

JUMPED THE ROUTE

BY C. W. ULLMAN

We were a seven man Short Range Ambush Patrol (SRAP) waiting to engage the enemy as we had the previous night. It was November 1968.

MISSION ONE

The night before, we had set up on a knoll approximately thirty yards off of Highway 19 in Vietnam's Central Highlands. It was November 1968. Our positions cascaded down an eighty foot hill with three soldiers at the top holding rearguard to engage the enemy if we were attacked from behind. Two more men were positioned twenty yards lower, and our team leader and his RTO (radio telephone operator) were sixty yards down and set back from the road forty-five feet.

The night was clear and moonlit with a good view of QL one-niner. We could see two hundred and fifty yards of road going west and seventy-five yards of road going east.

After our drop-off by armored personnel carriers (APC) some four hours earlier, we were cross legged sitting and waiting. I was whisper/bantering with my position mate when I noticed two men coming around our left flank walking down the middle of the road with their arms slung over weapons that were resting on their neck and shoulders. Their gait was a moseying stroll as if they were on a walk back to their homes after a late night of carousing. They were talking and laughing, completely unaware they were being watched.

Seated in the number two spot on the hill, I initially thought the team leader and his radio man had decided to walk the road. It was hard to believe the enemy, which we seldom saw, so out in the open and strolling so casually. I turned to my partner and asked, "Why are Holloway and Greeley on the street?" He hissed, "Its NVA," nomenclature for the North Vietnamese Army, Simultaneously, our two closest to the road SRAP soldiers, Holloway and Greeley, opened up on the moonlight strollers. The rest of our firepower that night was multiple M16's, an M79 grenade launcher, and one belt-fed M60 machine gun. As soon as Holloway and Greeley opened fire, the rest of our team lit up their weapons.

When people are completely surprised by gunfire, the panic drives them into diversion routes that they would not normally take. The one NVA closest to Holloway and Greeley sprinted jerkily towards them at an angle seeking cover, while somehow not being struck by our bullets. The soldier ran in front of them and through bushes while the muzzle flashes of seven weapons on automatic were trained on him, but not finding their target. He made it about forty yards off to the north toward a fuel pipeline we had been tasked to protect, when our M79 grenadier fired his tube and made a direct hit on the pipeline just as the NVA was leaping over it.

The massive fireball that erupted engulfed the soldier in such an intense blaze that it consumed all the oxygen immediately surrounding him, suffocating and preventing him from vocalizing his last moments.

The other NVA had disappeared in the opposite direction to the southwest. It was an hour later that we knew he was still alive, because we heard him moaning and crying out "Chiêu Hồi." The "Chiêu Hồi" or Chu Hoi program was designed for Viet Cong and NVA soldiers to surrender their weapons and their allegiance to Ho Chi Min, and come fight for the South. They would be given safe passage and a plot of land. But, surrendering after being shot or captured was too late to take advantage of the program's benefits. At that point they would now be a prisoner of war.

Because it was in the middle of the night, and we were uncertain the two men shot were not the advanced element for a larger cadre of enemy, we held our positions until dawn. Throughout the rest of that night the wounded NVA soldier would call out "chu hoi" until the early morning hours when he stopped. Once the sun was up and we were confident no other enemy was coming, we went to the vicinity of the NVA soldier. We found him with tourniquets around his leg and arm and field syringes of morphine stuck in his thigh. It was assumed he was either asleep, passed out or dead. When Sgt. Holloway jostled his body, he aroused and immediately put his hands over his head and surrendered while weakly croaking "Chu Hoi." We had radioed battalion headquarters in the night to let them know we had a confirmed KIA and a wounded enemy combatant yards from our position.

While we stood over what turned out to be an NVA captain, we requested battalion to send a Dust Off, military jargon for a medevac helicopter that carries the wounded and dead. The distant and unique sound that only the HU-1 (Huey) Helicopter's blades make while beating the air, signaled that our medevac was moments away. Flying in low and fast, the chopper landed in a swirl of a white cloud from our identifier smoke grenade popped to signal our position. We loaded our NVA captain onto a stretcher, carried him to the chopper, and strapped him onto the floor of the Huey. We then watched the aircraft as it flew away, nose down, tail up for maximum speed staying low over the landscape for its trip back to battalion. We walked some hundred yards to the ruptured fuel pipeline. It had been turned off at a pump station four miles away. We found nothing physically left of the soldier except one of his charred boots, and his weapon, an AK 47. Shortly thereafter our ride consisting of two armored personnel carriers showed up. We gathered up the AK 47, and loaded in the back cargo doors of the APCs and went back to our base camp at Landing Zone (LZ) Shuler.

