
SIXTY SEVEN**On The Ho Chi Minh Trail**

The next morning a sortie of Hueys came out and moved the company again, transporting us to a firebase named Rita. Not only was Rita right on the Cambodian border, but also smack in the middle of a branch of the infamous Ho Chi Minh Trail. We were no longer in rice paddy country, interspersed with smaller islands of jungle. Now we were deep in the heart of the jungle itself,...and “charley’s” territory. The trails through here were heavily traveled by crack NVA troops moving south toward Saigon and the Mekong Delta.

Rita was another small LZ, approximately a hundred yards in diameter. It was one of three located in this area, within artillery range of each other. It had a battery of guns located in the center and heavy bunkers all around the perimeter. These firebases were situated roughly in the shape of a triangle so that any one could supply firepower for the other two in the event they were attacked. Outside the perimeter there were several rows of concertina wire and the jungle had been cut back so that it was about thirty or forty yards away from the wire all the way around. Some twenty miles to the west, deep inside Cambodia, we could see a chain of thickly forested mountains that was plainly visible from the firebase.

It’s hard to explain, but to me this area felt different than any other we’d been in before. There was sense of foreboding here that I think touched us all, but that nobody wanted to talk about. I’m sure it had a lot to do with the fact that we were so deep in the enemy’s territory,...but it was *more* than that.

Up to this late point in my tour, I'd spent a lot of time in the jungle—the jungle in the mountains, the jungle in the lowlands and even in the deep swamps—but it never really bothered me. Sure, there were the physical inconveniences,...like the miserable heat, the interminable assortment of biting insects, and plants with leaves that could slice your skin open, but these were all things you could get used to—deal with.

Here, at Rita, the jungle itself seemed to have something different about it. When I looked out past the wire, I could see far more *dead* trees, their lifeless limbs sticking up through the thin canopy, than we were used to. It didn't have anything to do with defoliation. I'd seen what that looked like. These trees were all twisted and knurled, like the ones you'd expect in an Edgar Allan Poe story. They gave you the feeling that, if you turned your back on them, they'd reach out and wrap those bony branches around you! It just felt ominous here.

The first couple of days, we manned the perimeter bunkers for a much needed rest. We spent our time, doing the usual things, cleaning our weapons or, as I was doing at the moment, lying on top of a bunker reading a paperback.

I was lying on my back, under the hot mid-day sun, when a Huey came in to drop off a bundle of supplies that were suspended by a rope from the underside of the helicopter. The bird was hovering, so that the people on the ground could detach a net encircling the crates, when an 82mm mortar round exploded in the treeline just outside that part of the perimeter. Then a second one went off just a short distance from where the first one had landed and tree limbs fell to the ground.

The strange part was that neither the pilots of the Huey, the people on the ground, nor anyone else on the firebase even flinched when those enemy rounds went off. In fact, I turned leisurely on my side

to watch a third one come down, back in the trees, where it took out some more foliage. The reason for our lack of concern was that those NVA soldiers out there, who were operating the tube, fired three or four rounds in every day like clockwork, and every day the rounds went off in the treeline just outside the wire. There was an unspoken rule that no one was to go out there and shoot or capture that particular mortar crew, because they might be replaced by someone who could actually hit the firebase!

On our third day here, B company arrived by Huey and took up the positions around the perimeter. C company was now going out to patrol around the area.

We moved out of the wire, circling around to the eastern side, where we began following a well used trail. About a click north of the LZ, the trail emerged from the jungle, on the edge of an open field, shaped something like a huge, upside-down T “⊥”. The place where the trail entered the field was at the lower left corner of the T’s crossbar. That crossbar was about half the width of a football field, almost as long and was covered with two-and-a-half foot high, golden colored elephant grass.

The trail continued, from the corner where we emerged, on a diagonal across the open field and up through the middle of the T’s leg. To the left of the trail, in the field in front of us, was a huge bomb crater that had been there for a long time and was half-full of rainwater, like a miniature pond.

Captain Boatner decided that, since the trail crossed the field and this was clearly a heavily traveled route, rather than walking out into the open, we’d set up a company-sized ambush right where we were. The men spread out, just inside the treeline, so that the trail cut through a portion of our perimeter.

We didn’t have long to wait.

It was highly unusual to see NVA soldiers out in the open, but since this was *their* turf, they didn’t exhibit the normal caution they would deeper incountry. Three of them, wearing black shirts and shorts,

and carrying AK-47s, came down the trail toward us, sticking close to the treeline of the leg. Everyone in the company, fascinated by the opportunity of actually seeing the enemy for a change, remained quite and watched their movement.

There were only the three, so they were probably an advance party checking the trail for a larger body not far behind them. They stayed along the treeline until they got to the corner where the crossbar and the leg met, some thirty yards from where we were watching. Then they strolled out into the open, coming over to the edge of the crater, and just stood there looking down into it.

