

They Saw Us First

From Bob Ankony

The U.S. military tradition teaches that the infantry is "the queen of battle." Like the queen in the game of chess, the infantry is the most powerful and versatile piece on the battlefield, and it is the only force that ultimately takes and holds the ground.

One of the most elite infantry forces in the world is the U.S. Army Rangers. Its history dates back to Colonial America, when rifle companies from Rogers' Rangers made long-range attacks against French forces and their Indian allies and were instrumental in capturing Fort Detroit. During the Revolutionary War, many colonial commanders were former Rangers. One, General John Stark, commanded the First New Hampshire Militia, which gained fame at the Battles of Bunker Hill and Bennington. Stark later coined the phrase "Live free or die," New Hampshire's state motto.



TWO TEAMS, LZ BETTY

Ranger history lived on, and during the Vietnam War, Rangers were tasked with making long-range reconnaissance patrols. Our military occupational specialty was listed as 11F4P (infantry operations and intelligence specialist). Our motto was "*Sua Sponte*" (Of Their Own Accord). Every man had volunteered for our unit, including the intensive additional training, and knew what he would be facing. We all had chosen to be exactly where we were. We operated under G2 and G3, division intelligence and operations, and it was the job of Company E, 52nd Infantry (LRP), to be the eyes and ears for the First Air Cavalry Division—a 20,000-man force with 450 helicopters. We reconnoitered areas where the division was planning operations. We also patrolled along its flanks during operations, informing larger units where the enemy was or was not, protecting the troops from surprise attacks, and optimizing their use of force.

Our teams were only five or six men strong, but our advantage wasn't in numbers; it was in stealth and training. All team leaders and most assistant team leaders were graduates of the U.S. Army's Fifth Special Forces Group Recondo (from "Reconnaissance Commando") School. Since our patrols ranged from four to eight days, we carried ninety pounds of gear, including several dehydrated meals. But we could never carry enough water, so we topped off our canteens in streams whenever we were lucky enough to come across them.

Life depends on water and sunlight. Long-range reconnaissance patrols depend on silence and darkness. Staying alive meant not being seen: staying in shadows, living deep in vegetation, never being silhouetted, and being alert always so we could find the enemy first.

We carried a wide array of weapons: 5.56mm CAR-15 carbines and M16 rifles, 40mm M79 grenade launchers, .45-caliber 1911A1 pistols, hundreds of rounds of ammo, M26 fragmentation grenades, M34 white-phosphorus fragmentation grenades, claymore antipersonnel mines, one-pound blocks of C-4 and TNT high explosives, trip flares, parachute flares, strobe lights, binoculars, and survival knives. But those were merely defensive weapons. Our real killing weapon was the twenty-three-pound battery-operated PRC-25 radiotelephone, commonly referred to as the "Prick Twenty-five." Depending on weather, terrain, and type of antenna, it had a range of fifteen miles and was like having a telephone to God (or Satan, depending on which side you were on). It could bring the horrific firepower of the U.S. Air Force, Army helicopter gunships, or large air-assaulting infantry units. Or it could call in the cold, impersonal artillery to pound a position until the terrain was reduced to bare churned earth, and the enemy to flecks of pink mud.

At least, that's how it was supposed to work. But things didn't always go as planned. Sometimes, the enemy saw us first. When that happened, a recon team did what it could to stay alive. My team faced that situation four times.

The first incident happened on Tuesday, April 2, 1968. We had spotted several North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers and a woman the day before. And using our radiotelephone, we directed three scout helicopters and three helicopter gunships, which killed an officer and an enlisted man. Then an infantry company air-assaulted and swept the area, and we worked our way west through the vegetation to locate fleeing enemy soldiers.

