
FORTY THREE**The Gypsies**

The company walked along the dusty path for another half-hour when we came to the outskirts of a fairly large abandoned village. Though the mud huts covered an extensive area, the thatched roofs had long since rotted away. Their dried out, crumbling walls, standing bleached in the scorching sun, reminded me of what archaeological digs in ancient cities looked like.

In a ditch, near the edge of the village, we discovered a tunnel opening that went off in a direction under the abandoned dwellings. The opening was approximately three feet in diameter which meant that only the smallest men in the company would be able to negotiate it if it was going to be searched. That was perfectly fine with me since there was no way in the world I wanted to crawl into that dark, root infested opening anyway.

The captain called for volunteers and one of the shortest men in the company, a machine-gunner from the third platoon, came forward. There was a certain pride among these men because they were the only ones who could fit into most of the tunnels. To them that meant they could do something no one else could. They liked the designation “tunnel rat”, which was what they were called when they performed this duty.

This particular man removed his pack, pistol belt, and any other extraneous gear he was carrying. The only equipment he'd take in was a forty-five caliber pistol and a flashlight.

As he disappeared into the darkness of that opening, on his hands and knees, I thought about the chance he stood against whatever might be in there. If there were VC with AK-47's, the odds were pretty slim of his seeing them before they spotted him. That was especially true with his holding a flashlight, which made a perfect target.

If he ran into some type of mine or booby trap, the chances of surviving an explosion in such a confined space were virtually nil. And if he should survive the explosion, but the tunnel collapsed on top of, or behind him, it would be some time before the rest of us could get to him.

Not only was there the human element to be considered, but there was no telling what animals might have taken up residence in there. He might come face to face with anything from a leopard to a scorpion, including the whole gamut of snakes, rats, spiders, centipedes, etc.

About twenty minutes later he emerged from the opening and reported that it didn't appear as if anyone had been in there for quite some time. Not only that, but this branch of the tunnel split off at various points, indicating that the whole network was pretty extensive. There were quite probably miles of them running under and around the village.

Before leaving the area, groups of men fanned out and located as many entrances as they could. When they found one, they tossed a smoke grenade inside which would make it pretty difficult for anyone who might be in there to breathe.

All in all this entire sector turned out to be fairly quiet. Once again it appeared that the 1st Cav's reputation had preceded us and that the enemy had either moved on or gone underground to avoid contact.

Unfortunately there would come times when their reaction to our reputation would be just the opposite and they'd hit us often with everything they had. Of course, it wouldn't cause us to go away, but it would mean heavy casualties on both sides.

Since the area remained so quiet, it wasn't long before word came from the rear that the battalion was being moved to a different location once again. Never let it be said that rear command rested on their laurels where maintaining high body counts were concerned. If an area proved to be too quiet for very long, it was time to move on to where the action was. Because of this constant shifting all over the country, we acquired two things. One was the unofficial moniker "The Gypsies", and the other was the highest kill ratio of any division over here. It must be remembered that, while our particular unit had been fairly lucky for awhile, other units of the Cav were, as it was said, "hitting the shit" pretty regularly.

The battalion was flown by C-130 to another large base two hundred and twenty five miles to the southwest of Pleiku and approximately twenty five miles northwest of Saigon. This one was called Cu Chi and lay on an immense plain as flat as a table. The only exception was a single peak known to the Vietnamese as "Black Virgin Mountain" or "Sacred Mountain".

When I first saw Sacred Mountain I could easily understand why it impressed these people as being something special. I figured it must have been a single volcanic cone since there wasn't another mountain, or even a high hill, within sight anywhere to the horizon. The dramatic affect of its stark height against the flatness all around, coupled with the fact that it appeared to be a perfectly shaped cone, gave it an aura of having been created by some giant hand rather than by the forces of nature.

From Cu Chi the second battalion, our unit, was moved again, by Huey, to a small abandoned airstrip some ten miles from the main base.

The airstrip was part of a huge villa that was built by some rich Frenchman back when they were still involved in the war. Looking off in the distance I could see the remnants of a beautiful white colonial mansion set a good ways back from the field. It looked completely out of place in this land of mud huts and thatched roofs.

