
SEVENTY ONE**A Final Deadly Ambush**

C company spent one day on LZ Ike before going out on what would be my last patrol in the field. After what we'd been through over the past month, I'd reached what I can only describe as the physical and psychological bottom of the barrel. It wasn't hard to see, from the appearance and morale of the others in the company, that they too were all pretty much dead on their feet. What we were suffering from is commonly referred to as battle fatigue. The constant stress of our almost daily engagements with the enemy had really taken its toll. This made for a dangerous situation because tempers were short and mistakes were easily made when men were stretched to such limits.

On the second morning, the company moved out of the LZ. The countryside here had more the appearance of thick forest bordering open meadows of the same foot-high, golden colored elephant grass. We spent the day moving through one meadow and on to the next, staying close to the treelines, letting them guide our course. Since Rita, Ike and Terry were companion LZs, they were in the same general area where we'd been patrolling near the Ho Chi Minh trail.

In the late afternoon we came around a bend, following the treeline along the left side of yet another open field. The two treelines of this smaller field, only some forty or fifty feet apart where we entered it, narrowed down still further into a bottleneck that opened up onto a much larger meadow out beyond it. Looking down from above, these two open areas, with the bottleneck separating them

would appear in the shape of an hourglass and we were moving along the lower left side, up toward the narrow opening.

We were already pretty beat from having spent the entire day walking, so that the thought of stopping for the night was extremely welcomed. Even though we'd spent a day securing the LZ, we were so battle weary that one day did little to help us recover.

I was off duty, as far as the radio was concerned and walking some ways back, behind the CP. We CP radiomen rotated duty, two on and one off each day. And the one who wasn't on duty, would walk with the men of the line. That simple fact was about to save my life!

The front of the column stayed just outside the treeline to our left, moving toward the bottleneck, the other treeline, across the field, getting closer as they approached the point where the two almost met.

I'd just come around the bend into the bottom-left corner of the hourglass, to where I could see up through the bottleneck into the next field. Suddenly, with absolutely no warning, we heard a loud hissing sound and a trail of white smoke zipped past only a couple of feet over our heads. A B-40 rocket, that had been set up on the ground, right in the narrow opening of the bottleneck, exploded in the trees back behind us. At the same time, two thirty-caliber machine-guns, one up near the front of the column and the other back near where I was walking with the guys, along with dozens of AK-47s, opened fire from inside the treeline all along our right.

As soon as the firing began, we all dove headlong into our own treeline and low-crawled for some kind of cover. Unfortunately there wasn't much, the largest trees being only about four inches in diameter. I and the two guys, the one to my front, the other behind me, had dived to the ground

together and spun around, just inside the trees. The guy who'd been behind me lay face up between me and the other man who were on our stomachs. The only cover we had were some four to five-inch thick, knurled vines hanging parallel to the ground, about a foot over our bodies. Fortunately, however, there was enough small ground growth, grass and weeds, to just conceal us from the view across the way.

The three of us remained motionless, our heads in the direction from which the intense firing was coming. It happened that we were in almost direct line with the second thirty-caliber machine-gun, across the field, and the gunner over there had a pretty good idea of where we were lying.

Several bursts fanned across, only a foot or so over us. The rounds tore the hanging vines to splinters and the man who was lying face up, between us, began sputtering and spiting furiously while swearing up a storm. Our first impression was that he'd been hit.

"Hey," I shouted at him over the noise, "Are you okay?"

Still spitting, he finally yelled back, "Yeah! I got some chips from that son-of-a-bitchin' vine in my mouth!"

For some crazy reason, even under such horrible circumstances, someone complaining vehemently about getting bits of wood chips in his mouth, when just moments ago, thirty-caliber bullets had passed within inches of our bodies, seemed,...well,...funny. We two men, lying on each side of him, began chuckling involuntarily, and then burst into uncontrollable laughter. The guy in the middle, with small shavings of wood hanging from his face and clothes, and still spiting vigorously, rolled over onto his stomach and turned his head side to side, looking at us.

“What...?” he said, sounding somewhat foolish and guilty for having thrown such a scare into us, thinking he was hit.

Then, the absurdity of what he’d just said dawned on him too and he began laughing along with us.

