
SIXTY FIVE**A Horrible Accident**

The next morning, before moving back to the river to meet the boats again, we went out into the paddy to investigate where we'd seen the people carrying the rockets. I don't think I'll ever forget the strangeness of walking on top of the berm that went through the middle of that paddy and seeing body parts strewn all around, on both sides. There was a hand lying here, a leg over there, a head a little farther away. None of the four had escaped. They were here, albeit spread all across the field. It's quite pointless to say that it wasn't a pretty sight.

The company spent another day searching villages along the river with the Navy boats. There was no further contact between ourselves and the enemy on the river, but I was awakened at around two in the morning that night.

Just like the previous night, we'd pulled back approximately a hundred yards from the bank to find some dry ground on which to set up our perimeter. The boats continued patrolling up and down the river, all through the night, and it was when one of them was just about adjacent to our location that a small enemy force opened fire on them. Actually, I'd only been awakened by this particular incident because it was the closest one to our location so far tonight.

It was easy to see why the life expectancy of those poor guys was only two weeks. They'd go literally no more than a hundred yards at a time without receiving some kind of enemy fire from right off the banks!

I sat up on my poncho liner and watched the tracers flying furiously back and forth, over by the trees that screened us from the river. It was a damned shame that there was nothing we could do to help them, but there was no way we could move at night in this miserable terrain.

The firing died away when the boat moved out of range of that particular group of NVA or VC, but resumed several minutes later, farther up the river, when they got into range of another group. This was the usual routine every night for the men on the river boats! I'll say one thing for those sailors, they sure as hell had a lot of guts to go through that kind of punishment almost continuously.

On the following two nights separate incidents occurred, one of which brought deep sadness and the other a fair amount of satisfaction to we men of Company C. We'd moved, *thankfully*, away from the swampy area of the river and into the rice paddy fields between it and the border. These fields were bordered by large tracts of dense jungle that made it easy for the NVA to move their forces around undetected. We'd received new orders to set up our nightly perimeter and ambushes in the depths of those jungle areas, as a deterrent to that movement.

Just after nightfall, the main perimeter had been set up and the captain ordered the third platoon to send out a squad as a forward listening post and ambush. It was routine for the artillery officer to have the big guns in the rear fire out marking rounds. He would send in the coordinates and the guns would fire a round that burst in the air with a flash at night or a puff of white smoke during the day. That was done at three different locations around the company's position, in a triangular fashion. Then the guns would be left on those coordinates so that, should we have enemy contact, they'd already be preset to give us support.

Lieutenant Thompson had already spotted two of the air bursts and called for the third. As usual, the round whistled past, high overhead, but instead of the bright flash we expected to see in the sky, the round landed with a tremendous explosion. The people on the guns had mistakenly loaded a high explosive round rather than the harmless marking round! This was not the first time such a mistake had been made. I'd heard of these kinds of incidents before.

As soon as the round exploded, we heard terrible screams coming from out of the darkness in the distance. We knew immediately, from the direction of the explosion, that the round had gone toward the squad that had been sent out and, with those awful screams, suspected the worst!

Thompson jumped on the radio and yelled frantically for the guns to cease fire. At the same time, the rest of the third platoon grabbed their weapons and headed out of the perimeter in the direction the squad had gone. The artillery officer called a second firebase and had flares fired out continuously, to aid those guys in getting to the others as quickly as possible through the dense growth.

It was an automatic rule that, whenever there was an accident, the guns that had fired the errant round or rounds were not to be moved. The reason for it was so that a formal investigation could be held to try and determine who had made the mistake.

From the quiet serenity that had permeated the perimeter only moments ago, the area was now alive with activity. Flares, bursting continuously overhead, kept the scene lit with an eerie yellow glow as I and the other radiomen of the CP hustled the people in the rear to get medevacs out to us immediately. All the medics, from around the perimeter, gathered at the CP and checked their supplies, hoping to have enough of whatever they might need for the wounded who would undoubtedly be coming in, either walking or carried.

Everyone waited breathlessly for the third platoon to reach the location of the now defunct ambush. We radiomen stayed right with our handsets glued to our ears, waiting for some kind of word, hopefully that it wasn't as bad as it had sounded. The others around the perimeter huddled near their radiomen so that they might catch any conversation between the third platoon, who'd gone out to search, and the captain's CP.

Then our radios came to life.

"Six India, this is Three-Six India."

It was difficult to understand his words, because of the confusion around him and the fact that he was out of breath from running. Despite their having to fight dense jungle all the way, they'd literally run to the aid of their friends out there. All semblance of proper radio protocol was forgotten as he yelled into his handset.

