

AMBUSH AT AN LAC

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The 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry's Short Range Ambush Platoon (SRAP) conducted scores of amphibious ambush patrols between late May and the end of August 1969. Most were routine military exercises which failed to make contact with enemy forces operating in the vicinity of lake Dam Tra O. The operation executed on 28 June 1969 was an exception that erupted in a brief fire fight leaving one SRAP volunteer seriously wounded, and another soldier disabled.

One component of the SRAP mission in the Spring and Summer of 1969 included conducting amphibious ambushes near the shorelines of Dam Tra O and its outlet to the South China Sea, the Song Chau Truc. Operating from Patrol Base Carol, located at the tip of a peninsula jutting from the south-central shoreline, the platoon's members silently crossed the saltwater lake under cover of darkness and established positions along trails. Intelligence sources noted that enemy soldiers sometimes visited the villages and hamlets at night and retreated to their mountain hide-outs before dawn. On occasion the small teams observed such traffic at a distance though their starlight scopes, but rules of engagement dictated that ambushes could only be triggered if the target was definitely carrying a weapon. At two hundred yards on a dark night this was nearly impossible. The sightings, though disappointing, were not worthless; they offered encouragement for future successful ambushes. It seemed like it was just a matter of time before SRAP set up on the trail or path that the enemy chose to use for that particular night's route.

On 25 June Lieutenant Parsley assembled twelve members of the platoon and briefed them on the operation that would be conducted the following morning: Two six-man teams would board two of the fifteen-man rubber boats around two o'clock the following morning and paddle across the lake to the eastern shoreline near An Lac. Upon arriving ten men would disembark, slip through the vegetation and set up two five-man ambushes on the sandy trails between the villages and the South China Sea. The other two men were to paddle the boats about two hundred fifty yards back out onto the lake, and then move an equal distance southward to confuse any enemy observers.



Once in that position they were to link up and maintain a three-hundred-sixty-degree sentry watch while remaining ready to start the outboard motors and race to the beach if the ambush teams needed to make a hasty withdrawal from the area. If neither ambush patrol made contact before receiving authorization to depart their assigned positions, each patrol element was ordered to conduct a surprise sweep through a specific portion of An Lac before rejoining the boat's assigned pilots for a motor-propelled ride back to the patrol base.

At the appointed hour the two SRAP teams assembled next to the boats drawn up on the beach on Patrol Base Carol's eastern perimeter. Sergeant Wayne Cramblit, a newly-arrived volunteer from Company A, was the leader of our team. Andy Soltis and I were the riflemen / ammo bearers. Richie van Pelt carried the team's M-60 machine gun and Larry Hickman, a Forward Observer from a supporting artillery unit,



carried the radio. The night was dark, with a light breeze that helped keep the patrol members from overheating as we silently paddled across the water. Aided by a few compass checks performed by the team leaders, SRAP's boats arrived on location and on schedule. Practice made us near-perfect and we quickly established our ambushes at the pre-determined sites. The ambush turned out to be a routine event with no sightings, and the time slipped by briskly as we listened to the lizards and provided meals for a few sand fleas.

We remained in our well-hidden positions until well after daybreak. On occasion enemy soldiers were known to disguise themselves as farmers or fishermen and try to make their way past American units in broad daylight. Although they were often unarmed, they could be taken as "detainees for questioning" if they were of military age, lacked proper documents or exhibited any unusual behavior that suggested affiliation with the local guerrilla or main force units. On previous ambushes in the lake region SRAP patrols had detained a number of men with military-style haircuts or recently-healed wounds. In addition to these suspects SRAP patrols had also detained a couple of women who the National Policemen at our base determined were "Viet Cong agents." Infrequent sweeps through villages were widely disliked, but since the additional patrol action sometimes added a detainee or suspect at the end of an uneventful amphibious ambush, most SRAP volunteers accepted the duty as just another tedious responsibility that held the potential for eliminating one more adversary without a fight.

Upon receiving a radio command from Lieutenant Parsley both SRAP teams broke from cover and began cautiously working their way towards the designated sweep areas in the hamlet near the lake shore. Andy Soltis walked point. Wayne Cramblit followed, twenty yards behind and slightly to the right.

Richie van Pelt was next, walking slightly left of Andy's path. Larry Hickman, the radioman / FO stayed directly behind the machine gunner, maintaining a steady ten yard interval between himself and Richie. I brought up the rear, walking a little faster than the others, catching up after I periodically checked behind our little group for any signs of suspicious activity. We maintained our pace and arrived in An Lac about ten minutes after leaving our ambush site.

