

AN OCCURRENCE AT TRUNG LAP

A man speaks to his companion in a restaurant. I overhear him recite the familiar litany of names: Pleiku, Danang, Qui Nohn, Song Tra, An Loc, Ia Drang, Ben Phuc, Bien Hoa, Quang Tri, Hue, My Lai. For veterans of the war in the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), the words resonate through their years, a past that's still the present. All wars have their rolls of place names, sanctified by human sacrifice, courage, and honor. For both the man in the restaurant and myself, this was, and is, our war.

The Grateful Dead have referred to the Vietnam War as "shadow boxing the Apocalypse." The war reminded me of Indonesian shadow puppetry played out on the landscape of Vietnam, dark shapes guided by unseen forces somewhere beyond the stage, most appearances not being quite what they seem. My turf included Tay Ninh and Hau Nghia Provinces in an area generally northwest of Saigon in the delta, designated by the U.S. Military "III Corps." The Cambodian border and the "neutral" sanctuary beyond abutted Tay Ninh province to the north and west. Nui Ba Den, the "Black Virgin Mountain", sacred to the Vietnamese people, loomed eminent at three thousand feet above the flat delta, an area intersticed with rivers, dikes, and paddies.

My unit, the 2nd Battalion, 77th Artillery fired 105mm howitzers in support of the 1st of the 27th Infantry ("Wolfhounds") whose activities near Cambodia were depicted in the movie *Platoon*, the 1st Calvary (Airmobile), the 5th ARVN Division, RFPF (Rural Force, Popular Force) troops guided by MACV advisers, and others.

Attending Officer Candidate School courses at Fort Sill, home of the field artillery, I was taught that artillery was the "King of Battle" and infantry "the Queen". By 1970, my battalion had expended its 260,000th round at \$250.00 a pop -- a kingly sum in money and lives.

From fire support bases (FSB's) often named after recently deceased artillery forward observers, like FSB Kitchen and FSB Green, our batteries lobbed projectiles the size of watermelons into the countryside. Some spread a rain of metal shards over an area, some spread a fire storm of white phosphorus, others disgorged tiny shingle-nail darts, or flechettes, into approaching personnel at close quarters.

Our guns, half as long as a telephone pole, worked the Ho-Bo Woods, the Boi Loi Woods, the Mekong River, and a particularly eerie and dangerous area, the Michelin Rubber Plantation. The rubber trees, planted by French colonials, massed dark and dense on the road north to Tay Ninh Province and Cambodia. Their umbrella canopy totally masked the sun. A person standing beneath the cathedral rows of trees dwarfed to insect size. Viet Cong frequented the Michelin Plantation, rigging 122mm Soviet rockets on bamboo stakes and sending them into Tay Ninh City. U.S. troops nicknamed it "Rocket City" after the countless fusillades slammed into the base camps there.

In April of 1970 our guns received a call for artillery fire from a frantic forward observer, working with the infantry south of the Michelin:

"Red Ryder, Red Ryder. We've got a fire mission, over. Grid X-ray Yankee one niner four seven, five niner six two. Direction 1450 mills. Distance 1500 meters. U.S. bunker in the tree line. Three rounds Willie Pete. Nine rounds for effect, over."

After computing range data at the guns, the battery responded with the requested white phosphorus rounds ("Willie Pete" or "Wilson Pickett")

in army parlance. One round exploded early, a premature air burst, hurling a fire ball into the tiny hamlet of Trung Lap.

Trung Lap was viewed by intelligence sources as only tenuously sympathetic to U.S. forces and anything but pacified. Ambushes and terrorism in the village were common place. Our unit had made a mistake in Trung Lap. A water buffalo had been killed by our errant round, a hut burned, and a peasant farmer's youngest son immolated by white phosphorus. One feature of the WHAM Program, an acronym for "winning the hearts and minds" of the people of Vietnam, provided for solatium payments to the maimed, disfigured and disgruntled -- an exchange of U.S. military largesse for lost family members, appendages, or property.

My duties included personally presenting this solace money. As the representative of the U.S. military and the 2nd Battalion, 77th Artillery, my interpreter Sgt. Hieu and I presented a grieving peasant farmer in Trung Lap the following solatium payment: (1) 30,000 piasters for damage to one thatch building, (2) 60,000 piasters for one dead water buffalo, (3) 40,000 piasters for one dead boy. The hatred in the eyes of that small-boned peasant farmer will live with me forever.

by Peter Lindsey

....and when some raised a cry for the bombing of the Krupp armament plant, it was pointed out that this, after all, was private property.
Alexander Kendrick



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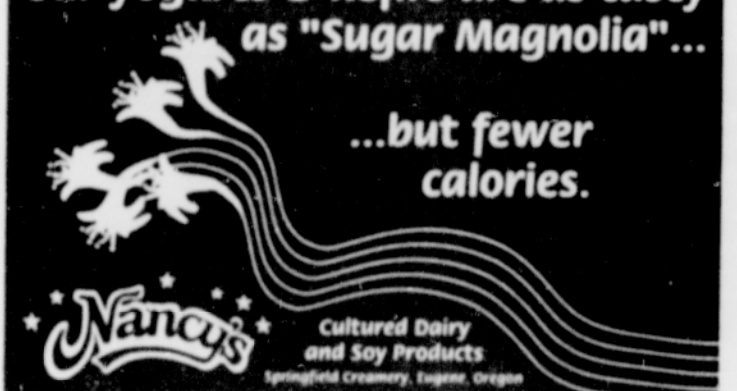
Etchings
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They speak of lives,
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MEANWHILE, IN NEWPORT

It was the newly elected Justice of the Peace's gravest case since being sworn in. The principles of the case were:

1. Dog (defendant) allegedly caught red-fanged in possession of a dead chicken belonging to plaintiff. Dog also suspected on five other recent poultry disappearances.
2. Dog's owner and guardian.
3. Chicken owner (plaintiff).
4. Bored looking Deputy Sheriff who would rather be out catching robbers, dope fiends, and those who don't signal when changing lanes.

Charge: Plaintiff alleges that defendant (dog) has been seen on several occasions loitering in a suspicious manner near chickens and that after these incidents of loitering chicken population declined. States further, that the chickens are valued for more than their company, that the plaintiff gardens and that chickens eat bugs and slugs (including the big yellow ones with brown spots that taste like Yaquina Bay cockles) menacing his garden. That the chickens convert said bugs and into eggs which plaintiff eats.

Defendant's guardian (owner) states that defendant is a young dog, the sole companion of his owner and should be given another chance.

Defendant declines to testify other than to wag tail when owner mentions his name.

Hizzoner wonders what the legal value of a chicken is.

Deputy says, statutorily, chickens are valued at two dollars per.

(Pause for judicial reflection.)

The findings of the court. The defendant is obviously guilty in the matter of the chicken found in his possession. Further, a preponderance of evidence indicates the defendant guilty in disappearance of other five chickens.

Therefore, the defendant, or if defendant is found indigent, defendant's guardian, must pay plaintiff twice the value of chickens, to wit: \$24.00.

More, the defendant is enjoined from molesting plaintiff's chickens and paroled to his guardian.

Plaintiff wants to know what will happen if defendant becomes a recidivist.

Hizzoner rules that in such a case a show cause hearing will be held to determine if the defendant should be held in contempt of court. Court adjourned.

Thus may it ever be in the halls of justice.

Alex LaFollete