

Bring Back the Evidence

In many places in Vietnam a strict curfew was imposed to limit the movement of people and transportation; this gave us permission to confront any and all activity during these set hours.

The men on the bunker line, along the west perimeter fence, were seeing a lot of night activity in the village, and receiving small arms fire. A few bunkers were given permission to return fire as long as they did not fire into the village. It seems they had gotten into a small fire fight.

A call came from TOC (tactical operation center) to our unit; they needed us to conduct a sweep of the perimeter along the cow fence to 200 meters out, from bunker #26 to the main gate. The cow fence is a safety precaution to keep livestock and people from wandering into the mine field. We were to look for anything out of the ordinary and to pay close attention to the village.

At 9:00 in the morning, the sun was already starting to burn its way toward noon, the sky was clear blue, not a cloud anywhere. The heat would soon be causing my ever present rash to explode into a burning, itchy mess on my back and upper legs.

My squad was chosen for the day patrol. We worked our way through the several layers of razor wire near bunker #26; it was one of the few places in the fence not mined. I stopped the man who carried the radio, he's known as the RTO (radio telephone operator) long enough to radio TOC. It was time to let them know we were departing the perimeter. They called the manned bunkers to alert them of our patrol. We would stand little chance against the weapons of a single bunker, for we had no cover from them in this area.

This was going to be a relatively short day patrol in an open area, with the exception of looking through the village. Villages always were interesting to me; as they gave me the opportunity to see how the farmer and his family lived in this unfamiliar part of the world. I was a city kid and had little exposure to any farm; even in the States.

You could always tell when you were approaching a village; the flies found you first, then the different smells would follow; Farm animals, food, and human waft. This explained why the flies were prevalent, depending on what time of the day you arrived, or what the season was, you might smell smoke. Most of the time it was a combination of burning fire wood from their small hearths and incense.

A small village consists of four to ten huts made of mud walls with dirt floors and red tile roofs. The huts were small, about 25 by 35 feet, and would have two, maybe three rooms, well-worn paths and a few banana trees separate the dwellings. Most of the time, a few chickens were pecking around in the dirt and a pig might be sleeping beneath a bed trying to keep cool from the penetrating heat of the day.

Most the men were in the field with livestock cultivating the rice fields. If it were time to plant rice, the entire family would be involved, including the children. If the women were in the village they worked with their hands: weaving, cooking, feeding chickens, and always watching children. Most of the time they would pay little attention to us; a stray

water buffalo would receive more respect. If you tried to speak to anyone, it did little good, unless there was a translator present. We would always check their identification. After all, we were looking for Viet Cong. Most of the time everyone became lost in hand gestures and we would just walk away. Once in a while, a villager would sell cold sodas or beer; where they came up with cold ones mystified me, but they always got a sale.

This day, we were looking for tell-tale signs of a fire fight: a body, an injured person. We might find some weapons if we looked around enough. We had permission to look through the village so we searched looking for tunnels. It was not uncommon to find small holes under a bed where the family could hide from mortars or from the enemy. Sometimes, we were the enemy. Today revealed nothing. I must admit we were disappointed not to bring something back.

As we were leaving the area, Jackson spotted a few bloody gauzes on the ground. Could this be used field dressings that covered the wound of an injury? I radioed back to the operation center, and told them what we were finding. I was told to bring them in. I no sooner picked up the first one when I figured out what I had in my hand. The women of the village were not able to find pads at the local drug store once a month so any cloth would have to do.

Therefore, I, like a good soldier, obeyed what was asked of me, and brought the bloody rags in to the command center for the colonel to examine. It so happened he was not in his office while I was there, and was told to leave them on his desk. I wonder why my squad was never asked to search another village again.