

Lock and Load

14 August 1969

When I woke up I remembered that it was my 22nd birthday but I had little reason to suspect that anyone else knew or cared. The sun was still hanging low on the horizon, not yet roused but anxiously awaiting its opportunity to dominate everything on the dusty orange landscape. A light breeze brought a hint of salt air from the South China Sea, which was only a kilometer away. My nose was still becoming accustomed to the breathtaking spectrum of odors I discovered when I arrived in Viet Nam, 18 days earlier.

When I received my orders at Long Binh replacement battalion, I was assigned to Charlie Company, 4th Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment (4/21), as a combat infantryman. When I arrived in Duc Pho I was told that 2 men were just lost to friendly fire and I was reassigned to Delta Company, 1st platoon.

The well worn passenger seat didn't provide much comfort, as I anxiously sat waiting for my company clerk to get the day's mail bag and supplies for my new platoon. I tried not to look nervous and stared down at my virgin boots; with shine still showing on the black leather boots. A soft coating of the orange dust which was on everywhere like a heavy spring pollen, covered my boots and everything else on the base. Like the rest of my clothes and equipment, shiny, at least as shiny as olive drab can get and I felt out of place with everything around me, which couldn't hide the wear and tear which came from use and abuse in bad conditions. I was self conscious and uncertain of what was in store for me but surprisingly relaxed, as I waited to be driven to my new platoon.

My departure seemed to be delayed and I sat in the passenger seat of the jeep staring across the sprawled out fire base. Duc Pho had an airstrip, a single lane of connected metal plates lying on top of packed orange dirt, not much more than a ¼ mile long. The airstrip ended at the base of the small of the western side of the hill that was the heart of the base. Surrounding the hill were the unit headquarters for all the units within and attached to the 11th LIB.

Sitting at the base of the hill, which overlooked the airstrip, I watched the choreographed movements of the base personnel dressed in olive drab mixed with an influx of the smaller Vietnamese workers, dressed in black silk PJs and straw hats. .

Over my shoulder, I heard my company clerk and turned to see him accompanied by Top, the company first sergeant, walking down the hill from the company HQ. Top, like most Top sergeants I encountered, had that bulldog look about him. He was short and stocky, with a distinct southern accent. Alabama or Arkansas was my guess. Top was as tall as the company clerk but the clerk looked insignificant next to Top. Top, who had a bull horn voice, had no problem letting everyone know that non-commissioned officers ran the US Army. I climbed into the back of the jeep without being told and shifted my rucksack to the other side of the jeep with the mail and

supplies. When Top and the clerk approached the jeep, they locked and loaded their M-16's. I got as comfortable as I could and put a round in the chamber of my M-16 as we pulled away from company headquarters and drove through the Duc Pho firebase.



Map of 4/21 Infantry Battalion's AO with Duc Pho at the upper left of map and highlighted in orange. The Red Ball runs from the northwestern to southeastern corners of the map and is designated QL1. The tracks from the old French railroad parallel QL1 and are elevated about 10 to 15 feet above the surrounding low lands. The Rice Bowl area, in white in the center of the map, and LZ Debbie is highlighted in orange on the right side of the map.

The front gate of the Duc Pho base was located on the western side of the fire base and opened onto the Red Ball, the primary North-South road in South Viet Nam, which roughly paralleled the coast of the South China Sea. The town of Duc Pho, a small town which contained small, dilapidated buildings and huts that bustled with activity.

Suddenly I heard shooting to our right and I quickly turned to see a jeep speeding down a dirt road which ran through the town. To our right I saw a jeep speeding up a dusty road that paralleled the Red Ball and inside the jeep were at least 6 South Vietnamese Militia, firing their M-16's into the air as they drove into Duc Pho. They stopped in front of one of the larger buildings and as the orange cloud caught up to it's creators, I noticed what I realized was a lifeless body being dragged behind the jeep. I was unprepared for this subtle initiation to war and sat quietly in the back of the jeep.

Our jeep slowed down as Top and the clerk stared at the dusty scene. After a few seconds, Top made eye contact with the clerk and said, "Let's go," and we continued south the highway. The casual nature of their exchange made an impact and I was reminded of the of my Basic Training Drill Instructor's advice, "Keep your mouth shut, your ears open and you may live to come home."

The rural village gave way to low hills which came down to meet the black strip of road from the east. I tried to stay alert but I wasn't sure that I would know an enemy before they shot at me. After a few miles we were stopped by an MP who informed us that the small bridge, that used to be across the Red Ball at this spot, was taken out by enemy mortars recently. The engineers, along with a horde of civilians, were repairing and replacing the structure, as best they could. In the interim, the engineers constructed a detour which went down into a steep ravine, across a small creek, and up the other side.

As we pulled out of the ravine, I saw the string of hills which rose off to the west and with my eyes I followed the 2 lane black strip of hot asphalt that swung around the base of the nearest hill and continued into an open agricultural plain. The hill overlooked the road, which made me nervous and I noticed that Top and the clerk were also on the alert. We drove past the hill with no incident and I saw a panorama of rice paddies stretching across an expansive plain to my right, with sugar cane fields terraced on the sides of the smaller hills to my left. This was my first glimpse of the Rice Bowl, the area of operations for my unit.

