
SIXTY**Dragon Ship**

“Tall Comanche,...this is Snoopy Four, over.”

I pushed the talk button on my handset, “Roger, Snoopy. This is Tall Comanche Six India. I’ve got you loud and clear, over.”

“Roger, Six India. We have napalm and thousand pounders ready to go. Pop some smoke so we can get a fix on you’re location, over.”

“Roger, Snoopy. Popping smoke.”

Wada called the first platoon who were closest to the enemy treeline.

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

“Go ahead, Six India.”

“Have your people pop smoke in front of your position, over.”

“Roger that.”

A few seconds later two plumes of yellow smoke billowed up into the clear air. The little single-engine Cessna, which had been circling overhead, made a pass directly over the field at about treetop level.

“Roger, Comanche. I’ve got your smoke.”

“Roger, Snoopy. The target is in the treeline just november whiskey (northwest) of the smoke.”

“Roger.”

During the interval when we were waiting for the Air Force to arrive, Captain Boatner had the artillery officer, Lieutenant Thompson, call for a mission to keep the enemy in the treeline pinned down. We'd been hearing the sharp cracks of those 105mm rounds going off in the woods over there, but that was called off when Snoopy arrived.

The Cessna fired a white smoke rocket into the location where the two jets were to drop their bombs.

One of them came streaking across, parallel with the treeline, right over the treetops, just back from the edge of the field, while the other one circled out in the distance.

The first pass was just a flyby to check the area out. On the second pass, however, two one-thousand-pound bombs dropped from the bottom of the plane and disappeared in the tops of the trees. A second later there was a tremendous crack, as if a thunder clap had occurred right in front of us. Large pieces of jagged, smoking shrapnel zipped past, with a buzz saw whizzing sound, to land at various places in the open field.

When the second jet came in, there was the distinct sound of rifle fire from deep in the treeline. Though the enemy's attempts to try and hit the jets with their AKs was futile, it did give us men in the open field the satisfaction of knowing that they were still in there and getting pounded.

I called the Cessna again.

"Snoopy, this is Six India, over."

"Go ahead, Six India."

"Just thought you might want to let your pilots know that we can hear rifle fire being directed up at them when they pass over."

“Roger, Six India. Thank you much. I’ll pass that along to them.”

The jets swung out in a wide circle around the area before they made their next run. Then, one of them came in low and dropped a finless canister that spun end over end, as if in slow motion, until it disappeared in the trees. There was an audible whoosh and flames engulfed the woods over an area about the size of a football field.

“Snoopy Four to Six India, over.”

“Go ahead, Snoopy.”

“That should put a dent in their rifle fire, don’t you think?”

I’m sure he could tell that there was the sound of a smile in my voice, “Roger that, Snoopy.”

“My men are going to drop the rest of their loads and then head back in. There’s a dragon ship on its way out. It should arrive just about when we’re finished, over.”

“Roger Snoopy. We thank you much.”

“Roger. If you need us again just give a call.”

While the jets made several more passes, dropping thousand-pounders all through the suspect area, Captain Boatner had the men of the companies move out of the open field and into the treeline to the left of us. If the circular, open field was thought of, from the air, as a clock face, and the enemy position was at twelve o’clock, our location, in the treeline, was now at approximately eight o’clock.

The men formed a perimeter that circled back into the woods with one part right on the edge of the field. This was where the captain had us set up the CP.

While the jets were finishing their last run, a C-130 began circling at a distance.

“Tall Comanche, this is Dragon Three, over.”

This time Wada answered the call on his radio.

“This is Comanche Six India. Go ahead, Dragon Three, over.”

“Six India, I can see where the napalm has torched the woods. Is that the location of the target, over?”

“That’s a rog, over.”

“Okay, as soon as the other boys are done, I’ll begin spraying the area with my 7.62 mike-mike. I’ve got a full load, so I’ll be here for awhile, over.”

“Roger that and thank you much,over.”

“When I get low on rounds there’ll be another ship out here to take my place, over.”

“Roger that. Sounds good, Dragon Three, over.”

