

Bu Gia Map

by

Chuck Coffin

[Everything in this narrative is based on my 40 year-old memories. If there are errors or omissions, they are unintentional. We are always the viewpoint character of our memories, so my recollections may differ from others who were there. This was one month before my 23rd birthday.]

You can find it on Google Earth. Type in “Bu Gia Map, Vietnam” and watch the map move from wherever you are, to southeast Asia, then narrow in on “Bu Gia Map National Park.” There’s a village there, too. Expand it, get closer to the ground and the terrain. Narrow down on the mountains, see how rugged the terrain is, how thin the vegetation. Go northwest from there, towards the border with Cambodia, and there’s a place where the border forms almost a peninsula of Vietnam into Cambodia. There are no roads near there on the Vietnamese side, though you can see one in Cambodia. Which is probably why we were there. As near as I recall, that’s the place on the border where we were. Somewhere along there, for sure.

March 25th, 1970. Give or take a day. My last mission before Recondo School, and just over a month before President Nixon ordered US forces into Cambodia. Some missions fade, some blur into others. But parts of this mission are etched into my memory, never to be forgotten. I can still smell the earth and the rotting vegetation, can feel the heat, hear the bugs buzzing around me. Rick Arden was Team Leader; I was Assistant Team Leader.

We were told we’d be conducting a mission along the Cambodian border, “north of Bu Gia Map,” a place I’d never heard of. We were supposed to be on the Vietnamese side of the border, but I knew the exact border location was, shall we say, subject to interpretation, especially in those mountains.

We flew up to a little Fire Support Base, and it scared hell out of me. It had, literally, one strand of concertina wire around it. While I was putting on my camouflage before insertion, using a truck mirror, some black guy came up to me and watched me for a minute.

“You one of them Rangers?” he asked.

In my best John Wayne/Gary Cooper/Clint Eastwood laconic imitation I replied, “Yep.”

“You going out there?” he asked, pointing vaguely north.

“Yep.”

He considered this for a minute and then said, “Man, you *crazy!* Ain’t no *way* I’d go out there!”

I looked around at the tiny FSB—I could throw a rock from one end to the other—and at the single strand of concertina wire, thought about one reinforced squad of NVA being able to overrun it in about five minutes, and said to him, “Man, *YOU* the crazy one. No way I’d stay *here!*”

I don’t remember much about the insertion. I think Rick is right, this was the one where we were inserted on the side of a very steep hill, something like a 30 degree slope. That’s very rugged terrain there. I think I recall being on the “low” side, being able to step off the Huey skid directly onto the ground, while Rick and the guys on the other side had to jump about 10 feet to the ground. I remember being very scared, as we’d recently been told of an insertion made on similar terrain where the pilot over-corrected when the “high” side guys jumped off and the chopper rocked, decapitating two of the guys on the “low” side. Troop of the Blues, I think.

But the insertion went without incident, and the chopper left, leaving us in the silence that was always surprising. We waited out the stillness, wondering if anyone had seen us come in. We made commo and moved out. I think nothing happened that day, and I believe we RON’ed that night, and continued to move the next day.

I think it was early morning of the second day, on the top of a hill—or mountain—we found the trail. It was a cool morning for Vietnam, only about 85 or 90 degrees. And the trail was a wide one, maybe 6 or 7 feet wide. Recent heavy use.

So we set the ambush. Daisy-chained a bunch of claymores along thirty feet or so, with the one at each end pointing down that trail’s direction. I remember Rick looking for a suitable place to hang a grenade or two at head-height and work it into the daisy chain, but the vegetation there was heavy with bamboo, and he didn’t find one he could camouflage to his satisfaction. I had recently come up with the idea—or stolen it from someone else—of putting a concussion grenade in the center of the kill-zone, the idea being we’d kill everyone in the zone but one, and have ourselves a prisoner—and a three-day in-country R&R (I remember Ted Scherk tried for 102 days R&R after he captured 34 Montagnard men, women and children. The CO threw Ted out of his office).

Usually we’d set the ambush and wait. Usually, nothing happened, and after a day or so we’d pack up and go somewhere else. So I was settling in for a long wait, and had just started heating water in a canteen cup for my noon meal using a dab of C-4—beef and rice, my favorite. The water had just come to a boil and I was readying the

packet when someone whispered sharply, "We got Movement!" I scrambled quickly into position, knocking over my water, but paying no attention. Rick and I grabbed the "clackers" for the claymores.

