

# THE BATTLE OF "ONE-NINER"

(AS SEEN FROM THE EYES OF THE S-3 NEARLY FORTY YEARS LATER)

BY  
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It was just another hot-sweaty day near the Cambodian border far west of Pleiku where we, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry, known as the Cacti Blue were chasing those elusive North Vietnamese Army units. Those same ones who fought here from the time the First Cavalry became famous in the Battle of Ia Drang Valley (We Were Soldiers Once...and Young by LTG Hal Moore) and did so long after we were returned to the US. The Cacti Blue had only a few days earlier locked horns with them and come away with heroic soldiers and many casualties. It was in this battle when 2<sup>nd</sup> LT Stephan Karopczyc earned his Medal of Honor posthumously. And this next engagement was no doubt a continuation of that earlier battle of Plei Djereng but at a slightly different location.

According to the plans the Battalion Commander, LTC Clint Granger and I had worked out, Companies "A" and "C" would leave their night locations and search toward Cambodia for evidence of the enemy. After all, this was an enemy heaven -- the major infiltration route into the Central Highlands. We knew they were there...but where.

haven

Sometime after 1500 hours (3:00 pm) Company "C" discovered a well used trail and a couple of enemy soldiers without weapons traveling on it away from where they had only recently searched. Company "C" fired on the enemy who escaped in the jungle which was thick as hell in this part of the World. Little did we know, but "C" Company had just alerted an entire enemy battalion, or more, who were in well defended positions awaiting our arrival. The company commander, Captain Rykowski, maneuvered his rifle platoons to block the enemy. Unfortunately, the enemy strength was not known to Rykowski at this time...but he would soon find out.

In the meantime, MSG Butters, the Battalion Operations Sergeant, and I monitored the radios in the Battalion Tactical Operations Center (TOC) and plotted the locations of the rifle companies as they reported in. Then sent those situation reports to the Brigade Headquarters as fast as we learned the situation.

On the next radio call to the TOC, we heard the enemy automatic weapons fire as it whizzed past the Charlie Company radio operator's (RTO) head. And the first report of a wounded soldier arrived over that speaker on the Battalion Command Net. We immediately called for a medical evacuation (Dustoff) helicopter to fly out to pick up our wounded. We followed the standard procedures to insure that the landing zone (LZ) was clear and safe before we sent the Dustoff chopper the LZ coordinates and the necessary details. By now,

however, every radio transmission from Charlie Company was filled with the crack of bullets flying by the handset from enemy automatic weapons and an occasional whump of a mortar round exploding nearby.

Butters said, "Oh, shit, we're into it again!"

And I agreed. There we were, sitting in front of the TOC's color coded maps, trying to figure out what the hell was going on and yelling commands out over the battalion command radio net. Get Company "A" moving in the direction of the fire fight to reinforce "C" company before the mass of enemy can get there. Captain Louie Barcena, veteran of the miscalculated Cuba invasion under President Kennedy, Commander of Company "A" replies in his heavy Cuban accent, "Jesus, we're on the way," adding a Cuban expression or two that none of us could translate and probably wouldn't understand anyway.

But they are too far away in this Godforsaken jungle thick with up and down ravines that would make a mountain climber cry. No matter, Alpha headed toward the sound of the guns where Charlie is now in a vicious fight for its life. And we in the TOC called for all available helicopter gunships to support the beleaguered rifle company while artillery pieces -- yards from our TOC -- blasted shock waves from their muzzles that shook the maps off the sandbagged wall and kicked dust up from every corner making it difficult to breathe. Sticky dust from the heat and humidity filled every pore. Sweat trickled to the most private places. Jungle fatigues stuck to our skin. It was just another day at fighting for freedom in this far-off country.

And then matters got worse <sup>for Charlie Co.</sup> Captain Rykowski was hit in his stomach and legs by enemy automatic fire. Severely wounded, he was bleeding badly. The Artillery forward observer, LT Emory and one platoon leader, LT Sudborough are mortally wounded. Charlie Company was losing leaders fast. Control was ~~fast~~ slipping away as ~~fast~~ American blood seeped into the jungle floor -- faster than the front line medics quenched the flow. Casualties were everywhere. The enemy was charging at a severely weakened rifle company. But Charlie's withering return fire was killing an even greater number of North Vietnamese Army Regulars. Guided by bleeding officers and noncommissioned officers and wounded radio operators, Charlie fought on. Butters and I, in the TOC, heard the pleas hoping against hope that help would arrive. Artillery thundered down on the rear elements of attackers. But it had little effect on the human wave assault which is only yards from the edge of Charlie's defensive perimeter. Butters and I concluded that they cannot hold out and will be overrun -- a devastating defeat.

