

1st CAVALRY LRRP's FIRST CASUALTIES

from Bill Carpenter

Most grunts who served in Viet Nam have a lot more, and better, stories than I, especially the LRRP/Rangers. In the big picture, this story is small potatoes. It was a big deal to six of us. I was only in one firefight before coming home. The average infantryman who pulled a full one-year tour would be in about 10 battles. The average LRRP would pull 30-40 missions in a year, half of these would end with a "hot extraction".

5 January 1967

CARPENTER, WILLIAM D RA16887249

Asg to: 90th Repl Bn APO SF 96307

Aval date: 15 Mar 67

I arrive in Viet Nam after the winter monsoon season. On March 20, 1967, I am assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division. I figured a grunt is a grunt, so it doesn't matter where I go. I am just glad I am not a Marine in I corps. They are getting the shit shot out of them.

During the "Welcome to Viet Nam" training there is a demonstration on how quick Medivac can get the wounded to a hospital. Why do they make a big deal out of this? Do they expect a lot of us to be wounded? One night we are put out on the green line, perimeter duty, with M-14's and one clip of ammo. A little better than spit wads and rubber bands, but not much better. A single clip of ammo doesn't last very long in a firefight.

We are told during the indoctrination that very few of the women are whores, and most of the whores have VD. A staff sergeant tells us, "When you kill a Chinese or Russian, not if you kill a Chinese or Russian, because if you are in enough firefights you will kill one. When you kill a Chinese or Russian, don't tell anyone, all it will do is cause you a lot of paperwork. Everyone knows they are here."

While I am at the 1st Cav's replacement depot, Captain **James** comes down and gives us a little talk about joining the division's Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) unit. I think, why not, at least I will be with some good troops to keep me out of trouble. Military rule number 1, never volunteer. Why did I volunteer for LRRP? It just seemed like the thing to do at the time. So I talk to Captain **James**. I have to come up with an instant sales pitch for this job interview. What I tell him is that the West Virginia hills are very much like the Viet Nam hills, and I had been running ridges all of my life. I also say that I have probably spent two or three years of my life camping out, so sleeping on the ground in the rain is not new to me.

On March 28, 1967 I report to Co. A, 1st Bn, 8th Cav at LZ English. The company is on perimeter duty for a new artillery firebase on top of a hill near English. We can look across the Bong Song Plains and see the South China Sea. Beautiful. We spend most of our time clearing the green line, laying concertina wire and building bunkers. There is no serious action during the week I am there.

3 April 1967

CARPENTER, WILLIAM D RA 16887249

Atch to: 191st MI Det

Purpose: for dy with Div LRRP Co

Six of us came to LRRP together. We have to set up our own GP tent. It takes a few days to "requisition" canvas cots for us to sleep on. Until then the unit was 18 men. After the war, they take the unofficial name "The Original 18". The new guys are to become Team 3 after we complete training. The idea of pulling a mission with five other new guys scares me.

The unit is a detachment, working directly under division headquarters. We are a bunch of orphans looking for a home, "The James Gang", named after Captain Jim **James**. Lt. Ron **Hall** is the XO and SFC Fred **Kelly** is the First Sergeant. Sometime during the second week of April 1967, the unit becomes HHC G-2, LRRP. I think the unit got a TO&E with that. In January 1969, the unit becomes Company H (Ranger), 75th Regiment.

Special Forces had worked out the principle of long range patrolling, but the entire idea of a division LRRP unit is new. There is a lot of resistance to this change from the higher ranks. "We didn't do it this way in WW II or Korea, why change?" Answer, "This is a different kind of war." Most of the NCO's are ranger trained, but it is all OJT for the enlisted ranks.

Team 1 had been pulling missions since January, and Team 2 since February. Some of the kinks have been worked out. They are the first 1st Cav "Ghosts". They must be doing something right; there has not been any serious contact, yet.

