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Greater Love

Pat Clark

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Greater Love

By Pat Clark

Lumbering through the berm and past the check-point, the Deuce and a Half turned left and headed down a rough, barely paved road. Bouncing and swerving north for a time, the convoy then turned west on another equally rough delta road. The division base camp was located near a small city along a branch of the Mekong River. The four dusty olive drab trucks were headed a few kilometers into the bush to return the men to their fire base. The road had been swept for mines earlier that day, but ambushes were always a possibility. Two men stood as lookouts in the front corners behind the cab and two sat in the back facing the rear. Everyone else just rode along talking or smoking or looking at the scenery but always on alert. Although the men appeared relaxed, each knew that his life depended upon the others.

They were riding through small clusters of hooches that seemed to be what passed for the suburbs in this part of Vietnam. Farther along, the road ran between green jungle and wide-open rice paddies being tended by farmers and their ever-present water buffalo. Always aware of the danger, they kept a wary eye on both sides of the road. Some of them grouched about the kidney jarring ride, the smells, and why the brass couldn't have flown them out on choppers. Flying was faster and safer after all. So far it was a routine trip without any sniper fire.

Over the rumble of the truck came a sharp metallic clang. One of the men sitting toward the front jumped up and like a defensive lineman scrambling for a fumble, fell on the grenade that was bouncing on the bed of the truck. Frozen, the men waited for the inevitable detonation. But none came. In what seemed like an eternity, the man grabbed the grenade and threw it into the nearby paddy. Still no detonation. Was it a dud? Where had it come from? How could a VC have gotten so close without being noticed?

As the men began to realize that they were safe, someone noticed that one of the grenades he had clipped to his web gear was missing. At least most of it was missing. The fuse, the safety pin, and the lever were still there. It seems while bouncing along the road, the body of the grenade had loosened, come unscrewed, and fallen to the floor. No one spoke for a time as they looked at each other. Soon, the convoy reached the fire base and the men jumped from the truck. Someone mentioned to the lieutenant the possibility of putting their buddy in for a medal. Maybe a Bronze Star or even a Silver Star. But nothing was ever done because the grenade didn't detonate.