

HILL 882

By Ted McCormick

The helicopter's jet engines strained, with the Huey B's blades slicing through the air, making the familiar sounding "chop, chop, chop," as the bird made a sharp turn. We were sitting on our helmets to protect against rounds coming through the floor of the aircraft.

Before we knew it, we were hovering like a bee, two feet above the LZ (landing zone), on the top of Hill 882, which lay in the Nam Hoa mountain range and ran along the northeast side of the A Shau Valley. The surrounding area was devastated ... the trees lay bent and twisted; and all the foliage had been burned away from air strikes, Napalm, and artillery barrages.

On closer inspection, after we secured the LZ, I began to notice many spent .45 PC brass casings and some Tupeolov 9mm caliber casings strewn about the area -- the Tupeolov was the Russian-made, NVA standard issue pistol; the fighting here must have been very close. We were taking over from the 2/502nd infantry, after landing, they were repeatedly ambushed by NVA regulars and had to be withdrawn because of heavy casualties. Our mission, as B Co., 1/327th Infantry, 101st ABN Division, was a search and destroy. Unknown to our unit, we were an advance party sent in as a blocking force for FSB (fire support base) Ripcord, a new FSB being built at the northern end of the A Shau Valley. S-2, Army intelligence, had warned us of a possible NVA sapper-battalion base of operations in the area (*actually it was a division, see "Seige of Ripcord," VFW magazine,*

June/July '96), and we were carrying extra machine-gun barrels and ammunition. Also, each squad was carrying a 90mm recoilless rifle.

Sappers were the special forces of the NVA Army. They were equivalent to our Green Berets or Ranger forces, and they were used for special operations. Their specialty was crawling under the wire of firebases and attacking with small-arms and concussion grenades, preceding an infantry attack.

Our Commander, Capt. Terry "Terrible Terry" Mills, split the company into three platoons, using two to push forward and try to locate the enemy while using the other platoon for command and control and to adjust possible air strikes and other firepower that was available to us.

We secured our equipment, got the order to move out, and quickly moved off the LZ and into the surrounding jungle to avoid a mortar attack. We descended the hill for three days, not noticing anything unusual or any sign of enemy activity.

Each day, we sent out recons in every direction, probing and trying to locate the supposed enemy base camp. Many times we had been sent out on search and destroy missions like this, and the only thing we got out of it was leeches and jungle rot, a bacterial skin infection that would eat away at the first layer of epidermis. The only known remedy was to get out of the jungle and into direct sunlight.

On the second day, the stillness of the jungle was shattered by the sudden, tremendous roar of a jet turbine engine. The triple canopy jungle cleared,

suddenly blown back by the rotor backwash of a LOH (light observation helicopter). Standing on the skid was an infantryman with an M-60 machine gun. They observed us for a second, the man gave a thumbs up sign; and then they slowly moved away.

This was what the 101st called a "pink team." One thousand feet up, two Cobra gunships circled waiting for the LOH to draw enemy fire so they could close in for the kill, with mini-gun fire and 2.75 rockets. It was one of the more dangerous jobs an infantryman could apply for, and I decided to put in for the job as soon as I got back to the rear. The sound of three squares and a cot at night made the danger seem less apparent. The life of a "grunt" was not very rewarding -- it was the dirtiest and most difficult job in the Army.

On the third day, we were due for resupply. There were no LZs in our immediate area, so we were supposed to get it kicked out by air. The resupply helicopters would ask the ground unit to pop smoke for identification; and, when the smoke was acknowledged, they would fly in at tree-top level and kick out the resupply.

We were out of water and rations as we heard the Huey approach. A request was made for green smoke, which was popped. We waited. Nothing. Lt. Shultz raised the helo on the radio.

"What's the problem with our resupply, where are you? We are still waiting, over..."

"We just kicked it out to you, over," the resupply answered.

"We never got it, you didn't kick it out to us, over," Lt. Shultz answered.

"I requested green smoke, it was popped, and I delivered, activity was observed on the ground, over..."
"It wasn't my unit, possibly you kicked it out to Delta Co. by mistake, we need a new resupply ASAP, over and out."

We stood dumbfounded. There was no other unit operating on this side of 882. Who could it be? Delta Co.? Could the helicopter pilots bearings have been that far off? We wondered -- mixups are common in the military.

