

SRAP

By

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SRAP on LZ Carol. (Doc) Sheldon Canter is standing, Mike McFarland, C.W. Ullman - the author, and Joseph Milnac (Roadrunner) are right behind him.

Landing Zone (LZ) Carol was like Gilligan's Island, except Gilligan did not have daily helicopter meal service, and Mary Ann and Ginger were not massage therapists named Lucy and Ethel who visited twice a week. Our days were spent perfecting our tans and trying to win the hearts and minds of local villagers.

MAP INFORMATION AS OF 1968
BẢN-ĐỒ TIN-TỨC NĂM 1968



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Our mission was to periodically patrol the lake and sweep the village of An Loc on the lake's shore. We were looking for weapons and any signs of enemy activity. Our sweeps never found anything because the outboard motors on our slow rubber rafts alerted the locals that we were headed in their direction, giving them ample time to stash weapons if there were any. When we showed up for our "surprise" visits the entire village turned out to greet us like we were visiting dignitaries. After we came ashore like MacArthur landing on Leyte, the locals tried to sell us everything from bracelets made from brass bullet casings to conical shaped hats called non las. The villagers had nervous smiles and we wore scowls.

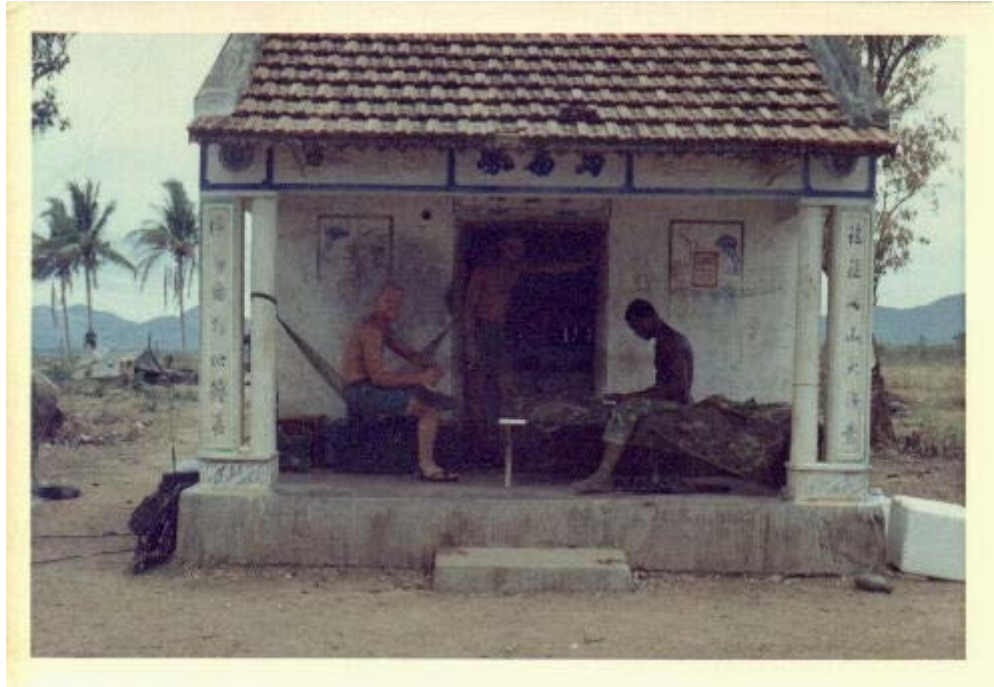
After searching their huts and not finding weapons, we climbed back in our rubber boats and head back to our LZ. Except every time we were about four hundred yards off shore from the village, somebody opened fire on us with an AK.47, forcing us to dive into the lake leaving the rubber boats to slowly motor on with our weapons, radios and our newly purchased wares still onboard. The boats were so sluggish that one of us would swim after the nearest raft, get onboard, and round up the other two pilotless crafts like stray cattle wondering in a prairie. This would eventually lead to a different outcome.

When we arrived back at LZ Carol, Lieutenant Parsley (LT) told headquarters we had taken enemy fire, which justified our existence on the lake. After LT filed his report, he brought out a football and we took up the game we had not finished the day before. After the game we readied large empty food thermoses to be sent back to the rear.



Before LZ Carol the unit was based in An Khe. The three weapons with deployed bipods are belt-fed M60 machine guns. This is SRAP about to leave on a mission.

We knew it was a cush assignment to be stationed on our island and did not want to blow it, so we changed into combat gear in time for the two p.m. arrival of the chopper that delivered our hot meals. Around three p.m. Lucy and Ethel would sometimes arrive, and then talk about who was the cutest Beatle. Just before they left, we made them plates of food to take home. LT would go off to his pagoda-hooch to nap, someone would fire up a smoke, and then we would swing in our hammocks discussing Ayn Rand. We used to say this was the hell of war.



Pagoda-Hooch on Dam Trao Lake, July 1969. LT, Andy Soltis, unidentified soldier.

