

Soldier escapes enemy captivity

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Chopper picks up specialist missing for fourteen months

LONG BINH—A soldier held captive by the Viet Cong for more than a year was found in Tay Ninh province, 18 days after his escape.

Spec. 5 Thomas H. Van Putten was picked up on a riverbank 20 miles north-northwest of Tay Ninh City by soldiers of C Troop, 3rd Squadron, 17th Cavalry, attached to the 25th Infantry Division.

"I blew a kiss to the gunner on the LOH (light observation helicopter) that picked me up," Van Putten said. "I'll never forget that big, beautiful blond mustache he had. When I jumped in the chopper I grabbed the pilot's shoulder and yelled 'I love you, I love you.' That was really something. And I hugged the gunner."

Van Putten was first flown to the 45th Surgical Hospital in Tay Ninh and later to the 24th Evacuation Hospital here where he underwent medical examinations and debriefings. He then flew to the United States for a reunion with his family.

Army doctors reported he was suffering from malnutrition and dehydration, but his condition was listed as "good."

Van Putten had last been seen about 10 a.m. on Feb. 10, 1968 while riding as a guard on a road scraper in Tay Ninh province. He had been in country 11½ months up to that time. His vehicle was later found off the road.

His unit was the 362nd Light Equipment Co., 588th Construction Engineer Bn., 79th Engineer Group, where he was assigned as a construction machine operator.

A specialist 4 when he was taken prisoner, Van Putten was promoted to specialist 5 Jan. 3, 1969, while still missing.

His first words to the Americans in the helicopter were: "I've escaped from the enemy. Give me something to eat."

The soldiers gave him warm root beer, fruit cocktail and chicken with noodles. "I never tasted such delicious food in all my life," he said.

"When that chopper came down it was the most beautiful thing I've seen in my life. WOW! I was waving my shirt and arms and doing everything to get his (the pilot's) attention," Van Putten said.

Before being captured the 6-foot, 1-inch soldier weighed 185 pounds. He was down to 121 pounds when he was brought here.

His first night back with Americans Van Putten complained: "I try to sleep, but the bed is too comfortable. I just keep wanting to talk to people."

32nd Abn learns out of C tunnel

U CHI — Infantrymen of the 1st Bde., 82nd Airborne Division's 1st Bn., 505th Inf., hunted four enemy and killed two while uncovering a large weapons cache hidden in a maze of tunnels near here.

The action began when the battalion commander, Lt. Col. G. Thomas Jr., and Cpt. L. Parrish, commander of B, while flying over the area spotted a small group of enemy soldiers running across an open field. The enemy disappeared into a tunnel entrance.

Two officers landed their observation helicopter in the isolated area and, together with the platoon, located the entrance and fired grenades into tunnel. They sealed the entrance and, armed only with one submachine gun and a shotgun, searched the area until Co. B and Co. C, 1st Bn., 17th Abn., arrived.

During the next two days a large cache of weapons was recovered from the tunnels that they combed the area, but the enemy in the tunnels held out, despite smoke grenades and a night-vision smoke generator. The NVA apparently tried to escape at night, and Americans prepared for this.

On the first night an ambush in Co. B's 1st Platoon caught three enemy trying to escape the tunnels. The last night the NVA were killed and another in brief skirmishes by a combined infantry and cavalry force.

In the three-day operation the soldiers took from the tunnels 10 AK-47s, one AK-47, five others, two RPG-2 rocket launchers and various types of ammunition, rockets, grenades and miscellaneous supplies and equipment.



USARV Photo

A VIET CONG PRISONER for more than a year, Spec. 5 Thomas H. Van Putten arrives at Long Binh on a stretcher carried by medics. Although Van Putten lost 64

pounds during captivity, doctors at Long Binh described his medical condition as "good."

No American casualties

9th rips enemy hunting cache

RACH KIEN — Co. A of the 9th Division's 2nd Bn., 47th Inf., caught an NVA force returning for a cache which had been discovered two weeks ago and killed 44 without suffering a casualty.

The action took place five miles northwest of here where another company of the battalion had killed 34 NVA and uncovered 23 boxes of machine gun ammunition, 11 B40 rockets, 13 rifle grenades and 1,500 of AK-47 ammunition late in March.

In addition to the 44 kills, the mechanized unit captured two 57mm recoilless rifles, six AK-47s and a 9mm pistol. An element of the 25th ARVN Division working in the same area added five kills to the total.

The action began just after Co. A's 1st Platoon had set up their night ambush position. An estimated 75 enemy moved out of a woodline directly towards their position.

