

A Minor Incident at Ba Xuan

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Straddling as I am the boundary between advanced middle age and incipient old age; I cast my mind back over four decades and marvel at the things I have been called in my lifetime. Some good, some not so good; some insulting and some quite complimentary. After husband, father and grandfather however; the appellation next in proximity to my heart is “Doc” Richardson, the Mekong Medic, which was what I was called by members of the 3rd Platoon, Troop G, 17th Armored Squadron, 3rd Air Cavalry in Vietnam. The Red Hawks were one of the few ground cavalry units in IV Corps and patrolled the Southern aspect of the old French Indochinese Colony of Cochinchina. I was not a physician as I arrived in Vietnam in January 1969. As a graduate of the Combat Medic Course at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, however, I was as close to a doctor as most of these kids were going to see for most of their tour “in country”.

I suppose it is part of the human condition that youth believes itself immortal and moral judgments are always sharply rendered in black and white. The existence of mushy boundaries between good and evil, of misty gray zones that leave one uncertain where lies the moral high ground, are discoveries usually reserved for the fourth and fifth decades of life; not the second and third. So it was that less than two months past my nineteenth birthday I found myself in a fighting position on a bluff above the runway of Chau-Bai Army Airfield; diligently searching the Indochinese night for people trying to kill me. I was both exhilarated and scared. Defending home and hearth from the evils of Godless Communism in an exotic land was an exhilarating adventure. But there was also

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the fear. Not so much of dying, for at nineteen, death is something that happens to someone else. It was fear of failure, of letting down your buddies, of not living up to your self-image.

Chau-Bai, Chang-Hoa, and Ba Xuan were like a series of linked college courses, each escalating in difficulty and intensity; until one day I realized I was no longer a newbie incurring the dudgeon of the 106 squad for calling their recoilless rifles cannons, or generating snickers among the infantry squad when I tried to list the differences between a fifty-caliber machine-gun and an M-60. Somewhere along the way I had become a skeptical combat veteran, scornful of biased reporters, cynical politicians and Rear Echelon Maternal Fornicators: the REMFs that inhabited the rear areas and were the bane of combat soldiers since Sargon the Great marched the first professional army through Ancient Mesopotamia.

Since Tet of 1968, every Vietnamese holiday was considered a high-risk threat date. For this reason, in mid-May 1969, in response to intelligence estimates predicting an attack on the Special Forces camp at Ba Xuan over Ho Chi Minh's birthday; G Troop refitted, received some replacements and deployed across the Mekong Delta to Ba Xuan. Here, sweating, grunting and complaining about the heat, we removed our 106mm recoilless rifles and heavy machine-guns from their vehicle mounts and man-handled them into fighting positions around the base of the mountain.

At the far end of a spur of ridge jutting from the side of the mountain, we set up a position for one of the 106s with the infantry squad providing cover. Even today, in the hours after midnight, when sleep refuses to come and the moonlight is peopled with ghostly images of the past; I can hear once again the grouching and bitching as we man-

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handled the heavy weapons in the hundred degree heat with Corporal Sanderson, gun captain for the 106, supervising construction of the sandbagged redoubt.

“Damn! It must be a hundred and ten out here!” SP4 Hank Wilmert had been “in country” for six months now and had survived several firefights. “Whose brilliant idea was dismounting the 106s anyhow? As heavy as they are, humping them is a real pain in the ass!”

“Whine, whine, whine.” Corporal Sanderson’s reply did not interrupt his survey of the 106’s fields of fire as he continued, “Look how good the cavalry is to you, Hank. Fresh air, sunshine, and plenty of exercise. Some people just don’t appreciate how good they have it.”

“Corporal Sanderson,” Hank’s voice was the soul of reasonableness as he continued, “we’re sitting ducks out here in the middle of nowhere. If we get hit, there ain’t no other cavalry unit left in the Delta to come riding up just-in-the-nick-of-time.”

“Move the breach a bit more to the right, Hank. That’s better. If we do get hit tonight, you’ll sure as hell be glad this position is done and done right. Now get a move on. There’s only a couple of hours daylight left. I want another row of sandbags here and an enclosure for the canister rounds over there where we can get to them rapidly.”

