

The Hospital Firefight

In 1965 the NVA decided to cut the South Vietnam in half at the Central highlands. Their goal was to overrun the Provincial Headquarters at Pleiku. But first the Special Forces Camp at Plei Me had to be eliminated, and the RVN force stationed at Pleiku destroyed. An elaborate plan was hatched by Field Force (NVA Division) to lay siege to the Special Forces Camp and draw the RVN from Pleiku into an ambush; much as they had done a decade before to the French. However, their plan went awry, when the 1st Cavalry Division reacted quickly. It was the NVA who were defeated. They then were forced to flee in disarray 20 clicks back to the Cambodian border area near the Chu Pong massif.

The NVA had set up a regimental field hospital about halfway between the Plei Me Special Forces Camp and their Chu Pong Massif base. As the NVA fled west, the 1st Brigade of the 1st Cavalry division was given the task of finding and attacking the retreating NVA regiments. This was the first time the 1st Cavalry had engaged the NVA in this area. Delta's action on 1 November would directly lead to the famous Ia Drang battle, which began two weeks later.

On November 1, 1965 a 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry pilot spotted several NVA in a clearing 500 meters southwest of the hospital. Another 30 NVA were seen to the northeast, and 1/9th deployed its ground platoon. The "Blues" patrolled to the northeast and walked straight into the NVA Regimental Hospital; taking them by surprise, killing the security, and capturing 42 NVA and a large supply of hospital equipment.

The first "haul" of this kind in the Vietnam War created excitement that rapidly spread up the chain of command, bringing in a stream of VIP's to inspect the booty. 1st Brigade Commander Colonel Harlow Clarke, and two Generals were on the ground with just 19 infantrymen when an NVA battalion, located only a kilometer to the northeast, began a counterattack.

Realizing the precarious situation, the brass called for their birds and got the hell out of there. The challenge became how to stop a battalion of NVA from sweeping back through the hospital area with only 19 infantry on the ground. By now it was mid-afternoon, and the 1st Brigade transmitted an urgent request for any unit that was ready to move.

In 1965, Delta Company was a Combat Support Company, comprised of the battalion's Recon, Mortar, and Weapons Platoons, much like the Echo Companies created later in the war. The Recon platoon was on "Eagle Flight" (Quick Reaction Force, or QRF) status at LZ Charger City and ready to go. Lt. Colonel (later General) Robert Shoemaker, the 1/12th Battalion Commander (RIP Sir) volunteered Recon, and within minutes they were airborne and heading to a tiny, one ship LZ near the hospital. There was no briefing. No details were provided, except that a battalion of NVA had to be stopped.

As Recon landed, they could see bodies strewn about the area. They appeared to be mostly NVA. Lieutenant Arthur West, Recon Platoon Leader, and Platoon Sergeant Harvey Mclaurin got everyone on line and headed about 100 meters across the dry stream bed in which the hospital was located. They then got on line at the base of the hill to the north. It was vital that this hill be secured, being the high ground directly above the hospital and in the path of the advancing NVA. Recon was supposed to be working in concert with two other platoons on its left flank. However, no one from Recon ever saw the other platoons.

As they started to advance up the hill there was an immediate eruption of fire. The NVA had been attacking down the hill. Some took to the trees creating a three dimensional battle field. Sergeant Onana sprinted ahead of the advancing Recon line and ducked behind a large rock. There he was shot through the head. Lieutenant West was severely wounded; SP4 Dieter Arnold slung the 220 pound former football player over his shoulder and carried him back to safety.

Enemy fire was heavy. Tree limbs were being shot off, brush mowed down. Recon had little to no fire support. Artillery had not yet been placed and Delta's mortar platoon was too far away. ARA was impossible because of the tree canopy. Communications were almost non-existent. Specialist Four Chuck Rose, carrying the battalion radio for Lieutenant West, was headed up the hill when his radio was destroyed by three NVA rounds. The "dead" NVA were getting up and shooting Recon in the back after they advanced past them.

Sergeant Mike Van Kirk saw Private Rodney Harris get hit and went to help him. Van Kirk hit the ground just as an explosion went off between his legs. He was in bad trouble, shrapnel wounds from head to toe. Two medics from another unit showed up and attempted to carry him down the hill, but NVA mortars forced the medics to drop Mike and leave him.

Meanwhile, Private First Class Chuck Doole, who was on the far left flank of the advancing Recon platoon, was receiving heavy fire from his left. Many of the NVA were in the trees sniping at anyone that moved. Chuck saw Sergeant Onana get hit in the head. Then about one quarter the way up the hill he saw Private James Pottkotter get hit. He ran over to check on him, as did PFC Carl Duvall. Pottkotter was dead. They continued advancing up the hill. Spotting an NVA who was flinging grenades down the hill from behind a tree, Duvall shot him. Fire continued to be heavy. Doole was hit in the leg, knocking him down. He lost his weapon in the process and crawled to some cover. Sergeant Harry Lute ran over through a hail of bullets and carried Chuck back down the hill to safety.

Recon continued to advance up the hill, until at one point they were pinned down by machine gun fire. M-79 fire was directed at the position to no avail. Finally, SP4 Louis Sloan got up, ran towards the machine gun position and neutralized it with hand grenades, allowing Recon to continue the assault. Later, according to

eye witness reports, Sloan took out several NVA bunkers with hand grenades while singing "My Girl". (Yes these things do actually happen.)

As it was starting to get dark, Chuck Rose, SP4 Phil Byron and one other, probably Larry Burkhead, made it to an NVA bunker at the top of the hill. They had no communications and were not aware of any other friendlies nearby. In fact they believed that the rest of Recon was likely dead. Later, SSG Oscar Rubio crawled up to the bunker with a shrapnel wound in his arm. He told the others that he had seen no other friendlies and was lucky to have found them and not the NVA. They spent the night on top of the bunker hearing movement all around them. The 1st Brigade finally flew artillery into support range and started peppering the area with artillery blasts. They had no idea whether the artillery might be targeting their position, but it was landing close, making for a truly a harrowing night.

During that night hundreds of NVA continued to move west, trying to get across the Cambodian border to sanctuary. They never took back the hospital. Recon Delta suffered three KIA and seven seriously wounded, which was more than a third of the platoon.

It would all happen to Recon Delta again in April 1966, not far from the hospital, in the same Chu Pong Massif/Ia Drang Valley area. Half the Platoon would be killed or wounded.

A decade later, after the U.S. Congress had cut off all funds to the South Vietnamese, the NVA finally did cut the country in half at the Central Highlands. But they did not have to fight Delta to do it. They won politically what they could not win fighting the 1st Cavalry.