The 9th Infantry Division was the only major US. Army unit to conduct operations in the Mekong Delta area of South Vietnam. With most of the terrain in the IV Corps Tactical Zone at or below sea level, the US. military units fighting there were forced to conduct a much different type of war from that being fought over the remainder of South Vietnam. Mobility was achieved primarily by helicopter and river patrol craft, and ground actions were usually quick, hard-hitting, deadly affairs.

The 9th Infantry Division's long-range reconnaissance patrols were also handicapped by the "water world" that made up most of their area of operations. The large civilian populations in the area and the limited range of cover and concealment made it extremely difficult to move about unobserved during daylight hours. Recon teams were often forced to move only at night.

No-fire zones, poor cover, and a cagey enemy, who frequently mixed with the local villagers during the day and became Viet Cong guerrillas after dark, made it nearly impossible to conduct covert patrols without extremely high risk of detection. To conduct patrols in that type of environment, the E/50th LRP's were forced to operate much like their US. Navy SEAL counterparts.

Back in the fall of 1968, the LRP company had been operating from the anchored ships of the Mobile Riverine Force, but after they were caught smuggling beer on board (a rule strictly enforced by the MRF commander) they were unceremoniously kicked off the ship. However, when a VC sapper team swam out to the USS Westchester County from nearby Toi San Island with a large amount of plastic explosives and blew a couple of very large holes in it, the LRP's were quickly forgiven and invited to return to the anchored ships.

They soon found themselves running ambush and interdiction patrols along the trails and canals surrounding the MRF. The overwhelming success of the patrols kept the long-range reconnaissance men smugly satisfied with their new role as the security force for MRF.

Team One-seven had been particularly successful, pulling several very effective ambushes over a three-week period, especially in the vicinity of a major canal intersection known as "The Crossroads," located halfway between My Tho and Ben Tre. The area consisted of a large expanse of dense forest and mangrove swamps bordered by several kilometers of open rice paddies. Nearly half of Team One-seven's ambush patrols had resulted in contact with the very active local Viet Cong force.

On 27 January 1969, Ranger Team One-seven, Company E, 50th Infantry (LRP), prepared for another routine night ambush patrol. Sgt. Richard Ehrler, One-seven's team leader, planned to insert his six-man patrol by helicopter as close as possible to a tree line, then move several hundred meters to the canal, where they would set up their ambush. Ehrler had overflown the area late that afternoon on the way out to drop off a two-man radio-relay team at Ben Tre. The relay team, consisting of George Calabrese and Chuck Semmit, would handle the patrol's communications while it was in the field.
The patrol inserted an hour before dark, and immediately found itself in some very deep shit. Before Ehrler could even get his team off the LZ, a single VC, carrying an AK-47 over his shoulder like a hobo's staff, strolled out of the jungle a hundred meters away. He immediately spotted Ehrler and jumped back into the jungle just as the LRP team leader cut loose with a sustained burst from his M-16. Miffed at himself for missing the easy shot, Ehrler did the only smart thing he could do: he radioed for an immediate extraction and requested a reinsertion into the team's secondary LZ a couple of klicks away.

The helicopters were still in the area, so the request was accepted. The aircraft quickly returned and recovered the ambush patrol. A short time later, they were back on the ground again and ready to move out.

That time the team landed in an open rice paddy near a small abandoned hootch. Ehrler recalled checking it on a previous mission and discovering that it had been used in the past only as a shed for housing water buffalo.

It was already growing dark when Ehrler dropped to one knee by the shed to observe a nearby tree line. He wasn't very happy when he spotted another Vietnamese male just inside the woods staring back at him. When the LRRP team leader reported this through his radio-relay team to his TOC, he was ordered to Charlie Mike (Continue the Mission). Ehrler was certain they were in for an interesting night.

He kept his team in place near the shed until it was fully dark, then gave the signal for them to move out. About an hour later, they heard a brief burst of automatic-weapons fire coming from the vicinity of the buffalo shed. Clearly they had done the right thing in waiting until after dark to move out. There was no doubt now that the enemy had spotted the patrol coming in and had attempted to take it out.

The burst of gunfire back at the buffalo shed also convinced Ehrler that his team had successfully evaded the enemy, so he decided to move the team into the nearby jungle to get them under cover. Unfortunately, the LRPs immediately detected the sounds of heavy movement around them. Freezing in place, they soon discovered that it was coming from a group of Vietnamese peasants on their way home from working in the fields all day. Unfortunately, until the peasants departed the area, the patrol would not be able to reach the cover and concealment of the nearby trees.

