

“They Can Shoot You, But They Can’t Eat You”

Wildcat A-Team Lights Up Charlie's Tree On Christmas Eve

Before the Vietnam war got really serious, some strategic thinker in Washington or Saigon decided maybe the whole thing could be ended by simply declaring a Christmas truce — that if both sides ceased hostilities for two weeks, maybe no one would feel like starting it up again. Nice thought. The first big truce was for Christmas of 1965 and was subsequently enacted every year for Christmas and the Tet holiday.

Other than getting shot in the head and having my camp in constant danger of being overrun, 1965 was a good year. I was initiated in the gentle art of war and introduced to the world of treachery and intrigue where I lived for the next 20 years.

In '65 I was the sometime commander, sometime executive officer of Special Forces Team A-224, located in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam on what had been *Route Coloniale 7*, at a place called Phu Tuc, midway between Cheo Reo and the coastal town of Tuy Hoa.

Initially, hunting in our AO was good, but the arrival of large, serious units from North Vietnam made any combat operations far from camp an exciting proposition. We had been mauled fairly severely during the summer and were always leery of bumping into a large unit of NVA regulars, but by December we had recruited and trained a respectable indigenous force, and were feeling cocky and invincible again.

We figured the Viet Cong would take advantage of Christmas and New Year's to create mischief, since most Americans tended to get stupidly sentimental then. The SF soldier of that era was a different breed of cat, however, and most were fairly hard around the edges. We did not take HQ's Christmas-truce directive seriously, and planned to simply ignore it, since we considered the idea at best naïve, and at worst downright dumb. But the staff weenies in Saigon were absolutely serious, and we were obliged to suspend combat operations and even send a large number of our troops home on Christmas leave.

Truce Ruse

Amusing myself at the berm with a sniper-scoped Garand (I didn't think the Saigon staff weenies would miss a VC or two), I heard a commotion outside camp. It was our interpreter Nay Tay, waving his arms excitedly. While the good guys played truce, the bad guys had moved a main force battalion, reinforced with a mortar section, to his home village

of Ban Ai Nu, just north of Le Bac bridge where Route 7 crossed the Song Ba River. While sneaking and peeking, he talked to some friends who had been sent to collect reeds along the river for making rock baskets and assault mats. (The VC, prior to attacking, fixed installations, would force villagers to make large, cylindrical wicker baskets and heavy 3-by-10 foot woven mats. The baskets were filled with rocks and rolled toward the installation by forward assault forces – the VC version of light armor, with the stones affording protection from small arms. The mats were thrown over barbed wire so assault parties could cross. Both were primitive, but effective.)

His acquaintances informed Nay Tay that the VC planned to take out our camp once and for all during the truce, since their agents informed them that we had sent many troops home. As far as I was concerned, baskets and mats cinched his story.

I took this to Captain “Linc” German, our team commander. Linc was smart and tough, and immediately began planning a preemptive strike, after duly reporting the information to the B-Team in An Khe. But they called back and told us to ignore the report, since “there was no way to confirm enemy hostile intentions.” *Oh, great!*

German could not simply thumb his nose at the hierarchy, so obviously a large-scale spoiling attack on the enemy's bivouac was out – and we were in deep shit. Attempting to figure the next move, I visited CPT Le Van Khue, a Montagnard who had begun his military career as an assistant machine gunner with the Japanese in Indochina in World War II, and was later recruited by the Viet Minh, but ended up fighting for the French, then for Saigon: Now he regarded himself as fighting for the Americans. He had been wounded a dozen times and was covered with scars; he could speak every language and dialect in Southeast Asia – and I was supposed to be “advising” him.

Khue wanted to wade in that night and kick the ever-lovin' shit out of the Cong before they got organized, since their usual MO was to plan things to death. When told that this was out of the question, his reaction was the same as ours. So, taking turns on his bottle of Johnnie Walker, we developed a plan for a “tiger hunt,” simply for fun, up in the area around Le Bac.

The "hunting party" was originally to consist of only Khue and myself, accompanied by a couple of Strike Force squads, reinforced with four M1919A6 light machine guns and four M79 grenade launchers, plus all the linked ammo and 40mm HE we could carry (the tigers in that area are big and mean). As the plan formed we added specialized personnel, including Staff Sergeant Tommy Toon, team medic. Toon was a pro who meticulously executed whatever was planned and never lost his cool. And it was always nice to have a medic around.

Via Route 7, it was about 25 kilometers from our base at Phu Tuc to the bridge at Le Bac, but to conceal movement and intent, we planned to travel east of the road through relatively difficult jungle. Captain German would stay in camp to "hold down the fort" while the hunting party went about its business.

