



## DAY ONE

Wednesday, 31 January, 1968

### **FIRST ENCOUNTERS**

The morning broke cool and clear. The word came early, a line from Neil Diamond's *Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show*: "Pack up the babies/And grab the old ladies/And everyone goes..." Rach Gia had been attacked. We were to abandon Xa Xiem.

It was done with lightning speed. The soldiers' wives packed their pitifully few belongings and within less than an hour were on the short dirt road that ran the klick and a half from Route 12 to Xa Xiem. A truck convoy appeared, dispatched from the capital, and we started loading everyone aboard. It didn't occur to us to question how the trucks had been rounded up and organized in the midst of the fighting. It seemed a business-as-usual proposition. Two jeeps appeared, Huynhl's and the advisors'. We decided to run up to Rach Soi in advance of the trucks to find out what was going on. Because of the distance from Rach Gia, radio reception was notoriously bad at Xa Xiem at night. During daylight, it was non-existent.

The little two-jeep convoy sped northwest towards the District town. The paddies were devoid of farmers, but that didn't strike us as unusual. It was, after all, Tet; and it was, seasonally, post-harvest and pre-planting. The countryside was unremarkably quiet. We hadn't yet grasped the significance of "country-



wide offensive." Although we were irritated about losing our truce time, there was very little apprehension. We were delighted to be getting out of Xa Xiem. Our spirits, particularly those of my team, to whom, being American, Tet wasn't especially important, were inappropriately high.

Geo Heatherington was giving it the old team try, acting bright and chipper, "present for duty," although obviously still in pain.

We passed through Minh Loung without incident. We failed to note the ominous lack of activity in the town, which should have been bustling, and a few minutes later arrived at the District Headquarters compound, Schick's shop

The Ruff Puffs at Rach Soi were agitated but happy to see us. The word was about that Rach Gia had been hit hard and that there were still VC in the city. The District town had been shelled during the night and had taken some harassing small arms fire, but no attack had developed. The Ruff Puffs were expecting one at any moment and were afraid. We were the vanguard of the cavalry, come to save the settlers from the approaching hostiles.

The troops arrived, and were put into position on the south side of town. Nothing happened. The advisors lolled around in Schick's lavish hooch catching up on events in the provincial city, which Schick had been following by radio all day.

Charlie had bungled the attack. The VC rehearsed offensive operations extensively, but suffered from



inflexibility. Once they settled on a scenario, they practiced it diligently without regard to any changes in the tactical situation. This had been demonstrated in November when they had attacked *Mot Muoui Lam* at Xa Xiem, using the same plan they had used against Second Battalion a week earlier, ignoring the fact that Huynhl had strung more barbed wire entanglements in the interim than most comparably-sized units had used on the Western Front in 1916.

They had obviously begun their preparations for the assault on Rach Gia before the armored unit had moved to town a couple of weeks ago and hadn't changed them to account for this major alteration in the balance of forces. They had ignored the tracked vehicles altogether.

At the appointed hour, Victor Charlie poured into the city by the hundreds. Tasked to attack the American compound, the VC had fired Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) into the mess hall, which, at 3:00 in the morning, had been empty. Assigned the mission of capturing the National Police headquarters, they had assaulted a near-by shop by mistake. The Cavalry, utterly unmolested, had driven into town, machine-gunning the disorganized VC in the streets by the score. Friendly casualties were light. The enemy was being slaughtered.

Scattered pockets of resistance were still being encountered in Rach Gia, but the bulk of the bad guy survivors had fled, pursued relentlessly by the armor. It sounded as if the locals had the situation well in

hand. Inappropriately comfortable at Schick's resort, I was feeling an indescribable mixture of emotions, a combination of relief, guilt and anxiety. If Rach Gia were indeed doing so well, I felt a little dread that *Mot Muoui Lam* might be sent back to Xa Xiem.

