

their genitals thrust forward. They knew a good thing when they saw one. They knew what the men were after.

And sometimes fights would break out among the scavengers over a bar of soap or a Coke, or over some half-eaten sandwich or half-full can of vegetables. They would hit each other with their fists and claw at each other's eyes. They would bite and scream and wail like banshees.

Once the six men returned to the Company, triumphantly riding the sides of the truck, their weapons brandished like jubilant Freedom Fighters entering Paris, they would collect their money and spend all afternoon and evening in the club, drinking their winnings.

And it probably would have continued forever, except one raucous afternoon in '69, the week's lucky six went out drunk without their Coke and soap and played the game for real.

ASYLUM

The asylum was in the most hotly contested area of Bien-Hoa Province, near the tiny hamlet of Tam-Hiep -- a few dusty, isolated weed huts along the muddy banks of the Bien-Hoa River. The asylum was three hundred yards away from the village, surrounded by a high cement fence topped with embedded glass to keep the insane in and the evil spirits from drifting over to contaminate the village. The Vietnamese considered insanity catching.

Since the insane were locked in and no one wished to be contaminated, the patients were left to fend for themselves. There were no attendants. The courtyard of the asylum was piled high with bones, discarded paper, feces, and busy rats.

Once a day, in the early morning, their food was brought by an old man from the village in a creaky water buffalo cart. He placed the day's ration on a squat table just inside the gate, and left again until the next morning. There would be a caldron of rice, a pot of meat, ten large French loaves, three packs of Park Lane cigarettes, and two small boxes of matches.

When the Fifth Infantry broke through to the village and entered the asylum grounds, they were appalled by what they saw. They stared with drooping mouths at the incredible filth. They couldn't believe it.

Then something drew them to it. They dropped their weapons and other gear at their sides and went to work. They didn't hesitate. They dug right in.

They opened the doors and windows and drove out all the rats. They buried and burned all the garbage. They brought out paint, boards, and nails, and all the other equipment they had lugged along for the pacification of the village.

All the villagers from Tam-Hiep came out and looked on, amazed once again at the strange things appearing before their eyes. They watched the men work all day and on into the evening. They took a spontaneous holiday. They watched as the infantrymen fed those who had difficulty feeding themselves. They watched giant, battle-hardened soldiers take grown Vietnamese men and women onto their laps and delicately feed them with their mess-kit spoons. They watched them fix and paint and clean. They watched them and smiled. They shook their heads.

Once it grew dark, the men set up camp on the asylum courtyard grounds. They pitched tents, cut trenches, and ate C-rations and leftovers. The villagers returned to their weed huts for their own meals. As they squatted around their ricepots and shoveled in from their bowls, they chatted noisily. They grinned and smiled and laughed often. These Americans. They shook their heads. Strange people, these Americans.

Later, after the men of the Fifth Infantry finished eating and smoking, for a little relaxation and amusement, and to relieve the tension they had been under, they raped and killed all the villagers. Then they burned the village down.

At dawn, they broke camp and left. The insane waved goodbye from the courtyard gate, and the men waved back. The village still smoldered as the men fanned out into the black-green jungle and disappeared. The insane ambled happily back into the asylum and went about the business of being insane.

-- Rick Christman

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