For the next two weeks, SFC **Kelly** tries to teach us everything he knows. The training is very intense. "Let me try that again." "Don't have time, gotta go on." The running winds me, but running is supposed to wind you. Lt. Hall did like to run. Two-a-days in football were a lot harder than the physical part of the training. I had a lot of civilian experience in topog maps and first aid, so no problem there. I do not know radios and the idea of calling in an artillery strike scares me.

About the third week of April, about 8-10 new guys come in to start training for team 4.

Team 1 is down to four members, so at the end of training, **Bill Carpenter** and **David Ives** join Team 1. **John Simones** is the team leader and **Doug Fletcher** the ATL. The other two team members are **Art Guerrero** and **Goeff Koper**, medic.

John had been in the Marine Force Recon before coming over to the army. Doug had been with 2/8 Cav before LRRP, and had earned a silver star in the A Shau Valley. Art had been with 1/7 Cav, Custer's old outfit, and also had a silver star from the A Shau Valley. Geoff is a combat medic. All of them had been in country for several months before coming to LRRP. They have pulled about 10 missions as a team. Good people, they will take care of this newbie.

Team 1, four old pros and two new guys, is inserted at dusk on Thursday, 20 April 1967. We are put in close to the head of a stream. We are to more or less follow this stream and see what we could see. See what you see, hear what you hear, smell what you smell, and think before you act. The stream runs to the southwest. The closest US army troops are at An Khe, about 15 kilometers south of us. The nearest friendlies are at Kan Nak, some 7-8 km away. Kan Nak is where the stream we are on empties into the Song Ba. The Green Berets had a base there at one time, but there is only an irregular force there now, who may even be VC. Don't depend on them. Our E&E plan is to head for Kan Nak.

We are outside of artillery cover. Because of the mountains, radio contact is difficult. There are no radio relay points. We are to report in morning and evening. Most of the time, base has to put a chopper in the air for radio contact.

This is not going to be like hunting back home, the squirrels shoot back.

On Friday we go through a lot of elephant grass, 7-8 feet tall. The word "leach" takes on a whole new meaning for me. The elephant grass is loaded with them. Walk, pick off six or eight leaches, walk, pick off six or eight leaches. We hear someone cutting wood, nothing out of line. I hear a hen cackling, and am told that they run wild in the jungle. This is not West Virginia, chickens do not mean people.

On Saturday morning, we move from some open timber to some pretty thick new-growth jungle. We go slow to keep quiet, we can't see more than 10-15 feet in any direction. We eat the first meal of the day. We are low on water, so Art and I take the canteens down to the stream to fill them. The stream is about 20 meters away.

Art and I encounter a major trail, a "high speed runner". The tall timber keeps the trail well hidden from aircraft. You had to be on the ground to see it. Finding things like this is LRRP's job. This "trail" is wide enough, and smooth enough, to drive a jeep on it. This means this trail has a lot of foot traffic, not just someone going to grandma's house.

There is a little hooch set on low stilts by the trail. The trail goes close to the hooch and curves around the hill below it. There are several firing positions in an arch on the downhill side of the hooch, overlooking the trail. The opening/door to the hooch is on the uphill side. Don't see any people around.

Art decides to check the hooch out. His web gear makes him about three feet wide. We have left our packs with the rest of the team. Art sees some paper on a shelf inside the hooch. I pull security while he goes after the papers. He gets stuck in the door. I hear voices, not in English, from the other side of the hooch, about 10 feet away. I let Art know we have company. He is stuck in the door, he finally gets free, soundlessly. He tells me to take off while he pulls rear security. The "high speeder" is between us and the cover of the jungle.

"Think before you act". Not this time, I have a split-second mental lapse that will be fatal for David Ives. I take off too fast, and hit the brush too hard. This by a guy who spent his life in the woods and knows how to not spook wild animals. Art is watching the people, he says later that there was a woman and some men; the woman had something in her hand. When I hit the brush, she screams and throws the item in the air.

Everyone knows what happens when you make a woman mad. She turns to the men in her life, father, brothers, uncles, etc. and says, "What are you going to do about it"? I always tell everyone that the reason I was wounded is that I got a woman mad at me. Never make a woman mad, she will get even.