Later on in the afternoon, we began to hear an M-60 machine gunner testing his gun far down the mountain. It coldly echoed throughout the Valley. We tried to identify the unit through radio contact with no result. What actually had happened was the NVA had been monitoring our radio frequency. When the pilot asked for green smoke to be popped, having some of our smoke canisters that they had captured from the 2/502, they popped theirs at the same time. The pilot, seeing their green smoke, kicked out all our resupply to the enemy by mistake. The "activity" the pilot and his crew observed were actually NVA soldiers dressed in our fatigues that they had captured, also, from the 2/502nd. Now, they not only had our captured weapons; but we had supplied them with our ammunition, too. We were about to face our own weapons and ammunition in battle. It was made painfully aware to us that we were about to face a formidable adversary.

On the fourth day, after we had sent out a recon, the silence of the jungle was interrupted by the unmistakable cold, sharp, "crack" of AK-47 fire. We

froze. Then came the answer of an M-16 on full automatic.

Silence.

"BOOM, BOOM, ... KA-BOOM!" as grenades exploded. More automatic weapons fire.

Back at the defensive perimeter, we didn't know what was going on. We braced for an attack, not knowing what was happening. After about one minute of these small-arms exchanges, it subsided; then there was silence.

Our patrol returned, and we found out that the scout dog had tripped an ambush that the NVA had set up for the squad and was killed with three hits from RPG-7 (rocket propelled grenade) fire. We moved down to where the squad was attacked and buried the dog, then waited for dark to move into position.

After the sun had set and it was completely dark, we moved off the trail and down a finger where one of the members of the recon had seen a NVA soldier run after they had killed the dog. It was so black at night in the jungle that you had to hold onto the guy in front to know where you were going. Slowly and in single file, we descended the finger, triggers on the ready, until after two hundred meters. The decision was made to set up a NDP (Night Defensive Perimeter) for the night.

Unknown to us, we had moved to within fifty meters of the NVA sapper base camp. By us moving at night, a tactic that took a lot of getting used to, they could not be sure exactly where we had set up and, by opening fire, would have given away their position from the muzzle flashes of their weapons. The enemy waited.

The next morning, I was chosen, along with five other men, to go on a recon of the surrounding area. We readied our equipment and left our position, going back up the trail ten meters, and then began cutting a trail to the left with a machete. I was walking rear security and had all five of the squad's LAWS (light, anti-tank weapons) strapped over my shoulders along with my M-16, four hand grenades, and two bandoleers of ammunition.

Cutting trail was a slow and tedious process, and we kept stopping and starting as the pointman hacked his way through the triple-canopy undergrowth. It was almost noon, and the temperature was already reaching 100 degrees.

The NVA were battlefield opportunists -- they were always ready to exploit any battlefield situation. They would wait for their enemy to make a mistake, then take advantage of it. In combat, they were a formidable opponent. They were masters at camouflage, mortars, and flanking tactics.

They dressed one of their soldiers in our fatigues and sent him out to meet us. He lead the team into an infantry-classic, "L"-shaped ambush. He made noises, shook the bushes, gave the pointman fleeting glimpses of his silhouette, and led us unsuspecting to our fate. The pointman, leary and confused, held his fire, not sure of his target. We had stopped again; and I sat down and leaned back against a tree, daydreaming, lost in pleasant thoughts of family and home. Then they sprung the ambush.

We were hit, simultaneously, with three RPG-7 rockets,

two from the front and one from the right flank. Boom, Boom...Boom! We were showered with dirt and rocks from the explosions. Machine-gun and small-arms fire started to strafe from the front and right. We were in the center of the kill zone, frozen in shock and fear, unable to move, and pinned down. The acrid smell of gunpowder from the explosions filled the air.

We were in a very serious situation. The small-arms fire picked up, sounding like popcorn, with rounds wizzing all around us. We had to react or be cut to pieces in the crossfire. Lt. Shultz screamed for the LAWs to be brought to the front. Frozen with shock and fear, I somehow managed enough courage to move. Under fire, I ran to the front of the column.

When I got to the front, I found Lt. Shultz dazed and crouched over the pointman behind a fallen tree. He was barking orders into the radio receiver but was unable to hear; his right ear was bleeding, indicating a blown ear drum from the concussions. He was in shock and had a possible head concussion. The pointman, covered in blood, lay in a fetal position and was unconscious; he had suffered multiple wounds and was losing a lot of blood. He looked ashen and close to death.

"Keep your heads down," I hollered and quickly fired all five LAWs and then began to fire my M-16, switching back and forth with three round bursts from full-auto to semi-automatic to conserve ammunition. At this point, I was the only one returning fire; everyone else in the squad was frozen in place, unable to mount any kind of defensive counter fire.