Canisters were anti-personnel rounds set to explode at set distances once fired, releasing hundreds of lethal darts like a gigantic blunderbuss letting loose on the battlefield.

As I worked on my own position, the designated casualty collection point, Hank pulled me into the conversation.

“What’cha think, Doc? Tet this year was pretty quiet up at Chau-Bai. Ya think we’ll get hit tonight what with Ho Chi Minh’s birthday and all?”

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“Lord Hank, I don’t know. There was a Green Beret Captain that spoke to the L.T. when we first arrived.” We called our platoon leader, Lieutenant Wilson, the L.T. among ourselves. “He seemed pretty intense about the threat. And it would make sense, what with Tet so quiet this year. To be honest, I ain’t gonna cry if its quiet tonight. Before Chan Hoa, I’d have welcomed some action. Now, my first priority ain’t saving Vietnam from Godless Communism. It’s gettin’ as many of you guys home in one piece as humanly possible. But that captain sure seemed concerned about an attack.”

“What’cha think’s gonna happen if they do attack in strength, Doc? The rest of the troop is at the base of the mountain. We’re almost a football field away from them.”

“That SF Captain told the L.T. if it hits the fan and we’re bein’ overrun, he’ll fire a red flair as a signal for us to retreat to the top of the mountain where the helicopters’ll take us off. What the hell’s so funny, Hank?”

“Har, har, har. Bet you believe in the Easter bunny too, Doc.” Tracing the ridge crest with his hand, Hank continued, “That’s at least 90 meters to the base of the mountain. And another 1800 meters to the top of the mountain. No cover. In a firefight. When we’re bein’ over run. Now I don’t want to talk dirty about Special Forces, ‘specially after John Wayne showed us how to fight this war in his Green Beret movie. But I’m beginning to suspect we’re being B-S’d about this mountaintop helicopter rescue.”

I had just completed a check of all the positions along the spur when Platoon Sergeant Tolliver hove into view, making his final inspection of the perimeter. As he passed my position, I caught a bit of his conversation with Corporal Sanderson.

“...Lieutenant has set up his Command Post at the SF operations hooch. They’ve

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got better comms with Squadron Headquarters. G-2 is fairly sure they'll attack tonight..."

G-2 was what we called the denizens of the Intelligence and Security section of the puzzle palace back at Squadron Headquarters. With guard duty at midnight, an hour or so after sundown I checked my equipment a final time and went to sleep.

"Doc. Hey, Doc, wake up! It's midnight." Hank's voice was low as he roused me for my guard shift.

"What's the situation, Hank? Anything going on?"

"Nope. Really quiet, Doc. Comanche Troop had some choppers overhead for a while. Slicks and Cobras I think. They flew off about ten minutes ago. Had to refuel, I suppose. I went ahead and called in a comms-check and situation report, so your next comms check ain't due 'till 0100."

"Thanks, Hank. I have it now. Grab some sleep while you can."

To clutch your weapon in a sandbagged position, peering into the night peopled with legions of phantoms in black pajamas intent upon killing you and your buddies is the ultimate definition of aloneness. Random sounds in the night are never a dog rummaging through the garbage pits or a water buffalo snorting from his pen adjacent a farmer's hooch; they are heralds of your adversary turning a claymore mine or preparing to materialize from the mist like the Count in the old Dracula movies, slitting your throat before you even know he is near.

After eons and eons, the radio operator at the L.T.'s command post, Red Hawk 3-6, broke squelch to initiate a series of radio checks. It was finally 0100 hours.

"Red Hawk 3-1, this is Red Hawk 3-6. Comms check, over."

"Red Hawk 3-6, this is Red Hawk 3-1. Read you five by five. All quiet, out."

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“Red Hawk 3-2, this is Red Hawk 3-6. Commo check, over.”

And so it went, 3-2, 3-3, 3-4, 3-5 as one by one they reported the perimeter quiet and I waited for my turn to be queried.

“Red Hawk 3-7, this is Red Hawk 3-6, commo check, over.”

