

### Detachment B-52 Delta Project.

After our assignment to the 1st Infantry Division, Delta was officially on a stand down, I was granted a 15-day leave. On 20 January 1966, I returned to California to marry Keiko Iwai in Reno, Nevada. A week later, we got married. In Southeast Asia, the war continued to escalate during the period between 19 January and 2 February 1965, as Commandos conducted covert maritime raids against Tiger Island, the Mach Nuoc radar installation, Quang Khe and the Dong Hoi naval installations in North Vietnam. Unbeknownst to myself, the worst disaster in the Vietnam War was about to occur to Project Delta.

### 1st Cavalry Division.

#### Operation Masher.

On 24 January 1966, the 1st Cavalry Division's Third Brigade (the Garry Owen Brigade) launched the Bong Son Campaign in eastern Binh Dinh Province of II Corps area. The 1st Cavalry Division had requested long-range, reconnaissance assistance from Field Force Vietnam (FFV), FFV an army corps headquarters, which exercised operational control over U.S. and allied forces in the II Corps Tactical Zone. On the same date, the Commander of FFV, Lt. Gen. Stanley R. Larson, assigned the 5th Special Forces Project DELTA the mission of supporting the 3rd Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division with reconnaissance teams. The 1st Air Cavalry Division (Airmobile), commanded by Major General Harry W.O. Kinnard, was located southwest of Bong Son about 40 miles, at An Khe in the central highlands. Initially, this operation was officially known as Operation Masher. But so many Americans having been killed, the name of the operation was changed to Operation White Wing from the second phase on. It began with an air assault into the Cay Giep Mountains, then moved down into the Bong Son Plains and north into the coastal plain. The Masher/White Wing Operation consisted of four phases was to last 41 days.

The 3rd Brigade of the 1st Cav was supported by the aviation assets of the 133rd Assault Support Helicopter Company with 16 CH-47 Chinooks, and the 228th Assault Support Helicopter Battalion also equipped with CH-47 Chinook helicopters. These two units were initially responsible for the night movement of the 3rd Brigade's supporting artillery units. They consisted of Division Artillery (155mm How), the 1st Battalion's 21st (105mm How) 30th (155mm Towed), 77th

Artillery (105/155mm: Self-propelled). They flew into the perilous mountain positions after infantry and engineer troops cleared enemy personnel and immediate timber. Some ten of the Chinook pilots had already been killed. For the first time ever, special slings allowed the CH-54 helicopters to displace the 155mm howitzers to inaccessible mountain top firing positions. Ammunition and supplies were then delivered under heavy fire despite the adverse weather conditions of low ceilings and poor visibility. Echo Battery 82nd Artillery (Aviation) with its OH-13 observation helicopters, "Huey" UH-1B helicopters and O-1 Bird Dog aircraft served as the eyes of the artillery by providing aerial observation and reconnaissance. In addition, it provided aerial rocket artillery, adjustment of artillery fire and medical evacuation.

The huey slicks of the 227th and 229th Assault Helicopter Battalions had a reduced load limit due to flying in the mountains. However, they were extremely busy, ferrying troops and supplies to the infantry and artillery units from their distant base at An Khe. The infantry units of Col. Harold G. Moore's 3rd Brigade suffered high casualties: 70 men killed-in-action and 200 wounded, mostly all on the first day of the operation, against a main force unit well dug in. The Hueys of the 227th and 229th were engaged by the NVA anti-aircraft units and some forty-five helicopters had already been seriously damaged.

Bong Son terrain.

On 26 January, After initial coordination with personnel representing the 1st Cavalry, Detachment B-52 (DELTA Project), left the airfield at the coastal town of Nha Trang and flew by C-123 to the Bong Son airfield. The last elements of DELTA departing Nha Trang arrived at Bong Son by 1700 hours. The DELTA's assigned 145th Aviation Platoon with its 6 HU-1B Iroquois infiltration slicks and 2 HU-1B Iroquois were on site at Bong Son, serving as aerial weapons platforms (gunships). The Americans and South Vietnamese call the town of Hoai Nhon, "Bong Son." On the flight in from Nha Trang, the teams had noticed the abrupt dark forested mountain range to the northwest of Phu My District, which walled off the long, green coastal plains from the interior. The dark ridges of the nearby mountains were ominous and threatening and floated above a heavy ground mist. This rugged terrain was made up of craggy, jungle-covered peaks with deep gullies and draws. The

airfield was located about a mile-and-a-half to the west of the town of Bong Son, between road 514 and the Lai Giang River, on the northwest side of the Cay Giep Mountains. The An Lao River flows southward out of the An Lao Valley to meet the Kim Son River, then to the northeast. When the two rivers meet, they form wide and deep into the Lai Giang River, which continues to flow northeast to the South China Sea. The town "Bong Son" is located on the north side of the Lai Giang River.

The Forward Operating Base (FOB) Headquarters of the 1st Cavalry's 3rd Brigade and the nearby Delta Project combined command post and logistical site were positioned in the open level area near the ocean at coordinates BR 865965. The immediate area of Hoai Nhon (Bong Son) District was astride the old Mandarin Road, now called Highway 1, and the coastal railroad, the backbone of South Vietnam's north-south transportation system. The Bong Son coastal plain, bordering the South China Sea, is a series of low, flat hills, and a fertile mosaic of criss-crossing silvered streams. Villages there are heavily populated, surrounded by tall palm trees, rice and sugarcane fields, and murky swamp that extend up to Tam Quan in Northeastern Binh Dinh Province.

#### The Briefing.

The day they arrived, Major Beckwith and his staff from Project Delta were quickly briefed by the 3rd Brigade operations and intelligence staff, and were given the overall picture as existed. Project Delta would operate in the northern end of the An Lao Valley, which was the operational area of the NVA 22nd Infantry Regiment. Its mission was to conduct surveillance on the main routes leading into the northern end of the long and narrow An Lao Valley and to determine if the North Vietnamese Army were using them to reinforce or to withdraw from the US Marine force pushing south toward the valley and from the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cavalry and the Vietnamese Airborne Brigade pushing north. The ground operation looked good on the map, as the Project Delta staff was informed that a U.S. Marine force was to the north, pushing south toward the An Lao Valley. The 1st Cavalry and a Vietnamese Airborne Brigade pushing north. However, intelligence was limited on the An Lao Valley because since 1958 no one had operated in this area. ARVN personnel at the 22nd Division Headquarters in Qui Nhon felt that at least two regiments would have to be used to enter the An Lao Valley. The 22d Division was responsible for the

five northern provinces of II Corps. Qui Nhon, just to the south, was also home to the Republic of Korea CAPITAL Infantry Division.

The briefing further told Beckwith and his men that the total population of the area was about 500,000. The 3rd NVA Division controlled the lives of the people and kept the National Highway #1 closed in Binh Dinh Province. Food along with intelligence was readily supplied to the NVA. When the rice paddies were flooded, movement was greatly restricted for the U.S. infantry. It was raining. None of this northern area from Bong Son was under government control and the rice harvest belonged to the enemy. The enemy's regional and local militia had always been using guerrilla tactics. The NVA had adequate intelligence to ambush and raid government forces and then withdraw quickly. The ambush acquired weapons and demoralized government forces, and the raids destroyed supplies, equipment and installations. Main force units were organized along conventional military lines, such as platoons and companies. They also had responsibility for the province. When these units had adequate strength, thanks to their tactical doctrine, they would conduct positional warfare. They had recently done it. This province and its inhabitants were an ever-present problem. South Vietnamese control of Binh Dinh Province was always threatened, because the people were sympathetic to the Communists. Most worrying was the fact that the weather would keep the U.S. Air Force from flying a reconnaissance mission known as "Red Haze" that detected heat emissions from the ground, showing the presence of large numbers of troops, generators, vehicles, field kitchens and cooking fires, etc. This would have given eyes to the Delta Project to work around these spots instead of going in blind. Also worrying, was the fact that air support and communications would be severely limited due to the weather. The AN/PRC-25 FM field radio, to be carried by the recon teams, had a line-of-sight transmission range of 25 miles, and the teams area of operations (AO) would be deep in the mountains.

#### NVA Order of Battle.

Binh Dinh Province was located within the boundary of Inter-region 5 (i.e. Inter-region meaning the region linking North Vietnam with the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) in the south). COSVN was established in June 1961. During the war against the French, MR-5 included some 10 provinces, but during 1964-65, as newly infiltrated NVA units were incorporated into the extant

structure, it was recognized to include only the provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Tin, Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh. MR-5 was bordered on the south by the "Southern Extremity" (Cuc nam) Military Region, which was comprised of the provinces of Khanh Hoa and Phu Yen. It was bordered on the west by the Western Highlands Front (Mat Tran Tay Nguyen), which was comprised of the provinces of Kontum, Pleiku, Phu Bon and Dar Lac. On the north it was bordered by the Tri-Thien-Hue Military Region, which included the provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien, as well as the ancient imperial capital of Hue. MR-5 controlled the Central Highlands, and connected the Ho Chi Minh trail (Duong Truong Son) to the roads in South Vietnam, thus increasing NVA offensive operations in the lowlands. As of 1965, MR-5 was commanded by Major General Chu Huy Man, 52, an ethnic minority member who served concurrently as Political Commissar. He was a Montagnard and veteran soldier. He joined the People's Army in August 1945 and served as a regimental commander at Dien Bien Phu.

As of 1965, the principal military force within Binh Dinh province was the 3rd NVA Division, aka Yellow Star Division (Su Doan Sao Vang). The Binh Dinh Front controlled the eastern portion of Vietnam, which included the An Lao Valley and coastal plain. The 3rd Division was formed in Hoai Nhon district of Binh Dinh on 2 September 1965. The North Vietnamese Army's 3rd Division commander was Senior Colonel Giap Van Cuong and the Political Commissar was Dang Hoa. Regiments of the 3rd Division included the Quyet Chien Regiment of MR-5 and the recently infiltrated Quyet Thang and Quyet Tam NVA Regiments from North Vietnam. The 3rd NVA Division, and as all other military units in Binh Dinh were operated under the control of the Binh Dinh Front, established in 1966. They controlled Binh Dinh Provinces An Lao Valley and coastal plain. Senior Colonel Giap Van Cuong concurrently commanded the Binh Dinh Front. The Front's Political Commissar was Tran Quang Khanh, who also served as the Secretary of the Binh Dinh province Party Committee. All three regiments now occupied the An Lao Valley in Binh Dinh province. Project Delta was tasked to support the 1st Air Cavalry Division by locating the NVA forces, that had largely disengaged themselves after the initial large battle with the 1st Cavalry. The recon teams were also assured support, if they got into trouble with the NVA. A company size reaction force was to be provided by the 3rd Brigade, in order to exploit suitable targets and to help any team having to exfiltrate under enemy pressure. This was not to be the case.

The enemy units.

During the rainy season from May to November, the NVA spent their time in the mountains, conducting reconnaissance, rebuilding their units, training personnel, maintaining their uniforms and gear and building up the strength of the individual soldier. The standard uniform of the NVA, was khaki or green. The often washed Chinese-issued green outfit often appeared gray to Americans. The two sets were often mixed, because the units only received enough material to issue two uniforms per year to the individual soldier. After this period of time, when the enemy was hard to find, the North Vietnamese Army could normally be counted upon to reappear and conduct their Winter-Spring Campaign. This would happen in the dry season from December to April. From 1966 on, the construction of the Truong Son Trail was under overall responsibility of Lt. Gen. Dong Sy Nguyen. To make matters worse, some three regiments of infantry, and two battalions of artillery were reportedly moving into the western highlands of the Tay Nguyen Front from the Truong Son trail. In January 1966, Delta was alerted for an operation in the remote mountains of the upper An Lao Valley in order to locate the 3rd NVA Division and its supporting units, and report on any enemy troop movement in these surrounding mountains. The Third Division had the combat initiative in this area, with its ability to appear and engage whenever it was advantageous, then disappear at will. This operational area covered some 1700 square kilometers, and the NVA were always widely dispersed. Its 12th Infantry Regiment (Quyet Thang Regiment), commanded by Lt. Col. Xoan, was deployed in Hoa Hoi District. Its subordinate units--the 7th, 8th and 9th battalions--occupied the area in and around the Mieu Mountains, from Hill 82 south of Phu Ninh (BR 973789) to the well fortified village of Hoa Hoi at grid coordinates BR 031699. The village of Hoa Hoi is located in the fertile coastal region on Road 505, east of the Mieu Mountains and Highway 1. This area is criss-crossed with fortified enemy bunker systems. The 12th Regiment was formally the 18th Infantry Regiment of the PAVN 312 Division. It controlled the use of the national railroad, Highway 1 and Road 505 by interdicting and harassing military and civilian operations and traffic on them.

