

## Tet at Widows' Village

Tet (tet) n. Vietnamese Lunar New Year's festival, celebrated in late January or early February.

Tet [Offensive] n. The highly coordinated massive strike by seventy thousand mostly Viet Cong against one hundred cities in South Vietnam during the 1968 New Year's celebration truce. The offensive was successfully repulsed by U.S. forces while the Viet Cong sustained very heavy losses in men and materiel. However, the U.S. news media declared the offensive a (psychological) victory for North Vietnam.

Something's up, something big and I don't like it at all. The captain just called and I am to pull in my listening posts, assemble my platoon from its ambush position and move to the dirt road about half a klick to the south of here. Deuce-and-a-half trucks (two and a half ton cargo/personnel carriers) will pick us up there and take us back to the company's position at the fire support base in the Binh Son rubber plantation. It's two in the morning I want to argue. This is unheard of, moving back at night. I don't ask him what's up. He doesn't say and wouldn't even if he knew.

The last few days have been quiet here in the "rubber". In fact, other than being ambushed last week with two men wounded, the rubber has been rather quiet and we've been somewhat at ease. The "old-timers" in my platoon say that this is as peaceful as they've ever seen it, and that makes them ill-at-ease.

I don't like driving around in the middle of the night let alone like this in the rubber forests in an unguarded convoy. The captain just called again and said that we are to stay on the trucks when we get to Binh Son Fire Support Base. The whole company except the mortar platoon will be leaving together when we arrive.

My men are herded around like cattle not having a clue what is going on. At each lower level in the chain of command, less is known. The battalion commander probably has a good idea what is going on. Captain Lawson, my company commander, is told enough to get his job done. I am informed where to take my men and they simply go there, often not really even knowing where they are.

The Tet holiday started yesterday, it's the Vietnamese New Year. As my platoon filed out of the Binh Son Fire Support Base last evening, we could see the people in the nearby village celebrating. Many of the villagers were in the village center dancing to music and drinking. Some of them had on colorful costumes of bright yellows and orange-reds. The three days of the Tet holidays are to be a truce, no fighting, both sides agreed. So now I don't understand why we're being trucked around at two in the morning.

Sitting "shotgun" in the truck cab, I can recognize even in the darkness the country around us. This is Highway 15 and we're headed to the Saigon area. I've been on this road quite a few times lately to Bien Hoa Airbase, to Saigon and back and forth to the Ninth Division's headquarters at Bearcat.

Now leaving the rubber plantations and jungle behind, I peer forward and I'm in shock at what I see and realize what I am hearing. I nudge Forcade, my RTO, and tell him to "look at all that fucking armor (tanks and APC's) out there". Across the rice paddies ahead, I can see our road and at least two other roads and they are all bumper-to-bumper with tanks and APC's (armored personnel carriers). "And listen, you can hear small arms, machineguns and fifties (fifty caliber machineguns) way out there. There's a helluva battle going on out there and it looks like we're going into it. And look at that orange glow over there, I think that's Bien Hoa. Must be their damn ammo dump going up." There's nothing we can do except see where these trucks take us.

The rice paddies give way to dry open fields with a scattering of hootches; Saigon's urban sprawl. The sky is orange-pink from the flares dropped by overhead aircraft; everything else is black

silhouetted. Now we can hear a number of fire-fights and their supporting helicopter gunships going on around us. And the Air Force jets are zooming around out there.

In my rear view mirror, I can see some of my men hanging out around the back of the truck staring forward, their faces glowing orange-red. More than the fear of going into battle, I think we are all struck by the awesome display of military strength before us. Our little motorcade of deuce-and-a-halves begins to slow as congestion builds on the converging highways. We also begin to pass clumps of circled-up tanks and APCs camped in the fields along the road. Altogether in my two years in the Army, I have not seen this much military. I feel like a little pebble caught in a field of boulders. This is more like war as seen in the movies.

"Machete Bravo 2-6, Bravo 6," the captain calls me on the radio.

I answer "Bravo 2-6".

"We're 'romeo oscar novembering' (RON - remaining overnight) with some armor about a klick up the road. Come to my position when the trucks stop. Have your first begin a Bravo perimeter, you'll take 120 to 240 (degrees on the compass)."

"Roger that Bravo 6."