And now I was really frightened.

I have never, ever believed they were NVA. I have always thought they were Chinese. These guys were big, stocky, maybe weighing 160 or 170 lbs or so. Their skin was much darker than Vietnamese, and they seemed much healthier. They were wearing heavy packs, but they were bouncing along, full of energy. They had, we learned later, fresh haircuts. They were *muscular*. They *had* to have just left a base camp, fresh and rested.

And they were happy. They didn't have a care in the world, and they acted like they were on a holiday, or a fun jaunt through the woods. They never suspected there was anyone else around.

Rick grasped his "clackers" and I grasped mine. "On three," he said. "One... Two... *Three!*" And we squeezed the clackers and blew the claymores. I was no longer scared, and wasn't for the rest of the day. Too busy, too many things to do.

As always, the noise was tremendous. More so than usual, we were closer to the claymores than we should have been, but the terrain didn't allow us much option. I was partially deaf for a few days (and acquired a hearing problem that persists to this day, and continues to worsen. But the VA doesn't recognize it). We fired our weapons, threw grenades, put out fire all along the trail. And received return fire. While lying on my stomach, I felt a hot burn on my back, near my spine at the level of my shoulders. I had been hit by shrapnel. Not badly, but I still have the small scars. I remember PFC Tomlinson also got some shrapnel in his leg. I don't remember if anyone else was hit.

After a while—five minutes? Fifteen? I have no way of knowing—return fire ceased. We waited, watched, saw no sign of activity. After a bit, Rick said, "Let's check the kill zone." As ATL, I led the way, while Rick was talking on the radio.

I was a few meters ahead of the others, stepping over the tangled brush, walking point, when from the kill zone, someone popped up and unloaded his AK-47 at us. So much for concussion grenades and taking a prisoner.

Rick says that I fell "like a sack of potatoes." He's right. I hadn't had much martial arts training at that point, but I had learned that the fastest way to hit the ground is not to "throw" yourself, but to relax and utterly collapse, which I did, pulling my M-16's trigger as I did. Nothing happened. I must have looked like I'd been killed, without a chance to fire back.

I heard someone shout "The sonsabitches killed Chuck!" and heard the entire team open up, hosing down the area, while I frantically worked the charging handle on the M-16 and managed to feed a round into the chamber—which was empty. What the hell?

I ran a couple magazines through, then crawled backwards to where the team was back in our original ambush position...or, as I put it in an attempt at humor, "I set the world's record for crawling backwards, on one's stomach, wearing a 60-lb. rucksack!" Once back with the team, we all put out more fire.

I felt a burning along my right side. Didn't have time to mess with it then, but much later I realized that a bullet had come right along my side, burning it, but never breaking the skin, like a hot iron laid against my side. There's still a faint scar there, though there seems to be a few more rolls of skin now than there were back then.

What had happened to my M-16? Stupidity is what happened. My stupidity. I thought I was smarter than the Army. They issued us 20 round magazines, and then told us to only load 18 rounds into them. "That's dumb," I thought. "Twenty round magazines should hold 20 rounds; I might need 'em."

No, the Army was right. Loading 20 rounds into the magazine creates so much pressure on the spring and the rounds are packed so tightly that when the bolt goes forward, it can slip over the top round, chambering...nothing. Which is what had happened. I'd been walking point with no round in my chamber. I've told the story over the years to countless young troops, as an object lesson: Sometimes the Army has a reason for telling you to do something in a certain way.

We kept firing, and receiving return fire. Then I spotted muzzle flashes from some thick brush by the trail. I sighted carefully on the spot they were coming from and fired three rounds. No more muzzle flashes. No more return fire, either. I've always been proud of my rifle shooting. I've won some awards, but that was the most important shot I've made, I think.

After a bit, Rick said, "Let's go check." He turned to me, and asked, "You want me to lead?"

"No," I said, "I'm ATL, and it's my job. You keep talking on the radio and get the birds out here." But I was a bit shaky about it. And I did check to make certain I had a round in the chamber.

