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**FIFTY NINE****A Really Unfriendly Welcome**

The Cambodian border,...the Parrot's Beak,...the Ho Chi Minh Trail,...the eve of TET. I'd heard of the first three. They were areas where "charlie" pretty much ran the show. The Cambodian border and the Ho Chi Minh Trail were used by North Vietnamese Regulars to make their way down the western side of South Vietnam. By staying inside Cambodia, they could remain in relative safety for half the length of the country.

The Parrot's Beak was a portion of the Cambodian border that jutted into South Vietnam with the shape that its name implied. It gave the enemy fairly deep penetration into Vietnam only about fifty miles west of Saigon. C company, and in fact our entire division, would soon be smack in the middle of all three.

The fourth, the eve of TET we knew was always a time of heavy enemy activity, both strange and deadly. The strangeness was due to the fact that they liked to celebrate this Vietnamese holiday by getting high on opium. This not only caused them do the strangest things, but tended to make them feel that there were invincible. That was when there were extremely dangerous to us,...as you can imagine.

The division was flown, by C-130s, to the large military base at Tay Ninh. Tay Ninh can easily be described as situated in one of the most dangerous location in the country. It was only about ten miles from the Cambodian border with the Parrot's Beak jutting out below and another protrusion called the "Fish Hook" curving around to the north of it. In essence, it was surrounded by enemy territory.

The plan was that from here each company, in turn, would be choppered out to an open field approximately half-way between the base and a small LZ, almost directly on the border, named Rita. We were to secure the perimeter of the field, about two hundred yards in diameter and ringed by a dense treeline, so that heavy construction equipment could be flown in to begin building a new LZ.

Four of the companies in our battalion, Alpha, Bravo, Charlie and Delta sat on the ground, just inside the perimeter wire of Tay Ninh. Then A company, or Alpha, boarded a sortie of Hueys that would take them out to the field, drop them off, and then return for B company. At this point we thought we'd lucked out getting the job of securing an LZ for awhile,....even if it wasn't built yet. It wouldn't take long to burst that bubble.

Every radioman remaining behind was tuned to the same frequency as A company, so that we could hear what the situation was when they got out there. With so many radios using external speakers, occasional conversations between the four platoons of A company could be heard all over the area like a PA system.

I was doing the same as most everyone else, sitting on the ground with my back resting against my pack, soaking up the sun. It seemed that nothing could spoil such a warm, lazy afternoon. Some of the guys were munching on snacks of peanut butter and jelly, spread on saltine crackers they'd saved from their C-rations. Others were trying to fill the waiting by penning letters home, usually a catch-as-catch-can situation at any time.

With approximately four hundred men spread out around the area, there was quite a bit of conversation and laughter. The topics ranged anywhere from girls, to how much time they had left *in-country*, and everything else in between. The mood was light.

Then our radios slammed to life, riveting everyone's attention.

"We're taking heavy fire from the treeline to our west!!" ...sssst.

"Two-six, get your men down on our left flank and move in toward that treeline!!" ...sssst.

"Roger, Six!!" ...sssst.

"Get those birds out of here!! You're taking fire!!" ...sssst.

"Roger that!!" ...sssst.

During each transmission, the sound of rapid, heavy gunfire and all kinds of powerful explosions could be heard in the background. The people talking on the radio were shouting to be heard over the din.

It was only a matter of minutes when we could see the birds returning from the direction of the LZ. As soon as they landed, the men of Bravo company got aboard and were off.

Here came that old familiar knot in the pit of my stomach again. The situation would become clearer when B company added their hundred-and-ten men to Alpha's. If the enemy didn't pull their usual hit-and-run routine when a second company arrived on the scene, then it meant they were dug in for a tough fight.

No sooner did Bravo land than the transmissions began including them.

"Fan out!!...Fan out!!...Don't bunch up over there!!...sssst.

"Try getting those wounded back here so the medics can work on them!!" ...sssst.

It wasn't long before word began to circulate among the companies, still back at Tay Ninh, that the NVA had been listening in on our transmissions with a captured American radio. They'd known, well in

advance, of the plans to build a new LZ in that open field and had plenty of time to dig in with at least a battalion of seasoned troops. Our companies were being dropped into a human meat grinder!

As soon as B company was clear, the Hueys lifted quickly away from the field, heading back to the base for their third trip.