"Machete Bravo 6 out."

Upon arrival in some dried rice paddies in the eastern outskirts of Saigon, the captain informs me the VC have launched a major offensive against Saigon and the surrounding areas. They have broken the truce big-time. We are to form a perimeter around a company of tanks for the remainder of the night and I am to have one listening post out five hundred meters. We'll wait to see where daylight takes us.

The helicopter flight is a short one. With the rising sun we're flying to a small village just outside of Long Binh, the large sprawling military complex with its Headquarters II Field Force Vietnam (General Westmoreland's compound). We will land south of "Widows' Village" in an open area next to the main road

which passes between the village and Long Binh. After landing, we will sweep north through the vill.

I've only been deployed a few times by helicopter in my month and a half "in-country". They feel a lot better than the trucks. Driving along roads we're exposed to ambush everywhere and occasionally one of the trucks hits a land mine in the road. In fact, most of the guys sit on their flack jackets to protect against the mines. We can never relax in the trucks.

On the helicopters it's different. Once airborne we're free, nothing can touch us. And I feel more powerful, like part of a lightning-fast strike force. The enemy can only guess where we are going to land. The LZ's (landing zones) are often "prepped" by artillery and we usually have assault helicopters with us.

Flying to the LZ I look out to see Long Binh stretched out to the north. I recognize Westmoreland's headquarters as it looks like a western frontier fort with all its logs and telephone poles sticking up. Some guys call it 'Fort Apache'. The complex's importance is announced by the forest of radio antennas sprinkled throughout. Out to the front of the helicopter is the village just beyond Long Binh. I can see the APCs all along the road facing the village.

As we approach the LZ someone hollers "HOT LZ! - get the shit out". Oh gawd, this isn't what I expected. I've never landed in a hot LZ before - the VC attacking us as we land. Pawing wildly at each other, we all scramble out of the helicopter and dive head first for cover as the VC bullets snap and crack all about, and their rockets roar by our heads. I pounce hard on my chest and hold my breath for a moment.

The day is already becoming hot. The earth behind this ten inch high berm seems parched as I cling to it and count my limbs and mentally feel my body everywhere for bullet holes. The ground is red dusty-dirty. The little bits of grass poking up here and there are long since dead-brown and are covered in a layer of the red-tan dust. The dust is like the red silt of the Colorado River I remember as a child, only this dust is "air silt". It is in the

air and covers everything anywhere we go in southern Vietnam where humans, especially the Americans, live or drive. The air silt is mainly caused by traffic driving over dirt roads. The grit and dirt blown up by the helicopters settles back down and covers us too. My eyes try to water away the dust in them as my tongue sticks to the insides of my mouth. Most importantly, my body feels whole, unscathed by bullets.

Our gunship helicopters soon arrive and strafe the southern edge of the village. The VC fire back at the helicopters exposing themselves to us. We in turn shoot them with our M-16s, M-60 machineguns and our M-79 grenade launchers. Ahead and off to our right a few hundred meters, the APC's are indiscriminately raking back and forth with M-60 and fifty caliber machineguns. Looks like they're also using a flame thrower.

After the gunships suppress the enemy fire we begin to move out. We are going to sweep through the village, check every hootch and clear out the enemy. My platoon, the second, is the middle of three platoons from my company. Lt Jones and his first platoon are on the right along with Cpt Lawson and his four-man headquarters contingent. They are linking up with two platoons from B Company of the 2/47th mechanized infantry who made the initial contact with the VC and are now set up as a blocking force along the side of the village next to Long Binh. The men in my platoon are spread out in a line in front of and ninety degrees to the position of the 2/47th. Our third platoon is on line with mine to the left and will sweep through the area outside of the village. My platoon, of the five on the ground, will be the main one to sweep and clear the village.

Known simply as "Widows' Village", the inhabitants are widows and children of deceased ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) soldiers. They exist on small government pensions and from laundry and room cleaning services provided to U.S. soldiers at Long Binh. The houses that clutter around the village center consist of a jumble of corrugated steel, cardboard and plywood randomly thrown together. On the north side of the village there are a dozen or so

brick and concrete structures. The side closest to us has hootches of made grass and bamboo. Around the hootches are small banana trees and green grass, twelve, eighteen inches tall. Next to almost every hootch is a small vegetable garden with melons, cabbage and other leafy green plants I don't recognize. Some of the hootches have pens with chickens and small pigs. Scurrying here and there are pathetically thin dogs and large fat rats. The dogs will be eaten by the villagers and I've heard that they ate some of the rats too. The village is very rural. There are about one hundred fifty women and children and a handful of old men who live here.

