

HAPPY BIRTHDAY MOTHER

Monsoon winds blew down from China one afternoon in late October and swept across the mountains of the Annamite Cordillera, the spinal cord of Viet Nam. Huge columns of rain clouds the winds freighted from the South China Sea massed above sharp jungled peaks and streamed across high shallow valleys which were terraced with rice fields or were wild and uninhabited. Rays of sunlight shot through the clouds like shifting cannon fire into windblown trees and palms which broke the shafts into spiked prisms and shadows. The wind was cold and rain from the advancing clouds hammered the jungled ridges with a heavy roar, flooding valleys and peeling away the mottled walls of primitive homes built of mud and thatch which were bunched together in lonely villages; and the rain relentlessly poured down upon a haggard and straggled column of armed and helmeted men who were sliding down the muddy ridges toward a village in one of the smaller valleys.

I was among them, second in the ragged file, and I followed the point man into the valley. I was able to see the village beyond a maze of rain-swollen paddies, enclosed by walls of hedgerows and palms which were whipped by the wind. It was a skimpy place, wretchedly poor as most of them in the mountains were. The farmers and their families lived a harsh existence and were killed early by disease, exhaustion and hunger. In a sense they were a frontier people who had left their culture in the overcrowded coastal plains and settled on its rough fringes among stoneage tribes they loathed and feared in much the manner of my own ancestors amongst the western Indians. An island amidst an ocean of drowned fields, the village seemed suspended in a history of approaching armies. I looked back at the other marines stumbling down from the muddy ridges and saw their reflections in the water of the rectangular paddies, cast against the salt and pepper sky like war gods.

I noticed that the point man was having a hard time crossing the valley along the spines of paddy dikes that collapsed under the weight of his feet. He was a short, fat man, hunched in his labored walk in the sucking mud, and were it not for his clothes, I might have mistaken him for one of the small apes that lived on the higher slopes. His back was bent, his hands grasped his knees and pushed his legs to drive them like sluggish pistons one slippery step after another. His rifle swung loosely from his right shoulder and bruised his hip with every move of his legs. His red jowly face was haggard, almost cadaverous, shriveled like an old orange under the green and brown-dappled mushroom bowl that covered his head, which swiveled from side to side. His chin and nose arched as if he was literally sniffing whatever might be ahead or around, an ambush hidden in the trees and bushes, a sniper in a palm tree taking aim; he also abruptly dropped his head every few moments to detect mines or booby traps that might have been sowed in place of the rice that had been harvested a month earlier. His head seemed almost as loose as his rifle, swinging on its socket like an unlatched gate, and I decided I would not be surprised if it turned completely around and stared at me.

The thought hardly formed. A shot crackled from the village, its flat echo the sudden sound of a popped paper bag at the same instant the point man fell off his feet and splashed backward into a paddy, dead from a bullet that pierced his brain and blew out the back of his head.



A silence as sudden as the shot lasted only a moment. I discovered myself half submerged in water and mud, choking on vomit and slime, when most of the other marines started firing rifles and machine guns into the village. I tried to focus my eyes for something to shoot at but I could only see a small hill I had not noticed before. After a few moments I realized that it was the point man's rounded stomach sticking out of the water like a dumpling in stew.

A voice bellowed over the rifles and machine guns and the shooting raggedly ceased. The voice shouted again and most of the marines behind me began to withdraw back to the ridge. Three of us ran to the point man's body and started carrying him back. He had not taken an ounce with him when he died and our initial attempt to run slowed quickly to a panting walk. I had his legs and pushed at him as if he was a wheelbarrow, desperate to get out of range of a second shot. We finally dropped his body next to a tree and covered it with a poncho. We spread out along the ridge bottom, which was heavily brushed, and pointed our weapons at the village. The captain crouched against an embankment and shouted into a prick-6 radio for an air strike. He shouted at another officer who was trying to locate the village on a partly disintegrated map, and shouted again into the radio its coordinates.

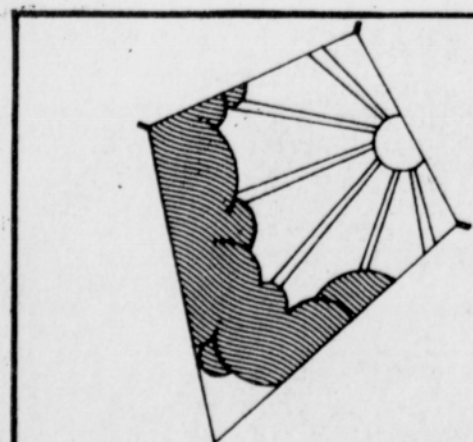
We waited for the jets like executioners. The village was almost completely obscured by the rain and by fogs rising from the fields. It appeared and disappeared as if it was straining to vanish before it was found by bombs, to become as much a phantom as the man or woman who had killed the point man.

Two Phantom jets came at sunset. The rain had stopped and the sky was pink in holes between darkening clouds. The jets shrieked down from the tops of the mountains and flew straight for the village just above the mists that blanketed the fields, barely clearing the trees as they dropped aluminum cannisters of napalm. Great jellied globes of fire erupted from all over the village, instantly swallowed by mushrooms of black smoke that were as immediately consumed by a terrible heat. The village was on fire. Houses exploded in flame, their thatched

roofs bursting into the air. Palm trees became torches, even the mists in the fields were burned away and we who cowered at the bottom of the slope were slapped by the heat.

The jets rolled back and came again, diving down the same ridges and across the fields, and dropped the last cannisters into the flaming village. I stared at the fires. I felt the stinging heat against my nose and eyes and smelled the acrid smoke blown off the fires by the wind. Helicopter gunships flew in a few minutes after the jets left, and though they were tossed about by the wind, they jinked and careened over the paddies like dragonflies, which they resembled. I heard the heavy chatter of their machine guns as they shot up the fields on the other side of the village. Two helicopters shot rockets into the village then raked it with machine gun fire. A single helicopter broke off and flew toward us. A green smoke grenade was tossed into a field in front of us. The helicopter hovered a moment, its thin tail wobbled by the wind, then settled its sled-like skids into the paddy. The poncho was pulled off the point man, and four marines grabbed his body and raced bent over toward the helicopter, ducking its huge whipping rotar. The body was handed up to a crewman who pulled it inside, like dumping garbage into a truck, I thought while shielding myself against mud and debris thrown up by the blade's windblast. The helicopter lifted a few feet off the ground and backed unsteadily into the wind until the pilot thought he could clear the trees, then in a great burst of power the machine ran with the wind. The helicopter bounced suddenly overhead in a loud clatter and instantly swung onto its side as it arced around the mountain and flew across the wind into the air above the open paddies. The other helicopters left off machinegunning the opposite fields and hovered above the valley until the bird that carried the point man rejoined the flock, then they flew over the mountains and followed the jets southeast to the coast.

We were left alone again. The sounds of machines and guns were replaced by the final explosions of the fires. We waited until they burned down and crossed the paddies at dusk. The wind blew into our faces and stung our eyes with smoke and ashes. A thin man led us this



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