



T-MINUS-THIRTY

New Year's Eve, 1967-1968

TRUCE

It was the second cease-fire in a week, and it was holding. We and the Viet Cong had announced two-day suspensions of hostilities for both Christmas and New Year, and, with a few scattered exceptions up north, the truces were honored. It struck me as curious that the avowedly atheist Communists and the government of the predominantly Buddhist south had agreed to stop killing one another in recognition of European, Christian holidays, but it wasn't the kind of question Americans probed too deeply. It was in perfect keeping with our value system, and, even if it didn't make total sense, it added up to four days out of the field -- oh, man.

On December 31, 1967, I was 26, a Captain of Infantry in the United States Army. A reluctant Regular, I had received orders to Viet Nam in retaliation for having attempted to resign my commission after returning home from a thirteen-month tour in Korea. I was now assigned to Military Assistance Command-Viet Nam (MACV) Advisory Team 60, serving as Senior Advisor to the First Battalion (*Thieu Doan Mot*), 15th Regiment (*Trung Doan Muoui Lam*), 9th Infantry Division (*Su Doan Chinh*), Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN, pronounced "Are-vin" by Americans). In the military shorthand of the period, our unit was referred to simply as the 1/15, "One-Fifteen" in English. In Vietnamese, we were *Mot Muoui Lam*.



The 9th Division, consisting of the 14th, 15th and 16th Infantry Regiments, was stationed in IV Corps in the Mekong delta, with its headquarters at Sa Dec. The Mekong is one of the great rivers of Asia, rising in the Himalayas and touching parts of India, China, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam on its epic journey to the South China Sea. Americans tend to think of it only in association with the war in Viet Nam; ironically, there is no river by that name on Vietnamese maps. The Mekong splits into two main branches while still flowing south through Cambodia, and these, upon taking their turn to the southeast and entering Viet Nam, acquire Vietnamese names. The two branches flow parallel to one another, about 20 kilometers apart. On American maps, the upper branch is labeled the Mekong, the lower, the Basaac; their Vietnamese names are the *Song Tien Giang* and *Song Hau Giang*. For the most part, the 9th Division's operating territory (or DTA, Division Tactical Area) encompassed the provinces between the rivers, from the Cambodian border to the sea.

Vinh Long, on the northern, or Mekong branch, in the heart of our DTA, had the 43rd Ranger Battalion and Third Squadron, Second Cavalry, whom we called the Three-Two Cav, both ARVN, to protect them. The Three-Two was an armored unit. Vinh Long also had a battalion of Province troops. Vinh Long didn't require help from 9th Division.

The division covered two provinces below the Basaac, which abutted Cambodia, An Giang and, on the Gulf of Siam, extended from Cambodia to the enemy-held U Minh Forest on the Ca Mau Peninsula, the largest province in Viet Nam, Kien Giang. The capital of Kien Giang is Rach Gia (pronounced "Rok Yah"), nestled on the Gulf at the angle



where the Peninsula begins. The Americans called it Rock Jaw.

My unit, *Mot Muoui Lam*, was stationed at Xa Xiem when I joined it on Wednesday, November 22. It was an absolutely nowhere place in Kien Thanh District of Kien Giang. You won't find it on any map in the world. The battalion had gotten there as a result of the disastrous bad luck of our sister battalion, *Hai Muoui Lam* (2/15).

The big counter-insurgency initiative of the time was the Revolutionary Development (RD) program, winning the hearts and minds of the people. The thrust of the program, insofar as ARVN troop utilization was concerned, was that, first, Viet Cong main force units would be swept from the area designated for pacification (preferably by American units; but these were only rarely used in the delta), whereupon ARVN would provide screening to insure they didn't return. RD cadres would then go into the now-secured villages and build schools, sing songs, administer first aid and otherwise do the right things to make aspiring democrats of simple rice farmers.

