

The Boy and the Water Buffalo

It is hard to justify how a group of men
Would massacre a village without good reason why
But when I reflect on my similar experiences back then
I can grasp what happened at the place called My Lai.

I was sent to the area near Quang Ngai
As an emergency replacement of another FO
No one explained the terrible reason why
I was just told to pack my field gear and go.

I landed from a chopper on a desolate hill
No one rose to meet me or brief me why
There were no officers or NCOs in sight to grill
Only a group of desolate EMs who seemed about to cry.

The Company CP had tripped a large IED
And much of the CP group had been caught in the blast
Eight KIA and seven WIA were the result of the deed
And most of the Company's officers were a thing of the past.

A new Captain flew in to command the clan
And a lieutenant arrived to help lead the dispirited men
They needed to take charge and devise a plan
And I sensed this new adventure was about to begin.

The Captain informed me that we would leave very soon
We would return to the spot of the ugly detonation
The new CP group and the third platoon
Would rejoin the Company to continue the mission.

So began a sojourn West of Quang Ngai
North of the VC's stronghold at Horseshoe Bend
Only 30 KM west of My Lai
A trail of misery seemingly without end

We did a combat assault but were unopposed
And headed NW to join the rest of the men
Into a bucolic farmland of rice paddies and groves
With no indication of the Viet Minh.

But over the days and weeks I would quickly learn
That the VC played a game of attrition
No victory from large engagements theirs to earn
But a deadly pattern of slow killing was their mission.

The key to their plan was a simple ploy
A daily routine to assure our death
The key point of contact was a local boy
Who followed on a water buffalo our daily path?

Every day as we left when our night laager position
The boy would arrive to follow our track

He would offer us cokes a simple proposition
But his role was to follow and at dusk report back.

To his father, uncle, or others
Who would return to plant mines along our tracks
In the morning the blast would maim one of our brothers
And the toll would accrue from repeated attacks.

The enemy remained largely unseen
We would rarely confront them in a face to face fight
And the daily attrition grew to be obscene.
And made a mockery of our military might.

So now I can see how as the losses would mount
And without chance of payback become an insane obsession
The entire population became the enemy to take to account
Only death to them all would settle the account.

So Calley and company would slash and burn.
Without thought to the horror that they caused
Maybe this is the critical thing we must learn
There are limits to humanities ability to learn.

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