

Rock 'n' Roll War

AFVN

Armed Forces Vietnam Network - - AFVN - - from the Delta to the DMZ, from the amped-up "Gooooood Morning, Vietnam" to the late night, mellow-voiced DJ playing rock and blues and sounding stoned, radio was everywhere in Vietnam, all the time. There was news on the hour; plenty of helpful tips - - take your malaria pills; change your socks - - and dedications: "this is for the bad daddies of recon, Echo Company, 1st of the 505th out Phu Loi way". But mostly it was music - - rock 'n roll, Motown, rhythm and blues, country-western, soul. A bit of blues late at night, but no jazz or classical music. It was Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles, the Stones, Credence, the Temptations, the Dead, Johnny Cash, Wilson Pickett, Elvis, Marvin Gaye, the Doors, and Otis Redding

The grunts, who were always on the move, would buy cheap, plastic radios, wire them to PRC-25 batteries, and hitch them to their rucksacks. They humped their radios wherever they went and, when they could get away with it, they'd even bring them out on ambush.

On the island, the radio was always on and once, after listening to *Piece of My Heart*, Thomas and Al got into a heated argument about whether or not Janis Joplin was black. "No white woman can sing like that", Al said vehemently. Calmly and firmly Thomas replied, "I'm telling you she's a white girl from Texas." I kept my mouth shut, Al wasn't going to believe me any more than he did Thomas. So they went back and forth for a while, ending the debate only after a boat carrying our mail pulled in at the island's dock. Since there were no TVs in the field and no newspapers except *Stars & Stripes*, Al may have left Vietnam without ever getting straightened out about Janis Joplin.

Music Bunker

In late spring, the Viet Cong became more active in the northernmost part of the 82nd's area of operations and we had to look for suitable radar sites up there along Route 1. Swede drove the jeep onto the rutted road leading out of Rock with the lieutenant next to him in the front seat and Klassen and me in the back. The first place we checked out was an abandoned factory near the Phu Cuong Bridge, which spanned the Saigon River 15 miles north of Rock. After the lieutenant decided the site wouldn't work, we headed west on Route 1 to a place near Cu Chi where there was an artillery observation tower. It was a weird structure out in the middle of nowhere, about 60 feet high, secured by guy wires, with a spiral staircase circling its support column, leading to a platform at the top. The staircase was sheathed in sheet-metal to protect climbers from being observed, but the sheeting was riddled with bullet holes and in places large swathes had been blown away. The lieutenant started up the stairs and I followed, while Klassen and Swede waited on the ground. We reached the top, climbed onto the

platform and looked around. The view was pretty spectacular, but we didn't stay long to admire it. The VC were entrenched in the area and we felt really vulnerable 60 feet up in the air, so we scrambled down as quickly as we could.

We had just hit the ground when Swede and Klassen told us there were two GIs stationed there who had something to do with the tower. We walked over and saw the timbered and sandbagged entrance to a concrete bunker buried in the hillside. A sergeant and a PFC attached to an artillery unit were the only members of their squad there that day and they told us that counter-battery radar was soon going to be installed at the site. After showing us the massive steel entrance door designed to withstand high explosives, they invited us into the bunker. The interior, dimly lit with a low ceiling, was much larger than I had thought it would be. There were a number of radar monitors, three different radio sets, some other electronic equipment I couldn't identify, and four bunks. The place was air-conditioned or at least well-ventilated, since it was comfortably cool.

But the most spectacular feature of the bunker was a stereo system the sergeant had set up. He had four huge Sansui speakers, a 150-watt Pioneer tuner/amplifier and a Garrard turntable. After we were all inside, the PFC closed the steel door and the sergeant turned on the sound system. He cued up a Zombies LP and *Time of the Season* came on really loud, with the base vibrating like crazy, seeming to shake the bunker itself. After that, came *Foxy Lady* and Hendricks' extended guitar riffs exploded all over the place, the whole bunker reverberating. It occurred to me that you could stay holed up here listening to records, smoking dope, and never knowing there was a war going on, even if you were getting mortared. I was pleasantly musing on the idea of serving out my tour in this cool, safe space when the lieutenant broke up the concert by shouting it was time to get back to Rock. The sergeant opened the big steel door and we walked out into the tropic air, squinting in the bright sunlight, our ears ringing.