We get back to the other four guys. There is the 20 questions situation on why it took us so long to go 20 meters to get some water. We call in a sitrep.

We are on the NW side of the stream. There is a clearing on the hillside across the stream from us. It is big enough to get a chopper in. John decides to move over beside the field and set up for the night. We can hear someone following us as we move; we have a "trailer". When we get over by the field, we button hook to see if we can pick up our trailer. We set in the ambush for a while, but see nothing. It is getting late by now anyway. When it is darker we move about 20 yards to a different position that John had checked out before we button hooked. We are in a little cove with open timber on one side and the open field up the hill from us. There is heavy brush on the other two sides.

We can hear them getting into position during the night. Or is it a wild boar out there? Better to think it is Charlie and be ready. It now seems strange, but I sleep well that night, knowing that Charlie was out there and could hit us at any time. You get tired humping 100 lbs. through the jungle all day. I don't know how Geoff does it. He weighs about 150 lbs. Will Charlie try to crawl up on us during the night? I am wondering what it will be like to kill a man with a knife in hand-to-hand combat. I feel inadequately trained. Today I realize, a person can be trained on how to kill, but they cannot be trained to kill. Just do it.

I keep remembering one of the war stories of the time. A Special Forces guy was on a patrol like this, they hear Charlie crawling in on them, he rested the end of his rifle on his foot, when Charlie touches his foot, he shoots him.

It is Sunday, April 23, 1967. David and I have the 5-7 a.m. shift. I am not a morning person; I never have been a morning person. I sit up against my pack, which is in turn leaning against a tree. Don't sit up, it's easier to see you, too much target, but if I lay down I may go to sleep. Why do all of the Hollywood battles begin at dawn?

There is another problem. Either the LRP rations, or the malaria pills, have given me a diarrhea. This is a quandary. It is about 6:00 a.m.; the sun is just coming up. I tell Dave, pick up my rifle and some toilet paper and walk far enough away from the other guys and take care of the diarrhea. It is LRRP policy to not initiate contact. Perhaps all we have is a trailer. If I see someone, will I shoot before they do?

No problem, I don't see anyone, but I don't look too hard either. We know they are there, why look.

I go back to sitting against my pack while the other guys stir a little, ready to start another day. The next thing I know, I am laying about 8 feet down the hill from my pack. A hand grenade has blown me down the hill. I have just become LRRP's first WIA. I had heard nothing, I felt no pain, but I am dazed and knew I have been hit. Shrapnel has chewed up my face and left arm. My pack and the tree have taken most of the blast.

I crawl back up the hill to my weapon, ammunition and pack. As I get to the pack, a burst from an automatic weapon hits the ground in front of me. A lot of dirt and rocks kick up into my face. I think, "Whow, Just like in the movies." Weeks later I realized that one of the rocks is really a .45 caliber round which bounced off the ground, went through my lower left jaw, through the roof of my mouth and stops about ½ inch from my brain. It breaks my jaw, along with taking out about 8 teeth. The nerve to my left ear is severed along with several nerves to my left cheek.

The impact of the bullet knocks me out. After this, events are flashes of consciousness a few seconds long. I do not know in what order they occur.

I am trying to cover my sector and return fire, but I cannot see. I feel a lump under my left eye. Months later I realized that the lump is what is left of my eye and lower eyelid. If I put a little pressure on the lump, I get a little dizzy, but for a moment I can see some. I think, with the right pressure I will be able to see to return fire.

I try to raise my rifle to return fire, but my left hand is too weak to support it. I realize that a lot of the muscles of my left forearm are hanging in shreds. So I take my right hand and shove the muscles back where they belong. Do I think they would stay there? I don't know. It doesn't work, so I prop up my left arm, and rifle with my right hand, but when I move my right hand to the trigger, the rifle sinks, I need three hands.