Now it was our turn.

From the continuous radio conversations, we could tell that the presence of a second company had made little difference. I was feeling more tense than usual because I'd been in-country for ten months now and the kind of contact that was taking place out there was the last thing anyone needed when they were getting short. "Getting short" was how we described approaching the end of our tour.

The fifteen Hueys zipped in over the treetops beyond the base perimeter and landed with a sense of urgency. Wada and I were both on radio duty for the captain, so we followed him aboard one of the birds.

The sortie lifted into the air and raced along, staying at treetop level. I looked over at Wada who was sitting against the back wall facing me. He stared back with the same cold, numb expression that I knew I must have on my face right now. We couldn't have spoken to each other over the deafening roar of the Huey's engine, even if we'd wanted to, but there was no need for conversation anyway. We knew exactly how each of us was feeling.

Unfortunately, the flight was short,...all too short as far as we were concerned.

The birds dove rapidly into the middle of the field, creating that strange elevator drop in our guts. Before the skids actually touched the ground, we were out and moving away, so that they could make a hasty retreat.

Captain Boatner made a quick assessment of the situation with our company lying scattered on the ground in the six-inch high elephant grass. We were approximately fifty yards away from the section of treeline where A company had gone in, directly in front of the enemy's guns. Bravo was pinned down right at the edge of that same treeline, and the amount of fire coming out of those woods was horrendous. Not only were there several thirty-caliber machine-guns zipping rounds just over our heads, and hundreds of NVA infantry firing their AK-47s, but B-40 rockets were exploding all through the woods.

The captain directed me to contact our platoon leaders and tell them to form a perimeter right where they were. There was a huge bomb crater near where we'd been dropped off, in the middle of the field, so those of us in the CP jumped into it while the rest of the company spread out to our right and left, parallel to the enemy treeline.

The captain, Top, we three radiomen and the medic all peered over the rim of the crater, watching that treeline. What we saw was almost too hard to believe. Alpha company was completely out of sight, having gone into those woods, and B company was strung out along the front of it. Everysooften, a rocket would explode, tossing some of the guys from B company into the air like rag dolls. It didn't look real. Somehow it looked like a scene out of a John Wayne movie. I'd never before seen men tossed into the air like that from explosions!

Captain Boatner yelled, over the earsplitting noise, to Top, "We've got to get over there and help those guys. I can't believe that Jerry took his men into those woods!"

From the reports we were hearing over the radio, the captain of A company, the man that Captain Boatner had just referred to as Jerry, had already been killed in there, along with a large number of his company. And B company was taking just as severe a pounding over at the edge of the treeline.

Then, unconcerned for his own safety, the captain told Wada and I to follow him toward Bravo. He wanted to get whatever information he could from the men still left, whom we could see squatting just at the edge of the trees.

We two radiomen hated the idea of moving any closer to the holocaust that was taking place over there, but it was our job to stay with the captain. He had to maintain communications with the rest of our company.

While we were running forward, in a very low crouch, I stopped for just a moment to kneel beside a blonde kid who lay flat on his back. He couldn't have been more than eighteen years old and, with his fair hair and blue eyes, appeared much younger than that. I knew immediately that there was no sense in calling for a medic. There was a small red stain directly in the center of his chest where a bullet had entered. He'd died before he hit the ground, those lifeless blue eyes staring up at nothing.

I was only about twenty feet back from where the captain and Wada had taken cover behind one of the trees right at the edge of the treeline. I could see that there was a lieutenant from one of the platoons of B company hunched there too.

The amount of rounds buzzing through the air had increased and were so dense now that I had to low-crawl the rest of the way to their location if I didn't want to get hit. When I got there, I remained flat on the ground to the right of them. The tree was only about a foot in diameter, which didn't even

give the three of them, jammed behind it, enough cover. Even though they were right next to each other, the captain had to yell to the lieutenant over the tremendous noise.

“What’s the situation?!”

“When we got here, Alpha was already out of sight inside the treeline. Our Six had us move up to try and give them support, but this is as close as my platoon could get!”

Several rounds whacked into the front of their tree, causing them to duck lower momentarily.

“Where’s your Six now?”

The lieutenant pointed into the woods over to our left.

