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**Steve Tedder**

## Lost Innocence and Learning to Hate

“Why did they kill her? She was just a little kid.” I asked Staff Sergeant Pye and Sergeant Thom, our Kit Carson Scout. Both men sat with their backs against an empty revetment next to the runway enjoying some morning shade. We had just arrived at our staging area at Tay Ninh.

SSG Pye asked, “Did you see it, were you there?”

“Yeah, I was there. Top sent me with Moose to drop off the garbage cans at the dump.”

“Have a seat and I’ll let Sgt. Thom explain it to you. He knows a lot more than I do why these bastards do what they do.”

After squatting down Sgt. Thom asked me exactly what I’d seen.

I told him that yesterday had been an off-day for me. That meant the platoon was going out to the bush without me. There were 29 men in the Rifle Platoon but only 21 went out in the field each day. We rotated, and yesterday was my day to stay behind.

Soon after everyone was gone I was lying up in my bunk reading a magazine when one of the clerks came in. He informed me that Top (1<sup>st</sup> Sergeant) needed a Grunt volunteer to report to the Mess Sergeant with his rifle and gear. When asked why he said I’d be riding shotgun taking the trash to the dump.

Sure enough, when I reported to the Mess Hall, Spec. 4 Jerry (Moose) Gillett was there waiting. After making comments about my not needing my pack, Moose climbed behind the wheel into his deuce-and-a-half. I made my way into the passenger seat where I noticed a

shotgun mounted next to the gear shift. Moose's Lt. had told him he could have his pick of any weapon and he liked the shotgun. Personally, I preferred the M-16.

Moose explained he went to the dump located right outside the perimeter several times a week to drop the garbage from the mess hall. It had never occurred to me there were trash dumps in Viet Nam but it made sense.

He also told me how the Mess Sergeant would include some vegetables and bread in it that were basically okay for the kids. The dump was overrun everyday by kids scavenging for any leftover food from the GIs, telling me Just wait, you'll see.

The gates were manned by ARVN QC's (same as our MP's) who quickly waved us through. We'd traveled only a short distance before Moose turned down a dirt road. In no time we were at the dump.

I was amazed at the number of kids who swarmed the truck and followed us in a group, yelling and waving. Both boys and girls, most of them were under twelve years old. Careful to avoid running them over Moose backed up to one of the garbage piles and we dismounted.

Climbing up the back of the deuce-and-a-half, Moose and I made quick work dumping the six garbage cans onto the ground. We threw out a lot of chopped cabbages, carrots and other seemingly fresh food. According to Moose, the Mess Sergeant had made this trip once and after seeing the kids he had included a little more palatable food scraps.

Those kids yelled and dug through their newfound treasures. I had no clue what was being said but they sure were happy. They must have recognized Moose and knew he had nicer pickings than they usually got from the other mess halls.

As I climbed into the cab, a sharp explosion detonated behind me, like an M80 firecracker. I dove headfirst into a pile of garbage while pulling my rifle off my shoulder. Crouching in the trash, I looked behind me in time to see a puff of white smoke rising. Below the smoke lay a small body, motionless on its back.

A second before, the air had been with laughter and shouts; those were gone, replaced by the most godawful screams from the kids. A few ran towards the kid on the ground, all were hauling ass away from us. Moose and I took off at a run to reach the downed child; we found it to be a small girl. Her right arm had been blown off and her face which must have once been beautiful was a bloody gaping crater where her jaw had been. Her white shirt was scorched and covered in blood.

Completely at a loss on what to do, Moose and I stood aside while a boy, maybe 12 years old, with tears streaming down his face stooped to pick up her limp body. Cradling her, he mumbled incomprehensibly and carried the body towards the gate. The girl had been killed instantly.

Inside a minute, an ARVN QC jeep pulled up alongside the boy and his terrible burden. One of the ARVN lifted the girl's body and placed it in the back, then sped off with the boy and the corpse through the gate. Many more QC's arrived; all the kids disappeared.

No one said anything to Moose or me. We got back in the truck and returned to the Troop area.

We paked in front of the orderly room to report to Top and the XO (Executive Officer) what had happened. The XO asked what type of booby trap did I think it was.

Booby Trap? Why would anyone booby trap the dump where all those little kids were? It didn't make any sense. It happened 30 yards from where the trucks unloaded. It was obvious; the bomb wasn't meant for us but for the kids. After I explained that it sounded like a firecracker than a mine, Top said it was probably a "Toe Popper." The Viet Cong must have rigged it to go off when someone picked it up. I was familiar with the M14 Land Mine. It was designed to blow off an enemy's foot, not kill, only wound. With its small explosive charge, it did sound like a firecracker.

After leaving the Orderly Room I helped Moose wash out his truck. We rolled to the EM Club and got royally drunk. Neither of us could believe what we'd witnessed. It was also the first dead person either of us had seen. What could we have done?

I awoke the following morning with a terrible hangover. I forced myself to eat breakfast, then grabbed my weapons and gear and headed to the flight line with the rest of my platoon. After a 30-minute flight our Huey landed at Tay Ninh. There, Pye and Thom rested by the revetment.

After I recalled for them the events of yesterday, Sgt. Thom had this to say:

"It's simple why the Cong would kill a child. And they do much worse, believe me. I've seen it with my own eyes. Always for the same reason. To control the people. I'm sure those kids and their parents were warned not to take food from the Americans, not even from a garbage dump.

When they ignored it, the VC set booby traps. You know that we Kit Carson Scouts are ex-VC and NVA. I was an officer. I did not Chu Hoi (defect to help the south and the Americans), no,

even though my family up north were treated very badly by the communists when the French left. I was educated, and was given no choice. I became an officer in the North Vietnamese Army. I determined to defect as soon I was sent south.”

After coming down the Trail through Laos and Cambodia, Thom was sent to an area in the Central Highlands to fight the Americans. One day, he was sent into a village with his men.

“The people there refused to give us food and shelter. My captain made everyone line up. He made the village chieftain bend over in front of all the people. My captain cut around his anus with a long sharp knife. Grabbing the man’s intestines, he pulled and nailed the end to a tree.”

The captain made the chief’s wife stand in front of him with a pistol at her head. He made the man run around the tree, threatening to kill his wife if he didn’t. Soon he collapsed, but before he died my captain pulled the trigger and killed her.

“We took everything the villagers had, including several teenage boys who we forced to fight with us. When we returned, the people remembered us. They knew that you Americans were powerless against us. Not long after, I managed to defect. And here I am now.”

SSG Pye spoke up. He said that, during his first tour, his unit swept through several villages where the people completely ignored them. They didn’t even allow the medic to treat their ailments or sores. He knew why but couldn’t think of anything to counter their fears.

Not long after, we were called to mount the helicopters for an insertion in the AO (Area of Operations). I was on a different ship than Pye or Thom and we didn't have a chance to finish our conversation.

The more I got to know Sgt. Thom, the more I came to admire him, not only for saving our asses more than once but his knowledge of the history of his country. I learned so much from him. I often wonder what became of him. I hope he made it out.

I also thought about that day at the dump, never fully able to forget the bloody limp girl, a child of maybe 6, lying amongst the garbage. That day, and the image I could not rid myself of, and the days and images that came after, fed my anger at the North Vietnamese. I came to believe they did not deserve to breathe the same air as decent people, and for the rest of my two tours in that war, I did not hesitate to pull the trigger on any RVN or VC who crossed my path.