Dave and I share a poncho to sleep on. We are literally shoulder-to-shoulder. The grenade exploded on Dave's side of me. Some time in there, I realize that Dave is dead. I guess it is because he is lying there on his back, not moving. I do not see any wounds on him. Geoff said later that Dave lived long enough to get the radio operational. Art said later that Dave was shot through the head. I don't know, maybe the grenade didn't get him and he was shot while working with the radio. I just know that Dave is dead.

I am passing in and out of consciousness. Art reaches up and yanks on my foot to wake me. The nerve damage from the bullet and the grenade concussion has almost deafened me, but I heard Art tell me to get the radio to him. I tell him I can't see to return fire. He said he knows that, so get the radio. I say Dave's dead. He said he knows that, that is why I need to get the radio to him.

Dave's pack with the radio in it is on the other side of Dave. So I crawl on top of Dave to reach his pack. This pack, with radio, weighs 80-90 lbs. I am lying on my chest, I reach out with my right hand and grab the pack to drag it down to Art. Gee, I can't pick it up. So I grab the pack and try to slide it down to Art. Try lying on your chest, then reach out with one hand and move an 80 lbs. canvas container. I do not get it all the way to Art.

I know that both Art and Geoff have been wounded. How do I know this? John and Doug are down the hill from me, I assume they are ok. Don't worry about what is going on behind you; take care of your sector. I made that mistake on a training maneuver at Ft. Myers, know better now. Training helps.

Where is the fear? No time for that, do your job, the other guys' lives depend on you.

"That is, you can't, you know, tune in"

"But it's all right"

"That is, I think it's not too bad."

(from the Beatles' song, "Strawberry Fields Forever")

I got the following note from Geoff in 2000, 33 years later:

If the following is not some dream cooked up when I was a little out of it, I remember that when we arrived at the spot where we were attacked the next morning, Art and I laid down on a slope facing uphill behind the root of a very large tree that was next to us and that created a depression on the downhill side that was about 10" or so high; Ives was laying down to our front without any protection. You were behind a tree, to his left. When the shooting started we were screened by the fact that we were laying behind the tree root. At first both Art and I thought that there was firing coming from our rear (downslope as well as from our front) and he fired at least one M79 round in that direction. We then concentrated on the fire to our front. Now, our tree root gave us a problem, in order for Art to aim and fire he had to raise himself up higher than the root and he exposed himself - I believe that this is when he was shot in the arm. By now Ives had been shot at least once and was asking for help (even though he attempted to assemble the PRC25 whip antenna). When I tried to climb over the root I was shot in the chest that stopped me cold for some time (it could have been seconds or minutes - I don't remember). When I finally managed to crawl to him he was dead and the firing had slackened off to almost nothing. John and Fletcher were by this time making sure that there were no more live VC to our front and since I was now next to the radio I started to talk to An Khe (Ives had managed to get the radio going before he died). I was not as coherent as I thought I was and John took the set from me not long after I started talking.

An interesting sidelight to all of this is that when we got into position the night before, Art and I were laying right over the wild animal trail that we had followed into the clearing. That night while I was on watch (Art was also awake) and it was pitch black we heard a rustling noise coming from somewhere down trail from us. It kept getting closer and louder and we could now hear snorting along with the rustling. Art whispered to me that

it was a wild boar and while I was still prone pointed my CAR15 in the direction of the ever-increasing noises. Art, who was lying next to me, laid his CAR on my hip and pointed in the same direction. We could still see nothing but we decided that we would have to fire if it got much closer. However, at the last minute the boar (if indeed it was one) seemed to hesitate (maybe it smelled us) and moved off downslope into the brush. I have thought about whether or not our firing at the whatever it was could have either sprung the ambush prematurely (and saved us from being fired at when it was light and we were good targets) and possibly saved Ives who I don't think that they could have seen then.

I think what ultimately saved us was the fact that while you, Art, Ives and I were located in a group John and Doug were set up to our right and might have been as much as 10' away. When the VC checked us out at first light they may have thought that the four of us to their front constituted the whole group and did not realize that Fletcher and Simones existed until they began a heavy fire into their flank. I have an image of John and Doug standing and firing on full automatic across our front and into the ambush. I give John and Doug all of the credit in the world for fighting like tigers when the heat was on and giving us the chance to survive.