Hunting Two-Legged Tigers

Although I had carried every U.S. weapon in the World War II inventory during my tour, and had separate rucks packed with an eclectic mix of U.S., French and World War II German gear for specific missions, I normally went out with an M1A1 Thompson. As much as I loved that Thompson, though, it was really too heavy for mobile warfare: For moving far or fast, I usually packed an M2 .30 Carbine with a modified M1A1 paratrooper stock. The carbine was lighter than the Thompson and the ammunition was half the weight.

For backup, I carried a Chinese Type 51 Tokarev pistol taken from a VC lieutenant I killed in September, and a Fairbairn-Sykes British Commando dagger as well as LBE (Load Bearing Equipment) packed with gear of my choice for that particular mission. I had initially worn my green beret on operations, but after I got shot in the head and discovered it was not really bulletproof, I was cured of that habit. Of course, no one wore socks or underwear.

Early the morning of Christmas Eve we all had a couple cups of the cook's high-octane French coffee and left as planned, making as little noise and commotion as possible while crossing through our own barbed wire, over the airstrip, and past our OPs (Observation Posts) in the darkness. We often did send hunting parties out to bag fresh game for the camp, so it would not appear unusual in case we had rats in the camp. Once in deep jungle, we guided on the road, staying well back in the protective screen of vegetation. We would not only be able to remain oriented, but could

observe the road, in case the communists had the temerity to move down it in broad daylight.

In December, the Highlands can get chilly at night, but dawn still comes with that incredible majesty of color and cacophony of sound unique to the South Vietnamese jungle. No matter how tired, scared, or down you might be on a night operation, at first light you are inevitably imbued with renewed hope and enthusiasm, brought by the infectious energy of the sun and the shrilling of thousands of disparate life forms who, with the arrival of daylight, are lustily rejoicing that they, too, survived to play the game of life for yet another day.

We moved out with a small element from Recon Platoon as point, a flank element on the left to orient on Route 7, and a larger group screening the higher ground to the right. The command group consisted of myself, Toon, Nay Tay, Khue, and his radio operator/batman known as "Dootenhaf" by the interpreters, because he was usually loaded like a 2-1/2 ton truck (Deuce and a Half). We had a PRC-25 for comms, and for internal comms used CIA-issue HT-1's. The point and flanks were armed with M3A1 "Grease Guns" as well as M2 Carbines, and did not carry rucksacks, their supplemental gear being divided among the entire party. They normally roamed ahead and back and forth, covering more than three times the distance the rest of us did. They did not rotate, since they were all from that area and had hunted it since childhood.

The main body comprised two reinforced squads with machine guns, grenade launchers, and ammo. Notwithstanding their size, those guys never complained and never fell out of formation, even though a 1919A6 Browning weighed about 35 pounds with a 100-round best wrapped around the gun. Some old-fashioned guys, who liked to hit what they shot at, had M1 rifles, but most not carrying special weapons were armed with carbines, and the grenadiers had .45s.

We also had a rear guard ranging back and forth to ensure we were not followed. Other than the modern weapons and uniforms, it was an ancient scenario, dating from the dawn of time – hunters on the prowl.

In the jungle, I could allow myself to sink to a primeval psychic level, tuning out conscious awareness to allow my body to function on a sort of automatic pilot – an atavistic mechanism inherited from vague and shadowy ancestral warriors whose highly honed survival skills flitted like tiny memory bats in the innermost labyrinths of my subconscious mind, where they had been implanted as a part of

my genetic heritage. The instincts these ancient predators imparted proved unerringly correct. In a one-of-us-is-going-to-live-and-one-of-us-is-going-to-die situation, I would usually let my instincts prevail, and sometimes it felt as if my conscious mind had detached itself and was watching events with a certain amount of studied interest. Incredible experience.

No one in the group needed instructions or orders, all coming from stone-age villages where they lived a harsh life – and where the careless died young. We lapsed into either an introspective or a mindless silence, broken only by the creaking of equipment, an occasional clink from a loose buckle, or the labored breathing of machine gunners as they climbed the banks of intermittent streams. Even for someone in his early 20s in good shape, all that ordnance was a difficult cross to bear. The only piece of equipment I did not mind carrying was my M2 Carbine: 6.1 pounds of sudden death, at 750 opportunities per minute.

After several hours of humping that jungle, you actually started looking forward to a good fight, just to unload some ammo and toss a 15.88-ounce grenade or two at some Dink who should have stayed in Hanoi.