The next morning, we came to a long grassy clearing a hundred meters wide, which seemed to run forever both north and south. Pausing at the edge, not wanting to cross such an opening in daylight, my team leader, Sgt. Doug Parkinson, and his assistant team leader, Staff Sgt. Bob Carr, debated alternative routes. But finally, they determined that there was no way around the clearing without moving a tremendous distance to our flank. Deciding it was best to cross as a team rather than expose ourselves one man at a time, we started our move. As we entered the clearing and crept forward step by step, I felt naked even with a rifle in my hands, grenades at my waist, and a heavy load of gear in my rucksack. Sweating from both heat and anxiety, I looked at Parkinson and our Montagnard front scout, Dish, who was leading the way. I stared into the vegetation across from us, knowing that our fate rested not on skill but on dumb luck.

Once we reached the middle of the field and were completely exposed, I thought, *well, if anybody's there, this is when they're gonna open up.* But a minute later, nothing had happened and we were across. Pausing a moment to catch our breath, we worked our way inside the tree line, where suddenly, we smelled cooking food. There, before a large bunker half-buried in the ground, pots of rice were still cooking over a low fire, and some clothes were drying off to one side.

Realizing we had stumbled across an enemy force of unknown size, we retreated across the same clearing to where we knew it was safe. Then we radioed the tactical operations center to tell them of our find. They sent a white team of two scout helicopters, followed by a red team of two helicopter gunships that rocketed and machine-gunned every suspected site. Then they airlifted in the nearby infantry company. We led them in sweeping the area and searching the bunker, where we found several blocks of TNT, two rifles, a submachine gun, and a pistol complete with holster and belt. That's when we realized the only reason we had survived: the enemy had seen our team heading directly at them and ran, thinking we were point for the 160-man infantry company operating in the area.

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The next incident happened on Sunday morning, April 21. Operation Delaware had already begun two days before, when two brigades—about 11,000 men and 300 helicopters—from our division air-assaulted A Shau Valley, near Laos. My platoon rappelled down to the 5,000-foot peak of Dong Re Lao Mountain, known as "Signal Hill." We were there to provide a vital radio relay site for the troops slugging it out in the valley, for approaching aircraft, and for communication with headquarters in the rear. This was day three, and a lot of the fighting had already happened. Approaching Signal Hill from the air, we could see a crashed helicopter on the peak, several dead Americans, and dozens of men who had survived the fight so far.

There were still enemy snipers, so our company commander, Cpt. Michael Gooding, ordered Sergeant Parkinson to make a patrol around the peak. We slogged through the mud to the western side of the mountain, where we came to the crashed helicopter, lying on its side on a steep embankment, and the perimeter of debris just beyond it. Then, stepping over an enemy fighting position where they had abandoned pouches of cartridges and two grenades, we pushed through a dense wall of mud-covered branches and trees, twisted and broken from the bomb blasts and bangalore torpedoes (interconnecting tubular explosives) used to clear the LZ.



DOG PARKINSON, SIGNAL HILL

After pushing our way through the thick mat of debris, we entered dense virgin forest swathed in a thick blanket of fog—the cloud cover that surrounded the peak. The cool, moist air felt good in my throat and lungs as I looked around, studying the vegetation. We were glad to be finally out of sight of our helicopter detachment above, again dependent just on one another.

After we had quietly moved another hundred meters down through the eerie fog-shrouded forest, Parkinson touched Dish in front of him and whispered, "Let's turn south for a heading alongside the peak."

Bracing our feet on slick tree roots and the stems of huge ferns, we groped along from stalk to frond to keep our balance, slowly maneuvering through the fog and undergrowth that limited our visual contact to the men immediately in front of and behind us.

Suddenly, after an hour of this slow, painstaking progress, I had just grabbed a sapling trunk so I could step onto the roots below, when shots went off right in front of me. Raising my rifle and cautiously moving in that direction, I saw an NVA soldier lying on his back. Sergeant Parkinson and Dish were still shooting him, making his body quiver with every shot.

Since Parkinson and Dish were on both sides of the soldier, in line with me, I held my fire and looked for other threats. But after we determined that no other NVA were in the area, we went over to the blood-soaked body.

Dish explained: "I walk past, not see him. But he think me NVA man, so he stand with no gun and speak." It made sense: In this fog, Dish, a small, dark-skinned Montagnard who stuck leaves and grass on his fatigues just like the enemy, could easily pass for one.

