

6TH BATTALION, 11TH ARTILLERY

Hawaii



Viet Nam

On Time, Sir!

From Georgia to Viet Nam Section Ten Rumors of War and Tall Tales IV by Clenton Thomas, B Btry, '68-'69

A ZIG or A ZAG

One of the things I kept my eyes open for was someone going off the deep end. On one occasion I thought Lance had. I was in our hooch in my bunk reading when Lance came running in dropped down on his knees and pulled out his ammo canister. An ammo canister was a metal box some fourteen inches cubed. We would take an empty one and use it to store our clothes and personal effects, it had a lid and would keep your stuff clean and dry. Lance had two of them and he was going through them throwing his stuff right and left and muttering to himself. When he got through with his, he reached for Ramsey's canister, I was just fixing to ask him if he was all right when he looked up at me.

Doc have you got any packs of hot chocolate? I thought I had a couple and got down off the upper bunk to search my canisters. I didn't want Lance to do it because he was doing Ramsey's just like he had done his. Turns out I didn't have any and when I informed him, he told me that he had met an Infantry man. And he did not smoke, drink beer nor did he drink sodas, I believe he said that he didn't even drink coffee. But he did like hot chocolate and Lance had invited him to come to our hooch that evening. Doc! He talked with me like no one I have ever talked to before and I wanted him to meet Ramsey, Orton, and you. So there will be no drinking tonight of beer or sodas, no smoking, nothing but hot chocolate. That is if I can find enough hot chocolate packs. I've only got two so far and if I cannot find any more we will let him have them. About that time Dick Orton "gun chief on gun one" came in and he was as excited as Lance was. He had found three packs and had an idea where he could find some more at. Lance threw over his shoulder as they rushed out, Doc see if you can round up some more packs. I was relieved that Lance had not dropped off the deep end after all.

One of my duties was to oversee the Conex building where we stored the Cigarettes, beer and sodas at, I had a key and the Chief of Fire Sergeant and the Captain had one also. It was my job to ration them out each week, we would get, for those that smoked, a carton of Cigarettes, two beer and two sodas. Some of us

didn't drink and I knew which ones did and didn't, so I would work out a trade for them. Those who didn't drink would get four sodas and their counterpart, they would get four beers. The first ones to get four beers was myself, Lance, and Orton. It also had the C-rations and when the Infantry was out in the field we would have to eat C-rations. One or two of the C-rations in each case had a round tin that contain a pound cake, it was sought for the most often. They also contained packs of hot chocolate in them and I rounded up four more packs of hot chocolate and set those off to the side for the four of us that would be in the meeting that night.

You can't have hot chocolate unless you have a way to heat it, we would have to make us a GI stove. We would take a small tin can something like a Vienna sausage can. With a can opener we would open slots around the side close to the bottom of it for air to get inside. We would then put dirt inside the tin about a quarter inch deep. Our fuel source was C-4 rolled into a marble size ball and placed in the center of the tin. Then we set a metal drinking cup, full of water, off the bottom of our canteen onto it. Lighting the C-4 with a kitchen match, it wouldn't burn but for around 15 to 20 seconds and the water would be steaming hot. It was said that C-4 burn at 1000 degrees, but I believe its burn rate was at about half of that. Still it got that water really hot.

When Lance brought our guest in Ramsey, Orton, and myself was in the hooch waiting for him. Lance introduced him to each one of us and I cannot remember his name first or last. But I do remember when I heard his name, thinking that he had a Jewish name so that made him a Jew. I'm thinking now that one of his names started with an "S", with that in mind I'll just call him "*Steven*". After we had brewed us some hot chocolate we sat around listening to *Steven* talk to us. I don't remember what all he said but he talked a lot about himself. He was married and had a couple of kids. He was living on a farm that was given to him by his father and the way he talked it had a large house. He talked to us for an hour or more, and finally said. I've got to go and get some sleep. I'll be going out on my last patrol, we'll be in the field for two weeks and then after that I'll have another couple weeks before I go home. What I'd like to do is when I return off patrol is to spend two or three days visiting with you guys. Of course we thought that would be a great idea and we were already thinking about getting more hot chocolate for his return visit.

Steven then said; here I've been talking about myself and haven't given the rest of you much time to tell me about yourself. I'd like for each one of you to tell me about yourself. He started by asking Lance to tell about himself and then went to Ramsey, then Orton and I was to be the last one to speak. I don't remember everything they said, Lance had a girlfriend in New York that he was to marry when he returned. Ramsey and Orton talked about their family and where they

lived. After each one of us told a little about themselves, *Steven* would give a prediction about them and their future. It was now my turn, back then I was not one to give many details about myself. But there was something about *Steven* that made it easier to share about yourself. I told him that I didn't have a wife nor even a girlfriend. And I told him about my parents separating when I was five. At fourteen I watched my sister and Daddy argue over a man she was seeing and Daddy slapped her and she slapped him back. The next day when we got back from a fishing trip she was gone. She had eloped and we did not know where she had went. The next time I saw her she had a five year old daughter.

Soon after Janice left, Daddy shacked up with a younger woman and he had a child by her. When I graduated from high school at nineteen, two weeks later I had packed up everything I owned and left. With the intention of not ever going back. Fact was I would not set foot back into my Father's house until some eleven years later. I told *Steven* that if anyone was a black sheep in my family, then I was it. *Steven* looked at me for a little bit and told me "Doc some day you will have the family you have always wanted."