Our LT had had enough of the AK.47 firing on us every time we left An Loc. He decided we should stop the Viet Cong (Charlie) responsible for the shootings. Once in awhile, LT would go George Patton on us and say we were American G.I.s and nobody was “gonna make us look like a bunch of dumbasses.” He devised a plan: the next time we went across the lake, a man would lie on the floor of each individual raft. Once we docked and the search of the village commenced, the three men would sneak out of the boats and hide in the brush. After the search was completed and the boats left, Charlie would predictably open fire, the three left behind would kill or capture him, and then we could retire to our hammocks to continue our book club discussion of *Atlas Shrugged*.

If one was not present at a briefing, he was usually volunteered for the special duty. Because I was catching up on the latest Beatle song with Ethel and arrived late to the meeting, I was chosen to lead the assault.



Roadrunner, author, Soltis and Doc Canter. Behind was one of the rubber rafts.
In the left background was the village of An Loc.

The next morning at oh six hundred hours three rubber rafts left LZ Carol and arrived to a village delegation offering hot tea and some kind of rice concoction. I and my fellow warriors, Roadrunner and McFarland, lay in the bottom of the boats planning to ambush Charlie.

I was twenty years old and Roadrunner, a new arrival, was younger than me. He wore a tattoo of, well the Roadrunner, and he talked incessantly about what a badass he was and how nobody could get a jump on him. The guys new to a unit felt compelled to talk tough. McFarland was a badass and didn't speak much. He was older than me, but I had more time in country and outranked him. Fifteen minutes after our landing, we left the boats. I carried an M16 with multiple twenty round clips plus a .45 caliber sidearm, McFarland carried the same and the radio and Roadrunner shouldered an M60 belt-fed machine gun. We quietly entered the tall elephant grass and hunkered down waiting for our unit to finish the sweep.

After two hours, the search was finished, the boats pushed off, and we waited as the watercraft reached the free fire zone. I stood up to get a better look at their distance from shore at the exact instant our mysterious AK.47 shooter opened fire. However, it was not one shooter but three on the other side of a bush only four feet from us. I had never been that close to an AK.47 firing on automatic.

The shooting so startled me that I collapsed onto the ground in a fetal position, started kicking my legs and pissed my shorts. Seconds passed before I regained my composure and turned my M16 on Charlie's position. I emptied my weapon into the bush, but missed because they were so close I fired over their crouched bodies.

They sprinted away from their lair and I wanted to give chase, but we needed Roadrunner with his M60, and he was not moving because he was paralyzed with fear. He said he would lay down suppressing fire for us. Having been in combat before, I knew that when someone said they would "cover you," it usually ended with someone accidentally getting shot.

Our debate was interrupted when our guys from the rubber rafts thought it would be a good idea to return fire at Charlie, except they were actually shooting at us. McFarland jumped on the radio yelling at them to hold fire. When our lake contingent ceased firing, we finally had the opportunity to go after Charlie, but Roadrunner would not stand up.

I had a similar experience in a firefight where I was so severely gripped by fear, I could not move. When fear is that strong it literally freezes a person: their body, throat, and breathing, and creates a uniquely identifiable tremor in their voice. I did to Roadrunner what a sergeant had done to snap me out of it: I kicked him hard and gave the order to move out.

The three of us picked up and ran through the village. We did not fire because we didn't want to hit any of the villagers. However, that did not stop Charlie from shooting. We took cover behind water wells and trees while Charlie sprayed bullets everywhere. Charlie knew that if he shot one of us or a villager we would get bogged down providing medical aid and he could make a break for it.

In a withering crossfire, Roadrunner pulled a panicked child to safety and held onto him. After the shooting stopped, we had lost track of the enemy. I caught eyes with an old poppy san who pointed to his right. The three of us took off in that direction and caught a glimpse of Charlie heading out onto a rice paddy.

The reaction most guys had after being terrified was to be very angry. Roadrunner was having that reaction and wanted to shoot back, but I told him to wait until we had a better shot from the edge of the paddy some fifty yards away.

As we were running, Charlie moved into the open. When we reached the dirt berm to fire our weapons, we noticed a family in the middle of the rice paddy. Roadrunner was sliding the safety on the M60 to "Off" when I told him to hold his shot. The family consisted of a woman about thirty-years old, her parents and her four children.

While I watched the group, Charlie had reached the tree line on the far side and again opened fire on us and the family. Roadrunner was begging to shoot back, the adults in the field were screaming, the children crying and I held my hand on the M60 telling him to wait.

McFarland tapped me on the shoulder and said he could run our tree line and get at the shooters from a different angle. However, we were pinned down, preventing any of us from moving. When the enemy finally stopped to reload, McFarland took off running. I watched him run and for a brief moment, forgot about keeping Roadrunner in check, and lifted my hand off the M60. Roadrunner interpreted that as the sign to open fire. I don't know if was Charlie or us but the thirty year old woman took a round in the arm prompting Roadrunner to let off the trigger.

