

## Chapter Twenty - Five

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### THE BIRTHDAY

**T**he next day, just as I suspected, we were sent back up the river. This time another platoon accompanied us. Together we would secure and sweep the area we had just left, then move inland to the northeast two clicks and be extracted by another branch of the Rach Ba Rai. This mission would take most of the day and we had all packed a couple of meals of C's, hoping we'd be back by dinner.

Our platoon was short three men. The previous day I had sent Whetsell and O'Daniel to sick bay because of their sorry-looking feet. Gulason had also stayed back; his orders for leave had arrived and he was to be shipped to Saigon that afternoon to fly to Bangkok the next day. He had gone to the mess hall with us for breakfast and then walked to the dock to see us off.

"Get some for me," a voice hollered from the boat.

"Yeah, I'll get a real ugly one with the clap for you," he yelled back as the boats began pulling away.

Minutes later the small flotilla was churning ahead. I sat low in the hull among a hushed group of soldiers. Without asking, I knew most of them were thinking of Gulason and picturing what the next week would be like for him. I visualized myself in Bangkok.

I could feel my body healing itself of the sores and scratches that covered my arms and legs. I saw myself lounging around the pool, surrounded by nubile young girls relentlessly trying to entice me into some numbah one boom boom. In my daydream I felt my soul recycle itself into a gentler state. I envisioned the hate and fear draining away, slowly replaced by hope and humanity.

The hum of the engines and the smooth rocking of the boat lulled me deeper into my thoughts. I was now on R & R, not in Bangkok, but in Australia. I had put in for Sydney about two weeks ago and would find out in a couple of weeks if my request had been granted. I had heard that the Australian women were beautiful and very friendly. I also knew that the opportunity to visit such a faraway place would never present itself again.

The hard slapping of the water on the hull as we crossed the wake of the previous ship jerked me back to reality. We had pulled along the other LST and some of the soldiers were yelling and waving at their friends from 3rd Platoon 20 meters away. One hundred meters ahead, the speedy gunboat was quietly guiding the way. If attacked, the thickly armored and faster gunboat would have a better chance of evading or responding to the enemy's fire. We, on the other hand, heavily loaded and displacing more water with our flat prow, were an inviting target.

The wide river swept to the left, and our boat, closer to the inside, gained on the other ship further on the outside. The procession continued. This time we were behind the lead gunboat. The 3rd Platoon's boat was now bringing up the rear, 30 meters behind. The river narrowed. The thick, green, leafy walls of jungle slowly grew sparser. From time to time we passed areas where the once-thriving verdant flora had been replaced by a gloomy spectacle of dead trees, scrubby bamboo, and barren land. What had once been a lush area of palms, mangrove trees, and hardy undergrowth had been devastated. The few brown banana leaves still hanging and the gaping holes in the canopy attested to the destruction by a powerful herbicide.

This chemical defoliant, nicknamed Agent Orange for the color of the cans that housed it, had been sprayed from time to time since 1961 on areas that might have concealed Viet Cong operations. Operation Ranch Hand, as it was called, had decimated large tracts of land, eliminating all possibilities of natural growth and crop raising. This desolate landscape had managed to contaminate the surrounding water. By destroying the soil and the trees' root system, the earth washed away into the water, creating silt, changing the riverbanks and poisoning the aquatic life. The total enormity of Agent Orange's destruction would not be felt until 1969, when it was discovered that dioxins in it caused birth defects and cancer.

As I watched the stricken panorama slowly unfurl before me, I noticed that even the appearance of the water had changed. Where it had once been merely brown and dirty, it had now turned into an opaque, viscous yellow liquid. The boats sliced silently through the thick flow. The sparkle and reflective shimmer that had bounced off the water had now diffused and been absorbed by the dull surface.

We continued our travel through the murky waters and observed the ravages wreaked by the deadly planes. Eventually the boats arrived at our destination, one klick beyond the scorched earth. The gunboat slowed to a crawl and began firing several rockets into the landing area. Then a half-dozen mortar rounds were lobbed beyond the dense wall of trees. The rockets' blast into the trees and the ensuing crashing of branches added to the muffled explosion of the mortars and quickly sparked a feeling of excitement. An awareness of impending action surged through the closely packed and waiting masses.