Staff Sgt. Jawan Thompson, platoon leader, had taken his patrol to within 200 yards of the cache site. "They moved right by our position, some as close as five meters," Thompson explained. "We let them pass by before opening up. They poked around where the cache had been hidden."

When the enemy had moved past the first platoon's ambush site, the company opened up with their track-mounted .50-caliber machine guns and small arms.

"They were so surprised they didn't have a chance," Thompson said.

Staff Sgt. Alan Strickland said the enemy element "was extremely well disciplined and maintained, that is, until we cut loose. Then it turned into a rout."

11th Cav tears ambush apart, kills 102

PHU KHUONG—Elements of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment killed 102 enemy and detained six more in a day of fierce fighting six miles east of here.

The action began when an enemy force attempted to ambush an armored reconnaissance patrol.

"The first RPG round was premature and that was the enemy's downfall," Maj. John C. Bahnsen said. "Before they were able to carry out the rest

of the ambush, we had them encircled with armor." Bahnsen, former commander of the Blackhorse Air Cavalry Troop, was putting in his first day as commander of the regiment's 3rd Squadron. Twenty North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers were killed in the opening phase of the action and six suspects were detained.

Early that morning a light observation helicopter (LOH) pilot had sighted a bunker complex with one individual trying to evade detection in the same

area. Blackhorse elements operating nearby moved into the complex in the dense bamboo jungle.

The cavalrymen caught an enemy force in the bunkers and battled them from their armored vehicles while artillery fire ringed the area to prevent the enemy from escaping.

As the Blackhorse troopers moved out of the contact area in pursuit, they were fired upon with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades by another enemy force. The cavalrymen

opened up once again and fighting continued until nightfall. A total of 82 NVA bodies were found in the area. Seven Americans were killed and 28 were wounded.

Engineers from the regiment's 919th Engineer Co. uncovered an enemy munitions cache as they swept for mines and boobytraps near the battle scene. The find included: 120 82mm and 139 60mm mortar rounds, 1,600 rounds of .51-caliber ammunition, 20 pounds of TNT and 24 cans of 82mm mortar fuses.

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A LITTLE GIRL, faced with a big canal, finds the answer to her problem on the back of Spec. 4 Braulli Ballestros, a 9th Infantry Division rifleman, who—for once—may not mind the Mekong Delta mud.

Americans profit from week spent with ARVN unit

TIEN THOM—"It was really an interesting experience, a chance to see how the Vietnamese live, a chance to learn a lot about how they're different from us and how we're all the same."

That was the reaction of Pfc. Gerald W. Windhorst to spending a week living and working with a South Vietnamese Army unit here, 16 miles southeast of Tay Ninh.

Windhorst was part of a squad from a 1st Bde., 25th Infantry Division infantry unit who made the week's stay at the village.

The squad, led by Sgt. Pete Bauer, went combined ambush patrols with the ARVN forces at night, and during the day tried out Vietnam's food, customs and language.

"We learned right away that those ARVNs really know what they're doing militarily," Bauer said at the end of the week. "We didn't know what to expect, but the first night on ambush patrol they all stayed awake all night, and after that it was up to us to keep up with them."

Windhorst says he was struck by Vietnamese generosity.

"The people, both the civilians and the ARVNs, were ready to share everything they had with us," Windhorst said. "We had a lot of invitations to eat with them, too, and we tried just about everything, even if we didn't eat very much of it."

Windhorst added that he'd like to spend some more time in the village.

"It was really worth our while," he said. "I think there was a big increase in our understanding of each other after that week."

He beats paralysis, flies again

NHA TRANG—Maj. George C. Stroh had been in country exactly one month on his first trip to Vietnam in 1965 when he was hit in the spinal column by an enemy 30-caliber round.

He was flying as gunner in a "Huey" gunship in the Mekong Delta when he got hit.

"It felt like I had hit my funny bone or was getting a 110-volt shock that wouldn't quit," Stroh said.

It immediately paralyzed all the muscles on the back of his upper and lower left leg. He was medevaced out of Vietnam and began a program of physical therapy.

"In three months I learned to use different muscles to do the work of the old ones. I requalified in all the aircraft I had been trained to fly."

After fifteen months in the States Stroh volunteered for his

second Vietnam tour.

He arrived in Vietnam Nov. 1, 1967 and has served as aviation officer with the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) since July 1968.

He is the commander's principal advisor on all aviation matters within the group. A part of Stroh's job is arranging aircraft transportation for the commander, his staff, and all "VIPs" and press representatives who want to visit the isolated camps.

