

Two Streams, Part III

It was a tough slog. Recon platoon had been reduced to about half its numbers with the wounded evacuated and two of their dead still on the battlefield. They continued to use artillery to pound the NVA, who were well concealed in the brush and tree line near the dried stream bed running north/south. They were still "dug-in". An element of NVA engineers which had been escorted by their infantry, had fled back towards the Cambodian border. (A fact determined through later NVA revelations during interrogation.)

Small arms fire continued on both sides, but one machine gun was reeking devastation and wounding more troopers in their relatively exposed positions. The gun swept back and forth methodically. Chuck Rose remembers returning fire while crouched behind an ant hill that was being chopped away in front of him, dirt and insects flying all around. The distance between lines was only about 25 meters.

It was at this point that SP4 Frank Crary, a team leader in SGT Webb's squad, suddenly sprang up and ran parallel to the Recon line. Those who saw Frank expose himself this way wondered if he had lost his mind. After all, the troopers had been under tremendous combat pressure, seeing their friends shot, burned, and screaming in pain, with mortars, napalm, bombs, and artillery going off extremely close for hours. Anyone could have snapped. (authors note: never did anyone in Recon "snap" .)

When Frank started running, the NVA tried to shoot him down. Fortunately, they missed and he disappeared into the wood line next to the stream bed. He then worked his way back along the tree line next to the stream bed, systematically killing NVA; some of whom were located on the other side of the stream. Approaching the machine gun position, Frank jumped down into the dried up stream bed and worked his way behind the machine gun which was just a few feet from the stream. He pulled the pin on a grenade and lobbed it the short distance into the middle of the machine gun crew, then ducked behind the wall of the stream bed for cover. The grenade went off perfectly, killing the crew and taking the gun out of action.

Frank's amazing action was both extremely courageous and intelligent. It seemed to break the back of the remaining NVA. Firing stopped from not only the machine gun but also from the other positions in the NVA line. Little opposition from the NVA remained. Recon was no longer pinned down. LT Carpenter got everyone moving. He said: "That path worked for him. Let's go the same way". So the few remaining Recon troopers swept through the NVA positions, following the same general route that SP4 Frank Crary had taken.

Cautiously Recon moved from tree to tree looking for remaining NVA. None were left alive. But many dead enemy were strewn about the pock marked landscape. Blood trails headed west in parallel lines, heal marks following. Sporadic fire continued. Some of the NVA bodies were burned, some were shot, and some were dead from no obvious cause; likely concussion. Many of the bodies looked like porcelain dolls, with perspiration adding a strange sheen to their repose. Recon pumped a round or two into each body to make sure it was

actually dead; a necessity learned during previous encounters with the NVA. There was no thought of souvenir hunting, just clearing the field and a strange feeling of elation treading on what had been the enemy's territory. The ground was alive with stinging ants whose hives had been blasted, angrily attacking all humans, dead and alive. Troopers were being stung incessantly, but after all they had been through, and with immediate danger still lurking, the ant stings seemed barely perceptible.

Bursts of automatic fire erupted a short distance to the west. Elements of A Company were sweeping towards the Recon positions and engaging the fleeing NVA. Delta Recon was notified by radio that Alpha would be closing with the Recon positions. LT Carpenter and SFC MacLaurin cautioned everyone to hold their fire towards the west. A half hour later troopers from Alpha slowly emerged from the brush, appearing like shadows silhouetted by the setting sun. They were a welcome sight to the dozen or so remaining troopers of Recon.

After elements of Alpha Company (about a platoon) linked up with Recon, an organized search of the recent battle area was conducted. The search was focused on the dried stream bed area that made up the western leg of the "L" shaped NVA positions. After the search, most troopers were carrying several rifles over each shoulder.

LT Carpenter led the combined Recon and Alpha troopers back north towards LZ Hawk. Since medevac choppers were unable to carry the dead, SGT Lute and PFC Baylor's bodies were being carried by two troopers each, one on arms, one on legs. A vast trove of weapons, and three NVA POW's, who had been captured by Alpha while fleeing the battle area, were also being transported. SFC MacLaurin set up the order of march, with the remainder of SGT Webb's squad leading the patrol on point. The tactical situation was very serious, as it was now dark and an ambush by the NVA could not be ruled out. Therefore, noise discipline, proper interval, and communications had to be maintained, even while transporting loads of extra weapons, two dead bodies, and three POWs.

The POW's hands were tied behind them. A trooper who had been assigned to guard the POWs tried to assist an NVA down a steep embankment, to prevent him from falling and making noise. The NVA soldier tried to kick the trooper in the face as he reached up to assist him. His bad judgment was rewarded with a good thrashing which broke the noise discipline momentarily. The NVA became a believer and cooperated fully after that.

Another incident occurred during the return patrol. Carrying the bodies was exhausting and troopers traded off, both Recon and Alpha sharing the load. At one point a trooper from Alpha was assigned by SFC MacLaurin to help carry a body. The trooper said to "Mac" "I ain't carryun' no damn dead body". SFC MacLaurin pulled his 45 cal side arm, put it to the trooper's head and furiously whispered " You're carrying him or we'll leave your *damn dead body* right here! Got it?" The trooper believed Mac was serious and, with some alacrity, helped carry the body.

Recon made it back to the LZ Hawk perimeter about midnight with no further incidents. The POW's were interned in a roped off area and assigned a guard to protect them and prevent escape. Recon was allowed to sleep the rest

the night. LT Carpenter debriefed the Battalion S-3 and went to sleep about 1:00 AM. Then at 4:00 AM he was awakened by the S-3 and ordered to guide a patrol of Alpha Company back to the firefight area to do a more thorough search. Only one of the two adjoining streams had been searched the previous day. So a very tired LT Carpenter guided another patrol back to the firefight area. They found more bodies and weapons near the east/west stream bed, where the initial contact took place. A total of 43 NVA bodies were found.

After 52 years, the Army recognized SP4 Frank Crary's bravery and approved the Distinguished Service Cross. Frank's award was signed into law by President Trump on December 12, 2017.

SGT Lute and PFC Baylor (both KIA) were awarded the Bronze Star with V. (Baylor should have received the MOH.) Many others deserved medals of valor that day.

D Company KIA April 7, 1966: SGT Harry Lute, PFC Jerome Baylor, SP4 David Bailey (died of wounds April 8th)

D Company WIA April 7, 1966: PFC Kirby Cleveland, SP4 Robert Ruiz, PFC Donald Freed, PFC Charlie Miller, PFC Carl Berg, PFC John Rockwell, PFC Billy Prewitt, PFC Freddie Abram, PFC John Childers, PFC Lawrence Dean, SGT Basil Wolf