

LRRP Team 1 Foxtrot Bloodies the NVA D114 Infiltration Group

October 30 – November 3, 1967

By Ken White

Late on the afternoon of October 29, 1967, the 2nd Brigade issued a warning order to the LRRP platoon at LZ Uplift in eastern Binh Dinh Province directing it to deploy a reconnaissance team into the Soui Ca Valley at first light on the 30th. A large NVA unit, possibly a company or larger, had been spotted by an aerial reconnaissance team from the 1st Squadron 9th Cav earlier that afternoon moving south through the jungle-covered Ho Son Mountains, south of the Crow's Foot (i.e., Kim Son Valley). The team's helicopter gunships engaged the enemy troops in two separate incidents resulting in five KIAs. Several hours later, a company from the 2nd Battalion 8th Cav made contact with a large NVA unit as it moved southward into the Soui Ca Valley from the Ho Son Mountains. The cavalymen engaged the enemy troops in a brief firefight, but were unable to fix them in position and the enemy troops broke contact and fled back into the jungle. The cavalymen pursued the fleeing troops and attempted to re-establish contact with them but were unable to do so, but they did succeed in capturing an enemy soldier and taking him prisoner.

Papers found on the prisoner indicated that he was a member of the D114 Infiltration Group, a group of replacement troops fresh off the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam. The group was on its way to join the NVA Sao Vang (Yellow Star) Division in eastern Binh Dinh Province. Nothing in the papers, however, indicated which unit of the Sao Vang the group would be joining or where it was located. But intelligence reports from the district police of Hoi An District in eastern Binh Dinh Province, indicated that the Quyet Thang Regiment (18th NVA Regiment), one of the three regiments of the Sao Vang, had recently moved into the Phu Cat area of eastern Binh Dinh Province, somewhere in the southern Soui Ca Valley or Phu Cat Mountains, just south of where the prisoner was captured.

My team, LRRP Team 1 Foxtrot, was the next team scheduled to deploy from LZ Uplift, so we got the warning order from brigade. We were a five-man team that had carried-out numerous missions in the Soui Ca Valley and surrounding jungle-covered mountains in support of 2nd Brigade operations. The team consisted on Sgt. Ron Holte, team leader, from Colfax, Wisconsin; Sgt. David Dickinson (KIA), assistant team leader, from Denver, Colorado; an RTO and a lead scout who would not be deploying with us on this mission; and myself, SP5 Ken White, team medic and scout, from Waltham, Massachusetts. Our regular RTO and lead scout would not be with us on this mission because we were assigned two troopers (identities unknown) from the 101st Airborne Division. The 101st was unable to get all of its reconnaissance troops into the Special Forces-run MACV Recondo School in Nha Trang for training in the time needed, so they sent some of them to the Central Highlands for on-the-job training with the 1st Cav LRRPs..

Immediately after receiving the warning order, Sgt. Holte, Sgt Dickinson, and Lt. George Utter, platoon leader of the LRRP platoon at LZ Uplift, from Wellesley, Massachusetts, boarded the detachment's Command & Control helicopter and headed to the Soui Ca for a pre-mission fly-over. The purpose of it was to find a suitable LZ for insertion of the team and to develop an operations plan that would ensure that we would find the NVA troops if they were in the valley. If the D114 Infiltration Group was on its way to join the 18th NVA Regiment in the southern Soui Ca, it would have to travel the entire length of the valley, a distance of roughly 8 miles from where it made contact with the company from the 2nd Bn. 8th Cav. With that in mind, an LZ at the southern end of the valley on the eastern side of the eastern ridge was chosen for insertion of the team. It was chosen because it was believed to be far enough away from where the enemy troops would likely to be located to allow us to get on the ground without our helicopter being heard by them. An alternate LZ was also chosen, but it would be used only in the event that the primary LZ was unusable due to enemy activity.

At first light on the 30th, eastern Binh Dinh Province was firmly in the grip of the winter monsoon. Northeasterly winds from the South China Sea were sweeping across the province delivering drenching rains and preventing the 1st Cav's helicopters from getting off the ground. It wasn't until 1400 hours that afternoon that we got word from brigade that a helicopter team from the 227th Aviation Battalion at LZ Dog in Bong Son was airborne and en-route to LZ Uplift to pick us up.

