

Two Streams, a Small Unit Action April 7, 1966 Bob March

This story really began about a week before on March 31 when Delta Company air assaulted into LZ Eagle to relieve A company and the 1/9th who had been engaged all night with over 1000 NVA. LZ Eagle was less than a klick from the Cambodian border. When Delta arrived in the morning there was a downed Chinook and two burned Hueys along with 197 NVA bodies. This was the first real Contact of Operation Lincoln which had commenced March 25th, 1966. Operation Lincoln was intended to stunt the build up in the Ia Drang/ Chu Pong area after the Pleiku Campaign in November, 1965. The 32nd, 33rd, and 66th NVA regiments were still active in the area and building strength.

Upon arrival at LZ Eagle, Recon platoon was ordered to locate the remaining NVA. Recon spent the next week patrolling night and day and into Cambodia. (This period is the subject of another story.)

On the evening of April 6th the Recon platoon arrived at LZ Hawk, three klicks east of the Cambodian border and at the base of the Chu Pong Massive, where the 1/12th Battalion CP, as well as the rest of Delta and part of Alpha Company were located. Recon platoon spent the night in relative comfort for the first time in over a week, feeling fortunate not to be on some night patrol or ambush.

The next morning, April 7th, a squad of the Delta Weapons Platoon (AT Platoon) was on a Recon clearing patrol about a klick south of the perimeter when they encountered a few NVA. There was an exchange of gunfire and one member of the Weapons Platoon was wounded (believed to be SP4 Carl Berg).

The Battalion S-3 then ordered the Delta Recon Platoon to patrol south and find the NVA. LT Carpenter, the platoon leader, decided to take two of the three squads of the Recon platoon. Included in the Patrol was SGT Lute's squad and SSG Rubio's along with the company medic, SP4 Jerome Baylor, the F.O. SGT Larry Cheney, and the two Platoon RTO's (PFC Bob March and PFC John Rockwell). The platoon was very much under strength due to hospitalization, so the total on the patrol was around 20.

Recon headed south from LZ Hawk. They passed a hut in a field and decided to ignore it. After about three klicks they intersected a dry stream bed and followed it south west. They then found freshly dug spider holes, which had been poorly camouflaged.

Approaching a thick grove of brush and trees that lined that part of the stream bed, LT Carpenter made a critical decision. He directed SSG Rubio's squad to cross the dried stream bed and move along the south side, parallel to SGT Lute's squad on the north. Sgt Lute's squad and the Command group watched SSG Rubio's squad cross the stream bed and move out. Then the rest of Recon followed the stream bed towards the brush and trees.

As they approached the brush, suddenly what appeared to be a bush, got up and ran right in front of the point man, across the line of march. If the point man had acted fast he could have tripped the VC. Why the VC, who was probably

a guide for the NVA, just didn't shoot is anyone's guess. PFC March aimed and was squeezing the trigger on his rifle as LT Carpenter ran right in front of him towards the VC. (March came within a millisecond of shooting the platoon leader as he let off the trigger.) LT Carpenter ran over to the VC, who had crouched behind an ant hill, and decapitated him by emptying a magazine into his head. He then yelled: "He's mine!"

It was at this point that all hell broke loose. The NVA (estimated to be 100 strong) had observed Recon's approach and opened up furiously. Everyone in Recon took off and ran toward the shooting at high speed, like they were trained to do. SGT Lute lead the way and was out in front, being a fast runner. PFC March was about 20 feet to his right, also in front. All the troopers moved towards the enemy, laying down a base of automatic fire. SGT. Lute's squad spread out more or less on line. Suddenly SGT Lute went down into the prone position with his rifle outstretched in front of him, as if to fire. PFC March, who had been an RTO about 3 hours, had to run back 25 yards to LT Carpenter.

Immediately, SGT Cheney contacted the Delta Mortar platoon and began a fire mission. But realizing that SGT Lute was not moving, LT Carpenter had to determine if SGT Lute was dead before dropping mortars near him. He asked for volunteers to brave the intense fire and run forward and check on SGT Lute. PFC March and PFC Charlie Miller both volunteered and Charlie Miller was picked to run forward. (Carpenter told March: "No, you're my RTO.") As Charlie ran forward, the remaining members of Recon fired heavily to reduce the risk to him. He ran forward quickly and checked SGT Lute, who had been shot in the head. As he ran back his eyes were as large as saucers and he yelled: "He's dead." Charlie had been shot through the helmet right in the forehead area, with a big hole blown out the back. It would have killed him, but the bullet was miraculously diverted around his head between the helmet liner and the steel pot, leaving only a bad welt. Lucky Charlie.

Meanwhile, on the southeast side of the stream bed SGT Rubio's squad was also heavily engaged. PFC Robert Ruiz was one of the lead troopers and was less than 20 feet from the NVA positions. He was behind a small tree for cover, but the NVA were hammering at him with heavy fire. He decided to run for a nearby ant hill and was hit badly in the arm, knocking him down. The Medic, SP4 Jerome Baylor, ran over to check on Robert. Then an NVA threw a grenade at them and SP4 Baylor placed himself between the grenade and Robert, taking the full force of the blast, killing himself and falling over dead on top of Robert.

SP4 David Bailey was moving along the northwest side of the stream bed shooting it out with NVA positioned in Spider holes. Many of them were running back to their central position where a second stream bed met the first. As SP4 Bailey was shooting at one NVA, another NVA shot SP4 Bailey in the stomach, knocking him down. He was in terrible pain calling for the Medic. Two troopers ran over, picked him up and carried him to the rear through a hail of bullets. As they carried him away he was angry and yelled, "Kill the Mother F..ers!" SP4 David Bailey died of his wounds the next day.

SGT Cheney started bringing in Delta mortars on the NVA positions. It was danger close to the Recon troopers who were elated to see the mortars so on

target. Mortars immediately suppressed incoming fire from the NVA, which allowed the wounded to be transported to a medevac area. Delta fired mortars at a high rate until they ran out of both H.E. and Willie Peter rounds. The Delta mortar platoon was firing so furiously that they actually had to urinate on the mortar tubes to cool them. Delta mortars were effective and likely prevented the much larger number of NVA from over-running Recon.

LT Carpenter radio'd back to SGT Webb's squad and told them to come and help as fast as they could. They double timed for the entire three clicks, heading towards the sound of hell unleashed without hesitation. He also told SSG. Rubio to get the remainder of his squad back across to the north side of the stream bed and join the survivors. This was easier said than done, as the NVA had different ideas.

(To Be Continued Part II)