Finally, the Vietnamese moved on, and the team was able to resume its patrol. It soon ran into a cluster of five hootches scattered over an area the size of a football field. A cursory check revealed that all but one of the structures appeared to be empty at the time. Ehrler, not wanting to be caught out in the open, signaled the patrol to move into the one vacant hooch that appeared to be isolated from the rest. Much to their surprise, the LRPs discovered that the hut was built like a fortress: from the ground up, almost to a height of four feet, the walls were made of thick, hardened mud, broken only by a narrow doorway. There was also an aboveground bunker built right into the earthen walls of the hut, with an overhead ceiling constructed of compacted dirt over a layer of large mahogany logs. The place was almost impregnable to small-arms fire.

Ehrler quickly deployed his team inside the hootch; it was an excellent spot for an ambush. Given the other huts in the vicinity, someone had to be using the area. They were situated among a number of small rice paddies, and the interconnecting paddy dikes were constantly being used by the VC as footpaths as they moved through the area. It was a natural fortress except for one side, where a heavily thatched wall prevented visibility in that direction. The thatch was dry and very brittle to the touch and would have caused a lot of noise to remove it. Instead, Ehrler posted two of his teammates, Leon Moore and Roman Mason, at the outside corner of the building next to the thatched wall. He instructed the two Rangers to jump over the wall and kick holes through the thatching if they were compromised during the night.

Silently, the LRPs left the hootch to set up their claymores. When that had been done, and their ambush was in place, they sat back to wait for the enemy to show up. They had completed the active part of an ambush. The rest took only patience and a little luck.
At 2300 hours, Ehrler put the team on 50 percent alert. Richard Thompson, Mark Durham, and Mason immediately went to sleep, while Norman Crabb, Moore, and Ehrler pulled the first guard shift.

It was close to 2320 hours when Ehrler thought he saw movement in the trees 150 meters away. It was a clear night, well lit by starlight. Ehrler slipped quietly over to Moore's position and retrieved the team's starlight scope. When he asked Moore if he had seen anything from his position, the LRP reported that he hadn't. However, Moore was facing directly away from the tree line.

The LRP team leader then edged over to Crabb's position, where the two recon men spent the next fifteen minutes watching the wood line. What held their attention for that long was the twenty or so VC who were moving about in the trees across the paddy from their position, far too many to take on with a six-man ambush patrol.

The two LRPs were not overly concerned about a large number of enemy troops moving about so close to their position; they were in the middle of VC-controlled territory, and spotting enemy units moving about at night was not a rare event. Besides, they had no reason to believe that the VC even knew their patrol was in the area. And just in case, they had a healthy number of claymore mines facing the wood line if the enemy troops there decided to get nosy and wander over to check out the hut on the other side of the paddy.

Ehrler contacted the TOC (Tactical Operations Center) and reported the situation, warning that the patrol might be in jeopardy. He thought about waking the rest of the team and putting them on a hundred percent alert.

Just then he heard the sound of voices coming from somewhere behind him. Thinking it was Mason and Moore, the team leader grabbed his weapon and started around the corner of the hootch to shut them up and tell them to get back inside the building. He had just turned the corner when he realized that the voices were speaking in Vietnamese. And there in front of him, standing four feet away, were five armed enemy soldiers.

The VC were looking directly down at Mason and Moore, Ehrler's rear security element. The five enemy soldiers were so preoccupied watching the two LRPs that they didn't notice Ehrler standing behind them. Slowly, Ehrler raised his M-16 and was preparing to waste them when he spotted about twenty more VC on the other side of the paddy dike, ten feet away from where Mason and Moore lay sleeping.

Convinced that he had not yet been seen, Ehrler slipped silently back around the corner of the hootch and in hushed tones, quickly apprised Crabb of the situation going down outside the hootch. Telling him to cover the closest VC while he went inside to wake Durham and Thompson, Ehrler said a silent prayer that some miracle would occur to prevent the coming disaster.

After he woke the rest of his teammates, Ehrler got the relay team on the radio and whispered that they needed assistance immediately. While he waited for confirmation, he peered over the wall and saw that Mason and Moore were still asleep, totally unaware of what was happening. There was no way that Ehrler and the rest of his teammates could come up with an idea to distract the VC long enough to warn their men to get out of there. With over twenty weapons trained on them at point-blank range, their salvation was now in the hands of their Maker.

Finally, the radio-relay team called back and reported that division would not send gunships until the team was actually in contact. Knowing that there would not be enough time for the gunships to respond once the shooting began, Ehrler ordered his teammates to open fire at once, hoping to put enough rounds into the VC to force them into momentarily forgetting about the two sleeping LRPs, affording them the opportunity to escape inside during the resulting confusion.

Unfortunately, the plan failed to work. As soon as the four LRPs stood up and opened fire, Mason and Moore snapped awake and were immediately cut down by the VC before they had a chance to get to their feet.
Inside the hootch, the mud walls were holding up surprisingly well against the heavy battering they were taking from the enemy AK-47s. The thick thatch roof even managed to absorb the blast of several hand grenades. Fortunately, the enemy soldiers Ehrler had spotted back in the trees had not yet joined in the firefight, thereby keeping the LRPs out of a potentially deadly cross fire.

