
THIRTY SEVEN**Pound Cake and C-4**

It took the better part of the morning to make it down the side of this particular peak, to the bottom of the narrow cleft between it and the next one. Actually, the trip was made far easier than it might otherwise have been by an incredible feat of engineering. When the company had moved through the dense growth for half-an-hour or so, we broke out onto what was literally a flight of stairs cut into the side of the mountain! This stairway was not a natural formation. Individual steps, approximately two feet wide, had been carved into the solid stone by human hands!

Not only were the steps themselves amazing, but, in the areas where the slope was particularly steep, a handrail entirely of bamboo ran along one side of them!

During the month we'd spend in the mountains we would come across these steps almost daily, and never in the same place twice. It was impossible to calculate how many thousands had been cut into the miles of mountains we covered during that time, but it was a certainty we wouldn't see anywhere near all of them!

Often, while the company was either ascending or descending those stairways, we would see a thick copper wire strung in the trees off to one side. This was a communication line used by the North Vietnamese.

Where the line had been attached to a tree, it was supported by a white ceramic insulator, like the ones used on telephone poles back in the States. Some of the places where this wire had been strung

were astonishing. It would parallel the stairs for some distance and then veer out over a deep declivity, to another part of the peak, in order to save on wire. The amount of work and determination that went into the stringing of these lines was nothing less than incredible! Though we men of the company were often close enough to the line to cut it, we were frustrated by direct orders from the rear not to do so. We were never given any reason why, but I figured that somewhere along the line American Intelligence had to be listening in too. Any scraps of information, pertaining to enemy troop strength or movement, traveling over that wire, could be invaluable.

In the narrow cleft, at the base of two peaks, we came out into a barren area that was devoid of any growth close to the ground. The treetops, jutting out from both slopes overhead, formed a thick canopy through which it was even difficult to see the noonday sun, and nothing grew beneath them for lack of direct sunlight. The ground, however, was covered with a thick carpet of golden leaves that had dropped from the trees over many years. This gave the area the look of a brightly colored New England autumn.

Also, along the side of the same trail we'd been following, we came upon a large cache of ammunition that had been left by the enemy for future use. There were about fifteen cases of 7.61 millimeter cartridges stacked neatly, right out in the open. These were the rounds used in the Russian AK-47, the automatic assault rifle that was the mainstay of the North Vietnamese Army, and the same type that had been used to put one of those rounds through my elbow.

At first I was surprised to see those cases of thousands of rounds just sitting there like that, but, when I thought about it, there was little reason to try and hide them. For one thing, the canopy of trees overhead was so thick that it would be virtually impossible to spot them from the air. And for another,

there were so many of these trails throughout the mountains that our having come across this particular stash was purely a stroke of luck. The NVA probably figured that the chances of anyone finding them before they had the opportunity to use them were extremely small,...and they were right.

It was just about lunchtime anyway, so the captain had us stop here to eat. It had been nearly a month-and-a-half since I last ate C-rations and it would take time to get used to them all over again. But when you'd worked up the kind of appetite that came from climbing around in these mountains, even C-rations weren't so bad.

I slipped my aluminum pack frame off and rested it on the ground, flexing my shoulders several times to ease the ache where the straps had dug in—something else to get re-used to. Then I removed a green can of beef and potatoes from the bottom of my pack bag.

C-rations came twelve meals to a case and each individual meal was packed in a thin cardboard box. Though there were twelve different meals in a case, each case had the same twelve meals as all the other cases. That didn't make for a great deal of variety, especially when several of the meals, for instance, ham and lima beans, were considered inedible by most everyone. Those two ingredients, eaten separately at a normal dinner, wouldn't be all that bad, but if you can imagine them mashed together in a tin can, they were even hard to look at, very similar to what dog food looks like in a can.

