

Vietnam War (4)

Category: Vietnam 1967-1968

Published: Monday, 19 September 2011 15:07

Written by dave

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During a routine heliborne search and destroy mission straddling the Oriental River, one of my Huey's took a round in the engine, killed it, and the chopper dropped into the river. Only by a mad scramble did the four men on it - pilot and co-pilot and two door gunners get out as it sunk - in at least 40 feet of water. With help from my Wolfhounds they got to dry land.

But then the Division wanted to save that chopper. So required me to stay in place and 'secure' that bird - 40 feet down where nobody could possibly steal anything on it - all miserable night. Rather than my company of guys being able to fly back to Cu Chi and sack out the rest of the night, before another mission in the morning.

So I stayed with the company. Next morning a crane helicopter came with crews, and they took much of the day to finally lift it out while we stood guard with one company, but I continued search and destroy operations out to about a mile and a half radius the rest of the day.

I also took the time to fly across the river to an isolated Special Forces camp. Where its commander was a Captain Williams who I had as a Sergeant in Hawaii at the NCO Academy in 1960. He went to OCS and got commissioned. Old home week. While there I worked out a plan with him to rescue the team if the Viet Cong attacked them with more than they could handle.

And on the way back I had my command chopper circle the area where on one Huey extraction one man dropped and lost his rifle when trying to climb aboard.

It took a while before we got the rifle back while the pilots were very nervous that we hovered low enough I could spot it, before landing and then my radio man Sgt Jobe jumped out and recovered it.

While we were there a call came in that a Company A man was shot through the chest, and they wanted a medical dustoff mission. But we were much closer, so we flew there, got him into the chopper, and

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made it for the Cu Chi hospital pad, where medics were waiting. It took only 16 minutes to get him from lying in the field to surgery. It would have taken well over 30 had a dustoff flown out.

He lived.

Battalion Expansion

The 20th of August was a big day for the 1/27 Wolfhounds. As planned for some time the Infantry Battalions like mine, which had 3 rifle companies with a total of 690 men were to be expanded with enough men for a new 4th Rifle Company and more officers, bringing my battalion to 924 men, and 155 of 164 authorized officers. So Company 'D' was added to A,B, and C. That gave me 13 rifle platoons to fight with rather than the 9 I had earlier.

Planners had come to conclusion that VC hunting took more manpower than firepower, so beefed up all the rifle battalions.

This change was accompanied by a big ceremony I planned. The only one during the months I was in the Battalion. I made sure it was as good as one at West Point.

By this time General Tillson was gone to J-3 of MACV in Saigon, and new Major General F. K. Mearns, West Point Class of 1938 took over the 25th Division. I formed the battalion in a hollow square so all the men could see what was going on. Besides me being handed a new Company D gideon to hand to the new Company Commander, we also held a Combat Awards Ceremony, and Gen Mearns pinned 7 Silver Stars on my deserving men.

Then we handed him a captured Viet Cong pistol, with a Wolfhound crest pounded into its handle.

Then he and Col Emerson, the Brigade Commander handed out 22 Bronze Stars for Valor and Army Commendation Medals for Valor to my troopers.

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Then we held the traditional Memorial Service for the dead Wolfhounds since the last one we had. And Col Emerson spoke, detailing what the 2d Brigade had accomplished in comparison to the other Brigades. By the time he finished the men were practically cheering.

New General Mearns got the message.

That evening we had a big sit down dinner, having invited 50 to our 40 officers, secretaries and nurses from Saigon. I had to drink the helmetful of champagne before I could have my name inscribed on it, as the CO of the 1st of the 27th Infantry.

Then we had several days training, with the new Company, while refreshing the old timers. That ended with every man, with his weapon, on a night perimeter of our base camp, and ordering them all to fire their weapons outward, surprising any Viet Cong around, and probably upsetting the whole civilian area thinking a big battle was on. But lots of weapons in the hands of administrators got fired, or fixed to fire. I believe in the Marine Corps motto 'Every man a rifleman'

Next day we started heliborne operations again, expecting some heavy fighting later.

