

HISTORICAL OCCURRENCES

VANHOOK'S DEROS GIFT

From Bill Hand

This was a "hurry up" mission in that Captain Mike Gooding asked if I could have the team ready to go in three hours. The date time group was approximately 68/20/03 1200 hours. The team (Silent Avenger 3 Foxtrot) was short an Assistant Team Leader (ATL) since Richard Turbitt was home on extended leave in Waukegan, Illinois. To replace Turbitt, I persuaded a very reluctant Don VanHook to act as my ATL. Don was down to less than three weeks in country and as a serious short-timer was very concerned at my reported propensity to initiate contacts. To assist him in making the proper decision, I assured him that I would conduct myself according to the generally recognized "Code of Self Respecting LRRPs".

Having settled that question, 3 Foxtrot would be comprised of the following members:

Team Leader (TL) – Sgt. Bill Hand

Assistant Team Leader (ATL)– Sgt. Don VanHook

Senior Radio Operator – Sgt. Glenn Lambert

Medic/Assistant RTO – Sp. 4 Tom Ford

Front Scout (FS) – Sp. 4 "Little" John Hardesty

Rear Scout (RS) – Sp. 4 Ron Bitticks

Of the six team members, four were seasoned, one still a rookie, and Bitticks was the "FNG", fresh out of company training.

Some two weeks earlier, Captain Gooding had approached me about one of our replacements, a guy by the name of Ron Bitticks. It seemed that Bitticks was a product of the University of Wisconsin, an art student, and had expressed anti-war sentiments. No other TL wanted him and Gooding hoped that I would take him, either to finish making an LRRP out of him or to recommend his transfer to a line unit.

When I entered the training team tent, I found Bitticks reading an anti-war article in Ramparts magazine. As we talked, he admitted that he was against the war but that since he was in Vietnam, he wanted to see it up close and personal, even though he doubted that it would change his convictions. We talked some about art, a subject of which I had very little knowledge. I came away satisfied with the certain knowledge that he would make a trustworthy member and that *Degas* was an artist of note and not some new helicopter fuel.

Overflight was performed by myself, while VanHook coordinated communications, gear and ration requisition and the various other pre-mission administrative tasks. The area of operations (A.O.) was four square kilometers, bordered on the southern line by the My Chanh River, and on the east by the village My Chanh (which figured prominently in Bernard Fall's Street Without Joy). From the overflight, the A.O. appeared to be low rolling hills covered with waist high, to shoulder high, scrub. Our mission was to monitor a high speed trail intersection in the North-East Quadrant. This would be the same intersection at which Sgt. Tedder's LRRP team had initiated contact on an NVA unit, losing Sp. 4 Leon as a KIA during the body search of the dead NVA.

I selected an L. Z. (landing zone) in the Southwest quadrant bordering the river with a North-South tributary stream running through it. The LZ was approximately a klick and a half west of the village with a small hill intervening which would mask the insertion from enemy observation. I noted that once we left the insertion area that no water would be available. We then flew to L.Z. Jane to make final arrangements with the 1st Air Cavalry Brigade from whom we would be working and then returned to Camp Evans.

I called the team together and gave them my impression of the area. The team, especially VanHook, was extremely nervous since Leon had been killed on that intersection and also due to the fact that no good cover was available. VanHook briefed me on the admin preparations and I performed a last check of the team. We were ready.

At approximately 1700 hours, we loaded the Huey for insertion utilizing the three plus two trail system. This concept required three slicks and two gunships, with the slicks flying in trail formation and the guns acting as flank security.

On insertion, things went to hell very fast. Our Cobra pilots had never inserted an LRRP team and "prepped" the LZ with both rocket and mini-gun fire. This of course had every VC/NVA eye in the area looking our way.

Because of the intervening hill, I decided to continue the mission and motioned for Little John to move the team west away from our objective. Little John had only moved a few meters when he came to a small stream with a single canopy stretching over it. He dropped to one knee, and called me forward. As I reached his position he

pointed to the mud on either side of the stream. At least five individuals wearing "Ho Chi Minh" sandals had crossed minutes earlier as water was still seeping into the tracks.

Van Hook rolled his eyes as we crossed behind them and moved up-hill on the southside of the trail and set-up our overnight position (RON). Our cover was low scrub but it offered us an excellent point from which to observe the trail. While VanHook positioned the team and directed the placement of the Claymore mines, I called in a "Delta Tango" or pre-plotted artillery target.

