

LRRP Operations at LZ Uplift in 1967

From Jim Wright

Some of the details are now cloudy as my aging process progresses. In late 1966, I was assigned to the 5th Special Forces Group, Nha Trang, with a reporting date of early March 1967. This assignment was a carryover from my previous enlisted/NCO training and experience during the 1960-1965 timeframe with the 325 Battle Group and 82nd Airborne Raider Detachment, A Team member, 7th SFG, Fort Bragg and as a Ranger School instructor in the Florida Ranger Camp. All this led to my first officer assignment as the Commandant, Dominican Training Committee, Dominican Republic, during the 1965/1966 expeditionary force mission to preclude Castro's revolutionary takeover of that country. This Dominican assignment involved operating a 2-3 week mini Ranger School and conducting semi combat operations near the Haitian border with units from the Dominican Army and Air Force. When the 82nd and XVIII Abn Corps returned to Fort Bragg in September 1966, I soon received orders for the 5th SFG, Vietnam. Unfortunately, before I reached the Personnel Processing Center at Long Binh, a lieutenant in the 2nd Bn 5th Cav, 1st Cav, was killed along with several of the men in his platoon. Fortunately or unfortunately for me, there was no such thing as a Special Forces Officer Branch so as a "Johnny on the Spot" infantry officer I was diverted to An Khe and the 1st Cav. I remained with the 2/5th until being wounded in May 1967 and medevaced to the 67th Evac in Qui Nhon.

While in the hospital at Qui Nhon, I was unexpectedly visited by Captain David Tucker, First Cav HHC/LRRP Commander, who wanted me to join the LRRP unit upon discharge from the hospital. Although I had the honor and privilege of serving with a lot of great Soldiers while in the 2/5th I was looking forward to getting back into a LRRP operational environment more attuned to my background. I subsequently reported to the 1st Cav LRRPs at An Khe and continued on to LZ Uplift to assume duties as the Forward Detachment commander/leader. At the time, we were pretty much OPCON to the 2nd Brigade headquartered at LZ Uplift. From this location, we conducted operations principally throughout Bong Son. As I recall, we had 6 operational LRRP teams, 3-4 support personnel and a dedicated Huey. Missions were fairly typical for the LRRP Detachment – essentially providing extended recon in the Area of Operations not being covered by 1st Cav ground troops. Teams were deployed per SOP which required detailed mission planning and recon; insertions and extractions and debriefs. My time was generally consumed with morning and evening aerial commo checks with deployed teams and reconnaissance of likely insertion sites. A great deal of time was also spent gathering and providing intel to the brigade and division S-2/G-2. Mission planning and team training was continuous.

On 25 July 1967 while conducting an aerial commo check with one of the deployed LRRP teams they reported the presence of a sizeable enemy unit nearby. The LRRP SOP procedures when in close proximity to the enemy required specified clicks of the handset in order to report information and avoid any risk of being detected by radio conversation transmissions. This related LRRP situation report seemed to indicate the enemy presence to be at least a company or possibly an NVA or VC regiment. This, in turn, was reported to the brigade S-2 and on to the division G-2. This resulted in a command decision to conduct a B-52 Arc Light strike in lieu of trying to redeploy already engaged ground troops. This decision and timing required the unscheduled movement of the affected LRRP Team to a location south of a specified East-West grid line before the bombing strike. It also meant establishing radio communication outside the prearranged commo check time for the team. In these instances, the general SOP required LRRP teams to immediately establish radio contact if a helicopter overflew their location at treetop level derived from previous planned map locations. On 26 July 67, we left LZ Uplift just before daybreak in order to establish communication with the LRRP team and make them aware of the movement requirement. The LRRP Huey included 6 PAX (myself, a pilot and co-pilot, 2 door gunners and Sgt Jim Horne, LRRP Ops Sgt). As we completed low level flights in the vicinity of the LRRP team I observed what appeared to be a column of men moving along a nearby ridgeline. As we attempted a closer inspection we started taking significant ground fire causing the pilot to take evasive actions to include a rapid increase in altitude. During this process I was successful in establishing commo with the LRRP team and made them aware of the situation and pressing need to get south of the designated East-West grid line before the Arc Light occurred. Suddenly, the Huey shook rather violently but seemed to be under control. At this point, a door gunner informed me that the tail rotor had been shot off and we were experiencing other problems with the hydraulics, aircraft controls and loss of altitude. The forward airspeed kept us from an immediate and uncontrollable descent to the ground. The associated aircraft problems and rapid loss of altitude also precluded the execution of the school solution for a missing tail rotor which required making a running landing on some sort of airstrip. It soon became apparent we could not make the airstrip at Phu Cat Airbase or any other suitable landing sites. Other options seemed to be high risk propositions at best. Given, these were the days before helicopters had collapsible fuel tanks the further risk of a catastrophic explosion during any crash were

