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**FIFTY FOUR****Ghost Warriors**

The third event came on the eve of the day when we were to leave the mountains for the last time, and turned out to be one of the strangest any of us had ever experienced. Actually, “strange” isn’t really an adequate description. “Eerie” would be closer.

During the course of the week following our bout with food poisoning, two of Captain Boatner’s (Captain Conrad’s tour had ended and Captain Boatner was now the company CO) radiomen reached the end of their tour and rotated back to the States. Buffalo and I were picked to fill those positions, so that now the captain’s three radiomen were Wada, Buffalo, and myself. Doc Clark had been made head medic in the captain’s CP shortly before the poisoning.

We were stopped for the night at the base of the mountains where they slopped down to meet the edge of the rolling hills. We had received word from rear command that early in the morning we’d have to be out in the open hills for a chopper pickup and the captain wanted to be as close to the landing coordinates as possible.

Earlier in the day, when we were descending from higher up on the side of the mountain, I could see the lowlands stretching away through the cleft between two peaks. As always, views like this, where you could see for forty or fifty miles, were one of the pluses of being in the mountains. Even through the hot, haziness of midday I was able to make out the farmlands and rice paddies, lying like a

patchwork quilt, out past the hill country, and further beyond that, the blue expanse of the South China Sea.

The place where the captain had decided to dig in was low enough on the side of the peak so that the ground had leveled out considerably. The angle was now only about twenty degrees and the heavier growth of the jungle had given way to a setting much closer to forest. Most of our perimeter was in the woods at the top end of an open field, but there was a small section of it that curved down into the field and then swung back up again toward the trees. The field itself was covered with sparse, burnt-out grass no more than two or three inches high.

The field stretched on down to our front for another fifty yards where a denser treeline skirted the lower portion of it. That treeline took a turn up toward the lower-left part of our perimeter, where it formed a point and then dropped away again along the edge of another field. This created a thin finger of trees that came up and almost touched the perimeter.

Everything was peaceful and quiet until just around midnight. At that time the captain, the first sergeant, myself, Buffalo, and Doc Clark were sleeping fitfully, near the center of the perimeter, with Wada sitting up for his turn on radio watch.

Suddenly, several hand grenades went off in the open field beyond the lower part of the perimeter. The entire CP snapped awake instantly and we lay perfectly still on our stomachs, waiting for the expected incoming return fire. We remained that way for what seemed an eternity, nerves and muscles taut, listening for some sound in the darkness.

Nothing came.

Finally, the captain spoke in an irritated whisper.

“What the hell are those guys doing down there?”

He took a quick glance over at Wada’s silhouette lying near the radio, “Who’s got that part of the perimeter?”

“That’s the third platoon, Sir.”

“Get Three-Six on the horn and find out what’s going on.”

While Wada was making the call, the first sergeant whispered in the direction of the captain, “There doesn’t seem to be anything happening on any other part of the perimeter, Sir.”

The answer came back to Wada almost immediately and he reported.

“Sir, Three-Six says they had movement down in front of their bottom hole.”

The captain tried to scan the impenetrable darkness, “Well,...it seems pretty quiet now. Tell him to keep us posted.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The tension eased off gradually as everyone, but the men on watch, went back to sleep. It was entirely possible there had been someone out there who didn’t want to be discovered. Maybe it was one or two NVA soldiers carrying 122mm rockets down to the lowlands to be fired in at one of the LZs. They’d try to avoid contact so that they could get down there safely and deliver their deadly charge.

Some ten minutes later, another series of blasts went off down at the same location. Just as before, we in the CP waited for return fire from whomever it was out there. But it never came.

“Get Three-Six on the horn again and ask him what the hell his people are doing down there.”

The captain was really irritated now. False alarms that kept waking his men from their much-needed rest just wouldn't do. Again the call was a short one.

“Sir, Three-Six says they had more movement outside the perimeter on their bottom hole.”

The captain thought for a moment and then whispered to me, since I was off radio duty.

“Hutton, make your way down to that bottom hole and see what you can find out.”

“Yes, Sir.”

I headed down the slope quietly, squatting low to the ground. Actually, at this point, I wasn't too worried about moving around in the dark, mainly because there'd been no return fire. It was a pretty safe bet that, if it was the enemy out there, they'd have fired back almost immediately.

Shortly I came up on the back of a foxhole with four men standing in it up to their waists. They were all staring into the darkness down to their front. I slid into the hole beside them.

“The captain wants to know what's going on down here,” I whispered.

