

Chapter 8



The Man in White

Deep wrinkles furrowed his brow and cheeks. He shuffled, cumbered by his years. Ivory thatch and goatee complemented his white shirt and trousers, contrasting with green bamboo hedge and brown paddy. He was barefoot. Puttering near a hedgerow, he waved and watched as we—alert and cautious—traversed a fallow field.

Charlie Company had conducted a helicopter combat assault into a nearby rice paddy two nights before, where we reinforced a platoon fighting off a fierce attack near some grass shacks in Dodge City.

After that battle, and after the firefights that followed, we swept the neighboring fields and hedges under a sweltering sun, searching for the Viet Cong who usually triggered a gunfight in and around Dodge. The VC honeycombed the ville with spider holes and tunnels; finding them all proved impossible. We destroyed those we found, but on each ramble through Dodge we encountered new burrows and fresh enemy soldiers.

Enemy automatic weapons fire crackled, digging up the ground around us, driving us to cover behind the nearest paddy dike. The

firefight intensified as we fought back with rifles, machine guns, and grenade launchers. I forgot about the man in white, concentrating instead on staying alive and defeating the enemy. The brief fight ended, inconclusive, with no friendly losses. We would search the distant tree line for evidence of enemy casualties.

Advancing toward the enemy-occupied hedgerow, I flinched as heart-wrenching wailing wavered across the paddy. Turning toward the sound, I glimpsed a bent old woman hobbling toward the trees to my left, arms stretched in front of her as if pulled by an invisible cord. She threw herself onto the ground, disappearing behind the trees and shrubs.

I remembered the man in white standing near those trees, and with ugly suspicion tormenting me I changed direction, striding to the tree line.

Beyond the trees, arms wrapped around her dead husband, the widow vented her anger, her grief, her despair. She screamed, she bawled, she sobbed, and finally she whimpered, sinking into the emptiness of a future without her mate. Her tears diluted a red splotch that merged with others as his blood seeped from multiple bullet holes in his shirt, transforming his white clothing to crimson.

Our eyes met. I shuddered at the anguish and intense hatred surging across the abyss that separated us. Her feelings needed no common language to bridge the distance from her soul to mine. Unable to withstand such intensity, I shifted my gaze to the dead farmer. As if he had known the end was near, and had welcomed it, his wrinkled face was serene. Choked with emotion, I whispered, "I'm sorry," and turned away.

The hapless man's strange reaction, standing upright in full view and waving when caught in the middle of a firefight, mystified me. Whether he attempted to draw our attention away from the VC's position I can't say. Perhaps he tried to warn us. The poor peasant died as he had lived, with dignity and calm acceptance of his fate.

The man in white became just another number in a war where inflated statistics enhanced or destroyed careers. Uncertain as to which side caused his death, I reported him as a VC killed in action. He probably was a VC, at least when the Viet Cong controlled his village. When we won the shoot-outs, he became a friendly Vietnamese farmer. Without the means to change his circumstances, he changed his loyalty. I couldn't blame him for that.

I turned for a final look at that huddled heap of human misery and then walked away, toward the next hedgerow and the next firefight.