“He went in there with two of our other platoons. I think most of them were hit right away, but there’s no way we can get in there to help them. Everytime we try, my men get cut to pieces!”

Just as the lieutenant finished speaking, a B-40 rocket exploded about ten feet in front of the tree, raining dirt and debris down on all four of us. The men still remaining of Bravo company were lying on the ground, along the edge of the treeline to our left, firing into the woods.

While all the explosions and firing were going on, another sound became noticeable. I twisted to look over my left shoulder where I saw an incredible sight. A Sikorsky Sky Crane came down not more than twenty-five yards behind us. The Crane was an odd looking helicopter that reminded me of a giant praying mantis. It had extremely long rotor blades and a huge engine hunched up on its back that exuded power. The pilot and co-pilot sat side-by-side in a small bubble type cockpit that hung down in front like the head of an insect. The sole purpose for this awkward looking bird was the transporting of very heavy loads and, in fact, it was lowering a bulldozer to the ground at that very moment!

No one said anything right away, simply because it stunned us that the two pilots had no idea they were hovering right in the middle of a tremendous firefight! Captain Boatner turned and yelled to Wada, “What, in God’s name, are they doing?!...Get on the horn and tell them what the hell’s going on here!”

Before Wada could reach them, they proceeded to set the dozer gently down and then lifted away just as two rockets exploded only feet in front of their cockpit. If those pilots hadn’t known what the situation was before, they sure as hell did now. Miraculously they received no damage and made a very hasty retreat.

When it was gone, the captain yelled out to the lieutenant, “I’m going to have my people pull back to the center of the field to act as a securing force! You’re too boxed up here as it is!...As soon as you can get you’re people together, move them back too! We’ve got to get air support in here! This is suicide!”

“Yes, sir!” the lieutenant yelled back with an exuberance in his voice at the thought of getting away from this deadly fire zone. It must have been a good feeling for him to see that at least one of the COs had the common sense to realize that this was an intolerable situation.

Captain Boatner moved away, back toward the bomb crater, both Wada and I staying close by him.

“Get the platoon leaders on the horn and tell them to pull back to the center of the field!”

We made the calls as we went, and the company began pulling back

We got back to the crater and jumped in, our backs resting against its sloping wall.

“Tell the platoon leaders to have their men keep a sharp eye all around”, the captain told me.

“There could be more of those sons-of-bitches trying to get around behind us.”



I finished the call, and then watched the treeline where what was left of B company was pulling back to get behind our perimeter.

It's difficult to describe but, during a heavy engagement like this, with all the earshattering noise going on, everyone moves and acts with great haste, yet time itself seems to almost stand still.

Top had also rejoined us in the crater. He'd been directing our guys on the left side while the captain was up near the treeline on the right.

“Why the hell did Scott and Jerry ever go into that treeline?! They should have known better than that! Why didn't they pull back and call for air support before they went in?!”

Scott was the CO of Bravo, who was also nowhere to be seen. With the amount of fire that had been coming out of that treeline, it was pretty clear that none of the men who'd gone in, before we arrived, would be coming out.

All Top could do was shake his head, because the captain was right. They'd made a grievous error in trying to storm that treeline without calling for air support first, and, God help them, they'd paid dearly for it.

There was still sporadic gunfire coming out of the treeline when the captain turned to Wada.

“Get the Air Force on the horn. I want them out here. As soon as we get the area cleared, I want them to burn those woods!”

“Yes, sir.”

B company finally succeeded in getting their wounded back behind the perimeter we'd formed and the lieutenant, to whom the captain had spoken a short time ago, rolled over the edge of the crater wall.

“That’s it, sir. We’ve gotten all of our men out and a few of A-company’s. The rest are just too deep in there to get to.”

Captain Boatner thought for a moment.

“Any word from the men left of A company whether or not there’s anyone still alive in there?”

“Yes, sir. They say there’s definitely no one left. They said they could see the snipers in the trees pumping rounds into the men laying on the ground, just to be sure they were dead. I’m afraid their CO bought it with the rest of them, almost as soon as they went in.”

“What about you’re CO?”

“He was badly wounded, Sir, but we managed to pull him out. Our medics are taking care of him and the others right now.”

“Good. We’ll get some medevacs out here as soon as we can.”

He turned to Wada again, “Any word on the Air Force yet?”

“Yes, sir. They should be here in about ten minutes.”