All the companies of the battalion set up camp, for the night, on both side of the runway, which was no wider than a modern four lane highway. Since this would be our basecamp while operating in this area, the forward supply personnel, who had moved with us, began setting up the large mess tents where hot meals would be prepared.

During a patrol of the area with my platoon, I got a chance to see the interior of the old mansion. On the outside it looked like a haunted house from out of an Edgar Allan Poe story, with thick vines climbing the walls all the way to the gabled roof. The patrol had no small difficulty approaching the house through acres of rose bushes that, like some unchecked monster, had grown wildly out of control since the time when an army of gardeners had kept them pruned and beautiful.

The inside was just as impressive with a huge staircase and Victorian scrollwork covering the cracked plaster walls.

Even in its ruined condition it was apparent that, at one time, it must have been a fabulous estate. It was clear that whomever owned it tried to recreate the romance and pomp of his French homeland in the steamy jungles of Southeast Asia.

Though the wine cellar no longer housed the hundreds of bottles of spirits that it once must have, its immense size gave a hint of the extravagant indulgences of a bygone day.

Strangely enough, I felt a touch of home in this old abandoned house. Even though it was more on a level with a museum than any house I'd ever lived in, after having spent so much time sleeping under a poncho liner outdoors, and seeing the retched conditions under which the majority of the people in this country lived, a house with a shingled roof, more than one floor, and regular rooms was light years closer to my sorely missed homelife.

It wasn't difficult to deduce that this expensive estate probably belonged to one of the wealthy owners of the vast rubber plantations which had been a major crop in this country and were still being worked today. The small air field allowed them to live away from the actual growing fields, since there were none nearby, yet gave them access to the major population centers whenever the need arose.

Even with the family and domestics long gone, the romance of the place lingered on.

The fact that the company hadn't really had any major contact with the enemy for quite some time, coupled with the excursion through the French estate, did little to forewarn any of us that we had moved into an area of heavy enemy activity. Little did I realize that just ahead lay some of the most harrowing days I would spend in my entire life!

It began when we boarded the Hueys for a chopper assault into an area of reportedly heavy enemy movement. The birds dropped us off in a field of waist-high, golden-colored elephant grass. Unfortunately, as one of the last Hueys was lifting off, its engine exhaust set the sun-parched grass afire. At first we tried to extinguish the flames, but it was hopeless. Within minutes the inferno was racing through the field with forty foot high flames! In fact, it became all we could do to run for the safety of the green surrounding jungle, where it would be difficult for the fire to burn. Luckily everyone made it with no injuries and the fire simply leveled the entire field to the ground before it died out.

We moved through the heavy jungle growth for several hours, making little headway, until about mid-morning when we arrived at the top of a large hill. Here the captain had us stop for a ten minute break before continuing on.

The part of the hill where the column was stopped was covered with very sparse grass and occasional trees with trunks no bigger than three inches in diameter. To our left, as we were walking, the hill sloped down into a thickly overgrown depression. To the right, and about thirty yards away, a dense treeline ran parallel to our line of travel.

I pulled off my pack, sat down on the ground, and rested my back against it, as did the men to the front and back of me. The man behind me was a Japanese-American kid from Seattle with the last name of Wada whom I had become good friends with. In front was Swede, the kid from Chicago.

It was known that the North Vietnamese were just as curious about us Americans as we were about them. At that very moment several squads of NVA Regulars were hidden up in the trees of the treeline just thirty yards from where we sat on the ground. I, Wada, Swede, and a good number of other men were sitting out in the open in direct line of the enemy's sights!....Yet they don't open fire immediately.

While we smoked our cigarettes, ate a quick snack, or just chewed the fat, the NVA sat there and watched,...their weapons at the ready.

The sun was just about at it's peak with the hottest part of the day rapidly approaching. I thought about the effort it would require to get up and put my pack back on once the break was over. It was apparent from the way the others near me were sitting, with their heads slumped forward and eyes

closed, that they all felt the same way. It was so tranquil with the birds singing down in the dense growth, at the base of the hill, that it was very easy to doze off for a few minutes.

Then the call came.

“Saddle up!”

“Saddle up” was the term used for putting our packs on and getting ready to move out. It was a fitting one for the 1st Cavalry, since it was a throwback from the days when they actually rode horses in the Old West. This was, after all, that same cavalry albeit much more modern.