MISSION TWO

We loaded at twilight into two APCs again, and rode west for about three miles. When we reached our destination, one man at a time disembarked from the carriers and hid in vegetation some thirty yards off QL one-niner. By the time we had exited the vehicles the sun had completely set. We walked single file away from the road into thicker growth, but were still able to view the highway. We set up in a triangle.

At the top of the triangle was the team leader and two others providing rearguard. There were two, two man teams providing the triangle's base. I was manning one of those bases positioned on the outside. We laid out our claymore mines facing the road, ran the wires back to our position and plugged them into our detonators. My teammate and I emptied from our rucksacks all of our ammo magazines, grenades, water, and C rations. We placed them for easy access, crossed our legs, and waited for Charlie to make a midnight stroll. But this night would turn out to be different.

Unlike the previous moonlit night, it was very dark due to a thick overcast sky. A thin ribbon of light on the horizon was visible if your head was close to the ground and looking up. Other than that it was impossible to see anything beyond twenty feet. Added to this was the wind.

When the weather is still it is easy to hear the crunch of twigs caused by approaching foot falls or if someone is low crawling. When it's windy the question becomes is all that it is being heard twigs crunching, or the wind snapping small branches? The cacophony of brush, grass, bushes, branches, and ground cover being blown about and into each other ends up disguising the crunch of approaching danger. From the first hour after we had gotten into position and settled in, I had been hearing crunching off to my left blended in with twigs snapping. After two hours, I turned to my teammate, Tom Bellinato, and asked if he was hearing crunching. He thought he might, but he could not be certain.

In our third hour of sitting cross legged, Tom leaned close to me to whisper that he needed to stretch out his cramping legs. I moved some ammo magazines out of the way to make room for him to change positions. His legs slowly unwound as he leaned back to rest on his right elbow. He looked down at his outstretched legs and then turned his head to look at the ribbon of light on the distant horizon, but he could not see it. The horizon light was blocked by the head of a NVA Sapper that was less than a foot from Tom's face. Sappers had been used by the NVA for years. They are soldiers who paint themselves black and slowly low crawl into a position inside a wire, perimeter, or LZ to cause the maximum amount of damage with satchel charges or gun fire.

Tom immediately un-holstered his .45 and fires his weapon into the Sapper lying inches from him. Tom empties the entire weapon, but because the Sapper is so close, Tom's outstretched arm actually shoots into the ground on the *other side of the Sapper*. The Sapper fires off a burst from his AK47 then jumps up and sprints off before anyone can respond.

Tom bellows "SAPPER" causing all seven of us to direct our weapon's fire outside the triangle. I immediately lowered my M16 muzzle to within a foot of the ground aiming inches from my left leg while holding the buttstock of the weapon shoulder high, and then opened fire while walking the weapon's aim out to a horizontal position. For this mission, I had brought ninety magazines with me and used three of them in less than a minute repeating that exact fire line. Tom's foiling of the Sapper to his right from executing the kill signal, gave me the chance to clear the area with automatic and semiautomatic fire where I had been hearing the majority of the crunching. The Sapper Tom had seen had infiltrated so deep into our perimeter that he was probably minutes from alerting his comrades to open fire on us. Had Tom's legs not cramped, I would not be here today. We were lucky except for one of us. When the Sapper had fired off his burst he had hit one of our men.

There were two PRC 25 radios on this mission. The team leader had one and I had the other. I was listening in when battalion was called asking for extraction, because one of our guys had been shot. The battalion RTO ordered us to, "To hold one." "To hold one" means he was looking for the battalion commander to relay our request. About fifteen minutes passed before the battalion commander, a major, came on the radio to get a situation report. When told of the wounded "penny," code for an enlisted man or noncommissioned officer, the major said to hold our position and wait for his decision. Fifteen minutes passed before he gave his decision.

"I'm concerned about rolling into a bigger ambush if I send a force to your location. There is not enough intel to know the size of the enemy. You are to hold your position until dawn when at that time a rescue force from LZ Schuler will rollout. Over."

There was a long pause. The gravity of the situation descended on Holloway's radio man. "Roger that," was all he was able to muster. We were not getting help. We were not getting rescued. We were on our own, and the night got darker and the wind picked up.