There's Rules Against That

With locals for guides, we made fairly good time. The move up to the bridge was uneventful, although we *did* stumble on the tiger we were supposed to be hunting. And a big one. I can still remember the drumming sound of his paws, like the pounding of a horse's hooves, as he streaked by. Had he attacked someone it would have blown the operation, since everyone would have instinctively opened up on him. Back in that land which time almost forgot, people still struggled with the ancient problem of hustling up their dinner – without providing some other life form with its dinner instead.

The prospect of being eaten by a predatory carnivore is another of those timeworn fears that harks to our ancestral beginnings and strikes chords of terror in supposedly rational beings. But as modern soldiers, we were much more advanced than the unfortunate, unenlightened *tiger*: Unlike him, we hunted down and killed members of our own species, then left them to rot in the sun. Nothing uncivilized about us. Staff Sergeant Jimmy Steel, our team demo/logistics expert, was fond of saying, "Vietnam ain't so bad. They can shoot you, but they can't eat you. There's rules about that."

At about noon we stopped for a cold, dry lunch, making a perimeter by simply marching in a circle until we closed on ourselves, with the flanks setting up outer security, while the point and rear elements came into the center to confer. There was no movement on the road or trails, indicating the VC were controlling traffic from the villages.

It was still light when we approached the bridge, so we moved to a hill east of Ban Ai Nu, where we set up an objective rally point. It was a decent place for a final stand, not on an obviously direct line back to Phu Tuc if we were pursued, and a good place to observe the area prior to the operation. The VC were busy tearing up a section of the bridge, the bed of which was made of railroad ties, removing enough planks to preclude a mechanized force from coming to our rescue from Cheo Reo. The Cong were merrily burning the stacked timbers, which was generating a great deal of smoke. Burning the bridge timbers instead of tossing them in the flooded river was probably nothing more than grandstanding to impress the villagers – or themselves.

From what we could observe at that distance, the VC team was at least battalion strength, and had set up a semicircular perimeter, with the village of Ban Ai Nu in the center and their backs to the river. They were swaggering around, with no effort at concealment, apparently enjoying Lyndon Johnson's Christmas present. They had also set up a pyre of planks from the bridge in the south-center of the town. It appeared the villagers had been moved out by the paranoid VC, and were being held in a compound to the northeast. That was good: We could now indiscriminately shoot the shit out of the place.

We were sweaty from the march, and with the advance of darkness I began to shiver, although I never knew at such times whether it was really the cold or whether I was simply nervous. While Khue, Toon, Nay Tay, and I studied the scene through binoculars, the troops had another cold meal and rested, as soldiers have done since time immemorial, never knowing when they will have the next chance. It was important to recover from the grueling march before going into action, outnumbered at least 10 to one.

Amphibious Assault

Based on details supplied by Nay Tay and what we could see, we decided to attempt an infiltration of the enemy perimeter under cover of darkness, to take out their communications center and supply dump, while eliminating any leaders we found in our sights. We would then exfil and signal the troops to shoot the place into hamburger with the machine guns and grenade launchers from our side of the river. Clausewitz might not have approved, but all we really wanted to do was disorganize them enough to buy a week until our leaders woke up and called off the ill-conceived truce.

After dark, we deployed most of our fire support force on high ground on our side of the river, leaving a heavy flank to the south to secure our retreat route. The southern flank was also charged with booby-trapping the bridge with grenades while we did our dirty deeds. At the river bank, however, we discovered why the VC had backed up against it – the depth and swiftness of the water there made it unfordable, at least to the average Montagnard/South Vietnamese. So much for the best laid plans of mice and men.

Since the only place to ford was directly under the bridge, which still served as a source of amusement for the VC, I was all for scrapping the infiltration scheme, and backing off to simply blow hell out of the place from across the river. Not Capt. Khue, though: Our Montagnard madman would have none of that. His cunning scheme was to leave the bulk of the infiltration party on our shore to cover us, while Toon and I, who both stood over 6 feet, carried him and Nay Tay across. The Johnnie Walker must have added his brain. As I got ready for Khue's insane little adventure, I knew it was not the cold that was making me shake.

I slipped the Tokarev into the right cargo pocket of my trousers, stuffed a spare magazine into the one on the left, and wondered how waterproof Chinese cartridges were. I passed my carbine, web gear, and maps to Khue, hoisting him onto my shoulders, while Nay Tay and Toon did the same. Toon and I locked left-on-right/hands-on-wrists for mutual support and ventured out into the river. It was cold, swift, deep and treacherous, with slippery rocks scattered at random on the bottom.