The marking round hit a kilometer away, across the river and to the west. After rechecking my calculations and coordinates, the artillery Fire Direction Center (FDC) and I came to the conclusion that I was using an old French generated map, which was not accurate. Within two more rounds, I had the artillery close enough to give us support if we got into trouble during the night.

As last light was falling, I checked the placement of the Claymore mines and discovered that Sgt. Lambert, my RTO, had set his mine facing the team. VanHook rolled his eyes as I proceeded to instruct in a very quietly profane manner on the correct way to deploy a Claymore mine. Lesson learned, the guard schedule was set up and we passed the night uneventfully, making all the required communication situation reports ("sit-reps").

I always took the hour before dawn and as my watch ended, touched the others to wake them up. The team rotated by twos preparing meals, and Bitticks and VanHook were the first up on this particular morning. No sooner had they lit their C-4 to heat their water for coffee than Little John grabbed me by the arm as three NVA crossed the stream heading west on the trail some 50 meters downhill from us. I elected not to ambush since this was the first day, and called for artillery. By the time that we had the tubes deployed our way for the fire mission the NVA were long gone. We fired a short fire mission west of us in hopes of getting lucky or at the worst to speed them on their way.

A Mister Warren flew over the area in an H-13 scout helicopter to assess the results but found no casualties or signs of blood trails. He then flew slowly back to the village trying without success to draw enemy fire. I held the team on the hill for the next two hours to observe the trail and to otherwise give the area time to quieten down. Then we saddled up to re-cross the stream and move northeast to observe the high speed trail junction which was approximately two clicks distance.

When our point, Little John, hit the hill east of the stream, he found that it was solid elephant grass. Hardesty had gotten his mom de guerre honestly, in the he was short of stature and in a very few minutes the elephant grass had him totally exhausted with only a few meters to show for his efforts. I relieved Little John at point and noisily broke bush by lying down on the grass until we crushed a trail to the far side of the small hill. At this time we broke for chow, made a sit-rep, and observed the activity in the village.

From observation, our biggest dilemma was our route to the target area. To continue our current route would take the team across an area consisting of nothing but waist high brush. To gain any cover at all, we would have to retrace our path back to the stream bed, follow it north to the beginning of single canopy jungle and then find the closest point to cross to the trail junction. This would also entail the expansion of our area of operation in order to accomplish the movement.

I felt that since all of the NVA traffic had been moving toward the jungle cover to the west that our chances were better in the open with proper camouflaged movement.

I quietly briefed the team on our intended route of march and immediately drew a negative from VanHook, who was adamant that we should use the safety of the jungle approach. I patiently explained again my rationale, adding that we were due on the trail that night and the enemy would never anticipate an LRRP team crossing such an open area. Hook flatly stated that he would not cross the open area. Rather than continue the argument with VanHook, I instructed the team to saddle up and told Hook that he could go the jungle route but the team was crossing the open area.

I spread the team out about 20 meters between members and we started across. After going about 150 meters, I looked back to see Hook hurriedly catching up with the team's rear position. We crossed the area uneventfully and intersected the trail 500 meters south of our objective at an old NVA anti-aircraft firing position. We took a break at this point.

After a short rest, we moved to a small hill approximately 100 meters south-south west of the trail intersection. At this point the trail was at least 3 meters wide and capable of vehicular traffic. The only cover available on our hill was the ever present waist high brush, but if we stayed low it was sufficient to conceal our presence while giving us excellent observation of the intersection.

While setting the team in place, I discovered that a claymore bag of M-79 rounds had been left at our last rest stop. I told VanHook to finish placing the positions and the claymores, while I returned to retrieve the lost ammo. I found the bag at the anti-aircraft site and returned to the team within 20 minutes.

After I checked our positions and fields of fire, I called in three "Delta Tangos" around our position. One was 100 meters away on the trail intersection labeled "Alpha". The second was on the anti-aircraft site, and the third was to our rear. At this point we were ready to begin our observation with Tom Ford and myself taking the first watch which was the last hour before EENT (End Evening Nautical Twilight or in National Guard parlance – darkness).

I was looking down the trail to the south and saw a rabbit bigger than any that I had seen in my life, and in a whisper commented to Tom, "Look at the size of that rabbit!" As Tom trained his binoculars down-trail, he whispers back, "That's no rabbit, that's an NVA!" I responded, "Don't give me any crap, that's a rabbit!" He then responded, "I see your rabbit, but look up-trail about 50 meters at that NVA fixing to cross the trail!"