The village seemed oddly quiet as we approached, a sign we recognized as imminent danger. Andy responded to the lack of village activity by slowing his pace and moving his head from side to side, investigating the flanks of our pathway through An Lac. All the Vietnamese seemed to be inside their houses, and although a small fire was burning outside a doorway, it was unattended.

Moving cautiously westward our patrol approached the crest of a small rise in the terrain until Andy stopped suddenly and gave a hand sign ordering a halt.

He stepped off to one side a few paces investigating something while the rest of us dropped into kneeling or prone firing positions and provided all-round security. A whistle from Andy turned our attention to our point man as he stretched his right hand toward his right-front indicating something of interest with his index finger. Turning west toward Andy I saw a woman inside a thatch house on my left push her child into a hole in the floor. Simultaneously, bursts of automatic weapons fire erupted from four or five points near the crest. Richie was knocked backward by a burst of AK-47 bullets that shattered his femur and smashed into the receiver of the machine gun. Larry and I dove forward into the dirt and began firing into the banana grove to the right-front where at least two enemy soldiers were firing on full automatic. Their rounds were passing over our heads because they forgot to correct for the fact that they were firing downhill. Then a huge blast swept over the two of us. A claymore, one of the many American weapons that fell into enemy hands, sent its lethal charge just over our heads. My ears felt like they were pushed inward, and Larry dropped his rifle and put his hands on both sides of his head. Fortunately, the anti-personnel mine was poorly sited in relation to our prone positions and only hit us with the force of its explosive pressure wave and showered dirt on us.

After the claymore detonated Wayne and Andy attacked the enemy soldiers emplaced just beyond the crest. Andy laid down a base of fire, covering Wayne, who lobbed hand grenades into a newly-excavated trench and the remains of a roofless masonry building. I expended another magazine into the banana grove on automatic, and then shifted to semi-automatic for the next magazine. After reloading I took the opportunity provided by Andy and Wayne's attack on the trench and ruined building to crawl forward to where Larry lay with his hands on his head. He seemed out of touch with the situation so I grabbed the radio handset and reported the contact. I could see van Pelt from my new position so I also requested a priority dust-off. Then as Wayne and Andy continued to drive off the enemy, I pulled Larry forward to where Richie lay near the path. Larry was much closer to the mine than I was, and seemed unconnected to the situation; van Pelt's wounds were physical.

He was still on his back where he fell, his leg shot nearly in half. The bone was visible, so I took both Larry's field dressing and mine and gently covered the hole. He wasn't bleeding badly, an indication that shock was beginning to take effect. Although Richie was conscious and reasonably coherent, he lay motionless; moaning about his leg, the pain and shock left him incapable of doing much else.

The enemy ambush squad left the scene without firing any more rounds in our direction, so Wayne came back to where the three of us were gathered and told me to go forward with Andy and keep an eye out for any attempts to flank us. He talked on the radio for a little while and then announced that a helicopter was on its way to evacuate Richie. A minute later he told me to "pop smoke." I dropped back a few yards and took one of the newly-issued mini smoke grenades that I had in my pocket and tried to light it. It failed and I tried a second grenade; this one also refused to light in spite of the fact that I used my Zippo. A third mini grenade failed, so Wayne grabbed a regular smoke grenade from Hickman's web gear. This one was red, but the helicopter was very near and could probably see us anyway. True to form, some authoritarian voice asked "What is with the red smoke?" Then the helicopter came in and hovered near van Pelt. Andy and I rushed over to load Richie onto the cargo floor. There was at least one person in the cargo bay, dressed in a clean uniform. Some radios occupied more space in the center of the aircraft, so it may have been the command and control helicopter. After loading Richie aboard, Andy and I resumed our positions overlooking the trench, providing minimal security for the departing aircraft.

Our patrol remained in place for a short time while we waited for the other five-man ambush team to reach our location. The other five SRAP members arrived within a few minutes. Wayne ordered seven of us to search the area for any enemy casualties or weapons, while he and Larry kept radio watch. We found a few dozen empty AK-47 cartridges in the trench, an NVA entrenching tool, and a little blood trail that quickly disappeared as it passed through the banana grove. There we found an AK-47 magazine that our attackers had abandoned, more spent cartridges and one of those cheap-looking Chi-com hand grenades. We found another blood trail, with bigger drops, which indicated that either Larry or I had at least hit someone. That trail disappeared after about twenty-five yards, evidence that the wound was probably bandaged after withdrawing from the direct line of fire. Tracing the Claymore's detonating wire to its firing end we found a spider hole with a grass and wicker cover hidden in a clump of shrubs. We turned most of the enemy equipment over to Wayne. I kept the hand grenade, knowing that some mess sergeant would part with something good in exchange for a souvenir of this nature. I also retrieved the dud smoke grenades and stuffed them back into LRRP bag in my shirt pocket. Then Wayne ordered us to conduct a house-to-house search of all the huts within fifty yards of our path through the hamlet.

