
FIFTY SEVEN**The French Compound**

No other movement came from the area of the compound during the night and, with the dawn, the sun rose on what should have been a perfectly beautiful day.

As soon as it was light enough, Captain Boatner directed each platoon to begin moving into the compound, just as we had several days earlier. Before going in with the CP, I noticed several guys standing over a body, a short distance from where we'd spent the night. I hefted my pack onto my shoulders and carried my rifle over to where they were standing. When I got there, the others moved off toward the gate, but I'd seen the solemn expressions on their faces.

This was the girl who'd been shot in the dark.

There I stood,...alone,...looking down at her. She was approximately eighteen years of age and lay on her back, her dark eyes open, staring lifelessly up at the sky. She'd been wearing loose, black, silk pants and a dark blue, silk blouse that had been torn open by the impact of the rounds. Her white bra was the only covering on the upper front of her body. She had long, beautiful, almost waist-length black hair and it was easy to see that she'd been an extremely pretty young girl,...that is, before last night.

One bullet had gone through her upper right thigh, while another had hit her in the side, but the fatal one caught her at the inside corner of the right eye and entered her head. The back of her skull was distorted out of shape from the impact on the brain.

There's no way to describe all the things that flash through your mind at times like this. One feeling that always seemed to rise far above the others, whenever I saw casualties,...both ours and theirs, was an overwhelming sense of utter waste.

Like most of the others in the company, I'd been hardened to the sight of death, because it was such a commonplace occurrence here. We'd seen more of it than anyone should ever have to in an entire lifetime. Yet, somehow this girl was different. Yes, she was a Communist,...and yes she was a Viet Cong,...the enemy,...all the things we were supposed to be here to fight against. But right now she was, above all else, a human being.

Don't get me wrong. None of us had the mistaken impression she would have hesitated a moment in killing all of us, given the chance. But that didn't make it any easier seeing her lying there with the life gone from her.

There was also the fact that, before she died, she'd cried out about having babysons. I had no way of knowing whether that was true or not, and if it was, of course, she should have thought about it before getting involved in such a potentially fatal situation. But, then, this was her country and she was fighting for what she believed in.

Here again, however, there were a million different "what if" scenarios that could apply.

What if she'd been forced, against her will, because of her obvious beauty, to be the mistress of this area's head VC, which it was later discovered she was?

And what if she did have the babysons she'd cried out about? What about them? They no longer had a mother to care for them. As they grew older and understood that the Americans had killed her, being fed all their information by the Communists, they would naturally hate Americans with a passion.

That's one of the true horrors of war, the innocent children who suffer and the hate that they develop for the rest of their lives.

And so, like a diseased legacy, the hate would be carried on.

It struck me how, as clearly as hate showed us its ugly symptoms, we humans always managed to feed it somehow, so that it remained alive and well. Would we ever learn?

I left all those thoughts to lie with her, as I knew I must, and walked slowly toward the entrance to the compound where the rest of the CP had gone.

The story was much different from what we'd found the first time we went through here. Within a short time, as the platoons circled and searched each small building, a group of approximately twenty younger men, along with the women who accompanied them, were rounded up in the center of the compound. Today this place was thriving with occupancy, where, two days ago, it was little more than a ghost town!

There was no doubt, whatsoever, that these people were VC. I made my way over to where Captain Boatner, Top Soloway, and the other radiomen were interrogating a man wearing the khaki colored shirt and shorts that were typical of North Vietnamese soldiers. He was attempting to show them the papers that legitimate residents of the area carried for identification but, of course, he wasn't a legitimate resident, so he didn't have them. One of our guys made him kneel on the ground and pulled the shirt back from both his shoulder. There we could see the telltale impressions left by the straps of a heavy pack that had been carried for a very long time. He had obviously come down from North Vietnam with that pack.

There was another man wearing a white shirt and bright red shorts that looked like loose bathing trunks. In the dwelling where he was caught, the guys also found a little girl, of about four or five, who had a chain around her neck that was fastened to the foot of the bed, like a dog on a leash.

Everyone in the compound was checked for concealed weapons and the group of suspects made to stand in the center with empty sandbags over their heads, their hands tied behind their backs. An Army truck came rolling in, from the base in town a short distance away, and the suspects were loaded aboard for a trip to the rear and interrogation.

I felt pretty good about the fact that this had been such a successful operation. In a stroke of genius, Captain Boatner had pulled off a real coup here. The enemy usually had all the advantages on their side, knowing the language, the land, the local people, etc. and it was difficult to catch them with their pants down, as had happened here. It just felt good to show them that they weren't always as smart as they thought they were. Not only that, but it made up somewhat for the incident with the bees, which these people had set up.