

COMBAT ZONE

Baptism of Fire

Rounds chunked into the timber and pinged off the steel plate of the partially constructed bunker that stood at the base of the island's wooden radar tower. Then the firecracker sounds of small arms fire reached my ears from the tree line on the north side of the Rach Tra canal. Without knowing how it happened, I was suddenly on the ground, low crawling - - to where I didn't know. After what seemed like a long time, I became aware that I was crawling away from my rifle and steel pot. I abruptly turned 180 degrees, too charged with adrenaline to be embarrassed. I got into a running crouch and hustled back to the bunker, back to my M-16 and helmet. Everyone was crouched down or sprawled on the ground, weapons pointed across the Rach Tra. The incoming had stopped. No one had been hit. I realized that only seconds had gone by since I dove to the ground and started my crawl.

Suddenly nothing was happening. Slowly, the infantry squad and my radar guys exhaled. Then everyone started talking at the same time, keeping their eyes focused across the Rach Tra. The radio on the floor of the bunker came to life. I grabbed the handset and squeezed the push-to-talk button. Red Leg at All-American, somehow already informed of the small arms fire, wanted to lay down some artillery north of the canal and requested adjustment. I reported that the shooting had stopped, but I was ready to adjust the fire and confirmed our coordinates. Within seconds, a marking round came in well north of the tree line on the far side of the canal. It looked all right to me, so I told them to fire for effect. The 105's at All-American boomed out and soon rounds were thudding into the paddy. By now, there was probably no VC anywhere near the impact zone, but the artillery made everybody feel better. I was still shaking inside.

LCM RPG

We heard the LCM (landing craft medium) long before we saw it. Then it appeared in the distance, heading up the Rach Tra to Rock from the Saigon River, looking huge compared to the small boats and sampans we were used to seeing on the narrow canal. I was standing on top of the radar tower, waving as the LCM passed the island when I heard a loud explosion and saw smoke mushroom from the vessel's starboard side. Almost immediately, the LCM's 50 caliber machine gun started up, spraying an undulating line of tracer rounds that whined close over my head. I ducked and slid

straight down the tower's wooden ladder hitting the ground hard, my heart pounding, breathing heavily, splinters in my hands and knees.

The landing craft was upstream from the island when I got to the bunker. The LCM crew had radioed All-American that they had been hit, so Red Leg at the fire base was already coming up on our push. The RPG explosion and machine gun fire had jolted me and I was consciously trying to calm myself. I hadn't much real-life experience adjusting artillery fire and I didn't want to screw it up. Using the island's map coordinates as a starting point, I gave Red Leg what I calculated to be the correct direction and distance. A gun boomed to our south and a smoke marking round exploded - - directly over us. That almost panicked me, but I said in as calm a voice as I could manage "Add 800." The next round, which came in north of our position across the canal, looked about right and I gave the direction "Fire for effect." The guns started booming at All-American and in a short time I heard that weird, empty boxcar sound of artillery rounds rattling through the air above us and then thudding and cracking into the paddies and tree lines north of the canal. The firing ended abruptly and the Red Leg officer came on to thank me for adjusting the artillery. I was happy and relieved to have handled the job without anything going wrong.

A week after the LCM was hit, it came back downriver spraying the lush greenery on the north side of the canal with kerosene and setting it on fire, trying to deny the VC the cover and concealment that had allowed them to fire on the RPG without being seen. Although sending up billowing black plumes of acrid smoke, the fires quickly died out and the defoliation attempt failed. But a few weeks later, the LCM returned to spray Agent Orange on the trees and shrubs bordering the canal and it was not very long afterwards that the countryside looked as leafless and barren as New England in late November.

Ambush

The night was dry and quiet, with a cool breeze blowing. About nine o'clock, I was on my way out of the bunker to check out Mike Klassen at the radar console, when small arms fire, like a string of exploding firecrackers, erupted well away from the island toward the northwest. In a millisecond, the noise swelled from a few rifles to a continuous din of small arms fire, now joined by the deeper sound of machine guns cranking out a steady baseline. Claymore mines began to blow and then hand grenades. I scrambled to the roof of the bunker and saw a crazy quilt of tracers along a tree line about three kilometers northwest of the island. In seconds the "whump" of a mortar could be heard as Rock's four deuce battery fired its first illumination round and, to the south, one of the 105mm howitzers at All American began firing. I slid down off

the roof and trotted over to Klassen, who had brought our radio up to monitor Bravo Company's push where someone was shouting "get us more light bulbs". Artillery now came up on B Company's frequency and requested adjustment. After some squelch and static, I recognized Sgt. Mitchell's voice coming clear and calm over the radio above the roar of the firefight, directing red leg to fire for effect. South of us a whole battery at All American opened up in what became a continuous fusillade of light - - the northern sky filling with parachute flares popping continuously, two and three at a time, their smoking trails sputtering in the brightness, making zigzag patterns. The small arms fire had subsided now, only to sporadically flare up and die down again.