With my added company "D" I was able to change my tactics on my heliborne assaults. They worked. I could box in suspected VC hideouts better. We killed 15 VC and captured 21 in a surprise attack without suffering a single casualty. I then followed it up with a night ambush and killed 3 more and captured 6.

It was the most successful day for me to date.

Then Several Small Operations

In the span of just about a week, we had a series of combat assaults that drew fire. The Viet Cong, backed up by NVA units were getting more aggressive and penetrating across the border further.

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I got intelligence where a VC platoon was. I went after it, found it, and got into quite a fight. While we killed 9 VC and captured the Platoon Leader, we took 2 men killed and 13 wounded before the remnants fled into Cambodia.

With information we got from the platoon leader we went after another location. I inserted a platoon and flushed out 30-40 VC. We were able to kill 15, capture 20. We came back that night as an ambush, and killed 3 more.

All that without suffering a casualty. Following up on that, we made a dusk raid , killing two VC - one of which I shot with my M-15 rifle with tracer ammunition, and we captured a wounded one.

I flew out into our operational area one day in a little OH-23 chopper when my command huey was unavailable. Enroute to one of my companies sweeping an area, I spotted what I was sure was a VC running across a rice paddy. I closed up on him and with my M-16 rifle and hand signals made him my prisoner at the point of my gun pointed down from the hovering helicopter and forced him to walk into the arms of Company B half a mile away while we flew behind him.

Then, next morning we flew into a small village, 2 men started running. We killed them and got papers off of them showing one was a finance clerk.

By this time in my first 25 days commanding the 1/27, I had conducted 50 combat assaults - and got orders showing I had earned 10 Air Medals - 1 for each 5 combat missions.

Before we reorganized and I got more men, I had conducted heliborne operations with a maximum of 175 men. Now I could fight with 550 men - when we were allocated enough helicopters.

On one mission when we were put under operational control of the 1st Brigade, instead of under our parent 2d Brigade. We went out on missions in their operating area, but our production went down. The 1st

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Brigade commander and staff simply couldn't mount as effective operations as we were getting used to.

The rest of September, after there was a reorganization of the boundaries of our operating areas our production under the 1st Brigade plans went way down.

By this time in the Vietnam War 'body count' seemed to be the only measure of success. It was a lousy one.

Over a 5 day period, the 'rest' of the 2d Brigade - the 2/27 heliborne battalion and the 5th Mech battalion only killed 4 VC, took 1 PW and some weapons. While my 1/27 killed 14 VC, took 4 prisoners, and captured 8 weapons. We remained more effective than other units.

Morale, training, and good operational planning counted for the difference.

But as I have said before in this treatise, just getting body count every day in small numbers and capturing some weapons, requiring thousands of American soldiers, is NOT going to win this war.

So on the side, and in order to try, even on a small scale, an effort to be more effective within the South Vietnamese population in our assigned area, I formed a 'Vietnamese Civil Affairs' Platoon, and put a Lieutenant in charge of it who had 2 years in the Peace Corps in Brazil before joining the Army. And though Col Emerson, my Brigade Commander didn't feel like this would do any good - while he pursued Body Count that was reported to Division headquarter, I was trying get something started that would directly compete with the Viet Cong in winning over - one way or another - the loyalty of people in the villages.

Without backing my efforts didn't go very far beyond competing at the propaganda level in some of our villages.

Frankly, I thought less and less of Col Emerson as a Brigade Commander. He had little imagination on how we could clear out the

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Viet Cong better than what we were doing at high cost.

In between Missions there was time at Cu Chi Base camp to hold brief ceremonies.

LINK ME: Photo of me awarding a medal to a soldier for his bravery back at Cu Chi base camp

If you scroll down below the Collections Photograph page you will see a piece of the South Vietnam Map, where Cu Chi was northeast of "Ho Chi Minh City" - previously when we were there at war 'Saigon.'