



T-MINUS-TEN

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THE GREAT BIG RAID ON HOA QUAN

Geo and I had a running argument going on that, were the topic not serious, would have sounded as silly as Abbott & Costello's "Who's on First" routine. It was "Who's in Control?" It concerned the territory below the Cai Be, and it was my contention that, if we weren't there, *they* were. Geo maintained that the absence of government army units was no proof that the enemy had taken over an area; we wouldn't know for sure unless we went to see. My insistence on referring to the abandoned areas as "Indian country" irritated him.

"Who runs the villages? Who collects the taxes?" I would ask. After the December 6 incident at Chac Kha, when VC tax collectors had come to a village on our side of the river, one which had a platoon of PF in residence, there was no question in my mind as to who was governing the real estate between us and the U Minh Forrest. Geo was hardheaded about it.

Huyhnl was realistic. He was especially concerned about the village of Hoa Quan in his old district: he had ties and obligations there. Since my arrival, he had repeatedly talked about the need to visit Hoa Quan; today, we were going to do it.

The letter which follows was written the night of the raid on Hoa Quan. When I decided to include the incident in this narrative, I was tempted to change the verb tenses and write the story from the distance



of 35 years. Upon further thought, however, I decided to simply use the letter for two reasons: first, because it was written the same day as the events it describes, the letter carries a freshness and immediacy I could not pretend to duplicate today; but, primarily, because it captures both the exhilarated adrenalin rush I was feeling when I began it and the sober reflection that occurred as the adrenalin wore off. The Great Big Raid on Hoa Quan was nobly conceived and flawlessly executed. The letter captures Huynhl - and *Mot Muoui Lam* - at their best; and the intra-army politicking of ARVN at its worst. Over the years, I've often wondered what would have happened had the Nguyen Van Huynhls of Viet Nam been allowed to run the war their way; but it's fruitless speculation. There weren't enough Nguyen Van Huynhls to go around.

January 20, 1968: "Today, after talking about it for months, we finally went to Hoa Quan (pronounced, improbably enough, Wah Wan). Hoa Quan is a large village distinguished by its big monastery and pagoda, and it lies well below the Cai Be River - far down in VC country. No government troops have been there for months, and it's indisputably an enemy stronghold. Chau Thanh B District Force, the local VC company, is headquartered there, and all the main force VC units coming up from the U Minh stay there when they're in the neighborhood. The tragedy of Hoa Quan is that the people are (or were) pro-government up until about a year ago, when the government abandoned Kien Giang Province south of the Cai Be to the VC. This really hurt Huynhl, who used to be District Chief of Kien



Binh District, in which Hoa Quan is located. He considers the people there as his, and feels obligated to them.

“Hoa Quan is a rich village, large and beautiful, and it is of interest now that the harvest is in because of the rich rice crop. The VC are collecting 30% of the rice for export to the U Minh or Cambodia, where they sell it; and, on the rice people take out to market, they are charging an additional 30 piastres per basket tax. In other words, the people have plenty of rice to eat, but, if they want to sell it, it costs them more than they will probably make. The object of this exercise is to cut off as much rice as possible from the government-controlled areas in an attempt to force the price of rice higher, thus hurting even more the government’s wounded economy.

“To accomplish this, the VC have tax collecting stations on every canal in and out of Hoa Quan.

“The purpose of our operation this morning was two-fold: (1) To slip into town unnoticed and kill or capture whatever VC might be there, and (2) to hold the village all day so that the people could get their rice out to market without paying the VC tax. The latter was what we considered our more important mission.

“It was a lovely little operation. Moving like the VC, in little sampans in the dark, our first sampan [*with Sgt Tau, of course*] slid into Hoa Quan silently by way of a small, almost unnavigable and therefore unguarded canal at 0700 this morning, just as dawn was breaking (the sun doesn’t rise until about



0715 this time of year). There was an early-morning mist hanging over the glassy calm water that both cloaked our movement and muffled the sound of our paddles. We had been on the water since 0300, poling the sampans, as we didn't want to run the risk [noise] of using the motors.

