

Cacti Blue Soldiers Use Cave As Hideout, Return Unscathed

By SP4 John Rowe

OASIS — Three Famous Fighting Fourth Division soldiers found themselves in a mountain cave with Quirt, a scout dog, "an M16, an M79 and a lot of prayers."

Separated from the rest of Company B, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry, the men were trapped in a cave as friendly airstrikes pounded enemy bunker complexes in the Chu Prong Mountain area around them.

Pleasant Surprise

Five hours later, Specialist 4 Randy Harritan of Wilmington, N.C., Private First Class Ken Eldridge of Stanton, Mich., and Private First Class Michael Boyle of Overland Park, Kan., provided Company B with a

pleasant surprise as they found their way back to their company's location.

The Cacti Blue troops were elated. Not only had their fellow infantrymen returned safely, but eight NVA had been killed in the fighting.

Three more enemy were killed the following morning as Company B raised its enemy dead to 11 in what started as a search and clear mission of the densely vegetated area.

Harrowing Experience

The harrowing experience for the three soldiers and scout dog began when PFC Eldridge, walking point for the company's Second Platoon, was fired at by an NVA soldier who had darted out from behind a tree.

"I dove behind a nearby tree and lost my M16 and steel pot in

the process," said PFC Eldridge. "Apparently they thought I was dead so three of them came into the open to get my weapon," he continued.

Specialist Harritan, a dog handler who was directly behind the pointman, killed the three NVA with fire from his M16.

In the ensuing firefight, the three infantrymen became separated from their company when they sought cover in a cave.

Couldn't Find Them

Company B proceeded to send a patrol to look for the missing men. Sergeant Larry Nenne of Toluca, Ill., said he called out the names of the men, but received no answer.

"We were afraid to yell because we might give away our position," said PFC Boyle.

"We could see NVA running past the cave," explained PFC Eldridge.

First Lieutenant William Burdick of East Lyme, Conn., Company B commander, said he thought there was "no hope" for the missing soldiers and the scout dog when Sergeant Nenne returned with his negative report.

"I then called in the artillery, gunships and airstrikes to help us against the well entrenched enemy force," explained Lieutenant Burdick.

Shook Up

What were the missing soldiers thinking about when the airstrikes were going on? "It shook us up a little. There we were with an M16, an M79 and a lot of prayers," commented PFC Boyle.