



First Dead

by **Richard Shand**

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The village next to the firebase was ostensibly Viet Cong, although we regularly visited it by day on our time off. On one occasion, however, I saw the Thais level their 105 howitzers and direct fire into the village to ward off a ground attack.

I had watched the Thais drag the dead bodies of the Viet Cong behind a 3/4 ton truck into the firebase. The bodies were pulled by cords were tied to the feet and the heads lolled in the dust. The Thais then dragged the trussed bodies by hand across the stretch of ground between the berm and the radio hooch and deposited them in front of the American major. He stood with his hands on his hips, silent for a while. Then he gave a nod of approval to the small crowd of Thais and strode into the hooch. I walked over to examine the bodies.

"You gotta get a picture of this," Steve had said, running for his camera. We had never seen dead Cong before. There were three, all bedraggled, half naked and covered with dust. Their faces were curiously blackened. I took a closer look. They were very young, their straight black hair disheveled, and one of them had a gaping hole where his left eye should have been. For all intents they could just be three youths lying peacefully on the ground together, until closer examination revealed small holes clotted with blood and lumps of flesh riddling the bodies. Small holes, neat and carefully drilled here and there on the chest, one or two on the arms and legs, and the faces, except for the one, virtually untouched, the eyes cloudy and half closed.

"Claymores," the major said. He had come up from behind me.

"Hmm..." I was noncommittal.

"We got them in the wire between us the village."

I nodded assent.

"Come over here!" I followed him to the front steps of the radio hooch. "Look at these." There were three weapons displayed in front of me. One was an AK-47, the standard assault rifle of the NVA, another a rather battered Chicom rifle, and the third a most unusual M-16.

"Don't touch it!" the major cautioned. I pulled my hand back. " This is a grenade launcher." He indicated a squat tube under the barrel. " It still has a round in it. Experimental. We don't even have one yet." He smiled.

I shook my head. "How did they ever get a hold of it?"

"I don't know." The major spread his hands. Crazy war.

In accordance with Thai traditions, the bodies were buried at the corners of the firebase outside the wire - a practice intended to keep the ghosts of the dead men earthbound to ward off future VC attacks. One was buried just in front of our position. For days afterwards I could catch the sickly sweet scent of decay on the evening breeze.