I was precariously top heavy. On tiptoes, the water lapped at my nose, and at times both Toon and myself would be submerged for short periods when we stepped into holes, which in me at least caused

flashes of sheer panic. What a trip. With excruciating slowness we worked our way over, made the far bank, did a few laps around our rosaries, readjusted equipment, then crept up the little ravine that led directly into the edge of town.

There were no sentries or OP's, thank Buddha. Nay Tay, the interpreter, and Khue, the lunatic, took the lead as we picked our way gingerly under the longhouses among the goats and chickens, before pausing to assess the situation. I was soaked through and half-drowned, but ready for a little excitement simply to warm up and revive. While huddled trying to decide the next move, a gaggle of Dinks officiously bustled up to the pyre, doused it with gasoline, and lit it. We eased back into the shadows to observe the festivities. After 20 minutes or so it became apparent that what we were witnessing was a meeting of the battalion command group and staff, finalizing plans for the attack on our base. Incredible. It was like my worst nightmare, only for real.

I finally got so cold I poked Khue and whispered, "What now, Cap'n?"

He did not answer immediately, but finally turned and murmured in French, "You know, Peck, I've always wanted to die on Christmas Eve in Ban Ai Nu."

"Me, too, Cap'n; me, too."

Firelight Firefight

I nudged Toon, who needed no further prodding, and the four of us stepped into the circle of firelight. My heart was racing, and the scene from *Gunfight at the OK Corral* careened crazily through my mind. Toon, always the cool hand, damn him, may have opened fire first, since I still remember his loud-mouthed AR-15 going off beside my right ear, but if he beat the rest of us to the draw it was only by a millisecond.

Dear Sweet Jesus, the whole thing took on a surrealistic aspect, almost in slow motion, with the burning timbers, the dodging and weaving figures in black pajamas, the dancing shadows, the blinding muzzle flashes, the curling smoke, the discordant staccato of automatic weapons, the crump of a grenade, the vague mental note that all the gunfire was probably bad for your ears, the screams of the dying, the smell of burning powder, the smell of fear – maybe theirs, maybe yours – the carbine coming up dry, the flash of panic, immediate recognition of

the problem, the rote and practiced changing of magazines, watching with interest as the dust flew out of the back of a guy's shirt as a trio of Carbine bullets smacked into him in the firelight, and all the while the bizarre thought cloying at the edge of the vestigial part of your conscious mind that you probably could have been a lawyer in Cincinnati....

The carnage and blood lust ended for me when I went through all the magazines in my left-hand pouch, and momentarily forgot I had four more in the right pouch. Completely overlooking the highly sophisticated and murderous Tokarev on half-cock back in its holster at my right side, I instinctively and basically went for the knife on my left when I thought I was out of ammo. Crouching in the midst of that mayhem, clutching the reassuring bronze hilt of the Fairbairn-Sykes dagger brought me back to reality. I idly observed that Toon had rushed up close to the bonfire and snatched all the map cases and documents left by VC on the way to meet their maker.

While marveling at Toon's presence of mind, I tripped over a body – which turned out to be alive. I still had my knife in my hand, and was about to sink it into the toad I had stumbled over, but he scrambled to his knees, and was bowing, with his hands clasped together in the Vietnamese sign of surrender, while squealing something which I could not understand. This caused me to hesitate. *Sum 'bitch!* I should have struck him before he got up, but, instead, thanks to my inhibiting Judeo-Christian upbringing, I rapped him on the top of the head with the butt of the knife, "Merry Christmas," then fumbled around trying to get the damn thing back into its sheath. By the time I succeeded in that, I got smart about my ammunition situation, and stuffed another magazine into the carbine, and Khue was bawling for us to bug out.

No one needed a second invitation. My boy was down, but not completely out, and for want of a better plan, since my superego had decided it would not have been sporting to kill him after he surrendered, I grabbed Mr. VC by the hair and scuttled for the ravine dragging him behind me, while subconsciously hoping I would inadvertently break his neck in the process. As we made good our escape, the entire VC battalion opened up on itself, not knowing what was going on, and began to shoot itself to pieces.

Reaching the river bank, Khue fired one of those goddamn hand-held flares, which always scared the bat-shit out of me when they went off with that hair-

raising *WHOOOOOSH*. That was the signal for our fire support element to do its magic, and the whole place looked and sounded like Omaha Beach on D-Day. Toon and I skipped the niceties, and hoisted the two Yards on our shoulders and headed for the other bank, with me still towing my VC charge, who was trying, with only a certain degree of success, to keep his head out of the water. The whole place was lit up like a Christmas tree, very appropriately, and I was afraid some bright-boy commie would spot us in the middle of the river, and cook our collective Christmas goose.