Major Khanh's 2nd Main Force Regiment (Quyet Chien Regiment) was deployed in the Kim Son Valley at BR 738801. Whenever the area south of Bong Son was lacking

US troops, the 2nd Regiment would move back into and occupy the coastal Cay Giep mountain range at BR 931902. Main Force units were usually organized along conventional military lines, moving from region to region. They were supported by guerrilla forces at the regional or local level. The 97th Battalion was one of the identified units in this regiment. The valley had a dense civilian population and was divided by the Kim Son River that flowed toward Bong Son. This operational area was located due south of the An Lao Valley and southwest of the village of Bong Son.

The Kim Son Valley is northwest of the mountain of Hon Giang at grid coordinates BR 8177. These NVA units all had indirect fire support and anti-aircraft defense. The base structures of the NVA 95th Regiment, 38th Main Force Battalion, an unidentified transport unit and eleven local force companies were all based in the high-ground of the four main stream branches in the headwaters of the An Lao River Valley just below the province of Quang Ngai.

The 22nd Infantry Regiment (Quyet Tam Regiment) was commanded by Major Tin Phuong. The Regimental Political Officer was Loc. The 48th Engineer Company supported this regiment. The An Lao Valley with its craggy, jungle covered peaks was located 19 miles northwest of Bong Son (Hoai Nhon) and 12 miles west of the town of Tam Quan. Both towns are on Highway 1. The peaks in the foothills rose to 1,600 feet or more. Thousands of civilians resided in the valley of this operational area. The An Lao River split the valley, and Road 514, branching off of Highway 1 at Hoai Nhon, ran along the eastern side of the river. The town of An Lao (BS 7409) was located 3 miles to the south of Hung Nhon (BS 7414).

Major Beckwith returned to his area and briefed his men, warning that this was an extremely hazardous mission and would be difficult to accomplish. He also revealed that each of the Project Delta teams would be infiltrated into their operational areas by a single helicopter at last light the following day; 27 January. Due to the hazardous nature of the assignment, Major Beckwith requested only volunteers. Seventeen brave men stepped forward. They were formed into three teams and team leaders were assigned. The Vietnamese mercenaries with Project Delta refused to go out on this operation. Then the team leaders conducted their aerial

reconnaissance of their respective operational areas. Things were moving altogether too rapidly.

#### Situation.

Their 1:50,000 scaled maps of the An Lao operational area were issued and studied. The three teams individual tactical area of responsibility (TAOR ) were assigned during their briefing. Team #1 (Eskimo) operational area was at the apex of the north end of the An Lao Valley. At the head of the valley, a large ridge came down to the valley floor. On the east side of the ridge, a stream, named the Nuoc Dinh, flowed into the river Song An Lao. After a map study and aerial recon, the team leader chose to land to the east side of the route 514, between the villages of Nuoc Dinh to the south and Thang Xin to the north. Team #2 (Capital) had the eastern side of the TAOR with the stream Nuoc Tre bordering on their east side of their operational area. Team #3 (Roadrunner) had the operational area on the west side of the An Lao Valley, above the stream, Song Gio.

A 1st Cavalry infantry reaction force was promised, if there was any trouble. The UH-1B's of the 2nd Battalion (Aerial Artillery), 20th Artillery would provide the extreme close air support. The UH-1D Huey personnel transport aircraft from the 1st Air Cavalry's 227th or 229th Assault Helicopter Battalions would insert them into their operational areas. The Delta Project had no reason to suspect that the operation would encounter difficulty. After all, Delta was providing their intelligence, and there were two Battalions of helicopters.

#### Operation 2-66, team composition.

Team #1 (Eskimo). This five-man team, led by SFC Henry A. Keating, was composed of SFC Robert P. Whitus, SSG Norman C. Dupuis, SSG Agostino Chiariello, and SSG Brooke Bell. This team would be inserted just to the east of road 514.

Team #2 (Capital). This six-man team was led by SFC Frank R. Webber Jr., with team members consisting of SFC Marlin C. Cook, SSG Donald L. Dotson, SSG George A. Hoagland, SFC Jesse L. Hancock, SSG Charles F. Hiner. It would be inserted far into the interior of the mountains on the east side of the An Lao Valley.

Team #3 (Roadrunner). This six-man team was led by SFC Marcus L. Huston, with SSG Billy A. McKeith, MSG Wiley W. Gray,

SSG Ronald Terrance Terry, SFC Cecil Joe Hodgson, SSG Frank Neil Badolati. It was to be inserted into the western foothills, within sight of the upper end of the An Lao Valley.

Chopper pad:

As the teams waited at the launch site to load, no one talked. The pilots were making their preflight walk-around. There was a quiet resolve as they silently made their last minute checks of their gear. Nervous, they avoided each other's eyes as they prepared to set their lives adrift again upon the winds of fate--alone. They had come to accept the whims of fortune. The weather report for flying was considered marginal--temporarily bad with periods of driving rain. The sky was mostly covered with an extremely low ceiling of heavy black, puffy cumulus clouds scudding along. Team Capital paused for a last picture in their faded "Tiger" camouflage to be taken as the shadows grew long. The emerging ground fog would also make for poor visibility. The possible devastating effect of bad weather made everyone a little tense. The air really seemed to stink. The pressure was dropping, releasing the methane trapped below ground in the surrounding low swampy areas. It would rain. The problem of air support and extraction, not to mention a reaction force from the 1st Cavalry, weighed on everyone's mind. But they were confident that Col. Beckwith would move Heaven and Earth to get them out in a worst case scenario. The reconnaissance teams knew that the rain and low hanging clouds would limit the enemy's visibility and help muffle the sound of a helicopter on its low approach. The humidity was also high enough to muffle sound.

Then, the spell was broken by the whine of the turbines, and a perceptible vibration as the long rotor blades began to turn. They listened as the engines built up torque. Soon there was a strong pulsing sound from the big engines, which drowned out any conversation. Now, only their eyes were talking. The helicopters were vibrating, then the pilots brought them down to an idle. They signaled the teams to board. The three groups of men boarded their respective choppers. A quick last photo opportunity was made of the smiling Badolati and Terry of Team Roadrunner already seated together inside the helicopter. Once again the engines built up torque, until the sound became deafening. The door gunners watched the rear of their helicopters and gave the pilots the "clear" to take off. Then the first pilot pulled pitch to lift off, bringing the Huey's to a five-foot hover. The

pilots checked their gauges as they stabilized. Then the Huey dipped its nose and moved slowly forward. Soon it was rapidly accelerating, then shuddered as it raised its nose into a gentle climb. The chopper made its slow, gentle climbing run, lifting higher and higher and leveled off at 200 feet. The second helicopter gently lifted, higher, dipped its nose and moved forward. Finally the third ship followed in turn.

The choppers then banked south, flying over the Lai Giang River to the south side and turned, following the winding river westward. The far mountains appeared closer and in sharp focus due to the changing weather. The secondary road 514 on the north side of the river could be seen clearly. All too soon they abruptly turned northwest, each chopper breaking formation and initially following the An Lao River and road 514. With daylight waning, they headed to their respective insertion point. The nearest team insertion point was 18 kilometers, the furthest, twenty kilometers away. They were on their way. Before them was the verdant, vine-tangled mountainous terrain surrounding the brutal land of the An Lao Valley, with its inherent rain-swollen, low cloud cover. The team members watched the heavy overcast, the lighter colored thick groves of bamboo and lush, dark solid forested slopes below. The landscape was transformed by variations of changing light, wind, color, and shifting stormy winds and roiling clouds of the gray sky. It made a wild, primal sight. The fog and rain made low-level flying necessary. The clouds hung ominously gray overhead, and along the tops of the ridges to the west, low and thick like a blanket, as the sun sank behind the dark gray clouds. The cold and dreary weather settled over the landscape, and the purple shadows deepened in the menacing thick mountain forest below.

The valley had already grown darker in the twilight because of the dark rolling clouds. The silver threads of streams betrayed the deep shadowed rifts through the dreaded, beautiful expanse of forest below. Clouds that veiled distant rugged peaks of the feral, unknown mountain fastness were now melted into a velvety blackness. The far open areas of tall grass took on a bluish cast with the distance. Two men sat in each open door, their legs dangling, to facilitate a quick exit. They gripped the aluminum piping of the canvas seats that folded down from the bare wall of the backside of the fuselage that the rest of the team sat on. Only

the lonely whine of the helicopter's turbine and the cold whipping wind broke the silence as each sat mute, lost in their own thoughts of the trial and hardship they faced ahead. Some, frightened and praying to their God, felt a sensation of dread in the pit of his stomach, knowing the absolute and veritable truth, that in the blink of an eye, this could be the end. Others were mesmerized by the stunning deep green backdrop of imposing mountain forest. Each helicopter would abruptly lose altitude, make a false insertion and run into its selected landing zone in the foothill areas below the main ridge lines. The teams would land in areas that were from 1,500 feet high, below the ridge lines and mountains, and would climb behind them into the swirling, mist-shrouded interior to a height of almost 3,000 feet high. Here was the dense double and triple-canopied mountain forest. Soon the team was descending to a small clearing below, into the depths of reality. The entire team, now standing on the struts, jumped the last six feet into the saw-toothed, man-high elephant grass, as the door gunner leaned forward to check the tail rotor clearance and gave "clear."

#### Team Eskimo.

Team Eskimo was on the ground. It was 6:58 p.m. During their last light insertion at coordinates BS 746197, they had quickly moved into the timber off the side of a ridge above the road. They had had their look at the vast black sweep of invisible land. The team leader, SFC Keating, had his men wait, listen and watch. Everything appeared normal. There was only the sharp, clear sound of birds calling. The birds were flying low to the ground, due to the thinning air. Bad weather would soon be on them. Hoping that the weather had covered the sound of their insertion, Keating wanting to check the road for tracks, quickly moved his team to the west, across the road that ran inside the woodline. The ground fog developing, offered little chance of their being seen from any distance. Keating knew that the weather would make the road bed fresh and clean. Any tracks seen would be fresh.

#### The road bed.

The team detected the faint image of many man-made tracks in the wet soil of the small road bed. The soil of the road bed was damp, and the small, flat plain, rounded-sole imprints were eye-catching. The deep heel and toe marks of the deep, and widely-spaced prints with the scuffing of the toe indicated that they were traveling

south in a hurry. The rain would erase all traces of these tracks and theirs soon.

The stream.

The team studied the far bank, up and down stream, listening for any sound. They ran right through the stream, high-stepping across as quickly as possible, barely wetting their feet. The team had crossed the stream called the Nuoc Dinh where it gradually curved around to the right, at a point where there was little chance of being observed. The banks were not steep and would allow them to cross without leaving any scuff marks in their passing. A gradual, rocky slope favored their crossing. They could use the hard surface of the rocks to cross on both sides. Careful not to dislodge any rocks, they crossed. Now, they moved north three hundred meters to grid coordinates BS 746200 and crawled into the thick brush to remain-over-night (RON), and wait out the weather. They listened and watched for signs of any communist troop movement along the road they had just crossed. In the darkness, the air was rich and alive with the smell of all the released pungent rising odors of the live brush and trees of the mountain forest, nearby stream, earth and damp mud were detectable--they knew from the random air currents that it would rain. They were aware of the small night creatures skittering silently around them in the undergrowth. A drizzling rain began after dark. No one slept, thankfully; holding their bladders in check kept them awake. Team Eskimo spent a miserable, wet and uneventful night.

The dawn came.

In the cold gray tones of early mornin with mist, fog and drizzle, low-hanging clouds were the only hint that the sun had emerged from the east. The team's eye slowly crawled across the forest. Then they got up slowly from the ground, preparing to move. There was only the hissing sound of hot urine splattering the tree trunks. Early in the morning at 0650 Hours, SFC Keating directed his point man, SSG Dupuis, to move northwest approximately. In the early morning light, the heavy moisture-laden atmosphere impaired visibility and sense of smell, but the rich odor of rotting humus was still strong. An early morning gauzy scrim of mist hugged the ground that was strangely calming. There was a faint fragrance of wood smoke drifting on the wind. Dupuis on point moved the team slowly and quietly through the low-lying brushwood and forest searching for the firmest footing, the hard-

packed sand. They avoided the patches of shiny mud that would reveal their tracks and stick to their boots. They entered an area of thick brush and bamboo and then again reentered the forest, moving around and between uphill through the timber. Now they could no longer see the valley, due to the heavy foliage. They were able to move quietly because the drizzling rain baffled any slight sound they made in movement. The absence of wind in the low area would cause the smell of their bodies to go to the ground. Tree by tree they crept, listening and waiting for minutes. Then they slipped another few yards through the large trees and boulders. The team moved slowly, weapons at the ready, constantly searching the shadows far ahead and glancing from side to side and to the ground around them as well. The few spider webs the point man encountered were silvered by the rain. He noticed the spiders anchored in their tight-web centers. He moved around them so as not to leaving any disturbing evidence of their passage. The team slowly climbed a small, gradual sloping finger ridge and stopped at 0850 hours. After moving two hours, the men needed a break. SFC Keating climbed a tree to observe and listen to the valley below. He plotted his present position at grid coordinates BS 737204. Disappointedly, he was only able to see a 700 meter-section of the valley below. Within his field of vision from the tree to the east was the bend of the stream known as Nu'oc Dinh . Further on to the east, across the other side of the stream, he could see rice fields, Thang Xin village and portions of the trail fronting it. Part of communal route 514 could be seen south of the village. The team remained here for a half-hour, while the team leader observed the valley. After climbing down from the tree, Keating informed the team that he had observed no activity in the valley, but all the rice paddies were under cultivation, and that all the trails below were easily seen and well used. Because fog was developing in the valley, obscuring his observation of the area, he had decided to move northeast, back down to lower ground again to be close enough to the trails and route 514 where they would be able to see and hear any enemy movement better.