The team alerted and we watched an NVA point man look up and down the trail, cross and signal the rest of his element of four to follow. I immediately got on the horn and requested gunships, as the enemy element would not cross any delta tango.

The NVA element moved toward us and traversed the reverse base of our hill. It was spooky watching their movement, as they moved exactly as a well trained LRRP team would move. The gun-ships showed up right at dark after the NVA had moved out of our sight and up a draw on a hill opposite of our position. The gun-ships worked the draw over with rocket fire with negative results. From the stop, look and observe actions of the NVA element, coupled with the air and artillery activity, I felt that the NVA knew that an American Recon unit was working the area. However, the night passed without incidence.

After a morning with no observable enemy activity, Little John spotted a party of four Viet Cong at least one kilometer north of our position at approximately 1530 hours. Base camp was alerted with a code 2 sit-rep (enemy troops in the open, request gun-ships). When the helicopters arrived over the area, the enemy personnel quickly went to ground seeking cover. Because of the distance distorting depth perception, it was extremely hard for us to guide the choppers over the exact area where the VC were hidden, but in a very few minutes one of the enemy was located and taken out with mini-gun fire.

Due to the light cover and the success of the apparently well camouflaged enemy element, the gun-ships made the decision to orbit and call for a zone fire artillery mission utilizing a new type of munition which was code named "firecracker". The inventory nomenclature for this round was "cofram" and it basically was an artillery shell that scattered many smaller explosives bomblets similar to a grenade. It was thought to be very effective in areas such as the one in which we were at the time.

We could hear the artillery being fired in the distance and shortly we heard the rounds rumbling through the air. As the rounds approached the impact area each made a cracking sound and the bomblets were scattered over the target area, exploding on impact with a sound not unlike a string of firecrackers. The explosive carpet covered a half square kilometer area. The birds requested a "check fire" and went in for assessment. Three more enemy KIA were found.

Knowing that we had a heavy volume of enemy traffic in the area and that we had called numerous fire missions over the space of three days, I felt that the NVA/VC command structure had to reasonably admit that a recon team was working the area. The team shared that view especially after observing the cautious actions of the NVA element of the previous day.

Guard duty was set for the night and I passed out the "dex" pills for those who might need them to stay awake. I elected to stay on guard until 2400 hours believing that if we were hit that the action would be initiated in that time frame. By 0100 hours, I felt safe enough to go to sleep and instructed the regular watch to be sure and wake me by 0400 hours, the next period of likely danger.

Shortly after 0200 hours, VanHook put his hand over my mouth to wake me. Leaning to my ear he whispered, "We've got gooks talking!" I raised up slightly and listened intently, hearing nothing. I crank up the Star-Light scope and made a 360 degree visual sweep around our location. The trail was empty, and no other movement was apparent. I continue to listen and observe for the next few minutes with no results and quickly began to come to the conclusion that VanHook was suffering from a bad case of "Shorttimers'" jitters. I told Hook that I was going back to sleep and to wake me if he saw or heard anything.

Exactly twenty minutes later, he had his hand on my mouth again, saying that he heard gooks talking again. Once more, I listened and observed with the Star-Light scope with no results. I was convinced that Hook was just imagining things and told him as much, "Hook, you're short and nervous. There's nothing out there, and don't wake me up again unless you're sure of what you've got!" Twenty minutes later, I'm awake with VanHook again. Once again nothing could be seen or heard. With whispered authority I said, "Hook don't wake me up again! I've got guard in forty minutes and I've got to have some sleep. Don't worry because there is absolutely nothing out there! Now let me get some sleep!"

I laid back against my rucksack, pulled my boonie hat over my face to keep the mosquitoes away and promptly fell asleep again, some 15 minutes later, VanHook clamped his hand over my mouth and when he saw my eyes open, he whispered, "Hand! Hand! You son-of-a-bitch, you're talking Vietnamese in your sleep!" The source of the talking had been identified, and I wound up finishing the night watch duties with no further incidents.

At 0630, I woke the other team members and set turns for cooking chow, putting Bitticks last. VanHook quietly fussed the whole time about my dangerous nocturnal conversations. As the morning progressed, each of the team members finished their meals, inspected weapons and reapplied camouflage to their faces and arms. Bitticks began to heat his meal water with a small ball of C-4. As I continued to observe the trail junction some movement caught my eye on the Northwest branch. Before I could alert the rest of the team, Tom Ford stood erect pointing to the intersection and said "Gooks!"