Now that they were only about twenty yards away from us, it was easy to see them clearly. One was a full head taller than the other two, evidence that he was Chinese, while they were Vietnamese.

We had often run into, and were quite adept at recognizing Chinese, as opposed to Vietnamese, because of the difference in height between the two peoples.

While they were standing there, looking into the crater, and oblivious to the fact that some hundred-and-ten pairs of eyes were silently watching down the sights of their weapons, the captain raised his arm in preparation to open fire. It looked as though the three scouts weren't going to come any closer and he didn't want them getting away.

Just as they turned to walk back to the opposite treeline, he dropped his arm and the company opened fire. The three of them were cut down before they took another step. A squad of men, sent out to check the results, confirmed three killed on the other side of the crater.

Though it was only the middle of the afternoon, the captain issued orders to dig in. We were going to remain at this same location overnight.

It was quiet until about eleven P.M. Trip flares had been set up at various locations crossing the trail and Lieutenant Thompson had brought his marking rounds in to set the big guns, in case we needed them.

At around eleven, one of the flares went off.

In its yellow light, we could see a line of NVA soldiers, one behind the other, stretching all the way back up the trail to the north. We'd caught at least a company sized unit in our trap! As soon as the flare illuminated this scene, we all opened fire, hundreds of pink tracers zipping crazily across the field and return fire cracking back at us.

We called the firebase for the artillery to fire flare rounds out continuously, keeping the area well lighted. The beginning of the line of enemy, only about ten yards directly in front of us, had been cut down, but some of the wounded, lying in the grass, were returning fire while the others, further back in the line, hightailed it back up the trail the way they'd come.

It wasn't long before all the firing stopped and a heavy silence settled in. The only sounds to be heard were the whispers of the radiomen over their handsets. The flares were called off, the last one drifting slowly down into the trees and dying out, leaving pitch darkness again. Everyone remained in position. No one was about to venture out into the field until morning when we could see if anyone was still alive out there.

Nothing else happened for the rest of that night, but the following morning, a Sunday, had a big surprise in store. I was lying on the ground asleep, at the base of a tree about eighteen inches in diameter, with the other people of the CP. The sky had just started getting light when, suddenly, a B-40 rocket hissed out of the woods behind us. It exploded in the tree only about twenty feet directly over

our heads. Fortunately, B-40 rockets throw out a fairly small amount of shrapnel, so that the limbs of the tree shielded us from injury. In fact, other than shocking everyone instantly awake, who wasn't already up on watch, and sending us scrambling for our holes, no one was hurt.

At the same time that the rocket exploded, automatic weapons fire erupted on the trail, in the woods behind us. The men on that part of the perimeter opened fire and the engagement only lasted a few seconds until someone tossed a hand grenade into those woods.

After the explosion, a squad of men moved down along both sides of the trail, effectively surrounding the location where the rocket had come from. It didn't take long to find that whomever was down there had fled. But the men who were searching did find something that seemed almost too incredible to imagine. Actually, if they hadn't seen it themselves they'd never have believed it!

There had only been two people out there, judging from the sandal prints on the trail, and they'd snuck up quietly, one of them pushing a bicycle. They'd used the bicycle to carry a home-made claymore mine. fashioned out of the bottom of a fifty-five gallon drum.

The American claymore was about ten inches long, six inches high, and fairly easy to carry. The NVA, however, didn't have factory made claymores at their disposal, so they constructed their own by cutting the bottom off of a fifty-five gallon drum, to a depth of about three inches. Then they packed that entire bottom with plastic explosive, very similar to C-4, and embedded whatever they could find into it. That included everything from shards of glass to nails and stones.

Finally they inserted a blasting cap through a small hole in the center bottom of the drum. In order for the mine to explode parallel to the ground, they stood it on edge, on a makeshift easel fashioned from pieces of bamboo tied together with reeds. Because of the huge diameter and depth of the drum,

their claymore was at least ten times as powerful as the American version and quiet capable of wiping out an entire platoon, if it happened to be in front of the blast!

The men found the NVA claymore standing in the center of the trail, aimed in the direction we'd have gone in pursuit. The B-40 rocket and weapons fire were simply the bait to draw us up the trail. When we were in range, one of the enemy was prepared to squeeze a plunger and set the mine off.

At first it was puzzling why the claymore had been abandoned, standing there on its easel. On further examination, however, it was discovered that a piece of shrapnel, from the single grenade that one of our guys had thrown, cut the wire between the mine and the man with the plunger! Imagine his surprise when he squeezed and nothing happened! Evidently he'd dropped the plunger and took off running.

It was, indeed, nothing short of a miracle that a tiny piece of that grenade had severed the wire. The odds of that happening were a million to one!