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Thunder III

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The five Hueys from the 173rd Assault Helicopter Company, the “Robin Hoods,” brought our company of infantry into Thunder III twenty-five men at a time. After four lifts, the whole company was assembled at the resupply pad and the resident first sergeant began showing us which bunkers were assigned to us. My company was Delta Company, Second Battalion, Twenty-Eighth Infantry Regiment with the First Infantry Division, also called the Big Red One. I told our company commander which bunkers my platoon would occupy and began assigning them to my platoon of thirty men. In total, my platoon had nine bunkers that spanned 150 meters of the perimeter. I made sure that both bunkers with machine guns had an extra guy. The extra guy always came in handy during a ground attack. They could link up more ammo, load up empty magazines for our M-16s, or give cover fire while more ammo was being loaded into the gun. They also could help change the barrel out when it got red hot and couldn’t fire anymore for fear of melting. Machine gunners were the biggest targets in a ground attack, so the extra man on the gun was a practical necessity.

As platoon leader, I was on my second tour and would stay with whatever bunker was most in danger of being hit by the North Vietnamese if they attacked. I chose a different bunker each night to sleep in. It was January 1969, and the Vietnamese New Year, called Tet, was coming soon. We wanted to be ready this year. As soon as everyone was assigned to their bunker, I went around inspecting them. Some needed sandbags replaced. Some needed to have the area around the bunker policed up from trash the departing unit had left behind. No matter how good a platoon leader, or platoon sergeant, the fact is soldiers always leave a trail of trash when they vacate someplace. Additionally, someone had to check each bunker for jungle rats and cobras. The rats were notoriously ferocious and would send a good-sized cat scurrying for safety. The cobras controlled the population of rats and other small animals and were sometimes found

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in the bottom of the bunkers. I used a good flashlight and a borrowed .45 caliber pistol from my machine gunner to take care of this last task. One by one I cleared each bunker. Thank God, I didn't have to engage in combat with any rats or cobras. This time.

A previous company commander had once been in the bottom of a bunker trying to read his maps by flashlight when he noticed movement on one of the sandbags. It was a huge rat. The captain pulled out his .45 caliber pistol and fired a quick six rounds at the moving target. He missed, and the bunker was vacated a couple of seconds later by both the captain and the rat. The whole company had grabbed their weapons upon hearing the gunfire and were finally able to breathe easy when the captain announced, "I missed."

After I gave the "all-clear" for all the bunkers, everyone got busy filling new sandbags and using poncho liners and engineer stakes to set up sun screens against the relentless heat of the sun. When it wasn't raining, it was normally around 100 degrees Fahrenheit with astronomical humidity. Sweat poured off anyone making any sort of exertion in those conditions. After filling twenty-five sandbags, the mess sergeant put out the word that it was time for our hot lunch. The resident first sergeant who was with Headquarters, Second Battalion, Second Infantry (Mechanized), told me we could start sending our troops up to the makeshift mess hall in the middle of the fire support base, one man at a time from each bunker. I hollered out to everyone to take their weapons with them and to wear their steel pots, army issued helmets, when they went to get some chow. Everything went smoothly and within twenty minutes we all had a hot meal, served on the finest paper plates, for the first time in two weeks.

Hot meals were always an improvement over our normal C-rations. We had had a bad time in the bush for the last forty-five days, with two ground attacks and countless firefights with three of our soldiers killed just recently. Two of our soldiers had been killed in November 1968

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at FSB Cantigny, and another killed during a ground attack on December 1, 1968, at FSB Junction City III. These deaths were still fresh in everybody's minds and were spoken of frequently. A hot meal was just what the doctor ordered. Our morale improved immediately. As Bonaparte is alleged to have said, "An army marches on its stomach."

After a hot, well-cooked meal we were ready to march to Hanoi. In the infantry we were always grateful for the efforts of our cooks and thanked them profusely for such a great meal. For entertainment most of us had small transistor AM/FM radios we carried with us everywhere. When we got back to the bunkers, we pulled out the radios and tuned into our favorite local radio program. After a short rest, we began to fill sandbags again to improve our bunkers.