This sensation must have spread to the navy personnel behind the 50-caliber guns above the huddled warriors. Overhead, the loud booming of the heavy stationary gun abruptly joined in the shooting frenzy and began strafing the landing zone. The deep rhythmic roar seemed to send a wave of electricity that galvanized

the small force into its final preparation. Weapons were rechecked, belts and webbing tightened and re-adjusted, pockets buttoned, and backpacks buckled.

Above, the captain slowed the engines. The boats crept forward with just enough momentum for steering. A scraping sound traveled up from beneath the hull as the boat scraped the river bottom and beached itself. Like a drawbridge, the bow was lowered and the order, "Move out, go, go, go!" was given immediately. The eager force lunged forward and clambered up the metal slope as it was being lowered.

I drifted into the midst of the slow-moving group. Already several soldiers leaped onto the riverbank and were quickly cutting into the undergrowth. Each squad broke its own trail and quickly disappeared from the riverbank. I slipped into the rank of the 3rd Squad.

I was walking behind Private Carnelli, a short, stocky Italian who had joined the army voluntarily and was often accused of being a "lifer." As I followed the slow-moving figure, I noticed the words inscribed on his helmet cover: "Yeah, as I walk through the valley of death, I fear no evil for I am the baddest motherfucker on earth." "Rock 'n' roll, lock and load" also accompanied these words of wisdom. I couldn't help wondering if that dumb dago really believed all that crap or if he was just trying to project an image of a tough bad-ass killer, as if that creation could somehow protect him and bring him out alive. I thought of the writing on my helmet cover and the message it conveyed. Besides daisies and a peace sign, I had written "January 69, FTA" and "No sweat, GI." This was my fractured and compacted philosophy at the time.

I had mentally divided most of the men in the platoon into two categories: the peace-loving brothers who were just going through the motions and whose primary goal was to kill time and return home, and the lifers, mostly RAs who had bought into the program and were so gung-ho they would often talk in military jargon, such as "I have to GI my weapon." I wondered how deep the layers

of military crap were buried and if they even realized that our involvement in Nam had resulted from a series of accidents and misinformation. I thought of how LBJ had committed ground forces after false reports of enemy attacks on a couple of our destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. I contemplated whether our objectives were attainable or merely an exercise in futile propaganda. Were we the ground troops caught up in an inexorable snare that had tightened without our knowledge and sucked us in the program? Were we the reluctant draftees, programmed to turn into gung-ho killers who obeyed orders we knew were against our Christian upbringing?

This war had begun under President Eisenhower and his involvement in the support of the French colonial occupying forces. It had continued under Kennedy and his policy of containing the spreading communist menace. LBJ's war, as it was now called, had escalated once more in 1964, when President Johnson, running against the war hawk Barry Goldwater, had to compete for the more aggressive voters. It was now like a bog, pulling us deeper and deeper into an endless confrontation under LBJ's declaration that he would not let South Vietnam fall under communism the way China and Korea had. He had assumed total control of the military under the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

Now I was trailing behind one of this policy's converts. We labored cautiously through the humid and pungent undergrowth. The odor of rotting vegetation and decaying wood, mixed with our own sweaty bodies, created a distinctive aroma that enveloped us like a clammy blanket.

We were traveling slowly into a area covered by stagnant water. Underneath, the squishy ground was soft and slippery.

"Watch your step," a deep whisper rolled back.

"This is a prime area for punji pits," advised another.

I trod carefully, thinking of the possible dangers hidden below the fetid layer of water. My clothes were now drenched with sweat and clung to my body. This dampness and filth caused all my

minor little cuts and insect bites to sting and itch. I thought of the jungle rot and festering sores spreading all over my body and hoped that a major rash or infection would overtake me and sideline me for the next few operations.

We slowly slipped inward, cutting across trails but avoiding their tempting welcome. Traveling down these narrow trails would make us too visible, or even worse, lead us into an ambush. If any place was booby trapped this would be it. The VC knew too well that the lazy Americans with their bigger bodies and heavy packs preferred walking down the open trails. We were careful. We had heard the stories that emanated from this area known as the Iron Triangle.

