
SIXTY EIGHT**A Booby Trap Of Our Own**

Not only did that Sunday morning begin with a bang,...literally,...but it was also the eve of the Vietnamese New Year called TET. The TET offensive of 1968 had gone down as a historical event, a concerted Communist attack, both NVA and VC, on American installations all over Vietnam. The enemy had planned, in advance, to put on a tremendous show of force figuring that the American people would see the futility of their continuing the conflict and pack it all in and we had no reason to believe that this one, Tet of '69, would be any different.

Oddly enough, from a military standpoint, the offensive of '68 had been considered a failure, but it was also a major turning point, back home, against support for continuing the war.

The overall political affect of TET, however, had far less impact on we men of Company C than did the strangeness that began when the sun went down that day.

First of all, from the experience of past TET holidays, we knew that the Vietnamese, both North and South, celebrated it like there was no tomorrow. Opium, the drug most preferred by the Asians, would flow hot and heavy.

We had run into the enemy, on more than one occasion when they were obviously high, but nothing would compare to the numbers who'd be that way during the holiday!

We spent most of the day in the same location where we'd pulled the night ambush and I witnessed a very bizarre ritual—one that I'd seen performed before by members of the Cav, although I must admit that it was a bit too gruesome for my taste.

One of the guys placed a First Cav shoulder patch on the ground with an ace of spades, from a deck of cards, lying on top of it. Next, he pounded a wooden stake through the two of them and, finally, drove the stake through the eye of one of the corpses.

As horrible as this might sound, it had the desired affect of scaring the hell out of the North Vietnamese which, after all, was the idea. They were an extremely superstitious people and the ace of spades was a death card to them. The Cav patch served to let them know who they were dealing with. It was a psychological ploy that served the purpose it was intended to and, after some of the horrible things we'd seen them do to both our guys and the South Vietnamese people, we had very few qualms about it.

We also saw something that brought a chuckle, even from the captain. One of the guys in the second platoon had a small scratch pad that he always carried with him. On the trunk of a tree, standing right beside the trail, he tacked up a series of notes, one above the other, as high as he could reach. We knew that the enemy would read those notes eagerly for any information they might get.

Each note had some little zinger written on it like, "The First Cav is watching you," and "We're going to get you!", all the way up to the highest one which read, "Try and reach this one you little bastards!"

Another guy came up with an ingenious idea, for which he asked Captain Boatner's permission to try. It was a given that, as soon as an American company left a particular sight where they'd spent the night, the enemy would move in and dig up whatever trash pits were left behind, looking for anything they could use to construct mines or booby traps. A discarded C-ration can, for example, could be used to make a mine by filling it with plastic explosive. We were always particularly careful about leaving anything for them to use against us.

Knowing that they would almost inevitably come up the trail behind us, as soon as we moved out, this particular guy decided he'd like to give them a little taste of their own medicine. Just before the company left the sight, he unscrewed the top from a hand grenade. The top contained the blasting cap and a four-second fuse, which gave the man throwing it that much time to get rid of it before it went off. He then unscrewed the top from a smoke grenade and screwed that onto the hand grenade. Since a smoke grenade wasn't an explosive device, there was no need for a four second delay. When the pin was pulled, and the handle released, it detonated instantly.

Without releasing his grip on the detonator handle, he removed the pin from the grenade and slid it into an empty tin can. Now the can prevented the handle from flipping off.

He carefully set the can on a branch of a tree, out over the trail, with a trip flare wire tied to it that ran down the trunk and across the trail. If his little surprise worked, anyone who came along the trail and snagged the almost invisible wire, would tip the can over, dropping the grenade straight down on himself. And, because of the cap from the smoke grenade, there would be no time delay. It would go off as soon as it was out of the can.

Would it work? We had no way of knowing, because the blasting cap on a smoke grenade wasn't as powerful as the one on a hand grenade. It might not have the charge necessary to set it off. We'd just have to wait and see.

Captain Boatner had us move approximately three-hundred yards further along the trail, up the leg of the "T", where we would set up again for the night. When we'd gone about half that distance, we heard the distant explosion of the grenade that was left behind. The booby trap had worked!

Guys, all along the column, turned to one another with a deeply satisfactory, "All-right!"

My thought was that I'd like to have seen the expressions on the faces of those who'd tripped the wire of our own little booby trap, having the tables turned on them for a change.