The Big Red One had its own radio station called Radio KLIK (Kay-El-Ay-Kay) and was located in the Division Headquarters village of Lai Khe. The village was part of an old rubber tree plantation about twenty-five miles north of Saigon on Route 13, sometimes called Thunder Road by the GIs. The "thunder" came from the many bombs and booby-traps that exploded on the road, almost daily, all the way up to Bu Dop on the Cambodian border. From Lai Khe to the border the First Division had built ten small fire support bases, called "Thunders," which the many units of the First Infantry Division could retreat to for a stand-down whenever they had a hard time in the jungle, or after a particularly rough combat action in which they had lost men, killed or wounded. That was our situation, and we were going to enjoy our short respite from the war as long as we could at Thunder III. I was elated that no one from my platoon had been killed in the last eight months but, even in a relatively safe place like one of the Thunders, you could never let your guard down completely.

On our most recent operation we rescued a Bird Dog pilot after he was shot down. We had been in four firefights over a five-day period and in one of the firefights the plane had been

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shot down. We raced to rescue the pilot before the NVA could get to him. When I approached the pilot, it was almost sunset. He came out from his hiding place on rubbery legs and shakily said to me with tears in his eyes, "I have never been so happy to see another human being in my life! Thank God you're here!"

I told him, "The day ain't over, sir, so let's get out of here," as I led him back to a landing zone for him to get picked up.

A Bird Dog pilot was an army or air force pilot who flew a Cessna or a Piper Cub airplane, usually outfitted with rockets on its wings to pinpoint where the big fighter jets should bomb or strafe. I had been walking point when each of the firefights took place and we had racked up a lot of dead enemy. It takes its toll on you. We were all more than ready for the break that being on the Thunders would give us until our next operation into The Iron Triangle or War Zone C.

Thunder III and was located near the village of Chon Thanh, which was about fifteen miles north of Lai Khe. It was relatively peaceful and the kids who swarmed down Route 13 from Chon Thanh were all friendly and full of life. I had known them from my first tour with Delta Company back in 1967. They all called me by my Vietnamese name, Anh Hai, which means Number Two Brother, or Second Brother. I simply loved all those children. It lifted my spirits every time I saw them, and I couldn't wait to see them again as soon as our bunkers were fixed up.

My platoon of infantrymen was in tiptop shape and we had the bunkers repaired in no time. We made sure that our fields of fire were all cleared, placed our Claymore mines out by the perimeter barbed wire, and led the attached wires back to the bunkers. We were set for the

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evening. I asked my machine gunner, Ray, if he wanted to go say hi to the kids, who I knew were waiting for us out by the front gate.

He said, "Yeah, let's go." My machine gunner was from Great Neck, Long Island in New York. He had been a weightlifter and bodybuilder who had worked out with Lou Ferrigno before Lou became an actor. Ray had also been a part-time burglar before he was requested by his sentencing judge to go serve his country in the army. After his discharge, Ray told me he would go back to the same judge and request his record be expunged. All he had to do was get an honorable discharge and the past would remain in the past.

As we approached the front gate of Thunder III, we saw dozens of kids milling around and talking with the GIs standing with them. Some of the kids were selling Coca-Cola, and some were selling Bier 33, the French/Vietnamese beer. It was called Ba Muoi Ba, which translates as "three-ten three," or thirty-three.

As soon as the kids saw Ray and me, they stopped what they were doing and ran over to us screaming with joy, "Anhhai! Anhhai oi," they sang. What they were all saying was translated as "Second Brother, oh!" The sounds of their joy spilled into my heart and I laughed as the smallest kids tried to jump into my arms at the same time. I led the kids away from the gate to the side of the road and we chatted back and forth for a while in Vietnamese. Ray showed them his biceps and struck a Mr. Universe pose. As he held that pose, two kids jumped and started swinging on his arms like he was a child's playground and his arms the monkey bars. We were all laughing and yelling at each other when I looked north along Route 13 and saw a huge cloud of dust in the distance coming inevitably our way. It appeared to be at least two kilometers down the road still, but I yelled at the other GIs and the kids to get out of the road, to come over to where I was. I had a bad feeling and I didn't know why.