At Rock, Sgt. Willie Way got the word he would be leading two squads to link up with the ambush squad and sweep the killing ground. Willie, just promoted to Staff Sergeant, had joined his new platoon only two weeks earlier. He remembered that in night training at NCO School they always used camouflage makeup for the face and hands: certain shades for white soldiers, different shades for black, twigs and branches to conceal the outline of the steel pot. But tonight, he and his men were going out with no camouflage and almost no combat experience.

The barbed wire and steel barriers were pulled away from Rock's entrance and Willie's two squads started out, heading to where the guns were firing. After a few hundred meters, they veered to the right off the old French road, past the first farmhouse in the village, and onto a crumbling, disused trail that ran along the paddy dikes. The RTO was talking to the ambush. The crucial thing was not to shoot each other up. Illumination kept coming in and suddenly the rotor chop of a helicopter could be heard. From the south, two Cobra gunships whirled over the Rach Tra canal and broke in on the platoon frequency. Sgt. Mitchell's voice came on: he would pop red flares and red smoke to mark the ambush squad's position. As Willy moved his men off the road onto the paddy dike, he could see the red flares going off and the Cobras' mini-guns beginning to hose down the area in front of the tree line - - streams of tracers flowing out of the sky. Willie was walking slack, 8 meters behind his point man and just behind Willie was the RTO. Now the only gunfire was the whir of the mini-guns. As Willie's squad moved closer to the ambush site and entered the area of illumination, everyone got down. Willie was on the horn with Sgt. Mitchell telling him they were the roughly 100 meters down the paddy dike, would pop a red flare and then link up. The flare went up like a roman candle as the squad edged along the dike and saw before them, dimly at first, the jumble of poncho liners, men, and weapons that was the ambush. The point man began shouting "1st squad, 1st squad" and the link up was made.

While Sgt. Mitchell was on the radio telling the gunships to standby, a medevac came up on his frequency. Before the chopper made it over the tree line it killed its running lights, the illumination rounds had stopped, and the night abruptly grew dark. Sgt. Mitchell popped yellow smoke and the Huey came down fast, suddenly turning on its

lights. At the same instant, the gunships again began blasting the far tree line with their mini-guns. Three GIs who had been wounded when the ambush blew were hustled out to the paddy wrapped in ponchos and loaded into the medevac. The Huey had barely touched down and now it was off again vibrating in a strong upswing towards the south, its running lights again turned off, the dust-off completed.

Illumination rounds started coming in again and the gunships continue cranking along the tree line. Willie got his men in line out in the paddy and they slowly moved across the killing ground in the flickering, jumpy light of the flares. Suddenly in front of him was a man lying in the low paddy grass. Willie froze, staring at the prone figure, then hip-sighted his rifle and pressed back on the trigger: the M-16 hammered and kicked and half a magazine emptied into the corpse. His men had dropped to the earth behind him. Nothing moved. Then they stood up, moved in a running crouch to the body and saw two more figures on the ground not far away: VC in green fatigue pants, black shirts, and cloth hats, AK-47s. They were dead. The squad moved on. Two more VC were found far down the paddy near the tree line. One moved, or seemed to, and was riddled by Willie's men. On the sweep back from the tree line, they spread ponchos and rolled the bodies of the VC into them together with any weapons and gear that was lying around. Willie got on the horn and reported to the CO that they had found five VC. All dead.

Willie's two squads and, behind them, Mitchell's ambush squad, slowly walked the paddy dike back to the pocked-marked French road, adrenaline played out, exhausted. At Rock, the Bravo Company's CO was out near the road to meet the platoon as it came in. They trooped through the wire looking ragged and weary. The CO just nodded when they passed by. The platoon went back to their bunkers and talked quietly among themselves. The other men of Bravo Company left them alone. Situation reports came in from the company's other two "nightingales" farther down the Rach Tra canal. "Sit Rep Negative." Quiet. The four deuce platoon started firing H&I, then stopped. Off in the distance the 105's at All American began to put down a blanket of high explosive rounds out in the area where the ambush had been sprung. Shells came over like rattling freight cars in the night. Passing overhead and then impacting out in the paddies with a crack and shudder. The firing intensified and then stopped. A lightship buzzed over the ambush area, flipped on its dazzling arc lights, then doused them and sped off. Again it grew quiet.