“We don't know. We keep getting movement out there,” one of them answered.

I tried, futilely, to peer into the same inky darkness, but, as usual, could see no more than about five feet.

“What does it sound like?”

There was no hesitation in the guy's voice. He sounded sincerely worried.

“It's like a platoon of men starting down at the bottom of the clearing and making their way up toward us.”

“That many?!”

It wasn't hard to tell, from the irritation in his voice, that I'd come across sounding a little bit too skeptical.

"You think I'm kidding? You just stay here and listen for awhile."

It was easy to understand why these guys were already somewhat ticked off. Since there'd been no return fire, they figured everyone else around the perimeter was probably thinking they'd gone off the deep end.

I didn't have long to wait.

Out of the dead quiet, an almost imperceptible sound began to make itself heard, drawing all our attention down to the front.

"Here they come again!" one of the other men whispered.

I cocked my head to put an ear directly in line with what I thought I was hearing. There was no doubt about it. It was the sound of twigs and ground clutter crackling under the weight of heavy, human footsteps. That wasn't something easily mistaken by men fine tuned to what someone moving around in the darkness sounded like.

The footsteps grew steadily louder, as if a line of men, stretched shoulder-to-shoulder across the open field, were making their way up toward the perimeter!

"How close do they get?" I whispered.

"We let them get past the point where the trip flares are, but that's it. That's as close as we dare let them come."

Now I was completely puzzled, "And they don't trip the flares?...That's impossible!"

"They're getting close again," another man said while picking up a hand grenade.

We all followed suit, the footsteps advancing slowly but steadily until it seemed they had every intention of walking right over us. We waited until the last possible moment and then pulled the pins on our grenades, tossing them out in a frenzy.

The explosions of the five grenades lit up the area momentarily, like the glare of huge flashbulbs, while dust and debris rained down on us, crouched in the bottom of the hole.

When the echo of the ear-splitting explosions died away, we raised our heads above the edge. The advancing footsteps, and all the sounds associated with them, had ceased completely. The tension eased somewhat for the moment.

“Well,...what do you say now?” one of the guys asked in a whisper.

In complete dismay, I could only blurt out, “I don’t believe it!”

It was now painfully obvious that there was something out of the ordinary going on here. Not only did the footsteps cease with the blasts of the grenades, but there was absolutely no sound of anyone running away in retreat, back down the hill!

Like the others, I’d waited as long as I dared to throw my grenade, but there comes a point when it’s more expedient to play it safe than to let curiosity be the death of you. If that really was the enemy out there, and there was no doubt in our minds that what we were hearing were human footsteps, then it had taken extraordinary courage for these men to let them get as close as they had on so many separate occasions.

“It’s the same every time. We wait until they get close, toss the grenades out, and then there’s nothing but silence for a few minutes afterwards. You tell us what it is.”

I had no answer for that one. How could I go back up the hill and tell the captain that there was definitely somebody out there, but we didn't know who it was, and they were acting totally contrary to anything we'd encountered before? This was no movie script for a grade B ghost story. This was supposed to be reality!

“There's another thing that bothers me,” one of the other guys in the hole added soberly.

“What's that?”

He looked at me in dead earnest, “If that was you out there, would you keep coming up the hill knowing you were going to be pounded with grenades every time you did,...and not fire a shot? Neither the NVA or the VC are that dumb.”

While we were pondering his question, another man slipped into the hole with us. It was definitely beginning to get crowded in there now.

This time it was Lieutenant Heitov, leader of the first platoon. He'd gone up to the captain's CP from his part of the perimeter, to find out what was going on, and been instructed to follow me down to this bottom hole.

“What the hell's going on down here? Are you guys having hallucinations or what?”

Sarcastic criticism was something these guys didn't need right now. They knew how it must look to the rest of the perimeter, but they also knew that there was movement out there. I took it upon myself to answer for the rest.

“Sir, I don't think you have any idea what these men are dealing with down here. Just stay for awhile and listen with the rest of us.”

“All-right, we'll put an end to this foolishness once and for all.”

Heitov performed an exaggerated yawn for our benefit, “I’ll be tired as hell tomorrow with the sleep I’m missing on account of you guys.”

The other men in the hole looked over at me and I simply shook my head slowly, expressing my sentiments about his blatant self-assurance. I knew that, if the pattern hadn’t changed, it wouldn’t be very long before the lieutenant became a believer.

A couple of minutes later, just like clockwork, the footsteps began down at the bottom of the clearing again. Lieutenant Heitov perked right up, holding his arm out for us to be absolutely quiet while he listened.