He then said to all of us, I wish there was some way I could gather all of you and your families and take you to my Father's House right now. I kind of laughed and told him he would need a very larger house. Looking at me, he asked what do you mean Doc.? Well if all four of us was to come with all our families and with your family, your house wouldn't be able to hold us all. To which he replied Doc there would be plenty of room in my Father's House it is a big place.

He then told us that he needed to go, that early in the morning they would be moving out on patrol. Saying our goodbye's to him, we sat and talked about his return visit. Lance told us that he was going to get up early in the morning and go see him off. We all agreed to join him in the morning. Lance and Ramsey was up and headed out the door telling me I'd better hurry that they could have already left. I wasn't more than a couple of minutes behind them, but it was long enough that I saw them and Orton already on top of Dort's and Balogh's hooch. I joined them and saw that the patrol were already leaving the hill. From where we stood just behind gun one, some 100 feet down the hill they were at a section of the perimeter wire. It had a small hump and as each person topped it they would step down and disappear from our sight. There was no way we could see any of them that had left the hill already, but there was a long line reaching back to the Infantry mess hall. I asked Lance had he spotted him yet. We were all looking around the point where they were crossing over at.

Someone suggested that we check the line back to the end and see if we could locate him. If he had already gone over we had missed him. So all four of us worked our way to our right eyeing each fully packed infantry man trying to pick

out *Steven* from among them. Coming to the end of the line none of us had spotted him so we started looking at each infantry man going back toward the crossover point. Suddenly we all noticed that the line had come to a stop. We began looking for a reason or who had stopped it and quickly came back to the crossover point. And there standing on top of that hump stood someone looking back at us. When he seen all of us looking at him *Steven* threw up his hand and waved at us. We all waved back and he turned and stepped off the hill. We stood there until the last man went over the hump.

Steven had said that the patrol would be back in two weeks, so we began collecting hot chocolate packs. It was a long two weeks, and I believe that the whole hill knew about it, from us as we traded for packs of hot chocolate.

The day before the two weeks was up Lance told us that although the point where they had left the hill might not be the return point. It could even be on the infantry side and we might not be able to see them when they returned. So the next day we spent a lot of time looking all around the hill to see if we could see them coming in. Late in the evening Lance went down to the infantry camp and came back telling us that they had not come in. Maybe they had encountered some trouble and it had delayed them by a day was our thoughts and we hoped that it would not give us any less time with *Steven*.

The next day we did the same thing and with the same results. Only this time it was more serious than the day before. We even thought that they might have air lifted him back to Duc Pho because he was due to leave shortly. But Lance felt sure that if that had happened he would get word to us. And figure out some way to keep his appointment with us. Third day would bring new fears that he might have been wounded. And had been picked up by a dust off chopper. We didn't want to even consider this as a possibility. And kept reassuring ourselves that they had a routine patrol but was delayed and would be back to the LZ tomorrow. Late on the fourth day a shout went up that they were coming in. Their re-entry point onto the LZ would be at the guard bunker right next to our hooch.

Lance stood on "The Rock" that the infantry had blown into to our area. Our section of the hill "the command area: which contained the battery Commander, the chief of fire, Lieutenant "B", FDC (Fire Direction Control), Ramsey was our "Electrician", Lance our "Communications" and myself the "Medic". We had a perimeter wire around this area that included a chain link fence in one section of it. The only opening in it was just before you went into Gun One's area, in front of the Conex building. The infantry would pass by in-between our wire and the trash dump. The Rock was close to the wire and high enough that Lance standing on it could see the men as they come over the outer perimeter wire onto the hill and see them close up when they came past him.

As we watched the men crossing over the perimeter wire on a couple of boards, their Captain stood on the outside of the wire lending a hand to each person as they stepped onto the boards to steady them and we could tell he was speaking to each one. "In retrospect I felt that it was a word of encouragement he was giving them." Of course Lance was checking each person face as they passed by him. It had worked down to the last six or seven men and Lance had not seen him yet. The Captain was the last to crossover and when he reached Lance's spot. Lance asked him where is "Steven", was he picked up in the field and returned to Duc Pho? He was supposed to go home within a week or so but he was going to spend a few days with us.

The Captain responded; **He zigged when he should have zagged!** *What's that supposed to mean Sir? The day before we were to return, his squad got into a fire fight with Charley. If he had of zigged instead of zagged he'd been alright.* You mean he was wounded, what hospital was he taken to Sir? *"I believe that Lance would have found a way to go see him if he was in a hospital close to us."* **I'm sorry he is dead, like I said if he had of zigged, instead he walked right into the path of a bullet. He was killed instantly. That's the reason we are so late coming in, none of us really wanted to come back in without him.** With that he turned and followed his men toward their base camp. Here was a man that had touched so many lives that when he was killed, they all grieved for the loss of a comrade.

"I suppose I should add a P.S. at this point because you may be wondering about the prediction that he made to me: **"Doc some day you will have the family you have always wanted."** Later I was to marry and had two children and because I wanted my children to know their grandfather I had struck up a relationship with my Dad. Then on the 24th of January 1980 on a Thursday evening, around 9:30 PM, I believe "Steven's" predication came true: *For I was adopted into the family of God. I became a child of the King. I now have brothers and sisters worldwide."*

And in my mind's eye view, I see myself stepping someday through Heavens golden gates and off to the side will be standing "Steven" with two cups of hot chocolate. And he will say *"Hello Doc! I've been expecting you! Welcome, to my Father's House."*