Just to break up the monotony, I had planned to answer “It’s 0100 at the sound of the bell and all’s well”. However, as I said “0100” the mortar position manned by the South Vietnamese Army just a few yards below me on the ridge disintegrated in an orange fireball as the noise of rocket explosions started ripping the night silence apart. Immediately, incoming rockets, outgoing recoilless rifle fire, machine-gun tracers and parachute flairs rent the darkness to shreds.

As I fed the ammo belt into the machine-gun Hank fired in short bursts, I monitored the radio as Corporal Sanderson fired the 106 as rapidly as possible. In the greenish light of the parachute flairs, I could see the Viet Cong charging out of the tree line like ants swarming out of an anthill, to surge across the rice paddy through the swirling tracers that engulfed us all. Repeatedly their rockets exploded in our positions. Repeatedly our 106 rounds exploded among them. And still the assault continued, for neither of us would concede the fight. When the assault was about two hundred meters out, I glanced at the ridgeline and my heart sank. Red and green tracers covered the crest, lethal spider’s webs that made any attempt to cross that spur certain death.

“Told ya, didn’t I Doc?” I couldn’t tell if the tremor in Hank’s voice was due to adrenalin affect or the recoil of the machine-gun he kept firing. “I told ya there was no way we were gettin’ up that mountain! It don’t mean nothin’ Doc. Hell, nothin’ means nothin’ any more!”

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Later, as the leading edge of the enemy force closed to within 100 meters of our berm, I prepared myself for a modern version of Custer's Last Stand, for the frantic firing of the 106 and the endless rattle of the machine-guns did not break up their attack. It is strange how time slows and one becomes serene at a time like that. As though one exists in a different dimension from the frantic noise and activity being played out around you. It was at this moment, having prepared for and accepted my death, I heard the rotor wash of the Cobras and Slicks of Comanche Troop roar over the mountaintop, followed instantly by the whoosh of rockets and the staccato chattering of the rapid fire machine-guns as the door gunners opened up.

Awe struck, I watched a line of rockets from the Cobras walk explosions across the front of the assault wave. Instantly it faltered. Seconds later, a second wave of Cobras sent rockets stalking the leading edge of the assault and the survivors began retreating to the tree line. A few minutes later, like misty phantoms dispelled by the wind at dawn, they disappeared into the jungle. The helicopters remained overhead for a time and occasionally a door gunner would spray tracers into a patch of jungle. Finally, however, shortly before dawn, silence settled over the area.

Dawn arrives suddenly in the Mekong Delta. One moment, all is dark. Then streaks of red grasp the mountaintops like bloody raptor claws. A short time later, rays of sunlight spew from the peaks and darkness rapidly melts away. Perhaps a half hour after sunrise, with all the casualties attended, I was called to a bunker several hundred yards along the ridge. The wife of one of the Cambodian Mercenaries serving with the South Vietnamese Army had gone into labor during the attack. Washing my hands with a bar of soap in the stream of water poured from a canteen, I delivered a baby boy, which the

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father wrapped in a blanket and handed to his wife. Through out, the infant's mother stoically endured without a whimper. I suppose I have retained this memory for over four decades because to me it exemplifies the endless rhythm of life: two lives transitioned out of this world and a new life transitioned into it -- all with in the space of five and a half hours.

So passed Ho Chi Minh's birthday in 1969. Two days later, we heard over Armed Forces Vietnam Radio a communiqué from Military Assistance Command - Vietnam, that despite concerns about a major offensive on Ho Chi Minh's birthday, nothing of significance had happened with the exception of a minor incident at Ba Xuan. In due course, we remounted the machine-guns and recoilless rifles on our vehicles and convoyed back across the Delta to our home base -- grateful to have survived that minor incident.

At Ba Xuan I lost my belief in the integrity of journalists and politicians. We live in an age when large segments of the population have abdicated their right to think for themselves in preference to acceptance of pre-masticated opinions from self-serving politicians and agenda driven journalists. Additionally, it is an age in which the authority to plunge the nation into armed conflict no longer resides solely in the Congress, it has been redistributed to the Executive branch and to some extent, the United Nations. With the escalation of broadcast media into our everyday lives, this is a dangerous combination. As Plato noted 25 centuries ago, only the dead have seen the end of war. As such, it is a lesson I believe we would do well to teach our children.