

## #23 Armor – the field, Vietnam

Writer's Notes – the unit was moved south, out of jungle

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Some things that happen are like dreams. Even though you see them with your own eyes, it is hard to think of them as real, and as time passes they become more unreal. Moving down that hill, toward whatever destiny lay below in the valley, Lou had time to think of that morning's engagement between the enemy and the American armored column. It was the first time Lou had seen such action between infantry and mechanized forces. Like many things he had seen, the action had left him with mixed feelings. Nothing was black and white in his world, perhaps in harmony with the country the company was traversing.

It had been a typical morning with the company waiting at the top of a hill in a defensive position, awaiting an enemy attack that rarely happened. Charlie seemed hesitant to mess with them, but Lou knew that would change as soon as the enemy could figure a way to attack without getting themselves clobbered in the process. After the sun had risen completely from behind the hills off to the east, the company went about its business of preparing for the day ahead. The company's commander, Captain Carlson, had adopted a policy of giving the men an hour after stand down to prepare for the day's patrol. It gave the men an opportunity to eat and clean their weapons before moving out. Of course it also allowed the day to heat up before the company moved out, but there was a price for luxury in the field. The day would be hot and muggy regardless, and the men were used to these conditions. It was nice to take a small break before the work of the day commenced. Of course their days really never stopped. The Second Platoon had returned from another unsuccessful night in ambush and was busily eating breakfast, cleaning weapons, and catching some ZZZZs in the shade of the jungle.

Lou's day had started out quietly. The platoon was operating smoothly with his squad leaders handling most of the problems, leaving Lou with only a dozen things to worry about at any one time. After a quiet night dug in on the hill, Lou felt rested. He was neither anxious for the day to begin, nor apprehensive about the work ahead. Just another day in the Nam.

One of the squad leaders, Sgt. Fry, had called for him to come over to where he was standing. Lou had some coffee made, and grabbing his weapon he moved over to where Bobby was standing.

"What's up, Sergeant Fry?" Lou asked, approaching Bobby's position. Bobby pointed toward the valley below. It stretched out toward the south in a broad, relatively flat plain, covered with fields of rice and small villages. From the company's vantage point on top of the hill, it was possible to see for several miles across the valley floor. Lou had been struck by the valley's beauty the night before, and once again he admired the view. After having spent the first six months of their tour in the mountains of the Central Highlands, Lou sometimes found the relatively flat nature of the South disorientating. The company was operating in the hill north of the valley. It was thought that a large enemy force was held up in this area of hills, and the company had been looking for their base camp for the past week. Their quest had brought them to this hill overlooking the valley below, and today they would head back into the hills, away from the scene below.

"Pretty, isn't it?" Lou said.

"Yeah," Bobby replied, "but the reason I asked you over is there." Bobby was pointing at something in the valley below. Lou let his eyes scan the valley, looking for what Bobby found so interesting.

"Along that road," Bobby said, giving him another clue. The "road" was a dirt path that weaved its way through the valley. Staring intently, Lou finally picked up some tiny specks moving along the road at the far end of the valley.

"What is it?" Lou asked.

"Hare says its some tanks," Bobby said.

"Cool," Lou said. He sat down on the outer edge of the foxhole, looking out across the valley. The company had never had an opportunity to work with any armored units. In the area they had operated in up north, armored units were relatively useless. Dense jungle and mountains were not the ideal environments for such machines of war. Of course Lou had seen them on the perimeter in the major firebases at An Khe and Pleiku. And on the trip from An Khe to Pleiku, he had seen tanks in the treeline along the road, providing cover for the convoys

that made the daily trip between the bases. Their areas of operation were severely restricted and they were confined to the area around the main road. Of course this was all conjecture on Lou's part, since he had never actually seen a tank in action before.

Lou's eyes followed the course of the road as it weaved through the valley. Starting from some point across the valley that Lou's eyes could not discern, it headed first west and then veered northerly toward their hill. Below, about a mile from the hill the company occupied, lay a wooded area. From their perch above the valley floor, the wooded area looked like it covered several acres almost completely surrounded by rice paddies. The road entered the far side and exited the woods before heading west. On the southwest side of the wood was a small hill covered with what looked like elephant grass, sort of yellow in color. The road ran along the bottom of this hill and seemed to circle around behind it. Beyond that hill was a series of foothills heading into the jungle further to the west.

"Not great tank country, is it?" Bobby observed. Even though the countryside was flat, the rice paddies surrounding the road and the wooded area below glistened brightly as the morning sun bounced off the water flooding the fields.