“It looks like you’ve run into a pretty big force down there, so we plan on flying continuously all night. When one of us gets low on rounds, he’ll be replaced by the next ship. Keep your heads down. It’s going to be a long night.”

“Roger, Dragon. Thank you much. We really appreciate it, over.”

“Roger, that. We’re here to help you all we can, buddy.”

We watched as two streams of pink tracers extended down from the side of the dragon ship, snaking back and forth, in a continuous, crisscross pattern over the trees at the enemy location. The C-130 circled slowly with the line of tracers staying fixed on that general area. These dragon ships had had their insides stripped of any extraneous materials and were loaded with nothing but ammunition for the miniguns that could pour out deadly fire for extremely long periods.

It was beginning to get dark now, so we men on the ground set up our watches and prepared for the night ahead. We had to remain alert in case the NVA moved away from their original position and tried to sneak up on us through the woods to our rear. Whenever there was air support taking place, one of their favorite ploys, in trying to avoid it, was to move in close to the American position.

One of my turns for radio watch came at two in the morning. Wada awakened me and the two of us sat watching the gunship that was still circling with its cannons firing. During the course of the night, one dragon ship had replaced another, so that there'd been the continuous, giant chainsaw roar of their mini-guns filling the air. That sound completely overpowered everything else.

The plane had turned on four searchlights which kept the target area bathed in light almost as bright as day. Wada happened to notice me smiling to myself in the dim glow of the moving light and shadows that filtered over to our location.

“Why are you smiling?” he asked with a slight grin of his own.

“I was just thinking how odd it is that we manage to sleep through all that noise. If someone back home started up a chain saw at two in the morning, the neighbors would have a shit-fit, and that's nowhere near as loud as this.”

Wada thought about it too, “Yeah, I guess you can get used to just about anything when you're tired enough. But, you know something funny? As loud as that is, it's a damned comforting sound. If they should stop firing for some reason, most of us down here would wake up just like that.

“I guess it's kind of a reverse psychology. It's the quiet that we have to be worried about, not our friends in that ship up there.”

It might sound strange, but it was so true.

The dragon ships had taken an occasional rifle shot earlier in the evening, but though the NVA were heavily dug in, they must have decided that those continuous thousands of rounds per minute was just too much to handle. It wasn't long before there was no more rifle fire.

I stayed on watch until dawn when the ship ceased firing, but continued to circle the field. Captain Boatner was the first to awaken in the CP and came over to where I was sitting with the radio. He rubbed the back of his neck, to relieve the ache from sleeping on the hard ground, and looked out toward the enemy treeline.

“Have you heard anything at all from over there?”

“No, Sir, not a thing. It's been pretty quiet since the dragon ship let up.”

Just then I heard a call on my radio. The external speaker was disconnected so that the only sound came over the handset. I kept it lying in my lap, so that I could hear if anyone called.

“Six India, this is Dragon Two, over.”

“Go ahead, Dragon Two, over.”

“I think we've done just about everything we can here. I'm going to head back to the base, over.”

“Roger, Dragon Two. Wait one, over.”

I told the captain what the pilot had said and asked if there was anything else he wanted him to do.

“No, tell him we appreciate them staying out here all night with us and thank him.”

I gave the pilot the message.

One thing we men on the ground really felt strongly about was the dedication the Air Force extended to us. Those pilots always exhibited a deep appreciation for the men who had to face the

enemy down here on the ground, on his own turf, and that meant a lot. They bent over backwards to do whatever they could, no matter how much the cost in time, manpower, or weaponry.

When the sun was up, and everyone had eaten their breakfast of C-rations, the captain had the second and third platoons move across the field and enter the enemy treeline. Those men moved cautiously, but found nothing other than the empty bunkers the NVA had used. They did report, however, that there was quite a bit of blood all through the area.

Evidently the NVA had taken a real beating before they decided to move out.

There were no enemy bodies left lying around. They always tried to carry off their dead, whenever they could, to prevent us from establishing accurate body counts.

