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**SIXTY TWO****Mortared In The Open**

Once work began on a new LZ, it usually went pretty quickly. A backhoe was choppered in to assist the bulldozer that had been dropped off by the Crane, during the firefight. While the dozer cleared the surface of the field, down to the bare soil, the backhoe dug deep pits, every so many feet around the outer perimeter, and one larger one in the center surrounded by a series of smaller ones. The one in the center would be the TOC or Tactical Operations Center and, around the TOC, the smaller bunkers were for the men operating the artillery that would be airlifted out.

During the course of the first day, while the engineers were busy at work, our company remained on the perimeter as the securing force. The next day, however, a sortie of Hueys brought in another company to take up the security and flew us to an area of open farmland only a thousand yards from the Cambodian border. For the rest of my tour, less than two months now, we would patrol all along the border, including stretches of the infamous Ho Chi Minh trail, and the banks of the Song Sai Gon, a major river flowing from Cambodia, through the capital of Saigon (from which the city derived its name), and eventually making its way out to the South China Sea.

Our first day along the border proved to be an interesting one that foreshadowed the amount of action we would be seeing almost on a daily basis. These last two months would also be the most harrowing, from the standpoint of enemy contact and it had already begun when we flew in to secure this field for the new LZ.

The morning was typically hot and dusty as the company patrolled through farmyards and fields. At first it appeared that this was going to be a relatively easy area of operations, but looks, as had so often been the case, can be all too deceiving. There were times when we could make out Bravo company patrolling about a thousand yards down to our left as we faced the border.

The land was wide open and flat, with mud and thatch farm houses scattered randomly throughout, which was the reason we could see the other company, even at such a distance.

At just about mid-morning, we were in sight of each other, both companies moving in the direction of a huge abandoned church that stood alone in the open, and appeared to be in relatively good condition. There were no dwellings or trees or any form of obstruction around the great building with its high bell tower. It dominated the open plains as if it had been placed there by mistake. Evidently the location was considered central to all the villages in the area when the French built it.

When our two companies were approximately five hundred yards from it, but at different angles, a Huey Cobra flew overhead, calling on the radio.

“Tall Comanche, this is Bluebird Two, over.”

I was on radio duty, walking behind the captain.

“This is Comanche Six India. Go ahead, Bluebird Two, over.”

“This is Bluebird Two, I’ve been scouting the area and it looks pretty quiet down there right now, over.”

“Roger that, Bluebird. Let’s hope it stays that way, over.”

“Roger. I see there’s an abandoned church to your front. That could be a nice location for a sniper to set up shop. I think I’ll put a couple of rockets into it just to be on the safe side, over.”

“Roger that, Bluebird. We appreciate it, thank you much.”

We all watched as the Cobra circled and climbed in altitude. When it was high enough up so that it appeared like a tiny insect, no bigger than a gnat, it lobbed over easily and headed down toward the church at about a forty-five degree angle. It picked up speed as it dove toward the corrugated, red tile roof, looking, for all the world, like a missile homing in on its target.

At about a thousand feet, several smoke trails left its pods and headed directly toward the center of the massive roof. The rockets penetrated the tile and disappeared inside.

Then, to everyone’s utter amazement, there was a tremendous explosion that nearly knocked us off our feet. The ground shook, as if from a powerful earthquake, and a white mushroom cloud, very similar to what an atomic bomb looks like, billowed toward the clear, blue sky! The explosion was so huge that the great church almost completely disappeared.

After several stunned moments, in which we just stood where we were, hoping that none of the debris raining down, all that was left of the church, would land on our heads, cheers and shouts of excitement could be heard drifting across the plains from both companies, brought about by the spectacular display.

We, in the CP, heard the Cobra pilot, who was just as surprised as we were, shout, as if he’d just hit the lottery, over my external speaker.

“Yaaaah-hoooo! Looks like we struck pay dirt down there, Buddy!”

“That’s a definite Rog, Bluebird!”, I answered. “I don’t know what you hit in there, but whatever it was it’s sure as hell gone now, over!”

The only possible explanation for such a massive explosion was that the NVA had hidden a huge cache of munitions in the church, figuring no one would think to check in there until they could make use of it. On a whim, the Cobra pilot decided to take a random shot at the building and the rockets set off the munitions. An explosion of that magnitude had to be easily visible for at least twenty miles in every direction, which meant that the NVA, on the other side of the border, must have been well aware they'd just lost their valuable supplies.

Our company moved around to the right of the now disintegrated church, toward the border, while B-company went out of sight way over on the other side of it.

When we were only about five-hundred yards from the border, we came upon what must have been a small village at one time. There was a single, leafless, dead tree standing in the middle of ten to fifteen shallow depressions where earthen dwellings once stood, but had eroded back into the soil. Because the surface here was completely exposed to the sun, it was devoid of any growth whatsoever, the ground baked hard and cracked from lack of moisture.