Huynhl jokingly suggested that the Province Chief, an ARVN Lieutenant Colonel, must be furious: the Lieutenant Colonel was rumored to have been paying the VC tribute to keep them out of his city. *Hell hath no fury...*

Shortly after noon, there was a flurry of activity on the western edge of Schick's compound. The VC were coming. Troops rushed into position, but,



**January 31, 1968: Tau (in sunglasses) and his Killers pose at Schick's compound at Rach Soi while in route to Rach Gia. Chieu Hoi Charlie (center) holds an AK47.**

again, nothing happened. We then received orders to leave the dependents behind and bring the troops to



Rach Gia. Many of our men had not made it back from leave. We started the campaign with barely 300 men.

We advisors kept our personal effects, extra uniforms, and any unneeded field gear, in a jeep trailer at Schick's. Instinct told us it might be a while before we got back to Rach Soi, so we made some hasty decisions about what to take and what to leave behind. For reasons I still don't clearly understand, I decided to leave my helmet and take my camera.

Huynhl's jeep led the convoy; we were directly behind him in ours. We reached the eastern side of town at about 2:30 in the afternoon, passing the camp that had been set up for the Cav. Some of the tracks were already back, their crews stripped to the waist, cleaning weapons. It was quiet.

We crossed the bridge into town expecting to see scenes of death and destruction, and were surprised. Yes, the houses were full of bullet holes and there was some debris lying about, but no bodies. Nervous soldiers were tensely patrolling the deserted streets.

We came to the Provincial Capitol, the former seat of the French governor. It was a walled estate with an expansive lawn and a long, U-shaped driveway that ran to the door of the two-story masonry mansion, then looped back to the wall and exited another gate. The Province Tactical Operations Center (TOC) was on the ground floor, and it was there that we were to receive our orders.



Two deuce-and-a-halves were moving slowly up the drive just in front of us, so we slowed to follow them.

The lawn was partially carpeted with the bodies of VC. In their ragged uniforms, with limbs often askew, they epitomized the futility and the tragedy of war. A sign had been placed nearby, declaring them the Liberators of Rach Gia. I felt myself becoming nauseous and looked away, concentrating on the trucks in front of us. They stopped directly in front of the building, so we parked our jeeps and began to dismount.

The tail-gates of the trucks dropped. A small detail of troops climbed aboard. Then, mangled corpses started flying out the backs. They weren't handed out -- there was no one on the ground to take them. They were thrown. They hit the ground and bounced. As they hit, blood spurted from gaping holes. Some hit head first on the pavement, and I could hear their skulls crack.

My stomach was coming up. Not the contents. The entire stomach. It felt the size of a football, and it bounced a couple of times when it hit the bottleneck of my throat. It fought violently to get out, then rolled over and sank back into place.

From that moment forward, my mind cauterized by this experience, I was never again physically sickened by anything I saw in Viet Nam.

The timing couldn't have been better.  
*Sickness of the heart is another matter.*



Inside the TOC, we quickly learned that the enraged Province Chief had ordered all dead VC brought to the Capitol for public display. Over the next few days, the collection was to grow to several hundred. I didn't photograph them.

Two major navigable canals converge at Rach Gia. One runs west by northwest from the city towards Cambodia, paralleling the coast of the Gulf of Siam about a kilometer inland, a veritable inland waterway. The other runs north by northeast in a straight line to the Basaac, joining it a few kilometers above Long Xuyen, capital of An Giang Province. From their junction on the northeast corner of town, they flow in a common channel for just about a klick before reaching the Gulf. The visual effect on a map is of a short-legged, left-leaning "Y." Although technically inaccurate, throughout our operations at Rach Gia, we referred to the left arm of the Y as the east-west canal, and the right as the north-south.

Our orders for this afternoon were to cross the north-south arm and advance up its eastern bank three or four klicks, just to make sure that Charlie was out of the suburbs.