The Vietcong have infiltrated the village prior to the Tet holidays. They have built bunkers, tunnels and trenches throughout the village and have stockpiled a fair amount of ammunition. I don't understand how they could do all this within a few hundred meters of the U.S. base.

As we enter the village my men are spread out about five meters from one to the next. Each hootch must be carefully searched and cleared. My men automatically form four to six man teams to search a hootch; they are directed by the four squad leaders. One or two men enter the "house" while a couple stand guard on the outside and a couple more stand guard to our front. I coordinate the operation by ensuring all hootches are searched, my men stay in a reasonable line and the platoons on each side are in line with us.

I am surprised again and again when I go inside a hootch. They are small at twelve to fifteen feet across, some smaller. There is a sleeping area with rice mats rolled up during the day, a cooking area, a sitting area and sometimes an altar off to one side. The floor is dirt and possessions are few. The only connection to my world is the occasional transistor radio. These people are dirt poor, even by Vietnamese standards. They live in squalid conditions without the main breadwinners, men. I stoop as I walk around inside. The Vietnamese are small people at four to five foot tall and eighty to one hundred pounds.

Inside these hootches we find the villagers. They cower in a corner or in a depression in the floor. Some hide in a mud and stick bomb shelter in the middle of the hootch. They are greatly scared of us and I suppose of the VC. They fear for their very lives. My men tower over them like goliaths as they take them out of their hootches, their homes, and send them to our rear where a squad from Lt Jones' platoon is collecting them. We don't speak their language and only a couple of Vietnamese kids speak ours. We communicate by grabbing, pushing, shoving and pointing with our rifles at what we want. These people are most likely not our enemy, but we don't know for sure. We are rough with them to get them to do quickly what we want; to get them out of our way. We can't be nice, but we try not to hurt them.

Some of the villagers have been hit by stray bullets in the crossfire. One old man is bad off with a bullet through the head; he won't make it. Our medics treat their wounds and a dust-off helicopter has been called for the most serious ones.

Pow - pow! Sniper fire to our front from the middle of the village. It quickly escalates into heavy and continuous SKS, AK-47 and light machinegun fire. All my men are down and are returning fire. I rush around and put my M-60's into good fields of fire. I reposition some of my men and I get a few others out of hootches. Again, machineguns and fifties on the APC's randomly rake the area to our front. I call the captain to tell him that I can see trenches and maybe some bunkers in the village center forty, fifty meters ahead. He calls the standby helicopter gunships back into action. Again when the helicopters swoop in we can see the VC and we can eliminate them. I check with my squad leaders and so far we've had only two minor wounds and neither guy needs evacuating.

We continue the sweep through the village after the VC have fled the trenches. Carefully approaching the village center, we find two dead VC and evidence of several other wounded ones being dragged north through the village. There were probably about thirty VC that escaped.

Another twenty, thirty meters along in our sweep we are sniped

at again. This time it's a single VC from a grass hootch. Before I can give any orders, Gallardo, the grenadier from Sgt Delia's squad, uses his M-79 grenade launcher to lob a grenade right into the hootch. The explosion causes the grass structure to burst into a ball of fire with greatly leaping flames. The sniper is silenced and probably some civilians too.

Continuing our hootch-to-hootch search, we reach the north end of the village. The remaining hootches are concrete and brick and there are a few small wooden outbuildings. The searing sun is now almost straight overhead. We've been in the village for some four hours now. I can see the guys are getting tired and are restless for this to end. We're all hungry and most everybody has already drunk all their water. Not much further to go if the operation ends when we clear out of the village.

The firing is sustained and heavy. Again SKS's, AK-47's and a couple of light machineguns open up on us as we move into the open area beyond the village. Within a few seconds the barrage comes at us like a wall of lead. Scrambling like centipedes, we all low crawl for cover behind buildings and in ditches. The VC are firing from trenches and fox holes just past a road fifty meters to our front. My men are spread out seventy meters and begin to return fire. The flanking APC's are too far away and behind us to offer any support.

