

A "LRRP" REMEMBERED

from Paul HART C/1/9

From

On Dec. 27, 1967 I was a WOI pilot flying a UH – 1 Huey "Slick" helicopter with C (Charlie) Troop, 1st. Squadron, 9th. Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (AM). In late 1967, Charlie Troop was operating out of a forward fire base named Landing Zone (LZ) Two-Bits near the town of Bong Son in II Corp. along the coastal plan. .

Most helicopter units utilized slicks for combat assaults (CA) troop transport, medical evacuation (Dust Off or Medivac), Command and Control (C&C) and re-supply. The uniqueness of the 1st/9th was that our "Slicks" were always flying in direct support of a combat operation. Our four crews got a lot of practice and pretty good at what they did and how they did it.

On the night of the Dec. 27th the troop received a call to assist and extract a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) that was in contact with an enemy force. Our Operations scrambled the Lift platoon, Blues and a section of Guns. We were "saddled up" and flying into darkness of the mountains and valleys south of Bong Son in minutes. It was an area we were familiar with and had worked often in the months prior, but always during the light of day. Night operations, in the best of circumstances, posed inherent dangers. Add mountainous terrain, potential enemy fire, and the rush from a good shot of adrenaline had everyone's heart rate jumping. As our flight of four along with two gun ships headed into the darkness we were told the LRRP team had been "hit", "overrun" and take casualties. Our mission was to combat assault the Blues into the area, engage and secure, locate the team and medevac the casualties. In the darkness of the mountains our guns ships first scouted, then designated an LZ as close as possible to the team's location. Under the cover of darkness and watched over by the guns, we inserted the Blues and quickly moved to a holding location above the nearby valley floor. The gun ships circled to provide fire support as we monitor the radio transmissions and watched tracers streak through the darkness. During this holding period there was discussion among the lift pilots regarding the extraction of the team. I accepted responsibility for the extraction and medivac. I would return to the LZ single ship to get the team out. The other three aircraft would pick up the troops from the squad I would leave behind. With the area still "hot", we received a call from our Blues telling us that they had reached the LRRP team and needed immediate medivac. It was my call to go. I made an approach to the makeshift LZ at the direction of our Blues and under cover of our gun ships. I was concentrating on the job at hand, but was also as fully aware of the urgency of this or any medivac mission. There were lives in the balance. Safely landing in the dark, the possibly of enemy fire, loading the wounded and getting out of the LZ to the nearest medical facility became my goal. In the few frantic and hurried minutes it took to accomplish this, I was able to glance around at the team. Some appeared to be conscious, others not, but the pain and bleeding was obvious. I was told we had two KIA and three WIA, one team member appeared uninjured. This would be, "get them on and get gone". The crew chief yelled "flights up" while he struggled to keep everyone on board. I pulled pitch and lifted off. Being familiar with the area, I flew to the nearest field hospital/aid station that fortunately was not too far away. We were there, on the ground and to the waiting medical personnel within minutes. After the team was unloaded and being evaluated, we departed for Two-Bits. The Blues had been extracted without further casualties and all aircraft had returned and landed safely. A successful mission for us, but the LRRP's were not so fortunate.

As the aircraft commander that evening, I was recommended for and received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), something that I continue to display and take pride in. Not because I consider myself a "hero" or great pilot, and not because it came from an act of war, but because it came from an act of humanity. What more can be asked than one soldier trying to do his best to help another.

I continued to fly with Charlie Troop and did a similar extraction within weeks of the 27th. This time it was single ship, no Blues, a gun team for cover, coastal mountains, hot, hover only LZ, dangerous and as exciting, but with better results. Everyone out, safe and home for another night. Couldn't ask for more. Sometimes we were all lucky.

Within weeks, just prior to the 1968 Tet Offensive, the 1st Cav. Div. moved north to the DMZ in support of the Marines and the embattled garrison at Khe San. The 1st/9th would "saddle up" to "scout" this new frontier and Two-Bits, its surroundings and the fate of the LRRP team became history. History yes, forgotten no.

The Squadron moved north to Camp Evens and we went without incident until the beginning of Tet. Living in a hole with a tent over it and never too far from a bunker got old real quick and I was getting short. Way to short for this! I got through January, February and most of March before hitting that lucky DEROS date and catching the first big bird back to "the world".

I am writing this on Dec. 27, 2006. 39 years to the day since that action. In recent weeks (and quite by accident) with the help of former Cav. LRRP's and this great tool called the "internet", I have found out that there was only one KIA that night. His name was Billy Critchfield. We were both from New Jersey; both graduated high school in 1965 and were both 20 years old that dark night. Billy had just returned from another mission and volunteered to go out again with another team. I've learned a little more about that team, their insertion earlier in the day and that they may have been accidentally discovered after calling in an air or artillery strike on an enemy force in the valley below. A satchel charge or charges tossed as enemy evaded through their position appears to have been the main cause of the casualties. I have not heard from any of the former team members, nor am I aware of their current status. I've been told that the Team Leader, Joe Haverland "Montana Joe", left the LRRP's shortly after this mission and passed away in the early 70's. There may also be a photo of the team taken just prior to this mission; if it's available I would certainly appreciate a copy to add to this account and my personal file. I suspect that somewhere in the "Official Records" there is an "After Action Report" or at least an informal "Debriefing" on file, but that's something for someone else to discover.

Dean Lindstrom is a cousin of Billy's. He remembers him through the eyes of a 5 year old as they shook hands when Billy was preparing to leave for Vietnam. He has spent a number of years researching LRRP operations and Units hoping to learn more about the teams and their missions. He's also interested in the circumstances surrounding Billy's death. I know he has posted on the LRRP web site and has been "in the loop" regarding these recent communications – I know the information is appreciated.

On Dec. 27th, 1969 I was married and my wife and I celebrate our 37th Anniversary today. I was fortunate and life has been good. Children, grandchildren, retired NJ cop, living in sunny and warm Arizona. I'm happy with who I am, where I've been and what I've done, but will never forget those that didn't have the chance to share these intervening years. I appreciate "filling in" some of the answers and being a small part of the LRRP history as the story continues.

Respectfully,
Paul Hart