
FORTY NINE**NVA Against The Moon**

When the sortie of Hueys arrived, they came in one at a time and took us off the top of the mountain. From there, we flew about twenty miles in a northeasterly direction toward Phu Bai until we left the Annamese Cordillera, the mountain range of which the A Shau Valley was a part, and came down in the low, rolling hills between them and the farmlands near the coast.

Once again the change was so abrupt that you could almost draw a line between where the mountains ended and the hills began. These hills were no more than twenty or thirty feet high, with bases averaging fifty yards in diameter, and shallow ravines running all around them.

There was very little vegetation here, other than a sparse, dry, grassy weed no more than two to three inches long that lay almost flat on the ground. Though there wasn't much in the way of cover, the ravines afforded a means by which the NVA in the mountains could make forages down into the farmlands for food. The only place where they had adequate concealment was in the mountains, but there wasn't anything to eat up there. Rear command had information that they were coming down almost nightly and returning before sunrise with the food they'd commandeered from the local farmers.

At first glance I figured this was going to be a nice, easy area to work after having spent so much time climbing in the mountains. With so little foliage for the enemy to hide in, it wasn't difficult to believe that there wouldn't be much action here, and these low hills were a damn sight easier to negotiate than the mountains had been. On our first night here I'd find out just how wrong I could be.

The captain had the company form our nightly perimeter on top of the highest hill in the area. This gave us a commanding view of the lower hills for quite some distance. Just before dark, however, word was given to my platoon lieutenant that the second platoon, our platoon, would be moving about five hundred yards to the east to set up an ambush. There was a secondary dirt road out there which ran from the mountains toward Phu Bai and the coast.

Near the close of twilight we moved silently out of the perimeter, down the side of the hill and continued east following the natural depressions. I was at about the middle of the line of thirty or so men, carrying the lieutenant's radio, as we made haste to get to our destination before it was totally dark. It wasn't long before we came to the indicated road, which was no more than two tire ruts in the parched earth, and turned onto it going in the direction of Phu Bai. The idea was that we would follow the road a ways until we found a good location to set up the ambush.

When we first got to the road, the men split off so that there were now two lines, one on each side of it. It had gotten dark enough to where I found it almost impossible to see the lieutenant in front or the man in back of me, even though they were no more than five feet away.

We'd only gone a short distance when suddenly an M-16, at the front of the column, opened fire. Immediately, everyone ran to the right side of the road where there was a bank of earth about four feet high that we could get behind for cover. The entire line began pouring fire over the top of the bank, out into the darkness, and several shots were fired back.

The exchange continued while the lieutenant and I, being his radioman, pulled back across the other side of the road. This was normal procedure so that he could issue directives to the men on the firing line and establish communications with the main body of the company back on the hill.

As soon as we stopped and settled into the sparse grass, I could here a tiny voice repeating itself over my radio handset.

“Comanche Six India to Two-Six India, come in. Over.”

I unhooked the handset from my shoulder strap, where I always kept it hanging, so that I could here if any calls came in. I was sure they wanted to know what we’d run into because they were close enough to hear our firing in the distance.

“Comanche Six India, this is One-Six India. Go ahead, over.”

“Comanche One-Six India, Six wants to know what your situation is,...over.”

The lieutenant motioned for me to let him have the handset.

“Comanche Six India, this is One-Six. Tell Six that our point man ran into somebody on the redball we were moving down. We received some incoming, but it seems to be dying away now, over.”

“Six wants to know if you need any assistance from the 80mike-mike, over.”

This was the company’s mortar tube that had been sent out to them earlier.

“We don’t need any HE (High Explosive) rounds, but we could use some flares out here, over.”

“Roger that, One-Six, over.”

The lieutenant gave them the coordinates and within seconds we heard the distinct, but muffled poof of the mortar in the distance. After fifteen or twenty seconds, a flare on a little parachute lit up overhead.

The men along the bank, on the other side of the road from us, strained their eyes to pick out anything that might be moving to their front, but were only able to see dark shadows drifting along the

ground as the flare sailed lower and lower. A second flare, and then a third came out, but the NVA had long since fled back along the ravines toward the mountains.

The lieutenant passed word across the road that he wanted to speak to the four squad leaders before making a decision about what to do next. We were in a somewhat unusual situation in that, once an ambush had been walked into, and firing had broken out, the ambush sight was compromised. That meant that anyone still out there would certainly avoid the area unless they were completely crazy. Or,...now that they knew approximately where we were, might decide to circle around and pull an ambush back on us.

We also had another problem. Whenever we became engaged in a firefight, the men used up their ammunition pretty quickly. From our experience, the enemy usually walked into our ambushes much later in the course of the night, but this particular incident had taken place even before we had a chance to get to a site where we could set that ambush up. What it amounted to was that we were a good distance away from the main body of the company, with little ammunition,...and the night had just begun!

