
FORTY SIX**California Dreaming**

When daylight finally arrived, we ate a quick breakfast of cold C-rations. In one sense it was a relief that we'd gone through the night without incident. Yet, in another, we weren't looking forward to attacking the top of the hill again.

I gazed up at the deep blue sky, its billowy white clouds drifting slowly by. How could such a God-awful situation exist on such a pleasant day. The fact that we'd been sent here for the purpose of fighting a war, and were trained to do just that, didn't mean we had to like it. There were times when I wondered why, rather than carrying a rifle and barely tolerating the same filthy clothes a month or more at a time, we weren't sitting in lounge chairs under this bright golden sun, wearing colorful tourist shirts and enjoying the grandeur of it all. Isn't that what tropical paradises are supposed to be for?

Nobody should die on a beautiful day like this.

Other than that one incident on the other side of the hill during the night, there hadn't been a sound from the top.

Shortly the second platoon was ordered to prepare a squad for going up the hill. There was an absolute somberness among those men when they strapped on their belts of magazines and started up toward the top.

That somberness permeated the entire perimeter because we all knew that, if they ran into the same hellish fire we'd gotten every time we went up there, another group would be picked to go next.

They made their way up past the first line of trees and into that deadly clearing. This time, however, the captain wanted a running commentary of what was happening, so it was the first time that a radio was taken along.

It was eerie how everyone in the company could hear the radioman whispering into his handset as he walked. It wasn't that the radios around the perimeter had their volume controls turned up very high, because they didn't. In fact, whenever we were in contact with the enemy, all the radiomen disconnected their external speakers, so that the only volume came through the telephone type handsets. But it was so quiet that everyone around the perimeter could hear from one of the radios near their sector.

Whenever the radioman who'd gone up the hill let go of the push-to-talk button on his handset, we could hear the distinctive static hiss that followed each transmission for a second.

"We're in the center of the clearing now and so far there's no sign of movement." (hissst).....

After a few tense seconds, he came on again.

"Now we're going to move toward the treeline." (hissst).....

A seeming eternity, during which we expected to hear the numbing blast of hundreds of rounds.

"The point man is moving into the treeline." (hissst).....

We could each hear our own heartbeats pounding in our ears when they entered that treeline from which we'd been repulsed so many times.

"Everything is still quiet. We didn't get this far yesterday." (hissst).....

"The point man is through the trees and we're following him in." (hissst).....

The drama was so thick that you could cut it with a knife.

“We’re still moving in and so far there’s been no resistance.”(hissst).....

Almost immediately I felt the wonderful sense of relief that spread rapidly around the perimeter. We realized that if the enemy was still up there, they’d have opened fire long before the point where the second platoon had now reached.

As we suspected, the movement on the far side of the hill last night was the NVA probing for a clear way out. They must have tried a feeler to see if the back way was open. When they found it wasn’t, they went for one of the sides. They too knew that a unit the size of an American company was too small to cover the entire top of a hill as large as this one.

When the third platoon was sent up the hill to assist the second, the rest of the company spread around the lower part of the perimeter to fill in the gap they’d left. We could still hear the transmissions being sent back to the Captain’s CP and they sounded pretty incredible. Our people were moving through a huge complex of massive bunkers that covered the whole top of the hill. Those bunkers contained living quarters, storage facilities and a good-sized armory for holding weapons. They said that the roofs were constructed of tree trunks at least three feet in diameter! No wonder they could withstand the air strikes! They also reported finding more than sixty bodies of NVA soldiers.

Though the NVA had stood their ground for a full day, it cost them dearly. Where we had fifteen men killed, they’d lost over sixty. That’s a kill ratio of 4 to 1. And that didn’t count the dead and wounded they probably carried off with them. They were known to do that, so that we couldn’t get an accurate body count.

It was pretty clear, from the size of the place, and the fact that they were willing to take such a pounding trying to hold it, that it was an important site. Judging from its well hidden location, out here in

the swamps, and the amount of time and effort that had gone into its construction, it was definitely a main base. It had to be a real bummer when they discovered an American infantry company totally unaware, but relentlessly, moving in their direction. That must have been when they decided to try and divert us away from it with their first small ambush.

Unfortunately for them, and the men of our company who'd been medevaced out, it hadn't worked.

By early afternoon a thorough search of the complex was completed. The third and fourth platoons brought down a cache of weapons that had been left behind. It included Russian B-40 rockets, RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenades), and even some rounds for an American M-79 grenade launcher. These were all placed in a hole in the ground and buried.

Also found in one of the bunkers up there were the latest issues of Playboy and Mad Magazines! It wasn't such an easy task for the men of our own company to get a hold of those!

Going through the wallets of the dead soldiers for any possible information, it was found that a surprising number had the words to the American hit tune California Dreaming, by The Mommas and The Papas, written down on folded pieces of paper. It turned out to be their favorite song!

A call came out from the rear that our Hueys were on their way to pick us up immediately. Earlier in the morning rear command had requested a B-52 airstrike on this location for one o'clock in the afternoon. Because of its obvious importance they wanted to be certain that the enemy couldn't return to this base and use it again.

One o'clock was rapidly approaching, so we quickly packed our gear and moved the short distance down the hill to the edge of the swamp. There the Hueys came in one at a time and hovered just above the ground so that each group could climb in.

It was a tricky business having to get aboard with the birds not stable on the ground, but there wasn't enough room down there for a landing, nor was there the time to cut an opening on the side of the hill.

I felt a tremendous sense of relief, almost to the point of exuberance, at leaving that little spot of land where we'd spent so many grueling hours in a death grip with the enemy. I got a seat at my favorite location, sitting on the edge of the floor with my legs hanging out, so that I had a commanding view over the whole countryside. The cool wind rushing through the Huey was such a welcomed relief after the stifling heat of the swamp.

Off in the distance, about forty miles or so, I could see the dark form of Sacred Mountain dominating the landscape as usual and up ahead, between the pilots, the other Hueys of the sortie rising and falling on the air currents.

When I looked back toward the place we'd just left, I witnessed a truly incredible sight. The hill we'd been on had blended into the green of the terrain because of our increasing distance from it, but the whole general area suddenly turned into a white mushroom cloud when the B-52's dumped their load right on time. Judging by the size of the explosions, and the amount of area that the strike covered, there wouldn't even be a hill left when they were through.