In late October, *Hai Muoui Lam* had come to Xa Xiem and set up their headquarters there to support, protect and defend the pacification effort in that village. The RD cadre came into town and started making happy citizens. It lasted a couple of weeks, until a full regiment of VC, the D-2, came up out of the U Minh and overran the place, destroying most of 2nd Battalion in the process. *Hai Muoui Lam*, or what little was left of it, was pulled back to the regimental headquarters town of Long Xuyen, the capital of An Giang Province, to rest and be refitted. *Mot Muoui Lam*



was sent to Xa Xiem to replace them. This took place a week before I joined them.

On November 21, when I had finished in-processing and was en route to my unit, I spent a night at the advisors' hooch in Long Xuyen. Captain Bob Crowell and Lieutenant Marshal Hock, the advisors of 2nd Battalion, were there recovering from the debacle, about which I had been told nothing. Neither did anyone bother to mention that 1st Battalion had been hit two nights previously. Crowell said little about Xa Xiem, apparently at our boss', Major Langlais' direction, other than to acknowledge they'd been recently stationed at a village of that name. I later found that they and their one NCO, a Staff Sergeant Richards, had been going out the front door of their sleeping quarters as the VC came in, firing, through the back. Their Sergeant had been hit, and the two officers had dragged him across open ground to the pagoda, entered it, and hidden with the moaning man under the altar as the Charlies searched for them. During our uncommunicative night together at Long Xuyen, only Hock said anything, and it was the same thing, over and over again. Every few minutes, he'd flash me a grin and say, "You're gonna **love** Xa Xiem!"

Mot Muoui Lam was commanded by an extraordinarily capable officer, Major (*Thieu Ta*) Nguyen Van Huynhl (pronounced *Winn*). Huynhl was 32, and famous when I met him: Pulitzer Prize-winning American journalist Jim Lucas had devoted an entire chapter of his 1966 book *Dateline: Viet Nam* to Huynhl, describing him as the model Vietnamese officer, the kind needed if we were to win the hearts and minds of the people and thereby, the war. He had served the people of Kien Giang in one capacity or another since 1960.

Prior to assuming command of *Mot Muoui Lam*, he had, as a Captain (*Dai Uy* in Vietnamese), been District Chief of Kien Binh, right across the Cai Be River from Xa Xiem, so he was back on his old stomping grounds. While most members of the battalion, including the advisors, viewed the assignment to Xa Xiem with foreboding, Huynhl saw it as an opportunity to build a political base; he had post-war ambitions.



I noted his charisma as early as my third day with *Mot Muoui Lam*, writing on November 24th, "... Xa Xiem doesn't have much going for it, but it is interesting. The hamlet is mostly Cambodian and is a training area for Buddhist monks. ... As in most hamlets with monasteries, the monks are the local government and control the people. The majority of them speak



only Cambodian, and Maj. Huynhl is fluent in Cambodian. He is their friend, and they constantly come to him with information. They are not pro-government so much as they are pro-Huynhl...."

He glad-handed people everywhere he went as if he were running for election, which, in truth, he was. He intended that, when the war was over and won, he would return to Kien Giang and become Province Chief, a position analogous to an American Governor. He was using this assignment to build his post-war network. He already knew all the local village chiefs and an astonishing number of simple peasants, intimately. He had marvelous political and intelligence connections.

He knew everything the VC were doing in the province. This knowledge was to save our lives on a number of occasions.

Huynhl was a Catholic crusader with a genuine sense that the war against the Communists was a holy cause. He thought himself under God's protection, bulletproof (a notion of which he was to be soon and repeatedly disabused). Like most Catholic officers, he was the beneficiary of a French education and fluent in that language, as well as Spanish and Cambodian. His military schooling in America had also brought fluency in English, which he maintained through frequent, lengthy discussions with his endless succession of "advisors," and a subscription to *Time Magazine*. His readings in that magazine sometimes made him insufferably cute, but his interest in American events and, particularly, politics, was genuine.

He was affable and charming, 5'6," with a round face frequently split by a broad grin. He was also quick, intelligent and brave beyond question, a charismatic leader



who wore three rows of medals on a fatigue uniform that never seemed to lose its starch even in the muddiest of rice paddies. His men would follow him anywhere and do anything he asked.