This region had been the headquarters for Viet Cong activity. In 1967 during Operation Cedar Falls hundreds of tunnels, bunkers, and booby traps had been destroyed. Still it was rumored to continue to harbor and control the enemy's forays into Saigon, 55 kilometers south. One hundred meters ahead we could see that the trees and palms were still showing the ravages of the battle. Several trees had been knocked down by explosions, their roots unearthed and lifeless. Others were broken midway up their stems, the victims of the subsequent air strike. All around, the vegetation that had survived this carnage was marked along their scarred trunks by dozens of pitted and shredded bullet holes.

We traveled quietly through this former battlefield, observing the ruins of a dozen fighting holes, marveling at the strength of the bunkers and the force it had taken to pulverize them. Grimly I thought of the lives that had been taken and of the blood that had drained on the hard, impervious clay. To my left and right I could see the other squads silently filtering out of the camp, their faces showing the strain of their uneasiness.

Minutes later the four point men reached the end of the undergrowth. Ahead lay a vast open area covered by tall, wild grass and rice paddies. The middle and rear caught up to the stilled forward line and regrouped as a platoon. We set up a defensive

line at the edge of the field while the lieutenant called in our progress and waited for further orders.

Across the shimmering expanse of rice paddies, a deserted dirt road was visible ahead. This road led to a large village purported to be crawling with Viet Cong and people friendly with the communist insurgents. We relaxed quietly in the shade, aware that at any time the cry "saddle up" could snap us out of our lethargy and back into action. I lay comfortably propped up against my pack, chewing on a blade of grass, enjoying this brief lull. I thought of my birthday coming up the next day. Boy, did I ever want to be somewhere else. How could anybody celebrate turning twenty-one in a lousy rice paddy? I longed for the faces of my loved ones and ached with desire for the festivities I knew I would be missing.

I turned to my friend Private Dohmeyer and said, "Dodo, can you get me a birthday cake and decorate this paddy by tomorrow, 'cause I'll be twenty-one *mañana*."

"Sure, what kind of cake you like? I got pound cake or crackers and cheese."

Meanwhile the squad leaders were coming back from their briefing with the LT.

"Up and at 'em," hollered Shipley, the 3rd Squad leader.

"What's happening?" wondered an inquisitive voice.

"We're moving through the paddies in two minutes and setting up a checkpoint on Route 4 right outside the village. We're to be set up by 1800 hours."

"There goes your party," mumbled Dohmeyer as we adjusted each other's backpack.

We deployed ourselves for a sweep formation, leaving the protective shade and entering the searing heat of the early afternoon. The sun beat down on us and bounced back off the paddy water. Soon our fatigues were soaked in perspiration. Even the ducks and water buffalo hardly moved as we walked by.

"Charlie's sleeping this one off in the shade," announced a weary soldier.

"Yeah, even the mosquitoes done quit for the day," added another.

Grumbling, we plodded sluggishly in the ankle-deep muck. Two hours later, drenched in sweat, we stepped out of the ooze and onto the sides of the slightly higher dirt road. We turned toward the village, 1500 meters away, and began moving double file on each easement of the road. We kept off the elevated road to reduce the chances of becoming visible or bunching up and giving a distant foe the opportunity to trip a remote-control mine. Every ten or fifteen minutes a truck or bus or scooter would pass by, sending a plume of dust swirling behind.

We continued moving carefully, avoiding the smoother and more inviting road surface, one foot at the paddy's edge, the other on the slippery embankment's side. This made the going more difficult, but by now our destination was already visible a half a klick away. We had been told that some ARVN forces would be waiting for us.

Ahead, near a small sandbag bunker and some strands of barbed wire, a group of South Vietnamese soldiers were squatting around. The people of Vietnam did not sit like Americans. Instead, because of their small bodies and thin frames, they were able to squat down on their ankles without toppling over. These fierce warriors sometimes walked together holding hands. Their over-size uniforms and helmets gave them a comical look. They often lacked part of their gear or wore shower shoes instead of boots.

Many stories had circulated about debacles caused by their poor training or lack of determination. Most GIs felt that if they would do their jobs and support us instead of just marking time, the war could be quickly won. The joke among the infantrymen was that we aggressively went on search-and-destroy missions to uproot and annihilate the enemy, whereas the ARVN went on search-and-avoid missions just to put in their time and earn their meager 1600 piasters a month. These soldiers knew that if they were killed in action, no insurance or pension would be allocated



for their dependents.