Suddenly, another burst passed inches above us, shattering more of the vines and causing us to tense up. The third man raised his head slightly, “Determined little bastard, isn’t he?”

Once again we broke into fits of laughter. I know how strange that must sound, three men laughing hysterically when all hell is breaking loose around them, but the only explanation I can offer is that, having been in this kind of situation on such a regular basis, involuntary laughter was one of the ways that the mind had of dealing with the horrendous stress we were constantly being exposed to.

I raised my head slightly, hoping to get a bead on where the machine-gun fire was coming from. Forcing myself to be straight, I said to no one in particular, “How the hell can we be laughing at a time like this?”

The guy beside me now sounded serious too, “I don’t know, but it sure beats the hell out of thinking about what’s going on right now.”

During this whole time the exchange of fire between the two opposing treelines had continued at a crazy pace. We three managed to crawl back further into the trees, along with everyone else, out of the line of sight. As we got to a safer point, one of the platoon lieutenants came running through the woods behind us with some of his men. He stopped and squatted down long enough to shout over the din.

“Second and third platoons are moving up front. Hutton, you stay here and take care of the wounded as they fall back. You other two men come with us.”

“Right!”

It wasn't long before four or five guys came staggering aimlessly back through the trees, from the direction of the bottleneck where the front of the column had been hardest hit. They weren't wounded, but appeared to be in a daze, completely oblivious to the heavy firing and rounds zipping all through these woods.

As soon as they got near me, I grabbed hold of each one and pulled him down to the ground. They were in such deep shell-shock that they might just as well have been unconscious. Still, I kept talking to them, despite the fact that they didn't answer, because I wanted to let them know that someone was there.

I really had no idea what to do for them, other than keeping them from standing up to wander around and most certainly being hit. I figured that the best thing was to keep talking as if they were coherent. I tried to sound as convincing as I could, reassuring them that everything was going to be all-right.

Over the course of my tour I'd been in more firefights than I cared to think about and had never seen one that wasn't a mass of confusion. But this one had gotten completely chaotic!

From somewhere, just a short distance up the treeline, on our side, I heard someone yell loudly, "Chu hoi!, Chu hoi!", the Vietnamese term for surrender, over the firing. Then there was a loud explosion, in the clearing, that sent a powerful shockwave through the air. At first I thought another B-40 rocket had been fired, but that wasn't it. One of the guys who'd been hit and killed during the initial outbreak had been carrying an M-72 LAW, the fiberglass bazooka, slung over his shoulder. He'd been lying in the open field, between the enemy and us, until a few moments ago when a stray bullet hit the

LAW and set it off. His body all but disappeared in the explosion and the grass in the no man's land between us and the enemy caught fire, burning until the clearing was nothing but ash.

One of the platoon medics came through the woods, from the direction of the front of the column. He was helping support a guy who had a shoulder wound and had another guy, in deep shell-shock, following along. When he stopped at my little group of guys, sitting on the ground, the glazed look in his eyes gave me a really bad feeling. It said it all as far as our situation was concerned.

“We’ve been hit real bad,” he said, shaking his head, nearly out of breath. We’ve got all kinds of walking wounded making their way back here and the ones who can’t walk are being dragged. We’ll have to set up some kind of medical area in that clearing back around the bend. Can you get these guys over there?”

I yelled back to him, “No problem!”

He moved away, in the direction of the clearing he’d mentioned, his arm slung around the wounded man.

I got the guys, sitting on the ground, to their feet and started them, along with the guy the medic had just left with me, moving in the direction of the clearing, keeping them herded together so they wouldn’t stray. After I left them with the medic, in the clearing, I ran back into the treeline to help get more of the wounded who couldn’t walk out of there.

The medics had so many wounded on their hands that they were all but overwhelmed by the numbers.

The lieutenant, with whom I’d spoken only minutes earlier, came into the clearing where we had some fifteen wounded lying all around on the ground and at least that many who were in deep shell-

shock. His eyes scanned the area quickly and then he came over to me, the only one in the clearing, besides the medics, who was still functioning, and said that everyone in the CP had been hit. The enemy had purposefully waited to nail the CP and had made good work of it. That news was a terrible blow to me. All the guys I'd been with for months had gone down. I was only spared because, by the luck of the draw, I'd been off radio duty.