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This huge cloud of dust moving down Route 13 could mean simply that a convoy was coming through. That was bad news for anyone on a slow walk down Thunder Road. Route 13 was not paved and was made up of red laterite clay. Laterite is a type of reddish soil, found in tropical or subtropical regions that has been leached of its soluble minerals. When it is dry it produces huge amounts of dust. If you were riding a motorcycle or bicycle you could possibly get hit or knocked over by one of the vehicles, and the convoy wouldn't even slow down. If you were a driver of one of the hundreds of cyclos or Lambrettas traveling on the road, the red dust from the convoy could temporarily engulf you in a cloud and blind you so that you had to pull off the road until the way was clear again.

A cyclo is a modified motorcycle that can carry extra passengers. Sort of a motorcycle taxi for three to five passengers. The Lambrettas are small open-air vehicles with just three wheels, like a trike, with enough room for eight or ten passengers to sit. They are powered by a motorcycle engine and had a roof rack where they carried crates of chickens, ducks, pigs, and other assorted cargo from village to village.

All the children stayed behind Ray and me as the ominous cloud of red dust came closer. I still held two of the kids in my arms as they clung to my neck. Suddenly I realized who it was and yelled, "It's the Cav! Get back! Get back!" The cavalry units were mechanized infantry units that loved to race along Thunder Road heading south, and then hang a right turn at the village of Ben Cat and head towards the Iron Triangle along the Saigon River. Then they would swing north towards the Michelin rubber plantation where they would race through and catch Vietcong and North Vietnamese enemies by surprise. They were very successful at this and had fought many battles in the large rubber plantation that way, but the way they roared down the road was

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reckless and dangerous to the South Vietnamese. They certainly didn't win any hearts or minds by running these people off the road all the time.

The cavalry unit roared towards us. I put the kids down and started motioning with my arms for everyone to get back away from the road. The Americans that were on the road moved back inside the safety of the fire support base and I stayed with the kids to make sure none of them got hurt. As the column of armored personnel carriers (APC) approached our position by the gate, I could see that they were doing about thirty to thirty-five miles per hour with three or four soldiers riding on top of each APC. This was normal because everyone called the APC a metal coffin, and never wanted to ride inside of one. There was only a slight westward wind that day. The second APC was only about ten meters from the rear of the first APC, which didn't give time for the clouds of raising dust to blow to the west side of the road. The APCs needed much more distance between them for the following driver to be able to see the road with any kind of certainty. The APCs didn't slow down as they roared past us at the front gate of Thunder III. Instead, they seemed to pick up speed.

I watched carefully as they came—one, two, three, four—until the fifth APC hit a small depression in the road and its back end went into the air. When it went airborne, one of the soldiers on the topside of the APC flew up into the air and came down, missing the top of the vehicle and landing in the road. Ray and I immediately jumped in front of the next APC, waving our arms frantically to try to make them stop. They didn't see us or the soldier in the road and drove on ahead as Ray and I sprinted back to the side of the road before we could be crushed ourselves. We jumped out again and again as the next two APCs roared through. Finally, the horror of what had happened caught the eye of one of the APC commanders sitting on top. He radioed the convoy to immediately stop.

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Finally, the cavalry convoy came to a stop. Ray and I rushed to the soldier. I was praying he had fallen between the tracks of the APCs and had not been run over. When Ray and I got to him all I could do was scream, “Son of a fucking bitch! Goddammit! What have you guys done?” It was clearly too late to save the soldier.

Ray reacted too with, “Oh my God! Oh, Jesus!” The soldier had died a terrible death under the tracks of at least three APCs. His face was unrecognizable. One of the cavalry guys took out the dead soldier’s wallet and looked at the military ID inside. He started wailing as he passed the ID to a lieutenant who walked up. Other soldiers started crying as they realized they knew the dead soldier.

I told the lieutenant, “We tried to get you guys to stop, but none of the drivers could see us because of the dust.” Not knowing what else to add, I simply said, “I’m sorry, man.” One of the cavalry non-commissioned officers (NCO) ordered a driver to lower the back ramp on one of the APCs. It slowly came down and after rolling the soldier in a poncho, they put him inside. The ramp was raised, and the convoy started out again, perhaps a little slower than before.

Ray swore under his breath and fought back tears as we walked away from the middle of the road. Shaking my head, I walked back to the kids who had a look of horror etched onto their faces. Some of the kids were crying openly. I hugged them to me a little tighter than before and I told them to please always be careful on Thunder Road. They promised me they would.