We got to the kill zone and spread out. With a "newbie," (whose name I forgot—if you read this, my apologies) I went left to the end of the kill zone where there was a body. I told him to watch down the trail to make certain there were no reinforcements coming, "And if I see you watching me instead of the trail, I'm gonna butt-stroke you," I told him. "No problem!" he agreed vigorously. And his eyes never left the trail.

"No problem," he said, and I began stripping the body, searching the pockets.

"This one's still alive!" I heard someone shout behind me. I turned, drawing the Browning Hi-Power 9mm I carried, and saw one of the Chinese sitting up, groping for something, maybe a weapon. I was bringing the Browning around, when Rick took a step toward him and fired his M-16. The bullet hit the guy above the eyebrows and took off the entire top of his head.

I remember being surprised he didn't die like they do in the movies. No dramatic flopping back, or being hurled back. Instead, he groaned, and slowly, slowly leaned back, finally settling on the jungle floor, as the last of his energy, and his life, left him.

We finished searching and stripping the bodies. We took the rice packets they were carrying—we knew that somewhere there were guys who could do forensic analysis and tell where the rice had come from. Papers, of course, and anything else we could find that could provide intel.

Sometime during that period, the Cobras got on station, and scoped out the area. "You've got movement, 360!" they told Rick, and came down and hovered above us, firing rockets and mini-guns, while turning a 360 over us.

We began to realize we'd stirred up a real hornet's nest. We were surrounded, on top of a mountain, and no place to go. No way we could make it back to our insertion point. And there was no PZ anywhere near us that we knew of. The trees were too thick and too tall to allow anything to get near us. These were mountain hardwood trees.

One of the Huey pilots came on the air: "Move 200 meters northwest," he told Rick. So we headed that direction. Did we take one of the bodies? I have the vague memory that maybe we did, but I'm not sure about that. The thought being they could do a forensic analysis on the body, even though CSI wouldn't come on television for 35 years. Maybe we just discussed it. As we left that area, I stepped over the body Rick had shot a second before I had. I could see bone chips and brains, but no skull top.

We got to the location the pilot directed us to, and looked around. We were in bamboo, thick stalks rising 10 or 12 feet in the air. And wondering, what was going to happen next. A helicopter couldn't land in the bamboo; why had he directed us here?

Then the pilot did one of the bravest things I've seen. Using his helicopter blades like a weed-whacker, he lowered his Huey into the bamboo, cutting it down. Even today, I'm astonished. Pilots can be such picky guys, and they *hate* FOD—Foreign Object Damage. I've seen pilots refuse to land on a chopper pad if there was a scrap of paper on it. But this guy was cutting his way into the bamboo, splinters, leaves, stems flying everywhere. He must have had his own personal wheelbarrow to cart his brass ones around.

When he had carved a hole in the bamboo thicket deep enough for us to reach the skid, we started handing up our equipment, the captured equipment, the dead body (?), and finally each other, as the door gunner and the crew chief frantically pulled us up. When we were all aboard, the pilot tried to lift us out.

But the helicopter wouldn't rise out of the leafy bowl it had cut. Thinner mountain-top air, 6 Rangers and a dead body, plus the crew, and perhaps an older model Huey...it just didn't have the lift. And the Cobras told us the movement was getting closer.

We started tossing things out to lighten us. The dead body (if there was one). Then our packs (including my favorite PZ-cutting knife. The packs were recovered a few days later when someone went in on a Jungle Penetrator). Then the equipment we'd taken off the bodies.

Finally, the helicopter began to rise. Slowly, slowly, it pulled itself up above the lip of the bamboo bowl we were in. Straining almost like a living thing, as we were urging it up, it finally slipped over the bowl, and started down the mountainside. It still didn't have the lift to get out of there, so it was building up speed "sliding" down the side of the mountain.

As we "slid" down the mountain, I could see sparkles throughout the greenery. They were pretty, like a Christmas display. It took me a few seconds to realize that those were muzzle flashes of people shooting at us. We truly had been surrounded, and if not for the Cobra and Huey pilots, we would have had a very bad time indeed.

When we got back, Rick and I put the "Weed-whacker" pilot in for a DFC, but I never heard if anything came of it. Probably not. Most likely all he ever got was our most heart-felt thanks.

And just over a month later, May 1st, 1970, while I was finishing up Recondo School with 5th Special Forces Group at Nha Trang, American forces went into Cambodia to wipe out those sanctuaries.

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