He said that the captain had stood on a low mound, at the edge of the treeline and yelled the *chui hoi's*, across to the enemy, that I'd heard a short time ago. Almost immediately he'd been hit in the upper part of his legs and was out of action. The only one, other than myself, left of the CP was Top and that was because he wasn't here. He'd gone back to the rear, for the day, to take care of some company business. I had that to be thankful for too, because, if he'd been out here, he might very well have been another one of the casualties.

There was an awful irony in the fact that, just a short while ago, the captain had yelled *surrender* over to the enemy and now, here I was standing in a clearing with guys lying all over the place, moaning with the agony of horrendous wounds. And to make matters worse, there was only the one lieutenant left of the platoon leaders, myself from the CP and one or two medics to take care of all the wounded.

After what seemed an eternity, the firing finally died away. I had just finished gathering all the CP radios into a group, in the clearing where the wounded were lying, when the lieutenant returned. He called one of the medics over and the three of us stood there, in the gathering dusk, looking out over the field of wounded.

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

One of the guys in the CP must have had the chance to called for air support, before he was hit, and a Cobra now arrived, circling overhead. That pilot's voice, calling over the radio, was one of the most beautiful sounds I thought I'd ever heard. I reached down for the handset.

"This is Comanche Six India. Go ahead, Thunderbolt, over."

Knowing we were in a bad way, from the transmissions he'd heard, he wasted no time, "Six India, I can see the burned out clearing down there. What's your position from there. over?"

"We're about twenty yards november echo (north east) of the clearing. I'll pop smoke, over."

"Roger that."

I pulled a smoke grenade off my pack, that I'd left sitting on the ground with the radios and tossed it out toward the clearing where the ambush had taken place.

"Roger, Six India. I've got your smoke. I also see a lot of people lying on the ground near your location. Are they yours, over?"

"That's a rog, Thunderbolt. We've been hit hard. The November-Victor-Charlie are in the treeline across the field from us, over."

"All-right, Six India. You take care of your people down there, and I'll take care of that treeline right now. There's more help on the way, so you hang in there."

"Roger that, Thunderbolt,...and thank you much."

The Cobra began pouring its munitions into the enemy treeline, only about forty yards away from us, on the other side of our thin line of protective trees.

"We've got medevacs on the way out," the medic said and then added, "Most of these guys are in a really bad way. They need attention right away."

The lieutenant let out a long breath with the overwhelming magnitude of the situation.

“All-right, we’ve got a shitload of problems here. We have medevacs on the way,...the wounded have to be tended to...”, he looked up at the circling Cobra spraying its mini-gun into the enemy treeline, “and that Cobra may be the only thing keeping those bastards from coming over here and wiping the rest of us out. They know they’ve hurt us bad and it’s going to be dark in a few minutes, so the first thing we’ve got to do is try and set up some kind of perimeter. I’ll go and get the guys that are left busy on that.”

He looked over at me, “You take care of CP communications, and see if you can get some of these shell-shocked guys in position right around this area. They may not be able to do anything, but at least we can try to make them look like they can,” and then to Doc, “and you medics will have to do the best you can for all these wounded.”

The Cobra had emptied its load and been replaced by another, but the NVA could circle around in the woods and come out of the trees anywhere. It was all too clear that it was a large force, possibly capable of overrunning the rest of us.

Moving as quickly as possible, I got each shell-shocked guy to his feet and, like a nurse with a dazed patient, walked him to some position in the immediate area—a fallen log, a stump, a rock, anywhere where there was the slightest cover. Then I’d sit him down on the ground and talk to him while I physically placed his hands on his rifle, lying in his lap.

“There, now you just keep a hold on that, okay? Everything is going to be all-right. We’ve got help coming.”

When I had them all somewhat set up, I made my way over to the radios. Since I was the only radioman left, I'd have to stay in contact with the medevacs that were inbound, the air support already overhead, and rear command who were working on pulling Alpha Company 2/8 from wherever they were, to be choppered out to us.

Before I got to the radios, however, I noticed Captain Boatner lying on a poncho among the other wounded, a short distance away. I changed direction and went over to kneel beside him. It was obvious that he was in a lot of pain and that he'd been given a heavy dose of morphine, but at least he knew I was there. He raised his head, turning his glazed eyes on me, tears streaming down his cheeks.

