
FORTY**A Night Charlie Alpha**

Unfortunately the main priority of war, or at least of this particular one, was high enemy body counts and, after a month of patrolling in the mountains, C-company had had no major contact with the enemy. Rear command decided it was time to change that by moving us down to the farmlands where there was confirmation of enemy activity.

Early one afternoon we received word that a sortie of Hueys would be coming out to pick us up. We all felt a great sense of relief at the thought of not having to climb another mountain for awhile. Not only was the routine of climbing down one peak and up the next each day becoming extremely tedious, but, during this period I'd taken on the job of the first platoon lieutenant's radioman. The previous radioman, Benjamin Harrison, whom the men had nicknamed "Water Buffalo", because of his large girth and strength, had moved up into the captain's CP.

I knew that being a radioman was one of the two most dangerous jobs in the company, for a couple of very good reasons.

First of all, communications was one of the first things the enemy tried to knock out in any ambush. Naturally, that made the radioman a prime target.

Secondly, it wasn't too difficult to spot a radioman with the antenna sticking up from the top of the radio, strapped to his rucksack frame.

Besides the extra risk, there was also the additional twenty eight pounds of the radio itself that I'd have to get used to carrying on my back, but I liked the idea of being able to hear what was going on at all times. That was the main reason why some men were willing to put up with the added risk.

The other dangerous job, other than that of a supposed non-combatant, like a medic, was that of the M-60 machine-gunner. In any firefight with us, the enemy was going to try and knock out our most effective weapons first. At the top of that list was the M-60. For a fairly light weapon, it put out a tremendous amount of deadly firepower.

The sortie picked us up and flew us to the open fields just outside the perimeter wire of LZ Jane where we got word that we would spend the rest of the day preparing for a night chopper assault on a local village. This would be the first time most of us had participated in a night air assault and, when it was over, I'd be truly grateful it was the only one I'd be involved in during my tour.

With virtually no cover here, outside of Jane, for the enemy to sneak up on the company, we could relax and enjoy the rest of the day drinking beer and having a hot meal that was brought out to us. It made us feel good to see how the company supply people bent over backwards to do whatever they could for us guys in the field. Very seldom did they actually come into contact with the company they were supplying, but when they did, they really made a bash out of it.

Whenever we made contact with the enemy, the people in the rear would huddle around their radios listening to the barrage of transmissions between the platoons and the captain's CP. It was a strange situation because they could hear the shooting and heat of the battle in the background each time someone came on the air. They also waited anxiously for the line reports that might be sent back during or after an engagement.

Line reports were the casualties sustained in a battle. There were three codes for reporting them over the radio. A “line three” meant that a man was missing in action, a “line two” that someone had been wounded, and a “line one” that someone had been killed. If, for instance, the word came back that we’d had two line twos and a line one, they knew it meant that two men had been wounded and one killed.

With the line reports, the people in the rear felt the same pain and sorrow as we men in the field. After all, that was their team out there.

After the sun went down, I sat on the ground with the other guys of my squad. We rested our backs against our packs with our legs stretched out in front of us, like sitting in lounge chairs, and waited for the birds to come in. It wasn’t quite as dark here because the airbase and town of Quang Tri were only a few miles away. Also, with so many small villages and farms down here in the lowlands, there was much more activity than there’d been in the uninhabited mountains. There was seldom a time when we didn’t see at least one or two flares drifting down in the black sky, way out in the distance.

It wasn’t long before the sound of Huey engines approached from the direction of the base at Quang Tri. It was difficult to make them out until they actually came down near the company. Because they wanted to maintain as much of the element of surprise as possible, they were flying without their usual night running lights.

I and my group boarded one and it sat there for a few moments while the other men got to their particular birds. Then the whole sortie lifted off into the night sky as one.

Flying at night was another new experience for most everyone in the company. It felt strange to be sitting on the edge of the floor and looking down into the inky blackness below. Since we were flying without running lights, it was difficult to make out the other choppers in the formation.

The dashboard in front of the pilots and the panels of switches over their heads were lit by deep red lights that cast an eerie glow around the interior of the aircraft. The red lights, the roar of the engine, the wind whipping through with tremendous force, gave me the feeling I was riding in the Devil's chariot! It was an exhilarating experience.

That exhilaration came to an end, all too soon, when the Hueys dropped swiftly down to a rice paddy at the back of a small village. As our bird hovered about eight feet off the ground, I and Lange, who was sitting on my right in the open doorway, looked down. The pilot had switched on a powerful floodlight which illuminated the ground below us.

The problem was that there wasn't any ground at all,...but water! We could see circular patterns of ripples, caused by the downdraft of the Huey's rotors, fanning out into the darkness beyond the range of the light. The rice paddy was flooded!

Lange's and my gaze came up slowly to stare at one another. Neither of us said anything, because it would have been difficult over the roar of the engine anyway, but it was evident we were both thinking the same thing.

“They've got to be kidding!”

I turned my head and looked over at the door gunner who was sitting just to my left. He held his arm straight out in front of him and rocked it up and down with a thumbs down sign. That meant that this was as low as the bird was going and that we would have to jump!

I then turned back to Lange who had a stunned expression on his face. We almost always expected that an LZ might be “hot” when we went in, but no one had mentioned that, on top of taking enemy fire, we’d have to jump some eight feet into water,...and in the dark!

Finally, the door gunner becoming more insistent with his thumbs down gesture, Lange looked at me with a resigned shrug of his shoulders, stepped out onto the landing skid, and leapt away. He dropped straight down, landing in the water with a tremendous splash. Immediately he scrambled away under the bird and out of my view.

