



DAY TWO

Thursday, 1 February, 1968

SWEEPS

We spent the night in the fields above the city. We spread the troops along various paddy dikes, forming a tenuous, unprotected line that could have been easily breached by any serious attack, but none was attempted. Rach Gia was sporadically shelled during the night and some ground probes occurred, but there was no sustained effort by the Charlies to do much of anything.

Tension was running high during the night. Everyone was as nervous as a whore in church. The darkness was punctuated by the periodic explosions of mortar rounds, interspersed with brief outbreaks of small arms firing. An occasional Charlie would sneak in close enough to loft an RPG into town. Overlaying it all was the pervasive hissing of the radios, their operators constantly tuning and retuning them by exchanging long counts with their fellow operators. Anyone who served with ARVN during those days when they were still using AN/PRC-10's will be able to count to 10 forwards and backwards in Vietnamese for the rest of his life.

I fell back on the old paratrooper trick of sleeping through the frightening parts, something I'd learned during my days with the 82nd Airborne. During the airplane ride to the drop zone, when fear of the



upcoming jump was mounting rapidly, all of us aboard would cope with the terror by closing our eyes and willing ourselves to sleep. It worked. I was no more able to affect the enemy probes and shelling now than, as a strapped-in paratrooper, I had been able to affect the flight of a Hercules, so I zonked out.

Geo thought I was goofing off, and it angered him. No one, he said, could really sleep through all the noise and distractions around us.

"What difference would it make if I were awake?" I asked. "What purpose would it serve?"

"That's not the point! You can't really be asleep. You're faking it."

"What **is** the point? You want me awake? For what purpose? If you want me to relieve you on radio watch, wake me up and I'll take my turn. If you need me for anything else, I'm right here where you can always get me. We're not going to do anybody any good if we all drop dead from exhaustion."

He growled and muttered under his breath. It seems some people can sleep in stressful situations, while others can't. Pinkham and I could, Geo and Church, particularly, couldn't. I never knew Church to close his eyes in the field. I often wondered how he did it. Sleep was a coping mechanism for me.

At 4:00 in the morning, we were the recipients of one of the VC probes. It only lasted a few seconds and the bad guys melted away. I recount the incident only because one of our soldiers was killed, our first



fatality of the Offensive. He wouldn't be alone for long.

At dawn, we went with Huynhl to the TOC for our orders of the day. Province was still concerned that sizable units of VC might be lurking in the suburbs, and ordered us to sweep northwest from the edge of town, paralleling the Gulf coast. We were to do five kilometers out and back. As usual, Pinkham and I accompanied Huynhl while Geo and Church marched with Son. We strolled at a normal walking pace, enjoying the weather and the lack of activity.

The operation was short. The paddies west of Rach Gia had dried, the walking was fast and easy. We found what we needed to know when only halfway out.

Next to the road was a VC fighting position. Charlie's bunkers were dug in a square "U," the base of which was invariably two meters long, one and a half meters deep, and half a meter wide. The arms were also one and half deep, a half wide, and extended one meter forward from the base. The base portion was protected by a meter of overhead cover, alternating layers of dirt and log, leaving the tips of the two arms open to the air. Two men would occupy each bunker and fire from the two entrance holes. They were dug with such monotonous uniformity, one had the impression they were done with a giant cookie cutter. The overhead cover made the position impervious to anything but a direct hit by a 250-pound bomb. No amount of small arms, or aircraft cannon, or rockets,



or cluster bomblets, would dent one, unless a bomblet fell directly into one of the entrances.

The occupants of this one had been fighting from the entrance holes when machine-gunned by the Cav the day before. The Cav had apparently been in too much of a hurry to pick up the bodies, for they were both still there, their lower bodies still in the holes, their torsos sprawled on their backs against the mound of overhead. The corpses had already blackened and bloated. Both were full of holes.

Their eyes glistened, sparkled. A closer look showed that their eye-balls were riddled with squirming maggots. Their ears, nostrils, mouths and all the bullet holes were congested with worms. Twenty-four hours earlier, I would have retched my guts out. Today, it was just a curiosity. The VC had been dead less than a day. The deterioration of the bodies in that short period was astonishing.

The bodies told us what we needed to know. The Viet Cong didn't willingly abandon their dead. If there were dead ones still here, there were no live ones. We walked back to town.

