

## 4.2 Mortars

It was about 2:00 in the afternoon when the phone rang in our platoon leader's room. It was late in the afternoon for a day patrol to begin unless something unusual was happening and it was too early for a night operation, as it normally doesn't take four hours to set up a night operation. It was the command center and it seems we were selected to do another road patrol for a passing convoy. We were to provide security for a late afternoon convoy going to the Army base at Lai Khe; we were to patrol about 2.5 miles along highway 13 that passed adjacent to our firebase of Phu Loi.

Our patrol had pulled this duty a few times before without problems; it was pretty straight forward, although, last time Mac shot himself a water buffalo; this is not what we normally do when we are bored with our assignment. This big gray animal, with a hump on its back weighing about 900 pounds and sporting two large horns setting square on his head, for some reason, the critter took an instant dislike to Mac and began pawing the dry dusty dirt beneath him." Ferdinand" was standing next to one of the village huts, about 250 feet from the road we were patrolling, Mac noticed this aggressive behavior and took special interest in what the animal's intention might be as Mac was the closest moving object to this ill-tempered beast of burden.

When Ferdinand began his charge, Mac didn't hesitate; he stopped the charge in his tracks with a short burst of rounds from his M16. The owner of the animal was soon on the scene voicing his objection loudly and not so clearly that is, until the farmer picked up the slacked rope one end tied to Ferdinand's yoke and the other to the stake in the ground.

These animals are very important to the village. They are used to plow the flooded fields so the rice can be planted and assist with the harvest. The water buffalo is the main mode of transportation for most of the people living in these remote villages and is not cheap for a family to purchase. Sometimes, several families get together

to just buy a pair of them. Needless to say, the patrol was stopped at this point while Lieutenant Michaels called back to our command center for advice and assistance.

I found out later the farmer was paid for the loss of his property but only after the U.S. government paid the Vietnam government for the animal. Then the province chief got his cut; after which the village chief got his cut; only, then did the farmer have the rest of the money. He was really never compensated for his loss.

Today's patrol was now making quick checks of their weapons and equipment before they loaded in the truck. We were taking the deuce and a half, which could carry all the men we had in our patrol; at this time, we numbered about 18. It was about 2:30 in the afternoon and we traveling along the dusty perimeter road heading for bunker 26, where we were to pick our way through the razor wire of the perimeter fence. Bunker 26 was one of a few places in the fence where the mine field was void.

Soon we were outside of the fence walking toward a small dirt one lane road heading west. We spread ourselves out along both sides of the roadway as far as possible but could still maintain contact with each other. Before long, we left the road and were in the open fields of rice stubble working our way toward the distant Highway 13 where we were to begin patrolling the 2.5 miles of road as the convoy passed. We would return to the compound through the main gate where the truck would meet us and return us to our area.

I don't know what was so special about this convoy; trucks pass along this highway all day long without any added security. Perhaps, there were VIP's within it or a USO show moving to a new location. It was the wrong time of the year for Bob Hope. Although he was special, he was not the only celebrity to make an appearance in Vietnam.

I remember one time when I was working as an airplane mechanic with the 605<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company, I was changing the spark plug on an engine when I saw someone approaching me; they were wearing fatigues that were somewhat altered: on the sleeves were sergeant stripes and on the collar were major pins. I stopped to pay closer attention to whom was standing there watching me work. I was not quite sure who it was until she opened her mouth and asks me, "What are you doing?" It turned out I was talking to the comedienne Martha Raye. No one else was near, just the two of us until she walked away to find another GI to surprise.

Martha Raye was known as a comedienne who made many people laugh by putting herself down. Many people put themselves down if they have a poor self-image. Martha Raye had a great self-image and I found her intelligent and I know she cared about the solders she met in Vietnam. She was a big Hollywood personality that was on stage with Bob Hope and others, but she still took the time to meet privately with a few of us, one on one. She came across as a friend from the States.

It was now about 3:00 PM; the sun was at its hottest. We reached one of our check points and made the turn to our right; in about 30 minutes we should be patrolling the highway. I could see a rubber tree plantation to our front and with some luck we would be entering the shaded area and could cool down some; perhaps we might have some time for a smoke and drink some water.

I knew some of the patrol were not happy about the late day call for the patrol. A few had been still trying to rest on their cots back in our area and did not want to be on this patrol in the relentless sun. They were scheduled for a roving patrol tonight and they most likely would not get back in time to eat and prepare for it. Luckily, I was not scheduled until tomorrow for a night ambush or patrol. One should always be ready for the unexpected.

I was watching the first few members of our patrol enter the rubber tree plantation when the unexpected happened. Over the top of my head, I heard a familiar whirring noise followed by ripping thunder dirt and rocks were being hurled about. The sweet acid smell of burnt powder and earth filled the hot air. I realized it was a shell

that hit to our left about one hundred fifty meters. My mouth went dry as adrenaline coursed through my body. I was far enough away as not to get hit from the debris but, still the same, it was too close for comfort. It was an explosion I had no control over. The patrol began to get up from the prone position when we heard the next one go over our heads and hit about the same distance away. It was soon followed by another a minute or so later. We were under a mortar attack in broad daylight.

A lot of us were caught in the open. The rubber tree plantation was still about 300 meters from where I was lying; it was our only hope of escaping a closer hit. The trees would stop some of the shrapnel as it ripped through the air. Our platoon leader was on the radio and talking to the command center when I heard the distant sound of a mortar being fired from the compound. We were all on the move at this time trying desperately to get into the rubber trees for some protection, especially me: I was the last in the line and closest to where they were hitting. Soon another one came crashing to the ground, but not so close as to find any of us. Another one was on its way. This was not looking good; by now they should have us zeroed in.

I had just gotten into the plantation when I heard it coming. I dove for the ground and was hoping for the best when it hit just outside the rubber trees. The lieutenant had reached the command center and got it stopped.

It seems an outpost had spotted us moving across the open area and did not know who and what we were. All they could see is we were heavily armed and were moving in an area that had a lot of enemy activity so they called the firebase to fire on us. I can just bet some people got their butts chewed for that.

Once the mortars stopped and it was safer to pick up and move out, we stopped in the plantation for several smokes and a short rest before resuming our mission of keeping a watch for the enemy near the road as the convoy moved through our area.

In a hostile environment one never knows what danger you might be facing, when it might come, and who might be the aggressor. There are times when you are in a position where you're not able to fight back.

I'm thankful the Lord was watching out for us that day. I will never forget how it felt to be the enemy.