yeah, they just told me, but it seems too incredible to believe.”

“Well, you can believe it, Buddy. They showed me the mangled bullet and the ammo pouch. In fact, it was the talk of the CP for some time after you left.”

The call came for the company to prepare to move out. Ron had to go and make sure that everyone in the squad was ready.

Whitey stood, pulling on the shoulder straps of his pack, “We couldn’t believe it when Ron showed us the grenade round with the bullet hole through it. Everybody in the company was talking about it. Somebody, *up there*, he directed his eyes toward the sky, “must have been looking out for you that day.”

“I guess so!” I said, still amazed by what I’d learned.

While we were making slow progress down the side of the steep, jungle-covered mountain, I couldn't help but ponder what Ron had related. I thought back to that day and remembered something that hadn't occurred to me before.

When the enemy fire had come out of that treeline at me, there'd been three shots fired on automatic. I could distinctly remember hearing the first one whiz by inches in front of my face. The second one went through my elbow, but I couldn't recall hearing the third one go by.

Now that Ron had told me what he found, it was obvious that the third round didn't go past at all, but went into my pistol belt! It was incredible that a grenade round, resting directly against the side of my stomach, had saved my life, or at least prevented me from sustaining a great deal more injury than I did. If that grenade round had gone off, from the impact of the bullet passing through it, I would have been blown in two! And if the grenade round hadn't slowed the bullet down to the point where it stopped between the two layers of the pistol belt, it would have gone into my stomach! As Whitey had said, someone *up there* was watching out for me that day!

Operating in the mountains, and more specifically, in the jungle, presented a whole new set of experiences to my senses. The heat, just as it had been in the lowlands, was almost unbearable. Here in the jungle, however, there was the distinct smell of dense vegetation, something like you'd have from a freshly mowed lawn, only far stronger.

That wasn't hard to understand, since the jungle struck me as an environment that seemed to be growing at a pace which was almost out of control. There didn't appear to be a single spot in the entire landscape where something wasn't growing, or struggling to grow through all the other growing things.

There were times when the men at the front of the column had to cut their way through the growth with machetes and it was so dense that, if we were lucky, we might go thirty or forty feet in an hour!

As hot and sweaty as it was trying to move through that tangle, I found a certain kind of beauty to it all. I'd never seen an environment so full of living things. Not only were there the plants of innumerable variety and brilliant color, but there were more different kinds of insects and animals than anyone could ever imagine in one place. Of course, the insects tended to make it miserable with their biting and buzzing, but then, this was their turf and we humans were the intruders.

Along with the overpowering smell of green growing things, there were the incredible sounds of the jungle. I always thought that the calls I'd heard in the old Tarzan movies I'd seen as a kid were just added into the sound track for affect, but I was wrong. All those exotic bird calls and caw-cawings really were out here, and it did sound like those movies!

I didn't realize it now, because I was new to this setting, but my fascination with the beauty of it all would soon grow old and be replaced by the bone-weariness of having to trudge through such dense growth day after day. This, after all, was the jungle.