MEDIC! MEDIC!, someone screams through the din off to my left. Heading that direction to maneuver a squad, I detour toward the calls. Rounding a corner of a concrete building I see two of my men standing up against the wall. Ducking in to get out of the VC bullets spitting by, I end up standing face to face with the wounded man. "Smiley" Smilanich has been shot through the jaw, sideways, in and out. His jaw is obviously broken as he spits out what looks like bone, teeth and lots of blood. Rounds six inches away pin me to the wall as I stand right next to "Smiley". I can tell he is in shock. SO AM I. Slowly and thickly the blood is oozing down his jaw and neck. It seems to glow to me. Soaking into his fatigues, some of the blood has already begun to dry and

a fly has landed on the blood on his cheek. I stand there forever staring at his mouth. I am frozen in time.

RTO Forcade finally catches up to me and calmly calls the captain to tell him that we have a whisky and we need a dustoff. Yeah, yeah, I agree as I shake out of my trance. This is the first wounded American I have seen up close. It settles heavily into me that this war is real and Americans really do get hurt or even killed. People like me could easily get wounded or killed. It's a very sobering thought. The bullets crack around us and I am all of a sudden a very scared young man.

The adrenalin pulsing through my every tissue makes me want to scream. I feel like I have to vomit or pee in my pants or have diarrhea - or all three at once. The wall of lead flying at us screams in my ears. My men stare at me. I have no choice but to move on.

"Doc" Willis, our medic, shows up and begins first aid. "Smiley" tries several times to talk and finally we understand him. "Does this mean that I get to go home?" I answer yes and he's relieved. I direct the three men to move back fifty meters to a pink building to wait for a medevac helicopter and to act as our rear security.

We are very much pinned down but our situation is controlled. The VC opened up on us a little early so we have the protection of these buildings. Flashing into my mind are the lectures in Officer Candidate School on combat in "built up areas". What did the lecturers have to say? I can't recall and this action doesn't seem to apply anyway, it never does.

My squad leaders have moved their men around and my platoon is now somewhat in line facing the VC. At twenty-thirty strong, the VC seem determined to stay and fight it out this time.

The hot air is heavy and not moving. The burnt gunpowder begins to fill the air and hang hard on the ground. It is acrid and burns my nose and eyes. All the weapons create such a din that we have to shout at our nearest neighbors. Our senses are dulled to noise and gunsmoke.

Cpt Lawson calls to say that the gunships are not available at this time and artillery can't be used. The APC's are still maneuvering to flank our position. I am to move my platoon forward to suppress the VC. NOW!

I direct Sgt Delia to move his squad up to a dike on the left and I send machinegunner Mack and his assistant with them. I get two men, Gallardo and Martinez, and the three of us low crawl forward to toss grenades into the VC trenches. Scrambling back to safety, Gallardo is hit in the leg and we drag him with us. Behind the building Gallardo says he's not hurt badly and he refuses to go back to the medic.

Seeing a dike to my right front, I take second squad and move them forward. From there we can lob grenades and M-79's into the VC. Going back to the buildings I see a depression in the ground to the left front. I move the first and third squads out to the depression. I move back up to the second squad. We are now all out in the open. Cpt Lawson calls to say he is moving his headquarters contingent up to my rear.

My men begin to eliminate the VC. Slowly, one by one, the VC are quieted. The VC gunfire tapers off as they begin to retreat through the trenches to their rear. Two VC are left behind to cover the withdrawal. These two are in foxholes with no exit and I know they will fight to their deaths.

This remaining pair of VC are stubborn, determined. I have a hard time comprehending the fact that they willingly or not are going to give their lives to cover the withdrawal of their comrades. I hardly think about it in my concentration of the firefight to kill them. It nags at me though.

I am in a ditch sixty feet from the fox holes. Cpt Lawson and his RTOs and his FO reach my position. I admire the captain for wanting to be where 'it's happenin'. He wants to get right in there and throw grenades himself. He tells me what he would do and still lets me run the show here. We work well together and he trusts me to always get the job done.