Nguyen Van Huynhl was an extremely complex man, so complex that I deliberately limited my attempts to understand him. I related to him almost exclusively as an officer and soldier, for, in those roles, I had training and professional standards by which to judge him. The differences in our cultures and ranks were too great for us to have become intimate; and one shouldn't get too close to the people with whom he serves in a combat unit. In any event, I was, initially at least, intimidated by him. But there was an all-too-brief period when we were genuine friends.

I was alphabetically used -- Amused, Bemused, Confused -- by Huynhl's politicking. I was never sure whether it was in the service of democracy, the sitting government, the military security of his unit, or his own political ambitions. I suspect it was a combination of all of the above, with emphasis on the latter. Still, Huynhl's political campaigning was a wonder to behold. During December and January, particularly, he would often ask me to accompany him on one of his "operations." Sometimes we took troops; others, just the two of us and a driver went. My letters home during December reflect two typical cases:

December 2, 1967 [on a battalion "search and destroy" mission mounted at Huynhl's initiative into his old district territory]: "... Yesterday's operation was a complete farce, a stroll through the coconuts, which was at once an irritating waste of time and a pleasant change of pace. We spent most of our time lying on the river bank drinking coconut milk, and



the rest was spent stopping in to see families the *Thieu Ta* knows from the days he was district chief here.

"... [T]heir hospitality was wonderful. We got something to eat or drink almost everywhere we stopped, and even ate dinner with one of the families..."

December 6, 1967 [Chac Kha is the largest village of Kien Binh District north of the Cai Be River]: "... This morning was interesting. The *Thieu Ta* asked me to go to Chac Kha with him to meet the local VC tax collectors. Well, that sounded different! So I went with him, and soon had the story: last night, the PF (Popular Forces) at Chac Kha set an ambush on the canal south of town, and about 2000 saw a sampan with 3 men in it coming up stream. The PF platoon leader waved the sampan in, but the men inside, being VC cadre ... drew pistols and attempted to fight. The whole thing was over in 15 seconds. It was a stunning victory - three VC tax collectors in one fell swoop! It is almost impossible to identify one VC party official in an area, much less kill one. But the PF eliminated 3 at one time, and the greatest thing of it all was that one of them lived. So now we've got a high, political-type VC prisoner - that is, if he stays alive. He's got a few holes in him. After seeing his two companions this morning, it's a wonder he's still alive. They look not unlike Swiss cheese. *Thieu Ta* took the bodies to the hamlet and laid them out in the market place so everyone could see 'the wicked witch is dead.' The villagers, including the kids, all gathered around to spit on and kick the bodies, and a few of the local PF were so carried away, they shot the VC a few more times for good measure. Well, it's a different view towards death than our own, to say the least... The brutality of the adults is, perhaps,



understandable, but what disturbs me is groups of 6 to 10 year-old children who are already so used to violent death that they can view a mutilated, horribly mangled human being with detached boredom.

"C'est la guerre, says my counterpart..."

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More to the point in the immediate case, however, Huynhl was a graduate of the U.S. Army Engineering School at Fort Belvoire, Virginia. Huynhl had bunkers built all around the perimeter of Xa Xiem, had the rice cut to ground level in all the adjacent paddies, and strung barbed wire entanglements as only a graduate of Belvoire could. When the VC came back and stupidly attacked again (three days before my joining the battalion), they had left 60 bodies hanging in *Mot Muoui Lam's* wire without inflicting a single scratch on a single ARVN soldier.

The citizens of Xa Xiem, for whose benefit all this was ostensibly being done by both sides, had wisely abandoned the place after 2nd battalion's disaster. Huynhl now made it into a fortress that would have pleased the planners of Verdun. The only civilians were wives and children of *Mot Muoui Lam's* soldiers, who somehow found their way there and shared the dangers with their husbands, and also a handful of Cambodian Buddhist monks.