*Merry Christmas,
Geoff*

Art had been shot through both legs by the enemy behind us and through the left shoulder but he was still able to use "JoJo", the sawed-off M-79 "chucker". Art told me later that the enemy had tried a human wave assault. He fired an M-79 HE round into the line. It hit a woman in the chest. The head went up, the arms went out, the legs kept running, and the trunk disappeared. Try living with that memory.

I come to; Doug is carrying me to the chopper. He has me in his arms like a baby. Wait a minute, I weigh 225-230, Doug is about 6' 2" and 210 lbs or so, but not big enough to carry me alone. But he is doing it. John is walking beside him. Is he carrying some one too? I don't know, I don't care, its over!! Wait a minute; I have my rifle in my left hand. My right side is toward Doug. The rifle is dangling down. Is the weapon on safe? What if the trigger catches a branch and a bullet hits someone? I'd better check the safe. I can't lift my left arm, so I move my right hand to check the rifle. Doug says, "It's ok, it's over, it's over." His voice is so calm, like a father comforting a child with a bad dream. I don't remember actually being loaded on the chopper.

I come to, it is so cool. I lift my head and see my blood on the chopper floor. Hey, if I can see my own blood, I am going to make it, I am alive. I look out the side of the chopper at the forest below; so green, so quiet, so calm, just like my West Virginia hills. It would be fun to walk in the woods to watch the squirrels play in the trees. Maybe I can take the dog out this weekend and let it run a coon. I see feet to my left; there is a pool of blood around the feet. Someone is sitting on the bench. It is Art, he says, "It's ok, it's over, it's over, lay back down." At sometime I raise my head and look to my right, I see another pair of feet, no blood; I try to lift my head to see a face, I can't. Somehow I know this is Geoff. Where are John, Doug, and Dave? I guess they are taking another chopper. They would not leave Dave.

WESTERN UNION TELEGRAM

APR 25 67

Mr and Mrs Ova M Carpenter, don't phone, report delivery

The secretary of the navy has asked me to express his deep regret that your son, PFC William D. Carpenter was placed on the seriously ill list in Vietnam on 23 April 67 as the result of gunshot wounds to left arm, left thigh, buttocks, facial fractures and loss of left eye. He was on reconnaissance patrol when hit by hostile small arms fire. In the judgement of the attending physician, his condition is of such severity that there is cause for concern, but no imminent danger of life.

I come to again; they are taking me off the chopper. They pull me out and put me on a stretcher lying on the ground. A female in OD green fatigues, with short curly red hair and freckles bends over me. She smiles and I think I smile back. She is talking, but not to me. Little Orphan Annie is in the army. It's ok, it's over, it's over.

I come to; they are using scissors to cut my clothes off of me. Don't take my boots, I want to keep my boots, only guys who have "been there" have jungle boots.

I come to, I am on a gurney being wheeled down a hallway, someone is holding my hand.

I come to, they are putting me on an x-ray table, they lay me on my chest and extend my head forward. They then rest my chin on the table. PAIN, "You stupid son-of-bitch, the jaw is broken, this really hurts, pad my jaw some way." This is the first time I have felt any pain. I don't care whom this private is talking to or what their rank is. They padded my chin to do the x-ray.

I come to, Capt. **James** and Lt. **Hall** are standing by my bed. Privates salute officers, I sit up and salute them. Apparently John was with them but I don't see him. I come to again and say "Hi, Sir" and go back to sleep. I think the captain visits me several times.

A Donut Dollie wakes me up, -- would you like to write a letter home? -- I can't, my hand is messed up. -- I will write it for you—I don't know what to write. -- I'm sure you will think of something. I talk a little and go to sleep, she is still standing there when I wake up. This is repeated several times. I don't know how long it takes to write that letter.

"Nothing is real,"

"And nothing to get hung about."

