



So reads the official entry in the IFFV Duty Officer's Staff Journal for 2 November -- the Battalion's last combat action. Here's how it came to pass.

I had been the Charley Company XO for about two weeks, having been pulled from the field in anticipation of the stand-down process which was expected to begin soon. This evening was to be my second stint as the Green Line Duty Officer, so I had left the company area around 1500 to go to my hooch to get my combat gear and get a little rest before the guard mount scheduled for around 1700. At about 1530, someone from the Company came to my hooch with the message to get down to the company area immediately because the Battalion had to provide a platoon as a reaction force for a unit in contact and I had been selected as its leader.

When I arrived in the Company area, the remnants of my old platoon had been formed up, along with a Battalion Assistant Operations Officer (can't remember his name), who was there to brief us on the situation. He told us a LRRP team had called in helicopter gunship fire on a one hundred man VC unit that passed in front of them, and had requested an extraction (NOTE: the log entry states 40 - 60, but my memory is quite clear that we were told 100 VC). I also clearly remember being told that we would be outside of artillery coverage, so was not given any coordination info. In fact, we would be so far out that ammo would have to be accomplished through the relay station situated on top of Whiskey Mountain. The Battalion Commander had directed that, rather than an extraction, a reaction force would be sent in to follow up on the contact. We were to wait in the Company area until we received the word to move to the flight line; when the choppers arrived, we would CA into the strike area, meet up with the LRRP team, and pursue the crippled enemy unit. Operations had to scramble to find a map for this area, as Charlie Company had not worked in this specific area since July and we didn't even have a map; we just knew it was at the northern edge of the Le Hong Fong. But, what seemed to be of most importance to Operations was that everyone on the reaction force had to wear a helmet. Since I had spent my tour in the bush without the encumbrance of a helmet, I didn't have one with me, nor was there time to go back to my hooch to get mine, so someone found one in the Company area and loaned it to me (I doubt if he ever got it back - it's probably still laying out in the jungle where I threw it off during the firefight).

A couple of words about the [Le Hong Fong](#) -- I don't know how to truly describe it, other than to spit out the words like you would a wad of phlegm; there is nothing in my life experience that I can use as a comparative reference. The Le Hong Fong is an area northeast of Phan Thiet that is an amalgam of a coastal plain, jungle undergrowth, and desert. It is totally covered with a very dense, interlocking thicket that is only about eight feet high; this is not normal brush that you can just walk through with a few scratches - it is so dense that the point man has to take a run of a few steps, throw himself into the thicket to make a little indentation, then back up for another run and another leap of desperation. Your progress is measured in meters per hour, with a point man achieving exhaustion in about five minutes. The brush is not high enough to give any shade, there is no wind blowing, the sun is glaring off of the salty sand, and there is not enough water in the world to keep you from dehydrating.

This area had long been a safe haven for the anti-Japanese guerrillas, then the Viet Minh, then the VC and NVA. There were bunker complexes deep in this brush that you would literally fall into (if you got that far, because they could hear you from a mile away), interconnected with tunnels through the undergrowth. It was totally impossible to see anyone from the air or from ten feet away; on the other hand, the bad guys had cleared fields of fire under the brush so they (in their bunkers) could see you well enough to really mess you up, and you couldn't get to them.

After receiving this briefing, I looked around at the reaction force. There were a few familiar veteran faces: squad leaders Sgt Gary Cokley and Sgt Benjamin (Benji) Alvarado, JR Dacus -- the radioman, a couple of Grunts and the platoon medic. The rest were FNGs -- I don't think that they were even assigned to Charley Company, as I had never seen them before. As a side note, since the Battalion was scheduled to go home in six weeks, I wonder why we were even receiving replacements. Benji and Gary had already divided up the force and created two squads of about ten men each; then they spent the rest of the free time working with their new charges to try to teach them the basics of how we conducted ourselves (hand and arm signals, normal procedures upon contact, etc.). The irony of the fact that I'm taking twenty green guys into an area where one hundred totally pissed off VC were hanging around because they wanted to get some sort of revenge against the reaction force that they expected would probably come was not lost on me.

So we waited -- for what seemed like forever. I'm getting more nervous with every passing minute, because the amount of daylight time is finite and we were running out of it. Finally we got the order to move to the flight line, where we divided up into chinks and waited for the Slicks to come in. After another inordinate waiting period, our taxis arrived and we mounted up and headed northeast. The ride seemed like it took forever; each passing minute in the air was one we didn't have on the ground, and darkness was to be soon upon us. In hindsight I have looked at a map and estimate that the ride probably was only about fifteen minutes -- not the eternity it seemed.

The Slicks came on approach and flared for landing. There was no signaling smoke, so I fully expected to encounter a hot LZ or sniper fire; almost disappointedly, there was none. The troops got off of their Slicks in good order, with Gary and Benji taking charge and forming a defensive perimeter around the LZ. The area was forested, but fairly flat with sandy ground and open at ground level. The tall trees were spaced close together such that you still had to actively search for an opening big enough to become a LZ if you needed to bring in a Slick. We didn't spend too much time organizing on the ground -- just enough for the Slicks to leave and for our hearing to return; we were quickly in a formation of two columns abreast and moving to the northeast.