But Revolutionary Development was not to be abandoned. "You asked me what Revolutionary Development is," I wrote my wife on December 7. "Well, it's how we're going to win the war... It's sort of a domestic Peace Corps, and consists of young men stumbling around in black pajamas ('So they can identify with the peasants they've come to help'). They've got a lot more enthusiasm than ability, and they go



around singing patriotic songs while they build things that collapse as fast as they build them. And when the sun goes down, you've almost got to hold them 'among the peasants they've come to help' at gun point...In effect, RD is a brilliant idea that's not going to work..." At nights, we assigned them to the portion of the perimeter we thought least likely to be attacked.

We were stuck there, shelled and harassed constantly. The Americans made a sign, "Xa Xiem Xucs." The humor was lost on the Vietnamese.

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There were three other Americans with me, the four of us making a full battalion advisory team. The team's role was to "support and advise" the Vietnamese, a rather presumptuous statement insofar as the "advise" part went, given the relative experience levels. The Viets had been fighting for years, and we learned from them.

In real life, we were there to keep higher (American) echelons advised of operational developments, usually via radio; confirm any body counts, a particularly unpleasant job function; and, because we owned, with few exceptions, everything that flew, coordinate and control all aerial support. This included air strikes, whether by fixed wing aircraft or helicopter; aerial resupply; and, most importantly from the standpoint of advisorly leverage, medevacs: if the Viets were doing something in battle we strongly thought wrong, or failing to do something we thought important, we could simply refuse to evacuate their wounded on the grounds of being unwilling to jeopardize our



flight crews. But during our Xa Xiem days, I was still several months away from being that calloused.

My teammates were First Lieutenant George ("Geo") Heatherington, 24, of San Diego, California, by way of the University of California at Berkeley and the Armor Officer Candidate School at Ft. Knox, Kentucky; Staff Sergeant Joseph Pinkham, a Down-Easter from Maine; and Staff Sergeant William Church, a 6'2" Alabaman, who arrived in December, replacing a SFC Bennett. The NCOs were both 31.

Geo and I sniffed around each other for quite a while like a pair of strange dogs. He was 5'11," thin, and shaggy-haired. A Californian? Berkeley? I thought him the reincarnation of Karl Marx in Clint Eastwood's body. He naturally assumed that I, a Regular Infantryman from Georgia, was Attila the Hun in disguise. He accepted my arrival with a certain amount of relief, however - a terrified tanker in an infantryman's hell, he welcomed the

presence of a Regular Grunt as a Godsend.