Lifesaving flights first, sleep last for dustoff pilot

TAY NINH—WO Stephen B. Peth, a dustoff pilot, put in a hard four days recently while flying in the area north of Nui Ba Den near here. The way patients were coming into the 45th Surgical Hospital during that period, one might have thought an entire fleet of dustoff ships was operating in the area.

While Peth and his crews considered it a routine period, although a little hectic, it was not until the final figures were in that they learned he'd set a new record for the 159th Medical Detachment's Tay Ninh standby: 242 patients evacuated in four days of continuous action.

It all started when, after a quiet morning, Peth was called to aid a Special Forces unit that had run into heavy contact on the north side of Nui Ba Den, the Black Virgin Mountain. Although subjected to automatic weapons fire from the enemy, he managed to fly out 40 wounded during the afternoon.

Later that evening, a 1st Cavalry Division fire support base was attacked and its medevac ship disabled. Peth and his crew rushed to the beleaguered outpost and began work. Aircraft were drawing fire at 3,000 feet as he circled the fire support base. Then a unit about 100 yards north of the base requested the urgent evacuation of three men.

Under heavy fire, the dustoff ship spiraled into the pickup site. Peth brought the ship down toward a large bomb crater. Unable to land the

ship inside the crater, he hovered with his landing lights on to speed the loading. Escorting gunships' crews screamed over the radio for him to turn out his lights and clear out before he was blasted out of the sky, but Peth stayed until the wounded were loaded.

After successfully dropping off his patients at the nearby 45th Surgical hospital, he returned to evacuate patients from the fire support base.

Peth volunteered that night to remain here for two more days. What began then for Peth was an around-the-clock whirlwind of flying, changing crews and aircraft but staying on the job himself.

Ben Soi, a little village southwest of here, came under heavy attack. Again, the dustoff crew led by Peth braved small arms and mortars to evacuate civilian and Civilian Irregular Defense Group wounded.

Later the third day, Peth was notified that a Vietnamese Airborne unit had suffered numerous casualties in an engagement south of Ben Soi. Starting in the early afternoon, with time out only to dodge incoming mortar barrages, Peth managed time and again to evacuate wounded Vietnamese soldiers from the battlefield.

Finally, Peth and his latest crew settled down for some much-needed sleep. However, their rest was cut short when the 1st Cavalry Division's fire support base was hit again. They quickly scrambled to assist, bringing the four-day total to 242 wounded evacuated.

America to the rescue

Orphan Andy finds a home

LZ BAYONET—His name is Tran Thai Hong Phuc but to soldiers of the American Division's 198th Infantry Brigade, he is simply "Andy."

Not long ago he was a war orphan who, thanks to a few American Division soldiers, found a chance to start a second life with a new family.

Today he lives in Tam Ky, north of here, as the son of an officer of the Army of the Republic of Viet Nam. But it was not long ago that soldiers of the 1st Bn., 32nd Inf. found the 10 year old after a battle near Tam Ky Son Village, where some months earlier his parents had been killed by Viet Cong in a raid.

He was taken to Landing Zone (LZ) Bayonet, the 198th Bde. headquarters. "His clothes were torn, he looked as if he'd never had a bath and his hair hung down to his shoulders," said Spec. 5 Theodore L. Schlepp and Spec. 5 Stephen Alexander of the brigade's military intelligence (MI) unit.

"He jumped right into my arms. Right then Steve and I knew we were going to help him," Schlepp said recently during one of Andy's visits.

After advertising in their hometown newspapers, the two

men received gifts and cash contributions to help support Andy, whom they enrolled in a local school.

But in time the two soldiers found it tough to be both "father and mother" to their 10-year-old charge.

Spec. 4 Michael C. Huckert of brigade psychological operations took over befriending Andy where the two busy MI men left off.

"I liked him right away," Huckert said. "We worked to teach him some English. At first it seemed hopeless but one time Andy was watching the movies

when something particularly funny happened. He laughed and everybody else laughed too. That was the turning point—it broke the ice between the two of us."

For several months Andy continued to be a regular audience at the brigade movies and a steady customer forchow. But Andy's restlessness showed that the base camp was not the best place for the youth.

Through Staff Sgt. Bao, a Vietnamese interpreter, Andy was introduced to Lt. Tran, an ARVN signal officer who legally adopted Andy.



A BRIEF BREAK is welcome to Spec. 4 Leslie Blankenship, an artillery radio operator of the 199th Light Infantry Brigade during operations 10 miles south of Saigon.