On the island the radar squad had stayed up to follow the fire fight as best we could. After everything got quiet, I talked briefly with Al who was manning the radar console and turned in. I had already completed my watch, so I hit the rack and didn't wake up until the next morning, when I took a boat upriver to Rock where Willie told me what had happened.

I soon discovered that the VC corpses had been choppered back to Rock, rolled out of the ponchos, and lay sprawled on the dirt in the center of the base. Their weapons, equipment, and some of their uniforms had been taken by S-2 for analysis. I avoided the area most of the morning, but finally bowing to a gnawing curiosity and sense of inevitability, I walked over. The eyes of the VC were opened, startled looking, and flies crawled on their faces. Their bodies were twisted and grotesque: arms and legs stuck out in unnatural positions. One of the corpses had swelled like an over-inflated balloon. A large part of another had been blown away - - not a leg or head, but a large chunk of torso, from the shoulder to the hip. When I realized what I was looking at, what our weapons had done - - not a neat hole or a clean amputation, but whole hunks of flesh, bone and sinew ripped away - - I gagged. Nausea swept over me in waves. To avoid being seen, I dashed behind the communications bunker and vomited.

"Ralph." "Buick." Mac had come up behind me and, seeing me throwing up, began kidding me about drinking too much Johnnie Walker. I smiled weakly and made a joking reply, embarrassed to tell him what had made me sick. We exchanged another word or two and I moved off toward the canal in a cold sweat, knees weak, stomach heaving. After all the training, even the experience of coming under enemy fire, I didn't know 'til just then what I had gotten into.

The bodies remained a centerpiece at Rock for several days more, bloating and stinking in the sun. Then one morning they were gone. I don't know what happened to them.

Friendly Fire

Baby Huey had assembled a number of us from different radar sites to give Mac and Swede a hand humping sensors to locations north of the Rach Tra Canal not far from the Saigon River. The sensors, equipped with vinyl-clad antennas configured to look like shrubbery, would be planted in the ground with the antennas protruding above the surface. Designed to detect the movement of enemy troops, there were a number of sensor types: some picked up ground vibrations, some were sensitive to infrared radiation, and others captured sound. Each of the guys had packed a sensor in his rucksack, which on top of our M-16s, ammo, grenades, entrenching tools, and canteens added significantly to the weight we were carrying. Humping these heavy loads on crumbling patty dikes, keeping a sharp eye out for trip wires all the while, we had covered several miles when Mac pointed out a good spot to implant two sensors. We got to the location by wading up to our chests across a small stagnant creek and, upon reaching the opposite bank, were grateful to flop down and take a break. Sitting on the dike, we were able to catch our breath a little and also get rid of the leeches we'd pick up in the creek, clinging to us everywhere. After de-leeching ourselves - - a small drop

of insect repellent made the leeches squirm and drop off - - we broke out our entrenching tools and dug two holes. The sensors, their protruding antennas looking like leafy plants stems, were implanted along a paddy dike we thought the VC were likely to use. The fake shrubbery was supposed to mimic plants indigenous to Vietnam and looked pretty natural to my New York City eyes. Whether it would fool the VC was hard to say, but they would be traveling mostly at night and not have much opportunity to note anomalous flora. As an added precaution, we had scanned the area pretty well and, as far as we could tell, no Vietnamese had been close enough to witness what we were doing.

Our burden lighter by two sensors, we swapped around equipment to equalize the loads and moved on. The day was sunny and we were sweaty and already tired. We planted four more sensors in what Mac thought were likely spots. The final two sensors were buried next to a trail that led from a thickly wooded strip along the Saigon River onto a large paddy dike. We had just finished the job when a Huey gunship flying low over the river opened up with its mini gun on the woods we were standing in. Everyone hit the ground, except the lieutenant, who remained upright. He popped a red smoke grenade, the gunship stopped firing and we started breathing again. But after making a wide arc upriver, the helicopter swung back down and made another run, mini gun whining like an electric drill. The rounds whispered over our heads, thudded into the trees, snapping off twigs and leaves. The lieutenant was on the radio trying to get someone to call the moron off. After the second pass, the gunship crew, having gotten their rocks off, flew down river. I looked around and everyone seemed to be okay. Still shaking as I watched the last of the red smoke drift off to the east, I said out loud, "What's wrong with that asshole?" The lieutenant gathered us around him and told us this area along the Saigon River was a free-fire zone, but that, three days before, he had gone up through the chain of command to clear our presence there, and we had been given the green light. There's always some shit bird that doesn't get the word. Despite my outrage at our nearly getting zapped by our own guys, Baby Huey's cool behavior under fire had really impressed me. I thought differently about him after that.

