
FIFTY EIGHT**Someone Worth Fighting For**

For several days after the cleanup of the French compound we patrolled through the villages around it with no further contact. Then word came from the rear that a Vietnamese crew chief, the same one we'd seen with the French plantation owner when he told us to get off his property, was discovered to be VC and captured. Through his interrogation it was learned that the head of the local VC had put out what amounted to a contract on C company because we'd killed his favorite mistress.

Even though we remained right in the area and made no attempt whatsoever to change our regular routine, we never did run into that angered band of VC. We found plenty of tunnel systems, which we investigated and saturated with white phosphorus grenades, but they were always empty. Oddly enough, we kept finding undeniable evidence that we were always very close to the enemy, yet our paths never crossed. It was very possible that, though the VC were in a highly vindictive mood, they were still that little bit more apprehensive about taking on the First Cav,...and that was just fine with me. Or, through some crazy quirk of fate, it might have been that we just kept missing each other.

About a week after the operation, we moved approximately five miles down the road from where the French compound was located, into the vast fields of rubber where there were no villages. The straight rows of trees seemed to go on forever and the only signs of life were an occasional crew of harvesters going about their work. It seemed that this area was going to be as quiet as the one we'd

just left and, to a certain extent, that was true. But it wasn't going to be very quite for everyone else around us.

One day, at about the middle of the afternoon, the captain got a call instructing him to move the company to an open field of burnt-out weeds across the road from the rubber. This field was at the corner of a T-intersection where a side road met the main redball. We were to wait there until a convoy of APCs (Armored Personnel Carriers), that was enroute, came along and picked us up.

It wasn't long before the tracks, over one hundred of them, arrived. With so many, we figured this had to be a large operation and that our company was going to play a part in it.

The platoons grouped their men the same way they would if this was going to be a chopper pickup and got aboard with about seven or eight riding on the top of each track.

The APCs moved out down the side road, but hadn't gone more than about a thousand yards when something strange happened. The lead vehicle pulled over and passed the word along that our rear command was on their radio, wanting to speak to our captain.

Captain Boatner jumped down from the APC we were riding on and went forward to where the armor commander handed down his radio handset. The men sitting on top of the track were only able to hear his side of the conversation.

“You want us to do what?!.....Is this some kind of joke?.....Yeah,....right. Six out.”

He passed the handset back up to the other man who simply held out his arms, indicating he hadn't the foggiest idea what was going on.

The captain turned to Wada with a distinct sound of disgust, “Call the platoon leaders and tell them to have their men dismount.”

The word passed through our company that we'd been ordered to leave the APCs and walk the thousand yards back to the intersection where we were originally picked up!

It goes without saying that there was no small amount of aggravation because we'd just lost our ride, but that was only part of it. Who was the bright number, back in the rear, who'd ordered us to take that ride in the first place and then, after only a thousand yards, wanted us to get off and walk back to where we started?

Before we began the trek back to the intersection, we watched the convoy of APCs pull out, in a great cloud of red dust, and continue on down the road. The walk back was hot and dusty, made all the more wearisome because of the apparent stupidity of the whole thing.

When we reached the intersection, we were told to wait for another convoy of trucks that was being sent out from the base to drive us to another part of the rubber plantations. At least the fact that we were going to get another ride took some of the edge off the understandably ugly mood we were in. Someone, back in the rear, must have had the good sense to realize that we couldn't be too happy with what appeared nothing more than blatant foolishness.

The trucks arrived and drove us to an area that was a borderline between where the rubber ended and the heavy underbrush began. It was getting late in the day, so we set up our perimeter and dug our foxholes in preparation for the long night.

Shortly after we were settled in, Lonnie Jones, a sharp black kid from New Orleans, who'd replaced Water Buffalo as radioman, since Buffalo had rotated back to the States, overheard a conversation between the rear and someone connected with the unit of APCs we'd ridden on earlier. He learned that, just after the company disembarked from the vehicles, and they drove off down that

side road, all one-hundred-plus were wiped out with every man lost! The sad information was that a battalion of seasoned NVA Regulars had been waiting in ambush and simply massacred them!

Now that strange order from the rear, to disembark from the tracks, no longer seemed to have been so stupid. Even though it was some kind of crazy mix-up, on the part of somebody back there, it quite probably saved the lives of every man in the company. Obviously, whomever had been responsible, hadn't known of the ambush or those poor souls wouldn't have been sent to their deaths, but, again, somebody "up there" was watching out for the men of company C!

That *someone* must have been watching over our company continuously, because the loss of the APCs wasn't the only tragedy we narrowly missed within a short period of time. The convoy of trucks that regularly transported us between the base and the rubber also befell a similar fate. The same battalion of seasoned NVA Regulars set up another ambush along the oiled road and wiped out all the those men and vehicles shortly after they'd dropped us off in the rubber.

It became perfectly clear that the NVA were intent on catching our particular company in their deadly traps, which meant that there had to be a deeper reason behind their actions. Through interrogation of captured prisoners, rear command learned that they were trying to fulfill the vendetta put out on us by their fellow compatriots, the VC, from back at the French compound. We'd been right in assuming that the Viet Cong didn't want to try tackling us alone. They knew that a large contingent of seasoned NVA were making their way to this area and figured they'd enlist their help in getting even when they arrived.

For several weeks we continued patrolling through the area, trying to connect with the enemy force and, apparently, the NVA were doing the same thing, but, through that strange quirk of fate, we never did meet up.

Since, in the eyes of rear command, things had gotten a little too quiet, we gypsies were being moved again, this time to a town and Army base called Quan Loi. There was a main road running from the edge of the town out for a mile, in an almost perfectly straight line, to a steel bridge that crossed a large river. The company's job would be to guard the length of that road during the day and spend each night in the bunkers around the perimeter of the base.