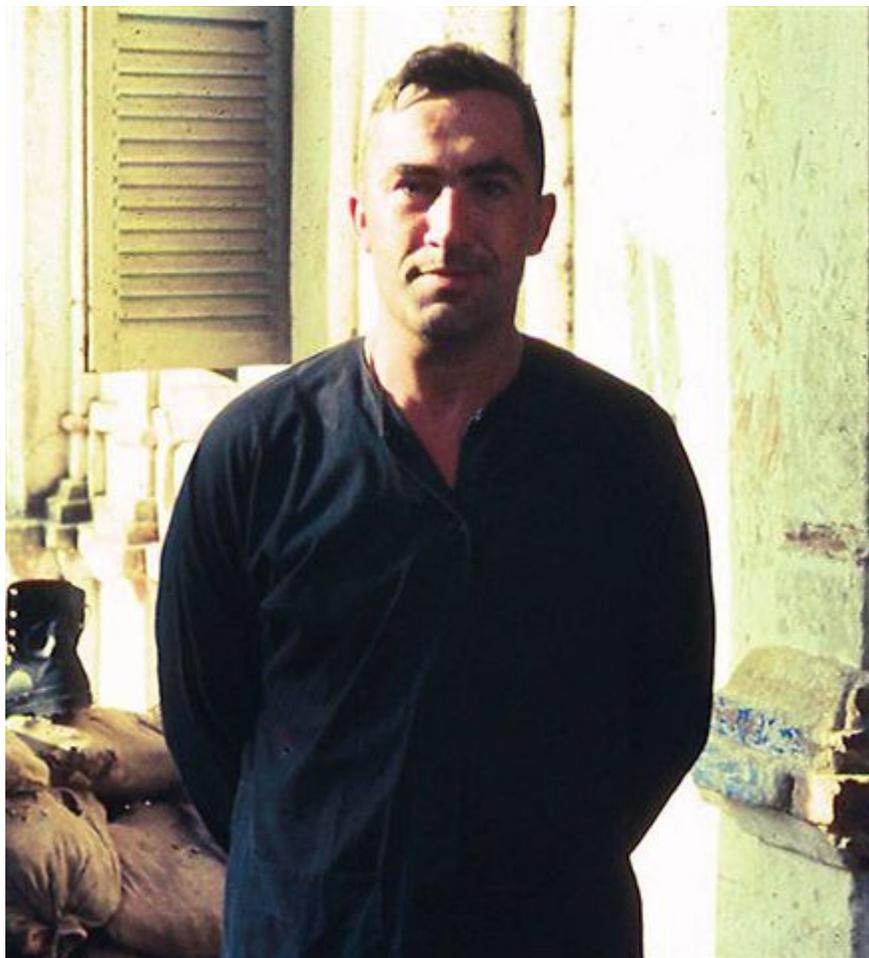
I came to be an admirer of Geo. He was the older of two brothers raised in a single-parent home in San Diego. His mother had difficulty controlling the two boys, and his younger brother became caught up in gang activities. When Geo graduated from high school, he took his little brother with him to the Bay Area to get him away from this dangerous environment and reared him single-handedly. He had seen his brother enter college before leaving for the



Army. We had long talks at night during December and January and the stereotypes faded.

Senior-subordinate relationships can't develop into real friendships in a combat unit. I had to know that, should it become necessary to issue an order that might result in a subordinate's death, I could expect it to be obeyed immediately and without question. Men don't willingly accept such orders from buddies. But Geo and I came as close to friendship as we could.

Pinkham, too, was initially an odd duck to me. He was short and stocky, square-jawed, black-haired and brown-eyed, constantly in need of a shave. He packed a pistol rather than a shoulder weapon, and in action wore an olive drab cowboy hat. No helmet for Pinkham. He sometimes struck me as dense. He had the annoying and unsafe habit of carrying a round in the chamber of his .45, and kept the pistol on half-cock in its holster. I had at first kidded him about it, but finally directly ordered him to stop doing that. Then, one day, as we were climbing out of our jeep in Rach Gia, his .45 went off, just as I had warned it some day would, and blew the side of his boot off, barely missing his foot. Facing my furious (and terrified) wrath, he managed, as he often would, to grin his way out of it.



Pinkham's saving grace was his ability to put on a sheepish, little boy grin, a sort of Yankee "Aw, shucks" routine, which was so unaffected, so genuinely innocent, that it was impossible to stay mad at him. I was to find that he didn't know the meaning of fear.

Church was solid and reliable, quiet and professional, Black. He, too, had some irritating characteristics. He couldn't swim, and was deathly afraid of water. The bureaucrat who assigned him to duty in the Mekong delta must have been a moron, but, then, things like fear of water don't show up in military records.



Church had a distracting tendency to suffer silently, to not speak up when he should have. The team ate with the Vietnamese when we were at Xa Xiem. When Church joined us, he picked at his food and really didn't eat anything for the first week. It worried me, so I pulled him aside one night after dinner and said, "Look, Sergeant, a lot of Americans don't like Vietnamese food. You don't have to eat it just because the rest of us do. We can get you a couple of cases of C-rations next time we're in Rach Gia." He responded, "It's not the food, sir, I love Vietnamese food. It's just that I'm no good with chop sticks, and I'm afraid I'll embarrass ya'll."

While on the subject of Church's silent suffering, I never knew him to sleep a wink while in the field on combat operations, or to ever complain about it. When his radio watch was completed, he'd stay awake and on duty; he was too polite to awaken anyone. We appreciated the extra sleep.

