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A Short Glimpse of Hell

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As I was heading out to pull perimeter guard the evening of 16 June 1967 the sergeant in charge of the rear detachment told me to be up at the battalion resupply pad the next day at 0800 hours.

His last words to me were, “Don’t fuck it up!”

Why does everyone tell you to ‘not fuck it up?’ Does every asshole who has ever been put in charge of another human being live in mortal fear that they are going to go out and fuck up on purpose? Do they think their threats guarantee success? Or that only their crude imperative stands between good order and discipline versus complete anarchy? Threats of court-martial, or the thousand other ways to ream your ass, were always implied in the Army. Is it just another way of making themselves blameless or a cover-your-ass (CYA) way of saying to our superiors, “Well, sir, I told him not to fuck it up.”

On 13 June 1967, I had graduated from the much-ballyhooed Combat Indoctrination Course (CIC) in Lai Khe. When I processed in at the First Replacement Company in Di An back in May, they all spoke of the CIC School with great reverence. Allegedly, a World War II hero was in charge of the school and the commanding general of the Big Red One thought the world of him. The WWII hero turned out to be a guy who was on Omaha Beach on 6 June 1945 and who had been promoted to second lieutenant via a battlefield commission. If he stayed in Vietnam for any length of time, he would be able to retire as a captain. That would be a significant raise in retirement pay from his old rank of staff sergeant.

I can’t say I learned a lot at the school. It was interesting to hear about Omaha Beach, but I had already been through infantry training for an entire year before I came to Vietnam. I already knew all the infantry weapons and now I really knew which way to face my Claymore mines. Hint: Face This Side Towards Enemy is printed on the business side of the Claymore. I

also knew how to throw a hand grenade, how to fire an M-72 Light Anti-tank Weapon (LAW), and how to “shut the fuck up” while out on ambush.

I was supposed to go out to the bush to join my company on 14 June, but due to a shortage of personnel the rear detachment sergeant had used me for three consecutive nights of perimeter guard duty. He told me in no uncertain terms not to be late the next morning and to make sure I got on that resupply chopper because CPT Turner was specifically asking about me. Our commanding officer, CPT John Turner, had told me when I finished the CIC school that I was supposed to join up with the rest of the company (Bravo Company 2/28th Infantry) in the field and I was afraid he would be mad at me for not coming out sooner.

Early the next morning after no sleep on guard duty, I had breakfast in the mess hall and got my gear ready to go. Doing my best to imitate a good soldier ‘not fucking it up’ I sprinted for the supply room where the B Company three-quarter-ton truck waited for me. I nodded at the supply sergeant and hopped up in the back. Within minutes we were headed to the resupply pad. When we got to the S-4 resupply pad I realized it was just a bunch of perforated steel planking (PSP) that was covered with asphalt. PSP are just a bunch of steel grates that are hooked together and if you use enough of them you can lay down an airfield. The S-4 pad was a good acre in size.

I dismounted from our Bravo Company truck and watched the S-4 guys drive up in Deuce and a Halfs with all kinds of material for the field. They had cases of C-rats, cases of every kind of ammo—small arms, machine gun ammo, mortars—hand grenades, portable water tanks, beer, flares, smoke grenades and bags of mail. They started loading everything into sling load nets they put out on the ground. I stood there, amazed that there were actually cases of beer going out to soldiers in the jungle!

There were a couple of officers there giving orders to some of the S-4 NCOs and talking periodically on the radios that had long whip antennas attached to them. In my mind's eye, I can still see the unofficial "true leader" of the S-4 gang up on the back of the Deuce and a Halfs. He tossed case after case of ammo to others who would catch the cases at the tailgate of the truck and run and lay them down in the nets that were spread out on the ground. This guy was working without a shirt and was exceptionally tall for a soldier in those days. He looked about 6'6" tall, probably weighed 260, and he was a human machine! I had never seen anyone work that long and hard in such unbearable heat and humidity. This guy was like John Henry, that ol' steel driving man, in his famous race against the Steam Railroad spike setting machine! I mean, this guy was really humping that ammo around. His body movements mimicked some huge piston on a locomotive train as he would grab a case of ammo from the stack in the back of the truck and turn, step, and then throw it so it slid into the arms of the other soldiers waiting at the tailgate of the truck. One after the other he snatched a case, turned, stepped, and threw the ammo then turned back and grabbed another case. Snatch! Jerk! Turn! Step! Throw! Turn back and Snatch! Jerk! Turn and throw! I was mesmerized and amazed. It was already 95 degrees and about 98 percent humidity that morning and this guy was working like his life depended on it.

