

Mission out of Camp Evans

From David Shows

PRELOGUE: I wanted to share a story with a few of you guys. I know its way too long to be a posting on the site. That's OK, I just needed to tell the story. It's funny you go all of these years without talking about these things, and now I can't seem to shut up, I try not to be so wordy, but it just comes gushing out. I think that talking to some of you guys may be taking the place of psychotherapy for me. Don't bother billing me I have lousy health insurance. Like Ken Storm told me, making contact with you guys across the years kind of helps me to put things into their proper place.

The 6 man team was all G.I. no Montagnards.

The only man on the team whose name I remember for certain was Ken Storm. This was Ken's first mission.

The ATL was with me for several missions and was damn good but for the life of me I could not remember his name, although I tried for many years. Ken Storm, and Bill Hand were able to tell me that the ATL was Ron Bitticks.

We inserted just before dark in what appeared from the air to be a bomb crater on the side of a densely wooded mountain. We discovered that it was not a bomb crater but was a man made clearing. Filled with fallen trees, it took a good bit of effort to get out over the jumble of logs.

We spent the night a ways up the mountain from the clearing and the next day we made our way to the top of the mountain, at the top we found a network of heavily used trails. We also found what appeared to be the remnants of a stone fence, and what we thought might be the stone foundation of an old building.

We proceeded down the other side of the mountain into a large valley. As we crept our way down we kept hearing periodic single rifle shots, some apparently from the same mountain we were on, others far away. When we got within perhaps a 100' of the valley floor we realized that these single rifle shots were coming from back up the mountain behind us perhaps 100 ft or so above our position above the valley floor, and perhaps several hundred feet to either side of the route we had taken down the mountain, and apparently from the opposite mountain side facing us. We later heard this repeated many times, one shot, wait a couple of minutes then another a couple of hundred yards or so from the first, wait a few minutes then another shot and so on in a circle around the valley floor.

We decided that it was trail watchers or guards signaling and we were within their perimeter. We tried several times to make sit reps, but had almost no commo, we could hear static and occasional words over the radio, and the base was not hearing us any better.

We continued sneaking down a steep sharp ridgeline near the valley floor, and ran into a cleared area, which was about the size and shape of a large bomb crater. From the air everyone had thought they were bomb craters, which is apparently what the enemy had wanted. The cleared area was surrounded by a low wooden fence in the wood line (not visible from the air) and was planted with green grass-like plants. As we continued downward along the ridge we found a similar disguised field on the other side of the ridge. We hunkered down near the bottom of the ridge perhaps 30 to 50 foot above the valley floor and spent the night. The guard's shots continued at regular intervals every couple of hours, and we could occasionally hear voices coming from the valley.

The next morning our commo was so bad we decided we had better get out of there back up the mountain we had just come down where we hoped we could reestablish commo. As we started sneaking up past the second "field" we had found, the field suddenly filled up with several women tending the plants, and three or four uniformed NVA guarding them. We laid there in the wood line just a yard or so from the edge of the field for a couple of hours until the group left going back down into the valley. We were unable to call in the sighting. We sat there for a while making sure we were alone and before we could start back up, we started hearing a noise that seemed to be coming from the woods beyond the first field we had seen. It sounded like chopping on a tree with an axe.

This kept up for sometime, eventually I decided to leave the team with Ron the ATL and attempt to sneak around the first field to see if I could see what they were doing, and where exactly they were. As I was moving the noise stopped. When I got perhaps 50 yards or so from the team along the upper edge of the field, I could see a group of men in the bottom moving below where the team was waiting, several shirtless men (I remember thinking they were large and muscular for Vietnamese) who were carrying long sections of trees which had been de-barked. These poles were about 6 or 8 foot long and obviously quite heavy. Several uniformed NVA with rifles accompanied the group. I could see and hear that they were

laughing and talking as they moved past. The team could not see them but could hear their voices and movements. I laid on the edge of the field until the group was out of sight, and then snuck back to the team. Ron and I were standing at the front of our little column studying the map and trying to pick a route to get us back up the mountain as quickly as possible without being seen by the guards.