Dish had turned around just as Parkinson caught sight of the NVA from his rear. The NVA, realizing his mistake, stood there, arms at his sides, mouth and eyes wide open, as Dish and Parkinson raised their rifles and opened up on him.

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The third incident happened at last light while my front scout, Gair Anderson, my assistant team leader, Bruce Cain, and I were each placing a claymore mine facing an enemy trail. It was a well-used trail, four miles west-southwest of Quang Tri City, and we had heard enemy troops only the night before, casually talking as they walked along. We were confident that more enemy troops would return. Then, just as we slipped in the detonators, a dark figure suddenly appeared on another trail, a hundred feet away.

It was Friday, July 19, 1968—my second patrol as team leader of a long-range reconnaissance patrol, and already my second enemy contact. In the first incident, eleven nights earlier, our five-man team had run head-on into an enemy patrol. Gair had quickly fired a long burst into the patrol's lead, and we retreated into the jungle. But this time, we had only a small spit of ground and the Quang Tri River behind us, so we had to fight.

As the three of us stood there, struggling to see in the fading light, the unknown figure, apparently unsure who we were, stopped, stepped back, and slightly raised his rifle. Gair was closest, and Bruce the farthest back. Gair glanced at Bruce and me, and seeing that everyone was still in position, he raised his rifle, aimed, and cracked off a shot, which sent the guy sprawling backward. But he was in

an upright slouch, still facing us and looking alive enough that I raised my CAR-15, flicked the selector to auto, and emptied the twenty-round magazine in two long bursts of tracers that swept across his legs and chest.

I was worried that the soldier could be the lead of a much larger force, so we threw grenades past him and I got on the PRC-25 with our tactical operations center to notify them of the contact.

They sent a slick and two helicopter gunships that rocketed and minigunned the area, and we were extracted to our base at LZ Betty. The next morning, I led two platoons of infantry to the area of contact and conducted a sweep, but we found only the body along with his AK47, two loaded magazines, a sandbag and a sock full of rice, a small rubberized poncho, and two clean pairs of U.S. military socks. I had gone into the field that day without any socks because all mine were dirty, so I sat down next to the body and slipped on a pair. His decision to verify before shooting us had saved our lives and cost his.

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**LZ BETTY, ENROUTE TO PATROL
BRUCE CAIN, WITHOUT HAT,
BOB ANKONY AND TONY GRIFFITH**

The last incident happened early Saturday morning, July 27, 1968. It was our second day of an eight-day patrol in terrain of 50- to 150-foot hills covered with short elephant grass, scrub, and cactus. It was sunny, with temps in the nineties. Because the heat had dried nearly everything, once our canteens were empty we drank from muddy streams.

At first light, I ate an orange, skin and all, for breakfast. (By then I had reached the point where I could not stomach another meal of the same rations.) Then I shook some foot powder onto my heat rash: thousands of tiny red, itchy bumps on my crotch, butt, and feet. I tied my boots, and we mounted our gear and zigzagged northwest, where we came to a wide ravine covered in hip-high elephant grass.

"What do you think?" my assistant team leader, Bruce Cain, asked, kneeling down with my front scout, Tony Griffith, and me to scan a stretch of thick vegetation on the far side.

"I don't know, it's pretty big," I said, scanning the area with my twenty-power spotting scope. "You just never know what's in there." Setting my scope down, I said, "All right, I think only one of us should cross first, to scout it."

"You don't think we should all cross together?" Cain asked.

"Nah, it's six of one and half a dozen of the other."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, if we all go and Charlie's in there, they might run, thinking we're a platoon."

"So what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, but if they hunker down and open fire, we're all gonna be in a world of shit."

"So what're you gonna do?"

"Send one man."

"Then you gotta send Griffith."

"Nah, Tony's too new."

"You can send me, Sarge," Griffith piped up. "I can carry my weight."

"Not this time, Tony—I'll go," I said, looking across the field again.