Those cases of ammo weighed 70 to 100+ pounds each and he just snatched and jerked them like someone's lunch pail. He would snatch a hold of it and jerk it into his chest and turn and take a step and then loft the case so that it hit just before the end of the truck bed and bounced into another soldier's arms. The soldier who caught it would run and place it in the sling net. There were about five other S-4 guys and he kept them all running in a steady stream. You could tell these guys had done this a hundred times before and were a true team. In no time this guy had single-handedly emptied out the truck and was on to the next truck to empty it out, too.

It made me tired just watching him. I, myself, was in pretty good shape, but this guy was like an unstoppable bull. In the years ahead, as hard times came and as I worked under some of the worst conditions possible in Vietnam, I would always measure myself against this one soldier and his unbelievable strength and endurance.

The S-4 guys hollered over and told me they would let me know which chopper to get on. I thought I would go out to the field with the next load of supplies, but they didn't signal me. I didn't have a wristwatch, but at about noon the Chinooks start coming in. They quickly loaded up three of them and then the Chinooks all hovered one at a time to take on a sling load. After all three were loaded they all flew off to the north.

After they disappeared into the horizon, I began to hear all kinds of radio chatter and screaming from the S-4 guys, "The choppers are coming back! Move the goddam trucks! MOVE THEM NOW!"

Some guys obeyed immediately and jumped in the trucks to move them out of the way. The Chinooks had turned around and were coming back to the pad. They dropped their sling loads off to the side, moved over to where it was clear on the ground, and lowered their ramps while still hovering. They tilted the Chinooks with the pilots' section up in the air and the tail section down and dumped out everything that was inside. They never touched the ground. Then they swung back level and powered straight up out of there and away heading north. Time seemed to stand still.

The S-4 guys were screaming, "They're in a firefight! Gooks have .51 calibers at the LZ. The First of the Eighteenth is going out!"

I lost track of time. In the midst of this chaos a dozen trucks pulled up to the S-4 pad. Soldiers started dismounting. Sergeants barked orders and the soldiers started getting organized

in platoon formations. I backed up about fifty meters, trying to get the hell out of the way so they wouldn't sweep me up into the loads of Infantrymen that were forming up. A panicky kind of excitement was in the air. Radio messages were quickly spread like wildfire around the soldiers in front of me.

I heard, "Ten dead and more than twenty wounded coming in!"

"It's going to be a hot LZ! Run straight to the wood line after we land!"

"The First of the Sixteenth is coming back!"

The First Battalion of the Sixteenth Infantry Regiment was a whole battalion of men. Over 400 infantrymen. Suddenly the Chinooks appeared in the sky coming from the north. They swooped down, turned, and lowered the ramps one after the other all in a row. That's when I had my first glimpse of hell.

As the ramps at the back of the Chinooks lowered, dozens of wounded and dead soldiers came falling and rolling out of the Chinooks onto the ground. Some who were able to walk came stumbling out like they were intoxicated. They had their arms and legs bandaged; the bandages were all hasty field bandages, half falling off and soaked through with blood. Some of the wounded soldiers who were able to do so assisted others to get out of the Chinooks and onto vehicles. A few of the ambulatory soldiers carried three or four rucksacks and extra rifles. I had once been an ambulance attendant and I have never seen blood look so bright in my life. It practically glowed. It was neon red and it was everywhere: on the soldiers, on the Chinook, and on the ramp at the back of the Chinook. All the wounded had a look of horror and pain across their faces. My heart went out to all the suffering before me, but I stayed where I was. Medics from other units started showing up in old box ambulances the army had at the time. Three-quarter-ton trucks started rolling up and Deuce and a Halfs and jeeps. Whatever could roll was

commandeered to bring fresh troops in from the First Battalion of the Eighteenth Infantry and take the wounded soldiers of the First Battalion of the Sixteenth Infantry away from the resupply pad to the aid stations and MASH units. There were lots of dead soldiers, too. I couldn't count how many body bags were carried off and placed into the backs of the Deuce and a Halfs. My knees got weak. I chain-smoked nervously. The dead were all destined for graves registration, which was close to Highway 13 and the village of Lai Khe.