Exfil And Home

With the VC preoccupied with their fratricide, our luck held and the security force formed a human chain on the far bank to help us ashore. Toon still had all his documents, plus a couple of pistols, and I had my VC. My prisoner promptly collapsed on the bank, so Toon and I lifted him by the legs and poured the water out of him; it was really unbelievable how much he had shipped during the crossing.

After draining Charlie's bilges, I told him Vietnamese to get his ass in gear. Still sputtering and gagging, he laid back down and shook his head. I pulled the Fairbairn-Sykes, once again forgetting what a pain in the ass it was to get back into that floppy little leather scabbard. The blued steel of the blade glinting in the light of the burning village seemed to reanimate my prisoner sufficiently, and we all moved out to link up with the southern security element.

The firing from our side had slacked off except for the continued *bloop* of the slow-loading M79 grenade launchers. The VC still banged away like hell's delight, and, with most of their leaders dead, had abandoned all rules of fire discipline. Khue and I fired simultaneous flares, which again caused the hair on the back of my neck to rise, to signal the support element to cease fire and save ammo for the trip home. They were deployed in a semicircular, linear formation, in march order, so we spent a minimum amount of time un-assing the area. Our only wounded was a grenadier who had shot himself in the calf with his .45.

Unable to contact anyone by radio, and rather than stumble around in the dark, Khue decided to remain overnight in the next town. We set up an ambush in case we were followed, or in the unlikely event the VC did not abandon their attack plan. I was beyond fatigue after the march, the two river crossings, and the gunfight, so I "did not advise otherwise." After we

redistributed ammunition, there still appeared to be enough to hold out for the rest of the night, if we did not get too trigger-happy.

The troops set up a 50%-on-50%-off ambush along the highway, anchored by the 1919A6s, while the command group took up residence in the village chief's longhouse, with the point and flank elements of the previous day as security. I made sure my prisoner was being treated decently, which he was, then rolled up to catch a quick nap before my turn on watch. When I awoke the sun was up. The security elements had not awakened anyone in the command group during the night, probably by order of Capt. Khue, who still retained his French attitude toward rank.

Khue, Nay Tay, the VC prisoner, Toon and I shared my chunk of C4 (plastic explosive, which burns well) to make up some C-Rat coffee. After our ritual morning jump-start we tried to radio Phu Tuc once again, but were picked up by the MACV Team in Cheo Reo, which was monitoring our set.

HQ Not Amused

Bad luck. Obviously they did not buy the tiger hunt bullshit, and instead of chuckling and quietly congratulating us for our initiative, they appeared determined to make a big deal of the whole thing. Khue was quick to "advise" me that it was my own goddamn fault for crowing to them. Oh well, what the hell. At that point we knew the incident would be reported through official channels, which dulled the edge of our good spirits.

Of course we did not share this with the troops, who were still on a high from the success of the mission. Since I was uncertain what lay in store on our return, we shut down the radio, then took our own sweet time getting back to camp, diddly-bopping down the center of Route 7 like it was a victory parade (albeit with a heavy point and with flank security out on both sides of the road keeping up with the lead elements).

As anyone who carried a rifle in Vietnam can tell you, getting a medal for valor is not unlike getting the Purple Heart. Usually you are awarded the Purple Heart for simply being at an accidental point in space and time, where, without doing anything necessarily "right" or "wrong," you get in the way of a high-speed projectile. The same is generally true for all medals; when deserved, they are usually awarded for things that happen accidentally, and, like the tree falling in the forest, someone has to be

there as a witness for it to "really happen." In the conventional units, there were always numerous people to witness events, heroic or otherwise, but in Special Forces during the early days of the Vietnam War, we were very much alone and on our own.

It was difficult to receive any of the really high-powered awards while serving with the 5th SFG (Special Forces Group), no matter how many Dinks you killed with your bare hands and a broken beer bottle. In this instance there had been so many VC breaches of the truce, HQ decided it would be poor form to make punitive examples out of Toon and me, so they gave us medals instead – Army Commendation Medals with "V" device – citing actions that took place on 27 December 1965.

During my three combat tours in Vietnam, Christmas Even of 1965 was one of the few times I really felt deserving of any sort of recognition. It was one of the few times that I actually planned and executed a semi-clever operation – rather than simply shooting my way out of a mess I had stumbled into, like a trapped rat