

## **One Lousy Day**

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In Vietnam many days were lousy, but one stands out above all as a life changer - August 11, 1971. The day before that fateful day I was in Chu Li, the division rear, where I was finally offered a rear job. Infantry platoon leaders were customarily taken out of the field after six months on the sensible theory that six months had used up every lucky chance you ever had in life. I had been in the field almost eight months and was slated for a rear job for the rest of my Viet Nam deployment. I turned down the rear job because it was not appealing - probably the worst decision I have ever made!

I left Chu Li via helicopter to Firebase 4-11, where another helicopter took me to my platoon in the mountains west in Quang Ngai province. I spent that night with my platoon in our night laager.

The next and fateful day dawned sunny. We patrolled around the narrow valley, which had ridge lines going up on both sides and a little stream bed in the valley itself. In late morning we heard fire from the valley west of the ridge line, and the radio calls that the other platoon there was taking fire.

Our company commander and the platoon he was with were on the high ground between the two platoons in their respective valleys. This provided radio contact to both of our platoons and with the battalion firebase. Our artillery forward observer was with the CO. In early afternoon, the company commander, using bad judgment, left the high ground to go down into the western valley. Once they left the high ground, my platoon lost all radio contact because of the terrain. He was our only link to the forward observer and the battalion rear which we needed to get help if we got into trouble.

I certainly did not plan to spend the night without radio contact, since we already knew the bad guys were around. I saw only two choices to get back our radio

contact, both very dangerous. However, to stay in place with no contact wasn't remotely thinkable.

The first lousy choice was to try to climb the steep ridge line the company commander had abandoned, assuming we could get contact from the high ground. The bottom half of the ridge line was open ground with only knee high grass, but about half way up jungle cover started with heavy growth that could be hiding the enemy. The ridge was quite steep on my side. If the enemy were lurking above, we were dead under such adverse circumstances.

As I looked at my map my other choice was to head south down the stream bed in my eastern valley. About two kilometers to our south the valley made a sharp "V" and turned north up the western valley: also a lousy choice, but the lesser of two evils. We made it to the "V" mid afternoon and started up the very narrow western valley. Along the way we would have to go 20-30 feet up the bank to get around waterfalls. This was very treacherous terrain and we were narrowly channeled, single file as we went up the bank and around the waterfalls.

We knew the Viet Cong were in front of us and were falling back as we advanced. I suspect they only wanted to get away and not fight our firepower. We knew they were around because we found a number of freshly made booby traps. They knew they were caught between two GI platoons.

In late afternoon the monsoons would start with rain and heavy cloud cover; this made us move all the faster to regain radio contact, but I didn't know how far up the valley we'd have to go. I also knew this wouldn't end well. We kept moving and had to go around another waterfall up the bank, single file, again finding improvised booby traps, Rama of the Jungle type using vegetation and spikes; one used explosives, but fortunately we found it before hitting it.

We came down off the bank into the streambed which was dotted with large boulders. Exhausted from the climb, I told everybody to drop their rucksacks for a short pause. As was my custom in situations like this, I dropped my ruck but walked farther up the streambed with my M16, looking quite intently on both sides to scope things out. If there had been radio contact we could have fired

artillery in before we were in rifle range of any bad guys. As we were moving, the RTO (radio telephone operator) would keep trying to get contact, but we still had none.

While I knew VC were there, when I went further to look I didn't see anything, and went further. Finally I looked back and saw how far out I had gotten from my platoon - way further than I intended. I quickly scuttled back to the platoon. I believed we were clear for some distance because I hadn't seen anything, so we started moving back up the streambed.

Our platoon got about two hundred meters past where I had checked. At this point the VC opened fire. I was walking third in line but their entire initial bursts focused on me - they were clearly hosing the platoon leader down first.

That initial burst hit me in the groin, which doubled me over as if punched in the gut. As I looked down where my hand was holding the wound, I saw a big hole about 2" by 3", very deep and bleeding badly. It didn't look like a bullet wound. Later I found out that the bullet had shattered my compass, which severed my femoral artery and left not only the hole, but shrapnel and nerve damage that has plagued me to this day. All I knew now though was we had been hit only with small arms fire. Immediately after taking out me, the platoon leader, the next bursts were going after my machine gunner, who was a few guys behind me. He was hit in his side but was still able to operate.

Instantly all the guys dropped behind boulders in the streambed and were looking for the VC to find a target. I yelled at them to just start shooting. At that point everybody sprayed out several magazines each, and the grenade launcher guys got about ten grenades out. A US platoon always had the advantage of firepower!

I was lying there with my bare left hand trying to stop the bleeding while I used my right hand and my teeth to open the pressure dressing I carried. The medic made his way up to me through the gun fire. When he looked at me he tried to find an entry wound because my gaping hole looked like an exit wound. He stuck an IV in me while I pushed on the pressure dressing. The arm getting the IV was

extended out from the rock that I hunkered behind. The VC hosed me down again and bullets hit the rock next to my head and ricocheted. Something hit my extended hand, maybe a bullet, maybe rock shards. My hand was bleeding but not badly enough to even worry about under the circumstances.