Nevertheless, I always enjoyed joining up with these indigenous fighters, and they in return were always friendly and seemed happy to see us. Usually they greeted us as their numbah one friend and profusely shook our hands. After a few minutes of small talk and military matters the conversation progressed to the more important matters: what could we get for them from our sources (mainly the PX) and what did they have (including pot and boom boom) that would make our meeting more enjoyable and profitable. I usually declined these generous offers and instead inquired about their local food. Many times I opted to share their meals and exchanged my C-rations for whatever they were having.

This time, however, after a short meeting with this sorry-looking band of the ARVN, the lieutenant sent them packing. We waved good-bye and watched curiously as they began walking down the dirt drive. Two of the soldiers had straddled an old bicycle and were laboriously trying to gain speed while keeping upright and preventing their bags, canteen, and weapons from getting caught in the spokes. Finally, after a few near crashes, the precarious two wheeler stopped zigzagging, gained momentum, and eventually disappeared down the thoroughfare.

Meanwhile the checkpoint had quickly been upgraded. The sandbags had been restacked. One of the 60 calibers had been set up on top of the little guard shack. The other had been pointed toward the village and set up behind an arc of sandbags five high. The lieutenant's CP had taken over the coveted covered-guard station. The rest of the platoon had set up perpendicular from the road approximately 160 meters on each side in three-man ambush positions every 40 meters.

The claymores and final preparations hadn't been deployed yet and wouldn't be for at least an hour, not until after total darkness. Then quietly, furtively the anti-personnel weapons would be hidden in both directions. Two listening posts comprised of three men each would also be sent about 100 meters up the road to

provide an advance warning on an enemy movement.

It's 1845 hours. The traffic had slowed to about a vehicle every fifteen or twenty minutes. The field hands and their buffaloes plodded by on their way back to the village. The setting sun reminded everyone of the impending curfew at 1900 hours.

I had set up my gear at the first position north of the road closest to the CP. I had been kidding with the guys in the next two positions about my birthday in a few hours. Five hundred meters away, amid a cloud of red dust, an old truck was barreling down toward the village.

"Hey, birthday boy, save me some cake," hollered Ski from the next position.

"Yeah, cake and ice cream coming right up," I replied.

"What about party games and a clown?" added Whetsell from the command post.

"The clown's right here," I said, pointing to Carter sitting at my position.

At 200 meters the truck was being flagged down. The trucker, seeing the well-armed checkpoint, eased up on the gas and began to slow down. It was now 1853 hours. The small, nervous man was all too aware that he had to be in the village by curfew or risk everything he owned, as well as his life. Cursing, he braked in front of the waiting sentry.

"*La dai, La dai,*" waved the sentry.

"Step out," ordered another.

"Papers, papers, ID," gestured the first sentry.

The scared little man nodded his head repeatedly as the two large soldiers stepped closer. He reached for his back pocket, retrieving an old leather wallet. He opened it and handed it to the first soldier, pointing to an official-looking ID card.

The first soldier appeared unconvinced. "This you?" he said, pointing at the nervous little figure.

The other sentry looked then asked, "Name. What's your name?"

"Nguyen Van Triem," he replied several times.

Still the soldiers appeared unconvinced. Stalling, they began going through the entire wallet, checking and asking questions about its varied contents.

"Who's that?" they inquired, producing the picture of a pretty teenage girl.

Meanwhile, without being noticed by the beleaguered driver, two soldiers climbed into the back of the covered truck and quietly absconded with a case of Vietnamese beer. The soldier carrying the beer headed for the ditch and immediately hid the loot from inquiring eyes. The other walked up to the roadblock and, looking at the ID card, announced that everything seemed in order. He returned the wallet to the anxious truck driver, who politely thanked us and hurriedly climbed into his cab and hastily departed.

It was now 1857 hours. In three minutes we had to be ready to enforce the curfew. A voice called me to the side of the road. I hurried to the summons. There Private Moore and Corporal Shipley were passing out the pilfered ale.