As the team prepared to move, the point man, SSG Dupuis facing uphill, sensed close movement to his left front near a well-used trail. Then SFC Keating sensed something. Now both men's eyes and ears were alert for any sound emanating from the darkness. Again, they both heard men coming. There was a shifting movement in the shadows. Stopping, they simultaneously saw movement in their peripheral vision and heard the rustle quickly emerging through the

foggy mist. More footsteps were coming. Then they saw them. At a distance of fifteen meters, the three fast-moving, black-clad figures quickly appeared in their direction from the cloudy gloom of fog on the trail. Immediately the NVA observed the recon team. Only one was seen to be armed with a weapon.

The NVA had almost missed seeing and hearing the team. Due to the lack of visibility and the difficulty in sound detection, they had reacted slower than Team Eskimo. The two unarmed NVA took cover as the armed one raised his weapon, a U.S. M-1 Carbine to fire. He was immediately wounded by Dupuis and Keating who had reacted and fired instinctively. Without hesitation Dupuis and Keating both reached for hand grenades as one of the black-clad NVA broke cover and quickly recovered the weapon from his dead comrade and fired two rounds. Dupuis threw first. The M-26 hand grenade was swiftly followed in the air by another from Keating. The firing had stopped. The resulting two explosions killed the wounded man in the brush and blew him out into the trail. SSG Dupuis was startled at the impact of a red-hot stinging blow to the side of his head. A large fragment of shrapnel had hit him in the head, tearing a gaping hole in the side, stunning him. Keating motioned for the two men behind him to flank the NVA position to the right. As the two flanking recon members now closed on the quiet NVA position, the three remaining members simultaneously closed into the NVA position. SSG Dupuis, wounded in the head and a little foggy-brained with pain, was still able to follow the team leader quickly in the direction of contact. All that was found were two, separate bright red blood trails leading away from the area. Judging from the amount of blood, both NVA were badly wounded. Keating checked the NVA laying in the trail. He was dead. A search of the body revealed nothing.

#### Changing direction.

The team leader was now aware that his team's lives were at stake. But sticking to his original plan, he unhesitatingly initiated a quick briefing of their movement out of the area, in a northeasterly direction. Dupuis still on his feet, informed the team leader he was hit in the head. Keating quickly checked him and found that a piece of shrapnel had hit him above his left ear. Dupuis told Keating that he felt dizzy. Keating appointed SSG Bell to take the point, while Dupuis now brought up the rear. Dupuis managed to keep up, trying to wipe away the blood streaming down his face, and stem the flow of blood with pressure to the wound. They moved

lower down and crossed the stream to the other side, bypassing on the north side of a deep pool in the stream to grid coordinates BS 744207. It was fearfully demanding for Dupuis. After a distance of 500 meters, Keating, worried about Dupuis' condition, stopped the team. They stopped and took up defensive positions, listening and watching for movement from their rear. Here, SFC Keating decided to set up the radio to transmit a quick spot report. While the team listened and watched for movement to their rear, Keating immediately unknotted the olive-drab triangular bandage worn around Dupuis's neck and applied it to his shrapnel wound. He continued to feel nauseated and weak. The middle portion of the triangular bandage was placed over the dressing and tied off, causing the pain in his head to throb even more. The only wounded member quickly taken care of, the team leader had the long antenna broken out and attempted to send a spot report to their Forward Operational Base (FOB). He stared up at the hills surrounding the team and knew why the high ground and weather was blocking the transmission. There was no response. Quickly he ordered the long antenna broken down and moved the team further north. Now the team began to encounter a number of well-used trails, all running generally from the northeast to the southwest. The team leader now decided to move back west, across the stream and up the high ridge. They carefully changed their direction in their uphill movement. Stopping and moving off their trail a short distance, they moved back for a short distance to watch behind them.

Dupuis teetered, hovering on the verge of collapse as the team climbed higher. The woods-wise team leader knew that any tracks or sign they left moving uphill would be harder to follow. Careful in the placement of their feet, the team avoided leaving any minor disturbance or spiral twist against the spongy leaf-mat, because this would indicate a change in direction. The team was led back in the direction they had come from, but from above their back trail, and stopped in the shadows. Their eyes roaming the old trees that rose from the slope, the team watched and listened to their back trail for the possibility of a fast moving, NVA tracking team. There were only the normal forest sounds. Keating cautioned his men to walk slowly and carefully so that they would not scuff the humus and leave any unusual disturbance. They now moved for the saddle at the top of the ridge. The slower they moved now, the harder it would be to track them. His head aching and still bleeding due to the exertion, Dupuis was still going strong at the top of the ridge.

No radio contact.

After moving some distance, the team arrived at the top of the ridge and stopped on the south side of a saddle at grid coordinates BS 733206. The team overlooked another narrow valley watersheds that led into the An Lao Valley. Through a few openings in the trees, they could see the rice fields between the existing villages of Nu'oc Trong Thu'ong to the north and Nu'oc Trong Ha to the south. The area looked as it should on the map, but still the team could observe no people in the village or working in the fields. There was not even any smoke haze above the village that would indicate cooking fires. They moved over the crest of the hill to grid coordinates BS 730206, well below the ridge near the bottom, out of sight of anyone moving along the top of the ridge. Again they stopped and broke out the long antenna to make contact with their FOB. Still there was no radio contact. Now, the team leader was worried. The NVA would now be searching for them; one man was wounded and as yet, no communications. Their worst nightmare was coming true. Their rear security would now have to have "eyes in the back of his head." The team leader again studied the map. He would move the team north, a little higher, to a south facing slope, and attempt to make commo again. The team moved a little lower to observe the valley at grid coordinates BS 725208. There was still no sight of people in the rice paddies, around the village of Nu'oc Trong Thuong or on the trails nearby. The team moved again, contouring along the side of the ridge a little to the east and then north a short distance, until the ridge turned west again. They slipped quietly along the edge of a small clearing next to the woodline. Under extreme stress, Keating noticed that the surrounding tall grass was not beaded with water due to the wind and quick evaporation. Their destination was the south facing slope at grid coordinates BS 729208. They would make another attempt at commo at 1200 hours with the FOB. They arrived and found a small clearing. Keating thought that it would not be obvious if they entered it for a short distance and hunkered down. Sure of his ability, they could hear anyone moving by in the tree line and remain hidden. Carefully they parted the grass to avoid twisted or broken stems, and the team hunkered down out of sight in the tall grass near the woodline in a defensible hollow. The rain would soon cover the presence of a trail through the grass. If they advanced slowly, the vegetation in the tall grass would cushion each step and obscure any impression. The entire team now was extremely worried. The weather was getting worse.

### Radio contact.

Keating called the FOB. The periodic glances of the others back at him were rewarded when they saw the relief on his face and that he was talking to someone finally. The transmission had not been answered by the FOB. Instead, it was immediately answered by the aerial relay, who relayed their message to the FOB. Team Eskimo immediately let the Forward Air Controller (FAC), Air Force Captain Kenneth L. Kerr, aware of their situation. The team was notified that he was busy elsewhere, but that a helicopter was being dispatched to their location. Keating knew it would take some time for the NVA to get enough troops into the area to organize a search and find them. But they had to remain hidden from those now scouting the area and wait until the helicopter was close enough to signal it. The team waited patiently. They were nervous as the time passed, not knowing how long it would be before they were found. Finally, the familiar sound of the helicopter was in the far distance. They all knew that if they couldn't hail the passing helicopter with the radio, they would be on their own for some time. They radioed and made contact, but as luck would have it, the helicopter had already spent two hours searching in the extremely bad weather without spotting or hearing from the team. The helicopter, now low on fuel, notified the team that they were returning to base and would be back in the area in 45 minutes. Their spirits dropped, as the team listened to the sound. It faded, blocked by the far ridges of the mountains. They were alone.

### Landing zone.

Suddenly, there was the familiar faint sound they had been waiting for--a dull rhythmic thumping. As they listened the sound continued to grow louder. The distinctive *whop. .whop. .whop* reverberated in the valley. The team leader grabbed the radio as soon as he heard it. Upon re-entering the area, it spotted the team leader's panel almost immediately. Seeing that the landing zone was too small and had too much slope, the pilot directed them to move 400 meters south to the clearing shown on the map. The team picked up and moved. An hour later, there was the sweet music of a helicopter, then the distant glimpse on the horizon. When the pilot answered, the team felt relief. They found the open ground thick with eight-foot tall elephant grass covering a steep hillside. Keating notified the pilot that he would have to move the Team Eskimo to the top of the ridge where it was flatter but still

covered with tall elephant grass. He also requested a rope ladder. It was now getting late in the day. The worried team arrived at grid coordinates BS 728204 and much to their relief, found that the elephant grass in the area showed no dark signs of movement through the tall grass by anyone searching the area. The grass was now silvered with beaded water. Hovering overhead, the extraction chopper notified Keating that only four members would be extracted on the first run. The chopper dropped their rope ladders to the waiting team and successfully loaded four members of the team. The team leader waited alone for 10 minutes on the ground for another chopper and at 1620 hours, he was extracted.

#### Team Capital.

At last-light on the evening of 27 January, at 1850 hours, Team Capital led by SFC Webber, was inserted 1900 meters to the east of team Eskimo on the high ridge line above them at grid coordinates BS 766198. The insertion point was 8 foot-tall elephant grass surrounded by tall timber. They were above a well-timbered watershed between two main trails, one below them to the west and one below them to the east. Their primary concern was observation of the trail to their immediate west, which ran southwest to northeast. The team quickly moved four hundred meters away from their helicopter insertion point, moving west-northwest. The forest closed imponderably over them. They passed over the crest of the ridge, following a gentle sloped finger ridge, and made their way down the mountain under the verdant, three-tier jungle canopy to a place above the trail, coming up a draw. At this point, the team stopped to observe the trail. They found a defensible hollow in a thicket and crouched there alertly to remain overnight. The trail was only 75 meters away, slightly below them. During the very early morning hours, a light rain had fallen. It was cold and damp, but sheltered from the now dying wind, they were not too miserable. Visibility was poor. Later, the team was surrounded by a shroud of fog and total ominous silence. There was none of the usual sounds of the night creatures. No one slept. They all watched and listened. Their ears constantly alert for any sound emanating from the night, they kept themselves awake thinking of their wives, lovers, and home. The rocks and damp from the leaves radiated the coldness. The long dark hours dragged by, and at last the night passed. On 28 January, as the early morning black became gray, the team still watched and listened, dreading the coming day. At first light, they silently prepared to move. The long night had been uneventful for the team.

In the first faint, chilled gray light of dawn, the light outlined the hills above them. At 0730 hours, the team leader made radio contact on schedule and reported negative traffic. At last, the blackness paled as dawn stole out of the east. The morning was quickening in the east and gradually filtering through the trees. It was lightly raining. In a constant state of tension, the six-man team was ready, watching the forest shadows and listening for any sign of movement or sound. In that early morning light of late January, the only movement and sounds were natural.

Fresh NVA tracks.

As the light fog was bathing the tree-covered hilltops, the team using caution crept from their RON site on 28 January and moved directly toward the trail marked on their map. Completely focused, they moved past the massive base of tree trunks of gigantic and patriarchal trees whose widely-stretched canopy of foliage interlocked far above them, denying almost all light to the forest floor. They paid close attention to foot placement, so as not to leave a distinguishable trail on the spongy leaf covered ground. They avoided leaf covered rocks, wet slick areas, roots and holes that were a hazard to their movement. All objects were almost indistinguishable in the dark-gray obscurity, except when close. The point man stopped. The team froze in place and immediately went down, crouching low, weapons at the ready as they smelled, listened and watched. The breeze brought their nostrils only the feral innocence of the landscape. Ahead of them in the shadows was the well-used, one meter wide trail. Beneath the great 150-foot, full-foliaged trees, which denied the light, the trail appeared to be well traveled during the night. The point man, SSG Hiner, carefully approached and quickly looked both ways. Nothing. He spotted the tracks. The trail had been used during the night. The point man went down on his knee, studying the tracks, because there was no standing water in the tracks. The moisture had not blunted the tracks. They were only hours old, because they were made after the rain had fallen. The tracks were not spotted with rain drops. The shallow, plain prints of the NVA were clear in the damp soil. They were fresh. Webber decided to continue to move. The team moved across the trail, following it in a Southeastern direction and continued to move back up the mountain for 400 more meters to the top of the ridge, using the large tree trunks for cover and concealment. They were indistinguishable in the dark-grey obscurity, except when close.

