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TWENTY

FOUR

**Charlie-Alpha**

After a breakfast of C-rations, the company packed up and moved out. We headed in the direction of the trail where our LP had spent the night. There were approximately one-hundred-and-ten men in the company and we walked one behind the other with a distance of about ten feet between each man.

When we got to the trail, we followed it for about five-hundred yards in the direction of the rolling hills. At that point it began to run along the bank of a lazy stream that was about fifteen feet across. The stream was a natural boundary between the back of the farmlands and the hills beyond them and the other side was covered with dense, tangled brush, that came right up to the edge of the bank.

We continued along until we came to a row of those same tall boundary hedges that also ran parallel to the stream, but about five feet back from the edge of the bank. Here we began splitting off with one man, in turn, walking to the left, or stream side of the hedge, and the other to the right, or inland side of it.

Just before I reached the beginning of the hedgerow, a single shot was fired at us from somewhere in the thick morass on the other side of the stream. Immediately everyone squatted in place and tried to determine exactly where the shot had come from.

I was surprised at how composed these men seemed to be with incoming fire, even if it had only been one shot. When I was out here for awhile, I'd learn to take such things in stride right along with the other veterans.

Evidently the lone assailant had fled back through the mess on the other side after firing his single shot. When it was determined that he was gone, we stood up and began walking again. I split off and walked on the stream side of the hedge.

Suddenly there was a tremendous explosion just up ahead and on the opposite side of the hedge from where I was! Everyone hit the ground and screams of “medic!” filled the air.

At first it was thought that we were getting incoming mortar fire because of the size of the explosion, but there was only the one blast, and then it was quiet. Although it had occurred close by, the hedgerow had given me and the others, on this side of it, protection from flying shrapnel.

A few moments later word came back through the line that one of the men carrying an M-60 machine-gun had stepped on a booby trap, a buried mortar round. The VC would bury them with the nose up and the detonator just at the surface, so that it would go off when stepped on.

It was also determined that the shot fired from across the way was probably a ruse to divert our attention away from noticing the nose protruding slightly from the ground.

I was grateful that I couldn't see what was going on up there, because we heard that our man had been blown in two, up the middle, and killed instantly.

While we waited in place, the men in his platoon loaded his remains into a body bag for removal by helicopter. They'd have to carry him with them until we reached a safe place to bring a bird in.

When they were ready to move, the captain had us continue along the trail until we reached the main river from which the stream we'd been following branched. Here the river was about fifty yards across and flowed lazily along under the baking sun.

We followed the bank of the main river for some distance until we were well out in the open. Since this was the primary source of irrigation for all the rice paddies in the area, the dense foliage had disappeared on both sides for a long way around. The only trees I could see now grew right along the banks and hung down into the water, just as I'd seen trees do in pictures of the Mississippi.

The company stopped on the bank and we waited for a medevac helicopter to come out for the body.

With so little shade to fend off the scorching sun, and the spirits of the company at a very low level because of our dead comrade, the captain gave permission for us to take a swim in the river. Again, I

was amazed at the resilience these men exhibited. They'd become hardened to the idea that death was an everyday part of their job, although they hated it as much as anyone else would. But they knew that any one of us could be the next one to buy it,...at any time. There were no special exemptions here.

It wasn't long before they were splashing and laughing as if they were on a Sunday outing back home.

When I jumped into the water I could easily understand why their spirits had bounced back so quickly. After having been soaked with sweat and burned by the hundred and fifteen degree heat, the coolness of the river was absolutely invigorating.

Since there weren't any pressing orders at the moment, the captain decided to let us continue enjoying the little peace we had. He told one of his radiomen to call in and instruct the Huey, that was due out, to bring a couple of barbers along. Anyone who needed a haircut could get it and then jump into the river to wash off the trimmings.

I didn't need one, because I'd just had mine cut back at An Khe, but I watched as the captain himself had one of the civilian Vietnamese barbers give him a trim and then a shave with an old fashioned straight razor.

It wasn't long before the Huey returned, having taken the body back to the rear, to pick up the barbers.

Somewhat later I was within earshot of a radio when a message came over that, when the barbers returned to the base at Quang Tri, they were arrested as members of the local VC. I felt a chill when I thought about the fact that, just a short while ago, they'd held straight razors at the throats of a good number of men in the company, including the captain! Evidently their purpose was to gather information about the locations of companies in the field. They probably hadn't tried anything because it was more important to get that information back to their comrades.

Along with that bit of news came word of a company of Marines, somewhere within our area of operations, who had recently taken two Vietnamese orphans, a young boy and girl, into their care. This morning, having gained the trust of the Americans, the boy had calmly walked over to an M-60 machine-gun and turned it on the men. Before someone was able to get to a weapon and shoot him, a good number of the company was cut down. A little kindness could be a very dangerous thing in this country.

C company remained on the bank of the river until around noon. Then a call came out that we would be going on a charlie-alpha, or chopper assault, into what was termed a hot LZ approximately three clicks from our present location. The Captain's map was sectioned off with a grid of thousand-yard squares or "clicks".