"Well, one of you better get going," said Cain, "before the sun gets higher."

"All right," I said, picking up my CAR-15. My palms felt sweaty. "But give me a minute after I cross, so I can scout the area and give you a wave."

"We'll do that," Cain said as I stepped out into the wide-open field while my team watched from cover.

Moving ahead slowly and deliberately, I kept my rifle at my hip and studied the vegetation on the far side. I reached the middle and most vulnerable

part of the ravine, imagining how it would feel to be hit with a sudden burst of bullets, when suddenly a Vietcong (VC), wearing just shorts and an undershirt, jumped up in the grass seventy feet ahead, holding a rifle. For a moment, we stood facing each other, both frozen in fear. I was 19, and he didn't look any older. I raised my CAR-15 as he made a mad dash for a clump of vegetation. Taking aim, I let loose a long stream of tracers that swept across his left hip and right shoulder.

But instead of falling, he only stumbled and kept on running. Not knowing whether I had hit him or whether he had friends in the area, I emptied the rest of my magazine at him as he disappeared into the vegetation. Then I ran back as fast as I could.

When I got back to my team, I looked to where the VC had run, and said to Bill Ward, my radiotelephone operator, "Get Redleg Three Five on the horn!"

It was time to call in our big guns at LZ Pedro, three kilometers south, manned with a battery of 105mm artillery. **Ward** dialed two knobs on the PRC-25 to their frequency as I shot an azimuth at the enemy's position with my compass. After writing down its direction and range, I pulled out my map, figured our location relative to our reference point, and took the handset from **Ward**. Being our lifeline, it was always wrapped in plastic and taped to protect it from moisture. I put it to my ear and squeezed the rubber-booted switch underneath. "Redleg Three Five, this is Slashing Talon Five Niner, over."

"Go ahead, Five Niner, this is Redleg Three Five."

"Roger, Three Five. Request fire mission, over."

I then gave them the direction and range relative to the reference point on our map, known only to us and command so that enemy troops monitoring our frequency couldn't figure our location.

The fire direction center for the battery found our reference point on its maps and determined our position and elevation, along with the enemy's. With those factors and wind conditions known, the artillery crews could calculate the charges for their shells, and settings for the guns. Then they swung three of their six 105mm howitzers in our direction.

Seconds later, high-explosive shells screamed overhead and slammed into the thicket of vegetation, exploding in plumes of bright orange, shaking the earth, and sending up debris and clouds of black smoke. "Redleg Three Five," I said amid the thunderous noise, "this is Slashing Talon Five Niner. You're on target. Fire for effect, over."

"Roger, Five Niner," LZ Pedro replied as each howitzer fired several more shells in rapid succession.

Moments later, we radioed cease-fire since it was obvious that if I hadn't killed the VC already, he was certainly dead from the artillery.

We then mounted our gear and vanished into the hills.

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The First Cavalry Division would end the Vietnam War suffering more casualties than any other division: 5,444 men killed in action and 26,592 wounded in action.¹ Company E, Fifty-second Infantry (LRP), redesignated Company H, Seventy-fifth Infantry (Ranger), participated in the two largest battles of the Vietnam War—the Tet Offensive and the siege of Khe Sanh—and air-assaulted into A Shau Valley, the most formidable enemy-held territory in South Vietnam. It became the most decorated and longest-serving unit in LRP/Ranger history.² Company H also fought in Cambodia, and it lost the last two Rangers of the Vietnam War. Its lineage passed to Second Battalion, Seventy-fifth Ranger Regiment. Since 9/11, the regiment is the only continuously engaged unit in the Army. Today's Rangers do not patrol. They don't train allied forces or engage in routine counterinsurgency duties. They have a single-mission focus: they seek out the enemy and capture or kill him. Their mission sets Rangers apart as pure, direct-action warriors.

CITATIONS

1. Marine Corps deaths available only in aggregate, not by unit.
2. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Company_E,_52nd_Infantry_\(LRP\)_%28United_States%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Company_E,_52nd_Infantry_(LRP)_%28United_States%29).