



# CAP

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### *The Old Man*

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Out of all the literally hundreds of patrols I went on just a few stand out in my mind. The rest are blurred with the passing of time. The events in this story show how dark human nature can be at times; how combat can rob a man of his ability to reason; cause him to cross that fine line between war and murder. I'm certainly not proud of what happened that day but at the same time I am prepared to share it with others.

I was with Sandy Norton that day. It was a typical day patrol for us; two marines and probably four or five PF's. We were bored, hot, didn't want to be there. Everyone who was in Vietnam knows exactly what I mean. I normally carried a 60 and sometimes took it on patrol but that day I had traded for a 16. Sandy was carrying his blooper. The patrol had been uneventful as were most patrols over there. As I recall we were somewhere along the river at the southern shoreline of Vinh Chau Island.

At some point we noticed an old man going down river alone in a small boat. It was hard to tell his age; I would guess somewhere in his 60's-ancient by Vietnamese living standards. We yelled at him "lai dai...lai dai", "come here...come here". The PF's with us did the same thing. He seemed to be ignoring us. What? Ignore Americans? How dare he do such a thing!

That instantly made us hate him no matter what happened after that. We contacted CACO and had the PF's do the same with their superiors at Hoi An.

After what seemed like several minutes CACO came back on the radio and to our surprise told us in the clear to "blow him away". I still remember my cold and precise answer- "Roger that". That's all I said. It meant no more to me that I was about to kill a human being than opening a can of c-rations. As I raised my weapon our PF's began to argue with us. They were very upset because of what was about to happen. Looking back they were the only ones showing any kind of rational thinking. Of course I didn't want to hear anything they had to say. After all, who was in charge here? We Americans that's who!! By the time I was through arguing and pushed the PF's aside the old man had gone around a bend in the river. We no longer had a clear shot at him. That made us even more upset. I emptied several magazines in his general direction and Sandy lobbed a few blooper rounds his way. We may have gotten lucky(?) and killed him by sheer accident. I'll never know. I do know that I would have killed that old man and watched his body float down stream if I had gotten a clear shot. And knowing what I would have done has haunted me all these years.

That old man may have been VC suspect. He may even have been VC. But looking back I still think it would have been murder and not war if we had killed him under those circumstances. He may have ignored us; it's just as likely he was deaf and couldn't hear us at all. I hope we missed him and that he lived many years after that. I also hope that writing this will ease some of the guilt I have felt for what I would have done to him. I think I did cross that fine line and have to live with it from now on.