At last, the helicopter gunships arrived on the scene. After quickly coordinating directions with colored smoke to identify Charlie Company's location, they engaged the charging North Vietnamese with their four machine guns on each firing pass. Bullets impacted only yards from Charlie's blood soaked perimeter. Pass after pass, the UH-1D's rolled in firing burst after burst into the enemy

human wave ranks. All hell broke loose. The enemy human wave assault was broken. The gunships saved Charlie from certain death. The North Vietnamese retreated and dragged their wounded and dead toward Cambodia but left the battlefield littered with corpses.

Rykowski was getting weaker. We heard his radio transmissions fall off as he nears death from loss of blood. Butters and I, in the TOC, can hear this clearly. Butters said that if we don't get a medevac in there soon, Rykowski and many of his men will not last much longer.

And it is now getting dark, not a nice situation.

LTC Granger and I agreed that I will take Captain Lanning, the Assistant S-3 into the battle zone and put him in command of C company while on that same helicopter evacuate Rykowski to the battalion aid station where he can be stabilized. Once a wounded soldier gets medical attention, he has a chance of long term survival but Rykowski ~~had none~~ <sup>was</sup> bleeding to death in the jungle.

Butters demands to go but I order him to stay with the TOC as we need him there more than we need him tromping through the jungle. LTC Granger agreed that he will stay in the firebase as we can't have both senior officers in the battalion out trekking through the jungle in search of what remains of Charlie Company.

At about a few minutes before seven in the evening we; CPT Lanning, two radio operators, a couple of other soldiers and myself, jumped from the Command and Control (C&C) helicopter into a jungle clearing somewhere south of Charlie Company hoping to be able to link up with the remnants of Charlie or Alpha which had now joined some of Rykowski's men. The C&C could not land as the trees were too tall and the area was covered with downed trees from artillery or earlier B-52 bombing runs. My guess is that we had to leap ten feet but at the time is seemed like twenty. Nonetheless, we rallied and started to move in the direction of Charlie and Alpha who were, hopefully, in a relatively secure location. Enemy activity was absent...at least now it was. I was not sure how far we would have to travel to get to those friendly soldiers but my guess from the map was that it would be about five hundred meters. Five hundred meters in this jungle can be a lifetime. This is not like ambling down the Boardwalk.

After boring through about two hundred meters of thick jungle in the near darkness, the six of us came upon a small trail leading in the direction that we wanted to go. As the senior officer, I was leading our small patrol. Ranger training drummed into me not to get on any trail in any territory much less in enemy territory where we were. We left that trail only to enter a large enemy bunker complex, unoccupied thank goodness, only a few meters from that same trail.

Soon after we arrived in this area formerly occupied by the enemy, we heard sounds of movement coming down that enemy used trail. I thought it might be members of Alpha or Charlie seeking to link up with us to lead us to their night lager position.

So I yelled, "Hey, who's there?"

And the answer I got was the last thing I wanted to hear. It was not English. It was Vietnamese. There was a lot of yelling coming out of their mouths none of it to my liking. We all hit the ground – Captain Jim Lanning was only a couple feet from me. I told everyone to put their weapons on full automatic for if they come for us we will take as many as we can.

I asked Jim if he had any hand grenades. He said, "No."

I said in a whisper, "Hold your fire!" There was dead silence from us as we lay there in this enemy bunker complex breathing only when required. I cupped the radio mike closely to my mouth and quietly transmitted to the TOC that we made contact with the enemy. But I had no idea where we were with respect to Charlie Company. All the while, enemy soldiers were now crashing through the dark jungle the trail at a trot – how many, I don't know – but one helluva lot more than there were Americans hiding in this North Vietnamese Army bunker complex. My guess is that nearly a hundred enemy passed by the silently hiding and praying Americans of which I was but one. —

After it got quiet, we resumed moving but as slowly and as quietly as it is possible in this dark jungle. Behind us, we heard the whop, whop, whop of approaching rotor blades. Some more of our soldiers were arriving at the jungle clearing we had jumped into earlier. We returned to the vicinity of the so-called LZ only to find that LTC Granger and his radio operators had dropped in the same place we had just left a half an hour or so before. So we joined up and headed back toward the enemy bunker complex. Radio contact was made with Charlie and we, now reinforced, moved out to link up with them.