While the troops ate lunch, we drove to the TOC to see if they had any afternoon plans for us. They did. Yesterday's fight had made them wonder if there were any more bad guys northeast of town. We had made strong contact but only had five bodies to show for it, which implied there was still a bunch of VC running around loose. We were to replay yesterday's sweep, except we were to start where we'd finished and

check an area from the bank of the big canal eastward for a kilometer, then northward for three, to the south bank of another canal which flowed westward into the big north-south. Rather than scrounge sampans for our crossing, we were to travel in style. The Rach Gia Navy base was providing their three Landing Craft-Vehicular/Personnel (LCVPs). We'd be able to cross the whole battalion in one lift.

We moved the men down to the canal bank and the three old World War II diesel landing craft soon came chugging up river. We boarded and drove a klick or two up the canal, then turned into the east bank and dismounted.



Movement via LCVP, Rach Gia, February 1, 1968

houses and the trees behind, onto an extremely wide paddy. Open ground stretched before us the entire three klicks to our objective, a small village. The treeline we had passed through was to our left, also stretching the entire distance. We formed line and began advancing in virtual parade ground formation at

Today,
the command
group would
move with
the right
flank
element. We
passed
through the



a normal walking pace. We were still confident, and, as yet, untired and reasonably unafraid.

We were taken under fire immediately and mysteriously. The fire was coming from our front, but there was no foliage there to conceal enemy positions. They certainly weren't firing from the village over a mile away. We quickly discovered that they were firing from behind the paddy dikes crossing our axis of advance, sliding westward into the treeline as we pushed forward. They would then run up the treeline and slide back out onto the paddy at the next dike.

It wasn't a determined resistance but a delaying action, perhaps a squad of men with AK47s, capable of putting out a sufficient volume of fire to keep us deployed on line and advancing very cautiously. They were covering for someone. We assumed the main body to be in the village ahead, probably withdrawing across the canal. I radioed for the Air Force as *Mot Muoui Lam* fought its way slowly forward.

We still thought ourselves cowboys in those early days, we advisors. Geo and I were still wearing our soft caps, Pinkham his cowboy hat. Only Church wore a steel pot. The rest of us had left them in the trailer at Rach Soi. Helmets are heavy, man. They make your neck stiff.

I have a wonderful photograph from February 1st.



From the angle of the picture, it's obvious that I am lying on my belly, shooting upward. The focus of the picture is Tau, standing at the corner of a hay stack, his face to the enemy. He has a VC flag around his neck as a scarf. His right hand is behind his back, pulling a 40mm grenade from its pouch in the grenadier's vest he's wearing. In his left hand is an M-79 grenade launcher. He is reloading. Pinkham is kneeling to Tau's left, holding a carbine, his cowboy hat perched on the back of his head. In the immediate foreground is Geo Heatherington, also on his belly, only his shoulders and the back of his head in the frame. Geo is in his soft cap. He had had his jump wings and First Lieutenant's bar embroidered on the front of the cap in silver, and they were so conspicuous that he might as well have been wearing a flashing neon sign proclaiming him to be an American officer. In the picture, the hat is turned around backwards, the tell-tale embroidery to the rear.



It is a picture of soldiers in transition. Geo would be the first of us, after Church, to don his helmet. We weren't terminally stupid. All of us but Pinkham would be under steel within days, and even Joe fell in love with his pot within two weeks.

By the time I left the field, I was even wearing mine in the shower.

A Forward Air Controller, Bart Niner-Eight, came on station in his Bird Dog. He had a pair of F100 Super Sabers inbound. He relayed their ordnance load. They were hanging napalm canisters, which we called unfinned nape. We were to develop quite an attachment to nape, for it had a wonderful effect on the enemy: when a canister tumbled in and burst, the ensuing fireball momentarily sucked the oxygen out of the surrounding air, which terrified the VC crouched in their bunkers. Invariably, some would pop out of their holes and run. Above ground, we could kill them.

I described my target to Bart and he marked its limits with smoke rockets to ensure we had a common understanding of the area to be bombed. In a few minutes, when the jets arrived, he would re-mark the target area, then the jet jocks, referred to as ramrods, would bomb and strafe the ground between the two balls of smoke.

The Sabers appeared and made their first run. We suddenly understood what we were facing.

The United States Army preaches fire discipline but doesn't practice it. Victor Charlie did. "Fire discipline" simply means that you employ no more



firepower than is necessary to do the job at hand. If a company of VC wanted to avoid contact and the company commander felt he could stave off pursuit with only two men, only two men would be allowed to fire. We would never know about the other 98. We would frequently spar with what we thought to be a squad until, emboldened by our perception of vast numerical superiority, we'd put our troops on line to charge, only to find there were really hundreds of the little bastards. The Charlies were superb practitioners of the art.