During their ascent, the slope was covered with large hardwoods and massive boulders and very little undergrowth. Slowly and silently they worked across the level top, crossing back over the trail and continued down for another 200 meters.

Back over the top of the ridge.

Team Capital was now just below the military crest of the mountain ridge. Again they slowly moved down a narrow finger ridge through large, old-growth open timber along the side of the mountain, their eyes sweeping the landscape about them. The well-used trail was below them, on their right, in a draw. Ssg Chuck Hiner was the point man. The forest canopy was 150 feet high. The team's position now overlooked the head of a small finger valley, where there was a small village with cultivated rice fields, dwarfed by the bulk of the mountain behind it. In the dark, open understory, there was little growth, as the team moved from tree to tree. It was too open. They decided to move southwest into thicker undergrowth. They came across an area crisscrossed with well-used trails. There were again fresh tracks to be seen, but older that led to the ridge back above them from the valley floor. The rain had had its effect upon the shallow and flat, plain sole imprints of the NVA. Rain drops marked the tracks located on the higher elevated ground of the trail, and water sat in the tracks of those in the lower elevated part of the trail. The team leader determined they were made in the last twenty-four hours. The wet, pushed-up sides of the tracks in the soft ground were almost rounded out. A lot of men had moved through the area, off the top of the ridge. The wet, but still hard-packed, well-used, high speed trails were scouted for just a short distance.

More trails.

They came upon a trail with an unused, partially, half collapsed hut, black with rot and furred with green moss and rusty fungus that had not been used in a long time. They continued following this same trail, moving parallel to it down the mountain, until they were 300 meters above the stream at grid coordinates BS 763187, where they stopped to eat. In Vietnam, a well-trodden forest trail invariably follows a stream course below the trail. There a trail forks off. Usually these trails would follow a straight-line directness from point to point, further into the interior. While the team was eating, the birds were active and noisy. After eating, they broke out the long antenna and made radio contact with the FOB. They continue moving down the mountain.

They moved parallel to the trail from a good distance away so that the team could observe anything moving their way along the trail without being seen. They quietly moved through the trees, boulders and the leafy humus, cautiously inching around and over obstacles in the path of least resistance. Now close attention to his surroundings, Hiner, told Webber that the forest around him was changing. The trees were smaller. After moving about twenty minutes, the understory started thinning out. Hiner noticed that the birds were no longer active and noisy. He slowed the team's movement now as his senses awakened a warning in him. The team had reached that point at which people had been cutting wood for fuel.

The woodcutters.

Then SSG Hiner, on point, caught the vague, unmistakable whiff of familiar odors--collective body sweat and tobacco coming to him in an overpowering wave. He signaled a halt. He saw nothing in the dim light, but his instincts told him they were there. And that, he knew, was trouble. Each member of Team Eskimo had already stepped to the nearest tree for cover on its darkest side. They were craning their necks forward, letting one eye peak ahead while observing their respective areas to the sides and rear. The air was tense. They could feel trouble. Ahead of the point man, there was something in the shadows that was not right; a slight squeak and a rattle. Now he made out a cart with two water buffalo hitched to it, staring at him. They were almost invisible in the darkness. The buffalo had given them away. Something dark stood in shadows. Then again, there was a flicker of motion, so slight that Hiner's eyes scarcely detected it. Then he saw them. A shadow separated itself from the trunk of a tree. In a blink of the eye, it was joined by other shadows, all wearing black. The team scouting the trail in the thin ground fog were observed from only a short distance by a gang of woodcutters standing motionless. The team was compromised. Hiner realized the woodcutters had paused in their work, and after a moment resumed working. Hiner knew that the team had been seen and signaled for them to fade back into the forest and alerted Webber behind him to the Vietnamese presence. As Hiner observed the area ahead, the team leader agonized over deciding whether or not to kill the poor, innocent and unarmed

wood choppers. He decided not to kill them. The woodcutters had already worked up the mountainside until they were out of sight.

#### The wallow.

A mistake in judgment had just been made. Wood choppers often served as informants for NVA Special Forces units throughout the country. As Hiner watched, the further away they got, the quicker the woodcutters moved. All the team members knew that it was just a matter of time before trackers and infantrymen of the 22nd Regiment converged on the area. SFC Webber collected his team and led them from the low area, into thick brush of higher ground. Hitting heavy cover, they were quickly crawling through the heavy growth. Hiner, on point, stopped momentarily, thinking about what he was smelling. They moved more carefully now because of the smell of livestock. A sharp stink of urine and feces hung in the thick air, as they moved forward on their hands and knees until they broke out of the brush. A buffalo wallow was immediately in front of them with trails running in all directions. Buffalo tracks and fresh cow chips were everywhere. There were no large trees, just ten-foot scrub trees. Seeking the thicker forest, the team now ran through the area, into a cultivated area of banana trees. At this point they heard a dog barking below from the village, about 200 meters down the mountain. It meant only one thing; people moving around unnaturally fast--fast enough to excite a dog to their unusual behavior. People were being alerted and getting ready. Almost after these thoughts registered in the minds of Team Capital, they heard someone banging an alert on metal. The banging had a pattern to it. It wasn't hard to guess what it said. The person banging the metal would bang for about a minute, pause and then start again. All other noises were drowned by the metal banging. The team, bent at the waist and knees, ran northwest until they could not hear the banging anymore. Webber stopped the team to check his grid coordinates. They were now located at BS 755185, some 600 meters north of the village. Quickly they started moving again and came across freshly cut trails. Two to three meters wide, they were running from north to south, coming up from the valley floor. The unwilted leaves on the cuttings from the brush were still green and fresh. The men cutting this brush were somewhere nearby. Plain soled tracks were everywhere. The team leader stopped his patrol here to look at the area and checked his watch. It was now 1600 hours, getting late in the day. The team huddled closely, discussing their situation and decided to look for a place to remain-over-night (RON), with good

cover and concealment. Webber, sitting next to Cook, switched on the radio he carried and reported their situation over the radio.

Worried about the life of the battery.

The radio transmission was short and sweet. The electricity in the battery would drain quickly depending upon the temperature and humidity. The team individually prayed to see the next day's light. After setting up for the night, they quietly discussed their situation again and decided to re-cross the largest main trail that ran north to south and again come back to a point above the village. The village was located at grid coordinates BS 756178. Hopefully, the NVA would have already checked it and moved on looking for the team. They felt the safest place was in an area already checked. They didn't have to worry about their scent traveling laterally in this weather, because the rain would take it to the ground. It was a long night's vigil. They were listening to the shrilling of the tree frogs and smelling the clean, fresh air that came before a rain and the small *plit . . . plit . . . plit* of the rain drops hitting the leaves around them. The tree limbs above shivered in the rising wind. The rain began to fall. The night passed uneventful. Hidden in the brush, the team listened to the sounds of the patterning rain on the trees. Their eyes and ears were searching and probing the source of each new noise. They listened to the creaks and moans of the drenched trees and the movement of the great upper limbs in the wind. The air was fresh and sweet. They could smell the wet rocks, leaves and damp earth. Unknown to the team, elements of the NVA 22nd Infantry Regiment were busy quickly establishing area ambushes for the team, and trackers were now searching for their trail.

Early in the morning on 29 January, the weather had turned very bad. At first light, there was heavy rain and the mountain was covered with a heavy fog on the ground. The team waited, watched and listened without eating, until it was time to make radio contact at 0730 hours and reported negative traffic. The only sound was a bird calling somewhere close at hand. It was succeeded by an answer nearby. A twitter of movement, then silence. Finally satisfied that all was well, the team slowly and silently slipped out of their Remain-Over-Night (RON) position, and began moving with SSG Hiner as point man. He was followed by SFC Hancock, SFC Webber, SFC Cook, then SSG Dotson and rear security was SSG Hoagland. The shadows loomed large in the coming faint light of morning. Hiner continued to move in the

area of heavy undergrowth and rocks to avoid detection. They halted more often and listened longer. They wondered about their tracks being found and followed. They moved back to the east, contouring along the side of the mountain. At 1000 hours they stopped and ate 30 meters from the main upland trail. Although they could not see the trail, they would hear if someone were using it. The point man slowly emerged from the heavy brush at the side of the trail, looking in both directions. The main trail here was two to four feet in width in various places. Since the early morning rain, the trail had recently been used by a lot of soldiers. The team quickly hopped across it and turned their direction south, down the mountain. They now concentrated hard on choosing their footing in the rocky area by stepping a little higher, to keep from twisting an ankle.

Slowly they emerged at the top of a rocky cliff. The team now moved west again. Finding what they were looking for, they were now forced by the terrain and very heavy brush to close up into a tight single-file formation. They were on their hands and knees in order to avoid this obstacle. They noticed that many of the plants folded their leaves and insects were bothersome and noisy, forecasting rain. Feeling the confinement of the towering brush, the team was carefully threading its way through the thick rugged undergrowth. The weather continued to be bad. Soon, there was the drumming of the rain on the brush and rocks interfered with their hearing. They moved more guardedly than ever, because they had trouble hearing. Gradually the point man, Hiner, saw what appeared as an open area up ahead and headed the team for it. A quick check of the map and they determined that they were at grid coordinates BS 752183. Team Capital, after snaking through the side hill brush, stopped. Hiner signaled a stop to Hancock. He now scrutinized the clearing from inside the heavy brush. The small, gentle-sloped, side-hill clearing was fairly clean of underbrush and was a jumble of large, three to four foot long rocks, which stood just as high above the ground. The low side of the clearing was to their left and the high side to their right. The clearing was about 20 meters long and 10 meters wide. Webber checked his watch; it was 10:40 a.m. The team would remain still, watching and listening for five minutes. With a spine-tingling awareness, hearts thumping against their ribs and adrenaline pumping, they could not help but notice the unnatural cathedral silence that had fallen over the mountain forest. Nothing moved. Momentarily they held their

breath and for the longest time they listened, eyes searching. Always as the team moved, they mixed caution with courage. Wariness was their constant companion wherever they went--alert to the cry of a bird or snap of a twig. Nothing escaped their notice. Now, the unnatural stillness foretold a deadly presence. No birds chirped. A funereal silence. They heard only the sigh of the wind. The team broke out of the thick undergrowth into the small clearing. Although there was a chill in the air, their palms were damp with sweat. They tried to see into the surrounding brush and its shifting leaf-light. They felt a slight chill in the air of anticipation. Their eyes narrowed, constantly flickering from side to side and ahead as well as to the ground in front of them. Their hearts thundering, they stopped. They dropped into defensive positions, facing outward, sweaty palms clutching their rifles, and again momentarily holding their breath to listen. A small gust brought them something else. A distinct pungent smell manifested itself, a smell of unwashed bodies mixed with the faint smell of fish sauce the Vietnamese ate and uniforms long exposed to wood smoke. A chill went down each man's neck and crept down his spine. It was too damned quiet and now, too late.

