
SIXTY SIX**An ARVN Lesson**

The second incident happened the following night. The company had spent the day patrolling the open rice paddies with no contact with the enemy. Our morale was pretty low, because of the guys who were wounded the night before, but especially because we all had a deep affection for the platoon sergeant who had been killed.

Since we were in a fairly open area, Captain Boatner kept the company moving until after dark. He decided that we would skip the usual procedure of digging foxholes and just find a location where we could spread the perimeter out, flat on the ground, for the night.

When we came to a line of trees that ran in a long, thin row, with bushes around the bases, he gave the word for us to stop and set up. Out to our front was an open field with the next treeline a good thousand yards away on the other side.

At about the center of that field there was an ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) compound which was basically a fort, something like the type that the cavalry used in the Old West, back in the eighteen hundreds. The company hadn't been settled in long when all kinds of hooting and hollering began issuing from inside the compound.

The captain spread the bushes in front of him and peered out in that direction.

“What the hell is going on?”

Lieutenant Thompson, Top, and we radiomen took up positions where we could all look through the bushes at the compound. Top was the first to answer.

“Sounds to me like they’re having a drunken party over there, Sir.”

As we were watching, the sky over the compound lit up with the white light of a five star cluster. These were special flares that were normally used to signal different meanings to someone a great distance away, according to their color. The flares came in red, green, and white and were shot off by removing the cap from one end of a short aluminum tube. The cap was then placed on the other end to act as a hammer and the base of the tube was hit on the ground. The five balls of light, that lit up the sky, looked very much identical to what roman candles look like during a Fourth of July celebration back home.

Then several more followed the first display. It was evident that the Vietnamese soldiers in the compound were just firing them off for fun.

Top gritted his teeth, “Look at those sons-of-bitches! Our people supply them with all their equipment and they just piss it away having a good time.”

“Yeah”, Thompson replied...”And they do that every night. In the morning they’ll order a whole new bunch of supplies so they can do it all over again tomorrow night.”

“Worthless bastards! They don’t give a damned who sees them either,” Top answered.

Again Captain Boatner spoke, as he watched the display.

“Every time they fire one of those flares off it’s costing our people back home their hard-earned tax dollars. I think it’s about time we taught them a little lesson in humility, don’t you Lieutenant?”

Thompson looked over at him, “I sure do, Sir. What do you have in mind?”

The captain didn't take his gaze from the flares.

"Do you think you can get us a fire mission directly over that compound?"

It immediately dawned on Thompson what the CO was getting at and a smile crossed his face. The lieutenant picked up his radioman's handset and made the call to the firebase himself. While he was giving the coordinates of the compound, the captain had me change my radio frequency to that of the ARVN soldiers inside the compound.

"This should be interesting. After the round goes off they'll be on the radio as fast as their legs can carry them. Don't answer them right away. We'll let them sweat it out for a little while."

I smiled too in anticipation, "Right, Sir."

We also passed word of what we were doing along to the men on the perimeter. The captain figured it would be good for everyone's morale to be in on the fun. Each platoon tuned one of their radios in on the ARVN frequency.

We heard the deep boom of a gun back at the firebase and then the sound of the round whistling overhead. The marking round burst, with a bright flash of light, directly over the compound. Immediately the flares stopped firing and the radio came alive with frantic calls in broken English.

"American company, come in! American company, come in!"

We all began laughing quietly, like a bunch of mischievous kids, at the sound of panic in the Vietnamese voices.

"Americans, cease fire! Cease fire! Cease fire!"

While the ARVNs were on the air, we could hear people in the background yelling in panic. They knew that an American company usually followed a marking round with an HE, because, due to the

difference in weight of the two rounds, an HE would travel farther than the marking round did. The marking round was used just to get a general feel for where the guns were aimed. The follow-up HE would tell us exactly where the real rounds would land if we needed them.

Then Wada began getting anxious calls, on his radio, from our own people back in the rear.

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

He waited for several repeats of the call and then answered, trying to suppress his laughter.

“Go ahead, Romeo Charlie, over.”

“Comanche, this is Romeo Charlie, what the hell’s going on out there. We’ve got ARVNs on all our horns going crazy about some kind of attack, over.”

Captain Boatner took the handset from Wada, “This is Comanche Six. Tell them we’ve got the situation well under control, no problem,...out.”

The response from the rear sounded utterly confused, “Roger that,...Six?”

When the people in the rear were finally able to get through to the panic-stricken ARVNs, the radios quieted down, but there were no more wasteful displays of flares from the compound that night, and probably for some time after that.

Once again, the captain had found a way to boost the lagging morale of his men, especially that of Lieutenant Thompson, and taught the ARVNs a lesson to boot.