It now came down to the mathematics of war. There were seven of us sitting cross legged on top of the ground with nothing more than tall grass as shelter; no sand bags, no fox hole, no bunker, just grass, and the enemy knew exactly where we were. Being this exposed with an unknown enemy size drove us all to wonder if we could hold them off for an entire night. We quickly set about counting our ammo magazines and switching our M16s to semiautomatic.

When the sapper was first discovered we were shredding the local landscape with automatic weapons fire. Now, I wished I had some of those rounds back. Tom whispered to conserve ammo and to fire a burst of 4 rounds every fifteen minutes. It was called H & I, Harassment and Interdiction. All we were trying to do is keep the enemy off balance, and dissuade them from advancing on our position.

Some of us had been in country for the Tet Offensive of January 1968. The stories of NVA charging into U.S. camps with satchel bombs in human wave assaults while firing haphazardly, and also throwing hand grenades was a prospect that we were not prepared for.

With the reality of Tet having happened only ten months earlier, I drew my knife from its sheath and laid it on the ground in front of me. If they were going to bull rush our triangle, whoever got to me would be met with my blade. I then drew my .45 caliber side arm and laid it next to the knife, and next to that I laid out five hand grenades that I would throw in a different direction once per hour. Counting the grenades sent a chill through me. At the rate of discharge I would be out of them two hours before sunrise and the arrival of our extraction force.

Being part of a seven man strike force was always more appealing to me than a line company of 200 plus soldiers. What security one found in a large company also carried with it the emotional baggage of 200 individuals. In a small team, we knew each other pretty well. We knew we could depend on each other. We knew our strengths and our weaknesses. In a fire fight we didn't have to worry about panicked comrades mistakenly shooting friendlies on purpose. With a large company there are the gripes and personality differences that happened on long deployments that create aggravations, antagonisms, and straight up hostilities at one another that one was fearful might be settled more drastically should a fire fight break out. It's hard enough to deal with just the physical challenges of humping a 40 to 60 pound rucksack up and down hills of 30 degrees while wearing an ill-fitting helmet, bumping into one another because of a loss of balance, trying to stop yourself from falling by grabbing a tree trunk that is completely covered in three inch long thorns, vines that entangle your gear nicknamed "Wait-a-minute" vines, bamboo vipers that are on low hanging limbs, walking through spider webs, mosquitoes, the oppressive heat and humidity, and the periodic tiger. There is a constant state of frustration and anger just below the surface that you are never sure how it will manifest. That paranoia and accompanying stress was almost more fatiguing than the demands of battle.

A certain fear started to creep in the longer I was firing my weapon and counting spent magazines. "Am I firing too much?" was much of my thinking. Agitation also becomes more pronounced over the smallest things. I mistakenly grabbed one of Tom's M16 magazines thinking it was mine and he said, "Get your fucking hands off that." I saw a look that made me feel I was his enemy. A flash of that thought was allayed when he told me I had grabbed one of his magazines. But, in that split second before his reprieve my mind raced through multiple scenarios of Tom losing his temper and killing everyone in a fit of nondiscriminatory fire for his own survival. Or, Tom thinking my lack of awareness and distractions caused him somehow not to spot the Sapper and he was angry with me. Or, he was hopeless of us getting out of this alive, and he was going to take me out before he died.

All those fears and paranoia's subsided when he pointed out the magazine's owner, and then seconds later thumping his big hand on my shoulder and saying, "We're gonna get through this." There are many ways people feel love, warmth, and acceptance, but to this day I have never been flooded with such an overwhelming tsunami of affection for another person as I was in that instant.

Also in that instant, I realized how much I was losing grip of the situation and had shrunk under the weight of fear of the unknown. This all became more pressing when I threw a hand grenade off in the distance and a blowback piece of shrapnel hit one of our guys.

When the scream of *I'm HIT!* goes out the reaction varies within the team. I knew it was my grenade and had confidence it was a surface wound. Tom reacted by crawling over and slapping a handkerchief on the wounded man's neck. The wounded soldier sounded like he had lost an arm. I'm not sure why, but I knew that his screaming would embolden the enemy. All I felt was I wanted him to stop screaming. "Shut the fuck up and stay down," was my 'encouragement.' The vagaries of mortal combat brought out my raw dichotomies: either take it or die, just don't get me killed.