We humped out of there a lot faster than we went in. On the way back to Rock I asked Mac if he had known the area was a free-fire zone and he said he did, he thought everyone did. I told him I hadn't known and that the next time we were scheduled to do any work in a free-fire zone to let me know ahead of time - - I just might have something more important to do instead, like saving my ass.

Live from the Killing Ground

The sensors were not the hardiest pieces of surveillance equipment, they sometimes conked out. And like the radar, they gave a lot of false positives. But occasionally, they worked almost too well. One night while I was lying on my rack in the bunker at Rock,

the four deuce mortars at the east end of the base whomped into action. A few minutes later, Swede came in, saw that I was awake, and said "C'mon Sarge, you gotta hear this." I rolled out of the bunk and followed him to the Sensor bunker where there were already a bunch of guys listening to a small speaker and passing around earphones.

They told me that the acoustic sensors about four clicks to the northeast of Rock, right near the area where we had taken friendly fire from the gunship, were picking up the explosions of the 4.2 mortars. Based on the sounds coming from the speaker, the rounds appeared to be detonating right on top of the sensors. Then, over the background static in the lull between impacts, you could hear what had drawn the GIs to the bunker - - the screams, moans and frantic Vietnamese shouting, coming through loud and clear in the acoustic sensor transmissions. Apparently, a band of VC had been detected by the sensors and the resulting mortar barrage was tearing right into them; we could hear their frenzied yelling and their wounded screaming in pain. Some of the guys look transfixed by the sound. I listen for about a minute and went back to my bunker. I was grateful that the sensors worked and felt no pity for the VC, but I also knew those screams and moans could have come from me and my guys a few days earlier, if the Huey had dropped the angle of its mini gun just an inch or two during its run at us. Killing VC was one thing. Hearing it live like a radio program, in the safety of a bunker, was another. It spooked me.

Bad Shit

Willie Way and I had pulled a 24-hour pass and spent the night at a hotel in Saigon. At 8 o'clock the following morning we caught a jeep heading back to the field. Right away, the driver let us know that a unit of the 82nd had gotten wasted the night before somewhere on the Rach Tra. We looked at each other. That was our division, our AO. The driver didn't know any details; we rode back in silence.

As soon as we got to Rock, Willie got out of the Jeep and ran to find his platoon. A boat was about to go down river, so I grabbed a can of M-16 ammo and jumped in. I told the driver I wanted to get to the island as soon as I could. Although he was going farther east, he said he'd drop me off. I still hadn't heard any details of what happened the night before and was getting really anxious about my squad. The boat driver didn't know much, but he had heard that a Bravo Company ambush had gotten messed up near the island. Bad news for them, I thought, but it gave me a little hope for my squad. We pulled up to the island's makeshift dock and I jumped out with my ammo can. I really didn't know why I had taken it.

The driver was gunning his outboard in reverse, backing away from the island, when I saw Mike Klassen and Al walking toward me from the radar bunker. A huge wave of relief washed over me. They told me that an ambush on the south side of the canal

only about 200 meters west of the island had gotten wasted. No sit reps had been received from the ambush squad after 1:00 AM and at about 2:00 AM one or two rounds had been fired somewhere near the ambush location. The thinking was that everyone in the squad had fallen asleep. When two Bravo Company squads got to the site late in the morning, it looked like five guys in the ambush had had their throats cut and only one managed to fire his weapon. Bad shit. But the feeling overwhelming me was not sorrow or horror; it was profound relief that no one in my squad had been killed or wounded.

The GIs killed on the ambush had belonged to the same platoon as the infantry squad on the island and my guys told me the grunts had been grumbling about the radar not picking up the VC. Al said, "I told them mother fuckers we didn't miss nothing, our radar was never pointed that way and never was supposed to be." Then Klassen brought the discussion to an end, saying that it was too bad about the ambush getting greased, but fuck it, it didn't mean nothing