

HISTORICAL OCCURRENCES

GOING WHERE NO U.S. SOLDIER HAD GONE BEFORE

From Rick Arden

Editor: this story is about the mission that was referred to in the Starts and Stripes interview on page 10 of this newsletter.

I will try and not repeat what is on the audio but flesh out some of the detail.

This action took place in March 1970 on the Cambodian border. This particular area was very remote, there had not been any US troops or even a helicopter fly over for five years. The nearest firebase was almost an hour helicopter ride away. As we learned later this was one of the areas being considered for the Cambodian invasion. I was the TL of a five man team sent to recon this area. Chuck Coffin was my ATL. We left our base and flew to some tiny firebase. The AO was so far that there was to be no fly over we would do it cold. The only clearing the copters could find was not level with a lot of stumps. The left skid was close to the ground the right was 2 or 3 feet off the ground. As the copter hover I was on the side that was off the ground. I thought I didn't come this far to abort so I jumped. Everybody jumped and we were ok. As soon as we were inserted I knew we would see some Gooks the place just had that feel to it. As I said in the interview, we located a well-used trail; it was very wide three men could walk abreast. Obviously the Gooks were used to being left alone in this area.

After being in the AO for three days we could tell this whole area was a super highway for troops moving south from Cambodia. I didn't think staying in the AO any longer would tell us much more so I decided to set up an ambush to try and get some stuff to take back.

We didn't have to wait very long, 6 of the cleanest regular NVA troops I had ever seen were coming down the trail. Their uniforms looked brand new. As a matter of fact I still have one of the uniforms they were carrying, it has never been worn.

They were spaced farther apart than usual so I couldn't get them all in the kill zone, we managed to get 3 with the others scattering. We called in the contact and took a little fire from the ambush area that we quickly suppressed.

I was thinking about getting out on the trail when all hell broke loose. We started taking heavy fire from our left; a much larger force was trying to flank our position. I don't know how big but from amount of small arms and 30 caliber machinegun fire probably a company. Our helicopter gunship support was almost an hour away. I wasn't overly worried, we had a good defensive position and as long as we didn't burn though our ammunition I thought we could hold out.

The biggest worry was B-40s, we took a several rounds that were luckily off the mark but one of my guys took a piece of shrapnel. I think it was PFC Tomlinson. The shrapnel was in the calf, I was the closest to him so I bandaged his leg. We were in contact about an hour when the gunships showed up and started to scatter the Gooks. The Ranger with the wound could walk but with great difficulty. I asked the pick-up copter to find a place close by where we could get McGuire rigged out.

The situation was total chaos so I took the radio from the RTO to keep dialog with the helicopters. I told Chuck to lead the team on the trail while I was trying to find us a way out.

When Chuck stood up we took fire from the trail and he dropped like a sack of potatoes, I thought he was dead. He wasn't and we killed the Gook that had fired.

While I waited for an answer from the copters we went out on the trail to strip the bodies. When we got out on the trail someone called to me that one on the NVA was still alive. I saw he was badly wounded but alive. I did not want to deal with a wounded POW along with my wounded, a company of NVA running around, and all the other problems I was dealing with so I shot him in the forehead with my M-16. I don't tell this because I am proud of it, it happened. Team Leaders made life and death decisions every day in the field. I guess it would be easy for someone who has never been there to second guess me but, given that same set of circumstances I would do the same today.

The helicopter pilot radioed there was a small clearing about 25 meters away so we took off in that direction. When we got there the McGuire rigs tangled up just under the skids. The helicopter pilot slowly descended cutting bamboo and tree limbs with his blades. He got to just over head high and we managed to climb in.

Because of the damage to the props he could not get back up so we threw everything overboard, except weapons and the radio, to lighten the ship. Finally the bird shuttered up in the air and we were on our way home. I thanked the pilot when we got back and he took off, I never saw him again. 1st Cav. Troops later went back in force and gathered up all the stuff and brought it back.