"As luck would have it, we missed Chau Thanh B by only a few hours - they had left Hoa Quan at about 0400 this morning. But the VC tax collectors, about 10 men, were already at work in the village market, stopping sampans and checking the rice. Imagine their surprise when, straining to see in the half light, they realized the sampans they were about to stop were filled with government troops! Surprise was complete. When the first shots were fired, the rest of us, who were waiting around the corner in the small side canal with our hands on the starting ropes, cranked our engines and raced into town full steam ahead. The confusion was incredible. Neither side was seriously trying to hit the other - there were too many civilians already up and about - but convention required that we shoot at one another, and a brief, violent, but generally harmless firefight ensued, the VC breaking off when they realized they were up to their fannies in ARVNs. Then came a wild, almost comic chase through the middle of town. Having by now landed, we were running as fast as we could, shooting more or less up in the air, and the VC were galloping along a couple of hundred yards ahead of us, shooting back over their shoulders without even looking.



Amazingly enough, we got one of them - the rest got away....

"The mad chase was a riot. Chickens squawked, pigs grunted, dogs barked and chased both sides. Kids stood and grinned and watched, people awakened by the firing instinctively jumped out of bed and headed for the sanctuary of the pagoda - half dressed and undressed. Soldiers chasing VC turned to look at the nude and semi-nude women heading for the pagoda, and ran into trees, tripped over bags of rice (I ran into a wall), and engaged in other humorous activities. Then, the hated Cong having been driven away, we got down to the serious business of the day - eating coconuts & watermelons and sleeping.

"Seriously, after a coconut break to help us catch our breath, we gathered all the people and told them to get their rice out of town, that we would stay all day to protect them. Then, after *Thieu Ta* gave a 30-minute harangue on what bad guys the VC are and how the government-controlled areas are paradise on earth, the people dispersed and actually loaded their rice onto sampans and started for Rach Gia, Rach Soi, and Minh Loung. It was looking like a perfect operation, and, as such, it was too good to last. So, naturally, it didn't.

"Fifteenth regiment, finding out we were in Hoa Quan, had a fit - after all, we're forbidden to cross the Cai Be. So we were ordered to leave and return to Xa Xiem immediately. *Thieu Ta* argued with them. He had given his word to the entire village to protect them the entire day, and he couldn't break his promise. But



regiment was adamant. So at 1200, after giving our solemn word to protect the people, we slinked out of Hoa Quan, followed by the hard stares of the population. Behind their eyes you could see the flicker of hope being extinguished, and their faces set in an expression that said, 'I guess the VC have been telling the truth about you all this time.'

"We were bitterly disappointed and terribly ashamed. The Republic of Viet Nam, through us, symbolized by us, had just let the people down again. Huynhl, understandably, was miffed, and worse. Now, more than ever, he can't wait to leave Xa Xiem and go north. He's ashamed to show his face around here any more.

"Today was another in a series of brilliant examples of why we're going to lose this war.

"... When *Thieu Ta* gathered the village together in the pagoda, he asked me to watch, and, as opposed to his usual politicking, he was quite sincere when he talked to the people of Hoa Quan. But what was truly touching and, later, sad, was the way those 400 people listened to him and looked at him. There wasn't another sound in the room. Everyone strained to catch every word. Not a single eye was diverted...

"... And we let them down. Right now, as I write this, this very moment, I know the VC have the very same people in the same pagoda, saying, 'See, we told you so.' And later tonight, they will take reprisals...

"We might as well go out in the woods and hunt VC far away from the population, and indulge in the

meaningless absurdity of body-count warfare, like the Americans....”

Only Pinkham and I went on the Great Big Raid on Hoa Quan. Since we didn't take the whole battalion, we didn't take the whole advisory team. Our withdrawal that day was hastened by news that Chau Thanh B was rushing back to town to counterattack.

Geo could not have gone had he wanted to, however; he had left Xa Xiem for R&R in Bangkok on the 11th, and he eventually managed to stretch his time out of the field to two weeks. It was a shame he missed this one. Had he gone to Hoa Quan with us it would have settled the argument.