The fresh soldiers who had just arrived in trucks got onto the Chinooks. The ramp closed and the choppers took off again heading north. The soldiers were all loaded for bear. They could barely walk up the ramps, they were carrying so much machine gun ammo and bandoliers wrapped around their shoulders. Although I considered myself to be an atheist at the time, I still thanked God that I wasn't in those Chinooks heading into battle. The proper designation for a Chinook was CH-47. Infantrymen shortened all that even further to "Hooks," and sometimes "Shit-Hooks." The Hooks came back in about thirty minutes with more wounded and dead. This went on all day. I had no idea how much time had passed. I don't remember drinking anything at all, but I smoked steadily. I was utterly stupefied watching all this unfold in front of me. I felt like I was rooted to the ground. I tried to move my legs and couldn't. A kind of dread came over me like a dark, ugly blanket; I realized for the first time that I may have made a mistake by volunteering to leave the relative safety of Saigon and come to the Big Red One. At about 6 p.m. the S-4 guys said to get on the next Chinook coming in and go on out to the field. I was petrified with apprehension. Somehow, I was able to make my legs move, Frankenstein-like, as the Chinook came in and landed. I prayed no one could see that fear was affecting my ability to bend my knees. I walked up the ramp and into the belly of the Hook with rubbery legs.

I could not step anywhere without stepping in pools of blood. All the seats were bloodstained. I found a seat on the left side and sat, resting my rucksack on the seat next to me. There was no one else on the Hook besides the pilot, copilot, and two crew members who were manning .50 caliber machine guns up towards the front. We lifted off and flew fifteen or twenty minutes when the Chinook swerved violently and banked to the left. The .50 caliber machine gun on the left began firing in four- and five-round bursts. We circled three times while he was firing away. The sound was deafening. Then he fired 100 rounds without stopping. I was watching the gunner's face. His teeth were gritted as he held an unlit cigar in his mouth. His eyes had a wild look to them.

He finally stopped firing and hollered over to me, "They just got a mortar attack!" And then he added with a large grin, "Had a bunch of gooks in the open!"

We descended and touched down. It was almost dark by now. I had my rucksack on. I slipped as I was going down the ramp on something wet. I didn't have to look down to know what it was. Two guys brushed by me, carrying a body bag on board. The body bag was full; they strained under the weight of it. A chill went down my spine. I asked someone where Bravo Company 2/28th was and they told me. I walked up to some guys who were digging in the ground and asked if they were Bravo. They said yeah. I asked where Captain Turner was because I had to report to him.

They said, "Don't fuck with him right now, man, his RTO just got killed." My heart sank. SP4 Morrow was dead. Just killed. That was him that they just put on the Chinook. He was the only one in the whole fucking company who had been nice to me. Oh my God, I thought, this is not going to be easy. I stumbled on ahead and came to the CO's foxhole. I reported to him anyway because I was afraid what would happen if I disobeyed him.

I said, “CPT Turner, sir. You told me to report to you when I came out to the field.” He looked up at me.

Recognition came slowly to his eyes and he said, “Aldridge. Welcome to the field. First Sergeant! Put Aldridge with Third Platoon. They had the most killed and wounded today.”

The first sergeant (who was an SFC, I believe) led me over to the Third Platoon and told the platoon sergeant that the CO wanted to assign me to them. The platoon sergeant was one SSG Jiminez. He said, “You stay with Clinger. He’s over there digging a foxhole. Clinger, here’s a fucking new guy for you.”

He indicated a soldier a few yards away. I went over and introduced myself. Clinger said, “Oh, you’re the guy who volunteered to come to the bush!”

“Yeah, I’m the guy.”

“What the fuck did you do that for?”

“After everything I’ve seen today, it’s a goddam mystery to me why I volunteered for anything!” We both laughed and then he showed me what we needed to do to the foxhole to make it big enough for two people. We fell into a hushed conversation while we took turns digging. I got to know Clinger that night. His full name was Guy Clinger. He was from Pennsylvania and he said his family called him “Mick.” I asked him what his job was.

He said, “I walk point.” I asked him what that was like and he told me, “Honestly, it’s as scary as shit, but someone has to go out there and do it.” Just three weeks before, my friend Jim Goseco had driven me up from Saigon. There had been a sign hanging over the road at Di An. It said, “No mission too difficult. No sacrifice too great. Duty First!”

Jim had slammed the brakes hard and with tears in his eyes he pointed to the motto of the Big Red One and said, “Oh my God, Dave! You’re going to fucking die!”

I laughed at the time. But it wasn't so funny now, as I dug deeper and deeper in the foxhole. Hell was coming. I'd better get ready for it. At first, everyone called it the Battle of Operation Billings. In later years, they called it The Battle of Xom Bo II. There were 39 soldiers killed in action and 150 more wounded that day.