Actually, I didn't mind the beef and potatoes, which consisted of large chunks of beef, like stew meat, and diced potatoes in a thin gravy. The only catch with it, and the reason why a lot of the guys didn't like this particular meal either, was that it had to be heated in order to look halfway edible. When it was first opened there was a layer of white, lard-like fat floating on the top that didn't look anything like appetizing. This fat had been a liquid part of the gravy when the meal was originally prepared.

What I did was simply remove it from the can before I heated the contents and ended up with what I thought was a pretty good meal.

Another meal that I didn't mind, most of the time, was the spaghetti and ground beef. It was all right except that occasionally the meat was more gristle than beef.

Beside the main course, most meals contained a can of pears, peaches, or apricots, in their own juices, and a small tin of either peanut butter or jelly to be spread on saltines that came in little cellophane packets, like the ones you get in a diner to put in soup.

There was also a packet of cocoa mix, and a sundry pack containing smaller packets of instant coffee, powdered non-dairy creamer, sugar, a small roll of toilet tissue, a pack of four cigarettes, two pieces of chewing gum, and a plastic spoon for eating the meal. An important item, that came in every other meal, was a small aluminum can opener which we referred to by its military designation, a P-38.

Sometimes the meal would also contain what I can only describe as the "infamous" chocolate tropical bar. This was a special kind of chocolate that had been formulated so it wouldn't melt in the tropical heat. Unfortunately, because it was made that way, it was dry and powdery, with a taste that hardly resembled chocolate. I don't think those things would have melted if they were taken out into space and fired directly into the sun! And we weren't the only ones who felt that way about them either. I had actually seen kids throw them back at guys who'd tossed them out of the backs of trucks on the road. Now, you know that if kids in a poor, underdeveloped country like this one didn't like a chocolate candy bar, it had to be pretty awful.

Basically the meals contained just about everything a man needed for the day. Those who didn't smoke would give their cigarette packs to those who did, so it worked out pretty well.

The two things that did cause real problems with the C-rations, however, were the can of pears and a can of golden pound cake, each of which came in only one meal per case. Since these were about the best tasting items, and considered a treat, there was always a big scramble to see who could grab them first. There had been times, especially back in the rear, when I'd seen someone open up a case of C-rations, take out the pound cake and pears, and throw away the entire remaining case of twelve meals!

As I removed a small block of C-4 explosive from my pack, I thought, too, about the interesting ways the guys had come up with to heat their meals. Most, including myself, would break off a piece of C-4 about the size of a marble and light it with a match on the ground. C-4 had the same exact consistency, texture, and white coloring as the window putty, or glazing compound, used to secure panes of glass. This was also the high explosive used in claymore mines and hand grenades. Its characteristics were such that a small amount would explode with a vengeance if ignited under pressure, as inside the shell of a grenade, but would burn with an extremely hot, yellow flame if ignited in the open air.

There was also another way of heating meals, much quicker than with the C-4 alone, and I'd often watched, in fascination, when several guys got together to do it. However, I must say that I preferred not to use it myself.

One of them would simply unscrew the detonator cap from the top of a hand grenade and light a match to the open end! Since the C-4 inside wasn't entirely enclosed, with the top removed, the grenade wouldn't explode, but it would shoot a flame about a foot out of the top, like an intense blow torch! That flame could heat several cans of food, one after the other, in a matter of seconds!

I often wondered who the first guy might have been who'd had the guts to try that one. There was a very thin line between the C-4 in that opened grenade being exposed enough to burn and not exposed enough to explode. Whomever he was, he'd taken the awfully risky chance of being blown to pieces when he put the match to it.

After lunch, some of the guys moved the cases of captured ammo to a clearing further down the declivity where a Huey could be brought in to pick them up. Once the bird was loaded and on its way, the company began the long, tedious climb up the side of the next peak.

There were times when I was awed by the sheer beauty of the vistas that presented themselves from the heights of these peaks. Often the thick foliage would open up and I could see for miles along the deep, narrow gorges that ran between the massifs. At other times I could look down several thousand feet to where we had been earlier in the day, and marvel at the dense green canopy under which we'd walked.