At the time, I thought what the hell is Granger doing here – we had agreed before I came out that both Battalion Field Grade Officers should not be here together. But he was the commander...so be it. We moved on to the night lager location after meeting some members of Alpha company who came to provide us protection – a little late – and assured us that the route to the night lager location was mostly secure.

They guided us to that location. It took us about an hour or so of picking our way through the Vietnamese jungle to get to there. In the meantime, the first medical evacuation helicopter, Dustoff, was attempting to evacuate some wounded when it was shot down by an enemy rocket propelled grenade killing two of the crew and blinding both pilots. The enemy grenadiers were killed by Company A

personnel after they had revealed their hidden firing position. The area was again secured so we could begin the evacuation.

It became obvious when I arrived at the lager site that the evacuation was going to be difficult, if not impossible, as the trees were one hundred feet high and the hole cut by the battalion engineering team was only big enough for one HU-1D (Huey) to get into and out of. The pilots informed us that they could only lift out two wounded at a time. And that would take better than average flying skill. The Hueys had to lift straight up and could not deviate in the slightest direction or they would crash into the trees and come down on those of us under them. Hitting a tree with one's tail rotor didn't make for the best flying. The only way to get this done was for me to stand directly under the helicopters as they hovered down guiding them with my flashlight and radio. It was bold and simple...but somewhat dangerous. I used the bright flashes of the emergency strobe light to direct the pilots to the general area in the dark but turned off the strobe as they hovered down toward the ground as it tended to destroy the pilots' night vision. There were no night vision goggles in Vietnam at that time. I talked to the pilots and signaled with my flashlight to tell them to go forwards or backwards or *separated* sideways a few feet while they hovered down. Only a few short feet spared the tall jungle trees from the spinning tail rotor. A single tail rotor strike could terminate the evacuation...not to mention me. I planned to jump sideways off the tree stump where I was standing were a chopper to come crashing down. But, truthfully, I would not have made it. The main rotor wash burned my eyes but I dared not shut them. A single mistake would mean the seriously wounded would most likely not get medical attention until the next day -- probably too damn late.

A successful landing (a most liberal use of the term) allowed the pilots to put only one of their helicopter skids on a downfallen tree while we loaded the wounded. Full power was required to keep the UH-1D steady as soldiers shoved litters carrying two of Charley's bleeding, moaning soldiers aboard to be lifted out to their only chance for life saving aid. My ears still ring when I think of those rotor blades swishing just above my head as I communicated with pilots via flashlight hand signals. Sometimes one is just lucky and the Cacti Blue needed all its luck that long night in the Vietnamese jungle. The first flight brought in the Battalion Surgeon, a Doctor, and his chief medical assistant to administer emergency first aid to the wounded. He began the difficult task of sorting the horribly wounded from the slightly wounded and the dead. Those able to survive the night would have to wait until first light in the morning before getting to the aid station or the hospital. The others we would evacuate now.

It took the better part of three hours to lift out thirty or more severely wounded. But it worked. And I have been told that none of our wounded that we evacuated that night died from their wounds --- not all bad. It is clear that had we not undertaken this radical and somewhat dangerous medical evacuation, more Americans would have died from loss of blood even though we had the Battalion Surgeon administering emergency aid in this tiny landing zone.

About 2 or 3 am, LTC Granger and I were lifted out of this LZ back to the firebase where we could enjoy the sound of fire from the 8 inch howitzers and the 175 mm rifles either of which would lift one six inches off your bunk or air mattress whenever they blasted away. After the harrowing medical evacuation, I slept soundly hardly noticing our heavy artillery friends.

The next morning, when I awoke, my ankle was swollen to double its normal size. I couldn't lace up my jungle boot. As we were flying later that morning in the C&C helicopter, LTC Granger asked what had happened to my ankle. I told him I was not sure but most likely it was injured when I jumped out the night before but I hadn't noticed it until then. Adrenalin, or something, has a way of protecting us soldiers in times of battle. Later it turned out that I had a "stress fracture." Stress used here can have more than one meaning. But that is the way of war.

When we landed in that same LZ for Charlie Company the next morning, now fairly well cleared, I came across Captain Jim Lanning with two grenades dangling from his belt.

I asked, "Did you have those last night?"

He said, "Sure did."

I asked him why he hadn't given them to me when I asked for grenades.

Lanning said, "Because you would have thrown 'em!"

And he was right. And it is just as well he didn't.

An afterthought: This battle was named by MSG Butters as "ONE-NINER" in honor of one of the RTO's from Charlie Company who was killed in action at this fight while standing by his Company Commander, Captain Rykowski. His call sign was "One Niner Sierra."

BGC