

**THE HILLS**

By

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*“One could not idealise the natural beauty of the surroundings. It harboured  
a committed and clever enemy somewhere within it.”*

*- Neil Matthews, Australian soldier*

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I saw them for the first time from up in a chopper.

“First timer?” The door-gunner yelled, looking over. I nodded.

“Welcome to Vietnam.”

I was new, brand new, not a week in-country, embarrassed about my new boots and un-stretched fatigues and my answer to the standard Vietnam conversation starter; “How long you been in-country?”

The door gunner was leaning out, looking down. “Bet you’ve never seen anything like this before?”

Almost parallel to the earth below, the Vietnamese terrain over Phuoc Tuy was all lush triple-canopy jungle divided by open farmlands and rivers.

Banking through thick haze, the Huey dropped, as the helicopter passed over a dense set of defoliated trees, empty and eerie, and scarred ground that spanned acres where the cover was all but eaten away by chemical or napalm, all Jerry Lee Lewis, *Great Balls of Fire*.

All I could see of the hills was what the transient mists allowed, and all I felt was hostility, secreted by the fog of the rainless monsoon.

The chopper would take several hits, shattered plastic all over the floor, a door gunner sprawled out dead among the plastic and a pilot, bleeding from the chin, in its throes up front.

“Welcome to Vietnam,” the dead door-gunner had said before my section leapt from the Huey and threaded off into those same hills.

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At the end of my first week in-country I had met an apologetic corporal from C Company, relaying a story he had heard.

“Patrol went up Long Hai. One man came back. Dead before we could find out what happened.”

I waited for the rest of the story but when I asked what happened the corporal just looked apologetic. I would soon learn it wasn’t that sort of story.

He was twenty-one, young in rank, and this was his second tour. The corporal looked like the perfect soldier: early twenties, slim but muscular, fresh-faced, cropped blond hair as per the military standard, an aquiline nose indicative of his European descent and he wore a crisply pressed khaki uniform, starched and fit as though he had been born in it.

Despite his clean fatigues I could see from his boots that he’d been in the hills a lot over here.

The stories were not real before the hills and they taught me little.

Proper war stories could only be heard by friends, about friends, in stories brought in from the field, from the hills. It was all fantasy stuff otherwise.

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Midnight. The darkness that filters through the rubber trees is almost impenetrable. But the enemy are here, the enemy are close.

Vietnam was not like the older wars.

There was no dedicated front where opposing armies, armed to their eyes, would face each other across the line, fingers on triggers and knuckles white.

It was hard to kill the VC, who had the edge, squatting in black pyjamas, jabbering in Vietnamese, they could be anyone, they could be everyone. Nowhere and everywhere simultaneously. They come as stealthy lone killers. Sometimes they never come at all.

It played hell with the nerves when all there was to do was to stay alert and have one's SLR ready. In combat there is no choice but to pay attention, to see things never seen before.

I'd stand, sometimes, half-frozen by the immensity of my situation, no bearings to rely on and none in sight, with thoughts I couldn't articulate.

The soldier's fatal flaw is the punishing anxiety that one day, any day, Charlie and his reach might come closer than he had come so far. That anxiety alone was enough push men past breaking point. And there wasn't much release in contact—a meeting with the VC.

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Each day, despite the uncertainties, we made our legs move; one boot forever chasing the next.

We spent an awful lot of time in the hills.

We patrolled those hills bent beneath our packs, marching on blistered feet, with dirt running in muddy tracks down our foreheads and necks and clinging to our uniforms and praying for air that wasn't entirely moisture until we could barely feel the agonising ground beneath our boots.

We'd been trapped and ambushed in those hills, lain under fire with little more than the foliage that grew on their barren ridges to shield us.

We'd been blown apart in those hills, all booby traps, mortar attacks, tunnels, Claymores and land mines, until we left with faces as scarred and cratered as the ground itself; the unremoved pieces of shrapnel our internalised service medals.

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It has been a quiet war of late, time spent mostly at camp, all of us grunts hanging around, stories and faces.

Even behind Nui Dat's 12-kilometre barbed wire perimeter, surrounded by Australian troops, that alertness, that tightness can still be felt.