"Not unless they got water wings or can float."

Lou watched as the tanks moved closer. After ten minutes he could see that the three vehicles were in fact not tanks, but armored personnel carriers. They seemed to be moving along at a leisurely pace, in no particular hurry to get wherever they were going. Lou wondered about the infantrymen riding in the vehicles below.

Lou was glad he was not operating with one of the armored units. He had an opportunity to see an armored personnel carrier up close and was not particularly impressed. The inside of the vehicle would be cramped when loaded with men. Lou could not remember exactly how many fit into one of those things, but he would be claustrophobic for sure. There were no windows to look out of, so the men inside would ride along without any idea of where the driver was going. Lou could not imagine such a ride, and could picture himself vomiting violently as soon as the vehicle started moving. He was sensitive and nauseous whenever he had the opportunity to ride in any sort of rocking contraption. Boats made him violently ill. Planes, especially military planes he had jumped out of in training, nauseated him, and

commercial airliners were not much better. Helicopters, especially when driven by the maniacs in this country, did wonders for his stomach. Only will power had kept his stomach from emptying on several occasions riding the slicks into combat. There was no way they could get him into an armored personnel carrier.

The men who rode in them probably felt secure, being surrounded by steel, but Lou always thought of that as an illusion. Hell, he carried an LAW from time to time. In training he had an opportunity to use one on the practice range. The light anti-tank weapon was capable of punching a hole right through the side of an armored personnel carrier, turning the steel sides into so much shrapnel to be spread amongst the occupants of the vehicle. With its shaped charge, the LAW supposedly could punch a hole through twelve inches of steel. Even a fifty-caliber machine gun was capable of puncturing the sides of an armored personnel carrier.

Lou would rather fight out in the open. If something was going to happen to him, Lou would rather go staring into God's sky than being roasted inside an iron coffin.

The armored patrol was just entering the woods below when Lou decided to head back to his position in preparation of moving out. He got to his feet and stretched, taking one last look at the valley below. With the way the company operated, it just might be his last look at a valley in a long time. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted the dark cloud of the explosion. His head whipped around, pinpointing the area of origin as the noise drifted up the hill from the woods below. All of a sudden the wooded area was alive with explosions. The woods were too heavy to see exactly what was happening, but it did not take a rocket scientist to figure out the gist: the enemy was down there in the woods waiting. The three armored vehicles evidently presented Charlie with a juicy target, and he was in the process of devouring them.

Lou could only guess at what the men in the APCs were feeling. Got to be scared shitless if they are still alive, Lou thought. The enemy would want to make a quick job of it and get the hell out of the area. Lou knew that artillery would kick in any minute, followed by gunships and jets. The gooks would have to leave the area quickly in order to avoid being pinned down. Lou felt tense as the sounds of battle drifted up to the company's position. Goddamn it, get the artillery going. Get the fucking copters in, Lou thought.

Of course until someone down there in the woods began directing fire, it was impossible to bring artillery or anything else into the area. Artillery and bombs killed everything, and if not coordinated properly they would kill the Americans trapped in the maelstrom below. Like everyone else in the company, Lou wanted to grab his weapon and head for the valley floor. Fuck Charlie, he wants a fight we'll give him one. Of course that was impossible unless someone chose to send copters to airlift them into the area. Although the action was taking place right in front of their eyes, it might as well have been in a different country. The trip to the valley below would take at least an hour, probably longer. Although not the highlands, the foothills the company operated in were thickly covered with jungle, and movement was arduous. There was nothing the men could do but watch. Lou felt like crying.

"Calvary!" Bobby said, pointing once again across the valley floor. Lou's eyes had no trouble picking out the vehicles now moving along the road in the distance. Right away Lou could tell that these vehicles were larger than the APC located in the woods below. They were not moving along at a leisurely pace neither. Those suckers were moving out in a brisk military pace, rushing hell for leather into the battle below. Lou wondered if the first vehicle had been put out as bait for Charlie. If so it was a cruel fate for the men in the woods below. A black haze hovered over the treetops as the sounds of explosions and gunfire continued deep below their position. Red and green tracers would periodically peek above the woods as each side poured automatic weapon fire into each other. There were more green tracers than red. Maybe that meant something and maybe it didn't.

The armored column was quickly approaching the woods. Lou could now see that there were twelve tanks with a half dozen APCs following behind. Off in the distance Lou's eyes spotted two tiny dots in the sky. Lou knew air support was on the way, but it now looked like this was going to become primarily a ground assault. They'll stop and unload the infantry, Lou thought.