"What do they mean by a "hot LZ"? I asked Rick as we prepare our gear to leave.

He sounded more serious than usual when he answered, "That means we'll be flying into an area where we'll be under fire when we land."

I began to feel that familiar uneasiness growing in the pit of my stomach as seven Hueys appeared in the distance, made a long, slow arc around our position, and then came in to land in the dry rice paddies about a hundred feet back from the river. I could tell by the expressions on the faces of the other men that they weren't exactly too thrilled about the mission either.

The Hueys landed, one behind the other in two parallel lines, one of three, and the other of four, and the men on the ground had split into groups of seven or eight each, so that they could move right in and get aboard. Two Huey Cobras, looking for all the world like great green sharks, circled overhead, acting as gunship escorts while the others were on the ground.

When the first half of the company was aboard, the sortie, as a formation of Hueys was called, lifted off.

I watched the birds disappear in the distance while the rest of the men on the ground moved into position for the next flight. Then I knelt on one knee, in a group with the seven others who would run up and get aboard when the birds returned.

The wait wasn't a long one. The sortie circled around and came down with each bird next to a group, who then ran over and jumped in.

A chopper assault was a new experience for me and there was no small amount of excitement hearing the combined whines of the seven engines. I got a position sitting on the edge of the floor with my legs hanging out the door.

The birds rose into the air, almost in unison, with the ground dropping away in a tremendous whoosh of air that blew up blades of grass and dust.

For the short time we were in the air, I watched the birds in front and to the side of us bob up and down like boats on a sea of swelling waves. Then they swooped down rapidly into another cemetery and hovered a couple of feet off the ground. When we jumped out into the open, and ran for the cover of the burial mounds, I could hear the sound of scattered crack-crack-cracks, from snipers in the treeline about a-hundred-and-fifty yards away. At the same time, the men who were already on the ground were peppering that treeline with their M-16s.

I had a difficult time maneuvering, because of the heavy ruck-sack frame and pack on my back, but there was plenty of incentive for finding cover as quickly as possible with bullets whizzing by like angry bees. In fact, I was surprised at the extra effort the pumping adrenaline summoned up.

After the arrival of the second half of the company, the fire from the treeline subsided. We could make out the edge of a small village just on the other side of those trees and a church steeple that rose over their tops near the center of that village.

The treeline acted as a natural boundary between the open fields in which we'd landed and a string of small villages that ran down along the other side of it. It went all the way to the horizon out to our left.

To our right front it jogged back another two-hundred yards and then continued off toward the river from which we'd just come.

I could plainly see why we Americans had dubbed this area "Churchville". Including the nearest treeline to our rear, which was a good thousand-yards behind us, there were at least half-a-dozen steeples visible above the tree tops. It seemed that almost every small village had a large church in the center of it.

The churches had been built by the French years earlier, during their colonial period and occupation here. Unfortunately for us, however, the steeples provided excellent perches for enemy snipers.

Though the heavy firing died off soon after our arrival, occasional shots continued to come out of the trees for most of the day. I thought it truly amazing how easily a person got used to being under fire, even if it was only an occasional shot from a good distance off.

When the original outburst eased, the company remained in the cemetery without returning fire. Since we were a good hundred-and-fifty yards out, and well protected by the burial mounds, it would have been an extremely lucky shot for anyone to be hit. The sporadic fire was more a form of harassment than anything else. In fact, at about the middle of the afternoon, I was sitting with my back resting against a mound, writing a letter home. A bullet whizzed past, with a nasty buzz, just a couple of feet over my right shoulder and I made note of it in the letter, thinking what a strange kind of reality this was when you were actually right here to experience it.

Most of the men sat, just as I did, with a mound between them and the treeline, but occasionally someone would get up to move to another part of the perimeter, stooping low, not too worried about the random shots now and again.

Just before suppertime I witnessed one of the most incredible sights I'd ever seen. Since the people in the treeline refused to quit firing entirely, the captain decided to call in an air strike. Within a short time, a small, single-engine Cessna arrived on the scene accompanied by two Air Force jets. The small plane

was a spotter with the call name “Snoopy”. While he talked to the company radioman, who supplied him with the coordinates where the strike was to take place, the jets circled out in the distance.

Once Snoopy had the coordinates, he requested that we pop smoke so that he knew exactly what our location was. Two men, nearest the treeline, tossed smoke grenades out so that clouds of billowy yellow smoke could be seen from the air. Then he made a low dive and fired a single rocket into the area of trees where the firing was coming from. The rocket burst into a cloud of white smoke when it disappeared in the trees.

This done, the snoopy moved a good distance off and the jets circled until they were lined up parallel to the treeline. The first one raced in low and released something that looked like a bomb without any tailfins. The object flipped slowly, end over end, until it too disappeared in the trees. Suddenly a massive wall of orange flames engulfed the treeline in an area about the size of a football field. There was no loud explosion, just a kind of dull “poof” when the fire appeared.

The second jet made a similar pass, with the same result, and I was stunned to see such a burning wall of fire. It was hard to imagine anything being able to live through a hell like that.

This, of course, was napalm and it was thrilling and frightening all at the same time.