One thought that often crossed my mind was what it would be like to be out here all alone, with no connection to the outside world. There were many occasions when the company was completely lost and the captain didn't have the foggiest notion of which peak we were on! He'd sometimes have the artillery officer call for a marking round, to be fired at the top of a peak indicated on his map, from one of the LZs down in the lowlands. That way he could determine, from where the round exploded, where we were in relation to it. The funny part was that the people on the guns in the rear didn't have any better maps than we in the field did, so that the location where the round went off could be highly suspect too!

Whenever I got a chance to see the grid maps that were issued to officers for the particular area we were in, it wasn't hard to understand how such a condition could exist. Those maps often had no reference points on them, other than elevation lines on a background of pure green, and I'd heard that even the elevation lines were mostly guesswork on the part of the map makers.

The reason for that was because much of the territory we were negotiating on foot was virtually unexplored by man. Of course, the North Vietnamese had their particular trails through these mountains, which included those incredible stairways, but there were immense tracts of dense jungle where it was obvious that not even they had been.

Oddly enough, I felt a kind of excitement at passing through areas where no human had ever gone before. I believe it was akin to the same feeling I would have had if I were to touch the stones that made up the pyramids in Egypt. These places were exactly as they had been for thousands upon thousands of years, quite possibly even before Homo Sapiens himself made an appearance on this planet!

Finally, late in the afternoon, we reached the peak we were supposed to be heading for and found a situation that we'd encountered before out here. There were huge trees with trunks five or six feet in diameter all over the summit. The men of the company carried machetes, and sometimes an occasional ax for clearing, but these were useless against such formidable giants.

If we were to have a hot meal flown in with our supplies, there had to be a clearing large enough for a Huey to come down in. This was when the Army engineers were called out.

I must confess that I, and I know the others of the company as well, enjoyed it whenever they arrived, for several reasons.

First of all, when there wasn't anywhere for a Huey to land, the engineers had to rappel from above the treetops in order to get to the ground. This almost always made for a funny exhibition when they came down through the thick canopy. With four or five of them sliding down on ropes, there were always one or two who would end up hanging upside down in the branches. It was great entertainment to see just how a man would right himself and get the rope untangled from the tree.

Fortunately, the engineers usually had a good sense of humor and didn't take the laughter of the men on the ground to heart.

Secondly, if it wasn't for the fact that they cleared a landing site, we would spend many a day without a much appreciated hot meal.

And lastly, by the time we'd climbed down the side of one mountain and up the side of the next, we had very little energy left to do much clearing. For that reason we appreciated the engineer's work all the more.

I enjoyed watching them do their job too. First they collected the quarter sticks of TNT that we carried, one by each man in the company. Having the men in the field carry the explosives with them, there was no need to have a lot of excess, dangerous material flown out on the Huey each time it was needed.

Then they would tie the required number of sticks, sometimes as many as fifteen or twenty, to the base of a tree with what looked like white, plastic clothesline, but was, in reality, an instantaneous fuse called Detcord. Detcord didn't burn slowly like the old type fuse used with dynamite. Instead, as soon as a flame was touched to the end of it, no matter how long it was, the entire length ignited and burned white hot! That heat, in itself, was enough to burn partially through a tree.

Since the TNT was tied around the base of the tree with the detcord, it exploded as soon as the cord was ignited. Sometimes, with as many as twenty sticks, the explosion was so tremendous that it rocked the entire top of the mountain like an earthquake. For that reason, when the engineers yelled, "Fire in the hole!", a warning that the explosives were about to be set off, we men of the company moved part-way down the opposite side of the peak. That way we had its mass between us and the blast.

We were usually stunned by the magnitude of those explosions.

Even though we had the peak for protection, the air would literally vibrate from the shockwave and I could feel that vibration pound right through my body. It wasn't a pleasant experience. Not only that, but large pieces of shattered tree trunk would come raining down where we'd taken cover and occasionally cause injuries to some of the men.