On our first night at this new location, the airstrip was hit by incoming mortar rounds, something that hadn't happened for quite some time, and the reason we heard for that proved particularly interesting. It was discovered that the unit, not a part of the First Cav, that had been securing the perimeter previous to our arrival, had contacted the local VC and made an *under-the-table* deal with them. What it amounted to was a simple agreement to the effect that, "If you don't shoot at us, we won't shoot at you." Evidently, it had worked well, because the base hadn't been mortared during the entire time that they were here.

No sooner did they move out, and we come in, than the nightly mortaring resumed. It was plain that the VC didn't feel the Cav would be open to any such arrangement and they were right. The higher echelon had no desire whatsoever to strike such a deal.

This turned out to be another relatively quiet assignment, the only action being the nightly incoming mortars to the base airstrip. Naturally, that didn't sit too well with rear command who, as always, were looking for those high body counts.

During the day, the company was strung out in groups of five men each, along the side of the road from the edge of town to the bridge, each group approximately twenty yards from the next one. Our purpose for being here was to keep the road open for the farmers who needed to get their produce and other goods into the town's market and for Vietnamese civilians who went in to work in the base PX and other facilities.

There were no trees growing at the sides of the road so that the sun beat down with a vengeance. Quite a few of the guys set their ponchos up into hooches, just so they'd have a place where they could occasionally get out from under that sun. We spent most of our time buying Cokes from the Coke girls, boom-boom from the boom-boom girls, and just generally taking it easy. The people who passed by on the road paid little attention to us and we to them, but it's a sure bet they were glad we were there.

Later in the afternoon, each day, we'd pack up our gear and stand at the edge of the road waiting for a convoy of Army deuce-and-a-halves to come by for a lift back into the base. It was while I was standing there with two other men, Gary Scott and Dave Johnson, that an incident occurred which brought me much closer to the Vietnamese people than I'd ever felt before. I was off radio duty on this particular day and so was with the guys from my original platoon, 1/6.

We'd only been there for a few minutes, our packs on our backs, weapons in hand and our steel pots the only protection from the afternoon sun, when a girl in front of one of the dwellings, directly across the road, motioned for us to come across. She was about eighteen or nineteen years of age and unusually tall for a Vietnamese girl. She was also very pretty with long, satiny black hair. At first, we three were somewhat leery, because we had no idea who she was or what her motives might be.

When we crossed the road and entered the front yard, she gave us a pretty smile.

“You like cold drink of water?....Very cold from well.”

There was something so sweet and honest in the way she presented herself that we felt there was no danger from her. Not only that, but this area was fairly open, so that it would be difficult for anyone to be lurking about. Experience made you adept at noticing things like that.

“Yes, that sounds great. Thank you.”

Then she did something that we were totally unprepared for. She lead us into the house where she poured water from a ceramic pitcher into our individual canteen cups. It was so unusual because I couldn't remember, during my entire time in-country, ever having been invited into the home of one of the local people. Of course, we'd been inside dwellings before, but that was only during searches for hidden weapons or enemy soldiers, never with an invitation from the residents.

The water was just as she said it would be, cold and refreshing, something I hadn't tasted for a long, long time.

Two small children, brimming over with curiosity about our equipment, just as children anywhere would be, hovered around while we talked. The girl explained that they were her little brother and sister, whom she took care of while her mother worked at a day job on the base.

The house, due to its location on the main road leading into town, was considerably more substantial than the huts of the villages out in the countryside. Though it still had the typical earth floor, it was separated into two rooms, the front being the sleeping area, dining room and living room, all in one, and the back a cooking space or kitchen. In that part of the house there was a hearth, with a large iron kettle hanging over the fire, brewing the evening meal. In the front room, where we stood, there were

two simple wooden beds, somewhat like cots, and a table with the pitcher, from which she'd poured our water, sitting on it.

More than ever before, I felt a real frustration at not being able to speak the language of these people. Though we were able to communicate with her and she with us, on a simple level, her very warm and friendly manner made us feel that she'd be wonderful to have a good, long conversation with. Her name was Lon and, as I mentioned, she was much taller than the average height of the Vietnamese people. She explained that this was because her father was Chinese. He'd passed away some years earlier, leaving her mother to tend to the raising of the children. She also said that she had a brother who was a soldier in the ARVN or South Vietnamese Army and was away on duty.

Lon wore a shiny, lavender, silk blouse with black silk pants and the typical conical straw hat, and, even with the language barrier, her personality had a warm effect on the three of us. I couldn't help feeling that she could just as easily have been a college coed anywhere back in the States.

It wasn't long before we heard the trucks coming up the road. We thanked her several times for the refreshing drink of cold water and she seemed genuinely pleased that it had meant so much to us. After we climbed into the back of the last truck and it pulled away, the three of us waved good-bye to her, while she stood in the front yard, waving back with that wonderfully warm smile.

Naturally, the other guys in the truck weren't going to let us off that easy.

"Okay, you guys, what were you up to in there?"

"Come on, give us all the juicy details."

We simply smiled at one another without answering any of their questions. It was more fun to let their imaginations run away with them.

I think that, deep inside, we each had the same good feeling that there really were some people in this country worth fighting for. It wasn't so much that we had anything against the Vietnamese people to begin with. It was just that, when you were constantly exposed to those who were only interested in making a buck off you, or trying to kill you, a person with real friendship in her heart, as Lon had been, was like a breath of fresh air. Brief as our time with her had been, we knew we'd never forget her kindness.