
SIXTY NINE**A TET To Remember**

The company's perimeter was set up beside the trail with the captain's CP only about ten yards back from it. We were about halfway up the leg of the "T", off to the side of the open field. Because this was the eve of TET, we were in for one of the strangest nights we'd experienced, though we didn't know that yet.

At dusk, as usual, the guys on the foxholes around the perimeter went out beyond their positions to set up their trip flares. Joel Harvey, a shorter, blonde kid in the first platoon, who wore glasses and had more the disposition of a university professor than a grunt, walked out beyond his hole where he intended to set up his flare. While he was out there, the light faded from twilight to almost dark.

Just when he was finishing his setup, he heard someone say the Vietnamese words for "Come here". He looked into the dusk and, less than twenty feet away, could see two NVA soldiers standing side by side in the middle of the trail! Again one of them spoke in Vietnamese saying, "Come here," and motioned for him to go over to them.

Unfortunately, Harvey had made one of the gravest errors anyone could in this situation. Probably because it was still light when he went out to set up his flare, and that he wasn't going far, he'd left his M-16 leaning against a tree back at the perimeter!

When the two beckoned a third time, he realized that they must be high on opium. Otherwise they'd have shot him as soon as they noticed him.

Keeping his cool, in a gutsy move, Joel turned and began walking slowly back toward the perimeter. They followed as soon as he started to move! When he reached the tree where his rifle leaned, he picked it up in an easy manner, turned around, and shot them both.

He hadn't had time to warn us about the two men following him so, needless to say, we were all surprised by the shots.

When he explained to Captain Boatner what had taken place, the CO told him that he was lucky they were high on something or he wouldn't be here to tell us about it. A slight dig for leaving his rifle behind. Yet, in his very next breathe, he commended Joel for having the courage to handle the situation the way he had.

And that was just the beginning!

At around midnight, I got a call from the rear on my radio. Because it was night, I had only the handset sound functioning.

"Comanche Six India, this is Romeo Charlie, over."

"Go ahead Romeo Charlie, over."

"This is Romeo Charlie,...inform Six that we have radar confirmation of a high speed aircraft heading in your direction from the other side of the border, over."

Knocked back by the message, I passed it on to Captain Boatner. Everyone in the CP had the same reaction at the same time.

"You're kidding?!"

"See if they can give us any more information," the captain whispered in the darkness.

I gave the request over my handset.

“Roger, Six India. The information we have indicates that it’s a single aircraft moving fast enough to be a possible Mig, and that it should reach your location in just a few, over.”

When I passed the word that it might be a Russian jet, the first one to speak was Top, “What the hell are we going to do against a Mig?!”

Captain Boatner said simply, “Tell them to keep us informed of its progress.” What else was there to say?

Top was right. There wasn’t anything else we could do. There was no time to have the Air Force send out an interceptor before it reached our location. We just had to sit tight and wait.

Some pretty tense minutes went by, all our ears focused on the sky, listening for the approach of the Mig, but it never materialized. Then rear command came on again and informed us that, as the aircraft was approaching our location, it just vanished from their radar screens!

Here was that strangeness again! Not only had it simply disappeared from their radar, but, if it did actually approach our location, the way the people in the rear were telling us it did, we should have heard something. We didn’t..

Everything was quiet again, until well past midnight when another group of NVA soldiers came down the trail and tripped one of the flares. There was a brief exchange of gunfire, over on that part of the perimeter, until the flare burned out. Then a very deadly game began to be played out.

The remaining enemy soldiers, who hadn’t been hit during the initial exchange of fire, had dived into the foot-tall grass just a short way outside the perimeter.

One of the cardinal rules every soldier learns, no matter which side he’s on, is that you try to avoid using your rifle in the darkness, unless it’s absolutely necessary, because the muzzle flash will give your

position away. If the enemy was able to spot that flash and aim toward it, there was a pretty good chance he'd hit you.