"That goddamned round landed right on the squad! We can't tell how many are dead yet, but we've got critically wounded all over the place!"

The captain grabbed Wada's shoulder, "Tell them we've got the second platoon on their way to help!" Then he turned in the direction of the second platoon on the perimeter and yelled, "Two-Six, get your platoon out there *now!*"

Two-Six didn't even take the time to reply, but had his men saddle up immediately and move out. Doc Henry, the head medic in the CP, since Doc Clark had gone back to the States, took all but one of the other medics with him and left with that platoon.

Tense minutes ticked by while the rest of us waited anxiously for word. Intermittent specters of yellow light and shadow moved slowly across the perimeter, created by the continuous drift of flares overhead.

It wasn't long before the second platoon began reentering the perimeter, some helping those who could walk, and others carrying the critically wounded in poncho liners. As soon as they began coming in, the other guys on the perimeter gave whatever assistance they could. They also had to maintain a protective front around the perimeter, because the enemy, if they were nearby, wouldn't give a damn about our personal problems, but would take advantage of the situation if they were able to.

At this point, with the flares bursting over our location, and all the yelling that had been going on, not only out where the round landed, but in the perimeter itself, our security had been seriously compromised. Though we were in an extremely dangerous and vulnerable set of circumstances right now, no one was worrying about it. We were all doing everything possible for our friends who were hurt.

The medevacs were on their way out. There were moans and heart-rending crying from those who were being brought back to the perimeter. One of those men, who wasn't wounded physically, sat down on the ground near me. He was crying in deep, body-racking sobs.

"It was unbelievable!...In the flash from the explosion I saw the serge's head blown off!"

He couldn't speak anymore, but gave in to his tears. I sat down on the ground beside him and put my arm around his shoulders. It was difficult to know what to say to someone who had gone through what this poor guy just had.

"I know,...I know,...but it's all over now," I said, feeling totally inadequate.

The medics had their hands full tending to the wounded who were lying on the ground in the center of the perimeter. They didn't have time for those who were psychologically hurting. If I could do nothing else for him, I had to try and keep him from going into shock.

"Everything's going to be all right. You're back with us now and we're going to take care of everything. Don't worry, it'll be okay," I told him over and over. I kept my arm around his shoulders, squeezing tightly, so that he had some kind of security knowing someone was there. And I wasn't the only one trying to soothe the walking casualties. The others, in the CP, were sitting on the ground with the shell-shocked doing the same.

The medevacs began coming in, one after the other, guided in to where they could lower rigid stretchers to the medics on the ground. There was no room for them to land in this growth. The men around the perimeter had automatically divided their attention so that each of the conscious wounded had someone to stick by him with words of encouragement. When it was time for the guy with me to go, I helped him to his feet, "Come on, buddy. You'll be in good hands over there. They're going to take care of you."

When all the members of the squad had been medevaced out, and some semblance of order returned to the perimeter, it was determined that three of the men had been killed outright and the rest either severely wounded or in deep shell-shock. The sergeant, who was in charge of the squad, had a six inch piece of shrapnel go through his helmet, blowing his brains out the back of his head. One of the men, who helped the wounded back, had brought the helmet with him. It was covered with blood and brain tissue.

I noticed Lieutenant Thompson sitting by himself on the ground, in the darkness, near the base of a tree. He had his knees up and his arms folded over them. I made my way over and sat down on the ground next to him. Even in the semi-darkness of the ground flares that had been lit for the Medevacs to come in, it was easy to see the pain and tears in his eyes.

Thompson had dark hair and a thick, bushy mustache. He'd always had a good sense of humor and the guys enjoyed kidding with him. Over the time that I'd known him, I'd really come to like him. Again, it was difficult to know what to say.

"Sir," I spoke softly, "I know how you feel, but everyone knows it wasn't your fault."

Thompson let out a long, slow breath of hopelessness. He kept his gaze straight ahead, staring into the darkness.

"I just talked to the people back at the firebase. Do you believe they moved the guns after it happened?"

"I thought they weren't supposed to do that!"

"They aren't,...but, evidently, somebody wanted to cover his ass."

Now there was anger in my voice, "Shit! That means they won't be able to prove the mistake was back there."

"That's right," he answered in resignation.

"Well, it doesn't matter. All of us in the CP heard when you were calling out the marking rounds. We know that you never called for an HE."

Thompson smiled sardonically, “I appreciate that fact, but it doesn’t matter. As of right now I might as well consider my military career over. This thing will have to be hung on somebody’s head and, because they moved the guns, I guess I know who they intend that to be.”

There wasn’t much more to be said. We sat in silence, watching the last of the medevacs pull up and away.