The NVA were watching through the tiny openings in the thick wall of brush, of their carefully pruned shooting lanes, which enabled them to see undetected. In that next instant, the air was rent with the explosive and unique popping-rattling sound that characterized Kalishnikov's AK-47 from their left rear flank. It seemed unreal, with a quality of everywhere at once as the 7.62mm assault rifle rounds smacked bodies, branches and rocks. The intense and sustained automatic fire raking the clearing from the thick foliage was brief. Hancock, Hoagland, Webber and Cook were wounded immediately by the sustained burst that had come from different directions. There was a heavy hollow sound, as bits of skull, blood and gray matter splattered everywhere, as SFC Jesse Hancock head popped back violently, following the hollow smacking sound. His body instantly lurched convulsively and was slammed to the ground in a heap onto his stomach. He was killed instantly. His bowels voided. His splayed legs and arms jerked spasmodically for a moment and gurgled before the body ceased moving. SSG Hoagland, being rear security, had been the closest to the NVA. Hoagland had collapsed onto his back, having been hit high and low in the back. He was paralyzed from the waist down. He shuddered with almost uncontrollable pain and was unable to move. He still retained his rifle. Again came the

distinctive slow, deep, unique and sharp popping sound of AK-47 fire. The team searched for targets, but saw nothing. They returned fire in the direction that the most firing came from. The brush was too thick to see anything. The directional sound of the NVA firing told the team that at least a platoon size element was involved, but the sonic crack of rounds passing near the rocks confused the true direction the rounds were fired from. The automatic fire was heavy but only a general direction was determined, because the team could not see through the screening brush into the shadows. The NVA had no trouble seeing them. The NVA looking from the dark into the light was the ideal ambush situation. Webber looked down to see his bloodied sleeve. His wound left him with one useless forearm, it was shattered from the elbow down. He could not wiggle his fingers, hand or move his forearm. The bullet had shattered the bones and had damaged the muscles. He could not effectively use the arm. It would take a short while for the pain to begin. He now used his arm as a prop to fire and load. There was no time to examine the wound. Having been hit twice by several burst of AK-47 fire, both in the back and the stomach, Cook fell onto his stomach, beside a small tree, withering in pain, on the ground. He still had hold of his rifle. Unable to move, Cook looked down at the dark spreading stain soaking the ground. He called out for the team to hear that he couldn't move from the waist down. He told them not to bother because he couldn't travel and that they would be killed if they helped him. Then he coughed up a pink froth with small pieces of pink lung. His eyes, filled with pain, were now dark and dangerous. This was his final stand against the inevitable. Fighting the terrible pain, Cook began returning fire into the surrounding thick brush from where muzzle flames flickered in the shadows. Dotson and Hiner were the only two not wounded. Hiner low crawled as fast as he could, up the hill to the north side of their defensive area to provide covering fire in that direction. After settling into place at the top of the clearing, Hiner heard Cook called out to him, to get the radio out of his pack. Hiner yelled to the wounded Webber to cover him with fire as he took his bearing on the tree where Cook was located and moved back down the hillside to where Cook lay. Hiner quickly started a fast low-crawled down to Cook, who was still on his stomach firing along with Webber, both putting out a heavy volume of covering fire. Cook was still exactly where he had fallen, beside the tree. Hiner removed the radio from his pack and quickly low-crawled over to Webber's position, behind a large rock.

Radio contact established.

Hiner quickly started transmitting, requesting any station that could hear him, to respond. Looking at the low clouds just above, he was now very apprehensive. He worried about establishing commo. If he could be heard, could anyone help him! Webber now moved to the southern edge of the brush of the clearing. He now felt a searing hot pain. His stomach felt like revolting, as he swallowed it down. Hiner called the FOB and got no response. He then called any station that could hear the sound of his transmission. He was immediately answered by an unidentified aircraft, which turned out to be a not to distant C-47. Hiner identified himself and gave the aircraft his grid coordinates and situation in the clear over the radio to relay. The unidentified C-47 relayed his message to Delta's FOB, mobilizing the headquarters. At 1040 hours, Capt. Kenneth L. Kerr USAF, the on-call Forward Air Controller (FAC), Robin One was standing by and alerted. In this weather, the FAC made his own judgment about flying.

The Scramble.

The FAC immediately grabbed up his map, survival vest and flak jacket and left for the airfield. Upon arrival at the aircraft, he threw his flak jacket on the seat. He would not wear it. Capt. Kerr's well-trained hands and eyes made a quick pre-flight inspection. He checked the gas and oil. Moving clockwise, he inspected the four rockets under one wing to insure that the safety pins were pulled. His hands and eyes roamed the control surfaces for free movement, and then moved toward the tail of the aircraft, to repeat the process. Satisfied that his rockets were all armed, he climbed into the aircraft and using his grease pencil, wrote the frequencies and call signs to be used on the left window, above the radios. His FM radio was located to his left above him. Now with his crew chief standing by, he turned on the ignition switch, yelling clear and starting the engine. It coughed as the propeller whirled to life. After a very brief period of time he began to taxi as he turned on the radios. He built up his airspeed to 45 knots and lifted into the sky. It had taken the veteran pilot all of five minutes to scramble and become airborne from the airfield in his Cessna O-1 Bird Dog (L-19) west of Bong Son, as he called the TOC. The FAC notified them that he was in transit to the area. Capt. Kerr's aircraft was equipped with a UHF radio, a multichannel radio to talk to fighter aircraft. A VHF radio to talk to the command post (CP), and a FM radio, to talk to troops on the ground. He now turned on his FM radio as he flew up the An Lao Valley and started attempting to

communicate with the patrol on the ground. He flew the aircraft at 95 knots into Team Capital's transmission range, while his eyes scanned the area.

Seeing Webber was now in a good defensive position, Hiner yelled for Dotson to move where he had previously been at the top of the clearing. Hiner, still listening to the radio for the FAC, in his peripheral vision saw SFC. Donald L. Dotson, rise from the ground, attempting to move his position across the clearing to secure Hiner's place. He got only 10 feet. Dotson fired only one round off as he moved, before he was knocked backwards with the explosive impact of being solidly hit. Several bullets had ripped high into his chest, and all passed out his back. He flopped disjointedly to the ground in mid-stride, without a word. With glazed eyes, he weakly attempted to rise. His breathing became labored. Frothy red bubbles beaded and oozed from the corners of his lips, as he closed his eyes. His breathing now came in shallow gasp. He slowly slumped forward as his final breath wheezed out. Blood now poured from his mouth. The ground darkened below him as he sank into oblivion.

Robin One.

The weather was very bad. The FAC, still flying low and slow, was worried about the team and himself. Hiner's ear riveted to the radio, finally heard the FAC calling. Team Capital had just established radio contact, but Hiner was still unable to hear or see him. Robin One requested Team Capital's immediate location. The weather seemed to close in behind Capt. Kerr, as he flew north. Hiner immediately complied with a six-digit grid coordinates and situation report, telling him that they were now completely surrounded by a platoon-size element. Robin One informed Hiner that due to the bad weather, he could not call in any Air Force tactical aircraft. The cloud ceiling now varied at only 300-500 feet. Flying extremely low in the reduced visibility of foul weather increased the chances of being hit by small arms fire. Finding one little open patch in the valley, Robin One was now flying at 60 knots. He entered into the patrol's area, and banking in a wide orbit at an airspeed of 60 knots, he started watching and communicating. Hiner threw a red smoke grenade. As Capt. Kerr banked the aircraft, nose now slicing through the horizon at an idle and maintaining a speed of 45 knots, he flew over their position and located the team's exact position by a panel.

The FAC, Robin One, transmitted from his little two-seater, high-wing monoplane, that he would have to leave. He informed Hiner that he had to leave the immediate area to escort the gunships to Hiner's location. A pair of aerial rocket artillery (ARA) UH-1B Huey gun ships armed with 2.75 inch rockets were on the way. They would provide the artillery fire support that was beyond the range of conventional tube artillery. Dense clouds over the mountain ranges were causing the delay, but as soon as he arrived back with the gunships, Hiner should mark his position with smoke again. They would have to find holes through the cloud layers. As the FAC exited the valley, the Iroquois aircraft were pulling pitch and gaining rpm's, straining toward lift-off. The pilots scanned the gauges, stabilizing in a hover. Now the choppers lowered their nose to build air speed and made their forward run, climbing for altitude and scattering multitudes of birds trying to sit out the storm. Quickly they rendezvoused with the FAC, who just exited the valley and was now banking to the left, arcing around to lead the choppers. They followed the FAC up the wild-looking An Lao River, flying through rain and fog in the treacherous mountain terrain. A half hour later, Hiner heard the distant whining sound. Like a distant mosquito came the drone of the low-flying, single-engine aircraft. Robin One requested smoke now. Hiner pulled the tape off his yellow smoke grenade and straightened the pin.

The gunships first run.

Responding to the now transmitting FAC, Hiner informed him that the Team had suffered two killed-in-action (KIA) and two wounded-in-action (WIA). He also requested the gunships to make their runs to the south and east of his position. The NVA were keeping up sporadic gunfire throughout his transmissions. Frantically, the team fought back in the short time it took for the FAC to arrive in the immediate area. Having informed the FAC that he was popping another smoke, Hiner threw it into the center of the clearing. Unfortunately, the yellow smoke could not be seen due to the low pressure. It hung sluggish and drifted slowly along the ground and curled upward serpentinely in the slight breeze. Hiner was informed over the radio, that the smoke could not be seen. This sent him into a frantic search for another smoke grenade. Hiner quickly popped another, and told the FAC to conduct their strike in a radius of 50 yards from the smoke. The FAC identified the correct color. Red. Flying at low altitude, the FAC turned, sliced the nose through the horizon at an idle, then flew at

60 knots, at a slant. He used the 3rd nut on the windshield as an aiming point. There was a loud whoosh as he fired the white phosphorous (WP) smoke marking rounds, to mark the target areas for the gunships. Hiner could now see that the Team Leader Webber was struggling to reload his weapon with only one arm, while returning fire. The gunships flying extremely low on a gentle glide slope and at a reduced speed were vulnerable. They made their first run. The remaining members of Team Capital listened to the distant rhythmic thumping of the gunships coming in to attack. Their turbines gradually growing louder. They were frightened. Hiner and Webber heard the sudden, explosive impact of ripple-firing and whooshing sound of the rockets as they watched for the enemy to close with them. The ground shook in successive waves with the concussion effect of the rockets as rock and the dirt geyers erupted. The NVA had sat tight, hugging the American position. There was now no incoming fire from their positions around the clearing. The Team was beginning to have hope that the NVA had withdrawn, then after about three minutes, it started again. The incoming fire was now the heaviest from the south, west and eastern portions of the perimeter. The NVA had a hard time seeing from the northern uphill side unless they exposed themselves. Rock chips were flying everywhere. The gunships were being cautious about firing their rockets too close to the team. Each helicopter carried 48 rockets. This weapons system was commonly used on obscured targets, in mountains and jungle, where suppressive fire had to be accurately controlled. Hiner informed the FAC that the NVA were between the strike zone of the helicopters first run and the edge of the clearing.

The gunships second run.

Hiner told the FAC to have the gunships make a strike right over their position. The gunships complied, attacking and chewing up the clearing very precisely. Having expended all their ordinance, they now had to leave. The aggressive and well camouflaged NVA force recognized that it had isolated the six-man reconnaissance team and began their "hugging" tactics of the perimeter and started attacking by fire. After the gunship run down the center of their position, Hiner sneaked a peak around the perimeter. There was a blinding flash followed by a searing pain. Hiner received a glancing blow from a 7.62 mm round that parted his hair. Hiner's head seemed to explode, as he felt himself hit the ground. Blood was fountaining and running down his face and chest, lost consciousness for a few moments. He revived consciousness, but he

was nauseated, weak and dizzy. A sudden blackness would come upon him now for a moment, whenever he attempted to lift upward. On his back, he attempted to raise himself on his elbows, but his head hurt too much. Momentarily, he gave up the effort. With his ears ringing, he tried to focus his eyes on the radio, hearing the FAC calling him on the radio. His head was still pounding. Keeping his eyes closed, trying to help his eyes focus, he felt for and found the radio handset. It was important now to keep talking, staying in contact, to keep the FAC informed. He made the FAC aware that he was wounded.

Hiner requested an Air Force strike, using napalm to burn an LZ next to their position and was told possibly from B-57's nearby. But he was also told that the FAC was worried about collisions over the area. Hiner requested the 1st Cavalry reaction force. Extremely worried about the time delay in the return of the gunships, he asked how long before the gunships returned. He was now told that the 1st Cavalry had none available at the present time and that the helicopters would be on their way back in a half hour. The brave Air Force Captain informed Hiner that he would use his aircraft to buzz their position to worry the NVA and help them out, knowing his aircraft had no armor protection and lacked self-sealing fuel tanks. After several low, high-speed passes under automatic fire, the FAC informed Hiner that available gunships were again entering the valley and he now had to leave just long enough to intercept and guide the two gunships into this area.

The gunships third and fourth runs. The gunships arrived and immediately each made two passes around the perimeter. Hiner informed the FAC that again the NVA had stopped firing. Meanwhile, the third pair of gunships--airborne were waiting in the valley away from the immediate area. Having expended their ordinance, the second pair of gunships returned to Bong Son. As soon as the sound of the helicopters faded down the valley, Hiner called the FAC and said they were again receiving fire from the east and that he could see glimpses of the NVA moving in closer to his position. His head throbbing, he requested the rockets be fired very close in on the perimeter because he felt they were preparing to overrun his position. The volume and din of enemy fire around the perimeter intensified. During Hiner's transmission, the FAC could hear the gunfire in his headset. The FAC, now worried

about such close in supporting fire, warned Hiner about this. His reply was fire the rockets closer.

