
FIFTY**Shootout At The Crossroads**

When the barrage of artillery finally stopped echoing all the way back to the mountains, the dead stillness of the night settled in on us again until morning. After dawn we got up and headed back the hundred yards to where the firefight had taken place. In the darkness it was almost impossible to see what actually happened, but the light of day revealed the incredible facts.

We found a smaller trail that intersected the main redball we'd been moving along. The initial M-16 fire we heard was when our point man, Scott Parkins, a tall, lanky kid from South Carolina, met the point man for a group of NVA soldiers at that crossroads. Because it was dark and the embankment at the side of the road ran right up to the intersection, the two hadn't seen each other until they were only a few feet apart.

When they came face to face, it was very much like a street shootout in the Old West. It was simply a matter of who could bring his weapon to bear on the other first.

Scott had brought his rifle up and emptied four magazines, killing the point man and scattering the others following him before anyone else had a chance to fire a shot!

Several of us, including the lieutenant, stood staring down at his four empty magazines laying in the center of the intersection. They really impressed upon us the incredible feat he had performed. He'd emptied one magazine and ejected it from the rifle. Then he'd taken another one out of his ammo pouches and slipped that into the weapon. Finally, he'd pulled the cocking lever back to drive the first

round into the chamber and emptied that magazine. And he had gone through that entire procedure four times in the brief span it took the rest of us to dash the eight feet to the bank at the side of the road and begin firing over the top of it! Now *that* was moving!

A couple of men were sent a short distance up the smaller trail the NVA had used to see if they could find anything of the ones that got away. While they going about that, I walked over to where the body of the NVA point man lay face up under the scorching sun. Already the merciless flies had begun to gather around his eyes and wounds.

He appeared to be no more than twenty years of age and was extremely thin, a familiar trait for most of the enemy soldiers we came into contact with. He had on a black tee-shirt and tight black shorts. On his feet he wore what we Americans had dubbed Ho Chi Minh sandals. They were made by cutting two flat pieces from the tread section of an old truck tire in the shape of shoe soles. Two strips of thinner rubber, from an inner tube, were then fastened through slits in the sides of the soles. These acted as straps to hold the sandals on the feet.

Once Again, we saw the ingenuity of these people for making unusual materials work to their advantage. It was obvious that, because of the war, they weren't able to devote much time or material to the manufacture of shoes, so they used an otherwise useless commodity, old motor vehicle tires, to make sandals that would last indefinitely. After all, a truck weighs a couple of tons and runs on tires for a year or more, so how much more mileage could a man get from them with his light body weight?

Seeing the condition of this man also showed just how effective Scott's composure, under the circumstances at the time, really was. There were bullet holes in a line, approximately every eight inches

from the bottom of his right leg, up across his torso on a diagonal, to one that went through his head. After his initial look at Scott he must not have known what hit him.

Whenever enemy soldiers were killed in an ambush, their pockets were gone through to see if they might be carrying any kind of useful information. I'd seen the contents of more than one of these men's wallets and it usually proved pretty interesting.

There was almost always a picture or two of the family back home in North Vietnam, which tended to give an otherwise ghostly enemy a more human aspect. Along with this, there might be some paper money and several postage stamps.

The stamps were by far the most interesting item and were eagerly sought after by just about everyone in the company. The ones I'd seen pictured an American Air Force jet being shot down by a North Vietnamese gunboat in the Gulf of Tonkin. Even though the proportions were somewhat fanciful, the gunboat having been drawn far too large in relation to the size of the plane, as either a propaganda booster for the North Vietnamese people or simply a statement of their determination, the artwork was well done and colorful. The flames shooting off the falling jet were bright reddish-orange and the waters of the Gulf a deep blue.

The men who'd gone up the trail to look for signs returned and reported that they found more sets of sandal prints in the dusty soil. Not only that, but at least one of those who'd gotten away must have been hit because there was a blood trail along the escape route.

When we were through checking the area, the platoon moved back to the hill where the main body of the company was located. For his incredibly swift reaction to the situation, which prevented any

casualties whatsoever on our side, the platoon lieutenant put Scott's name in for a well deserved silver star.

The company remained in this area of the low hills for another week without running into the enemy. During our daily patrolling around the bases of the hills, we did come across an old, unmarked grave of what must have been an NVA soldier. Actually, we probably never would have noticed it but for the fact that the dry, powdery soil covering it had been partially eroded away by countless rain storms. There was little of the body visible and what was exposed had almost blended in with the surrounding ground, but the stench was so overwhelming that we could smell it from a long, long way off.

With the lack of activity here now, rear command sent the Hueys out to pick us up again. This time we were flown a fairly short distance and dropped off right at the base of the mountains where the hills met them. From there we began a day-long trek into one of the valleys that worked its way back into the interior of the massive cordillera. Our ambush had proven that there were enemy forces somewhere in the area. If we hadn't run into them again, down in the lowlands, rear command figured that we might catch up to them in the mountains.

After a long day of moving through the inevitable jungle that covered all the mountainous areas, we made our way to a point about halfway up the side of one of the lower peaks. The captain decided that it was getting late and we'd better begin digging in for the night.

A Huey was sent out with a hot meal and the supplies we had ordered the evening before. When it was dropping slowly in toward the clearing we'd hacked out of the thick growth, the pilot radioed that there were two places on the side of the mountain where smoke had been popped. Whenever a Huey

was inbound, and the company was hard to spot because of the terrain, the pilots would request that we “pop smoke”, or set off a smoke grenade, so that our location could be easily seen from the air.

The pilot said that when he requested smoke, a yellow cloud appeared at one point on the side of the mountain, followed almost immediately by another cloud about a hundred yards higher up. The captain had his radioman ask what color the second one was and the pilot reported it was red. Since the smoke we’d popped was yellow, it was clear that someone else was trying to lure the Huey to within their range. The bird hovered a short distance out and the door gunners opened fire into the area of red smoke with their M-60s. This was just another crafty little trick by enemy soldiers higher up on the same mountain we were on. Since they had no helicopters of their own, they went to the trouble of carrying an otherwise useless smoke grenade for just such a decoy as this. And if they’d popped their smoke first, and the Huey had gone toward it, they might just have downed themselves a quarter-million dollar bird.

Now we had to stay even more on the alert because we knew that there were NVA no more than a hundred yards away, higher up on the mountain. Another odd aspect of this war was that the two opposing forces often maneuvered in such close proximity to each other without actually coming into contact. I felt that this was because they’d rather not tangle with us unless it was to their distinct advantage and absolutely necessary. Whenever they did, they usually came up with the short end of the stick.