Lt. Shultz handed me the handset of the radio; he wanted me to try and direct artillery fire. He was in contact with batteries of 105mm and 155mm howitzers, from FSB Veghel. The noise was deafening from small-arms fire. Dirt kicked up all around us, as rounds wizzed through the air. "Drop five, left five, fire for effect!" I hollered into the receiver, then waited for the explosions, only to hear the rounds landing harmlessly, hundreds of meters away.

I tried to adjust again, with the same result. It was very difficult to hear with all the small-arms fire and explosions. After throwing several hand grenades and expending the rest of my M-16 ammunition, I informed Lt. Shultz that our position was futile; we needed reinforcements.

I told him I was going for help; and I ran, under fire, through the jungle, back to our staging area. When I arrived, I found them under attack, too. The NVA were probing the area trying to pinpoint our position. We returned to the ambush site to find the situation the same. The squad was still pinned down, caught in the crossfire.

At this point, we began to return fire defensively to extract our wounded. The pointman was still alive but very close to death as we withdrew; and the NVA were flanking to the right and left, probing with small-arms fire.

After regrouping at our staging area, we set up a defensive perimeter and called in a Medivac for the wounded Lt. and pointman. As the Medivac came in at tree-top level and lowered a basket, we all opened fire

with everything we had to keep the NVAs' heads down while the wounded were extracted.

I remember looking up and watching the helicopter hover, realizing one, well-placed round would send it crashing down on our position. It seemed like it took forever to get the wounded to safety. As soon as the Medivac had extracted our wounded, the NVA again began to probe our position, flanking us to the right and left as we withdrew. It was a valuable learning lesson to us as a unit -- the enemy had shown himself to be a cunning adversary.

We regrouped and were resupplied at the top of 882 the next morning. Our orders were to assault the NVA base camp after resupply. No one talked about the battle that lay ahead. We all nervously joked around, knowing the enemy was preparing just the same as we were. After resupply we received orders to move.

Our tactics going in were to get into position, get on-line, and move forward until we made contact; then the plan was to pull us back after we identified their position and call in air strikes and artillery before a final assault on their base camp.

Slowly, we moved ahead. We were ten feet apart from one another, close enough to see a man on either side. The enemy waited until the last second, then had to open fire or be overrun. We hit the dirt in a hail of small-arms fire from both sides.

After a brief but very intense small-arms exchange, we pulled back as planned, about one-hundred-and-fifty meters, over a small finger of the hill. It was 11:00 in the morning. We were very close to their position but

fairly safe on the other side of a small finger of the mountain. Strike after strike of Cobra gunship attacks pulverized the enemy base camp with 2.75 rockets and mini-gun fire; then we used artillery from surrounding fire bases -- 105mm and 155mm howitzers completed fire missions.

In the early afternoon, we called in TAC (tactical air command) jets flying out of the Air Force base at Da Nang. They began the strike by dropping 250lb. bombs. At the distance we were from the target, I felt it was too close. It began by a tremendous "Boom!" as the jet passed directly over us at tree-top level, breaking the sound barrier; fifteen seconds later, the ordnance would hit. The NVA had the jets timed, too, and at the last possible second would open up with everything they had, hoping to place a round in one of the jet engines. I was in a bomb crater and covered my head with my arms. Thirty seconds later, the bombs would hit with fantastic concussions and blasts, sending shrapnel ripping through the trees above our heads and dirt and debris raining down on our position. There were two jets, each taking turns making passes at the target. Each bombing run seemed to get closer to our position as we all lay crouched down. Hell had come to Hill 882 that day.

After the jets had exhausted their supply of bombs, they began using Napalm. Napalm is a mixture of gasoline and a jelly-like substance, which is designed to stick to anything it comes in contact with. The first pass went well, directly hitting the enemy positions; but on the next run, the pilot miscalculated; and the cannister

exploded, splashing over onto our position. We were engulfed by flames. Triple-canopy jungle instantly was burned away. Horrible screams could be heard throughout our position, as men were being burned. I was covering rear security.

The second we were hit, I looked to my left and saw Greg Kuehl, a fellow soldier who was the assistant gunner on the M-60. He ran towards me. His fatigues had been burned away, and he held his arms outstretched. He ran towards my position, in shock and fear, stumbling up the hill.

I stuck out my foot and tripped him, trying to avoid touching his burning skin. I held Greg down to prevent him from getting up and running off into the jungle and certain death. I called for the Medic, who was busy attending other burned victims.

The jungle was gone, completely burned away. A gooey, white-plastic material dripped down the tops of the trees, still on fire. There was a sick, sweet smell of cordite and burning plastic. We suffered five casualties, three from Napalm and two from small-arms fire.

