

10-18-1966

East, the sky was black, and torrential rains fell. Clouds were at 1500 feet. Near Vinh Quoi, a single UH-1D circled and then, to the Southeast, a group of dots emerged from the gloom, quickly into a flight of 17 transport helicopters. The lone aircraft paced the flight Northwest toward the operational area ten meters West Northwest of Vi Thanh. As they passed Vi Thanh to the North, a flight of five armed helicopters swung into position and joined. Then, another black squall line was pouring down the rain that characterized the transition between monsoon and dry season in the Mekong Delta. It was moving west at 20 miles per hour, and might be out of the operation before the flight arrived. Far from help. The flight, now divided into a flight of five, followed by three flights of four, assumed their positions for their landing in the four landing zones, then descended, accompanied by the armed helicopters, into the rain.

The lone aircraft was flown by the mission commander, CO, 121st Assault Helicopter Co. Aboard were the commanding general of the 21st AVN Infantry Division and 42nd Division tactical zone, 92 Nguyen Van Minh and his Advisor, Col Hathaway, U.S. Army. Also aboard was Major Gausa, the Commander of the 120 Chinese mercenaries and ten American advisors that constituted the raid force. For this was a helicopter raid. The objective was to seize and search a Viet Cong prison but suspected of harboring an American who had been in captivity for two years. There might be others. The wind was strong from the southeast, and permission was asked and granted to land east instead of north. Visibility was restricted by the heavy rain. Major Buxton, former transport platoon leader, armed platoon leader and instructor pilot, knew the area intimately at low level. He sighted his landing zone, but was too fast and too high, went around. Again he saw his landing zone, and again could not slow and land. The third time around, he went into his landing flare, before the landing zone came into sight, saw it, and let down to offload the raiders. The second flight, behind him, landed. The fourth flight, across the canal and tree line, had followed the canal North, made a hard right to the East and landed 100 meters beyond the designated spot. The raiders sprang out, entered the tree line, and the aircraft departed East, to Vi Thanh.

The third flight strayed to the West, saw a crooked canal and landing zone, and landed. This was 1300 meters from the designated place, and in the very midst of the U MIN 10 Battalion.

The three raider forces, Papa 1, 2 and 4, proceeded direct to their objective. The prison hut was empty, there was no trace of prisoners. The hut was burned.

The thirty raiders who had descended on the U-MIN 10, Papa 3, were heavily engaged immediately and the two American Advisors wounded. They requested help, and a medical evacuation helicopter came into the landing zone. It came under heavy fire and broke off, too heavily damaged to try again. Radio transmissions from the American ceased, and a heavily accented

THE MIP (Cont'd)

We need chop

voice transmitted, "We need chop!" Viking lead decided to come in from the east and attempt to bring out the American wounded. He approached the landing zone, hovered, and began a takeoff when a burst of machine gun fire shattered the right windshield, killing the pilot instantly. Controls shot out, the armed helicopter slowly went into the swamps at 20 to 30 knots, and crashed. The three survivors, still under fire, escaped the wreckage and crept away, to evade the VC all night. Before communication was lost with Papa 3, that group reported 24 of the 32 wounded.

General Minh had three Battalions standing by at Vi Thanh, with a fourth on the way. He decided to put the three Battalions into a landing zone 1500m Southwest of the unfortunate landing zone of the raiding force, Papa 3.

By the time Gen Minh decided to put the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd of the 31st into the landing zone, two flights of 12 aircraft each had been formed at Vi Thanh. The first flight was airborne, approached, and accompanied by the Maverick Armed Platoon, 175th Avn Company, was guided into the landing zone by the Viking armed platoon, 121st Avn Company. This landing zone, too, proved to be an unfortunate choice. It was surrounded on three sides by Viet Cong emplacements and automatic weapons which opened up on the first flight and disabled 7 of the 12 aircraft on their way out of the LZ. The second flight of 12 came into the LZ, landed short, and was moved East 1000 meters to reinforce the ARVN soldiers already under fire on the ground. With a left turn-out, automatic weapons in the north tree line opened up. One aircraft went down on the way to Vi Thanh, and 8 of the 12 were declared unflyable. Still the reinforcement went on. Airstrikes pounded VC positions in the treelines, artillery fell along the river. After the fourth flight, aircraft were landing and taking off without receiving fire. Before dark, three battalions were airlanded. ARVN forces had taken 30 to 40 casualties, with half that many dead. The BN CO, 2/31 and his deputy were severely wounded, and evacuated.

After nightfall, the plan was for continuous airstrikes and artillery under illumination from "spooky". The ground fire on both sides subsided, and ceased. At dusk, the beleaguered remnants of Papa 3 had withdrawn into an open. With too many wounded, this force was unable to move further. They stopped and put out panels. A VNAF airstrike on the treeline to the west is in progress. At the Papa 3 force returned fire into the treelines, the AF pilot, unaware of the situation, saw this group. He shifted his strike and dropped napalm on the panels. It appeared that there could be no survivors.

During the night, the enemy withdrew to the Northwest. The next morning, 2/33 battalion was placed into a landing zone near the downed helicopter. Simultaneously, a new battalion commander was lifted in to the 2/31 Bn, and

THE RAID (Cont'd)

dead and wounded airlifted out, with their rifles and equipment. 40 ARVN soldiers had been killed, and 50 wounded.

During the first lift of the 2/33rd, the Vikings noticed a wounded raider weakly moving his arms in the vicinity of Papa 3's last location. He was taken to Vi Thanh by the trial aircraft of the warrior flight. He had been shot through the chest. He was the sole survivor of papa 3's group of 32 men.

Three Americans were sighted 200 meters from the downed aircraft. They were Viking Lead, Major Nutter, and Sergeants Olson and Swindler. Considerably the worse for wear, and babbling an epic tale of survival amid bombs, napalm artillery, and 1000 Viet Cong withdrawing all through the night, they were evacuated by grinning Dust-Off pilots within minutes.

Not a shot was fired. The VC had fled.

The battlefield cleanup was completed. An Outlaw aircraft was slung out of the landing zone by a CH-47. Eight UH-1's at Vi Thanh were carried to their home stations. The downed gunship was inspected by maintenance personnel and declared a total loss. On order of the 13th Battalion Commander, it was completely destroyed and set afire by rockets and machine gun fire from the 336th T-Birds.

The last of the raiders were airlifted to Vi Thanh where they boarded a C-130, with dead and wounded, for their home station. All ARVN troops were extracted and a plan to airlift a battalion of the 33rd regiment to the Northwest to try to head off the withdrawing VC was cancelled. Troops sent home, dead and wounded evacuated, equipment and aircraft hauled off for repair, the engagement at last was over. The results of the battle were:

ARVN: 40 dead, 60 wounded

VC : 100 killed in action

121st Avn Co: 1 killed, 10 injured, one aircraft destroyed, eleven damaged.

336th Avn Co: 3 wounded, one seriously, 6 transports and two armed helicopters damaged.

Raiders: 2 Americans killed, 12 missing, 17 killed.