Crimson and Clover

Swede had to haul a radar set to Camp Red Ball for repair, so I climbed into the deuce-and-a-half and went along for the ride. When we off loaded the radar at the Tech Shack, the private sitting behind the desk told us we'd have to see the Spec-5 who was in charge to give him the details of the problem and he wouldn't be back for at least an hour. So we walked over to the NCO club. The place was almost empty - - one GI sitting on a stool at the far end of the bar and the bartender restocking liquor bottles on the shelves of the back bar. The juke box was booming out *Crimson and Clover* by Tommy James and the Shondells, the volume way up with the heavy base notes reverberating through the near-empty club. Neither the bartender nor the GI looked our way and the place felt weird and unwelcoming. Swede and I just stood there, listened until the end of the song, and walked out.

Back at the Tech Shack, the Spec-5 had finally showed up and we were able to take care of business. After loading the radar set onto the truck, we headed back to Rock on Route 1. When we got close to the Hoc Mon Bridge, we could see a heavy firefight going on by a tree line out in the rice paddies. A dust-off evacuating some wounded GIs had just lifted into the air in a swirl of red smoke. Suddenly, the strange, uncomfortable feeling I had experienced in the NCO Club came back over me - - along with the echo-chamber reverberation of the words - - "Crimson and clover, over and over - - the right colors for Vietnam.

Atlantis

About mid-summer 1969, a Donovan song called *Atlantis* got a lot of airtime. It was strange music, which began with a recitation about the tragic extinction of the legendary continent of Atlantis and ended with a dirge, "Way down below the ocean where I want to be she may be . . ." chanted over and over again.

About this time, a new infantry squad came to the island and they had a couple of FNGs ("fucking new guys") with them. On their second day on the island, four of the grunts, including three of the FNGs, went swimming. They were in midstream, a little west of the island when small arms fire started crackling from the tree line on the north bank of the canal. The grunts swam back to the island as quickly as they could and the firing stopped almost before they were out of the water. They pulled themselves up onto the dock, out of breath but uninjured and, as they looked around, they noticed that the fourth swimmer, a new guy, was missing. Everyone started looking up river, straining their eyes in the afternoon glare trying to make out the GI in the water, but there was no sign of him. The guys in his squad were yelling his name and Mike Klassen and I climbed the radar tower to get a better view, but there wasn't a trace of him. Reluctantly, because the grunts probably shouldn't have been in the water, their sergeant radioed the bad news back to Rock.

About an hour later, two boats came down the canal and slowly moved back and forth over the area where the guys had been swimming. Finding nothing, the boats went farther downstream to look, but again there was no trace. The next day and the day after that, boats came down again, dropping TNT overboard, hoping the underwater explosions would dislodge the body and bring it to the surface. Everyone on the island felt the disappearance was spooky: one second the guy was right there in the water with his buddies, the next second he wasn't. And no one knew where the small arms fire had come from. *Atlantis* was being played a lot on the radio and every time I heard it, I thought of the drowned G.I. It was weird and starting to bother me.

Four days after the grunt had disappeared in the waters of the canal, Al and I went upriver to Rock to pick up C-rations, water, ice, and beer. A few hours later, we were on

the way back down to the island, the boat moving more slowly than usual, looking for the drowned man. Then Al saw something in front and to the right of the boat and we slowed down further. The thing we were staring at looked like a husked coconut floating just below the surface of the water. As we got closer, we realized what we thought was a coconut was the dead grunt's matted brown hair. His body, very white, looking almost phosphorescent in the murky water, seemed to hang down from his head like the tentacles of a giant jellyfish. Everyone in the boat was staring. Then Al said, "Let's get him outta there", but no one budged. "C'mon", Al yelled, "it's a fucking GI" and jumped into the water. That jerked the rest of us out of our trance and as Al pushed the body close to the boat, the driver and I grabbed the corpse under the armpits, two of the other guys in the boat got a grip on the legs, and with difficulty we heaved the heavy, sodden body onboard. Naked, eyes closed, skin very pale and wrinkled, he didn't appear to be wounded. Al pulled himself up into the boat and we laid the grunt's body in the bottom, face-up. Someone threw a poncho liner over him and the driver radioed back to Rock that we had found the body and were coming in.

That night, I woke up from a nightmare in a cold sweat. I'd been struggling under water with the drowned GI, frantic, gasping for air, while Donovan chanted over and over, "Way down below the ocean, where I want to be . . ."