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Collateral Damage

Pat Clark

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Collateral Damage

Pat Clark

Despite the damp and rotting vegetation of the delta jungle, the smell of the firefight hung in the air. The trauma and chaos of battle were over. Searching and destroying were history. “Mopping up” was all that remained.

The village from which the ambush had come lay across a canal, tucked neatly into the edge of a tree line abutting a dry rice paddy. Deep green shade covered thatched hooches. An open area of hard packed dirt in the center of the village was bathed in dappled sunlight. Perhaps not idyllic, but appealing. At least until the ambush. And now it was time to care for the wounded and secure the village. Three squads would check for VC and hidden weapons while one squad secured an LZ in the paddy for the dust-off chopper.

Open-sided hooches were the easiest to search with the exception of the mounded, dried-mud bunkers. Sometimes, after taking heavy casualties, these hiding places were “checked” with grenades. But not today. Other hooches with more substantial walls might provide some protection and privacy for occupants, but they were also cover for Charlie. They required more care. No obvious VC were found among the children and elderly. Some of the villagers had visible wounds and some were only traumatized by the fighting. Those who could walk were herded into the center clearing and guarded. The badly wounded stayed where they fell; cut down perhaps by VC with their AK-47s or, more likely, by Americans with their M-16s, M-60s, and M-79s. An Army medic, using only GI cotton bandages, was desperately trying to undo what bullets and shrapnel had done.

The platoon seemed pleased with its action during the firefight and afterward. Searches

revealed some evidence of blood trails leading into the jungle, however no weapons or enemy were found dead. But this area was a VC stronghold and even this spurious victory was deemed worthy of celebration; perhaps if only for the relief of surviving.

The euphoria following a firefight seems to dull the part of the brain that feels guilt or remorse. Focus on survival means little else can clutter thoughts. The problem is, like a narcotic, it dulls but does not erase. Images seem to be etched permanently. For those who have experienced war, time has perhaps altered recollections and allowed the mind to soften the harshness of reality. But for some, memories linger explicit and frighteningly real.

Especially at night.

Apparently there is no expiration date for the anguish of collateral damage.