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## **Encounter at Charlie Battery**

By JOHN EDDY

I extended prostrate in the dirt and blackness of another night in Nam. You can learn to handle enemy rockets and mortars, but no amount of training prepares you for insanity.

The year was 1968. I was a 20-year-old marine adrift on what was labeled a tour in Vietnam. I felt each of those 13,000 miles separating me from Myrtle Street, Pat Stern's GTO, and a hamburger. I felt even further from God.

I lay sprawled a few feet behind the steel trails of gun two, one of six 105 mm howitzers that made up Charlie Battery. I was responsible for firing this lean killing machine. The arty piece and I had bonded. I was like her: cold, hard, and callous to war. She smoked gun powder; I smoked pot. Her attitude was angry indifference; mine was cocky defiance. She killed by design; I by desire. This was survival. Tonight though the gun stood silent, and I was coming apart like a frayed sandbag.

First, I realized if I didn't die in Vietnam I was still going to die. Second and more agonizing was the guilt. Not only had I killed with this charming little concoction of steel and high explosives, but I'd loved it. I danced to the forward observer's description of our rounds slaughtering enemy caught in the open. I strutted to the reports of our explosives burying North Vietnamese alive in bunkers. I elated firing into tree-lines, knowing that enemy body parts scattered like dust in a tornado.

I had become a spiritual cancer, a moral wasteland, an emotional morgue. Death's appointment and the thrill of the kill were tag-teaming to destroy me. I lay motionless. Suicide, promising no more pain, sang her little tune. I might have considered the big sleep if I hadn't heard my girlfriend Molly's voice saying, "My parents have found Jesus. He's alive."

Esoteric words? No, but why had I forgotten this, our last conversation, until now? At the time I'd said, "Isn't Jesus just a historic figure that died some 2,000 years ago? Sort of a Christian Buddha?"

"I don't think so, John," she said. "Dad and Mom have been having some powerful experiences with God—charismatic experiences.

"They told me that Jesus died on a cross.... Maybe this is something you need.

"The important part is that Jesus, after 3 days in the grave, rose from the dead. He died in order to forgive our sins, John. I'm mixed up here a little too, but He died for us because He loved us. Somehow in His death He took our sins upon himself."

I didn't say anything. When you're 18 and your world has been muscle cars, cruising, and scoping girls, how do you respond? Finally I managed to say, "Risen from the dead? That's heavy duty."

"My folks say that He ascended to heaven," she continued. "Then He sent His Holy Spirit back to earth for those who become His followers. John, let's do something together. Let's seek Jesus. I'll

pray here, and you can pray in the Marines."

"OK, Molly, I'm not sure what this is about," I said, "but if you want to seek Jesus, I will too. Can't hurt."

In the dirt that night I was not sure how to pray, but I knew it was seeking time. I muttered, "Jesus, if You really are alive, help me and forgive me. I'm afraid; I'm desperate; I'm lonely; and I'm crazy; Jesus, I'm sick of this rabid coyote I've become. If You are really there, come into my life. Help me, Jesus."

Praying calmed me like the little boy I vaguely remembered having been. Granted, my words lacked eloquence, but what followed was miraculous. I was to learn that Christ takes your tiny seed of faith and the opening of your soul's door to give life to a dead heart.

For the next week I found my soul saturated with a permeating peace, as Jesus lived through me. During this time I needed no dope and felt no fear. I wanted my relationships with others to be peaceful also. I mended fences.

Around this time we took a prisoner. Amazing even myself, I stooped to the ground next to where he lay surrounded by 40 angry marines. His body tightened with the anticipation of harm. Lighting a cigarette I gazed into his eyes. Our personalities met. Doing the only thing that came to me, I handed him the menthol-laden Salem. As he accepted my peace offering, hate between us dissolved. Then I knew this guy and his friends were not the enemy. If we'd have grown up together, we would have played baseball, set off firecrackers, caught frogs, and shared other childhood experiences. Greed, hate, intolerance, political corruption, lies, deception, fear, and a host of other human defects were the real enemy.

I looked into the Vietnamese boy's grateful eyes and watched the smoke exhale through his nostrils. His hate had vanished also. We both were so awestruck that, even if we could have communicated, I doubt if either of us would have spoken. God was teaching me more in a momentary gaze than I learned in all my years of school. You can imagine the chills during Scripture exploration when I read, "Love your enemies ... do good to them that hate you" (Matthew 5:44).

Bad days are rare now, but were these early experiences in my Christianity the end of my woes? Has life since then been easy street, smooth sailing, a cakewalk? No. Jesus had not waved a wand over me. Yes, I had been saved, but a drug problem and the legion of symptoms of post-traumatic stress needed to be faced. This took time, courage, and an infusion of grace to overcome. Much had been repressed and recovery's digging is desperately painful. However, I kept remembering to seek and also what Jesus began to teach me that black night somewhere south of Da Nang: "He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer" (Psalm 102:17).

Today when I meet someone down, dirty, and as destitute as I once was, I don't give them advice. I suggest they consider taking Molly's—"Seek Jesus." It worked for me.

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