Now things became serious, because we had to see how badly the woman had been hit. Charlie again had guns blazing and this time they fired in the direction of the family. I gave Roadrunner the sign to let the dragon out and the M60 came to life, firing tracer bullets which stopped the AK.47s. I told him to shoot high so I could low crawl out to the woman.

Our guys from the rafts finally caught up to us. Someone suggested we call in artillery to "rain down hell" on Charlie, who had a three-hundred-yard head start down the beach on the South China Sea.

LT said the problem with calling in artillery was accuracy. "Sometimes they hit the designated target and sometimes they blow up your LZ."

When LT nixed that idea, more suggestions were offered such as airstrikes, helicopter gunships or Navy bombardment. LT reminded everyone that it was three guys we were after, not a German Panzer Division. LT's order to chase after Charlie was met with groans, because most of our guy's physical conditioning was so bad, that they were out of breath just running across the street.

I reached the woman first. The children were crying and Poppa-San is yelling at me in Vietnamese. While McFarland radioed for a medivac, the woman resisted my help to bandage her arm, so I yelled at her that she would bleed to death if we didn't bandage the wound. She did not understand English and I did not understand Vietnamese, but I prevailed by sheer force. When I got a good look at her forearm, I almost puked. The bullet had shredded the skin, muscle, tendon, and bone. Thankfully, Doc, our field medic, showed up and took over the medical duties. The kids tugged at him, because they thought he was hurting their mother, so McFarland and I pulled the kids aside.

After we separated the children from their mother, Poppa-San started yelling at McFarland who did not like to be yelled at!

So I pushed the old man down and away from McFarland to quiet him. But, Momma-San was pissed that I pushed her man down so she started yelling and hitting me.

"How far out is the chopper?" I asked McFarland.

“ETA is any minute,” McFarland replied.

Medivacs came in low and fast, because they were unarmed. It was one of the few helicopters that could barely be heard before they were on top of you. McFarland was told over the radio to pop smoke for identification, so he pulled the pin on a purple smoke grenade. Suddenly the chopper burst over a stand of palm trees, swirling the purple smoke in its tail rotor, circled the field low and quickly landed. When the family saw the helicopter all hell broke loose.

They huddled around the wounded woman and would not let us put her on the chopper. It dawned on me why: whenever a Vietnamese villager was individually taken away by helicopter, it was usually for interrogation by the Vietnamese National Police where the villager was sometimes treated roughly.

The pilot yelled at us to put the woman onboard, but her family members were clinging to her good arm, her waist, both legs and would not let go. My hand fell onto my urine soaked crotch which angered me. The pilot yelled again and I told him to fuck off. Out of nowhere, Poppy San started beating McFarland with a rake. The children pleaded with us as the woman writhed in pain. McFarland was about to hit somebody, the pilot was threatening to leave and Mommy San began taking Mickey Mantle swings at my head with a rake that was taller than her. McFarland came upon a solution to our problem.

He grabbed Poppa-San and put him on the chopper. Seeing his move, I surprised Mommy San when I knocked the rake out of her hand and hoisted her onboard. McFarland picked up two of the kids, shoved them inside the aircraft, and I followed suit with the other two. The last person placed in the medivac was the one for whom it had been called, the wounded woman.

The medic yelled over the roaring engines, “What am I supposed to do with them?” pointing at the kids and the old people.

“Get them something to eat when you get to the rear,” McFarland hollered.

The pilot yelled, “I am not taking all of them.”

“The hell you’re not, Sir,” Doc countered.

“That woman has lost a lot of blood and if she dies, it’s on you. She won’t get on the chopper without them.”

The pilot, a warrant officer, looked around the inside of his helicopter, checked with his onboard medic and then his co-pilot. They both nodded and he glowered at me.

“I’m going to have you brought up on charges, troop,” He threatened.

“Do you hear me?”

I was in no mood for the pilot to pull rank on me with what I had just been through in my urine soaked shorts. So, I looked at him for a moment, stepped away from the chopper and saluted.

“Go fuck yourself, Sir.”

The pilot was so angry he looked like his head was going to explode. The medivac lifted off, hovered about ten feet in the air, turned and then flew away.

I was completely drained by the last twenty minutes of mayhem, so I sat down exhausted on a rice paddy dike which reminded me again that I had pissed my shorts. At that point I didn’t care, so I pulled out a pack of Chesterfield’s from my ammo pouch, and offered McFarland and Roadrunner smokes. Roadrunner lit us and reminded me that I told an officer to fuck off and I would probably face a court martial. I exhaled and offered, “By the time he files the paper work, it’ll be three weeks before anything happens.”

McFarland retorted, “So?”

“I have my DEROS date for home; it’s two weeks.”

The enduring image I have of the whole experience was McFarland and Roadrunner showing the kids how to hold on in the chopper for safety, the gleeful smiles on the children’s faces thrilled to fly in a helicopter, and the medic tending to the woman who eventually recovered fully from her wound.

We never did catch Charlie.