This also followed along the same lines as the well known "three-on-a-match" that most people had heard of. To the superstitious, being the third person to light a cigarette from a single match had become an accepted sign of bad luck. What wasn't so well known was that that bad luck image had come about because of a real situation on the battle field. Soldiers knew from experience that, in the dark, if three of them took the time to light their cigarettes from one match, by the time it got to the third one, the enemy had had time to aim his weapon and hit that third man.

So now, the NVA soldiers, lying in the grass, decided against using their rifles and began tossing hand grenades over into the general area where they thought our perimeter was. One thing about a grenade, when it was thrown in the dark, it was virtually impossible to tell from which direction it came.

The point where the enemy were spread out in the grass was only about fifteen or twenty yards from where our CP was located. Our outer perimeter passed between the enemy positions and the CP, and the men on that part of the perimeter began tossing grenades of their own out into the grass.

We, in the CP, had taken cover behind a foot-thick, fallen log that lay parallel to the point where the enemy were. Over the top of the log, we watched an eerie show of sparks flying and brilliant flashes from the grenades going off in the darkness, some very close, others out in the grass beyond the trail. In fact, we were set up so close to this part of the perimeter that an occasional explosion would cover us with dirt and debris thrown up by the blast!

Most of us had never experienced such a strange exchange. It was far too dark to see anyone out beyond the log, even our own men who were just a short distance in front of us.

This weird exchange went on for quite some time. It wasn't a continuous barrage. There'd be a flash and shower of sparks, along with a deafening report. Then there'd be a few seconds of quiet until one or two more went off.

Evidently, figuring that this strange game of grenade tossing wasn't working for them, the NVA crawled back to a point where they were out of throwing range and took off back up the trail, the way they'd come. With no way of knowing whether they'd left entirely or just pulled back to circle around and hit us from another direction, Captain Boatner had Wada call the rear and request air assistance. A short while later the engines of a plane could be heard approaching our location.

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

Wada had the call on his radio, “Go ahead Dragon Lady Two, over.”

“Comanche, are you presently in contact with the enemy, over?”

“That's a negative, Dragon Lady. The November Victor Alpha seem to have disengaged, over.”

We could see the running lights of the C-130 circling out in the distance, the pilots not exactly sure where we were in the darkness.

“Roger that, Comanche. If you're not under immediate threat, we'll have to get permission from your rear command to use our weapons. With the firepower we're carrying, and you being in the dark down there, your CO will have to make a formal request for us to engage, over.”

The dragon ship, like the one that had aided us near the location for the new LZ, carried four to six mini-guns. It could spray an area the width of a football field with so many bullets that there wasn't more than an inch of space between each round hitting the ground!

If the enemy was very close to us, it could be extremely dangerous if their aim was off, even a hair. At night the odds of that happening were very high so that, if the company wasn't in immediate, life-threatening danger, as we had been at the new LZ, special permission was needed for the plane to engage its weapons.

Captain Boatner took a few moments to weigh the danger of an accident against our current situation and decided that the risk wasn't worth it. The contact seemed to have stopped and no one had been injured.

“Tell them we'll hold off for the moment. We don't seem to be in any immediate danger.”

Wada passed the message on.

“Roger, Comanche, but I'll tell you what we can do for you. We also have high intensity lights aboard. We don't need permission to use those if you'd like us to light the area up, over.”

The captain instructed Wada to tell them that it would be much appreciated.

As the plane passed almost directly overhead, suddenly the entire area, for as far as we could see, lit up like daytime! There were huge, brilliant arc-lights across the wingspan of the plane that shone down in a line. In fact, the lights were so bright that we couldn't look up at it without shielding our eyes!

While it circled, our men made a thorough search of the grassy area where the enemy had lain. They found three bodies of those who were hit in the initial ambush, but the rest had fled after the grenade throwing incident.

Upon completion of the search the captain had Wada thank the pilots and tell them that they could return to base. Nothing further happened during the night, but we men of C company would never forget the strangeness, for us, on that eve of the TET offensive of 1968.