Here it was all pay vouchers, smokes, letters from home, information handouts, sermons, games of cards, war-spoils in the form of expensive Japanese cameras and watches from Hong Kong and chattering radios with Jimi Hendrix and Johnny Cash on repeat, their music paradoxically dissolving the distance between Vietnam and Australia and yet reinforcing it in the same breath.

It was all a reflection.

Pictures of stacked Viet Cong dead, burning monks, wounded and weeping soldiers, screaming Mama-Sans and the haunting knowledge that for all that will come out of Vietnam, the straight history will never be known.

How could it be? It cannot be understood if it isn't experienced.

There is an unknown history, a history not of operations, of places, of soldiers, of commanders, or of weapons but of experiences and guesses and truths and moments and memories and the hills that compounded it all.

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I sat in the dirt, lit a cigarette for something to do, and the cigarette burnt my fingertips. I was thankful. If we weren't patrolling, we were waiting. I'll never forget the monotony.

In those brief moments when the ground underfoot had ceased rumbling, when there were no signs of airstrikes or firing from the perimeter, when there was no incoming or outgoing, and there was a lot of incoming, the war was inextricably tense.

Even in the deep, dark jungle, where there were more ways to die than could be counted, the tension was palpable.

The sun and the heat and the endless hills and paddies. Smoking cigarettes. Digging foxholes.

Wishing for more than rations. Slapping mosquitoes. Cursing the Vietnamese.

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The soldiers, often with eyes watering, would keep diaries and write poems.

Many wrote home about the country, about the scenery; about palms and grasses, about pine trees and rice paddies.

Descriptions of South East Asian flora and fauna drawn and described with such animation, a simple grunt was almost an artist, but landscape was no longer scenery anymore, it was *terrain*, and aesthetic value meant little if it didn't provide tactical use. Young shoulders. Old heads. Different eyes.

I tried to write. I didn't manage it too often because reading and writing, and truly focusing, was like trying to read the faces of the Vietnamese, stoic and dogged, and there wasn't much I wanted to focus on less than that.

When I did write, I wrote about the hills—for it was all the hills we wished were flat that made for the infantryman's Vietnam.

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I tried to relax once. I uncurled my balled fists and exhaled, the first exhale I allowed myself since being in 'Nam and tried to let the thoughts go. I never could.

Not even at six months in-country on R&R in Vung Tau, on that tiny thumb of land that stretched out to the ocean, watching the South China Sea break the Vietnamese sunlight into a mosaic of reflected colour, could I feel at ease.

Within the punishing fear and boredom of combat people changed. Many retreated into the war-washed positions of cynicism and despair that Vietnam knew well. Some went insane, some found religion, and some found compassion.

Vietnam taught us all.

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There was a soldier sitting perched on the stump of a rubber tree. He was alone. It was the corporal. I hadn't seen him since the end of my first week in-country, and he looked on the verge of collapse now. Vietnam's inescapable terminal exhaustion.

He like so many who had surely left recruit training with the physique of a middleweight boxer would return from their time in-country with ribs in full view; all skin and bones.

He had the same stare that the rest of the soldiers here had, back from the boozier, drinking a beer.

Yes, he said, it sure would be good to get out of this place.

He sat there looking at the hills, and I was suddenly convinced they could hypnotise a man; they held such fearful mystery and marked the secret histories soldiers would never be able to share.

He unfolded his six-foot frame, looked at the hills again, and stood up torpidly.

"Oh, man," he said. "The hills are getting old."



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Phuoc Tuy province, South Vietnam, November 1966: 6RAR soldiers follow an armoured personnel carrier (APC) during Operation Ingham, a “search and destroy” mission.*



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

CUN/72/0017B/VN

*Phuoc Tuy Province, South Vietnam, February 1972: Aerial view of Long Hai Training Centre at the foot of the notorious Long Hai Mountains.*

## **Acknowledgements:**

This story was inspired in no small part by the incredible service and sacrifice of all Australians who served in Vietnam during the period 1962-75 which is forever marked by exceptional bravery amid gruesome conditions, a brutal enemy, and the officially endorsed ignorance they would be met with on their return home.

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