With one exception.

Charlie had an air raid drill. It consisted of every man firing his weapon straight up into the air as rapidly as he could. It threw up a wall of lead the planes would have to fly through. The first pass would often be our first opportunity to make an intelligent estimate of enemy strength. If Charlie didn't shoot at the planes, it was because he wasn't there and we were only bombing the bushes.

We did that a lot, too.

There were a bunch of these drills. The volume of fire was horrendous. And effective. One of the Sabers was hit and went down. The pilot was just able to make a turn and reach the Gulf before punching out to be picked up by the Navy. It was the first aircraft I'd ever seen lost, and it made an impression on me. It was, however, by no means the last.

The village was in flames following the airstrike. Resistance evaporated. We swept in on a

run, only to find the place empty. The enemy had crossed the canal; it had been from the opposite side that they had bagged the F100. We found not a single body in the charred ruins. Charles could melt away like an ice cube in the desert. We never quite got used to it.

Geo and I walked to the canal bank and looked at the gloomy woods on the opposite shore. There was still a large



number of Charlies **Village set afire by air strike, Feb.1** running around loose. We would have to find and fight them some day.

As we brooded on the bank, we heard shouting behind us. We turned and saw that it was coming from my friend, Lt. Laan.

We had a standing joke in the Army in those days, "There's always that two percent who never get the word." Laan had come up with one. His men had scared up the single VC who had failed to withdraw and taken him prisoner. The Charlie was little more than a boy, unwounded but terrified. The *Binh Sis* had tied his elbows together behind his back, an incredibly painful position the ARVN commonly used with prisoners. He was kneeling before Laan, who had drawn his .45 and had it



pressed between the boy's eyes. Laan was shouting for the prisoner to beg for his life.

The Charlie was doing so with great conviction. He was sobbing, tears streaming down his face. Laan was apparently unconvinced of his sincerity and screamed louder. He began to tighten his finger on the trigger, which the boy could plainly see.

I turned to Geo, disgusted. "What is this shit?"

The two of us started striding purposefully toward Laan. We were American officers, righteous and superior specimens of manhood. We were not going to tolerate the wanton abuse of a POW.

The screaming was escalating into a self-sustaining chain reaction. The prisoner was still on his knees, his torso swaying. He was sobbing so violently that he couldn't get words out. This infuriated Laan even more. He pulled all the slack out of the trigger as Geo and I came abreast of him.

We saw Laan's eyes and, in perfect unison, did an about-face and walked away. He had gone insane. He was going to splatter the helpless kid's brains out, and there was nothing we could do to stop it. We instinctively knew that we couldn't be witnesses to a murder, either. We had gone but two paces when the sound of a gunshot shattered our souls.

Laughter.

We turned. The Charlie was on the ground in a fetal position, passed out, his face in a puddle of vomit. His pants were fouled. At the last second, when the boy had involuntarily closed his eyes, Laan had



pulled the muzzle aside and fired right beside his ear. The boy had fainted. The troops thought it was hilarious. Laan was strutting away with an ear-to-ear grin on his face.

There's a difference, a line, between line-of-duty killing and murder. Soldiers had better learn the difference. Most do.

I didn't think it a goddamn bit funny. I was enraged, both at Laan and at my own cowardly impotence. That the prisoner was still alive was in no way due to any actions on my part. It was an incident that changed me. I forcefully intervened in every future case of potential prisoner abuse I saw. It was the least I could do for the little Charlie I almost let die. His survival must have given me the feeling of having gotten a second chance to do right.

In April, 1917, when America at last declared war on Germany, the war-weary French were elated. The Americans were coming! Victory was assured. French civilians lined the streets to watch as the first groups of what they expected to be rough frontiersmen arrived and were nonplused by what they saw. Years later, a witness described to a visiting American journalist his emotions at the time:

"We were expecting cowboys. You sent us Boy Scouts."

Mot Muoui Lam got me.

We walked back over to the north-south canal and called for the LVCPs on the radio. It only took them a few minutes to reach us. We boarded and sailed back to



town, where we were placed along the south bank of the east-west for the night.

We set up headquarters on the front porch of a masonry building and slept with a roof over our heads. We were too tired to handle any serious introspection. We went to sleep almost instantly; but I was troubled by my ineffectiveness, and unsure about how the incident would affect my friendship with Laan.