heightened. Basically, we were confronted with a “cushioned” crash landing into perceived triple canopy jungle or a somewhat “cushioned” landing in the South China Sea. As I recall, at least 1 or 2 PAX were non-swimmers so we quickly ruled this option out. It finally came down to attempting an autorotation without benefit of a tail rotor over the nearby beach area. The odds for injury or death were not in our favor but we had great confidence in the skill of the pilot, 1Lt John Othmer, Spokane, WA. We also switched to the distress frequency, 44.44, to report the situation and probable crash location. Luck was with us since the call was received by MG Tolson, Division Commander, who was conducting air assault operations in the nearby AO. He reassured us he was coming to our aid. At about 350’ the airspeed dropped to a point the aircraft went into an uncontrolled spin to the ground. Upon return to consciousness, I discovered the aircraft was on fire but the fuel tanks had not yet exploded. Also, the main rotor blade had hit the ground in a manner that sent the transmission through the tail boom and not the passenger compartment. I was also unable to breathe or move much of anything below the neck. Sgt. Jim Horne, the LRRP Ops Sgt, pulled me clear of the crash site to avoid being caught in a fuel tank explosion. As he turned to assist others he collapsed and I believe became paralyzed. Apparently, a fractured vertebra or bone cut his spinal cord or some nerves causing immediate paralysis. Gunfire and rocket fire suddenly erupted as MG Tolson landed a reaction force. We were initially medevaced to LZ Uplift and on to the 67th Evac at Qui Nhon for further treatment and evaluation. The pilot and I were diagnosed with broken backs and some unknown degree of paralysis and evacuated to Clark Air Force Base, Philippines, and on to the 249th General Hospital, Tokyo, Japan. I was later medevaced to Fort Sam Houston, TX. The medical developments with Sgt Jim Horne remain largely unknown. He was believed to have been evacuated to Hawaii, underwent surgery and was sent on to a stateside hospital and discharged to a VA Hospital in Arkansas. The fates of the co-pilot and door gunners remain unknown. One report indicated 1 or 2 of these had been killed in the crash. In any case, I am hopeful Sgt Horne was not totally disabled and has experienced a decent quality of life.

Captain Tucker later forwarded my personal belongings although I never recovered my personal Colt 45 Commander pistol that was removed at LZ Uplift. I believe MG Tolson received a valor award for his rescue efforts while being under fire. Captain Tucker verified from bullet holes and reports that the aircraft had taken ground fire resulting in the crash. The LRRP team also cleared the AO in time to avoid the B-52 Arc Light. I was later saddened to hear that Captain Tucker was killed while doing a commo check or LRRP team insertion or extraction.

Needless to say, I recovered from the 1967 injuries and eventually returned to Vietnam in 1970. With the help of MG Casey, 1st Cav Division Commander, who had been my brigade commander in 1967, I made it back to the 1st Cav in time to command a rifle company in the 2nd Bn, 12th Cav coming out of Cambodia. This was another experience that brought me into contact with a lot of great men wearing the horse blanket who put it on the line under some very risky and arduous conditions. This time, however, I completed the 12 month long tour and made it safely back to the land of the big PX.

I stayed on active duty after Vietnam and retired in 1987. I am currently serving as a contractor in direct support of Army training operations. The Vietnam experience clearly has many similarities with the previous operations in Iraq and the ongoing operations in Afghanistan. I still believe from my LRRP experience in Vietnam and the AARs from both OIF and OEF that the continuation of divisional LRRP units would prove to be operationally effective and pay big dividends during these times of persistent conflict and asymmetrical battlefields.

If Sgt. James A. Horne can be located I owe him my thanks for his assistance which may have contributed to the severity of his own injury.

Jim Wright