I wasn't the easiest person to get along with, either. After Geo finally decided that I wasn't really a closet Nazi, he was consistently irritated by my analyses of the local political situation (I insisted we were losing by virtue of leaving vast tracts of the countryside undisputed). My sense of humor embarrassed him, and my insistence on speaking (very bad) Vietnamese appalled him. One day, in the worst of the two latter worlds, I made a poster that said, "*Hao Xur O Hoa Xu*," and hung it in the area where the advisors slept. Unsuspecting Vietnamese wandered in and out all day, stopping to read aloud:

"How's your ol' wazoo?"



Then they'd shrug their shoulders and shake their heads in bewilderment at the American Captain rolling around on his bunk giggling like an idiot. Geo never got used to it.

We initially had trouble settling on what to call one another. We were the only Americans in a unit of 450 Vietnamese, and, of necessity and choice, very close. We saw no point in saluting each other all over the lot, or using our formal titles in day-to-day conversation. On the other hand, Pinkham, Church and I were Regulars and first-name familiarity was unthinkable. And we all were excruciatingly aware of our roles as representatives of the United States Army, and the resulting responsibility to behave professionally.

We hit upon the very acceptable expedient of using our Vietnamese ranks, which, while ostensibly maintaining a formal relationship and the distinctions in rank, became, in daily usage, our affectionate nicknames for one another. I was *Dai Uy*, Geo, *Trung Uy*, and Pinkham and Church had to share *Trung Si*.

Heatherington and Pinkham were with the battalion when I joined it two days after the second VC attack. When the assault had started, Geo, just coming off radio watch, had been sitting atop a bunker on the firing line, smoking a cigarette. At least thirty VC had simultaneously risen from the ground in the classic kneeling grenade-throwing position only twenty-five meters away from him, and he never quite got over it. We were introduced by my boss, Major Langlais, two days later, and after the Major had left to return to Long Xuyen (Langlais nervously and - to



me, mysteriously - declined Huynhl's repeated invitations to stay for dinner and spend the night), I asked Geo, "Well, Lieutenant, what's your honest assessment of the military situation here?" His response was a quiet, deadly serious and blood-chilling, "We're all going to die tonight."

I wrote my wife that evening, "My lieutenant is named Heatherington, a young Berkley graduate who is very capable and extremely intelligent. He has made quite an impression on me."

Church, as mentioned earlier, joined later, a refugee from a hard-luck cavalry unit of the 21st ARVN Division to our south. He had been riding atop an M59 armored personnel carrier (APC) when it struck a mine. Although he had been thrown/blown clear without serious injury, he could never again bring himself to mount a track; so he was assigned to an infantry unit, mine, arriving in mid-December.

While in Xa Xiem, we all suffered from a terror unique to advisors. When there was a disruption in the night, such as a mortar attack, there would be a change in noise patterns that would cause us to awaken and roll out of our cots onto the floor, where we would lie for the few seconds it took for our heads to clear and grasp what was going on about us. Our secret fear during those few seconds was that the Vietnamese would run off and leave us. During those first panic-filled moments, the Viets seemed to forget any English they ever knew. We perceived the order to run had been already given, and everyone knew it but us. But in every real instance, we found Huynhl calmly reading his *Time* and our cook, Ut, preparing a midnight snack (usually



a sugar cane soup). Huynhl would soothingly say something like, "They're only registering their tubes tonight - three rounds per gun. Tomorrow night, they shoot 100 rounds per gun. But we'll go outside the perimeter and watch." (The following night, 300 shells fell on Xa Xiem precisely at the predicted time. The battalion sat out in the rice paddies and watched. We had left about 25 men behind in the village to guard it; some of the wives of this group refused to leave their husbands and stayed behind. It was from this group that our only casualties of the affair came: when we got back to our quarters, Geo Heatherington and I were each to find a dead, minced, mangled woman in our beds, placed there by their grieving husbands. They were my first war dead).

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