"Strawberry Fields Forever"

28 April 1967

CARPENTER, WILLIAM D RA16887249

Awarded: Purple Heart

Reason: For wounds received in connection with military operations against a hostile force.

As soon as I am staying conscious for a while, I am put on a stretcher and loaded on a plane. The plane is gutted, and has metal racks to hold stretchers. We are stacked three high. I leave country completely naked, I have my pocketknife, my Buck hunting knife, and one dog tag in a bag on my stretcher. Why do I have only one dog tag? What happened to the other one? These three items are my entire memorabilia from VN, except for some shrapnel and one flattened rifle slug.

I am headed for a hospital in Japan, but it is full, so they send me to the hospital in Camp Zama. This will be my fifth temporary duty station in two months. My mail will never find me. The next day, a Japanese woman comes in to change the bed. She grabs the sheet on me and pulls it down, and screams. I am still naked. Someone brings me some pajamas.

At some time, I need to pee. I grab my IV stand and use it as a cane. The bathroom is only 2-3 beds away. I'm LRRP, I can walk that far. An E-6 medic is sitting at a desk at the other end of the room. He yells, where are you going? I tell him. Back in bed, I will bring you a pee jug.

A medic wakes me up. He wants me to sit up so they can x-ray my chest. They have brought a portable machine to my bed instead of wheeling me to x-ray. Nice of them to do that. Why do you want to x-ray me? You are not breathing well and you have a fever over 103. I don't know what ever came of that.

It is May 20, I am at the debarkation center in Japan, waiting for my flight home. I am 45 lbs. lighter than I was a month ago. They still have me in a bed. Up walks Geoff; he's headed home, too. How did he know I was here? He is ambulatory, but walks with a slump and has some difficulty breathing. The round had gone in his shoulder and ended up in the pelvic area, it did a lot of damage in between. But we are both alive. There is some small talk, and he leaves to catch his flight. What do you say to someone you had shared a look at death with, and survived? We do not communicate again for 32 years.

A bunch of us "walking wounded" are sitting on benches waiting to board the plane. An air force one-star general comes up and shakes each man's hand and says, "Thank you". When he comes to me, I stand up and come to attention. He tells me to sit back down, "I am here to salute you." Some officers cared.

On May 23, 1967, my birthday, the plane I am on lands in Denver. I am home. Happy Birthday Bill. A major gets on the plane, he is looking for Private Carpenter. What did I do this time? Majors do not escort privates. I am the first off the plane. Standing at the bottom of the ramp is my family. Really happy birthday Bill. My sister-in-law has basically raised hell with everyone until she finds out when I am coming home. "I'm sorry ma'am, we can not release that information." The Red Cross gets the information for her.

John, Doug, Art, and Dave all get Silver Stars and Geoff and I get Bronze Stars for this mission. Why did I get the Bronze Star? The only constructive thing I did was try to get the radio to Art. What I really did was get the shit shot out of a team. I guess six guys who are nine miles from home when they take on a bunch of the bad guys deserve something.

There is a very interesting postscript to this that I still cannot explain. In the fall of 1968, I am married and in college. One afternoon I receive a phone call from a woman who says she is Geoff's mother. She asked if I am the **Bill Carpenter** who had been in LRRP with Geoff **Koper**. Yes, I am. She said Geoff had died from his wounds. Geoff was from Princeton, NJ. I am in Ft. Collins, CO. Art had kept track of people and told me that Geoff was in college. How did she find me? I didn't ask.

Not very many people knew the connection between the two of us. I was speechless. My war is over; no more people are going to die in "my war". We are both safe in the real world. I made a few comments, but can't remember what else was said. I thanked her for calling me and hung up. This was before called ID and all of that stuff. After I hung up, I realized that I did not even know where to send flowers. Going to the funeral was out of the question.

Well, Geoff had not died. I still do not know who made the phone call, or why. A Denver newspaper had an article about Art a few weeks before. Geoff and I were mentioned. Perhaps some sicko war protestor wanted to try to extend their mental instability to me. It never occurred to them that the biggest opponent to war is the person being shot at.