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**SIXTY FOUR****The Song Sai Gon**

That same day Captain Boatner got word from the rear that our company was being assigned a new mission. It had been learned, through informants, that the small villages, all along the Song Sai Gon River, approximately three clicks from our present location, were being terrorized by roving bands of VC. The VC were exacting large amounts of the people's rice harvests for their own use and indiscriminately kidnapping their women,....again, for their own use.

The plan was for us to hook up with two LSTs that the Navy was using to patrol the river. LSTs were the beach landing craft that put men ashore on D-Day during World War II. The front of these boats originally dropped down, so that the men they were carrying could run out and up onto the beach. Those fronts had been welded shut and a platform added, over the center of the boat, that a single Huey could land on. In the front section, a large mortar tube had been installed for firing rounds out along the banks during an attack. We'd heard that the life expectancy of the sailors manning these boats was approximately two weeks. We'd find out why soon enough.

A sortie of Hueys picked us up and flew us to a point some two-hundred yards back from the bank of the river. We had to make the rest of the way on foot, because there was no solid ground, for that distance, on either side of the river.

During the rainy season, the river overflowed its banks and flooded the land for miles around. But even after the monsoons ended and the river receded, the land on both sides remained marshy. There

were large trees growing all along the banks, but the terrain back from those consisted mostly of marsh reeds some three to four feet tall.

When our company finally managed to reach the bank, two of those LSTs were waiting to pick us up. Their part of the mission was to carry us along the river until we reached a village. Then we'd go ashore and carry out a search for VC, weapons, stores of food, or any information the local people could give us about the enemy's whereabouts.

We all kept a sharp eye on both banks while the boats carried us up the river. It wasn't hard to see that, in the event of an attack, these men were literally sitting ducks. For most of the time, the shore was no more than forty or fifty feet away on either side and so thick with growth that a large force could hide right on the edge without being seen.

When we reached the first village, the boats swung in toward shore and we disembarked, fanning out quickly to cover the area. It wasn't too difficult to determine if the food stores we found were being held for the enemy when a village had far more than they could possibly use themselves.

In actuality, this was one of those rare occasions when the villagers expressed the sentiment that they were quite happy to see us, although they had to be extremely cautious, because of the reprisals they might suffer at the hands of the VC. They got it across to us that they were sick and tired of their young women being abducted, often to be found dead when their captors were through using them.

After searching this village thoroughly, we reboarded the boats and continued up the river to the next one. Just as we were pulling into the shore again, I got a call on my radio.

“Comanche Six India, this is Chickenman Yellow Four, over.”

“Go ahead, Chickenman, over.”

“Comanche, I’m inbound with a couple of FNGs and supplies, over.”

“Roger that, Chickenman. Will you be dropping them off on the boat, over?”

“That’s a rog. Stand by, Six India. You’ll have to guide me in.”

“Roger. Will do.”

The FNGs that the pilot referred to was a term used to denote new men coming out to the field. It stood for “fucking new guys”.

The Huey came zipping down the river, skimming just feet above the surface of the water, and hovered over the platform in the center of the boat. I moved up forward and used hand signals to let the pilot know when his landing skids were just over the center of the platform. Once the bird settled down and some of the men began unloading the supplies, the pilot called again. With the roar of the chopper’s engine, it was difficult to hear anything else, but the pilot and I could talk to each other over the radio. It was an interesting situation because I was standing only about ten feet and a little below the front of the bird. Looking up through the window, I could see the pilot and his co-pilot while he talked to me over his helmet radio.

“Thank you much, Six India. You know, it’s kind of hairy landing on one of these things. The platform is so small that we can’t see the end of it under the nose of the bird. It’s a blind landing.”

“Roger. When you were coming down I could see how that might be a problem.”

“You got that right, buddy. I wouldn’t want anything happening to this guy now,” he said, meaning himself, and then continued, “I’ve got five days left and a wakeup staring me right in the face.”

I could plainly see the big grin on his face, despite his helmet’s dark eyeshield and the microphone that wrapped around from the side to just in front of his mouth.