"Here, Doc," Moore said as he handed me a couple of large amber bottles. I clutched the dark containers and thanked the two soldiers. This night might turn out to be special after all. I returned to my post with the two large bottles of Bah Muy Bah, a popular strong beer with the number 33 on the label. The two bottles had to be split with my two night comrades.

"Jackpot! Looka here," I said, setting the bottles on the ground between them.

"You can't drink this until after midnight because you're not twenty-one," replied one of the soldiers.

"Yeah, well, neither of you guys are old enough either, so why don't we all call this shit Vietnamese root beer and guzzle it?" I asked.

It was now 1910 hours. The sky was a deep purple with pink highlights near the western horizon. Four hundred meters away, unaware of our presence, a lone figure walked along a rice paddy

dike. The tiny silhouette was too far away for us to identify him or even to guess what he was doing out there.

"What do you think that gook is doing out at this time?" asked an inquisitive voice.

"Maybe trying to get home. He could be running late or forgot to look at his watch," answered Dietrick.

"Sarge, do you see that gook out there?"

"Yeah, do you think you could hit him or at least let him know the time?" barked the sergeant.

"Affirmative, Sarge."

I did not feel good about what was about to take place. As I observed Dietrick settle into a steady, prone position against the dike, I wanted to yell, giving the man a chance to run or hide. Instead, I watched transfixed thinking that a man was about to die just as I was celebrating my birthday. Secretly I hoped that Dietrick would miss and the small figure would be able to escape.

"I can't believe this," I uttered just as the shot rang out. The bullet reached the faraway dike before the sound wave. We watched the startled figure jump in the paddy and begin running. He was almost completely hidden now and within a few seconds disappeared completely.

Dietrick and most of the platoon seemed unconcerned about what had just taken place, as if it didn't matter whether or not he had killed this man, just as long as the sanctioned curfew had been enforced. I was glad the target had been spared and thought maybe some benevolent higher power had granted me a special birthday gift. I knew that others in the platoon felt the same way but they wouldn't say anything. Instead we heard voices in the falling darkness congratulating Dietrick.

"Whew, that was close."

"Good shot. That little dink probably shit his pants."

"Pipe down over there or you'll give away your position," snarled the lieutenant.

Within minutes the sky turned obscure and each position turned

within itself for sustenance.

It's 2400 hours. I was awakened from a deep sleep.

"Wake up, birthday boy; it's midnight. You're on."

"Okay, I'm up. What's happening?"

"Nothing. Everything's quiet."

"Okay, good, I'm awake. Where's the detonator?"

"Right there, next to the radio. Don't fall asleep."

I had chosen this shift and now had an hour to sit staring into the darkness, reflecting on previous days and years. I was now a full-fledged adult. I thought about my present situation, of the mud hole I was sitting in. I tried to commit to memory all the feelings I was experiencing. I promised myself I'd remember this time and these emotions, so that in future years and future birthdays I would be able to compare them.

I looked up at the myriad of twinkling stars and vowed to begin a ritual of reflection and evaluation each birthday. I anticipated that all my future birthdays would outshine this dismal one.

My three shifts passed by quietly. During the 0030 hours situation report the voice on the radio wished me a happy birthday. At 0345 during the second watch I witnessed an air strike low in the western sky, approximately 4 to 5 kilometers away. I could see flares slowly floating down from invisible aircraft. Then a second or two later as the light reached the ground I could observe parts of the sky turn crimson from the light of the hundreds of tracer rounds spewing from the miniguns of the AC-47. Each spinning minigun fired 6,000 rounds per minute, and Puff the Magic Dragon, as the AC-47s were called, carried three of the Gatling GAU-2A miniguns. I watched the fiery rain stream in short ten to twelve second bursts, and a couple of seconds later heard the rattling purr of the guns. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the deadly red showers ceased, and as I viewed the last illumination flare descend slowly to the ground, I could hear the stillness returning to the hushed countryside.

It's 0630 hours. I had been staring in the darkness for about a

half hour. Finally a faint sliver of light entered the horizon. I was almost able to see the next position. To my left the higher shape of the road began to emerge from the early mist. Little by little, human shapes emanated out of the murkiness. The light helped me vanquish the fatigue and boredom. The wonder of the dawn energized me. I relished the last few minutes of solitude before the chaos of reveille.