The sun couldn't come up fast enough.

Periodically, on the near horizon a head would pop up drawing us to fire at it. It was after a couple of hours of this that I realized the NVA were using this decoy technique to make us waste our rounds. We were so amped up that any hint of enemy drew an outsized volley reaction of overkill. In one of these decoy moves we fired 200 rounds in thirty seconds.

Every thirty minutes battalion radioed for our status. We would give it to them and they would give us the time. The oh three thirty status check brought a chilling effect. We were easily two hours from sunrise and our rescue, yet I had only five magazines left. Tom let me know he had six. He and I would be out of ammo two hours before extraction. This point was underlined when the two man team to our right asked if we had any spare magazines or rounds.

The level of dread of knowing you're going to be tested in hand to hand combat cannot be over estimated. None of our team had been tested in country and our training for it was over a year ago during Advanced Infantry Training. Simulated fights during daylight hours, in controlled conditions in the United States were nowhere near what we all feared was about to happen in the dead of night in Vietnam.

The pall that settles upon you foreboding this end can paralyze. One of two things happens to you: the grip of fear ties you in a knot and you're trying to figure out how to get out of this, or you prepare and rehearse in your mind a fist fight with an unknown enemy, of an unknown size.

I vacillated back and forth. The thing that snapped me out of the fear side was the whimpering of the soldier whom I accidentally fragged. Every time I heard him it just pissed me off. I wanted to yell at him to keep quiet, to put a sock in his mouth, to just shut up. My consumption with this hatred, layered with my paranoia, and fatigue was interrupted with Tom's slap on my back.

"Do you hear that?" He asked.

"What?"

"Listen."

All I could hear was the wind blowing through the vegetation. Then my mind was sprinting through possible endings. The NVA was amassing men; they were setting up a machine gun nest; they were strapping together bundles of C4 explosives around a blasting cap to throw at us. Or they had already invaded another of our perimeters and killed some of our guys. Then I think I heard it: tracks.

The very faint rumble of a metal track on pavement mixed with a diesel engine belching was the sound. What were we going to do against an NVA tank? I didn't even think the NVA had tanks in the Central Highlands. Wouldn't G2, our name for military intelligence gathering, have warned us that the enemy had tanks? As I was thinking of seven troops, two of them wounded and one of them whining, and no use in virtually any combat situation, Tom said something.

"What?" I asked.

"Get on the radio."

I picked up the hand set on my PRC 25 and I heard a voice that I didn't recognize and knew was not from battalion. I picked up in the middle of a spoken order.

"-switch to channel 45. Now!"

"They want us to switch to a different frequency," I said to Tom.

"OK, go ahead."

"But, I don't recognize the voice. They're are trying to throw us off."

He looked at me with confusion. "Whattaya mean?"

"They're trying to isolate us-"

He waved me off and then whispered to our rear element something I could not hear. They responded back. Tom came back to me.

"It's Alpha Company. They're coming to get us."

I flipped the frequency dial to 45.

"- we are five ETA. Over," came a voice over the radio.

Terry was Holloway's RTO. He responded, "Alpha, this is Sierra Seven, over."

"Sierra Seven, this is Alpha. We have two APCs headed in your direction. We estimate ETA in 4 to 5. What side of the highway are you on? Over."

"Alpha, this is Sierra Seven. We are south of QL one niner. We're about fifty yards south of road. Hold your fire. We will let you know when you're near us. Over."

"Sierra Seven, this is Alpha, roger that. How will we know it's you and not enemy? Over."

I thought that was a good question.

“Alpha, this is Sierra Seven. We’ll pop smoke near the road when you’re close. Our position will be just to the south of the smoke. Over.”

“Sierra Seven this is Alpha. Pop smoke now.”

Greeley tossed a smoke grenade over Tom’s and my head at the road. It released smoke just as the APCs crested the road. They were seventy-five yards from us. The lead track opened up their .50 cal to the right of the road. The mounted machine gun’s unexpected roar made me piss myself and notify the surrounding enemy that the cavalry had just arrived.

They pulled off the road to our position. Ted Clark was nearest them and was the first to stand up and wave his arms. Then Tom stood and told me to get up or someone was going to mistake me for the enemy, “and shoot you in the ass.”

We all went towards the tracks that had a deployment of seven men per track: one driver, one top side .50 cal gunner and five infantry men who set up a perimeter with weapons pointed out.