Our insertion into the southern Soui Ca was unopposed and we wasted no time in moving out. It was 1500 hours and we were about one kilometer below the ridge on the eastern side of the eastern ridge in 5-foot high elephant grass. Once we made it up to the ridge, Sgt. Holte directed Sgt. Dickinson and the two troopers from the 101st to set-up a defensive position in a nearby cluster of thickets while he and I worked our way down the western side of the

ridge towards the valley floor. It didn't take us long to find a spot that offered a good view of the southern end of the valley. It was a grass-covered knoll that was roughly 100 meters from the valley floor and 400 meters or so from the river that ran down the center of the valley. It was covered in elephant grass so it provided good concealment in addition to a good view of the valley looking straight-ahead and northward.

Crawling on our hands and knees, we worked our way out to the edge of the knoll. Sgt Holte pulled out his binoculars and started scanning the valley while I concentrated on scanning the hillside above and below our position for any enemy activity. Suddenly, he turned to me white-as-a-ghost, and said "NVA troops are coming down the trail straight towards us." I quickly pulled out a small pair of binoculars that I carried in the leg pocket of my fatigues and started scanning the area. The binoculars were not Army-issue like the ones that Sgt. Holte carried - I think I had gotten them at a Vietnamese shop in An Khe or Phu Cat, but they were light-weight and powerful enough to give me a pretty good view of the immediate area. There in front of us, no more than 200 meters away, was a column of NVA soldiers moving southward on a trail that paralleled the river about halfway between the river's edge and the base of the hillside where we were located. The NVA soldiers were wearing pith helmets and khaki uniforms, and were carrying rucksacks on their backs. They were equipped with web gear and automatic rifles with those distinctive large-capacity curved magazines.

The NVA soldiers were traveling in two groups. I tried counting the number of them in the first group, the one closest to us, but I lost count somewhere around 25, but there were likely 35 to 40 soldiers in it. My view of the second group was partially obscured by terrain features, so I was unable to accurately count the number in it, but from what I could see, it appeared to have about the same number in it as the first group.

This was not the first time that we had seen enemy troops in the field, but it was the first time that we had seen such a large number of them moving in the open in daylight. They seemed to be oblivious to the fact that there might be Americans in the valley on the lookout for them. Maybe because it had rained most of the day and because much of the valley was shrouded in fog, they didn't think they had to worry about being spotted.

While I was busy counting the troops in the column, Sgt. Holte was on the radio with Lt. Utter back at LZ Uplift reporting what we were seeing. Lt. Utter directed Sgt Holte to contact the Fire Direction Center (FDC) at LZ Uplift and initiate a fire mission with the heavy artillery battery there. LZ Uplift was located about 16 kilometers northeast of our position, adjacent to Highway 1. It was further away from the Soui Ca than LZ Crystal, which was about 10 kilometers directly east of our position, but it had big guns that could easily reach the valley. Sgt Holte communicated with the FDC and I acted as his spotter.

The first few artillery rounds exploded near the rear of the column causing total panic and confusion among the enemy troops. Sgt. Holte and I immediately began to adjust the artillery towards the head of the column as the NVA soldiers broke rank and attempted to run forward to escape the kill zone. More rounds exploded among the troops and those troops who could, scattered towards the river or towards the hillside where we were located. The barrage continued for about 20 minutes. A team of helicopter gunships from the 2nd Bn. 20th Aerial Rocket Artillery (ARA) followed the tube artillery barrage with rocket and machine gun fire. But the nightly monsoon rain had already started and because of the low cloud ceiling and reduced visibility in the valley, the gunships were limited to making a single run at the enemy troops. From our observation post at the edge of the knoll, we counted five definite KIAs and possibly thirteen more, for a total of eighteen. We had no way of estimating the number of WIAs. Sgt. Holte and I continued to scan the valley and direct artillery at targets of opportunity until the rain made it impossible to see anything beyond a few meters in front of us. We then worked our way back up the hillside to the ridge and re-joined Sgt. Dickinson and the two troopers in the cluster of thickets at about 2100 hours.