Shortly after stopping us so that we couldn't pursue them, the enemy shooting stopped after we put out our full fire power. While the machine gunner had been hit on the left side of his chest, it didn't penetrate. He was still mobile, the assistant gunner had been blazing back with the M-60 machine gun.

To sum up our situation, I'm hit badly, the machine gunner is hit, we're still out of radio contact, so how do we get a Medevac? We had to first get radio contact, but the clouds were getting thicker and lower so we were at risk of not being able to get aviation in even when we could call. Medevac pilots were known for "brass balls" and would go into places many pilots wouldn't to pull out wounded, but we were getting marginal even for their bravery.

Both RTOs put up their long antennas which they had tried earlier with no success. I suggested they take a long Claymore wire and attach it to the antenna hoping to extend the range, a desperate move that didn't work.

The platoon sergeant looked back from where we came. The firing had come from the west side of the streambed but back about 200 meters there was a place on the east bank where the jungle on the ridge line came down almost to the streambed. He took one of the radios and a few guys and went back to the south and started going up the ridge line through the jungle. He got some distance up the ridge onto higher ground when he got radio contact and ordered an urgent Medevac. It had been some time after I had been shot before we restored contact.

The battalion sent out a small LOH (light observation helicopter) which was in the area to see if they could evacuate us. A Medevac would have to come from Chu Li. The LOH found that back at the "V" in the streambed there was just enough space on a sand bar that he could get in. The machine gunner could walk, so a few guys took him to the sandbar and he was taken out by the LOH.

I certainly couldn't walk and the sandbar was too far to try to carry me. I waited for the Medevac. When it finally arrived, it brought along big brother in the form of two helicopter gunships which circled low where the VC had been. No VC in his right mind would stick his head up while gunships are circling.

Unfortunately, the streambed was too narrow for the Medevac to land. The only way to get me out was for the helicopter to hover high enough above the canopy on the ridges on both sides. They lowered a jungle penetrator, a big steel cable with a paddle-seat which came from a crane arm sticking out of the helicopter. Sitting on the paddle-seat, I was strapped under my arms to the device. Once I was thus secured, they started raising it to the helicopter while they hovered. The cross wind bounced me off the rock face on the ridge a few times.

Once I cleared the canopy and the ridge line, the Medevac started flying "up, up and away," with me still swinging on the cable 20 or 30 feet below it. By now it was getting darker, windy and raining hard. When they finally got the cable all the way up to the helicopter the arm was supposed to swing to the door. Unfortunately the arm was stuck and wouldn't swing close.

By now, I was bleeding badly due to my position on the penetrator. The medics tried to pull me into the helicopter but to do that you need slack on the cable. So one medic leaned out and was pulling me by the shirt while the other medic was lowered the cable. Work out the physics of this. There is 200 pounds of soldier and another 200 pounds of the jungle penetrator, so there was no way they could pull it in.

Once they couldn't hold on any more, I dropped below the skids of the helicopter. This bounce made it impossible for me to keep pressure on the wound. They pulled the cable up and tried again with the same result. By now I'm sure the medic realized time was rapidly running out on me, so he tied himself to the helicopter with his pistol belt, leaned out, grabbed me under the arms, undid the straps holding me in place, and jerked me across three feet of empty space and into the helicopter. At that point I had lost enough blood that I was sliding in and out of consciousness. They put IVs in me and used better dressings to stop the bleeding.

I had the sensation of being more tired than I had ever been in my life. I realized that I could just let go, and they would pull a KIA off the helicopter. Then I actually thought how useless it would be to die at age twenty two for a piece of shit streambed that nobody would ever care about. I also thought how unhappy my family would be if that happened. I made a very conscious decision that even though I was so tired, I would fight it and hold on. When I felt myself finally being pulled off the helicopter at the hospital in Chu Lai, I felt a terrific sense of relief. I was relieved that I had done my job and made it there alive - now I was in the hands of the medical staff. At the same time I also felt relieved that I was no longer responsible for the twenty other lives in my platoon.

The following day I woke up in intensive care. My right hand was heavily bandaged and I had IVs going in both arms. A friend stopped by and I dictated a letter home explaining to my family what had happened. My machine gunner was on the same ward with me and doing well. The General came through and awarded each of us our Purple Hearts. Later in the day, the Medevac pilot came in and apologized for the equipment failure that nearly cost me my life. Then just onto a long recovery.

I tell this story in perhaps overly lurid detail, not because it is extraordinary, but because it is ordinary. All the casualties, whether wounded in action or a now only a name on Viet Nam Veterans' Memorial, are ugly, messy, bloody, painful and terrifying. They occur from some mix of misfortune, misjudgment, enemy or all too often friendly fire. I do not say there is anything in my story that rises to the level of true heroism. I certainly saw bravery: my medic working his way up to me among the boulders and holding up the IV while we were still taking fire; the guys working their way up the steep ridge line to get radio contact; the Medevac crew hovering maybe sixty feet off the ground knowing the VC were still around. Doctors who have seen my scars tell me that my surgeon equally showed his bravery to take desperate measures to handle a desperate wound.

So on Memorial Day, by all means we must honor the dead for their sacrifice. Let's also bear in mind that none died the sanitized death we are accustomed to today in a world of hospitals or hospice, surrounded by support, surrounded by

loved ones. The nation's combat deaths are indeed "above our poor power to add or detract."