As their lead element pointed at our position, I fired my CAR-15 missing at a range of maybe 115 meters. The team picked up the firing but the enemy element fell back to the cover of the reverse slope of the hill on which the junction was situated.

We immediately began taking small arms fire and I realized that the unknown sized element could flank our position by advancing on our left side. I yelled to VanHook to get three guns covering the North approach, while I grabbed for the radio to call for support. Due to the volume of incoming fire, I elected to break procedure by not encoding my message.

"Silent Avenger 65, this is Avenger 3-foxtrot we're in deep stuff over!" The small arms increased in intensity as our people began to identify the flanking enemy.

"Silent Avenger 3-Foxtrot this is 65, we have you Lima Charlie, but be advised that you are using improper radio procedure and you must encode a code Two to transmit on this push." I recognized the voice of Sgt. Joe Paluso, but could not believe what I heard.

"Negative on the code Two 65, request red-leg fire Delta Tango Alpha ASAP." I replied as I fired the Claymore mine oriented toward the source of considerable fire.

"3-Foxtrot be advised that you are compromising this push and that you must transmit a Code Two", Paluso advised.

"Paluso, you bastard, go to the trash push and if I make it back to camp, I'm going to cram your Code Two up your butt and then kill you!" I yelled back.

At this point the soothing voice of SSG Rudy Torres came over the horn, "Wilco on the trash push my good man."

Lambert quickly dialed in the frequency for the unsecured channel and called "65 this is Three Foxtrot, we're up!"

I yelled at the team to control their rate of fire as Torres responded, "Roger 3-Foxtrot, sounds like you could use some help out there. I've got tubes and birds cranking, tell me what you want the red-leg to fire."

"Confirm fire Delta Tango Alpha, Zone Fire three by five, troops in the open battery five, over!"

"Seconds later Rudy responded, "Roger on the Zone Fire, Delta Tango Alpha, Three by Five, Battery Five. Red Leg advises to go to their push for adjusting fire, over."

Over the noise of the steady gunfire, I yelled at Lambert to drag the spare PRC-25 to our position and to dial up the artillery frequency. "Fast Gun 22, this is 3- Foxtrot, over."

"Roger, three foxtrot, we have you Lima Charlie and are prepared to fire marking round on Delta Tango Alpha", came the reply from the 105 howitzer battery located to our Northwest at LZ Jane.

"Roger, fire it."

"Shot over!"

Hearing the boom of the shot in the distance, I replied, "Shot out!"

"Splash, over!" The smoke round impacted exactly on target in the trail junction. To the team I yelled, "Get low, it's coming!" and then to the artillery, "Smoke round on target, fire for effect!"

Immediately, the sounds of multiple artillery rounds being fired filled the lulls between the small arms fire.

"Three Foxtrot, shot over!"

Hearing the approaching shells, I responded, "Shot out!"

"Splash, over." The FDC was warning of the impending detonation of the first volley. Suddenly, the area of a football field erupted in explosive fury. No longer could we hear the guns firing in the background as the high explosive shells kept falling on the junction.

Lambert handed me the primary radio hand-set and pointed at the helicopter gun-ships orbiting in the distance. Sergeant Torres had come through on his promise for complete support. Not knowing the gun-ship call signs, I called, "Unidentified gun birds this is Avenger Three Foxtrot, over!"

"Roger, Three Foxtrot this is Blue Max at your service, we'll roll in at your direction when we get a check fire from the Red-Leg."

"Roger, Blue Max monitor red leg push for check fire!" The artillery fire continued ripping up the area of the junction and now the only incoming fire was from our Northwest where the flanking NVA were positioned.

I crawled over to VanHook and Bitticks who were facing the flankers to get a better sense of our situation. Hook had his M-16 at his cheek ready to fire but just laid there in an aimed position. Bitticks explained, "See that bush about 50 meters out? There's a Gook behind it." As I watched the NVA parted the branches of his cover and with a clear target, VanHook fired. The round hit the NVA squarely between the eyes, lifting him from a sitting position and slamming him back against the ground as his head exploded.

Lambert yelled at me, holding up one of the radio handsets. I crawled back over, took the handset, "Three Foxtrot, go."

"Roger Three Foxtrot, this is Fast Gun 22, be advised last six are on the way and we are check fire."

"Roger two two understand check fire Break. Blue Max this is Three Foxtrot. Did you copy check fire from Fast Gun?" The last rounds had just impacted when Blue Max responded.

"Roger on the check fire, where do you want us to put our ordnance?"