We drove back to the east side of town and parked our vehicles, dismounted the troops, and issued orders. We scrounged half a dozen sampans in which we ferried the men across the canal in several shifts. Once everyone was assembled on the eastern bank, we sent First and Second companies inland a few hundred meters, with instructions to move north paralleling



the canal. Third Company and Headquarters moved beside the canal. Huynhl and I walked with Headquarters, sticking to the large trail along the bank.

It was a walk in the sun. We did our three or four klicks, then turned around and came back to where we had started. We began ferrying the men back across the canal into town. The three rifle companies crossed first, leaving Headquarters and the command group alone on the eastern bank.

Suddenly, the walk in the sun took on a different aspect. A violent barrage of automatic weapons fire erupted from the trees just behind the houses along the trail. A platoon of VC had been watching, waiting for the odds to even up, and now attacked. We retreated down the trail at a dead run. We had long-since learned that, in a retreat, there are no prizes for being last.

We ran at least two hundred yards. The heavy volume of fire continued, but for some reason, the Charlies didn't seem to be in pursuit. Something or someone was holding their attention back at the starting line.

I came to a low spot alongside the trail, which provided some cover and I flopped into it. Church was there, lying on his belly, his head down, his eyes tightly shut. He had planted the stock of his carbine in the dirt, had the barrel pointed upward at a 45-degree angle, and was firing long bursts on full automatic. Unless the Charlies were swinging through the trees, he was wasting a lot of ammunition.





"What in the hell are you doing, Sergeant?"

"Gaining fire superiority, sir!"

Ah, yes. Fire superiority.

Sound travels at about 1,100 feet per second. A military rifle round leaves the barrel of the weapon that fires it at nearly Mach 3. It stays supersonic for approximately 800 yards. Even the little, underpowered .30 caliber carbines with which we Advisors were mostly armed could launch lead at a respectable Mach 2.

This little-appreciated fact of physics means that a bullet in flight is accompanied by a sonic boom that sounds exactly like a bull-whip cracking. The sound wave created by the boomlet travels outward in a cone from the path of the bullet until it hits the eardrum. The human ear, struck a sharp blow by the wave of air, cannot distinguish whether the origin of the sound is high or low, ten millimeters or ten yards away.

Every round sounds as if it passes within two inches of your head. It is the sound of Death.

Once a soldier learns to recognize the sound, his body reacts to it involuntarily. He reflexively dives to the ground, getting there long before the following sound (the muzzle blast) of the originating gunshot reaches him. It's one of the most quickly learned conditioned reflexes known to man.

Survival in combat is often dependent on reflexive reactions to sounds. Slow learners die. Not



knowing what various sounds represent is why so many of the people killed in battle are the new guys.

The concept of fire superiority is to capitalize on this reflex. The theory is, if you put so much lead into the air that the crack of the bullets around the enemy's head is louder than the sound of his own outgoing muzzle blasts, he will involuntarily go to ground, allowing you to maneuver against him. In actual practice, fire superiority acts paradoxically: if your own weapons make so much noise that they drown out the crack of the incoming bullets, you *think* the enemy's gone to ground and can force yourself to move forward. Combat marksmanship is a joke. The name of the game is to intimidate through sheer volume of noise.

Church was establishing fire superiority. I shook my head.

Still, Charlie wasn't pushing us, and our rifle companies were hurrying back across the canal to our rescue. Geo had gone over with them, but was now back. It was then that I realized that Pinkham was missing.

Our first casualty of the Tet Offensive was carried down the trail towards us. It was Kim, my co-conspirator, the intelligent Intelligence Sergeant, shot in the leg and bleeding profusely. He would be hospitalized for two months.

We now had the weight of numbers in our favor. We formed our companies in line and counterattacked north. The VC withdrew north and east, and our line



shifted obliquely to the right to maintain contact. I was becoming frantic with worry about my missing NCO.

We passed to the rear of the houses, through the woods and into the open field beyond. We moved into a small cemetery, the headstones providing good cover. There was a 100-meter wide rice paddy to our front with an east-west treeline on its far (north) side. As we crouched behind the stones, a grinning Joe Pinkham came in from my left

“Where in the bloody hell have you been?”