Dividing ourselves into two twos and a three, the three man group provided security while the others investigated the area around each thatched building before entering. Inside, one man watched the inhabitants as the other looked in every place that seemed likely to hold anything of value to the enemy. After looking in pots, pans, baskets and storage urns, we probed the walls and roofs with bayonets or K-Bar knives. Either we were unlucky or the Vietnamese were on to the American scheme for searching villages, because we found very little in most of the houses. A rifle cleaning rod, a couple of magazines worth of loose ammunition for AK-47's, a half-dozen magazines for a MAT-49, an old French sub-machine gun.

The big find of the day was two bundles of documents wrapped in green plastic that was similar in color and texture to the plastic of North Vietnamese ponchos. All the adults who we found inside houses where military items were found were detained for questioning and delivered to Wayne and Larry's position.

Wayne frequently reported our progress and after we completed our sweep he received the order to return to Patrol Base Carol. The SRAP volunteers who had spent the night and early morning hours guarding the two rubber boats positioned down the lake shore started their 25-horsepower outboard motors and moved in to the beach to pick up the ambush teams. On our way back across the lake, talk centered on the actions of Wayne Cramblit. Without regard for his own safety he ordered Andy to cover him, and then charged across open ground to a point where he could lob grenades into the enemy positions. His hand grenades probably didn't kill anyone; they did manage to wound at least one of the enemy soldiers firing at us and deliver the message that our patrol was not going to lie down and let the People's Army enjoy an easy victory. Andy saw most of it from his nearby vantage point as he poured magazine after magazine into the area in front of our patrol. I still wonder why neither of them had been hit.

At our patrol base Lieutenant Parsley debriefed our ambush teams and collected most of the enemy equipment for shipment to the rear. Since Hickman was still obviously suffering some of the effects of a claymore exploding just a few yards away, he was briefly examined by the medic and told to report to the chopper pad for evacuation. The Vietnamese detainees, who sat apprehensively through the boat ride with their hands bound behind them, were turned over to our resident National Police officers for interrogation. Within minutes they were all pronounced "V.C., V.C., very bad people." Lieutenant Parsley also consigned them to fly to L.Z. Uplift for further interrogation. Before cleaning my rifle I threw the three dud smoke grenades into the pit where we burned our trash and added the fourth, unused grenade in the LRRP bag. They threw off a fine cloud of smoke that evening, but none of us ever carried that type of smoke grenade again.

Hickman never returned to the field. We speculated from time to time that he suffered a concussion that was great enough in magnitude to allow him to return to the United States. He also suffered the shock of seeing Richie's leg after it was blasted apart by AK-47 rounds. That picture is one that still follows me through life. We made a few attempts to contact van Pelt, but never heard anything from him. Someone got his home address from a clerk and three or four of us wrote letters. We also wrote to him by sending the letters to St. Albans Naval Hospital in Brooklyn, near his home of record.

I am the last of the five SRAP volunteers who went on that particular ambush on 28 June 1969, so it fell to me to tell the story. According to information I received from the VA, Larry Hickman, our Forward Observer, passed away in September 1986. Richard van Pelt passed away in December 1988.

The Privacy Acts limit the VA's authority to release information concerning the cause of a veteran's death to a small list of individuals; old Army buddies aren't on that list. As a result I don't know what took these fine men from the living. Wayne and Andy are in a different category; we know much more about their lives after Viet Nam. Wayne Cramblit returned to Washington State after completing his enlistment and resumed an honorable civilian life. He worked as a fireman and emergency technician before that fateful day in August 1998 when he fell off a roof while helping a friend with that unpleasant home maintenance chore. Andy Soltis was wounded in the autumn of 1969 while serving with Company C. The bullet passed through his abdomen and a few organs before leaving a sizable exit wound. Evacuated to the United States, Andy recovered reasonably well under the care of Army doctors, but the wound left him classified as a disabled veteran. He attended college earning a B. A. and an M. A. in Business and enjoyed a prosperous career before cancer struck in the late 1990s. The fighter that stood fast in dozens of fights with the Vietnamese Communists reappeared. I watched Andy fight for six years before Agent Orange added another veteran to its toll on June 15, 2004. May all these brave men rest in peace.



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