“Damn! You trying to make me cry out here or what?” I answered with a grin of my own.

“How much time you got left in-country?” he asked.

“I’ve only got about forty five days left now, but to you that must sound like forever, right?”

“Hell, I think if I had another forty five days of this bullshit, I’d just shoot myself in the head and get it over with.”

I laughed, “Thanks for the words of encouragement.”

It only took a few minutes for the men to unload the bird and the new guys to get off, after which it lifted into the air, over the boat, and hovered for some seconds, so that the pilot could still see me.

“Hey, you take care of yourself out here, Six India. Maybe I’ll catch you back in the States sometime and buy you a drink.”

“Roger that. I’ll be looking forward to it,...and good luck.”

I saw both he and the co-pilot give me a thumbs up, which I returned, and then the bird pivoted and headed away up the river in the direction from which it had come.

The company stayed with the boats for the rest of the day and searched three more villages before it was time to go ashore for the night. We had to move inland, away from the river, until we were able to find enough semi-dry ground for our perimeter.

A strange incident occurred, just after the boats dropped us off and continued up the river on what would be their nightly patrols. The company was moving in from the bank, across an open stretch of tall reeds, when someone spotted a man running, about seventy-five yards away. He was running in the same direction we were moving, away from the river, so that all that was actually visible, above the tops of the reeds, was his head. He was definitely a VC, evidently not fearful of our being able to catch him

at such a distance, and with good reason. There wasn't really much we could do in this wet, soggy terrain, other than watch him run.

Taking everyone by surprise, Sergeant Albert, one of the platoon sergeants, walked up onto a small hump of dry earth, about five feet in diameter and two feet higher than the level of the swamp. He pointed his M-16 in the runner's direction and calmly squeezed off three shots. It appeared that the man went out of sight just before he fired, so that hitting him, when all that was visible was the top half of his head, made it seem ludicrous to even attempt.

Some of the men actually began razzing the old serge because the company had to hold up while someone went out there and checked the area where the man was last seen. We were all bushed and just wanted to get set up for the night.

"Come on, Serge. There's no way you could have hit that guy. Why waste the time and rounds on him?"

Sergeant Albert, a senior man with nineteen years service in the Army and a thick southern accent, calmly stepped down from the hump with a smug grin, refusing to acknowledge their complaints. Due to the mud and water, it took some time for the three men, who'd been sent to search, just to reach the location. They suddenly began waving their arms and calling over to where the main body of the company was waiting.

The captain had us make our way over in their direction. There was no telling what they might have found, but it seemed pretty obvious that the man who'd been running was long gone by now.

The company circled out around us and the CP, with one squad, made its way to the spot where the three men were standing. We stepped into a small clearing of reeds that had been flattened down in

the search. To all of our utter amazement, a young Vietnamese man lay still on the ground. When the medic turned him over, we saw three small holes in the side of his chest. Sergeant Albert had hit him dead on with all three shots!

Captain Boatner turned to look at Albert, who was standing behind him, his M-16 cradled in his forearm.

“Good work, Sergeant, I don’t think I’ve ever seen finer shooting than that.”

The CO also remembered the razzing that had just taken place, “I believe some of these men owe you an apology.”

Sergeant Albert smiled. He knew the moment belonged to him.

“It was nothing, Sir. Just like huntin’ squirrel back home.”

The old sergeant now found himself in the middle of a group of admiring young guys who’d never dreamed that an M-16 could be used with such incredible accuracy. With all that we’d seen in this country, it took a lot to impress us, but there was no doubt we were, one and all, amazed by Sergeant Albert’s fantastic display of skill.

Once the body was searched, the captain had us form up. We still had to find a place for the night. We finally came upon some local rice paddies, right at the edge of the marsh. They weren’t totally dry, but at least the ground was a little more solid here. This presented a somewhat hairy situation because the drier ground was so small in area. The men on the perimeter ended up pretty much shoulder-to-shoulder all the way around. Being that close together, added to the fact that we couldn’t possibly dig foxholes in such wet earth, didn’t make for a healthy situation if we were attacked. But there wasn’t much we could do about it if we were going to have a somewhat dry place to sleep.