Four of us slowly made our way to the APCs. When I got to the track, the lead sergeant from Alpha said, “You’ve got two wounded. I’m only counting the one with the neck wound.” The guy I fragged.

It was then that our rearguard came forward. Two soldiers holding up a soldier between the two of them doing the human crutch carry. The wounded soldier was using one leg to help. As the three of them got closer it was only then that I found out who had been shot.

The soldier had sustained an AK47 bullet wound that had travelled up through his foot, shattering his ankle, and exiting out his calf. The soldier was Sergeant Holloway, the man leading the mission. None of us knew he was the one shot. He didn’t want the rest of us to know during our stand because he didn’t want us to panic. The only two who knew were Greeley and Terry. He was now on the verge of collapse and losing consciousness.

“Get him in the back door. We got to get him to the rear,” said the Alpha sergeant.

His RTO radioed battalion requesting a dust off to meet us at LZ Schuler to transport Holloway back to the battalion hospital.

We swept the area gathering up all magazines and anything that could be used by the enemy against us. I went back to Tom’s and my area with a flashlight and did a quick search for any equipment possibly left behind. I found one magazine. It was the last one I had. When I was finished I looked on the other side of the grass that had been on my left while I had heard the crunching. Two feet from where I had been sitting was a trail of blood... just two feet.

I was angry and I wanted to find whoever it was and finish him off. I was angry at battalion for leaving us out there. I was angry that Sergeant Holloway had been wounded. And, I was angry because while Holloway had suffered a more serious wound, I had to listen to “flesh wound” moaning on the ten minute trip back to Schuler.

One of the guys from Alpha Company told me they had been listening the whole night on the radio to our communications with battalion. While listening on the radio they could also hear from outside their tracks our gunfire in the distance.

“It sounded like World War Three out there. We figured you guys would have a lot more casualties or dead enemy. We didn’t find any KIAs going or coming. What happened,” he asked.

“They must have figured out we were going to set up in the vicinity. We got two of them the night before,” I answered.

“They jumped the route?” He inquired.

“Whattaya mean?”

“You know in football? When the defender plays the receiver and figures the quarterback is gonna pass to him the DB steps in front of the receiver and picks off the pass. He jumped the route.”

“Yeah, I guess. How come you guys came early? We thought you weren’t showing ‘til daybreak.”

“Sarg, had been told by battalion to stand down ‘til sun up. But when the fire became more sporadic, he figured you guys were running low on ammo. We’d been in ‘go’ for a few hours. Finally, around 3:30 he says, ‘Mount up.’ So, we loaded in and here we are. Sarg basically disobeyed orders. I wonder if he’s gonna get any shit for it.”

About then we pulled into LZ Schuler. The medevac was close enough that he was swirling dirt all over the place. He touched down on the steel plate landing pad and a few of our guys carried Sergeant Holloway, who was completely out of it, over to the chopper. Neck Wound also got onboard. The rest of the SRAP team watched as the helicopter took off spraying dirt onto into our eyes and onto our camouflage makeup.

I looked for the shower/sink tent a few yards away to wash the dirt and painted on camouflage and fatigue off. By then the entire night had caught up with me and I was beat. The single naked light bulb in the tent made the tent feel sad. I found a sink in the tent in front of a window, turned on the water, and watched the basin fill. I grabbed a bar of soap and after wetting my face washed off the camouflage. I was running out of gas for this whole cleaning procedure, and stopped to rinse my face regardless of what had been washed off. Someone had left a towel so I used it to dry off. I was standing while drying my face, and as I brought the towel down and looked out the window.

I was startled to see someone on the other side thinking he was being funny, standing so close, except there was nobody there. It was only when I slightly moved that I realized it was my reflection in a mirror and I hadn't recognized my own face.

Later on I found out the 97th NVA regiment had been looking for us, there was a bounty out for my unit. When we took out two of their guys the night before they were going to even the score this night, and would have except for Tom's cramped legs.

It was then that I realized we had gotten very lucky. There was a minimum of twenty Sappers that night. They were most likely minutes if not seconds from wiping out the whole seven man SRAP team. Now, without Sergeant Holloway as our platoon leader because of his wounds, I was no longer enthralled with our merry band of warriors. Fate had been tested and I didn't feel like testing it any further. The next day I put in for a change of assignments.

It was later that I found out the night of the ambush, when Sergeant Holloway was shot, was also the night of his birthday.



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