The lieutenant decided that the best course of action was to find a nearby spot where we could basically *hide out* for the rest of the night. We all realized the precarious position we were in so that, when he had the platoon form up and move on down the road again, no one made a sound.

It wasn't long before we came to an open field, just off the side of the road, that was fairly flat and covered with two-foot high elephant grass. The lieutenant instructed everyone to spread out and lie down in the grass. The hope was that we could spend the night here without anyone discovering us. No one needed to impress on us that being as quiet as possible was critical.

At just around midnight, being a very light sleeper, I was awakened by a sound. At first I wasn't sure I'd even heard anything, since it had been so subtle. I was lying in the grass next to Doc Clark and the lieutenant who were both fast asleep.

At some point a full moon had risen, casting its eerie silver light over the landscape. I didn't make a sound, but just lay there listening for whatever it could have been that had awakened me.

For awhile there seemed to be nothing but silence, and then it came again. Slowly I raised my head and looked out to my front in the direction away from the road. It became readily apparent that the sound was the rustling of the grass, but I still couldn't make out what it was that was causing it.

With the instinct that comes of experience, I scanned the area in complete silence. My eyes had adjusted to the light of the moon now so that I could actually see the grass swaying back and forth about thirty feet from where we were lying. The problem was that there was a low hill off to my left, beyond which the moon had risen, and it cast a dark shadow over the area I was trying to see into. Since the grass was a light golden color, I was able to see that moving, but whatever was causing it to move remained obscured in the shadows.

My first thought, and the reason I wasn't too alarmed, was that there were quite a few water buffalo in these farmland areas, which the farmers used for tilling their fields. I figured it was probably one of those munching on the grass over there.

After several moments of trying to make it out, I glanced, almost casually, over to the top of the hill where the disk of the moon appeared to be resting. Suddenly a cold chill ran up my spine. Against its brightly lit surface I could see the silhouettes of men coming over the top, one behind the other, and disappearing into the darkness to my front. The chill came from the fact that I could plainly make out

the pith helmets, back packs, and shorts of NVA soldiers! They were so close to us, and so clear that I was even able to see the silhouettes of the AK-47s they were each carrying! At least a company of them were coming over the top of the hill, walking down its side and passing within thirty feet of our platoon lying in the grass. And we had no ammo!

Moving ever so slowly, to avoid making the slightest sound, I nudged Doc Clark lying next to me. Our faces were very close to each other so that he could see me put a finger to my lips. Then I stretched my arm out in the direction of the hilltop and he sighted along it, directly to the moving column of men. From there, I moved my arm slowly down to the grassy area where the rustling was coming from.

Doc realized immediately what I was showing him and silently awakened the lieutenant on the other side of him.

In the time since the three of us had gotten fully awake, the end of the line of enemy soldiers had passed by and continued on toward Phu Bai. It was definitely at least a company sized unit, judging from what I saw, and it may have been larger, depending on how long it was before I actually woke up.

Doc and I whispered what we'd seen to the lieutenant, who'd just missed seeing the end of the column. He took the handset to my radio and whispered into it.

“Comanche Six India, this is One-Six, over.”

While he was doing that, Doc quietly began waking the men nearby and telling them to awaken everyone else. In the silvery light of the moon I could faintly hear the hiss of the handset during breaks in the conversation between the lieutenant and the captain's radioman back at the company. I knew what he had in mind when he took out his map of the area and played the red beam of his flashlight

down on it. He was giving the coordinates of the enemy's position, based on the direction in which they were last seen moving, for an artillery barrage.

Unfortunately, the best way to make that barrage the most effective was by the use of surprise, and that meant not calling for any marking rounds before actually requesting the HE. It was unfortunate because, if there was any difference between where we were lying in the grass and where the battery of guns thought we were, it could mean those rounds might come right down on us.

Because we were on a redball that was marked on the map, however, there was somewhat less chance of that happening and the lieutenant decided to go for it.

Incredibly tense seconds of silence ticked by while we waited for the fire mission to begin, but we knew that, if the rounds landed in the right place, we might just pull off a stunning maneuver. We'd have the opportunity of catching a large contingent of enemy soldiers out in the open, under a barrage of artillery...an opportunity that didn't present itself often.

Then, as if a thunder storm was brewing off in the distance, came the sound of dull booms. Moments later they were followed by the whistling of rounds high over our heads and, about a hundred yards down the road, thunderous explosions that lit up the night with great flashes of sparks.

The rounds landed precisely where we knew the enemy force would be at that moment, which must have been an utterly devastating surprise for them.