As the jeep drove into the bowl, I could see a green tint on top of the water filling the paddies and realized that the green was the tips of the rice plants, just reaching out for the nourishment of the brutal sun. I began noticing a large number of destroyed and mangled trucks and armored personnel carriers (APC), rusting and abandoned along the roadside. The contrast between the growing rice and mangled hulks made me uncomfortable and represented a dichotomy that I would see repeated.

To the east was the coast of the South China Sea, as well as what appeared to be a body of water between the black top and the sea. Along with the farmers, there were a large number of fishermen who made their living supplying the other staple for the area, fish.

The Red Ball began to stretch out into the bowl and the homes, the single room, grass huts, of those families whose livelihoods depended on the fish, rice and sugar cane crops began to crowd the edges of the road. Small villages with names like My Trang and Nga Man were the farmers contact with the modern world. These villages contained merchants and some services that were unavailable to the farmers and fishermen who lived in the Rice Bowl. At the southern border of the bowl, there was a large orange hunk of dirt, scrub brush and rock which shot up out of flat ground right in front of our jeep. The jeep stopped at the base of the anomaly, and I looked up to my left and saw the entrance to the American fire base, LZ Debbie. Top stopped the jeep and turned around to address me, "This is LZ Debbie, the base for your unit's area of operations. Any questions?"

I shook my head and strained my neck at the hill which went almost straight up. The entrance road leveled out onto a small terrace containing 6 small buildings 100 yards up from the base of the hill, and then the road hugged the side of the hill, going almost straight up to small plateau on the peak. The access road was bordered by a crown of bunkers surrounding the top and sides of LZ Debbie.

Top turned to the company clerk and nodded down the road and we continued our journey south where hills rose off to our west, continuing around the valley filled with the symmetrical shapes of hundreds of rice paddies, which gave the area it's name, the Rice Bowl. We continued around the eastern tip of the hills for several miles until we pulled up to a small bridge, which had sand bagged guard emplacements on the north and south side of the bridge. The bridge was guarded by a detail of South Vietnamese Regional Forces, who had created a secure perimeter with 2 check points, stopping and inspecting all vehicles. As we pulled up, we were waved through by a smiling militia man carrying an M-16, who appeared to be no more than 15 years old. Off to the side, stretched out in any shade they could find, I got my first glimpse of my new platoon. They looked tired and dirty, with little or no interest in the new birthday boy. Most of the guys wouldn't say it to my face but until everyone could remember my name, I was referred to as "new meat", the tag put on every new member of the 1st platoon.

After the jeep crossed the bridge, we pulled off the side of the road and were greeted by several GIs, none of whom has any insignia of rank. No saluting in the bush and no show of rank, this was already explained to me. The clerk handed over the mail and supplies and in turn took a hand full of outgoing letters. Top rolled out of the jeep, greeting the GIs and introduced me, mentioning that my nickname was Batman. Slick, my squad leader, was in charge of the weapon's squad, which contained the platoons three M-60s and he was also the temporary CO (Commanding Officer) of my new platoon. The other 3 squad leaders were Ski, Gerber, and Dale, who had rifle squads. At the time of my arrival, the platoon consisted of the 3 rifle squads with 6 or 7 men in each squad, a weapon's squad, and the HQ squad, with the platoon leader and the 2 RTOs (Radio Telephone Operator). Each M-60 was assigned to a rifle squad and many of our operations, as I was to learn, were squad size operations.

Slick asked me if I wanted to take a break before the platoon headed out. In a wasted attempt at bravado, I assured Slick that I was ready to go. I felt very conspicuous and, to be honest, scared. What do they expect of me and who the hell are these guys who will become my brothers in my fight for survival.

I walked over to my future brothers with Slick and the squad leaders, as the resting men showed varied amounts of interest. "This is Bat-Man. He's going to be in my squad and take over as LA's assistant machine gunner. Any questions?"

Everyone was busy with mail or sneaking some z's, so the introduction was brief and the only questions revolved around when we were heading out.

Unfortunately Slick started the next sentence with my name, "Batman says he's ready to go, so let's see if you lazy bastards can keep up with him."

Everyone began groaning as they threw their rucksacks on their tired backs and we slowly began to hump up the hill, rising to our west, several hundred meters away. The climb up the rocky sloop with 40 or 50 lbs. of gear had my head spinning before long. Slick must have noticed that I was struggling and dropped back to where to my spot in line and asked if I needed a break. I did but I could not let these guys think that I couldn't handle a simple hill climb, so I tried to sound as confident as possible and responded with a smile that I was fine. Somehow I made the climb without passing out and was greatly relieved when we arrived at my platoon's night laager.

LA, my machine gunner, was a curly haired, blond kid, and he looked no more than 16, who came from Los Angeles. He seemed distant and moody and once we got settled into the laager, I tried to talk to LA and learn what to expect and what he expected. LA seemed to get irritated and was uncooperative. LA and I were attached to Ski's squad, Ski, the squad leader that LA's M-60 was assigned to, showed me how to set out the nightly Claymore anti-personnel mines and trip flares in front of our position. Ski explained that our primary mission right now was to patrol the hills, south of LZ Debbie and work with the local forces on operations.

I received my guard duty assignment for the night and passed out quickly.