

Valuable Papers

By Tom Peters

Adapted excerpt from "Step Away from the War"

Our unit would see only sporadic action in the spring of 1970, until April 30th. Two regiments from the 9th and 25th Infantry, two squadrons of armored support, and three Ranger battalions would join the 8700 ARVN troops in an operation called Toan Thang 42. The invasion of Cambodia was on. The very next day, the US launched a B-52 bomber raid in the area, dropping 775 tons of explosives deep in the area just west of us. The grand prize the generals were looking for was the Central Office of South Vietnam (COSVN). This was supposed to be the center of all operations for the North Vietnamese in South Vietnam. It was never found, but not for a lack of trying. Most of the NVA and Viet Cong had moved west into Cambodia the week before. We all knew that large forces had been taking refuge in Cambodia for years. I kept a low profile because I had only a short time left in my tour. We all knew, we were most vulnerable as newbies and short timers. That vulnerability showed itself during a reconnaissance operation designed to put us out ahead of some straggling NVA troops that were moving west from our position. We had a relatively new lieutenant and troops that had been in country for some time but hadn't seen much action. A gung-ho sergeant that I wasn't too fond of took point position this machete yielding job was first in the column and a position I was assigned to for my first 6 months. I kept near the radio man concerned that the lieutenant might lead us into an ambush. The sergeant wanted to take a road, but I urged the lieutenant not to listen to him.

"Mind your own business PETERS." the sergeant said. "I have only 13 days left SERGEANT."

“Hand me the machete and take a break!” I said, staring a hole through him. There was serious rage in my voice. I got my way.

As we advanced through the thick forest, winding around bomb craters, I noticed that we were walking parallel to a slightly raised ridge line to our left. The hair on the back of my neck signaled ambush, so I eased off our set azimuth and veered to the right. The lieutenant kept correcting me, but this where my memory fails me, I know that there was strong arguing between the lieutenant, sergeant, and myself. There were bunkers involved, and threats made over whether to attack or call for artillery. The friction must have put me over the edge mentally. Tensions flared and threats were made. Four days later, I got on a resupply chopper and flew back to our home base, Cu Chi. I was technically AWOL, Absent without official leave. When the resupply chopper landed in Cu Chi, I reported to our Executive Officer (XO), First Lieutenant Harry Morris. He was concerned that I had left the field early, but he told me not to worry about it. After checking in my weapon and ammunition he directed me to the now empty barracks. I worried anyway. The captain could be angry enough to court-martial me for leaving the field without permission. My actions in the last week had been confrontational and stressful, but I sleep for over 12 full hours.

After breakfast, I went to Lt. Morris’ office. “Did you hear from Captain Mitchell?” “No, I’m going to assume your captain is far too busy to pursue a court-martial on a decorated soldier with 356 days in country. Let’s just see what happens. I’m sure it will be fine, relax and let me handle it.” With two days left in my tour the lieutenant entered my barracks with a smile and an envelope.

“All your papers are in order and a cargo plane leaves in the morning for Ton Son Nhat airport.”

“Thank you, sir! Thank you, sir! I stood at attention as he handed me the most valuable papers I had ever received.