Since the treeline was a good three to five-hundred yards away in every direction, and the land completely flat, giving unlimited visibility all around, the Captain Boatner decided to stop here for a lunch break. The platoons formed our usual circular perimeter and sat on the ground, using their packs as backrests. The captain, Top Soloway, Lieutenant Thompson, who was our forward artillery officer, his radioman, the head medic, myself, Wada, and Lonnie sat in the center of the perimeter.

While we were eating, I kept staring off in the direction of the treeline on the border.

“You seem to be mesmerized by something out there”, Wada said, lifting a spoon of boned chicken to his mouth from a green can.

I looked over at him, somewhat surprised that anyone had noticed.

“Yeah,...it’s kind of a strange feeling knowing that we can actually look into Cambodia, right out there, and that there are probably hundreds of NVA sitting just inside those trees.”

Wada gazed out at the treeline too, “I know what you mean, but I don’t think we have to worry about them too much, at least not during the day.”

“It doesn’t really worry me, but it is a funny feeling knowing that they’re right there. In fact, they’re probably watching us with binoculars.”

“Probably,” Wada answered, scanning the distant horizon.

We finished eating, and were pondering the fact that we’d have to saddle up shortly, to begin walking under the hot sun again, when we heard a familiar, distant, muffled poof. It was so low that it was almost inaudible, but it was there nonetheless. A few seconds later a small explosion raised the dust just outside the perimeter. Someone shouted, “Incoming!”, though it was hardly necessary at that point, because we’d all spread out flat on the ground.

Several more poofs were heard while we tried to determine from what direction they were coming. The first round landed about ten feet from a group of four men at the edge of the perimeter, but none of them were injured. Because of that, and the small size of the explosion, it was easily determined that the mortar being fired at us was a French sixty-millimeter tube.

I had seen one of these mortars when it was captured during one of our ambushes. Evidently the NVA had captured a large number of them years earlier from the French and some were still in service, although infrequently. The main reason they seldom used them was that they were so ineffective. A good example was the round that just landed only ten feet from the guys on the perimeter and none of

them were hit. The only advantage of the tube was its portability, since it was only about two feet long and two-and-a-half inches in diameter, but, because of its small size, it did very little damage.

The rounds, from the second set of poofs, came down, some of them actually landing inside the perimeter. We, in the CP, were lying in one of the shallow depression, the bottom of which was only about six inches below the level surface, but it was enough for adequate protection. A round exploded six feet away without even hurting our ears.

The only way those rounds were really dangerous was if they made a direct hit on someone. Illustrating that very point, one of the guys on the perimeter had one land in the depression he was lying in and received only minor cuts to his face. He'd be medevaced out for treatment, but it was nothing serious.

Oddly enough, after some of the heavy contact we'd been through over the past months, these explosions didn't cause us any real concern. They were more of an annoyance than anything.

Most of us in the CP, including the captain, were openly exposed while we knelt, trying to figure out where the tube was located. Since the nearest treeline was so far away, and the land completely open all around, there was virtually no place to hide. It seemed that a tube as small as that wouldn't be able to reach us from the trees and, though we could hear the distant poofs, it was literally impossible to pinpoint from which direction they were being fired.

Finally, the poofs ended and the rounds stopped falling. Captain Boatner had us saddle up and begin walking back toward a low rise of land about four-hundred yards behind where we just were. I was walking beside Lieutenant Thompson, the artillery officer, and the captain was on the other side of

him, when I noticed a smile come to the CO's face. He began speaking, as much to himself as to anyone.

“You know,...we haven't had a real opportunity to see what some of those fancy rounds, that the LZ has back there, can really do.”

“No sir, I guess we haven't,” Thompson answered noncommittally.

We reached the top of the rise and the captain turned to face him, again with that somewhat mischievous smile.

“Lieutenant, how would you like to call some out, just so we can get a first hand look?”

Now Thompson, catching on, smiled too, “Well, Sir, what would you like to see?”

“Oh, I don't know. Let's see. How about some of those new air-burst, anti-personnel rounds?”

“No problem. And where should we have them come in?”

The captain looked out over the plain we'd just crossed.

“How about if we lay a blanket over the spot we just left? Maybe we'll catch some of those bastards with their pants down.”

Thompson took the radio handset from his radioman, “It's as good as done, Sir.”

While he was calling in the coordinates, the rest of the company took up positions all along the edge of the ridge. Everyone wanted to have a good viewing location for the show. We could see the dead tree and abandoned village shimmering under the baking sun, out there on the barren plain.

It was well known that the enemy would usually check through a location we Americans had just left, in case something usable might have been left behind. In this case, however, it was highly unlikely there was anyone out there, simply because any figure moving in those open spaces would be easily

visible from this ridge, but there was also a psychological angle to what the captain was up to. Not only would it be good for the morale of our guys to see some rounds fired out, after they'd had to sit through a mortaring, but it would serve to let the enemy know that we wouldn't take any kind of assault, no matter how trivial, without some kind of retaliation.

Shortly, the distant booms of the big guns could be heard behind us, the whistling rounds sailing through the air, high over our heads. The main shells burst about a hundred feet over the village, dropping smaller canisters down with little explosions raising dust clouds all over the ground. If there was anyone out there, they'd have been turned into hamburger, and that was the whole point of the show.