Occasionally I can see one of the two VC get hit; the body

recoils from the impact of an M-16 or M-60 round. Still, they get back up and continue plunking at us with their single shot SKS's. I know that each of them have been hit at least a few times, if not many times. I keep asking myself, "How can they take it?, Why don't they give up?" I don't understand VC's, the oriental mind. In a way, it's hard to watch the slow tortuous deaths of these two people. I respect their courage; they are really fighting for something.

A couple more hand grenades finally bring stillness. I call "Cease Fire!" down the line. I'm so certain the two VC are dead that I get up and walk to the fox holes. I'm followed by Forcade and a couple of others.

"Boy, I sure can smell marijuana," Forcade says as we peer down into one of the fox holes at a much-bloodied body crumpled in the bottom.

"Yeah," I answer. "He musta been all hopped-up on the stuff. He probably never felt a thing..." Suddenly the body stirs a little, he's not quite dead yet. I raise my rifle and BANG!, I shoot him through the left chest. His misery is ended.

"No! Don't touch that body. It might be booby trapped," I scream at a couple of guys at the fox hole twenty feet away. "Get a rope and drag him out, it's safer that way."

Cpt Lawson rushes up. "Nice job, Miller," the captain says giving out one of his rare compliments. He sends Lt Jones and the first platoon out north in pursuit of the fleeing VC element and lines up the third platoon to our west facing west. The APC's arrive on the road to the east. My job is over, it's the captain's show now.

I set up security to the south and coordinate the incoming dustoff helicopter for the five guys with not-so-bad wounds. In the mid-afternoon sun, my guys settle down lighting up cigarettes here and there, drinking their remaining water and opening up C-rations; it's been almost twelve hours since we last ate and relaxed.

"Hey Lieutenant, Sir! Come over and look at this!" A couple

of guys from first platoon are standing next to a four foot high wooden shed. Inside is a cache of chi-com (Chinese communist) ammo and marijuana; lots of dope, maybe fifty pounds. This is the stash of dope the VC used in combat. I send for Cpt Lawson who tells us to take the ammo out and burn the shed and marijuana. After he leaves, one of the guys looks at me as if to say, "Do we really have to burn all of it?" I tell him, "Burn it!" I send for gasoline from the APC's.

I wander along the dirt road near the fox holes and trenches deserted by the VC. There's a pockmarked motor scooter standing further down the road with a flat tire. Trash and debris are littered everywhere, as well as equipment like canteens, web belts and clothing left behind by the fleeing VC. And there are six to eight VC bodies lying on the road, some in grotesque positions testifying to the agony of death. Some of the faces of the dead VC are left child-like, as in a gentle sleep. Other faces are locked in a horrific scream as the mind realizes death is at hand. Many of the dead have a large wet spot on the front of their crotch where death has released their bladder. And released their bowels too; I can smell shit. Lots of flies have already begun buzzing around the bodies and some flies are walking across the eyeballs of the open-eyed dead. I know that within days these eyes will be a wiggling bag of maggots.

Back down the road the other way, Cpt Lawson greets the battalion commander as the colonel and his retinue land in the Colonel's command helicopter. I can see the captain pointing and gesturing, probably telling the story of "Widows' Village" as they walk towards the fox holes of the last two VC. Behind in the village, black smoke billows up from two hootches still on fire. We have left that village battle-scarred with blown down trees, burned grass and destroyed hootches everywhere. We blame the VC for the destruction.

The battle is over. This was my first real test of combat leadership. I think I did okay, I hope so. Maybe I ran around a little too much in the excitement of it all. I feel badly for

"Smiley" and his torn up face; he gets to go home though. I know I was scared there for a bit, but I soon got over it.

The participants in 'Widows' Village' are credited with fifty VC killed and ten detainees taken; seems like a few too many to me. For my part in the operation, I am put in for a Silver Star for heroism. A week later while at the company's rear headquarters at Bearcat, I ask the XO (executive officer) for the Silver Star papers. I tear them up and tell him that I was just doing my job; I don't want the damn medal.

At that time, we also hear rumors that the VC attacked cities up and down Vietnam and that they overran several cities up north. Some of the battles lasted for more than a week. The Stars and Stripes newspaper begins to call the VC attacks during the Tet holiday truce as the "Tet Offensive." The members of my platoon refer to it simply as "Widows' Village."