"Blue Max, do you have our location in sight?" I responded while listening to the diminishing volume of small arms fire which was concentrated in the area in which Hook's element was covering.

"Roger, we have you identified."

"Max make your run east to west, from the trail junction one hundred meters out. Guns and rockets, over."

"Roger that keep your pennies low we're rolling in hot at this time!" I yelled at the team to get down as the gun-ships started their run. In trail formation with guns burping and rockets firing, Blue Max quickly paralleled our position and lifted clear of the target area. No more fire came from that quarter.

"Ah, Three Foxtrot, this is Blue Max, how was that, over?"

"Max, that was on target but request you make one more run up the North-South ravine where you pulled out."

"Roger, I have it in sight. Are you taking fire from that area?"

"Negative, but that is their only escape route that we can't observe."

"Roger, we're rolling in!" The gun-ships again delivered their lethal ordnance on the draw. "Uh, Three Foxtrot, what can we do for you now?"

There was complete silence except for the beating of the helicopter blades. "Max, if you would orbit over our position I'd appreciate itbreak, six five do you copy?"

"Roger Three Foxtrot, go."

"Six-five, request that we implement Plan Zebra, over." Zebra was the plan that Captain Gooding and I had formulated which would allow the team to be re-supplied by the Blues of the First of the Ninth Cavalry. After the resupply the team would extend the mission for another five days.

"Ah, Three Foxtrot this is six-five, we do not copy 'Zebra'. What the foxtrot, over?" Torres evidently had not been told of our plan.

"Six-five please contact Avenger Six for details."

"Three Foxtrot, be advised that Six left for Alpha Kilo at first light." Without Captain Gooding being there to coordinate the effort in a timely manner, Zebra would not work.

"Roger Six Five, request extraction as soon as possible."

"Roger on the exfil, birds are on the way break. Blue Max call sign for the lift will be Red Dog 11. They request you remain on station for pick up, do you copy?"

"Roger that."

"Break, Blue Max, Avenger Three Foxtrot, this is Red Dog 11 inbound to your location out of the Sierra, five mikes out. Three Foxtrot what is your situation? Over."

"Dog 11 this is Three Foxtrot, be advised that the PZ will be green and that Blue Max is flying cover. Will pop goofy grape when you are one mike out ... break, Max be advised that we are going to blow two claymores at this time." I yelled at the team to get down while I fired the two Claymore mines that were not oriented for the firefight. Both exploded spewing their steel shot across the southern running portion of the trail.

After the noise subsided, I yelled to the team, "Birds inbound, saddle-up!" Hastily, the team members policed up their magazines, struggled into their ruck-sacks, and assumed positions for extraction, all the while keeping a wary eye out for any NVA activity.

Lambert handed me the hand set. "Avenger, this is Dog 11, we are one mike out. Pop smoke, over." I pulled the pin on a purple smoke grenade and threw it on the crest of our hill. "Dog 11 smoke out, over."

"Ah, roger that, identify goofy grape. Are your packs ready for pick-up?"

"This is Three Foxtrot, roger goofy grape, affirmative on the pick-up." The Huey set down upwind from the smoke, and the team boarded in an orderly but very quick manner. I gave the pilot the thumbs up signal that we were all aboard and he pulled pitch, lifting us off for the short ride back to Evans.

On our return to Evans for debriefing, Paluso was nowhere to be found. Torres had taken me at my word and sent Paluso to An Khe. While the team was undergoing debriefing, the gun-ships gave the following assessment of the action; 1 NVA KIA by small arms fire, 3 NVA KIA by artillery, and 6 NVA KIA by gun-ship. Total enemy casualties were 14 KIA confirmed for the mission.

VanHook went underground in a bunker to finish this tour, but came back for two more with the Special Forces. Back in the real world, Don became an EMT in North Carolina. He and I were able to visit several times and I talked to him the day before he died of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Tom Ford transferred out of the unit after the disastrous Signal Hill mission in the A Shau Valley. He has yet to attend a reunion.

Little John Hardesty completed his tour, returned to Maryland and raided his family. I had the pleasure of talking to him a year or so ago but we are still waiting for him to join us at our annual reunion.

Ron Bitticks, the erst-while hippie artist that no one wanted, became an outstanding Team Leader, winning a Silver Star during his tour. Ron is currently a college level art teacher in Milwaukee and attended his first reunion in 1996.

Newlywed Glenn Lambert was killed in action the following month on Signal Hill in the A Shau Valley. I forgave Joe Paluso at a reunion at Fort Hood.

Bill Hand