

Aging in the Nam

It was a dark and stormy night when word came down to saddle up. The commanding officers of the lead elements now knew that Operation Scot Orchard was a go. It was October, 1970 and the Marines of Hotel Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment had just endured its fourth typhoon of the month. This monsoon season was particularly harsh for living in the bush in the rocket belt outside of Da Nang, Vietnam. Although this was documented to be the most heavily booby trapped area of the country, our mission had been to run daytime patrols and night ambushes in an area encompassing twenty square miles, preventing the Viet Cong from launching rockets into the Da Nang Airport, and nearby hamlets. Unbeknownst to the cold, wet, and exhausted Marines, an operation was unfolding which held the promise of rescuing an American prisoner of war from the clutches of the Viet Cong.

Daylight brought clear skies, along with favorable winds, perfect conditions for helicopters to ferry us to a classified location, where we would begin our assault in the foothills of the Que Son Mountains. The fluttering of birds was the first indication it might be time to grab our mildew laden gear and assemble in the landing zone, still wondering where the hell we were going. It appeared the secret operation was still just that. The sound of air being chopped by the speed of rotor blades told us it was time to lock and load, as the CH-53's came in low over the tree tops, with the dawn of a yellow morning sun as their back drop. In a matter of moments, 30 Marines, with that five mile stare, maneuvered up the corrugated, rough ramp, ready for whatever came their way, and disappeared into the morning sun.

A booming voice could be heard above the whine of the engine that we needed to listen up, at which point the only sound was the whoosh of the rotating blades above. Captain Calderwood, his voice firm and confident, relayed the following information to his platoon of 18 and 19 year old Marines, who had seen too much, and endured too much, to be treated as the teenagers they were. "Gentlemen, we have intelligence that the Viet Cong are holding an American POW in a jungle camp, located in the Que Son Mountains. We, along three other rifle companies, are going to find him and bring him home. Your mission, on my command, will be to penetrate their defenses, seize control of their command area, and locate and secure any POW's." While turning to the Marine on my left, I suddenly realized this was going to be different than all previous operations, and whispered the words from our beloved Marine Corps Hymn, "first to fight for right and freedom," to which he replied, "and to keep our honor clean." Without prompting the rest chimed in with "from the Hall of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli, we fight our countries battles in the air, on land and sea." There would be no perfidy on this mission. And then the all too familiar clack, clack, clack of AK-47 rifles could be heard whizzing by as we swooped into another hot landing zone.

The helicopter came in low and fast, kicking up stagnant vegetation as the wheels made contact with the steamy jungle floor. As the rear ramp dropped, Marines clamored out to engage an ever elusive enemy. Sporadic fire could be heard from a nearby tree line, but helicopter gun-ships silenced it quickly. "Move out," came the order, and we advanced toward the coordinates, to overrun "Charlie," before he had time to react. In a different set of circumstances apprehension may have set upon us as we began to peregrinate the jungle path, leading deeper and deeper into hostile territory. Not this day. Instead a sense of mission filled everyone with an obsession to find this one man, a pilot who had been shot down, and secure his safety.

Being a path of earthen material we were not prepared for the density of the hard, smooth surface, packed down by continuous use by the Viet Cong, or worse, the NVA, which provided a false sense of security as we moved along through uncharted territory. Then came the "pop" and I froze in place. Please dear God, don't let it be a Bouncing Betty, the worst kind of booby trap to encounter. Its deadliness is due to the five foot vertical lift, with an aerial detonation, devastating to anyone nearby, particularly the fool who stepped on it. And I knew who that

fool was. So I just stood there, 60 pounds of radio and gear strapped to my back. Seconds were like hours until the Marine behind me came up to me saying “are you going to stand on that thing all day?” To which my reply was “your damn right I am, if that’s what it takes.” With nowhere to go it is amazing how receptive you are to an immediate brain storming session, searching for a way to relocate you, and your foot to a safer location. Prioritizing was pretty simple since options were limited. It was decided that the best course of action was for everyone to remove their flak jackets, pill them around my leg, and I would become an instant standing long jumper. It’s hard to believe that a single step can age a person 20 years. Landing ten feet or so away from a sure Purple Heart, or worse, we were relieved to discover the booby trap was a dud. Beginning the day as an invincible nineteen year old, a forty year old man laid his head down to rest that night, not on a pillow covered with percale, but instead a helmet to keep his head off the damp earth.

As for the captured American, we never found him even though we discovered the base camp with fires burning and weapons stacked at the ready. We had caught the Viet Cong completely by surprise, so they simply melted into the jungle, not wishing to engage a superior force. Operation Scot Orchard, the last major Marine Corps operation of the Vietnam War, ended four days later with no casualties, except for one slightly graying Marine.