The armored column did not slow down entering the woods. Whoever was in charge had decided just to barge right in and begin kicking ass. All twelve tanks entered the wood line, while the APCs stopped a quarter of a mile short of the woods. The woods below began to explode skyward. The explosions doubled, then tripled and then quadrupled as the tanks

joined in the fray. Trees fell over with branches being flung high in the air. The individual explosions from moments earlier turned into a continuous roar emitted from the woods below. It was a giant monster bellowing in pain and anger. A dense cloud of smoke threatened to blot the area from view.

Lou did not know what the firing rate was for the tanks, or even what kind of weapons they had. Some had a single barrel protruding, but others had double barrels that were much shorter. Either way, they were pouring out a tremendous amount of firepower. Now the number of red tracers seen dancing amongst the trees greatly outnumbered the greens.

Three tanks suddenly broke out of the firefight on the near side of the woods and began heading up the road that circled the hill on the south side of the woods. They were moving quickly, as if pursuing or being pursued by the enemy, although there was no one else in sight. Within minutes they disappeared. The armored force below did not seem to miss them as they continued to destroy the woods below. Of course they were not killing woods. Whereas at first Lou had felt bad for the Americans trapped below, now he began to feel sorry for the Vietnamese. Old Charlie is fucked, Lou thought. The enemy had either been unlucky or out-thought. It did not matter which, because either way he was now caught in a trap of his own making, and Lou could not see him getting out of it.

Lou spotted movement on the hill that bordered the woods to the west. Little tiny specks of black began to move up the side of the hill. The enemy was losing and trying to withdraw up the hill. No way, Lou thought. Gunships would be arriving shortly and anyone trying to flee through the elephant grass would be spotted and eliminated from the air. Again, Lou was wrong.

Enemy soldiers were perhaps three-quarters of the way up the hill when the three tanks that had left the battle earlier appeared on the top of the hill. Lou had to clamp down his lips to keep from groaning. The three tanks now sat across the top of the hill with their guns facing downward into the elephant grass. The little black dot kept moving toward the top of the hill. From his experience Lou knew the enemy could not see the tanks sitting up there. In elephant grass you were lucky to see the ass of the man in front of you and if you dropped your eyes for a minute he was liable to disappear from view like magic.

The three tanks at the top of the hill opened fire as one. Two of the tanks had the short double barrels and began to place shells rapidly across the face of the hills. The rate at which they fired rounds was amazing, and Lou guessed that between the two barrels, each tank was sending out one round a second. The tanks marched their rounds systematically across the depth and breadth of the hill. The center tank that had only one barrel must have been firing canister rounds since every time it fired there seemed to be a long furrow where the elephant grass was cut down. All three tanks had fingers of red light issuing from them as their machine guns blanketed the hill. The little black spots on the side of the hill stopped moving for the most part. Some moved for a while trying to move left or right. Some moved back toward the woods. But most just stopped moving. Sometimes an explosion occurred where a black spot lay, and after the smoke had cleared there was nothing to see in that area.

The din of battle in the woods was slowly diminishing and Lou saw the APCs moving into the wood line. There would still be action in those woods for some time. The Army would probably have some outfit from one of the large divisions moving in to support the mechanized unit really soon. A battalion or two was probably being loaded aboard copters right this minute in preparation to being inserted into the battle field below. The din was diminishing, and there would still be action for some time.

The elephant grass on the hill had caught fire here and there along the face of the hill. Smoke from the explosions was now being joined by the smoke from the grass, and together they were really beginning to cover the area.

"Moving out!" The words were shouted from somewhere across the perimeter. Lou suddenly became aware of his surroundings again. He turned his back on the scene below and moved briskly over to his equipment. Ten minutes later the company was moving down the hill, away from the morning's battle. That was someone else's reality, and this was theirs.

Lou thought about that battle during the company's move down the hill. He had felt anger and frustration when the three APCs had gotten ambushed. This had turned to pride and joy with the arrival of the relief column. Then, when the tanks had shown up at the crest of the hill, he had felt pity for the enemy. It was easier to empathize with the enemy infantrymen caught on the side of that hill than with the men sitting inside the tanks doing their jobs. Lou

could almost feel their fear, caught in the open without any chance of fighting back. Having been caught in a couple of enemy mortar barrages, Lou knew the helpless feeling that came during such devastating attacks. Someone had goofed and some Americans had died in that ambush; someone else had goofed and a lot of enemy troops had died as a result. War sucks, Lou thought as he worked his way down that hill and started battling up the next. By noon the morning's battle was forgotten, and no one ever talked about it. END