We soon met up with the LRRP team that had started this mess. They were still on the ambush site awaiting our arrival, and were pretty happy to see us -- although they would rather to have been extracted instead of having to stay. Before I could get to talk to their leader, their Kit Carson scout came running up to me and dragged me over to the body of the VC they had killed in ambush. I've never seen a person so proud of something -- it was either his first kill or the VC was one of his in-laws. The LRRP team leader explained what had happened and showed me the trail and drag marks left behind by the VC unit -- the trail would be easy to follow because of the soft sand, as long as there was daylight. I told him to have his group fall in behind us and brought Gary and Benji up to the trail so we could get oriented; then we formed up and began to follow the trail.

The pucker factor is getting pretty intense at this point. We weren't making any noise, everyone is alert and doing their job, but I'm aware of how it is beginning to get dark and how we really didn't want to walk into the remainder of this VC unit while they were in defensive positions and we couldn't see anything. We had traveled about one klick when I decided that there was just not enough light to continue on. I halted the column and called in the NCOs so we could get a NDP in order while we could still see to set one up. This was especially critical to me because of all the inexperienced guys we had with us.

As Benji, Gary and I were talking, we heard a noise over to the left. We initially thought that one of our guys had made the noise, but then we heard it again. This time we realized it sounded like a moan of someone in pain; it was so close to our column that if I had not halted the column at that exact time, we would have walked into the source of the noise within fifteen seconds. When we identified the sound, my thought was that this was someone from the VC unit that was hurt bad and had been left behind – I didn't consider it a lure into an ambush, because the VC could have sprung an ambush without going through those theatrics. I turned to Benji and told him to get his people on line so we could sweep the area for the source of those moans. I told Gary to set up his squad in a half-perimeter on his side of the trail, and when Benji's group finished the sweep we would complete the perimeter.

Our ten-man skirmish line started edging toward the location where we had heard the sounds. The moans stopped when we got closer but I attributed that to the thought that the person making the moans must have known we were there and coming for him. So here we are – about ten Grunts moving in a skirmish line, with me and my radioman in the center and slightly to the rear – when the sky becomes lit up with a solid line of green tracers emanating from a spot about ten meters in front of us. We all returned fire and hit the ground, not really knowing what we are firing at other than to try to put our rounds at the origin of those green tracers. After the initial fusillade, there was a period of quiet; I think that all of us were fine at that point, except that I did not realize that the some on the left of the line had hit the ground immediately, but some of us had moved on a little further before becoming intimate with the dirt and sand. That served to create a "bunching" of about five of us, rather than just a single depth skirmish line.

There was another exchange of gunfire and at least two grenade detonations – I don't know if they were ours or theirs. At this moment, I was on the ground (with only my shirt buttons keeping me from getting any lower); I didn't have a tree or other obstacle in front of me, so I started crawling forward to try to get the line moving and to try to find a tree to absorb those damn green tracers that seemed to be coming only at me. Up to now things were essentially under control; then it got strange.

As I had crawled just to the right of Benji's feet (who has the benefit of being behind a tree), the little patch of air that existed just an inch over my head turned a bright lime green, the sonic boom cracking of the bullets going by my ear became deafening, and I was kicked in the shoulder just as if someone was running by and tripped over me. My reflexive reaction was to softly mutter an expletive and raise myself up off the ground, as if I'm in defiance of the bullets still looking for me. During the second while this was happening, I was remembering a briefing I had in one of my officer charm schools, about how Charlie always shoots high when its dark – guess this Charlie had missed that briefing.

I somehow realized that my radioman was hit (maybe his cursing gave that away), as well as one of the new guys, PFC Jim Vonesh; they had been part of the unintentional bunching when we hit the dirt. I got on the horn and called the Whiskey Mountain relay station to tell them that we're in contact and three of us are wounded. Meanwhile Doc had come up to us and started working on me, putting a pressure dressing on my upper back and yelling at someone to "hold it there", while he went about working on JR's leg and Jim Vonesh's chest.

The dustoff was a bit interesting, as it involved shooting a star cluster so he could vector in on us, setting out pocket strobe lights so he could identify a hover location, using a jungle penetrator to haul up the wounded, all the while he is telling me to hurry up because he's running short on fuel.

So ended the Battalion's last combat action; however, this story is far from complete. Somewhere, somehow, during one of the exchanges, [SGT Gary Cokley](#) was killed. I did not know it at the time, and didn't even consider the possibility, because he was supposed to have been across the perimeter and away from the action. He had apparently inserted himself into the right of the line, and was possibly caught in the first burst of fire. Just a guess, as I haven't talked to anyone who knows. Regardless, I'll continue remembering Gary as a brave soldier who believed in being at the front of the action. Anything else would be disrespectful.

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