As he watched, Webber sensed movement amidst the screening brush and trees. Now focused, he saw movement again flitting among the trees and brush in the dappled light and shadows. There was a brief, muffled, tonal conversation in Vietnamese. Then as if the wind had lightly blown a few leaves, the khaki uniform appeared. Webber's eyes blazed malevolently as he saw his enemy, a lone North Vietnamese Army regular "*bo doi*" with a red star on his khaki cap, rise up and throw a grenade. He fired and then yelled grenade to Hiner. He saw the stick grenade "potato-masher" arcing high through the air, flipping end over end into their position. The explosion of dirt, smoke, rock chips and shrapnel enveloped the area. The potato-masher was followed quickly by two more into the small clearing. Immediately after the three explosions Webber pointed to Hiner in the direction from which the grenades had come. Both Webber and Hiner now laid down a magazine of ammunition in a cross-fire in the direction.

Webber now felt exposed. He knew that he had to move his position. The watching eyes of the NVA were too close. Before long he would be too weak to help himself, so he would have to join Hiner. His trembling knees probably wouldn't hold him up if he tried to stand or run. He low crawled now, and would attempt to retrieve the mortally wounded SSG George A. Hoagland, who could not move. Hoagland said he didn't feel anything from his mid-chest down. He knew there was no longer any conscious movement, which indicated that his nervous system were gone. George told Webber to leave him. He was dying and faced his death with courage. Webber quickly low-crawled to Cook and finding him still alive but unable to talk. Webber managed to drag him over to Hiner's position and laid him down on the opposite side of the large rock. Webber could see the throbbing neck muscles as Cook experienced searing spasms of extreme pain pulsing through him. Webber administered morphine to Cook and himself, then crawled around the rock and joined Hiner. Hiner could now see Webber's face was white with tremors of pain shooting through his arm. Hiner also saw that Webber's energy was ebbing fast. His limb was useless, the forearm shattered by a 7.62 caliber round in the initial devastating fire from the NVA. Hiner dressed Webber's wound, and checked his watch. It was 12:30.

The gunships fifth and sixth run.

The FAC requested smoke again and Hiner told him to wait. He was out of smoke and had to search one of the dead bodies. Hancock laying on his stomach was the nearest and easiest to get to. His head pounding, he managed to sit up. As he got to his knees, his body swayed. He knew he would have trouble standing, much less running. Hiner ran as fast as he could, the jolting, intensifying the pounding in his head with a vengeance. His feet felt sluggish and unresponsive. The entire distance he waited to be slammed to the ground. It was only a short distance but it seemed to take forever. His blurring vision and nausea was affecting his balance. Webber saw that Hiner was weaving from side to side as he ran, staggering almost uncontrollably. Hiner flopped down besides Hancock and opened his pack. The searing pain in Hiner's head continued to swell and rise, then slowly subside and dissipate in a rush of unconsciousness. Hiner, revived momentarily. He was determined to choke back the brutal pain and doggedly endure it. The smoke grenades were there. The FAC was now informed to pull the rocket strikes out from the edge of the perimeter where the NVA had pulled back. The third pair of agile gunships now made their first rocket run right over the edge of the perimeter. The explosions were deafening. They turned and came around, making their final run exactly the same. At this time, Delta's FOB, listening back at Bong Son, requested the FAC to find out if Team Capital could move to a landing zone.

Special Forces Forward Operational Base (FOB) at Bong Son.

Col. Beckwith alerted the 1st Cavalry's Third Brigade staff commanded by Colonel Harold G. Moore. He was notified that there was no help forthcoming from the 1st Cavalry, because all their units had become heavily engaged everywhere and all air support elements were committed to their own men. Very briefly the 1st Cavalry's situation was explained. By noon, Col. Beckwith, pleading with the 3rd Brigade staff for air assets, was immediately notified that the third team had called for help and an emergency extraction. One team, Eskimo, was already out, Team Capital was surrounded, and the last team had already started their run for life through the mountains, the NVA being in close pursuit.

The 1st Cavalry's main heavy contact with the NVA was to the north of Bong Son, at a well fortified village, west of Tam Quan

on the first day, 24 January. It was followed by only light, sporadic contact for several days. The brief lull in the fighting was over. On the 28th of January, units of the 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry came into heavy contact with the NVA at the hamlets of Phung Du centered at grid coordinates BS 8706, on the national railroad and Highway 1. Phung Du was located six-and-half miles north of Hoai Nhon, on the south side of secondary crossroads. Four of the Chinooks had been shot down in one hour's time. Using the wrong tactics, the Cav troop carriers took a heavy beating in these initial combat assaults because they carried the infantrymen into the low areas under NVA observation and received a lot of concentrated anti-aircraft fire.

The Cav unit had air-assaulted into a large, sandy graveyard landing zone (BS 8706) in front of a well-entrenched enemy, with good grazing fire. They were now pinned-down in the open. The units, in the open and under intense machine-gun and mortar fire, sought the cover of the large open graveyard, with flood control dikes and open rice fields to their back. Both units were taking heavy casualties. The enemy in the small hamlet occupied a maze of zig-zagging communication trenches with fighting bunkers, underground bunkers for protection against artillery and aircraft. These NVA fortifications were well concealed by thickets of bamboo, cactus and tall palms, and well protected by mines and booby-traps and punji stakes. In the early hours of the morning, under the cover of darkness, the pinned-down units of the 7th Cavalry began withdrawing to the south. On 29 January, the 2nd Battalion, 12th Cavalry was conducting an air assault into the sandy hills to replace the withdrawn 7th Cavalry. In attacking the fortified positions, they made best use of their supporting fire from Cav artillery. Massed fire of mixed fuze quick and fuze delay were fired, along with gas rounds, in order to assist the 12th Cavalry successfully advance and take the system of trenches. In the three days that would follow, the 12th Cavalry would account for 191 NVA killed-in-action and 10 prisoners.

Col. Beckwith's aura of self-assurance was momentarily shaken. A dark and terrible pain showed briefly in his eyes as he listened to the 3rd Brigade staff explanation. He knew that resources that should be redirected immediately would not be. There would be no 1st Cavalry reaction team for Delta. They were on their own. Delta, now dying, the tall, fierce and strongly built Col. Beckwith momentarily was helplessly enraged. Then his hard, square chin

set, his face grew grave and stern. His nostrils broadened as his mouth tightened. A sudden poise of his head indicated thought and power, as his eyebrows drew down and tightened. He quickly returned to his area and ordered all those recon and support personnel in Delta remaining behind to ready themselves and standby to go in on a moment's notice and attempt to rescue at least one of their lost patrols when the situation allowed. He was again updated and briefed by his communications and operations personnel. Col. Beckwith still had his Command and Control helicopter, and went into the air to be ready in the event a situation presented itself. The Commander of the Delta Project, now like his lost teams on the ground, felt very much alone. He had been promised support, and there was none. He knew that he would get them out if he had to do it himself. The first attempt to rescue these two men by helicopter was going to be made by their commander, Col. Beckwith.

Team Capital An Lao Valley.

The FAC asked Hiner if the team could move to an landing zone (LZ). Hiner answered, but his voice was now fading and getting weaker as he replied negative, because the team was all dead or wounded and unable to move. Hiner now requested a reaction force to come in, as the popping sound of a heavy volume of AK-47 fire started hitting the ground and rocks from the southeast portion of the perimeter. The FAC again requested the estimated strength of the NVA, while flying around the area to select a landing zone (LZ) for the reaction force. Finding one, he marked it in his memory. Hiner replied platoon strength. The FAC now informed the Delta FOB that a reaction force of 15 men was needed to relieve Team Capital. The FAC started making tree top level passes over the Team's position to insure he had their exact location and try to scare and keep the NVA away or down to take the pressure off the two men. The FAC made three passes before the gunships had arrived, while talking to Hiner to get an exact fix on the position for the next strike. Now the FAC climbed and made a wide turn. He then came back and fired his two smoke rockets, marking the exact location of the NVA forces, twenty meters from their position, while the rocket ships positioned themselves.

Four gunships arrived overhead.

Hiner tossed one of the grenades retrieved from Hancock's pack. He now requested that the gunships fire their aerial rocket artillery 50 yards out from his position in a 360 degree circle. He also asked

where the reaction force was. The FAC called the FOB and asked about the estimated time of arrival (ETA) and was told they were on the way to loading on the choppers now. The FAC relayed that information to the two men, that it would be another thirty minutes. Hiner and Webber speculated and worried if they could last that long. His head throbbing in agony, Hiner was only dimly aware of the gunships in the distance; they were banking sharply and now bearing in for their direct fire support mission. He continued to have trouble with his equilibrium and co-ordination. Then Hiner passed out again. Webber's arm was throbbing, and he was now very weak. He could feel the grating sensation. But it didn't matter, for right now, he was still alive. He was now worried about Hiner, because he didn't seem to be moving or conscious. Each helicopter carried 48 rockets, made their runs individually. As they listened, they heard the whooshing roar of the of the 2.75 inch, high-explosive rockets being fired, and felt their violent explosive concussions with their eyes clamped shut. The first gunship was striking the north side of the perimeter, the second, the west side, and the third, to the south. But all the smoke, dirt and rock debris from the explosion caused the last gunship coming in from the east to misjudge the target. His rockets came right down through the middle of the perimeter. The deafening shock waves of the explosions were chewing up the area, and spewing shrapnel and debris everywhere, including SFC Marlin C. Cook's position on the other side of the rock. His agony was over. Immediately after the rocket strike, the FAC informed Hiner that a reaction force was getting ready. Neither Webber or Hiner noticed what happened on the other side of the rock. Later, it would be told by the gunship pilots that they saw Cook's body lifted off the ground with the intensity of the strike, as the rockets swept dead center over Team Capital's position.

#### Reaction force under fire.

The choppers, loaded with the Delta reaction force, started inching their way up the An Lao valley. Now the NVA's green tracers were everywhere. They had used their time wisely. Forced to fly low and slow due to the weather, the reaction force almost immediately started receiving heavy ground fire. The further they went, the heavier the ground fire became. The force turned and started flying back to try an approach from the north. The pilot, Major Murphy, who was flying the reaction force, came on the air with the FAC, and informed him that they were now in the air and that they were going to try to come in from the north. The FAC responded

"negative." It was impossible that way due to the extremely bad weather to the north. The reaction force would have to come up the valley. Major Murphy informed Capt. Kerr that he had already tried that way and received heavy ground fire. Capt. Kerr replied that he had been flying back and forth to guide the rocket ships in and that he could make it that way. The now doubtful Major Murphy turned the lead ship in the formation and started climbing above the clouds. Major Murphy called the FAC and said "on the way." The FAC told Hiner to hang on, adding that the reaction force was still on the way and would be in the area shortly. Major Murphy called the FAC and now informed him that he was above the clouds at twenty-five hundred feet, trying to find a hole to lead his formation through. The FAC told Major Murphy to rendezvous with him at Bong Son, then informed Hiner once again that he had to leave the area to guide the reaction force in. The FAC again flew down the gauntlet of NVA fire, through the closing walls of the valley and picked up the reaction force. The formation flew up the valley through and the green tracers of heavy ground fire, led by the Air Force FAC. The FAC told the choppers to standby, while he marked the best and closest LZ he had previously selected with his last two smoke rockets.

The LZ was not close to Hiner and Webber, but it was their best bet. After he dropped the reaction force off, the FAC told Major Murphy to orbit around the southern end of their approach in the valley, because a second reaction force from the 1st Cavalry was now on station just to their north side of the valley. Capt. Allen J. Carter from Project Delta, was with the Cav reaction force. The reaction force, under Delta's Lt. Holland, now had secured the LZ for the 1st Cavalry and threw a yellow smoke to inform the FAC he was on the ground and not to let anyone fire on his area. The 1st Cavalry would remain behind to secure the LZ for evacuation or until they were called upon to help Lt. Holland, moving to Webber and Hiner's position. Hiner and Webber heard a helicopter approaching and threw a smoke. Hiner got back on the radio and gave a situation report and started asking for a reaction force again. He again passed out briefly and when he became lucid, he heard the FAC say the reaction force was on the way. Hiner informed the FAC to have them use rope ladders so they could come right into the clearing. The FAC informed Hiner that the reaction force was already on the ground and working their way toward them.

Lt. Holland's reaction force.

By this time, the remaining members of Delta, who had stayed behind on the missions, had formed their own reaction force led by Lt. Guy H. Holland II and were landed in a distant area away from the two wounded men. The LZ was south of Hiner and Webber's position on a gentle sloping part of the ridge. The reaction force on the ground, now staring into the utter stillness of wavering and shifting shadows, had a steep climb in front of them. Lt. Holland knew they had to hurry, the noise of the rotors and engines of the helicopters on the ground had provided the NVA with a good direction to their location.

The Command and Control ship.