I suddenly caught movement out of the corner of my eye, and probably 20 feet to the side of us I saw a pair of eyes staring at me through the brush. I went for my gun and was already starting to pull the trigger when Ron grabbed my arm and whispered to me "it's Storm". The face was still looking at me and I gradually began to recognize Ken. I have never gotten over the sickness in the pit of my stomach realizing just how very close I had come to shooting him. If Ron had not been so alert to see what was going on, and so quick to grab me I would certainly have shot Ken. Ken had slipped off to the side of our column to respond to a call of nature, Ron who was facing toward the team, and the others behind me had seen him go, I was facing up the mountain with the team to my back and had not. For years I wondered if Ken ever knew just how very close that had been. If it had not been for Ron, I would have killed him in 1968. When I got to talk to Ken in 2008, he clearly remembered the incident as well as I did. One of the first things he said to me was "thanks for not shooting me" and then he asked if I still had that gun I pulled on him. He said that it taught him a lesson, one that he almost didn't live long enough to learn. He said that he never again got out of sight of a team without being certain that every one on the team knew where he was and what he was doing. We both owe a heavy debt to Ron.

We regrouped and were just about ready to try to sneak out again when a helicopter came overhead. The Lt. (I don't remember his name) was in the chopper, and I think Bill Hand was with him but I'm not sure of that. The Lt. was giving me hell for not making scheduled sit reps and calling in sightings. When he understood the commo problem he asked why we didn't move to establish commo. I remember telling him that anyway we moved that morning we seemed to be running into enemy troops. He said he was going to put another team out to act as a radio relay and to sit tight. We asked him if we should attempt to snatch a prisoner if they came back into one of the fields. He advised if we got a good opportunity without endangering the team to go ahead. I remember we got a chuckle out of that, how do you kidnap one enemy soldier from a group when you had poor to nonexistent commo, and no way of arranging an immediate extraction without involving a good dose of risk? Later that day another helicopter came back into the area and went all over the area of the valley. He was equipped with a "max sniffer" device and after awhile reported that the valley was full of people (thanks a lot we had already figured that out).

I believe we may have stayed there one more night listening to people moving all around us.

As we were still lying low (I remember that we made hot tea from instant packs with lemon while we were waiting, the first time I ever drank hot tea), helicopters came back into the area and the Lt. advised that he was extracting us immediately and directed us to the second field where we had seen the women working. We had discussed going out by McGuire rig, and I'm not sure why we didn't, I know Ron was all for it, and if the Lt. was listening to Bill Hand I know he would have been all for it. I was willing but not keen on the idea. I never would have admitted it back then, but I was always afraid of heights, and hated rappelling and rope extraction. I did it when I had to, but I never liked it.

In hind sight I suppose the Lt. made the decision to come down into the field which was just barely large enough for a chopper, and get us out as rapidly and unexpectedly as possible. I'm positive it was the right decision. Ships hovering above the triple canopy long enough to hook us up and pull us out would have been too tempting and too easy of a target for too long. The Lt. must have thought all of this out, I didn't until much later.

We lay in the woods beside the field as gun ships went up and down the valley not firing, just hoping to get the other folks to hide, which apparently worked. When our chopper got near the ground in the field we made a dash for it and jumped on from both sides before its skids had even reached the ground. I remember all of us yelling as we got aboard to get the hell out of there. We kept expecting to be fired on but there was no response from the woods as we flew away. It seems to me that the Lt. was aboard that ship that picked us up but I'm not positive of that.

Later in de-briefing, as we were trying to describe what we had seen, and trying to describe the plants we had seen being cultivated, Ron reached into his pack and produced a good handful of the plants roots and all. It was one of those "duh" moments for me, "why didn't I think of that". Ron was a great ATL, he frequently made up for any shortcomings on my part. We were told that the plants were a type of rice that did not require a flooded paddy. I remember we discussed plans for putting a team in as a radio relay, and taking a small very light team back into the valley to see if we could see more of what was going on there. I

remember everyone on the team was eager to try this. Apparently the decision was made to do an “arc-light” (massive bombing attack) on the valley very soon after we left it.

As a team we were disappointed we wanted the chance to go back in and do some more LRRP’ing, I think there was something seriously wrong with us at that time.

Chuck Awe was the RTO on Evans during much of this mission, and he and I later got to discuss it at some length when we met up at Fort Hood in early 1969.

I never stopped thinking about this mission over the years, partially because of the heavy adrenalin rush of being so close to so many of the enemy for so long without being seen, and partially because of the near tragedy with Ken.

I didn’t start trying to put together this account until the summer of 2007 when I was talking to Doug Parkinson about it. I would love to see the debriefing and team notes from that mission, to see just how accurate my memory is after all of these years, and to put names to the others involved. Since I originally wrote this, I had the wonderful opportunity to talk at length with Ken Storm, due to a big helping hand from “Dutch” Pete Eisentrager. Ken reviewed this for me and has helped me out in some areas where my memories had failed me. Most significantly he told me that the ATL on the team was named Bitticks first name unknown. He also verified that this was his first LRRP mission and we talked a good bit about the “almost” friendly fire incident. Subsequently Bill Hand told me that the ATL was Ron Bitticks.