While the search was being conducted, the fourth platoon, who were still on the company perimeter, in the woods behind the CP, called in and reported they had movement out to their front. Everyone became immediately alert, expecting that the vanished NVA division might try to move in on us. A couple of shots were heard from their area and then they called again.

“Six India, this is Four-Six India, over.”

“Go ahead, Four-Six India,” I answered. Since it was daylight now, I’d hooked up my external speaker. The captain could hear both sides of our conversation.

“We have two NVA prisoners who’ve just Chu Hoied,...over.”

Chu hoi was the Vietnamese term for surrender.

“Tell Four-Six to have them brought down to the CP,” the captain told me.

A few minutes later one of the men from the fourth platoon came into the CP with the two prisoners, hands on heads, at rifle point. He reported to the captain.

“Sir, these two were wandering around out in front of our position.”

The captain looked them over. One was wearing a white, smudged rag as a loin cloth and the other was completely naked. The naked one had had his privates severed from his body, probably by a piece of shrapnel from the bombings. He was obviously in shock and it was amazing that he was able to function at all, let alone walk around!

Even though they wore no recognizable part of an NVA uniform, it was clear they were from the battalion that had been dug in the previous day. There were no farms or villages for many miles around, so they were definitely North Vietnamese soldiers.

Neither of them spoke any English, so the captain had them sit on the ground and instructed the medic to do whatever he could for the wounded man. He also told Wada to inform the rear of their surrender, to which the radioman received the reply that a bird would be out shortly to pick them up.

It wasn't more than fifteen minutes when a Huey could be heard in the distance.

“Comanche Six India, this is Chickenman Yellow One, over.”

“Go ahead, Chickenman, over.”

“We've got the supplies you ordered last night. I imagine you could use them about now, over.”

“That we could, Chickenman, that we could, over.”

The pilot was referring to the fact that we must be pretty low on ammo after what we'd gone through, which always made for a dangerous situation.

While the bird was dropping in for its landing, the captain spoke with the medic who'd been treating the prisoners.

“What's that man's condition, Doc?”

“Well, sir, he’s been in shock for some time and there’s really not much I can do for him out here. He needs a hospital real bad.”

“Okay.”

The captain took a few steps in thought, his hand rubbing his chin, and then looked over at Top Soloway.

“Top, I think we’d better send these two in on the supply bird.”

Top looked down at the wounded man, “I think you’re right, Sir. Being out here’s not doing this one any good. Not if they want to have him around for interrogation.”

“Tell the pilot we’ve got two prisoners for him to take in,” the captain told Wada.

Once the supplies were offloaded from the bird, the two NVA soldiers were taken out and put aboard. One of the door gunners had a forty-five pistol in hand, in case they should try anything, but that was highly unlikely at this point. To the contrary, the one who was coherent gave us the impression they were glad to be in our hands. I’m sure they realized they’d get much better medical treatment from us than they would from their own people.

No sooner had the sound of the Huey’s engine faded in the distance than there was another call over the radio.

“Tall Comanche, this is Major Brickton. I’m inbound to your location. We should be there in about five, over.”

I walked over to the tree that my radio was leaning against and lifted the handset. I also looked around at everyone in the CP. Like me, they all, including the captain, exhibited very puzzled expressions. The reason for our dismay was that no officer, with a lick of sense, would ever announce

his rank over an open frequency. This was especially true when we knew that the NVA were already in possession of one of our radios.

I pushed the talk button on the handset, the bewilderment of all of us clear in my voice, “Say again?,...over.”

“This is Major Brickton. I’m inbound to pick up your two prisoners. We should be there in about five, over.”

I look over at Captain Boatner and then answered somewhat awkwardly, “Sir, the prisoners have already gone in. They were put aboard the supply bird that just went in, over.”

Suddenly, the radio almost leapt off the ground.

“You did what?!”...Who the hell is in charge down there?!”

“Sir, one of the prisoners was badly in need of medical attention and had to go in immediately, over.”

“You tell that dumbhead CO of yours I want to see him as soon as I get there, out!”