The initial helicopter extraction attempt was being made by Colonel Charlie Beckwith in the Command and Control (C&C) ship. The colonel had made his decision. His helicopter was coming in above them, offering hope. The pilot who had descended at maximum speed was now slowing. He whizzed in at treetop level, skimming over the trees. The situation looked good momentarily. But when it was well within range, the helicopter was met with intensified anti-aircraft fire. The green tracers made it easy for the NVA to see that they were hitting the helicopter. In the face of intense, short-range fire and hearing the hits on his aircraft, the pilot immediately aborted. In a hail of enemy fire, the helicopter was riddled. As it lurched, he swung it, quickly around and away, trying desperately to evade the fire. The crew chief notified the aircraft commander that Col. Beckwith was hit by a 12.7mm round in the stomach and was bleeding badly. The wound was below the rib cage. An emergency call from the pilot went out to Bong Son of an incoming wounded passenger. The pilot now raced his ship to Bong Son, utilizing the increased speed of the newer and wider blades mounted on the aircraft. The passenger could smell the raw, overpowering odor of torn intestines, and immediately alerted the pilot. The colonel was now forced to lie on the floor on his back. An inspection of the gaping wound revealed a balloon-like bulging intestine. The chopper flew the colonel, who was being medically assisted by another passenger to the aid station.

End of the line.

It was during and after this time that Webber and Hiner, now gradually slipping from the pressure, felt that this was the end. They had now been fighting to stay alive for two hours. Hiner called Robin One (FAC), asking for help. The FAC was desperately

requesting help in the form of a reaction force from the FOB. Hiner could vaguely hear him on the radio at this time, because of his condition, and didn't know who the FAC was talking to. At this time the area around the remaining two Delta Team members was quiet. Webber was now very weak from the loss of blood and worried now about Hiner, whose head wound was still bleeding and his fainting spells were becoming more frequent. Hiner, now lucid, crawled around to each dead body, checking it. He collecting their grenades and ammunition and returned to Webber's position. Both men figured that they were going to need all the ammunition they could get. The FAC was directing a chopper from the 1st Cavalry over the clearing, when Webber told Hiner to get out into the clearing and wave to the gunner. Hiner waved to the gunners, who in turn pointed down the ridge towards the reaction force.

Webber and Hiner saved.

The FAC told Lt. Holland to take a compass bearing of 360 degrees, straight north towards Hiner's position. Immediately after the FAC's transmission, Hiner informed the FAC that he was again receiving fire from the southwest. The FAC again used his unarmed aircraft to buzz the NVA positions on Hiner's southwest side at tree top level, trying to get them to stop firing or scare the NVA off. He flew his aircraft at top speed, hoping he was not much of a target for the NVA on the ground to fire at through the heavy surrounding timber. The NVA were well aware that this small aircraft was responsible for bringing death and destruction. Banking in a large circle, the FAC now remained overhead Hiner's position . During this time, the FAC attempted to raise Hiner on the radio, but he had passed out again and Webber was too weak from loss of blood to help himself. Having failed to raise Lt. Holland, the FAC was now extremely worried about what was happening below. Lt. Holland contacted the FAC, asking how far they were from Webber and Hiner. The FAC requested they pop a smoke grenade to mark their position. Seeing that they were located southwest of Hiner and Webber, he gave them a compass heading of 30 degrees. Lt. Holland's force was quickly moving again. The FAC called Capt. Carter and informed him that he had located a small LZ, approximately 150 meters to the north of his position that would accommodate one helicopter at a time for evacuating the dead and wounded. Capt. Carter said he would move north and secure it. At this time Lt. Holland called the FAC and stated they were again marking their position with smoke. The FAC quickly found the drifting smoke and gave him a compass heading of 50

degrees. Hiner again, lucid and desperate, came up on the radio and asked the FAC where the reaction force was and how soon it would reach him. Hiner was now informed that they were approximately 100 meters southwest of his position, down slope. He replied that they were not receiving any incoming fire at this time. Lt. Holland requested through the FAC for the two wounded men to throw smoke and fire three rounds into the air so the reaction force could get a quick fix on their location. Hiner threw the smoke and Webber fired the three rounds. Now everyone knew where they were. Now the FAC could see Lt. Holland's force closing on the two men. He requested the FAC buzz the two wounded men and cut his engine when he was over their position. The FAC repeated this maneuver for five minutes and then called a gunship in to hover over their position as the reaction force now stealthily approached. The helicopter complied and hovered for ten minutes fixing the location for the now, warily watching reaction force. The NVA had withdrawn. At 1530 hours, the reaction force broke through the clearing and found the stunned Webber and Hiner, in a numbed state of mind, covered in each other's blood and that of their fallen comrades. The great loss of blood rendered both men a little insensible and also an end to their pain. Webber's eyes struggled to focus on the faces of the men who had saved him. They had survived the carnage, their souls had not.

The ride back in the helicopter.

The small reaction force had quickly moved into Webber and Hiner's immediate area and rescued both. A stunned silence followed as they looked into the bloody, grimy faces of the two wounded men on the ground before them. A helicopter flying up the valley quickly materialized, its two gunners ready, their eyes searching the terrain. It quickly banked, and the pilot, lowering the collective, coolly flew steadily into the area. The chopper flared, stabilized in a hover and gently eased down to extract the wounded men. The helicopter throttled back to keep the rotor wash from creating too much debris in the air. Webber and Hiner were now very weak from profuse bleeding and needed to be physically assisted onto the chopper as pain bolted through them. The Huey rose and flew out over the valley and turned south. The air cooled quickly with the altitude. On the ride back to the hospital, both Hiner and Webber in their pain and fatigue, drifted in and out of consciousness. For the two wounded men, a peaceful somnolence settled over the chopper.

Then sweet oblivion. Of the six Team Capital members, four were killed and only two survived.

#### Team Roadrunner.

A lone helicopter passed over the small Gio River, whose silver water had already faded to a dull pewter. SFC Houston's six-man team was quickly inserted at last light, at 1900 hours on 27 January 1966. The door gunners were watching for the enemy, while keeping a close eye on the rear of the ship. They were standing by to communicate to the pilot if the tail rotor came too close to any object. They gave the "clear" when the whole reconnaissance team was out of the chopper to avoid lingering near the ground too long. The team landed in a clearing just below the crest of the mountain ridge at grid coordinates BS 711172. The pilot pulled back on the collective and nosed the chopper up and then into a quick turning climb away. Now alone, they were hoping that no one had heard or observed their insertion. They immediately moved 200 meters northeast through the elephant grass into the increasing gloomy cover of the trees for two hundred meters, below the crest of the finger ridge. The gloomy, dark forest closed imponderably over them like a shroud. The thick timber and darkness made them stop. The men were located above the nearest civilian populated area, the village of Hung Nhon, at grid coordinates BS 742144.

Slightly sweating in the cold from the tension, each man, huddled close by keeping his distance, listening and watching with wide eyes. It was a high-up and lonely place, many miles from the nearest friendly face. Small wings buzzed at their ears. There would be no moon or starlight, so hopefully they would be safe for a while. Their weapons were at the ready. Unbeknownst, to the recon team, the nearby NVA were already checker-boarding the area with trail watchers, ambushes and patrols were searching for them. One small group of NVA was fast closing on them, scanning the horizon and ground ahead of them for sign. The men of the DELTA Project knew that if the NVA were aware of them, they would immediately use the terrain, darkness, and adverse weather as opportunities to set up their hasty ambush positions in every site where they are likely to encounter the American patrols. The NVA commanders would checker-board every grid square of the map, completely enclosing the area. The NVA also knew that reconnaissance forces were deployed well forward in the offensive, and that sooner or later the 1st Cavalry was also

coming. Therefore, it was necessary to locate and kill the Americans as soon as possible before they wandered too far and learned too much.

Their first day was a short one. The existing light dropped low over the western range of mountains as they went into the thick brush on the southern exposure of the mountain to remain-over-night. The thick overcast of cloud cover obscured the moon. The light gone, the mountain forest came alive with the drizzle of rain. The alert and crouched team members took note of the physical manifestations around them. Only a few night insects had begun their incessant, low, monotonous song. The tree frogs joined in with their sweet, melodious, trilling. Every sound directed their attention. Their ears were keened to the sound of the night creatures. A night bird called from the trees downhill. The night was so dark that the team was unable to move far. There was only the varied odors of tree leaves, the shrubs around them, rotting wood, wet leaf mold of the soil, clean damp air to fill their nostrils, and the sound of small animals moving in the trees was almost undetectable. The smell and feel of the air was changing. At night the ground is the most dangerous place to be. Predators hunt best in total darkness. Fearful shapes take place and the smaller creatures, sensing the danger, go to the trees. The dull glowing patches of phosphorous gave depth to the darkness. As the hours wore away, the team members attention was attracted at intervals to the steps of some padded, soft-footed animal somewhere nearby, which soon stole away into the obscurity. The lonely and crushing solitude of the night passed uneventful with intermittent spells of light rain drumming on the canopy above. Periodically, they were soaked with sluicing sheets of rain. The men were uneasy, and already so wet and wretchedly cold that it made no difference. It grew very black and still, though they heard the heavy pattering drop of water accumulated and dripping from the trees. They had spent a long night, peering into the dark and listening to nature's night-sounds. It was now that formidable hour before dawn when even the life of the forest seemed at its lowest ebb. The night seemed to pass at an incredibly slow pace, but finally the sounds of the night were replaced by the awakening chorus of those who are active by the coming of daylight. The men were greeted by sleepy chirps and the twittering of birds coming awake and beginning to move about. As the new light emerged out of the

east, on 28 January, the chill dawn mist strung in a ghostly gauzy veil over the narrow creek below.

Dawn's early light.

The short antenna was removed and the long one was hurriedly broken out and screwed into the radio. The team leader whispered into the handset, praying that he would be heard immediately. Radio contact was quick and successful. The long antenna was now replaced by the short one. Its signal would radiate more straight up when any aircraft showed up in the immediate area. Commo was made at 0720 hours, reporting their location, negative contact and direction of movement. Chilled, wet and miserably cold, they stood slowly, working out the stiff muscles and pain in their joints from sitting too long in one position on the cold, wet ground. After urinating on the nearest surrounding tree trunks, they were ready. The bleary-eyed team began at 0730 hours to move slowly, contouring and winding around through the overgrown forest, across the head of a deep ravine. They were headed in a southeast direction, along and up the opposite, gentle-sloping finger ridge. They moved carefully to avoid disturbing the leaves. The only sounds were the natural ones; the wind, birds communicating and the tumbling water murmuring in the ravine. Moving down the opposite side of the ridge, the team noticed fresh dirt. Then they moved until they came to the point above a stream, from which they could see below. They stopped to observe a trail running along side of the stream. SFC Huston now decided to confer with his men about checking the area where he had observed the fresh dirt.

The NVA ambush site.

Huston now selected a well concealed position twenty meters further down the ridge to better observe the trail below, and posted SFC Hodgson there with the rest of the team. This was at grid coordinates BS 715170. The team was now above the small village of Hoc Khoan at the edge of the mountain, below in the valley. Voices could be heard in the valley. He did not want to be surprised by any NVA movement on the trail. SFC Houston selected his second in command, SSG Badolati, to go with him back up the ridge to check the area thoroughly. A silence pervaded over the trail and the thick green mat of vegetation beneath the primeval towering old growth trees, as the team watched. The only sound was the murmur of the wind and the rush of the nearby stream. Huston and Badolati, now up the hill,

were moving about the ridge. They found it to be saturated with the fresh dirt from a newly prepared, platoon-size ambush position. These individual fighting positions were known as spider holes. They had been dug the previous day. The holes were two feet deep and a foot wide. Checking his watch, Huston noted the time. It was 0930 hours. Having seen enough, the team's two leaders returned back down the ridge to the rest of the team. As soon as they joined the team, SFC Houston noticed the keyed up Hodgson by his alert body movement, rapt attention and posturing behind his weapon. Hodgson, in deep concentration to his front, was watching down the trail. Huston reacted with a startled response to the single report of the rifle. Hodgson continued to fire. He fired several burst, seeing the approaching NVA legs buckle, twist and then fall. The team leader immediately withdrew Hodgson and the rest of his team back away from their positions as he and Badolati sprayed the area down the trail with fire in case there were more NVA. Houston quickly conferred with Hodgson, who stated that he had killed two NVA and wounded a third coming up the trail. Houston now heard muffled voices. Now there were the barely audible but excited high rising, broken and low pitch tonal sounds of Vietnamese being spoken. There was more movement on the trail well below their position. They were not going to go away. Huston told Badolati to lead the team down and across the trail and stream and move up the gentle-sloping hill on the other side of the draw. Badolati moved to the trail and briefly stopped to check the area. They watched and waited. Badolati approached and carefully checked both directions. Nothing. The team rapidly crossed the trail in one large stride, blending into the concealment of the darkness. They moved a short distance away from the trail and stopped, keenly observant. They waited and listened to make certain their movement across the trail had gone undetected. The men crossed the stream and slowly and quietly contoured up along the side of the hill, until the time when the sun would normally have reached its zenith. There was no sun. The sky was still heavily overcast with drizzling rain. Huston knew they had been compromised now.