No sooner did we stand up than all hell broke loose. A firefight is like nothing anyone could ever imagine unless they've actually gone through one. The first thing that happens is that the sleepy quiet is shattered by an instantaneous burst of hundreds of bullets which tear splinters out of the trees and throw dirt up from the ground all around. Twenty or thirty enemy soldiers firing their AK-47's all at the same time, on automatic, put out what can only be described as a “wall” of bullets in a matter of seconds.

As soon as the outburst began, we dove for the ground. One thing we always noticed was the distinct difference in sound that guns made when they were pointed in your direction. It was easy to distinguish incoming fire from outgoing by the difference in sound. Instead of the deeper booms that firearms in the movies make, guns in real life, fired at you, give a sharp crack, like two pieces of hardwood being slapped flat against one another.

The problem now was that we'd dived flat on the ground, for lack of any available cover, and there was no cover within easy reaching distance.

I was lying face down, as were the men on either side of me, with my head in the direction of the enemy fire, so that I presented the smallest possible target to them. This was the first time I'd

experienced being caught so flat out in the open and it was akin to having your head in a shark's mouth just before he closed it.

Wada lay on my right and Swede to my left, with no more than three feet between each of us.

After the initial huge outburst of fire died away, there were sporadic bursts that came at intervals of seconds apart. It seemed incredible that none of us had been hit yet, with our being so totally exposed. Every few seconds a burst ripped up the ground, starting from in front of our heads and passing down the length of our bodies, in the spaces between us.

At that point the only cover we had were the steel pots on our heads. I'd never had such a feeling of trying to jam so much of my body into such a tiny space. Each time a burst of bullets kicked the dirt up, throwing it into our faces, we all cursed in unison, more to ourselves than to anyone, and tried to scrunch just a little further into our helmets.

Crack-crack-crack-crack-crack!

"Shit!....We gotta get outta here!" I exclaimed, spitting out the dirt that was thrown in my face and mouth by the rounds burying themselves inches from my head.

Crack-crack-crack-crack-crack!

"Dammit!....We gotta move!" Wada yelled.

During the short interval of the bursts, our eyes were shut so tight that there was a powerful expression of what appeared pain on our faces. Between the bursts we opened them and stared into each others sweating faces.

At the same time we were pulling on the edges of our steel pots, in an uncontrollable effort to get deeper inside them. We were so exposed that there was no way we could even raise up enough to return the fire.

Between bursts, when we stared into each others eyes, we could tell what the other was thinking without speaking. It was a mutual kind of communication that only someone in a situation like that could understand.

After what seemed an eternity of lying there and taking what came, the firing died down somewhat. That was due, in good measure, to the fact that the other men of the company, who hadn't been caught so out in the open, had begun returning the fire with a vengeance.

Immediately I, Wada, and Swede, as well as the other men on both sides of us, who had also been pinned down, slid back to the curve of the hill and down the side, out of the line of fire.

Now that the shock of the ambush had worn off, the company easily turned the tide of battle in our favor. This was the courage of these men who didn't pull back to lick their wounds, but began effectively picking off enemy soldiers who were perched in the trees. At the same time, any wounded were being given immediate attention by the medics, and air support was being called in.

Within a matter of fifteen minutes a Huey Cobra was circling overhead and being given the coordinates for that treeline. The most beautiful sound in the world was when the air was suddenly filled with that huge chain saw sound of its mini-gun pouring rounds into the enemy treeline. Then, after it had completed several passes with the mini-gun, it made several more, firing as many as ten rockets in a single pass.

While the Cobra was doing its job, I had time to think about what had just occurred. It was incredible that I and the others had lain out there for so long, with as many as a dozen full bursts of automatic weapons fire passing up and down the length of our bodies, and not one of those bullets hitting us! Since we were lying with so little space between us, it seemed that it would have been easier to hit us than to have missed so cleanly! Again, fate and the Good Lord must have been watching over us.

I also noticed now that my hands were shaking, as were Wada's and Swede's. Another strange affect of battle is that a man usually didn't feel the strain until after the fact. That was because there was no time to stop and think about what was happening until it passed. As usual, the thinking about it proved to be the worst part.