Ehrler finally realized that the enemy soldiers in the woods behind them had been quietly waiting for the survivors of the patrol to make a run for the trees. Clearly, the VC had known all along that the team was in the area. It was the only thing that could explain what was happening at that very moment. But Ehrler was not about to lead his men in an escape attempt in any direction. They weren't going anywhere.

He knew that Mason and Moore were probably already dead, but the team was still not going to leave them behind. Risking more lives to recover your dead might not have made sense to anyone else, but that was the way that LRPs operated.

Ehrler took his radio and was crawling around the hootch to a point where he could fire into the right flank of the attacking enemy force when he spotted more VC on the left flank. The team was now completely surrounded and was taking fire from three sides.

At that moment, an RPG round sailed in through the open doorway and detonated on the ground three feet in front of the LRP team leader. The explosion flipped him fifteen feet across the hootch and slammed him hard into the wall on the far side of the room.

Ehrler never lost consciousness, but for the first few seconds after the explosion he felt as if someone had smacked him across the face with a two-by-four. The intense pain quickly ebbed into a dull, constant throb, and when the wounded LRRP team leader opened his eyes, he realized for the first time that he could no longer see.

Ehrler recalled that before the blast there had been enough light in the hootch to see quite well. The incoming tracers and the muzzle flashes from their own weapons had provided adequate illumination. But now as he squinted and rubbed his eyes, there was absolutely nothing. Ehrler might have been blind, but he realized that he had no time to worry about it.

Ehrler crawled slowly across the floor, arms outspread in front of him, groping desperately for his missing weapon and the team radio. Suddenly, another tremendous blast, to his right, rocked the hootch. Someone yelled that Thompson had been hit, and moments later came a confirmation that he was dead.

Although only five minutes had elapsed since the initial shots had been fired, half of Ehrler's team had already been killed, and he was unable to see.

Somehow in the total darkness, he managed to locate his M-16 and the missing radio. Ehrler quickly got in touch with the radio relay team and demanded to know where the Cobras were. He was told that the gunships were en route.

Just then, Hotel Volley Two-seven, the 105mm battery on Firebase Claw, came up on the LRRP push (Radio Frequency) and asked if they wanted artillery support. However, with two dozen VC only ten to twenty feet away and the team leader blind, Ehrler had no choice but to refuse. There was no way he could pull one of his remaining two teammates off the wall long enough to adjust artillery fire on their own position.

After an intense fifteen-minute exchange of fire, Crabb shouted to Ehrler that he was out of ammo and Durham was on his last magazine. Ehrler yelled back that he still had most of his basic load remaining, and quickly began passing his magazines up to the two men at the wall. Finally, he tore off his web gear and tossed it over to them, keeping only a grenade for himself-in case the VC overran their position.
Suddenly, Ehrler could tell by the sounds that the VC fire was beginning to slacken. This had to mean that the enemy, too, was running low on ammunition, or that they were withdrawing from the fight. Ehrler ordered Crabb and Durham to return fire on semiautomatic only to conserve their remaining ammo. He told them not to fire unless they had specific targets.

Ehrler then contacted the relay team again to ask them where the gunships were, and to advise them that if the Cobras didn't arrive in the next few minutes, the TOC would only have to send in Graves Registration for a reaction force.

Ehrler heard the voice of Charger Two-one (Cobra Gunship Call Sign) breaking in on the LRP tactical push, calmly telling him to mark his position so that the gunships could begin their runs. The blinded team leader located the strobe light in the cargo pocket of his pants, and pitched it across the hootch in Crabb's direction. He told him to turn it on and toss it out the door. With the strobe light flashing outside the hootch, Ehrler reported to Charger Two-one that anything more than ten meters in any direction from the light was all his.

The enemy soldiers who were still able to flee, broke and ran as the rockets and mini-guns from the Cobra gunships plowed up the countryside around the hootch. The three surviving LRPs crouched in terror behind the earthen walls. Outside the walls, everything died. The "friendly" fire from the Cobras came within mere feet of becoming very "unfriendly" fire, but the accuracy of the gunships was uncanny.

Ehrler shouted for Crabb and Durham to be ready to drag their dead comrades to the extraction ship as soon as it landed. If there was no effective sniper fire, they could go back then to retrieve their gear and equipment.

Suddenly, a single Huey slick flared out over the nearby rice paddy and set down amid the carnage surrounding the battered hootch. The aircraft commander waited patiently while the two LRPs dragged the bodies of their three slain comrades to the waiting helicopter, then quickly returned for their gear. While the gunships continued tearing into the nearby tree line, keeping the enemy there at bay, Crabb returned and grabbed Ehrler by the hand, then personally led the blinded team leader back to the extraction ship.

Ehrler spent the next ten and a half months recovering from his wounds and learning how to live as a blind man. Today, he still remembers the men who died with him that day. And he says he can still see fine-in the darkness where he lives.1

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