He became the team's rear security to make sure they were not followed and to attempt to sweep and cover their trail, hoping whoever attempted to follow would only quickly scan the area without seeing their trail. Huston was now seriously considering an extraction. As the men moved up the hill, they observed more newly constructed ambush positions. The freshly dug fighting positions saturating the area with two machine-gun positions,

clothes and baskets spread about the area. The team leader warned his men to touch nothing. SSG Terry now warned the team leader that he had observed a platoon sized force of khaki and green uniformed NVA moving up toward the hill. Voices could be heard as if directing others in the valley below. They were compromised. Huston told the men that they were now going to move fast and try to evade the fast closing enemy force. They headed for the darker light of cool deep green, running bent at the waist and knees. Soon they were pumping their arms and legs fast for a short distance, then stretching out into a long, slow stride, which would last for two hours. The Bo dois of the 22nd NVA regiment in their faded, Chinese-issued green uniforms were following close behind their small team of scouts now trailing the American team. When Huston called a halt, it was 1200 hours. They were breathing heavily from the run, their chest heaving and blood pounding in their temples. They set up security to rest. The team would remain here to catch their breath and make commo before continuing to evade. They were unaware that they were now being tracked through the mountains. The trackers now identified the number of personnel and knew that they were a reconnaissance team. They were now stalking the team. There was but one thing left: the NVA would harry the Americans through the mountains until they killed, captured or ran them out of the area.

#### The Trackers.

The Americans could see that the weather and wet terrain would make it impossible to hide their back-trail, if they moved too fast. Hopefully, Huston thought that the security patrols of the 22nd NVA Regiment would not be aware of them and accidentally cut their trail. If so, they knew that it would be easy for the trained eye to follow their trail. The enemy commander may have already employed his trained counter reconnaissance personnel. The rainfall had smoothed the ground, the Americans with their vibram soles would leave a trail. Unknown to the team, a vigilant and silent moving North Vietnamese Army regular "*bo dois*" tracker had already picked up their sign easily. He squatted and gently brushed the impressioned leaf edges of a boot track with a fingertip. He had a vivid awareness of everything around him. A team of six men in a hurry, left an easy trail for any experienced tracker to find. The "*Bo dois*" tracker could see where the Americans had made an attempt to lightly sweep their backtrail. The large vibram sole of the American jungle boot was well made and had good traction on any terrain.

However, the raised portion of the sole would leave noticeable marks on bare ground and leaf carpet if the wearer moved too fast. The boot was made for good foot protection. That was the problem, and the NVA knew exactly who had been there. While the Americans left heel marks, the NVA did not. The plain smooth sole of the NVA sandal was noticeably harder to observe and left a shallow and uncomplicated faint track, often without edges. Slow and careful movement prevented scuff marks that could not be erased. Any disturbance of the ground would remain there for the eye to see. The NVA tracker rose from the ground, quickly and silently moved ahead to the point where he saw the trail disappearing in the distance. He was followed patiently by others at a distance. The trail became easier to follow, because the Americans were running. Finally, with a silent stealth the "*Bo dois*" tracker followed the trail slowly over the top of a hill and squatted, watching and listening below. He could see the difference between the darker scuff marks of disturbed leaves and the lighter color of the undisturbed area of their trail disappearing ahead and below him. The tracks now of a shorter distance apart, down the hill were easy to see. His sharp eyes became aware of movement and a slight sound below him in the shadows. The hunter knew he had found the Americans. The tracker moved back the way he had come. He conferred with the units commander, who issued instructions to a subordinate, who in turn waved a selected number of men behind him forward for instructions.

#### Attempting Commo.

The team had now been stopped for about ten minutes, just below a hill. There was a constant awareness as they stopped to rest and relax. Huston could smell the acrid smell of sweat and fear. Each man was quietly facing outward in a small circle. But at any given moment they could come under observation of the NVA. Only the low hum of insects pervaded the whispering wind. The team leader was starting to check and verify his location on the map. They were approximately eight kilometers northwest of An Lao on the south side of a finger ridge above a deep draw and creek. Their position was located between two main trails that separated at the foot of the mountain and paralleled the finger they were on. Both came back together at the top of the mountain ridge that ran northwest/southwest. SFC Houston, by habit, glanced hopefully up for the position of the sun. Then a quick glance at his watch confirmed the time. The weather was still marginal. It was just past noon. After catching his breath and getting his breathing

regulated again, he prepared to make radio contact with a situation report and ask to be extracted.

Found.

Then all was quiet, the hum of the insects gone. Experiencing a sense of uneasiness, SSG Terry raised his head, searching, an edgy mood infected him. His instinct or the subconscious hearing of a sound told him they were there, somewhere. The light erratic wind combined with the mist and drizzling rain made it extremely difficult to classify sound and scent. There was a slightly different sound and also a different scent that caught Terry's attention on their back-trail. He was laying back on his indigenous rucksack, and slowly raised upright, silently alerting the team. He had been intuitively warned to the silent sound of an almost indiscernible smooth animal movement. Within seconds, Terry could make out the barely audible low whispering of voices. The slight breeze and creaking trees created a confusion of sound overriding the sound of the trackers' approach. Then the nightmare began. As he cautiously scrutinized the immediate area, Terry detected a subtle but harsher shadow in the brush about twenty meters away on their uphill side. A small rounded silhouette. The distant image became intelligible. A brown face stared at him. Shocked, he momentarily stared back, so well did the face blend with the shadows. Overcoming his initial shock and confusion, Terry lifted his rifle and made a smooth trigger squeeze. The man was down. Nearby, muzzle flames flickered from the brush. Badolati and Hodgson jump to their feet, prepared for flight. There was the sound of a bullet striking bone, followed by a sharp, pained, wordless agonized cry as Badolati was knocked passed Huston by the impact. SSG Badolati had been hit in the upper portion of his left arm. He remained on his feet, his back arched and shuddering in pain. He moved passed Huston through the forest. The 7.62mm round had almost severed his arm.

The firefight.

Surprised, everyone hugged the ground and waited as AK-47 fire continued to a lull. Now the team fired suppressive fire. From Badolati's cries and arterial spraying of blood in all directions as he moved, everyone knew he had been hit. Hodgson twisted sharply with the impact of a bullet striking the receiver of his rifle as he brought it up to fire. The impact of the 7.62mm round striking the receiver threw the weapon from his hands, rendering the weapon useless. Hodgson was now unarmed, so he followed and caught up

with Badolati. Seeing his arm was almost severed from the wound he quickly applied a tourniquet to what was left of his upper arm, to staunch the bleeding. His arm just hung by some intact tissue and muscle. Most of the blood loss was stopped. There was now only seepage. His hand and forearm were placed inside his jacket between the buttons, and a triangular bandage applied to help him carry it, as it was tied in place. He still had one good arm. The team leader, SFC Huston, pointed the way north for Hodgson and Badolati to move. Unarmed except for grenades, Hodgson asked Terry for his 9mm pistol that he carried as a backup. Terry complied. The packs were left in place. Hodgson helped Badolati now suffering from shock. When Huston asked Hodgson if he had been hit, he answered "no." But Huston saw fear in his eyes. Everyone returned fire in the direction of the NVA, then moved out one after the other quickly, covering each other with fire. McKeith remained behind the rest of the team, covering the team leader. They soon caught up with Hodgson and Badolati. SFC Houston led them approximately 30 meters at a run, then checked to see everyone was together. Huston told Hodgson to stay with Badolati because he was unarmed. After the team had moved approximately 400 meters, Huston called a halt to attempt comms with the FAC or the FOB, and discovered the pack with the radio was now in the hands of the NVA.

#### The blood trail.

The NVA had now secured a perimeter around the rest area that the Americans had occupied during their break. Now, the small "*Bo dois*" tracker entered the area. Blood was splattered everywhere. The copper scent of blood was overpoweringly strong in his nostrils and the metal taste on the back of his tongue. From the direction that the spray of blood hit the ground and the scuff marks, he determined where the wounded man had been when hit. He had been standing. The bright red blood splatter was of great volume and irregular in pattern. Looking ahead, he saw bone fragments. He also saw a spattered blood pattern indicating the wounded man was moving off rapidly away from the point of impact. The tracker ordered the ditched American equipment gathered and put in one place and quickly displayed, as he followed the blood trail. He would check, in a few minutes, what the Americans left behind. He saw the fresh, bright pool of blood where the wounded American had been attended to. Blood-soaked, turned-over leaves indicated two men standing together. Only a faint trickle of a blood trail existed from this

point on. A tourniquet had been applied to stop the bleeding. The tracker would now follow as quickly as he dared to keep this man bleeding. He knew that pursuit would eventually kill the wounded man. Turning around, he walked quickly over to look at the equipment. The Americans had left six packs with their food, which his men could now use. They also contained extra ammunition. His eyes widened, when he discovered two radio sets--AN/PRC-25s, and an HT-1--one serviceable and one useless M-16 rifle that would be cannibalized for parts. There was also a 6.35 pistol, three needed lensatic compasses and four pair of binoculars. The quality U.S. compass was a much-needed item by the NVA. The tracker now led the men quickly through the forest on the easy to follow scuff marks and spotty blood trail. The Americans were running. The wounded one left a trail of fresh, oval-shaped blood drops, on the leaf mat. Like the fingers of a hand, the splatter marks were pointing the way. The further they moved, the more blood they encountered.

#### No Radio.

Huston now halted briefly to have Badolati attended to, and realized that the only radio the team now had was the ground to air, HT-1. Badolati, in shock, and pain, was now frightened. He felt faint, and his knees were wobbly and threatened to fold on him, but he had managed to run because of the increased adrenaline flow to his body. SFC Huston used the HT-1 to call their emergency code, "Flaming Arrow," indicating to anyone listening that the team needed help. The only reply was "Alpha Mike." The team fought to calm their labored breathing. Huston gave the HT-1 to Gray to carry. After telling Huston that Badolati was still losing blood, Hodgson was asked to put another tourniquet on quickly. Badolati now feeling a lot of pain asked for morphine. It was administered. Huston told the others to keep running, and took off again, running heading out of our operational area. His plan was to lead his men north out of their tactical area of responsibility (TAOR) and then west and finally south to reenter his TAOR to their emergency rendezvous point (RV). The team ran. They quickly came up on an old, hand-made rock wall. The team stopped and took up a defensive position as Huston looked at the three-foot high, eighteen-inch thick wall that ran as far as he could see both ways through the forest. He knew they could now stop here and defend from this area long enough to attend to the exhausted Badolati. Crouched behind the temporary safety of the low wall, they peered over the top to scan to scan the area. Huston

looked at each brave man but saw fear in their eyes. Badolati sensed that he was going to die and told Huston so. Huston told him that they would make it out. Badolati wanted to be left behind, so that the team would have a better chance of making it out. He continued to beg Huston to leave him. Huston hoped the NVA would run up on the wall like they did so that they could kill or hurt the NVA bad enough to halt their pursuit. The team took up their positions. What they dreaded most happened as soon as they settled into place. The 7.62 mm rounds of automatic AK-47 fire were slapping into the trunks of the trees around them, hammering into the rock wall, and plowing into the ground in front of the rock wall, kicking up debris. The NVA were already here. Rock dust, wood chips and bark were flying everywhere. Huston told Badolati to start moving north, adding that the rest of the team would catch up with him quickly. Badolati started running north by himself as Huston watched his direction, then turned back to firing over the wall. The team returned a heavy volume of fire. The khaki and faded green uniforms of the NVA were now materializing out of the dark, utilizing fire and movement. At the wall, SSG Terry and MSG Gray both returned fire, emptying a magazine a piece into the khaki ranks. Reloading, they saw Hodgson running to the west. Terry and Gray picked up and followed behind Hodgson. As soon as Terry and Gray caught up with Hodgson, it was apparent that they were alone and that the NVA was now close behind them. The three men heard firing to the north.

Startled now, Huston saw that three of his men were gone. Huston moved up to the cover of the wall and started returning fire. Realizing that he and SSG Billy A. McKeithe were now alone, he started moving away from the wall to take up the run again. He was covered from the rear by McKeithe using the cover of a large tree. He asked McKeithe where the other three men were and he said they had already left. Huston gave McKeithe the chemical CS gas powder grenade. McKeithe threw it into the air. The lingering, noxious, crystallized gas would saturate the surrounding overhanging vegetation to help delay and confuse the enemy. Once human contact was made with the small powder crystals, they would stick to them. The term CS is a code-name for ortho-chlorobenzylidene malonitrile, which will intensely irritate the eyes, skin, the respiratory system and stomach, often causing temporary blindness. This gas, unidentifiable to the NVA, would cause enough fear among them to stop or slow them down. No one was left to defend the wall but the two of them. It was time to go.