“Aw, you know, back there on the trail. Me and Tau and a coupla *Binh Sis* sorta hung around to shoot at the Charlies.”

The reason the VC hadn't pursued us was that Pinkham and Tau had taken them on while the rest of us were running away. The resistance had stopped the attackers in their tracks, giving us time to get our act together. I wasn't surprised by Tau's involvement, but Pinkham's pairing with him on his own initiative was the first indication I was to receive of Pinkham's natural heroism. I was to receive many others.

We formed line in the cemetery in preparation for an assault towards the trees. It was getting late in the day. The light was beginning to fail when I realized what a wonderful opportunity I had for some genuine combat photography. I snapped three pictures in rapid succession.

*Click...*



Troops are apparently milling around in the cemetery. Some are crouched behind stones, others are beginning to move. It's obviously beginning to get dark.

*Click...*



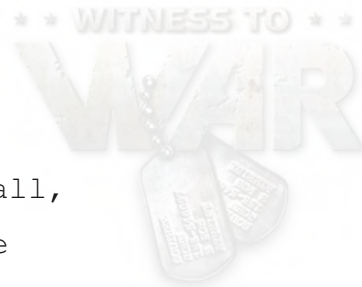
There is an evident sense of motion in this one. Most of the soldiers are on their feet, moving forward rapidly in a crouch. One or two radio men seem to be standing upright watching, speaking into their handsets.

*Click...*



The assault line has just reached the trees at the far side of the paddy. The shot captures the explosion as a grenade goes off. To the left side of the frame, away from the center of action, is a small black speck, an imperfection in the film, a mote on the lens.

The pictures are on 35mm slides. Ten years later, when the company for which I then worked adopted the use of microfiche readers for its records, I took the third slide to the office and put it into a reader to see if, perhaps, the black speck were just dirt on the slide, which I could remove. A cold, clammy feeling



came over me when I saw that it wasn't a speck at all, but a figure in a black shirt, a face peering at me from beneath a conical helmet. Live VC. Many years later, the wonders of computer enhancement would reveal a number of live enemy in this picture; but their discovery would never have the emotional impact of the single VC detected in 1975.

The Charlies retreated down the treeline to our left, west towards the main canal. The command group, which had been following the assault line, took an angle to the left, assuming we'd reach the trees at about the same time our troops, chasing the retreating Charlies down the treeline, came abreast of us.

As we advanced, we came across the freshly-killed body of an enemy soldier. He was wearing a black shirt over green fatigue pants and had a conical helmet. Next to his body was a brand new Kalashnikov. He had been shot through the throat, his Adam's apple blown away.

He was the same Charlie I found looking at me from my slide a decade later. I must have captured his image only seconds before his death.

I responded with indifference to the body. I had been vaccinated within the hour. Only later would I reach the point that such sights would anger me, disgusted by the waste.

Our pursuing troops hadn't reached the anticipated spot in the treeline. We got there ahead of them, before the withdrawing VC had passed. A burst of fire came out of the trees at us.

The only cover immediately available was the dead Charlie. Geo and I dove behind the corpse and cringed, as several more bursts cracked around our heads. Then the enemy ran away and it was quiet.

We reformed the troops and searched the woods. In addition to "my" VC, we found four more bodies. It had cost us but three wounded.

Mindful of Province's order, we gathered the enemy dead and carried them back to the sampans. Once back in town, four were tossed into the back of one of the trucks for transport back to the TOC. The *Binh Sis* had special treatment for mine, however.

They mounted him on the hood of my jeep like some goddamn deer. The troops were having a great deal of fun spreading the story about the American Captain hiding behind the dead Viet Cong. I was to have the privilege of personally delivering the corpse to Province. A few of the grinning soldiers gathered around the jeep and insisted I take a picture. I did so reluctantly, the last picture of a body I was ever to take.

*Click.*