“Who the hell is that out there?!” he whispered, a touch of dismay in his voice.

In no time at all, by the sound of them, the footsteps were half-way up the clearing to the perimeter. The lieutenant was the first to reach back and take a grenade out of an open case, sitting on the back edge of the hole.

“Wait until they’re almost on top of us. I want to see who they are.”

The awful tension grew steadily stronger while we all stood motionless, grenades in hand, waiting. The sounds didn’t get much further than they had all the times before when the lieutenant decided he couldn’t wait any longer. He pulled the pin and tossed his out, followed immediately by the rest of us.

After the blasts, we raised our heads above the edge of the hole where the smell of the explosions filled the air.

“They were almost on top of us and I still couldn’t see anything!”, the lieutenant whispered completely baffled, “Why don’t they fire back?”



I avoided the inevitable, “We told you so”, and answered simply, “That’s what we’ve been trying to figure out, Sir.”

Heitov indicated the next foxhole, about ten yards over to our left.

“Hutton, go over to that hole and see if they’re hearing the same thing.”

About halfway between the hole we were in, and the next one over, was the spot where the treeline came up from below to a point, and then dropped away again. That narrow finger of growth separated the other hole somewhat from the clearing directly down in front of us.

I climbed out of the hole and maneuvered over to the next one where I squatted on the ground next to its edge.

“Are you guys hearing the same movement we are?”, I whispered to the guys standing in it.

“Yeah, but it seems to be concentrated mainly on your location. We tossed a couple of grenades out when you guys did, because we could hear footsteps in the trees, but it’s nothing like what you’re getting over there.”

With that I made my way back over to the other hole and slid in.

“Sir, they say they can hear them, but not as heavily as over here.”

“Good. At least that proves we’re not entirely crazy.”

I was relieved that Heitov had also witnessed what was going on. Eventually, he and I made our way back up to the CP where we had to explain the situation to the captain. At least with two of us, it was a little harder to conclude that we’d been smoking too much of the funny weed.

Grenades continued to go off regularly, outside the lower perimeter, for most of the night, until shortly before dawn. During that long period, almost every grenade that the men around the perimeter

carried had been passed down to the bottom hole. That amounted to something like twenty cases worth! A couple of times we even had artillery flares fired out over that field from the nearest firebase, hoping to catch sight of somebody out there, but there was nothing to be seen.

The next morning Captain Boatner, Lieutenant Heitov, myself and most of the third platoon made a thorough search of the open field below the bottom hole. We found absolutely nothing!

There were no signs of tracks, blood, or animal remains from all those explosions, or anything else that shouldn't have been there. The field looked exactly as it had when we first set up at its top edge!

Someone suggested that it might have been monkeys throwing things down from the trees, but that didn't wash. No animal in the world, whether it was a monkey or an elephant, would remain anywhere near that field after the first explosions. Whomever, or whatever it was, had started up the hill again only minutes after each barrage of grenades. And then there was the mystery of why there hadn't been the slightest sound of a retreat back down the hill afterward. Where did they go?

The captain gave no reprimands to any of the men for using the amount of grenades they had. It was plain from the testimony of the lieutenant, myself, and everyone on the two lower holes, that we'd heard something out there. He knew his men. They weren't prone to imagining things or keeping the rest of the company awake all night if there wasn't a damned good reason for it.

When the search was over, he had us form up and prepare to move out toward the rolling hills for our pickup. No "logical" explanation, for what it could have been, ever came forth from anyone. Our only alternative was to chalked it up as "just one of those things".

As for myself, I knew what I'd heard coming up that hill and there was no mistaking it. At times, when they'd gotten close to the hole, they were actually clear enough to make out as individual footsteps.

There seemed only one explanation, bizarre as it might sound, that even came close to an answer. In fact, it was something I just happened to overhear two guys discussing between themselves, though it was never brought up to the captain or other officers, simply for fear of ridicule.

Since there'd been war of one form or another, for over a thousand years in this country, might it have been the ghost warriors of some long forgotten mandarin, who fought over this very same ground untold centuries ago? The way those footsteps kept coming up that field abreast of one another, as if in formation, was very reminiscent of those ancient military tactics.

I said it would sound eerie, but, then again, it wasn't the first unexplained mystery we'd heard about over here, and it probably wouldn't be the last.

I do know one thing for certain. Whatever it could have been, it was real enough to keep a company of seasoned soldiers doing battle with it for an entire night. And it was nothing like anything we experienced either before or after that one time.