By the time the perimeter was established on this uneasy ground and we were all lying in the wet grass, it was well into twilight. That was when the men on the perimeter, just in front of us, whispered back that they had movement out to their front. The perimeter was so small that the CP was located just behind one of the M-60 machine-gunners. The man on the gun had its two front legs resting on the rice paddy berm in front of him, pointing out toward the open paddy. Looking over the his shoulder, along the barrel of the weapon, I could see four people walking one behind the other. They were coming almost directly toward our location, each one carrying a 122mm rocket slung over a shoulder.

We were also able to make out that there were two men and two women and the two women were each carrying one of those big rockets too! We could easily determine, from their direction of travel, that they were headed for Tay Ninh which had been rocketed with those deadly missiles almost every night during the past month.

Captain Boatner, who was lying on the ground right beside me, spoke very softly to the machine-gunner in front of him.

“Easy does it, now. Let them get right out in the center of the paddy.”

The four VC, completely oblivious to our presence, continued to come ahead until they were only about forty yards from the gunner’s position. Then, the captain whispered, “Now!”

Pink tracers, from the M-60, zipped directly into the center of the small group and as soon as he opened fire, the rest of the people on our side of the perimeter did likewise. From the amount of fire pouring into the center of the paddy, it looked as if the four people simply disappeared.

Within a matter of seconds it was over and the firing stopped. It was now too dark to see if there was anyone lying out there, so the captain decided to play it safe. He turned to me.

“Call the rear and have them send a Cobra out here. I don’t want to take the chance of any of those people crawling around on us in the dark, especially with the size of those rockets they were carrying.”

I made the call and, within a matter of minutes, a Cobra from out of Tay Ninh, was circling overhead.

“Comanche Six India, this is Bluebird One, Over.”

“Roger, Bluebird One, this is Comanche Six India. We just had four Victor Charlies come up on us carrying 122 mike-mike rockets. Looks like they were headed for Tango Nevada to do some serious damage, over.”

“Roger that, Six India. Those bastards have been hitting us every night with those big mothers. Looks like the surprise was on them this time. What can I do for you, over?”

“We want to make sure we got them all. We’d like you to blanket the area just to be sure, over.”

“Roger that. What is your location, over.”

“We’ll pop a flare at our closest point to the target and I’ll direct you from there, over.”

“Roger that.”

One of the men near me pulled the pin on a trip flare and tossed it out to our front.

“Roger, Six India. I’ve got your flare.”

“Roger. The target area is forty yards whiskey of the flare, over.”

“Forty yards!” The concern in his voice was clear. “That’s cutting it a little close, don’t you think, Six India?”

“Roger that, Bluebird, but we have faith in you guys, over.”

“We appreciate that, but make sure you keep your heads down, over.”

“That we will, Bluebird,...that we will, over.”

It was completely dark now. All we could see of the Cobra were its red and green running lights as it came down low to hover directly over our position. Then a stream of pink tracers began snaking back and forth across the rice paddy just out to our front. This was definitely the closest I'd ever been to the receiving end of that torrent and it sent a cold chill up my spine. The chainsaw sound of the mini-gun ripped through the night, and we were actually close enough to hear the rounds tearing up the ground out there.

In a matter of seconds the spray had completely covered the area of the open paddy, which was about three-quarters the size of a football field. Then the stream stopped. It was replaced by the steady rat-tat-tat-tat-tat of the Cobra's automatic grenade launcher placing rounds up and down the paddy with the speed of a machine-gun. This was an even more impressive spectacle, at such close range, because, with the flash of each explosion, in rapid succession, there was a stroboscopic light affect with dirt and debris flying into the air.

Finally, this ended too.

“Six India, this is Bluebird, over.”

“Go ahead, Bluebird, over.”

“I think that ought to do it for anybody who might have been still down in that paddy, over.”

“I think you're right”, I answered. “We thank you much for the assist. We really appreciate it, over.”

“Roger that, and we appreciate you guys stopping those bastards. Maybe tonight, for a change, we can get some sleep back at Tango Nevada.”

“Roger that.”