**“Dog Handler in Vietnam”**

*By Dave Baker*

The Village I was sent to in Vietnam had been built earlier by the French and had a few cement buildings, but the majority of it was just sticks with tin roofs. When people went to the bathroom, they just came out and did it in the street. It stunk, it stunk and on a hot day it really stunk. But you got so used to it that it was, after a while you know, like being home. I mean, you know, it was just a normal thing.

The dog handler’s job was to patrol the bush outside the village at night to make sure none of the VC could sneak up on us. There were tunnels around our unit, and the VC would use them to get close to the fence. Then they’d come up and get through the fence and get to our main communications center. Tried to blow it up a number of times. One night I was out with my dog on guard duty, and someone from the tower yelled that there was a guy in a tunnel who kept coming up to the fence and trying to get through. So off my dog and I go. We’re going to get this VC.

As soon as he sees us, back down the tunnel he goes. So I brought my dog to the fence line and unleashed him. The fellow doesn’t see that the dog’s back here. Well, by the time I get to the other end of the tunnel, the guy’s back here at the fence line, trying to come out of the hole. As soon as he stuck his head up, my dog saw him, grabbed him by the throat, ripped him right up. When I got to them, the dog had taken his head off, torn his arms off, taken his intestines out, and was eating him. I never saw anything like that before in my life, you know.

I went to get the dog off, and I reached behind him and grabbed him, and he bit my knee. Right here. Just four puncture holes. Let go. Went back to the VC. I backed up. Sat down on the ground, wrapped my leg all up, and waited until he was done. You know, when the dogs are taught to be killers, they’re so sick, it’s as if they’re nuts. If they get someone, they consider it their reward. They worked for it and they deserve it. So I had to let him finish. I couldn’t go near him, because he’d kill me. His eyes were wild and he was foaming. There was no way I could stop him.

In the village I was in and in the villages around, there were just local VC. They’d have maybe two or three bullets allotted to them to shoot for the night, and they’d come out with their single-shot rifles and go blikety-blink. About every two weeks or so, they’d put on a mortar attack, but primarily it was just the snipers. You always had to watch your back, because there was no front line there, and you had women and kids as warriors, too, and you really didn’t know who was trustworthy and who wasn’t. It was all a battle field.

There’d be accidents. In one village that I had to go through, the kids would play a game. They would try to touch the killer dogs. If they could touch a killer dog, they were big heroes. But this wasn’t known to me when I first got there. A lot of the old timers don’t tell you all the tricks of the trade, you know. So I knew nothing of this game of the kids. One night when I was working, cutting through the side of the village, and I’m looking into a shack over there and I see a bunch of eyes. I didn’t know whose they were. I just figured to myself, Jesus, somebody over there is going to shoot me just when I get to the right spot.

I had my gun on my side with my hand on it, and my dog was pulling ahead real hard, but I wasn’t paying too much attention to him. I was looking at those eyes as I walked. And I was on the ready, because if I saw anything that looked wrong, I was going to start shooting. What I didn’t know was that those eyes were all little kids watching their buddy, who had dug a ditch and hidden himself under some weeds right by the path. When I came by, he was going to jump up, touch my dog, and then take off, and he would be a hero. And they were watching him to do it. So as I went by, he jumped up, touched my dog, and my dog took his head off instantly. Just popped it like that. You know some of these Vietnam people are very, very thin, especially the young kids. The neck was like a dog bone to him.

I didn’t know what to do. I mean, I’m standing there – the head’s sitting over there, spitting and gurgling. Oooooh… I get goose bumps now just thinking about it. It was a real ripper for me. I pulled the dog back quick, and I looked this way and that way, and the kid’s mother was coming after me. She had something in her hand. I thought, “It’s a grenade. It’s cocked. I’m in real trouble now.” So I had to pack her down. I shot her, and I kept shooting as a backed out.

When I got back to my base, they sent an alert out to see what went on, and it turned out she just had a rock in her hand, but I didn’t know that. I just thought, “She’s going to get me, and I’m going to blast her…” That was a rough one.

Another time we were sent to the wrong end of a village, just me and another kid. The dogs weren’t with us that time. We were supposed to get out some VCs who were in this house, and we had been told that they were armed. So we went in figuring everybody there was armed and bad guys.

We broke into the hut, and the rule is, one guy shoots to the left and the other guy shoots to the right. That way you don’t end up shooting each other. You know, when you’re shooting like that, you don’t stop until everything stops moving. You get a little smacked out, sort of high. You get a rush when you go in, and then when you settle down off that rush, you see what you did. And I shot three ladies and two kids, and he shot one lady and a pig.

It turned out we’d been sent to the wrong damned place. The lieutenant had his little map turned around, and he’d sent us a hundred and eighty degrees in the wrong direction. After everybody was dead, we called up the lieutenant on the phone and said, “Hey, you jerk, there’s nobody in there just women and kids.” “You go to the right place?” “Yeah, right up here in the northeast corner, red shack.” And he goes, Oh, jeez, I sent you to the wrong place…”

I never forgave that officer for doing that, you know. Two of the ladies were nursing their babies, and these babies couldn’t have been more than two, three months old, maybe. That stays with me all the time, all the time.

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