As a precautionary measure, we didn't stay in the thickets very long. Instead, we moved southward along the ridge for about 300 meters until we came to a large clearing at the base of some large boulders. There we set-up our night defense position along the clearing's edge and set-out our claymore mines. We didn't know if the NVA troops would try coming after us during the night, but if they did, at least this way we had a better chance of hearing them as they approached our position. With the exception of the driving winds and drenching rain, the night was uneventful. But at one point, at around 0200 hours, the wind and rain had picked-up to the point where we thought we would have to tie ourselves to the thickets to prevent from getting blown down the hillside.

On the morning of the 31st, the valley was socked-in with fog, so we spent the morning moving northward along the ridge looking for signs of enemy activity. We had moved a distance of about 2 kilometers but didn't come across anything of any interest, so at around 1100 hours, Lt. Utter directed us to move down the western side of the ridge towards the valley floor and set-up an observation post. Sgt. Dickinson and the two troopers took the first shift while Sgt. Holte and I remained on the ridge. At about 1600 hours, Sgt. Dickson and the two troopers returned to the ridge reporting no enemy sightings, so Sgt. Holte and I moved down the hillside to take our turn. We quickly

found a spot about 100 meters from the valley floor that offered a good view of the valley straight-ahead. Sgt. Holte started scanning the valley with his binoculars while I scanned the hillside above and below our position. Shortly afterwards, a lone NVA soldier appeared on the ridge about three hundreds meters above us standing under a tree. He was most likely an NVA scout. He was dressed in the customary NVA jungle uniform consisting of a black pajama top and khaki pants rolled up above the knees. He had a carbine rifle slung over his shoulder with a bandolier of magazines wrapped across his chest. He was looking directly at the two of us through a pair of binoculars. Once he realized that we had spotted him, he took off running southward along the ridge towards the clearing at the base of the boulders where we had spent the previous night.

Our presence in the valley had been compromised and we knew that we had to get off that hillside as quickly as possible before the NVA scout returned with help. But just as we started to move out, a group of enemy soldiers appeared on a trail less than 100 meters in front of us moving northward. There were seven of them. One was lying on a stretcher and the other six were carrying him. Sgt Holte quickly contacted the FDC at LZ Uplift to initiate a fire mission with the heavy artillery battery there, and again I acted as his spotter.

Because of our close proximity to the trail, Sgt. Holte and I felt that it was too dangerous to try and move up the hillside to the ridge in daylight, so we stayed put for the next several hours and continued to scan the valley. At roughly 1800 hours, a second group of NVA soldiers appeared on the trail in front of us moving northward. There were five of them. Two appeared to be wounded and were having trouble walking. The other three soldiers were helping them along. Sgt. Holte and I were starting to wonder if maybe there wasn't an NVA field hospital located north of our position. Our topology map showed hootches nestled in several ravines on the eastern side of the valley, so maybe the NVA soldiers were using them as a makeshift field hospital. Finally at 1930 hours, a third group of six enemy soldiers appeared on the trail moving northward. Sgt. Holte and I continued to direct artillery at the enemy soldiers and it was only when the nightly monsoon rain made it nearly impossible to see more than a few meters in front of us that we worked our way back up the hillside to the ridge and re-joined Sgt. Dickinson and the two troopers in the thickets.

For the next three days we repeated the previous day's routine: moving north along the ridge in the morning looking for signs of enemy activity until the fog lifted, setting-up an observation post on the western side of the ridge, and then scanning the valley for signs of the enemy. On the fifth day of the mission, the division's helicopters extracted us from the valley and brought us back to LZ Uplift where we were able to take a shower and get some dry fatigues.

In mid-November, several weeks and several missions after this one, the LRRP platoon at LZ Uplift underwent a redistribution of its teams. Sgt. Holte, at his request, returned to his original unit, Charlie Company, 1st Bn. 7th Cav. Sgt Dickinson moved to the LRRP platoon back at An Khe and died shortly afterwards in a roadside bomb explosion east of the An Khe Pass on Highway 19. I moved to the LRRP platoon at LZ English in Bong Son and continued to pull missions, mostly in the An Lao Valley and in the Da Dan Mountains separating the An Lao from the Bong Son Plains, in support of 1st Brigade operations.

LRRP teams operating out of LZ Uplift carried-out numerous missions in some of the most hostile areas in all of Vietnam in support of 2nd Brigade operations for the purpose of gathering intelligence on enemy units and disrupting enemy activities. This earned the LRRPs a reputation of being one of the most combat-effective elements in the 2nd Brigade's operations against NVA and Viet Cong forces in the area.