"It's my fault! It's all my fault! I should have known!"

Seeing his distress, it was all I could do to keep the tears from welling up in my own eyes. This man had been far more to us than just a CO. And now, here he was again, even though in great pain, taking the burden for his wounded men upon himself. I put my hand on his shoulder and, over the ripping sound of the mini-gun, spoke from deep within my own heart.

"No, Sir. It wasn't your fault. They had us set up. They were just waiting for us."

Then I lied, "We've got things under control, sir. The perimeter's set up, and everything's going to be all-right. Don't you worry."

It was a lie because, at this point, I had absolutely no way of knowing whether *anything* was going to be all-right. If those NVA out there decided to attack, it was going to be far from all-right. But I also realized that there was no point in raising his level of distress any further than it already was with something he had no control over and couldn't do a thing about anyway. Not with the wounds he had.

He closed his eyes and rested his head back down on the poncho. As far as I was concerned, if there was any fault to be placed, for all these wounded guys, including the captain, it lay with the people who had put us in this deplorable situation in the first place. But, right now, there was no time for debating the rights or wrongs of it. We were in dire straits and these men needed a hospital as soon as possible.

“Comanche Six India, this is Romeo Charlie, over.”

I'd just returned to the radios when I heard rear command calling.

“Go ahead, Romeo Charlie, over.”

“What is your situation, over?”

“Right now we're holding our own, but six and the entire charlie papa are line two. We need assistance out here ASAP, over.”

“Roger, Six India. We understand your six and entire charlie papa are down. A sortie is picking up Alpha, 2/8 right now. Hang in there. They should ETA your location shortly.”

“Roger that.”

Then a call came over the third radio.

“Comanche Six India, this is Red Bird One, over.”

“Go ahead Red Bird, over.”

“I'm inbound with two other medevac birds and I can see the ARA firing down into the trees.”

“Roger, Red Bird. I can hear your engines sierra echo (southeast) of us. We're about forty yards this side of the ARA, between it and you, over.”

“Roger that, Six India.”

The lieutenant came up, in the now almost total darkness and knelt beside me, “What’s the word?”

I told him about the other company that was on its way out and also that the Hueys we could hear approaching were the medevacs.

“Good, I’ll have some of the guys on the perimeter move around the back there and secure the LZ for those birds.”

The first medevac came in to hover just above the tops of the trees, but there was another problem.

“Six India, the space between those treetops is too tight for us to come in without ground guidance. You’ll have to have someone guide us in, over.”

I look around, but there were only the medics and they were completely tied up. Then I remembered that I’d been carrying a small, portable strobe light in my pack, similar to the ones used for traffic accidents back home. It was meant for just this type of situation.

“Wait one, Red Bird. I’ll have to guide you in myself, over.”

“Roger that, Six India.”

I stuck the small strobe under the elastic band that encircled the outside of my steel pot, walked out into the center of the clearing, switched it on and held my arms out to my sides, bent up at the elbows. Naturally, having any kind of light showing in the darkness went against everything that had been ingrained over the course of a year here. I realized that, if the NVA were still anywhere in the vicinity, the strobe, flashing square in the middle of my head, made a perfect target. But there was no other choice. I figured, the hell with the enemy. All these guys were my friends and they needed medical help right now. If someone didn’t guide those birds in, I had no doubt that a lot of them were

going to die and that was something I wasn't going to allow if there was any way I could possibly prevent it.

The pilot of the first Huey centered himself on the flashing light and came down slowly, his rotors clearing the branches on either side by no more than three feet. Performing such precision flying, in the dark, with the enemy still potentially very close by, took a lot of guts on his part, but then, I was always struck by the unbelievable risks these pilots took on our behalf.

While I was guiding the birds in, one at a time, the medics and some of the guys from the perimeter were carrying the wounded over and helping to put them aboard. Then another sortie of Hueys, their running lights visible in the field behind our clearing, came down and dropped off the first contingents of Alpha 2/8. They immediately began to establish a perimeter out there.

The officers of Alpha came hurrying into our clearing and had some of their men carry the remainder of our wounded out to the Hueys that had just dropped them off. Then they had the rest of us, including those with a lesser case of shell-shock, move back into their perimeter. We would remain in that location until morning.