Once again I looked over at the door gunner who gave the same sign, indicating that it was my turn to go. Now I felt even more worried than I did before Lange went out. I’d seen how awkwardly he hit the water, due to the top-heaviness of his pack, and realized immediately that I was even more top heavy with the extra weight of the radio! I also knew that there was no getting around it, so I might as well do it and get it over with.

I stepped out onto the landing skid, the wind from the rotors and the roar of the engine blasting me, took a deep breath, and jumped.

As I expected I would, I landed on my back with the water covering most of my body up to my chest. The water was only about two feet deep, but the downdraft from the Huey’s blades kept me pinned to the spot where I’d landed. I struggled to turn over on my stomach, but couldn’t overcome the force of the down-rushing air and the weight of my pack.

Before I’d jumped out of the bird, there was too much noise from its engine to hear it, but there was a heavy firefight going on between the company and the village.

Now I could hear bullets buzzing past, just inches over my head, and the floodlight, beaming down from the Huey, made me stand out like an actor on a darkened stage. I began cursing out loud at the fact that, instead of moving away so that I could get off my back and scramble out of the open, for some reason, the Huey seemed to be just hanging over me. In fact, at one point, it actually dropped down to where I could reach up and touch the landing skid! Having that much mass hanging so precariously over me was a bit unsettling, to say the least!

At last the bird rose up, turned off the floodlight, and moved away into the darkness. With the deafening roar of its engine fading away in the distance, the sound of gunfire became much more pronounced. I rolled over and crawled, on my stomach, about twenty feet through the black water until I came to a dirt paddy berm where the others were lying. They were firing their weapons furiously into the village and getting almost as much fire in return.

No sooner had I moved up next to the others than I felt a sharp, stinging pain in both my hands. I rolled over, resting the back of my head against the muddy berm and pulled my hands out of the water.

On the thin, fleshy tissue between the bases of my fingers were several three-inch long water leaches! I'd had leaches on me before, up in the mountains, but they never caused any real pain. They were wood leaches, however, which were much smaller than this water variety. These were longer and flatter, giving them the ability to swim through the water, as they rippled their bodies, like an eel.

Immediately I pulled the small plastic bottle of insect repellent, that we referred to as "bug juice", from the elastic band around the outside of my helmet. Leaches had such a strong suction that they were impossible to pull off by hand. The alcohol in the bug juice made them shrivel up and drop off.

With that problem taken care of, I turned back over and began firing into the village along with the rest. Even though I was still lying in the water, my pants were bloused inside my boots so that there was little chance of any more leaches reaching my skin.

Shortly, the fire coming out of the village slackened and then quit altogether. A second sortie of Hueys had dropped the remainder of the company off on the other side of the village, effectively surrounding it. This being the case, the Viet Cong inside were probably trying to figure out their best plan of action before the sun came up tomorrow. They knew that once that happened, we Americans would be in there looking for them.

Now began one of the most miserable nights I'd gone through since arriving in-country. There was nothing for us to do but lie there all night with the cold water of the rice paddy covering most of our bodies. The men up and down the berm set up the usual watch schedule so that, while one man was on watch, the others could try and get some sleep.

I couldn't remember when I'd felt this uncomfortable last. The water came up to just under my armpits and I shivered continuously until just around midnight when I fell mercifully asleep. If anyone had told me, previous to this, that I would be able to sleep while lying on my back in cold, muddy water all night, I would have thought they were crazy!

Nothing more occurred during the night, and the next morning the men on the other side of the village swept through to our side. In the process they captured one Vietnamese boy who looked to be in his mid teens, but that was all. It was clear, from the amount of return fire last night, that there had to have been more than one in there, but with all the tunnels under these villages it wasn't surprising the rest had escaped.

It was impossible to tell whether the captured one had been left behind to fire an occasional shot out in order to cover the escape of the others, or that he remained of his own accord because he had family in the village whom he feared we might harm.

Within minutes of the capture a Huey arrived and dropped off two South Vietnamese Army officers and an American lieutenant to interrogate the prisoner. This was when I began to wonder just who the real enemy was here.

The Vietnamese officers began asking the prisoner questions and, when he gave an answer they didn't like, gave him a severe crack across the knuckles with a bamboo shoot about eighteen inches long that they'd brought with them. They did this several times until the boy's knuckles were a bloody mess.

I could feel my blood begin to boil and it was plain, from the expressions on the faces of the other guys standing around, that they weren't too happy about it either. Our captain, also noticing, stepped into the circle that had formed around the group of interrogators and spoke in a low, even tone.

"All right, that's enough."

The American lieutenant, all spit-shined and neatly pressed, who'd come out with them, stepped forward and replied with a smug attitude, "Captain, I would advise you not to interfere."

The captain looked the lieutenant straight in the eye, "In that case, Lieutenant, I won't be held responsible for the actions of my men should this treatment of *our* prisoner continue."

The lieutenant looked around at the circle of men watching the scene. If looks could kill, he and the two interrogators would have already been dead. One of our men raised his M-16 slowly so that it was on a diagonal across his body. The look in his eyes left little doubt about his intentions.

After a long pause, the lieutenant wisely backed down. He realized that, out here, we were the law and we meant business.

“All right”, he said with anger in his voice, “We’ll take the prisoner back to the rear with us.”

Again the Huey, that had been circling, returned and picked up the interrogation group. I couldn’t say that I was sorry to see them go, but it made me wonder just what that poor devil would go through when they got him back in their own area. If the form of torture I’d just witnessed—and there was no doubt in my mind that it was torture—was the norm, then what had happened to the humanitarian agreements I’d always heard about, things like the Geneva Accords, which the United States government claimed to adhere to? I felt that, even if the North Vietnamese government refused to abide by them, that didn’t mean our own government should lower itself to doing the same. The thought of being a part of such barbarism went against everything I believed in. And I was sure, from the way the other guys of the company had reacted, that they felt the same way too.