Then we received orders to assault the enemy camp, and I was ordered to take over the machine gun. Slowly, we approached the enemy positions.

After the Napalm hit, the firefight had ended. We were within their bunker complex before we knew it. Two dead NVA soldiers lay half buried in their exposed bunker which had taken a direct hit from a 250lb. bomb. Their faces looked serene, despite the violent way in which they had died. There were 20-25 bunkers -- 15 were destroyed, all were hit with Napalm.

Burned fatigues and equipment lay everywhere. They had a "highway" as wide as a city street cut through the triple-canopy jungle, leaving the very top of the canopy intact to conceal it from the air. This clearly was a major sapper base. Barbed wire lay in rows, which they used as a practice area for the sappers.

We had a forward observer attached to us, and he found a stockpile of about one hundred, 81mm mortars. I looked to my left and saw him hold one up from the pile; then I noticed a black wire running off into the jungle meaning it was electrically command detonated. "Booby trap!" I hollered and dove behind a large rock, waiting for the blast.

Nothing happened. By us moving in so quickly, the enemy didn't have time to set up the booby trap properly. We found fresh footprints that ran down the mountain.

We were busy looking through the camp when suddenly the scout dog alerted. There was movement to the front, and we all assumed defensive positions within their camp. It was getting dark and the sun was setting, so the decision was made to set up within their base camp.

The next morning, we received word that 2nd platoon had been ambushed and had suffered casualties. The enemy had also shot down a LOH -- the welfare of the pilot and crew was unknown. We were to move immediately to 2nd platoon's location and mount a search and rescue for the downed airmen. We marched all morning until we reached their area.

Captain Mills was there, and he briefed us on the

mission. They had no radio contact but were getting a signal from the transponder, so there was a possibility that someone had survived the crash. In any case, we had to retrieve the mini-gun that was on the aircraft so it wouldn't fall into enemy hands.

I was carrying the M-60, and Capt. Mills told me to walk his point. He would walk my slack (2nd man back). We started out towards the downed helicopter. I was tense and nervous as I walked down the trail; and, with each step, I had to look for the wire of a booby trap while at the same time look ahead, scanning the surrounding jungle for an ambush.

I had three hundred rounds strapped over my shoulder, as Capt. Mills and I worked our way towards the crash site. It took us all day; but, by late in the afternoon, I began to notice AK-47 shell casings strewn on the trail. I pointed them out to Capt. Mills, and we moved on about one hundred more meters and then began to see burned foliage. Suddenly, we were on top of the crash site.

All that was identifiable that this was a helicopter was a piece of the tail rotor fuselage. The torso of a man hung hideously from a tree. In the middle of the trail lay what I first thought was a log but on closer inspection realized it was a dead American soldier. He was intact and charred black from being burned from the explosion and frozen in the position as if he was still seated in the cockpit. I became aware of the finality of this conflict. We secured the mini-gun and other components of the aircraft and set up a defensive perimeter for the night. That night, as I pulled guard protecting my fallen

comrades, I was very reflective of my life, this war, and what part I was playing in it. The moon was very bright; it was a beautiful night as I lay behind my machine gun, contemplating.

I thought of these men who were so committed to this war that they had given their lives; it had to be for something. I knew we were going to win this thing; it would just be a matter of time. We never would commit ourselves as we had just to pack up and leave. If anything, Viet Nam would probably end up separated like Korea, when the NVA realized our resolve and that they had no real chance of winning against America's awesome firepower and air superiority.

I thought of these dead pilots' families as their bodies lay in pieces, burned beyond recognition. I was prepared to give my life but not for country and cause. I was ready to die for "esprit de corps" and my fellow soldiers. I had become adept at fighting guerrilla warfare. I was nineteen.

After the battle, we moved off the hill and set up recons in the valley that led to FSB Cannon. At night, we could plainly make out red flashlights as the NVA spotted the trail, moving into position to attack FSB Ripcord.

On July 1, 1970, the first mortar rounds hit Ripcord which was to become a twenty-three day siege, ending with the decision to withdraw from the FSB after a Chinook helicopter, carrying a load of fuel, took hits from an NVA 12.5mm anti-aircraft gun and crashed into Ripcord's ammo dump, exploding on contact. This battle was the last major engagement of US forces in the

Vietnam war.

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The battle of Hill 882 by B Co 1/327th 101st Abn Div is
classified from 27 May - 1 June 1970

After Action Battle Report

<http://www.ripcordassociation.com/operation-texas-star/>